

Jurith's Way  
by Karlene Kubat

I

The White Notebook of Mirabul

Wild heart beating into myth,  
Made of sea blood, bits of star grit,  
Long equations, and the songs of birds.  
She heard the cries beneath our noise,  
Alluded to some raw emotions of her own,  
Yet She was much alone in thinking,  
Knotted beyond our vain acuties.  
Lo! that overarching Mind's effect,  
The Powerhouse of this green coil,  
And She the trusted Maker of our way.

.....Pilgrims of Jurith

Now that I'm off on this wayfarer's station I have a different perspective of the whole Laom affair. But that doesn't clarify a great many things. The unanswered questions are still whipping up my innards and pulling me in ten directions. So this old cynic is finally stuck deep in something, and he feels helpless as a callow youth begging

the sun for omnipresence -- ah, to be several places at once, a constant hunger for those in my line of work.

I started having a persistent dream as soon as I left Laom. Sometimes I am myself in it, an observer, and sometimes I am also Jurith or one of the others. But it's all fragmented, tormentingly incomplete, and try as I will I can't remember enough when I wake up. I feel panicky, as though I have failed her. I break into the hot sweat of prodigal flesh, but that was my youth, randy, glorious, and wasteful; it's far too exulted a term for a banged up old hulk like me. I've finally succumbed to those infernal life extenders. Once you get on them you can't stop, but I have to preserve for a while longer whatever is left. There is a consuming purpose which drives me. I've become a part of the mystery I seek to unravel. I must get home. There are answers there, things I must discover. Home, that place once left never again to be found, sweeter than a lover and even more faithless.

These recollections along with a bit of self-analysis which I'm clearing out of my head are being handwritten, and my unaccustomed fingers are rebelling. Jurith incinerated my video recorder the day I arrived on Laom, and justly gave me credit for it. She damn near liberated my telewrist, which would have severed my umbilical with Mother -- the only mother I remember: a big, sumptuous galaxy transport. At least this odd business of writing will give me something to do besides guzzle minus-time bracers while I'm waiting to deport. How fortuitous that I've found this handsome little book of empty vellum pages just crying to be defaced with something worthwhile: the subject of Jurith. The notebook is a real collector's item. It has a heavy white cover that locks with one of those old metal keys which, of course, is missing, and the center of the top cover is set with an

eyeball-size lapis lazuli gem carved into the head of an ape. For someone like me that in itself invites a story. The android in the transport company store -- "Another famous WAYPORT to serve you" -- didn't even know what the notebook was. Not too surprising. It was probably left by some early explorers with fairly romantic notions of the "Big Deep." Anyway, it suggests the romantic, especially with writing added. Almost everyone learns this brain-toning exercise at an early age, but I forgot there could be something very personal and touching about writing out words, sort of rounding off the corners of experience. With the length of time I've been in this business, there's a heap to round off.

The general rule in my kind of reporting is to forego opinion and just try to scrape the muck off the facts, which is plenty hard enough. A long time ago people who did what I do were called journalists. They raced around on one troubled little planet, trying to get the news as fast as they could. Now we're called historeps. The title gives one a rough jolt of responsibility. That's why I keep trying to get it right. Like a gambler helplessly ensnared in habit, I can't quit, even when I know I'm getting it wrong. I've got an incurable hunger to stop the unfamiliar in motion, freeze it and identify it, although I know by now that it's all one big flux. There isn't real news anymore except on home base, but you can't really go home. Time locks you out and the rest is history. When I come tail-dragging in with a hot spool of news there's nobody to scoop. All my friends, that is the people I bumped into on the last loop, are either dead or out somewhere like me. What a lot of time it would save if stories could be wave-laid, but, thanks to code breakers, it's generally against the law. Most of the stuff I do has to be declassified

first -- seniority earns me the loss of speed.

I drop my collection of stories off at the history bank, Control Building H-30, where some fad-head -- the latest fashion in androids -- looks at me like it's trying to identify a prehistoric anomaly, gives me its evilly designed patronizing smile and proceeds with my labor of screwed-up love. The data goes first to the Controller -- the real live political experimenter of the current century -- then through screening and out on the multiplex so the history buffs can tweak their channels for intergalactic gossip and finally into H-30's elaborate cross-file banks. End of my assignment. Then up to the top floor of old H-30 to sweet-talk the current research bureau chief, and out to the next burn-off. I've been at this so long I can smell a story before the bureau, and I usually make my own assignments.

Once I had a daughter who was born and lived and died while I was out. I looked her up in the human records terminal. She wasn't bad, had my eyes and the same silly lopsided curve to her smile, but luckily she wasn't stuck with the rest of my face, these big gnawing teeth and boozy jowls. I know she was smart, had a good job, but who was she? What did she think? And where did her one carefully requisitioned child end up, if she had it? I could find nothing on that score. All I can remember about her mother is that she was a bright little collection of cosmic dust passing through, just passing through the same as I was.

But as to the Laom affair, it will take home years if ever I achieve the peripatetic historep's legendary detachment. First of all, I fell in love with the amazing doctor known only to increasing numbers as Jurith. This did not make me unique but was unavoidable. The minute I met her she was livid because my presence had contaminated an

air lock from the shuttle which was supposed to be used only for unloading sensitive lab equipment -- I've developed an entire repertoire for debarking in remote places without undergoing the customary guarded tour -- and things went steadily downhill from there. Jurith was by that time admittedly and for good reason somewhat paranoid.

I didn't know when I arrived on Laom exactly how Jurith came to be there or how much of Laom she had made. I knew only that there was a war going on and without coming in under the right code our android-run shuttle, ferrying Laom freight and me from Mother, would have been blown to smithers, well actually just vaporized.

I now know that Jurith, with the help of her colleagues, made Laom from a primeval hunk of space debris into what it must still be at this writing: a grand tour de force of human ingenuity. Later, I came to know that Jurith even hijacked, in a manner of speaking, her little quintet: the Quester expeditionary crew. They still didn't quite know this when I left, but even though they were all free to go, the war notwithstanding, none of them would do so. They were scientists on a very hot frontier, with unprecedented freedom, and Jurith had them in the palm of an idol's hand.

Her colleagues and their children were Jurith's only human companions on Laom -- three men, two women, and five children; at least, I at first thought they were the only humans, but of this I will write more later. Among the adults it would appear to be a nice even pairing but was nothing of the sort. They were an unpaired group.

The Quester Expeditionary Force did not set out for the place later named Laom at all. En route to some mysterious point at the other side of the transverse, the doctor detected on her spectrograph a monolithic chunk of what had heretofore been known as a rare metal. It was an element

Jurith sorely required in her scheme of things. With its first sighting long ago, the plan of the young wizardess grew around this core of barren rock like the rich sponge around the pip of a delectable fruit.

There was something unsettling and indefinable going on between Jurith and the Controller, and I believe there is more which she was still trying to understand. I don't understand it yet either, of course, but Jurith would be impressed by my accurate mental addition, although she praised wisdom of experience most. Intelligence without it was beneath discussion. Whether or not Jurith finally figured it out I couldn't say at this moment, but she must have because she's so damned smart. Still I might have the jump on her. I can go home and penetrate Control in one of my clever dissembling masks -- for instance, the one where I just walk in and ask anything, since everyone I knew before has been dead a long time. What a way to make a living. Although by now what I do is, as I say, pure habit.

When I wrote that I fell in love with Jurith I could distinctly hear her laughing in her ever more distant world. "You fool, blast off and let me get on with my work," she once told me. But it was inflected with her special dose of compassion. If I hadn't gotten out of there when I did I might have gone soft. As it is, when I get too old for this game I'll probably retire to a leisure colony and write poetry about her -- if there is anything left of my gyri after all these roving years of interstellar poison and shortchange.

I had no reason to think that Jurith was any more schizophrenic than the rest of us. So the day I arrived and questioned her about the war and she opened her softly fluting mouth and said, "What war?" I thought it might be a problem of semantics. I replied, perhaps a little too

bluntly, "Harquint, the rare metal rustler, and his trigger-happy cowboys are trying with everything they've got, which is a helluva lot, to lasso this entire rock in what amounts so far to a series of androicide missions for a string of expensive androids, and you say there's no war?"

She looked at me with heart-freezing eyes that later became, at special moments, promising as the little trout streams on Korak -- I don't remember her eyes as any particular color; they went from blue to gray to violet to clear glass and back again -- and said, "There is no war. There is no war for your video recorder, no war for your telewrist, no war for your ears or your tongue. No war."

"What about my eyes?" I said, "You left out my eyes."

Her mood did a quicksilver roll to laughter. "They're a sort of carnelian brown," she observed closely. "Looks like you might even have a few crystals of grit left in you."

And that's when I began to fall in love.

"Why did you let me come here? You knew what I was up to," I said.

"Nobody comes here, Mirabul. Only a fool would want to come here. Obviously, I thought you might come in handy."

At this moment, because I am something of a masochist, I was seized with immutable adulation. I simply stood there shamelessly worshipful, my big blunt teeth hanging over my tongue, and fell still more deeply in love.

I've seen all kinds: the chicken heads; the eggheads; the muzzy half-and-halves creaking along on a pathetic mix of high tech parts and rare organic originals; the derelict trippers; the pigeonholed gray faces who will even kowtow to low-level androids; the rigid butts with wound-too-tight, broken mainspring heads and cryogenic hearts...but I never saw anything like Jurith and never will again. She has no

ideology whatsoever. If anything, she is an altruist, the more so because she has no idea of it. Her musical brain plays fugues with countless reels of complex data, but it never makes enough music to suit her. She is a demure authoritarian anarchist who loves order. And, even more confusing, she has an all-consuming hunger and asceticism, devouring everything but as though her body didn't exist. She is self-energizing light flushing out a terrible darkness in the universe and a black corner in my soul -- it comes to the same thing. I think of her evenly formed white teeth and how I labored to make them appear. They shone like glittering comet tails behind musical lips that could say there was no war and almost make me believe it. It wasn't a lie but an impassioned refusal which bordered on the erotic. I wanted to stand there with her and revel in her declaration of non-war until Harquint landed on my back.

"No more of war," she said in a near whisper while I wavered between a stubborn and querulous doubt, which is the tool of my trade, and the beginnings of complete devotion.

"I didn't come here to quibble," I insisted with faint heart, "but people have played these word games before. At first they made up words for things that didn't exist and then fought over the nonexistent things. But you pretend that the thing doesn't exist by refusing the word that stands for it."

"A lesson in linguistics I do not need, Mirabul. There hasn't been one drop of blood wrongfully shed here and there won't be by dinner. Please go and freshen up, a cold shower perhaps. Then I'll introduce you to my colleagues."

"Is this the brush-off, before I even change my socks?"

Again she was transformed by laughter and I ransacked my brain to keep her at it. But it was no use. I was only funny spontaneously or when I didn't intend to be.

Her fingers combed through a deep blond cloud of hair the color of old-world tussah silk. It fell casually to her shoulders, accenting an oval face with a straight delicate nose and pale vaporous skin.

"It's good to laugh with a stranger," she said, and I can still hear the gentle pleasure in her voice. "But you're not a stranger anymore, are you?...and experienced and clever I see."

"More experienced than clever, alas."

"And honest. I'm afraid I'll tell you things you don't need to know. I'm afraid you'll find out that I'm not good at subterfuge."

"Oh, I think you're very good at it if need be, or you wouldn't have come so far," I said.

The irony in my words matched the irony of her amused expression.

"You're still something of a fool for coming here."

"I've done a lot of foolish things but coming here, I suspect, isn't one of them. Perhaps you think I'm a fool because I might get killed here," I said, now in the full and relentless grip of my profession.

"I simply meant that there is nothing going on on Laom that would interest a non-scientific mind," she answered, no longer smiling.

"There's you," I said, already sniffing out a rich scent of history. "I think posterity must have you."

"Foolish man," she offered, turning on her heel and beckoning to an aide. "Go with Boaz. I've work to do."

I had been afforded the attention of her personal aide, Boaz, a handsome android -- all Laom android servants, I found, were made imperfectly attractive, strong, nimble, and courteous. I was amazed at their superior quality, even though I was not ignorant of Jurith's celebrated reputation

for producing android strains of exceptional versatility. Of this I was to learn much more, for in the beginning I had not an inkling of the extent of her triumph.

Thus I went off to my ablutions, following Boaz through air locks and android-built domes to a heavily textiled quarters.

In the main chamber were eight walls, eight ceiling triangles and conforming floor, all covered with delicately woven tapestries and rugs depicting wild forests and meadows filled with flowering vegetation, animals, and birds.

Water was precious there and maybe that's why it felt extra luxurious as I washed the dust of a long time twist from my lethargic hide. While I sponged myself with a thick lather of herb-scented soap, I looked out a diamond peephole at more android-built domes green with the tint of their interior oases. Beyond them hung the brutal red skyline of jagged, hard peaks which everywhere imprisoned the rare metal. On a few far-flung planets it was painstakingly extracted in infinitesimal amounts. Conversely, it was so plentiful on Laom that Jurith had renamed it Laomite.

The fresh air of my splendid bailiwick was continuously filtered. Thus my old dislike of stale rooms wouldn't preclude my decision to try the hookah which had been set up on a low carved table. I seated myself near the table on a pile of bulging pillows, wondering how this fanciful sensualist's room had come about and what Jurith's digs were like. Puffing away thoughtfully, I tried to draw a rough mental sketch of Jurith and her milieu.

It seemed to me that the doctor had a tight little fiefdom here with her companion retainers, the five scientists, and her obedient android population. I was wrong. She cared little for hierarchic orders and liked to have positions interchangeable. But she did rule, without

seeming to acknowledge it, mainly because her companions needed a leader and she was the wisest and smartest and also captain of the original expedition. Besides, she was the one responsible for marooning her companions, a weighty responsibility she handled well because she considered the fate of her crew a fortunate and honorable destiny.

Apparently, some time after she settled her flock on the hunk of rare metal, she had little trouble getting Control to allot her necessities from the increasing number of big transports crossing the transverse. Very soon she audaciously began requisitioning materials for her work. Aborting or diverting a mission was a serious business. Seizing government property and squatting on uncharted space debris was highly irregular. I continually puzzled over how Jurith had gotten rigid Control to concede. Naturally, Control would have been overjoyed with the Laomite resource, if it had known about the rare metal, but that notable geologic detail Jurith at first neglected to mention. This neglect must have been at least a misdemeanor, and still not even a reprimand, as far as I could tell. There is the nasty little effect of travel time which winnows out the opposition back home, even though computer terminals never die or forget anything. Still, I know something of Control, having worked out of one of its bureaus all of my adult life. There is always a new regime ready to go to great lengths, pardon the pun, to make its far-flung subjects knuckle under. I, nevertheless, go my own distance -- the license of a historep who has learned how to be a chameleon. But I don't fool myself that I'm invulnerable.

The original Control -- the one who sent Jurith out -- would have known precisely her level of competence. It was Control's business to approve the selection of explorer cadets. And the present Control could certainly verify the

putative genius. Jurith's little planet was virtually a high class android factory. Her andys were now prized throughout the galaxy, the *sine qua non* of androids. Sometimes known as Juroids, they, in fact, have made new and distant colonization possible. Even externally, what beauties these creations are with their humanoid eyes and cultured synthetic skin and proteinaceous hair. Jurith used the astounding properties of Laomite inside her androids as an analogical pituitary gland, employing very small but critical amounts of the metal alloyed in a secret process. Later, the andys, under her constantly perfected design, were building themselves. Some of the androids who worked the mines had been stolen by Harquint and converted into warriors. The flaw was, perhaps, that Jurith had made her androids with astounding brain systems almost infinitely convertible. It seemed obvious to me that in light of her supreme contribution to Control's far-reaching system of expansion, Control owed her a great deal. Why did they not protect her better?

Into Jurith's sacrosanct world a few Laom years ago, Harquint had come out of nowhere, almost as if he had been lying in wait for someone else to do his prospecting for him. By that time Jurith's Laomite resource was well known. Harquint wanted to carve Laom up and had a huge market ready to partake of his success. Foreign transports built with Laomite systems could move lighter, faster, and further with fewer overhauls than anything else in the field. But foreign transports belonging to Harquint's sometime buyers carried mainly the implements of war, and Jurith would not deal. She sent Harquint's messenger androids back to him with a flat refusal and a warning not to return. War was anathema for Jurith, the complete opposite of her purposeful existence. She labored to perfect, among other functionals

of the skilled professions, android neurosurgeons needed for both new colonies and distant colonies which were dying out. The increasing possibility of having to fight a war in order to continue to do this was interfering with both the quality and quantity of her work. Still, she avoided the reality of her own war with a fanatical vehemence that was unlike any other part of her practical nature. Harquint had not yet come close to endangering human life on Laom. The humans were too valuable, and he most certainly, although very mistakenly, thought he could use them. Furthermore, he definitely wouldn't want Control's out-cruising battle fleet breathing down his neck. He continued to pick off Jurith's androids so that she had to repeatedly stop work, put more of them into the field and step up her defenses. But Jurith insisted there was no war. Naturally all of this primed my historep itch for answers to an insatiable level and caused a lot of scratching that was both pleasure and pain. What did the head-in-the-sand denial of war mean?

At dinner I studied the five other scientists with a scrutiny which I feared was approaching the impolite. We were seated around a low stone slab table in the tapestried dining hall where the six adults always took their dinners together after the five children were fed. The mineral and metal utensils had been fashioned by androids, as had the hard carved stone chairs cushioned with ample silk pillows over which my tired rump rejoiced. Silk was worn and used in every manner on Laom. Silk worms long gone from our home planet were tended by a crew of androids, just as another crew raised vicuna for the prized fluff of their luxurious pelts. It amused me that here on this supposedly crude outpost was a certain kind of luxury rarely if ever found anymore on the home planet.

The woman at my right was called Nima; the most

talkative of the Laom group, she did her best to keep my voice unheard. Jurith had, of course, arranged the seating to lessen my chance of bringing up the war. I gave her a knowing look but she only smiled inscrutably over her blue clay goblet and rolled her tongue, sampling the wine.

I could forgive the bright little engineer, Nima -- obviously hungry for fresh company -- for barely giving the wiry geophysicist, Pysu, on my left, a chance to acquaint me with his penchant for sharply accented jokes -- the accents of later Ginsans were soft and hardly noticeable. It was Nima who told me that Pysu was from the little colony of Ginsa, which was nearly autonomous because of its relative unimportance. It began as a way station, but its inhabitants developed a small mining operation of semi-precious stones; actually quite flawless and lovely. The Ginsans were known for their tall and humorous stories, having little else to occupy their free time but keen observation and the clever hoodwinking of transients. Nima was an elfin blond with almond-shaped eyes so dark I couldn't distinguish the pupils. She had a voice which was soft but deep as space. It seemed a miracle if, in fact, her small fastidious body had produced the two big children I'd seen cavorting off to their rooms with the other three earlier. I wondered who had fathered her two: the blond plant genius, Larstev, talking quietly to Jurith, the comedic genius, Pysu, or the prematurely white-haired metallurgist, Ezzlin, who sat across from me? Ezzlin's ice-blue eyes looked down his long waxen nose at me as he produced a grudging smile from time to time, then turned back to the botanist, Larstev, or the black-haired woman on his left whose name was Roggi.

Roggi drew my fervent interest. She was big and quiet and smoldering with more than a hint of fire inside, a

barely dormant volcano. She was both a skilled biologist and a medical doctor, to say nothing of her involvement in android technology. Just looking at her large nimble hands made me feel more secure than I ever had on Mother Transport with its staff of travel-weary physicians.

I studied the self-possessed towhead, Larstev, who was still talking animatedly with Jurith about one of his prime ecosystems. Although enthusiastic, he kept his voice low and I could not hear all of what he was saying. He seemed lost in his own thrall, this small-boned, muscular man with straight white teeth and smooth clean-cut features. One could have mistaken him for an android except that he seemed to have none of the subtle and endearing intentional physical flaws of Jurith's ingenious design. He could easily have been Jurith's brother but was not even remotely related to her. He was enviable, graceful to watch as he bared his teeth good naturedly and worked the cumbersome knife and fork over his plate of perfectly seasoned vegetables and grains -- alas, no meat was eaten on Laom.

Jurith attended Larstev with concentrating eyes, stroking him with an earnest finesse of words fascinating to behold. Her voice was soft and minimal, but it was her wholly directed focus which seemed to capture his ego. I could almost see Larstev's chest inflating. I wondered if this social artistry of Jurith's was what had kept the five others from bashing one another's heads in over all these years. They were strong independent individuals with outrageously dominant personalities. From a psychological point of view, a study of the human linkage in this unique group was itself worth the trip, but I was strongly hooked on the rare metal angle and the war. All of it was closely tied together anyway. Each person here had carved out a niche with indispensable expertise, yet they all understood

one another's work surprisingly well. Each clearly loved his or her work above all else, even above the children whom they all indulged and loved with equal devotion. They were a strange lot as families went, but always Jurith emerged at the head, as certainly as she formed the head of this equitably round table, nurturing her colleagues' egos while they devoured both food and acclaim with hungry greediness.

I felt a shiver and a craving to belong as the mellow wine sloshed in my belly. Please be fair to me, Laom paragon, my blurring eyes silently implored Jurith. Give this cynic's ego a little boost too.

The air-filtered room remained a faint smoky red from the great crimson-dominated tapestries and the myriad candle flames dotting the huge metal chandelier which swayed over our heads. But why was it swaying? My old practice of overview was operating oddly out of sync, more physical than mental. I felt myself soaring up to the curving stone support rounding the ceiling's base, and was convinced I roosted there, looking warily down like a starving buzzard. The carpet below was a shaded green, almost black with indistinct patterns. Suddenly it was all moonlight and fearful shadow on tangled fern and bramble where I had run to escape death in some faraway night. I heard myself forcing out laughter in a lusting hunger for camaraderie, but my face was dripping sweat as I slid down on it.

I awoke lying across the soft vicuna bed on the floor of my quarters. Jurith was sitting on a stack of pillows across the room, floating there regally in her pale green evening robe with her legs crossed serenely and tucked to one side, the toes of her shoes spearing the carpet.

Roggi, who had just shot me with something, was putting away her microderm gun and monitoring my pulse and blood pressure with a small hand-held instrument. Her long

fingers pulled back my eyelid and stared at my eye's white portion which I envisaged as a red network of misery.

"Drugged," I muttered.

Roggi put back her head and laughed, a great wicked shriek, and Jurith smiled with an amused patience.

"You picked up a virus to which we're all immune here," Roggi said. "I should have stuck your rump the moment you landed."

"Am I gun die?" I asked and began vomiting unashamedly into a handsome rock crystal bowl.

"I'm afraid not right away," Roggi answered in a voice which somehow managed to mock and console in equal measure. "And I hope not on my little planet, you big lummo."

"No waya talk ta sick trav'ler," I mumbled with numbing tongue and fading brain while Roggi wiped my face with a gently ministering hand.

"Please go to sleep now," Jurith's firm voice urged. "You'll feel much better in three Laom days."

In three of Laom's days I was wheeled into one of Larstev's incredibly expansive garden domes by my personal android attendant, Noto. Noto, a charming creature with a sweet eggshell-white face, pointed out the big iridescent butterflies flapping among pungent orange blossoms above my head. The place was, in fact, alive with winged creatures merrily whirring and zooming past my dazed, insensitive stare. I was still sitting in a steamy quandary, my limp hands folded over melted knees, when the soft evening lights came on and Jurith entered ahead of Noto who was carrying my hot soup.

"Shall I feed you?" Noto asked in a high, gentle voice.

"I think I can handle it," I answered.

"Thank you. That will be all for the moment, Noto," Jurith said.

Noto's emerald silk robe rustled as she bowed her delicate head of gorgeous red hair and departed on her noiseless little feet.

"I want to talk to you," I said.

"Eat your soup," Jurith commanded.

I ate my soup, slurping and slopping and shaking and damned embarrassed.

"I'm not used to being messed up by invisible bugs. What else have you got on this rock that's going to get me?"

"I think nothing else," Jurith offered with a frown.

"Roggi has put a few deterrents into your blood."

"I don't know whether to thank her or protest."

"Just thank her. She's very good."

Jurith was peeling an orange she had reached up and picked while I was slopping soup. Her long fingers plunged into the center, tore it apart and sectioned it neatly.

"Eat. Good for you."

I took it and ate, thinking it was the sweetest orange I had ever tasted.

"How did you happen to come here, Mirabul?" Jurith began peeling another orange as she spoke, one for herself. I watched with fascination as those clever fingers neatly sectioned the orange and lined up the segments on my tray. Her hand moved deftly over the pretty row, selecting the most perfectly intact segment. She held it up on the palm of her hand, obviously enjoying its beauty, then popped the sweet segment into her mouth and motioned for me to answer.

"Well, as usual among those of my profession, I was coming from somewhere else, the Fland Colony, which had highly touted your androids. Someone there mentioned that it was a shame you had to put up with Harquint, you and your scientists being such worthy individuals. That is, you provide so much for so many, my informant went on to say.

Immediately, I saw a lengthy history unfolding."

"Oh you did, unfolding on this uneventful Laom outpost of hardworking individuals?" she said, delicately licking the juice from her fingers.

"This place is incredible. How's the atmosphere out there?" I pointed above me.

"Without a suit only good for androids."

"That I know...what I meant was...well, about this hellish non-war--"

"Come, come, come, I must treat you gently. You're a sick man. Don't make me treat you cruelly, Mirabul."

She had folded her arms in annoyance. A honey-fall of hair curved just above taut shoulders and framed her sanguine cheeks. I think her eyes were amethyst then. Yes, amethyst when she became angry and one brow tended to arch.

"What are your quarters like?" I asked. "Do they inspire the same eroticism as mine?"

Now both brows shot up and her face crinkled in its wonderful laughter.

"You're curious about my personal quarters? You mean, of course, the place where I sleep."

She stood a moment looking away in reflection, then reached down, pushed a little button on my chair and stepped ahead. The chair followed her brisk pace through a series of air-locked domes -- all interesting regions which I hoped to investigate later -- until we stopped before a solitary structure which, I could see beyond the air-lock, was angled in several dazzling hexagonals rising into the sky. Sharp points suggested a gigantic cluster of quartz crystals. It was, in fact, a colossal group of Laom quartz crystals, of which there were entire mountains on this planet. The huge geofoms had been hollowed out by androids using lasers. Because this form of silica transmits ultraviolet light more

readily than glass, the metallurgist, Ezzlin, had devised a method of opaquing the translucent density when necessary.

Jurith pressed her hand against the glass and a shield slid open.

"Come in," she invited.

There was nothing in the room but a wondrous play of light, and in the center a several-foot-thick puffy white heap of vicuna bedding dimpled from the slight weight of Jurith's body. The crystal was unopaqued, and from the outside came a lurid twilight violet. But inside, soft lights shot up from the glass floor as we entered, refracting from skillfully faceted walls and angled ceilings. Without a way to shut out direct light, the place would have been a blinding scream of prisms during the fast arriving and departing day.

"Where do you keep things?" I asked, for there was truly nothing anywhere visible but the sheer pattern of the crystal and the vicuna bed.

"What things?"

"Well, clothes, baubles, keepsakes."

She pressed a thin silver bar by the door and sparse shelves and racks of apparel appeared from the entrance wall of mirror.

"My clothes," she offered, "and beyond the same wall a bathroom. We recycle our water here, of course. Just a minute. I'm going to wash the juice from my fingers," she called over her shoulder, disappearing into her bathroom.

"So this is it, this empty dazzle?"

"But what more is needed?" she asked, returning and examining the room along with me. "This is where my brain turns off. It's a comfortable resting place, and I plan to use it for my final sleep when my life must conclude. I had the androids build a small control chamber under the floor

beneath my vicuna bed. It controls everything including the opaquing and sealing of my crystal. I need only press a special button to seal myself in a vacuum preserved as I lie. My complete although blurred form could then be viewed from outside, disturbed only by the cut of the crystal unopaqued. I have thought this would bring others...peace to see how gratefully I rest. I also hope it would serve to remind those who follow of the importance of ongoing work."

"Remarkable and generous of you...but on a brighter note, have you no other rooms of your own?"

"A garden -- we all have our gardens and orchards -- otherwise, the places where I work, where the greatest part of my life is spent." She hesitated and said, "I have sometimes occupied the room in which you're staying...just to...think."

"Oh really? It's a room of antiquity and seems quite ornate after this...but I like it there," I said.

"I sometimes did too," she offered with yet another of her mysterious smiles.

"Who smokes a hookah?" I asked.

"No one. It was a gift from Pysu. He found it in a transport store -- you know how you find curious things in those places, people shedding impedimenta as they go. He thought it a most wonderful contrivance."

"I'm trying to know who you are, doctor."

"Call me Jurith...and to what end?"

"I suspect a spellbinding story."

At this she gave a derisive little smile.

"You can know me by this room, I think, and by the person you see before you...and by my work. That's all there is."

"Oh, no!" My echoing shout turned into incredulous laughter. "Not for an instant do I believe that. There's

much, much more than this emptiness...these sheer planes of crystal...and even your marvelous androids."

"Poor fool, Mirabul, we don't communicate well. You must go and rest until you're strong enough to travel."

"Travel? In that case the return of my strength will take longer than we both thought. I'm just doing my job, Ma'am," I lied a little, "for Control's Bureau of History, remember?"

"You're a troublemaker, I think."

"I didn't make the trouble you've got here, and I wouldn't want to cause any more. I'm growing very fond of you, as a matter of fact."

"Fool." The word came amidst a soft sigh. "At any rate, we don't pay much attention to Control here."

"You eschew the hand which feeds you?"

"The hand feeds less and less. We're becoming more self-sufficient all the time."

"Didn't you ever wonder why Control let you get away with settling here before they ever knew about Laomite?"

"If this is where I'm supposed to start babbling my deepest speculations, you're in for a disappointment, Mirabul."

Jurith bent over me and pressed a button on my intelligent little cart and off it went.

"Back to your quarters, Mirabul. And try not to emerge until your strength and manners have both improved."

#

Where did you get that contraption, anyway?" I asked Roggi, eyeing the evil little conveyor chair from which I was finally parted.

"We built it when Ezzlin broke his leg and was driving us all crazy. My treatment should have produced a swift

healing, but Ezzlin wouldn't stay off the leg, so we stuck him in the chair."

"Ezzlin is a sort of bastard, isn't he? Every time I run across him he exhibits a strong desire to spit on me or worse."

Roggi sighed, pushing back wayward strands of long black hair which was mostly gathered at the nape of her neck. She whacked down her rolled white shirt sleeves and sealed them around her wrists. Her large green eyes held mine a minute while the trace of a smile, half amused, half critical, played across her thick red lips.

"It takes awhile to understand Ez. He's intense, but he's all right. He regards you as a nuisance. If you could see it from his point of view...well, there are enough distractions around here lately, and..."

Roggi had fallen silent, and I saw an opening through which I might scramble.

"This attack from Harquint won't go away by ignoring it."

"It isn't being ignored at all."

"Then what are Jurith's plans and what does Harquint expect to gain?" I was a little too hasty.

"Whoa! Wait a minute, you transport jockey. I'm not such an easy mark as that. I came here out of the kindness of my heart to check your blood. Why don't you just give yourself a rest. You know you weren't in such great shape even before the virus struck. You ought to take better care of yourself."

"When everyone, even an android, goes haywire every time a certain subject comes up, it really peaks a fellow's curiosity."

Roggi slapped her long legs, which were clothed in raw silk slacks, and roared. "Don't tell me you were pumping

Noto for information. Oh, that's a good one! That must have set her little banks whirring."

"How much Laomite does Jurith have to consign to Control transport builders in order to stay here? And why doesn't Control rub out Harquint?" I asked.

"Control didn't send you here to find that out," she shot over her shoulder. She was already leaving, her face as stony as one of the cold black peaks beyond my peephole.

"If you really understand my needs why don't you stay here with me?" I called out to her stiffening back. That was a mistake.

I was shelved.

I finally got Noto to take me to Boaz who agreed to take me as far as one of Jurith's android factories. He left me standing outside her office, then in a few minutes showed me into a room banked with glaring scan and design screens. Jurith was in a brown smock, crouched forward on the edge of a big soothe chair, watching a squiggle of android innards on a screen.

"You've only been allowed in here because I'm waiting for something to happen here," she tossed over her shoulder. "Maybe you'll get my dander up, reroute my circuitry and effect a speedy solution for this obstinate screen."

"Why don't you build a psychiatrist?"

"You're determined to leave here as friendless as when you arrived, aren't you, Mirabul?"

"What do you mean?"

She spun around in her chair and I could see that I was in for it.

"Look," I said, holding up my hand, "I intend to apologize to Roggi if I ever get near her again. She's been good to me. It's this wall I keep running into that's scrambling my brain. My job is information and I can't get

any. How do you feel when you can't get anything out of these terminals?"

"You see we're at cross purposes here, Mirabul. We're a practical lot, and we can't see any benefit accruing from your objective. All we see is trouble."

"Then why haven't you thrown me off?"

"We might have some future plan for you."

"Is that the we of absolute authority, or are you actually speaking with everyone's sanction?"

"What?" she asked. It was as if she had never entertained the idea of dissension among her people.

"Doesn't anyone want to talk to me? Why do I continue to feel that your campaign of secrecy involves something personal?"

"That isn't true."

She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair and stared down at their movement, as though at work. "Mirabul, why don't you suit up, go out with our geophysicist, Pysu, and have a look around. Give me a chance to think."

"While I get zapped by Harquint out there," I suggested.

"I've sworn to remain calm, but this is almost too much. You certainly have a way of getting under the skin."

"Now you know I'm not really a fool...at least all the time."

"I was hoping through the power of suggestion to make you believe yourself one," Jurith said with a woeful smile spreading over her troubled face.

To prove my noble intentions, I stuck my neck way out. I soon found myself suited up, airborne, and darting over the rough red and black terrain in a fast little craft piloted by Nima, who had come along at Jurith's request.

"I'm glad Jurith wants you to see some of my

handiwork," Nima said as we took off. "I don't have many chances to show off something I've made. "Now look down. It wasn't there when your shuttle came in. You've arrived just in time for the unveiling, or more accurately, the veiling. What do you see?"

"Blazing meteors! The whole area down there is enclosed under one giant dome." We had traveled underground to our aircraft and taken off through a surface airlock, so I had not known we were outside a single huge dome.

"Lovely, isn't it, if you'll pardon my immodesty. We used a synthetic developed right here on Laom. We equation it out according to its stablest level of tensile strength. The greater pressure on the inside keeps it from collapsing."

"What about exploding?"

"That's where its peculiar property comes in. Our clever new Lalox hardens to a nearly impenetrable density when it's expanded to a certain thickness. That thickness is precisely calculated to withstand the atmospheric pressure in which humans thrive. We can also instantly reseal areas damaged by...meteoroids," she said, just managing to escape a mention of Harquint's threat.

"Amazing. How ingenious you are," I said, tapping her shoulder with my gloved hand.

"Of course, I've had a little help -- Jurith and the others -- we always pick each other's brains. We'll be undoming the gardens soon, except for a few of Larstev's most fragile ecosystems. And we'll be making quads and footpaths and places to run until your lungs give out, in a straight line instead of in our gymnasium or with a life support on your back." Through her visor her black eyes sparkled with childlike anticipation.

All this I was mulling over as we flew along above the

hostile outlands until Pysu pointed out a large android mining operation called Blueboy. But just as we were coming in Nima veered quickly away. I saw a flash of light and a vapor cloud.

"Dahm!" Pysu swore with his odd accent. "That's the first tahm he's struck a power shed. Radio base and put me dan. Hafta try and get those androids organized."

"Ezzlin's down there," Nima said with a frown.

"What? I thought he was at the Redhead mine."

"No," Nima said. "Sorry. Guess I mentioned that Mirabul was visiting Blueboy, and he flew over."

"All the more reason ta get dan. He'll be apoplectic by now. No radio...just put me dan."

"Let me come," I said.

"Bettah not," Pysu answered. "Try tomorrow. I'll come back with Ez."

We shot down and planted our craft on what Nima called "the crude," just long enough for Pysu to unwind his wiry body and hop out. Then we zoomed off with our evade system monitoring the flyway.

Talkative Nima was suddenly very quiet.

"Why doesn't Harquint come down and speak to Jurith? Has that ever occurred to anyone?" I said with exasperation.

"He won't come. Sends messengers. Probably concerned for his health."

"Jurith wouldn't harm him."

"You're right. Apparently he thinks someone would."

"What about Jurith going up?"

"Over five dead bodies she will."

"You mean she wants to?"

"Says so. We won't permit it. Harquint invited her first. It looks suspect."

"It seems to me there has to be some kind of face to

face dialogue, and I don't mean on a holovideo. The good faith of an appearance might get things started favorably."

"Not with that freeloading pirate. He can't be trusted. What good are conversations with a man like that?"

"Something might be worked out. Have any of you others thought of going?"

"He won't have any of us, just Jurith."

"That's odd. I wonder...I wonder if I could talk to him."

"You! Mirabul, you're going to get me in trouble."

"Are you so afraid of Jurith?"

"Of course not. Our relationships here are built on respect and trust. And don't try to play us off against each other."

"I wasn't. You're all paranoid."

"With good reason."

"If I were to return to Mother and from there drop in on Harquint, who would be the wiser? He doesn't know who I am."

"I wouldn't be surprised. That buttinsky knows about every insignificant piece of freight that comes in here."

I laughed. "Well, it's time someone else held a few of the chess pieces."

"Why you?" Nima asked. "You're just supposed to record it, not make it happen."

"Don't you know about history? None of it works that way. Besides, I can't stand a stalemate, and this one is damned stale."

When I unsuited, instead of returning to my quarters, I went for a walk, determined to work out a way to get Jurith to buy my plan. So what if I wasn't maintaining the prescribed distance for the nonexistent ideal historep? I hadn't been doing that since I arrived, since my beginnings,

and no historep worth his salt would aim for such sterility anyway.

As I walked, free of life support, I kept looking up at the new dome, but there was nothing to be seen which didn't resemble pink sky. There were a number of domed gardens -- flowers, vegetables, fruit and nut orchards, and mulberry trees for the silkworms -- into which a hungry soul could escape just to breathe sweet air and listen to buzzing bees. I stopped and peered through one dome at the llama-like creatures which produce the luxurious vicuna wool the androids spin into such handsome clothes. A dozen or so were grazing in a miniature meadow of grass. At the perimeter were troughs of rich mash which Larstev had developed to supplement their minimal green grass supply.

After several minutes of walking, I found a place set apart from all the others. I had a funny feeling that it was off limits, although it didn't have one of Larstev's "Sterilize Before Entering" signs over the entrance. Just outside the safe double air lock, the lock door, which was supposed to slide shut and seal, had caught on a small bundle of rose briar clippings which probably fell off a worker's cart. Beyond the steamy doors, I saw the most brilliant garden upon which my eyes had yet fallen, planted with hybrids of seeds whose ancestors had traveled an incredible distance to germinate. I gave the door a little tap with my foot and it slid open, allowing me to slip in before it tried again to close itself, striking the briars.

Soon I was in the faintly forbidding romance of strange and familiar blossoms and vines: roses, hollyhocks, bright poppies with crumpled-papery petals, lots of things I knew without recalling their names. There were tall stalks the twilight blue of home, tiny white bells, and wine-velvet snapdragons -- my favorites as a kid. In a trice, I was

that little kid again, snapping dragons in one of the great flower preserves of my homeland. The air was almost cloying with sweetness and growing more humid the further I ventured. I heard something and stopped dead, listening like a thief. Laughter, soft at first, then wild and shrill, dying down to the last tinkle of a small bell or the cooing of a baby. Then I heard the plashing of a fountain and was surprised. Water was so precious here that the scientists had scrapped the tempting idea of a small bathing pool in one of the other gardens.

Peering through the curls of a twisted ornamental tree, I saw Jurith, or thought I did; her back was to me, the same ashen blond hair and the same way she held her shoulders. Then the woman turned. It was Jurith but not Jurith, a young and giggling Jurith in a soft yellow shift, reaching up for a butterfly. Further away I saw another head turn above a white stone chair back. There were the flashing teeth and eyes of Jurith. She stood up, a pale pink robe embroidered in gold flowing out and swirling around her ankles. She set down the cup in her hand and came toward the fountain which trickled out from beneath its terrace of ferns. The other laughing young woman, who was also Jurith, was rippling the black pool with her white fingers and splashing water onto the petals of a swaying lotus blossom.

"Come now, don't trail those pretty sleeves in the water," Jurith sang out in the slow musical voice that was never enough in evidence to satisfy me.

I knew there were six adults and five children on Laom. I had seen them all. The rest, I had been told, were androids. What was I seeing here? Had Jurith made another of herself, only younger? Was this natural young Jurith really an android? But why? I stood spellbound, my head buzzing with questions and wild guesses.

"Tell me again about the water," the young Jurith said.

"There were vast amounts of it, in places as far as the eye could see," Jurith said.

"And it was deep?"

"Very, very deep."

"Those were the seas, weren't they, filled with living things, beautiful things, and some of them the people ate. Oh, how sad."

"Only a very few things could be eaten."

"Tell me about the rivers."

"They flowed swiftly down from high mountains where the water was frozen in white fields of snow."

"Like our mountains?"

"Many much higher, some green with trees and jungle preserves at their bases."

"Green with trees. Oh, I want to see them. I want to...I want to! Will I ever see them?"

"Perhaps some day you will if they still exist. It isn't in the realm of the impossible."

"When, when, when shall I see them?"

"My dear one, I can't say."

"Tell me about the river in the city."

"Sometimes it captured the blue of the sky. It was often dark and glistening within the shadows of very tall buildings. People traveled upon it in swift river flies. They would get off and dine in fine restaurants and then travel back, laughing and dancing and talking."

"Tell me how it looked from on high...that last time you saw it. Remember?"

"The last time I saw it I was high in the highest place in the city. I was about your age but it seems moments ago. The river below was a black velvet ribbon. The sun was setting and the treetops in the quad were golden...so very

beautiful. It was the time of...is someone there?"

I realized that Jurith was coming my way and quickly retreated, making a few wrong turns in my haste but managing to get outside the door. I stood there a minute wondering exactly why I had fled. There was something very private and extraordinary about what I had seen and heard. I just didn't know Jurith well enough to walk into that puzzling setting. But I wanted to know her, because the more I saw the less I could believe. Boaz found me standing there like a dunce with my head hanging in thought.

"No, no, this is no place for you, Mirabul, sir. Please come with me."

As he spoke he bent down and pulled out the bundle of briars and the door to yet another Laom mystery slid shut.

Within the next odd number of Laom days, many of the gardens and orchards were undomed and androids began setting out new hothouse shrubs and flowers along the walkways. I hadn't been able to get nearer to Jurith than dinner where she limited her conversation with me to a few polite comments, but I had made up with an altered Roggi. She was even generously good-natured about my crude proposition.

"Really, I'm deep down amused, Mirabul. Sex is not a main attraction on Laom," she said as we strolled along before dinner.

We had been watching the children cavorting, with screams and giggles, under their vast new dome of sky. Nima's two were almost swarthy and had her black eyes, but the girl, Tedra, and the boy, Luddi, both had thick black hair and both were almost as large as their tiny blond mother. The other three children were fecund mother Roggi's. I wondered if Ezzlin, who seemed to want to kill me on the spot whenever we met, might be their father and speculated aloud, causing Roggi a great burst of laughter.

"Pysu's then?" I said, thinking perhaps this dark wiry man had fathered all of the children, some of whom were dark-haired. "Most don't look anything like Larstev."

"You don't give us very much credit for individualism," Roggi said, laughing still harder.

I stood for awhile quietly watching Roggi's auburn-haired daughter, Mekin, who was playing a flute while her younger sister, Glytta, and brother, Carp, danced wildly, occasionally standing on their hands and cartwheeling.

"All right," I said, "either you entertained transport passengers or you traveled in the beginning with your own sperm bank."

"Now you have it," Roggi said, her green eyes sparkling. "Nima had her favorite sperm and I had mine. So simple and common. You see before you the fruit of careful choice. We waited a long time for their arrival."

"What about Jurith?" I asked.

"Jurith?" Roggi said a little surprised. "Jurith is the mother of us all."

"You were Nima's doctor, but who was yours?"

"Oh, we had no problem with me. Egg gathering is rather a simple thing. Now Jurith has created a fine line of physicians much needed in the far colonies. We worked together long and hard on this project, and I can't help being a little conceited about it. It's beyond expectation. Jurith has been so pleased until..." Roggi stopped as the unmentionable subject died on her tongue.

"Until the war, Roggi. War at the mention of which you eclectic geniuses quaver. This game is a lot sillier than anything your children would dream up. Someone, maybe everyone here, is going to get hurt if you don't square off with Harquint."

Roggi tore her fingers through her long black hair.

Her olive skin was flushed and her whole body twisted in irritation, causing her large breasts to sway arousingly under her customary white silk shirt.

"I more than respect Jurith. I love her. You don't know what she's done for us here. How she kept us together at the beginning. There was a time at first when none of us was speaking, except to Jurith, and all five of us had murder in our hearts. When our food supply was running out, before the transport came, we were reduced to the disgusting level of starving beasts who think only of ingestion. Jurith knew a transport was en route, has always known such things. And anyway she was constantly sending messages from our ship, hoping to lasso a distant transport and bring it into this untraveled sector. She told us that a transport was coming. Later, she told me she hadn't been sure it would get here in time. She distributed the food, holding back her own portion each day, except for water, and giving it to us at the last. We were so wrapped up in getting hand to mouth that we didn't see her shrinking before our eyes until one day she was too weak to get up. Added to this sacrifice she still had to care for...that is..." Roggi stopped herself with a shocked expression on her face which highly aroused my curiosity. "Finally the transport came," Roggi said quickly, her voice quivering with fierce pride. There were tears in her eyes.

"You may have thought it was Jurith's original captaincy along with her high capability which made us assent to her tacit leadership here on Laom. It wasn't altogether that. What it really was was her willingness to sacrifice herself for us. After that we knew we could trust her with our lives. She was exemplary of what none of us was sure we could ever quite achieve. She was designed by very unusual parents, but she has paid a price. Oh, I

suppose Jurith has her little faults, but even they are unique, and I think we love her for those too. We owe our unity to her. She brought us this far, willed us to succeed and did it with humility. I must believe that what she wants is right."

"Worthy praise, but why does she want it this way?"

"I honestly don't know, but if I did I couldn't tell you without her consent. I don't profess to know every corner of Jurith's complex mind. I never knew her before the expeditionary plans. I'd heard of her parents. They were famous. She rarely discusses anything personal and more rarely anything which pertains to her past. I know a little, and that's between myself and Jurith. Her past really seems to have started the day she arrived here over twenty homeland years ago."

We were seated on a black stone bench, and I was looking out at the stark mountains on the horizon. They shimmered red in the fading light, and there were long mean-fingered shadows creeping toward us. I turned to Roggi and stared into her eyes with real audacity. The encircling dusk painted her face a harsh orange.

"Roggi, did Jurith make an android who looks like her double?"

Roggi blinked. Her orange-glowing eyes widened then narrowed to slits as her head tilted back to put distance between us. "You've asked me something strange, very strange, and I'm wondering why, but I won't pursue it."

In the next instant her disposition underwent a quick change. "Oh, bother," she said, standing up and beginning to laugh in a forced way. She turned toward the dining hall, motioning for me to follow. "Come on, Mirabul, we'll be late for dinner. We don't starve here anymore."

"But couldn't I have some meat?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. Well, well, a carnivore. We'll cleanse your body while you're here. Think of it as a gift."

The children had gone in without my even noticing. Night came and went quickly in this small outland, and two of Laom's days always passed before anyone but the children, and sometimes myself, slept.

After a light dinner -- the dinners were always light, except for special occasions, but nourishing -- no one stayed in the hall and talked as usual. I was shunned and left to my own devices, having fallen into everyone's bad graces. As I wandered through a sleeping orchard of bluish-white blossoms, I berated myself for hanging around so ineffectually. I was hooked on the growing mysteries of Laom and unwilling to assert myself and get thrown off. Somehow I had to persuade Jurith to listen to me, to let me talk to Harquint. That at least I could do.

When I got back to my room, I found Larstev waiting inside. His normally smooth and grinning face bore a solemn threat. Nevertheless, he stood up and gripped my hand with politeness, as though we had just been introduced, then sat down again and motioned for me to do the same.

"Let's get right to the point," he said with his brusque clipped accent. "Boaz told me that you were near Jurith's garden, and I didn't know what you had seen there so I decided to say nothing. I've just spoken with Roggi, and I believe you went inside the garden. Neither of us has told Jurith yet. She knows only what Boaz told her, that he found you outside the door. Are you getting this, Mirabul? We don't want to upset Jurith. She has enough on her mind."

"I'm getting it," I said.

Then something came to me. Why hadn't anyone thrown me off Laom yet if I was so much trouble? Were they afraid of

drawing attention from Control or were they actually planning to use me for something? I decided to take a chance and lean a little heavily on Larstev.

"You're a botanist, Larstev, so you'll be the first to agree that you can't get nectar out of stones. I really did want to help. I was even going to ask Jurith to let me talk to Harquint. But now I guess I'll be leaving. That ought to cheer everyone up."

Larstev threw himself back on the vicuna rugs and pillows and stared at the softly lit, tapestried ceiling, a parade of magnificent jungle beasts and exotic flora long gone. "Jurith designed this room," he said, ignoring my threat. "I never did figure out why. You see, even among ourselves we have secrets. She devoted some time to this place, and we all thought she was making a kind of queen bee's cell. Something none of us would have begrudged her, but I don't know what she did here. She may even have been ill, a little deranged with her outsized goals, or just meditating. She always eludes us, even now. We were all babies when we came here, such babies. In a way we still are. If you devote a great deal of time to thinking and performing experiments I suppose your emotions atrophy, regress, or really never develop. Sometimes you simply need a caretaker...a pampering mama."

"Do you resent Jurith a little?" I asked.

Larstev tore open the throat of his high-collared blue tunic and sat up.

"Resent! Resent? For twenty homeland years I've wanted Jurith all to myself, and later, especially in this mysterious room... I wanted her to let me in here. I did resent this room. Then she stopped coming here. Ezzlin and Pysu have felt the same, I know. We would like to believe we would die for her. Instead she is our cool fountain of

youth. She doles out extenders and overdoses herself so she'll live long enough to finish a fraction of what she intended. Meanwhile, we three men playfully fight over Nima and Roggi, who occasionally let us in, and once and awhile go up to the transports and sleep with the little trippers passing through -- at least we used to before the --"

"Before the war," I said, then sat in silence, thinking about all I'd heard.

"I don't know why I've given you this intimate account," Larstev said. "Just a new ear, I suppose. It's of no use to you."

I offered no further comment. It seemed clear nobody was going to allow me a shred of leeway.

"Well, goodnight," Larstev said, jumping up. "Open!" he commanded the door which quickly obliged.

This is the last straw, I thought. I'm getting out.

"By the way," Larstev called over his shoulder, "You can't leave just yet."

"I don't want to anyway," I muttered, but the grapes were sour. I could live out my life here and get nothing out of these cryptics. I was damned frustrated because I admired them so much, all but Ezzlin.

Lying lost in thought, I don't know how long it was before I heard the whimsical guest-arriving-tune at my door and called, "Come in. You might as well."

"You're a little testy," Nima said as she stepped inside.

"Well, what unfortunate news have you come to deliver? I never get any that's of any use," I said.

"Maybe I'd better come back some other time," Nima said. She pulled her hand out of the pocket of her flowing silk skirt and started to turn away.

"No, no. I'm sorry I'm cross. You're very refreshing

to look upon. I like the yellow shirt with the green skirt, fresh as a...a daisy."

"Flattery from Mirabul. How nice. I just came on a purely social call. I had in mind a nice platonic chat."

"Suddenly everyone is getting interested in me," I said. "I don't mean to be rude, but--"

"You really should cultivate the rest of us a little more."

"Are you jealous of Jurith?"

Nima's blond hair, which was twisted up atop her head, let out little streamers of mirth as she shook her head in laughter. "I don't think so. You see I'm comfortable with who I am. I like myself. I'm happy with my work. I just think it's rather nice to have a fresh ear to bend. We don't get many new listeners on Laom."

"Be my guest," I said. "You may have both ears. Neither is working very hard at the moment."

"I, like Jurith, was brought to life on the Hustler planet, and I'm a Hustler true to form."

"Not too true, I hope."

Nima sat on a stack of pillows, her dark eyes staring straight at me as she considered my remark.

"Well, it's how I got here. I hustled in a good sense by striving to know everything I needed to get myself in this position. I know what you're thinking. Why would I want to go where I had to make everything? But that was the very point, the incredible challenge which lay before us. I haven't the breadth and depth of Jurith, but I'm a good problem solver."

"Now that does sound competitive," I said.

"Well, of course we compete. It keeps us going, but we help each other too. Never mind about Jurith. I love her. It's you, Mirabul, who must keep going back to the influence

of Jurith on our lives. All right then, let me tell you something about her...just a little fragment.

"When Jurith and I were in training together, learning to be not good but expert pilots -- we were compelled to be experts -- the two of us were very competitive. Competition was encouraged because it made us quickly perfect everything we were taught. And after one flying stint when we had been particularly hard on each other, I was so exercised at the way Jurith had pushed me to a dangerous edge that I was ready for a physical confrontation. In truth, the baser part of me wanted to smack her a good one. Jurith suggested we meet at ECCO, our barracks, for a glass of iced water. You see what a humorist she was even then. 'You nearly trashed my ship!' I shouted at her. 'You were making right angle turns like solidifying plasma,' she responded in far too pleasant a voice. 'You're so good, Nima, but you were getting sloppy. What if it happened out there?' she said. I felt myself being cosseted and cajoled like a baby. 'Don't patronize! Don't condescend!' I nearly screamed. We were sitting at a table in the ECCO lounge. Jurith slid back her chair and got up. She pushed her chair out of the way and knelt down on the floor before me. I wondered what in black suns she was doing. 'You must know something of me if we're to spend our lives together,' she said. 'I cannot fight with you. There is no malice or conceit in what I'm saying. Please review the recorded trajectory of our maneuver, and please tell me at once if I ever do what you did.' She put her hands on mine and looked straight at me with those clear disarming eyes. I had never seen anything like this. I now know that Jurith had begun life quite differently from most of us, but I didn't then. I knew only that I was witnessing an unmistakably earnest and true declaration. I could not look away, malleable as a lamb,

and I believe there were tears in my eyes."

#

Not long after Nima's visit Pysu invited me to fly over to Blueboy with him, probably noticing that I was getting mean and restless, or maybe Jurith ordered my outing. I suited up and went through the air lock out to board one of the flashy yellow sky birds. We shot up and skittered over the buckled terrain so fast and sometimes upside down that my vision was a whirligig of sensations. Pysu was laughing like a delinquent, and I was convinced that he'd been asked to give the troublemaker a little shakeup.

After we leveled off, I studied Pysu, trying to figure out who was really inside that suit, that skin. This galaxy is peopled by homeland colonies so different from one another in habit, custom, and temperament that there is always plenty to learn. Some people don't take life extenders, content to live out their one hundred fifty or more odd years and leave the scene forever. I gobble extenders like the insufferable fool who thinks he has great value. I just need to move through this flux as long as I can...through layer upon layer of mystery.

"You feel ahlright?" Pysu asked.

"No thanks to you," I grinned. I liked Pysu, what I'd seen of him. The trouble was I liked everybody, except Ezzlin. I had a bad feeling about him; there was nothing there which invited me to break bread.

We plummeted suddenly, like a falcon making the kill, and collided with the crude, which according to Nima was "any rough tilty place without a landing pad" -- there were no landing pads anywhere except beside the big new dome, and all the terrain here was rough and tilting. I sat a minute,

waiting for my frame and contents to adjust.

"How do you keep these racy little buckets together, treating 'em like that?" I croaked.

"We've got a great crew of ahndy mechanics who lahk to have something to do," Pysu answered, jumping blithely out of our visibly contracting machine. I followed slowly, considerably tamed, bouncing a little less heavily along.

We went into the dim computer room, unsuited and then watched the whole operation on the scanners. A big mechanical maw was nibbling into the throats of the Blueboys, these sharp bluish-red mountains one hundred forty kilometers west and south of Laom's hometown dome. Androids did all the necessary button pushing and loose-end errands of mobility the stationary computers couldn't handle. The rare metal was trimmed down and dressed up in chemical vats, sluices, and coolers, then air-trucked to a transport shuttle. So casings of the stuff were still going off Laom, but how was it getting past Harquint, and who was buying it?

Here in his special milieu, Pysu was bold as a homeland moon in full phase and surprisingly willing to answer my probing questions. He sat back in his chair, his high gaunt cheekbones rosy-brown with enthusiasm and his curly black hair wildly aglow in the flashing light of the computer screens. The once unyielding mouth was eager to pour out data of which he was obviously proud. The pliant top lip formed two sharp, ivory-edged points of indulgence beneath his elegant, slightly hooked nose.

"This is an impressive playpen," I offered in way of encouragement.

"Ahnd whither goeth the transport shuttle with its precious cargo? thinks Mirabul. It's written ahl over your face. It's our payoff to Control to lev us alone. A tax and protective insurance ahl rolled into one."

"And Harquint just watches it being loaded into a transport which is hardly a member of Control's battle fleet?"

"He does now," Pysu said with a smile. "He waylaid ahr shuttle and had his ahndys remove and attempt to uncrate one shipment for ahxamination shortly ahfta he arrived on the scene. He won't dat' again."

"Why's that?"

"Because the casings ahr loaded into one big tamper-proof freight container that wull explode without the receiver's code. Lost his freight shuttle ahnd ahndys. Ahl we lost was one shipment of not vera rhare -- to us -- rhare metal -- well worth the losing."

"I should have known that the Laom brain exchange could easily fuse into a critical mass," I said, having a good laugh.

For a moment Pysu looked as though he would leap out of his chair and embrace me as an honorary, if not yet liberated, citizen of Laom. The one thing that the Laom quintet had in common was that they all devoured praise, for, other than enjoying the working process itself and the fruits of their labors, it was the only reward they had. Jurith understood and fed this need with subtle expertise.

An android foreman named Blauter entered the computer room and asked Pysu to suit up and come out to attend a little matter of concern among his crew. I went along. We followed him to a spacious storage building which had been built alongside a mounting refuse heap of black tailings. The android pressed a bar and a big twenty-meter door slid up to reveal a scene which caught me deep in the belly, just as if I had seen real human carnage. Piled high were burned, torn and dismembered androids, a sad sickening heap of waste that surprised even Pysu who quickly turned away

from me.

"We put them here, Pysu," Blauter said, "just as you told us. But the crew doesn't like to handle them. Sometimes they are hot and they damage us."

"Blahk suns!" Pysu swore. "So mahny? Just since last week! Close the door quickly. That dahmed Harquint with his dahmed spying eyes!"

The door slid shut and we stood in the dim macabre light, immobilized and silenced by a kind of nauseating awe of the gelatinous, moldering heap. A large blue eye had popped out of one nearly intact head and was lying on a seared cheek, pitifully pleading to be reconnected. Hard-bitten old Mirabul looked at all these desiccating likenesses and felt terrible stirrings in his heart for the brutal androicide of the faithful engines of Laom.

The next evening, which was not a night when we took to our vicuna beds for rest, I was summoned by Boaz to Jurith's private garden -- the one which Larstev had made for her, as he had made five others tailored to the partiality of himself and each of his colleagues. The seat by the little fountain and lotus pond where I'd encountered Jurith's young likeness was empty and the garden silent except for the soft plashing of the water. Its sparkling surface shone rose-gold in the gentle artificial light. Only a miniature yellow frog winked at me from his luxurious leaf pad. I was supposed to wait there, but I went on a little deeper into the garden, brushing past a row of peacock-blue delphinium. I quietly approached the back of the white stone chaise lounge from which I'd seen Jurith rise on my earlier visit. Again I caught a glimpse of her ashen hair, but this time a silver head was pressed against her shoulder. I coughed lightly and Ezzlin jumped up with a snarling word I couldn't make out. I tried not to stare but I was fascinated. His

hair stood up in shocks as though he'd been twisting his fingers through it. The haughty, long-nosed face had cracked all over with misery, reminding me of an old raku pot. He blinked his swollen red eyes at me and hurried past without speaking. This rigid, hostile acting man had been crying like a baby on Jurith's breast.

I came around the chair and stood near Jurith who remained stretched out in thought upon her cream pillows. She wore a fuzzy white vicuna robe still crumpled a little at the breast where she had cradled Ezzlin. The robe slipped away below her thighs to reveal white ankles and bare feet clad in scant slippers. She was so alive and immediate and destructible at this moment that I was alarmed at the thought of so fragile a form holding such power of mind. It was too much to be contained in any ephemeral being. She dipped her head, straightening her robe and motioning for me to sit in the stone chair beside her, then tossed one of her pillows on the seat.

"Ah, Mirabul, fate has planted you in our midst."

"What does that portend?" I asked, frowning even as I took in the fairness of this mystery.

She smiled and said, "Surely you have many questions."

"As surely as Harquint's above," I answered, waiting and watching and thinking. Great suns, were some of my questions to be answered?

I studied her face. Her eyes closed briefly and her tongue flicked over her lips as she sighed.

"Ezzlin?" I said.

"Oh, Ezzlin, my sad boy. He's had some trouble at the Redhead Mine, lost his assistant, an especially skilled android I gave him for his birthday. I believe he fell in love. I'll miss her, poor thing. I took great care with her. This is a strange business."

I saw that it was indeed, and far too complicated for my layman's analysis. But then something occurred to me.

"Did his treasure perhaps resemble you?" I asked.

"Crude, even for you, Mirabul."

"Sorry," I said with a touch of sheepishness, "but I've seen far stranger things, even from the well-intentioned."

"She looked nothing at all like me," Jurith assured me with an attempt at lightheartedness, "I'm not Ezzlin's type. He likes pretty young women."

"I think Ezzlin would argue that. You have the sort of beauty which will never... Well, why am I summoned to this romantic place? Am I Jurith's type?"

"Mirabul, the historep who is no fool," she said, laughing. "If you stayed here my feelings would deepen. I would have to care for you too. Humans involve me. They're such wonderfully complex engines."

"You study them to make the perfect android?"

"Don't think me cold. There are few I dislike. Probably that's why it's better for me here."

"Is Harquint one of the few?"

"Yes, but on principle alone. He isn't a person to me, but certainly an evil force. If only he would go away...but what childishness. He won't. Ah, we must have our darkness in the universe in order to define the light."

"Would you kill Harquint?"

Jurith's body stiffened and her eyelids fluttered and closed for a moment. Lying there with her arm flung over her forehead, the still, cool sculpture of the real Jurith, she chilled and sped my heart. "No!" she whispered. "It must not happen. A killed adversary is total defeat."

She sat up and groped along the flagstones to find a woven brown bag which waited there, then pulled open its drawstrings and lifted out a voice recording machine with a

small traveler's case of voice-script discs. These things she placed on a low table beside my chair. Under a glow lamp, which to my surprise exposed a trembling hand, her fingers continued for a few seconds to caress the case. She looked into my eyes and I saw that hers were clear as glass, reflecting only the dusky rose light.

"You asked me once if I had keepsakes. I suppose these are something like that, mementos. The day I met you I didn't quite believe I would come to share them with you, even though something told me I would, that you were the one I had always expected. When you've finished with them, I will ask you to do two things. One, whose outcome I will never learn from you, is a favor to me and will perhaps finish your story. The other is for Laom because Laom is for so many others.

"You're in my hothouse -- I have to smile a little at the irony of this." She looked around her. "My fragile slice of the faraway which Larstev has so artfully made. Rest here on my chaise lounge, and don't be surprised if you hear my heroic little nightingale. There are a pair nearby." She stood up and searched through the trees. At last her eyes came back to me with a beseeching flame. "I leave you with a history, historep," she said softly, and vanished, leaving a wake of swaying fern fronds. I lay down in the warmth of her cushions, watching the fronds for a thoughtful moment as they stirred with her presence.

Jurith's body, of which the brain and heart were held in trust for others, had taken leave, but the autonomy of her powerful will and the changes of her mellifluous voice, punctuated by her fluting male nightingale, would guide me on a strange long journey.

II

The Cygnet Sings

Look how the orphaned mute swan flees her mourning!  
Rising up on dawn's rose-feathered wet sails,  
Spurning her old birth lake's bright-jeweled dazzle,  
Outdistancing swimmers and fierce hunters in swales.  
A maverick young migrant of airless iced paths,  
Destined to beat dark night with wing red-stained,  
Stretching long neck toward her own creation,  
Forsaking self for the flock that remained.

.....Laom Historiographer

Voice Script I

Hello, connoisseurs of civilization. I am Jurith, and I am making this record for you because I have a strong feeling that I should, that something is going to happen.

I have grown up in a world of forms and formalities and am naturally eager for the undefined and unexpected. Don't mistake me. I swear I'll never run away from anything. Life will accelerate. I'll rush toward my own reality.

Yesterday I saw mother and father for the last time. They stepped out of their silver ship and came up the garden path like two shining myths. I ran out to meet them and we went into the receiving hall together. There were hordes of well known faces present but I had eyes only for the two who gave me life. My party was really an excuse for their many friends and colleagues who had come from near and distant places, all of them in awe of what my mother and father were about to do: to forsake home and great notoriety for permanent oblivion.

Mother and father put their arms around me and we

entered the hall. All the heads turned. There were whisperings and exclamations, and I shook until my knees almost crumbled beneath me. This was the very pinnacle of the hooding ceremony for my final doctorate. Beside this meeting, in which I felt myself to be the true unity of my parents, all else fell into shadow. If only we could have stayed together a little longer. But we have parted. If I cannot accept this, I will cast aspersions on their expert teaching. They travel at this moment out to head the largest data center in all the colonies: Control's acclaimed MACRA. It is a one-way trip, but they are still young and strong. I stay here to train with, among others, the eminent Dr. Ammon, whom I've met only once briefly at my father's laboratory.

When I was small my parents took me everywhere with them. They taught me to think, to reason -- without curious, independent reason how can there be anything of value? Oh, they were the best teachers in all the realms. I won't dwell on missing them. They're gone. Gone!

Last summer I was working on a presentation for an experimental physics forum which a colleague of my father's was conducting. My father sat in the southernmost room of our house, in the only plant-shaded corner of our glass solarium. He was looking, so engrossed, into one of our microscreens while I was looking more and more frequently out at the blue sound which sparkled through a sweet dance of red hollyhocks. Finally, I jumped up from my terminal.

"I'm bored! Bored!" I cried. "I wish I were a tripper just bouncing from colony to colony with endless vials of laughter on my belt."

It usually took awhile to penetrate my father's deep concentration when he was working, but this time his chair swung around almost immediately and he stood up. My father,

Javan, is tall and blond with a narrow, intense face which I find handsome, and a clever, very persuasive mouth. His eyes are full of the most interesting things, like richly filled display screens from which you can order anything in the universe. He slid his hands into the pockets of his gray work tunic with a highly amused expression on his face.

"You want to be a tripper, you say? It's a special calling, I think."

"Maybe I'm just a hedonist," I called out against my father's laughter. "Oh, Javan, how can I be so bored?"

"You're not operating at anywhere near your full capacity. You must find work which holds you like a lover."

"No, no!" I insisted. "I want to shut down, to float over a wild place, to laugh and laugh and even dance."

He raised one amused eyebrow -- so winsome when he does this -- and said with a deliciously playful curl to his indulgent smile, "I think that can be arranged."

So then Javan and my mother, Lupe, took me out to a pleasure colony and let me have whatever they approved as suitable for such an escapade. And I did float and laugh beneath their guiding hands and watchful eyes. I will never forget that evening with them in the Luxe -- famous among the colonies for its endlessly exotic entertainment. I was surfeited with wildness and happiness and such high anticipation, and rocked by all the pulsing chroma-tones reverberating in those sensory-designed capsules.

"The higher portion of your brain is on vacation," Javan roared against my ear above the noise. "You can kick boredom end over end."

I can feel that night again: laughter coming from my toes and fingertips, peeling off my tongue. Lupe holds my hand. Her eyes are aquamarine pools beneath a waterfall, deep and full of splash. The men stare at her, and Javan

laughs proudly.

Along with equations Lupe taught me parables and myths and songs. She likes to speak in riddles. She wants to make you think. Her eyes shine and you are in their fast water, the excitement of engagement. Her voice is high and sweet. "What is it that you want to do, my untold story?"

I watch Lupe and Javan flickering, burning bright before me like two blue flames on a hearth. I tell them with only my thought how beautiful they are. They nod appreciation. Lupe is pushing thin strands of dark blond hair away from her forehead and then leaning on her long graceful hands and smiling, waiting for my answer.

Everything is moving very fast, my heart, the people, the sound, the color, the room. But not my head; it turns so slowly. I look around the Luxe, at the dazzling sheets of light which are the floor and walls and crackling air, at the waxen people with melting lips and opaque eyes. They stretch out, continually coming unfastened from the ceiling. I laugh and laugh and my parents hold me.

"Javan, Lupe, I want to take all that you've taught me, to go, to do...to find things unfound, make good out of them with my hands and brain." I look at my hands, trying to remember something. "With my hands and brain and heart."

"Then you will," Javan assures me.

"You will, our pure clear spool, our own expression of love," Lupe says.

At last they take me back to my room. They tell me to sleep, but I say, no, I'm so alive with ideas my head is bursting. They tell me to sit down and write out in treacherous longhand precisely what I intend to do. This old way is so enervating. I write all night with feverish haste and aching hand, then fall into chaotic sleep.

The birds are singing outside my open window; white

birds high in the palms, cooing. I see their wings flutter. The sun is burning through the palms and scorching the banana leaves below. I rise quickly and hurry to read my beautiful master plan. I am shocked. It's nothing more than a senseless jumble of erratic desires.

This is how they taught me to beware the distortion of heat, to see that the ecstasy I want will only come when I am silent and cool and still. I, in control of all my faculties, will attach myself to one idea and drive it to the very end of my existence.

#### Voice Script II

Lupe, Javan, I'm so lonely for you, but afraid to wish that you would come back. You should have taken me with you. I can't bear it. Cannot! I'm ashamed. I don't know what has happened to me. How can I dream without sleep? How can I sleep without dreams? Who am I besides Javan and Lupe? Who am I?

#### Voice Script III

I'm tired. I know I've neglected you for weeks, my friends of the future, but I've been working hard. This Dr. Ammon is a tyrant, a madman, a workaholic. He has no shred of compassion. According to him, if you're lonely you're not working hard enough. I could never be like that. Could I? I suppose it's necessary to describe the doctor. I must try to be accurate and unemotional. He is a little taller than medium height -- or does he only seem taller? He has wide shoulders, a narrow waist, half hidden by a black, high-collared military jacket, and mean black eyes. Ah, that won't do. It just makes me agree with him that I'm spoiled...but not that I'm a child. He shouldn't call me that. Of course he does it to toughen me. He isn't that

much older than I, but his life has been so different from mine. To understand him is a part of my training, that is to know what he wants me to do, but I really don't want to. Am I just what he says I am, and unfit to travel besides? I never thought of myself as having excessive ego. I never thought of myself as a self...a separate entity really...and isn't thinking of one's self what ego is? Oh, why must I spend half my time with a medical doctor who is an absurd social psychiatrist?...worse, a militarist! I'm not a patient. I can't go on the expedition for which I'm training without his clearance, that's why. He says that I'm not ready...that I may never be ready. I know this is just manipulation. I've never been so angry. I told him that I'm at my peak, that I could leave tomorrow. Then I walked out. I heard him laughing. I know it was stupid. I've been meditating for an hour. An hour is a very long time for someone with as little time as I'm permitted.

#### Voice Script IV

Javan's brother, Fleen, came to me today and told me Dr. Ammon had spoken with him. He is interviewing members of my family. This is the last straw. And he's political too. I can't stand politicians. I don't understand their motives. Power? Need of adulation? They are self-serving and cold and too often fanatics. Why does a psychiatrist want to go into politics? He must be mad.

Fleen tells me with awe that Ammon is brilliant. I hardly need to be told this...but, of course, Fleen doesn't understand. Poor Fleen. He misses Javan too, and he has come so far to see me. But when I look at him I think of Javan and want to cry. He looks tired, worried. He also tells me that it's rumored the brilliant Dr. Ammon is headed for the big seat at Control, a radical shift at the top, a

whole new social program. I don't care. It won't make any difference to me once I'm launched. I just want to get out of here. Javan, Lupe, where are you now? Are you laughing? You have each other but I have no one. Even this bothers prying Dr. Ammon. He asks me, where are my friends? I tell him I have always been too busy...I realize that all of my friends were my parents' friends...older, kind and still fond of me, but busy too. There is no time. What is he talking about? What if I am a loner as he says? Isn't that an asset where I'm going? I do like people...individuals. I adore them, all the ones I've known, except for... Oh, never mind.

#### Voice Script V

Sorry, another month has gone by in silence. It seems Dr. Ammon is doing everything to get me permanently grounded. For a horrible moment, I wanted to crack up a shuttle I was piloting today. I don't even care; that's the worst of it. I'm sweating. I have a fever. I'm cold. I refused to take anything or see a doctor. I've been seeing a doctor. That's what made me sick. I've checked out of the squad house. I'm going home, back to our big old empty house. I'm giving it away when I leave. Maybe Fleen wants it. Dear old house. I'll rattle around in there like a shriveled nut in a shell. I'm nauseated. Wonderful! It suits me. I told Dr. Ammon I was through seeing him. He said it was just as well and that, despite the demand for someone like me -- my usefulness, he said, *usefulness!*-- I probably wouldn't be going anywhere until I grew up. That did it. I cracked. I cracked! Oh, I hate myself at this moment. It was within my power to be as cool and single-minded as the evil doctor, but I... Something is happening to me. I'm changing. Javan, Lupe, don't let me change.

Please think of me. Forgive me. Help me. I'm disgusting.

Voice Script VI

I'm better. Out of bed now. I listen to music, mostly string quartets and flutes...also poetry. I will not see anyone. Dr. Ammon tried to barge in here in hologram. I'm afraid I was discourteous. I zapped him. He sent a woman doctor in the flesh. Incredible! Probably one of his close, quote, unquote, friends. I instructed the house system, Domotron, to politely send her away. I intended to die in peace but I appear to be recovering; at least my jittery stomach is leveling off. I'm so angry with myself that I'm willing myself to become any age Dr. Ammon desires. If necessary, I'll leap-frog all the happy interim years of adulthood right into my dotage. I'll greet him with a hoary hand...a jaundiced fish eye, concealing my naïveté with eons of phony wisdom. Can it be done?

This time when I go back to the squad house, I'm giving the house to Fleen. He says he and his friends always adored it. There are few houses like this. None just like it. It's a place which needs to be loved. I won't be back. Can't stand it...the voices...

I'm sitting in the garden...so warm. Floppy little bees buzzing. The doves are back; they will still feed from my hand. I've been here a week. Agony. Everywhere I look I see them in those rare moments...hear them. Lupe, singing, folding down the petals of a pink lupine, looking for something. Javan, his brows raised, lips puckered, stroking the back of a bumblebee with a blade of grass. Lupe, Javan, my anger with you at leaving me has made me sick with shame. How could I know that I, the unity of Lupe and Javan, would be torn in half? How could you just leave me? Help me understand myself. You were the only ones who

knew me. My heart is dying.

#### Voice Script VII

Well, I'm back in the squad house. I've been here three days. It appears that Dr. Ammon isn't going to censure me for my miserable conduct and absence. The expedition has been postponed again. It was too far off in the first place.

Ammon came to my room, looming over me and handing me a voice script critique. This is his technique. I have to be honest with you, don't I, future folk, if I'm going to bother with these scripts at all? Or else, what is the purpose of all this talking? I'm going to let you listen to this critique. It isn't expressly clinical, and thus I suspect it was made solely for me. I'm going to listen again. Will it help? Decide for yourselves, from another point of view, whether or not the following is accurate:

Notes to myself on Jurith Lupe/Javan's Daughter file:

This cadet is spinning like a lopsided top: a huge intellect dragging along an infantile dependence. The heavy engagement of the one has helped to foster the other. It has been impossible for me to get anywhere *in loco parentis* -- a surrogate parent might be indicated in some cases, but not this one; their hold on her is above competition. Javan warned me of this. Both parents felt a deep responsibility but had absolute conviction that the situation could be corrected. Jurith is nearly nineteen, but the part of her which reasons is extremely advanced, while the part of her which feels is rudimentary and chaotic. The parents' departure has had no less an effect than a death, and with the same shocks of anger, sorrow, and loneliness. In struggling to gain independence, Jurith assumes a flippant and reckless manner, and, though she is innately courteous,

she has at times invited censure. This I have provided with accusations of childishness and too much parental coddling, but, in assuming the role of a strict parent, I have failed. Jurith is not really spoiled, only well-bred; she was not coddled, only well-loved. She is conscientious to a fault, capable and responsible but far too self-critical. She is deeply angry at being abandoned, but even more angry at herself because she cannot resolve this loss without hostility toward the two people she loves most. She is suffering. I mean to treat her like one bereaved. She must come to see that this pain of loss is a permanent appendage to her life which will not go away, but will slowly fade to a tolerable level as well-filled time superimposes. She will turn out to be no risk at all.

#### Voice Script VIII

Good morning, Jurith. Ah, you intend to record our conversation?

Can't I? If you can, I can.

Go ahead.

Do you want to be my parent?

Do you want another parent?

Definitely not. Today is my birthday.

Happy birthday, Jurith. I was going to say it when you first came in, but you distracted me with such a...a healthy self-assertive desire for equality.

Of course, you keep records on me and imagine you know everything about me.

There would be no need for our sessions if I did.

You could search the very lining of my cerebral cortex if you wanted.

That is not my technique, Jurith.

What is your technique? Was the critique a technique?

I let you listen to it? What did you think?

Everything you said was accurate. I could have said it. Maybe I have said it. What goes on inside your head, Dr. Ammon?

Let's talk about you.

I don't want to talk about myself, Dr. Ammon. I'm sick and tired of questions followed by questions. I want to know who you are and what you do. Doesn't that mean I've grown up and stepped outside my tiresome ego?

It could.

Do you want further proof? Although I confess I love them too much, my parents don't control my life. My vision is hyperfine; my hair is combed; my teeth have been chemically rinsed; my uniform is tidy...I have not been abandoned. My parents are not coming back. I am very happy and grateful that their worth has been realized. Oh yes, and I've eaten a full breakfast and in forty-five minutes I'm going up and stand the shuttle on its retros...while I sing an ancient cradle song taught to me by Lupe.

Jurith, this evidences a manic phase. You--

Sorry to disappoint you, but it's merely the stubborn adult child of two willful parents asserting herself.

These highs and lows will even out.

Why are you a politico, Doctor?

Can't you turn that off now? This isn't very productive.

Oh, please, I'm just coming to the best part: knowledge of my psychiatrist.

Then let's adjourn to somewhere else. My office is for work, and this, I see, is play.

#### Voice Script IX

Dr. Ammon was right. I was very high that day, and I

have since been low. Two steps forward and one back. What a case I am. Javan and Lupe would not think I'm such a clever daughter now. But I am better and working very hard. I'm making plans; plans which shape in my mind like a very beautiful equation. I have met the others with whom I will eventually travel. Apparently it has been determined that we can survive in one another's company. They are all refreshingly different, highly individual, but I'll have no problem. We will all stand straight and bend together. I feel that I can do anything, partly, I suppose, because of what Lupe and Javan have done. Today is one of my high days. At least they are growing more frequent. I feel older...even a little wise.

On the day of my birthday, Dr. Ammon and I left his office. We went to a nearby restaurant on the big square quad of the Explorer Coordinating Center for Officers which we call ECCO -- my temporary home. Sounds impressive, but unfortunately my captaincy and doctorates do not disqualify me from emotional malfunction.

I think it's important to say something about Dr. Ammon. I believe that he has helped me, although I can't say exactly how. He has filled a gap, jarred me loose from an obstinate agony and forced me to let up on myself. He knows how to dissolve time, a strange phenomenon. His eyes are just as black and unavoidable and fiercely demanding as ever and he occasionally still sets my teeth on edge, but I resent him less, resist him less. At times, I actually like him. I hope he isn't becoming a parent. He certainly doesn't resemble tall lean Javan in manner or appearance. He is tall, with a torso shaped like a triangle and powerful arms which I'm sure could hug his adversaries to death. His hair is just an unstudied mess, wild black kinks and coils which hardly create the soothing and tolerant image of a

healing master. He sometimes jumps up from his chair and rushes toward me as if he were going to throw me down in a hammerlock -- I do know how to use a hammerlock; it was part of my physical training. I think he is sometimes anxious to be somewhere else, and yet when I comment on something I feel that I have his full attention, actually that he is grinding me up in his cranial machinery with the aim of improvement. I wonder what colony his parents were from, or maybe they were each from different colonies. He has no colonial accent but often speaks with a careful, stilted grammar, which it is evident he got from old academics. It is very hard to talk to him about himself, since he considers this obstructive to my progress. I cadge rumor from the other cadets. He never knew his parents. He was born on a distant transport, abandoned to a reliquary of scholars coming home to die. What a strange beginning. The transport was under fierce siege from a seceded colony, and Control's battle fleet saved it from obliteration at the last instant. The result of this is that he believes in arming heavily and war is something he anticipates. A very sinister attitude, but I understand the path leading to it, even if I find it revolting. I still wonder how he came to be a social psychiatrist, or social master, as they are called. I wonder even more what he can do as head of Control. Of course, Control always anticipates war. How else could it be so powerful? But why is it said that Dr. Ammon intends something new for Control? It sounds almost menacing...and yet I don't want to believe this about him. I know I'm quite naïve about this, however.

As to the rest of his elliptical face, he has a rather straight nose, an angular chin, flat untanned cheeks, brushy eyelashes, and mercurial lips which can easily curl into a cruel smile of disbelief. He is cunning. He can be

artfully tactful or brutally honest but never cares to impress me with his brilliance -- something I appreciate, having gone all through school with quillet-tongued know-it-alls. I can spring-load my language if I have to, but it's tiresome. I'd rather retaliate with silence -- the way of Javan; his silences were grand and eloquent. My dearest Javan, dearest Lupe, will I ever stop begging for your lost attention?

#### Voice Script X

Someone ordered me a vacation. I flew myself northeast across the planet on a swift far journey -- quickly, before whoever it was had second thoughts -- to the remotest spot I could think of. A barren expanse of alien land, sliding into a great flat declivity called Wierlfoss. Low bluffs of lichen-covered rock surround bronze wide-stepped shelves of falling, pooling meltwater. There is no end to all of this water or to the big open terrain where clouds boil right down into cataracts and bounce off amber bluffs. A pearly light filters through the whiteness, turning the mist to double rainbows. Bright-colored lichens thrive on low boulders. I listen to water music. The cold air bites my lungs. Slanting blades of sun shoot out of thunderheads, dividing me from everything.

I'm staying in the top wing of a formidable marble structure called Black Hall. There's an old chancery below filled with photographs of faces I've never seen. I'm told by slow-speaking androids that Control's mighty come here to meet and meditate, eat and sleep...dreaming of power, I suppose, and immortality. Visitors can serve themselves or be served from ample kitchens. The few androids in service are generous but silent and grinding antiques.

So far I'm alone but I don't feel alone. There is a

presence wherever I go, as though cliques of the influential have just swept out of the premises. This morning I awoke to the roar of the cataracts. The long, gauzy curtains trailed outside the open windows of my room. Pink peonies hung in damp globes from a crystal vase by my bed -- they weren't there when I fell asleep. A thin mist rolled across the black and white marble floors. I lay there for a time, watching the spun glass curtains climb steps of wind, and listening to the water. I felt so warm and at peace that I could hardly believe how disturbed I had recently been. I threw back my fleecy blanket and ate from an obsidian bowl of fresh fruit -- white grapes and a honey-sweet, red pear. I dressed and walked far out on the brown rocks, breathing in the swirls of clouds and dipping my fingers into the mirroring pools of dripping glacial water. How did I think of coming here? I feel far removed from everything...happy and calmer after yesterday.

As I walked I began to think of Dr. Ammon. He recently vanished into the Citadel, one final rung up Control's ladder -- he's near the top now -- but I'm still troubled by something that happened after our last session, a freakish thing. I ran into him a few days later, only yesterday it was, in the ECCO tower elevator. A power overload shut us down, momentarily leaving us stranded between the eightieth and eighty-first floors. I was staring blankly at a back clothed in a black tunic and thinking of something else. It was the speech I had just delivered to a hall filled with curious students. I didn't even realize it was Ammon's back until he turned around, and hardly then. His face had loosened in deep concentration...as if unmasked for a few relieved seconds. I was chilled by the remoteness in his eyes. Then came his flash of recognition.

"If the computer decides to take too long, I think I

can fix this," I said, hoping I'd delivered levity.

"I know you can," he answered.

We stood without speaking for long seconds, and I had a sudden awareness that he was uncomfortable. It was almost as if he didn't wish to be reminded of my existence. I was staring into those black eyes, which seemed to look right through me, and I thought -- perhaps a bit paranoid -- why have I allowed this person to know so much about me? It can't come to any good. I know just enough about politicians to know that they never forget anyone who can be of use to them. But still, I couldn't see how I could be useful.

I wonder exactly how old he is, I thought, too young for the heavy weight of Control. I watched his mouth curve into that penetrating and cunning smile. My ears began to ring and my skin prickle with discomfort.

"Almost thirty," he answered without even blinking, "but there are more important considerations than age."

I froze. I thought he was able to do this only in transfer sessions. I didn't say anything, just looked up at the survey eye, thinking I would zap it, fix the elevator by some legerdemain of my own and get out of there. My ears went on ringing with dangerous vibrations.

"There have been times, Jurith, when you've seemed as old to me as the idea of sin. That's a paradox, isn't it?"

"Yes, for someone who has been diagnosed as immature."

"Only a temporary state." He laughed.

"Doctor, there is something...something I feel that..." I was strangely driven to speak, then quickly stopped.

"What?"

"No...no, never mind. I'm sorry...the sessions are over. What is that repair computer doing? I *will* fix this lift in a minute. Imagine, an ECCO tower elevator in this condition."

He turned away and said something into his telewrist, and I thought he was retreating into his dark world, but in what must have been only an instant he turned back again and said, "Jurith, you know you can still talk to me if you need to. Come and see me at my office."

"I could never find you in all that obfuscation," I said, knowing my laugh was sarcastic.

"Ask anyone at the Citadel. They'll know. I would enjoy a talk before you leave. You're a very special person, Jurith, and I have a vested interest in you."

I felt a sudden fear, a peculiar dread creeping up from my toes and coiling in my stomach. "You must be yourself, Jurith, unafraid," he intoned at my captured eyes. There was a long, indistinct moment of confusion, then he looked at me with something like shock or surprise. "Jurith?" he said and took a step back, smiling an odd smile. My mind clicked out of paralysis. *Yes, I interested him like an insect.* The elevator gave a fast lurch as the door slid open. "Interest you?...like an insect caught in a bottle!" I heard myself say aloud. It was too late to do anything but rush away without looking back. This was all very bad and cowardly, but I don't want to think about it now.

I walked and stared at the odd configurations of the rocks and imagined that I was losing myself in the stark, bracing nature of Wierlfoss. There were no birds in the glassy sky, nothing on the rocks but orange, yellow, and purple lichen, nothing in the water but microscopic worlds I couldn't enter. My mind kept returning to an overwhelming creative need which was eating me up with the force of its urgency. I tried to think about the beginning of this need, and it seemed that it had always been there. I tried to think of how I could hold myself in check until I could employ all of those seeking instincts. My nature became a

part of the nature in which I walked. The openness and barrenness of the place was filled with the burgeoning ideas which lived in my mind. The space of Wierlfoss itself was filling up with my solitary thinking. I suddenly thought of Dr. Ammon and what he would say about my obsession with passing time and the need to work.

#### Voice Script XI

This morning, which is day two in Black Hall, I ordered music from the house system: a dazzling concerto filled my room. It was a very old piece, thrilling interwoven themes in which a few instruments battle the herd in a grand clash of wills. "We three virtuosi against the masses," the two horns and cello cried. The cello won the day, not by bravado but subtlety. I identified with the cello.

I went out on my inspection tour of brown rocks, my careless investigation accompanied by intricate thoughts. I wanted absolute control of my ideas, but a kind of free-floating anxiety was with me all the way out. I suddenly felt that I was being followed, and was glad to find that I was not paranoid. I was being followed. I sat down on a fairly dry mossy rock which was not too near the cataracts but encased in the brilliant shield of light rising from below. The sun was trying to burn off the mist, and each particle of water was struck by a pale yellow ray, creating a fine golden haze reflecting upward. I waited, staring off to my right from the direction I'd come. There was a moment of steeling myself in tense anticipation, and then a tall figure stepped out of the bright mist -- Dr. Ammon. I felt intense anger, embarrassment...a quivering fear. I didn't want to let him see any of these.

"You are surprised?"

"I expected someone."

"You're angry."

I didn't answer but stood up, although Ammon had settled himself on a nearby rock. His black tunic was gone. He was wearing easeboots so that he could walk a great distance. His clothes were functional khaki apparel not much different from those of an android drone, except that they had an exclusive cut and seemed to glow faintly around the edges in the light. He struck a pose which I'd often seen in his office, the guise of appearing to be staring off and thinking while he read my pulse and brain waves. I was so disappointed to see him that I could hardly restrain my feelings. This had been *my* place, my odd paradise. In my freedom I was so happy, so far away from...Ammon...and alone. There was no escape...but there would be. There would be! I swore it in my silent storm of protest.

He looked at me finally and smiled. I had never seen much of him outdoors, except for that one day in the Quad, and only in his black uniform, stalking around his shadowy office. He was paler in this glaring light, his terrible eyes even more intense, great shining black orbs that rocked me with dread. His lips withdrew their smile.

"I offend you very much."

Again I didn't answer. I shook my head and stood up, walking toward the cataracts and analyzing recent events very carefully as I walked. Everything fell away but that cold analytical click of thought which nearly always brings me the information I seek. My heart pounded in anger. I stopped and looked behind me. So now in the clear air of Wierlfoss I understood. Did he think I would come back at this point and tell him how sorry I was for the elevator scene -- ask him to dine with me? I would not. For the first time in my life I truly loathed someone. What an evil moment it was. I could think of nothing but a swift removal

of the body which carried my poor misappropriated brain. He was still sitting there watching me. I kept walking around the edge of the shallow cauldron which seemed to stretch to infinity. My boots were not easeboots; they squished and slid across the damp moss. For a long time I didn't look back. When I did I saw only a bank of fog. I had walked away from the single most powerful man on the planet. All this emptiness plays tricks. Maybe I just imagined him, I thought, and then laughed aloud at myself. Why had I really come to Wierlfoss? I was sure now that I knew why. I returned to Black Hall in a grim mood, showered, then wrapped myself in a long robe and went out onto my cold terrace barefoot -- the harsh cold fell in with my disappointment. To bolster myself, I ordered champagne and oysters, which I had never eaten, popping a mollusk cruelly into my mouth and draining away the champagne.

"You drink that indecently," an agitated voice scolded.

I half imagined it was a creaky socializing robot, until I looked up and saw Ammon standing on the other side of a low stone parapet which divided my balcony from the one he was on. He jumped over, wearing the same boots but with gray uniform slacks and a high-necked sweater.

I began to shiver uncontrollably but not from the cold.

He went into my room and ripped a blanket off my bed, returning swiftly and wrapping it around me while I sat with my face averted.

"This was to be my vacation," I said, choking down rage. "Did you have to manipulate that too?"

"Why do you say that?"

I gave a bitter laugh. "I'm Jurith," I whispered.

He sat down uninvited and ate an oyster, deftly slipping it down his throat. "May I?" he asked and took a sip from my glass. "Champagne should be sipped."

"I know what to do with champagne," I replied, then took the glass, refilled it and drank the stuff all at once.

His eyes expanded into a great disapproving blackness. Good, share my anger, I thought, but he quickly smiled.

"What happened in the elevator?"

"What elevator?" I said, stubbornness rising.

He laughed. "I'm not really a politician at heart."

I was in great danger of losing everything I sought but I couldn't silence myself. "It's what you seem to me," I said. "Someone interested in acquiring much and paying back in strange currency...extinction."

"If you think that, you are blind and stupid. But you are neither, are you? Just young. Do you think you have no ties with war? To what do you owe your right to exist? Come, come, your unusual life, just being who you are...no ties, no roots in war? You child--"

"Please don't call me that! I was happy here, just for a short time. Did you send me here to torment me, test me, what? What do you expect me to do?"

He stood up, leaning over me with a menacing intensity.

"Send you here?"

"You've been structuring then erasing my memory of it."

He turned away so rapidly that his haste was an obvious affirmation of the truth.

"I'm rather inexperienced, it's true, but I can observe and reflect. I can analyze. I do it very well. You've pried into my life! For what purpose? How can this be of any use to you? I can't stand the thought of it."

"Jurith, Jurith, I haven't pried very much. It's just a procedure for all trainees. A certain verification. We spend a fortune on you cadets."

"In other words, you presume to own us."

"No! Black suns, listen to me! I haven't meant to

violate your privacy."

"You haven't?...planting this place in my mind and...and following me here!" I shouted.

He sat down again, shaking his head at me.

"Don't do anything more to me, please. Let me get out of here, off this planet, on to my work. You know I can be valuable. Diagnose me however you will, but don't use your power to stop me. I beg you. I mean to succeed. Don't, don't..." I knew I was losing all the mastery of self I had carefully achieved. The massive weight of weeks of intense stress came pouring down on me.

"You won't be detained, Jurith. Precisely one of the reasons I came here...to make sure that it was really what you wanted...that you weren't simply running away because of your parents. It was only a little extra concern I had for you. But in the elevator you--"

"Run away!" I was close to screaming. "I am a scientist. Run away? You insult me. In the elevator I felt that I was being manipulated...still feel it, can't stand it. It's you, Dr. Ammon. You really should go now, or I'll go. I'm sorry you force me to be so honest. Sorry, but I don't trust you."

He put his head down, running his fingers through the wild mass of hair and muttering profanities. "If you don't trust me, you shouldn't tell me so. Don't you understand that this is not the way you keep your freedom."

"Freedom? Have I lost it? We have always had freedom to speak, freedom to--"

"No! No! Ah, you in your isolated domain of perfect equations and flawless ideals. You have no real idea of so much. You -- whether you like it or not -- are a political object, and I am, yes, as you say, the manipulator of that object. But nothing is at all as you see it...or very

little."

"But I don't want to see it as you do; that's what it amounts to."

"Black and white. Good and evil. If only it were that simple."

"Dr. Ammon, I know very well nothing is that clear and simple...especially me."

"What understatement."

He lifted his head and I knew that very soon the menacing eyes would be inescapable...the eyes of truth, the eyes of evil...the teachers of both: the evil truth.

I went inside and put on my traveling clothes while he sat there quietly staring out at Wierlfoss. When I came out, he hadn't moved.

"The vacation is over, I think. Goodby, Dr. Ammon."

He jumped up and gripped my shoulder. I'm not used to being restrained. My parents raised me with love. The shock of this action almost sent me to the cold stones.

"Listen carefully to me, Jurith."

"I will not listen. You can't control me, Dr. Ammon. No one will ever control me. If you try to stop me from leaving this planet, I'll...I'll--"

"What? Kill me? You who are stuck fast in the two-dimensional world of peace and peace?" He was laughing.

"Kill you?...kill you? It really terrifies me to hear you say such a thing. You jump to such violent conclusions that you make me wish I had no emotion at all."

"It begins to look as if the only peace-loving emotion I'll ever know is yours, Jurith...and you are a wild, tempestuous peace at best."

"Please don't try to make me fond of you, Dr. Ammon. I can't stand any more of this confusion."

"You do like me. What you dislike is my practical

grasp of reality, interpreted as the need for defense. But you do like me. I know that, Jurith."

Why did it matter? I couldn't answer. I didn't want to contemplate what might be the truth of his assertion. Escape was foremost in my mind and I went quickly.

"I hate to see you go like this. I won't see you again until the day you leave," Ammon called. "I sent you here because I like this place myself, and I wanted you to have it all to yourself. I didn't intend to follow you, but in the elevator you...I still don't believe you know what your feelings are."

How angry he could make me and how I hated that anger in myself, and how I feared his intrigue...which now seemed certain to me. I came back.

"My feelings are just what I say they are. All I can do is apologize for telling the truth. I don't trust you."

"Then it's good you're leaving. I'd like your trust, but I'd be lying if I said I'd entirely earned it. Our jobs come first and mine is to see that you perform at optimum."

"Goodby, then," I said. "That's optimum performance."

I went on, knowing instantly that I had lied to myself and to Ammon. I was deeply disturbed with the lie and with having to admit that there were so many varying shades of truth, just as he had insisted. My brain was churning.

I wandered out to the air pad and sat in my ship for a long time, staring at nothing. Life must not get any more complicated, I thought. I looked up and saw that the night had turned so dark I might already be in deep space. How wonderful to be out there free of all this, free as Lupe and Javan were free. I ached with a strange tension as I leaned forward to activate the ship. The door flew open and Ammon climbed in. His face was a grotesque greenish white in the light of my controls. A little fear started in my wrists.

"You're a thorn of innocence," he hurled at me.

"Not anymore," I answered.

"You understand now that you could never have realized your potential if they had not gone away."

"I would have. I will!"

"You were overprotected. They couldn't tolerate your loss of innocence so your emotions were temporarily stunted."

"Stop, please. Don't tell me what they did or didn't do to me. You want me to rave!"

"I want truth. Your parents wisely left you, but they left you unfinished, unfit for large purpose. Unfortunately for you, they left that to me -- your weaning."

"I've had enough. I feel such a disturbing dislike for you, Dr. Ammon, that I--."

"On the contrary, you have realized that you can both like me and think me wrong. That's why I terminated our sessions before I intended. It isn't really beneficial for you to like me *or* think me wrong."

"How long have you known my parents? How did you meet them? Once you were at my father's laboratory. Why?"

"I'm inundated." He switched off my trip lights. "Is this useful interrogation? I came to your father's laboratory to ask him to work on a problem of defense."

"Of course. What else? And did he agree to do it?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it."

"Why should I make this up? It was a matter of individual protection for high risk, high echelon staff. In his research, he'd inadvertently come across something very promising along this line and he agreed to pursue it."

"I see, to save lives then."

"Yes. You're relieved."

"My father wouldn't help advance the causes of war."

"Perhaps."

"You didn't know him very well."

"Well enough."

"Your circumspection makes you suspect."

"In what way, Jurith?"

"I don't know. I just know that you're keeping something from me in regard to my parents."

Ammon leaned back in the seat, then closed his eyes and folded his hands over his chest. Was he reflecting on an answer, preparing to punish me, or just napping? I was highly agitated. I let out a sigh and smacked the console several times with the palm of my hand.

"Careful, don't beat up the equipment," he said. He swung the seat around and looked at me with a faint smile. "Do you want to hear a story?"

"If it's the one I'm waiting for."

"It is."

"A true story?"

"I wouldn't tell you any other kind...not in regard to Lupe and Javan."

"Maybe I don't want to hear it."

"Maybe. Do I go on?"

"All right."

"I met your parents on Hedone."

"It's hard enough for me to imagine my parents spending much time on the pleasure colony Hedone, but you?"

"We were all there at one of R\_\_\_\_\_'s outings, a sort of honorary banquet for high achievers who had done service for the Federation. In those days I generally went where I was asked to go and your parents did too. Anyway, I found them the most enlightening people present. While the rest of the company debauched themselves, we escaped to a walled garden

and sat under a plum tree, discoursing on various subjects of interest. After awhile my avowed training, my profession and rather straightforward manner prompted your parents to begin talking about you."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"They were full of praise for you and seemed to value my opinion."

"Opinion of what?"

"You see your parents had been aiming for the position at MACRA for a long time. There in that rarefied atelier they could pursue their projects and experimentations to the outermost limits. The data, the equipment, the stimulating colleagues and uninterrupted life style make MACRA superior to any other scientific milieu. Despite all of this, they were deeply saddened because they couldn't take you with them. Even though they knew you were exceptionally mature intellectually, they realized that they hadn't prepared you for this separation emotionally. They were relieved to find that I understood all of this so readily."

"So what you're telling me is that they gave my lopsided self to you."

"In effect, they did. Without being told, I knew they hoped for more than your independence. They wanted--"

"Well, I won't be given."

"They wanted me to be there when you needed--"

"You can't help me, because you don't know anything about the kind of love they had for me. You deceived them. Oh, it makes me laugh. Poor Javan and Lupe. They believed you were the answer because they had no choice. Staying here and pampering me was certainly no choice, and I would never have allowed it anyway. I would have insisted they go even if I had died of it. And I did die a little because I was so alone. I won't even blame them for that, for not

making me a more sociable creature. I can't because I love them too much."

"Nevertheless, they should have--"

"Please don't tell me what they should have done."

I got out onto the glowing pad, rubbing an improperly bent leg paralyzed with numbness as I stared into the soft orange light. My hands looked like small dead branches, hands which were the unity of Lupe and Javan. I grimaced when I tried to stand up and said, "Ah, my leg is numb."

Ammon jumped out and knelt to put pressure on the leg. When he removed his hand the pain was gone.

"You suppress far too much, Jurith. You must think of yourself as a whole separate being, not an extension of two lovers."

I straightened up, angry again. I couldn't accept that uncanny reading of my thought.

"Come back inside the hall," he said.

"I don't want your condescending analysis. I've got to leave."

"Then go, of course. I suppose it's exactly the right choice. See how easy it is to thwart Ammon. I'd say it was my own test of your good judgment, but it wouldn't fool either of us. Have a good journey. You'll achieve your freedom soon."

He put his hands in his pockets and walked away toward the hall. I was deserted again, but now I felt like the deserter. I thought that I must need him in the same crippling way I needed Javan and Lupe, still, I stumbled after him. I fell, bruising my knee and cursing out loud. Eventually, I got to my room, put on my robe and went next door. His door was ajar and a small, blue glow lamp gave the cavernous marble room a sad, cold light. Ammon was lying on his bed half dressed -- as though he'd given up the

idea of undressing -- with one bare arm thrown over his forehead. I cringed as he turned those darkened eyes on me. They emitted the cool blue light of his hard self-contempt.

"Nothing will be denied you, Jurith, if you go now."

"I didn't come to ingratiate myself. I was afraid and I don't like being afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That I'd made a serious mistake."

"As you say, then," he said with soft laughter. "I could hardly mistake your honesty for veneration."

"May I take a holovideo of you with me when I leave?"

He sat up, ran his fingers through his incredible hair, and studied me without answering. Somehow I didn't believe that I had surprised him.

"May I?"

His smile was ironic as he advised, "It will be against the law to take a holovideo of me off planet."

"But you are the law."

"How little you know," he said. "Take it. I'll review our motives when it's too late. You could probably get any other contraband from me you wanted."

"That's all I want."

"Nothing more?"

My face burned as I stared at his black-haired chest. "You want me to say something...I can't...I can't."

"Come here, my orphaned Captain, and leave your pride across the room."

I came and sat on the bed and touched his hair as I then realized I'd been wanting to do. It held the coolness of Wierlfoss and felt like slippery coils of rope. I'd never seen let alone touched such hair, blue-black as the tentacled shadows of night. My hand was a nervous thing. He took it and held it against his throat. I could feel the

thumping carotid. Sparks of blood crackled up my arm and out through all the startled networks of my body. "Flee, flee!" my reason cried, but I was caught by my own terrible hunger. Unity had been a word of mystery; now I was on the verge of knowing it, and with a rare, wandering soul which opposed it. At once, something fearful forced its way into my mind, an image of Ammon walking in a barren place, his head all in shadow. As he came closer, his blood-filled eyes gaped out of the darkness in hideous pain, a pain so real I must have moaned in empathy. Then a soothing voice broke through this vision, and I was tumbling under the powerful sway of a very dangerous tutorial master. An endless exploratory journey had already begun, out into the remoteness of uncharted Ammon. I was divided. "Look beyond this," a small voice begged. "This moment is also the future." But the rest of me wanted only to connect with Ammon, to stop the forward motion of all things, wanted what a pleasurer seeks, forgetfulness and total immersion, but wanted also, as Ammon well knew, the coddling and stroking of one deprived of a rich and centered love. I tried to say or to ask that which was not clear even to me.

"No," he interrupted. "Don't tell me...don't ask me anything. All of this is unanswerable."

"But you have the power...authority...the absolute--"

"So you tell me," he interrupted again with a laugh. "The High Seat still has its legs, and anyway my clandestine authority is the wrong kind for this, my Captain."

He was thorough and skillful in his treatment of me, so that I was released into deep pleasure without even knowing if his feelings went beyond immediate satisfaction. I awoke alone and thought I had only dreamed such a wild occurrence, until beside me on the pillow I saw one white rose on a slender stem; it had a single thorn hidden away near the

sepals and was dewy fresh, but, like me, cut off from its nourishing branch. Too soon it would turn to dust. "It has power enough to be eaten," I once heard Lupe say of a dark velvet rose in her garden. I thought of tasting the petals, swallowing them as an ancient might do to preserve their magical power. Is that what Lupe meant? Half amused and curious, I bit into the folded edges of the unfurling bud. The scented petals tasted bittersweet and dry as ashes. I still refused the illusory night as anything but dream, just as I had refused to let the rose die a slower death. To think of the night past was a slow death, and not to think of it a swift one. Who ever loves a perfect rose without suffering its death? Ammon finished me beautifully.

#### Voice Script XII

I've been working with other scientists daily, flying shuttles out to near colonies. I did go as far as Lupe's birthplace, Karak, and thought of looking for relatives, but before I had time to tap into a records computer I was ordered home. I suppose New Frontiers thought it was too dangerous. But it didn't matter -- some of my relatives found me. Quester cadets are well known and followed as celebrities on Karak. Splendid agrarian Karak. It is a strange old-fashioned place in many ways. I see where Lupe got all of her wonderful stories. But let me tell you about some of the Karakians I met.

I flew to the big valley of Vernikka, a high, fertile place surrounded by craggy black mountains with great waterfalls -- quite impressive when one remembers that every bit of Karak was manufactured long ago, designed by agrarian scientists who wanted it to look like the rugged homeland region of its immigrants. There is a broad cinder cone in the center of the valley, and three Karakians volunteered to

show me quilted Vernikka from a lookout on the rim of this cone. They were Ing, Nilando, and Chauv. Ing told me that he is the youngest son of my maternal grandfather's little brother. He has greenish-blond hair and narrow turquoise eyes. All three wear makii, a rough bluish-white camouflage textile which can change its background hue with adrenaline arousal. The warriors are called Makalf which means defenders.

"I didn't expect to see you in makii," I told Ing. "I thought the family was seriously agrarian.

"They are seriously agrarian; who isn't here? That's why I'm Makalf, to keep the land of our family's bloodline, to produce the vegetables and grains for which there is no equal. I've been Makalf since I was twelve."

"Eleven years?"

"Yes. I became Makalf the day the Kursand invaded our land."

"You call the Kursand, the hands of evil lords."

"Are they not the hands of an evil body?" Ing said.

"You know the Kursand are sent from Control, of course," Nilando said to me.

I stared at her with disbelief, but I'd already heard this rumor. What a lovely deep voice she has. She and Chauv are lovers and warriors. They look at each other in a special way that makes me happy and a little sad that I don't have this sort of easy camaraderie with a lover. I wondered what they would say if they knew how close I've been to the dark anonymity about to assume command of The Federation? They don't even know of his existence, of his immeasurable power, and I am sworn not to speak of Control. I hardly know of his existence myself, so strange and illusory are my recollections of him; perhaps he has suggested to me that I forget. And yet...my blood ran cold.

What had Nilando said...that Control was trying to destroy the way of life in my ancestral homeland? Was it all just talk? I felt a restless and uncertain anger.

"So you don't know," Chauv said, studying my face. You, a Quester Cadet, so close to the top. Still, I'm not surprised. Karak is far from you, privileged one."

"I've heard the rumors," I said in a voice which indicated I was not pleased with Chauv's remark.

"Control first sent the Kursand here in order to bring Karak more tightly under its rein. We produce Lagro, which is the reason we're seldom ill. You'll take it on your exploration, Jurith. It's an ingredient in life extenders, among other things. It will keep you alive. It comes from an innocent vine plant which grows only on Karak and only because of Karakian genetics. Our laboratories do this for The Federation. We're rich in agrarian expertise. Do you wonder why Control wants to enslave us?"

"Don't you think they want only to protect Karak?"

"From what?" Chauv asked. "They're the only threat."

"It's complicated," I said.

Chauv's green eyes glittered beneath his high-arched brows. His hair was a mass of blond fuzz, and his thick lips curved into an amused smile. I could feel his interest in me, but I've grown used to such media-maxed attention. I was glad that Nilando seemed unconcerned.

"Complicated? No, it's entirely simple...we kill Kursand," Ing said.

I shook my head in disapproval.

"Kursand are the rotten arm of Control. Karak wants and needs the protection of The Federation. Despite what Chauv says, we do have our detractors and pirates. But the present Control is decadent and over-extended. We know. We're not ignorant agrarians here," Ing said with rising

excitement.

Perhaps things will change soon, I wanted to say, but knew that I must keep silent.

Nilando leaned out above the protector field to point at something far below in the quilted valley, and I saw smoke. "Kursand," she muttered. Chauv pulled her back by her sash, and she nuzzled against him, laughing. They are beautiful together. Her parents and Chauv's father have all been killed in the recurring clashes with Kursand. The Kursand, of course, have labeled them radicals who must be eliminated, but these young people fight and smile. It's a way of life now. I feel like a raw innocent with them, and yet they show me reverence.

"Tonight is the first celebration of harvest festival. We want you to speak to our people...your people too. Let them ask you questions. You're highly thought of here, for a number of reasons. The celebration will be carefully guarded by Makalf, but there will be Kursand spies. Will you do it?" Ing asked.

Without hesitating, I said I would and that I hoped it would help, but I felt ill-equipped for anything momentous.

The harvest celebration called Corona was held on a high plateau where everyone could look down on the rich valley which brought such plenty to the Karakians. The people came carrying staffs of fire and wearing strange and brilliant costumes with elaborate masks representing the characters and animals of their ancient folk tales. I thought of Lupe and how she must have loved this. I wished I had seen it with her and wondered why I never had.

The people began to dance and sing, making circles and performing familiar jaunty steps. They drank the fermented juices of the native fruits. I had never tasted such nectars, and when I started to feel their effects I put my

cup aside so as not to speak like a fool. The entire event was flashed on hologram across the sky, so that when I stood up to speak I saw myself as a giant figure floating above Karak. "Blazing comets!" I whispered to Ing, "I'm hardly keeping a low profile, am I? Do you have to do that?" He shook his head in the affirmative and said that this method of titan presentation was a very good mind bender.

Then Ing placed a speaker disc on my collar and introduced me. I smiled amid wild cheering and waited for quiet. As an unofficial government emissary, I was used to public speaking by now, but I could sense a very unusual restlessness in this crowd, which was nothing like the unquestioning enthusiasm I witnessed at home. They weren't going to let me off easily. A woman shouted, "You're one of ours and you walk with leaders! Help us, Jurith!"

"What do you think I can do?" I asked.

"Tell them to treat us as allies, not subjects, not enemies!" she shouted back.

"The Federation respects Karakians. You're immensely important to all of us," I answered.

"No, we're not!" a boy shouted.

"Yes we are," someone else interrupted. "We're important as potential slave labor and valuable produce."

"Please tell me precisely what you want," I said.

"We want the Kursand out! Kursand out! Kursand out!" everyone began to chant.

I looked out at the flaming staffs waving to the chant and at the masked faces made even more grotesque by the flickering fires and the agitated mood of the crowd. Finally, I raised my hand for silence and said, "I agree. Those who came here to make trouble for Karak should all go back where they came from."

A man in a violet and black costume who wore the beaked

mask of a great black bird came near the base of the high platform where I stood. He stared at me until I was quite unnerved. I didn't look at him directly, although I sensed very strong and violent emotions. I had no mask to hide behind and my white dress uniform made a perfect target in the spotlight. I stepped forward out of the light and looked down into the hooded black eyes.

"You, Captain," the man said with a husky voice throttled by the warlike mask. "Do you speak for Control?"

My knees were turning to liquid but stubbornness rose up in me. "The opinion is my own," I answered. "I cannot speak for anyone else."

"Then until you can speak for Control, it is better not to speak at all."

This answer was ambiguous enough to keep him in favor with his captured audience, but I knew all at once and beyond a doubt that he represented Control and that I might be at risk. I ignored him and went on to talk about my roots in Karak and the great myths and stories my mother had taught me of this place. All the while, I felt the black eyes on me, waiting. Ing must have sensed it too. He signaled for music and led me away into the rock cave behind the platform. It was beautifully constructed of a fine synthetic rock and blown out in a tubular passageway down which the echoing of clapping and whistling could be heard as we hurried along. We came out at a right angle to, and a good distance from, the platform. Chauv and Nilando followed, and we got into Ing's waiting ship and flew away to his family home in the foothills just above the valley.

Ing's large home is made of lasered stone. The rooms are open, spacious, and handsomely appointed with thick rugs and tapestries depicting the folk heroes, each in her or his special haunt. The wool used is from the silky hybrid

sheep, and the colors are the rich deep hues of Karakian nature. I thought, this is how I will have my home some day if ever there is time for such beauty and comfort.

My friends spoke often in their Karakian tongue, so familiar to me through Lupe. I felt as though I belonged here with these handsome defenders of Karak. When they spoke, the passion of their convictions was like a song in their voices. Ing's voice was the most musical of all, and, as the night raced swiftly toward morning, I came to feel highly attracted to my distant cousin. Still, I told him frankly that I couldn't stand his eagerness for killing.

"If you watched your father die at the hand of another, could you not kill that other?" he asked.

"That's a terribly painful question to answer. My father doesn't sanction the taking of life."

"He would kill for you soon enough, I'll warrant," Chauv said.

"Let's change the subject," I suggested.

"It's unchangeable," Ing said. "Death is a recurring specter, the only immortal beast. It ends all other living bodies, even war."

"War doesn't live; its destruction leaves nothing and leads to nothing," I insisted.

"It leads to a new beginning," Ing said with flashing turquoise eyes.

"Not for the annihilated," I said, wishing I were alone with Ing and we were speaking of other things. "Death isn't glorious. It's ugly and absolutely final. I mean to cheat it of much time, to cheat it!" I swore passionately. In that moment I saw my future self bringing that sworn oath to fruition. There was a pause of silence in which everyone was heavily engaged in thought. Then Chauv said, "If we listened to you, we would lie down and become slaves."

"I can't believe you want us to do that," Nilando said.

"No," I answered, "but what happened to reason? You can talk to Control."

"They speak with death and we answer the same, to the last loyal Karakian," Ing said. "They will destroy the hands that feed them, destroy themselves," Ing went on.

"This is horrible. Control is the government of your Makers and your protector."

"Sadly ignorant and bright friend," Chauv said, shaking his head at me, "Karak was born of wars. There was a time long ago when the Makers expected their planet to annihilate itself. For a black night of time the only civilization worthy of that name lived off planet. That's why they made colonies like Karak. The Makers are like gods to us, the ultimate heroes of our folk tales. They were not of the same mind as Control, or we would not exist here. In any case, Control has grown corrupt and forgetful. The leaders wallow in dissipation."

"Surely not all of them," I protested.

"It matters not, because they do nothing. The Makers are our only heroes," Chauv insisted.

"The Makers were lovers of peace," I reminded everyone.

"As we are, but peace is expensive," Nilando answered.

Ing got up and poured us a hot, spiced fruit wassail slowly simmering on the central stone around which we all lounged on enormous soft pillows. We sipped and lay back in quiet thought.

"I still believe that you must talk," I said.

"You talk for us," Ing said, and the others agreed. They half believed I had Control's ear, and I couldn't tell them how naïve they were in this. I wanted only to escape Control's proximity forever, not embroil myself in its politics. I had begun to see that Control was a Gargantuan

head with a long, snapping tongue of intrigue-ridden agents, one prevailing entity with the power of legions. Should I fear Ammon or fear for him? It doesn't concern you, my inner voice said. You must make a world of your own. Despite all of this, by the time I left my friends knew that I would speak for them if I had the chance.

Chauv and Nilando had to leave. They were already late for a meeting of their Makalf wing. I too would be stretching my luck if I stayed much longer. "It seems like I've known you a long time," I told them.

"Then you won't forget us," Nilando said.

"Not ever."

"We'll meet again," Chauv assured me with a cheerful grin. He squeezed one of my hands and Nilando the other.

I started to ponder what the future might hold for them, and a fierce pain came into my head. I jumped up and hugged them to dispel it and to capture some of their very disarming optimism.

When they were gone, I went for a walk with Ing over a foothill of beautifully lasered black mountains. "The Makers were remarkable sculptors," I said, gazing appreciatively around me. The path borders were lushly overspread with the close-grown, sharp-scented flora of Karak. Ing picked a sprig of pink celesteflower and tucked it into my hair. This seemed such a gentle impulse for one so harshly motivated that it moved me deeply. Ing watched me for a moment as I rubbed my eyes. He decided to kiss me. It was a warm kiss, so tenderly given that I murmured with surprise, "You have a heart."

"How could you doubt it with it so boldly exposed?" He laughed. "You're a spellbinder, Jurith. I'm even moved to overlook your hopeless idealism."

"What a pair we'd make." I laughed and immediately







wine uniform of the Quester Expedition are recognized everywhere. We're afforded every courtesy and waited on with reverence, like fattening sacrificial lambs. I'm both amused and irritated by this. None of us has time to take advantage of inner circles. We don't care. We are the inner circle as far as we're concerned. The four guards outside the chrome doors stood at unblinking attention. I was trying to think why I had come. I didn't intend to go inside. I hesitated a second and started to leave. Just then the outer door slid open to release an aide, and I saw that the great bronze inner door was also open. Someone was bent over what I thought must be Ammon's desk. The aide moved slightly and I could see that Ammon was leaning on his hand in his impatient way, listening. He ran his fingers through that wild mass of hair. Instantly, I recalled what he had been to me and all that I had pushed out of my mind and into my dreams. My knees were shaking. What was I doing here? I leaned back against the wall, unable to move, stupefied and angry at my helplessness. The head came up slowly and those paralyzing eyes stared out at me. I was frozen in place like something trapped in a lens of ice. Then the person in front of him mercifully blocked his numbing gaze, and I fled. I went so quickly and blindly that I turned down the wrong hall. I ducked through an archway which led into a pearly waiting room, and stood there on the thick carpet, breathing heavily. My heart was trying to launch itself without me. After awhile, I went back out into the hall but discovered that I would have to cross the passage to Ammon's chambers to get to the elevators. Now I felt foolish, like a child playing games, very undignified. I decided to walk boldly out and march to the elevators without looking to the right or left. I went, carrying on a little dialogue with myself. *What is this*

*stupidity you've done, Jurith? You might have said goodbye sensibly, but now you've acted like a fool. Why did you come here? Get out quickly, quickly!* I stood at the elevator anxiously tapping my foot. A voice at my back said, "You are Jurith."

"Yes," I said, steeling myself and turning around with an attempt at a casual smile.

It was a blond young man in gray uniform, the very aide who had been leaning over Ammon's desk.

"I've seen you often on video," he said. His manner was friendly and courteous. "Doctor Ammon thought you were waiting outside his office."

"I was waiting for a minute, but now I have to go."

"Please come back, then. He'll see you now."

"I'm sorry. I have to leave."

"I know you're the Captain of the Quester Expedition, Doctor; if I don't bring you back you might get me into a lot of trouble. In such a situation one just doesn't refuse...if you'll forgive my forwardness."

Very smooth and diplomatic. The higher you go the smoother they get, I thought. There was nothing left to do but follow him. I took a deep breath and shot along beside him with as much indifference as I could muster.

When I entered, Ammon was standing looking out through a wall of glass over all the buildings below and beyond. It was a fine early fall afternoon, the sun flaring and dipping over this broad city divided by its sparkling black ribbon of water. I knew that if I were to stand at the edge of the glass I could look down and see the dense growth of the park set like an emerald baguette between the Tower and the Quad. But I stayed just inside the door of this imposing courtly office, where the sun's orange light slanting through the topaz shield could reach only the lower half of me.

"Why did you run away?" he asked without turning around.

I felt myself shrinking and resisted. Always a question, I thought. "Why did I come?" I said.

"A better question. You were only going to stand outside?"

"I don't know. I think it was just going to be a kind of silent goodbye," I said. I am a fool, I thought. I was terribly confused as I stood in a silence which seemed to slip into hours. "Well, goodbye," I said at last. *Moreover, I am an awkward fool.* I turned to go.

"Wait, Captain!" his voice ordered.

I saw that he had turned around at last. I caught a glint of raw emotion on his face, but it gave me little satisfaction.

"Come out of the shadows. You're cut in half. Sit there, please." He pointed to a big sooth chair.

I glanced down at the golden treetops in the park and then sat down, glad for a way to rest my trembling knees.

He moved over to the polychrome tapestry covering a wall behind his desk. I kept my head bent, only sensing where the dark mass of energy had gone until I realized that his back was turned again. His arms were stretched out and he was leaning on extended fingertips pressed against the tapestry. He cannot face me, I thought, but why? His stance was extremely annoying. Was he gathering himself for some terrible statement? A knife of fear went through my heart. He had the power to...but then I studied him closely and, from the way he held his head, determined that his eyes were closed, looking inward, engaged in self-examination. He turned around then, his face blank, impenetrable.

"You're ready to travel?"

"Yes."

"Forgive me, but you understand fully what this means?"

"Understand and eagerly anticipate."

"Suppose you were needed here...your talents sorely needed...if you were to have a position at the right arm of the head of the Science Academy, eventually the head, as it goes -- an elegant grove to walk in with your Brahmins, all the funding credits for unlimited research which go with the position...anyone you chose to work with -- how would you respond to that?"

"Would you have said goodbye to me if I hadn't come here?" I asked.

"Jurith! Black suns, Jurith!" he said with an acerbic laugh. "I've just offered you paradise."

"Eventual head of the Academy? What a nice purchase, so highly coveted. Javan and Lupe might even have approved. They would have been pleased. But now it seems tame to me, even though I would never have dreamed of such an offer, and certainly not from you. Why? Is this another test?"

He pulled off his black tunic then threw it down and ripped open the neck of his white silk shirt.

"I...don't want you off this planet...yes, it was a test."

"And yet you have certainly programmed me to go. As if that were necessary -- I'm wild to get away."

He hurled himself into a chair, shaking his head. I heard soft but sharp laughter and knew it was directed at himself. Finally, he sighed. "This is nearly the eve of your departure."

"Oh, now I'm going again. You had me confused."

"What is it that you want, Jurith?" His voice sounded tired, sad, but he was still so dominant a presence that I could feel sorrow only for myself.

"Nothing, I just...yes, there is something I want...as

long as I'm here."

"What?"

"Please don't start a war on Karak."

He tossed his head. "There's already a war of sorts on Karak...one I didn't start. It needs to be finished."

"Please don't finish it brutally. There are other things which can be done."

"Such as?"

"Deport the Kursand. They have no purpose there. The rest will fall into line with a little help."

The sharp sound of his laughter was like cracking ice. "You make it seem easy, like resolving a little family squabble. There are deep interconnections which you don't understand. Problems in Control. Black suns! You had to go there!...mix in it without understanding at all."

"Killing is easy -- we humans are so fragile -- an easy horror, a nightmare. But you! You don't need easy ways. You're the supreme strategist...a clever, clever man. You can think of other ways."

"Don't be another flatterer. I'm not a magician. Do you imagine we're as omnipotent as *they* are led to believe?" He stood up and swept his hands out toward the windows.

I didn't want to think of that. I preferred to think of Ammon as all-powerful, and was surprised that I preferred this since I had never cared for power. I felt overwhelmed and disappointed. "I suppose I only came to say goodbye through a closed door," I said.

"Then say it and be on your way, and don't ever presume to tell me how to run this big complicated ship!" His face was a fierce contortion of censorious anger.

I ran to the huge bronze door and was enraged to find that it wouldn't open. It wouldn't open! Something in me snapped. I slammed my fist against it over and over above

the sound of his voice, until there was blood, the blood of my fingers, spattering in tiny drops. His alarmed shouting drove me on until he was behind me, his arms crossing in front of me and dragging me back. I was in such a fury that I struggled wildly, but he spun me around and held me in a crushing arm-lock with my face pressed awkwardly down against his shoulder. My neck hurt. I could smell the faint, musky spice of Ammon, and I was shaking violently. I felt his fingers moving soothingly over the back of my head, the fingers of a shaman, a spellbinder. Finally, I was silent and still. We stood there in that strange embrace until a guard rushed in. "Get out, you fool!" he shouted. "I'd have been dead by now anyway!" I began to laugh, unable to stop, and then he began to laugh too. He picked up my dangling hand, wiped it on his shirt and led me into his private bath. After my hand was topically induced to heal rapidly, he tried to give me a tranq, which I refused.

"I had no idea I could act that way," I said with shaken voice. "You've caused this. How could I do that when I'm always so...restrained...so...I've never-"

"Stop it! Stop the justification, Jurith, that silly, puerile fear of losing the promise of your future. You can't always think you're inadequate because your parents abandoned you. Not you! It's beneath you. I won't stop you from going. Can't you understand that?"

"I've never done anything like that in my life. Why did it happen?"

"I wish it hadn't. The question shouldn't be asked or answered. You feel too much...but it won't matter. You're strong. Do you know you're the strongest one in your crew?...it isn't body...all mind. You're--"

"Don't tell me how strong I am!" I protested, "Or how intelligent! I've been senseless...ridiculous...it hurts!"

"It happens. Emotion isn't necessarily ridiculous. I don't have to lecture you -- you've taught me that. You've far too much sensitiveness in you. Still, wherever you go there it will be...that tempering passion for the good. Maybe it's exactly what a real warrior needs."

"Where I go there will be no war."

"Wherever man goes war is inevitable, and you above all may generate it."

"No! If only I could prove that to you. But you'll never know what I do."

"I'll know. I know you. Let's not think of it...speak of it. Now that your hand is all bloodied -- it was me you were beating on and I felt every blow -- let's use what time we have left to better purpose. I should not have let you go to your mother's homeland...but I have exigencies. I could not monitor every move you made."

I tucked my bandaged fingers under my arm. "Don't you ever long to see your homeland, colonial passenger?"

He laughed. "You always surprise me."

"I doubt it. Don't you have wanderlust?"

"I have it sometimes...but someone has to do this, to keep it from...perversion. You should see what fanged avarice looks like waiting in the shadows. In comparison, I would appear high-principled...even to you."

He fell silent, then said, "I'm not sure of my homeland. They told me my mother was fair...fairer than you...white as snow. Look at me...a dark hairy beast."

"Do you have a woman?"

He clicked his tongue softly and laughed. "I'm a man who has only women, never a woman -- my profession has precluded it. I'm consumed by work...time..."

"Do you live with someone?"

"I live here now, alone. I gave up my other quarters

when I sold my soul to Control. All I can offer you is Control's magnificent bed."

"Offer *me*? I'm going to the squad house before I'm reported absent," I said.

"No, my Wierlfoss anomaly. You won't be reported absent, because you're my guest. It will be better. I programmed this appointment in you carefully some time ago, but I can never quite anticipate you. Don't look so resentful. I cheated just a little because I knew that we would need this time. I want to see you eat. You're thinner. I'll give you an anodyne...watch you sleep. You need rest. Allow me that...after my cruelty."

"I'm not hungry. I have no intention of taking a sedative and I don't want to sleep," I said, absently following him down a long, gilt corridor and into a cavernous chamber which echoed with my stream of protests. I fell silent in surprise.

The white marble room had a high, dark blue ceiling, the color of twilight, and a few pieces of heavy furniture along the walls resting upon a sapphire carpet. There were also blue and white tapestries -- early scenes of The Colonies -- and a huge bed covered in stripes of blue, brown, wine, and silver velvet. He sat on the carpet before me, and I sat on the edge of the low bed, spreading out my undamaged fingers. I looked at my bandaged hand, I suppose with surprise; it seemed to me I had just discovered it.

"Will you please take something for the pain."

"No...it feels good."

This remark evoked that silent, ebony gaze of the critical mind. He was thinking how disturbed I was.

"Would you have said goodbye?" I asked.

"I told you that I needed to see you, but goodbye? No. What does it matter if I say goodbye? We said that the first

time you walked into my office as a Quester candidate. You were not stuff for denial. You said farewell to this planet the day you were born with that prodigious brain already accelerating. Silence and distance won't make you any less my concern."

"You don't really want me to stay on this planet."

"I wouldn't have wanted you as I do if you had accepted my offer...sad irony. Forgive me. It was a cowardly way of eliminating my own guilt...also a clumsy indulgence. But the anger...you affect me deeply, Jurith."

"Which surprises you because no one ever affects Ammon."

"At this point, I'm not too surprised. Remember I know you, Jurith. Sometimes it's better to want what you can't have. The value remains high and draws you along on your lonely path. I cannot have you, Jurith."

"I don't want you to want anything more of me."

"That would be better."

"Because it can't be," I went on.

"I know that."

"I don't trust you."

"I know that too. I'm sorry."

I felt a growing frustration at his facile compliance. "What do you *really* know, Doctor?" I asked.

"I know that what you want is divided by a bloodied hand which feels good."

"Do you know you've made me envy Lupe and Javan? Do you know that? When I was on Karak I met someone--"

"You met a young Makalf named Ing, and you're attracted to him."

"I should have known you were spying on me."

"I don't have time to spy on you, Jurith, but I am informed. After all, you're part of an important project."

"That's right, a pawn in an experiment the entirety of which even I haven't grasped. But I can't deny that I'm using you too, Doctor, to get what I want."

"Yes." He picked up my hand putting his thumb against my pulse. "This is turning unpleasant again. We're going round and round. Ah, Jurith, you're a white rabbit I pulled out of a hat and couldn't put back."

"Was Wierlfoss just..." I couldn't finish what I wanted to say, even though it had taken me this long to get to the point of mentioning it.

"Ah, Wierlfoss." He rubbed his palm against my shaking hand. "Wierlfoss was a thing in and of itself. Needed. I don't know what else to say because you'll put the meaning, the end of it, where you want it anyway. You..."

I sat very quietly, staring at his reluctant mouth, willing him to go on. He assented to this with a smile.

"You have a subtle power, Jurith, which I expect will grow into an amazing controlling force. When I was waiting for you today, I remembered with what pleasure I waited for you in Black Hall. Today I was thinking how you must come one more time, even though one thorn in my hide was enough."

"I destroyed it...your lovely white rose."

His laughter was quick. "So like you...to dispose so quickly of the troubling ephemeral...eat the petals."

"But how did you know? You were gone."

"I told you I know you, even though there's no end to your surprises. I know a great deal of you. You're much more trouble than war."

"Please don't compare me to it."

He rose from the carpet with a quick jump, unleashing such a forceful energy that I instinctively felt the need for defense. But he carefully unwound the bandage from my hand. "There, you see, already a scab and soon scar tissue,

the very thing which makes us hard-hearted and competent."

He looked at me a long moment with his very hard and competent mind -- a look I will never forget -- and then lifted the wounded hand to his mouth. I opened it and held it against his inscrutable face. "You didn't program this, did you, Doctor?"

"It can't be done," he said against my hurting fingers.

He helped me to take off my handsome wine uniform with its proud Quester insignia, then closed his hands over my shoulders and let me down against the pillows. Soon I fell into a rapidly expanding darkness which shone like the deep universe, but it was the eyes of a magician. I knew I would never again look out into the bright night of space without seeing them. He lifted my damaged hand above the pillows and placed his own hand over it to keep it from further hurt, and in that one small gesture I came to know another Ammon. I heard and felt a voice without words, along with the brief gift of total self for which I traded mine.

#### Voice Script XVI

For more than a homeland month, we've been out in this glittering night, cruising faster and faster away from time. We've all been so busy getting regimented and doing our analyses that I haven't uttered a word for posterity, only for the daily log. At the end of the first cycle when I went to record on the log screen, nearby I found this handwritten lyric tucked into the sleeve of the holovideo disk that Ammon had promised me:

Jurith,

I see you as apotheosized human equation, trailing riddles and sonnets for us all. Find my home (the place where you are). I marvel, after all, at how you forsook the palm grove for the long

night of random. Better to immerse yourself in the importance of the unknown than to let your genius inspire war. It will anyway, my Captain. Genius such as yours produces cause, and the effect is war. Your most lethal weapon will always be love. Forgive me, White Rabbit, forgive me for my part in the effect.

Q. Ammon

I had never seen Ammon's handwriting. The letters are large and black with a squarish, energetic sweep. I realized with a foolish bout of madness that I didn't know what the Q stood for and that it would remain forever in my head as an unknown, representing, of course, a greater unknown, Ammon himself. How much did he really know of me, of my deep craving to stare continually inward where thought informs the future, of my urgent need to transcend the body on free mentation's big springboard of creation? I thought of his words; he did know but his premise was wrong; it had to be wrong. I agonized at something useless: did it appear that I had left him easily? Nothing in my life has been harder or more inexplicable. Once he asked me, "How do you see yourself?" and I replied, "I don't see myself. I see possible effects of me." It was so spontaneous that I knew it was as close to the truth as I would come.

Occasionally, we talk to transports as we cross the transverse at white speed. We will see less and less of them. If we needed anything, we could actually bring something aboard, but we are self-sufficient. We sometimes communicate with the colonies. Study goes on. Routine is comforting.

Voice XVII

Today I called our physician, Roggi, into my cabin to tell her that I am pregnant. She was not happy with me and

I could see her holding back deep concern as well as anger. I had unintentionally abused the very special privilege of unplanned reproduction bestowed only for select frontiers or in adjudicated decisions. I told her I was sorry, and asked her to keep it from the others as long as possible. Control would not have allowed me to go. We are supposed to place any planned embryos in birth chambers after we arrive, so that they can be very carefully monitored and protected from lethal rays and contamination. Is this how you intended to find your homeland, Ammon? No, you would not have allowed this. It's my fault. I removed the tiny invisible contra from beneath my arm because it irritated under my suit when I was sweating in test flights. Thoroughly unscientific. The possibility was so remote as to be unthinkable, and when I came under your sway I simply forgot. I've reduced you to nothing and yet part of you is growing in me. This will be an interesting experiment. What irony. I feel numb. I must try to stay that way as long as I am in command.

#### Voice Script XVIII

Today during examination Roggi said, "The fetus is a girl, not as active as she should be but this might mean nothing. Are you sure you want to go on with this, Captain? It's an easy thing to correct."

"Doctor," I said, "it seems ludicrous to be called Captain in this position. Call me Jurith. I intend to keep her if I can. I'll call her Qyoo, Q-y-o-o, after her male contributor."

"How interesting. I've never heard that name."

"Actually, it's an initial. I don't know what it stands for."

Roggi began to laugh, and I laughed too. It felt wonderful. How lucky I am to have this amazing young woman

at my side. She asked me to call her Roggi with a twinkle in her lovely eyes. They are a different shape, like the stone of a plum and glittering green as the wet moss one encounters at the edges of Wierlfoss. I wish such memories didn't creep up on me and jump into my consciousness. Will Ammon's child be born in this ship, perhaps closer to his home than he was? Again I think of the incredible irony.

With what amazing audacity our tiny sphere of life moves through darkness incomprehensible.

#### Voice Script XIX

We were fired upon today by a chase ship from the seceded colony of Burgan. Quester K-900 is easily identifiable as non-military, and I have stayed well outside disputed perimeters. The Burgans obviously intended it as a warning because we weren't injured or greatly damaged, only thrown off course. I switched to the auxiliary propulsion of our ion gun while crew members Nima and Ezzlin went outside to make a few minor repairs. Burgan refused radio contact but I've waved the matter to Control, for all the good it will do. Ammon would be amused and think that I am learning lessons of war.

All the rest of the crew know of my condition. It's no longer possible to hide. Nima discovered it first. Her darting eyes miss nothing; they are almost as black as Ammon's, a startling contrast with her close-cropped, pale blond hair. She is young, as we all are, but no child, a sharp engineer and master of all trades, a swift problem solver, a *klujer*, as Roggi calls her. Nima fits neatly into all the crawl spaces when we need something fixed. She was the best pilot in our squad. We used to compete quite fiercely, and I was well-satisfied when I bested her in a difficult maneuver.

Ezzlin is the elder among us, although not very old, twenty-seven. We pay little attention to age differences, but Ezzlin is different in other ways. His brown hair is already showing a bit of silver, and his skin has an unusual waxy opaqueness. He is a taciturn introvert, but has a lovely, mellow voice when he decides to use it. I've wondered a number of times exactly why he was chosen. He is, however, a superb metallurgist, having carried the refinement of rare metals to a high science. He is also a person content to take orders, but he treats me with an overemphasized respect. I sense that he has definite and strong opinions buried deep within and by which he himself feels vaguely threatened.

Our botanist and keeper of the animal genes, Larstev, looks like a young gymnast. He is small-framed but quite powerful, blond, and altogether handsome. He has a very sunny disposition and is always grinning and whistling. When I saw the fascinating little hydroponic garden he had coaxed into existence, I told him he could obviously grow tomatoes on the nose of our ship. He was pleased.

We also have a trickster aboard, our wiry geophysicist, Pysu. His skin is a golden nut brown stretched over a lanky frame with a noble head of grizzled black hair. Sometimes his wit is as dry as the land he came from, the gem mining colony of Ginsa. When Pysu is not at spectroscopy or telescope looking for interesting terrain, he may well find time for an inventive prank or two. At one of our meetings, he reported to us that he had discovered a new element on his spectroscopy and for cycles thereafter lauded his discovery, gradually adding to it all the characteristics of our personal desires. Finally, at one meeting he went too far and I asked to see the spec report. "Ahm sorry," he said, dryly, "It was ice. Melted right off the scope."

He's very good for us when we get too serious. I still have not quite grasped that these remarkable humans are my permanent family.

#### Voice Script XX

I've been ill but I think only Roggi knows, and she is very loyal. I do my work just the same as ever and take medication and a liquid concoction of Lagro.

But something else has happened. I have been having very disturbing dreams. They seem to have something to do with our destination, but how could they, since we have no absolute destination? I'll try to pay close attention to the dreams and analyze more carefully. There is a voice in the dreams but never a face, only my face, and I'm staring at mountains made of red numbers. I don't know whether this is an equation or a metaphor. The dreams come with great intensity, and the oddest thing is that in the dream my face, my self tries urgently to stop the dreams by falling asleep and dreaming something else. The meaning must be so simple and yet it eludes me.

#### Voice Script XXI

The same dreams, the same black void, and on and on at non-reflective speed. We are pilgrims looking for stardust in which to sink our feet.

I have come to realize that what I call the voice in my dreams is something which directs me but which also seems to contradict the face represented by my own striving. Through deep self-hypnosis, I have managed to place a question in my dreams. I now believe I have been programmed to find some prize which Control desires, and if Control wants it this badly and secretively it can only have war as its final end. I am continually amazed at how Control can plan power ploys

that take millennia to complete, but I'm not at all amazed when I envision the future realm of peace and harmony of which I am to be the seed. I have been steadily pushing us into a dangerous region of dense plasma storms, and I have no logical reason for this, only a consuming urge superimposed on reason. Even if we couldn't detect mass, we would know we were in a magnetosphere when we hit these wild gases stripped of their electrons. I'm not at all interested in rediscovering charted planets...want to get out of here. Today I veered from an ion storm on our course and was shortly thereafter stricken with a guilt and depression so severe that I realigned the original quadrant. I did this mainly to see what the effect would be, and, as suspected, as soon as the correction was made, I slipped into a sense of well-being which was near ecstasy. The ride was very unpleasant for us. So, I am indeed the white rabbit you pulled out of your hat, Ammon. You were more right than you knew -- you will not get the rabbit back in, not with the tenderest greens or the sweetest hand-fed delicacies. You have taught me a good lesson. This is *my* quest, mine and my crew's. I *will* be free to shape it. I'm too disoriented still, with Qyoo anchoring me to medication, to exert my will. But soon little Qyoo will be a separate entity and then I will have a new strategy.

#### Voice Script XXII

It has been a long time since I spoke to you. I had all I could do at the end of each work period to record the cycles in the log.

Qyoo has made her appearance, attended by six devoted parents. Thanks to Roggi, the delivery was quite euphoric. Qyoo frightens me with her pale delicacy. She sleeps a great deal and smiles. I haven't enough milk for her, but

Roggi has concocted a nourishing formula. Pysu and Roggi have just threatened to tie me down if I get up and set foot on the flight deck. Nima is displaying her expertise there now with cool and decisive authority.

Ezzlin stuck his long face in and nodded toward me with an aloof silence, but he is even more carefully respectful now, folding his hands oddly when he speaks to me with a few reverent words. He treats me as if I were the anointed mother goddess of an ancient myth, and he a worshiping believer. This worries me more than a little.

Larstev brought me a small tomato from his airy cosmic garden. It's bright as the red giant stars we see in the distance and smells like our homeland...a summer garden.

"This little red sphere represents our destiny, a new strain I've named Quester 900, so hearty it would grow on our rocket rims. I'm going to sit here and watch you eat it, Captain Mother," he said with such excitement in his teasing eyes that I was affected by his enthusiasm in a very heartening way. I ate it like an apple, and this small ritual gave me a great new strength.

I think of the threat that lies over me. My orders, if they matter now, were to establish a daring new outpost, not by constructing a space platform but by taking advantage of whatever rarities we came across in free exploration. I intend to do this, but I will not be controlled like a robot.

#### Voice Script XXIII

I stand at the starboard observation deck, watching the beautiful gas clouds of orange and pink and green swirl away. I've veered from the plasma storms and now I expect they will rage in me. Ammon has dipped his fingers into my brain. I haven't told the crew. They assume all is going according to plan and I can't give them cause for worry.

Morale is the key to our existence now. I feel a malaise, an anxious dread creeping over me. I can't let it take possession of me. I must be free to go where I will.

#### Voice Script XXIV

I've been lying here for four cycles. At first Pysu saw me biting distractedly at my fingers, and he was about to make a joke when he caught the look in my eyes. It must have been bad.

"I've been having a little trouble with my balance," I lied, "probably some external influence. It will pass."

I quickly called Nima to take over on the new course I had set, realizing fully that I would soon be incapable of following through. Perhaps because explorers in the past had found hints of something rare near gas clouds and closer to home planet, I had been programmed to follow up on this speculation. I was so obviously going against the plan I had been programmed to follow that the punishment was great. I left the flight deck, and Pysu followed me out with a grave face. I didn't quite make it to my cabin. A terrible wave of dread came over me. My face must have gone very white. It was as though an incredibly powerful G-force were pushing me down and forcing all the blood out of me. The sorrow, remorse, and guilt were a wretched blackness.

"Worst luck," I mumbled as I reached for my door slide and felt my hand fall through space. Pysu caught me and carried me to my berth. "I'll get Roggi," he said.

"No, don't leave me. Don't let the others see this. Please do as I ask, Pysu. Hold onto me. It will pass."

Pysu seemed to understand at once what was needed. He held tight, stroking my back. "Best ordah Ah've had since this little paylahd embahked," he said, laughing gently. But neither of us could foresee what was to come.

Ammon knew me as he had said, knew my weaknesses well. How does one describe coming unhinged? It is at one moment a gibbering nervous frenzy punctuated by hysterical laughter and at the next moment a wailing descent into a deep pit of misery, like a dream from which there is no awakening when the bad part comes...no hope of awakening because you are already awake. You wish instead for total oblivion and yet you know you must not get it. You must fight. "I'll fight you the way I know best!" I cried out. I remember grabbing at Pysu's shoulders, convulsed in torment. I could hear his accented, lulling voice far away. "There my dahlin, there my dahlin," while the agony of guilt and fear consumed and dissolved me as though it were a slaking acid in my bones. Every image which came before me presented itself as a brutal accusation of depravity. How wrong, selfish, evil I was. I saw Lupe and Javan shaking their heads and holding up their hands to shut me out, they upon whose praise I had lived. I fell down like a child, took hold of their ankles and kissed their feet with ranting and tears. I wanted to be taken up as a helpless baby, a deprived innocent vying for attention and love. Lupe laughed her high sweet laugh and pushed my face into the water with her foot. Searing water was all around, licking at a hot beach, salty water, a sea of tears. I crawled out of the water and collapsed on the sand, finally pushed myself up, raised my fist and opened my mouth to scream at them, but could make no sound. Lupe and Javan faded, and I lay back panting, only to discover that Ammon was holding me down on a stony bed of cold wet moss. He was pinning me there with his weight, making violent love to me, his black eyes burning holes in my flesh. "Selfish, spoiled child," he snarled. "Give me what I want. Give! Give!" I held onto him fiercely like a limpet clinging to a rock. "Get yourself free!" he roared

at the height of my pain and ecstasy. "You are a thorn in me!" He thrust himself down on me and then flung me away off the slippery boulder and down into the freezing cataracts. Freezing, freezing needles in my head as I whirled round and round in the white pool of ice, gasping and screaming, "I will! I will!" I must have beat on Pysu. I must have torn at him and clung to him and slobbered and drooled and screamed. The door was sealed and no one but Pysu heard, until it was over. He lay holding me and then I slept, exhausted. That was four cycles ago, four homeland days, an eternity. I just called for Nima who came with her reassuring air of containment.

"Have you stayed the course I gave?"

"I have," she answered. Sweet music to my ears.

"Good," I said. "How is my smiling Qyoo?"

"She's like a little white primrose in winter," Roggi said, coming up behind Nima. "Are you back with us now?"

"I'm here to stay," I said.

"Goodby, Ammon," I whispered when the others had gone. "Goodby, my beloved Javan and Lupe."

A little later Pysu came back into my cabin. He sprawled his lanky frame over the inadequate seat beside my bed and stared at me, his warm olive eyes waiting and watchful. Then he began with that cunning, accented voice which I will emulate poorly.

"Ah've seen trippers on bahd trips come ta Ginsa, ahnd ah know how ta deal with 'em, but yeh were a real challenge. Yeh tried ta make lahve to meh. Ah was sorely tempted, but ah didn't think it wahd fit the situation."

I saw the twinkle in his eyes and blushed. "I'm sorry, Pysu."

"Nah, dahn't apologize, except for failing ta dah it. If yeh eveh get the urge while yeh head is straight, laht

meh knah."

We laughed, then I said very seriously, "You're going to mean so much to me, Pysu. You already do." This pleased him. He sat quietly watching me, and I knew that he wanted to talk about what had happened.

"Ammon tinkered with us all, but yeh were a special project, ah think...more thahn heh bahgained fahr besides. Heh lahved yeh thahn?"

"I can't speak for him. I feel that he did...but it just couldn't make any difference. You think he had a strange way of showing it, of course."

"Ahnd Qyoo?"

"Oh, Pysu, we must never speak of this again. Any of it, please."

"Ah won't. Ah sweah teh yeh."

"The sickness was something programmed to override my will. I don't quite understand it all yet myself. Maybe I won't ever know, but I do know what has to be done."

"Ah know thaht yeh dah. We'll mahk a good fahmily, Jurith."

"We will, a very good family."

#### Voice Script XXV

Four homeland years have passed. Poor little Qyoo still smiles in her blissful world of dreams. Larstev needed my unused voice scripts to record the amazing developments in his test garden. How could I refuse? There is, after all, an official log, and this spotty diary was really a self-indulgence.

This distant grain of metal we examine through our spectroscope might have held no more than a passing curiosity were it not for the analysis of our computer spectrograph. The entire little planet pulsates with a

coveted resource which sends warring colonies into frenzies of exploration and espionage. Pysu and Ezzlin are very excited, Larstev not so much so because it is not his longed for paradise of unnamed flora. Roggi and Nima are willing to take a look, chart it, and send out reports, but not to remain. They too dream of more interesting places for their highly tuned minds to plunder. They'll change. There will be no charting or reports. I immediately saw an incredible wealth of possibilities here for something I intend. I've been thinking quietly for two cycles. We wanted to find a place hospitable to growth and life and self-preservation, but what if we take this versatile raw substance and fashion it with our hands and brains into what we desire? One journey is ended. Another must begin. It's always the journey which gives one life.

#### Voice Script XXVI

Just enough space left to say we've landed, and I've made certain that we won't leave for a very long time. I could never adequately describe the shivering excitement in my bones. I feel young and strong and my mind is all my own. We're free. There is nothing but today and tomorrow. It's dawn. The horizon is a fiery pink and the mountains are burning with light. I'll begin sending out a continuous message to long-range transports, although none have any reason to be near. But the seceded colonies do send out colonizers and stores. We can deal with them. We're not a seceded colony but we're free, autonomous, and no threat to anyone. There will be no explorations out here for a long time. Our food cannot yet be easily replenished but Larstev will begin at once to change this. I know that I've done the right thing. I will record no more. Let our work from this time forward speak for itself.

III

Reflections of a Restless Meat-eater

I journeyed far beyond myself  
to solve a mystery,  
And there I found the enigma  
was deep inside of me.

.....Old Historep

I'm still writing. I've taken Jurith into my system,  
and I have to keep the voice going.

When I finally got back home to Control's crammed  
archives building, H-30, I had a few more unrelated stories  
to file -- little sketches of human drift -- but I was  
reluctant to let go of Jurith's voice scripts, even though  
she willingly gave them to me as part of my Laom story. For  
several days I hung onto them possessively as a private link  
with Laom. I had not really returned from Laom at all. I  
lay about mooning and drinking too much, thinking of our  
final days.

The eager young voice on the very first script, filled  
with fiery drive and such a wild passion for everything, was  
the same voice I knew. Just as I knew the pure sparkling  
eyes that make a questioning young girl so irresistible were  
still the eyes of Jurith. That was why she could inspire  
her colleagues -- while she grew wise, she never lost the  
childish anticipation of things to come. It was part of the  
reason she stayed flexible and young and humorous while her

feverish brain burned up infinite bits of complex data. I understood in a flash what had happened to Ammon. That bastard must have felt her loss deeply, for who had ever matched him in daring and cunning? I pined in my cups like a lovesick calf, but there was much more to it than that.

I was staying at a new friend's digs, a little shuttle pilot who had dreams of far-flung places and wanted to live vicariously off Mirabul's tall tales -- all true, of course. I only lie when I'm toning them down. The places I've been and the things I've seen make me more than a nuisance to plenty of people.

It was nice reveling in my melancholia and trying to line things up in my head while the kid stroked my ego. She was on furlough. Every evening she cooked things for me -- meat for a change. I tried to help but she wouldn't have it, said I was a klutz. She stood there barbecuing in the summer light. I liked to watch her move in her thin white jodhz slacks and yellow skin-shirt, happily singing and turning chunks of wine-soaked lamb with big tongs held skillfully in her strong little hands -- the same hands that could stand the shuttle on its nose homeward bound or tuck you neatly into a big hovering transport when the computers went on strike.

The blue smoke shot up from the grill and drifted off over the broad, sun-drenched banana leaves flapping their tatters over a dense, bird-noisy park below. I sat in a soothe chair just watching the kid, a little bleary-eyed, a half-filled glass clutched in my mitt. She never let me see the bottom of my glass until I held up my hand for the cut-off. I didn't want to pass out on her; she didn't deserve that. She was a nice little orphan. She had long dark hair and reminded me a little of Roggi, but she had small bones and smelled of tropical flowers and Roggi was a big beauty,

smelling faintly medicinal, a fresh comforting smell to which I became rather attached.

The kid liked to snuggle up to me late at night. Her skin was satin-smooth and warm. I held onto her and loved her as best I could. She was good at it and seemed to be satisfied with me. In between, I did a lot of wandering outside and into dark boozy holes which for some reason have always generated my best ideas, a lot of hard dreaming and thinking and boozy drifting. No, I hadn't come home yet at all. Well, home was in the soles of my feet, anyway. I only returned to some harder and harder to find spot on this Hustler planet to recover from getting my nose bent in too many different directions. While I was on Laom I had drunk only a little wine. When I was in the middle of something good out there, work was my whiskey. I used to shoot over to a pleasure colony and tie one on after a long haul. Now I simply let myself get taken in like a stray dog. You can always find a lonely soul; they're in the majority. They need you and you need them. I'm a heavy load sometimes, but I can tame down enough not to scare a nice little shuttle pilot. The kid told me when I came home with her that it was my sophistication that turned her on. I picked her up, held her on my lap and roared with laughter.

So I dreamed of Laom. What did Jurith do after I finished with the Voice Scripts? At first, I didn't see her. She was busy directing the salvage of slaughtered androids. She even found time to make Ezzlin another comely playmate. It seemed to me Ezzlin's stunted soul was shriveling like a fig in the noon sun, but he would have crawled across the crude of Laom on his hands and knees for Jurith, and that deserved some kind of consideration.

Finally, Jurith came to my room, politely sending Boaz in to announce her arrival. I jumped off my pillows and

nearly threw myself at her feet. That was the state of excitement in which the voice scripts had left me. She wasn't having any of that and sat down casually on a tapestried pillow, staring a moment at the forest scenes on the octagonal ceiling. Her dark blue robe had a slit revealing her smooth calf, and she had kicked off her shoes, but in a most unapproachable way. Jurith had a presence that let you in or out as she directed. Something about the room was on her mind, and I intended to start slowly along that vein.

"Why did you make this room?" I asked.

"Very complex reasons for me, for you probably not very interesting."

"That means you're passing over something highly interesting to me but probably none of my business."

"Probably you're right." She folded and unfolded her hands. "I once thought I might like to be interred here."

"What?" I gasped.

"Oh, I've changed my mind." She laughed. "As I told you, when I die I'll be sealed inside my crystal sleeping room. But I hope I straighten things out here first."

"Are you going to ask me to talk to Harquint?"

"Do you have any questions about the voice scripts?" she asked.

"I don't think I can talk about them without being slavishly worshipful."

"Oh, well...you're teasing me, Mirabul."

"No, I'm amazed that you would share them with me. All of a sudden I know you so well. I've sort of grown up with you in milliseconds."

"Yes...and wasn't I naïve?"

"You were incredible...and are."

"You don't know all that has gone on in between."

"I get massive hints from your colleagues."

"We've all worked so hard, but we've also laughed and loved along the way. It's gone too quickly."

But you sleep alone, I wanted to say. You exquisite sacrificial lamb. That's what he did to you, black-hearted Ammon.

"Mirabul, you have such pity in your eyes. It's very unflattering. Don't think I've suffered. It would be so far from the truth."

"You have!"

"No, only a very little...as much as anyone. My world is so unreal that it's paradise. Each person makes his own. Black suns! I get indignant with the implication that I'm a martyr or approaching goodness. I have the same stormy temperament as ever. Now I'm busier. I will fight to have my way when I think I'm right. I can be devious. I--"

"Never mind, Jurith." She still had the habit of explaining herself away as she had done so long ago with Ammon. "You're wasting your time here trying to diminish yourself."

"Mirabul, you fool. I'm so fond of you." She laughed.

"Then will you let me talk to Harquint?"

"Will Harquint let you is a better question."

"I'll agree to any terms he wants for the meeting."

"It could be dangerous."

"What would rubbing out the insignificant carcass of a travel-weary old historep get him?" I asked.

"You're not insignificant. You mean a great deal to us all."

"He doesn't know that. But he'll know I'm powerless and that's all that matters."

"All right. You've probably guessed that we've already talked it over anyway. I'll send one of my simpler androids

with terms, in case the poor machine gets incinerated."

"What was the other thing you wanted of me, Jurith?"

"I want you to have the voice scripts and later file them back at H-30. Perhaps someone might be interested, my future relatives. And perhaps there will be more history some day for another one such as you, Mirabul. Although, I know there is not another of you anywhere."

"I kind of hope there will be, poor fool that he be," I said.

I was to meet Harquint on the crudest of the crude, halfway between the Blueboy and Redhead mines, in an open desert in broad daylight with his monstrous ship hovering above us invisible to the naked eye, and no other living thing or android within even the distant vicinity. I agreed, making no attempt at hiding my point of origin.

Jurith herself suited up with me and flew me out.

The ground was sharp and jagged, even in that flat terrain. I was hard-pressed to see this stuff greening up, as was Larstev's dream. My abbreviated shadow was sharp and black in the white hot light, and without my gold-coated visor the flash from Jurith's helmet would have blinded me. She gripped my arm then raised her gloved fingers in a V and touched them to my mouthpiece.

"Good luck, our Mirabul," her voice echoed inside my helmet as she marched off, climbed into the little yellow bird and vaulted off the crude just as zero hour was approaching.

I stood there as alone as I had ever felt, without even a shadow for company. But my feet were shaded. I looked down at them, planted in red dust on a striated rock with jagged outcroppings. The far horizon encircling me was crystal clear and I could see the tips of saw-toothed mountains gnawing at a green sky.

My suit provided radio contact with Jurith back at the dome but I was not to use this, except in an extreme emergency, until Harquint left me. There was such a silence all around me that the blood pulsing through my body began to sound like a big payload shuttle blasting off with quadrupled lift. My eyes started to burn with sweat, and I asked the terminal for air-conditioning which it quickly supplied.

I felt a jar of sound and imagined whirling metal biting into metal, which in another milieu would probably have deafened me. I looked up. A steel-gray shuttle came crabbing down, yawing and pitching for an instant then slamming into the crude on big dancing shocks. A figure in a blue-black suit jumped out, the gold on his visor flashing back at me, and there I presumed stood Harquint.

He strode forward as though he were sparring his way through a hostile crowd and raised his gloved hand in front of him, palm out, touching it to the thickly gloved palm of my outstretched hand, as was the universal signal for non-belligerents.

"Peace," I said and heard the word hiss inside my helmet while Harquint threw back his head.

"Or war." His laughter bounced inside my helmet. "Why is the Laomite hoarder afraid to show her face to Harquint?" The helmet microphone distilled his hard voice.

"I don't think there's anything about you that frightens Jurith," I said. "It's just that she's highly prized by her colleagues...who certainly can't entrust her to someone engaged in useless androicide."

"I tried to deal fairly with the doctor at the beginning. Control gets her not very generous consignments. Does she monitor their use the way she would insist on monitoring mine?"

"It's only a small tax she pays Control for supplies and support...although they haven't given much of that."

"For the right to exist, I think, and she has only started paying it since I arrived -- you are right -- hoping to insure protection from me," Harquint said, stepping closer and tilting his head to study me.

"There was not much for either of us to see, swathed in our life support suits, except our heights. I was a little taller than Harquint, but I am quite tall, and I had a notion that he was a muscular animal in good shape. By now I had decided that he was capable of reasoning and I wanted to get to the point.

"Do you intend to go on with this low grade war? And to what possible end?"

"I could blow the dome, all of her colleagues, and that shiny new dome right off Laom and put my own men in here, but we'd have to start from scratch, or crude as they say. You think that's a better plan?"

"What makes you think Control would stand for that?"

"I think I've got more hardware out here than Control does for the time being, and that time being is all I need. That's why I'm through with my low grade war, historep."

"Control would go for you first. You'll get the brunt, whatever backup you have."

"So be it. I'm prepared."

"You're bluffing. You don't want to wipe out that heroic little band of Laom dwellers. They're too famous. And they're brilliant frontier types, too valuable. You would need them to run this place and make a profit. Isn't that all you're really interested in? Which do you want, profit or war?"

"They go hand in hand and both are challenging. You rarely see one without the other, as you well know if you're

worth your salt. Tell me, historep, how did you get involved here?"

"I met Jurith."

"And how did you get to be the doctor's champion?"

"I just like to see justice."

"Oh, ho! Justice! Justice!" Harquint roared. "Your kind are notoriously indifferent to it, I think."

"It's in the nature of our work, true, and we get that way because we meet so many like you, Harquint. But when we come across something or someone authentically good and valuable, that something or someone stands out like a supernova. Even you could recognize such a person. I defy you to climb out of your suit under Laom's new sky and meet Jurith face to face."

"I've offered to meet her in my ship. She's stubborn, afraid to come."

"She's not afraid. They won't let her. She's irreplaceable. There are plenty of Harquints but there is no other Jurith."

"Careful, historep. I begin to think you're under the spell of the queen of androids."

"I don't deny it, but it has no bearing on anything. And I begin to think you're a coward. Jurith doesn't kill. She's committed to life, so much so that she would sacrifice her own to extend life for others. I suppose you can't understand that. When Jurith first settled here she secretly starved herself and gave her food to the others."

"She was foolish to weaken herself. A leader must always be strong."

"Jurith is the strongest person I've ever met. Even as a young woman en route here she commanded her ship in great sickness and bore a child."

I stopped at once. Jurith wouldn't like what I'd said.

I cursed myself that I'd gotten carried away and said too much. But I wanted to believe her history would have an effect on Harquint, impress him enough to deal. I was sure that Jurith could bend him in a confrontation, even as he continued to imagine that she was weak and pliant in her hatred of war, as the ruthless often imagine the virtuous to be. He was silent a long time, staring off at the horizon, thinking. Make up your mind to meet Jurith under that dome, you bastard, I shouted inside my head, trying to will him to decide. But just then he turned his faceless helmet toward me with a flash of gold light.

"When you're gone, prying historep, I'll come," he said. "Tell her that."

He said nothing more, only walked away to his ship, but as he reached for the door he suddenly turned and waved, and I quickly waved back; it was an instant reflex which made me grin inside my helmet. Then the shiny gray ship vibrated off the ground and I stood alone, wondering if I had done anything right, anything to the good of Laom.

Nima and Pysu picked me up. Jurith and Roggi were with Qyoo who was having one of her tantrums which needed to be controlled with chemicals.

"He'll meet Jurith under the dome," I said. "After I'm gone," I added. "I suppose he doesn't want me carrying home any news of his dealings."

Pysu pressurized the little cabin, unsealed his helmet and yanked it off. "I wahnda what this portends," he said with his peculiarly delightful speech, then he ran his fingers through his grizzly black hair and rubbed his hand over his face in worry.

Nima and I had our helmets off in a flash, and I felt sure I had jettisoned a headache.

"I think he's only part bluff," I said. "He could do a

lot of damage. He's hard to read, and he's no fool, not like old Mirabul."

"You know Jurith calls you fool, as a term of endearment, don't you?" Nima said, blinking her bright jet eyes at me.

"I know." I laughed.

"Fools of long ago were considered wise," she went on with a wink.

"I can't claim to be that," I said.

"Yeh mahya dahn us a heapa good, Mirabul. Ah just dahn knah. We'll hahta wait and see." There was admiration in Pysu's voice which pleased me no end.

My acceptance by these rare Laom dwellers filled me with gratitude. They were all I cared for on Laom, and most other places, and I could only repay their kindness by leaving in a hurry. At last I'd found a home and it wasn't a place but a little band of very special people I had to leave behind, a bittersweet discovery.

I didn't see Jurith that night, which was a rest night, but Roggi came to me.

"Your welcome face, usually so comely, is all twisted up in a troubling frown, Roggi," I said.

She curled up on my bed of pillows and began to rub my back, always doing something generous with her long dexterous fingers.

"Oh, I know, but you should see poor Jurith. She tries to hide it but she is so distraught when her little white flower has one of her seizures."

"Can't something be done with the girl?"

"Yes, yes, yes! But Jurith has always believed that Qyoo was better off in her sometimes brilliant and half functional world of love. Isn't that ironic, a woman of science holding onto such a notion? There's more to it.

Who knows what lies inside our Jurith's head? I know she feels terrible guilt because she carried this young woman's fetus through cosmic storms on our journey so long ago."

"Haven't the fits changed her mind?"

"Yes, they're more frequent now and Jurith is coming around. I think she'll let me do it."

"Do what?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm thinking out loud. Well, where to begin? You know that Jurith's androids are, for all practical purposes, humanoid."

"No, I don't know that at all."

"You haven't seen the ones who go to The Colonies. The ones around here are simple in comparison. Jurith believes it would be too demeaning to her androids to have servants with high mentation."

"Demeaning is a very human word for android etiquette, Roggi."

"But accurate. With all your admiration for Jurith, even you underrate her genius. Her androids have human qualities. If you don't believe me, let me tell you in strictest confidence that the one she just gave to Ezzlin has fallen in love with him."

"Poor creature. When you tell me the love has been consummated, I'll begin to doubt everything, Roggi."

"Why is that so preposterous? Our androids now build humanoids, and their work is flawless."

"I guess I'm a fool after all."

"A delicious old fool." Roggi laughed. "You know you're quite appealing. Too often you demean yourself."

"You've been on Laom too long, Roggi."

"I know what assorted men look and act like, Mirabul. I have male friends, generous fellows whom I meet occasionally on the transports...other scientists. Ideas

aren't all we exchange. We're kind to each other when we cross paths on this wild frontier."

"I'd rather not think of that. You're one of my fantasies, Roggi. But we're straying. What has all this to do with Qyoo?"

"Anatomically, she is superb, and actually she has mental flights of really genius proportion. She is simply unstable. Her chemistry is skewed. I can treat her chemically, but I also want to insert a minute analog computer in Qyoo's brain, the kind we use in our brightest androids but specially designed for her. I've tested it very carefully, a sharp multi-functional, high-performance device I've modified for organic chemical control."

"No wonder Jurith is upset."

"But why? She helped create it. It's a beautifully engineered biocomputer, does amazing things. I've heard similar operations are done in our homeland."

"Doesn't the work often produce sluggish drones?"

"No! Now you underestimate *me*. This is what I do best. Few would be able to detect the transition. She'll still have much of her sweet temperament, but those unpredictable tantrums will be gone. In effect, she'll be mad and glad like the rest of us, only with greater extremes. The analog will also maintain swift and sustained reasoning power, which is already well supplied in Qyoo."

"Superwoman incarnate. How does Jurith accept it?"

"That's not what bothers her. In all her success with our extraordinary androids, she knows how exquisitely functional they are, but she still can't stand the idea of something foreign in her darling's head. I think it may have something to do with the father, and also she's afraid that such power might lead Qyoo into a dangerous future."

"What a remarkable triumph. You make me very reluctant

to leave this wonderland, Roggi. Is there a risk in this?"

"Minuscule. You see how vain I am. My hands ache to do it."

"I believe your hands and your heart and your brain altogether can do incredible things," I said. "I'm living proof of a little something of your handiwork."

We stretched out together and held hands with a completely natural rapport, staring at the peaceful forest scenes on the ceiling and then at each other.

"Look at us, our length. I'm a big hulk, but we fit together nicely." I leaned over on my elbow to capture her smoldering jade eyes. "I'd like to try you on for size."

She quickly displayed two rows of sparkling white teeth and a flashing tongue. "Nothing would please me more," she said in a low sultry voice.

The next thing I knew my arms were full of that voluptuous, steamy creature, that dormant volcano erupting over my heart. How I wished that Laom nights were longer and that we had begun all of those tender and wild actions and reactions much sooner.

"It's possible that I'm a little jealous of Roggi," Jurith said the next afternoon. But she was smiling almost joyfully, relieved that she would take on Harquint at last and that she had finally put Qyoo in Roggi's capable hands. Qyoo's last terrible spell had finally driven her to this conclusion. "When I make a decision that's it," she said. "Whatever happens, I'll blame no one...regret nothing."

Why do you love so deeply and let no one touch you, I wanted to ask, but I couldn't. Despite all of her generous warmth, Jurith had a private side locked away and quite unapproachable. I knew that the key had once belonged to Ammon. I was determined to dig into the history of that strange Mephistopheles when I returned to Control's ample

headquarters. By then he would be long gone, but I had my methods of excavation and time was actually on my side.

"I wish I could stay and fight on for all of you, but unless I go nothing will happen," I said.

"You've already done a very good thing for us, my dearest old fool," Jurith said.

They were lined up with the children when I got into the shuttle for the last time. It had not surprised me that the children did the assignments their parents required of them in the laboratories as easily as they played, but now as I looked them over one last time, I tried to imagine what the future of Laom would be with such a brain trust. There stood my small home of friends, my large world of humanity. Even Ezzlin was sporting a tight little smile, as if to say, "You've done something for Jurith, you over-inquisitive bastard." Everyone else came forward and embraced me. Roggi was crying and Nima blowing me kisses. Pysu was grinning his pleasingly crooked but honest grin and Larstev had raised his arms over his head in a sign of victory. Then Jurith came to me one last time.

"You'll dream of us, Mirabul, and you'll see that everything is as it should be. When you return to where I started, you'll learn the answers to my questions and whisper them to me, shout them to me in that big, golden park beside the Quad; it will still be there. "You're here," she said, touching her hand to her heart, "and you were good for us. Now blast off, my secret sharer. Tell them they'll hear from me," she said, smiling mysteriously, "because I've dreamed it."

She kissed me, smiling too broadly, and I saw for the first time her beautiful crystal eyes breaking into splinters of sorrow. I stood there, callous old travel-weary message carrier with my head hanging down, and cried

hard. While I was doing this, Jurith reached into her pocket and handed me something, whispering into my ear.

"One last story on video, an answer to a question you had, for your eyes and ears alone. Wait until you've finished with all the rest, until you feel the time is right to let me speak to you one last time. I don't know why I did this. It may change your opinion of me, but I had an intuition that it was important for you to know the truth."

I blew my nose and when I looked up Jurith was gone.

So maybe it was all a dream, the fool thought as he drank his way slowly but with incredible speed toward the place which somehow in the black holes of space he still thought of as home. Current travel speed had taken another quantum leap on the way home. If progress continues, I may find myself chasing my tail.

So then I hung out until my little shuttle pilot's furlough ended. As soon as she went on duty, I played Jurith's voice scripts one more time, all but the video which I was determined to save for some future epiphany. I knew when the heat was on, when the dog star barked as they say, I'd probably look at that one too, but so far I was trying to be a good old working boy with some self-control. I broke down in the middle of the voice scripts, put away one neat dram of mind duller, finished listening and left. There was no one left in Control to implicate, so the scripts went into H-30, but with a top security seal and an honest but slightly abbreviated version of the Laom story for public consumption, minus a character sketch of the historep or his intervention. That stays in my little white notebook and I haven't yet decided what will become of it.

The next phase is the point where I set about my business with a seriously devious strategy, the getting ahold of certain tools of my trade, only I wasn't collecting

history for H-30 anymore. I wasn't quite sure why I was doing it but I couldn't stop.

First, I went down to the transport station, fed my code into a space-time locker and took out a briefcase where I keep a few things. I packed this off to a juice bar--any deep, dark hole will do; no one knows who I am but I always look damned suspicious, since I never fit in with the current freak show. These seedy old places are fast vanishing but there will always be a few. I ordered a drink and carried it with me to the back of the place. Then I sorted through the case and came up with the small but weighty official seal marker of Control. I took out a nice little photo spool, which would affix the miniature seal mark to itself on contact, and put everything back except the seal-marked spool which went into my skin shirt slot. This official seal never changes and has come in handy a number of times. I borrowed it from a dead Control spy courier when I was out collecting information on that rotten business between the Kursand and the Karakians.

Next, I went back to H-30 and slapped the appropriate request on my spool by talking to one of H-30's loan machines. I then sorted through computer archives until I found the heavy black signature of Dr. Q. Ammon, which I carefully, and expertly I might add, photo-produced on the bottom of the spool. Finally, I microrecorded the whole construction. The Control seal is invisible and only shows up under government photobytes. In this way I became the official biographer of Q. Ammon. It didn't matter how long I had been gone, the longer the better. I should then be permitted to peruse everything but a few highly technical classified documents--and I knew how to get those too, if necessary--pertaining to Ammon's life on the Hustler planet.

I went around to the finance terminal, pushed six

digits and thus requisitioned a few of the trading credits H-30 owed me. Then I went to a barber -- all I could find was a fuzz-head android of the most inferior model -- Jurith would have had hysterics -- and I nearly trimmed his sprockets for what he tried to do to my head. I left him staring at his nose with both eyes, but I got the job done. Finally, I bought myself a smart dark green tunic and sallied forth to Control's uppermost tower with my invaluable spool and my pocket video recorder.

Control keeps its own archives on its leaders. They are sacrosanct, so that any leader is at liberty to say what he wants for any reason whatever. And this was precisely the place I wanted to crack. Getting past the android stations is easy. There is a set routine and to save time I always skip the first six or seven of them. Higher androids are often more interesting than humans in this line of work, as they have been programmed with distinct and cheerful personalities. They actually give the illusion of helpfulness. As you go further up the pole they get more sophisticated, until finally you're dealing with the most treacherous and devious machines of all: humans. Then it becomes a game. Who is, pardon the pun, in control? Who has more authority? Who is more artfully intimidating? At such times I am always in control, to continue the pun, always have more authority and am always officiously intimidating. I've been doing this so long and bureaucrats never change, the same desk, a new head with the same old parts. The last sentence at the last barricade is, "I'll have to check with \_\_\_\_\_ about this." To which I reply: "Do you mean you've taken this much of my time and you don't even have the authority to recognize my official position as verified by this spool which you've just viewed? Black suns! Where is \_\_\_\_\_?" and here I supply the first name of

a person at the top who is never in. It often gets me by. It did once again.

This time I was not as interested in government information as I was the personal aspect, but since Ammon was apparently so married to his work I expected the personal to include Control, even though Ammon by nature and occupation might be prone to secrecy.

When a high official like the head of Control dies, a quick transition takes place and personal files, always interspersed with light years of trivia, are often overlooked or ignored. Unless the biographer is a real ferret, the stuff is skimmed over. Some officials actually favor the mystique of handwritten memoirs but most are voice scripts of endless prattle which someone once thought interesting, and interminable computer documents. I was hoping that Ammon's files had been overlooked and stacked, but after all my careful sleuthing I found nothing. This left me with more questions: In his relationship with Control did Ammon not think of himself at all? Or had his term, his work been somehow stopped? It was as if he had never existed. Now I was nervous as a hound off the scent. I decided to back away and instead take a look at Jurith's relatives. This kind of loosening up and diversion often lets a new idea float to the surface.

By a curious stroke of luck, I soon took up Ammon's trail again. In researching Jurith's relatives, I found that Ammon had bought the family home which Jurith had given to her Uncle Fleen. He had bought it even before Jurith left. This surprised me. I went out to the property. The house was gone, and there was now a thick pod of buildings at the edge of the sound. I discovered the place was called Ammon Shores, but no one knew why. Typical. Eventually, I learned that the large imposing structure in the center of

the pod had once been a retreat for Control officials. I went inside and wandered around, my footsteps echoing on the barren granite floors. In the main hall were walls that angled up and curved into a high elliptical dome. Spiraling around the walls was a rising walkway along which were hung photographs of dignitaries going back in time the higher I climbed. I rushed up the stairs with pumping breath and quick side glances. Near the top I found him. A large triangular photograph, obviously very official. "Q. Ammon," it said. It captured something impatient and disturbed in Ammon, as though he didn't like being frozen in time and hung there. He was wearing the old-style, high-collared black tunic. I couldn't stop looking. This was the man who had known Jurith as no one else had, had even, as Jurith said, dipped his fingers into her brain. As I pondered on, I found that I was actually envying a man who was gone. I stared at his hands, strong, lethal fingers with unblemished skin. Damn him! He had touched her intimately, held her, whispered to her in the darkness and fathered her beautiful and flawed offspring. I stood there sweating and confused. Mirabul's intruding nose was bent out of shape. I felt frustrated. I could tell very little. The intense black eyes might be angry or scheming or pained or all of those, or devoid of feeling entirely. His smooth lips did not pretend to smile but there was the beginning of a smirk, a cynic's smirk, I decided. After awhile I began to think that he was smirking at me. I left.

As I was coming down, I happened to glance between the open risers at the bottom and saw a little marble alcove off to my right. I could just make out one of the tall glassed-over shelves recessed in the wall. I hurried inside. The shelves were indirectly lit and went floor to ceiling all the way around the room. Inside, were personal objects with

the names of their original owners on small tags. My heart set off at a gallop and my ears were ringing. I walked around the room, quickly passing over gilded books which looked as though they would fall to dust at a touch, eating utensils, toiletry items, and weapons. When I finally reached the engrailed gold box my hands shook. It had no tag, but delicately inscribed on the lid were the initials Q.A. The lid and base seemed forever melded together with time, silent and solid, but so promising. I hunched over before the glass like a wild animal mad with hunger. There was no one around. I had not seen another soul the entire time I was in the building. It would be easy enough to take off my tunic, wrap it around my fist, smash the glass, grab the box up against my chest and run. I moved closer to the glass and pressed my hand flat on it. A voice came out of nowhere. "You are interested in something?" I looked up and my eyes traveled around the room. Above the alcove's entrance was a tiny, barely visible dark circle, an eye monitor.

"Idiot, Mirabul!" I whispered fiercely. I emitted a nervous laugh. "I am this man's biographer," I said to the empty room. "I would like to examine the box in here."

In a little while an android guard trotted in. He dropped the spool into a viewer, studied my seal, then took out the box. It was as simple as that. Except that the box was heavy and locked and there was no code for opening it. It would have to be carefully lasered. This could be done, the android assured me, but I would have to come back.

"I'll be here first thing in the morning," I said, hardly able to stand the thought of leaving the box now that I had found it.

"No, please, in the afternoon," the guard corrected me. What if something went wrong? What if they wouldn't

let me in? I swayed angrily on my big tired feet, wanting to squeeze the android innards out of that hefty can of rigmarole with its blinking pupil screens. Then I went back to the kid's apartment, threw a jigger of protein into a glass of mind-fogger and sprawled on a soothe chair to stare at waving banana leaves until my eyes turned to stone.

There was no hitch. The box was open on a table in a private study prepared for me when I arrived the next afternoon. Inside was a thick leather journal filled with large black script. I almost kissed the android as he left the room. I intended to film each page, but when I actually had the journal in my hand I thought that I was going to piss. Never had my emotions swarmed over an assignment with such force. But it wasn't an assignment, I reminded myself. It was, in some intricate, unexplainable way, me looking for myself. My mouth was dry. I took only one swallow from the juice flask in my pocket and leaned over my task as gingerly as if I had fallen into a cactus bed.

#### IV

##### Janus Faces the Perfect Future Past

Sophist!  
Out of the bone cave,  
Out of the trick box,  
Dark warrior unthroned with laurels.  
Sophisticate,  
Jack of all envy,  
Howling in silent  
Self-deliverance, without a trace.  
Only in one mind's eye,  
Only in one way,  
He is as he was, as he will be,

Absolute.

I

If anyone gets his hands on this journal he can be assured that its existence is the result of something unexpected. I have no intention of letting it survive beyond this need to split in half and scribble to myself. I'm not so in love with Ammon that he is for posterity, yet he suits me. He will not write fatuous lies to himself in the traditional manner. The old scholar, Crochi, the one I called father, taught me well. He taught hard, but he taught me to speak honestly to myself...and to laugh at myself -- the essential keys to life -- then listening to others and understanding the entire range of their unspoken messages becomes easier. I have the ability to hear thought without its voice. That is another matter. I remind myself that as a child I assumed everyone could do this, and thought little of it; thus, I was not made careless by overweaning confidence, and the restrained use of this ability has served me well.

To the few who recognize me, I am hardly more than a title. I don't give much credence to titles or labels, doctor, social psychiatrist, politician, lover, or any other. Social psychiatrist, an amusing label. Such a person is supposed to observe and assist individuals for the good of society. This may well run counter to knowing one's self and being taught to think. Should people be taught to think? It's a dangerous business and really, for the majority, there isn't much need for it.

Control once praised social experimentation, but the spirit is burning out. High Council suggests that I be sold

as the new hope. Periodically, there must be such an animal, "The New Hope," currently the ghost in Control's machine. People are prone to deal in trends. New clothing, new food, new technology, anything but new ideas. They are much harder to come by. It requires unassisted thinking which, again, few know how to do. The entire apparatus of Control is like a charming and comely celebrity with a disreputable private life, all flash for the populace but dirty business as usual. Business has deteriorated to a game of cat and mouse, some mice to be eaten, some to be played with and bled, some allowed to escape for a later meal, but all carefully watched. Now a diseased strain of mice has overbred. They are never eaten, only feared and catered to. If you look beneath the surface illusion of good times, you see mostly a profiteering horde of narcissistic selves, their jowls and buttocks carved on by cosmetic surgeons. When I prowl alone I hunt out the little pockets of rational minds, fragile and very lean, existing in shadows. Those who sell mediocrity encourage the buyers to trample these original enclaves, but it is these rare souls under attack who sustain ungrateful leaders. Eventually the beautiful diversity of these few is bound to disappear. Then we may as well lift the ban and allow unrestricted cloning.

## II

I'm not dating this journal. Dates mean nothing to Ammon who despises marked time. I put numbers down to indicate the beginning of each entry which takes place whenever I get to it. I've begun to look forward to these black squiggles of self. Careful, Ammon, words can trick you; they pile up and become a barrier to the truth. They annihilate action. But I want to strip things down, to clarify. The more I try to simplify my life the more



white flesh running with the blood of wounds and of my arrival. If I fantasize at all it is certainly about this fabled past. I have no real idea of it. It is good to write this, the only therapy Ammon will have. Heal thyself!

Of what am I wrought? When my dreams or thought regressions carry me back to infancy, there is the feeling of constant bombardment, thunder in the bay of the great old transport that was my unsettling home, a hard rolling and pitching and fire, the preparations made again and again to die -- I didn't learn an easy way but by the time I was six I had died many times. I thought endlessly of revenge and retaliation. In the last attack when old Crochi died of heart failure, I thought of nothing but killing with my bare hands, of getting my fingers into the face of the enemy, of ripping off his mask and tearing him methodically apart, of making him pay with great pain and eternal suffering. I tried vainly to personalize that dark beast of an enemy. I was paranoid and eagerly violent, but, in that situation, it was normal -- normal, a fluid, quicksilver condition. Had I ever found a representative of the enemy and been strong enough to repay him, that sole action would have been only a metaphor for the destruction of a giant unreachable evil.

My teachers who returned here to die were the revered minds of an earlier age, and I was revered along with them for my precocity. I was for a time a public oddity and thereby a kind of celebrity. In this way I came into favor with politicians, though I quickly divested myself of a public image. Thus I remind myself how I came to arrive at this strange back door of power.

I am actually already making Control's decisions. R\_\_\_\_ is finally old, despite his life-extender doses. He depends increasingly on Ammon for advice. The Club has asked me to move upstairs. R\_\_\_\_ would welcome it. He

wants to let go and roll with his boys now, and why shouldn't he? But do I want The Seat? Not just yet. Not until I must.

So Ammon takes care of large numbers of bloated mice. He invents Reducers and sends them out to foster causes the way entrepreneurs create markets. They break contagious hordes into small splinter groups, immunizing the masses. These groups overlap until no one can trample anyone without stepping on his own feet. It isn't insurgency when the government is doing it, and it works. Slowly and with cautious design the demands are met. Then there appear new reasons for new causes and on and on the process must go, always dividing the masses into impotence.

Am I an autocrat? Yes, I suppose I am. Anyone in this position must be because there are pretenders and corruptors in every direction who care nothing for debate. But at present I'm an unseen autocrat with overview, a remarkably versatile condition which cannot last. For a little while I have all the power without exposure. The indispensable ghost in the machine, pushing the levers.

### III

Control has a dilemma in New Frontiers which has captured my attention -- a good problem for Ammon to solve as long as I don't over-extend myself and let other demands slide. A lively challenge, which also ranks as a top priority.

A long time ago the Resource Bureau sent out a robot explorer, a small fast E-T80, looking for rare metals. It recently reported sighting a gigantic hunk of an element extremely valuable and was about to wave the position when the signal vanished in a cosmic storm. Control needs this resource badly. It means a quantum leap for long-distance

transports and white-speed battleships -- new factory platforms for speed, and speed is dominion. They've decided on a manned search mission for reasons of expediency in future development and for a permanent outpost. However, they can't reveal its uncertain destiny to the crew for fear the fractious colonies planning secession will interfere and get into the race. This find would seal Control's position of dominance in warfare. It would also unite the populace in the ostensible cause of exploration and colonization.

With the help of my review, New Frontiers has already chosen a unique group of young scientists as crew. Since they will be required to stay as close as possible to coordinates not precisely known and since we can't pre-set the course because of the possibility of artificial detection and intervention, I've suggested a reverse programming technique which will require a reasonable time period of hypnosuasion.

In preliminary testing and observation, I quickly chose the captain for this mission. This young woman called Jurith comes from excellent stock, of a lineage finely tuned genetically to produce highly analytical mentation. I know her as exceptionally qualified, but it's her single-minded dedication to achievement which most interests me. This is also something of a risk. She is perfectly capable of using this mission as an individual goal -- I see this intent already shaping in her discerning mind. She and a backup member will be given the rough coordinates by suggestion. But because I perceive that this particular subject will be able to break through the technique after a time, I will reverse program. I won't use this method with the backup member, whom I've also chosen, because it could produce divisiveness in the crew, and also the backup is not as likely to go against the dictates of suggestion. The backup

member is called Nima, a versatile and very resourceful woman of high energy. The program, then, is to send Jurith to a designation she will feel to be against her will and need to refute with the superimposed strong urge to find the correction of the rough coordinates. Ammon must confess that he loves this delicate circumvention, loves to set his persuasive designs against the will of another. The effect will be a distressing ordeal which, unfortunately, I must also suggest while the subject is under hypnosis. I will suggest only a bare frame, leaving the rest for the troubled mind to formulate out of its own delusions. This is really as tamper-proof as sending out a robot, but a robot could never do what an intelligent and independent frontier mentality will be able to do, especially the mentality of Jurith -- a mind with infinite cross-byte selection. Of course, I am most disappointed that I will probably not be able to learn the outcome. Still, if I do my job well I am almost certain of the result. The cadets must all undergo psychiatric scrutiny and some suggestion, but I will have to know the captain very well and especially her weaknesses -- one is already evident. Before they went out to head MACRA, Lupe and Javan told me that they had sheltered their choice daughter excessively, but because they knew how eager she was to become a part of the Quester Expedition, they were confident she would overcome the loss of her parents. To that end, they requested my help. After the first meeting, she seems such a mature and independent spirit that I find such parental attachment hard to believe, but in this unusual circumstance it would not be surprising. I suspect exaggerated posturing. I'll know by next session.

#### IV

Jurith, a different sort of name for this young

captain. She has a computer file full of doctorates. I haven't yet decided what is named by this name. She has been since birth an experiment, actually raised within a family unit and, even more unusual, the father and mother who were also her prime teachers are her biological parents. It is rare that we find this combination on the Hustler planet anymore, except in such experimental cases. Thus her full name becomes Jurith Lupe/Javran's Daughter. So, she is altogether rare and perhaps in many ways quite fortunate. I can verify an amazingly broad assimilation of knowledge and excellent logic, although she is willful and charged with undisciplined emotion. I have never seen anyone like her. She is clever, quick and impassioned with a zest for life, but she has a certain neurosis linked with her parents -- obviously I am describing a very powerful manifestation of filial love. But at what point does such love injure its disciple in this nuclear family cluster? What an interesting study this particular subject would make were there time. I must keep to essentials and cut a deep narrow channel of structuring.

The Quester crew is actually occupying time which has been mostly stolen from other duties. I can't deny my growing interest. I'm only a few years older than they and yet these bright and handsome specimens are worlds distant. None has had the raw experience of bare necessity or imminent destruction and death. But why compare them to myself? They're all a very large cut above their peers. The crew have high dedication to profession and remarkable depth of character, two qualities I looked for in making the choices. One member, Ezzlin, is excluded from nearly all these observations. My official documentation is crammed with this sort of data, yet I persist in preoccupying myself with this private account. A form of recreation?

Pysu often reminds me of myself, although he isn't nearly as cynical and far more amused and amusing than I. He'll have the new resource refined and stocked with laser precision. Roggi is the one I must be careful not to touch, a voluptuous, ripe dark fruit. I have known and appreciated women who resemble her but in body only. Her mind is a delight. She is respectful but for the most part quite unintimidated by me, and she doesn't play games. We have good, honest sessions. She's straight as an arrow and will make a steadfast friend for Jurith. Today she told me that building multifunctional viruses and pitting them against one another like toy armies was one of her favorite youthful pastimes. This deadly game intrigued me and revealed a great deal about her character. Little Nima, in size only, is more of a powerhouse than the tall metallurgist, Ezzlin, but what exactly do I mean by this? I dislike Ezzlin. He is with Quester because of his profession -- at that he is the best -- and for no other reason. I feel the threat of him. He is permanently flawed. In the short time I have, I can't expose the reason he was permitted to develop that way. He had no peer group and grew up almost alone except for a very competent and apparently strict and mechanistic tutor. No one knows what went on in that remote laboratory where he studied, and I haven't time to methodically pick his brain. He loathes hypnosis but is easily mastered. His long association with elements has turned him to stone, and yet... I'm working to see that all five cadets will be as devoted to Jurith as possible but have given few suggestions to Ezzlin in that quarter. He is already obsessive about her and I don't want to push him any further. All have been shown news videos of Jurith and her family, but I haven't yet introduced her to them. Ezzlin asked to see the videos again and again until I curtailed his voyeuristic delight.

He is on his way to creating a mythical deity, but Jurith will handle him. She will know as I do that he craves both a flawless love object to match his fantasies -- one that must not be touched or tainted -- and a strong leader. He has deeply grooved ideals, fantastical in nature and born of an early extreme loneliness and overexposure to unusual eccentricity. I'm glad that our captain will also have Larstev at her side. This twin is so highly prized in his profession that his old tutors are angry at his removal. His specialty is terreforms and his data file has convinced me he could green up an asteroid belt. A bit of an egoist, which is life affirming, and as wholesome as a Karakian apple, the coveted one at the top of the tree. He does have a quick temper but it vanishes just as quickly because he hates to waste time. He cares only for accomplishment, not power, and will be fiercely loyal. Larstev grew up with a class of botanists who divided their time essentially between physical fitness and designing new plant species as well as reviving old ones. He'll keep everyone in shape and well fed. Enter Nima who will repair and invent whatever is needed to streamline daily life. With her daring resolve and problem solving ability and the untold input of the others, especially Jurith, they may end up with a very sumptuous mode of life. Really, it's inevitable, if all goes as expected. This little band contains all that is needed for a new world. I'm almost vain about my choices, with reservations for Ezzlin, although it's far from a controlled experiment. But here I have "controlled" in a way I could only dream of doing elsewhere, in The Seat.

High Council's interpretation is that I'm slavishly involved in promoting the prosperous future of this half mad planet and in extending even further its far-reaching influence. With slight alterations, this is true. Why else

would I so painstakingly structure these cadets for an expedition from which I can only predict the benefit? We have reached so far beyond time that if there is no one to do this our civilization, such as it is, will have no path to a future. Technology has far outdistanced our momentary existence. We live approaching 200 and at last tire of everything. It's important to see one's short-lived hour as a valuable link in something infinite and with a beautiful symmetry. Power can alter destiny favorably -- but does it?

Perhaps I engage myself this way because I am, after all, only fascinated with cause and effect, with changing the direction of inertia, ah, with moving and transforming matter. Time and dispersion. Cargo and battle fleets. Insidious little mice gnawing relentlessly, though often heroically, at the edge of the universe. What if this vital life form that is Jurith could pluck a certain thought from my mind, a thought extracted from behind blood-sealed walls and boldly written down -- that she is an input resource for the value of negative time? Speed. One rare element used to gain another. What powerful effect!

V

I'm spending much more time with Jurith than the others. She is very complex, very intellectually self-sufficient, but unfortunately very dependent upon her two departed parents for friendship and emotional support. She despises this need in herself. I have looked for more family or friends because for the moment she should have that to which she is accustomed. I can't believe she is so bereft of anyone, almost an orphan like Ammon, but I am far removed from that painful loss of tender filial love. There is only Javan's nonbiological brother, Fleen, who lives another life mode and with whom she is not very close. The

mother, Lupe, was from the troublesome colony of Karak. I'll do no hunting in that hornet's nest. I've tried various tactics but this is really a matter of time. She never complains until I put her under hypnosis and question her. Then she regresses and whimpers like a child. This provides some relief. She isn't sleeping at her rest period. Today I put her to sleep and did no programming at all. I simply told her to rest and left the room. I've tried to impress upon her the fact that she has always intended to leave her parents, but my words have little effect for the time being. I wish there were more time. I listen to her voice scripts after she is gone. I'm getting an abundance of hostility. She is making herself ill.

## VI

Black suns! We are steadily pressed toward a bloody confrontation on Karak. This cannot be allowed to happen. Karak is a vital supplier and Karakians are also a valuable resource. I'm always compelled to think of humans as resource. One trouble after another.

I'm worried about our Captain. She's shut herself away in her empty family home -- not healthy at all. So much for families. I tried to intrude my hologram there and she cut me off. Her illness hasn't weakened her audacity. I sent around a friend, a doctor. The woman was rudely turned away. My stubborn attention to problem solving is causing the Captain to occupy more and more of my thought. I intend to make a voice script of praise in the guise of criticism and hand it to her. She'll immediately see through it but perhaps appreciate the attempt and maybe learn something. Even that is still possible for this handicapped dilemma.

Jurith has returned. Did my backhanded praise help? She wanted to record our conversation today. I could hardly

keep a straight face. Slowly, she's healing herself, but she's swinging now, very high and very low. She was high as the noon sun today and very amusing. It was her birthday -- nineteen years of Jurith -- so I closed the office and took her to a restaurant on the Quad. We drank cold guava juice outdoors. I'd almost forgotten how fine it is to be out in the brightness of the afternoon. The breeze was sweet and balmy, the park shining with lush greenery and flowers, golden pollen floating everywhere. And there sat my Captain in the most refined light. Everyone stared at her in her stunning wine uniform. The Quester Expedition has been widely publicized as a New Frontier exploration, mainly to obscure its real purpose. How the people love the idea of explorations and revere those who go. They are treated like glorified sacrificial offerings, which of course they are, offered up for the hungry state. My guards lingered in the shadows, and no one paid the slightest attention to me. I'm an unknown face in outer circles, one of the principal reasons I've not taken The Seat. Although I wear the black uniform of Control, I could be anyone in The Tower. This anonymity I hold onto with greed and, yes, cunning.

#### VIII

I've been able to go on with Jurith's programming. Today she lay in my soothe chair, her hands folded across her waist, her eyes closed, looking so uncharacteristically vulnerable and responding superbly to my suggestion. I take care to see that she knows nothing of it when she awakes. She no longer fights because ultimately it's her nature to be expedient. What a relief to see her frenzied metabolism slow down. I found that after awhile I was simply studying her in silence. "Deep sleep now," I said and myself felt like a somnambulist. When she turned her head her hair fell

over her closed eyes, and the helpless, deathliness of it disturbed me. I knelt down and lifted the golden strands from her pale forehead. I've never touched her, have made a point of not doing so. I'm the last person she needs to become dependent upon. The gesture was so pleasurable that I let my hand caress her face. Her head pulses with sharp visual images as she sleeps, and these began to transfer with my physical contact. I was in much deeper unity than I intended at that moment. I removed my hand, shocked at such carelessness. If I tried to describe her I would fail. She's altogether like satin and marble; no, a fluid surface, restless water reflecting a changing sky. She's Larstev's sun-blushed apple and the park's intense green and the bright-feathered birds which sing there in the wind.

#### VIV

I've been too busy to scribble here, moving swiftly down a channel of synapse and action. I've officially taken the seat to the right of R\_\_\_\_. It was no longer possible to deny my position. Now I've committed myself to the last stage of this circus of musical chairs. The committee representing the populace have voted. I subsequently dismissed all my prized cadets of the Quester crew. This experiment will prove a great success, and they are free to go on with the rest of their training, except for Ezzlin, whom I've referred on for continued in-depth analysis. As a graduation present I've suggested a retreat for Jurith; this I did under hypnosis -- I've authorized a vacation of which she'll hear in a few days. At least she deserves this for all I've put her through, although nothing will atone for all that is yet to come. The others will have vacations too, but not at Wierlfoss. Black Hall is for Jurith alone, a place as provocative and unyielding as this rare creature.

She'll like it, I know. She thrives on solitude because her mind is an orchestra in need of a back-drop of silence in which to rehearse. I've ordered everything I could think of for her comfort but the elegance must be sparse, her environment uncluttered to complement her nature. What a bastard I am. I've done all of this to ease my conscience. But why? They've been bought and paid for. They've all made a contract, agreeing to submit to whatever preparation is necessary, and with all her being Jurith strives for this long, uncertain expedition. Why did I write "uncertain?" It's as if I had thought of dissuading her, thought of some calamity as a possible excuse? She craves the expedition in a way that produces a base response in me: a grudging of her single-minded devotion to being precisely what I want her to be. What convoluted duplicity is this? I dislike that pervasively nervous fear in her, fear that something or someone, perhaps I, will prevent her from going. Nothing will prevent it; I'll see to that. But did I have the right to tamper with such an exquisite and rarefied mind? Yes, I did and, no, I didn't. Worse yet, I can't help reveling in the experiment, loving the execution of it. Is her opinion of me correct then? Am I as diabolical as her "politico?" Probably worse. She has no idea of what I've done, am capable of doing. Better that I've finished with this work. Concentration is needed elsewhere.

X

Menren, who sits at my right as I now sit at the right of R\_\_\_\_, tells me that someone attempted to kill me today. I laughed and said, "Only one? I must have done a great deal that is useless this week." The assassin's reward is the coldest death. Trial by artificial intelligence, then quick-freeze and temporary display in the hall of saboteurs:

Chillikplace. This is the assassin's moment of infamous notoriety before incineration. At the apex of all permanent members of the hall is Chillik, a woman who poisoned herself in order to poison her leader -- Chillikplace, her icy memorial, the self-indulgent fancy of the neurotic autocrat who took her leader's place. He took pleasure in evilly scrutinizing his murdered enemies with late night tours and sometimes revelries in the hall. R\_\_\_\_\_ says Chillikplace is one of his favorite haunts and that it has kept him clear-sighted. He once held a banquet there. You didn't attend, Ammon, and you are pleased with your resistance. The idea of dining before very well preserved human forms who may or may not have once been more evil than their persecutors did not appeal to me. I felt too close to their skins in my own persuasions. And Chillik is there. I have long been in love with this tall, powerful woman with such unforgiving gray eyes, a mass of pale-streaked, snow-leopard hair and long, elegant fingers. The snow leopard, a creature long extinct, was her companion and is poised at her side as though he intended to defend her. If anyone deserved to live forever, cunningly doing in her detractors, it must surely have been Chillik. When I stand before her I'm saddened by the waste of such determination. At least it makes a story of great will. Banquets in this hall are a perversion of the kinds which have proliferated under R\_\_\_\_\_ 's decaying regime. Careful, Ammon, nothing comes close to the power which is still, ostensibly at least, in R\_\_\_\_\_ 's hands. I know far more precisely than he the gruesome postures of death. If one must kill, he ought to know what it looks like firsthand. There are far too many who kill and have never seen or smelled death. Carnage and stench or puff of vapor, it is never clean.

XI

I was coming up in the Tower elevator today and met Jurith. The elevator stopped, and we were incarcerated there for minutes which at first seemed like hours. I was sorry at once to be put in this position, sorry for both of us. I'm always moving forward in a hurry and when I've finished a project I don't like to look back.

Jurith was very disturbed about something, but she averted her face so that I could get no idea of what it was. Possibly, she had sensed my own discomfort. She does this very well. Then all at once I clearly knew her thoughts, perhaps because they centered on me, and answered them point blank, a piece of recklessness on my part. After that she wanted to get out of my presence with horrified eagerness. I found myself apologizing, asking her to come and see me when I certainly had mixed feelings about it. Jurith in my new office? Never was there a place she belonged less -- I can hardly tolerate it myself. There is not much which surprises Ammon, but Jurith caught me off guard. She assaults my strength with her unwitting power. She would have been surprised too, if I had let her remember what it was she did. I could not do that. I attributed the behavior to loneliness and having partially accepted me at last as a replacement, however inadequate, for her father. I suppose this is a rationalization. In the end, she went away angry and oblivious to the act. Only I was punished for it, sorely punished. This is awkward for the observer, the experimenter who prides himself on detachment. I am an animal and respond like one. Why does the pen balk at describing the incident? Is Ammon afraid that once written down it will take on too much importance? Yes.

She was standing there in her white uniform, having apparently just returned from speaking to an eager young

assembly of would-be explorers. Except in videos, I've never seen her like this, a cool, white flower blooming over a marble sense of purpose. I know that my entire demeanor changed. I could feel it giving way, feel myself breaking into the careless voice one speaks to himself when he's in the presence of what he craves. But this was Jurith! I had shouted it inwardly at myself but the warning declaration became a sweet song. Her obvious fear of me was completely intolerable. I told her, well, powerfully suggested, that she be herself, do what she wanted without fear. I saw her hands rise and come very pale against my black tunic, the nails trimmed neatly to nothing, the small blue veins pulsing beneath the knuckles, the delicately tapered fingers gliding up to my shoulders as if they had come to a familiar place. But it was the way she looked at me, raw emotion, a forlorn kind of joy and hunger, as though she had found an answer, something more than a needed human contact, much more. Who ever touched her? I knew the answer. No one. I know how she lives, everything she does. I am the closest she has come to an influential human relationship since the departure of her parents. She is strong to live like this after such thorough adoration. Privation is something I'm used to, but at least I can obtain physical satisfaction whenever I have the time or inclination. Not so Jurith. There is no one. I don't know why. Of course when she came to me with a raw desire so intense that it had freed her from inhibition, I welcomed her. She moved against me and lifted her mouth to my own. The words seem empty alongside my reaction. And what did Ammon do? He has to stop and rethink it, and the process is excruciating. He held her against the circular wall with thoroughly non-parental lust, as any man in Jurith's sway would have done had he been so favored. In that fleeting mutual discovery with the impact

of laser fire, I would not have cared in the least if the elevator's motion had never resumed and we were as frozen in time as Chillik. In seconds, the agonizing realization that I needed to do much more than caress her forced a decision. I pushed her back and held her attention. My swift and necessary command to forget at once was accepted with ease because her eyes were still languidly following the object of her desire. That was that. My joy went unrequited. She was back in her fearful anger, hardly missing a beat, oblivious to anything but the threat of me. I wish she could have done the same for me. Her agile brain senses that I've done something to her in our sessions which is dangerous, and unconsciously resists this tampering. Will I have to go up there now and find out what is going on inside my Captain's head? I try to pin down what disturbs me and come back to the two Juriths in the elevator -- the terrible fear and hatred in the one. It's this I cannot tolerate, or the way we parted. That's what it comes down to: I can't endure the part of her which is fear and revulsion. I'm such a fine example of trust, such a well-intentioned bastard! I've violated her mind -- and still I think of the project! Will I have to go up to Wierlfoss just to recheck my handiwork? No, it's quite irreversible. But I will go. I can see that and, worse yet, I can promise myself nothing.

## XII

Black suns! What can I clarify with this scribble? What can I legitimize? The pitiful confessions of Ammon. Jurith knows that I've probed and ordered her mind, but she has no idea of the project. And because I couldn't tell her anything she has personalized my motives. What can it matter now? We have personalized each other. I laugh when I think of my vain mental swagger. The experimenter has

jeopardized the experiment, far more seriously than in the normal manner. Fortunately, Jurith is consecrated beyond selfishness. Yet I have interfered again.

I came in the night while Jurith was sleeping, rose the next morning and followed her out into the stark Wierlfoss terrain which I find so mind-cleansing. I was both sad and excited, sad because I knew that my appearance would upset Jurith, and excited because I would have a glimpse of what this environment would do to her and what she would do to it. She is not beautiful in the false way of fashionable women but naturally beautiful, an uninformed, unaffected beauty through and through. I found her sitting on the rocks, bedazzled with glowing particles of mist. The nimbus of light around her, coming from the cataracts below and the mist above, made her appear to spring from a fiery chamber beneath the ground. This is how myths are made. I watched her for awhile, reluctant to alter her peaceful state. Then I saw her bend her head as if waiting for something and knew that she had sensed my presence. What a striking pale figure dressed in civilian black: slacks, boots, thick coat, and an oddly shaped small hat set atop luminous hair which flew away, blending into the light.

Something happens to me at Wierlfoss, something which feeds a dormant, heedless Ammon. I become immortal as the rocks, anonymous and without obligation or restraint. But in this visit Jurith happened to Ammon along with the rest. Jurith, powerful in her silent judgmental anger, in her quick analytical exposure of myself. I was immediately cast as an unwanted intruder on my own Wierlfoss terrain, but I felt no remorse. I had a visceral ache which I had somehow managed to turn into a point of duty. I can only laugh at this rationalization. Jurith lost no time in fleeing my presence. This became a thrilling invitation to chaos, the

haphazard quantum in my predictable world. I briefly determined to leave her alone and depart, but then reminded myself that I had as yet learned little.

I had cleared out Black Hall for her and put her in a room next to the one I always occupy. At the time I arranged this, I had firmly convinced myself that I had no intention of being present. Eventually she came out on her terrace in a pale blue robe, barefoot and looking like an ice carving in the white northern light. I watched her swilling champagne and bolting oysters as though demented. The moment she saw me she began shivering violently, not with the prevailing cold but with fear of me. I couldn't bear it, ripped a blanket from her bed and futilely wrapped her in it as if this would solve everything. I wanted to dispel the thick cloud of hatred and fear, to let out the hungry prisoner who still existed in the elevator, to make her laugh. I happily ate and drank with her -- of her -- only augmenting her anger. Every act and word was a pleading to be left alone. I wanted her respect and regret, even to the extent of an apology for the cruelty of her mistrust -- deceitful, hypocritical Ammon! I wanted the truth of her feeling, the very truth I had buried. I got nothing but accusation: politico, warmonger, untrustworthy, interfering -- like soft punches to the head. Then the incisive blow: it was I who needed to admit the truth. She was leaving -- somewhere in the middle of all this she had gone in and put on her travel clothes. My own sudden fear and frustration forced me to restrain her, and the moment I had ahold of her I felt the death rattle of an indifferent Ammon. She nearly fell to pieces and still admitted nothing but her mistrust of me. I let her go. I sat down and asked myself what I, Ammon the manipulator, was doing there, wallowing in this slavish desire for the impossible. I

waited, listening for the soft departing hum of her ship. After several minutes there was still only silence. Then reason was completely abandoned and I began to run, assuring myself that if she took off before I got there I'd shoot her down, blast her out of existence! What right to possess Ammon in this careless way?

She was sitting with her head bent behind the shadowy Z-glass dome. Equipped with only a fraction of my reasoning power, I tore open the door and began talking. But I found that I was only denying everything once again while asking obliquely for whatever of Jurith could be spared. Salvaging my position as tutor and advisor, I mercilessly brought up Javan and Lupe. I knew with all honesty that I wanted Jurith to stand alone, free of attachment, and yet I was offended by her eagerness to be free of me. My selfish motive sent me trudging back to Black Hall alone; this was the Ammon who had always kept emotional entanglement out of his subject relationships. Jurith had something I wanted and, as much as the prospect warmed me, I knew it would not be obtained locked in her embrace; the embrace was only a quick way in for a glance at the large storehouse I coveted.

I lay on my bed remembering how I had left her -- the broken crystal of shadowed eyes, the emotional seesaw of attraction and fear. In contrast, I saw the early images of bared teeth flashing in sun, the pulsing white throat disappearing in mystery above the stiff collar of her heavy wine jacket, the surrender of conflict as she slept so vulnerably in my office. I recalled my carefully masked excitement and the expectant, flushed exuberance of her that heightened my senses the moment she entered my office. I saw then that this intuitive animal throbbing with such large purpose had often been a warm promise to me, that the gorgeous analytical engine which drives her, and that

ultimately exposed me, is a power which draws me like a magnet. Small wonder that I wanted to bend her a little to me, even until we had begun to dislike each other -- this would be the most useful ending. We never succeeded in coming to an end, or even in diminishing by a fraction our excessive need, an exclusive need. In the end, I had nothing but the fear of changing everything to carry me away from her as she slept exhausted. She had finally come to me of her own volition, and come with the certainty of leaving me forever, my Captain of the One Way.

"It's somewhat like a bellyache," she had whispered.

"Where?" I asked, putting my hands on her as though I could fix whatever it was.

She laughed and said, "It's a physical concerto -- two finely tuned instruments playing against a giant orchestra of hurt...but then we are forced to join in."

I looked into those eyes, so eager to trust, and communicated without speaking, "I might already have killed you, Jurith."

"Yes," she said aloud, dropping her head and speaking against my flesh. She couldn't know exactly what I meant, what I wanted to confess, but it didn't matter.

Then I asked her to come to me as she'd done at first. She put her hands on my shoulders and floated down so weightlessly against Ammon that he believed himself in a dimension without fleshly boundaries, only the absolute presence of his finest discovery: Control's resource for the creation of negative time. From this, a sharp knife of ecstasy and very soon a vision of myself a thousand times grotesque.

"There is a way," I remember saying, suspended in the high narcotic cloud of her, "that I could keep you with me."

"Then you wouldn't have me but have killed me anyway,"



that he is immortal, he who so loves death in disguise.

I walked through the vined hedges and among bright flowers, carrying an urn of ashes, what remained of R\_\_\_\_'s first serious woman. Rows and beds of lilies and poppies and groves of pungent eucalyptus trees, rustling under the artfully designed glass sky, stirred by narcotic breezes scented with sweetness and euphoria. I saw R\_\_\_\_, young and strong, thrusting his promise upon perfumed dark hair and black eyes, the fleshy lips gone to seed and finally dust. Long passed over by R\_\_\_\_, long using and used, she came here, swallowed her fatal nectar with his name only on her lips they say and was burned to purity. Why only his name? Because he is great or because he was the best lover? "Go," he said to me, "and do this thing for me. I can't go myself because I remember too much. We believed in each other. Time betrayed us. I remember her voice, her eyes, her body only as she was then. She killed for me, you know, Ammon. She slept with evil for me and returned to me long after I cast her aside." Down the scented rows I went, my head anesthetized and without care, fertilizing the flowers with her spent particles of energy. Back from the Necropolis and out of Thanacar's tampered air, I regained my sanity and thought myself an ignorant barbarian participating in a hellish farce. Or is this the madness? Yes, there is an element of madness in everything. I must never come to the Necropolis, neither the flesh nor bone nor ash of me. No fruit thriving on the dust there will nourish man.

#### XIV

More work. A full scale war is erupting on Karak, and the Makalf are dying because R\_\_\_\_ has always believed they would yield. But he has little hand in it now. The Makalf think Control has betrayed them, while in fact they're

dealing with a pack of opportunists at Control's perimeter who see an easy chance to hold Karakians hostage while they hawk Karak's incomparable produce on the black markets of seceded colonies. I intend to have these hawkers and their Kursand henchmen thrown out, even if I have to send in some hard-strike units who will spurn the psychological games of hide and seek with real burn power. Up to this point, Control can be blamed for the Kursand and for not keeping its house clean. But the Makalf too are getting careless with their targets in their bloodlust. War fosters no blameless heroes on either side.

I received word that Jurith was getting involved on Karak and had her stopped. I feel a need to keep track of her, although I don't intend to see her until she leaves. Curious, when I leave a woman's bed I hardly think of her again, except a flashing glimpse now and then of how she performed in that bed -- perhaps they pay me the same compliment. I don't want to recall Jurith in that way. It was I who inveigled her, yet she was like a rare vine that tangled around me and infused my senses with such a sweet narcotic. I was wild and came away wild and am wild still. I watched the video of her on Karak. This is a Jurith I have never seen. She has the inchoate qualities of a leader of great persuasiveness. She stood on the stone dais ringed in light with the restless crowd milling at her feet -- unmasked and dazzling in the elegant white uniform, daring to make a target of herself, appearing cool yet with the steady fire of a cause she had hardly begun to know. She has no idea of her appeal or of the risk she takes. If I hadn't gotten her out of there the Karakians would have had a new champion and the Kursand a blameless target. How can insurgents forget the undying power of martyrs? It would have done them no good to kill her, or perhaps they know

this. Perhaps she was safe. She is vitally important in a universal way and, of course, to me. She can no longer affect my life in a personal way, but I never know of which importance I am thinking. If I were to let myself think of Jurith as she has been to me alone, I would send for her now or go myself and find her and repeat the same magnificent error. Jurith, fragile flesh and bone prisoner of such large thoughts -- Ammon's inextinguishable white flame, Control's universal resource. Alas, she's also an emblem of peace -- always the dream of an idyllic condition which never was or will be.

XV

S\_\_\_\_ is on a shuttle bound for the detention colony of Retriba. He was sorry to go and left rather suddenly between two guards and wearing a permanent skin-diffusing suppressant. Now let him babble in his own perverted delusions. Is Ammon growing soft? I should have had him incinerated. He drugged R\_\_\_\_, wangled a classified information code and nearly got one of my best Colonial Reducers trampled by a mob of insurrectionist pigs. Ammon, you know it is actually more satisfying to think of him where he is as he is. I don't feel like killing anyone just now anyway. It is Jurith, of course, who has become my conscience. After she's gone my efficiency will improve. How glibly this rolls off my pen. But when the heart is lost in the wilderness the killer walks out.

Her physician told me she has asked for something to make her sleep. Ammon could do this...one last time...how could it matter? Ah, but how it could. If only I could know that she really wants to go. But I do know! Still, if she can't sleep, perhaps there is some doubt. Ammon, why can you not accept the fact that Jurith can leave you? Leave what? An inflated ego? Part of what she is is the

leaving of you, Janus-face. I am suddenly co-equal with a feverish hedonist, craving one last fix on Hedone, one last trip to the colony island of pleasure, without thought of what is to follow. Remember, Ammon, coming up through the ranks as a young boy how you fetched your politico masters from such islands as Hedone, accomplished it with all your elaborate and useless medical knowledge concentrated in your hands and heels. The flesh must often have its play before the mind, feeding, exciting the mind. This vulnerable little mound is all we have to work with, the sorry human predicament, prickly rashes of desire, flashes of clarity.

I don't give a damn about saying goodbye. What good is that? You are there, breathing my air, just down there in ECCO. Am I mad to leave you there, or mad to think of you at all? Time, how I loathe this constantly forsaking beast. Jurith, cruel eater of hearts. Even Ammon isn't this cruel. It's late and you are sleeping, no, awake, perhaps dreaming of Ammon, suffering...please be suffering. You will come because I have given up the idea of not allowing it to happen. You will come, whether or not you want to. Better if you don't want to. You'll suffer less in the end.

#### XVI

Have I the pathetic tendencies of a masochist? I denied myself a sedative and lay all night with my eyes like two white-hot ovens. I don't want to forget what this feels like...thereby preventing a repetition.

Two days ago Jurith came to me. I was expecting her, but when I looked out and saw her standing there with the eyes of a wild animal quick-frozen, I was sorry that it had come to this, sorry for all the pain, but not sorry enough to let her get away as she at first tried to do.

Lt. Chak brought her back, and she stood nervously

aloof, a stranger in the shadows of my office. First I'll get used to having her in this place, I thought -- Jurith of the open blue dome, Jurith of the black velvet dream -- then I'll assume human form. But Ammon split in half and then into four, leaving an empty carcass in a dark place while his roaming shades assumed wills of their own. One of them held up the walls with the power of position, while the another stooped to offer Jurith free-wheeling tenure as eventual head of the Academy. Another almost begged her not to leave the planet, while still another listened to her simplified version of the war on Karak and responded most cruelly. Perhaps this last is who I really am -- all the Ammons converged at the moment she began advising me on the intricate business of Control. I threw her out. But she couldn't get out because the exit was sealed. Instead, she bloodied her hand on my bronze doors -- the blood is still there. "Leave it!" I yelled at my android servant, Chor, this morning. I don't even want to contemplate what perversion lay in this order.

When she began beating on my doors, I stood amazed at the spectacle of so much rage spilling from such a peace-loving creature. I felt at first that I must let the violence come out, that I would feel relieved to have my part in creating it exposed once and for all. But I could hardly approve such a raw method. At last I've pushed her over the edge, I thought. So much for titles that imply expertise in handling. In a second or two it came to me that she was unable to stop. She was damaging herself! I shouted at her but, of course, it accomplished nothing, unless it spurred her on. Next I leapt over a couch which seemed to have slid into my path, and encircled her from behind, pinning her arms down and dragging her backwards. Completely wild and surprisingly strong, she fought as if a

feral beast on the wilderness colony Zoologia. I turned her around quickly and firmly restrained her in a crushing awkwardness until she went limp against me. Her hair smelled like the fragrance-loaded air of the Quad the day I sat with her at the edge of the park. Your hair is full of pollen, I thought. We stood in silence, I looking down at her half-hidden face, her neck twisted, the skin of her bloodless cheek forced against my shirt. She could easily hear my heart crashing beneath the fragility of the closed, white-lidded eyes and trembling mouth. I let my chin slide against the tangled silk of her head and felt the wildness in her ebbing away. I was thinking I would carry her to my soothe chair and simply hold her there like a hurting child when a laggardly guard rushed in. I bellowed at him to get out. "I could be dead by now!" I think I added, and Jurith began to laugh. I haven't dismissed the fellow. I'm afraid I will keep him simply because he made her laugh. But she couldn't stop that either, and I thought she might become hysterical again. I held her out from me and looked into her eyes. The pupils were large and brimming with moisture, but she appeared so thoroughly sane that I began to laugh too. Then I saw her hand. She stood totally given over to laughter while blood trickled slowly from the battered fingers dangling at her side. I took the hand, wiping the blood on my shirt, and led her off to my healing cabinet. There I applied a sealant and while I was doing this she said, "When I'm far away I won't believe any of this happened...that I was here with you." I didn't answer but tried to give her a tranq which she refused. She would take nothing from me now, not even if I offered her Karak to be towed off to another galaxy. Soon enough she began her pitiful self-vindication, and I put an end to that. I knew it was the constant sense of parental judgment which made

her prattle insipid excuses. We talked. I naturally represent a dark side of life to her which both repels and fascinates her. She has at times a perverse desire to convert me to a quivering gelatinous votary. Have I ever had wanderlust, she wanted to know. I didn't call it that in my early travels. Yes, I've had wanderlust but I've never thought of giving up and running away, which is what would result if I indulged myself now. Do I have a woman, she wanted to know. This at first amused me and then flayed me to the consistency of hung-up meat, but it passed and I assumed my amused disposition. I have a certain obsession disguised as a woman, I wanted to say, but even I found this ambiguous. I said nothing like it, only the truth of the way sexual needs are satisfied. I offered her my bed to sleep in and immediately knew that she was thinking of Wierlfoss. She blushed, an unbelievably delicate sensual response which made me change my mind about rest.

We wandered from my office with Jurith in a stubborn, fractious temper, until she actually came to be sitting on my over-sized bed -- I've noticed that Control's beds grow larger as one climbs the proverbial ladder, but haven't lingered over the obvious implications. I sat on the floor in front of her, wanting to assume as non-threatening and harmless a posture as I could, responding honestly to her remarks while delving ever more deeply into her hidden world. I believed that I could will her to handle large emotions and perhaps will myself to do the same. Suddenly I told her that I had sent for her. This seemed to disturb her, but then she threw her head back and recounted with playful words her white-rose breakfast at Black Hall. Her unpredictability is so predictable to me at times, and this quick knowledge of her seems to hold her in awe.

I unsealed the damaged fingers and saw that the wounds

were healing nicely. As I did this I tried to think of a way of communicating without using a hypnotic command but rather a hopeful request done with mind and silence. I held her gaze and thought, *I want you to trust me*, knowing as I did so that I could never be trusted by Jurith. When I looked at the battered fist, I felt a sickness in me that went deep. For a few hours more it would hurt her to use the hand, but there would be wounds I had caused which would never heal. I caressed the wound as though I could change the others I had intentionally made. Then, opening the hand and holding it against my face, she made herself completely vulnerable, and I saw a hunger in her eyes equal to my own.

I helped to free her from the lovely, blood-stained uniform, the handsome skin of her public personality masking such exquisite flesh. Her head tilted back against the pillows, her eyes half closed, she watched depraved Ammon's hopeless gesture as he lifted the wounded hand above her head and covered it with his own, hoping to prevent the bruises of love-making.

What else did I say? Ammon doesn't remember any more words. Perhaps there were none, only small cries from the parched throat, which humans make when they are closest to the natural innocence of their animal brethren, when they are most happy or soulful or grieving. For a little while I was all of these and Jurith was mine alone.

## XVII

Our leader, my formidable old mentor, R\_\_\_\_, is dead. He died of excess and weariness. But in his early years his life was lean and purposeful. The ceremonies are over -- his and mine. Long live R\_\_\_\_. May I not live so long.

Did I say flayed and hung up like meat? Yes. I now realize it was only a figure of speech. That was when I

still shared the planet with Jurith. Now it is not a figure of speech.

Karak is in trouble, and I must act. What am I waiting for? The excellent killing machine stalks his prey. He can't get out of the habit, even though his incisors are buried in the lime pit of another century and he is gnawing with raw infected gums on his ginned leg.

There are the semi-seceded colonies Control has come to think of as obsolete and expendable. Suppose I did go out and talk to them? I am expendable. It would shock The Club, indeed, the entire system -- the new head of Control leaves The Tower and walks among the vegetable eaters. Until the herbivores began to fight back it was said that only carnivores relished war. I suppose it could still be said. I'm afraid The Club wouldn't see my attempt as one of benevolent good will.

I'm vacationing in Jurith's quaint old house. There's nothing like it. Awhile back, unknown to Jurith, I made Fleen an offer he couldn't refuse. I don't know why -- I've only made myself worse. The house was all she had. She left nothing of herself behind at all. She apparently made a point of disposing of everything she had ever possessed and even made an attempt to get her news videos permanently classified. Actually, she succeeded, but I have them anyway. There is nothing in the Squad House. They say that her room was almost as bare when she lived there. Her fingerprints must be everywhere here. In the garden as a child, did she ever imagine erasing herself from such an idyllic existence? I can't believe that it was entirely Lupe and Javan's departure which brought on this severing from all that she has known. I know that she was always thinking of something remote, as though her prescience drove her with the vision of a distant future -- rebirth in

another place. If I closed my eyes and waited, thousands of her fingerprints would begin to glow in the darkness. All the doors open with antique knobs -- the most futuristic of scientists living in a place with hand-manipulated doors, doors with hinges...her fingers there opening and closing doors...semiprecious stone knobs caressed like that over and over again.

You'd better begin to take the advice you once gave her about abandonment, orphan, or you'll slip over the edge. Jurith, hurtling through space, while you cohabit with her fingerprints. Poseur! Hypocrite! Fiend!

Beyond the garden, the land curves around the sound as space curves around a hurtling projectile. I'll leave this place to Control. Everything I have belongs to an entity with a head and body which are myself, but only for an eye-blink. For the future of Jurith's garden I envision more pod decks for bureaucrats -- stingless, honeyless drones. I could put a stop to it, consecrate it, but I won't. She's done with it, wants nothing of it. One controls nothing for more than an instant, if that. Morbidity. You have a life to finish, Ammon. I almost wrote: a lie to finish. A life. Burn it up. Use it. Do something beyond yourself, you emasculated bastard! It wasn't only her quick, warm presence; it was the assault on your convictions. You've been rendered inefficient by the reflection she caused, the blinding reflection of her, to make a sad pun. Too much cruel reflection, too deep, too bright. Heal yourself. Do it. Do it! She took everything, left nothing, only your heart beating you to death. You fool.

#### XVIII

So incensed was I at my inability to cope with the dilemma I've made, I briefly thought to enter Memrase and

have the memory of Jurith totally obliterated and Subject X imprinted in her place. But it was a cowardly idea and besides the pleasure of the memory is often greater than the pain. There's no remedy. I am Ammon who is consulted and does not consult, does not depend upon, does not ask, who is silent or always knows whatever vacuous answer is required.

#### XIX

I reread XVIII. My writing grows alien. Jurith has been gone a week. It comes to an end soon. I have plans. I'm leaving, going out to The Colonies, the troublesome ones, all of them. I've asked Menren to take charge. He's familiar with everything, a good man, an appropriate man to fiercely and honorably guard my tenure because he is a leader with something of the bureaucrat in his nature. Pro tempore Menren will enjoy the circus more than this renegade orphan does: the parade of bootlickers, the parties and posturings and subtle games which continually delay progress. I've always been too expedient for this. I want action. I want to get something done before I end. I want my hands on the substance of this realm. I don't care whether I make any mark after self as long as I effect the desired changes. I can't help myself -- duty; it's the thoroughly ingrained teaching of Crochi, forcing me to see myself as a link, only a link but possibly a useful one, in what is hoped to be an ongoing endeavor. I can't deny that I've enjoyed power and will continue to do so. Someone in The Seat should have done this a long time ago. We are too insulated from life. The offspring out there, children of mother homeland, sometime deceiver that she is, need to feel they are part of something which flows both ways, a feeling of community to humanize the void. A leader must walk out and lead, make himself conspicuous with progressive acts.

He cannot act on hearsay sanitized for the golden Princeps.

Once I did want The Seat in the comfort of The Tower, that for which I sacrificed and fought, but I've had it so long unofficially that the ceremony of vestiture was an anticlimax. Perhaps I wanted only the "getting" of it. As soon as it was handed over I developed a vague feeling of oppression -- the axe falling? I foresee that I will officially lead here after the dust settles no matter where I journey. In travel, I have the authority to enter Life Stretch and return to live out my term if I so choose. Amusing...I enjoy endowing myself with various futures in this destructible black script.

I seem to be going on a crusade -- is it one of peace or war? If I must advocate war I really ought to be at the vanguard, not for every skirmish but once and awhile. I'll take the big First Fleet. Menren can order a shakedown of the others and build them up to First Order Readiness with only a few words to a Control-sanctioned terminal. How fortunate for the Hustler planet that he is genetically approved as a leader. He'll have the power of my code at his fingertips. This is precisely what I don't like, the easiness and detachment of it all, the hand and the eye so far away from the end result that war becomes a bloodless game. Everything large and real is made small and unreal by distance, only a flash of light on the screen. One feels nothing. A little piece of the galaxy blows a million light years away, too far away to grieve, or a thousand lifetimes would not be enough to mourn the distant chill of megadeath. I know the other end of the preventable, the thunder of pursuers, the cries of those begging for a chance merely to beg for more chances. There is nothing as awe-inspiring as the animate going to its inanimate phase...the glorified black beauty of Wartech. I am The Controller high up in The

Tower -- how I roar inside with laughter -- the blind fish at the bottom of the sea. When the system grows dark around you, you don't notice that you're losing your vision.

Now I have a legitimate wanderlust, and while I'm out there I'll have the rest of existence to look for relatives. It has become unjustifiably important...Jurith again, her amazing relationship with her parents. Once so many poets, now mostly mere personal dreams...fearless snow queens, wrinkled and sere as fallen spring petals blowing over barren fields...grizzled old warriors with black children's eyes, searching the bottomless well of space for the fires of squandered youth.

I'll leave you, riddle book, here in my Captain's home until next week. I'll come to peruse these half-truths of my conscience once more, then watch them burn, purging me of history's ellipses. At last I'll say farewell forever to the House of Jurith.

V

A Message From Laom

Ruler of all this:  
Blue ether; green curvature;  
Red flocks; violet maelstrom;  
Myriad facsimiles attending the  
    gold-black abyss.  
Sovereign of unending nuance,  
Almighty master of intent,  
    albeit not of body,  
Neither blood nor bone nor atom of  
    disintegrating flesh.

.....Q. Ammon

When I finished reading Ammon's words to himself, I thought I knew him, at least knew a great deal more about him. No, I would never know him. But he fell in love and suffered from its blows as easily as the rest of us. This tough, authoritarian mind-bender was actually a sensitive poet. Extraordinary! Still, he was suspect and highly so. What was he up to? He had ended his journal by calling his writing "half-truths" of his conscience. I started to mull this over, closing the journal and holding it gingerly like something hot. It grew warmer and warmer in my hands and then my ears began to burn. I laid the smoldering little book in the gold box, closed the lid and returned my stupendous treasure to fish-eye security.

Ammon had said that he split into four entities in Jurith's presence. I appreciated the analogy. At the beginning he had said he split in half to scribble to himself. That interested me. Apparently everything he did or calculated was arranged by several Ammons. Here was a man who spoke of games, subtle games. When he orchestrated such games I felt sure he was a master gamesman.

The most burning question, of course, was why the journal had not been destroyed. One was led to believe that Ammon had to leave much sooner than he intended, but if that were so, would his departure have been sanctioned? Unthinkable that he could take the First Fleet without sanction and great purpose. Why was the journal so quietly preserved in its gold box? By now it could have been forgotten, but still... Why was there nothing about him in Control's records? Why? Why? Why? My head was so full of questions I was top heavy. Each time I found an answer it knocked something else off kilter. The equation wouldn't balance. I was going round and round with a great numerical

headache.

I flew back to the Quad in the center of the city and sat in the park, staring at the shimmering Tower through the high waving fronds of an overhead palm. A silent, awesome pinnacle, always more grandiloquent than the last time I saw it, climbing above a spreading complex of domes and pods, a gold-sprinkled, white stalk, growing with unbelievable audacity ever closer to omnipotence. I wondered what it had looked like when Ammon was in it and where I myself had been then. My life is a haphazard span of wars, cultures, and technologies, but the designs of man are a familiar constant, never much higher or lower than the beginning of his walk.

I strolled up and down, up and down in the park-scented warmth beneath the shadowy mahoganies where red and black monkeys leapt and chattered. The monkeys hadn't been here last time and mostly they stayed in the deep center of the park, venturing out at dusk. An elegant black and white plume-tailed monkey approached, shrieking out his presence. He paused momentarily on a limb which stretched toward the vainglorious Tower buttressing the sky. The monkey's eyes glittered red in the light as he appeared to contemplate the Tower. All at once something was as clear to me as anything had ever been, and I was off and running.

Over to H-30, twentieth floor, juridical records banks. I sat down before a terminal and demanded instant answers. Soon Ammon's journal entries were flashing before me as part of a much lengthier transcript. Ammon had been tried in a private tribunal, *in absentia*, for treason. After a rather short but fiery battle, he was acquitted by a hair with the testimony of Menren. This devoted assistant had been a wise choice, for it was surely Menren who made a hero of his leader by bringing him into the public eye. Ammon was

restored to all his ruling glory, and I learned that he was lauded for removing the First Fleet for ostensibly peaceful purposes. He must have removed it like a thief in the night, but with imperial vapor trails of exalted purpose.

My nose had grown by a meter. I was a young historep again, hot on the trail of something which led forward and backward and sideways. But now all I could do was play around with various imagined endings, and I lived each minute in fear that I would come to a dead end. If I couldn't find enough pieces of the puzzle to allow me to sketch in the rest I would come to a dead, dead end.

Even if I hastily boarded one of the new negative warp transports, I would still not find the Laom I had known. It had taken me years to come home. No matter how fast I traveled, time would always bend the changeless away from my grasp. Still Laom lived more closely to my reality than the green-canopied arboretum through which I strolled. Herein was almost all the beauty which the teeming Hustler planet contained. Open fields, alpine meadows, blooming deserts, and virginal forests now belonged to The Colonies, except for a few carefully tended preserves. Far north, brooding Wierlfoss might not have changed much, although I was afraid to go and see. But what legacy had Larstev bequeathed to Laom's barrenness?

The monkeys were nesting, but the bright-feathered birds still sang their evening songs and fluttered through high branches as the sun and I only appeared to take our leave of puzzling places.

Around the other side of the broad deep park, the little shuttle pilot breezed in and out of her communal apartment. When she was in I was in; when she was out and someone else was about to be in, I found other quarters to rest my bones. She was in now and tried to fix me a drink,

but I didn't want or need stimulant or depressant. I wanted focus. I had taken no new assignment but I was more at work than I had ever been. Shuttle pilots bring home interesting edibles from the big transports, and I sat down to a tidbit of quail and one cold glass of white wine.

Did I want something else, she wondered later, holding out a sorter of pills. I had not tried to hide my nervous quandary and my roommate saw this condition as something to be assuaged. But I was going to use my own brain dope this evening. I could lose a kilo of weight just sitting very still and letting swaying banana leaves center my thought.

Did Ammon leave the journal on purpose to soften his quick exit with its mention of noble intentions? Was he really an evil force? Jurith's tape coincided with Ammon's journal, but could it be that he was not so smitten? Very hard to believe, but even if he did love her he could have used the persona of distraught lover to his advantage. Did he really go off to do good deeds by offering his official persona to The Colonies as a symbol of unification? Did he, didn't he? Did he, didn't he? Why would a person write a journal of half-truths? Why not all true or all false, unless for ulterior motive? There was something, something obvious that I was missing.

My mood was so intense that the muscles of my neck and shoulders ached. My forced reasoning was stretching thin. Maybe Ammon never left the planet at all but went off as a hermit to live in some remote crag. Ridiculous. But what happened to the First Fleet? The transcript never mentioned it, just treason. Treason! Of course, it would never do to reveal the disappearance of so powerful a force, to let the populace know that such force was not at the ready despite our still invincible defense. Ammon's defense had been invincible too: Menren of unimpeachable integrity. Thus he

had made off with a mammoth collection of matériel and ended his bout with The Club smelling nearly as odorless as the pure white rose he left on his supposed beloved's pillow.

I sat another half an hour, until I realized I was numb with mental exertion and getting nowhere.

The kid snuggled with me awhile and then announced that she was going to leave me alone to recover.

"You're ill, my Mirabul," she said with a worried frown. "You're sweating and you have a fever. Please let me give you something. I have something wonderful that just came in from the chemical research lab on Moda. They say it'll let you enter another's dreams or thoughts or sleep like a baby. All you have to do is swallow it and ask for what you want. Just swallow and ask for rest."

"No, little girl. I want all my wits now, such as they are. Go to sleep. I'll be all right."

I lay in the dark for awhile just thinking. Ah, my handsome band of Laom friends, where have your lives gone? Jurith, what happened to you? You told me to learn the truth, but I have so few answers to give you. I wish I could return. What happened to Qyoo? Jurith, beautiful in your strength and purpose. Wise Jurith, come and talk to me again. At that moment I could restrain myself no longer, and I knew it was time for Jurith's special holovideo capsule. I got up, dug it out of my travel case, turned on the system and lay back to watch and listen.

The paleness of her, the fire in her eyes and the smoothness in her voice startled me. She was wearing silver green, spun silk which shimmered with the softness of spring light. She seemed already to have become the myth Ammon had predicted, although I must have seen her only a short time after this holovideo was made.

"Do you remember when you asked me about your room,

Mirabul, the room I had made to die in before the androids carved my crystal: Here I am sitting in that room. I'll speak now. Judge me as you will

"After passing a few homeland years on Laom, despite all the rewards of my work and all the devotion of my companions, I fell into a depression. My crew had formed their liaisons, although they were as loyal to me as ever, but I longed for what none of them could give me and I was angry at myself for this longing. I began to go out great distances, searching the few transports which passed so infrequently through a corner of our sector. At first there were no travelers, but then I found a few scientists and hungrily exchanged information and ideas with them. More arrived and after awhile transports hovered over Laom for the sole purpose of my discussions. In no time at all I was asked to speak to various groups of interested students and scientists in the experimental and teaching laboratories and auditoriums of newly arriving, multipurpose transports. There was a growing interest in the subtly calibrated performances and multiple uses of my androids, which had come to be known as Juroids. For a time I enjoyed the delicate balance of inciting minds to operate at near full capacity while at the same time disclosing none of the secrets of my work. But the increasing demands of these performances took me away from that very work and drained my strength. I reminded myself that this was not the reason for my original and temporary departure from Laom; that purpose had been to assuage loneliness in the company of an alter ego. Quite frankly what I was really looking for was another Ammon. This foolishness I would never have admitted to myself in the beginning, but it was true. Under protest, I curtailed the lectures and more aggressively threw myself into marketing our beautifully diversified androids to newly

arrived experimental outposts, but always I was searching for an unknown quantity whom I would recognize at once. Each time I met someone and went through the procedure of discovery, my hunger grew. There was no Ammon, not even if I had discovered a place peopled with millions, and yet he had not even been a companionable being. My intelligence also informed me that because of the hideous time warp Ammon was long dead and that it was my heart only that kept him alive. I could not let go and eventually I fell into an irrational state which I suppose some might have defined as madness. Indeed it was a compartmentalized madness. It was a total blindness in this one soul-gripping area of my brain. I could risk telling no one what I was going through, because I was the listener, the healer, the one who consoled my companions in times of need. They depended upon me for comfort. I began to construct this room for my mental travels back in time to Ammon. In it I put tapestries both because he had been fond of them and because they reminded me of Karak, but they also concealed eight simultaneous holovideo points. By now my commitment to my work had provided a corps of androids to do my bidding. I constructed the room almost by instinct, hardly visualizing the outcome, the way a bird can't escape building the perfect nest it cannot possibly envision as complete. When the room was finished I closed myself into it and did what I had been unable to do until that hour: I opened the holovideo capsule Ammon had sent with me. For several homeland years I had avoided its unknown content, not strong enough to witness it but fearfully tormenting, teasing myself with its existence until I could no longer elude its mystery.

"I had no idea what I would see. I lay on my vicuna pillows transfixed, staring at the dimension of it, caught

in the beauty and sorrow of it, the ultimate death-dealing blow to my soul: my own past. Ammon and myself at Black Hall, we two on the terrace, my voice, his voice, the expressions on my face which I had never known. Ammon and myself through the indelible night in the marble room. I watched spellbound, a voyeur of my own self, my body passing once through the torture and ecstasy of another Jurith and again through the torture of the present moment. Viewing it from the outside could not be as I remembered, but it was even more powerfully devastating to watch than it had been to live. After these initial scenes I raged at Ammon and languished on my pillows weeping the way Qyoo often wept from deep within her caged soul. Agonizing in the darkness, I whispered over and over, 'Why this? Why this?' I visualized Ammon in a thousand deformed postures, laughing black-heartedly at me, lying cold and dead in his crypt, quick-frozen, blowing over the Necropolis as particles of gray ash, or murdering thousands with a punch of his index finger and on and on. But none of these images, however grotesque, offset my own remembered image of the day we sat on the edge of the park, charged with half-acknowledged desire, playfully sizing each other up in the first golden light we had shared. The clear memory of that hour, which only my brain had filmed, drove me to despair.

"Curiously enough Ammon had put in something else. I'm not quite sure why he did it, although it could do him no harm by the time I saw it. It reveals something of him which is once again a little baffling. When I finally climbed out of my bittersweet misery and looked at it, I was utterly fascinated, deeply moved, and again confused over who Ammon was. I know only that he was complex and that he clearly sensed my motives for submitting myself to the Quester program and to his indifferent manipulation. I say

indifferent because in spite of everything there was in him an overweening pride of accomplishment which made a part of him indifferent in the end to our relationship. I suppose we were very much alike in this, if in little else. But let me show you this one face of Ammon and someone else. I think you will be surprised, even you, dear old fool."

Menren must have been responsible for what I next looked upon, or one close to Ammon whom he hadn't divulged. It began with a swift moonlight cruise. The landing place, I realized with close scrutiny, was a clandestine point somewhere on "The Hill," a point downstream at the fringe of an earlier version of the city in which I now resided. The Hill contained a mingling of shiny black laurel and cypress and was profusely stacked with pod dwellings. These climbed away from the bank opposite the one on which, some distance further north, The Tower stands and where the heart of commerce abuts the park. The video had opened with Ammon boarding a small fast River Fly. He was clothed in a thick, dark velour tunic which had wide gathered sleeves and which belted at the waist over black skin pants, tapering down to scuffed black easeboots. Over the wild tousled hair he wore a cap of the jaunty kind the River Fly tenders wear, and the only sign of opulence I caught was the gleam of his gold telewrist beneath the cuff of his sleeve as he raised his arm to point at something across the water.

This Ammon was all kinetic energy, much as Jurith had described him, leaping onto the River Fly in his powerful easeboots and pacing as he talked in a low hushed voice which carried the hint of a strange emphatic and archaic accent Jurith had once mentioned. Whenever there was a close-up, I stared with fascination at this face which formed and reformed masks of changing temperament. The high moon had turned his facial skin a bluish ash, and the large

wide-set eyes shone darkly with the excitement of engagement and mysterious purpose. It was clear that Ammon used this often-repeated mission as one would use a stimulant, and there was about the whole venture an air of risk, a very real possibility.

The hovering River Fly skimmed along over a phosphorous oily wash of the broad river, and in just minutes was settling into a shadowy moorage beneath the dark foliage of the closely podded hill. Barely audible were Ammon's soft easeboots dashing up a dimly lit and twisting path of rough terrazzo. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of his face as he glanced over his shoulder. Then he disappeared beneath and between the spidery steel legs of a great cluster of airborne pods. The Hill had swallowed him up and once inside, where lights shone down a long stone corridor, one could see that he was indeed inside its flank. I followed along as though I were at his heels until debouchment into a large and unostentatious but comfortable chamber. A number of men and women were standing as if waiting for someone, but took only polite notice of Ammon, nodding as he entered. I did notice that the bright dome light high overhead was dimmed considerably when Ammon entered and wondered if it had something to do with his appearance or was merely coincidental. The room was a natural and spacious cave, the stone floor uncarpeted. The footfalls of the milling people echoed against the polished floors and walls along with the sociable gabble of voices. Very soon the people, who looked and dressed like the ordinary citizens one might see on the streets of the city, began to find places to sit, chairs and couches and pillows which were all turned in the general direction of a large and imposingly elevated soothe chair.

Ammon emerged from the crowd and went across the room, simply standing by a metal slide entrance and waiting. Then

the door vanished into the wall and a wizened and stooped man entered. His height and broad bony shoulders indicated that he had once been a considerable physical presence. He was leaning on the arm of a dark-haired young woman. The crowd fell silent and watched as Ammon and the girl assisted in getting the old man comfortably settled in the large soothe chair. The old fellow's voice was so soft that an amplifier was placed on his lapel even though he seemed intent on making only short airy comments as one might do at a party. I could hear Ammon speaking clearly, since in some concealed place he wore his own amplifier for the making of this enthralling video, of which no one seemed to be aware. I was then sure that it was being done in stealth with the help of Menren or an aide. The one thing I noted about this whole procedure was that there was trust in every gesture of every person in the cave room. No secret guards with roving eyes were detectable, and the people were held calmly and respectfully in their places by a common interest and devotion.

Here was Ammon then, a great power, who had come to sit at the feet of a sage, but in a secretive way which surely indicated the possible displeasure of the ruling body. Ammon had been so calmly received that I even questioned whether or not the people knew who he was and what he represented. What, in fact, did he represent? I would never believe that he had totally forsaken his office. Could he possibly be intent upon forsaking this trusting crowd, this obviously revered ancient, with video proof of insurgency?

Who was this distinguished relic? I studied him with warming interest. I knew that Ammon's esteemed benefactor, Crochi, was long dead. Could it be another of the wandering philosophers and scientists from that flying sarcophagus of

Ammon's childhood? The man's eyes were rheumy, his hair a pale yellow-white and his colorless skin bearing a flaccid translucence well worn with time, but when he smiled his teeth were handsome specimens and expertly kept. His fingers, though deformed with long use, were also well kept, the nails neatly trimmed and buffed. If he was a fugitive hiding in the shadow of death, he was the best tended one I had ever seen, and also the best preserved for a hide of his obvious vintage. This devoted loving care indicated great worth, just as his presence as a leader indicated a powerful protector...Ammon? Yes, of course.

The old man waved his hand dismissively when questions were presented in a flurry of eagerness for his wisdom. It appeared he was determined to withhold advice or comment, shaking his head and smiling. At last he lifted his head and looked straight out with glittering eyes. They were the palest blue glass I had ever seen, like windows on a high place of intense light.

"...in those regions there were families," the ancient was saying as his soft voice rose to an audible pitch. "No one wanted to live there anymore, except the contrary ones. Everyone had fled to the cities. It was a place of open fields, harsh winters, only weather-controlled for the spring growth. We few were the planet's granary, you see, its tenders. We were hardened by it and loved our life. They left us alone with only our children, our cattle, and the falcons for company. The falcons ate the vermin of our fields, according to their natures and only incidentally for the good of our harvest. We loved their indifference and majesty against the blue of our sky. When the frost shone and the fields slept, we sat at our hearths and talked. You know nothing of this. We recorded our voices and our songs, our words of comment about the way we thought things worked

and should work. Our minds were free-ranging. The winters were for reaching into the deep places of our minds. The summers were for our hands to prod the robot machines to do our bidding. When the robots told us it was time to harvest we still walked into the fields and split the grain kernels with our teeth, testing for ripeness so that we would not lose touch with nature. We knew that we were pitiful examples of the great longing always present in man."

"What is this longing, old one?" Ammon asked.

"Why do you ask? You above all others already know. You know it is the longing to be a wolf who thinks not of its destiny but only of its dinner and its mate. It is the longing to be a weary squirrel who falls carelessly upon the forest floor and is never seen again, a little drying hide going back into the ground and making a greenness for the birds to peck; the longing to be a bright flower remorseless at its quick passing; to be in harmony with nature and not the ravenous eater of its fragile existence; to be a thing of beauty in its own skin without borrowed fur and feathers. Man is a discordant note against the sweet music which vibrates out of his range. He hears only his own sound, a cacophony of disorder. It is the pitiful cry of the mutant begging for an unawareness of his horror. It is the scream of the murderer who kills to nullify his own end. It is not death which destroys man, but his knowledge of it."

"You are wise, old man," a voice cried out.

"I'm a fool like all the rest. I tell you what you hide in your hearts.

"You know that my son was famous because when still a child he left the fields and came here to journey into the future. Always in our society a few were genetically selected to achieve a capability which must abandon us in order to keep us. It was I who taught him to explore with

his thought. Now when I come to see Javan's handiwork, always dreaming that it was he would restore this place, I find he is gone and his daughter too. This is what I've done with my wisdom. Flesh of my own flesh working in diseased fields..." His voice trailed off, and he dropped his head, staring at his restless hands, hands still eager to grapple lovingly with the mysteries of a wild place.

I leaned forward in amazement, for I was staring at Jurith's paternal grandfather. Then Ammon's face flashed across my screen, and I saw a face impassioned with some powerful motive, a face restless as the hands of Jurith's grandfather. For an instant it was a presence contorted in love and anguish and violent upheaval -- I did not imagine this. It was too much to be contained in one moment without an explosion of will. But it was contained, and the naked expression ebbed away until nothing was visible but a granite exterior and this too passed into a mask of calm. Ammon was drawing the old man out for a purpose beyond himself, a record of this rare existence solely for Jurith. She had never been permitted to know of her grandfather's appearance in the city she was leaving forever. The doctor, the mind tamperer, one of many Ammons, had his reason for this omission, but it angered me. Was he afraid of the old man's influence, of having his own power softened, or afraid for the Quester Expedition, an expedition of which the old man obviously did not approve? Remembering Jurith's utter loneliness, I thought how it must have angered her to see this, and yet she sounded as if it were a praiseworthy gift.

"...yes, in the harvest season we were the happiest. Then the transports hovered above siphoning off our handiwork, and we danced and sang all through the night. It was in one of these times that Javan fell in love with the Karakian scientist, Lupe, an agrarian genius who came with

one of the transports. He was only a boy and she a woman of great beauty, so they said. I thought her eyes too dreamy. But in all truth I am a dreamer, too, and she won me over as well as my son with her lyrical folk tales. The stories were on her lips, her fingertips, in her eyes, all a mystery of old barbarism and cunning. She was, after all, of the soil like we few. Soon the red scarf she wore around her waist was around Javan's neck, and their laughter made my eyes flow with joy and grief. Javan had the madness of love in his veins, his fine mind tuned to hers, and he would not let her go. I was the same once. It is the willful way of us...that steadfast grasp. One night when the harvest moon hung like a bleeding omen in the smoke, and the giant robots roamed the fields burning stubble with their grinding maws of fire, Javan and Lupe got up from their pillows strewn beside the trout pond, where they thought they had hidden themselves, and climbed aboard the last transport. So I was done for then. Most of you can't understand the love of a father, but perhaps you are better off. It is a terrible consuming thing. It is the love of self. The pristine genes of we few have directed us to preserve and perpetuate our flesh and we are in the grip of a thing beyond us. For you it was necessary to make the genes forget this, because population was destroying all life. So you know not the sweet and terrible bondage which we have felt.

"They came here, the two lovers, and polished their roughness to a fine brilliance. The combustion in these two minds always igniting experimentation, even when they produced a daughter and weaned her in the blinding light of themselves. I was not allowed to enter that rarefied atmosphere of their young offspring, lest I damage the experiment, for she herself was an experiment...is an experiment wherever she may be. I have seen videos of her

and records of her work and pronounce her a sublimation of both her makers, for all the good it will do her. It is too much for one human to contain, but I will think of her as she must be, unusually strong and purposeful."

The old man's head slumped to one side in a thoughtful gaze. Then he lifted his eyes until he was looking straight out before him but at something faraway and perhaps in the past. His final words echo in my head, "Cherish the circle. There will be no peace until we demystify death."

I saw no more of Jurith's grandfather, only a short close-up study of Ammon back in the River Fly with the moon flashing on the black water behind his ashen face. He said nothing, and his silence underscored the depth of meaning in the smile which slowly crept over his face. I, who intensely read faces as a part of my profession, saw self-satisfaction and a pretense -- humorous to me -- at a grudging show of deference to someone who was probably little less than deified in his mind and who was soon to be an incredible time and distance away. Did Jurith have regret when she looked into those eyes? Of course she did, although she would not have changed anything. I knew that much of her. The eyes of Ammon I will not forget; they arched a little in sadness mixed with humor and a hint of some other personal message which only she would know. Ammon's face was assuredly one of fluid mood changes, including a total unyielding blankness which he was apparently able to summon at will. Still, I was convinced that I had glimpsed another enigmatic face this time, that of the trickster, the great artificer who only half believed anything, even his own schemes. However, it was quite possible that he had once again fooled me. The video faded upon an inscrutable smile, and Jurith was again before me.

"I never met my grandfather, Mirabul, but I know him.

I understand him. After one viewing, I put this video away because I was not yet ready to grieve over the missed opportunity of developing a relationship with my forfeited grandparent. It also pained me to look at the Ammon in this video. I returned to watching our emotion-filled meetings, almost reveling in my despair. I knew that Ammon would have kept copies. I didn't want to think beyond that.

Toward the end of these Laom days and nights in the room, what I viewed became a burlesque. The humor arrived when I began to visualize my entire preoccupation, to look down upon myself melting into the video. Oh, the way we two Juriths looked. The two selves enslaved in heated emotion couldn't help but eventually produce such humor. Still this comic relief was not an effective cure for the heroine of the absurd. The older Jurith insisted upon the reality of the finite, the hopelessness of hope, but it meant nothing to reason it out and try to stop. I did go on with it.

I emerged from the room drained, pretending work fatigue but already with a new scheme of madness assembling itself, or assembling Ammon. I would recreate him in my workplace: the android womb. I would make him better than he had been, a nonviolent, peace-loving, humanoid engine. I sequestered myself away, making my workplace off limits for anyone except my android assistants. I labored long and feverishly on my most perfect of perfect creations. My colleagues all began to stare closely at me. I often laughed too loudly at dinner, and only stopped when one evening I caught a glimpse of Nima elbowing Roggi with a look of concern. I feared they would begin questioning me, and I couldn't have that. I could never admit to anyone my private dream; it had to be entirely under my control, entirely my own world where nothing could be damaged or altered as it had been in the past.

Finally I brought my new Ammon to my room. He walked there beside me while everyone slept. You cannot imagine my euphoria as I moved through this climactic moment. He was all mine from his encyclopedic mind to his flawlessly cultured skin. You will forget that he is an android, Mirabul, as I almost did. He conversed with me and, yes, he loved me...the ultimate vanity of my creative power. But, alas, he was not Ammon; he was Jurith! I found no great satisfaction in this. I was forced to admit that what made Ammon wholly Ammon was the part of him to which I had believed myself diametrically opposed, the violence and vengeance of his animal nature. Since it was the whole Ammon who appealed to me, I had to conclude that I loved this bellicose nature. I was laid low. Even the great physical healer Roggi with all her ingenious curatives and psychotherapies could not have purged this secret illness from my soul, although she was never asked to attempt it.

But let me backtrack a little and explain how my self-destructive game was played.

At each visit he would emerge from the panel behind this tapestry you see at my back, where he otherwise remained, sleeping the blissful sleep of androids, storing up energy and deepening and broadening his thought by exponential figures with masses of information I had selected for him. I not only wanted him to appear to love me but to appear to be my spontaneous friend, something the real Ammon had never had a chance to become. What audacity. But did not an ancient philosopher once say that to appear to be is to be? Ammon II did begin to take on a life of his own, increasingly unpredictable even to me, with a rapidly multiplying complexity of personality I could only vaguely have anticipated. He was an open-ended system -- like man himself. I was both fascinated and guilt ridden. Sometimes

when I awoke with a start in the night I tried to hate the original for having created this terrible need in me. My reasoning told me we had neither of us created anything in the other but only, in a fortuitous meeting, responded in the ways our genes demanded of us. My reasoning told me this...I did not always listen, but I couldn't hate.

I had given my android the exuberance of Ammon. His Ammon voice both thrilled and frightened me. All this I had stolen from Ammon's video -- Did Ammon program my request for his holovideo, a request I'd made out of the blue when I was with him, or had my subconscious formulated this scheme when I asked for the holovideo? -- *the matrix*, as I came to call it when I first showed portions of it to my alert creation. He watched his archetype with great interest, his dark, limpid eyes working like two intelligent cameras. After awhile he began to run his fingers through his black human hair touched with just a lock of gray, and to affect other gestures and mannerisms which startled even me with their authenticity. He was programmed to continuously assimilate information, thus, I wouldn't let him see the portions of the film where Ammon spoke of war or vengeance or any violent intent. As my android's character deepened so did his attention to me. He began to understand that he was to have a position of equality, even at times the same authority which Ammon had because he was my benefactor and teacher. I preferred his loss of subservience, as I've never liked this quality in any human, and at last I allowed myself to forget that I was his creator.

Our talks were wonderful adventures for me, I should say for both of us, invigorating and beautifully reasonable. He was, of course, always logical, but I began to see a reflection of carefully observed emotion. He appeared and acted as though he possessed feeling, which ultimately came

to mean that he felt. Now you will say I'm playing with semantics, but I no longer considered the difference, and he became what he imitated, just as we become what we mime in early learning. I made videos of our conversations, and one is included in this conversation with you. When you look at this, you will see for yourself. How will you judge me?"

I stopped the video for a minute. Was I ready for this? Jurith too could split apart like Ammon into different personalities. But why should this surprise me? They were both so inordinately complex. I poured myself a fermented malt which I'd been saving for some special moment, having decided this was certainly that time. It was a fine distillation, one I might never see the like of again, made on the distant colony of Esquite. It went down dry with the smooth gingery aftertaste of overripe fruit, setting up a curl of warmth in my viscera which encouraged me to lean over and start the video. The dark room of the little shuttle pilot's digs came to life again, back in another world, and I can't deny that I was a totally enthralled and zealous participant. I hesitate to say voyeur...but, yes.

There were the brilliant tapestries of Jurith's octagonal room. More was seen of it this time, and I was surprised at how much more impressive it was viewed in this manner. It held the same sharp mystery which a room achieves when only a portion is seen reflected in a mirror.

Jurith and the android were sprawled on the huge vicuna cushions placed beneath a remembered garden tapestry of a predominantly scarlet hue. They were talking animatedly, and as I studied the android with growing fascination I realized the true genius of Jurith's work. I could no more think of him as an android than I could think of Jurith as one. Except for a photograph, I had never seen Ammon until

the previous video, and the two figures were identical. He was arguing with Jurith rather playfully but insistently about *the matrix*.

"Why don't you let me see it in its entirety?"

"I see no reason not to be perfectly honest with you, Ammon. You might take on characteristics which cause me deep sadness...abhorrence."

"How could they? You knew of him what is called love."

"Do you think you couldn't make me sad?"

"I'm sure I can, by not being him."

"You're far too clever."

"Do you think I can be sad, Jurith?"

"I think you can be anything you choose to be."

"But *being* doesn't matter unless I can feel. A lesser existence would be illogical. We have discussed the ancient philosopher who said that you are what you do. In order to appear sad, one must ultimately become sad."

"I made you, Ammon."

"You made me so that I could make you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean so that I could make you complete. You are apparently incomplete, Jurith, or why would you have done me? You want me to know love as he did."

"I can't quite agree. I want it to be a better relationship. I want you to be a friend."

"This is paradoxical, Jurith. You won't allow me to be the Ammon you love, but you want me to love you in the same way. I'm perfectly capable of *making* love to you. I lack nothing for the act but your permission."

"Ammon, you are disturbing me."

"If you think I'm incapable of tenderness, let me show you. My maker is tender, and therefore I am. Correct?"

"Yes," Jurith muttered and threw back her head, closing

her eyes.

The android studied her in a curious way then bent his head and kissed her throat. She lunged away from him and sat up.

He smiled. "You want a lover, but you won't allow me to have the qualities you love. What can I deduce from this?"

"Don't deduce anything now, please. I'm tired. I just want to talk, not argue."

"You do look tired. Let me rub your shoulders. You're so tense. You're not happy. Does this feel good?"

"Wonderful."

"I exist to make you happy. Isn't that so?"

"There is irony in your voice, Ammon. I can't believe my own achievement. You are far more than I could have envisioned. Don't be ambiguous. I want clarity."

"So do I. I'm not happy, Jurith."

"Stop that! Please."

"I think that I have something I must do. Something to which you hold the key. You must unlock that place."

"Please believe me, Ammon, there is nothing in the video which will make you perfect...far from it."

"I think I'm already perfect. I believe I must strive for imperfection."

"Oh, I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"Perhaps it isn't in the video as you say, Jurith, but there is an unknown quantity which I must have. Why did you allow me to watch him making love to you? How can I return to my sleep after that? How can I let you leave this room?"

"You have no choice."

"I think you have emasculated me with your idealism."

At this Jurith looked at her creation with true shock on her face. Without knowing what it was, he had struck at

the truth so precisely that she was devastated."

"What did I leave out, Ammon? Answer that."

"You're playing with me. You're very intelligent, Jurith, and expedient. You don't make things on such an infinite scale as he who sits before you without a function. What is mine?"

"To be my friend...to..."

"To appear to love you?"

"Of course."

"And expect nothing? Then why did you make me so intelligent, so...entire? Any fool could love you. Why are you laughing?"

"I think I've created a monster."

"Amusing. Could it be that I look and gesture like Ammon but I am really you, Jurith?"

"You know it could."

"And you want me to love myself?"

"Which self, your self or my self?"

"Aren't they the same?"

"No. I've given you all of Ammon that I know."

"All of his external parts and a small section of his mind, hardly worth mentioning. The rest is you. One can only assemble from personal experience, from what is assimilated."

"There is a little more than that. You have something of my colleagues Larstev and Pysu in your excellent Ammon body. Are you dissatisfied?"

"I think I am. You are inside this skin. I've learned that man is capable of much corruption. Apparently I'm not. I've been made to loathe it. I've never seen anything but this room and you, study-videos, and the room I was born in. What do you think would happen to me if you let me out?"

"Nothing. There is no corruption on Laom."

"Why can't I see your colleagues?"

"I believe that you're the result of a perversion in myself."

"And you're ashamed."

"No. You see you started out as a wonderful secret in a lonely, temporarily slightly unbalanced mind. Even though you helped to heal me -- that is, not altogether but in some ways -- I still want to keep you to myself. Anyway, there's nothing to be gained by meeting anyone else."

"I think it would extend my personality to observe how others see you."

"Possibly."

"Did you think I would do and say only what you wanted...like a robot?"

"Of course not. You know I didn't. That would be very unintelligent. You can eat and sleep and even dream, quite remarkable. You have infinite variables at your command."

"I probably should not show love for you, Jurith, but I can't help myself. It's a part of my role."

"You see, you really are very much like your prototype, Doctor Ammon."

"He didn't want to love you? Why?"

"Humans are extremely complex. He did but he didn't. He had other fish to fry."

"A curious idiom. It means you were an obstruction?"

"Yes, in a way, but I was also one of the other fish."

"He was using you for something else, then, and his unexpected attachment interfered with this other purpose."

"Precisely."

"This is very intriguing."

"Yes, no doubt."

"You don't find it so?"

"More disturbing than intriguing."

"Have you figured it out?"

"Most of it. Don't look at me like that with those beautiful liquid orbs, Ammon. I feel as though you are looking right into my brain...reading my mind."

"As he could do."

"Yes."

"Your reason for coming here and your reason for being sent, were they not one and the same?"

"They were not. I had other fish to fry too."

"You came here to make perfect androids with the rare element which is the apex of my brain, and to make a perfect life."

"There is no such thing as a perfect life. Only you are perfect, Ammon...so very perfect."

"I must escape this perfection somehow. I believe it is a relative thing sought only by you. There can be no perfect state, for to be perfect is not to exist at all. Isn't that so?"

"Such high mentation."

"Well, would Doctor Ammon think me perfect?"

"I can't answer that."

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

"Then he would not...unless..."

"What?"

"Unless that's why he loved you, because you did not have certain of his qualities in you...because he thought you were perfect and that you might complete him."

"I'm sorry to laugh, but now you really are talking about relative perfection. My dear friend, I'm so very far from perfect--"

"But not to him. Man's idea of perfection can only be a relative thing, not an absolute, for man cannot imagine

the absolute called perfection. For him you were perfect.  
Was he perfect for you?"

"No."

"Then together you were perfect."

"Please stop unless you want to see me go mad."

"You won't. You are very sane."

"He sent you here to find Laomite. Elsewhere it is very scarce and known only as 77. It is needed for a great warring nation."

Jurith jumped up with a naked expression of fear. "How did you find this out? What do you know of war, Ammon?"

"I have studied the history of the home planet. I know that war is a great evil and much admired. I know that I cannot permit it to come near you. I believe that Doctor Ammon approved of war and this is why there is a kind of war within you, Jurith."

"No!"

"But he engaged in it."

"He wasn't able to see another way. War is engrained in man's brain very early as part of his birthright."

"But there is your way, Jurith: open communication, a trading of needs, nothing clandestine, honest verbal exchange, face to face. This is what you taught me...a state of mutual respect."

"He wasn't able to see that...or at least to use it."

"Because he is flawed."

"No, don't you see, Ammon, *I* am flawed, a flawed member of society. I had to leave because I could not survive on the Hustler planet and carry out my work. Eventually I would have clashed with them, been vilified and destroyed. I was different and could not be silent. There are some who can, but I couldn't. I was brought up to respect living humans. You see, I myself was an experiment. I was taught

that my own flesh must be used to the highest achievement and not desecrated. And beyond this I had a dream of...yes, a relative kind of perfection, a yearning to bring myself new into a world of my own making."

"If you are flawed than I am flawed," the android Ammon said with a pleased grin.

"No! You are perfect."

"Because I cannot die...is that what you mean? But I can be destroyed. Would he destroy me?"

"Jurith, why are you crying. Come here to me."

"No, Ammon, no. I can't bear it! I can't bear it anymore. Oh, I've done such a terrible thing."

"No, something very good. Why can you not see that? I have many constructive ideas always formulating. I would like to get out of here, to go and make myself useful for you. The ideas seem to grow and grow, and I have your wishes to consider. I can carry on with your ideas, do things for you that even you cannot imagine. Let me show you, Jurith, how *this* Ammon can love. I am the real Ammon."

The video went blank and then Jurith reappeared alone.

"I wish I could see your face, Mirabul. I would know at once what you thought. I will simply imagine that you are both shocked and impressed. I mean impressed with him. I myself was impressed. He came to have just the balance of man and woman in him which I have always striven to make.

"You are wondering what happened to him. I let him have free run of our entire village as long as the others were asleep. He began to wander about while they slept, investigating things, but he did obey my wishes and kept out of sight of everyone. Then one night we had an especially tender and moving conversation. He repeated everything he had said at the end of the video you saw, vowing that he would carry on with my ideas. He was remarkably incisive

and expressed the opinion that he could best manifest his love for me by the accomplishment of good deeds of far-reaching consequences. I was fascinated and deeply touched, although I never quite knew what he intended. What he had been telling me that evening was goodbye, Mirabul, another silent goodbye from Ammon. He left the same night, took a shuttle and disappeared from my life. I told the others I'd sent an android out in it and that it was probably destroyed. Possibly my beautiful Ammon was done in by Harquint. I grieved as though I had lost a brother, for truly I had, but it was I who sent him away.

I cannot very well convey how magnificent he became over the period of time that he was developing. I made videos of our conversations and studied his progress. It was like watching a seedling grow tall, put forth sweeping branches and come into full blossom. He was a near perfect creation, assuming wisdom in quantum leaps, minute by minute. I first treasured him as a work of art, but he quickly outgrew such a designation. He was like a germ-free void in his honesty and goodness, but he was also guilelessly powerful. Yes, those are the words for what he became. If the opportunity had been his, I knew that he had become capable of manipulating others, as I suppose I often do for the sake of peace. Unlike humans, my Ammon had no sense of evil in himself and rightly so, for in him it didn't exist. He could manipulate his environment with only his purity of intent.

"Despite my dark thoughts, I like to pretend that he survived. He is the most wonderful thing that I ever set in motion, except for Qyoo. Isn't it a strange irony that it was his imperfect prototype who inspired me to do this? He knew that I suffered hopelessly because he was not Ammon and yet he could reward me richly with his friendship and

devotion. In that last hour as we sat in this room talking, he took my hand and told me that everything he did would be for my benefit and that there was no other reason for him to exist. This was not a playful utterance. It was deadly serious and left me awestruck. His words and manner had the quality of a vow which could never be tampered with. Had I really set this creature in motion? Yes, yes, and yes!

"When I heard his words I couldn't respond. I know it's difficult for you to see how I could be so affected. There is the love a mother has for her child, as I love Qyoo. The love I felt for my creation at that moment was very like maternal love, but still different. While the feeling remained, it freed me from the need of anything, as though I had managed at last to reach a shining place at the end of the mind, and if there were nowhere else to go, if it all stopped there, it would be all right. I also knew at that moment that my Ammon was complete, if only for me, free of corruption. I began to tell him about the androicide, about Harquint, about Qyoo, about everything. He insisted on going immediately to Harquint, and I let him slip away as though I had sent him, Mirabul. This happened quite awhile before you arrived. His physical likeness to Ammon was so lovely and so painful. I feared wanting him, and he grieved over this. It was like a terrible itch which couldn't be scratched. I couldn't bear it. Nevertheless, I would not have sent him outright, but I knew that he would find a way to go -- have I repeated Doctor Ammon's obvious duplicity? I never heard from him again. Nothing changed. Harquint went on in the same way. But I can't stop thinking of my new Ammon's final words. He said, 'You're my creator, my spirit, and my reason. You're the way I will be, Jurith.'

"Please don't think me deluded or prideful when I tell you that if he was destroyed it was far more than a personal

loss. It was a monumental loss for which I bear the heavy burden of responsibility.

"I must bear so much responsibility...for my friends and my androids and, most of all, for Qyoo. I've begun to concentrate more and more on what must be done. Roggi doesn't know how close I am to agreeing with her. For a time it seemed enough that Qyoo should love me without question, but this is horribly selfish. I've now watched her trapped in the most severe fit she has ever experienced. I could see a force inside her struggling to assert itself, a terrible shapeless agony striving fiercely to achieve form and purpose, but not as I once struggled with all the power and cunning at my command. In watching Qyoo, I felt as if I myself were rising out of a dark illness and about to come upon the truth of something large and important in my life. I now believe that importance is Qyoo made whole. Instead of running to Roggi and her drugs, I held Qyoo and let her fight with me. It was as though Ammon and I were fighting out an old battle inside her flesh, flesh delicate and pale as orchid petals, reddened and contorted in an ugly helpless fury. This is the anger of frustration which is in us all, but we damper it down until it only smolders. Qyoo cannot. She fought me and pushed herself away with what seemed such a violent hatred that I began to cry. Oh, I howled, Mirabul. My heart broke all to pieces. In the midst of this I felt cool hands brushing against my face, and there was Qyoo. She put her arms around me and smiled. 'Oh, Qyoo,' I said, 'You have far too much love in you.' And the moment I said it the words twisted like a knife, because Ammon had once said the same words to me. I realized that I had no more right to hold Qyoo inside her tangled brain than Ammon felt he had to hold me back. Qyoo never remembers her rages, and it is her exquisitely peaceful moments of pure

innocence which have kept me from interfering. But no longer. The time has come for Roggi to begin her work. Qyoo must have her chance as we all have it. I foresee in her a great bright star. There is a small chance of her extinction, but I won't think of it any longer.

"Now, my friend, my personal historian, you know a great deal more. And what will you do with this exclusive information? Knowing me, knowing my life here, at least you'll understand why I've felt the need to tell you these things, to communicate from such a distance. I know you won't forget us, Mirabul. I know you understand that we have the premeditated form of a beautifully shaping design.

"A few last words: Not long after you arrived here, I received sketchy word that a young historep was speeding here to investigate Laom and its Juroids. I had decided that after you, dear old fool, I could not withstand further investigation of my private history, that I would give the young cub a cursory tour and send him off. But as things developed, I thought this person would make an excellent courier to you -- you see how I revere you -- that you could then learn perhaps what happened here. Your young colleague will arrive as you depart. Since you must leave, I hope you won't begrudge him this opportunity. After my meeting with Harquint, I'll send the historep to overtake you at white speed. Look for his account at H-30. I have no name to give you, but you'll sniff out the information, I know. See to the good of Laom, my friend. I won't say goodbye."

The pale face of Jurith faded, and I felt immense fatigue, but I began pacing and pacing until my little roommate entered. She led me to the bed and handed me a glass of the coolest juice. It went down so innocently, but it wasn't at all what I intended in my feverish thirst. Almost immediately I could feel myself slipping into a

comatose playground of shadowy figures. I saw the girl's eyes shining in the artificial light and reached for her body. "What is it? Blast you! What have you given me?"

"No, no, Mirabul!" she gasped, slipping from my numbing fingers. "You need this...something wonderful from Moda to make you sleep. No side effects...only a nice diversion."

I raged, falling back on the pillows helpless as a particle caught in a solar wind. As I drifted away from myself in little bits of mist, distorted faces flashed before me. I remembered vaguely something she had said about this incredible new drug. "Enter into another's dream," I muttered. "Enter another's dream of life...life of dreams."

I seemed to be awakening with an abrupt impact of such clarity I was astounded. Something in me still clung to the idea that I was sleeping, but the sense of reality was too powerful, too immediate. I was traveling, traveling swiftly and with a sharp awareness. Was my strong desire for Laom taking me there? Would this experience finally bring me the knowledge I'd been seeking ever since I left? But I'm not asleep, not asleep, I insisted. Incredible! I'm awake. My Laom friends are near...I'm in your center...you encircle me. Everything is always in black and white sharpness here on Laom. There, the dark-shadowed mountains like great fangs tearing at the sky. But I'm quivering with the most gut-wrenching fear and excitement, because I'm about to know something. She has leapt out of the past and into me. Yes, I am Jurith. Listen to me. I am Jurith, Mirabul, Laom, all! and I know something...someone is approaching in the shape of an answer...three dimensional, a beating heart.

Mirabul, Mirabul, you cannot escape my words. Hear me. I am thinking of you with all the power of my thought. I sense the ominous. I call my messenger, and you respond.

Our minds meld in waking dreams. You, once an outsider, have come inside. I need you. There is something you can tell me. Do you remember? A word, a name. I analyze, beginning to know fragments of truth. What is it? Help me.

In a few moments I must try to resolve this ugly situation, a very destructive little war. Yes, Mirabul, I own it is a war! One of great consequence. It radiates out from this small quarter, endangering distant places.

Time is passing from me. Now, Mirabul, do you see how time is bent? I've been sleeping, the old sleep of cool preparation which summons my strength of mind. Sleep is everything to me. Here in my crystal I use sleep. Harquint comes at last. War comes! I don't go to meet this bold and greedy warrior. His suit is blue-black, his visor, shining gold. He carries a weapon, and my colleagues are outraged. "Not necessary! Not necessary!" cry Nima and Larstev. But Harquint comes as he pleases, striding inexorably forward.

Roggi tells me I've slept too long.

"He's here and says he won't wait."

I struggle into the soft draping folds of my white vicuna robe, allowing myself to feel coddled and protected by carefully fashioned cloth, the artificial outer skin, the vain presence of man -- I think these trivial things slowly and deliberately.

"Oh, he can wait a little," I say, imagining I am irritated, but then I hear my laughter, a little shallow and nervous but consoling, and I'm surprised.

"Where shall we meet?" I ponder half to myself.

"He says he will only see you alone and he means it," Roggi intones with worry.

"All right, send him to me here."

"No! No, Jurith, not here, not Harquint here in your crystal."

"Yes, here." I laugh. "This isn't a hallowed place."

"But he has a weapon on his belt. We have no weapons here. You know that, Jurith."

"Well, then, if he kills me you have my permission to swat him like a fly. Go now." Roggi grimaces, rushes out.

I wait, looking around my crystal. I speak aloud to calm myself, "I forgot there is no place to sit. Does this brutal effigy Harquint ever sit?" I wonder. I am laughing nervously again when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Not if he can lie," says Harquint's amplified voice.

"How lie?" I ask with irony and calm at last. I am studying this terrible dark force with gilded helmet as though it were something I could fix.

He pulls off his helmet. His graying dark hair is a wild grizzle, his eyes black, black, black!

I am blinded by something my eyes refuse to see. I stumble back to the sheer dazzling walls of my crystal, my hands searching the cold surface at my back to touch something fixed, to feel if I have really awakened for this day or am still asleep.

"Hello, Jurith," the voice unmasked says. "Is this where you've slept so long?"

"Don't, don't!" I cry out. "Don't, don't do this!"

"Do what?" He laughs with great relish.

I can't feel the surface of my crystal, can't feel anything, not even the floor where my feet must be. I swallow and take hold of my voice as though my throat were a fist. "Don't finish your evil design here...because you take such delight in it...because you are who you are, Doctor Ammon." I hear the dry whisper of the name and begin to believe that my tongue hasn't lied. I have always said he was dead, always believed he was alive, or was it the other way around?

"I'll do nothing to stop Laom from existing. You are the outlaw, Jurith...if a praiseworthy one. But we must come to terms, you and I. Control needs--"

"Control!" I scream. "Control! Control is getting, already getting!"

I shake my head. Who is this person rattling inside me? What has happened to me? "Control?" I whisper, thinking how far away it really is, and then my head jerks up, remembering that Control is Ammon and Ammon is here.

"Control is getting a pittance. You were sent here *by* Control, *for* Control, and you have misbehaved...hoarded, misappropriated our rare metal. And for this you are famous, Jurith. I've roamed the hills and valleys of space for more than twenty homeland years, and your name and handiwork are known on every tongue. I too have some of your amazing androids -- there was one most amazing. Yes, you are famous, Jurith, but you didn't create 77; you only renamed it. What kind of citizen are you? A selfish one? Is it only fame you want after all? Are you going to fight a war with me now? Your implements of war will be only the ones I, who represent Control, have loaned you as patrols.

"I'm not a citizen," I whisper, "...came here not to be a citizen..."

My chin falls down on my chest. The vessels in my head and neck are bursting. My right hand is a fist. I look at it. For more than twenty homeland years I have beaten on your door, I think. There are the scars. My tongue is dead, but where I bite it bleeds and I taste the brine of shame. There is the lowly urge in me to fight, to fight hand to hand, to beat upon the closed bronze door of Ammon. I swallow and swallow my shame until I can smile.

"Of course not," I say. "There will be no war. Laom is yours, Control's, however you care to say it. You should

have told me in the beginning, the very beginning who you were, or did I know it?...was this an experiment too?"

"A moment ago I clearly saw that you wanted to kill me. If I handed you this weapon," he says, touching his belt, "would you put it to my head and finish me? Now you smile. But you still want to kill me, and you can't stand it, Jurith, because it makes me right."

"Let me see it," I say, "How do you kill with it?"

"Simple. You hold it thus and press," he says, handing it to me.

"You know I wouldn't kill you...don't you, Ammon, Harquint...whoever you pretend to be?"

"I'm Quithran Ammon, Control's first outward bound Commander," he says. There is great amusement and not a little sarcasm in his voice.

"Quithran...Quithran?"

"As to you, you haven't changed. Even I don't know what you would do to me...or have done to me, Jurith."

I am backing up slowly, looking at Ammon who is smiling earnestly now, no differently, I imagine, from the way he smiled when we sat outside the restaurant near the park so long ago, so far away. I don't want to feel anymore what I feel. I don't want to feel at all. "I see my work is finished...that I'm out of work now." I laugh...a hollow sound. I turn the weapon on myself and press the bar.

Ammon steps toward me, reaches out and takes the weapon away. There is something more that needs to be done before it works. I'm shaking badly, since I haven't expected to be alive. I no longer look at him, only at the floor. I am Jurith, scientist with honed analytical mind, and my world has abandoned me again as my knees are about to do; they give way but I force myself to rise up.

"You thought I would kill you," I hear myself whisper.

"Black suns! You are amazing. But what you did is completely in character, exactly what I should have expected. I really can never quite believe who you are, Jurith." His frown is a dark study. He is violently angry because my attempt on myself was so easy, so quick.

"Another of your experiments? Oh, you thought I would kill you!" I interject. "You know that I could never handle large, cruel emotions, but I think now you have cured me."

"Good," he answers.

We stand in silence. His presence fills the room, this terrible force field draining my energy. The light shifts and careens off my skull. With averted face, I stare at prisms, concentrating with all my strength.

"Jurith, you are a giant. Don't cower. Look here!"

"I don't cower, not before you. I simply don't want to look. You remind me of someone I knew once, but not very well at all. I wish you would go now. This farce is over. Laom is yours to do with as you want. I won't stay here as Control's slave."

"Is your child mine too?" he asks, and I feel such a wild surge of anger I don't know how my body contains it.

"No," I say. My hands are clenched fists.

"Jurith, you are lying. Let me see it."

"It is a young woman. Her name is Qyoo. Q-y-o-o," I spell it out slowly.

"Qyoo? I see. Where is she?"

"Resting. She's had surgery."

"Why? Answer me. I'll think about it and know."

"Because she was mostly love...too much love. I think she got it from me. It drove her mad. Now she'll be much better...only half love. I need surgery too."

Ammon steps toward me, the dark suit defining threat, a musculature of power. I back up, throwing out my hands.

"You! You, Ammon, are one quarter lust...excuse me, false love, one quarter Control -- a war machine -- and the other parts...ego and black magic. One quarter played with me and one quarter used me and one quarter experimented and one quarter sated itself. Isn't that how it went? Or was it one quarter only that..."

Ammon is methodically removing his blue-black suit.

"I must take this off. It's very uncomfortable. I'm sweating."

I am beginning to shake, my voice, my hands, everything, rattling like a bare branch in an ice storm.

"No, it was not even false love...it was one quarter experiment and one quarter Control you felt for me."

Ammon is still piling clothes on the floor. "Come here," he says, standing bare-chested in fatigue pants.

"I've deceived us...I'll kill you now," I say.

"Good," he answers, "a normal, healthy response at last. Come here, then, and I'll show you how to do it. But first put all my quarters back together. I'll tell you exactly how they work."

"My androids!" I cry out, "only they are real."

I move forward a mere fraction, refusing to be caught, but I need to read his eyes. They are the code I must decipher. Something strange has happened. I stop dead and look at him bathed in the dazzling light of my unopaqued crystal. He is a blinding density, painted with prismatic bands of color, an ancient holographic icon, shining in multicolored skin. Such a classic pose of contradiction, the smooth-spoken, hard experimentalist, the restless freebooter, eyes glowing in a red band, forehead in blue, chest in green. I draw back. I know the colors will fade, that I am asleep. But Ammon has reached for me with quick impatience, taken hold of me! I know that I'm not going to

awaken mercifully from this agony which has paralyzed me. I am already fully conscious, already delivered to the brink of time-leaping insolence -- now in a violet band -- held there close enough to see everything, to know even the remote flickering of the orphan's death watch. I see the whole chronicle of Ammon: the abandonment, the early fear which tempers metal for certain reprisal, the shattering of one quick spring turning on simple carnal desire, the wormy rose of dark disappointment, the guilt of cool battles which once seemed bloodless, the huge curiosity crippled by tedium and anger, the terrible solitude of mistrust. I see...I see eyes that are deep, black, vengeful rivers of sorrow. "No!"

"Now," he says, tightening his grip, "here's a little periphrastic something. Pay attention. I'm four quarters to the twelfth power in need of Jurith, and the black abyss take the rest."

"You are a multitude of colors," I whisper, but it's only an empty phrase to balance me.

"I think I'm impotent. Too many cosmic rays. Ah, but I *will* have you, Jurith."

We come together. My eyes linger on the wry mouth because I can't remember ever seeing it dissolve into this kind of smile, a careless boy's pleasure expanding in a green band of light and fading into cream; its touch burns and everywhere his hands burn and then his body, sinking down on my soft vicuna bed. All the colored light is focused white, as ice feels pressed against hot skin.

Ammon is not impotent. I don't know whether he meant it or not. I'm not a seer now and my reasoning mind has shut down. I have at last no sense of time passing. My world has narrowed to skin, the firm, space-logged skin of a time Master. My head is on his chest, my eyes myopic and wandering among a forest of gray-black curls.

"I don't know if you're telling me the truth," I say with slow languid voice.

"About being impotent?" he asks, grinning and leaning on his elbow.

"No, no!" I hear myself laugh.

"I've told you the truth, Jurith. I am Control and I *will* oversee Laom to that end, but I'm--"

I sit up, my heart beating wildly.

"I thought I cured you of large, cruel emotions," he says, pulling me down and tucking my head under his chin. "In this I don't compromise, Jurith. This is the way my reality deals with unwieldy emotions. Once I sat outside with you in a golden summer. It was the day of your nineteenth birthday. I wanted to eat you up, to nibble and devour until you and your exclusive, excluding uniform were all just me. It was a time-fangled way of getting a badly needed soul. Soul, I say, for want of a better word. There is an ancient practice of eating our enemies...we should really eat those we love. You know the rest. You left, and I left The Tower. We both had work to do, but in a sense I followed you so that you wouldn't escape me in time. Always at the end of my travels was Jurith. You were my catalyst, my force...peace. Ah, hot emblem, now you're all the wildness that is left in me, the fire in my heart."

"How could you leave The Tower? I thought they... How could they let you? You were to be a new era, a new--"

"And so I am, am I not? I left with careful design and the help of power-hungry Menren. I didn't begrudge him that. He was schooled for the pro tem Seat by me. We arranged something for The Club and the sub-power of mice. The Club agreed to try me *in absentia*, for the sake of appearances. Appearances are very important to them. How they must have quavered when Menren, with all the cunning I

had taught him, made me a hero of the populace. It took years for the story to catch up with me. I was deeply engaged and didn't care, but I can't deny the satisfaction.

"I took the First Fleet and did The Club's work for it, but it was my work, my responsibility, my idea. No, that isn't quite right. It was your idea too, Jurith. The Colonies were coming apart at the seams, but after twenty odd years, I think I've sewn them up again. Whoever now occupies my Seat hardly knows or cares. The one in The Tower presides over a monumental abstraction. For him, any abstraction will do as long as he perceives a sense of order within The Club, any kind of order as long as he feels at the center of it. But the absolute center of man's universe is his own brain, and the depth of his imagination is what guides or shackles him. You, above all others, know this very elementary fact. As long as I'm alive out here, I am still Control, and The Seat on the Hustler planet is mute.

"So I've been a space sojourner, chasing myself through relative realities as a dog chases its tail. I've done what I set out to do and done it always on the periphery of your world. The colonies know me only as Control, as Condor. They are the life blood, what counts. They drug the mother planet into stupefaction by its own decree, and drown it in a glut of affluence with their aggressive commerce. They thrive as it pulses after them with its great arsenal, a flagellating whip of inducement. And I...I've sometimes found a friend, *been* a friend out here, more pleasing still.

"Should I use time-stretch to come home to die I will have full restoration. I've been gone so long, have ministered so far that I am canonized in life. A paradox. All leaders should vanish in their prime. I've had an extravagant freedom of which the poor Tower dwellers can only dream. I saw my designs come to fruition under my own

hands, not always bloody hands, Jurith. I did everything, large and small, even cool micro-mode brain surgery in some remote places. Have you finished with your android neurosurgeons?"

"Yes. One of them assisted Roggi in Qyoo's surgery."

"I know a thousand places to send them. Gray matter is in crying need of your genius.

"But now I want to see Qyoo. Qyoo? You never knew my given name?"

"No. But Qyoo is--"

"I want to see her. Now, please."

"Put on your clothes, then, and your helmet too. I'll have to make some excuse."

I go outside and motion for Roggi to leave the others and come to me.

"Harquint wants to see Qyoo. One of the young women on his ship is so afflicted, and I've told him about our neurosurgeons. I think this will help our cause. Let us go quietly by ourselves. He's wearing his helmet to avoid the bacteria of Laom. Please keep the others away, Roggi, so that he doesn't feel threatened."

Roggi nods her head doubtfully but faithfully responds to my request, and Ammon and I go quickly to Qyoo's chamber where I seal us in. She is sleeping with such peacefulness spread over her pale face, the skin almost translucent against the soft white pillows.

Ammon removes his helmet and picks up Qyoo's hand, touching it to his lips. Her eyelids flutter, revealing the diamond clear eyes. He stares into them for long moments, and she stares back with wide eyes which acknowledge him, the father she has never seen. When I look at Ammon, I realize that he is telling her something. He has entered her sharp wakeful dream and I can only stand and watch. Now

I am an outsider, observing two creatures of genetic kinship share a profound secret. Qyoo smiles then closes her eyes and turns her face languidly away, lifting her hand up to her chin.

"Remarkable, this blossom of ours," he says, laughing with deep pleasure. "She's you, but whiter; perhaps it is my albino mother. There is nothing of my darkness in her."

"Oh, you're wrong. She has a violence, a wildness which longs to be set free. I tried to keep the Ammon in her silent. Perhaps that's why she fought so hard. Now she'll be free to have you. The unity of Ammon and Jurith."

Tears spring to my eyes as I think of Javan and Lupe.

"Formidable!" Ammon exclaims. "The universe can hardly withstand such a fusion." His face reflects humor and mischief and perhaps a shred of awe.

He touches her lips with the pad of his thumb and kneels down to kiss her half-open mouth. "She will love with ferocity," he says. "I have told her so."

Outside my crystal again, Roggi's brilliant eyes ask me just what I am doing with Harquint, but I'm not ready to say anything. I feel a great deal of friction as we reenter my crystal in silence, leaving the others outside. I am quite impatient. I turn around and say to them: "Go and take care of things. What can be happening while you're all standing around here? We'll be ruled by Juroids at this rate." I can see by their puzzled eyes that they believe the worst and fear for me, but I'm thankful that at least Pysu, Larstev, and Nima admit they have pressing business to attend. "I'm safe as a lamb," I assure them as I seal my thick crystal behind me and turn to Ammon.

He removes his helmet and his black eyes now look amazed at my presence, as though nothing has come before and we have just met after twenty years.

"What happened to Karak?" I ask.

"Black suns! Let me see your hand."

He examines the scar, pulling me down on my vicuna bed.

"I made love to you, holding your hand thus."

We begin the indelible scene all over again, time running backwards. I feel as fragile as the young cadet who lay in his arms then with the same ferocity of desire.

"Too many cosmic rays?" I finally gasp with rushing lungs.

"It does take longer in between these sweet melds than it used to," he says.

I throw my hand over my head, breathing in deep breaths, and rise up, asking, "What happened to Karak?"

"Isn't this where we start over? All right, all right, you're looking for your triumph. Don't leave me. I'll tell you. I deported the troublemakers and talked and talked. No, it sounds easy. It wasn't that easy. There was more blood spilled. There is always a ratio of spilled blood to bended knees. But we'll let this accounting pass for now. You saw what they grow, Jurith, when you were so busily offering yourself up for the Karakian cause."

I had seen something in his eyes, a masked sorrow which troubled me, but I let it go. "Lagro, yes. We took it along. Larstev grows a little."

"Yes, Lagro, among other remarkable things. I was surfeited with produce there. They supplied the entire First Fleet with hardly an interruption of normal commerce. And their Jurith they claimed with zealous pride. In the beginning I told them I came in the name of Jurith's peace."

"Did you?"

"Yes, but it took awhile to make that peace. You are a great heroine there. I would like you to see...but wait a little, wait a little. I'm moving too fast."

I smile dreamily. I'm busy touching my lips to skin planes in my micro-world. Suddenly I look up into the sated eyes. "Did you..." The eyes narrow intently. "Did you ever..." I struggle with a question so hurtful my heart beats pain into my throat.

"Yes," he answers in a carefully softened voice. "Lupe and Javan met their end in a strange experiment and were interred in MACRA's mausoleum with great ceremony." I feel his arms tightening around me the way I hung onto Qyoo when she slipped over into the torment of madness. "They were so valuable, so much loved, Jurith." He dips his fingers into the tightening muscles of my back, massaging grief and perhaps reading the images flashing over my brain.

I lie listening to his heartbeat, trying to think only of the sound, but it says, *Lupe and Javan, Lupe and Javan, Lupe and Javan, forever and ever*. No two more vitally alive humans ever existed, and yet I have always known I would have to hear this, the total silence, the emptiness, the finality of the lush, rich beauty which was Lupe and Javan. Nowhere in the universe. Nowhere. "No," I whisper with hollow refusal. "No!" My tears fall into a bed of curls. Ammon thrusts his fingers roughly through my hair to my scalp, for awhile his hard-clasped palm diffusing the pain.

"I found a photograph of you in the MACRA personnel computer. You before I knew you, in your parents' garden. I was stunned...printed it, carried it off...my only booty in all the universe. It hangs in my quarters. Blond Jurith among crimson hollyhocks, face opening on blue sky."

I lie quietly, swimming in sorrow, occasionally sighing until I feel I must look at Ammon. He has made me look at him, focusing full attention on me, holding himself silent and scalding me with his eyes.

"What?" I almost shout, but I know what.

He smiles a curious smile. "Not long after I arrived out there, you released an amazing android," he says. There is a slowness in his voice, reflective, almost reverent.

"Yes," I say, falling quickly back on my pillows. But I am forced to meet the relentless black eyes with my curious mixture of pride and shame. "You've always known that I'm flawed," I finally add.

"You've been away from me so long you now refer to your amazing capacity for love as a flaw. Don't be ashamed, Jurith. Your creation! What a daunting specimen, if you'll pardon my vanity...and fortuitous. I made good use of him. At first, I was jealous of my likeness. Jurith has no need of me, such is her genius, I thought. I soon discovered that he was mostly you disguised as Ammon, and I almost fell in love with him. He was too magnificent to rival Ammon -- I mean too perfect -- and far too kind and pacific."

"What did you do with him?"

"The question more properly is what will he do with himself? I grieve to say he is more faithful to Jurith than his prototype. His future? Ah, what can we postulate? Fortunately, he came helmeted...unusual for an android."

"He left in his own time and manner. The others didn't know about him, and I suppose he was protecting me as well as himself...and even you."

"I see. Well, following a security scan, he came into my presence still helmeted, as I have come into yours. No one had seen him but me. After my initial shock, I spoke with him and found him charming and highly intelligent. Perhaps he is Ammon in a state of grace: he lacked a desire for self-preservation -- what made you turn my weapon on yourself, Jurith? It was the worst thing you could have done to me. Of course, you knew that...wanted--"

"No, nothing so cunning or cruel. I thought you'd come

to taunt me...would destroy us. I felt myself finished."

"Perhaps you're right...that I'm a quartered black sun...if I could cause that. Some of my quarters must do reprehensible things, but the entirety of me wants you."

"You'll lull me into a sense of security...no, never that with you...I know how complex you are. I know your plans aren't finished...whatever they may be. They go beyond the simple love of Jurith."

"The love of Jurith simple? Not to me...it's what I've come for."

"And Laom?"

"Incidentally, Laom...of course, Laom."

I laugh, sorry that my laugh is so bitter.

"Is this the simple love of Jurith, or is it also something complex? Will I ever touch upon it with my bare existence? Don't castigate me too much, Jurith, not now at this moment. Let's go on together here...remembering, exploring...vulnerable. Please."

"I'm sorry. You as a psychiatrist know that I'm in the trauma of your sudden proximity. I lied. My love isn't simple but a complex maze which loses me. I only feel and go on feeling. What is it that I want from you? I don't know. How can something so powerful be so intangible, so utterly mysterious? I've never wanted such power over me. It frightens me to relinquish anything. You frighten me."

"That gives me no pleasure. I'm not a sadist. But you've nearly described my own feelings, except that I don't fear you, Jurith. I fear your absence -- it once drove me to madness. Most of all I fear your non-existence, like a sun burning out and making a very dark system."

"If what you say is true, how can you...but, no, you've explained how you can...almost explained how you can."

"Can what?"

"Murder my androids."

"Ah, we've flashed on another channel. Now we're talking about something else. You've cast off logic."

"What has logic to do with love?"

"Nothing, really nothing, but it has something to do with rightful ownership and, in particular, Laomite."

"And round and round we go. You'll find that I'm stony hard stone, adamant as the rock of Laom, unbendable...but destructible. No, Ammon, I won't bend, but you can, of course, destroy me."

"Black suns! Just let me love you!"

Ammon is not so gentle this time in taking me against him, but exasperation soon melts away and as quickly in me. We are gentle again, delicate in our approach, afraid of pain, like shy children first meeting. These clashes exhaust and confuse me, but I accept them because of our inflexible wills and because the sweetness consumes everything else. I don't question, I only immerse myself in giving and receiving...in the hot effusion of Ammon and Jurith. Time falls away.

I lift my head and find Ammon sleeping. I've never seen him sleeping, the simple luxury of it. Yet it is so like death it frightens me. The light is different, and I realize that I too have been sleeping. I wrap my white robe around me and ask the computer to send Boaz with a light supper and rose wine, then I return to Ammon. I lean on my elbow and try to think myself inside his head. He opens his eyes, smiling and reaching for me. "I'm spoiled with contentment," he says against my ear. "And hungry," he admits. He begins pulling on his skin pants as though he expects to go out in search of food.

"And you'll be fed."

"I've already been fed. Look, you still blush. What

memories that summons."

Boaz comes with food, and I'm astonished. He brings me back to reality. He is more real to me than Ammon. He spreads the food on a cloth on the floor, as I've instructed him to do. There is fruit, sweet hot bread, cheese, and rose wine, which I pour into the rock crystal goblets, so beautifully carved by our android artisans that I am proud.

Ammon watches Boaz in silence, taking in his reverent manner toward me, and, I suppose, thinking of my android Ammon. I too think of my creation, and again questions leap into my thought, but I speak of other things.

"Here's an apple from Larstev's orchard. What a genius he is. You chose us all and put us together. I wonder if you knew what would happen among us. Can you know such things with your clairvoyance?"

"Sometimes I see things clearly and sometimes not. Sometimes I don't want to." He turns to Boaz as he speaks.

"Goodby, Boaz. It was nice meeting you. You've taken good care of my woman."

"Ammon! Boaz, you're not to speak of this to anyone. Do you understand?"

"Of course I understand, Mistress, Jurith."

"Oh, now don't be phony with me. I wish Roggi had never taught you that form of address. Please, I ask you nicely. You are to speak not a word of anything you saw or heard in this room."

"I will not speak a word, Jurith."

Boaz bows deeply to Ammon who bows back, and I feel a little fear of some kind, gnawing at the back of my mind even as I am laughing.

"Why do you have a male servant?"

"It seems better. The men have women and the women have men."

"I see."

"No, you don't see. You can't be jealous of Boaz?"

"Why not? He's had the luxury of your company ever since the day he was created. But if I'm jealous it applies somewhere else."

"You're thinking of your ectype."

"Yes."

"We never finished this conversation. What did you do with him?" I ask.

"He became a welcome companion. I kept him in a little locked cell in my quarters and called him out at odd lonely hours. Sometimes I imagined I was speaking to you through my alter ego. I gave him a great deal more information about myself and Control. He told me that he would self-destruct if forced to commit violence. I may have fixed that."

"But why should he say such a thing, unless you--"

"I didn't try to turn him into a killing machine."

"You did the others."

"Black suns! You blew up one of my cargo shuttles."

"At that point there had been a near invasion and mass destruction, I believe. It was Pysu's idea. You do remember Pysu?"

"You're joking. I picked his brain clean."

"Then you must have laughed a great deal."

"He used to tell me great long tales, very clever fabrications...because for him analysis was a game."

"Isn't it?"

"In a way, a rather stirring game...an artificial way of making friends. But, yes, I did laugh a lot, even though I knew what he was up to. He had, still has, I'm sure, wonderful qualities I couldn't ignore. He was recommended because of his extensive geological knowledge and that among

other needed areas of expertise. The comedy was a bonus. I knew he would make you all laugh. He was used to being alone for long periods of time, a studier, a thinker...witty and sagacious. A natural for the Quester Expedition."

"He was of great help to me on the journey...when I...fell ill."

I see that I'm making Ammon uncomfortable, but I can't stop. Yet, I must stop this. But I hear my voice going on. Am I talking to my analyst now, looking for solace? Can the perpetrator also cure the malady?

"Of course pregnancy was my own fault...but then I fell into a kind of madness. At first, I didn't do very well. It took all of my strength to...and I couldn't give up command...not at least, until the very last...when I was delirious. I know it was--"

"Jurith, don't do this."

I look at Ammon. His face is half averted, one hand pressing against his neck with his head turned to the side in a great flux of agitation.

"I know it was intended to happen, had to happen, but I hated you. Somewhere in a corner of me there is still that hatred...or I would now be able to shut up. I can't give up the idea that you enjoyed it, all of it. You say you're not a sadist. What was that you did? What was it, Doctor? A remarkable experiment which worked? Something you're proud of? I swear by my life that I got here by my own will."

Now I realize that I've almost screamed and am thankful that the walls of my crystal can emit no sound to the outer corridor. I see that I've succeeded in wounding Ammon deeply. The proud invincible Master injured at last.

He lifts his head and the taut skin of his face is even a little paler, making the glistening black eyes look all the more like forbidding dark caverns. I see grief. He

shakes his head and mutters something inaudible.

"I should have forgotten this long, long ago," I say.  
"I didn't realize it was all going to pour out of me."

"You've never forgotten, Jurith. Never will and never should. I knew exactly what I was doing, convinced myself that it was necessary and that you were submitting yourself to it for your own purposes...using me, in fact. That's how it went. But all the while I was...that quarter of me you speak of was hating it. It was nothing compared to what I feel now. You with child, giving birth -- Black suns! Why did I not allow myself to see this? Was my vision blocked with pride or lust? I have no excuse but the one you make for submitting. It sounds hollow in the face of your hatred. I know that. You should remember everything...and the hatred is, of course, no less than I deserve."

"But now I've said these things I feel released from them. I remember how I felt about you even then. Pysu held me in his arms...sometimes I thought it was you."

"Great suns!...that it could have been!"

"Do you understand me? Please. I tried to understand you."

"For twenty years I've...I understand. Let's talk no more of this now, Jurith, unless it will do you some great good. It does me none. I know only that I left you alone to create your world and that it was a terrible sacrifice borne of guilt and a huge desire to see you triumph. It has nothing to do with what Control needs. You are my own triumph, Jurith...because I left you alone."

I reach nervously for the food, unable to think of myself as triumphant. "Please eat something. It would make me feel better."

"I don't think I can right now."

"But you said you were hungry. Drink something."



swallow quickly. I am quite responsible for myself and the others, no matter how independent they may be.

"You haven't changed your drinking habits, I see."

I finish off the entire goblet.

"And you still take pleasure in annoying me in little needling ways," he says with a grin.

"We've started to talk about...about my creation so many times without finishing. Why is that?"

"No particular reason. We have so much to say that we're easily led astray. I'm sorry, but I need to piss."

"Over there." I get up, press a small area near an opaqued door, and the door slides open.

"It's beautiful in here," Ammon calls over his shoulder. "The light from above. Suddenly I crave a shower. I'll wash your back if you'll wash mine."

I slip out of my robe and come up behind him, laying my face against his back. A soothing circle of warm water sprays down upon us. I take up a flagon of soap, pour it into my palm and lather it over his curly-haired skin.

"Water is precious here. We love it. It's such a sensuous luxury."

"You are the same for me."

He turns around and rubs soap over me, then sets the flagon blindly down and slides his hands over my shoulders and down across my back. "Great white nights! how I love to have hold of you. This was just an excuse to touch you."

Water streams over us as we come together, sliding down the steaming wall. "Oh!" I laugh, slipping against him and remembering the cataracts of Wierlfoss. I hear my name above the roar. I hear the soft sounds of pleasure in his throat, then in a little while feel myself swathed in a towel and carried off to my soft bed.

I open my eyes with sudden shock because his arm is

thrown over me and I am so used to sleeping alone. I sit up. The room is dark but I see the glitter of his eyes from a small glow light in the spire of my crystal. He watches me awaken, waiting for me to speak.

"I couldn't think who you were for a moment."

"Quithran Ammon," he answers. "Inexhaustible lover of Jurith...space-weary dreamer...father of Qyoo."

"Quithran," I whisper slowly.

"Yes?"

"Who calls you that?"

"No one."

Silence.

"Ammon?" I say. He knows the rest of the question.

"I didn't do anything with him," Ammon answers with his undiminished prescience.

"But what do you *intend* to do with him?"

"Nothing...yet. I can't really do anything with him. He seems to have a volition of his own. I have made suggestions..."

"Oh, Ammon, what have I created?"

"Perhaps you've made what you originally intended, Jurith, the ultimate experiment. It excites me. If anything should happen to me, I have programmed my personal android aide to carry out certain instructions in regard to our -- what shall we call him, surely not Ammon...perhaps I will refer to him as Anima, meaning soul in an ancient tongue. Is he not our soul? He's quite logical. It may be that he is superior to me."

"You don't believe that. You're playing with an abstraction again."

"No, I'm staring in the face of an absolute...but I don't know if what I'm thinking is a righteous or profane sentiment."

"Let me look at you, Ammon, at your eyes. I must know what you're thinking. If you won't tell me let me guess."

"I'm thinking of bones and stardust, megadeaths and eternity, matter and antimatter, universes winking on and off with categorical cosmic ease...and the ultimate experiment. And of course you, Jurith. You!"

I have a fear in me that I too must pay and pay for my victory with all that I cherish. I am afraid to pursue this, as though my words are the final step in some master plan, but still one question lingers in my mind.

"Where is he, my creation...your ectype?"

"It makes no difference that you know, Jurith. He's quite intact and superfunctional with his quiet power, an amazing persuasiveness which brooks no deterrent -- really *your* quiet power. He's in one of my fleet carriers, Number One, in fact. Does that satisfy you?"

"Ammon, he was programmed to emulate me, but he... He was fascinated with you."

"And am I such an evil exemplary?" Ammon laughs with great gusto, but as quickly his face is serious. "Don't worry, Jurith, I only informed him some and extended his character in certain ways; if you'll allow me, he's quite sophisticated now, but I did finally take the precaution of stopping his tendency to emulate, and he has your wisdom, with his approval. As to his convictions, they are, well, prototype-Ammon-proof, as adamant as Jurith and as ready to self-destruct under autocrats like me. Self-destruct, that is a painful, painful thing to say. When I see you taking my weapon, holding it to your head, *your exquisite head*, this body of mine begins to self-destruct. It was the worst thing you've done to me, worse, far worse than recounting all the pain I caused. You would have left me again...damn you!...exited my life with bone-chilling finality!"

"I will say again that I believed I was only a needed instrument to you, to possibly an evil end, and consequently my work here was thwarted...finished. Emotion blinded me. The difference in what I believed to be our attitudes had already finished me before I took the weapon. I wanted the pain to end. Can't you see how I could do it then?"

"I can't think of it rationally."

"Imagine how it hurt to realize that you had rendered the weapon unusable because you believed I would use it on you. Imagine that. It hurts still. I, Jurith, would kill Ammon?"

"Forgive me. It's reflex. I have a warrior mentality. I must preserve the body until the last dog is hung."

"Jurith is hung?"

"Black suns, my sweetest thought, you murder yourself not I! Why do you do it?"

"Everything that I have worked for is to be turned against me. In the darkness of this news, my long devotion to you seems only a joke...and I a fool. I've forsaken my colleagues who trust me."

"Ah, I came at you wrong, in my usual storm. There is some anger in me at you too, Jurith. It's misplaced and has to do with vanity and your monumental independence, near indifference. I've not been above attempting to bring you down, because it's difficult to believe who you are. I was inured in mistrust. I must keep testing...proving."

"Always the experimentalist, endlessly verifying," I say, laughing and settling down in Ammon's lap like the careless child I would like to find myself, if only for a few moments. I am thinking how we circle and dive at each other with extended beaks, how we make little forays inward, ruffling and preening our feathers, scolding, clucking, cooing, and starting all over again, circling closer and

closer. "You aren't Condor, but the great black raven of Karakian legend," I say, "the shrewd and unpredictable predator...the raucous cunning trickster."

Ammon lifts my chin and looks into my eyes. "You have a fowl imagination." He grins. "And you're the swan with extended neck, clean and white but only seeming vulnerable. You sail forth to conquer with purest quiet power."

After a period of thoughtful silence, he sighs. "I've fought some wars along with my good deeds and raised hell with your android population."

Again I feel anger starting up somewhere deep inside and marvel at how helpless we animals are when at the mercy of our unevolved brainstems. I cool myself, but all I can say is, "Why?"

"The answer is involved, as always. I acted with practical intent, but there are complex personal motives dragging along. First of all, I've established several outlying factory cities. We need 77 for our Lightning transports, these big fast beasts cruising in your spaceways are Control's mobile construction sites, rotating cities. They're actually multi-purposed, transports and--"

"I know what their purpose is. They're the ultimate battle fleet, one which plays hopscotch with tracers faster than angseconds and evilly continues to build itself in the process."

"Then you don't need my explanation."

"I asked why you annihilated my androids."

"Personal motive. I wanted to see if you would fight."

"I'm still your experiment," I say. The anger rises.

"Yes. It's my way. I can't stop it. I need to turn the mind inside out and examine the contents. I'm always looking for something...the method, the way, the truth..."

"Have you decided what it is?"

"I suppose I have, but I don't quite believe it. You are positive light directed out. It's what brought me down here to you at last. I intended to remain anonymous for awhile and get what I needed. It seemed enough to know that you existed here in all your rustic splendor, and that my fleet hovered over you, sparing you from danger."

"Little agony was spared. It must have been trying knowing that the one place you wanted to obliterate was the one you needed absolutely intact."

"Jurith, Jurith, my pretender of peace, I could never harm a hair on your head."

"Ah, but you would like to kill my idea, the one which exists inside this head, and therefore you need to stop me. Death without death. I prefer the other."

"So, we must go through another circle of hell. Help me to stand away from the pain this time, and let me comment like a cool diplomat. You can't be killed in essence, why then in fact? Even when humans war and trade flesh they long for your way...enlightenment. The incomplete brain lumbers on cradling a dormant seed of your way...a fatal hope. Look what you've done to me."

"I believe you consider it bad, Ammon. And look what you've done to me. There is no future for Jurith, no Laom for Jurith's universe."

"Perhaps Qyoo is our only future now. Let's talk no more of Laom...only of Jurith and Quithran."

"To talk of Jurith is to talk of Laom," I say, but I whisper to myself, "Quithran," thinking of all the years of unknown Q, thinking of our Qyoo. "Why Quithran now?" I demand, "Why now?"

"Why not? I didn't intend to come so soon, but when I talked to the historep, Mirabul -- I liked him by the way -- he made you come so alive to me that I was no longer merely

content with your existence. In any event, I knew that sooner or later I would need you."

"For what?"

"For myself!...and for you. It's more than a little obvious that we need each other. I resisted. I'm so nearly powerless with you. Don't you know that? I'm naked in more than flesh. Quithran is naked. There is another face of Ammon...one who loves you and would still leave you."

"Control's face," I say, and, because I hate saying it, it is almost inaudible. "If I could think of a way to save Laom from becoming an instrument of war, I would not go away either, but I'm going. I'll go to Karak. It must be wonderful now. I might do some useful work there. But oh how I sorrow for the dreams of my companions. I promised them so much...still we've come so far."

Tears spring into my eyes and I see that Ammon is angry, almost sneering at my surrender, but he calms himself and says coolly, "I want Qyoo."

"Oh, yes." I smile, "I think it's your turn. Roggi has set free genetic elements of oil and water. It won't be so easy for you. I had the Qyoo who was all love, her fleeting tantrums notwithstanding, and she was not interested in explanations then."

"You would let her go!" Ammon roars, and I think with great joy that he is fighting for me with Qyoo but I do not give in.

"She's almost the age I was when I was left," I say. "But she'll be with you. If I can leave you, I can leave her." Thus I try to implement my lie.

Ammon takes hold of my shoulder, accidentally pinning my hair painfully with his fingers, and pulls me down roughly. For a moment his face seems merciless and violent.

"Not a hair on my head!" I remind him.

"Jurith, Jurith, Jurith, you cause me such trouble. Your wholeness is not a virtue."

"I'm not whole," I say with hurting scalp. I almost smile because I feel so awake, so alive. "I don't want to go, but you know that I will. Haven't I shown that I can leave you?"

"Black suns, at what expense!" He releases me and touches my cheek with the back of his hand in surprising gentleness. "Even the vilest corner of me wants you. Can we really leave each other again?" His eyes glitter impatiently, waiting for my denial, but I say nothing.

"Then get up and stand across this fangled shard of light you've brooded in for twenty years! Go on!" He gives me a shove and reaches for his clothes, checking a readout on his gold telewrist. "...over there, watch me get dressed and quit this dazzle. But don't come near me."

My pretending is finished. I don't get up or move.

"Not now. I can't now."

"What difference between now and later?"

"Now is now. I can't even speak of later." I feel a sop of tears rising in my eyes, the child in me abandoned, loathsome self-pity coiling in my chest.

He is standing in equivocation, scratching his head and looking at his clothes, then at me.

"You will mercifully dispose of me on your way out, please," I say, utterly foolish with self-contempt.

He looks down on me with reminiscent whimsy, and I look down on me -- there is Jurith, everyone's bulwark of strength, lying naked on twenty years of dreams, as deprived of choice as a rabbit locked into its mating code.

He drops down beside me and throws himself over on his back, smiling. "I couldn't put you back," he mutters.

"When you came to me at Black Hall you completely disarmed

me, even though I was half waiting. Remember what you did? The Quester Expedition made you bold, made you come to me with such urgency. Remember? Show me just that one precise gesture, Captain."

Never having forgotten, I let my hands play through the unruly hair, then touch the hot, damp face of this usurping Ammon. Our silent mouths nuzzle coded touch phrases, then, now, far, near, always more. We slip the airless lock of division, combine, implode, sabotage the disciplined network of two, reshaping in fugitive oneness.

I awake with a deep shock of fear and shake Ammon gently.

"I can't wait any longer. I've got to tell Roggi who you are. They're out there and I've forgotten that; you've made me forget. I've got to do it now, but only Roggi, so she can stop things from happening."

"What from happening?"

"I don't know, but I have fear that something will happen if I don't act."

"Let me think about it. I'll come to know what it is that frightens you."

"No, I can't wait. I've got to go now. Wait for me. I'll be back in a little while," I say, slipping into a fresh silk gown. "Go back to sleep."

I have Roggi paged and meet her in my garden. She is pacing up and down under my miniature date palm when I arrive. Her flashing eyes are loaded with censure.

"It's a good thing you called me when you did. The others are fit to be tied. Can you imagine how they feel? It's only because we have absolute faith... They're none too favorably disposed toward Harquint after the squandering of androids that went on. As Nima has suggested, we have a conference room, Jurith, where we could have all sat down

together. Oh, I know those weren't the terms Harquint agreed upon, but surely with your persuasive powers you could have gotten him to agree to some place other than your sleeping chamber."

I let Roggi hurry on in this vein, spilling out all of her worry and concern, then lift my hand for silence.

"Roggi, bear with me, please. In all the years you've known me have I ever led you astray? Hasn't my concern for you all always been foremost in my mind?"

"You've always shown it to be, Jurith."

"Tell me, Roggi, do you remember very much about Ammon?"

"Ammon? Of course I do. What an impression he left on me, but what has that to do with--"

"What did you think of him? I mean before you had any reason to believe that he might have hurt me. When first you met him and worked with him, what was your opinion of him? Tell me."

"This seems a strange time...but, well, I was attracted to him. Before your...difficulties, I thought he was an exceptional, if mysterious person. I think I believed that he was just what Control needed, that he might do great things. Why am I being asked these questions?"

"What effect do you think he had on me?"

"I thought a very great one. I thought he had a great power over us all, that he had somehow changed your life drastically, that he had hurt you, that he was Qyoo's father, and that you had never gotten over him. Have I been accurate? Why have you suddenly become so candid on a subject we've barely ever touched upon?"

"Sit down here with me, Roggi."

Roggi sits and, with one glance at my face, takes my hand in hers.

"Tell me, Jurith, what this is all about. What can have happened to you? You look so different. You... What in blazes am I beginning to think...can it be?"

"That Harquint is Ammon? Yes, it can be."

"Blazing comets!...let me stop and think what this means."

"Everything is changing very quickly, Roggi, but where Laom is concerned you must not think that Ammon has any power over me. He does not. He knows that. Where Laom is concerned I am adamant, I am stone. And because Ammon is... that is, because I do mean a great deal to him, I believe that something can be worked out. I need time with him. You must think of a way to give me that without telling the others. You must help me."

"But don't you think they have a right to know, since this concerns their futures too? I'm overwhelmed by this. I know what Control wants. They've given us protection because...no, wait, all this time it has been Harquint supposedly giving us protection while he breathes down our throats with the threat of annihilation. Black suns!"

"But he won't do that, Roggi...in any case because of the Laomite. Don't you see? You have no idea what is out there. A battle megalopolis the likes of which you have never dreamed, all under his command, all Control's. We are as nothing...just as you have come to see, except for the Laomite."

"And except for you? Can we assume that?"

"I..."

"You've lain with him and you don't know?"

"I know. I do know."

"Suppose he uses you as a hostage to get what he wants?"

"He won't. He doesn't have to."

"Then he would kill you if you got in the way and refused to stand aside. That's what you're really saying."

"No, no, Roggi, he will not. You must believe that."

"Then what does he intend to do?"

"I haven't found out precisely; that's why I need more time. We need more time to...to work through our own relationship. Strong emotions control us now and we aren't always rational. Please don't look at me like that. There is nothing to fear. The worst is over. Our feelings which began with such startling effect so many years ago continue to shape and deepen moment by moment, and I know this is what will save Laom. I know it, Roggi, as surely as I have always known the way to come out of a crisis. Do you trust me now? Will you help me?"

"Dearest Jurith, you look as I've never seen you. What can I say to this tragic glowing face? How can I desert you when you've given so much to us and asked so little? But what in blazes am I to tell the others?"

"Tell them that Harquint refuses to leave the purified air of my crystal until we've reached a solution because he will be susceptible to the bacteria of Laom, nor will he allow an injection to reverse the onset of contamination. Continue to have our food sanitized and wait for me to call you. Can you do that?"

"But you could contaminate him."

"You know the swiftness of bacteria here; if I had done so he would already be ill. He isn't. No doubt he has taken his own precautions. He too is a doctor, don't forget. Can you do this, dear Roggi?"

"I suppose I can, especially if I tell them that Harquint has a lot more hardware lurking up there than we imagined and that he knows he will not escape us if any harm comes to you."

"But if any harm did come to me you must let him go to save Laom. You must promise me that."

"Now I'm ready to call the whole thing off."

"Don't you see, Roggi, I could have an accident in my own chamber, and you would needlessly kill Ammon and destroy yourselves and Laom. That's all I mean. You must promise."

"Oh, black suns! I will promise because I love you and trust you and because you're wise...and because I've never been able to refuse you anything anyway."

"I love you, Roggi. There is one more thing, the most difficult. I must ask you to swear to me, Roggi, that you will never tell anyone that Ammon has been in my crystal. Whether or not something happens to me, you must swear. You must always tell the others it was Harquint. It's possible that this distinction is very important for the future. It isn't Ammon alone who has prescience. I see a danger for him, for us all, if his presence in my chamber were known to the pro tem Control, but most of all I see a danger for Qyoo, as *his* child. She has a chance now. Do you see? Pysu long ago swore his silence. He alone among the others knows who Qyoo's father is...and I've not forgotten that I asked you to keep this secret too."

"Yes, Jurith, but you frighten me. You seem to see a dark future for yourself."

"No, dear one, my future can never be dark. Now do you swear? Swear to me."

"I swear, Jurith. I will never break my word."

"You must, of course, tell Qyoo nothing of this, if something should befall me before I'm able to explain."

"Roggi's face is solemn. Her voice breaks. "Jurith, Jurith, don't frighten me so. Does he mean you harm? Black suns, tell me!"

"No. No! Now *I* swear to you. I believe he would die

first.

"Now, I'm going."

"Have a...a wonderful time, Captain. Your wish is my fortune...until my bones are dust."

I am smiling as I walk away. How I love the way Roggi will always make me smile, even when she is as gravely worried as I know she is at this moment.

"Where have you been?" Ammon asks. "I've had coded communication with my adjutant, a nervous fellow when I'm away too long...even though I've assured him I have friends down here."

"They don't have any trouble believing that?"

"They had trouble, but finding me alive and cheerful was convincing...and my word is the final word.

"How is big beautiful Roggi? What a temptation she was."

"She thought the same of you. She's wonderful as ever, our watchful mother. I do wonder what you saw in me, a troublesome spoiled child with a huge complex, when you had Roggi."

"I saw my whole world coming and going. The challenging peaceful intent, futile, but...and the powerful sense of destiny in you was like a magnet."

"You hoped to change my attitude?"

"I hoped to study it."

Ammon has put on his dark skin shirt.

"You look nice in that."

"And you look nice in pink silk, very nice. Come over here where I can touch you. I can feel you across the room, as I always could when you came into my office."

I kneel beside Ammon who is sitting cross-legged on my bed. He clamps his imperious hands over my shoulders.

"Jurith...I want to take you on a voyage, right here,

right now. All you have to do is look into my eyes and not turn away for awhile...until you're locked completely in my concentration. We'll travel together. If you cooperate, I'll keep out the difficult times. Will you come with me?"

"For what purpose?"

"I feel the need to share with you something of what I've done over the years. You were always there with me but you didn't know it. Show me you trust me now. We'll go away together to anyplace I've been...to anything I know."

"You want to hypnotize me again?"

"This is a little different. I want to make you trans-subjective, to take you with me and slip you into certain frames of my wandering years. I was forever talking to you. Didn't you ever hear me?"

"I've often seen and heard you in my dreams," I say. But already I cannot take my eyes from his, whirling dark siphons with long, gnarled orchards at their center. But orchards are my private paradise. How can I be thinking of them now? I see them. Ammon's eyes...orchards. How can he know what they mean to me? They are life-affirming, the beauty and promise of their seasons...blossoms, fruit, bees, and honey...the security of order in nature. There is something I must decide but I can't turn away. Ammon and orchards. How does he know? He has used this to entice me.

"You...you do this well," I say, trying to hold myself away from submission, trying to feel the familiar vicuna now vanishing beneath my knees. Ammon's fingers are sliding down my arms and catching hold of my hands. I no longer feel or see my immediate environment...or is it really my environment? I am rising on air, traveling through eyes opening pathways along winding corridors of cloud.

"Am I awake?"

"You are with me. Come."

I hear Ammon's voice far away. I'm unable to catch up, then I've stepped over a precipice, afraid, dizzy, falling. "I'm falling!"

"You're not falling, only resisting me. Let go. Please relax. Don't hold your strong will against me; it saps my strength. Let go. Yes. Ah, relief. Now you're traveling with me. See the light? The light on Logarth is very bright. You catch it well in pale violet. Haven't I a good sense of color? If you don't like it blame the violet trees here. As far as you can see, pure water and tawny islands. This is where my surrogate father Crochi lived much of his life. It was originally shaped as a water planet with a network of subterranean-linked islands, a system computerized and watched over by the proud and able Logarthian water tenders.

"There are jackal here on this largest island. I don't know exactly when they arrived. The earliest water tenders brought curious pets which ran off and multiplied. There was once a quick violent war over this planet's water. Both warring colonies were annihilated off planet. No more transports came. The computers shut down. The water grew stagnate and scummy. Jackal and birds covered the islands. The noble stone buildings tumbled down, leaving scattered pillars and gold-white rubble. The few water tenders who were left retreated to caves, disease-ridden and dying. Along came Crochi. Someone like Crochi would naturally think this a perfect place to begin again.

"Crochi was young and adventurous. He wanted to teach the indigenous and naked scavengers logic. How that makes me laugh. Since they were dying anyway and there was nothing much to be gained by avarice, Crochi thought he had an experimental vacuum of the first order. He learned a great deal...and so did his subjects."



keep up with him. His guards move out of the shadows. People in hand-woven clothes stare at him.

"Do they see me?" I ask.

"Do you want them to?"

"Yes. I want to be seen...to move among crowds of strangers and let them rub up against me."

"Then they do...but in some places we go you must be careful."

"Can I be hurt?"

"Didn't you just stub your toe?"

"Why do you have it so?"

"I want you to feel, to breathe, to taste...and to feel me." He throws his head back and his hair flies away from his eyes as he laughs. "Your face is crimson, Jurith. See what an enchanter I am. Look."

I bend over the quiet water which spreads peacefully upon the pearly, graded shore. "I want to be able to see myself blushing," I say. I see in the gentle ripples that I look no more than twenty in my thin, pale violet dress and sandals.

"Did you do that?"

"No, you did. You haven't aged, Jurith. That's how you feel inside."

I put my hands to my face. "I'm hot."

Ammon pulls a handkerchief from one of his many pockets, dips it into the water and dabs at my face, pressing it gently against my forehead. His eyes are intent on what he is doing. "Cool water for this hot memory screen," he says.

I can hardly resist the hand, its tan, lithe vitality. But I only think of touching it to my lips, yet the thought gives me a quick, leaping joy.

"I must keep you from thoughts like that now. Later."

"Later?"

"You think not?" He laughs. "You'll see."

I kneel down and thread my fingers through the water.

"When Crochi cleaned up the water, wasn't he shortly in trouble? Surely someone came along and wanted it."

"Surely someone did. Someone always wants a place with white temples, violet trees, and clean, turquoise water. Crochi was finally compelled to go among the sick, healing bodies and struggling with apathetic minds, and before he knew it he had an army to fight the invaders of paradise."

"Just what he didn't want. What did he do?"

"Come, I'll show you."

We walk along the pebbled shore of the great canal which stretches out like a giant beckoning arm, until we enter a small village, passing through a narrow-walled alley of cobblestones. I am following Ammon like a curious tourist. I see and feel every detail.

Perhaps it is the truculent way he walks ahead of me with his shoulders square and dark which makes me suddenly whisper, or think of whispering, the warring name Harquint.

Ammon stops, turns around frowning and takes my arm. "You must not do that in this transmigration. I am solely Ammon. The other is a negative, cutting across mind power. I derive force from totality. Subterfuge is an unfortunate ploy to be put aside."

"But how could I affect such mind power?"

"We are conjoined. You'll soon realize the power you have to alter our state. There's no point in hiding it. You've probably never used what has always been with you. Now, as we are, you influence me greatly...make me vulnerable. Be careful. We must stay in accord."

"Sometimes you aren't speaking aloud and yet I hear your voice as though you were."

"Most of the time." Ammon laughs. "Don't trouble yourself about which is which. Forget method altogether."

We walk on. Sometimes my shoulder touches his arm. Black birds swoop in the sky, and I see that they have long white tail feathers and curved beaks. The air is still. No dust rises. The violet trees shimmer in warmth. In the center of the town stands an onion-domed, pink temple with a portico of delicate pillars which look like uncoiling ropes. The light is changing, throwing an orange gilt over the pink surface. Cooing doves perch in the incised patterns running along the coping where the rose dome meets its vertical base. Before the temple is an azure reflecting pool. At the top of the temple's curved pink marble steps stands a blank-eyed statue, arms outstretched, water pouring from the hands. When Ammon approaches he makes a respectful kind of genuflection. I know at once that the statue is Crochi.

"Crochi would not approve of this at all," Ammon says, "but his followers did it anyway. Zealous followers always misinterpret the requirements of their leaders."

"Is this then a hallowed place?" I ask.

"A brothel," Ammon says. "It's what saved Logarth from extinction...because it was the first and last place the invaders saw. Yes, it is a hallowed place."

"Interesting."

"Much more than that. A powerful weapon."

"Weapons! Love, kindness, hate, all merely different kinds of weapons to you," I think or say.

"Sometimes, sometimes not. Forget about it now," he says, and I know his intention is to render me calm and agreeable.

"Do you want to go inside? Accommodations are very nice."

"You know that I'm hesitant, so I'll do the opposite of

what I want and be objective."

"You'll do the opposite because now you're trans-subjective, not objective, because we're conjoined, because I want you to come inside and be pleasantly surprised...and because, yes, my skittish companion, you are stubborn."

I'm sitting on a large pillow on a thick white carpet in a delicately fashioned room with doorways which rise in leaf-tip arches. There are pearly fretwork dividing walls, recessed, latticed windows beneath a gold-filigreed ceiling. There is nothing vulgar about this subtly perfumed room. It is like an ornate flower enfolding us. A sinewy, dark girl in gold-threaded gauze is serving us plump green figs and tiny crystals which hold an aromatic sweet amber wine.

"If I weren't here--" I begin.

"Taste," Ammon says, "but do it slowly; it's potent."

I drain the crystal.

"Always assertive. You'll give me a headache. I remember again how you once sloshed champagne down your elegant throat before lustful Ammon. Can you not do this in moderation? Taste with taste. You need not contradict me here, Jurith. You'll always have your independence, whether I give it or not," he adds, laughing.

I stand up and look in the mirror, frowning. I am draped in pale pink gauze. I feel a slight dizziness. "You were right, of course. It's going to my head. I hope it won't annoy you. I thought you had better control of me. Oh, a terrible pun...hilarious...help me stop laughing."

"I warned you."

"But this cannot be. Get me out of this, please."

I'm atop a bed and the gown is gone. "This isn't what I meant."

"Yes, it is," Ammon says, sliding his fingers under my waist.

We wrestle on the supple bed, a softness not unlike my vicuna. We're playful, perspiring, happy. Once, a clear shaft of reason fires across my brain. "How can this be?" I whisper. "No, no, not a question to be asked," Ammon says. "Shh. Put your arms around me. I'm falling asleep."

We don't let go of each other, drifting off like two travel-weary tourists. In what seems like the next instant, we are awake. Silence. Then I hear a howling misery which curdles my blood.

"What is that? Stop it! Stop it!"

"The jackal are wailing," Ammon's low voice drifts out of the darkness from the other side of our large bed.

I wonder if he has been sleeping, dreaming. I wonder and wonder about this enfolded mystery. I am floating in a strange detached way. "Jackal?" I ask.

"They run in packs around the town...gone by morning."

He does sound sleepy, and yet I wonder... The wail grows louder. "Oh, must I go through this?"

"Yes. I like the little beasts. Listen, they're chorusing. Hear?"

"A kind of celebration," I whisper.

Ammon moves across the huge bed until I feel the warmth of his body touching my side. I'm unaware of anything but the eerie wailing and Ammon's taut-muscled arm and leg touching me ever so slightly. The sounds fade away.

"How glad I am for the song of the jackal," he says, taking hold of me.

Sometimes I am watching Ammon as he was alone in this setting; sometimes I am participating with him in the now of his memory and we are new in it. "Am I really in the night of some far off place? How?"

"Isn't it enough that we are here together?"

"More than enough," I answer.

I feel myself stretching. Am I awakening from sleep? Soon I'm sipping from a child's teacup a hot, spicy, black liquid thick as syrup. This marvelous essence needs the thick cream in the tiny pitcher resting on a silver tray in the middle of the bed. As I am pouring cream and looking at Ammon's dark head across the room, he is peering through ventilated walls at golden light on the other side. The light reddens. I dreamily watch Ammon in his reverie.

"I'm feeling very lazy in this elegant brothel," I say, finally. "Is it late? Something is buzzing. There's a fly in here. A fly!"

"It's evening," he says.

"Again?"

"I watched you sleep and dreamed your dreams."

"You'll make my analytical nature devour itself with such convoluted remarks. I'll begin treating you like a difficult equation. It will take all of my energy."

"Here we are, you in a silken bed, I standing on an ornate rug, watching light. Think only that. Otherwise you'll get no further than Crochi when he first began with his sick-bodied empty heads."

"And where *did* Crochi get with his marvelous gift? Possibly he bestowed this gift on you."

"I came to Crochi already in possession of what you call my gift."

"Please tell me about Crochi. He was so important to you and yet you say nothing, or almost nothing, about him."

"I've told you about him."

"Not very much."

"Jurith, we're going to leave Logarth now."

"Why?"

"I have some problems concerning certain aspects of Crochi. I don't want to drag you through something which

could make me lose our way."

"I'll be as strong as you. I want to know. I must try to know more of you."

"We would both wail like the jackal."

"Ammon, may I borrow a little of my mind now?"

"No. Enough! Don't do this Jurith."

"I think I can feel my own strength. I need to know about Crochi and Logarth...because they're part of you."

"We'll battle, but I'll win. The journey will end."

"Please let me see what you saw."

Already I am beginning to feel uncomfortable and wonder if I've been foolish. Ammon is reluctantly thinking in flashes of something which scores his mind with pain. I want to turn away, to come out even as I struggle to hold him to his thought. I fight. The pain of remembering weakens him for a moment and he willingly relinquishes.

"Then have your way; see what Crochi bestowed upon me in the same way I give it to you. We'll both suffer."

First, I see the main hall of the brothel, a wide-vaulted ceiling of shimmering mosaics supported by thin pillars of stretched gold flames. Shrill voices are ricocheting off the ceiling and echoing over the marble-blocked floors. A crowd of men in gray, red-trimmed uniforms is moving in a clatter of agitation over the polished floor. Now I see they are handling the women, black-haired women with great dark eyes like gleaming brown pods -- the eyes of the girl who brings us refreshment. I don't like this scene. "What's happening?"

"The women have come here to disarm the soldiers, soldiers who were sent here to ferry water to a hostile warship which has claimed Logarth. See the young girl in pale yellow, Crochi's woman. And there is Crochi, tall and bony. His eyes are clear and blue. Feel my sorrow, then.

This is what Crochi gave to me when I was still a child. He was ill, helpless and delirious. He didn't mean to. He'd already discovered that I could be conjoined with his past experiences and he was trying to focus on something he wanted me to know, but he was too ill. He thought he was dying. See what I mean? You'll have it now. Take it all."

"Ammon what is it? What's happening?"

But Ammon's mind is fierce and angry, and I am forced to feel this too.

"The women have drugged their men to protect them from the soldiers, then entered here to feed the soldiers poison, to lie with them if necessary until they die. But Crochi has found out. He tries to stop his girl, Lim, who is the leader. She argues, telling Crochi he has given Logarth back to the water tenders and they will not lose it again. A soldier cries out that he's been drugged. It was planned to happen slowly while the men were asleep, but this one man has drunk too much. Now do you see, Jurith? Black suns!"

I am paralyzed with horror, held fast in Ammon's vision which is fixed in the past and unalterable.

The soldiers have gone mad with rage. The olive-skinned girl, Lim, has her floating yellow dress torn away in shreds. They violate her brutally and others take over, wrestling with Lim. The women spring into action like warriors, yelling and beating the men with pottery cups and jugs. They're also beaten, blood everywhere, the gold-embroidered upholstery drenched with it. Lim's bare arms rise in the air, turning, knotting above the soldiers until her arms are broken. Finally Lim is still. Restrained and forced to watch, Crochi is shuddering on the brink of a wild madness. Four men drag him to Lim's body. Suddenly they bend over him, and I am sick. They hold him down over his mangled, deathly-white, blood-soaked Lim and gouge out his

eyes...the last thing he sees... All around the soldiers are dying... The last thing he sees..."

The screams which curve through the air are mine. For an instant I am in our room in the brothel, so sick, retching, then I am back on my vicuna bed, shaking in spasms of nausea.

Ammon is groaning and rubbing his eyes.

"What happened?" I demand with shaking body. "Tell me the end."

Ammon's voice is bitter. "Crochi was a stoic. He stayed on Logarth the rest of his long life until he started home to die. I don't know why he left or why he stayed so long, but that's how I came to know him. Perhaps he looked back on the whole affair as a kind of experiment. His mind worked that way. He devised a system in which Logarth could trade its water peacefully as a protectorate. He taught the children of Logarth the value and pitfalls of language and how to keep it clean and pure as the water. He taught me that it is man's ignorance of the power of language and of the proper way to understand and use it which keeps the species from evolving. He told me that his blindness was a field upon which he painted his own visions. In this way he tried not to recall what his optic nerves had registered as they were torn from his face."

Ammon's great black eyes are overflowing. I consider what Crochi meant to him. He presses his fingers into my shoulders, suddenly aware of me and highly agitated.

"You're a sensitive. You suffer in another's flayed skin, Jurith. Look at yourself, shriveling with agony! Don't ever do that again. I won't give in for the sake of curiosity. All this was unnecessary."

"No! I would do it again...even more to know what you carry in your brain. When I found that I could--"

"You can, but only if I let you. You haven't learned what I'm able to do."

The prismatic light is shifting in my crystal. Ammon's granite face is streaked with yellow and green, inflexible and alien. "The journey is ended," he says in a low voice.

"No, no!" I hear myself begging. "Now I've become an addict. I feel like a deprived tripper...without stimulant confined to a single uneventful space. Please take me with you again. I've traveled far but seen so little. I do have wanderlust but it isn't just that...to see through your eyes is...the feeling is... What am I stumbling to say? That at least for a little while I can be you. I'm simultaneously filled with excitement and dread...chilling fear...thrilling discovery of..." Discovery of Ammon I start to say but he knows, as he knows that I'm already in the throes of a drug...the drug of Ammon himself.

He shakes his head with pursed mouth and his rigid lips curve into a threatening smile. "I warn you, Spice, keep your wings folded and don't appropriate my itinerary. If you try to hijack me on a spiral again I won't break the transmigration. We'll suffer all the way through."

I turn away, out of the cutting blade of light bouncing off an angled surface. My head begins to throb. I sense something about him...so bleak. What is this new misery?

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"Yes," I lie, my heart beating faster and faster until I think the next beat will shut me down.

Ammon turns me around with his hand on my shoulder. I know that he feels my panic. I can sense the fierce will which could lock me in the blackest hole of existence.

"What is this? You're afraid, terrified...and of me."

"Of something, is it you?" I ask with a nervous tremor.

"It won't work," he says, giving a short, disillusioned

laugh. He studies his telewrist, and I feel my fear.

The silence becomes a thing in itself; it shimmers with brutal intensity, carnivorous, eating my desire. I shiver with sadness, knowing my fear is a wound in Ammon.

Jurith...remember being trapped with me once long ago in the ECCO tower elevator?"

"How could I forget? It was like...like now," I say, realizing where he has led me.

"Can you try to remember what happened?"

"Easily. The elevator was stuck. You were peering inside my head. I wanted to get out of there...felt dangerously threatened."

"Go on. Because you...because of something you did, Jurith."

"No. Nothing I did. What are you talking about? I sensed so clearly that you were interfering with my life, and I... What do you mean, something I did? I was inexcusably rude I know, but it was the effect of fear."

"I invited you to come and see me in The Tower -- really something I only half wanted you to do, for various reasons -- and told you that you interested me, which of course you did. But immediately I saw such mistrust and confusion in your face that I decided to put a stop to it then and there...that affront to Ammon's ego. I glared at you nose to nose to make sure I had you with me, and said something like: You'll be yourself now, Jurith, without fear...do what you want without fear. In that way, I only intended to send you away agreeable and reconciled.

"Clairvoyant Ammon was never so unprepared for any response. You leaned toward me up on your toes. Startled, I watched your white-uniformed arms gliding out to me. I felt your hands move behind my neck, curling into my hair as you pulled my head down. It wasn't the kiss of a starry-

eyed young subject but a hungry, whole-souled offering which stayed with me all that day and into a restless night. Of course I had to fix that...quickly demanding that you forget what I had unwittingly encouraged you to do. That's why you emerged frustrated and suspicious...because your prodigious sensitivity wouldn't easily accept the expunging of such powerful emotion. Thus I returned to Black Hall to see--"

"If I would still conform to the pattern," I finish. "I don't believe you could make me forget something like that...something so intimate. How could I have done it?"

"You tell me. You think I, who had conditioned you to transfer at the blink of an eye, couldn't erase the memory? "Remember now!" Ammon demands, stabbing me with his eyes.

My head reels. I am astounded and alarmed at such force. The memory, long concealed, clearly shapes itself as if I had just completed the act. "I do remember," I say with awe. "You've interfered with your own experiment."

"Always unavoidable...as you well know," Ammon says.

"You've deceived me again, but to a higher purpose you would probably say. How can I act and feel as I do when you've just destroyed my world? Have you some other plan unfolding in which I might be useful after Laom?"

"Is that what you think? I haven't destroyed your world, Jurith. It's all here, all that you've made. What I've destroyed, it seems, is your trust. I keep finding you and losing you. Let me climb out of this treachery. Tell me now what you really think of me?"

"Why don't you reach beneath my pitifully unreliable consciousness and help yourself. You're perfectly capable of reading my mind. If you dig deeply enough surely you'll find the truth. But don't bother to simply rely on what I tell you. Don't--"

"Black suns! I *am* simply relying on what you tell me,"

Ammon interrupts with furious protest.

"You want to know what I think of you. Isn't it amazing that we as a species place so much emphasis on knowing what is thought of us when we do so little to encourage good opinion? I still mistrust you. Contrary emotions creep into my judgment. I can't help it. But if I and my opinion didn't exist, Doctor Ammon, you would still be extraordinary. I have a passionate idea that what you've done will be beneficial over the long run. I want, need to believe that...only...only it seems to exclude our private selves. I suppose that's what it should do, but I still can't look at you without thinking of myself as a negative instrument, something...expendable," I whisper the last word to myself, feeling that all the fluid energy of life has gone out of me, that I am shrinking down to a small hollow core of mistrust and fear.

"You can look into my eyes." He sighs and rubs his eyes with the heel of his palm. "I won't do anything to you...carry you off...read your thoughts...look for hidden motives...suggest my own. I won't try to let you in, Jurith. We'll never know each other, no matter what we do."

"I don't believe that. Oh, I don't believe that!" I'm so very angry at him now, and at myself.

He looks at me with equivocation, then his eyes narrow and suddenly I am truly inert, hands still, body frozen, heart numb. When I am able, I begin to think that he has said these things only to jar me loose from stupefying fear.

He turns his back, rubbing his shoulder. "Have I any kind of influence at all over you at this moment?" he asks, again taking care not to look at me. "Please say, no," he adds, and this changes everything.

"It actually hurts to laugh." But I am laughing hard.

"It isn't much fun severing myself from you, but at

least I'm not perceived as looking or touching wrongfully, or planting an unwilling idea in your head."

"Why are we doing this?"

"Because we're afraid...both of us."

"Of what?"

"Of being vulnerable. Let's go away together again. Aren't you ready to travel with me now?"

I lay my face against his back and reach around, locking my arms over his chest. "Won't we burn ourselves up on these great voyages?"

"We'll burn each other up," he answers.

"All those years...I wanted to have the unity of Lupe and Javan. In the little time I had to devote to such dreams, I went looking for it, worked very diligently at it considering I didn't really know what I was about...thought it an adjunct to work. Out in the new colonies, up on the transports -- lecturing, talking to scientists, travelers, in whomever I sensed reciprocal feeling. They were kind, polite, full of respect, eagerness and finally lust. I could see in the end they wanted something very elemental from me. When I looked into their eyes I saw only my own emptiness. I would have preferred the treacherous eyes of Ammon. I wanted someone who understood but they didn't begin to comprehend what I wanted. I tried to give but you had of me all that I would have given. There wasn't enough left over. I couldn't...I couldn't!"

He turns around, gripping my arms. "Look here! Tell these eyes you forgive them...travel with me."

"I don't quite forgive them yet," I say, looking deeply into infinite black space. "But I need them."

The pupils of his eyes widen and we are journeying with great haste. This time I am all eagerness and my fear is pushed far out to the dark perimeter of rapture.

"But this is another orchard!" I'm amused at his desire to please. "An orchard in blossom."

"A sweet beginning. Enjoy this. It isn't such a nice place I've brought you. The irony is that this orchard is the loveliest you'll find anywhere. A thin veneer of beauty often covers the profane."

"But this is beautiful, genuinely beautiful."

"Yes, it is and you look nice in it, the loveliest thing it will ever have in it. It was made to court the rich cargo lords, powerful men and women. They bring mates or find ephemeral partners here, those deemed experts in the art of pleasure."

"Where are we?"

"This is Casino."

"Ah, Casino. Even I've heard of it."

"All scandal, no doubt. Is it going to upset you?"

"Not today. Look up there. I've always loved the way white blossoms are pink before they open, and then there is just a hint of it at the edges. Just a hint is better than all the pink in the universe. A black-knotted network of branches supporting this effusion of white, fringed in the most subtle pink...striking against Casino's blue dome."

"As you are in your pink silk. This is a place of clothes-conscious prettifiers. The most elemental presentation of man is clothing, his second skin, his vanity, his statement of self. If I were such a fool as comes here to sport, I would be expected to wear gold tunics twined with black satin braids and bedecked with shining buttons bearing Control's insignia. I'm sorry to say it has been done by Control -- A façade of grandiose delusion."

"Your black skin pants and shirt are a much more convincing statement of power to me," I say.

"Not intended. Black works best in shadows, as I do."

"But in this orchard, against all this white -- so much white -- you are strikingly prominent, Lord Ammon."

"The pink silk of Jurith wields far more power," he replies.

"I begin to love this place. I could stay forever."

"Paradise is short-lived I'm afraid. Eventually, you wouldn't like what you saw. Even in this orchard your eyes would be opened."

"Please don't open them in this orchard."

"I'm not so cruel."

"What lies beyond?"

"The gambler's avarice. The dilettante's fancy. I've no quarrel with the function of the place. It serves its purpose well. Here you can have palm groves, white sand beaches with turquoise water, fragrant gardens...subtleties of taste for the most jaundiced palate, and of course pleasure palaces for the rolling of dice or humans."

"Why are we here?"

"To show you an orchard."

"You're teasing me."

"I am teasing you, Spice. I first came here to stir up trouble, and if we stay longer I'm afraid that's what you'll see me doing. I want you to see this. Remember you can be hurt a little but not killed unless I am killed, and obviously I'm not on this trip.

"If you died I would too...wouldn't I?"

"While we're conjoined...you would suffer badly, as badly as I did. But I can't be killed by my thought, only by something we jokingly call reality. This too is a reality, this trouble."

"Why do you stir up trouble?"

"The place has to be cleaned up. The vast wealth pouring through some of the businesses on Casino has become

a mere trickle on the Hustler planet. It has been going to the development of satellites like itself without the knowledge or consent of Control, illegally extended capital."

I don't want to think of intrigue. Reaching above me I snap off a branch, holding it in my hand against the dome sky as if it were a torch. The light of blossoms seems to come from within. I think I shouldn't have broken it off.

"And if I could be killed by your thought..." I wonder, still pondering this and realizing again that Ammon knows what I'm thinking. I understand clearly at this moment the thing of which he is capable.

Ammon looks at me steadily. I see tiny orchards swimming in his eyes as the pupils grow larger. He takes the branch from me and brushes it slowly over my hair. Then I hear, "Interesting for Ammon to feel emasculated with a few well chosen words. Now I'm fighting to hold us here."

"Because I've brought up death?"

"Sooner or later Ammon and Jurith will not exist. Are you satisfied?"

"I'm sorry...sorry. Oh, stop! The orchards! You've taken them away."

"You don't want to associate orchards with death any more than I do."

"They don't belong here on Casino. Why does beauty stand so near evil?" But Ammon ignores my rhetoric.

"We're in the Saloon. Follow quietly. You can't be seen."

"But I--"

"Shh, let me concentrate a moment."

I look around the huge galleried room filled with flickering screens and gaming tables. Here one can bet on horses racing on Casino or on another colony. There are

thousands of games of chance to be played. The gamblers, some intensely fixed, some nervously milling about, are all dressed in the ever-changing forms of outlandish high fashion. A tall woman in a red-hooded sarong catches my eye and I begin to study the game she is playing. She doesn't understand the game at all. Her attempts are wild random stabs at logical probability.

Ammon's face is calm as he crosses the room, but I hear laughter in his head as his thoughts ripple over mine.

"You, Spice, would not be good for the Saloon. There would be no loose profit here with you afoot."

My thought answers. "I would like to be seen. I'm interested in studying these games."

"Oh, no doubt you are," Ammon replies.

"Look at the perplexed faces. Why these games are child's play. I'd at least like to show them how to--"

"Break the bank? Absolutely not. These people can all afford to win or lose in their own good time."

"Nevertheless, they're losing far too often."

"Never mind. The score is evened out for a few seconds when someone wins."

"What fun I could have had."

"I'm sorry to deprive you of fun but this is serious business. See the big man swathed in raw silk. He's one of the people who was causing us trouble. Now he's supposed to be working for us and he's afraid for his own neck. Since the Satellites have been cut off they've had to fall back on their own resources. Their spies are trying to blackmail him back into line."

"How does he survive?"

"He squeals on them, and we haul his detractors off to the penal colony for realignment. But lately he doesn't squeal enough."

"Doesn't the word get around?"

"Oh, yes, but so does our word. We have our ways."

"Jubal, how go the rackets?"

I'm amazed to hear Ammon speak. I thought we were going to float through the room without detection.

"Everything is sweet, Condor." Jubal says, nervously waving guards over for Ammon, who, I see, is already guarded by his own men. "You know I get really afraid when you come in here. You...coming in here! Why waste your time?"

"Afraid of what?"

"Of you...and afraid *for* you...me and the business."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Maybe it'll keep you not honest but approaching it at least."

"No good Saloon tender is honest," Jubal says with an obsequious joking voice.

"There's satellite scum in here, Condor. You shouldn't even be in the same room. Why don't you visit Ginta's Saloon...where the conservative tight asses sit around on their thumbs mentally toting up how much credit is left in their terminals?"

"Ginta's Saloon isn't giving us any trouble."

"Neither am I, anymore."

"Then you won't mind if one of my men checks the feed on your account terminal to make sure there's been no tampering."

"Not again."

"That's what happens when your reputation goes. I don't need to tell you how much public funding flashes here, and we just want to make sure it shows up on the right screen."

"You know, if the people in here knew who you were they'd go crazy just trying to get in your line of vision. I've seen it happen to cels -- they actually bring in more

money. But you! You're way beyond celebrity...a myth!  
Solar white-outs, it scares me forty pounds worth."

"You could stand to lose some weight."

"No, no, I've got to eat forty pounds just to recover.  
Have you ever thought of death by trampling? It's much  
slower than a flash-out."

They head for Jubal's office, a place of gleaming  
metallic surfaces, and I follow, observing Ammon with  
fascination. Here is another face I've never seen.

"Well, I'm not going to do a Shield unless it becomes  
absolutely necessary so you might as well start eating.

"Where's Decks?" Ammon asks, looking around.

"I told someone. I told one of your men. He got  
burned."

"By whom?"

I feel a rage of emotion in Ammon.

"I don't know. A Satellite grub. They walk in here  
like they own the place. I can't turn the Saloon into a  
flash-out gallery, not with the money that comes in here."

"This makes me very unhappy, Jubal. Decks was one of  
our best. He came here at my behest to do a job and you let  
him get burned. This doesn't look good for you at all."

"If you want to know the truth, I think Decks, your  
wonder boy, wasn't playing very straight with you. As your  
surveillance, he was in a perfect position to help himself.  
I think he was getting help from the Satellites and didn't  
pay up."

"What do you mean, you think? Do you run this place or  
don't you?"

"All right, I do run this place and he was."

"Explain that."

"He invited me to a little collusion."

"You're lying. You can't lie to me, Jubal. Black

Suns! we shouldn't have let you continue here, but with all your greasy talent we were willing to work the kinks out of you. You're a fool."

"You're getting it all wrong. I'm not--"

I watch with fascination as Ammon fixes his gaze on Jubal, who has made the mistake of looking straight at the most effective sensory power he will ever encounter. The huge man's girth slumps in the giant chair where he is used to presiding. His eyes roll into a glassy, fixed stare.

"What happened to Decks?"

"Decks...is okay. Valuable man. Satellites...going to use him."

"To get Control."

"You...to get at you."

"That's what I meant. Where is he?"

"Can't...can't...say."

"Where! Or shall I rip that skewed brain out of your thick skull?"

"Room below."

"Lead the way."

"Some of the boys down there."

"So, you don't want to make this into a flash-out gallery. What do you think these men with me are here for? You lead the way, Jubal."

Now I begin to worry. This is too drastic a change from orchards for Jurith. Ammon is disturbing to me and what's more I think he enjoys this role he's in. He doesn't need to be here doing this. Why is he showing it to me? He's getting at something but my sleuthing mind feels blunted in the face of all this strangeness. I'm highly uncomfortable and I begin to balk.

"Jurith, you're resisting. Come with me."

"I'm sorry. I don't think so. I don't want to know

about these people. You...I don't recognize you here, don't want to know what you're getting at. Oh, it's interesting in a coarse sort of way but I'd rather not see any more."

Ammon pours out a fast barrage of words in a heated, scolding manner. "You think Control never has to deal with low-down elements...that the higher you go the finer the ideals? You think if we don't look at this it won't exist? I want you to look. I want you to know. That's why we're here, to see where I've been. It's all an example of how I'm made, how I came to be Jurith's Ammon -- the one I made, not your paragon. Did you think it was pretty?"

"I'm not so naïve. I've come face to face with evil in my life but I don't have to wallow in it."

"Would it surprise you to know that I sometimes, far too many times, have to wallow in it? You can wallow in it at the top of Control's Tower or you can wallow in it in the basement of a Saloon. The only difference is that it looks a little dirtier down here. Perhaps you're not whole, not fully dimensioned, until you've *wallowed* in it."

"Strange, very strange."

"What is it?"

"I feel sadness, deep sadness in you, Ammon."

"Why strange? Why? Man's condition is either joy or sadness, hatred or love...ignorance or too much knowing, and sometimes all of this together is nothing more than sadness. Once and awhile it's bound to get me. How's this? Feel how calm I am?"

"Yes. I wonder how you do it."

"Now come with me."

"You hope to teach me that man's condition is alterable?"

"I want vindication from you for the unpleasant things I have to do."

"Is this a subtle way to make me lose?"

"I'm surprised that you would employ the terms of war, Jurith -- win, lose? Not like you. Are we engaged in a battle without my knowledge?"

"In a metaphorical way, yes...of sorts, yes, but I'm beginning to think that nothing is without your knowledge. I've disturbed you again."

"Because you question my motives, Jurith. Motives which actually reflect your own ideals. It's only that I can't be what you are and I want to show you why. May I?"

"Why do you have to be personally involved in this?"

"Because I believe that it makes a difference, just as you believed that rebirth on Laom would make a difference."

"Oh, it made a very great difference. I would do it all again...exactly the same, if I had to."

"I know that. Now will you accompany me?...let me finish this edifying confrontation? This time it will be very dangerous for you to interrupt."

No sooner have I assented than I find myself in a cool blue underground room where a man is being held in a field of pain stimuli. He cries or laughs at the whim of those who attack his senses. Ammon's men quickly disarm the Satellite torture detail, but then a curious inquisition ensues. I feared that I would be watching the enemy flashed out of existence, but instead Ammon begins to question the two disarmed torturers. Swiftly, he locks the first man's concentration in a helpless response mode and asks whether the torture was done for reward or pleasure. The man is left with no answer but the one he truly feels, and answers that he is paid for his work but that he enjoys it. The second man answers in the same manner.

I watch each man's taut face loosen, slide from a sneering pretense of unconcern to genuine fear as Ammon

plumbs deep inside the mind, regrooving personality. The eyes dilate and the mouths twitch nervously with growing discomfort. Their faces sag. They begin to groan and bite their lips brutally, but Ammon does not permit me to see what method he used to reduce them to gibbering fools. It is only when he speaks aloud that the reason for their sudden impotence becomes clear.

"I'm sending you back to your Satellite bosses, but from this moment forth you will hate what you do and suffer excessive guilt for your actions. You'll be your own torturers and eventually, if you use your evil for profit, you'll grow careless and die for it. You each alone will choose your way but know this: you'll have absolutely no more pleasure in what you do; it will be an agony."

I have watched Ammon closely. At one point the veins at his temples swell with the force of powerfully directed concentration. But still I'm dumbfounded as the men crumble before my eyes. They are reduced to howling self-abasement, groveling and weeping. I watch the onslaught of their enfeebled mental states with shame.

The power of Ammon is a fearful power. His penetrating eyes and dreadful concentration are like a white hot weld of fire, burning a new pattern across a brain subtly programmed from childhood, rearranging a mind in one deft seizure.

Now he is finished with them and turns away. He is looking fondly at the lean Decks who sits awkwardly with long bent legs and hanging head, trying to regain his composure while one of Ammon's men kneels before him.

"Decks?" Ammon says gently.

When Decks lifts his gray head I look into his pale eyes and immediately begin to feel his pain. His whole body vibrates with pain and a terrible depression. I groan inwardly, and Ammon quickly speaks to me with his thought,

"Stop, Jurith. He is righted. Only wait and see."

I watch as Ammon soothes and revives Decks with a thorough hypnotic embrace of pleasure-giving forgetfulness. In a little while Decks has returned to his normal state. He is a dry-tongued, humorous soul with a calmness which would take a great deal of hostile input to ruffle.

"Did my eyes light up...smoke pour out of my nostrils, Doctor?" he asks.

"You were well surged, Decks. Glowing beautifully," Ammon answers with humoring voice.

Decks laughter is like a song as his gray eyes crinkle with tears. "So you've saved me one more time," he says, and I wonder what he means. I begin to feel Decks' devotion to Ammon as a warm, glowing presence filling the room, a presence far more tangible to me than a chair or table.

"Well, my good soldier, carry on with your work here and we'll meet again in other places...better places, worse places more worthy of your prowess and cunning."

Decks stands up, and I'm surprised at how tall he is, towering over Ammon like a great thin tree. His eyes glow with an odd yellow light and his thin-lipped mouth is wide with friendly promises. I next realize that I've been hearing an unfamiliar accent when he speaks. Then, when he bends forward to shake Ammon's hand, he appears springy and lean in his tight gray skin suit so that I think of a giant wiry insect. How strangely beautiful he is, angular and graceful and pared down to the essential intent of the life form. As I watch him I feel my analytical mind working again. Very quickly the room fades and we are alone, walking in the orchard.

"I like Decks very much; he's bionomically different, having adapted to some unusual ecology, but I believe that he's also bionic," I say.

"He is, my sharp Spice. I found him on one of the very old test drifters, those self-sustaining, miniature propulsion colonies, slowly escaping the galaxy. I myself made him bionic. He was dying, a beautifully superior being. I suspended him and had our fleet lab build him spare parts. The sort of thing they love to do, although I've no doubt you could have done it better. I installed the parts, and he's been clicking away ever since. He likes to call me Doctor, instead of Condor, which as wandering Controller I must hear from so many quarters. And you...you sometimes call me Doctor, although I think it's done with a little malice, sophistry," Ammon says, laughing to himself.

I look up. There is the dark-haired, bearish head, framed by great bursts of white blossoms fringed in pink. All this against the startling cobalt dome. The powerful black pupils now burn only with white flecks of orchard, miniature vanishing rows. Then the reflected orchards are replaced by Jurith, and I know our thoughts will send us to our knees. He takes hold of me, lowers me into the sweet grass of the orchard. I am a streaking sunset, hot colors sliding down among cool grasses, warming each blade.

In awhile I find myself encircled by bottomless pools of dark brown iris, and slowly the iris transitions to a reflecting universe. I watch the sapient mouth curving into a timeless smile. We are traveling again.

The awesome throb of a white-speed propulsion system rumbles beneath me in a chase/attack phase. I listen, chilled to the bone by approaching thunder. There are great vibrations, each lasting only a few seconds as the ship is held in place by a powerful force field. We are in a large and sumptuous cabin with buff padded walls and dark porthole windows. The cobalt blue carpets roll out before us, strewn with tawny furniture cast in soft adjusting forms.

"We're aboard your flagship," I say.

"Yes...the Condor's lonely nest. Welcome to the First Fleet."

Ammon's voice command causes a wall to effulge as a broad screen.

"If you look there, you'll see your position. Aside from four Breaker Escorts slightly in the lead, you're at the head of something rather awesome."

A massive and intricate diagram of the fleet hurtles across the screen. On and on an interminable city of war matériel of the most formidable configuration crosses our vision, until finally the last menacing black warship comes into view at the narrowing tail. An evil black dragon, I think and Ammon answers my thought.

"Considerably larger and more persuasive than when it left our homeland," Ammon says, letting the screen fade.

"You're very quiet, Jurith."

"I was trying to remember what I felt in the orchard."

"You no longer feel it?"

"Here, the feeling is commingled with pain. Here, you are the Condor, ominous vulture indeed, at the head of all you've shown me...and much, much more in far-flung places. And not only that..."

"What?"

"You've brought me to a war. These vibrations... We're under attack."

"Nothing very threatening. Remember the vulture cleans the environment."

"But what in black suns can we be obliterating with all this?" I feel that I'm shouting as I sweep my hand aft to indicate what follows the flag ship.

Ammon smiles, his face bearing a grim light. "Actually the Breaker Escorts are doing all the work here. Jurith's



Quester was in the range of Burgan out-flyers. There was nothing I would or could have done differently had I known of Ammon's nearness. I feel a deep sorrow, as though we have parted again.

"Come," he says, "I didn't mean to make you sad. Let's go on the bridge now."

"The bridge! To see what you're doing to the Burgans? Don't make me watch this, please."

I struggle but in my weak moment of sorrow am overcome and slip into a gray limbo while Ammon talks.

"We are revisiting a period just a few years ago when I decided to revoke Burgan's petition to secede. They have at this particular moment taken out their last Control flyby."

"Why should they have done this?" I ask, snapping to attention. "You must have been antagonizing them."

"No, they are far more bellicose than we."

"A small colony naturally feels it must have a defense," I say.

"Ah, then you approve of their tactics."

"How I loathe it when you try to ensnare me in war games. I am only trying to defend the Burgans. Someone should."

Ammon makes no answer but suddenly I find myself in a larger room full of flashing screens which leave not a particle of the Burgan drama lost to the imagination. Several men and women are sitting at panels monitoring the complex data input which obviously runs the fleet with nanosecond efficiency.

"Captain," I hear the First Mate say, "with all respect, our Breaker Escort must slip shield and dead target immediately. A simple maneuver, but your order for Hold Phase is allowing the Burgans the advantage of costing us some repairs due to close-field burns."

The Captain turns to Ammon. For a moment I think I am sitting at one of the masterfully chilling video dramas so famous on the Hustler planet. The climax is about to change the destiny of the players, and I am only a helpless, unseen witness to something which is already history. I listen to Ammon as he inclines his head to the captain and gives his order.

"Unjam the Burgan screens and give them a full view of our fleet down to the last voider beam prod. Now tell them we've decided their total annihilation is more feasible than this protracted game of chess in which the king and his men try to preserve scant opposing pieces. Give them five minutes, until 0900, and then, if negative, remove them from our system."

"Murderer!" I cry. "Might makes right, you murderer!"

Ammon does not answer, but I feel the terrible unwavering force of his will. I am compelled to go on watching, having forgotten how I came to be here.

Very soon the captain turns to Ammon and says, "The Burgans have surrendered."

I see that Ammon remains expressionless as he speaks.

"Send a governing body down from Fleet III to be left in place until our next circuit, at which time they'll be relieved."

"Did you know they would surrender?" I ask, still pulsing with the adrenaline of anger.

"If their leaders had not done so they would share the blame for their murder."

"You would have done it?"

"I always deliver what I promise unless demands are met, but I knew I wouldn't have to this time. Might does not always make right but there's no doubt it can prevent annihilation. But enough of this, Jurith. Why did I bring

you here? No -- I hear you -- it wasn't to swagger."

"I've seen what you wanted me to see."

In the next instant we are back in my crystal, having arrived there on a strong current of Ammon's displeasure.

"I want you to see much more of Ammon, the whole of him, actually, which is, of course, impossible. But why do I need this? Tell me what I already know."

"You...you mysteriously believe that I'm connected to immortality...that the more I know of you the more likely you are to feel immortal."

Ammon is looking at me with an inscrutable expression which I believe masks acknowledgment, and I go on.

"It's simply your desire for order. Those who create and play in chaos are always striving for their own order. But order is of the infinite, unseeable by us, having little to do with the eye-blink span of we mortals."

"Perhaps my immortality is easier than all this, Jurith...with your help."

"Ah...my android Ammon?"

"Yes."

"But is he immortal?"

"He believes, Jurith, that he is indestructible, that only he can destroy himself."

"Yes, I gave him all the indestructible qualities I could but--"

"And I gave him one more -- a multi-functional force field even more invincible than my own. My Shield was advanced by your father in a MACRA lab. Very sophisticated. You see the Ammon android has become a family project."

"Javan made such a force field?...but, why?"

"Out of necessity. He was being attacked by a faction within MACRA itself."

"I can't believe this. MACRA by its very nature is a

stable entity, noncombatant, composed of a totally dedicated body of scientists."

"Jurith, you underestimate the devious and competitive nature of man, the designs which form as malignancies in his thought. It's all ego. Ego is militant; it perseveres."

"Designs," I whisper, catching up this word of Ammon's, for something has occurred to me so preposterous that I fall into a moment of silent astonishment.

"It couldn't be that all this was of your construction, Ammon? No, no, I can't believe...the exacting videos of yourself which you sent with me so long ago, the denial of your feelings and the withdrawal of yourself, so that I would need...would create Ammon immortal. Nothing so elaborate...nothing so elongated could ever have been your *design*..." But even as I demand that it be impossible I begin to believe that what I have said is the truth.

I kneel before Ammon on my vicuna mattress and struggle to wrest some clue from this inscrutable mind. I still see in the dark eyes the lambent flames of a lover, but there flows a terrible void behind that fire. There the mouth, glowing golden in my crystal, relaxed and without any curl of mystery, maddeningly smooth and deceptively calm. There is no tight, muscular withholding of news, but neither is there a way into the chamber of secrets. Ammon has set up an invisible wall between us, like the metal door upon which I once pounded. I had pounded to be let out while I was crying to be let in. Something in his manner, some small flicker or synapse of warning makes me afraid to go on with this lest I can never turn back, and yet I am consumed with a desire to know. Was it a grand scheme, a scheme atop other lesser schemes, or have I now become so paranoid by the constant vacillation of emotions that my suspicions are unstoppable, a self-destructive ambivalence?

There follows a menacing silence between us. Our minds are not now linked, yet Ammon can look into mine with a considerable degree of ease, and I myself can interpret his restive impulses with a deep, shaping awareness.

"Can you," I ask, "take me back with you to those days when we shared the Hustler planet?"

There is a second of swift puzzlement, then he smiles. "You'll learn nothing new of me there. I was imprisoned in artifice. The country runs on it. If you are a large prominent boulder stuck on the prong of a mountain, you will come crashing down without an artificial brace. You never really know who you are until you leave the familiar behind and begin to fend for yourself with the tools you alone devise. Isn't that why you wanted to go, Jurith? You had always a desire, a need to step beyond the constricting environment which presumably defined you...proscribed you. Wasn't it so? What was it that you wanted?"

"I wanted to create...first to create a place...an unassailable place for my work...a totally new environment."

"An environment which unavoidably defined you, Spice. And thus you wanted ultimately to define yourself -- creator of Laom...creator of the super-android."

"But you believe that you did it, Ammon...that you reached into my mind and recreated Jurith."

"No, I could never recreate a machine as magnificent as you. You are almost flawless in your single-mindedness...in the purity of your method at obtaining your objective."

"Then what is it that you think you've done?"

"It's too clear, clear as the indefectible optics we produce in unfettering space...so clear that you cannot see it but only see through it."

"Oh, Ammon, you are maddening!"

"You aren't the first to say so, but the first I care

about. And you want to go back there, backwards for clues. It isn't a good idea."

"Because you know that I will go with *this* mind, not the mind of that young, reaching, experimenting cadet."

"Perhaps you'll recognize a lying man there, Jurith. There was more deception in me then, although you don't believe it -- you think I've grown more evil. Not long before I met you, I began to keep a journal...I didn't tell it all. I lied even to its private pages, some truth, some purposeful lies, exactly the way a life generally goes."

"Isn't it the same even now?" I ask.

"Do I still lie? Not to myself."

"But to me."

"I withhold certain things from you, Jurith."

"To what end?"

"Well put. A good end -- thank you for making my answer so sweet -- to a very good end."

"Just when I think I may come to know who you are, Ammon, you slip away like vapor and recast yourself into yet another enigma. You have the audacity to say you want me to know you...and then to imply that not knowing you is somehow to a good end. Are you as self-serving as you seem?"

"Yes! As you are; it's what makes us valuable."

"Do you care much for the way things develop beyond your existence?"

"I don't know if it's possible to achieve anything lasting -- lasting being relative. If it is, I do. I make gestures...let us say that I care but I don't know if it will do any good. Everything goes around but we want to believe that it also ascends. And you, Jurith, you really want to create life not mechanical beasts."

"No."

"Yes, it's true, a human android and another soul, more

sweet...one you and I have unwittingly created together."

"Qyoo," I whisper, with the adrenaline shooting through and through me.

"Yes." He smiles. The light of my crystal strikes his face with a green shaft. "Perhaps I wanted you to create Ammon because I refused to anticipate Qyoo. Above all else, I did not want to father another being. My own tumultuous childhood was a cruel romp with death. I could never have imagined a life as beautiful as Qyoo whose body would course with my own blood."

"You with all your prescience couldn't foresee her?"

"I didn't try. I didn't even reflect on it."

"*Did* you want me to create Ammon?"

"Did I, didn't I, did I, didn't I?" he chants, taking me by the arms and paralyzing my vision -- white wings of thought flying high above and soon dropping us through shimmering noctilucent clouds, down upon a distant planet I remember well...but to a place there I've never known.

I asked to come here and now I wonder what I've done. At this moment I am far more frightened of the past than of anything the future holds.

"What paradox you are, Jurith, making us slog through this fear, and yet we've come here because you wished it."

"I think you intended us to come here," I say.

Ammon is standing with his hands in his pockets. He wears the formal black tunic of The Seat. He too seems formal, restrained, as he once was with me until that occasional moment when his wildness would break through, a wildness which at the time perhaps confounded even him.

I ask where we are because nothing is familiar.

"This is the estate of R\_\_\_\_. I often stay here. Others have always loaned me their privileged spaces. Owning space is a nuisance. I once tried to own a space

which belonged to Jurith."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I was speaking of madness.

"I brought you here because, among other reasons, it's a less alarming reentry, a place unknown to you."

"But it's beautiful. I had no idea R\_\_\_\_\_ lived like this."

"He spent later years here...died here."

"One of the better places to die. I don't know what to call it. It's a forest but--"

"Both a massive room and a forest domed. R\_\_\_\_\_ liked to sleep out of doors but he liked even temperatures and a gentle, rather moist breeze. Of course, rain was only to be watched from a window, although it can rain here too in a few select places. Here is the irony of captured nature."

"I've often thought how I would like to walk again in rain," I say. I am wistful.

I look around, drinking in the gently writhing grass clumps, wildflowers, and ferns sparkling in refracted sunlight. The lushness overspreads a forest floor where towering trees reach toward a blue dome one can only mistake for naked sky. The shaggy, red tree trunks affixed with sweeping boughs are an invitation to sanctuary. Birds flutter through the foliage, their echoing songs etching ornately noted pathways through the stillness. We walk forward among the massive living columns which guard the secretive depths. I take a deep breath of resinous air. A butterfly dances over the stony path. I try to see where the path leads but it disappears and reappears and vanishes again among the dark trunks. It curves through light and shadow, dividing small bunches of celesteflower and dense beds of arched ferns.

"Why shut out the rain when one could sleep under a

shelter?" I'm thinking.

"R\_\_\_\_\_ shut out more than rain here, Spice. He shut out trouble. He didn't like shelters over his head; he was claustrophobic but a space dome gave him no cause for alarm. The towering forest is well fed with misted air and underground irrigation."

"Why are we here?"

"You wanted to see it...me in it. Just come along and let things unfold."

I take a deep breath of air pungent with resinous fir needles and mulched ground, and float ahead in a pleasant dream. After awhile I hear voices, laughter, a stringed instrument. My steps falter.

"R\_\_\_\_\_ is having one of his gatherings. I didn't attend many of these unless it was demanded of me. I preferred to come here and be alone. I came here briefly after I met you at Black Hall. I should have plunged back into my work. Instead I lay under a tree thinking of the way you ate oysters and the whiteness of your skin. I never liked leaving you and going directly back to my work.

I smile with an arousing pleasure, for never, except in a rare dream, have I sensed so strongly the feeling of Ammon's earlier mental embrace.

We enter an interior meadow and find an android-attended banquet table lined with guests. The table is covered with a bright gold cloth and piled high with exotic edibles. Off to the left is a round stone structure rising three stories and with a steps spiraling up the side of its creamy wall. Androids are coming down the steps carrying trays of food and drink and huge stuffed pillows. Ammon explains silently that R\_\_\_\_\_ liked to watch forms gracefully ascending and descending stairs.

I sit on a little padded stool with my feet in the

grass, feeling so lazy I can't imagine getting up to approach the table, even though I know that Ammon expects me to dine there. An android comes over to me, picks me up and carries me to a pillowed seat at the table while Ammon laughs at my astonishment. I am left reposing between two well-sated guests, members of the high inner circle, while Ammon goes off to speak with a member of The Club who nods a smiling welcome. Across from where I sit, the ground opens and a playing chamber orchestra rises on a marble dais. A shaft of gold light ignites the crystal goblets of wine. Everyone at table except myself is wearing a pale blue robe. I am in white. Ammon comes to the table, obdurate in his solemn black tunic and skin pants. R\_\_\_\_, at whose right Ammon sits, is led off to dance.

A tall woman with long red hair rises and goes to Ammon, kissing him on the neck. I feel jealousy and flush deeply at my inability to control it. Ammon will sense this. I want to get away, try to rise, and find that I cannot. I stare at the woman. The elegant lines of her body are clearly visible through the diaphanous robe. I remind myself that Ammon is master of this scene to which he has brought us. I am angry.

"Save your strength, Jurith." I hear his voice whispering in my head. "I am only building a scene as it happened except that you are here. You wanted to know me in this place; now wait and listen."

"Lithia," I hear Ammon speak softly to the redhead, "R\_\_\_\_ doesn't care in the least when you come to me."

"It isn't R\_\_\_\_ I wish to unsettle," the clever Lithia whispers back, averting her gaze from Ammon's probing eyes.

"Then who has gleaned enough importance to capture your favor?" Ammon asks, glancing down the long table. But even as he utters this stinging question a revelation appears on

his face, and he turns quickly and looks over his shoulder. There stands Menren at the edge of the meadow, his long shadow stretching out before him. Ammon rises and goes to Menren at once. "Lithia wants you jealous," he says with the utter frankness which he often employs to advantage. "You should be flattered at such eagerness, though I refuse to lend myself to this puerile scheme."

"I'm the scheme's victim, Master," Menren says with a smile, and I believe that his voice has some irony in it.

"It's more than Lithia's beauty warming your heart. She claims to know important secrets and you use her thus. What has her spying given you as a promised condition?"

Menren, who must know the futility of anything but truth before Ammon, speaks. "You've found me out. Lithia has been close to you. Now she cares more for me than I for her, but I do care."

"Much less than you care for knowledge of my intent," Ammon says.

"She hasn't told me much, mostly speculation. You're so inscrutable, Master, that you foster these methods."

"Next you'll tell me it's only because you love me that you ferret out my plans," Ammon says.

"Nevertheless, it's so," Menren replies. "I love you as Master, even as I covet your world."

"Well said. I've taught you zealousness and have only myself to blame," Ammon says. "You strive to learn when and if I'll succeed R\_\_\_\_. Why not simply ask? You, Menren, of all present here may ask."

"You might mistake my asking for a wish to elevate myself, Master."

"I make no such mistake. If you replace me, poor Menren, you'll wish you'd followed me out."

"I wonder what that portends," Menren says with a grin.

"I'll leave you to imagine, my capable aide," Ammon answers.

He comes and leads me from my place at table. We stroll among noble hollyhocks with high crimson blooms. "I've always loved these particular flowers," I say, "but I hate the intrigues of your office."

"When power is lusted after, fate is exacting," Ammon says, and his voice foreshadows something he intends to show me which I want to resist.

"How can you smile so fetchingly at this?" I ask.

"Do I smile? I've survived many tiresome intrigues. There is a great deal of rot at the top. It spreads among depraved members who arrive at Control's gates."

"You need a benevolent anarchy such as we have on Laom," I suggest.

"Oh, ho, ho! How you make me laugh, Queen Jurith. You who reign supreme over adoring colleagues and worshipful androids in your limited perimeter. You should try to govern this malignant Medusa who claims me. One can hardly stroke the egos of The Federation through a telescope."

"Lithia was your lover," I say, not realizing immediately that this is the subject Ammon intends. "She's beautiful."

"She wasn't my lover, but only an occasional meal which left me still hungry. In our ways we used each other."

"Are you showing me her disloyalty? Then she's a fool," I say.

"She goes to Menren because she wants to punish me for not giving her more than physical satisfaction, and then must punish Menren by returning to me. A sumptuous body housing a narrow mind."

"You don't show me this to make me jealous," I say. "You aren't so base or petty."

Ammon shakes his head from side to side. His face beside the flowers is solemn and his eyes apologetic. Come away from these blooms, I want to say. You hurt their beauty. But I say nothing because Ammon knows.

"Don't look so sad. You wanted to know all my quarters. Now it seems you can't abide one."

I feel a coldness creeping over me, his coldness. I am beginning to see the conclusion of this story.

In the next instant, we are hiding in Menren's room. Lithia has come here with some stolen piece of Ammon's plan to tame an uprising by offering up a corrupt official who is an erstwhile friend of Menren's. Lithia and Menren lie together. I hear clearly her whispers against Menren's fair head. Then Ammon steps from the shadows, smiling.

"How beautiful your bodies are together," Ammon says. "Excuse me. I should have sent someone else, but since it's you, Menren, I have thought of your welfare." Ammon sighs and says, "The disgusting things with which I must contend. Damn you, Menren! Finish her now before R\_\_\_\_'s men get here. They won't be so kind."

Menren leaps from his silver bedclothes like an athlete. Lithia screams and runs toward the door which Ammon has sealed. The room is dusky orange and dark with shadows. Lithia runs to Ammon, cursing. "I'll live to see you die. I swear! I swear! You never cared for me. Never! Never! That is my death. Why kill me? Why? You will drown in your own blood!" Her voice is wild, pleading and threatening. Her fingers reach out to rake Ammon's face, but she mistakenly looks into his eyes. "I loved you. I loved you!" she cries in a last attempt to save herself. Her body trembles as she whines and crumples to the floor. Menren comes from the bathroom holding a microderm gun.

"This is not to sleep," Ammon charges.



exemplars and helpmates for the human species. I'm sorry I couldn't do more...being human, I'm deficient."

"For me, as well as mankind, I own it was enough from you," Ammon says. "You made me want to live."

Very soon we are standing on a volcanic mountain in Karak, and I realize that for the first time it is I who have brought us somewhere.

"Now you'll taunt me," Ammon says, "while I'm vulnerable in self-loathing."

"I wanted to get you away from there, and I think I wanted to show you my roots," I say. "This is where my Lupe was rocked in her cradle."

"This is a battlefield," Ammon says, himself wary.

"No," I say. "That's over now. This is the peace you made."

"When I came here to stop the war, I remembered your hand bloodied on my door. I never wanted you in my office, defiled by my office. You were tossed unfledged into a snake pit."

"It wasn't a viper who loved me there."

"Did you transfer the emotion for your parents to me? Is that what finally happened?"

"You...my analyst, how can you ask? You know the two feelings are separate. I love them still as if they lived. They do in me. You know also that I tried to avoid you. When I thought of that kind of relationship at all, I thought it might be with a man like my father."

"A benevolent scientist like you...but you have a wildness which... It wouldn't work," Ammon says. "But I do envy scientists who've managed to remove themselves from the populace. They control the variables of their worlds."

"Not altogether," I reply. "This world was created by devoted agrarian scientists. Their good science led to

prosperity, and that led to war."

"Now you understand what I meant about your androids and about Laomite," Ammon says.

"My work didn't create a war," I insist. "You did that...experimenting again...to see if I would fight."

"You need only have come up to my ship."

"They wouldn't let me. They thought you would take me hostage."

"I might have taken you away...for a time."

I turn to Ammon. He's not possibly in my dream, in my mind. He's there on a hill in Karak, his head against the ascending dark green peaks at his back, forested mountains of basalt tough as his will. His profile is cunning, the jet eyes looking out at the valley below, hair black as a raven's feathers blowing over his forehead.

You are finite, I think, and it's the worst thing about you.

He turns to me, smiles and says, "Only that? And it's the worst thing about you."

He points to the edge of the cliff and says, "This is where you came with your Karakian boy, Ing. Yes? I sent Decks here to help Ing. He was important to me not only because of the powerful warrior he became but because he loved you. A company of Kursand took him prisoner and tortured him. He was strong and withstood a great deal, but it was too late for Decks to be of any help."

Now I see Ing raising his hands and calling the Karakian farewell, "Keep our life." I didn't keep it. There is no joy in my homeland. "I didn't need to know this, did I?" I ask and think: more sorrow.

"I was afraid you would search for him and see what happened," Ammon says. "You could do it through me...what I saw through Decks."



extension of Jurith that I love."

"An extension of yourself too," I remind him.

"Yes," he says, "but I'm not so enamored of myself."

He turns to me with a brooding laughter, and still he is on the cliff and still his hair is black.

"Ah, now you've become my analyst," he says. "You're thinking that my preoccupation with violence, subterfuge, and war is really a search for love. Everything must revert to that. It's Jurith's way." He gives himself over to a laughter he can enjoy. "But if you believe this nonsense, Spice, you must finally admit that war is necessary."

"No," I insist.

"You are not illogical."

"War is illogical."

"Jurith, war is merely a brutal instinctual effect of imperfect man. All animals fight to survive. Man with his ponderous intelligence has evolved to the point of fighting simply for possession."

"You'll never possess me by that method," I say, and my pronouncement emerges as vanity, and I'm ashamed.

"Ah, but I don't want to possess you, as if I could. I want to come near you and have a little of your light."

"My light is going out," I answer.

"No, it isn't. It will shine beyond you in the things you've done, in Laom, in Qyoo, in the Ammon, the Anima, you've made. I know this, although I can never know all of you, Jurith."

"Can we ever know anyone? Who was Lupe and who was Javan?" I cry out over the valley of Karak.

"They were the beginning of Jurith. It's all we need to know," Ammon answers.

"I would loathe myself if I thought like that."

"My prejudice pleases me, nonetheless," Ammon replies.

"Come back now," he suddenly decides, and there we are reclining in the middle of my crystal. "It isn't easy to take you places, my complicated Jurith."

"You're far more complicated...an unsolved mystery," I insist, still hopeful of discovery.

"It isn't fruitful to try and solve such mysteries, Spice. The real ones are insoluble; the rest is artifice.

"Are you my friend?" Ammon asks.

I am surprised, very much so. The question is so unlike Ammon it is worrisome. Even his voice is different. It reminds me of someone else. Then I realize it reminds me of my android Ammon, our Anima. I am astonished. I say nothing of this and don't know if Ammon has read my thoughts. I study him so carefully that I am lost in my scrutiny. "Yes, I'm your friend," I finally whisper. My abbreviated voice silently becomes a long affirmation stretching over decades backward and forward.

"Jurith, when we sat so long ago in the Quad I had my schemes and my dreams of your accomplishments. You've outdone them. Let's go back and find out what we were then, what else we might have been. Come with me now and let us live for a moment in an unfinished past."

"I tried so many times to do that but couldn't," I say. "How is it that you could do it now?"

"I'm Ammon...the real one." He laughs. "And I'll do it because you are Jurith. Do you trust me now?"

"Yes," I say, already traveling in Ammon's vision, "but even if I didn't trust you, I would make this journey."

I am swiftly back in my white Quester uniform. In a facilitating mutual eagerness we have hastily returned to the long ago Quad. There is no other human near us. The sun spangles the table and chairs. Ammon's face is splashed with playful leaf shadow from the tall eucalyptus trees. I

marvel at their pungent fragrance.

"Can't you open the collar of your tunic? You look so serious."

"Do it for me," Ammon says.

I do. I can feel the stiff fabric in my hands.

"No one can see you?"

"No, do you see anyone? We have each other all to ourselves."

"What shall we do?"

"Breathe the air," Ammon says. "And look at each other as we couldn't do then.

"I didn't know what had happened to us," I say.

"We must talk," Ammon says, "I'm filled with lust. A strand of hair has blown across your eyes. You are vulnerable...vulnerable.

"When did you first know that you needed to reinvent yourself in a distant place?" Ammon asks.

"You tell me," I say.

He takes my hands and stares across the table into my eyes. "You were six years old and your parents had just told you how carefully you were selected and how special you were. They had taken you to Zoologia. You were permitted to hold a gray-furred chinchilla. You stared into those large brown chinchilla eyes--"

"Yes! The fur was exquisitely soft, and the eyes!

"The innocent life of that warm creature pulsing in your hands was a miraculous thing to you. You were overcome with the mystery of it. After that you never wanted to be in one place, neither your body nor your mind. Your large thoughts strayed further and further, deeper and deeper. You were a volatile creature, wild to go and create something. Your parents had to tamp you down and channel your thinking. Then you were studiously aggressive, single-

mindedly aggressive but growing overly consumed with the passing of time. This was manifested as fear of failure. Your parents dispelled it by making you break away from your study with desultory periods in which you were to let your ideas range freely. You did this very well. In no time your thoughts were catapulted off the planet by a prodigious imagination. You had, have, a facile ability to assimilate, analyze and synthesize data. You began to create your own world, a construction of your mind which you set out to reify. It wasn't Utopia. You were too smart for that. You liked to put flaws -- you called them beauty -- into everything, just as an ancient designer flawed his patterns so as not to enrage the gods with hubris."

"Stop! Stop!" I cry. "We should never crave to be known so intimately. You will steal my fire."

"You have stolen mine."

Ammon leans back in his chair, watching two green parrots natter high on a limb. "Your grandfather believed that we long to be like those above, unquestioning, unaware of self, unafraid of time, driven only by instinct."

"The noncognitive animals are never without wariness," I say, "but I agree that they have a superb innocence."

"Let me see my grandfather."

Ammon's tilted chair crashes to the flat stones beneath its legs. He stares at me. "I cannot do that."

"You can," I say, realizing that we are back in my crystal.

"I won't do that."

"Why?"

"Jurith, be content with what I've given you of him."

"I never knew him," I say. "I want more."

"Jurith..." Ammon stops a long moment and then goes on. "My beloved, forgive me. I cannot."

This term of endearment softens me. "Why?" I whisper.

"Jurith, can you not see that if I speak in my thoughts for your grandfather I must speak against you? He was proud of you, but he didn't approve of what you did. He thought you should have stayed in your homeland...fixed it."

"Perhaps I should have. Had I a selfish wanderlust? Did I run away? I wanted to do the most good with what I had to offer."

"Black suns, you cannot doubt your amazing achievement! I would rather you doubted my love."

"Because your love is based upon my achievement and my belief in it."

"Of course."

"What does this leave me? Can I be jealous of my own achievement?"

"Oh, how you make me laugh. You are your achievement! I was never wrong to love you as fiercely as I do.

"Keep the memory of your grandfather as I gave it to you, Jurith. I can't make it better than that."

"I suppose you're right. It's my old familial longing. Then let's go to Wierlfoss."

"No!"

"You deny me everything."

"Wierlfoss is not to be tampered with. It was a giant stepping stone for you. If we go back we may slip on that stone and fall into the cataracts."

"We can't really go back at all, recapture anything."

"You don't need to recapture that. You've seen it all as I gave it to you twenty years ago."

"Why did we go home then, Doctor?"

"You're angry."

"Disappointed."

"Jurith, once you were interested in knowing me."

"But I am... Ah, that's what you want. Where shall we go then...to know you?"

"Even your sarcasm is delicious.

"Take my hands and look here."

I look and fall again into the limpid eyes, but recognize nothing. He is alone, a muscular youth in a place of fearful darkness. I am filled with dread and fight to stay there...to see where he has gone on the Hustler planet. He enters a side door within a dim and cobbled alley.

"You will feel no pain," He says, and as I am wondering at this I see that two men who look like guards have come to block his entry. They beat, kick, pummel, and punch until he is down, bloody and bruised. Somehow I am able to watch this and at the same time know that Ammon is above this abuse and alone with me. He writhes on the floor, pulls his knees up, rolls over and stands up. The guards are walking away assured of their success. With all the grace of a skilled martial artist he tackles one unsuspecting guard, chops the base of the man's spine and turns, rising with a spinning heel kick directed at the other's side. This guard then receives the edge of Ammon's hand on his neck and is swiftly out of commission. They lie in pain as Ammon lunges through another door and enters a room where a naked man is being beaten by two women. Just the menace of Ammon's bruised and rippling body is enough to make the women pause and back away. He lifts the man who crumples against him.

"You've come then," the man says. "Once again you've come. I'm sorry, boy. They always go too far."

"Where are your clothes?" Ammon says just as a woman rushes forward with a robe. Ammon wrenches it from her grasp and slips it over the man's head. "It would be easier if you didn't give orders to allow no one in," he says.

"Next time exclude me from those orders."

"I thought you considered it good practice," the elderly man of oleaginous appearance and manner intones. "You were a bellicose student when we met. I'd have thought this would salve your surly disposition."

"I wasn't bellicose...only serious, and as to this I'm not omnipotent. Death is practice for nothing."

"How you overstep protocol. Do you forget that I am a member of The Club?"

"I remember and grieve."

"How dare you show any sentiment in my presence! You are here to serve me...to serve us all."

"I am here to serve myself...or I would not be here at all."

"I could have you flayed for this insubordination," the man admonishes as he trembles against Ammon's shoulder.

"You already have...in this rotten cave!" Ammon replies. "If you don't like my opinions find someone else to scrape you up from these sado-masochistic romps."

The man laughs. "I cannot. You're the best. You break the bones of others and subsequently mend mine. And as nearly as I can tell your lips are sealed against what you consider infamy. I resent you and...ah, the bloody pain!...marvel at you, envy you...perhaps fear you...almost love you. Still you could replace me, Doctor."

"I could never replace you," Ammon says, but the man is too wounded to notice the censure in Ammon's voice.

I feel a rage seething within me and then we are back in the Quad beneath the eucalyptus trees.

"My youthful years were different from yours," Ammon says. He feels my anger even as he studies my face.

"You didn't have to do those things."

"I did...as surely as you had to find Laom. When you see a leader who leads anything very large, remember that.

The office is unobtainable without serving darkness as well as light. Only Jurith's fine hermetic world is clean and bright."

"My world was not so effortless."

"I said clean and bright."

"It wasn't always so bright either."

"What was wrong with it?"

"You weren't in it."

"I was and am. I'm glad you suffered as I did, or you wouldn't welcome me...violent beast that I am."

"Why must you always so graphically illustrate how necessary violence is?"

"Because it is. I want your acceptance of the whole Ammon. Anything less is dishonest. You love a sometimes violent man, Jurith."

"No!"

"Did you love me on the floor all bloodied?"

"Yes."

"Did you love me when I got up and broke bones?"

"No."

"Liar! What would you have had me do, die there?"

"No. Is this how we visit the one innocent moment of our past? It can't be why you returned to the Quad. Or is it? Is this why I'm here...another trick! Yes, I see. You want to remind me that long ago I sat here beside a devious warrior."

"You love a violent man."

"No! No! No!"

We are back in my crystal, and my fists are coiled against Ammon's chest. He will not give up. He demands affirmation, his mouth suppressing mine, demands the truth I see so clearly...but then I cry, "There's no longer any light in me but you! You're the real one and I'm false. I

too have violence in me. I've been--"

"Sh. Sh," Ammon says against my mouth. "Of course it's the reverse. You are Jurith. I cannot...must not ever try to steal your fire. This argument is moot. You are Jurith and I am Ammon and we are good. Together we are very good and powerful.

"Tell me about Anima, Jurith. Did he--"

"No. He tried to touch me and I was horrified."

"Afraid of yourself, Jurith, not of your own creation."

"Yes, but Anima was my self, at least when I knew him."

"Do you realize you have neuroses?"

"Yes, of course. I believe you created them...or at least the madness I developed for want of you."

"Do you, woman of such high mentation, now see one of the reasons we are so in need of each other."

I do not answer.

"Still you won't come clean."

"The expression is strange on your lips. Yes, I am soiled aren't I? Soiled with dishonesty."

"I retract that, not soiled, no never soiled, but dishonest with yourself. You are drawn to pain, misery and brutality, hoping to fix these curses of man, but they are the truth of man. In fixing them you kill him. You cannot cut away half his face and leave him alive."

"What do you want me to say?"

"You know."

"You want me to say that I am fascinated with your dark power, that I want to come near you and touch this aspect of you, that I can never be whole without this admission. That's why you keep showing me this part of your nature, because you know that it draws me to you and you want the truth. The truth is that destructive forces create the mountains we venerate."

"There. Now I can rest in peace. Your peace. I have no shame or hesitation in saying it is this which draws me to you. This light. This good intent. This hopeless, impelling delusion of peace."

"Now turn about is fair play. If you don't believe in peace, you cannot think much of me."

"I love you, all of Ammon loves all of Jurith."

"Then I'm satisfied."

"How do you love me, Jurith?"

"Unconditionally."

We are together, transcending arrival and departure, no surface to our skins, no membrane between our thoughts, no sorrow dividing us. We are bright chroma of the senses, traveling a high rainbow ring without beginning or ending, glittering and diffusing, glittering and diffusing.

The door slides open. I have not locked the seal! Ezzlin comes in. He picks something up off the floor, and I see a flash of light. Ammon's body pulls up around me, coils and tightens until I cannot breathe and then relaxes. He reaches for me. "Love you," he says, letting out his breath. I am screaming, holding him, staring at the broken eyes...screaming at Ezzlin.

"You cannot! You've killed him! You cannot!"

Ammon laughs, choking. "I'm not dead yet -- the clumsy pervert -- but...soon will be. I should have...should have left him out...obsessive hysteric."

I am weeping, grieving, holding Ammon.

"It's all right," he says. "Now it's done. I never wanted to be as old as...as old as... Ah, I think I finally know how to do this."

"Roggi!" I scream. "Roggi! Roggi!"

Ezzlin stands looking at us, a wild hollow thing, his eyes glazed. I don't know what he thinks he has done.

Something good?"

"Oh, Ezzlin, Ezzlin!" I cry. "Kill me too!"

He stands stiffly then shudders and draws his hand over his face, dropping slowly to his knees.

"Give me that!" I demand, but he lifts the dangling weapon and holds it against his head. My hand reaches out. "No!" I see a flash. Ezzlin ripples, flows down upon the floor. The weapon slides toward me. I pick it up, reaching forward with Ammon's fingers still clasping my other hand.

Ammon has been speaking slowly into his telewrist, to the captain of his flagship, laboring to make the words an assurance. I don't know what he is saying in this coded message. I haven't heard the words, cannot bear to hear the finality which must be in them. He is utterly cool and self-contained. I am flooded with fear.

I hold the weapon, studying it dumbly with my broken analytical mind.

Roggi comes running in. She touches Ammon with her corpus meter and looks so startled. "No," she says. Her voice is soft. "No, I'm sorry, Jurith. Forgive me." Roggi means that Ammon's white blood cells are swiftly dying from this vile weapon; the dying will spread and spread, multiplying in speed and thoroughness. If it wounds anywhere positioned on its terminus phase, the weapon ultimately kills no matter how clumsy the wound. I hardly know how to use it but I know its effect, have seen its effect, this excellent, this vile killing implement.

Ammon is using up his strength to save Laom from extinction. He has executed some last plan which is familiar to his aides. He is sending the First Fleet home. How they must be gnashing their teeth. I kneel before him, turning this consummate killing instrument over and over in my hand. Roggi, who has gone to look at Ezzlin, is watching

me now, creeping toward us. I wave her away.

"Don't! Don't even think of it, Jurith." Her voice is unusually high and frightened. "You are so strong, stronger than all of us." She is weeping now, down on her knees, but my thought is unchanged. "Please, Jurith, please don't leave us. We love you and need you. Qyoo is awake. She's going to be so wonderful. Please, Jurith."

"I know she is," I say. "She is Ammon too. She knows her father now, unnamed. Thank you, Roggi, for Qyoo. Tell her I love her. Tell her...teach her to take care of Laom, of you. I love you all. I give you Qyoo. I'm sorry, Roggi but at least we've made something important here, so important. You'll see. Keep this part from Qyoo."

Roggi is crawling, reaching toward me. I put the weapon to my head and motion her away. She leaps back.

"Jurith, I'm so angry! We need you to finish this!" she screams.

"No! You don't need the crazed woman I would be. Please Roggi dear friend have Boaz remove Ezzlin, then go over there just outside the door and wait."

I watch as Boaz carries Ezzlin's body out followed by Roggi who stumbles outside and crumples against the outer passage wall with her head in her hands. Then I seal the door.

I have left Qyoo now, left her the way Javan and Lupe left me, with finality. Will she forgive me? I forgive Lupe and Javan. Qyoo won't miss me so much. She's a woman, a new person now, our Phoenix bird, Ammon's and mine. She'll struggle with our potent and stubborn gene pool and it will be a glorious fight.

Ammon has been watching me, straining to read my thoughts. I bend down to hear his voice.

"Qyoo is so pale...deceptively fragile power. I never

found my albino mother's people but I told you that, didn't I? But Qyoo...Qyoo will be a bright star. I've seen it."

He finishes speaking and closes his eyes with a finality which terrifies me. He is so still.

"Ammon! Wake up, please. Help me. I'm tired. I'm afraid I won't do it right."

"No," he says, and without his eyes I am lost.

"Help me," I insist. "I've done what I set out to do. I'm finished...the rest will go on without me."

Still with his eyes closed, he groans. "You've had your way, Jurith, but this...this is not a good price to pay."

"No price, just my sovereign right...and better for the others. Don't leave me...help me. I hurt more than you."

Ammon opens his eyes and grins. "Don't...don't deny me a little suffering." He lifts his hand for the weapon.

"Give to the expert then, pacifist...poor white rabbit," he mutters. For an instant I believe there is nothing wrong with him. It is Ammon of long ago, laying me waste with a smile, faraway on the edge of the golden-green park. I am so relieved. I lie down, holding him with an unrelenting passion. He drags his arm around me and looks at me, still smiling. "Cosmic rays aren't the excuse now," he says. His eyelids quiver.

I begin to weep uncontrollably. I have never cried enough and must have my compensating flood of rage and misery. It lends nothing to our condition but I cannot stop.

"Did I kill us or did you?" he asks, and I understand that he wants me to find some levity in this. "The answer," he says, "if...if there were one...would be time...time did it! There is no answer, but we...we've certainly killed time."

His face is amused, cold, bloodless. Then glistening beads of sweat appear on his forehead. He doesn't want me to scrutinize him and holds my face against his damp cheek. I can hardly stand to breathe. The one thing I know absolutely and of my own free will is that I can no longer tolerate my world without Ammon in it.

I lift my head, startled at something that has occurred to me. "You knew this would happen," I say.

"Something like it, but to know and to...to control are far apart," he answers. "I'm better at reading thought than I am at...at making predictions...but I have...have often known the progressions of things. It was the reason I...I wanted you to come up to...to my ship...thought I could forestall this...but you wouldn't...I needed you...decided to take the chance. You too are prescient, Jurith...but you've never...never indulged yourself."

"No," I answer, thinking of the strange flashes of future which have sometimes been revealed to me. If only I had gone up to meet Harquint. Would Ammon have carried me off? I'd have gone away if I'd realized...but I don't want to think of anything...what might have been...or new ideas. My work was good. I'm tired.

The weapon is at his side but kept from my sight. I don't look for it, only know it is there in his hand waiting, an unfailing, almost sweet relief. The heavy thought of it fades away. I am thinking only of Ammon. No, not the loss of him again. In an instant I see so much life in him that I'm spellbound. I laugh with him, feeling such happiness. How has he done this, or have we had any hand in it, does it necessarily flow like a circle? I am seized with a wondrous, wild euphoria and I can feel it in him.

"Ammon!" I cry as his arm grips me tighter and tighter.

"Carry out your plan...my only love," he whispers.

I reach for the place which will create our frozen vacuum and my fingers obey their final command.

He releases his grip to turn my head so that we can look at each other while his other weighted hand moves with its last expert finesse.

"Uncaged," he whispers, his dauntless laughter a soft promise. "We fly away!" his voice proclaims. I am held so fiercely close that his mouth is part of my own voice, my own song. I am soaring, soaring, spreading as a weightless feathered thing floating into the velvet night of his star-pierced eyes.

#

I wake up in my sometime bed in the little pilot's digs, sweating and sick. No side effects the kid told me, but I find she's made herself scarce. I wonder if it's the drug making me sick or the dream. The dream was enough to do it. None of it could touch reality. Jurith wouldn't let it happen like that, but where in black suns did it all come from? I stagger into the shower. The water is so full of rotten chemicals it begins stripping off several layers of my skin. Excoriated, I stand thinking of the dream. It isn't like a normal dream where you have to struggle to put the elusive fragments together after you wake up. Instead, the scenes flash through my head with details sharp as laser beams, and I feel like I played all the principals myself. My immediate environment is only a dull shadow in this state, and I wonder if the drug is still working.

The kid left food for me: fruit; even a cold game hen, a plump little morsel she probably liberated from some unworthy destiny. I just can't eat it but my mouth is dry

so I drink mildly fermented cloudberry juice. It has a tangy, exotic flavor but actually comes from this planet, up north around Wierlfoss. As I drink it I, of course, think of Jurith. Everything reminds me of her. Did she die like that, murdered by love? I shudder and almost puke. I'm a sick old boy. My shoes I finally locate stashed in the closet...too damned tidy for me.

I go out and walk up and down in the park. I know where I'm supposed to go but I'm afraid to go there, so I stall. I sit down on a bench, muttering obscenities at the people who stare because I'm muttering obscenities. Eventually, a bland-faced young man steps up. He's trim and clean, muscular and quietly jugular-oriented. He wears no apparent uniform but his clothes are all of a muddy-green piece, a uniform stripped of its insignia. He has the sly confidence of a government official, a Reducer.

"Excuse me, big man. Is there something wrong?" he inquires with thinly feigned interest in my welfare.

"I'll say," I reply, having just registered the understatement of all recorded time. "Quite a bit, as a matter of fact."

I stop, reverently staring after a red monkey flying between the branches of a tattered old mahogany. The Reducer is now totally focused on me and pays no attention to his graceful progenitor.

"You know you guys were a good idea way back at the beginning but you haven't done well by us little folk."

Now he's listening as well as focusing. His eyes draw a keen bead on my hands which I see are shaking, the damn drug or the dream? "Of course you haven't done a thing about alleviating the larger problems. From this you're excused, but it's your explicit job to at least make them appear to be nonexistent, and they do stick out.

Furthermore, you haven't done much about the little things either, like advertising and its handmaid self-delusion which are a real pet peeve of mine. But right now I want to start a cause -- isn't that what you call it? -- and here I know you can help. Right down your alley, eh?"

"A cause. I see. And are there many who feel as you do, sir?"

"Oh, never trouble yourself about that, Reducer. There are many indeed. Great bleeding numbers of us."

Reducers don't like big numbers.

"And what is this cause?"

"Well...time."

"Time? You wish to move the time forward or back?"

"We want it stopped."

"Stopped?"

"Actually, Reducer, we'd like to see it made all the same in the universe. And being all the same, there would be none...no future and no past, only now. You see that's the way we all really live, and this phony business of time is killing us."

"I see you're a jester, big man."

"Yes...a fool in the most convenient sense, a loving term for a historep...a tired, shamefully confused old meddler."

"Well, historep, you ought to go home and sleep it off," the Reducer says, turning to take his leave. He believes he understands everything.

"I was afraid of that," I say to his vanishing back. "I'm cured of sleep so I'll just go on talking to my friend. She didn't, doesn't, wouldn't like time either. There isn't any, after all. It's only an illusion, and distance too is an illusion. Maybe Jurith can hear me. Maybe she's just around the corner, emerging from a frontless, backless

continuum...one of the myriad inverted funnels of multi-dimensional space."

I sit awhile until my simian-eyed friends come out and play tag with my feet. I feed them government issue food pellets which they eat or pee on according to their cunning whims. They are the only living primates who never ask questions which should not be asked. Red-coated or black and white with thick-plumed tails, they are majestic in their authenticity and changeless indifference.

I go along the edge of the park, mostly with my head down, reverently glancing sideways now and then at the spreading branches of the great ceibas. As slowly as I can I am making my way to H-30. It must be done, although as I reach its portals I am nearly delirious with expectation and dread.

Back to my old tactics at H-30. I play around with a file terminal and find out the story is there, fresh input, but routinely classified and not yet released by Control. I feed in my senior historep top clearance identification, hack through a barrage of verification codes, then start slipping in markers until I unlock the young historep who was crazy enough to get strung on my wire: Zlo Nur, "the fortunate." He didn't even originate on this planet. The computer tells me he got away from Laom with a video disk which was hastily waved here from some remote outpost. Then it must not have been considered classified at the time, or maybe in the confusion the transmission was overlooked. There isn't anyone out in Jurith's neck of the woods paying attention to things like that. Guess I softened Jurith up for him, and off he went right on my tail. I go to the videolarium and find a private screen in a dark corner. I set myself down in a vulgar rendition of a soothe chair and call up my nemesis.

Zlo gives himself a flattering introduction, does a haunting but artful montage of Laom -- these young pups with their flashy gas -- then launches into a cavalier interview with Jurith. Like a bolt from the big deep, Jurith takes control of this svelte, blue-haired peacock and is leading him down the garden path, quite literally. She takes him into her garden and they sit on the stone benches, chatting about New Frontiers while my heart aches.

The next thing I know Zlo is doing videos of the famed Laom mines while hanging around waiting for the Jurith-Harquint confrontation to conclude. I'm getting fairly relaxed when suddenly there is a cut to a startling new segment. Zlo is babbling with excitement and taking a few quick shots of the exterior of Jurith's opaqued crystal before he's ordered off Laom. I sit stunned, breathless, my heart ricocheting off my ribs as though something in the images has bounced out and struck me hard in the solar plexus. I crumble forward, out of the chair, down on my knees in front of the image.

"Black suns, black suns," I mutter, watching Zlo's mouth, hearing his words in disbelief as he finally summarizes his story aboard a white speed Laomite-fed transport bound for the Hustler planet.

"...so again we can only report what we are told, that the celebrated entrepreneur Harquint and the brilliant and still youthful genius of Laom, Jurith -- creator of Juroids -- were both fatally wounded yesterday in a freak accident, occurring inside the meeting chamber. That magnificent crystal is now permanently sealed and the two prime movers remain tragically entombed within their glittering vacuum. Certainly this dazzling crystal is destined to become a great shrine throughout the universe. We were assured by Jurith's personal physician and associate that there would

be no further damage to factories, mines, or androids on Laom, that Harquint, as he lay dying, was able to stabilize the threat of the devastating war matériel at his command and that Laom would continue to supply Control with adequate amounts of the rare metal Laomite, known in the homeland as 77. What supply agreement was reached with Harquint's construction amalgamate was not revealed at the time of our leave taking. Shortly before our transport shuttle ferried this historep out, Control representatives departed the air space, leaving behind only a small observer patrol."

The first thing I try to do when I can see straight is find Zlo Nur, but he's not findable, vanished, even his address erased. No, not a pretty boy like that, with all that hot ambition?

"He no longer works here," a low echelon fad-head tells me.

"Well, he's from Batarr, isn't he?" I say.

"We don't have that information."

"Come on, I know a Batarrian when I see one. Has he gone back there?"

"We don't have that information."

"You don't have any information, you worthless scrap heap!" I rage and storm out of there. They don't care in the least but it helps me get on. They've been programmed to roll their eyes -- some bored modal engineer with a cute sense of humor.

I requisition a communication terminal and contact Batarr's transformation headquarters which relays all incoming communications to that colony. I'm in Nurs up to my ears. The place is crawling with them, but I get ahold of one of Zlo's former bosses, a man I happened to know who handled Zlo when he was building a hotshot reputation as a local busybody. He tells me he saw Zlo briefly and that he

thinks the young man is on the pleasure colony Hedone, taking a breather from a recent enervating assignment. I should be so lucky. I'm wondering if Zlo has iced himself under his own volition. I doubt it. In any event, I catch a transport, expecting to find Zlo happily dissipating at the Luxe or one of the other leisure clubs on Hedone.

The hardware and the presentation have changed numerous times at the Luxe, but it's essentially the same place it was when Lupe and Javan took young Jurith here to flap her restless new wings. The noise vortex is almost tolerable now. They say it gets better if you buy a vial of Hedatome and get tuned, but I'm here on business, even though business with the customers is frowned upon.

I put the word out that I'm looking for Zlo, and he locates me with the appropriate amount of awe and respect for his newly professed idol.

"*The Mirabul* looking for me," Zlo says, and I can tell he's well tuned. He also has a stunning little tripper in tow, whom he probably snagged off a transport shuttle on his way down.

As long as Zlo views me as a glorified ceiling ornament I realize I'll get nowhere, so I apologize for interloping and suggest that he get zipped by next morning and meet me for breakfast. Zlo is no cub, even though he slept on the long trip home, the same as I did.

The next Hedone morning well before I like to rise, I'm heading for a sunny table poolside -- a fairly natural looking pool with lots of tropical verdure overspreading its broad stone perimeter. Zlo jumps up with an obsequious and zealous greeting.

"Blazing comets, I've been trading your incredible stories all over the place, *Mirabul*. I thought maybe I was hallucinating last night, but here you are. Your reputation

is ubiquitous. Why, they say you can get in and out of a place with a story before the transport captain rises from her seat."

"If it's that easy I hope it's true," I say. "However, you may find in the end that I'm not quite all that I am."

Zlo laughs and orders breakfast, offering to buy mine.

"I don't eat that stuff," I say, "but I'll drink a large glass of guava juice, on you since you seem so flush."

"But not so pleased about it, not so pleased," Zlo says and changes the subject. The first sign that I am correct in my assumption.

I sip my juice and watch the pretty young things playing in the pool, one of them Zlo's tripper, while Zlo messes with his food.

"Well, what can I do for you, I mean for the pleasure of your company, Mirabul?" Zlo asks, pushing back his plate and his chair.

"I'm going to come straight at you, Zlo, because I'm in a hurry. The older you get the bigger the hurry. No time for oblique niceties."

"Sure, sure, what is it?" Zlo asks, and I see he's nervous now.

"I want you to tell me everything you can about your visit to Laom."

"My visit to...what? I don't..." Zlo looks around over his shoulder. "Mirabul...you're kidding."

"You think I hauled my weary carcass onto this twinkly bubble because I'm kidding? Your report about Jurith and Harquint?" I prod.

"But that's... I can't. It's classified. Probably for good they told me. After all the work I did. But how do you know...how--?"

"You haven't seen many historeps around who are my

vintage, have you, Zlo? The casualty list is high for us. Just let me assure you that the Laom story is mine. You arrived there on my heels, probably caught up with me on the way home, traveling on one of those new Laom-modified freighters. Jurith let you come because she wanted to tell me some things. I talked to Harquint first, then I had to go before he would come in. Now I want the rest."

"Black suns, Mirabul! I can't. Control...that is...I was paid for my work and sent here."

"By whom?"

"Control. That's it. The absolute top." He shrugs.

His female companion rises out of the pool in a surging cascade of water and heads for Zlo, splashing us like a wet puppy. She flings her head, dousing us again with her long black hair.

"Okay, okay, hon, get off. Get off my lap, damn it! Look what you've done. We're all wet. Sorry, Mirabul."

"You said you'd come in with me. You aren't a dud are you? Are you, big smart historep, a dud?" the tripper coaxes Zlo.

"Look, here's a stack of credits. Go get yourself a vial...plant your cute little ass at the bar and wait. Okay?"

"Okay, but you better show up soon. You're supposed to be having fun here." She glares at me as the interloper.

"Is that an order?" Zlo shouts. He looks embarrassed.

"She's probably a spy," Zlo mutters. Now he looks paranoid.

We both watch her thin red straps slide up and down over her plump buttocks as she bounces away.

"Blast it!" Zlo says, slamming down his passion fruit juice.

"Well, that was refreshing," I say, mopping my face.

"Sorry I can't help you, Mirabul."

"Nothing has changed," I insist. "Just start from the point where you're standing by the crystal after it's happened."

"How in blazing comets did you get ahold of that?"

"Here's a question for you: why was it there in the first place?"

"Because he told me he wanted everything done correctly. It had to be filed, on record, but not released."

"Who's *he*, Zlo?"

"Control."

"Control who?"

"The Condor. He came. He was there. He wanted a requiem. I could see that he was really interested, even though he never removed his protective suit -- there was no time to decontaminate. Afterward, his aide sent me to the Hustler planet -- I was asleep -- white speed with Laom freight...in a twinkle, then here. That's it. You aren't going to make any of this part of your story are you? It's my neck. Hey, come on now. I've heard you're a real straight arrow when it comes to stuff like this."

"Like what?"

"Like my not getting permanently iced."

"Don't worry," I say, trying hard to sound casual. "but I might want to see you again. Maybe we can work together sometime...my silent partner." I offer this as incentive -- *me* work with this gassed up unit? "Leave your address at H-30 under the name Lon. Okay?"

"Okay," Zlo says. He looks a little hopeful, but anxious now to see my backside.

I feel somewhat inclined to have a vial too, but I get myself out to a transport and hoist my stunned frame aboard.

On the flight home I think about what Zlo has told me. What am I to make of this? I remind myself that it is only my amazing dream which brings Jurith and Ammon together on Laom. But it is the Condor of my dream who came to the requiem. The Condor is out-cruising Control, and the only out-cruising Control I know of is Ammon. Is this another scheme of the diabolical Dr. Ammon to rid Control of interference with the precious Laomite? Is it to be endless space-cruising cities of war after all? Can he be this cold and cunning?

Back on the Hustler planet I make my way through the middle of the park, down the broad avenue which rolls out from the entrance of Control's great Tower. I can see small shuttles taking off and landing on the pad of its pinnacle in the clouds. These are the movers and shakers of the Hustler planet. Lower echelons must use the elevator. The Tower itself is a marker of time: at twelve o'clock noon in the summer its long shadow sweeps straight down the avenue, cloaking all the rushing hustlers. Do they know their haste is futile? I veer off to the side and stare into the thick foliage at a pair of canaries, one in full-throated song, as they bounce from branch to branch on the sun-spangled leaves of a banana tree. Cloned canaries, bright yellow feathers of nature which I would sorely miss if they had been consigned to extinction. Their eggs, could they lay any, would not survive but, thanks to the efforts of Flora and Fauna Intragalactic, the birds exist. I think of offspring and rare genes. I think of Qyoo and all at once have a mighty curiosity about her, about her destiny already written. I think about Ammon's and Jurith's predictions for her -- voices in my dream, I remind myself. I must try to keep memories of the dream separate from those of reality, or are they the same? The dream seems more real than real

parts of my life. My life has all been a dream. The sun is sinking and I realize I've been thinking a long time, my thoughts ranging far out there again. Apparently I'm going to be haunted by this loss and speculation right to the end of my existence. So far I don't grow weary of it, only of not knowing.

While I've been sitting there in my reverie, Tower Avenue has been cleared of pedestrians and the shoulders are being cordoned off by shield beams which simply rise out of the stone causeway and flash at me. As the beams approach, an amplified voice tells me to leave my bench. I get up, shuffling onto the narrow strip of grass which leads into the forested park. People are gathering and staring in the direction opposite The Tower. I hear music, a marching band playing real instruments.

"This is a rare occurrence," I remark to a young woman who is gazing down the lighted causeway.

"Well, so is his coming," the woman says. "No one believed it would ever happen. It's pretty amazing."

An excited man turns to speak to the woman. "They say things will be different now."

"They always say that," an old woman says, "but I wonder... Never thought I'd live to see it."

I've been so buried in my own endeavor I, for once in my life, don't know what is going on here. Lest they think I'm some kind of deviant whose just crawled out from under a rock, I refrain from asking. I wait and watch.

It's dark now and the sky is lighting up with holographic pyrotechnics above the band. Then I see, hovering a few meters off the ground in Control's official air car, the blazing figure of a man approaching. He is surrounded by dignitaries and aides, all standing respectfully at a lower level. He wears a dark blue

uniform, simply and smartly cut, adorned with only one embellishment near the left shoulder: the carved gold infinity symbol which signifies the leader of The Club. He is Control.

The air car passes, moving slowly toward the exalted hierarchic pillar rising up to meet the far distant stars. The spotlighted head turns my way with uplifted hand. I stare at the face floating before the dazzling blue and gold lights of the eternal Tower.

"He's really come back," a young girl says.

"There he is! There he is! Back at last," voices in the crowd repeat, their words melting together and rippling down the avenue.

I see the curly black hair with perhaps a strand of gray, and the serene smile. I strain forward with crashing heart and quivering knees. For one fleeting instant I am able to catch even the sparkle and dark mystery of Ammon's eyes.

"Who is this?" I whisper to my frenzied self. "And who was that in my dream?"

The End