

The Singer Enigma

Concord, Book 1

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THE TRUTH SEEKER

Tarhn had the blood of the rulers of space in his veins—and a mysterious horror shadowing his secret soul. He knew only that he had been exiled from the planet where he was born, and raised by an alien race for the psychic powers he possessed—but what fearful force had stripped him of his childhood memories and almost of his sanity still remained unknown as he reached manhood and the challenge he could avoid no longer.

Now, as an all-destroying blight spread from planet to planet, from galaxy to galaxy, Tarhn had to find out the truth about himself and his past no matter what the terrible cost. For if he went on living a lie, the entire universe would die ...

Excerpt from a closed discussion of Assembly Council PA382 (Singer), Councillor Elenda speaking:

We are taught that when we lose ourselves on the spiral of knowledge, it is best to remember where we have been, and why. Let us begin again with a review of our responsibilities to this Council, to the full Assembly, and to the Concord.

The Concord has only one command: No group shall wage undeclared war. The Assembly's primary function is to expel, proscribe, or annihilate planets that break this command.

Did the Singers wage undeclared war?

It would seem a simple matter to decide. A group is defined as three or more persons acting in concert toward a common goal. Undeclared war is any group act which, in the absence of a Declaration of Intent, results in the premeditated deaths of more than one hundred Concord citizens within eight Centrex days.

There is no doubt that the Singers fit our definition of a group. There is no doubt that more than one hundred citizens died within eight days. There is no doubt that no Declaration of Intent was issued. Only premeditation is in doubt. The full Assembly could not resolve that doubt. Three thousand beings from three thousand distinct cultures can rarely agree on the simplest matters; whatever else the Singers may be, they are not simple.

The Assembly delegated the Singer decision to this Council. We have spent years, many years, attempting to understand the Singers. We have not succeeded. Fortunately, we are not alone in our search for understanding. There exists a group/society/entity called Carifil which also sifts nuances out of ambiguities, seeking the residue of pattern which permits insight into Galactic events.

Though the Carifil have no legal existence under the Concord Charter, Carifil talents have been very useful to the Concord. We do not know who the Carifil are, but we do know that they have no single planet home, no single racial identity, no allegiance except to the Concord. Their information is not tainted by parochialism. Carifil have been called everything from assassins to saviors; they are both, and neither. Some Carifil have Attained high Concord positions, most have no official powers. All have unusual

mental abilities. None is infallible.

Which brings us to the Singer enigma once again

I

N'Lete's urgent, silent call brought Tarhn out of sleep into instant wakefulness. His mind had overridden the breathing reflex—danger in the air. In a blur of motion Tarhn ripped nasal filters out of his personal baggage and fitted them on himself and the slakes. Though the filters looked exactly like those carried by sensitive Galactic travelers, the filters did more than block out exotic odors.

Tarhn breathed cautiously, but smelled/felt/sensed nothing unusual. The slakes showed no reaction except relief at being able to breathe safely again.

With a few swift motions Tarhn dressed. Unless the slakes' hypersensitive olfactory perception had sounded a false alarm, someone would be by shortly. He was more than a little curious to find out whether that someone wanted him dead or merely unconscious.

The slakes were less discriminating. When they heard the door being unlocked they rose soundlessly on their rear legs and folded their wings. Their attitude of sharp-toothed eagerness made Tarhn want to laugh aloud.

Not this time, my friends, he thought firmly. *I need him quiet, yes, but still conscious.*

The slakes grumbled silently, but when the intruder entered only n'Lete bit him. And at that she only allowed herself a small bite, enough to ensure that her paralyzing venom would penetrate quickly.

Tarhn caught the man before he fell to the floor, ensuring that no loud thumps reached curious ears. The intruder wore the standard uniform of an *Adventure* crewman.

Others?

By way of answer, the slakes spread their huge wings and calmly began a grooming ritual.

Good.

Tarhn bent over the man and began to probe. No mind shields slowed him as he drilled key words into level after level of the crewman's mind. It was a technique the Carifil used in psychic integration, but it served equally well for inquisition.

After long minutes of silence Tarhn ended the probe. The crewman knew little, but what he knew was tantalizing. To him Tarhn was no more than an ordinary tourist who had passed the afternoon in the ship's forward lounge. All forward lounge passengers were to receive a dose of amnesian, enough to wipe out any memory of the previous twenty-six hours. But amnesian was unpredictable; different races had varying degrees of resistance to it. Apparently whoever had planned the operation considered it important enough not to risk unmeasured doses via the ventilating system. Instead, the victims were knocked out by an airborne drug. When they were safely asleep, an individually calibrated dose of amnesian would be administered.

Neatly planned.

Efficiently executed.

But why?

Tarhn rapidly reviewed the past day. As ordered, he had begun his surveillance of Lyra early yesterday. Together with other tourists bound for Wilderness, they had entered a special Access and emerged on the sixth planet in the Wilderness system. Then they had embarked onto the *Adventure*, a ship on which they were to savor the archaic joys of sublight interplanetary flight. Lyra had gone straight to her quarters, not to emerge until after today's midday meal. He had watched, chosen his moment, and effected a natural entry into her life. At no time had he seen or sensed anything unusual, other than the orange man.

And Lyra herself, of course.

Tarhn gave a muffled exclamation and injected the amnesian into the helpless intruder.

Quickly, slakes. We go hunting.

The slakes scrambled onto his shoulders, claws cool and sharp against his neck.

Gently, n'Lete.

The slake obligingly retracted her claws and wrapped her sinuous lower body around Tarhn's neck.

Tarhn moved past closed doors in a crouching, weaving run. Though he could sense no guards, certain precautions were a matter of reflex. As he neared Lyra's door he removed a pronged ornament from his belt. Without hesitation he jammed the prongs deep into the circuit which controlled the door. A short, low hum vibrated through his bones, then the door retracted part way.

Lyra's body blocked the door from fully opening. Obviously she had sensed something was wrong, but couldn't unlock the door in time.

Tarhn sent the slakes out of sight and stepped over Lyra into the room. He bent down, searching her still body for signs of life. Neither pulse nor respiration. Skin stiff and cool as a slake's claws.

Tarhn cursed himself for wasting time on the crewman. He should have come immediately to her. On an impulse he probed her mind. The probe was easy, so easy; her mind was familiar the instant before discovery, floating free and light, brilliant with potential, pulsing with subtle rhythms, more subtle songs.

Even as he withdrew, Tarhn felt nearly dizzy with relief. She was alive. Whatever drug they had given her suspended mind and body, but did not kill. Someone either knew more about her mind than he did, or was very cautious.

Though alive, Lyra was totally helpless.

At the sound of men approaching, Tarhn closed the door silently. Startled cries and the heavy sound of falling bodies made Tarhn's lips curve in an unpleasant smile. He opened the door.

*Well done, hunters. *

N'Lete rose and flicked the narrow tube of her tongue over Tarhn's hand.

Conscious, too. Such restraint!

Tarhn's praise sent delighted ripples through the slakes' sinuous bodies. He stroked their triangular heads while he probed the helpless crewmen.

As he had suspected, Lyra was the eye of this storm. One of the ship's emergency lifecraft waited. They were to load her aboard, release the lifecraft to its pre-set course, and report to sickbay for a dose of amnesian.

At Tarhn's signal, n'Lete and Bithe injected enough venom to keep the crewmen unconscious for several days.

Tarhn lifted Lyra easily and settled her across his shoulders. Not for the first time he realized that being uncommonly big was at times uncommonly useful. On the other side, though, once in the hallway he would be a fine target and would gladly trade sizes with a Gallian dwarf.

The slakes moved swiftly down the hall. Tarhn waited for several seconds, then ran lightly after. Twice he had to leap over crewmen sprawled unconscious across the narrow hall, capsules of amnesian rolling from their nerveless fingers. Other than those two, though, Tarhn saw no one. It was unlikely that the decks would be so deserted unless the entire crew had been bought.

He hoped they had. Otherwise there would be an immediate alarm when one of the lifecraft emerged from the mother ship.

Tarhn entered the lifecraft bay at a speed which proved his trust in the slakes. Nor was he disappointed; they both were coiled proudly next to their latest victim.

And your last for a time, I hope.

The slakes politely but completely disagreed.

Bloodthirsty beasts, aren't you? he thought fondly.

N'Lete and Bithe opened their mouths in hissing agreement.

Tarhn strapped Lyra into the lifecraft nearest the exit portal. He yanked out the course tape and switched the controls to manual.

In.

The slakes scrambled. When they realized that Tarhn intended to strap them down, they clacked their wings loudly.

*Hold still or be left behind. *

The slakes held still.

Tarhn strapped himself into the pilot's seat. His fingers moved rapidly over the controls, lifting the

craft into humming life. With a final glance around, Tarhn threw the lever which separated lifecraft from ship. As the tiny vehicle puffed outward into space, Tarhn breathed deeply for the first time since he had awakened.

“We were lucky, Lyra,” he said softly, “though you’re in no position to appreciate it. The exit portal was on the sunward side; even if an unbought crewman or passenger should be foolish enough to look out a portal, all they’ll see is a great burning sun.”

Tarhn held the craft toward Wilderness’ sun. Later he would change course into a nearly flat trajectory which would put Wilderness between them and the cruise ship. But now there was little to do but sit, review what had happened, try to guess why.

The assignment had begun in the usual manner—mental alert from a Carifil, vivid image of whom he was to watch, directions as to the place he should intercept her. So he had soon found himself aboard the *Adventure*. He had discreetly watched over Lyra’s cabin until she finally left it. When she went to the forward lounge and sat alone, he sat well behind her, waiting to see whether she had friends or enemies aboard.

Although the lounge was thick with people, his quarry was easy to keep track of. Lyra Mara was a silent amber pool surrounded by flocks of yammering life. Not so much as a ripple of awareness crossed her face when a man dyed the last shade of orange sat beside her and attempted conversation.

A discreet mental probe of the gaudy man gave Tarhn only the impression of a fashionable predator seeking diversion from the boredom of interplanetary flight. Tarhn was not satisfied. His own mind was broadcasting the fiction of a rich tourist, in case anyone was curious enough to probe. The orange man might easily be working beneath a similar cover.

Tarhn stepped up the probe in stages until it reached the point of diminishing returns; more information could be gained only at the cost of revealing the probe to an alert psi. If the orange stranger was other than he appeared to be, a cursory probe would not uncover him.

After a few minutes of listening to the persistent stranger, Tarhn was ready to believe that he was no more than his mental and physical surface proclaimed, a vain, mildly intoxicated man of wealth who could not believe that Lyra was not interested in him.

Tarhn chuckled deep within himself. At least the slizzard showed good taste. Lyra had a tranquil, self-contained beauty that made others appear garish. Her hair could have been spun of the finest amber and her skin had a rich translucence which invited, even demanded touch. And her eyes ... though he had seen only a vicarious mind-picture of her when he had been given the assignment, he was certain that no gemstone in the galaxy could match the red-brown depths of her eyes, much less the tiny starburst of gold which was their center. Most Galactics had only darkness for pupils. Was the dilating mechanism the same as his? Would sudden light, interest, fear, or mental effort cause the gold to expand?

With practiced ease, Tarhn brought his thoughts back to duty. Lyra was undoubtedly attractive, but she was also endangered, dangerous, or both, and in some way also pivotal to Galactic politics. The Carifil wouldn’t waste him guarding a nonentity, no matter how beautiful.

Tarhn leaned forward fractionally, his senses on full alert. The orange man was entirely too persistent about getting Lyra to his cabin. Either he was uncommonly crude or had more than simple pleasure on his mind.

With the easy motion of a hunting cat, Tarhn rose and walked up the aisle.

“I am unaware of your home planet,” said Tarhn in high Galactic. “Is it one on which ceremonial rudeness is practiced?”

Perhaps it was Tarhn’s sheer size which made the stranger speechless. When Tarhn repeated his question in low Galactic, the now furious man interrupted.

“I understand high Galactic better than you,” the man said loudly.

Tarhn’s dark hands lifted in a polite indication of disbelief, then turned palms up in an apology which was thoroughly negated by his ice blue eyes. At the same time, the severe planes of Tarhn’s face smoothed into the expression of one who waits patiently for a dull child to answer a simple question.

“On Danir I would have you killed,” said the man in a guttural tongue.

“And on Tau,” replied Tarhn in the same language, “I would feed you to the slakes—after you had

been bathed. As we are here rather than there or Danir, I await your pleasure.”

“I wouldn’t lower myself to touch you,” said the man.

Tarhn bowed and murmured, “Good ... for you.”

The insult was doubly telling, for Tarhn had delivered it in the gutter patois of Danir, a language which a Danirian aristocrat wouldn’t understand. The stranger’s surge of outrage proved that he had indeed understood, but to admit it would be a further humiliation.

As the stranger retreated, Tarhn turned to Lyra. Looking no higher than her lips, he addressed her in high Galactic.

“I hope that I have not offended you, your people, or your gods.”

“Kindness is rarely offensive,” responded Lyra in the same language.

Her words lacked all trace of planetary accent, but even more surprising was the quality of her voice. It was rich with muted harmony, vibrant in a way that made all remembered music pale and flat.

Tarhn bowed and turned his hands palm up in the Galactic gesture of greeting or parting. When Lyra made no further comment, he moved to return to his seat. Then he felt her fingers warm and light on his palm.

“If it would please you to sit with a strange and awkward woman ...”

Tarhn’s fingers returned the pressure of hers, savored the texture of her skin.

“Stranger you may be, but awkward? To listen to your voice is to know the heart of beauty.”

Boldly Tarhn raised his glance to her eyes, only to find himself caught and held, a fly in amber.

“You are kind,” said Lyra, “and your mind is disciplined. Your presence is welcome.”

Tarhn hesitated, then regained control of his wits. His momentary tension must have relayed itself to Lyra, for she removed her hand quickly.

That is what I meant by awkward,” she said softly. “The nuances of Galactic Courtesy often elude me. On my birth planet a mind both kind and disciplined is ...” She paused, obviously searching for the right word. “‘Good’ is the only word your language has, but it is a meager analogue.”

Tarhn searched Lyra’s face, but could detect no more than her words told him. He was not surprised that she thought him kind; he’d been careful to imbue his mental camouflage with that lack of aggression which can be construed as either harmless or kind. But how had she sensed the discipline beneath?

“I have been called many things; disciplined isn’t one of them. May I ask why you think me so?”

“You don’t invade others with your thoughts. I’ve discovered that such control is rare out here. I have come to value discipline highly.”

Tarhn continued the conversation with just the surface of his mind; the remainder was analyzing her words. In order to “discover” that the average person radiates thought/emotion like a star radiates energy, Lyra must have come either from a planet of psi nulls or psi masters. He would assume the latter. For one, it would explain Carifil interest in her. For another, he had been taught to overestimate a potential enemy. Fewer nasty surprises that way.

Not that Lyra seemed a candidate for enmity. By now they were laughing and talking in middle Galactic, the language of friends. They had even exchanged names. And the scent of her nearness was as clean and heady as flowers at dawn. In spite of himself, he felt pleasure creeping through him, and not even the sternest self-reminders diminished his growing ease with her. Lyra’s laugh alone was worth the sudden assignment. His residual irritation with Carifil vanished. Though they had called him away from his first freetime in years, being ordered to stay close to Lyra was ample compensation.

At last Tarhn’s conscience pricked him hard enough to get results—n’Lete and Bithe would be hungry. Lounge rules forbade “pets,” though Tau slakes could hardly be classified in the same category as Libern velvets or Sthian lap mice.

“I’m sorry, Lyra, but if I don’t feed n’Lete and Bithe they will gnaw through my room and come hunting for me.”

Lyra responded with a phrase from Courtesy which showed confusion, but did not demand an explanation if he did not wish to give one.

“According to lounge rules, they are pets. On Tau, the children of the Helix are given battle slakes to raise. N’Lete and Bithe are more companions than pets. Would you like to meet them?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lyra, giving him a delighted smile. “On my planet there are no animals.”

After a long moment Tarhn said neutrally, “No animals?”

“None. Many plants, marvelous plants. But that’s not the same. To have flesh live and not be human!”

Lyra’s voice left no doubt that such a miracle was to be savored and explored. Tarhn filed that incredible fact under the growing mental category called Lyra Mara. He wanted to ask the name of her home planet, but that would be a curdling breach of Courtesy. Better to wait, grow closer, observe, as the Carifil had trained him to do. And they had trained him well. Not so much as a flicker of incredulity escaped his mental discipline.

He was almost as wary about communicating his appreciation of Lyra’s radiant grace. He thought of complimenting her, but said nothing out of fear that she would be offended.

“I’m not,” said Lyra softly.

Though Tarhn’s walk never missed a beat, his mind flashed instantly into defensive silence.

“I’ve been clumsy again,” said Lyra. “Forgive me. Your mind is deeply disciplined, yet ...”

She stopped and lifted her strange eyes to his. For a moment Tarhn felt swept by vertigo as he looked into the widening gold at the center of her eyes. Then the feeling passed and he found himself listening tensely to her.

“... No word for it here. Complement? Yes, but more. Far more. Ease and rightness and creation.”

When there was no lessening of his mental barriers, Lyra lowered her eyes and said sadly, “Of all the aspects of Courtesy I don’t understand, the injunction against truth is the most baffling. I know our minds would be unity, one with the other, as surely as I know we are man and woman. Yet I must say nothing or risk offending you. I risked and lost. I will offend no further.”

Tarhn watched her walk away, divided between profound relief and a numbing sense of loss. Out of the turmoil which passed for thought came the certainty that whatever else might pass, Lyra had told the truth as she knew it. He would bet his life on it.

He already had.

The realization that there lived a psi who could easily penetrate at least the outer levels of his mind moved through him like a shock wave.

Abruptly he turned toward his cabin. What had been a quiet cruise on an amusingly archaic spaceship had turned into a trap. No Access. No way for the Carifil to replace him. No way to escape.

Tarhn paused in midstride, surprised by the intensity of his emotions. Just what was he escaping from? A beautiful woman who found him desirable? A terrible crime, surely, punishable by extended, intimate confinement with him.

He debated going after her and apologizing for his rudeness, but a cold thread of unease held him back. He tried to pursue the thread, to discover its source and thus know whether it was tied to real or imagined threat. But the thread was born of patterns he had avoided so long that they were inaccessible to him now.

With a surge of impatience at his coy mind, Tarhn started swiftly after Lyra. Whether the danger was real or not, he had a job to do.

“Lyra,” he said, catching up with her. “Let’s forget Courtesy for a while. It’s more suited to people who have little in common and less common sense.” When she hesitated, he added, “Minds as ... perceptive as yours are rare. You surprised me. I’m not used to being surprised. I reacted badly.”

Lyra’s sudden smile told him that the contact was retrieved.

“My slakes are still hungry. Are you still interested in seeing them?”

In answer, Lyra put her arm through his and leaned lightly against him. The subtle moonlight scent of her skin made Tarhn take an involuntary breath. Instantly she pulled back, fearing she had offended him. Tarhn’s arm tightened, holding her close.

“I like it this way,” he said, leading her back down the passageway.

“Let’s start again,” he said lightly. “Though born on Tau, I’m essentially a Concord citizen. I’ve lived on twelve planets and visited many, many more. Cultural variations seldom surprise me, and the only thing which offends me is intentional cruelty.”

Lyra moved her right hand in an unmistakable gesture of approval.

“Good,” he said. “Now. The most logical, rational approach for us would be to use your cultural norms, at least until we understand each other well enough to make our own private rules. Agreed?” he said, stopping and facing her,

“Yes.”

Tarhn smiled and allowed his fingers to touch her . shining hair. She tilted her head slightly toward him, inviting further touch.

“I assume that touch between strangers isn’t tabu in your culture,” he said, enjoying the cool, sliding pressure of her hair between his fingers.

“Tabu?”

“Forbidden. Or at least discouraged, hedged with rituals and social distance.”

“Oh, no. We have no tabus on—”

But instead of naming her planet, Lyra simply repeated that there were no tabus.

“We also have no word for strangers,” she added thoughtfully. “At least, not stranger in the sense carried by the Galactic word.”

Tarhn’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “Semantics. The curse of man. What would the word stranger mean in your language?”

“Nothing, for we have no strangers. Your fingers tensed, Tarhn. What’s wrong?”

Tarhn was amazed by her acute perceptions; his fingers hadn’t tightened enough to register on a Carifil bio-monitor, yet she had known immediately.

“Just surprise,” said Tarhn lightly. “It’s hard to understand how, on a planet with a population large and advanced enough to join the Concord, there would be no strangers.”

“Then imagine what a surprise the galaxy has. been, and still is, for me. Since leaving home, you’re the first person I’m glad to be close to, even with your baffling sharp edges. No, that’s not fair. I must be as unexpected and jagged to you as you are to me. Yet in so many ways you feel like a—like one of my people. I keep forgetting you aren’t.”

Tarhn looked into her intent amber eyes, gold-centered, serious and inviting, and wise and confused, and wished for an instant that he had no reason to know Lyra other than the sweet reason that he wanted to.

But he was Carifil, and he had many reasons, some of them unclear even to himself. He took Lyra’s hand and resumed walking, slowly.

“I’m surprised you left your planet,” he said.

“It was necessary.”

When Lyra didn’t elaborate, Tarhn went back to the subject of strangers.

“Even though your people aren’t strangers among themselves, didn’t they consider the Galactics to be strangers?”

“Not in the sense of alien. We called them otherwise. Our word has no exact analogue ...” She frowned in concentration. “Is there a word in Galactic for children who have strayed, but still retain the potential to return and be unity again?”

“Lost?”

“No, that’s too accidental and too final. The straying has an element of choice, more mental than physical. Although, of course, physical distance often follows mental distance.”

Tarhn laughed suddenly. “Prodigal children. Nearly every culture has its own version of the child who grows and/or goes away from its cultural values. After various experiences, the child comes to accept the values it was born with.”

“That’s it,” said Lyra. “We call the Galactics prodigal children.”

“Then you believe that Galactics should embrace your cultural values rather than their own?”

Lyra hesitated, then gestured agreement. “In some senses, yes, but ...”

Tarhn waited.

“Do stars embrace the way of light rather than darkness?” she asked finally.

“Hardly. By definition, a star is matter which radiates energy within certain wavelengths.”

“Exactly. Galactics will realize, as you do, that intentional cruelty is as ... as ... oh, you’re right, semantics can be a curse!” she said, smiling yet serious. “Intentional cruelty is like a star choosing darkness—not impossible, but highly improbable. A violation of what it means to be a star.”

“You have a difficult culture to live up to,” said Tarhn, stopping before a closed cabin door.

“Not for them. My people.”

“Oh?” said Tarhn, pausing as he removed a key from his belt.

“Yes. For example ... I’ve heard that Galactics, some of them, can physically destroy—murder? is that the word?—that they can actually murder another person.”

“It’s been known to happen,” said Tarhn grimly.

“And the one who murders lives?”

“It varies from culture to culture, but most often the murderer survives.”

Lyra’s hand made a curt Galactic gesture of negation-from-disbelief.

“At home, only a very few of my people could even hold the thought of murder. And of those few, even fewer could carry the action out. Not one of them could survive it.”

Tarhn smiled without humor. “If all planets were as efficient, and lethal, at catching their murderers, we wouldn’t have a problem either,” he said, inserting the three-pronged key into the lock circuit.

“I wasn’t clear,” said Lyra. “The one who murders—murderer? yes—the murderer would die as a result of the act, even if there was not one other person in the universe to know or catch him. To take another’s life is to negate your own.”

“That philosophy isn’t unique to your planet.”

“It’s not a philosophy,” said Lyra patiently. “It’s a fact. Like gravity.”

“Then,” said Tarhn, twisting the key in the circuit, “yours would be the only known planet in the galaxy where philosophy had the inevitability of universal constants.”

“You don’t believe what I’m saying, do you?”

“Intellectually, I concede the possibility of anything,” said Tarhn carefully. “Emotionally ... well, let’s just say I find the whole idea improbable.”

“As improbable as I find the idea of animals?” asked Lyra, with no rancor in her tone.

Tarhn laughed and his impatience fell away. If Lyra wanted to believe her culture was perfect, and perfectly good, why, he’d once made the same mistake about his own culture. She would soon discover that no culture condoned intentional cruelty to one’s own kind. Of course, the definition of just what constituted “one’s own kind” was sometimes very exclusive.

“Come on,” he said. “I’d like you to meet two animals who are more improbable than most, A warning, though. They’re predators, and quite proud of it. While they certainly won’t harm you, I’m afraid their delight in the predatory state might offend you.”

“Do they think as we do?”

“Ummm. Let’s say that they’d never intentionally harm someone they care for. It’s just that they care for so few people.”

A smile flickered over Lyra’s lips.

“I left my planet to learn; perhaps they have something to teach me.”

Tarhn sent a quick, tightly shielded mental command to the slakes. When the door opened fully, they stayed wrapped about their ceiling perches instead of launching themselves across the room in their usual greeting. He heard Lyra’s murmur of surprise as the slakes turned and examined her with startling blue eyes.

“But they’re beautiful,” she said softly. “Such eyes, like yours.”

The slakes rattled their wings slightly; blue light cascaded off the scaled patterns on the wings.

“They don’t frighten you?” said Tarhn.

“Oh no. Such beauty.” She looked at him suddenly. “Should I be frightened?”

A small smile came to Tarhn’s lips. “Some call them the deadliest animal ever to be allied with man. And most people find them ugly. Or at least unattractive.”

“Then I must see differently than most people. How do the slakes move?”

“Very quickly,” laughed Tarhn, holding out his arm. N’Lete flashed off her perch and coiled securely

around his arm and shoulder.

“You must be strong, to hold her weight so easily,” said Lyra, measuring the slake with her eyes. “She’s nearly as long as you, though very thin.”

Tarhn wondered how Lyra had known n’Lete’s sex, but let it pass.

“Slakes have a low density,” said Tarhn, stroking n’Lete’s long neck. “On Tau they glide and, when forced, fly on the shoulders of the wind. And the wind always moves, swift and deep. So they have little need for heavy muscles to power their wings. Their bones are hollow and their skin and flesh are light, resilient, yet very strong.”

N’Lete opened her mouth wide and air rushed hissing through serrated teeth. Two long fangs folded down from the roof of her mouth.

“Yes, n’Lete,” he said, chuckling, “I was just leading up to that.” Then Tarhn stopped smiling and looked at Lyra. “Perhaps you won’t find them so beautiful when I tell you how and what they eat. If my description ... disturbs you, I’ll stop.”

Lyra said nothing, waiting and watching him with clear amber eyes.

“The two long teeth (fangs) are hollow. When she bites, a drug flows through the teeth into the veins of her prey. The prey immediately is paralyzed or tolled, depending on the amount of drug n’Lete pumps in.” Tarhn watched, but other than a slight dilation of gold Lyra showed no reaction.

“Why,” she said slowly, “do they kill?”

“Food. Slakes must eat.”

“Are there no plants for them? No ... you have no word for it!” she said wonderingly. “Symbiosis? Yes. No.” Lyra paused, searching. “Let me describe what I mean. On my home planet, there are many plants. Some of them are fulfilled by nurturing us. Slow trembling delight that the fruit of their bodies mingles and becomes one with ours. Is it like that out here?”

Tarhn hesitated, then plunged. “Yes and no, Lyra. Some Galactics are sensitive enough to the lives and needs of plants to sort out which plants give willingly and which give only because they can’t get away. But most Galactics don’t have that sensitivity. All they have is their rumbling stomachs. If a plant or animal isn’t lethal or very quick, it is eaten. It has always been this way. The survival imperative. The biosystem of every known planet is based on it, civilizations are based on it, and individuals accept it with varying degrees of distaste or pleasure.”

Lyra said nothing for a long time; her mind and body fairly hummed with concentration. In the sudden silence, he remembered the lyrical voice, subtle music that should have been alien but was more familiar than the texture of n’Lete’s tongue sucking soothingly against his palm. Once he thought he heard music, a rhythmic exchange, dispersing. But it must have come from outside the cabin, for inside all was quiet. With utmost delicacy, he attempted to eavesdrop on Lyra’s thoughts, but the rhythmic music disturbed him.

“Teach me more.”

Tarhn started. “About the slakes?”

“Any aspect of unity describes the whole.”

“What?” said Tarhn, then as he felt the mist of sweat on his skin he realized just how hard he had tried to penetrate Lyra’s thoughts.

Unsuccessfully.

He gathered his fraying concentration and returned to the slakes.

“Tongue ... yes her tongue is basically a straw with rasping edges. She sucks the blood from the paralyzed prey, then shreds the flesh finely and swallows it. Not all of the flesh, unless the wind is strong enough to lift her and her meal to a safe place, a place where she may lair up until her body transforms enough of the prey that she can lift and glide on a normal wind.”

“Safe? Then slakes, too, are hunted as food?”

“A grounded slake is as good as dead. There are many predators on land, all of them hungry.”

“And the plants ... ?”

Tarhn turned his hand palm up. “It takes energy to live. Few plants offer as much energy, unit for unit, as flesh. Survival again.”

Lyra's eyes were as opaque as her thoughts for a moment, then she said, "May I touch her, or her mate?"

"Bithe thought you'd never get around to him; he was getting lonely. Here," said Tarhn, bracing her with his free arm, "hold your arm out as I did."

"I thought you said they were light."

"They are, but—" Tarhn steadied Lyra as Bithe swooped onto her arm and shoulder. "—they push off hard," finished Tarhn.

Bithe and Lyra studied each other for a moment, then Bithe's tongue flicked out and tickled Lyra's nose.

"Behave yourself, Bithe," said Tarhn.

Lyra laughed delightedly. "No, let him touch as he pleases. He's not heavy at all. Like lightning ... all power and movement."

"And danger," muttered Tarhn. But not for Lyra. She had a voice and touch that would charm a rogue slizzard.

When Lyra's fingers unerringly found the patch of skin under Bithe's wing that forever needed scratching, Tarhn realized that Lyra must be in some type of rapport with the slake. He probed discreetly, but neither of the animals had the sluggish mind and muscles that betrayed an animal under mental control. And Bithe fairly rippled pleasure at finding another pair of hands that knew where he itched. Tarhn sighed inside himself; the Carifil weren't going to be happy when they found out the qualities of Lyra's mind. Or were they? Maybe they already knew. Maybe—

"Sorry, Lyra, I wasn't listening."

"The slakes. They enjoy the touching, but I sense they would enjoy it more after they're fed."

"Getting nervous?"

"Not about Bithe," smiled Lyra. "n'Lete is less tolerant of hunger and strangers. But, to raise young in the world you've described, I guess intolerance would be useful."

"Necessary."

"Yes ... but she is grace and blue fire just the same."

N'Lete's sinuous body rippled.

"Keep talking," laughed Tarhn. "You've just made a convert to tolerance."

"Vanity?"

"It's more complicated than that," said Tarhn, stroking n'Lete's head with his fingertip. "She knows she is the culmination of five thousand years of Helix breeding. She's just pleased by your discrimination."

Lyra ran her fingertips lightly down n'Lete's back. The slake's head lowered fractionally in response. Then both slakes jumped to the floor. They waited, wings folded, balancing on their rear legs and long tails.

Tarhn opened a travel bag and brought out a handful of synthomeat strips and two soft bottles of clear fluid.

"How often do they eat?" said Lyra, her eyes never leaving the slakes as their serrated teeth quickly rasped the meat into paste.

"It varies," said Tarhn, poking open the bottles. "The more active they are, the more they eat. This will hold them for about two standard days. Longer, if they don't get some exercise. They need water every day, though if they must they can go without longer than I can."

Quiet sipping sounds made a counterpoint to Tarhn's words. The sounds increased in volume as the liquid diminished.

"What will they do now?"

"Sleep, if we let them. Incurably lazy," added Tarhn, laughing softly. The slakes ignored him, except to request a lift to their perches. Tarhn obliged, throwing them lightly upwards.

"Have you eaten yet?" he said to Lyra. "Or is public eating not a practice among your people?"

"We eat when and where we are hungry. Usually twice a day. I'm hungry now."

"Ship food? Or did you bring your own?"

"Ship food."

Tarhn wondered whether she ate meat, or even realized what meat was, but decided to wait and see. When he saw that Lyra was reluctant to leave the slakes, he took her hand and led her to the door.

“They’ll still be here after we eat,” he said.

“Then you’ll let me see them again, talk ‘with them, and touch them?’” she asked eagerly.

Suddenly Tarhn believed, really believed, that Lyra had never known animals; her fascination was genuine, as was her delight. He supposed he would feel the same if someone had introduced him to a pair of walking, talking rocks.

“You can move in with them if you’d like,” he said, laughing.

“I’d like.”

Her childlike directness echoed in Tarhn’s mind as they strolled to the nearest eating room. Maybe that was the explanation of the enigma surrounding her: she was a child. Never mind her woman’s body, her subtle sensual heat. She was unwary, direct, inexperienced. A child, untouched and uncomplex.

Now if he could just fit her finely honed mind into that comforting picture

Reluctantly, Tarhn filed the problem under “later.” He needed more information. Much more.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Lyra opened her eyes, but left her hand suspended over a dish of food.

“Selecting my meal,” she said.

“How does passing your hand above the various dishes help?”

Lyra looked at him as though he must be joking, then realized he wasn’t. She pulled her hand away from the food hurriedly.

“Is my way of choosing offensive?”

“Not to me. Just unusual.”

“You’re sure? What about the other people?”

“I’m sure. How does it work?”

Lyra’s hand resumed its station above the food belt.

“It’s very simple,” she explained, moving her hand slowly down the row of dishes. “My mind and body have certain energy structures, patterns. Some foods would destroy the patterns, some would merely disrupt or dull them. Others would give energy to the body, but would slight the mind. Or the reverse. And still others would be suited to both mind and body. Ah, there,” she said.

“That’s animal flesh,” he said, curious to see her reaction.

She wasn’t surprised. “I guessed it might be, after what you told me; it’s rich with potential for my body. Without this,” she said, indicating a dish of raw vegetables, “the flesh would drag on my mind. Together, the foods balance each other. And with this,” a pink globe of fruit was placed on her tray, “a willing gift from a living plant, my meal is complete and complementary.”

Tarhn’s hand reached for the same foods. “I assume they would do as well for me?”

“Don’t you know?” Then, “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to be rude. How do you usually choose?”

“Taste and experience.”

Lyra closed her eyes and moved her hand from his temple to his fingertips without touching his skin. Tarhn’s curiosity was nearly painful, but he said nothing.

“Your methods have been good,” she said finally, “Your patterns are rich, complex, and pulsing with strength. Yet ... may I choose for you?”

“If you explain your choices.”

“Three of this fruit,” she said. “Willing food is rare out here. And this ... is it flesh again?”

Tarhn nodded. “A sea creature.”

“It will fill your body. And ...” her hand hovered over the ranks of vegetable dishes, finally selected raw and cooked roots. “To balance the flesh. Now, something to relax you,” she murmured.

Tarhn followed Lyra down the curving wall of food. Her hand hesitated over the condiments for a moment, then picked out a paper of finely ground seed pods.

“How do I eat that?” he said, not recognizing the seasoning.

Lyra spoke over her shoulder as she led him to an alcove.

“Sprinkle it on the fruit.”

“What does it taste like?”

“To you, it will be elusive, sweet and sour, very good. You need it,” she said sitting down. “To me, it would taste quite bitter. But don’t eat any more of it for at least nine meals. It would begin to taste bitter, so bitter that your body would reject it.”

“All that from waving your hand over it?”

Lyra looked perplexed, then smiled hesitantly. “Is my way of gathering information so different from yours?”

“Reading energy patterns isn’t a common way of learning.”

Lyra paused, savoring the taste and texture of the fruit. “I suppose not,” she said thoughtfully. “Reading patterns requires deep integration of mind and body. Most Galactics are in a state of dynamic disharmony with themselves. Yes ... disharmony.”

Tarhn watched as Lyra seemed to recede inside herself, viewing her insight into Galactics from all angles as a child views a bright new toy. He tried eavesdropping, but was not surprised when he learned nothing. Whoever trained her mind was a match for Carifil masters,

Tarhn sprinkled the ground pods over a section of fruit and took a cautious bite. An elusive refreshing taste rose from his tongue and filled his mouth. The seafood she had selected was one of his favorite foods—the succulent flesh of a Thininden crab. The roots were unfamiliar, crunchy, and delicious.

He ate slowly, enjoying the blend of familiar and unfamiliar flavors and textures. When Lyra returned from her intense concentration, he praised her choices; then said, “Could you teach me to choose as you do?”

“Yes ...”

“But? Is it secret learning? Tabu?”

“Oh, not at all. It just requires joining minds while I educate your reflexes.” Her eyes searched his face, then she made a gesture of negation-and-regret. “I should have guessed there were tabus against two minds joining. Every other source of pleasure out here has strange rules too.”

Tarhn remembered his blithe words about abiding by her cultural norms and felt vaguely ashamed. “Your culture has no tabus about the mind? Not even if the other mind might be unwilling?”

“Unwilling?” said Lyra, subtle distaste coloring her voice. “When I first came out, I found all kinds of minds reaching into mine. It was ... horrifying. No discipline. No peace. No restraint. Chaos. I learned to shield myself. I would not go through that again. Even willing minds aren’t always compatible; sometimes the patterns can only lightly touch. Anything deeper would be uncomfortable, even damaging. Joining two minds is not a casual thing. I would not have suggested it were I not sure that our minds were deeply harmonious. We are always careful; disharmony can be dangerous.” She hesitated, then added, “I’ve never experienced a basically compatible mind that was nonetheless reluctant to share with me. I think it would be destructive, like fighting against yourself. I have no desire to find out whether I’m right.”

“In other words,” said Tarhn evenly, “as long as I want mental privacy, I’ll get it.”

“But of course,” said Lyra.

“And physical touching?”

Lyra’s puzzlement was obvious, and disconcerting. “The same. When we touch, our patterns also touch. There’s only as much pleasure as there is harmony.”

As Tarhn examined the ramifications of all that Lyra had said, he suddenly felt disoriented, the way he had sometimes felt after a training period with Jerlis. Everything he had learned about Lyra seethed inside his mind, half-real, half-mist, inchoate. All he was sure of was that he needed time to integrate new facts with old realities.

As though she sensed his saturation, Lyra said nothing more. When they finished eating, she led him to her room. Her whole manner wordlessly conveyed that he was free to sit or sleep or think or talk or leave, whatever he wished. Her unruffled acceptance of his need for quiet reminded him again of Jerlis.

Or perhaps Lyra understood him for the simple reason that she, too, needed time to absorb her new experience;

Tarhn shrugged off his peripheral thoughts and began a series of mental exercises which both relaxed and sharpened his mind. When he was ready, he reviewed what he knew about Lyra Mara. Then he

extrapolated from these facts. But the process was unusually difficult; no significant probability could be assigned to even the most simple extrapolations.

Not enough facts.

His subjective impressions weren't much help either. She was too wise to be naive, too naive to be wise. If she was lying, he lacked the skill to detect it. If she was telling the truth as she believed it, the people and culture who spawned her were chillingly unique. Yet nothing is truly unique. Only the lack of information makes it appear so.

Tarhn released his concentration. Although he hadn't brought order to chaos, he felt no frustration. In fact he felt good, better than he had felt for a long time. The image of pink fruit sprinkled with rich brown spice surfaced in his mind. He smiled and stretched, savoring the unusual feeling of humming relaxation.

II

But that had been yesterday, and now it was time to make the course corrections for Wilderness, and he still had no more idea of who else was hunting Lyra than he had had when he first stepped aboard the *Adventure*.

As he completed the corrections, Tarhn sensed a change in Lyra. Her pulse beat visibly in her throat and her breasts stirred with deeper breaths. He touched her skin lightly; warm, pliant. She would be awake soon.

The most delicate of probes touched his mind. Had he not been trained to catch just such overtures, he would have missed it totally.

Helpfully, Tarhn thought about their recent escape. This must have satisfied Lyra, for she never went deeper than the first level of his mind. And Tarhn was certain that lack of ability hadn't circumscribed the probe—anyone who could use and learn from such a fragile mindlink was a psi worthy of respect.

"Awake now, Lyra?" he said casually.

Lyra's eyes flickered open, then closed again.

"You're safe, for now," he continued. "But you must have made some high enemies in your lifetime."

Lyra's eyes snapped open, showing enlarged golden starbursts against the dominant amber color. Simultaneously Tarhn sensed a quantum leap in her mental awareness. Then both gold and awareness diminished to their former levels.

"What do you mean?" she asked in high Galactic.

"We're beyond Courtesy," said Tarhn bluntly.

Lyra was silent, eyes again closed.

"You can keep your secrets. And your enemies," said Tarhn. "After we land on Wilderness you can contact your people and have them pick you up."

"I've no people who will help me," said Lyra slowly. "Nor do I have personal enemies."

Tarhn's metallic blue eyes flicked over Lyra.

"You're either stupid, innocent, or a liar. Your mind is too well-trained for you to be stupid."

"And what about you?"

Tarhn found himself confronted by her compelling eyes.

"If I wanted to hurt you, I'm sure going at it ass first. But whether you trust me or not, you're stuck with me for a while."

"Obviously. Why?"

Lyra no longer spoke in high Galactic. Instead, she used the language of friends. Tarhn took it as a hopeful sign.

"You could say I'm curious," said Tarhn.

"What else could I say?"

"Who's after you, and why?"

"I don't know."

Tarhn accepted that—for the moment.

"Maybe this will help. Whoever it is owns at least part of the *Adventure*'s crew. Probably the whole

lot.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?” said Tarhn sharply.

“I own Adventures Excursions, among other things.”

“What other things?”

Silence. Her lips, eyes, and mind were closed tight. Tarhn was on the point of risking a probe when she finally spoke.

“We’re entering the atmosphere.”

Tarhn’s attention snapped back to the control console. Lyra couldn’t have seen the meters, yet—

“You’re right. How did you know?”

Lyra gave no indication she had heard, nor did Tarhn have the time to press her. The approach was fast and the landing hot. In the hands of an unskilled pilot, either would have been fatal.

“Kerdin poor place to land,” muttered Tarhn as he freed the slakes and launched them into flight.

“What could be wrong with this place?” said Lyra dreamily. Her body radiated relaxation as she spoke softly of great stone mountains surging above the quiet alluvial valley, of the intricate symphony of animate and inanimate life, of predators and grazers and plants murmuring over the sustaining earth.

It was not so much her words which held Tarhn spellbound, or even the endless beauty of her voice. It was her mind. For an instant she had been open, clear, a sentient window looking on a planet that was both intimate and eternal, infinitely complex yet as simple as rock and flesh and fiber.

And Lyra’s eyes two starbursts of gold.

“What’s wrong with the place?” he repeated harshly, surprised by his own roughness and by the current of fear running sudden and cold and deep within him. “It’s the hunting continent.”

“Hunting? Wilderness is a preserve.”

“It’s taxed as one and is supposed to be one. But—” he gestured impatiently. “Killer animals from fifty planets have been dumped on this continent. For a fat price, the killers of a thousand planets hunt them.”

Lyra’s face paled and lines of revulsion made her appear suddenly old. Beyond what his eyes told him, Tarhn sensed her total rejection of the concept of killing.

His strange panic left as quickly as it had come.

“Lyra,” he said gently, “we’ll probably have to kill animals to eat and perhaps men to survive.”

Gold stars flared in Lyra’s eyes, small, brilliant.

“If you have to kill or die, which will you do?” he demanded roughly.

Starbursts pulsed and the hair along Tarhn’s spine stirred to an unheard melody. Then gold and melody vanished.

“I will do what is necessary,” she said, her voice as flat as its innate depths would ever let it be.

For a moment Tarhn felt as though she were speaking to someone else, but there was no one else to listen,

“Good. I’d be a fool and a murderer to take you out of this lifecraft if you were incapable of defending yourself.”

“I don’t like destruction.”

“Did anyone ask you to like it?”

“No. They only asked that I endure.”

Tarhn hesitated, then turned and began removing equipment from the lifecraft’s many compartments. Most lifecraft were supplied with food, clothing, water, medicine, and weapons. The weapons interested Tarhn right now, but he couldn’t find a single one. Finally he discovered a small lasgun, buried beneath a miscellaneous pile of junk in a rear cupboard. The gun was old, scarred, and contained less than half a charge.

“Hope it’s enough,” muttered Tarhn.

After he and Lyra had carried the equipment away from the lifecraft, Tarhn launched the slakes and motioned Lyra away.

“Stay here.”

Tarhn crouched behind the lifecraft's open door and fired at the control panel. Within seconds the panel flared and belched noxious smoke. Tarhn held the firing stud down until the charge was exhausted and the panel fused into an amorphous lump.

"Why?" said Lyra when he returned.

"Homing signal. When the lifecraft leaves the mother ship the signal locks on and stays on as long as the lifecraft controls are intact."

"Then we've been followed."

"Maybe. A signal does no good unless someone listens for it. But why bother? With the lifecraft's range, Wilderness is the only place we could be. All I did was ensure that no one will ride down the signal and pick up our trail immediately. They'll have to hunt for the lifecraft now. And unless they have metal scanners handy, they'll have a long, frustrating time of it."

"But now we're trapped here."

"We were trapped on the ship," said Tarhn dryly. "I prefer being trapped on a planet. More room to run. And the sooner we start running the sooner we'll find a permanent hunting camp."

"And then?"

"We use their spacecom and pray that my friends find us before your enemies do."

"There's hunting on Wilderness; is there also an Access?"

Tarhn didn't show his surprise. He knew of at least one Access on Wilderness, left over from the days when Wilderness had belonged to the Carifil. But to find out where the Access was and whether it still operated he would have to contact the Carifil. And as long as Lyra was close by—

"You're learning fast, Lyra. I'm sure there is an Access somewhere. The hunters are rich, lazy, and impatient. But they're not fools. They wouldn't risk getting caught near an illegal Access. I'd gladly risk it, but I don't know where the Access is."

Lyra did not answer. A relaxed tension had swept over her body, leaving only her eyes untouched. Tarhn recognized the physical signs of high mental effort, sensed the power which dilated time and starbursts until both and all were caught in the growing moment, expanding ...

Tarhn closed his eyes and fought the pervasive energy which seemed to well from the very earth and focus in her half-gold eyes. He felt the cold thread of panic return and multiply until a new pattern was woven, a fresh curtain concealing. With a final twisting shudder of his mind he was free. By the time Lyra spoke he had even regained a measure of control.

"There are two Accesses on this continent," she said softly.

"Two? Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Two."

Tarhn didn't press; he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Can we use one of them?"

"Yes. The farther one."

"Why that one?"

The turn of Lyra's mouth suggested disgust, yet the prismatic beauty of her voice didn't change.

"The closer one is ... destructive. You may use it if you wish."

"But you won't," said Tarhn with exasperation. "How long will it take to get to your Access?"

"I don't know. It's on the other side of that mountain range."

Tarhn's eyes followed her pointing finger to the awesome thrusting stone wall which paralleled the valley.

"Sweet gods. You're sure you won't use the closer one?"

"I'm sure."

"Did you find out anything else?"

"There are two or three hunting parties between us and the Access."

Tarhn knew that, at least, was certain; the slakes had already spotted two groups.

"Anything else?"

"Animals. Many and vicious. But—"

Tarhn waited, then prodded. "But?"

“They won’t attack me,” she said reluctantly, “or you, if we stay together.”

Tarhn burned to probe her mind, to find out who and what she was, but prudence/fear restrained him.

“All right Lyra. We’d better get started. You’ve chosen a long trail for us.”

He handed Lyra her backpack of emergency equipment and set off for the distant mountains. They had been walking for less than an hour when Tarhn realized that the journey would be much shorter than he had thought. The knowledge gave him little pleasure as he watched a small flyer settle nearby.

“Friends of yours?” he asked dryly.

“I have no friends out here.”

“Not quite,” said Tarhn, probing the minds of the man and woman who slowly climbed out of the craft. “You have two admirers stumbling along under stukor, wanting only to carry you off and get to know you.”

“Stukor? Is that a person?”

“A mind control drug. Illegal, of course, but effective. One unit and the person is yours, until the dose wears off.” At her blank expression he felt impatience flare. “But you wouldn’t know about such things, coming from a perfect culture.”

His impatience vanished as he considered their options.

“Well,” he said finally, “we can always run. Outcome doubtful. Those two will follow us with the mindless obsession of a crosset on a fresh scent. If they don’t catch us, more people will join the hunt; the new hunters might not be programmed as nonviolently as these two. There’s almost no possibility of making it to either Access before we’re caught. So let’s be docile, play their moron’s game. They have orders not to harm you in any way. They expected only you; they’ll see only you.”

At her look of bafflement, Tarhn explained hurriedly.

“Stukor. No flexibility. If reality deviates from their orders, they ignore reality.”

All Tarhn could do was to alert the slakes to follow him. Controlling stukor victims was impossible, even for his mind. Their master, however, might be more amenable.

Unnoticed, Tarhn slipped into the flyer, found space to sit next to Lyra’s pack in the small cargo area. He shrugged off his own pack and settled down to the business of picking what he could out of the captors’ minds.

By the time the flyer settled near an obviously new hunting camp, Tarhn knew little more than he had before he entered the flyer. The man and woman had been prepared to accept Lyra unconscious or conscious, in the lifecraft or away from it. If she resisted them, they were to drug her. She was not to be harmed.

As the flyer’s canopy split open, Tarhn counted fifteen guards around the flyer. Too many to control; too many to fight. Perhaps he should have waited and followed Lyra. Perhaps. But there was no assurance that her captor would keep her on Wilderness. Once through an Access, she was lost without a trace. And she must be kept under the eyes of the Carifil.

Tarhn imprinted the layout and geography of the camp on his mind in the scant seconds he had of remaining life. Simultaneously, he took a certain grim pleasure in knowing that the death cry of his mind would set off a Carifil search which his killers would not survive, Lyra would survive, though. She must.

No matter what happens Lyra, be calm. You are safe. You will stay safe.

Before he could find out whether her confusion came from unexpected mindtouch or the message he gave her, a guard spotted him, stared. Then shock and undiluted terror radiated from the guard’s mind. Her hands flew to cover her pale gray eyes. She bowed deeply over her trembling fingers.

“Mercy, highborn. If this crawling creature had known, it would not have disgusted you with its slizzard eyes.”

Even while part of his mind raced at the implications of being addressed in the language of Tau, the tongue of his childhood, Tarhn responded easily.

“Helix eyes see all without disgust. It will continue precisely as instructed.”

The woman withdrew, nearly falling in her haste. Orders in low-voiced pig Galactic flew to the other guards. When Tarhn stepped out of the flyer the guards ignored him, while at the same time taking

extreme care not to block his path.

Tarhn followed the procession at a leisurely pace, unasked questions crowding his mind.

The camp was small; the translucent central dome looked subtly skewed, as though it was not yet at ease on its new foundations. In the center of the dome was an empty Access platform. Tarhn stood aside while discreet guards brought pillows for his and Lyra's comfort. When they both sat down, a guard stepped forward and rubbed a small damp pad across Lyra's forearm. In an instant she was unconscious.

Tarhn controlled his immediate impulse of outrage; his own position was too precarious .. Until he knew whether Lyra's captor considered her Helix or slizzard, he could only ignore her

With an effort, Tarhn concentrated on the platform. He knew that portable Accesses were mathematically feasible—the equation being no different from that describing a permanent Access—but he hadn't known it was technically possible.

The area above the platform became a deep lambent blue, Tau blue, Helix blue. When the light faded, the man on the platform appeared as a towering shadow figure, thick and strong, cloaked in gold and distance. His eyes had a forceful blue life of their own, and on his shoulders rode two battle slakes.

It was the slakes, even more than the man's eyes and the rich cape, that told Tarhn exactly who had captured Lyra.

"Kretan a Harnan n'Ahler," said Tarhn clearly, "Acting Helix of Tau."

Kretan betrayed no surprise at the ritual greeting. Rather his face fleetingly showed the pleasure of a man who has looted his slakes after one prey and seen them return with two.

"Tarhn a Harnan n'Ahler, gene-son of my full sister's half-daughter, Conditional Helix of Tau."

The ritual greeting and bland smile made Tarhn uncomfortable. His discomfort increased when he realized that Kretan was totally impervious to mindtouch. There was none of the elusive, impenetrable feel of a shielded mind, nor the tangible solidness of a mind chained by drugs. Kretan was simply and irrevocably ... null. Psi blank. Unreachable.

Like trying mindtouch with a mountain.

"A maturity ago in Clereth's womb, your genes showed great promise, greater even than mine. Physically, at least, the promise has been fulfilled."

Tarhn heard Kretan's smooth voice as though at a great distance, for his whole being was bent on reaching into Kretan's mind.

"Why didn't you return to Tau to be proclaimed First Helix?" continued Kretan in his passionless tones. "Is it that you are as mad as your gene-mother and my full sister were, and therefore unfit to be First Helix of Tau?"

Tarhn abandoned the idea of controlling Kretan and rallied his mind for the more useful task of winning, or at least surviving, the ritual battle of words.

"Had I returned, your servants would have killed me," said Tarhn, matching his tone to the older man's.

Kretan's index fingers locked and unlocked in a gesture of agreement Tarhn hadn't seen since he was a child.

"The necessity of your absence or death is past," said Kretan.

Tarhn knew better than to comment, though the stretching silence had the effect of pressuring him to speak, to explain why he was in Kretan's camp with the alien Kretan had planned so carefully to abduct. But on Tau, unasked explanations were the sputterings of a weak mind.

Tarhn resisted the silent pressure.

Kretan's fingers locked again, remained locked. Deep in Tarhn's mind, that part of him which had expected and accepted death relaxed. Kretan had accepted him as an equal—for now.

Carefully, Tarhn refrained from looking at Lyra, blissfully unconscious on scattered pillows. Until Kretan indicated what her status was, Tarhn could only ignore her.

Kretan stepped off the platform, then looted his slakes toward two translucent ceiling perches Tarhn hadn't noticed. At Kretan's swift movement, there was a ripple of Helix blue from the lining of his lavish cape. The names of all Kretan's Helix ancestors flashed in delicate gold wire. The supreme genotype

which Tau could claim was written in the cold blue flare of Helix stones.

It was Tarhn's own name that struck blue lightning.

"The mating cape," observed Tarhn. "I thought never to see it beyond the winds of Tau."

"A maturity is a long time," said Kretan. "The first maturity is longest of all. We shall talk, Tarhn a Haman n' Ahler. Then I will know who wears the Helix cape."

"My sanity awaits your instruction."

The ritual response appeared to please Kretan, but without mindtouch Tarhn couldn't be sure. Kretan's expression changed in a manner more suited to microscopic measurements than to the unaided eye.

"I hear your words; their sanity accords with mine."

Apparently that was a signal, for the guards withdrew. Not that Kretan required guards—his battle slakes could dispatch even armed men with silent ease. Tarhn thought longingly of his own slakes, but knew it would be hours before they retraced the path of the swift flyer. At least Kretan's psi-blankness had one good aspect; he would never suspect the clear mental call which would guide n'Lete and Bithe to the camp. Whether Tarhn slept or spoke, the call would go out, ending only with death.

A servant appeared with cups of sweet spring water and dishes of chilled fruits. After Tarhn had sampled both, Kretan began to talk. Though he was speaking with a putative peer, Kretan's accents and sentences retained the stilted flavor of Tau's command dialect. Tarhn decided that Kretan had spoken in the command mode of Tau for so long that he was unable to fully adjust to speech between equals.

"Were you taught of Tau's history before the Plague?"

"I learned what every Conditional Helix must learn," said Tarhn, allowing his voice to become that of a person reciting a prayer; "Before there was Concord there was Tau. Of all planets known, only Tau bore a race with the wisdom and genius to perfect their future through the genes of their children. It is the honor and burden of the Helix strain to guide Tau in its ceaseless quest for the Supreme Helix. All dreams, all desires, all lives are secondary to the goal of genetic perfection."

"Clereth trained you well, in spite of her madness."

Tarhn said nothing; the memories he had of his gene-mother were few and unpleasant.

"My sister was also mad," said Kretan.

"Your sister was a First Helix."

Kretan's fingers moved in agreement. "When the Gene-Masters told her of the bankruptcy of Tau's gene pool, she was sane enough to know that chance or induced mutations would not suffice. She displayed her Helix genes when she accepted the necessity of off-world breeding, an idea both revolutionary and inevitable. She betrayed her genes when she chose war rather than Access as the means of hybridization."

"The Access was not yet built," observed Tarhn.

"No., no more than a child is 'built' at fertilization. In both instances the potential is a measurable reality."

Tarhn's fingers locked in silent agreement.

"Flerhan's wars drained Tau," continued Kretan. "Worse, they were futile. As my first Access partner pointed out, the wages of war are penury. Yes, Li'mara made me pay for the use of his money."

It took much of Tarhn's training to sit quietly through Kretan's history of the rise of Access Unlimited. Nothing in the older man's tone suggested the sheer weight of Galactic misery caused by Kretan's inexorable pursuit of power and the Supreme Helix, the billion families broken and scattered through the galaxy as planet after planet sold a portion of their population into virtual slavery to raise the price of an Access installation.

"As with all the other great empires in history," said Kretan, "mine began with and grew upon a foundation of vision, power, and opportunity. The vision was Tau's, the power and opportunity were the Access.

"The Access is my net. With it I seine Galactic gene pools, choosing and combining genes. Ultimately I will breed a race which will consummate the possibilities of Galactic genotypes."

Tarhn listened and tried not to think of the people who had lived and died in misery that Kretan might

pursue his goal. The “five year” conscripts from each planet became six and eight and ten and then a lifetime of penury and sweat under harsh alien suns.

Not many planets complained when their conscripts failed to return after their allotted time—poverty and prisons had supplied most of the conscript labor. If a planet had a belated resurgence of conscience, AU made searches for individual conscripts, but such searches among billions of people took time. Years. If the planet persisted, some conscripts would eventually be found; the remainder were listed as dead on a thousand unknown worlds.

As for the conscripts themselves, they rarely revolted. Kretan organized his operations with the exquisite precision of a psychosurgeon. He never took from his expanding corps of interplanetary conscripts so much that they had nothing further to lose by rebelling. Kretan knew that when a person’s life has been peeled down to a few fragile, translucent layers, those layers gain inordinate value.

Conscripts learned obedience ... or death.

“My most enduring problem has been trying to make Galactics understand the vital nature of my goal. Few had the intelligence to sacrifice willingly for their children’s future. It is unfortunate that with all our Galactic machines, we have yet to replace the womb. Even my best engineers failed. Children born, yes, but they never reached their genetic potential. Insanity was the norm. I was forced to continue working with individual Galactic wombs.”

Tarhn shifted position fractionally, but Kretan didn’t notice.

“In spite of difficulties, Access Unlimited expanded geometrically in the first years. When my first partner died, control of AU passed to me. The first conscript planets were opened, ensuring a supply of workers and wombs.

“To my deep disappointment, as Li’mara’s heir grew it became obvious that he was mentally incapable of pursuing the Tau goal.”

Tarhn’s mind leaped within his still body. Daveen had been a Carifil, but even that had not saved him from Kretan’s assassins. Tarhn vividly remembered the psychic cry, the search, the living death on a Proscribed planet

“Did you not live with Li’mara’s half-son, Daveen?”

“I knew him.”

“Genes, but no sanity. His foster mother diminished his potential to the point that his mind could not understand the vision of the Helix.

“I had heard that his foster mother was also yours,” added Kretan in tones that were as assured and dangerous as a stalking svarl.

Tarhn’s savage thoughts of the many times Kretan’s assassins had tried to kill Daveen, Jerlis, and himself did not show as he answered neutrally, “Jerlis protected my youth.”

“Yet you are not warped like Daveen ... ?”

“I am here,” said Tarhn, then wondered if that was much recommendation for his sanity.

“You are here,” agreed Kretan, “The egg is ripe, the sperm is active. Now we must see if together they can create the Supreme Helix.”

At last Tarhn could glance toward Lyra. His mind knew that she was awake and listening, though her posture had not changed. At his silent request, she gave subtle signs of being awake.

“I had hoped to examine her for flaws before she was conscious.”

Her, not it. The dignity of a personal pronoun. Certainty crystallized in Tarhn that Kretan had selected Lyra to be the gene-mother of a new race; Tau’s long growth would come to fruition in her womb. And while Tarhn had many reservations as to Kretan’s sanity, he in no way underestimated his uncle’s genius.

Tarhn looked at Lyra with new eyes.

“Then we are but one child away from completion?” said Tarhn.

“If not her half-children, then her quarter-children.”

“I assume enforced rest was necessary before you told her of her honor?” asked Tarhn smoothly.

Kretan showed his first sign of discomfort. With elaborate casualness he selected and ate a ruby fruit.

“On Tau, such means would be unnecessary,” said Kretan. “Unfortunately, I have learned that not all

women, or men, appreciate the necessity of raising the generic level of their children. I have accommodated my means to their irrationality.”

Which was as pleasant a way to sum up his uncle’s rape-and-slavery methods as any Tarhn could imagine. He tried to think of an equally delicate way to tell Kretan that he was fit only to suck zarfs, but polite words failed. Tarhn kept silent, thereby increasing his advantage over the older man. Kretan turned away and addressed Lyra in Galactic.

“You are awake. Have you learned from our conversation?”

Lyra sat up and faced Kretan with no sign of malaise. She spoke before Tarhn could coach her.

“I have learned nothing that is new. I am a unique child of my people, as Tarhn is of his. Together we can be unity. In our unity waits the future of all children.”

Tarhn’s respect for Lyra increased geometrically. With a few words she had the old bastard humming like a sated slake. No forced pregnancy for her. And her tone of utter simplicity, her prismatic voice joining all words into a blinding white truth.

*Beautifully done, Lyra. *

It is the character of truth to be beautiful.

Her reply set up strange resonances in his mind, but he was too concerned with measuring Kretan’s total reaction to worry about his own. If Kretan was obsessed with becoming gene-father to an imagined future race, Tarhn’s future could be measured in seconds. If Kretan would settle for the role of foster parent, however—

“She is as discerning as a Gene-Master,” said Kretan after a long silence. “With my own genes a Supreme Helix is possible; with your genes it is a certainty. When I am fully satisfied with your mental stability, the mating will occur.”

Kretan rose and mounted the platform. The slakes plummeted to his shoulders as the blue light rose.

Tarhn watched Kretan disappear in a blaze of Helix blue and thought about the many ways there were to shorten a man’s life. Painfully.

Please ...

Lyra’s mindtouch conveyed agony. His violent thoughts vanished in concern for her.

*Are you hurt? Is it the drugs? *

No. Her relief sighed through his mind. *Your thoughts ... but they are no longer.*

Yet the memory of pain still lingered in her eyes. He gathered Lyra to him, comforting, and her warmth was a subtle song against his body. For an instant he wondered who was comforting whom, then dismissed the thought for more urgent ones.

* Kretan is deaf to mindspeech, more than a little insane, but far from stupid. We must appear to communicate normally, but if we talk we must tell him nothing he doesn’t already know. I’m sure he has listeners posted. *

It was easier not to talk than to monitor each word. They lay down beneath the now dark dome. His last thought before sleep was of the magnificent texture of her red-gold hair curled against his cheek.

III

When Tarhn awoke, he could see only one of Wilderness’ three moons overhead; early night. His mind automatically reached out for what had wakened him, assessing possible dangers. Lyra asleep was a gloaming rainbow of light; the others in camp were only flickers of awareness. Kretan-hadn’t returned; his mind would be unmistakable, a dark star, immense power turned in upon itself. Further out two minds slept, familiar in their narrow intensity, his own slakes. He praised them without disturbing their rest, then resumed searching for whatever had awakened him.

Where? That soft whisper, a desert wind sweet with promise of rain. So far away, so ... familiar ... Tarhn’s apprehension vanished in a gust of silent laughter; he reached out with all the power of his mind, completed the link.

If I could touch you I’d pull your ears, came Jerlis’ clear thought, bright with apprehension and affection. *You have one of the most difficult shields to evade that I’ve ever had the discomfort to work

with.*

Even as Tarhn savored the mixture of emotions in her mindspeech, he couldn't help wondering why Jerlis had contacted him. And not just Jerlis ... behind her thoughts was the silent strength of linked Carifil minds, his friends.

I'd be flattered, little mother, but I've a feeling that you're more interested in the amber woman who sleeps beside me.

She is safe?

From physical harm.

You?

Safe ... for now.

Tell us.

At Jerlis' words, Tarhn's memories of the time since he had first seen Lyra unreeled with stunning quickness. There was a moment as waiting minds digested, categorized, extrapolated, then—

Conclusions.

Tarhn's response was a good deal less coherent this time. Jerlis was not asking for something as simple as the physical movements of Lyra and himself. Jerlis wanted all that he had felt and thought condensed into a few succinct probabilities by which she could measure his and Lyra's actions/thoughts in the immediate future.

He tried

Xerle's Ears, Tarhn, came the half-laughing, half-irate reply. *I've had cleaner reports from backward children.*

It would help if I knew where she came from, why we guard her, why—

She hasn't mentioned her home planet? You have not guessed it?

No and no.

Jerlis' satisfaction oozed across the mindlink. *I'm glad her ears are straight.*

Why—

Sorry, Carifil. No one, not even you, must know what she is until you bring her to us.

The total conviction of Jerlis' thought, with its aura of great possibilities and even greater dangers, silenced Tarhn. He was still curious, of course, but he trusted Jerlis. He could wait.

If it weren't for my slizzard uncle, you would have had her within a Centrex week. What would have been more natural than that I bring a new friend to meet with old ones?

She would have come willingly?

Before Tarhn could reply, Jasilyn slipped from her role of supporting link to active link.

Have you looked at Tarhn lately, Jerlis?

Not as thoroughly as you, I'm sure. Laughter surrounded Jerlis' thought. *Your point is accepted.*

Has she accepted your point, Tarhn?

At his laughing negative, Jasilyn's thought became tinged with exasperation. *By the Tortured God, no wonder your conclusions were contradictions! Limited mind contact and less body knowledge. You lazy nuft. Or is she from one of those peevish cultures?*

I don't think so ...

As useful, and pleasant, as body knowledge might be, cut in Jerlis, *Tarhn is in no position to go exploring.*

Any position ... Jasilyn's thought became laughter and memories.

Tarhn couldn't help remembering, and responding.

Shut her up, Jerlis.

Jerlis, amused but determined, maneuvered Jasilyn back into a supporting—silent—link. *Our conclusions,* resumed Jerlis crisply, *are simple. Don't attempt to force Lyra's shields; it could be fatal to one or both of you. We have set the Carifil Access, the one Lyra chose, for two plus slakes. If you haven't reached the Access within three Wilderness days, we will come and get you.*

She must have sensed Tarhn's curiosity—why wait, Kretan might have other plans—for she

explained.

We want to be silent as a listening ear this time, Tarhn. Nothing to connect her or you to either the Carifil or Concord. The less noise, the least suspected. In this, at least, Kretan seems to agree with us. Also ... don't pass up a chance to kill the old zarfsucker. But don't jeopardize Lyra's safety, or your own.

Killing slizzards is always a pleasure. Unfortunately, I don't know where in the galaxy this one is.

We've had the same problem for many years. Be lucky, Tarhn.

The link dissolved into echoing silence. Tarhn checked the sleeping guards quickly, then more carefully.

Stukor again. He should have guessed by the pale guttering of their awareness. Kretan took no chances. Probably the guards were programmed to make kerden sure no one left the dome. As for the dome Access—sudden death for anyone but Kretan. Fortunately, Kretan hadn't known about n'Lete and Bithe, thus he couldn't take measures against them.

Awake, friends. You go hunting.

The electric eagerness of the slakes brought a smile to Tarhn's lips. He sent a detailed description of the dome, and as much about the surrounding camp as he had seen.

To all but Lyra give the bite-without-death. Swift, deep, silent. They must sleep through darkness and light and darkness again. Fly in, my friends; there are traps for walkers.

Tarhn waited, breathing lightly, listening though the dome deadened all outside noise. When he saw neither awakened guards nor sudden lights, he relaxed slightly. As he hoped, the guards were probably programmed only to respond to dome or perimeter alarms.

To Tarhn's surprise, the dome door was not connected to any alarm; apparently he and Lyra were to have the freedom of the compound. If Tarhn tried to escape, it would prove his insanity.

Cunning old zarf.

When the slakes appeared beside the open dome door, Tarhn praised them, stroking their sinuous blue bodies until they rippled with pleasure.

Bithe, guard her, Lyra, until I return.

With a swift glance around the dome, Tarhn moved noiselessly toward the largest structure in the camp. The windows were retracted to allow air circulation—and slakes. Tarhn pulled the triple-pronged tool from his belt and tinkered with the door mechanism. The door opened silently.

N'Lete brushed against his legs as she surged down the rows of hammocks, checking each guard's body for the bittersweet scent of slake venom. Satisfied, she folded her wings along her body.

Tarhn didn't even glance at the guards as he moved quickly between the hammocks. Behind the first partition he found only kitchen machines. The second partition had only sonic showers and chemical toilets. Behind the third partition was what Tarhn sought.

Security machines.

He scanned the bank of equipment and his breath came out in a loud rush. Labels! Each machine had a panel explaining its function and maintenance requirements.

"Kretan will wish he'd never used untrained conscripts," muttered Tarhn as he read each panel. "Ahhhh."

With a few deft flicks of his fingers, Tarhn could turn off all camp power to the Access, including the backup system. If there were no alarms. A big if. The Access could still be med from the other end, though, for the power source was far off-planet. But no electrical alarms or messages could pass from camp through the Access to Kretan.

Tarhn touched nothing, turned his attention to the last machine; its function was to monitor the camp flyers. As he read the panel, Tau obscenities muttered into the night; the camp flyers would lift only if the information channel to the Access was open. But if the channel were open Kretan could easily track each flyer. He could probably even take over control of the flyer with some sort of override signal. Yes ... Kretan would have something like that. Give the people you are uncertain about just enough freedom to prove themselves guilty.

Kretan wouldn't trust water to be wet.

Tarhn's mind raced over the escape possibilities. Take a flyer, hoping that they would reach the second Access before Kretan could override. Very low probability ... an unauthorized flight was probably what Kretan was waiting for. In fact, as long as the Access was intact, they were neatly trapped. And destroying the Access would warn Kretan that something was wrong. Of the two, he preferred a defunct Access.

Sorry, Jerlis, but I'll have to make a few small noises. Lyra and I need at least two days to reach our own Access on foot.

Tarhn signaled n'Lete and ran noiselessly back to the dome. Bithe's blue eyes flashed coldly in the moonlight before the slake returned his attention to the sleeping Lyra.

With a quick twist, Tarhn removed his ornate metallic belt. The pronged tool disappeared back into the belt's design. Tarhn held the belt thoughtfully for a moment, then began stripping selected components off the belt. He had to disable the Access with one fast stroke. No time for finesse, for disguising the sabotage as a mechanical malfunction. It had to be final and irreparable from Kretan's end of the Access.

Unfortunately, the compressive Tarhn would be using was known as one of Carifil invention. Kretan would know immediately who his enemies were.

Tarhn's belt became a long wire studded with pale green nodes. A sophisticated assortment of tiny tools glittered on the floor at his feet. When the wire was long enough to wrap once around the Access platform, Tarhn shaped the remaining wire and tools into a wide, ornate arm band. As he slid the band up underneath his tunic, he spoke softly to Lyra. She murmured, sat up. Her hair rippled and shone like fluid amber, her eyes were sudden gold. He thought he heard an eerie questioning beat of music, but knew she had spoken with neither tongue nor mind. He moved uneasily, listened, heard nothing. He would have dismissed the incident as imagination under stress but for the slakes; their heads were tipped up to Lyra in an air of expectation and response. He opened his mind to theirs, but found neither concern nor unease, only relaxed pleasure. He stifled a surge of irritation/anger/fear before it reached the slakes. It was bad enough that he had irrational flashes; he certainly had no need to upset the slakes with them.

"We're leaving," he said as he wrapped the wire in a single loop around the Access platform. His voice sounded harsh to his own ears, so he tried to be more civil. "It would be safer if you wait outside the dome with the slakes."

Her questioning look did nothing to settle his nerves.

"You do realize that you were Kretan's prisoner, don't you? I don't know what your customs are, but out here prisoners escape as soon as they can." At her look of confusion, Tarhn snapped, "Of course, if you want me to die, we can just stand on our thumbs and wait for Kretan."

"It is not your deathtime."

The clear voice, the white truth, rasped Tarhn's mind. Her eyes were pure amber now, deep and mysterious.

"I've offended you," she said quietly. "How?"

"I don't know. It's not important, and probably not your fault."

One-third truth, two-thirds lie. Both knew it, but neither mentioned it.

Tarhn waited until she and the slakes were outside before he set off the compressive. A thin, high sound and the Access was neatly sheared in half. Tarhn shoved the upper half awry, gave a grunt of satisfaction. It would be a while before Kretan could get a new Access into place.

Lyra said nothing as she followed him through the compound, watched him further disable the flyers. He searched several buildings before he found their packs.

"Which way is your Access?" he said as he handed her a pack.

"To the left of the moon, high on the shoulder of the jagged peak."

Tarhn measured the distance and wondered if even three days would be enough. Alone, yes. But Lyra was an unknown quantity.

At a silent signal, n'Lete scrambled into Tarhn's arms. He held her, concentrating on the mountain, the need for speed and secrecy. Then he launched the slake upwards with a powerful stroke of his left arm. At the top of her arc, n'Lete's wings snapped open, beat with a slow strong rhythm, scattered blue sparks in the silver moonlight.

When Tarhn looked away from n'Lete's flight, Lyra had her pack on and was walking quickly toward the first rank of foothills. Tarhn made no move to take the lead, she had chosen the exact path he would have. By the time they crossed the first hills, n'Lete should have returned with advice as to the best route up the mountain.

Up, Bithe.

Tarhn distributed the slake's coils around the pack and his shoulders. Bithe hissed and sucked gently against Tarhn's neck.

Afraid I'd make you walk, weren't you? Well, my friend, it's not a free ride. You're on guard duty.

Bithe quit teasing and rested his narrow head on top of Tarhn's. The slake's nostrils expanded hugely as he sifted the cool night air for scents of danger.

Tarhn's long strides covered the ground quickly, yet Lyra stayed ahead, moving with a lithe grace that looked too beautiful to be so quick. As he watched her, he realized that her night sight must be almost as good as his—moonlight alone could not account for the ease with which she evaded obstacles.

After a time the second, then the third of Wilderness' moons culminated their slow-motion chase across the dark sky. The last moon had barely disappeared before the first translucent promise of dawn grew in the northwest. As the promise deepened, the hills began to thrust more urgently at the sides of the mountain. Brittle grass gave way to rock and scrub bushes. The steep land ahead was seamed with granite and dryness and dead stream courses.

Tarhn lengthened his stride until he was beside Lyra. Though they had rested only once, briefly, through the long night, Lyra's walk was still as swift and strong as his own. He touched her arm and pointed to a jumble of rocks.

"We'll eat there. N'Lete should be back soon." As Lyra moved toward the rocks, Tarhn wondered why he hadn't used mindspeech. He was reluctant, but why? And something else Bithe had not caught scent of a single predator all night. Not one. Yet Tarhn knew this was the hunting continent, justly famous for its imported panoply of vicious animals .. Then he remembered Lyra's statement that no predators would harm her.

Tarhn moved suddenly, jumping at a shadow. Bithe grumbled a complaint and leaped to the ground.

Tarhn sat on a flat rock and ate mechanically, drank lightly, barely looked at Lyra, N'Lete's arrival was a relief from the dark silence. He concentrated on the slake, drawing information from her slowly and thoroughly. He stroked her folded wings as he chose the best trail.

"See that high ridge," he said finally. "The one just turning red in the light."

Lyra followed his finger. "Yes."

"Beyond it is a small, shallow bench valley watered by a spring. We'll sleep there. Ready?"

In, answer, Lyra stood and adjusted her pack. Tarhn waited for a word of protest, the valley was clearly a full day's hike, but Lyra simply studied the terrain in the strengthening light. After a moment, she began climbing with her easy, springy stride.

Feed, Bithe, but don't lose us.

Tarhn launched Bithe, watched the slake claw his way upwards, seeking the thermals that rose with the sun. He arranged n'Lete around his shoulders and pack, then caught up with Lyra. After a short time, he went ahead of her, his stride more lope than walk. He held to the pace even after the beautiful, brutal sun climbed high and hot over the brittle land.

Tarhn knew the pace was punishing; he rationalized it as necessary. He neither slowed nor spoke during the hours it took them to traverse the rumped foothills. At last he paused on a high, rocky outcrop and looked over their backtrail. Not so much as a bird moved over the land.

Lyra wiped the sweat from her eyes and flexed her shoulders against the pack. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly, underlining her fatigue. Tarhn waited for her to complain about the pace he had set. When she didn't, he felt suddenly ashamed. She had done nothing to earn his anger. He was behaving like a half-gen-ed bastard while she showed the qualities of a Helix.

He stepped behind her and eased the weight of her pack onto his arms.

"Need to rest?" he said.

“Thank you,” said Lyra, sighing and flexing her back gratefully. “Is it safe?”

Tarhn hesitated as he watched silver drops of moisture slide down her neck.

“If you can,” he said finally, “we should get more land between us and the camp.”

“Then I can,” said Lyra simply.

She took the full weight of the pack again and began the long climb which would take them to the first jutting spur of time mountain. He followed her silently around huge boulders and brittle plants cooking under the merciless orange sun. Sweat soaked through Lyra’s loose tunic until it clung along each sinuous line of back and legs.

When they had breasted the first low mountain ridge, Tarhn stopped. Lyra’s clear amber eyes looked at him hopefully.

“Yes,” he said, lifting her pack off. “It’s finally rest time.”

Lyra sighed and pulled the irritating tunic away from her skin.

“Does your culture have any nudity tabus?” she asked suddenly.

“It might,” laughed Tarhn, “but I don’t.”

“Praise the billion stars,” breathed Lyra and stripped off her clothes. “Ahhh,” she said, opening her arms to a cooling breeze, “everything is worth this moment.”

Tarhn agreed.

For the first time Lyra laughed unrestrainedly, a haunting twin-toned song which moved him as deeply as her sun-browned body. Her eyes lifted to his, neither bold nor shy, and for an instant he saw himself as she did: a mysterious, powerful man focused in glacial blue eyes; a mind of pouring power and cutting edges, yet richly compatible; a fine body whose ability to give and receive pleasure she would gladly discover.

And her voice redolent of regret saying, “But the climb to the Access is long.”

“We won’t always be climbing.”

Tarhn felt Lyra’s hands light as flame on his shoulders, then she moved back and bent to retrieve her tunic.

“Either we leave quickly,” she smiled, “or not at all.”

Tarhn’s fingertips traced the line of her chin, then curled against the warmth of her lips.

“You’re right,” he said softly.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and thought of all the excellent reasons why they should resume their forced march. There were many, but the one which decided him was not among them. Lyra would have far more pleasure if her body were not numb with fatigue.

Yet at least he could touch her mind without diminishing her strength. If she would allow it.

He found her mind open, the depth and points of their linkage limited only by those areas of his own mind which must remain unrevealed, and others he had long ago hidden from himself. Yet even within those restrictions he felt awareness expanding geometrically as each additional linkage crystallized, multifaceted, level after level of mind opening, complementing, spiraling toward unity of power, awesome song—

Tarhn felt himself leaning against a boulder’s searing heat, terribly alone, sick with the certainty that it was he who had ended a song he could not recall, only mourn, and Lyra a healing amber mist, warm, praising the beauty they had known, the glory they might yet know.

Tarhn opened his eyes and saw Lyra pale and trembling with the effort of reaching him. Or was it only that? And he realized then that for her the missed linkages had been baffling agony, completion offered and then cruelly withdrawn.

Yet it was she who comforted him.

Tarhn drew her into his arms and murmured against her hair. She leaned against his strength and gentle touch until the trembling stopped.

Why do you hide yourself, from me? she thought sadly.

Lyra’s thought contained no shade of bitterness at what he had withheld, only sorrow that there had been agony where there should have been joy.

*I don’t know why ... I’m sorry, so sorry. You fit more perfectly into my mind than I had ever

dreamed possible,* thought Tarhn, wonder and sorrow mingled. *We must have known each other in many past lives to know each other so deeply now.*

“So many, yet not enough,” she said, twin-toned, chilling, “Still your barriers exist, shriveling creation. On my home planet such barriers don’t exist, but they reach out from the galaxy to destroy us, suffocating. I was bred to judge Singer creation, but I cannot judge alone, ignorant. You will teach me the nature of those barriers, Tarhn my complement, my other self. When I have learned we will be one ... or nothing.”

Questions writhed in Tarhn’s throat, choked on fear of the freezing gold in her eyes.

“It’s late,” he said, the words thick. “We have a long climb ahead.”

“Very long,” agreed Lyra and she picked up her pack once again.

They climbed slowly, ceaselessly into the baking afternoon, scrambling across talus slopes and through slashing thorn thickets. Sweat stung open cuts, diluting blood and dust into myriad patterns over their bodies and still they climbed and further until Tarhn could only wonder at Lyra’s endurance, knowing his own fatigue.

At last they scrambled up a long rockfall and stumbled onto the tiny bench valley carved out of the bony ridge of mountain. The dying light burned translucent in the whispering, dark trees. At the center of the grove a spring bubbled promises of water and peace.

As one, Lyra and Tarhn sank to their knees at the edge of the spring. Crystal coolness drowned the pain from welts and bruises, eased the tightness born of dust and blood and searing sun.

The sound of foliage rustling above made Lyra raise her head suddenly.

“It’s just the slakes,” Tarhn said.

Lyra relaxed again. “Can they guard us against predators?”

“They are tougher than anything on Wilderness—man or beast. But they’ve seen no animals approach us all day.”

They will,” said Lyra. “I’m too tired to warn off any more.”

Tarhn had forgotten Lyra’s earlier words. He berated himself for allowing her to use energy needlessly.

“The slakes will guard us,” he said. “Save your strength for those things the slakes can’t do.”

“Like eat for me?” said Lyra with a weary half-smile.

“Like eat for you.”

He handed her several tubes of high energy rations. She ate them slowly, half-asleep before the last one was finished.

“Not yet,” said Tarhn.

He deftly peeled off her tough, supple footgear, part of the lifecraft’s emergency stores. As he had feared, her feet were raw with broken blisters. His fingers moved gently; when they passed, the sores were gone. At Lyra’s exclamation Tarhn stopped.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. Not at all. It’s just—”

When her confusion tumbled into mindtouch, Tarhn understood.

“I should have told you,” he said. “I never thought that you wouldn’t know of healing.”

“I’ve never needed it before, nor has anyone I knew. Can it be learned?”

“In part, for simple injuries,” said Tarhn, resuming his work on her feet. “But mainly it’s a matter of genes. There. Feel better?”

“Thank you. Ignoring the pain was one more sap on my energy.” Lyra looked at him closely, then added, “And healing was a drain on yours, wasn’t it?”

Tarhn laughed. “Not as much as carrying you tomorrow would have been.”

Lyra’s lips touched his, then with the next breath she was deep in sleep. The cool water Tarhn bathed her with did not disturb her, nor did she wake when he wrapped her in a blanket and carried her away from the spring. Even with the slakes on guard, it would be foolish to sleep near water in a dry land.

Tarhn walked until he found a place where shadegrass grew in a thick carpet beneath an old tree. He

lowered Lyra gently to the ground. As he turned away, Bithe settled silently in the branches high overhead.

Guard her well, my friend, or I'll use your blue hide for my next pair of boots.

Bithe hissed complacently.

Tarhn gave a last glance to the sleeping Lyra, then stretched out beside her, asleep before his head touched the grass.

Tarhn woke at the first suggestion of dawn. Stars still silvered the darkness, but they would soon be drowned in the sun's pouring light. He stretched hugely, satisfied for no reason other than a resilient body renewed by a night's sleep. Lyra murmured and snuggled against his warmth. Her whole body plainly said that if he were going to thrash about and let cold air beneath her blanket, the least he could do was warm her again.

Tarhn laughed silently, then relented and tucked the blanket more firmly about both of them. Not that she needed more sleep; the strengthening light showed her face unlined by fatigue, lips a relaxed curve. But the day would be long and he was loathe to end the drowsy lucent moment. He closed his eyes and drifted into the sensual half-world between sleep and waking. Lyra uncurled along him, savoring his warmth.

If it's warmth you want

Tarhn rolled onto his back and in the same motion lifted Lyra so that she became a supple covering over the length of his body. The smiling lips that moved against his seemed not at all sleepy, nor did the laughter that felt warm against his chest. Lyra sat up lightly on his stomach, discarding the last of the blanket. She eyed his tunic as though it were an unexpected growth.

"It's a fine fabric," she said, her teeth and eyes shining in the almost dawn, "but not nearly so fine as your skin."

Tarhn's breath drew in sharply as her fingers slid beneath his tunic. In seconds he was nearly dizzy with desire, with her hands that seemed to know his body as intimately as he did, where to touch and where to linger, when to wait and when to hold.

With a few quick motions they removed the offending tunic. He lay back again, absorbing her beauty as she rose above him, dawn highlighting the supple curves of neck and breasts and hips, the soft inviting pressure of thighs. His hands followed his eyes until she trembled with need of him. She lifted gracefully, slid over him, hips moving slowly, caressingly, transforming the movement into timeless rhythms of sensuality.

As their bodies mingled, so did their minds. Pleasure dazzled the imperfect links, evading pain as they came yet more deeply into each other until neither one knew nor cared who was man or woman, cloud or earth, for both lived only in the burning lightning which united them.

Even after the incandescent urgency was spent, she yet held him while his hands and lips told her of the beauty she had given him. But finally even the warmth of their joined bodies could not deny the chilly dawn.

Tarhn pulled the blanket over them, delaying the moment that they must wake and walk in a harsher reality than the one they now shared. He held her, savoring the ease they both felt in the other. The fragrance of her hair, the softness of her breasts moving with each breath, the pale rose of dawn.

He bent to kiss her breasts and felt his body stir with new desire. His mouth moved slowly over her, teeth arousing gently, tongue exploring all her textures, her body opening to him like a rain-sweet flower until he wanted her as he had never wanted any woman, knew that he would always want her. He whispered her name and heard her voice make a song of his own.

The road to the Access is long.

Tarhn couldn't decide whether he or Lyra or both had said/thought/felt the words, but neither one denied their truth. She kissed him undemandingly and he answered in kind, both secure in their numberless tomorrows, both prepared to resume their march without regret.

They climbed all morning through gradually thinning air, then down and into a deep valley gouged out of the surrounding mountains by a long-melted glacier. Steep cliffs and hanging valleys formed by ancient

tributary glaciers rimmed the main valley. Though the ice was gone, some of the valleys spun a sheer ribbon of waterfall or cascade into the main valley.

“Which way?”

Lyra’s eyes swept the valley, then she pointed toward the jagged notch of a close, steep cascade.

“That one. Climb the edges of the cascade, then up through the notch into a tiny cirque. The back wall of the cirque has crumbled into a steep—”

Tarhn’s mental command for silence chopped off Lyra’s words. The wind stirred in the valley again, bringing with it a faint wailing like a foretaste of death.

“A crosset,” said Tarhn shortly. “The hunters must be mounted to have caught up so quickly.”

“Crosset?”

Tarhn’s face was corded and grim.

“A tracking animal. It can follow anything anywhere.”

“Anywhere?”

“A crosset can’t fly—neither can we. It can’t swim, but it can track us through shallow water. And rocks are its home.”

Tarhn fell silent. Almost absently he held out his arms for the friends he had called out of the sky. His hands stroked each of them lovingly while he made his request.

“No,” said Lyra when he would have launched them once again. “Nothing must die.”

“The crosset must die. The slakes are our only weapon.”

“What about rain,” said Lyra quickly. “Would rain wash out our trail?”

Tarhn looked at the wisps of clouds teasing the mountaintops and shook his head.

“It would take a violent storm to wash away all scent of us. These clouds could do no more than spit.”

“How much time do we have before the hunters can see us?”

“An hour, maybe less.”

“Enough,” said Lyra, shedding her pack.

“What—?”

“We must climb to the cirque. Quickly. There is a way which will destroy neither slake nor hunter. Trust me.”

Tarhn launched the slakes toward the hanging valley, devoutly wishing that Lyra had their wings. By the time he dumped his pack next to her, Lyra had reached the lower rocks of the cascade and was clawing her way upward. After a timeless nightmare of frantic scrambling, Tarhn passed through the narrow notch and into the cliff-ringed cirque which looked more like trap than haven. As he ran toward the far end of the cirque, the sound of the crosset drifted up to him, louder than before, and with it the exultant howls of Manx catans carrying their riders to the kill.

Tarhn swore futilely. The hunters would be across the main valley and up the cascade in less time than it would take Lyra to scramble out of the rockfall at the back of the valley.

“Lie down there,” said Lyra, pointing above his head to a slab of rocks which was protected by an overhanging cliff. “Tell your slakes to fly high and fast away from here, beyond the clouds. And don’t move,” she added urgently. “If you aren’t safe when the storm ends ...”

Though she said no more, Tarhn felt the quick wash of her love for him, then all feeling in him died as he watched the gold consuming her eyes, amber diminishing, gone, a woman standing tall and golden and alien, alien.

Tarhn clawed his way up to the ledge, heavy with fear and memories rising ghastly after too long burial. He slapped the memories aside and wriggled under the sheltering cliff, but the memories rose choking, fresh dreams dying, and the alien standing quiet as waiting death, face and hands reaching toward the sky. Gentle harmony lifted from her lips, caressing, filled the tiny valley and bloomed above the barren rock. Nerves taut with fear relaxed under soothing assurances of song.

The breeze from the main valley became a hard, steady draft sucking air heavy with warmth and water up to chill mountain heights. Wisps of moisture fattened into clouds boiling over one another and the sun died in a ragged fall of water. Gentle harmony transformed to eerie duet. One voice rippled in

joyous praise of the waters of life.

The second voice sang of the swift waters of destruction.

Golden light leaped from the alien's outstretched fingers, yearning, compelling. Wind burst into the cirque with a rending howl, shaking the very cliffs. Clouds spat lightning and splitting thunder and the land quivered and rang with unleashed energy. The alien stood gold and untouched by rain and wind, a still center in the wheeling violence. Light wove through her fingers as her keening song wove the storm.

And the water was a thick tide rising.

Tarhn buried his face in his arms as water poured into the cirque faster than the tiny stream could carry it to the cascade, heard a new sound usurp the thunder; rumbling, gnashing, the sound was a force greater than rain, unendurable, rocks lifting and smashing in a slow, immense slide down the cascade.

Yet still the alien song called down lightning, kneaded clouds with sliding dissonance and golden light incandescent that burned his eyes and mind until he saw only memories, curtains of will separating past from present vaporized, leaving him trapped and trembling on a harsh ledge of stone, paralyzed by the depth of her betrayal. Then an acid torrent of hate dissolved his anguish into leaping rage. He reviled the Carifil for not telling him, loathed himself for touching her obscene life, prayed to survive the storm that he might kill the unspeakable Singer he once loved.

His head lifted, lips twisted and ugly with words of fear and frustrated revenge.

For the Carifil wanted her alive.

The song ended abruptly and with it the worst of the storm. Tarhn watched the golden light fade, allowing the rain to reach Lyra for the first time. In seconds she was drenched. She slipped and stumbled over the ragged rocks many times until blood flowed from the hands that had held gold fire.

Tarhn smiled to see a Singer bleed. He watched unmoving while she fell again and again in her climb to him. When her head was nearly level with his he looked coldly at the devastated valley beneath her feet.

"And you were worried about the slakes killing," he said cuttingly. Those poor bastards would have died easier under slake fangs than under the flood you loosed. You're a Singer all right—if it moves, kill it. But first make it suffer."

Lyra shuddered away from him, his name fell unheard from her lips.

"What?" he demanded, his voice a lash.

He sensed her reaching out to him, then recoiling in pain when she touched the black flames of his hatred.

"Only the crosset died," she whispered. "It would not leave the scent."

Tarhn's disbelieving laughter cut deeper than words. Lyra swayed, then lifted amber and gold eyes to his.

"Believe what comforts you," she said raggedly, "but spare me the destruction of your hatred. I have not earned it."

"You earned it the day of your birth, Lyra Mara, half-gened bastard of Daveen Li'mari and a killer race."

*Tarhn, why are you destroying us? Why do you hate me? *

The thought slid through his defenses, a silver anguish that would have made granite weep, but Tarhn was flesh, not stone.

"Singer." The word was an animal's snarl.

Lyra seemed to waver before him, transparent, then opaque, mind and body, a weary stranger who had mistakenly thought she knew him.

"The Singers didn't know that they carried sickness," she said finally. "You are Tau; your people conquered many races; killed many people. Yet you do not hate the Tau."

Tarhn dismissed her logic with a cruel gesture. When she spoke again, the music of her voice was strangely thinned.

"I must reach the Access quickly."

"Why? Dead crossets are very poor trackers."

"Our minds are too closely attuned—"

Tarhn's surge of denial needed no words to give it force. Lines of strain appeared across Lyra's face.

"Yes. Attuned," she said emotionlessly. "Your hatred destroys me as self-hatred would. You have the training to control—No. I've learned that much. To expect discipline or kindness of a Galactic is to be disappointed."

"So ... a Singer is vulnerable. And what if I don't choose to discipline my emotions?"

"There are easier ways to kill me. But, perhaps, none so satisfying for you."

"I'm no Singer," spat Tarhn.

He banked his emotions as he would a fire, burying hatred until its fierce heat no longer seared through Lyra's mind. Immediately relief loosened the taut lines of her face. She breathed deeply. "Thank you."

As though she knew he would not reply, Lyra turned and began working her way across the rain-slick rocks. Tarhn watched her through narrowed eyes, the bloody marks left by her hands and feet a clear trail for him to follow.

After a long time he did follow. Though the rocks were slippery and the footing unpredictable, he didn't fall. He knew then that the song, or his hatred, had depleted Lyra to the point at which she had little strength to cope with the trail. Soon he was close enough to hear her muffled cry of pain when she fell yet again. At the sound of his approach she flung her head up, eyes blind with Singer gold. He hung back as she crawled slowly toward the last steep rockslide guarding the rear exit from the valley. There eons of winter ice had eroded the circling rock into a narrow col suspended between high peaks. When she fell yet again on the sharp rocks, he closed the gap with a few swift strides and bent to pull her to her feet.

She screamed in agony at his touch. He withdrew his hand as from a fire, looked at her measuringly. "If you aren't able to get through the pass alone, I'd have to carry you."

She breathed deeply and her voice shook. "No ... when you touch me, no shield, no discipline, nothing baffles your destroying hatred. Leave me here."

"No."

Lyra stifled a cry of despair. "Then please, please open your mind, let me show you where the Access is. I can't stay close to you, I'll—"

"Walk or be carried."

At the edge of his tightly held mind, Tarhn sensed a question asked and answered in a cascade of aching song. At last, to his relief, she pulled herself to her feet. Much as he despised Singers, his flesh crawled at the thought of simple touch bringing such agony.

Tarhn lost count of the times Lyra fell in her slow progress up the slippery sloping pile of rocks which led over the col. At last she fell and did not rise. Tentatively he touched her; no response.

"Praise the Tortured God," he said beneath his breath, relieved at not having to watch her worm's progress any more.

He lifted her limp body into carrying position across his shoulders and carefully traversed the last slippery ledge. The downhill side was much less steep. And it was dry.

N'Lete and Bithe swooped from ragged wisps of cloud, wings spread so that the descending sun shone through blue skin stretched over black bones. They were blue fire and beauty and grace.

They were friends.

Tarhn put Lyra down and held his arms open for the slakes to land.

I'm glad that demon storm didn't catch you, slakes.

The slakes coiled around him delightedly, tickling his ears with their darting tongues.

Enough!

With a few last feints, the slakes ceased their play. Bithe scrambled down and flicked his tongue over Lyra questioningly.

She sleeps.

The quality of Tarhn's thought forbade further exploration. Bithe retreated a few steps and assumed his guard stance. Tarhn launched n'Lete into the sunset sky. If anyone had survived the storm, as Lyra

claimed, n'Lete should find them nearby.

When n'Lete had vanished to a dot, Tarhn arranged himself in a position of deep concentration, giving himself completely over to Carifil training. When his eyes opened again, they no longer glinted with uncontrolled hatred. He was once again Carifil on assignment. As only Lyra knew precisely where the Access was, he must ensure that she would be able to lead the way.

He worked quickly over her, healing the gouges and deep gashes rocks had made. When he finished, he sat cross-legged near her, working with his emotions again, weighing some probabilities, absolutely ignoring others. In this state he absently received n'Lete's report that no hunters moved nearby. He automatically lifted his arm that n'Lete might lay her head in his lap. Bithe opened one blue eye at the intrusion, then obligingly moved over a fraction to make room for his mate.

At length, Tarhn sensed Lyra's emergence from behind the protective blanket of unconsciousness. "You healed me," she said wonderingly. The latent music of her voice made his hatred flare again.

"I'd do the same for any animal." As though sensing Lyra's distress, Bithe moved close to her. Slake and Singer stared silently at each other for a long moment, then Bithe lowered his head into Lyra's lap and rattled his wing hopefully.

"He weighs so little for his size," said Lyra softly, obviously seeking a neutral topic.

Tarhn merely grunted.

Lyra glanced quickly at him, then rubbed the skin beneath Bithe's wing. Bithe leaned into her touch, hissing contentment through serrated teeth.

Lyra smiled with pleasure. "Here's one Tau who likes my company."

"He should. You're both killers. And bastards."

Lyra was silent for a moment, then asked, "And what is your heritage that it belittles his?"

Lyra's gesture included both Tarhn and the slake curled in his lap. Tarhn's hand moved under n'Lete's chin and his voice hummed pride and affection.

"N'Lete's most distant ancestors flew to hunts and wars with my own ancestors, the genocrats of Tau. Bithe, on the other hand, is wild, the product of unrecorded mating during battle. As for me, I am Tarhn a Harnan n'Ahler, Conditional Helix of Tau. Both of my immediate progenitors held high power in the government of Tau. They died insane under the lash of the Singers. I was a child. My gene-uncle Kretan seized power. A true Helix will not rule Tau again, thanks to the murdering Singers."

Tarhn was powerless to control the waiting, seeking violence which coiled through his words.

"I regret your loss, Tarhn a Harnan n'Ahler," said Lyra formally. "Though our lifelines span eternity, the knots of death are painful."

Violence seethed in the blue light from Tarhn's narrowed eyes. Lyra raised her hands in a timeless gesture of defense.

"I wasn't alive when my people unwittingly brought sickness to many planets," she said in a strained voice. "Yet I know their agony."

His violence never lessened.

"Tarhn," she said desperately, "Every Singer who left Chanson died. The plague was not restricted to Galactics."

"Sorry to hear that. I've spent a lifetime hoping to lay hands on the Singer who visited Tau."

"It was an accident! They did not know—"

"Didn't they?" rasped Tarhn.

He brushed n'Lete off his lap and stood to tower over Lyra.

"They knew kerden well what they were doing. The leaders of a hundred planetary systems don't just die of a simultaneous accident. I'm not crying over their deaths—most of them were carrion eaters overdue for another beginning. But to call it an accident!"

"We still grieve—"

"Then my greatest wish is to feel similar grief over the ashes of Plague!"

Tarhn's words echoed around him, returned woven into rills of dissonance promising/warning that his wish could be granted. Yet it was not Lyra who sang; she had withdrawn infuriatingly behind her mental defenses: She registered on his psi no more than would a stone. He gathered his rage to batter her shields

until she was forced to writhe under the acid of his truths as he had long ago writhed under the truths of—

N'Lete clashed her teeth together, warning her mate to flee Tarhn's violence. The sound shocked Tarhn as nothing else could have. He saw his own hands like claws so close to Lyra and wondered searchingly what had nearly driven him to violate the trust of the Carifil. But his mind withheld the answer, buried it with the ease of long experience beneath an impenetrable will not to know.

Tarhn returned his attention to n'Lete, gently arranging her coils in his lap. Soon Bithe slunk over, his whole body rippling with confusion over Lyra's withdrawal and Tarhn's rage. Tarhn smoothed Bithe's wings and murmured soothing words until the slake calmed and settled against him.

"I was wrong to link you with a Singer, Bithe. You have been as worthy and loyal as your mate in all our years together. And who am I to sneer that you enjoy her sweet voice and sweeter touch? I am supposed to have a seventh level mind, yet I was utterly fooled."

Tarhn's hands continued their gentle movements, though his mind had turned inward. Stars in their thousand colors burned through the deepening night, followed by the haunting moons. The third moon of Wilderness rose before Lyra's return captured his wandering thoughts. Though her voice no longer held subtle echoes of harmony, Tarhn was certain he could hear/feel a song pressing against her, urging her.

"My awareness has touched many worlds, known vicariously the many cultures of man. I have sifted countless minds to find one with which mine could communicate effortlessly, totally. A mind which would join mine in the intricate, expanding union of complements. You have such a mind.

"And you despise my race, loathe my presence ... yet wish to see me live. Why?"

Tarhn was silent for many minutes, then he said, "Daveen Li'mara had many powerful friends. In a moment of sheer sentimentality the Council must have agreed to allow you off-planet. It is they who want you alive. Perhaps they still believe you are more his daughter than a Singer."

"I carry his genes."

"Do you? We have only the word of murderers on . that."

"Singers are not murderers. They are gentle and loving beyond your ability to know."

Tarhn's only response was violence quickening.

"The Access lies at the bottom of this slope," she said in a thin voice. "There's no need to stay together any longer. Unless you enjoy causing me pain?"

The tone of simple curiosity slipped the leash of Tarhn's control. He launched the slakes unceremoniously.

"Shut up and walk. I'll be right behind you."

Lyra rose and ran down the slope. He swore as he remembered that her night vision was as good or better than his. A swift command reached n'Lete as Tarhn plunged after Lyra. Her trail was marked both by sound and the salt-cinnamon fragrance of plants broken off in her heedless flight. Tarhn ran recklessly, eyes fixed on the jumble of rocks which seemed to be Lyra's goal. The faint smell of a scavenger's den rose in the damp air, stronger as he neared the rocks. Then he saw Lyra slip between two of the larger rocks and out of sight. At the same instant a whiplike shape plummeted soundlessly through the moonlight. Wings flashed blue fire as n'Lete braked before disappearing into the rocks. Tarhn waited tautly, then smiled.

Down, Bithe. They're waiting for us.

Tarhn's low chuckle followed him into the scavenger's den. N'Lete was coiled on the ground, wings cocked with pride.

Well hunted, n'Lete. Your children would have ruled the battlefields of Tau.

N'Lete hissed agreement.

Tarhn's blue crystal eyes lingered over Lyra for a moment. Even now her body retained the elusive grace of song. For a searing moment memories of what they had shared flooded him with doubts. But she was a Singer.

His hands were indifferent as they lifted her.

Bithe?

The drumming sound of air resonating in Bithe's throat led Tarhn to the Access.

Up, slakes.

When the slakes were settled on the platform Tarhn leaped up to Join them. The combined weight of slakes and humans triggered the Access. Within seconds Tarhn felt five distinct spasms. The Carifil must be jumping him all over the kerden galaxy. Then there came a short respite during which the contents of the platform were scanned down to the last atom. A final spasm and Tarhn arrived on Centrex.

IV

“Report, Carifil Tarhn a Harnan n’ Ahler.”

Tarhn wondered at Councillor Elenda’s hostile tone, but gave the report as requested.

The woman stood silently for a few moments, then said sharply, “Was it necessary to be so brutal?”

Tarhn lowered the still unconscious Lyra onto a nearby allform couch.

“Yes,” he said shortly.

“On what basis?”

“She’s a Singer.”

“Hybrid.”

“Only a Singer could call that storm.”

“That storm saved your life; she could have easily let you die.”

The same thought had occurred to Tarhn many times, but all he said was, “She claimed Singers aren’t murderers, yet at least five men died under her song.”

“You would have done the same if you could.”

“She still lied.”

“You counted the bodies?”

“There wouldn’t have been enough left to count.”

“There were no bodies. A guide and four hunters lived to report a Singer’s presence on Wilderness. It would have been better if she had killed them. Do you distrust her still?”

“She lied about other deaths. The plague was no accident.”

“Did you lie about the hunters dying?” countered Elenda.

“I drew obvious conclusions from the data on hand.”

“Exactly.”

Elenda let her remark echo for a moment before saying, “Come. The others are waiting.”

Tarhn followed unquestioningly; he knew that someone would come to care for his slakes. And that the slakes would care for Lyra. He wondered who the others were and what they waited for. Elenda gestured to him to precede her through a curving door. Anticipation radiated from the room like heat from a fire. Who—

“Jerlis!”

Tarhn’s whoop of joy set off waves of friendly laughter. Tarhn never noticed it; his whole attention was centered on the tiny woman who was lost in his massive greeting.

“Don’t squeeze too hard,” said a laughing voice. “We’d be lost without Jerlis.”

Tarhn smiled and gently put Jerlis back on her feet, though not out of reach. His hands savored the familiar texture of suede and his mind brimmed pleasure at unexpectedly seeing her. Her dark skin/fur was still lustrous, her sensitive ears still erect fans, and her round turquoise eyes still unclouded.

“You are ageless,” he said simply. “I am glad.”

Jerlis smiled, revealing the jagged teeth of carnivorous ancestry. To someone who didn’t know her the smile would have been chilling. To Tarhn it was the sun rising warm after a long night.

“No one can compete with Jerlis,” said a husky voice close to him, “but is it too much to hope for a civil greeting?”

Tarhn turned and looked into the ferocious orange eyes of a Rynlon.

“The way your consort greeted me,” said Tarhn wryly, “I half expected you to ignore me.”

“Never,” said Dachen.

Tarhn hugged him soundly, then really looked around the room for the first time.

“Jasilyn, Iandrel, Kotomotay, Fiodor”

Tarhn was delighted to see so many of his friends, but why were they here? When he had begun his ill-fated free time, these people had been scattered across the galaxy.

“Yes,” said Dachen, “a pattern is nearing crisis. We must decide whether to cut or weave or wait.”

Tarhn sent quick apologies to his ungreeted friends before he stretched out on an empty allform couch.

“Thank you, Tarhn,” said Elenda quietly. “I apologize for my rudeness earlier and for my haste now. The haste, at least, is necessary.”

Tarhn smiled, but the immense attentiveness of his mind never wavered.

“All of you were called away from assignments. Again I apologize and plead necessity. We have two important, strangely linked patterns nearing crisis. One is the Singer enigma. The other is Kretan a Harman n’Ahler.”

Tarhn stiffened.

“Most of you have heard of the Singer enigma; a few of you have worked with me to solve it. The salient facts are scant and simple. Chanson, often known as Plague, was first discovered by a Concord Survey ship nearly three decades ago. First contact was peaceful. The Singers appeared to be an amiable race. When told about the Concord, they petitioned for membership. After the petition was received, the usual cultural index examinations began. The results were nonsense. The Singers’ culture eluded categorization.”

“The contact team couldn’t decide whether Singer culture was the minimum level necessary for full Concord membership. They called for an Assembly vote, as in all cases in which the team cannot make unanimous recommendations.”

“As their name indicates, the Singers’ special value to the Concord was the surpassing beauty of their songs; Contact’s recording equipment failed to capture that beauty fully.”

Elenda stopped, her startling violet eyes fixed on a point light-years distant.

“The obvious solution,” she continued, “would have been to transport a few Singers to the next Assembly gathering. That’s what we did for the Talerit, whose unique ability was empathic drama. Instead, Contact arranged to jump Singers to individual planets to be heard and judged by separate planetary governments. Later, Contact could give no explanation for this arrangement.

“The rest you know. Wherever the Singers sang, people died. The Council, acting for the whole Assembly, has spent the intervening years trying to discover exactly what happened. Contact left a spacecom on Chanson, but the Singers absolutely refused all communication—particularly mental.

“The planet was proscribed. Since then the only contact we’ve had has been accidental, and tragic.”

Elenda exchanged a look of sadness with Jerlis.

“Daveen Li’mara, a Carifil, had established a close orbit around Chanson. His objective was to penetrate the Singer silence. After several weeks his ship’s engines suddenly became erratic. We believe it was sabotage. Not by the Singers, but by Kretan a Harman n’Ahler, as Jerlis will explain. Surprisingly, after the ship crashed, the Singers saved Daveen’s life, if not his memories. He never used the spacecom. When his daughter was born it was the Singers who told us, as they told us of his death. Beyond these singularly terse communications, we had no contact with the Singers until four standard days ago. Then the Singers requested that Lyra Mara be exempted from proscription.”

“The Council debated the request; at length we agreed to allow Lyra Mara off Chanson in hopes that we would learn more about the Singers from her. The Carifil had an additional reason for giving Lyra her freedom. Jerlis?”

Jerlis sat up and faced her friends’ curiosity.

“Kretan isn’t nearly so spectacular as the Singers, which is part of the problem.”

Jerlis curled her ears in exasperation and started over again.

“Kretan a Harman n’Ahler, bred and raised a Tau genocrat, inventor and two-fifths owner of Access Unlimited. Three-fifths is owned by Lyra Mara.”

Iandrel’s surprised oath made Jerlis smile.

“Are you trying to ask me how a Singer came to own the majority interest in the richest enterprise in

the galaxy?" purred Jerlis.

Iandrel laughed and complimented Jerlis in his native tongue.

"I'll take that as yes," said Jerlis. "It's a long and tangled story, and you'll have to be patient with me. Fifty years ago Tau had just lost the last in a ruinous series of interplanetary wars. Tau was stripped of all but its human resources. One of those resources was Kretan. He succeeded in—shall I say discovering?—no, describing, the mathematical basis for instantaneous movement within the galaxy. He thereafter spent many years designing and building a machine he called an Access.

"It was as brilliant a piece of work as has ever been done by man. But there was a problem. Tau had no money to finance Accesses, nor any real interest in them. Kretan took the plans to many other planets before he found Lyle Li'mara, a wealthy trader from a planet new to the Concord. Lyle agreed to finance production, installation, and selling of the Access in return for three-fifths ownership of the patent and Access Unlimited."

"Lyle died soon after. Through a series of circumstances I won't deal with now, his grandson Daveen became my ward. Technically, Daveen owned three-fifths of AU, but by Concord law he was unable either to wield or delegate this control until he reached the minimum age to be a full Concord citizen. Thus, for two decades Kretan ran AU without interference. He was, and is, brilliant and ruthless, with an affinity for power which is frightening."

"As soon as Daveen reached citizenship age, we tried to assert his control over AU, using the AU money which had been held in trust for him. Kretan, of course, resisted. We fought him through every court in the galaxy. We had just won major concessions when Daveen so conveniently crashed on a proscribed planet."

Jerlis scowled fiercely.

"I'm sure Kretan was responsible. He had tried persistently to kill Daveen before he reached majority, for by law Kretan would have then become sole owner of AU."

Jasilyn interrupted with a frustrated noise.

"I know," said Jerlis quickly. "Concord laws would confuse Xerle Herself. The important thing to remember is that if Daveen died without gene heirs before he was a full citizen, Kretan inherited the company. But if Daveen died after he was a citizen, without gene heirs, Elenda, Tarhn, and myself would have inherited Daveen's interest."

"Kerden three-toed mard," muttered Jasilyn, then added more loudly, "Then why did Kretan try to kill Daveen?"

"He didn't try to kill him," said Jerlis patiently. "He merely tried to force Daveen to land on a proscribed planet. Once Daveen touched Chanson, and lived, Kretan had won."

"I'm afraid to ask why," said Fiodor mildly.

"Don't," said Jasilyn with a laugh.

Jerlis snapped her teeth together in irritation and gave Jasilyn a long look. They had met physically only a few times, though their minds were often linked for Carifil business. And under Jasilyn's flamboyant red hair and rustic manners was a mind as fierce and cunning as any Jerlis had known.

Jasilyn smiled meaningfully at Jerlis; she knew the game was up. She leaned so close to Fiodor that her bright hair touched him.

"Kretan," said Jasilyn in a loud whisper, "sounds like a seventh level crook. He'd probably been sucking Daveen's three-fifths. The thought of a Death Audit In The Absence of Gene Heirs would give him the Salcan trots. But with Daveen caged alive on Chanson, no problem."

Jerlis sighed, but conceded that Jasilyn had covered the high points succinctly.

"Yes. The only trick was to keep Daveen alive for the decades Kretan wanted. Daveen fooled him by dying in his first maturity. But he left a gene heir. Kretan was sitting fat; unquestioned control of Access Unlimited for the foreseeable future.

"Unless the Concord voted to annihilate the Singers."

Tarhn turned on Jerlis with an expression of disbelief.

"Are you saying that in order to inconvenience a rich man, you let the Singers escape a just annihilation—and even permitted one of them off-planet? Kretan is a cunning old carrion eater, but he

isn't a Singer!"

Jerlis' turquoise eyes widened. That Tarhn of all people should underestimate Kretan

"Listen to it this way, Tarhn," said Jerlis earnestly. "In just under five decades, the Access has almost totally replaced lightships as the means of moving goods, people, and information within the galaxy. Planets that don't have Accesses are nearly as isolated as they were before interstellar lightships. Further, the Accesses make money for the planets, even considering the inflated installation and royalty payments. And if the planets are too poor to pay or are impatient to make money, the installation fee can be paid in people. Very attractive, especially to retrograde governments. Three-eighths of Kretan's Accesses are on conscript planets."

Jerlis searched Tarhn's grim face for dawning understanding, but found none.

"By Xerle's Great Ears," she snapped, "do I need mindtouch to get through to you? Kretan has a virtual monopoly on interstellar movement, owns the free labor of over seven billion people, and receives one-sixth of the gross profits made by all Accesses. He is within eight years of de facto control of the galaxy."

"But the Concord—" began Tarhn.

"Can't do a kerden thing. Most planets are even afraid to try. Years ago a movement started in the Assembly to pass a law which would have had the effect of circumscribing Kretan's power. Ten supposedly powerful people representing the ten most powerful planets organized the movement. And when the yearly renewal time for their Access leases came around, there were ten planets that no longer had Accesses.

"The planets were ruined. Since that time, only the Carifil have openly challenged Kretan. With Lyra Mara's help, we can win."

"Can you revoke the patent?" said Kotomotay. "It sounds as though he must have broken enough laws to bring him before the Deliberators."

"And if we win, Kretan will destroy every Access built," said Jerlis. "Maybe that wouldn't destroy the Concord. Maybe; Concord planets are too dependent on the Accesses to live well or even badly without them."

"Then kill him," said Tarhn bluntly.

"Xerle's Eyes, Tarhn! Did you leave your wits on Wilderness? Every time the Concord gets rumors of Kretan's location they jump a platoon of assassins to the area. Nothing. The Carifil have hunted him for years. Nothing. Unless we can clear up the Singer problem, we have a choice between chaos without Accesses and despotism with Accesses."

"Don't forget," said Dachen dryly, "we also have to keep Lyra out of Kretan's reach now. If he lifts her the game is over."

"Insane! All of you!" said Tarhn savagely. "You want to exonerate the Singers falsely in order to give one of them virtual control of the galaxy."

"Kretan is a known, quantifiable evil," said Jerlis. "The Singers are not."

"They are murderers."

"There's no proof of that, but there's plenty of proof that Kretan is far too powerful."

Tarhn sat silently, seeking an escape from Jerlis' net of facts. Finally he looked at her and said hoarsely, "Then kill Lyra Mara to force a Death Audit."

Jerlis turned from Tarhn to Elenda and demanded, "What else happened on Wilderness?"

"I relayed precisely what Tarhn reported, as he reported it."

Tarhn moved uncomfortably under Jerlis' probing eyes.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Tarhn," said Jerlis in a voice of gentle confusion. "You believe the Singers planned the plague?"

"I know they did."

As if voice alone were not enough, he reinforced his certainty with brief mindtouch.

"What evidence do you have that the Carifil and Concord have overlooked?"

"None."

"Lyra did nothing, told you nothing—"

“Nothing.”

“Then you believe rather than know.”

Tarhn disliked appearing unreasonable, but could do nothing about it. He knew. His stubbornness was not lost on Jerlis, but its cause was.

“Tarhn, what happened on Wilderness?” she said patiently.

“Elenda used command probe,” answered Tarhn. “My report was complete.”

“It couldn’t have been,” said Jerlis flatly. “Everyone in this room received that report, and all we know now is that the Singers are psi masters. And we already believed that. We learned nothing new. Certainly nothing that would make us decide—”

“Then you’re all using unconscious filters,” snapped Tarhn.

“Or you are,” returned Jerlis neutrally.

Tarhn felt anger flash hotly even as part of his mind calmly told him that his anger proved the truth of Jerlis’ statement. He made a casual gesture with his hands, though the thought of psychic integration sent baffling surges of panic through him.

“Looks like it’s time for integration,” said Tarhn lightly. “Elenda must have thought so or she wouldn’t have probed me.”

“That’s not why I probed,” said Elenda.

Tarhn looked at her in surprise. “Then why?”

Dachen sensed the unease radiating from Elenda and touched her hand lightly.

“Did you know that Daveen and I were complements?” said Elenda abruptly.

Confused, Tarhn could only say, “I wasn’t sure.”

He sensed Iandrel’s rush of sympathy for Elenda and remembered that Iandrel’s complement had also died.

“I’m lucky,” said Elenda. “In time I found another. I have two reasons for telling you about Daveen. The first is your own completion: Lyra. I know from your rage that you agree with me. Somehow the Singers also knew.

“They requested that you be the one to guard Lyra.”

Tarhn sensed his mental defenses closing one upon the other down to levels he had not known possible. Though he realized the absurdity of his reaction, it took him several minutes to control it. When he emerged, he felt the concern and love of his friends and Jerlis’ hands on his forehead pouring reassurance into his mind as she had when he was an untrained child.

Elenda resumed speaking as though nothing had happened.

“I will kill no one’s complement. And I will kill no Singer.”

“Tell him why,” said Dachen.

“It’s not,” said Elenda, “as Tarhn would like to believe, out of misplaced sentiment for Daveen. But when he died the first time—”

Tarhn’s startled exclamation was involuntary,

“Yes. The crash was fatal. I felt him dying, felt his awareness condense into a shimmering line, felt that line curl put from his broken body, sensed the irrevocable knot forming, formed and then the Singers asking if death be consummation or accident and Daveen ...”

Tarhn strained to hear her words, so low had her voice become.

“... and I/Daveen ... Daveen/they radiant song”

Tarhn waited, but it was Jerlis who finished.

“When the song faded, Daveen lived again, though changed. The last thought he communicated was, “Theirs is the power”

“Do you understand now, Tarhn?” said Elenda.

“You believe he died,” said Tarhn carefully. “You believe the Singers returned him to life. Perhaps, if you can call what remained of Daveen’s life. Even if you are right in your beliefs, is one deliberate life enough to forget thousands of deliberate deaths? Is—”

Tarhn stopped abruptly at a look from Dachen. The Rynlon’s orange eyes were embers of disbelief burning in a crucible of steel. “The second reason, my deliberately blind friend, is pragmatic rather than

ethical. As such, you will doubtless find it easier to grasp. If we set out to destroy the Singers we might find ourselves in the position of savages throwing stones at a lightship. If we're lucky the Singers will overlook our puny attempts. If not—"

Dachen clapped his hands together explosively.

"The Singers aren't that powerful," said Tarhn.

"Oh?" said Dachen. "I can't remember the last time I resurrected the dead, or even sang up a small drizzle."

"You forget something."

"What?"

"I can kill Lyra Mara without even touching her."

"Yes, you're a weapon," admitted Dachen. "But are you Carifil or your own? Can you obey if we say don't kill? Can you control yourself as well as you control Lyra? Yesterday I would have said yes. Today ... you are more landmine than lasgun. Whether your explosion kills Singer or Carifil is purely chance. You suggested integration. I agree. Jerlis is here; she fits more deeply into your mind than any other Carifil."

Tarhn controlled his inward resistance and looked into Jerlis' troubled eyes.

"Do you agree?" said Tarhn.

"Only if you do," said Jerlis. "You're free to refuse."

Tarhn laughed softly. A Carifil could refuse integration, yes. But he would never receive another assignment until he had been integrated.

"When do we begin?" he said.

Dachen visibly relaxed, sending Tarhn into laughter again. Dachen smiled wryly.

"Laugh all you want, Tarhn. I'll be kerden glad to have you back. The Carifil walk a very thin wire now: Kretan and a few others don't want the Singers destroyed. Fortunately, Kretan is powerful enough to bend the Assembly. But when word goes out that a Singer walks free and powerful, the six thousand gods of Dianthus couldn't stop an Assembly vote to annihilate. That gives us very little time to solve the Singer enigma before we're ordered to kill in ignorance and fear, not knowing why or what we kill until it's too late."

"I can't change that," said Tarhn.

"You can change the ignorance. Lyra is the only message the Singers have sent us. I think they were afraid we might not decode all of it in time, so they arranged for you to be close by, the key to all her locked information."

"Kerden stubborn key they chose," muttered Elenda.

"Very," agreed Dachen cheerfully. "Well, they've done their part. Now it's left to us to find out why the key is reluctant. When we know that, we may know enough that Lyra is no longer required."

Jerlis smiled at Tarhn's confusion.

"Tarhn," she said softly, "it can hardly be a coincidence that you were the only one who heard the first Singers—and lived."

"But I didn't hear them," he said irritably. "I was a child too young to have slakes, much less be admitted to the Hall of Genocrats on a state matter."

"Then where did you live before you went to Feldenshold? And who gave you two young slakes called n'Lete and Bithe?"

"I ... don't ... know," said Tarhn wonderingly.

"I do," said Jerlis,

"How?"

"You told me, long ago. You were old enough to have slakes when the Singer came to Tau. You took them with you that night. Something happened to all of you. Or have you also forgotten that the Helix strain is psi null and that normal Tau slakes have less awareness than a pile of rocks!"

Tarhn felt the room fracture into jagged pieces while a distant form wailed and writhed away from golden notes searing, growing, a dawn of melody, beauty rising on the sun, song rising, warmth burning acid deep.

Tarhn!

Jerlis' frantic mindcall wrenched the room back together.

Give me sleep, Jerlis, Give me peace.

When Tarhn awoke, only Jerlis was there. He felt tension throughout his body, felt Jerlis' eyes take note, felt her thought that integration should wait until he was more relaxed.

"This is my normal state, Jerlis. I usually bother to conceal it."

"I must be getting old. This is the first time in centuries someone has known my thoughts without my help."

Tarhn looked at her searchingly, then smiled.

"You're not getting old. Usually a good part of my mind is busy overriding useless signals from a different part of my mind. Now, I don't care if you know my tension."

Jerlis nodded her head slowly, then said, "How long—"

"As long as I can remember."

"Even after Carifil integration?"

"Yes."

"Then you are the most powerful mind I have ever touched—and the most secret. Though I love you, I don't really know you. I can't help a mind of your power unless you want to be helped. No one can. Except, possibly ... Lyra."

The savagery of Tarhn's negation made Jerlis step backwards.

"Sorry, Jerlis. It isn't your fault. You're only telling the truth."

Jerlis wondered what other truths might draw a similar or worse reaction.

"There's only one way to find out," said Tarhn, handing her a psitran.

Jerlis accepted the psitran, hesitated, then said, "Integration is not punishment, Tarhn. No, let me speak. Part of your mind is cut off, barricaded even from yourself."

Tarhn waited, his blue eyes hooded and opaque. "It has been many years since your first integration. That is neither good nor bad, simply fact. You have seen and done and thought much in those years. It would not be surprising if you had some events that were not digested, that you needed help to integrate into your changing self. I have been integrated eighteen times; there is no more shame or failure attached to that than to scanning a library cube for knowledge you don't have."

"I understand that."

"Intellectually or emotionally?"

"Both."

"Then why did you wait and hide?"

Tarhn's allform rippled, trying to soothe new tensions.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be here."

"You don't have to be here."

"Jerlis," he began angrily, then stopped when he saw her turquoise eyes lambent with patience and shared pain. "Sorry. This can't be very pleasant for you, either."

Jerlis' fingers moved in an intricate gesture of agreement, apology, and love. "I suspect that your first integration was not fully successful. Yet, an unintegrated mind that had reached the seventh level would be unique in Carifil history. Not impossible; merely highly improbable. But we must begin somewhere. We must find some focus for the second integration." She paused, then asked, "Have you forgotten all of your childhood?"

"I haven't forgotten any of ..." A look of mingled perplexity and frustration creased his dark face, shadowed his vivid eyes.

Jerlis waited, then said softly. "Tell me the important things you remember, beginning with Tau and ending after your first integration."

"At my birth," began Tarhn tonelessly, "I was declared a Conditional First Helix of Tau. Clereth, my gene-mother, elected to raise and train me so that I would have the qualities necessary to be confirmed First Helix. Clereth had no night vision. Flawed genes, though otherwise she would have been at least a Second Helix. She hated me, because my genes weren't flawed. She made my childhood as difficult as

she could, short of actually damaging me. I doubt if that matters now; I haven't hated her since she died."

"How did she die?"

There was a long silence. "I don't remember."

"Review your childhood in your mind. What is your last vivid memory of Tau?"

After a few minutes, Tarhn spoke slowly. "There is a room, a kind of large closet, in the Helix house. It is filled with cloth and the scent of dawnflowers. I used to sit there and look out the window and dream of the time I would have my own slakes. I think—yes, I remember now. I had n'Lete then, but she was unmated. She had refused all male slakes in the compound. I suspected she had chosen a wild slake, but I couldn't be sure. It didn't matter, though. She would not be fertile for at least fifteen years Someday," he added dreamily, "I'll take my slakes back to Tau, so they can breed successfully. Slakes live so long, even longer than a Helix. Did you know that their venom is the basis for some of our extender drugs?"

Jerlis' sad smile drew a sigh from Tarhn.

"I know, Jerlis. I'm evading. I guess my last memory was about one Tau month before the ... before the Singer came to Tau. You say I heard the Singer, I doubt it. I was a bit young to be allowed into the Hall of Genocrats on a state matter."

"Would a Conditional First Helix, no matter how young, have been refused entrance?"

"... no."

"Given what you know, not what you remember, of Tau's government, would a Conditional First Helix have attended that night?"

"... yes. Not attending would have been a failure of training and self-discipline. But—"

"After Tau," said Jerlis smoothly, "what are your important memories?"

"Feldenshold, first. I'm not sure how I got to that planet, or why I left Tau. Cold-sleep travel confused my mind. One of my servants ... Kretan ... all mixed together. After the plague, Kretan took over the government. I can reconstruct from later knowledge, not memory. Is that all right?"

"Of course."

"I must have been affected by the plague, but not enough to die. Kretan was off-planet, trying to raise money to build an experimental Access. When the plague struck, he came back and took over. As was right. At that time, his was the supreme genotype of Tau. Except for mine, of course, and I was sick and too young to rule. Either Kretan tried to kill me, or my servant was afraid Kretan would try to kill me. Whichever, my servant and I and my slakes went cold-sleep to Feldenshold, All I remember about my first months there is that Feldenshold was ugly and my servant died.

"I spent a lot of time in the Waif Station, until Dnorie bought me. We hunted svarl together, golden svarl, until I'd paid back my Waif Fee. Then I hunted alone with my slakes. I did very well. Mama Firk—she's Carifil, isn't she?"

"Sometimes."

"Mama Firk heard about me, gave me an impossible job to do, and I did it. Then my slakes and I went on a lightship to the nearest Access planet. I stepped into an Access, and when the blue light died you were there."

Tarhn smiled suddenly. "After that came the good times, Jerlis. Especially when Daveen was with us. Strange ... a child takes everything for granted. I've never really thought about it, but the Carifil must have been looking for me, too. I'm glad you found me before Kretan did."

"So am I, for many reasons. You were very different from what we had expected."

"Oh?"

"You weren't psi null, for one. We'd have protected you anyway, of course. We'd have protected a litter of zarfs if they could have helped us curb Kretan's power. When we discovered what you were, we trained your mind and body to the best of our knowledge."

"And I became a Carifil."

"Do you regret it, Tarhn?"

"Never. I wanted, still want that more than anything else. That's why I'm on this kerdan restless couch, waiting."

“You won’t have to wait much longer. Just a few more memories.”

“The important ones ... Daveen. So many good memories, like that crystal day when the Deliberators finally awarded him controlling interest in Access Unlimited. We had won. Kretan would no longer own bodies and souls across the galaxy then Daveen’s lightship falling from orbit to crash on Plague.”

“Chanson,” said Jerlis softly.

“And the mind-linked search for Daveen. I wasn’t integrated, not Carifil, but I sensed the beauty.

“And my first integration finally came. I was frightened, and you were a warm breath of serenity. It was so easy. We sat and shared our memories and emotions, and I learned to accept what I knew about myself as you had accepted me. We taught each other, too, though I’m sure that most of the learning was mine.”

“That was my mistake, Tarhn. At the time, I didn’t know that you had heard the Singer. The Carifil assumed that everyone who heard the Singer died. It wasn’t until we understood why the Singers wanted you as Lyra’s guide that we realized that your blanked out memories were not the result of cold-sleep. Too late. You were on Wilderness. The Carifil need those memories, Tarhn. And so do you. You’ll never be whole until you remember.

“And you do not want to remember.”

Tarhn stiffened, then forced himself to relax.

Jerlis waited until he no longer struggled with himself, then she spoke quietly.

“We will begin with your first Carifil integration, then work backwards through your life until you are a child on Tau. Neither of us will have control over which of your memories surface. The memories will be called forth by a key word. Each memory will be older than the preceding memory. Do you understand and accept these conditions of integration?” she asked formally.

“Yes.”

“Tarhn,” she added gently, “whatever you are afraid of, you won’t have to face it alone. As an integrator, I have a more flexible, experienced mind than yours. Together we can cope with and learn from your fears. My mind is supposed to be stronger than yours, but I no longer believe that to be true. My instincts say that even with your crippling struggle against yourself, we are well-matched. You will have to help me.”

“How?”

“By fighting me as little as possible, by hiding from yourself as little as possible.”

“But I thought you could force integration, if it came to that.”

“I don’t think so, Tarhn. Not with you.”

“Then get some help. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“If what I believe is true, even mind-linked Carifil could not force your awareness. But we might break you. No, we would break you. I won’t permit that.”

Jerlis put her psitran on, adjusted it minutely, and murmured an integrator’s wordless chant of relaxation and readiness. Tarhn watched with apprehension that grew as he realized he was more afraid for her than for himself.

She bent slightly, kissed him. “Remember you are loved. Your pain, your fear, all that is you.”

Tarhn hugged her gently, then said, “Be careful, little mother.”

“No psitran for you?” she asked.

“I’ve enough power. Too much.”

“What are you afraid of, Tarhn?”

“I don’t know.”

“Singer?”

Tarhn’s body tightened.

“Do you accept that as a key word?” said Jerlis.

“That’s not up to me.”

“Normally, no. Do you accept that word?”

“Yes.”

“I think we’ll skip Wilderness for now; your report was complete, though baffling.”

When Tarhn's body showed no relaxation, they both knew she had guessed right: Wilderness was catalyst rather than beginning. The beginning was earlier, much earlier, but to demand it too hastily would be useless.

Jerlis placed the psitran on her head and sat next to Tarhn. With her hand on his forehead she sent the mental commands which preceded integration.

Tarhn felt his defenses lowering, but it was more than training commands which made him receptive. It was Jerlis herself; her love and compassion permeated the harsh edges of his mind, calming.

We'll regress from the first Carifil integration. I don't want to approach your memories too quickly. Remember how you felt after integration; we talked over your tests? Remember?

Yes, I—

SINGER

"Tarhn, you've come a long way from the jumpy, near-savage svarl hunter of a few years ago," said Jerlis with obvious satisfaction.

Her finger pressed a button and Tarhn's personal file appeared on the wallscreen. At the same time the light dimmed to a deep rose until the outlines of the comfortable room were barely visible. Tarhn's eyes quickly adjusted to the new light.

"As the final act of this stage of your training, you are allowed, required, to review your file. If you have questions, I'll answer them if I can. Your own comments will be recorded and added to the file if you wish."

The lines of symbols rose quickly to the top of the screen and disappeared. The rapidity of turnover caused Tarhn no difficulty. He had proven that he could scan and assimilate data at a phenomenal rate.

The first few minutes of the file dealt in minute detail with his general physiology, health, and attainments.

"Any comments?" said Jerlis.

"None."

"Sure?" said Jerlis as she sensed the stifled laughter in his voice.

Tarhn laughed openly. "With the exercise, food, and healing talent, I'd be shocked if I were anything but an 'exemplary specimen.'"

"Not shocked. Just out in the field working your nonexistent tail off."

Next on the screen came the section which Tarhn dreaded—psychic profile. The symbols were complex, finally giving way to charts, diagrams, statistics, formulae, and verbal summation. Tarhn read the words with apparent dispassion.

"Initially, subject displayed symptoms of psychic distress, manifested in physiology as high blood pressure, pH imbalance, acute muscular tension—"

The list continued, even down to a hologram depicting the reduced oxygen flow to the brain due to vascular constriction. The conclusion however, held Tarhn's attention.

"These symptoms no longer persist, though whether this is due to resolution of psychic conflict or to conscious manipulation of physiology cannot be determined. It should be noted that if the latter is correct, the drain on mental and physical prowess would be considerable. Subject's profile shows no small amount of prowess, but this cannot be taken as unobjectionable proof of psychic integration, as the subject's mental potential was measured only after psychic distress was ascertained. We therefore have no true measure of subject's undistressed potential. Nonetheless, we recommend that subject be admitted into the Carifil."

Tarhn sighed quietly. He'd made it.

"Any comments?"

"Just a question. Does it make any real difference why my symptoms disappeared?"

"Of course. Part of your training is to integrate all levels of mind. When this is accomplished, a person with, say, apparently 'normal' potential can raise himself several mental levels to his true or integrated potential. Also, the unintegrated personality, no matter how brilliant, is psychically inflexible and therefore vulnerable. In our type of life, that can be fatal. But don't worry; the odds are with you—you'd be our

first unintegrated seven.”

Tarhn smiled but said nothing.

“And if you’re worried about your—overall stress rating, don’t. Every living mind is ‘distressed’ by certain circumstances. What matters is degree and ability to cope. You’re doing well on both counts. If you weren’t, it would have shown up during the flexibility simulations we put you through.”

Tarhn nodded, but his relief was not undiluted. Beneath the resilient layers which rationality, experience, and training had gently woven over the past, he sensed a fetid ugliness. But he ignored the uncomfortable intuition as he had all similar ones, and it became yet another barrier to full integration, another manipulation that would drain his strength.

SINGER

Tarhn sat on a grassy hillock, his posture one of ease and pleasure. Above him the slakes floated and chased one another through moist, spring-scented winds. Close to the ground the winds became a breeze sighing over silver foliage, lifting Tarhn’s blue-black hair playfully. Tarhn savored the moment, then reluctantly began the exercises which would allow his mind to be free.

At first it was an effort to block out the seductive movements of spring, but gradually he felt a distinct floating sensation which was the first sign of the body loosening its hold on the mind. What he sought was not the absolute severing of mind-body ties, that was death, but the reshaping of those bonds into a strong yet light connective filament of awareness which could reach beyond and around the rainbow sky, surging colors bursting over his mind, dividing into three separate strands of russet, blue, and gold. The gold pulsed with eerie beauty, beckoning vivid blue, teasing the warmth of russet. Blue wavered, touched, joined, and became gold, only to have gold explode into burning blue, burning, burning—

A voiceless cry of danger and regret seared Tarhn’s questing mind. The cry was from Daveen and not meant for Tarhn, but he received its freight of fear, anguish, and love ... followed by the emptiness of deep unconsciousness or death.

With the feral swiftness of a hunter, Tarhn leaped to his feet and raced for the compound. He sharply curbed his mind, that none of his fears for Daveen would touch Jerlis.

He could be wrong. He must be wrong. His mind had barely begun training. A mistake. Yes. Surely. Daveen was safe and well, soon to control the immense power of the Accesses.

But when he saw Jerlis, Tarhn knew he was not mistaken. Her very air of immaculate control told him some-thing was wrong.

“So, you felt it, too,” she said in a low voice.

Tarhn nodded.

“Did it seem he died?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Then we search,” she said quietly, handing him a psitran.

Within minutes the search for Daveen spanned the galaxy as mind after mind was alerted to the emergency. Had Tarhn the training, he could have become a part of that transcendent, psi-linked search, but his unwillingness to open the third level of mind relegated him to message carrier.

Yet even as mere messenger, Tarhn’s flesh crept as he sensed the scintillant power of meshed Galactic minds.

Tarhn knew the search was over when Jerlis wearily removed her psitran. Yet her face gave no hint as to whether Daveen was alive or dead.

He is both.

Jerlis’ thought had the emotional neutrality of exhaustion. More for herself than for Tarhn, her thoughts continued.

His mind pattern lives, but in altered form. What he knew of the galaxy is almost gone. He is newly born, and the planet of his creators shall be his home.

Thoughts splintered on exhaustion, sending fragments of what had happened into Tarhn’s waiting mind.

Daveen orbiting Chanson to renew contact with the Singers. Fusion drive erratic. Accident?

Sabotage? Kretan? Singers? Irrelevant. Daveen's senses warned him seconds before the drive went critical. Lifecraft partially disabled in explosion. Injury. Looping, bucketing dive ending in crash on Chanson.

Nothing.

Singers. Singers golden in his mind, gentle, asking. And they healed him body and mind, after their own fashion.

SINGER

"What did Daveen say?" said Tarhn.

"Kretan gave in! Daveen will determine Access policy. No more chattel contracts. He was given Wilderness and seven other sun systems, plus ownership of over two thousand corporations on three hundred different planets. And all the back profits due him will be—"

"Hold up," laughed Tarhn. "I think I get the point. He's now one of the richest persons in the galaxy, Kretan was kicked solidly in the ass, and evil's golden eyes no longer look at our galaxy."

Jerlis smiled, then looked thoughtfully at him. "

"That's very interesting, Tarhn."

"What is?"

"You associate the color gold with evil."

Tarhn smiled to conceal sudden uneasiness.

"Hangover from my svarl-hunting years. What else did Daveen say?"

"Well, he won't actually control Access Unlimited for a year. The Deliberators felt that a sudden change might, bring social and economic trauma."

Tarhn nodded, but his eyes were far away. Jerlis waited, then sent a careful thought.

Is anything wrong?

Though the thought was questioning, the feeling which surrounded it was a desire to aid rather than to pry. Though Tarhn rarely allowed his own emotion to enter mindspeech, Jerlis invariably opened the second level of her mind to him. For a moment Tarhn was tempted to see whether he could invite Jerlis to share his emotions without her discovering all of what he felt. The temptation shamed and confused him, for he didn't even know what he wanted to conceal from her. Perhaps—

Suddenly Jerlis was inundated by a flood of emotion from Tarhn. Shame and confusion foamed at the crest, but the wave itself was composed of an intense, nearly obsessive desire to comb evil and its attendant miseries from the countless stars of the galaxy. The motion had the burning clarity of laser light, startling in its purity.

It was also a child's emotion; total, beautiful, and tragicomic in its innocence.

Jerlis reached out in understanding, and for the first time knowingly went beyond the outer fringes of Tarhn's mind. What she felt there was shocking. The mind which had conceived a hatred of evil was itself hard, savage, bitter, a place without comfort or rest or compassion.

Jerlis wept silently as her mind soothed and warmed his.

SINGER

N'Lete and Bithe rode atop pack animals piled high with svarl pelts. Tarhn swung easily to the rhythm of his own riding beast. The orange sun gleamed coldly on the stock of his lasrifle.

Well done, you lazy slakes, thought Tarhn affectionately.

For once he hadn't directed his feelings toward n'Lete alone. And both slakes returned his affection eagerly.

Tarhn laughed at himself as he remembered how he'd hesitated to use n'Lete for svarl hunting. His fear that the golden killers would get n'Lete, too, had proved baseless. The svarl had no natural predators, and man hadn't hunted them extensively enough to make them unduly wary. The slakes would swoop down on an unsuspecting svarl and nearly immobilize it with their venom. Then Tarhn would send the slakes away until he'd managed to finish off the svarl. That had all been before he had his own lasrifle. Within months after he had made the decision to use the slakes, Dnorie had been repaid the Waif Fee,

plus food pelts. His pelt wealth grew enough to buy a lasrifle, so that the slakes no longer risked death for their friend.

Tarhn looked back at the heaped, gleaming pelts, but the usual surge of satisfaction was gone. Each year that he hunted the svarl, their death brought less surcease to the hot, nameless gnawing in his mind.

After four years he knew that svarl were only svarl.

Tarhn's frustration transmitted itself to the slakes. But it was Bithe, rather than n'Lete, who launched himself from the pelts onto Tarhn's shoulder. The slake's tongue sucked in a tentative caress on Tarhn's neck. If Tarhn had been prey, that same tubular tongue would have followed the entry wounds of teeth to a major blood vessel. But Tarhn was a friend and the tongue was meant as a gesture of friendship.

When Tarhn arranged Bithe's coils more comfortably around his shoulders, Bithe knew that his overture had been accepted. His tongue frisked over Tarhn's ear and under his chin, tickling Tarhn until he laughed and caught Bithe's darting head.

Enough, Bithe. Do you want me to fall off from laughter?

Bithe snuggled against Tarhn's grasp, basking in the unexpected warmth of Tarhn's affection.

*Ah, Bithe. I've been unfair too long. N'Lete made a good choice in mate." He smoothed the resilient, folded planes of Bithe's wing. *Thought of unknown genes, you, too, like to touch and be touched. I'll be more even-handed in the future, if n'Lete will let me.*

N'Lete opened her electric blue eyes as Tarhn looked back at her, then stretched her wings and fell back asleep.

Tarhn laughed and disturbed her no more. Soon they would be leaving the high, open plateau and n'Lete would be needed to reconnoiter. Only once had bandits thought Tarhn easy prey. Whether the bandits had died by slake venom or lasrifle was a hotly argued point among svarl hunters, for the bodies bore marks of both. The debate, however, was academic. All hunters treated Tarhn and the slakes with equal respect.

Tarhn shifted Bithe's coils minutely, carefully concealing his own returning malaise. The slakes were so kerden sensitive to his moods that he had had to train himself not to reveal the incessant gnawing in his mind. He had hoped that the successful hunt would bring relief. Fifty svarl: an impossible number within the time limit given. Mama Firk had smiled strangely when she'd placed the order. Fifty svarl in thirty planet days. It's a test, boy, to see whether you're as good as my men claim. If you are, I'll send you to some friends I have, powerful friends

Well, he'd been better. Most hunters were pleased to take one svarl in a week. The very best hunters sometimes might take two. By finding and killing two svarl a day, every day, he'd done something which would be a legend.

But the successful hunt was a bad taste in his mind. The monotonous killing and skinning, killing and skinning, dragged on him more than the physical labor ever could.

Tarhn writhed deep within himself as unacknowledged memories of golden death burned relentlessly.

SINGER

Cold sharp wind blowing over miles of geometric landscape. A flash of gold between the rugged red rocks of Feldenshold's back country.

Without thought or pause, Tarhn snatched the lasrifle from Dnorie's rough hand. Before the startled woman could recover, a quiet lethal beam of energy felled the fleeing svarl.

"Not bad, halfling," Dnorie said grudgingly. "But the next time you take my lase I'll peel your dirty hide for bait."

Tarhn ignored her threat. Though only twelve, his body was nearly a match for any other, including the Monsen hunter who stood next to him. Experience, however, was clearly on her side.

They glanced at the bottom of the rocky slope where the svarl lay. Light glanced off the spun gold fur, imitating the movements of life. But both knew better; he had killed it with a shot any hunter could brag on.

"That's one for you, even though you used my lase. Now you only owe me ten more, plus one for every month I feed you."

“How can I hunt svarl without a lasrifle?” demanded Tarhn.

“That’s your trail, halfling. Read it any way you like.”

Tarhn stemmed his rising rage by signaling the slakes to feed. He knew that their blood-sucking made Dnorie uneasy. But frustration still simmered as he slid down the rocky slope to view his kill. Dnorie gave him no time to set traps—and even if she did it would take a year or more just to pay off the contract. Not to mention the wild fee of one pelt for a month’s food. In fact, the years since he had come to Feldenshold had been a series of senseless limitations and humiliations. His servant had been robbed and killed not long after they arrived, leaving him to find his own way through the crude and violent frontier towns of Feldenshold. The Waif Station had doled out meager allotments of food and shelter until it was decided that he had learned enough pig Galactic to be indentured. Dnorie was one of the many people who prodded and paraded him, but she was the only one who thought him worth the Waif Fee.

Five svarl pelts, b grade or above, to repay the Fee. Six months’ training in svarl hunting, One dead svarl. Ten more owing, until next month, then eleven, then twelve, then—

Tarhn shrugged off his complaints. Since the first time he had seen a holocube of a svarl, he’d been obsessed with the idea of killing them. Dnorie was an expensive means to that end.

Tarhn’s mood lifted as he reached the dead svarl. A strange exultation shook him as he saw its yellow eyes glazed and dull with death. Eight hundred pounds of golden killer would never move again. No more would this svarl bring unsuspected, hideous death. No more would this svarl stalk gracefully across the frigid rim-rocks of Feldenshold. No more—

Skin it.

Dnorie’s matter of fact order punctured Tarhn’s excitement. He drew his long knife, and with the ease and economy of a professional he began to prepare the svarl for skinning.

SINGER

Clereth had discovered the broken sculpture. Without a word she got the blindfold and wrist ties.

“Just because you’re a Conditional Helix, you think everyone else is a worthless bithe to be ignored,” hissed Clereth as she tied her son’s wrists behind his back and blindfolded him. “It was my planning, my genes, my training that made you what you are. And you will respect me!”

Rage and fear fought within him as she left him alone in darkness which even his night sight could not penetrate. He screamed his fear, then his hatred. With all the strength ten years had given him he hated and fought and hated, hated, until exhaustion slumped his body to the floor. In the absolute darkness the sound of his own helpless panting terrified him afresh. He held his breath to stop the sound.

A rapid clicking noise was heard even above the roaring blood in his ears. N’Lete! Clereth had forgotten to close the window and n’Lete had come to him. Sobbing very quietly, Tarhn lowered his cheek against the cold floor, no longer alone.

A slower series of clicks startled Tarhn. N’Lete was still; what other slake moved over the floor? When n’Lete coiled her body to make room for the stranger, Tarhn understood. It must be the wild slake he called Bithe—lowborn. N’Lete would loll any other slake which touched her.

With a sigh, Tarhn relaxed and waited for his mother to release him. Tonight was the Gathering of Genocrats. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t keep a future First Helix away.

As he had expected, Clereth waited as long as possible before releasing him. She neither spoke nor looked at Tarhn during the short flight to the Hall of Genocrats. When the flyer touched down Clereth moved into the crowd without a backward look. With the slakes riding his shoulders, he scrambled down the steep, narrow steps of the flyer and into the crowd. Were it not for the hissing, wingspread slakes he would have been late. But the crowd parted hastily before the dangerous slakes, allowing him to reach his own seat next to Clereth just as Flerhan, the reigning First Helix, was beginning her speech.

The words were nearly unintelligible to Tarhn. Clereth spoke mostly in the command dialect, and while the words were the same as those of ordinary conversation, the inflection was very different. The last sentence, however, was in the command accent; he understood it easily.

“Listen well. Decide well. We judge a race’s fitness to enter the Galactic Concord.”

Electric blue lights pulsed rapidly, signaling the end of the speech. Tarhn’s eyes strained to cope with

the changing brightness. When he could see clearly again, an alien stood where the First Helix had been.

Tarhn looked once, then sighed with boredom. The Singer looked too much like a pale yellow Tau to be exciting. Then he flicked on the chair screen and his interest quickened. Golden eyes, brilliant. He stared at the alien eyes, fascinated by their depth and color. Surely no Tau ever had such eyes. Even the strangers who came through the Accesses did not have such eyes.

The lips on the screen parted and a low, sweet melody sprang into being. No devices amplified or modified the Singer's voice, and none was needed. The huge hall quivered with strange music.

Tarhn relaxed, hands loose in his lap, fingers quiet for the first time. Two voices sang where only one had sung before, but he did not think it strange. He closed his eyes and sank into the brilliant mist of music, each note a separate drop of wonder which brushed his skin and dissolved into his mind.

But the cool mist became blistering acid. A soundless scream of pain stiffened him, only to be erased by the pulsing colors of knowledge elusive, scattered, reborn as faces, Clereth's face, distorted by agony beyond his understanding. A vivid stream of empathy became a cataract of grief, remorse, and self-hatred which could not be contained by life.

Then nothing except the song telling him (no)

SINGER

Cool mist and acid screaming, erased. Colors unwanted. Clereth agony, remorse, hatred. Song telling no

SINGER

Screaming erased colors. Clereth agony. Song telling ... no.

SINGER

Screaming Clereth. Song. No.

SINGER

No!

SINGER

No!

Jerlis flexed her aching body. So close, close. Not enough. She/Tarhn tension increasing. Allform couch struggling to relax her. No. Tarhn. Tarhn was separate. Biomonitor showing massive stress responses.

Jerlis watched and felt, still in the dual world of integration where she and Tarhn were almost one. When his body relaxed completely, she knew/felt that it was an act, the same act which had limited his potential for all those futile years, wasted.

"I failed you, Tarhn. Your training ... you're supposed to be integrated at least down to the fourth level, because—"

"—only then can the mind be free for total development," finished Tarhn bitterly. "And because I am a seven we all knew I was an integrated personality. That's so much slakeshit. There are as many pieces in my mind as there are planets in a solar system."

What is your sun, Tarhn, thought Jerlis persuasively, aiming deep into his mind with all the strength and skill she commanded.

Sun, flaming center of life. So many suns, gleaming red, flaring gold ... gold, twin flares of gold that are really Tau blue—

Abruptly Tarhn's mind shut in upon itself, leaving Jerlis with barely a thread of contact, but it was enough. A film of sweat covered Tarhn's skin, but it was cold to her touch. She swore bitterly as her hands and mind worked over him. She knew that his withdrawal reaction was panic; she could feel the coldness of it seeping into her mind. But such panic could only come from an inflexible mind confronted with a situation which threatened the mind's entire world view. The part of her that was Jerlis aloof

rejected such panic as impossible. The part of her mind that was his laughed hollowly, warningly.

A lethal bolt of hatred seared Jerlis in the microinstant before her defenses closed. Tarhn or something that was part of Tarhn had surfaced. She waited until she sensed that he was once again in control of himself.

“Did you find your sun?” she said mildly.

When no blazing hatred met her question, Jerlis relaxed her defenses. Immediately a rich mixture of anger, regret, and indelible fear flowed from Tarhn to her. The contact went beyond the conversational level to the second and third, instantly telling Jerlis of the spinning chaos of his emotions and needs. She gathered Tarhn like a child against her, held him until the convulsive shudders of mind and body subsided.

What was it, Tarhn; what did the Singer tell you?

Jerlis’ compassionate thought found no answer, for Tarhn had none. Nor did he wish one. Both knew that she had done as much as he would allow, that only one other mind could do more, and that he would die before he accepted another Singer into his mind.

V

Tarhn.

It was Jerlis. Tarhn called the slakes from their soaring and returned to the compound. In the days since integration he had become calmer, definitely more in control. But he worried about Jerlis. She had been so tired after trying, and so depressed at what she called her failure.

Jerlis?

We’re in the sky room.

Tarhn settled the slakes more firmly about his shoulders and went up to the sky room. Dachen began speaking the moment the door hissed shut.

“I’m convinced of one thing, Tarhn. You hate the Singers. The fact of hate is unimportant for now. I want to know why you hate.”

Dachen lifted his hand abruptly to cut off Tarhn’s words.

“The reasons of a frightened child are not good enough for a man of your mental ability; they sure as shit don’t impress me.”

“Would you prefer I love her—as Iandrel seems to?”

“Jealous?” shot back Dachen.

“No,” said Tarhn neutrally. “Were it anyone but Lyra I would be pleased; since Meraile was killed Iandrel has walked in grief.”

Jerlis made a startled sound. “Were you there when Lyra met Iandrel?”

“No. Why?”

“Lyra took one look at him and said, ‘You walk in grief.’ Then she apologized for speaking truth to a stranger, saying it was a breach of Courtesy—”

“What did Iandrel say?” asked Dachen curiously.

“He asked her whether she spoke truth to strangers on Chanson.”

“And?”

“She said there were neither lies nor strangers on Chanson.”

Dachen sensed there was more, but Jerlis seemed reluctant.

“Go on,” he said finally.

Jerlis looked apprehensively at Tarhn.

“Don’t worry, little mother,” he said gently. “I’ll not explode again, thanks to your help.”

Jerlis sighed. “I’ll warn you, Dachen, what Lyra said will only confuse you more. Iandrel told her that he would be her teacher while she was on Centrex, unless his sadness harmed her.”

“Is she vulnerable to just anyone’s emotions?” asked Tarhn, surprised in spite of himself.

“Yes,” said Jerlis slowly, “but only to a degree. She said that his mind was strong and deep, but only partially compatible with hers. Then, as though it explained everything, she added, ‘I’m sure your grief will neither destroy nor create me. I have experienced it before. After those Singers who visited the

galaxy dispersed, their complements quickly followed. All but one, my mother's mother. As one of the few surviving starsingers, her talents were needed. She delayed the finality of dispersion that she might serve those who needed life. Her aura was much like yours.”

Dachen sat silently for a moment with the air of one who is sorting and filing facts in hope of future correlation. At last he said, “Dispersion? Not just death?”

“Yes.”

Dachen frowned, then turned back to Tarhn. “We've found that while hatred can sometimes force mental development, the results are considerably less than they would have been in the absence of hatred. You're no different. And even if you could stretch your mind so that you could control or have revenge upon the Singers, what do you do afterwards?”

“Stop hating.”

“Never,” said Dachen flatly. “As long as you don't know why you really hate, hatred will rule you. The Singers feed your hatred now. Without them, hatred would be hungry; it must be fed. If not by the Singers, then by its host. You.”

Jerlis waited tautly for Tarhn's response. It was a long time in coming.

“How much time can the Carifil give me?” he said quietly.

“If it were only us,” said Dachen, “all eternity. You're omega, Tarhn, one of those minds we search and pray for and so rarely find. But the Carifil aren't the only ones waiting. Elenda believes the Singers also wait.”

“For what?” said Tarhn and Jerlis together.

Dachen shrugged. “She doesn't know. Yet when a nine has a hunch, we kerden well pay attention! Quite simply, Tarhn, you have as much time as circumstances and the Singers give you. Are you really in control?”

“More than ever,” he said firmly.

“I hope that's good enough. I'm no seer, but my waking dreams have been vivid and uncomfortable.”

Tarhn didn't press; if Dachen had anything helpful, it wouldn't be kept secret. Tarhn stroked the slakes absently, knowing that the tension radiating from Dachen was disturbing them. When they would not be calm, he shoed them off the balcony. He watched their long vivid bodies shrink to indigo dots before he turned back to the room.

“Do you trust me enough to let me continue as Lyra's guard?”

“Trust? Irrelevant. You're our best hope of controlling the situation.”

“And,” added Jerlis, “of understanding the Singers. You have had more experience with her than any of us.”

“Iandrel?” said Tarhn.

“Not the same,” said Jerlis. “Their minds are compatible enough for good friendship, good sex. But they are far from complements and they both know it. Very much like you and Jasilyn.”

Tarhn smiled crookedly as Jerlis hurried out of the room to answer an unheard summons. Then he turned back to Dachen. “Will Iandrel let me observe Lyra through him? Lyra won't act normally if she senses me near.”

“What's normal for a Singer?” said Dachen.

Tarhn's hand moved impatiently. “You've heard my ideas on that.”

“At length,” agreed Dachen. “The fact remains that we need knowledge we can all agree on, and quickly. Iandrel's been with her, but he has learned nothing useful. Not his failure—we decided Lyra needed quiet time after Wilderness. And you. Right now, though, if you're really in control, I might chance a confrontation between you two.”

Tarhn frowned, then spoke slowly, carefully.

“Jerlis considers my integration a failure. I don't. What happened afterwards ... convinced me that my view of the Singers is biased by deep emotions. I'm not so bloodthirsty now as I was then. Nor am I a convert. I'm skeptical of the Singers and of myself in relation to them.”

Dachen smiled widely. “Good. If the Singers fool us in spite of our efforts, that's life. If we fool

ourselves, that's stupidity. Now, Iandrel's been mindlinked with Lyra to as great a degree as is possible for them. He found neither danger nor difficulty in the link. In truth, he found as much pleasure as in a similar link with a Carifil. But he did sense ... loss or urgency or pressure, and found she had had little experience in coping with them. That's why I'm reluctant to—"

Dachen's head lifted in an attitude of attentiveness. Tarhn waited without comment, knowing his friend was listening to a silent message. Within seconds, Dachen began and ended a searing monologue in his native tongue. Tarhn didn't know the exact translation, nor did he want to.

"Critical mass," said Dachen in Galactic. "Kretan knows the Carifil have Lyra. Instead of trying to save the Singers, he's forcing a full Assembly hearing."

"When?"

"Five Centrex days. That vindictive, zarfsucking—" Dachen reverted to the language of Rynlonne again.

"But she's his path to the Supreme Helix," said Tarhn. "No Tau would kill his children's future."

"Oh?" said Dachen sardonically. "Well, maybe he's just trying to force us to return Lyra to Chanson, hoping he can grab her somewhere off Centrex again. But I wouldn't bet a cold turd on it. Kretan will kill whatever is necessary to keep the controlling interest in AU out of Carifil hands."

"Elenda's sure he wants death for the Singers?"

"Yes."

Tarhn watched Dachen's thin, strong legs devour the room in three long strides. He didn't share the Rynlon's anguish at the Singers' probable fate, but Tarhn disliked seeing his friend suffer.

"We have five days," began Tarhn. "That's kerden little time to save a race of people. Or ourselves," he added in a muttered afterthought.

"Then let's question the Singer we have."

"Lyra?"

"She's the only Singer I know of off Plague," said Tarhn dryly.

"She's also under enough pressure to break seven mindlinked Carifil. Can you imagine being the sole spokesman at the death trial of your own race? Our hostile interrogation won't help her."

"She seems cool enough."

"You haven't touched her mind lately," said Dachen succinctly. "And the lines around her mouth—do you remember seeing them before you knew she was a Singer?"

Tarhn gestured ambiguously; he thought as little as possible about the time before he knew what Lyra really was.

"Then think about it, my thick-skulled Tau. What happens to us if Lyra breaks? We might as well hand her, and the galaxy, over to your fanatic uncle now and save her a lot of suffering."

Tarhn felt Dachen's orange eyes weigh him, sensed his friend's strange mixture of bafflement and anger and compassion.

"I've failed you," said Tarhn.

"I don't give a zarf's crusted ass who failed or didn't fail!" thundered Dachen. Then, more quietly. "All that was yesterday; we're living now. Now! Most of us want to live all our tomorrows, too. So we'll talk to Lyra as a group. If that doesn't help the Singers' case materially I don't know, Tarhn. I don't know. She's asked to leave Centrex. Why shouldn't we let her? Why should we force her to spend her last days of life with the excruciating torture of being hated at close range by the man who is her complement?"

Tarhn felt anger surge, but realized it was futile. Dachen was right.

"Then I'll leave," said Tarhn quietly.

"No. Not until ..."

"Until what? Do you want her to break?"

"I haven't given up hope of a ... solution between you two," said Dachen slowly. "If Lyra can take it, so can I." He looked at Tarhn curiously. "Don't you want—"

"No," said Tarhn quickly, too quickly.

"Perhaps if Elenda and I shared our unity with you, then you would know what waits for you in

Lyra.”

“I know what waits,” Tarhn said thickly. “Death.”

“Did it seem like death before you knew she was a Singer?”

Unbidden memories of Lyra and himself, of their minds and bodies joined in a life so consuming it was indeed like death, the special death of gods that rise from the ashes renewed, revitalized, reborn in the rhythms of ecstasy—

Forgive me, my brother. I had no right to ask. Tarhn felt Dachen’s gentle-sad thought, drew a ragged breath, forced the sweet fire of memories to abate.

“The others are coming,” said Dachen suddenly.

“Lyra?”

“In the library. If the others agree, she’ll join us.”

Soon Elenda, Jasilyn, and Iandrel and Jerlis came into the room, closely followed by Fiodor and Koto. Iandrel looked around and smiled without humor.

“Look at us, grouped together in the flesh like savages afraid of the dark.”

“I don’t know about you,” said Jasilyn with a slow smile, “but I link much better in the flesh.”

Iandrel laughed and bowed to her. “I’ve never won an argument with you yet.”

Jasilyn leaned lightly against him and whispered, “That’s because you only use your mind.” Jerlis laughed. “Jasilyn, you’re shameless.”

“Of course,” said Jasilyn serenely. Tarhn joined the general laughter as Jasilyn led Iandrel to a double couch, her body rippling with exaggerated provocation. But by the time Elenda finished outlining the problem, the last echo of laughter was forgotten.

“A Singer brief in five days?” said Iandrel incredulously. “We don’t know enough to say spit to a svarl, much less to convince the Assembly that the Singers are harmless.”

“We don’t know that they are harmless,” said Tarhn.

“Lyra’s no killer,” Iandrel said flatly. “I doubt that she’d kill even in self-defense. Look at Wilderness.”

“Have you learned anything which would sway the Assembly?” said Elenda.

“Lyra is ... well, Lyra. She’s extremely sophisticated in the generally constructive emotions of man—friendship, love, completion, and the like. She’s utterly naive about hatred, greed, jealousy, cruelty, and all the other mainly destructive emotions of man. You could say that she is uniquely ‘good’ or you could say she is only half-human—whichever would help the Singers in the Assembly vote.”

“Did she sing for you?” said Tarhn.

“No. You know she was forbidden to sing as a condition of leaving Chanson.”

Tarhn’s silence eloquently pointed out that edict or no, Lyra had sung on Wilderness.

“Would you be willing to hear her sing?” said Elenda.

“Delighted,” answered Iandrel immediately.

“It may come to that—for all of us,” said Elenda. “Anything else to add before we go to the source?”
Silence.

Tarhn shifted to a more comfortable position while they waited for Lyra to arrive. Only Jerlis noticed that more comfortable meant having a wall at his back. He was grateful that she said nothing with either tongue or mind.

Even with his back guarded, Tarhn was unprepared for his own reactions when Lyra hesitated at the entrance to the room. He saw her as piercingly beautiful, a flawless amber sculpture, rich with lambent mystery.

“By the sacred bone,” said Jasilyn into the spreading silence. “Why has Tarhn been wasting his time with me!”

With her words, Jasilyn sent Tarhn a blurred feeling of rowdy, laughing sex.

“That’s not a waste of time,” said Lyra distinctly, sadly.

Jasilyn’s surprise at having her thought intercepted gave way to laughter. “No, it isn’t,” she agreed. “Surprised you think so though.”

Tarhn wasn’t, but he kept that fact to himself.

Lyra smiled fleetingly, then said to no one and everyone, "I will be pleased to talk about my people, my Singers ... but could we first talk about Galactic culture?"

Tarhn moved restlessly, then felt a casual, calming thought from Jerlis.

"What'll it be?" said Iandrel. "History of Galactic gene pools? Trans-time physics? Trans-light cellular—"

Lyra's laughter deepened into rich music, then she became suddenly serious.

"There's so much I don't know."

"You know the basics—compassion, honesty, love."

Lyra shook her head slowly.

"That's not enough, is it? Not out here. Talk to me about hatred, Iandrel. I've read the many definitions in your library. Not enough. Intellectual knowledge is only half-truth until it's integrated with emotional experience."

"Surely you felt Tarhn's hatred."

Tarhn winced at the anger in Iandrel's mind. Lyra also winced, but for a different reason.

"Yes, I felt it. As little as possible."

Iandrel started to ask Lyra if she had ever hated anything, then showed his intelligence by approaching the question from a different door.

"Have you ever not loved anything?"

"Of course. I separate liking, companionship, complements, and the many other feelings in between which Galactic has no words for."

Iandrel tried again ...

"If you don't like, love, and so forth, how do you feel?"

"I feel nothing," she said simply.

Iandrel silently queried Tarhn.

She never returned my hatred, admitted Tarhn. *Where others would have, she just went null.*

Iandrel sat lost in thought, fingers idly playing with a bowl of polished pebbles on the table next to him. The pebbles shone in subtle grey shades punctuated by occasional startling white and deep black. He chose five pebbles shone in subtle gray shades punctuated by *oc*—

"Now," said Iandrel, pulling the table around in front of Lyra. "We'll call this pebble the relationship of complements."

He set the smooth white stone on the table, feeling the weight not only of Lyra's attention, but the minute and patient scrutiny of Carifil minds. He concentrated only on Lyra as he placed a cream-colored stone next to the white one. "This is love-friendship-like."

To the immediate silent objections of his friends, Iandrel said, "I know, I know. They aren't the same thing, but I'd have to spend the rest of the afternoon picking pebbles if I showed all the gradations of human emotion."

Lyra hesitated, then made a gesture which meant proceed, I reserve judgment.

Iandrel put a light gray stone near the cream-colored one.

"This," he said, tapping the stone lightly, "is neutral or no emotion." He looked at the three stones reflectively, then at Lyra. "Apparently, this is the complete spectrum of your emotions. Now, let me show you how the rest of the races of man feel."

A slate gray stone dropped into line.

"Dislike," said Iandrel shortly. "A moderately strong feeling. It results in arguments, discomfort, general malaise. And this," he said, holding a black stone in his palm, "is hatred. It results in violence, agony, destruction. It is one of the two keys to the mind of man."

The bitterness in Iandrel's voice made Lyra's nerves leap.

"Space is black," she said softly, "yet it doesn't hate."

With a weary gesture Iandrel scrambled the pebbles; they clicked loudly in the silence.

"The colors are symbolic rather than definitive," said Jerlis softly. "Most of the races of man see poorly at night and fear what they cannot see. To them darkness means danger, fear, death. Light is their solace."

Lyra reached out and lined the stones up again, preserving the sequence from white to black.

“Do all people feel this spectrum?” she said, her eyes watching Iandrel.

Iandrel looked at the reassembled stones, then removed the white one. His hand hovered over the creamy pebble for a moment; he smiled wryly.

“I should have chosen more pebbles. Most people know at least some degree of friendship. Some even know love. All know dislike. Nearly all know hatred.”

“And none know a complement?”

The surprised pain in Lyra’s voice made Iandrel pause. He put the white stone back on the table.

“A few, Lyra,” he said gently. “Very few.”

Lyra stood quietly in the bated silence, then said, “I must know more about this hatred. Can you teach me?”

“I’d rather not.”

“But,” said Lyra, covering all but the two darkest stones with her hand, “I belong to the races of man. I have a cross-fertility index of 91% and a phenotype of 5 3. Yet I’m only half-human by emotional standards. How can I ever find completion if I’m so lacking in emotion?”

“Hatred obstructs completion,” said Iandrel curtly.

Tarhn did not need mindtouch to know who Iandrel’s words were directed to.

“I have briefly, very briefly, touched countless minds,” said Lyra, her eyes opaque with memories. “Always I searched for a mind which had potential for ultimate compatibility with mine. I touched no mind with even minimum potential except Tarhn’s.”

Lyra stopped and a too familiar look of confusion on her face rankled Tarhn. Iandrel coldly indicated that Tarhn should control himself.

“At first,” continued Lyra, “I wasn’t sure that Tarhn’s feeling toward me was hatred. I knew only that the emotion was painful, destructive to both of us. When I named it hatred, he did not say no.”

“There are countless minds you haven’t touched, Lyra,” said Elenda. “Among them you will find completion.”

“Perhaps. If I had time to search. And even then, the mind I found would have been touched by the darker spectrum of emotions.”

Tarhn felt Iandrel swearing, but refrained from making any comment.

“You see,” she said firmly, “I must know hatred in order to find completion.”

“You’re too vulnerable. Hatred will destroy you,” said Dachen.

“I’ll go slowly. Like the serum you wanted to give me before I left Chanson; I’ll take only enough hatred to make me immune.”

Iandrel’s mind belied his laughter, but in the end he agreed.

“As you wish, Lyra. We’ll begin the immunization with a dose of Galactic history. Then we’ll go to the armory.”

“Armory?”

“Yes. Weapons are a useful measure of hatred. Or fear.”

“Fear ...”

“Yes. When you understand fear, you’ll have little trouble understanding hatred.” He looked at her, then asked abruptly, “Don’t you fear Tarhn?”

“I ... no. Should I?”

“He can and might kill you.”

Lyra said nothing, nor did her face or mind hint at her thoughts.

“Do you like the thought of dying?” said Iandrel.

“If I wanted death, I would be dead. Death is but a pause, an ingathering between lives.”

“It’s not that simple,” said Iandrel, his mind and voice haunted by memories. “Sometimes ...”

“If you really wanted death, it would come,” said Lyra. “Your mind is still divided between duty and longing, life and rebirth.”

Anger flashed in Iandrel’s eyes like sun on a glacier. Tarhn felt the thought Iandrel left unspoken: she was so completely sure of herself. So immune.

“Forgive me, Iandrel. Yours is the greater experience. I’ve never known full completion, cannot fully empathize with its loss. I’ve known only Singers; they are not like the other races of man.”

“I suppose they’re perfect gods,” said Tarhn sarcastically.

“Gods?” she said, looking swiftly at Tarhn. “Gods ... that is another thing you must teach me about,” said Lyra, turning back to Iandrel. “Singers have no gods and no hatreds. Are the two connected?”

Iandrel laughed, then looked thoughtful. “I’ve never considered that possibility. Perhaps.”

“Perhaps it’s time to talk Singers rather than philosophies,” said Tarhn in a clipped voice. “Let’s start with why the Singers wanted Lyra off Chanson.”

“No Singer could be my complement,” said Lyra, her voice that incredible blend of truth and mystery and white song.

“Could not or would not?” shot back Tarhn.

Lyra’s amber eyes lingered over his face, making him writhe with memories quickly buried.

“Could not,” she said. “The necessary combination of genes and experience did not exist on Chanson. Perhaps because so many starsingers died in what you call the plague. Perhaps not; my mother, too, required a Galactic mate.”

“Did the Singers cause Daveen to crash?”

Tarhn’s voice made Lyra shrink back for a moment, then she straightened and faced him unflinchingly.

“I don’t know. I do know that his genes made possible the birth of a ... my birth.”

“A what?” snapped Tarhn.

“A focus.”

“What does that mean, Lyra?” said Elenda before Tarhn could continue his interrogation.

“Simply that: a focus. You have no other word for what I am.”

Iandrel overrode Tarhn’s caustic disagreement by saying, “How are you different from other Singers?”

“I am less vulnerable to destructive emotions.”

“Less ... ?”

“Far less,” said Lyra firmly. “I have walked among Galactics for many days, yet I live.”

Lyra waited, silent and poised, for the next question. When none came, she said quietly, “I have learned much from your language. Much could be learned from mine.”

Dachen sighed. “We’re not even sure that the Singers have a language. It sounded like singing to the contact team. Put bluntly, Lyra, we have little reason to trust a Singer’s song.”

“That is your loss.”

Tarhn looked at her sharply, but said nothing.

“It could be the Singers’ loss,” said Dachen.

“That too,” agreed Lyra calmly.

“Let Lyra tell us something simple in her own language,” said Jasilyn suddenly. “Like what the Singers do or say when they meet each other.”

“Why that?” said Iandrel.

Jasilyn grinned. “Rituals tell a lot about a culture. Take the Qenx, for example—”

“You would,” laughed Iandrel.

Tarhn laughed silently; Qenx greeting rituals were the scandal of the Concord.

Lyra smiled, then said, “I’m afraid the Singers would disappoint you, Jasilyn.”

“Try me,” she answered promptly.

A cascade of sound poured over them, rushing, evocative, sung by a thousand voices serene. Tarhn fought as the room dissolved, threatening to re-form under new knowledge, new reality.

“—feel I should know what that meant,” said Dachen wistfully. “So beautiful.”

Tarhn’s mind cleared and he realized that the others had not heard what he had, had not reacted in the same way. And the song had been only three beats long.

Only three.

“Can you translate?” said Elenda.

Lyra frowned as she reviewed her knowledge of Galactic.

"May your thoughts/songs be the nexus/matrix of creation," she said slowly, then made a swift gesture of denial with her hands. "That leaves out too much. Thoughts, to the Singers, are that-which-shapes-energy. Creation, defined by the lower voice, means becoming-of-intelligent-mindfriends. The higher voice praises energy as the source of infinite potential for variety in ... intelligent life experiences."

"All that in three seconds?" yelled Jasilyn.

"My translation was poor," apologized Lyra. "I left out the—"

"I'll take your word for it," said Jasilyn hurriedly.

"Thank you," said Lyra. "You have a question, Dachen?"

"Call it a clarification. To the Singers, thought shapes energy. Is that meant in the sense that if one does not think, one cannot create?"

Lyra gestured agreement.

"But even with thought," continued Dachen, "my direct creations are limited to the inherent strength of my body. This room, the entire compound, is but the indirect result of thought. Machinery sculpted the land, erected the buildings, brought plants and animals from far planets. For us, machines are necessary to implement many of our thoughts."

"I ... understand," said Lyra hesitantly. "The Singers have no machines."

"Do Singers need machines?"

"No."

"Then their minds can act directly on matter; they can do as much with unaided thought as we can do with machines. Probably more."

Tarhn literally held his breath. If Lyra admitted the Singers' power, she was assuring their deaths. Or was she? Dachen's acid comment about savages and lightships ...

"I'm not sure. The shape of energy which you call the Access is known to the Singers, yet the only off-planet trip within genetic memory was taken by means of your machines. Perhaps they lack the people for the song which warps space; the Singers grow fewer every year."

So much for your population pressure theory," thought Jerlis to Tarhn.

It wasn't much of a theory. And we're not sure she's telling the truth.

She hasn't lied yet.

Tarhn's impatience crackled around his thought like summer lightning.

Fine. She could be a perfectly innocent nova. The results are the same whether innocent or guilty.

"—know why?" said Dachen.

"Not yet."

Tarhn's restlessness increased.

"Question, Tarhn?" said Dachen.

"Yes. Lyra says that the Singers are vulnerable to so-called destructive emotions. How vulnerable?"

Tarhn saw twin points of gold leap in the center of amber eyes, felt a haunting echo of music though Lyra was absolutely still. When she did speak, there was no music in her voice and her mind was as closed as his.

"Any mind which complements mine can destroy me. Or create me. Directed thoughts/emotions from many, many minds can destroy me. Or create me."

"How?" said Dachen.

"You ask me what it is to be a Singer, yet forbid me to sing. Would you ask a slake to describe flight by walking on the ground?"

Tarhn sensed a flow of thought between Dachen, Elenda, and Jerlis.

"That would be unreasonable," agreed Dachen. "But can you sing without hurting us?"

"Of course," said Lyra, her voice rich with surprise. "Songs are meant for pleasure, for ... enlightening."

"I vote for pleasure," said Jasilyn. "That way I'll know whether anything is lost in the translation."

"I doubt that the Singers had lust in mind," said Dachen dryly.

“Do you consider lust undesirable?” said Lyra.

“Well ... no,” Dachen said. “As long as everyone involved knows that nothing more nor less than body pleasure is intended.”

“In that, at least, Galactic and Singer are alike,” said Lyra. “We consider lust an intense, though inherently limited pleasure. We have many songs which celebrate sensuality. You can help me sing one of them.”

“How?”

“You’ll see,” smiled Lyra.

Tarhn felt his body tense as Lyra’s eyes sought his. The room lights dimmed and he knew another of those wrenching instants when he saw himself through her half-gold eyes ... a reclining shadow figure, body rippling with life, subtle movements reflected and increased by skin molded over flowing muscles.

“... will be volitional. That is, you’ll hear and feel only as much as you desire,” said Lyra.

Tarhn sensed the waiting gather and condense into sensuous lips murmuring simple melody, singing without harmony, testing the response, soothing as a smooth spring day when he had watched clouds shaped by warm winds.

And the song was a spring wind touching him, lifting black hair and teasing naked skin into awareness. Notes poised, trembled, waited until his sigh remembered the wind’s caress lingering, asked more.

Song tumbled down, down, weaving upon itself the sensuous texture of living velvet, surrounding him with vibrant awareness. Song touching and cherishing every aspect of his flesh.

And indrawn breath asked more.

Laughter and wind and sweet velvet clinging, spiraling into flawless duet of sensual possibility. Notes like agile tongues touching, trilling dissonance nipping aroused flesh. Laughter rode the wind beyond sound, returned in rhythmic waves deep with music, haunted by contralto echo’s, distant, promising, dissolving.

Tarhn opened his eyes, knew the heat and strength of passion and the memory of Wilderness was twisting agony and need.

And fury.

Half-gened bastard!

He was aware of the others brought to their feet by the force of his thought, but they were only shadows against the incandescent reality of Lyra. Anguish flowed, yet he couldn’t say whether its source was her or himself, then knew it was both, that the song roused Singer and Galactic alike. His nerves writhed as a distant cataract of song poured from a mental wound, bleeding agony beyond his ability or wish to know.

With a convulsive shudder his control returned.

“An exciting song, Lyra Mara,” he said finally. “Perhaps you have a song that would tell us why the Singers are so eager to have you mated that they descend to pandering.”

“Complemented, not mated,” said Lyra. “There is a difference between the two states. But that doesn’t answer your question, does it? I am a focus: complemented, we will be the channel of awesome creation; uncomplemented, I will be the channel of immense destruction.”

When they asked for an explanation, she said only, “Am I a prisoner here?”

Music flared at the edge of visibility around her, and Tarhn was certain that the others finally saw it, heard it, felt it.

“Could we prevent your leaving?” said Dachen.

“No.”

“Then you aren’t a prisoner.”

“My people are hostage to your fear.”

“If you are free,” countered Elenda, “how can they be hostage?”

“My people die while we juggle words,” said Lyra harshly.

Tarhn’s nerves leaped at the pain and impatience which crackled through Lyra’s words.

“What does that mean?” he demanded.

Lyra turned again to face him, music flickering subtly around her.

"It means that my people have little time. I must be completed soon, if it takes a thousand Galactics to replace one unwilling Tau!"

Lyra's eyes became golden flames; when she spoke again, it was not to anyone in the room. He heard music redolent of regret, explaining—

"You're in contact with the Singers," he said accusingly.

"I have always been."

Jerlis exchanged swift thoughts with the others, then said, "Will you tell us what they said?"

For the first time Lyra moved restlessly, fingers dancing over folded arms, mouth thin with unknown pressures.

"They said that Tarhn is my completion; my genes were shaped for his. To search again is futile; before I find another or others the Concord will have slain my people. And me."

Jerlis didn't bother to deny what could too well become truth.

"There are other things to consider before you run away," said Jerlis. "Your people need you."

"And I need peace. I can no longer cope with his hatred,"

"Your people need you alive and free," continued Jerlis evenly. "Kretan a Harnan n'Ahler prefers you dead or captive. If you leave Centrex we can't guarantee your safety."

"I should have stayed with Kretan; he could have taught me much," Lyra said.

"More than you'd want to learn," said Iandrel quickly.

"To be Tarhn, I need to learn more."

"Lyra," said Iandrel in soothing tones, "Kretan will grab you, take you to Lokan or a similar chattel planet, and force a marriage. You will be his prisoner; your life and property will be his. And then he will own the galaxy and all the people in it."

"The people are already owned by their misery."

"And Kretan's power is the root of much of that misery," said Iandrel. "We've talked of this before, and you agreed."

"I had time before," said Lyra. "There is no more time. Galactics hate my people, suck from us our future. I have little reason to put Galactic hatred before Singer love."

"You make it difficult for us to convince the Assembly that Singers should live," said Elenda wearily.

"I am the judge of my people. Tell your Assembly this simple truth: if Singers die we don't die alone."

Iandrel rose and gathered Lyra's rigid hands in his.

"You've been under pressures we can't imagine; it's no surprise you're angry. But threats won't make things easier for us—or for the Singers."

Hunger leaped in Tarhn as Lyra relaxed under Iandrel's gentle touch. He examined the odd feeling, odd because it owed little to passion, much to a longing that his own touch could give solace rather than pain. He stood quickly, snapping off the confusing thread of knowledge.

"I'm leaving Centrex," said Tarhn abruptly. "That will take some of the pressure off her, let her think coherently."

"No," said Jerlis. "You're not ready yet."

Tarhn rubbed his hand through his hair wearily; Jerlis was right, as usual. He was reduced to impulse and confusion.

"Jerlis, I am very tired of causing pain, of being able to control but not understand myself."

It was Lyra who answered him, fingers amber-warm on his cheek, then gone in the instant that touching him twisted her trembling lips with pain.

"Let her go," Tarhn said hoarsely to Jerlis. "Take her to Be-a Mora, Iandrel; give her pleasure to equal her beauty."

"You give—"

"Damn you, I can't!"

In the end, Iandrel took Lyra to Be-a Mora, the Garden of the Galaxy, while the Carifil watched and waited and hoped.

Tarhn shifted the psitran to a more comfortable position.

“Ready to relay,” he said to Dachen.

“Ready to receive. Go.”

Tarhn rode Iandrel’s mind as he and Lyra mingled with the gentle swirls and eddies of people rapt with the day’s pleasure. Iandrel unobtrusively guided her through colorful drifts of laughter. Even after three days of Be-a Mora’s golden sun gleaming with undiminished grace on the creamy walls of the city, Lyra was still less than serene. There was little peace in the amber eyes that measured the buildings that rose in a dreamy cubist wave, cresting on flowered bluffs overhanging the jade waters of the river Linverale. A sensuous veil of spice-flower rose from the boundaries. of the large park Iandrel had just entered.

Tarhn felt Iandrel’s mind leap to full alertness.

Trouble?

Iandrel hesitated, then thought, *Not sure. Can you mesh with Lyra—without hurting her?*

Tarhn hoped his tumult of emotion didn’t leak to Iandrel.

If I must.

“Lyra,” Iandrel said clearly. “I want you to allow Tarhn into your awareness. Don’t go into his mind; just permit him into the outer levels of yours.”

Perhaps she sensed, the urgency building in Iandrel as Tarhn did, for-she didn’t object.

Tarhn’s mind reached out tentatively, touched, held, merged at the edge of Lyra’s awareness. The only difficulty was in not going further; her mind called to him irresistibly.

Deeper.

Iandrel’s thought vibrated with urgency.

Tarhn struggled with himself for a minute, then forced his rebelling emotions deep into his own mind where they couldn’t touch and burn Lyra.

A scented amber mist caressed him ... Lyra. Her mind like Sorsanna sculpture ... translucent, smooth, flowing into iridescent rainbows of emotion, luminous depths of intelligence, mysterious, compelling.

He sifted more deeply into her mind with a gentle care that Iandrel admired.

Perfect. Now withdraw.

Iandrel’s matter-of-fact command brought Tarhn crashing into a present where the submerged part of himself trembled near revolt. He withdrew quickly, yet with strange reluctance.

Iandrel deftly excluded Lyra from the link.

Be ready to mesh like that again without warning. Her life is yours, Carifil.

Tarhn was shocked at the change in Iandrel; in a breath his gentle warmth had metamorphosed into a cold, polished, and deadly mind.

We’re being followed by at least four men. They’re under some type of mind drug, probably stukor.

Kretan’s trademark, thought Tarhn bitterly.

Probably. I can’t break the drug’s compulsion.

Which is ... ?

Lift Lyra to one of the large estates on this planet. None of them thought of the estate by name. This is their image of the place.

Tarhn looked upon miles of empty forests bisected by a nacreous road leading to a huge compound. The main house, and the wall which surrounded it, was a fantastic amalgamation of red turrets alternating with turquoise arches and, triangular gold blocks.

Helix, but it’s ugly.

Granted, returned Iandrel, dryly, *but such monstrous taste ought to be easily located. Get the Be-a Moran Carifil on it. My next contact with them isn’t for an hour. I want Lyra to have friends on hand if the guards succeed in getting her there. And tell the agents to be ready to kill. The guards gave the impression of being armed. In any case, they are compelled to kill anyone with Lyra,*

How much time do we have?

None. They're surrounding us.

Dachen's contacting agents now.

Don't fail Lyra; she is priceless beyond your dreams.

There was a disturbing ring of finality in Iandrel's mind, but when Tarhn would have questioned, Iandrel curtly limited the link to a simple relay.

"We're being followed, Lyra. Two in front, two behind. When I signal, link with me and run to the flyer pads, Don't stop. Don't look back. Now!"

Tarhn felt the surge of strength as Iandrel followed Lyra's swift flight. The closest guard recovered first. A weapon appeared in his hand, and his mind radiated a desire to kill. Iandrel's muscles bunched, launched his body in a flying arc toward the armed man. At the top of the arc, his foot flashed out and upwards against the guard's face.

The guard died instantly as nasal bone and cartilage sheared through his brain.

Iandrel's harsh command overrode Lyra's dismay; she closed her mind and ran. The three remaining guards hesitated, then chased the fleeing pair.

Iandrel wove in and through surprised groups of tourists, using them as shields. Soon the take-off pads were within reach. On one of them, a small two-seat flying machine was being readied for use. Tarhn sensed another of Iandrel's incisive commands and was not surprised when the mechanic scrambled from the machine as from a white-hot sheet of metal. Lyra needed no prodding from Iandrel to sprint around the confused bystanders and up the flyer's ladder.

Iandrel was right behind her.

The engine roared violently when Iandrel slammed the airflow lever full down. The grass blurred and fell away as the machine leaped into the air.

"Primitive, but that's supposed to be part of the pleasure," yelled Iandrel over the howl of air. When the plastic canopy closed over their heads, he said in a more normal tone, "I'd rather have a moonskimmer or a nograv racer. Or an Access," he added grimly as another machine lifted in pursuit.

Lyra said nothing; he knew her thoughts were on the guard who was not following them.

"Now," said Iandrel, "what can you do to get those men off our backs?"

Before Lyra could answer, a beam of energy sizzled through the canopy. Tarhn felt the pain of Iandrel's scorched cheek and hand, and the immediate dizzying dive which ended below treetop level. The flight continued in a swerving, swooping, nerve-stretching race between the trees.

Lasrifle, he thought curtly at Tarhn's questioning thought. *Must have had it broken up and concealed in their clothing. Be ready to link with her. I can't dodge that beam forever.*

Tarhn's respect for Iandrel increased as he watched Iandrel's fluid control of the machine's vertiginous rush between swiftly looming tree trunks. He didn't interrupt Iandrel, even when the forest twilight was abruptly split by laser light.

Without slowing, Iandrel activated a crash cocoon around Lyra. He didn't activate his own, for to do so would remove the machine from his control.

Tarhn/Iandrel felt the machine lurch as one of its airfoils erupted in a dazzling sheet of flame. The canopy exploded against a tree limb and the machine plowed to a sliding, shuddering halt on the forest floor.

Tarhn felt himself hurled from Iandrel's mind into Lyra's even as Iandrel commanded her to run.

But Lyra had seen the bright flow of blood across his body.

Help me, Tarhn, she thought urgently. "I can't heal him alone.*

Tarhn drove his mind deep into hers, power growing with each linkage point, interlocking with sweeping ease and strength.

Their mind swept through the pathways of Iandrel's pain, healing. Their hands plucked shards of plastic from his body, pressed, made him whole with the skill of their mind. Sweat dripped from their body as they poured strength into the healing, forcing suddenly leaden hands to touch and hold bleeding flesh, strength pouring futilely, dammed, sinking, links shearing too soon, knowledge coming too late.

Tarhn felt rough hands drag Lyra away from Iandrel. Her mental scream was a low verbal cry.

Hurt! Help him!

One of the guards twisted his weapon to lethal and killed Iandrel.

“Lift her.”

Tarhn sensed a strange tension begin in Lyra as she felt Iandrel’s life knot endlessly. Tension tuned her body, tightened her throat, sucked Tarhn’s mind back among the jagged linkages of failure.

Her eyes opened searing gold.

Fright trembled over her captors, but it came too late. Tension exploded in a savage paean to nihilism ... and three men died.

Tarhn felt her mind fragmenting away from linkage, dissolving, slipping elusive into depths he had never suspected of her.

Dachen’s insistent commands finally penetrated his concentration.

“Iandrel’s dead,” said Tarhn curtly. “The other Carifil are nowhere in sight. Lyra is ...” Tarhn hesitated, then his voice broke in disbelief, “dying!”

Total link.

Dachen’s command drove into Tarhn’s mind. He opened, but the link stopped completely just inside the third level. Deeper than any but Lyra had ever gone, not nearly deep enough. Dachen could sense both Lyra and Tarhn, but he could not help either one. His contempt seared Tarhn’s mind.

She’d better not die because your crawling self wouldn’t link. You’re her complement. Will her to live.

Can’t. Too strong.

Dachen’s answer was ice and cutting edges. *Her mind is in pieces. A child could control her, if he wanted to.*

Tarhn felt agony and fear tearing deep within him as he reached again for Lyra, then Dachen stabilized the link until Tarhn was in control. Tarhn reached out, fastened onto Lyra, and held.

When Elenda entered the room, he heard her words with Dachen as though at a vast distance.

“We haven’t found the estate yet, or Iandrel. Four Carifil are flying over the forest along the directional line Tarhn gave us.”

“Iandrel is dead. Lyra killed three guards.”

“And?”

“Tarhn says she’s dying, though they didn’t hurt her.”

“From what Lyra said, Singers who kill, die.”

“Perhaps. Lyra seems to be willing death. Tarhn wouldn’t mesh to the fourth so I can’t be sure what’s wrong.”

“Now?”

“Tarhn is supplying her will to live—until he cracks wide open. Then it’s anybody’s guess what will happen to both of them. And us. Savages and lightships.”

Tarhn’s teeth ground against each other and sweat shimmered over his face. She was so far away, rainbow colors receding, dimming. No strength to hold barriers among minds, to hide ... must ride the waves of contradiction openly, Dachen and Elenda will know ...

Lyra, a deep amber pool serene, beautiful beyond dreams, resonating, a flame of passion flickering, promising, kindling, fulfilling. Lyra, an alien god-devil singing down lightning and the icy reaches of panic. Lyra, an exhausted, appealing mortal unable to heal herself. Lyra, screaming in agony at his simple touch. Lyra, mind clean and translucent. Lyra, golden, devouring, Tau blue helpless, Lyra Lyra,

LYRA

“Breaking.”

Dachen’s word, his own, a dream?

“Why won’t he let us link and help?”

Echoes taunting, fading, shrieking.

“... same reason he’s breaking ... HATRED and fear LOCKED ... deepest level. Would you ... OPEN ... stinking ... SAVE the ... wanted DEAD?”

Into Lyra’s desolate, dissolving mind Tarhn poured yet more strength, his own memories of life. The diamond sunrises of Tau scintillating over hoarfrost when fledgling slakes first rose to taste the sweet chill

of flight. N’Lete and Bithe clacking playfully, inviting Tarhn’s affectionate, itch-soothing hands. The mountains of Wilderness surging against the incandescent sun, yet yielding to her power. Her supple walk through brittle-brush and rock and the infinite beauty of her voice.

Life.

The link became less difficult; he sensed her awareness waiting, balancing the solace of un sentient, irrevocable dispersal against the possibilities of sentient, sensual life ... and the scale dropping toward annihilation, heavy with a novel sense of degradation unworthy of life/completion/rebirth.

Certainty crystallized in Tarhn that only love or hope of completion would hold Lyra to life. The Singers may have loved her, but it was not to them her need reached out. He was her complement, yet her hopes had evaporated in the searing blast of his hatred.

Deliberately, he began to divide his awareness. Memory by memory, incident by incident, he peeled the layers of his mind, sorted out his hatred of Singers, impounded his corrosive emotions behind boundaries of will, then shrank the boundaries inward until all hatred was a caustic knot beyond his awareness, beyond hindering, beyond help, final.

Only then could he send convincing half-truths to Lyra.

Lyra, honey-smooth breasts shimmering beneath Wilderness’ sun. Laughter haunted by music as she leaned toward him, sunrise incarnate with amber drift of hair and glowing eyes. Lyra, linking with his mind, point on point, soaring. Lyra, body pulsing with the rhythms of passion, his own body hard with answering need. Need for her life. Need for her. Lyra, trembling with life, mind changed by memories yet willing to live.

Willing to live.

LIVE.

And a chant rising in the darkness between their minds, warming, soothing, peace and golden joy unguessed, expanding and joining, soaring on wings of song, vivid fall of melody lighting the darkness, weaving complex futures’ intricate mysteries.

An exhausted assent crossed the stars.

Tarhn slumped bonelessly on the allform, hand dragging the floor. He heard/felt all that went on around him, but was incapable of responding as Dachen spoke to him.

When Tarhn did not answer, Dachen turned to Elenda.

“My mind was with the Carifil. What happened?”

Elenda’s eyes were dark violet and her hands trembled as she drew *an* uneven breath. “I’m not sure. Tarhn’s mind was closed for a while, then it was open. No shields, no holding back. Nothing. He ... he sent love to Lyra. But it wasn’t a dimensional love. It was like a reflection in a mirror. And his mind had no dimension either. So utterly controlled, so ... inhuman.”

“Did he appear stable?”

Tarhn felt Elenda’s eyes on him as she answered with a strange half-laugh.

“Stable? Gods yes! Rigid. Frozen. I would have said it was impossible to lie with mindtouch, but he did. And ... the song. The song made it true, made her believe.”

“Song? Tarhn?”

“I don’t know who sang.”

“Was it all a lie?”

“It couldn’t have been the whole truth,” she said flatly. “Hatred like he had just doesn’t evaporate. It’s got to be somewhere in his mind, destroying—” Her hands smacked together in frustration.

Tarhn felt Elenda bend over him and remove the psitran. Her fingers smoothed the damp curls back from his forehead.

“He did what we asked,” she said, “I only hope we saved the right one.”

“Maybe we can help him ...” began Dachen, then said nothing at the hopeless shake of Elenda’s head.

“He fought against himself. There’s no way to win a battle like that, and a thousand ugly ways to lose. He is beyond our integration, Dachen.”

“Tarhn?”

Jasilyn's breathless call matched the worry she radiated.

"We can't reach him," said Elenda. If he is aware of us, he's the only one who knows."

Tarhn felt Jasilyn's hands move over his body skillfully, swiftly attaching leads from the biomonitor unit. And he felt the fury building in her, violent. As the last connection was made, he heard the hissing, clacking cries of Tau slakes ready for battle. Two vivid streaks of blue crossed the room, condensed into two angry slakes coiled next to him.

Jasilyn moved warily away from the slakes; it didn't take much sensitivity to figure out that the animals were fully aroused and prepared, eager, to fight for their friend.

"I don't blame you," said Jasilyn. "I'd like to kill a few people myself." Jasilyn's hair pulsed like wind-driven flames as she paced the confines of the room, talking in a voice which reflected the rising anguish of her mind.

"Iandrel dead. Tarhn ... Tarhn Lyra. Did you know," she said to no one, "did you know that that little flower had fangs? The dead and the half-dead. FOR NOTHING! We can't even find the little curdling Singer! By the Tortured God, I'd like to give Kretan's balls the Fifth Twist. And the Singers. The space-pure Singers, too good to help themselves. Can you hear me, Singers?" she screamed. "CAN YOU HEAR ME? Lyra's lost! Gone! Out of the game, whatever curdling game it was you were playing. Iandrel ... Tarhn"

Though her words were no longer coherent, Tarhn felt Jasilyn's anguish tearing at his mind and longed to comfort her as she had so often comforted him.

Yes, comfort her.

Lyra? LYRA!

No answer, just the humming of a voice or voices, beautiful as only Lyra ... or Singers.

We are here.

Like mindtouch ... yet ... strange, interior How?

You are changed; we can touch you now ...

Humming deepened, separated, a chant describing half-life dying. And he knew they mourned for him Help me?

A contralto wail of regret ridden by faces once living, long dead, Singers' agony. Unfocused. But

Notes rose, flowered under warm showers of harmony, redolent of bliss and rest and peace renewing. Valleys of soft-petaled life lifting to the pouring drops of song, strength multiplied joy, perfection in rainbow harmony bridging, linking. Strength.

Soothe the jagged life.

Song drained out of his mind, fading echoes, memories ... gone.

"Tarhn!" said Jasilyn's voice, ragged with pain. *TARHN!*

Tarhn moved his hand to touch the white hands twisting so close to his. As his fingers closed over Jasilyn's, he saw the lines of rage and grief dissolve from her face, leaving a serene beauty he had never seen before. Her wordless wonder filled his mind, returning more peace than he had given. With a deep sigh he slipped into normal sleep.

VI

"Tarhn?"

Jasilyn's call was lighter than a breath, completely undemanding.

"I'm awake."

"I won't believe it until I see those blue stones you have for eyes."

Though her tone was teasing, there was an undercurrent of worry. He opened his eyes.

"Believe me now?"

"Yes," said Jasilyn with a catch in her voice. "What I can't believe is that you slept almost two days, you great lazy nuft."

"Lyra—"

"Kretan's backup was faster than ours; all we know is that she isn't on Be-a Mora."

“Is she alive?”

“We think so.”

“What else, Jas?”

“The first Singer brief was inconclusive.”

“Good. That gives us some time. They can’t annihilate until—”

“But Kretan’s people are demanding a re-hearing.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“Then he must have Lyra.”

“Yes,” reluctantly, “but we’ve blanketed the chattel planets. No marriage between aliens has taken place on any of them. So Lyra must be alive; he won’t kill her until he has the Access rights legally locked up.”

Tarhn laughed suddenly.

“Share the joke,” said Jasilyn.

“Kretan. All that power and he can’t ram through a marriage.”

“Not one the Deliberators would ratify. They’re scalded after Kretan’s two snatch-and-run operations. Kretan, may he die like the Tortured God, isn’t stupid. Somewhere that canny old bastard is setting up an unimpeachable marriage contract.”

“And he must be close or he wouldn’t be pushing for a re-hearing.”

Jasilyn’s silence was all the answer he needed.

“She’s drugged, of course,” he said thoughtfully, then shook his head. “Won’t do, Jas. Lyra is either dead or ... dead.”

Then why would he be pushing for a re-hearing?”

“Once Lyra’s dead it makes no difference to Kretan whether the Singers live or die. It would be smart for him to give up gracefully; he’s made a lot of enemies keeping the Singers alive.”

“But you don’t believe she is dead,” said Jasilyn.

“If he can’t marry her, Kretan has no reason to keep her alive and every rea—Gods! Why didn’t I—my brain is sand! Tau!”

“Tau?”

“Tau! Tau is the only planet in the galaxy where Acting Helix Kretan a Haman n’Ahler can mate anyone without any consent other than that of the Gene-Masters. He could breed with an eight-toed zarf if they agreed. And for the honor of being chosen, the zarf gives up all material goods to the Helix, to be held in trust for the unborn Helix.”

“Nice planet you came from.”

“Only the Helix has Gene-Rights. And there isn’t anyone in the Tau genocracy who wouldn’t gladly pay the Helix for the honor of being half-parent of a future First Helix.”

“Still sounds like a curdling nasty piece of business. The, Helix could grab up all the wealth under pretext of Gene-Rights.”

Tarhn laughed. “That’s what the Gene-Masters are for. They evaluate the chosen person’s genes. If a First Helix child is—likely, then the Helix is permitted his Rights. If not, no Rights. That’s why it’s taking so long. Kretan is waiting for the Masters to unravel her genes. Once they agree—”

“What if they don’t agree? Or has Kretan paid them too well?”

“You don’t pay Gene-Masters. But they’ll agree. They’ll leap up from their scanners and proclaim her co-Helix of Tau. And they would be right. Who are you relaying to?”

“Jerlis. Can’t you tell ... ?”

“No,” he said curtly. “Tell her to set an Access for Tau.”

“Tarhn, are you all right?”

Tarhn knew exactly what she meant; he should have been able to sense Jasilyn’s relay, follow it, and reach Jerlis himself.

But he couldn’t.

“I’m fine,” he lied, and prayed his mind was as closed to her as her mind was to his. It was like being

suddenly immersed in dark water, seeing only vague blurs and dark shapes where formerly he had seen crisp images alive with color. And when he stood, he felt the weakness of his body. Not debilitating, just ... languid, as though some nerve impulses were slow or absent. He wondered for a moment what disease shape his hatred had taken that allowed it to feed so quickly on mind and body, dissolving and devouring.

If only—

Tarhn brushed away regret. He had done the best he could; he had kept Lyra alive. Now he must get her off Tau, quickly, while he still had the strength and will.

“Blue room Access is ready for five plus slakes.”

“No, Jas. Thanks, but no. Tau has only one nonfreight Access. If it’s used by anyone but a high Tau genotype, alarms ring from pit to hall.”

“We don’t have any Tau agents except you. Tau has never accepted off-worlders.”

“And never will, so long as Kretan is Helix.”

Tarhn strode from the room, not as quickly as he would have liked, but at least his legs obeyed. Jasilyn hurried after him, pleas changing to curses when she realized he wasn’t listening.

Tarhn took in the blue room with a glance; the slakes weren’t there. He tried to reach them with mindtouch.

Nothing. With a smothered curse, Tarhn rolled the balcony window open. His hands curled around his lips, magnifying the ululation which came from his throat.

“What in the—” began Jasilyn,

“Re-set for one plus slakes, Jerlis,” said Tarhn, ignoring Jasilyn’s puzzled questions. He knew that Jasilyn must be burning Jerlis with her demands that he not leave and hoped that Jerlis could take it.

“You have twelve Tau hours, Tarhn,” said Jerlis. “After that a river of Carifil is going to pour through Tau’s Access.”

“The Assembly—”

“—can suck zarfs. Twelve hours.”

Jasilyn was nearly knocked over as n’Lete and Bithe swooped through the open window. They hesitated, then scrambled onto the platform at a signal from Tarhn’s hand.

“The slakes ... Tarhn can’t use mindspeech! Stop him, Jerlis!”

But Tarhn had already leaped onto the Access platform, falling on his knees in a blaze of blue transfer light. He had several wrenching moments in which to savor the depths of his rash leap before the blue lights dimmed and he found himself facing an enameled wall. In the center of the wall was a vivid Tau blue Helix surrounded by the angular script he hadn’t seen since he was a boy. The half-forgotten names of his Helix ancestors echoed in his mind as his eyes scanned the gene lists.

The last name was his own.

The wall split soundlessly in the middle. Relieved that the scanners had accepted him, Tarhn signaled the slakes to precede him into the half-light of the Hall of Genocrats. The wall closed behind him immediately after he had passed through.

“Well, slakes,” he said softly. “We’re home. Let’s hope nobody else is.”

Although the Hall seemed to be deserted, Tarhn felt uneasy. Being without psi in a weakening body was like walking naked through a slizzard den—at best hazardous, at worst fatal.

“Come, slakes. Let’s see whether the new genocrats are as careless of their field cloaks as the old were.”

The tic-click of unsheathed slake claws told Tarhn that the slakes were as nervous as he.

“Gently, n’Lete and Bithe. Softly.”

The sound of claws stopped. Tarhn skirted the amphitheater in an attempt to orient himself from old memories. The hookrooms bordered the bowl, and in the hookrooms would be overlooked cloaks. And the hookrooms were also opposite the exit arches.

Which meant he had just walked past a hookroom.

With an impatient gesture Tarhn sent the slakes to check the blank depths of the unlit hookroom. When the slakes returned without alarm, Tarhn stepped into the darkness and waited without moving

until his eyes had adjusted to minimum light vision. The unique smell of the hookroom, a rich compound of scented fabric, nambel leather, and slake musk, brought an explosion of memories. For an instant he was a young boy, arrogant, with two half-grown slakes riding his narrow shoulders to a dusk slizzard hunt.

“We hunted well that day,” he murmured. “And many others. May we hunt as well tonight, Ahhh ...”

With returning vision, Tarhn spotted the cloaks scattered around the hookroom. The names of the highest genocrats had changed after the plague, but not their habits. There were at least ten field cloaks hanging forgotten from their hooks. Tarhn paused over each cloak, hoping to find one from either the a Hamahn or n’Ahler house. N’Ahler would be better, but he was in no position to be selective.

Not one of the names was familiar.

For the first time Tarhn fully realized the devastation wrought by the plague. The cloak he held was richly made, as rich as any he had ever seen. Yet of the three ancestral names embroidered in gold, not one had the “a” of a Second Helix ancestor preceding it, much less the “n” of a First Helix. And the lining of the cloak was palest blue, fitting only for a Tau who had had no Helix ancestors for four generations.

A wave of dizziness swayed through him and he clung to the hooks to keep his balance. He must move more quickly. He must find a cloak to hide behind before he dared the streets. And the cloak must be of at least middle blue or his unmistakably Helix phenotype would be his death.

Tarhn left the hookroom empty-handed. The slakes, excited by the residual musk of their own kind, moved so swiftly to the next hookroom that Tarhn found himself stumbling in his attempts to keep up.

“Ssssnaahh,” he whispered, hoping they remembered the old stalking call.

The slakes slowed until he caught up with them.

Even so, his breath was a fire in his ribs when he entered the second hookroom. He went immediately to the cloaks, pawing the folds of each until the lining was revealed. One was of nearly middle blue. Not dark enough for a Helix by half, but ... the name had an “a” preceding.

Tarhn snatched the cloak down and tied it over his shoulders. Too short, of course; barely reached past mid-calf. But the only cloak on Tau that would really fit him belonged to Kretan.

With fumbling fingers Tarhn laced the cloak from neck to navel. If he were careful, his off-world clothes wouldn’t show when he walked. And the hood shadowed his Helix eyes. Now, to get a flyer.

“Up, slakes.”

The slakes clawed up the cloak, using the ladder of nambel hide loops that had been sewn on the cloak for just that purpose. When they reached Tarhn’s shoulders, the slakes assumed a show position, unsheathed claws grasping the wide braids of leather which crisscrossed the cloak, wings half-spread.

The slakes felt unreasonably heavy. Tarhn sagged, then set his shoulders and headed for the streets of Helix.

Few people moved along the dim streets. Either it was very late or people no longer spent time and money prowling the nightdens of Tau. And the Taus who were abroad walked as though they had been too long over their cups and nyth pipes. It was late, then. Tarhn walked as quickly as he could toward the gambling district. He lurched occasionally as though he were the last one to leave a nyth party. The lurching was easy; what was hard was to keep his feet under the slakes’ weight. He comforted himself with the thought that he made a convincing picture of a genocrat nythsot.

The thought lost comfort with every street passed. If he didn’t find a flyer compound soon, he’d have to make the slakes walk. Then he would be as conspicuous as a slizzard in a slake nest. A Tau who couldn’t bear the weight of his own battle slakes but if he launched them, he had no way of calling them back.

Tarhn leaned against a building to gather enough strength to cross the next street without falling. The sound of slurred, angry words followed by an elaborate apology floated through his gathering fog of lethargy. Tarhn signaled the slakes down to the ground. His finger pressed gently against their noses, commanding them to stay until he returned.

Tarhn crept to the edge of the building and peered around the corner into a compound crammed with flyers. At least that hadn’t changed after the plague—Sathen’s slake lair still lured rich Taus into its gambling rooms. A tall, lone figure in an expensive field cloak staggered among the flyers, hands

outstretched, searching for the one elusive door that would open in recognition of his palm.

Obviously the man was gone on nyth and needed help to find his flyer. Tarhn's help, to be precise.

Tarhn pressed flat against the building as two people walked away from the parked flyers. He need not have worried—they were barely more sober than the lost genocrat.

"... arrogant slizzard. My third near-father of my mother's family was fourth removed from a Second Helix. I should have—"

"Clack-clack," cut in a scornful voice. "You'd've eaten slakeshit if he'd asked you to. Next time let the old malper find his own flyer."

"Next, time I'll—"

The roar of a rising flyer masked the rest of the words. Tarhn was afraid that his quarry had escaped until he spotted an erratic shadow haunting the edge of the flyer compound. Tarhn waited until the street was deserted before he walked his slakes across. When they could get no closer to the man without discovery, Tarhn lifted the slakes to his shoulders.

"High winds, a Narmeht," said Tarhn to the genocrat, picking that name from the man's cloak.

"Uffgn ..."

Tarhn's nerves tightened another notch; the old zarf was too full of nyth to—

"Highprey," mumbled the genocrat.

"If your flyer wears the family code, perhaps I could spare you the trouble of finding it in this slizzard den."

The genocrat's slurred assent was all Tarhn needed. With a pace that rebuilt the fire under his ribs, Tarhn moved through the rows of parked flyers. One good thing about the plague—so few living genocrats could claim the "a" that the search was made easy. Ahh, that one. Dented from many bad landings, but ... it must do.

Tarhn brushed the slakes off his shoulders and signaled them to wait. When he returned to where he'd left the genocrat, no one was around.

"Uhhmgh ... gghn."

Tarhn looked beneath a nearby flyer and saw the genocrat sprawled on the ground. With neither care nor courtesy, Tarhn yanked the nythsot upright and staggered toward the flyer. The slakes hastily moved away when Tarhn's burden landed with a thump against the flyer. Tarhn held the nythsot upright against the door by the simple expedient of a knee in the genocrat's spine.

"... malper is too kind," Tarhn muttered as he forced the man's flaccid hand against the code plate.

The entry panel parted suddenly, spilling the genocrat face first into the cargo area. Tarhn crawled in, not at all careful where he put his feet. The genocrat didn't stir though, even when Tarhn dragged him fully inside and dropped him again.

"Up ... slakes."

The slakes settled delicately on top of the unconscious genocrat.

Tarhn staggered to the pilot's seat and slumped against the controls. With deep, shuddering breaths he tried to exorcise the pain claws digging into his brain. Tired .. , tired. Great Helix ... shouldn't be ... have to. What ... ? Sleep ... yes sleep

No.

Compelling notes. Had to do ... remember. Why ...

Lyra.

A name, lovely. Did he ... know anyone ...

Fear splintered like lightning through the dense clouds of exhaustion and disease, thawed frozen nerves and memories. His hands trembled on the flyer's controls. The craft jerked into the air, barely missing the ornate overhang of a nearby building. Ground lights blurred, focused, twisting dark water halving city. A river ... ? Yes. Up ... down? Why not? Up we go slakes ... a slizzard wind is rising on the back of the white moon. High prey tonight ... high prey.

... and the lightsbelow ... nicelights. Every ... shade of blue ... genocrat holdings. None so clearas those ahead ... Taublue, Helixblue, house dark. Do something Clereth hated house dark. Daughter of Helix ... hated night. Flawed gene no nightsight. Afraid. Dead? Yes ... genemother Clerethdied with all

the rest of ... Singers ... music gentle rising peace and strength. Land now ... see pretty Singer.
hear sad song.

After the smashing noises ended Tarhn heard the hiss of an automatic med pack. Fire blazed through his arm, radiated in searing waves, pumped throughout his body as the stimulant took hold. He shook his head to banish the last of the pain claws. The landing had put a few more dents in the rumpled flyer. It would have been worse if the old nythsot hadn't bought the best in automatic safety equipment.

Tarhn released the crash net after only two tries. The slakes clacked, restless beneath the cargo net which had snuggled them to their unconscious perch.

Patience, slakes. We should apologize to friend a Narmeht. Any nythsot with wits enough to plan for his crashes deserves our kindness, if not our love. By the Helix that stimulant was potent!

Tarhn released the slakes, signaling them to use the bite-without-death when they explored the nearby Helix compound. At least he hoped he had given them the correct signal; it had been a long time since his last battle games.

Tarhn turned his attention to the medbox attached to the pilot's seat. There was no way of knowing how long the stimulant would last, and he had no desire to return to a state of raving weakness. He hammered with the edge of his hand until the warped latch on the box gave way. Inside were three sizeable chemical darts waiting to be launched into unconscious flesh.

"Helix, it's a wonder I didn't jump through the canopy. Enough antidope in one of these stun darts to make a slerg leap from pit to hall."

Yet all he felt was ... nearly normal. Not overtight, not stretched.

The lines on Tarhn's face deepened into a grim mask as he realized how far his body had weakened if such a huge dose of stimulant only made him feel almost normal. Still sluggish, though. Well, there were three doses left. Maybe another one would give him the strength for a mindcall to the slakes.

Before his common sense could assert itself, Tarhn jammed one of the darts into his arm.

Blue lights fractured into rainbows, dots, raging red fire. He hung onto the seat and waited for the chemical storm to pass. When it finally did, his mind reached out for the slakes. Their joyous response made him smile.

It won't last, my friends, so pay attention. Find and protect Lyra, she of the beautiful voice and touch. Lyra.

No sense of confusion came from the slakes, so they understood.

Send everyone else you meet into sleep ... or death, if you must. Go separate and silent, my friends.

The flash of battle eagerness from the slakes gave Tarhn a moment's surprise, for he felt no such lift. He felt ... drained.

Tarhn snapped the mindlink and found himself once again clinging to the seat for support, body sweat-slippery and trembling with fatigue. He gathered his will and stumbled toward the Tau blue lights which glowed at the bottom of the hill. Unconsciously he found himself detouring to pass close to the slake perches. When he had lived in the Helix house, the slakes had' been his only joy, his only respite from the endless demands of Clereth. Poor Clereth, she had hated no one so much as herself.

Tarhn leaned against a squat, silver-leafed tree. When his breathing slowed, he listened to the night sounds of Tau. Other than the erratic screech of a large insect, he heard nothing. Apparently Kretan had not installed any new alarm systems. Not surprising. As far as the Carifil knew, Kretan had been on Tau only eight times since the plague, and had only stayed a few planet hours each time. In fact, Kretan had stayed away from his home for so many years that the Carifil had stopped watching Tau.

Of course, another reason why there were no alarms could be that Kretan was not here and thus had no need of alarms.

Tarhn pushed away from the tree. Kretan had to be here. If he wasn't, Lyra was dead. And if Lyra was dead, the Singers would have told him. And

Tarhn gave himself up to the forces of fatigue and gravity. What his rolling descent of the steep hill lacked in silence it gained in speed. The slake perches at the base of the hill smacked him soundly. He lay wrapped around them for a moment, listening for alarms. Even the insect was still.

No light flashed on in the Helix House. Either the servants hadn't heard him or Kretan hadn't brought servants to the House. He hoped it was the latter. But even if there were Servants, he could see in the dark and they couldn't. Tarhn pursued the genetic differences between low and high Taus while part of his mind berated him for stalling.

"Not stalling," he muttered. "Resting. Sounds better."

With a dispirited curse, he pulled himself upright again. He looked longingly at the two darts shimmering in the palm of his trembling hand; with them he could know if the slakes had found Lyra, if she were ... if Kretan

Tarhn carefully tucked the darts into a belt pocket. As long as he was on his feet, he didn't really need the darts. He pushed away from the slake perches and moved toward the dark bulk of the House. When he was halfway there, his brain finally received the message his nose had been frantically sending—the slake perches had been used very recently. Traces of musk lingered where his hands had gripped the claw bars. Slakes were only allowed out of their compounds under the direct control of their master. Kretan must be here.

Tarhn should have been relieved, but any relief was swallowed up in a greater fear. N'Lete and Bithe were separated; one of them was simply no match for a mated pair of slakes guarding their own territory. Fear for his friends released a wave of chemicals into Tarhn's wavering body. His legs responded with a surge of speed which carried him into the shadow of the House.

He leaned against the ancient wall, remembering all the times he had slipped out of his room to play with his slakes. The rough fieldstone wall had served as a ladder then.

It would have to serve as one now.

Tarhn kicked off his sandals and surveyed the wall. Balconies jutted invitingly from all four levels, but he ignored them; they were traps for the unwary. Only two windows were unshuttered. One of them was on the highest level. The other was the ventilation duct into the second level storage closets. He had used that duct many times in the past.

Tarhn climbed for the duct. His bare feet searched for purchase while his fingers clung to impossibly small holds. Before he was halfway to the window his hands and feet were slippery with blood. He hadn't remembered the climb as being difficult or long, but he was smaller then ... and stronger.

When his feet finally reached the rainsheaf, he felt light with relief. Though the shelf was barely as wide as three toes, it gave him the first secure purchase of the climb. The sound of his breathing was loud, too loud, but there was little he could do about it.

Tarhn raised his head to measure the distance to the duct. He remembered the next part as the most difficult. Prying off the scent screen while clinging to the wall with puzzled pleasure Tarhn realized that the screen was in front of his face. Of course. He was easily twice the size now that he had been then.

But then would he still fit into the opening?

Tarhn pried the scent screen out of its frame. The smell of daffodils enfolded him, rousing memories of sheets and handcloths and blankets and rugs freshly taken from the closet for special, scented occasions.

Tarhn measured the screen against his shoulders. Too small. He shrugged out of the now ragged cloak and measured again. Still too small. The sour taste of defeat and exhaustion rose in his mouth. He hadn't the strength to reach the other open window and he was too big to get through this one.

He swayed suddenly, grinding bleeding toes against cold stone. Pain roused him to the knowledge that either he attempted the duct now or he joined the cloak and screen on the ground. His hands fumbled along the inside edge of the empty duct. The thick metal pipe which held the winter shutter sat firmly along the top of the frame inside. There was no point in testing the pipe's strength; it would either hold him or it wouldn't.

His shoulders ached as they took the weight of his body. Bleeding feet slipped more than once, but the repeated shocks of pain served as a goad. With a convulsive heave, he lifted his body into the opening. His hips passed through easily, but not his shoulders. With a groan Tarhn sat on the ledge, legs dangling inside the closet. His muscles clenched and relaxed erratically, jerking him like a puppet.

When the fire in his ribs diminished to embers, Tarhn squirmed sideways, jammed his palms against

the top of the duct opening, and shoved with all the strength that remained. Had his body not been well-greased with blood and sweat he would have stuck as surely as a cork in a bottle. As it was, he lost most of the skin from his back and shoulders. The landing was soft, thanks to a pile of rugs. He lay there and congratulated himself on the pretty patterns his blood made on the white rugs. Rugs and blood spun, grew, diminished, leaped in a bizarre dance that ended only when he pushed another dart into his wrist.

N'Lete's battle challenge lifted him into a staggering run even before all the stimulant was in his bloodstream. When two strange slakes answered N'Lete, Tarhn's body responded with savagery. He kicked through the closet door, barely noticing the agony it cost.

The screams were coming from below him. Tarhn reached the stairwell in four swift strides. Even as he descended, his hand wrenched a curved ceremonial knife from its place of honor above the second level landing. Though the knife hilt was heavy with Helix stones, the blade was a businesslike fishhook with no dull edges.

Tarhn reached the first level, hesitated, then plunged on to the ground level. The crash of a crystal vase told him he had guessed right. Tarhn burst into the lower room, stopped suddenly.

Lyra lay in an alcove across the room. Neither the slakes' screams nor his abrupt entrance roused her. Subdued lights pulsed as the biomed machine monitored the delicate balance between drugged unconsciousness and death.

N'Lete was in a guard position next to Lyra, but the other slakes were approaching from either side. At Tarhn's entrance, one of the slakes pulled away as though to guard the wall, to Tarhn's right.

Tarhn whistled shrilly through his teeth. From a distance he heard Bithe's response. He signaled n'Lete to watch the slake which had retreated. Why had it retreated? Why didn't the slakes attack?

The withdrawing slake rattled its wings restively and stared toward the near wall. Tarhn looked closely, then exclaimed in disbelief. A tiny Access. Recently used, too, for blue light still gleamed. The slakes had just arrived, only to find n'Lete. Would Kretan be next? The Access looked too small for a man, but it would explain how Kretan came and went with impunity. Too small to register on Concord scanners, or else used too infrequently to be traced. And Kretan certainly hadn't advertised his presence by adding alarms or guards ... or even servants.

The certainly grew on Tarhn that the House was indeed as deserted as it seemed. Kretan trusted no one.

Tarhn stepped cautiously toward Lyra. One of the Kretan's slakes moved to intercept him, jaws open in warning. N'Lete screamed again. Tarhn motioned her to his shoulder, ignoring the stabbing unsheathed claws. Kretan's slakes were at a disadvantage; the floor was ice-slippery. Without aid a slake couldn't get airborne. Not that they couldn't kill him easily enough from the floor.

With a sudden motion, Tarhn launched n'Lete toward one of the ceiling perches. She hung there, wings cocked and ready for a dive onto the back of a grounded opponent.

The Access lights glowed suddenly blue. No time to wait for Bithe, only time for lunges and desperation.

Tarhn screamed the attack command and simultaneously threw a heavy glass sculpture at the closest slake. Shards of glass exploded through wing membrane, but the slake needed only teeth and claws for Tarhn. He leaped to one side to avoid the slake, only to find that it refused to be drawn away from Lyra. From the far corner of the room came the grating sounds of two slakes locked in death combat.

The Access whined an arrival signal. As the doors opened Tarhn sent a heavy chair skating across the floor. Slake claws scrambled frantically for purchase, then the slake screamed in anger and pain as the chair knocked it reeling and skidding across the room. The slake stopped only when it crashed through the open Access doors and against the feet of its master. Even as Kretan stumbled over the injured animal, his hand reached beneath his cloak for a weapon.

Tarhn's knife flashed through the tubes bleeding drugs into Lyra. His fingers closed around the last dart. He wasn't sure what the massive stimulant would do to Lyra. He was only sure that he had perhaps two seconds before Kretan killed him. The dart penetrated Lyra's skin easily, as easily as the beam which seared through his outstretched hand. Tarhn threw himself to the floor, wondering why he was still alive as he rolled to shelter behind an allform. Bithe's scream of agony answered him. The slake had

arrived in time to intercept most of the beam meant for Tarhn.

Tarhn erupted from behind the allform in a staggering rush. He saw n'Lete dragging herself from her kill only to be met by the dead slake's mate. Bithe writhed on the polished floor while Kretan sought the head shot which would ensure the slake's death. Tarhn's scream was not a formal battle call. It was an inarticulate explosion of anguish and hatred. He knew he couldn't reach Kretan before Kretan killed Bithe, knew that he himself would quickly follow the slake into death.

Tarhn's bloody feet slipped, dropping him to the floor. Fire scored across Tarhn's scalp, burned through his shoulder.

The curved knife hadn't been designed for throwing; it turned over almost lazily in the air. Kretan lunged away from the flashing blade, but not quite quickly enough; he saved his life at the cost of losing two fingers.

Kretan's weapon dropped from his mangled hand. The silver tube bounced, then rolled toward Tarhn as though it had been summoned. His fingers curled around the weapon with agonizing slowness. Light and warmth drained out of the room, pushing Tarhn's numbed body toward the abyss. As the dark rushed up to meet him, Tarhn's hand aimed bright death at Kretan.

VII

Lyra awoke to horror.

It seemed the floor was glazed with blood, human and slake sprawled in silent violence, and over all the stench of burned flesh. When she recognized Tarhn, she knew real fear for the first time in her life. Her mind reached for his, found ... nothing. Heedless of the blood, she knelt beside him, her hand resting quietly on Tarhn's forehead. Skin cool, sticky with drying blood. No sense of Tarhn, no flash of agony or fear or hatred. Nothing except a pale dissolving rhythm.

Singers.

Lyra's thought was both query and demand.

You are changed, Lyra Mara.

I have killed, returned Lyra unflinchingly.

A sound like cave winds reached her, damp and hollow. Notes of despair and wonder rose,

What do you wish, starsinger?

Lyra felt the distance which separated her from her people, a chasm of emotion/experience which few Singers could cross and fewer still survive that crossing. They called her starsinger. Only that. And what further degradations waited, what deeper chasms to be bridged before she either died or became a focus.

A hum of compassion loosened the strange bonds of fear which held her taut.

I wish this man to be whole again.

Through you we will heal him, if he desires.

He does. Lyra's impatient thought crackled across their waiting.

His mind refuses.

Then heal only his flesh!

Their acquiescence came as seeking discrete notes, erratic as the faint heartbeat beneath her hand. The two rhythms hesitated, matched, joined, and were sealed by subtle harmony. More voices merged, reinforcing the bonds with melody, leading the rhythm into smoothness, stately, flushed with the steady beating of a living heart.

The flesh lives, only to be destroyed by the mind.

Why?

Echoes of regret were her only answer, followed by a chant which wove into a half-remembered song, waiting. Lyra felt a moment of spinning terror when she realized what was required of her. Terror faded into whispered music which dissipated as she slid into the emptiness of Tarhn's sleeping/hiding mind. At first she moved hesitantly, nerves anticipating caustic hatred.

Empty.

Even shadow memories had fled. Contours and depths vastly changed. Former linkage points remained, yes, but all the myriad missed linkages had vanished as though they never existed. A strange mind; safe, yet so diminished and shorn.

Why had he severed, perhaps destroyed so much of himself? Even at the middle level, where past resistance had exploded the mesh ... quiescence. The former fiery interplay of mind and ego had left ... nothing.

Come now, Tarhn, she thought with a taste of asperity. *Only pure Singers are this free of corrosive emotions.*

The thought of Singer reverberated in his hidden mind, twitched.

Ahh. You're listening.

No response.

Are you a Singer?

 she prodded. *You don't look like a Singer. Where is your sunbright hair, your golden eyes that—*

Tarhn's mind leaped toward consciousness. She held him below the threshold of waking ..

Not yet, my once lover. Let's think about golden eyes.

A vague memory of Lyra's eyes formed, but it lacked power.

Too pale, Tarhn. Singer eyes look like this. Twin suns of gold burned in Tarhn's mind, lighting hidden wisps of memory ... Lyra singing of passion, communing with Wilderness, with an assembly of Tau genocrats.

NO

Tarhn's mind heaved into desperate consciousness. All memories vanished and linkages became reluctant, slippery. Lyra poured energy into the mesh, fighting to retain it. She won, but had only echoing emptiness for her victory.

Tarhn?

Tentatively Lyra explored the silence. She touched and held new contact points automatically, ignoring the fact that each link felt lifeless, tasted of old terror and new sickness. Emptiness thickened with each link deeper, a baffling viscous passivity, a will

NOT

A murmur of song touched her as she rested. A mere breath, yet the descant carried immense expectations, infinite praise, and patience. The pressure behind was greater than the resistance ahead; she pushed further into the clinging emptiness with a controlled rush that ended in the deepest level of his mind.

And there was fetid horror consuming, growing.

Lyra clung to the mesh and willed herself not to flee. It was only disease, no worse. Spreading, though, spreading with a sucking voracious eagerness which shook her control. And the pressure from the Singers was gone and she was alone.

No, not alone. Somewhere was Tarhn, and knowledge.

With hardening will, Lyra reinforced each point of the mesh. Tarhn was her complement; whatever distortions and diseases were his could be known by her. Must be known by her. Only then could she judge the creation of the Singers.

It is time to be one or nothing, Tarhn. You may help me or fight me, but you cannot hide.

Golden notes touched the stretching disease, swept through it with leaping purpose. Energy and will and seeking melody like rivers crying in deep canyons, sweeping rubble away until at last the core is reached: a single tiny sphere, heavy as a collapsed star, radiating black energy ... Tarhn.

Get out!

His savage thought cracked across her mind and made each linkage an arc of pain. She fought her reflex to flee from his lethal hatred, for in hatred was the knowledge she must have.

Tarhn sensed the sudden slackening of the mesh, knew her weakness and what caused it. He permitted more of his emotions to leak from the dark star, but with hatred came a lash of memories

the Hall of Genocrats lambent with Singers ... gold music touching innocence with evil ... No

Memory and hatred stopped as Tarhn switched his energy from fighting Lyra to fighting the memories

which threatened to explode from the dark star. Lyra tightened the mesh, but could get no closer to knowledge. No more memories eluded the pouring energy and control that compressed the seething darkness.

Out, thought Tarhn calmly.

You'll have to drive me out. And you can't, because half your mind and most of your power is—

Tarhn struggled briefly, testing her strength and his own.

Harder, Tarhn. Surely a half-gened bastard couldn't have a stronger mind than the First Helix of Tau!

Tarhn waited sullenly beneath her goading thoughts; he could control himself or evict her, but not both. *Then stay, Singer. It makes little difference.*

Strange. You say you loathe Singers above all else, yet you humbly submit to my presence deep within your mind. Impossible, Tarhn. What is it that you really hate, really fear?

Tarhn twisted against the pull of her logic, but was unable to break away. He fell back into passive waiting.

If you hated Singers you would be fighting me with every erg of power you command, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you!

Before he realized what had happened, Lyra bridged the last emptiness with a net of linkages surrounding the pulsing darkness. He shivered in her grasp and the darkness licked outward.

What do you want?

 he thought desperately.

Knowledge of that dark star, your hatred.

It will kill you.

Why do you shrink from that? Destruction is the goal of hatred.

Tarhn's mind twisted feverishly, seeking any weakness in the enveloping mesh of mindtouch. He found none and fell back into passivity. Lyra's regret sifted through his waiting.

I'd rather reach you as a complement than as a Singer.

Echoing silence.

So be it.

A song threaded through his mind, glowed from linkage points, scattered in a child's sigh of wonder as Lyra herself had sighed long ago when Daveen celebrated her own nascent awareness with the Song of Unfolding, the song she in turn now gave to Tarhn.

Rills of joyous descant leaped from each contact, flowed into single melody spiraling around the sullen darkness, followed wisps of shared memory with glissandos of praise. Perception heightened and strengthened in harmony with the sweet clear song. Memories, dreams, wishes won free from the darkness and harmonized with the irresistible melody.

Subtle dissonance flexed against the harmony, testing and restraining until all that escaped darkness stood unflinching inside the golden spiral of sound. And surrounding all, rhythm pulsed relentlessly, defining the spiral and demanding that Tarhn know and accept his unfolding self.

The darkness erupted.

Fear screamed in ascending notes that clawed upwards through the spiral; banished memories resonated in savage response. Beyond will, beyond despair, song and darkness shattered into brilliant remembered mist. The mist that subsumed darkness delicately, irrevocably dissolving the last barriers to total memory.

Grotesque lies ravaged Lyra's mind. Singer eyes golden with delight tormenting helpless children. Singer laughter a demon's cry bursting with unspeakable desire, loathsome power twisting ... golden eyes insatiable ... perverting ...engulfing galactic minds that all might be as vile as Singers.

Lyra's scream joined Tarhn's, agony and hatred in awful duet. Her mind reeled and would have fled, but hatred held the linkage now and hatred would be fed and fattened. Nor did she cry out to be spared, though fear flowered within her and each razor petal cut away her will. To struggle was death—not the simple ingathering which separated new lives, but the final dispersal of mind into the echoing void.

She endured.

She endured through all the myriad layers of darkness reeking of disease, through rationalizations and

displacements (dying svarls laced with blood unsavory triumphs futile) until there was but one memory left, one blinding instant of discovery long ago on Tau,

NO!

when Tarhn listened to his first Singer

NO

sing the Song of Unfolding, his shoulders numb to slake claws drawing blood unknowing, the agony that made his body rigid owed nothing to his transfixed slakes, everything to the song unfolding

No

and remorse pouring through him from an unending catalog of cruelties petty and gross, crimes against trust, outrages against human needs, pleasure in human degradation, loveless life ... all his.

nonono

But the song was not swayed by a boy's sobs or his writhing, evading

noooooo

self-impaled on golden notes no escape from knowing unfolding you must know

(no)

Death shuddered through Tarhn as he once again tasted and plumbed his potential to rend the sensitive, sentient fabric of minds, to ravage others rather than examine himself, to feed upon their uncertainty. To denigrate, debilitate, degrade, destroy.

Song drowned in the anguished howl of evil revealed.

Not the Singers.

Himself.

And in her own moment of sickening revelation, Lyra knew how true Singers killed.

(and we are nothing)

The song would be finished, pressuring her with unsung (futile) notes, half-truth so convincing, so deadly. Her own Unfolding ... neither difficult not unpleasant, for among Singers the idea and reality of destruction was merely a tenuous veil across the shining sun of Singer creation ... a half-truth as alluring and as deadly as Tarhn's.

Song pushed, required.

Lyra abandoned the linkages and bored through the poisonous corrosion of self-loathing surrounding Tarhn until she could touch the dying core of his mind. Then song resumed, coaxing, a simple melody carrying a simple truth. Potential is not reality. His ability to destroy is equaled by his ability to create, to give love rather than hatred, to cherish life rather than dispersion harmony explaining that song was instruction, not indictment.

The music touched a responsive part of Tarhn, that part of man which ponders neither evil nor good but has continued life as its only imperative. His mind quieted, then expanded with the song to examine and hold each past thought, experience, emotion, and desire. To accept with neither disgust nor evasion the realities of self through cascading hours of song which grew from one to many voices until at last he slept peacefully within an integrated mind and body.

A tiny figure which had waited patiently during Lyra's song and silence finally stepped forward.

"Lyra," said Jerlis, as gently as if to coax a shy child into the light.

But when Lyra's face lifted her eyes were terrible golden ice and her low voice twinned eerily.

"Now we are one ... and nothing. Two half-truths joined by Singer lie."

"You healed his mind. If that is a lie—"

"Healed?"

Lyra's laughter made Jerlis' skin ripple with unease.

"I did not finish the song; I no longer believe it. They lied him back to life ... as they lied me back."

Again Lyra's laughter crawled over Jerlis.

"But now," said Lyra softly, "there is no one left to lie for them."

Lyra lifted her hand from Tarhn's head, then bent to kiss him.

"... beautiful flawed creation. Not your error, my once love. Nor shall you be my complement in terror."

“Let me help you, Lyra. Let me touch your mind,” said Jerlis.

“Dispersal will help me.”

“And the Singers? Who will help them?”

“I will. Their creation was flawed, but as they lived in the radiance of a billion suns, so shall they disperse.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jerlis, hesitantly.

“I am the first focus this galaxy has known. I shall be its last.”

Rising music smothered Jerlis’ cry, but it was music such as Jerlis never wished to hear ... long wails twisting and descending in eerie lament, aching descant of sorrow and regret. And Lyra silent within song that condensed into flaring energy, concealing her within inhuman keening, sound beyond understanding wrenching—

Jerlis stood alone and anguished. After a long time she went to rouse Tarhn. Before she touched him, his eyes opened.

“We must go, Tarhn. Nothing remains here.”

Tarhn sat up and silently measured the extent of the carnage. Without speaking, he got up and examined the Access controls hidden in a wall cupboard. His hands flashed across the unfamiliar dials. With unconscious consummate grace he turned away and swept n’Lete and Bithe into his arms. He coiled them together and gently laid them in the Access.

When the slizzard wind rises you will be there, on the back of the white moon.

The Access lights burned incandescent blue. When the doors opened again, the Access was empty. Jerlis’ sorrow for him was a clear fall of moonlight, gentle and undemanding. For a brief moment he allowed grief and comfort, then put both aside.

“She’s with the Singers,” he said quietly. “Did she say anything before she ... left?”

He sensed an odd reluctance to speak in Jerlis.

What is it, little mother?

Her surprise gave way to wonder at the piercing clarity of his mindtouch. Changed, yet familiar, different, yet still Tarhn her son and friend.

“Yes, I’m still me,” he said with gentle amusement. “Who did you expect to find?”

“You move differently now, Tarhn. You have a Singer’s ease and grace. And your mind—if I had time, I would explore its new textures and power. Do you know how powerful you are, Tarhn?”

“If I’m as powerful as I was blind ...” His words dissolved into rueful laughter.

“Don’t condemn yourself,”

“I know. My past is best used to instruct rather than punish my present. The Singers were most thorough.”

“And Lyra ... ?”

“Lyra was the leading edge of song. Did you hear her?”

“Just one note rising. Then other voices and she no longer sang.”

“Remember when you tried to integrate my mind?”

“That is not easily forgotten! But you don’t have to tell me what happened, Tarhn. I have no claim or right to your mysteries.”

“It was a sad, trivial secret. When the Singer came to Tau, he sang to our minds. It was an attempt to integrate us. And the first part of the song made each of us know, really know our potential to destroy. I was only a child, yet my personal list of atrocities nearly overwhelmed me. It was as though I was each living creature I had ever harmed. I would have died then, except for a child’s stubborn trick. I denied the Unfolding. I denied that I could be evil, that I could knowingly hurt other life. It was the Singer who was evil. It was the Singer who devoured minds.”

“What was the second part of the song?”

“On Tau? No one lived to hear it or sing it. People like my gene-mother Clereth either died rather than face themselves, or died because they had faced themselves. And the Singer ... the Singer dispersed, the final death, for he lived each wretched revelation, each rending Unfolding.”

“But why? Surely the Singers knew what would happen?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. You see, the second part of the song balances the first. It explains that if you have maimed you can also heal. If you can hate you can also love. An old paradox, but the song made it fresh and potent. And now, little mother, tell me what your mind would rather hide. What did I do to Lyra?”

“Don’t you know? Can’t you reach her?”

“Not yet.”

Tarhn felt Jerlis’ question forming, felt her dismiss it and return without evasion to the vivid memories of Lyra as Tarhn slept. When she had finished, Tarhn withdrew. After long silent minutes he heard Jerlis ask him a question.

“I don’t know what she meant, Jerlis. Like you, I’d prefer to believe she was insane. But, she’s tough. Unbelievably tough.”

“She’d have to be. She’s your complement,” said Jerlis, looking pointedly at the charred corpse which Tarhn had so far ignored. “Anybody I know?”

“Kretan.”

“By Xerle’s magnificent Ears,” breathed Jerlis. “That settles one problem. You’re his only living gene heir. Access Unlimited belongs to you now.”

“No. It belongs to the Carifil. And,” he said over her protest, “if you won’t have it, then give it to the Concord.”

“What about Lyra?”

“Will she live long enough to make a claim?” Tarhn asked bluntly.

Jerlis’ ears curled tightly against her skull, then snapped upright again.

“I don’t know. When I left, Elenda was ear deep in Council politics. There’s a chance she’ll succeed.”

“Jerlis,” said Tarhn sadly, “when did you start believing in miracles?”

“I sent a dying son to Tau. When I followed, I found a living, powerful son and a very dead enemy. I’ve sent some accomplished assassins after that bastard, Tarhn. For three decades So if I’m suddenly credulous, it’s your doing.”

“I wasn’t alone.”

“I know,” whispered Jerlis. “I’ll miss your insolent slakes.” Her eyes dulled, then she said abruptly, “Let’s clean up this mess and get out. Jasilyn will have my ears for keeping her waiting and worrying.”

“I’ll tell her we’re coming.”

“Alone? No linked minds to aid you?”

Jerlis muttered something about Singer cures being worth the disease. When Tarhn reached the tough, fiery mind of his friend, he felt Jasilyn’s surprise and affection and relief—and fear.

Of me?

No, you arrogant slake—oh Tarhn, I didn’t know. I’m sorry. They were such beautiful friends It’s the Council. Elenda lost. The Singers. Lyra. Re-hearing soon.

Scan for an Access within a six unit radius of Tau’s only personnel—

I’m sitting on the coordinates now. How do you think Jerlis got there? We were scanning the known Access for your return and we got an echo. We were still trying to center it when—

Kretan came through.

I’ll set your Access for three transmissions. First Jerlis, then the sla—sucking zarfs! Two. You follow Jerlis.

Tarhn felt Jasilyn’s anger at her error, and her searing hope that Kretan had foretasted his own death. Then mindtouch narrowed to a relay of information without emotion.

Access ready now.

Access ready, he confirmed as blue light glowed once again in the room.

You first, Jerlis.

“What about—that,” she said, indicating Kretan’s corpse.

“The Helix genes of Tau are extinct. Let the Gene-Masters make of it what they will.”

“But you’re Helix.”

“Extinct.”

Jerlis hesitated, then stepped into the Access. Alone in the quiet room, Tarhn heard the low wail of a slizzard wind and knew the white moon was rising.

“High prey tonight, my friends. Good hunting.”

The sound of the waiting Access overrode the wind. Tarhn stepped forward and left his birthplace in a cold blaze of Helix blue.

VIII

Tarhn stretched his body wearily. In the two days since Tau he had slept little, though it was not lack of sleep which oppressed him. He rubbed his hand through his black hair and sighed.

“Any luck?”

Tarhn looked into the orange depths of Dachen’s eyes,

“No,” said Tarhn. “She evades me.”

“The Singers?”

“They ... how can I explain? They are there, yet not there. They are suspended in waiting.”

“For what?”

Tarhn stood and walked to the window. Above him a billion stars murmured to the darkness.

“They wait for Lyra’s command. Their waiting is a slow chant, like an immense beating heart. Can’t you feel it?”

“No.”

“They’ll sing soon, when the last waiting has drained into Lyra and the heart beats with her rhythm.”

“Focus,” said Dachen quietly.

“Yes. I fear the coming song far more than I fear the Council’s verdict.”

“What can the Singers do? Another plague?”

Tarhn turned away from the window. “No. Their starsingers died in the last one. Starsingers”

“Do you know what that title means?” said Dachen.

“The energy, the power of the starsingers is drawn from a star the way we draw energy from smashed atoms.”

“Can they nova a star?”

“Can we?”

“Yes.”

“Then so can a starsinger. They can do everything that we—”

“What is it?”

But ignoring Dachen, Tarhn reached out for the Singers, demanding as Lyra had once demanded their minds.

We are here.

What do starsingers do with the energy a star releases to them?

They create. It is their greatness ... and their sorrow.

Sorrow? Why?

Ask our focus, our future and our creation’s future.

Creation?

Our children.

Children ... memories of Lyra’s certainty that she and Tarhn were the future of all children, that Singers considered Galactics to be prodigal children.

What is Lyra? What is your focus?

Half gene-child, our judge.

Are we ... are Galactics your gene-children?

Not yet.

What are you to us?

Your creators.

And their anguished song swept Tarhn into the void. He reached out reflexively and his hands dug into Dachen's flesh. The Singers dissolved, dying, dispersing.

"What is it, Tarhn?" said Dachen, hands on Tarhn's shoulders comforting.

Tarhn laughed a little wildly. "I know the answer to the question of the ages: why are the races of man so alike? Why, on planets separated by immense distances, did we rise one after another, change and evolve, find each other, kill and give birth and hate and love, and always search for our differences in fear of knowing just how deep our sameness was?" Tarhn gathered his reeling thoughts and tried to explain to Dachen. "It's what you feared ... savages against lightships. The Singers have no gods because they are gods. No, not gods. They can die like men, or even more horribly, more finally. They can be killed by hatred. They are our creators, and we are murdering them slowly, terribly. Dispersing them, never to be reborn again."

"Then we are lost," said Dachen simply. "They must kill us to survive."

"The mass of Singers cannot directly kill. Starsingers might be able to, indirectly, but then they disperse. Only a unique Singer ..."

"Lyra."

"Yes. Lyra. Focus ... immense creation or awesome destruction, she once said. I don't like to think what she meant."

Dachen's eyes burned umber. "What can we do for ourselves, for them?"

Tarhn hesitated, extrapolated, weighed, answered. "Without Lyra, the Singers are helpless. They suffer and disperse under the weight of Galactic hatred. Suicide is impossible for them, though they would die more quickly if they could."

"With Lyra?" demanded Dachen.

"... as they lived in the radiance of a billion suns, so shall they disperse."

Into Dachen's mind came a withering vision of Galactic stars exploding, blooming in a holocaust whose crescendo was song and destruction and white light consuming the galaxy, Singers' epitaph.

"Is Lyra's only purpose to destroy?" asked Dachen harshly. "Was she born only for that?"

"She was born to learn, to judge before either creation or destruction. We—I have driven her, made her what she is now, what she will be." A look of pain and listening swept over Tarhn. "The Song. It begins. Can you hear it yet? A slow threnody like sea waves rising, waiting, waiting for the moon to focus their massed strength."

"The Assembly also waits," said Dachen into Tarhn's silence. "Come. Let's do our futile best to turn the tide."

The Assembly chamber was a huge egg-shaped darkness crossed by a rectangular bar of light. Although the contrast between light and dark defeated Tarhn's eyes, he sensed that each seat in the dark gallery contained a fearful, vengeful, or simply bored Assembly member. With a sudden, smooth motion Tarhn stepped into the light and sat in the Singer witness chair. He wondered who the accusing witness would be ... if anyone. Few people wished to be linked in history with the extinction of a race.

The Council filed into the raised, fan-shaped area reserved for them. Elenda raised her hand for silence. When all were quiet, she would open the meeting with a centuries old ritual prayer. But before the first word was spoken, the other witness materialized out of the darkness.

Lyra.

Tarhn reached out to her mind, seething questions and hunger. The levels of her mind flowed together fantastically, rainbow promises yet unborn, wisps of music flickering, beating heart.

Why? he asked/demanded/wondered while savoring her amber presence and power growing in her matchless eyes.

(the golden eyes of death)

No! Don't evade me! Why do you speak against your own people?

Listen well, Tarhn, that you may know what I know, judge as I judged.

Her mindtouch was as beautiful as crystal ... and as impersonal. Even as she turned to speak to the Council he felt the song beginning, knew that only he and Lyra could hear it. (Lyra why do you turn

away?)

“It is customary for witnesses to be nameless for this type of hearing,” said Lyra, her eyes looking at no one yet holding everyone. “It is also customary that I, the accusing witness, lay my charges and then listen while the accused witness speaks. I acknowledge these customs.

“And I ignore them. I am Lyra Mara, Singer. Mine will be the only words spoken here.”

The explosion of sound that Tarhn had expected didn't come. The Assembly and Council sat transfixed in the presence of a Singer. Only Carifil eluded her fascination and battered Tarhn with their questions.

I don't know! he thought fiercely. *Listen to her and pray to whatever gods remain.*

(once was a time when gods walked with men but none remember for the gods were slain).

Lyra!

But only savage laughter echoed in his mind and he ached with her cold regret and the burning music of her voice.

“We are an old race, older than you can know, older than we can remember.”

Aimless energy coalesced into rock and water, dust and ice.

Random.

No life.

Potential stretched thin across the darkness, bonded elements one to the other in clouds of carbon oxygen hydrogen ... roll call of life.

Yet none answered.

Planets seethed into quiescence and fragile hydrocarbons met and meshed into semblance of life, dissolved tragic eons short of sentience.

“Singers came into this galaxy before there was life, before there was hope of sentience. Singers were the first life, the only intelligence in this galaxy. Alone.”

Across the void between galaxies, a golden filament of energy touched a barren planet with song.

Chanson.

Life beginning.

“We cherished our new planet, and it regrouped its atoms into life to feed its worshipers and gods. We grew many in number, great in power. Alone in the immense barren galaxy. Omnipotent. Omniscient.

“Bored.”

Lonely.

No life to praise other than our own, nor sentience. We joined in mind and sang of our desire. Our song reviewed the planets of potential. All was ready, waiting.

Empty.

Tarhn felt his mind reeling away from the stroke and counterstroke of Lyra's words, Singers' chant.

(oh Lyra do not judge them too harshly).

And she heard his inner cry. *Now who evades? Listen to us, Tarhn, know the depth and breadth of creation—and betrayal.*

Lyraaa!

His anguished calling dissolved into emptiness. She was closed to him and her sweet voice sang relentlessly in his mind.

“Singers differ from Galactics in ways both subtle and immense. We have the power to create, to bond the sliding interface between matter and energy into life.”

We sang to the emptiness.

The rising chant wrapped Tarhn in rhythmic beauty, harmony heard only in dreams, felt only in wonder. Harmony swelling in praise of the elements of life and of planets capable of nurture. Point and counterpoint rippled in elegy, flowing miracle of sound and perfection. Then starsingers' piercing notes leaped upward, surmounted the barrier of harmony and soared in marvelous dissonance above the flawless melody.

And on a thousand, thousand planets life caught and held.

“Life seethed in the galaxy. Simple life, vast with sentient potential. The Singers waited, waited with eons of patience for the evolving life, praised and cherished each minute move toward self-awareness, individual intelligence.

“But life stabilized far below the threshold of sentience, much less intelligence. The Singers’ desire for other minds grew, for there is little to learn from and share with the random motions of mindless life.”

Lyra paused, and echoes of chilling laughter haunted Tarhn.

“Not an insurmountable problem, surely, for minds as powerful as the Singers. A simple rearrangement would suffice ... weeding on a cosmic scale. But even weeds have life. Though all Singers may create life, none can destroy life with impunity. Even mindless weeds.”

Descant keening permeated Tarhn’s mind, rippled through flesh which still heard chanting.

“Yet they desired ... and sang. A hundred thousand planets stirred. Mountains drowned in seas, swamps cracked into deserts. Continents split, bleeding new land. Over all moved strange seas and rivers and winds. The chosen life survived and expanded on their new worlds.”

“And starsingers died, even as the weeds.”

Mournful chants beat slowly in Tarhn’s blood, thick with regret and waiting.

“for yet more eons. The Singers replenished their numbers, grew stronger than before. And more alone. At last they called out to sentience—and were answered by a cacophony of fear and hunger and rut. Was this the summation of so much power and patience and agony? This wretched idiot screech?”

“Their song flashed through colors into incandescence which scoured golden eyes, scorched golden souls. In arrogance

despair

they forged an imperative: intelligent life would evolve in the image of the Singers. On countless planets chaos bloomed, wrenching dominant life into extinction, opening new horizons for the chosen species. Restless species which would speak and build and wonder at the cascading stars. Species whose children would evolve to know and praise the infinite marvels of life perceived through variegated minds. Species whose minds would at last give the Singers different knowledge ...”

Lyra’s voice shaded from whisper into ironic laughter that was made terrible by her tears.

“... flawed creation devouring its creators. You hated without sapping your strength; you slaughtered and lived to slaughter more.”

We could not soothe the jagged life.

Our songs were white drops flung into black flames. We bled songs and dispersed and the black flames licked ever nearer like space mindlessly consuming itself.

Mindless No.

Ignorant.

Like children before Unfolding, power protected from knowledge.

Though our children were never so cruel.

Never so ignorant.

Even to the least, thought and result are one; sorrow caused is sorrow felt; love returned is infinite.

if you knew you would have

“discovered Chanson. The contact people were welcomed, though their presence was rending. We mourned their blind, maimed minds, endured their casual cruelty.”

Children of our minds let us come among you.

Let us know the tortured beauty within you.

Let us sing.

“And we sang to you as to the children of our bodies. The song dissolved your mental barriers keeping thought from result. Each Unfolding grotesque with past brutality, present knowledge, future—none.”

We could not understand the monstrous revelations, nor breast the acid torrent dissolving our minds.

Starsingers drowned in destruction.

Ignorant.

Dispersed through the void.

“The results of that song are known to you as the plague. Those who listened with their minds died. Just death. Mere death. They would live again, in time.”

“But our starsingers will not.”

Tarhn felt the beating heart quicken subtly, yet no one spoke or moved. Then he knew all hearts kept time, beat as one bell tolling an endless midnight while dawn receded into the void.

We must know what our children know.

Of black fire and freezing darkness. They live and die and are reborn in black flames.

How?

The darkness disperses us.

Not them.

Why?

Must we disperse ignorant into the void?

Creation consumed finally.

If we could but know our children.

Ourselves.

“I had thought the starsingers martyrs in the cause of light. Yet, they were our strongest. They were the only Singers who knew that creation is change and change is both gain and loss destruction. Did they know also that Galactic minds would shrivel in the light of song? Did they know and sing anyway, murderers?”

“You believe they did, and for that you would erase the Singers from this galaxy. Look to your own children then; look to your own genes changing. Even now Galactics walk among you whose children will sing minor songs. And their children more and more until you can’t ignore your own genes changing.

“Yet that is a possible truth: Singers are murderers. Which are they? Murderers or martyrs? Or is there yet a third possible truth? Did they try to light the darkness, and failing, allow simple death as a healing benediction over their tortured children? Time might light the darkness; death is always the price of time.

“My people paid that price, and more. With that costly time the Singers created a tool through which they might know their children and yet live to use knowledge.

“I am that tool. From my Galactic father came the ability to survive the licking darkness. From my Singer mother came control over the interface between matter and energy. The Singers raised me and I shared their ignorance of Galactic minds. Knowing only creation, I was sent ... here.

“Yet even my special genes were not enough. The Singers had known this; they had known that if I were to judge Galactics I must be a Galactic, and yet a Singer. I must be complemented.

“A man came to me. A Galactic.”

Tarhn felt the heartbeat falter, then surge. He learned/remembered Lyra’s wonder and joy when she had sensed the completion which waited in him. Tasted her bafflement at the unexpected reluctance, missed linkages, an agony of jaggedness which would have killed any Singer but her.

(i did not know lyra let me)

(nor did i no)

(seek her she is alone as we never were never could be focus)

Futile cries leaking from closed minds, he could not reach her.

“From him I learned of flawed creation. Singer and Galactic, betrayed, betrayers, one and nothing. Hear me, Singers I can live in the black flames but I cannot light them. Even with a billion suns I cannot. But I can release you.”

A threnody of regret rising, falling, beating with the beating heart, beating in his bones, beating, and each beat a sun touched and known, energy flowing into Lyra, focused.

Creation gone awry and deadly.

(as they lived in the radiance of a billion suns so shall they disperse)

(we are still becoming Lyra creation is not ended)

(it ends now see it)

And he saw their galaxy a silver spiral reeling, novas flaring and feeding Lyra who shaped chant into Song. His own traitor heart beating time to stars dying.

NO

He pushed against the pervasive beat, screaming at the Singers to stop Lyra stop themselves stop. His call fell into the beating song, returned.

We cannot, would not. She is our focus.

She is my complement, Lyra Mara.

A sigh, prolonged pulsing of sorrow and regret.

Lyra Mara died in your Unfolding.

Shock wrenched Tarhn free of the song. His eyes opened and he saw Lyra so close—a stranger, powerful and sure. Singer. Focus of blasting radiance and suns exploding. Must all vanish into the golden eyes of death? Must he go alone and unfinished, never to savor the supple flesh and mind soaring link upon link growing to completion (Lyra where are you?) he would know if she were dead? She could not be dead. He had (sensed) her inner cry, and long ago ... so long ... his flesh had said what his mind withheld, bodies wise with each other's wisdom.

Simple touch. Creation unending.

Lyra. I have changed. Know me as we disperse ... if we must.

Tarhn's hand touched her face and he reached into the burning gold and beyond. His mind linked effortlessly with hers, though he did not feel her. (where are you?)

The song returned stronger and he felt his blood pound again to the inexorable beat of dying stars ... Lyra writhing. At his touch?

Even now, my love?* he thought hollowly. *Even now?

Agony condensing into thought.

**... flawed creation,* whispered her mind.*

Flawed? Or merely different?

**Does it matter?* she responded quickly, hope smeared across despair.*

Does my touch maim you now? Does my mind?

No ...

Shall we end as ignorantly as we began?

Pause beating, beating.

I brought knowledge to the Singers. Now I release them ... and their tortured children.

Stars extinguishing, pulling a frail thread of darkness across the galaxy. Soon the net would be stronger, larger, subsuming even the suns which warmed Galactic life.

Did I scourge all love and mercy and hope from you? Can you feel only agony, seek only dispersion?

That is what I was created for! Can't you feel it, know it? The Singers were helpless before their own creation. They were doomed to dissolve in the acid backlash of Galactic minds. Condemned to feel their minds wasting, dispersing by slow increments into nothing. They could not even hasten their own dispersal!

**But you can,* thought Tarhn, anger and sorrow mingling.*

I must. They erred, yes, but they have paid enough and more for their mistakes. Would you lengthen their suffering?

Their error was weakness. We share strength. We know the black flames, have felt their freezing embrace. If the Singers had known and been strong, their creation would have been different.

Different ... but still flawed.

You can't be sure. Can you deny hope?

(hope)

Waiting beating beating beating

(touch me Lyra know completion know hope)

Touch him. Hope!

If ...* her thought surged, *if only we ... yes!

Mental linkages came alive as he/she raced to convergence. Against brooding knowledge and power, lightning emotions flashed, disturbing in their sudden illumination, fascinating in their beauty. The limitless yielding was gone, as was innocence, but Tarhn/Lyra did not mourn the loss.

Only fools regret the omissions that make a masterpiece possible.

Different.

Paeans of joy and possibility leaped above the consuming beat of exploding stars, shaped novas' chaos into a net of light leaping from the still living galaxy. For a moment Carifil tasted the wonder of what their friends were, then the moment and Tarhn/Lyra became a reaching net of light. Carifil stretched toward the light, yearned, and were comforted by a fall of song,

We are what your children will become.

Descant farewell swept through Galactic minds. Only Carifil sensed Singers flowing from the galaxy, lifting and condensing into a single shimmering line, song pouring across the void between galaxies, seeking, finding.

Aimless energy coalesced into rock and water

Dust and ice.

Random

No life.

Golden notes touch a sterile planet

Creation singing

Life beginning

Again.