

Eleanor Arnason: Stellar Harvest

After her helicopter broke down in a dusty little caravan town named Dzel, Lydia Duluth rented a *chool*. This was a native quadruped, reminiscent of the *hasa* on her home world, though (thanks to this planet's smaller mass and lighter G) taller and rangier than any *hasa*. Instead of hooves, it had three-toed feet; and a pair of impressive tusks curved up from its lower jaw.

"What are those for?" Lydia asked the stableman.

"Digging up roots and pulling bark off trees, also for fighting with other males. Loper has been gelded and won't bother you with any kind of mating behavior. Sex is a distraction," he added in the complacent tone of one who has never been distracted. "Necessary perhaps for evolution—we are not ignorant; we know about Darwin—but hardly compatible with civilization. Loper will give you no trouble. He has been civilized."

The animal turned its long, angular, lightly scaled head, regarding her with a bright orange eye. Not a sight that Lydia associated with civilization, though maybe one could see the triangular pupil—expanded at the moment, in the shadowy stable—as a pyramid, emblematic of Egypt and geometry.

"Tomorrow," she told the stableman. "At dawn."

"Loper will be ready."

She spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Dzel. Narrow streets ran crookedly between adobe buildings. The natives—humanoid, but not human—dressed in brightly colored robes, which hid most of the differences between their species and hers. One noticed height and the long thin hands, one finger short of the human norm. Their skin was golden brown and hairless, with a faint shimmer produced by vestigial scales. Their eyes, visible above veils, were all iris with round black pupils. Most of the irises were yellow: a wonderful hue, as clear as glass or wine.

One could put an exotic romance into a setting like this or an adventure story: Ali Khan on the trail of interstellar drug dealers or seeking evidence of the long-vanished Master Race. Though poor Ali was at the end of his career; a man of 110 simply did not convince in action roles. No matter what one did with computers, the audience knew how old he was. They knew they were not seeing the real person; and Stellar Harvest had built its reputation on authenticity.

Well, not her problem. She didn't plot stories or write scripts. Instead, she recorded Dzel: the colorful inhabitants, dusty winding streets and dark blue sky.

There were sounds to be recorded as well: bells ringing in the wind, plaintive voices that rose and fell musically, so every conversation seemed to be a duet or trio, and the soft thud of *chool* feet, as the animals plodded past.

Her mood, somewhat edgy since the helicopter's sudden failure, gradually relaxed.

Species are stable, said the voice in her mind. *Humans have not evolved in the centuries since you began to build machines. Your nervous system is designed for an environment like this. That's why you find animal noises and the sound of the wind relaxing. In a sense, this is your true home.*

"Did I ask for an opinion?" said Lydia quietly, while aiming her recorder at a street shaded by blue and red awnings. The light beneath the awnings was alternately blue and red, colored by the fabric it had come through. A woman in a white robe walked toward her. What a vision! And what a location for a chase or fight!

The women, veiled and hooded, passed Lydia. Golden eyes gave a quick considering glance. With luck, the recording would be good; she'd have this light forever, along with the woman's grace and glance.

At sunset, she returned to her inn. The helicopter pilot, a native in blue overalls, had news. Their machine was not fixable. He would have to stay in Dzel until a salvage truck arrived, then ride back along the caravan road. "We are still trying to find you another copter, missy "

