Subway

Josh cautiously moved to the bottom of the ramp and glanced up. The gentle incline was brightly colored and set with an abstract mosaic pattern. The right-hand wall was a bright but subdued red, the left side guarded by a simple waist high wall of the same color. It provided an open view into the room below. All he could glimpse at the top was a neutral-colored vaulted ceiling.

He shimmied his shoulders in the environmental suit, trying to break the stickiness of the sweat from the last couple of hours. The suit’s anti-bacterial capability was not keeping up with the stench seeping from his collar. The unpleasantness of his own body was becoming a distraction he could ill afford at the moment.

The others, also showing signs of the past few hours, were in a line trailing him. Spaced out two meters apart all those walking had weapons in hand. Mikiu was directly behind him, trailed by Susan, Dr. Lovis, and Jameson on the alien stretcher with Wendy guiding it. Jerimy was in the rear, walking sideways to keep his eyes rearward to watch for security robots. Apparently, the cities builders hadn’t bothered with aerial security assets, or they hadn’t met them yet. They hoped that the former was the case, but cast an occasional glimpse upward just to be sure. The ceilings were high enough that such an attack could come as a surprise.

Both of the engineer’s hands were occupied with their only remaining heavy beam rifle with a charged power-cell. The rifle Josh carried was almost depleted and they had lost their reserve power-cells during the attack in the welcome chamber. No thought had been given to retrieving them. Escape from the city had become their primary desire since the hasty retreat from the lounge area.

Reaching the top of the ramp Josh raised a hand motioning the others to stop. Using extreme caution he advanced a step to peer onto the next level. Slowly he moved his head from right to left. and then reversed his feet and repeated the maneuver. Satisfied that there was nothing threatening in any direction he slowly stepped off the ramp. It took a few seconds for his tired mind to register what he was looking at. It was in fact, the transport system they were seeking.

He found himself standing on a long-raised platform with two long grooves cutting across the length of it. They were two meters in width with unknown depth, and both disappeared into dark tunnels at either end. The rooms ceiling was high, almost as high as the town center, but not as brightly lit. Here the illumination level was at an inside lighting level, and not the outdoor midday pretense level of the center. This was a working space, and it was eerily familiar. Josh had been in such showy transportation hubs as this in numerous cities. It shared some of the same characteristics, generously spaced tall columns, a vaulted ceiling, walls, and floors, all in muted colors. Compared to the entrance ramp the overall effect was subdued. With the exception of the artwork randomly placed. These were bright splatches of color interspersed with lines and shapes that resembled nothing. He suspected that was by intent. It was a common theme of urban developers on other worlds he had visited.!!!!!!

Taking another three-hundred-sixty-degree look, he motioned the others forward. Mikiu was the first to break the silence they had maintained since leaving the medical unit. “You were right Josh. It’s a dammed train station. I guess that makes you right too Jerimy. There are other cities on this planet.”

The engineer, still looking down the ramp, was brusque. “At least there were other cities. We don’t know if they still exist. I hate to sound pushy but how about we move away from the ramp, preferably to some place less exposed.”

Josh led them to his left, away from the grooves and towards the wall. It was populated with small seating alcoves, all with tables. The alcoves fit the pattern of half-circle seating groups like those in the lounge area. “Over here. These people really liked cozy seating groups. The entire wall’s lined with them.”

Weary after their dangerous journey the group slid onto benches leaving Jameson floating in front of them. Josh and Jerimy took the last seats on either side placing themselves first in the line of fire, with the exception of the alien stretcher supporting Jameson.

Wendy asked, “should we turn off that thing, and just let him rest on the floor? Using this alien technology is beginning to make me nervous.”

Dr. Lovis shook her head, eyes closed in weariness. “I think we may have to rely on it. He’s in trouble and I don’t have the equipment to help him.” She raised her head glancing first at Mikiu and then Jerimy. “The other controls on that floating med-bed, the ones you told me not to touch, we need to touch them. Maybe the bed can save him. I can’t, not here, not with the gear I’ve got. We know more than one species lived here, you’ve got to think that their medical gear can make species adjustments.”

Josh took a long look at Jameson on the floating stretcher. “Once we’re away from city we’ll try it. We’re as likely to kill him as cure him but I think you’re right. We’re at the point of no choice. Do you think waiting a little longer is okay?”

A weary shake of her head. “No. He’s stable for now. It’s just that the longer this goes on the slimmer his chances.”

Mikiu took a long look in both directions before turning his attention back to the group. “Even if we figure out the controls for this train system, assuming we can find them, there is the matter of powering this medical whatever it is. Whatever technology there anti-grav is based on it requires power. I’m thinking maybe it gets wirelessly from the city. I just realized that of all the robots we’ve seen none of them had obvious charging ports. That in itself doesn’t mean anything, but I also haven’t seen anything resembling a charging station. Not even in that robot lounge or storage area we found our first day. If the thing quits hovering, we can always take turns carrying him, but if it’s providing life support…. A loss of power would be very bad.”

Susan chipped in, “lack of charging stations doesn’t mean anything. These people are way ahead of us in a lot of areas. The fact that these systems are still running says they were pretty good with power.

Mikiu conceded. “You may be right. We still need to figure out how to control the thing.”

Susan had an answer. “Everything seems to have a mental component to it. For whatever reason, Josh seems to have a talent for tapping into that.”

“Certainly not brain-power,” said Wendy, a weak smile playing across her face. Maybe it’s because his thoughts are so simple, nothing too complex.”

Josh gave her a one-eyed glare. “You get cranky when you’re tired.”

The girl shook her head. “Not cranky, just trying to get a raise out of you. Remember, I’ve been in your head. I think you need to be challenged occasionally and I think this qualifies.”

Jerimy’s eyes rolled back, “challenged, that’s piston poop. He just gets lazy, and you have to kick him in the ass. That’s what his old man says.”

The subject in question turned his one-eyed glare in the engineer’s direction. “Okay, with all this praise I think I’m sufficiently motivated. Give me a moment to think, and before anyone gets nervous, we’re probably safe here. Jerimy, do you think there’s any kind of internal tracking system coordinating with the security bots?”

“No, no I don’t. I see what you’re getting at. If the city knows where we are, and I’m pretty sure it does, it’s obviously not communicating with those attack robots. They would have rolled up on us by now.”

“Two isolated systems?” asked Mikiu.

“Possibly. Wendy’s right Josh, you do seem to be more attuned to the city than the rest of us. Any ideas?”