

Figment #9, Spring 1992



"I want to keep it," said Moira, cuddling the creature. A triangle of sunlight from an open roofpanel fell across her and the animal she held, making them the most vivid images in the dimness of the dome. Even here, in the center of my universe, she was the one Lokia's sun shone on. The planet accepted her.

I loved my teenage daughter dearly, and I knew her well; I never ventured out of our home dome if I could help it, but she came home for meals and sleep and education -- I saw her every day. Our relationship was not as intimate as it would be if we were on board a ship like the one I grew up on, where everyone lived in each other's pockets, but it was the best I could manage when she spent so much time out under the open sky, which was the barrier that kept me indoors. I didn't like air that went on forever and ground that didn't have a decent wall every few meters. It just wasn't right.

I loved Moira, and I knew this was going to be a major argument, because the stray she'd brought home this time was even cuter than the one she found the previous week, and that had been a twenty-minute discussion. With a mental sigh, I sat forward in my comfichair and started my lines again. "Moira, that thing probably hasn't even been classified yet. Nobody knows what it does. Suppose it has venom in its teeth or claws? What if its digestive enzymes work on furniture? What if it's

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Figment #9, Spring 1992

untrainable? Please, take it back outside before it bites us or makes a mess."

"Oh, Mom. It's small. I'll keep it in my room. Then if it makes a mess, you'll never know the difference."

"What if it's carrying a disease?" I asked, but I could feel myself weakening. The creature had large serene blue eyes, and it was staring at me with a kindly expression.

Moira tightened her arm around it. "Aw, Mom, you know we're genetically incompatible with Lokia germs. Susu couldn't give me anything if she wanted to, could you, Susu?" She scratched the creamy patch of fur under its chin. It blinked and made a low trilling sound, like a smoothly running appliance.

"You don't know what it eats."

"I do too. I found her in a beetleberry bush. She was wolfing them down. I bet she could help you clear out the backyard -- she eats, you chop."

"Ugh." How could anything eat those noxious berries, which had a chitonous cell wall and smelled pungent and unpleasant? "Maybe you're right," I said. Brad had been encouraging me to make a garden in back of the dome; beetleberries and the open sky had been my two main obstacles.

"What will your father say?"

"Let's wait and ask him," said Moira. She grinned. When I reached the wonder-what-your-father-will-say stage, she knew I was inclining toward a yes. "Would you like to hold Susu?" she asked.

I sat back in my chair and held out my arms, hoping the creature wouldn't wet on me. I hadn't had a wet lap since Moira was a baby. She set the creature in my lap. It was six-limbed, like most Lokia animal life-forms, and it had hand-like processes on its foremost limbs, delicate long fingers. Its back hair was long and silky, brown stippled with green, save for the creamy patch under its chin. It had a round head, small earflaps, large round eyes set for binocular vision, and a dark muzzle with a tiny nose and mouth.

I stroked its fur, and it caught my hand in one of its own. Its fingers were tipped with suction discs, except for the third on the left hand, which was longer than the other four by two joints, and had a specialized tip it kept curled closed. It held my hand long enough to inspect my wedding ring. It leaned forward, and a thin, pointed red tongue darted out of its mouth to touch my diamond before I could jerk away. And even when I tried, a slightly delayed reaction, its grip was too strong to break. Brad had talked about myofilament arrangement in Lokia life-forms, how their muscles were generally stronger and

Figment #9, Spring 1992

smaller than ours. I was just beginning to get alarmed when it let go of my hand, turned around twice in my lap, and settled down, closing its eyes and trilling.

Moira smiled at me. "See? Her digestive enzymes don't hurt. She tasted my hand, my fingernail, my cheek, and my hair, and she didn't hurt me at all."

I stroked the thing, mesmerized by its fur's softness. Brad and I had deliberated a lot before deciding we might as well let Moira run off into the bush. She would probably spend the rest of her life on Lokia; she might as well get used to the planet. She was lonely. There wasn't another child her age at the base, only toddlers and babes in arms. Brad had gotten special dispensation to bring her, since he was one of the best xenobiologists available when Lokia needed a good one.

We knew we could lose Moira out there. Every new planet could surprise you, though Lokia seemed more benevolent than most, hosting no large predators and nothing yet identified as poisonous. Brad had trained Moira in self-defense, taught her how to aim and shoot a stunner, inoculated her against everything he could. He gave her a kit to take with her which included a communicator, a compass, a distance meter and a distress beeper. We knew if we kept her indoors she would go crazy. She wasn't bred to indoor living the way I

was.

"What do you think, Mom?" asked Moira.

I watched my hand as it traveled along the creature's fur. Susu made a warm, lightly scented lapful. How could anything that ate beetleberries smell like hyacinths? "I like it," I said, surprising myself. On shipboard, we were always fighting stowaway planetary life-forms; if they weren't some form of produce, they were a menace to our supplies. This was the first non-human planetary indigene I had ever felt attracted to.

"Maybe I can find another one, and we could each have one. I bet you never had a pet before, Mom."

"No, I never did."

"I've never seen anything quite like it," said Brad that night. "How did you find this when all our exploratory people missed it, Moira? It looks like it has the cranial capacity of a small child. I wish I could scan its brain, see if it has a complex cortex, though that wouldn't necessarily tell us anything. Hey!"

Susu licked his watch.

"It's all right, Daddy. She's safe."

"I don't think she's a she, honey. She's the third sex."

"Well, nobody has a pronoun for that yet. I'll call her she. Her name's Susu."

"All right. Would you mind if I took her to the lab

Figment #9, Spring 1992

tomorrow?"

"Yes! I don't want you running tests on her. I don't want her to get a bad opinion of humans."

"I'll be as kind to her as if she was my own child," he said, grinning.

"I remember some of those experiments you performed on me. That depth perception one where the floor dropped out from under the glass? Not that one, and no injections, and no bright lights, okay? You want to be mean, you have to find your own Susu. I'm going to find one for Mom."

"You think you can just walk outside and pick up another one, huh?"

"Yep."

That night I woke up when something warm and flower-scented cuddled up next to me. Despite her promise, Moira hadn't kept Susu in her room. We had taught Susu how to operate the toilet, and she seemed enthusiastic about using it. Moira gave her a bath and both of them emerged radiant and unbitten. I touched Susu's clean, soft fur, felt her warmth, smelled her scent, and heard the thinnest thread of her trill. I lifted the covers and she crept in next to me, curling up against my back. Her trilling lulled me to sleep. Brad never even

stirred.

Moira came home late for lunch the next day. Brad had not been able to find Susu to take her to the lab with him; later she turned up in the laundry cubby, and Moira took her and went out, leaving me, as usual, to my crafts. I was working on a video visualization -- an abstract; I was trying to incorporate a three-dimensionality. If it turned out well, I would send it in to the Culture Club, and if they liked it, they'd transmit it to everyone on the local net and give me credits towards new pletware.

When Moira came in, she had three Susus clinging to her -- one in her arms, one on each shoulder. Her own was the one in her arms, easy to distinguish by color and by shape, plumper and chunkier than Susu's slender siblings. "This one's Shisu -- she's for you," Moira said, presenting me with the animal on her left shoulder, the smallest, with dark, steely gray fur aside from the creamy patch under her chin. Her fur too was stippled with green, and her eyes were pale green. "This one's for Daddy," said Moira. "Hisu. Now we have a matched set."

Hisu was the largest, with the lightest fur, and dark blue eyes. Shisu and Hisu came to me, touching tongues to my diamond, the fabric of my coverall, my hair, my hands.

Shisu climbed up into my lap and settled there. I stroked

Figment #9, Spring 1992

her, feeling such a yearning for her, such a painful pleasure at having her there. "Oh, Moira," I said, leaning over and hugging Shisu. "Thank you. Thank you."

"Maybe she'll make you feel more at home outside," said Moira. "When the sky looks too wide, you could hug her. Of course, she doesn't smell as nice as Susu."

Shisu smelled like jasmine, one of my favorite scents. I laid my cheek against her back. Yes, she would need to go outside to feed, and if I let her out without going with her, maybe she'd never come back. I would have to face the open sky, and all the terrors of going suitless under it. I closed my eyes and savored Shisu's scent. Brad had wanted me to get psych adjustments for years. Maybe I could cure myself, with Shisu's help.

"This is wonderful, Moira," Brad said that evening. "I had people out scouting for these creatures all day, but we didn't find a single one, let alone a bonded set. Maybe the lab will have to hire you as help. With any luck, this set will be making babies soon; that seems to be a traditional Lokia response to captivity and an unlimited food supply." Hisu tugged at the sticktite holding his shirt closed, and he laughed.

"How do they make babies with three sexes, anyway?" asked Moira.

Brad twinkled at her. "Have you had that how-humans-make-babies lecture yet, honey?"

"Oh, Daddy, ages ago. Mom told me. I'd already found info on it in the teacher, anyway."

"Oh. Hmm. In that case, I guess you're old enough to hear about Lokia. We haven't gotten all the details down, but it looks like this: The male, or minus, like Hisu, and the female, or plus, like Shisu, produce the gametes. Susu, the third sex, acts as a facilitator and incubator. She arranges the fertilization, usually getting the group together. Then she ends up with the zygote, the fertilized egg, inside her until it's ready to be born. The courtship rituals and mating processes vary from species to species, but the roles the sexes play seem to be consistent. Stimson thinks the incubator gives the zygote some genes, but they're free-floating in the cytoplasm, not inside the nuclear envelope. It isn't a form of triploidy we understand yet; we don't know the mechanism that determines sexual differentiation. Any questions?"

"Uh," said Moira. "I think I need to expand my vocabulary first. Thanks for trying, though, Dad."

There was some debate among members of the colony, but I decided that the species Moira discovered possessed enough sentience to be persons. Brad took Hisu to the

Figment #9, Spring 1992

laboratory and ran him through a lot of tests. I didn't need to test Shisu; sitting on my lap, she learned to build video displays on the computer, and not simple ones either. She loved the sensation of controlling something she was looking at. The images she created disturbed me, most of all because I felt I almost understood them.

All of Shisu's computer-generated visuals had groups of three in them.

And if I almost understood her artwork, perhaps I almost understood her thinking. That meant that perhaps what I suspected was true. It made sense in a Susu-Hisu-Shisu manner.

I suspected them of being ambassadors from one people to another. I suspected them of coming to evaluate us, we, the intruders on their planet.

I suspected them of friendship true and deep, deep enough for them to think we were worthy of their help. Shisu often looked to my comfort as well as her own. She went outdoors with me, and when I panicked, she covered my eyes with her warm hands, and trilled until my fear seeped away. When Moira was troubled, I heard her telling Susu about it, and I heard a trilled response that comforted her. Brad told me that when someone else wanted to take Hisu away to run some tests,

he refused and so did Hisu. Brad had a harness he strapped to his back, and Hisu rode it; they never left each other when Brad was at work. On one level this did not make sense to Brad. He was committed to the quest for knowledge, and he knew that many of the other people he worked with could find out more about Hisu than he could. On some other level he and Hisu were committed to each other, and that was stronger now.

I suspected the Sus of thinking they understood us, the way we thought we understood them.

I suspected that was a dangerous assumption for anyone to make.

I suspected I made it myself, trying to imagine myself into Susu's mind when she first came to scout us out. What did she see? Three people living together as a unit. Three people with an unlimited food supply who were not doing their job of reproducing.

I spent most of my life on board the Orion, one of the Family Trade Ships. I knew I was marked for exogamy, so I spent a lot of time studying people other than those of the ship, and not so much time learning the important shipboard things. I tried to remember if there was a kinship word for a daughter who gave birth to her own sister or brother, but if there was, it was one of the forbidden words, those given to a person of a

Figment #9, Spring 1992

certain age, and I left to be with Brad before I learned it.

Susu was incubating now. Moira missed a period, and she felt ill in the mornings.

I wondered if anyone had any information on whether the facilitators of one species ever helped the mating group of another. I wondered if Susu had committed the ultimate act of diplomacy.

If there was no word for what was happening to Moira, perhaps it was not such a bad thing. I thought of the one choice I could make for Moira that would ease the pain I saw ahead of us. I thought: what would life on Lokia be like if we rejected the first diplomatic offering we received from its sentient species?

I slept uneasily in this planetary gravity, and longed again for the undimmed stars of space.

