

# HOW SERE PICKED UP HER LAUNDRY

Alexander Jablovok

**Alex Jablovok tells us his latest tale “started out as a story about urbanism and weather and grew a few extra body parts in the telling. This won’t be the last time you see Sere Glagolit, the main character, or Tempest, the city in which this tale takes place. Much thanks to both the Cambridge Science Fiction Workshop and Rio Hondo for being patient enough to enable it to make some sense. And speaking of works you can’t escape, the last story I had in *Asimov’s*, ‘The Forgotten Taste of Honey’ (October/November 2016), has itself inspired a novel, *Icecliff*, currently in progress.”**

My potential client, Mirquell, played it safe. I had to find a specific woman, who, if I seemed suitable, would then tell me how to get to Mirquell. But when I found that woman, after struggling through a maze of unfamiliar streets between two hills that made up the neighborhood of Drur, instead of telling me where to go, she tried to put me to work.

“Look, there’s another one!” A woman darted out right in front of me, almost knocking me over, squatted down over a ceramic drainage grate, and peered down into it. “Kiff! Another one.” She paused. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you, Jaenl,” a man’s voice answered from inside the panel house that hung off the wall above us. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to *care*. There are more of the damn things every day. They’ll be coming out of the toilet next.”

Jaenl was an Om—human, if you prefer—female, like me, though smaller, older, and bonier. The lining hung out of her nightgown.

“Excuse me,” I said. “My name’s Sere Glagolit—”

“Well, *you* can help me.” Jaenl gestured for me to get down next to her.

“You’re supposed to show me how to get to Mirquell.”

She squinted up at me. Suddenly I was conscious of the fact that I was dressed more for a party rather than an interview with a potential client. That was probably because I *was* dressed for a party. Not one that had been as much fun as I hoped, but the dress was red, hit my curves right, and glinted in a way that made it nicely mysterious by Umberlight. No one had persuaded me to take it off. Instead I’d hit home

just before Actin lit the streets, and, rather than dig around in my mess of a room for something more appropriate, I'd just brushed my hair down in a way I hoped looked more conservative and had headed over here. And I was *still* late.

I really should have thrown on a jacket. Of course, I would have had to find one first.

"If you really want to find Mirquell . . ." Jaenl seemed startled that anyone would actually want to do that. "But do you see it?"

I couldn't get to my "if you can't find *me*, why should I hire you to find anything else?" prospective client without this woman's help, so I squatted down next to her and stared into the sewer.

It took a couple of seconds before I saw it: a segmented bug, maybe four inches long, with pinch-grip legs that had trouble getting a purchase on a rusty pipe. "Yes. Now what?"

"Get it out! Can you figure out how to get it out? Damn things . . . they're making me crazy."

It was a small-scale problem, one I could maybe solve, unlike most of the issues I had to deal with. My boyfriend had dumped me and taken our business along with him, I couldn't make rent, I owed money, and my behavior in the wake of the breakup had pissed a lot of people off. Because there isn't any problem that you can't make worse, right?

But this little puzzle . . . the one thing I'd paid attention to that morning was my hair, but now I reached up and undid the dark red ribbon I'd used to tame it.

"Hold one end," I told Jaenl. "If we lower it down, maybe we can get that thing to grab onto it."

Jaenl grabbed the ribbon. "So you know what that thing is?"

I shook my head. "Just guessing."

Our city, Tempest, was filled with refugee intelligent species but had an even bigger supply of the pests, vermin, and parasites that always accompanied them. There was no way to even guess what world this one had originally come from. But I could see the pincers were made to hold onto something smaller than that pipe.

We lowered the ribbon together, keeping it level.

"Come on," I said. "Come on, you bastard!" Now that I was doing it, this was all that mattered. I wriggled the ribbon against the thing's legs. That just made it grab onto the pipe more. I tried again. It ignored me.

Now I was irritated. Nothing was cooperating. I pulled the ribbon's edge against it, yanked . . . and one of its pincers came loose. It flailed around and encountered the ribbon. Reflex led it to grab on.

I stopped wiggling. The bug seemed to like this new object. In short order, it surged forward and grabbed onto the ribbon, dangling underneath it in what was clearly its preferred orientation.

Without exchanging a word, we lifted the ribbon up and out.

"Put it down, put it down!" Jaenl jumped up and, balancing on one foot, pulled off a house clog.

Then she squatted back down and pounded the thing with the heel. It rolled and squirmed, but the impacts didn't have much effect on it. At last it shot out some pale orange goo, ruining my hair ribbon and getting some on the clog, rolled, and fell back through the grate, vanishing into the darkness.

"Damn it!" Jaenl sat back and sighed. "That stupid exterminator didn't do a thing. Hung around here for days, poking into everything. Then . . . hey, Kiff!"

"What?" Her mate was back at the window.

"Did Zinter accomplish *anything*, you think?"

His reply was inaudible.

"What?" Jaenl yelled.

"Got himself killed."

"Yeah, there is that." That reminder seemed to perk Jaenl up. "He went up there to poke around and find where those bugs came from. Then he decided to, I don't know, block their route, destroy their nest, something. Used some focused explosive. Zinter was dedicated to his work. Just not very good at it. Roof fell in, killed him."

"He fancied himself an Extirpator," Kiff said. "Never finished the apprenticeship. Guess he kept some of the heavier weapons, though."

Their house, along with a line of similar ones on the quiet street, had been built into a lower level of a vast, layered structure, hundreds of feet high, that stepped back every thirty feet or so. Whoever had built it, secreted it, or grown it was long gone, and more than one generation of other nations had moved in and altered its many cells to suit themselves. People usually called it the Drur Reef. It defined one side of the neighborhood.

Drur Reef supported itself on a massive Architon pier, sharp and incomprehensible in the clear sky. Above that was only the almost-invisible dot of UMBER, our darker sun, giving good light when alone, but a useless wingman when Actin was also up.

"He did his work right about there." Jaenl pointed to a projection that looked like a helmet, a hundred feet or so up and back. "Took him a long time to find the right spot."

A story about a suicidally incompetent exterminator with a murky professional background was the kind of neighborhood gossip I usually lived for. But I had things to do. The suns were high, the day was well on, and I had rent to pay.

"Where's Mirquell?" I said.

"Are you sure you want to work for her?" Jaenl examined the orange-stained bottom of her clog, then tossed it into the small garden fronting the house. The other one followed it. She regarded her now-exposed toes as if reconsidering the polish color. "No one I guide up there seems particularly happy afterward."

A friend at a party told me she knew a woman who was looking for someone who could dig out odd bits of information and get people to talk, someone experienced with city entities and various nations. I'd done that kind of thing to grow my own business. That had left me with nothing.

"If someone else takes the business risk and pays me a negotiated rate," I said, "I'll be happy."

She snorted. "Mirquell's slipperier than that. But maybe it will work out for you. She's up the hill on the other side, Mesklitchtown. Seems to do okay up there, I have to say. Go down this way, hundred feet, a bit more. There's a lubricant recycler next to a boarded-up house. You'll know you're there when you smell it: the greaser's a homebrew place, uses dumped waste from the neighborhood. Still, seems to fractionate pretty well. We all complain, we all go there. There's a gap between the buildings, looks like nothing, but that's the way." She looked me up and down. "How far are you across?"

I was a head taller than her and more than proportionally wider. I had hips, boobs, other projections that weren't usually regarded as liabilities. "Nothing for you to worry about. I can turn sideways."

"Suck in your breath. The walls are greasy, you'll get it on you otherwise. The path'll climb after that. First a little, then a lot, but always doable. The Mesklitch are mostly sleeping this time of day."

"I know Mesklitch."

"Maybe. It's a rough crowd out here. Still, get out by Actin-set, you should be okay. You got hours, and I guarantee you won't want to talk to Mirquell for that long." She turned her head. "Hey, Kiff! Toss some shoes out here, will you?"

“What’s wrong with the ones you already got on?” Kiff shouted from inside the house.

Jaenl shook her head at me. “Why does he always gotta know why, instead of just doing it? It’s a sickness.” She raised her voice. “’Cause there’s crap on these. There’re some white slip-ons in the front hallway. Those’ll do.”

I left Jaenl frowning at her toenails and waiting for her shoes.

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“Doable” was just accurate.

I did managed to squeeze between the two grease-covered structures without touching, though it was close. And the path climbed, and then climbed some more. It got steeper, turned into rough stairs, then into something like a climbing wall, only someone had chiseled away the easiest footholds. This neighborhood liked its privacy. I had kept my nice evening shoes on, and ended up shredding the toes on the rough rock. There was no way I was putting that goo-covered ribbon back on, so my loose hair kept getting in my face.

The double sunlight of Actin and Umber should have driven all the nocturnal Mesklitch indoors, but I still felt assessing eyes, probably adolescents resentfully on day watch. The kids hid out in the crumbling spheres they stuck on the outsides of their houses as their neck glands developed. Though they hadn’t secreted brood shelters that way for thousands of years, they retained the ancestral ability. I caught sight of yellow eyes within the round entrances, waiting impatiently for Umberlight, so they could come out and jump from building to building. Given how they got around, I was lucky they’d left any street at all.

Near the top, I found her. A plump Om woman with short red hair and hoop earrings sat at a table shaded by the raised side of a cubical shelter. There wasn’t much inside: a small kitchen, a hammock, a toilet screen.

She wore an expensive but unflattering suit with wide-legged trousers and an embroidered jacket, a season or two out. The embroidery was hard to clean, and I could see some dangling threads. Money once, it looked like, and used to it, but not so much now. I hoped we weren’t here to found some kind of losers’ club.

I waited for her to say something. Finally, she did.

“Did you come up all this way just to block the view?”

“I’m Sere. You must be Mirquell.”

“And you must be late.”

I had to recover from that, and fast. I sat down in the other chair without asking. Sweat trickled down between my breasts and down my back. I wasn’t going to read-just or dab at anything.

“You need someone to poke around,” I said. “Various places, various nations. Lost, hidden, forgotten. Something I do. A friend told me.”

Mirquell looked unhappy. Her wide face with its downturned mouth seemed optimized for that particular facial expression. “This friend tell you what my problem was?”

“No.”

“Good. At least I don’t have to correct any wrong ideas you’d already have.” She looked at me: big girl, dark skin, crazy black hair, party dress, shoes that were okay this morning but now had to be trashed. All of that made her even less happy. She drummed her fingers on the table. Thick fingers, cracked nails. There are a lot of ways to go wrong in Tempest, City of Storms, particularly for us Oms. I’d found one. Looked like she’d found another.

One thing was clear pretty quickly: she liked looking, didn’t like being looked at. So I turned to check out the view. She’d probably picked this inconvenient spot so no one could drop in on her unexpectedly, but maybe so she could keep an eye on some-

thing too. Figuring out what would help me figure *her* out.

We were near the top of a hill, pretty high. The flat roofs of Mesklitchtown dropped down below us, hiding Kiff and Jaenl's twisty street. The orange and yellow wedding cake of Drur Reef loomed up nearly a thousand feet, and spread out over half a mile. The different layers had left open areas where roads and other transportation ran, all clear from this height. I could see the helmet-like structure Jaenl had pointed out. No real sign of anything that poor exterminator might have got up to, though.

A few layers above that someone had once strapped elevator tubes to make it easier to get to the top. I could see traces of at least two that had vanished. Only one was left, starting in a vivid green and purple spot of dense plant growth and shooting up to the top of the wedding cake, where the structure separated into a few buttes, vague with distance.

Above it all the Architon pier thrust up a couple of thousand feet, then curved out, to end abruptly in a smooth, slanted surface that gleamed in the mixed light of Actin and Umber. If the Architon had some plan for a larger structure, of which this pier would be just a supporting element, they hadn't gotten to it yet, though the thing had been standing for endless centuries, so long that dirt had piled up and formed a steep slope, which had then been covered with a gigantic colonial structure slowly grown by creatures themselves now vanished, and their constructions reconfigured and reused by other nations entirely. The Architon were never seen, didn't talk to anyone, and, in fact, didn't seem to have really noticed that dozens of other species had been infesting their city for some thousands of years now. Presumably, they took the long view of their own pests.

Mirquell sighed and accepted that life was far from perfect. "I'm trying to create a business relationship with the Case." She paused.

"Are you waiting for me to argue with you?" I said. "Tell you that's impossible, ridiculous, whatever? The Case must hire *someone*, if only for waste disposal, even if no one seems to know who, or how. There's a Case in Shrivis. That's not far from here. But, still, you aren't in Shrivis. Do you think you have a way to contact them here?"

She looked sour, as if having her researcher already know things was a downside. "I don't. But I have a way to do the Case a favor. A month or so ago, the Shrivis Case got contacted by someone. And they *hired* him." She did not hide her outrage. "I'd been working it for months at that point."

No one seemed to have ever seen a representative of the Case. They lived inside what looked like swollen black seed pods, each a few hundred feet long, and never emerged. Or maybe each Case was itself a single individual. No one really knew. I suppose we could have called them the Pod, or the Egg, or something, but everyone had settled on the Case. The Case did communicate and negotiate, but rarely, and only on their own terms, through various intermediaries. They had landed in the City of Storms during a particularly turbulent time a few centuries ago, and no one could even say when, exactly, they had set up their dwellings. Suddenly, it seemed, they were just *there*, part of the landscape, five Cases in all.

"Who did they hire?" I said.

"A guy named Zinter," Mirquell said. "Jaenl's probably already told you about him."

"She mentioned him. What did they hire him to do?"

"All I know is that Zinter, an exterminator, mind you, a guy who handles sand squirrel infestations and getting hibernating grackuses out of people's basements, used some lensed explosives to bring the roof of a tunnel in Drur Reef down on his own head. Did they hire him to commit suicide? Somehow I don't think so."

I looked down. I could almost see where it happened. He'd ostensibly been trying to get rid of those odd bugs coming out of Jaenl's toilet. And working for the Case on something else? Or taking care of both things at once?

“Is that tunnel used for anything?” I asked.

“Nothing that I know of. But someone has recently leased it. In fact, there has been a lot of leasing activity up and down the Reef. Even the top of that highest butte over there. And all of it for stuff unused for a long time. Impossible to say who it is, they use a lot of fronts and cutouts. But Zinter blew up one of the newly leased tunnels, or at least tried to.”

“And you want me to find out what he was up to,” I said.

“No. Nothing so complicated. I want you to find out who has the use of that butte up at the top there, and who has leased all the parcels on the way up that look like they give access to it. I understand you know someone in Plats, Surveys, and Parcels.”

So that woman at the party who’d given me the lead hadn’t just been chatting. Mirquell must have a thick network, even if she currently hid out in a bolted-together shack on an exposed hillside surrounded by irritable Mesklitch. She’d been searching for someone who could get access to a key piece of information.

But this was deflating. I did, in fact, know someone in Plats, Surveys, and Parcels. Siboo was a buddy of my old boyfriend’s. Was that really why Mirquell wanted to hire me?

“I’ll throw in an extra opportunity,” she said, just at the right moment. “Information I’d pay more for, if you need an escalator to keep your interest.”

“How about we talk about the actual job first.” I wouldn’t let her distract me. I needed work. “Escalator later. What, exactly, do you want?”

“I want the identity of whoever uses and controls those parcels, and fast. Tomorrow would be best.”

“And you want to know what they’re using it for.”

“Of course I do,” she said. “But I’m not paying for that. At least, I’m not paying *you* for that, even if you tell me. That’s not the escalator.”

I gritted my teeth. I hoped it looked like a smile. “Okay. What’s the escalator?”

“Why did Zinter do it? What was he after when he dropped that chunk of rock on his own head? So those are the two units of work. Uses and controls, fifty. Zinter’s goal, two hundred. I know you were making a lot of money before. So was I. I’m not interested in negotiating the rates.”

Did she even care why Zinter went hunting bugs underground with explosive charges? It didn’t matter. The best price/performance ratio on this deal was to drag myself over to Siboo’s office, sit down for five minutes with the idiot, get the name of the parcel owner, give it to Mirquell, and call it a job. Less than I had hoped, but it was a start.

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For meeting Siboo I found some stiff, creased trousers I couldn’t even remember buying, and a taupe jacket that looked like something you’d wear to maintain messy machinery, a gift from an older relative who had wanted me to get some decent work. I was a few years bigger than the ill-behaved Sere who had resentfully received it, but an emergency loosening at the shoulders and I could at least get the damn thing on. As long as I didn’t emphasize my words by waving my arms too much, I thought the sleeves would stay on.

After five minutes in Siboo’s office, though, I was wishing I’d dressed inappropriately again. The tangle of offices and cells that made up Plats, Surveys, and Parcels had been shoved in underneath some kind of power plant, and the low ceiling radiated heat. It also vibrated in a way that made my teeth feel loose.

Siboo had met with Lemuel, my old boyfriend, in bars, always a bit conspiratorial, like he was dealing with top-secret information, rather than the location of some particular nation two centuries ago, which might have left behind some interesting

detritus Lemuel could clean up and resell.

Maybe he was worried that I wouldn't spring for the drinks. I think he wanted to impress me, though. When I came in, he had all sorts of important-looking displays open, showing property lines, ownership chains, subrights negotiations, but as we talked I began to suspect that none of that had anything to do with his day-to-day, which seemed to consist of stamping an ideogram on a corner of a particular property diagram.

This was how a lot of us Oms made our living in Tempest: we're known for our ability to sit still for long periods and do work that makes other nations want to rip off parts of their own bodies. It was a known fact in the city that, no matter how simple the initial setup, once humans got hold of it, it became a complex, mind-numbing nightmare.

"So, what is he up to now?" Siboo said, as he juggled screens, trying to answer my ownership question.

"Lemuel? I don't know, Siboo. We broke up. I don't see him."

"You must run into him, though. I mean, you get around."

That was kind of my reputation. "I think he's fine. Making a go of it." With *my* business, the one he'd managed to get licensed to himself.

"I know he's been kind of busy lately," Siboo said. "Still, it would be great to see him."

"If I run into him, I'll let him know."

Lemuel didn't treat his friends any better than he treated his girlfriends. He relied on his charm and entertainment value to keep people coming back. So far, I had to say, he'd been right. Siboo was all needy, maybe the reason he'd agreed to see me. Because Lemuel's angry ex-girlfriend was his best conduit to the friend who wasn't talking to him? I didn't have the energy to care about how sad that was.

"Interesting," Siboo said.

"What?" Sweat was beading on my forehead. I had to get out of there.

"All those parcels got leased recently. Several different owners, but none of them is big enough to really do anything with. Plus, that's not a great area. Why are you interested in it?"

"I'm not interested in it. A client is."

Siboo pouted. He was both bulky and insubstantial, like a cloud in a shirt a size too small. He had good lips for pouting, though. "Well, you can tell said confidential client they have someone a bit rough to deal with. Ferrulin."

"That's who has leased all the parcels?" I said.

"Yep. And all at the same time. Oh, they did it through a couple of shell companies, so that no one would see they wanted something and hold out for a higher price. But that's pretty easy for me to figure out."

Ferrulin. That was a bit of a surprise. Second only to bureaucracy in the Om skill set is organized crime. Ferrulin wasn't a criminal enterprise, exactly, but it certainly had more than a couple of toes over the line. With a lot of Oms in management, Ferrulin was a cleaning organization, contracting for all sorts of things: clothes, houses, factories, public areas—and with a good reputation among a variety of nations. But they also managed the cleanup of more private messes, cleanups that sometimes involved them with various order-enforcing agencies in the city, angry that key pieces of criminal evidence had mysteriously vanished.

I looked at the complex patterns of ownership and control up the many layers of Drur Reef. The leased parcels interconnected, creating a complicated path up from the bottom, all the way to the top butte, which stood separated from the nearest level ground by a chasm about ten feet across. There was a solid way to it, but that was from the other side, via a narrow walkway. I saw no sign that Ferrulin was at all in-

terested in anything over there.

“What are they doing with all that?” I asked.

“Really, Sere. That’s something I can’t see here. I know that they got control, for the length of the lease—which is just for the next month, by the way—but there’s no way for me to even know who might be actually using it. You maybe know people from your neighborhood who do business with Ferrulin who could tell you a little more. Sar . . . you know Sar, right?”

He’d grown up just a few streets up and run with an older, more dangerous crowd than me. I nodded.

“He does some hauling work for them, still in Panetto. And there’s a guy named Gimnus, Lemuel knew him. Gimnis, maybe? Building maintenance, works with Ferrulin subcontractors. And you had a friend you mentioned once, Zazstra Hass . . .”

“Zaza?” I said. “Zaza works for Ferrulin?” We’d once been close, but I hadn’t seen her in years.

“Not her, I don’t think.” He looked uncertain. “No, her little sister. That’s right. Some pretty close stuff, crime scene cleanup. You used to hear about her, then you didn’t. I forgot her name.”

Zaza’s little sister had been named Anikee. I was pleased to be able to remember the name of that little pest. Showed my brain was still working, even without much to work on. But none of these people mattered, since all I needed for Mirquell to pay me was . . . damn. Damn it!

Mirquell had been careful in her phrasing when we made our agreement. I would recheck the actual contract, but I knew what was in it. She was paying me, not for the legal lessee, but for the actual on-the-ground user of the parcels. Her phrasing had implied that they were one and the same thing, but they weren’t, not necessarily. Ferrulin was mostly a clearinghouse, getting subcontractors work, guaranteeing performance, and putting in a little muscle if they decided their subcontractors were getting pushed around. People liked working with Ferrulin and built long-term relationships through them.

So I didn’t yet have what I had agreed to give her.

I had thought it would be easy: Siboo, info, done. So, maybe not so easy.

“Something wrong?” Siboo asked.

“Nothing to do with you.” He deserved something. I wasn’t paying him. He was doing this as a favor, and probably not the last one I would ask for. “Lemuel is digging around out in Ffolio.”

“I know. I gave him the information for that.”

“He’s doing an event out there. For investors, I think. People who want a piece of his business. I know some people who are going . . . if you want, one of them can probably take you. As a date.”

His wide face lit up. “Sure. Sure, I’d like that, Sere.”

If that makes it sound like maybe I still paid an unhealthy amount of attention to what Lemuel was up to, well, it was kind of an unpleasant surprise to me, too.

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I swept across Ferrulin’s wide lobby toward the reception desk like I meant business. I’d dressed for it, trying to get the look of the prosperous householder I was pretending to be. The main thing I had to do was show outrage without giving away that I had no real idea of what I was supposed to be outraged about.

Vitrines gleamed here and there in the darkened lobby, displaying various hard-to-clean clothing items, including a human ball gown, quilted Samrong armor, and a Kriv godsuit, built to soak up water and sink instantly to the bottom of a sacrificial pool, along with its wearer. It had dozens of lace cuffs, hard to keep up to the standards of demanding deities.

But none of the displays was as decorative as the golden Aara who manned the reception desk. He pulled a comb through his fur as he watched me approach. I heard the crackle of static electricity.

"Excuse me." I tried for an entitled voice, the kind that got people to jump. "You guys have caused me a real problem."

The Aara moved languidly. He put the comb into an elaborate case, snapped it shut, and regarded me with wide, nocturnal eyes. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Do you really think you've cleaned up everything in Drur?" I said. "It's a total mess, a disaster, I'm scared to go out of my house. And the kids, the poor kids . . . what are you going to do about it?"

Various people gathered in the murky back of the lobby at a wide service window, dropping off and receiving clothes and other items. Several of them turned to look at us.

It should have been all of them. My voice clearly wasn't resonating enough. I had to increase everyone's tension while pretending to be completely self-centered. I was pretty sure that no matter what messes Ferrulin and its agents got up to elsewhere in the City of Storms, they would want to keep their own nest here clean.

"Brune clothing is *not* toxic!" the receptionist said. "Maybe there are allergies . . ."

"Allergies?" Ah, there. I got my voice to vibrate the front of my face. Everyone in back was now ignoring their own business in favor of mine. "You call that miserable flesh rot an *allergy*?"

"Only in great concentrations!" the Aara squeaked. "In enclosed . . . the area is cordoned, you should not be anywhere near . . ."

"Well, if that's true, those Brune have been wandering off their route." I lowered my voice a little. "Look, I don't need to get you in trouble. . . ."

"I'm not in trouble!" the Aara said. "I'm just—"

"I just want to *talk* to them," I said. "Keep them from trying to kill my family. Simple, and done."

"You'll do this one on your own?"

"Totally confidential," I said.

He flipped through some information on his desk screen. "They should be—"

"What is the location of your objection?" a voice said in my ear.

I jerked. The Khruskr stood right next to me, its forearms out in a guard posture, the subhands at the joints twitching their digits. A natty black suit covered its exoskeleton, and its compound eyes gleamed iridescently in the subdued lighting. Kursk moved quickly and silently, almost like they were drawn on reality, not part of it.

The guy was Security, not an easily bamboozled decorative receptionist. Time for me to get out of here. "I should be—"

"What your address? I can check out your difficulty."

He moved, subtly, to keep me from fading back. Now my crowd, once pressure on the Aara, was pressure on me. This was all way more entertaining than dropping off the sheets.

I couldn't list an address anywhere near the location of any parcel Siboo had given me. They could check that, find all the nearby owners, and see I wasn't one of them. But those were the only addresses that came immediately to mind.

Then I remembered the stinking lubrication store Jaenl had used as a landmark on the way to Mirquell's. That was the address I gave. "What in the world are they doing in there?" I demanded.

When a Khruskr didn't move voluntarily, its exoskeleton kept it absolutely motionless. I pictured ideas as prey it hunted through its own head. The silence got bigger.

"That nowhere near!" he yelled. "Why you come here to complain?"

"I was sure it was yours. Don't you clean that place, or something?"

“No, no, no! No leasing, no subleasing, no contract, no technical support services, no expediting, no legal advice. Nothing from us.”

I really wanted to ask, “Are you sure?” but that would have been pushing it. “I’m really sorry,” I said instead. “But do you guys have any idea of who might be in charge there? You seem connected to everything.”

“No! Nothing to do with Ferrulin. We vet our freelancers carefully. Only topnotch contractors. No toxins, no unexpected death.”

The Aara hunched on his seat, watching us. Even his fur seemed to have sagged. All I’d really learned was that the contractors, whoever they were, were doing a job on behalf of some Brune, a reclusive, subterranean nation that rarely emerged on the surface—I knew a bit about them, not much. That was interesting, but not at all what I wanted to know. But if I hung around any longer, the Khruskr would feel obliged to learn more about me.

“In that case,” I said, “thanks for your help.”

With luck, the Aara receptionist would be just as happy not to let the security Khruskr know that, while denying responsibility to me, he’d let out some confidential client information. That could be our secret.

I’d like to think I walked out with great and solemn dignity, but I’m afraid I scuttled out like someone with an intestinal problem.

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That evening found me in a bar back near my own neighborhood, in Panetto. A heavily Om area, so one you had to be careful of. Particularly if you were an Om.

I had a target. Siboo had given me several possible Ferrulin contacts when we talked, but I hadn’t really paid attention, since I thought I could get the subcontractor information out of Ferrulin easily enough. After all, why would that be something confidential? I didn’t want to call on him again, so I was stuck with the one I remembered: my buddy Zaza’s annoying little sister, Anikee. She turned out to be, not a contractor, but an actual Ferrulin employee. That was trickier. But right now, she was my best option.

So now I waited like a stalker at a table in the street she would most likely use to get home, watching people of various nations hurry by as Actin set. Umber glimmered red right behind it, at this time of year only getting a few minutes to show its stuff.

Then: there she was, a young woman with a quick, short stride.

I stopped myself from standing up. I grew into my looks early. If she recognized me, rather than the other way around, this would be easier to pull off as an accidental meeting.

She looked at me, slowed, sped up again, then stopped, excusing herself when someone almost bumped into her. “Sere! Sere, is that you?”

I raised my hand tentatively, as if not quite sure who she was.

She clicked onto the terrace and slid into the seat opposite me. “Sere. It’s me, Anikee. Zaza’s sister.”

“Anikee! Of course I remember you. Sorry, I was thinking about something else.”

“I’m sure you have plenty to think about.” With that cryptic comment, Anikee crooked a finger, and in a few seconds had a stemmed glass of something golden with a slight mist on the surface. Here I’d had trouble getting the waitress to pay attention to me.

We caught up. She told me she worked at Ferrulin in scheduling and traffic. She was telling the truth, so I lied, telling her how I had a nice apartment and ran a small cleaning company. Doing well, no complaints.

The conversation was actually quite pleasant. I had to drag it out, conceal what I was there for, but ended up enjoying it. She’d grown up into quite a young lady. A bit

too crisply pressed, maybe, but that had always been her essence.

"You know . . ." I trailed off. I was actually getting drunk. That wasn't at all the plan. *She* was the one who was supposed to be drunk.

"Know *what*?" Okay, so she was drunk too. Maybe a bit less. Her drinks were more expensive and came in fancier glasses that were harder to empty.

"I lied, before."

"About what? Oh, that you managed a cleaning company." She giggled. "Of course you don't do that, Sere. You think no one talks about you?"

"So you know. I did have this business . . . kind of salvage, digging up things left by long-gone nations. Dangerous, profitable." I had to stop myself from going on, talking about Lemuel, cursing him, then turning the table over. I was pretty sure that hadn't been part of my original scheme. I should have written it all down on my hand or something. "Once we dug down and hit . . . you ever run into the Brune?"

Was that a hint of suspicion? Hard to tell, since I deliberately didn't look at her. "I've heard of them."

"They supposedly evolved from something that rolled itself in its own droppings to defend itself. They've moved on from that, but, wow, we cut through an old Brune deposit, and almost fell down"

I leaned toward Anikee to whisper the rest of my story and almost fell out of my chair. Anikee shoved me back, not gently, and I found myself laughing.

"I always wanted to play with you guys," Anikee said in a low voice. "You and Zaza never let me. Odd, now, to think about how important that was to me."

"Oh, it was crazy." I settled down. "We were running around, trying to get the excavation closed up again, falling down . . . it was ridiculous." Actually, it had been a different excavation altogether, and we'd run into biting insects, but the activity was pretty much the same. I was hoping she'd want to tell me something, let me know she knew things. Nothing important. Just something to impress a long-ago older girl.

She stuck her tongue out from between her lips, considering. She really did look like her young self then, quiet, smart, pushed around by brassy older girls who liked to smuggle boys in, even boys they didn't particularly like. Then did a crummy job of cleaning up the mess.

I felt a little queasy now. Like old times. I signaled the waitress for another drink. When she ignored me, I waved my arm until I almost knocked my current drink off the table. To keep it safe from future mishaps, I drained it.

"We've dealt with Brune," Anikee said. "At work. But don't tell anyone. It's kind of confidential."

I put my finger up to my lip, all supersecret, like girls are supposed to be with each other.

"They don't come out much. Except when they really have to. And the Brune out in Shrivis have to go to a zoning meeting, to stop someone from digging a structure right across their colony. No representatives allowed. Principals only. So the Brune are planning to attend, in force. And when they go out, they get dressed." She finished her own drink, and her subtle signal, not my waving, brought the waitress. She tried to leave without pouring for me too, but I caught her.

"A Brune came into the office during negotiations, with a sample mantle, huge thing, you could live inside it. You should have seen it, Sere! Fantastic work, gold, circuitry, deep fluorescence, you could feel the detail across the room. We knew it would be trouble, though, when it set off all the alarms—we get a lot of dangerous stuff in there."

"Alarms?"

"You know, when you guys wanted me to go away, you would stuff me in a hamper," Anikee said.

"I . . ." That caught me by surprise. "Did we really?"

“You know you did. And you left me there!” Anikee was suddenly near tears. “You have no idea how miserable I was. How much I wanted you to like me.”

“It doesn’t seem to have done you any lasting harm.” Now that I was close to learning something, it felt like she was just trying to distract me. “So you have some contractors doing the Brune’s laundry?”

For a moment, I thought she’d just stalk off. Then she relaxed. “Well, yes. Skilled work, not easy to find. This is a particularly difficult group of Brune. Harder than the usual.”

“Who is best to clean something like that?” Did I sound casual, or so fake it was obvious?

She shrugged. “Not my area. They found someone who knows how to deal with toxic formalwear, I guess. This stuff is a particular challenge.” She paused. “It was really hard to get out of that hamper. I was suffocating. You’d put something heavy on the lid.”

“We were just girls.” I couldn’t believe she was bringing this up now. Just because we were talking about some different kind of laundry? “We didn’t mean it.”

“You meant it.”

“So you don’t at all know who is doing the cleaning of the Brune garments?” I couldn’t believe it. So close, this whole evening, and she’d tell me everything but the one fact I needed to collect and trot back to Mirquell with.

“I do know they’ve had some odd delays. Lots of concern about that, and I need to reschedule things. But they should be on duty mid-morning tomorrow. Finally.”

“But who—”

“You know, she slept with that guy you both liked.” Anikee’s words burst out. “Tam. The one with the silly hair. I could hear them, because she’d shoved me in that hamper and forgot I was there. She thought no one knew. I guess *you* didn’t.”

It was so startling that I found myself laughing. Of course, being hammered might have had something to do with it. “Oh, Tam, my man Tam. Yeah, his hair was stupid. He was very proud of it. Didn’t like people to touch it.” I hadn’t thought of that jerk in years. Zaza had always made fun of him. I guess that should have been a tipoff.

Anikee stood up. “I’m late for something. I just realized.” She made sure I could see her smile was clearly fake. “I’ve heard you’ve had a . . . rough time. People talk about it. I’m sure it’s more interesting to hear about than to experience. But you’re tough. I’m sure things will turn around for you.”

“Look, Anikee—”

“Best of luck.” Then she strolled away from me, bracelets tinkling, heels clicking in a precise line, all trace of her past erased.

It was only after she had vanished into the night that I realized she’d stuck me with the bill.

\* \* \*

I’d come back to Drur to make a wholly inadequate report to Mirquell and then slink home, unpaid.

So why was I carrying a backpack with lights, water, and some other gear up Drur Reef in the hot sun instead? It wasn’t to get rid of my hangover, though that would have been nice. I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go to Mirquell and admit I couldn’t find out who was using those parcels to go up the butte. That they were carrying Brune clothes was a nice extra detail but not what she was paying me for.

At least Anikee had told me when they were coming. And I knew how to get into the tunnel. Well, I knew Zinter had done it, and I knew where he had gone. It was worth a shot at least.

All the girl had been looking for was a simple “I’m sorry I was an asshole.” And I hadn’t even been willing to take the first step. At least I’d squeezed out all of her in-

formation before pissing her off and sending her back to her apartment to cry it out. At least I was doing my job.

I walked along the wide platform on which Zinter had started. There were plenty of people here, Erqs, Saristisians, quite a few Mesklitch. They all kept to themselves, and wide areas were almost deserted.

Despite its distinctive look, I managed to walk past that helmetlike projection and had to double back. It turned out to be a ventilator housing, no longer functional. From there, it took me only a few minutes to see where Zinter had found access.

Erosion had formed creases in the wall, and rubble had tumbled down. Water had dissolved some openings. Most of them just ended after a few feet, but one that I found after some painful trial and error led farther, kinked, and ended in a vertical access tube.

Rubble blocked the access tube below, so I started climbing. It was tight, it was dark, the air was thick. The steps were solid, cast into the flexible ceramic of the tube itself. This thing would probably survive the eventual nova of Actin, to be found floating in interstellar space by some being from a succeeding dispensation. At the moment, my main goal was that it not find me in it.

The upward tube connected to a maintenance way that ran in either direction. Twenty feet down or so, an opening, its hatch long gone, connected to a much larger space. I lowered my light, finally turned it off, and realized I could see. Light filtered in from high above and from way down the tunnel to my left.

This was right on the route that Ferrulin's mysterious contractors would follow. And if they were on schedule, that would be in just a few minutes. Even if they refused to tell me who they were, I hoped their appearance would give me something to work with.

The tunnel was maybe thirty feet high. To the left, it ran on until it came to the surface, in an area I had not been able to get access to. The bright circle of its end was broken by a hill of rubble. But beyond that, gleaming in the sunlight, I could see that highest butte and a bit of the Architon pier to the right.

Above me was where Zinter must have set his explosives. The top of the tunnel was broken in, revealing further chambers higher up, where cracks let in some sunlight. Enough rubble had fallen down to make a climbable slope leading up.

I found a piece of that rubble to sit on and wait. I imagined Zinter in here. What had he really been after? As Mirquell had said, if it was blocking passage through here, he hadn't done much. If it was to kill the bugs . . . something chose right then to scuttle across my upper arm.

I didn't shriek, but jumped up and flicked on my headlamp, despite the fact that it would warn the oncoming contractors that someone was waiting for them. It was those bugs, the same ones from Jaenl's sewer, two . . . no, three of them. They paid no attention to me, and just moved placidly along.

Then I felt something at my ear and realized there was one in my hair. Okay, that time I *did* shriek. I whipped my head around and whacked my hands through my hair. Finally I smacked it, and it flew off into the dark somewhere. Zinter really hadn't done much about controlling them.

Then I turned and looked up the tunnel toward its end in the light. I wasn't sure why. Had I heard something a few minutes before that only now percolated into consciousness? Or was there just a glint of light?

At any rate, I looked to see low-slung pods on big wheels making their way over the rubble, climbing over the top, and vanishing in the direction of the trail up to the butte.

It had to be the contract cleaners. But . . . *this* was their route, the secret passage Ferrulin had taken so much trouble to lease on their behalf. This was where I knew I could

catch them, talk to them, and get them to identify themselves, so that I could, dammit, slump up to stupid Mirquell and tell her the one fact she had hired me to find out.

They'd gone another way, though, and were now gigantically far ahead. I couldn't see what they were but could see they were moving fast. I almost ran after them anyway, then stopped. It really was too far.

Now *this* was when I should have gone up to Mirquell, admitted defeat, and displayed all the random baubles of information I'd uncovered ("their pods had big wheels!") in the hopes that one might catch her eye and lead her to regard me as something other than a total and absolute loser.

Thinking about Mirquell, I remembered what I had seen from her patio. And it had been confirmed by Siboo's diagram. There was an elevator somewhere right above me, and it led to the other side of the butte these guys were heading to. I grabbed my backpack and clambered up the slope toward the sunlight overhead. Partway up, I found a couple more of the bugs, these almost completely encased in brown shells. I was really getting tired of those things.

\* \* \*

Elevators were an expensive way to get around . . . there had once been a fad for building them, by some nation or other. Now they were mostly private enterprises, with transport monopolies in their usual area.

I had no money left. None. I'd spent pretty much all I had giving myself a wretched headache, while allowing Anikee to see that I was pretty much the same shit I had always been. Cheap at the price, I told myself.

Maybe someone would let me go up for free because I really really had to.

I thought the scavenging business I built with Lemuel had showed that I was no longer the girl who gave up as soon as things got tough. Then, when he maneuvered the contracts and client connections to take the business away from me, I realized I simply hadn't known what *tough* meant.

Now, for the first time since before Lemuel, I felt like I wanted to get to the end of something. I did manage to wish that I'd picked something a bit more sensible to accomplish, but maybe that wasn't the kind of thing you got to pick.

I found myself in a narrow area between high walls, forgotten and abandoned. The contractors had hauled their pods through, leaving tracks. I could see this wasn't their usual route. They'd had to dig through sand dunes to get by.

Things were different around the corner. Fortunately, no other Oms were in sight. The area was largely Prirt, little guys who lived in teeming colonies, each centered on a female who hid herself from view.

These had been busy. The area was filled with multilevel crops, fermenting waste disposers, solar power generators, and dangling meshes filled with peeping infant Prirt, who the adults regarded more as pests than as the hope of a new generation.

I could see paying customers gathering under the awning at the elevator's base. This was probably a big source of revenue for the Prirt colony here, so they weren't going to give access away.

I heard a squeal of a wheel behind me. Maybe one of those cleaning contractors had gotten stuck on the sandy path and was only just getting up. I collected myself and strode off to help out, and in the process identify the actual contractor doing this work.

Instead, it was a Saristifian. He was wrestling with a cart, but it did not contain any Brune clothing. Instead it held baked goods: wide flat cakes or loaves, still steaming from the wet oven. The cart's wheels were sinking into the sand, and he had already lost several of his loaves as they slid off his poorly maintained cart.

Saristifians are bipeds and stand six feet tall or more, but are way wider than an Om or a Khruskr. They're covered with what looks like thick fur but is actually a

kind of interactive tendrils. The tendrils hide their eyes and other sense organs. They favor shady, moist environments and develop algae colonies on their tendrils, tinting them green, rose, or purple.

That was why this one was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a reflective cloak—it must have disliked the sun and heat up here even more than I did. But it had work to do. Just as I did.

I was just about to turn away, get to business. But, what, after all, was that business? I was no longer sure.

And I sure wasn't in any hurry to see Mirquell, though that had to happen eventually. Meanwhile, I was free to maybe do something for someone without a slyly worded contract.

"Need help?" I said, in the standard city traffic most of us use, when we can.

"This is a disaster!" he said, in the same traffic. "He has destroyed the paths. In pursuit of his prey. He had big prey, he said."

"Zinter?" I said. "You met him?"

"All met him. A disaster." He looked at me, examined my backpack. "He told me he was tracking those things. A sign of prey."

Looked like Zinter had managed to impress everyone he met. But I had an elevator to catch. "What help do you need?"

"Pick up. I bend badly. Pick up and assist."

With that permission, I knelt, picked up his spilled loaves, and put them back into their slots on his cart. The thing was really a wreck, and could have stood a lot more re-engineering than I had the inclination for. I did tighten down a couple of bolts with my fingers, breaking another nail in the process, and bent up a flange to keep the loaves from sliding out so easily. Pretty soon the thing would fall apart completely, and nothing would be able to help it.

Then I pulled the cart's wheels out of the sand. "Where are you heading?"

"Up, up."

"I'll help you go up."

I won't pretend that possibility hadn't been in my mind—he probably wasn't going to go all the way up to the butte, and, aside from the elevator, there weren't a lot of other places to get to from here. But I would have helped him even if he had been guaranteed to be useless to me. Really.

Can I help it if my virtue gets rewarded so quickly?

So, now deputized as his assistant, even if he didn't know it yet, I escorted him toward the elevator, lifting the cart over every tiny bump. It's a wonder he ever got anywhere without me, I was so useful.

Just as we got to the square that surrounded it, he slowed. "We may be delayed," he said.

"Oh?" I said. "Why?"

"Trade disputes. Disputes over payment. If they attempt delay, take a loaf. Oh, take one now. I *anticipate* delay. When we are delayed, when they are informing me of the impossibility of solving the problem, go . . . there." He gestured toward what I recognized as a reproductive shelter, where a largely immobile Prirt female would be hidden and protected. These could be quite dangerous to approach, even with permission. In addition to the defenses, manual and automatic, that always surrounded them, for all their gravid immobility, the females could be both duplicitous and vicious.

He saw my hesitation. I thought he might be amused. "Go halfway and break it open. Do not eat any yourself. You get your pay by going up. Then proceed and provide. You will be safe. We will get where we wish. All solutions are congruent."

It was good he had told me to resist eating it, because now that I held it, still warm, the loaf smelled intoxicatingly delicious, better than any Om-baked bread. I

had no doubt, from what he was trying to do, that the Prirt females had a similar attraction to it.

But it would be for completely different reasons. Saristifians were experts in vector products, which appealed simultaneously to different nations for widely divergent reasons, some for taste, some for intoxication, some for nutrients, some for mood changes. They had more than one thought in parallel, and they seemed to think in matrix form, optimizing over a number of variables simultaneously. Their products reflected this.

The Prirt in charge were clearly quite familiar with my new boss and less than pleased to see him. Half a dozen of them popped up as soon as he entered the square with his cart and stared at him. Then they hopped over. “No, no! No need! Everyone up top is sated, as are we!”

“All are hungry.” The Saristifian was professional. “All need loaves.”

“Stay back, stay back! No room aboard. Big cargoes, big needs, no loaves, no cart, no you.”

“Anyone hungry?” he said, to those waiting for the elevator. As he did so, he gave me the signal.

“No, no, no!” The Prirt all jumped in rage. “Paying customers! Leave them alone. Do not entice them.”

And, despite the fact that this couldn’t have been the first time he’d tried this—that was, after all, why they were so mad at him—the Prirt males had their attention focused entirely on the Saristifian as he walked slowly toward them, banging his cart.

I did my best to keep my motions smooth, so as not to attract anyone’s eye. As I got to the spot he had indicated, I broke the loaf. Around me I could hear the crackle of security channels, and could see the grainy flicker of laser spotters. Prirt tended to stick to classic technology.

The reproduction shelter vibrated at a low frequency I could feel through my feet. Prirt females don’t talk, or, at least, don’t use any of the standard traffiqs. Their concerns are inward and deep.

Fortunately those concerns seemed to include a freshly baked Saristifian loaf. All the security seemed to vanish at once, and the air was clear. I stepped forward and slid the loaf into a small door that opened in the house.

I skittered back as fast as I could and rejoined the Saristifian. Lasers flickered again.

The Prirt already knew something was up. “No, no. Not proper. Disrupts reproductive plans. Too many infants already . . .”

Because at that point the female that had taken the loaf sent out an even deeper vibration that indicated a need for genetic material. “Would any of you gentlemen . . . ?”

A male Prirt could no more resist that signal than they could resist falling if dropped off a cliff. Even if it was impossible, even if the female was protected, they had to try. So the loaves were also a Prirt aphrodisiac.

The males hesitated, then ran for the reproductive house en masse. It was a total breakdown of societal norms. Even I knew that, because I like to know which societal norms I’m breaking before I do it.

Like the Prirt in that moment, I still do it, because sometimes I just don’t care.

“Please, please.” The Saristifian wrestled the cart into the elevator, which had come down and opened during all the excitement. After a moment’s hesitation, the others crowded in, giving me and the Saristifian a good amount of elbow room.

So I did not scam the Prirt into giving me a free elevator ride, but only because I slipstreamed in behind a scammer more comprehensive and great-souled than I could ever hope to be.

\* \* \*

The wind was stiff up at the top, and I suddenly felt totally exposed. I was above everything but the Architon pier, and the city opened out around me.

The Saristifian had hustled off with his loaves, having mysterious clients up here, hidden amid the rocks. Well-paying ones, presumably, given the effort he'd taken in getting up here. He'd let me go, though, with a cheery "thanks for the assistance!" I'd be careful to keep in touch with him. Maybe someday, when he wasn't stimulating Priirt mating reflexes, he'd let me have a bite.

Ahead of me, the ground vanished into the dark chasm that separated this butte from my target: the one Ferrulin had leased for the mysterious cleaners. From here, I could see large, skeletal structures looming on it, purpose unknown. They could have been there for centuries. That spot didn't get much traffic. And it didn't look like the cleaners had gotten there yet.

I stepped forward . . . and stopped. The map showed a walkway from here to there, and there actually was one: mesh, maybe two feet wide, without handrails or other protection, swaying in the rising wind.

The cables supporting it stretched up until they vanished from sight. The curving part of the Architon pier was directly above me, and if I looked up for too long, it seemed to be falling over on me, causing me to almost lose my balance.

The cables presumably attached up there somewhere. No way to tell. Plus, a couple of hundred feet up, a lot of the view was blocked by what looked like masses of colored balloons: Sosh dwellings, dangling by monofilaments from the support cables. Sosh were an aerial nation, both fragile and clumsy, and preferred to live in out-of-the-way places where they weren't always running into the solid structures other nations insisted on putting up everywhere.

I tried stepping out on that walkway. It was the only way to get to my destination. Each time I did, it seemed that the wind gusted harder. The whole thing looked purely symbolic, a marker in the sky showing where eventually something you could walk on would be built. I never got farther out than a few feet before scurrying back.

This amused the group of Sosh who dangled beneath the lowest set of bubbles. They hooted mock encouragement at me:

"Bounce, bounce!"

"Up and over."

"Brachiate!"

Somehow, a distorted story of Oms' evolutionary past had made it into the city's popular culture, and we were constantly mocked for our inability to swing through tree canopies.

Screw them. I stared at the dangling walkway and waited for a drop in the wind, when I could sprint across.

The Sosh overhead returned to their original activity, eating lunch. But just eating it didn't satisfy all of their urges. Instead, one by one, they would put their food in a glider about as big as they were, with a wingspan about four feet, and would send it out into the rough wind.

It floated gently, ruffling edges seeming to adjust automatically to the rush of the wind. Then, at some random point, it tilted and dropped down toward the city below. At that instant, one of the Sosh dropped and, shrieking, pursued, finally plucking it out of the sky and eating a piece of lunch on the wing. Then that one brought it back for the next one to have a shot.

More than once the glider slipped past my shoulder, and the pursuing Sosh, without touching me, buffeted me with the current of its passing.

I tried to step out on the walkway again, and one brushed right over my hair, and

I jumped back, earning another chorus of hoots.

But the pursuing Sosh, distracted by its interest in frightening me, had let the glider descend too far before going after it. The Sosh dropped too quickly in pursuit, missed, and let its lunch escape. The glider vanished somewhere below, where, presumably, it would crash and have to be cleaned off someone's balcony. These guys were probably not the most popular people in the neighborhood.

They certainly weren't making a big fan out of me.

This Sosh's buddies shrieked in delight at his clumsiness. He took a calming circle above the city, trying to keep his wings outspread. But Sosh had long ago compromised a raptor's gliding ability with heavier brains, so he finally had to give that up and rejoined the rest.

"Wait!" one of them shouted to me. "Wind will drop."

"Temporarily!" another one said.

"Run run run."

"Brachiate!"

Someone had a species-related obsession, it seemed.

I didn't entirely trust them. Still, they probably weren't trying to kill me, either. So, instead of trying again immediately, I waited.

Five minutes later they all yelled, simultaneously, "Now!"

With ridiculous trust I launched myself at the walkway. And, what do you know, the wind died just as my feet hit it. I moved smoothly and quickly. The walkway itself was well designed, with a grippy surface. I just had to ignore the fact that there was nothing keeping me from falling off if I misstepped. If one of the Sosh wanted to brush me off . . . but they stayed above, watching with interest.

My last few steps were accompanied by a rise in the wind. By the time I had made it to the safety of the highest butte, it was even stronger than it had been before. Sosh had a great sense of localized weather—and Tempest had a wide range of extremely localized conditions, from rainstorms in one spot to hanging glaciers in shaded clefts. I glanced back. They seemed to have lost interest in me and had settled down for a comfortable nap, hanging under their homes.

\* \* \*

A lot of the Sosh gliders littered the rocky soil of the butte. Several of them were really big, with a wingspan more like ten feet. Maybe those were from group dinners, or long-distance competitions, with Sosh from other parts of the city.

The skeletal structures loomed above me, ten feet high and more, their purpose no clearer now that I was right next to them. Their crudely welded joints, and the differences between them, implied that they were one-offs, each made for a specific purpose and recently. Much older, and they would have shown signs of rust.

The sky had grown darker. Clouds were forming, not too far above me. The shadows made this place solemn and lonely.

Then I heard a heavy crunch on the butte's other side. I'd beaten my mysterious quarry up here. Now I'd finally know who they were. They came into view.

These people were low-slung and exoskeletal, no more than a yard long, with large, cumbersome heads, on which they had attached various types of equipment, from spotting lasers to support brackets. They moved in synchrony, together pushing a big-wheeled pod up to each of the metal frames and opening them up.

From other descriptions of encounters with Brune, I'd expected a vile smell, but, if anything, what came out smelled of flowers and grass, and even that faintly. Using long poles, they maneuvered gigantic cloaks and other garments onto their frames. Each frame seemed custom made for its garment.

"Who are you?" I yelled above the wind to the one with the most elaborate headgear, including what looked like a high-powered laser.

"Leased land," he said. "Private."

"Just tell me," I said. "I'll go. Just a name. Anything"

But he had lost interest in me and was supervising the placement of the Brune garments. And the garments were indeed incredible. Anikee hadn't been kidding about that. Each one would cover a creature easily eight or ten feet high and nearly as wide. Metal embroidery glistened in elaborate patterns amid tufts of dyed hair. Thick multiple folds with crystal inclusions marked where the Brune had projecting joints they felt worth emphasizing.

But those were just the outer mantles. I could also see layers and layers of inner garments, in contrasting colors and textures. Each vied with the others in magnificence.

But what were these guys actually up to? They arranged the garments on the metal frames, one to a frame. Then they attached sharp metal points so that they jutted above the clothing. Was that to prevent the Sosh from trying to land and steal the clothes? I hadn't seen any of them come over here. They certainly hadn't bothered to recover their gliders.

I was realizing something. Despite the mild odor, these things were toxic. A mere puff from one made me double over, retching. My eyes burned, and then I coughed viciously. I scrambled to get upwind as much as I could.

Alarms. I remembered Anikee mentioning the alarms, at Ferrulin. I hadn't let her finish that story.

I couldn't see how they were planning to clean the garments, though, or why they had hauled them all the way up here. The gusts had increased, now strong enough to stir even the heavy clothing. The clouds had thickened to a dark mass, and now pushed close. A few spatters of rain beaded on the various garments.

A growing buzz, and my hair floated upward. What . . . ? The biggest mantle flared. The bolt of lightning blinded me, and the thunder of inrushing air knocked me off my feet. I rolled about ten feet, and finally managed to stop myself in a small hollow.

As I poked my head up, I saw coronas streaming from what I could now see were lighting rods. I was in trouble.

A series of bolts hit various frames. The cleaners stood still and watched the lightning vaporize the toxics in the clothes. This was the most dangerous laundromat I'd ever been in. Whether or not I had learned what I needed to, I had to get out of here.

There was a moment of calm. I knew better than to think it would last. The sky was black all over, flickering with internal discharge. The lead cleaner stood aside from the rest and split its attention between the sky and me.

I ran for their path down. Maybe I could wait there, in a safe spot, and interrogate them as they came down. I should have thought of that in the first place. I dodged past a rock outcrop . . . and skidded to a halt.

A cliff dropped away at my feet. The trail down was at least ten feet away across the chasm. There was no way across. How—?

Then I saw it: a collapsible bridge, now neatly stacked right at the edge. They had made their own passage across the gap I had seen in Siboo's office, then pulled it in so that no one would be tempted to follow . . . and end up in the kind of shit I was now in.

There wasn't going to be enough time to crank it back out again.

I needed help. I ran back up.

"We are Remediators," the leader said, presumably because he didn't want me to die with that question unanswered. Then he turned his head. A flicker of laser, and a lightning bolt struck the ground next to him. He changed angles slightly. Another flicker, another bolt.

"I have to get out of here!" I screamed.

He flashed, and two bolts hit at once, so bright everything was now covered with a

vast purple spot. I had dropped to my knees.

“Be done soon,” he said. “But they come too quick for control. We are Remediators. Yes? You asked.”

I had. He was doing his best, using what had to be an ionizing laser to guide bolts where he wanted them. But it was a dangerous game, and one he would eventually lose. The cloud could generate a lot more lightning than he could control.

That is, I would lose. They didn't seem to mind thousands of volts shooting through their bodies. Maybe it was something you had to get used to gradually.

Imminent death inspired me. I scuttled toward where I had come from, barely able to see, until I found the largest and most complete of the Sosh gliders. It had held a big meal, though I doubt it had been as big as me. There weren't a lot of choices, and the only one I had left was to fly.

The glider was clumsy, but surprisingly light. I held it up, angled it into the wind, getting a feel for how to maneuver it. It twisted in my hands like something alive, and I sensed it had some decent processing power. I couldn't fit inside it, so I would have to hang underneath, without a harness or any other support—a wind gust almost knocked me off my feet, and the butte itself, while I was figuring things out.

That was followed by three quick bolts, the last of which I felt in my teeth. The head Remediator made a buzzing noise, and I sensed even he was reaching his limits.

No point in waiting around to get fried. I took a breath, lifted the glider over my head, and ran. The wings caught the air, and I was airborne, hanging under it.

It responded smoothly to my movements. A slight tug and it tilted. I dropped down over the vastness of Drur Reef, seeing its various layers, the structures on it, the elevator, the Priirt village—had they finished mating or were there still free elevator rides for all?—then realized I was getting too near to the Reef's cliffs. One touch of my wing tip and I would tumble down. I pulled just slightly to my right, already feeling my shoulders burning, and skimmed past the rocky outcrops.

Then I was in sunlight, Mesklitch rooftops below me. My ears rang, purple spots still obscured most of what I should have been seeing. That storm was only over the high buttes.

Suddenly, there was shrieking all around me. The entire flock of delighted Sosh had decided to join me in my maiden voyage across the city's debatable sky. They were careful not to come too close, though they did jostle each other, partly friendly, partly competitive. “Go, go, go!” they yelled.

“Brachiating!”

At least my evolutionarily obsessed friend had gotten what he wanted.

The Sosh were still yelling all around me when the wings automatically tucked to give whoever was in pursuit some sport, and I fell out of the sky.

\* \* \*

My fall was broken by an abandoned Mesklitch brood shelter. The thing was just layers of foam, after all. I was out for a couple of minutes, and a couple of minutes later a brisk Mirquell appeared and directed a mixed group of Oms and Mesklitch in carrying me down and out. Not to her house, but to Jaenl's, who seemed to have become resigned to taking care of things for Mirquell.

They laid me out in front of the house, like some kind of display. I was quite the tourist attraction for a few minutes, but I didn't move much, so people quickly lost interest.

“Remediators,” Mirquell said, after I made my report. “Excellent. They keep themselves private, so not so easy. But, just so you know, I'm not paying you anything extra for the drama of your entrance.”

“Knowledge delivered with grace,” Jaenl said. “That should be worth something.”

“It isn't,” Mirquell grated.

When I turned my head the world spun. I groaned and decided against sitting up just yet.

"Do you need anything else, you poor thing?" Jaenl said.

"If you have some spare sense, bring it on out," Mirquell said.

"If we had that, would we be living here?"

"Oh," Mirquell said. "How about a chair?"

"I don't think she's ready to sit up."

"It's for me."

Jaenl sniffed, but did as she was bid.

"Lightning." Mirquell turned in her seat and looked up at the highest butte. "Nice way to get serious energy to vaporize some toxic waste." The clouds were still thick up there, but the lightning seemed to have stopped. "Looks like these Remediators follow a recurrent storm through the city to do their business."

Pieces of my mind were coming back online. For a few minutes I hadn't even known what had happened to me.

Now I was wondering at how far I'd gone just to ID some laundry workers for this woman. I half hoped my brains were totally scrambled, and I was just remembering that wrong.

"A couple of questions," Mirquell said. "Ready?"

"I—"

"The specific Brune whose clothes are getting cleaned are from Shrivis."

"Yes."

"They need to come out of their covert because someone threatens the integrity of their underground structure, there in Shrivis, and the only way to prevent it is to come out, in person, for a zoning meeting."

"Yes."

"Only they can't, because their entire wardrobe is toxic, lousy with organometallics—arsenic, mercury, cadmium, the works, and they'd kill pretty much everyone else at the meeting if they attended."

"Really? I know I felt—"

"Really. You should have a real doc look at you, and soon. You escaped most of it, but you do have some blistering, and you probably inhaled some. Now, I'm just guessing about the specific compounds. Maybe there's no cadmium. But whatever it is, it'll kill anyone in an enclosed space."

"Good thing I was . . ." I stopped. "Say that again."

"I don't say things twice. You heard me."

"If I'd run into them in the tunnel . . ."

"Their original route, right? The route they leased."

"Yes."

"But which they didn't use. Why not?"

"They didn't use it," I said. "So instead of running into them down there, I had to chase them up to the butte."

"You already told me that. I don't like hearing things twice either."

Maybe I had, but I hadn't really thought about what that might mean. Of course, the pods were sealed. The pods were sealed. Maybe that made a difference.

Maybe that would have protected me if I'd run into the Remediators down in the tunnel, as I originally intended. They had clearly gone through a lot of trouble to ensure they did not run into anyone during their journey up. Those kinds of toxins were never safe.

Could Anikee have intended that? Given me a chance to get poisoned underground? That hamper had sometimes been quite smelly. But, instead, I'd almost gotten killed by lightning! I should drop her a note, let her know how it all worked out.

And say I was sorry. She wouldn't hear it, now, but at least I would have said it.

Mirquell wasn't interested in any thoughts aside from those relevant to her goals. "Please answer the question."

She'd be irritated if I asked her to repeat it, so I ran the conversation back in my head. "I don't know why they didn't use the original, leased route, but I presume it was because Zinter blew part of the tunnel up, trying to kill bugs."

"That was *his* story. But we know who he was really working for, don't we? The Case." She smiled at me. I was already growing to dislike that expression. "Well, Sere, dear, you could have come to me with this conclusion and earned a nice payout, but, instead, you came to me with a box of pieces, which I had to assemble myself."

I stopped myself from saying anything. Who Zinter was really working for . . . "You think the Case hired Zinter specifically to alter the route the Remediators were taking with the Brune garments? What for?"

"Not alter it. Block it. He screwed up. They were supposed to be completely blocked. They made it anyway."

"You think the Case have a reason to prevent the Brune from attending the zoning meeting?"

"I'm certain of it. It's the only conclusion that fits the available facts. You had all the facts, but the conclusion . . ."

"Is yours," I said.

"Right."

There was something about it that bugged me, but maybe what really bugged me was that she would be so eager to get out ahead of me, and even more eager to prove she was smarter than me, and even *more* eager not to pay me extra. I'd just fallen out of the sky, dammit. I deserved at least some kind of break.

"So what are you going to do now?" I said. "Take over Zinter's job? Block the route completely so that the Remediators can't do their final load?"

"Never mind what I'm going to do," Mirquell said. "You did a fine job. Not as good as you might have, but totally adequate." She levered herself out of her seat. "I can always use someone . . . adequate."

And with that, she was off, presumably to score some explosives so that she could completely demolish that tunnel, and drop the path above it as well, so that no one could get through. Just in hopes that the Case would like her for it.

I wanted to tell her the Case didn't even know she was alive.

I sat up. I was in pain, but I was hungry. Eating would distract me from the pain. I reached into my backpack for a bar . . . and felt something gross. I grabbed it and pulled out a dead bug, legs hanging limp.

"Hey!" Jaenl said. "You killed one. That's more than poor Zinter managed."

I looked at it. I remembered flicking away one that had fallen into my hair. It must have landed in the bag. I had been too busy to look in it since. But how had I managed to kill it?

Maybe that Saristifian had seen it, clinging somewhere behind me, and had thought it was just a personal affectation. What had he said? "He learned to track them, these things. As a sign of prey." At that point the bug had been alive.

And that called to mind that Mirquell had told me, right off, that Zinter had originally trained as an Extirpator, one of those romantic hunters after escaped predators and other dangerous creatures. She had presumed his explosives knowledge had come from that time. And that the inadequacy of that knowledge probably accounted for why he had come to such a bad end.

"Either of you talk to Zinter much?" I asked.

"Oh," Jaenl said. "That would be Kiff."

"What?" Kiff said from the window. I wondered if the two of them had anything to

say when they were in the same room.

"Zinter was formerly an Extirpator?" I said.

"That's what he told me," Kiff said. "He apprenticed with someone famous, or Zinter said he was famous. Guy name of Proffur."

"Why didn't he finish out his apprenticeship?"

"He said it was because Proffur was a has-been. He was down in a hole out in Kremmid . . . and if you know Kremmid, you know that's pretty low."

"The neighborhood has its charms," I said. "Though they can be hard to find. Yeah, I know Kremmid." I knew the neighborhoods of Tempest mostly by what was buried in them. Time I figured out what was alive in them.

"But I think it was because Proffur had some standards. Don't get me wrong, Zinter was kind of a charming guy. But he was the victim of his own bad decisions. Fought with Proffur, didn't learn everything he should have. I mean, Proffur's expertise was spoor, the traces beasts leave. You know, droppings, parasites, bits of hair, that kind of thing. So what does Zinter do when he's on his own? He gets a job dealing with *spoor* itself."

"You certainly spent a lot of time jabbering with him." Jaenl was unexpectedly waspish. "With a loser."

"He could be interesting to talk to."

Suddenly that stupid dead man seemed like the most intimate person in this whole business. Someone who thought he was smarter than he actually was, refused to take advice, and didn't pay quite enough attention to all the important details, a neglect that ultimately killed him.

Yeah, I knew him. Or someone a lot like him.

I also knew, I thought, that he had had much bigger ambitions than killing bugs. And that the Case had no way hired him for some elaborate scheme to prevent Remediators from doing their toxic laundry.

He'd been trying to be an Extirpator, without really knowing how.

\* \* \*

It took me a couple of days to locate Proffur, odd for an Extirpator. After all, whatever his current target was, it was part of his advertising. He should have wanted to be found.

Proffur's current project was in the worst part of Kremmid, the part even natives of the district disdain: the Slump, where old mine works had collapsed, leaving a rumpled, dangerous, and unattractive area.

But he didn't respond to a message, so I finally headed out to see him in person. Mirquell had been prompt in her payment, and for a wonder, instead of blowing the cash, I used most of it to get caught up on my rent. Almost, anyway.

He was not only in the Slump, but *underground* in the Slump, in the old workings. I wandered around for a bit before finding the sleeping tent, cooking shelter, and dehydrating toilet that was his camp.

Just past that was the old adit leading into a ridge, lit by dim bacterial glow bulbs long overdue for a shot of sugar. As I went, it just got darker and quieter. Was I going to have a career of dark tunnels?

I was just about to give up when I saw the flicker of brighter light ahead. I slid my feet forward carefully, cautious of some unseen pit. Not too much further on, the adit opened out into a much larger space, so dark its extent was unknowable. A set of spidery metal stairs led downward—to where white light showed a motionless shape lying with its face against a black rock wall.

\* \* \*

I clattered down the stairs as loud and present as I could. Proffur looked like an Om, but a bit bigger and heavier: a Hanten, wearing a thick jacket and headphones.

I waited. It was quiet for a long while, until he said: "Stop staring at me."

Unless this Extirpator had no enemies, he was too confident.

"Oh, for—" He pulled off his headphones and sat up to face me. He was immensely tall, seven feet or so, and his knees jutted up like towers. His face loomed over me. Hanten faces were large to an Om, with craggy forehead, massive jaws, and large, disconcerting eyes set wide apart. "Who are you?"

"My name is Sere Glagolit. I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"Why should I answer them?"

"I hear you're an expert on spoor."

He bared large teeth. "And what spoor brought you to this place, Sere?"

I pulled out the bug I'd found in my backpack and handed it to him. He looked down at it as it rested on his palm.

"There is something deep underneath here," he said. "It only moves once a day, if that. Maybe something forgotten in storage at the spaceport has hatched out and is now worming its way through. There can be layers of loose and soft rock, even far underneath a seemingly stable city. Where did you get this?"

"These have been infesting a neighborhood. Drur."

"When I kill that thing down there—and believe me, I will—no one will ever know. Maybe someone will dig out its remains thousands of years from now and wonder how it died. Is that the purest kind of kill, do you think?"

"Sounds absurd, actually."

"It might keep climbing up if I don't take care of it. It may be half a mile long. It doesn't have any reason to care about any of us on the surface. It might just . . . splash around. Annihilate everything you know."

I couldn't tell if he was serious, crazy, or just trying to distract me with an irrelevant truth. Hanten were hard for Oms to read, and they knew it. But how easy were we for them? They never let on. "Maybe it's just the distraction we need. Something to focus on."

He dangled the bug between two thumbs, and I took it back.

"What do you have to do with the Case?" he said.

I'd had the pleasure of solving minor puzzles while beating the hell out of myself. But this feeling, where two seemingly unrelated pieces suddenly slid together, was what told me I had finally found the right line of work.

"Nothing, I don't think," I said. "I've certainly never run into one. They never come out, do they?"

"You saw others of these segmented invertebrates. Did they all look alike?"

I thought about it. Near Jaenl's house, yes, all pretty similar. But elsewhere . . . "I saw a couple in a higher location. Those had full shells, dark in color. And they were dead."

"Ah. It has moved then. Lower down, it seems like. These parasites don't move far once they fall from their host. And they usually lack everything they need to develop much further, so they die."

"Their host?"

He settled back against the wall. "Even I know little about the Case. But I do know that they sometimes have . . . a kind of pet, I suppose, though the relationship is much more significant than that. I happen to think that the Case brought their most feared predator into their own nests but never fully domesticated it. The creature's been called a Soot by some, so I'll use that too.

"Soots pick up a lot of diseases and parasites, and when they get infected they lose whatever partial domestication they have and can cause a lot of damage in a Case. They see it as possessed, as bringing a real spiritual darkness with it, and try desperately to kill it. They lack the skill of death. And the Soot are tough, proof against

most conventional weapons, explosives, high energy, serious toxins, anything. Now, a Soot might be able to cure itself, given the right resources. Various things will kill the parasites before they kill the Soot. But the Case get frantic and usually just manage to drive it out. But they still want it dead. It is an almost spiritual threat to them. If they had the sense they would hire . . . wait. Wait a minute."

I'd been hoping to get information without letting out any in return. But Proffur was an Extirpator. Spoor. He knew the information I had dropped was a sign of something else.

"Zinter! Poor Zinter. He was never that good. I might have made him adequate. But he quit me, quit the business, said Kremmid wasn't to his taste. As if I picked it for its pleasures. You go where your prey takes you. But perhaps he was a bit smarter than I had given him credit for. . . ."

He was figuring things out. I could see that. And faster than me, because he knew Zinter, knew his history, knew what decisions he might have made. He now knew that Zinter had been hunting something, in Drur. The fallen parasites indicated a creature called a Soot, important to the Case. I'd thought I was getting information from him, and he'd ended up getting a lot more from me.

Still, maybe he wasn't sure if he'd squeezed me dry yet. Drur was big. Just through dumb luck I hadn't blabbed the specifics of the tunnel, the fresh parasites down below. . . . Maybe I could at least distract him a bit by giving him a more specific location that had the virtue of being wrong.

"He never managed to get rid of them," I said. "They are still all over. I mean, there's a whole *new* infestation, in a different spot. How do you kill them? We're pretty desperate, I have to say."

He considered me. I did my best to show only frantic confusion, like someone so focused on the parasites that were driving her crazy that she was missing the important thing their presence revealed.

"The parasites aren't easy to kill," he said. "At least for a nonprofessional. You need a ridiculous amount of energy. Massive electrical discharges, ionization, high heat, things like that. No biological counteragents as far as I know. Where are they now?"

"All over Mesklitchtown! Just within the last few days. No one up there expected that. Massive electrical discharges . . . I don't even know how I would do that. Do you know an exterminator that could handle it? Someone you could recommend? And quick. I need someone tomorrow."

He considered this. "I don't know of anyone with the right skills."

I waited.

"It's a specialized situation, these parasites. Perhaps I could come up, make a more thorough diagnosis. I would be happy to."

*I'll bet you would.* I was certain he'd be heading up to Drur anyway, armed for Soot. Then *he* could make a deal with the Case.

Was there a good reason not to just let him do it? Yes, there was. That Soot was *mine*. Not his, not Mirquell's. I knew only Mirquell had the resources to deal with it, but I'd found it. I knew exactly where it was, in the lower tunnel of Drur Reef. I didn't know if it headed up in that direction to purposely do it, but I knew how it could cure itself. Lightning bolts. The poor thing was trying to get at its parasites, and everyone, from Zinter to the Remediators, seemed to be trying to keep it from getting up there.

I'd given him a lead to the wrong location, and indicated, as much as I could, that I was clueless, and that there was really no reason for him to hurry. The thing had been up there for weeks, after all. No one had any idea it was there.

It took every ounce of self control I had to lounge back and ask him some clueless question about whatever it was snaking through the rock below us. He talked, but

reluctantly, his answers clipped and monosyllabic. He was anxious to prepare to hunt Soot, and he wasn't doing much to hide it.

Finally I took mercy on both of us and stood up. "See you tomorrow. Ten? Meet me at the base of the hill, I'll show you where things are bad."

"Make it a bit later. I have some preparations to make."

"Sure!"

I felt his eyes on me as I climbed back up the stairs. Just as I got to the top, a deep boom shook the walls, making the stairway rattle.

I turned and looked down at him. Even with this sign that his prey might really be down there somewhere, Proffur was up, briskly packing up the various instruments and tools he'd been using to track it. He had bigger, or at least more profitable, game to chase now.

\* \* \*

Kiff leaned out of the window. "Jaenl's gone."

"Where?" I wondered if Kiff ever left his house.

"With Mirquell. Somewhere."

When I got to Mirquell's house, however, it was shut up and empty. The table and chairs were gone. I stood there, blood pounding in my ears. I had no doubt that Proffur would be here soon, no matter what ostensible appointment we had for tomorrow morning. If I'd distracted him properly, he'd poke around Mesklitchtown for the parasites before . . . I saw what was going on below.

Part of it, anyway. The patio only caught part of the view of the spot where the Remediators had crossed once they had abandoned the tunnel—the tunnel where I was persuaded the Soot now hid.

The fact that I wished, at that moment, for a glider, should have told me how crazy I was. Instead, I slid down the steep path below Mirquell's, up into Drur Reef, and up to the spot where I had met the Saristifian. It was now so packed with people of various nations that there was no room to move. I shoved my way through anyway.

The Remediators were gathered in a bunch with their pods, shuffling aimlessly. Mirquell stood where the path narrowed, facing my friend with the laser head. Mirquell shook her head, spoke slowly and clearly.

"While the rest of your route is properly leased by Ferrulin, they did not lease this one. I have. And I will not give you access."

"We must take these up," the leader said. "Soon."

"I told you, you can't. I will not grant permission."

"You wish payment? Shaking down?"

"A nice idea, but no. You can't afford it."

The Remediator wasn't large, maybe three feet long, but it did have a laser. That wasn't of much use in the negotiation.

Despite myself, I admired Mirquell's quick use of the legalities. Ferrulin had leased the Remediators a concealed and secure route up to the butte where the lightning storms hit. But when Zinter tried to kill the Soot—and I was positive now that that had been his goal—he had made that route impassable for them. I thought it was the detonation, but not directly. It had frightened the Soot into the lower part of the tunnel, right where the Remediators were to pass. That made them apprehensive. Anxious to do their work, they had been unwise, and not had Ferrulin renegotiate for the alternate route. It was kind of waste ground: who would care? And no one ordinarily would have.

But Mirquell had somehow gotten the ownership information and obtained a lease for herself. Or maybe she was just making it up. Who knew, with her?

I saw my Saristifian in the crowd, who gave me a wave, a few of the Prirt, who did not, and Jaenl. All were intent on the discussion, as if they had a stake in it. And,

since this was their neighborhood, I guess they did.

Mirquell glanced at me as I came up. "What are you doing here?"

I glanced up toward the heights. Clouds were gathering on the highest butte. No wonder the Remediators were anxious.

"You offered an escalator for what Zinter was doing. Then you reached a conclusion, and took it yourself."

"That's right," she said. "Thanks for summarizing so clearly."

"Only your conclusion was wrong. Maybe the Case care about whether the Brune make it to the zoning meeting, or, more likely, they know nothing at all about it. It's irrelevant."

Mirquell waved me off, not even looking at me. "This is no time for another theory of how the Case behave. Aren't you the one who less than a week ago knew nothing at all about them?"

"What I do know is that Zinter wasn't here to stop the Remediators from getting their work done. That was just collateral damage. You know the Case better than anyone. Have you ever heard of a Soot?"

That caught her attention. She didn't like it, but she turned to look at me. "It's a ceremonial pet the Case have. Or are rumored to have, at any rate."

"It's more than a rumor. There is at least one. Infected, crazed—and on the loose."

"And how do you know this?"

"Do you really want me to list all my sources? The Soot got infected with a parasite, broke out of the Shrivis Case, and managed to hide itself here, probably because it was hoping to get up to the lightning storm and cure itself. Zinter got hired as a pest exterminator. He recognized the pest he was supposed to get rid of as a Soot parasite. That meant an escaped Soot was hiding somewhere nearby. That gave him enough information to contact the Case in Shrivis and get hired by them to eliminate their former pet, which they now feared more than anything else. But Zinter wasn't the man for that particular job. In trying to kill it, he only managed to kill himself."

"And you, what, think you know where it is?"

"I know exactly where it is." I swallowed. "In the lower tunnel. I was standing right under it." I remembered that parasite falling into my hair. If I had looked up . . . well, I might have solved it all earlier, or I might be dead. Interesting set of possibilities.

Mirquell stared at me. Then she looked up the slope, to the butte where a storm was only a few minutes from breaking.

"Leasing this parcel took everything I had left," she said.

"Are you saying you won't pay me for the escalator we agreed on?"

Mirquell smiled. Her mouth looked better frowning. "This isn't enough for that, Sere."

"What?"

"It's plausible, I'll admit that. But I don't pay on mere plausibility."

I looked around at the crowd. The Remediators, miserably hunched together, just wanted to do their job. That's all any of us really wants to do. Our job. Everyone else watched, not taking sides.

"When I was putting these facts together, I interviewed the Extirpator who trained Zinter. A Hanten named Proffur. I learned what I needed to, but he in turn learned that there is a Soot on the loose somewhere in Drur. He won't pass up that opportunity. Unlike Zinter, he's unlikely to fail."

"Oh, for—this is great, just great. What the hell were you thinking? Why can't anyone around me do the simplest . . . damn it. Damn it to hell."

Mirquell ranted and swore, exactly as if I was her employee and had just told her of a major screw-up. I *had* felt bad about tipping off Proffur, no matter how in-

escapable that had really been. Now I didn't.

"What does it matter?" I said. "No Soot, no problem."

"Because I saw Proffur, dammit," Mirquell said. "Big Hanten, some kind of blunderbuss on his back, charging through Mesklitchtown like a madman. Your Extirpator. No doubt." She paused. "What was he doing up there, when the Soot is down here?"

"I gave him some false information. That will only slow him down, though."

"That's something, at least." She glanced up toward her house. "He'll spot us, if nothing else. If I could have your attention?" The crowd fell silent. "If everyone could just go about their business, I would appreciate it. We'll have an informational party later. And you guys." She addressed the Remediators. "If we get your help, you can get up to get your laundry done."

It was Proffur who had put me over the edge with Mirquell. Would she ever have believed me if he hadn't shown up?

"My escalator . . ."

"Yes, yes. Don't be tiresome, Sere. I can already see that's a personality flaw. You earned your escalator. Now let's get that Soot."

\* \* \*

Somewhat to my surprise, Mirquell gave up her property rights and sent the mass of Remediators on their way. They tore up the path, pods bouncing behind them. Their leader remained with us as we descended into the tunnel.

"Tunnel was a necessity," it told me. "Not our environment. A tunnel predator . . . dangerous for us. Sensible to just change our route."

They were impervious to lightning and toxins, but the risk of something hunting them through the dark tunnel was enough to frighten them.

What babies.

I led us to where I had been standing when I felt the parasite fall on me . . . where I thought that was, anyway. We searched the complex ceiling with our lights. Several times we thought we saw something. Each time it turned out to be a leftover piece of equipment, or just a shadow.

I heard Mirquell breathing hard next to me. I was breathing hard myself. I tested my chain of conclusions. Had I really gone wrong somewhere along the way?

I moved to get another angle of view.

"You should look down," Mirquell said quietly. "You really should."

I did, and froze.

I stood on the rim of a small pit. Not deep enough to really fall into. But deep enough to partly conceal the Soot.

Because that was what it had to be: a serpentine creature with dozens of legs, maybe a dozen feet long, and two feet thick, its head turned toward us.

It opened a mouth that revealed two sets of crisscrossing teeth. It looked dusty, sick—but its teeth were still a bright yellow, seeming to glow in the darkness. In the light of my headlamp, I saw a couple of the parasites clinging to it. Eventually they too would drop off.

It had been clinging above me. I was sure about that. But maybe it had grown too tired to do even that.

"Let's get this taken care of." While I was examining it, Mirquell had worked her way around to the other side of the pit. She squatted and did her best to pry up a big slab of broken rock. It was too heavy for her. "Get over here and help me with this."

"You want to tip a rock onto its head?" I willed myself not to laugh.

Mirquell paused in her futile, grunting efforts. "The Case want this thing dead. We can't wait around for nature to take its course."

"They want it dead . . . or cured," I said.

"Dead is easier and quicker. This thing is heavy!" Mirquell lost her grip on the slab

and sat back on the ground.

"It should get up to that lightning field to cure itself."

I could see the butte from where we stood. The first few flickers of lightning were visible above it. In a couple of minutes, the rest of the Remediators would come into view and then would head for the last climb up.

"Oh, really?" Mirquell looked disgusted. "Are you going to carry it up there on your back?"

I looked down at the beast in the pit. "It looks like it can still move. It's just been blocked at every opportunity and, sick as it is, has lost the will to act."

"I'm so glad I hired an expert in Soot psychology to explain these things to me. Your Extirpator buddy won't be distracted for much longer." She made another effort to topple the rock and failed again. "This is ridiculous."

"Come on." I talked to the Soot. "They'll let you go. No one will stop you. Head on up there." I pointed. Was that a tiny, distant clap of thunder? Who could tell?

"Now *that's* inspirational," Mirquell said.

"Lightning?" the Remediator leader said, and I remembered his ionizing laser.

"Can you bring it down? Down here?"

He turned his massive head toward the distant butte. A brief flicker of laser and a massive bolt of lightning turned the darkness of the tunnel into more than day. Mirquell howled, I fell backward . . . and the Soot, with a massive effort, humped itself out of its pit.

It moved clumsily, but desperately, its legs whirring in the crumbled dust of the floor. The Remediator ran up the tunnel, getting out of its way, and brought down another bolt of lightning.

That gave it renewed energy, and it ran after him.

Mirquell could make jokes about it, but it really *was* inspiring. It wanted to live. It wanted to be well.

But there was no way that stubby-legged thing was going to get up to the top of the butte, certainly not in time to catch the real energy of the lightning storm. The Remediator could maybe zap it a couple of times. Would that take care of all of its parasites?

"How fatal are toxins to that thing?" Mirquell said, as she puffed down the tunnel alongside me.

"If not an expert on Soot psychology, I guess I was an expert on Soot physiology. Proffur said it was incredibly resistant. Lightning, certainly. Toxins, explosives . . ."

"We'll have to take a chance. Hey, you! Stop the train. Stop now!"

The rest of the Remediators had made it to the head of the tunnel, and were starting up the last slope. The Remediator leader said something to them, and they stopped.

"Get it in there," Mirquell pointed at a pod. "Just get him in, and get it up. It's dead if you can't. Come on! Give me a bolt, right now, and it'll follow."

The Remediators opened the last pod. I immediately felt a burning in my eyes and lungs. Mirquell coughed beside me.

But the leader shot his last laser, the lightning hit the stacked Brune clothing, and the Soot jumped after it. They slammed the lid onto it, and all set off, desperate to get to the top before the storm stopped.

Just as they did that, an outcrop nearby exploded, showering us all with rock slivers. I turned. Was that a glint, somewhere off in Mesklitchtown? Maybe not, but Proffur was certainly there. Too far away to be effective, he had still wanted me to know that he understood that he had been decoyed and scooped.

A detonation like that might have been regarded as hostile, and maybe it was. Still, from Proffur, I thought it was kind of a gesture of respect.

\* \* \*

“No sense . . . in . . . crossing,” I managed between gasps. “It’s too dangerous.” So we stayed on the far side of the chasm, well away from the lightning strikes on the butte.

The Remediators had been too desperate to get to things to remove their temporary bridge. They had swarmed across, into the teeth of the storm, and thrown the last garments on the frames with frantic haste.

Mirquell was breathing so hard she couldn’t speak, and just slumped down at my feet. Still, out of shape or not, the woman had kept going, all the way up after the Remediators. She wanted to keep an eye on the Soot. Her Soot, she thought. And I guessed it really was.

The beast had only just managed to flop itself out of the pod it had ridden in. At least it hadn’t suffocated or been poisoned, though I suppose either of those outcomes would have been fine with Mirquell.

Now it lumbered into the midst of the Remediators. Desperate to use as much of the lightning storm as remained, they paid it no attention.

The lightning found it immediately, and a quick succession of three bolts hit it. For a moment it stood stock still, as if it had been killed, and was staying up solely because of the eddy currents in its nervous system. Then it shook itself all over, a startlingly sinuous movement, and rolled across the rocks.

Remediators dodged it, sometimes moving into a group to protect a clothing frame. Their leader monitored the Soot carefully. Gusts of wind ruffled the heavy garments, and sheets of rain raised beads on them.

I kept my eyes on it.

When the Soot stood up, it had changed. Not that the lightning had instantly healed it. It was still clearly weak and unable to muster much energy. But it moved like someone who had seen a destination, long anticipated, long deferred. Could you detect optimism in something so different? I thought I could.

At last it stood at a point that stuck out slightly above the surrounding slope and let the lightning strike it repeatedly. Every so often it turned, like someone letting a hot shower hit a particular point of tension, then shook itself, hard. The Remediators rearranged their clothes around it, picking things out of the fabric as the lightning struck.

Then it wriggled and moved various combinations of its many legs. As the lightning hit it, the beast danced.

\* \* \*

The rain had almost dried, though puddles still glimmered here and there in the late Umber-light. The temperature had dropped with the setting of Actin. Mirquell had packed the still-weak Soot into a pod and had the reluctant Remediators haul it down. She would be trying to make a deal with the Case before the thing regained its strength enough to kill her.

I’d stayed behind. The butte stood alone again. With the Remediator bridge gone, there was no way for me to reach it. I looked out over the City of Storms. Its many neighborhoods, full of dozens of nations, flickered into light as the sky darkened.

There was a slight creak, and the immensely tall figure of Proffur folded itself into approximation of a sitting human next to me.

“Mesklitchtown,” he said. “Nice.”

“It was the best I could do on short notice.”

“Good enough.”

We sat next to each other, watching Umber swell out into a vast red blob as it approached the horizon. How long had he been underground listening to whatever he thought might destroy them all? Was he just going to abandon it?

“She’ll have more trouble with the Case than she anticipates,” he said. “Still, that

was a clever move, letting it cure itself that way. Yours?"

"I like to think so," I said.

"Don't regret not being able to follow up on the idea yourself. If you've captured something too big to handle, whether it's a predator or an idea, it's perfectly reasonable to get help or trade it. Things like that take way more skill and effort to subdue than people think. Sometimes trying to hold on to it yourself is the worst thing you could do."

I was startled by how much of a relief that was. Because, yes, Mirquell would realize the vast bulk of whatever profit there was from capturing the Soot. And I had been wondering if I had been a fool not to try to grab it for myself.

He was right, of course. I didn't have what it took. Not the resources, not the capabilities. Not yet. And Mirquell owed me the escalator fee for figuring out Zinter. She'd tried to scoop me. But she'd been wrong. I'd been right. Profitably right. And I knew she would pay me. Even if it bankrupted her, she would pay.

And we'd be working together again. She was annoying, no doubt. But real opportunities often were.

I felt good, better than I had in a long time. Oh, my body was a wreck, bruised and bleeding. Still, like the Soot, I felt like I had been cleansed with lightning.

"If I ever run into a job that would benefit from someone of your skills, I'll be sure to let you know," I said.

Hanten don't really laugh, but they have a kind of wide-eyed moon face they make when something is instructively contradictory. He made it now. "I was going to make you the same offer. But it seems you know your role better than I know mine."

"Good, good." I had to build a strong network of subcontractors and partners. He was a great start.

Without another word, Proffur got up and vanished down the path. I waited just a bit longer, until Umber was swelling out just at the ridges, and I was shivering with cold, then followed him down.

"After quite a few tries, one of my first short story sales, 'Beneath the Shadow of Her Smile' (April 1985), was to Asimov's. I was not a member of fandom, and really had no idea of how things worked. Since I lived in town, I made it to the 1989 Boston Worldcon, where I managed to run into the Asimov's editorial staff, particularly the charming and helpful Gardner Dozois, who spent quite a while helping me understand the lay of the land. It is very much not Gardner's fault that I still don't really understand it.

"Gardner ended up being the editor for quite a long time, and with him and with Sheila after him, I have done my most worthwhile work. Trying to please an editor can get you into trouble, but trying to impress one is the best way to stretch."

—Alexander Jablokov