

Copyright 2001

By Karlene Kubat

QYOO AND ANIMA

By

Karlene Kubat

QYOO

I am keeping this journal so that I won't lose the little-used practice of writing things down for clarification and order. I am a child of disorder, and now that Roggi has fixed the flaws in me I love order, love to write in the sprawling longhand my mother Jurith taught me when I was still slipping in and out of dark dreams. Jurith exists for me in a lovely kind of dream that was my strange reality. Often it summoned red clouds of fury and forgetfulness. I can never forget Jurith as long as I draw breath anywhere in the universe. Without her there is a great emptiness in my life and an ache that never goes away. Now she lies forever sleeping in her carved crystal chamber, beside the vanquished warrior Harquint, and with only a blurred image of her beautiful form for her admirers to view. Her clear voice still rings in my ears. I remember so many of her careful teachings. All my scientist parents on Laom have been my patient teachers.

I am lucky to have been coddled and spoiled a bit by these brilliant minds that have been my family, they who supported Jurith as disciples of a worthy and cherished leader.

When our doctor Roggi fixed me, with my mother's hard-won permission, she gave me rare alloy parts which can be replaced as easily as those of our Laom androids. She told me that I should last a very long time. Even before Roggi freed me from my troubled dream life, I was able to problem-solve with great alacrity. Afterward, my family let me work with them on more exacting tasks, always doing new and creative things with the amazing metal Laomite. This singular, multi-purpose metal has made our famous androids and made our lives. I've taken great delight and refuge in its challenges. Work is play, as I see it.

I write this at the beginning of my journey to my mother's homeland. In just a few hours I will enter time-stretch-sleep so that I may awake at journey's end without having aged in the years the journey takes. I will arrive as an unknown outlander who has been called forth to teach at Laurels, the distinguished academy of my mother. There I will instruct in the many uses of our rare metal Laomite. This is a great honor for one so young. Upon arrival and after formally receiving my warranted degrees, there is a hooding ceremony. I have not been to University but have passed all the equivalent tests. They were child's play.

My mother told me that I was meant for posterity, and perhaps that is another reason I am writing in this journal. Should I not write for others as if it were so? My father told me the same thing, although I never officially met him.

Often I have pestered Roggi about my father, wanting to know exactly when it was that he came and spoke to me. I recall it as if it happened only an hour ago, and yet everyone seems to think I merely dreamed such an occurrence. I know that it really happened. I have a clear image of my father, a noble face I will never forget, so unlike my pale mother whom I closely resemble.

He had startling black eyes that looked deep inside me, and his hair was wild and black with a faint spray of silver at the temples. His cheeks were tan and flat, and his full-lipped mouth played over a range of expressions as he looked into my eyes and filled my head with truths which would perhaps fill volumes. For a long time, I too believed this visit was only a dream, but the more I recall it the more I am certain it was real. No one on Laom could tell me anything about him. I plan to search for evidence of his existence. I cannot remember if my mother ever spoke of him, and by the time I began to look for answers and ask about him she had left me forever. I have a longing for him, too, one that I suppose can never be answered, but I can always recall the words and images which he placed inside my head.

My mother's and father's words have become a kind of directive, a doctrine that lies beneath all my willfulness and to which Pysu says I must always return. Our fatherly geophysicist, Pysu, comes from a small, mineral-rich colony which to this day practices respect for its elders' wisdom with an almost ritual devotion. Pysu can be a prankish comedian, thus I have never tried his patience with my voracious appetite for elaborate tricks and mischief, some of which he himself taught me.

Our botanist, Larstev, taught me everything imaginable about plant life. He also taught us martial arts, he being an expert in the nimble use of his body. When he wasn't in his gardens or the laboratory, he could be found in the gymnasium sparring with one of us. I practiced until no one wanted to spar with me except Larstev, who told me on this day of departure that I am better than he. I believe he was being kind. He did bring forth my love of trees, and I look forward to my first glimpse of the great forest preserve over which Control's government offices are said to tower. Mother used to speak of this and of the river of water which runs through the city like a dark satin ribbon. I made her describe it over and over, just as she saw it from high

above, I believe in her final visit to the Tower offices.

The most difficult test I have undergone is the leave-taking of my family: Nima, our engineer and so much more, and our amazing doctor, Roggi, and Pysu and Larstev and all their children with whom I have grown and worked. Mother once told me that she had great difficulty giving up her birth parents, scientists who had to journey a far distance to do their work. I never fully understood what she meant until my own time of departure came. Now I understand your great loss, Jurith.

I will write no more now. Soon my hour of sleep comes. Years of time are as hours to us, and when next I write here I will be on what most now refer to as the Hustler Planet.

\*\*\*

Hello, little magenta book. I have been on the planet for two weeks and have not had even a minute to write in you, to write on your rough pages made in faraway Laom. My heart is sad with longing for my homeland. This is a very strange place. I look for friends, but there is a coldness in the people. They like to play a great deal, are often frivolous, have not much depth and care nothing for poetry. They talk endlessly of the possibility of war among certain none-too-distant, fractious colonies. Whenever I must speak of this, I tell them that there must be no war. War is an endless and descending road that leads nowhere. This Jurith taught me well. Jurith, Mother Jurith, if only I could walk and talk with you again just one more time.

Upon my arrival, I was met by a welcoming committee from The Academy. They helped me settle into my rooms. Actually, it seems like a very large habitat to me, located in a pod of dwellings called Ammon Shores. This new home is really spacious, modern and well-appointed, but I would prefer a smaller space. Everything is large here. The land stretches on forever. As more and more families move off the crowded planet in search of

suitable employment, the land is being reclaimed as ecological sanctuary. This pleases me very much. The great hordes of people in the city overwhelm me with their fast-paced lives. I hope one day to have time to explore the countryside. Presently, I have been too busy.

I started my classes almost immediately, and I am somewhat disoriented and very tired. They do not seem to understand or care how far I have come. The hooding ceremony I expected has been postponed until a spring holiday break. The head of Laurels Academy is most expedient and very demanding. They want to pick my tired brain clean. Is this the posterity I was meant for, Mother Jurith? I can write no more tonight. I must go to sleep.

\*\*\*

Today I was sitting on a bench in the huge forest preserve not far from Control's Tower when one of the teachers in the Academy, Leona, came along and sat with me to eat her lunch. We have a great deal of weather here, and the sky was full of clouds. I huddled in my brown alpaca coat and bit into an apple.

"I hear you are something of a pacifist," Leona said.

"I'm not really anything with a title," I replied. "I just have opinions about the evils of war."

"There is a pacifist group you might want to join."

"A pacifist group?"

"Yes, there are groups for everything here. It's good to belong to something...it's encouraged, in fact."

"Is that what social life here consists of, then -- groups and causes?"

"I guess so, yes. I never thought about it. You're an odd one, Qyoo."

I didn't answer, took this as an insult. I am getting used to such remarks, but if one more person tells me how quaint, odd, or strange I am, they'll find out that I'm not such a pacifist.

Great black suns! I'm in a foul mood tonight. I have nothing more of interest to report. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!

\*\*\*

Today I went to the department head and asked for more work. More work, more stimulating work, please. I am incredibly bored and not using a fraction of my brain capacity. Most of my students are simpletons with little initiative and even less imagination. The time will come when I will have to sit down and think of a way to escape all this. I also believe my advanced knowledge of Laomite is being used to help implement war among the colonies. The day I learn this for certain my present lifestyle will end.

\*\*\*

Spring break is upon us, and I am going to the hooding ceremony to claim my evidence of proper credentials. What then? What then shall I do?

One of the young men in my class, a student nearly my own age is making eyes at me. How outrageous! I could send him end over end with one neatly placed back heel kick. Instead, I must be tolerant. His father is someone important in government, or so he implies. These are the sorts of games played here on Hustler. Do I sound disenchanting? The word hardly describes my condition.

\*\*\*

Oh, something so strange has happened that I hardly know what to think or how to respond. I feel so anxious and uncertain, sick with a horrible sort of agony I cannot dispel.

At the hooding ceremony, I was surprised to find that much was made of my teaching methods, "brilliant" they were called. Then I was fêted at a reception in Laurels' formal meeting hall.

It was attended by prominent members of government, the foremost being the head of Control. Yes, The Controller. I had no idea there would be such an elite gathering and wore only a simple white wool dress and improper footwear. I had to stand in a line with my colleagues and shake the hands of all the anointed of government as well as Academy alumni. The moment arrived when I lifted my head, extending my hand to The Controller, and found myself staring into familiar black eyes--the eyes of my father.

"Father!" I said in a small, startled voice as my weak knees nearly caused me to stumble and fall.

The Controller merely stared back, stared and stared with those black eyes piercing the very soul of me until I thought I would sink through the floor.

"I'm afraid not," The Controller answered with a completely disingenuous smile. "Unless I misheard you," he went on.

I stammered some inane apology, almost in tears. Then he and his aides left the room.

I can't remember the rest of the evening. All I could see was the face of The Controller. It was the face of my father. The face I have carried in my head since he appeared to me. It was my father. Oh, black suns! It was my father--the imposing, dark-haired man who is head of Control. How can it be? I can't doubt what I know. What will happen to me next? The very thing I dreamed of has come to pass in a frightening manner.

This is vacation time. I have no work to banish my despair, only time, hours of time on my hands. I plan to fly away into the countryside and stay in one of those attractive lake cottages I've seen advertised on my house video. I will carry you with me, comforting journal, and write until my heart is calm.

\*\*\*

Ah, this is more like it. I feel happy here in my cottage by this great pool of water. I wish I never had to return, I who

love work. There are blue-feathered little birds singing in thick white stands of green-budded trees. There are fish in the lake. The waters shimmer in the sun. Nearby is a small glass house with vegetables and fruit inside. This is paradise.

\*\*\*

I expressed my joy of solitude too soon. I no longer know what to think. I have fear again and even more confusion.

As I lay on my blanket on the lake's shore, I heard the sound of rustling grass and sat up, thinking it was my landlord. It was the man I have called my father, The Controller. I could sense his strong emotion as he stood over me, casting a long, dark shadow. Because I was shaking, I was afraid to stand.

"Please understand that I am not your father," he said.

"Who are you?" I asked, not really knowing what I meant by this and hearing the fear in my own voice.

"Don't be afraid of me, Qyoo. Why don't you call me Anima, as your father did."

"But you are--"

"No! I am not your father."

"Why have you come here?"

"Why would I not come? You are so like Jurith I want to call you by her name. I am astonished."

"You knew my mother, but--"

"Oh yes, how I did know your mother, and your father, too."

"I didn't know my father, but he came to me once as if in a dream, and he was...he was..." I could not say it again.

"No. He was not I, Qyoo. I see there is a great deal you do not know. I, on the contrary, know very nearly everything about you and about your mother and about your father. I have not yet decided what I will tell you or when."

"Please, you must...excuse me, can't you tell me everything?"

"I am under no obligation to do so. You, in your innocence, could do me harm, even though I have anticipated your arrival."

"Then it is you...I am in great danger of you, as I feared."

Anima looked at me with much censure in his eyes and said, "I will not harm you, but I'm afraid you must do as I say."

"You have all the power there is. If I can be harmful to you, you will harm me first. I think in a logical way, sir."

"Black suns! Don't call me sir. Call me Anima. I cannot harm you, would never harm you. You are Qyoo."

"The way you say that worries me a great deal," I replied, and there I spoke the truth and trembled at his words.

"I don't want to make you afraid, Jurith's daughter. It is just that you must not be a problem for me. I have too many of those already. As you grow used to me, I will probably tell you some of the things you wish to hear. It would be so much easier if we both had more time."

"I have little, sir...Anima. I have a job at The Academy."

"It was I who brought you to The Academy, little one, but even I did not fully comprehend your effect. Perhaps I've done us harm. From the day I left...from the day I arrived here, I've been without ties in a way that could never be satisfied."

"I think you cared very much for my mother."

"You are bright and quick, as she was."

"I am not my mother. As much as I loved her and wish to emulate her, I am not Jurith."

"No. Or I could hardly have withstood our meeting."

"When I am loved, if ever I am, it will be for myself alone. I have no wish for or thought of it now."

"So it should be, Qyoo, but don't study me so. I continue to insist that I am not your father."

"You are exactly he who spoke to me in my past."

"You will come to know there is a difference, Little One."

"And you will come to know I am not so small."

Anima laughed for the first time, tossing his wind-tousled hair with much delight. I saw with some trepidation that he could take great pleasure in me. He was silent for a moment, staring off in thought and then speaking again.

"My aides are waiting at your gate, which is as far away as I could send them. Invite me in for a cup of tea, Qyoo."

"Please come into my cottage for a cup of tea," I said.

I was nearly mesmerized by the man and this remarkable situation, for here was the most powerful man in all my universe, a man who looked exactly like the remembered image of my father.

We walked side by side up the path to my little haven. Although I am a fraction taller than my mother was, I saw that I was not as tall as this man. He stood in my kitchen and watched me brew the tea. We carried our cups to a room which is here called the living room, a term I remarked on as strange, for are we not alive in all the rooms of our dwellings? Anima was very amused at my estimation.

"You observe with singular opinion, originality," Anima said. "It's always good to look at things in a different way."

"Are you perhaps the twin of my father?" I asked.

"You are relentless, Qyoo. Let us say I am like the twin of your father but I am not your uncle."

"You want to make my brain work and I don't want to," I replied. "I'm on vacation."

"Then stop this line of questioning and accept me as a friend. I am no relative of Jurith's daughter."

"You see me only as a part of my mother."

"How can I help that, Qyoo?"

"I am not my mother, and you are not my father."

"You have spoken the truth, Little One."

"I'm not so little...the brain of me."

"It is only a term of endearment. Please allow me to say it. I have many cares and it gives me a special pleasure."

I stood up and saw that my casual clothes were rumpled from lying so long by the shore. Pulling down the edge of the white shirt I wore over my rough tan slacks, I walked to the large window of my cottage. I stared out at the peaceful lake and said over my shoulder, "I am still very much afraid of you, Anima."

Anima came up behind me, and my body shook as he placed his arm loosely around my waist.

"That sentiment gives me no pleasure, but it will change. You will come to see that I can give you knowledge of yourself, Qyoo. No other can give you this. In ways that go beyond us in many directions, we really have much to give each other."

I turned around and fell into relentless black eyes, eyes quite unafraid of holding onto my gaze or of openly studying me.

"You walk with bare feet. You cannot know the pleasure this display of freedom gives me. Now look into my eyes, Qyoo."

I did so with apprehension.

"Do not ask me again if I am your father. Do not tell me I am. I am no relative of yours. Do you accept that?"

"Yes," I answered, and vaguely knew that a powerful sort of magician had forever altered me in ways yet undiscovered.

\*\*\*

For a month I have feared to write anything here. When I read what I have written, I tremble with fear. I have not heard anything from The Controller, from Anima. I heard, or saw on video, that he had gone out to stop a war between two near colonies. It involved pirated goods. According to the news, he did stop the war. His must be a very trying job, for they say he will countenance no war and one is always in the offing in some quadrant of The Federation.

I am writing today because I am angry again. My amorous student, now passed on to another level, came to me as I dined alone in a small restaurant near my dwelling. He sat down at my

table and began to speak of his father's work in government, a mid-level financial officer who, he says, has the ear of Control. I did not laugh in his face as I thought of doing. He is cocky and so comely it sickens me, a narcissist who expects me to slaver over his beauty. His name is Weller. I went on eating as if he were no more than an empty chair at my table. "Pass the salt, please," I said when he finished speaking. His ego languished, and he left to stare at me from across the room. I read him easily. He thinks that I should be in awe of him because his father has connections. He followed me home and now knows where I live. What a nuisance. I wonder why he has fastened his attention on me. I'm not so easy to love or even like. Leona says I am truly strange. "Why do you bother with me, then?" I asked her. "I'm absolutely fascinated," she replied. "You're a real diversion from the humdrum," she added. Her insults I take as honesty. I cannot help but like her.

I have joined a pacifist group for want of entertainment. They told me they like to annoy Control with taunts of the government's warlike conduct--some irony here. "Why do you not approach the perpetrators instead?" I asked. "They would dispose of us in short order," came the answer. I mean to change the aims of this ineffectual little group. They need some courage to put into play their convictions. We can work ourselves into very sophisticated mediators for peace by constant confrontation and the right language. I have suggested a shuttle to the next conflict. When they actually began to listen to me, some of the group fled. Good. Now we have a serious, viable force. It will take a lot of work. We must become recognized as useful.

\*\*\*

Yesterday when I returned home, two of Control's aides were waiting at my door. They were instructed to bring me to The

Tower. I made them wait while I attempted to shower the fatigue and angst from my flesh and bones. The angst remained. I dressed in a long, pale blue robe with a high collar split at the throat, and a light cape as the spring nights are cool.

I have let my hair grow long since Roggi's surgery. Jurith called me a towhead. "My little towhead mirror image," she teased me. Jurith, Roggi, how I miss you, how I grieve. No, I can't think of it. Too much pain. My loneliness for the minds I loved is terrible to bear. It turns me into a whining child.

As I rode up in the elevator beside the aides, I thought of Jurith. Once she was here, here in the same intimidating place. The thought was too much to contain.

"You are sad," Anima said when he saw my face. "But very lovely in your sadness. Take off your cape and come here to me."

I handed the cape to an aide, taking my time and looking with careful side glances at Anima. His tall, well-formed body was clothed in black skin pants and an official black tunic of fine-woven wool. On his feet were black, simply tooled leather boots. His gold telewrist gleamed and flashed as he ran impatient fingers through waves of thick black hair.

After the aide had closed the door on us, Anima beckoned me to a pillowy squab beside his chair. When I was seated there, he began to massage my neck and back.

"You are very tense and tired, Little One."

"Tired of uselessness," I said.

"I'm very sorry that you can't engage your prodigious mind and abilities to better effect, Qyoo. You and I have a lot of impatience in that regard."

"How do you know about me, know all these things?" I asked, thinking that he even knew just how I wanted to be touched.

"Come, we will have supper. I've found a wine you will like: champagne to make your eyes sparkle."

"I don't drink beverages that alter my mind."

Anima laughed at my ascetic manner and said, "You will drink this, or the ancient bottle will shatter with indignation."

We sat at an intimate round table, arranged in the same wood-paneled room. It was a meal of cleverly prepared vegetables and fruit, for Anima seemed to know that I eat no meat.

"The food is delicious."

"Yes. Drink your champagne."

I lifted my glass and quickly drank it all down."

"No!" Anima exclaimed with laughter. "Champagne must be sipped slowly. He filled my glass again and I tried his method but preferred my own.

"I must bite my tongue to keep from calling you Jurith, and yet...wait a minute, don't become angry. You are very much your own person, Qyoo. I will learn to say Qyoo with the same loving voice."

"I'm glad you loved my mother. I wonder if you will ever tell me how all that came to be. I'm afraid to think of it."

"And that is why I won't speak. First, come to know me. There is time for the rest."

We sat by a half open fire, and Anima spoke of the war he had ended. I was surprised to find that he would share these matters with me. He treated me as an equal whose input he valued. This pleased me and made me cherish his voice. You are not my father, I kept reminding myself. You are not my father or any relative of mine. It seemed important to remember this.

Anima sent me home from our talk late that night. I was much becalmed but soon began to feel a deep excitement. I attributed that to the satisfying manner of my new friend, to a future that promised intelligent communication for which I so often hungered. Now I had something to look forward to, for Anima had promised to send for me again.

\*\*\*

I have waited, but Control has forgotten about me. I attend peace meetings and try to elude the ever-present Weller.

\*\*\*

Damnation! Yesterday, Weller waited outside my classroom and followed me home. This tall, blond god has finally gone too far. He announced that he wishes to become my legal mate and seek permission to father my child.

"You are an idiot!" I said. "Why do you waste your time on me? Surely, there is something better you could be doing."

"There's nothing better. I've chosen you, doctor. Shouldn't I be praised for my discernment? There is no one else like you. I know that you are alone, that you have no serious interest in any other person. If I obtain permission to father a child with you, think what we could produce."

"You are a superficial being at best, Weller. I find nothing likeable about you, not your huge ego and certainly not your appearance, which I find highly annoying."

Weller reached out for me. Perhaps he anticipated a loving embrace. He quickly found himself flat on his back on the ground.

"Don't get up until I've gone inside," I warned. "If you do, it will only incite a similar action."

"I'm not in the least deterred!" Weller shouted from his prone position.

"At your own peril," I responded and slammed my door.

I walked into my kitchen and was handed a cup of tea by Anima. I was so shocked I almost dropped the cup.

"Sorry I have to slip in and out of your life without much warning, Qyoo. Do you want some help with that fellow?"

Anima was smiling--I presumed at having witnessed my emphatic treatment of Weller.

"You've handled it very well up to now, but he is making your life miserable."

"I can't understand why he's fixed on me. I've never given him the least encouragement. He seems to thrive on my anger and revulsion."

"His father is as obsequious as his son is overbearing. I could send the entire family to a colony."

"Because of me? No, I don't want to adversely affect anyone's life that way."

"You will suffer for your honor, Little One. Let me do it. I'm tired of the lot of them. The mother is a terrible gossip. Unfortunately, they are no worse or better than various other ranks of government employees. Ah, I would do better to send myself to another place in the universe! Forgive this private complaint. I do this tedious work for...for others than myself."

"I've missed you, Anima, missed our talks."

"Your bags have been packed, Qyoo. You are coming away with me for your leisure this week. Yes?"

Anima stood before me, casually dressed in another set of black clothes: a high-necked shirt, skin pants, a shiny, heavy navigator's jacket, and elegant boots. He was sporting a broad white smile, and I saw how eager he was to be off.

I frowned and said, "Oh, I'm sorry I can't go with you. I have to oversee a meeting."

"A troublesome pacifist meeting. Where are you going with that? I foresee problems there. They were harmless enough until you joined their ranks. Now they've employed enough excellence and cunning to become much more than an ongoing nuisance."

"No, we'll be a great help to you," I assured him.

"I think not. I have a large conscription of uniforms which is quite enough help. At any rate, you are coming with me. The meeting has been cancelled.

"You are so thorough that it frightens me, Anima."

I stood in silence, draining my cup while he spoke.

"Around me is a large staff which assures thoroughness. And where you are concerned it's a necessity. Hurry now. Time is wasting. Put on your coat. Weller has been removed."

"You could spoil me...possibly to my detriment."

"I will spoil you only to your satisfaction," Anima said as he sealed my coat with a single deft hand.

"What? You are flying us somewhere?" I said with surprise when we entered Control's shuttle and Anima settled in the pilot's seat.

"Unfortunately, we must have escorts," Anima said, motioning toward the two ships taking off behind us.

"Where are we going?"

"A surprise. Wait and see."

"The entire planet is a surprise to me. I've seen little of it in my drone's existence."

"That must be changed. You're far too valuable to waste on small tasks. This planet is poorly equipped for the satisfaction of one such as you, Qyoo," Anima teased.

"And perhaps you, too, Anima."

"I am inured and generally too busy to notice what it lacks," he answered.

We flew to a startling region of remote land which I liked very much, a place called Wierlfoss which contains a luxurious retreat belonging to Control: Black Hall.

While aides installed us in our rooms, we walked out among great flat pools of water that fell in upon themselves with a wild roar of noise. In the center of all this the light reflected up from a glowing declivity holding translucent clouds. After a long walk, we settled ourselves on mossy rocks and sat for awhile in silence.

My feelings were very close to the surface in that place, at once tender, focused, and alive. "My head is in a strange

turmoil," I shouted over the water's cacophony.

"Take several deep breaths. Think of nothing but your environment, the way the air thickens with gold mist," Anima advised. "Your mother and father were here together. This is an unchanging place."

My head flew back in astonishment, and I prepared to get down off my mossy rock, but Anima took hold of my shoulder.

"Please be at peace, Little One. Is it not good to exist for awhile in what is nearly changeless?"

As he rubbed my neck and held my hand, I felt myself sliding into a soothing, transfixed state, a peacefulness which was the first I had felt in some time. I laid my head on his shoulder and felt his dark eyes traveling over my face.

"You no longer flinch when I touch you, and you now breath when my eyes are upon you. That is some progress. One day you will not fear me at all."

"I don't think that will ever happen. There is too great a disparity, too much that is unknown, too much--"

"No more. Let's go in and have supper. You are cold."

A sweet-faced female android served us supper in a small study just off what I presumed to be Anima's other rooms.

"Will you have an oyster?" Anima coaxed.

"I don't eat anything that is sentient," I said.

"At this point the oyster won't mind," Anima promised.

"No thank you," I insisted.

"Drink your champagne. It came from some far place hundreds of years ago, and you are its destiny."

I drank too fast and gasped while Anima laughed at me.

"Now open your mouth."

I did so and Anima slipped an oyster into my mouth and kissed me on the lips. I swallowed quickly and stood up to flee to my room, but had forgotten the direction and instead ran out onto the balcony and leaned on the stone parapet, feeling dizzy.

"If you are going to remain out here I'll get your coat," Anima said at my back.

"Why did you do that?" I said, staring into the black night.

"I knew you would swallow the oyster. Ah, and I wanted to. It should be done. Have you never been kissed that way?"

"By my father," I said. "I remember it very well. It felt something like your kiss."

"And now we've come full circle. Do you want more denial from me?"

"No, you aren't my father. But there is something I don't quite know...something--"

"Come inside. I think you need to sleep now. Your rooms are just outside the far tall doors and to the left. If you need anything call one of the servants. If you happen to need me I'll be next door in my rooms. Good night, Qyoo."

"Good night," I said, feeling dispossessed and very alone.

I awoke from a startling dream in the early morning hours. My father had been speaking to me. I saw his agitated face but could not understand his words. I was crying. This is ridiculous, I thought, to find myself crying like a baby. "You are a professor at Jurith's Academy," I reminded myself. I put on my robe and went into the hall. Anima's door was slightly ajar, and I walked into his room. I saw in a small, pale glow-lamp how his dark head was turned away on the pillow.

"How can you just come away from your work, all the demands of your position...how can you just come away with me like this? It seems strange to me," I heard my troubled voice announce.

"Hmm...what? What in the wilds of Hustler! Oh, it's you. Why are you here?" Anima said, rolling over on his back and staring at me. He was then fully awake. "What Qyoo?" There was silence. "Can't you tell me what you want?"

"I don't know. I was dreaming. Or am I dreaming now? I hardly know. I had very definite ideas, very different plans.

Now there is this uneasiness. It isn't like me to be so uncertain, so fearful. I don't know what I wanted. Something. What? Please...I think I should go back to Ammon Shores."

"Ammon Shores. How ironic that is, Little One. If only you knew how ironic."

"I don't understand. Shouldn't you make me go? Why am I--"

"No. You have come to me, awakened me. I understand what it is that you want. Come here, Qyoo."

"I can't. I want to but I can't move. Come to me."

Anima threw the covers aside and came to me. The light of one moon shone on his naked body. Again, I felt fear of him.

"You are shaking. Come, I will fix that."

He picked me up so easily. I thought of my own agility, so useless with the ungovernable trembling of my body. He took away my robe and gown, and I buried my head against his chest.

"No. You are Qyoo, sweet Qyoo. You are beautiful and intelligent. There is no shame or fear for one such as you."

"I have never been this way with anyone, not ever."

"I know that, Qyoo. I don't want to hurt you, even a little. I only want to give you pleasure."

His body was warm. I held onto him, wanting and not wanting, filled with desire and terror, all of which he knew. I could not escape from those very dark eyes shining in a pale light as his mouth covered mine. I could not move away from his body, only ever more deeply into him until I thought I had always existed inside of Anima and he had always existed inside of me.

When I awoke with a jolt and sat up, he awoke and sat up beside me, his eyes holding onto me. I could not look away.

"You will feel no pain, no shame, Qyoo. You are beautiful and bright all the way deep inside. I love to have you with me. You will be my greatest pleasure. I hope to be yours."

"How can I believe that? You must have had many women."

"Please! That is nothing. It has nothing to do with you,

Little One. There is no other Qyoo."

"And no other Anima."

"No other," Anima said, laughing. "I am your sine qua non."

A wildness seized me and I pulled away from him, grabbed my robe, and rushed out of the room. He found me leaning over my own balcony in the cold morning air.

"Why did you leave me?" he asked, standing behind me. His hands came around my waist, and my wrists began to ache.

"I felt too much," I said. "I've never felt so. It's hard to stay still in one place and contain all of that."

He kissed my neck, and I turned around in his arms and was carried back to bed.

"Have I learned how to please you?" I asked after awhile.

"You have pleased me without the need of learning anything," Anima said.

"I think you do martial arts," I said for no explainable reason, except perhaps my thoughts of his graceful agility.

Anima looked at me and smiled, as if he expected me to attempt some aggressive action.

"Yes, Little One. Your father was a warrior. And he gave me something else...a high-defense shield I can activate."

"Have you ever?"

"Ah, yes...unfortunately. Actually, it was developed by your grandfather, Javan, on the science station MACRA."

"My grandfather? Show me this invention."

"Absolutely not. It changes my nature. Let us make love not war, my sweet Qyoo."

He kissed me, and again I could think of nothing else.

"What is this I feel, Anima?" I asked. My heart ached.

"You must decide," he answered, and lay with his arm over his eyes until I felt an overpowering need to hear his voice.

"It's all right," I said. "I understand that you think of me as Jurith."

"No! I can think of you only as Qyoo, my short past and long future. It is you I want now...no more my beloved Jurith."

My heart soared too high to return with ease.

Anima stayed with me as long as he could but was called away before he intended to go. I left, too, although he wanted me to stay and rest. He told me he had plans, but revealed nothing more to me, and I have not seen him for several weeks. I had been so happy that I was laid very low by his absence. After awhile, I swore that I would not become dependent upon someone as personally unreliable as The Controller must be. I knew that he had many concerns, but reasoning had little to do with my dismay.

The pacifists asked me to mediate a dispute over water rights which was escalating into a sort of war. I had to take a shuttle out to the colony of Pearl, near the prison colony of Retriba. Retriba can be dangerous because the entire place is mostly run by prisoners at various levels of freedom and authority. But it does have a powerful android warden. Pearl Colony trades water with Retriba for prison-grown produce, and they have sometimes withheld their water when they are not happy with the produce. I intended to shuttle from Pearl to Retriba to talk to the produce growers. Pearl accused them of saving the best produce for themselves and had once again cut their water supply. The produce growers had taken a Pearl waterman hostage and threatened to kill him. Technically, I was not supposed to be on Retriba, but my appearance was to show both good faith and my seriousness in helping to work out a solution.

"Why do you think Pearl Colony deserves inferior produce?" was my first question when I arrived.

The produce representative was a crude buffoon with a sharp tongue, but his effort was motivated by a reasonable cause.

"Why do you think, mediator? Should they have good produce when we don't get enough water to grow it?"

"Do you think your situation will improve by taking a

hostage? I've seen the waterman and he's been beaten. What good will can you expect to come from this?"

"Maybe if we take you hostage we'll have faster results," the produce rep threatened.

"Take me then if you think it will improve anything," I quickly offered, "but let the injured man go."

"A few days here and you won't be so willing," the produce rep warned. Life here ain't so cozy as your nice purchase on Hustler."

"I'm here for results. You want more water and Pearl wants better produce. Can a hostage fix that?"

"Maybe. It got you here."

"If you get more water will the produce for Pearl improve?"

"Sure it will. They know that."

"Let the man go and I'll see that you have more water."

"Why should we trust you?"

"Because I'm here. No one ordered me to come here. I came to get you more water and that's how you'll get it, by good faith. As soon as I leave here with the hostage, I'll go directly to Pearl and see that more water is supplied. But I expect you to send your best produce to Pearl in return."

"What've we got to lose? If it doesn't work out we'll do this all over again, and the next time the waterman is dead."

"Don't make threats. That's no solution. Just do what you're supposed to do, and I'll see to the rest."

"Ain't seen nothin' like you around here, ma'am. What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say because I'm not supposed to be here. Just call me The Mediator, and when I'm called expect results."

That did it, and I left with the waterman in a hurry, before the produce rep changed his mind. The beaten waterman needed medical attention, some of which I saw to on the way to Pearl. On Pearl, my job was much more difficult. I had to argue with

the leader of an angry mob of watermen.

"Try it," I advised. "Give them the required water and see if your produce improves. It will take awhile. Give it a chance."

They finally agreed and even thanked me for the return of the injured waterman. Before he was led away, the hostage kissed my hand and also asked my name. I smiled and said, "Just call me The Mediator, and when you call me expect results."

I laughed all the way home, when I wasn't sleeping. My weekly leisure period was gone and I had to rise early and teach a large class, half of whom didn't want to be there.

My pacifist friends were drunk with success and let slip that they had provided the mediator who got the hostage freed. I asked them not to release my name, and believed I was successful in this until the news media came knocking on my door. I sent them away with a terse comment, and the next knock was from Control. Indeed, it was Control Security and not Anima who knocked on my door. I was hauled into Security and questioned in a room filled with blinding sensor lights.

"Unauthorized visits to Retribe are not permitted," the security agent repeated for the tenth time at two o'clock in the morning.

I was sweating and tired.

"I got the hostage freed, and I think resolved the problem," I also repeated for the tenth time.

The angered security agent then grabbed me by the arm, apparently deciding on a more persuasive method of interrogation.

"You were not authorized."

"Were you? No one was doing anything," I said, rubbing my arm and telling myself I should have remained silent.

"Take her to lockup," the agent ordered just as all the lights went out.

In the corner of the room near a small glow-lamp, I saw that

The Controller had entered the room.

"Out!" he ordered, and everyone scattered. "Come," he said to me. He was wearing rough sparring clothes.

I followed him out of the building and into his shuttle. He sat beside me without a word and I thought his aide would deliver me to my home, but we rose up and flew to The Tower landing pad. I was tired and followed along, hardly noticing where I would end up. It was his private sleeping quarters. I had never been there.

"Are you going to do a lot of this sort of thing?" he finally asked. I saw that he too was tired, and annoyed.

"Whenever it's needed and no one else does anything, I suppose I will," I answered.

"Qyoo?"

"Why did you bring me here? I haven't seen you... I thought you were through with me."

"Qyoo? Black suns!" he said, and came toward me in a great fury, reaching out his arms.

"No!" I cried. "No! No! I don't want you! I don't want you!"

"Yes, you do! Yes, you do."

He grabbed my flaying hands with incredible agility. I gave up. His strength was unusual, and I had no desire for combat, knowing I could not win, but my silent rage remained.

"Retriba! That hell hole! What if something had happened to you? Black suns! How can you be so naïve?"

"I laughed all the way home."

"That is sheer stupidity, and you are not stupid."

"Oh, of course not. I am for posterity, my mother said. I offered myself in exchange for the hostage, and the produce rep turned me down. I laughed all the way home. So you don't have to worry. Apparently I couldn't even be a hostage. I'm tired."

Anima said nothing, only drew me along to his huge bed and

left me there to toss myself into sleep.

I arose in the middle of the afternoon and found myself still alone. I wonder how I get out of here, I thought. I had disgraced myself again. I was thinking my emotions are too extreme. I thought Roggi fixed that. What would Anima say if he knew I had a bionic Laomite alloy in my bionic brain? Bionic parts? Maybe he does know. He seems to know everything.

I did my ablutions in Control's white marble bathroom, dressed, and went into the next room--the room I'd had supper in with Anima under such pleasant circumstances. The table was laid and well stocked with appealing edibles. I wasn't hungry but picked up a pear and stuck it in my pocket for later. I walked through the door and into the hall where an aide was standing.

"I need to get to The Academy," I said.

"Yes, of course, doctor," the aide replied right on cue.

"Well?" I said.

"Yes, of course, please wait inside."

I went back into the sitting room and paced up and down before the large windows.

Eventually, Anima came into the room. I knew it without turning around.

"How do I get out of here?" I asked. I had tears in my eyes and hated this, continuing to look out the window, down on the green park, the dark river. Where had Jurith been standing when she looked down on the same place?

"I'm sorry, Qyoo. I've been...detained."

"Of course, and I'm sorry I've been such a disappointment to you. I just need to get to The Academy."

"Turn around, please, Qyoo."

I turned slowly, and the dark eyes bored into me once again.

"Don't you know that I will never be through with you? Haven't you come to realize that by this time, Qyoo?"

"I don't know what that means."

"Yes, you do. You are logical and quick-witted and you know exactly what it means."

"I don't know if I want to know."

"The time has come to talk to you, but this cannot be that time because I have none. I must go and so must you, but I will send for you."

"Don't send for me."

"I will send for you, and here is something to think about until we meet again: I want you, exactly you, no dream, no likeness. You. I want you with me. You are like a wild bird and I don't want to cage you, only to have you with me."

I began to weep.

"Your emotions will even out a little more. Your chemistry is still adjusting," Anima said as if he knew everything, and surely he did.

He held me in his arms for a long moment, then kissed the top of my confused head and said as he left the room, "Practice mastery of self. In awhile I will tell you the truth and hope we can withstand it."

\*\*\*

My students have heard of the hostage incident, and are staring at me without receiving even the most salient points of the lecture. They are trying to make up their unchallenged minds. I'm certain The Academy frowns upon my extracurricular activities. I'm even more certain that few of my students care very much about hostages or me. Except, of course, for my former student, Weller. He is still obsessing, although now somewhat reticent after having been snatched from my door by Control Security. He begins to suspect that perhaps my associations are more useful than those of his family. This he finds encouraging. He is an opportunist and very pragmatic.

\*\*\*

A troubling incident occurred during my last leisure days. I and three other pacifists were protesting the shipment of weapons to Karak. That agricultural community of my ancestors has long been peaceful, and they have no need of a stockpile which aids and incites fomentation. We were blocking the freight shuttle's loading dock in a very orderly fashion when Security arrested us, that is they arrested three of us.

"You and you and you are going to cool your heels in lockup for a few days," the agent said, singling out my compatriots.

"And why not me?" I asked.

"Because we know who you are, doctor. You will not be touched in your lifetime here or in any other place The Federation roams. They who touch you, whether intentionally or accidentally, go straight to Retriba."

"What?" I said, blushing with embarrassment before my pacifist friends. "I know nothing of this."

"Well, now you do," the agent said. "We'd be willing to let the others go if you will leave with them immediately."

"Come on," I said to my friends. "We'll accomplish nothing here."

We retreated in silence. I knew Anima had done this, and I felt ashamed. It was a tidy method of never having to come and save my neck. But I had never asked to have my neck saved.

"How did that happen?" Rone, one of the pacifists asked on our way home.

I fumbled about and muttered an answer of half truth. "I think it was an old friend of my mother...a debt of kindness paid with my protection."

\*\*\*

Weller told me today, when he insinuated himself into my lunch hour, that he is going through channels to become my legal

mate. I asked if he was any good at martial arts, jumped at him, and he hurried away. He has extremely narrow brain function. I've recommended clinical analysis. A bevy of young female students now follow him about like imprinted baby chicks.

\*\*\*

What am I doing with my life? I sometimes feel that I am living in an ancient asylum for the demented. I am a drone. I am incredibly bored. Am I losing my mind or is there too much of it? I miss Anima, our wonderful conversations which held such reason and meaning...the way he touches me. I think I am ruined by this man who has shown me how much more there is that I cannot access. His dry humor, his wisdom, his brilliance. He has often reminded me of my mother and the little I know of my father, but he is also very different. Who is he? I am afraid to think very deeply about the answer.

Anima asked me to practice mastery of self in order to withstand the things he would reveal to me. Instead, I have become more unstable. I must stop this. There is a strong intuition that I will need every measure of the self-control that he has recommended. I will do this. I will do this. I will exercise, take long walks, breathe and think. He will find me a different person, able to face whatever powerful truth is hurled at me. I will do this. I am Qyoo. I am Jurith's daughter, Qyoo, and must never disgrace my family.

\*\*\*

In the middle of the night an aide came to my door, helped me pack, and took me to a shuttle to be piloted by Anima. I waited in the co-pilot's seat. Perhaps he would ask me to fly. I often did so on Laom, out to the Blueboy Mine or sailing across the crude with Nima shouting at me. I began to recall those days and fell into such a drowsy reverie that I only snapped to

attention when Anima had settled into his seat. We took off with no more than a soft hello on our tongues, once again followed by Security escorts. I was not asked to fly.

We landed on a bluff above the sea near a neat white stone house that very much resembled a tidy old castle. It was surrounded by a high wall, the inside filled with masses of growing things which I could more readily smell than see in the soft artificial light. I inhaled salt air mingled with the fragrant nectar of lush blooms.

Anima and his porter took me to a sparse bedroom, a lovely place done in blond wood and simple neutral linens. The uncluttered walls were hung with a few good landscape paintings.

"Ah, this is very much to my liking," I said, "I've never cared for the clutter of busy, fancy rooms."

"Of course not," Anima said, "You are a Laom native.

"Now finish the sleep I've stolen from you, and I'll see you in the morning, Qyoo."

"But where will you be?"

"In the next room, Little One, but you need sleep more than you need me now."

He was right as usual. He kissed me on my forehead and left. I soon fell into the soft feathery bed and drifted into a heavenly place, so content.

Breakfast was late, a huge bowl of fresh fruits and tea with honey. I did not encounter Anima until I walked into the garden, still in my long white robe. I was nibbling on a sweet gold pear when I spotted Anima giving instructions for privacy as if he intended to work. I wondered if he would talk to me. He turned around and spoke with his strange prescience.

"I am here just for you."

We sat down together on a huge, tufted, cream linen couch placed beneath an awning. Anima smiled at me as I finished my pear, then took the core in his hand and laid it on a bare plate.

"You look healthy enough. You have followed my advice."

"Yes," I answered.

He took my hand and looked at it and said, "You will go through many moods and changes here, Qyoo, but you must promise above all else not to leave me until I finish. Do you promise?"

"Of course."

"You must further swear never to reveal anything you learn here to anyone ever. Do you swear on your life?"

"I do."

"You are a little high now and I wish you could remain so, but you will not. Again, do you promise not to run away from me?"

My heart leapt with a small tremor of fear, but I said, "I'm a responsible adult, not a child. I will, of course, stay here until you are finished."

"Please keep that promise clearly before you."

"Do you remember that I told you it was I who had you brought to this planet?"

"Yes. I thought you meant only that you had asked for a specialist in Laomite."

"Oh, no. I asked for you to be sent here, Qyoo, and I did so before I left Laom."

"What? But you were never on--"

"Sh...sh. Don't argue with me. Just listen and you will learn a great deal. Remember it is all true. I intend nothing less than complete honesty."

"At the time, I wanted anything of Jurith I could have. Jurith was gone, killed by your father and--"

"No!"

"Listen! Listen to me. It is difficult. I will have to go back and forth in time. I wanted everything of Jurith, and you were that everything. Yes, I wanted you because you were born of Jurith and looked like her, and Roggi had fixed you."

"You knew all this! You--"

"I had seen Roggi many times in those short nights, seen them all working in their laboratories. They never saw me, only Jurith, who was my...

"Look at me, Qyoo. Do you not know what I am going to say? You know, don't you? But your brain refuses to work at it. Look at me and think for a minute what the Queen of Juroids was doing with me."

"You...you...you...oh!" I swallowed hard and stood up and felt my knees crumpling. "You are--"

"Sit! You have promised."

I sat down but my heart was leaping out of my chest. "Yes, I have known somewhere in my mind, haven't I? I have known," I whispered. Then I cried out, "My mother told me I must never--"

"Your mother was wrong! You have been brought up to believe your mother was all truth, all-knowing. Your mother was wrong. Her creation outstripped her understanding of him, and she was proud of that but she was also afraid. Her great longing fired her genius, and she made what she wanted then spurned me in fear. I frightened that amazing woman and it pained me sorely. I am far evolved from what I was then. I have grown my capabilities exponentially, in every way. Jurith would appreciate that, but she would probably still be afraid. It is the kind of prejudice that should not be in the repertoire of a pacifist."

"You...you shame me, sir, but it is something ingrained--"

"Then get it out of you! And don't call me sir! It is beneath us both and a blatant insult. Look at me! I am the same person who satisfied you in my bed at Wierlfoss. You came to me, awoke me from sleep and wanted me. Sit! Are you not a self-proclaimed responsible adult who will hear me out to the end?"

"Yes," I said, and began to shake, the terrible black eyes holding onto me with a force I could never have imagined. How I surprised myself, hated my once smug self. I sat shaking with

terror and grief and rage, fiercely hanging onto the absolute truth of Jurith.

"It was Ammon who began to change me."

"You are called Ammon."

"Ammon was your father. Your father was The Controller. Your father was me but I am not your father. Your father was Harquint."

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" I heard myself screaming. "Oh, stop, Anima! I am losing my mind."

"Let me hold you until you are calm."

"No!"

"At first, yes, I thought of you only as a part of Jurith. All that is gone now. You are Qyoo, very much Qyoo. An independent being like no other, but we share some of the same interior. You are bright and wonderful and fearless, and I care very much for you, Little One. Think how many things we share. You are a part of me, linked to all that is meaningful to us."

"My whole life I have idolized my mother," I said.

"Your mother was wrong, and she knew it. It was the one fear she could never conquer. You can. You already have without even realizing it."

"I didn't even know that you...that you could feel so much."

"Then you insult your mother's great genius. I am not ashamed of my creator, she who ended by asking me to teach her. How much I have learned since that request. You know that I am far beyond you in capability, far beyond even your prodigious brain, Qyoo."

I shook my head in agreement and said in a spiritless yet awe-struck voice, "Tell me of Ammon and Harquint."

"Ammon was your mother's psychiatrist/teacher when she was a young captain with all her doctorates. She was preparing to make her long journey to find, to create Laom. Ammon fell in love with her and they accidentally made you. When your mother left,

he grieved and followed her off the planet, out into the universe as a rogue Controller, Condor, who became Harquint when he began a war with Laom to tease your mother back into his life. In the long years before he returned to her, your mother fell into a depression and made her own Ammon in the likeness of her lover. A super-android like no other of her creations. That was the beginning of me. I was mostly Jurith until I left your mother in sadness for her fear of me. I went to see Ammon, a great prescient genius who informed my intelligence mightily. Still, with all that, I was nothing of what I am now.

"When Harquint came down to see Jurith, she discovered that he was Ammon and fell once again under his powerful sway. Mistakes were made unbefitting such intelligence. In their deep thrall of one another they grew careless. The door of Jurith's crystal was left unlocked. The half-mad, Jurith-obsessed metallurgist, Ezzlin, entered, picked up Ammon's weapon and fired upon Ammon, then seeing Jurith's grief, Ezzlin killed himself. Ammon was dying. At that point he spoke to his crew high above Laom, and to me in his flagship. He told me what he wanted me to do. According to Roggi, Jurith gave Ammon the weapon to finish her. They could then die together as Jurith and Harquint while I went on to assume the head of Control. Before I left, I asked for you, the wisest thing I have ever done."

"No! Too amazing! Poor Jurith! Strange that I am Qyoo."

"Ah, your father's given name was Quithran, the letters of Harquint. Your mother knew Doctor Ammon only as Q. Ammon, until he returned to her, and you had already been named Qyoo."

"How astounding this all is, how strange. Oh, you should have left me on Laom. Perhaps I should go back."

"And do what?"

"Work and work and work, as Jurith did."

"Do you want to be Jurith?"

"No, I can never be Jurith."

"Nor can I be Jurith or Ammon. We must be ourselves. I have been so for a long time. But even in all my busyness I have often been lonely, but for one who could understand: you, Qyoo."

"Is that the end of the story?"

"The end of their story."

"Then it will be all right for me to go now."

Anima looked at me a long time, and I saw his eyes close a moment, just as his face closed over any expression.

"Yes, you can go. I thought you had enough of your father in you to overcome Jurith's flaw but, no, you are not yet the adult you claim to be. If you go away from me forever, the part of me that has become you will die."

"I cannot bear such a burden, Anima."

"It is mine alone to bear," he said, and left me in the garden.

\*\*\*

I did not return to Laom. I have taught and drifted and grieved. I'm certain Anima knew that I was angry at him for deceiving me. I cannot really decide if it can even be called deception, since he always intended to tell me. He was only being himself, but he certainly knows that I am Jurith's daughter, taught by Jurith to think like Jurith. Still, I now abhor that one ingrained notion. I can no longer use any term for it but his: prejudice. He implied that I needed to grow up, and he is right. It appears he is almost always right. Perhaps some day I will grasp the even-handedness of my father and prove him wrong. I do not ever see him, and that is the worst punishment of all, for he is the only one who can satisfy my loneliness.

\*\*\*

I have terminated my position at The Academy and become a

full-time mediator. They did, after all, use my knowledge to create ever more sophisticated implements of war. I felt disengaged and useless. Now I do small but important, or larger, tough prickly jobs further and further from my Ammon Shores home. Yes, how ironic is my home place, as you once said Anima. And how I miss you, my beloved teacher, for along with all the rest you were indeed that. The more I recall your words the more I realize what you have taught me. Now I do understand the true meaning of fairness and lack of bias. I could not be a good mediator if I did not understand this. Sometimes I must go where various kinds of firepower are poised to ignite, and walk in front of every kind of menace with my heart in my throat.

#### ANIMA

It was Ammon who told me to keep a journal. He said the practice had become a habit for him and that my writing would be like a companion to me, a useful therapy and a way to clarify thought and resolve inner conflicts. He was right, and I have always done so to good effect.

This is the beginning of a new journal. It happens to coincide with my first sight of Qyoo on Hustler.

I was deeply moved by her pitiful reaction to my disturbing image. Her father communicated with her shortly after Roggi's surgery, when she was still in a dreamy state, but Ammon's hold on her was apparently quite powerful and she remembers this well. When I reached out to shake her firm, ivory-skinned little hand, she lifted her face to me and her clear eyes widened in shock. Then she had the grace to speak to me in a low, if startled, voice: "Father!"

It was no less than I expected, although I could not stop looking at her, taking in every hint, every indication of this wondrous approximation of my beloved Jurith.

"I'm afraid not," I answered with a counterfeit smile made only for the others present, but no one had caught this bizarre exchange. "Unless I misheard you," I finished with my last deception of the evening. I was called away at a welcome time.

So that part is over with, I thought. Now she is in pain, the confusion and terror of me. As soon as I can get to her, I will try to mitigate that fear. I am responsible for her.

\*\*\*

Today I had to attend the funeral of Mordan out on Karak. He was a great general in his colony's peacekeeping force and probably known to Jurith. As governor he led Karak toward a long episode of peace, and with his passing I fear unrest in the homeland of Jurith's mother Lupe. There is a spirited contest for leadership there. I've begun talks and will arbitrate for the most appropriate appointment. This is a sensitive business and must be handled with delicate finesse.

\*\*\*

The Academy is still at vacation interval, the continuing rites of spring. When I sent for Qyoo, I learned that she had gone away. She was found at a rustic lakeside resort. I'll try to get away and meet with her there in a few days.

\*\*\*

I've met with Qyoo, arriving as an interloper, disturbing her peaceful rest to insist that I am not her father as she firmly believes. She is very perplexed by me, and demanded to know everything with a childish impatience. Along with those over-sensitive emotions, she is quite logical and expects great harm from me. She called me sir, and I would have none of that. With each revelation I made, she was more afraid of me. I told her I would have her near me, knowing I can be useful beyond

comfort, but she didn't understand this and brought up her mother. She knows that she is of interest to me because of Jurith, but I've told her that I mean to treat her as a separate individual, treat her as Qyoo. Even this did not bring her peace of mind. She is quick-witted and can be highly amusing. I refreshed her good manners by telling her to invite me in for tea. This she readily did, and I began to find her unique personality entertaining. She is, however, very suspicious, and I suppose rightly so. I promised to give her knowledge of herself. She stood there on her nimble bare feet and thought of all that had transpired. For a while, I thought only of her bare feet. The women I have known never remove their shoes, unless they are diving into a pool or preparing to enter my bed. I enjoyed this very much, her bare feet padding so ingenuously over the open ground and then the stone floor of her cottage. She is altogether undissembling, open and honest and very innocent. The latter characteristic is almost painful to observe. I made her look into my eyes, then hard-shaped the certainty that I am not her father. I am teaching her to grasp this, despite my appearance, and to see me as a separate entity.

When I consider where Qyoo has lived, on small and unpeopled Laom, I can imagine how intimidating and jarring this place must be for her: vast expanses of land; the crowded city with its great hordes of self-engrossed, often rude and raucous people. Her poor head must still be reeling.

I remember how it was when I came here. Even with Ammon's memories intact, the gabble of voices disturbed me. How fortunate that, while I can hear sound at a great distance when required, I can also shut down audio reception. Sometimes I do this and simply read lips--a secret form of retaliation; it is very peaceful and relaxing.

Ah yes, upon arrival I was thrown at once into a complex maelstrom of demanding work, expected to know everything, to be

ubiquitous and omniscient. Hard lessons were learned, and with incredible speed. I had to unseat the stubborn Pro-tem with all the intricate legerdemain I could employ, and at the same time immediately stop small and large squabbles going on in every quarter--much of this fills earlier journals.

Now I must steal some time to try and ease Qyoo's difficult adjustment, this confused and brilliant, exotic little bird.

\*\*\*

These fractious colonies will never cease their unruliness. Nothing is too base an action in their rules of conduct, and all such lead to war. Now it is piracy. Casino's habitual gamblers have taken to the airways and waylaid alcoholic beverage shipments being freighted out of Vetrona. This had gone on until an air war ensued off both colonies and ended up back on the playing grounds of Casino. The fools should know better than to mess with Vetrona. The Vetronans had decimated four resorts before I arrived, and all in the space of sixteen hours. I arbitrated the closure of this action by fining Casino's guilty band the value of the freight plus a pecuniary sum and Vetrona the value of the four resorts for taking remedial action without requesting adjudication by myself or Control's Attorney General.

"Can you have forgotten that you are part of the Federation?" I asked Vetrona's angry governor. I was not smiling myself. "Inter-Colonial retaliation is the decision of myself or my security chief or High Court, and not yours to make. All of this could have been avoided if you had swiftly followed procedure. This should have been handled by Control's Extra-Security Force, as you well know. The prompt action of impartial means is what keeps these incidents from escalating," I lectured.

"Once again you are right, Condor," the sheepish governor admitted, fawning in his use of the title that is mine when I am off Hustler on official business.

I declined his invitation to a banquet in honor of my visit, an inappropriate display under the circumstances, and my refusal good punishment for his misconduct. He would have liked his constituents to see a video of himself dining at my right hand. It finally dawned on him that my physical appearance on Vetronea was one of censure. Ah, the tedium of these political maneuvers.

I was home in time to sleep, then arise early and arrange for dinner with Qyoo, that done before my work day even began.

\*\*\*

The table was laid in my sitting room, and Qyoo arrived a little late with my chosen escorts--I always send two, for reasons of safety and to foster exceptional conduct, although my aides are unfailingly proper and loyal.

Qyoo was lovely, ingenuous in her fresh beauty, wearing a pale blue, high-collared, long dress. She is very slightly taller than her mother and small-boned, with hair so blond it appears white--the genes of her paternal grandmother? Her skin is pale, her clear eyes reflective, taking on various hues in the manner of cut crystal. When I looked at her everything shut down in me, save the image I received. For the first time, I did not think very long of Jurith, although Jurith was palpably there. With closer examination, I found sadness in her eyes and inferred that she dwelled too much on her mother and Laom.

I massaged her neck and back, mostly to relieve the tension of coming here. Touching her was instantly compelling, a pleasure so overwhelming that I had to stop and suggest supper. She is, of course, bored with her present life and not using a fraction of her quick intelligence and multi-functional abilities. A regrettable waste, but it will change.

I had ordered a very well-prepared vegetarian meal, and encouraged Qyoo to drink her champagne. She did drink it, in the same rapid manner that was Jurith's. I suggested a more

enjoyable method.

She generously told me that she was glad I had loved her mother, and wanted to know more. She is not ready for what she must hear. Instead, we sat by the fire long into the night, discussing some of the problems of my office, the recent arbitration of Casino and Vetronea. I was not surprised at her interest. She is incisive and always ready with sharp opinions. I so enjoyed our exchange that I kept her too late, and then apologized for stealing her sleep. More and more she enters my thought in her own unique voice and form. Yet she is so incredibly inexperienced, so naïve. Her profound ability to reason compensates for some of this.

\*\*\*

Trouble among the bottom feeders. I received a visit from Blev, my eyes and ears in the netherworld. How glad I am to have fished his young body out of the river so long ago. It occurred on one of my restless night walks, and he has paid me back a thousandfold with his special knowledge and total loyalty. He had been severely beaten and was on the verge of drowning. I instantly recognized his street savvy as a valuable acquisition, that is as soon as I had patched him up enough to hear his tongue in use--the medical knowledge imparted to me by Ammon has often served me well. I installed Blev in a hastily vacated maid's room until he was healed. He had learned something from his near death experience which made him even more valuable: how to stay alive by silence and stealth and character study. He now stood before me with one hand sifting through his red curls as he delivered the bad news: a few of my rookie agents, fortunately ones far removed from Special Security, are taking large kickbacks from the illegal sale of highly concentrated Lagro imported from Karak.

Some of this may be my fault. In many quarters of the

populace I am only referred to as Ammon, The Ammon, and it is rumored that my doctors prescribe a regular ingestion of Super-Lagro which allows me to remain ageless, thereby cheating death. Because I am who I am, I have allowed this rumor to persist as a fairly harmless explanation of my longevity. Now I'm afraid this remedy must be curtailed. It saddens me to think of any agent's participation. Most of them are trustworthy men and women who earn high enough credits to make this form of greed unnecessary. I suppose I could allow this illegal trade to continue, touting me as an example of its effectiveness. That would be fairly innocuous, if it weren't for the fact that high concentrations of Lagro cause liver damage. I've asked Blev to get word to the media that vast numbers of people will need their livers regrown if they imbibe in these high doses. Since Lagro by itself has no habit-forming narcotic effect and only promotes well-being in small doses, perhaps such news will ruin the trade. If it doesn't slow the traffic, I suppose we'll have to do a messy housecleaning, which will be very bad publicity for Control. Ah, and so it goes, one day at a time, ad nauseam.

\*\*\*

I went to see Qyoo, and observed her in a state of high agitation, having just tossed the milksop Weller on his backside. This is another part of her which pleases me. She can defend herself and does not hesitate to do so.

I was brewing tea in her kitchen when she entered. I placed a filled cup in her startled fingers and apologized for my strange schedule. We spoke of Weller, and I offered to rid her of him but she denied me that pleasure. Strange that a pampered young woman unused to people is able to care so much for others. A consuming reverence for life adds much to her character.

She told me that she missed me. Any such remark from Qyoo tends to shut down parts of me, and I become linear and intense.

I'd ordered her bags packed, and I told her we were going away during her leisure time. She remarked that she was expected at another of those annoying pacifist meetings, and I replied that it had been cancelled. Indeed it had, and I would like to have cancelled the group's existence but I know such pressure valves are necessary. My thoroughness troubled her, and she warned that I would spoil her. Ah, how I wish I could attempt it, but she is really unspoilable.

I flew us to Wierlfoss. Qyoo slipped into that milieu as if it had always belonged to her. Random sensations roil out of those boiling white cataracts and pooling sink holes so alive with an old planet's voices. Qyoo was very sensitive to this new environment, overcome by it. I advised her to breathe and think of nothing. She laid her head on my shoulder, and I became fully aware of the change in her: she was less fearful, even glad to have me near, but there was still that reticence born of awe.

Our supper together was another awakening. I offered Qyoo a century-old champagne, placed an oyster on the tongue which professed to eat nothing sentient, then kissed that sweet, warm mouth and watched her swallow in astonishment. She had never been kissed quite so intensely, and fled to her balcony. Once again she was uncertain of my identity. Her clouded thoughts would eventually clear with cool reasoning, and I would find myself the victim of that clarity. I sent her off to bed.

I lay awake a long time, having her in my mind, chastising myself, and having her again. I knew that I was finished in that regard and that I would not withstand even another glimpse of her. At last I dropped into my rest zone, to be awakened in the early hours by a harsh and accusing inquiry which seemed to imply dishonesty. The only dishonesty had been in not having her the night before. She unconsciously resented it. My grainy voice rising out of sleep was too rough. I saw that she wanted me but that she had no idea how to proceed. That I could fix and did.

I was shut down except for one consuming effect: the immense pleasure of Qyoo. I, who often handle a multitude of things at once, could have handled nothing else, not the smallest variant thought. I was all of this emotive engine, Qyoo, and she was all of me. I realized that I had never before made love to one I loved. It is entirely different, so immersing that one can think of nothing else. Qyoo does not yet understand what she feels, but she has shown me.

\*\*\*

It was hard for me to leave Qyoo so abruptly. There was an emergency meeting of The Club over which I had to preside. Once again I am plunged into dark strife. This time when I was called away I had an urge to remove my telewrist and throw it out of the shuttle, a feeble attempt at becoming unreachable, but I am ever dutiful, the reliable slave in The Tower.

I know that to keep disappearing from Qyoo's life is counterproductive to her well-being. It only makes her angry and more wary, but there is little I can do about it. If I had her completely in my life I would not have to worry about this. We must swim through a rough, deep river of startling history before that can happen. She is so young and in some ways inflexible in her thought--it is her loyalty to Jurith. To refute any teaching is to lose her anchor of stability. I have considered what might happen. Still, I must do it.

I have to put this aside and go try to learn from my Security Chief, Copan, what malefactor has poisoned the tax assessor on Casino. The poor man is dead and rebellious Casino is getting out of hand again. It can only be a symbolic act, a threat, as it will certainly not halt taxation. The heavy and rapid monetary exchange there always fosters devious actions. The place is forever on the verge of lawlessness.

\*\*\*

When I finished with Copan, I called in Decks. I keep repairing him because I am so fond of him, and he is another great asset, a bionomic being from a distant environment, fearless, subtle, and wise. He would have given his bionic life for Ammon, The Ammon, ah, but this Ammon, me, I remind myself--by now I should not have to.

"Decks," I say, "Where do we begin on Casino, my friend?"

"It's a dirty syndicate," Decks says. He leans back in his chair, his long legs extended, his wiry gray body never fitting any of my furniture with the least comfort.

"Not just one house then?"

"Nearly all of them, Boss."

"That's bad news but not unexpected--Copan says the same thing. I may have to go there."

"I wouldn't do that, Boss. They're pretty blown up this time. They aren't above taking a whack at you."

"Wouldn't that be a little obvious?"

"They'd try to disappear and watch the shakeup around here."

"What do they think my Security Forces would be doing, paring their nails?"

"I'm just giving you the outside possibilities. Don't like to see you around that."

"If I don't go they'll assume I don't give a damn and it will only get worse. I'll go, do a Shield, and string out whomever you've fingered."

"Why not leave it to Security?"

"I've left it to Security. Look what happens. They're thumbing their noses at my men. We've been a little too polite. It's my turn, Decks."

"Takes a lot out of you, Boss."

"It burns me up for a time but I get over it."

"Okay, Boss."

"Let's get it over with, 0200 day after tomorrow."

"You'll throw Security into a spin."

"By now they know how I operate. That's why my code name is Handson."

"Since when?" Decks says, jumping up from his comfortless chair like a big, wild spider.

"Since...I don't know, a long time. What are you laughing at? You probably supplied the name. Get out of this miserable asylum! I'll see you 0200, day after, my friend."

"Get a lot of rest, Boss," Decks advises as he ducks through my tall doors.

\*\*\*

I did rest, because I know what a Shield will do to me, a force field that can switch my poles around like magnetostriction skewing itself. All I have to do is ask for it and without total concentration the term bent out of shape can go literal in seconds. I've learned to handle it for longer and longer periods, but when it's over I don't feel much like talking and I sleep a lot recouping energy.

\*\*\*

I have asked myself if I should ever try to describe this. In doing a Shield my concentration is so focused on threat stimuli and field dispersion that I hardly remember what it feels like.

Decks sent a well known card, meaning an infiltrator, into the dirty, or criminal, syndicate, a man who works for and is paid by Decks who is credited by Control. The card is a friend of the syndicate and may work for them but also works for Decks, simply put an ambidextrous agent who informs one way.

The card will get the syndicate together on some solid pretext. Decks has already evidenced and fingered those

implicated in the crime, a lot of hard prep work completed.

Of course, when I show up they will know what it means, and we like to have the malefactors boxed. This time they were indeed boxed, at the racetrack.

I suppose it is a strange, surreal business. I will walk into the box, know all their names, and it may even appear that I will shake their hands. This time I do greet them by name, but never shake their hands. They are more than wary and quite surly and fear-driven. I notice every squint of eye, every blink, every click of tongue and grimace, as if in slow motion. There are nine men and seven of them are offenders. This is also how the other two are taught a lesson. I smile and ask them who's winning and tell them in the same tone of voice, so that it takes them a few seconds to get it, that they are invited to Security Headquarters for interrogation. This is the moment of absolute concentration on hands. The hand in the pocket, the hand in the vest, the hand out of sight, the hand in motion. Decks is behind me, but I never think of this. Security is entering the room, but I never think of this either. I think of the hand in the pocket and watch the weapon flash and deflect. I lift the shooter up and throw him toward Decks or Security, whomever is closer. I see a blade and walk toward it. The closer I get the faster it slides out of the hand and hits the floor. I lift the man up by his empty knife-hand and know he is yelling, but I'm not listening to that. I'm listening to the sound of an unlatching weapon still in another pocket. I grab that hand before it can activate the concealed weapon. All of this is happening so fast that to the untrained eye it looks simultaneous. I am going through the room like a search and destroy finder dart, but faster, and Decks and Security are not just sitting on their hands either. I note that the two uninvolved men are pressed flat against the wall doing nothing. Good. School is not yet out. We finish off six more. I am

exploding and have no idea where I am and never think about that and don't care.

\*\*\*

After a shower, I intended to sleep a long time without even removing fresh sparring clothes, but half way through Copan came and said that Qyoo was being interrogated in the Light Room.

"Black Suns!" I exclaimed. I'm rather irritable after a hard burn, and it took Copan a while to get up the nerve to fetch me. "All right, get me over there, Chief."

I was mad at everybody, including poor Qyoo, who had actually done a decent thing, getting the Pearl hostage freed, something that was going on while I was at the Casino racetrack.

I threw everyone out and took Qyoo home with me. It was 0230 of another day. I thought she could sleep in my bed and I would go recover somewhere else.

I had heatedly asked her if she was going to keep up the pacifist activities, knowing she would. Actually, I had something in mind that might keep her safe and ease my concern considerably, protection in the form of an edict. That way it would simply become procedure and could never be disputed. It is, however, not foolproof, not against ever reconfiguring evil.

Then Qyoo asked why I had brought her there. "I thought you were through with me," she said.

I realized the consequences of my necessary neglect. I was furious at everything and simultaneously exhausted but I went toward her like a sudden wild storm, thinking I would hold her and stop all of that. Qyoo was tired, too, and hurting. She cried out that she didn't want me. That was mere childish punishment. I ignored it and simply grabbed her and held her and raved about the dangers of Retriba. She was hurting, hurting and agitated. I could feel it all through my body. When she said she was tired, I mentally echoed that condition, put her to bed,

and left to finish sleeping. I knew she wanted me with her, but I was no good to her like that, useless. Furthermore, she'd had a rough time; it was early morning and she needed sleep, too.

I told myself to wake up when she awoke, and I did and then went to see her. I had an appointment on Casino to even things out there, but I needed to say some things to Qyoo first. She wouldn't look at me and wanted to go.

"Turn around, Qyoo," I said. I told her I would never be through with her. I saw that she needed me very much at that moment, and I wanted to take her and lock us away and love her but I couldn't. I told her I would send for her, and she asked me not to--more punishment. Then I told her how I wanted her with me and she cried and I held her. Her emotions are very raw and often extreme, still evening out from the surgery, which I tried to explain because it confuses her. I told her to work on self-control and that soon I would tell her things which I hoped we could withstand. Then I had to leave.

Black Suns! How I wanted to sleep longer, to regain my more agreeable self, to awake and think only of Qyoo, a luxury temporarily out of reach. When I returned from Casino, where I had now established quite a bit of leverage, I slept through the evening and into the next afternoon. It was not enough but they were after me again. Days of meetings and travels and hortatory harangues interspersed with routs of skullduggery.

\*\*\*

Time at last. I immediately sent for Qyoo and flew her away in the middle of the night to The Club's Sea House. I want to have this over with once and for all, but I am dreading the outcome. From the moment I saw her, I could feel her pleasure in coming to me. She is in an amorous mood and I withhold this in myself because of what is ahead. I feel no guilt in wanting her, perhaps some in taking her from Laom, and certainly in neglect.

\*\*\*

I looked in on Qyoo, sleeping peacefully in her soothingly Spartan room. To look at her in a calm state is a singular pleasure. I will go make a few demands on the staff.

\*\*\*

This is extremely difficult to write, but perhaps a useful exercise. I am very much in pain.

Qyoo found me in the garden, giving instructions for undisturbed seclusion. Strolling up nibbling on a green pear, she looked refreshed and healthy, confident and almost playful. I knew this would not last as I tried to extract promises of tolerance and patience and to explain the confidential nature of what I would say.

And so I told her. I cannot go through it all again here. Amidst her interjections and shock and attempts to flee, I told her who I am and who she is and how it is that we are here now. She has been taught a blindness, and for that can hardly see me anymore. Qyoo, whom I love and who rejects a love of me already in her. She is angry with me in the extreme and wants to punish me with coldness. I revealed my disappointment and said that she was not yet an adult. Then I told her what perhaps I should not have said, for it sounded like a pitiful plea, this wrenching truth: "If you go away from me forever, the part of me that has become you will die."

"I cannot bear such a burden," she replied.

"It is mine alone to bear," I answered and left her in the garden, along with my happiness.

As I walked away, I felt I had swallowed a small, sharp blade that was traveling through my body, cutting here, cutting there, until my insides were in shreds.

The history that drew us together has parted us. Qyoo has

much to learn. She does not yet understand the full range of her mind and what she will be able to do with the special equipment she was given. I could have helped her with this. Now she must find out for herself. There is no other who understands her as I do. Perhaps someday she will come to know this. I will think of Jurith's daughter always in the same way, watch over her and try to help her when I can. I am responsible.

I had wanted a private life but it is not to be. I have none. To accept this will certainly make me more thorough in my work. It sounds good, Anima, you illusionist, you overweening, self-appointed bondsman.

#### QYOO

We have a small office, funded by charitable credits from like-minded friends. It is located on the hillside above Ammon Shores. Leona is now my secretary, although why I need one I can never quite comprehend. "To field all these calls and demands made on you," Leona replies when I question this.

"It is getting too complicated," I tell her. "Why can't we keep this simple?"

"Just let me go away for one day, Qyoo, and you'll see how simple it is," Leona continues as she tosses back her shoulder length black hair. Her hair is highlighted with a distinctive near-white streak, and she is slender and quick-witted but precise and methodical in her actions. She shakes her finger at me, rubs her long nose and smiles, waiting for me to concede.

"All right, I know I need you. Is that what you want to hear, Leona? I need you to get me out of this thing at the Phenix Performance Hall. It's simply a lot of hot air and there are other things more important."

"Qyoo, there will be over a thousand people over there, expecting to hear about the kinds of results mediation can

produce as against brute force. Are you going to relinquish that valuable captive audience for a mistaken notion of priorities?"

"It isn't really that. I'm tired...just trying to save my energy for real work."

"Well, whether you will own up to it or not, this speech has become a part of your real work. Go take a nap. I won't let anyone near you for at least an hour."

"An entire hour!" I exclaimed. "I will have to experience it to believe it."

\*\*\*

I have slept and dreamed of Anima, as I often do, his fathomless dark eyes processing all my errors, my flaws, my cruelty and foolishness. There was hurt in the eyes of my dream, hurt I had refused to recognize in my selfishness, my terrible bias. That is my punishment. His voice returns to me as the wise teacher, and I try to recall every scrap of advice he ever gave. I am needy on my lonely path. I am never with or beside anyone but always standing above or between or beyond, or alone. I steel myself for some defiant act and find that a path opens for me. Is that what you meant, Anima? I will receive no more advice from you. I was not worthy of your friendship. Thus do I ponder as I comb my hair, put on this long wool dress and fasten my boots. I must go now and turn into that person who stands before others and speaks. Even I am surprised at the voice, the words flowing from some inner wellspring I can never locate.

\*\*\*

"And this is how it works," I said to the hall of listeners. "It is a much more exact process than you would think. At first springing over the emotion, one listens hard for the reason, but the emotion must never be forgotten. Hearing the cause of emotion, one then engages the representatives, the adversaries,

in the clearest reason possible, always holding up only a reasonable objective which takes into account what each values. One looks for commonalities in disputes, and one never takes advantage of the weakest place on one side to gain ground for the stronger adversary. Such an act would show an inconsiderate partiality, arouse animosity and defeat progress. There is a point here which I believe might be useful in all your dealings with each other."

"You were wonderful," Leona said, and I was embarrassed at her slavish enthusiasm. I could not digest her praise, as I must finally confess here that I've always seen myself as rather less than more, something damaged and repaired, as an anomaly.

When I think of it, I imagine how Jurith carried my fetus through cosmic rays and how the ruin must surely have occurred. Poor Jurith, I caused her much worry and grief. Still, she believed I was for posterity. I have often made sarcastic use of that prophecy--more reason for shame.

\*\*\*

Weller has given up on me at last and become my adversary. He exhibits a very self-destructive jealousy. He wants to punish me for spurning him, but revenge is an unhealthy impetus. He has formed a group of malcontents who picket my meetings, cause disruptions and advocate violence. I should not have wounded his ego so badly. Now I have an enemy. One of my faithful news gatherers, Rone, tells me that Weller is also dealing in Super-Lagro traffic, making a lot of money and using it to finance hate groups. I have seen Weller on the street. He wears the shiny black skin of animals, Colonial contraband, and looks as if he has been sewn into it. Young women flutter around him, vying for his favor. He would be pitiful if he were not so potentially dangerous. What can his parents think of all this, they to whom social affirmation is so important?

\*\*\*

Journal of neglect, I have not written here in awhile. As a matter of fact, for some time I did not think I would ever write here again. What happened to me is a short story all its own, some of it humiliating, but who among us escapes life without many obstructions? The problem occurred just after I finished the following thorny little life-in-the-balance dispute.

I was asked to mediate a family argument in which a woman's life was threatened by the hand of her own sister. The dispute was ostensibly over the rightful ownership of a family heirloom, an ancient gold clock. This fracas had been appearing in daily installments on the video shows of gossipmongers, and I thought it was not something in which I should become embroiled. Too many ludicrous and sensational theatrics for my earnest methods. But often disputes like this occur over some small thing the average onlooker would consider ridiculous. Then I heard that the sister, locked in her house, tied in her bed and held there by the aim of a serious weapon until she would reveal the whereabouts of the clock, was an old, well-respected poet. I listened to a bank of her remarkable poems, and my heart began to melt. How in blazes had things come to such a low point, I wondered, having often wished I myself had a sister. So off I went to see what I could do. The warring sisters lived on Karak, of all places, the peaceful homeland of my grandmother, Lupe.

A few sheepish policemen were standing outside when I arrived. The gray-haired sister in possession of the weapon, and whose name was Juno, was quite willing to let me in, even welcomed a fresh female ear to receive her tirade.

"I will listen but not while you hold the weapon. I will hear your entire story as soon as I've seen the condition of your sister," I said.

The lethal weapon, also a family heirloom, still dangled

from her hand as she relocked the door and led me to the bedroom. She was quite pleased with the clever way she had crept up on her sister, Radia, and tied her fast to her bed.

"The old witch takes a sleeping potion. It was so easy. What do you think of that? Nothing could get out of that. The best knots you'll ever see. How smart is she now?"

"Oh, this is overkill!" I said. "How does this poor creature eat and go to the bathroom?"

"She gets only water and I bring her a pan."

The shrunken little woman tied in her bed had a rope knotted around her reddened throat, and this was lashed to the bed with other restraints. Her faded blue eyes watched me with a thinly veiled expression of quivering arrogance and disgust.

"There you see before you the smart one in the family," the threatening sister, Juno, announced.

"So this isn't about a clock at all," I said.

"What? Of course it is. I want that clock. It should have been mine. She has always gotten everything. Everything!"

"So this isn't really about a clock," I repeated.

"I'm going to remove the rope from her neck and the others from the rest of her body while you fix her some soup. This woman really needs your help. It's clear that you are the strong one, the clever one. No one could ever think otherwise. Why don't you come and live with her and take care of her? She really needs your help. Of course, you could share the clock. Put it right up there on the mantle, and whenever you both looked at it you could remember the day you saw clearly how things really are. Here, I'll take that weapon and untie your sister while you heat the soup."

Juno handed over the weapon and shuffled out of the room.

All at once, I heard a rattling voice from the bed.

"I was going to give her that hideous old clock until she did this. I will never forgive this. Never! Never!"

"Yes, you will," I said, "because all your sister really wants is your respect and love. Obviously, she never got either from you. You've overlooked someone of great importance.

"I've read your beautiful poetry. I know how sensitive you are. You're of a delicate nature which needs to be cared for and pampered--such is the way of a creative mind. Your sister can come and take care of you so that you can go on with your writing. You have many more poems in you, and this experience will give you a whole new perspective, new subjects. In a way, it's really quite wonderful."

"Yes...I suppose it could be. Yes. I've never hated her, you know. Ignored her, I suppose, yes. Didn't realize what a character she is. Has some fortitude, doesn't she?"

"I heard that," Juno remarked as she entered the room with the steaming soup.

"Then you heard a compliment from your sister," I said.

When I left, the gold clock was on the mantle, and Juno had gone back to her lonely little cubicle to pack her bag and come to live with her sister. It is not always that easy.

Now I was on Karak and had not been there for awhile and the last time only briefly. I thought I would walk through the little village and out past the Lagro farms to the green-covered volcanic hills. I wanted to think of Grandmother Lupe.

Walking along some distance beyond the village, I saw an imposing farm with stone walls and a high iron gate. Clearly, everything was completely automated down to the electronic eye that watched me pass. I felt a growing feeling of unrest the nearer I got to the entrance and decided to increase my pace, but I turned around and stared through the iron gate as I passed. Up beside the low stone buildings was a landing pad with a shuttle parked there, and beside the shuttle was a cluster of dark figures. I sensed danger at once and was surprised at my quick ability to do so. I hastened my steps even more, back the way I

had come, to find my own shuttle port and depart.

A land-car raced up to the gate with fire streaking from the engine. The gate opened and the rumbling car drew up beside me as I hurried along. A black window slid down and I heard a voice that I had never imagined could incite fear in me.

"Well, well, well, it's The Mediator, boys. The woman I left behind."

I knew enough not to say what was on my tongue. I turned around, planted my feet apart and felt myself undergo a quivering change. It was the first time I had ever asked my body to prepare for a serious, life-threatening battle. It took all four brutes in the vehicle to finally get me inside, and they did so in various bruised and bloody conditions and with the help of a kill-stunner.

I awoke metal-cuffed to a chair, I presumed in the big farmhouse which supplied illegal Lagro to the Super-Lagro trafficking hoodlums led by Weller.

My anger was overriding my ability to think clearly, and I was beginning to practice deep breathing to calm myself.

"Sling, behold the warrior-pacifist," Weller said to one of the swarthy thugs I had earlier chucked into the roadside ditch. "I'm thirsty. Bring me a drink, Sling. Toss some Lagro into it."

"You're a tough little number, Qyoo. Even when you threw me down, I used to think you were such a soft little thing."

"I thought the same of you."

"Watch your tongue, girl. I'm the one in charge here."

"Not for long."

"Oh yes, for as long as I want. When I saw you out there, I could not believe my eyes. You snooping around here."

"You should have left me alone. I was just out for a walk. Now you're in big trouble."

"You're not that important yet, Mediator. Looks like your ego's bigger than mine. Guess we can fix that."

"How are you going to stand Retriba? The women are all in a separate place."

"Hey, War-and-Peace, they'll never get me in that hell hole. I got connections," Weller said, and flicked his slender fingers together. "I'm at the point now where I can buy almost anything."

"Not this time. If I were you I'd try to go as far as I could as fast as I could, starting right now."

"I go anywhere, you're coming along. I'll get you to fight for me. You've got interesting tactics. We could use you."

"I guess you haven't heard that anyone who lays a finger on me ends up on Retriba," I said, merely attempting to rattle his nerves.

"Never heard that. Sounds phony. Anyway, they'll have to catch me first."

"Any time now," I said, certain I was bluffing but still enjoying the psychological effect.

"Well, we'll just put you in our shuttle and take you back to Hustler. I'll make you a bouncer in one of my Lagro bars."

"Fine," I said, and decided I didn't want to hear any more. I concentrated hard on that wish and was surprised to find that I didn't have to hear any more. Weller's lips were moving but there was no sound. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to read his lips, and found myself in a place all my own while still cuffed to the chair.

I woke up in the shuttle, apparently having been stunned into oblivion while I was peacefully relaxing.

A Lagro bar was where I ended up, again cuffed to a chair, this time in Weller's office.

"I have to relieve myself," I said.

"Right. Take her there," Weller said to one of his women. "And here, carry this stunner or you'll end up a sausage."

The woman laughed and motioned for me to follow.

"Retriiba will be a real change for you," I said as I was sanitizing my hands.

"Retriiba!" the woman exclaimed, her green eyes widening. "Don't start anything with me, please. I'm just following orders."

"That's how you're going to end up there."

"You better get back to the office or I'll give you a little bit of this," she warned, waving the stunner.

I thought I might be able to take a little of it, but I walked back to the office and sat in the chair and lost the use of my hands again.

"Am I just going to do this for the rest of my life?" I asked.

"For a while, until we figure out how to make you work for us. We like your style."

"Aren't I a little high profile for that sort of job switch?"

"We're thinking maybe a regular dose of the stunner will speed your decision for reemployment."

"Well, I can tell you that it won't. It will make the work you want me to do impossible."

"Too bad. How would it affect your ability to cuddle up to the customers?"

I was becoming emotional again. These six thugs sitting around the office treating me like a new kind of game were making me furious. I was just getting ready to shut down when the door flew open and my eyes did the same.

It was The Controller followed by Security and moving like an electrical discharge. As I sat mesmerized by this deflecting force engaged in a lightning-fast power ballet, I realized how naïve I had once been to ask Anima to show me what a Shield was. I have never seen anything like it. I found out I could use hyper-vision when I tried to concentrate on what was going on.

When it was over, Weller and the five other thugs were stacked in the corner like fireplace fagots, Security had uncuffed me and Anima was kneeling on the floor across the room, looking dazed. I sat staring at him and slowly his head rose and the dark eyes stared back. He was so very burned out, but I couldn't move or open my mouth. All I could do was look at him, and for a long moment he managed to look back. Then Security asked me where I wanted to go. I couldn't think. I knew where I wanted to go but I couldn't go there. There were tears running down my face, and I felt my emotions boiling over. I began to shake.

"I...want...to...go," I said.

"Okay, where?" the agent asked.

"To...my...where I live. I'll show you," I said. "Will you tell him that I...will you thank him for me, please?" I said, glancing toward Anima.

"Oh sure, but not right now," the agent said, and we left.

The next evening my new phone sounded. It had only been there a few days and hardly anyone knew I had it yet.

"Are you all right, Qyoo? Please turn on your video."

It was Anima. Parts of me were shutting down and I felt myself sinking to the floor. I was on the floor. What is this? What is this? Help me out, I begged my own self. I felt a little stronger then and was able to speak with the video on.

"Yes...yes, Anima...I'm all right. You must be so tired. I'm sorry...sorry--"

"I am fine. No more Weller. He has a new address. We have cleaned everything he touched. His entire family is moving to Vetrona."

"Oh...that was very quickly done. I hope I'm not...too responsible for his downfall."

"No, you are not. Only he is responsible. You were not hurt, Qyoo?"

"No, Anima, only my pride."

You must rest awhile, Mediator," Anima said. I heard a little levity in his voice and caught a faint smile.

"And you must rest," I quickly replied.

"Good-bye, Qyoo."

"Oh...thank you, Anima. Thank you and good-bye."

I stayed kneeling on the floor for a long time, staring into space. I could not make anything work in my head. I would not flex my body or stand up. I would not lie down. I could not bear the idea of time, of sliding away from this moment.

\*\*\*

Roggi's girls Mekin and Glytta suddenly arrived from Laom. Apparently they left shortly after I did. They are lovely young women, and I was so happy to see them. They are staying with me and are curious and bright and funny and want to know about everything. We talk and talk but I have told them nothing of my own history, as I had promised Anima never to speak of it. That is really all right; it is painful to do so anyway.

The girls want to work for me but I have told them no. They must polish off their educations at The Academy, even though they could probably teach the others there. Roggi sent them with plenty of monetary credits. We were actually quite rich on Laom and I never even knew it. There was so much I didn't know.

Mekin is a big, auburn-haired young woman with freckles, a broad smile and almond eyes. Her younger sister Glytta is more delicate with copper-blond hair, hazel eyes, and possessing a nature a little more reserved, although she laughs with a ready enthusiasm.

They have certainly livened up my environment, although I am away a great deal, but when I return there is always something going on. I like this, to a point. I do need my quiet, the time when I sit and carefully work my mind over the many difficult situations at hand. I have a small, comfortable room away from the others, where I often go and ask myself for silence. There I

sit and think and occasionally punch messages to myself and others into my portable notebook. Sometimes I communicate late at night with Leona's terminal back at the office.

There are a number of big problems going on almost simultaneously. I believe I will have to journey to one of the outlying colonies, Turn, which is actually a large communications relay station with a vast number of very sophisticated monitoring telescopes and other very sensitive devices. High security there is the norm, but something strange is going on that has caused the workers to very nearly divide in half in a militant manner. Control's Extra-Security is watching this, too, but anxious representatives from both sides have made oblique suggestions that I might be of use. I don't relish getting into a situation like that without a lot more information at hand, but it looks like I am not going to have that advantage. They either will not say any more or have not been allowed to release any information.

\*\*\*

Several busy weeks have passed and apparently the situation is more serious on Turn. I know it must be so, because today when I ordered passage on a shuttle to go there I quickly came under a closer scrutiny by Security.

In the evening my phone rang, and once again I was stunned by the voice and sight of Anima. I cannot understand how it is that I can barely hold myself together when I hear his voice. Nothing else has such an effect on me.

"Qyoo?"

"Yes?"

"Are you enjoying your old friends?"

"Yes, Anima."

"I wish you would not go to Turn."

"Are you ordering me not to go?"

"I have not yet seen a time when I will need to do that. I

don't like to thwart your plans. I only wish you would not go. It is a rather dangerous situation that may resolve itself."

"Is anyone doing anything about it?"

"Oh, yes, we are paying careful attention to it."

"I don't like to go blind into a situation either...but I've been asked to help. A request like that means there is some hope for resolution."

"Yes."

"And you can tell me nothing useful?"

"This is unusual. I think if you must go, you should go with no preconceived conclusions but only observe everything at once. I wish you would not go...but it is a private wish, Qyoo."

"Oh, then Control would not be opposed to my input?"

"I would not. Your record is very good."

"Thank you...thank you, Anima."

"There is one restriction, one order, if you wish: you must return at the end of a single Hustler week. That is not negotiable. If you fail to do this, I myself will come there and remove you. If you go...please pay special attention to the transmitters, Qyoo. Please guard yourself...as others will do for you."

"Yes, I will."

"Good-bye, Qyoo."

"Good-bye, Anima."

\*\*\*

Coming into the Turn dock is quite an experience. Turn is a massive hunk of technical hardware, spinning out the voices and visions of the universe. Long ago total automation of this place was attempted, but too many things went wrong, causing a giant backlog of data and a terrible snarl on Hustler. At first, androids were employed, but Hustler's growing population rebelled, demanding a quota of non-android positions. And so it

was that the natural animal element became indispensable, and they have fiercely hung onto their tenure.

I knew why Anima was allowing me only a week. All disputes aside, Turn is a hazardous place for the careless neophyte. Microwaves zing in here at dangerous levels, and shields are not possible everywhere, especially for the transmitters. They are the oldest and the highest level of the technocrat hierarchy here. I thought of this and remembered Anima's guarded allusion to them. I was already in a hyper-alert state when Extra-Security met me and took me to my tight prefab quarters.

"I thought the opposing representatives might be somewhere around here," I said to the agent whose name is Tanner, Captain Tanner.

"No, Mediator, they've not yet reached such a compatible stage as that...appearing together in the same place, and one alone would not be allowed."

"No, I would not allow it," I said. "Little progress," I went on with a regretful frown, and thought to myself: one week.

It had taken three Hustler days to get here at top cruising speed and in a crowded shuttle, and I longed for a warm shower to wash the space dust out of my hair and off my skin.

"Bathroom beyond the green door, dinner in the cafeteria through the lock in one hour," Captain Tanner curtly announced. "Good luck on Turn, Mediator."

I was soon standing in the precious and soothing water, lathering my body and hair with soap that smelled of coconut. Almost at once, I had the strange feeling that I was being watched. I rinsed my face and opened my eyes, searching the narrow white stall. I saw no evidence of anything, but there was a perforated light fixture overhead which drew my attention. I wound one of my towels around it and left it to hang there battered by the rush of water. I smiled at my wariness and tried to hurry, knowing there was most certainly a per capita water

allotment on Turn.

When I found the cafeteria, a large, cream-colored bay scattered with semi-filled, round tables, I also found that there was a great deal of meat on the menu. These technocrats were all carnivores.

"Have you found anything to eat?" asked a voice at my back.

I turned around and looked into the chestnut eyes of a small, golden-skinned woman wearing white work clothes.

"I'm afraid the menu here is a bit lopsided for the likes of me," I said with a smile.

"Oh, you're a vegetarian. How can a mediator have the power to force a decision without eating meat?"

I laughed and said, "Well, that isn't quite the way it happens. Understanding works better than power and force, and vegetables do very well for understanding. I'm Qyoo, and you are?"

"I am Mirra, and I'm fed up to here with the transmitters."

I grabbed an apple and a bowl filled with oiled green leaves, sat at a table, and said, "Come sit with me, Mirra. I'm really glad to meet you and I want to hear why you're so angry. "Why are you fed up with the transmitters?" I asked, biting into my green apple.

"Have you got about ten years? It's a long story."

"Just start anywhere. What makes you the maddest?"

"The transmitters aren't the same as we are. They've fixed it so they'll never die, never free up any positions for the others. They're at the top. They get huge monetary credits, and they want to keep it that way. They're dangerous."

I was ruminating on this when a white-haired, elderly man rushed up to our table.

"Right away you want to huddle with the opposition. I can see how fair this is going to be."

He started to hurry away in a rage, and I called to him.

"Wait a minute, transmitter. Come back."

He came slowly back and in his presence I said to Mirra, "Are you a representative of the opposition?"

"No, I'm nobody around here, just a disgusted employee."

"Good. I will listen to anything you have to say, too, transmitter. I would never meet alone with only one representative. I'm Qyoo. What is your name? Are you a representative?"

"No, I am Wills, and don't let this woman fill your ears with lies."

"Everything I say is the truth."

"We don't need any of you latecomers around here, and we know how to dispose of you in short order. You haven't seen anything yet."

"What? Are you threatening this woman's life?"

"Threatening?" Mirra said, "People are dying."

"That wasn't us!" Wills raved. "If we'd done it there wouldn't be a shred of evidence. We're a classy lot. We handle our own."

"I'll say," Mirra said. "Why don't you ask him if he's animal, vegetable or no longer classified as either?"

"You little crackpot! We're the ones who take all the hot stuff, all the risks. We're the ones who burn up. Well, not anymore, not anymore, you alien junk!"

"I'm an alien? I'm junk? That's a good one," Mirra said.

"Look at me! Look at me!" Wills demanded of me. "Guess my age. Come on, how old am I?"

The microwaves," I said with my thoughts going in a straight line. "You're not very old, Wills. You've sacrificed yourself for your work. Nothing could be more noble."

"Noble!" Mirra shrieked. "To have your own specialists keep replacing your damaged parts until there's nothing natural left? To live forever and cheat the crew out of their hard-earned

promotions? Is that noble? You are supposed to quit or die!"

"How dare you!" Wills shouted, jumping up and reaching for Mirra.

"Stop!" I said, stepping between them. "Stop! I don't want to hurt either of you or see you hurt each other. You both have reasons for some anger, but there is a solution and it won't be solved this way."

"How?" Wills demanded.

"We'll find a way together," I said, "with consideration for each other."

"I consider only my own colleagues," Wills said and stalked off.

"So you think that's noble," Mirra said and fled in the other direction.

Captain Tanner came up to my table with a plate of cheese and pasta and set it down in front of me.

"You'll need more than lettuce and an apple for this crowd, Mediator. That was a pretty good initiation."

"It was," I said. "I learned a lot. Is that the level of anger steadily prevailing around here?"

"Pretty much, except when it gets physical."

"Have people really been killed?"

"Three people have died mysteriously, and there's fair evidence of foul play but nothing conclusive that points to anyone."

"Which side were the three people on?"

"One a transmitter, two from the hostile support staff."

"Which one died first?" I asked.

"Why don't you eat that before it gets cold," Captain Tanner said.

"Which one died first?" I repeated.

The captain blinked his gray eyes at me and said, "You get right down to it, don't you Mediator?"

"That's what I'm here for, and I don't have a minute to spare."

"What? How much time do you have?"

"I've been give one week."

"Impossible!" the captain said, standing up. "You might as well leave on the next shuttle."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"It went in this order: support staff, transmitter, support staff. Tell you anything?"

"Only the obvious, which might mean nothing...or everything."

"How functional is Turn while all this is going on?"

"Well, there's an irony for you. We're in the business of communication here, and there is little of it going on between the transmitters and the rest of the people on board."

"How does that work?"

"Extra-Security steps in and splices the hot spots whenever there's a meltdown."

"Is it working?"

"We've had to call in more security--the shuttle load you were with."

"Hmm," I said, and thought, the more I learn the gloomier it gets.

"Well, I'm off to the hot seat to see what nasty things happened while I was fortifying with a rare steak."

"That will give you gout," I said.

"I haven't time for gout. Eat that stuff, Mediator. By the end of the week you'll be a meat eater."

"Never," I said and waved my hand at him.

I toyed with my food and then went back to my room to sit and think.

"Pay special attention to the transmitters," Anima had said. What did he want me to see? I'd already seen the obvious: premature aging, and heard about the continual need for spare

parts. I could sympathize with that, having a few of my own. I thought it very unfair that the support staff wanted the transmitters to die early just because they looked like they should. But that wasn't really why they wanted them to die, was it? They wanted their jobs: better monetary gain, the top of the ladder--and microwave damage, I reminded myself. I wondered if the difference in credit allotment was really enough to make the non-transmitters willing to rush into bodily ruination. Why were the transmitters so tolerant of that condition? Well, they received the best remuneration and they got spare parts. Were there other perks? There was something else I wasn't seeing. Anima, Anima, I wish you had told me more, since you gave me only a week.

I thought that I needed to get among the transmitters, but I couldn't while they were working. I decided to find out where the transmitters were when they weren't on duty. It might be helpful if I could casually observe them for awhile.

I was thinking of dropping in on Captain Tanner for some additional information when I smelled smoke and heard an alarm go off. My bed was on fire.

Security rushed in and extinguished the fire, but my room smelled horrid. Most of my bed was charcoal.

"You weren't playing with flammables in here, were you?" an agent asked.

I simply looked at him in astonishment, shook my head, and said, "My job is to put out fires."

"Well, you missed this one, Mediator. We'll have to put you somewhere else until we can clean this up."

"Where?"

"There's a room over adjoining the transmitter compound, belonged to the dead man."

"Great. I assume the body has been removed."

That got a laugh, but I apologized. "That was irreverent of

me. I'm just a little tired."

The agent picked up my travel bag and said, "Follow me."

The room was upscale, very nice, and so was the compound, from what I could see of it through its large glass window--a very beautiful entrance hall with a desk clerk and a sign pointing to a sauna, hot tub, and even a pool.

"Well, does everyone have it that nice?"

"Life's pretty good here, but the transmitters have first class all the way."

"What about their families?"

"Ditto. Their children are sent to the best schools on Hustler. And they have the best doctors, their own clinic. They bring their own doctors in."

Glancing into the lobby, I saw some elderly looking men playing a card game that involved gambling.

"Aren't only Hedone and Casino allowed gambling?"

"Oh no, anything goes here. High stress, you know. Keep them happy and hard at it."

Before I went to sleep I was visited by Captain Tanner. He tossed his large, stocky body into a soothe chair and said, "How did the fire start in your room?"

"I have no idea. I was just sitting in my chair thinking when I smelled smoke. I turned around and the bed was on fire."

"Propellant."

"What?"

"Somebody burned you out."

"I thought they wanted me here."

"Not everyone."

"I'll try to sleep on that," I said.

\*\*\*

If ever I have felt ineffectual this is the time. I'm sitting in my new room wondering where I will be by the end of the week. I must get results here. Oh, I must. This is

serious. I think Control, Anima, is really counting on me to do something. I cannot let everyone down.

I'm going into the transmitter's lobby and just sit in a corner and watch things for awhile. Then I'll try to do the same thing in the other residences.

Captain Tanner tells me that he may be able to get the two reps into the same room by this evening. I believe he plans to trick them into coming and then see if he can cool them off. This is no way to proceed, but we have to at least get their attention.

\*\*\*

I went into the empty lobby, settled in a dim corner, and picked up a large antique book of astronomical photographs. I held it in front of my face and waited. I needed to hear something, see something, the smallest clue.

Two older women came in and sat down near the entrance, speaking softly. I requested the supra-norm sound range I had discovered in my repertoire, and listened to their conversation. It was mostly about doctors. Medicine seemed to be an important topic around here. Then one of the women said, "Paulus does everything, but alas, not exteriors."

"I wish we could."

"Yes, but there go the hazard credits and all the high regard that goes with them."

"Preferential treatment."

"Right. He's the best, though. He removed all of it from Devon as part of the autopsy. They don't know a thing."

"Oh, that's what he did. Poor Devon. I guess he was tired of the whole thing after his wife left. But they couldn't just let him leave, could they? Back on Hustler, I mean, who knows what he'd have done? He was out of it anyway."

"Sort of living on borrowed parts."

"Oh-ho! Jora! That's too much! I'm late, have to go."

"Me, too. See you later."

The two women got up and went through the doors out onto the walkway, and I sat wondering what it was that I had heard.

I'm writing out what my speculation was: Paulus is a doctor, a specialist who does things to the transmitters, replaces failing organs with synthetic parts. They don't want this known because of hazard credits and perks, but Mirra certainly knows it. Devon is the dead transmitter. But why would Paulus secretly reclaim his parts in an autopsy? And why would Devon be of danger to them on Hustler? Those women seemed far too casual about the entire matter.

My brain was whirring. I really needed to sit quietly and think, but I also needed more pieces of the puzzle. I needed them before the evening attempt to mediate. I decided to look in on the opposition.

Their lobby was very nice, too, nothing low-level there. Further inside, they even had a pool and gymnasium similar to the transmitters'. It must be the pay level, I thought. It was lunch time and more people were coming and going. I spotted Mirra but she started to walk away, and I called to her.

"Mirra, please don't be angry with me. I'm here to help everyone resolve this problem."

"Which problem are you talking about," Mirra asked, "theirs or ours?"

"Please tell me what both problems are."

"Ours is them."

"And don't tell me theirs is you. Really get specific. Do you know?"

"What? Of course I know."

"Then tell me."

"Well first of all, we're very suspicious of them."

"That happens when you stop communicating. Go on."

"Let's sit down. I want to get off my feet."

"Over on that couch," I said.

"So, suspicious because you don't talk to them and you suspect things?"

"Because we know things."

"What?"

Mirra leaned close to me and whispered, "One of our men found out they've been using restricted stuff in their bodies, that's what. I could die for this. The man who found it out is dead. He told it to someone else, and she's dead. How do you like that, Mediator? Oh, why am I telling you this? It's your eyes. I was watching you in the cafeteria before I ever spoke to you. You're very different from the people here. And now you're getting things out of me. You must be good at this."

"I was doing all right until I came here."

"That's unusual."

"What, Mirra?"

"That you would tell me that, let me know you're having trouble."

"Why pretend? I am having trouble. I've nothing to hide."

"People here don't do that. They're arrogant know-it-all types with huge egos...always playing games, one-upsmanship."

"That's fairly common everywhere, I think."

"No, it's worse here, much worse."

"How did you find out what the dead people knew?"

"Sara...she told me before they got to her, while she was sealing a kitchen knife cut for me. Poor thing. I was so afraid, still am. If anyone finds out..."

"You're safe with me, Mirra. I'm a listener, and when I talk it's for everyone's benefit. I hope. I try."

"Sara was one of you?"

"Yes, in our clinic, but she worked parttime for Doctor Paulus. So did the dead man. He was the one who put the

patients to sleep for surgery."

"I see," I said, and I was beginning to see quite a bit.

"Doctor Paulus does not reside here?"

"No, he comes and goes."

"Do you happen to know if he's here now?"

"I haven't seen him for a while but he might be. Mostly, he's with the transmitters, even when he's not in their clinic."

"What do you do, Mirra?"

"Oh, nothing. I just cook."

"Really? That's one of the most important jobs around here. Where would they all be without you to fill their stomachs? I don't suppose you ever do much vegetarian?"

"Why look at those eyes. You're starving, you poor thing. Come with me. I'm going to fix you something nice."

"Golden sunlight, how well you cook!" I later raved to Mirra as I dug into a plate of real food. "You are wonderful. This is so delicious. What is this delicate little loaf?"

"Eggplant and lentils," Mirra said with a pleased voice.

"Oh, but the seasoning! There are other things in here, little onions, and the sauce! Wonderful! I was so hungry."

"I'll fix you something special every day, Qyoo. I get new things off the shuttle all the time. No one around here has any taste buds."

"If you ever want to come and cook for me, just let me know. I've got a simple household, and we're all vegetarians."

"I'm going to think about that," Mirra said. "I'm very sorry I was so mean to you, Qyoo."

That was the best part of my day.

\*\*\*

The worst part was straight ahead. In the evening I went to meet the duped representatives, and had to change my tactics entirely. It was the shortening time frame that drove me to it.

I had visions of Anima dragging me out of here by my hair.

When I arrived at the small conference room of Security, the two representatives had already discovered each other's presence and were preparing to exit through separate doors. Captain Tanner was leaning against the wall shaking his head.

"Ah, here is our mediator. Please wait just a moment. Qyoo, this is transmitter rep, Giles, and this is support staff rep, Gannet."

"How glad I am to meet you at last," I said, ignoring their exploding anger. "Perhaps we could all sit at this end of the table and--"

"I think not," Giles said.

"Certainly not," Gannet said.

"Ah, you both agree," I remarked.

"We certainly do not," they said in unison.

"Captain Tanner gave no indication that--"

"I had no idea that we'd..." Gannet interrupted Giles then hesitated.

"Which one of you requested me?" I asked.

"At one time or another I think we both thought--" Giles tried to say.

"I'm sure I was the one who first--" Giles went on when I myself interrupted.

"Wait a minute. You both wanted me here. Do we agree on that?"

"A...yes," Gannet said with Giles adding agreement.

"Good. We will start from there. The prime rule of mediation is that both representatives must always be present. I will never meet with either of you alone."

"But I thought..." Gannet said. "I had some things I wanted to talk over with you."

"So did I," Giles said, "but certainly not while Gannet is jumping down my throat."

"Begin," I said.

There was silence.

"Do you want to draw straws over who goes first?" I asked with a small measure of sarcasm, enough to flush their stubbornness into the open as useless.

"Giles?" I said, noticing that his mouth was twitching.

"We have been here a long time," Giles said, rubbing his prematurely wrinkled face.

"Too long," the stocky woman Gannet remarked.

"Wait. Your turn is next," I said. "Another rule is that you do not interrupt each other."

"They have falsely accused us of murder when they themselves have killed," Giles blurted out. "And they accuse us of other things beyond our control."

"What things?"

"Our...our surgery. We need this! We need this!"

"I will speak," Gannet said. "I will speak now or I am leaving. They've done illegal things. We know what they are up to."

"Liar!" Giles shouted. "I don't have to listen to this. You liar! We didn't know--"

"Oh, you knew. You knew!"

"Stop!" I said.

"I'm leaving," Giles said.

"So am I," Gannet shouted, standing up.

"Wait! Now I will speak, with both of you present and before you quit this room. Here is what I have to say: I will give you twenty hours to return to this table and proceed until there is resolution."

"What!" they both exclaimed.

"And let me tell you what will happen if you let this opportunity slip away. Control will come in here and decide for you, and when you hear what they have in store for you, you will

think of me as the princess of paradise. Now you have the advantage of participating in the outcome. With Control in arbitration you will decide nothing. Turn is far too necessary to be permitted the luxury of your indecision. Right now on Hustler it is certain that an entire staff is being trained to replace every functionary on this system. When that happens you will have no more validity than space junk. Never assume that you are indispensable. It is not the case. Bite your tongues, my friends. And when you next open your mouths here let it be with something constructive that will advance the unity of your desires. Good evening," I said and left the room.

Captain Tanner knocked on the door of my newest quarters, and I invited him in, pointing to a large soothe chair. He sprawled in the chair and looked at me.

"Well, that was something to see. You are The Mediator, all right."

I laughed and said, "I'm afraid it was necessary."

"Is Control really going to do that?"

"It could happen," I replied and smiled. Then I said, "I'm glad you came. I was on my way to see you. I want to look at the terminals in the accounting office of the transmitters' medical clinic."

"What? What can this have to do with mediation?" the Captain said, sitting forward in his chair.

"Everything," I said. "It has everything to do with a resolution of this dispute, and may also provide a solution to the unsolved problem of the murders."

"Blazing comets! Now you're after my job," Tanner said.

I laughed again and said, "Oh, you are going to love this, Captain. Your eyes are already filled with curiosity. We must hurry. There is not much time and a great deal to do."

\*\*\*

We had closed ourselves into the transmitters' clinic, and Captain Tanner had agents posted outside.

I was speedreading screens of accounting data while flagging indicators for the case I was making when the Captain leaned over my shoulder.

"How can you unscramble that mess when it's scrolling by that fast?"

"Just something I learned to do. Ah, here. See this."

"What?"

"That is the symbol for a classified alloy that employs Laomite and other rare metals. It is here being ordered, and further on, there, small amounts which add up to a great deal as you go along."

"How do you know that's what it is?"

I turned around and folded my arms with certainty. "I used to teach a class on Laomite and its uses at the Hustler Academy, Laurels. I'm from Laom and considered an authority on the subject."

The Captain's gray eyes traveled over my face, studying this Laom dweller with interest.

"Well, I'll be stardust! You are full of surprises, Mediator. And what about this stuff, then?"

"It is highly classified and used only in sensitive spying devices, and for a few other of the government's projects. Although illegal, its use for body parts would be top of the line. It is extremely light, durable, and non-corrosive. Furthermore, it is most certainly used here for intercept equipment and could be requisitioned fairly easily with the right connections and monetary encouragement. It would be the perfect place to divert portions of its shipment, as Doctor Paulus has done."

"Paulus!"

"Yes. Is Paulus on Turn?"

"He is, but he's leaving on the morning shuttle."

"Don't let him. He's the murderer."

"What?"

"Look at this," I said, scrolling up to the receiving accounts of Doctor Paulus. Watch this, see how these bills are spread in amounts which have nothing to do with the actual value of the items. The surgery itself is highly inflated, but even more of the cost has been systematically inserted in other places. Doctor Paulus is making a fortune here."

Captain Tanner stared into space, the pupils of his eyes growing dark with the awakening understanding of my offering.

"The people who died were his assistants, as I'm sure you know, and when the transmitter Devon decided to return to Hustler he ended up dead. The implicating parts in his body were removed in an autopsy performed by Doctor Paulus."

"How do you know all this?"

"I overheard a conversation which provided some facts."

"Where? Who?"

"Never mind. The important thing is that both sides are suspicious and accusing each other of what neither has done. If we can straighten that out, we might make some headway."

"Mediator, you've certainly gone the long way round to resolve this dispute. Amazing. I've got to go hunt up Paulus," Tanner said. "Meanwhile, in case he's noticed us in here, I'll post an agent at your door."

"I think he started the fire in my bed to scare me off."

"Yes, I do, too."

"He isn't going to give up his largesse so easily."

"We'll see about that, Mediator."

Tanner left and I remained behind, extracting selected incriminating materials to take to the mediation. The room was dark, except for the lighted terminal, and I sat before it

completely engaged in loading my notepad. Until, that is, I began to sense the presence of another in the room.

"You don't know me at all," an odd, monotonic voice said. "Why do you come here and sabotage the most satisfying, the most useful, the most outstanding work I have ever done in my life?"

"And lucrative," I said, turning in my chair to face my adversary. "Don't forget lucrative, Doctor Paulus."

"Great works must receive worthy compensation."

"I'm sure you have made some exceptional parts, Doctor. I am very close to this familiar alloy. It was not illegal where I lived and was used in many gratifying ways. It was my mother who created it."

With my adjusted vision, assisted by the very alloy of which we spoke, I saw the lean and wiry Paulus flinch as his eyes widened in surprise. His eyes had been implanted with special lenses, encoded, I knew at once, with various visual command options. Without these he would be blind.

"Then...then you, above all, must understand how the work I do rescues, improves, extends life."

"And how it has caused the premature ending of it, Doctor, something that is under no circumstance acceptable."

"They were not valuable beings, easily disposed of, easily replaced. All life has its expendable quarter."

"Except for your own; isn't that your consensus?"

"I have clinics on Hustler. Think what you and I could do together. There would be no end to our creations, our amazing and worthwhile achievements. No end! No end to--"

"Our overflowing coffers?"

"Yes, yes, that too."

"And may I return your original remark a hundredfold, Doctor Paulus, for you do not know me at all. You are not a good judge of character. I could never crawl as low as you have."

"Then you, worthy as you may be, must not live to destroy

me," the Doctor cried, lunging toward me as he fired the small stunner that was his partner in dealing death.

At the same instant, my right foot struck at his mid-section, and I watched the flashing stunner rise into the air and sail away. He rolled over, gasping, and I stood waiting with flexed body as his breath returned. He got to his knees, stood up, and came at me, reaching for my throat. I threw up both my arms and heard a wrist snap as he cried out in pain.

"My hand! My working hand!"

"Your hand is out of work, Doctor."

"Who are you? What devil are you? I should have poisoned you in your shower, that excellent body come to destroy me. Me! I should have killed you in your sleep! I wish you dead!"

"I do not wish the same for you, Doctor. I wish you long years on Retriba, all lived in thoughtful regret."

"Never! Never! I will die first."

"Qyoo? What is going on here, Qyoo? Are you all right?" Tanner called as he raised the lights and rushed into the room.

"You had better ask the doctor if he is all right," I said, handing Captain Tanner the stunner. "I think this was his little helpmate in the killings."

"Weapons are not permitted among personnel here," Tanner said in his perfunctory manner as he took possession of the weapon.

"That is the least of his worries now, Captain."

We both looked at the doctor, kneeling on the floor addressing his broken wrist in the manner of a consoling and grieving parent, and without a thought of us.

\*\*\*

"Good evening, representatives. I'm glad to see you seated here together," I said to Giles and Gannet.

"Good evening, Mediator," they said in encouraging unison.

"Normally, I would be prepared to listen and would not begin with my own excessive talking, but these are unusual circumstances. I believe I have news that will lift the cloud of suspicion hampering our progress."

I went on to discuss the tactics and capture of Doctor Paulus, exhibited my proof, and watched the changes in both faces as I did so. I looked to Giles for the first comment, as his face showed the greatest consternation.

"At first, we really didn't know what the doctor was using to fix us. I swear we had no idea. The restoration work was wonderful. We were so improved and heartened by his work. When we found out from Devon, we all agreed that we couldn't go back to what had been. We had become invincible. It was heady stuff, and none of us could retire early freeing up any positions because of the excessive costs. We had to work longer hours just to pay them."

"You were dishonest," Gannet said. "We had put in our time but were given no chance for higher pay. It is expensive for our families to live here and to travel back and forth when we wish to leave. We've been used and betrayed."

"What if some of the older transmitters were to retire now on a similar pay scale?" I suggested. "That would give the retirees time to explore the universe, engage in your pet projects. I know that many of you are inventors, for instance. Free time to engage your minds, be with your families. Is that not a fine end game for life? Your excessive surgery debts can be forgiven, expunged from the records henceforth."

"No debt and a similar pay scale?" Giles said with pale cheeks coloring in aroused interest.

"I think something very nice could be arranged."

"And how many new positions would there be?" Gannet asked.

"We can work that out. You see it is all doable if you will only work together and respect each others positions. Think of

the inhabitants of Turn as a big important family which proudly serves The Federation, and is amply and gratefully compensated for doing good work."

"I'm sorry. We...we were quite afraid," Giles said.

"And I'm sorry you were falsely accused," Gannet offered.

"Now shake hands, my friends," I said, "and in the days to follow we will work out an agreement to be signed by both sides, and there will be no more strife on Turn."

"What a relief," Giles said.

"I feel as if a stone yoke has fallen off my neck," Gannet admitted, and we all shook hands.

\*\*\*

"I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it, Mediator," Captain Tanner told me. "And I'm glad I did see it, that I was able to record the finesse of a master. The story of how The Mediator came to Turn and corrected the wobble in our spin will long be told around here."

"Oh stop! My face is red, Captain. And the hard work is just beginning. Now comes the equitable agreement."

"From what I've seen, I've no doubt they'll both be signing and then kissing your hand by the time you leave."

\*\*\*

It was nearly as Captain Tanner predicted, and I was a little surprised myself.

I packed my small bag on the last afternoon of my stay and went to say good-bye to Mirra and any of the others with whom I'd become acquainted. Then I stopped in at Captain Tanner's office.

"You see, I am still a vegetarian, Captain."

"Yes, yes, and with remarkable results," the Captain conceded.

"We've worked rather well together," I said.

The Captain stood up, shook my hand and said, "We have indeed. I will miss you, Qyoo."

"Well, sometime when you're on Hustler come say hello.

"By the way, you might tell the kitchen that as soon as Mirra can be replaced she's coming to cook for my household. She has kept me alive among you carnivores."

"Is that so? Say, Control sent their shuttle for you, so you won't have to ride back on the Turn bolt bucket. It's in the main dock, waiting. Pretty impressive ship. Security standing all over the place out there."

"Oh, luxury," I said. "Maybe I'll get to shower on the way home."

\*\*\*

When I climbed aboard, an aide immediately took my bag and led me to my cabin.

I stood there grinning with relief, heard departure announced and threw myself into a big support chair. I stared around the cabin as we slid out of the dock. Then, through the port window, I watched Turn spinning away in a silver-yellow light. I smiled with satisfaction.

The cabin was very comfortable and plush with deep pile cream carpeting. Wonderful for bare feet, I noted. The couch's blond end tables held softly lit lamps and baskets of fruit. I saw a lovely pale blue gown thrown over the cream-quilted bed. Last of all, I discovered a beckoning shower which was stocked with flagons of soaps and ointments.

My success had left me very high, and I sang happily as a fine warm spray poured over my tired flesh. Soon thereafter, I hot-air dried my hair and slipped into the diaphanous blue gown, leaving my feet bare. Ah, how refreshed I felt. This was nothing like the way I had arrived.

I couldn't stop smiling, and in this frame of mind decided

to peek outside and see what lay beyond my sumptuous hideaway.

I saw a handsome wood-paneled study. Someone in tan skin pants and a white shirt with the sleeves casually rolled was resting upon his elbows at a desk. A uniformed aide was leaning over him. Then the dark head, sensing my presence, turned back over a shoulder, and I was staring into the black eyes of Anima. The aide immediately left the room.

Having expected nothing like this, I was dumfounded and swayed backwards, leaning against the door jamb.

Anima sat looking at me for a few seconds in silence, then jumped up with an agile quickness and came toward me.

"What...what are you doing here, Anima?"

"I've come for the princess of paradise," he answered with a broad white grin. "Ah, and you do fit the role, barefoot and filling my gift with ruinous beauty."

I shook my head, still in shock.

"I watched you say it," Anima insisted, "Black suns, you were eloquent, and I was the evil force in your scheme."

"I called you no such thing."

"But it was implied."

"It was all said for effect," I argued, thinking I should have known that Anima would be apprised of everything. Then I remembered that Captain Tanner had said he made a record of the mediation. I'd misinterpreted that. "All for effect," I repeated.

"And a very great effect it was, especially on me. Thrilled would be a fair description of my condition."

"How can you take the time to bother with me?" I asked.

"I can make time for she who cleans the Turn clock. Besides, I'm on vacation. What better place to escape to?--my shuttle where few can reach me. Don't worry about my presence, Qyoo. I will not bother you. Do what you want. Relax and enjoy your victory. Wander about. Eat. Sleep. Your company is

edifying, and knowing you're near gives me pleasure."

"Were you working when I came in?"

"A little...always a little."

"I'm a bit hungry...think I'll go eat a pear, or something."

"No. You're dining with me. Please. Now, if you want."

Upon my assent, Anima pressed a button on his desk and two aides came in and began arranging a dinner table. When they were finished, Anima poured me a sparkling flute of champagne."

"How old is this?" I asked, sipping.

"So old no one really knows," Anima replied, winking at me.

"I've made you happy, Anima. That pleases me more than anything."

"We hardly need this to carry us aloft, but here, to The Mediator," Anima said, clinking his glass against mine.

Then another amazing thing happened, and I almost fell backwards out of my chair.

Mirra entered the room in a lovely cream dress and carrying a porcelain tureen of squash flower bisque. She shrugged, lifted her mischievous eyes with amusing raised brows, and smiled at me. When she had departed I watched Anima unrolling his shirt sleeves and said, "Do you know everything about me, Anima?"

"No one can ever know everything about another."

"How diplomatic."

"That I know about." He smiled, sealing his sleeve cuffs.

"I must do this more often. Have you one or two little disputes I can polish off on the way home?"

"Oh no, Mediator. You are on vacation, too."

"I am so high I will not be able to land."

"That is good, very good. It is just what you have needed."

The dinner went on and on, and my nervous excitement precluded the ingesting of large amounts, but I was more and more enthralled with Mirra's expertise. I thought perhaps she really belonged in Control's elaborate kitchens. She was obviously a

great culinary talent who had been languishing in a stultifying outpost. Anima liked all of her delicate preparations and I was impressed with his good taste, but no longer too surprised.

We talked for a while about Turn and how things ought to go, and then fell silent. The champagne coupled with all the excitement had made me a bit drowsy. Anima saw this at once and sent me to bed.

I did sleep for a while in my pillowy silk bed, but alas awoke screaming. I had dreamed that my bed was on fire. I jumped up only half conscious and flattened myself against the wall of my cabin, uncertain of where I was.

"Qyoo, what is it? Open your eyes, Qyoo."

"Where is this?"

"You are with Anima in the Colonial Shuttle, Qyoo."

I opened my eyes wide and said, "Oh, I think it must be..."

"What?" Anima, in his robe, drew me away from the wall.

"The doctor set my bed on fire, and I thought it was happening again. I'm sorry I woke you."

Anima stared at me. "Why was I not told this?"

"Why should you have to know? I'm alive." I smiled and said, "He also tried to finish me off with a weapon and choke me to death, but, in a manner of speaking, I finished him instead. I suppose it is all coming back to haunt me."

"I heard that the doctor was the culprit, but I heard nothing of what happened to you, or that you did the capturing. I'm very angry at these omissions."

"You have a temper, Anima. That is good."

"Good?" Anima said with surprise. "It's an affliction."

"No. It helps you to--"

"Ah, be more like you."

"No, Anima, no. That isn't what I meant."

"Yes, it is. I know you're afraid of me because I am--"

"No!" I insisted.

"I see it in your eyes when I get too close to you. I try not to do that but it's difficult."

"I think what you are seeing in my eyes must be regret, terrible regret."

"That I'm not--"

"No! No! Oh, don't misread me, please Anima. You're far too perceptive for that. The regret is that I've hurt you when I only wanted...only wanted..." I was thwarted and said, "Oh, the champagne has made me sad."

Anima's voice was cool and his calm face masked any sentiment. "Please go back to bed, Qyoo. You've worked hard and received some cruel abuse. You need rest."

"No! That isn't what I need! I'm not reeling from the fatigue of achievement or abuse. I'm in pain. Don't hurt me anymore! Don't hurt me!" I cried. I had been beating out my anger on a chair back in unison with my voice. I saw Anima staring at my hands and felt ashamed, but my frustration was rising beyond containment.

Anima came and placed his hands over mine and spoke in a composed voice that further annoyed me.

"What is this? Stop it, Qyoo. I live to see you happy."

"How can I be happy when you shut me out? You shut me out! You give me everything but what I want."

"What is that?"

"I want you to treat me as you did...the way we once were."

"The way we once were is no longer possible."

I sank to the floor shaking. "I want you to stop! I don't want this! It's unbearable! Unbearable!"

"Qyoo! Qyoo, you're becoming hysterical. You are frightening me. Try to calm down."

"Oh, go away from me! Go away!" I cried.

Anima remained immovable as I pushed at his legs. I stood up and moved toward my bed, intending to fling myself down in an

effort to escape this destructive emotional turmoil. I had forced myself to stand up, but could hardly remain on my feet.

"Try to stop this. Try!" Anima demanded. "You must accept that you will always have a wider range of emotions than you can sometimes handle...but you are so strong, so independent. You cannot cower here."

"Then let me cower somewhere else!" I cried, backing away from him and turning aside to blink my watering eyes.

"You will not go from me like this," Anima assured me.

He picked me up and carried me out of my room and into his, placing me on a large couch and sitting down beside me.

I turned my rigid face slightly toward him and saw how his eyes shone. "Moist eyes," I whispered half to myself.

"Oh yes, I can do that, Qyoo...or you have done it to me."

"And you can turn me into a pleading child," I responded. I stared in confusion at the glittering eyes and then at the mussed black waves as he ran exasperated fingers through his hair.

"Please, Anima. Please!"

"Please care for you? My feelings for you go very deep," Anima said, turning his face away from me.

"And you think it cannot matter. Is that what you mean?"

"You have said it."

"How I hate what you've done to us!" I raved. "I've been shy with you, so in awe of your knowledge and power. You've mistaken this wonder, all this pitiful equivocation, for a foolish, childish prejudice. I was over that long ago...have only disgust for it. Good night, Anima."

Finally, I had managed to say it, getting it out in a quick emotional override of all my hesitation. I stood up, a little proud of this, and walked away. But my forthright words had markedly changed Anima. I at once found my overtaken self sprawling on his imposing bed, and I sat up dazed. One cannot walk away from Anima if he does not wish it.

We confronted each other balanced on our knees, I with my head down, unable to look up.

Agitated fingers wound my hair tight, pulling my head back to allow those eyes at me. I held onto anger and confusion until the steady obsidian gaze erased all memory of both. I then felt my mouth wavering in a faint smile. That was enough for Anima. Long deprived, our urgent demands would not accommodate my breathing--I forgot to, grew dizzy, gasped for air. He at once held me away from him. I breathed and laughed. He laughed. We stared at each other. "Dark eyes holding secrets," I thought, and realized I had whispered the words. "Crystal eyes spilling light," Anima responded. I became aware of his hands still on me, inviolate hands I had struggled to catch sight of deflecting enemies. Light as air, they slid over me, drawing me down and fitting my body to his. How am I? I briefly wondered, unable to separate from that possession. Am I now a personal effect? I pondered, and then all speculation fell away. I was confounded, laughing, but with tears, crying, yet in laughter. I fell silent. I was a pulsar, a long explosion. I was Qyoo and Anima inseparable, high and swift and far away from a pitiful self.

Our bodies slowed and slowed until I floated in a warm crimson glow that crept over my senses like an idling sunrise.

Out of total silence his voice deafened me, but it was only a whisper breathed against my ear.

"My selfishness misread you, Little One."

"Little One?"

"Little One," he repeated. "Little One," he said again, welding this preferred endearment to my questioning mouth.

"Little One!" he insisted. I was growing fond of it. "Beloved Little One." The last avowal may have bruised my lips but easily prevailed. I no longer questioned his meaning.

\*\*\*

The time I spent with Anima in our shuttle chrysalis as we hurtled through diminishing distance was indeed a time of paradise, and I the princess. How little I expected such fulfillment when I tossed out that quick metaphor. Never have I been so happy or treated with such devotion. Shut away from everyone with only very little communication and work for Anima, we luxuriated in each other's company. I dreaded the moment when we would land and Anima would disappear back into a thoroughly preoccupied existence flooded with constant demands. We had made no future plans. I was afraid to even imagine such a remote possibility, and Anima said nothing. There remained only the unspoken understanding of our mutual need. The reward for my achievement had been undivided Anima. How could I ever complain? Now I must go it alone again, and so I have. But not so alone. I have the girls and Leona and a few friends, and now Mirra feeding us delightful delicacies with tender loving care.

#### ANIMA

I hardly know when I sleep. I have not even had time to acknowledge the pain of Qyoo's absence. She must know that I have her always in me. I catch a video glimpse of her, read a report of her travels and hurry on to the next intrigue, the next irrelevant ceremony, the next monstrous impending atrocity. Avaricious women contrive to have the advantages my bed is presumed to offer--after Qyoo a form of contagion I cannot stomach. Excitement would only make me want her, and I cannot have her near me now. There is too much danger around me. I am constantly gazing in every direction to align the highest threat. And the treachery of time--it slips away with lightning speed. Every minute stuffed with some fool's inanities.

War again. The Lagro wars of once peaceful Karak. Weller

was only the visible tip of a subterranean expanse of corruption. It is suddenly large and dangerous and mired in vast sums of monetary exchange. Nothing brings forth blood like too much or too little wealth. Where to start with this? I meet regularly with Karak's governor. His position is weakening, and I am surprised at each meeting that he is still with us. I can't just burn everything up there and ruin the colony. Yet it is fast becoming a region of outlaws, spreading violence, and growing firepower. I cannot wait much longer to finish this, but what of the peaceful and blameless farmers who struggle to remain neutral and carry on with business? How can I keep them safe and rid the place of vermin?

Our strike units will have a difficult time because of the way the original architects designed terraforms--all those underground lava-like tubes so useful for transport and storage are now camouflaged strongholds for retreat and concealment. Our technological precision is excellent, but we must thread ourselves in among the innocents with great care while our enemies care not at all. There is a definite fragility on Karak which extended warfare would certainly decimate.

Blev and Decks are in the thick of it--my special sets of stealthy eyes and ears. Dissembling Decks can withdraw into an abbreviated version of himself and become indistinguishable in a crowd. Useful. Control Security is loyal. I interviewed my personal corps, handpicked them all, looked hard into their skulls, and I trust them. They are now at a level of experience which allows them to make accurate decisions. It is absolutely necessary to delegate some authority to this branch. They are like a hand with agile fingers, each alone skilled, all together a remarkable force.

There is a new and powerful stimulant: Lamell, a dangerous drug now flooding the market. It was conceived in the clandestine laboratories of Karak. Security recently confiscated

a huge shipment of this new chemical. I wanted to know all of its properties and had it analysed. It is a combination of Lagro and the exotic herb bethmel. When the two are combined the result can be lethal. Lamell, like Lagro, has life-extension characteristics, but also promotes a heady sense of well-being and is highly addictive.

I must lock you away now, my useful and intimate companion. This night is already spent.

\*\*\*

A strange, unsettling occurrence. I attended an obligatory holiday celebration, one whose original purpose and meaning has long been swallowed by time: The Festival of the Red Moons, an autumn harvest feast, now a very ostentatious affair. Control's special party is eagerly anticipated, its invitations coveted by select rank and file. I have little to do with it except to appear, greet, and shake hands. A member of The Club, Cecil, my Minister of Finance, has an officious wife with invasive tentacles reaching into all facets of social activity. It is she who, with the help of her pervasive staff, produces and directs Control parties. It is also she who contrives for a way to explore my bedroom. I am considered the most useful and eligible of all the sexual meat in the hierarchy. Rumors fly that I am well endowed, capable of sustained sexual interest and extraordinary prowess. It was my equivocating Jurith who wished me so, fulfilled her wish and then fled in terror at her handiwork.

Dora is an annoying, vain, and cloying woman whom I have held at bay because of Cecil. Otherwise, she would be gone. Cecil himself is no friend of mine. He has just revealed in a very tenuous manner his possible involvement in a scheme which might imply conspiracy. Some would find this conclusion paranoid on the evidence at hand. It is not, but simply a required

attitude in dealing with the power-hungry Club. I believe I am supposed to consider myself fortunate that few really covet the position I hold, or are able to handle it.

As it turned out, Qyoo's growing notoriety brought her an invitation to the Harvest Party, in which I'm sure she had scant interest, but she dutifully put in an appearance. I had hoped that I would not come across her there, except for a few stolen glances from a distance, for I would then have to ignore her before all the others; this done to avoid gossip which might link her to me in a dangerous way for her. Control Security and a few trusted aides are aware of her, and it was hoped no one else. I have been very careful about this.

I did catch sight of Qyoo, and headed in the opposite direction, but later I could not resist one glimpse of her as she stood in a cluster of chattering heads. Her lustrous red gown molded against that pale, glowing flesh evoked a cruel passion in me. Perhaps I looked a few seconds too long.

"Your attractive friend grows more prominent every day," Cecil said at my back.

I felt the muscles of my body flex as my teeth clenched and my brain fired warnings of caution. I turned around and smiled at Cecil.

"Alas, she is more a nuisance than our friend," I said. "Even as beneficial as she has lately been to us in realigning Turn. Remember the woman is a pacifist as well as a mediator, assuring us of many annoyances on the road ahead."

"Oh. Well, yes, but I thought--"

"Ah, there is your lovely wife, Dora, beckoning to you, Cecil. Better see what she has need of."

"She has need of her slave. No, it's true. I cannot explain how or why I love that woman. I only know I do."

I stood a moment, watching Cecil fall under the domination of his tyrannical wife, then turned back to glance one last time

at Qyoo before I quit that bedecked hall of noise. Unfortunately, Qyoo was looking directly at me. Her boredom dissolved in a grateful smile, as if she intended to come to me. I turned my back on her and strode away. A terrible finish to a worrisome evening. Will she understand? Will she hold onto the little I have given, and understand?

Working at my desk far into the night, I have from time to time considered Cecil's remark about Qyoo. He wants me to know that he knows. That would seem counterproductive to ulterior motive, or is his ego simply ungovernable? What can all this portend? The first thing I did when I returned to my office was to ask Security to follow Qyoo home and to all other places with added care. I have a feeling of unrest. I am never at ease when I have not enough answers.

\*\*\*

It has been necessary to visit Extra-Security in the field and solidfy their orders. I have been on Karak without publicly revealing my presence, only a week after the governor was assassinated and buried with honors. The dishonor of his impotence was left in silence. I had given him ample forces to at least hold the traffickers in check, but his fear and uncertainty resulted in inaction, and his death. Now it is up to me, as I suppose it always was. I would like Colonial governors to have all the authority that is necessary, and to use it in a just manner with swift and decisive action. I've had Copan's Extra-Security Chief Benot enact martial law, which became absolutely necessary. But of course the unsullied segment of the population is very unhappy about this. Right now I am not so popular on Karak, but they will calm down. They give me small concern. It is the traffickers, bold now in their success at dealing death, who infuriate me. I am looking for the place where their path has been made easy. My hunch is that it leads to Cecil. We are gathering information. At this level a great

deal of it will be required. Under the circumstances, it is well that this particular governor is out of office, although the method of his removal is an atrocity which must have redress.

\*\*\*

I am in a terrible state and writing solely to take stock of what has transpired.

Dora invited me to dine with her and Cecil. They live in the penthouse of a highrise which Cecil owns. It towers above Ammon Shores on one of the highest hills. I had not been there in some time but found it even more palatial, filled with handcrafted furniture and art objects purchased in Hustler port cities, where luxury items arrive from the remotest colonies and corners of the planet. It was the house stewards who caught my attention. Two of them were former farm laborers from Karak.

I thought this a good opportunity to scrutinize Cecil but was denied that possibility. Tall and svelte Dora greeted me, wearing a scant navy gown, and told me that Cecil had suddenly been called away. I knew at once it was a lie. No member of The Club in hosting a dinner for me would fail to appear. It would be very bad protocol.

I laughed at that and exposed her feeble deception without any attempt at tact.

"Called away to what?"

Dora tapped at her thick copper hair, tossed a floating emerald scarf over her left shoulder, and said, "Ammon, I've invited you so many times and at last you've deigned to come. Please forgive Cecil's absence."

"That is hardly an answer to my question, Dora. If Cecil is absent from a dinner with me, I'm sure he is unaware of it. And since my manners can be no worse than yours at this moment, you are about to find me absent, too."

"Oh, no! Please, Ammon, don't go. I have so long wanted to

talk to you. Cecil is often gone and, despite all my busyness, I'm really quite lonely."

"You've not been honest with me...or Cecil, apparently."

"Forgive me. Yes, I lied. Cecil will be home very late, as usual. Please forgive me. He has no idea you're here."

"That is quite clear, and I've no idea what you imagined would take place without him, Dora."

"Am I not attractive?"

"I'm sure some men find you so."

"But not you?"

"Perhaps in some ways, but what of it? I've no intention of becoming a trophy on your shelf of conquests."

"Oh, please just stay here awhile. Talk to me. You know I'm terribly fond of you. What can it hurt?"

"You don't know?"

"Please, Ammon, stay...stay. I might tell you things."

"What things?" I asked with a pulse of interest.

"Well, I know certain things that... No, no, what am I saying? I've drunk too much...drinking...waiting for you. Oh, look what you've done to me!"

As I record this conversation I'm recalling how I began to organize my thoughts and how I moved quickly into a tactic which I knew would easily exceed my intended scrutiny of Cecil. My next words were much more agreeable.

"Dora, I'm beginning to feel a little sorry for you. Come let's sit for a minute over in that handsome corner of the room...on the silver couch. You can pour out your heart, pretty woman. I will listen."

I picked up her hand and walked over the thick, intricately woven carpets to a plant-sheltered area near the windows. There we sat down.

"Now tell me what is troubling you."

"Ammon, I've always heard that you have a very sympathetic

heart. Now I believe it's true. I've watched you and--"

"What troubles you, Dora?" I repeated, taking her head in my hands and capturing her eyes. Doctor Ammon had given me this, too, his useful sway over others, and now I employed this subtle power in search of urgently needed answers.

"Look at me, Dora. You do look tired. Look at me and just relax...relax. Ah, that's better. Now I have you. Tell me exactly what you are thinking. Your thoughts, Dora. Close your eyes and just talk to me."

"I'm thinking how I want you...have wanted you for so long. I know I can be so much better for you than she is."

"Who is?"

"The Mediator."

"What do you know of her, Dora?"

"Cecil...Cecil tells me how you meet with this woman, Qyoo, how you have traveled with her."

"How would he assume this?"

"Cecil always knows what he wants to...is always finding out things. He transfers credits into accounts and obtains answers."

"Why such interest in The Mediator?"

"I think they want to use her to...to learn things about you. And perhaps to recover the shipment of Lamell."

"Ah yes, the shipment. They would want that."

"You must realize it was a terrible blow to Cecil to have it confiscated...such an expensive loss, a terrible blow. His share is very large, and he was furious."

"Who helped Cecil in this matter?"

"Others...I don't know. I don't know!"

"You must rest here awhile, Dora. When you open your eyes you will remember nothing of this. I did not come to your home at all, did I?"

"No, you didn't come at all."

"Good. Now sleep."

As I left, I ordered the two Karakians removed. I looked out a window down on Ammon Shores and hurried to my small shuttle on the rooftop. My waiting pilot flew me at once over to the lawn of Qyoo's compound. My aide and I walked to her lighted quarters, and I found everyone there in a state of confusion. I had intended to take Qyoo back with me and sequester her in my safe quarters, but she was not at home. Leona ushered me into Qyoo's small, neat study and explained to me.

"Karak!" I said in a fury of consternation.

"She was due back this afternoon," Leona said. "It may be nothing. She often misses her shuttles. It's that little extra attention she gives that--"

"Why did she go there?" I demanded, already wondering where in damnation her security was and thinking how many heads I would roll.

"It was a small thing--two farmers fighting over an uncertain border. They begged her to come, as their dispute seemed insolvable."

I obtained the particulars from Qyoo's computer file, probably false and useless, and asked to know at once when and if she returned. Then I departed in great haste.

At Control H.Q., I switched to the big Extra-T shuttle and headed for Karak. There was no trace of Qyoo to be found anywhere, or her trailing security guards. The disputing farmers did not exist, and Qyoo had vanished. I could hear Qyoo's sweet voice: "You have a temper, Anima. That is good." Let it be very good, my only love, for I am in an unspeakable rage.

\*\*\*

An hour after dawn, I called Dora to my office. Mid-level in The Tower she had her own swank bailiwick of the superficial called "Social Affairs." Affairs is an accurate description. She swam through her own treacle into my secretary's office, then

bounded ahead of my aide and stood before me in a blinding orange and copper suit.

"Where is Cecil?" I asked without a greeting.

"Ammon, why did you not come to my dinner last night? How unkind to--"

"Where is Cecil?"

"He...I don't know. He didn't come home, and I..."

"Ah, then he was never at home," I said in mock surprise.

"Ammon, please forgive me, but I am so busy with the Winter Snow Banquet that I hardly--"

"As of now, the office of Social Affairs no longer exists. I am giving you half an hour to locate Cecil. Upon leaving this office, you will go straight to the Light Room with Security. There you will exhaust all your pitiful resources in an effort to locate your erstwhile meal ticket. If you can shed no light on his whereabouts, you might well find yourself planning your next social event at the women's prison on Retriba."

"What? What! You can't--"

"Silence! Out of my office! Security!" I shouted.

Dora was led away weeping and stamping her belligerent feet. I wasted not another second thinking about her.

I lowered my head and leaned forward with my fingers pressed against my scalp in an exercise of deep mental searching. As I entered this state, I was thinking, if only I had given Qyoo something that was traceable. That would have been so easy. Then a surging answer hit me with such force it temporarily stopped my breathing. Qyoo was traceable; she was utterly and completely traceable, and by me. Resting inside our privileged skulls were non pareil, multi-faceted implements of detection, superior achievements of technology: biochips made from the now classified rare alloy Triplao. If ever one of us concentrated in a linear manner with a same-identity search command, we would be able to home in on each other's locations. The nearer I got to

Qyoo the more precise my sense of her whereabouts would become. It might take days, but given the correct proximity field the accuracy of the process was incontrovertible.

The next problem to be analysed was the routine maze that held Cecil to his pattern. He was an unimaginative creature of habit who had risen to power by answering the needs of those above him, no matter how outrageous or depraved the needs were.

Cecil could well have removed Qyoo from Karak where she might be more easily found. In fact, I suspected he had. She was somewhere on Hustler. There were thousands of places she could be, but not thousands in the mind of Cecil. I knew a number of spots he frequented. He would not go to the most obvious of those. I phoned Copan.

"Is your man getting anywhere with Dora?"

"Perhaps," Copan answered. "They went to her place to have a look at Cecil's wardrobe. Some of his tropical clothes are missing."

"Ah, thank you, Chief," I said and disconnected.

I decided that Qyoo was somewhere near the southern coastal town of Sultrona, not at The Club's house there; that would be too obvious, but somewhere nearby. I felt certain of this because I remembered Cecil's comment on the subject of leisure: "It is a fascinating place I can never get to often enough," he had said. "The remote kind of place you absolutely must take the right woman," he had added, and laughed loudly at his daring. If Dora had been present, she would not have been laughing.

\*\*\*

I have left my aide, Keffer, and my secretary, Phillipa, in charge of the office. I, my pilot, and two of my right-arm security have been in Sultrona for two days. I disposed of the possibilities I know outright and am now working on what I believe to be effective intuition. "Somewhere near the water,

scenic, remote, and defensible," I had announced to my men.

The Club's palm-enclosed house, Latana, is a very beautiful and restful place situated just above a long white beach and turquoise waters, but I am not at rest. I sleep there only a few hours each night. Tomorrow I am flying down the south shore to look for installations which match my definition. What if Qyoo is on the other side of the planet? No, I remember all too well who Cecil is.

\*\*\*

I have not been at this journal for some time. Let me proceed slowly with an attempt at checked emotions, as if I were recording someone else's story. A formidable task.

The day after my last entry, my pilot flew low along the southern coast while I looked at private coves which had limited access. He was instructed to keep the engine soundless and hover when so ordered.

I found one place perfect for concealment. It lay in a rugged, white-sanded half-moon cove. A strong interest returned me to this site several times. The buildings looked like an old, abandoned resort with only parts still solid and intact. There was an adjacent thatched structure under which could be hidden a small air shuttle or land car. The location, with its dilapidated buildings, was a perfect choice if one wished to be ignored. I asked my pilot Kurt to fly low, and we hovered near the back jungle side, away from the sea windows. Beneath the thatched roof of the shed, I spotted the shine of a land car.

"Keep the power quiet and don't move off position," I instructed. I leaned forward in my seat, grasped my forehead, and expunged all external stimuli to see if I could link with another minuscule but potent mass of Triplao. An amount of time passed unknown to me. I looked up, smiled, and said to Kurt, "Put me down on that small knoll rising between those two tall

palms, then go back for Security."

"You know I cannot leave you alone, sir," Kurt said.

"Do as I say. I've already lost a week blundering around in this treachery. Put me down there now. You will not be held accountable. I'll do a Shield, if necessary."

I could feel my loyal pilot's agitation, but he argued no further. Moving down off the knoll, I caught a glimpse of him darting over the palmy horizon at prime speed.

I worked my way through a tangle of vines and into the lava-walled back grounds which were strewn with wind-torn palm branches. I sprinted from tree to tree and, with my vision at full range, spotted a blond, almond-eyed Karakian male, armed and lounging on the crumbling resort steps. If I did an early Shield I'd burn valuable energy, so I simply relied on experience and physical agility to deactivate this lone, desultory guard. He went down easily enough. I gagged him with his own scarf and cuffed his unconscious body to an iron fence with his own equipment. Then I moved into the moldering building. The further along I went the more stable the building became, until I was in a section of fairly decent living quarters. I spotted two guards outside a rather ornate hall door and decided it was time to do a Shield. The correct timing of that decision is nearly as important as the Shield itself.

My concentration was on a hyperfine bore of motion as I ground down the two guards, laid them out, and tore through the door. Without pausing I laid aside two more dark figures coming at me and then crashed through another door. Inside, I found Cecil leaning over a white-clothed bed. Qyoo was bound to it, and Cecil had just injected her with what I later found to be Lamell. Cecil's hand went to his pocket, but his weapon skidded across the floor as his forearm snapped. He was unconscious before he could finish a howl of pain. I ripped Qyoo's bindings from the bed but left her there. In a Shield I never like to

touch an innocent, for it is easy to do damage merely with the speed of the action. I glimpsed her face and stored the image somewhere as I tore through the rest of the place looking for the enemy. I found one more rebellious body, completed my work and closed the Shield. My two newly arrived Security men found me slumped against the resort's wall on the veranda. They rushed up and leaned over me.

"Leave me," I ordered. "Release her and get her out!"

They carried Qyoo through the doors and placed her upon pillows on the veranda. One of them held up a Lamell cartridge with which I was now familiar. I knelt over her and took her pulse. It was far too slow, and I needed to get her back to Latana where I could inject her with a stimulant from the emergency medicine stash kept at the house.

We flew back to Latana, I holding a dazed, semi-conscious Qyoo in my arms and willing her not to slip into a coma. When I had sent one of the house servants for a stimulant, I settled Qyoo on a comfortable bed and looked for a suitable vein for the injection. I was anguished to find a number of injection tracks on her arms. She began to revive with the help of the powerful stimulant, and I told her to rest and try to sleep in a normal manner. I soon passed out beside her as my body tried to recoup burned energy. After a few hours I awoke to Qyoo's cries. She was incoherent and highly agitated. I realized that in a week's time she had become addicted to Lamell, probably administered in dangerously large doses. I sent my agents back to the resort to see if they could find more of the drug. Extra-Security had already removed my handiwork. I had asked that Cecil be clinically treated and kept under high security in a temporary holding room at Control H.Q. It would have been almost pleasant to remain at Latana where Qyoo could mend in the tropical warmth, but I wanted to get her back to my clinic where I intended to work at reversing her addiction.

Once back at The Tower, I installed Qyoo in a bedroom prepared next to mine. She stood in a daze as I removed her soiled clothes, examined some dark purple bruises on her upper arms, and carried her into the shower. "Hydro, a fine warm spray," I ordered from the hydro-system, and watched Qyoo turn her face up to the gentle rush of water. I rolled my sleeves and lathered her hair and body as she stood staring at me with those stunned crystal eyes. I helped her dry off, rubbed her hair with a soft towel, then slid a white gown over her head, a nightdress which Phillipa had brought me. She was becoming nervous.

"Raise your arm," I said. She slowly lifted her arm and blinked at the syringe half concealed in my hand. As I lifted her sleeve and injected her, she muttered something I didn't try to understand. I carried her to her bed and stroked her hair until she fell asleep.

I intended to continue giving Qyoo regular injections of Lamell in smaller and smaller doses. When I entered her new quarters to inject her the second time, she was more alert and adamantly refused.

"What is that?" she demanded.

"Just a little Lamell," I said, tapping the syringe, "until you're feeling better."

"No!" she cried. "I'm through with that. I'm stopping it right now."

"Qyoo, I'm sorry. Please understand. You can't do it that way. It might kill you."

"Let it then! Let it! I'm through. Do you know I begged for it...begged that...that creature, Cecil, for it. That's what he did to me..and far worse."

"What?"

"After he fixed me so that my brain, my body, the tips of my fingers were screaming for it, he said, "You will offer yourself to me and then you will have it."

"Never!" I shouted, "but I did in a manner finally offer myself...I didn't fight. Twice a day I was rewarded. I remember that he hit me trying to get my attention while he...because I turned off my mind. I shut myself down. Before you came, he told me he'd increased the dosage and that soon I would tell him everything about you, your history, your habits. I told him that he might as well kill me. 'I know nothing and will tell you nothing. Just kill me, or I'll die of it, anyway,' I raved."

I laid my hand over Qyoo's trembling silken head and said, "Qyoo, please excuse me a moment. Little One, excuse me."

I walked across her room and then into and across my bedroom where I closed the door on my soundproof bathroom. I smashed the side of my hand against the marble counter and watched it crack. I splashed water on my burning eyes and leaned against the wall breathing. Then I walked back to Qyoo. She was sitting in a chair, shaking badly for want of the Lamell she had refused.

"I don't blame you for going away from me," she babbled. "How can you stand to be around me? I am so contaminated that--"

I lifted her out of the chair, placed her on the bed and went for the Lamell.

"Raise your sleeve."

She did so and I gave her the injection. Then I sat down beside her and held her with her satin-smooth, palest blond head beneath my chin. In a few minutes her body stopped quivering.

"Wonderful creature, you are mine," I said. "I am yours and you are mine. Your body and mind and spirit are pure. Can you forgive me, Qyoo? Please, please forgive me for the terrible pain and misery I have caused you."

"Anima," she said with a perplexed voice. "You have no need of my forgiveness, but I'll gladly give it if it brings you comfort."

"You were being watched over by agents I heretofore considered some of my best," I lamented.

"Please don't blame them. They're in enough trouble already," Qyoo said in an evened out manner the drug provided.

"Here is a rough sketch of what happened after I found out I'd been led astray and was attempting to come home: In the restaurant at the Karak shuttle dock, one of Cecil's men pretended to be a waiter and served me and, unknown to me, your agents fruit juice laced with a powerful sedative. They took your men's I.D. and equipment and boarded the shuttle under the guise of security agents bringing some arrested drunk addicts back to Hustler. I suppose they rightly assumed it would be easier to capture me on Karak."

"It never will be again," I said.

"When we arrived, they flew your agents out into the mountains, miles from anywhere and turned them loose. They were laughing about it later. Your men are probably still making their way home. At least they didn't kill them, as far as I know."

"They shouldn't have drunk anything. My agents never travel on public transportation when they have someone in custody. I see I'll have to make that fact more widely known. Black suns! I hope we've learned something from all this misery. I've tried so hard to keep you from any involvement or danger."

"That's what you were doing at the Harvest Festival, when you would have nothing to do with me."

"Of course. Otherwise, I certainly wouldn't have avoided the only person of interest present that night."

I kissed her and said, "If you need anything or me, tell my aide, Keffer, or my secretary, Phillipa. They will bring whatever it is or find me. Don't worry. We'll get you through this. Gradually, I will give you a little less poison until you have no need of it. I could have put you on a cleansing machine, but I could not bear to do it. Now go to sleep. Rest, Little One."

I later took Cecil to his penthouse and sequestered him in a dark corner of his bedroom where I froze him in place with my own brand of useful chemical. He was paralyzed and the only things that worked were his eyes and ears.

I then ordered Dora sent over, and walked across their bedroom with my arm thrown over her shoulders.

"Oh, you will see, Ammon, my darling man, how good I can be to you," Dora offered.

She was struggling with my shirt and I tore off her suit, ripping her expensive costume and then the rest of her clothes as I threw her onto the bed. She loved this and did whatever I ordered of her, performing with an eager and slavish surrender. When she had fallen asleep, I arose, injected Cecil, freeing him from his invisible incarceration, and then pushed him into his sprawling living room. His face was twisted in a livid and murderous contortion.

"It is better when the woman wants you," I said, "although I can't imagine what you see in her. I suppose it is a matter of taste, bad taste.

"You have risen high and fallen a great distance. Eventually, you will have a fair trial. I can't say when. Whenever The Mediator wishes it."

I smashed the edge of my hand across his cheek, splitting the skin of a face softened in excess. The blood gushed as he backed away. But in a last furious effort he rushed at me. I jump-kicked him in the groin, then stood him up and wrestled his howling frame into the hallway. Security was waiting to haul him back to detention. These actions I considered merciful, for I had not killed him. Ah, Doctor Ammon, my brawling prototype, you are very much with me at moments such as those.

Qyoo went through some very difficult days then began to improve. While she was visiting my clinic, I obtained her permission to make a complete imprint of her lifelong memory, to

be placed on file and added to. She also allowed me to take various cell samples from her and place them in cryogen storage. I am not entirely certain of all the reasons I have done this, but I feel good about it.

For a week I have been giving her only a harmless solution, this done for psychological support and to assure that she is fully recovered.

Last evening after leaving my office, I came near her bed and gazed at her pale form held in a deep, peaceful sleep. I was seized with an inexorable longing to have her near me, and I stood in silence to have what I could.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"I was dreaming of you, Anima."

"Was it a good dream?"

"Yes. We were...together."

"Ah, that is because I have been standing here loving you."

Her cheeks crimsoned and her eyes glittered with that strange gold light which comes from the depths of her.

"Anima...I haven't been able to be with you."

"No matter...it was just the drug."

"I am free of it now, I think."

"Yes."

For a long moment, she looked at me in silence. She could not always speak her mind in these matters, and I saw tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Qyoo, do you want me? May I have you?" I asked, all politeness in my understanding.

Her laughter was purest joy as she stretched out her arms to me. I lifted her up and carried her to my bed.

"You are very much a part of me, Little One."

"A good part of you?"

"The best part."

She put her arms around me and again looked into my eyes. I

saw the longing there and was glad for it, something I could fix for her, something she could fix for me. I spoke only a few more words. Sweet truth.

"When we are together, I can think of nothing but you."

\*\*\*

Qyoo is gone now, back to her home and work and friends. There was not much for her here, and she needs her work. There is not much here for Anima either, but a great mass of work for The Controller. Too much of it leads to nothing. I am in the thick of it anyway. At the back of everything is always that inconsolable want. It stalks at night but I am not often in my bed. At some point in the future when I can no longer do without our proximity, without the symmetry of Qyoo and Anima, I will send for her again.

QYOO

Hello, Journal. I wonder if I am much changed since last I wrote here. Anima has made me whole, yet without him I sometimes feel only half. But I am not without him, am I? Just as he once told me he is never without me. Tormented Anima thought he was to blame for what happened to me. There is no fault. I have insisted that he accept this. There is only the evil which surrounds us. This I have come to know and must always know, but I will still concern myself only with the good. That is the most beneficial way to use a life.

Mekin and Glytta have told me many more things of my homeland, Laom. They said that upon their departure their brother Carp was already beginning to turn out androids comparable to Jurith's finest work, with brilliant features and flawless cultured skin. Now they are called Carpoids and are appearing everywhere. How proud Jurith would be of this.

I once told Anima that I loved his wonderful skin. He said that it was Jurith's multi-faceted adaptation of Larstev's and Pysu's skin cultures. I know that a frozen universal cell bank was always kept on Laom. There was a catalogue which included most of their cell cultures. Jurith accelerated the two special cultures, then qualified and stabilized the extension indicators and elevated the endurance with anti-age markers. Anima's skin is incorruptible and beautifully viable. His thick black hair was cultured from a single strand of Doctor Ammon's hair. This came from a treasured memento Jurith had somehow collected and carried with her in a small pendant. Oh, I must think no more of this. I am missing Anima. He sometimes calls, but is often too busy even for that.

\*\*\*

There has been death and destruction on Karak, and it breaks my heart. Great Mother Lupe's homeland torn asunder by greedy plunderers who would destroy an innocent people and a whole way of life simply for monetary credits that float mysteriously into their coffers. Now that Cecil has been tried and put away, I'm sure that Control's new Finance Minister is hard at work exposing these clouded trails of deceit. Anima insisted on leaving me out of the trial and, while I would have done my duty, I was very thankful that I wasn't needed.

I have watched video reports of The Controller announcing that Karak is being stabilized and will soon be cleansed of its polluting element. When I see Anima like this I am startled and amazed. He is so much the strategist, the tactician, the experienced statesman, eloquent, concise, and, of course, highly logical. It is then that I realize with a sudden shock how much power he wields and who it is I presume to know. Occasionally, I catch a video of myself and I am surprised at that, too. The public moment demands something of me which is there when needed.

I'm not entirely sure how this works. Whatever problem I ask myself to resolve is somehow provided a solution, if not immediately then eventually. I have come to trust this strange process, in fact, to rely upon it.

\*\*\*

I am going away for a while, but I will take you with me, my therapeutic journal. A very sinister figure is lodged on, of all places, Hedone. He is a distant outlander who has overnight arrived and, from his unlikely post, threatened to exchange reality for some hideous so-called magic in his black-hearted possession. There is no such magic, but of course this fool has duped the hopeful and desperate. He has gathered many of the jaded pleasure tenders of Hedone into his fold and announced that he will convert the excesses of Hedone to a better purpose, if an evil one. He plans to rule Hedone, warning of far-reaching consequences. Some of those with their reason still intact, including many of the retired well-to-do, have fled to Hustler and secretly asked for my intervention. I have not yet informed Control of this request, but I might have to leave behind some concise notification, to be delivered after my departure is well underway. This is a wily effort, but I'm not certain that I would otherwise be allowed to go, and I've always been very independent in the methods of my work. Control's plan, I suppose, would be to remove the offender by stealth, but he has rapidly amassed quite a following, and this could result in some bloodshed. I have already taken Leona into my confidence and devised a way of ridding myself of my trailing Security Agents.

Until now, there have always been two kinds of folk on Hedone: those who visit the place to gamble and pleasure themselves in an effort to escape the monotony of life, and the idle retired and rich who never leave, or seldom go anywhere else. I will concede that Hedone is for some a necessary place,

and in the past has served as a fairly harmless and often useful divertissement. Although I myself might have gone there as Jurith told me she did, in the safe tutelage of her parents when she was young and restless, I have had no interest in visiting the place until this recent development. There is much to do, and I may not write here again for some time.

\*\*\*

Just a quick note to state that I will soon be landing on Hedone and have managed to accomplish this maneuver free of any official encumbrance.

\*\*\*

Within a short time after my arrival, I felt a certain understanding of the present interloper. I would hate to see this escalate into a war of wills, for he is indeed very cunning and dangerous, but I suspect this is the direction we're headed.

The so-called necromancer greatly feared by the departed Hedonists is a burly man with wild, red-flecked black hair and piercing blue eyes. His name is Azor, and it was he who met me and welcomed me to Hedone, having learned of my arrival when the pilot sent a message that I was aboard. He laughed with a boisterous humor at all my wary hesitation and escorted me off to an elaborate room in one of the pleasure palaces which abound on this colony. I'm certain that since the time of Jurith's visit here the place has expanded by incredible extremes of luxury and excess in every quarter. I could not abide my sumptuous but garish new rooms and immediately protested.

"Oh, I agree, I agree," Azor said with booming laughter. "It is really an egregious waste of resources, isn't it? We are going to shake this place down. In no time I will have a useful headquarters here."

"I'm afraid you can't just squat on a Federation Colony and

do as you please," I admonished.

"Oh, can't I?" Azor bellowed with a chortle of amusement. "Let us sit ourselves down on that thing over there and talk," he went on, pointing to a gold couch the size of a land-car.

When my startled body had sunk deep into the hideous expanse of furniture, I pushed myself up then slid down onto the thick-carpeted floor and remained there.

"I think this will be more tolerable," I said and then tried to explain my reason for coming. "So you see I've been asked to help, but you must understand that this is an unusual situation for me. Normally, I meet with two disputing parties and we try to move toward resolution."

Apparently quite pleased with my informality, Azor joined me on the floor and said, "Well, slender girl, there is no dispute here. My friends and I are all of one mind."

"Just how did you accomplish that so swiftly? I mean in a place where people are happiest without any kind of intervention that threatens their pleasure?"

Azor winked at me and said, "By getting them to see that their real and true pleasure was the thing being threatened."

"No, I am quite astonished at your success. This is a large colony and well policed. Are you going to tell me that everyone who remains here was simply won over by a vagabond who--"

"Eh, eh, you underestimate me, but I admire your nerve. Perhaps you see me only as a big laughing oaf, a fool. I assure you I have done this before in other places and met with resounding success."

"What other places? What do you call success?"

"You want to know everything at once. If what they say about you is true, then you know what success is, Mediator. This place is dirty. The entire Federation is dirty."

"I think I know who you are," I said. "You are a pretender who wants power. You will not get it. The rightful position is

taken by a master, and one who strives for justice."

"Such a one is best to work against, for he will not kill indiscriminately, I think."

"And will you?"

"I've never had to use such a distasteful method. I strive for the mind. When you have that you don't have to kill at all, quite the contrary."

I shook my head and said, "Why must you do this?"

"Because I can."

"That is no reason. It is more like a sickness."

"Don't try my patience. Don't assault my ego. There is filth and impurity everywhere, and that is why I am needed."

"How have you taken vacationers, holiday dwellers happily indulging themselves and turned them to your purpose?"

Azor smiled a slow, knowing smile that might have borne him aloft before his converts. "The pleasure they seek here is merely a temporary anodyne for their misery. What I offer them is constant and permanent."

"Offer it to me and see what the result is," I said.

Azor looked at me for the first time with surprise.

"Be careful, Mediator. I see that you have little fear or awe of me. That is not very healthy for you."

"So at last you have failed and must resort to threats of violence," I said.

Again for the first time, I caught a flash of anger in Azor's eyes and knew that my arrow had pierced its mark. He laughed but it was a laugh of displeasure.

"You shouldn't jump to such conclusions, Mediator. I am only doing what is best for everyone."

"Ah, that arbitrary assumption is the death knoll of all freedom, outlander. I myself am not so fond of Hedone but many others are and that is their right. This place is not without its restrictions, made solely for the well-being of those who

come here. No great harm comes to anyone, least of all you."

"Hedone's filth harms us all. I should not be so surprised that you have a way with words, Mediator. You will soon see that I, too, have such a gift."

\*\*\*

I have not slept well here. The bed is too soft. The air too rich with perfumes. I have brought my own water and dried fruit, both locked in a carrying case. I've become more wary after my previous experiences with evil designs. Azor has invited me to hear him speak before his starry-eyed followers. I asked if I might be given a chance at speaking. He equivocated and finally said he would think about it and let me know. So it is to be a battle of wills.

\*\*\*

What a show. Azor walks with me to a glitzy performance hall now used for his regular and vainglorious persuasions. He offers to have me sit beside him on the elevated stage before he rises to speak, but I prefer to lean against a side wall and watch the worshipful and teary faces locked in false dreams. When the clapping ceases Azor, who has donned a white robe of many folds, floats to the front of the stage and stretches out his arms. There is absolute silence. His voice is a monotonic drone, and I know that it will not really matter what he says. I would not bother to record it here. Sentimental posturings about love, loyalty, devotion, release from pain, and again and again about loyalty to the saving cause of purity, to the man of purity: Azor.

I edge my way up to the stage and sit on a side wing of the apron. I hear a shocked cry and someone shouts, "Remove her!" I swing my feet, get more comfortable, smile and stretch my hands toward Azor. He looks at me in surprise, mistaking my gesture

for deference.

A flank of Azor's protectors rises from the front row and moves toward me, but Azor waves this hostile unit back.

"Have you heard of The Mediator, my friends? This is she, come to join us. Let us welcome her."

There is a little half-hearted clapping. I do not get up but continue to look out at the audience with my hands pressed together and the tips of my fingers touching beneath my chin. I am wearing cerulean blue skin pants and a matching skin shirt. I kick off my sandals then stretch out my feet and wriggle my toes.

"This is nice, getting comfortable," I say. "Nice to see you all here. Where are you from?"

There is a long silence and then a cautious voice says, "Most of us are from Hustler. Now we live here."

"Oh, are your families here, too?" I ask.

"We are all one family now," Azor intercedes. He is clearly not used to this kind of interaction with his audience.

"Families and friends are wonderful," I say. "My sweet mother is dead, but I have other family far, far away on a place called Laom. They were so good to me and I miss them very much. Imagine how happy I was to have two young girls from my family come to join me. We laugh and talk and argue. It's very nice. I came to your big planet in quite an innocent manner, to teach about a rare metal in The Laurels Academy. Then I got interested in helping people settle arguments. I was not used to being around great numbers of people, but I found that I liked it very much, liked to see them happy. I suppose all of you never think about these amazing differences because you are so used to crowds and noise and laughter. What kinds of work do you do?"

"I'm a--" someone says, but Azor interrupts. "We work no more for the evils of a false paradise."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sorry to hear that. Work is very good for the body and soul. What will you do then?"

"We labor in the muddy vineyards for purity," someone calls out.

"What are the muddy vineyards?" I ask, and from the corner of my eye I see a restless shifting of Azor's white robe.

"Let us educate The Mediator," Azor says.

"Muddy vineyards?" I say and point to a woman in the second row, whose mouth is twitching.

"All the filth everywhere," the woman says.

"In your place of work?" I ask.

"I'm sick of my boring job," the woman responds.

"But it's clean there?"

"Of course it's clean," she says with impatience.

"Good, at least it isn't filthy in your place of work," I say. "Do you mean there is a lot of dirt somewhere? Or are you referring to people and their actions, or what?" I continue.

I hear a small giggle, and Azor raises his arms and says, "We all know where the filth is, don't we? It's in the soul of man, in the nature of man."

"Do you really mean to call all these well-intentioned, trusting faces here before us examples of filth?" I ask Azor in an amazed voice.

"The Mediator wants to disrupt you, confuse you, wants to--"

"Just to make you think," I say and smile. "It's so good to think. I'm always doing it. If we can't think for ourselves, why do we have all this marvelous equipment in our heads? I can't resist using it. Can you? To think for yourselves is--"

"I'm afraid The Mediator must be on her way now. She's a very busy woman, and we can't expect her to stand here and--"

"Oh, but I love it here, talking to all these interesting folks. You've been so kind to me. I was just getting ready to ask what purity is. I mean is it something abstract, something absolute? That would mean none of us can really have it. I'm not even sure we'd like it. It would be a kind of nothingness to

have purity, wouldn't it? I mean if you look at the true meaning of the word. And if you aren't doing that, what are you looking at? I guess you mean little strivings toward purity, which is what we often try to do, because it's good for us and makes us feel worthwhile. That's nice. It's something we can all do every day, everywhere, on the job, at home, in an emerald green park, beside a river--oh, how I love your planet's rivers. Isn't life wonderful when you're busy and freely involved with others and thinking about all sorts of incredible things?"

"Yes!" I hear a unison of voices agree, and then Azor takes my arm and pulls me up and attempts to lead me off the stage, but I lift my hands and pull away with laughter. I jump off the stage, pick up my sandals, put them on and raise my arms over my head with a large grin. All this is accompanied by loud clapping and cheers. For a few moments those who make up the audience have awakened from their lotus dreams.

"This was fun. Can we talk more later?" I ask.

"Yes!" everyone shouts, standing up and clapping.

Azor comes down and takes my hand. He is not so tall standing among his disciples. He is in a hurry to leave and pulls me along with a showy grin as we move backstage.

"You are a dangerous woman," he tells me.

I laugh and say, "Perhaps only dangerous to you."

"You must leave here at once, Mediator."

"I think it will not be quite as easy for you now," I say.

"A few words from your little silver tongue will not suffice to thwart my purpose or turn my flock, Mediator."

I watch Azor nod to his guardsmen and they move into position around me.

"These good men and women will return you to your quarters. There you will call for a shuttle from Hustler."

"I think no shuttle will come for me," I said and meant it, for I had decided before leaving to give no notification of my

departure to any official at all. The shuttle I left on was, in fact, on its way to Casino and only dropped me off on Hedone with some pre-ordered cargo. "The pilot told me when I arrived that this was the last shuttle allowed to land here," I went on. "I believe Control has closed Hedone. I hope you have ample supplies. I don't think you will be receiving any more."

Azor's face was contorted in anger as he spoke. "Then you will be confined to your lovely quarters for an indefinite period," he said with a stiff voice.

"So then, persuasion, control of the mind is not enough after all," I said. "You must use force. The Federation's Controller, too, does not hesitate to use force when it's required to a just end. I think you will find this out."

"The Mediator needs her rest now," Azor said with a livid face. "Escort her to her quarters."

\*\*\*

I was nibbling on some dried apricots when one of my guards came into the room, a tall female with a solemn expression.

"Do you require a meal?" she asked.

"No thank you. I'm fine."

"Do you require anything else, Mediator?"

"Just my freedom to move among you and converse with you," I answered.

She folded her arms over her old holiday clothes of bright colors and said with a thin smile, "That you cannot do."

"Why do you fear me so?" I asked.

"I don't fear you."

"No, I mean all of you. Haven't I been friendly and open and honest? My only wish is that you can be the same."

I was sitting on the only piece of furniture I found suitable, a small, hard hassock, and I remained seated there looking up at my nervous and serious guard.

"Why did you come here?" the woman asked.

"Are you prepared to listen to my answer?"

"Why not? I have plenty of time now."

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Lily."

"Ah, the pollen from your anthers leaves an indelible stain," I said with gentle laughter. Lily was laughing too.

"I came because I love my freedom," I said. "And I cannot love it so much when others are without it."

"We have freedom to do right," Lily said.

"Freedom to mind your master, but what is really right for you, Lily? If it must be exactly the same for everyone then it is not freedom."

"Before I came to guard you I was told to watch out for your words. They say you are some sort of magician."

"That makes me laugh, because the term fits Azor so much better. A wily magician who seeks power through the support of his converts."

"Don't criticise our leader."

"Why not? If he can't bear criticism then he is not fit to lead."

"What about your leader, The Controller? Does he not control you, all of you?"

"No, he does not, could not and would not. He holds the High Seat with the approval of The Federation and the people, and thereby holds The Federation together. Try to imagine such a job. It requires great strength, experience, and wisdom to promote such freedom as exists in our universe. And remember he is your leader, too, and he has justly allowed you the freedom to make choices. What if he told you your only purpose in life must be to realize some cloudy abstraction called purification? What then?"

"Stop! I see what they mean about you!" Lily cried, and

fled the room.

"Truth is only for the free," I called after her.

\*\*\*

My new guard was a dour man, squat and powerful with thinning blond hair, who asked me not to speak at all.

"You must fear me greatly," I said.

"Silence!" he shouted.

"May I ask you for a few needed things?"

"You may speak out of necessity, but you will spout no dogma at me, I assure you."

"Good. I, too, despise dogma," I said.

"What is it that you want?"

"I would like a bird."

"What?"

"A bird. I saw one perched in a cage hanging outside the performance hall. It looked so lonely and so am I. I think it isn't being cared for, and I would like that job. I'm no good at being idle, guard. What is your name?"

"Ortus. I will see about the bird."

"Thank you, Ortus."

\*\*\*

When the bird arrived I immediately let it out of its cage and fed it a few pieces of torn-up dried fruit. It is a medium-sized parrot with lovely soft gray feathers, and it already says a few words. Perhaps I can teach it more. It was so happy to have the fruit that it now flies to my shoulder and whispers fond little mutterings in my ear. It is a great comfort and source of amusement, and also a non-threatening subject for Ortus and I to speak on.

"How are the people of Hedone today?" I asked when Ortus next entered my room.

"No!" Ortus said with a defiant voice.

"Oh, sorry. Have you any seeds for my bird? I think it needs a little variety in its diet," I said.

"Where would I get those?"

"I don't know. Perhaps some were kept somewhere for this greedy little fellow. Possibly in one of the offices at the performance hall."

Ortus went off, I hoped, to find seeds, and I sprawled on the carpet, leaning against the couch and staring around my dazzling pale purple room. My new winged companion, whom I have named Gonin, flew to the topmost pillow of the mountainous gold couch and scolded me for ignoring him.

"Oh, Gonin," I said, "loan me your wings so I can visit with the people outside."

I began to think about life on Hustler. I know that Leona will never say where I've gone, that she will say I'm in some other safe and distant place, if steadily questioned. This I had prepared her to do. There is little chance that I can be readily found. The pilot who flew me here was off on other distant missions. I know that The Controller is embroiled in the problems on Karak. The canceling of shuttle transport is surely a stopgap measure until more attention can be paid to the strange situation here. But if nothing changes, the full forces of Control will eventually come to bear on Hedone. I hope to have effected some changes here myself before that happens. I have no desire to be rescued or removed until I've accomplished something. After that, it would be ideal to return to Hustler without anyone there ever becoming aware that I've been here. Unlikely, since everyone here now knows who I am. The people here are not violent, simply misguided. Azor's madness does not trouble me as much as the theft of his followers' reason. Control might view this as a need to eliminate Azor. I think of it as restoring sight to the temporarily blinded.

"Come one, come all," Gonin announced from his high perch.

"Come down here yourself, you little comedian," I responded from my place on the floor beside my purple hassock.

\*\*\*

Today Ortus knocked politely on my door and when I opened it I found Lily standing beside him.

"She wants to see the parrot," Ortus said.

"Oh, come in both of you. I've missed you, Lily."

Lily offered a thin smile and walked over to Gonin who was perched on an ornate black iron chair back, a most uncomfortable chair but excellent for Gonin's curling talons; he had taken it over and the husks of his welcome new seed meals were spread over the chair seat.

"Look how he loves those seeds which kind Ortus found for him," I said. "What a little delight he is."

"I've got to return to a new task I've been given. Let me know if you need any help, Lily," Ortus said.

"But you'll come back again won't you, Ortus?" I said.

Ortus looked pleased and said, "Sure I will," offering a wave as he was going out the door.

"I used to talk to this parrot when I was on my way to the swimming pool," Lily said. "He has an interesting vocabulary."

"So I'm finding out," I said.

"May I offer you my hassock, unless you want to drown yourself in the couch or fling yourself over the bed."

"I'll just sit on this nice soft carpet, thank you."

"My only view of your life outside is through this thick glass window, looking out on that tired, sprawling banana plant living in its own glass cage."

"You could probably have remained among us, if you hadn't decided on a big vocal harangue."

"Is that what I gave you, Lily?"

"Well, not exactly, but you didn't agree with us."

"Of course not.

"Could I ask you something, Lily?"

"Maybe."

"What did you do on Hustler?"

"I...I don't know if--"

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Who do I see anyway but you and Ortus? And Ortus won't let me talk about anything but Gonin. It would be nice just to have an innocent little conversation. Take pity on me, Lily."

"I don't think you need my pity, Mediator, but anyway... Well, I worked in medicine as a restorer. I'm sure you know what that is, don't you?"

"Yes, but tell me anyway. I like to hear your voice."

"I injected damaged and worn out and dying people with new growth cells, accompanied by marker commands to seek out and rebuild various parts of their bodies."

"It's a wonderful occupation, isn't it? You are a life giver. I can't imagine anything more--"

"Stop!"

"I'm sorry. You are feeling guilty. They must miss you terribly back home."

"I don't want to talk about it. I was worn out. I was coming here more and more to escape. Then Azor...he was so--"

"Yes, Azor. It's so comforting to lay all your misery at the foot of huge promise."

"Don't go any further with this!" Lily cried out. "I already feel a lot of guilt, that I've betrayed my...my--"

"Your master."

"No, not that, but a true leader, one who really cares, who wants to help us."

"Does he? Does he really care? What has he actually offered you but a few vain words without clear definitions?"

Lily jumped up and tugged at her fading blue and yellow

holiday clothes with nervous fingers. She shook her short red curls and stared at me with troubled pale blue eyes.

"I'm leaving, and I won't be back. You'll be all alone now, except for stubborn Ortus."

"Oh, Lily, I much prefer to talk freely to my little Gonin here than become a sleepwalker out there."

"You understand nothing!"

"Don't go. I understand a great deal. How can I do any less when I see such need? Wait. Look at Gonin. Listen to this: Gonin? What shall I do, Gonin? What shall I do?"

Gonin flew to my hand and turned his head to the side to stare at me. He ruffled his feathers and said, "Tell the truth."

"You see. This parrot appears to know more than Azor."

Lily ran out, slamming the door hard.

\*\*\*

Another day. I know that if I ask it of my body I can break down the door of my room and walk out. But to what end? This will not serve any purpose. To be incarcerated here is more disturbing to some outside. Lily, perhaps. Maybe even Ortus. They might begin to wonder just why I must be treated like this.

\*\*\*

In the afternoon, Azor suddenly put in an appearance, at first acting as mild and principled as a member of my family. What can this portend? I wondered. I soon found out.

"My friends have asked after you. They know that you have not been able to leave us, and they wonder where and how you are. I myself am wondering if you would be of any use to us in getting supplies, that is if we let Control know we are holding you."

I laughed and said, "I'm afraid I cannot be of much use to you. You see I'm considered quite a nuisance on Hustler, and they are probably thoroughly delighted that I'm stranded here."

"You mean they know you've come?"

"Control always knows what I'm doing," I said, and that spoken with a needling recollection of the phrase I'd just taught Gonin: "Tell the truth."

"As to all my new friends out there, please tell them I wish I could see them, and would love to visit with them again."

"I'll be sure to tell them," Azor lied, and then departed in a far less friendly manner than that of his arrival.

I finished the afternoon doing a series of exercises and then sat very still to think. Gonin chattered at me, rustled through his seeds and took a few swallows of water from the pool I'd collected for him in the lavender bathroom basin. I myself had about run out of my own water and would soon be drinking from the same faucet. I couldn't quite believe that Azor would sink low enough to poison my water supply, but his ambition was very great. Anima would probably say I was losing some more of my innocent trust at a very necessary time.

I had expended a great deal of thought on the problem at hand, and now I began to think of Anima. The darkening room was quiet. My friend and pupil Gonin had retired to a shadowy corner to roost on a wall sconce. This is not the time for longing, I thought, and yet I could not help it. I thought of the two of us in his shuttle. We must have been a little like two blindsided lovers anywhere, and yet our combined experiences were so different from others. And, of course, my emotions in that particular situation are always more extreme. He understands all of this and his patience is almost beyond my comprehension. But look how patient I am as I sit here in my confinement, writing. Yes look, Little One, I can imagine him saying. I remembered that I slept with his warm hand supporting the back of my head, his fingers threaded through my hair and caressing my scalp--it was exactly the way Jurith used to hold me when I cried. I awoke and turned over, and he lifted his head and stared at me in the

darkness. I knew that he could see even the slightest tremor of my eyelids. I opened my eyes and saw in the same way. There were so many questions I wanted to ask and could not. Sometimes he would smile at me and answer something I had only thought. Often I desired nothing more than to repay in kind the subtleties of his tenderness. And much later...oh, the night when he had pronounced me well again and carried me to his bed!

Suddenly I think that I will never have a life with him, perhaps no more than the joyful fragments that have occurred. I wish no prescience on this subject, no foreknowledge to override my ignorance and longing. And yet I steel myself for a solitary existence, as if rehearsing for what must come to pass.

It is already a new morning and I need to lock you in my case and slide it back under my bed, little journal, my only confidant.

\*\*\*

I awoke anxious and fidgety and was startled to find Azor leaning over my bed.

"You sleep late."

"I was up late, thinking."

"Did it help?"

"What is it that you want, Azor?" I asked, sitting up and reaching for my robe.

Azor stepped back and walked over to Gonin who was busily sorting through his seeds. "I want you to come and talk to my friends, show them how well and happy you are, how glad to be among us. But if you say anything that displeases me I will put this messy little fellow in my stew."

I stared at him and I was not smiling and neither was he. I wondered how much I could say before he would explode. I decided it was time for another barb in his flesh.

"Why don't you stop all this, Azor? I am sure you would be

allowed to disappear forever if you simply went away."

Azor's fierce laughter was a brutal ripping of silence. "And how would I do that? Fly like this bird? Even if I wanted to, which I do not, there is no way for me to leave now."

"And you will get no more supplies. All of your so-called friends will not be so happy when you can no longer fill their stomachs. That eventuality must be fast approaching."

"Some stores are dwindling. We can exist for quite awhile on less. I would like to be allowed to take my flock and go somewhere else."

"I see. And where would that be?"

"We could inhabit some of the wild lands on Hustler. Create our own village, our own--"

"Hostile country, a place to rail and foment and spread your deceptions across the land, perhaps?" I said.

Azor stood shaking his head, his auburn-streaked black hair flying over pools of blue ice glinting with anger. "I am thinking of ways to use you to my advantage, Mediator."

"You will not outthink me. More and more it appears that all those captured folk out there are really your hostages. Am I right? You cannot have your friends and eat them, too."

"You are a devil! You and I could rule the planet."

"Rule! Overpower! Suppress! Oh yes, and purify! What a worthy career you have chosen for yourself. Look where it has led you. To clarify your crude and reckless intentions you can only confer with the enemy."

"Are you the enemy? You are nothing but a slender girl."

"Ah, but I am good enough to rule with you."

"I still have them. They still love me. I am their hope, their salvation, their--"

"Mistaken identity."

I saw that I had gone too far, and Azor came toward me with outstretched arms ending in tight fists. "Back off!" I cried at

once. "I do not want to hurt you."

"Hurt me? You? You annoying little--"

I only sent him flying through the air onto his backside. He sat a moment stunned and then started to rise.

"Don't get up until you have rethought your position," I warned. "With the same frame of mind, you will only end up in the same place."

"I will go and get my guards."

"Are they well trained? Bring a lot of them if they have long had other occupations. Is there still good medicine here?"

Azor sat looking at me and rubbing his chin. "Who are you? Do you work for Control?"

"I do not."

I turned to my little feathered friend. "What should I do, Gonin? What should I do?"

"Tell the truth," Gonin squawked.

"I am just The Mediator," I said.

\*\*\*

I refused to leave my room until I could bring Gonin with me. He sat on my shoulder and fluttered his wings as I walked onto the performance stage. Azor stood at the podium and held up his hands and pointed to me. Again I positioned myself on the fabricated apron's edge. I pulled up my feet and sat cross-legged. I was wearing the only other outfit I had, besides the casual slacks and shirt I wore in my room: matching cream skin pants and shirt. My hair is getting longer, falling over my shoulders and getting in my eyes. I tossed it back and grinned at my audience.

"Hello again!" I called out. "I've had a nice rest and rescued this little wise-feathers from oblivion. I heard you had a few gatherings that culminated in a request for my appearance. I also heard that you were getting hungry for many things that

were not available. What else have you all been doing?"

"Just waiting for you," a man in the back shadows called out. I requested hyper-vision and looked for the source of that familiar voice. It was Ortus. "Oh, Ortus, my friend," I called, "thank you for all the seeds for my parrot. I mean, I hope he will be my companion. Would you all give him to me as a sort of going away present?"

"Yes! He is yours! Take him!" came certain enthusiastic voices from the audience.

"I have good news. I've just used one of the satellite relay phones here to ask for a shuttle. Very soon you'll be eating all the foods you've been missing. You can all go home and live busily and happily and sometimes thoughtfully ever after. I know Azor is relieved. He was quite worried about how you would all be fed."

"He did feed us," a woman started to complain, but I soon interrupted her with a moderating voice, knowing full well that Azor was in a highly unstable condition. "He fed us a lot of--"

"Isn't it better to concentrate on the future? Do you not have many new friends and a much greater appreciation of your homeland? Almost everything that happens to us in life is a learning experience at least, maybe even with positive results you never imagined. Do you know I'm looking at faces alive with interest and perhaps some new plans. What a vacation this has been. I'm an excitable person and I just can't sit still any longer. I stood up and jumped high into the air with Gonin taking wing and fluttering over my head. The audience exploded in laughter and clapping. Cameras flashed in the hands of a few rejuvenated tourists and I hoped those recorded images would not find their ways into the public venue: The Mediator caught in a highly undignified victory leap. I held out my arm and Gonin resettled himself on my fingers. My greatest wish at the moment was to defuse a disappointed and angry mob.

"We will meet again at another time and place, Mediator," Azor said, turning away from the podium.

"I think Azor wishes to say good-bye," I said. "What should he do, Gonin? Tell us, what should he do?"

"Tell the truth!" Gonin shrieked, and the audience stood up and cheered in tumultuous delight.

\*\*\*

Lily knocked, announced herself and entered after my shouted invitation. I had just finished dressing in my freshly laundered pale blue skin pants and shirt. Ready to travel.

"Lily, I hope to see you from time to time on Hustler," I said as I fastened my sandals and looked up smiling.

"I hope so," Lily said with a sigh, then settled herself on my hassock and crossed her hands over her chest in a few moments of silence which I did not interrupt.

"I'm sorry for my past conduct. You must think I'm a silly, gullible person," she said at last.

"Not at all. I think you are troubled by something personal that is intertwined with your marvelous work. That remorse has made you turn away from your occupation, made you vulnerable and very open to soothing suggestion."

"Mediator, are you perhaps...also a psychiatrist?"

"Your misery is easily readable...and the innuendo of your words has given much more away."

"Hedone. This used to seem like a wonderful place of escape to me. I will probably never return here, even when it's back at its pinnacle of luxurious, libidinous debauchery."

"That's quite a mouthful, Lily."

"Well, Mediator, I am a doctor of something or other."

"And with all that amassed knowledge and skill perhaps you were unable to save someone you loved."

Lily's head rose and her widening dark blue eyes stared into

mine with enlarged black pupils.

"To your startling list of credentials I must now add a close connection with the occult."

"No," I said with a polite chortle of amusement. "It didn't take super perception to deduce that."

"Perhaps not. Everyone who stayed here and dreamed as I did must have had, probably still has, some hugely unanswered need or a desire to escape some terrible failing."

"That includes me," I said.

"Oh no, not you, Mediator. You are far too wise. I thought I was wise, but I was only arrogant. I couldn't save my own father. He was in an accident and somehow able to take himself off and wait for my help. He believed that only his gifted daughter could save him. He tried to reach me, waited and died while I was at a party laughing with friends. I had yanked out my ear-spike so I would not be summoned to one more emergency."

Lily was in tears, and I put my arms around her and said, "All the more reason to go back to work, my friend. You will never get over that but it will soften. You will have to work over and around it, but work. The salvation you seek is in the profession you chose, employing your marvelous training to rejuvenate all those lives still waiting for you. Each one who walks away healed will make you stronger."

"I think you must be right," Lily pondered. "Isn't it strange that I thought it was Azor, but no, it was you. You are the one I stayed here to experience, and in a place and manner I would never have imagined."

\*\*\*

I am writing crowded into this shuttle with a noisy batch of former tourists who act as if they've just awakened from a long, long sleep. Gonin must ride beside me in his old cage, but he seems to trust that he will not remain in there forever. I have

promised him as much, just as I have promised Azor that his punishment will be tolerable. I had no authority to do this but perhaps I can arrange something. I know that Azor is still dreaming of other conquests. His is an unquenchable thirst. What shall I worry about next? The act of eluding my security when I left, I suppose. I will escape all this by taking a nap.

\*\*\*

My household is in chaos. No one wants to do anything but chatter at me. Just as I feared, pictures of me leaping into the air with Gonin flying overhead have appeared all over the city. They seem to display nothing but a wild, eccentric demoniac, and I am truly embarrassed. How will I ever restore my old effectiveness as a serious mediator with this kind of misleading advertisement? At the time I leapt into the air, leaping I must admit with great relief, I was only thinking of distracting the audience. I have not gone outside or spoken on the phone to anyone. Leona, Mirra, and the girls have all tried to comfort me with praise. "Don't you realize what you have done?" Leona asks. "Made myself ridiculous," I answer. "Qyoo, you have brought home a shuttle full of captives, and even their captor," Leona argues.

When I first arrived, I tried to negotiate with a security official who would promise me nothing in regard to Azor. He was led away glowering at me. I have felt some guilt over this, even though he did try to lay his hands on me in a helpless rage. Poor fool. He is not really a violent person, just incredibly self-deluded, slightly unbalanced and also very persuasive.

\*\*\*

Wild to be out of my self-imposed confinement, I coiled up my hair, pulled a dark hat over my eyes, threw a black coat over black shirt and slacks, then caught Transit to the Tower Park Lands. There I could walk under the peaceful, drooping limbs of

silent and indifferent trees. They are so large and protective, rising into the sky like dark viridian fingers. There was a glowing bank of fog encircling me, soft mist against my face. I thought of Gonin and his instant fame, one of the reasons he had been left at home. And what if he flew to the top of the highest tree and would not come down? Still, I was happy to be alone. I can be that way easily while working through a deluge of consuming thoughts. Although Laom seems very far away there, and so small in relation to that vast expanse of misted greenery.

Moving along in a restless manner, I halted now and then to study an odd configuration of thick white air curling among ghostly branches. Then I came upon an open space with a pond, which I had discovered earlier on my lunchtime strolls. A mist was roiling off the water, and standing before its white opacity was a tall dark statue I had not seen before. But it was not a statue and as I drew nearer I discerned that it was Anima. As much as I trusted my own vision, I still would not believe it, imagining that if he was on Hustler he was not far off but surely up in The Tower and completely unaware of me.

It was Anima. He, too, had on a black coat, the collar turned high against his dampened hair. I walked within a few meters of him and stood without speaking. I supposed that now I was even more carefully followed--my care, his steadfast fealty to Jurith--and that Anima would ever after my recent noisome return know exactly where I was. As long as it was not intrusive I didn't mind. I wondered who would speak first and moved ahead, trying to determine his expression without the obscuring fog between us. Perhaps he will be like a stranger, I thought, and I felt deeply afraid of this. It must have been in my eyes.

"No, please don't come to me that way...not after all this anticipation," he said.

He leaned toward me and took off my hat, putting his fingers in my hair in the same way that I remembered. I saw the paleness

of my tumbling hair reflected in his eyes. I knew that my own eyes had changed, and then my eyes closed and I could see nothing, but only feel.

When finally he let go of me to let me breathe, he said, "I want to scold you, but how can I now? How can I scold you?"

"If you really want to, you'll do it," I said, and then let myself float high upon his laughter.

He took my hand and we walked along in silence. I hardly noticed where we were going, until finally I looked out and saw that we had gone along the edge of the pond to a handsome little summerhouse. I had wondered about this place before when passing by. It was an octagon with waste-high wainscoting and was glassed in all the way around with a deck below. We climbed the steps, and Anima held his hand over the lock-eye and the door slid open. The floor was carpeted in thick wool the color of the tree bark outside. I immediately pulled off my shoes and felt the floor's pleasant warmth rise up through me. Then I realized that I had been cold. A few small lamps sprang on, casting areas of dim light. Large brown-hued pillows were piled on the floor and propped against the walls' dark red wainscoting. Anima took off my coat, then removed his own and laid them aside. He removed his boots and led me to the greatest number of pillows, where we settled down. Anima leaned back with his head resting on a supporting hand. With some constraint, I allowed my roving eyes the pleasure of his rapt face, tinted a translucent amber by the shaded gold tones of diffused light. His jet eyes reflected glints of the same warming light. Outside, the light was changing. The fog drifted through dark tree branches and floated around the windows, its whiteness diminished by the faintest violet hues of evening. I had long thought of something like this but could never have imagined it as it was.

After a time the few lights, which neither of us needed, were extinguished by some command unknown to me. The silvery

night fog swirling against the windows was then more intense, evoking the illusion that we were held securely at the center of a spinning cynosure, all importance within and nothing beyond.

Anima's question startled me: "Now may I hear your voice?"

"I have thought of you and sorely missed you, Anima."

"When you speak so I am good for nothing but you, Little One. But in that condition I must be very good to have Qyoo."

He reached for me with unyielding hands that burned through my clothes. My thoughts disintegrated. I felt my heated body dissolving and flowing into his. In that suspended state I never revisited my earlier thought of alienation.

When we had left the summerhouse and made our way back to the edge of the park, Anima said, "Come to my office tomorrow afternoon and I will be The Controller."

Having quickly caught a glimpse of the change in me, Anima smiled and said, "Don't worry, Qyoo. You will be The Mediator."

\*\*\*

The previous evening might have been no more than an incredible dream, but for the fact that my real living body still feels the effects. Now I am to go in a serious manner and face the music of The Tower. Leona has twisted my hair high up on my head. "Very sophisticated," she says. I have donned soft platinum wool, a suit that Leona had ordered for my homecoming: a high-collared skin shirt, jacket, and slacks. "Simple and elegant," Leona says, handing me a new pair of delicately molded, platinum-hued boots.

"Leona, what is this? Are you trying to redesign me?" I ask. "I have never disguised myself."

"This is good for your morale," Leona argues. "You yourself said all those pictures have taken a toll."

"It's not so bad. If I were that fragile I'd never get anything done."

"And furthermore, you know the Security Chief will probably be there. You must have your dignity among those surly top dogs. You must hold your own, Mediator."

"Thank you for telling me," I say, sliding into my pretty little boots and clicking my heels across the floor. "All right. Don't worry. I will try not to bring disrespect upon this...this singular occupation I have made."

\*\*\*

Yes, Security Chief Copan was there, seated to the right of The Controller at a long table, and with Attorney General Hauk seated to the left, followed by two aides and a secretary who was not Phillipa but Chief Copan's male secretary. There was a formal air about the room, and the stubborn, flippant side of me was about to suggest that perhaps more information could be gotten in the Light Room. Still, I couldn't allow foolish whimsy to give anyone such dangerously invasive ideas.

When I first walked into the room, at exactly the appointed time, all the heads turned toward me and The Controller stood up and escorted me to a chair. He did not come too close or touch me, but I could feel the glance of his eyes traveling over the near side of me. I looked straight ahead and nodded at the others.

After The Controller had finished a polite greeting and a brief expression of gratitude, Chief Copan said, "Yes, incredibly good work, Mediator, but did you actually happen to tell this person Azor how he would be dealt with?"

I lifted my hands from my lap, placing them before me on the shining black table and knitting my fingers loosely together.

"I believe I told him how I hoped he might be dealt with," I responded. "Of course, it was not my position or prerogative to make any definitive promises."

"It certainly was not," Hauk said. "After taking over

Hedone and brainwashing that pitiful crowd, he now seems to believe that he will be allowed to go off and commit the same felonious act somewhere else. Is that how you hoped he might be dealt with?"

I smiled and said, "Nothing so specific. I told him that perhaps if he willingly returned with his supposed followers, he might be leniently dealt with. In view of his mental condition."

"His mental condition?" Chief Copan said.

My eyes traveled around the table, passing quickly over The Controller's interested face, and settled back on Copan. "Has anyone actually attempted to examine his personality? Azor is quite intelligent and highly persuasive but he is also seriously delusional."

"Are you a doctor, Mediator?" Hauk asked.

"My five doctorates have recently been certified, two of which delve rather comprehensively into some of our more abstruse pathologies," I responded. "But a reasonably bright child could easily come to the same conclusion regarding Azor."

I did not dare to look at The Controller, yet I could feel his subtle smile.

"Yes...well, tell us this:" Hauk went on, " Was Azor at any time verbally abusive, forceful, or violent?"

"Any delusional person who does not get his way is at some time one or all of those," I answered.

"Were you held hostage, Mediator?"

I smiled again and said, "Azor thought I was, but it was only something I allowed, a technique to have my concerned new acquaintances intimidate Azor into letting me speak to them again."

"Again?" Hauk said.

"Initially, Azor thought I might join them and he allowed me to engage his audience. After that they began to annoy him with concern for my well-being, which is just what I had intended."

A barrage of questions ensued, all of which I carefully and thoughtfully answered. Finally, the presiding officials at the table came to the conclusion that Azor ought to at least be thoroughly examined, counseled, and medically treated before punitive measures were taken. But I was not to be let off so easily. Just as I was preparing to rise and depart, Attorney Hauk assailed me with the worst possible question.

"I wonder, can you tell me, Mediator, was that really you in those pictures, the ones we've all seen supposedly of you leaping into the air with some kind of bird fluttering over your head?"

I felt my face flushing and demanded of myself that it stop immediately, deciding that I would stare everyone down and overcome this predicament once and for all. When my eyes very briefly fell upon The Controller I found that his beautiful white teeth were exposed in an irrepressible grin.

"Yes, that was the same person sitting here," I replied. "It isn't one of my usual actions in the resolution of disputes. In this case, necessity without any other assistance has equaled the distraction of a woman leaping into the air."

"With a bird?"

"With a bird," I replied, and smiled at everyone.

After a short silence in the room, The Controller said, "Please don't assume that your skilled handling of the problem on Hedone has gone unappreciated, Mediator. It has not, and will go into the record as a remarkable accomplishment which has probably saved us countless hours of heavily spent effort and possibly even bloodshed. We thank you very much."

"And I thank you," I said.

"I have one or two more simple questions for The Mediator," The Controller said, rising from his chair. "I know you're busy, so you can all be on your way. These are just a few things that will remain off the record."

I stayed in my chair, and when everyone had filed out and

the door was closed, The Controller turned back to me. "Your questions?" I said.

He walked down the length of the table, at whose end I had been placed, and stood above me with a look on his face that I would not allow myself to interpret.

"Will you stay and have dinner with me tonight?"

"Is it important how I answer this?" I asked.

"Nothing will happen to you if you refuse...except that I might have Azor hung from a sturdy limb below in the park."

"You wouldn't defile a place of such beauty?" I said.

"No, not a place of such beauty," he answered.

We adjourned to The Controller's elegant and uncluttered study where a small but exquisite table had already been laid. There I was offered a toast to my success on Hedone, but all through the early evening and our delicious and artfully displayed dinner I felt uncomfortable and sensed that something was wrong. The need to address this concern was unavoidable, but I waited until we were relaxing in comfortable chairs in another place, a dark wine sitting room hung with photos of The Colonies.

"I think you have a bone of policy to pick with me," I said with a cautious display of prescience.

"Yes," The Controller said, and from this man of two distinct personalities for me I was correct in eliminating Anima.

"You have done so well. Your successes are more and more expected. Your conduct and adeptness today were exceptional."

When I heard this pro forma litany of praise, I knew I was in trouble and my heart began to race.

"You needn't condescend. I can feel your disapproval. I'm in the wrong place. I've known for some time that I cannot do what I do and be with you. Your duty to Jurith in regard to me should no longer rule a part of your life. You must let go of the little you have of me and forget--"

"Let me speak! You cannot always take charge of everything,

Qyoo. Yes, I have a duty to honor your mother, but my main duty is to you. You are impulsive and headstrong at times, and it is something I admire in you, but sometimes you must align yourself with the directives of this office. You certainly know when that is required. You might have gone to Hedone with my approval if you had trusted me enough to ask. Then it would not kill me to try and find you. And this! How wrong you are. Your early life has made you feel yourself wanting. You are so afraid of being hurt that you must be the one to hurt first. You have just hurt me--especially after last night--by so quickly and carelessly asking of me what you do not really want."

Because tears were streaming down my face I wished I was not wearing the clothes that reminded me of my earlier dignified self. I wished that my hair was not coiled so falsely above my head. I wished I could separate into two people as easily as The Controller. I wished I could leave the room, and so I did attempt it.

I turned and rushed blindly toward the study doors, but The Controller was there ahead of me, standing with his arms folded.

"Why do you always run away from me when you are most in need of me? It isn't logical."

"Is there anything logical about this situation?" I asked.

"You're right, Qyoo. I think it's a non sequitur. Why are you crying?"

"Mostly because I'm ashamed, horribly ashamed."

"I never spoke to shame you. I never intend to do that."

"Anima...may I call you Anima?"

"Please stop this foolishness."

"You are too perfect for me, Anima."

"It would have been nice if after our dinner I could have explained my dilemma to you, and you could have agreed to help me resolve the problem and then we could have gone to bed."

"I said you are too perfect for me."

"I heard you. Apparently you are not yet ashamed enough to surrender your cutting blade."

And with that Anima truly had the last blow. I thoroughly despised myself. I and my lovely platinum suit turned to silent stone. I will not cry or rave or fall down I swore to myself, because Anima would probably find those ineffectual actions disgusting and beneath me. I stood at a window in frustrated silence, staring at nothing. Anima took a step toward me.

"Just don't come near me or I'll send you flying over both Hustler's moons!" I cried out in a helpless fury.

Anima laughed and said, "I don't think so, but it might be entertaining to see you try it."

"You think that most of the time I'm completely out of control, don't you?"

"You are certainly out of my control," Anima said, continuing to enjoy himself.

"Well now that you've discovered how very bad I can be, you will, I'm sure, have no trouble in letting me--"

"I am very much in awe of you, Qyoo, of the astounding capabilities flowing out of you with the seeming indifference of a mysterious, unstoppable river. I will never know the end of you--there is no end. And I am very much in love with you."

I was dumbfounded.

"I would like to lie down somewhere," I muttered.

"Come," Anima said, taking my hand and starting across the room. Then he turned aside and looked at my face. "You are cold and shaking badly, Qyoo. Are you ill?"

I returned to consciousness lying in Anima's bed with something warm beneath my neck. My suit had been replaced by a covering of soft blanket.

"Little One?" Anima questioned.

"What happened?"

"Your blood flow was reduced and you lost consciousness."

"Hmm...guess I couldn't withstand that level of power surge coursing through my body. My machinery must be broken," I said.

"Lie still. You are all emotion," Anima said.

"We were fighting."

"Not my description...closer to the opposite extreme," Anima said, removing the warm pack from beneath my neck.

"I can't really handle this sort of--"

"Qyoo, try to be calm. You are far too excitable."

"You did something to my circuitry."

"I'll be careful not to do it again."

"What?"

"I would rather show you. You seem better able to withstand me when you are participating."

"What happened to my hair?"

"It was elegant but I removed the annoying pins," Anima said. "Your hair is wonderful to touch." He knelt and put his hands in my hair, sliding it between his fingers. "So very fine and cool, slippery and smooth, like satin."

"I'm feeling faint."

"You are teasing me, Little One."

"Yes, I am teasing you. All at once I feel like a woman leaping into the air with a parrot."

"It was not all a need to distract...the parrot. Some of it was pure pleasure," Anima said with his usual incisiveness and the same disarming grin he had displayed in the afternoon.

"Just as some of this is pure pleasure," I admitted to myself, but aloud.

"Very soon all of it will be," Anima responded.

I lay watching him undress, those quick, deft fingers and hungering dark eyes promising deliverance.

ANIMA

The Burgans again! The one colony which hates me on principle...because Ammon won their submission by threatening to annihilate them. They will not attempt to leave The Federation now, only sting it like a mad hornet every chance they get. Chief Copan became more exercised than I have ever seen him when I suggested going there for a physical confrontation with the unruly governor. It is a long voyage, with some elements of danger upon arrival, and Copan believes the governor must be made to come here. "Would you make that great an effort only to find yourself dismissed?" I asked Copan. The wily bandit has refused to attend even an occasional gubernatorial conference on Hustler, using time and distance as his excuses. They are so distant that they feel themselves outside the loop of parity. From earliest times, they have used this remote perch to their advantage, swooping down on passing freight with piratical attacks while claiming boundary infractions. Governor Roke makes sham attempts to rein in his wing commanders and yet covertly sanctions everything they do--of course, sharing in the profits of their booty. And yet Bergan is a very necessary, if irregular, terminus for lesser contingents of The Federation's outflying Extra-Security. After countless warnings it is time for a showdown, and I see no solution but the removal of Roke. Yet in pulling out his entrenched roots the colony could suffer severe disruption. Well, it has been done before in other places. We have managed to move a state of near chaos back toward stasis; all done with great attention to delicate and guarded political manipulation. Most colonial governors refer to Roke as Governor Rogue. "Why is his eminence Rogue never at our conferences?" the Pearl governor, Rother Kive, recently asked me. "Why, indeed?" I answered, sorry that for confidential reasons I could

not make the determined reply that Roke had submitted his last refusal. I have thought of a way to make him come here but it is as underhanded and deceitful as Roke himself. So be it.

Roke has a daughter, Ketta, a recent graduate of Beryl, a well known but more socially oriented academy than the rigorous intellectual bastion of Laurels. Ketta frequently stands in for her father at colonial social functions. She is an attractive but spoiled social butterfly, clearly devoid of any interest in folding her wings over a useful profession. She enjoys currying favor in high places and has from time to time fluttered into my path with negative results. My interest in the realm of the fashionable is as fleeting as fashion itself but I am not benighted there. Better acquainting myself with Ketta to learn the patterns of her life is necessary for what we intend.

\*\*\*

I have not spoken with Qyoo in awhile. She has never once called me, always assuming that she is interrupting something. But anyone who calls me is interrupting something. Circumspect and restrained, she will never ask for anything for herself. Her face and voice and body invade my mind involuntarily, but I cannot often stop and think of her because it involves shutting down so many other parts of me that must keep functioning. How ironic that what keeps me functioning so well is the pervasive idea of her presence somewhere reachable. At least we resolved the difficulties of the Hedone incident. As long as we must keep reacquainting ourselves with each other there will be some misunderstandings. Recently, I happened to catch a news video of her at some pacifist event, and the sight of the one named Rone with his hand on her shoulder surprised me. I had no idea what I could feel at a gesture so innocent.

\*\*\*

There was a function at the Governor's Hall last night. I

took advantage of this event to look for Ketta, and found her. She is slender and dark-haired like her father and with his almond eyes. His eyes, I remember, rove through a room, hunting for prey; hers are flirtatious and self-aware of her prettiness. I found that she likes musical events and invited her to sit with me at a small string concert to be held in The Tower Theater the following evening. Upon learning her address, I told her I would send an aide for her. All appears to be going well.

\*\*\*

After the concert ten days ago, I took Ketta to a small, quiet restaurant on the north side of the park. She told me a great deal about her comfortable life on Bergan, carelessly letting drop a fair amount of useful information concerning the lifestyle and habits of her father. I am allowing her to be publicly seen with me at various events. She will ultimately be told that her life is in danger because of her association with me, and that she must go to a place of seclusion and remain there incommunicado for awhile. We will immediately inform her father that she is missing. Because it is well known that she is the darling of her father's eye, we can then expect his journey to Hustler by the swiftest means at his disposal. My informants tell me that Ketta has been vainly announcing to her close friends that I am as good as captured. Pleasant news. My conscience has no impediment there.

\*\*\*

In my preoccupation I have been careless and I am usually not so, and especially not with Qyoo. I should have called her, reassured her in some manner, even taken her into my confidence.

Last night I was standing at my study window for a brief moment, thinking on some problem and watching a driving squall of rain, diagonal silver blades blowing across the illuminated park

canopy far below. Keffer came in and told me that Security needed to see me immediately. They hastily informed me that Qyoo was down in the park in some unnatural condition, whatever that meant, and they wanted to know if they should disturb her privacy and make themselves known to her.

"I'll go," I said, grabbing my coat and ramming my feet into ease boots. I took the speed elevator then raced along the path to the place where they had seen her, not too far from the Summerhouse. I could find her nowhere and asked for hyper-vision, scanning everything in the vicinity as I hurried over the wet path. Then I saw her huddled low on the deck against the door of the Summerhouse. She was completely drenched, her hair darkened by rain and pasted across her face. I wasted no time in speech but simply picked her up, unlocked the door and carried her inside. I ran down the inside steps that led below into the small bathroom, grabbed all the towels I could get my hands on then ran back up and removed some of her outer clothing and wrapped her in them. I knelt on the pillows with her held against my own damp coat while I rubbed her hair dry. Along with all the wetness, her face was streaming with tears.

"Sorry, I was just walking and I got caught in that. I never thought that you would come here. I never meant for you to come and do this. I was just walking and--"

"Why were you walking? Why? On a night like this!" I demanded to know. And you are crying. What has happened?"

She turned her sad crystal eyes on me and, without knowing anything, I nearly cried along with her.

"I just needed to get out, to walk. The large trees are so comforting. I never think about the rain...have never gotten used to such a startling thing happening. Water from the sky."

"Black suns! Qyoo, tell me what is going on?"

"This warm floor feels good. I'll be dry soon. I can catch Transit back. I never meant for you to come and do this."

Her body was shaking. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, buried my face in her sweet damp hair and said, "Please talk to me, Little One. Please open up and talk to me."

"How are you?" she said in a flat voice.

"I'm fine. How are you?" I asked with great caution and hoping to start somewhere. Then I turned her around again and studied her eyes filled with so much pain.

"Is it...was it...? I've been so busy that I never even thought about... Qyoo, you could not think that I would..."

Qyoo dropped her head and then lifted it again and her eyes traveled around the room. I knew that she was remembering us there together, and I did not know how I could begin to explain what she must have encountered in recent videos, but I intended to do it if we had to stay there all night.

I swore several oaths and said, "If only we saw each other more you would understand that--"

That was the wrong beginning, and she stood up suddenly and said, "I don't want to understand anything. I just want to go."

"Well, you will not go, not until I've explained this very grievous misunderstanding."

"If you try to keep me here against my will, I am so beyond caring what happens that I will fight to leave. Then you will need to have me arrested for daring to touch you like that."

"Fight on," I said in astonishment, "the penalty will be mine." But after a few of her angry shoves in an effort to leave, I grabbed her wrists and kissed them in misery. "Stop!" I shouted. "I can't stand this." I pushed her against the pillows, pinned her hands as carefully as I could, kissed her cold mouth and said, "Understand this at least if you won't let me explain: There is no one but you. No one!"

"I'm hurting!"

"Am I hurting you?" I said with a startled voice and quickly released her.

"It's my heart that hurts!" Qyoo cried.

"And now I am hurting," I said. "Will you let me speak?"

Finally, I was allowed to explain. Qyoo apologized with pitiful remorse, and I said, "I fully understand, Qyoo, but now you are privy to some more treachery and I don't like that because the more you learn the worse it is for you."

"Anima, it seems I am not long-suffering," Qyoo lamented. "This...this lack of restraint has only caused you--"

"The fault was mine, an error of omission," I said.

She leaned forward on her knees and looked at me.

"Are you getting dry? Are you warm enough?" I asked, lifting a clotted tendril of hair from her eyes. "Forgive me. I'll arrange for you to enter the Summerhouse any time you wish."

"Please forgive me for disturbing you tonight, Anima."

"Qyoo, I want you to disturb me from time to time and think nothing of it. I am yours. You are mine. You have the right to disturb me. Sometimes I disturb your life, do I not?"

"Not ever! I love your presence...even in anger."

"You have never said that to me, Little One, and it makes me want you more than I can stand. Come here."

Thus warmed by a sweeter friction we ended the stormy night.

\*\*\*

A month has passed. I am told that Roke is speeding toward Hustler and that he has brought six war ships with him. This would be amusing, if not so annoying. They will not be allowed in our air space. I am going down to the Security Communications Room and barge into his flight deck in hologram to remind him of this longstanding policy, which he already knows as well as I.

\*\*\*

And so I have just returned from the SCR, leaving Roke in a vitriolic snarl.

"I am coming to find my daughter!" he fairly howled at me.

"And you will certainly be allowed to help us look for her, but only on your own two feet, Governor." Former Governor, I wished to say. "You know that your war ships will not be allowed in our air space, let alone our docking services. This is nothing new at all but old policy."

"Then they will stand off and wait for me," he bellowed.

"Better if they stand far off, back at their own facilities, in fact. This is busy air space and six war ships hovering out there with all the other metal at work are just an obstruction and a nuisance. May I ask why you found it necessary to bring them with you?"

"For protection in travel!" Roke yelled with bulging cheeks that would soon blister if he didn't calm down.

"Travel protection is precisely why we have Extra-Security and that is why they are at their jobs at all times. Your war ships have no authority to patrol among The Colonies. Without even a word of warning from me, they will automatically be considered a threat to the system."

"Well, now I wonder if you will even let my own ship dock," the slightly more tractable Roke remarked.

"We will but only in a shield dock, and only you may disembark."

"What in blazes does this mean?"

"Nothing at all except normal procedure in a situation you yourself have created. With six heavily armed war ships close on your tail, you have been perceived as hostile and now you must be brought through proper security."

"I have a staff, my aides and a crew that will have been confined for a long time."

"Then I think you should have shown them more consideration in your travel preparations. Your ship will be serviced to the satisfaction of your crew, but for the time being you alone are

free to disembark. Control closes channel," I said and watched Roke fade away in a pique of dissatisfaction.

Earlier, I was on the phone talking to Security at one of The Club's lesser dwellings where Ketta has been sequestered to prevent her fabricated endangerment. It really is a very comfortable guest house sometimes used for visiting Colonial governors--Roke, of course, never having been among them. We have discovered that Ketta's various personal accounts receive monetary credits that regularly arrive from Bergan and in some instances can be directly linked to Roke's contraband earnings. It seems this pretty little butterfly has a profession after all, as a conduit for her father's large sums of illegal income. By quietly spreading her alias accounts among various Colonial monetary houses, she has managed to store up for her family a very handsome fortune. Her expensive jewels and exquisitely designed clothing certainly reflect her willingness to partake of these overflowing coffers. Roke has a dual purpose in arriving on Hustler, and that must certainly be to rescue both his daughter and the ill-gotten family fortune.

Ketta has asked to see me, and having had that possibility explained as too risky has begged to speak to me in hologram. She assumes that the might of Control can swiftly dispose of her dilemma and that she will soon be back to reeling in her trophy fish. She is her father's misguided daughter. Alas, the indulged husk has been polished and lacquered to a certain perfection but there is no kernel of sustaining meat inside.

I do not wish to see her again. What shall I do with her? A case could be made that she has no idea of her father's misconduct. But all those hidden accounts would bespeak no such innocence. Amazingly enough, I know that if I asked my Qyoo what I should do with this source of so much short-lived misery for her, she would argue for leniency. In such matters, she is like the Jurith in me, but in certain startling moments she is very

much her father, as I am. Is it any wonder that I think of her as part of me?

\*\*\*

At last Roke arrived and soon found himself before a panel of top echelon interrogators. His stance was one of outrage and indignation. He answered no question to the satisfaction of Control and frequently incriminated himself in loose-tongued outbursts. He is far too used to answering to no authority but his own. This governor remains ungovernable and unrepentant. Near the end, after listening to a sampling of those uneven exchanges, and in between communications with General Forther on the Karak situation, I entered the room.

"What have you done with my daughter?" Roke screamed at me.

"Your daughter is at the moment far more comfortable than she may be in future," I replied.

"Controller, I will see that you--"

"Roke," Chief Copan interrupted, "This disrespect will not be tolerated. It will go heavily against you alongside all your other infractions. Calm yourself. You've long extorted from your own government--there is no shadow of doubt here--and now the time has come for The Federation's payback."

"This must be decided in a court of law!" Roke shouted.

"As it will be," I said, nodding to Attorney General Hauk. "Until that time you and your daughter will be held in confinement. Perhaps not quite in the manner to which you are accustomed but fairly and comfortably."

"I own a house here. I will live there," Roke decided in his unrelenting authoritarian way.

"You will not," I assured him. "You will live where we and your greed have put you. You and your daughter, too, are ones who bear watching, Roke. You have gone unwatched far too long. Out on such a distant perimeter we must have a governor who knows

how to police himself or herself--perhaps it will be a woman we appoint this time. In any case, it will be a person of presumed integrity who has only to learn from your misconduct where lawlessness ends."

\*\*\*

If only the aforementioned series of events presaged a tidy solution to one incidence of poor governance. It certainly does not. Out on the penumbra of The Federation stands governorless Bergan, more unguarded and susceptible to lawless elements than ever. There can be no more vacillation among members of The Club in regard to my conclusion: I must go there and bring about order. I know when my physical presence is required and this is one of those times. Fortunately, the problems on Karak are winding down and I have already sanctioned all the actions necessary to tie up loose ends. The proposed journey I must make is long and arduous and will take me away from the daily business of The Tower for several months. I have complete trust and faith in Keffer. That is why I mentored him through the ranks and selected him as my aide. His job will be to communicate with me and to field any new and unattended situations to the very capable members of this old hierarchal system, and he will do it with all the experience I have afforded him and can myself supply over a long distance--and with the abundant knowledge of Phillipa. I will take Phillipa's very competent secretary Erik with me. I am finishing off all the impending problems that can be quickly disposed of and have already effected proactive steps and preventative measures for the others. It is not the first time I have been called away and I have so far returned without serious incident or crisis in my absence.

I have nothing but confidence, except in one perplexing area, that of the personal. How can I journey so far from Qyoo or be so long away from her? Perhaps it is not her problem but it is certainly mine. Possibly, when I tell her I am going her

own strength of character and that stubborn refusal to lay herself bare, which I have so often witnessed, will also strengthen me for such a long separation and send me on my way.

I have tried to contact Qyoo to explain what must be done but Leona tells me she is away on Vetronea, once again in the middle of something, a property dispute I believe. I cannot disrupt her business, but I have sent word that I would like to see her before I leave.

\*\*\*

Qyoo has finally returned, and I asked that she be brought to the Summerhouse this evening after she has rested. Even though my agents are always somewhere about, we are much more alone in that small geometric haven, and there are certain enhancing memories which come to mind in the place. There will be no interruptions. We will need this time.

\*\*\*

The moment I saw Qyoo I began to miss her. She met me at the door of the Summerhouse, and the delight and fresh exuberance of her expression heightened my own guilty sense of desertion.

Once inside and seated on the pillows of our warmed floor, I questioned Qyoo gently about her work. But in a very short time her sensitive insight revealed itself.

"You are different, Anima, or am I talking to The Controller?"

"Both," I said, and stared a long moment into those discerning crystal eyes so breathtakingly reflecting the evening's blue-violet hues.

Her pale blue skin pants and shirt clung to her body in an irresistible way as she drew up her knees and clasped her arms around them. A small furrow formed in her brow. I wished to smooth it with my fingers but would not trust myself to touch her

until I had finished with my sad news.

"It is nothing very serious," I said. "I must go away for a while."

"How long?"

"Just a mere...few months."

"A mere few...I suppose it is Burgan."

"Yes, Qyoo."

She turned her head aside, staring out the windows, and I knew it was done to hide her strong feelings. "So far away," she said and turned back to me with a quick smile.

"Now may I hold you, please?" I said. "I am much in need of you."

"No, Anima. I'm hurting."

"All the more reason to let me hold you, Little One."

"And I am angry. I'm sorry, but I am angry! How can I be angry at you? It isn't logical, as you would say. How can I be angry at you, even though you can so easily tell me--"

"No! It was the most difficult thing I've had to do in preparation for this journey."

Qyoo gave an agile leap and walked to the windows with her arms rigidly folded and her stiff, slender back turned to me.

"There is really nothing more for us, is there, Anima? Why do I complain? I go away, too. I myself cannot even imagine what else there could be."

I sat thinking of useless answers and wishing that my arms were not empty.

Then Qyoo turned around and said, "Oh, I don't blame you. How could I ever blame you for a circumstance beyond us? It can't be altered. All of the time I have already spent with you will be the most memorable part of my life."

"Please don't put your cherished generosity in that murderous tense," I said, growing impatient. "You are not suddenly gone from my life."

"But you will soon be gone from mine."

"Shall I go now, then?" I asked, knowing that I only wanted her to come to me and disliking myself for such a tactic.

"Yes, go now. Let us get it over with once and for all, this forever going away and returning to near strangers."

I was so astonished that I let Qyoo simply walk out the door. I stood a moment in disbelief and then rushed after her. She had gotten as far as the steps and collapsed there in a fit of weeping.

"How easy it is for you...how easy to go away from me!"

I picked her up and carried her back inside and lay down on the pillows with her wrapped tightly against me.

"I knew the moment I saw you I couldn't leave you," I said. "Come with me."

She threw her head back in surprise and said, "Anima, don't imagine me a...a manipulative child...trying to force you to concede to something by a hopeless fit of tears."

"Oh, I thought you were," I said, laughing and kissing her. "I don't know why you were not immediately a part of my plan. You will come with me. You will be of tremendous help, Mediator, and astonish everyone...just as you do me."

"You will have the cabin next to mine. We will travel and talk of what must be done on Burgan, and wake up beside each other. You will be with me. I will have you with me."

#### QYOO

I am traveling with The Controller, now known as Condor. I have become a part of his staff. I have left my household, my sad family, and my little parrot all behind. No longer are we hurled through Colonial spaces in Control's distinctive shuttle. Now we are in something considerably more intimidating, the Flag Ship of the First Fleet of The Federation, and traveling with

Extra-Security war ship escorts fore and aft. When we finally arrive on Burgan I must make myself useful however I can.

This morning Condor asked me if I would like to come to the bridge and see what our entourage looked like on screen. Very impressive indeed. I met the captain, Captain Lormar, and the crew, congenial women and men but seriously attentive to their work. Then Condor went to communications to speak with the recently appointed governor on Karak, and I went to have tea with the medical doctor on board, Doctor Earlin.

"This must be a very fulfilling profession," I said as we sat in the lounge and swallowed rich black tea.

Doctor Earlin stared off at the evening-blue walls hung with pastoral scenes from Hustler, then returned her gaze to me and said, "Fulfilling but sometimes exhausting. We've just returned from a long expedition, trying to locate a small colony of peacefuls who withdrew from The Federation a century ago and now want and need to return. They were ill, disease-ridden, and dying. We had to quarantine them and heal those we could, then resupply them, help them to rebuild their broken and needy infrastructure and establish a more reliable communications channel."

I stared at the tall doctor's face, high cheekbones topped by large, well-used blue eyes covered with reinforced glassy lens tissue. Her dark blond hair was cut in a short, no-nonsense manner and she wore the Royal Blue very well, the uniform of the First Fleet. In her eyes I saw a sincere interest in me that equaled my own in her.

"How was that colony formed?" I asked. "It must have sprung out of some off-course military air wing."

"Yes, in a manner," the doctor said with scrutiny. "There was a great deal of strife around at the time, and they had had enough of it and were far enough away to retreat and settle. They used all of their fancy equipment, some of it damaged in

frequent battles, to rebuild an old test drifter. It grew and grew with collected space debris and eventually turned into a self-declared sovereign colony by virtue of its remoteness."

"They had broken a prime rule," I said.

"Yes, but by the time we arrived there were too many there who were liable for no infraction. Condor's orders did not allow for any punitive measures. His proclivity is always to the positive and constructive."

As Doctor Earlin made the latter remark she again looked at me closely, and I knew she was wondering how I fit into this journey. She must know that I am not part of the original flight plan, but would not presume to question my sudden appearance.

"I've heard of your many successes, Mediator. Is that how I am to address you or should I say doctor?"

"Please call me Qyoo," I said.

"Then you must call me Teal."

"I don't mind giving you your proper title, especially in this official environment where you should be respectfully addressed," I said.

"Then call me Teal when we are alone," she suggested with a friendlier smile than I had heretofore been afforded.

"Oh, sorry, there is a message in my spike that a member of the crew has an earache. Fortunately, I've never had one, even with all the demands continually pouring into my ear-spike. It's probably just a pressure inversion. Welcome aboard. We will talk more, Qyoo."

After Doctor Earlin left, I sat alone sipping my tea and thinking of this fascinating little space-drifting village I have joined. My longest voyage until this one was accomplished in sleep, and now I am very much awake and eager to study everything my eyes fall upon.

This evening I have dined with Condor, Captain Lormar, First Mate Jenid, Doctor Earlin, Erik, and another aide named Kolla. I

listened to a lively discussion about the last expedition, of which Condor seemed very well informed. He contributed a great deal to the conversation. I was the odd person out, sitting mostly in fascinated silence but with an occasional question of my own. I was not necessarily ignored or left out, but I do feel rather like a freelancing interloper. I would like very much to be of use. It would be uncomfortable to be thought of only as Condor's consort, but I'm not certain that anyone, other than close-mouthed Erik and probably thoroughly loyal Kolla, is even aware of our relationship. From Doctor Earlin's treatment of me, I'm quite certain no one else is.

\*\*\*

Last night, with my usual unshakeable need for respectful distancing, and an intensified desire for appropriate behavior, I left early for my cabin where I did my ablutions and quietly retired to my bed. An hour later, my door slid open and Anima appeared at my softly lit bedside. I was propped on three pillows, wide awake and staring at nothing.

"Are you tired, Qyoo?" he asked in a patient voice.

"Not very," I answered, adjusting my focus. "My brain is sorting over a mountain of data and will not shut down."

"Why did you not come to me, if only to say good night?"

"I'm having a bit of trouble with all of this, Anima," I tried to explain.

"You are feeling a little strange and left out but that will go away very soon. It has nothing to do with us. From time to time throughout our waking hours I have thought of us together. Then, when at last I come to the best part, I find that you have retired without even speaking to me."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be thought of as just...just--"

"Just mine?"

"Anima, I'm very proud to be with you, but--"

"And I am very proud of you. I understand. It is your self-respect again. Let me assure you that everyone on this ship respects you. You are quite a bit more famous than you realize. You have been accepted as part of my staff. There is no question of this. I expect your help. You may wear the Royal Blue if it will make you feel more comfortable."

"Oh," I said, "I never thought of that. I don't suppose I've earned it. Perhaps Doctor Earlin would take offense."

"Doctor Earlin would never display any such emotion to you, either in or out of my presence."

"You know your crew very well."

"Yes. I have approved the placement of every person on this ship. I know their backgrounds and I know what to expect. I have enough of the random to consider without the surprise of errant conduct within my own crew."

"How then could you have ever chosen me? I am nothing but errant conduct. Oh, I see, I am some of the random that--"

"Qyoo, you are the one exception to all my rules. Good night, Little One."

Anima leaned down, kissed my forehead and left my cabin.

I lay for half an hour thinking that I had handled myself very poorly. My head was filled with selfish pride, lolling upon my pillows like a huge swollen wound. I was ashamed. I flung back my covers, slipped from my bed and tiptoed toward Anima's cabin. The door between our compartments had not been entirely closed, as if it would have been considered rude.

I stood in the middle of his dark room in total silence, myself wondering what it was that I intended. Then as I stared at the bed I was startled by a profile glitter of jet eye, but saw no other motion from either cover or sprawling body beneath.

We are racing through endless, frozen black space, and I am standing in this warm capsule of life in the presence of all that I desire, I thought. I was overcome, gathering up my gown and

settling down in the middle of the soft wool carpet. Cross-legged and with my head propped in my hands, I stared at the silent, reclining form of Anima. My ears were tuned to hear his breathing but I very soon heard instead a low, mellow voice, slightly amused, slightly impatient. "Isn't that enough philosophizing for this night? Come."

As I slipped into his arms I whispered, "How lucky to be so often forgiven...so easily understood."

"I have learned to give you your head, like a high-spirited Thoroughbred on the track. First you cross the line, exploding with all that nervous energy, and then I manage to calm you enough to present your hard-won garland of praise."

"I am a horse?" I said with feigned astonishment. But laughing Anima was through with talking.

Some time later, I awoke and found Anima's hand as always in my hair. I ran my fingers over the back of that hand and whispered to myself, "I'm glad for this, glad I've come."

"No more than I," Anima responded, "But go to sleep, Little One. We both need some and have not left much time for it."

\*\*\*

I decided that I would not wear the Royal Blue, lest it be thought that I got it undeservedly. I will stand out in my various skin pants and shirts, but I will accept this position as the truth of the matter and try to make myself useful.

"You are good for us," Doctor Earlin said one day to my surprise and delight. "You listen to us and let us talk at you. You are a very soothing person, Qyoo. We like having you in our midst and hearing your wise thoughts."

Wise thoughts heard by everyone but myself, I decided, clasping my hands together beneath my chin in embarrassment and gratitude.

"You are being very kind, I think, Teal. I only wish I

could be of greater use," I said and then resumed my lunch, taking a few bites of an apple and some milled grains.

"No, I have meant what I said, and I think when we reach Burgan you will be invaluable to Condor."

"I'm sure his competence in political matters will far outshine any help I may give," I said.

"But don't you realize...perhaps you do not."

"What?" I asked, studying the doctor's troubled face.

Doctor Earlin reached her hand across the table, touched it briefly upon my arm and said in a regretful voice, "Despite our formidable strength and powers, there is still an element of peril for us. You must know that Condor is despised on Burgan."

"I hope that will be overcome," I said, almost choking on my food, but I was saved from a revelation of my ignorance by an interruption of one of the doctor's assistants.

Condor has never spoken of his relationship with Burgan, and I am worried. I really have no right to pry into confidential matters, and yet if I am seriously meant to be of use I ought to know much more than I do. I wonder how I will broach this subject.

\*\*\*

After the evening dinner and as I passed by the half open door, I saw that Condor was working at a terminal in a little study beside his sleeping quarters. The screen was scrolling rapidly, and I stood a moment watching him run his fingers through waves of lustrous black hair as he concentrated. His hair, I noticed, was longer. I was not overly surprised at that but wondered who cut it for him. Someone on board must double as a barber. Almost everyone had several minor jobs in addition to their specialties. I would not make my presence known by an unwanted interruption, so I went into my cabin and lay on the floor where I sometimes liked to rest. The floor was hard but

covered with a soft carpet, and I often preferred to lie there because from childhood I had favored a rather hard surface.

I awoke to find myself being carried by Anima to his bed. When I was first gathered up, I had suddenly cried out some complaining sound in a startled voice.

"I'm sorry. I found you asleep on the floor again," Anima explained. "Do you not like the bed?"

"I'm not overly fond of it," I answered, "but sometimes it's nice, although a little too soft."

I was still thinking about how I would talk to Condor about Burgan. My worry was increasing, and even though I knew my emotions were probably too sensitive in that regard I needed to say something before things got worse.

"I'm going to leave you here to sleep and go back to do some more work," Anima said. "I think my bed is not as soft as yours, a good excuse to have you where I can find you when I return."

I fell asleep and soon entered a very complicated dream which essentially became a monstrous scene of death for Condor among the Burgans. I awoke thrashing about with low cries of the most terrible fear and shock. When I was able to stop, I rushed into my own cabin and sealed the door, hoping no one had heard. I needed privacy. I ran into a corner of my room and sank to the floor behind a chair, hugging myself in the darkness and trying to stop the terror of what I had seen in the dream. I could not banish it from my head, but the destructive scene was so real that if I continued to see it I would slip into dysfunction.

Meanwhile, Anima had become aware of everything. He had to unseal the door and hunt through my room to find me, and I knew that he was growing very disturbed. He was in fact about to voice his annoyance at what looked like ridiculous conduct when he examined me more closely and everything changed.

Anima knelt on the floor, drawing me toward him while I turned my face away. I think my eyes were still glazed over in a

suspended state of horror.

"Why are you here like this? Little one, you are very far away. What is wrong? Please answer me."

"It was something I saw...real...very real."

"A dream?"

"Please don't ask me. I don't want to talk about it. I didn't want to be found...was trying to straighten myself out. Removing myself isn't so easy to do in these quarters."

Anima picked me up and sat in the chair with me. I could feel the tension in his body, strong and powerful, nothing like the ruined body I had seen in the dream. Once again the sharp visual image tormented me and my body went rigid.

"Look at me," Anima said, and I looked into his eyes.

"Relax, Qyoo. Relax your entire body. Try to let go completely. There is nothing to fear. Nothing can hurt you."

"Oh, but there is something that will hurt you!" I cried.

"Who has planted such an idea in your head?"

"It doesn't matter. It's the truth."

"Who?" Anima demanded, and I saw anger glinting in his eyes. Now he was Condor and poor Doctor Earlin might suffer the effects of his displeasure. Studying me, he would come to know almost everything without my saying a word. I should not even have thought of the doctor, for I know how I myself can get things out of another's mind when I concentrate on doing so.

"Doctor Earlin," Anima said with knife-like precision.

"Please don't be angry with her," I said at once. "She thought I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That the Burgans despise you. I dreamed that they had destroyed you. It was a very bad dream. I can't get it out of my head. I can't--"

Anima held my face against his shirt and I felt his fingers sliding through my hair and then pressing hard against the back

of my head. "Stop it, Qyoo. Please try to stop it."

"I want very much to stop it," I muttered into his shirt.

"Qyoo, it is not I the Burgans despise but your own father. Unfortunately, to the Burgans we are one and the same. Your father once threatened to destroy the entire colony because they were disruptive and would not come to heel. They were forced to surrender and ever since that time many have hated Ammon."

"I must see that nothing happens to you," I said.

"Oh, Little One, thank you for your concern but nothing is going to happen to me."

"I don't believe you."

"Doctor Earlin should never have spoken to you about this. She is a fine doctor but she has no idea how you are put together, that you are a Sensitive and that with the wrong stimulus your whole body can drown in emotion. It is the very thing which when properly channeled makes you so superior as a mediator. She was beginning to see this. She has told me how she enjoys your depth of understanding. I am sorry, Qyoo."

"Please don't say anything to Doctor Earlin."

"I will do exactly as you wish me to do."

"Thank you," I said, still struggling for containment.

"Come with me. I'll massage some of the tension from your neck and shoulders and hold you until you sleep. After that perhaps your dreams will be good ones."

The matter of the Burgans was far from settled in my mind, but I was very much tranquilized by Anima's devotion.

When a well-tended and relaxed version of me was lying in his arms I asked in a more carefree voice, "Who cuts your hair?"

"My hair? I haven't thought about it. Someone will. My barber is not on this journey. Do you not like it?"

"I think I'm as fond of your hair as you are of mine."

I saw that Anima was relieved to find my train of thought elsewhere engaged. "I'm glad something pleases you," he said

with a chortle of laughter. "Then for the time being and if you want, you may cut it just as you like."

"Not too short," I suggested, and Anima agreed that this would be acceptable.

\*\*\*

I am still having trouble with the thought of our eventual contact with the Burgans. Strangely enough, I have no fear for myself. It is all for Condor. I cannot pry into confidential matters and yet I want to know more. I have noticed that when we dine little mention is made of the Burgans, and I have given this a sinister interpretation. There is no Extra-Security high official aboard and this, too, seems strange to me. It implies that Condor intends to handle everything himself. Still, there are military personnel throughout the vessel and in the very intimidating fighter escorts accompanying us. If I were the Burgans I would be concerned enough in observing the heavily armed Flagship of The Federation's First Fleet standing off my surface. Some of the Burgans' most advanced war equipment came to Hustler with Governor Roke, but they will have many other harmful wings patrolling the corridors of their space. Apparently, they have always been a very bellicose colony.

\*\*\*

Last evening I had such a severe headache that Anima took me to Doctor Earlin's well-equipped office and did a brain scan.

"Painful but not serious. You really tense up when you worry. Appropriate and light exercise, deep breathing, a warm shower and more rest than you're getting," Anima said as he ran the back of his hand across my flushed cheek.

He pressed his thumbs against the base of my neck at the back of my head and held them there until some of the pain began to melt away. Then he ordered the door to open and allowed the

doctor, waiting outside, to peek into her bailiwick.

"Can I be of any help at all?" she asked.

"She will be fine, just tension," Anima said. "As you've probably discovered by now, our Mediator is ultra-sensitive, the penalty she must pay for being so good at her job."

"You should rest quietly in a darkened room. I'll give you a sedative," Doctor Earlin offered.

"No!" I cried out in overreaction, but quickly calmed myself and said, "Thank you very much, Doctor Earlin. I'll just rest."

I went to my cabin and showered, rolling my head gently in the warm recycled water. Then I lay down, but Condor came in and said, "You will not feel better until you've unburdened yourself of the cause of this tension. I'll sit here while you talk."

"I know that I can't ask you about confidential matters," I said. "I know that I can't interfere in that way and yet--"

"Qyoo, you may ask me anything...anything you like. Whether or not you will get an informative answer is another matter. Stay where you are, relaxed, eyes closed, and tell me everything that disturbs you. Let me decide how I'll respond."

I threw my arm over my aching closed eyes and said, "I've really become involved here, haven't I? I'm a person who must have facts, must have answers, or all the attacking variables of possibility will kill me. I'm here because we both wanted it, but I must be of use; that's who I am, and I can't be of use in ignorance."

"Go on."

"Oh, I cannot do this!" I cried, propping myself up on two pillows. "It appears that I'm stepping into your sovereign province. I would never presume to--"

"Presume. I'm not that pompous or insecure...or sovereign."

"Do you intend to go among the Burgans?"

"Not immediately upon arrival. Do you think that I would bring you into a situation of danger, Qyoo?"

"I'm not afraid for myself."

"No. That is the whole crux of the matter, isn't it? Well, I am not so foolish as to ruin a valuable colony by invited destruction of myself."

"Then do you intend to...to repeat the policy of my father?" I asked in a controlled voice as my body trembled with my daring.

"Ah, the ultimate inducement to surrender," Condor said, and even in the dimness of my cabin and with unfocused eyes I could see his scornful smile. He then spoke as the regretful warrior but with starkly revealing rhetoric. "The convenient killing apparatus borne of wayward genius--will I hold it over their heads to compel a state of peace? An expedient method of getting peace, profane at best and a preface to more wars at worst."

"You say it all very well."

"And you believe I will repeat the process?" Condor asked.

"I suppose the threat of destruction must remain firmly in place but possibly it will go unspoken," I said with all the temperance I could summon.

"I won't carelessly imperil this Office, and my first and last pronouncements will be of and for peaceful accord. Does that suit you, Mediator?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Then, my valued supernumerary conscience, please give me a share of peace, too, by resting here free of worry." He stood up, kissed the palm of my nervous hand, and walked to the door.

"By now I think you must regret having asked me to come," I could not resist calling after him.

"I knew what to expect. I'm still overjoyed at that sudden foresight," Condor said as the door closed.

I slept late, as our cycle of day goes here, and awoke feeling refreshed and hungry. I am going to lunch.

\*\*\*

Doctor Earlin was sitting with Condor's special aide, Kolla, in the dining room. I have spoken only a few times to Kolla, who is a handsome, young blond male with serious, keenly focused gray eyes and a head full of useful knowledge. I believe he is about the same age as myself. When he speaks to me, he makes only brief eye contact with a shy deference to whatever I may say. I sense well reined in strong opinion beneath the surface. Because he is so loyal to Condor, his respect for me is undeviating, but I wish he did not feel the need to hide so much of himself.

"Kolla was just telling me that he was a great sprinter in his sports days," Doctor Earlin said.

"I don't think I put it quite that way," Kolla explained. "I merely liked to run and did a great deal of it."

"When I had vacation on Hustler, I found that I liked to run around the edge of a lake," I said. "It was a wonderful feeling to run so far over such a distance in that beautiful setting."

"Yes, it would be," Kolla agreed.

"But you can still do it, can't you?" I asked. "I mean there is nothing to prevent you from running whenever you have the time."

"Whenever I have the time," Kolla repeated with a shrug.

"None of us have enough of that," Doctor Earlin said, "And speaking of time, I'm off to my little cell to do some lab work."

Kolla jumped up and grabbed his half finished plate, and I said, "Please, Kolla, stay and finish your lunch. I like company when I eat." He sat back down and stabbed at his plate in silence, occasionally glancing at me as I peeled a beautiful plump red pear.

"Were you born on Hustler?" I asked.

"Oh yes, old native stock," Kolla said with a jestful pride.

"And quite good at Laurels. Advanced studies, right?"

"I liked academia well enough."

"And did you--"

"Are you...excuse me."

"No, go ahead."

"Are you having only that pear for your lunch?"

"This pear?" I said, holding up my half finished work.

"This gorgeous pear. What a shame to eat it. Yes, it's going to be my lunch. I really prefer to nibble from time to time, like a sort of grazing preserve animal."

Serious Kolla was laughing when Condor sauntered up to our table. I thought Kolla would click his heels when he stood up. He bent his head to the side, listened to a few words from Condor then nodded to me and left.

"You've frightened off my lunch partner," I said.

"No, I didn't frighten him off. He's just that way," Anima said, sitting down across from me. "What did you do to him? He was laughing most noticeably. A rare occurrence."

"Nothing...merely explained my eating habits...said I nibbled sort of like a grazing animal."

"Ah, that would do it. Your headache is gone and you are feeling better."

"Is that a question or an observation?"

"And you are mischievous, so you are definitely well. Good."

When my pear was cored, I sliced it into thin spears and ate the slices one by one with utter delight at such sweetness. Finally, I licked the juice from my fingers with an attempt at subtle delicacy.

"You are fascinating to watch," Anima said in a soft voice.

I could never have convinced myself that at that precise moment I wasn't experiencing the same pleasure in looking across the table. The joy of this suddenly filled me with an almost manic daring. I stood up as my scarcely moving lips formed soundless emotive words. What had I done? Temporary insanity.

Anima's capable vision could easily interpret my mouthed words. Glimpsing the surprise flashing over his understanding, I turned away to carry my flaming self off without looking back.

"That was ruinous," Anima said in the evening when he found me reading at my screen, and complacent in my robe until that moment. "You can be very surprising, Qyoo. The words you didn't speak floated in and out of my consciousness all day. I'd like to hear the audio version."

"I have a playful quarter of spontaneity that sometimes overwhelms the shy rest of me," I said, quite embarrassed.

Anima leaned against my cabin wall with his arms folded.

"That was play?"

"No. Well, not altogether."

"Then I would like to hear it spoken."

I walked over and leaned against the wall beside Anima, my eyes cast down upon my bare feet. My impulsiveness had come back to bite me and there was no escape, even though this serious moment was so far removed from that other audacity at lunch. I could feel the heat spreading over my face.

"I..." I said, glancing up at him, "I want you, my love."

"Your solitary rest is over, and that blush is the final stroke," Anima said, sliding his hands down my arms.

"The power of words," I muttered, but it was the unspoken.

\*\*\*

I have not seen Condor or any of the crew in what must accrue as several days. We have been under attack from Roke's six warships. Our shielded Flag Ship has returned fire, and our fighter escorts have also been very busy. The Burgan war ships had claimed "hazard condition" after their long journey from their Colony and were allowed to resupply on Vetronea. They immediately proceeded to dog us through Colonial air space, but were carefully watched by other Extra-Security patrols. They

declared their intention to simply return to their Burgan base, then slowed their cruising speed until Extra-Security veered off and our fighter escorts began to monitor them over the greater distance. Informed of their closing speed, Condor immediately ordered our Flag Ship shielded, and very soon thereafter we and our escorts were engaged in battle with the six out-flyers.

I cannot believe that even former Governor Roke would have sanctioned such stupidity. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from this conduct. It was clearly made known to everyone that Condor was on a peaceful mission to reconstruct disruptive Burgan practices to a better end for all the Burgans--except for a few self-aggrandizing pirates. These reckless freebooters must have a great deal to lose. I am angry at the endangerment and waste of resources, and I've no doubt that Condor is no less angry. We are being knocked around a bit by maneuvering tactics, but having seen our awe-inspiring configuration when I first came aboard, I know who holds the dominant position.

\*\*\*

As I was finishing my journal entry, Doctor Earlin had me paged and asked me to go at once to Kolla's quarters where he had been carried after an injury. The doctor had already taken care of Kolla but wanted me to sit with him as she had no monitoring device in his room and she was busy elsewhere. It seems Kolla was standing in the Communications Room during a rough maneuver and a metal light deflector came loose and hit him in the head. Kolla was still unconscious. He had been scanned and a fast-working, live intra-heal applied to the small but deep lesion.

I sat cleansing the drying blood from his face with damp sterile towels. I knew that he would soon awake and not have much pain from the wound itself but there would probably be a great deal of discomfort manifested by a nasty headache. There would also be some confusion, and I was ready to deal with this.

I decided to remove his bloody tunic. As I was tucking the covers around his bare chest, he groaned and opened his eyes.

"Mother?" he said.

"I am Qyoo, Kolla. Do you remember me?"

"I was running...and...and someone threw a rock. Sorry, mother. Don't worry."

I took the small Evaluator Doctor Earlin had left with me and held it against his neck over a carotid.

"You will be just fine, Kolla. You were in the CR and something fell and hit your head."

"Ah, yes. I must get back...mother," Kolla said and started to rise. He was quite strong and I had to apply more force than I would have liked to hold him down.

"No, Kolla. You have a wound in your head that must heal. Lie still, please."

"Don't...don't baby me. I didn't realize...mother...didn't realize you were so strong."

"Look at me. Focus carefully now, Kolla. Who am I?"

"You are...you are... Where is Condor?"

"Condor is quite busy."

"Yes, but he was waiting for me to--"

"Kolla, you must lie still. Does your head hurt?"

"Yes...really a bad headache. What happened?"

I explained all over again and asked Kolla to identify me. His gray eyes blinked and focused carefully then closed.

"You are The Mediator," he said, turning his head aside in embarrassment.

"Please call me Qyoo. Do you need something for the pain in your head? Doctor Earlin has left an anodyne for you that will help."

"Anything that will help get me on my feet."

"No, it will help you rest." I picked up the injector and said, "Let me have your arm."

"I have data that Condor needs."

"Others will take care of it. Your arm, please, Kolla."

He reluctantly drew his arm from beneath the covers and said, "What happened to my uniform?"

"Your tunic was bloody and I removed it."

"How long will this take?"

"You will heal very quickly if you lie here and rest."

"You are certainly The Mediator," Kolla said, and I smiled. It was the first unadulterated opinion I have heard from him.

\*\*\*

The six war ships are considerably tamed and limping toward their home dock, and things aboard Flag are returning to a more even keel. I have wondered if Burgan officials can possibly have sanctioned these maverick actions, and have decided to ask if the time is right when next I see Condor. He has spent a lot of time in the CR communicating with Extra-Security and probably, most certainly, with Burgan. I don't know when he sleeps. He is never in his cabin of late but sometimes in his study with the door closed. Once I dreamed that he had come into my cabin and put his fingers in my hair; perhaps he did so. We are about two Hustler weeks out from Burgan air space, and tensions aboard are mounting. Kolla is back at work with Secretary Erik and Condor. He thanked me in a very touching, if formal, manner, and now even grudges an occasional smile when we meet. He does not fully comprehend that his resentment toward me is mostly because of my proximity to Condor. As if I could steal away or even slightly mitigate any of Condor's strength and independence. I must fight with myself to retain my own independence.

\*\*\*

In the second quarter of this day Erik came to find me. I was helping Doctor Earlin with some lab work.

"Condor would like you to come to the meeting room just off the flight deck within a quarter hour," Erik said.

When I arrived I walked in upon a meeting in progress. Around the rectangular table sat Condor, Captain Lormar, Erik, Kolla, and Adjutant Sander. They were all wearing the Royal Blue, and I in my tan skin pants and shirt felt like an odd little puppet pulled out of a toy box. I nodded to the upturned faces and sat down straight-spined in the only empty seat, then placed my folded hands on my lap and looked everywhere but at Condor. I always have that initial problem with him in official settings, until I can distance myself enough from the Anima I know to become an indifferent entity. Condor's engaged and impersonal manner usually hastens the process. Soon I was able to look at him with bland attention and no thought of myself.

"Everyone here but you, Mediator, now knows that when we reach Burgan air space I intend to have the acting governor shuttled aboard for a comprehensive interrogation--of course disguised as a familiarizing discussion," Condor said.

I saw no reason to respond yet and sat waiting for more.

"That was my original intention and, in the light of this recent insurgency, it seems even more necessary. Because my presence may well be inflammatory, I would like to have you present at that initial meeting as both a tempering influence and a contributor to the discussion, when it appears that your input can be useful." Condor paused and studied me.

"Yes," I said, nodding my head in agreement.

"The acting governor is a woman named Marl Shinn. We have already looked each other over, in a manner of speaking, in a superficial communication that involved a few sparks of fire from both sides. We've concluded that we may be able to do business. If I find her capable, I will leave her in her present position for a while, but with full authority to govern. If I am well impressed, I may appoint her governor outright and leave her in

charge to prove herself by the next term. Your skillful judge of both character and ability will be useful to us in this exercise, Mediator."

"I will do my very best," I said.

"Good. Have you any questions?"

"I have none at the moment, Condor," I replied.

"Then you may go."

I left the room and went back to Doctor Earlin's lab. The rest of my actions were dutiful, methodical, and fortunately involved no deep thinking, for I was pondering this new turn of events with concentrated interest.

\*\*\*

In the middle of my most recent sleep period, I awoke to find Anima lying beside me. He was leaning on his elbow and staring at my drowsy face.

"Have I dreamed you again?" I asked with groggy voice.

"Go back to sleep if you want," Anima said. "I simply needed to be near you. Hmm, your bed really is softer. Does it bother you very much?"

"Apparently not too much," I muttered. "I've managed to fall asleep here."

"Poor Qyoo. How I have rearranged your life. Please go back to sleep."

"No," I said, rolling against him and tucking my head beneath his chin with my mouth touching his throat.

"Oh, Little One, I am tired."

I leaned back on my elbow and said, "Now I'll watch you go to sleep. Close your eyes."

I drew my fingers lightly over his closed eyes, and he pressed the palm of my hand against his mouth and was silent.

"We will both fall asleep thinking of the morning and sleep very well," I whispered.

\*\*\*

We are finally parked in orbit above Burgan's surface and the shuttle carrying Marl Shinn is on its way. Erik came to inquire if I wished to wear the Royal Blue. I thought about this and came to the decision that I would not. It seems to me that if I am seen as somewhat apart from the others I may be more effective. Of course, I can hardly be thought impartial, but perhaps at least a little more detached. I'm sure that Marl Shinn has no idea what it is that I do, but perhaps I can make her see that I will look fairly at the needs of both sides. That is, if I am allowed to speak at all. I am being paged.

\*\*\*

And now my part of this long trial of words has ended and I intend to rest, but first I am eager to write here, for it helps me reflect on what has come to pass. The sort of communication which produces clear understanding is very hard to come by. Gesture and bearing are extremely important, but most important of all are the words chosen. And if they are wrongly inflected, used inappropriately, or misunderstood, all may be lost in a single sentence...or all may be given away.

Condor imposed our seating arrangement. He sat at the head, I at the foot, and Marl Shinn at the middle of the table's side. Erik sat off in a side chair next to Kolla--they were the only others in the room and were there to observe and to make certain the proceedings went directly into micro-records.

Marl Shinn is a little older than I but not quite as tall, a bit large-boned, although not at all fat. Her face tends to flatness with ruddy cheeks and intense brown eyes set wide beneath dark brows. Her hair is a tawny color and must be very long, for it is expertly coiffed into a thick and gleaming

butterfly roll rising over the back of her head. This striking hairstyle adds to her height and gives her a very distinctive appearance. She was wearing a fitted jacket and slacks that were almost the color of her hair, and on her feet were tan boots with thick heels. Her pierced ears held tiny faceted red stones that reflected the circle of light under which she was seated. When she occasionally turned her head these nearly invisible but brilliant little gems flashed like laser beams and added to her highly conspicuous presence.

I soon learned that her face would seldom alter its serious expression, except for a pliant mouth. The subtle movements of her full and restive lips were for me a very readable index of all her inner workings and changes of mood.

Condor had introduced me to Acting Governor Shinn before we sat down, and in her firm handshake and steady gaze I immediately sensed a forthrightness, but also a certain amount of consternation and hostility. Thrust into this strange new environment, she was a bit overwhelmed. I tried to think how she must feel to be aboard this grand and rather intimidating Flag Ship of The Federation's First Fleet.

Once seated, we exchanged a few amenities and then Condor said, "I can't pretend that I'm not disappointed in the conduct of Roke's returning so-called escorts. Although why he needed six war ships to visit the planet I cannot imagine. If he had brought your entire fleet it would not have done him any good."

"I suppose he foolishly thought he might bluff his way into preventing what has happened to him," Shinn said.

"What happened to him was inevitable, but as to the present circumstance, we thought it was perfectly clear that our long journey was being made in the interest of restoring order and establishing a lasting peaceful relationship with our Colony Burgan. Did you have prior knowledge of the lawless actions of those six war ships now limping into your repair docks?" Condor

asked in a very direct manner.

"No, Condor. I'm afraid I can only continue to apologize. I had no idea that such an offensive thing would happen. It was certainly foolish and served no purpose for those I represent."

"Those you represent?"

"Perhaps I had better explain that I do not represent any of Roke's followers who are in a powerful and wealthy minority. My constituents have long complained of Roke's self-aggrandizing lifestyle, and that of his cohorts. However, he controls the military and the police through their leaders who happily share his spoils.

Condor leaned forward in earnest and said, "How is it that you are still alive, Marl Shinn?"

"You may well ask," Shinn answered. She drew her hands from her lap, stretched her arms out in front of her on the table and knotted her fingers tightly together. "If you hadn't called Roke to Hustler, I myself might have been seeking asylum there. I do have a large circle of protective friends who have recently managed to put me in charge. Before Roke left, things were becoming more difficult as our complaints increased. If he had not been called away, I believe he would like to have annihilated us all, as you once threatened to do."

There is the brutal sting and thus the terrible fear and mistrust, I thought. I looked at Condor at the far end of the table, and even with my hyper-vision I could not detect the least physical change in his face, not so much as an eye blink. I found this remarkable, considering his undeserved treatment. There was a moment of silence and then Condor spoke, of course, with no intention of vindicating himself.

"I would remind you, Acting Governor Shinn, that Burgan was created by The Federation in the interests of The Federation. I would then ask you to imagine yourself at the head of this Federation when time after time the extended hand of friendship

is slapped away, when Burgans, with all the necessary linkage they require, declare themselves sovereign, when fair trade is pirated, when repeated orders to cease the lawlessness are ignored, and finally when even Colonial vessels passing through free space channels are fired upon or commandeered. Remember, no attempt has been made to police yourselves, and that has resulted in the death of innocents and the destruction of Federation property. Could Burgans not have done then as you are attempting now? Why did you leave Condor no choice but the one he made?"

Marl Shinn wrung her hands in great discomfort, unwilling to give in and yet without a very relevant answer.

"I...I believe it is immoral to use death as an ultimatum."

"And I certainly agree. What would you have done?"

"I...I cannot answer that question, Condor."

"You can, but you choose to equivocate. If you wish to govern Burgan, you must have that question and its answer away before you. The answer is the most questionable method of obtaining peace, but it does for a time curb lawlessness, and you have proven yourselves lawless citizens."

"Not all of us, and it is my hope to bring about change."

"And that is my hope: peaceful change. Perhaps we can work together."

I was beginning to think there was no need at all for my presence. Nothing had been required of me, and Condor had handled the situation as the brilliant adjudicator and teacher that he was. Then I saw Marl Shinn's mouth twitching in agitation.

"We had many reasons to wish our sovereignty. I am told we did not receive the same consideration as the other colonies. We were ignored. We were not adequately supplied. We were not--"

"You had better review your history before you say any more. You were given the same considerations along with very adequate supplies. Your great distance only made them slower in arriving.

The Federation would have done no less. We need you here at this remote outpost. The excuses you make are not the reasons your leaders claimed sovereignty."

"I'm told they were the reasons," Marl Shinn said, folding her arms, which I took as a bad sign.

"Oh no, Marl Shinn, your leaders claimed sovereignty simply for the base purpose of evading Federation taxes on all their plunder. They would have Burgan a wild place existing on freebooting and nothing else. They have always believed they were too far away to have much trouble with The Federation. That is why I have come. I wish to--"

"To finally give us that trouble!" Marl Shinn mistakenly blurted out. Poorly armed with erroneous history, she was in a defensive position, thinking only of her people and not reading Condor correctly. For her, he remained a threat.

For the first time, I watched Condor turn his eyes on me, and the message was clear: Tame this intractable but necessary link with Burgan so we can carry on with the business at hand.

"Excuse me," Condor said, rising from his chair. "I must answer a communication within this time frame, but I will return in perhaps thirty minutes." He then nodded at Erik and Kolla who also stood up and left the room with him.

So I had been given thirty minutes. I thought I would later remind him not to be so stingy with time when he expected miracles. Noting that Erik had left the micro-recorder running, I rose from my chair and walked over to sit across from Marl Shinn. She looked at me with suspicion and shrugged.

"I'm not an official member of the government, so I don't have to rush out when Condor leaves," I said with a smile.

"Condor gave a very favorable account of you in his introduction, but he gave you no title. You seem familiar to me. Who are you exactly?" Marl Shinn asked.

"I'm...well, some call me The Mediator."

"Oh yes, now I know where I saw you...on news video. You got that mystic pretender off Hedone. You don't work for The Federation?"

"No, my effectiveness lies in remaining neutral. If I showed favoritism, I would lose both my integrity and any usefulness I may have established."

"But you are here with Condor."

"Yes. He thought my lack of bias would be a helpful avowal of his good faith."

"His good faith?" Marl Shinn said.

She stood up and walked around the table with her head bent in thought, but with her arms folded in an unreceptive manner.

"Yes, good faith. He has come a great distance, laying aside all the demands of his office, to see that Burgans are fairly treated in this delicate transition from waste to mutual benefit."

"Mutual benefit?"

"Of course, with law and order comes mutual benefit for The Federation and all the citizens of Burgan, not just a few."

"Well, a gainful reciprocity for all is what I have sought, but how can I trust one so powerful whose methods have been--"

"This is not the time for idealism, but for pragmatism. Condor did not have to come here. You really ought to give that some consideration. It might have been a bloodbath. He could have sent an entire war fleet, removed all the corrupt leaders in your military and police, and instituted martial law. His physical presence clearly signifies that he's after peace...after a satisfied colony which functions in a lawful manner, serving and being served by The Federation. Isn't that obvious?"

"Perhaps to you," Shinn said, sliding back into her chair at the table and resting her head on her elbow to stare at me. After a long silence, she went on. "I've not yet seen it proven."

"But why then is he here, if not to prove it?" I asked.

"Why is he studying you so closely, if not to determine how good you might be for the Burgans? If you cannot see this, how can you know what is best for Burgan? It is certainly to your credit that you care for your people, but if you insist upon living in an old and erroneous history, you will lose an irretrievable moment of great fortune...for yourself and for your people."

"You're very convincing, but I have other worries, too. Down there are still people who wish me gone, or dead."

"And you think Condor cannot deal with them? This is the head of The Federation who has dealt with many such. If you cannot arrest them yourselves, you can probably supply a list of their names and they will be removed. I must be careful not to speak for him, but isn't that also obvious?"

"Do you mean they will be killed?"

"You have a court of law. Appoint a judge you trust, try them and imprison the guilty. Did you not say you have the majority with you? In that case, what can you fear?"

"A great deal. For you, Mediator, it is all a sweet exercise, clean and swift."

"Not at all for me, but for you it could very well be. I'm just playing the notes of your good reason, trying to steer you from the extraneous."

"And you steer very well."

"Then I will leave you with some thoughts: Condor did not have to bring a pacifist to this meeting. He did it to allay your fear, because he is a leader of veracity and tireless service to his office. You will have to work very hard to match the generous efforts he has and will expend on behalf of Burgan."

We sat staring at each other for a few minutes and then Marl Shinn's solemn face broke into warming laughter.

"Well you are certainly a measure of his ingenuity," she said. I looked into those determined brown eyes and thought that Burgan would henceforth have tenacious governance, but it

remained for Condor to sanction her willingness.

When Condor, Erik, and Kolla returned to the room, Marl Shinn said in an agreeable voice, "Please tell me what I must do for Burgan, Condor, and I will do it."

I received only a swift glint of light from Condor's dark eyes, but it was all that I had wished for. Then I asked to be excused, for I saw no further purpose in remaining. Marl Shinn's eyes followed me out the door and I heard her say something as it closed, but I didn't try to hear what it was.

A sudden release of tension swept over me, for I had held strong emotions at bay as I always do in mediation. I walked to the dining room and there ate a slice of green melon and drank tea with honey in it. The tea did not relieve me of tiredness, so I went to my cabin and put on my gown, intending to sleep, but instead I have written this account. I will put my journal away and then lie down on the floor to rest.

\*\*\*

"Please, Little One," Anima said to me at some time in my sleep, but it was not a part of my dream. His hands slid beneath me and carried me to his bed. "How can it be that I am always picking you up off the floor, a woman of such prominence?"

"You could leave me there," I muttered in a soporific state.

"I could not. I want you with me."

"Please don't go down to the Burgans," I said in sudden fear, for I had dreamed that he would do so at great peril.

"We will clean things up somewhat and I will go. You know I must go."

"Then I will go with you," I said.

"You will not. I'm sorry."

"I will only not go if it is the requirement of Condor. If it's a personal wish, I will still go."

"You are becoming very clever and unmanageable, Little One.

This must be the hubris of your recent success with Marl Shinn. She believes you are a bright sorceress with an omniscient tongue, but I believe you are only a masterful enchantress with a brilliant mouth that must be kissed."

"Only a... I haven't seen you so amusing and happy for a long time, Anima."

"I think it is true. We will talk more of this, but right now are you not tired of talking?"

I said that I was.

#### ANIMA

One more cycle of day, and Condor has been busy cleansing the Colony of Burgan. I did not reveal to Qyoo that I was going down with my men. I certainly had no intention of remaining behind punching buttons and nodding my head while they did all the work. I gave Erik instructions to say that I was extremely busy if Qyoo should look for me, but of course she never does. She is so discreet and careful of imposing herself that she will never seek me out if I am not within her field of vision. Yet if she would ask anything of me I would always respond if I could. In this case, I could not.

I rather like the rough and tumble, and for that I can thank, or blame, my prototype. Getting in the middle of some slight risk is a fine way to blow off the madness of this office. We did have a lot of work to do, making certain that Roke's cronies paid their final and long overdue taxes to The Federation. This done by way of removal from office, arrest, and ultimately: confiscated profits. We found a virtual horror of misappropriations and abuse of authority. It is no wonder that Marl Shinn and her followers were on the march.

The Chief of Police thought to hold his power by a show of muscle which soon went flaccid when we dislodged him and his

armed guards from a barricaded precinct house. My men were so swift and skillful that it was really not necessary for me to be there, but I wanted to face that corrupted individual who had sworn to uphold the law. The Burgans needed to see that my concern and awareness strained toward ubiquity, especially with the unfortunate history I had inherited. Yet I had come close to telling Marl Shinn outright that I was forced to uphold that old decision: Ammon's threat and therefore my threat.

Surprisingly enough, General Paiz surrendered the moment we entered his palatial quarters. He made the case that he was tired and depressed and uncertain that his men would support him. It is true that the rank and file did not partake of much profit, and many or most of them have quietly supported Marl Shinn. Paiz did have a few loyal supporters he had favored, and I left it to Marl Shinn and her new guardsmen to decide what to do about them.

I have appointed Marl Shinn governor of Burgan and believe that I am right in this. She is on the reform path and has a seriousness of purpose which will brook no foolishness from others, and she appears to have no interest whatever in self-enriching side trails. We must all go down tomorrow for the swearing-in ceremony. Qyoo will have her chance to see what her remarkable expertise has facilitated. I am proud to have her in my company, although I can never claim her as an instrument of The Federation, for it would ruin the impartiality that, along with her great communicating skill, makes her work so valuable.

Having written the above, there is still something bothering me about Qyoo. I feel uncomfortable about letting her come with us. I've been so busy I have not had time to ponder this, but it is something to do with her safety. We have both inherited this prescience which can sometimes be very helpful but which also makes us disturbingly wary. Qyoo is so important to me that I suppose I've become overprotective, or she might think me so.

I have returned very late and have decided that when I

finish writing here I will not disturb my Little One, but let her rest. When I came in, I could not help looking at her as she slept. Long lashes brushing over translucent cheeks. Her white-blond hair tousled about her face and across the pillow. I could sense her exquisite brain deep in the formation of some intricate dream. What an amazing and continually surprising creature is this daughter of Jurith and Ammon. How thoroughly we are linked by our past and by the future we engender.

\*\*\*

I have not written here in some time. I see that in my writing above I could almost predict what I might have prevented, and for this failure I bear large guilt. I will discipline myself to write with restraint the following abbreviated version of what ensued.

The swearing-in ceremony gave the colonials a chance to at last celebrate some good fortune. Despite the thievery of Roke, they have managed to fabricate a thriving outpost teeming with industrious workers at high levels of competence. The place is burgeoning with very imaginative, light-infused architecture which links the colony in a vast connective superstructure. This entire construction is superbly spacious and functional.

Roke spared no effort in the wealth of material refinement he showered upon Governor's House. While lunching in its elegant dining hall enclosed within opaque walls of carved and beveled glass, Marl Shinn said, "I am ill at ease here."

"Let us see how long you will remain so," I remarked, winking at Qyoo who sat on my left across from the new governor.

Marl Shinn offered a dauntless smile and in a whimsical manner that I could readily enjoy said, "How do you bear up in the great Tower?"

"There are places in it so elaborate they are fit only for my detractors," I answered. This quelled her dash of mischief, and we were regaled with a toast of praise and gratitude.

When we had finished with our generous lunch, Marl Shinn asked if we might walk with her in a ceremonial display of victory. It was only a short distance from Governor's House to the Representatives Meeting Hall, and the passage was lined with her cheering supporters. As we strolled along in a slow procession, I noted that Qyoo, highly visible in her cream suit and just ahead of me, was growing agitated and had begun to scan the crowd. It flashed through my mind that her high emotions had suddenly reversed, perhaps from the wine at lunch, and left her in an exaggerated state of foreboding. Then I turned back to listen to Marl Shinn, but all the while I had a presentiment of some negative force close-by. When once again I looked out at the crowd, my eyes immediately focused on an unsmiling face, the narrowed eyes glazed with hatred. A face of violence looking directly at me and moving forward. A Paiz loyalist, I thought, and was at once prepared to handle this situation without even a thought of how I would do so. The assailant had some distance to cover, and I saw in the right hand held at his side the gleam of a short double blade. This was all happening very fast, but in the final moments I saw Qyoo running toward him and I swore out loud, knowing if he had been a warrior under Paiz, he would have some of the same skills at which Qyoo was so adept. He evaded her first spinning kick and plunged the blade into her left arm before she brought him down. I could feel that forceful knife thrust in my own arm. My body flexed in rage as I raced forward.

Marl Shinn ran to Qyoo. I had reached the assailant who was rolling over to stand on his feet and run. I picked him up by one arm, heard the socket wrench as he screamed in pain, and held him above my head to smash him into the street. I heard Qyoo's cry, "Don't kill him!" I threw him down and stood over him a second or two, thinking that it was exactly what I had intended. Then I left him to one of my men and hurried over to Qyoo.

She wanted to stand up and did. Crimson blood was oozing

through the sleeve of her cream jacket and the wounded arm dangled at her side. "That was clumsy of me," she said, and fainted. I caught her, lifted her, and turned to Marl Shinn.

"There is a medical facility in Governor's House," she said, waving me in that direction. Her face was white with shock but she remained very level-headed, rushing off to find a doctor.

I did not bother to tell her I would allow no doctor near Qyoo, but only closed and locked the dispensary door, tore through the supply cabinet looking for an electrother or a cure-gun, found none and began to work on Qyoo. I had placed her inert body on the examination table. I cleansed the wound, applied rapid-heal sealant, then bandaged the arm and slung it for her. She opened her eyes and watched me in silence.

"How do you feel? Do you want an anodyne? A tranq?" I asked, but she shook her head without saying a word.

I was simultaneously commiserative, deeply beholden, wallowing in love, and fiercely angry.

"I and my agents handle my security," I said.

"Your agents have to wait until they see what will happen. I do not," she answered, sitting up.

"Nor do I," I said. "Nor have I in the past, nor will I in the future."

Her body was trembling with contained emotion. I stared at her slender white fingers protruding from the sling and then lifted her carefully against me. "Don't ever...please don't ever do anything like that again."

She pulled away from me, held her wounded arm and looked at me with clear, overflowing pools of misery.

"I know it hurts a great deal. Please don't do that. I can stop the pain."

"No, you cannot," she answered.

In awhile, when I had put an end to Qyoo's despair, I unlocked the door and the poor useless doctor rushed in.

\*\*\*

When we made our final good-byes at the shuttle dock, I said to Marl Shinn, "Once every two Hustler years I will expect to see you at the Governor's Meeting."

"And you will see me," Governor Shinn replied. "I've never been to Hustler and I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm sure you will never forget this place, Qyoo. Your loyalty to Condor has been a great asset and exemplary for the rest of us." As Marl Shinn spoke she divided her attention between us, looking for some indication of a deeper relationship, and, finding no hint of such on either of our faces, finished her remarks to Qyoo. "I am certainly looking forward to seeing you again."

"And I you, Governor Shinn. I will think of Burgan only with very positive thoughts. It is quite an amazing place and so fortunate to be under your care," Qyoo complimented with her fine diplomacy.

Back aboard my flagship, I took Qyoo to Doctor Earlin's office and boosted the healing progress of the wound with an electrother. It was already healing well and swiftly, an indication of the excellent condition of her body in general, but I saw that there was still some pain involved and asked, "Why will you not have an analgesic? You are suffering, Qyoo."

"I don't like anything that changes me. I've been changed enough," was her answer.

"Ah, you are stubborn to the point of foolishness!" I exclaimed, and then regretted my remark when I saw her sad eyes. "I'm sorry. I am exasperated and disturbed by all your misery. Remember that I said I would not expose you to any danger."

"I exposed myself and apparently in a very useless manner. I should tell you that if something like that happened again,

despite your censure, I would do the same thing."

"Then I will have to watch you as well as my back," I said.

"Please don't be angry with me anymore, Anima. I am hurting."

"I insist that you let me stop the pain or suffer along with it more anger from me. Are you a masochist? Very soon I will order it done and that will be the end of it!"

"Then give me something," she conceded at last.

I wasted no time, but gave her an injection.

"Now please go along to my more comfortable bed and rest. I will sleep in your bed."

"No. I won't drive you from your bed, Anima. I'll sleep better with you there anyway. Come when you're tired. You won't disturb me at all."

"It's easier...better if I stay away," I said.

"It's my arm that was wounded. The rest of my body is fine," Qyoo responded.

"You need not remind me how fine your body is, Little One."

\*\*\*

Two weeks out, and I am already receiving invitations to all the Colonies and regular communications from Hustler which demand my attention. There is something else which invades my thought, some presentiment of unfavorable developments that is pure Ammon. These pervasive intrusions which come from time to time must never be overlooked, for they have proven to be a precursory of something unseen that will soon be in full view and in a disadvantageous manner.

\*\*\*

When I was on the flight deck six hours ago, I asked Captain Lormar to have a full sweep of outlying mid-path quadrants placed on the scanner screen. Looking into long-reach space behind and

away from our travel line is done automatically but displayed at less frequent intervals, and I wanted to scrutinize these ignored radians for any objects moving with feasible closing time. When I had studied the screen for several minutes, I quickly asked for magnification and found what I believe to be the object of my unrest: another of the many hundreds of old test drifters, but this one had been modified into a curious black engine of war. Although still at a great distance from us, this menace would have no trouble spotting our conspicuous and easily identifiable flagship and escorts. It appeared to be moving in steady and undeviating closure. I at once had Flag shielded and our escorts alerted. Captain Lormar stood beside me watching the screen, and within half an hour the scanner saw fit to recognize and issue a warning of the distant object I had identified earlier.

"Once again you have verified legend, Condor," Captain Lormar said with a self-assured nod of his head, yet his cautious eyes held to the screen. We both stood watching in silence.

"Ask CR to try and get the navigator of that reconstituted discard on screen," I finally said to First Mate Jenid.

I had not long to wait for it seems our mysterious visitor was eager to be known. I immediately recognized him as a member of Decks' spider-like clan of bionomic nomads who had long ago abandoned their dying planetary outpost to take up residence on modified test drifters. These they had captured from time to time while dwelling on orbiting junk. Unlike ever-grateful Decks, they are for the most part a scavenging and hostile collection of loners who come together whenever they wish to hunt. Their stalking method resembles the fabled and cunning packs of persistent wolves.

"While I'm talking keep your eyes out for the rest of the pack. They may be on the way," I warned Jenid, then turned on the audio of the opened channel.

"You are on a tight course, navigator. Identify yourself

and announce your intentions or veer from your present path."

"I am Rathe. I see I have the honor of speaking to the great vulture himself. Why are you shielded, Condor? You've left nothing to free space but communication. Do you fear this humble passerby?"

"Announce your intentions or veer from your present path," I repeated.

"We monitor your news videos. Useful sometimes, Condor. We like to know what's going on in your rich domain."

"To what end?"

"I see you've got the Burgan devils back under your talons with a new governor. They're a nasty lot...give us asteroid belts worth of trouble."

"I'm sure their attitude toward you is similar. State your purpose, navigator. I am running out of patience."

"You have someone on board who interests us?"

"I don't think so, navigator," I said in a warning voice. My troubling prescience had reached its zenith, and I knew at once who it was they found interesting, but not why."

"You are carrying the woman called The Mediator. We were glad to hear of this. We need her services in a customizing dispute we can't settle without losing half our modifieds in a blood feud. I've come to get her. It's a long journey back to our factory ship's orbit but it has to be done."

"I am laughing, Navigator Rathe, and you had better be laughing, too, or you'll soon be minus a lot more than half your ragtag ships."

"What will it cost you to give us the woman for a single year, your time? We'll pay her in true gem stones. Let me speak to The Mediator. Let her make up her own mind."

"Even if she were available, which she is not, I would not let her speak to you. Settle your own disputes and stay out of our way or--"

"Maybe you'll change your mind. Enough of our horde will be on you within...say fifty of your hours. You'll have to close your shields sometime to travel efficiently. When you do, we'll be alongside for the exchange."

"Do you imagine that we'll be waiting around for a prowling pack of scavengers? You need a lesson in modern mechanics. Get out of our space or we'll assist you in disappearing, you sleazy carrion! Close channel," I ordered.

I was furious and said to Captain Lormar, "Fire one over the bow, a low burn prod that will knock loose his arrogance." It was done, and the shuddering black contrivance peeled off to join his distant herd of thugs.

"Eventually they'll become such a nuisance we'll have to bring more of our fleet out here and clean them off the transverse, but not on this trip," I said.

"Escorts close all shields and chase our tail," I instructed our monitoring war ships as we closed shield. "Now we will employ the full benefits of our Laomite core," I said, and returned command to Captain Lormar.

"Aye, no space junk will ever catch Flag when she turns into a projectile," Captain Lormar announced with pride. Then he, Jenid, and the rest of the crew bent their heads to the tasks they loved.

When I turned around I felt the unmistakable nearness of that intense presence lately disputed, and I looked up. Qyoo was standing on the bridge walk, staring down at me like a pale ghost. The same troubling presentiment that had occupied me must have brought her to the flight deck. She should have been asleep instead of standing there, an exhausted wraith of culpability. In the heat of frustration, I wanted to blame someone for letting her enter into the confidential arena of that busy nerve center, but of course there was no one to blame. The flight deck had never been declared off limits to her.

I said nothing, only smiled as I walked up and took her by her good arm. Leading her off to Doctor Earlin's office, I helped her remove her shirt, then examined her arm and pronounced the wound's swift healing a medical success. Together and in a strained silence, we got her back into her soft blue skin shirt.

The limpid, knowing eyes were fixed upon me with regret, and the pursed mouth that is so often my sweet reward held back a fusillade I did not wish to hear.

"I should have spoken to him. I might have--"

"We will speak no more of this," I interrupted.

"But now there is anger and a desire for retaliation that--"

"Why do you wish to tarnish your accomplishments with dross? We will speak no more of it, Qyoo."

"Would you ever have mentioned it to me?"

"Perhaps later. Maybe not. It makes no difference."

"It does!"

"Please go rest."

"Don't treat me like a child!"

"I do not," I said. "I respect you, learn from you, but you must understand--"

Qyoo had vanished.

\*\*\*

Last night I lay in my bed with my door slightly open, wondering if Qyoo would come to me. I knew that I had not treated her like a child. She is young and innocent in many ways, but I have always shown my respect for her and I hope that I have never condescended. Her emotional outbursts are usually followed by flawless reason, and I wondered if the pattern would repeat itself one more time. I was wishing that I could sit and talk with her a long time without being interrupted. I fell asleep. Then I awoke and knew that she was in my cabin. I raised my head slowly and saw at first the pale outline of her

body in the rose light of my small glow-lamp. She was in my big soothe chair, curled there with her bare toes protruding from shadowed folds of gauzy white gown. Her loneliness and desire to be near me were almost tangible, yet for a while she sat and stared without moving or speaking. I could hear her inhaling and exhaling and then a long sigh.

"Anima?" she said, so softly that had there been anyone else in my cabin they would not have heard.

"What, my love?"

"Will you let me explain why I acted that way?"

"I know why. Come here."

She came across the floor with her gown held above her knees, as if wading through water. I listened to her measured steps brush over the carpet and felt a huge and unusual impatience. Her intent was to sit on the edge of the bed and deliberate, but I drew her in against me and felt how cool she was. Her hair slid through my fingers like cold water but her scalp was warm. I held her head and found her mouth chilled and damp as if she had been walking in fog. Just as I began to feel the heat of that mouth, she said, "I want to speak."

"It isn't necessary."

"It is for me."

"I already know what you're going to say."

"Then tell me, Anima."

"Please forgive me, Anima. My presence has brought danger, and I only wanted to speak to that rustler because I was afraid for your safety and the safety of Flag," I said.

"All right," she said, "but you should have let me say it. And there is one other thing."

"You are still afraid," I added.

"I've caused you to have an enemy, Anima."

"I will not laugh, Little One, but I could. The Controller has many enemies."

"You are loved. I know. I see it everywhere."

"Sometimes it looks that way, but I am also hated and plotted against. Mine is a position that invites enemies. I would not be very effective if there were none."

There was silence and then Qyoo asked, "Are we safe?"

"Comparitively, unless an asteroid jumps in front of us."

"I don't know how you can be so amusing and stoical at the same time. I wonder what line of reasoning you--"

"Oh, please, not philosophy at this hour!" I threw myself against my pillows and closed my eyes. Histrionics with favorable results, for just then Qyoo could not bear to be ignored.

"I can use my left arm now...two arms again," I heard at the same moment that I felt her assertion sweetly confirmed.

Offering my own two arms, I said, "The welcome return of ambidexterity--certain to deliver me from that other Qyoo."

\*\*\*

We have reached the old way station of Ginsa, originally a colony of mines famous for semi-precious stones. Because most of the gems marketed on Hustler and in The Colonies are synthetic, the term semi-precious is actually a misnomer, for the stones extracted here are precious indeed. Only a few are still mined. Most of the mines have been turned into lovely high-domed parks, each containing plants and animals with healthful symbiotic relationships which allow them to flourish, and also to attract tourists. The Colony is popular with travelers who wish to go somewhere different and take a long time in doing so. It is the original home of Pysu, the prominent geophysicist who first traveled with Jurith, helped found Laom, and became one of Qyoo's close-knit family of parents. I remind myself he is in my skin.

On our voyage out, the urgency of our mission prevented any thought of landing, but now homeward bound I decided to shuttle

down, taking Qyoo with me, for I thought she would have some pleasure in this visit. I knew that she had never been to Ginsa and might not pass this way any time soon. There was also something I needed to discuss, preferably in a pleasant setting.

Informing the jovial governor of this Colony that I desired no ceremony upon our arrival and that we wished to remain as unobtrusive as possible, we were quietly docked in Ginsa's spacious tourist port within ten hours of my communication.

Governor Bryze met us and accompanied us out to the most architecturally pleasing of the Colony's resorts, situated in The Dome of Trees. Within this green realm are certain well-tended birds and arboreal animals which have free range of the forest grounds surrounding the ornate old buildings. The entire resort had been emptied out in preparation for our arrival, and when I informed the manager that I had not intended to inconvenience anyone, he replied that the few dwellers present were given free access to another forest dome and happy to remove themselves.

We were very soon relaxing on the long veranda and sipping tart, sweet red juice made from the crushed seeds of a dark-leaved tree in the forest. A network of branches hung down just beyond and along the low-slung eaves of the broad stone veranda. We were alone and enclosed within all this ramous verdure with only the cries of brilliant pheasants and tree fowl and the tinkling-glass music of small twittering birds.

"I feel as if I've stepped into a very lush video catalogue of flora and fauna," Qyoo said. "So fascinating...very nearly overwhelming."

"Because your frame of reference is barren Laom and always will be," I remarked.

"We had our sweet little gardens but you're mostly right, and that stark reality is not a hostile thing to me."

My body sprawled in a rarity: a varnished wood lounging chair. Qyoo sat upright in a straight-backed translucent chair,

and I said, "Please lie in that sisal hammock near the edge of the veranda. I like to see your body in a relaxed state."

She walked over and eased herself, with several amusing attempts and some uncertainty, into the hammock. Once in, she was a picture of serenity, her beige-gowned body slung in a soft curve with one arm dangling over the side, her white-blond hair strewn over the string netting, her crystal eyes flashing with the emerald of tree boughs.

"Notice how the voices of the birds have changed now that you enhance their environment," I said. "All those welcoming chirrups of delight."

"Anima, is this really you? You are so amusing and poetic, arranged in that strange chair, offering blandishments like a...a patrician gentleman I've only heard about in some old story."

"When did you hear such old stories?"

"Jurith had them sent to me. She was a wonderful, eclectic teacher. I would sit in the videolarium and watch and listen to the storyteller until...until I would go out of my mind."

I quickly but wrongly changed the subject to myself.

"What I have of childhood is Jurith and Ammon," I said. "A volatile mixture both beautiful and horrifying."

"Horrifying?"

"Your father's childhood experiences had elements of great terror. Let us change to yet another subject."

"You're too careful with me. I'm not so fragile, Anima."

"Well then, perhaps I've done it for myself."

We remained in silence, both listening to the distinct songs of the birds. The cycling air held intermingling floral scents as taunting as an unanswered desire. I was watching Qyoo as her idle gaze discovered two dancing green butterflies. Her joyful preoccupation was so pleasing that I regretted the necessary.

"Please tell me, Qyoo, why you would think of waiting all those years to have a false dream--the cloning of your mother?"

Qyoo's head turned toward me, and with my hyper-vision I saw that the green had left her eyes and now they were full of my reflection, one of me in each startled eye.

"Why have you asked me that question?"

"Can you answer it?"

She would not look at me, but closed her eyes and laid her arms over her forehead in a moment of thought.

"The girls told me that Carp was doing phenomenal work, and they also told me...told me something I didn't know: that Jurith's cells and memory imprint were held in storage with those of the others. I began to think about it, how I missed her, how I had never been with her after...after Roggi's work on me, how with cloning and accelerated growth I could have her back. I sent word to Carp. It was only a simple inquiry...only an inquiry."

"I must tell you that the inquiry was never sent."

Qyoo sat up, held onto the unstable hammock and dangled her feet over the side to steady herself.

"How could you do that? How could you intervene in my private affairs like that? Do you know everything I do?"

"I would like to know everything you do out of my own absorption with you, and selfishness, but I haven't that much time. This particular inclination of yours happens to concern me, too, and I wanted to talk to you before it went any further."

"But how did you find out?"

"Security regularly monitors communications with Laom because it is a classified region of strategic production."

"Ah, yes, regular shipments of Laomite keep arriving, don't they? I arrived with one of them."

Qyoo flipped herself out of the hammock and lay supine on the stone floor.

"Little One, do you really prefer that hard stone?"

"I think better this way. I'm wondering what you expected

to happen when I arrived on Hustler."

"Are you wondering that?" I asked.

"No, guess not. You and I don't wonder very much, do we?"

"Not if we have any exposure to what can be considered.

"My expectation of your arrival's effect was not nearly as presumptuous as what I allowed myself to hope would happen, Qyoo...and that hope did not come near the reality."

"And now you're horrified at my irreverence. You really had much more of her than I. It has always been there, a possibility I never dreamed of. I miss her so. Wouldn't she be a wonderful gift to you, too, Anima?"

"Oh really, Qyoo, don't make me censure you. You, the incisive and fair-minded Mediator, could not think to test me in this way, engage in such self-indulgence, dishonor your mother! Explain this, Jurith's daughter. Please extricate yourself from what looks like emotion-driven thoughtlessness."

"I am never The Mediator with you, Anima, only with Condor, only with The Controller, only with others. Here and now my so-called genius melts away. With you it seems I'm all emotion and you are all logic, so much logic that I'm caught in it."

"That makes a pretty counterbalance, but it has nothing to do with us. I am not all logic, and your excellent logic is suddenly at fault in saying so."

Rolling to a prone position, Qyoo turned her face to me and rested her head on folded arms. I myself could feel the hard floor against her flesh and knew she was not comfortable, knew she was hurting her slight-fleshed body.

"Get off that punishing stone. It is as painful to me as to you," I said, tossing her large pillows from a stack beside my reclining chair.

"Oh Anima, I'm afraid of my feelings. I must never be jealous of my mother. I loved her too much. How can I blame you for loving her? Why would you not want her back? I'm so flawed

that I will never please you."

"Jurith was flawed, Qyoo. What I might want of your mother is more of me. Her gifts of personality and history were given to me selectively. Ammon gave me all of his memory. Then my desire for Jurith only increased, but I had enough of her harsh criticism of herself within me to temper that need. Some of myself is obscured, and true enough it lives in her past. Her past is available in her memory imprint, which must only be matched to the body of Jurith. If I were a pitiless narcissist I would clone her for that reason. No, don't look at me that way. I am not accusing you of depravity, only of temporary blindness. In one fleeting moment I thought of it, too, but then I asked for you. All of this is the purest form of irony, Qyoo, but I know that your excellent mind can assimilate what I am telling you. Now you tell me the cruelest possible result of your intention."

Qyoo leapt up with her incredible animal gracefulness and walked to a column, leaning there and staring up at the trees. I saw a tiny golden tamarin peering at her as it clung to a high limb, and I smiled. In a little while, she turned around and said, "Jurith did not wish to live without Ammon."

"Yes."

"The way I feel about you," Qyoo whispered, rubbing her hand over her eyes and then down over her throat in compelling gestures of her guilelessness. "And you must live with all of that and try to care for me," she called out.

"What I feel for you is not the same at all, Little One. What I feel for you is deep-rooted recognition but also something new for me, always new, every hour an unexpected turn. I certainly cannot foresee all the choices you make that you imagine I do. How boring that would be.

"When you gaze at all this, Qyoo, is it not a transient beauty that you see? That very impermanence is the hurt of you. The flowers, the birds and animals, even the enduring trees you

love so. I wanted you to have these things with me, within this finite time, so that you will always have this outside of time. Hereafter, you will always have this, undiminished, at its best, as we have Jurith. Experienced, and thereafter experience unalterable. My feelings for you work the same. They are now, and also amassing outside of time, as memory. As long as you are aware, you will not ever lose anything. That is permanence for us. Time is a contrivance of expedience. Isn't it very clear?"

"It is very clear. Forgive me. I am flawed. You will always have to consider that unfortunate circumstance."

"Your flaws help make you the singular one who is Qyoo."

She came and knelt down and folded her arms across my lap and laid her head there. "Anima, I think...I think your...your unconditional devotion can never be matched by anything so fine from me...unless it is the total sacrifice of my self."

"Look at me, Qyoo," I demanded. "Please don't ever tell me anything like that again. Don't ever allow yourself to think in that manner. You must never--"

"Excuse me, Condor," the manager called, approaching from the opened doors. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but you told me to let you know when the gemologist arrived. He has come."

"Yes, thank you. In a moment," I said, turning back to Qyoo. "Is this resolved? Neither of us can ever find our beginnings or recreate what is outside time, but there is now and there is the memory of it. Can you be happy for this while?"

Qyoo's pearling smile spread into an offering of peace. Her intelligent eyes sparkled, very soon reflecting bright glints of colorful mischief.

"Yes, I'm happy, Anima. This now is a wonderful keepsake."

\*\*\*

The gemologist, Dilgar, took us to a small museum and store on the grounds and there showed us the raw and faceted minerals

for which Ginsa is famous. We stood in a room whose walls were stained dark red and lined with illuminated glass cases of myriad rare extractions from the rugged terrains of the Colony. Great and small gems winking and shining and dazzling with refracting prisms. Some were displayed in their emerging geometric forms, others faceted in intricate ways which best revealed their luster and translucent color. We next moved on to the jeweler's section where Dilgar related the legends and stories of the heirlooms displayed, many being objects of theft and deception, love and war, and often stigmatized by the misfortunes of their successive owners.

Of all the gems the rarest and most prized is called Tzarlite. When faceted this deep-mined gemstone holds light as no other, refracting glittering flashes of color over a great distance. In The Tower's Colonial Display Room there is a fine example of Tzarlite, but here we looked upon many more polished and emerging raw forms of this complex crystalline structure.

Dilgar handed me a multi-faceted gem and I held it up to Qyoo for her examination, remarking that it resembled her eyes in the coruscating way it so mysteriously captured light. Her laughing eyes further confirmed my observation.

Later, we walked through the grounds among the lush and varied network of plants, brilliant flowers, and birdsong. Here, this regenerated life seems even more miraculous than on the vast preserves of our planet, where it is expected, but still always appreciated in some manner by the harried dwellers on Hustler. Qyoo looked for her golden tamarin and found it again, or one like it, high in a feathery locust tree near our veranda. The sociable little squirrel monkey hurried down to a lower branch, twisting its head from side to side with blinking eyes while it chattered at Qyoo. Her laughter and cooing voice were a musical reward for the tamarin and for me.

As I was writing the above, Qyoo left her restful hammock

and came to stand near my desk on a corner of the veranda.

"I didn't know you kept such a journal," she said. "I keep one, too, although lately the entries have been rather sparse."

"I think I've known you kept one," I replied.

"Tell me what there is that you don't know about me," Qyoo said.

"That is impossible to do," I said. I was laughing, for I knew she would accuse me of being too logical again.

"You are too--"

"Logical," I finished for her, then pulled her around onto my lap and kissed her. She laid her head against my shoulder with a quickening heart that I could feel and that joined the rhythm of my own heightened senses. "Do you know there is no logic in a kiss?" she whispered. "Ah, but there is so much else in it. And at last you've admitted that I'm not always logical, Little One."

"Do you know that I've written about you in my journal?" Qyoo said. "I keep it carefully hidden away."

"I am going to ask you to do more than that. I will give you a special lock-box which only your hand will open. There are some aboard Flag, used for special and personal effects. You must keep your journal as safely as I keep mine, Little One."

\*\*\*

Last night dinner was served on our veranda. Champagne with cream-stuffed fruits, followed by a thick, chilled red pepper soup. Platters of meatless, spiced and herbed delicacies from a nearby garden, and a flamboyant conflagration of lemon bananas flamed in cognac sugar. For a moment the eruption of flames made our shadows dance over the wall and something in the trees cried out in protest. Qyoo's delighted face was flushed and moist from our steamy Tree Dome environment. She wore the diaphanous blue gown I had given her after Turn. Her quartz eyes sparkled with

the light of the flames and then the light of the dinner candles.

I could stand it no longer and left my chair to go and get something: a Tzarlite pendant that I had just purchased from the gemologist, Dilgar. This five-carat, brilliant-cut gem of perfect octagonal shape was skillfully faceted with petals of a geometric flower. But it is much more than an exquisitely cut and extremely rare gem. The stone was carved by a master craftsman, the great-grandfather of Pysu. It was given to Pysu's great-grandmother, a gift of love to a young girl named Daena who later became a prominent humorist and historian. It became known as Daena's Charm and was passed down through the family until it reached Pysu who had no mate or children and sold it to finance his journey to Hustler where he continued his studies in geophysics. It was said that Pysu bore much anguish when he parted with the gem, and this was especially so because Daena had worn it all of her life, claiming that it brought her great luck and happiness.

The humid air was becoming too much for this Hustler dweller of the northern latitude. I dropped the pendant into the pocket of my slacks and rolled my thin white shirt sleeves, not thin enough. As I was doing this, I stood looking at Qyoo's back and realized at once her state of mind: a peaceful sort of elation. She sat at the small dining table, from which a steward had just cleared our plates, leaning forward a little on her hands and staring out at the forest. Her bare feet were drawn to one side with the ankles crossed. I knew that nothing I could give her would make her any happier than she was at that moment, and I also knew that I was not giving her the pendant to change her.

Walking up behind her, I reached out and touched the candlelit aura of silvery blond hair. She had twisted it up for coolness but I wanted to have my hands in it and pulled out the combs, tossing them on the table. Regardless of the temperature of the air, her hair is always cool. Irresistible slippery satin

sliding through my fingers. She dropped her head back a little and sighed. I withdrew the Tzarlite pendant, dangled it before her eyes and said, "Do you know what this is?"

She sat up straight and answered: "After my educational tour earlier, I can at the least tell you that it's a very, very expensive piece of jewelry."

I dropped the pendant into my shirt pocket, drew her from the chair and led her to a comfortable lounge at the edge of the veranda. Well-placed artificial luminaries rendered the nearest dense foliage a dazzle of thriving green against a backdrop of deepening shadow. A theater of unaffectedly enhanced nature with night sounds. When we were cozily seated there I again took out the storied gem and placed it in her nervous palm. It captured the forest illuminations and winked with astounding brilliance.

"Rest here calmly while I educate you a little further," I said, and told her the story of Daena's Charm. "Now it is Qyoo's Charm," I said when I had finished. "Consider that it has been rescued to have its meaning restored in a worthy place. It seems fortunate and rather fitting that it is given with a conviction perhaps even greater than that of the original bestowal." I took it from her palm and fastened it around her neck and kissed her speechless mouth which was warm and moist and tasted of our flaming dessert. Never have I given even a lesser such gift to any other. Never have I wanted to. Never will I.

#### QYOO

I have been home two weeks and I must get back to keeping this journal. I was wounded on Burgan while trying to protect Condor, and after that I did not feel like writing anything. Next I was too disturbed and worried to write, and finally I was simply too spoiled and lazy. I am very much ashamed of my neglect, little book.









This answer visibly displeased him, but there was nothing he could do about the way things had gone. Still, I had a feeling there was something he intended in retaliation for Condor's humiliating rebuff. I kept this in mind.

Rathe's cousin Selk was stealing his salvage business, and the two had become so enraged that they had threatened to annihilate each other. Selk had bristled at making the long journey with the possible outcome only that of tangling with Extra-Security. It was clear they were both near bellicose self-destruction, and that only greed had ultimately prevented it. I knew that The Controller would have deemed such an occurrence good riddance, but I was thinking mainly of the safety of Scopa.

When I finally had them together but moving around fiercely at opposite ends of Rathe's cabin, I said, "Are you two the only persons in your sector who do this sort of salvaging?"

"I started this business. He has no right--" Rathe began.

"That isn't what I asked," I interrupted. "And you both must come to this table and sit down. I can't listen while you circle each other like two stalking animals."

They came and sat with reluctance.

"By the way, how did you arrive here so soon, practically on the heels of my own return home?" I asked.

"We came to take you with us when we heard you were at Burgan. We just kept coming, working out a plan," Rathe said.

"It's good that you reached such an agreement."

"No blasted alternative," Selk lamented.

"When you want something this badly, then you are willing to give up a little, right?" I said.

"I'll give up nothing! He's got to quit," Rathe exclaimed.

"Red death if I'll quit anything!" Selk hollered, unbending his long, lithe body and standing up. His beige, cloth-padded arms flapped up and down as he bent and pounded on the table. "I knew this would never, never work!"

"Stop!" I said in a firm voice. "I'm a mediator, not a combat referee. All right, now we'll return to your agreement to come here, and start over from there," I said. "You have both traveled far from your factories to meet in this cabin. You cousins will both hold your tempers, or I'll assume there is nothing worth salvaging in either place."

"You're a bossy little whelp," Selk said.

I ignored this and said, "Is there a great deal of this...this space junk you snag floating around out there?"

"Enough to keep me busy for--" Rathe blurted out and then checked himself.

"For the rest of your life," I finished. "Then why do you begrudge Selk a share of it?"

"I was there first," Rathe insisted.

"Is that all?" I said with a short laugh. "Do you know that you two are at cross purposes?"

"What's that mean?" Selk asked.

"Why do you not become partners? Rathe and Selk Salvage, or some such title. By combining your factories and streamlining the work you could scour the universe. You wouldn't have to resort to illegal tactics if, as you say, there is all this unclaimed salvage out there."

I saw a light go on in Selk's eyes, but Rathe was still thinking of hanging onto something.

"More than you can handle in a lifetime divided in half is probably still more than you can handle," I said, directing my remark to Rathe.

"That would take some working out," Rathe said, softening.

"You can draw up an agreement, exactly as you both wish it to be, each allowing the concessions which will make it work. Then you can work together or apart. I would suggest combining your efforts, but if you really want it to work you must abide by Burgan laws and stay out of their fly space. You are too good at

business to be small-time pirates anyway," I added, stroking their egos for a smooth finish.

The two stubborn bionomads sat staring at each other for a minute of ponderous awakening and then Selk spoke.

"The crazy thing is we had to come all this way just to have this little mediator tell us what we should have figured out for ourselves."

"This woman is no *little* mediator, I reckon," Rathe said. "It's like they say, some kind of special magic that--"

"Please don't start any more rumors. There is no magic in mediation. It is far closer to common sense," I said.

"Well whatever it is it works pretty good," Selk said.

"You will both have to shake hands," I advised and then sat watching as the two men warily stretched out their arms and clasped those long gray fingers in settlement.

"Now comes the formal pact. We will work that out, and each time we come to a sticking point remember that you have shaken hands and that your mutual success rests on agreement."

When after several Hustler hours by my telewrist we had reached a satisfactory working arrangement, Rathe asked, "What do you ask in payment for all this effort, Mediator?"

I had thought it was to be that Scopa would remain intact, but seeing an opportunity to extract more I gave a quick answer.

"I would ask that whenever you encounter Extra-Security, Burgan outflyers, transport of any kind, or Condor and his escorts, that you exercise utmost courtesy as you go about your business."

"It is both a large and a small payment," Rathe said. "I had intended to pay Condor back in a different way."

"It is what I ask," I said. "If there is any honor in you at all then you will do this."

This remark of honor made Rathe rise to the occasion. He hesitated for some minutes and then offered me more than I could

have imagined.

"I'll go you one better, Mediator, since you are so loyal to your wily leader. But it's for you, not him. There's a plot against him. The ousted governor of Burgan, Roke, is directing some of it from his place of house arrest on Hustler. I got asked for his help and considered it, but it's a long way off and I didn't really want to get involved with those Extra-Security sharp shooters. There's another person involved, Condor's locked-up ex-finance minister. How's that for payment?"

By the time I returned home I had extracted as much information as I could get from Rathe, and I was in great fear for The Controller. My long journey was one of anxious concern, for, in not knowing which persons around The Controller could be trusted, I was unable to send any message of warning, and when I arrived I was in the same predicament. I had learned that Roke and Cecil were working in consort with a few supporters who had been promised gainful reward, and that they intended to oust The Controller by some method which would look like a freakish accident. To make matters worse, I could not find out where The Controller was, but only that he was away and would be back in the city in time for the hugely popular Spring Moon Celebration. At that time, the largest of our moons would rise over the city, and the streets would be filled with revelers dressed in elaborate costumes honoring the lushness of spring.

While I was away at Scopa, The Controller returned briefly and found that I had eluded his Security. He went to Leona to learn where I had gone, and she refused to tell him, only saying that I was on a long, safe journey and that I could take care of myself. She told me that he went away more sad than angry, for he thought that I had returned to Laom and blamed himself for neglect of me. So now I knew that my love thought he had lost me to my homeland and that he must be very deeply hurt and suffering, as I would have been. I knew very well that I had

chastised him for going away from me, and then done the same to him. I myself was suffering with the guilt of this.

Because I had arrived home in the darkness of night and without announcing myself to anyone, I knew that Security, who had probably given up looking for me, would not have discovered my return, and I was thinking how I could use this to my advantage in protecting The Controller. Instinctively, I knew that on the night of the celebration some harmful act would be attempted against him.

I enlisted the help of Glytta and Mekin and Leona and Mirra in finding a suitable costume which would allow me to move easily through the streets without encumbrance. It turned out to be an elfin green raiment representing the tender shoots of spring, and it fit me much like my skin pants and shirts but was of a shimmering iridescent cloth which Leona found in a fabric shop. It was sewn up very quickly according to clever Glytta's own beautiful design. My tell-tale white-blond hair was bound up beneath a green net, and I wore a mask. Mekin announced that I resembled a capricious forest sprite from one of her childhood story videos. Gonin affixed himself to my shoulder as if I were a welcome green branch. That was all very amusing but this was serious business, and I did not feel at all mischievous or playful when I finally ventured out to survey the route The Controller would be taking down the long avenue to The Tower.

Along the avenue the twilight horizon was an intense but shaded blue, the color of a peacock feather eye. The air was sweet with the scent of new spring flowers and pink-blossomed boughs lifting their thick-laden branches against the evening sky. I could hear the distant music of the procession as it traversed the main arterial of the city. I was hoping above hope that my decision about where the accident was intended to happen had been accurate. Just beyond where a street corner right-angled into Tower Avenue was a building that had been owned by

Cecil. He kept a penthouse flat there and had first brought me to it when I was abducted and taken to Sultrona. The structure was a vainglorious construction of prize-winning architecture, the rooftop culminating in a strange counterbalanced obelisk, narrow at the bottom as well as the top, and gave the impression that it would topple at any moment. A fitting monument to Cecil himself. He had joked of it falling upon his enemies. It must have weighed many tons, and was perfectly balanced and solid. With just the right angle of lasering I calculated that it would fall directly across the avenue obliterating everything in its path. For processions such as the one on this night, Security was positioned along every rooftop, but there was no way agents could perch at the base of this vertical promontory. My probing reason brought forth sharp clues that this monolith was the intended instrument of death.

The massing crowd of onlookers was being held back by sensor gates. Jostling my way among them, I listened to their laughter and the heightened anticipation which always ensued when The Controller was on ceremonial view. I walked back from the avenue, onto the shoulder of the park's dense growth. There I asked for hyper-vision and stared up at the darkening obelisk rooftop. Pausing for a long moment, I stood behind a low oak bough and scrutinized every angle of the sky-piercing obelisk, certain I had caught sight of some infinitely small glimmer of red light at its base. My heart began to accelerate and my muscles tense as my body prepared for the commands I would deliver. I began to move very quickly but without drawing attention to myself. A multitude of stimuli were assaulting my brain as it rapidly fired back. I was thinking and looking, listening and seeing and acting all in one swift whorl of noise and vision and motion. The music grew louder. Then I saw the air-car round the corner, moving as slowly as those aides who walked beside its hovering position just above the ground. I

looked up and saw the obelisk shudder ever so slightly.

"Run!" I shouted at the onlookers as I pointed up. "The obelisk! Run! Run!"

Two Security agents blocking me were downed by my own hand. Swiftly alongside, I leapt into the air-car, threw aside the pilot, grabbed the controls and accelerated to G-force speed just as the obelisk came thundering down, crashing into the street with a deafening explosion. I landed at the north edge of the park as huge pieces of the shattered monolith were still rolling down the other end of the avenue. Members of The Club and the two other agents force-held in the air-car righted themselves and grabbed me. They were attempting to tear me apart. One had me by my loosened hair and was going to smash me across the face when The Controller restrained the man and threw him onto the lawn. I stood up and walked a short distance, dizzy and exhausted and rubbing my aching scalp. Then I half fell half sat on the lawn and stared at my bleeding hand. I had no idea where that had occurred. For a moment, I had no idea of anything except that I had seen The Controller alive. I lay down on the damp spring grass and closed my eyes.

"Are you all right?" The Controller asked, kneeling over me.

"Now I am," I said, sitting up.

The Controller went immediately with his Security to see what casualties and damage had occurred in the street.

When my normal breathing had almost resumed and my adrenalin had dissipated enough to lessen my shaking, I walked off through the darkened park, hardly thinking or caring where I was. I came to the Summerhouse and went inside, sliding off my sandals and throwing myself down on the pillows. There I soon fell asleep as if I had been knocked unconscious.

I awoke to find Anima examining my blood-encrusted hand. He stared at me a long moment in silence, and I was filled with such joy at seeing him that tears came into my eyes. He lifted me

against him and put his hands into my hair.

"I thought you were gone from me forever, Little One...but it turns out that instead you were off involving yourself in another long and complicated story."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't reach you. There was no time to explain."

"Every time I'm certain I couldn't possibly be any angrier at you I end by only wanting to kiss these shoeless feet," Anima said, his hand stroking my bare foot. "Do you want more sleep?"

"No."

"Are you thirsty, hungry?"

"Only for your company," I answered.

"Then come back to The Tower with me where you can have a warm shower, some food...fresh clothing."

"You don't like my pretty costume?" I wanly teased.

"Qyoo...when you leapt back into my suddenly rejuvenated life on this weird night of the Spring Moon...you!...you, in your magical green costume, you were the most welcome sight I've ever seen or am likely to see. And for this heroism you were beaten and nearly torn to pieces. I'm so sorry...sorry! Your hand!"

"It's only a little cut. It's nothing at all."

"How in black suns can this have happened?"

"Do you want to hear about it?"

"Not until tomorrow," Anima said, holding me as if I would dissolve. "Come. I will bathe you and feed you."

I awoke the next morning in Anima's bed in The Tower and found him staring at me in wonder. The mysterious black eyes were fixed upon me, limpid dark caverns of heat into which I felt myself falling as I relived our previous night of reunion. His jaw finally clenched in a strange tight restraint I had never before seen, then he spoke.

"You have saved me from complete destruction."

"No less than you have done for me," I answered, "and more

than once."

"Where have you been all of this long time, Qyoo?"

"I...I had to go out to Scopa," I answered, knowing that it would do no good to begin with evasiveness.

"So far away? And so long gone. I've neglected you. I know that, but I never cease to think of you, not ever. Why did you not tell me you were leaving, Little One?"

I sat up and reached for the robe Anima had given me, but he took it from my hands and pulled me into his arms as if I would leave again.

"I could not. You would never have let me go," I answered.

"What in black suns were you doing out there?"

"You see how disturbed you are. You would never have let me go...and if I had not you would be...would be...oh, I can't let that scene play through my mind."

"You had better begin at the beginning," Anima coaxed. He lifted the Tzarlite pendant in his hands. "At least you have kept this with you."

"Yes, always. I hid it very carefully beneath my shirt for fear that Rathe would..." I quickly silenced my own voice.

"Rathe! That mongrel!" Anima said, sitting up with his eyes now sparking jets of anger.

"As you've asked me to do, I'll begin at the beginning," I said, pushing him back down against the pillows.

I told my Scopa story while he listened with expressions of censure, amazement, and at the end angry resolution for the measures needed to be taken against his enemies.

"As to the perpetrators, I am hardly surprised, but as to your own conduct, you have left me nearly speechless. That you, alone and with hardly a thought of self, would undertake to save me was an act far above praise...but very foolish for your own sake, Jurith's daughter."

"Selfish," I corrected. "I cannot always have you but I

must always know you are somewhere in the thick of things."

"Our feelings for each other are exactly the same," Anima said. "Of all the difficult equations I have ever solved, you are the one I cannot solve, Qyoo. There seems scant place for you in my life, and yet you are firmly there. I knew when I had you sent to Hustler that you would be very important to me, but never did I realize how important. You are the heart of me. How can I resolve this? You ignore my pleas for adherence to policy. You carry on outside the directives of The Federation as if you are a sovereign entity with no allegiance to any office. Yet you are a boon to our existence, an undeclared asset. Shall I appoint you something? Would it do any good? You would abide by few rules. Now I owe you my life. What can I do with you?"

"Love me," I said.

"That is understood, as you well know. If I were not so besotted with you everything would be much easier."

"What would you do then?" I asked.

"I would create a position for you in the government and make you adhere to its imperatives. But how can I have you a member of The Club and sleep with you at the same time? There is something unseemly about it."

I picked up Anima's hand and held it against my throat, laughing merrily. "Oh, you are a hypocrite!" I teased. "And I am The Mediator, a shadow force of The Federation."

"You think this is all very amusing," Anima said with a loving yet perplexed expression, "but it is a problem to be resolved, and you must help me, Little One."

"I will always help you in any way that I can, but right now, Anima, I have a small favor to ask."

Anima had put on his tan skin pants and white shirt and was rolling his sleeves for breakfast on his terrace and then, I presumed, a long session of work at his desk. I watched him run a comb through his hair and turn to me with a compliant smile.

"Today you may have anything, anything within my power to give you...any day that is so, but especially today."

"I want to have a picnic with you."

"A picnic...in the park?"

"No, at Wierlfoss.

"Ah, then what you want from me is time, the most valuable of all commodities. I will take you to Wierlfoss for your picnic, but I'm afraid you must wait four days."

"Gladly," I said with delighted anticipation and eager impatience, twirling around the room in my long white gown, I suppose somewhat like a thoughtless and gleeful child.

"Come here to me, Qyoo," Anima called out from the open doors to his terrace as he extended his arms. "You are so endearing in your defiance, your struggle with patience, your huge enthusiasm. You tempt me to a careless joy...even a slight madness. Can you smell the blossoms on the spring winds?"

Standing beside Anima and leaning against the balustrade, I inhaled deeply. "I smell jonquils and cherry blossoms and hyacinths," I said, looking up at him. He was looking at me with complete concentration, so that I feared I would forget myself and leap into the fragrant air where a bluish bird soared.

"Perhaps I can fly," I said, leaning forward, but Anima put his arms firmly around me and drew me away to our breakfast high above the busy insects, birds, flowers, all the budding trees.

#### ANIMA

"Breakfast with a collection of choice individuals: friend, lover, advisor, scholar, humorist, and my protector, my problem solver...did I mention object of my desire?"

Qyoo was laughing. There is little which gives me more pleasure than to make Qyoo laugh. And the greater pleasures are all of Qyoo. She was worried, staying nearby as if I would

disappear, and well I might have had it not been for her. She wanted to go on a picnic at Wierlfoss. I believe she wanted to get me somewhere where she could think of me as safe, safe under her protection, safe in her deceptively delicate and white, but swiftly defensive arms. First, I had things to take care of that might possibly keep us both safe. I would not speak of them at that time, never in that way taint those rarest moments of happiness spent with the countless subtle shades and mysteries and explosions of life which are Qyoo.

"What shall we speak of while you eat your melon? The limitations we have placed on genetics? The way language works? Why it is so important to keep memory imprints?"

Qyoo stared out over the sap-green buds of the park canopy and then stabbed a slice of crisp white melon with her gold fork and slid it between her poised-to-receive, rose-pearl lips.

"Why is it important to keep memory imprints? Really? They can only be used in a clone of their originator."

"That is not entirely true," I said, wondering if I should have brought up this subject.

"No, it isn't entirely true, is it? I've recently discovered that in certain cases permission may be obtained to temporarily superimpose stored memory imprints on a blood relative for review."

"To what end?" I immediately asked. "This palimpsest technique is an extreme effort which can be dangerous, Qyoo."

"I'm not afraid of my mother's thoughts," she candidly responded.

I am, I thought in complete selfishness. Among other more damaging possibilities, I would not want her to feel how her mother had lusted after me in my Ammon incarnation.

"I was wondering how she felt about childbirth," Qyoo said.

"Were you?" I asked, and realized that I was beginning to feel pain. What if Qyoo wanted a child, obtained permission to

have one? After she was repeatedly raped by Cecil, I had thought of this and carefully monitored her. I soon learned that the new drug to which she had become forcibly addicted had prevented conception.

"I was only wondering if Jurith really wanted me after my accidental appearance, or if I was quite a monstrous burden."

"She really wanted you," I said. "She loved your father very much and really wanted you."

Qyoo said no more, only finished her melon and drank her guava juice, then threw back her head and watched large, billowy spring clouds lay over in the wind and sail away.

"Let me see your hand," I said and checked the red scar that ran along the outside edge of her right hand. She received this wound disarming my two agents before she leapt into the air-car. It was actually a knife cut, which she did not remember. I had seen her take on the two agents and part them from their stunners. Then out came the knife from my defending agent. All of this happened in seconds, and the knife was gone in a flash, removed with one grasp of her bare hand. My agent was going to slit her throat. The thought is unbearable. I had known it was Qyoo the moment I saw her in her silvery-green, forest sprite skin pants, tight shirt, and strange mask. I also knew at once that she must be there for a very good reason. The wound was healing swiftly from my treatment with sealant. I kissed the disappearing scar and then her lips which tasted of melon.

"I'm going home and see my family and my bird, Anima. I haven't spent much time with them since my recent return."

I want her with me, near me all the time, in my arms, in my bed, in my life. To chastize my crestfallen self, I said, "Good. That will be good for you. I'll finish my work and then in four days we'll go to Wierlfoss."

"Until then, will you miss me?"

"Not at all," I teased, but she wouldn't smile at this and

walked away from me to lean over the balcony.

I walked up to her, held her against me, and said, "There will come a day when I will not let you leave me at all."

"You like to keep prisoners?"

"You know what I mean. I will change your address permanently."

She shook her head but smiled, and when she turned her crystal eyes upon me they were brimming over with the bitter-sweet effect of my words.

\*\*\*

In the four days since Qyoo went back to her family, her bird, and mediation, I have accomplished quite a lot.

I went to Retriba and confronted Cecil in his tight-fitting little cell. He was not happy to see me.

"You've destroyed your rather expensive architectural memorial of self for naught, Cecil. The apex of your building met the same fate as the final level of your rapacious existence. You will now be placed in isolation and have no communication at all, and especially not with Dora."

Cecil folded his hands on the small table between us, and I saw that the knuckles were white with rigid control of his rage. His large, hunched body shook and his straight sandy hair, now growing long, fell over his red-encircled, watery eyes.

"I admit that I've been wrong in attempting to overthrow you, to...to destroy you. Somehow you are invincible. I have given up, Ammon. You see before you a broken man. Please don't deny me Dora's visits. I will die."

"Just what you hoped would happen to me," I reminded him.

"Yes. So there is no chance of seeing her? I have nothing with which to bargain?"

I let this probing question dangle and said, "Dora is now being held for her assistance in your attempt on my life."

Cecil ran his hand over his pinched face, and his head sank down on the table.

"I wonder why you didn't just leave things as they were. You didn't have enough? I never held much stock in material possessions, but it appeared that you had everything you desired, a wife for whom you apparently care, property, position. Of course, you wanted The Seat for personal gain, a position for which you are certainly unfit. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"And you believed that things had so deteriorated that you could get it with drug wealth...that sort of affiliation?"

"Yes."

"You have no morals at all, Cecil. What you did to The Mediator was... For that, I would hang you out on Tower Avenue for all to see, if it were acceptable."

Cecil's head came up slowly and he said, "May I see Dora one last time?"

"How can you ask any favor of me after what you've done, what you've attempted? If you were free to act violently this moment, you would show me no mercy, and I'd have to kill you."

"I'll tell you everything...name all those involved...how it was to go, everything, if you'll let me see her."

"Do it now," I said. "I'll send someone in to record the information. When I've verified it and begun to act upon it, you might possibly be allowed to see her one last time."

"Dora did what I asked of her because she wanted my forgiveness...because of you!" Cecil shouted after me as I left his devious presence.

I felt no sense of guilt, having never sought Dora's attention, only using it as a means to an end after it was already foolishly given. I marveled at a fickle personality which could profess such need of me and then coolly plan my end. There was the old saw about a woman scorned, and Dora had

certainly been scorned by me. I had tainted myself to punish Cecil. In such ploys as these one's hands need frequent washing.

All was revealed to me, the connections which led directly to Roke. His daughter was not implicated in this particular business but remains the queen of embezzlement. An assistant of Kolla's was involved. Kolla is inconsolable. It was the one time I allowed him to pick his own man, one who apparently valued economic gain over loyalty. This has taught us both a lesson, but I cannot have my hands on everything at once. In all, nine have been arrested, including those who lasered the obelisk and Dora and her maid, a wasted young woman who willingly carried information to the others. Roke will be tried and incarcerated in a less comfortable place. I am still pondering the fate of his daughter for her lesser crime of avarice, but she will have her trial.

Despite the fact that Rathe paid Qyoo with information favorable to me, I still think of him as a dangerous scavenger and will keep a close eye on him, leaving him at present to right himself with his new partnership.

Qyoo hardly realizes how all those fearless, meritorious acts define her. In her role of Mediator she speaks and acts with riveting gravitas, yet when she is with me she is less certain, playful, stunning in her innocent discovery, but also often appearing the devoted disciple of an undeserving master, myself. Does she think of me, perhaps unconsciously, as a father? This would be unbearable. Her father and mother and Roggi and Laom have made her a rare being like no other. I am made more aware of this with every encounter and must handle myself with care, or I might become slavish.

\*\*\*

Today I called in Doctor Kev, my foremost doctor, the finest medical genius in my clinic, more accurately the finest medical

practitioner of Jurith's genius. The handsome fellow sat across from my desk with his usual prepossessing chair-side manner and awaited my stated reason for his appearance. No niceties are ever involved with Doctor Kev. He is a busy researcher at my clinic and, in any event, he prefers the immediate presentation of the unvarnished point.

Doctor Kev, should the need ever arise, I would like to be able to produce offspring in the natural manner."

"That is no problem at all," Doctor Kev replied, leaning forward with quick concentration. "Have you any sperm in mind which you would like to use?"

"Yes. I believe the scientist, Larstev, left frozen sperm on Hustler with a signed agreement that it could be used for procreation in a well-minded person of a certain intelligence."

"Then I will obtain it from the sperm bank and assist you in what must be done when you require its use, Ammon."

"Thank you, Doctor. At the moment, it is only an idea, but I would like another opinion that its realization would be--to make a pun--fruitful."

Doctor Kev smiled and said, "It will be both fruitful and enjoyable, of that I am certain."

"Tell me, Doctor, you helped me minister to Qyoo when she was in our clinic, is it your consensus that she is capable of bearing a child?"

"As a doctor yourself, you know that she is," Doctor Kev tactfully answered.

"But another opinion is always wise," I replied.

When Doctor Kev had departed, I sat staring into space for several wasted minutes of speculation, wasted on The Federation's time but not on mine. I have thus prepared myself for any eventuality, and with a surprising measure of pleasurable relief. Perhaps the sudden realization that I might not even exist at this moment has made me reason in a way that my beloved Jurith

would easily understand. I would like to give Qyoo anything she wants. Jurith would have to understand that.

\*\*\*

I put on my heavy leather jacket and flew Qyoo to the frigid north, a place to which she warms with the same ironic joy of her mother. I see us out in our surreal landscape as I write this while she sleeps. With the intense scrutiny of a botanist, her crystal eyes fondle rich-colored patches of minute lichens. She studies the microscopic plant life while I study her.

We picnic sitting on glacially sliced, miniature seamounts, surrounded by stepped cirques of falling, pooling meltwater. A Black Hall servant has brought our picnic spread and departed. I hand Qyoo a cut-crystal flute of champagne and pull her white Angora neck scarf close beneath the chin that is Jurith's chin. I cannot help but think of Jurith in this milieu, but I am very soon enthralled only with this irenic creature Qyoo. Against the white of ice, her snow-blond hair becomes a platinum gold, teased from beneath her white woolen cap by the steady northern breeze. Filaments dance around her rose-tinted face. With two fingers she lifts the blowing strands from her eyes, smiles, and I am on my knees. I turn away then hand her something, inadvertently the roasted leg of a small duck. Her perfectly even pearly teeth tear at the fowl's crisp flesh. She chews and swallows, apparently unaware she is eating meat, gazing off in some suprarational dream I wish to enter.

"Qyoo," I say apropos of nothing, or only of making contact.

"This place makes me think in a very different way," Qyoo says.

"In what way?" I ask, settling back on my cold rock mount.

"The seamless whole of this." She spreads her arms.

"Can you not be more specific?"

She turns her crystal eyes on me, in which I find the pellucid blue of ancient ice and am warmed by it.

"I don't feel or think of self. Or I really feel myself an extension of...no, as if it's a very natural continuum with myself in it, of it, unaware."

I understand perfectly what she is saying but cannot resist asking, "Do you notice me anywhere in it?"

Qyoo laughs and glides off her perch, down upon the thick, beige vicuña blanket, placing her hands upon my knees. I at once find myself sliding down and holding her against me so that her laughing answer comes against my ear.

"Oh Anima, even if you weren't physically here you would be in it. You are in me."

"Almost," I say, for I am a hungry animal and no tempting morsel in our food basket will satisfy this hunger, but only what is in Qyoo, of Qyoo, only Qyoo.

\*\*\*

We have flung our cold and exhausted bodies down before an outsized fire, lying on a faux white fur rug upon the massive hearth. Qyoo's head is on my shoulder and her eyes are filled with orange flames. I am reliving our unrestrained lovemaking far out there with only a soft wool blanket between our half-naked bodies and the ice. I look at Qyoo more carefully and raise my head.

"Qyoo? You are thinking of your father."

"Don't do that! It's unfair, invasive."

"I'm sorry, but I want to know if sometimes you...perhaps you think of me as your father."

Qyoo sits up and fairly shouts at me, "I do not!"

She stands and her long blue robe whirls away from me as she rushes barefoot across the cold marble floor and throws herself into the far corner of an enormous black leather couch.

"You do," I say, walking slowly across the room, which now

holds a slight accusing echo of my accusing voice.

"You remind me of him, of course. Once I thought of you that way. I would like to have known him. Sometimes you do remind me of him, but I never think you're my father. I never think of you like that at all. If I did I couldn't be here with you now, not like this."

"I'm sorry I've disturbed you. What were you thinking? Or was it too private? Forgive me," I say. "Shall I go to bed and leave you to your musings?"

"Go if you want," Qyoo says, looking small and pale huddled in the corner of the gigantic couch.

I want to comfort her but I leave the room. Our day was perfect until this moment. Something is troubling Qyoo and I know that I can find out what it is if I'm willing to encroach upon her fragile state. With Qyoo that is the wrong way. I go to bed and lie in the darkness waiting for her to come to me.

Qyoo does not come to bed, and in the early morning hours I find her far-too-cold body tossing in sleep on the couch, with no cover. I lift her up and carry her to bed and she rolls against me, clasping her cool arms around my neck.

"You left me," she whispers.

"I did not leave you. I am here, am I not? Your body is cold, Little One. This particular trouble with us is that we can withstand cold far too easily. It allows us intransigence. Why did you not come to bed?"

"I was thinking."

"Were we not happy yesterday? I thought we were. Was I wrong?"

"I was so happy that it frightened me."

"Oh, that again. Fear of enjoyment," I said, kissing her chilled mouth. You can stop that right now. We're about to soar high as my shuttle, and this can't be followed by an antipodal mood with no certain cause. Look at me. Do you agree that such

fear is a waste of precious time?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me?"

"I always want you, Anima."

\*\*\*

The white water roars in our ears. Neither of us wishes to shout and we say nothing, holding hands and walking. We walk a long way until we find a less noisy declivity hidden within the open rush of sound and wind. There are no trees, and I believe Qyoo is reminded of Laom here.

We sit on petrified stumps thousands of years old and watch beams of light burn through the whirling mist. Qyoo is all in pearly white, her scarf, her hat, her coat, her winter slacks, and faux fur boots. I am content to look at her. She is singing.

"I've never heard you sing. I didn't know you could. It's lovely. Don't stop."

"Nima taught me. She was small but had a surprisingly deep voice and sang in contralto."

"I remember Nima well."

"It seems so long ago now, Anima."

"You're not going to indulge in sadness, are you? After dinner and our fire, you will come to bed with me?"

"I will. I'm sorry about last night. I was remembering something I'm sure my father told me."

"Can you share it with me?"

"I want to but I don't want to hurt you."

"Is that what these moods are about?"

"I suppose... I'm not always in control. You know that."

"Yes."

I look at Qyoo, at her stunning vitreous eyes now filled with more than the compelling sadness...pain.

"What did your father tell you?"

"Please, no, Anima."

"Was it about your children?"

Qyoo looks at me startled, and I know that I have struck at the truth.

"He said that my children would be the legacy of Jurith and Ammon and Laom. This lay hidden a long time until...until recently it came to me."

"When you wished that you could have a child with me."

"Am I so transparent or do you simply know everything?"

I gaze out at the white mist burning away in the sun and then back at Qyoo.

"It's a very natural occurrence in those who love, linked to a genetic imperative. Was it only a vague thought or do you really want a child?"

"I only wanted yours."

"Then you may have it."

"What?" Qyoo says with wondering voice.

"I can give you a child in the act of love. A part of me is made of Larstev and I will use his frozen sperm."

"You sound as if you've already thought of this."

"I have, the moment I suspected that it might be your wish."

"How could you so easily know what my wish might be?"

"Oh come now, it is not so difficult. I am the one who holds you in my arms and reads every subtlety of your existence."

Qyoo offers her most mysterious smile, one of pure happiness which subdues a great deal of thought. I let her ponder all of this. Nothing more needs to be said. The remainder of our remote "picnic" plays itself out in a sublime state of awareness of each other, our environment, and little else. Our emotion-primed intellects exchange exalted ideas on the art of being at Wierlfoss, immediate, exhilarating, sensuous ecstasy, and ice.

QYOO

There is to be a Colonial Governors' Conference in Sultrona. The Controller did not know if I would wish to be a part of the welcoming committee because of past experiences, but I said I loved the tropics and would be delighted to help in any way that I could. I'm now staying at The Club's ornate and rambling white house in the palms: Latana. When The Controller is in residence it is all his domain.

Here, where Anima first began my recovery, I only remember feeling how uplifting, soothing, and welcome it was. He cared for my demoralized, recalcitrant, chemicalized self so gently, and now once again he has rescued me from sadness. But what would we do with a child? The devotion required, the concerted responsibility. How would this be between us, and how would we live? Somehow I cannot envision it, something I am usually so capable of doing. When I am with Anima I am very drawn to this idea, even eager for it, but then later I begin to think in a practical way and become frightened by such an undertaking. Of course, it is an instinctual propensity to want a child, a provision I'm at liberty to reject. At least it is not a thing that can happen by accident. If I had a child I could easily confirm that the little being was planned and desired. I keep returning to the prescience of my father. What he foresaw can hardly be rejected.

\*\*\*

The governors have all arrived and have been housed in rather handsome cottages a hundred meters down the beach. I went to meet Marl Shinn. We sat under an umbrella on a sandy pavilion by the beach and became reacquainted in quite a different atmosphere.

"This is a wonderful place," Marl Shinn said. "I've not yet

seen The Tower in the city, but I hope to."

"Oh, you will. There will be a Tower dinner for all of you before you depart."

"Qyoo, can you tell me something about The Controller? Is he as fierce and demanding as it is rumored?"

"I wouldn't say that he is as demanding as he is exacting; he gets things accomplished. And he is fiercely devoted to his work. Huge demands are made on him."

"He certainly seems to value your input."

"Sometimes our work intersects. I'm always glad to do what I can," I answered with a succinctness that encouraged no more.

"Will you deign to put on a suit and go in swimming with me?" Marl Shinn asked.

"I'd love to," I said, "I only learned to swim a short time ago at a lake where I was vacationing. It's a very relaxing exercise, and I haven't done enough of it."

We changed in a nearby cabana, and I watched Marl Shinn run ahead of me and dive into the water with a boisterous athletic confidence. She wore a navy blue one-piece suit and her sturdy limbs had strong, smooth-muscled tendons that carried her through the water like a porpoise. Her marvelous thick ropes of golden brown hair were loosed from atop her head and braided into a long pigtail which flew out behind her as she dove into the water.

I am leaner and longer-limbed than Marl Shinn. I have not ever looked at myself in swimwear. I had stood before the mirror in the cabana and stared at the faint pink, two-piece bathing suit I had carried with me. It seemed to fit as it should. My flesh is firm although pale. I had twisted my hair into a short braid, but fine threads floated around my face. I laughed and shook my head at this strange flour-skinned person before me.

We swam races beyond the shallows. I could easily have outdistanced Marl Shinn, but did not try to do so, letting this Burgan-confined Colonist plow ahead of me for her own enjoyment.

After a while we threw ourselves down on towels tossed over the warm sand. Water beaded on our skins, slowly evaporating in the sultry sea breezes. We lay in comfortable silence, occasionally chatting about the progress Burgan was making. I rolled over on my back, turned my head aside and saw The Controller's agents not far off and then The Controller leaving the water with two governors, one on each side and he very much taller. I had never seen him in swimwear. In the bright sunlight I realized how tan his skin looked compared to my pale flesh. He passed close by and, with my eyes barely open, I saw him pause and glance down at me. He had never seen me in a bathing suit. I wondered what he could be thinking of this pale creature lying on the beach like a bleached white shell. I could feel the heat in my face, and opened my eyes. He was standing above me with his head cocked against one shoulder, flagrantly staring at me and thoroughly unconcerned about it.

"Marl Shinn, will you join us for a cool drink?" he asked, still looking down at me. "Would you like one too, Mediator?"

"No thank you. Go ahead, Governor Shinn. I'm going to lie here awhile longer."

"Have you taken your exposure pill? Don't burn," The Controller admonished.

"I've taken my pill," I said, almost singing my answer.

Marl Shinn jumped up, then grabbed her towel and ran ahead to speak to the two strolling governors.

The Controller leaned over me and said in a soft voice, "You had better take care in those two small pieces of cloth." Then he straightened his tall, dark frame and walked away, turning once to wink at me over his shoulder.

It was at that moment that I decided about the child.

\*\*\*

There was to be a dinner party, then dancing to a very

sophisticated and well-strung orchestra in the ballroom of Latana. Glytta had designed my gown. She was now designing clothes on a regular basis, and still attending her science classes which she inadvertently dominated with her brilliance. I was wearing a new fabric Glytta was trying out, a textile that captured the smallest amount of light and with each movement glowed with an opalescent radiance. The design swept over one shoulder and fit snugly against my body but was gathered at my left side and cascaded down to the floor. Quite a simple and elegant gown, which was good, for I dislike outlandish style. The salon hairdresser had piled my hair atop my head in a loose coil which was not too severe. As I checked myself in the mirror in my room, I smiled at the winking Tzarlite, balancing it for a moment on my hand. It was cool and solid and heavy, yet it heated my palm as if it were alive with its long history. Later, in the honored position of hostess, I stood beside The Controller, greeting the Governors as they entered the dining hall. The Controller wore a handsome, very masculine dark gray evening suit with a white silk shirt, black satin at the waist and in thin diagonals down the sides of the trousers.

The Controller sat at the head of the banquet table with the Governor of Karak, the recently appointed Esmer Zine to his right, then myself and then Marl Shinn followed by the governor of Vetrona, Seale Menni. To The Controller's left sat the governor of Casino, Medfin Ealor, followed by the governor of Pearl, Rother Kive, and then Governor Bryze of Ginsa. Our more quiet conversations could not reach the others further along.

I glimpsed The Controller's platinum and jet ring, inlaid with the official sign of Infinity. The silver insignia flashed as he offered a toast to the leaders of The Colonies.

"May the jewels of The Federation shine ever brighter," he said as the others held their wine goblets high. Then we all drank and dinner began.

I had asked permission for Mirra to assist in the kitchen, and the results were splendid: Terrines of white-peppered, creamed leek soup, several huge stuffed sea trout, aspic of spiced tomato encasing boiled sliced eggs and stuffed olives, and an array of herbed side dishes. I ate only a little soup and a daub of savory red aspic on lettuce, preferring to speak softly with Marl Shinn and occasionally with Esmer Zine.

The orchestra commenced playing in the ballroom, and the Governors summoned their companions and began to dance. I sat talking with Marl Shinn about her childhood, until The Controller asked her to dance. She had come to the conference alone and the attention The Controller was bestowing upon her was, I thought, a salient reward for her meaningful intentions, long journey, and good conduct. I took my flute of champagne and decided to walk out through the palm grove up to a gate which opened onto the soft white sands. I removed my shoes, sipping blissfully from my glass and staring at the phosphorescent wave tops rolling in. I would have thrown myself down upon the still-warm sand, but I was afraid to spoil Glytta's lovely creation and so remained leaning against a palm. In a while I saw Kolla strolling along, looking rather forlorn. He had not been himself since his chosen aide had turned into a traitor enmeshed in the plot to do away with The Controller.

I placed my empty flute at the trunk of the palm and set out to meet Kolla.

"May I join you in your walk?" I asked.

"Oh, Mediator! Sorry, I was preoccupied and didn't see you. I'm just pacing. Come along if you like. Will you spoil your gown? Don't get too near the water. See, I've had to roll my good dress pants."

This was quite a bit of talk for Kolla, and I surmised that he had drunk a fair amount of champagne, a very unfamiliar beverage for this ascetic fellow.

"Have you finished with your duties for The Controller this evening?" I asked and then wondered if I had sounded too domineering for his currently susceptible condition.

"There is nothing more for me to do, at least for the moment, and I suppose I won't be needed until tomorrow," Kolla answered.

"I only wondered how far we could go. It's so lovely out. I can hardly adjust to this sultry climate where a person can go out with so little clothing and feel just fine," I said.

"I'm afraid I don't feel just fine," Kolla revealed.

"Why is that, or am I prying?"

"I have lost the confidence of The Controller by my inability to properly judge character," Kolla blurted out.

"Has The Controller said any such thing to you?"

"No, but--"

"Then I think you only imagine it. I know that he is very taken with your loyalty and good work, Kolla."

"Really?...I--"

"Why don't you try to forget what is in the past and just go on as before. Wealth is a powerful foe. It tempts even those of us who appear to have good character. We can all be fooled."

"Look out, here comes a wave!" Kolla exclaimed, grabbing my arm as I lifted the hem of my gown high.

I began to laugh and then Kolla was laughing, too.

"Oh, did it get me?"

"Let's see. No, the cloth doesn't feel wet."

This gown is rather something I wear in trust. My dear little friend, Glytta designed it with such cleverness."

"It's beautiful. She must be very talented. It glows softly, even in this dimness...like a nacreous shell. It looks especially good on a rather tall person like yourself."

"Am I tall? I never think of myself that way."

"You are...somewhat...slender and tallish."

"You know, Kolla, I think you would like Glytta. Do you have any a...well, any current female friend?"

"When would I have time for such an extravagance? I am always at the beck and call of his highness."

"Ah, do you resent that a little?"

"No! No. Not ever. He's generous with praise and remuneration. It's the drink making me sarcastic--my idea of wit."

We trudged on over the wet sand in silence, listening to the crashing waves and trying to outguess the incoming tide. We were both still feeling a heady rush of champagne.

"I'm going to introduce you to Glytta. Would you like that?"

"I don't know. How could I know? I've never seen her."

"She's lovely and very bright, like you. Oh, the more I think about it, the more I like the idea, Kolla."

"Talk to me again when I'm sober. If I'm still in favor of it I'll let you know."

"Look out! You're going to get it this time!" Kolla shouted.

I was holding my gown skirts up high and laughing wildly as the tide surged around my knees. Kolla was laughing and pointing at me, then he grabbed my arm and led me to the shore while I held up my mistreated gown, and there stood The Controller.

"So this is where my two outflyers have got themselves," he said with a grin.

If Kolla had been wearing shoes I could have heard his heels click. He stood there with a lopsided grin frozen on his face and his dress trousers rolled clumsily to his knees. He was still holding onto my arm and my heart went out to him.

"Kolla has saved me from ruination," I said to The Controller.

"Kolla is always indispensable," The Controller said, and I

was not surprised by his subtle understanding of Kolla's desperation. "It appears you are in need of several caretakers," The Controller went on, holding up my flimsy, thin-strapped, formal sandals, which he then stuck into his pockets.

"Oh, where did you find them?" I asked.

"At the gate. Shall we walk back? I have not yet danced with The Mediator, Kolla. Do you think she will dance with me?"

"If she doesn't she will have missed the art and essence of dance," Kolla said.

I had thought Kolla's remark a very tactful maneuver until I settled into The Controller's arms under the watchful eyes of the filled ballroom. He was as graceful as I was buoyant.

With my head so near his shoulder I could smell the faint and delicious aroma of citrus and spice. As we whirled over the shining floor, everyone gradually left it to gaze after us until we were dancing alone. I heard soft laughter and looked up into the dark eyes of Anima. He grinned and said, "You are light of foot, my pearl stolen from the sea."

When the music stopped, I said in a hushed voice, "I think you have swept me off my feet."

"That was supposed to have happened some time ago," The Controller said and left me to speak with a beckoning governor.

I walked through the glass doors onto the softly lit terrazzo terrace and sat at a table with yet another flute of champagne in my grasp. Marl Shinn came up and sat down.

"I don't know when I've had so much leisure time. I suppose the work begins tomorrow. We will all sit around and haggle over how we want things to go, neocolonial dreams and hyperbole."

"Neocolonial? I don't think so. I haven't drunk quite that much. Intercolonial, yes," I said.

Marl Shinn was once again sporting her regal butterfly crown of hair. She wore a striking fuchsia gown with a cascade of green gems hanging from her ears. Blinking her soft brown eyes

at me, she said, "Am I overstepping my bounds when I say how good you two look together?--darkness and light, the tempered and the temperate. Oh, it is lovely."

"What?" I said, lifting my head and looking straight into Marl Shinn's knowing brown eyes.

"I am overstepping my bounds, of course, but it is so obvious to me. I'm a bit of a voyeur, and it is so fascinating. It's really quite wonderful to be present at this time; one can live vicariously, imagine things. I always wondered who, if anyone, it could ever be."

"Have you been drinking a lot of this?" I said, holding up my glass.

"Indeed, I have partaken of the free-flowing bubbly, and why not? I am generally far too sober, and now I will just have to pay the consequences of overindulgence, not too much, just enough...just enough to remember everything.

"When The Controller and I were dancing I could not help but comment on your loveliness. Oh yes, I did it to see what I could bring forth -- please don't remind me of this conversation tomorrow. I will deny everything. -- and from that comment on, his eyes, if not his tacit manner were full of you, Mediator. I once thought to impress him with my competence but I could never approach yours, could I, Qyoo?"

"Marl Shinn!" I said.

"Oh, forgive me," Marl Shinn said, "Have I reached the mouthy maudlin stage? Please forgive me, Qyoo."

Governor Shinn stood up and ambled away. I sat in embarrassment for a moment then departed the table myself, leaving my nearly full glass behind in haste and repugnance.

Once again, I removed my shoes at the gate and went out onto the sand, hopeful of finding the beach empty. It was, and I walked briskly, staying well away from the water and letting the rising wind whip through my hair and clear my muddled head.

Marl Shinn is in love with The Controller, I may have whispered aloud. How miserable. How sad. How uncomfortable. How she must dislike me, and I had thought to have her as a friend. I did not even guess she was aware of our relationship, but a person in love always knows everything about the object of desire. I had the strongest feeling that I ought to remove myself entirely from the Governors' Conference, to return home rather than be the cause of someone's misery, walking around in plain sight and adding to the pain. I cannot stand to think of causing another pain. My cheeks felt unnaturally cool and I realized that I was crying.

"Oh, that horrid champagne!" I exclaimed.

"It's of very high quality," said The Controller, and I shrieked with surprise, having assumed I was totally alone.

I lifted the hem of my gown and began to run. It was the old Qyoo again, wishing to be unobserved, running to release myself, running from a problem I had neither caused nor could free myself from, but running anyway. I can run very fast, but so can Anima. I was soon caught.

When he saw my tears he fairly shouted, "What is it now, you little chameleon?"

"I have ruined a friendship," I bawled. "I have to leave right away."

"No more champagne for you," Anima said. "You'd better come with me. You'll have to sleep it off."

"I haven't drunk so much...but enough to feel miserable, and I need to go home."

"And I need you here. You are acting like a child."

I was silent, realizing how foolish I must look. Certainly I can hold a little champagne better than this, I thought, and walked all the way back to my room without a word. I closed my door quietly, then opened it again and called to the disappearing Controller, "Can you give me something for a headache?"

"Put on your robe and come into my room," he said softly.  
When I entered, he handed me a pill and a glass of water.

"No sedatives," he said.

"Of course not," I answered. "I'm not drunk, Anima."

"You're doing a very good imitation of it."

"No, it was something else that disturbed me. I had a lovely evening. Thank you so much for asking me to come."

Anima studied me closely and said, "Come into my bed. I'll hold you until you fall asleep. You know I can make you sleep."

I glanced toward the door, then slipped out of my robe and into Anima's waiting arms.

"Black suns, you're a handful, but I can't sleep without you either," Anima said with his mouth against my throat.

\*\*\*

Flocks of birds chorused in the palm trees. I awoke early, even before Anima. When I attempted to get up he reached for me and said, "What in blazes was all of that last night?"

"I don't want to say. It would be unfair to another."

"Who, Kolla?"

"No, not Kolla."

"Then it must be Marl Shinn. You've been with her more than anyone else."

"Why do you need to know?"

"Because you were very upset."

I stared at Anima's black hair touseled over the pillow, my father's hair, but I rarely thought of that. I ran my fingers through it and said, "Please, Anima, don't ask me any more about this."

"Don't play me like a violin. You'll get the wrong music, and it's beneath you," Anima said, sitting up.

"I was only asking a favor of you."

"Marl Shinn is fond of me," Anima said with his usual dead

center marksmanship.

"Yes," I answered, staring out at the turquoise shallows beyond the shore.

"Surely you aren't troubled by that."

"No. She had a little too much to drink and said some things, poor thing. She seems to know that we have a...a relationship, and I suppose it has aborted what might have been a congenial friendship."

"Ah, I see. You won't see her very often, anyway. She'll get over it. Where is my robe?"

"You don't even care."

"I do care but I've seen a great deal of this, Qyoo. I'm used to women in that condition. They don't know me, know anything about me. It has to do with power. You and I both have certain kinds of power. You should understand the phenomenon. Some women like to be around male power and they lose their heads over it in varying degrees. Marl Shinn is mildly affected. I ignore this and treat her with the respect she has earned."

"You sound so callous."

"I'm sorry, Little One, but you have not gone through what I have to reach this indifference. It is the only solution."

"I think I should leave."

"You will not leave! That is cowardly."

"I thought it was being kind."

"Then you are being too kind. Treat Marl Shinn as you have always treated her and forget what happened last night. By now she is probably royally ashamed of herself, and you will be in her good graces for a resounding failure of your memory."

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am. Come here and kiss me, unless you, too, are only after my power."

"I'm only after your power," I teased as Anima halted my escape and held me until my body trembled with longing.

"How I wish I could stay here with you, making love and listening to birdsong, but very soon I must go and be the attentive Master Planner.

"Did you say very soon?"

"Yes. Right now I am only after your power, Little One."

\*\*\*

For some time after Anima had gone, I lay sated and languid and smiling amongst the ruffled but elegant white linens and crushed pillows of the bed. My elliptic thoughts threaded through bird music and wind patterns in the clicking palms. I eventually breakfasted with Kolla on a small private side terrace near the kitchens. At first, he refused to make eye contact, leaning on his hand and staring in shock at two large-yoked eggs which appeared to stare back in sad rejection.

I stirred my tea and said, "I think you are mumbling, Kolla. What did you say?"

"If ever I swallow a drop of that deceitful elixir again, have me carted off at once."

"It couldn't have been all bad, Kolla. I seem to recall that you were laughing a great deal."

"That was you," Kolla said, at last focusing his youthful but wan bluish-gray eyes on me. "You made me laugh. I'm glad you came along, really. I might have jumped into the sea."

I gave him a long, appraising stare and said, "You need an extracurricular existence and I'm going to see that you get it. I think you're going to become one of my more successful projects, Kolla. You are so single-mindedly bright that you are nearly hopeless."

"What are you thinking about...that young woman you mentioned?" Kolla asked with a concerned expression.

"Yes, and she is very dear to me, so that should be an indication of how I rate your character."

"Overrated. The Controller has rejected me. He himself actually stopped by my room this morning and told me I would not be needed until noon."

"That was sheer benevolent generosity. Don't you recognize a considerate act when you see it? He is probably doing something right now that you ought to be doing."

"Then I'd better get going."

"No. You look a bit pasty. Take a walk on the beach, breathe deeply and collect yourself, then report in."

"You were riding the top deck yourself last night. How do you manage to come off so well today?"

"I didn't really drink that much, and I'm happy."

"I see," Kolla said, his eyes traveling over my face.

"Well, good for you."

"Come on now, Kolla, chin up. Wonderful things are in store for you."

"Okay. That's nice," Kolla said, chuckling a little but still a nonbeliever. That was going to change.

\*\*\*

When the Governors broke for lunch, I saw Marl Shinn sitting alone on the terrace of her cottage. I had made a point of walking to the village to try and run across her. When she saw me, she turned her face away and pretended that she had not.

I walked right up to her and sat down.

"Isn't it gorgeous here? You can say it's a lovely day before you even open your eyes and never be wrong."

"You can, I'm sure."

"Do you have time for a swim?" I said, ignoring her sarcasm.

"Qyoo, I'm...I'm quite embarrassed about last night."

"You too? I'm afraid I got a little carried away with all that very good champagne. I don't remember much, and I don't make a habit of doing that. Did my manners go on holiday? If

they did, I'll apologize right now, because I certainly wouldn't want to ruin our friendship over some silliness I don't even remember."

"I...no, you were fine. Yes, let's swim. I have time."

Hovering over a coral reef that held a chromatic buffet of delights, Marl Shinn and I grinned at each other through the slightly opaque green waters, and I thought how right Anima had been. I was fairly certain that I had won Marl Shinn as a friend. She needed all the friends she could acquire on the difficult and competitive road ahead, and I always need friends, if for no other reason than general well-being.

\*\*\*

"You've been doing your magic tricks again," Anima said in the evening, as we walked on the beach after another rousing dinner.

"Oh no, not you, too," I said.

"What me too?"

"This magic business."

"Well, what would you call it? Marl Shinn told me this afternoon that you are an amazing woman and a tremendous asset as an adjunct to my office."

"For that you may take part of the credit. You are the one who told me not to run away. But I'm hardly an adjunct to your office."

"Would you like to be?"

"I think I'm better as my independent self."

"You don't receive orders well. You dislike authority."

"Haven't I followed your orders, Controller?"

"Not always."

"But in those maverick cases weren't the effects positive?"

"Black suns! Yes! But you endanger yourself."

"I have to be free to make the decisions that I know are the

right ones."

"Yes," Anima said, turning and holding me against him and backing me a ways into the water. Fortunately, we were both wearing shorts.

"What right decision have you made of late?" he asked.

I squinted carefully at his face in the lingering rose dusk, nearly losing myself in searching the sober dark eyes that rather impatiently awaited an answer.

"I would like to have a child with you," I said.

He held me against him, staring out at the pink whitecaps, and I suddenly realized that it was what he wanted. He would never have told me if I had decided otherwise.

"You want it, too," I said. "Isn't that nice?"

"Yes, it is nice, very, very nice," he said, picking me up and carrying me off to rest against a bent palm. There I was thoroughly kissed. "I wish it could be now," he said, "here and now, but it will be soon, my little sleight-of-hand."

\*\*\*

I'm back in the city and feeling renewed and full of energy, although my skin is still white as a fair-weather cloud. Exposure pills have prevented me from tanning. Anima has told me that he prefers my natural skin and also that his tan pigmentation is from Pysu. He wants to use fair Larstev's sperm, because he is hopeful of a little girl who looks like me, so he says with the sweetest enthusiasm. I am very excited about this, but I will tell my family nothing until there is something to tell.

I have told Glytta that her gown was a great success, but have said nothing of Kolla. I must think very carefully how to make this meeting come about as naturally as possible. Overly contrived encounters are horrid, uncomfortable affairs and I am aiming for success. Perhaps they will only be friends but it is

something to contemplate. Strong attraction is a strange phenomenon. From the first moment I saw Anima as distinct from my father, some part of me knew that I must be with him.

Glytta knocked on my door as I was writing the above, and then entered to speak with me.

"I have a new gown for you to wear to The Tower dinner."

"But I was going to wear the same one. Everyone will think I'm a fashion head. That just isn't me."

"Qyoo, you're my model. I want to see how you look. Your body is perfect for my textile experiments."

"Glytta, I am not a mannequin. Do you plan to be a scientist or a clothes horse?"

Glytta yanked at her short, coppery blond hair and blinked her sleepy hazel eyes with surprise at my disapproval.

"It's just something I like to do. It doesn't interfere with anything...an avocation. Wait till you see the gown. You will change your mind."

"Glytta...oh, all right. Where is it?"

"Stay right there. I'll bring it to you."

The gown is a pale, nickel oxide green, the color of a certain quartz called chrysoprase, translucent like the shallow waters of Sultrona. The sleeves go to the elbow and the rolled neckline plunges in a daring decolletage. The straight skirt has a tiny ripple of gathers in the back, "which your trim, nicely rounded little bottom can easily accommodate," Glytta said.

"I'm not sure about that neckline," I pondered aloud.

"No, it's fine. Wait till you have it on. You'll see."

I tried it on, then stared at myself in the mirror in my room and said, "It's really very nice. Have you made any gowns for yourself?"

"Really very nice! You are gorgeous!" Glytta exclaimed with an enthusiasm for her own cleverness most innocently displayed.

"You haven't answered my question."

"Yes, I've made one or two for this chunky little body."

"Chunky? You are so pretty, Glytta, fresh as a dewy rose."

A plan was forming in my head and I wondered how I could get to busy Anima to ask him about it. I never wanted to bother him with frivolous matters and, while I didn't consider Glytta's future frivolous, this was still not a necessity that warranted immediate interruption.

I thought I would catch transit and go to the Summerhouse. His agents would tell him I was there and he might come if he was not indisposed. Then I fell ill. Sometimes it happens in the middle of the month, a burning pain. Disliking medication, rapid walking has always been my solution for menstrual misery, although occasionally a swift-working anodyne is the only answer. I set out walking as far and rapidly as I could and caught a transit when I felt too miserable to continue on. By the time I reached the Summerhouse I wished I had not come. I was in agony and lay down hugging a pillow against my abdomen. My pain-induced rapid breathing would soon result in unconsciousness.

"Oh, this was foolish," I whispered aloud with watering eyes. There was so much going on in the city, with all the governors about to attend dinner and then depart, that The Controller would never have any time for me.

"Oh, Anima, I wish you would come," I whispered and then began to moan and rock back and forth with pain until I felt a numbness creeping over me. The room spun around, sliding away.

I opened my eyes and Anima was leaning over me.

"You have a fever...clammy hands...rather puffy flesh. It is your cycle, is it not?" Anima said.

"Oh, they told you I was here," I muttered. "Have you anything I can take for the pain?"

"No one told me. I thought I heard you calling me. There is something for pain in the cupboard downstairs. Let me check."

Anima returned in a moment with a glass of water and a small

blue pill.

"Swallow this."

I took the glass with shaking hand and washed down the pill.

"I've never done that before...lost consciousness."

"You hyperventilated. Enough of that and you will easily pass out."

"Yes, that's what I did."

Anima held me, stroking my hair in silence.

"How are you now?"

"Better."

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

"Why do you so dislike your phone?"

"I...I guess I wanted to see you."

"And why is it so difficult to admit that?"

"Oh, why, why, why! I don't know. I dislike disturbing you. This way you can make up your own mind about seeing me."

"You are so afraid of being rejected, Qyoo. Do you think I will hang up on you? Grow angry? Not respond? I will always respond. Can you not remember that?"

"Anima, I just wanted to see you, to ask you something."

"Little One, I want you to come and live with me. It is time. We are too far apart. I cannot sleep without you beside me, and look what you are doing to yourself."

"I only wanted to ask you something," I said, weeping.

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't know. I don't think I can live that way. I can't! I can't!"

"Is it so bad to live with me? You will have all the freedom you want. I would never try to restrict your life, but I think you must accustom yourself to the idea of a new home."

"I will think about it," I said with an evasive finality.

"What did you want to ask me?" Anima said. At least he knew

when he had argued enough on the subject of changing my style of life.

"Oh, never mind. I don't think I'll come to The Tower dinner after all."

"Why? Are you afraid you will not be allowed to leave? Don't you want to say a final good-bye to Marl Shinn?"

"Oh, you would tempt me with that remark. Right now I'm feeling miserable, but it's no excuse for future selfishness. I will have to come, won't I?"

"I'm sorry you find it such a burden, Qyoo."

"No, I'm sorry. It isn't a burden. Oh, Anima, I am hopeless today."

"I will have you taken home, and you must go to bed and stay there until mind and body are restored. I wish you would tell me what it was you wanted."

"You will think I'm ridiculous."

"I will not."

"I wanted to know if I could bring Glytta with me to the dinner."

"Of course, bring her. You see how easy that was. You could have stayed in bed and phoned me."

"I don't like phoning you."

"How well I know it. If you choose to live away from me you had better learn to do it."

"I wanted to see you."

"Yes. Now we are back to my very reasonable solution."

"You are so reasonable, Anima, and I am...I am--"

"You are what I want."

\*\*\*

Glytta was very nervous about attending the dinner with me. She is more shy than Mekin, who has already developed a solid crowd of friends and goes about her studies with single-minded

relish. She has objectives in mind: a high-level position at the Academy and very esoteric metal research. Mekin often pilfers my mind for ideas in her research. She wonders why I have not stayed with my profession but admires the work I presently do. I'm not certain that Glytta will ever be a scientist, but all the equipment is there for a sterling endeavor in the field.

On the evening of the Tower dinner, The Controller sent Kolla in the official air-car shuttle to accompany us to the Tower. His mind must be working in tandem with mine, I thought.

Kolla was wearing a charcoal gray, formal evening suit, and his unassailable reserve was fully restored. I watched him carefully when Glytta entered our foyer wearing a shimmering lemon gown, of course, of her own design. Her lustrous, copper-blond hair was loose, just touching the straps of her gown, and her shy hazel eyes were moist and full of uncertainty, the very thing that would make dutiful Kolla watch over her. I detected not a whit of change in Kolla's face or manner when he was introduced, except that he immediately caught and straightened Glytta's falling cape. I was moved almost to tears by this simple display of concern and quickly implored my brain to adjust my overreactive chemistry.

In the shuttle, Glytta sat with her hands folded in her lap and never lifted her head until Kolla spoke to her.

"What classes are you taking at the Academy?"

"All the upper-division experimental physics classes," Glytta replied with a demure voice, but she did look into Kolla's eyes with the polite etiquette her mother had taught her.

Kolla blinked and smiled. "You are busy."

"Not very," Glytta answered with a little smile.

"Child's play, I suppose for you Laomites."

"I've heard it all before," Glytta said, and looked out the window at the dazzling lights of The Tower coming into view.

I took her cool damp hand in mine and whispered, "Enjoy this

night, Glytta. You are so lovely and your remarkable daffodil gown is perfect for you."

When we had handed over our wraps and entered the grand dining hall I drew Kolla aside and said, "Will you please sit next to Glytta and watch over her just a little. This is all new to her."

"There is a seating arrangement," Kolla said, "but I think she may have been placed near me."

"Oh, good," I said, "At least you two have a few things in common. That will be nice."

Kolla gave me a long, very readable stare and said, "All right, Mediator, I know when I am permitted no alternative."

I took hold of his sleeve and said, "Are you really so in need of an alternative, Kolla?"

"She's a very nice girl, and your gown is exquisite," was his reply as he turned and walked off to find Glytta.

Could Kolla possibly have a small crush on me? I wondered. This would not be good at all. I stood pondering this sudden revelation when a voice behind me dissolved my consternation.

"Hello, Mediator. Are you wrapped in another of Glytta's clever inventions? Your little friend certainly knows how to advertise. I've come to enjoy very much what you do to green."

I turned around and took in all of The Controller in his elegant formal suit. My knees trembled. I wondered how long I would react like that.

"You look very fetching," I said.

"Thank you. A moment ago I saw worry on your face. Is something troubling you?"

"Oh, it's nothing that can't be resolved." If Glytta will just get hold of her own subtle powers, I thought.

"Would you like a small apéritif?"

"No thank you. Tonight I will drink nothing at all."

"Good for you," The Controller said.

"Have you seen Governor Shinn? She was looking for you."

"No," I said, gazing around the room. "I'll go and look for her. Excuse me."

I sauntered away, feeling The Controller's eyes on my back and trying to maintain my equilibrium. My eyes soon fell upon a very striking rendition of Marl Shinn in a black-tulle-covered copper foil gown.

"How handsome you are./How handsome you are."

Our exact simultaneous praise made us burst into laughter.

"Let us go out on the terrace and gaze down. This place is spectacular. I've long imagined it and now I'm here," Marl Shinn said with an eager excitement that was poignant.

We stood at the balustrade looking out over the rainbow lights of the city and then at the broad dark swatch of the park below. I felt a tension between us and awaited her disclosure.

She turned to me and said, "The other night I made a careless remark about neocolonialism that was so utterly foolish I cannot let it go without explaining that it was the tipsy assertion of an old habit. If The Controller were to hear of this I would be devastated. I meant nothing at all by it. I only want Burgan to be a responsible part of The Federation, exchanging trade and outpost resources in the most equitable manner."

"I understand that, Marl. I have no intention of reporting any such remark to The Controller. I am not yet his spy, nor ever shall be, unless The Federation were to be in some grave danger. If you think me a tattletale, you have not yet acquired a full grasp of who I am."

Marl Shinn put her arm over my shoulder and said, "I think I am beginning to know who you are, you with your eloquent way of speaking, and I am immensely grateful for your friendship.

"And I for yours," I answered.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in this high Tower, safe

and protected from all that is below?"

"I don't know," I said. "One must go out into what is below, as The Controller does. This high office isn't an ivory tower."

"But he can return here and sleep safely, and it is a fitting height for this empyrean office, don't you think?"

"I have always thought The Tower a remarkable place," I said, even as a part of my mind envisioned this high fortress as a kind of prison.

"Yes, it is remarkable...and lavish, this massive, self-contained structure. So much is here: the museums, the music hall, the theater, the government offices, the medical clinic, the gymnasium, the shops, and on and on. I am so impressed with all of this. I hope you will excuse my babbling enthusiasm, but to reside here would be like living in paradise."

"Yes, it is a lofty and multifarious haven in many senses. As seen through your eyes, I have renewed pride in it. I live in a modest house in Ammon Shores with my lively near-sisters from Laom, a secretary, and a wonderful cook and housekeeper...and I'm afraid a very bossy parrot."

"Ah, I've heard of the parrot."

"Hasn't everyone?" I said, laughing. "Gonin now has an infamous place in my history of mediation."

"Qyoo, you are so lucky. Perhaps some day you will tell me the story of your childhood on Laom."

"Perhaps," I said, growing reticent and quiet and then, catching myself up, I said, "I would like to hear of your childhood some day, too."

"Forgive me. I think I've intruded. But as to my own childhood, it was a stormy one. Burgan has always been a bellicose outpost, as you well know."

"Yes, and now you will lead it into peaceful prosperity."

"With the help of The Federation I will," Marl Shinn affirmed with another show of loyalty.

"Perhaps we'd better go in," I said, taking her arm. "I think everyone is sitting down to dinner."

Far down the table, I saw Glytta with Kolla on one side and Phillipa on the other. Glytta was staring straight ahead while Kolla and Phillipa appeared to be talking around her. I was so angry that I wanted to get up, march down there and bring her back to sit with me. Unfortunately, I had no control over the seating arrangement. I was stuck near the head of the table between the governors of Karak and Vetronea. They were exuding an unflagging interest in mediation, and I soon felt as if I were being called upon to deliver an informative lecture on the subject. I gave The Controller one of my desperate looks, and he drew the governor of Karak into a conversation with himself, Marl Shinn, and Casino's governor, Medfin Ealor. That left me only Governor Seale Menni to contend with, and he was soon shut down by Mirra's elegant fruit torte.

Later, when the large and splendid orchestra struck up a complex but very danceable piece of music, I looked to see if Glytta might be dancing. She was sitting on the sidelines with her hands folded in her lap. I was furious with Kolla, but then I calmed myself. Just what I feared might happen had. Human interest in another is the most spontaneous and individual of all expressions. There was really no one to blame for Glytta's misery, except perhaps myself for bringing her. Just as I was going to make my way to her side, I saw The Controller stride up to her, take her hand, and lead her out onto the floor. I could not have been more thrilled if I had been dancing with him myself.

"May I dance with you?" Kolla asked.

I turned around swiftly and almost said, "You may not," but I knew this was a ridiculous response and lifted my arm to his shoulder in silence.

"You are very solemn tonight," Kolla remarked.

I looked off across the shining blond floor of the ballroom, at The Controller charming Glytta as they floated gracefully among the other dancers. She was smiling.

"Did you even try to talk with Glytta?" I asked.

"Ah, I see. Yes, I did. She is very contentious with me."

"That is a defense mechanism because she is rather shy. You have to come right back at her. She will like you for it."

"Do I want her to like me?"

"Oh, Kolla, do you not even find that lovely creature interesting?"

"She's interesting and intelligent," Kolla said and fell silent.

"Excuse me," The Controller said, tapping Kolla on the shoulder. "Let us change partners before everyone starts gossiping about how attentive I am to this beauty."

Glytta was laughing, and I tried to signal The Controller that his maneuver was of no use, but Kolla instantly responded to his High Lord's request, taking Glytta away without the slightest hesitation. I was hoping he didn't consider this a reparation.

"There will be little consanguinity there," I said as we danced off.

"I think you are wrong," Anima said. "They are both defensive and they are both going to knock each other around for a while until they find out how much they have in common."

"How wise you are," I said.

"I am going to send Kolla to escort Glytta home and keep you here tonight."

"Oh but...so you are going to hold me captive after all."

Anima said nothing, only danced me out to an empty corner of the terrace, put his fingers through my hair at the back of my head and turned my face up to his perplexed eyes.

"Qyoo, do you want to be with me?"

"Do you mean tonight or--"

"Do you want to be with me?"

"I want to..." I shrugged and felt my eyes brimming.

"You know you cannot have our child unless you live with me. Do you know that?"

"Anima, my life is so different from--"

"I cannot protect you and our child unless you live here in The Tower. You must know that. Any mate and child of mine will be subject to extreme danger. Even now you are subject to that danger. That's why my agents try so hard to keep you in sight. This condition cannot have failed to register in your highly intelligent mind."

My inability to respond caused me to weep.

"I see," Anima said. "Then my need of you is far greater than yours of me."

I ran to the balustrade and leaned over with tears leaking from my eyes in great choking torrents.

"Come away from there," Anima said, drawing me back.

"I'm sorry to come so brutally to the point, Qyoo, especially on this night of celebration. But there is no use in prolonging this. We've come so far, bonded by our intertwining histories, but now this needful partnership has snagged on an amorphous impediment which even you can't define. I would never prevent you from being The Mediator, however well guarded you must be. You may bring your entire household with you. Am I depriving you of something? What is it that you want?"

I turned rapidly and threw my arms around Anima.

"I want you! I want you, Anima!"

"Stop crying, Little One. You have what you want."

The Controller left me behind to dry my eyes while he went to fulfill his social obligations. In a while, I stood beside him bidding good-bye to all the smiling-faced governors, each having concluded by The Controller's artful attention that he or she was the most necessary cog in The Federation's great spinning wheel.

Marl Shinn gripped my hand, her brown-agate eyes bright with emotion, and said in her public voice, "We await your visit to Burgan with great and happy anticipation, Mediator."

"Good-bye, my friend," I said, clasping her jasmine-perfumed, rustling-gowned self against me, and with my eyes once again brimming.

This was a night of tears.

\*\*\*

"Do you wish to return to your home?" Anima asked when we were alone.

"Have Kolla and Glytta gone?"

"Yes, but that will not prevent you from having another shuttle. I myself will take you back."

"Oh, Anima, you always think of me, always with such deep consideration. Allow me to think of you. I will stay here."

"No. Only if you yourself wish it."

"I wish it. I want to be with you."

When I was in Anima's bedroom, I wearing the white gown which always hung in his closet, I watched him enter the room in his robe and decided to speak. I went up to him and laid my head against his chest, and he ran his fingers through my hair.

"Can we make a child?" I whispered.

He leaned away from me and looked into my eyes.

"Have you considered all that goes with that decision?"

"Yes."

"And you will do what is necessary?"

"Yes."

"If you change your mind tomorrow, it will be unbearable for me, Qyoo," Anima said with grave concern.

"If ever a day comes when I am cranky about this, you will never hear of it," I said.

"No, I want to share every mood you experience. How else

can I be of help to you?"

"You will share many moods," I said, laughing.

"I must go to the clinic and see Doctor Kev. I won't be too long. Go to bed, Little One."

I was so at peace that I actually fell asleep, and then I awoke to find Anima leaning down to gently awaken me. Never have I been so well loved or so happy.

In a while I heard Anima's ardent voice muttering against my ear, "It may be necessary to do this again."

"I hope so," I answered.

Anima laughed heartily and said, "You know what I mean, you little comedian. We'll have to be patient, although Doctor Kev and I are a very successful team."

Later, lying in Anima's arms I said, "I wonder what all of the crying was about."

"Probably the fear of change. May you never cry over this, beloved Little One. I will see that you have no pain."

\*\*\*

On his way to see Doctor Kev, Anima had stopped in his office and entered me in the Documents Terminal as "Qyoo Jurith's Daughter, legal wife of Q. Ammon, The Controller of The Federation." Authenticity and date were as simple as an officially coded entry by the hand of The Controller, with the terminal itself as witness. I was now his wife and he my husband. We decided not to make this public for a while, mainly because celebrations would ensue; it would always be there for any future need of verification.

\*\*\*

I have gathered my family together and tried to explain everything. Mekin wishes to move in with her friends near The Academy, and I have given my permission. Glytta seems a bit

lost. She is like me and dislikes having her environment undergo a sudden change, but she wants to come with me. Being a little more dependent upon me for her happiness and security, she wishes to stay by my side.

Leona couldn't imagine herself living in The Tower, which she finds intimidating, and wanted to remain in my house, but I have told her I really do need a secretary, and not just any secretary but her valuable self, near at hand. She is grudgingly willing to try this arrangement.

Mirra has been tripping through the house with delight, hoping there will be a fine opportunity for her as a regular contributor to The Tower kitchens.

Glytta will be living in rooms one floor below us with Gonin as her companion, and I suppose this is a convenient arrangement and that Glytta will be often in my large suite of rooms.

"Will I have to dine with you, Qyoo?" Glytta asked. "I'd rather eat with Leona and Mirra. I would feel too much like an interloper."

"You won't be an interloper. Once and awhile you can dine with us, can't you? Whenever you like, Glytta."

Leona and Mirra have decided to share rooms which have been made available one floor below Glytta. So we four are to relocate to this incredible, monolithic spire of a self-contained city rising out of heavily secured grounds and towering over Hustler's largest metropolis.

\*\*\*

We have been in The Tower for a week now, and I've been so busy I haven't had time to write here. But I thought it was time to open my journal, as I find it a soothing pastime and moreover something happened today which I thought worth recording.

Glytta came to me in an agitated state. She had run into Kolla in the elevator on her way to the pool, and he teased her

about closing in on him with her new move to The Tower. "There isn't room for me, you, and your ego in this elevator, so in the future when you encounter me in it, please take another car," Glytta stormed as the door closed. When she returned to her room, Kolla was there at her door waiting for her.

"I apologize if I've offended you with my feeble attempt at drollery," Kolla apparently said. "Since we are obviously going to be running into each other on a regular basis, I suggest we make an effort to avoid a shootout every time we meet."

"Good," Glytta answered, sailing through her door and calling over her shoulder as the door closed, "I'll try and confine our shootouts to once a fortnight, on principle."

She says she heard laughter on the other side of the door.

"I actually made him laugh, Qyoo."

"He's discovered that you share a commodious wit. Humor is going to replace much of that defensive anger," I said, "then you can banter good-naturedly as potential friends."

"I don't know about that," Glytta said. "He may be bright and nice to look at, but he's arrogant and condescending."

"Being very proper and formal is part of his working personality, Glytta. It's hard to lay aside several years of performing like that, but underneath is a warm and hungry being, I assure you. I've seen it."

"I haven't," Glytta said, and went off to work on a dress she is designing for Mekin who is in need of something special for a dinner with visiting scientists.

That evening Anima and I had a light supper in his study, brought to us by Mirra: A thick and creamy lentil soup and kumquat salad for me and roast beef and herb-creamed asparagus for Anima.

Anima put his hand on mine as we dined and said, "I really like this arrangement. To have you so near is something I've long imagined, but I think it had to evolve as it did. How are

you feeling? Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need?"

"I have everything, everything..." I said, smiling, my voice, trailing off as I stared at a large bouquet of orange roses.

"Except a child," Anima said. "Wait a while and be patient, Little One."

I phoned Glytta, with no answer, and then Leona where I found Glytta eating dinner. I went to my terminal to read my mail, sitting in my pleasantly Spartan office adjacent to more elegant quarters, which are also pleasingly simplistic--Anima's insightful touch. He had gone to work in his study.

"It must be the position of the moons," I joked to Anima later. "There are arguments and deadlocked disputes everywhere, and I hardly know where to go first. Fortunately, Leona maintains my calendar and knows where I'll be next."

"How does she arrange your calendar, by chronology or importance?" Anima asked.

"Depends upon what is at stake...the final decision is mine."

"Of course. Well, tomorrow I must go to Karak, as I promised Governor Zine I would meet with his military leaders in the reorganization. I am taking General Brede with me, and we will probably be gone several days."

"I might not be here when you return, as I think I am going to Pearl soon," I said. "The water tenders are about to strike. As you know, half the canal locks have been thoroughly automated, and it is a strike of solidarity."

"Yes, Phillipa told me and the news was also on my terminal. I saw that they had requested you, and went on to something else. Have you already definitive thoughts of how you will deal with this? I have some ideas."

"I'd love to hear them," I said.

And so we passed the evening, bouncing ideas off each other

in precious hours that flew too quickly.

"Sometimes I am astonished that you are really here," Anima said against my throat as we fell asleep. "I will say good-bye now and not wake you in the early morning, Little One."

\*\*\*

Leona was sitting in my office, quite busy on her phone, when she turned to me and said, "There is a Doctor Lily Bard on the phone who wants to talk to you. Are you interested?"

"Oh, Lily from Hedone. Let me speak to her.

"Lily, how are you?"

"All right. I'm a little embarrassed to be calling you, as I suppose you still think of me as foolish."

"I never did think of you as foolish, so how could I continue to think so, Lily. You had problems that distracted you. Now I hope you are doing well."

"Could you come and have tea with me? There's a small café near my clinic where we could meet."

"Oh, Lily, I'm afraid I'm incredibly busy right now. I may have to leave soon but later we could--"

"No, it has to be now or... Oh, I desperately need your help, Qyoo. When this situation developed I thought of you at once, and now if you can't come I don't know what I'll do."

"So you aren't all right after all."

"I'm all right. It's one of my patients. Please can you spare me an hour of your time? Please?"

The clinic where Doctor Bard worked turned out to be very near Mekin's apartment, and I rationalized that I could pay Mekin a visit, which I'd been meaning to do, after visiting with Doctor Bard. I then laid aside my pressing work and hastened to carry out this plan.

The small red-walled café was made cheerful with large green plants, jardinières of flowers, and the redolent aroma of brewing

coffees and teas. Lily was sitting at a synthetic black table by the window and was waving to me through the glass as I approached. She had ordered my tea served as soon as I sat down.

"Orange tea?" Lily asked with a tentative voice.

"Fine," I said, attempting a polite study of her.

Her red hair was longer, the thick curls pinned back, and her dark blue eyes were tired and filled with worry. She still wore the pale green jacket from her clinic, a loose tunic style fitted over a high white collar and tan slacks. Her adept, long physician's fingers twisted anxiously before her on the table top, and her shoulders were hunched forward in fatigue.

"I know your time is precious, Qyoo. I'm busy, too, so I'll try and hurry through my story.

"A month ago a strange case was brought to our clinic and the patient put into my care: a man who was found on a very old test drifter by salvagers. He was brought to Hustler still encapsulated in suspended animation, for it was feared that to allow him to awaken in the usual manner would have killed him. It was I who essentially brought him back to life in a very cautious and carefully monitored process. He is a research scientist. I have worked slowly with this very comprehensive procedure, spending long hours in dealing with his psychological problems. You see, he wishes to die. He simply refuses to adjust to his environment. He was in suspended animation for almost a century and is horrified by nearly everything he sees. He was actually released to his own apartment but he came straight back to me, as if he'd imprinted on me upon emerging from his chrysalis. You know all doctors have the right of euthanasia, but I cannot even entertain the idea of doing away with this man. There is nothing physically wrong with him. And worse yet, in my long hours spent with him I've begun to fall in love with him. He is very bright and so logical and clever at discourse that he could convince anyone of his need to perish.

Of course, I cannot complicate his life with my sentiments, and it would be unprofessional anyway. He wishes to die, Qyoo, and I don't know what to do. I just can't get through to him."

I took Lily's hand, for she was weeping, and I began to think about the approach that must be taken here.

"Of course, I want to see him," I said. "Where is he now?"

"The clinic has rejected his request to remain there. I've managed to get him to return to his apartment, but I go there regularly in great fear of what I'll find. He sits in a chair by the window and seems to be waiting only for my appearance. I never know if I'll find him still alive. He believes that I'm going to help him end his life, and I've let him rely on this simply to keep him alive."

"Is he on any medication?"

"He refuses to take anything which might give him relief."

"A hard case," I said with sober thoughts.

Lily's face fell with my unencouraging words, and I brightened and said, "The man has no purpose and is lost in a dark and alien world. You are his only light. I'm afraid for the time being you must become his purpose. Are you willing to do that?"

"I will do anything," Lily answered.

"Then I will use you as a sort of intimidation to keep him alive. He will have to believe that you are almost as dependent upon him as he is upon you."

"That won't be so difficult. It's nearly the case," Lily said, tossing her head with tears flying from taut cheeks.

"Let us see if we can make this man feel something," I said, patting Lily's hand. "You arrange for me to meet him within the next two days and I'll return at the hour you set. Meanwhile, watch him carefully and promise whatever you must to keep him alive. Now I must go and visit a dear friend nearby and then get back to a heavy schedule."

"Oh, Qyoo, you've given me the first positive feeling I've had in weeks. Thank you so much for coming," Lily said with an effusion of emotion, rising and throwing her arms around me.

\*\*\*

"I made tea about the time I expected you," Mekin said, offering me a filled cup.

"I've just come from tea," I replied, "along with an astonishing new task that is certain to test my wits."

"So you are right in the thick of it as usual, Qyoo. What did everyone do before you came along?"

I laughed and looked around at Mekin's shared apartment.

"This is impressive. It looks like you all function very well here...with all of this advanced technology. It actually resembles more a laboratory than a place to eat and sleep."

"It's both," Mekin said. "We're all like-minded here, fortunately. Glytta was here a couple of days ago and said I'm turning into a robot. She doesn't know it, of course, but I think she's falling in love with that high-minded advisor in your glorious Tower...Kolla I think she called him."

"Really, do you think so?"

"Well, he keeps creeping into her conversation. They're in a pretty competitive phase right now. She races him in the swimming pool and tries to beat him at handball. They play chess in his digs."

"What? I had no idea of this. The last I heard she was avoiding him."

"Avoiding him in the usual manner of pursuit, I guess. I don't have time for relationships, although a rather well educated male does live here with us."

"Oh, what does he do?"

"What we all do, experimental physics, et cetera, et cetera."

He teaches and tries to put up with our shortcomings."

"Do you ever think of Laom, Mekin?"

"I'm going back there eventually."

"You are? I had thought of doing that, but now I know it will never happen."

"It was becoming a very refined atmosphere when I left, and I think it's just the place for me...uninterrupted use of the cerebral cortex."

"Well, it appears you are in your prime and have no need of anything from me," I said.

"Don't be too sure. You may find me standing in your advice line one of these days."

I stared at robust, freckle-faced Mekin as she ran her fingers through her short auburn hair. Her almond eyes flecked with gold were suddenly mysterious and impenetrable to me. I looked more closely.

"Yes, if I let you look long enough you will discover things with that prescience. I wish I had a slice of your genius. You don't even appear to need it. Can't you lend me some?"

"Don't give me a headache, Mekin, in straining to uncover your unnecessary secrets. I have so many heavy questions tugging at me. If you need my help, tell me now. You know Roggi's children are my duty as well as my love."

"Thank you. That is good to hear."

"Well, what may I hear?"

"Nothing now. Maybe later."

"Are you going to make me worry?"

"No, please don't," Mekin implored, suddenly jumping up and hugging me. "I'm doing very well and expecting changes for the better. Everything is fine and you are not to spend one second worrying over this organic mass of independence."

"You will come to me at once if you need me?"

"I will, but don't confuse the issue. I will always need

you, you and your wisdom, my one and only Qyoo."

\*\*\*

That same evening I called Glytta and asked her to dine with me in my study.

"I'm running all over the place," Mirra complained good-naturedly as she set down our crockery filled with spicy bean curd soup and watercress salads.

"Why don't you eat with us, Mirra," I suggested, "then you can rest your feet."

"Ach, no. I haven't time. I'm going to the kitchen to give my rendition of a special pâté to the cooks."

"When all is said and done you will be the one found most in need around here," I said to her vanishing back. She waved her hand and hooted an exclamation of satisfaction without turning around.

Glytta held her hand over her mouth to stave off her affectionate laughter, and then said, "So, you went to visit Mekin. What did you think?"

"About what?"

"About my techno-obsessed sibling, of course."

"Let's finish eating and I'll tell you what I've been thinking," I said.

When we were through and had pushed back our plates, I started to speak, but an aide came in to clear the table and we both stared at each other, waiting in silence. Finally, I was able to speak in private.

"On the way home, I had time enough to ponder Mekin's rather mysterious condition, and I'm afraid I came to a rather astounding conclusion. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"So you noticed it, too."

I looked at Glytta, her worried hands hugging her caramel silk lounging caftan to her body, and said, "I believe that Mekin

intends to undergo surgery to facilitate a higher mentation. This is dangerous -- I am an example of what happens to emotion. And furthermore, it's unnecessary. Mekin has quite enough top-flight equipment to accomplish what she wants to do."

"So that's it. Yes, that must be it. How did you think of it, Qyoo?"

"Simply by analyzing little bits of innuendo here and there."

"Which is exactly what Mekin wants to be able to do in your easy manner. You know she idolizes you and wants to have your capabilities."

"Then she would need my mother and father as her predecessors."

"Who was your father, Qyoo?"

"Someone with a very high intelligence," I said, and the tenor of my nonspecific answer offered no followup.

"But you've been...I mean, mother...haven't you been--"

"Yes, I have some artificial technology built in, but it's the total system which must be considered. That cannot be duplicated by surgery. What are we to do about Mekin?"

"I don't know. I'm worried."

"Who is the man who lives there?"

"Oh, she'll never be side-tracked by any man. He's more like a brother, I believe, a fairly smart and exacting brother. His name is Rol Ediz, Doctor Rol Ediz. He's a professor."

"Do you think he's part of the problem?"

"I don't think she even considers human relationships."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"I'm not too sure of anything, not since I..."

"Since you cracked Kolla's reserve?"

"But I haven't cracked Kolla's reserve. That's just the point. I...Qyoo, you tricked me."

"I had no intention of tricking you. But I think you're

mistaken about Kolla. He couldn't be doing all these things with you if he didn't have a very high regard for you. I wouldn't be intruding here if I didn't believe that you two need each other. It sounds to me as if everything is coming along just fine. At least, you'll probably end up good friends.

"I wonder if I should try and have a casual talk with Doctor Ediz."

"You might make Mekin very angry."

"If she's very angry, that's an indication of something."

\*\*\*

Lily called me last night with a brief report, and today I went alone to see the long-arrested scientist known as Strathon DeRoin, Doctor DeRoin.

He is tall and semi-bionomic in appearance but apparently his body contains no unusual parts. His face is gaunt with dark-sunken, intelligent eyes that have lost their luster. He is slow to move, as if lifting an arm will join him to the active race of man. He wants none of that and shows it with a caustic black wit as bitter as a wasted life. His celestial peregrinations could hardly be considered such. He forwarded banks and banks of astro-physical research to his homeland before entering his long sleep. His ship, programmed to take him home, instead broke down and drifted for what would be considered ninety-seven years on Hustler. It is quite amazing that he was not long ago destroyed, vaporized by an asteroid or disintegrated in some hot spot.

"I am a fossil," DeRoin told me in his begrudging, high-flown manner of speech. "A fossil of no distinction save durability. Such must be put away in a dark drawer."

"Have you looked much about you at this interesting place?" I asked.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a contorted face, and held up his hands in horror.

"How old are you?"

"According to what scale?"

"According to the hour you went into suspension."

"I am forty-three."

"A young man."

"Say you. I consider myself forty-three and ninety-seven years of age."

"Had you children, a wife?"

"Yes. Those I knew I would never again lay eyes on."

"You might obtain permission to produce another child."

"Dying red dwarfs! You must be out of your head! I can't even get rid of myself."

"How do you feel about Doctor Bard?"

"Feel? I feel nothing. I believe she is going to help me."

"You don't care, even from the standpoint of collegial courtesy, what happens to her then? You must know that she is in grave trouble."

"I know nothing of the sort."

"She has failed to heal you, and her position and prestige are under attack."

DeRoin moved in his window chair for the first time, turned his face from its downward gaze and looked at me far longer and more curiously than his original disinterested glance.

"Don't assault me with your psycho-elocution. You can't play upon my sympathy. I may be of another generation but I use the same equipment you do to reason."

"Actually, you don't, but that is of no consequence," I said with a smile which must have looked ironic.

"What are you then, some kind of thing, some kind of super-real, techno-gizmo fabrication born of this looney society?"

"Granted ninety-seven years ago is a thousand years off in technology, but we still belong to the same race, Doctor DeRoin."

"Doctor DeRoin. How nice of you to use my distinguished

title. If you are so polite, perhaps you will show me the courtesy of escorting me permanently out of this damnable place I've landed."

"How in the light of two moons did Doctor Bard ever manage to fall in love with you?" I exclaimed. "You are a whining, self-centered child of forty-three irretrievable years. I find it difficult to have enough sympathy for you even to consider putting you out of your misery. And to think that the poor woman is weeping her eyes out over you, you cantankerous wastage!"

I stood in silence, staring out the window and allowing this to sink in. When I checked Strathon DeRoin's face I saw two large tears sliding down his pale, dormancy-hollowed cheeks.

"There is no place for me here," he bawled. "It is all too much for me. What am I good for?"

"You are apparently good for making one very fine woman happy," I said. "You are very likely also good for a consulting position at the government astro-physics lab, APLA," I added.

"What would they want with me?"

"You must realize that you are a living, breathing repository of celestial knowledge," I said. "As you well know, in star life you are just a brief whisper of time. Why not use it all up?"

\*\*\*

The water tenders on Pearl have postponed their strike, and I have wedged in some time to go and see the young physics professor, Rol Ediz. I keep going back to him as the possible key to Mekin's current risky persuasion--a notion which I really assume to be under serious consideration. I had Leona arrange a time when Rol Ediz would be in and Mekin would be out. Leona is very good at such legerdemain tactics.

He is not quite what I expected but does indeed have the high angle of chin, the false politeness, the carefully chosen

vocabulary which distinctly mark the proprietarily arrogant. He is lean with a vengeance, sandy haired and gray-eyed, and there is some intelligence beneath the exhibition of it. There is the clear tendency to consider himself intellectually far above his associates, and when he tried this condescension on me I pinned his ears back for a few minutes in a very subtle manner which took him a few seconds to grasp. Stepping briefly into psychological conditioning, with verbal signals, I eventually brought him grudgingly to near normal responses.

"How many are there living here?" I asked, not having gotten around to asking Mekin that question.

"Just four of us, the three women and myself. We get along very well."

"All on equal terms?"

"Well...yes."

"Actually, I take it that you rather consider yourself the head of the household. Is that so?"

"Well, I...I'm the one who knows...the one with the most experience and--"

"Ability?"

"A...yes, I suppose you'd have to say that."

"You didn't know then that Mekin has the academic equivalent of two doctorates? I suppose not. She's rather modest about this. You see she's so incredibly well schooled and innately capable that she's only taking these current classes so that she can legitimize her credentials and fit in, so to speak, with the rest of you. She could easily be teaching all of you a number of interrelated subjects which would up the ante considerably in your comparatively spare stakes of acquired knowledge."

"Really, I don't think you're aware--"

"Oh, I think I am. Do you know what I really think, Rol, having scrutinized you for a few seconds? I think that somehow you have bamboozled or browbeat my brilliant and overly

considerate Mekin into believing she needs an artificial cerebral boost to her already very high intelligence. If that were the case, I, and a number of other people who know who Mekin really is, would be most unhappy with you, most unhappy, indeed. You may tell Mekin I was here or not, as you wish. But I expect to see Mekin undergo a reversal of the attitude which has resulted from your supercilious bullying, and I expect to see it by my next rapidly approaching visit. Do you understand me?"

"Ma'am, I think--"

"Doctor to you, Professor Ediz. Do you comprehend what I'm saying?"

"Certainly I comprehend what you're--"

"Good. I'll be running along then. It remains to be seen if it was nice meeting you. Until next time, Rol."

\*\*\*

Leona handed me the phone, which was accompanied by a blank screen, and Mekin said into my expectant ear, "Qyoo, how could you do this to me?"

"And how could you contemplate such an uncertain invasion of your wonderful self?" I responded.

"How do you know what I intended?"

"This is Qyoo speaking, Mekin. Why do you even bother to ask? I love you as you are. You are strong, even-tempered, and most intelligent...except when it comes to your own body."

"And it is you I have always looked up to."

"If you want, Mekin, I will sit down with you and explain exactly what it means to be me in a physiological sense. I will explain the emotional problems I have dealt with all my life and how much expended energy it takes to come to terms with these problems. And finally, I will explain to you that they are never conquered but only dealt with on a regular basis. For all that we do to ourselves there is a counterpoise of payment. When you

have moved on and taken a richer command of your life, you will thank me. I am willing to wait for that reward, dear Mekin."

The phone went dead, but I was not disheartened.

A few calls later Lily materialized on my screen.

"My dear friend, I don't know what you did to Strathon but he got up out of his chair, then took his allotment of credit and walked to a shop where he bought himself a new suit."

I was laughing as I took in the much-changed visage of Lily hovering before me. I put my hands behind my head, sat back in my chair and said, "I think I'll invite you two to dinner. There is someone I would like you both to meet."

"A woman?" Lily said with a startled face.

"No, no, you are the woman of moment," I said. "I will let you know when that someone is available, tell you where to go, and I think we will all have a very interesting visit."

"I'm very curious about this and...rather excited to meet a friend of The Mediator's. What if Strathon won't come?"

"Oh, he'll come," I said. "When you tell him the invitation is mine, he will come, Lily. I look forward to it, and I'll be calling you."

"I'm so ashamed of how I treated you on Hedone, but I thank the day we met, Qyoo, and I thank you."

"When my goals somehow get accomplished I never remember the potholes of the paths taken," I said.

"Good-bye, Lily."

#### ANIMA

The first thing that happened upon my return from Karak was an afternoon visit from Glytta, who waited outside this weary Controller's besieged office to speak with me. I became so enmeshed in calls, each one declared more urgent than the last, that Phillipa and an aide had to remind me twice that Glytta was

patiently waiting beyond the massive and, I am sure, intimidating metal doors of my asylum.

"I'm sorry, Glytta. It's nice to see you. To what do I owe your refreshing appearance amidst this plague of commotion?"

A nervous rush of words came pouring out of shy Glytta.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted to say that everyone has been making demands on Qyoo and she's exhausted. And even when they don't make demands, even when they just look like they need help, Qyoo takes it upon herself to do something momentous, and always at her own expense. Of course, she makes everything better, but who is making things better for her?"

"Well, that was quite an earful. I haven't seen Qyoo since I returned. I checked her office but she wasn't there. Is she all right now? Where is she?"

"She's in bed, that's where she is. I think she just keeps going and going until she reaches a level of exhaustion which her body no longer tolerates, and she crashes. I worry about her."

"I'm glad you came," I said. "As soon as I can untangle myself here, I'll go see how she is, possibly have a talk with her about more rest."

"You won't change one hair on her head, but at least she'll know that someone cares."

Glytta stood up, nervous at having interrupted me but willful in doing her duty, and I admired her even more.

"I always care, Glytta. I hope you know that."

"Yes," Glytta said, "Well, sorry I interrupted you."

Two hours later I still had not gotten to Qyoo, but I was moving in that direction. Then it was time for dinner, and I went into my study to see if Qyoo might be there to join me. Qyoo entered and hugged me, looking wan and pale and tired indeed. She sat down at the table in her dressing gown and chased her food around on her plate without putting much of it into her mouth. When I stared closely at her, she smiled broadly

with a thoroughly forced expression which alarmed me.

"Qyoo, I don't think you know how to rest," I said with a wary attempt at initiating something helpful.

"What?" Qyoo said, "I'm ashamed to say I've been in bed all afternoon."

"Yes, you've obviously crashed from exhaustion, but one afternoon's rest isn't going to lift you from the crushing fatigue you're experiencing."

"What? What is this about? Crushing fatigue? How do you know that I...oh, someone has been bending your ear on my behalf."

"It doesn't matter whether they have or not. Your condition would have become obvious to me the moment I looked at you."

"Who was it, Glytta?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my mothering little helpmate, Glytta."

Qyoo lifted her head and her beautiful crystal eyes shone with a sudden brilliance, traveling slowly over my face and settling upon my eyes, there shining their light upon my soul.

"You are pregnant," I said.

"Yes, I believe so."

I stood up, gathered her into my arms and carried her to my bed.

"You are going to spend a lot more time here, Little One. Resting, just resting. I'm not going to let anyone steal away your strength. But you have to eat. You didn't eat much."

"I think I'll get better at the eating part as we go along," Qyoo said with a wistful smile which made me want to kiss every square millimeter of her petal-white face, want to hold her until she fell into a deep haven of restorative sleep. And that is what I attempted.

\*\*\*

I awoke to find Qyoo gone, and then I heard her in the bathroom vomiting. I strode into the bathroom and found her kneeling over the toilet bowl moaning softly and gagging.

"Are you through?" I asked.

"Oh, yes...hope so," she gasped.

I lifted her trembling body up and wiped her face with a warm wash cloth.

"Well, you are definitely pregnant," I said. "I'm sorry, my Little One, but this won't last very long."

"Good. I hope it's not considered a part of the joys of motherhood."

"You're shaking. Come back to bed. I'll hold you and get you warm."

I held her in my arms and, fearful of any more pain to come, watched her fall asleep. I had promised that I would allow her no pain, but her body was showing great sensitivity to this radical change in her chemistry. Now I will have to watch her closely. I can see that she will not run to me with every change and discomfort which occurs. However sensitive, she is stoic.

\*\*\*

"When exactly do you rest?" Qyoo asked, propped up and studding the center of our pillows with her imperial self.

I had left her in bed and was preparing to head to my office, and I said, "I've just done that."

"But not enough. You are tired, too. Everyone wants you omnipresent and omniscient."

"Oh, I mastered those two qualities long ago," I said with a laugh.

"I'm serious, Anima. At least get some exercise. Please go to the pool and swim. It relieves tension."

"I do that every few days. I'll try and get to a little

water work today if it will make you happy."

"It will make me very happy. Not your private pool, the larger pool. You may run into Glytta and Kolla. Apparently they swim together during Kolla's rest break. Then you can tell me how they are getting along."

"Ah, so that is your motive."

"No, Anima, I only thought of it after I suggested the pool. I can't bear to see you buried in work without some release."

"Don't worry about me, Little One. I am not one of your cases."

"Not one of my cases, my happiness," sweet Qyoo said as I kissed her good-bye.

\*\*\*

At the dinner hour I found that Qyoo had been up all afternoon and far too busy. I reported to her that I had indeed run into Glytta and Kolla. They were standing in the shallow end of the pool speaking softly to each other and appeared somewhat embarrassed by my appearance. I dove in and swam the length of the pool underwater, surfacing a few meters from them.

"Well, I'd better get back to work," Kolla said.

"Don't hurry on my account. Finish your break," I said, smiling at blushing Glytta.

"I've got some things to do," Kolla said, "better get at it, especially if you are away from the nerve center," he added.

He hoisted himself out of the pool and grabbed a towel, but as he was leaving, Glytta, who had also left the pool, ran after him. I caught a dark-vision glimpse of their bodies pressed against the wall in the shadowy hallway, twined together in a rather passionate kiss. When I related this to Qyoo, she could not have been more delighted.

"So, my little matchmaker, there is a happy ending to your story."

"They are perfect for each other," Qyoo said, smiling triumphantly at me.

"Not as perfect as we are," I said. Then my fixatedly worshiped, pregnant wife verbally cuffed my ears.

"I'm going to Pearl day after tomorrow, Anima."

"You are not!"

"I am. The strike threatens to last forever, and they have asked for me."

"I won't allow it."

"You have to allow it. I'm going to be pregnant for quite some time. I can't just languish here. I actually feel better when I'm busy. I'm strong and healthy. You must understand that I need to work, my love."

"My love! Now you call me your love, when you are about to jeopardize your health."

"That is pure drama, and from the practical Anima, too. How amazing. I am going to Pearl and mediate a strike. That's all."

Qyoo did appear much better and happy to be at her work. There was really nothing I could do, without appearing a tyrant, but let her get on with it. Still, I have a strong feeling of foreboding hovering over our currently smooth and peaceful existence. I will send some top-flight agents with her, along with my best medic.

\*\*\*

Qyoo arranged a most unusual dinner which occurred in our private but formal dining hall last evening. I can always count on her to bring something or someone interesting, even startlingly so, to my attention.

Doctor Lily Bard and her singular companion, Doctor Strathon DeRoin, sat with us at our more intimate, small round table arranged in the corner of the hall. We chatted amiably as we finished our last bites of Mirra's unforgettable concoction:

almond flan.

"Let us have our coffee in the sitting room. There is a cheerful fire to complement this cool wet spring," I said.

Qyoo was wearing a cherry-red soft wool dress which Glytta had designed for her. The color enhanced her pale cheeks and made her face bloom in sanguine beauty. For the sake of peace in the family, Qyoo has given in to Glytta, who now designs all of Qyoo's clothes. This exposure alone makes Glytta a resounding commercial success, although she still considers the realm of artfully disposed textiles a place in which to play. I haven't much time to follow this clothing saga. I only know that my eyes delight in graceful Qyoo, however she is wrapped.

Very soon after we had made ourselves comfortable before the fire, we became rather engrossed in the strange and sometimes unavoidably amusing story of Doctor DeRoin.

"You are much improved since the last time I saw you," Qyoo remarked.

"Yes, Doctor Bard has taken good care of me, but it was you, relentless Lady Qyoo, who finally woke me from my long sleep."

There were fine dimples parenthetically marking Qyoo's gratified but also a bit rueful smile.

"I gave you quite a jolt, didn't I?"

"It seems to have been just what I needed. You made me think there might be a useful niche for me in this strange place and time you inhabit. And you made me think, with a sudden leap out of self, that Lily...well, be that as it may, I woke up and managed to face off with the horrors of cultural shock."

"I've seen a video display of your capsule, Doctor DeRoin," I said. "It was well constructed."

"Yes, carefully designed to prevent desiccation which, minus the process my designers employed, might have been the most salient disposition of my self. Still, I really should be dead."

"Oh, Strathon--" Doctor Bard protested, but DeRoin broke in.

"Don't worry, Lily, I'm now able to see myself as alive, at least more so than dead."

"I'm told the research you sent to your homeland was an extensive body of pioneering inquiry," I said.

"Yes, but there is even more to my story than that. I had no idea when I set out for a dinner engagement this evening that I would be sitting at the table of The Controller, the sovereign leader of The Federation's considerable holdings. With that in mind, I am going to reveal something to you that no one else knows, or should know as far as I'm concerned."

"In that case, just one moment," I said, laying aside Qyoo's hand and lifting the arm of the couch where we two had positioned ourselves. I slid my fingers over a panel of buttons and punched one to check security. Everything in place. Then to double check I punched another button and Keffer very soon appeared inside the thick-paneled door of the sitting room. I went over to Keffer, bent near his ear and said, "Is this room thoroughly secure?"

Keffer looked at his telewrist, laid his finger over a digit read and replied, "Yes."

"Thank you, Keffer," I said, as he nodded and side-stepped out of the room.

"Now you may continue with your story," I said to DeRoin.

"Well, it goes like this," DeRoin began. "Before I entered my long sleep, I had discovered and was studying a blue galaxy, quite the largest ever discovered, at least at my reckoning. When I saw the arc minutes on my imager, I was astonished. Its central surface light intensity was very low: twenty-eight magnitudes per square arc second. There were stars birthed and birthing all over the place, a very slow process in such a blue, blue galaxy. But there was one star well-birthing, and after what would be considered quite a number of years your time, I managed to refine my already remarkably good imaging setup sufficiently

to detect the indications of a planetary system. This was done by steady superimpositions of imaging and the study of graviton waves bending around what appeared to be empty space.

Incidentally, in checking your latest published data, I've found no mention of this galaxy. I automated calculated increments of focus on the system before I suspended myself. As you've seen my capsule was well built and contained an information exchange data bank. For the entire length of my suspension, blue galaxy data, with specific overlay focus on the planetary system, was fed into a chip in the bank. A few days ago I removed this chip from the capsule, which as you must know is on display at your city's Museum of Industry. The curator allowed me to use some of the museum's old display equipment, and I read the chip, in a manner of speaking. There are indications of artificial spatial structures and some high form of life in this system."

"I'm not too surprised at that," I said. "Our physicists regularly come across life forms in distant systems, but your work is exciting and laudable and worthy of high honor. It would also afford you an auxiliary position on the staff at APLA, if you're so inclined," I added. "Since you've shared this information, I take it that you would be interested in assisting in mounting a probe to this new system."

"The culmination of a lifetime of work," DeRoin said, his sunken eyes suddenly infused with enthusiastic affirmation.

"This is all very fascinating," Doctor Bard said, "but I've never seen Strathon in such a high state of excitement, and his own system is not yet strong enough to handle all of this."

"Then perhaps we should let you go, so that our admirable explorer can have some rest. It certainly has been a stimulating evening," Qyoo said, rising from the couch.

Later, in preparing for bed, I laughed and said, "The long-slumbering and intrepid DeRoin had me concerned with his closely guarded secret."

"His discovery, however antiquated a method, is certainly praiseworthy," Qyoo remarked.

"Yes, it is, even more so because of the method. We'll have secured his desired brand of fame when his huge blue galaxy goes into our annals as the DeRoin Galaxy. The APLA staff will immediately want something headed in that direction.

"Ah, that big blue galaxy is calling. It makes me want to go out exploring, just as Jurith did," Qyoo said with entirely too much wistful nostalgia.

"You've done a great service just bringing the man out of his own darkness," I soothed. "Lily said it best when she whispered to me upon leaving, 'If it weren't for Qyoo, he'd still be sitting in his chair by the window, waiting for death.' DeRoin really has you to thank, Qyoo."

"He's thanked me. It wasn't such a miraculous feat. One had only to stimulate the right areas of sensitivity. Lily might have come around to doing it herself," Qyoo remarked as she stood at the window staring up at the stars.

"You always underrate yourself, Little One. Let the cunning stars burn on awhile longer and come to bed, my treasure."

\*\*\*

They are clamoring for Qyoo on Pearl, and I will have to let her go. She will settle the discord I know. My supreme achiever, and not even a member of The Club. Without her, I have often worked long hours at the impossible: omnipresence.

She asked if she could pilot her own shuttle, simply wishing to be off on her own and imposing upon no one.

"Not without my agents," I replied. "By the way, I've decided to give you Bora with a standby pilot, so you won't have to wait for shuttle access anymore."

I had other reasons for giving her Bora; it was loaded with security devices and medical stores.

"But Bora is your shuttle, Anima."

"It is, but I've just received into the fleet a new and very fast shuttle, Manx, which I intend to use from now on. This streamlined little rocket will return me to you twice as fast.

"Well, that I like. Thank you for Bora. It's familiar to me, and the pilot can be my co-pilot, unless I'm really tired."

"Let the pilot do her job, Qyoo. She's being well-credited. Unless, of course, you feel the need for recreational flying."

"Sometimes I like it," Qyoo said. "I miss ripping over the crude in those wild flights I used to execute. They scared poor Nima out of her wits, and she was not easily frightened."

"I trust you've grown up in that regard, Little One."

Qyoo looks wonderful. She still occasionally loses her dinner but she is well and healthy, and her eyes have a sparkle thrilling to behold. Doctor Kev and I watch over her with careful monitoring, because she says very little about her condition. We have not told her that she is carrying twins. She will find out soon enough and I don't want to frighten her. Larstev had a twin brother, a champion athlete who later became a field researcher in the prolific southeastern swamps of Kerteri. Larstev was secretive about this brother with whom he competed.

\*\*\*

Qyoo is gone and I am inconsolable, skipping my dinner and lying in my lonely bed with only circuitous thoughts as company. Fortunately, I am incredibly busy during waking hours. Upon her departure, I held her and kissed her good-bye a dozen times, just as if she were going back to Laom. She has her miniature sat-phone clipped to her shirt pocket and has promised to call me at some free moment. I know how that will go. They will sweep her up into their maelstrom of bickering and leave it all to The Mediator to untwist and set flowing in a straight line.

\*\*\*

I asked Kolla and Glytta to dinner last night. Their happiness as a paired entity both lifted and saddened me. I was missing Qyoo, but their company was delightful.

"I've been visiting Mekin," Glytta said. "I've smoothed her feathers, ruffled over a certain disagreement she had with Qyoo."

"I thought Mekin idolized her," I said.

"She does. It's all blown over, and Mekin is anxious to sit down with Qyoo and apologize."

"I had no idea of any of this, but it seems like good news," I said.

Sounding me out with polite inquiry, as she pulled nervously on the sleeves of her smartly cut olive tunic, Glytta said, "Qyoo doesn't gossip much with you, does she?"

"No. Neither of us care for gossip, although I must confess that in my line of work it's often necessary to pay attention to rumor. One frequently learns things essential to good government."

"And in that vein, I pass on to you whatever my heedful ears absorb," Kolla offered.

"Yes, you are most assuredly one of my most lucrative pipelines, Kolla," I said, plumping his ego.

"Mekin says that everyone is talking about the long hibernating Doctor DeRoin...as if he'd risen from the dead."

"I believe he felt that he had, and wished to go back to that prone position," I replied. "Until Qyoo snapped him out of it."

"Qyoo snaps us all up straight, almost before we even realize we've had major renovation," Kolla said with a wistful laugh.

I suddenly realized that, like myself, he was very much in Qyoo's thrall.

Glytta studied Kolla, and perhaps she was thinking the same

thing I was. Then with that singular composure and self-containment which seems to characterize Laom dwellers, she touched her napkin to her lips, smiled, and turned to me.

"The best thing that ever happened to Qyoo was you," Glytta said, looking at me with those soft, but in this case direct, hazel eyes.

"And vice versa," I said.

Mirra suddenly entered, muttering under her breath and gracefully sliding our generously filled dessert flutes into position. Caramel poached pears with cream.

"What did you say?" I prodded in a softened voice near Mirra's ear.

"Nothing, sir," Mirra replied.

"But I know what you said, Mirra," I scolded, again softly.

"Well, then it's true what they say: The Controller hears before you speak."

I chuckled and said, "I believe you accused us of partying and sating ourselves on your delicious fare while poor Qyoo slaves on in the heat of mediation."

"Quite an improvement on what I said," Mirra mumbled as she slipped away through the east doors of the dining hall.

"That woman is certainly irreverent," Kolla remarked.

"The price we must pay for good food, but, of course, she is only telling the truth."

"Why doesn't she let the regular servers carry in and out the crockery supporting her clever menus?"

"Because that way she would miss all the fun of checking up on us," I said.

Kolla shook his head in disapproval at this lax protocol, and Glytta laughed and said, "Kolla, don't be such a snob."

"Unfair," Kolla quickly answered. "I simply like regular procedure; it's less confusing. I think I'm a very egalitarian person."

"Perhaps when you're asleep," Glytta teased.

I supposed they were sleeping together and that soon I would have to give Kolla far better quarters than those thoroughly technocratized but Spartan digs in which he now resided.

"Returning to the subject of Doctor DeRoin, Mekin told me that he wishes to be placed back in suspended animation and sent with a probe to some distant and beckoning region of his explorations."

"What!" I exclaimed. "I can't believe that he would wish to leave Doctor..." I stopped myself, fearing that I was venturing into private matters, but Glytta had more to say.

"Doctor Bard, you mean? Apparently she was completely destroyed over her friend's professional yearning and has collapsed. She's now lying in a bed in her own clinic."

More work for Qyoo, I thought as I shook my head in surprise and disappointment.

"Doctor DeRoin has been suspended in travel for the last time," I assured my two mutually smitten dinner guests.

\*\*\*

Qyoo called from Pearl. She is staying in one of the water house resorts now springing up in a few places and perched over the hundreds of kilometers of canals crisscrossing Pearl.

I debated telling her about Doctor Bard, knowing she had enough on her mind, but then decided that she would want to know and perhaps get in touch with her friend, Lily, at some spare moment, if such a moment existed.

"Oh, Anima, why can they not be more like us?" filtered down Qyoo's instantly decoded voice.

"You mean and never leave each other's side?" I teased.

"I am laughing, but I miss you so when I try to sleep, and I often think, in the middle of some harangue, what would The Controller do here?"

"What he would probably do is leave it to The Mediator's superior resolution," I said.

"Are you eating and resting enough?"

"Oh yes. The produce here is much improved. Remember, it comes from the prison gardens of Retriba."

"Well, at least your earlier work there has provided you with edible food. Otherwise, are you making any progress while I languish here without you?"

"I'm flying an air-car out tomorrow to look at some of the more remote and automated channels linking the canals. I've been told there is maintenance work there for human hands, and I want to see for myself if this is so."

"You are thorough," I said. "And a cautious firsthand investigation will be to your advantage. Just be careful in those remote areas. The channels are swift when they're releasing water. Don't go without my agents and your pilot, please, Qyoo."

"How is Glytta?" Qyoo asked.

"Glytta is in love. There is no loftier condition -- I'm an authority on this. She and Kolla dined with me two days ago."

"And how is Kolla?"

"Also well into it, and I suppose far enough along to soon require new quarters."

"I'm absolutely thrilled. I can't wait to see the two of them together."

"They'll keep, Little One. Just take care of yourself and do what you need to do with extreme caution."

"I will do that, Controller."

"Do it especially for Anima."

\*\*\*

Yesterday afternoon, after I spoke with Qyoo, it became increasingly necessary for me to travel to the southern

hemisphere. My concern and unrest hadn't left me, and I did not wish to be away from my office while Qyoo was gone. Still, my Minister of State was recovering from an extra-terrestrial virus, and I felt I had to appear at the appointed hour six thousand kilometers away. A rapidly sprawling village had declared itself a sovereign city-state free of the strictures of The Federation, mainly due to penalties for absence of taxation. It was audaciously assumed that without a tax base for the burgeoning infrastructure the so-called city-state could go on implementing itself with The Federation's credit. Not likely.

My staff and I took Manx, our pilot skipping out of the atmosphere and settling down in southwestern Tormung in no time at all. The climate is not to my liking, hot and sultry with sudden blustery storms which rampage over the flat lands and shallow tidal basin, departing as quickly as they arrive on suffocating, moisture-laden winds. There is a putative health benefit in living within that huge county, which escapes me. Nevertheless, it is becoming an elderly tourist destination, although it is mainly known for its mud-rich paddies of rice. And that is what stretched before us as we de-shuttled: vast swampy fields of tawny-brown, plump seeds of hybrid grasses, uniformly pleasing to my order-loving vision and ready for another harvest.

The county commissioner's headquarters was in an ornate pagoda, standing at the center of an affluent village nearly surrounded by rice fields. Nearby was a fully automated shuttle port and a sprawling new hotel half-filled with curious tourists. The tourists were milling about the village, all of those I saw bearing dazed, seeking expressions while gusts of hot, wet wind continually slapped their startled faces.

The Commissioner, Tir Then, offered greeting as a man with two tongues: one eager for Federation credit, the other proclaiming independence on the strength of bountiful rice crops,

which The Federation buys and distributes. In thinking his domain remote enough to be forgotten, The Commissioner had foolishly declared it exempt from normal procedure.

Tir Then likes to speak in long, painstakingly arranged metaphor, quite anathema to my method of communication, although in more relaxed moments the artistry of it does not escape me. When he began one of these especially tiresome pedagogic rambles, I put an end to it.

"I will not waste valuable time floating around in your leaky boat of excuses Tir Then, however attractive its deceptive furnishings. Your infringement has been patiently countenanced. That is over and there is no lesson for either of us in these elaborately couched defenses. The needs of your infrastructure require that you tax your lucrative rice farmers in the same manner as all other counties. Despite all your vainglorious yearning, you are not a sovereign entity. If The Federation were to curtail your far-reaching markets, you would swiftly solidify in the drying mud of barren fields and oblivion."

An angry commissioner shook his rotund body in a moment of bluster and then laughed.

"Your need for rice must be great indeed if you yourself would come to my humble county, eloquent Controller."

"Don't trifle with me, Tir Then. I would not be here at all if my Minister of State were not ill."

"But with all the respect that is due, Controller, you have seen fit to come in his place when you could have sent someone else."

"To make it absolutely clear that I am fully aware of what transpires here. Henceforth you will sell no rice without a tax base in this county."

"My farmers will not permit taxation," Tir Then insisted, resting his silk-pajama-clad mound of flesh back in his ebony chair.

"Not only will they permit it, they will beg for it when their crops are rotting in their storehouses," I said.

Tir Then leaned forward in his chair, his small, black-bead eyes darting over my face. I looked steadily at him and then elsewhere in a dismissive manner. Waiting for this news to reach full effect, I smiled up at the high, louvered slats of the pagoda's sun-dazzled vault. The light there bounced through prisms of colored glass. I felt a certain buoyancy in this dalliance. For me, this was rest.

"What will you do with all this credit you think to garner from your slaves, Controller?"

I laughed and said, "It will only partially cover the water systems, schools, and clinics of this large county, for which The Federation has heretofore paid."

"Is that not the purpose of government?" Tir Then asked, haughtily folding his hands and drawing himself up in a manner inviting my censure.

"And you feel not even enough responsibility to imagine yourself a part of that government," I said. "What is your responsibility here then?"

"To care for my constituents," Tir Then quickly answered.

"As The Federation cares for you? You cannot have it all ways, Tir Then. This becomes a philosophical question upon which you should think long and hard. There is no metaphor which excuses bad logic, is there? When the Commissioners come to The Tower, always with their hands out no matter how successful they profess to be, we credit those hands with fluid capital and security resources. You are a part of us and we are a part of you. There is no advantage outside these parameters. Not for you, not for us. You have promoted yourself to an unearned and lofty position. I cannot imagine what you were thinking."

"I didn't imagine you had us so much in mind," the Commissioner said in a less certain voice.

"Then henceforth you will remember that you are always in mind. Always," I said. "You feed us and profit from it, and we gratefully respond, but you must be aware of your position and share in that response."

"I will have to meet with the growers and talk," Tir Then said, looking perplexed and circumspect.

"Do you want me to speak to them?" I asked.

"In one way I would welcome that. In another it looks as though I'm being overridden."

"You are being overridden."

"Let me call them together and talk. Can you come back if I need you as reinforcement?"

"I will find the time," I said.

The Commissioner jumped up from his chair in a motion surprisingly graceful for one so corpulent, and said, "Now then, let me regale you a little. It is not every day The Controller comes to Tormung. We will feast. We have beautiful women here. The humid air makes their skin exquisite. I will find you a lovely companion. Or better yet...I beg your forgiveness in taking the liberty of suggesting a wife. Surely in your position you have all the power, the means and connections to have any wife you choose. I would be honored in introducing you to a great beauty from this county, my own daughter, in fact."

I already have a wife, the only woman I would ever consider for that position, I thought, and then supposed it was time I told the populace she existed. How can I do that to Qyoo, sentence her to others in so restrictive a manner when I want only to preserve her freedom, our freedom together?

"Perhaps a light lunch and then I must go," I replied, clearly denying Tir Then the chance of prominence in the familial agenda he coveted. Such proposals are not new to me. "You will understand, there is always pressing business at The Tower. The next time I come I will join you in celebrating a new tax base,"

I said to the clearly disgruntled Commissioner.

\*\*\*

I have not written here in some time. With more difficulty than I have ever known, I will have to restrain myself to unfold this story. Recalling the horror of it nearly shuts me down.

Upon arriving home from Tormung, I assembled The Club and we discussed a number of the most salient problems within The Federation. My account of the rescued runaway rice belt could very legitimately be reported as favorable, and I was glad that I had made the quick but enervating journey. Karak had realigned its military, and the governor was doing well there, with the drug trafficking considerably emasculated. When the subject of the water tenders' strike on Pearl arose, I held in check effusive pride in The Mediator's competence and said in a confident voice that I expected a resolution at any moment. At that point I had begun to think of Qyoo and promptly ended the meeting. There had been no message from her upon my return, and I knew that she had intended to travel to remote areas on Pearl. I returned to my office with the thought of reaching Qyoo on her sat-phone just as Phillipa entered my office to tell me that Qyoo was on my private phone. Qyoo called me Anima in a voice I had never heard, and I was seized with fear.

"Qyoo! What has happened? Where are you?"

"I'm not sure that it matters where I am, Anima. I only wanted to say what I've never really said...to tell you what you have meant...what you mean to me, and to say how sorry I am."

I shouted at Keffer, "Get Kurt! Medics! Have Manx prepared to leave at once!" I was already heading to the speed elevator which would land me on the roof.

"Where are you Qyoo? I'm receiving no specific indication. Don't leave me blind here! Where are you?"

"There was a fight among the tenders near a resort, so I

left the medic and agents there to help curtail things and tend to the wounded. My pilot, Cinda, was helping, too. It wasn't quite as bad as I at first thought. After I got the raving and shouting stopped, I left the rest to local officials. Pressed for time, I decided to carry on with my investigation of the outer canals. I slipped away, took a land-car, and flew myself out."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Anima, so sorry."

"Where are you, Qyoo?"

"I don't think it will do any good to--"

"Black suns! Tell me where you are!"

"I'm near the Tortoise Channel on the left canal."

"What has happened to you?" I mouthed at my telewrist as I was boarding Manx. At the same moment, I turned to my pilot, Kurt, who sat at the controls with his shocked and questioning face turned back to me. "Pearl! The Tortoise Channel!" I ordered. "Now! Turn us into a missile." We roared off Hustler atop an explosion of thrust as I listened to Qyoo.

"Oh, poor Anima. You will never reach me in time."

"Are you in the water, Qyoo?"

"It was...I was walking along the catwalk beside the half-full canal fed by Tortoise. It was peaceful, lovely. I bent down to look at the green depth, saw my reflection...so much dazzle I was wearing my glasses even with pre-alerted vision. They slipped from my face and I grabbed for them, tripped and went over the side. I was laughing at myself. Laughing! I swam a little ways out and pushed myself up on the lockgate to get my bearings...needed to get back up on the high catwalk. I hung on here, supported by the metal bars of the lockgate, unaware that it was timed to close then...was closing at that moment. It caught my foot, Anima."

I swore an anguished oath and said, "You cannot get free?"

"I can't tear my foot loose, despite the pain even. I've tried. The canal is filling. I've calculated the rising of the water. By dusk I think...by dusk I will be underwater."

"Have you called your men? Surely, you have--"

"Yes. I think they are still busy in that melee back near the resort, and I can't seem to reach anyone else. I--"

"Black Suns! I will have their skins for this!"

"No, please, Anima. I sent them to do what they're doing. Please don't punish them. It's my fault. I'm so sorry about our child, Anima, so sorry that--"

"No! No! This is not over. I'm on my way, Qyoo. I'm in Manx at red hot burn. You must hang on. You don't realize that you can hold your breath a long time underwater, but you can. You can do this. Start right now. Don't struggle anymore. Relax and slow down your heartbeat. When the water rises over you, you must hold your breath. I will come and get you. I will get you, Little One. Please don't break this connection."

"I'll hold on as long as I can, Anima. I'll do as you say, relax. The water is not so cold. Just relax and hope..."

"Yes, Qyoo, but keep talking to me."

"I'm so sorry about the child, Anima. I know that you wanted this--"

"I want you! I want you and I will have you! You must stay alive for all of us."

I had one of my accompanying aides try to reach someone, anyone at the resort, and he reported nothing but garbled static. Apparently everyone was involved in the water tenders' riot, and no one was paying attention to anything else. I could not even reach the governor of Pearl, or the chief of police. I could not have been more furious.

"Are you in much pain, Little One?" I asked.

"I'm using suggestion for that. It helps...and the cool water has numbed my foot."

I leaned over Kurt, staring at our rate of acceleration then staring out the port, trying to sight Pearl with hyper-vision.

"If we move this ship any faster we'll incinerate," Kurt said.

"Just this side of incineration," I ordered.

I spoke again with Qyoo.

"The water is up to my shoulders. I've clipped the phone to my hair by my ear. It worked after I got it wet but I don't know how long--"

"It will work wet. Don't worry about it. Have you slowed your circulation? Are you making an effort to withstand the cold?"

"Yes, Anima."

"Remember, Qyoo, that you can hold your breath under water for a long time. I will be there. Remember that."

Staring out the port, I saw Pearl in the distance, glowing in a gold shimmer as it turned away from the sun.

"Qyoo," I said, "don't be afraid, Little One. I am almost there."

"I'm not afraid, Anima. I've been very happy. I love you. Please, please don't blame yourself if..."

Her voice died away. I knew that she was under the water.

We were racing up to Pearl and would have to sharply reverse our speed to avoid a very hard landing. I looked down at the gleaming red-gold water Colony as it fell into shadow and inky darkness. Kurt had programmed the exact point where Tortoise Channel angles into the left and right canals. We skimmed over the left canal, passed through the atmosphere slot, and landed on the big platform used for air-cars, where Qyoo had parked.

As I leapt from the steps of Manx and sped down the catwalk, I was thinking how I was going to handle this situation. If I did a Shield I knew I could prize the lockgate apart and bring Qyoo to the surface, but it would be dangerous to handle her

while in that condition because I could hurt her.

An aide named Charn, who is a powerful man and also a medic was running behind me with oxygen. I called to him over my shoulder. "I'm going to do a Shield. If I'm unable to revive her when I get her out, please take charge."

"Yes, Condor," Charn shouted.

Then, using my hyper-vision in the dim light of dusk, I scanned the lockgate position and saw a sight I will never forget: Qyoo's luminous white-blond hair streaming out and glinting a faint silver-blue beneath the water.

I sucked in a deep measure of air, did a Shield, dove, and swam. Although I thought of nothing at the moment but my task, every act was recorded and amazingly clear to me later. My vision worked with acute clarity, penetrating the darkening water as I swam to her side. Her eyes were open but unfocused. I hung near her with utmost carefulness and breathed into her mouth. Then I kicked myself down below her and grabbed the metal bars which were clamped over her foot. They came apart in my hands and her body floated free. I could taste the blood as it oozed from her foot and mingled with the water. I lifted her high above me and shot to the surface. In a few quick strokes I had laid her on the catwalk and leapt from the water. I closed the Shield and knelt a moment, straining to regain my normal self. Charn was administering oxygen when I took over, carrying her in long quick strides back to Manx.

I laid her on a low cot in my cabin, removed her wet clothes, and bundled her in blankets. I knelt over her, calling her name. She would not open her eyes, and lay still as death. In a while, I saw her eyelids flutter and pulled the oxygen tube from her mouth. She coughed, then opened her dazed crystal eyes and tried to focus on my face.

"Am...I...alive?"

"Yes, Little One. Yes!"

"Did you...come into the water...to get me?"

"Of course. Did I not say that I would?"

I began at once to work on her damaged foot.

"I'm sorry. It will hurt for just a moment."

Qyoo gave only a soft moan as I worked.

I suppressed the bleeding, straightened the foot and grabbed an electrother, infusing the damaged bone for swift repair and a cessation of pain. Then I bandaged the foot as gently as I could.

I felt her eyes on me, following the expressions of my face and the gestures of my hands as I worked.

Her whispered "I love you." stopped all the motion of me.

"And I love you, completely and unconditionally, in all ways and forever," I said, kissing her cold fingers. "Rest now. You are safe. You will heal."

"I'm so sorry, Anima."

"No. Waste no energy on regret. You are mine and I am yours. Rest. We'll soon be home."

I threw pillows beside the cot and lay holding her hand. Exhaustion settled over me, mingled with joy and an occasional sudden horror of what might have been. I did not want to fall asleep until we were home in our bed.

\*\*\*

Before me in my office stood Qyoo's pilot, the two agents, and the medic who had accompanied her to Pearl.

"Qyoo has asked me not to discipline you harshly for what I consider your desertion of her, so I will keep my reprimand light. If anything had happened which I could not myself right, my attitude here and now would be black indeed. Understand this if you have not understood in the past: your first duty is the safety of Qyoo. In this clear definition of your work and by this stricture, you must realize that no order of hers supersedes

this one of mine: In the field, you will never again leave her side under any circumstances whatsoever. Is that understood?"

"Yes Sir," responded the contrite voices in unison.

"Then you may go and await your next assignments."

I was restless and left my work to wander into Qyoo's study where she reclined ready to fly off her couch with impatience.

At a glance, she took all of me in and said, "The Shield has done havoc to your system again. You're in that miserable state between fatigue and inability to rest -- what I've caused."

"You will only add to the havoc with self-incrimination. Without you, I'm in a far more miserable state, usually in possession of a listless body and a muted brain."

"My foot is nearly healed. I will grow old and leave you anyway," Qyoo lamented with serious anguish. Having struggled with imminent death, she was in a very depressed state.

I sat down on the edge of the couch and said, "The shock of your accident has left you in a dark mood. I will never let you grow old, Little One. For me that is an easy task.

"Would you like to know what is growing within you?"

"A child, I presume, or is it a little wolf cub?" Qyoo said, suddenly reversing her mood with laughter.

I got my fingers into her hair and looked into her questioning eyes, now tinged with a soft hint of violet wonder.

"Twins," I said, "A boy and a girl. Doctor Kev and I both agree they are coming along in fine health."

Her body flinched, and I held her tight.

"Don't be afraid. You will have no pain. I promise."

"I'm not so afraid of that, but it's a tremendous responsibility. It makes me think of Jurith and how she struggled alone. When you said twins, I also thought of my father. I'm sure that he told me I would bear children."

"And so you will."

"No one knows that I'm your wife."

"Is that troubling you? I wanted to have you all to myself, quietly mine. I wanted to keep you safe from any risk that touches me. But I know it cannot be."

"Almost from the day I arrived here I was bound to be at risk, Anima." I was being gently consoled.

"Yes. It is the nature of this time and place, part of the reason we are here doing what we do."

"I'm not afraid to be called your wife."

"I know that, Qyoo. Yet even in knowing you, even in the need for us, husband was not a title I ever thought to have."

We sat in silence, staring at each other with an acute awareness of how much we could discern and the thrilling comfort of it. Our genesis from the combining of two superior beings, Jurith and Ammon, permits few who have more in common. Yet there is still that unknowable part of each. As for myself, the powerful will instilled in me affords me the singular analogy of a phenotype who is ever creating, ever improving -- in the process of perfecting, never perfect; except for the infinite, this might be construed as the definition of a human being.

Qyoo's soft, musical voice broke into my thought: "Once and awhile there is a sudden startling moment of recognition, Anima, when I think I know you as I know myself."

I had known what she would say. Qyoo was beginning to fathom the reciprocal us. I picked up her hand, held it to my mouth, and spoke against her pulsing fingers.

"Of course, you can do that. You are the genotype of Jurith and Ammon. Why should you not recognize yourself in me or me in yourself? So we are to each other what we can never be to others.

"Qyoo, I'm sorry that our relationship must conform to the roles that define our public selves -- my avowed wife, most regretfully exposed but proudly so. There is no other way. I would endure more foolishness than this to have you. We'll let

ourselves fall into old custom, celebrate together. Perhaps we'll admit one or two historeps for the necessity of public consumption. I'll issue a formal announcement, one suitable for The Federation in its entirety. Will that please you?"

"In some ways it will. Still, I regret the loss of our privacy, Anima. I see the necessity but I'm not terribly fond of ostentatious celebrations."

"Nor I, not after so many. But this one I mean for us to enjoy. If we must do it, we'll do it well."

#### QYOO

Now everyone knows about The Controller and The Mediator, but they know little of Qyoo and Anima. That history is ours alone, locked away in our journals, locked away in our thoughts.

We had a rousing good celebration. I never imagined it could be so satisfying. Mirra worked with the kitchen staff to make a splendid array of edibles never before tested upon the jaded palates of The Federation's hierarchy. Glytta designed a gown of white satin for me, the bodice encrusted with tiny pink and blue silk flowers. I wore my Tzarlite pendant, and Anima gave me a ring of the rarest blue pearl. Anima wore a handsome gray suit, very formal, with a black satin sash over a white silk shirt. I gave him a gleaming bracelet made of a special Laomite alloy which Mekin helped me create. On top of the largest rectangle in the bracelet is the Infinity sign and on the side beneath is printed *Qyoo & Anima*. This bracelet has other secret properties that are very useful to The Controller; it can be used as a power source and a stabilizer in microgravity.

Late in the evening as I was standing in the blue and gold ballroom, Leona came up to me. She was wearing a very pale gray, long-sleeved gown, the color closely matching the streak in her

loosely piled dark hair. Of course, the gown was another of Glytta's designs. Leona held a flute of champagne in each hand.

"Will you please take this and let me make a toast to you, Qyoo? If you are averse to it, you need only vouchsafe one sip to verify my words."

I smiled and grasped the bubbling cut glass flute.

"To The Mediator, the light of my life. May she of wise and giving manner forever reign beside her generous husband."

I laughed and said, "Oh, dear Leona, I don't reign but I thank you for honoring us both, and I drink to you, my right arm." This dry champagne tasted of the rarest celebration.

"All I can say is that The Controller is very lucky."

"The Controller knows that well," Anima said, stepping up behind me and taking my arm. "And if you will excuse us, Leona, The Controller wishes to dance with his wife."

"And The Mediator wishes to dance with The Controller," I said, laughing and handing Leona my glass.

"You are beautiful," Anima muttered against my ear. "Please understand fully what I mean when I say that. Very beautiful."

I could not answer, but only rest my head against Anima's shoulder and smile as we danced, floating and soaring and laughing and whirling across the glass floor, quite unaware of the others who soon left us the entire space for our matchless exuberance. They all clapped when the orchestra went silent.

There were the smiling faces of Kolla and Glytta; he with his hand soon pressed over hers against his chest; transported Glytta in a rose gown, and Mekin standing beside them, wrapped in wine velvet which made her thick auburn hair blaze above the dark color. Her trenchant bright eyes shone with warm approval which brought me deep satisfaction.

As the music started again, I said, "Before long I will be too rotund for martial arts."

Anima threw back his head and laughed. "Great suns, that is

an amusing allusion. What a comedian I have stolen from the less fortunate. How are the twins, little mother?"

"Shh, shh!" I whispered, holding my finger up to my lips.

"It will have been easier to have kept our marriage a secret than the twins," Anima said in high spirits.

"Before this dream is fully mythicized, I would like to take off this ethereal ceremonial gown of said myth and lie down."

"Then do so at once. You've already spoken to everyone. I will say good night for you and be along in a few minutes."

Held against Anima in the shadowy, glow-light dimness of our room, I worked my way back through flashes of my life. Then I turned and saw Anima's consuming black eyes gleaming with my own image in the faint rose light, eyes so often given to me and so often a mystery. I believe these eyes can plumb the intent and humor of me in one subtle blink.

"I never quite know what you are thinking, Anima. I never quite know how much of you I really know after all."

"You never quite will, as I am always studying Qyoo for answers, but it will continue to be interesting, will it not?"

"Anima...", I began with tentative voice, certain I had arrived at the most favorable moment, "I learned yesterday that there is a deadlocked land rights squabble going on between adjacent villages on Vetronea, and they--"

"No!"

"No? What do you mean, No?"

"The word is very self-explanatory."

"Do you mean you will not allow me to do my work?"

"Beyond no, I mean the Vetronea matter is something that I will handle myself."

"Oh," I said, for once taken aback. I thought in silence for a while, and then said, "Are you doing this because you want me to stay here, or is this...is this something you really feel to be within your province of governance?"

Anima chuckled softly, kissed me, and said, "Everything is within my province of governance, so you will never know, will you, Little One? I am not going to prevent you from doing your work. I intend to appoint you to The Club, Mediator. A new position with a great deal of freedom. I am only going to rein you in for a very short while to prevent you from getting yourself killed. You may mediate any dispute on Hustler which does not involve weapons or extreme violence, but until the twins are born you may not leave the planet for purposes of mediation. Leona wholeheartedly agrees with me, and that is something which pleases me; she has been one of my strongest critics."

"What!" I cried, throwing aside the covers.

"Calm down, Little One. You are carrying the grandchildren of your father. You must respect his wishes and keep them safe."

"You are playing upon my emotions," I accused.

"Yes, I am. No doubt about it. I love you and want you safe. No doubt about that either."

I slowly settled back down and felt my heart melting in the warmth of all this consideration, just as it was supposed to do.

"Our children will someday read our journals. What will they make of us?" I asked.

"Ammon was of the opinion that they would do great things by our teaching. I'm inclined to agree."

"Ammon was of the opinion! My father? What do you mean?" I cried out, sitting up once again in shock.

"Calm yourself and come back to me, Little One. You are all that I've wanted through this suspended night of ritual."

"You cannot leave my father's remark dangling in my head, Anima! I must know what you have meant."

"Your father was not of the same mind as Jurith, Qyoo. Your father was your father. Your father was Quithran Ammon, the Q of Qyoo," Anima said, laughing and pulling me down against him.

"My father knew--"

"That I would have you. He was very amused by the idea...thought it uniquely equal to his pairing with Jurith. He was quite a man...your father."

"As you are quite a man!" I exclaimed.

"That is a conundrum I will write in my journal, Qyoo."

"But if you knew all of this why did you appear so wounded when we first parted in misunderstanding?"

"I was fully capable of thwarting your father's wish if you did not want me."

"But you! Why did you not know how much I wanted you?"

"I did know but refused to know...a certain willful vanity and dark hopelessness which also came to me by your father's nature. And even in your innocence I wanted no equivocation from you, as there was none from me. I am not perfect, Little One, nor would I wish to be."

"For me, Anima, you are perfect, perfect as the miracle of a birthing star or an irrefutable equation -- a conundrum perhaps, if so, one I believe I'll never solve. I think my father's wish was really a rather precise prediction."

"So it appears, my much-required love." Anima smiled, once again with an air of provocative mystery, and said, "We will make it so."

The next moment opened and took us in but never closed, a measureless bloom, still sweet in all the late mornings.

THE END





















