

THE GOOD SHIP LOLLYPOP

by R. Garcia y Robertson

**Danger and slavery await a teenage girl if she can't outwit the
Boogie man who haunts...**

* * * *

Boogie Man

Shirlee first saw the Boogie man when she was seven. Mom was out cold, so Shirlee disabled the apartment alarm, then unlocked the kitchen disposal port. Mom's apartment had been a rec-room on a dorm deck, and the disposal easily accommodated a skillful child.

Crawling through the tubes, Shirlee emerged in what had been a cafeteria, when the Monrovia was a colony ship in deep space. Kids called it the Hall of Tables. Bare, chairless tables dominated the empty space, all bolted to one wall, because spin gravity had turned the ancient mess deck into a bulkhead.

She counted doors in the floor, until she came to Jill's, then thumbed the lock. Folks inside laughed to see her descend the ladder.

"For Elviz' sake, who's this?"

"Look, a curly blond Munchkin."

"Jill, your friend's here."

"Which friend?"

"Shirlee."

Lomax leaped on her, licking her ear.

Jill was eight, and lived in what had been a bosun's suite with her extended family, and a huge warm wolf-dog named Lomax. After a long fun play lasting past lights-out, Jill and Lomax walked her back to the disposal.

As Shirlee left, Jill's mother gave her a pair of little blue pep pills.
"These are for Mom. So don't swallow them."

"Of course." Adults had such weird notions.

She gave Jill's mother a good-bye hug, keeping a careful hold on the pills.

Lights had dimmed down to nighttime levels, but Shirlee could still see. At the entrance to the Hall of Tables, Lomax growled.

Jill stuck her head into the hall. "Nothing there."

Shirlee looked for herself, seeing only the bare hall.

"He smells something," Jill decided.

Something bad, though neither said so. Whispering a prayer to Saint Michael, Shirlee slowly entered the hall, holding Jill's hand, with Lomax in the lead.

Past the rows of sideways tables was the serving area, and disposal, opening into the wall instead of the floor. Everything seemed normal, just tilted on its side.

Saying good-bye, Shirlee crawled into the tube, headed home. Before she got to the first turn, she heard Lomax bark.

Glancing back, she saw a black shadow fall over the open door. Shirlee froze in fear. Barely able to see the Boogie man, she could tell he was big, scary, and clearly a man, not a chimp or SuperCat. She begged Saint Michael to make it go away.

Luckily the Boogie man was far too big and frightening to fit in the disposal tube. After looking at her long and hard, he went on, headed the way Jill had gone.

Shirlee scrambled back to her apartment, emerging in the kitchen. Mom was still flat out on the float-a-bed.

Putting the pills on the bed table, Shirlee punched into the Net, calling for Jill. She found her at home, asking, "R U OK?"

"SURE Y?"

"I SAW THE BOOGIE MAN."

"U DID?"

“SWEAR 2 GLADYZ. N THE HALL OF TABLES.”

“2 SCARY.”

“U BET.”

Mom got up, pushing aside damp hair, then looked groggily about. Her face was pale, and her skin sagged. Seeing the pills, Mom rolled bloodshot eyes. “You have got to stop sneaking off to Jill’s on your own.”

Shirlee nodded dutifully, and got out a carton of water. Mom popped a pill, broke the seal on the water carton, and drank. Then she plugged herself into the Net, and went back to work.

For once Mom was right. Shirlee never went visiting again without calling first. Jill would let Lomax out, and the huge furry, Dire wolf-dog cross would meet Shirlee in the Hall of Tables. Adults all claimed the Boogie man did not exist. But Shirlee was not fooled, nor was Lomax.

Shirlee did not see the Boogie man again until she was a teenager, but he was still out there.

Two years later, Jill’s cousin Didi disappeared while picking strawberries. Net searches turned up nothing but the broken ID band that had been around her ankle. Alongside two spilled baskets of strawberries.

By then, Shirlee and Jill were big enough for field work. Shirlee enjoyed spending days above ground, in the habitat’s broad agricultural strip, bathed in bright mirror-enhanced sunlight, eating cherries and berries whenever she liked.

But when the mirrors tilted toward night, throwing shadows over the fields, she remembered Didi, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

“Scared of the dark?” asked Jill.

Shirlee shuddered. “You did not see him.”

“You did not lose a cousin,” Jill reminded her.

When it got too dark to work, Jill whistled up Lomax, and the wolf-dog saw them home.

Shirlee celebrated turning thirteen by inviting Jill, Carol, and Tina to a private party in an empty dorm room. Slipping off their ID anklets, and blanking the security cams, they split up one of Mom's Z-pills.

Saying a prayer to Elviz, who had been an official narcotics agent, they solemnly swallowed their little bits of Z.

Never having taken any Z, not even a quarter pill, Shirlee was astonished. Walls moved back, as the little room expanded and dissolved, letting in the cosmos. She felt the living strawberry fields above, and the sunlight shining off the habitat's silver mirrors.

Finding the bare abandoned room far too confining, the girls blanked the corridor cams, then went giggling up to the surface, to run free through the fields, whooping and waving their hands.

Shirlee whirled around among the young plants, lit by the silver shining mirrors. She felt free and in the open, like when she was little. Not watched, not IDed. Unconfined and unafraid. Light streamed down from Niger A, the system's yellow sun, warming her skin. All that separated her from the cosmos was a transparent radiation barrier, holding in a thin layer of air.

For the first time since Didi disappeared, Shirlee stood in the strawberry fields, thrilling to the sunset. Fearlessly enjoying the moment, as the mirrors tilted in space, seeming to suck up the light. One by one, the stars came out around her.

Some of the girls knew their names. Carol pointed to a yellowish star. "That's Betelgeuse."

"And the big blue one is Rigel."

"That red one is Antares."

"No, it's Niger B."

"How do you know?"

"My dad is there." When she was little, Shirlee thought her father was a Feelie star, because she only saw him on 3V. Now she knew better.

"Can you see Earth?"

"Don't be silly." At this distance they might as well try to see

Graceland. Nor could they see the great gas giant the habitat orbited, since it was upsun from them. Monrovia seemed to hang alone among the stars.

“Time to go,” Carol declared. Jill agreed, and Shirlee felt suddenly chilled. Her quarter-Z was wearing off.

Heading back toward the tunnels, her high faded. She no longer felt free and unafraid. Or unwatched.

Tina felt it too, silently taking her hand. This was how Didi disappeared.

Carol whispered, “We are being followed.”

“What do you mean?” Jill demanded.

Carol shushed her. “Keep walking. Don’t look.”

Tina squeezed her hand, and Shirlee squeezed back, at the same time glancing over her shoulder into the darkness. Ignoring Carol’s warning.

For the second time in her life, Shirlee saw the Boogie man, a black shape outlined in starlight, like a ninja in a night suit. He easily gained on them, growing larger.

Shirlee shrieked and ran, dragging Tina after her. Jill swore aloud, then joined them, with Carol close behind.

Jill got to the tunnel entrance first, and threw it open.

Looking back, Shirlee saw no sign of the Boogie man. Not necessarily good. There were many entrances, so he could be somewhere below. Waiting.

“What should we do?” hissed Jill.

Carol kept her head, saying tersely, “We need to go down and get our IDs.”

“What if he’s waiting down there?” Jill protested.

“What if he’s sneaking up on us here?” Carol shot back.

Blanking the security cams and shedding their IDs no longer seemed

so neat.

Shirlee spoke slowly and firmly. "We must go down together."

"What?"

"Why?"

"We cannot stay here. So we must go together," Shirlee insisted, wishing to heaven they had brought Lomax. Whatever made her think that they had outgrown the wolf-dog?

Saying a prayer to Saint Michael, they descended into the tunnels. Shirlee held tight to Tina, knowing that the dim night-lights were deceptive. They had blocked the cams, so no one could see them, except for the Boogie man.

Jill went first, being the oldest, if not the most enthusiastic. Threading through the corridors, they approached the room where they left their IDs. Its door stood invitingly open.

That scared Shirlee, since she had shut it. Or thought she had. "What should we do?"

Jill hissed back, "Did you shut the door?"

Shirlee nodded, "Think so."

Tina shrugged. "Not me."

"So what's that mean?" Jill hissed.

"Who knows?"

Jill sighed. "Stand back."

Being oldest, Jill must go in. Privilege had its perils. Jill stepped warily inside.

Shirlee held her breath, gripping Tina's hand even tighter.

She heard a horrible scream from inside the room, followed by even scarier silence.

No one leaped to save Jill. Shirlee ran, hauling Tina with her. Straight for home, to wake Mom and call the cops.

She got no farther than the Hall of Tables. There she slowed, expecting trouble, her head set on SWIVEL.

Here was where she first saw the Boogie man, back when she was little. She stepped gingerly into the abandoned cafeteria.

Gloved hands grabbed her from behind.

She screamed in terror. Tina twisted free, and was gone.

Before she could scream again, a man's hand covered her mouth. Shirlee could not speak, breathe, or move her arms.

Someone said, "Knock her out!"

What? Why? Something sharp hit her in the hip, and she collapsed into blackness.

* * * *

Shirlee woke up under arrest. Nice robo-nurses explained that she was in a locked ward, facing multiple criminal counts. "Your friends are also safely in custody."

"What about the Boogie man?"

None of the nurses knew what she meant, telling her to relax and take her tranqs. "You are in enough trouble already."

Her newly appointed auto-lawyer agreed. Yesterday she would have gone to Children's Court, but now she would be tried as a teen. "Charges include electronic mischief, minor without ID, testing positive for Z, and evading arrest."

"What about the Boogie man?"

"Boogie man?"

"He was chasing us."

"That was a drug reaction."

“Tell it to Didi.”

“Didi who?” asked the auto-lawyer.

Talking sense to a program was pointless. What could a legal algorithm know about being high? Elviz personally tested every possible pill. Only the King really cared.

Mom was horribly upset, though she did not know the half of it. “Where in heavens did you get the Z?”

Shirlee rolled her eyes. What was she supposed to say, with her lawyer on-line? The program would probably turn Mom in. “The Boogie man left it for us.”

“What?”

“To make us silly.” And stupid.

“That’s absurd.”

Her Boogie man defense got a stiff reprimand from the judge as well. Blocking the corridor cams set off an alarm. Cops came looking, and caught them. There were no other suspects.

Nor did anyone believe this was Shirlee’s first drugged frenzy, not even Mom.

So she went to JuVee for the first time, on a ninety-day sentence. At least her friends were all there.

These first three months in JuVee were a flat out education. Instructional 3V was beamed straight into her cell, starting at seven AM. Shirlee was in class before she was out of bed. All the girls were older than her. Any curiosity she had about paid sex, hard drugs, illicit love, and kiddie porn were answered before she could ask. Popular girls faced all those charges.

Happily, she gained some status from being convicted. Girls still presumed innocent, got it the worst.

Not that they were treated too badly, aside from being force-fed organic food, and assaulted with pre-dawn instruction. They were not

beaten, except by each other. And she felt totally safe from the Boogie man.

She even got to see boys, in mixed drug counseling. Ex-addicts, petty thieves, and sex offenders happily felt her up when the counselors weren't looking. Shirlee got useful lessons in sleight of hand and camera angles.

This ardent interest was flattering, but the boys she liked best were least likely to grab her.

As her release date neared, she got bolder. On her final day of counseling, Shirlee brushed up against the boy she liked most, a repeat offender named Ivan. Terminally cute, he was older than her, with a sly smile, and warm, sure hands.

Shirlee got her first real kiss, and the brief feel of a boy's fingers in her pants, before adults pried them apart. Too bad he was in until eighteen.

As soon as she got out of JuVee, Shirlee made herself a peanut butter, banana, and bacon sandwich, fried in butter, to take away the awful taste of soy. She washed it down with a king-size vanilla shake.

Mom looked worse than Shirlee remembered, tearfully enrolling them both in rehab. Shirlee went for Mom's sake, finding it totally boring, being broken of a habit she had barely acquired. Drug classes just made her miss the boy who'd so deftly molested her. He would not be free for three more years.

Mom held out for a year and a half, dutifully keeping her daughter "clean." Then she finally crumpled under the burden of sobriety, relapsing with a vengeance. Despite Shirlee's best efforts, her Mom died less than a year after relapsing.

Devastated by her loss, Shirlee forgot to destroy Mom's stash. When she returned from the emergency room, she was promptly re-arrested.

Dad was somewhere in the B-system, and she had no other family, so Shirlee expected to end up back in JuVee. But it seemed way harsh to add another conviction. For Priscilla's sake, she was only fifteen, and already a re-offender. All for a quarter tab of Z.

Jill's family bid her good-bye. As the homeless, two-strike daughter of an OD, Shirlee would be in until eighteen. They kissed her, saying,

“Good-bye, curly.”

“Be good.”

“An’ keep the King with you.”

All she could say was, “Kiss Lomax for me.”

Jill wiped her eyes, swearing, “I will.”

Another sort of kiss awaited inside. Happily, she was in for a drug offense, which meant more “peer counseling.” Shirlee was delighted to find that Ivan was now a trustee. “Teens Teaching Teens” helped her immensely in dealing with Mom’s death, giving Shirlee a purpose, a boyfriend, and an astounding new feeling of worth.

As Ivan’s prize student, she learned the fine art of evading surveillance. Like how to silence a mike, or sidetrack a camera so it showed only an empty room. If you could make out in JuVee, you could make out anywhere.

Asked why he was in until eighteen, Ivan would only say, “Drugs, of course, and debauching little girls.”

She grinned back. “Sounds totally sick.”

Between bouts of sex education, Ivan boasted about his boyhood on Ashanti, claiming, “B-system’s the best.”

Not what Shirlee had heard. “No way.”

“There’s no law, not like this at least.”

She mouthed a kiss. “This is not so bad.”

Ivan laughed. “B-system beats this with a steel bat.”

“So you say.”

“Ashanti has Thals, Greenies, SuperCats, and floating cities....”

“Is that good?”

“Better than picking strawberries.” And safer.

Conditions of confinement kept Ivan from ever getting her bra off. Most of their dates were on camera, where she learned to keep a poker face, reciting the anti-drug mantra, while her peer tutor brought her to a concealed orgasm.

At eighteen, Ivan was released and deported to the B-system. Seeing Ivan set free was her second worst day in JuVee.

Even more alone, she moped about for months, missing Ivan, and remembering how Niger B had hung over the dark fields. Now her love circled that gleaming red star, while she stayed locked in Heartbreak Hotel.

Finally her gloom was broken by a happy, “Hey, druggie! How ya doin’?”

Carol stood casually among some new arrivals. Grabbing her friend, Shirlee asked, “What are you doing here?”

Carol smirked. “Two to eighteen.”

“Whatever for?”

“Nothin’ you wouldn’t do.”

That was for sure. Tall, red-haired Carol was far more cautious than Shirlee, deftly switching the subject. “Where’s your too cute boyfriend?”

“Back in the B-system.”

Carol ran a hand through Shirlee’s prison-cut blond curls. “That’s a real crime.”

New girls gave them room, looking fearful and envious. Two repeat offenders, hugging and kissing before the cams, while openly mocking the law.

Carol came on like a blast of cherry-flavored oxygen, insisting they both volunteer for work release. Which was a total misnomer. They were not released at all, but taken through the de-spin system, to labor in v-suits on the habitat docks, loading goods and produce onto robo-cargo carriers. Cyborgs did the heavy moving, but small tasks in zero-g were more cheaply done with prison labor.

Shirlee liked seeing the cargo carriers depart, headed outsystem, or downsun toward Freetown. Long cylindrical gravity drives, pushing huge colored cargo spheres, made them look like flying lollypops.

Carol smiled at her enthusiasm, saying, "This is why I am in JuVee."

"To get an unpaid job at the docks?"

"Because I was caught with contraband."

"Contraband? How'd that happen?"

Carol turned her back to the cams, mouthing the word, "Secret."

During the next rest period, Carol dragged her into a corner, far from the nearest mike. With their helmets tipped back, Carol leaned over, saying, "Let me lick your ear."

Shirlee nodded at the cams. "They'll think we're necking."

"Good." Leaning closer, Carol whispered, "Not all this stuff gets on the right ship."

Shirlee's drug tutoring kicked in, pretending to do one thing while whispering another. "What do you mean?"

"Stuff gets rerouted."

"What stuff?"

"Expensive stuff. Drugs, high-tech trinkets, even people."

"People?"

"Sure. Illegals from the B-system. Or folks who just aim to disappear."

Ivan had been from B-system, and totally illegal.

"Some stuff ended up with me," Carol explained. "So I ended up here."

Carol let go of her and laughed. Shirlee pushed her friend away, then they sealed helmets and went back to work.

It did not stop there. When they were alone, between supper and lights out, Carol lay down beside her pretending to watch 3V. What started out like seduction ended up being a business proposition. Cautious Carol had not just happened to land in JuVee. All this was carefully planned. Carol had a memorized list of shipments to be switched, and wanted her help.

“Why?”

“Because I want out of here.” Carol stared straight into the 3V docudrama about the founding of Freetown. “Not just out of JuVee. I want to go somewhere. Liberia. The B-system, I don’t much care.”

“I mean why me?”

Carol nudged her. “I need you.”

And not in the normal way. Taking her hand, Carol told her, “The Boogie man got Tina.”

Shirlee kept her face set, staring into the 3V, watching history reenacted, saying a silent prayer for Tina.

“Two months ago, just like Didi. All he left was her ID.”

Carol squeezed her hand hard. “Someone has to help me switch the loads.”

Trying not to cry, Shirlee nodded. She would do it. Not because it was smart, or safe, or because she stood to make a lot—but because Carol was all she had left.

Carol had it totally planned out, showing her how to reprogram the robots, sending cargo shooting off in new directions. Heavy lifters meant for Freetown sailed off to the B-system, replaced by their weight in illegal pharmaceuticals. Both recipients would presumably be pleased.

Such trades were completely illegal, but that hardly bothered Shirlee, being already in jail. After what happened to Tina, she was not sure she wanted out.

Carol herself could not wait to go. When the pre-programmed switches were complete, Carol was leaving in a special shipment, an entire cargo ship diverted to the B-system. Shirlee asked, “Won’t this give it all away?”

“My leaving will give it away,” Carol reminded her. “This provides the biggest payoff.”

“What about the Navy?”

“*Java* is off chasing slavers.” That was the nearest naval vessel, a J-class corvette assigned to the system.

Carol reached out, stroking her hair. “If you don’t like hijacking, just call in sick. I can do this alone.”

“No way.” Shirlee shook her head, grimly determined to see Carol safely away.

Her friend sighed. “Wish I could take you too.”

There was only room for one in the container set aside for Carol. Too bad. Dad, Ivan, and now Carol would all be in the B-system, while she was left behind.

Careful Carol included her in everything. Together they disabled the security cams, switching Carol’s container for a load of freeze-dried produce meant for the Leading Trojans.

Unsure what to say when Carol disappeared, Shirlee knew that without camera evidence the worst they could do was put her in lock-down, since she was already in until eighteen. Going through the de-spin system together, they suited up in zero-g. Cameras were showing another shift, recorded days ago.

Shirlee went to check out the container, while Carol made sure security systems would send it through. There was enough food and air in the container to keep Carol going until it was time to emerge and hijack the ship.

Happy to see everything secure, Shirlee went to get Carol.

All she found was Carol’s broken ID anklet, floating lazily in zero-g.

Shirlee froze, heartsick and terrified. Until that instant, she thought the Boogie man could never get her here.

What a fool! First Didi, then Tina, now Carol. She was sure to be next.

With the cams gone, she had no hope of getting through the de-spin system. Fighting tears, Shirlee did a zero-g flip, and swarmed back toward the cargo port, kicking off bulkheads to speed herself along.

Carol's container was open and waiting, already aboard the smart-loader. Opening her suit at the ankle, Shirlee tore off her ID band, letting it float free. That sent out a broadband alarm, but she was not waiting to see who came for her.

Climbing into the cramped container, she told the smart-loader to stow her away, and seal the ship. Then to lock down and forget any of this ever happened. Nothing would show that she was inside.

Concealed in the sealed ship, she shut down her suit, so no stray ergs would betray her. Lying curled in darkness, like a baby in a padded womb, she cried for Carol. Her sobs smothered the slight tremor of separation, as robo-container ship CSR15379 departed Monrovia dock, heading for the Leading Trojans at 2-gs.

Acceleration pressed her deep into the padding, and Shirlee knew she was on her way. More alone than ever.

* * * *

Stowaway

When she had cried herself out, Shirlee lay in the cramped darkness, feeling the firm tug of acceleration. She could lie here, safe and secure, as long as she wished. At 2-gs, she would reach the Leading Trojans in a few days. There CSR15379 would be unloaded, and who knows what would happen. Did they have JuVee in the Trojans? Probably.

She sorely missed Carol's cunning flirtatious mayhem. With Carol leading, any catastrophe was her friend's fault. Now she had literally put herself in Carol's place.

And Carol had not been headed for the Trojans. Carol wanted to go to the B-system. Why not? Dad was there. And Ivan.

Taking the ship to the B-system was hijacking. Another felony, to go with stowing away, electronic fraud, smuggling, and grand larceny, plus her previous convictions. By now her life was hopelessly illegal.

What would the King do? Elviz was a federal officer, who had seen both sides of the badge, and felt the law worked best in his own hands. Elviz would say, "What's really keeping you in this box is fear of the Boogie man."

Too true. He might have gotten aboard the ship. He could be right outside, waiting for her.

But if the Boogie man was aboard, would he give her a free ride to the Trojans?

"Hell no, girl." Elviz made his own luck. "Boogie man's got days to find you, and break into that container."

Better to face fate head on. Fighting fear and gravity, Shirlee pushed herself up and unsealed the container. Then she cautiously lifted the lid.

No Boogie man, just stacks of silent containers, identical to hers. So far so good.

CSR15379 had no crew, but it did have a command deck, several levels below. Carefully, Shirlee climbed down the stacked containers. At 2-gs, it felt like she was carrying someone piggyback. She stopped at the interior command lock, her heart beating hard, afraid what she might find.

Sealing her helmet, she purged the lock, just in case. Putting it through a full cycle, from vacuum to ship normal, would kill any air breather inside.

When the pressure reequalized, she entered the lock. No dead Boogie man. Darn.

Searching the lock for protection, she found an emergency kit, with a lethal looking flare gun. Not a real blaster, but it would have to do.

Shirlee dilated the inner door.

Relief surged through her, seeing an empty command cabin, with its paired acceleration couches and simple control console. She had a ship.

Quickly, she sat down at the controls and evacuated the cabin. Now no one could enter without a v-suit, and tons of pressure held the inner lock closed.

For the first time since she'd seen Carol's broken ID band, Shirlee felt tolerably safe. Surrounded by nothingness.

Setting aside the flare gun, she checked the security cams, running them back to before she got aboard, when the Boogie man was outside grabbing Carol. Again nothing.

By now she knew camera scans were near to useless, having rigged them repeatedly. Still, she felt safe enough to raise cabin pressure, while keeping the locks evacuated. No one could enter without pressuring an air-lock, or cutting a hole in the cabin. She was bound to hear that.

Secure for the moment, Shirlee unsuited and flipped on the screens, taking a look at local space. Great brown-banded Mali, Monrovia's gas giant primary, covered half the screens. Monrovia hung nearby, with stars reflecting off her huge tilted mirrors. Liberia and Freetown were lost in the glow of Niger A. Niger B was smaller, and redder, but distinct as a beacon.

She was meant to be in the B-system. And if it took one more crime to get her there, so be it. Elviz would understand.

Shirlee began reprogramming the command console, seizing total control of the ship. Complete with her own whimsical access codes.

Monrovia control immediately objected:

* * * *

CSR15379 return to autopilot

* * * *

She did not answer.

* * * *

CSR15379 return to autopilot, and submit a full status profile....

* * * *

Profile yourself. They would not even say please. She set the autopilot for a 1-g boost to Ashanti, relaxing into the couch as her weight returned to normal. B-system, here we come.

Monrovia control really hated that, but she did not dignify their shrill demands with a response.

There was nothing they could do. Carol had planned her escape perfectly. All the crewed ships were either far downsun, or on the other side of the system. Nor could they run her down with a regular robo-freighter. Too bad Carol could not see the resulting havoc.

“Nice goin’, girlfriend.”

Determined not to waste Carol’s last gift, Shirlee scrolled through the ship’s manifest, looking for something to use against the Boogie man—if he was aboard.

Damn! No convenient stash of small arms and battle armor. Her hijacked cargo was relentlessly peaceful, mostly food, medicine, and vacuum equipment. Plus some commercial explosives, and huge ice-mining lasers that would not fit on her hip. Useful stuff in the Leading Trojans, but small help to her.

She settled on a hand-sized laser cutter listed in the control deck repair kit. At close range it could slice any Boogie man in half.

Armed with the repair laser, she suited up, purged the cargo area, and diligently searched the ship. No Boogie man, just stacks and stacks of sealed containers.

Short of opening every container, Shirlee had done all she could. She retreated to the control deck, with its recycler, auto-galley, and twin couches, where she could sit back, setting the 3V for sense-surround.

Suddenly she was on a tropical isle, or the Pleistocene savanna of Glory. Or better yet, window shopping in a Freetown mall. Shirlee could even have made purchases, if she were not a convict felon fleeing the system.

Most exciting were views of the B-system, coming from navigation beacons, or human settlements on the outer planets. Greenies might have magical floating cities on Ashanti, but they were utterly uninterested in virtual entertainment. Greenies used 3V for communication, not to replace reality.

Humans, however, were shameless. Shirlee sat through incredible come-ons from B-system sirens, who stepped straight out of the 3V to shed their scanty costumes on the command deck. Totally wasted on her,

but even more educational than JuVee. Pleasure palaces in far off places promised to satisfy her every desire, no matter how lurid. Or far-fetched.

Scary sick, and not in a good way. She preferred the standard commercial pitches, from habitants in search of A-system retirees or high-tech smugglers trying to unload their goods—the cosmic shopping channel that she and Carol had fed.

All the time she kept looking for Ivan, or Dad, hoping to see one of them shilling for some drug supplier. Or posing as a pleasure habitat's satisfied customer. No luck.

But she did see Didi. Jill's cousin who disappeared from the strawberry fields. Someone Shirlee assumed was long dead. Snatched by the Boogie man.

Yet there was Didi, inviting her to a XXX spa. Older than when she'd disappeared, but not by much. This was a dated 3V from a cut-rate paradise, catering to budget minded pedophiles.

Horror and relief washed over her. Didi was alive. Not doing well, but alive. Or she was when this 3V was made.

Shirlee's whole world spun about her. If Didi was alive, Tina might be, and Carol. She shouted with glee, wanting someone, anyone, to share this with.

Of course there was no one, since speed-of-light lag cut her off from the cosmos. Instead she sent a terse tight-beamed message to Jill's family:

* * * *

DD is alive N the B-system.

* * * *

Anything more would make them feel worse.

Close to turnaround, a ship showed up on radar, headed straight at her. Not just any ship, a fast crewed vessel, decelerating at 3-gs from near light speed, with "bandit" written all over it. Who else would be hurtling toward an inhabited system while naval protection was away?

Her new neighbor signaled her:

* * * *

CSR15379, you are off course, do you require assistance?

* * * *

No thank you. Especially when 3V showed who was sending.

Curled in the oncoming ship's command couch was a SuperCat, a genetic combination of humans and big cats, with a long furry body, human hands, a bulging forehead, and six-inch dagger-like canines. Homo smilo-don. Three-gs did not bother the mutant beast in the least. He asked languidly, "Hello human, are you there?"

She made no answer, hoping the gene-spliced killer would go on his way.

"CSR15379, are you responding? Or are you merely a menace to navigation?"

He could not catch her, not at near-light closing velocity. But he could put a warhead into her out of sheer frustration.

Cautiously, she opened a voice-only channel. "This is not CSR15379."

"What ship are you?"

"*Lollypop.*" That's what she looked like.

His saber-toothed grin widened. "Hello *Lollypop*. Do you need help?"

"Doing fine."

"Glad to hear that. How are things in the A-system?"

"Hectic."

He laughed aloud, clearly having heard the frantic calls for her to come about. "Good for you, girl. Want some advice?"

"Sure."

“You are boosting for Ashanti.”

“Maybe.” Her trajectory was easy to read.

“Beware of Greenies,” the smiling predator warned. “They will rob you blind, then turn you in. You’ll get the most for your cargo on Njovu V.”

Njovu meant elephant in an ancient tongue, the name for a gas giant on the edge of Niger B system—a notorious base for wreckers and slavers. “Tell ‘em Simba sent you.”

“Thanks.”

Simba signed off with a crisp, “Good hunting, girl.”

Good hunting to you. Shirlee easily recognized cyber-stalking. Simba pegged her for a scared young female on the run. Unable to snatch her up himself, Simba was sending her to friends who could. Probably for payment at a later date.

Still, she dutifully adjusted her course for Njovu V, an icy outer moon of the gas giant. She could always return to an Ashanti trajectory, once safely out of warhead range.

Not halfway to the B-system, and mutant predators were already licking their toothy chops over her. Was there a single safe spot in the cosmos? Apparently not.

But going back to spend the rest of her life in JuVee had scant appeal.

Instead she studied *Lollypop*’s specs and manifest, trying to figure out how to defend her. By combining medical anesthetic with mining detonators, she could instantly flood any interior space with knock-out gas. Shirlee also attached high voltage surge generators to the cargo ladders and strategic deck areas.

Knowing how easily *Lollypop*’s controls could be overridden, Shirlee did her work with the cams off, avoiding ship’s systems, using external power and code words keyed to her voice. No one else could trigger the traps. Or even tell they existed.

Turnaround came. She flipped *Lollypop* over, braking to enter the

B-system. Njovu control sent her a friendly 3V. Speed-of-light lag made conversation impossible, but a handsome, helpful officer in the “rescue service” asked if she needed assistance. His flying-dragon ship badge read *Hiryu*, and he assured her, “We have a deep space tug waiting.”

Again the eager offer to help, with no mention of her many crimes and misdemeanors. Clearly Njovu had no intention of sending her back to JuVee. How nice to be so wanted.

Staring at this smiling, tousle-haired officer from the *Hiryu*, Shirlee could not shake the feeling that she was finally seeing the Boogie man face to face.

She did not acknowledge the message, knowing that so long as she was shaping for Njovu, they would do nothing to stop her. Running orbits through the autopilot, she found the perfect point-instant to head for Ashanti.

Despite Simba’s warning, her best chance lay with the Greenies. Not a great comment on her own species.

Niger B grew in size, becoming a small red sun, with a sprinkling of planets. When time came to switch trajectories, she did it from the command couch, not trusting the autopilot. Though Ashanti was the innermost planet, it was actually closer than Njovu, given her extreme angle to the ecliptic. Simple high-g braking would do.

As soon as she was on an Ashanti trajectory, Ashanti control called her. Speed-of-light lag was not near as bad now, and she could carry on a conversation of sorts. The Greenie who greeted her had grass-colored skin, matching her eyes. Her hair was flame red, a fetching combination. “Why are you coming here?”

Good question. She signaled back.

* * * *

Nowhere lz 2 go.

* * * *

While she awaited a reply, Shirlee studied the Photo sapien. Like SuperCats, Greenies had once been human. Now they were supposed to be better than human; non-violent vegetarians, immune to cancer, drugs,

3V, politics, religion, and all other forms of addictive behavior. Plus their bodies could turn air and sunlight into blood sugar.

“Are you armed?” asked the Greenie girl.

* * * *

Not really.

* * * *

“We do not allow anti-personnel weapons on planet.” And they call Greenies uncivilized.

* * * *

Great. My cargo is food, Rx, meds, ice-mining equipment.

* * * *

“That will be much appreciated.” The Greenie did not mention payment, since they had no money. Not that Njovu planned to pay her either.

Would Greenies consider her hand laser a weapon? Maybe. She needed a back-up. Her medical shipment contained high-pressure hypos of instant anesthetic. Even a Greenie could not object to her having a couple of those up her sleeve. She’d say she had trouble sleeping.

Checking her cams, Shirlee suited up just in case, then pressurized the inner lock to go and get the hypos. As she stepped out into the cargo module, with her helmet hanging open, the Boogie man grabbed her.

His hand closed over her mouth, keeping Shirlee from triggering her traps, while a horribly powerful arm pinned her suited arms to her side, so she could not reach the laser. Strong, implacable fingers pinched her nose closed.

Now she could not breathe. All her childhood fears came rushing back. He had her, and would not let go. She fought vainly to speak, plead, or just to breathe. None of that was allowed.

Not even the King could save her. Slowly her struggles eased, and Shirlee slid into blackness.

* * * *

Candy Shop

Shirlee never expected to awake, but she did. Still in her v-suit, she lay in one of *Lollypop*'s cargo containers, seeing foam padding lit by light strips, and smelling like a JuVee toilet stall—a particular mix of sweat, urine, despair, and disinfectant.

Carol stared down at her, wearing just a worried look.

“Am I dead?” And gone to Graceland.

Carol shook her red locks. “You wish.”

Too bad, because life seemed pretty horrible. Shirlee started to sob. Having Carol back was great, but not in some ghastly box. Her ship, her freedom, her hope for a future had all been snatched away. Incredibly unfair.

Carol held her while she cried, pushing blond curls out of her eyes, waiting for her sobs to subside.

When they did, Shirlee struggled to smile. “Good to see you, girlfriend.”

“Good to see you.” Too bad it had to be here.

“Sorry I’m such a sissy.”

“Forget it,” Carol told her. “I cried like a cranky baby at first. He had to beat me into shutting up.”

“You were here this whole time? Since he grabbed you at Monrovia dock?”

“Where else?”

Totally logical. Carol and the Boogie man had been aboard all along. “How come he did not show on camera?”

“Cams were programmed to edit out his ninja suit.”

“Sweet.” Shirlee wished she’d thought of that. “Why did he wait to take the ship?”

“You were being too cautious.”

Up until the end.

“So long as you were headed for Njovu, it hardly mattered,” Carol added. “He had me to play with.”

“Must have been awful.”

“Nauseating.” Carol pretended to puke. “But you get numb.”

“He beat you?”

“Till I learned to please him.”

They both grimaced at that.

“Wasn’t hard.” From the way Carol said it, Shirlee knew the Boogie man was listening.

“Take off the ninja PJs and he’s no worse than the guys in JuVee.” Carol examined her bruised hip. “The marks have mostly faded.”

“So I see.”

Carol apologized for her nudity. “He thought clothes got in the way.”

“Tell me about it.” Good thing she had a v-suit on. The wrenching shock of being seized and smothered had filled her suit waste-evac unit.

Just lying quietly was an effort, showing they were on high-g trajectory for Njovu. She had to get out of this box. Soon. While she still had a chance to make Ashanti. Having Carol back leveled things. Together they could beat him, somehow.

What would the King do? Naturally her hand laser was gone, leaving her with no cutting tools. Just her v-suit. Could a vacuum suit get her out of a sealed container? Lost in space, or even underwater, it would be great. But locked in a box?

Might happen. She asked Carol, “Want some clothes?”

Her friend shrugged. "He will just take them away."

"Maybe that's a good thing."

Carol caught her meaning. Both assumed the Boogie man was watching. What else would he be doing?

Sitting up, Shirlee stripped off her v-suit, giving Carol the ship's coveralls underneath. Absurdly small on the taller girl, but better than nothing—unless you were a guy looking on. Shirlee swiftly suited back up.

"Thanks." Carol gave her a grateful kiss.

As their lips parted, Shirlee mouthed, "Make-him-open-up."

Carol nodded, kissing her again, then laying down beside her. Not very romantic in a vacuum suit, but Carol knew their audience best.

Shirlee asked excitedly, "Did you know Didi is alive?"

"No!" Carol's eyes widened.

"Swear, I saw her. In a real sicko ad." Shirlee had always wanted to be a 3V child star, but not that badly.

"Think he took her too?"

"Would not put it past him."

"I've been sold online," Carol boasted. "To the Candy Shop on Njovu III."

Shirlee winced. "I saw the ads." It made Didi's brothel seem like a preschool.

"So did I." Carol took one of Shirlee's blonde curls, idly twisting it around her finger. "It turned him on to show me where I am going."

Shirlee smirked. "Got to beat being here."

That was the message she meant to send. This box was so boring, compared to what they might be doing. She prayed to Elviz that the Boogie man would open it up, to peel her out of her silly v-suit.

This same annoying suit kept him from just flooding the container with anesthetic. Her suit's alarms and oxy-tanks easily dealt with bad air. So he would have to unseal the box with Shirlee alert and awake.

Which he finally did, breaking the container seal from the outside. He could not resist having his latest acquisition just the way he wanted her.

Carol rolled her eyes to say, "Get ready."

Popping the lid, the Boogie man stood over them, hanging onto a cargo ladder, wearing his hooded black night suit. Goggle eyes glared at Shirlee out of a filter mask. Plainly this was meant to scare her, freezing her into submission.

Instead she shouted out, "Spark!"

Seventy-five thousand volts flashed through the cargo ladder from a hidden surge generator. His night suit protected him some, but not nearly enough.

Losing his grip on the ladder, her captor tumbled down and landed on the metal deck, which Shirlee had also electrified.

Ten seconds later, the shock ended, but the Boogie man still jerked about.

Hauling Carol out of the box, Shirlee made for the command deck, hopping over the convulsing slaver.

As soon as she had Carol safe on the command deck, Shirlee evacuated the inner lock, then flooded the cargo hold with anesthetic gas.

* * * *

Matching orbits with Ashanti required more high-g braking, but Shirlee hardly cared, so long as it kept them out of the Candy Shop.

Twenty hours later, they docked at a Greenie habitat circum Ashanti, a great rotating torus full of light and chaos. Instead of flat fields and dark tunnels, Shirlee saw a low-g riot of green vines and giant trees reaching up to an artificial sun. Semi-nude Greenies flitted on gossamer wings between tree houses, and floating platforms borne aloft by helium reservoirs.

Shirlee stayed at the dock entrance, to be close to the ship, while Carol met with the 3V-shy Greenies.

Naked green-skinned kids crowded around her, laughing, joking, and stroking her bare skin. Photo sapiens did not watch 3V porno, so a young human woman was as rare as a female SuperCat, and infinitely more interesting. Even if she was merely waiting by an airlock in the de-spin system.

Carol returned, wading through giggling kids, who tugged at her ill-fitting coveralls. She told Shirlee, "All they ask is that we swear off weapons and violence."

Two human traits that horrified the locals. "They do not care that we stole this ship?"

Carol shrugged. "Not particularly."

That came from being illegal themselves. Like SuperCats, Greenies had been created secretly centuries earlier, in a gross violation of bioethics and the Universal Human Rights Act. To be totally within the law, all such "bio-engineered beings" would have to kill themselves. "They just want any human troubles kept off-world."

"Outstanding!"

"If we want to make ourselves useful," Carol added. "We can transport goods for a share of the cargo."

Fifteen and free, hard to believe. "Sounds fine by me."

Carol shook her head. "Greenies see us as totally good."

"Weird, when they hardly know you."

"Maybe." Carol smirked at the kids crowding around them.

"What do you mean?"

Carol said that grown-up Greenies had wanted to stroke her skin as well. "I got propositioned on the way here. A lot."

"That so?"

“Twice by women.”

Shirlee grinned. “So, you gonna look for a Greenie guy?”

“Or gal,” Carol reminded her. “You gonna look for Ivan?”

“Hard as I can.” *Lollypop* had a cargo lander for loading in atmosphere. Shirlee had named it the *Liza-Marie*, and meant to take it down to Ashanti. Humans were rare there, so one as cute as Ivan should stand out.

“You know he’s gonna have a Greenie girlfriend,” Carol warned.

“Or three.”

“But they’re pacifists.”

Both of them laughed at that. All humans, even teenage females, had an aura of violence that no Greenie could match. Stealing spaceships, resisting arrest, electrocuting Boogie men—no wonder they got a wary welcome.

“I want to find my dad too,” Shirlee added. Her last fatherly contact had been a birthday call two years ago.

“Homesick?” Carol asked.

Shirlee shook her head.

“Me neither.”

Shirlee grinned at the admiring young Greenies. “At home I’d be in JuVee.”

“And the Boogie man would be out on bail.”

“Claiming we kidnapped him,” Shirlee added.

“Prove we didn’t.”

“What will happen to him?” Shirlee had not seen their comatose captor since Greenies had taken him off the *Lollypop*. Slavers preyed on Greenies as well, and being vegi-pacifists did not make them pushovers—not totally.

“Hard to say,” Carol admitted. “They don’t believe in punishment, or the death penalty, but they don’t believe in trials either. All they said is that he is a very, very bad human. So we won’t be seeing him again.”

Life without the Boogie man. What a concept.