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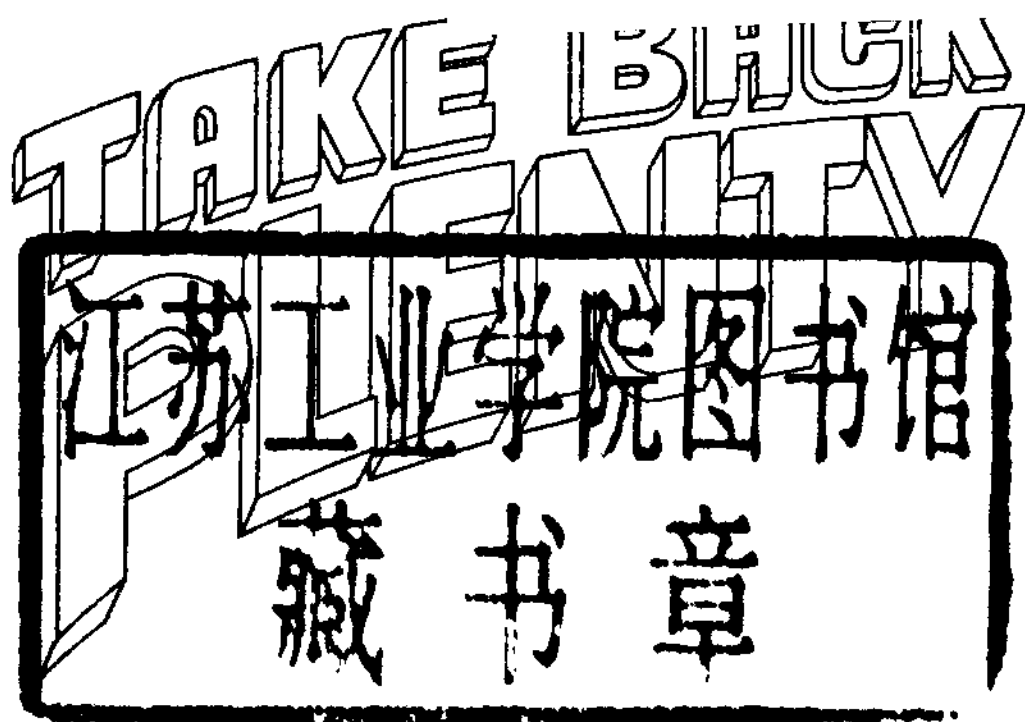
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COLIN GREENLAND



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SHOCKSTRUCK!

In the mess blocking the viewport something small suddenly slithered and jumped away, making Tabitha shout in fright. Only a lizard, she told herself. But there were bigger things out there, roaming the jungle. She had heard about them. The crash would have scared them away. They would be back.

Meanwhile there was an immense, omnipresent, utterly hostile monster facing them, surrounding them, not about to go away for anything: the planet.

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To the women behind the wheel

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ONE

Encounters at the Moebius Strip

1

“Nabe?” said the port inspector.

“Jute,” she told him.

“Giv’d nabe?”

“Tabitha.”

“Status?”

“Owner operator.”

“Shib?”

“The *Alice Liddell*,” said Tabitha.

He lifted his close-shaven muzzle and looked at her hard over the monitor of his reader. “Tybe and *registriatiod* ob shib,” he said.

“Oh, right,” said Tabitha. “Bergen Kobold. BGK zero—”

She shot her cuff and checked her wrist monitor. She could never remember the *Alice*’s registration number without looking it up, though she saw it twenty times a day. “Zero-nine-zero-five-nine.”

“Burbose ob bisit?”

“I’ve got to see a man about a job,” she said. “Look, could you hurry it up, do you think?”

But he was an Eladeldi, he was entering everything with his paw stylus and checking her record. His tongue was hanging out. Tabitha sighed in annoyance and drummed her fingers on the desktop.

She looked around the hall. All the other queues were moving right along. Locals simply had to slot a tag and step through the gate. Just her luck to get an Eladeldi.

She knew what he was going to say next as soon as he opened his little purple mouth.

“Records show *registriatiod* ob debectib axis lock crys-

tal,” he said. “Two budths ago.”

“Yes,” said Tabitha.

“Not yet reblaced,” he observed.

“No,” she said. “That’s why I’ve got to see a man about a job.”

But he still had to print out yet another copy of the Capellan regulations about acceptable levels of degradation on axis lock crystals before he let her through the gate.

She stuffed the printout into her bag, where—somewhere—three other copies were already lurking, and looked at the time.

“Shit,” she said.

The commercial terminal was closed for some kind of police operation. Tabitha found herself being diverted down a long underground tunnel to the civil concourse. It was swarming with people. Spacers in livery jostled with porters, human and drone. Eager evangelists pressed prophecies of the imminent Total Merge into the paws, fans and hands of glazed-looking tourists. Holos for local businesses, net stations and archaeological attractions competed for attention, whooping and gyrating on their daises. The hubbub was even more deafening than usual.

Of course: it was carnival.

Tabitha’s headset suddenly locked into an ambient channel and began to tinkle with tinny salsa. Irritated, she snatched out the earpiece and let the set dangle round her neck. She had to get a move on if she was going to make it to the city before noon. Hoisting her bag, she sidestepped a cargo float, waded through a crowd of squabbling Perks and elbowed between two Alteceans and a city guide they were trying to haggle. Stepping high in the light gravity and brandishing the bag before her, she ploughed her way out into the open air.

Outside, it was dusty and cold. Grit whirled in the biting desert winds. Half-naked children with slit eyes and matchstick limbs worked the emerging crowd with grim efficiency. Tabitha Jute pulled up the collar of her old foil jacket and strode off past the concession stalls, looking for transport.

The queues for air taxis would be impossible. She took the slidewalk to the canal. The queues there were just as bad. Fortunately most of the tourists were after a robot hover, which she couldn't afford anyway. Then—a stroke of luck—she cut in front of a white family still cooing over the color of the water, and managed to sling her bag into an arriving boat.

“The Moebius Strip,” she called.

The cries of the annoyed sightseers dying away behind them, they left the wharf and slid off downstream. Tabitha sat in the stern and watched the olive groves and sponge gardens on either bank swiftly give way to shipyards, silica refineries and air plants. In the distance for a moment the complicated towers of Schiaparelli rose. Then coral pink walls of rock closed about them as they took the deep cut into Wells.

“Here for carnival?” the driver asked Tabitha, in tones of boredom and resentment which didn't lessen when Tabitha said no. She was a Vespan, brooding with hostile humility, like all of them. The atmosphere had mottled her long cheeks with brown blotches. She complained about the cold.

“It was better before they knock the dome down,” she said. “Was you ever here when we had the dome?”

“Before my time,” said Tabitha.

“We had good warm then,” said the driver. “Then they knock the dome down. They say they gone put up solar.” Her mobile features squeezed themselves around sulkily. “They never. They still argue, argue, who gone pay.”

She lifted her elbows. She looked like a bundle of spoiled green peppers in a brown felt overcoat. Her glossy lobes were withered and shrunk, the soft pouches of her face sagging in permanent despair. Tabitha wondered how long the woman had been scratching a living on the waterways, complaining to uncaring passengers, never quite summoning up the cash or the strength to take the long haul home.

They swept along the crimson canal into the purlieus of the new city. There the cries of the watersellers and

the buzz of taxis came wafting on the wind, strident and echoing across the dirty water. A team of Palernian prostitutes, their wool in frizzy perms, sat smoking and dangling their legs in the sunlight on the steps below the Malibu Arcade. They hooted and waved at the boats as they whizzed by. Tabitha's driver started to complain about them. Tabitha shifted forward along the cracked red bench.

"I've got some calls to make," she said.

She ducked into the phone hood, unreeled the plug from her headset and plugged in. The scratched little screen played her a little tune and showed a phone company logo. Then there were ads, more than ever for the sake of the season. In a window in the bottom left hand corner of the screen Tabitha watched her credit flickering merrily away.

She tried the Moebius Strip, but all she got was an answering routine. She tried another number. She waited.

They passed a sulphur felucca with a crew of children. They were towing a desert manta on a long black line. It dipped and fluttered in the chilly air, its wings drab and flaky.

At last Tabitha got through. On the phone an oily face cracked a smile as she identified herself. "In for the carnival?"

"No, business," she said. "Carlos, how much is an axis lock crystal these days?"

"What you got?"

"A Kobold."

"Still driving that old thing? She's gonna fall apart on you one of these days."

"That's what she keeps telling me," said Tabitha. "Come on, Carlos, I'm in a hurry, how much?"

He told her. She swore.

He shrugged.

"That's what you get for flying antiques," he said unsympathetically. "Can't get the parts." He scratched his ear. "I could do you a great deal on a Navajo Scorpion."

"Piss off, Carlos."

She thought of the Alteceans, back at the port, snuffing over their bags and parcels. "Look, have you seen Captain Frank lately?"

"A crystal for a Kobold, yeah, that's about ol' Frank's speed," he grinned. "Try the flea market."

"Thanks very much, Carlos."

"Cheer up, Tabitha," he bade her. "It's carnival!"

2

Carnival in Schiaparelli. The canals are thronged with tour buses, the bridges festooned with banners. Balloons escape and fireworks fly. The city seethes in the smoky red light. Though officers of the Eladeldi can be seen patrolling everywhere, pleasure is the only master. Shall we go to the Ruby Pool? To watch the glider duels over the al-Kazara? Or to the old city, where the cavernous ancient silos throb with the latest raga, and the wine of Astarte quickens the veins of the young and beautiful? A thousand smells, of sausages and sweat, phosphorus and patchouli, mingle promiscuously in the arcades. Glasses clash and cutlery clatters in the all-night cantinas where drunken revellers confuse the robot waiters and flee along the colonnades, their bills unpaid, their breath steaming in the thin and wintry air.

Reflected off the oily water, a thousand colored lights flicker and glow on the scoured faces of the buildings. A thousand noises batter the attendant ear, calliopes and stridulators, cannonades and sirens, all mingling with the babble and slur of happy voices. Even the screeching rasp of a police hover forcing its slow way upstream can scarcely cut the din. The cop, a human, leans on his screamer, twice, and stalls. In the shiny black carapace

of his servo-armor he looks stiff and offended, like a gigantic beetle beset by ants.

They pulled in at Mustique Boulevard, below the skate bowl. Grubby urchins stood on the wall, sucking steaming mossballs and shouting abuse at each other.

“This isn’t the Moebius Strip,” said Tabitha.

The morose boatwoman jerked an elbow. “Close as I can, sister. Grand’s closed for the procession.”

Annoyed, Tabitha paid her and leapt easily to the landing stage. Her jacket flashed and sparkled with sodium light, her boots crunched on the sandy boards.

Picture her, Tabitha Jute: not as the net media show her, heroine of hyperspace, capable, canny and cosmetically enhanced, smiling confidently as she reaches with one hand for the spangled mist of the Milky Way; but a small, weary young woman in a cracked foil jacket and oil-stained trousers, determinedly elbowing herself through an exuberant Schiaparelli crowd. She stands 162 in her socks, broad in the shoulder and the hip, and weighs about 60k at 1 g, which she very rarely is. Her hair is darkest ginger, cut in a conservative spacer’s square crop. Her skin is an ordinary milky coffee, and freckles easily, which she hates. Here she was, in after a stiff haul back from Chateaubriand, spacelagged and frazzled, needing a shower. There were dark olive bags under her hazel eyes. You wouldn’t have given her a second glance that evening, amid the florid, the fancy and the flash.

Not that there was much of that around here. This was definitely the scrag end of the festivities. She ducked beneath the concrete walkway and strode along an avenue of makeshift stalls lashed together from pipes and plank-ing, weaving a path between the strolling browsers. Overhead, lines of bioflourescents snaked from pole to pole, tied on with string. Tabitha had come to the flea market after all.

Some of the stallholders had made an effort for the carnival. There were masks and bunting decorating their displays of scuffed cassettes and second-hand knitting. Here were bright clothes: everything from aluminium

shoes to cheap and garish movie shirts of winking kittens and prancing unicorns and swivelling strippers. Collectors rummaged in boxes of sunglasses, discussed the merits of filched scraps of cruiseliner trim. Two scrawny women in tiny dresses sat behind a table of china animals, painting each other's faces by the warmth of a dilapidated reactor stove. One of them whistled at Tabitha as she squeezed by.

A decommissioned shop robot leaned from under its canopy and fired a burst of sublim at her, filling her head with sun-dappled pools, the smell of honeysuckle, desire. A yellow child tried to interest her in a jar of dead flies. Round the corner were the Alteceans in their cardigans, their conical caps of brown felt, presiding over accumulations of human refuse. On high stools they squatted, hunched in their habitual dolour, their snouts inflamed and dripping in the irritant air. They snuffled and sighed to each other, beckoning Tabitha, knowing a haulier when they saw one.

"Axis lock crystal?" she shouted. "For a Bergen Kobold?"

The Alteceans wheezed moistly at her, waving their paws at their mounds of surplus respirators and dismantled heat-exchangers as if these treasures were all one could possibly require in life. Tabitha spent a valuable minute dragging out from under a heap something that looked promising but proved to be a caustic diffraction coil. She threw it back. She was wasting time.

Dodging a band of spacers in Shenandoah colors braying drunkenly out of a bar and shoving one another about, Tabitha pushed ahead into the crowd that lined the banks of the Grand Canal. She circumvented fat tourists in fancy dress, civic marshals in baggy overalls, then a personal camera drone, its head swivelling back and forth as it scanned the canal for its owner at home. A sailing ship was passing, its mylar sails flapping in the gusty wind. Behind it crawled a hoverbus of MivvyCorp employees having a party. Through the rigging of the schooner a five of Palernians could be seen, making a nuisance of themselves on a flimsy raft. They were hoot-

ing and flapping their great woolly arms as they tried to climb on to a private jetty. A tall woman leaned from a balcony and emptied a bucket of water over them. Hanging over parapets and out of windows, clustering in the streets and on the rooftops, the crowd whistled and applauded.

As Tabitha was trying to get past a couple of coked-up Thrants in expensive shakos and boiled leather, one of the Palernians turned a clumsy somersault, and one of the others pushed her into the canal. They yoicked and whooped. A spark-boat sputtered by, filling the air with the smell of ozone. In it a couple in electric suits were arcing and fizzing to the hefty thump of a jumpbox. The Palernians bounded up and down in excitement, flooding the raft and endangering their coolers. As a cop arrived, his cyclops helmet protruding above the heads of the crowd, the woman was lowering her bucket at the end of a rope, shouting to a gaggle of little painted boys for a refill.

Tabitha leaned out over the railing. She could see the Moebius Strip. It was only another hundred meters: there, just beyond the float full of oversized Capellans, dummies, their huge bald heads bobbing with grave benevolence as if conferring blessings on the excited crowd.

Carnival in Schiaparelli. Cold, dusty city, full of holidaymakers and noise and smells and dirt. Wherever you go, now, you will meet people who will tell you that Schiaparelli was a fateful city for Tabitha Jute. It was in Schiaparelli that she met Tricarico, who brought her aboard the *Resplendent Trogon*, which led her into the presence of Balthazar Plum—and if it hadn't been for all that, she would never have acquired the *Alice* in the first place. Likewise, here she was now, years later, in Schiaparelli, heading for a fateful encounter which would completely and utterly change her life, my life, all our lives. She was at the top of the steps leading down to the front door of the Moebius Strip. She could see the lights inside, the drinkers and gamblers.

And then the Perks came, scurrying up the steps on all fours like rats out of a cellar.