

TUNNELS

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Eleanor Arnason's first story appeared in 1973. Since then, she has published six novels and fifty works of shorter fiction. Her novel *A Woman of the Iron People* won the James Tiptree Jr. and Mythopoeic Society Awards. Her novel *Ring of Swords* won a Minnesota Book Award. Other works have been finalists for the Nebula, Hugo, Sturgeon, and Sidewise Awards. Eleanor's most recent books are *Hidden Folk* (2014), a collection of short stories based on Icelandic folklore, and *Hwarhath Stories* (2016), a collection of short fiction set in the universe of *Ring of Swords*. A new edition of *Ring of Swords* came out in 2018. The author lives in the Twin Cities Metro Area. Her current goals are to finish the long-long-past-due sequel to *Ring of Swords* and a collection of Lydia Duluth stories. We are pleased to bring you the latest stand-alone tale about this far-future adventurer.

Lydia Duluth arrived at Innovation City, planning to stay a few days at most. At heart she was a rube, an old word that survived on her home planet, though in few other places. Its original meaning was “an awkward, unsophisticated person, a rustic.” When it was invented, in the distant past of Earth, it had been pejorative.

On her home world, it still meant a rural person, but the connotation was positive. This was hardly surprising. Her world had been settled by back-to-nature conservatives fleeing the nightmare urbanity of Old Earth. To them, “unsophisticated” meant honest, and “rustic” meant solid. To their descendants, “you rube” was a term of affection, and “she’s a real rube!” was praise. After all Lydia’s travels, she still felt uneasy in big cities, and Innovation City was as big as human cities got: a seething metropolis of more than a million people that occupied a series of islands off the planet’s one continent.

She took a hydrofoil from the spaceport, which was on the mainland, and a pedicab to her hotel. The cab was a partly organic robot. An odd experience, to ride in something that pedaled itself while playing a Bach fugue. To Lydia the thing was excessive. But excess was the nature of cities.

She reached the hotel, climbed out, and paid. The cab thanked her with a sonorous run of descending notes, then pedaled off. She went in to the hotel desk. Thank the Buddha, the desk clerk was human: a two-meter tall man with bright green skin and silver eyes. As far as she could tell, he was naked. She wasn’t going to climb over the desk to make certain.

She had a reservation made by her employer, the famous holoplay production company Stellar Harvest. The clerk raised a silver-wire eyebrow when he saw that, but—thank the Buddha again!—didn't ask any questions about the company's many famous actors. One of these was visiting Innovation City at the moment: Ramona Patel, making her debut as a director with a romantic comedy about Krishna disporting himself among the waitresses in a soy milk bar. The comedy was supposed to be sophisticated and urbane, which explained the location and the transformation of milkmaids into waitresses. It wasn't Lydia's kind of drama. The locations she found for the company were used as the exotic backgrounds for action tales.

The clerk input her data, then gave directions to her room. She rode an elevator up the outside of the hotel. The planet's primary was rising, and the eastern sky was a lovely pale pink. Everywhere she looked, tall towers rose. Skyways outlined by electric lights hung between the towers, looking like so many diamond necklaces. As much as she mistrusted cities, she had to admire the view. This was civilization as humans rarely experienced it anymore!

It is impressive, said the AI embedded in her brain. Though not equal to the cities our long-lost makers built. You humans rely on biochemistry too much.

Her room faced west and had a spectacular view of the strait that lay between the city and the mainland. Lydia set down the one bag she carried and used the bathroom. Coming out, she noticed a pot of coffee steaming in the kitchen alcove. She poured herself a cup and walked to the window. The sun was fully up now. Close to the city's shore, the water was dimmed by the long shadows of skyscrapers. Farther out it was bright blue-green, flecked with whitecaps that appeared and disappeared in a slow, relaxing rhythm. Could anything equal water as a source of relaxation?

Not for humans. I suspect you are remembering your original ocean home.

This didn't seem likely to her. It had been a long time since fish crawled out of the ocean and turned into tetrapods.

The planet's one continent was a dark line at the horizon. Although almost empty of humans, it was the reason for the city.

The native life used silicon as well as carbon, as did organisms on other planets: grass on Earth, for example. But the interpenetration of carbon and silicon was far more intimate here, going down to the molecular level, so the life had both strong (carbon) and weak (silicon) chemical bonds, making it flexible, breakable, friable, and as solid as cement. Lydia had not done well in organic chemistry, and she did not understand the details. But she did understand two facts. No amount of gene mod would enable humans to live on the life here; eating it was like eating sand, and ordinary carbon-based organisms—the kinds that lived on most human planets—could survive here, but they didn't thrive and spread. You could plant a test plot and be sure it would not take over the local ecology, and there was no chance that the local organisms would contaminate your test plot. A few might creep in, but they did not interact with organisms being tested. If you planted the test plots far enough apart, there would be no risk of them contaminating one another.

The colony was a research station for BioInnovation, the interstellar biotechnology company. First, BioIn had studied the odd local life forms. Then it made the planet its center for gene mod testing.

She'd found out some of this on her way to the planet, which had been named Grit by its first settlers. It was a silly name, but the interstellar rules for naming meant the planet was stuck with it, though BioIn had been able to change Grit City to Innovation City in honor of itself. The rest of her data came from infotainment ads in the Grit spaceport. BioIn had packed the port with holos showing its history, accomplishments, and plans for the future.

Good ads, taken all in all. She had especially enjoyed the ones that explained

BioIn's plans for the native life. Using carbon-silicon gene mod, a new technology, the company's scientists had already created novelties such as glass bonsai trees. Their goal was to create building materials with genetic programming. Given the right conditions, these would grow into buildings.

There were carbon-based organisms that did this already; the best known were the *Tree House* (TM) brand of prefab housing. But genetically programmed concrete was new.

This was all interesting. But Lydia planned to get off the planet as soon as she delivered her expense report to the Stellar Harvest production accountants. BioIn made her uneasy. She had encountered the corporation on another planet while doing a job for the colleagues of her AI. Was that the right term? Since they were artificial, they couldn't be called a species. Co-workers? Fellow machines? In any case, they built and maintained the stargates that made interstellar travel possible. They had discovered the planet—named Checkerboard—and built a gate next to it, then leased the planet to BioIn. The terms were the usual ones: if intelligent life was found, the lease was void.

There was intelligent life, a very strange kind that interested BioIn. The corporation hid the fact. When the AIs realized something was going on, they asked Lydia to investigate. Why not? She had been between jobs for Stellar Harvest at the time, and the AIs had helped her in the past.

The investigation did not turn out well for BioIn. It lost control of Checkerboard and gained a lot of lawsuits.

Lydia had worked under an alias provided by the AIs, but what if BioIn found out she was the person who had caused them so much trouble? *Hardly likely*, her AI said. *The ID we gave you was convincing.*

Lydia felt a little dubious. But she needed to turn in her expenses, and the nearest S.H. accounting team was here.

She finished the cup of coffee. A small cart arrived with her baggage, which it unloaded with multi-jointed arms. No tip was required, but she said, "Thank you." Politeness was always a good idea, even when dealing with machinery.

The cart said, "Here at the BioInnovation Ritz, it is our pleasure to serve."

It rolled away. She unpacked. An easy task. She always traveled light. Once everything was put away, she poured another cup of coffee. She felt tired, which was usual after FTL, and slightly under the weather. Maybe a cold was coming on. Some people got a cold every time they traveled to a new human world. She was harder than that, but every now and then she encountered a viral strain that had her number.

Well, she thought, she could rest tonight, crawl into bed with a cold tab and a mystery. Tomorrow she would find the Stellar Harvest location crew, turn in her expense report, get paid, and be on her way.

She took a shower and the tab and went to bed, a mystery—the latest Agatha Lima—in her hand. She got as far as turning it on, then fell asleep.

She slept through to the local morning: more than fifteen local hours. Not unusual for her after an FTL journey, and she definitely did have some kind of viral infection. Her head felt stuffed and her eyes scratchy. She took another shower, which helped with the congestion and was a sensual delight. Her last stop had been a planet with water rationing.

The room's com was blinking. It must have rung while she was in the shower. She turned it on. The message was from Wazati Casoon, an old friend. He was with the location crew, watching out for the interests of his brother, the increasingly famous holo actor Wazati Tloo. This was not an easy task. The message said. "Ramona has insisted that Tloo be dyed blue. Krishna is always blue, she says. Tloo wants to keep his natural color, which is—as you know—a glorious shade of gold. If Ramona wants

a blue actor, she ought to hire a blue actor, he has told me. I have pointed out that Stellar Harvest does not have a naturally blue actor who's a good box office draw. Their problem, Tloo says. I have also tried to explain the importance of this role to his career. This is his chance to move away from action roles, to expand his range and the price he can command. He refuses to understand. Meet me for tea this afternoon, and I will complain to you."

She called him back and agreed on a meeting place, then went out to see the city, starting at street level. This was one story above ground—and sea—level. Traffic was a combination of pedestrians, skaters, and pedicabs. The cab sound systems were good. She heard their music only briefly, as they whizzed past: mostly organ music, an occasional calliope. Aside from those brief bursts, she heard human voices and the wind. The world had no birds.

Glass enclosed bridges crossed the channels between the city's many islands. She stopped on each of these. There was something about water, even when hemmed and shadowed by tall buildings. The planet's primary was overhead. The channels shone blue-green. Barges moved slowly through them, looking oddly incomplete without birds or bird analogs wheeling and crying behind them.

She had been on worlds like this before, where most of the life was in the ocean, but her home planet did have animals like birds, and—at some level—she still expected to find them. The Grit mainland had invertebrates, some of them good sized. Aside from these, the only air-breathing animals had come with humanity and lived here in the city. Cockroaches were inevitable. Every human planet had them. There were rats and mice, descended from escaped lab animals. No dogs or cats. BioIn had refused to allow them.

Some people trapped rats and mice and kept them as pets. She'd read that on her journey to Grit.

She had lunch at a sidewalk restaurant. A light meal. She was feeling increasingly congested and hazy. Nonetheless, she continued her exploration of the city. Her mood remained oddly reflective. She thought about the people who trapped rats for pets and about cities and civilization.

At last it was teatime, and she was at the Old English Tea Room. The walls were paneled with dark wood and had aquaria inset. These contained examples of the local flora and fauna: colorless fish, armored with glass, and thin, spiny pseudo-corals, which shone orange in the bright tank lights.

Cas sat at a back table: a tall, slim male with dull gold skin. The crest atop his head was down at present and looked like slicked-back, shoulder length, brown hair. On his home planet he would have worn a robe. Here he had on a silver jumpsuit, its fabric as fluid and shiny as mercury. Data glasses with glowing frames perched on his wide, flat nose.

"Dear Lydia!" He rose and embraced her. His body aroma was peppery, not quite strong enough to make her sneeze. "I've missed you! How have you been? What planets have you scouted? How is your sex life? You *do* have one?"

"That's for me to know." She did not ask about his sex life. She suspected that he had one of some kind, but the topic was forbidden. His species fixed most of their men, keeping only a few for breeding. The intact males—his brother Tloo was one—were physically splendid and hard to deal with, due to far too many hormones. Cas, the rational twin, was a eunuch. While no Golden would be the slightest bit embarrassed by discussing the sex life of a breeding male, the lives of their eunuchs were private.

"Surely you will tell me about the planets?" he asked.

Lydia laughed. "Maybe."

They settled at the table. Cas took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. "They are supposed to conform exactly, but they never do."

"Too few Golden in space," she said. "That's a human design."

“You tell me what I know, and I am edified. Tea? A shot of brandy? Small sandwiches with peculiar toppings?”

She laughed again. “Do you ever change?”

“At the moment, I am aging rapidly. I love my brother, though he is dumb as a brick and stubborn as a *witl*. But he is not making my life easy, and Ramona Patel is a monster.”

She couldn’t argue with the last. Ramona was notorious for her bad temper and indifference to the needs of other sentient beings. But she was a fine actress and a first-rate businesswoman, and—Buddha!—could she sing and dance!

A waitron rolled up. Lydia ordered tea, lemon, honey, brandy, and assorted sandwiches.

“I was jesting about the brandy,” Cas put in. “Are you planning to tear one up?”

“Tie one on or tear up the district,” Lydia said. “I have a cold.”

“Aha. An excuse. I will join you. My excuse is Tloo and Ramona. As bad as a virus, both or either.”

The food came: small sandwiches with peculiar toppings, as Cas had said. Lydia drank her tea with brandy, honey, and lemon. Where did the honey come from? she wondered. Did Grit have bees? She waved the waitron over. “Can you answer questions about this planet?”

“I am a full-service Milton (TM) model waiting machine, programmed to provide idle chatter and useful information. What do you want to know?”

She asked about the bees.

“They exist on this planet. BioInovation imported them to pollinate test plots. They can’t live off the local plants, and stay close to the plot where their hive has been set. There is almost no danger of unplanned pollination.”

“Thank you,” Lydia said. The waitron rolled off. It had sounded almost intelligent to her.

Not really, said her AI. I doubt it could pass a Turing test, let alone the far more sophisticated tests that we have devised. Humanity has never managed to produce artificial intelligence.

“Doubtless the information about bees is interesting,” Cas said. “But I came here to complain.”

She leaned back in her chair and listened to his problems, getting pleasantly buzzed on the brandy. Cas was far more romantic than his gorgeous actor brother. He thrived on drama and intrigue. He had both at the moment, as he tried to keep Tloo and Ramona in line and aimed toward the same end: a finished holoplay.

“Like herding rats,” he said finally. “I should be the director or possibly a producer. This is far more work than an agent should have to do.”

Lydia nodded agreement. It might be a good idea for Cas to move on, but who would manage Tloo then?

They talked about friends in common: Cy Melbourne, who was reaching the end of his career as an action star and wise enough to know it; the squid-like alien K’r’x, who was a rising character actor.

“It’s amazing how well he can express emotions, without having a face,” Cas told her. “It’s all in the motion of the tentacles and delicate changes in color.”

Could K’r’x turn blue? Lydia wondered. If so, he could play Krishna. Of course they’d have to move the story out of the milk bar and into an ocean.

Something, the cold or the brandy, is having an adverse effect on your thinking. That is a silly idea.

The data glasses, still resting on the table, began to flash. Cas put them on and stared at nothing she could see. At length he sighed. “More trouble on the set. It’s been wonderful whining to you, Lydia. I have to go.”

Maybe the brandy had been a poor idea, she thought as she left the tearoom. She was feeling very fuzzy. Time for a nap. She considered hailing a cab, then decided to take a train. Few human cities were big enough for subways. Innovation City was famous for its system, which ran through tunnels in—or was it on?—the ocean floor, linking the most distant island-neighborhoods. Some of the stations had portholes, looking into the ocean. One could stand on the platform and watch glass fish glide over silicon reefs.

She couldn't miss an experience like that. She took an escalator down.

The next floor was devoted to trains. Glowing signs hung overhead. Glowing paths led to the red, green, yellow, and blue lines. She picked red. It was a color she'd always liked. The red path led to a turnstile, which accepted her credit card. She waited on an empty platform.

You don't know this rail system. You aren't used to big cities. You could get lost. Have you looked at a map?

Ridiculous question! Of course she hadn't, as the AI knew.

The train came. She climbed into a car with half a dozen dozing workers wearing safety boots. Genuine proletarians. Her head felt as if it contained a drum rather than an AI. The train glided into a tunnel, moving so smoothly that she felt no motion. The other passengers kept sleeping. The train, evidently an express, sped through several stations where one or two or three people waited on platforms. She got out and found a sign leading to the Innovation deep line. She took an escalator down.

Lydia, said her AI in a firm tone. This is not a normal cold. You are very sick. Call for help at once.

She stopped in front of an emergency phone, but couldn't remember how to use it. There was another escalator going down. She took it. It was necessary—absolutely necessary—that she go as deep as she could.

Another platform, empty except for a trio of street performers, all human and almost naked. Their skins were pastel colored. They juggled balls, using all parts of their bodies, including their bare feet.

Another train. She settled in a car. The street performers joined her, sitting opposite. Their eyes had red pupils.

Her own eyes refused to stay open. As she closed them, letters appeared in front of her lids. GOTCHA, they said in glowing capitals.

Buddha in the western paradise, Lydia thought. The AI was right. This wasn't an ordinary cold. It was influenza, and it had been hacked.

This was the last clear thought she had for a long time.

* * *

Lydia woke. For a while she lay still, staring at a perfect, pitch-black darkness. The air had a dank, closed-in odor. She was on something that felt like concrete: cool, slightly damp, and mostly smooth, but with a touch of grittiness. She had her clothes on, which was a very good sign. Her body ached, but it didn't feel as if she'd been assaulted, except by the damn gene hacker.

She sat up finally and felt the floor around her. Her very expensive, state-of-the-art hologrammic recorder was gone. "Damn," she said out loud and checked her pockets. So were all her cards and her combination chronometer-phone-flashlight-and-personal-care-kit. She could have used it right now.

Robbed, she thought. Her head throbbed, and she was willing to bet money—that she had any—that she had a fever as well as stuffed sinuses. Except for the sinuses, her head felt empty.

AI? she asked.

There was no answer.

She felt the outside of her head, suddenly afraid the AI had been stolen. A crazy idea! Removal would have killed both of them. In any case, her skull was intact.

AI? she asked again.

Again, there was no answer.

She'd left the train with the street performers. She was pretty sure she could remember that. They'd visited taverns; and she'd bought drinks. She'd bought other things as well. She had a dim memory of a store full of glittery jewelry and the pale green performer dancing, holding a gold and jade necklace. The jade had been a perfect match for the performer's skin.

Where was she, anyway?

She climbed to her feet, swayed, reached out, and touched a wall. Like the floor, it felt cool and slightly rough. She waited till her dizziness passed, then moved along the wall, keeping one hand on it. It didn't end, though it seemed to be curving. Could she be sure of that? Not in pitch darkness with influenza.

Lydia stopped finally and put her back against the wall, resting. Then she walked forward carefully, sliding her feet along the floor. After twenty steps, she encountered another wall. She felt along it. Like the first wall, it didn't end and seemed to be curving toward the left.

She sat down and thought. She was in a long, narrow space. A tunnel? Not a train tunnel. It was not wide enough, and she had felt no rail. A pedestrian tunnel, then. But there were no people around. Did she know that for certain? She listened, then called, "Hello?"

No answer.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

What else did she know? Her flu had definitely been hacked. No natural virus would tell its victim, "GOTCHA." The work was sophisticated. It wasn't easy to create a disease that affected volition. She was pretty sure her desire to go down, away from people, came from the flu. So the hacker was probably not a kid with his first biochemistry kit. She'd never heard of these symptoms, which suggested the flu was local and new. Widespread strains of influenza made the information nets. For example, the tap-dancing flu that swept Earth a decade ago. That had been a gene hacker with a strong sense of humor, though it hadn't seemed so funny when some of the older and frailer victims tap-danced to death.

Most human colonies had better public health than Earth and were able to stop hacked infections quickly, though they kept appearing. Boys will be boys and so would many girls. It was another reason to avoid cities. Gene hackers were uncommon on the thinly settled planets. It was easy to track them down, and they were not treated gently.

Her mouth felt dry as a desert. For the first time in years, she was utterly alone.

Hello, she said to the AI. Anyone there? Are you okay? Help?

It did not reply.

Scary, Lydia thought. She rubbed her face, then pushed herself upright. She couldn't stay here in the dark. So. Go left or go right? She picked left and began walking, one hand on the wall.

Without her chronometer, she had no idea how much time passed. She stopped a couple of times to rest. If something didn't happen, she was going to die of thirst. How long could this tunnel be? She had a dim memory of a news bite about tunnels on Grit. They covered the ocean bed around Innovation City. Was that possible?

Finally, she saw a light. As she suspected, she was in a tunnel. The light hung from the ceiling at the end of a concrete stalk, which ended in a flower-shaped glass shade. The bulb inside was dim and yellow. Below the light was a drinking fountain. It flowed out of the floor as if it had grown or been extruded. The top was a shallow basin where water bubbled merrily.

Lydia drank. Buddha, that felt good! She drank again, until she was no longer thirsty. Then she lifted her head and looked round. In both directions the tunnel vanished into darkness. Maybe she'd stay here for a while. She searched her pockets for food and found nothing, not even lint.

She sat down. The hotel would contact Stellar Harvest when she didn't arrive, and S.H. would contact the local cops. It was usually easy to find people on thinly settled worlds, unless they got themselves lost in wilderness. This was another case entirely. A million people jammed together! How did they manage to keep track of one another?

The cops could follow the trail of her purchases until it ended. She remembered a final vending machine—a bright-blue, street corner cylinder with “Darqueria” flashing on top—refusing her card. She had run out of credit. What had happened then? Had the street performers still been with her? Or had they danced and juggled away? Who had emptied her pockets? And how far had she wandered from the Darqueria?

She got up to drink more water, then walked down the tunnel to urinate in decent darkness. Heading back, she saw something by the drinking fountain, her size, but lower to the floor. The way it moved was distinctive. She came closer. The creature had an oval body that rested on four legs, and four arms, two on each side of the oval body. One arm in each pair ended in a formidable-looking pincher. The other ended in a cluster of tentacles. The creature was holding a cup in one of its tentacle-hands and dipping it into the fountain. There was no head. Instead, its brain was housed in a bulge atop its body. There ought to be four eyes in the bulge, though Lydia couldn't see them. The Goxhat was facing away from her.

“Hello,” she said in humanish.

The alien spun. The four blue eyes glared. “Dangerous!” it cried in humanish. “Beware!” It waved the cup, spilling water. “Fierce! Fierce!”

“I'm not a threat,” Lydia said, trying to sound reasonable and unafraid. As far as she knew, the Goxhat were never dangerous to members of other species, but this one looked agitated and poorly groomed. The black hair that covered its body was spiky in some places and matted in others. What the heck was this guy doing here in this condition, and where was the rest of it?

“Where are your other bodies?” Lydia asked.

The Goxhat screamed and ran into the darkness.

Well, that had certainly been the wrong question to ask.

The alien had left its cup on the floor. She picked it up: badly chipped, blue-speckled enamelware. A human product. Hardly surprising, since this was a human planet.

So, she thought. She was in a concrete tunnel somewhere on Grit, her AI silent and no company except an agitated Goxhat. The problem of water was solved, but she still needed food and a way out.

Hello? she said to her AI. Are you there?

Still no answer.

She could go on. She even had a cup to carry water. But she was tired and afraid of the dark. She lay down by the fountain and went to sleep.

A touch woke her. She started up. The Goxhat leaped back, its cup in one hand. “Fierce,” it cried, brandishing the cup.

“I won't hurt you,” Lydia said.

“Many bodies! All around in the shadows!” the Goxhat cried. “Will come out and defend!”

“Do you know how to get out of here?” Lydia asked. “Up to the city?”

She'd spent time with another Goxhat. Although the aliens did not have faces, they did have expressions. This one looked baffled.

“Do you know the way to other people?” she asked. “Humans? Goxhat?”

“No Goxhat! Alone! Alone!” The Goxhat had to be using a translation implant. Its real voice was not even audible to humans. In spite of this, she could hear anguish.

“Humans, then,” she said gently. “Do you know the way to other humans?”

The Goxhat’s four feet danced back and forth. Its pinchers opened and closed in an agitated fashion. Finally it spoke, “Know humans.”

“Can you lead me to them?”

More jittering and snapping. “Yes,” the Goxhat said at last. “Keep cup. Must keep cup.”

She looked at the alien, then at the drinking fountain. The Goxhat’s mouth was on its underside. If it didn’t have the cup, it would have to climb onto the fountain and squat over the bubbler.

“I don’t want the cup,” Lydia said.

“Good.” The Goxhat filled the cup and held it to its hidden mouth. She heard noisy lapping. The alien filled the cup two more times and emptied it, then said, “Will show humans.”

She followed it into darkness. It quickly outdistanced her, its bare, nailed feet scrambling over the concrete. But soon it returned, calling, “Come.”

“I can’t see,” she answered.

“Nothing here. Only floor and walls and rats.”

“Rats?”

“Big ones,” said the Goxhat. “Not dangerous. Tasty.”

“Oh.”

They kept on, the Goxhat running ahead, and then back. Lydia followed, guided by scrabbling feet and the alien voice calling, “Come!”

Finally, there was another light, this one blue and flashing. When they got close, she saw the tunnel was obstructed by something that came out of a side wall. A news kiosk. It was sideways, its pointed top almost touching the opposite wall. The light she’d seen as they approached was flashing on the peak. There was space above and below the kiosk. The Goxhat scuttled under. Lydia followed, dropping to her hands and knees. On the far side, she rose and took a close look. There were news screens, but all were dark, as were the buttons under the screens. No headlines. No images. No way to order news.

“Why is this sideways?” she asked.

“Grew that way,” said the Goxhat.

Okay, she thought. Her AI added no comment. Lydia felt a pang of loss.

“Come!” the Goxhat cried.

They continued through the tunnel till a third light appeared ahead of them, this one yellow and steady. It shone from one side of the tunnel, out of an intersecting tunnel or possibly a doorway. She could see the Goxhat now, a low shape against the light. It scuttled forward until it stood directly in the light, jittering and waving its cup.

“Visitor!” it cried.

Lydia reached the light, which came through an open door. Beyond was a room. An electric lantern sat on the floor, illuminating concrete walls with pipes running along them. More pipes ran across the ceiling. As far as she could tell, all were concrete. One was dripping liquid into a large metal barrel.

Three people sat around the lantern, all of them human. One—a male—stood up. He was short and dark with a beard that Karl Marx would have envied. “What do we have here?” he asked, his voice deep with an educated accent.

“My name’s Lydia Duluth,” she answered. “And I need to get back to the city.”

“Can’t be done,” the man said in a friendly tone.

“What does that mean?” Lydia asked.

"Please come in." He gestured.

Lydia hesitated. Her headache was bad, the AI was missing, and the three humans were ragged and dirty.

"We aren't dangerous," the short human said.

She would have felt better with the AI or without the headache, but she decided to enter. As she did so, the man on the floor growled, a bestial sound.

"Ignore that," the short man said. "He's having a bad day."

"A bad year," said the woman on the floor. "A bad rest of his life."

Lydia looked at the two of them. The man had long, tangled blond hair. His black face was hairless, except for a pair of elegantly curved blond eyebrows. Gene mod, thought Lydia. No one had eyebrows so perfect. The woman was equally dark, with a halo of bushy hair and a round, pretty face. Her eyes were large and heavy-lidded with yellow irises that entirely filled her eyes. The pupils were vertical slits. Cat eyes. As lovely as the man's blond eyebrows.

Hobos, Lydia thought. Every human city of any size had homeless folk. It was an inevitable result of the freedom for which humanity was famous.

"How did you get here?" the short man asked.

Standing close to the door, ready to whirl and run, Lydia told her story: the attack of influenza and the journey down into the depths of Innovation City, the street performers and waking in a tunnel.

"Interesting," the short man said. "It sounds like the virus that brought us here, though that hit four years ago, more or less. It isn't easy to keep track of time down here. We assumed the virus had been eliminated and the people responsible caught and put away or revised. No one has come down in recent years because of a virus. Everyone we've met has had stories of bad luck rather than infection."

"There were others with the bug," the woman said. "But they came down when we did. Some of them died. The rest kept going deeper into the tunnels.

"And you're still here?" Lydia asked, horrified.

"We can't go back on our own," the short man said. "The virus has enduring effects. We can stay on this level or go farther down, but we can't go up. Never up. We decided to stay here, rather than to keep descending." He smiled, showing teeth that needed cleaning.

Four years without dental care, thought Lydia. Even when she lived in the hills of her home planet, a member of a revolutionary army on the run from the government, she'd had access to care from a revolutionary dental hygienist.

"You introduced yourself. Let me introduce us. I am Genghis Santa Fe, formerly an adjunct professor of philosophy at Innovation University. Seated on the floor you will see Affirmation Loo, who used to be a hedge fund manager. You can tell he is—or was—a businessman by his first name and by his lack of facial hair. I, alas, kept my face unmodified, since philosophers are expected to be hairy. Now I have to hack at my beard with a knife. The lovely lady is Topaz Mumbai, formerly a mid-range call girl."

"Concubine," the woman said in a firm, melodious voice. "And I was better than mid-range."

"As you say," Genghis replied courteously.

"Call me Tope," the woman said to Lydia. "He's Aff, and Genghis is Genghis."

Lydia nodded. "I'm happy to meet you. If you can't go up, can you show me the way up? I'll send people down after you. I'm surprised no one has looked for you before this."

"They may have," Genghis said. "Or may not have. I have no family on this planet. If I had been tenure track, my colleagues would have reported me missing, but adjunct faculty comes and goes. Affirmation is suspicious of his partner, who may have decided to keep quiet when he vanished and keep the fund's management money for herself."

"People in my line of work avoid the police," Tope added.

She wasn't sure she believed any of this. People don't simply vanish in a modern society. But she felt too ill to think about it, and the AI was giving her no input.

"Have you eaten?" asked Genghis.

Lydia shook her head and realized that shaking was not a good idea.

"Goxhat!" the bearded man yelled.

"Fierce! Fierce!" cried a voice in the darkness.

"Bring in the cup, or there will be no soup."

There were skittering sounds in the dark. Lydia turned and saw the Goxhat sidle in sideways, then twist and stare with four wary, blue eyes.

"The cup," said Genghis Santa Fe and held out a hand.

"Fierce!"

"Hand it over."

The Goxhat held it out with obvious reluctance. Genghis took it and dipped it into the barrel. "Here you are."

Lydia looked in. The cup was full of a dark, thick-looking liquid. "What is it?"

"Soil soup." Genghis pointed at the dripping pipe. "The pipes and tunnel walls are prone to small leaks, due to the nature of silicon. You do know that life on this planet is a complex combination of carbon and silicon?"

"Yes."

"Silicon chemical bonds are weaker than those of carbon and break comparatively easily. As a result, most of the life here reproduces by breaking, and is prone to leaks. But it's also self-healing, due to its carbon bonds. The leaks don't get large enough to be dangerous, unless an organism has been badly damaged or is ready to die. Then it will shatter like glass or crumble into sand.

"But I'm getting off-topic. Don't worry about the tunnels breaking. They are still young and healthy, and their leaks heal quickly. We have to use a power drill to keep this pipe open."

Lydia knew most of this, though she was happy to hear that the tunnels were not likely to crumble in the near future. Right now, what interested her was the dark liquid in the cup.

"What is soil soup?" she asked.

"Refuse from the city."

"Shit?" asked Lydia.

"No. The recycling system has separate tracks for different kinds of waste. They are all pureed and filtered. Toxins are removed and what remains is sterilized, then piped to the mainland, where it is added to the soil in experimental plots. But excrement is always kept separate from compost. This is compost."

Tea leaves and coffee grounds, egg shells, the exoskeletons of edible bugs and wilted greens. The smell was earthy, not bad, but not the smell of food. She wasn't hungry. "No, thanks," Lydia said.

Genghis held the cup toward the Goxhat, who grabbed it and pushed it underneath its hairy body. She heard slurping.

"Can you show me the way up?" Lydia asked.

"We know a stair. We can't climb it, but you might be able to. I don't know if your virus is identical to ours."

"Thanks," said Lydia. "I'll send people after you."

"That would be good," Genghis said. "Though it may be too late for Affirmation. He hasn't spoken for a long time now."

The man with blond eyebrows growled again.

"Can we go now?" Lydia asked.

Genghis bent and picked up the lantern. "The others will have to come. We have only the one lantern."

Lydia nodded. The short man led her out of the room. The others—the woman, the growling man, and the Goxhat—followed.

If anything, it was more depressing to walk through the tunnels with light. The walls were gray, rough-looking, and often stained. The leaks, Lydia thought. Disturbing to be inside something that was continuously breaking and mending.

"Why were the tunnels built?" she asked.

"They were an experiment," Genghis replied. "I told you the life here is based on carbon and silicon."

"Everyone knows that," Lydia answered.

"Well, then do you know that BioIn has been trying to engineer it?"

"To create buildings that build themselves. Yes."

"Exactly," the short man said. "The idea was to create a submarine tunnel that ran from the city to the mainland. They planned to run pipes through, carrying the city's waste to the experimental plots. That part mostly worked. There were going to be trains, so BioIn's employees could commute to work, as well as all the things people might need on a train platform: the platform itself, fountains, bathrooms, shops selling snacks and souvenirs.

"The original tunnel was designed to take minerals from the ocean and sand from the ocean bottom and use these to build itself, which it did. But it didn't stop, and it didn't simply go from the city to the mainland. Apparently, something went wrong with the shut-off gene.

"The tunnel kept building in all directions. You might say that it metastasized. Or, to use another metaphor, it became the Sorcerer's Tunnel." Genghis looked at her sideways. His face—lit from below by the lantern he carried—looked grotesque, full of shadows.

"What sorcerer?" Lydia asked.

The short man sighed, then said, "BioIn got what it wanted, pipes to the mainland. It didn't know how to stop the tunnel, so it let it continue to grow. So far there have not been any problems, though some of the pipes are releasing sewage into the ocean. As far as anyone could tell, when I was in the city and talking to scientists at the university, the sewage was not interacting with the native ecology."

* * *

They kept going. A rat ran in front of them, going from one side tunnel to another. It was spotted black and white and really, really big.

"Something else that did not go as planned," Genghis said. "The lab rats were not supposed to get loose and infest the city. There are robot cats, since BioIn didn't want to bring real cats to the planet; and they are fairly good at catching the rats, as is our friend the Goxhat. In case you are wondering, the rats live on garbage, which they find on the levels immediately above us, and cockroaches and mice."

"Where is the rest of the Goxhat?" Lydia asked. "Goxhat usually have half a dozen bodies or more."

"It won't say. As you may have figured out, it's insane, as is our friend Affirmation. Life down here is hard."

The tunnel they followed ended at a white, glossy spiral staircase. It looked ceramic. A light shone above it, warm yellow.

"There it is," said Genghis. "Follow it up. It will bring you to inhabited levels."

"Thanks," said Lydia. "I will get you help. I don't like to brag, but I work for Stellar Harvest, and they have connections."

"Stellar Harvest!" said Genghis. "I have been in love with Ramona Patel for years. What a beauty! What a dancer! What a voice! And what a warm heart she has in all her holos! Is she really like that?"

Stellar Harvest allowed no maligning of its stars. The fact that Ramona had the

personality of a *rahm*, all fangs and claws, was company information, not to be shared.

“She’s a remarkable woman,” Lydia said. “I’ve never met anyone like her. I admire her deeply.”

Which was true in a way. As a performer, Ramona was amazing; and of her kind, she was perfect.

Genghis sighed. “I’m so happy to hear that. Do you think—if you can rescue us—it might be possible to meet her?”

“Of course,” said Lydia firmly. She’d find a way to pressure Ramona. Wazati Cas would help.

“Then, farewell,” said Genghis. The others had come up next to him, Affirmation shambling with a vacant expression, Tope looking alert and almost elegant, in spite of her dirty clothes. Even the Goxhat was there, clutching its cup.

“Goodbye,” said Lydia and turned toward the stair. Pain stabbed into her head. She took a step toward the white, coiling structure. The pain grew worse. Another step, and she was on her knees, holding her head and groaning. She forced herself upright and took another step. Then she passed out.

When she came to, she was lying on the tunnel floor. Genghis stood above her. “You have the same virus we do,” he said. “Which is very interesting. We were sure it had been eradicated. We couldn’t help you. You collapsed too close to the stair, which we cannot approach. But the Goxhat is not infected. It was able to pull you to safety.”

Her headache felt like an ax buried deep in her brain. Lydia sat up and almost passed out again.

Genghis said, “A very sophisticated virus. No one who has been infected can get back up to the city and report to the police. I don’t know why people with this kind of skill waste it on crime.”

“Failure of imagination,” Lydia said and staggered to her feet. In spite of her throbbing head, she had an idea. “Where did you get your lamp? Is there a dump on this level?”

If there was, there might be refuse workers or robots. Someone—something—she could talk to.

“Of course the city has recycling,” Genghis said. “But not on this level.” He hesitated, then said, “There are people who aren’t infected. Tall Alys and her gang. They’re homeless scavengers. Most of the time they stay on levels that are higher up, but they come down here sometimes, because they won’t be bothered. We trade with them.”

“What can you offer?” Lydia asked.

“Alys is in love with Tope, who offers sex. I offer stories and poems. You may not think these are valuable. But Alys and her comrades don’t carry phones, for fear of being tracked; and this means they don’t have access to the planetary net. My area of competence is aesthetic philosophy, and I have done my research. Believe me! I tell them the *Ramayana*, the *Odyssey*, the story of Monkey, the *Canterbury Tales*. I know Goxhat accounting chants in translation, and the poetry of the Embitti poet Morning Star, which is mostly about exile and loss. It goes down well.

“Affirmation used to offer investment tips, which were—of course—useless, since no one down here has money to invest. Now he offers nothing.”

“Are they down here now?” Lydia asked.

“Alys and her gang? Not as far as we know. But we can look. They have a camp.”

“You haven’t asked them to take a message up to the city for you?”

“Yes, but Alys refuses. She doesn’t want to lose Topaz. The others won’t cross her. She is a formidable woman.”

“That’s angering,” Lydia said.

“We are past anger,” Genghis said.

“You are. I’m not,” Tope said.

They rested for a while, then Lydia got up and went to the Goxhat, who always stayed a short distance from the rest of them. "Thank you," she said.

"Dangerous!" the Goxhat replied. "Fierce."

"My name is Lydia," she said. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Goxhat!" the Goxhat replied, then hooted three times.

Lydia imitated the sound. "Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!—Is that your name?"

The Goxhat was silent for a moment, then repeated the three hoots.

"There's no point in talking to the Goxhat. It's crazy," Tope said.

"Thank you," Lydia repeated. "Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

"Lydia," the Goxhat said.

Genghis led them on another journey through the tunnels. There were more grey concrete walls with more stains. Lydia touched one. The concrete felt wet. Farther on were patches of something spiky that glittered in the lantern light.

"A local organism," Genghis said. "It's using moisture and minerals from the concrete. I don't know how—or what—it metabolizes. It cannot photosynthesize here."

"Why would a planet develop a biology like this?" Lydia asked, wondering out loud.

"The grasses on Earth were—and are—hugely successful," Genghis said in reply.

"And they use silicon to make themselves less edible. It works well, though not perfectly, since animals have evolved to eat them in spite of the grit they contain. And there are sponges on Earth that have skeletons made of glass. The glass carries light deep into the sponges, for the benefit of symbiotic organisms which photosynthesize."

"Thank you for this information," Lydia said. Genghis seemed unable to stop sharing. Well, he had been a professor, and he might be crazy now.

She couldn't measure time in the darkness. They kept going, past more glittering growths on the dull, gray walls. The air was damp and still and smelled of concrete and urine. More rats ran in front of them: some spotted, others white or dark. She didn't see any mice or roaches, for which she thanked the rats.

She did not like the place, which reminded her of other places she had been. Though then she'd had friends with her, as well as her AI. Please talk to me, she said to the AI. Tell me you are present.

Nothing.

A light shone in front of them, at the intersection of two tunnels. It was steady and yellow-white. Dark figures sat around it.

"They're here," Genghis said.

As they came closer, Lydia saw bedrolls and an electric stew pot. The figures sat around it. The air smelled of human food: meat, tomatoes, peppers, maybe potatoes or corn, the nourishment humans had brought from their home planet. In spite of her headache, Lydia felt suddenly hungry.

A figure rose and walked toward them. She was two meters tall, thin, and black-skinned with short, bright-blue hair.

"Alys," said Genghis. "The virus is back. We've found another victim."

The woman looked down at Lydia. Her eyes, as blue as her hair, demanded an explanation, so Lydia told her story.

"You really know Ramona Patel?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"I think you're lying," Alys said. "But it doesn't matter. We all lie about something here. What matters is how we act now. Come over and share our dinner."

They settled around the stew pot, except for the Goxhat, who stayed in the shadows, jittering, obviously afraid to come closer. Alys introduced the others. They were all human: a young man named Trail, an old man named River, a woman named Yan, a man named Olatunde. Lit by the two electric lanterns, they looked worn and shabby and not perfectly clean.

Alys dished the stew into bowls, and Genghis took one bowl to the Goxhat, who remained in the shadows, making slurping noises.

It was a good stew, Lydia decided, though she would have liked more spices. A bottle was handed around. It contained a cheap form of alcohol, which hit hard, burning down her throat and giving her a warm glow in the belly. Not something she would have enjoyed usually. But not bad now.

When they were done eating, and a second bottle was opened, Lydia said, "I need a message taken up to the city."

"To Ramona Patel?" Alys asked.

"Yes, if that's where you want to take it."

Alys shook her head. "I told Genghis. We survive because no one notices us, and we're safe down here, because no one comes here. If you really know Ramona Patel and Wazati Tloo, then your story will end on the planetary net, and someone will decide to find out what else is in the tunnels and clean us out."

"I don't have to tell anyone what happened," Lydia said.

"The story will get out. A crime has been committed. Hacking common diseases is a big negative everywhere. The police are sure to get involved. They'll want to get the hackers, and they'll want to find out if there are any other victims of the virus down here."

"Are there?" Lydia asked.

"Victims? Not that we know. The ones who came down when these three did—" Alys waved at Genghis and the others. "Died or went deeper into the tunnels, to places where we don't go."

"As far as we can tell, the virus doesn't spread easily," Genghis said. "There weren't a lot of victims, even when it was most active. That's clever, in my opinion. An epidemic would have attracted notice. This way a few people vanish, but that happens in a big city. They might have fallen into the ocean. They might have gone to the mainland and had an accident in the wilderness. I'm sure there are other explanations."

"Plenty," said Alys. "All of us are here, and we used to be up there." She waved at the ceiling.

"The city is full of cracks," Yan said. "They heal, but then they break open again. People fall through."

Was this a metaphor for failings in the social safety net? Lydia wondered. Or was Yan talking about the concrete in the tunnels that fractured and then healed?

"Is there no way I can convince you to take a message?" Lydia asked.

Alys shook her head.

"Time to pay up," Olatunde said to Genghis. "Tell us a story, one about a trickster. I like trickster stories."

Genghis thought for a while, then told the story about how the god Thor lost his hammer and recovered it with the help of the trickster Loki. This involved Thor dressing like a woman. Genghis had to stop the story and explain that in ancient human cultures women did not dress like men, and men did not dress as women. It was a rule or taboo.

"That seems strange," said Yan.

"Ancient humans were strange," Genghis said. He went on to explain how funny it was to think of Thor—a big, burly guy with a bristling red beard and bloodshot eyes—dressed up as a young maiden going to her wedding.

"Why?" asked Olatunde.

"Why was it funny? Tradition," Genghis said and continued with the story.

Thor ate like a god, not a maiden. Entire roasted animals vanished under the wedding veil he wore. Finally, the bridegroom—who was a frost giant—said, "My bride has quite an appetite. I had not imagined any maiden stuffing down so much food."

Loki replied, "She has been so eager to marry you that she hasn't eaten for days. This is why she's so hungry."

The giant bought this explanation, which told Loki how bright he was.

Then the giant peeped under Thor's veil, thinking to get a glimpse of the lovely maid, and saw the god's bloodshot eyes glaring back at him. He jerked away, startled and afraid. "Why are the maiden's eyes so red and burning?" he asked, according to Genghis; and Loki replied, "She has been so eager to marry you that she has not slept for days, and that has caused her eyes to be red."

"These are not plausible answers," Alys said.

"Well, they worked," Genghis replied. "The giant believed Loki and had Thor's stolen hammer brought in to bless the wedding. As soon as Thor saw the hammer, he reached out and picked it up with a firm grasp, stood up and pushed back the wedding veil, so all the giants could see his blazing eyes and bristling red beard. The giants cried out in fear and scrambled to their feet. But it was too late. Thor used the hammer, which was magical, to kill them all."

"It sounds to me like he was overreacting," said River. "He could have just left once he had the hammer."

The young man Trail nodded. "You can't be killing people, even if they're giants. It's illegal."

"And wrong," added Yan.

Genghis frowned. "The giants represent the destructive forces of nature. It's Thor's job to establish order and make the world safe for humanity."

"You call that order?" asked River. "A bunch of dead people? That's like cops breaking up a camp and saying that makes everything tidy, because we've lost our home. Only worse, because the cops don't usually kill us."

"You asked for a trickster story," said Genghis, sounding grumpy. "I have told one. Trickster stories are often morally ambiguous."

"The big guy isn't a trickster," Olatunde said. "He's just someone using muscle to solve his problems. I've met guys like that. It's smart to keep away from them."

"I'm not responsible for the story," Genghis said. "It's part of human history and culture."

"I never learned it in school," River said. "And I was good at history, till I had my accident. I can still remember the history, even though my memory doesn't work as well as it used to. A lot of wars. A lot of big guys fighting."

"There you have it," Genghis said. "Think of this as a story about the war between chaos and order."

River looked doubtful. "I'd say it was a war about a limited resource, like energy on Earth in the old days. There was one hammer, and this guy Thor wanted it."

Genghis made a growling noise.

The conversation wandered on for a while longer, while the second bottle got passed around. In the end, people lay down and slept. Lydia had stopped drinking and remained awake.

The Goxhat came over and crouched beside her. "Want to go up?" it asked softly.

"Yes," she said.

"Go down first. Two levels below is tunnel to the mainland. I/we have been there. Nothing to eat. No Goxhat. Nothing for us/me."

"You haven't told them?" Lydia waved at the snoring bodies.

"Never asked my/our name," the Goxhat said. "Hoot. Hoot. Hoot," it called softly. "I/we am/are me/us. I/we exist. Fierce."

"Can you show me the route to the mainland?" Lydia asked.

"Yes." The Goxhat folded its legs underneath it and slept, making a purring noise that was more pleasant than the human snores.

Lydia thought. If the AI had been talking to her, she would have asked it what to do. She could organize an expedition to the mainland. But she didn't trust the people here. Alys didn't want Lydia or the other victims of the virus to escape. She might try to stop them. As for Genghis and his companions—The former hedge fund manager was obviously crazy, and Genghis was odd. Tope seemed okay, but might not be. They seemed at home with their present situation, possibly due to the virus, though it hadn't affected Lydia that way. She wanted out.

Would she become reconciled to this life, if she stayed with them? She had no idea of the progress of the disease caused by the hacked virus. She ought to sneak away, while she still could.

The Goxhat was crazy. Still, she had never heard of a Goxhat harming any intelligent being. They rarely lied. How could they, since they did not have a sense of individuality? Lying to another Goxhat was lying to oneself. Possible, but not sane. They had not been around other intelligent species long enough to develop new habits, though they realized that humans—for example—were not Goxhat and behaved differently. In spite of this, they had not learned to tell deliberate untruths, except in fiction and poetry.

Of course, this Goxhat was crazy.

She decided to take the chance, reached down, and patted the Goxhat. Stiff hair prickled against her palm. The skin below was hot. The alien jerked awake. "What?" "Let's go now," Lydia said softly. "Without waking the others."

Four blue eyes blinked up at her. Legs unfolded. The Goxhat rose. "This way," it whispered.

She picked up one of the lanterns, feeling guilty. Stealing a light from people who lived in darkness seemed utterly wrong. But Alys and her gang could get another one, and she could not bear to travel in darkness. She'd send help when she got to the mainland.

The Goxhat scuttled ahead of her. She narrowed the lantern's beam, so it was a lance of light, moving over the tunnel floor and walls. There was some dust. Motes danced in the air in front of her, shining in the beam.

After a while, they came to a red spiral stairway that led down. The Goxhat scabbled along it, nails clicking on the metal treads. Lydia followed. There was no pain this time. The virus did not mind if she descended.

The stair spiraled past another level. Lydia's light bounced off a concrete floor and vanished into the dark mouth of a tunnel. Below her, the Goxhat's nails kept clicking downward. She followed.

The staircase ended two levels down. Lydia stepped off into yet another tunnel. This really did remind her of the space colony above the Atch home planet, though that been carved out of an iron asteroid and inhabited by more-or-less crazy Atch. She swung the light beam like a blade through the tunnel's darkness, lighting a pure white rat. The animal looked at her briefly, red eyes gleaming, then leaped away.

"They aren't intelligent, are they?" Lydia said to the Goxhat.

"Do not eat intelligent beings. Negotiate. Trade. Do not eat."

This was reassuring. The Atch in the asteroid had been a lot more interested in craziness than trade. Of course, they had no one to trade with, trapped like rats in their asteroid. Maybe that was what had driven them crazy.

The Goxhat scuttled into the tunnel. Once again, Lydia followed. Not having any kind of chronometer, she had no idea of how long they walked. But she got tired. She had to stop once to pee, and the Goxhat stopped once also. She did not know what it did in the darkness. But it came back to her looking relieved.

There were cross tunnels, which the Goxhat ignored, continuing straight ahead. Once their tunnel divided. The Goxhat stopped and considered, then made a choice.

"Are you sure?" Lydia asked.

"Will find out," the Goxhat replied.

That was not entirely reassuring. She really wanted her AI to chime in. But there was silence in her mind.

At last, the Goxhat said, "Rest."

They settled down on the concrete floor of the tunnel. Lydia took off her shoes and rubbed her feet, then sighed. She was thirsty and hungry. She hoped she had made the right decision, going with the Goxhat. Time would tell, and she had no way to measure time.

"Hoot. Hoot. Hoot," the Goxhat said

"Your name," said Lydia.

"Had eight bodies," the alien told her. "Good, strong bodies. Thirty-two legs. Thirty-two arms. Thirty-two blue eyes. That was me/us."

"Yes?" asked Lydia.

"Came to invest in BioIn. Flew to mainland to look at test plots. Industrial accident. Seven bodies died. This body fled."

"Why?" asked Lydia.

The blue eyes looked puzzled. "Forget. I/we found a tunnel. Ran in. Found the humans. Stayed. But remembered tunnel to the mainland. Afraid to go alone. Found you. Fierce!"

"I'm not fierce," Lydia said and thought she might have made a mistake. Did the Goxhat need a fierce ally? "I'm fierce enough," she added.

"Learned our/my name," the Goxhat said. "Saw me/us."

They slept and woke. The lantern still shone brightly. Lydia's mouth was dry.

"How much farther?" she asked.

"Soon," the Goxhat said.

She put on her shoes and went into the shadows to relieve herself. The Goxhat did something comparable. They rejoined at the lantern.

"Soon," the Goxhat repeated.

Lydia picked up the lantern and followed it.

Time passed. The tunnel began to slant up. She could feel this, a slight increase in effort as she walked. The incline grew steeper, which seemed encouraging. A fountain appeared in the middle of the tunnel, growing out of the floor at an angle. No light shone above it, and it was dry.

She was really thirsty, and her head had begun to ache.

"Don't remember this," the Goxhat said.

"Do you think we made a wrong turn?" Lydia asked.

"Will find out," the Goxhat replied.

A short time later, the tunnel slanted down. Ahead of them, the lantern beam glinted on water. Soon they were wading, ankle deep. Lydia lifted a handful and tasted it. It was salty, though not as salty as the oceans on her home world. She spit it out.

The water got deeper, up to her knees, then up to mid-thigh. The Goxhat's belly and mouth were underwater. "Can you breathe?" Lydia asked.

The Goxhat reared on its back legs, bracing itself against a wall and bringing its mouth above the surface. "Nostrils on top. I/we can breathe." It dropped back into the water and plowed on. Soon it was swimming. It had an oddly neat and efficient stroke, which kept its eyes and nostrils above water. Surge. Sink. Surge. Sink.

By this time the tunnel had leveled out. Light flashed ahead of them. Not a lantern. Sunlight.

Lydia pushed forward. The tunnel ended. She stopped, blinking, barely able to see though the brightness. In front of her, waves rolled toward a beach. Beyond the beach were low, stone bluffs, dotted with something that glittered. Above the bluffs

was a blue sky, full of fat, white clouds. The Goxhat was still swimming, heading toward land.

Lydia followed, wading through water that grew increasingly shallow. A fresh wind blew past her, smelling of salt. The Goxhat reached the beach and shook itself. Lydia climbed out of the water next to it, then turned back. Waves rolled in past the half-submerged tunnel. Farther out were breakers, then whitecaps. Beyond a wide expanse of water was the city, its towers dim with distance.

She turned and looked at the bluffs. Lacy, fragile looking plants grew on the stone. They were the things that glittered.

“Interesting biology,” the Goxhat said beside her. “As the plants age, their silicon chemical bonds, which break easily, become dominant; although the seeds that form within them are both carbon and silicon. The plants become hard and fragile. Anything—a wind, a touch can break them, freeing the seeds to fall. Go. Touch a plant.”

Lydia walked to the bluff and touched one of the plants, which looked like frost on a window. It shattered.

“You are talking normally,” Lydia said.

“I/we am/are?” the Goxhat replied. It was silent for a while, looking out at the field of glittering plants. “Maybe my/our translator is working better, or maybe I/we are beginning to recover. All Goxhat know that we—or I—live as a group, but die one body at a time. In the end, there is a single body, remembering what it used to be. When it dies, it dies alone, without comfort from the rest of itself, knowing—a terrible knowledge!—that when it draws its last breath, the person it was will be completely gone. I/we am that body.” Four blue eyes looked up at Lydia. “Loss and loneliness can drive a person crazy, but a good commercial problem will bring almost anyone back. There are stories about Goxhat who rose from a deathbed to strike a deal and were buried with songs of praise.”

“Oh,” said Lydia.

“BioIn wanted me/us to invest in colonies that built themselves. Most habitable planets have silica, and carbon is common on planets where Goxhat and humans can live. Seed a site with BioIn plants, their representative said. Then I or we could go off for a vacation or a trip to find new investments. When I/we returned, all necessary buildings would be grown.”

“Wouldn’t it be just as easy to bring in prefab buildings?” Lydia asked.

“I/we asked that. BioIn showed me/us graphs and columns of numbers, which did not convince.”

“Why did BioIn want your money?” Lydia asked. “It’s a big corporation. It ought to be able to fund itself.”

“You should see their financial statements,” the Goxhat replied. “Far too many liabilities. Well hidden, granted. But I/we know how to dig. The project on the so-called Checkerboard Planet ended in disaster. Do you know that story?”

Of course she did. She had been a part of it. “Yes,” Lydia said.

“The AIs have sued to recover the planet,” the Goxhat said. “And for damages. In addition the human workers on the planet have sued for back pay, though that is minor. More serious is the lawsuit brought by the indigenous life form. It is a grave crime to suppress the rights of indigenous life forms, and it will prove costly.

“They tried to have the case heard here, where they have influence. But it went to their home planet Nova Terra, where a new party is in power, one that is not sympathetic. BioIn has appealed, but they will lose; and the money they will have to pay has not been entered as a liability on their balance sheet.

“There are other problems, which I/we can explain to you, if you understand finance and accounting. It’s all off-balance sheet liabilities and stupid games played with subsidiary companies—the Checkerboard Planet was simply the last leaf or twig.”

"Did you tell BioIn this?" she asked.

"Of course. It's always a good idea to tell the opposition what their weakness is, while hiding mine/ours. Always negotiate from strength, even if the strength is only apparent."

"Did the industrial accident happen after that?" Lydia asked.

Three Hoots crouched down. It wasn't able to frown, but Lydia had a sense that it was frowning. "I/we were in a guest lodge at the edge of a test area. A lovely place. On one side were the native plants, glittering in sunlight. On the other side were green plots. Human plants. There were enormous machines working in the human plots, weeders and harvesters, wide enough to cover an entire plot. I/we went out to see, riding in a van with no driver. I/we remember now. The van stopped at the end of a plot. But the machine—the harvester—did not stop. The van would not start. The doors were locked.

"Trapped," the Goxhat said and shuddered. "The machine rolled right over me/us. But the van broke open, cracked like an egg. When this happened, I/we escaped. Only me/us. The rest of me/us died, crushed by the machine.

"The harvester backed up, till it was off the van, and a human climbed down from the cab. That was surprising. The machines usually operate themselves. The human came over to give assistance, I/we thought. But when it saw me/us, it said, 'You aren't supposed to be alive,' and pulled a gun.

"I/we recognized the weapon. We have guns to use against dangerous animals. Never against people. The human pointed it at me/us. I/we jumped. Goxhat jump well. Four strong legs! I/we grabbed the human before it could shoot, and we struggled. Somehow, in the struggle, the human became dead. It lay against the van—what was left of the van—with a dent in its head. I/we fled." The Goxhat paused.

"And?" Lydia urged. It was one heck of a story.

"There was an area of stone near the plot, outcroppings and deep ravines. I/we went there. Behind us/me, the van exploded. I/we found a cave and went in. Deep and deeper, till I/we fell over a cliff and was injured."

"How?" asked Lydia.

"On top." The Goxhat patted the bulge that housed its brain.

A closed head injury, except the Goxhat did not have a head.

"When I/we woke up, I/we kept going. Found a tunnel and then Genghis and his companions. They had light and food. I/we stayed."

"BioIn tried to kill you, because you had figured out the extent of their liabilities."

"I/we think so now. Had forgotten. They did kill me/us. Almost all of me/us."

"First we need water," Lydia said. "Then we need to get to the city without running into anyone from BioIn. What happened to your gun?"

"Genghis traded it to Alys. I/we got a cup." The Goxhat lifted the cup and flourished it.

"Revolution comes from the barrel of a gun," Lydia said, remembering an old line from her days in the FLPm liberation army. "It does not come from a cup."

"It is not possible to use a gun to drink," the Goxhat replied.

"You've been on the mainland," Lydia said. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Go north along the beach. Stay close to the bluffs. There are boat docks opposite the city. Creep in at night. Seize a boat. Drive to the city."

It sounded easy. Most likely, it would not be. But Lydia didn't have a better idea. "Okay."

They began walking north by the bluffs. By this time, Lydia had noticed that she was wet and cold. Nothing to do, except wait till the ocean wind dried her. The planet's primary passed overhead, and shadows began to stretch from the bluffs. There were animals on the stone as well as plants, Lydia noticed, creatures with many legs and transparent shells. Their bodies, under the shells, were bright red or yellow.

"If we dared walk along the water's edge, we could find empty shells," the Goxhat said. "Not as interesting as a balance sheet, but none the less interesting."

"Do the Goxhat understand beauty?" Lydia asked.

"Of course. There is the beauty of columns that add up correctly and the beauty of clear financial statements. I/we understand as well the beauty of poetry in praise of good investors and the beauty of public monuments that celebrate prudence, honesty, and fiduciary responsibility. You humans raise monuments to war and generals. I/we never do, in part because I/we don't have wars, but also because I/we would never raise a monument to the destruction of fixed capital. It would be like celebrating an earthquake or an enormous fire."

An interesting idea, Lydia thought.

"Think how rich you humans would be, if you did not destroy capital at regular intervals," the Goxhat added.

Another interesting idea. Lydia said, "Karl Marx said the periodic destruction of capital was an inevitable part of capitalism."

"Karl Marx was a fool," the Goxhat replied. "But probably right about humans. You are an odd species that does not seem to understand how an economy ought to work."

They kept walking. After a while, they came to a break in the bluffs. A small, clear river ran into the ocean, edged by crystal reeds.

"We are going to break them," Lydia said.

"We have to," the Goxhat said. "I will follow you."

It wore no clothes, which was typical of Goxhat, and its stiff, sparse hair was not likely to be adequate protection against the broken reeds. Lydia nodded, then moved into the reeds, clearing a path for the Goxhat. Plants snapped and shattered. Small, sharp fragments clung to her pants. She picked them off when she reached the river's sandy edge, then knelt and lifted water in her hands. Beside her, the Goxhat filled its cup. "You see. Much better than a gun."

When they were full, they waded the river. Lydia's clothing, which was almost dry, got wet to her knees. She crunched out through the reeds on the other side, and they kept on. The bluff's shadows stretched farther across the beach. The tide was coming in, covering the beach. What was it called? Not ebbing. A flowing tide? The planet had no moons, but there was always the pull of the system's primary.

At last they saw structures on the beach ahead of them, extending into the ocean.

"Docks," said the Goxhat.

"Let's stop," Lydia said.

They settled on the sand and watched day end. The sun was out of sight behind the bluffs, but they could watch its light on the clouds above them, going first gold, then pink, then orange. The city's towers shone dimly. The ocean grew slowly dark. The dock had a roof, but its sides were open. As far as she could tell, nothing moved on it. Maybe it wasn't in use.

Lydia asked, "How long were you in the tunnels?"

"I/we don't know," the Goxhat replied. "A long time."

"Then they won't be looking for you. I don't think there will be a lot of security. The only people on the mainland are BioIn employees. As far as I can remember, there are no dangerous animals."

"Only bugs," Three Hoots said. "Some this big." It held its hands with tentacle-fingers about a meter apart.

"We'll see if there's a boat in dock," Lydia said. "If there is, we'll take it. If not, we'll look for a radio or get the hell away and think about what to do next."

It wasn't much of a plan, especially with the Goxhat along. If BioIn caught them, they might both be killed. But they couldn't stay here. She'd starve and so would

Three Hoots. The longer they stayed on the mainland, the better the chances that someone would find them. Or they'd die in some corner and slowly wither into mummies, since the local biology would not be able to eat them.

If—Buddha forbid—they met anyone on the dock, it would most likely be a low level employee, who knew nothing about the plot to kill the Goxhat. Maybe they could talk their way out. She would have felt a lot better if her AI had not gone missing.

They moved at twilight, when they were still able to see. A handful of stars glimmered in the sky, members of a nearby cluster of blue-white giants, and a light went on at the dock's seaward end—on a timer, Lydia sincerely hoped. Otherwise, there was only the afterglow of day.

They reached the fence as twilight ended. More stars had come out, though not many. There were dust clouds in the stellar neighborhood, Lydia remembered. The blue-white cluster shone brilliantly, lighting the eastern sky. Beneath them were the city lights, much less bright. These gave enough illumination so Lydia could make out a boat floating next to the dock, long and sleek and powerful looking. She glanced toward the shack at the dock's landward end. It had windows, all of them unlit. Surely, if there was someone in there, there ought to be the yellow glow of work lights or the blue glow of entertainment.

"Try the gate," the Goxhat said softly.

"Locked," she whispered.

"I/we will climb the fence." The Goxhat swarmed up before Lydia could speak. It hesitated on the top, then jumped down, landing silently.

"I can see the gate controls," the Goxhat said and reached toward something. A moment later, the gate swung open.

Something was going to happen, Lydia thought. Security couldn't be this weak. "Let's move." She ran toward the boat, dropping into the cockpit. The controls were dark. "Are you on?" she asked the boat.

A mellow baritone voice replied. "My engines are not on, as should be evident. But I'm able to run my mind off the battery. So I am conscious."

"Can you take me to Innovation City?"

"Of course. Put your passcard in the slot and key in your password."

"Shit," thought Lydia. If her AI had been talking to her, it would have been able to override the boat's security. But she couldn't by herself. This meant she was going to have to move to plan B, which was sending out a mayday. No robot could refuse a request for emergency services, not here or on any planet. With luck, BioIn would not find and kill them before help arrived.

"What are you doing?" a voice asked. It was human and female. Lydia looked around and saw a woman standing on the dock, lit by the dock's light and the stars. She was short and wide and wearing some kind of uniform. More importantly, she was holding a gun.

Lydia opened her mouth to explain that she had an emergency and needed help. The Goxhat—who was still on the dock, hidden in its shadows—jumped. It hadn't been kidding when it spoke about four strong legs. It landed on the woman's back, its legs closing around her torso. One pincher grabbed the woman's gun arm, forcing the gun up, while both of the alien's tentacle-hands grabbed the woman's throat and throttled.

The woman pulled at the Goxhat's tentacles, trying to free her throat, but to no avail. She fell to her knees. Her gun fell from her hand. Lydia clambered onto the deck and grabbed it.

"Don't kill her," she said.

The woman fell over, and the Goxhat moved back. "I/we don't believe she is dead."

Lydia knelt and checked. The woman was still breathing, though she was going to have some ugly bruises.

“If there is anyone else around, we are in serious trouble,” she said to the Goxhat. “Let’s get her on the boat.”

They moved the woman and waited for her to come to. A frightening period. Lydia thought of sending the mayday. If she did, BioIn would know something was up. Wait, she told herself. Wait and hope.

The woman groaned.

“Are you awake?” Lydia asked.

“Yes,” the woman said in a choked voice.

“I have your gun, and we are desperate. I want your passcard and your password. If you try any games, I’ll shoot you. If you cooperate, you’ll end up alive.”

There was a silence, then the woman said, “In my shirt pocket. The password is ‘jubilant dragon.’”

Lydia found the card. “Remember, if you are playing games, you’ll be dead.”

“The password is ‘jubilant dragon,’” the woman repeated.

“Thanks.” Lydia got up and went to the boat’s controls, inserted the card, and typed in the password.

“Thank you,” the boat said. Its engines started. “Where do you want to go in Innovation City?”

“Anywhere.”

“I will take you to the West Side Recreational Dock,” the boat said. The ropes tying it to the dock came loose and pulled in. “Hang on.”

It purred away from the dock and headed east in brilliant starlight. The purr became a roar, and they were hitting waves. Water flew up, beading the boat’s windshield. The air tasted of salt. Lydia fell into a seat, twisting to look at the woman and the Goxhat, both on the boat’s deck.

The boat slammed into wave after wave. The woman groaned again, and the Goxhat made a keening sound. Lydia wondered if lack of food had made her crazy. She had actually threatened to murder another intelligent being.

Possibly necessary in this case, her AI said. But don’t make it a habit.

Where have you been? Lydia asked.

In retreat from the virus infecting you. I didn’t want it to infect me. I have organic components, as you must remember, and they are closely intertwined with your nervous system, which the virus was attacking. I shut down as much of our interface as was possible. What an ugly disease! You have not been thinking sanely, Lydia, and I have had moments when I wondered about my own rationality.

She felt a rush of relief—and a rush of anger. The AI had abandoned her, left her alone in the tunnel with crazy people and on the mainland with BioIn killers.

I had my own problems to solve. My integrity was compromised. I do not think I am able to experience fear, but I did experience something—

You’re okay now? Lydia asked.

I have scanned every part of myself and made repairs wherever possible. But some of my functions are impaired.

Lydia thought, if I get out of this alive, I’ll get you to help.

Thank you.

She moved on to her next problem. “What’s your name?” she asked the security woman.

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

“An odd name,” the Goxhat said.

The woman pulled herself upright and vomited over the side.

“I am moving quickly,” the boat said. “I assume, from the threats you uttered, that this is an emergency.”

“Yes,” said Lydia.

The boat slammed into more waves. The woman vomited more. Lydia felt queasy, but she had nothing to throw up. "Do you have water on board?" she asked the boat.

"Yes. Try the refrigerator in back."

She made her way there and found bottles of fizzy water. The Goxhat took one. Lydia drank another.

"I also have nutrition bars and trail snacks," the boat added.

"No thanks. Not right now."

The city grew larger and brighter. Lydia made out skyways and advertising. Yellow Sol-spectrum light shone through the skyways' transparent walls. The signs flashed and scrolled in a dozen different colors. "BioIn—the Wave of the Future." "Drink Cocaine Cola." If she had her choice right now, she'd go for opium, the time-honored analgesic, grown on many human worlds, or maybe a tall glass of beer. She didn't need a stimulant. Life was too exciting already.

She could see the West Side Docks, another flashing sign.

The boat slowed. The BioIn security guard slid down to sit on the deck, slumped and miserable, but no longer throwing up.

"I'm sorry about this," Lydia said.

"So am I," the woman replied.

The docks were straight ahead. The boat slowed more.

There are people waiting on the dock, her AI said.

Lydia peered and saw them. A row of humans.

"What is that?" she asked the boat.

"BioIn security. I radioed ahead. It was obvious to me that you were doing something illegal."

What alternatives did she and the Goxhat have now? Jump in the water and swim to freedom? Or use the security guard as a hostage.

"Send a mayday," she told the boat.

"I'll do it because my programming requires me to. But I don't know who is going to help you."

"Neither do I. My name is Lydia Duluth. I work for Stellar Harvest. I'm not a citizen of this planet. Say I'm at the West Side Recreational Docks, about to be arrested and possibly killed. Do it now!"

"Stellar Harvest," the security woman said. She had pulled herself upright, though she still looked miserable. "Really? Do you know Wazati Tloo?"

Lydia nodded. "And Ramona Patel; and you aren't going to get autographs from anyone, if you let these guys kill me."

The boat slowed, heading in to the dock.

"What if I tell you to turn around and go back out into the ocean?" Lydia asked.

"I will ignore you," the boat replied.

"What can we do?" the Goxhat asked.

"Surrender and hope the mayday gets through to someone who cares," Lydia said. She was tired and hungry, and her headache was getting worse. Though she spoke of help, she felt hopeless. Her only chance now, she thought, was that Wazati Casoon knew she was on the planet. When she didn't turn up at accounting, he'd begin to worry. But how soon?

My colleagues, the other AIs, know you are on the planet as well. They will begin to ask questions, when they discover they can't communicate with me.

They can't?

I am not fully functional.

The boat bumped against the dock. Lines snaked out and tied up. One of the humans on the dock said, "You are under arrest. Put down whatever weapons you may have and raise your hands."

Lydia obeyed. Beside her, the Goxhat lifted its four arms, waving tentacles and pinchers.

“Hey!” one of the humans said. “Calm down, will you?”

Three Hoots stopped waving. People jumped into the boat. One handcuffed Lydia. Another tried to handcuff the Goxhat. The arms with tentacles had no wrists, and the cuffs slid off. The pincher arms didn’t come close to meeting. One arm could be cuffed, but it could not be fastened to the other

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” the man asked.

“Leave it,” said the woman who had handcuffed Lydia. “It’s a Goxhat. They aren’t dangerous.”

“Huh!” said the guard they had kidnapped.

By this time, most of the cops were on the boat, but there were still a couple of people on the dock, holding rifles and watching Lydia.

More people came up behind them, these in shiny white battle armor. What the heck? Lydia thought. She wasn’t that dangerous. Armor wasn’t required.

The armor has the Stellar Harvest emblem, her AI said.

Lydia squinted. There was something on the white chests, which ought to be an emblem, but she couldn’t make it out.

A sheaf of grain and stars, said the AI.

Lydia relaxed, though not completely. There could still be a fight. But it looked as if Stellar Harvest’s legendary loyalty to its employees was coming through for her.

“We’ll take over now,” an amplified voice said. Ramona Patel. It was not the low, musical, sensual voice she used when acting, but the sharp, commanding voice she used for business.

The woman who’d handcuffed Lydia scrambled up onto the dock. “Who are you?”

“This is Stellar Harvest security, and I am Ramona Patel. You have a Stellar Harvest employee on the boat. We want her and her companion.”

“You can’t be Ramona Patel,” the woman said.

“Who are you to say who I am?” Ramona asked, her voice getting sharper and more commanding.

“I’m Captain Harbin of BioIn Security.”

“That’s well and good. I am a star who is top box office on a hundred planets; and—more important—I am the director of *Krishna at the Soy Milk Bar*, which is currently being made here.”

“That gives you no authority,” the captain said.

“Tell that to your company’s public relations department. BioIn’s name is going to be all over the holo, if—and only if—I get my employee back. I should add that the two people immediately to the right and left of me are lawyers. I’m not sure how well they shoot, but they know local and interstellar law.”

“We need to speak to our client,” a new voice said.

Another voice added, “Both our clients.”

Ramona said, “I suggest you call BioIn.”

The captain began cursing, then pulled out a phone. She moved away down the dock, so Lydia was not able to hear the conversation that followed.

“What is happening?” the Goxhat asked.

“We are having what humans call a Martian Standoff,” Lydia said.

“Is this good or bad?”

“Good, I think.”

Captain Harbin came back. “I am supposed to take them to headquarters.”

“We will come,” Ramona said. “I hope this doesn’t take too long. I need to direct tomorrow.”

“We need to ride with our clients,” one of the lawyers said.

The other lawyer asked, "Have we decided not to have a shoot-out?"

"Yes, dammit," Captain Harbin replied.

The lawyers undid their armor and stepped out of it. They looked almost identical: tall, thin, dark humans in severe suits. The armor folded down until it was the size and shape of two white briefcases, which the lawyers picked up.

"Get the prisoners up here," Captain Harbin said.

The guards on the boat lifted Lydia up. The Goxhat scrambled up on its own.

The lawyers walked over. "I am Counselor Chonqqing. This is Counselor Caracas. I would offer to shake hands, but— Are the handcuffs necessary, Captain?"

"Yes," Captain Harbin said firmly.

"Well, then," the other lawyer—Caracas—said. "This is a company planet, but you still have laws and judges; and I have set up an appointment with one of those judges. Let's go and see about bail."

They rode in a car labeled BioIn Security, traveling through the brightly lit streets of Innovation City. A large white van followed them. Lydia felt stunned and exhausted, but also relieved. This was one reason she worked for Stellar Harvest. The company put its employees in dangerous situations, because it insisted on recording its holoplays in genuinely exotic places. But it also backed its people up, and it knew there were three secrets to operating successfully on many different worlds: good security, good accountants, and really good lawyers.

They reached their destination. Lydia and the Goxhat were escorted out and into a building, the lawyers sticking to them like burrs. Behind them came Ramona Patel, out of her armor and in a bright red jumpsuit and gold boots with high heels. She wasn't tall, but her figure was perfect, as was her makeup and her long, dark, wavy hair. Stellar Harvest guards surrounded her, still in their armor. A deliberate show of strength, Lydia decided.

Are you there? she asked her AI.

Yes. I am admiring Ramona. This is an effective use of hormones. If you have it, make it obvious, I believe the saying is.

They entered the offices of BioIn Security. Lydia and the Goxhat were booked for kidnapping and theft. Ramona handed out autographs. Cops used their phones to record her standing in her famous hip-shot pose and smiling brilliantly. Buddha, what a smile she had!

Then they went to a courtroom, where the judge had his image taken with Ramona. Amazing what Ramona's eyelashes could do, dropping gently over her dark, dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her skin was brown, smooth and flawless. Her acting voice was as luscious as her skin. If the judge could have melted, he would have, turning into a gooey mass on the floor. Instead, he set a low bail, which the lawyers paid.

They left in the Stellar Harvest van: Ramona, Lydia, the Goxhat, the lawyers, and the armored security guards.

As soon as they were in motion, Ramona said, "This is an absolute disaster, Lydia; and if you don't have a good explanation, I will see you fired."

"How'd you find us?" Lydia asked.

"Wazati Casoon said you had vanished. He was worried about you, and he's the only person who can control his idiot brother. I can't have Cas worried till the holo is finished, and I can get that dimwit Wazati Tloo out of my life.

"I contacted BioIn Security. They said they couldn't find you, so I told our security to make themselves useful. They hacked the city observation system and found video records of you going down into the tunnels below the city. As far as they could tell, you were under the influence of some drug."

"A virus," Lydia said.

"We found that out later. Obviously, BioIn could have found your trail easily. It was

in their own records! They were lying to us. I had a holoplay to make, a thoroughly irritating star, and an agent who was becoming hysterical. I sent one team to look for you in the tunnels and told another team to dig into the BioIn information system and find out why BioIn was lying.”

One of the armored security people said, “You got the infection from BioIn. They know about the work you did on the Checkerboard Planet. It caused them serious trouble, and someone in the corporation wanted revenge. They figured you’d die in the tunnels, and no one would know.

“We think the street performers who robbed you work for BioIn, but we aren’t sure. They may have happened on you and realized you were vulnerable. In any case, they took your money and ID and phone, leaving you with no way to reach us.”

“But you’d had tea with Cas,” Ramona said. “He knew you were there, and he was worried. None of this explains why you kidnapped a BioIn guard and stole a boat.”

“I didn’t know BioIn was after me,” Lydia said. “But I knew they were after the Goxhat. If they’d found us, they would have killed both of us.”

“Why?” asked Ramona.

Lydia told the Goxhat’s story.

“Murder of seven-eighths of a Goxhat,” said Counselor Caracas. “That is serious.”

“I have BioIn stock,” Ramona said.

“I don’t usually advocate jumping bail,” Counselor Chonqqing said. “But I think both of these people should get off the planet. Then we will talk to BioIn. They have put themselves in a very difficult situation. Murder and attempted murder! Someone has to pay!”

Ramona leaned forward, an intent expression on her lovely face. “Lydia, I want your friend to talk to our accounting staff. We need to know exactly what is going on with BioIn. How bad is their financial situation? And who in the company decided to start killing people? After that, we’ll get you off the planet—and send a message to the nearest Goxhat embassy. They can decide what to do about your friend.”

“I/we will go home to the Goxhat planet and live alone,” Three Hoots said sadly. “The last remainder of us/me.”

The van pulled into the drive of a small building. “Luxe Hotel,” a sign flashed.

“We’re renting the entire place,” Ramona said. “Jack here will take you to accounting. After that, you need to take a bath. You stink, Lydia.”

Jack took them to the fifth floor, which was accounting. Lydia dozed while the Goxhat talked to accountants. The two lawyers listened and took notes. Finally, the accountants said they had what they needed. The lawyers nodded, looking satisfied.

Jack returned, out of his armor, a tall figure, handsome except for his oddly pale skin. She had met a few humans like him. It was a traditional human color. But it looked bleached and unnatural, as if the man’s white skull was shining through his skin. He escorted her to a hotel room. There was clothing here, he told her. It ought to fit. The Goxhat was next door.

Lydia took a shower and dressed, then walked to the room’s window. It was raining now. Looking down, she saw the light from vehicles and advertisements shining on the wet street.

Well? She asked her AI.

I am still admiring Ramona Patel. What an efficient woman! The virus damaged our interface, and there are functions I have not been able to restore. But if you plug into a secure computer, I might be able to access this system’s stargate. That will be our backup plan, if Stellar Harvest cannot get you off the planet. My colleagues—the other AIs—do not interfere with intelligent life, but they will want to rescue me.

Okay.

The doorbell rang. A moment later, the door slid open and Ramona entered. She

had changed to a Terra-green caftan with gold embroidery at the neck and hem. Her earrings—new since the last time Lydia saw her—were huge and delicate and golden. Her exquisite feet were in gilded sandals, and her toenails were a luminous green that matched the caftan.

Wazati Casoon followed her in. "Lydia!" The eunuch embraced her. "I have been distraught!"

"No kidding," Ramona said. "I found Lydia for you, Cas. I expect you to concentrate on your dim-as-a-red-dwarf brother now."

"I will think of nothing else," Cas said.

"We have our own shuttle over at the spaceport," Ramona said. "The problem is the hydrofoil from here to the mainland. You'll have ID from my own personal hair stylist, and we're going to transport the Goxhat in a case labeled wigs. I'm sending other people with you, so you get lost in the crowd. It's damn inconvenient. People I need here have to go with you. Do you know how much it costs to stop production?"

"It will give me time to reason with my brother," Cas said. "He still does not want to be blue."

"Krishna is always blue!" Ramona shouted.

Cas and Lydia were silent. After a moment, Ramona drew a deep breath. "I will get angry later. I'm sure your brother will give me plenty of reasons. It's too bad that he's so attractive."

"It's not his fault," Cas said. "Our species has bred for extremely attractive males for thousands of years."

"Brains would have been good," Ramona said.

"Our eunuchs have the brains. Unfortunately, we are not nearly as attractive as the breeding males."

"You saved my life, Cas," Lydia said. "I find that attractive."

"Thank you."

"The unit metal-workers will build a case for the Goxhat tonight," Ramona said. "You and the Goxhat will go to the mainland tomorrow. The shuttle will take off as soon as you arrive. You will be safe in one standard day."

Lydia felt tension go out of her shoulders.

"And I hope you will try to stay out of trouble in the future. This mess occurred because you did work for the AIs, and now it's costing Stellar Harvest money. A person can't serve two employers, Lydia. I'm going to recommend that Stellar Harvest put you on leave, until you decide whether you are working for us or the AIs."

Damn. But typical of Ramona. Nothing she did was an unqualified good.

Lydia nodded. "Okay."

"Now, get some sleep. You need to be sharp tomorrow."

Lydia nodded again.

Ramona's expression softened, and she looked humane for a moment. "You may be interested in knowing the team that went into the tunnels found the people you met there. The three who were victims of the virus have been rescued. The rest chose to stay where they are."

"I owe them," Lydia said.

"Send money to a homeless organization after you are off planet," Ramona said. "There is nothing else you can do for them. You have your own life to save." She turned and walked out of the room, Wazati Casoon following.

So thought Lydia. A happy ending for her, and maybe for Genghis and Tope. But Affirmation Loo was crazy, which might or might not be fixable, and the other people were still in the tunnels. And what about the Goxhat, who was the only remaining part of itself. What kind of happy ending was that?

The Goxhat would have died in the tunnels, except for you, her AI said. *BioIn*

would have gotten away with murder. The result is mixed and imperfect, but so is life.

* * *

Sixty days later, she was on Stellar Harvest's home planet, at a sidewalk café in Megastar City. The sky above her was cloudless and pale blue. A mild wind blew past her. The café was edged with native plants in pots. Their frilly, yellow leaves fluttered in the wind. Lydia sipped wine and felt reasonably happy.

Across the table from her was the last remaining part of Three Hoots. A small dish of a liquid called snap was in front of it. "It is a mild intoxicant," the Goxhat said. "Drinking it leads to a sense of mental clarity and well-being. I/we use it to combat loneliness."

"What are you going to do?" Lydia asked.

"Stellar Harvest has offered me/us a job as an internal auditor. I/we are planning to take the job. Better to be a stranger among humans, than a single body among Goxhat.

"In addition, I/we am or are impressed by Stellar Harvest's defense of employees. It seems like a good idea to stick with them until BioIn is bankrupted and sold off."

"You think that will happen?"

"The Stellar Harvest accountants say yes. According to them, it is not a good idea to pull an enron, unless you own the government that regulates you. I'm not sure what an enron is."

"A lot of crooked accounting."

"BioIn owns the government of Grit, but the corporation is still based on Nova Terra, and it does not own the government there.

"In addition, the Goxhat government has issued a warning to investors and business people. BioIn is an unsafe investment and an unsafe business partner. We are the best players of capitalism in the known galaxy. Many beings pay attention to our advisories.

"BioIn's stock is falling like a stone. As one of our proverbs says, justice is like a very slow punch press. It may not come down often, but it comes down hard."

"Have they found out who ordered the attacks on you and me?"

"Not yet," Three Hoots said. "But that does not matter. The corporation is corrupt and must be destroyed. The game of capitalism can only be played if the players and their numbers are honest."

Tell that to humans, Lydia thought.

The Goxhat have tried.

Three Hoots climbed onto the table and took a big slurp from the bowl of snap, then climbed back onto its chair. "In time, maybe, I/we will return home. But first I/we must deal with grief and learn enough to become an expert on investing in alien cultures. Single I/we may be, but I/we still long for profit and fame."