

*a sample portion of Chapter 36 of The Galactic Center by Thomas Stone:*

Laurie waited as Luc climbed around and over a giant squared block of concrete intended to divert streaming water from above into different drainage courses. Luc and Laurie had just emerged from one of those courses. Laurie reminded Dr. Luc the anandii were close behind as the cyborg stood upon its hind feet and looked at the exit. Natural light streamed over the doctor and Laurie knew they were near street level again. What then?

Luc helped Laurie up and over the concrete barrier and they both walked on all fours up a dry incline toward an opening. Luc stuck a camera out first.

The opening had been made when the first wave of invaders came up from the sewers and tore an iron grate from its concrete moorings, clearing an opening large enough for two to crawl through side by side. A French street lay beyond; Laurie had no idea where they were and so she followed the doctor as she dragged her frame from the sewer drain and stood.

The high-pitched whine of airjet controllers were interspersed with a wavering hum in the smoky skies above her head and Laurie searched the air but visibility was bad. She reckoned the sound of the craft was perhaps the next street over and shouted her thoughts to Dr. Luc. "Let's cut through a building to the next street. Maybe we can flag a ride."

"Wait a sec," said Luc. "I'm trying to contact someone via radio. It's better if they come to us."

Laurie stared at a temporary barrier at the end of the street. It looked most similar to an ordinary chain-link fence except that it stretched far overhead and at the top had a sort of upside down gondola affair making it practically impossible to climb over from the other side. Laurie could see activating wires and figured the fence was also rigged for electricity, although electric charges did not seem to phase this new bunch. And yet, on the opposite side of the fence was the enemy.

They were nearly pressed up against the barrier and circulated as if they were boxed in. A number had already attempted to mount the fence, none successfully. As Laurie watched, three of the creatures climbed to varying levels and hung suspended like grotesque look-outs.

The milling anandii offered no immediate threat. Dr. Luc said she would rather know where they were rather than not. Laurie agreed but okay, now where?

The anandii on the fence spotted them and began making a big deal about it, hooting and hissing to their pals below. In response, they pressed on the fence and it began to sway out.

In the other direction, a sizeable courtyard caused the street to widen where it coiled into a circle, maybe large enough for a military hovership. On the ground it was one way in and one way out of the roundabout, unless they elected to re-enter the sewers. At the thought, Laurie glanced at the opening whence they had emerged. Her heart dropped as she spied motion in the darkness -- a gripping hand revealed itself. Grasping a concrete edge, a bloodied and ragged unrecognizable person pulled himself from the sewer portal. He stood before Laurie on shaky legs.

"Kyle?"

His face was distorted and swollen as he peered at Laurie from squinting eyes lined with pain. Numerous, oozing wounds reflected the struggle he had survived. "You left me," he said, looking from Laurie to Dr. Luc.

"We thought you were dead," said Luc.

"Well, I'm not, no thanks to you."

"It's not like that, Kyle." The doctor held up the vial containing the sample taken from the cistern. "This is important," said Luc. "I need to get this the ICDC lab ASAP."

"What does it matter?" he replied, looking from the hissing army pressing on the fence to the dead end on his left. "There's no way out of here." He motioned towards the sewer opening, "They're behind me. The game is up. You said so yourself, there's no hope."

"I shouldn't have said that," she replied while simultaneously looking up.

Like a divine admonishment from overhead, a small craft flew into view over the circle and its robot pilot descended to middle. Dr. Luc met the craft but since it was completely robotic, there was not even a passenger seat. However, a small compartment aft of the control section looked as though it might hold one person.

Something snapped and the sound echoed in the narrow confines of the old Paris brick-paved street. A portion of the chain-link fence began to bow over in slow motion. The three anandii hung on as it became apparent the entire temporary fence might soon permanently collapse.

Laurie looked to the hovercraft. The hum of its anti-grav lifters increased in pitch and it began to rise. Laurie saw that Luc had attached herself to the craft by gripping handholds intended for

ground mechanics. As the craft rose, it lifted Dr. Luc's spidery form from the ground. The doctor called to her. "I must get the sample to the lab! Another hovercraft is coming for you!"

Laurie shook her head. "Unbelievable," she said. "She's leaving us here."

"Just like you left me."

"Oh Kyle, please, not now."

Another crack sounded out causing both Laurie and Kyle to jump. The fence completed its slow collapse and lay in a tangled heap while the fishmen began to crawl over it. Laurie backed away, glancing upward for help. Kyle followed and told her he thought he might be dying from his wounds. "Help me," he requested.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just prop me up." He looked at the windows in the wall behind. "Let's break through one of these."

"They're too high! We can't reach them."

Kyle looked toward the approaching terror and back to Laurie as he leaned against the wall. Likewise, Laurie took a look, but she did not release him.

They were face to face, both with a good grip on the other. "I have to tell you," said Kyle, "I didn't always hate you, but these last couple of days have shown me a thing or two. For one thing, I hate dying like this, but most of all, I still hate you."