

As she had promised, Kate followed Aunty Jean into the robot-proving ground without a word. They waded the ebb-tide round the wall separating the scientists' dormitory village from the proving ground, where it ended in the sea to prevent errant robots ingressing. On the beach was a sign, Welcome to Hell-city.

"Huh? I thought we lived in Zinc City? How is it a hell?"

Aunty Jean mouthed words. No questions now.

They walked along the dusty uneven road that ran parallel to the wall. *Wait?* Was that ...? A robot's foot-print? Kate glanced at her aunt shaking her head. No stopping now. Too dangerous.

Too dangerous? When Aunty Jean talked Kate's parents into allowing Kate to participate in her latest project, she'd stressed the benefit to Kate's dream of getting a summer job helping to train robots.

Aunty Jean took Kate's arm, and pulled her alongside for them to walk together into a street running into a westerly direction.

Every street corner had a tall egg-shaped steel sentinel.

"The Nubian-Class robots, at present folded-up and at rest," Aunty Jean said. "They are one hundred percent smarter than the Martian-Class robots. Common wisdom has it that there is nothing to fear from the Nubians while they sleep."

Duh! So the Nubians are dangerous to humans when they are awake?

Finally Kate saw what looked like the garbage mountain Aunty Jean had installed to discourage snooping.

"This way." Aunty Jean led Kate into a narrow alley between two concrete house-and-yard walls that ended at a t-junction. They went a right-turn and a right-turn again into a backyard filled with a pair of wire-sided aviaries, pigeons coo-cooring in both, with a path to a house door between.

Aunty Jean showed Kate the guest room and bathroom. "Make yourself at home. I need to go out, and I may be gone for the rest of the day."

"Okay if I go out too? Explore?" Kate said. "Any other humans in this town?"

"Other than the robots, everyone is human," Aunty Jean said. "Explore without knowing anything about the proving ground, the robots or the people? I can't allow it. I'll be locking you in. Your grandfather's marine telescope is in the study. You can look out of any window so long as you stay out of sight. And also, out there I am known as Harmless."

Kate laughed. "People think you are harmless?"

“Out there my name is Harmless,” Aunty Jean said.

#

Scrim stood by the window of his high-up, chewing the crust he found. The whole top of a loaf of bread. And he got a half-eaten fruit this morning. He looked out over his ground. Two Nubies sat folded-up in their steel egg-shapes, one at each end of the street. One of them was Yellow Leg, who probably knew everything going on.

When he finished the bread, Scrim was still hungry. He raced his mind over the hell, where might he find more food?

Fingers sat folded in his tall egg-shape at the bottom of Scrim’s high-up. Always there, always guarding. On his way out, Scrim laid his hand on his friend’s ID pad, so Fingers might know Scrim had left the high-up.

Fingers raised his head and slid his steel shoulders-and-arms free from the egg-shape.

Every couple-of-months Scrim asked the same. “Why did them scientists put men, all you, in steel cans and call you robots?”

Fingers talked by skitzing his finger blades. “Some-of-we can sense their every part. They teach us to know that we are still whole men. More secrets to keep, Scrim-friend.”

A no-answer meant the Nubies-themselves still dint know. Scrim put the secrets in his heart alongside all the other things Fingers told him for Scrim’s future. The dolphinate mate for life. The silver is magic. The mud is alive. Fingers and Scrim are of the dolphinate.

“Whisper me about the three cities,” Fingers said.

Scrim grinned. “I ask you, then you ask me.” He leaned against Fingers’ shoulder where the mic was. “Humans think of us as a human-dolphin-meld. For twelve generations, only the dolphinate lived in the delta. We were made by the scientist who brought us to the delta, after she bought it from an overlord. He died, the three cities grew, and farmlands spread into the old floodplain. Farmers come into our creeks to swim and fish ...” he stopped.

Sometimes he remember-dreamed how Hell-city’s hunters stole little-Scrim. “The hunters come into the delta to make us fewer?”

“The cities force them to take a quota of us in return for hay from the delta for their camels,” Fingers skitzed. “These things I heard while serving them in their tents while travelling here.”

Scrim’s stomach grumbled. *Give me more food it said.* Out in the street he heard Harmless talking here and there. “I have to go,” he said. “Get more food.”

#

Kate extended the brass-bound marine spyglass to its limits and rested the end on the upturned drinking glass she'd set in the laundry window. She focused on the birds in one of the aviaries.

Wait a sec? Something much bigger than pigeons in there? She refocused the spyglass.

A boy? Fifteen? Sixteen? Her age. Dark blond dreads. Skin that old ivory tone that she was instantly attracted to.

He felt gently under a brooding bird and brought out an egg. *Oh no!* He broke the egg by pressing into it with his thumb. With a quick move he upended it above his mouth. *Yuck! A raw egg!*

Despite her revulsion Kate watched him take two more eggs. When he came out of the aviary licking his lips, she licked her lips. She smiled as he stretched luxuriously outside the cramped confines of the cage.

Slightly shorter than her? Mm-mm, he was a total Mr Handsome despite his ragged clothes. She would definitely like to be introduced.

He was gone without her seeing how when the front door being unlatched echoed through the house.

Harmless dragged open the screen door between the house proper and the barred veranda. She looked at everything that Kate hadn't touched. "You didn't even try to get out of the house? Where's your famous initiative?"

#

Scrim visited in his street. The Nubies. If they slept, how come their patterns said hello-Scrim by swirling around his outspread fingers laying on their ID pads?

Stumpy waved for Scrim to come and sit with him on the curb in-front of the lane where Stumpy parked his made-over bicycle.

Hell-city's black trades took Stumpy's lower legs to put on someone who wore his out. Them offering Stumpy tin legs, he said no thanks.

"Be forever in their debt?" he explained. Stumpy's living was painting patterns on anything Scrim brought him. Old time crockery. Shards. Bits of flat steel. Selling them in the tourist markets.

"Yesterday Harmless stopped by, asking after you," Stumpy said.

“About the eggs?” Scrim said.

Stumpy laughed. “She didn’t mention eggs. She has a job for you. Extra special good pay.”

“Extra-special-good? Sounds like it is a nasty job,” Scrim said. “What’s she working on?”

Stumpy made noises like he didn’t know what science project Harmless had going.

“When?” Scrim said.

“The job is today,” Stumpy said.

#

Aunty Harmless dumped a string-tied bundle into Kate’s arms. “You’ll need to take off your own rags.”

Luckily her aunty left the room, because no way was Kate going to be naked under this get-up. She sneezed. The frock probably had a hundred years of dust on it. And who wore it before me?

“Ready?” Harmless said. “Mmm. That should do the trick.”

“What trick?” Kate said. Although Harmless hadn’t stopped Kate from listening in on every conversation Harmless had with her team, this trick seemed to have no relation to anything Kate had heard.

Deep green velvet, medieval style, tight fit. Kate yanked at the lacing across the bodice. What kind of performance have I signed up for? I stupidly didn’t ask and it’s kind of too late for second thoughts.

Her aunty walked round Kate tweaking and ... and inserting ... things? Kate recalled her mother not-so-secretly hiding audio pick-ups in Kate’s last ball-gown. *To eavesdrop on me.*

“That should do it,” Harmless said. “I’ll check if the mark is here.” She walked into her comm-room. She intends listening in to me with the mark, whoever he is. And for what? *Shut up thinking. Listen.*

“You there, Stumpy?” Harmless said. “We can’t fail, man. The proving team is at its wits’ end with so many of the Nubians out of contact. Yeah yeah. No, the Martians are fine. You need to ask? I’d say they’ll be annihilated and good riddance. Have you got the mark teed up? Ah. Waiting for us in the mountain.”

#

Scrim waited by the fire in the street-side cave in Harmless’ waste mountain. He tried to think what the extra-special-good pay might be. A week’s worth of food? Spit gathered in his

mouth. Harmless had pigeon squabs, pigeon eggs, and smoked short-eared rabbits that looked quite a lot like rats with their tails cut off.

He breathed in the fire's smoke. Mm-mm. This fire smells a lot like it is where these rabbits are smoked. Visit here one night, for sure. He swallowed his hunger-drool.

Shuffling coming from behind.

Harmless led forward a blind-folded girl in a green, floor-touching garment. "Greetings, oh Scrimshaw of ... where do you come from?" the science-woman said.

Harmless was always trying to find out his secrets. Scrim did not like his name in her oily mouth.

"Your curiosity overcame your scruples?" she said.

Whatever. Get the job and get away.

The girl wrenched loose from Harmless' grip, two-stepped out of reach and flipped off the blindfold. Seeing him, her eyes and mouth made three round ohs of surprise.

Like she knows me? I never saw her before.

She took a couple more steps, nearer to him.

Harmless laughed. "Look at her. Your job. Isn't she pretty? Meet Kate."

"Kate is the job?" Scrim said.

"She's my niece," Harmless said. "The job is to show her round. I don't have time. Besides, young people like the company of young people."

"What's the pay?" Scrim said. "Extra special good, Stumpy said."

Harmless laughed so hard she wept. Tears of it running down her pinked cheeks. "It's Kate! The job and the pay are one!" She walked into a crooked tunnel through her waste mountain.

Kate is the job and the pay — what does that mean?

"We should go," Kate said. "Got a place to hide near here?" she said.

She said with her face using none of her voice. Huh? Scrim made his face say.

She gestured with her head. We need to go. Now!

Scrim took her across the street. Row houses. The one where he liked to hide to study Harmless' waste mountain.

Inside the ruin, Kate glanced about like a wild thing, shook her head and frowned.

Behind the house was part of a shed still standing. Four brick walls with only the doorless hole for coming in. No roof.

Kate pushed past him and hid in the corner next to the doorway. She combed with her fingers over the green cloth she wore, pincered up a little black thing between two fingertips, and cleared a place in the floor-dust with her foot. Put in the little thing no bigger than a wheat grain.

Everytime he started to ask, she made a silent *Shh*. She found nine more before shaping her hands with more signs. He smiled, this time knowing exactly what she meant. Squared thing, solid? He prised a brick from the doorway.

She smiled too and he glowed inside, happy for knowing what she meant.

She mashed all the little things, grinding them like she'd make flour.

"We need to go now," she said with her voice. "I don't trust Harmless not to come and check why her gadgets aren't working?" She looked impatient for him to show her the way.

Where to, he wondered. "There's a road through the attics all connected," he said. He led her to a brick-oven beside the house. Fingertip-touched her showing her where to put her feet to climb up onto it.

She blushed. Then climbed. Blushed again when she tripped on the green cloth she wore and he steadied her.

He helped her up the stair by her hand, and after he got through the hole in the roof, he pulled her after him by her arm, skimming the back of his hand by her breast.

Sorry, he should've said. But his face heated up so hot he didn't want to be looking anywhere she might see. *What is your problem*, he thought at his blood. *Just be blood. Ordinary*. "Those little things ...?" he said for having a distraction.

"Things for listening," Kate said. "A way that Harmless could listen to everything we might have said. More particularly, anything you might have said."

His blood ran cold. "Things like what?" he said.

"Streets are not good for talking secrets," Kate said.

Scrim swung his head. Left. Right. No one in either direction and only an old tin roof overhead?

She shrugged. "Anyone can come along."

He walked ahead of her. "Watch where you walk. This street is missing some of its boards." At the end, he led her down a stair.

Again she blushed when he touched her to warn her of missing stair treads. Had him blushing too, now. His blood was not behaving.

Scrim peered round a street corner. Someone else's street. A six-stall market on the wider pavement. He heard a hurdy-gurdy tuning up. Could the people here be expecting tourists? Not good. Where there were tourists, there were guards.

"Those robots sitting fore and aft ..." Kate said. She leaned against him while watching round the corner with him.

Watch out my blood.

She shuddered. "Might they be some of the ones that Harmless calls the Nubian-Class? She said more and more of them are out of control?"

Scrim wanted to correct her. *They have freed themselves. They're out of contact. They call themselves Anuboids after that weird snout they were given. They are Nubies to me since I was a little and lost, and one of them saved me from ...* he shook his head. *Wait till I know her better. Wait till I know her job.*

His blood? He never before thought to listen to his blood. Right now his blood ran cold. He was afraid, he discovered. Kate might betray him and all the Nubies accidental-like just by shuddering in full view of a guard while Kate-and-Scrim walked past a folded-up Nubie. Most of the guards hated the Nubies.

Only one place Scrim could think of where to hide Kate with no one daring to decide to come up and winkle her out. Dry-mouthed, he grabbed her hand. Held it tight, whatever she might think. "There can be no tripping. We've got to move smart."

She picked up a good bit of cloth and held onto it while he led her through lanes, tunnels and narrow corridors open to the sky. His street was as usual and lucky-for-Scrim, Fingers wasn't just-then sitting at the bottom of Scrim's stair.

"Up there?" Kate said.

Her voice trembled? She was afraid? "Up there we're safe. Down here ..." What to tell her? "We are safe because a Nubie comes to be here."

"Right here into this lobby?" she said.

He nodded, remembering when Fingers found little-Scrim in-prisoned in a cage, and freed him. *Guarding me ever since.*

The way Kate glared at him.

He shrugged with his hands akimber. "What?"

"Help me out of Harmless' stupid frock? It's too tight for me to do it by myself. I can't climb that with it."

He grinned. By that she meant his stair. He studied what she called a frock. "How? Help, I mean. Can I use my knife?"

She giggled. "In the front where I can see what you're doing will be good."

His blood simmered. *Blood, be still.*

Kate pulled out the part criss-crossed with string. "These laces first."

He had to stand close up to her to slash the string. *Legs, be still. No trembling.*

"At last! I can breathe," Kate said. She loosened her top so far that he glimpsed private skin.

His blood sang louder. "Where next?" he said. He had to swallow hard with a flare of excitement in his throat.

"If you just cut the green stuff, we'll be good," Kate said.

He pretended to slash anywhere. It was all green.

"Maybe holding it so?" She demonstrated by pinching a pleat in the cloth from between her breasts to the top, to her stomach.

The way she slung her body-scent at him, he'd be legless in a minute. Something he heard? Long time ago in the delta. Man-talk. *Get with the action, Scrim. Not your time yet.*

"I'm wearing my own clothes underneath?" Kate said. "If that's the problem?"

Scrim forced his hands to the job. Slid the knife, sharp outward, into the fold she held and slid it downward to where he helped her pull the pleat straight for cutting through the sewn parts. After that an easy slide down to the lower hem.

"We made a coat," he said. "Keep it. Might be it'll be good for winter. If you're staying that long."

"I can't think that far ahead," she said.

"I'll go first, climbing," he said.

To make it easy for her to remember his moves, Scrim climbed the three floors of the broken

building half a length at the time. "Watch where I put my hands and feet."

He waited to help her step over the gate tied in the doorway to his high-up. "This gate is so we don't slide out when the house sways?"

She had a wild-hair, eyes popping look about her. "Rest up first?" he said. "I've got water." He sat her on the pad of old clothes where he slept. Fetched a bottle of water. Every little touch him-to-her and her-to-him weighed meaningful. He guided her hand around the water bottle.

#

Oh my, Kate thought. *This manboy is such a ... heart-throb!* He touched her and she just about melted? She glanced swiftly, softly into his eyes. *Mm-mm. Met me mid-look, didn't you? You're as taken with me as I am with you.*

I so so wish we could've met in our ordinary lives. I could've said no thanks, Aunty Jean. Would I have? What do summer-jobbers do, anyway? It's not too late to look before I leap.

But now, what do I do now? She breathed deep. *Tell him now or tell him after?* She thought it through for three seconds. *Tell him now and if he's upset, I can comfort him?*

"Is it safe to look out of the window?" she said. "This place seems quite unsteady?" She leapt up and staggered getting her balance in the swaying house.

She fell against Scrim standing right there, smiling, ready to catch her, and she couldn't help but give him a quick hug and a promise, a peck on his chin. She took his hand and pulled him to the window.

"I was staying in Harmless' house and I overheard her in her communications room," she said. "The Nubian-Class Robot-Proving Team hired Harmless to find out why the Nubians have stopped responding to the proving team's commands."

She felt him begin to tremble and tightened her grip. "Harmless thinks you're a spy. I so don't see you selling secrets to the competition? Her team is afraid to ... to take you in ... to question you about the skitzing language. Because you are so well-guarded by your Nubie-friends."

#

Scrim filled with such sorrow that his heart wept. "Where does Kate fit in?" he said thick-voiced.

"Harmless thinks she knows all about young love," Kate said. "When boys like to brag to impress their girls. She coached me on how to get you to tell me what language you speak with the Nubians. She expected to hear it all through the audio pickups she hid on me."

She laughed—maybe about Harmless’ disappointment—but Scrim knew only despair. Everything felt wrong and his roaring blood said it was too late to stop Kate-and-Scrim happening.

She squeezed his hand and raised it to the place between her breasts.

Where he could feel her heart beating, among other things.

“But you didn’t need to brag. We got into a fever to be together really well without it,” she said.

He sobbed.

She exclaimed. “Please don’t cry!” she said all in one word. “I’ve dreamed and dreamed about us. How good we’ll be together.” She hugged him close and kissed him every and any where she could reach while they were both upright. Walked him backward to the bedding.

Her thigh between his thighs. His thigh between hers. His spurter was never going to lie down again. He tripped backward. Did not fight her off when she fell on him.

He learned kissing without hesitation. Her world-breaking words lost their power. Dimly he marveled that she knew he was ready for the patterning when he didn’t.

All those wrong-time feelings — the blushing, his blood roaring hot one minute, slacking and cold the next — this was what he wanted? Grinning wide, he mind-jumped to the delta, to the feast to celebrate his new man’s paloosa patterning that would mark him as partnered for his evermore.

Kate helped him out of his clothes. They laughed about him helping her, not with his knife this time. She closed over him like warm smooth mud. He joined her love-making exultantly.

And after she fell asleep, Scrim beheld the delta’s silver erupting under his skin and mark out his pattern. Finally, he slept too.

#

Kate woke first. She smiled at the pearly pre-dawn light in the high-up. Smiled wider about last night, how she’d fixed Scrim’s upset. How they enjoyed themselves.

She licked her lips to prep them for a smiling good morning kiss. Found Scrim under the covers.

She reared back. Her mind stuttered. This wasn’t Scrim! Was it? Same dreads! He’d changed? His skin was pale silver-grey. It wasn’t last night. He had silvery blotches on him. Chest. Arms. Legs.

He didn't look human! Not his face nor ... she swallowed ... nor down below.

She felt sick. She'd made love with a ... ? What? She didn't know what. Not a human boy!

I can't stay. She dressed hurriedly, clumsily. *Please don't wake.*

She slid more than she climbed down the impossible stairs, and managed to sneak by the Nubian at the bottom without waking it.

Out in the street she blindly walked east, fighting back tears. *Not now. Not safe.* What had she done? *Damn Aunt Jean!*

Just in time she heard ... she stopped ... a pair of men meeting up. They would be coming out of that alley ahead? She slipped into the nearest foyer. *Please let there not be a Nubian.*

The men stopped right there in front of her, within the doorway. Guards. One was armed to the teeth. Gun. Laser. Knives. The other, older one had a baton.

Kate stilled so she only breathed. If they turned, they'd see her.

"Old Harmless has a hide sending us out for this," said the younger man. "Is it our job to take down out-of-control Nubians? I'm Ferris, by the way."

"Cade."

They shook hands.

"The Nubians are men in cans I heard," Cade said.

Kate stopped breathing. How could that be true?

"Scum from prisons, mass murderers," Ferris said.

"This whole city is a prison?" Cade said. "Most people here—the ones who hide from us—once were ordinary folk caught up by Hell-city's hunters."

Kate recalled the sign down at the beach. *Welcome to Hell-City.*

"The Nubians are men. Like us," Cade went on. "They're controlled with bursts of electricity. My cousin, who works in the pen, doles out way more pain than pleasure."

"That's a lot to take in," Ferris said. "My first shift in, and I'm paired with a Wall-Breaker?"

"You're my third buddy this ten-day," Cade said. "Both the previous two thought the same as you. The Nubians are two-and-a-half-times your size, faster in proportion, and furious that people *will* try to shoot them."

“So how do you stay alive?” Ferris said.

“I respect everybody on the streets like they are people,” Cade said. “And they are, if that rumour is true. As for the Martian-Class, they’re to be taken for a run at sunset, all three troops, in among the cornfields. The power to the gates and the maze will be out for the duration.”

As they walked away, Cade smacked Ferris on his shoulder. “If you *do* want to keep on living, I suggest you go get lost down a lane somewhere. The Martian-Class Proving Team are signing on keen types to police the Martians and the Martians are still no more than hit-and-run runners.”

Kate knew what she should do. Must do. *Treat them like people. Hurry. What if I meet Scrim? I am so so sorry, Scrim.*

She shuddered recalling his skin. Grey! All those silvery spots. Like he had some disease. And she slept with him? Would she need ... ? *Go now. It’s still early.*

She ran back to Scrim’s building, that foyer.

Yes. The Nubian was still there. Still the egg-shape. How could she talk with it? Him? Okay. He had an ID pad about her chin-height.

Swirling colours.

She put her palm on them. “P-p-please, Mr Nubian. Cade the guard said the power to the gates ... the power to the gates will be off from sunset ...”

Schlick.

Help! What was that sound? It came from under her hand! She stepped back.

The Nubian raised its strange head and slid its shoulders and arms upright and free from its knees. Stayed like that. Looking down at her. First with one side of his head, then the other.

She heard Scrim waking, three floors up, broken building, nothing in between. He moaned.

Kate woke from her stupor.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know ... From sunset ... from sunset today while the Martian-Class Proving Team practises the Martians in the cornfields. For the duration of that.”

She heard Scrim start down. So hurt.

I’m sorry. I didn’t know. She ran. Tears spattered from her face.

When Scrim woke, his arms were empty. His paloosa pattern blotched hesitantly. From fear? Where was Kate?

Nowhere in the high-up, he saw with one wild glance. Her clothes were gone. He had to go and find her.

His spurter didn't want clothes. How would he climb with it so rampant? At home, Kate-and-Scrim would've stayed in the silver mud day and night for a week.

He moaned. It was too soon for them to be parted. His body already couldn't remember how to be alone. Climbing down toward ground level, he fell the distance of a floor onto Fingers sitting half-unfolded.

Scrim's mouth and nose snotted with grief and his spurter sprayed uselessly.

Fingers calmed Scrim's paloosa pattern with a Nubie-finger-blade as gentle as a feather, despite that he-Scrim was a torn-asunder no-thing. A wreck when he was hardly begun.

Fingers slung Scrim over his back and ran him to the secret yard between the ruined house and the wall of the pen.

Scrim cried and spurted without let-up. The Nubies, still caught behind the wall, crooned him to sleep with their skitzing songs. He knew already that Scrim-and-Kate would never bear young. Conception was the work of that first week. Why was he still alive?

All day Fingers watched over Scrim while skitzing his finger blades at his Nubie friends.

Some brought others, one at the time. Some, gently, quietly, pulled down the stones of the wall and silently deposited them in the cellar of the ruined house.

Whenever Scrim remembered Kate, he spurted, with now not more than a dribble. He grew weaker and weaker without her to sustain him and him to sustain her with the silver mud and the manna. He was an interrupted journey. A broken circle.

Finally, Fingers dragged Scrim upright and lifted him up against his steel chest. He swept aside Scrim's hair on top of his head. Cored him, sudden, with one of his finger-blades. There was only a little blood.

Scrim's head cleared. His snot and tears dried up. He could breathe better than he breathed his whole life. His grief dried up. His spurter went back to being the tap to his bladder. But his paloosa pattern stayed. A man's skin on a boy. What use would his life be? He tried to remember if he ever knew any such as him.

Some hours after sunset, Fingers knelt beside him. "Climb up, my Scrim," he said with his knife-blades singing.

Scrim climbed onto Finger's steel back and held onto his neck flange.

Yellow Leg joined them. The streets were as empty as always when the Nubians roamed.

The gates between Hell-city and the common road through the rubble lay broken in the street. In the west, moonlight glinted on the steel Anuboids marching there.

Far away in the south, the Martian-Class robots jogged with their handlers beside them in low-flying, open hover-cars.

Fingers and Yellow Leg walked through the gate and picked their way among the rocks and stones of the rubble field surrounding the city.

Yellow Leg stopped them at the edge, by a stone as big as a house. "Hide here till daylight, Scrim-friend," he skitzed. "You are grey. Good camouflage."

Fingers knelt and Scrim slid off.

"Hide from the hunters, however you hunger or thirst," Fingers skitzed. "You need the delta's mud to be finished. The delta has many such as you, too human to mate with our-others."

"Will I see you again?" Scrim said.

"We-Anuboids are going to Bight. When you're done with growing, you may come there to search us out. If you still want to."