

# *The City Built of Starships*

By *Meredith Sue Willis*

*By the time they arrived, they had already divided themselves into the commanders and the commanded. Those who rebelled fled to the desert. Then, in the quarrelsome way of their race, they too divided into even smaller groups. One woman learned the secret of how to eat in that place and went deeper into the wilderness than any of the others. But she chose silence and told no one but her daughter.*

# In *the* Desert

## One

As long as Espera could remember, her father had come across the desert once during each moderate season to the cavern where she lived with her mother and the yaegers. During the harsh seasons, no one came. Then the wind blew the powdery stone sand into tiny razors, and there were week-long storms when the stone-sand mixed with ice needles. In those seasons, everything in the desert goes underground— things that are fixed, things that creep, and things that fly. It was in one of the great catacombs of the flying yaegers that Espera and her mother Soledad lived.

Espera much preferred the moderate season, when both the blue and the rose suns were in the sky together for a long lavender day. At that time of year, she and her mother could go out in the open and collect lichen and spores and the small radiant creatures they called glowworm. All these were second world natives that thrived in the crevices in the great rock fissures that split the desert land. The only first world creatures they knew were occasional human creatures like themselves.

When they went out foraging, the great yaegers would follow them, and they would share their handfuls of glowworm, which Soledad and Espera needed for heat and light, but which the yaegers appeared to use for pleasure; they bathed their great single eyes in Soledad and Espera's handfuls of radiant worms.

Once when she was small, Espera asked, "Why can't they find their own glowworm?"

And her mother said, "They can. They do. But it's so much easier for us with our little fingers that are like the worms themselves. This is our way of thanking and honoring the yaegers. We are guests in their world, Espera. This is an act of gratitude to them."

In the moderate season Espera and her mother also collected the first world people who came out into the desert searching for glowworm. Some of these were poor hands from the City Built of Starships who had fled their life under the officers. Some came to the desert looking for glowworm, which was highly valued in the City. The first world people were not nourished by second world food, but they had quickly discovered that certain second world substances altered their moods and gave them beautiful dreams.

Espera and her mother collected the bodies of these lost gatherers, keeping alive the ones that they could. Saving human travelers suited Espera's youth and temperament far better than the quiet meditation that filled her mother's days. Espera could scan the horizon for hours, hoping to see human travelers in trouble. It was their duty, taught Espera's mother, to succor the exhausted, heal the wounded, make comfortable the dying, and honor the yaegers and other second world people.

Best of all for Espera were the occasions when her father came.

Everything about Leon – his attenuated figure, his close protective helmet and voluminous cloak, the deep pocks on his left cheek from some long past ice storm – everything bespoke activity. His grim face and flickering eyes disturbed her in an enlivening way that she yearned for in the depths of the winter season.

As she got older and strove for calm and equilibrium as her mother taught, she no longer jumped up and down when she saw him, but she could never keep her lips from stretching into a smile.

And like no other visitor, he disrupted her mother's routine. When he came, everything was overturned. Soledad meditated when she usually would have slept, talked to him when she usually would have meditated. She forgot to give glowworm to the yaegers, and they would wait in the passageway, large presences, five times the size of Espera, their sharp smell filling the air as their long, heavy bodies coiled over the floor and each other, patiently waiting to dip their eyes.

When he was visiting, Espera fell asleep to the sound of her parents' voices, low and urgent, as if they had each, above all, to convince the other of something. Sometimes, as she fell asleep, she would open her eyes one last time on their faces near the box of glowworm, his with its deep penetrating pocks, her mother all large, light eyes. Then she would sink into sleep, hearing their discussion long after her body was at rest.

Her father's voice accumulated its evidence, grouped ideas that led, inexorably, to one point: "We must win back the City Built of Starships and the ships if we are ever to make this lavender world ours."

And her mother's voice, slower, deeper, repetitive and rhythmic: "The lavender world, the second world, is not ours. We are guests here."

"Soledad, where there is no advanced life, we are the advanced life. This place is our destiny."

"The yaegers are sentient."

"Sentient, perhaps, but not human. Why do you think of the yaegers before you think of your own kind, before you think of our mission?"

“Our mission!” cried Soledad loud enough that Espera was startled out of her near-sleep. “What mission? We were sent to this world so long ago that we have no idea what our mission was! Perhaps we were sent here simply because they ran out of room to live on the first world. We no longer know! We have lived here for three generations, and we have only made our lives and perhaps the lives of those who were here before us worse. The best we can do is live quietly, in harmony. With everyone, of whatever world’s lineage. That this is our mission.”

It was strange to Espera, born in this cavern, to think of the yaegers as anything but the companions of her life. She thought of their wings that could never be fully folded, of the bifurcated exoskeletal skull, the complex hemispheric eye, the bony hooks on their bellies that you could use to hitch a ride if the yaeger was willing.

What are they for, she once asked her mother, are the yaegers for us to ride?

They are for themselves, her mother answered: it is not an edifying question.

And her mother said to her father, “The best we can do is to be quiet and cause no harm.”

“How many generations then until we have a right to belong here?” he said.

“Never,” she said. “Among the corrupt people on the coast, most already starve, a few live by the violence of starving the others. This will collapse of its own.”

“It will collapse sooner if we pull out the supports, their false religion and dependence on drugs.”

“You speak of the one forbidden thing.”

“And what is that, Soledad?”

“The one forbidden thing is violence.”

“No,” said Espera’s father. “The one forbidden thing is to fail in our mission.”

The season after that discussion, Soledad refused to see him. Some new arrangement seemed to have been made, as if they had said what they could, and there was no more to say. He arrived one day when her mother was deep in the cave on retreat, and he took Espera out on the stony slope and began to teach her.

He taught her special ways to use glowworm to train the yaegers to respond to hand signals, and how to stop using the glowworm, but to make the yaeger still follow the signals. He gave her meditations for being able to eat even more rarely than she already ate.

“But my mother knows how to—”

He would hear nothing of what her mother had taught her. “This is not the time for your mother’s meditations. This is the time for you to learn what I have to teach you.”

So she didn’t tell him how she and her mother fed themselves. She made herself quiet and receptive, and he taught her how to encapsulate thirst and physical pain

so that it is separate from you and you can continue to do what has to be done. He invited her to ask questions.

“Why are there only two suns and not three or four or five?” she asked. “What is the meaning of life?”

He answered what it pleased him to answer, but all her questions were of equal importance.

“It is our duty to live in the darkness of meaninglessness,” he said. “We make our meanings.”

“Why is it that if I eat a handful of lichen straight from the rock it makes my stomach hurt?”

“Something is twisted,” he said. “They say that the building blocks of life in this second world are a mirror image of the building blocks that developed on the first world, the world of our origin. Someday, when we have created the harmony, we will create a way of eating the plants of the second world.”

She said, “My mother says the yaegers can teach us all these things – ”

“She talks to the yaegers,” he said. “She would rather talk to yaegers than with her own kind.” He said this with a kind of sadness or disapproval that made Espera change the subject.

Espera asked: “Why are we here on this world?”

“They sent us from the first world to create harmony here. They say that during the generations of the voyage, we lost our power. We lost information. We do not know many things.”

“So it is a mystery?”

“There are no mysteries, only a lack of knowledge.”

“What is the harmony?”

“The harmony is what will happen when the Starships belong to all the people. Even during the long voyage the corruption had begun. They gave false value to things. They divided into officers and hands, and they used all the drugs they had on the ships and then used their resources to make more drugs and fill their minds with false visions. They were worshipers of drug-dreams before they arrived.”

“All of them?”

“All but the Pure Ones,” he said. “The ones who became us. The Seers.”

“Who named us the Seers? Why didn’t the people listen? What was it like on the first world? Who named the glowworm and the yaegers?”

“We came through air and no-air,” he said. “We rode in the Starships. Or rather, they say, our ancestors rode, and had children, and their children had children, and after ten generations, the parents of my generation arrived here and found the aboriginal life forms and named them for what they most resembled in their images from the first world. There were small crawling creatures on the

first world who glowed and were called glowworms, thus the glowworms here. The first world had a hunting bird called a yaeger and it was also the name of a man who flew as fast as a bird.”

She said, “Will we fly like the yaegers once we have the harmony? Did they have the harmony in the first world?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “They had harmony and knew the truth. Here we do not have harmony yet, but the Seers have the truth.”

“Do I have the truth?” She was thinking of once or twice when she had told her mother she had not left the roof when in fact she had gone just a little way, for a little ride, clinging to one of the yaegers. But by not touching her feet to the stone sand, she thought she had not broken the Rule.

“When we speak in the service of the harmony, it is the truth.”

He told her many stories of the first world, and stories of the voyage on the Starships. He told her of how when his parents’ generation arrived, they starved and fought one another and died, and there were great battles over few resources. He told her how one group left the coast and came to the desert, calling themselves Seers because they were wise enough to discover how to live with tiny amounts of nourishing first world food. But then the Seers, too, broke apart into a few who called themselves the In-Seekers and only worked for peace within.

“That’s like my mother,” said Espera.

“Yes,” said her father. “But others of us became the seekers after harmony for this whole second world. And meanwhile, on the Coast, the Corrupt Ones, the officers and hands of the Coast,” he said, “ate the poison native foods and used the poison native substances as drugs, and they used first world explosives to make great fires that destroyed one of the starships and killed many of the Seers.”

“So they won the battles?” said Espera.

“Temporarily,” said Leon. “They won for the moment, but we who stayed pure, we will go back soon to make the harmony.”

He liked best to speak of the harmony which grew in her mind like a great silver sun. “We know how to empty our minds and live on air,” he said. “Our clearness and cleanness is our strength. They depend on the twisted corrupt drugs of the second world. But these present generations, yours and mine, will see harmony and truth restored.”

She held her breath: she loved the idea that something would happen. She whispered, “When?”

He said, “Let me teach you more about how to use the glowworm to make a pattern in the yaegers. Just as the corrupt ones, the officers, use the glowworm to make a pattern in their pathetic starving hands, we use the glowworm to pattern the yaeger to do what we want it to. You can make a pattern in it that will cause it to repeat the action you train it to do. I have showed you how to make the yaegers

come and go. Now I will show you how to make the yaegers let you ride on their belly hooks.”

“But they already let me ride. My mother showed me—”

“She has had you for many seasons, Espera. Learn now the lore I have to teach you.”

So Espera didn’t tell him that she had only to press her forehead against the eyeball of a yaeger and ask it politely for whatever she wanted. They never seemed to mind, they would carry her, or carry the hurt travelers back to the cavern.

“Your mother,” he said. “Your mother is the great master of the yaegers, and yet she does what she does for them, not for the mission. Look, when you have given them the glowworm enough times, you need only cup your hand, and the yaeger obeys. Then you open your hand—like this— and the yaeger is free of its duty.”

“When you train the yaegers,” asked Espera, “Do you train them to help lost travelers as we do?”

He said, “Remember this: when there is time and leisure, your mother’s way is best. What we do is to make a world in which we can all be In-Seekers like her.”

Espera was restless the next year. Her body had matured, and she wanted activity. Her mother permitted fewer and fewer questions, and she had more and more. Her mother said the way to truth and harmony is through stillness, not activity. Her mother spent more and more time in Retreat, emptying herself, alone in the smallest dark chamber.

Espera yearned with an intensity she dared not admit for her father's visit, and if not his, then for any stranger, living or dead. Anything that caused a tremor in the perfect stillness, anything better than sameness.

That year, the first of her matured body, her father did not come at all, and Espera even asked her mother once if there had been some change, some denial or refusal. Her mother had been in the meditation chamber for many days; she was weak from little eating, her eyes deep sunken and red. “I know nothing of his business,” she said. “If he comes no more, it is because it does not suit his purposes.”

“He might be dead.”

“Then let us hope he died in a place where he can be returned to the food chain.”

One day at the very end of that year’s bitter season, when it was so close to the shifting of the winds that Espera imagined she smelled the change, she went out onto the roof of their cavern where the great slabs of stone were almost flat. The sky was streaked with pink, but there was still danger of unexpected bursts of wind that could carry you too far down the slope to get back before you lost all heat and

moisture. She was dancing up and down to warm herself and flapping her arms at the yaegers just to make them dip their heads in surprise.

When she saw a dot hovering on the horizon. She squinted, and saw a dot below it as well. It was too early for travelers, and yet, this was surely a traveler, on foot with a slow floating yaeger overhead.

“It is too early,” she thought with a thrill. “How can this person be alive? How can even the yaeger have enough heat?”

She was filled with joy. She didn't care, it was an event, it was a change. She darted below, gathered extra cloaks for herself and for the traveler. She spent a moment with her forehead pressed to the rubbery tough eyeball of the nearest yaeger, to ask its permission to use it as a beast of burden. The yaegers didn't care; they were always willing.

She strapped the cloaks and a bag of glowworm to its belly hooks. With the carrier yaeger and three others who followed of their own volition, she leapt down the stones, ran toward the dots, seizing the belly hooks of the yaeger for a lift across the first wide fissure.

She was sure that the traveler was Leon. No one else would be daring enough. No one else would be strong enough. And even he was not walking firmly: he wavered, he lurched. She was so concentrated on him, that she barely noticed the yaeger that rose high above him on an updraft. The yaegers with her, however, spread out, dipped and tipped as its enormous mass passed above.

He did stop walking when he saw her. He wavered where he stood, holding himself upright and continued forward. He wore a mask of shiny material preserved from the starships, and did not speak, but she was still sure it was her father. Quickly she fastened a harness around him, but he kept leaning forward as if to walk on, and on. She stuffed a bag of glowworm between the harness and his chest. She hardly apologized to the yaegers in her haste, and when one of them didn't seem to want to lift the extra weight, gave it a hand cupping and whistle command that Leon himself had taught her.

His stiff arms and legs gave her no help as she signaled the yaegers, and they lifted and flapped, as yaegers generally disdain to do, but got him off the ground, and Espera herself guided his legs, aware of their dead weight. The wind was down, but she still measured the distance to the cavern entrance with worried eyes, and tried to decide if they should use energy leaping the crevasses or take the long way up the slope.

In the end, she decided to leap, and called the yaegers close to her, this time asking them with her full heart for their indulgence and guidance, and they surged forward all at once, lifting her and the traveler easily over the deep crevasses, carrying them airborne all the way to the cavern.

Overhead, the enormous yaeger who had come with him drifted in perfect dignity, circled the cavern entrance, then dropped to the surface and followed the other yaegers

inside. It was easily the largest she had ever seen, and she noticed that its jaw edges were extraordinarily sharp.

A warrior yaeger, she thought, like my father, who is a warrior man. She pulled back the mask, and it was her father, although almost unrecognizable, his face was so stiff, his dried lips pulled back over his teeth, his body stiffer with each passing instant. The yaegers had tumbled him off at such an angle she was unable to move him.

Frightened, with her own hands clumsy from cold, she shouted for her mother, afraid she would fail him here, just inside the cavern entrance.

Her mother came at once, passing among the ranks of yaegers. Without a word, Soledad lifted him and they made him a bed with all the glowworm boxes gathered around. Soledad told Espera to take the bindings off his hands and feet, to lie near him and use her body to warm him. Espera did as she was told, and lay quiet next to his still body. Up chamber, she could see the warrior yaeger keeping itself at a little distance from the others, watching.

They held her father's head and tried to feed him lichen broth, but his mouth wouldn't chew, his head lolled.

Soledad reached into the nearest glow box and broke a glowworm.

Espera gasped: she had never seen her mother break a glowworm. The yaegers stirred. Her mother tossed the large piece of the glowworm back in its box, and smashed the smaller piece between her hands, crushed and pressed. Then she rubbed her glowing hands on his eyelids.

He seemed to be less stiff immediately. Espera said, "Will the glowworm die?"

Her mother held her orange glowing hands before her. "It should not, if I did not break it too near its center."

His eyes opened, though he did not speak. His face relaxed, and he stirred his body in a natural way and slept.

Espera's mother still held her phosphorescent fingers in front of her, and then sucked them clean, and began striding around the chamber, moving objects, putting things in boxes. She did not go back to the meditation chamber, but gathered bits of moss and lichen that had accumulated over the enclosed season. Espera followed her in silence, in awe, joining in her activity, which went far beyond her own energy. When Espera finally slept, it was to the sound of her mother still housekeeping, cooking, grooming the yaegers, murmuring to herself.

When Espera woke, her father and mother were both awake and sitting at the stone table, alert, their thin faces turned at once toward her as she stirred. They waited for her to rise, to tend to her morning needs, to go into the meditation chamber to empty herself. They did not speak until she had eaten.

Her father did not mention his desperate arrival. He spoke directly to Espera. "We have reached a crossroads," he said. "There is a great opportunity. One has come to us and made an offer."

Her mother turned her face away.

Espera felt the thrill underlying his voice: this moment, this opportunity. She and her mother could rejoin him, he said. Everything past was forgotten. The In-Seekers and the Far-Seers were joining together again. Espera had an opportunity to go and see the coast. The time of harmony and truth was at hand. "One opportunity," he said. "Now."

"One opportunity for one blow?" said Soledad. "One act of violence? One final solution?"

Her father said, "We have been in touch with a very highly placed Corrupt One. This person is a maggot in the heap of corruption, but one who wants to join with us."

"Is this maggot their so-called Only Surviving Oligarch?" asked Soledad. "If not, then you and the maggot must kill their Only Surviving Oligarch."

Leon leaned his face forward, but toward Espera, not toward Soledad. His forehead and the skin over his cheekbones stretched tight, gleaming black, reflecting light from the glow boxes, his lips like something carved out of a great boulder, and his words hissed like the whistle the yaegers make through their blow holes. He said, "There will be no killing, Espera. I promise you. A message must be delivered. Less than a message, a thing presented to a particular one. One thing delivered, and then the harmony will begin." He took a breath, and said, "I have come to ask for Espera's help."

"Mine!" In her heart, Espera began to sing.

Her mother said, "I do not believe that there will be no killing. You have trained yourselves and your yaegers for killing, so there will be killing. Espera cannot be a part of it."

She loved her mother's face, a long oval, everything pulled down, smoothly. Her mother's red rimmed eyes. But at this moment, Espera felt, not that she loved her father's face more, but that she could not hold herself back from his energy, that he was drawing her as a magnet draws ferrous materials, that she could only fasten on to him.

He said gently to Soledad, "If you believed me, if you believed that this message would bring harmony with no killing, would you send her on this mission?"

"If I believed you," said her mother, "I would go myself."

He said, "Do you think I would break the rule of truth, Soledad? Do you think I would lie?"

Soledad turned her face away.

He said to Espera, "Do you believe me?"

She did.

