

AN ACE SCIENCE FICTION SPECIAL

# Furthest

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN







When Coyote Jones visited the planet Furthest, he was strictly limited in the areas he could see. He could move freely within the city where he worked, and in a couple of smaller towns, but everything else was forbidden—especially the giant dome that covered a city called T'a Klith.

Naturally that was the first place he went, when he'd eluded his watchers.

He reached the dome safely—only to be astounded when he found nothing inside. No city of three hundred thousand people as the Furthesters had claimed, only a bare expanse of rock and water under that huge dome.

Then why were the Furthesters hiding it? And . . . what deeper mysteries remained on this enigmatic world?



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"Where jobs are concerned, I've done almost everything: translating, interpreting, bilingual secretary, modeling, teaching, and singing. I'm old enough that the first singing I did was the antique torchsinger lean-on-the-piano-in-a-red-velvet-gown stuff; after that, when folk music came back, I worked the coffeehouse circuit. And I write."

FURTHEST is her first novel. Ace Books has previously published her novelette *For the Sake of Grace* in WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: 1970 and a novella, THE COMMUNIPATHS, as half of an Ace science fiction double.

# Furthest

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

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## CHAPTER ONE

"A secret is like a small child; the more you do for it, the more of a nuisance it becomes. Before you take upon yourself such a burden, consider well—the chances are that unless you take elaborate pains to conceal something it will never be noticed."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

He had to sit very still. The slitherboat was not an easy craft to manage, and the beginner was likely to end up in the water almost at once, with no hope of ever getting on the bloody thing again. So far as Coyote knew, of course, he was the only beginner.

That was a bit hard for him to understand. But then almost everything on this planet was hard for him to understand.

He had put in a lot of time preparing for this night, and had gained himself a reputation as a harmless idiot offworlder who actually found it amusing to putter around at night in a slitherboat. The idea had been that when he got to doing something more than just putter, nobody would pay any attention to him, and



he sincerely hoped that would turn out to be an idea with an accurate base.

He had stopped using the miniature paddle and was letting the current carry him, seemingly aimlessly, knowing he could count on it to head him in the right direction eventually, and he was digging the view around him while he drifted.

It was spectacular, you had to give it that. By day there was nothing to see out here, and the land spread out in all directions, the same dull gray color, unrelieved by tree or grass or any mark except the bluffs and spurs that loomed up here and there. If you could call it land, that is, because strictly speaking there wasn't much land there. It was a sort of rock net, somehow holding together the millions of flowing streams that were the real stuff of the planet. Sometimes there would be a strip of the gray rock as much as ten feet wide, but not often; the streams were everywhere, twisting and winding, honeycombing the rock so that the actual surface was almost entirely water. The streams themselves were gray, too, because they ran through the gray rock, and none of them more than two feet, perhaps in rare cases three feet, in width. By day it was all gray, as far as you could see, and one of the ugliest sights in the universe, to Coyote's way of thinking.

At night, though, it was different. It was different and beautiful and splendid, because that same gray water bore in it a small creature invisible to the naked eye, but fluorescent, and multicolored, and in the dark

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the rainbows flowed everywhere in a glory that Coyote knew he was never going to be able to describe to anyone who had not actually seen it.

There was not an inch of the water that did not teem with the spangled life, not an inch that did not dance and pulse with red and green and gold and a deep soft blue. The little geysers that went unnoticed in the daylight, not very high and not very impressive, were incredible in the dark, throwing fountains of color like flung fireworks into the air. They went off all around him, apparently random, although he knew there must be a pattern to them. And the streams poured magnificently stippled and pied down the sides of the bluffs and the pillars of rock, leaping from face to face and throwing bridges of brilliant color across the sky.

Coyote could not imagine tiring of it. He could have sat and watched it all the night long. But he sat there all alone. On any other planet of the Three Galaxies such a display would have been crowded with people, its magnificence would have drawn eager watchers not only from the planet itself but from all the planets of the Tri-Galactic Federation. Not here. In the course of more than twenty nights that he had spent out on these . . . What could you call them? Deserts? Could there be a desert of water? . . . these whatevertheywere, he had seen another living being only once, moving purposefully on a slitherboat and not even looking at the rampant beauty around him.

He had asked RK, the boy who worked for him, why



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no one ever went out to watch the water at night, and had received a blank look of incomprehension. "Watch the water? Why should anyone want to do that?" RK had said flatly.

Perhaps these people were color-blind. Perhaps familiarity bred contempt, even in the face of all this. But if familiarity was the problem it seemed that the children and younger people, to whom all this display would be more new, would come out at night to enjoy the view. And they didn't. No one came, except himself, all alone on the cursed bare flat sliver that they were pleased to call a boat.

At first he had continually fallen off, since there was nothing to hold on to and not even a ridge to give you purchase. The slitherboat was a lot like a surfboard, except that when you fell off you didn't go into open surf but smashed against the rock walls of a stream not much wider than you were. And every time he fell off he had had to climb out and race madly along the web of rock until the slitherboat reached an abrupt turn that would slow it down enough to let him grab it. At such times he had been delighted to find himself alone, since he would have been a hilarious spectacle for anyone watching.

"Do your people ever fall off the slitherboats?" he had asked RK, and gotten that same strange look. "Why would anyone fall off a slitherboat?" the boy had asked, as Coyote would have asked, "Why would anyone forget to alternate left and right legs as they walked?" Such a question could only mean that everyone rode

the slitherboats from infancy, that they were as much an automatic part of bodily motion as walking or running, but if that was the case, when did they ride them? Where did the children go to learn? He had never seen anyone riding one, except that one lone man, and he had never seen groups of kids going off to practice together. When and where did it happen? Or was the "obvious" explanation entirely wrong to begin with?

There was a faint chime in the air beside his head then, and he gritted his teeth and tried not to move, since that was the proper way to handle the situation. But he couldn't stand it; when he felt the little feet on his shoulders, and the tiny hands gripping, he gave in as he always did and started trying to brush them off. And of course the instant he did that the two that had been on him became twenty, or a hundred, and the air around him was alive with the soft sound of a multitude of incredibly small high bells.

Coyote shuddered, cursing himself for drawing the crowd with his thrashing around, knowing that if it happened again he would do exactly the same thing.

The jeebies were a lot like bats, except that they were bigger, standing perhaps a foot high and having a wingspread of better than three feet. And they were completely transparent, which was certainly different. In the daylight you could sometimes see them, faintly, against the background of gray; but at night they were as invisible as the air, and they came out of nowhere, each one making the tiny chiming sound that func-



tioned like the squeaking and screaming of bats but was definitely a hell of a lot more attractive. And the jeebies, unlike bats, were friendly—so damned friendly.

RK had told him over and over. "If you just hold perfectly still, Citizen Jones, if you just don't move at all, one or two of a flock will come and check you out and decide you're boring and move on. They just like to pat you a little and find out what you are like, and they can only do that by touching you, you know? Because they're blind."

"Don't move at all, huh," Coyote had repeated after him. "Sure. Something that feels like a little man a foot tall climbs all over you patting your cheek and rubbing your back and making tinkling noises the whole time, and you just don't move."

"Well," RK had said reasonably, "if you don't move they will go away. And if you start moving they will get excited and call the rest of the flock. So not moving is best."

RK was absolutely right. Not moving was best, and it was stupid to move, since the little beasties were completely harmless. But he had done it, and now he had a flock following him, clustering on his head and shoulders, crawling down his back and over his arms and legs, chiming and patting and rubbing.

And he was just going to have to put up with them all, he knew that from experience. It would be a long time before they got tired of investigating him and took off for wherever it was they came from. Grimly

he took his paddle from its loop on his back and began to make what he hoped were inconspicuous adjustments in the course he was taking, reminding himself that no matter how incredibly much activity was going on around a man who had drawn a flock of jeebies it was all invisible. Nobody knew but him.

He had no idea, of course, just how closely he was being watched. Or for that matter if he was being watched at all. It would have been easy to assume that he was just out here in magnificent isolation, no one aware of him in any way, since that was the way things looked. But he knew better than to jump to any such conclusion. For all he knew a giant radar somewhere was tracking his every movement. For all he knew a group of men sat hunched over a screen watching everything he did as if he were a threedy program being played for their benefit. He didn't know. Certainly these people should be capable of an advanced technology; on the other hand, since they never left the planet and almost no offworlders ever came in, it was possible that they were retarded in technological development or simply did not consider such an application of it worth their time. In the six weeks he had been on Furthest he had seen no sign, none, of any sort of surveillance equipment. But the chances were very good that if he had seen it he would not have recognized it for what it was, so he was completely in the dark.

He was operating on the hypothesis that he had been watched, probably very closely, when he first began these night jaunts, and that someone somewhere prob-



ably still checked on him from time to time, but that by now they—whoever they might be—had accepted him as a harmless nut glomming their scenery and not requiring any great amount of attention. If he was right, and that was by no means sure—and if he could refrain from doing anything unusual that would attract attention (and since he had no idea what *would* attract attention, that wasn't very sure either), and if it didn't just happen to be time for a regular monitoring check on his activities, he might just come out of this all right.

He sure as hell had to do something. Six weeks, and he hadn't learned one thing. And his license to remain on this world had an eighteen-month limit that might turn into eighteen hours on him any time.

He had gone quite a distance now. The little boats were like twigs on the water and the currents strong, and two hours would take you a very respectable number of miles. You'd have to hike back, of course, since those currents weren't going to obligingly turn themselves around for you, and the paddles were no use against the force of the water, but at least one half of any given journey would be pretty rapid.

Off to his left he saw what he was looking for. Now he would really have to be careful, and to his relief the jeebies were beginning to tire of him. He could do without their distraction now.

He turned the slitherboat, not directly toward the black bulk he was aiming for, but on a meandering course calculated to get him to it without giving away

his purpose. He wanted to allow plenty of time for a police-copter to appear and warn him off, or whatever it was that might be likely to happen to a trespassing outworlder, before he actually found himself beyond the point of no return on this excursion.

The looming black was now perhaps five hundred yards away, and except for the light from the fluorescent water he would not have been able to see it at all. It had no lights, no markings, nothing to warn anyone off. He supposed it must have the regulation aviation beacon on top, but it couldn't be seen from the ground in any case.

He was very close now, almost upon it, and nothing had happened yet. He wondered what the penalty might be for breaking into a forbidden city, and decided he didn't want to know. The time for worrying about that was long since past.

He had found the fork made by four streams that he used as a marker. There was a low rock spur on his right, and he reached out for it, using it to brake his motion, and he pulled the boat hard against the rock. It made a scraping noise, but he could always tell the city fathers, if they came running out to investigate, that he had fallen off. Or that he had had to take a leak. Or that he was lost. He stepped off, or more properly wiggled off, the slitherboat, and lashed it to the rock with an elastic loop.

Now came the tricky part.

Strictly speaking, what he was about to do was probably suicidal. This citydome was forbidden to him, he



had been told so kindly but firmly. He was allowed to move freely within the city where he worked, there was a small town on the other side of the planet that he was free to visit, and there was a single village, rather near the city, that he had been told he might enter. Except for that, everything was forbidden—including this dome that covered a city called T'a Klith. But he had found a way in. He hoped.

There was a fissure on this side of the dome, one of the countless streams of water, and it flowed under the edge. Now presumably all he had to do was slip into that stream, wearing his diving gear, and swim right under the dome wall into T'a Klith. Presumably.

There were a lot of other things that might happen. The stream might narrow to six inches and he would get stuck, unable to go either forward or back, and he knew what would happen after that. There might be an electric grid beneath the dome, set to trap just such critters as himself, that would fry him when he touched it. There might be great motors, or exhaust fans, or disposal chutes, any of which he would swim blithely into without finding out in time that they were there. There might be a welcoming committee at the other end with unpleasant implements reserved for nosy offworlders who broke trespass laws.

Those were just some of the things that might happen. He could think of worse. And then there was the possibility that was prompting this whole venture, i.e., that he would be able to make it down the stream and into the city, pop his head up unobserved for a quick

look, and get out with a whole skin and whatever information he could gather in the minute he would dare allow himself. It wasn't really likely that that was what would happen, since there was something very fairytale about the concept of a city that was at the same time forbidden and unguarded, but he was going to buy the fairytale for the moment. He really had no choice. He had to have something to report pretty soon or even *his* ordinarily resilient conscience was going to start bothering him.

He explored the water carefully with one hand, trying not to touch the sides of the walls, on the offhand chance that by not touching the rock he would fail to activate any alarms or traps. It seemed to be a wide enough channel, maybe two feet across as it went under the dome.

He checked the straps on his airpack, pulled the waterhood over his head, and snapped it to his wetsuit. RK had laughed at him for insisting on the cumbersome wetsuit, but had cheerfully accepted his explanation that he would get pneumonia if he kept falling into the water in his ordinary clothes.

Now. He waited for one last moment. Now was the time. Now was the time for the flyer to blast out of the air and order him up against the wall. Now was the time for a lawrobot to appear and shoot a hole through him. Now was the time for the giant loudspeaker to open up and order him away. Or something.

Nothing happened. A jeebie chimed, somewhere off to his right. Except for that all was silence and color



and silence. Apparently nothing was going to happen to keep him from having to go through with this. He shrugged, and snapped the last snap on his gear.

Under the edge of the dome the water was colder than outside, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The current rushed him through the blackness, the channel narrowing not at all, the total dark unbroken. It was completely and unendingly weird, and he resolutely refused to think. Whatever it was that was going to happen, it would happen, and he would deal with it as best he could. For the moment he would just float. Period.

And then, about the time he had begun to think in spite of himself, he was out, past the other side of the dome, and he barely managed to catch a spur on the rock wall and keep himself from being swept right out beyond the edge into the city.

Very carefully he edged to the rim, clinging to the wall of the stream, and exposed just his eyes. Then he put his whole head out and took a long, long look, turning from side to side, unable to believe it. And finally he went back the way he had come, unlashed the slitherboat, and headed for home, numb.

There had been nothing there. Nothing at all. Just the great dome, fully big enough to cover the city of three hundred thousand people it was supposed to house, and the bare expanse of rock and water, and that's all there was of T'a Klith.

Now why in the name of all the swirling attendants

of the Holy Light would anyone build a citydome over nothing at all, name it as a city, claim three hundred thousand citizens for it, and forbid people to enter?

Coyote was mournful. Things just weren't going very well, and a lot of people were going to be very unhappy with him, and the magnificence all around him had lost its glory and gone tawdry garish port-city vice strip. He kept his head down and ignored it, and when a jeebie lit on his shoulder he didn't even move.



## CHAPTER TWO

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
what a ball of gas you are . . ."

(from an old nursery rhyme)

When the Fish called him in to give him the assignment on Furthest, Coyote went in with his customary reluctance. He could not remember a single occasion when the Fish had called for him that he had not managed to make the comsystem ring at the single most inappropriate moment possible, generally when Coyote had just managed after a great deal of effort to make some beautiful woman absolutely ready to be absolutely happy. Then the comsystem would ring, with that blatant triad that meant an official—hence, not ignorable—call. He didn't know exactly how the Fish managed to time things so perfectly, but no doubt this was one of the spinoff benefits of being head of the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service.

He had stared at the Fish and the Fish had stared back, until Coyote had gotten tired of the game and said abruptly, "Oh, shit, man, come on—what did you call me in for?"

"Shit, Mr. Jones?"

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"Archaic. Twenty-fourth century term for human excrement."

"I see. It *is* amazing how much really useful information one can learn by specializing in ancient folk-music."

Coyote ignored him. The profession of folkmusician was as good a cover as could be had these days, and the Fish knew it as well as he did.

"For what, your Porscineness, did you call me in?"

"You were busy?"

"I was busy."

The Fish smiled at him, and Coyote seethed.

"I'll count to ten," he told the Fish. "One. Two. Three—"

"All right, all right. I need somebody to go to Furthest, Mr. Jones."

"To go to where?"

"Furthest."

"Where the bald-headed hell is Furthest? And is it?"

"Is it what?"

"Furthest."

The Fish made a small sound of indignation. "Look here, Mr. Jones," he snorted, "Is Earth Earth? Is Mars Mars? Is Alpha Centauri—"

"I don't mean that," said Coyote, shaking his head. "Furthest is a word, not just a name. Antique variant for 'farthest.'"

"Really? I didn't know that."

"No charge," said Coyote. "And is it?"

"Farthest? Yes, it is. It surely is. Let me show you."



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The Fish pushed the button activating the great map on the wall beside them. It took the whole wall, and at that it was on not only a small scale but a distorted one. Vast areas of empty space had simply been deleted and replaced with small black dots indicating VAST DELETED EMPTY AREA. If it hadn't been for that convenient mechanism, it would have taken half a dozen walls to put the map up.

The Fish pushed the pointer stud and a bright green light came on, out in the upper right-hand corner.

"See that?" he said.

"That's Furthest?"

"That's right."

Coyote whistled. "I didn't know there was anything out there."

"Furthest is."

"That's beyond the Extreme Moons."

"Right."

"Well," said Coyote, "I'm impressed."

"No charge," murmured the Fish, and Coyote smiled.

"So what am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"Go live there."

"How long?"

"However long it takes, up to the eighteen-month maximum they'll let us have, and believe me it took an unholy amount of pressure to get them to give us eighteen *days*. They don't like offworlders out there."

"Live there."

"Right."

"What's it like?"

The Fish shrugged. "I don't know. Want to see the threedies?"

"If you would be so kind."

The map on the wall flicked out and immediately the wall clouded slightly, cleared, and disappeared. In its place was a street, curving off into the distance, flanked by houses. The houses were all precisely three stories high and very narrow. Each had a central door with two windows on each side on the first floor, five windows on the second floor, and the third floor had no windows at all. The houses all seemed to be connected by a sort of pipe or tube that ran from the third story of each one to the house next to it. All were built of an unprepossessing gray stone.

"What is that?"

"That's K'ith Vaad, capital of Furthest."

"Ugly."

"Of an ugliness seldom seen," the Fish agreed. "Sort of an ugly-specialist's ugly."

Coyote glanced at him, instantly suspicious. If the Fish was making jokes—sodden jokes, but jokes—there was something nasty about this assignment.

"Okay," he said. "What else?"

The street disappeared and was replaced by a vast unending expanse of gray rock, like lava wastes, broken by small creeks and humps of the rock.

"Mmmmm."

"Exactly."

"And what else?"



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"That's all."

"That's all!" Coyote sat up straight and glared. "Come on, I don't believe it. How could that be all? Where are the tourist threedies?"

"No tourists."

"You're kidding."

"No, Mr. Jones, I'm not. No tourists are allowed on Furthest. You get on with a permit, on official business only, and you get off almost as fast as you get on. And they're damned choosy about what they consider official business. Those two slides are all we've got."

"Incredible."

"I agree with you."

"Well, what do you know about it? There must be some facts."

"Surely. Planet Furthest, dimension such and such, settled in the year 2083 by an Amerindian, a European, and two idiots from a Jupiter colony, plus a handful of unspecified other colonists. A very small handful. They were some kind of extremist cult, fleeing what they claimed was religious persecution."

"In 2083? Moonspittle."

"No, apparently that was still possible."

"Amazing. Go on."

"Climate is temperate, no dangerous wildlife or plants. No industry. No export except a plant called 'hwal' that's used as a base for perfume, and two or three rather esoteric musical instruments made of a kind of fiberglass. Almost no imports . . . coffee and sugar, I think. Government is paternal oligarchy, religion listed

as something called the Holy Way. People are human, naturally, since they started out human and have been completely isolated ever since. Must be very inbred by now, however."

"What else?"

"That's about it. Some eyewash about ideals, a picture of a building, just trivia. That's all we've got."

Coyote sighed. "Well, I'm afraid I don't see it. Here's this godforsaken planet at the end of nowhere, completely anti-social, bothering nobody—"

"They're bothering somebody, Mr. Jones. They're bothering the Tri-Galactic Council."

"Ah, now we're getting to the point."

"Yes. You see, a . . . dear heaven. Mr. Jones, I have a problem."

"Tell me."

"What does one call these people, Mr. Jones? Furthestanians? Furthestites? There's always 'citizens of Furthest' but that's awfully awkward for extended discussions. Just a minute."

He punched his intercom and the secretary machine, this year's absolutely newest and fanciest Amanuensis Mark IV model, gave out an attentive soft tone.

"Please check for correct spelling and pronunciation," said the Fish, "for the citizens of the planet called 'Furthest.'"

"Yes, sir," said the Amanuensis, and Coyote blinked.

"Yes, sir?" he marveled.

"Damn right," said the Fish.



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"Now, how did you get a robot programmed to say 'yes, sir' instead of 'yes, citizen'?"

"Custom-made. It will say 'yes, most gracious master' if I want it to."

Coyote chuckled and the Amanuensis gave out with its tone again.

"Furthesters," it said with an intonation of the most dulcet competence. "F-U-R-T-H-E-S-T-E-R-S, Furthesters."

"Very good," said the Fish. "Fine."

"Thank you, sir," said the Amanuensis. "Will that be all, sir?"

"That's all," said the Fish, and the light went out on the Amanuensis, leaving behind in Coyote's mind an image of quivering eager pleasure. The thing looked as if you ought to pet it and scratch it behind its ears.

"I don't like your secretary," observed Coyote. "It's sickening."

"Irrelevant," said the Fish.

"You were saying?"

"Yes. I was saying that the Furthesters were annoying the Tri-Galactic Council. You know how, Mr. Jones? I'll tell you how. The next person to hold the office of President of the Tri-Galactic Council will be the delegate from Furthest."

"Who is he?"

"Let me see, I've got it written down here . . . oh, yes. One Bressthen Hkwylle'e. I have no idea if I'm saying that right. The Panglish for Bressthen is Andrew, no equivalent listed for Hkwylle'e."

"Never heard of him."

"Well, why should you have? With 20,393 delegate worlds how could you possibly know any individual delegate, unles he's done something that's made him known? But the situation with Furthest is a little special."

"Tell me about it."

"In the first place, it's only been three years since Furthest finally consented to join the Federation, which means the delegate has had very little experience. Not only that, he belongs to a religious group which damn near keeps him in total isolation. He's got seven hours of obligatory ritual meditation a day. He's got three hours of obligatory ritual isolations, and I don't remember what else. He's not allowed to leave Mars Central, and so far as anyone knows he's never been seen anywhere except in his quarters and at meetings of the Council."

"He doesn't sound to me like a very good bet for President."

The Fish shrugged his shoulders. "Bureaucracy, Mr. Jones. The Presidential succession goes in alphabetical order, and Furthest is next on the list, never mind how unlikely the result may be. Bressthen Hkwylle'e takes office twenty-four months from next Thursday."

"All right," Coyote said, "I can see that this might not be the ideal situation. But I'm damned if I see what my role is supposed to be. Were you suggesting, for example, that I use mass projective telepathy and con-



vince the Three Galaxies that 'F' comes last in the alphabet?"

"Be serious, Mr. Jones."

"Then explain."

Coyote walked over to the wall behind the Fish's desk and pushed the button to make it transparent. He stared out for a moment at the sea of green trees one hundred and thirteen floors below and silently thanked the deities that kept him from having to spend his days in one of these rabbit warrens. It was better than it used to be on Mars Central, he supposed; at least there were trees now. But who would want to be cooped up all the time in block after block of identical two-hundred-story office buildings? Yecch.

"Yes, it causes a problem."

"Why? Is he some kind of lunatic?"

"That's the problem. We don't know. We don't know anything about him. We don't know what kind of lunatic a Furthester lunatic would be."

"What does the psychological profile show?"

"At Computer-Central, you mean?"

"Sure. What does it show?"

He went back and sat down across from the Fish.

"That's the problem, too. It shows nothing."

"You mean to tell me there's no psychological profile—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Jones," interrupted the Fish. "I mean no such thing. By law there *has* to be a psychological profile, one male, one female, for the citizens of any people within the Three Galaxies. But that pro-

file is made up by the psychcomputers on the basis of data fed them by those same citizens, and that's what was done in this case. And in this case there's something wrong."

"How bad?"

"We don't know. The routine measure is always the same. Every time a new President is two years in the offing there's a routine check. We have the Presidency about as nearly safe-guarded as is possible, but nonetheless it is a position of great power. It has to be. The President of the Tri-Galactic Council is the *only* person with full access to the Central Computers, for example. There are checks on him, but still he has full access. He is the only person with instant access to all of the other delegates. He is the only person with authority to act should there be—"

"I understand all that," said Coyote. "Of course he's powerful. How could an official over better than twenty thousand worlds be anything else? I'm not an idiot."

"Well, then. The routine check is to look up all existing information on the upcoming President, his people, his homeworld, and so on, and submit it to the computers for review. When we did this for Furthest we came up with some disturbing information."

"What?"

"*Everything* is average. Everything without exception. There is no smallest deviation from the mythical norm in even one statistic, in the data we have. The psych profile for a Furthester citizen is the ideal Mr. Human



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Being and his wife, Mrs. Human Being. It's too average. The computer says it can't be genuine."

"Maybe out of all the worlds there are it was bound to happen that there would be one average one."

"The computers say no. They say it's too perfect. There are very impressive and convincing figures about the odds against it. There just can't be any such Perfect Average World in this universe, Mr. Jones. Therefore, something is wrong. Therefore, something is being covered up. Therefore, something has got to be done, and well before the succession comes around. We've got to be able to judge the new President. We have to be able to make an accurate estimate of his behavior. If the things he is doing constitute abnormal behavior for a Furthester, if they mean that he is under strain or pressure, we have to know that. We have to know what the signs would be of a Furthester about to crack under a burden he could not bear. The safety of those twenty thousand worlds you mentioned depends on our having that information."

"And I'm supposed to get it?"

"That's right, Mr. Jones. Like I told you, they don't like offworlders. We had to exert every bit of pressure this office can muster, which is considerable, to get you permission to go there, let alone to stay eighteen months, and they may get sorry and retract it any time. Therefore, you are to assume while you're there that you have twenty-four hours to do the job. Just keep assuming it."

"Oh, lovely," Coyote muttered.

"And guess what?"

Guess what? The Fish was being arch, and that tore it. Coyote quickly considered alternatives.

"The women are all eight inches tall," he said.

"Not quite," chuckled the Fish, "but knowing your appetites I think you should know one thing. Of all those many thousands of planets there are only five left, in all the Three Galaxies, where sexual prudery still exists. Furthest is one of those five."

"Prudery?"

"Look it up," laughed the Fish. "In your dictionary of archaic terms."

Then he stopped laughing and went on, "You were the best possible agent available for this job. In the first place you're not especially sociable yourself, which makes you a good choice for an anti-social planet. In the second place, you're our most experienced man in exotic planet sorts of things. And in the third, and most important place, you are the strongest mass projective telepath we have. If anybody can convince the Furthesters that he is innocent, well-meaning, one hundred percent pure, you can. All you have to do is just put out clouds of psi good will, Mr. Jones, full strength."

"That's all I have to do, huh."

"Right. And find out what they're hiding. Convince them to let you in on their little secret. Fast. Without offending anybody."

"When do I leave?"

"Immediately. Top priority, federal rocket, warp drive,



suspended animation for top speed. It's a long way out there."

Coyote stood up and turned to leave, grabbing the envelope of instructions that the Fish was holding out to him, and he headed for the door. Two steps from it he thought of something and looked back.

"Oh, by the way . . ." he said.

"Yes, Mr. Jones?"

"What's my cover? Traveling minstrel again? I'm a bit tired of that."

"Not this time. This time will be different."

"Different how?"

The Fish laughed again. He was a positive comedian today.

"This time, Mr. Jones," said the Fish with glee, "you are going to stay put. You are going to be the proprietor of a MESH. And how do you like *that*?"

## CHAPTER THREE

"Mary had a little rocket,  
tried to put it in her pocket,  
met a telepath who told her,  
'A pocket's not a rocket-holder.'

Lucky, lucky little Mary!  
if she'd met an Ordinary,  
she never would have thrown it  
from her—  
*that* trip would have been a bummer!"

(old nursery rhyme)

He walked into the building they had rented for him, still suffering from a severe case of time/place disorientation and a stomachache. He knew nothing at all about the warp drive that made it possible for ships to get around the Three Galaxies in less than a couple of lifetimes, but he knew that the process never did him any good, and the longer he had to spend at it the worse he felt when it was over. And this trip had been the longest there was . . . there wasn't any-place farther than Furthest.

He still was unable to shake off the effect the warp



drive always had on him, that curious feeling of being separated, of shuffling along behind himself pointing and snickering, chuckling at his foolish bellwether body, and longing for the integration that would gradually deliver him from the acute consciousness of self.

How far away was he from the center of the First Galaxy? The figures didn't mean anything to him. His head persisted in telling him that he was now located in the far upper right-hand corner of a wall in an office building on Mars Central.

The building was perfect, and he loved it, both of him, the body that went in first and the spirit that followed. It stood on a street just off the main drag of K'ith Vaad, and it was just like all the other structures he had seen in the threedies, three stories of gray stone, tall and narrow and forbidding. But inside was something else entirely.

All the inner walls had been taken out, except those around a kitchen and bath on the first floor and two small bedrooms on the second. The stone floors and walls stretched away all around him, smooth with the patina that comes of centuries of walking feet, and the sun streamed in through the high windows and blazed across the floors. Dust motes swam in the paths of light and danced about him; by waving an arm he could raise them in swarms and swirls of mad whirling, and Coyote was purely crazy about the place.

He had never seen a building like this, not outside a historical threedy, in his entire life. No one had, if he was living now. There were plastibubble houses that

inflated as you entered their doors and deflated behind you and rolled themselves up as you left. There were the circular clusters of earthen domes that made up the dwellings of the Maklunites, spread like petals around the central ashram dome. There were the monstrous upended pillars of indestructible plastics that served for every architectural purpose in the inner planets. There were the houses of extruded foam and plastics that any citizen could have issued to him by the government upon reaching the age of seventeen and that made up the vast majority of private dwellings throughout the Galaxies.

But these buildings of Furthest carried him instantly back to the remote edges of history, to the days that had seen man first move out toward the stars, at incredible cost and only by virtue of brutally ignoring the misery that remained on the home planet. Such buildings as these of Furthest had disappeared from the known universe before the 25th century except for exhibits in museums—and now he stood inside one, and it was his dwelling-place for eighteen months. If he was careful, that is.

The first step was to get a helper of some kind, someone who could act as liaison between him and the people of Furthest, someone that he could ask questions and that could keep him from making stupid cultural mistakes. He didn't want to leave the building to take care of this at all; he would have preferred to spend the day just learning to be part of it. But such a course



of action wouldn't do one thing to further his mission here.

He set down his flightbag on the floor, noting with pleasure that no servomechanism came rushing out to pick it up and carry it off. To test the thing further he scrabbled through his pockets and found a piece of disposable fiber that had been part of his ticket for Furthest and ostentatiously dropped it on the floor, too, whistling an incredibly ancient song about a sweet chariot swinging low.

To his great delight, it stayed there right where he had placed it. He would be able to get things dirty if he wanted to, and to clean them up himself, a privilege hard to come by outside the austere clusters of the Maklunites. Things were looking up. (Although he had looked up "sexual prudery" and found it less than an encouraging prospect.)

Reluctantly he went out into the street and headed for the center of town, where there was a public outlet to the planet's information computers, and inserted his credit disc, still whistling.

The outlet bonged loudly, a red light flashed on, and across the screen in brilliant purple letters he read IT IS NOTED THAT YOU ARE AN OFFWORLDER. PLEASE STAND BY WHILE YOUR AUTHORIZATION IS CHECKED. He waited, amused, while it satisfied itself as to his credentials, and then the standby notice went off and was replaced by an equally purple WELCOME TO FURTHEST. YOUR QUESTION PLEASE.

He noted that there was an oldstyle manual key-

board, capable he hoped of handling Panglish, since his command of Furthest speech was very new and raw feeling, and proceeded to punch out his request.

I WISH TO HIRE A HELPER FROM THIS CITY. HOW DO I GO ABOUT IT?

A HELPER? A HELPER TO DO WHAT?

I AM HERE TO ESTABLISH A MESH. I NEED SOMEONE TO DO SMALL ROUTINE TASKS AND ACT AS LIAISON MAN FOR ME. IS THERE ANY SORT OF EMPLOYMENT CLEARINGHOUSE I MIGHT GO TO?

The computer supplied him with an address, ejected his credit disc, and returned to rest status, and he went to the clearinghouse. There was a certain amount of difficulty there, because no one in the place had any idea what a MESH might be.

"You're joking," he had protested. "You can't possibly not know what a MESH is. Everybody knows what a MESH is."

"You're mistaken, Citizen," said a chilly lady at a desk. "We don't know, not any of us."

Coyote looked around him, a bit bewildered. He had been warned, to a certain extent, as to what to expect of these people. In a tri-galactic universe where the vast majority of the populace either went nude or settled for some sort of tunic or loincloth, these people garbed themselves like royalty from antiquity. They wore full-length garments of synthovelvet, with long flowing sleeves, high collars, elaborate ruffs, skirts fully yards around, like a costume ball. It was one thing to be told of this, and another thing to see it. He felt more



disoriented than ever; his eyes were taking it in, but somewhere behind his body there was this discorporate entity making snickering noises about not believing it for a minute.

And on every one of their heads sat an article of clothing, or ornament, that looked like nothing so much as a pair of formal earmuffs; it was a broad band, elaborately decorated, that went across the top of the head and down the sides, and that was attached to an equally elaborate sort of puffed covering over each ear. Whew . . .

"Mmmm . . ." he said, playing for time. "Perhaps I could explain."

"I think you had better," snapped the chilly lady. "We certainly cannot allow one of our citizens to take part in something the nature of which is entirely unknown to us. Is it dangerous?"

"A MESH?" Coyote laughed. "No, of course not. Not unless you're one of those persons who only wants to see other people by appointment. It's just a sort of service center, a place where people can be together, love one another, do things, see things, hear things, learn things."

"Like a school?"

"No . . . more like a coffeehouse, more like a cafe."

"A restaurant, then."

"No."

Coyote shook his head, and reached into his pockets. "Here," he said, "could I use your threedy projector?"

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I've got some slides of MESHES from all over the Three Galaxies. I could show them to you."

The chilly lady's face froze over irrevocably. "It is not allowed," she said.

"What's not allowed?"

"Threedies. Threedies are illegal on Furthest."

Well, thanks a helluva lot for telling me that back at Mars Central, he thought first, and then he realized he was being unfair. Of course the staff of TGIS had not thought to find out whether threedies were legal on Furthest. Who ever heard of a planet where you were not allowed to watch threedies? He couldn't even imagine such a thing.

"Never?" he asked in amazement. "You've never seen a threedy?" And instantly he was aware that he had made a wrong move, that he sounded like an off-worlder being critical of the backward planet. Definitely not a wise remark he had made.

He knew only one way to handle a situation like this. He began talking, softly, prattling facts about the institution called a MESH. And while he talked he projected just one message, at full power and without pause, and that message was A MESH IS A GOOD THING—FURTHEST NEEDS ONE. It was made easier by the fact that he actually believed the stuff he was putting out.

"People can come and eat at a MESH, you see," he said. "Usually there is a pretty full menu, foods from all over the Galaxies, exotic drinks, things like that. And there is entertainment, usually lots of threedies,



## F U R T H E S T

but not here, of course. And music. Theater. I'm a folk-singer and guitarist myself, I specialize in antique instruments and songs, and I'll be performing very often."

A MESH IS A GOOD GOOD THING.

FURTHEST NEEDS ONE.

"And you can buy things there, too," he went on. "Local people, artists and sculptors, artisans, craftsmen, can exhibit their goods for sale. There would be an import counter, a place to buy offworld things. And MFs . . . a MESH always stocks everything that can be stocked in the way of MFs."

There had been a murmur from the chilly lady, who was beginning to warm up under the steady pressure from Coyote's mind.

"MF?" she asked, almost gently. "What is an MF?"

By the Light, were they still using *books* out here in this back of beyond? He couldn't believe it.

"Microfilms," he said carefully. "MFs. Microfilms."

"Oh, yes," the lady nodded. "I see. Of course we have microfilms . . . we're not savages."

He was beginning to wonder about that, but he noted that she wore an MF viewer as a pendant on a chain about her neck, like a fashionable woman anywhere, so apparently it was not so bad as it seemed.

"And you can learn things there," he said, after a moment to remember where he had left off. "If you only have one or two outlets to the Edcomputers in your own home, you can go with a group of friends and use the group outlets at the MESH and take courses together."

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A MESH IS A GOOD THING.

FURTHEST NEEDS ONE.

A MESH IS A GOOD GOOD THING.

FURTHEST NEEDS ONE.

"It's a place for being together," he crooned, "for being together and being friends with one another."

Careful, he thought . . . remember, this is a prudery planet.

"Just being friends," he said. "All happy together, all learning, hearing, seeing, enjoying. It's sort of a community nexus."

A MESH IS A GOOD GOOD THING.

FURTHEST NEEDS ONE.

The chilly lady smiled at him.

"You know," she said, "a MESH sounds to me like a very good thing. I believe Furthest needs one."

Two men, incredibly gowned and draped and capped, came forward and shook his hand warmly, and he relaxed the projection just a little. He didn't want to make them suspicious, and there was no data in the Central Computers about the possibilities of the Furthesters, except that those abilities were "average."

"Could you help me, then?" he nudged them, gently. "I really do need someone to work with me. Someone young, preferably, and energetic. Able to run errands for me. Someone who knows his way about."

There was a good deal of bustle, and punching of buttons on comsystems, and shuffling through files, and then they told him they had just the person. A boy, about fifteen, of a very good family, and intelligent.



He did not need to work but had just completed his schooling and was still too young to go on to advanced work, but was bored with sitting around doing nothing.

"That sounds exactly right," said Coyote. "Can you send me to him?"

"We'll get him for you now, Citizen Jones," they said. "Sit down, please, and be comfortable—it will take only a minute or two."

They were right, too; in five minutes flat the boy appeared before him, ill at ease but obviously bright and alert. He had the coppery skin and dark brown hair of all his people, the huge eyes of a brown almost black, the long straight nose that came from the forehead seemingly in an unbroken place, and if you got used to the strangeness no doubt he was a handsome specimen.

They introduced him and told Coyote his name.

"May I see that written down?" Coyote asked.

"Surely." They wrote it down for him. Arh Qu'e.

He couldn't say it properly, in spite of the drilling he'd had in the exaggerated aspiration of the language, and he gave up the attempt at once. There was nothing like a small strategic failure to win people over.

"I can't say it," he said frankly. "But I'll compromise. The name sounds like the Panglish sequence R-K. May I call you that—may I call you RK?"

The boy frowned slightly, and then smiled.

"Certainly," he said in flawless Panglish. "RK is fine with me."

"Good enough, then," Coyote said. "Now, can you

come with me at once? The job will require that you live at the MESH, you know—I suppose they explained that to you.”

RK nodded. “I can’t come with you,” he said, “because I have things I must do for my parents before I leave for any length of time. But if you will give me the address I can be there this evening by nine o’clock.”

Coyote nodded and wrote down the address for him. He was pleased. It was only the first day and he was making good progress. The headquarters for the MESH was satisfactory, he had found a helper that ought to be perfect, no doubt his personal baggage had been delivered from the port by now. He could go back to the house, unpack, have a leisurely dinner somewhere, and still have an hour or two to himself to enjoy the sensation of being surrounded with something out of the dark past before RK came. He could tramp up and down the stone stairs and listen to the echoes of his steps—there were no echoes in plastic buildings.

He thanked them at the clearinghouse, offered his credit disc in payment and was waved away. No, no. It was a public service he was doing. A MESH was a good thing, and Furthest needed one, and they wouldn’t think of charging him anything.

Coyote went away feeling almost ashamed. It was one thing to use his psibilities against sophisticated people. In that case—the usual one—his only advantage was in sheer quantity. Whereas most human beings had the ability to send simple messages of three or four semantic units in length and receive the same,



## F U R T H E S T

and talented experts could communicate far more freely and completely with their minds than people ever had with tongues alone, he was almost totally mind-deaf. A really powerful telepath could manage to get through to him with vague sensations, sorts of blobs of color and impressions of emotions, warnings of danger, all that kind of thing. But that was the total extent of it. He got all the feelings, but he could not get content at all, any more than a physically deaf person could hear music in the old days before deafness became a curable disorder.

But he could certainly put *out* the messages. Mass projective telepaths were rare, and he was the rarest. He could control a crowd of two thousand people at a mile's distance, and he could do that without even getting out of breath. And ammunition of that sort seemed a bit heavy for use against one chilly lady and two nondescript middle-aged gentlemen in fancy dress.

To get rid of his feeling of guilt he very carefully visualized the clearinghouse as he walked away, and projected a message back at his three victims while he moved along.

YOU ARE VERY GOOD GOOD PEOPLE.

FURTHEST NEEDS MORE PEOPLE LIKE YOU.

EVERYONE LOVES AND ADMIRES YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE  
VERY

GOOD

PEOPLE.

He felt a lot better then.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Death is only a new becoming."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

There was mail for him the next morning, and he sat himself down on the flight of stairs to the second floor, bathed in the brilliant light from the windows, and went methodically through it.

There was a garish chartreuse folder ostensibly from a company that called itself "Impact MFs Inc." A coy citizen from some outlying world peeked at him from behind a giant fan of microfilm. "Huge discounts! Sale-day is Everyday at Impact MF Inc.! Buy here, buy here, see hear, see here." When opened the folder began to hum in a seductive female voice and gave off a powerful odor of roses.

Coyote frowned at the thing suspiciously. No legitimate firm in this day and age would produce such a monstrosity. He turned it over and over, ignoring the sexy humming, and found what he had expected—a tiny fish hidden in a curly capital "I." It was from the Fish, and was a demand for an immediate report.

He dropped it gleefully down the stairs, planning to drop lots more stuff on top of it and make a regular



pile of trash at the bottom of the steps, and went on to the next item.

There were half a dozen legitimate brochures offering for sale the sort of goods that were sold in MESHes, which indicated that TGIS had done an appropriate amount of advance publicity for him while he was on the way here.

There was an ad for an assortment of mobile flowers from the Extreme Moons, all colors, hybrids with double flowers, and all of them singers. That would be worth keeping. And a price list for MFs, the real thing this time.

There was a note from an old friend, Tzana Kai, ostensible head of a translation bureau but really TGIS like him, wishing him success in his new venture.

And, finally, there was a small brown mailpouch, bearing a six-months-past postmark and the comsystem code number of the Maklunite cluster at Highmountain.

Coyote opened it carefully, wondering what could have prompted an extravagance like the mailing of an old-fashioned parcel instead of a telebounce facsimile. It would have had to be something very important indeed, because the Maklunite clusters had little money to spend and a thousand ways to spend that little.

The letter began: "To Coyote Jones, beloved of all of us at Highmountain. Last night our teacher and friend, Tham O'Kent, left us. It was his wish that the Change take place in our ashram, and that we all be with him; he left us without pain or any sign of fear. We shall miss him greatly."

Coyote stopped and looked up from the letter, afraid that he would cry and very much aware that Tham O'Kent would have laughed at such a reaction. It was only another evidence of how far away he was from the Maklunite Way that he could not look upon death as simply a change instead of as the end of things.

"Tham O'Kent had a message for you," the letter went on. "He asked that we tell you that it was one of the sorrows of his life that all the good will and work that both of you put into your time with us was not enough to make it possible for you to remain. He asked that we tell you that it was not your fault, any more than it was his, but that there are people who are not ready for our Way. He said that perhaps you are kept back because you are needed as you are. And he sent you his love, as teacher and as friend.

"You know that it is our custom to keep all things in common, and that when one of us comes to the time of Changing, all those things that he has by him at that time continue to be held by all. However, it was Tham O'Kent's request that his devotional book be sent to you, and we are happy to do so. Use it in wisdom and in love.

"We all think of you and love you. Tessa sends you greetings from Chrysanthemum Bridge. Return to us when you will."

Coyote put the letter down gently and picked up the book. He was having a certain amount of trouble seeing it, but he would have known it anywhere, by touch alone. He held it tightly and fought the tears



that threatened to make a fool of him, and then he saw RK standing quietly in front of him.

"You are troubled, Citizen," he said gravely. "Is there any way that I can help you?"

"I've lost a friend, RK," said Coyote past the lump in his throat. "I've lost a friend and I'm having trouble accepting that fact with regretful serenity, as I am expected to do."

"Lost him, Citizen?"

"He is dead," said Coyote harshly. "The Maklunites would say that he is only Changed, but I say he is dead, and the world is a worse place for his absence."

RK sat down beside him on the steps and regarded him gravely.

"Is it all right to talk?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Coyote. "Yes. It might even help."

"I was wondering," said the boy. "What are they?"

"What are what?"

"What you were saying, Citizen. Maklunites?"

"You don't know what Maklunites are?"

"No. Are they people?"

"They're a religion, friend."

"I've never heard of them."

Coyote was amazed. "How can that be, RK? Do you read the news MFs, watch the newscasts? They're the most numerous religion in the Three Galaxies; only Ethical Humanism and Judaism have more people."

The boy shrugged. "Perhaps I have just not paid careful attention, Citizen. What sort of a religion are they, these Maklunites?"

"A very gentle one. They live together, sharing everything; they love each other deeply. There is no closer being-together in all the Three Galaxies than that practiced by the Maklunites."

RK was frowning. "They are communists, then," he said severely. "Is that right?"

"Not communists," said Coyote. "Lovers."

RK looked shocked, and Coyote hastily amended his remark.

"Lovers of one another," he said, "in the highest sense."

"We are taught by our elders," said RK, "that communal living is a deadly sin, and that it was meant that each man should live with his family and protect them and love them only."

"You have every right to your beliefs," said Coyote reasonably. "They are held by many peoples, you know; for example, that is one of the doctrines of Judaism."

RK looked at him, a long measuring glance, and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Are you a Maklunite, Citizen Jones?"

"No," said Coyote. "I tried to be, though. More than I ever wanted anything else in all my life, I wanted to be a Maklunite. I tried so hard, and many fine people tried to help me, but I was not able to do it. It's one of those people who is dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes . . . well, there's no help for it. Does it frighten you to find yourself sitting beside a sinner?"



He was half joking, but RK took him seriously, and appeared to be struggling with the problem.

"You don't *look* like a sinner," he said finally. "It makes it difficult to answer your question."

"How would a sinner look?" Coyote asked in amazement. "Is there a special appearance for sinners?"

"Yes, there is," said RK calmly. "They look miserable. Completely and totally miserable."

Coyote whistled.

"RK," he asked suddenly. "Do you really believe that?"

"It is not possible," the boy said with the steady tones of unshakable conviction, "for a sinner to be happy."

"The Maklunites are happy," said Coyote. "They are the happiest people I know."

"I can't accept that," said RK. "If they live as you say, they cannot possibly be happy."

This, Coyote could see, was not going to get them anywhere. The boy was spouting some sort of cant doctrine, and it sounded like a dangerous one and one of which he should be disabused. On the other hand, Coyote could not afford to make an enemy of his only human link with the Furthesters just for the sake of a religious or philosophical argument.

"Well," he said, standing up, "this is an interesting discussion, but we'll never get anything done this way, will we? Let me put up my mail and we'll get started."

RK seemed relieved to have the subject changed, and he went to work willingly enough. Coyote took the

Devotional Book and laid it away carefully in his room, taking time to look for a few seconds at the well-used pages carefully filled with Tham O'Kent's meticulous writing, and then he went to join the boy. They had a great deal of work to do.

"From Coyote Jones, with love to all of you at Highmountain:

"I received your letter yesterday morning, with the book enclosed, and I thank you with all my heart. This is the first moment I have had free to write to you.

"I know that there are many of you there at Highmountain for whom the teachings in Tham's devotional book were of great importance, and you must have had a feeling of sadness at seeing the book leave your cluster instead of taking its place upon the shelves in your ashram. I am touched and honored, both at the tenderness of the sacrifice and at having the book for my own. (I can hear you laughing at that phrase, 'for my own,' but I suppose it will surprise none of you, knowing me as you do, and it is the most natural for me.) I will treasure the book until the time comes that I can pass it on to someone else, and I thank you again. If at any time you should have need of it, you have only to send me a message and I will return it to you.

"As you probably know, I am now operating a MESH on the planet called Furthest; I find the job very normal-seeming, but the planet is strange. My MESH opened for the first time last night, and I would like



to tell you about it, except that I'm not very good at expressing myself. Perhaps if I just tell you about one of the ladies—and I use that term deliberately—you will be better able to imagine the rest.

“Try to imagine a young woman, very tall and thin, with skin the color of pale copper. She is wearing a gown that covers every inch of her from the top of her throat to her feet, and you can see nothing of her but her head and her hands. The gown she wears is of heavy synthetic velvet and is vertically striped in alternate dark and light green. The collar is as high as it could be without choking her and the sleeves come down in points over the backs of her hands almost to her fingers. The skirts of her gown are fully a yard around and sweep the floor when she moves. Around the collar, the border of the sleeves, and the hem of her dress, there are three rows of heavy golden braid. She must be wearing something on her feet, but they are hidden by the gown, so I don't know what it could be. Her long brown hair is caught at the back of her throat by a loop of the golden braid that trims her gown. She wears no cosmetics of any kind, unless I simply am unable to detect them because of the skill with which she has applied them. Over the top of her head there is a band an inch wide, of the striped synthovelvet, going down the sides of her head and attached to what look like velvet earmuffs, heavily trimmed with pearls and gold lace, over her ears. (If you aren't familiar with earmuffs, they are a kind of round covering for the ears, attached to a band over

the head, and worn to protect the wearer against severe cold. It doesn't ever get very cold here.)

"Now multiply this lady by fifty, pair her off with men who are just as incredibly dressed, except that they wear full trousers instead of skirts, caught tight at the ankles, and you will have some idea of the appearance of my opening night audience. There were no children present, not even one, but when I have seen them, they were dressed like their elders.

"Usually, you know, the opening night of a MESH is a very festive occasion. Everyone knows that it is a place for all the people in the area and there is always a lot of sharing, a lot of helping, and people come in to the opening warm and loving and ready to know one another. Not here, let me tell you. These people not only do not know how to act in a MESH, they've never even heard of such a place. Apparently their government has carefully censored such information, along with a great deal of other information, although there couldn't be any formal official policy against MESHes or they wouldn't have allowed one to be opened here. At any rate, the people came in hesitant and half-afraid, and in spite of everything I could do they stayed that way, wandering around in twos and threes, touching things as if they had poison spines on them.

"I let that go on as long as I dared, hoping it would get better of itself (which it didn't) and then I called them into the central area and sang to them. And that was the strangest thing of all. You know that I have



almost no ability to receive the thoughts of others; like a twentieth-century primitive I get only blurry images and emotions instead of the clear information that normal people receive. But I have never faced opacity such as this before. There were perhaps a hundred people there, and they were like a hundred small squares of flat blackness, or black flatness. Just nothing. Emptiness. Total closedness. I wasn't getting messages of dislike or fear, there was just nothing there at all, and that's not normal. It was as if every single person in the Mesh was under orders to maintain an automatic and total psychic block at all times.

"I can't imagine what could have caused a whole people to be like that. It couldn't be accidental, they would have had to be systematically trained. It must be some part of their prudery code, something that is a part of 'good manners' for them, some part of their training for public behavior. Surely they can't be like that always, even when they are at home with their families.

"I don't mind admitting that I was awfully uncomfortable, and I wasn't sure exactly what to do about the whole thing. I decided that the best place to start was with the idea of building up confidence in their minds. So along with the music last night they got a constant full-strength mental dose of TRUST ME, I AM A GOOD MAN AND I AM ONLY HERE TO HELP YOU. I kept that up for two solid hours, until my whole head felt like a bruise, and it still aches, but I hope it did some good. I could sense no change in them (although it

would have to be a pretty damn radical change, of course, before I *would* sense it). But when they began to leave they all came up and spoke to me in a friendly enough manner, so I suppose I should be satisfied with the results for the time being.

"They appeared to be completely mystified by the music I sang and played, but that's nothing unusual. People ordinarily are mystified by the new and strange, and apparently these people have never been exposed to any sort of antique music. They did seem interested and I think that that interest will draw them back here so that I can try to reach them more effectively. I can at least hope so.

"I thank you again for the gift of Tham's devotional book, and I send you my warmest wishes and my love, from Furthest . . .

Coyote Jones"



## CHAPTER FIVE

"The idea that telepathy was in some way a freakish, non-human—or even worse, superhuman—ability disappeared only slowly during the twenty-first century. Difficult as it is for us to imagine such a situation now, it was at one time the accepted practice to ridicule and to discourage any and all attempts to use telepathy or any of the normal human psibilities."

(from *A Brief History of the Human Race*,  
by Dr. Evelyn Margaret O'Brien, Ph.d.)

RK was uneasy and strange the next day, to such an amazing degree that Coyote began to worry. They were stocking MFs in the dispensers and checking them against the inventory strips, a simple job that should have been a matter of thirty minutes time. But RK was so distracted and half there that three times in the first quarter of an hour he agreed to an MF title that Coyote called out when he should have noted it as an error. By the time they should have been through, the inventory was hopelessly mixed up, and Coyote gave it up and called a halt.

"Look here," he said, "yesterday I was the one who

was upset, and you did your best to cheer me up. Now this morning I would have to be an idiot not to know that *you* are troubled, and we're not getting anything done. I think it might be better for the business if we took a break and tried to fix your problem."

The boy flushed, and Coyote felt the curious sensation that meant a blocked mind was opening, a sort of slippery sensation behind the eyes, as if something had broken the surface of some hidden water, and then it was gone. He sat down beside RK and waited, not wanting to push him. He could have done some mental pushing, of course, but he hesitated to do that. It was almost always safe to operate mentally with large crowds, because the facts about mass telepathic manipulation had been carefully suppressed, and in fact a number of articles had been written recently doubting the very existence of any such technique. And to be absolutely accurate, the existence of a skill held by only thirteen persons in three galaxies almost constituted non-existence. But if he were to attempt to project to an individual, at such close quarters, he ran the risk of having that individual become alarmed at the strength of the projection, and that kind of alarm would inevitably lead to trouble. He wouldn't risk it unless it appeared really necessary, and settled for holding in his mind a vague sort of reassurance concept, reasonably sure that the boy would not spot it as projected.

"Citizen Jones."

"Yes, RK?"



"I do have a problem, you know that? I've got a really awful problem."

"Maybe I can help you, if you'll let me."

RK stared at him gravely. "You would, wouldn't you? I know you would. The only thing is . . . I feel like I ought to be able to trust you, but I have always been taught—"

"That offworlders cannot be trusted."

RK nodded.

"Well," said Coyote reasonably, "you'll have to decide that for yourself. Are you telepathic? You could check my thoughts for evidence of evil intent, RK; I'd be perfectly willing to let you."

The boy went white, and Coyote knew he'd goofed. Apparently he'd touched some taboo area.

"What is it now, RK?" he asked. "Have I offended you?"

"You asked if I was telepathic."

"So?"

"Of course I'm not telepathic! Why would you—why do you ask me that? What made you think of that question?"

"RK, you're really frightened—why?"

"I'm not frightened."

"I don't believe you. You're shaking."

"That's not true!"

"RK," said Coyote patiently, "I'm sorry if discussions about psibility are taboo for your people. I know your police use telepathy, and I didn't realize it was a subject that one doesn't discuss. It was just an error of

manners, and I won't mention it again. But so far as your problem is concerned, you are going to have to decide for yourself, like I tried to say before, whether you can trust me or not. If you can't trust me, then nothing I say to you is worth anything anyway. If I'm not trustworthy I can sit here all day and swear I am, and it won't mean anything."

RK dropped his face into his hands and moaned in sheer misery, and Coyote began to feel genuinely concerned. Apparently it was not just a minor problem.

"Try to trust me," he coaxed. "Try—you should know that you can."

*You should know, he thought, because you were here last night all evening long while I was putting out that trust-me stuff.*

RK drew a long shuddering breath and raised his head.

"I'll have to trust you," he said simply. "There's no other way. Only I'm going to have to ask you to trust me, too."

"Of course."

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favor, but just on trust. With almost no explanation. If you won't do it that way, then I'm up against it."

"Try me."

RK went and stared out of the front window onto the street, and Coyote waited. He had found waiting one of his most useful talents over the years. He only wished the Fish had just a little scrap of that particular talent, however; his report about the empty city-



dome had brought down a flock of URGENT notices on him from Mars Central, as if the inner secrets of a totally anti-social people could be brought into the light by shouting and shoving. He was waiting, and would continue to wait as long as he dared.

"Citizen Jones," said RK from the window, "it's not for myself that I am asking the favor. It's for my sister."

"Your sister? I didn't know you had one, man."

"I do, though," said RK. "I don't really know her well, because she has almost never lived with our family. I've only been with her during visits my parents and I made to her school, and very few of those are allowed. But she has always written to me, and she gave me my first *ak'ith*."

"Ak'ith?"

"It is a sort of knife," RK said. "It's more a decorative thing than a useful one, but it's important to a boy among our people."

"I see. Then you and your sister are close?"

RK hesitated. "I don't understand."

"You are fond of one another, I mean."

"I think so. As much as is possible when you see each other so rarely."

"And what is this sister of yours like, RK?"

"She's very brilliant," said the boy slowly, "and very beautiful—and she's been sentenced to Erasure."

Coyote dropped the stack of MFs he had been holding and bent to pick them up, with a long slow whistle. Erasure! That was the second most severe penalty in all the Three Galaxies, surgery by psycho-

probe that erased the personality and all memories and left the victim in a state of literally prenatal blankness. It was exceedingly rare, being used only for those criminals who appeared to be totally beyond all hope of rehabilitation by any other means.

"What has she done, RK? That's not exactly a mild sentence."

"That's what I can't tell you."

"I see."

RK whirled to face Coyote, his face twisted with desperation and rage.

"I can tell you just one thing," he blurted. "Her crime was one of religion. That's all that I can say."

Coyote had the feeling he was really in over his head now. How could there be any religious crime on a planet whose religion was almost nonexistent? There was a church in each city, according to those so-average statistics, and Coyote had seen one, only a few blocks away from the MESH. But in spite of the apparent religious excess of the Furthest delegate, according to the material in his briefing papers the religion called the Holy Path was nothing more than a very watered down brand of Ethical Humanism. It was based on such inflammatory doctrines as "be good to your parents," "don't tell lies, it's not nice," "do your share of the work that must be done," that kind of thing. There was a church service of sorts, called Tenth Day Observance, to which everyone was expected to go, and a Years-End Festival that seemed to be connected to the religion. But it was nothing more



than a code of ethics and propriety—how could it be possible for someone to rebel against anything so vague and permissive, to the extent of incurring Erasure for it? It didn't make any sense; it was another empty citydome.

"Will you help me?"

RK was staring fixedly at him, his face a mixture of pleading and defiance, his hands clenched in fists at his sides.

"Will you, Citizen?" he repeated.

Coyote thought rapidly. Would he dare risk such a thing when the safety of three galaxies depended upon his being allowed to remain on this planet until he could learn what he needed to know?

"What would you want me to do, RK?" he asked as casually as he could. "I'm afraid you'll have to tell me that, at least."

"Of course," said the boy. "All I need is a place for my sister to stay, a place to hide her. That's all. You don't even need to see her. There is a little room on the third floor—"

"But RK, the third floor is padlocked and barred. I wasn't able to get permission to even go up there, for some reason which I haven't been able to determine."

"That's because you are an offworlder. I can go up there any time, and my sister would be safe there. Could I bring her, Citizen? She is only nineteen, my sister, and Erasure is . . . is horrible."

"RK?"

"Yes, Citizen Jones?"

"Is she guilty?"

"My sister?"

"Of course, your sister! It's your sister we're discussing, isn't it? Is she guilty of the crime she's charged with?"

"Yes."

"She is guilty. And do you think the sentence is too severe?"

RK swallowed, but he faced Coyote steadily, and Coyote liked him for that.

"No, I think the sentence is fair."

"Then why do you want to hide her?"

"Because," said RK, "she is my sister. I know she is guilty. She admits it; she glories in it. I know that what she has done is foul and vile and despicable and that Erasure is what she deserves. Nonetheless, she is my sister, and I love her; I will not let them do that to her if I can help it."

He turned his back then and all the pride seemed to go out of him like air from a pricked balloon.

"I talk such a good line," he said bitterly, "but that's all it is, just talk. I will be honest with you, Citizen—there is nothing that I myself can do. It is only you—if you will help me hide her, she has a chance. No member of my people would do it."

"Not even your parents, RK?"

"My parents! To my parents, my sister is dead. She does not even exist. They are like stone, both of them. And besides, they would not dare. They are being watched, of course, and if my sister were to disappear with their help they would be convicted along with



her. It is only you who could help, because you are offworld—our laws do not apply to you in this case.”

“If I should be caught—what then?”

“My sister and I would be taken away, and Erasure would be the penalty. You would simply be asked to leave; it would be obvious to everyone that you had simply acted in ignorance of our customs and our laws.”

“I would be asked to leave.” Coyote shook his head. “That would not be good, RK,” he said. “I’ve spent all my life savings to start this business—I would be a pauper, destitute, with nowhere to go, no money to begin again.” *Not to mention, as he could not mention, that he would have failed in his mission, and that there would not be even a prayer that the officials of Furthest would allow another offworlder to violate their precious planet after such an experience.*

“You’re going to say no,” said RK exhaustedly. “And I don’t blame you.”

“You must understand—”

RK cut him off. “Wait,” he said. “Do this one thing for me. Let me bring my sister here to meet you, only that. Certainly, even if we were caught here, that could cause you no trouble. No one would dream that you had known she was an escaped criminal. Would you do that? And don’t tell me your decision until you have had a chance to speak to her yourself?”

Coyote considered the matter carefully. He was reasonably sure the boy’s assessment of the situation was accurate. If the police were to come and Coyote were to claim that he had had no knowledge of the girl’s

guilt, he would be believed. He could convince a few policemen easily, especially since he was an offworlder and would be considered inferior and stupid and liable to make mistakes in any event. He could surely afford to do that much, just as evidence to RK of his good will. But he had another question first.

"RK," he said carefully, "is it taboo to discuss telepathy? I mean, if I don't ask personal questions, can I talk about it in the abstract sense?"

He looked at the boy and nodded. "I see, you just don't like the topic at all, under any circumstances. All right, then. I'll try to be careful of the phrasing of my question."

"Thank you, Citizen."

"What I want to know is this—I know your police are trained telepaths. If I were to agree to your sister staying here, what is to prevent the police from learning about it in that way—and learning that I knew all about the whole thing, by the way?"

"How could they do that?"

"Wouldn't they make a routine search, house by house, something like that?"

"A—a mental search? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Is that so horrendous a suggestion?"

"Citizen Jones," said RK, white with indignation, "we are not barbarians here, just because we are far from the center of things. No member of our police force would search a mind without a warrant granting him specific permission to do so. No policeman may go around probing houses at random; he must have the



permission of a judge, and it is not at all easy to get. Such violations of privacy are taken very seriously by my people."

"I see. A warrant would be needed first."

"Certainly. And a petition for warrant requires firm, unmistakable evidence that there are grounds to suspect a crime. And a judge is very hesitant about granting such a warrant, because if the probe reveals that the suspect is *not* guilty, the government is liable for a huge penalty, payable to the wronged person on grounds of invasion of privacy."

"I understand. And there would be no reason for anyone to apply for such a warrant for this place."

"None at all, Citizen. The government is of the opinion that I do not even know of my sister's crime—it's supposed to be a state secret. Only a handful of people know, and all have been sworn to secrecy. I am supposed to believe that my sister is on a holiday."

"And after Erasure?"

"I would probably not be told . . . they would tell me that she had had an accident and her body destroyed beyond recognition, something like that. Unless they decide to make an example of her— But all that is irrelevant, Citizen. Because she escaped and I do know."

"Yes. Yes, well, that's all clear, RK."

"Will you meet her, then?"

"Yes, I will," said Coyote. What the hell. He was anxious to find out what a religious criminal, sentenced to Erasure, and only nineteen years old, might look like. Perhaps he would be able to get more of the details

from the girl, and there was certainly nothing about this that sounded average. It should be the sort of details he needed.

"Can you bring her here for dinner?" he asked RK. "A late dinner, of course. After the MESH has closed for the night."

"A midnight supper . . . yes, I can do that."

"Good enough, then. We'll consider it settled."

"You are very kind, Citizen. I'm grateful."

"I haven't agreed to anything yet, RK."

The boy smiled.

"Wait until you have talked to my sister," he said. "We will see, then."

"Oh?" Coyote's eyebrows went up. "It's like that, is it?"

RK just kept on smiling.

"All right, then," said Coyote, "I'll wait and see. And now, could you perhaps do *me* a favor?"

"Anything!"

"Could we perhaps get these MFs stocked in the dispensers before time for lunch?"

RK turned red, and struck an embarrassed fist against his thigh.

"I am not much help to you, Citizen," he said apologetically.

"You're going to be," Coyote assured him. "Don't you worry, young man, you're going to be a great *deal* of help."

He handed the boy a stack of MFs.

"Here," he said. "We've lost so much time that I'm



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going to have to go do the blasted market detail myself. You'll have to catalog these on your own. Can you handle that?"

"Certainly I can."

"Then do it," said Coyote. "And be careful, will you?"

## CHAPTER SIX

"Matthew Jessup loved a woman  
a highborn Thrail from Astra Three;  
through the sky he heard her call him,  
'Starship Captain, rescue me!'

"He followed her because she called him,  
always off the starboard side,  
naked she ran on before him,  
softly, mournfully, she cried.

"Ware, beware, ye starship captains!  
Ware, beware!  
Ware the witches back of Saturn  
combin' out their scarlet hair,  
sing ware, beware!"

(from an old ballad)

So this was the criminal sister.

Coyote tried to take her in without obvious staring, gave that up as an unlikely task and stared. Yes indeed. He could see now what RK had meant by the "you just wait" routine.

Unfortunately, it wasn't going to work. He knew



enough about these people to realize that what confronted him was probably the absolute quintessence of Further beauty, supposed to drive him mad enough with lust (worship? . . . terror? . . . what was beauty supposed to inspire in a man on this antiquated old chunk of rock?), mad enough with something or other, anyway to jeopardize his entire mission just to be near the source.

But he didn't find her beautiful. Intellectually, he could make a note: ONE FURTHER WOMAN, RAVING BEAUTY PER HER PLANET STANDARDS. Emotionally, though, esthetically, she could not even touch him.

She stood a good five feet eleven inches tall, nothing of her showed except her hands and face and hair, and she looked mean enough to eat nails. The line from her forehead to the tip of her nose was clean swoop, the skin was flawless burnished copper, and the lips were formed by a master, long and curled and strong, no doubt covering sharp perfect little white teeth like a vixen's. Her cheekbones set shadows against her skin, and her eyebrows were a permanent hauteur. If it had not been for the dark brown color of her hair and eyes, and the extreme tilt up of the eyes toward the brows at their outside tip, she could have stepped off the wall of an Egyptian tomb. He bet she could ignore three flocks of jeebies before breakfast every morning.

He could see her as splendid, as magnificent, as handsome, as striking, but not as beautiful. And most definitely, he could not see her as woman. There was

no softness here, no roundness, no warmth, and he would as soon have had a pillar of marble in his bed as this sister of RK's.

She smiled at him, the long lips curling in a heart-breaking perfection of curve, and spoke in a voice that was far too deep and knowing for nineteen.

"You needn't tell me, Citizen," she said, mockery dancing in the great brown eyes, "because it's written across your forehead in letters of an extraordinary clearness—*Sweet Saints, what a forbidding landscape!*"

Coyote went as far toward blushing as it was possible for him to do, and instantly regretted it, because she chuckled deep in her throat at his unease; apparently he was as transparent to her as a pane of glass.

"I hope I have not offended you, Citizen—uh, Citizenness," he said. Along with the rest of their archaic customs, the Furthesters still retained the distinction of sex by address. He thought. He hoped. He was confused enough to be not at all sure.

"Certainly not," she said smoothly. "I have seen pictures of your women, and although I can't see what interest they would hold for a man I do see that our women would not strike you as beautiful."

In such a situation even a TGIS agent falls back upon the strategic resource of courtly prevarication; Coyote all but bowed and swept the floor with his plumed hat. "I beg to differ with you," he said, "you are very beautiful indeed."

"And you are a liar," she said promptly. "I am beau-



tiful to you like a . . . like a scenic wonder. Not like a woman."

"Very well, then. But I remind you that this is the result of my unfortunate offworld tastes, and not some lack in yourself."

She laughed again and stood there watching him with dancing eyes while RK tried to tell him her name.

"I can't say that," he said at once. "Spell it for me."

"My sister is called Kh'llwythenna Be'essahred Q'ue."

"Impossible. It sounds like a cross between Ancient Celtic and Luna Pidgin. I can't manage it, I'm afraid."

"Try!" she said.

"Absolutely not." He shook his head firmly. "I'll give you no further excuse to laugh at me, my girl. RK, will you say that for me one more time?"

RK repeated it, and Coyote nodded.

"There's a 'Bess' in there someplace," he said, "and Bess it will have to be. Or, of course, Citizenness Q'ue. That's the best I can do."

" 'Bess . . . ' " She tried it out, considering it, her head tilted to listen. "That's quite good enough, Citizen," she said.

"Come along then, Bess," he said, "and you, too, RK, and let's have something to eat. I'm beginning to feel very exposed standing here."

"Here" was the stairway to the third floor. From the way that RK had produced her after the last guest had left the MESH Coyote was quite certain that she must have been up there all that day, even while he and

the boy were talking about her coming to stay. But he preferred to act ignorant of that fact.

He led the way into the central room of the MESH, where the stage was. It had no windows and several doors led out of it, so it seemed safest to him if someone should by some freak come to the front door seeking him. He had set a table there and prepared an excellent dinner, which the plates were keeping warm for them, and a good Betelgeuse wine stood waiting.

RK seated his sister, and Coyote poured the wine, and they lifted their glasses in a friendly salute. Coyote hoped he looked more pleasant than he felt; it was her fault, she had put that image in his head, and now no matter how he tried he could not shake from his mind the idea that he was dining with a Scenic Wonder. It was grotesque, and funny, and absolutely unshakable, and he knew he was not going to be able to be serious.

Bess cut a neat bite of her kthor steak, blew on it gently to cool it, much to his additional amusement, and then spoke to him in that amazing voice.

"My brother has asked you to grant me sanctuary, then?" she asked, and he nodded.

"He has that."

"Have you decided?"

"Well," Coyote said, hesitatingly, "you understand that it is not simply a matter of being gallant to a lady. I would not think of saying no to him, except for my situation."

"Yes?"



"Ahem. Bess, my dear Bess, my lovely Scenic Wonder, you must understand that I am not a wealthy man. All my savings have gone into this venture, every penny—"

Bess stabbed her steak and cut him off, all with the same gesture.

"Citizen Jones," she said, fixing him with eyes as cool and knowing as some ancient crone, the eyes looking out of that strong young body (at least he assumed there must be a body under all the trappings), "Citizen Jones, it is all very well for you to tell my brother fairy stories. He is young, after all, and you have no reason to value his discretion. But I ask you not to insult me with such nonsense, because I am neither blind nor a fool."

"I don't know what you mean," he said, very much afraid that he did know what she meant, and she proved him right.

"Citizen," she said, "no one, no one at all, would come all the way out to the very backtail planet of the Third Galaxy, and set up a MESH with his last penny, for the simple and single purpose of setting up a MESH to make money at it. You can't possibly expect me to believe that."

"Bess—"

"Not only that," she went on, "but my government would not have allowed it for a moment, if it were only that. Do you see any other offworld businessmen in K'ith Vaad, Citizen? Have you noticed any signs saying 'Welcome to Furthest' and begging you to invest

your funds? My government has a vested interest in the ignorance of its people, and a MESH represents a threatening factor of great strength."

"But—"

"Do spare me, Citizen," she continued, charging right over him, "or I *shall* be insulted; after all, for you to find my body of an unaccustomed and unbecoming cragginess is predictable, but that you should find my mind wanting is absurd."

"What am I to say?" he floundered. "What do you want me to say to you. . . . I would like to convince you. . . ."

"You'll not convince me if you keep at it all night, which I'm not likely to allow, but I don't intend to keep embarrassing you. It's rude of me. Shall we return to the discussion of your finances, and this time I'll pretend to believe you?"

Coyote sighed, and refilled his glass.

"You know," he said, "I was reluctant at first to believe in such a thing as a nineteen-year-old girl who could have committed a crime that merited a sentence of Erasure. But having met you, I find myself convinced. The only thing that amazes me now is that the crime was religious—I would expect murder, at the very least."

Bess chuckled. "That shows where lies will get you, Citizen. I'm not a nineteen-year-old girl; RK only said that to play on your sympathy, foolish boy that he is. I'm a hale and withered twenty-three, my friend, and of those twenty-three I've spent a total of four years



and seven months in solitary confinement for one thing or another. That tends to be aging. And the crime is not religious."

"Oh? Is it murder after all?"

RK, who had not said one word through all this exchange but had sat doggedly eating his food and looking miserable, stood up suddenly and struck the table with his fist.

"I forbid you, my sister!" he shouted. "You may mock and laugh and make a fool of us all, but I forbid you to speak your blasphemies in my presence—have you no shame at all?"

"Benighted moons," said Bess mildly. "I'm sorry, Ahr, Citizen, you must allow me to correct myself."

"Please do."

"The crime with which I am charged is defined by our government as religious, since religion is the mechanism by which we are controlled. That I do not agree with them, and consider it something else entirely, upsets my brother to an extent that amazes me. But he is quite right, in the sense that what I have done is technically looked upon as a violation of religious law by the elders and by the judge and by the rest of the creaking antiques who run this poor planet."

"I warn you," said RK viciously, "that if you continue I will not remain at this table."

"Then she will stop," said Coyote, and was rewarded at once by an almost imperceptible nod from Bess. "Sit down, RK, and eat your dinner in peace. We worked hard tonight."

The boy sat down slowly, the flush draining from his face, and took a long drink from his glass.

"Now, tell me, Citizen Jones," said Bess, with a flagrantly fake decorousness that very nearly caused Coyote to blow the whole thing by laughing at her, "how does our frontier life here compare with the sophisticated existence of the First Galaxy? You must find us dreadfully primitive."

"No," said Coyote, managing seriousness by staring at the wall above her head, "I really haven't had a chance to learn enough about your people or your way of life to make any kind of judgment. There are a lot of things that seem strange to me, but then that is true when I go to any planet farther out than Mars Central."

"You travel a lot, then?" said Bess demurely. "Perhaps that's why you find yourself so poor now . . . perhaps you should not have squandered all your worldly goods dashing about the Galaxies."

Coyote was ashamed of himself. He'd walked into that one like a junior diplomat at a tea-party, and this damned woman never missed a trick. Perhaps it was her beauty that RK had relied on to soften him up, and the beauty didn't impress him, but her mind impressed the hell out of him, and the boy just might turn out to be right with his "wait till you meet my sister" after all. The idea of throwing Bess to the government wolves and seeing that spectacular mind wiped cleaner than the newest babe's was beginning to really cause him pain.

"You're right," he said. "I shouldn't have. If I'd been



more careful no doubt I'd be a rich man at this moment. More wine?"

"Thank you, Citizen," she said, extending her glass to him. "Have you always been wealthy—until now, that is?"

"No, not at all. As a matter of fact, two years ago I owned nothing whatever except a few personal keepsakes, and even those were locked away from me."

"Oh? Were you in prison, too?"

Pleased to see evidence of genuine interest, Coyote told her of his attempt to join the Maklunites and his ignominious failure.

"But why couldn't you have had your personal things, the ones you mentioned?" she asked.

"Because I missed them," he said. "As soon as I was able to say that I no longer missed them they would have been given back to me. It was not a punishment, Bess, just a part of learning communal living."

"They live in each other's pockets, then," she said.

"I suppose that's accurate, although they would say they live in each other's hearts."

"I would despise that," she said fiercely.

"I'm sure you would." Coyote laughed. "It's a pleasure to meet someone who'd be even worse at it than I was!"

"And this cult is really numerous? I find it hard to believe."

"If by cult you mean 'a small exotic group of religious crackpots or something of that kind, I'm afraid the word won't fit, Bess. I told RK already, the Mak-

lunites are outnumbered only by the Ethical Humanists and the Jews."

"Hmmm. I find the whole idea of communal living repulsive. How can they manage with no privacy, no personal belongings, even their thoughts shared!"

To Coyote's surprise she shuddered violently, and he chalked one point up for himself. Apparently there were areas where it was possible for the rough and ready lady to be shaken up a bit.

"Oh, yes," he said, relishing her discomfort. "That's certainly an excellent description."

"But aren't there continual fights—don't people become half mad, cooped up together like that?"

"Well, I did," Coyote admitted, "but the majority don't. If they did, they would be told that they had to leave, just as I was. Of course there are very often novices, what are called 'Learners,' in the Maklunite clusters, and they do have trouble. They find it difficult and hard at first, even when they are very sincere in their desire to follow the Maklunite Way. Especially they find it hard to get over the clinging to 'things,' you know. The women don't like to go to the closets and find that a garment they had wanted to wear has already been put on by someone else."

"And the novices are not a source of continual conflict?"

"Some conflict," Coyote said. "But they are necessary. It would be difficult for a completely settled cluster to avoid becoming smug and complacent if



there were not Learners present to stir the surface up a little."

"I see. And marriages? How, in such intense communication, does a couple ever manage to build any sort of life?"

Coyote hesitated for a moment; he wasn't sure just how far he dared go at this point.

"Well," he said finally, "that isn't really a problem. Since the Maklunites do not believe in marriage."

"That's awful," said RK abruptly. "I really don't feel that you should speak in that way in front of a woman, Citizen."

"I am interested," said Bess. "Restrain your chivalrous impulses on my behalf, RK, they are superfluous. I wish to know—if the Maklunites do not, as you say, 'believe' in marriage, why don't they?"

"Because it is their conviction that the entire institution of marriage is based upon the idea of a human being as property, and they find that concept obscene."

Would she ask the obvious next question? He wondered. He had yet to hear the naughty word "sex" or any circumlocution for it even mentioned upon this planet. Perhaps she would ask what arrangements the Maklunites made for "you-know-what"?

"Well, the Maklunites' loss is our gain," she said instead, and he smiled to himself. Platitudes for emergencies, even from a hardened criminal.

"Thank you, Bess," he said, not sure the remark was appropriate but sure it would do as a filler, and then,

abruptly, before he could change his mind, he committed himself.

"Bess, you'll stay here for the time being at least," he said. "I'm not going to promise anything; you obviously understand why I will not and cannot. But until I see some reason to be more concerned about this matter, I want you to stay here. RK seems to feel we can keep you safe."

"Thank you, Citizen!" said RK fervently. "I won't forget your kindness, nor will my sister, I swear that!"

"It's not kindness," said Coyote. "It's stupidity and old age. And I'll thank you not to remind me of it, since I'm sure to regret it eventually."

"I don't think so," said the boy. "I will do everything I can to see that you don't regret it, ever."

"There's *nothing* that you can do, Arh," said Bess quietly. "If I am found I am found, that's all."

"I can see to it that Citizen Jones is not involved," said the boy firmly. "Somehow, I will see to that."

Coyote reached out and touched RK's hand gently. "Look," he said, "I know the risk I'm taking, and I take it with full responsibility for myself. I think I could play dumb if someone finds us, and I promise you I won't try to be a hero if that happens. I can't, because I have obligations that supersede any such abstract action. And I may change my mind tomorrow and throw Bess out. But for now, for tonight, we'll try it and see."

He thought for a moment that RK was going to really embarrass him. The people of Furthest were so cold and



unemotional and grim that the sight of genuine tears in the boy's eyes gave him the feeling that he was witnessing some monstrous display of emotion, and anything more would have been too much. But RK's good manners saved them both. He stood up and excused himself politely; he was tired, he said, and there was much to be done in the morning. He would see his sister up to the third floor, where she would be safe and comfortable, and then he was going to bed.

They went off and left Coyote sitting over the fragments of the dinner, wondering how long it would be before he began to regret his soft heart. He could just hear the Fish. But on the other hand, what else could he do? He couldn't let a fugitive girl be taken away for Erasure for a religious crime—and what the hell could she have done, anyway, missed Tenth Day Observance?

He shook his head and gave it up. Nothing made any sense, but then nothing had yet. He wasn't surprised.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Since the only real function of officials is to serve as repositories for mail—a sort of 'X Marks The Spot' function—we have no such creatures within our clusters. We have found that there is nothing at all that an official can do that cannot be done by a mailbox with equal skill."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

FILE 803.09.a, Segement 2  
TOPIC: The planet Furthest  
FROM: Citizen Coyote Jones  
TO: Office of the Director  
TRI-GALACTIC INTELLIGENCE SERVICE  
GALCENTRAL, STATION 5  
DATE: AUGUSTSEVENTH 3022

1. Last night, Augustsixth, it was my very unusual good luck to be invited to spend an entire evening in the home of a Furthester family. My helper here, the boy Arh Qu'e, somehow managed to persuade his parents to have me as their guest. As you are well aware, the Furthesters are extremely antagonistic to offworlders, and I was conscious throughout the eve-



ning that the two Qu'es were having to make an intense effort not to show their resentment of my presence in their home. Under ordinary circumstances I would certainly have made a point of leaving as rapidly as possible. However, in this case I realized that the opportunity should be made much of, and I simply ignored the strain.

2. The home of the Qu'es is like those I saw in the threedy in your office; i.e., it is made of stone, three stories in height, bisected by a corridor and staircase, with a central door flanked by windows front and back. The furnishings were of interest to me, since any clue to what a Furthester considers to be "comfort" should be of some use in the establishment of a valid personality profile. (And by the way, is anyone there aware of the fact that there exists on Furthest nothing even remotely approaching a "catalog," either in the old-fashioned sense or in the contemporary form, through which a purchaser might look before selecting clothing or household items? I find this rather mysterious.) At any rate, the majority of the furnishings appear to consist of blocks of this same stone, or rather of a stone that looks much the same but is extremely light and porous. I would assume that the stone used for furnishings is that surface layer which is continually worn by the water of this planet. There were tables, shelves, some primitive-appearing stoves. Rugs and curtains are all of the heavy synthovelvet which is so popular with these people. The effect is like the effect of their clothing, a sort of forbidding magnificence.

3. There was one item of furniture which I found of interest, as it did not entirely fit the pattern displayed by the rest. The chairs used by the family were beautiful objects, giving the appearance of having been carved from a single piece of wood, and that a rich dark wood of a high soft luster. The chairs are rounded rather than angular, and are obviously intended to be curled up in, although no one did so in my presence. I inquired as to their manufacture and was told that each chair is made of a single nut from a tree, and that these nuts are imported from one of the Extreme Moons, where they can be found growing to a length of fifteen feet and some ten feet in diameter. (I can't imagine what size the *trees* must be, but nothing about the Extreme Moons surprises me any more.) It should be noted that this is the *only* offworld item other than foodstuffs that I have seen since I arrived here, excepting of course those items I have myself brought in to stock the MESH. I was not told which of the Moons was the source of these nuts, and in view of the incredible reticence of the Furthesters I did not think it advisable to press the matter. I would suggest that someone at GALCENTRAL look into this, since the traders who deal with the Furthesters to supply the nuts might well have information that would be valuable to us.

4. The third floor of the Qu'e home was a genuine surprise to me. You will recall that my major impression—TOTAL impression, I should say—has been of austerity, cold magnificence, and so on. Even the luscious



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velvets and silks these people wear are in dark, somber colors and patterns. I was therefore surprised when taken up to the third floor of the building after our evening meal. In fact I was surprised to be taken up there at all, since I have not been able to obtain permission to go to the third floor of the building in which our MESH is located. The third floor appears from the street to be a sort of attic—that is, the roof is peaked and there is only one small, very high window. This is quite false, however, as the whole area is open to the sky, and it is really a sort of garden. It should be remembered that I have seen *no* plants on this planet, although of course there have to be some somewhere, and I am told by my helper that food is grown in hydroponic stations. I have never seen even a blade of grass, the surface of Furthest being literally as bare as ancient Luna. You can well imagine my surprise, then, to find myself in a magnificent garden, three stories up. Samples of some of the plants (primarily leaves and stems, since I had to take them without being seen, and scrappy bits of leaves and stems at that) are enclosed with this report; your analysis will show, I believe, that they are without exception water plants.

5. Discreet questioning on my part established as fact that the third floors of all the Furthester houses are, like this one, a sort of water garden. Water flows throughout the city, from a main aqueduct, through pipes that flow from house to house at the third floor level. The water enters at one corner of the wall, drops over waterfalls constructed by these people, flows in

patterns across the floor (in channels and pools, of course), and is then driven out the other side by small pumps and into the next house. Photographs are enclosed; I was forced to use extreme caution in obtaining them, even with the microcameras, and it may be that they are not of good quality. They should nonetheless give you some idea of the situation.

6. This artificial stream that flows from house to house is used by the Furthesters not only for decoration but as a means of communication. Messages are inserted in small plastic vials, the name of the person for whom they are intended clearly showing through the plastic, and then they are dropped into the water to be taken out by the addressee when they make their way around the city to the proper spot. I observed some half dozen such vials go by during the hour that we spent in the garden. When I asked how one could be sure that a message would not be taken out by someone other than the person it was intended for I got that standard politely shocked response. Apparently no one, under any circumstances, would consider doing anything so uncouth as looking at someone else's mail. It is at any rate reassuring to me to discover that they do *send* one another mail.

7. I do not feel that I have necessarily obtained any information of great value with regard to these people (although the computers may react to the data far differently than I do.) I continue to have the constant feeling that I am attending some elaborate theatrical being performed, with impatience, for my bene-



fit. On the other hand I see no *evidence* for any such conclusion—it remains intuitive. It is simply that everything is so formal, so precise, so perfect—it is difficult to believe that real life could go on that way for any group of human beings for any length of time. We shall see.

8. With reference to my previous report, FILE 803.09.a, Segment 1, and your reply to same: it is not possible at this time for me to make any attempt to investigate any other of the alleged citydomes on this planet. The others are all at a considerable distance from K'ith Vaad, and my traveling to them by any means other than slitherboat would cause an incredible flap, since I am forbidden to do anything of the kind. Since I am expected to be at the MESH seven nights a week there is no segment of time available when I could plausibly make such a journey by slitherboat as would be involved in further exploration of this kind. It is my personal opinion that even one such empty dome is sufficient cause for alarm; let us not compound our problems by finding that all the rest are empty, too.

9. I will continue as indicated. I am aware, as you have pointed out, that time is passing by and only eighteen months were originally allotted to me. It is not necessary for you to remind me with such regularity of the deadline which hangs over me, and if you continue to do so I will return to GALCENTRAL and allow you to carry on here personally. I am sure

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you would find it quite pleasant, since you prefer machines to women in any event.

END OF REPORT

PS: In case it isn't clear, you old fart, get off my back or I won't do your stupid job.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

"madness became her—  
she wore her follies in her hair;  
she was so lovely  
none of us would have had her cured;  
and when she took a slender silver knife  
and set to killing  
we knew ourselves, one and all,  
for murderers."

(from "The Nine Hundred Fables for Autumn After-  
noons," by Christopher Ganges)

Well. Another night, another dose of hell?

He lay there rigid in bed, his hands in fists at his sides, his muscles tense and knotted, feeling as if he lay in fire and wishing he did, determined to get through this night as he had gotten through the interminable succession of other ones.

There were things to think about, after all, things to pass the hours by and get him through to morning again. He could think, for example, of all the slow and subtle and exquisite ways that he could make the Fish pay for sending him here. Unfortunately, he was not a violent man, and that gave him very little pleasure,

although he felt that he might easily *become* a violent man if things went on the way they had to date.

Let's see. If torturing the Fish was out, he could always torture himself. He could review his present situation and reckon up all his failures, for example.

There was all the time he'd been here, now. All the days and nights and weeks he'd been the happy but slightly stupid little shopkeeper from outer space, introducing the locals to the delights of that intergalactic social institution, the MESH. And where had it gotten him? It had gotten him bored and miserable, there was that. But gain? He knew little more than he had the first day.

The cold Furthesters came and went in his MESH, listened politely to his songs, and perhaps they listened with pleasure, since many of them came back time after time, but if they felt pleasure they showed no sign of it. They never used the MF stations to the edcomputers. They rarely bought anything from the shelves. They behaved exactly as if the MESH had been a museum; they strolled through looking with well-mannered interest at the exhibits, stopped for a song or some refreshment, then strolled out, unaffected. He had had no luck at setting up some sort of nucleus for community life at the MESH, some nexus of Furthester interaction which he could observe and learn from. Chalk up *Failure One*.

What else?

He thrashed in the bed. Unlike his bed back at the asteroid he called home, it did not adapt itself plially



to his movements. Furthester through and through, it lay there under him unyielding and let him bruise himself flopping around on it.

What else? He had learned nothing about these people. He had been ignoring the constant stream of demands from the Fish reports, because he had nothing to report. There had been no repetitions of the visit to RK's parents' home. Apparently the boy had been able to persuade them only to the single token visit and that had been their absolute limit. He had attempted to talk, to get into conversations, to learn, but every trial was met with the same bland, unyielding, unresponding refusal to communicate. He rarely saw a living human being except for RK and the museum-strollers; and when he did see one, if he was seen first he was passed by hastily with head turned, as if he did not exist. Getting chatty with totally determined no-chatters was an exercise in futility. Chalk up *Failure Two*.

He had thought to probe more deeply into these people by growing close to RK, or perhaps to Bess, since he could not reach any of the others. But Bess kept to her rooms on the third floor—or did she live in a tent up there, since there *were* no rooms?—and RK maintained a continual shield of closed reserve, just as the rest of his people did. Coyote could have forced past that shield, of course, but if he had done so the boy would have known him at once for what he was, and that would have been sure to lead to expulsion from this planet, perhaps a very premature expulsion with

no hope of return and no way to repair the damage. Chalk up *Failure Three*.

So he was a failure. So what? So where was the guilt he was supposed to be feeling? The population of three galaxies depended upon him and him alone to succeed in determining what a Furthester was made of, and all he could think of was his own misery. Never mind the fact that the fate of three galaxies might well rest on his shoulders. Never mind the fact that a madman might be president of the Tri-Galactic Council the next time around because he, Coyote Jones, had not been able to concentrate on his assignment sufficiently to finish it. Never damn mind. . . .

It was impossible. Here he was, in the midst of Victorian England Transplanted, him, Coyote Jones, who had happily made happy as many as four women in a single night. Here he was, surrounded by swathed creatures who exposed their hands and their heads, no more, and who might not have bodies at all but were perhaps single columns of aluminum and fiberglass for all that he could determine from being around them.

He had been so long now without a woman that he could think of nothing else with any clarity. About the thought of a woman, on the other hand, there was an overpoweringly brutal clarity that was driving him mad.

Not once, not since the first time when he had lain at the age of thirteen with an elderly but infinitely experienced professional on Mars Central, not once in all those years had he been so long without a woman, nor half so long, for that matter. It was unbelievable



that he could still think at all, much less think coherently. He was maimed, tormented, destroyed, a poor blind creature in a state of advanced rut, and the hell with them. The hell with the populations of the Three Galaxies, and the hell with the Tri-Galactic Council. That was how he was, and if they didn't like it they should have sent a robot.

It had been funny, for a while. He had made lame jokes to himself about it. He had always enjoyed such an abundance of women that he had informed himself it was only fair to give someone else a chance. He had decided it was only justice that he should now go wanting. He had even taken the antisex pills they had sent with him, in spite of their disgustingly cute name—ANTI-TUME, who'd thought of it? He should be castrated. He'd taken them for weeks, in spite of the fact that if he took enough of them to really do anything about his constant tumescence they made him throw up and suffer from violent diarrhea, and unless he took enough of them to incapacitate him they had no effect on him at all.

He'd been a good sport, he had. But now it was becoming decidedly unfunny. He wasn't having any more. He ached all over, his body felt like a vast boil, he was a great deal too old and set in his ways to take up masturbation, and the idea that he was duty-bound to stay here and spend months more in this condition was too much. He couldn't do it.

It did no good to lecture himself about his damn

duty. It did no good to tell himself that he was being immature. It did no good at all.

He groaned and turned over onto his back for the thousandth miserable time, his whole mind one seething turmoil of thought of warm receiving female flesh, breasts and thighs and vaginas and all the rest of it, and wondered how it could be that the terrible pressure of his hunger did not simply bring the building down around him, and felt certain, knew for certain, that he wasn't going to be able to bear it this time.

And then a bell rang, like a gong, somewhere, and the words came fast upon its tone. . . .

HUSH . . . LET ME HELP YOU.

Help me?

He had time for only that one thought, and then the sprays of gold began behind his eyes, curling and uncurling, forming intricate dancing patterns that swooped toward him up to the last impossible instant before they burned him alive, grew and grew into roses of tender gold blooming into fountains, and then burst into trailing golden dust, chiming as they broke.

It was suddenly green, the green of the sea, full of the luminous rainbow color of the waters of Furthest, streaming before him into a distance that turned a corner and was somehow behind him turning it again as he faced it still, into a distance he could not measure, and he was the rainbows, all of him went rapidly blue and gold and green and flashed again into the fountains of scarlet through which he flew, a great gar-



landed bird that melted once more into a golden rose and floated down into the sea.

There was a roaring . . . wind, was it? And words, he knew there were words, but he could not understand them, it was a miracle, a thing of wonder that he got one or two here or there because he never had before, always before he had thought that he was completely deaf to mind-projected words, and what could this be that was cutting through his ancient inability and healing it so? There was a roaring, and water and mingled words, bits of reassurance, promises that it would be all right, it would be beautiful beyond description, and he believed it all eagerly as a child.

He was high above a canyon that flickered, purple, the color of sun-drugged love under cedars. Something caught him, there was a sensation of knots being untied behind his eyes, and on some high irresistible wind he streamed out and up and out over the canyon, borne by and born in the singing wind, with the flickering beneath him first water, then canyon, then the deserts of an unknown world, then the canyon again, then a field of scarlet vines through which he looped and dived and grew and knew he could never fall again. . . .

He was not sure just where and when it was that he first screamed, or if he screamed aloud. Somewhere when the . . . what? . . . slipped into his mind and took up being the lovely things with him, and he became aware that in his mind there were tendrils with which to twine and twine and curl gently, intricately,

in a dreaming dance of love . . . but who was it? And what was it?

The ecstasy, coming after the deprivation, washed over him in a tide, left him drenched with the juices of his own need, thinking that surely this was the end, that no higher pitch of joy could be reached without his dying of it. And just as he was sure of it he would be caught up again, held and wound round, part of a pattern that he only glimpsed before it ceased to be and was another, a slipping into crevices deliciously where only thought had been before, a burst of cinnamon and orange and wine upon his sight, a feeling of small chords sounding smelling of pale yellow and white, a glimpse of hands pressing him, stroking him, tendrils winding him, until he knew he was going to come one more impossible time. . . .

I CAN'T BEAR IT.

NOT ANY MORE. . . . He thought finally, broken with joy and fullness, and at once there were ferns, cool green ferns, where he lay warm, unable to even imagine what hunger might be again, and then it was over.

It was over, and he lay staring up into the black darkness of his own room, where the ceiling clock told him it was three o'clock, and his whole bed was torn apart as if he had been caught in a hurricane and blown through it, soaked and salty and reeking with semen and sweat, and what—what in the name of all the saints and gods had that been?

He thought first that he would get up. Then he was



afraid that he could not. And then it became clear to him that what he really felt, beyond amazement, was whole and renewed, and incredibly good, good beyond memory. He jumped out of the bed naked and wet like he was and went out of his room toward RK's. Whatever that had been, that incredible thing, it had been something of this world, something that RK would know about and that he, Coyote, was going to have to know about. He went into RK's room and shook him until he sat up blinking with sleep and stared at Coyote.

"What is it, Citizen Jones?" he mumbled.

Coyote grinned at him. "You see me?" he said. "You see the condition I'm in?" And then he remembered and turned on the light. "See me?" he repeated, "do you see? You see before you a man who's just been laid—pardon the shocking expression, O Furthester, but it's true and exact—a man who's just been laid by a legion of angels or a battalion of devils, he doesn't know which."

"You have been dreaming, Citizen," said RK in a careful voice, fully awake now.

"Oh, no! I'm not sure I could survive whatever that was twice, but I assure you I didn't sleep through it the first time, and I wouldn't trade it for ten years of my life. RK, do you know what it was? Do you? Can you tell me?"

The boy spoke slowly. "I don't think I understand you, Citizen. I'm sorry."

Coyote started trying to explain, realized there were no words that would handle it, and then saw, unmis-

takably, that he was being had. RK was white and sick and shaking, and if he were genuinely bewildered he had nothing to be disturbed about.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Coyote accused him. "Now tell me!"

RK shook his head and turned his back, burrowing stubbornly into the depths of his bed.

"You had a dream," he muttered, yawning elaborately. "Why do you come bothering me with your dreams, Citizen?"

Coyote pulled the boy around to face him and gripped his shoulders fiercely.

"Don't lie to me, RK," he breathed. "Tell me what that was!"

"No! It is forbidden!"

"Forbidden? Nonsense! Tell me!"

RK shook his head again, stubborn and grim and white-lipped, and Coyote laughed. He was exultant with his relief, and the glory of what he had just known, and a feeling of being new forever. He had no time or patience left for stubborn boys who lived in cultural straitjackets. He forgot all about ethics, he forgot the danger of frightening this single tenuous link he had with the people of Furthester, and he gathered his mind like a whip around the single command TELL and lashed it all at RK at once.

RK could no more have withstood that than he could have chosen not to breathe. He fell back against his pillow like one struck brutally, as indeed he had been, and the words poured from his lips.



"It was my sister," he said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Curse you for an outworld dog, you are just as the Elders say that you are, a dog, a filthy animal . . ."

Coyote ignored the outpouring of bitter words, and shook the boy gently, once again.

"RK," he pleaded, "what do you mean—it was your sister? You mean it was Bess?"

"Yes! Yes, it was Bess, curse her, too, curse her . . ."

He moaned it over and over, and pity touched Coyote even in the midst of his happiness, and he took his hands away from him.

"How could it have been Bess, RK?" he asked. "Tell me."

"She's a mindwife," RK cried, a cry of pure despair, "she's a mindwife, perhaps the greatest one that there has ever been in all the history of my people! And I should have killed her long ago!"

"RK," said Coyote gently, "what is a mindwife? Can you tell me? I won't force you, don't be afraid—just let me know, can you tell me?"

"You know what a mindwife is," the boy hissed, "you just lay with one! Have you forgotten already?"

"No . . . that's not it. I want details, RK, information. I think it is very important that I know."

"It is forbidden," mourned RK, "forbidden. It is forbidden that I should even have said the word to you, and I could not help it, and I am as great a traitor as she is now, I have betrayed my people and am accursed forever. . . ."

He fell into a hopeless, heartbroken sobbing, and Coyote could push him no farther. This was much worse than he had meant it to be, but he had not realized the barrier was so great.

"RK," he said finally, "one thing . . . since it is forbidden for your people to tell me about this, could I find out from the Furthest computers?"

RK sat straight up in the bed, the sobs choked off, his face white with terror.

"If you do that," he breathed, "if you use your off-world credit disc and do that, the police will come and we are all dead as of that moment, my sister and I for traitors and you for a dirty spy. Are you going to do it?"

"Of course not," Coyote reassured him. "I wouldn't harm you or Bess for anything in the universe, not to mention the affection I have for my own hide. But—"

No. He decided at once that further talk would be ridiculous. After the strongarm mental tactics he had already used, a little more was not going to hurt RK and would scarcely be noticed. He turned a single thought toward the bed . . . SLEEP NOW . . . and RK was lost at once, as deeply asleep as if he had been drugged.

Poor young one. Coyote covered him carefully and stood over him a moment, apologizing in advance for what he must do, trying to think if there could be any reason why it would not work.

The comsystems of Furthest were primitive, manually operated by keyboard instead of voice-sensitive like those of the Inner Galaxies. He was reasonably sure that



so long as he did not insert an offworld credit disc he would be safe. Why not? On a planet where offworlders were rare as green swans, why take elaborate precautions against them?

Knowing RK would not wake up for hours, he went to the table that stood by the bed, and where lay the small synthovelvet pouch, purple striped with deep blue, that held RK's personal things. He opened it and took out the boy's credit disc, closed it and laid it carefully back on the table. He didn't like doing this, but he disliked it a good deal less than what he had already done to his young friend, and it would at least be painless. Unless there was some safeguard mechanism about which he did not yet know anything, no one would suffer from what he was about to do.

What could a mindwife be?

Whatever it was, it was mighty nice. He could still feel her in his mind, that sensation of almost unendurable pleasure that was a sort of constant, whole, and total orgasm, of the body and mind and spirit. That was a mindwife, eh?

He smiled, thinking of his previous conception of Bess as a cold, sexless Scenic Wonder. It showed how little he knew . . . but who would ever have thought of such a thing as this?

He had too many questions, and they wouldn't wait. But he was going to have to phrase them carefully. Even with the Furthest credit disc, if he came on bluntly at three-thirty in the morning with a straight "What is a mindwife?" the computers were likely to

think something curious was going on and send the police to check him out. He couldn't risk that. He would have to sacrifice some time, in spite of his raging curiosity, to the devising of a suitably subtle phrasing, one that would not bring tragedy down upon them all. Probably the most casual possible approach would be the best, but he must be very careful.

Thinking again how goddam *good* he felt, all over, he folded his hand around the little credit disc and went back to his room.

Mindwife, eh? Roses and waves and golden spirals and an unending continuum of pleasure?



## CHAPTER NINE

"Frustration is a wholesome part of education, and a necessary one, but it must be the frustration of not knowing what one is eager to know. The child for whom all the answers are always PROVIDED may well develop the ability to memorize, but unless he is very unusual he will never learn how to think. Education by spoon-feeding is less trouble for the adults involved, but useless and destructive for the learning child. Teaching must be a matter of ALLOWING—not of forcing—a child to learn."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

*Handbook for the Elders of the Holy Path:  
On the Training of Mindwives*

The training of a mindwife is a sacred office. It is not to be taken lightly. With the exception of the mindwife herself, there is no higher status to be attained among our people. If at any time you should find yourself looking upon this holy work as tedious, as a tiresome and ordinary task, you are to go at once to your chambers and pray for illumination. If the feeling does

not pass in three days, you are to surrender your post irrevocably. For one who has failed in the nurture of a mindwife charged to his care, or caused harm to any mindwife in the care of any Elder of the Ahl Khres'sah, the penalty is death. Beware that you do not neglect any aspect of the training set out in this manual because you feel that it is trivial or because you personally dislike it; the training of mindwives is a part of our sacred history, and no smallest portion of it may be changed or eliminated. You are to follow the dictates of this manual as you would follow the Book of the Holy Path, from which its instructions are taken.

The mindwives will reach you no younger than two and no older than four years. A child whose training is not begun by the age of four can never achieve full mindwife status.

These children will be of a uniform personality type—they will be headstrong, willful, brave to the point of folly, selfish, opinionated, and completely undisciplined. This last is the case because, from the moment the potential for mindwifery is discovered in the child, the parents are forbidden to attempt any sort of discipline, however mild, except in those cases where it is necessary to prevent actual physical injury. If a girl is brought to you gentle and docile she is spoiled for mindwifery; she is to be sent home, and her parents must be brought before the Elders of their city for judgment and discipline.

Before beginning the detailed instruction in the training of these sacred children, it would be well to re-



view in a general way the basic stages through which they go, as follows:

### FIRST STAGE (Be'naq'qal)

The first thing done is to administer, by hypodermic syringe through the front of the throat, a chemical which inhibits the activity of the vocal chords to such an extent that no speech is possible. In order that the child may not move her hands in an attempt to communicate by gesture, her hands are manacled behind her back. In order that she may not vent her fury physically upon the other little girls in the room, she is strapped into a chair and restrained. This is done, by groups of six to ten girls, day after day, for the full length of the day. It is continued until the child either goes mad or discovers the telepathic channels of the mind. (The madness rate, we are proud to say, is exceedingly low, less than eight percent.) This may take no more than a week; it has taken as long as six months on some occasions. No sympathy is shown the children, and no tenderness—lest this seem cruel, it should be understood that anything which lessens their frustration and rage will only lengthen the time that must be spent in this state by the child. It is therefore the seeming kindness that is really cruel. You will find complete instructions for the heightening of this frustration at a later point in the manual.

It is of course possible to hasten this stage and the breakthrough as well, by administering a number of drugs, in particular the juice of the waterweed known popularly as Heaven's Ladder. However, such a technique

is resorted to only in those cases in which it has become apparent that the child is not going to achieve breakthrough by herself; it is to be considered a last resort. Maximum mindwife strength can be achieved only when the child accomplishes the communications goal without artificial aids; mindwives trained by use of drugs are inevitably less strong and thus less effective.

The inevitable question is, of course, what disposition is made of that eight percent of the children for whom the end of our training is with total madness, in this first stage. It is right that you should ask this question, and its answer should be further indication to you of the grave responsibility which you bear. Since we know that it is the Most High, and not ourselves, who chooses the mindwives, and since it is not possible for the Allknowing to err in His choice, it follows that a girl who goes mad is our failure and ours alone. Thus, when everything has been tried and madness is its result, the child is secluded in the Temple of Tiba Ness, there to be cared for to the ultimate limits of our ability until the natural end of her life. These are the Holy Madwomen of Tiba Ness; they are to be treated with tenderness and with our deepest love, for we have failed them. Because of our inadequacy they have been denied the opportunity to fulfill their destiny as the chosen of the Most High, as sacred mindwives.

## SECOND STAGE (Tazh Hari)

At this second stage we attempt to make up to the



little girls to some extent for the seeming brutality of the first stage. We introduce discipline, slowly but surely. We begin the training in all of those arts and skills which are expected of an accomplished woman of the Ahl Kres'sah. The little girls are now taught to play the paliss, the harp, and the flute. They are taught to read and to write, to practice the Five Sciences and the Seven Disciplines. They are given the education that would be given any wealthy young girl of our people, with the difference that it is even more intensive, that these girls always and without exception have the very best teachers and facilities that are at our command.

We have learned that the skill of telepathic communication is basically different from most skills in one respect; i.e., that enforced practice during the period of learning and unfamiliarity is not required. We have learned that once the non-vocal channels are established the individual will always prefer them. It is therefore no longer necessary at this stage to continue the vocal inhibitor medication. We have never seen a girl revert to vocal communication as the preferred medium once the mental channels were opened to her. The factor of frustration is therefore much less at this time.

It is of course the case that the children hate us to the very depths of their beings by this time. That is quite all right; it is in fact desirable. It is of great help to them in learning that love is not a necessary ingredient for social functioning, and that the three qual-

ities of respect: compassion, and patience—plus good manners—will do very nicely as a basis for most relationships. It does happen that occasionally a little girl of an affectionate nature will attempt to *show* that affection by such manifestations as climbing into your lap, patting your hand, calling you by pet-names, and the like. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that all such manifestations are to be met with **THE MOST TOTAL REJECTION AND COLDNESS YOU CAN MUSTER**. These are appealing children, and it will be a temptation for you to respond to their overtures in kind, but you absolutely must not do so. You must remember that their successful functioning as mindwives will be wholly dependent upon their being forced to find a mental channel for their sexual needs just as they did for their speech needs; this can only be achieved if they are met with complete frustration of their every attempt to employ normal sexual channels. As was true in the case of speech, seeming kindness on your part can only lengthen the time of their frustration. Therefore, the children are met at all times with coldness, in order that they may be broken of any tendency to normal sexual activity.

During this second stage the children are exposed to the most intensive training in color, pattern, and form perception that we can offer them. They are surrounded by beauty, in order that as mindwives they will have at their mental disposal the greatest possible variety of images. It is at this time that the use of drugs is begun as a standard measure for all the girls



in order to increase their ability at mental imagery; there is no hazard now, so far as we can determine, that any girl will develop that dependence upon the drugs in every situation of stress that is so unfortunate a tendency when they are begun too soon.

No formal training in the use of their unusual mental capacities is practiced at this stage. This is first of all because of the extremely heavy curriculum of other materials which they must learn. Secondly, much of what they must know cannot be taught them properly until they have reached puberty. Psi training is therefore confined to our hearty encouragement of their use of telepathic communication and to a large number of games which are made available to them and which are designed to strengthen their psibilities without formal instruction.

And finally, of course, the children are given intensive religious instruction just as are all our children. We must never forget that these sacred children are as much in need of the Holy Path as any of the rest of us, and that it is our responsibility to insure that their spiritual development is not neglected. Any failure here will be sure to cause us trouble at a later date.

### THIRD STAGE (Kehl Be'aff)

The third stage begins at the time of puberty, whenever that may be for each girl. (In any case in which puberty has not been attained by the twelfth year it is artificially induced by injection of hormones.) By this time each girl should have the basic elements of her education, in the general sense, and it should have be-

come evident what sort of talents each one has. At this point it should be possible for you to decide what would constitute a suitable specialty for each girl under your tutelage, and further education should be in the specialty rather than the broad spectrum training which has been given up to this point. The most common specialties for mindwives are Instrumental Music, Water Dancing, Poetry, and Theology, although others are possible.

There is a very great danger at this point, a matter of balance and proportion, that requires fine judgments on the part of the Elders. It must be remembered that the mindwives are expected to function as the most intimate companions of our greatest men. Such men are not going to be satisfied with a merely charming woman, no matter how beautiful she may be; therefore, it is necessary that the mindwives should be educated far in excess of the amount generally provided for the women of the Ahl Khres'sah. However, since normal channels of affection have been totally cut off in these girls, there is a tendency for them to substitute for such affection an all-encompassing dedication to their specialty. This must be precluded, since a mindwife must be devoted to mindwifery first and above all; she cannot place her sacred functions beneath her absorption in one of the arts or sciences. However valuable might be her contributions to our people otherwise (we refer you to the case of Mindwife Beness T'al Qylthr'a, whose work in the isolation of sensory areas in the brain, although the source of major medical breakthroughs on



this planet, was a great handicap to her in the exercise of mindwifery) it must be emphasized that no value may be set above that of mindwifery itself.

This creates an elemental dichotomy, very naturally, since we are in a manner creating what we must destroy. Therefore we take upon us the unpleasant task of furthering in these girls a tendency that we would discourage in our women under any other circumstances. That is to say, at this stage, along with training in the specialty, the girls are exposed in heavy saturation to every sort of CENSORED stimulation we are able to provide, UNDER CONDITIONS WHICH INSURE THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO FIND NO CHANNEL OF EXPRESSION FOR THAT STIMULATION. This means that they must sleep in a room kept fully lighted at all times, a room so warmed that no bedcoverings are required, and a room that is under guard. This guard is provided by servomechanisms which are of course themselves immune to CENSORED and are therefore not the hazard to the girls that would be the case with any other arrangement. (We can only look with admiration upon the holy asceticism of those Elders who were charged with the task of guarding the mindwives in those primitive days before efficient servomechanisms were available.) This condition of constant frustration without possible outlet has as its primary function the preparation of the mindwives for telepathic sexual communion. The analogy with the earlier forcing of telepathic speech should be apparent. The frustration which is induced in the mindwives at

this point is so severe, however, that we now find an additional three percent of the girls succumbing to madness, and this a madness of so repulsive an aspect that total erasure is the only measure possible for dealing with it. (This is of course therapeutic rather than punitive erasure.)

We suspect that the reason the madness rate is so low at this stage, in view of the intensity of the frustration, is that the girls, who now are in total control of telepathic communication, are able to combine their efforts in discovering a solution. We also suspect that an unfortunate byproduct of this combined effort is telepathic homosexual relationships among the mindwives. Unfortunately there is no surface evidence of any such relationships, and we have no way of checking on our suspicions. We must rely, therefore, upon their religious training and the principles which have previously been instilled in these girls to prevent any such unnatural developments.

At this point, once the frustration level of any given girl gives us reason to believe that she has discovered the proper channel for telepathic sexual communion, it is necessary that she be removed from the other girls and prepared as rapidly as is possible for her final status as mindwife. She must be provided at once with an Elder who will serve as husband-surrogate for the exercise of her abilities during this final stage of training, in order that she learn to prefer a male partner. (Reference to the previous paragraph should make this more clear.)



## FOURTH STAGE (Leth)

It is our suggestion that you very carefully consider the following paragraph. At this time you will be associated as Training Elder with perhaps as many as four girls at a time. Although you are sworn to celibacy, both physical and mental, it will be your sacred duty to serve as object of the mental attentions of these four girls. WE WARN YOU SOLEMNLY: You will be subjected to the most intense ecstasy that it is possible to produce in a human being—direct mental stimulation, and exceedingly skilled stimulation, of the pleasure centers of the brain. You are to look upon yourself as no more than a training mechanism, a physical object, upon which the novice mindwives may practice their holy skill. IT IS FORBIDDEN FOR YOU TO DERIVE SEXUAL ENJOYMENT FROM THIS FUNCTION OF YOUR OFFICE AS TRAINING ELDER. Should you find that CENSORED, should you find that constant prayer is not enough to prevent you from perverting this sacred function for personal pleasure, you are to go at once to your Chief Elder and request that you be relieved of your duties, as unfit. The penalty for ignoring this rule is death.

Assuming, as we do assume, that you will be able to fulfill your role in an appropriate manner, your work now consists in helping the mindwives in your care to further refine their techniques. You must discuss with each of them the particular characteristics of their performance. You must tell them if you find their attentions sterile, devoid of imagery, unsatisfactory in any

way. You must help them polish and perfect themselves in the exercise of mindwifery to the utmost limits of your ability. At the end of this fourth stage each girl will be formally wed to a man of our people who is of sufficient value to the Ahl Khres'sah to merit such a reward, the highest reward that we can give. She will have no further opportunity for training, and she must not disgrace us. It is our proud record that in all the history of our people only two mindwives have ever been returned to us by their husbands as unsatisfactory. You must use this last period of training to perfect, to polish, to intensify, to instruct. The specific techniques which are to be employed are described in detail in the later chapters of this text.

We have now come to the end of our brief summary of the nature of your duties. We caution you, AS YOU VALUE YOUR ETERNAL SOUL, if you now feel that your nature is such that you will find it difficult or impossible to carry out the procedures described, it is time NOW to request release from your post. We remind you that telepathic sexual communion is experienced only by those of our men who are the rare beneficiaries of this honor on the part of the nation. That you should yourself experience it, through the attention of not one but many of the holy mindwives, when it is otherwise denied to all but our finest men, even though you serve only as a training mechanism, is evidence of the high esteem in which you are held. We repeat what was said at the beginning of this discussion—with the exception of the mindwives themselves,



## F U R T H E S T

there is no higher or more sacred office than that of Training Elder. And with *no exception*, there is no office more dangerous spiritually. Think well, before you continue; if you are not strong enough, you must say so at once and before you put yourself in a position of eternal damnation.

We close this introductory chapter with a brief poem from the personal works of Dekh Habid'dah, revered Training Elder of the Third Cycle:

Let it be, Most High,  
that in the midst of flame  
I feel only the quenching wave;  
that in the midst of scarlet  
I see only the purest white;  
that in the midst of bliss  
I feel only serenity. . . .

Swim well, Elder.

NOTE: THE BALANCE OF THIS MANUAL IS AUTHORIZED FOR RELEASE ONLY TO THE TRAINING ELDERS OF THE HOLY PATH. IF YOU ARE A TRAINING ELDER THE COMSYSTEM WILL RELEASE THE REST OF THIS MATERIAL TO YOU UPON PRESENTATION OF YOUR CREDENTIALS.

NOTE: THE MATERIAL ABOVE IS AUTHORIZED FOR RELEASE ONLY TO MALES ABOVE THE AGE OF FOURTEEN. IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, IF YOU NUMBER IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD

## F U R T H E S T

WOMEN, AND CHILDREN OF EITHER SEX BELOW THE PRESCRIBED AGE, TO SEE THAT THIS TEXT DOES NOT FALL INTO THEIR HANDS. SHOULD ANY SUCH ACCIDENT OCCUR IT IS TO BE REPORTED AT ONCE, IN ORDER THAT IT MAY BE DEALT WITH.



## CHAPTER TEN

"To have proved yourself able to defend your property is to have proved not that you are a man, but that you are a slave."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

Coyote put the MF viewer down and slowly pulled out the film cassette. His head was aching from the succession of shocks he'd gone through this night, pleasant as well as unpleasant, and from lack of sleep, and from a state of overwhelmedness unparalleled in his memory. And now, instead of his former condition—an almost total lack of data—he found himself with too much of it, and not sure what to do next. The revelation about the mindwife system on Furthest raised a number of interesting questions when an attempt was made to integrate it with known facts.

He pulled a stylus and a senslate from the shelf by his bed and sat down to attempt just that sort of integration. Perhaps then he would be able to decide if not what to do, at least where to look, next.

**FACT ONE:** The communications system of the Three Galaxies is dependent upon the Communipaths,

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a select class of state-trained, highly skilled telepaths to whom the interstellar distances are irrelevant.

**FACT TWO:** Every child born throughout the Three Galaxies is tested at birth for the mutant blood characteristic called Factor Q, which is the unfailing mark of an unusual potential for psi activity, and for telepathy and telekinesis in particular. There are no exceptions to this rule.

**FACT THREE:** The children who grow up on Furthest to become mindwives are obviously possessed of extremely high telepathic abilities.

**PUZZLE ONE:** Given the first three facts, then, how does it happen that the potential mindwives are not taken from their parents at birth for raising and training in the Communipath Creche at Mars Central?

**FACT FOUR:** At the end of the introductory chapter of the manual on the training of mindwives is the phrase, "Swim well, Elder."

**FACT FIVE:** There is only one illustration in the introductory chapter of the training manual, and that single illustration is completely unlike anything previously noted in Furthester culture. There are no curiously antique houses with cumbersome furnishings; there are no elaborate costumes swathing hidden bodies till nothing shows but faces and hands. Instead the picture shows a naked group, both males and females, without even the ever-present ear coverings. And their surroundings appear to be an underwater cave—full to the top with water and growing water plants.



## PUZZLE TWO: Facts Four and Five.

Coyote stared at the list, weighing the combination of all these things with the fake citydome that covered nothing at all, with the strange over-structured secretive behavior of the Furtheesters he had met, with all the little bewildering pieces of data that he had accumulated. He willed his mind to achieve some synthesis, some breakthrough that would show him at least the proper direction for his further investigation.

But he didn't know enough, obviously. It was still just a collection of unintegrated motley facts. What else could he add to his information?

He could add the fact that these Furtheester religious were a pack of bastards so sadistic that his stomach was threatening him with rebellion. Tying gagged little girls to chairs for days at a time . . . rebuffing their every touch or word . . . arousing them to a sexual fever pitch and putting them under twenty-four hour guard by servomechanisms. . . . He was going to be sick if he didn't keep busy.

It was beginning to get light outside; he could tell from the crack of pale white that streaked the bottom of the heavy door to his room. Soon RK would be awake and calling him to breakfast. Whatever he was going to do had to be done rapidly.

He went back to the comsystem console and requested the Book of the Holy Path, hoping that it would contain some facts and not just theological claptrap, and knowing how very unlikely that was. The comsystem delivered the MF with a minimum of delay, the cassette

emerging within a minute or two from the duplicator slot.

It was obviously a sacred book like any other sacred book, he saw, divided into sections which themselves were divided into "verses" like the ancient Holy Bible of old Earth and the inner planets. The dialect was not the same as that currently spoken on Furthest, and he was going to have trouble translating it into Panglish.

He was flicking through the pages in his viewer, nervously trying to decide where to begin, when the knock came at his door and sent him into a panic. He left the MF viewer loaded, but attached it again to the chain around his neck, grabbed a robe almost as voluminous as Furthester garb, and called out, "Yes, RK? What is it?"

"It's not RK," said a voice coolly. "It's Bess. I suggest you let me in."

Bess! His stock of wonder was too depleted to allow him to be surprised, and he went straight to the door and let her in as if he were accustomed to having her come to his room at dawn and demand entrance. She was wearing her usual costume—head to foot total enshroudment, fancy earmuffs—even at this hour.

"Come in, lady," he said wearily. "Come in, and astonish me some more."

"Were you astonished, then?"

She sat down facing him on a low bench against the wall, folded her hands in her lap, and looked at him with merry eyes, and he hadn't the remotest idea what to say to her. Confronting him in the flesh, she was his



Scenic Wonder, cool and remote and cynical; but he had his memories of the past night, when she had danced an ecstatic mind-dance with him in his bed and in a world that he had not known existed.

"Didn't you enjoy my skilled services?" she asked him. "Wasn't it satisfactory, Citizen? You could complain to the Elders, you know."

"Bess—"

"Oh, you could, Citizen. It is your right. We mind-wives are supposed to be good at what we do. A great deal of time and money and rather perverted energy goes into ensuring that we are."

"Oh, Bess," he said weakly, "there's no question about it. You are superb at what you do. It's just that I can't, somehow, tie what you do together with what you appear to be."

"Ah," she said softly, "I see. Well, I suppose that depends somewhat upon your preconceptions about the way a government where should look, doesn't it?"

"Bess!"

"Oh, it's quite true," she said, her voice flat as the floor. "What we mindwives do, after we get through prattling about our sacred duty and our holy office and our service to the faith, what we do is whore for the state. I should not want you to misunderstand me—I'm a very high-class whore, but a whore all the same."

"You weren't whoring with me, Bess," he said firmly. "What you may do for the Furtherster government is between you and them, but what you did for me was absolutely beautiful."

"You were in need," she said. "I might say you were in need to the most incredible degree—it reminded me of my old fun days back at the Training Temples. . . . I used to be in need like that, a great deal of the time. And I couldn't leave you like that, not when I was able to do something about it."

Coyote smiled at her. "I thank you, Bess," he said seriously. "With all my outworld heart, I thank you."

"And now you have questions, I suppose?"

He reached over and retrieved the MF on mindwife training, and tossed it to her.

"I thought I was going to get some answers from this," he said, "but all I got was more questions."

Bess whistled under her breath.

"How did you manage to get this?" she asked tensely. "The police should be here by now."

Coyote held up her brother's credit disc and said, "This, first of all. And as for finding that specific item, I just kept requesting general bibliographies until I found a listing that was pertinent. Clever?"

Bess put her hands to her face and let her breath out slowly.

"Oh, my," she said, her voice shaking, "yes, that was clever. But isn't it funny? Wouldn't you think that by now I would be a little less impressed by the dangers of being a criminal?"

"I wouldn't have risked your safety, Bess," he said. "You should know that."

She shrugged, strong slender shoulders eloquent in dark brown velvet under the flowing silken hair.



"It was I who risked my safety," she said, "not you, Citizen." Her voice turned bitter. "I have betrayed my people once again . . . this time perhaps I really have. Except—except that I could not have left you so in pain, Citizen. And I trust you. For some strange reason, I trust you."

"I've got something else," Coyote told her gently, fighting the urge to draw her close and try to comfort her in her all too obvious misery. He had no idea how she would react to physical contact after the mindwife conditioning regime. "Look here, Bess."

He handed her the MF of the Book of the Holy Path, hoping that he was not defiling it in some way by the way he handled it.

"You can't read this," she said at once. "How did you know to ask for it?"

"It's mentioned in the other one," he said. "How do you know I can't read it?"

"Well, can you?"

"Probably not."

"I thought not. What good will it do you, then?"

"I suppose none. Unless you care to tell me something more about it. You *can* trust me, you know."

"Would you like to duel, Citizen?"

The barbed mockery in her voice startled him, and he stared at her, astonished.

"Well, would you?" she said.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Nonsense. Let us have no games of lies between us, Citizen. I am sick to death of lying and hiding.

What I mean is that if you would like to test your full projective strength at convincing me that you are to be trusted, I am willing to try my *own* strength at distracting you from that goal."

"I see."

"I'm sure you do."

"I would lose, I think," Coyote chuckled. "I'm sure I couldn't concentrate."

"For shame, Citizen. Where's your devotion to your work?"

"Where's yours?"

She smiled, acknowledging the point, and then turned the full sweetness of her eyes upon him, empty of all the sardonic goading they usually held, and he felt blinded and naked before her."

"I do trust you," she said. "I don't know what it is that you are here to do, but I believe that I could safely tell you what you want to know. At least I can make a beginning."

"Tell me, then!"

"Ask me, then!"

"How does it happen that the children who become mindwives are not sent to the Communipath Creche, Bess? They're obviously telepaths, they must bear the Q Factor—how is it that they are excepted from service?"

"They aren't excepted, Citizen. They don't have Factor Q in their blood."

"You're not serious."

She nodded. "Indeed I am. Factor Q does not appear in the blood of the Ahl Kres'sah."



"But that is very, very strange."

"No. It is fortunate. If that were not the case, and if someone were to try to take away the mindwife novices from Furthest, there would be war—our men would die, to the last one, before they would surrender them."

"I understand that," said Coyote. "That is, I understand why they don't wish to surrender the mindwives. What I do not understand is why there's no Factor Q in your blood."

Bess sat silent, looking at him and waiting.

"Wait a minute. . . ." He had a sudden thought. "Bess, this is going to sound foolish. No, it's too foolish. Tell me something else, first. Why are the mindwives kept secret?"

"I'll quote for you," she said, "from that book you cannot read. And put it in good Panglish, too."

"Please do, Bess."

"'And it shall come about, that the day will dawn at last, when the mindwives shall be laid naked before the Three Galaxies by reason of the loose tongue of a wicked man; and beware, then, ye people, O Ahl Kres'-sah, for the holy women of the mind shall be taken from you and sold throughout the Galaxies and shall serve as the slaves of evil men forevermore.'"

"That's in the Holy Book, Bess, just like that?"

"Word for word, Citizen."

"And your people believe it?"

"Of course they do."

Coyote nodded. "I begin to see," he said slowly. "Bess?"

"Yes?"

"What does it mean—Ahl Kres'sah? Can you put that in Panglish for me, love?"

"Are you that wicked man," she mused, "the one named in the Book, the one who shall make me whore for the galaxy instead of just for my own world?"

"Bess, I would not—I would not ever harm you. It is just really necessary that you believe that."

He went over to her then, slowly, to allow her time to pull away if she wanted to, and put one hand on her arm, feeling her shiver at his touch as if she had been burned.

"Tell me, lady," he said casually, "what does Ahl Kres'sah mean?"

"It means," she said, "I'm not sure . . . yes. The closest thing would be 'Children of the Dolphin.'"

"What!" Coyote stared at her. "Bess, I just don't understand."

"'In the first days,' " she said, and he realized that she was quoting again, " 'when the ancient ones went out from their mother world under sentence of death, it came about that they met the dolphin and that they drew near them and bore children by them, as they were instructed by the Most High. And He blessed their union, and bid them hide from all the universe, for all men would curse them and turn upon them and kill them, and He spoke and said that they should be known thereafter forever as the Ahl Kres'sah, Children of the Dolphin. And they praised His name, and they swam for joy.' "



There it was, at last. Coyote sat down again and tried to ignore the whirling of his head, and she watched him without speaking.

"That's why there is no Factor Q among your people," he said finally. "The mutation doesn't show up in your blood because it is of very different composition, that's all."

"That must be right, Citizen," she agreed. "I wouldn't know."

"Let me see if I have this straight, Bess," he said. "Your people came here originally, a thousand years ago, fleeing religious persecution. And there was a race already here—an amphibious race, with which you intermarried, something like the dolphin. Is that right, lady?"

"Yes." She smiled sadly. "I think 'dolphin' is the nearest Panglish equivalent. And now, if I have made a mistake in trusting you, the armies of the Three Galaxies will come, with rockets and bombs and lasers, and they will exterminate us, from the smallest baby to the oldest man, as an abomination in the sight of all human-kind."

"And your people have kept this secret, all these hundreds of years? And the earmuffs you wear—of course, they cover gills of some kind!"

Bess leaned back against the wall, arms behind her head.

"And what are you going to do now, Citizen?" she asked quietly. "Have I given up my people into slavery and death? It is said, in our Holy Book, that you others will kill us, one and all . . . will you give us up to be

destroyed, Citizen Jones, owner of a failing MESH? Is that what you are about to do?"

Coyote stood up.

"What I am about to do," he said, "is clear up some thousand-year-old misunderstandings. Come along, though, Bess, and let's get RK. I want him to hear this, too, and I see no reason for doing it all twice."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"to have lain with you, beloved,  
is to have known  
how the sun feels, rising. . . ."

(Anonymous)

Coyote found RK already awake and dressed and busy with breakfast. The boy showed the strain of the previous night. His hands trembled and his lips were tight with the effort he was making not to show his distress. He looked up at Bess and Coyote, one swift bitter glance, and then dropped his eyes at once and refused to look at them again.

"RK?"

"Yes, Citizen Jones?"

"I want you to bring all that stuff over here—that's right, man, just bring it along. Fruit, bread, cheese, coffee, that's plenty for breakfast. No elaborate carryings-on with paté of waterweed or anything like that are necessary, okay?"

"It's no trouble," RK said. "I'd rather do it."

"And I'd rather you didn't," said Coyote firmly. He went over and gathered the food up on a round blue tray, took RK by the arm, and moved both to the table.

RK sat down, sullen and grim, and stared at his plate, and Coyote really didn't blame him, Last night's antics had been a little much for one young over-disciplined uptight kid. Things weren't going to get any better for a while, either.

"RK," he said, "I'm not going to say I'm sorry about what happened last night, because it would be a bloody lie. What I *am* sorry about is that I had to be so rough."

"It's all right."

"It's not all right," said Bess, "and you know quite well it's not. You must quit posing, Ahr, and learn the virtues of honesty."

"You dare to talk to me of virtue!"

Coyote took RK's credit disc and held it up.

"Look here, RK," he said. "I've got something of yours. I'm sorry I had to take it without asking you, but you wouldn't have given it to me, you know."

RK stared at the disc and then snatched it from Coyote's hand, his face flaming, and pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

"Now that's too much," he said, fairly spitting his words at them. "You've gone too far, Citizen!"

"And so? Are you going to call the police, RK, and complain to them that you've been robbed?"

"You know I can't! Because of her!"

"Then you might just as well sit down and listen to what I have to say. I did what had to be done. I didn't like doing it, but I did it. I've read the introductory portion of the Manual for the Training of Mindwives. I've seen your Book of the Holy Path. I know what Ahl



Kres'sah means. And you have your property back once again. These are accomplished facts, the situation is as it is, irrevocably, and there is nothing to be gained by your stamping out of here."

"I won't listen to you, Citizen," RK hissed. "You are a common criminal, a thief and a fraud and a bully—and worse. I'm leaving this place, right now, and I'm not coming back."

"I can make you stay," said Coyote calmly.

"You would do that?"

"I would because I must," Coyote said. "I would and I will. Either you sit down and listen, as contemptuously as you like, but willingly, or I force you to sit down and listen. That's all the choices you have."

"You are—"

"That's enough, Ahr," said Bess. "You will hear him out before you spew any more of that sort of thing. Sit down and hold your tongue."

RK sank down, beaten and seething, in his chair. Coyote took bread and cheese from the tray and waited a moment, giving the boy a little time to recover before he began to talk. The cheese was revolting, having been made from the milk of some mysterious animal on a planet that went by the charming name of Wall-Hole, but it was all there was out here in the fringes, and if you wanted cheese you ate it, and that's all there was to it. He cut a wedge of it, tore off a chunk of bread, and chewed a generous bite of both, feeling the bubbling of RK's mind and astonished at the viciousness of it. The boy was really furious, and it was not all pride.

"Well, get on with it," RK said. "Enjoy yourself."

"I don't know how to begin," Coyote said.

"I can believe that easily enough."

"Not for the reason you mean," said Coyote. "I'm not at all embarrassed, I don't feel guilty, and like I told you already, I'm not even sorry. So I hurt your feelings and dented my image—that's tough, RK. Now I want to explain, and I want you to listen, voluntarily, if possible, under force if it isn't."

"Go ahead, then!"

"It seems," said Coyote with care, "that your people are suffering from two very large and serious misconceptions. I want to take them up one at a time, okay?"

"I have a choice?"

Coyote ignored him and went on. "The first one is this bit about having to hide the mindwives because they will be kidnapped if their existence is known, RK. That just isn't true."

"It is written—"

"I know. I know very well. It's written in the Book of the Holy Path. RK, who wrote that book? Think a little. Men did, you know. Men, who were fallible and who did not know everything."

"They were holy men, divinely inspired."

"Divinely inspired, shit."

"Shit?"

"Never mind. Term of opprobrium. Look, RK—at the time that that book was written, thousands of years ago, your people were fleeing from religious persecution. The universe was full of barbarisms, then; people



had to live in terror of idiocies from other people. Things have changed since then."

"You think so?" asked Bess. "Have you taken a good look at the culture of my people, Citizen?"

"Wait a minute, Bess," Coyote objected. "I'm not talking about behavior within the Ahl Kres'sah society—I'm talking about this Big Bogeyman from the Inner Galaxies that's supposed to descend out of the sky and steal all your pretty ladies. That's something else—and it's just not a real danger anymore."

"You can't know that," said RK.

"I can, because I do," said Coyote. "In the first place, since the mindwives are part of your *religious* tradition, it really isn't necessary that anyone know very much about them. Through all the Three Galaxies the right to secrecy in religion, the respect for cultural taboos, is accepted. Only a few people, people in positions of trust, need even know that the mindwives exist. That's point one. In the second place, there are exotic sexual delights beyond imagining or description in the Three Galaxies today. A new one no longer causes riots—it's just not that important. Even if the worst were to happen, even if the full details about the mindwives had to be splashed in living color across the Galaxies, it still wouldn't matter."

"You're wrong," said RK.

"No, RK," said Coyote. "I'm right. Listen, let me give you an analogy. In the ancient Bible of Old Earth, right alongside the commandments like 'Thou shalt not kill,' in the early books, there were all sorts of dietary restric-

tions, given exactly the same commandment status. They were *necessary*, at the time that they were written down, because there was no satisfactory method then for preserving food properly, for preventing food poisoning, for doing all the things necessary for dietary hygiene. But thousands of years later, long after none of that was needed at all, long after refrigeration was developed, people were still practicing this long list of ridiculous 'commandments' because they had turned up originally in a sacred context. This is exactly the same kind of thing, RK. The law about secrecy for the mindwives was absolutely necessary in the days when religious persecution still existed, when kidnapping was a reality, but such crimes have been unknown in the Three Galaxies for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"Oh, Citizen," said Bess softly, "if only you are right—and I'm sure that you are."

"I am," said Coyote, and he poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Now," he said, "that's the first misconception. And that's the smaller of the two."

"The smaller!"

"Yes, RK, the smaller. The really big one you people are lugging around with you is the one about this dolphin-human mating, and how all of you will be destroyed by the rest of the human race for it, and blah-blah-blah."

"Ah, Citizen," Bess objected, "there I can't go along with you. I feel that you are right about the other point, I know what the chances of the mindwives being kid-



napped are and just how silly that all is. But about this other matter—since you talk of the Bible, I remind you of the laws on just this subject that are to be found there.”

“I know, Bess,” said Coyote. “But look—nobody cares any longer. In the first place, the merging of your people and the dolphin-people is so complete that no one would ever notice the difference between you and ordinary human beings, whatever an ‘ordinary human being’ might be. Those tiny gill-slits you hide so carefully are not only not the spectacular mutation you consider them to be, they are just short of invisible. And whatever made you people think that this was the only planet where there existed humanoid—different, but humanoid—native races with which mating took place? Not to mention the incredible changes brought about by adaptation to various kinds of planetary conditions. Lord, you should see some of the so-called ‘humans’ that are to be found in the peopled universe today! If the Ahl Kres’sah had not deliberately shut themselves up like pariahs—although I do agree that it was probably necessary early in your history—if they had not done that, and if tourists could come to Furthest as they go everywhere else, you would long ago have seen that your fears were ridiculous.”

“Is that true, Citizen? You are not lying, it’s not a trick?”

Coyote breathed a sigh of relief. That was the first sign that RK was beginning to listen instead of just sitting there in a state of blind rage. He was encouraged.

"No, RK," he said. "I'm not lying. There are 'humans' who are almost indistinguishable from birds. There are 'humans' who have manes like lions, and tails, and claws. There are 'humans' that are not even describable—you have to see them to believe them. No one pays the slightest attention."

The silence around the table was so thick that it was almost visible. Coyote waited, wondering if anything more was going to be necessary.

"Citizen Jones," said the boy, "if what you say is true, then my people are undergoing a cruel hardship that is totally unnecessary and stupid."

"Exactly," said Coyote, pleased. "That is exactly right. And that is why I said I was neither ashamed nor embarrassed or sorry about what I'd done. Your people must be told the truth, RK. They must not be allowed to continue in this isolated purdah state because they feel they have to do so—if they just *prefer* it, of course, that's different. But otherwise, it's all superfluous. They can move as freely and as openly about the Three Galaxies as any other member of the Federation. There's just no need, none, for all these restrictions, and there hasn't been any need for them for centuries."

Tears pouring down her face, Bess fought to speak, but RK grabbed her hands and held them tight.

"Do you understand what this means?" he cried. "Do you know, do you see what it means?"

"It means freedom," said Bess. "It means that we are no longer to be hidden and caged, Ahr."

RK stood up. "Now," he said, "now I am so strong that



you couldn't possibly stop me from leaving the table! Now I am going to go up to the roof and I am going to sit and think about all of this until I can stand being so happy."

Coyote laughed. "I wouldn't try to keep you now, RK," he said. "I've said what I had to say and succeeded in what I wanted to do. Later I'll tell you why I wanted to do it."

"Don't bother about it, Citizen," said Bess. "I'll go with him and tell him the whole thing."

"Bless you, Bess," said Coyote promptly. "That's good of you, because I think I'm talked out," and he watched them go off together, very pleased with his morning's work.

When he went to his bed that night he found he had one task left to do, but this a pleasant one. Bess lay in his bed, free of her trappings of velvet and silk, in her own spare strong beauty of skin and bone, waiting for him.

Because he could not believe it he reached out and touched her, and found her trembling.

"I'm so frightened," she said. "I can't believe how frightened I am . . . for a hardened criminal I don't do very well."

He sat down beside her on the bed and stroked her hair.

"What can I do for you, love?" he asked gently.

"I want something."

"Can you tell me?"

In a very small voice, she said, "Citizen, I would like you to show me what the other kind of love is like. I don't have any idea, you know—would you teach me?"

Coyote held his breath, and thought about a lot of things he could have said, about how it probably wouldn't be very nice for her the first time, especially with her conditioning against physical release, about how she might well be disappointed by comparison with the ecstasy she was accustomed to, about how it might very well actually hurt her.

And then he decided that he really had talked enough for one day, and he pulled his robe off over his head and lay down beside her.

"Yes," he said. "I'd be delighted."

And he was.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

"No matter how inconvenient or unpleasant an illusion may be, if a man has chosen it himself and held it long enough, if he has built it up in sufficient detail and become accustomed to taking it into account upon every occasion, it will become precious to him and he will fight to maintain it in preference to even a pleasant truth. This is because it will have become one of the anchoring points of his mind, like the points which anchor the web of a spider, and to displace it will cause a shift in equilibrium for which painful compensation must be made. This is only a form of self-defense; nonetheless it inhibits growth."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

Bess sat beside him in the dark room, running the antiquated projector that he could not have managed without her, prepared to offer explanations when explanations were required, and otherwise simply pleasing him by her presence at his side. She had made a choice of several films which she thought would give him a generally accurate conception of the Ahl Kres'sah culture and customs, the last customer had left the

MESH for the night, and all was almost right. Coyote forgot sometimes that the girl who pleased him so was a condemned criminal, under sentence of Erasure; try as he would he could not make it seem real.

"This first one, now," she was saying, "is one of our classic films. It's a love story . . . the couple fall in love, and then they are separated when the boy's family is called for Surface Duty."

Surface Duty? The capital letters had been unmistakable. Coyote wondered, but decided to wait.

"It's a bit trite and dated," said Bess, "but it's one of those things that everyone sees several times as he is growing up, and that becomes really part of you. That's the kind of thing you need, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

"This should make a good beginning, then. It starts in a little village, called Saad Tebet; there's no Panglish equivalent for that, I don't think. You won't be able to understand it at all, I'm afraid. I'm sorry about that."

"Why not? My Furthester isn't fluent, but it should handle film dialog, Bess; at least for the most part it should."

Bess chuckled. "Did you ever try to talk underwater, Citizen?"

For a moment he was puzzled, and then he saw it.

"My god," he said, "that should have been obvious even to me, but I never thought of it. How do you communicate then? Telepathy?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Telepathy among our people is confined almost entirely to mindwives.



We use a finger alphabet, and a set of gestures, when we are at home."

"When you're at home. I see."

"The easiest thing, of course, would be for me to just translate it for your mind, but you don't do *that* very well either; you'd miss most of it. I'll just try to interpret it as it goes along."

"Good enough, Bess."

"Now—there's the beginning. That's an ordinary street, on an ordinary day. The ordinariest of the ordinary."

On the pale stone wall the colors suddenly leaped to life, in old-fashioned two-dimensional projection. There was water, and a sort of stone corridor through which it flowed, and people, both men and women, swimming along as easily as any fish. They were naked, except for the broad bands that tied back the long hair of the women. Some carried net bags as they swam, others had small satchels on their backs. Several children swam by, darting in and out among the adults, obviously playing a game of some kind.

"What are the colored circles on the corridor walls, Bess?" he asked.

"Those are doors. You see the little disc at the side of each? That is like a doorknob—you push it and the circle swings round on a central pivot to let you in. All the homes of the Ahl Kres'sah have that sort of door, and the colors are traditional, very bright so that they can be seen in the water."

"Those are Ahl Kres'sah homes? But what about the houses here in the city?"

"Oh, those aren't real, Citizen!"

"Bess, that doesn't make sense."

"What I mean is, those houses were built by the ancient Elders who first settled this planet. When the requests first began to come out from the Inner Galaxies for statistics and information about our people, we built those—exactly enough. One city, one town, and one village. No one would ever live in them by choice."

"But—"

"There, Coyote, there comes the heroine. You see, she is looking for the boy she loves . . . and there he is. Now, they are just going to talk together for a little while, it isn't anything important. They talk about loving each other, about their plans to marry. None of the speech is really important for a while."

Coyote watched the girl swim up to her lover, saw them embrace—a rather chaste embrace, but more than he'd thought would be usual with these people. The girl's eyes shone, the boy set a tender kiss on her forehead, and their fingers flashed in the water. The girl wore narrow enameled rings on the fingers of her left hand, he noticed, a different color for each finger.

"Why does she wear the rings, Bess?"

"To make it easier to use the finger alphabet. There is a 'letter' on each fingertip, each fingerjoint, the tip and joints of the thumb, and the palm of the hand, twenty in all. We touch the 'letter' with the right hand to spell out the words."

"I see."



"This next scene is all local color, Citizen. These two are going through the market; he's helping her shop."

"Your markets are under water?"

"Everything is under water."

"But what about the city, then? What's its function?"

"You're going to miss the film, Citizen."

"No. I can watch while you talk."

"The surface cities are simply a kind of cover, so that if any high government official should wreck a starship here, for example, and have to be admitted to the planet, there would be someplace to admit him to without giving away our secrets. People are chosen to live in the cities, chosen by lottery; anyone who is so chosen must take his whole family and serve three yeas, and one term of service exempts you for life. There is almost nothing more hated, Citizen, than Surface Duty, but we all must take our turn."

"So that explains the empty citydomes?"

"That's right. We have a dome for each hypothetical 'city' that we show on the faked atlas that is in the libraries on other planets. They're all empty; having to staff three of them is burden enough."

"And all the statistics about population, education, taxes, and all the rest?"

"All fake. There—they're coming out of the market now."

"What does she have in the net bag, Bess?"

Bess shrugged. "I can't really tell; salad vegetables, I think. Watch this, now—here comes the boy's younger brother with the bad news."

On the wall a younger boy, his face distraught, swam up to the young couple and began the rapid finger-speech. He, too, wore the rings on his left hand.

"Do you have rings like those, Bess?" Coyote asked.

"Yes, of course, when I am at home and not on Surface."

"What is he saying now?"

"It's very sad. He's telling his brother that their family has just been chosen in the lottery. Just as I was telling you, it's a tragic occasion."

"Why is it hated so?"

"Wouldn't you hate it?" she demanded. "Away from everything that is dear to you, forced to breathe air that hurts your lungs and burns your skin, having to be wrapped up like a mummy all the time when you are accustomed to wearing nothing but a hairband, isolated from your people and everything that is going on—surely you can't think you'd like that?"

"The girl is crying."

"Yes. Yes, of course she is. Her family was not chosen; that means she will be separated from her lover for three years, and no hope of any change."

"What will she do?"

"Watch."

Coyote watched as the story progressed. He saw the hurried, tearful packing done by the boy's mother in their home, a home which appeared to be a series of rooms cut in the solid rock and connected by halls through which the people swam. He could not see what the light source was, but there was a soft glow every-



where in the rooms. There was no furniture, as such; anyone wanting to rest curled into one of the colored nets that were slung in groups in the corners of the rooms.

Now the chosen family was leaving for the surface, pulling behind them on a sort of powered sled a large trunk that Bess told him held their personal belongings and their "uniforms." Everything else they needed would already be in the surface house assigned to them for their term of duty. They emerged onto the familiar gray waste that Coyote knew so well, in the brilliant glare of noon when it was its ugliest, and stood looking around them in seeming resignation, except for the boy, who was taut with despair.

"Bess, do your people ever come out on the surface to watch the water—the colors in it, I mean?"

"No, Citizen. There are many places on our planet where most of the surface rock has been worn away; we watch the night colors from below, in such places."

"I see."

"Watch, now!"

There was a scene where the family struggled into their heavy surface clothing, fighting with hooks and buttons and belts that were obviously totally unfamiliar to them. And then there was the weary trek into the town and into their house.

Then it flashed back to the girl under the water. She was going about various tasks inside her house, he supposed; her movements meant nothing to him, but seemed purposeful.

"What is she doing, Bess?"

"That is one of the classic Water Dances, Coyote. Listen, you will hear the drums and shells; they are the traditional accompaniment for Water Dancing. That dance she is doing—see how graceful she is?—is called the Dance of Unbearable Sorrow. The actress is famous for this sequence."

"She should be; it's beautiful."

They watched in silence for a while, and then Bess speeded up the film.

"I've got to skip some of these things," she said, "or we will never get through. Now, here is the important part. See what she's doing?"

It was dark now on the surface of Furthest, except for the rainbows of water. As Coyote watched, the girl, painted black from head to foot, slipped out onto the surface of the planet and headed for the city, crawling in the open, running where she was sheltered.

Bess turned off the projector.

"I think that's enough of that one," she said. "Most of the rest of it is trivial, and predictable. She is trying to join the boy on the surface, and that is strictly forbidden."

"No volunteer service, eh?"

"No. They tried it and found it didn't work; it meant a city staffed entirely by all the wrong sorts of people. Desperate people, sets of lovers like the two in this film, people running away from domestic crises, anything but the cross-section of normal, ordinary families that is supposed to meet the eye."



"Does she make it?"

"She gets to the steps of the boy's home, but the family has gone away for the night to visit friends that were called to the Surface earlier. She doesn't know this, and she is forced to spend the entire night in the open, waiting for them to return. The boy finds her in the morning when the family finally comes back, but of course she is dead."

"Why should she be dead?"

Bess glanced at him, surprised. "Surely you have guessed that by now? Our skin is incredibly delicate, it requires a great deal of moisture. If it is exposed to the open air, to sun and wind and dust, we die in a very few hours. Even covered as we are, we suffer."

"I understand, Bess. And that's a sad film."

"Very sad. And it's reasonably true to life. People *are* separated in tragic ways by Surface Duty, someone does occasionally find himself trapped in the open and die of exposure."

"The girl couldn't have knocked at some other house and saved herself?"

"This is an old-fashioned film, Citizen. Technically, she cannot do that because anyone whom she appealed to for help would be duty bound to turn her in to the police. I don't think anyone would really do that, frankly, but that's what the film is intended to convey."

"All right, Bess. What else have we got?"

"Let me see. This is the best for your purposes, I think."

She slipped another clip into the projector, explain-

ing, "It's the biography of one of our heroes, a man called—well, you couldn't pronounce it. In Panglish his first name would be Andrew, I believe. It should show you what constitutes the Furthester ideal for the male."

Coyote nodded approvingly.

"That should be useful," he agreed. "Go ahead, love, run it."

He was frankly astonished by the film as he watched it. The hero was a scientist, a man who was offered a great deal of money to put aside research that would lead to medical benefits for the people but that would eliminate the need for a drug brought out by a powerful chemical monopoly. This was heroic in any culture, especially when the man continued with his work despite threats on his life, threats to his family, and the usual bag of tricks trotted out in such situations.

What was surprising was the profile of character that emerged from the film. It was nothing like what Coyote had expected. The difference was so great that it made him half sick; his error could have been very dangerous.

He had based his conception of an ideal Furthester man upon the men he had seen in the city and in the MESH, men he had not for a moment suspected were literally "on duty." He had assumed that such a man, the very epitome of male Furthester, would be proud, cold, totally devoid of any display of emotion except conceivably a display of anger, given to abrupt arrivals and departures, interested in nobody and nothing except himself and his possessions. This was the estimate he had



made and would have reported, based upon months of the closest observation he could muster.

And he had been wrong, deeply wrong. The man he saw on the screen was not like that at all. He was gentle, warm, affectionate, patient, compassionate, loving. He was not given to open exhibitions of affection of the exuberant sort, but strong male affection, reserved but obviously tender, displayed frequently and willingly.

The personality that Coyote had been seeing had been entirely the pattern shown by a man conscripted into a life he despised, suffering the irritations of an environment literally poisonous to his body, encumbered by the unfamiliar trappings of a vanished culture, knowing that his wife and children were at that moment suffering the same indignities and miseries that he was. No wonder they appeared cold and unapproachable!

At the idea of the immensity of the mistake that he had been making Coyote felt like the embodiment of an elderly cliché—his blood “ran cold.” Never mind that it was trite, it was exact. If he had not learned the truth there would have been some very grave difficulties when a Furthester man became President of the Tri-Galactic Congress. No doubt he would appear even more cold, even more distant and miserable, in the alien environment of the Inner Galaxies, and yet his normal personality profile was totally unlike the picture he would present.

“Bess,” he asked suddenly, “didn’t you tell me that your people are forbidden by law to leave this planet?”

“That’s correct,” she said. “No one may leave.”

"Then how does it happen that you have a delegate to the Tri-Galactic Council?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "I had forgotten about him. But he is the one and only exception to the law. And even for him, it requires a special dispensation from the Chief Elder, and a long period of cleansing when he returns."

"Is it a religious prohibition?" Coyote asked in amazement.

"Yes, of course; what other reason could there be?"

"I'm afraid I don't see how it fits into the religious pattern."

"Well, Citizen, if you've based an entire theology upon the necessity for total secrecy, you are almost certain to find your goings and comings restricted by religious law."

"You're right, of course. Again, that should have been obvious to me."

"Why is it that all these things that should be so obvious to you are so opaque, Citizen? Perhaps it is the strain of worry about your financial situation?"

He tugged at a lock of her hair until she yelped.

"Be serious, Bess," he said severely. "Everything is supposed to be serious. After all, I'm a spy and you're a heretic."

She sighed and said, "Well, then, what else do you want to see from these?"

"What else do you have?"

"Some travelogs. An example of our humor. A film of a musical program. And something very special."



"The others could wait until later. What's the 'very special' one about?"

"It should really interest you."

"Don't tease, Bess."

"I'm not teasing—I'm simply embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? Why?"

"The other one is all about me. I'm the plot, the star, the suspense, the whole bit. All me."

Coyote raised his eyebrows. "I had no idea you were that important, Citizenness."

"I'm a mindwife," she reminded him, "one of the best, potentially perhaps the very best."

"So RK told me."

"And it's unheard of for a mindwife not to glory in her role, not to revel in her so-called sacred functions. They made a whole film about it. Full of dire moral pronouncements and urgent calls to prayer. It has my trial . . . and my wedding."

"Oh, Bess. You're married?"

"Nope. I went to the wedding, though."

"Bess," he moaned, "will you stop, please?"

She chuckled. "You want to see it, Citizen? It's just full of cultural foibles. Not to mention the fact that it's an excellent portrayal of how a mindwife is *not* supposed to behave."

"Of course I want to see it," Coyote said. "But not now. It's almost three o'clock in the morning. I couldn't do you justice in my present condition, I'm falling down tired. Let's see it tomorrow night, love."

"How much longer are you staying, Citizen?" she asked him.

It was a question he was accustomed to hearing from women, and one to which he had learned the only possible answer.

"Long enough, Bess," he said easily, smiling at her. "Just long enough."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"The vast majority of activities which take upon themselves the name 'revolution' are not revolution at all; they're just foreplay."

(from an old commercial)

Bess touched his hand and leaned over to speak to him.

"This will be a lot easier," she said.

"In what way?"

"Because in this one you get vocal speech. It's a news documentary, a weekly 'Story of the Week' kind of thing, and they're all done in vocal only."

"Where do they film them, then?"

Bess laughed. "Even our primitive society is up to the construction of a watertight underground chamber, Citizen."

"Sorry, love."

"The reason for it is that many people collect these documentaries. You must realize that, as isolated as we are out here, what happens on our own planet takes on an immense importance to us. And many people who could not afford to buy the films are able to buy tapes

of the sound track; so they put them together with that in mind."

"Good old profit motive," said Coyote with satisfaction. "I'm tired of getting everything secondhand."

"Here it goes—they're pretty. . . . Wait a minute. I don't have a word for it, I don't think, not one that you would understand. It's a slang word. 'Cheq'thah.' "

"Does it paraphrase?"

She frowned. "Let's see. Something aimed at the lowest common denominator. Full of bad jokes, with all the meanings underlined twice and everything pointed out to you with red pencil. You're lucky; your Furthester speech isn't good enough for you to see the puns. The language is completely behind the times, my parents' generation, but salted with current slang in what they think are appropriate places. Home, mother, and waterweed loaf. Have you a word for it?"

"Corny."

"Corny?"

"Ancient Earth word, but it's survived because it's needed. The sort of thing you described is called 'corny.' "

"Good enough. All right, the narration, the transition, all that stuff, is going to be corny. The actual events were all filmed as they happened, though, so they haven't been able to foul those up, they're authentic. Try to ignore the fillers. Ready."

NARRATOR: Citizens! Once again we are proud to bring you—the NEWS—in DEPTH! DEPTH, BREADTH, AND LIVING COLOR . . . brought straight to you!



"You see?" said Bess.

"Pretty bad."

NARRATOR: This week's story concerns the recent scandalous tragedy of Mindwife Kh'llwythenna Be'essah-red Q'ue, who as you know is now a fugitive attempting to evade the execution of her sentence—TOTAL ERASURE! Citizens, this is one of the most vital, one of the most gripping, one of the greatest stories of our times, a story with deep import for all of us—and now, Citizens—NEWS . . . IN . . . DEPTH! We take you first to Mind-wife Q'ue's wedding in the Grand Hall. . .

FADE TO VAST UNDERWATER GROTTO. A CROWD OF PEOPLE IS GATHERED IN NETS ALONG BOTH SIDES OF THE ROOM. GLOBES CONTAINING FOODS ARE TIED TO THE NETS. SERVOMECHANISMS SWIM SLOWLY ABOUT THE ROOM OFFERING TUBES OF DRINKS. AT THE FAR END OF THE GROTTO A SORT OF ALTAR IS CARVED IN THE ROCK . . .

"Bess?"

"What?"

"How did you get away?"

She chuckled in the darkness.

"We're supposed to be so bloody law-abiding. It never occurred to them I wouldn't sit docilely waiting for them to get around to Erasing me. I just walked out when the guards weren't looking."

"Clever of you."

"No. Stupid of them. Ah . . . here come the Marrying Elder."

AN OLD MAN SWIMS DOWN THE AISLE BETWEEN THE NETS, FOLLOWED BY A LINE OF FOUR YOUNGER MEN. THE OLDEST IS CARRYING A NET BAG CONTAINING A BOOK AND THREE CARVED SHAPES OF WOOD. ALL FOUR WEAR NARROW COLLARS OF GOLD AROUND THEIR NECKS AND BANDS OF GOLD ON THEIR ANKLES, SET WITH TINY DOLPHIN-LIKE CREATURES DIVING MADE OF A PALE GREEN STONE.

"What are the dolphins, Bess? Just decoration?"

"No. A sacred symbol. Only officials of the church may wear those bands. Some of the devout wear a dolphin on a chain around their neck, but only one, and not on a band."

"What are they made of? Is it jade?"

"What's jade?"

"A jewel stone, about that color."

"I don't know, Coyote—we call it 'atk.'"

"Well, it doesn't matter."

THE ELDERS FORM A ROW, THE OLDEST HOLDING A LOOP ATTACHED TO THE WALL BESIDE THE ALTAR, THE OTHER FOUR IN A GOLDEN NET SLUNG TO THE LEFT. MUSIC BEGINS.



"Wait a minute . . . Bess, this is under water. How are they going to do vocals?"

"It's just for the wedding. The speech—exactly as it was made in finger speech—is dubbed in later, like the music. The actress who does my speech is very good. Everything else, then, took place in the watertight rooms."

"I see."

"You'll see their fingers moving, but you'll hear vocal speech from the film."

"Got it."

"Here I come now . . . followed respectfully by my intended. He's a Senator in our Planetary Council, owns a monopoly on half a dozen products essential to our people, is a very powerful man."

"And you were *awarded* to him."

"Exactly. Like a medal."

BESS SWIMS INTO VIEW AND THE CAMERA MOVES IN FOR A CLOSEUP. SHE IS WEARING A SORT OF NECKLACE OF GOLD NET WITH THE GREEN STONES, A NECKLACE THAT EXTENDS DOWN OVER HER BREASTS AND SHOULDERS AND IS ALMOST A JEWELLED CAPE, WITH LONG FRINGES OF GOLD THAT EXTEND DOWN HER ARMS. THE MAN WHO SWIMS BEHIND HER IS WEARING A SIMILAR CAPE, BUT WITHOUT JEWELS.

"Those are wedding costumes, I suppose?"

## FURTHER

"Yes, indeed. Very high class wedding costumes they are, too. There now, you see, we've taken our places at the altar, holding those rings set in the rock. All traditional."

"Is the ceremony the same for mindwives as for—what do you call them—body wives?"

"Just the same. Now it's beginning."

ELDER: In the eyes of the Most High, under the blessed auspices given and ordained by Him Who knows all, I come to you this afternoon as Marrying Elder of the Ahl Kres'sah. I greet you; may you swim well.

ALL: May you swim well, Holy Elder.

ELDER: Upon this solemn occasion it is my joy to name as husband Tri T'tha Hahlw-Obe'an, who comes not as Senator, not as a man of power, but as a simple man, like any other man, to claim his wife. I call upon you, T'tha Hahlw-Obe'an, is it your will that I should proceed?

TRI: That is my will, Holy Elder.

ELDER: Upon this solemn occasion it is my joy to name as wife Kh'llwythenna Be'essahred Q'ue, who comes not as sacred mindwife, not as a woman blessed and chosen by the Most High, but as a simple woman, like any other woman, to be claimed by her husband. I call upon you, Kh'llwythenna Be'essahred Q'ue, is it your will that I should proceed?

BESS: It is not. I'll swear fidelity to no man and take no oath meant to make me a sacred whore for the government of this . . .



PANDEMONIUM BREAKS OUT, THE NOISE OF THE HORRIFIED ONLOOKERS DROWNING OUT THE WORDS ON THE SOUNDTRACK. THE CAMERA FADES OUT.

"That was a mighty short wedding, Bess."

"Wasn't it?"

"Why didn't you just refuse to go in the first place?"

"And miss an opportunity like that?"

NARRATOR: Citizens, this was a first. Never before, in the history of the Ahl Kres'sah, has any woman so disrupted and despoiled a sacred ceremony, much less her own wedding! And this was no ordinary woman, Citizens, this was a mindwife, a mindwife who—of course I know nothing of these things, but I quote her Training Elders—a mindwife who would have been one of the greatest mindwives we have ever had. . . . Citizens, this was a sad occasion. But it didn't begin here, no, it began long, long before. . . .

"Really?"

"Really. Watch."

NARRATOR: Citizens, the man whom you now see on your screens is the Senior Training Elder of the Temple of Mindwives. He has graciously consented to speak to us today of this unfortunate woman. Good afternoon, Holy Elder.

ELDER: Greetings, may you swim well.

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NARRATOR: Thank you, Elder. Now, you know of this sad incident—

ELDER: The wedding that was so abruptly cut off? Yes, I know of it. I could hardly avoid knowing of it.

NARRATOR: Of course of course. Now, could you tell us something of this woman? You had her training, did you not?

ELDER: Yes. A heavy burden, a very heavy burren.

NARRATOR: I'm sure it must have been.

ELDER: She was so obviously superior, from the very first week that we had her in our care, that it was felt best for me to take over supervision of her training personally.

NARRATOR: What was she like, as a child?

ELDER: Like any mindwife. Rebellious, angry, undisciplined, wild. That is normal and to be expected.

NARRATOR: Was she unusual in any way?

ELDER: In the degree of her abilities, yes; she was very unusual. The power of her mind has not been met with before or since, so far as I am able to determine.

NARRATOR: But she did submit to discipline, when she was a young girl at the Temple?

ELDER: Well. . . . You must remember, she was a very unusual case. Because of her brilliance, which is to a great extent a function of her *lack* of discipline in the sense you mean, we tolerated a greater degree of deviance from her than we would normally have done. That was our mistake, of course, as we can see now. But at the time it seemed justified.



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NARRATOR: I see, I see. Then this . . . performance . . . of hers was not unexpected?

ELDER: The business at the wedding ceremony? Good heavens, man, of course it was unexpected! She fooled us very neatly . . . there had been an initial resistance on her part, but we thought that she had gotten over that when she saw that we were not going to give in to her nonsense.

NARRATOR: Well, what sort of 'nonsense' was it that she advocated?

ELDER: I don't know quite how to put it. This is, after all, a family program, is it not?

NARRATOR: Well, perhaps we can come back to that. Can you tell us, had she been a source of difficulty to you before?

ELDER: Oh, yes. Yes, she had. She had been a source of havoc, if you really want to know. It had been necessary for us to keep her in total isolation . . . solitary confinement . . . off and on for the past six years, because of her influence on the other mindwives.

NARRATOR: But isn't that rather futile? I mean, isn't she able to communicate with them all the same? Mentally?

ELDER: Mmmh. Hmhmm. It isn't . . . uh, it isn't generally known, but we do have a sort of cell from which it is not possible for the mindwives to project their thoughts or receive the thoughts of others. It's heavily shielded against any sort of electrical activity—or any other sort of activity. In fact, if she had been returned to

our care after her arrest instead of to the civil authorities, she would not be at large now.

"Is he right about that, Bess?"

"I don't know. I had never before really tried to get out of that cell of theirs, so I just don't know. But I think I would have gotten away."

NARRATOR: When you say she had been a source of havoc, what exactly do you mean?

ELDER: Well, she had a lot of radical ideas, which, as I said, I can't possibly express to you here and now, when children might be listening. She communicated these ideas to the other mindwives, and although she wasn't too successful, there was always the possibility that they might spread. As I say, it was for that reason that we isolated her.

NARRATOR: You didn't feel she would remain a danger after her wedding?

ELDER: She fooled us, I told you. She seemed chastened, docile, very repentant. She had just spent an uninterrupted period of eleven months in the shielded cell. We felt that she had learned her lesson and would welcome, rather than abuse, her freedom.

NARRATOR: Ha, ha, ha. She really pulled the gills over your ears, didn't she?

ELDER: I don't find it particularly amusing.

NARRATOR: Well, Citizens, you can see why the Elder's becoming a little upset. He has been under a severe strain, of course, we must all remember that. . . .



"Bess?"

"Yes, Citizen?"

"How bad was it . . . the solitary confinement?"

"Would you like to try it some time?"

Coyote pulled her into his arms, conditioning be damned, and rocked her gently.

"Hush," he said. "I'm an utter ass sometimes. Too damn often. What's left in the film?"

"My trial."

"They let you talk then?"

"After a fashion."

"Let's see it."

"You're seeing it. That's what he was doing while you were gabbling, going through the 'now we take you to the sensational trial etc., etc.' bit."

"Oh."

NARRATOR: . . . speaking in her own defense.

THE TRIAL IS BEING HELD IN A CLOSED CHAMBER, BEFORE THREE JUDGES. THERE IS NO JURY, AND NO AUDIENCE. THE JUDGES WEAR NARROW COLLARS OF SILVER, OTHERWISE THEY ARE NAKED. BUT BESS IS COMPLETELY CLOTHED, IN A LONG ROBE OF WHITE CLOTH, A PRISONER'S GARMENT, OBVIOUSLY INTENDED TO BE A TORMENT UNDER WATER BECAUSE IT CLINGS AND TWISTS ABOUT THE BODY AND MAKES SWIMMING AN AWKWARD, NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE PROCEDURE.

JUDGE: What have you to say for yourself, Mind-

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wife? Are you repentant? Do you regret your disgusting behavior?

BESS: I regret nothing.

JUDGE: How do you expect mercy from us, if you insist upon taking that position?

BESS: CENSORED.

"What did you say, Bess?"

"I said 'kluth your mercy.' "

" 'Kluth'? What does that mean?"

"In Panglish? It's a pejorative term for non-mental sexual intercourse, if I may be so formal. I don't know the word."

"Oh, I see. 'Fuck' your mercy is what you said."

"Is that the word?"

"That's the one, love."

JUDGE: Obscenities will be of no use to you here, Mindwife. We are accustomed to such things and you waste your time and ours. If you have anything to say in your defense I suggest you say it.

BESS: My defense is composed entirely of the fact that I am guilty of nothing.

JUDGE: And how did you arrive at that interesting conclusion? Your crime was public, woman, how are you to deny it?

BESS: I deny that it was a crime.

JUDGE: I allow you to continue with this nonsense only because I am indulgent; I warn you that my indulgence has limits.



BESS: I am guilty of protesting against a system that is called holy, but is infamous. I am guilty of trying to bring the truth into the open. I am guilty of trying to cleanse our Holy Path of a festering dungheap.

JUDGE: You speak in riddles.

BESS: Judge, you know perfectly well what we mindwives are. Holy! We are filth. We are a special, very highly trained, very expensive sort of filth, reserved for the secret pleasures of those who teach us to perform our "duties" and for the men of our society who are powerful enough to buy one of us. You know this as well as I do. I refused, and I do still refuse, to take part in such a perversion, and that is not a crime.

JUDGE: You would put an end to mindwifery?

BESS: Either it should be stopped, irrevocably and forever, or it should be made free, for the benefit of everyone. Every Ahl Kres'sah, man, woman, and child, must pay for the training and the maintenance of the mindwives, either directly through taxation or indirectly in that he is deprived of what that money could purchase for our people if it were not so used. If all must pay for it then all should enjoy it—and you know quite well, Judge, that any one of us, any capable mindwife, could bring ecstasy to fifty men a day instead of one.

"Bess, I don't understand."

"What?"

"Surely . . . I thought this was for general viewing . . ."

"It was never released to the public, Citizen. I have a stolen copy."

"I see."

THE JUDGES ARE ON THEIR FEET, LIVID WITH RAGE. ONE RAISES A FIST AND SHAKES IT AT BESS, ENTIRLY FORGETTING HIS DIGNITY.

JUDGE: Enough! You cannot expect me to believe that this filth, this blasphemy, this unspeakable obscenity, is to be seen and heard by the people of this planet! I order that the cameras and the other equipment for duplication be turned off as of this instant—

There was a quiet click as the projector came to the end of the film.

"He got rather upset," Bess observed. "He never let me say another word."

"You weren't allowed to speak again?"

"Not once."

"That's incredible."

"I was summarily sentenced and taken away to prison—the state prison, fortunately, not the Temple one."

"But you had no lawyer, Bess—don't you people have specialists in the defense of criminals, people who act on their behalf and have special knowledge of the law?"

"For civil crimes, yes. Not for religious ones. For a religious crime it is a foregone conclusion that you will be sentenced, and the only purpose of the trial is for the accused to plead for mercy. No one is ever acquitted under such circumstances."



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"That's barbaric, Bess."

"Agreed. Many things are barbaric."

She got up and began putting away the viewing equipment.

"You know, Citizen, that judge who was shaking his fist had a very good reason to be angry?"

"Oh? Why is that?"

Bess laughed, tucking the cassettes into the shelves under the projector.

"Because, he has a mindwife of his own."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Up above the world so high  
Like a windbag in the sky."

(from an old nursery rhyme)

To be back on Mars Central again was a strain on his already abused powers of readjustment. Twice before he had done this switch, from a primitive mode of existence to the advanced technological style that was characteristic of the Inner Galaxy, and each time he found it more of a wrench. The cities seemed vast and noisy and swarming with people, the machines that had been an unnoticed part of the background like the walls and the floor suddenly seemed ugly and obtrusive, and everything looked foreign. He knew it would wear off in a day or two, but it bothered him now. And of course he missed Bess. The two months it had taken him to get here had been only two days for him—the first day, while he was processed for the hibernation tanks, and the last, while they readied him for landing. But he missed her already. She was good company.

He turned into the offices of the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service, stepped into an anti-grav chute and drifted



up to the seventh floor, where he found the Fish still attended by the Amanuensis Mark IV.

"Drop dead," he told it in chill tones, and it began blinking and clicking frantically, finally producing, "That activity is not one for which I am programmed, sir."

"Stop monkeying around with my equipment, Mr. Jones," ordered the Fish.

"You know something?"

"What?"

Coyote regarded him stonily. "It seems to me that a man who employs a servomechanism for a secretary should be advanced enough to give up the use of an ancient form of address like 'Mister.' "

"The reason," said the Fish, "that I am reduced to employing such a servomechanism, is that I am no longer able to find the ancient form of human being known as a secretary. Everyone is a lunasthetist or a biosylthesist or a starship stewardess or some such idiocy these days. I do not see that this misfortune, over which I have no control, should constitute a reason for an alteration in my personal habits."

Coyote shrugged. "All right," he said. "Be an odd old pansy. I don't care."

"Pansy?"

"Archaic term for homosexual."

"I'm not a homosexual. I'm not a heterosexual. I have no use for either alternative, and I'm sure you'd be more use to the Service if you'd follow my example."

"Mmm. Nonetheless, in this day and age, to call people 'Mister' or 'Miss' is very pansy."

"Irrelevant. Please get to the point, Mr. Jones."

"Have you read the reports I sent ahead?"

"I have. I found them singularly uninformative. Not one word in them that the computers didn't already have in their databaks. What have you been *doing* all this time?"

"The reason the reports are uninformative is because they are faked. I am quite sure that three-fourths of the personnel on Mars Central read the reports that come in from the agents of TGIS and I wanted them to be sure they had the full story, so there'd be no problem in accomplishing what I really want."

"I see. Then that's not really the situation?"

"No, no. Actually it couldn't be less like the stuff you have in your files."

"Tell me about it."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean, no. Period. I won't report to you, alone. I want to report to the full Board, plus a representative from the Tri-Galactic Council who's one of us and has some influence."

"Look, Mr. Jones—"

"Or I won't talk at all."

"Nonsense, Mr. Jones. We'll put you on hypnodrugs and you will tell us everything."

"You try that and I'll kill every member of your staff cheerfully. Would you like to refer to your files and see just what sort of damage it's possible for a mass



projective telepath to do if he really puts his head into it?"

The Fish leaned his cheek on his hand and sighed.

"You are so difficult," he said solemnly. "Is it really necessary for you to be so difficult?"

"Yes," said Coyote. "Otherwise nothing would get done. Ever."

"All right," said the Fish. "Who do you want in the meeting?"

"I told you. The full board of TGIS plus a Council member with influence and sympathy for us. That shouldn't be hard to arrange—especially since none of the board does anything but sit around on their butts and think of new regulations for the agents to break."

The Fish ignored him and began to dictate to the Amanuensis Mark IV, which then went to the comset by his desk and punched out the proper buttons to call the meeting. Coyote watched, unbelieving.

"You're even more of an idiot than you were when I was here last time!" he said finally. "Do you mean to tell me that the taxpayers of these three galaxies are paying for the maintenance of this Amanuensis that does things for you like punch the buttons on your comset? Do you mean to tell me—"

"I don't mean to tell you anything, Mr. Jones. You want your meeting, I'm getting it for you. You don't need to concern yourself with anything else—especially my office furniture."

"Especially my office furniture," Coyote mimicked, in a high falsetto voice. He pulled his hair, which was

longer and redder by half a year, up onto the top of his head into a raggedy knot, and went swishing around the room with one hand on his hip. "My goodness deary me, I do think that next year I'll get one of those automatic chair cushions that wipes my ass for me . . . perhaps with the TGIS insignia embroidered on it in pearls—"

"That reminds me," said the Fish, "where precisely do you wear *your* TGIS insignia?"

"Look," Coyote said, in his normal voice, "I'm supposed to be a folksinger, remember? I'm not *supposed* to be a TGIS man. It's called a cover, right?"

"In this office," said the Fish in icy tones, "you are a TGIS man. I am not interested in this trivial musical drivel you mouth about the galaxies at the expense of those taxpayers for whom you are otherwise so concerned. While you are here you will wear your insignia. Where is it?"

"I have no idea."

"One moment."

The Fish went through a complicated succession of servomechanisms, both human and plastic, and then he said into the receiver, "Miss Kai? Who? No—I am calling Miss Tzana Kai, will you put her on, please?"

"You're calling Tzana?" asked Coyote. "What for?"

The Fish ignored him, speaking into the receiver again.

"Miss Kai?" he said. "This is the Fish, at Mars Central. Would you please tell me whether, last time he visited



your quarters, Coyote Jones left his TGIS insignia somewhere around?"

There was a lengthy pause and then he went on.

"I rather thought so," he said. "In that case would you please send it along by the next mail rocket? Mr. Jones finds that he is uncomfortable here on Mars Central without his insignia."

Another pause went by, during which the Fish grinned with gleeful satisfaction and Coyote prayed for him to be electrocuted by his comsystem.

"Thank you, Miss Kai, we'll appreciate that," he said at last, and hung up.

"I just plain and purely can't stand you," Coyote said to him.

"I know that," said the Fish. "Come along then; I'm sure everyone is here by now."

Coyote stood at the end of the table beside the screen where his photographs were being projected, along with the classic boy-meets-girl film which Bess had let him bring along. When he had explained it all, he waited, and got the expected reaction. My goodness. Heavenly days. Who'd have thought it. That sort of thing.

"Yes," he said, "I agree with you. It's hard to imagine that a hoax of this scope could have been perpetrated on all of us for hundreds of years. But it's really a long, long way out there. There's not another inhabited planet or asteroid or anything else within nineteen million miles. If they'd been closer, of course, we would have gotten to the bottom of it long ago; but out there

at the end of nowhere they've managed very nicely to fool us all. It's hard on the pride, but it's true."

A member of the board observed that it was very interesting, and Coyote agreed. Another marveled at the cunning of the Furthesters and at the dedication that had maintained the Surface Duty construct for so long, and he agreed some more. A third asked him for a few more details about the mindwives, and he refused.

"They're a sort of state geisha," he said. "Awarded like prizes to men who have done unusual public service. That's all I know."

"That is your full report, then?" asked the Fish.

"That's it."

"In that case, may we have the outrageous request?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In that case," said the Fish firmly, "may we now hear the totally outrageous request that is the *reason* you insisted upon reporting to this body instead of just sending in a report in a normal fashion?"

"Well, there *is* something I want. Two somethings, as a matter of fact."

"I thought so. What?"

"I want a total blackout on the mindwife custom. On the grounds that it is an intrinsic part of the religious taboo complex of the Ahl Kres'sah."

"Done, of course," said the Fish. "That's quite routine. Now the other one—the outrageous one."

"I want an arbitrary one hundred year quarantine for Furthest," said Coyote, and then he sat down and let it all go on over his head.



Impossible. The scientists would want to go at once and observe these people. The anthropologists would want a chance at observation of a culture which still actually maintained the worship of an anthropomorphic god. The phonologist . . . such an interesting system of consonant clusters. The eugenicists . . . no other instance known of man/amphibian interbreeding. The dolphin experts, for that matter! My goodness. Oh deary me.

"Look," he said when it all began to die down a bit, "I appreciate all of these things you're saying. I realize that the observation of a planet like Furthest, with an artifact culture that's been isolated for a thousand years, would be a matter of intense interest to science. And I don't really care. These are people, not pieces of data. The scientists will just have to wait."

"On what grounds?" demanded the Fish.

"On the grounds that if you go in right now you'll break their culture to bits and destroy them, that's on what grounds."

"How can you maintain that?"

"Their whole lives," he said patiently, "their entire belief system, their religion, their conscription to Surface Duty, everything they do, is based upon the maintaining of these two big hairy secrets. Secrecy is the absolute foundation of their every move. And now they must be told that neither secret is of the slightest importance—"

"And how are they going to learn that?"

"I am going back and tell them about it," said Coyote.

"At government expense. And when they learn that, when they learn that they have devoted their lives, and their parents and grandparents have devoted their lives, to the service of something that is entirely meaningless and stupid, it's going to be a profound cultural shock. It's not going to be a small thing for them. You're going to have to give them time to readjust—time uninterrupted by a flood of prying poking scientists and tourists. I'm sorry if that's inconvenient, but it has to be like that."

"But look here, man," cried a member of the board, "if they are told that and given one hundred years to rearrange things, it will no longer *be* an artifact culture! You'll have destroyed the very things that would be most valuable to science!"

"That's tough," said Coyote.

"You can't do it like that!"

"If you don't do it that way," he told them, "you'll have destroyed a people. I think that's more important than the data the scientists want to look at. Even this way, even my way, the Furthesters may not make it, it may be more of a shock than they can bear. But at least they'll have a chance."

"But—"

Coyote cut off the protester with a wave of his hand. "No," he said firmly. "Just no. It would be all wrong. I've been there, okay? I am the expert on this subject, and I tell you it would be all wrong. Submit it to the computers, give them the data I brought you, and ask them—they'll back me up."



The Fish was nodding his head at the opposite end of the table. "He's right," he told the others. "Unfortunately. I don't like it, but he's right. He usually is."

"Give me whatever you want in the way of equipment," Coyote said, by way of comfort. "I'll take films, record measurements, do threedies, anything you like. I'll bring back enough data on the state of the culture right now, before it begins to change, to make a tremendous contribution to all the sciences that would be interested. Just guarantee me the century quarantine."

There was a good deal of sighing and moaning and regretting.

"Do I have it?" Coyote insisted.

"You have it," said the Fish with decision. "Nasty. But you have the quarantine. We'll send the directive down to the Council—computer-supported, of course."

Coyote let out his breath in a long sigh of relief. He had been a little scared he wouldn't be able to bring it off.

"I'll go back and tell them, then," he said softly. "I want to leave in twenty-four hours; you've got that long to get me a list of the experiments, pictures, tapes, all that stuff that you want, and the equipment to do it with. Then I'm leaving."

"Twenty-four hours?" asked the Fish sarcastically. "I suppose that's so you can go see Miss Tzana Kai?"

It hadn't been, but it sounded good. He could always do with seeing Tzana.

"That's right," he said. "Don't you wish you could?"

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"There is only one sort of love that has any value, and that is the love that leaves the beloved free. All the rest is sickness."

(from the Devotional Book of Tham O'Kent)

It seemed to Coyote that he had spent the majority of his time since he arrived on Furthest in two activities—bewildered waiting, and astonished staring. It was the latter of the two that was occupying him now.

He had arrived just after dawn and had all but run back to the MESH, his eagerness to see Bess and to pass on his good news so great that it was not even dampened by the monstrous list of scientific crap that he was supposed to do in the few months that remained to him here. And now he was faced with something that had done more than just dampen his enthusiasm; it had totally destroyed it.

The sign on the front of the MESH, dim in the early light, was most explicit: CLOSED BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNMENT—TRESPASSERS WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED. And underneath, a comsystem number for emergencies. It wasn't something he had expected to have to deal with.

There was a public comset at the corner, and at this



hour he would not have to wait to use it. He headed for the intersection at a fast walk that turned into a run, inserted his credit disc in the slot, punched out the number from the sign, and got a servomechanism which, after hearing that he had neither fire nor burglary to report, refused to discuss anything else with him. Now what?

He sat down on the stone curb with his head in his hands and tried to think, fighting a sense that something was more than just casually wrong. A jeebie chimed, close by his ear, and he didn't move a muscle; a cold wind whined all around him. He wondered if Furthest was about to enter its equivalent of a winter season, and supposed it must be; he didn't remember ever feeling cold here before.

Obviously, if the MESH had been closed by the government, something had happened to Bess, and perhaps something had also happened to RK, and neither of those somethings was likely to be anything nice. In addition, it was perfectly possible that he himself was under some sort of sentence, although it was unlikely that he would have been allowed to land if that had been the case. He hoped. What with the damned starship having had to be repaired, and the bloody scientists having talked him into giving them extra time to get their lists together, and the ship having to go around a meteor storm, one damned delay after another, it had been seven months since he'd left Furthest. One hell of a lot of things could have happened, in seven long months.

"Are you ill, Citizen?"

"Ill?"

He looked up into the face of a tall Furthest male, seemingly ten feet tall, in a costume of purple and black with high black boots. He hadn't seen those before either; they must be something that came out for this season.

"No, thank you, Citizen," said Coyote. "I'm just thinking."

"On a curb?"

"I was just leaving," Coyote told him. "Relax. I haven't defaced your kluthatz curb."

He left the outraged man staring after him and walked away. He knew where to go because there was only one possible choice. That was the home of RK's parents. If they didn't know what had happened to their children then he would have to tear the planet apart. In scuba gear. But he could try the Qu'es first.

He took two wrong turnings before he found the right house, and as he looked his tension grew, and the conviction that he was too late.

Tzana Kai had asked him what he was going to do.

"What am I going to do about what?"

"About Bess, Coyote," she had said. "You can't just leave her there—sooner or later she would be caught."

"I know."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Tzana, damn it to hell—"

"Never mind damning it to hell," she had said firmly, nudging him over onto his stomach so she could rub his



back. "Damning it to hell won't help her. You know what I want you to do?"

"Tell me."

"Bring her to me, Coyote. I can easily make one of these rooms watertight and keep it filled with water for her. And no one would dare touch her if I had her with me."

"It's a good idea, Tzana."

"Of course it is."

It was, too. Tzana's home, like the offices of the translation bureau that was her cover, was entirely made of inflatable plastic bubble chambers. It would be no problem to convert one for Bess, and Tzana was right; as a TGIS agent she could claim virtual immunity to any sort of harassment for herself and her household.

"I don't know that she'd be willing to come, Tzana," he said.

"You could ask her. That's more useful than damning it to hell."

"I'll ask her, all right?"

"All right."

The major problem then had seemed to him to be getting Bess off Furthest to begin with, without her being taken away from him by the Furthester police. He hadn't been sure it could be done. Now that problem seemed relatively minor—all he wanted to do was find her.

He knocked on the Qu'es' door, seething, and shuffled his feet impatiently, while minutes went by and no

one answered. And then at last the door opened and there stood RK.

"Citizen Jones!" the boy shouted. "Mother. . . . Father. . . . It's Citizen Jones! He's back!"

There was the sound of running feet on the stairs, and both of the parents appeared, arms and hands held out to greet him. He couldn't imagine what was the source of this sudden informality, but he returned their greetings with all the warmth he could muster through his worry, until he could contain his impatience no longer.

"Please. . . ." he said at last. "Please tell me what's happened to Bess."

RK opened his mouth and his father put a firm hand across it.

"She's all right," said Citizen Qu'e. "We want to tell you all that has happened, and what has happened to her. But not here in the doorway. Not like this."

"Could we take him down into the water?" his wife asked breathlessly. "It would be so much better. . . . He could wear diving equipment . . . it—"

"You know that's not allowed."

"But Father, Surface Duty is a farce now, a completely unnecessary farce. So there's a regulation forbidding anyone on Surface Duty from going below the surface—it's meaningless!"

Citizen Qu'e shook his head at his son. "RK, I wish you were right. Unfortunately, the laws have not been repealed, pending the report your friend here is bringing back from the galactic government."



"But everyone knows already!" RK protested.

"How could they know?" Coyote asked, bewildered. "Would someone please explain all this to me?"

RK's father nodded. "Come with us," he said. "We'll go up to the water garden, and we can tell you there. But first we have something to show you. Will you follow me, please?"

Coyote was sick with impatience, but it was obvious to him that he was going to accomplish nothing by objecting. He would be told as it suited them to tell him, and in no other way, and there was nothing he could do about it. The Fish would have been pleased to see that tactic used against him for a change.

He followed them up the steps and down the corridor, and then into a small stone chamber on the right of the hall.

"Look there," said RK's mother gently. "See what we have for you?"

"What is it?" he asked, staring around him at the usual set of bare walls, stone tables, chairs of warm loving nutwood.

"There," RK said. "Look there in the corner, Citizen. Go see what Bess left for you."

What do you say? He looked and looked and waited for appropriate words to come, something suitable for the occasion, but all he managed, finally, was, "Can I hold it?"

"It's your own baby," said Citizen Qu'e. "Of course you may hold it."

He picked up the warm little body and held it close,

expecting to be awkward, but finding that he wasn't awkward at all; the child fit into the curve of his arm and lay confident against his chest, as if he had always held it there.

"Bring the baby along," said Citizen Qu'e. "Bring her with you and we'll go up to the garden."

"Her? It's a little girl, then?"

"Her name is Ratha. Bess chose that especially because it is one of the few names in our speech that you would be able to pronounce easily. And it's a good name, as well; the Ratha is a kind of high grass, pale green and very lovely."

And when they were seated beside the running water on the upper floor, the baby close in his arms, he asked them.

"Where is Bess?"

"I think you already know," said her father, his voice harsh with his own grief.

"I know that something is deeply wrong. That's all I really do know."

RK's mother spoke then, biting off her words like stones, "You are being cruel, husband. There is no excuse for putting it off just because you find it difficult to say, not when you are tormenting him like that. Citizen Jones, Bess has undergone her sentence. She was taken away and she has undergone Erasure, and there it is."

The pain of it might well be bearable later. Now what was important was not to drop the child that Bess had



borne him. He took a deep breath and waited until he could control his voice, and said, "How did it happen?"

"I will tell you," said RK. "In a way it was my fault."

"No, son," said his mother. "There was nothing else you could have done."

"We were alone, you see," RK went on, "and no one except Bess and I knew about the child, and her time came early. And I was afraid. She was unconscious, and the pain had been so terrible, there was so much blood—Citizen Jones, forgive me, I did not know what to do. I went for a doctor because I was afraid that Bess would die."

"And he turned her in?"

RK nodded. "We thought perhaps he would not, because he waited a week. But then they came. The police, I mean. And they took her away, and closed the MESH, as you saw it, and I took the child and came here to my parents."

"He should have come to us sooner," said Citizen Qu'e. "If he had, perhaps something could have been done before the time came for the child to be born. But he was afraid we would not understand."

"And Bess forbid it absolutely," added RK. "She would not have it that I should involve our father and mother as well."

Erasure. There was a final sort of punishment for you. It meant that somewhere, depending on just how long it had been, there was a tall strong woman who had been Bess but was no longer. Her mind would be empty as a cave. They would have changed her face, made sure

that no one would recognize her and punish her for a crime she no longer even remembered. Someone, patiently, would be teaching her once again all those things she needed to know to function as a citizen of the galaxies. How to walk. How to dress herself. How to talk. How to read and write. How to fill some useful slot.

How do you bear what you cannot bear?

"I didn't know," he said wonderingly. "I didn't know how much I loved her. And now I can't tell her."

How could it be that he had not realized until she was irrevocably gone from him how much she had meant to him? Why had he not taken her with him when he left the first time? Because he was a foolish arrogant man for whom treasures had been thrown down with no payment asked in return, and he had walked away and left them without even thinking.

RK's mother reached over and touched his hand, a gesture he appreciated because he knew its rarity among these people.

"Bess knew," she said.

"Nevertheless," said Coyote, "I wish I had told her. It was one thing to know, and it was another to hear me say it. Perhaps she felt a need to hear those words from me, and I was too stupid to know."

"Enough," said Citizen Qu'e firmly. "Enough and too much. It is a thing that had been done and is over. We cannot forget, but we must go on now, for ourselves and for this child. When I told you Bess was all right, Citizen, I meant it—she has no burden to bear, she remembers nothing. It is we who have the grief of it.



And now we must put that grief aside and think of what there is to do."

"You are quite right," said Coyote. "We will do as you say, as far as it is possible. And I have some questions."

"Shall I take the child?" asked RK's mother.

"No." He shook his head. "No, I want to hold her, it comforts me. Tell me what the situation is now. Is there a sentence on RK, for instance? Was he charged with complicity?"

"Oh, no," said Citizen Qu'e. "He's far too young. They simply assumed that Bess had used her mental abilities, which they knew to be strong beyond their comprehension, to force him to hide her and do what she wanted. He was reproved, scolded a bit. That's all. And as for us, since we knew nothing of it at all, there was no question of our being held responsible in any way."

"That's all good," said Coyote with satisfaction. "And what about me? Am I a fugitive?"

"Bess took good care of that," her father laughed. "She was a very clever woman."

"What did she do?"

"Well, like any other society, my friend, we have unfortunate newsmedia that capitalize on the scandalous and the sensational. Bess had prepared a full 'confession' of her so-called crimes long before they came for her, in anticipation of something like what did actually happen. When she heard the knock at the door and they knew it was the police, she had RK delay them long enough for her to send the full text she had prepared,

by comsystem, to one of our scandal sheets. And they printed it, of course."

"But what did she say?"

"That she was a wicked, wicked woman. That she had fallen in love with an offworlder. That she had used her vicious mental wiles to ensnare you and force you to do as she wanted, and that you had been helpless against her. That she had manipulated her brother as she had you, for the sake of her hopeless passion."

"I'm going to be sick," said Coyote.

"Nol" said Citizen Qu'e. "Listen, it was genuinely clever. It cleared you completely of any complicity, it made it impossible that anyone should persecute this child, it cleared Ahr, it left the guilt wholly upon Bess, who was under final sentence in any event."

"Not only that," said RK's mother, "but it gave her a motive that the Ahl Kres'sah could understand. Guilty passion, irresistible love that drives one to unspeakable crimes, all that has a long tradition for our people. In a certain sense, it cleared her of guilt, too. Not in the eyes of the government, or of our church, of course, but the majority of people will forget the crimes that she committed against the state and concentrate on her 'betrayal' of our people to an offworlder for the sake of an overpowering love."

Coyote frowned. "You are telling me," he said, "that they will forget that she was a revolutionary, and remember her as a lovestruck fool?"

"Yes, yes. That's just what I mean," said the woman,



beaming at him, apparently pleased that he understood. And surprised? Possibly.

"I see," he said.

He did see. He saw very well. That she should have done that for him was amazing, and if she'd been around he'd have told her precisely what he thought of it. He wasn't about to let her get away with it, either, clever or not, but there was no point in upsetting her parents in advance by telling them what he planned to do, so he let it go by.

"Citizen Qu'e? Citizenness?"

They looked at him expectantly.

"I want to take the child with me," he said.

"We expected that you would."

"There are arrangements that I must make, though," he went on. "I will be here perhaps two weeks, tying up details with your government and carrying out some commissions given me by the scientists of the Inner Galaxies. I must find out if Ratha can safely travel in hibernation, and arrange for her passage, or for both of us to take a slowship if she cannot. May I leave her with you during that time?"

"You may," said Citizen Qu'e. "And you will stay here with us. In that way you will not have to be separated from the child and she will learn to know you before she leaves with you. Will that be satisfactory?"

"That is very satisfactory," said Coyote. "I thank you with all my heart."

"And what will you do first?" asked RK's mother, still smiling at him.

## F U R T H E S T

"I am going to go for a walk," he said.

"On the surface?"

"On the surface."

He had to have privacy. He had to think. Tomorrow he was to make a public telecast to the entire population of this planet, and he had a few changes to make in his planned speech. A hysterical lovesick woman swept by passion, indeed! *That* he could do something about.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"... and so you see, people of Ahl Kres'sah," he said, "you see that she was something more than just a woman who had the misfortune to be overfond of me. She was something a great deal more important than that.

"She was a woman who saw, before anyone else did, that you were a people enslaved by a myth. She was a woman who saw that you were being held back, as surely as if you had been shut away behind impenetrable doors, from the freedom that it really is to be a citizen of the Tri-Galactic Federation today.

"For the sake of all of you, in order that you might enjoy that freedom, in order that the undignified and miserable burden of an ancient conscription that had turned into a meaningless masquerade might be lifted from your shoulders, Bess gave me the information that I had to have. She saw past the meaningless restrictions and the ludicrous secrecy that was imposed upon you, saw far enough and clear enough to know where her duty lay, and she sacrificed herself for you, for every last one of you.

"She knew that she would not be believed if she tried to explain what she had done, and she knew that I could not return in time to save her. Nonetheless,

knowing full well what lay ahead of her, she gave me the information that I set before the government of these galaxies, the information that will allow you people to go where you will, to move freely, to learn, to share the multitude of advances that are truly your right as galactic citizens, and that have been denied you.

"She has set you free from slavery, and for that she has had her mind taken from her and Erased. If you remember her only for the crime of passion to which she confessed—to protect me, and to protect her family—you are unworthy of the sacrifice that she has made. You are to remember her as she should be remembered, as a heroine, as one who has brought you out of a slavery of centuries, as one who ignored the danger that she knew was certain, in order that all of you might at last take your rightful place among the people of the Tri-Galactic Federation. . . ."

That he was laying it on a bit thick, he knew perfectly well. He was quite sure that Bess could not have listened to it with a straight face. It served her right.



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Coyote Jones, agent for the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service, had been sent to a planet so unimaginably distant from the rest of the Federation that it bore the descriptive name Furthest. His mission: to find out why the total body of data about Furthest showed the world's inhabitants to be absolutely average down to the last decimal place. That data had to be false.

Jones was permitted to live on the planet, but the natives were so wary of him that he could uncover nothing—until he chanced into a personal crisis faced by his young Furthest assistant. The boy's sister had been sentenced to Erasure, and he wanted Coyote Jones to take the fugitive girl in and hide her.

Against his judgment, Jones agreed, and thereby became a criminal on a world he didn't understand. But suddenly the answers began to come, and he found that this planet named Furthest held more strangeness than he could ever have imagined....



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