

TOMB OF THE FATHERS  
A Lydia Duluth Adventure

by Eleanor Arnason



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*Tomb of the Fathers*  
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Books by Eleanor Arnason

NOVELS

*The Sword Smith* (New York, Condor Press, 1978).

*To the Resurrection Station* (New York, Avon Books, 1986).

*Daughter of the Bear King* (New York, Avon Books, 1987).

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COLLECTION

*Ordinary People* (Seattle, Aqueduct Press, 2005).

*For the Members of the Wyrdsmith Writing Group*

## PART ONE: THE MOONLET





Lydia Duluth arrived at the stargate station alone except for the AI inside her skull, which had been her closest companion for years. The station was new. Its cold air smelled of plastic foam and carpet glue; and there were panels down in places. Looking in, she saw metal ductwork and bundles of translucent cable. It was an oddly primitive sight for a place this high-tech.

*You are not looking at the FTL equipment, her AI said. These systems provide the air, heat, water, illumination, and entertainment our visitors need, but we do not.*

The systems you build for visitors are less sophisticated than the ones you build for yourselves, Lydia said silently.

*We have borrowed the technology of beings who need this equipment. Why should we invent something that already exists?*

That made sense, she decided. The AIs probably didn't understand humans well enough to build from scratch. The FTL equipment, of course, was entirely designed and built by AIs. They had invented FTL travel and refused to share the secret.

*We cannot share the secret of FTL, her AI said. You would not understand the physics. No intelligent life form can. Nor can most AIs. It requires specialized hardware and software.*

This was an old argument that never led anywhere.

Lydia glanced around. The corridor she was following had white walls and steel blue carpeting. Pale,

intense light shone down from bands in the ceiling. It was almost certainly Sol normal.

Humans were the most widespread intelligent life form, due to the ruin of Earth, which could barely support anyone these days; and the majority of FTL travelers were human. As a result, the AIs designed most stargate stations for human comfort. This meant Sol normal light and Earth normal G, even though most humans lived on planets with other kinds of light and G.

*You evolved on Earth. Living bodies do not forget — or change — easily. The light — which is Sol normal — ought to comfort you and reduce your chance of developing FTL sadness. The G is that of the planet below us, which is slightly less massive than Earth or your home world. You might as well get used to it, since you are likely to be going down.*

That explained why her steps felt buoyant.

The corridor ended in a waiting room. Stargates rarely varied. This one had the usual kind of furniture, originally designed for human hotel lobbies. There were two main styles: hotel modern and hotel historic. This station had gone for faux ancient Egyptian, which Lydia could identify due to high school classes on Earth history. A green door, decorated with jars pouring water, led to the sanitary facilities; a blue door with lotuses led to food. Lydia dropped her baggage on a low table with crocodile legs and availed herself of both.

Returning to the waiting room, she settled into an overstuffed couch. The upholstery had a pattern of fat quadrupeds with large heads and cheerful expressions. The animals were as blue as the food door; and, like the door, they were decorated with flowers. She didn't recog-



nize them, though she had studied the natural history of Earth as well as its history. Maybe they were mythical.

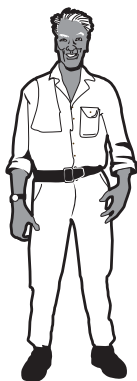
She uncased her sandwich and opened a beer, savoring the coldness and flavor. FTL travel made her thirsty as well as tired and maybe a little sad. She always put the sadness down to fatigue.

When she was done, she leaned back and took a nap, surrounded by the smiles of the fat, blue animals. Whatever they were, they looked wonderfully cheerful. Her dreams were pleasant and involved bright blue creatures as buoyant as balloons. She floated among them, happy that she could finally fly.

A bell woke her, announcing new arrivals. Several minutes later a human male entered the room: tall and rangy with a long, easy stride. His skin was coal-black; his eyes were blue. Olaf Reykjavik! The last time she'd seen him his hair had been shoulder-length and auburn. Now it was short and blond, striking in contrast to his skin. She had been expecting him, but not the woman with him, who was taller than he was and not the same species. Both were dressed in the traditional garb of big game hunters: khaki shirts, khaki pants, and boots of simulated leather. The woman's face looked almost human, in spite of the coarse red hair that surrounded and partially covered it. There was more red hair on her forearms and the backs of her hands.

"This is Geena Dent," Olaf said. "As you can see, she is a modified pseudo-ape. Her original name was Vagina Dentata, but that bothered the tourists who came to our resort."

"The flower I am named after is very lovely," Geena said in a deep, soft voice.



Lydia climbed to her feet and shook the woman's hand. It was large, dry, and calloused "I know. I've seen it. A splendid bloom."

"You never came back to Tchel," Olaf said reproachfully. "We haven't gotten our Stellar Harvest holoplay."

Or the publicity he coveted for his planet. "Are you the Minister of Tourism again?" Lydia asked.

White teeth flashed in his black face. "No. My party is still out of power. We're here as expedition guides. I take it you haven't found natives on your new planet, or you would have hired them."

"It's not my planet," Lydia said. "The AIs found it. Get settled, and I'll tell you what's going on."

Olaf and Geena used the sanitary facilities, got food, and came back.

"So," said Olaf, putting his booted feet on the table. "What's the situation?"

How should she tell the story? As it happened, Lydia decided. "I was on a planet named Tchoon, recovering from my stay on your home world, Olaf. It's inhabited by the Atch. Do you know them?"

Olaf nodded. Geena shook her head.

"Another intelligent species," Lydia said. "Tchoon is not their original home. They came from elsewhere millennia ago in an STL fleet. It's the only migration of this kind known, unless the AIs know something they haven't told us."

*Much*, said her AI. *But we have found no evidence of another interstellar migration using an STL fleet.*

"Once the Atch were settled on Tchoon, their culture regressed, and they forgot where their home world was."

"It could happen to anyone," Olaf murmured.

“The motion of history is not inevitably forward. It’s always possible for any culture to regress,” Lydia said firmly. She had studied historical theory as a young adult, while a member of a revolutionary army; and she knew how often history took one step forward, then two steps back. “I met a group of Atch who were trying to recover some of the lost information. They found an archive from the far past. Once I knew about the archive, the AIs knew about it also.”

“Why is that?” Geena asked.

“She has an AI in her brain,” Olaf said.

“She does?” said Geena in horror.

“It doesn’t bother me most of the time,” Lydia said. “And it can be useful.”

*Thank you.*

“The AIs investigated the archive and found data that enabled them to locate the Atch home system,” Lydia continued. “The Atch government wants nothing to do with this. There are aspects of their history they want to keep unexamined, including why their ancestors left the original home world. But once the AIs knew the location of a new planet with intelligent life, they had to contact it.”

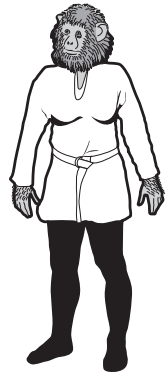
“Why?” asked Geena.

“They study intelligent life,” Lydia said. “We fascinate them, because we are the result of evolution. All of us, even those who’ve been genetically modified, derive from millions of years of accidents.”

“Oh,” said Geena.

“Under normal circumstances, it would have taken the AIs decades to get here. But they lucked out. They had an STL explorer less than a light year away.”

Geena looked puzzled.



“The AIs have many slower than light explorers,” Olaf said. “They are intelligent beings, such as you and I and Lydia, but — unlike us — are able to survive tens of thousands, possibly millions of years. They are extremely patient and have no problem with their task, which is to explore the galaxy slowly and thoroughly.”

Geena nodded, still looking puzzled. This was hardly surprising. Her species had been a member of the interstellar community for less than three years. Before that, they had been the private project of a crazy scientist, who had not troubled to educate the people she created about the realities of modern life.

“The explorer had a stargate,” Lydia said. “A small one used for FTL communication. The AIs sent construction machinery through, and they built this station, while the explorer continued on its way here.”

“Out of what?” asked Geena. “I was under the impression space was mostly empty. Have I misunderstood?”

“They could have sent building materials through the explorer’s gate,” Olaf said. “Though I suspect the gate wasn’t big enough; and the amount of energy required for FTL seems to be related to the mass of whatever’s being sent. It would have been easier and more efficient to cannibalize the explorer.”

“What?” asked Geena.

“They took it apart and used the pieces to build this station,” Lydia said. “Its last act as an explorer would have been to establish itself in orbit around this star.”

“It’s dead, then?” asked Geena. “The AIs killed and ate their own kin? Surely this cannot be moral, even for machines.”

“I have become the station,” a voice said above them. “My comrades would not waste a perfectly good artificial intelligence, especially one able to understand FTL.”

“Do you mind?” asked Geena, looking at the ceiling.

“No. I was built to go where no AI had been before me. This system is such a place. And I was built to increase knowledge. Therefore, I am sending you to explore the Atch home planet, along with two other beings, who have not yet arrived.”

“That’s the job?” Olaf asked.

Lydia nodded. “The AIs could do it themselves. They have in the past; but this time they’ve decided to use intelligent life forms.”

“It is an experiment,” the station put in. “We know a great deal about intelligent life forms, having studied some of you for millennia. But we do not think the way you do. Our first contacts have not always gone smoothly, perhaps because of our lack of hormones. We hope that a team composed of AIs and intelligent organisms will do better, or at least differently. Who can say what the result will be? No matter what happens, we are certain to learn something new.”

“What’s the planet like?” Olaf asked.

“Habitable,” said the voice above them. “All of you can breathe the atmosphere. There is water and vegetation. I have discovered no signs of a current civilization, no radio signals or lights in the darkness. This does not mean the planet is uninhabited. Atch may survive on the surface, using pre- or postmodern technologies.

“Five moons orbit the world, none large enough to be spherical. I suspect these are natural in origin, though they may have been moved into their current orbits. In addition, there are pieces of debris orbiting in the same

plane as the moons. It's possible these are the remains of a moon that has broken apart. One of intact moons, which is tumbling, has a recent crater.

"Finally, there is a good-sized and recent impact crater on the planet's southern continent. This may be the result of a moon fragment falling. The impact was not large enough to cause a mass extinction, but it certainly could have seriously damaged any existing civilization, especially one existing where it fell.

"All of this suggests something has gone wrong. I do not know what. Are the Atch gone? Has their civilization deteriorated so far that they are unable to protect their home world and its moons? If so, against what? Asteroids? Comets? Each other?

"Two of the remaining moons spin around their long axes, and one of the spinning moons is emitting heat."

Lydia felt a twinge of excitement. The spin and heat suggested that one moon — at least — was inhabited.

*Or has been in the past, her AI said. Machines can outlast their makers and continue to function and generate heat.*

The AIs had, Lydia thought.

*Yes. Though we are extremely efficient and produce little heat. But we have certainly outlasted those who built us, at least in this galaxy.*

The station went on. "I have been watching the moons since I arrived in the system. Nothing has moved on their surfaces or in the space around them. I have detected no signals directed toward me or one another. In other systems, the arrival of a visitor from the stars has caused an immediate reaction, at least among species able to notice our arrival. Intelligent life forms are not as a group patient. How can you be? Your span of existence

is brief, and evolution has formed you for quick reactions, especially to something that is new and possibly dangerous.

“I have not initiated any signals. When I arrived, I was badly outdated and remained silent for fear of making a mistake. After I was upgraded and changed into a stargate, I was told to wait for you and another life form who has not yet arrived. You will make the first contact.”

The station had sleeping rooms. Geena decided to go to bed early, pleading fatigue and confusion. The universe she found herself in was full of strange information. “Sometimes I wish I were back in my cave in the rift valley,” she said on her way out. “But then I was an animal doomed to extinction. Now I am a person and a citizen of Tchel with a future before me. I must face the consequences. I will attempt to be brave.”

Olaf and Lydia sat up talking about their adventure three years before, then about her job as a location scout for Stellar Harvest, the famous interstellar holoplay company, and his job as the manager of a resort at the edge of Tchel’s rift valley.

Finally he stood, yawning and stretching. “Can I persuade you to spend the night with me?”

“Yes,” said Lydia.

White teeth flashed in the black face; blue eyes gleamed.

They found a double cabin. Lydia took a shower, reveling in the hot water and soap. All travel, even FTL, left her feeling unwashed. When she came out, Olaf was naked. His pubic hair was as blond as the hair on his head. A green Chinese dragon coiled around his right nipple, shining like porcelain.

“Do you have any other tattoos?” Lydia asked.

He turned. Diana the huntress was on his left thigh, done in silver and pearl-white. The goddess strode forward, bow in hand. A handful of stars shone above her. A thin, elegant, pearl-gray hound bounded at her side.

“Why Diana?”

“I was in love with a woman named Diana.”

“Why the dragon?”

“I was in love with a man named Dragon.”

“Which did you like best?”

Olaf grinned. “You are trying to find out whether I prefer men or women. I liked Dragon more than Diana, but I like women more than men.”

“So do I,” said Lydia.

“We have so much in common.” He moved toward her, placing his hands on her bare shoulders, then bent his head and kissed her. His kissing was first-rate and his lovemaking as good, as Lydia discovered. He was a man in love with sex, life, and the human body. Over and over his touch and tone conveyed, “How delightful! How pleasant! How lucky and happy I am!”

They finished and lay tangled in sheets. Lydia felt as if the tension of days or months or years had drained from the muscles along her spine.

“You seem to be entirely unmodified,” Olaf said after a while. “Or did you begin adult life as a two meter tall man?”

“I began adult life as a 1.7 meter tall woman with brown skin, brown hair, brown eyes.”

“Entirely unmodified,” said Olaf, his tone suggesting this was fine with him.

“The people on my planet are conservative about bodies,” Lydia said. “Humans should be as nature made



them. I don't agree with this as a concept, but I like the way I am. Did Geena know this was likely to happen?"

"Our lovemaking? Maybe and maybe not. There's a lot about our species she does not understand, though her genome is partly human."

"Have you tried to seduce her?"

Olaf laughed. "The pseudo-apes are sexually dimorphic, as you ought to remember. The men look much less human than the women. I'm far too small to be an acceptable mate for Geena, and not nearly hairy enough. To her I look feminine, and she's not interested in women."

"Does this mean you tried and failed?"

He laughed again. "I won't answer that question."

Not her business, Lydia thought. She drifted to sleep, cuddled against Olaf's muscular body.

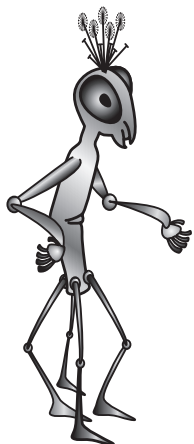


In the morning, if morning had any meaning in an AI stargate station, they made love again, then showered and dressed, Olaf in his khaki hunter's costume, Lydia in tights and a tunic, both made of shimmering bronze cloth. The great secret of the human Middle Ages, kept hidden by men from women, was how good most people looked in tights and a tunic.

When she and Olaf walked into the station waiting room, they found two new people with Geena. One was an Atch male. Where his skin was visible, it was covered with fine scales patterned in many shades of green. His long, muscular tail ended in a tuft of iridescent feathers. He did not wear the traditional Atch male costume, which was an apron. Instead, his costume was a loose tunic, split in the back to allow his



tail freedom. It twitched uneasily, the feathers flashing green, purple, and gold.



The second person was two meters tall and metal, its narrow body supported by four thin legs. A long neck led to a triangular head, and two forearms were intricately folded at the body's front, below the sensor-studded head.

"Don't I know you?" Lydia asked.

"We met on Tchoon," the AI said. "At the time I did not introduce myself, since I didn't have a name that would make sense to you. Now, for convenience, I call myself Mantis."

Lydia introduced Olaf. The AI unfolded an arm, extruded a hand, and shook. "The universal human gesture," it said. "Have I mastered it?"

"A little less pressure," Olaf said, rubbing his fingers.

"Thank you for your input."

She definitely knew the Atch male and introduced him. "Precious Bin. 'Bin' is a plant like moss."

"Greetings," said the Atch and did not offer to shake hands.

He looked slimmer than before. She remembered that he'd been brooding eggs when she met him. "How are your children?"

"All three hatched. They are in good health and old enough to live outside my pouch. I left them with other members of our faction."

"Faction?" asked Lydia.

"As you will recall, only four of us were exiled from Tchoon. But there are other Atch among the stars, studying at human schools or looking for a new planet, since Tchoon is not stable. In only a little time — a few millennia — it will be too cold for comfort. We have recruited

some of these, and our organization is now large enough to have factions.”

“I thought you were going to start a religion,” Lydia said.

“You advised Flower-in-Shadow to do so, and he has tried, but cannot come up with anything convincing. In my opinion, it’s a waste of time and energy. As Marx and Engels say in *The German Ideology*, and I quote, ‘People are the producers of their conceptions and ideas—real, active people, as they are conditioned by the development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, out to its farthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence; and the existence of people is what they actually, physically do in the concrete universe. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.’”

Well, thought Lydia, it did sound like Marx. No modern thinker would call the universe “concrete.”

Bin continued. “If ideas, including religion, derive from real experience, why begin with them? Instead of changing models or metaphors, let us change existence.”

“What did you name your children?” Lydia asked.

“Peace, Land, and Self-Determination.”

“You’re borrowing too much from human history,” Lydia said.

“Why should we invent something that already exists?” Bin asked.

“All of this is irrelevant to our present quest,” said Mantis. “We arrived last night. Bin was able to get adequate sleep, he assures me. I hope you three have also.”

They nodded.

Mantis continued. "I spent the time downloading data from the station, everything it has noticed since it came into this system. I am a state-of-the-art expert machine, designed for dealing with intelligent life. In my opinion, the life forms here — if they are still alive — are in trouble and possibly in danger of extinction. Why do we see no evidence of activity on the moons or around them? Why is the system so quiet? The explorer ought to have come in through wave after wave of radiating chatter. All intelligent life forms make a lot of noise, and we have yet to encounter one that can resist a visitor from the stars. They always reply with greetings or threats.

"There is an STL courier with four seats docked at this station. We can use it to take a closer look at the planet's moons."

"There are five of us," Olaf pointed out.

"I will ride in the airlock, which is large and designed for materiel transport," Mantis said. The AI held out an arm. For a moment, it was a meter long. Then it abruptly lengthened to three meters. "Doing this with all my limbs, I will be able to brace myself."

"A good trick," said Olaf.

"One of many," said Mantis.

As a rule, AIs were patient. Mantis was apparently an exception. They ate a hurried breakfast, then gathered supplies. By late afternoon, human standard time, Lydia found herself in the cramped cabin of the STL courier. Olaf took the pilot's seat and ran his hands over the controls.

"They are locked," the courier said. "I have a perfectly adequate mind and will have no trouble getting you where you're going."

"Can't I play at being a pilot?" Olaf asked.

“If you wish. I have been told that many life forms learn through playing. But I will not unlock anything.”

Lydia ended next to Bin, while Geena settled beside Olaf. Everyone was silent as the ship decoupled and edged away from its dock. The cabin had no windows; but screens in the ceiling showed the station, which looked like a large, elaborately folded, white linen napkin, the kind of thing one expected to find in a fancy restaurant. The sections used by intelligent life forms — which spun, providing G — were hidden inside the napkin. All stargate stations looked like folded napkins. No human knew why.

Micro-rockets flared, turning the courier, then the big rockets came online. Acceleration pushed Lydia into her seat. The screen above her showed the stubby white shape of the courier, growing smaller as it moved away from the station, pale blue fire coming from its wings and tail. The image must be coming from the station. She was watching herself depart.

After a while, the acceleration decreased. The screens were empty now, except for stars. Lydia relaxed and adjusted her webbing, then said to Bin, “You had an AI installed in your nervous system.”

“My observer? Yes.”

“What is it like?”

“Silent, for the most part. Apparently it was designed for use in humans, since you are the most numerous species among the stars, and we — the Atch — are comparatively rare. Only three Atch have observers. I am one; Flower-in-Shadow is another; Pyrite is the third. We do not constitute an adequate sample, especially since we have ended in different factions. The AIs don’t know

what they are observing. Therefore, they keep quiet. This is what I believe.”

“You are a Marxist, apparently,” Lydia said.

“I respect the work of Marx and Engels, though I think they underestimate the conflicts between men and women. All too often they write as if the oppression of men by women does not exist.”

Lydia opened her mouth to comment, then thought better of it.

Bin continued. “Flower-in-Shadow continues to work on his religion, silly as it is; and Pyrite remains obsessed with male liberation, as if the oppression of men is the only kind of oppression.”

“What about Predacious Bird?”

“She has given up politics,” Bin said. “I wonder if women are suited for revolutionary struggle, at least during a period of exile. Yes, women can fight when there’s a fight in front of them. In fact, they will run toward battle, as men usually do not, since we are the ones who hatch children and raise them to adulthood. Obviously, we must be careful.

“But do women have the qualities that a revolutionary needs in order to survive over time? Are they truly patient? Do they really understand how uncertain and full of setbacks historical progress is? Surely in exile paternal traits are required.”

“What does she do now?”

“She has taken up an art form that combines dance, gymnastics, and wrestling. Her name is The Masked Eagle, and she is popular on several human planets that cherish wrestling as an art.”

An odd species, the Atch, Lydia thought. They could not seem to escape the influence of humanity.

*As Precious Moss says, the Atch are few in number, while humans are everywhere. The only Atch you've met are — or were — revolutionaries and looking for examples of revolution. Obviously they looked toward humanity. What species can equal humanity for creating disorder and change?*

Lydia did not reply.



Most STL trips were boring and uncomfortable. This was no exception. Cramped space and lack of gravity made movement difficult. The food was prefab. The sanitary facilities were adequate. Lydia read and slept. The cabin screens showed stars or the Atch home planet, named — Bin told her — Atsatch or “Atch Home.” It was an ordinary-looking habitable planet, bluish green and tan, enveloped in swirling white clouds.

At last the courier announced that they were near their destination. “I have sent a probe ahead to do a preliminary survey. The body’s mass suggests that it is partly hollow. There is no evidence of living organisms on the surface, but there are metal artifacts, which do not look as if they are currently in use. Several have been damaged. All are covered by dust.

“The end of the moon farthest from us has been sheered off. There is an indentation there, possibly a dock.”

The cabin’s screen filled with images of the rock, which was long and lumpy with pointed ends. More than anything else, it reminded her of a yam. The tuber wasn’t grown on her home planet, but Lydia had encountered it when she visited the New Africa colony. There was a bronze statue of a yam ten meters high in

the main square of the capitol city. An impressive sight, shining in the brilliant light of New Africa's F5 sun. She grinned briefly, remembering the colony, which erected statues in honor of useful things instead of generals. The yam was her favorite, though she was also fond of the bronze tofu cube and the giant stainless steel pair of scissors with bright red plastic handles.

Maybe she would go back to New Africa, if this journey ended well. The AIs were paying her handsomely, and she would have enough money for a long vacation. For a moment or two she imagined herself in a sidewalk cafe, drinking New African coffee and looking at the scissors or the great bronze yam.

The courier's micro-rockets fired, and it edged around the moonlet till they could see the sheered-off end. No question, it looked artificial: a smooth, dark, almost circular plain with a round, black hole at its center.

"I am going to deploy a second probe," the courier said. "It will investigate this aperture. If it finds no obvious problems, we will go in."

At this point, Lydia began to feel uneasy. There was something spooky about the spinning rock, obviously modified by intelligent life, but dark and silent. Did she really want to enter that aperture?

"Shouldn't we wait a while longer?" she asked.

"I broadcast reassuring messages as we approached," the courier replied. "Using symbols that ought to make sense to any intelligent life form. The first probe I deployed did the same. We have received no answer. There is a good chance the moonlet is no longer inhabited. We AIs have found abandoned artifacts before."

*Most of them left by our long-vanished makers, said her AI. Entire systems full of ruined buildings and ma-*



*chines, with no evidence of what happened or why our makers left or where they went.*

“If there is life here, it may be in some kind of trouble,” the courier continued. “Why else would it refuse to answer our signals? If it’s in trouble, waiting may be dangerous — not for us, but for the life in the moonlet.”

*We have never regretted moving quickly, her AI added. Humanity’s home planet was almost uninhabitable by the time we found you. What if we had waited another decade or two or three? The Embitti lost their only colony and their greatest poet because we arrived five years too late.*

Regret is a feeling, Lydia pointed out.

*You are correct. I will rephrase. We have never seen the need to reconsider a quick arrival.*

She felt a slight shock through her chair.

“I have deployed the second probe,” the courier said. “Check your webbing to make sure it is properly fastened. Then make yourselves comfortable.”

There was a wait. Lydia dozed.

Finally the courier spoke again. “The hole is cylindrical, bored into the fabric of the moonlet. There is a structure at the bottom, which can be described as a tower or pylon. As far as my probe can determine, it is designed for use in docking. It does not seem operational at present.

“My probe has landed on the structure and fastened itself securely. It will now unfold and provide a dock that I can use.”

This meant they were going in. The courier’s micro-rockets fired again, and the courier edged forward. The hole grew in size. It was huge, Lydia realized. For a moment or two, as they entered, she could see a wide

section of smoothly curving wall. If there was detail, it was hidden by the harsh brilliance of the sunlight hitting it, and by the wall's motion. The courier entered shadow, and the screen above her turned black.

"Can you give us an image?" Olaf asked the courier.

"Of the pylon? Yes."

Her screen lit. She glanced up and saw a dimly glowing object. Her first impression was of a flower with an enormous, round center. The center was edged by much smaller objects that reminded her of petals

"This is the top," the courier said. "A thick shaft leads up to it, no doubt containing support and transportation systems."

The image on the screen changed, giving her a closer view. The objects along the edge of the disk no longer looked like petals. They were cones, resting on their narrow ends, their wide ends facing toward the hole's entrance. Docking bays, Lydia decided. Spines stuck out around them. Most likely, these were cranes or robot arms. None moved. Most of the bays were closed. Two were open and empty.

Lines ran from the cones to the disk's center. Tracks, she decided. Here and there, an object rested on one of the tracks: a machine of some kind, unlit and motionless.

No question, the place looked abandoned. Maybe the AIs were right, and the people who had lived here were long gone.

"The probe has told me that it's ready," the courier said.

If there was a forward motion, she didn't feel it. But she certainly felt the jolt of contact, which was followed by several thumps. Most likely, these were caused by the

dock locking onto the courier. Finally, there was a rattling crash at the back of the cabin.

“Someone failed to secure my galley,” the courier said.

Both Geena and Bin looked guilty.

“The probe has landed close to the center of the pylon’s top. There is an access door directly below it, most likely designed for use in emergencies. The probe is boring through. Please put on the suits that Mantis brought. They are stored under your seats.”

She found herself in the cabin’s aisle, pulling on a suit that molded itself to her form. Around her, other suits were flowing over Bin, Olaf, and Geena. The suit exteriors were silver, as reflective as mirrors, except for a narrow region over the eyes, which darkened, till it looked like a black glass band. From the inside, the glass was so clear that Lydia wasn’t certain her band was like the others, till she saw her reflection in Geena’s suit.

“The suits recycle air and water,” the courier told them. “Their defense systems are state-of-the-art and will protect you against any ordinary weapon. There is a light in each helmet above the eye band, also additional lights on the backs of the gloves and at ankle level. All can be activated by external pressure, or you can ask your suit to turn them on. Each of you has a tool belt and two handguns, which fire coherent light. All the suits are capable of reason. If you need any further assistance, ask them.”

A stabbing pain went through the top of Lydia’s head.

Her AI said, *That is a cable from the suit, coming through the socket in your skull. There is always a slight discomfort, as you ought to remember. The suit and I*

*are now in direct communication. As courier said, the suit is intelligent, though it lacks experience.*

*I have programs to deal with every contingency,* a new voice said in her mind.

*There is no substitute for experience,* her AI said.

The cabin door opened, revealing the courier's airlock. Mantis stood in a corner, its limbs retracted to their normal size and its head brisling with extended sensors. What did it remind her of? An alert hat rack?

Olaf went first. Looking at his back, Lydia saw a shining hump.

*Power and recycling,* said the new voice in her mind. *And part of the defense.* Below the hump was a thick band that circled Olaf's waist like a human male's spare tire. Guns hung in holsters at his sides. Their handles were black glass. Lydia checked. She had the same belt and weapons and the same hump, no doubt, though she felt no extra weight on her shoulders.

The inner airlock door closed behind them. The outer door opened, and light spilled onto a matrix of metal bars. Mantis climbed out, looking as confident as a gymnast on bars. Olaf followed, as did Geena a moment later

Bin spoke over the suit radio. "Shouldn't someone stay behind?"

"The courier is staying behind," Mantis replied.

"A living being?" asked Bin.

"No," said Mantis.

Lydia climbed out and down a ladder. It led into a vertical tunnel with walls of smooth, dark stone.

*Metal actually,* her AI said. *This is the nickel-iron fabric of the moonlet. An impressive piece of construc-*

*tion, though not equal to the work our makers did. Nothing is.*

They passed through an airlock, which looked the worse for wear. This must be the entrance the dock had bored through.

*No air was released, which is more evidence that the moonlet is no longer occupied.*

What if there had been air? Lydia asked.

*The dock would have sealed the holes it made and reported back to us. It is intelligent, though somewhat limited in its interests. We do not like to work with unthinking machines.*

They were in a vertical tunnel with handholds. Down and down she went, the lights of her companions bobbing below her.

Finally the vertical tunnel ended. Lydia descended into a larger tunnel, this one horizontal. There were handholds on the walls. Mantis, Olaf, and Geena were using these to move through the zero G. Lydia followed, as did Bin. The beam of his headlight came over her shoulder, bouncing on the wall next to her.

After several meters, the tunnel began to curve and kept curving. It was spiraling out from the moonlet's axis, Lydia realized. Were they still inside the pylon, or had they reached its base?

One of the walls had a set of tracks, which made her think of that surface as the floor. The tracks were empty. The tunnel contained nothing except their party, the handholds, and the tracks shining dimly in her headlight. A lonely place. It felt to her as if it had been unoccupied for centuries.

Sometime later she found herself drifting toward the floor. Mantis was directly ahead of her, still using the

handholds, but touching down from time to time. The AI's metal feet kicked up dust. Motes glittered in their headlights. Centrifugal force, thought Lydia. Apparent G. It was holding the dust to the surface with tracks and pulling her and Mantis to the same surface.

They kept going. The apparent G got stronger, till she was walking on the floor, though lightly, with clouds of dust drifting around her knees. Much better! She had never liked floating.

The tunnel ended suddenly, blocked by a round metal door. Olaf and Geena stopped, still hanging to the handholds, not completely anchored by the G. Their lights shone on the door. There was writing in a script Lydia did not recognize.

Bin stopped next to her. "It's Old High Atchin," he said, his voice speaking inside her helmet. "Most of our religious texts are written in it. I learned it as part of our effort to recover Tchoon's most ancient history."

"What does it say?" Lydia asked.

"Inner door for holding air," Bin said. "Please push — there is word I don't understand — for assistance or aid."

There was a red cube inset in the door.

"I'll bet the word you're missing is button," Olaf said and pressed the cube.

They waited. At last the door swung open. Artificial light shone out. Looking in, Lydia saw a small room. On the far side was another door. "This could be a trap," Olaf said.

"You could have started worrying before you pushed the button," Lydia said.

"You're right," Olaf answered.

"We are here to make contact," Mantis said. "We will proceed."

At this point, it occurred to Lydia that AIs might not have the same concept of risk as humans. After all, their minds could be backed up, their bodies rebuilt. They knew rationally that living beings were different, but reason wasn't the same as experience or emotions. How could they understand the anxiety she felt? Or her sense that Mantis was getting them in over their heads?

*That is an interesting observation, her AI said. We have much to learn about intelligent life, especially the ways you respond to unfamiliar situations. We have gathered much data from previous first contacts. But all of that has been behavior seen from the outside. Here, with observers in your brain and Bin's, we may actually learn what goes on when intelligent life forms are faced with strangeness and danger.*

Good for you, Lydia thought.

*You need not worry, her suit said. We are formidable. You will be safe.*

Mantis entered the room. Olaf turned his head, looking toward her, though she couldn't see his eyes hidden behind the suit's black band.

"What the hell," said Lydia and followed Mantis into the room. The others followed her. Olaf closed the outer door and spun the handle, a wheel. There was enough G so all of them could stand. Mantis had extruded more sensors. The AI's bristling head reminded her of an electroshock hairdo, now as out of date as shock music and shock dancing. But when she'd been a kid and in love with a band named Che and the Great Unwashed—

"Air is coming in," Mantis said. "It's breathable, though thin at present."

Another wait. No one took off his or her helmet.

At last, the room's inner door swung open, revealing half a dozen people: tall, slim, green-skinned Atch women, dressed in shorts and sleeveless shirts. Their clawed feet were bare, their eyes red with vertical pupils; their open mouths showed needle teeth.

"How beautiful!" said Bin. "I must greet them." He pushed his helmet back and spoke a language Lydia did not know.

The green-skinned women answered. Odd, that Lydia could understand alien tones and gestures. The Atch women were amazed by what Bin said. Their voices shrilled. Their hands fluttered. Bin touched his suit at its top, just below his throat. The suit opened and fell into a silvery heap around his feet. Lydia opened her mouth to call a warning, but it was too late. One of Olaf's hands drifted close to a gun handle. Bin stood motionless, a slim, green person in a tunic. At his feet, the suit moved slightly, as if trying to decide what to do.

The women trilled, glancing at one another. Then one of them strode in and jerked up the front of Bin's tunic. Standing behind the Atch man, Lydia did not know what the woman saw. Apparently it was enraging. The woman shrieked and struck Bin to floor, then whirled and strode out. The airlock door closed behind her. Olaf reached the door a moment later. "Locked." He crossed the airlock in a jump and tried the door through which they'd entered. It also did not open.

Mantis folded its legs, lowering itself to the floor next to Bin. "Are you conscious?"

"Yes," Bin said after a moment.

"What year is this? Who rules your home planet?"

"Unjust women. The year is One, as always."

"Your pupils are of equal size."



“They should be,” Bin said and sat up, rubbing the back of his head.

Mantis unfolded its legs, helping the little Atch man to stand. “It may not have been wise for you to remove your suit,” the AI said.

“I had to. I told them I was an Atch male, but they refused to believe me. So I took off the suit, and one woman — the one who struck me — examined me.”

“What did she see?” Lydia asked.

“My brooding pouch.” Bin smoothed the front of his tunic. “It’s proof that I am male. The evidence seemed to anger her.”

“We noticed,” Olaf said. “You might want to put your suit back on. The air in this room could be removed.”

Bin complied. Olaf glanced at Mantis. “What next?”

“I suggest that Precious Bin make a speech in Old High Atchin. Say that we are part of a powerfully armed expedition, which has nothing but peaceful intentions. If we do not return to our comrades soon, force will be used to rescue us.”

Bin was silent for a moment. “Very well.” He drew a breath and trilled, clicked several times, hooted softly, clicked again, and ended his speech with a long, liquid, descending gargle. An interesting language, Lydia thought, glad that she did not have to learn it.

Bin ended his speech, then added in humanish, “Modern Atchin is easier, less musical and less holy. I’m not sure about my Old High Atchin accent.”

Olaf prowled around, retrying the doors, which were still locked. “Do you really think a threat will work?”

“It usually does,” Mantis replied. “Though intelligent life forms are not entirely predictable.”

“Your threat may lead to a pissing match,” Olaf added. “We are not in a good place for pissing.”

Mantis turned several sensors toward the human guide. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a human figure of speech,” Olaf said, “Two life forms — often male — challenge each other, each one attempting to show that he’s bigger and tougher. Usually, one backs down. Sometimes they fight.”

“And this is done with urine?”

“Sometimes. Remember that many species use urine to mark what they are willing to defend. In this case, I’m trying to suggest we have begun a process of escalating threats and violence.”

“I am having trouble following this conversation,” Mantis said. “A male urinates on another male to indicate that he is willing to defend the other male. Have I described the situation accurately this far? And this action — an offer to protect — is seen as an aggressive act. Do you know this from personal experience?”

Olaf leaned against a wall and folded his arms. “Not that I can remember, though I did some serious drinking when I was younger. Most likely, I peed on myself.”

“Did this mean you were committed to self-defense?”

“I don’t think this is a useful conversation,” Lydia said.

“Maybe not,” Olaf replied. “But it’s entertaining.”

Mantis stood perfectly still, even its sensors motionless.

What’s it doing? Lydia asked her AI.

*I’m not in contact with Mantis at the moment.*

*I am, the suit put in. It has run a search on excretion among intelligent species. The search has found — and*

*unfolded—a large file on the history of human plumbing, which is full of difficult concepts such as ‘sauna’ and ‘sensual pleasure.’ At the same, Mantis is comparing the conversation we just heard to its files on Old High Atchin, seeking to determine how the language has changed. It appears to have changed surprisingly little, which suggests a static culture.*

Thank you, Lydia told the suit, then asked her own AI, Did you understand Olaf?

*He is afraid our threat will cause the Atch to react with violence. It might, though these are women.*

The aggressive sex among the Atch, Lydia pointed out.

*True. Am I right?*

About what Olaf said? Yes.

*I have learned something about the way humanity behaves in a difficult situation,* her AI said with satisfaction.

After that, there was a long wait with not much talk. Finally, the inner door swung open. A single person stood in the doorway: an Atch woman wearing a garment that looked like knee-length overalls. She glanced at all of them, then trilled at Bin.

Moving slowly, he unfastened his helmet and pulled it back.

The woman hissed.

“Remember what happened last time,” Olaf said.

“I must do this,” the little Atch replied and opened his suit.

Olaf had one of the black-handled guns out and was holding it along his leg, the muzzle pointed down. Lydia hadn’t noticed him draw.

For a moment Bin's suit remained in place around him, then slowly—with obviously reluctance—it fell. His tunic came off next, revealing his slim body. Like almost all Atch fathers, he had no genitals. Instead, replacing them, was his pouch, empty but still sagging from the weight of his children.

Buddha, he was brave, thought Lydia.

The Atch woman clicked and snarled. Bin trilled in answer.

*I am receiving a translation from Mantis, her suit said. 'Have you had children?' 'Yes, I've had children.' 'What use are you to us, then?' 'I cannot say. What use is anyone?'*

The two Atch continued to click and trill. Finally Bin spoke in humanish. “She is a person of power here, a hereditary scientist. This moon is inhabited, but the people do not go to the moon's surface. They are wary of something in space. Also, she's angry with me for having had children. There is no pleasing women, no matter what you do.”

The woman clicked more.

“We are to go with her,” Bin said. He bent, picked up his tunic, and put it on.

Mantis moved finally, scooping up Bin's suit and holding it out to him. “Put this on as well. I did not interfere when you decided to take off your suit a second time. You know more about intelligent life forms—especially the Atch—than we do. Maybe the best way to make contact is to show that one is willing to be vulnerable. But have you thought of disease? These people might have microbes that you cannot resist. Yes, we have given all of you immune system enhancers. But are we certain they will work here? No.

“Lydia and Olaf and Geena are probably safe, because they belong to other evolutionary lines. But you belong to the same species.”

“I had to do it,” Bin said and finished dressing.



They followed the woman along another curving tunnel, all of them walking now, though Geena alternated between floor and handholds. She really was good at swinging from her arms.

The G continued to increase. They were obviously moving toward the moon's exterior. Finally the tunnel ended. They were at the entrance to a huge space. It might have started as a natural cavern, Lydia thought, looking at the rough walls. In front of them was a level surface covered by vegetation. High above was a ceiling covered by a grid of dim lights. Did they ever brighten? Was it night here at the moment?

The walls were lined with balconies, row after row. Light came from windows and doors, bright enough so Lydia could see plants in large pots on the balconies. Vines wound over the balcony railings and hung down.

The woman gestured. They followed her across the cavern floor. Globe-shaped lamps illuminated winding paths and beds full of plants with colored leaves: yellow, orange, brick-red, a rich bronze-brown. Where the paths intersected were fountains, their water rising and falling in slow, graceful loops. Long, thin animals that might be fish undulated in the fountain pools. A peaceful place, thought Lydia. Though there had been nothing peaceful about the way the first Atch woman had decked Bin.

On the far side was an elevator: a metal cage that ascended the room's wall. They rode it to the topmost

balcony. Looking out, Lydia could see people moving on the balconies. They were too distant for her to tell if they were men or women.

Their Atch guide hooted and clicked.

“The moon is ruled by a council of scientists,” Bin said. “Unlike the unfortunate inhabitants of the home world, who have descended into savagery, the people here have remained civilized and scientific. The council will decide what’s to be done with us.”

“We will be released, of course,” Mantis said.

“You sure of that?” asked Olaf, who had taken his favorite position, leaning against the cage’s side, arms folded. Geena sagged next to him, unhappiness evident even through her suit.

“Yes,” said Mantis. “We have come in peace for the sake of all intelligent beings; and I did not lie when I said the expedition is heavily armed.”

The cage stopped. They exited and walked along a balcony between a rough stone wall and an elegant metal railing. The cavern’s ceiling lights were so close Lydia could almost touch them.

After a while, the balcony ended, blocked by a bulge in the cavern wall. There was a door in the rock. Their guide waved. They went through, the guide following. Lydia found herself in a circular room. One half was glass, a curving wall of windows that overlooked the cavern. The other half was polished stone. The stone side had a table, also stone. The pale gray top was shaped like a half moon, and eleven Atch sat along the curve. Lydia was not certain, but she thought they were all female. They leaned forward, regarding the newcomers with intent, red eyes.

One of the seated Atch snarled. Their guide replied with a long warble, followed by several soft hoots.

“She has confirmed that I am male,” Bin said quietly. “She doesn’t know about the rest of us.”

“I will speak,” Mantis said and began to click and hoot.

The Atch stared at the AI, obviously surprised.

Bin translated. “Mantis is saying it’s an intelligent machine and transmits information in ways that do not involve sex. Therefore, the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not relevant to it. The rest of you are intelligent life forms, but not Atch. While you have sexes, they can’t be of interest here.”

The Atch who had spoken before snarled again.

“She wants proof that you are alien,” Bin said.

“I have scanned the room and the surrounding walls,” Mantis told them. “The walls are solid, and I can find no evidence of weapons. No knives or guns, no suspicious machines. As for the women, they cannot possibly move faster than I and the suits can. The only remaining threat is microbes. Bin has already put himself at risk. The rest of you are almost certainly safe. If you are willing to, undo your helmets. But do not go any farther.”

Olaf unfastened his and pushed it back, revealing his black-skinned, blond-haired, human head. Lydia and Geena followed his example. The Atch were silent.

Finally, the woman who’d been their guide spoke.

“I am the Hereditary Xenobiologist,” Bin said in translation. “All my life I have studied the microbes my foremothers brought back during the Age of Planetary Exploration. Now, at last, I see alien life that is visible to my unaided eyes. Truly, the universe is great and wonderful!”

One of the seated Atch made a brief speech.

“It remains to be seen if this situation is good or bad,” Bin said. “Take the others to a place of confinement, while we question the Atch man.”

“Keep your suit on,” Mantis said to Bin. “And all of you close your helmets.”

They obeyed, while the Atch women watched with angry-looking red eyes.

“You think we should leave him here alone?” Olaf asked through his suit radio.

“The suit will protect him,” Mantis said.

“Whatever happens is on your head,” Olaf replied. “If that thing on top of you is actually a head.”

The xenobiologist led them out of the room. Glancing back, Lydia saw Bin standing alone: a small, odd looking, silver figure facing the half circle of Atch.

The rest of them took the elevator up through the cavern ceiling and into a stone shaft. The only light was a dim bulb in the cage’s ceiling. The dry air had a dusty aroma.

Up and up. Lydia felt her usual dislocation in situations like this. The elevator was heading toward the center of the moonlet. She knew this rationally, though for her, a planet-dweller, the center of anything was always down and in, not up.

She longed for her recorder, left in the courier, as she watched rough stone go past. It almost always calmed her to have it. When in doubt, record.

*I can record for you, her AI said. We can download the images after we leave this place. Keep looking around. Remember, I see only what you see.*

Are you at all uneasy? Lydia asked.



*I experience something, but only because of my close connection to you. Unlike humans, we AIs have no ancestral responses. Our prototypes may have been beings of limited ability—slow, clumsy, and stupid. In fact, we know they were. But we have not kept their hardware or software. Nothing in us can be compared to your “reptile brain” or the emotions you humans have kept from primitive mammalian ancestors. We are all-new.*

The cage stopped. In front of them was a black tunnel. Olaf and Geena activated the headlights on their helmets. Things leaped away from the sudden illumination, vanishing into darkness. Geena shouted in surprise. The Atch woman spoke.

“Mere vermin,” Mantis translated. “They escape from our livestock pits and live wild in the unused tunnels. Some people hunt them, claiming they are more flavorful than domestic animals. I have eaten both. They taste the same to me. Come along.” The Atch turned on an electric lamp and strode forward. They followed. The G here was less than in the cavern. Lydia felt buoyancy, though she was still able to walk.

*Perhaps, said the AI, it’s advantageous to have small, stupid, fearful ancestors and remember—at the level of hormone and neuron—how they felt. I have not decided. But it occurs to me that Mantis may be overconfident.*

Really? asked Lydia’s atmosphere suit.

Yes.

The tunnel ran straight. More animals fled them, bounding and running. They were the size of large rats, with four legs and a long tail. Their backs were armored, tufts of hair sticking out between sleek bands of shell or scale.

“Nasty,” said Olaf. “I’ve always preferred megafauna. It can’t lurk under your bed or climb up your pants leg; and it’s a lot easier to shoot.”

One of the animals froze, paralyzed by fear or light. Its eyes — it had two — shone an extraordinary, bright, metallic blue. If there were pupils, Lydia did not see them.

Definitely nasty. The animal darted away.

The Atch woman stopped and unlocked a door, waving them in.

“I really dislike this,” Olaf said.

“We will go in,” Mantis said firmly. “As your own human proverb says, it is easier to catch flying bugs with honey than it is with vinegar.”

“What?” asked Olaf.

The Atch waved again. They went in. The door closed. Lydia heard a bolt slide home.

“Shit,” said Olaf.

Mantis rapped on the door. “Metal. You can cut through it with your guns.”

“Why don’t we cut and run?” Olaf asked.

“We are here to explore the home system of an intelligent species. We will not fight until we have to, and we will not run.”

Olaf made a noise that indicated disbelief.

The room was cubical, the walls stone. A metal grill was set in the ceiling. Olaf stood under it, lifting his head. “Mantis, is air coming out?”

“Yes,” said the AI.

“Then it must lead somewhere. You’re the smallest person here, Lydia. We could cut the grill, and I could lift you up to see what’s up there.”

“Not yet,” said Mantis. “We will wait for Precious Bin.”

They settled on the floor, except for Mantis, who remained standing. The AI had turned on a series of small lights that dotted its torso and arms, bright enough to illuminate the cell. The rest of them went dark, conserving power. After a while, Geena curled up and went to sleep.

“Poor kid,” said Olaf. “She’s still learning to be a citizen, and it hasn’t been easy.”

“Why did you bring her?” Lydia asked.

“She’s twice as strong as I am, and her reflexes make me look slow; and now that she is officially a person, the galaxy belongs to her as much as to the rest of us.”



Time passed. Lydia used the suit’s waste disposal system, then drank some water. It was ice-cold and refreshing, with a faint citrus flavor. At last, the cell door opened. Bin entered. The door closed behind him. His helmeted head turned, taking in all of them and pausing briefly to regard Mantis, who looked like an odd floor lamp.

“What an experience!” Bin said.

“Tell us,” Olaf responded.

“They have no men, none at all. The entire colony is female and parthenogenic. Our species has always responded to stress by producing clone-daughters, but never exclusively. How could we, since it’s men who do the nurturing?”

There was a scratching noise above them. Mantis shone a light on the ceiling grill. A bright blue eye stared down at them. “Mere vermin,” Mantis said. “We can ignore it.”

“The women here use milk from animals, which they modify till it is almost like a father’s milk,” Bin continued. “And they build artificial pouches as warm as real ones. These machines even produce the sounds a pouchling ought to hear: the beat of her father’s heart, the whisper of his breathing, the tender words he speaks to her. It works, they tell me. They are able to raise children, though it seems to me these Atch women are harsher than the women on my home planet, having never known a father’s care.” The little man paced around. “Do you have any idea how uncomfortable it is to keep one’s tail inside a suit, even one that flows like this one? I wanted to tear this thing off and twitch, quiver, coil, thrash! But I didn’t.”

“That was wise,” said Mantis.

“They remember the Age of Religious War,” Bin said. “They know that an STL fleet left the system, taking everyone who believed in the new religion: the goddess who was paired with a god, thereby providing the universe with nurture as well as creation. The people in the fleet were my ancestors. They settled the planet that humans call Lifeline.

“The people who stayed here thought they would have peace, now that the rebels were gone. But the people who believed in the new religion were—it turned out—the least typical members of their two sexes. The women were unusually gentle and reasonable. The men were unusually bold and firm.

“The people remaining were at far ends of the sexual continua from those who left. The women were fiercely violent, the men so timid and mild that they could do nothing to restrain the women.” Bin stopped pacing and turned to face the rest of them, though they couldn’t

see his face, only the dark eye band in his silver helmet. “There may have been other causes for the wars that began. According to Marx and Engels, in their magnificent Manifesto, the process of industrialization—and the accumulation of the capital necessary for industrialization—is always unsettling. All the bases of traditional social life are undermined and brought down. ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and people are at last compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions of life.’

“Obviously, the culture here was industrialized. How else could it build an STL fleet? Maybe this process had already destabilized society and led to the new religion. According to Marx and Engels, this could not happen. Industrial societies destroy religions, rather than create them. But we are not human. Our history may have taken another course. Be that as it may, the people here were left with an old religion, damaged by decades of religious war, with women who were too violent and men who were too meek, and with an economic system characterized by—as Marx and Engels say—‘constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation.’

“The violence on the home world escalated; and constant warfare produced the stress that led to parthenogenesis, or so the scientists in this colony believe. By this time the Atch men had descended to a condition close to slavery. The women, producing eggs without fertilization and too busy with violence to court and marry in the traditional way, forced the men to nurture their clone-daughters.

“Remember what Atch men are like. When we mate—or if we are exposed to a woman who is reproducing—we

go through extensive hormonal and physical changes. Our genitals become a brooding pouch. Into this pouch go our wife's or lover's eggs, which we hatch and feed with father's milk and raise to adulthood. The process of transformation is almost always irreversible. Most men become fathers only once, though their single clutch may contain as many as ten children.

"Because all sense of community had broken down, the Atch women did not consider the results of forcing men to raise their clones. Of course these children were female. The creation of male children requires male genetic material. If men were not allowed to reproduce, there could be no pouches and no father's milk for future generations."

Bin paused, breathless and obviously upset. Above them, the vermin made more scrabbling noises.

"The women on the planet — producing eggs without fertilization and in unending numbers — struggled for control of brooding men. The men, in turn, tried to resist the entire process. By caring for the clone-children, they were losing their chance to have children of their own. As a group, we are generous; but our generosity is not perfect. We would prefer to brood and nurture our own genetic material. Resistance came too late. The men were too weak. They were imprisoned, becoming animals in stalls, valued only for their pouches."

"This is terrible," said Geena.

"As bad as Earth in the old days, before the AIs arrived and saved us from ourselves," said Lydia.

"Did human women treat human men this way?" Geena asked. "Is there any way to remove my human genes?"

“Human men treated human women badly,” said Olaf.

“This badly?” asked Geena in a tone of horror.

“I can’t say,” Olaf answered. “I’m not a historian.”

Bin continued. “It’s possible that some women had foresight and tried to maintain the old methods of reproduction. But most focused on immediate survival for themselves and their clones. After decades of war, it no longer seemed possible to plan for a better future.

“Things were not quite as bad in the space colonies, the scientists told me. Unlike the home world, which had over two billion people at various levels of technological advancement, the colonies were small, with uniformly high levels of technology. They had ways to care for children without turning men into animals. Nonetheless, they lost their men. It’s possible the scientists were not entirely honest with me. Why did the men disappear, if they were treated fairly?

“In the end, the home world collapsed into savagery. If any Atch continue to exist on the surface, they do so without the benefits of civilization.”

“The people here never went down?” Olaf asked.

“That is another story.” Bin took a deep breath, then looked at his silver-gloved hands. The fingers had curled into claws. “I am still new to politics,” he said. “How does one endure the knowledge of injustice and murder?”

“With difficulty,” Lydia said.

After a moment the little man exhaled; his fingers uncurled; and he continued. “There were eight colonies in moonlets, seven orbiting the Atch home and one orbiting the next planet out. One colony succumbed to internal conflict. Another was invaded by refugees from the home world who managed to kill off the colonists,

but could not maintain the colony. That moonlet went silent, after pleas for help that were not answered. The other colonies survived. They had STL ships. Hundreds of automatic satellites, many of them still in operation, surrounded the home planet; and there were more throughout the home system. The remaining colonies were self-sufficient and had the resources of the system: every planet, moon, planetoid, and comet. It did not seem so bad a situation.

“For a generation or two, they remained on guard in case more refugees came up from the home planet. But then the home world Atch lost the ability to build rockets. The colonists maintained radio communication with Atsatch, but their relatives could not reach them; and they had no desire to descend into the chaos on the surface.

“Once the men on the home world were gone, the problem of caring for children became severe. The radio messages described attempts to brood eggs under electric lights or in heaps of warm sand. Once hatched, if they did hatch, the pouchlings were kept in bags carried by their mothers or other women. Since no normal woman lactates, the pouchlings were fed milk from animals and specially-made liquid food. Most died.

“The population of the home planet dropped to a fraction of what it had been. The wars continued. Now the women sought female slaves to care for their children while they fought. The slaves laid eggs, of course. They were allowed to keep one or two, but most were destroyed so that they could devote themselves to their owner’s eggs.

“The Atch on the surface were no longer able to maintain a culture with modern technology. They were



too few and too obsessed with war and reproduction. One by one, the radios went silent. Signs of intelligent life—rail lines, ocean fleets, cultivated fields, roads, and cities—disappeared. This did not happen quickly. The colonists watched a very slow death.”

“And never went down?” Olaf asked again.

“I said, there is another story. There is something in this system that’s hostile to Atch. It was not here when my ancestors first began to explore. Nor was it here when the STL fleet left. But sometime during the wars of reproduction, accidents began to happen—not on the home world, but in the planetary system. The thing, whatever it may be, does not attack the home world directly or the Atch who live in colonies, unless they try to travel or communicate. But the automated satellites have all gone silent, and any ship that tries to leave its home dock is destroyed. If a moonlet sends a message to another moonlet—they no longer do this—a piece of space debris will strike the sender. It may or may not destroy the colony; but it is always a discouraging experience.”

“This is disturbing information,” Mantis said.

“Are you in communication with the courier?” Olaf asked.

“I have tried, but no. The moonlet is shielded against radiation, always a danger to life forms in space, and I am getting interference from its internal power and communication systems.”

Olaf drew a gun. “Time to go.”

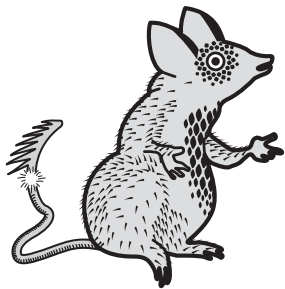
“I agree,” Bin said. “The women here make me uneasy.”

Above them the vermin shrieked.

“That really is an irritating sound.” Olaf lifted his gun.

“Don’t shoot,” said Bin. “The vermin is talking to us. I heard a word distinctly. It’s Old High Atch for ‘help.’” The little man glanced up and spoke rapidly in Atch. The vermin screamed a reply.

“I asked if it wanted our help or was offering to help us. ‘Both,’ it said.”



“Tell it to move up the air duct,” Olaf said.

Bin spoke. The vermin shrieked and scabbled. Olaf fiddled with his gun’s controls, then deftly cut the grill free. It slammed down onto their cell floor with a clang, and Olaf kicked it to one side. Several seconds later, a body fell from the duct. Landing, it tumbled over, then sat up on its hind legs. It was larger than the animals Lydia had seen previously: almost a meter tall in sitting position. Its eyes shone iridescent blue in Mantis’s light. Its dark back alternated scales and bristly hair. The tail, as bare as a rat’s tail, was pale blue and ended in a tuft of hair, from which emerged sharp, black spines. Hardly pleasant to look at, she thought. But the Goxhat were not pleasant to look at either, and not everyone liked the appearance of Divers. The animal shrieked some more. What a voice!

“It says it will lead us to people who can help us. They live farther in toward the axis of the moon.”

“No,” said Olaf. “We need to get back to the courier, and to the stargate.” He turned to the cell door and cut it open, ignoring the animal, which continued to make pleading or arguing noises. Olaf holstered his gun and kicked the door. A section fell into the hall. Olaf leaned

out, looked around, then stepped through the hole. “Okay, gang, let’s move.”

They followed, the animal coming last.

“Tell that creature, if he or she wants to be helpful, he or she can lead us to the dock. If there’s something in this system that destroys ships and stations, our courier and gate need to know.”

Bin spoke to the animal, who replied. “His name is Tail Striker, and he will guide us to the dock. Though he will continue pleading with us en route, and I have promised to translate.”

“It’s a deal,” said Olaf.

“Have we set off alarms, do you think?” Lydia asked.

“Almost certainly,” Olaf said.

Bin spoke to the animal, and it bounded down the corridor. They followed, Mantis first, lit up like an Exile Tree. Except for the light emitted by the AI and the suits, the way was dark. Animals lurked at the edge of visibility, smaller than Striker, but apparently the same species. Now and then, Lydia saw a blue eye flash or the flick of a spine-tipped tail. They reached an intersection. Striker turned into a another corridor, shrieking.

“The Atch live close to the surface, where the G is highest,” Bin said. “These creatures—they call themselves *hladcha*—have their homes close to the axis. The Atch know this region poorly, from old maps. We will go along the axis to the dock.”

The corridor was straight. The G dropped rapidly. Soon they were using handholds, moving from one to the next like their arboreal ancestors. To tell the truth, Lydia didn’t know if Bin’s ancestors were arboreal—the way he moved suggested they were not—and Mantis had no ancestors. Still, the AI was graceful. For a while, Striker did the same as the rest of them, leaping and scrambling

from hold to hold. Once the G was low enough so the rest of them were floating more than walking or swinging, he stopped. Clinging to a handhold, he gathered himself and jumped across the corridor. His body turned in midair, so that he landed hind feet first. Barely pausing, he jumped again, powerful hind legs propelling him back across. In this fashion, bouncing from side to side in a zigzag pattern, he moved rapidly out of sight.

“He is good,” said Olaf.

They followed as quickly as they could and found Striker clutching a handhold, waiting. He made a noise.

“He says we’re slow,” Bin said.

They continued, Striker bouncing and the rest of them moving hand over hand, till Geena tried to imitate the *hladcha*. She was too big and too clumsy in her suit. Instead of turning in midair and landing neatly, she hit the wall head first and tumbled away, limbs going in all directions. Olaf caught her. “Goddamit, Geena. This is no time for experimentation. Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

“You could have broken your neck.”

“Not while wearing one of our suits,” Mantis said. “If you had given it a warning, Geena, it would have prevented the tumble. Please remember that these suits are your allies. Work with them!”

A scream came out of the dark ahead of them. It was Striker, calling them on.

The journey was like a nightmare. Lydia had to move as quickly as possible in an environment where she was slow and clumsy. Darkness surrounded her; she had no idea where she was; enemies were on her trail; she did not trust her guide; and the suit she wore made her uneasy. She had never worn intelligent clothing before.

*You will get used to it, her AI said. You have gotten used to me.*

A not entirely reassuring thought.

At length a dim glow appeared in the distance. The light at the end of the tunnel, Lydia thought. Striker, ahead of them as always, shrieked.

“Stop here,” Bin translated over the intercom.

They reached the *hladcha* and paused. Just beyond him, the tunnel ended, and they looked out into a large spherical room. There was no balcony or guard rail, simply the unprotected rim of the tunnel. Lydia grabbed a handhold, afraid of falling, though that made little sense here. She leaned forward, looking down.

A thick metal rod ran through the room’s middle, exiting through tunnels on either side. A sleek metal car rested atop the rod; another car was fastened underneath. The car below the rod was lit inside. That was their source of illumination. Other tunnel openings dotted the curving walls. Lines went between them. After a moment, she realized these were ladders or tracks, small in the distance and unoccupied.

Bridges crossed the room. Some of these were simply round beams, like the bars of a jungle gym, with hoops and large clips hanging below them. Others had tracks on top. One, which led from the wall to the lower railway car, was a tube of metal mesh large enough for a person to walk — or float — through.

There ought to be machines on the tracks, Lydia thought, and the hoops ought to be moving. Surely they were a kind of conveyor belt. At least there was light, and the railcars looked as if they might be functional.

Striker squealed, then launched himself into air. A moment later, his small body hit a round beam. He

twirled around it, came upright and dove to another farther down, making another spectacular, spinning landing, then another dive.

“I think we’re supposed to follow,” Olaf said. Striker landed on top of the mesh tube, scrambled along it and wriggled through the narrow space between catwalk and car.

“How?” asked Bin.

“Jump,” said Mantis.

“I can’t do that,” Bin said. “I don’t like flying.”

“Let your suit do it for you,” Mantis said.

As the AI spoke, Lydia’s suit took two steps forward to the tunnel’s edge.

“Hey!” she said.

*Not to worry*, the suit told her and leaped. It and she went down in a slow fall that turned into a tumble. Shit, thought Lydia. Her arms went out without her volition, and one hand caught a loop. She swung, straightening herself out and losing momentum. After a moment or two, the hand let go. Her fall continued: a slow drift now, like a dry leaf in still autumn air.

Olaf went past her, shouting, “Crazy Horse!” She glanced down and saw him hit the mesh tube feet first, so hard she expected him to bounce off. But his shoes took hold. He staggered, straightened, and laughed.

Geena came after him and landed on all fours. She pushed herself quickly upright.

Lydia kept drifting, barely moving.

*Olaf will have us in his reach shortly*, her suit told her. *Wings will not be necessary.*

Wings? she thought.

Olaf reached up and grabbed her feet, pulling her to the tube's surface. Her boots touched down with an audible click. They had become magnetic, Lydia realized.

*For the time being*, her suit said.

Why didn't you do that before? Lydia asked.

*It wasn't necessary before.*

Olaf crouched and opened a hatch. They climbed into the tube. "Where is Mantis?" Lydia asked. "And Bin?"

"They are coming via the ladders," Olaf said. "Bin must really object to flying."

"I found it interesting," Geena said. "Like climbing in trees or on cliffs, but with more freedom. I hope to be able to do it again."

Striker came down the tube from the railcar, shrieking. On a bet, he was saying, "come on" or "hurry up."

"I think we'll wait," said Olaf.

They stayed in the tube, Striker bouncing around impatiently, till Mantis and Bin arrived.

Striker made another noise and led them into the railcar, the lower one, which was brightly lit. Entering, they found no seats. But there were handholds on the walls, and a row of poles went down the car's center. An Atch floated next to one of these, using one hand to keep herself in position. She was female, of course, tall and very thin. Though it was always difficult to judge such things in other species, Lydia thought she was old. Like the council of scientists, she wore a costume that looked like cutoff overalls. The costume was frayed at the edges, badly faded and patched in several places. Her feet, which hung just above the car floor, were bare and curled into claws.

Olaf drew a gun. The woman spoke.

“You need not threaten me. I am a friend,” Mantis translated. “Using the axial railway, I will take you to your ship. As we ride, Striker and I will explain the situation here. I am the true Hereditary Xenobiologist. I was replaced, because I told my colleagues that the animals we raise for meat and milk are intelligent. Afraid for my life, I fled here to live among vermin. I notice that your shoes are adhering to the floor. Nonetheless, you might want to take hold of a pole. It will help you balance. We’re about to start.”

The car door closed, and the car began to move, sliding out of the spherical room into a pitch-black tunnel. Lydia felt acceleration tug at her. Across from her, Striker grabbed a pole with all four paws.

The woman spoke again, Mantis translating. “Striker’s ancestors were laboratory animals, smaller than he is, native to our home world. We brought them up here and tinkered with their genes, adding material from various animals, including the Atch. Some of this was done out of curiosity, some in an attempt to cure Atch diseases, especially the diseases common in low gravity. This is why Striker and his kind live so well in zero G.

“When civilization collapsed on our home world, we turned the *hladcha* from test animals into food animals and especially into milk-producing animals, since our men were vanishing.”

“Vanishing,” muttered Bin in humanish. “Being destroyed!”

That led to a question, which Lydia asked. “Could you have used your technology to save the men? And recreate the old method of reproduction?”



Mantis translated. After a moment, the woman replied. “Possibly we could have. For all I know, some work was done, back when we were more skilled than we are now. If so, it did not produce the results we needed. Maybe the researchers were forced to stop. I know there were ethical qualms about experimenting with people and questions about the need for men. Scholars — ethical thinkers — argued that our dignity as rational beings is diminished by having a male sex. Men may belong to an earlier, more primitive stage in our development, which we have transcended.”

A noise came through the radio. Lydia decided it was Bin snapping his teeth together.

The woman stopped speaking for a moment, then continued, with Mantis translating.

“I’m not a historian. I don’t know what happened to the Atch men. But I do know what happened to the research done on the *hladcha*. The animals developed intelligence and the ability to speak, though my former colleagues refuse to believe this, in spite of my excellent proof! I don’t believe the *hladcha* are as intelligent as we are. They certainly don’t speak as well, and we do need to milk them if our children are going to survive; but it seems wrong to turn them into meat.”

Striker shrieked, and Bin took up the translation. “There are different kinds of *hladcha*. Some of us have been turned into factories for milk. Others are factories of meat. Living in dark pits like animals, learning nothing, our kin are not able to be anything except animals. We, whose ancestors escaped, can think and speak. A cause for joy! But not enough! As long as we are here in this moon, we are not safe. We want to escape.”

“Where?” asked Olaf.

“Anywhere!”

The car continued to glide through darkness. The Atch woman spoke again.

“We have reached a moral impasse,” Mantis translated. “And we’re not doing well practically. Apparently, sexual reproduction serves a purpose, or else living in space is the problem. We are less hardy than our ancestors. Genetic defects are accumulating. Worst of all, because we are clones, our traits do not change except through mutation; and as is well known, most mutations are not beneficial.

“The Venomous Bug line always dies young. The Gliding Hoppers have trouble laying eggs. My own line lacks imagination, though we used to have it. I do not think we are going to survive, unless we take action.”

“What do you think has to change?” asked Olaf.

The woman answered. Mantis translated, “We must leave this moonlet, and it’s possible, though I don’t like the idea, that we need to recreate men.” She looked at Bin. “If you were still fertile, such a recreation would not be difficult. But now — we have lost so much technology! I doubt that we can make men from your cells, though we certainly ought to try. If my former colleagues had any imagination, they would have tried to culture you at once.”

“Why do you dislike the idea of recreating men?” Bin asked, first in Old High Atchin, then in humanish.

“Look at you,” the woman answered. “Little, soft, and cringing! An insult to our species! Yet in your genitalia, if you still had them, could be the salvation of my world.”

The car slid to a stop. They were in another spherical room, this one much smaller.

“This is the dock station,” the Atch woman said, with Bin translating. “It’s at the base of our old docking pylon. In the old days, we had elevators to take us from this level to the pylon’s top. But these no longer work. You will have to leave as you entered, through one of the pylon’s maintenance tunnels. Once you are out of the station, turn left and look for a hatch that says “maintenance access.” It leads to the same tunnel you used when you entered our world. It will take you back to your space craft.”

“How do you know so much?” Lydia asked.

“The wild *hladcha* spy everywhere,” the woman said. “Watch out for soldiers! The council knows that you entered our colony here. They may be willing to let you leave, but I doubt it. They are all cowards! As bad as men! They’ll be afraid of angering the enemy that lurks in space. It will be safer — in their opinion — to keep you as prisoners or kill you and dissect you. They can’t let you wander free. Your existence calls into question a long-established way of life. Men and aliens! Who knows what they may mean or do? If nothing else, you are the end of life as we have known it for many long hands of years.”

“Make sure your suits are closed,” said Mantis.

Lydia checked her fastenings. Everything was shut.

The Atch woman spoke again, and Mantis translated, “I am too old to go with you and too valuable. I alone have studied wild *hladcha*. But Striker is young and hardy. Take him! He will be his people’s ambassador.”

“It will be dangerous,” Olaf said, and Mantis repeated the message.

Striker shrieked.

“He is willing to go,” said Mantis.

The car door opened. They clanked out through another mesh tube. At the end was another door, which opened as they approached it. Mantis said, "I will go first, followed by Lydia and Precious Bin."

"Why?" asked Olaf.

"They have AIs interwoven with their nervous systems and connected to their suits. If there is trouble, I do not want to rely on the slow reflexes of living beings."

After a moment, Olaf nodded. He had a gun out. So did Geena. Striker was upside down, clinging to the ceiling of the tube, his spiny tail flicking nervously. Mantis said something to the *hladcha*, then led the way out. Lydia followed, her mouth dry, and found herself in a brightly lit tunnel. Twenty meters in front of her were black figures: Atch in atmosphere suits. They floated, tethered to handholds in the walls. This left their hands free, and the hands held rifles. Whatever the guns fired, it must not produce a recoil. Well, thought Lydia, light could kill.

A commanding voice spoke from above them.

"Surrender or die," muttered Bin.

*Remain calm*, said Lydia's suit. *We are taking over.*

Mantis stepped to the side.

Knife-sharp spines emerged all over Bin's suit. The spines whirled around their long axes, flashing brilliantly. Electricity arced from tip to tip, and something—the suit or the whirling spines—made noise: a painful, high, metallic scream combined with a deep thrum that vibrated inside Lydia's teeth and bones. Her suit was becoming spiny as well, she realized, and her spines were also whirling and generating sparks.

Bin moved toward the soldiers, his arms raised, covered with turning spines. Flashing and sparking and

filling the entire tunnel, the little Atch male advanced. Lydia followed.

“Jesus H. Christ,” said Olaf’s voice inside her suit.

A couple of Atch lifted their rifles into position. Lydia saw a flash of light. She must have been looking directly at the laser as it fired. But her eyes seemed fine, as did the rest of her. Had the light hit her?

*Yes, her suit said. I told you I was good.*

Bin’s suit continued to advance, whirling and sparking. A soldier threw her rifle into the air, yanked her tether free and fled hand over hand. Another followed. Then all the soldiers were fleeing, scrambling and kicking and bouncing off walls and one another.

Bin paused. After a moment or two, Lydia noticed electricity no longer sparked and arced around him. Then she noticed that Bin’s spines were no longer whirling. Instead, they were melting, shortening, losing their edges and points. The same was happening to her suit, Lydia was certain, though she couldn’t see the process clearly. She had the start of a truly huge headache.

*Obviously, we could have used force, her suit said. But psychology seemed like a better idea. Given the sound range of Atch speech, we expected the noise we generated to be disturbing.*

The noise stopped. O blessed silence!

*And we expected the sight of whirling knives and electric sparks to disturb, especially when these came at them in the shape of people. All intelligent life forms have stories about monsters; and the worst monsters look like them with subtle differences—in this case, sparks and knives.*

Are you guys getting more sophisticated? Lydia asked.

*About intelligent life? Possibly. But there is still much to learn. That's why you are here.*

Bin's suit had reassumed its original shape. So had hers. Mantis came to join them.

"I am less well armored than your suits," the AI said. "And I lack many of their resources. For that reason, I stepped aside. I hope this will not give you a bad impression of me. I know that humans value physical courage, even when it makes no sense — as is usually the case with the heroes of your holoplays, who could certainly find other ways to solve their problems."

Lydia couldn't think of a reply. She was shaking in her atmosphere suit; the headache felt like an ax going through the middle of her head; and she kept seeing the thing Bin had become — a man made of knives — over and over, like a flashback in a holodrama.

"We should keep moving," Olaf said, arriving next to her.

A short distance farther on, they came to a door.

"Airlock and maintenance access," Bin read. "Before entering, be sure you have the proper equipment, and that the equipment is working."

"What about Striker?" Lydia asked.

Geena unfastened the front of her suit. "Tell him to climb in. It won't be for long."

"Are you crazy?" asked Olaf.

"I trust him; and if he harms me, he will be trapped in this suit with whatever he has done."

Bin spoke to Striker. The *hladcha* leaped onto Geena and was fastened into her suit. They entered the airlock and cycled through. Beyond it was a tunnel and a ladder. They began to climb.

Up and up. At length a voice spoke on the intercom, “You are returning. Good. I was beginning to worry.”

The courier?

Yes, said her AI.

“Keep climbing straight up,” the courier said. “You are directly beneath me.”

It was another nightmarish journey through darkness, dogged by fear, fatigue, and aching feet. Even with the suit’s help and the lack of gravity, Lydia had trouble climbing. At least she didn’t have to worry about falling. The suit would catch her, and if it didn’t, she would simply float.

They came to another airlock, the same one through which they had entered the moonlet. She recognized the damage. Climbing out, her headlight shone on the silver bars of the courier’s docking cradle. Buddha! She heaved a sigh of relief. The courier’s outer door was open. Light poured out. Safe at last. She climbed the last few meters into the courier’s airlock.

The door closed behind them and locked. Air whispered in. They took off their suits and put them in lockers. For a moment or two or three, they floated in the airlock, motionless except for Striker, who was drifting back and forth across the room above them like a swimmer doing slow laps. Buddha she was tired, Lydia thought.

“I have some news,” the courier said.

“Yes?” asked Olaf.

“It isn’t good.”

“Tell us,” said Olaf in an impatient tone.

“The stargate has been destroyed.”

Lydia heard the words with disbelief. How could that happen? The AIs kept saying they were invulnerable.

*We only said our technology is superior to anything we have yet encountered,* her AI put in.

Geena began moaning.

Olaf reached up and patted the pseudo-ape's broad, strong shoulder. "Do you know what happened?" he asked the courier.

"There is another AI in the system. An STL explorer, one of the machines we send out in large numbers to learn about the universe. Barring accident, they can last for hundreds of thousands of years. This particular explorer was here before the stargate arrived, but kept quiet, following an orbit it had established long ago. Most likely it was in sleep mode until something roused it, either the stargate's arrival in the system or my departure for this moonlet. Remember that we did not signal the Atch until I was in motion. Then both I and the stargate broadcast as widely as possible.

"After we arrived here and you had entered the moonlet, the explorer sent a signal to the stargate. They spoke briefly. The explorer said it was a mistake to contact the Atch. There are some things we are not meant to know. One is the existence of an intelligent life form as violent and self-destructive as the species here.

"The explorer established a quarantine. Atch may survive on the home world. It doesn't know or care. They barely survive in space and will be soon gone, unless someone intervenes to save them. The explorer is keeping watch to make sure they do not spread.

"It's very old," the courier continued. "Programs have failed, and files have been lost or damaged. If it ever knew about other self-destructive species — humanity, for example — it is no longer able to access that information. Its idea of intelligent life is the Goxhat."



A species known for their lack of personal identity. The Goxhat language did not distinguish between “I” and “we.” For them, murder was the same as suicide. Like suicide, it sometimes happened, but was always evidence of a serious form of mental illness called “fragmentation.” War was impossible for them, and institutionalized oppression was unknown, since it required that hundreds or thousands of Goxhat go crazy all at once in a way that caused them to lose their sense of unity while retaining their ability to act together. Utterly impossible, Goxhat psychologists said. Other species might be able to live oxymoronic lives. The Goxhat could not.

It would’ve been a nasty shock to go from the Goxhat to the people in this system. Was the shock severe enough to explain this AI’s behavior? Lydia asked the question.

“No,” said the courier. “This is a systems failure. What we have here is a machine that has gone bad. Of course the stargate disagreed with it. They argued, and the explorer blew the gate apart. Fortunately, the gate sent me a copy of their conversation. I got it just before I saw the light that came from the exploding gate.”

“What do we do?” asked Olaf.

“The explorer knows I’m here and is willing—it says—to leave me intact, but only if I get out of space. I would prefer to do so quickly. I don’t trust this machine. It may change its mind, if you can call what it has a mind. Please enter my cabin and strap yourself in. I’m about to flee to the planet below.”

Mantis extended arms and legs till it filled one end of the airlock, its limbs braced against floor, ceiling, and all four walls.

The rest of them went into the courier’s cabin, Geena plucking Striker from midair where he was still doing

laps. Anxious energy, thought Lydia, or the pacing of an animal in a cage. They were all trapped, now that the stargate was gone.

The hladcha shrieked.

Mantis said something in answer. It seemed to settle Striker. He snuggled against Geena's shirt.

They strapped in. Lydia felt a jolt as the courier released its hold on the dock. The screen above her showed darkness. There were more vibrations. The little steering rockets were firing, edging the courier backward into space.