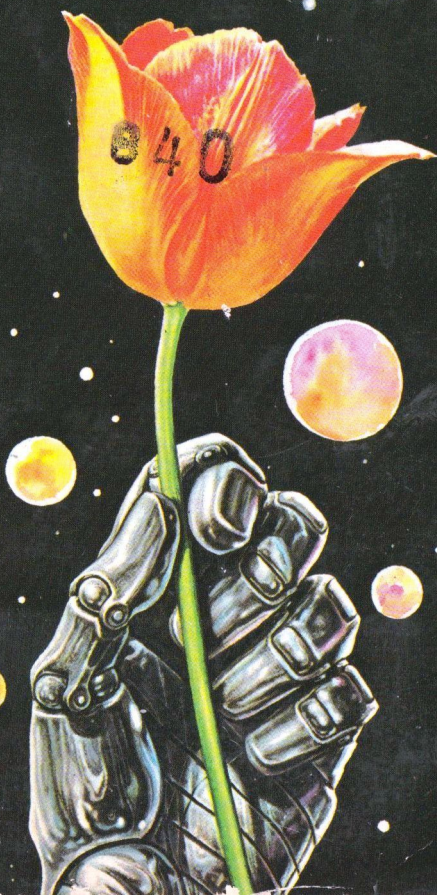


*Which was the true path—loyalty to
self or service to the stars?*

the Communipaths

BY SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN



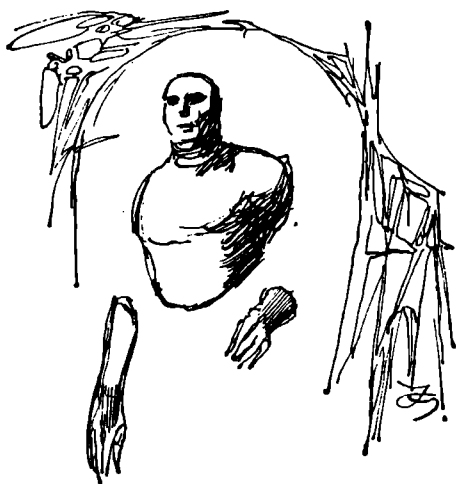
**FROM THE DIARY OF TESSA, MEMBER OF MAKLUN-
ITE CLUSTER "CHRYSANTHEMUM BRIDGE," PLANET
34.922.107:**

Gentle Thursday was not so gentle to Anne-Charlotte or her baby. Four Fedrobots came and took the baby away. Later they charged Anne-Charlotte with high treason against humankind because the baby was needed as a Communipath.

Anne-Charlotte screamed foul and dreadful things, and her mind projected an obscene sticky blackness that tried to drown us. She flew over the ground like a low-flying bird, and then teleported herself in fits, popping up all over the landscape.

We don't know what to do about Anne-Charlotte. Patrick says she is insane and not responsible. But what if her baby is insane too? Now we won't know until the baby gets mad enough to rip apart the galaxy. . . .

**Turn this book over for
second complete novel**



***the
Communipaths***
BY SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

ACE BOOKS

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New York, N.Y. 10036

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CHAPTER ONE

I AM Tessa, and this is Gentle Thursday. Usually on Gentle Thursday there is so much to do that I have no time for writing; but today is very different because this morning they came and took Anne-Charlotte's baby away. I am sorry they took the baby, because I loved it very much. And of course with Anne-Charlotte so unhappy no one can do anything but sit and try to bear it.

Patrick suggested that since I am younger and thus am less affected by Anne-Charlotte it would be a good thing if I would try to write it all out—how it happened, I mean—and then perhaps we could all read it over, what I wrote, and see if there was anything we could do. (I'm sure there isn't; the laws are very definite about babies like Anne-Charlotte's.) But Patrick thought it would be good for me, and so he tried to give me a strong motivation to keep at it. He doesn't need to do that anymore, not since I've turned ten, but it seems to be a habit he can't break.

At any rate, I'm going to try to write it all down, just as it happened, simply to please Patrick. And I must do it quickly, since I've only the Log with its little bits and scraps and notes to remind me, and Anne-Charlotte is very rapidly ruining the way I remember it with swords and flames and a sort of fan that folds and unfolds with a great slow dignity—and a lot of black, a great deal of black. Soon, if I'm not careful, between what she is doing and the attempts of the others to make her forget, I won't be able to remember it clearly enough to write about it.

I don't have much range yet, and that helps. I've come as far from the livingdomes as I'm allowed to go, and picked out a really big Anais cactus with a red parasol bloom that's big enough around to shade me perfectly, and I'm sitting here on the arm of the cactus with my feet propped up. It's far away enough that not much gets through except all that black from Anne-Charlotte, and that's only likely to make me go to sleep. Fortunately the Anais cactus is prickery to sit on, and that will keep me awake.

I loved that funny baby, I really did. I loved it as much as anyone. But I don't suppose that's the place to start, is it? The place to start would be to tell about us.

There are twenty-one of us now, a good number to be, with seven of us children, and we all live together at Chrysanthemum Bridge. We are Maklunites, and of course everyone knows about Maklunites, so I don't guess I have to explain about *that*. Or do I? Patrick said I was to pretend I was writing this for someone very far away, perhaps as far away as Saturn with its glowing rings (that's how Patrick put it), and I suppose it is possible that there might be someone on Saturn who does not know about Maklunites. On the other hand I don't want to be boring. . . . Let me see. What I must do, I guess, is put just enough about things like Maklunites and our names and what we eat and so on, and then scatter it along through the whole thing so there's never an awful lot in a clump. Then no one—this someone I am writing for, I mean—then this someone will not be tempted to skip around. I think I can manage to do that well enough.

Maklunites began on Earth, a very long time ago; I don't know just how long. And we weren't very popular there, of course, and so we moved, as far as we could go. And as more was learned about traveling

through space we moved farther and farther, and now there are a lot of us through the galaxies. My group lives on the third of the Extreme Moons, the one called 34.922.107 on the star maps. That's an awkward name, "thirty-four-point-nine-two-two-point-one-oh-seven," when you want to tell somebody where you live, and so the people who came here first renamed it Iris.

They weren't Maklunites, those first people, but they were loving people, a Mr. and Mrs. Alhafi Fez, from New-York-Complex. Mrs. Fez was very fond of flowers and the flowers of Earth (for one thing ours can move around, and they sing, and I know the flowers of Earth don't do either of those things). It's a good thing the flower Mrs. Fez liked the most was an Iris, I think. Imagine, if it had been one of those outlandish things I've read about in Patrick's big Panglish dictionary—just imagine living on a planet called Sweet Pea, or Bachelor's Button! Iris is bad enough, Patrick says, and he thinks this flower bit can be carried too far, particularly since it's become a tradition and all of the eleven settlements of Iris have names that are for flowers in one way or another. Patrick says it's getting sickening, and he thinks we ought to rename Chrysanthemum Bridge for a fish, or something, and he's probably right. I don't think it will happen though, because names just sort of grow on you, and our cluster has always been called Chrysanthemum Bridge.

Our livingdomes are beautiful, I think. Of course I've never been any farther than the next settlement and I haven't had much chance to compare it with anything, but I've seen a lot of pictures and threedies and I've never seen any reason to think the less of Chrysanthemum Bridge. In the very center is the ashram, with our altar, and I will tell more about that later. Then around that is our common room, like a ring, with our made-mantras painted over the doors so that they will

be always before our eyes. (This is the first one: TO BE SELFISH IS TO DO HARM, AND TO DO HARM IS FORBIDDEN. This is the second one: THE VISIBLE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE IS RADIANCE. This is the third one: WHAT IS NOT LOVINGKINDNESS IS NOT PERMITTED HERE. This is the fourth one: THERE IS NO STERNER DISCIPLINE THAN JOY.)

When Anne-Charlotte had her baby they say she lay beneath the second made-mantra and never ceased to smile. And now they have taken the baby away, what will she do? The baby's father died before it was born, and Anne-Charlotte had promised him that she would save it, but surely she must have known she could not. When they came for it, sending four Fedrobots for just one little baby girl, eleven months old, Anne-Charlotte tried to kill it. I heard her, even though they tried to keep me away, and she was screaming that she would kill the baby before she would let them take it to the hell they had reserved for it. She lifted the baby high into the air to dash it against the wall. But Patrick went very swiftly and he took the baby before she could hurt it, and he handed it to the tall man who came with the Fedrobots, and they were gone while I was still hearing what Anne-Charlotte had screamed.

But I was telling about Chrysanthemum Bridge. At eight points around the common room there are doors, and leading from each door is a livingdome like the big central common roomdome. It's all made from the pale yellow clay of Iris, and from the air it looks like a flower with eight petals. Patrick says that's only an accident, because if it were intentional it would be horribly "cute," but it happens to be the most practical way to build a Maklunite cluster. There are people living in seven of our eight domes, and someday, if all of

the children marry, we may have to add a second ring of livingdomes around the outside. Then again, we might all move away, though I can't imagine living anywhere else myself.

They wanted Anne-Charlotte's baby to man a Communipath station on the Bucket. They were very stern with her about it. "That baby is a very valuable and delicate piece of property," they said, as if a human being could be property! Patrick's woman put her hands over my ears when the Fedrobot said that, but then she laughed at herself and took her hands away. How am I to learn if she does things like that? And so I heard it all. They have charged Anne-Charlotte with high treason against humankind, because it is a very grave crime to have a baby alone like she did and not allow it to be registered, particularly since she knew that it would have a high Factor Q.

I don't really understand about Factor Q. I should, but I can't seem to make myself be interested in what they tell me about biology and life science and all the rest of it. I'm sure it would be good for me if I paid more attention, and perhaps I will resolve to do that soon. But not yet, because I am too busy, and because there are too many other things to learn.

But I know roughly how it goes, the Factor Q thing. Every baby, through all the three known galaxies, must be registered at its birth and given a blood test by the nearest government medical computer or inspector, whichever is closest. All those babies who have a potential for above-normal telepathic development show Factor Q in their blood at birth, and they are always taken from their parents immediately and put in the Tri-Galactic Federation Creche on Mars. (I think it used to be on Earth, but Earth is used only for agriculture now, and all the government offices are on other planets.)

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Anne-Charlotte knew her baby would have Factor Q, because both she and Drijn, its father, had been raised in the Creche themselves and had had very high Q ratings. Neither of them was released from candidacy for the Communipath network until they were eleven, and that is very late. They decided, she and the baby's father, that they would not register the baby, that they would hide it and keep it, and in a way I understand that, but it is a grave crime. If one woman is allowed to keep her baby, then how can any woman be asked to give hers up? I can see that.

I can also see how, when Anne-Charlotte had only the baby to remind her of her man, and he had died, she did not want to let them have the baby. The law about the Bucket is a cruel law; if it did not have to exist, everyone in the Three Galaxies would rejoice, Patrick says.

You see, because of the work they do the Communipaths that man the Bucket live only to the age of eighteen, very rarely to nineteen, and from the time they take over the stations at twelve until they die they are never allowed to leave their quarters. I am told that they live in incredible luxury, that they may have anything that they want merely for the asking, but what is that to them? If they were ever allowed to leave they would not return to their stations, and that is why they must be prisoners. And they all must die, in spite of everything that the doctors can do they always die, and so they must be prisoners. It is so terrible, and so sad.

Ian is our teacher, and he told us all about the Bucket. He says that long ago, on Earth, before there ever was a rocket or even a flier or a landcar, before the times we learn about in Small History, people fought fires with what was called a Bucket Brigade. They would form a line outside a burning building, from where they

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got their water up to the building itself, and they would pass buckets of water along the line and send the empty ones back to be filled. They had no hoses, no sprays, and no quicker way to move the water. And that is why the Communipath Network is called the Bucket, you see, after those bucket brigades. The stations are lined up across the Three Galaxies and the Communipaths pass information along from station to station, just like the buckets of water. We have no other way to do it, no other way to move messages across space, and so we condemn the Communipaths to death. Deliberately, knowing exactly what we are doing.

I am so glad I have no Factor Q in my blood! I have as much psibility as any normal human child, and with the usual training (plus the Maklunite training, which is much better, of course) I will be taught to use what I have. Already I am able to receive messages within a single room, if they are no more than three or four semantic units in length, and Ian says that that is very good indeed for a ten year old. I cannot send anything at all yet, of course (except, Patrick says, if I was in real danger, and then I could probably send a good loud yell for help, he says), but with more training and practice I will be able to keep from disgracing myself.

Of the twenty-one in our Maklunite cluster there are seven from the Creche, and that is a lot, because the Factor Q babies are rare. I think that is one reason that our group is so far out from the Galactic Service, and if they were closer it would be hard for them to get out of it.

As it is, Tomaso has to. I like him very much. He has a big deep voice and a curly black beard almost half-way down his chest and he is always laughing. But he has to be a Forest Ranger here on Iris because his Q rating is so high and because he comes from a family of high ratings and they watched him very closely. (I

have never seen a forest, by the way, but when I am older I will be taken on a trip to see one, and a waterfall, too. A waterfall is something I would really like to see.) But forest or not, Tomaso must be a Galactic Forest Ranger, and the government will not release him from the Service.

Patrick laughs about it. He says, "After all, Tomaso, you are paid eighty credits a month just to baby-sit some cactuses and a herd of peripatetic flowers—and eighty credits buys all our seed and enough left over to put fuel in the flier. Why do you complain?"

The trouble with Anne-Charlotte's baby was that it had so much psibility. It was like hiding a bolt of lightning to try to hide that baby. Why, when it was no more than two months old, if it wanted something to eat all of us would scream at Anne-Charlotte to hurry, because the baby made our heads hurt so badly.

"And what are you going to do with it as it gets bigger, my lady?" Patrick asked Anne-Charlotte often and often. "Any day now the Communipaths will be getting all these pretty little baby thoughts about HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HURT HURT HURT just like we do. How are you going to hide it?"

Anne-Charlotte is lovely. She has black hair in two long braids almost to her hips and her skin is the color of the Tsai bushes after the rain (and in case you never saw a Tsai bush that's a sort of pale golden brown with a shine to it). Her eyes are big and black and she has a good wide mouth that used to be always smiling until the baby's father died. When she thinks there is a sort of flicker all about her, and I could watch her move and listen to her talk and never be tired of it.

She knew what Patrick meant, about the baby, and so she took to carrying the baby with her everywhere she went, in a little net bag. No one paid any attention to that, since all of the Maklunite women carry their babies

that way most of the time anyhow. But it was good for Anne-Charlotte because she could grab the baby quick when it wanted anything and stop it from putting out all those headache-making signals.

But naturally the baby was beginning to be much too big to carry all the time. We watched it every minute, because we knew that if it wandered away and a stranger got close to it and began to hear it projecting they would know it should be in the Creche. Anne-Charlotte carried it as much as possible, and it slept in her bed curled up in her arms, and we set up a schedule during the day so that it was never alone.

Even so, something must have been getting through. It has to have been that way or they would not have come and taken the baby away. Somewhere on the Bucket one of the Communipaths heard it, poor little thing, and knew the signal wasn't anything that was supposed to be loose in the air. No signal of that strength should be anywhere but in the Creche, and since the Creche is totally shielded at all times, whoever heard the baby knew at once that something was wrong.

You know what I think, though? I think only a monster would turn in a little baby to the government. None of the Communipaths are Maklunites, of course. A Maklunite would have been glad that the little baby had escaped the Creche. A Maklunite would have carefully kept the secret of one little telepathic baby somewhere out near the Extreme Moons.

I am going to find it very hard not to hate that Communipath who told the Galactic Service about Anne-Charlotte's baby. I am going to find it very hard not to hate the four Fedrobots that came to take the baby (though that's silly, since they are like our coffee pot, or the computer that Ian uses for teaching, and hating them is a big waste of time). And most of all I am

going to find it very hard not to hate—even though hating is a bad thing—I am going to find it very hard not to hate the one human man who came and took the baby from Patrick's arms.

They called him Coyote Jones, and he did not look at all like a bad man. He was big, bigger even than Patrick, bigger even than Ian, who is the biggest in our group. He had long red hair and a red beard and I could have loved him. But I hate him. I will remember him, and someday I will take something away from him, something that he loves. Just wait and see if I don't. (And when Patrick reads that, is he ever going to be angry with me! It is bad enough for me to feel that way in any case, but on Gentle Thursday it is inexcusable.)

I expect what I had best do is go back to the living-domes and ask permission to spend the rest of this day in the ashram, because I am foul and black and dreadful inside. I thought that the writing it down might help, but it hasn't; it's only made it worse. How *could* they come and take Anne-Charlotte's baby away like that, when it is big enough to know what is happening to it, when it has heard its own mother say that it would be better dead than going with them!

I think I am going to be very, very sick.

CHAPTER TWO

COYOTE JONES handed the baby over to the director of the Infant Ward of the Tri-Galactic Federation Creche. He wished them luck with it. All he had gotten from it was a blinding headache that had very nearly forced him to turn the child over to the Fedrobots for delivery to the Creche. Only a grim determination not to be humiliated in what was already an exceptionally nasty task had kept him from doing so, and he had marched into the Creche with his teeth gritted, his stomach churning, and black lines streaking across his field of vision like jet fireworks.

"Here," he said bitterly, "here's your bloody contraband child. And never, do you hear me, never are you to involve me in such a piece of piracy, rape, and carnage as this was again! Do you understand me, Director?"

"Citizen Jones," the director snapped, "I was not the person responsible for assigning you to the task of claiming this child. I will thank you to keep both your mouth and your mind to yourself."

Coyote Jones was not much good at receiving, being able to do little more than get broad amorphous messages of distress or pleasure, but he was a mass projective telepath and his wrath was a fearsome weapon. Between the effects of the baby's totally unblocked rage and terror, and the more controlled but stronger fury of Coyote Jones, the director was hard put to it to maintain her equilibrium. She was being forced to use every bit of control and skill at blocking that she had (which was considerable, or she would not have been in charge of a ward of the Creche) and the ef-

fort of maintaining it at peak for such a length of time was exhausting her.

Coyote Jones looked at her with contempt, projected a large and regal male image of spitting—with a superbly wide trajectory—projected a second image of washing his hands, and walked out, leaving the whole thing to be dealt with by the Fedrobots. They were lucky; they were completely impervious to telepathy, having been built that way deliberately, with chemical rather than electrical circuits to make it certain.

If he had known for one moment when he got the assignment that it was an eleven-month-old baby girl that he was intended to pick up, he would have flatly refused. It was one thing to take a baby that had never seen its parents and transfer it at once to the Creche; it never knew anything else, had no life to compare with the one it had in the government facilities. But this baby was a different matter entirely. It knew its mother; it was accustomed to her arms. Worst of all it was a Maklunite baby, which meant it had been surrounded from birth with the tenderest and most intensive love that existed in the Three Galaxies. It had lived slung on its mother's back, or carried on the shoulder of someone of its Maklunite cluster-group, from its first moments of life. It had known the closest association with other humans that it was possible to know—and now it was supposed to be happy in the laboratory atmosphere that was the Crechel.

He knew perfectly well, though, that they hadn't deliberately refrained from telling him his quarry was a baby. They had not known it any more than he had. All there had been to go on was the information from the Communipaths that there had to be a telepath of incredible strength at large somewhere and untrained, because there was static on the Bucket. No one had known that it was a baby—not that it would have made

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any difference if they had. The problems would have been exactly the same:

Static on the Bucket was very dangerous. Under normal circumstances—which meant ALL circumstances, up to now—every human being in the Three Galaxies who was capable of projection of a strength that could cause disruption of the Bucket was in effect a prisoner of the government and under its literally constant surveillance. All of those with such strength were known to one another; they shared the same purpose, and most important they were trained not to interfere with one another so that information could move without obstacle. When the static had begun coming through during the past spring they had been baffled and alarmed. At first they thought one of their own number was playing a practical joke. In order to rule out that possibility, the Communipath Department had had to put the stable of Communipaths under total sedation and then revive them one at a time, and still the very first one they waked up had reported the static.

Then a freighter coming in from the Sirius Gap had tried to send a Mayday message when fire broke out in its hold, and the entire message had been scrambled with a powerful image of a golden fish. The fish and the fire, the fish and the freighter, all had been confused to such an extent in transmission that the rescue teams had arrived too late to save the freighter. And it had not mattered greatly except in financial terms, because all freighters were on automatic pilot. But what about the next time, when it was a passenger liner with four hundred people aboard?

The rogue telepath (and Coyote made a face, thinking of the tiny girl they had hung that title on) had to be found at once, found and put under government training. Whoever it was, he had to learn to control his projection, had to learn not to interfere with the vital

communication of the Three Galaxies, had to learn not to simply blast out into space with every thought indiscriminately. The Department had naturally assumed that the person responsible was a full-grown adult human, someone in whom in some freakish way a telepathic ability had developed to a greater extent than had been estimated at its birth. There had never been a known mistake in the blood test that identified Factor Q, but there could always be a first time. They had thought that perhaps this was the result of such an error, and everyone, whatever their hypothesis, had assumed that it was an adult, because the concept of untrained projection of such strength from a child was simply not within the realms of known possibility.

Various unpleasant things had been contemplated when he was given the assignment. He had been called in by Tzana Kai, ostensibly head of the Tri-Galactic Translations Bureau, Inc., handily located on an artificial asteroid near the central point of the middle galaxy. Tzana was a double agent in the ancient tradition, and she never sugarcoated anything. She had given him a list of possible nasty projects that might be involved.

"It may well be," she had said, "that this rogue telepath will not be willing to submit to government training and control."

He had nodded. He wouldn't have been willing either.

"You know it is only possible for the government to control the Communipaths as it does because they are conditioned from birth to martyrdom for the sake of mankind. This person, whoever he is, has no such conditioning, and he has tremendous power. He has it within his hands to totally wreck the communications system of the galaxy and reduce us to the state we were in before the Bucket was developed, with every message taking years, decades, even centuries to arrive."

"And if he knows this and isn't willing to become a pet?"

"You will do your best to simply render him unconscious and bring him back here for surgery. In such a situation we would not dare allow him even one instant's consciousness before the surgery, you realize."

Surgery. That meant severing all the known telepathic pathways, with the interesting side effect that it left the subject of the surgery little better than a vegetable. Charming.

"And if I can't, as you put it, render him unconscious?"

"You will have to kill him."

Tzana was a good deal tougher and harder than he was, and he hoped he never was able to match her in either quality. But he had agreed to the assignment, since it was obviously a question of the life of this one man versus the lives of all the thousands of people who might die in various accidents caused by Bucket static. It was extremely, overpoweringly obvious.

A baby, though, was most definitely not a part of the package he had thought he was buying.

And what kind of a baby could do what this baby had done? He wasn't sure he enjoyed contemplating the idea at all. A superbaby?

He had an interesting memory of the effect upon him of the baby's mother's projection of utter agony. It had been like going down for the third time into a black and slimy swamp, but not being granted the privilege of death. The swamp had been full, teeming, swarming with creatures like obscene snakes. . . . He shuddered, remembering. If the baby could do anything like that, it was not going to be sunshiny fun and games at the Creche.

Which was perhaps a good thought. Perhaps the baby would be more trouble than it was worth and they would have to release it. And then he remembered that

that could only happen with suitable alteration to the baby's brain, alteration that would leave it a happy idiot, harmless and useless, for the rest of its life.

His flier was hovering off the landing port of Tzana's asteroid, and through a fog of irritation he requested permission to land. The landing crane reached out, hooked him abruptly but neatly, cut the power to his engines, and deposited the little car efficiently on the front Terrace of Tri-Galactic Translations, Inc. A bell rang announcing his arrival, the door opened of itself, a melodious voice in the walls said, "Welcome, Citizen Jones," and Coyote's rage increased. He detested all things automatic. In his cover, which was as a traveling folk singer, he played an antique nonautomatic twentieth-century guitar. His flier had no automatic pilot except the emergency unit required by law. And next year, definitely, he was going to move to the outmost of the Extreme Moons, maybe beyond them—if there was something beyond them.

"Tzana!" he bellowed. "Where the bloody hell are you?"

She stepped out from behind a pillar of inflated plastic and stared at him with raised brows, so he stared back, up and down. She was good to look at, in spite of her age; a woman constructed along simple but satisfactory lines and well-maintained. He happened to know that she had corn-yellow hair that clung about her head in a neat shining cap, and that that well-formed head fit neatly into his hand when he wanted her to hold still while he laid her properly. She had a tendency to rush things. At the moment, however, all he could see was her face, peering out of a hooded silver tunic, a little in advance of current fashion but very becoming. Her excellent legs were in silver tights and sandals, and she looked what she was—efficient and capable—and also what she was not—chilly and uptight.

"Your cover is showing, Tzana," he said. "I can't even find your butt in that thing you've got on."

She sent various rapid images at him, all of them uncomplimentary, but all he got was a succession of purple blobs with black spots.

"You're wasting it, Tzana," he said.

"Not at all. It makes me feel better."

"Are you mad?"

"The way you came in here shouting and carrying on? This is a place of business, you know. What if I had had a client of fine sensibilities, Citizen Jones?"

He began to tell her what she could do with her clients of whatever sensibility, and he intended to make quite a project of the telling, but she interrupted him before he could get more than half started.

"Wait a minute, Coyote," she said gently. "You are really upset. What was it? Did you have to kill the rogue after all?"

She stared at him, waiting, and he let her have it all, not caring just how much it might hurt. He saw her eyes widen with shock and pain as she got it.

"Oh, dear heaven, Coyote," she said at last. "I am so sorry. I should have gone myself, but we never thought of it being a child."

"It was a little girl, less than a year old, and weighing about as much as a kitten. Thank God we spent five weeks of the trip back in hibernation, Tzana, because the last few hours after revival were hell. It didn't cling to me, you know. It was scared and mad and it just stood straight up in my lap and stared at me and hated me and gave me splitting headaches."

"Why do you keep saying 'it'? What was the baby's name?"

"It was Maklunite. They don't name their kids, Tzana, because they feel it is an invasion of freedom. They let

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the kids pick their own names when they get old enough."

"Maklunite . . . that means carried by the mother everywhere she goes, from birth, doesn't it?"

"That's right. And all the rest of it."

"I begin to see. Coyote, come in here and sit down and let's have something to drink."

He followed her through the door, and the anteroom deflated behind them, folded itself neatly into a bundle, rolled up into its pod, and was still. The room they were in was large and cool, and a houserobot appeared immediately with two long tall drinks called Birds of Paradise. Their usual effect was to convince the drinker that he, too, was a bird of paradise, and could fly. Coyote took his eagerly. He could do with feeling like a Bird of Paradise because at the moment "buzzard" was the only bird he could quite see himself resembling.

CHAPTER THREE

WHERE Anne-Charlotte walked there were thickets of the Anais cactus, from little ones only a few inches high to the giants towering fifty feet in the air. They weren't really cactus, of course, they were far more like a tree; but they *looked* like cactus, and most of them were spined like cactus, and the settlers out from Earth had named them cactus before they knew any better. In the eastern sector of the planet, where the climate was warm all year round, the colonists built their houses high up in the giant cactuses on broad platforms, but here the giants were empty except for the spreading red parasols of their flowers. All the land around Chrysanthemum Bridge was still wilderness, covered with the cactus thickets and a low cover of aromatic brush. The mobile flowers roamed here freely, apparently having learned that no trappers were allowed on Maklunite lands.

She had the thickets all to herself. She had made her way up over the red bluffs behind the livingdomes and followed the trail out into the wilderness. The members of her group rarely came out here. Not that there was anything to fear, particularly for Anne-Charlotte, for no venomous thing was able to harm her and there were no large animals on Iris. But the wilderness area was slow traveling; it took hours to get here and hours to return, and there was so much work to do in the cluster that there was rarely time for anyone to go so far.

She would not be able to return to the livingdomes that night and would have to sleep out in the open. But she didn't mind that at all, for she had plans for the night and solitude was an essential factor if they were to be successful.

Patrick was following her, she knew, because she felt the gentle touch of his mind from time to time. Always she rejected him fiercely, but she made no effort to cause him pain or difficulty. If he had really wanted to interfere with her he would have come by flier. The fact that he, too, was on foot was sufficient evidence that he simply wished to stay near her and see that she did no foolish thing.

Anne-Charlotte was not concerned about Patrick catching her. He could never keep up with her on foot, because among her psi abilities was a skill of skimming the ground lightly, never quite leaving it, never quite touching it, almost a kind of low flight, an effortless movement that carried her at easily three times the speed an ordinary human being could produce. Patrick could never reach her in time to stop her from anything she chose to do, and she was sure he knew that.

Why, then, she wondered, was he following her at all? It was unusual. No Maklunite interfered with another one, even if his purpose—which was unlikely—was to take his own life. Only if all his cluster-group had agreed that he was not capable of being responsible for his own actions would any steps be taken to limit his freedom. She knew that no such agreement had been reached by her group, because she would have been told if it had, and she would not have been allowed to leave. Very gently she would have been accompanied everywhere, probably by Ian and Freya, who together constituted their strongest pair, psychically as well as physically. Someone else would have taken over Ian's work in the cornfields, another woman would have been sent to do whatever task had been set Freya for that day, and she, Anne-Charlotte, would have found herself under at least attempted control.

She was by no means sure that it was really possible for them to control her, unless all of the other six psis in

the cluster joined against her. Perhaps not even then. She felt her strength like a fountain, playing within her, growing always, and she intended to encourage that strength. Soon, she was sure, she and the baby together would be more than strong enough for what she intended to do, though she never would have been able to accomplish it by herself. She wondered what the officials at the Creche would have done if they had known that her baby found the so-called "impenetrable" psychic shield around the Creche as easy to slip through as a piece of cheesecloth, and she hugged herself in delight at its power. Always she felt it, its thoughts completely unformed, little more than pictures, but so strong and so sure, finding her as easily as if it had still lain curled against her hip instead of in its narrow bed almost three full galaxies away.

It was beginning to get late now. Above her the other ten of the Extreme Moons were rising, balancing their ring so that they seemed flung out in an oval of silver spheres from where she stood. The wind was coming up, too, to greet them, and soon the sand would be gusting in miniature whirlwinds in the open spaces. She would have to go into a thicket, out of the wind, before very long.

Behind her Patrick was puzzled. He dared not touch her often, for if he did she would put up all her shields against him and he would lose her totally. If he continued, as he had been, merely sending an occasional light touch her way, he felt reasonably certain that even in her present state she would tolerate it, because she loved him. But what was she up to? He wondered if Drijn, had he lived, would have known what to do with her now—perhaps so, but he doubted it. She was growing, changing, and soon she would be so far beyond them they would not be able to follow her at all. He could not understand how she could possess such psi

strength and power and have escaped the Bucket! And when they asked her, she only laughed and said that she was being taught by an expert. Who? He shook his head hopelessly.

All that day after the baby had been taken away the whole cluster had stayed within the domes, except for the younger children. They had gone into the common room and seated themselves together on the floor, all their hands touching, so that they could amplify even the feeble psibility of those of them who were not Factor Q's, and they had ridden out the storm of agony that Anne-Charlotte had loosed on them. It had been a terrifying ordeal. It had even reached out to the child Tessa where she sat writing and brought her back to the livingdome in terror at the blackness within herself, since being a child she had not realized that it was not she herself but Anne-Charlotte who was creating all that evil. It had been worse than anything they had known, worse than the storm when her man had died, but nowhere in its content, nowhere in the thoughtwinds that she had sent screaming through the cluster, nowhere had there been an indication that she planned to harm herself in any way or that she was not in control of her actions.

It was customary in Maklunite clusters for each Thursday, Gentle Thursday, to be spent by the entire cluster-group in an attempt to make some tangible dent in the misery that many lived in throughout the Three Galaxies. All other work, all activities performed for the cluster itself, were suspended on that day in favor of work done for others who needed help, of whatever kind. Anne-Charlotte had canceled that particular Gentle Thursday for them, however. They had had no choice but to bear what she did to them, and ordinarily such selfishness would have brought down the full weight of their disapproval upon her.

It was not that Anne-Charlotte could not have avoided what she did. She could have done so easily. She was by far the strongest single psi in the cluster. She could have shielded them against the worst of her pain if she had chosen to do so. In her agony, though, she simply had not cared about them, and though they would have preferred her otherwise, still they had understood. No one had reproached her. And through the weeks that followed, while the baby had lain in hibernation on the government ship that took it to the Creche, they had been gentle with her. She had seemed calm, more calm than they had expected her to be.

And now today, the third day after the baby's return to normal animation, she had suddenly taken off by herself at dawn without a word to anyone. Why?

It was, of course, possible that all she wanted was a chance to be by herself. Out here she was beyond the reach of all their thoughts, since only the two of them, her and himself, had a telepathic range of more than a few miles. Because the Maklunites lived in such close communion it did at times happen that one of them felt an overpowering lust for total solitude, and at such times a Maklunite would go out from his group, beyond their sight and their range, and remain there alone until he felt once more ready for group life. If that was Anne-Charlotte's intention he would leave her at once and no one of their cluster would presume to go near her until she returned to them of her own volition. It certainly was possible that that was the case; she had had a very difficult time since Drijn died. First his death, and then the birth of the baby, and then the tension trying to hide it. . . . It had been bad for her. And she had lain with no man since Drijn had grown sick, though all of them had offered willingly; even Tomaso, who tended to be reluctant to go to anyone but his woman Naomi, had seen the need growing in her and

asked her to let him help her, and still she had refused. It had all been bad for her.

And yet, nothing in her mind made him even half sure that it was simply a need to be away from their constant closeness that had brought her out here. He decided to stay with her a while yet and see what happened.

Anne-Charlotte had found an ideal spot for her activity. Here a single giant cactus loomed forty feet high, and around it had grown a sort of family of smaller ones, so that their combined flowers made a great circle of roofed shade. The cacti were so thick and so close together, ringing about their central pillar, that she was completely isolated. If a real sandstorm should come up this night the bubble-tent she had brought in her net bag would be ample protection for her in this strong circle. It made a natural ashram, and only the altar was lacking.

She looked about her until she found a flat stone, whorled in gold and green spirals like all the rocks of the wilderness, and she considered it carefully. It was not really heavy, it could not have weighed more than fifty pounds, and the distance from the spot where it lay and the base of the giant central cactus was only a hundred yards.

She laid down her net bag, closed her eyes tightly, and drew all the strands of her mind into a single golden knot back of her eyes. Holding her breath, she set an image of the base of the cactus pillar upon that knot. She brought her full strength to bear upon it until she was able to leave it, confident that it would remain.

The stone was next. Carefully, slowly, because this was more difficult, she created in her mind the image of the stone, ignoring the baby's distant pleasure in the colors, seeing with intensity each whorl, each fold of

green into the gold matrix, making it as real as her hand or her foot.

Now, to place the stone at the base of the cactus, it would only be necessary to bring the two images together . . .

With Anne-Charlotte's horrified scream, slashing on and on into the air, Patrick's mind was torn by two images. The first was of a falling cactus, smashed by the impact of fifty pounds of stone slamming into it on a trajectory toward the great central one. The second image was of Anne-Charlotte's baby, torn and bleeding from the cactus spines as she slammed into them like the stone had done.

Anne-Charlotte stared at the smashed cactus, knowing now that Patrick would be upon her as fast as he could reach her. She had not intended for one instant to let him guess what it was she intended to do, but she had overestimated her strength and skill, and when she had failed to teleport the stone high enough for it to clear the ring of cacti the thought of a similar failure with the baby had thrown her off her guard. And that had been foolish. After all, when she teleported her baby out of the Creche it would be vastly different, because the baby would be helping her, and it was far stronger than she was. Damn!

It would take Patrick a while to get to her, but there was no point in fleeing. He would only get the flier and follow her, and he would bring all the other psis along to help him find her. She was strongest, but not strong enough to escape the six of them on foot when they were flying. Her only hope now was to convince them that she was right to do what she did, and then perhaps they would all help her.

She had been a fool to give herself away so easily, and she was disgusted. If she had only been more careful Patrick would soon have left her and returned

to the cluster and she would have been free to do as she chose.

She had meant to fast, first of all, so that her mind would be clear and her body free of all impurity. She had meant to practice the skill of teleportation, something she rarely had occasion to do and was by no means good at, beginning with very small objects and working gradually to larger ones, beginning with small distances and increasing them a little at a time. But in her folly and her overconfidence she had destroyed all chance of such a program, unless the rest of the cluster was willing to help her and would agree to her plan.

She knew the baby would help. She could feel it, always rocking gently inside her mind, clinging to her psi-presence as it had clung to her body when she had had it near her. The tiny feelers of its thoughts were not very clear, they were mixed with a strange freight of terror and hatred and frustration, but all of them were so strong, so incredibly strong.

Anne-Charlotte knew what that had to mean. It meant her baby was something very different, something new, something special. Even the strongest of the Communi-paths, although ordinary distances were irrelevant to them, could not pass stellar distance alone. That was why it took eleven stations, carefully spaced, to span three galaxies. And this one little baby, all alone and untrained, was tossing its thoughts across the full expanse of the known universe as easily as it would throw a handful of sand in play.

She was confident that she would be able to reach it and make it understand what was needed for it to come to her again. The baby would provide the strength and she would provide the knowledge, if not at the first try then very soon, and the Creche would unknowingly

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help her, too, because they would be training the baby there.

Remembering the Creche, she laughed softly. What puny beings she and her fellow prisoners had been compared to this baby that was held there now! She would have given a great deal if she could have been there, if she could have seen how the directors and their doctors and their experts—and most of all, their psicomputers—reacted when faced with the baby that she and Drijn had brought into this world!

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the cactus to wait, resigned for the moment to her failure. It was only a temporary delay, she was sure of that. She would convince them all, they would help her, they *must* help her. And if they would not agree willingly, she was sure there were other things that she and the baby could do, together, that would convince them.

CHAPTER FOUR

TODAY has been a day to try to remember. You would not think it, to look at the entry in the Log, though! It has only the day's date, and then it says, "On this day the woman Ledyce was considered for Choosing and was rejected by us. It was felt by all of us that she would be only a source of trouble at Chrysanthemum Bridge and that at this time our difficulties with Anne-Charlotte make it impossible for us to attempt to heal her of the characteristics that caused us to reject her. She went away very disappointed and we regret it that we caused her sorrow. Both Patrick and Anne-Charlotte were absent from the Choosing Meeting, but both have affirmed our decision since their return.

It would look to an outsider reading our Log as if Patrick and Anne-Charlotte had perhaps merely gone to the next settlement to borrow something or out to work in the fields. But of course an outsider would not know how rare it is to have a Maklunite absent from a Choosing. I wanted to add something to the Log to make the real excitement of the day clear, but I was firmly put down by everyone else and told to write it all down myself as usual if I wanted every detail recorded.

That's easy to say, of course; it's not so easy to do. I guess I will just say that this happened and then this happened and then this happened, until I come to the end of the happenings. There are a lot of times when I wish I were like the other kids and interested in something that did not take so much time. This writing things takes hours and hours, and Patrick will not let me take one of the recorders and just dictate it instead of writing it down. He's very strict about that. "You

will not value what you do if it is so easy for you, Tessa," he says to me. "It must come hard so that you will take great care, so that each word will matter to you as you set it down." He is right, of course, and so here I am putting down one letter at a time, hour after hour. I also wish that he would be wrong just once in a while.

Anyhow, the woman Ledyce arrived just after dawn this morning. She wore a Choosing garment, but she had not made it herself, even I could tell that. You could see the machine stitches. It was a long full shift, falling almost to her feet, with full sleeves and a hood, made of scarlet syntholinen, and sewn instead of just extruded, so that it would look more like a handmade garment. Except that no handmade garment ever had stitches of such regular irregularity. It had a wide border of herons embroidered in silver and gold. I liked the garment very much, and I will remember that border of herons for a long time, but I think we all knew at once when we saw that it had been made for her by machines that she was not for us. Still, she had a right to the Choosing Meeting, and I could feel Patrick's stern admonition in my mind. "She is not to be prejudged—there may be many reasons for her coming in such a garment."

I couldn't imagine what the reasons could be, though. After all, if she had many duties and her hours were just too full to allow her to make her own Choosing dress she could have simply come to us naked. Many Maklunite candidates do just that, and there is no prejudice against it. You have two choices, you see. Either you prepare a garment, as beautiful as your own hands can make it, as proof of your desire to be a thing of beauty and industry in the cluster you want to Choose and be Chosen by, or you come with only your body, because you feel that nothing you could prepare could be as beautiful as that which you were given at your

birth. You make a beautiful garment for the Choosing to do honor to the cluster you want to join, to show that the occasion is as important to you as it ought to be, since it can mean your whole life from that day on. Or you make none, and celebrate your body for its own loveliness. There are things to be said for each course, and if the day should come when I want to join another cluster instead of stay here—which I can't imagine my doing, but if it should—then I don't know which of the two things I would do. It would take a lot of thinking to decide.

What the woman Ledyce had done, however, was something else entirely. She had purchased a garment to make herself beautiful. None of her own time had gone into its preparation, it had no more meaning for her than something she would have worn to a party or to any social gathering. It was chosen to feed her own vanity, not to give pleasure to our eyes.

We all heard Patrick, just at the edge of the wilderness, as we began the Choosing. I still have trouble recognizing some of the mindvoices of the others when they are beyond a very short distance, but Patrick I can always recognize. It's very odd, how you can only *hear* the voice from the throat, but the voice of the mind has a certain look to it and a certain taste, and I am told that there are some people who have mindvoices that bear with them a perfume as well, although I have never known one. Patrick was much too far away for me to be able to understand the details of what he was telling the others who are better at psi, and I was terribly frustrated, but I could not ask aloud what he was saying. Sally heard me wanting to and the instructions she gave me about what such a demonstration of bad manners would get me made my whole mind sting. Later, though, she told me that he had said that all of his attention was going to be needed to follow Anne-Char-

lotte and that they were simply to go ahead and make their decision without either him or Anne-Charlotte to help.

We were all in the ashram wearing our best in honor of the occasion, and I was feeling almost pretty, although I'm not at all. I had a new tunic to wear, and Mark had made me a new necklace of the beautiful beads he carves from the seeds of our trek-apples. Each bead was carved differently, each in a wonderful curving and rippling pattern that made me think of folded flowers or the threedies I have seen of the oceans of Earth. Mark can make more beautiful things than almost any one of us, and he is only thirteen. When he is a grown man, he is going to do great things and we all have such hopes for him. (And I am not supposed to be writing about how I looked, but about what happened—whatever is the matter with me today?)

Ian and Freya went to the woman Ledyce, and welcomed her, holding her close and giving her a cup of our own wine that we make from the juice of the cactus. Then they led her to the place of honor in the center of the room and had her sit down, and then the Choosing Meeting began.

"Do you prefer ordinary speech, Ledyce-who-comes-to-us-for-Choosing, or do you wish mindspeech?" Ian asked her first.

"Ordinary speech," she said at once, "so that all may understand."

I was glad of that, since I would not have been able to follow as well if it had been mindspeech.

"And why do you come to Chrysanthemum Bridge?" asked Freya.

The woman bit her lip, and we could see that she was nervous, but no one is allowed to interfere at a Choosing. The one who comes to be Chosen must manage alone, by whatever arts he has at his com-

mand, to convince the cluster that it should Choose him. So we all waited until Ledyce mastered her trembling and began to speak.

"I have been rejected by three clusters," she said sadly. "At each I have been found wanting and sent away. I have lost confidence in my own reasons."

"Perhaps then," said Ian, "you should accept the judgment of the others and find some other solution for your lifespending."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I must and will be a Maklunite; it is the only thing that I have ever wanted to do with my life."

"Explain to us, then, why you feel that way."

"I want to be of use," she said, so softly we could hardly hear her. "I want to help."

"That is a good reason," said Ian, "because the galaxies have great need of people with that desire. But there are many other ways of accomplishing it. Why do you come to us?"

Ledyce shook her head and began to cry.

My heart ached for her, but I knew it was no use. If she could not even tell us why she was here, it meant probably that she really did not know why, and that she was simply seeking help. Perhaps she would be potentially someone who we could all love and who could love us, perhaps she would be valuable to the cluster somewhere, but at this time we could not possibly take her even on probation, we all knew that. Anne-Charlotte and Ledyce both? The very thought was horrifying.

"Please," she said at last, while we stood grieving for her. "I am strong and healthy, and I work hard. I know three of the Ancient Tongues and I can dance and sing and play all of the new instruments. I would be good for all of you, I know I would. Chrysanthemum Bridge is

beautiful now, but I would make it more beautiful still. All of your men would find my body a pleasant place to be. I know how to make perfumes and bake bread, I have skills of carving and weaving . . ."

It went on for quite a while, and I kept feeling more and more miserable. What if at my own Choosing time I should act like this poor woman? None of the things she was saying was an answer to the question that had been asked. We had to know why she wanted to choose us, not just why she thought we should Choose her.

When she was quiet at last, Ian tried one more time.

"We must know," he said, "why you wish to Choose us. Until we know that I am afraid that it does not matter what skills you have, though all the things you have told us would be pleasant and useful. Why have you come to us? We must know that, Ledyce."

She stood there without saying a word, her head drooping.

"Ledyce," said Freya, "if you cannot put your thoughts into words, would you agree to open your mind to us? Perhaps we could then understand what you cannot say."

The woman shook her head firmly.

"No," she said. "No, I will not allow that."

"This cluster is very close," said Freya. "We are as much one person as we are twenty-one. If you could not share your mind with us you would be unhappy here, because you would be left out of so many things."

"Then you reject me, too?"

Her voice was dead, flat and empty of hope, and I wanted so much to go put my arms around her and tell her that of course she could stay. I felt Sally's forbidding like a bar across my chest and stood where I was, but I didn't want to obey her. Poor, poor Ledyce, to be rejected four times!

"We have trouble here now, among our own," said

Ian gently. "If it were not like that perhaps we would try to take you in for a little while, perhaps we would be able to help you overcome the fear you have of mindsharing. But not now, not at this time. All of our strength is going to be needed in the next few months to deal with all the problems we already have. I am so sorry, Ledyce."

She went away without making any fuss or quarreling about our decision, and we were left feeling that we had hurt someone who had been hurt too many times before. It was only the second Choosing I had ever been to, and the first one—when Gdal and Jonathan had come to us—had been such a time of joy. We had taken a three-day holiday then to celebrate their coming, and I still remember how happy we were, even if I *was* only five then. I had been looking forward to this, looking forward to having a new mind to know, a new voice to hear, someone else to love and to love me, and to have it end like this made me heartsick.

We all went to change, then, without talking, most of us staying naked because it was so warm except for the ones who had to go work among the cactus. You could not go naked in the Anais fields, not unless you enjoyed being continually stuck with pins; and so Naomi had worked out for us a garment much like the Choosing garment, that covered you all over but was loose everywhere so that you could move to work. There isn't anything you can do, of course, to actually cultivate the cactus, they just grow on their own, but you do have to keep the weeds out from between them, and Maklunites do not use any sort of chemicals to kill the weeds. We pull them up, one at a time. And many of the vegetables that are native to Iris grow best when they are planted in among the cactus, and of course they *do* need tending.

All that day long we worked quietly, saddened by

the morning. And the fact that Patrick and Anne-Charlotte were still away didn't do anything to help. It was so miserable that in midafternoon Ian called us all into the domes for music and a togetherness. We were sitting and singing the old ballads, listening with great pleasure to Jonathan, who knows all the old space songs, when they finally came back.

Freya heard them first and told the rest of us. I couldn't hear them for a long time, but most of the grown-ups did, and of course Mark did, because he is a Factor Q and has been trained far more than the rest of us.

"They are all right," Sally said. "At least we know they are all right."

"But Anne-Charlotte's mind—"

They switched to mindspeech then, showing each other things, and I sat there, frustrated, getting a word now and then, and fuming, wishing they would hurry up and get within my range. I've just got to get more practice, and that's all there is to it, I've got to spend less time writing and a lot more time working with Mark or some of the other kids. It's horrible to know that a whole conversation is going on around your head and not be able to share it except for little tags and pieces. Mark was grinning at me, so I knew that he knew perfectly well how fussed I was, and then he stopped grinning and looked completely shocked and I knew that whatever I was missing was something dreadful.

Usually the grown-ups are not so inconsiderate of us; usually they do not use just mindspeech when we are together in a group any more than they would speak in an ancient tongue or pass one another private notes. I knew it had to be something dreadful that had made them forget their manners so completely.

"Tessa?"

"Yes, Mark," I mindspoke silently, thinking the words as carefully and as clearly as I could. I knew he wouldn't really get them because I couldn't send properly and he was trying to listen to all the other conversations going on while he dealt with me; but he would be able to interpret my thought as a semantic unit for agreement.

"I'll tell you what it is as well as I can. If I am going too fast you'll have to stop me."

"All right," I thought again.

"Patrick and Anne-Charlotte were up in the wilderness, out beyond the bluffs, and there was some kind of accident. I don't really understand, except that no one is hurt, and it had something to do with the baby."

"But the baby isn't here!" I thought, forgetting he would get only something like a noise of distress.

"I *told* you I didn't understand," he thought crossly. "I'm doing the best I can." And then he went on, scolding, "You are going to have a terrible mindvoice! It hurts my head to listen to you, even now when you can't *say* anything!"

I didn't try to answer, because I knew it was true. I had been told often enough. It's just that I get excited and I forget about being gentle and about being careful, and I guess what I do is about the equivalent of screaming in somebody's ears, and not very clear or interesting screaming at that.

"I want to listen now," Mark thought at me. "You be quiet and you should hear them pretty soon; they're not far away now."

I strained as hard as I could, and made my head hurt doing it, but I couldn't hear a thing except the quick flashing that was the grown-ups. They don't think in words like I do, they just think in big pieces that everyone understands at once in the same way, and Ian says that I may be able to talk that way too one day. (And

then again I may not; normal possibility is usually pretty much restricted to words, and normal is all I am, and I might as well resign myself to it.)

Finally, when I had begun to think they would never get there, I felt them, just at the outside edge of my range, and then I heard them coming in the door, and it hit me all at once.

Dimly, I heard Patrick shouting, "Stop that, Anne-Charlotte! Stop that at once! Look what you are doing to the children!" But I couldn't really pay any attention to what he was saying, I was drowning in something black and sticky, and there were screaming things whipping round my head like the sandstorms, and someone was pushing me, pushing me down, down, down into the black and the black was screaming and had little sticky hands with claws—and that is all I remember, because I fainted.

When I woke up I was lying out in the grass where they had carried me, and someone had put my necklace of carved beads into my hand. Patrick was sitting beside me, looking patient and tired and loving, and he smiled when he saw that I was awake.

"That was pretty silly of me," I said. (And it was. I'm pretty big to be knocked over that way by Anne-Charlotte's dramatics, especially since I've had a chance to hear them all before.)

"I don't think so," he said. "Anne-Charlotte is very strong, and she is getting stronger all the time."

"There's something the matter with her, isn't there?"

He didn't answer me for a long time. I could hear the love-thinking in his mind, and I knew how sad he must be.

"Yes," he said finally. "There's something very, very wrong with Anne-Charlotte. It's a sickness that is almost gone from the Galaxies, the Light be praised, and I never thought to see it in my lifetime."

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"What is it called, Patrick?"

"Insanity, sweet. Madness."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I've heard of that. In the books."

"Well, I suppose that's what it must be. In one way, though, it may be a blessing."

I was shocked.

"How could that be, Patrick?" I asked.

"Because we may be able to save her life, Tessa. If she was mad when she had the baby and tried to hide it, they cannot accuse her of treason."

"I see! But what would they do with her then?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew the answer to that, Tessa, but I don't. I have to find out."

"And then we have to have a meeting."

"That's right."

He stood up, then, and dropped a cactus blossom onto my chest.

"You lie there a minute," he said, "and then when you feel better come on inside. We've put our private mindstorm to sleep for a while."

And I guess that's the end of the things that happened. At least for today.

CHAPTER FIVE

FILE 374.10.b, Segment 1114

TOPIC: Q Factor Aberrations

FROM: Nysse Falconer, Directress Infant Ward, Communipath Creche GALCENTRAL, STATION 11

TO: Communipath Control Committee Galactic Council GALCENTRAL, STATION 14

DATE: Mayfourth, 3018

1. The subject of this report is the present charge of the infant ward of the Communipath Creche, daughter of the Q Factor Aberrant Anne-Charlotte (member of the Maklunite Cluster called Chrysanthemum Bridge, on the Planet 34.922.107—colloquial name Iris.) This infant is as yet unnamed, in accordance with Maklunite custom, for which see the Maklunite Texts, Vol. 2, Sec. 13, Paragraph 4, and will be subsequently referred to in this report as Subject Infant.

2. Reference is made to the history of Q Factor Aberrant Anne-Charlotte, Communipath Creche Report File 374.10.a, Segment 391, from which we quote as follows:
We find Anne-Charlotte, subject of this report, to be mildly aberrant in that (1) she has consistently refused to respond normally to those portions of Creche training intended to induce the fondness for luxury which is so significant to the later tolerance of Communipath status, and (2) she has consistently resisted indoctrination in the Romeo-Juliet Myth Syndrome, also requisite for such tolerance. Such abberant tendencies, while not in any way danger-

ous to subject or to society, do make subject unfit for Communipath function, and inasmuch as subject's Q Factor, though high, is not of any such extraordinary highness as to justify an attempt at psychosurgery to correct the aberration, it is therefore recommended that subject be released from the Communipath Creche on her own recognizance after suitable indoctrination erasure.

We further quote as follows:

Subject Anne-Charlotte on Decembersixth 3008 was reported to this agency by the teachers at Galschool 840 (Special Wing) to be consistently untrainable and untractable as a productive member of Standard Culture society. It was recommended to this agency that the subject be released in the custody of the nearest Maklunite Cluster in accordance with her own wish; psychoprobe indicates that despite a certain rebellious profile she is correct in her own estimate that the life of a Maklunite would be the most appropriate for her. She was therefore released from Galschool 840 on Decembertwentieth 3008 to the Maklunite Cluster Sunfish.

Subsequent reports on Aberrant Anne-Charlotte indicated maximally satisfactory adjustment, as would be expected in view of the high probability factor in her case. No further entries are in the subject's file with the exception of the normal reference to her voluntary transfer to the Maklunite Cluster Chrysanthemum Bridge upon her forming a sexual relationship with Q Factor Aberrant Drijn. (See Communipath Creche Report File 374.10.a, Segment 382.)

NOTE: It is perhaps at this point that a certain laxness could be attributed to Communipath Control; however (see Wergenhoff, Vol. 9, Chap. 3; also Xthpa, Vol. 2, Chap. 4; also Standard, Vol. 11, Chap. 2, Cap. 9) experience in sexual alliances between Q Factor

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Aberrants has not previously been observed to lead to aberrancy in the offspring of such alliances, since the aberrant factors do not appear to be inherited to any significant extent. END OF NOTE.

3. Reference is made to the history of Q Factor Aberrant Drijn, Communipath Creche Report File 374.10.a, Segment 382. (See also note above.) We quote as follows:

We find Drijn, subject of this report, to be mildly aberrant in that he shows abnormal resistance to indoctrination in the Esprit-de-Corps Myth Syndrome requisite to satisfactory adjustment to future Communipath status. Subject Drijn is abnormally individualistic and independent. It is further noted that subject is of frail health and probably could not stand up physically under the strain of Communipath duty to even the unfortunate limited extent that is normally expected. It is therefore recommended, despite the very high Q Factor subject possesses, that he be released from the Communipath Creche on his own recognizance after suitable indoctrination erasure.

Further reports on Aberrant Drijn record his release from Galschool 3722 (Special) to the Maklunite Cluster Chrysanthemum Bridge, his subsequent sexual alliance with Q Factor Aberrant Anne-Charlotte (see above) and his death in 3016 at that Cluster.

4. No reference is made to birth records of the Infant Subject of this report inasmuch as said birth was illegal and unregistered. However, information available from those of the Maklunite Cluster Chrysanthemum Bridge who were present at the infant's birth give its birth date as Aprilninth, 3017. The subject is at this time, then, twelve months, three weeks, four days, of age,

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and has been confined in the Infant Ward at Galcentral, Station 11, since Aprilfourth of this year. Charges of high treason against humankind (See Forthright, Vol. 23, p. 809; also see Galactic Statute 11,313.26-a.ii) have been brought against Infant Subject's mother with reference to the illegal and unregistered birth. (For discussion of these charges and their legal proceedings see Galcentral File 19348, Segment 11.)

5. Reference is made to the report of the PsiComputer on Subject Infant, from which we quote as follows:

Subject Infant has been given the usual battery of examinations by computer and results have been correlated to produce its psi-profile. Results are the following:

Q FACTOR	99
TELEPATHY (PROJECTION)	81
TELEPATHY (RECEIVING)	83
RANGE LIMIT	No known limit
DURATION LIMIT	No known limit
TELEKINESIS	78
RANGE LIMIT	No known limit
DURATION LIMIT	No known limit
GENERALIZED PSIBILITIES	99

It should be noted that there are a number of complicating factors in this report from the computer. First, the percentile figures are, as is customary with a subject of this age, intended to represent potential and not actual performance. It is of course most difficult to measure actual performance with an infant who cannot as yet speak, whose attention span is necessarily limited, and so on. (For a discussion of techniques for psi-testing in infants see Neona, *PSI-Testing in Infants*: see also Galcenter Bulletin 11,286.) We should like to sug-

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gest caution in the interpretation of these projected percentile limits, since it appears that they are so far beyond the norm (on the usual scale of 100 maximum) that it is difficult to take them seriously. On the other hand, the psicomputers are not given to fantasy or error. We suggest that judgment on these projected figures be reserved, in view of the normal projection profile for the Q Factor child. An average profile is cited for purposes of comparison, as follows:

Q FACTOR	36
TELEPATHY (PROJECTION)	43
TELEPATHY (RECEIVING)	57
RANGE LIMIT	one-fourth galactic dimension
DURATION LIMIT	three hours
TELEKINESIS	13
RANGE LIMIT	30 meters
DURATION LIMIT	2 minutes
	13 seconds
GENERALIZED PSIBILITES	40

It should be noted that the above profile is considered high normal and would indicate an infant who would probably prove capable of Communipath function. A comparison with the putative profile for the Infant Subject of this report will show the basis for the caution urged. It is, in fact, not really possible to determine just what such scores as are alleged for Subject Infant would mean. There is no question, of course, but that special and close attention must be given Infant Subject, and that all the facilities of the Creche must be brought to bear upon her training.

6. Reference is made to the report on the behavior of

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Subject Infant submitted by Wardmistress Jane Partridge, as follows:

This child appears to be absolutely intractable. It will not respond to normal stimulus and the impression that is received by the teachers is one of deliberate willful refusal to participate in normal infant activities of the creche. Subject Infant ignores any and all stimuli presented to it, refuses to acknowledge sensory notice of music, light, color, presence of other children, and so on. However, a complete physical examination indicates that Subject Infant has normal sensory perception. We would be inclined to say—as a result of simple exasperation—that this is a very NAUGHTY child; however, in view of the fact that there is no data whatever available with regard to the traumatic effects of separating a Factor Q infant from its parents so long after birth, naughtiness and willfulness simply cannot be seriously attributed to this child. It is recommended that every conceivable scientific effort be made to minimize trauma in this case; in particular, vigilant supervision of personnel is indicated to assure that they do not allow fatigue or exasperation to cause them to misinterpret Subject Infant's behavior.

Reference is made to the fact that the longest known interval for separation of a Factor Q child from its parents is a matter of some twenty-seven minutes, this previous occasion having been due to a premature birth occurring to parents on an asteroid where there was no Galactic Inspector Medical Computer, necessitating dispatch of one by relay rocket. The normal interval between birth of the baby and separation is about two minutes, and current research indicates that within the next few years a method of determining presence of Factor Q while

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infant is still unborn may make even that brief interval briefer.

7. It is noted for the record that all recommendations made by personnel and computers with regard to this Subject Infant will be scrupulously followed. It is also noted that the government finds the entire circumstances of this situation repugnant and feels that an example should be made of the Infant Subject's mother, Factor Q Aberrant Anne-Charlotte, in order to prevent any such situation from arising in the future. It is felt that punishment of the utmost severity consistent with the principles of humane treatment of criminals and aberrants should be administered to the woman despite the very natural tendency to sympathize, since any other course might well lead to an attempt by other mothers of Factor Q babies to follow her example.

NOTE: Synthesis of all data in this file by Central Computer indicates that actual repetition of this situation is unlikely by a factor of 10^{13} to 1 odds, which is reassuring. Nonetheless, all precautions must be taken, since the odds against it happening once were also of astronomical magnitude. END OF NOTE.

END OF REPORT

PS: Buzzy, this poor little baby is absolutely pitiful; she'd break your heart. She just lies there and stares straight ahead with those huge brown eyes and wants her mother. This whole thing stinks.

Nysse

CHAPTER SIX

"ANN-CHARLOTTE," said Patrick, "we are prepared to listen to what you have to say. I warn you, though, that if you try again to perform as you did yesterday, we will put you to sleep again. We will not tolerate any more obscenity before these children."

Anne-Charlotte laughed softly, hugging her knees to her chest and letting her eyes close for a moment to hide the confidence in them.

"Are you sure," she asked, triumph smothered in her voice, "are you sure that you *can* overpower me?"

"All of us together? Of course we can."

She shook her head. "Don't be sure, Patrick," she said. "I advise you not to be so sure, not to be sure at all. I advise you to go very slow. You remember what I did with that big boulder out in the wilderness, Patrick?"

She turned her head and swept them all with her eyes. "Did he tell all of you what I did?"

"He says," answered Naomi, "that you lifted a boulder weighing fifty pounds or more and flung it through the air into a cactus a hundred yards away, and did it with such force that you smashed the cactus to a pulp."

"And that I did it by telekinesis alone!" Anne-Charlotte exulted. "You all know that?"

"We know that, Anne-Charlotte," said Ian. "Why insist on it so? Telekinesis is not so rare as all that."

"Really? Could you do what I did?"

He didn't answer her, and she laughed again. "Of course you couldn't! You have more psibility than anyone in the cluster except for Patrick and me, and you would be hard put to it to move a slice of bread from the plate to your fingertips! You don't know anything about it!"

"And so? What does that mean to us?"

"It means that you should be careful, all of you! How do you know I will not do to you just what I did with that stone?"

There was a silence in the room, then—it fairly rang with the silence—because all of them knew, with a sick certainty, that there was that possibility. They could not believe it, would not believe it, but they didn't really know. Not one of them could have moved that stone. And the silence was doubly oppressive, because they dared not use mindspeech either. Their minds were as open to Anne-Charlotte as their faces and none of them believed for an instant in his ability to shield his thoughts against her, not with the strength she had.

"Are you going to talk to us, Anne-Charlotte," Patrick asked at last, "or are you just going to threaten us? If that's all you intend then none of us is willing to stay. There is work that needs to be done, a great deal of work, and if we wanted to take time for something else this is not how we would choose to spend it. Make up your mind, Anne-Charlotte—either speak to us reasonably or we will end this meeting now and go on to other things."

She looked around at them, setting her glance on each of them in turn as they sat in a circle around the walls of the common room. "I don't really need a meeting," she said, talking almost to herself. "If I choose I can force you to hear anything I have to say, whether you like it or not, whether you are working in the fields or at the looms or in the schoolroom or out in the desert. Don't you know that?"

"Choose that, then," said Patrick abruptly, standing up. "At least while we listen we can get some work done."

"Sit down, Patrick," she said at once. "Sit down and

listen. I have no desire to make everyone angry with me."

"Then you must at least make a pretense of consideration."

She looked at him carefully, the light that shimmered about her coming and going, with the violence of her thought, and they all held their breaths. That she was mad they did not doubt; there could be no question of that. For a Maklunite to threaten violence to a member of his own cluster was the depth of madness; had she done nothing else at all, that would have adequately demonstrated her condition. But what sort of madness was this—in a mind such as hers? What were they to do with her?

"You are to help me," she snapped. "That's what you are to do with me! I am of your own cluster, we are of one mind, you must help me!"

"Give us a chance to do so, then," said Tomaso gently. "Explain what it is that you want to do."

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, and then she said it all at once.

"I want to teleport my baby out of the Creche."

Across the room Sally's hands came up and covered her face; the gasps of the other women were almost simultaneous. Only Patrick was unmoved by the announcement, since he had had his shock the day before.

"Say that again, Anne-Charlotte," said Johan, and they all turned in surprise. Johan was very quiet; he almost never spoke, and his psibility was little better than the children's. He spent his time doing something none of them understood with a complicated set of equations and a stack of old books; and even Valya, the woman who lived with him, knew most of what she knew about him because his mind was always open to her. He was upset, or he would not have spoken.

"I said," Anne-Charlotte repeated, "that I want to

teleport my baby out of the Creche. Out of the Creche and back here to me. I think that's clear enough."

"Anne-Charlotte," Sally cried, "that baby is not *your* baby! It does not belong to you!"

"And I suppose you do not call Patrick 'your' man?" Anne-Charlotte snapped. "I suppose Tomaso does not call Naomi 'his' woman?"

"Anne-Charlotte," said Patrick, his voice very stern and cold, "you are a Maklunite. You have been with us since you were a young girl. You know very well that this is nothing more than a manner of speaking, a way of naming. To say 'my' woman, 'my' man, is only a way of saying 'the person I prefer to be with above all others.' It does not and cannot mean possession!"

"I don't care," Anne-Charlotte bristled. "I don't care at all. The baby is part of me."

"As all of us are part of you."

"It's not the same thing."

"But the baby is needed, Anne-Charlotte, it is needed for the very existence of humanity. Very, very few of all the billions born throughout the Three Galaxies are able to do the task that it will do. You must not try to prevent that."

"You hate me, all of you!" Anne-Charlotte cried.

"Nonsense," said Tomaso. "We love you. We love you with all our hearts."

"But you aren't letting me explain!"

"Explain then. Tell us."

"Let me use mindspeech only!"

"No." Patrick shook his head, seconded by the others. "That would not be fair to the children."

"Why must I be fair to the children? What concern is it of theirs?" she demanded. "It is too slow, too clumsy, to have to put in all the words. Why not write letters? Why not carve out words in stone? It's just as bad!"

Patrick sighed. "Anne-Charlotte," he said slowly, "I

will say to you once again, and for the last time, that you will either observe the rules of this cluster, as they are observed by the rest of us—in which case we will listen to you, and you will explain in a manner that is intelligible to the youngest and the least of us—or else we will close this meeting and go about our business and we will hear what you force upon us if we must, but we will not be favorably disposed to consider what you ask of us.”

He looked about him, anxious for the children, knowing from the expressions on their faces that Anne-Charlotte was filling their heads with her usual inventory of lights and noises and frightening shapes. They had to learn to deal with it, of course, because she was one of their own; but it was bad for them, and the rest would have to work to undo the harm she did.

“Well, Anne-Charlotte?” he asked. “What do you intend to do?”

“Abide by the rules, since you insist.”

“Go ahead, then. We’re listening.”

“Very well. I say that my case is not the usual one. I say that my baby is not like the other babies at the Creche. She has been with me since her birth, she is not going to be able to accept the martyr conditioning at the Creche. It will not work with her. She is different, she is an exception, and she must not be kept from me. She is unhappy away from me, she is suffering, and I suffer with her! Can’t you understand that? Don’t you realize, can’t you understand for just one moment what it is like for me to feel her suffering, to know what she endures hungering for me, and be separated from her?”

“How can you be sure, Anne-Charlotte, that the baby is unhappy? How can you know? The Creche is shielded.”

“Not for my baby,” said Anne-Charlotte proudly. “Their bloody shield doesn’t work any more than if I

laid a handkerchief over my head would keep you from hearing me think!"

"Anne-Charlotte," said Patrick in the wondering silence that followed, "I believe that what you say is true. But if it is, then it is even more important that the baby be in the Creche where it can be trained."

"Why? For the Light's sake, give me one good reason?"

He told her, then, what Coyote Jones had told him when he came to take the baby, about the freighter that had been lost because of the baby's interference with the Communipath network.

"Don't you see, Anne-Charlotte," he said, "that the baby if left to just grow up here with us, is a danger to all the people who depend on the Bucket, not only just as an inconvenience to communication but because it threatens their very lives? That can't be allowed, Anne-Charlotte."

She watched him wildly, standing now, her hands rising slowly from her sides, her whole body quivering and flickering with the energy echo from her thoughts.

"And," Patrick went on, "we will have no choice except to advise the authorities at the Creche at once of the fact that the shield does not work where your child is concerned. It can only be pure good luck that there have been no other accidents if the baby is still able to project as if there were no shield there. And you, Anne-Charlotte, instead of plotting to do evil, must try to reach the baby and make it understand that it must *not* send its thoughts so far. You, or someone else if you are unwilling, will have to make it understand, young though it is, that it literally has the power to cause people's deaths."

"There is something else," Tomaso broke in.

"Yes, Tomaso?"

"There is the matter of the charges against Anne-

Charlotte. She does not seem to understand her present position."

"We have all forgotten that in the confusion," Patrick agreed. "Damn and damn and double damn! Don't you see, Anne-Charlotte, that even if we approved of what you choose to do, even if we were willing to help you do it, it would do you not one bit of good? My poor darling, you are charged with high treason and it is only a matter of time until they send the Fedrobots to take you back to Galactic Center for trial. If you have the baby with you then they will only take it back to the Creche again and that will mean two separations from you instead of just one, and all that horror to be repeated once more. You must see that!"

"Patrick?"

The small voice from the tiny girl who sat at Sally's feet stopped him in the middle of his speech. "What is it, child?" he asked.

"I want to know something."

"Yes?"

"I want to know what will happen to Anne-Charlotte if the Fedrobots come. I want to know what they will *do* to Anne-Charlotte."

Patrick hesitated, but Anne-Charlotte did not. She turned to the little girl, Patrick's smallest daughter, and very clearly, she explained.

"What happens to someone charged with high treason against humankind, Patricia? It's quite simple. The brain of the traitor is severed from the body, completely, and it is placed in nutrient tanks where it is kept alive until such time as it is needed by mankind."

"Give her an example," Ian directed.

"The brain of Marcus Strake," said Anne-Charlotte, "who tried to create a market for a drug he had invented by adding it to the water supply of a planet. His brain was maintained in nutrient solutions for al-

most forty years. Then it was wired in directly into the controls of the explorer ship *Nightwind* that was used to locate the habitable planets of the Third Galaxy. It served in that capacity for eleven expeditions before it finally went mad and died, and then the name of Marcus Strake was considered to have been cleared by its service."

"And the body?" the child insisted, staring at her with big eyes.

"The body is burned," said Anne-Charlotte brutally.

"With fire?"

"With high energy blasts."

"Like when someone dies," said Patricia, her voice trembling.

"Yes! Like when someone dies, exactly."

Patricia forgot then about the decorum of the meeting and ran to her father, crying bitterly that she did not want that done to Anne-Charlotte, that they must do something to stop it; and Patrick did not scold her nor would he allow Sally to take her from him. Holding her close and stroking her fine yellow hair he spoke to all of them.

"The child is not alone," he said. "None of us wants to see that happen to Anne-Charlotte. None of us feels that what she has done is in the same class as attempting to make drug addicts of a whole planet. But I do not think we need to worry about it, because there is no question of her being convicted. I think," he said, his voice breaking, "I think we are all able to see, without the need for any doctor's help, that Anne-Charlotte is completely, totally insane. The mad are not held responsible for their crimes."

And as he said that, without one word or one sound, Anne-Charlotte disappeared.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SUN from the high windows in Tzana's room fell through a great prism the size of a fist that hung from the ceiling, split into a sevenfold glory and turned Tzana into a creature of rainbow. Beside her Coyote lay contented, tracing the brilliant stripes along her thighs and the soft curve of her belly, up along the tilted breasts and back down again. She lay quiet under his touch, watching him through half-closed eyes.

"Tzana?"

"Yes, love?"

"Do you know, it's very nice to see you like this."

"Replete, you mean? Like the ancient Bordencow?"

"No. Quiet, I mean. Quiet, relaxed, loving. None of the efficient superspy about you at the moment at all."

She smiled at him, reached out one hand and stroked his cheek, and sent him image after image of soft warm shapes in scarlet.

"I'm sorry I don't understand everything you're sending," he said gently. "I really am sorry about that."

"I don't mind," she said. "Why should I?"

"I don't know. Isn't it something like talking to someone who's almost deaf?"

She didn't answer, and he nudged her with one sturdy toe. "Come on, Tzana," he said. "I've been told before. Very much, they tell me, like mouthing words at someone who can't hear you, just like I said. Very frustrating, apparently."

"We have other ways of communicating," she said, chuckling, "and I find them totally *unfrustrating*."

Coyote laughed and began to concentrate carefully on the patterns of his stroking, watching the changes in her mouth and the nipples of her breasts. She was a

good woman to bed, satisfyingly hungry, free of any remnant of the inhibitions that still marked some women, especially those who lived near old Earth. Despite the fact that her psibility was so far beyond his, they had enjoyed one another through some dozen of the past years, whenever their work chanced to throw them together. He would miss her, he knew, if he did not see her at least once or twice a year, and to a certain extent that amazed him, since he ordinarily would not have noticed if the people he knew had disappeared from the face of the earth. And she respected his privacy totally, never entering his mind unless he asked her to do so, never pressing him for anything. . . .

He smiled, thinking of her eminent satisfactoriness as a woman. She deserved the best he had to give, and the best was precisely what she was about to get.

He gathered her toward him, settling her expertly against his side, and bent to her mouth, feeling the quickness of her breath against his face—and from the comsystem in the curve of the room across from them there came the high series of triplet tones, A,C,E, over and over; the same quick minor triad that meant top priority government call.

Her feet hit the floor with the second sounding of the A, and before he could finish cursing she had punched the RECEIVE button and the voice of their mutual superior informed them crisply that they were wanted. At once. Immediately, if not much, much sooner.

"Cover?" asked Tzana, and Coyote noted with distaste that her voice was almost completely back to normal.

"Coyote—I presume you are able to reach him, Miss Kai?"

"I'm able," she snapped. "As you know perfectly damn well, you officious bastard."

"Shame on you, Miss Kai," said the voice. "A little

more respect, please."

She ignored it and repeated, "What cover, please?"

"Coyote Jones is expected to give a concert—antique Twentieth Century Ballads—for the vice-president of the Tri-Galactic Federation, and a group of twelve guests, at the Marsgovernment House. You, Tzana, are needed as translator for a group of aliens—wiggly things they are, too—from beyond the Sirius Gap, here to observe methods at the Creche. Actually, we will need you both at a meeting at once. Or sooner. Make it fast."

"How fast?"

Coyote went to the comsystem in one lunge, grabbed Tzana across the flank and pinned her securely against him, and bellowed at the voice.

"We can't possibly make it for at least three hours, and more likely four, because—"

"On the contrary," the voice cut in, "this is an emergency, a Federation rocket is at this moment on Tzana's landing port, and I will expect you within the hour."

The system went dead, the man's usual way of dealing with obstreperous agents, and Coyote knew from long experience that calling back would produce only a series of charming, patient, useless secretary-robots. If he was lucky he might get a human being, but there would be little or no difference between her and the robots.

"BEM dung," he observed, flatly. "Piles of odorous BEM dung. Piles and piles of—"

"Coyote," she chided, "you are only wasting your time."

"Time with you is never wasted, love."

"You are a dear and a darling and a gallant blessing to have about the house," she said, slipping out of his grip and heading for the bath, "but it's no use. You know that perfectly well. If there were any chance of our ignoring him we'd both be in some other profession."

"Like folk singing? Or running a translation bureau?"
"Yes. Like one of those."

Coyote reached up and slapped the prism, shattering the rainbow into thousands of scraps and patches that went scuttling and skipping across the floor in frantic clusters. There would be another time, no doubt, if they were both lucky, but he was not pleased. Not that his pleasure was relevant in any way.

"Hurry up," he shouted after her. "We wouldn't want to keep a government rocket waiting, at x-ty-ump credits per three minutes, now would we?"

Tzana chuckled, came out of the bath at a run, and pulled over her head a spectacular little piece of yellow synthowool that was made up mostly of empty spaces, a pair of yellow tights, and working slippers, little clear plastic things slotted for magnets for use in low-gravity situations. She smoothed her hair with both hands, smiled, and was ready to go, and there he stood still naked in the middle of her floor, watching her with great satisfaction. If there was anything he could not abide it was a woman who took forever to get herself dressed and groomed, and Tzana was the absolute antithesis of that.

"Forty-five seconds flat!" he said appreciatively. "That has got to be some sort of a record."

"Forty-three," she said. "And now I have to wait for you."

"Nope," said Coyote. "I'm ready."

"You call that ready?"

"Hell, yes! I'm not primping for that old bastard and his crew of lobotomied robots and yes-men. I'm ready as is."

"Naked?"

"Naked?" he mimicked, in a piping falsetto. "With your not inconsiderable equipment hanging out? Whatever will we do? La, what *will* the neighbors say?"

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"Coyote," Tzana said patiently, "we are going to Mars, remember? Government Central. Big muckymucks. Protocol and high class twaddle. All sorts of—"

"BEM dung. All sorts of BEM dung. I'm going to give a concert, as I recall, and I always give concerts in my skinny-skin-skin."

"I don't believe it."

"Sometimes I wear a sort of loincloth."

"I don't believe you, man."

"Unless I'm on a planet with very low temperatures and no central heating."

"You really mean it?"

"Mean it. Yes. I do."

Tzana sighed and pressed the stud that released the little yellow dress.

"Hey," Coyote protested, "must you do that?"

"Certainly. If you're going naked, so am I."

"Then I'll dress," said Coyote promptly. "Not that I don't know when I've been had, lady, because I do, and don't expect it to work every time. But I can't possibly listen to Old Whatshisface if you're standing beside me with *your* equipment hanging out. I'd keep patting and fondling. I'd find my mind wandering. I'd be unable to keep track of Whoozis's conversation. I'd lay you right there on the table. Here."

He reached into the black guitar case that lay against the wall, pulled out a black caftan with a hood, popped it over his head, added sandals, and watched her restore her dress.

"Good enough," he said. "Let's go."

They went out through the Bureau, deflating everything behind them except the living quarters of the rest of the staff and the reception room, and boarded the rocket, with Coyote humming at the top of his lungs an antique ballad he knew Old Whatshisface particularly despised.

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"What is that tune?" Tzana asked, settling herself beside him.

"This one?"

"That one. What the bloody is it?"

"Don't you like it?"

"It's awful. It's incredibly awful."

"It's really old, lady! 1953, I think. Thing called 'Harbor Lights.' Our friend the Fish really hates it."

"I don't blame him! *Yechh.*"

"Isn't it though?"

"And that's why you're practicing?"

"Exactly! That's why. He *really* hates it."

Coyote leaned back, closed his eyes, and really put his heart into it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HERE I AM, up in this cactus again. It's getting to be some kind of a tradition, this cactus, and me writing in it. Yesterday I heard Mark tell two of the little kids to "stay out of Tessa's cactus." I'm not sure that's a good thing, even if he didn't mean it. That is, I'm not sure I like what it indicates about me.

Once, long ago, Patrick says, there was a great philosopher who could only think if he could see a certain tree from his window as he worked; and when the city where he lived was going to cut down all the other trees around they left that one because he explained that he needed it. That was nice of them, of course, but I certainly wouldn't want that to happen to me, because I want to be able to work no matter where I am. I think tomorrow I will definitely go and work on a rock or something, instead of coming here.

It's very peaceful now, quiet and peaceful and beautiful. From where I sit I can see Freya working in the salad beds with Dan and Nathan, and Ian has Tomaso's three boys and my little sister Patricia down by the well practicing the skit they are putting on in honor of Patrick's birthday. I wrote it, so I'm not required to be in it, and that leaves me extra free time today, and unless Sally catches me and makes me come back to help her with the breadbaking I will be able to write for a couple of hours! I feel a little bit guilty, because Sally is tired from yesterday, and baking bread for twenty people is a big job. But I don't feel guilty enough to make me go back and help her. Patrick says this is a good quality in a writer—he calls it "protective insulation"—but he says I am to keep a careful eye on it and if it starts approaching selfishness I will be forbidden to

write at all until I have learned to do my share again.

That would be awful, I think. I think if I were forbidden to write I would die like something that had been shut up and stepped on. (And of course that means I must be *very* sure it's not selfishness.)

In fact, now that I have started on this train of thought, there is just no question about it, I will have to go back and help Sally instead of writing. A conscience is a very uncomfortable thing indeed to have, and I wish it were in the depths of space. Here I go!

Now I have only perhaps half an hour left before dinner, and I will have to rush through this, but at least my conscience is happy. Sally and I made enough bread for a whole week, I'm sure, if not enough for a month, and I thought she would never be satisfied that it was enough. She is a hard-working woman and I don't know what we would do without her at Chrysanthemum Bridge, and I sincerely hope I don't grow up to be like her just because she's my mother. I'll fight my heredity!

What I was just beginning to say was that it was so very peaceful here for the first time in weeks. The reason it's peaceful is sad, though; it's peaceful because we have Anne-Charlotte under complete sedation, and so there's not a single really ugly thought in the air for a change. I do love Anne-Charlotte, we all do, but we were just all worn out with her constant messing up our heads. I know what it was like for me; I can't even imagine what it must have been like for the others, who have Factor Q. Having her completely asleep is like having a weight lifted from off my head, and I'm a little giddy, I guess, with the ease of it.

I wouldn't have thought what Anne-Charlotte did was possible. I know about telekinesis, of course, and at least in theory I know about teleporting, because Maklu-

nites are trained in all known forms of psi from birth. I know they teach teleporting in the Creche, too, and even without training some humans can use it. But I have never seen anyone teleport his body more than just in simple levitation exercises, a matter of a few feet. Even the sort of skimming along the ground that Anne-Charlotte has always done was nothing more than a fancying up of levitation. We used to try to copy her, all of us kids did, and we found out very fast that it wasn't so awful hard to make a couple of little leaps, but to keep it up over and over like Anne-Charlotte does is a terribly rare thing. None of the rest of us can do it, and Tomaso says he's only known one other person in his whole life who could.

But the day we had the meeting Anne-Charlotte did even more than that! She was very angry with us because we would not do what she wanted us to do, even though she must know that it is terribly wrong for her to plan to steal her baby from the Creche. We could not do that, or help her hide it if she was able to do it, especially after Patrick explained to us how the baby is an actual danger to people living in the Galaxies.

And then she was very angry because Patrick said that she had that mind sickness that he calls insanity. She was so angry, and so beautiful. And one minute she was standing there, wearing only her beads and sort of pulsing and glowing, with anger just pouring from her so that I was really almost afraid of her, and then suddenly she was gone! We didn't see her move, it happened so fast; she just disappeared like something that had never been. Patricia screamed and Patrick began to curse, which I don't think I've ever heard him do before, and everyone first stood like they'd been hit on the head and then we all ran at once for the doors and windows.

Outside our livingdomes the country is flat for the

space of our fields, and then it begins to slant up, just very easily, and soon it turns into low hills with thick groves of the Anais cactus. Out at the edge of the distance you can see from the domes the hills turn into high red bluffs that rise up out of the ground all of a sudden, and then on top of them is the wilderness where the cactus are so thick you can get lost in them. The first bluff at the edge of the hills is called Troublesome, after some mountain on Earth when people still lived there. At least that's what Ian tells us in the history talk-classes, though he couldn't show us where it might have been on the maps. He says it may well have been just a story mountain, something out of a myth or a fairy tale, but that there are old songs that tell of a mountain named Troublesome.

We were all looking out of different windows and doors when Freya called out, "There she is, Patrick! Come look—oh, please hurry!" And we all ran, just in time to see a tiny figure standing on top of Troublesome before it disappeared into the wilderness.

Freya just dropped to the floor then and began to cry. I'd never seen her cry before and it made me cry. Then Ian went over and put his arms around her and rocked her gently and soothed her, and Sally came and made all the children go outside. Freya is the oldest of our women except for Naomi and she has always mothered Anne-Charlotte, as much as anyone *could* mother someone wild like Anne-Charlotte is. And Sally told us it was just as if Freya was losing a beloved child, except really almost worse than death to have Anne-Charlotte lost and sick and frantic like that.

Then when Freya was calm again we had another meeting. With all the meetings and discussion nothing was getting done, and it's a wonder all our crops aren't ruined, but there was no way to get around it. There had to be a meeting for us to discuss declaring Anne-

Charlotte not able to decide things for herself. This was a serious step to take, because Maklunites do not interfere with one another. I don't understand, myself, what it could be like to live under any other sort of arrangement, and Ian says I am very lucky indeed to be able to say that. He tells us that there were thousands of years back in the beginnings of human history when the great majority of people lived their entire lives, from birth to death, without ever knowing what it could be like to be free to decide *anything* for themselves, and that that is why we are so extremely careful now in our clusters to preserve freedom for one another.

Patrick and Ian explained to us all at the meeting, then, that Anne-Charlotte is like a small baby now; she cannot be trusted to care for herself or even to know what she really wants to do. And so we must do all her deciding for her from now on.

"We are all responsible for her," Patrick said, "down to the youngest of you children, because she is one of our own and she is so completely lost and alone. And she is much worse than a child in one way, because she is capable of doing great harm and not capable of discriminating between what is right and what is wrong. She is like a fire that has gone out of control, and we must see to it that she does no more damage, to herself or to others."

Sally asked Patrick what he thought should be done, and for a little while I thought he had no answer, because he just stood there and said nothing.

After a while Tomaso came over and touched him on the shoulder, and Patrick sort of jumped as if he had been asleep. And Tomaso spoke to him in such a gentle voice, like someone speaking to a person who is sick or hurt. So *funny*, to hear anyone speak to Patrick like that! Patrick has always been our tower of strength, all my life long.

Tomaso said, "Patrick, you must let someone else help you with this. You've been too close to Anne-Charlotte all along and you've worn yourself out with the whole terrible mess. Let it go, let us take it all over for you. Go and rest!"

But Patrick shook his head. "No," he said. "No, I can't."

"But you love her entirely too much to be able to think properly," Tomaso said.

"That's just it," said Patrick, and he explained that it was precisely because he had loved Anne-Charlotte so much that he had to take his full share of the deciding and the action where she was concerned.

"I think I must have let her go on her own way too long," he said sadly. "Perhaps I loved her too much. I think if I had loved her less, if she had been less dear to me, less close, I might have taken action against her months ago."

"You mustn't blame yourself," Freya said. "I did exactly the same thing. I've known her from the very first, and I knew always that she was wild and in many ways in need of control, and yet I always spoiled her. She was so lovely, and so very free, and I loved to watch her. Patrick, we've all done just what you did."

"That's no excuse for me," he said, "because I knew. I knew before any of you did, from the day that they came and took away the baby. When she raised it over her head to smash it against the wall, my friends, she wasn't just being dramatic. I saw her eyes, and she would indeed have killed that child rather than give it up if I hadn't moved as fast as I did and taken it from her. I knew then that her mind was ruined, completely ruined, and I should have called this meeting then, at once."

He shrugged his shoulders, and went on, "But that's all pretty irrelevant now. The question is what action

should be taken. You all agree that she is completely mad and must not be allowed her freedom?"

We all nodded and raised our hands in the sign for agreement, the formal sign that we use only when it really matters, and Patrick looked all round the circle to be sure it was a matter on which we were united.

"Then," he said, "it will be entered in the Log that as of today the laws of freedom are suspended where Anne-Charlotte is concerned. And I think what we must do is go after her in the flyer. Freya and Ian and Valya and Jonathan and I together should be able to handle her, unless she is completely beyond all control. Tomaso, will you stay here? Someone with a good range must stay here so that we can contact the cluster if we need to."

It was a cruel thing they were going to have to do, he explained to us, because obviously they could not just go pick up Anne-Charlotte as they could have done with any of the rest of us. Not when she could teleport herself for miles at a time.

"We will have to exhaust her," he said. "All we can do is use our collective psi to anticipate the direction of each jump she makes so that we don't lose her completely, and simply run her down at each one, keep her making jumps until she drops with exhaustion, and then we can land and bring her home. Under complete sedation."

"Patrick, does it have to be like that?" Sally asked. "It sounds like the way animals are hunted . . . driven till they drop like that!"

"What else would you suggest, darlin'?" he asked her.

"Is there no other way?"

"I really don't think so, Sally."

"We don't dare do anything else," Freya said. "We don't know how strong she is, we don't know what her limits are or even if she has any, in practical terms."

It's even possible that she will be able to bring down the flyer like she would bring down a bird with a stone. I don't think we can afford the luxury of mercy any more."

They told us that if she were to come back to the cluster we children were to make ourselves as scarce as we possibly could. Not that they thought she would hurt us, none of us could believe that she would, but they said we couldn't really know and that we must take no chances.

"And you must not hate her," Patrick said in a sick voice. "Her poor mind is sick, it is ruined, just remember that. She does not know what she is doing, and you must not hate her."

As if any of us could have hated Anne-Charlottel Why, before they took her baby away it was always Anne-Charlotte who took us on trips into the Anais cactus, and she would tell us stories there. She knew better stories than any of the other grown-ups, and she knew more and better songs. And once she took me into her bed and held me all the whole night long when I was frightened of a storm, and not once that night did she call me a silly baby or laugh at me. I love Anne-Charlotte, and I wish someone could make her well.

She is asleep now. It took them almost fourteen hours to reach the end of her strength. They say she made no attempt to harm the flier or any of them, but just kept leaping, miles at a time, with the jumps getting shorter and shorter, until at the end she could only move a few feet at a time. And they had to sit in the flier above her, watching, until she actually dropped unconscious in the sand below them, bruising her poor head on the side of a rock, and then they went down and gave her a sedative that would keep her out, and they brought her back.

Ian carried her into the ashram at last and laid her

on a pallet under the made-mantra that was her favorite, where she had lain when her baby was born. I watched him lay her down and cover her with her own blanket, and she looked small and thin and young, and so tired. There was no glow about her then at all, almost no life, because they had lowered all her life processes as much as they dared with the sleeping drug.

I asked to sleep there beside her, but they wouldn't let me. Patrick said no, I must leave her to whatever healing Valya might be able to do. Valya is a powerful healing-woman, fully trained in psi medicine. We ourselves rarely need her, because Maklunites are almost never sick; but out here on the edge of the Galaxies where there are so few doctors Valya is kept very busy, and she is often away for days at a time. Patrick said that she must be able to be alone with Anne-Charlotte and free to concentrate only on Anne-Charlotte, and that if I were to stay my mind would interfere with that concentration, and of course I can understand that. I am sorry, though, that I could not have stayed, because I worry now when I cannot see her. I know it's silly, because obviously she cannot teleport with her body filled with that drug, but seeing her disappear once has somehow made me feel that she may not be there unless I can see her with my own eyes.

Valya has been with her ever since they brought her back, except for a short while during the night when her man Johan went and made her sleep a bit and took the watch in her place.

It's peaceful, like I said. Everyone has gone in from the fields and there's a low wind rising, and twenty feet from me there is a mobile flower, about as high as my knee and a pale lavender color, doing a solemn little dance in the breeze all by itself in a circle. So peaceful, and so mournful, and so quiet.

Whatever is going to happen next?

CHAPTER NINE

I KNOW who I am. No one else knows. But I do know who I am. I am not BABY. A woman comes. A woman comes and she calls me BABY and she says to me HELLO BABY. She brings things. She puts me in a bed and all around me there are colors. I like colors. I like the fish that swim there. But I am not BABY.

There is a box that comes, too. Anne-Charlotte says the box is called COMPUTER. That is its NAME. I like colors. I like fish. I like names. The computer calls me BABY too, but that is not my name. I am not BABY. I am SUSANNAH now. I am SUSANNAH.

There is a golden light on the wall now. It will change when the song changes. The song will change because I am going to make it change. I know how to make the songbox go the other way. There are little wheels inside the songbox and it is far away. It is clear far away where the woman is. The woman who does not know my name. And she has a button to push to make the songbox change so that the color will change. But she is too slow. I like to see the color change. I am tired of the gold. I want to see red now, red on my wall and on my floor and across my bed. There are people talking in the air. They are talking about me. They call me BABY. They do not know that I am not BABY. They do not know that I am SUSANNAH.

There. There, now. Now the light is red. In a minute I will make it blue. Far out in the dark there are silver things moving, but I know now that I must not bother them. I know because the computer told me and because a man came and told me. The silver things could fall out of the air if I wanted to look at them, but I must not do that. I must not touch them and I must be care-

ful of them. The people who talk in the air can be hurt, too . . . they are busy, and I must not bother them. I must not make pictures for them and I must not talk to them. I don't like all the MUST NOTS.

Now the light is blue and the woman is coming. She will say to me **BABY YOU MUST LET THE MUSI-COLORS ALONE. PLEASE BABY.** Why should I let them alone? There is no one who will fall or be hurt if I play with them. If she will stop calling me **BABY** then maybe I will do what she says.

Anne-Charlotte is not talking to me tonight and I am afraid. Why isn't she talking to me? I know her mind-voice. It is like the brown sand they put in my fruit. **CINNAMON.** That is the name of the brown stuff. It would be very nice if my mouth could make all the names that my head knows, but I cannot make it work. I can change the colors though. I can change the song-box and change the colors. I can say the name **CINNAMON.** I will be able to say **SUSANNAH,** too, if I try. I will try it now. **SUSANNAH.** Why isn't my mother talking to me tonight?

Nothing is wrong with my mother, though. I know that. If something happened to her I would know about it. I would know and I would start to bother and bother and bother everyone until they helped my mother. I would make the silver things fall down and I would scream at the people who talk in the air and make terrible pictures for them.

But Anne-Charlotte is just sleeping. She is sleeping, but somehow she has turned off her mindvoice. How can that be?

The woman is here now. If I could make the words I would ask her how that can be. She is touching me. I could make her hand burn where she touched me but I won't do that because she is good to me. But I don't

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want her to call me BABY. I am not BABY. I am SUSANNAH.

Now the light is green. The woman has turned off the songbox but it is easy to turn it back on. If I do not get too sleepy I will keep changing the colors all night long. Now it is orange. I cannot say its name but I know the look it has.

I want to hear Anne-Charlotte's mindvoice. . . . I am afraid without it.

Now the color is blue again.

I am not going to go to sleep.

I am going to stay awake all night and wait for my mother to talk to me.

I am not going to go to sleep.

I am SUSANNAH and I am not going to go to sleep.

I am not . . .

I . . .

CHAPTER TEN

"WE WISH to thank you for coming so promptly," said the tall man in the brown tunic; and the other men, dressed like him in the official worktunics of the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service, nodded their agreement. "It was good of you," said the man in brown.

He was called the Fish, because the legend was that he had never shown signs of having human blood in his veins, not once in all his years of service. The men around him had similar code names, and those who knew them well could use those, or they could use the TGIS numbers marked on the shoulders of the tunics.

No one *wanted* to be a TGIS man; it was a service filled by lottery from among the most capable, both male and female, human and alien, each year. Once chosen, an agent served ten years. Often it happened that by the end of that time his awareness of how badly he was needed kept him in the service past the end of the obligatory term. All of the men in this room were on voluntary, some of them had seen thirty years. For the Fish, it was the thirty-fourth.

"You are not at all welcome," said Tzana crisply. "I have just finished two nasty assignments for you, Coyote has just completed one of the nastiest you've ever given anyone, and besides that we are tired, both of us. We both need a long rest."

"My heart bleeds," observed the Fish.

"We are sorry, despite his attitude," said another of the men. "This is important, or we would not have called on you again so soon."

"It's always important, according to you," said Tzana. "Please be quick with it and let us get this over with. We were interrupted at a most inopportune moment."

The Fish smiled and opened his mouth, but Coyote beat him to it.

"We know," he said. "Your heart, it bleeds."

"What is it this time?" Tzana insisted. "Drug smugglers? A broken robot gone berserk in a cafeteria? The khadilha of Abba lost his favorite pet? A mutant insisting on his civil rights? What incredibly urgent matter demands our attention that could not have been handled by one of your other agents just as well?"

"Miss Kai, you are positively vitriolic," snapped the Fish. "Kindly control your venom."

"Damned if I will," Tzana said. "Get on with it."

"It's this Rogue Telepath business again."

"What?" Coyote stood up and shouted at the old man. "I told you by god when I got rid of that poor little baby—that poor little so-called rogue telepath that I could have held on the palm of my hand—I told you I'd have nothing more to do with it. I'm not kidnapping any more babies from their mothers, not if you order me at laser point, is that clear?"

"My, my, such youthful exuberance," murmured the Fish. "It's not that at all."

"No, no, Citizen Jones," said a man on their left, known as the Ruby because he was a brilliant ruby color from head (if it was a head) to foot (if it was a foot).

"What, then?"

The Ruby smiled. "It's the child's mother we need now, my friend."

"The mother?" Tzana was amazed. "Haven't we done enough to her already?"

"You forget, Citizen Kai," said the Ruby. "The woman is a criminal, charged with the gravest crime known to mankind."

"Those charges were meant seriously?"

"The Light be patient, Miss Kai," said the Fish harshly. "That's not the sort of charge that's made as a joke!"

"Yes, indeed," came the agreement from around the table.

"Why did you think they weren't serious?" asked the Fish. "High treason against humanity is not ordinarily seen as a pécadillo."

"Well," said Coyote slowly, "I agree that the woman broke a law. A very important law, basic to the survival of all of us. Okay? I grant you that. However, it seems to me that there were very special circumstances involved here."

"Such as?"

"Such as the fact that she was known to be a Factor Q Aberrant. Such as the fact that she had spent the full limit of years in training in the Creche before the government finally decided to let her go, and no one really knows how much that hurts the mind, even if we do erase the training by psychosweep. Such as the fact that she was only twenty-two years old when the baby was born and had undergone severe psychic shock only a few months before when the baby's father died. And, most important of all, such as the fact that I think she's suffered enough already."

The Fish made a noise of derision.

"I am inclined to agree with Coyote," said Tzana.

"You are always inclined to agree with Coyote, Miss Kai," said the Fish. "I don't consider that relevant."

Tzana glared at him. Pigheaded old bastard, with his affected ancient terms of address and his stupid slavish devotion to minutiae of the rules and his utter disregard for the human heart. Perhaps this would be her lucky day. Perhaps he would die horribly before her eyes.

The Fish glared back at her, very much alive.

"There are courts, after all," said another man mildly.

"There are courts and judges and all the rest of it. If there are extenuating circumstances the woman will be pardoned or her sentence made lighter. It is not up to us to do that."

"It is up to us to see that she is brought back to civilization to stand trial," said the Fish. "That's what we want you two to do."

"Why us?" demanded Coyote. "Why not a couple of Fedrobots? You've got lots."

"Because," said the Fish, "for all we know she would melt them both into puddles of plastic and make herself a raincoat out of the puddles. That's why you."

"Oh, crap," said Tzana disgustedly. "What are you talking about, or have you at last gone senile?"

"Well, let me tell you a thing or two," said the Fish, "and perhaps you will find it less 'crap,' as you so very elegantly put it. We have had a long and detailed communication from that band of freakish fanatics in the outback—"

"Maklunites are not freakish fanatics," objected Coyote.

"Nonsense, of course they are. Living like Stone Age savages in conditions more appropriate for the year 2018 than 3018. No hygiene. Food cooked by hand. No morals. Ugh. Please do not spout froth at me."

"Look, my fishy friend—"

"I will *not* 'look' and there's no point in your insisting. In this day and age only fanatics, and totally demented fanatics at that, could conceivably live as do the Maklunites. They have a philosophy of life which would do credit to a child of three and is a disgrace thereafter. They are idiotic, backward, sloppy, cravenly sentimental fanatics, and if it were up to me they would certainly not continue to escape three-fourths of the duties of a galactic citizen because of the so-called precepts of their so-called religion. Don't talk to me about the Maklunites! Nonetheless, we have had a communication

from them. A long and flowery and archaic communication, but, I am happy to say, comprehensible."

"Pray do tell us," Tzana said through her teeth, sending soothing messages at Coyote as hard as she could. If he were to punch the Fish in the mouth that worthy might very well die just as she had wished, but Coyote would be taken away and shut up and she had no desire to see that happen. In view of the fact that Coyote, being a mass projective telepath, could have rendered every man in the room unconscious with one thought, it was funny that she had to worry about his fists, but that was how he was. She could see the muscles twitching in his hands.

"I intend to," said the Fish. "It seems that this woman has gone quite berserk, threatening to teleport her child out of the Creche and all sorts of other nonsense. Although I do not think that this is within the realm of possibility, much less probability, the Maklunites inform me that they have seen her teleport a fifty-pound boulder through the air over a distance of several hundred feet. They also inform me that they have seen her teleport her own body for as much as fifteen or twenty miles, instantly, and repeatedly. They inform me that they have no idea what the limits of her psibility may be, but that they strongly advise caution in dealing with her."

"But that would mean they are betraying her!" exclaimed Coyote. "I find that hard to believe. Maklunites don't betray their own people."

"They don't have betrayal in mind," said the Ruby. "The communication demands that we drop all charges against her on the grounds that she is totally and completely insane and is therefore not responsible for her acts. The detailed list of things that she has done is given not as betrayal but as support for their contention that she is mad."

"I see," said Coyote. "I see what they are doing."

"I see, too," snapped the Fish. "And I don't intend to let them get away with it, my young friend."

"I am not your friend," said Coyote. "Thank God."

"God who?"

"Take your pick, you old humbug. Astarte. Jehovah. Ichthy 12. I don't care. Thank anybody. Just so you don't count me in among your friends."

"What do you plan to do?" Tzana asked.

"I want the woman brought back."

"Even if she's mad?"

"Nonsense. Madness has been unknown in the Three Galaxies since the 2080's. Nonsense."

"Not completely unknown," observed a quiet man from the end of the table. "Eleven cases reported since then."

"Eleven cases in thirty years? Not very impressive," said the Fish. "I want her brought back here. We have psychocomputers. They will be given full access to her."

"Oh, really? How are you going to manage that?" demanded Tzana. "You know perfectly well that the moment she was allowed to be awake enough for them to examine her, if what the people at Chrysanthemum Bridge say about her is true, she would just teleport herself or the psychocomputer halfway to hell. How do you propose to examine her?"

"We'll find a way."

"How are they dealing with her now? At Chrysanthemum Bridge, I mean?" asked Coyote. "Aren't they in danger?"

"The woman is under total sedation."

"And that's how we are to bring her back?"

"You are quite correct."

"In that case, you don't need us. Send a Fedrobot."

"Unfortunately," said the Ruby, "we can't do that. The Maklunites refuse to turn her over to anyone but

a human being. We do not wish to create an intergalactic riot by taking her from them by force."

"Ah," said Tzana. "I begin to see."

"Perspicacious of you, Miss Kai."

"We are to bring her back quietly, without upsetting any Maklunites, because despite your opinion of them, they make up a very respectable proportion of the total population of the Three Galaxies. We are to bring her back under total sedation . . . -what, then? How do you plan to try her?"

Coyote cut her off short. "They don't plan to try her at all, Tzana! Don't you see? They couldn't possibly. They wouldn't dare wake her to stand trial, she'd dissolve the lot of them. They'll bring her back here, pass sentence, take her poor muddled mind and put it in nutrients for some pet project, all very quietly, without any fuss, all without ever waking her up again."

The Fish sighed loudly.

"Don't I just wish we could get away with that," he said. "If only we could get away with that, Mr. Jones, we wouldn't have any problems. Unfortunately, we can't do it that way. In spite of the fact that she and her brat literally endanger the entire world, the law is going to insist on protecting *them* from *us*. We have to wake her for the actual trial. We can keep her as heavily sedated as we dare, but we have to wake her, in the formal sense of the word. And that is going to be very dangerous indeed."

Coyote whistled long and slow.

"Perhaps they're exaggerating?" he ventured.

"Maklunites don't exaggerate," said the Ruby. "Whatever one's opinion of the sect, and I must say I find them rather charming and appealing, they are certainly truthful. If they say this young woman can send herself bouncing about like a rocket, then she can. And if she

can do that, I, for one, would not care to have to guess what else she might be able to do."

"She glows, by the way," said Coyote. "How about that, for a beginning?"

"Glow? What do you mean, glows?" said the Fish. "Nobody glows."

"This chick does."

"Chick? Mr. Jones—"

"Chick. Archaic twentieth-century term for a woman. Very common in a particular type of hard rock song. I happen to like the term. And this one, this chick, glows. Like a candle."

"What's the plan?" asked Tzana. "Why aren't you just ordering her killed, which would be the obvious move?"

"For the simple reason that we don't dare. Number One, there are too many Maklunites. Number Two, we don't have any idea what the damned baby might do if we did."

"Oh, I see!" laughed Tzana. "Baby has talents like her mother, eh? The joke seems to be on you!"

"It happens, however," said the Fish grimly, "that at the moment we have physical custody of the baby, and we don't *think* it can teleport itself. So long as we have her baby, we *think* the woman will be careful what she destroys. We hope so. It's a chance we have to take, at least at the time of the actual trial. But not before."

"I don't want anything to do with it," said Coyote.

The Fish curled his thin lip. "I don't give one thin damn, Mr. High-and-mighty Jones, whether you want anything to do with it or not. I chose you because I knew you were soft in the head. If you won't do it and Miss Kai here won't do it I'll send somebody nastier. You seem to have a soft spot for this grubby band of nomadic noodniks. Who would you suggest that I send in your place? How about our mutual friend, Trik-thi-

gridj, the one that looks like a giant eggplant? He's at liberty right now, and he's not noted for his sensitive feelings. Shall I send him? He might do the little hell-cat good."

"He'd probably throw her out the porthole in one-inch cubes."

"Possibly. Then he'd have solved at least part of my problem."

"Coyote?"

Coyote Jones turned his head and looked at Tzana. They traded pictures for a while, with Tzana's head ringing at the stuff he was pitching her; but she was stubborn and he knew she was right, and he gave in at last.

"All right," he said. "Give us six Fedrobots and the fastest ship you've got, and we'll go get her."

"Why six Fedrobots?" demanded the Fish. "You don't need even one."

"I do it my way or I don't do it," said Coyote. "I want this to look official. I don't want the people at Chrysanthemum Bridge worrying that it's some kind of underhand operation."

"All right. Six Fedrobots."

"We'll leave right away," said Tzana and she stood up. "Come on, Coyote. It smells bad in here."

The two of them stalked out, followed by an agitated servomechanism that wanted them to hold still for sanitizing. In the hall, Coyote carefully dumped the contents of his belt-pocket over it and left it clucking miserably to itself and trying to deal with a wad of assorted, sticky leftover lunch.

"BEM dung," Coyote said. "Just BEM dung."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FILE 374.10.b, Segment 1116

TOPIC: Q Factor Aberrations

**FROM: Al-havania Jo, Directress Women's Ward,
Fed-hospital GALCENTRAL, STATION 30**

**TO: Communipath Control Committee—Galactic Council
GALCENTRAL, STATION 14**

DATE: Julythird, 3018

1. The subject of this report is the Q Factor Aberrant Anne-Charlotte, member of the Maklunite Cluster called Chrysanthemum Bridge, on Planet 34.922.107 (colloquial name, Iris).

2. Reference is made to previous reports with regard to this Q Factor Aberrant, specifically to the report of Mayfourth 3018, this file, Segment 1114, from the Directress of the Infant Ward of the Communipath Creche.

3. Aberrant Anne-Charlotte has been in our care for the past three days. Details of her arrival are formally as follows:

On Julyfirst 3018 subject was brought to Fed-hospital as a passenger in hibernation on Galactic Rocket #813. Subject arrived in the custody of Citizen Tzana Kai, head of Tri-Galactic Translations Bureau, Inc., and agent of TGIS. Presumably such custody was authorized by appropriate government agencies, although this writer finds the position of

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chief translator strangely inadequate for the task of transporting a seriously ill woman through space. However, the papers carried by Citizen Tzana Kai were all in order and no challenge to her custody was issued by this office. Subject arrived in poor condition, extremely thin; severe prostration was diagnosed and the recommendation was made that sedation be discontinued immediately in the interest of subject's health. This recommendation was refused by the Chief Medical Officer of this hospital, as was an identical recommendation made the following day when subject's life processes appeared to be approaching a dangerous low. Subject is still under total deep sedation.

4. At this time this writer wishes to register a formal protest against the continued deep sedation of this subject; there appears to be no reason why such sedation should continue in the face of the poor physical condition of the patient. Reference is made to the statutes of this galaxy, specifically Galactic Statute 1,314, which guarantees persons charged with crimes—of whatever magnitude—the same medical care that is guaranteed every other citizen of the Three Galaxies.

5. Instructions issued to this writer were to maintain deep sedation and perpetual care for the subject until such time as she can be brought to trial. Instructions will be carried out as given, under formal protest. (See Item #4, above.)

6. It is requested that formal investigation into the unorthodox nature of the treatment and handling of this Q Factor Aberrant be initiated at once by the appropriate agency at GALCENTRAL.

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7. Copies of this report have been forwarded to the following:

GALCENTRAL, STATION 3 (Department of Human Relations) GALCENTRAL, STATION 6 (Department of Justice) GALCENTRAL STATION 41 (Department of Health)

END OF REPORT

PS: Buzzy, just what the hell is going on around here? Are they trying to kill my patient, or am I just getting foolish in my old age? Somebody had better do something very double damned quick or there isn't going to be anybody alive to stand trial for the heinous crime of wanting to keep her own baby. This whole thing smells to high heaven.

Jo

CHAPTER TWELVE

FROM: Citizen Coyote Jones Coordinates 11/353
Postbox 19,333 Planet 13.22.4

TO: Office of the Director TRI-GALACTIC INTEL-
LIGENCE SERVICE GALCENTRAL, STATION
5

DATE: Julyfifteenth 3018

You are hereby advised of my formal resignation from the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service as of this date 3018. It is my considered opinion that the TGIS is an archaic, outdated, superfluous, ill-founded, busybody organization dedicated to making unfortunate situations worse, and I can no longer find it in me to be a part of its operations.

Finally,
Coyote Jones

FROM: Office of the Director TRI-GALACTIC IN-
TELLIGENCE SERVICE GALCENTRAL, STA-
TION 5

TO: Citizen Coyote Jones Coordinates 11/353 Post-
box 19,333 Planet 13.22.4

DATE: Julyseventeenth 3018

You are hereby advised that your resignation of July-fifteenth 3018 is not accepted by the TGIS. Your services are sorely needed by this agency and your opinions are not considered relevant. Your status is unchanged and your cooperation appreciated.

Immovably,
The Fish

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PS: Don't be an adolescent idiot, Mr. Jones. Next you'll be telling us you've been converted to that Maklunite claptrap and you're joining a cluster out by the Extreme Moons.

FROM: Citizen Coyote Jones Coordinates 11/353
Postbox 19,333 Planet 13.22.4

TO: Office of the Director TRI-GALACTIC INTEL-
LIGENCE SERVICE GALCENTRAL, STATION
5

DATE: Julynineteenth 3018

You are hereby advised that the main body of your letter of Julyseventeenth is being ignored as irrelevant and of no conceivable interest to this writer. However, the suggestion made by you in the postscript to said letter is accepted with gratitude and enthusiasm.

Delightedly,
Coyote Jones

PS: Don't try to pull any strong-arm tactics on me, Fishface. This whole double agent bit is against my RELIGION!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FIRST OF ALL, where was she? Her last memory was of dropping to the sand in the wilderness on Iris, not just too tired to teleport again, but too tired even to stand and shout her hatred and rage at the merciless members of Chrysanthemum Bridge who had tracked her across the wilderness hour after hour after interminable hour. The sand had been cool on her face and hands . . . and she remembered nothing after that. Where was she now?

"Now" included a room with square walls, square flat ceiling, neat right-angle divisions marking off the meeting of wall with floor, nice neat square window—opaque—nice neat square door. Over the door was a nice square clock with neat black numbers and a sweeping red second hand. And she lay in a nice square white plastic bed. Only two places in the Three Galaxies could she have found such sterile precision, and the Four-Corner Fundamentalists wouldn't have allowed the red second hand on the clock. Therefore, "now" had to be somewhere in Galcentral.

She was quite sure she was being watched, although there was no one in the room and no object immediately identifiable as a monitor screen. This was obviously some sort of medical facility, and all medical facilities were monitored twenty-four hours a day. She lay very still, waiting to recover from whatever had been given her, and tried to remain calm enough not to attract immediate attention.

She was so weak. Not a weakness that would come from the ordinary effect of the state of hibernation that would have been necessary for her travel here. How long had she been asleep?

She tried to lift her head from the pillow, and found that even that simple action was beyond her strength. It must have been a very long time indeed since she had been put to sleep.

She ran over carefully what she knew about the medical installations at Galcentral, and her knowledge was pretty extensive. As a Factor Q Aberrant she had had a chance to see quite a bit of the Tri-Galactic government's medical facilities. And the style of this place gave it away at once. It was antique, almost museum quality. The furnishings were not even of one piece with the floor and walls, although they had been plastisprayed to create that illusion; where the light struck them at a certain angle you could see the outlines of legs and bases under the spray. Think. . . .

Mars. Only on Mars would such archaisms still exist. Only in the vast facilities of the great Galcentral stations, where the government had established its central seat when there had been only one galaxy to administer instead of three. And where in that huge complex would such makeshift operations as plastispraying of hospital furnishings be allowed? It could only be a Federal hospital, and an immense and ancient one. And if that was true, no matter which one it was, she was very near the Communipath Creche, and very near her baby.

Immediately she knew she had made a mistake, because a small bell rang beside her head and a medrobot appeared in the doorway, followed at once by a human being in an official medical tunic.

The human smiled at her.

"We are glad to see you awake," he said. "You must be extremely tired of sleeping."

He ha, she thought, and tried to smile; she had no intention of causing these people to be more wary of her than they were already.

"How long?" she asked, her voice so hoarse she scarcely recognized it as her own.

"How long have you been here?"

"Yes. How long?"

"About three weeks."

"Three weeks!"

The medrobot came soundlessly but with incredible speed from the door to her bedside. There was a blur of silver and before she could move or speak to protest she felt the chill that meant a drug-spray had touched her arm. Apparently any sign whatsoever of emotion was likely to cause them to put her out again completely. She was going to have to be very cunning.

In the depths of her mind she felt the baby's pleasure at having her near once more. How could they have left it alone for three weeks? What had they told it that had kept it—of course. The baby would have been under sedation, too, all this long time. They could not conceivably have controlled it in any other way.

She questioned it, gently, carefully, the familiar sensation of mindspeech, like flying through cool currents of mist, proving to her delight that whatever the weakness of her body her mind was not in such dreadful shape. As she had thought, the baby had no memory of having been cut off from her for weeks, it seemed to believe that it had had trouble reaching her only through part of one afternoon. She hushed it, noticing that it had named itself Susannah, and agreed that that was good, very good. HUSH NOW, SUSANNAH. Obediently, the baby curled its thoughts with hers and was still.

Already she could feel the effect of the drug that they had given her. Her lips were numb, her eyelids were heavy. But what could be the point? Why wake her at all, if they were so afraid of her reactions?

"Why," she asked through leaden lips, "are you waking me up? If this can be called waking me!"

"Your trial is today, Anne-Charlotte," said the man in the tunic pleasantly. "You can't be tried in your sleep, I'm afraid."

"Are you medical or police?"

"Both, Anne-Charlotte. Medical police."

"I see."

She was exhausted already, after so few words. She lay limp in the bed, so conscious of the slow rise and fall of her chest, of how sharply etched her bones were, of what an effort it was not to go to sleep again. The medrobot apparently noticed it, too, because another chill touched her arm, and in a minute or two she felt more awake. She smiled, thinking of the complicated set of drugs and antidotes that must be having to be balanced in the poor little computer's innards.

The medical policeman—or police medical man, whatever he was—was joined by another, and they whispered together, watching her, until a third came, bearing a tray. Anne-Charlotte was amazed. Either she was incredibly important or all the power had failed in Gal-central! It had been a thousand years since human beings had been served trays in hospitals by other human beings. In fact, the newer hospitals simply inserted the sick person in a plastic pod, which proceeded to feed him, minister to him, evacuate his wastes, take his temperature and pulse on a round-the-clock basis. The pods would, if an actual emergency were to arise—which was unlikely, since they were directed by a very sophisticated central computer that was capable of dealing with almost anything—summon the single human doctor who stood by for just such occasions. They could deliver babies, perform surgery, set broken bones, change diapers, entertain a cross sick child. Even death could be handled skillfully by the medical pods. Yet here stood

a crisp white live lady with a crisp square white tray. Anne-Charlotte was impressed.

"We'd like you to try to eat something, dear," said the lady with the tray.

Anne-Charlotte was wise enough to know that food was probably her primary need at that moment. She managed her best good-little-girl smile.

"Gladly," she said. "I'm hungry."

"How nice! Here you go, then!"

The bed rose, propping her up, and extending an arm for the tray and swung it across in front of her. Music began to play, then stopped abruptly at some signal from the medical computer that she was about to lose her temper. She ate, as much as she could, docilely; somewhere they had found a Maklunite to prepare the food, and the Light be praised; it was nothing like the mess of plastics and additives that usually passed for nourishment in Galcentral stations.

All three humans stood quietly watching her until she was through, and then the tray disappeared into a slot in the wall. She waited for them to make their move, whatever it was, too exhausted by the effort of eating to even ask.

"Anne-Charlotte?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"How would *you* feel," she whispered, "after—what must it be—seven, eight weeks, perhaps longer, of total sedation?"

"I would feel very ill. Very weak and very ill."

"Well, then. I feel very weak and ill."

The man came over and stood beside her.

"I wish we hadn't had to keep you like that," he said gently. "It was only because we had no other way to handle you, you must realize that."

"I do," she said. "You couldn't possibly have kept me

here any other way. You couldn't even have brought me here any other way."

"So we are told," he said. "It is a measure of our inadequacy that we have had to be so cruel."

"And I am weak enough now that you can be sure that I will cooperate?"

"No. Oh, no. We are sure of nothing where you are concerned. I am not even sure that you will not kill me in the next few seconds."

"Then why am I awake? It seems very risky!"

"Because many thousands of years of judicial tradition stand behind your right to a trial."

"How do you know I won't escape?"

He looked at her for a moment, then reached down and lifted one of her wrists a few feet above the bed. When he released it her arm dropped like a dead thing.

"We cannot be sure," he said. "But you see that we have done what we could."

"And you have my baby," she said bitterly.

"We would not harm your child, Anne-Charlotte."

"You have had it under total sedation for weeks," she said. "You don't consider that 'harm'?"

"How did you know that?"

She didn't answer, and in a moment he nodded his head.

"Ah, I see," he said. "Of course you would know. Yes, of course you would know. Is the baby relatively happy?"

"As happy as is possible, under the circumstances."

"We are not proud of having done that to the child, you know," he said. "On the other hand, do you know what your baby would have done if we had *not* sedated it?"

"Wrecked this galaxy," said Anne-Charlotte. "And probably the two galaxies beyond as well!"

"And you are proud of that!" exclaimed the man. "You glory in it, don't you?" He shook his head and stepped

back from her bed. "You are proud that it could kill millions of people, proud—"

"You waste your breath," she said swiftly. "I have no sympathy for this society after what it has done to me. Of course I am proud of my child's ability to destroy such rottenness."

The medrobot clicked and another chill struck her arm. Anne-Charlotte laughed.

"This poor machine is going to be sicker than I am," she observed. "What sort of program have you fed it?"

They didn't answer, and she went on, "It wouldn't be fast enough to kill me. Do you know that?"

"In one hour," said the police person, ignoring her question, "we will come to take you to the courtroom."

"In one hour!"

"Yes, exactly that."

"But you will have to carry me into the courtroom!"

"We dare not have you any stronger than you are," he said. "Believe me, we hate that. You must try to understand. Morally, it is repellent to all of us. The idea that you should stand trial for your life when you cannot so much as move your head without help is morally and ethically an abomination, an obscenity. On the other hand, we dare not risk the havoc you would so willingly loose on the Federation if you were able."

She spat the words at him between her teeth. "Perhaps I am still able!"

"Perhaps," he admitted. "We can only guess. We have done what we had to do."

"You are beasts."

"No," he said. "We are trapped by a situation that is unique and for which no precedent exists."

"My baby," she said, "my baby and I, we will destroy you all. Every last wicked foul one of you, we will destroy you and all that you have done. I promise you that."

"Anne-Charlotte," he said softly, "please, what exactly have we done? Could you explain to me?"

"Explain! When you take babies from their parents and train them to be abominations, teach them to be mental monsters that could not live outside their luxurious prisons, deform their minds until they are willing slaves of a task that will see them die of total exhaustion before they are eighteen! Why should I explain?"

"What you say is true, in a sense," he mused. "And yet, what else could we do? Don't you realize that without the Communipaths to transmit information the outer galaxies could not even have been settled? We would be suffocating in our own filth, trapped on the inner planets, with no hope but the eventual extinction of our race . . ."

He looked down at her, his eyes dark with sorrow, and spoke gently.

"Anne-Charlotte," he said, "you are a very sick young woman. We have made you what you are, I suppose, and deserve your hatred. Still I wish we could help you in some way."

"I only wish I could hurt you," she hissed, "and I will! I will!"

He reached down and touched her wrist, his fingers warm and strong on her cold skin.

"Try to rest," he said. "You have about an hour."

"You're going away?"

"Yes. I'll only upset you more if I stay."

"Tell me," she insisted, holding him by force of will, "do you believe in reincarnation?"

"Of course," he laughed. "Doesn't everyone? Do I believe in the sky? Do I believe in my five fingers?"

"Then, tell me," she said, "what does a Communipath become after reincarnation? Is he a Communipath again, and again, and again, age after age, because you con-

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demn him to a life of such total depravity that his soul can never grow, never learn?"

He turned his back on her.

"Try to rest," he said, and was gone.

She lay watching the door he had gone out through, trying to calm the reaction of her body to her own helpless rage. She knew where she was now, she had seen the marking on her tray. This was Galcentral Station 30, Fedhospital, the Women's Ward. The Creche was Station 11. That meant that the distance between her and Susannah could not be more than a handful of miles, perhaps ten miles at the most. These stations were built straight up, not out.

She closed her eyes, going over in her mind the map she had so carefully memorized when first she considered her plan to get the baby back again. There was Station 30, and in its row all the other 30's. Next to it, across a mall, were the 20's. Beyond them, the numbers from 10 to 19. The second of those, Station 11, was the Creche, and it should be in an almost directly straight line from here. . . .

She was incredibly weak, much weaker than even she knew. The force of her desperate attempt to teleport herself across two malls to Station 11 was just sufficient to throw her against the side of a freighter coming in at the Galcentral Food Warehouse, Station 20. There was no smallest scrap of her body to create problems for anyone.

The baby was still very young and not capable of any quick decisions or action. They had time, just barely, to reach it with their drugs before it realized what had happened.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TZANA KAI's translation bureau functioned smoothly and without any hitch, ordinarily. Her staff was very good at taking the product of a computer, which would simply substitute rough morpheme equivalents in bundles, with various feature and intonation markings attached, and turning these chunks of raw language into suitable vehicles for communication. Most of the work they did was, of course, literary output, since the computer's own product was usually sufficient for ordinary business purposes. And then there was a certain minor leftover portion of their business which was made up of diplomatic assignments and vanity stuff. Gentlemen wishing to propose marriage to ladies of alien tongue, scientists asked to present papers at conferences where a majority of the delegates would not know Panglish, that sort of thing. And poetry—always and forever poetry.

These days Tzana Kai was glad she had a good staff, because she had little heart for any of the work. Ordinarily she rather enjoyed it, and despised the intelligence work for which it was presumably the subordinate camouflage. But the superlatively nasty problems that had piled up over the little Maklunite baby seemed to have mushroomed into a Medusa-like monster that she could not get off her mind. She worried about the baby; she mourned over the grim death of its mother. She could not stop puzzling over the problem of what could have been done instead of what *had* been done, and on top of that, she missed Coyote Jones.

This was stupid and she despised herself for it. And she couldn't quite decide what it meant. She had seen

the doctors, who had prescribed the immediate and obvious antidote.

"Another lover, and at once," the doctor had said. "If the fixation seems to be persistent, perhaps a group arrangement, something very different from just a man-woman encounter."

"Nonsense."

"I beg your pardon, Citizen Kai?"

"I've had eleven since Coyote," she told him crossly, "in all shapes, sizes and combinations. All kinds. All skillful. All charming."

He had cocked his head and stared at her for a full five minutes, while she pigheadedly stared back and refused to be intimidated.

Finally, he had nodded as if something had clicked in the back of his head, and spoken to her soothingly.

"You're not suffering from the Romeo-Juliet Syndrome," he said, "if that's what's worrying you."

"The Light have patience," she said, "that's the very last thing that would occur to me! I have a nice normal head, thank you."

"That's just what I said," he agreed.

"Then how come I can't get the thought of Coyote Jones off my mind?"

The doctor smiled at her.

"Dear Citizen Kai," he asked her slowly, "did it ever enter your mind that you just pure and simply are happier when you have him around to keep you company?"

"That's not the Romeo-Juliet Syndrome?"

"Certainly not. With R-J you suffer from the notion, a curious and sick one, that *only* in the presence of Citizen X can you bear to continue living. That is an illness, Citizen, a condition requiring hospitalization, treatment, therapy. What you are feeling is just normal human fondness. You like the man, the two of you work

well together, you enjoy his company and you like to go to bed with him, and now he's gone you miss him. Why should that worry you?"

"Because I've never felt this way before, that's why! He's always been 'gone,' as you put it. I rarely saw him more than once a year, ever—that's why I can't understand the way I keep moping about him."

The doctor had leaned over and patted her hand reassuringly.

"Ah, but this time he's gone for good," he pointed out. "Psychologically, that's a different matter. A very different matter indeed."

She had sat there for a moment, just a little bit stunned, as much by her own stupidity in not having figured it out for herself as by what he had said.

Finally she had stood up and thanked him, and still in a half-daze, she had taken a taxi-flier back to the Bureau. Of course, that was it, she had been an idiot not to see it—it was the fact that this time Coyote was gone for good! Of course, there was the outside possibility that she might run into him somewhere, years from now, but it wasn't likely.

She hoped he was happy, wherever he was.

When the Fish had called her from Mars to tell her what Coyote had done, she had been overjoyed.

"You realize what the idiot's gone and done?" he asked her.

"What? Shot you, I hope."

"Nothing so simple."

"Well, what, then?"

"He's become a Maklunite, Miss Kai. That's what."

"But that's very clever of him!"

"Clever? How so?"

"Because then you have to accept his resignation after all."

There had been a long and disapproving silence from the Fish.

"You knew he had resigned?" he asked finally.

"Sure. He sent me a carbon."

"And your refusal—you've seen that, too?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Most unethical," the Fish said. "Most unethical."

"You can't make a Maklunite do undercover work," she laughed, "because it's against their religion. Good for Coyote, I say!"

"Good for Coyote, eh? We need him, Miss Kai. How many mass projective telepaths do you suppose there are in the Three Galaxies, Miss Kai?"

"Not many."

"Eleven," he said flatly. "Eleven of them to do what it would take at least two or three hundred to do properly. Perhaps you'd like us to go back to controlling riots with Mace and tear gas, Miss Kai?"

"Look," she said, "I've got a lot of work to do. I'm sorry, on a general basis, that you don't have enough people to do all your dirty jobs. But on a personal basis, I'm glad Coyote got away from you."

"Oh, I'm not so sure he got away!"

"If he's a Maklunite you can't—"

"I know the law, Miss Kai," the old man had cut in. "I know it very well. And before he can be officially a Maklunite, he has to be accepted by a cluster. He's tried one, and been turned down."

"Oh, dear."

"Hmph. Oh, dear, you say. I hope they all turn him down. Do him a lot of good. Maklunitel Why not an Ethical Chocolatist? Why not a Reformed Traditional Atheist? Why not a Forfending Fundamentalist? Why not, for that matter, a Five-Square Krishnakon?"

She had hung up as quickly as she decently could and gone straight to her comsystem to request data

on the Maklunites. What she found had made her a little dubious about Coyote's prospects. He had to be "Chosen"—and she didn't know just what that meant; but it apparently had to be based on unanimous acceptance from the group.

Of course it would have been simple, theoretically, for Coyote to have mass projected just that sort of unanimous acceptance and assured his Choosing. But she knew him. He wouldn't do that.

Now she sat at her desk, staring at, but not seeing, a new glossary of Sirian technical infixes that had come in that morning's mail. She could not manage to get interested in the intricacies of internal structure of the Sirian scientific word. She punched her comsystem remote input button and called the Galcentral number.

"Yes?"

"You're the Fish's secretary?" she asked briskly.

"I am secretary to Citizen Wythllewyn," said the voice in tones of ice.

"You'd better not let the old bastard hear you call him 'citizen' instead of 'mister,' if you intend to keep your post," said Tzana.

There was a silence, and then the voice spoke again.

"May I help you—whoever you are?"

"This is Tzana Kai. I want to talk to old whatshis-name."

"He isn't in."

"Then perhaps you could supply me with the information that I need."

"Perhaps. If it is not confidential."

"I want to know the present whereabouts of another agent."

"Name, please."

"Coyote Jones."

"One moment, please."

Tzana sat and fumed. If there was anything she

despised it was these top secret com-numbers, where you could not see who you were talking to. She could imagine the person on the other end, though! Whoever it was, its hair was pink-and-green-striped, the current In thing, and it was excessively thin, and it sprayed its perfect body instead of wearing clothes, and it chewed synthetic marijuana. All of that was predictable. She hoped it had piles.

"Citizen Kai?"

"I'm still here," she said.

"I'm a little bit hesitant to give you this information."

"If you don't give it to me," said Tzana pleasantly, "I will come get it. And a considerable quantity of your pink and green hair. Or are you bald?"

"Really!"

"Give," said Tzana. "I mean it, now. I am a fearless and redoubtable secret agent, and I eat little girls for breakfast. You know what my security rating is and I'm not asking for rocket coordinates. Tell me about Coyote and make it swift."

The voice that came back at her was so chilly it made her giggle. She really did wish she could see the girl.

"Coyote Jones," said the voice. "That was the person in question?"

"That's the one, dearie."

"According to our last reports Citizen Jones has been accepted on probationary basis by a Maklunite cluster called Faw-Griver."

"Called *what*?"

"They are religious fanatics," said the voice smugly. "You can't expect the names to make sense, Citizen."

"Spell it."

"F-O-G-R-I-"

"Oh, Fog River! You were saying Faw Griver, you know."

"As I was saying—"

"Yes, do go on."

"As I was saying, this cluster, Faw Griver, has accepted him on a probationary basis."

"What does that mean, pray tell?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"I'm sure you would, missy, because I'm sure the Fish made it his business to find out and it will be in the file. Give."

"According to the file it means he won't make it. I'll read it to you. 'These people have taken him on trial for three months but have great doubts, they say, because they think he's too much an individualist to adapt to group living no matter how sincere. Hal If they knew he was only joining them to get out of doing his duty to his government they'd think less of his so-called sincerity. We should have him back in six weeks.' That's all it says."

"In the Fish's handwriting?"

"Yes, Citizen Kai. Exactly."

"And where is Fog River?"

"Let me see. Planet 27.108.333, it says here."

"Colloquial name?"

"C-A-L-F-I-N-N-A. Calfinna?"

"Mean anything to you?"

"No, but with that number it's quite a ways from here."

"Thank you."

Tzana hung up. Well, at least she knew where he was. She could have looked up the coordinates in the Tri-Galactic Atlas, but she didn't think she wanted to. It was very far away, and so was Coyote, and she hoped to heaven he managed to adapt to the Maklunite way of living if that was what he wanted. And if he did manage it, then there could be nothing more between them. Not that there was any rule against it, but just

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because he would be too busy, always, and too far away.

She squared her shoulders and went out into the reception office to talk to a fat Dravidian lady who wanted an acceptance speech of an award made to her for her roses. In eleven languages, she wanted it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANNE-CHARLOTTE is dead.

I write that down, but I find it very hard to make myself believe it, even when I'm looking right at it. She was so much *more* alive than so many other people, if that makes any sense. . . . I guess it probably doesn't, though. And she *is* dead. That is a true thing. My not believing it won't change it any.

Maklunites do not mourn their dead. We know that death is only a beginning and is an occasion for rejoicing, not for sorrow. But usually those of us who die die in the ashram, with all of the cluster around them, and it is a time for great loving and celebration. When one of us dies as Anne-Charlotte did, that's so awfully different—they say there was nothing left of her at all, not so much as a scrap of flesh, just a mark of blood and slime on the side of the freighter. She was destroyed as if she had never been. And that is awful, because she was alone, and probably she had time to be afraid and to hurt, if only for a second, and none of us was there with her to comfort her.

But Patrick says we must not grieve. He says it is the greatest good fortune that could have come to Anne-Charlotte—not that she died as she did, of course he doesn't mean *that*—but that she died before anything else could happen to her. He says that nothing that was suffering as Anne-Charlotte suffered should be allowed to live, any more than we would let a hurt animal that could not be mended lie and drag out its dying. And he says that the disease of her mind is so rare now that probably no doctors could have been found that would have known how to help her; and even if they had been able to cure her completely, it would

only have meant that she would have had to stand trial for high treason.

He is right, of course. Patrick is always right. There is no way that Anne-Charlotte could have survived without horror. It is better like this. My mind knows that. Unfortunately my heart doesn't and so I requested permission for an Aloning, away from the cluster, and they said yes, and here I am, almost all the way to the bluffs, with my bubble-tent and my writing things. And no food, because I want to really think.

Of course I know perfectly well that it's just pretend, my being alone. It's not as if I were a grown-up. I'm sure Patrick knows every move I make and every thought I think, and although my psibility is not much it is certainly good enough that I can tell they've sent Mark to camp out on the other side of that gully over there just in case I break my leg or go berserk. But at least I can't *see* any of them, or hear them, and the pretend aloneness will have to do.

There is a great goodness that has come out of all this awful time, you see. I am proud to be able to sit here and write about it, and I wish Anne-Charlotte could have been alive to hear of it.

It's her baby, the baby that has named itself Susannah. The doctors at the Creche have written to Patrick and told him that the baby seems to be completely free of Anne-Charlotte's illness and that it seems to be able to understand that her death was an accident and not something it must tear the universe apart over. And wonder of wonders, the doctors say that for Susannah the work of manning a station on the Bucket will be just an ordinary day's work, like any other day's work. There is no reason to believe that she will have to die any younger than she would have if she had stayed here with us. She does not even need the other stations on the Bucket, apparently; she can just pass information

across three galaxies as if there were no space there at all.

Just think what that is going to mean! They say that if there is one like her there are probably others, or will be soon, and in any case, now that they know the possibility to such a degree of power is possible they will find out how to make it *certain* that there are more like her. I don't understand it and I don't even care, but it is a matter of eugenics and genetics and a few more "-ics" I can't remember the names of. It doesn't matter what it is, really, the important thing is that it means an end of the Communipaths like they are now, slaves and prisoners of all the rest of us!

Patrick says that no one had ever dreamed that the sort of possibility Susannah has was within the limits of possibility. They had never even considered that a human being might be able to do a tenth of what she can do, and do it easily and happily as well. He says that now they know, the technology and the money and all the rest of it certainly exists to put an end to the Communipath obscenity forever and ever and ever.

They won't be able to do it overnight, and probably not in a year, and certainly if they find a way to do it quickly (which they probably will, because the computers will help) it's not possible to make these new kinds of human beings grow up to an age where they can serve as—not Communipaths, that word has too many horrible things associated with it—but whatever the new name will be. It's not going to be possible to make them grow up any faster than any other human being does. That means that a few more Communipaths, maybe quite a few more, will have to die, before they can be replaced by the new kind of people. But at least the end is in sight!

I think I am feeling better already. Writing this down has done me a great deal of good, I think. In

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fact, I don't think I want to fast at all, or even be alone, and instead I am going to go see if I can't join Mark over there on the other side of the gully and just he and I can be alone together. And then later I'll write some more about all this, okay?

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