

NIGHTCHILD

by
Scott Baker

CONTENTS

[Nightchild](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

Also by Scott Baker:

Symbiote's Crown

NIGHTCHILD

by

Scott Baker

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NIGHTCHILD

First Nosferatu:

The planet seemed perfect for human colonization. It was colder than Terra but a little warmer than Mig Mar, and with allergy treatments men could eat a few of the native plants. There were no land animals to compete with the settlers; the most highly developed life form the

Hegemonic Survey was able to discover was a small shell-less mollusk that lived in one of the tiny equatorial seas.

As soon as the Survey declared the planet provisionally open, colonists began to arrive. The soil proved fertile, the days pleasant if uneventful; since there were more Terrans than MigMartians among the colonists, a Terran, and not a Tibetan, name was chosen for the planet. The colonists named it Shovak's New Rural Siberia, after the last expanse of agricultural land on Terra to be domed.

The Hegemony had a ten-year ban on childbearing on all newly opened worlds. By the end of the fifth year—their crops flourishing and they themselves in perfect health—most of the colonists thought the wait unreasonable.

In the sixth year the research team that had accompanied the colonists found the first evidence that Shovak's New Rural Siberia had once housed a full spectrum of highly developed life forms. By the seventh year they had discovered proof that one of those life forms had been a technologically sophisticated city dweller.

All higher life on the planet had died out about three million years ago. There was no evidence of atomic war, no other obvious explanation.

More researchers arrived.

The probationary period passed uneventfully, and it was judged safe for the colonists to reproduce.

Three children were born; there were a number of miscarriages. In every case the birth was fatal to the mother. The fathers of the three living infants were also dead, their deaths roughly coinciding with the presumed times their children were conceived.

No explanation for the deaths was found but their fact was evidence enough; the colony was abandoned. The researchers remained.

The three children seemed perfectly normal and quite healthy; none of the tests to which they were subjected linked them in any way with the deaths of their parents. They were adopted by the research community and grew up well liked.

Some years later a new geological scanning technique revealed a huge cube, kilometers on a side, buried deep beneath the surface of the planet. It took two years to reach it, a further year to force a way through one of the walls into the thousand-leveled vault inside.

After the first research team to penetrate to one of those levels returned to the surface, the planet was renamed Nosferatu, after an ancient Terran

legend. The legend of the Vampire.

After Nosferatu, Nal-K'am:

Sixteen years before Nal-K'am was first contacted by the Terran Hegemony, a conditioning machine failed to implant all the correct behavior patterns into a newly initiated priest of Night.

The priest was assigned to help in the relocation of refugees from a series of flash floods and mudslides which had devastated a small village far from Temple City. The village was too small to have a Shrine, so for the first time since his Naming Day the priest was forced to spend a night outside the sealed buildings in which his kind customarily slept.

Knowing that he had only to obey the commands of the Goddess within him and all would be well, the priest retired to the private room which was his right when among the laity. There he saw nothing wrong in the removal of not only his boots and Nightmask, but his stockings, undermask, and gloves as well. Wriggling his toes, extending and stretching his fingers, he spent a few instants enjoying the unaccustomed pleasure of free air on his skin, then placed his mask upright against the wall, to which it clung, and made his devotions to Her in whose image it was fashioned: The Goddess Night, in the Aspect of the Preserver. He waited until he saw Her other two Aspects superimposed on the features of his mask, then lay down and repeated his sleep-syllable.

He slept as he had in the orphanage in the days before his election, with the window open. The warm breeze played over his unprotected skin and he was repeatedly bitten by vlats, small biting insects especially common in the lowlands.

The fifth morning in the village he was needed early. A priest with the red circle of the administrator on the fore-head of his mask opened the door to the room in which the young priest was sleeping and discovered him there, asleep, with his skin exposed to the air.

The newly initiated priest was returned to the Temple. The malfunctioning conditioner was discovered and repaired.

The vlats remained.

One of the many vlats which had bitten the priest later bit Ugyen Dochen, then aged eleven.

Another, a gravid female, soon deposited a clutch of seventy eggs in a nearby swamp. One of the many vlats hatched from her eggs later bit the daughter of the village's civil administrator.

Six years later Ugyen Dochen married the administrator's daughter. A

son was conceived the second night of their marriage; Ugyen Dochen died two days later. His wife died in childbirth; she was never recognized as a victim of the new plague.

The boy was sent to an orphanage.

CHAPTER

1

The Temple of Night was a jagged black wedge gouged out of the late-afternoon sun.

The Sun. Ts'a-ba, The Hell of Burning Heat. Within it, Rab-tu T'sa-wa, The Hell of Great Burning Heat, where the fires of torment were ten times as painful as those of Ts'a-ba. Within Rab-tu T'sa-wa, at the core of the Sun, Mnar-med, The Hell of Endless Torment, where suffering was a thousand times more intense than in Rab-tu T'sa-wa, from which the sinners looked out upon the inhabitants of Nal-K'am with the envy which the damned of Nal-K'am felt when they thought of the Gods, the Lha, in the highest of the Lha Heavens.

The Temple. Had it been graceful it would have soared; as it was, its tremendous height was only an excuse for its breadth. The city at its feet did not stretch half the length of one wall; the spaceport at the city's edge could have been fitted a hundredfold onto the Temple's smallest terrace.

The Temple's shadow had spread to engulf Agad Orphanage's outer wall by the time Lozan returned from the port tea shop. It had been a long walk, and as he ducked into the shadow he was grateful for the relief it gave him from the still considerable heat of the setting sun.

He was not supposed to be out, so he made his way cautiously, making sure he was unobserved even well before he was close enough to see the gate and its leering tutelary demons of black stone. Once sure that there was no one to see what he was doing, he climbed nimbly over loose stone and crumbled masonry, following a route through the wall that had been used by generations of orphans before him.

Act dead, he told himself, letting his shoulders slump. *Don't let any of them know you know you're alive.*

Nal-K'am. The Hell That Was Five Lesser Hells. Yan-sos, the Hell of Repetition. T'ig-nag, the Hell of Black Lines. Bsdus'joms, the Hell of Concentrated Oppression. Nu-bod, the Hell of Screaming. Nu-bod

Ch'en-po, the Hell of Great Screaming, where the heretics suffered.

Lozan was a heretic; he did not believe he was damned and in Hell.

The courtyard was deserted. Luck. He was able to circle around its edge and join the orphans in Dusum's work party before they entered the eating hall. Ranchun, a tale-teller who hoped someday to be a monitor, saw him join the group, but Lozan knew Ranchun lacked the courage to report him to the orphanmaster. None of the orphans could lie to Lozan and get away with it; Ranchun knew that if he reported Lozan to the orphanmaster Lozan would find out about it and beat him for it. Besides, Dusum would lie for Lozan if necessary; he had known Lozan was gone and had been waiting for his return. A former Agad orphan himself, the monitor was one of the reasons Lozan was so rarely caught for anything.

Dusum saw Lozan, fell back a step so they could talk. At a gesture from Lozan, the orphans surrounding them moved away so the two could talk without being overheard.

"Where's Dorjii?"

"Still out."

"I can't protect him if Sren sees he isn't with us. Did he get it?"

"I've got it. Here." Lozan took a small piece of Dakkini wood from his pocket. It vanished beneath Dusum's tunic.

"It's too small."

"They wanted more money this time. I couldn't get you as much."

"Is it good?"

"Yes. Dorjii tried it. Better than last time."

"I still can't do anything for Dorjii."

"No."

Once inside the eating hall, they separated, Dusum pushing his way back to the head of the line. As Lozan picked up the greasy, all-purpose utensil and watched the cook's assistant ladle flesh stew—despite the fact that the Agad orphans were the only orphans deemed worthy of meat, there was still very little flesh in the stew—into his bowl, he could see Sren stationed where he could watch most of the hall.

There was a faint smirk on the orphanmaster's puffy face, as though he'd just caught somebody at something. Looking round, Lozan could see that almost all the monitors were on watch; Sren had stationed them where they'd be sure to see anyone trying to sneak in or out of the hall. It

was hot and muggy inside; sweat was running down the fleshy folds of the orphanmaster's forehead and into his eyes. Sren wiped his face with a gray sleeve, then noticed Lozan watching him. Catching his eye, Lozan smiled. The orphanmaster's smirk vanished.

Lozan sat down across from Tad, who ignored him and continued sucking at his soup. There was old stew caked around the rim of Tad's bowl but he ignored it, as did

Lozan. Neither of them had ever eaten from a truly clean bowl.

Nidra came to the table, hoping to catch Lozan before he started on his stew. Nidra was probably the reason behind Sren's smirk; Lozan had heard that Nidra'd been caught stealing food from the kitchen a few nights back. He'd have gone hungry for two days now, and would have to eat whatever was put in his bowl by the other orphans for at least a week. Lozan had had some meatrolls at the tea shop so he gave Nidra some of his stew and added about a third of his bread. Tad took Nidra's bowl and added a spoonful— the recommended amount for one wishing to be generous— of his own stew before passing it on. The boy he'd passed it to pursed his lips to spit on it but saw Lozan's headshake and contented himself with adding a generous spoonful of his own stew before passing it on. Nidra was Lozan's friend—or as much Lozan's friend as anyone but Dorjii could ever be—and though Lozan was small no one could win a fight against him.

Lozan looked over at Sren and saw the orphanmaster watching him. Dorjii'd undoubtedly get caught when he tried to sneak in. Lozan was already safe, but Lozan never got caught at anything. It was as though there were unsuspected holes in the orphanage's strict discipline, holes which opened only for Lozan and which closed immediately after him, leaving a furious orphanmaster, envious friends, and sometimes even a puzzled Lozan wondering how he'd managed to escape.

Two priests entered, moving with quick grace, as though the heat had no effect on them, despite their black robes, masks, cowls, gloves, and boots. Sren did not see them at first; his attention was riveted on an insect biting his left forearm which he was stalking with his right hand. When he did see them he brushed quickly at the insect, missing it, then bowed low, bowing with surprising grace for one so fat.

The priests' black backs were to Lozan. Between them he could see the gray-robed orphanmaster gesticulating, his heat-reddened face shining. Sren's lips were moving and Lozan tried to catch his words, but the noise in the hall was deafening and he could hear nothing.

The orphanmaster pointed at Lozan. Lozan pretended to be fascinated by his stew. Tad had seen Sren's pointing ringer and was sitting up straighter, his eyes modestly downcast, a meek smile on his face; Lozan could tell Tad was sure he was being singled out for praise.

The priests turned to face Lozan. He was convinced they were looking at him, though with their expressionless masks and hidden eyes there was no way he could be sure. Through a sudden lull in the noise, the orphanmaster's furious voice came through with sudden clarity. Tad almost choked.

Though the two priests still seemed to be watching Lozan, Sren's head was swiveling back and forth on his thick neck. Lozan was sure he was looking for Dorjii, but the hall was both large and crowded. Two more priests—one with a red circle on the forehead of his mask—came in and the orphan-master turned to greet them, bowing once more.

Lozan finished his stew and began tearing off dry mouthfuls of bread. Sren and the four priests were absorbed in conversation, no doubt completing some sort of arrangements for the examinations which were to begin the next day.

Every few moments Sren glanced up from the conversation, searched the hall. Typical luck for Dorjii; he'd be caught and severely punished. Dorjii'd boasted that in the five years since the death of his parents had brought him to Agad Orphanage he'd amassed the worst record in Agad's history, and being caught breaking the rules under the eyes of the four priests whose decisions would determine his future would certainly be a fitting finish.

Finish in more ways than one. Lozan and Dorjii were sixteen now, and it was almost summer. With Naming Day less than a month away, Lozan could no longer tell himself that getting caught for something meant no more than a beating or two days' hunger followed by a week eating out of the begging bowl. To be singled out by the orphanmaster, as Lozan had just been, was bad enough, but to have Dorjii's record and be caught breaking the rules with the priests watching! Dorjii'd be lucky to get the sewers.

Ranchun had once said that he'd heard that a boy from one of the lesser orphanages had been taken directly from the examination room and hung. Though Lozan was sure Ranchun had invented the story, hanging was still a more likely fate for Dorjii than the priesthood, despite what the Offworlder had been telling them. Dorjii was throwing away what little hope he had to avoid the sewers and the mines.

But perhaps the wild chance was worth it, the chance neither Lozan nor Dorjii would have been able to imagine until four years ago. The chance that Dorjii was taking, that Lozan had refused.

They'd been twelve when they first met the Offworlder, going to the port in defiance of both the orphanage's rules and their own unadmitted fear of the wasting plague. Sren had told them that the Offworlders were mortals so evil that they had been condemned to visit Nal-K'am while still living, so evil that their presence brought disease to the dead and their lies the death that to the damned in the Hell That Was Five Hells brought no release, but only rebirth in another, perhaps worse, Hell.

So Sren had said, and Lozan could tell that the orphan-master believed his own words. But Dorjii had laughed at Lozan's fears, had reminded him that he was alive, not dead and damned, and there had been as much truth in Dorjii's voice as there had been in Sren's, so Lozan had followed the bigger boy to the port.

Once outside the orphanage, they'd removed their telltale copper earrings, violating not only the rules of the orphanage but the law itself. If anyone had cared to examine them closely, they could still have been identified as orphans by the cut of their brown tunics and by their shortcropped hair, but no one took notice of them, then or ever.

Sitting slouched at a table outside the tea shop, a cracked tslin-wood Go board in front of him, the Offworlder had looked at first glance like any other old man sitting in the sun. Only his pale skin and rounded, unpierced ears revealed him for what he was, but to Lozan and Dorjii he was the most fascinating thing they had ever seen.

When he saw them staring at him, he'd smiled and invited them to join him at his table. Greatly daring, they had done so. Speaking with a faint accent, he asked them if they played Go. Since everyone on Nal-K'am played Go, it seemed only natural that Lozan had asked himself what it could have been about the two of them that had interested the Offworlder.

The old man caught the proprietor's eyes and ordered meatrolls and buttered tea for Lozan and Dorjii. He asked their names and introduced himself—his name was Lavelle— while they ate and while Lozan, who was the better Go player, set up his handicap stones. Thinking back on the day in his dormitory bed that night, Lozan thought that perhaps it had been the fascination with which they had greeted Lavelle's every statement that had appealed to the Offworlder, but in any case, within what seemed like moments, he'd begun telling them stories of the many worlds he had visited. While he talked he pulled things from his pockets to show

them—small carvings of strange birds and animals, holophotos that startled them with the vivid, three-dimensional reality of the worlds they depicted, worlds with red skies and with purple, with orange plants and yellow plants and green plants—world after world, and none of them Nal-K'am.

When they had to leave, Lavelle gave them each a carving. Lozan got a small black sextapod with open jaws and sharp fangs; Dorjii got what the Offworlder said was a falcon, a bird now extinct on his homeworld but surviving elsewhere.

They came back whenever they could sneak away from the orphanage, either alone or together. After years of hard work and hunger and punishment, of lectures on self-renunciation and the necessity of coming to understand the hidden sins of past lives in order to escape from Hell, to avoid falling through Ts'a-ba and Rab-tu T'sa-wa to an eternity of torment in Mnar-med, they found his stories of strange worlds—on hundreds of which, if his stories were to be believed, he had played some heroic role—endlessly fascinating, though perhaps the real source of the pleasure they took in his presence was the knowledge that he was a mortal who thought of them as fellow mortals and not as the damned souls the orphanage taught them to believe themselves.

The stories: Lozan was sure they were all true, though he was just as sure that Lavelle himself had not played the leading role he claimed in every one of them. For four years Lozan and Dorjii frequented the tea shop, played Go with the Offworlder, listened to his stories, and ran small errands for him in Temple City. They could always find him there, sitting at his table in the sun, the skin that had been pale when they first met him now a red-brown darker than their own.

They told him what they knew of their world, what they had experienced themselves, and what they had been taught of the Eight Hells, and Lavelle listened attentively, respectfully, and that too was new and strange and wonderful.

Over the Go board they dreamed of the worlds where Night was unknown and men knew themselves to be human beings, and alive. Though Lozan told himself repeatedly that it was no use dreaming of things he'd never see, he listened as eagerly as Dorjii whenever Lavelle told them about the wonders he'd seen on other planets. And he listened with special fascination whenever the Offworlder talked of Terra, the Mother World, from which Lavelle claimed all mankind had come.

"The Mother of all mankind—you here on Nal-K'am as much as anybody

else. Or Grandmother, really, in your case, since you're obviously of MigMartian descent. I can tell that from the shape of your ears, and from the fact that you speak Tibetan."

"MigMartian? Tibetan?" Lozan asked, disturbed. He reached up to touch one of his large, pointed ears, snatched his hand away when he realized Lavelle was watching him. He wanted to be human, Terran, like Lavelle, like all the people on all the worlds Lavelle had told him about.

"Mars was the only other planet in the Terran Stellar system that could be made habitable," Lavelle said. "It didn't start out that way, you understand, it had to be terraformed—changed—first, but even after we made it over it was a pretty inhospitable place. Cold, not hot like here.

"The Tibetans were a group of Terran humans driven from their own land by religious persecution just before the first years of interplanetary flight. They were used to harsh conditions—though not as harsh as those they found on the terraformed Mars—and they were the only group of people to try to settle there who succeeded. They renamed the planet Mig Mar, which was their name for it in their language—the language we're speaking right now—and it became the jumping-off place for all further human expansion into space."

"But MigMartians are human?" Lozan asked. "As human as Terrans?"

"Yes."

"As good as Terrans?"

"Some think better. MigMartian adepts lead the race in the mental arts and sciences, and MigMartian-trained adepts are the only humans competent to deal with aliens. They're a proud people, and the only human world ever to choose to adopt a changed physical form—as, I guess, a badge of distinction, proclaiming their identity as MigMar-tians when they're among other humans. But they're as human as I am. And as human as you two are, no more, no less. Though the Priests of Night—no one's ever seen a priest unmasked, have they? Perhaps not your priests—"

"They're human," Dorjii said, and there was something in his voice that made Lozan want to change the subject. "If we are. Fourteen orphans from Agad were chosen for the priesthood last Naming Day. They choose whoever they want. They might even take me."

"You?" Lozan demanded. "They'll find out in Testing that your sin was killing without regret, and there you'll be, down in the sewers crawling through hot excrement. For your own sake, of course, to teach you the proper repentance so you can win your way back to life as a human. Not

just because they need people to keep the sewers clean."

"No." Dorjii shook his head. "Listen. The priests told me that my father and mother died in a train wreck. They told me that my parents had built up such a store of favorable p'rin-las in their existences here in Nal-K'am that I was to be granted the opportunity to come here, to come to Agad. They thought I was too young to know better, and I pretended to believe them. But I know they killed my parents."

Lozan glanced quickly around. The tables near them were deserted, the customers preferring the cool shade of the shop's interior.

"Father was a Nagyspa, a trainer of animals and a hill sorcerer. His father had trained him in the sight, but he knew little of the Vajrayana Way and what little he knew he never had a chance to teach me. But he was an adept. Maybe not like the MigMartian adepts, but an adept. That's why they killed him.

"He taught me a little of the sight before they killed him. Not much, but enough so I could tell the priests were lying. Enough so I know I can trust the two of you."

"They won't choose you for the priesthood," Lozan said.

"Are you sure? They chose Tasains last year and he wasn't the kind you'd think they'd take."

"No."

Dorjii fell silent. Lozan said, "Dorjii can charm the birds from the trees. I've seen him do it. He calls them and they come to him."

They were all silent a while, Lozan remembering the first time he had watched Dorjii with his birds. Dorjii had been new at Agad then, but he had made little attempt to get to know the other orphans. Instead, he slipped away by himself whenever he got the chance. Curious, Lozan had followed him one day to a grove of frond trees about a kilometer from Agad. There Dorjii had stood perfectly still, his left arm outstretched, singing softly in a high, quavering voice. Soon a black bird with red wings had glided down from the fronds to perch on Dorjii's arm. It stayed there, perched, while Dorjii talked to it and ruffled its feathers.

Lozan had always loved birds, always envied them their freedom. From the moment he had seen Dorjii with the bird on his arm, he'd been determined to become the bigger boy's friend.

And later, after he'd won Dorjii's confidence, Dorjii had revealed the secret that made all the difference. Dorjii had taught him that he was alive, not dead and damned, and that all else was lies.

Lavelle finally broke the silence. "I've spoken with adepts on Mig Mar who still follow the Vajrayana Way."

Dorjii shook his head. "If my father could have known. He must have thought the Way would die when he died. But—it is dead, here. The priests killed it. Let's talk about something else."

That conversation had taken place two years ago, when Lozan and Dorjii were both fourteen. A year later, the Offworlder had asked them, "What do you know about how men came to Nal-K'am?"

"Nothing," Lozan said. "Just what the priests say: how we sinned in our earlier lives and were condemned to Hell until we repented our sins."

"And you, Dorjii? Did your father tell you anything?"

"Nothing. Just that this was not Hell and we were alive. He never said we came here from somewhere else."

"On Terra we once had the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamlin. Have I ever mentioned it to you?"

"No," Dorjii said.

"Back in the days when all mankind lived on Terra alone, there was a town named Hamlin in a part of Terra known as Europe. This town, so the legend goes, was infested with rats. Rats are small vicious creatures which multiply rapidly and which eat human food. You're lucky you have nothing like them here.

"Anyway, there were so many rats in Hamlin that they soon ate all the food and the people of the town were starving. So when a man came along and offered to get rid of the rats if the townspeople would pay him a great sum of money, the town agreed.

"The man had a magic flute. When he played it, all the rats in the town fell under its spell, so that when the Piper walked out of Hamlin playing his flute the rats followed him, never to return.

"But when the Piper returned to Hamlin for his pay, the townspeople were greedy and refused to pay him. So he played his flute again, only this time it was the children of the town who fell under its spell and who followed him away, never to return."

"So?" Dorjii had asked when the Offworlder finished.

"You know of no similar legends here?"

"No. Why?"

"I have a love of good stories, and that one has always seemed to me to

be one of the best. You two of all people should know my love for a good story."

And he had laughed and called out for more meatrolls and a tray of sweets. But on that day, for the first time, Lozan felt that he'd seen a hidden side to the friendly storyteller, a chill hardness beneath the smiling surface. And in the year that had passed since he had first seen beneath Lavelle's smiling surface, he had felt that hidden grimness more and more often. It was not that the Offworlder seemed less friendly or sincerely interested in Dorjii and Lozan, quite the contrary, but the man had been increasingly tinged with something else, an impersonality, as though he saw all three of them as no more than stones on a Go board.

Lozan had not been sure what this meant, or even if it meant anything at all, and he'd said nothing about it to Dorjii. He had waited, watching and listening, for the day when he'd see the pattern clearly, when he'd understand.

And that day had been today. They'd met Lavelle at the tea shop in the early morning. He'd asked them to be there and that was something new, for he'd never asked them to meet him at any specific time before.

"Can you keep a secret?" he'd asked.

"Sure," Dorjii said.

"From the priests?" And the grimness that Lozan had always sensed lurking beneath the smiles was there, out in the open.

"Yes," Dorjii said.

"They have ways of making people talk. Even people who promise to keep secrets."

"So?" Dorjii asked.

"I have had a little training, some on Mig Mar, some elsewhere. I can help you keep a secret, if you'll let me."

"Yes," Dorjii said.

"Lozan?"

"Yes."

"All right. Do you remember that story I told you, about the Pied Piper of Hamelin? It was just a story, a made-up tale. But three thousand years ago there was a real man whom we call the Pied Piper of Mars. His name was Yag Chan, and he was one of three children born on a planet we call Nosferatu.

"Since his parents had been MigMartian, he was sent back to Mig Mar for adept training. While he was undergoing his training, a huge vault was found beneath the surface of Nosferatu. It was opened the year Yag Chan returned to Nosferatu as a second-degree adept.

"Yag Chan was a member of the first party to enter the vault. Inside they found millions and millions of tubes, each containing a different kind of alien monster. One tube had what seemed to be a human being in it, and for reasons we've never really understood the party took it to the surface and opened it.

"When the tube was opened, the alien inside it began to revive and the humans died—all but Yag Chan. When the party was discovered some hours later—they'd somehow managed to get to the surface and open the tube without being detected, though there were people all around the area—the alien was dead and Yag Chan was unconscious. When he was revived he was unable to account for either his unconsciousness or his survival.

"The alien from the tube was cut open. It proved to be totally inhuman beneath its skin, nothing like anything that had ever been seen before. The scientists and adepts examining it were unable to explain how it had ever been alive, much less account for its death.

"When Yag Chan was taken back to Mig Mar for further examination, it was found that whatever had happened to him seemed to have had no effect on him. But he was kept on Mig Mar while further tests were devised. He spent the time there completing his adept's training at Gompa, the capital city.

"Two years after Yag Chan was returned to Mig Mar, an epidemic of unconsciousness struck the people of Gompa. When it lifted some eighteen hours later, all the children of the city old enough to walk were gone, and for the next few days children continued to pour into Gompa from the outlying towns. The children were dazed; none of them were able to explain what had happened to them.

"Yag Chan was missing, as were two other men in adept training—two men who proved to be the other two children born on Nosferatu. Everyone else in the dormitory where the three had shared a room was dead, and in their room two small objects, similar in some ways to the internal structure of the alien from the vault, were found.

"A starship intended to carry five thousand colonists and all the supplies they'd need to start a colony was missing. There were more than forty-seven thousand missing children.

"We think that the dying alien somehow took possession of Yag Chan's mind and body before its own body died. We think it stole the children and escaped in the starship.

"We have been searching for those children for three thousand years."

"Here?" Dorjii asked. "Us?"

"Probably not. We have found evidence, convincing evidence—a ruined starship, far to the South—that would seem to indicate that your people originated on Ne-chung, a Mig-Martian splinter colony. It could be—Ne-chung attempted to found a number of colonies and some of their ships were lost."

"But?" Lozan asked.

"But I'm suspicious of that Temple, and those priests. The Temple's too big. Inhuman."

"Human beings couldn't make a Temple that big?" Lozan demanded.

"Of course we could, if we had a big enough mountain to start with. But human beings wouldn't want a Temple that big.

"Listen: I know that Naming Day is coming soon, and that you'll both be getting assigned your work. You won't be sweeping the streets, or working in the mines or sewers; you're too smart for that, smart even for Agad—you knew that only the most intelligent orphans are sent to Agad, didn't you?"

"No." Dorjii shook his head. "They told us we were special but they never said why."

"The priests don't waste intelligence, but with your records you won't do well. You won't like what you get, not with Sren's hand tipping the scales.

"If I were you I'd want to get somewhere where the priests couldn't follow me, somewhere away from Nal-K'am altogether. Now, if—say you were working in the sewers and you learned something that nobody off-planet knew. The priests wouldn't want you to tell anyone, and they'd try to stop you if they knew what you were doing, but if you had a way to get information to me that they didn't know about and couldn't discover—"

The Temple, not the sewers. Dorjii's face hardened; Lozan felt an unfamiliar twisting inside of him.

The Offworlder looked at their faces, said, "Don't object. Neither of you is stupid enough to escape the priesthood. You're not afraid of the Goddess, are you?"

Lozan had not been afraid of the Goddess for some time, had not even believed in Her since the day Lavelle had shown them how the priests worked the miracles of Eclipse Day, and he was not afraid of Her now. But there was something about the priests and the Temple which he did not understand and which frightened him. It was not just the thought of the discipline, of having to wear a mask and never being able to touch anything except through gloves, though that was part of it.

"You said—the priests aren't human?" But he would have known if they were, were something different from other men, just as he knew when people were lying to him—

Lavelle's lying to us now, he realized. Not lying, exactly, but—Something. I can't trust him.

"They're probably human. I hope they are."

"If they're not? How can you protect us?"

"Like this." Lozan felt his will seized, twisted, released. His head hurt. "I asked you earlier if you would let me help you keep our secret from the priests and you agreed. Remember? That's what I just did: the secret is safe now; the priests can never force you to reveal it. And I can protect you in the same way."

"No." The decision was suddenly there, unpremeditated, irrevocable. "You can protect yourself, not us. No."

"Yes," Dorjii said. Lavelle's eyes were cold, Dorjii's scornful. "Even if they're not human. I'm not afraid."

Looking at the dull, familiar forms of the priests talking to Sren, Lozan couldn't understand why he'd run from the shop in such panic, why he'd disgraced himself in front of Dorjii.

The lies in Lavelle's voice. And the way the Offworlder had so, so casually seized Lozan's will, twisted it— No.

Dorjii slid into a seat to Lozan's right and began eating rapidly. For once he'd made it past the monitors without getting caught. They were all looking at Sren and the priests.

Dorjii ate ravenously, gulping his stew and tearing at his bread without pausing to speak. Finally he looked up, a small, sure smile on his face.

"Wish me luck, Lozan. I'll need it if—" He paused, smiled. "I may need it."

"Good luck, Dorjii."

They slept in separate dormitories. Lozan had trouble getting to sleep

and when he finally dozed off he was plagued with dreams. Dorjii laughed while a body with Lavelle's face but covered with crawling worms chased Lozan. The Offworlder's face became the mask of a priest and the flesh rotted from the body until it was nothing but white bone and writhing black worms. Lozan was running but the skeleton was faster. It caught him and held him, trying to kiss him with the dead Nightlips of its mask while worms dripped from the bones of its hands onto his flesh and began burrowing their way into him. They crawled over him and through him and stripped the flesh from his bones as the other skeleton placed a Nightmask over his face. The Nightmask's lenses were black. He was blind, and in the darkness he became a worm, gnawing on the flesh of a priest who he realized was Dorjii. Dorjii began screaming, and Lozan awakened to realize the scream had been his own. The second moon was shining through the window and the other orphans in the dormitory were awake, watching him. He stared back at them until they turned away. He did not go to sleep again that night.

CHAPTER

2

During the night it began to rain. The rain was still streaming down when morning came, a heavy, unseasonal rain, ceaseless, unvarying. The rains of Lozan's previous experience had all been winter or spring storms, short, cold, and violent, torrents of freezing rain torn by thunder, lit by lightning, all over in a few hours. But the thick monotony of the rain on the roofing stones, the heavy, moist air that made breathing more difficult, both were new and drove the night thoughts from his mind.

It was just after dawn. Through a window cut into the dormitory's eastern wall he could see a blue-white glare beginning to force its way through the mass of low gray clouds. No clouds, no matter how thick, could ever fully mask the Sun.

Lozan was the only one awake. His eyes were bleary from lack of sleep. The damp clothes were slimy to his touch and he shrank slightly from the feel of his clinging tunic and trousers. He dressed quickly, then went to the door and opened it.

Outside, the courtyard was a quagmire of red mud from which isolated paving stones jutted ineffectually. Fog hid the countryside beyond the gate in vagueness, sent drifting tendrils into the courtyard. Out there swamps would be forming.

A priest with a red circle on the forehead of his mask stepped through the gateway, not bothering to avoid puddles and mud holes. He climbed the steps to the eating hall and flung open its doors. In the brilliant light streaming from the open door, Lozan could see that none of the red mud had clung to his boots or cloak.

The priest turned back to the gate, raised his right arm. Blue light flashed. A gleaming cylinder of white metal, twice the length of a man, floated in through the gate, came to rest hovering over the steps. The priest backed into the hall and the cylinder followed him. A second priest in an unmarked mask shut the doors.

Lozan remained on the threshold, standing just inside the open door and looking out over the submerged courtyard. The eastern sky had become too hot to look at. Rain and puddles sparkled, steamed; silver mist softened the harsh outlines of the orphanage's stone walls. A yellow garuda flew by overhead and was lost again in the mist. In his imagination Lozan followed it on its flight, wishing that he too could soar over the walls on feathered wings. He felt what remained of the night's tension slipping away from him.

A bell sounded and he heard the orphans in the room behind him beginning to stir. He ignored the noise, watching the misty courtyard until the second bell, when boys began shoving past him to sprint across the courtyard. After

Nidra collided with him full-on, Lozan followed the others, slowly picking his way between the deeper mud holes, ignoring the soaking he was getting.

The cylinder was gone and the eating hall's glow bulbs had dimmed to normal. Eyes swollen from lack of sleep, Sren himself guarded the threshold, picking the sixteen-year-olds out of the meal line and sending them to stand with their backs against the right wall. Everyone could see the cordoned-off area where the two priests Lozan had observed earlier were assembling complex equipment from gleaming black subassemblies.

Red-circle moved with a jerky, darting rhythm that Lozan found somehow disturbing. His assistant had a slower, more fluid way of moving, yet the two managed to coordinate their actions without conversation or delay.

Like they were both part of the same machine. Are they going to try to make me like that? Perhaps it was not too late; he could sneak out tonight, go find Lavelle and—

No. Never again, that twisting in his mind.

Red-circle and his assistant finished their work at the same time. The assistant beckoned to Sren, handed the orphanmaster a small box. Sren carried it over to the line of testees. He took a narrow, hinged bracelet of lustrous white metal from the box and held it up so everyone could see it.

"Come by here and get one of these," he told the sixteen-year-olds. "When you've got one on your wrist, get something to eat—fast—and then ask the priest with the red circle on his mask what he wants you to do next.

"Good luck, all of you."

The bracelet he snapped around Lozan's wrist was flat, almost as wide as Lozan's thumb and about half as thick. Once on his wrist, it looked as though it could never have been anything but an unbroken band. It weighed so little that Lozan could close his eyes and pretend it wasn't there, but when he opened them again there it was, glowing softly against his dark skin.

In the meal line he tugged at it with his left hand but succeeded only in chafing the skin of his wrist. His fingernail could not scratch it and he had nothing with which to try to pry it off.

He sat in the first unoccupied chair and ate mechanically. The monitors had long since herded all the younger boys out of the hall and Lozan was one of the last testees to be seated; Ranchun was already being examined before Lozan had finished his first spoonful of mush. Some of the machines now glowed with a steady opalescence and there were occasional flashes of much brighter light.

Lozan dawdled over his meal until everyone else had finished. He waited, watching Sren until he was sure that the orphanmaster was ready to come get him, then stood up and walked very slowly over to the counter. He scraped his dish as slowly as he could into the trash can, then handed the plate to the dishwasher and walked over to the waiting priest.

"Your will, Reverence?" he asked, his eyes lowered in modest imitation of Sren.

"The will of the Goddess, my son," the priest said. "Walk down this aisle. Whenever you see something like this—" he indicated a glowing, opalescent boss—"touch your bracelet to it and you will be told what to do next."

Unwillingly Lozan stepped forward and pressed his bracelet to the machine. The bracelet began to glow. A quiet voice said, "Put your eyes to this slit." A light winked on briefly to indicate the proper slit.

There was a momentary flash of intolerable light when he put his eyes to the slit. Then the quiet voice said, "Touch your bracelet to the machine once more and go on to the next test."

He shuffled on to the next machine. It examined his teeth, then passed him on. Every time he touched his bracelet to a boss, there was a tingling sensation in his wrist and the cold white light with which the bracelet shone intensified. After encountering two dozen machines, some of which merely wanted to look at him while others wanted to touch him, sample his skin, taste his blood, or inject him with something, his wrist blazed with light.

He felt a shock when he touched the bracelet to the final boss. All the tingling stopped and the bracelet faded to a dull black. The machine's neutral voice said, "You have finished. Go join the others in your group."

The other sixteen-year-olds were already assembled against the wall. Lozan took a place in line. The black bracelet was tight around his wrist. He put his hand behind him and rubbed the bracelet as hard as he could against the rough stone of the wall. When he examined it, he saw that the metal was unscratched.

Red-circle walked up to them, stopped in front of them. He spoke softly but with great clarity, his voice like that of his machines:

"Through the intercession of the Goddess, we of Her priesthood now know you as She knows you. We know your strengths and your sins, your pasts and your present.

"Know this: You are being judged. Yama, the Great Judge, weighs the black stones of your sins against the white stones of your repentances, and only the Mother's mercy holds you here, in Pret'yaka Naraka, this bubble on the surface of Nal-K'am. Beneath you are Yan-sos and T'ig-nag, Bsdus'joms, Nu-bod and Nu-bod Ch'en-po; in the sky T'sa-ba blazes. Let the Mother withdraw Her mercy and you fall—fall through all the Hells, fall for two thousand years, only to spend an eternity in Mnar-med.

"This bracelet you wear is the outward mark of Night upon you, the sign that She is interceding for you with Yama. Whatever your sins in your past lives, whatever vocation we discover for you, know you that so long as you remain here on the surface of Nal-K'am, in the bubble that is Pret'yaka Naraka, for so long has Night's strength upheld you.

"Here in your orphanage it is a mark of distinction to wear Night's bracelet, and for the period of your examination it is the Goddess's will that you remain here. Should you attempt to go elsewhere, in express violation of the Goddess's will, She will let you taste of Yan-sos, only taste,

until that taste has convinced you to return. Such is Her mercy.

"In Her mercy She gives you now this taste." The priest did nothing that Lozan could see, but suddenly Lozan's right wrist felt as though it were encircled by molten metal. He screamed. All the testees were screaming.

Except Tad. By some freak, Lozan's eyes came to rest on him. He was silent, standing with clenched jaw and eyes squeezed shut, his pride overshadowing the agony he could not hide feeling. Lozan could not admit that there was something Tad could endure that Lozan could not, so after that first involuntary scream he kept his teeth clenched and tried to keep the scream he felt from forcing its way out. The pain engulfed his hand and crept up his arm until he was sure he could bear it no longer.

And then it was gone. Lozan looked at his hand, flexed his fingers. The pain was a fading memory. He forced himself to grin at Tad, then looked expressionlessly out at the priest.

"Tad, Lozan. For the two of you, a word of advice. Pride and strength are not the way out of Nal-K'am, not the way to achieve life as a mortal. Pride is the way of the Lha-ma-yin, and after their long lives of fruitless war are over they each and every one find themselves condemned to endless tortures in Mnar-med."

He believes what he's saying, Lozan realized. He really is trying to help us. For some reason, that was more frightening than the torture had been, that the priest would believe what he was saying.

"Lozan, Tad. You have endured a taste, an instant's taste, of Yan-sos. But Yan-sos is a great Hell and in it there are sixteen Minor Hells, in each of which your suffering would be greater than in the one above it, and you have only tasted the least of these. Your pride is Moha, stupidity. If you cling to it you will fall, fall though the sixteen Hells of Yan-sos, fall and fall for two thousand years until you end up in Mnar-med. You must repent your pride, you must let it fall from you, if you are ever to achieve life as mortal men.

"Now, all of you, sit at these tables, taking every other chair. 'In Her mercy, the Goddess Night has seen fit to let you taste of Yan-sos. Now She grants you a taste of the Lha Heavens. Wait quietly. Soon you will taste Her mercy."

Lozan stared fixedly at the table, determined to keep his rage and frustration hidden. It was not the time. Later he'd find a way to deal with the bracelet. Later.

The priest had believed what he said.

Though wasn't it better to believe what people said? To be so truthful that the world showed you only truth? Of course. Without warning, he was submerged in a caressing tide of peace and reassurance while a silent explosion of sweet froth came swirling up in his mind, a froth in which each iridescent bubble burst to release a delicious concept: *I really do want to tell everyone the truth, and Night upholds and protects me; I can trust Her, and I want to do my best, without thought of personal reward, to help all those around me—a thousand betrayals.* Somewhere he was aware of himself answering questions, but he was lost in rejoicing, dancing with the bubbles far above the plane where his voice answered questions, oblivious to the lower depths where he was a small animal, trapped and rigid, screaming with fear and fury, screaming...

He was shuffling forward in the evening meal line by the time the bubbles became infrequent enough for his subterranean fury to reach through and reunite itself with his conscious mind. All at once, he was shaken with such self-loathing that he could barely hold on to his tray. He was himself again—or almost himself—and he hated that part of his mind that melted in ecstasy with each bursting bubble. But far more than he hated himself he hated the priests who had done this to him.

Dorjii was sitting alone at a table, a quiet smile on his face. Things were still a little unreal for Lozan as he sat down by his friend; he could not feel the chair in which he was sitting and there was still a languid swirl of bursting bubbles weaving back and forth in his mind.

This—this must have been what he had feared, this loss of himself, this sickly-sweet stranger in his skull. This would be how they'd make a priest out of him. He had to go back to the port, find Lavelle. Now, before it was too late.

If he could. If it wasn't already too late.

Lavelle commanded powers. There was no other hope, no way Lozan could lose himself on Nal-K'am. Maybe Lavelle could save him, could help him before he became like Red-circle. Maybe.

Dorjii just sat there, a vacant smile on his face. Lozan kicked him under the table. Dorjii said, "Lozan," and smiled.

"Dorjii, what did you and—" He could not say Lavelle's name; the twist the Offworlder had put in his mind prevented him from it. One slavery or another.

But at least I can still think his name. At least I still know who I am.

"Dorjii, what happened last night, with you and—What happened?"

"I'm so happy, Lozan. So happy, even if this isn't real."

Lozan kicked him again, hard, without effect. All the other testees seemed in far worse shape than Dorjii, sunken into themselves, unfocused eyes half-closed and blissful smiles on their faces. More than one slept, and the boy next to Ranchun seemed unaware that he was drooling.

Whatever the Offworlder had done for Dorjii, it hadn't been enough to enable him to resist the bubbles completely. But just because it hadn't been enough for Dorjii didn't mean it wouldn't be enough for Lozan. Lozan was stronger; look how he'd come out of this on his own. *He* could do better than Dorjii. Could he make it to the tea shop despite the bracelet? He had to try. Tonight. Now.

Trust the truthful, the bubbles sang.

He made sure that at least two monitors saw him enter his dormitory, then went out the window. It was a long drop, more than five meters, but he'd made it before and he didn't feel it this time.

Let your sins go, let them pass, and rejoice!

He hugged the wall of the courtyard, grateful for the security the rain lent him. He reached the hole in the outer wall without incident. Climbing the jumbled blocks of broken stone was difficult. It was dark, neither moon showing through the clouds, and the rain made his footing treacherous. He slipped twice and scraped his elbow on one fall but was otherwise unharmed. He was following a route he knew as well by night as by day.

Once through the wall, he circled around to avoid passing the gate and made off to the right, heading for the monorail track. It was usually shorter to head in a straight line for the port, but the lowlands around the orphanage would be flooded now, slowing him up, and he didn't trust his way in the dark, not with so little feeling in his body and limbs. He could be trapped in deep mud without realizing it until it was too late.

The bracelet grew warm. Without the aftereffects of whatever they'd done to him, he'd probably be in agony. As it was, he felt only a prickling sensation; it was lucky he'd left immediately.

But he was coming to himself. The walking seemed to clear his head. With each step he took, the stinging in his wrist increased, the bubbleflow within grew stiller. By the time he had climbed the embankment and begun to follow the track, there was a thin band of utter pain around his wrist.

At first as he followed the track the pain diminished; the track must

have curved back towards Agad. But soon the pain began to increase again until it was worse than before.

Lozan looked at his wrist. The band was glowing with smoky red light. He touched it with his other hand to see if it was truly on fire. There was no sensation until his fingers actually touched the band, then the agony was in both hands. He snatched his left hand back.

When he let his right hand fall back to his side, the bracelet brushed against him. The touched muscles flared with pain, though his tunic had insulated them from direct contact with the bracelet. Lozan had to hold the arm slightly away from him from then on.

He began to run clumsily on his still unfeeling legs. Running he forgot time, distance; existence was the rain, the track, the pain in his arm.

Once, when the pain had taken his arm almost to the elbow, he fell and rolled completely off the embankment to lie in the sticky mud. His arm was pinned under him and the pain had locked his muscles and prisoned the bracelet in the pit of his stomach.

With his other hand, Lozan pushed his right arm out from under him, whimpering as the band traveled slowly across his side. Then his body was again free of the pain, though the agony in his right arm reached up past the elbow. The band was flaming.

He would not give in. Defiance brought weary anger and with anger came strength. The priest. Dragging his useless arm, he crawled back up the embankment. Then he was running again, the mud sucking at his feet.

After a while the pain in his arm began to diminish. He ran faster, gladly, until he realized that he must be running the wrong way. Stifling a sob, then sobbing, he turned around and began to run back the way he'd come. The mud was pulling at him. Sensation was beginning to creep back into his legs and every step brought shooting pains and a new weariness. His breath rasped between his teeth. He had to stop as a spasm of coughing hit him. The rain continued to fall. He ran.

Suddenly the lights of the port were close. He had been running with his head down, seeing only the track in front of him. He stopped, panting. He had to think.

If only he hadn't refused Lavelle's offer.

The pain had taken his entire arm. It stood out stiff and useless from his side, the effort of keeping it away from his body no longer conscious, the burning agony beginning to creep into the lesser pain of his abused shoulder muscles. The bracelet danced red on his wrist, burning with

unclean fire.

That way. He stumbled from the embankment. He'd never taken this way before and it was hard to think, hard to concentrate on anything but the agony that was his arm.

There. He saw the lighted window off to the right. He forced his arm in closer to his body, hiding his blazing wrist in his pocket. The loose tunic pulled away from his side, but it was no longer far enough. His side was burning.

He opened the door with his left hand and walked in. His walk was stiff, jerky, and his teeth were clenched in a rictus of pain.

Lavelle was gone. There was only the proprietor. It had all been for nothing.

Without conscious volition, his wrist lifted from his pocket. He could not keep his arm from extending rigidly out in front of him. The proprietor saw the blazing bracelet.

"He's not here! He'll never be here again! Get out! Now!" The man picked up a short, stout piece of wood and began advancing on Lozan with it.

"Out!"

Lozan lurched back into the night. To the left. He saw the embankment and headed for it. He reached the track and tried to run but his legs would not obey him. He walked and crawled. There was nothing but the pain.

The pain was a narrow band around his wrist when he again saw the distant lights of Temple City. He continued on, feeling the pain increase slowly until he was back where he remembered climbing up onto the embankment. By luck alone, he kept his balance as he stumbled down it. From there he walked and waded back to the orphanage, almost losing himself in the unlighted succession of unfamiliar pools.

The pain in his wrist gave way to the lesser pain of his bruised and strained muscles. He had to crawl with only one usable arm up the rubble and through the wall. He staggered across the courtyard and into his dormitory, too tired to care whether or not he was seen. He slept.

When he awakened, there was a bloated swamp spider clinging with its mandibles and hollow legs buried in his right side, just below his armpit. He ripped it out of his flesh with his good hand and crushed it underfoot, but it left a huge purplish swelling on his side.

There was no way to disguise his condition. His legs were so stiff and

pain-filled that he could barely walk; his right arm hung dead at his side. With contemptuous charity, he was plucked out of the morning meal line by one of Red-circle's assistants. His shoulder and arm were treated with a salve which cut the pain a little and the swamp spider's bite was treated with a disinfectant. Nothing was said, no questions asked or accusations voiced. He hated them for their smug confidence.

Still, this time he made no protest, attempted no resistance, when the bubble-stream swept him away from his pain.

CHAPTER

3

A few times during the next weeks, Lozan made some token attempt at resistance, tried to hold onto himself against the bubble-flow or attempted to pull himself out of the residual flow in the evening, but each day he surrendered himself with more abandon, each day he made less attempt to find any purchase on reality in the evening. He woke and slept to the iridescent flow.

Then, late in the testing, he found the bubbles dulling, the flow slowing, the soundless explosions no longer irresistible. He was torn between clinging to himself and clinging to the oblivion the bubbles offered. Neither could claim him. He would take shelter in the bubble-stream only to be brought up short by self-loathing, or hold hard to his thoughts only to find himself thinking, *lovely, lovely*, when he looked at Sren. He slept each night with the sick knowledge that he would give way again the next morning, yet never escape his accusing self.

Perhaps they were weaning him, for five days before Naming Day he was told that his examinations were through. Most of the other testees had been finished for some time and he was sent to work with a group of them in the flooded lowlands, where the younger orphans had been working since the rains began.

It had continued to rain during all the weeks of testing, and in the summer heat the flooded areas were a breeding ground for insects of every sort. The air was thick with vlats, chugs, sro, dbee, and other biting insects. They were everywhere, biting through the coarse cloth of the orphans' standard-issue clothing as though it were in itself appetizing. Unprotected skin they left a purple mass of overlapping bites. Only the tiny iridescent birds that gorged themselves on the insects were immune

to their bites.

Lozan waded around in the high, gray-green grass of the swamps, putting tablets of insect-specific poison in the thousands of tiny pools where the insects bred. He had no protection and was so badly bitten that after the bubble-trance faded on the second day he got only an hour or two of sleep each night. His body was covered with the scabs from picked and scratched bites. His movements were dazed, mechanical, and when he did sleep he had nightmares.

His third day in the swamps, Dusum took pity on him. After sending the other boys—many of whom were still floating in their bubble-trances—off to spread insect poison, the monitor sat down on the gray-scaled trunk of a fallen frond tree and produced a bag of Dakkini wood slivers and a tiny pipe from the folds of his protective clothing.

He put some of the slivers in the pipe bowl and tamped them down. Striking a flame, he held it to the pipe and inhaled slowly, filling his lungs with the harsh blue smoke while a smile spread over his face.

He passed the pipe to Lozan. "Here. You look like you need this as much as I do." He spoke without exhaling any of the smoke he was holding in his lungs.

"It's funny. The only thing that helps us escape the insects is an intoxicant, and that'll put us in Nu-bod, maybe in the Fire-Insect Hell itself. One hundred and one wind diseases, one hundred and one yellow diseases, one hundred and one cold diseases, and one hundred and one other maladies.

"Or maybe—" Lozan passed the pipe back to him. "Or maybe," Dusum continued a moment later, "this is a lesson meant to teach me not to make an undue profit from the sale of intoxicants, and thus avoid the Fire-Insect Hell. In which case, I'm defiling the lesson by smoking Dakkini wood and will probably be reborn in Rab-tu T'sa-wa, in the Burning Hell of String-Like Worms. A definite mistake on my part."

A cool breeze was blowing across Lozan's abused flesh, taking away his pain and leaving him clean and refreshed. A flock of tiny birds darted by overhead. For the first time since he'd begun work in the swamps, Lozan was detached enough from his own misery to appreciate their beauty.

"Give that back to me," Dusum said. "You've had more than you need and you've got work to do. Go do it."

As Lozan slung the bag of insect pellets across his shoulder, he could see the monitor refilling the pipe from the little bag. Lozan turned away and

began slogging through the mud and water to his assigned area.

The morning was almost gone before the true effect of the smoke began to manifest itself. His rough clothing began to feel smooth and soft where it rubbed against him. The wind caressed his face and the sun on his skin made him shiver with excitement. The squelching noise his feet made in the mud was infinitely sensual.

The landscape around him became exquisitely feminine. Hidden in the outward shapes of the frond trees he saw the forms of veiled women. His reflection in a pool he was wading through became the beautiful girl with long flowing hair whose image Lavelle had once projected for him: the Offworlder's daughter Katerine. The water undulated slowly, rippled languidly, beckoned. Katerine was becoming other girls, other women, each more beautiful than the last.

Lozan's scrotum tightened. His penis stiffened, grew, pulsed with waves of slow fire which swelled when they reached his penis's root, then burst to expand throughout his body as he merged with the rippling reflections and with the water through which he waded, mechanically scattering pellets of insect poison.

He slept soundly that night, but in the morning when he awakened he found himself more badly bitten than he'd been the day before. Once again he was assigned to Dusum's crew, but this time the monitor failed to offer him any Dakkini wood.

That night Lozan's nightmares resumed.

Naming Day morning, the sixteen-year-olds were awakened before dawn. A priest was waiting to take them to the central orphanage in Temple City.

They left Agad at first light, without having eaten. The priest kept to high ground so it took them most of the morning to get to the monorail line. Sren kept pace about two meters behind the priest, careful not to trample his shadow. Behind the orphanmaster came the orphans led by Dorjii and Lozan, neither of whom had any such inhibitions about Sren's shadow. Often Dorjii would step on Sren's heels, then apologize insincerely when the orphanmaster turned to yell at him.

Dorjii seemed to be enjoying himself. Lozan attempted to keep up the pretense that he was having an equally good time.

There was a train waiting for them on the embankment. The orphans had the last car, where they were all crushed together in a space meant for perhaps a third their number. The windows would not open and the air

inside was hot and sticky. They were already covered with mud and, most of them, with scabs. As they rubbed against each other, the mud, kept liquid by the moist air and by their sweat, gradually covered their whole bodies and faces with a thin film. The car stank. Ever present, vats and dbee flitted among them. The orphans were too tired to kill more than a few of them.

Lozan was near the center of the car, with three boys on either side of him, so he saw little of the city through which they were passing. A glimpse of low stone buildings, purplish when they weren't gray, a brief view of sodden streets full of trudging people.

He could see more whenever the train made one of its frequent stops, though the doors to their car were never opened. At each stop, small cloth stalls crowded the stationyard walls and thin-faced children hawked sweetrolls through the open windows of the other cars. The children would look through the windows of Lozan's car at the packed orphans within, then turn incuriously away.

Though few people got on or off at any given stop, each stationyard was crowded with petty officials, vendors, fortune-tellers, beggars, and relatives of the travelers, plus a few people just watching the train. The beggars all had their left ears cropped—the traditional license of their profession—and each of them had the number of the station where he or she was allowed to beg tattooed in purple just below the right eye.

A fortune-teller standing just outside Lozan's window invited passersby to learn the future his trained birds would select for them out of a deck of Miso cards. Lozan wondered if that had been what Dorjii's parents had really done.

There was a loud retching sound in the back of the car as the train accelerated. Lozan looked back. Tad had vomited and those in front of him, too closely packed to have been able to move away, were now yelling at him and beating him as best they could in the cramped space. Lozan grinned. This train ride was the kind of thing he could endure without effort, the kind of thing that would never get to him. It reassured him, made him feel less impotent, helpless.

Finally, at the largest station they had yet seen, Sren and the priest unlocked their door and the orphans stumbled out. The priest let them breathe and stretch for a moment, then led them out of the stationyard and down a long deserted street leading them in the direction of the Temple. At its end, Lozan could see the warning statue of a tutelary demon which marked the end of the city and the beginning of the kilometers-wide

expanse of dead rock which separated the city from the Temple which had given it its name. But distant though they really were, they were so close that only the face of the lowest level could be seen through the mist and rain, a looming wall of gigantic oblong stones, dead black, rising until it was lost in the distances above. Each stone looked larger than all of Agad Orphanage.

The priest led them down the right side of the street along the edge of a wide gutter brimming with foul-smelling water. One of the orphans at the head of the line slipped on a slimy spot where the gutter had overflowed and fell into the water. Moments later, Lozan heard another splash. He glanced back, saw Tad being held under water by four grim-faced orphans.

The street was still empty. The priest led them past a shrine, an intricately carved cube of black stone two hundred meters on a side, surmounted by a tapering golden dome, and on to a gate set in a long wall of smooth gray stone. In the arch above the gate the words, "All is transitory, painful, and unreal," were carved.

At the gate, Sren and the priest surrendered them to a balding monitor who told them his name was Randal. He checked their names off on a list, then led them through the gate and across a wide open space into a large building, then down a flight of narrow stairs to a wide, low-ceilinged room with three great tubs set into its floor. Here he had them strip and bathe, two at a time in each tub. Lozan and Dorjii were the first ones in; the water in the tubs at Agad was never changed and if you didn't get in early you might as well not get in at all. Dorjii had been famous at Agad for his fastidiousness and Lozan had followed his example in bathing twice a week whenever possible.

When Lozan emerged from the tub, he was handed fresh clothing by a boy Randal had impressed as an assistant. The clothing was identical with that he'd worn all his life, except that his new tunic was black instead of brown. The new clothes fit no worse than his old ones had.

When all the Agad orphans had been bathed, Randal took them to the eating hall. It was huge, at least ten times as big as the one at Agad, and filled. In a corner, away from the other tables, Lozan could see a party of about two hundred girls, presumably from Vtbhaga Orphanage. Their hair was cropped as short as his; distance blurred them so that had it not been for the half-veils hiding the lower parts of their faces Lozan would have been unable to tell they were girls. Some of the other Agad orphans were pointing at them and discussing them in loud voices.

Lozan dismissed them from his mind and ate hungrily, though the food was far worse than that he'd learned to despise at Agad. The easily resisted discomfort of the journey had revived his spirits. It had been part of the familiar world, the world that had never posed him a problem he couldn't solve or evade. As long as there was nothing to turn him traitor to himself—and why should there be? They'd learned who he was. They couldn't be planning on putting him in a position of trust.

Unless they'd decided to change him.

The meal over, they scraped their dishes and followed Randal through a doorway into another hall. High above them on the far wall, an unsupported stone slab jutted out. They were crowded in close to the slab's shadow. Behind them, other orphans pushed and shoved, attempting to get to the front.

Everywhere except above the stone slab the glow bulbs dimmed and went out. A priest with a white circle on the forehead of his mask came to the edge of the slab and silently surveyed the upraised faces.

Almost directly below him, Lozan and Dorjii craned their necks looking up at him.

"Old," Dorjii said, and Lozan could see that the dark figure was racked with tremors which cloak, cowl, and mask could not quite hide. The priest's stance was rigid, only the trembling of his cloak revealing his state, and that only to those close enough to him to see it.

When he spoke his voice was steady and powerful, though thin with age:

"Praise Be to Night.

"Praise Be to the Mother. Praise Be to the Preserver. Praise Be to the Dakkini of the Just Wrath.

"Praise Be to the Mother, Who alone intercedes for us in Nal-K'am with Yama the Stern, the Unmerciful Judge. Praise Be to the Mother, Whose compassionate love outweighs the black pebbles of our sins on Yama's scales. Praise Be to the Mother, Who has given up the Bliss of Abiding with the Empty One that we may be reborn mortal, and alive.

"All Praise Be to Night the Mother.

"Praise Be to the Preserver, Whose mercy alone keeps us suspended here in Pret'yaka Naraka, here on the outer skin of the Hell That Is Five Hells, here where our suffering is so much less than we merit.

"Her mercy alone keeps those among us who have killed without desire

to repent from Yan-sos, where the S'in-je would cut and tear us to pieces again and again.

"Her mercy alone keeps those among us who have killed without desire to repent and who have stolen that which we were not worthy to possess, who have taken the food and bedding and medicine of the sick for our own use, from the Hell of T'ig-nag, where the S'in-je would nail us to a floor of burning iron and draw sixteen black lines upon our body to guide them in cutting us asunder with their saws of burning iron.

"Her mercy alone keeps those among us who have killed and stolen without desire to repent and who have indulged their thirst for improper love from Bsdus'joms. In Bsdus'joms, the S'in-je lead us into forests of trees whose leaves are sword blades. In these forests are women so irresistibly desirable that the sinner pursues them up and down the trees though the bladed leaves slice and hack his body, shredding flesh, muscle, and bone.

"Her mercy alone keeps those of us who have killed and stolen and indulged in improper love without desire to repent and who have wrongly engaged in the use of intoxicants from falling to Nu-bod, where the S'in-je pry open our mouths and pour molten copper down our throats.

"All Praise Be to Night the Preserver.

"Praise Be to the Dakkini of the Just Wrath, Who casts those among us who lie and slander Her name, Who takes those among us who would condemn the rest of us to further damnation by their lying blasphemies and foul persuasions, and casts them down into Nu-bod Ch'en-po, where She watches with compassion as the S'in-je boil them in iron kettles and cause the lies they have uttered to become snakes that are born within them and eat out their entrails.

"All Praise Be to Night, the Dakkini of the Just Wrath,

Who even when She casts us into Nu-bod Ch'en-po, yet saves us from Ts'a-ba, from Rab-tu T'sa-wa, and from the endless torments of Mnar-med.

"You, Orphans—you are those who would have passed your existences here in Pret'yaka Naraka, suspended over the torments of the Hell That Is Five Hells, in greater hunger, in greater thirst, than the Tantalized Ghosts, the Yi-dvag, were Her mercy not infinite. She has clothed you, She has fed you, She has caused you to be sheltered, while many of those outside these walls, rejecting Her favor, have been given Yama's justice and starve, naked and unprotected. Be thankful. Praise Her.

"Praise Her, thank Her yet again, for from you alone in all Nal-K'am does She choose those whom it pleases Her to elevate to Her priesthood. Only to you does She open the priesthood, only to you does She open the sisterhood—and only to those who have become priests or sisters is open the possibility of mortal incarnation while still in your present state of existence.

"Be loyal to Her, for Her hand and Her hand alone holds you here in Pret'yaka Naraka, and She alone can grant you living incarnation in the next life.

"Be worshipful, for She alone is worthy of your worship.

"Praise Her, for She alone withholds Yama's torments and keeps you here, in Pret'yaka Naraka, and this from mercy alone.

"Obey Her, for She alone is your true Mistress and in Her service alone does Righteousness lie.

"And fear Her, fear Her always, for none can stand against Her wrath."

The priest paused, then continued in a harsher voice:

"Abase yourselves! Kneel and hold your foreheads to the floor. Remain thus, thanking Her for Her mercy, until you are led from here."

The glow bulbs above the slab went out and Lozan could see that the priest was surrounded by a corona of blue flame. Then that too was gone and the hall was in darkness.

The floor was cold against his forehead.

Gently, so smoothly that he was not aware just when it began, a languid upwelling of silver-gleaming bubbles invaded him. This was not the violent explosion that had torn him from himself at Agad but a subtle chorus: *Praise Her, Be Thankful, Trust...* Around him he heard sighs of pleasure as his companions abandoned themselves to the gentle ecstasy. Only Lozan resisted.

A priest was standing beside him, his robes glowing with a deep purple luminescence. The priest tapped Dorjii on the shoulder. Dorjii looked up at him.

"Follow me."

"The Temple?"

"Yes. Follow me."

Dorjii left. Lozan remained kneeling until he too felt a tap on his shoulder. Gingerly, afraid of losing the profound concentration that

enabled him to keep hold of his sense of identity, he rose to his feet.

"Follow me," the priest's soft voice said, and Lozan followed as his guide unerringly picked his way through the crowd of kneeling figures. They stepped through a doorway and it was suddenly light, though no light had shone through the open door.

The light came from beneath the surface of a pool of swirling water. The sweet, heavy perfume of djaka blossoms pervaded the air. On the wall behind the pool was a great mask of the Mother.

"Your earrings," the priest said. Lozan removed them and handed them over. "Take off your clothes and bathe until I return."

The priest waited until Lozan had entered the pool, then left, taking Lozan's clothes with him. The water was warm and more than warm, with a deep-seated heat that seeped through the skin and soothed the muscles underneath. The water tasted sweet on Lozan's lips. There was no danger here and Lozan allowed himself to relax.

"Come with me." The priest was back.

"My clothes."

"I have others for you."

As Lozan stepped from the pool, he noticed a cloud of short, black hairs floating on its surface. Startled, he put his hand to his head. He was bald. Even his eyebrows were gone.

He took the clothes the priest held out to him, smooth green trousers and a tight-fitting shirt the color of blood. Red and green: the colors of Yama, God of Judgment.

"Am I to be given to Yama while still in this existence, Reverence?" he asked.

"Night has not abandoned you. Dress."

He dressed and followed the priest through the door, but instead of finding himself back among the kneeling orphans he found himself in a small, dimly lit room. A priest wearing blood-red robes and a mask of dark green sat on a massive chair of rough red stone; the priest's whole body blazed with shifting purple fires. Through the flames Lozan could see the white circle on the forehead of the green mask. The body shook and quivered beneath its cloak and the flames wavered around it, yet the mask hung steady and unmoving, its black lenses fixed on Lozan's face.

"Kneel," his guide whispered. "Kneel and kiss his left foot! Quickly!" he snapped when Lozan made no move to comply.

Lozan knelt, the black bracelet tight on his wrist. The flames withdrew from the priest's left leg and Lozan kissed the smooth surface of his boot.

The flame-wrapped priest raised his hand and stretched his fingers towards the kneeling orphan. The room exploded with unseen light. Everything was transfigured. The priest radiated holiness, authority, and strength, as though Yama Himself animated him. When he spoke his voice was more than human:

"Lozan, Yama relinquishes you to the Goddess Night, and the Goddess takes you for Her own. You are not Lozan now but another, nameless, Her servant and nothing more."

Lozan looked up at the priest. The priesthood? But he was dressed in red and green—

And the priest shriveled; he was dying, rotting, his robes rags through which Lozan could see his flesh being eaten by long, black worms. Yet throughout he remained a figure of majesty. Horror gave Lozan the strength to say, "Reverence, I am unworthy."

"Silence." The priest gestured with a skeletal arm and the horror receded. His flesh brimmed with light and an expression of godlike pity gave life to the features of his mask. "The Goddess uplifts whom She wills. Do you think She does not know about your petty transgressions? She ignores them! It is not for such as you to question Her mercy. Stand!" His voice filled the tiny room.

Lozan stood obediently while a red cloak was placed over his shoulders and a green mask was set upon his face, where it adhered like a second skin.

"You are Yama's still," the old priest said, "but soon you will be Night's."

Lozan's guide took him by the arm, led him from the room. They went down a long flight of stairs, along a narrow corridor. The corridor ended in a wall which swung away when the priest's black-gloved hand traced a pattern in the air before it.

They stepped into a huge cubical chamber of blazing white stone. The light was fierce, constant but with a strange subliminal rippling. The air itself seemed luminous.

A platform of red metal in the center of the room was ringed with concentric circles of the same metal. The outermost circles were low; each ring in was a little higher than the one surrounding it. On the platform stood three dark figures. The strange quality of the light made it impossible for Lozan to tell how big or how far away the figures were.

The door swung shut behind them. Lozan looked back. The wall was an unbroken expanse of blazing white. As if the door swinging shut had been a signal of some sort, the priest began to walk toward the platform at the center of the pattern. He stepped over the raised metal circles as though afraid to touch them. Lozan followed him, imitating his caution.

Lozan found it increasingly difficult to keep his unfamiliar red cloak from brushing against the red metal. Once, where the metal ring was a little higher than his knee, a corner of the cloak escaped his grasp and touched the metal but nothing happened. When Lozan looked up he could see the priest climbing the four steps that led to the platform.

The huge figures on the platform—there were three of them, fashioned from some shining black substance that could have been stone or metal or neither—stood with their backs to Lozan. He felt he should know them but did not. From beyond the figure closest to him came a faint blue glow that the room's pervading luminosity had earlier masked.

The priest stepped up onto the platform and disappeared behind the figure, which Lozan could see stood three times the height of a man. As Lozan ascended the stairs recognition came: the Dakkini of the Just Wrath. Why had he failed to recognize her before? The other two figures had to be representations of the Mother and the Preserver.

Now that Lozan was on the platform he could see that the blue glow came from a fourth statue lying crumpled on its side—a fallen figure that Lozan recognized as Sin Vanquished, though Sin's body was more youthful and firmly muscled than in any representation that Lozan had seen before. Behind the twisted figure, the priest stood facing Lozan.

"Stand there, on the black," he commanded, pointing to a black disk set into the floor at the point where the gazes of all four figures met. Lozan did as he was told.

There was something disturbing about the figures. Each of them was—wrong. It was not just that Sin was youthful, His face alive with intelligence, when He should have been stretched skin over malformed bone with the face of an idiot. Why was there a hint of deformity in the body beneath the Preserver's cloak, and why did it seem that one of Her shoulders was higher than the other? The Mother's face had never worn that look of cow-like stupidity, and Her body was too slim, too sensuous, not matronly enough. The Dakkini of the Just Wrath—that was harder. There was nothing, perhaps, except a hint of cruelty in the expression, a look of abandon in the eyes, yet the Dakkini of the Just Wrath was the most disturbing.

Is this how the priests picture Night? Lozan asked himself, not sure why the figures disturbed him as profoundly as they did.

"Place your left arm at your side and extend your right arm in front of you. Gaze into the eyes of Night the Preserver." The priest's voice came from behind him.

The room's luminosity seemed to increase. The Three Aspects were covered with pinpoints of swirling fire and Lozan could feel a growing vibration through his feet. There was an instant of total pain and the bracelet fell from his wrist.

The world shattered into slow-drifting fragments.

The drift slowly coalesced into a new world. Everything was veiled by an ever-thickening orange mist. Lozan was in some sort of transparent cylinder and around him stretched endless vistas of similar cylinders in which nude bodies floated. He tried to move his head and could not. He could not feel his body.

A priest in multicolored robes came walking slowly up the corridor between the rows of tubes. Lozan was sure the man was coming for him. The priest's movements became slower and slower until he froze, balanced in mid-step.

CHAPTER

4

Lozan's gaze was fixed on the frozen figure of the approaching priest. Was the priest paralyzed, even as Lozan seemed to be? But if so, why didn't the unbalanced body fall forward?

Nowhere in the great hall was there any motion. Tubes stretched away in rows, seemingly to infinity. None of the bodies in them bobbed or drifted. The orange cast of everything remained constant. It was as if time had stopped.

It's me, Lozan realized. They've done something to me, stopped me so completely that I keep on seeing what I saw when they did it to me.

A strange passionless fear began to grow in him. He pictured black worms making slow tunnels through his unresisting flesh. Would he even feel them?

Yet his thoughts brought with them no adrenaline excitement. His

anxiety was disembodied, of the mind only. Am I dead? he wondered, but even that question was cold, abstract.

This was no Hell of which he had heard.

As much as he wanted anything, he wanted to shut out the image of the approaching priest but there was nothing he could do. When he tried to close his eyes there was no sense of resistance, no feeling of fighting the weight of drugged flesh, but his will was dissipated, diffused, lost in the nothingness where his body had been. How could you command the fading memory of an eyelid to close?

For an interval, he examined the bodies in the frozen field of his peripheral vision. Those he could see clearly were human, both male and female, and seemingly about his own age. Like himself, they were hairless. He supposed that they too were orphans entombed on their Naming Days. There had to be some connection between these rows of tubes and the tubes in the vault on Nosferatu that Lavelle had told him about, but what? These tubes contained human beings like himself.

Lozan, who had never seen a nude woman, was interested to see how the girls floating in the tubes differed from the boys, but his curiosity was short-lived, unsustained by either attraction or repulsion.

At least they all looked healthy. If they were being eaten away from inside they showed no sign of it, and there were too many bodies for them all to have been entombed when he had been.

How long had he been here? Where was he? How had he gotten here? There was no way of knowing, no way of finding out.

No way of knowing: the eventual answer to all his questions. He went over what had happened to him again and again but found only more questions without answers. No solutions, no help, no relief.

He grew bored with fruitless reexamination of the same limited facts. He turned his attention to the future and with no basis on which to make true plans tried to lose himself in fantasies of escape and revenge. But devoid of emotional content his fantasies soon bored him and he gave them up.

At least he supposed it was soon. How much time had passed? His mind never tired; he had thought his way over the same courses so many times that he had lost count. He grew as detached from his thoughts as he was from his emotions. The rows of encapsulated bodies were inescapable but he ceased to regard them; the questions and fantasies still passed through his mind but he had lost all interest in them. They persisted, mechanically,

as though happening somewhere outside of him.

Gradually he became aware of a darkness, a way of seeing somehow below or behind the unchanging images to a restful dimness, a soft comfortable space which was strangely familiar, though he had never before been aware of it. He allowed himself to slip down into it, felt the room fading from his consciousness.

Lozan floated in darkness. The cycle of fears, plans, and memories had been left behind with the image of the hall. He floated placid, content, and undisturbed.

So gently that his first awareness was of having been seeing them for a long time, the darkness came alive with stars of every imaginable color. He felt a pleasant sense of anticipation as his floating awareness seemed to recognize and welcome them.

More and more stars were becoming visible. He floated in a thick fog of softly blazing lights. They were all around him, filling all space.

In the distance a star began to move. He watched with detached anticipation as it grew to a ball of golden light, arching towards him. He felt it strike him, defining his chest where before there had been only a void. It sank through him, a softly spreading pool of tingling warmth and awareness. As the tingling spread, he could feel his body with a clarity that was more like vision than touch but which had the intimacy of touch.

An emerald star came curving in from the right. It sank gently into the face that materialized at its touch and Lozan was lost in a universe of soft green light. Warmth and awareness spread from his face throughout his head and down into his body. The pulsations from the emerald star met those spreading from his chest and reinforced them. He felt his bodily awareness rise to a new level, to a clarity and precision transcending anything he had ever experienced.

Stars were coming at him from all directions—crimson, jade, violet, gold, azure, turquoise—sinking into every part of his body. With each gentle impact came greater detail, further precision; with each impact he perceived the individual stars in the cloud surrounding him with greater clarity.

Now each muscle of his body was limned, each separate fiber distinct and clear. Now he was gliding inside the living bone, touching the marrow with invisible fingertips. Now he was the bloodstream, aware of the path each corpuscle would have taken had his heart been beating. And behind and within each cell, each organ, he could feel the ghosts of other possibilities clustered like golden shadows.

As the sense of the void behind the static image of the hall had grown, so his awareness of these other possibilities grew until he found himself completely within one of the shadow bodies, experiencing from within the altered tensions of unfamiliar muscles, the unaccustomed ways new facial muscles attached themselves to a different skull. He became aware of the differing cells, the unique energy configurations, and then, with an almost imperceptible shift, he became aware of a new set of configurations, a new body. He drifted from shadow body to shadow body, feeling the altering flesh, the shifting bone, exulting yet detached. Some shadows were male, others female; he drifted though all with a fascinated interest that was not curiosity but was content to rejoice in what it found.

His own body built itself up around him again, its familiar contours charged with ecstatic energy. From the six directions, multicolored rivers of light flowed in dancing turbulence, meeting and merging within him until he was nothing but light, each atom of his being a sphere of lambent joy. From within him, the golden shadows radiated out in shimmering spirals until they merged with the most distant stars. This went on forever.

And then he was snapped from eternity. The rivers flickered, dimmed, went out. The spiraling shadows were gone. The stars were gone. He was shrinking, collapsing back into a body of dull flesh. There was a dizziness, then the sharp pain of something striking his forehead.

He was lying sprawled and twisted on some unyielding surface. It was bitterly cold and as the chill ate into him he tried to draw his body up into a tight ball. He couldn't move.

His head throbbed and he could feel a warm sticky pool-blood?—forming beneath his right cheek. Had he fallen? He felt nauseated. His thoughts were unbearably sluggish. His muscles would not obey him.

It was dark, not with the comforting dimness of the void from which he had just been wrenched but with the appalling emptiness of blindness. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed. He was as helpless as he had been in the tube and far more miserable.

The central fact of Lozan's life had always been his struggle to master the hostile world of the orphanage. And he had almost always won. Even when he did something for which he knew punishment was inevitable, he did so by choice. If he'd cared enough he could have controlled his rage, let Dorjii take the blame, or maintained his position among the orphans in some other way. The choice had always been his and he had always known

himself free to choose.

Now, blind, paralyzed, and in pain, he had no choice but to submit to a situation beyond his comprehension. His strengths were meaningless, his future out of his control.

Hell? Is this a Hell? Was that one of the Lha Heavens?

No! Panic lapped at him, all the worse in its contrast with the timeless bliss he had just experienced. His mind skittered from impossible hope to impossible fear, doing anything to avoid confronting his real helplessness.

This is real. I'm alive and this is real. He forced himself to focus on his ragged breathing, willing it smooth; he made himself feel the pain in his legs, not try to avoid it. He refused to worry about the future, wrenched himself back to the present.

After a while, a measure of calm returned and with it a renewed faith in his ability to master himself. He could think rationally again.

He had been in the tube where he could see and not feel, then in the void with a body—many bodies—more alive than his own had ever been, then here, where he could feel but not see. The void was the key to what had happened, it had to be.

Unless it was a priestly seduction as the bubble-stream had been?

No, he decided, not sure why he knew. *I got there on my own.* But the priests must have pulled him back to his body again. If he could return to the void—but when he'd gone there before his mind had been severed from his body and now he was once again linked to his physical self. Had he created himself a new body in the void or had he somehow brought his original body with him? And if he returned to the void could he take his body with him, leaving the priests nothing with which to pull him back?

What if his body died? Without a tube to preserve his body when he left it, could his mind survive?

But it was worth the risk. Anything was better than lying helpless on this cold floor.

Lozan could sense the void all around him, waiting for him under the reality his senses reported to him. He tried to disengage himself from his feelings and thoughts, tried to slip behind them into the void's welcoming obscurity. But the void eluded him; he could not escape the stubborn reality of the floor beneath him or the pain in his twisted legs. Perhaps being in his body cut him off from the void. But he had to get there in his body. He concentrated harder, willing his mind to complete stillness.

Voices. They seemed to come beating in on him from the void, soft shimmering whispers he could almost see, almost hear, almost feel. Then the whispers were blazing, burning incomprehensibly into his mind:

Your Ritual Approaches, Younger Sister. (A great expanse of black stone. Fierce pride. A dark shape taking on substance.) Have you prepared your transformation?

(Affirmation. Shifting interplay of forms and textures. Sequence of incomprehensible symbols. THE BLADE flashes and blood wells forth.)

(Assent.) The Goddess will aid you. I may advise you in your choice of sacrifice but you must then proceed unassisted until you have completed your transformation. (Blood flowing over and through an intricately carved pattern. Strength/Growth/Joy.) Which (Colored lights/Nude figures) will you choose?

(A bright globe of golden light/A tiny male human figure.)

The floating figure: Lozan recognized himself. But he had understood nothing else; though he could recall what he had received, each image/word/sensation was so powerful, so uniquely itself, so resonant, that it refused to link up with the others in any pattern he could understand. The whole remained fragments of brilliance, separate, incomprehensible.

Lozan's concentration had been shattered. The conversation was gone. But it had concerned him; he knew he had to take in as much of it as he could in the hope of understanding it later. He stilled his mind:

(Deformed limbs/Rotting meat with dbee swarming over it/A slack drooling face with empty eyes.) Did you do this, Child?

No. (Sincerity I Fear I Frustration I Respect.)

(Assent.) None of us could be so inept. A priest approaching his marriage? (A contemptible lout with a low forehead dressed in black robes, accompanied by an equally ignoble woman, their faces transfigured by brutish awe.) I will see to him later. But if this (Golden light/Lozan's naked body) were whole/right/untampered-with, it would be magnificent. Can you undo the damage unassisted before your Ritual?

(Assurance. A slack face faming with intelligence/A cripple throwing away his crutches and walking.)

(Assent.)

Silence/blindness/the feel of the floor beneath him and the pain in his

legs. The voices were gone. In Lozan's mind half-glimpsed fragments of alien images still floated, a confused mass of glimmering strands winding in and out of darkness.

There had been two voices, but when he tried to grasp the meaning of their conversation the strands seemed to shift, forming patterns which broke apart and recombined before he could make sense of them. Then he caught an image fragment which seemed more stable than the rest and followed it down to where it linked itself to a dark repellent pattern that wound like a snake around and through all the other patterns. He understood.

The knife poised, descending. His blood spurting.

They're going to kill me. Sacrifice me to the Goddess. He felt sweat tracing a course over his shuttered eyelids and knew a moment's relief that his eyes were closed, not open and unseeing.

No. A slow rage began to build within him, driving out all fear. *No.* He remembered:

He'd been eleven the day all the Agad orphans had been taken to one of Temple City's lesser squares to see criminals punished. Priests had marched the prisoners to the gallows in a long line—there had been more than forty of them, thin, ragged men with heavy chains on their wrists and ankles, their faces dead.

Dead except for the face of one man, though at first he looked no different from his companions. But when one of the priests grew careless and came too close to him, the prisoner's face had come alive with hatred and he had struck the careless priest a killing blow on the back of the head with the heavy chains binding his wrists.

The priest had died quickly, the rebellious prisoner very slowly, burned and stretched on the blasphemer's rack. But it had been worth it to him, Lozan realized. Given the chance he would have done the same.

Given the chance he would do the same.

Pushing his rage to the back of his mind, he concentrated on what he could remember of the strange dialogue. This time the fragments fell into place, formed a comprehensible pattern: it was as if the recognition and acceptance of his coming death had been the only key he needed to unlock the total meaning. He searched through the vivid strands, discarding one after another as he looked for something he could use as a weapon.

A priest had somehow blinded and paralyzed him. And a priest was almost beneath contempt to those planning on killing him, though they

too worshiped Night.

But one of them was curing him; he would not be helpless. Yet—his cure was only to better ready him for his execution. Only as long as he remained unrecovered was he safe. No—safety was a dead dream, as stupid a hope for him as it had been for the prisoner who had killed the priest. He tried to open his eyes. The muscles of his eyelids twitched, as they would have twitched had insects been walking on them, but he could not force his eyes to open.

He tried again, putting all the strength of his will into the effort. His body was swimming in chill sweat before he was rewarded with a blurred glimpse of black floor, then he was blind again.

Still, that meant he had some time left in which to plan. He reviewed the conversation he had heard, realized that he was certain that the speakers had not known he could hear them. He wondered an instant at his certainty, then accepted it. His knowledge might give him some advantage, and he had nothing else upon which to base any hopes.

Could he listen in to more of the whispers?

He tried to blank his mind again but could hear nothing. And he could no longer sense the void waiting just out of reach. It must have been whatever that priest had done to him that had allowed him to overhear the soundless conversation. Now he was deaf again.

But he still had the advantage of his knowledge. And—he fastened eagerly on the thought—they must expect some cooperation from him, else why all the preparations, why the ritualistic confrontation with the old priest back at the orphanage? He would act bewildered, compliant, go through the motions until he got close enough... If they bound his wrists he would have the satisfaction of crushing his would-be murderess's skull with his chains, short-lived though that satisfaction might be.

He tried to open his eyes again, succeeded. But it took a great effort to keep them open, and he allowed them to close a moment later.

A few meters in front of him two curved ridges of red metal rose from the black floor. Just beyond them, the black surface ended in a curving wall which glowed red, as though with dull flame. The color of the wall had reminded him of something, but—He couldn't bring it to mind.

He tried to open his eyes again, succeeded in keeping them open. He drew his arms in under him and pushed himself upright, his muscles responding smoothly but without strength. His eyes felt tired; it was a strain to keep them from closing again. How much longer did he have

before they were going to kill him?

The ridges formed two concentric circles, with himself at the center. The red wall just outside them was actually a glowing hemisphere arching over Lozan, enclosing him completely.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, rested a second, then got shakily to his feet. His legs would barely support him. But the throbbing in his head was gone, and when he touched an exploratory hand to his forehead he found the shallow gash in it already closed. Absentmindedly, he scraped dried blood from his cheek.

He pivoted, examining the hemisphere above him. It was featureless and gave off no heat he could feel, though it looked hot. He stepped towards it and was reaching out to test the strength of the material of which it was made when things came together in his mind and he realized what it reminded him of: the way the bracelet on his wrist had burned when he'd tried to reach Lavelle. He snatched his hand back and sat down again in the center of the rings, successfully resisting the urge to throw himself flat.

If he could only get in touch with Lavelle! He must have learned enough to buy his way off-planet. The hall he'd been in, with the tubes like the ones Lavelle had described to him—that was the proof Lavelle needed. If he could get to Lavelle—

Unless Dorjii had already done so and Lavelle had left Nal-K'am with him. And Lavelle had promised Dorjii a way to get in touch with him.

No. It would do no good to escape. There was no shelter he could count on anywhere on Nal-K'am. Better to do as much damage as he could. Like the prisoner with his chained wrists.

I'm not afraid, he realized. *Not afraid of dying.*

His weakness was gone. Strength was flowing into him now, strength such as he had never imagined. In a way the sensation was like bathing again in the rivers of the void. Either he still retained some connection with it that the priests—that those who controlled the priests—had been unable to sever, or else the cure they had worked on him had done more than merely restore him to normal. He felt alive with an insane confidence that ignored the odds against him.

Younger Sister. He seized upon the title by which the second speaker had addressed his would-be murderess, drew hope from it. On Nal-K'am, women were considered incompetents, and though the Offworlder had mentioned worlds where women were considered the equals of men the

statement had made no lasting impression. Lozan felt more confident when he thought of the fact that he would be facing an opponent who was only a woman—no, better yet, a mere girl, and one who would have to defeat him without help.

Careful, he told himself. *You don't know enough to be confident. All she has to do is paralyze you again.* But if she were going to do that, why cure him in the first place? And he had already decided that they expected some sort of cooperation from him. What he had to do was concentrate all his energies on staying alert and ready for his chance. They would be coming for him soon. He had to be ready.

Though he waited in a tense half-crouch, without moving or relaxing, he did not tire. The energy flooding into him was still building as the hemisphere dimmed to a smoky red bubble and flickered out of existence.

He was in a huge arena of black stone. The walls must have been thousands of meters tall.

The Temple. He was in the Temple; this could be nowhere else.

At the center of the arena was a block of white stone the shape of a man's coffin. It rested on another, similar, block which looked as though it had been extruded from the black stone of the floor. Beyond the block, Lozan could see a set of rings exactly like those in which he was standing, though the other set was empty. There was no one else in the arena.

Statues of the Three Aspects of Night as he'd seen them in the orphanage projected from the left wall, their united gaze falling on the white stone. Above him and to his right, half-hidden in a sparkling crystalline haze, were three tiers of what he finally realized were seats fashioned from intricate rococo filigrees of glistening red metal.

The seats were empty.

Lozan walked warily towards the center stone, looking for something he could use as a weapon. But the stone hid nothing, though now that he was close to it he could see that its upper surface was not as featureless as he had at first thought it but was carved with an intricate pattern of grooves that was both curving and fanshaped. He tested one of the channels with his finger, sliding it along the smooth furrow, and noticed that as the channel approached the apex of the fan on the far side of the stone it got deeper. He looked more closely, saw that the point of the fan ended in a small hole.

He looked around again, then rounded the stone. At about the same height as his waist, a cylindrical cavity about twice the size of his hand

was cut into the stone. Though it was empty there was a tiny point of light on its floor from the hole in its roof. The smooth alabaster surface was clean but a faint odor Lozan could not identify lingered about it.

Looking up, he found himself staring into the stone eyes of the Dakkini of Just Wrath and he knew: the center stone was located where Sin Vanquished had been located in the tableau at the orphanage, and the carvings—

When he'd seen them earlier, whisper-imaged, they'd been obscured with his blood.

This is where they're going to try to kill me. He had to avoid the center. He looked around again, then ran back in the direction from which he'd come, not resting until he had his back pressed against the black stone wall of the arena.

Strength and energy were still flooding into him. Though he'd run at least a quarter kilometer, he wasn't even breathing hard. He knew he dared not trust the feeling of prowess that accompanied the energy flowing into him, yet still he found himself relaxing a little. So far, at least, he was still free to run or attack; though he was weaponless he was still unchained. And there was no bracelet on his wrist to compel his obedience.

A sound just over the threshold of audibility penetrated to him, low wailing notes and muffled drum beats. The sound permeated him, sinking into his thoughts and merging with him until it was the beating of his heart, the rhythm of his breathing.

And then a voice, a voice which seemed to come from everywhere in the arena:

"Nameless One, you are here to await the Mother's mercy. Your time of purification has passed and you have been washed free of sin through the Mother's intercession.

Surrender your will to Her, lay down your past and all your memories, for soon She shall come to you and grant you that most precious of gifts: life itself, the life of a mortal free to perfect himself further and strive for rebirth in the Lha Heavens.

"Know that you are to be observed by S'in-je set here for their own punishment, that they may watch you and envy at the perfection of the reward granted you. Know this and be not afraid, but await Her coming with glad heart.

"Know that you are to be granted not only mortal life but that most

precious of gifts, mortal love."

The haze over the tiers of seats thickened, hiding them from view. It solidified, becoming for an instant a single billion-faceted crystal. Then it faded to a thin mist and was gone.

CHAPTER

5

Giant men and women were standing in front of the seats of the highest of the three tiers. They appeared to be at least three meters tall, their heavily muscled bodies covered with intricate serpentine patterns, patterns which covered their arms and legs as well as their bodies and which rose from their thick necks to flower on their faces and bald skulls. No two patterns were similar except in the dissonance of their colors, and Lozan was somehow sure that what he was seeing was neither paint nor costume but flesh. Each giant was dressed in a black kilt and, except for the jewels scattered seemingly at random around their heads and bodies, was otherwise nude.

Lozan glanced quickly back at the empty arena. Would he have to face a giantess? They looked powerful but perhaps they were too massive to move quickly—

The giants stood like rigid statues of bright metal. Around them the haze was reforming, thickening and solidifying until it was once again a single gigantic crystal. When it too had faded to mist, there was a second tier of motionless beings beneath the first. It was hard to make out the details of the new arrivals; they sparkled and glittered as though encased in layers of diamond, but even so it was plain to see that there was no uniformity among them. Some were larger than the giants above them, while others were smaller than Lozan himself. Many of them were not altogether human—one had antlers, another a ring-shaped head through which the red filigree of the seat behind it showed clearly. Beneath the glittering surfaces, colors writhed and flowed in fascinating, almost intelligible sequences.

Once again the haze appeared, solidified, vanished. Five figures now sat in the bottom tier. The outside two were masked and cloaked like priests, except that their robes and masks were not black but coruscated with prismatic fires. But if these two were almost familiar, the other three were so contrary to reason that Lozan thought they must be illusions like those

the priests created on Eclipse Day. He could see them with unnatural clarity, their forms leaping out at him with no blurring or loss of detail, and this too made him doubt their reality.

The one on the right appeared human, except for its great size and the two gnarled growths protruding from its skull where a human's ears would have been. The growths curved gently upward until they stood upright like the weathered trunks of trees and, indeed, they seemed to be topped with thick foliage. They were miniature trees with curved trunks, and though the air of the arena was still their boughs whipped back and forth as though tossed by a strong wind.

When Lozan first saw the being, both trees appeared green and lush, but almost immediately the tree on the left began to change color, its leaves fading to a sickly yellow, then darkening through reds and purples to a dull brown. The dead leaves withered and fell to the figure's bare shoulder, where they vanished. For a moment the wind-whipped branches were bare, then buds appeared and the cycle began to repeat itself.

The being on the left was by far the largest creature present. Shifting patterns of blue flame flickered across its gray skin. Its head was a huge puffy globe, featureless except for a ring of eye sockets around its equator. A single red eye seemed to swim beneath its skin, surfacing in turn in each eye socket. Its arms ended in red-lipped mouths with gleaming white teeth.

But bizarre though the others were, it was the central figure which caught and held Lozan's eye. Its iron black body was human-seeming except for the many-fingered hands at the ends of its long arms, but it had no head. Instead, directly above the shoulders the neck flared out into a wide flat pedestal on which two figures, one male, one female, were in constant motion: leaping, dancing, touching each other, and making love as though they were independent entities. As Lozan stared, the two tiny figures reached down to the pedestal and each picked up an eye which it held cradled in its arms so as to train it on the arena's center. The standing figures seated themselves. All motion ceased.

Lozan looked back to the arena. He was no longer alone.

But though he squinted and rubbed at his eyes, he could not force them to focus on the figure standing in the other set of rings. The thing was a blur, a vague multiple image, size, shape, and color all uncertain. But though he could not see her, he knew her for what she was.

She was becoming visible. The blur was drawing in on itself, seeming to flicker in and out of a constantly sharpening focus. She seemed smaller

than he had feared she would be, though with the flickering distortion he could not be sure.

He ran forward, hoping to take her by surprise. If he could get the knife away from her before she realized that he knew she—

But there was no knife. He stopped, confused, then retreated slowly back across the rings, back until he was once again pressed against the arena wall.

Where he had been expecting a giant or a monster, a slender girl stood, a girl as lovely as the watching creatures were grotesque. She was dressed in a long red cloak much like the one Lozan himself had briefly worn, only of some sheer, nearly transparent material through which the amber skin of her body glowed with a soft warmth that made Lozan feel he had never before seen true skin. Her hair was long and strange, a deep red that was sometimes black and which swirled around her when she moved like a cloud of dark flame. Her small, finely boned face framed eyes of lambent jade, cool in the warmth of her skin and hair, yet glowing with their own light. She seemed a creature of light, light made flesh, and yet there was nothing insubstantial or unreal about her.

Looking at her, Lozan felt that only she was real, that all other beings were mere caricatures. His hands were clammy and the sweat of his excitement was rank in his nostrils. He felt a Dakkini-wood tautness in his groin. His stomach knotted and he was briefly conscious of his nakedness.

The voice spoke again, repeating to the girl what it had already told Lozan but adding, "Together you two shall be united in Her name and together you shall receive your reward."

The girl shivered in the cold air and wrapped her thin cloak more tightly around her. She looked uneasily about, poised as if to run, perhaps trying to locate the voice's source. She was slender and her movements were full of nervous grace, but there was no exaggerated frailty to her; every line of her high-breasted body, every angle of her face expressed a flame-like vitality, a burning aliveness so pure and forceful that Lozan was bewildered by it.

Her eyes had found the watchers and she was staring up at them in frozen shock or fear, yet even so she seemed in motion. Was his every sense lying to him, must her loveliness be a trap? Did he have any choice but to try to kill her before she killed him?

Where was her knife?

If she wasn't his murderess, if she was another victim like himself, if he

had been meant to overhear that whispered conversation so that he would make her his victim— Who knew what amused those things watching them from the tiers?

Where was her knife? If she was going to kill him, where was her knife?

She finally looked away from the immobile watchers and her eyes came to rest on Lozan. A tentative smile lit her face. Lozan felt a surge of tenderness, of sympathy, wash over him. He wanted to go to her, comfort her. But he had no comfort to give. He could only watch her, his back to the cold stone of the arena wall.

The distance made it hard to read the expression on her face. As he studied it he felt her presence engulfing him, warm, velvet-soft... He found himself smiling, desperately twisted his features into a sneer but the green glow of her eyes was plunging him into gentleness, lassitude... Everything but her eyes, her green eyes, was fading, gone... Her green eyes, expressing something Lozan could never have named but which drew him in, soothed him and yet awakened within him new longings which he knew instinctively only she could satisfy.

His isolation, his loneliness at the orphanage where not even Dorjii had been able to understand him, the suddenly unbearable strain of never allowing himself to fail at anything, no matter what it was—all these rose up in him and all these, her eyes promised, she could soothe.

The world was a green mist. From its mist the voice sounded: "The Goddess commands you to come to Her and receive your reward. Come forward, come to the center, come to your mortality and your love."

The voice was the voice of the world.

The girl... He took a step *forward*, away from the wall, seeing nothing but the green mist. He took another, quicker step, ignoring the voice within him that was only now beginning to protest. He took another step and began to run *forward*—

And somehow that part of him which had been screaming at him to stop, to go back, made contact with the alien energy fountaining inside him and absorbed it, turned it to its own use, made it its own strength. Lozan halted, shielding his eyes behind his hand.

The girl was still visible through the flesh of his hand.

She was in his mind. Not real, in his mind! The muscles of his legs were tense with contradictory commands as his will fought hers for control of his body; he could feel his lips stretched in a mindless grin. How could he defend himself, how could he strike back, when his opponent was inside

himself? It would be so easy to take just one *step forward*, to feel the ecstatic play of muscles fulfilled as he *went forward*, to abandon himself to the joy of running *forward*—No! He caught hold of himself, thrust the image of the waiting knife, the spurting blood, between himself and the compulsion. Only the certainty of his death should he obey gave him the will to resist, only the alien vitality filling him gave him the strength.

But she doesn't have a knife. She doesn't have a knife.

The girl began walking towards the center stone, the blazing darkness that was her hair swirling about her as she moved. Though she walked as lightly as though gravity had no hold on her, yet there was a nervousness beneath her grace that stirred Lozan's sympathy despite all will to the contrary.

She knelt behind the stone a moment, then stood and faced Lozan, her hands held open before her in supplication or reassurance.

He had seen her through the flesh of his hand. She was not real.

There was a simplicity to her actions, a fitness, that made Lozan feel that the only possible thing for him to do was to walk forward and kneel facing her. He recognized the compulsion for what it was, but even as he identified it it worked on him and he found himself divided, struggling against himself in a battle he could never truly win. For without first ceasing to resist the compulsion, there was no way he could reach the girl to stop her from imposing it on him and once he complied with *it—forward!*—he would never again regain control.

The voice of Night spoke again: "Nameless One, you who were once Lozan, you displease the Goddess. Yet still will She grant you Her mercy if only you go to the center stone and there abase yourself before Her image. Only submit your will to Hers and She will grant you mortality and release you from Nal-K'am."

The girl was praying and Lozan recognized the prayer as one he had been taught in early childhood at the orphanage. The girl's voice was warm and clear, innocent but not childish; hearing her he was once again convinced she was what she appeared to be. Fighting his conviction, he tried to keep the image of the waiting knife before him; though there was no knife he concentrated on it until he could almost see its curving length. Though he told himself her hair was the color of dried blood he knew he was attempting to lie to himself—her hair was a cloud of flaming crystal filaments and it floated in his mind as it floated in the light.

No.

The arena was changing. A dank wind blew from walls wet and glistening, stone no longer but fleshy stretched membranes through which nightmare creatures struggled to make their way into the arena. Impossible arrays of teeth and suckered tentacles, clutching fingers and sharpened claws threatened to erupt into the arena; holes like sucking mouths appeared unexpectedly in the floor, closed with wet smacking sounds. Only a narrow path leading to the calm center of the arena where the girl waited remained free of menace.

She was on her knees again, praying in a voice so beautiful and truthful it made him forget where he was. The floor beneath him was heaving and tossing, slippery like the inside of a mouth. He fell, staggered to his feet, fell again.

There was a feather touch on his shoulder. He whirled, barely retaining his balance, to confront a wall transformed, through which questing cilia slowly reached for him. The surface was translucent and from the depths lidless eyes followed his movements.

The cilia were lengthening, thickening into tentacles, reaching out for him. He leaped back, narrowly avoiding a mouth that had formed in the floor behind him. The wall bulged outwards and its substance began to ooze from it, flowing like some thick pulpy liquid across the heaving floor. Half-formed limbs were visible in the churning depths. There was a smell like rotting meat.

Lozan turned, ran, skirting the open mouth's quivering lips. Almost as soon as he'd passed the mouth, the floor beneath his feet was solid again but he continued to run until he was once again in the rings where he had regained his body.

He took a quick look at the girl. Around the still-calm center where she knelt, the radiance was being slowly leached from the air. The arena was dimming and the shapes animating it now moved half-hidden by the deepening twilight, but an aureole of pure light still lingered around her. The radiance intensified her loveliness, purged it of any hint of menace by simple contrast with the grotesque forms around her. The illusion of normality she provided drew Lozan to her like a man dying of thirst to water, though he knew why she was waiting for him, though he knew what she wanted from him—

No. She would wait in vain; he would never willingly embrace his death. Better to stand and face the monsters of the arena; if he had to die he would at least cheat her of the pleasure of killing him herself.

He turned his back to her and her illusory sanctuary. He stood his

ground as the thing that had emerged from the wall flowed towards him.

Something happened to time. Continuity shattered into uneven fragments only loosely connected by memory. It was as though something he'd been looking at without noticing had suddenly leapt into focus. Each instant was a new recognition, a resolution which dismissed all past perceptions as irrelevant errors.

For the first time he saw the thing coming towards him. He retreated a step before he could recall his decision, but though he then stood firm he could not bring himself to step back to where—

For the first time he saw the thing coming towards him. He retreated a—

For the first time he saw—

For—

For the first time he saw the thing flowing across the floor towards him. He retreated a step before he remembered that he had determined not to retreat, but though he once again stood his ground he could not force himself to step forward to regain the position (positions? He could not remember) he had lost, could not bring himself to—

For the first time he saw the thing coming towards him. He turned to run when—

For the first time he saw the girl beckoning to him. He ran towards her then suddenly, remembering, stopped, realized—

For the first time he found himself walking towards an incredibly lovely girl. He took another step towards her then, realizing that he should have been running from her, pivoted, began running towards—

For the first—

For the first time he found himself running towards the thing that was oozing over the red rings. He skidded to a halt and retreated a step before he remembered his resolve and, remembering, knew it hopeless: without continuity he could not stand firm in the face of fear and desire. He would have to advance.

He took a reluctant step forward, fighting the voice in his mind that told him to do what he wanted most to do. He was almost within reach of the—

For the first time he saw the thing he was approaching and stopped, panic-stricken, but it was too late, he was held fast by suckered tentacles that burned where they touched him, that tightened on him as they drew

him slowly to the multiple arrays of insane teeth which gaped open and began to close on him, piercing his skin and—

Were gone. He lay sprawled once again on the cold floor. His skin felt as though it had been burned with acid and he was bleeding from thousands of tiny puncture wounds. But around him the arena was once again solid stone and time had returned to normal.

He looked up at the tiers, only to find them once again hidden in the billion-faceted crystal haze. He turned back to the girl, remembering that he had run from her but certain that for the moment he had somehow defeated her.

Her image wavered as though he were seeing her through a curtain of moving water. It shifted, altered, became something different; she grew, elongating and swelling like an infant exploding into adulthood in a fraction of a second.

A slumped giantess confronted him, her splotchy red body covered with dull lifeless jewels. In her right hand she held a great golden cup, while with her left she grasped a long knife of the same metal. Her hands shook as though she could barely maintain her grip on the cup and knife. Her eyes were fixed on the floor.

An intricate pattern of blue gems winked from the curved blade; 'from the pommel of the knife a great blue gem protruded, catching the light and breaking it into a million fragments. The cup in her other hand was fashioned like a flower with four overlapping petals, and each petal was the face of a skull. In the eyesockets red gems gleamed.

Behind the giantess the fading light died. Something was forming, as though darkness itself were taking on form and intelligence. But Lozan's attention had been caught and held by the knife. It fascinated him, not just because it was a weapon he could use against the giantess, not just because it had almost been the instrument of his own death, but because of something about it he recognized as almost a part of himself, a part of his will as the illusion of the girl had been a part of his desires. He was neither paralyzed nor enslaved; his will was his own, but there was something about the knife to which the alien vitality in him responded. He advanced, his eyes on the precious blade.

He never had a chance to take it from her. By the time he registered the dark form solidifying behind her, it had reached out to cloak her exhausted form in its own substance. Then it curled back from the rejuvenated giantess, now a vivid crimson, and drew in on itself, curdling until it seemed its darkness hid a deeper darkness, its shapelessness a

shadowed form. Lozan could feel its multiple awarenesses focused on him and before its irresistible command reached him and took him over he had recognized it for what it was, no priest-generated sham but Night Herself.

Helpless, his muscles no longer under his own control, he advanced to meet the Goddess.

The giantess stepped to one side and Lozan felt himself kneel and prostrate himself to the darkness, heard his voice say, "To you, O Goddess, I relinquish my life." The crimson giantess silently handed him the knife. He took it and kissed it, then drew it across the inside of his right arm and offered the bloody blade to the shadow form. The giantess took the knife from him and handed him the cup. He kissed it in turn and allowed a drop of his blood to fall into it before offering it to the Goddess. The giantess took the cup from him.

He felt himself stand, watched detachedly as his body climbed onto the center stone and lay loosely on its back in the center of the carved pattern. He could feel the stone ridges digging into his back and buttocks but he was not uncomfortable. He felt relaxed, at peace, warm for the first time since he'd found himself in the arena.

He was not sure how long the giantess had been standing over him. The curved blade gleamed. Seen closely she was all crimson: skin, eyes, nails, the crimson lips drawn back from sharp crimson teeth. He knew she was beautiful, with a beauty strangely akin to that of the illusion she had created for him.

He felt her presence in his mind, a flaming hunger, a burning, illimitable strength, terrible yet beautiful. The Goddess had withdrawn from his mind, but he felt no desire to struggle against the weaker control that held him now, even when the giantess raised her knife.

She made a shallow incision in his throat, working the knife slowly back and forth so the blood would flow freely. The knife cut the veins on the insides of his forearms, made deep incisions in his inner thighs, in his belly, chest, and again in his neck. The crimson hand cut deliberately and he could feel the blood running out of him and flowing through the channels beneath him. The knife's jeweled pommel and blade burned steadily brighter. Lozan felt only a soft lassitude.

He felt his hand come up from his side and saw it take the knife from the giantess and hold the blade poised over his heart. He felt her essence pour into him, a river of caresses, a forest of burning buttered feathers and hungry tongues, touching him, tasting him, stirring up memories like

disturbed sediment from the bottom of a stagnant pond.

He was filled with the past, faces long forgotten and memories long buried swirling up in him as the past recreated itself. Through every episode the tongues would taste and the feathers of fat would beat, separating out an image or emotion, churning it around until all its moments were superimposed on one another, and then it would burn, giving up its life in an explosion of ecstasy in which Lozan had no choice but to share. And all the time he was lost in her crimson joy, feeling her feeding on him, feeling her hunger for the cloying sweetness that he had become. His will was sluggish, lost in memories, drowned in fat, drifting confused through changes taking place in a body that might have been either his/hers or the one he/she was feeding on.

He shared her greed, her anxiety to complete her transformation, her frustration that, despite everything he could do to help her, his disintegration was taking place so slowly.

The tongues had licked at the center of his being and the feathers had isolated it but the flames could not consume it.

She bent all her efforts to his destruction, frantic now with the need for energy her changing body imposed on her. She concentrated herself around the seat of his soul, striving with all her being to absorb it.

And was riven, shattered, swallowed up and herself devoured as the nightmare shapes of the arena came surging out of him, boiling out of the darkness where they'd lain hidden for so long, rending, ripping, destroying. He reached into her flames and absorbed them, sucking out her vitality like a snail from its shell, leaving only a burnt-out husk behind him.

The battle lasted forever and was over in a fraction of a second. His nightmare projections melted into quicksilver pools and retreated back to his unconscious. Out of a confusion of memories alien and familiar, yet all become strange, his identity reformed and he was himself again, but a self transformed, reborn a creature of living fire. He pulsed with energy; he was the stone on which he lay, the cool air around him, everything and nothing, existing in all time yet burning in the infinite present. He was unbounded, illimitable, freedom itself. Though there were gaps in his memory, his past was laid out for his inspection with a detailed patterning that was altogether new to him, yet he knew it for only a moment in his life, he knew himself rooted in eternity. It was as though he had been straining for color in the blacks and grays of an eternal twilight when suddenly he saw the dawn glowing with its thousand colors; yet it was as

though his eyes had been being blasted unmercifully by the killing light of Nal-K'am's unshielded sun when suddenly he found himself perched beneath cool starlight at the edge of a silvered waterfall.

He realized he could hear (see? feel? taste, touch...)

voices like ringing crystals all around him, a confusion of intertwined arguments in his mind:

*Votrassandra? No, dead, all dead, only we... [Fear/Denial/ Revulsion]
... Remember [Cold steel/Velvet fear]—this is not the same... Dissolve, all
dissolve... Human? We should have destroyed/killed/taken all the
nagyspas before this... Votrassandra? Rilg? Human?... wasted the
centuries, now they Jind us unprepared... Terra? Human?
[Confidence/Anger!]... Votrassandra? The door to
Rildan—Votrassandra? No, human but...*

He shoved the voices to the back of his mind. Fronds of alien memory waved in the crystal landscape of his thoughts, showing him abilities he had never known he possessed. He healed his wounds and only when he was whole again did he realize how weak he really was. He had lost a lot of blood.

He could feel the cloud of darkness as it extended into his mind, warm and resonant, a part of him, yet separate from him. He opened himself to it as his memories told him to, and then he knew what he had to do.

He lifted the paralysis which held him and allowed feeling to flow back into his body, then got shakily to his feet. The giantess lay on the ground, her heart still beating faintly in her misshapen body, her melted features vacant. Lozan lifted her and put her in his place on the altar. Her skin had faded to a pinkish gray broken by purple blotches. Nothing remained of her former beauty.

Lozan took the skull-flower from its cavity and emptied it of all but a little of his blood, then put it back in place. Picking up the knife, he made the proper incisions in the huge body and neck, noting that the blood flowed sluggishly, as if it had already begun to congeal. When the cup was full he placed the knife in her huge hand, gently bending her fingers around it. It was more than he could do unaided to control her dying muscles and he had to ask

Night's help. He felt no new influx of energy from the giantess when the knife plunged home in her heart. She had already been dead in all but name.

The cup was full. Slowly he lifted it to his lips and drank, almost

gagging at first on the thick, sweet, salty taste. When he had drained the cup he placed it on the altar by one of the dead hands. He pulled the knife from her chest and placed it alongside the cup. Then he collapsed against the white stone, so weak he could not stand.

He offered them no resistance when they came for him. They were he as he was them; there was no one for him to fear.

CHAPTER

6

A floating confusion filled Janesha's mind. Thoughts kept drifting away from her or melting into a meaningless flow of random pleasure and mindless peace and she could not remember what had happened.

She was unable to order her impressions of the space around her, but from scattered flashes of clear perception she had deduced that she was lying on her back with her eyes closed somewhere in the Hall of the Crimson Cloud. Her hall. But its familiar geography was vague in her mind and in the disordered impressions she received she seemed to sense some monstrous change...

She concentrated and in time enough new information seeped through her confusion to enable her to pinpoint some of the changes. The rose pillars had been filled and there was a skull, her first, in her Place of Remembrance. Re-lieved, she realized that the chaos which enveloped her must be some sort of side effect to her transformation, though she'd experienced nothing like it in the Key Memories. She'd have to consult Chordeyaen—

Her ringers groped for the new circle of bone on the necklace around her neck. But they moved stiffly, clumsily, and the bone disk felt oddly repellent, not at all like she'd imagined it would feel. And there was something about the skull in her Place of Remembrance that frightened her, something that kept her from attempting to visualize it more clearly.

She couldn't visualize his death, couldn't remember it. She remembered him lying on the altar, still and waiting, but the Ritual itself, the ceremony in which she'd killed her ties to humanity and become truly Lha—that was gone, hidden from her, confused with a fantasy in which she saw her own body lying slack and flaccid on the altar. Yet she remembered the salt taste of his blood, warm and thick as she drank it.

She should have been aware of her body's functioning on every level from the intracellular up, but now her internal perceptions seemed distorted or altogether absent. She was no longer mistress of her own body and it felt strange and cramped to her in ways she could not define.

For the first time she felt fear. This was no proper transformation effect, nor even any of the dangers against which she'd been warned. She forced her eyes open and laboriously lifted one hand up where she could see it. It was small, too small, brown where it should have been crimson, and it was the wrong shape.

She stared at the too-long fingers, the too-narrow palm, and began to understand. It was no confused picture of her own body she had been sensing but a true picture of another body, a male body, the body of a boy, the body of the boy who remembered looking down at her DEAD face as he consumed her mind—

Music penetrated Lozan's sleep, pulled him from the dream in which the crimson giantess was telling him so much. As consciousness returned, he felt the measured beating of a drum join the quiet droning which had first roused him. Each drumbeat reverberated in him as though he were inside the drum itself, yet at the same time the sound remained muted and distant.

He heard a gong struck sharply, then held. In the ensuing silence Lozan could hear the blood moving in his veins. The gong was struck again and the air was full of its frenzied clanging. Shell and thigh-bone trumpets of the types sacred to Night began to weave a rapid pattern around drum and gong, while in the background the quiet drone continued unchanged.

Lozan felt no urge to open his eyes, though he was thoroughly awake. Beneath him he could feel a warm surface, unyielding yet comfortable, and he was content for the moment to lie on it while the music skirled around him.

My lotus throne, he thought. I am Lha, this is my lotus throne, and I am in the Hall of the Crimson Cloud. My hall.

The knowledge was just there, unquestioned, no more surprising than the knowledge that he had five fingers or only one nose. Below the surface of his thoughts, the ecstasy he had felt at the completion of the Ritual still simmered and he could feel it stir in response to the music, a slow surge of fire.

He thought of the giantess he had killed and her face was as clear to him as it would have been had he been looking directly at her. Despite his underlying joy he felt uneasy, though he had no fear that the other Lha

would blame him for her death. Any true fear was far away and he still felt some of that ecstatic certainty he had known as he drank from the skull-flower.

Remembering Night's caressing presence in his mind, he knew that that certainty had not been his alone and the knowledge pleased him.

But Night had withdrawn from him and the slack face of the dead giantess would not leave his thoughts, its image tinged with a strange sense of loss, almost of mourning.

As though I'd lost someone I loved. Why?

Abruptly the music rose to an intricate and sustained crescendo, then ceased, abruptly complete. In the sudden silence, Lozan found his disinclination to move gone. He opened his eyes and sat up. Something flapped against his chest and a flash of unformed anxiety made him look down at himself.

His body was whole and unscarred, betraying no signs of the treatment it had received in the Place of the Ritual. He was wearing a black kilt like those the watching giants and monsters had worn, further proof that he had been given a place among them.

Not giants, monsters. Lha. Like I am. Lha. One of the Gods.

Around his neck hung a necklace of thumb-sized pieces of turquoise on which a white disk was so strung that its sharp edge pressed against his chest. He'd felt it flap against him when he moved. The disk was ringed with alternate bands of tiny-faceted green and white gems. Lozan held it up to his face to examine it closely.

It's different, seeing and remembering. Remembering? But this was all new to him.

No. I remember it.

As Lozan's fingers held the disk, he knew it for a circle of bone from the forehead of the dead giantess. Janesha. Her name had been Janesha. As he continued to hold the disk it seemed as though his anxiety was flowing out of him into it, leaving him through his fingertips. When he finally let it drop back to his chest, he was at peace with himself. He looked around.

It's different, seeing and remembering.

He was in a world of vivid color, sitting in the center of a huge golden-yellow flower whose marbled surface was shot through with twisting pink and green veins. The flower had at least a thousand petals radiating from its center in thick overlapping rings. It floated on the

surface of an emerald-bottomed lake, though it seemed to be polished stone.

Overhead hung a shimmering crimson mist, covering the sky without coming within a dozen meters of the ground. Through it filtered an abundance of impossible amber light in whose rays the flower glowed. And though the air was cool, the stone surface was warm to the touch.

The Crimson Cloud.

He was thirsty. He leaned over, cupped water from the lake, brought it to his lips and drank it. It had a faintly sweetish taste.

A slender silver bridge spanned the distance to the lake's white shore. At regular intervals along the shore were slender pillars of rose-colored crystal. Twined around each pillar was a complex lattice of interwoven vines of some scarlet-red metal. The vine's heart-shaped leaves hugged the pillars' smooth crystal surfaces.

Between the pillars thick jungle showed, a dense mass of brown and red tree trunks, black roots, green fronds and leaves, all laced with a multitude of brightly flowering vines. But Lozan could see that it was not truly a jungle, for the dense vegetation was neither choked nor tangled, but ordered and spaced in tightly patterned configurations whose final effect was of great formality, not primeval chaos. Yet it conveyed nonetheless an overpowering sense of growth and fecundity only precariously held under restraint.

In the trees brightly colored birds sang. The whole scene was both exotic and exhilarating, yet profoundly restful. Lozan loved it.

I've got to do something with the vines. They're too passive, too boring. Memory again. But this time he found he disagreed; he could see nothing wrong with the vines.

A path of pink quartz led from the water into the trees.

Lozan decided to follow it but his awakening anticipation was tinged with a vague uneasiness.

The silver bridge swayed beneath him as he crossed. In the water below he could see tiny opalescent fish darting.

When he reached the shore the air was suddenly rich with the heavy scent of the jungle, as though in crossing the bridge he had crossed some invisible barrier that had held back the forest's influence. He reached for an explanation, found none. But the explanation was unimportant; it was the pleasure he took in the exotic tapestry of scents that counted.

Amidst the trees the air was even richer, velvet and intoxicating. A perfumed current seemed to seep along the smooth quartz path and *Lozan* allowed himself to be caught up by it. He began to run, feeling himself moving as lightly as in a dream. Thick foliage closed him in on both sides. The path was a ribbon of living light winding through fertile shadow. Ahead of him he heard a bird's shrill cry. He ran.

The path curved sharply to the right, led into a small clearing. Waiting for *Lozan* at its center was the *Lha* with the two trees growing from the sides of his head.

Seeing him, *Lozan* knew him: *Yag ta Mishraunal*. The Eldest.

CHAPTER

7

Seen standing, *Yag ta Mishraunal* conveyed the impression of limitless strength, of indomitable force in repose. The leaves gleamed on the branches of the tree-like growths that grew from his head, and light seemed to shine through his alabaster white skin and from his large golden eyes. Though the boughs of the two trees whipped back and forth in response to winds which only they felt, *Yag ta Mishraunal's* face was serene. He stood smiling, infinitely calm, and *Lozan* could detect no trace of arrogance in his face or stance.

From him radiated a sense of welcome so powerful *Lozan* could feel it as he would have been able to feel a breeze, or sun on his face. It warmed him, enfolded him; he felt himself cherished.

Perched on the alabaster giant's right forearm was a huge crimson hawk. The hawk watched *Lozan* with fierce eyes, but from it a welcome radiated, a fierce welcome totally unlike that he felt in the *Lha*, but one *Lozan* knew instinctively was granted to him and him alone. For an instant his sight blurred and he saw the world through the hawk's bright eyes, saw a world divided into two separate visual fields, in one of which *Lozan* stood out in sharper definition than would have been possible had he been looking at himself through human eyes. Then his vision blurred again and he was once more looking out of his own eyes.

The hawk lifted its head and screamed. Almost of its own accord—was this too memory?—*Lozan's* arm came up in front of him. The bird flew to it and perched, gripping him carefully with its powerful talons. He was surprised at how light it was.

"The bird is yours," Yag ta Mishraunal said. "I am Yag ta Mishraunal, and I was chosen to be your teacher because I, like you, once thought of myself as a human being. You have heard of me from your Terran: I was born on Nos-feratu, where I was known as Yag Chan."

"The Pied Piper of Mars." Lozan found himself unsurprised.

"Yes. Follow me, please. The hawk will accompany us."

He led the way out of the clearing and down a new path. The hawk flew above Lozan's head, occasionally darting to the left or right, sometimes circling impatiently, but never leaving them for long.

I know this path, Lozan thought, though every turn and twist brought him face-to-face with something unexpected. He found himself nodding when the jungle abruptly ended and they emerged from it onto a black and green checkerboard plain which seemed to stretch away for kilometers beneath the crimson mist. In the distance Lozan could see white walls rising, see statues, fountains, pools, pavilions, and small domed buildings.

Everything he saw was new and surprising, yet he felt as though he recognized all he saw, had known it all his life.

Yag ta Mishraunal led Lozan across the plain to the nearest building, a circular structure of smooth white stone surmounted by an alabaster dome in which thousands of green and white gems scintillated. A complex pattern of inset lines of scarlet metal swirled around the building, came together in a concave disk of red metal which projected slightly from the white stone.

The foliate Lha stepped through the seemingly solid surface of the red disk. The hawk dipped low and followed him through.

After a moment's hesitation, Lozan followed. He met with no resistance from the seemingly solid-looking disk, yet when he reached back to touch the wall from the other side his hand encountered cool unyielding metal.

The walls of the place were covered with screens of black silk on which demons, glowing purple and blue, were painted. With their fanged mouths, many arms, and multiple heads they resembled the stone figures which stood guard around the Temple and Shrines, but though some of them were depicted in the act of biting the heads off sinners Lozan found the sight of them comforting. He knew their wrath was not directed at him.

Yag ta Mishraunal motioned Lozan to a mat, seated himself facing him. Lozan sat in conscious imitation of the other's posture, crosslegged with

his right ankle resting on his left thigh.

The hawk drowsed on a perch beside a large crystal globe ringed by a table of twisted strands of red, gold, and white wire. Inside the globe a tiny jeweled landscape glowed. In the foreground, a tree fashioned of jade like flowing water rose from a field of grain, its smooth twisted branches and small pointed leaves all carved from a single stone. The tree was both flowering and in bud, yet hung with tiny globes of opalescent white fruit. Beneath the tree stood a tiny deer-like animal staring out over the field with eyes of amber, and each stalk of grain in the field was composed of tiny gems—amethysts, sapphires, topazes, and other, less familiar gems.

A surabha, Lozan thought. It was very beautiful. "Jan-asha's work?" he asked.

"Yes, like everything you see here in the Hall of the Crimson Cloud. How much do you remember?"

"Remember? Not—not much. Things seem familiar, words for things I've never seen before suddenly pop into my mind, I find myself thinking things I don't understand—"

"Ah. One moment." The alabaster giant made a quick twisting gesture with the fingers of his right hand. Two cups of tea materialized on the wire table.

Lozan found himself nodding again. That was what a *surabha* was for.

Yag ta Mishraunal picked up one cup, motioned for Lozan to take the other. Lozan sipped cautiously at the thick buttered tea.

"Everything I am going to tell you you already know, somewhere inside you, but the knowledge may not be available to you or may not make sense at first. So pardon me if I make things too simple, too obvious. But if anything is unclear, ask me about it; I am here to teach you, not to hear myself talk.

"You are—as I am—the end product of a partnership between a human being and an entity created on the planet Nosferatu—or Rildan, as it is properly called. Those of us like us who are products of such a partnership call ourselves the Lha, the Gods—a label we took to amuse ourselves, nothing more—and we live here in the Refuge, which you know as the Temple."

"But I don't look like you," Lozan said, feeling a vague disquiet, an unformed dissatisfaction stir within him. "I look—like anyone else. Like everyone else."

"As did I, when I thought of myself as Yag Chan. Later, when I was safe

and had learned to control my physical form, I decided to change my appearance. As you may wish to do when you too learn to control your physical form."

The denial was a certainty within him. He felt he had no choice but to say, "But I'm not one of you. Not a Lha. I'm a human being. Just a human being."

"No. You are no more human than I am. I examined your mind while you slept and confirmed the fact that you are one of us. You could not have absorbed Janesha otherwise."

"Are you examining my mind now?" He was suddenly terrified.

"I can refrain from doing so, if it disturbs you."

"Yes. Don't—don't do it. Leave me alone."

"All right. But if you force me to rely on words alone it will take me much longer to give you a true picture of what you are, who you are. You must let my mind meet yours for true understanding."

"No. I can't, I—won't. Not now. Please, not now."

"Why?"

"I—can't explain. I just know it's important. Please."

"Very well. I will limit myself to the spoken word. But you have begun to remember; perhaps my words will carry more meaning than they would otherwise.

"You are Lha, one of those beings who can merge their individual selves into a single greater Self. That Self it amuses us to call the Goddess Night, as it amuses us to call ourselves the Lha. Do you understand?"

"It sounds as if I've heard it before but—no. No."

"Do you remember—in the Place of the Ritual, the being that helped you at the end?"

"Yes."

"That was Night. That was all of us, all the Lha, united. Through our partners, our symbiotes, we can merge our individual selves—give up a part of our separate identities— and become something else, something greater than any one of us. Think back. Remember. Remember Night."

The warmth. Being within, part of the—all-aroundness. The cherishing. Not lonely, not different, not afraid...

"Yes." He had found his own kind at last—

No. "The Goddess helped Janesha try to kill me. I remember, I was winning and then Night came and took control of me for her. That—thing's not part of me, not the same as—"

I don't understand. It doesn't feel right, saying these things to—him—but I've got to tell him that I'm not—

Not Lha. But I am.

"No. Night never attempted to kill you. She lent Janesha some of Her Shakti, Her force, but Janesha and Janesha alone attempted to absorb you."

"If I'm—a Lha, like you, why'd you leave me out there so long? For sixteen years if I'm—like you? And then, now—"

I don't—why am I trying to Jight him? Why?

"Because we were unaware of your existence. At your age and at your stage of development, you appear to be a human being. I myself passed for human until I was much older than you are now.

"You appear human because you were born to human host-parents. No Lha can bear children, for a Lha must kill its human parents to achieve birth. Your parents—like my parents, like the human parents of every Lha here in the Refuge—died so you could be born.

"I told you that you were the product of a symbiosis between a human being and an entity created on the planet Nosferatu. No human being can survive such a partnership unless he is born into it—and then the symbiosis modifies him so that from the moment of his conception on he is no longer human.

"But the entity which makes you Lha—you might think of it as a virus with a non-material extension, though it would be just as correct to think of it as non-material with a viral extension. It can be transmitted from human to human just like a disease—and a little over sixteen years ago an error was made and it was allowed to spread beyond the Refuge. You know it as the Wasting Plague."

"My parents—died of the Wasting Plague?" It was the first information he had ever heard about them.

"No. You killed them, as a Lha must kill its parents, in order to obtain that which you needed to exist.

"Inside the Refuge, we inoculate selected members of the priesthood and sisterhood with the entity to ensure our own reproduction, though it is seldom that a living child is born to two such humans. Either they die

before the child is conceived or it does not survive to be born. So when our records showed no children born to victims of the Wasting Plague we assumed there were none. Hence, we were unaware of your existence. But we are few and children are rare among us; you will find yourself valued and cherished here."

The truth was there, still there, unmistakable in the other's voice. *But couldn't you hear the truth in her voice when she was praying in the Place of the Ritual? It was a trick, so she could kill you!*

"Had we known you for what you were—had we even suspected that one such as you might exist—you would never have been forced to confront Janesha in the Ritual of Knife and Cup. But raised as you were by human beings, believing as you did that you were a human being, you seemed so thoroughly human that even I, and I examined you myself, was fooled. As a result of my error, you faced Janesha and she died."

"I don't understand why—how she died. What I did that killed her." He found himself picturing Janesha as she had first appeared to him, as a slim girl with amber skin and red-black hair and eyes of melting green. He felt a strange weakness, a sorrow, as though he had lost someone he had loved.

"You absorbed her, as she was attempting to absorb you.

The first law of our kind is that we are one self, that we cannot prey off each other as animals prey off each other. A Lha trying to consume another Lha is himself consumed, himself, destroyed. So it must be; the first law is a part of our very nature, inherent in what we are; it is no mere moral code such as you find among humans.

"Trying to absorb you, Janesha was herself absorbed. And though I must bear some of the blame for her loss—for it is a loss, we mourn even the loss of one such as her—it is she and she alone who bears the final responsibility. Though I found it painful, I examined enough of her memories in you to be sure that she at least suspected your true nature. Yet in her hunger and her greed she tried to go against her Lha nature, and by her own actions she destroyed herself. Understand: you killed her by reflex, by instinct, by the mere fact that you were what you were. As I, at one time, killed Mishrau-nal—which is another reason I chose to become your teacher for a while."

"Mishraunal? I know the name but—"

"A Rilg. From Rildan. You know some of the story; Lavelle told you how we found him in the vault and brought him to the surface. He tried to absorb my mind and was himself absorbed."

Of course. I already knew that.

"So I am Lha. One of you. What does that mean?"

"It means that you are free to do whatever you wish to do, as long as you do nothing to hinder or endanger any other Lha. To live among us you will need to develop your innate powers to the point where you can participate safely in the mind of Night and control such things as the sur-abha—but that is mere training, and no more an obligation than it is the obligation of a human child to learn to walk. It is a part of your natural development, something you will need to do if you wish to become totally free. We are all free here, free to choose our bodies, our minds, our lives."

The concepts were too broad, too vague. Lozan felt suspicious; there was something Yag ta Mishraunal was not telling him. "What does that mean? What, specifically, am I free to do?"

"Anything you are able to do. Until you have developed the strength of mind to teleport yourself from hall to hall you will have to remain here, in the Hall of the Crimson Cloud—though you are, of course, free to visit my Hall if you would like—but I think you will find the room ample."

"All this?" Lozan whispered, the extent of the plain, the jungle, the emerald-bottomed lake suddenly registering. "All this?"

"It was once Janesha's; it is now yours."

At the orphanage Lozan had never owned so much as the cup from which he drank his tea; the bed in which he had slept had been his only by virtue of some changeable administrative whim. Now he was sole owner of an area far greater than all Agad, and the reality of it stunned him.

Yet—he must not allow himself to be distracted. Something within him denied the other, denied the Lha's calm words with desperate strength. Yet even as he yielded to that denial, Lozan felt apart from it.

Free to do anything? Impossible. He could not believe it. The situation could not exist where there was nothing to fight against, nothing against which it was necessary to defend oneself. Yag ta Mishraunal must be lying to him, though the Lha's lies were so subtle that Lozan's truth sense could not detect them.

"When will I be allowed to leave this hall?"

"When your training has progressed to the point where it is safe for you to leave."

It was as though Lozan was seeing once again the slender girl with green eyes whom Janesha had pretended to be, only now the girl was

dead, her face slack and lifeless, her dull eyes staring, her hacked-open body black with dried blood.

"When? When I've killed some other defenseless orphan for you?"

"No. When you can tap Night's knowledge and use the teleportation lattices which are the only way to move between the different parts of the Refuge. You can leave the Hall of the Crimson Cloud as soon as it is safe for you to tap Night's knowledge."

"Safe? Why safe?"

"Because your individuality has as yet no defenses. Were you to merge with Night you would lose yourself in Her. Do you remember the two figures dressed like priests, but in colored robes, who watched you in the Place of the Ritual?"

"Yes."

"They attempted to merge with Night before they were strong enough to maintain their individuality. They are gone now; Night looks out of their eyes."

"And what do I have to do to learn to defend myself? Kill orphans like Janesha tried to kill me?"

"You do not understand. You think the Ritual is cruel, but you are wrong. The Ritual is kind."

"No."

"It is kind. We are as far beyond human beings in our evolution as human beings are beyond the cattle they slaughter, but we are far kinder to men than they are to the beasts they eat. Have you ever seen cattle slaughtered?"

"No."

"The more fear a cow feels before it dies, the more hormones in its blood and the finer the flavor of its meat. So each cow at a slaughterhouse is forced to watch the murder of the preceding cow, and when its turn comes it is killed slowly to make sure that its fear and pain enhance the flavor of its meat."

"You said the Ritual was kind."

"Yes. Understand, we Lha are not like human beings, choosing to eat meat when we could remain healthy on a vegetarian diet. We need the—there is no word for it but you can think of it as the life-force of sentient creatures. The universe is itself a living thing and there is in every thinking, feeling creature something—an energy, a force—that allows that

creature to draw upon the life of the universe, to take for itself that living vitality which its nature allows it. It is this energy, this force, that allows living organisms to draw upon the living vitality of the universe which we need, for our nature is such that unless we continually renew our supply of such force we die in agonies inconceivable to lesser beings. But fully charged with this life-force, we can tap the basic vitality of the universe for powers and abilities that you, as you are now, cannot conceive."

"The Ritual."

"The Ritual is necessary—not perhaps the movements, the gestures, the outward physical manifestation, to be sure, but the absorption which is at its core is necessary. And, think— had you believed Janesha to be what she at first appeared to be, would you have been afraid of her? Think—how did you feel when you lay down on the altar? Were you afraid? Were you unhappy? Did you feel any regrets, frustrations, anger that your life was soon to be over?"

"No." He had not feared her. Why could she not have been what she had seemed to be? "But I knew that she was—that she was not what she pretended to be. I fought her."

"Because you were Lha. Had you been human you would have trusted her, you would never have fought."

"But the knife, the blood— No. It's still cruel. Like torturing someone who's asleep."

"The knife, the blood—they are there for a reason. The Lha feels the pain of the ritual, feels the pain that the human does not. The outward form of the Ritual is symbolic; it gives form to the Lha's otherness from humanity. With the knife he kills his human host-parents again, declares himself other than they were. When he drinks the blood he drinks his own blood, the blood of his own dead humanity."

"No. I can't. I won't."

"The Ritual is just a rite, just a way of symbolizing a change. Long before we participate in it, we begin absorbing human life-force. As you yourself long ago began absorbing human life-force."

"No. Never. I didn't."

"You did. Remember, I experienced your thoughts while you were asleep. You are Lha; you killed your parents."

"That was before. I wasn't even born. I didn't know."

"True. But do you remember when you were floating in a void filled with

stars? Stars of every color you could imagine? Do you remember drawing them to you, making them part of you?"

"Yes," Lozan whispered. They had been so beautiful, so— When they'd come to him they'd given him back his body, given him so many bodies to enjoy, to be—

"I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't hurt them."

"You didn't hurt them. But those stars were the minds of the orphans in the shaefi tubes around you. You yourself were in suspension and had no idea what you were doing; otherwise you could have refashioned your body and mind despite the suspension. As it was, you absorbed enough life-force to resist Janesha. To do that you had to tap a great number of minds."

"How many?" It had been so beautiful, so peaceful. So innocent.

"More than six hundred. Absorption demands close physical proximity, but in the twenty-seven years you were in your tube you were able to draw upon the infinitesimal amounts of life-force available to you from the more distant humans."

The number was too large to grasp. "I've killed six hundred people," he said, trying to make sense of it.

"No. All but a few of those closest to you are still alive. Your power of absorption was limited by your condition and there is not very much life-force available from a suspended human. But you built up a huge charge of life-force nonetheless; you will not need to absorb another mind for many years.

"In this you are lucky; under normal circumstances a Lha must absorb a human life many times every year. That is the price we pay for our contact with the living vitality of the universe. But the other side of the coin is this: with an adequate supply of human life-force we are each and every one of us immortal.

"Immortality, I was taught on Mig Mar, is a delusion; everything comes to an end, nothing endures forever. Perhaps. But that is a philosophy for the short-lived, for those whose lives rarely span more than a century, not for those of us who may live to see the stars that warm the worlds upon which we live grow cold and die.

"But enough. I have said what I had to say and more than I needed to say; it seems that I take a joy in the sound of my own voice that I had forgotten. Come, tell me, do you have any questions you would like me to answer for you? I will do my best."

"How much longer—until I need to, to do the Ritual?" Lozan asked.

"Not for a long time. No one will force you to make any decision you do not want to make; you can wait as long as you want."

"How long?"

"Perhaps thirteen years, perhaps slightly longer."

Thirteen years. He couldn't remember the child he'd been thirteen years ago. It was almost another lifetime, beyond imagining. All he wanted to do was sleep. He said as much.

"Perhaps that would be best," Yag ta Mishraunal told him. "Lie back on your mat and allow yourself to relax. While you sleep I will key you to Mishraunal's memory."

"I don't want—"

"No one will invade your mind. You will just continue to learn what you need to know to be free and take your place here among us."

As Lozan lost consciousness he was dimly aware of Yag ta Mishraunal's warmth, of the hawk's fierce loyalty.

CHAPTER

8

Visions of the distant past flowed from Yag ta Mishraunal's mind to the boy, and from his mind to hers. Furiously she fought to maintain consciousness of herself against the torrent of imagery, but she dared not let the other Lha know she was there, hiding in the depths of the boy's mind. Yag ta Mishraunal must not detect her resistance, must not learn she still lived.

It was no use. She could not fight the key memories any longer. She felt herself receding from herself, caught up in familiar sights and sounds—

Lozan dreamed.

There was a tunnel leading through blackness and blankness to the living heart of the world and he was falling through it. Falling, he began to unravel, mind and body disintegrating, the strands of his being unraveling into separate fibers until he was no longer a man but only the potential from which one could be made.

Detached and disembodied, integrating separate viewpoints as he had

integrated his separate senses when he had been a person, Lozan floated above the world that was Rildan, observing.

Beneath, within the world of jewel-like cities he was observing, he could perceive a time many millions of years in that world's past. Six-limbed omnivorous birds flew and fought in a planet-wide jungle, rending their prey with teeth and talons. Generation succeeded generation, eon succeeded eon; the omnivores lost their wings, took to the trees, began to develop the rudiments of intelligence. The jungle died, the creatures upon which the omnivores depended for the major part of their diet died out, the omnivores' intelligence increased, kept on increasing. By the time they had developed into a race of vegetarian agriculturalists, only their fanged jaws and certain stages of their embryonic development linked the Rilg with their meat-eating ancestors.

Rildan, a planet of jewel-like cities surrounded and separated by wilderness. Each city was a single work of art, a unified conception flowing from the natural contours of the land yet soaring out of that planet-hugging union to become a creation of pure artifice, something new and free, pure and beautiful. Concepts and materials from myriads of worlds had contributed to the formation of something unique to Rildan, and each city was a transcendent synthesis in which grandeur and fragility, the elfin and the grotesque, merged and fought, balanced and enhanced each other. The cities were as much gardens as creations of stone and metal and shimmering synthetics, and though this was true of all the cities, yet no two were alike.

Lozan's faceted vision encompassed the world, its history visible in its present like some form meant to be glimpsed in the depths of a glass sculpture.

He saw beings of many races, many planets, coming to Rildan to learn from the Rilg, for the Rilg were the oldest and wisest of the galaxy's civilized races. Rildan was the library of a vast interstellar civilization that had endured more than two hundred thousand years.

The Rilg were scholars, sometimes artists, a race of teachers. Unlike the swarming short-lived beings of other worlds, they took little pride in power and position but lived only for learning, for the collection and synthesis of knowledge. Breeding seldom, they had never been driven to conquest by population pressure and they had little of the competitiveness of more sexually motivated species. When, after eons of peaceful civilization on their own world, they had been motivated to seek out the stars, it had been from curiosity-mingled, perhaps, with an atavistic pleasure in flight inherited from their long-dead avian ancestors.

Empires came, fell; rulers were born, ruled, died. Rildan remained.

The Rilg were slim, tall beings who moved with quick awkward grace. Their bodies and limbs were hidden by tight feathers which changed color in response to their moods; they had four arms and two legs each, and the feathers on these were smaller and quicker to change color than those on their heads and bodies. Their fanged jaws were discreetly hidden between feathered lips.

Though the Rilg wore no clothing, each Rilg wore a double belt of jeweled metal around its waist and a similar band encircling its head. Though these were, to a certain extent, ornamental, they were only secondarily so. Their primary function was as psychic amplifiers and transformers.

Many of the races the Rilg had studied on other planets were gifted with mental powers the more intelligent Rilg lacked: telepathy, clairvoyance, levitation, direct control of energy flows, psychokinesis. The Rilg had duplicated some few of these abilities by mechanical means; flight, mental control of machinery, and pseudotelekinetic control of visible objects were relatively easy to attain, though the powers achieved were clumsy counterfeits when compared with the natural talents of the races whose abilities the Rilg were trying to imitate. But new senses were impossible in brains not designed for them, and it was new senses—with the consequent broadening of their mental horizons—that the Rilg craved most. All the Rilg brain seemed able to cope with was a form of mechanical telepathy in which only the speech center was stimulated, and even that required intensive training from birth.

And so, despite their achievements, the Rilg were a frustrated race. For millennia it had been clear to them that they were approaching the limits of what they could comprehend with their natural minds and senses. Their physical heritage was inadequate; mechanical aids were useless. The choice was clear: evolve or stagnate.

Lozan's multiple awarenesses encompassed the creation of a symbiotic entity which could merge with its Rilg host to provide new sensory, manipulative, and interpretive control centers. The symbiotically modified Rilg had complete control of his physical structure and could modify the new neural structures in the light of experience. A side effect of this control was virtual immortality, but this was less important to the Rilg than it would have been to the members of other races.

Though the symbiotic entity which the Rilg created was not wholly material, it had a viral component which would be transmitted when its

host reproduced. Incorporating the symbiote into themselves, the Rilg took their evolution into their own hands and became a new race.

Yet, as their horizons expanded, the thought of any kind of knowledge beyond their grasp became unbearable. When they discovered the Choskt, a race of limited intelligence possessing a form of short-range precognition, the Rilg coveted the ability for themselves as the members of another race would have coveted wealth, or territory, or sexual merger.

The Choskt were studied until they were understood as well as they could be understood by a race which itself lacked precognition. A Rilg was selected to evolve the new neural structures within himself. Linked with him in telepathic rapport, the massed mind of his race shared his consciousness as he brought his new sense into play.

The combination of the hyperdeveloped Rilg mind and the Choskt sense of precognition was something new to the Universe. Through that suddenly open channel, something—a force, a being, or something less imaginable—exploded into the linked minds.

In that instant, nine tenths of the Rilg died. Overloaded by the infinitely resonating experience of those deaths, the telepathic bond uniting the Rilg in one consciousness burned out. Each Rilg faced the change occurring in himself as an isolated individual.

Lozan's mosaic viewpoint shrank to encompass the consciousness of a single Rilg, Mishraunal, and the consciousness of his off-world pupils.

When the Change struck, a small part of the teacher's mind was following the great experiment while most of his attention was centered on his pupils. In the midst of an explanation he had given a thousand times before, an explosion of intolerable *wrongness* ripped him from himself, left his unconscious body to crumple to the floor.

His pupils saw him fall, lie blind and moaning on the floor. His lips drew back to reveal his fangs and, in response to an instinct that had not manifested itself in a member of his race for millions of years, he snapped again and again at something his students could not perceive. Blood flowed from his mangled lips, pooled beneath him.

Cracks appeared in the floor under him, widened; the blood that had been pooling beneath him drained into them. One wall of the classroom caught fire. A whirlwind caught two of his pupils and dashed them to death against the burning wall.

Through the open window, the students could see the city of Pransitthaja dying, its towers falling, its buildings splintering and

crumbling as the dying Rilg struck out in blind spasms of destruction.

The headless body of a Rilg floated in through the open window, disappeared with a sound like metal hitting metal.

Mishraunal jerked on the floor. His feathers were colorless and matted with blood; he whimpered as the channels of his mind were warped and fused into new patterns. His back arched in a final spasm, then it was over and he fell back, quiet now, and slept. His students gathered around him, unsure whether he was dead or alive and afraid to touch him to find out.

Mishraunal awoke to an ugly twilight, though through the window he could dimly sense Rildan's blue-white star high in the sky. His body was a deadness, an unliving heaviness, yet each of his nerves felt as though it were being scraped by a file. And in his mind there was only silence where the thoughts of his fellow Rilg should have been. He was alone, cut off from the community mind for the first time since his race had taken its evolution into its own hands, and he was afraid.

He tried to heal himself but could feel no response from his body. He could reconstruct the room around him from memory and match the dim shapes he could perceive with those he recalled, but he could perceive nothing of Pransit-thaja. His attempts brought only confusion and new pain.

Timidly, afraid of piercing through to the thing that had hurt him so badly, he tried to break through the wall of telepathic silence that imprisoned him. He could sense nothing. He was trapped alone in his bruised and broken mind.

He tried to contact the simple minds of his students but even these evaded him. What little impression he could sense was garbled and incomprehensible, overlaid by a vividly hallucinated pattern of luminous spheres.

Yet he had made some contact, however garbled. He motioned all but one of his students—Azgquan, recognizable by his bulk—away from him and squatted on the floor, staring as best he could into the creature's dimly sensed face. Two of his arms seemed broken; he ran the fingers of the other two hands over Azgquan's rough features, trying to pick up by touch alone those nuances of feeling and expression which evaded his probing mind.

His fingers still on Azgquan's concave face, Mishraunal tried to concentrate all his chaos-torn mind on piercing the resistant surface of the other's thoughts, but the more he tried to focus his awareness the more the image of a sphere of violet fire came to dominate his

perceptions.

He tried without success to ignore the hallucination. The more he tried to focus on Azgquan's mind, the larger, more intrusive grew the sphere. Without warning it exploded.

Mishraunal was suddenly within Azgquan's mind, experiencing it with an intimacy and intensity with which he had never experienced another's consciousness. His vision seemed to double, then the sensation faded and he found himself in a sea of caressing violet, washed clean of all fear and pain. Floating all around him were bobbing balls of colored light and in his new-found delight he drew them to him, rejoicing as each exploded and altered the texture and taste of the sea in which he swam.

Finally he was lost in a flood of multicolored ecstasy, tasting colors which crawled through his body and transformed him into a creature of shimmering rainbow. He basked and pulsed in the heart of a liquid sun and time had no meaning for him.

I've pierced to the heart of the universe, he realized. Through all the surfaces, all the appearances. And the universe is alive and I'm part of it, part of its life. I'm alive.

He was no longer the being he had been when time resumed its passage, when the radiance dimmed and his senses returned to him. The room around him still blazed with the splendor he himself seemed to radiate, but elsewhere the blinding light had given way to a crystalline clarity in which his senses functioned as never before. Myriads of senses he had never before been able to distinguish from one another were coming into play and in their interaction he knew an overriding joy. Everything he perceived caressed him, yet it would have been the work of an instant to count the grains of sand on a beach on the far side of the planet.

He searched the planet for other survivors. Some of the Rilg he detected were dying and some were pinned in that agony of the first instant of the Change, unable to move beyond it, frozen, but most of the surviving Rilg were as he had been, trapped in prisons of mismatched senses and telepathic silence. Not even with his newly augmented powers could he pierce the walls imprisoning them. He felt their pain and despair as if it were his own but could do nothing to reach them.

Then, in cities on the far side of the planet, Mishraunal touched three minds brilliant with the same rainbow vitality that animated him. The four merged, lost themselves in a bliss like nothing the Mishraunal he had once been would have been able to imagine.

In Pransitthaja, a fifth mind broke through to rainbow vitality,

transformed itself, reached out in search of others. The fourfold individual of which Mishraunal was now a part encompassed it, merged with it, made it part of itself.

When at last the five were again separate individuals, each contained within himself the being formed of their union, and each knew that he could merge with any of the others at any time.

The new being who had once been Mishraunal perceived the dead bodies of his pupils clustered around him, realized that it had been their deaths that had triggered his transformation. To the Mishraunal he had been before the Change, the knowledge would have been horrifying, but to the being he had become, to the being that had perceived and shared in the living essence of the universe itself, the deaths of any number of non-Rilg organisms, regrettable though they might be, seemed small enough price to pay for the rebirth of his race.

For the birth of a new Rilg, a Rilg who could tap, who could manifest, who could merge with the living essence that was the Universal Core, the wellspring of Creation.

All over Rildan, dulled minds were beginning to surge with new splendor as, one by one, the Rilg found or were taught the key to transfiguration. Sitting among his dead, Mishraunal was bathed in wave after wave of transcendent joy.

Mishraunal's triumph faded. Lozan floated in a sensation-less void, without anticipation, without impatience, without memory. Time had no meaning.

Another consciousness impinged on his awareness and in automatic response he extended to it, merged with it, began observing and recording.

The mind he had merged with knew itself to be Mishraunal but it was not the same mind Lozan had entered before. For this Mishraunal, nine thousand of Rildan's long years had passed, and in that time the Rilg's mind and body had both changed almost beyond recognition.

Mishraunal was just completing the absorption of another mind and his thoughts were suffused with ecstasy. Over the millennia, his capacity to control his mental processes had evolved to the point where he could now absorb a mind without any loss of self-control or consciousness of the external world. He was concentrating on his body.

His external form was similar to that of nine thousand years ago, but he was no longer muffled in feathers. Soft yellow scales covered his body, each

scale a complex, syn-thesthetic sense receptor. The whole surface of his body comprised a single sense organ. Though he could have apprehended his environment perfectly well without any bodily sense receptors, he preferred to keep his sensory mosaic as rich and varied as possible.

Internally the changes were more radical. Most of his internal organs had been dispensed with. When blood can be moved by telekinesis more readily than muscle power, there is no need for a heart, and when each individual cell can be supplied with nutrients and drained of wastes by teleportation, blood itself becomes unnecessary. With enough power of mind, viscera become unnecessary.

Mishraunal's abdominal cavity was filled with neural tissue but even this was different. The bulky and inefficient nerve cells, with which his race had made do during most of its history, were gone, replaced with compact substitutes which multiplied his mental capacity a thousandfold.

A hemispherical membrane rose quivering from one of his double shoulders. It had not been there a moment before, and under Mishraunal's careful control it stretched and expanded as within it he constructed and organized a new body of neural tissue.

The body of the Aol whose mind Mishraunal had just absorbed floated in the air in front of him. It was rapidly collapsing in on itself as Mishraunal emptied it of the substance he needed to fashion the thing growing on his shoulder. When he had taken all he needed, he allowed the rest of the body to vaporize.

The thoughts of his fellow Rilg murmured in his mind as he worked:

—Deviants frozen at moment of Change. Flickering in and out of existence, staying the same, always the same, but if the new symbiote enables them to Change as we have Changed...

—Orange bivalves with highly developed parapsychical abilities. Have never developed any kind of mechanical technology and are thus limited to the surface of their planet. Their culture shows no interesting features but their abilities make them a rich source of life-force. While...

—Has accepted and is grateful but still suspects that—

—Demonstrated the impossibility of proving the Universe itself sentient but failed to take into consideration—

—Below me I sense...

—Demonstrating the limiting factor intrinsic to purely projective teleportation. Unless the teleport can attune himself to a proper receptive matrix no amount of projective force...

The slavebrain growing beneath the humped gray membrane was structurally complete. Mishraunal drew on his reservoir of stored life-force and fed vitality into the waiting tissues, felt them link themselves to the universal life-source.

—No further modification of our neural structures...

Satisfied, Mishraunal began disengaging the new brain from his own body's life-support systems.

—Contact has been made with the first group of Deviants. They reject our offer of a new symbiote but once they experience the reality of contact with the Universal life-source for themselves...

Mishraunal's skin was once again an unbroken expanse of yellow scales. The slavebrain floated in the air while the membrane extended itself completely around it. Henceforth, anything the brain needed for its continued existence it would have to teleport in through its armored shell.

—Flickering in and out of the present, trying to avoid the new symbiote but...

Mishraunal switched his attention to the telepathic bands on which the slavebrains functioned. He selected an unused recognition pattern and programmed the brain to superimpose all its transmissions on that pattern. Then he began preparing it for the study of the mildly interesting Aol culture.

He was testing the brain's responses to hypothetical culture patterns when he became aware of a change in the background murmur of his race. Thoughts were coming in to him blurred with a shifting distortion, a distortion faint at first but growing worse even as he became aware of it, as though the thoughts he was receiving were vibrating slightly out of phase with themselves. The vibration was not a constant thing; it changed, shifting from thought to thought and mind to mind, accelerating and decelerating, expanding and contracting, but growing, growing all the while, intensifying, growing ever more pervasive. Without ever directly invading his own thoughts, it took up residence in his mind and body, an agony that shook his very cells until he thought he would be reduced, cell by cell, to a smear of purple jelly. Yet there was nothing he could do.

And he was only participating secondhand in the agonies of others. The vibration crawled through the network of thought linking Rilg to Rilg like a living thing, and wherever it touched a mind flared up, screamed, then faded as it died.

An infinite number of vibrations were crawling from mind to mind, and

in their wake those minds which had escaped direct contact with them found time altering and fragmenting, so that a single thought came to them both rapidly and slowly, or at innumerable different rates simultaneously. Meaning was lost—what meaning had been possible amidst the agonies and deaths—in anticipatory and echoing fragments of thought. Each mind found itself experiencing its existence at a rate that no other mind shared, and that rate was not constant but shifting.

Mishraunal was burning inside, being eaten away by acid, shattered and shredded and pulled apart as hundreds of millions of Rilg in whose minds he shared went down into death. Yet even as he felt their agony as though it were his own, another part of his being was greedily drinking in the life-force liberated by all the deaths. Even as wave after wave of death agony swept over him, he was gorging himself, bloating his spirit on life-force until he feared his mind would burn itself out from the overload, and he had no control over the part of himself that was doing this.

Then the searing vibration and death agonies were gone as though they had never been. Mishraunal was engulfed by the ecstasy his absorption of so much life-force had brought on and it was so intense that it terrified him, yet he could not stand against it and he was swept away.

Finally that, too, dissipated and he was left with his loss and confusion. For some reason, he seemed to have come out of the ecstasy sooner than the other survivors and for the moment he was alone.

Had this been some nine-thousand-year delayed aftermath of the Change or perhaps something new but similar? Had some unwary Rilg made contact with some unsuspected new type of alien mental structure?

Mishraunal's newly programmed slavebrain lay at his feet, burnt out. All the slavebrains were burnt out. There was silence now where before billions of recognition patterns had competed for the telepath's attention.

Mishraunal could sense the other surviving Rilg mastering their ecstasies. His mind reached out to theirs and he entered into a strange rapport, in which each Rilg's anger and fear met and resonated with the fury in the minds of his fellows, becoming colder, more implacable, sinking so deeply into the shared substructure of their racial mind that their hatred of whatever had done this to them became as basic to them as their lust for knowledge and their need to absorb other minds. And underneath the anger the ecstasy, linking them, lending its strength to their fury.

To their linked minds came a whisper of thought, a soft loathsome projection like slimed velvet. The projection was so weak that the Rilg had

to strain to apprehend it but they knew its very weakness to be an alien mockery, for they could sense that it came to them from an infinite distance and that at its point of origin it was powerful beyond conception.

— *We greet you as kin, the alien voice whispered, though it is not a kinship of which we are proud. We are the Votrassandra, the Time Binders, and you have forced us to act against you.*

Once we too were Rilg, back when the Rilg were a noble race. When the Change struck we chose to endure it, to learn from it, rather than to repudiate all that was good in us and and live as parasites and predators. You knew us as Deviants and tried to make us over in your own image. For your efforts we thank you, for it is because of them that we have gained the power to deal with you.

The Rilg have become a cancerous growth. It was necessary that you be stopped. We have stopped you.

Nowhere but on Rildan do any Rilg survive and you cannot leave your planet. Your off-planet teleportation lattices have been destroyed and we have placed a barrier around Rildan. It will destroy any

Rilg attempting to penetrate it, yet it is harmless to all other life forms.

Look around you. Those sentient beings you held captive have been taken from you and freed. For fresh victims you will have to rely on whomever you can entice to visit you, for the barrier will keep you from going to them. We do not think you will have many visitors.

Yet it is not our intention merely to condemn you to a lingering death. Had we wished only your destruction you would now be dead. Instead we offer you an alternative.

The Rilg were once a noble race; perhaps somewhere within you that nobility still survives. Become somehow other than you are—become somehow something other than Rilg—and the barrier will be no barrier to you.

If this seems impossible to you, consider: the potential to become Votrassandra lies within you, for like you we are products of the Change. So we offer you the chance to join us, to become Votrassandra, and survive. As Votrassandra you would be free, free to leave Rildan, free of the need to absorb other minds, and endowed with knowledge and powers beyond your present comprehension.

But the transformation from Rilg to Votrassandra must be undertaken willingly. Should you resist, once the transformation is in progress, you

will be torn apart by your own misguided strength. We will not deceive you; the transformation is perilous and not all who undertake it will survive.

We have seeded Rildan with our adapted symbiote. You need merely desire the transformation and our symbiote will merge with you.

We will not interfere with you again. Should you reject the change we offer you, you are free to devise one of your own. But you must change or you will die.

The voice of slimed velvet was gone. In cold deliberation, the Rilg began to test its assertions.

No barrier was apparent to any of their senses, but when a Rilg tried to levitate free of the planet he died in the same agony that had taken the off-world Rilg. Whatever killed him did so without revealing anything of its nature; the other Rilg shared his agony, participated in his death, but could learn nothing from the body they recovered.

Another Rilg levitated to a height just below that at which the first Rilg had died and teleported himself as far from Rildan as was possible without a receptive lattice. He, too, died, and from him the Rilg learned no more than they had learned from his predecessor.

A slavebrain was constructed and an attempt made to pass it through the barrier. It died. The Rilg tried to bring their energies to focus beyond the barrier, to create a slavebrain which would not have to penetrate the Votras-sandra's killing enclosure. They failed.

Since the basis of a teleportation lattice was sixty-four linked slavebrains, there was no way to get a lattice past the barrier. And since without a lattice the Rilg could not escape the barrier, they were trapped.

The Rilg created a fleet of purely mechanical spaceships intended to raid uncivilized planets and bring back prisoners in shaefi suspension. The spaceships vanished beyond the limits of Rilg perception and never reappeared.

Individual Rilg were already suffering from life-force deprivation, Mishraunal among them. The few animals remaining on Rildan were collected and their miniscule charges of life-force absorbed.

One of the Rilg attempted the transformation to Votras-sandra. Mishraunal shared in his growing horror as he became alien to himself, could only agree when he decided that it was better to put an end to his life than to suffer the loss of everything that he loved and valued in himself. The Rilg resisted the transformation.

His death was a prolonged torture to which the other Rilg eventually had to shut their minds.

The Rilg were not cowards. A second, and a third, of them attempted the transformation. The results were similar.

Investigation showed that any attempt to alter their basic nature would produce the same result. The Votrassandra alternative was no alternative.

Shaefi tubes sufficient to house the entire race were constructed. When an individual Rilg found the agony of life-force deprivation too painful to be endured, he entered suspension, there to await whatever solution the race might devise.

Attempts to devise mechanical equivalents of teleportation lattices failed. Attempts to locate other teleporting races elsewhere in the universe failed.

The Rilg did not accept defeat. If the barrier prevented them from making contact with the outside universe on their own, it did not prevent that universe from coming to them. With shaefi suspension, they could wait. A plan was devised. Work began.

Mishraunal took no part in it. His life-force exhausted, he had taken refuge in one of the brightly lit suspension vaults. There he floated in an indestructible tube filled with thick orange gas, his body paralyzed but his mind free to participate in the work of his race.

Rildan became a trap. The Rilg symbiote was modified so it could be transmitted like a disease and Rildan was seeded with it. Any being walking unprotected on the surface of the planet would be infected with it, though it would not betray its presence until the time, years later, when its host would sicken and die—and before that happened the Rilg hoped its host would have transmitted the symbiote to others of its race. And when two such hosts reproduced, their offspring would be adequate to house the symbiote, a being equivalent to the Rilg, yet of a different race. Different enough, the Rilg believed, so that to it the barrier would be no barrier. Yet all such beings would share in the Rilg's group mind and through the help of such beings the Rilg could win free of Rildan.

The bait for the trap was knowledge. Rildan was known on a billion worlds as the greatest repository of learning in the universe. On far fewer worlds was it known that the Rilg now lived by the death of other intelligent beings, and on none of those worlds were the reasons behind that fact understood. So as direct knowledge of the Rilg was lost over the millennia, the eons, the Rilg would become a legendary race, fabled beings with infinite knowledge. In time there were sure to be visitors to Rildan,

investigators who would ignore the vague warnings of legend and concentrate on the riches the same legends promised.

Though the Rilg would be in suspension, their group mind would still be active.

It was not a plan the Rilg would have chosen had there been alternatives available to them, but there were no alternatives to be had. They had to assume that the Votras-sandra would not destroy them, that the Votrassandra would not interfere with their plans. It was not a safe assumption, but they had no other hopes. Every other alternative which they had been able to conceive had been tried, had failed.

Before they entered suspension, the Rilg altered their outward semblances, each taking on the appearance of a member of some other race which the Rilg had once contacted. If the vaults were opened by the members of a race hostile to the Rilg, they would find, not Rilg, but members of many races, and perhaps seeming members of their own race among them. They might revive what they thought to be a member of their own race.

Those Rilg it was safe to awaken were taken from suspension and given new forms. Mishraunal became a brown biped with only two arms. He was in acute pain and thankful to return to suspension.

Hungrily, yet with infinite patience, the Rilg awaited release.

Blackness. Drifting. A slow coming together of things which had been separated. Two minds returning to consciousness of themselves.

CHAPTER

9

She was calmer now, with a calmness she'd forced on herself. Even before she'd been caught up in the memory sequences, she'd seen the futility, the danger in her senseless attempts to turn the boy against Yag ta Mishraunal. No, not altogether senseless—she'd needed that reassurance of her own potency, her own reality. But that kind of reassurance was a luxury she could no longer afford.

Though would Yag ta Mishraunal really have detected her if she'd continued? He still thought as a Rilg—the memory sequence had reminded her of that—and would any Rilg have done what she was about to do? No, and it was on that alone that she based her hopes. She must not

be suspected until the boy's body was hers.

It was a pity she'd have to destroy him to get his body; the thought of killing any Lha, even one who had never merged with her in the creation of Night, horrified her. But what choice did she have?

None. What she'd done had been an accident, a mistake. Certainly they'd seen that. How dare they condemn her? How could Yag ta Mishraunal denounce her as he had when he himself had selected the boy? When he himself had absorbed Mishraunal?

Once she had a body of her own again, she could break through this silence, merge with the others once again. Then they would understand, then they'd have to admit she was still one of them, still Lha, as much Night as they were. They'd have to take her back.

But if she failed and the boy survived? Would he take for his own as much of her as Yag Chan had taken from Mishraunal? Would he call himself Lozan ta Janesha and remember her with affection, even with love?

No! She fought down the panic she could not afford. There was nothing to fear. She would succeed.

But she could feel her will wavering. She was beginning to identify with him. How much longer could she maintain her identity?

She knew it had begun. One by one, her memories were slipping from her. Only a few so far, and those inconsequential, but with every loss she felt herself dwindle, her strength diminish.

How could she be sure? Would she even know if she lost some vital memory, some bit of information that would give her plan away? How could she be sure?

She could wait no longer. She began.

Slowly, far too slowly, she established a network of subtle controls in the boy's mind. She worked with precision, stealthily, using minimal energies, but even so she knew her work would never stand close scrutiny.

When she had done all she dared do with the boy, she turned her attention to the hawk, damping the sudden in-flux of energy and strength she felt when its brain became hers again. Too much joy could give her away as easily as too much fear.

At last the hawk too was ready, though she hoped she would never need to use it. There was nothing more to be done until Yag ta Mishraunal left the boy alone. Reluctantly she allowed her awareness to go unfocused,

conserving her dwindling energies.

Yag ta Mishraunal and Lozan were walking across the green and black plain, wandering from pool to pavilion, from pavilion to statue, from statue to building. Occasionally the Lha would point out something of interest but for the most part they walked in silence. Lozan's thoughts were elsewhere, fascinated by the searing brightness that had been Mishraunal, in comparison with which his own thoughts were so stunted and insignificant that they hardly seemed worth thinking.

Mishraunal, the Lha—all of them—they're so much more, more alive than human beings. More different than Sren is from a cow, even an insect. And they don't die. I won't die. Human beings, people, everything else dies. That's why they need their religion. So they can believe they'll be reborn.

I won't have to die. I won't ever have to die. I can be like Mishraunal and I won't ever have to die.

The hawk flew above them, only appearing for brief instants when it dipped from cloud into the clear air beneath.

So bright. Like afire. How could I ever be like that? He tried to shake himself free of his paralyzing sense of his own insignificance. *Think like a Lha*, he told himself. The hawk caught his eye. "What did you mean when you said the hawk could become part of me?" he asked as the hawk disappeared back into the crimson cloud.

"Just that. Janesha shaped it from her own flesh, gave it her own life. It remains a part of her. Now that you have absorbed her it is a part of you, as she is a part of you.

When you regain her memories, you will understand how to take its identity."

"You mean—become the hawk?" Lozan asked.

"Yes."

"Would I be—just a passenger or would I be in control?"

"You would be in control. The hawk's body would be as much yours as the body you now inhabit. More—you have not yet learned to control even your own body."

"When can I become it?"

"Soon. When you have more of Janesha's memories. Have you begun assimilating them yet?"

"A few, maybe, but—no. Not yet. Just little things."

"Then you are not yet ready to try the hawk. But it will not take too much longer."

They had been walking for hours without pause, but Lozan was neither hungry nor thirsty. His steps were effortless, as though gravity had loosed its hold on him, yet he was intensely aware of the smooth cool pressure of the plain against the soles of his feet. The crisp air, rich with the scent of the distant jungle, brushed his skin, clearly defining the interface between himself and his environment. He felt extraordinarily solid yet paradoxically weightless.

Mishraunal's memories were still settling into place among his own, slowly becoming less awesome, more accessible. Lozan was beginning to fit the formless intuitions he had always felt into the Rilg's perceptive structure, and the more he assimilated of these new modes of structuring his perceptions the more he became aware of the meaningfulness of sensations which he had always ignored, or rejected. Slowly, with faltering steps, he was coming to grasp a whole new way of apprehending the world around him.

"Today you will understand much that would have been meaningless had I told it to you yesterday," Yag ta Mish-raunal was saying. "For example, had I told you then that we were a race at war, a race in hiding, you would not have been able to understand that for this very reason we are, you are, free to discover for yourself your own way of doing things. We are still young as a race, and our future lies not in any premature attempt to fit ourselves into some preordained mold but in the exploration of our unknown potentials. We do not yet know our limits, whatever they may be; we have not yet discovered our unique strengths. Ultimately, none of us can dictate to you how you should use your abilities, for we are still ignorant of their true nature. But remember, always remember, we have enemies."

"The Votrassandra."

"And the Terran Hegemony. We cannot afford to forget them yet, not while we are still so few, so unsure of our strengths. A child can be destroyed by something that a mature adult would only laugh at."

"The Temple. Here, the Refuge. The Terran I used to talk to told me that human beings would never build anything like it. That's why he suspects you're here, suspects you stole the children from Mig Mar."

"Lavelle is a fool, stupid even for a human. Human beings could have built the structure that the Refuge seems to be. We made sure that even his own computers tell him that."

"Yet he still suspects you. He told me the story of the Pied Piper of Mars, how you stole the children—"

"And thought that his feeble efforts at mind-blocking you would keep you from revealing his secret. He was stupid, unbelievably stupid."

"You told me you were—Yag Chan? Then it was Mish-raunal in the tube?"

"Yes."

"Then how—? Why did Mishraunal try to absorb you? Couldn't he tell you were like him? Even if you weren't a Rilg?"

"He had been too long in suspension. He was too weak, unable to perceive the differences between myself and my human companions—no easy thing to perceive, for I myself thought I was a human being.

"And so he died, as Janesha died. But three million years of shaefi suspension had dissipated his energies to the point where he did not know what he was doing. I honor his memory, as I honor him within me."

"But Lavelle suspects you are here," Lozan said. "Even if he should not."

"True. They've discovered Nal-K'am, but they do not yet know what it is they've discovered, and though they suspect they do not know enough to know what it is they should suspect. I told you earlier that the Refuge is the Temple. That is not strictly true—we are beneath the Temple, buried where they will never find us. The Temple itself is an elaborate sham."

"Lavelle asked me if I thought the priests were human."

"The priests *are* human. The symbiote with which we have inoculated some of them is undetectable until it begins to kill its host; its material extension masquerades as an ordinary protein molecule. And since the coming of the Terrans, all host priests have been taken here, inside the Refuge, where the Offworlders will never discover them."

They sat down by a small pool. Facing them from the opposite shore, Lozan could see an iridescent blue statue of a standing Rilg with arms outstretched.

Blue. The color of joyous creation.

The statue had been fashioned from something that resembled feathers as much as it resembled stone or metal, and as the breeze played over it it sang with a voice like hundreds of tiny flutes.

At the bottom of the pool, transparent crustaceans endlessly stalked tiny red fish. The fish always escaped. Lozan wondered what the crustaceans ate, since they obviously couldn't live on a diet of uncaught

fish. Beside him, Yag ta

Mishraunal sat perfectly still, staring into the pool as though fascinated by the perpetually unsuccessful hunt.

Yesterday Lozan had been consumed by hatred and suspicion; today he felt a trust for Yag ta Mishraunal that he had never before felt for any being. The trust he could understand, accept; it was the previous day's suspicion that worried him. He was changing rapidly, he knew that, but how could a day's growth render the previous day's feelings so alien that they were incomprehensible?

Was it because I knew he was the one who chose me for the Ritual? But even as he asked himself the question, he knew he would have to look elsewhere for his answer. It would have been a good enough reason, perhaps, but he knew it had not been his reason.

Then why the hatred, the suspicion? Why couldn't he remember?

He focused all his new-found perceptive abilities on the alabaster Lha, alert for any betraying tension, any wrong-ness that might lurk behind the other's calm facade, but there was nothing, no sign that Yag ta Mishraunal was anything other than what he appeared to be and claimed to be—or, indeed, what Lozan wanted him to be.

But isn't that what I expected? What I already knew?

And he did know. Novice though he might be in the skillful use of his mental abilities, he knew he was not deceiving himself.

Maybe I distrusted him because I didn't dare admit I needed what he was offering me.

He realized Yag ta Mishraunal's attention was on him.

"Dorjii—" he began, found he couldn't continue. He moistened his lips, tried again. "Lavelle and— No. At the orphanage I had a friend. His name was Dorjii and—he was my friend." But what could Dorjii mean to him here, now?

"You forget that I've been in your mind. I know about Dorjii. Though I'm glad you decided to tell me about the deal he made with the Terran. It shows you're beginning to trust me."

"I trust you, but—no. It isn't that at all."

"We're safe here. There's no way your friend could signal to Lavelle. No physical radiation can penetrate the walls of the Refuge. If Dorjii is here he can do us no harm; should he be elsewhere he can learn nothing dangerous."

"Good. But—I wasn't worried about us. I was worried about him. He was chosen for the Temple; I heard a priest tell him he was. I think he was meant for the Ritual. I don't want him—killed. Can you save him? For me?"

"Certainly, if he is still alive and if he really was meant for the Ritual. We can arrange to have him conditioned to remember nothing of his time here and release him. We can even arrange for him to visit other planets as a sort of special envoy for the priesthood, if you'd like. I know you both wanted to escape Nal-K'am.

"But Lozan, have you forgotten that twenty-seven years have passed since you were placed in suspension? Dorjii may have played his part in the Ritual or been placed in someone's pillar long ago."

Twenty-seven years. Such a short time for Mishraunal but—so long. Twenty-seven years. He could be old already.

"Someone's pillar? The pink crystals with the metal vines around them?"

"Yes. The pillars contain humans in a sort of inverse suspension so as to broadcast their life-force throughout the area around them. If Dorjii was taken for someone's pillar, he's dead or as good as dead—once begun, there is no way to reverse the action of a pillar. But if he's still alive I'll make sure he escapes both Ritual and pillar."

Lozan thanked him.

"But if I do find him alive, there is something you should consider. We Lha channel our human sexuality into absorption and thus we usually absorb the mind of a human of the opposite sex. Janesha chose you; you would choose a girl, and so on. But that's more custom than necessity. If you were to absorb your friend's mind, you'd be granting him the only rebirth possible for a human: rebirth as part of yourself. That way you could keep him with you always. Remember, he is an ephemeral and would otherwise die within a few years anyway."

"No. Not Dorjii."

"I understand. I, too, once thought I was a human being and had human friends. But as you realize more of your true nature maybe you will change your mind."

"No. Not like it was for me with Janesha. No."

"That was because you were Lha."

Lozan changed the subject. "You said the Rilg are still on Rildan. Why

haven't you rescued them?"

"Fear. Not only are there still humans there, but the Votrassandra might learn of our existence."

"Mishraunal was revived without alerting them."

"But he never attempted to leave Rildan. I left Rildan, and I was not a Rilg. Even now, we try to make sure we never become too like the Rilg, for until we understand how the Votrassandra defeated the Rilg we dare not face them."

"Yet you do plan to rescue the Rilg someday?"

"Of course. We are prepared for the day when we can free them; our lattice needs only to be activated to connect the Refuge with Rildan, and the human population of Nal-K'am is almost numerous enough to satisfy the Rilg's immediate needs."

No more like us than we are like cattle. And they wouldn't really die, not exactly. It's not the same.

"We know a little more than the Rilg did about the Votrassandra— we know they used the energies of time itself, though we do not yet understand how to do so ourselves— but we are still too immature as a race to confront them. We Lha are the union of two races and possess powers denied both our progenitors—of this we are already sure—but we are still in our racial infancy. Already we know that some Mig-Martian techniques work better for us than do the techniques the Rilg used—we can make use of mudras, gestures which help focus and direct our nervous energies, in ways the Rilg could never have done, for example—but we do not as yet know enough to do more than attempt to take from the two sciences what we can best use. In time we will create a science of our own, and it will be infinitely greater than that of either the Rilg or the MigMartians."

Yag ta Mishraunal stood. Lozan followed him across the green and black plain.

Walking, Lozan found his sense of his identity changing. Only a short while ago he had felt himself extraordinarily solid but now, as he used his sense of perception to observe his own body, he realized that his skin was only a bag filled with muscles, bones, organs, and fluids. How could you speak of a body as though it were one solid thing (and that thing him) when he was so many different things—a beating heart and kilometers of veins, arteries, and capillaries, ducted and ductless glands, each different, coiled intestines, a brain that was itself composed of innumerable

individual cells? He realized that what he really was was a rather large and amorphous entity like an ethereal jellyfish or a giant cell in the center of which his organs were suspended, that part of him within his skin only the cell nucleus but his consciousness encompassing the cell as a whole.

Intrigued by this new point of view, he began to study himself, looking within and beginning to learn the patterns and rhythms of his body. His nervous system fascinated him and he followed various nervous impulses from their places of origin to their ultimate destinations in his brain. After a while it occurred to him to try to discover the origin of his sense of perception itself. In this he failed; parts of his cortex would be excited as though stimulated by trains of nervous impulses, but there were no impulses that he could detect. At last he gave up and went back to studying the more easily comprehensible workings of his brain and body.

Some hours later, he sighted a structure of curving white stone and shimmering translucent forms. As he and Yag ta Mishraunal approached it, Lozan began to be able to make out tapering pillars rising to varying heights, each topped with a translucent globe. Spiraling ramps emerged from tunnel mouths and coiled around slender columns. Glistening translucent forms hung unsupported in the air.

When he was closer still, Lozan began to notice brilliantly colored specks darting around in the translucence. Curious, he tried to focus his new senses on them.

At first the lack of a clear visual image on which to focus his other senses left him unable to organize his impressions, but he persisted until he found the logic. The specks' identity became obvious; they were fish and the translucent substance was water.

"What keeps the water like that?" he asked Yag ta Mishraunal.

"The fish."

"The fish?"

"Of course. They're no more natural creations than the hawk is; Janesha programmed them with the ability to maintain the water in the shapes she wished it to retain."

"When can I try the hawk?"

"Tomorrow."

The floor of the structure was a network of tiny pools, all housing fish. The fish were of all shapes and sizes, alike only in the eccentric brilliance of their coloration.

"Their minds are very simple," Yag ta Mishraunal informed Lozan. "It should be both simple and safe for you to merge with them."

"Safe? You never mentioned any danger."

"Sit down over there, where you can look into that pool."

Do you remember the two robed and masked Lha who watched you during your Ritual?"

"Yes."

"Their identities were obliterated by premature contact with the Goddess. Night is more than the sum of those portions of our minds which we contribute to Her being; She is alive, with a mind and a will of Her own. The two you saw, and others you did not see, tried to open themselves to the full force of Her being before they were strong enough to maintain their individuality while merged with Her. Now She alone animates their bodies."

"This could happen to me?"

"Easily, had I not protected you from it. You were lucky that your mind was not more sensitive to Her when you absorbed Janesha. Had you been more sensitive, more open, you would have been lost."

"But now that you have learned to open your mind a bit more, any direct contact with Her, even with another Lha who is in contact with Her, could be deadly to you. So I have placed a block on your telepathic channels. Only my mind is open to yours and that only in a limited, safe, way."

I must have sensed him closing me off, Lozan thought. Blocking my telepathic sense. That was what felt wrong to me about him.

He felt himself relaxing.

"I don't like having to be protected," he said. "Like a child. Can you teach me how to protect myself?"

"Soon. I'll give you some of the basic techniques in today's training session and the rest will come to you when you assimilate Janesha's memories."

"When will that be?"

"Soon. How soon, I can't tell you; no Lha has ever absorbed another Lha before. But when I absorbed Mishrau-nal— The shock knocked me unconscious but I had most of his memories assimilated by the time I recovered."

"It's taking me a lot longer."

"I had already been trained as a MigMartian adept. One of the Bon-po, not a follower of the Vajrayana, but it probably helped me.

"Now, for your training. As a Lha you have a mind which is partially independent of your physical human brain. You must learn to foster that independence and make use of it. Think of your symbiote as an immaterial second brain into which you can transfer your self, or as a body with no characteristics which you cannot change at will. By operating from within your symbiote, you can reach back and modify the structures of your physical brain."

"Show me how."

"You are already doing it a little. Your sense of perception is one result. But since you have not yet modified your material brain to conform with the Rilg model, you cannot yet interpret your new perceptions except as extensions of your old senses. You will learn to change this, but it is a slow process.

"Now. Concentrate on what you are. You are not your body. You are not your brain. Everything you are—your feelings, thoughts, memories, sensations—can be concentrated into a single point. Yes. Now move this point out of your brain into other parts of your body, then out of your body altogether. There is nothing to fear, you can always return to your body and enough of you will remain behind to keep your body alive. Now let the point that you have become float just above your head. Good. Now ease yourself back into your brain and allow yourself to take up residence again in your body as a whole.

"Feel that body. Make yourself aware of it as a whole, make yourself aware of your whole nervous system. Concentrate on your arms. Hold them out in front of you and concentrate on what holding them that way does to your nervous system as a whole, to the whole pattern of energies. Do you have it? Good. Now cross your arms in front of you with the left arm over the right. Concentrate. Can you perceive the pattern? Good. Now cross your arms with the right over the left. Can you perceive the difference? Good.

"We can use those differences, those patterned energies, in a way the Rilg never seemed to understand. We call that use mudra, after something the adepts on Mig Mar do. Again, we found it easier to steal a label and adapt it to our own uses than to invent one of our own.

"Now remain sitting as you are, but clench your fists—not too tightly—and cross your arms, the right over the left. Keep your eyes open

and stare into the pool in front of you. Do you see that fish near the center, the red and purple one with the long gold fins? Study it carefully with your eyes and mind, then close your eyes and with its image still clear to you reach out for it with your other senses—"

Lozan's visualization of the fish gradually clarified. He was not sure whether Yag ta Mishraunal was helping him or whether he was doing what he was doing unaided, but as he concentrated he began to sense the play of the muscles beneath the fish's bright skin, began to comprehend the workings of the organs those muscles sheathed. At last he was aware of each bone, each organ, each gland; he knew when a neuron fired and a blood cell died.

"... concentrate on the nervous system. Participate in the impulses flowing to the brain from the eyes, from the swim bladder, from the lateral lines along your sides..."

For an instant he felt the touch of Yag ta Mishraunal's mind.

"Try to attune yourself to the rhythm of the impulses. Identify yourself with the fish's perceptual field. Now concentrate yourself in a single point again and move this point into the fish's brain. Allow yourself to expand into the fish..."

Lozan translated the impulses he felt in his swim bladder into comprehensible terms, became aware of the pressure of the water surrounding him, the clicking sounds the other fish in the pool were making. The sounds seemed to come from within him and to reverberate throughout his entire body.

He concentrated on the organs on his skin and became aware of movements and vibrations, of smells and tastes—the total feeling of the water in which he was swimming. Then at last he managed to identify himself with the whole and was the fish, straining water through red gills, flexing tail and fins—

Abruptly he found himself sitting on the edge of the pool, feeling a twinge of dull excitement. He opened his eyes and saw the red and purple fish floating belly-up, its long golden fins trailing dispiritedly behind it. He looked at Yag ta Mishraunal.

"As you can see, contact with other minds can be dangerous."

"What happened?"

"You absorbed its mind. Had you been in contact with another Lha, you would have been consumed. As Janesha was consumed.

"Now, try the same thing with another fish, but terminate your contact

with it before you kill it."

The surfaces of three pools were littered with dead fish before Lozan mastered the technique of leaving a fish's mind without absorbing it. He became a moon-shaped fish with protruding eyes and an underslung jaw filled with jagged teeth, swimming around near the bottom of a deep pool,

His field of vision was much wider than it had been in his human body, so extensive that only a sixty-degree cone of space behind him was hidden from him. Colors were very bright and subtly different from those he was used to; he could see only a short distance in any direction before his vision blurred. The entire surface of his body could smell/ taste the water, and as he adjusted to his new sensory mosaic he found that this sense conveyed more important information to him than did his vision. Deep within himself, he could hear the other fish feeding, and though they were too distant for him to locate them visually he was able to approximate their position—just below the surface and to the far side of the pool—from the movements he sensed in the water around him. He was having no trouble adjusting to his altered senses.

He ignored the other fish, content for the moment to remain near the bottom of the pool, darting back and forth or floating motionless, feeling and smelling and tasting the water. It was like flying, effortless, free from gravity, yet at the same time he was more intimately in contact with his environment than any burrowing animal could have been with the soil, more a part of the world around him than he had ever been in his human body.

Abruptly he sensed traces of blood and flesh drifting down like fine silt from the fish feeding on the bodies of the fish his earlier efforts had killed. His fish-brain reacted instinctively, the smell and taste overwhelming his rationality instantly, driving everything but hunger from his mind. He rushed to the surface.

There he found the body of a small silver-yellow fish being torn apart by fish smaller than himself. At his approach the smaller predators scattered, hanging in the water, watching him from a safe distance as his powerful jaws ripped at the dead fish's sides and belly. Occasionally one or more of the smaller fish would dart in and snatch morsels of food that escaped him. He ignored the small fish but kept alert for any fish large enough to dispute his claim to the carcass.

All at once he was satiated. Freed of his hunger, he found himself swimming back to the bottom, rational once more.

I lost control, he realized and tried to detach his consciousness from

that of the fish. He could not pull free. Regretfully he absorbed his host's mind.

"I couldn't maintain my identity," he admitted.

"I didn't expect you to be able to, at least not yet." Yag ta Mishraunal pointed to a crystalline-appearing torus which glistened in the air above them. "Do you see that fish, the one with the green fins and red eyes? I want you to enter its mind, only this time I want you to try to maintain some consciousness of your own body while you're in the fish's mind. I'll maintain the torus if you find it necessary to absorb the fish's mind, though I hope it won't prove necessary."

CHAPTER

10

Nine hours later, Yag ta Mishraunal took Lozan to the Place of Remembrance and left him there.

"I wish to merge myself with Night, so I've closed the telepathic channel linking us." The Lha's voice sounded flat and expressionless. "I'll reopen it when I return. If you keep from deviating from the sequence of visualizations and mudras with which we've programmed you, you should have no trouble. Should you finish before I return, you might want to work with some of the electrical fish; I think they can teach you something about expanding your perceptual mosaic.

"I'll prepare the hawk so you can use it in the next part of your instruction," he finished and stepped into the wall.

Lozan was alone in the silent oval room. He walked over to the skull and ran his hands over its uneven surfaces, building a tactile image of it. His fingers traced the spiral of green gems radiating from the right eye socket and the matching spiral of milky white coiling from the left. He closed his eyes and rested his hand on the clustered jewels set in the center of the skull's forehead, felt them warm to his touch.

Opening his eyes, he stepped back until he was about two meters from the pedestal on which the skull rested. He sat down, crossed his right leg over his left, and lifted his necklace and twisted it around so that the bone disk rested against his forehead. It felt surprisingly cool against his skin. Staring into the skull's spiraling eyes, he felt his own eyes growing heavy.

He twisted his fingers together in the way Yag ta Mish-raunal had

taught him and closed his eyes. He began blanking out his senses. First the senses dependent on his exterior sensory receptors: taste, smell, hearing, vision. Next the senses signaling his position in space and the arrangement of his head, limbs, and organs. He felt as though he were floating. Then the interior senses. He could no longer feel his heart beating or his lungs expanding and contracting. He had only his sense of perception. He blanked that and became a point of blind consciousness, then triggered the sequence with which he'd been programmed.

Lozan, he thought, and projected the image of his seated body, visualizing it as completely as if it were being perceived with all of his sensory systems. He allowed himself to expand into his visualization, identified himself with it.

Next he visualized Janesha's skull, projecting the remembered image into the nothingness surrounding him. The spiral eyes began to spin, glowing and flowing, until the skull was clothed in radiance. The light condensed, became flesh; where the skull had been he perceived the head of a young girl with green eyes and floating red-black hair. Her hair grew until it was a shimmering cloud. Within the cloud, her body took on substance, materialized, as slim and lovely as Lozan had remembered it.

Janesha, the illusion Janesha he had seen in the arena, floated in the void with him. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be asleep.

He concentrated harder on her. Her image clarified as she began to register on his perceptive sense. He perceived her totality now—living sinews, beating heart, strong bones. She was alive. She was real.

Her green eyes opened. At first they stared dully, but almost immediately they came alive, focused on Lozan. There was something frightening in the look they gave him.

This is only an illusion, Lozan reminded himself. *Something I'm projecting from my memories. Nothing to be afraid of.*

The girl's smile was terrifying.

Janesha, Lozan thought, helpless to alter the sequence. He felt his consciousness leave his illusion-body for hers. Her body felt strange but he had no time to explore that strangeness; looking out through her eyes he could see his own body changing. He fought against panic, reminding himself that he had known that this would happen, but it was hard to remain calm while his body altered form and color, while its features changed and it became female.

Finally nothing of Lozan remained in the figure he faced. A crimson

giantess. Janesha. The real Janesha.

She repelled him, as he knew she should not.

Janesha, he thought reluctantly, and felt his consciousness jump the gap to the tall crimson body. He was reluctant to identify with it and expand into it and when he had done so he felt uncomfortable, as though the phantom messages its nerves were sending him were out of phase with his receiving consciousness. It was with a sense of intense relief that he saw the other body taking on his form.

Lozan, he thought, and felt his consciousness make the jump once more. It was all over. He was back in his own body.

Yet he felt no influx of new knowledge, no rush of alien memories.

Perhaps it takes a while. He unblanked his perceptive sense so the projection would merge with the true image of his body. He tried to open his eyes.

His eyes would not open. With mounting frustration he tried other muscles, other movements, until he was forced to admit defeat. Not one muscle obeyed him. He was completely paralyzed.

What had he done to himself this time?

He assessed his situation. He was still oriented in space, still aware that he was sitting upright with his hands twisted together in his lap. He could feel the cold floor beneath him and the pressure his legs exerted against each other. There was no pain. His perceptive sense told him he was still in the Place of Remembrance. But taste, smell, hearing—every sense which would have given him a direct idea of what was happening in the world beyond his skin was gone.

Still his heart was beating and his chest was rising and falling as his lungs took in and expelled air. Whatever he'd done to himself, it hadn't interfered with the automatic functioning of his body. He seemed in no immediate danger. He'd be safe until Yag ta Mishraunal returned. There would only be the shame of having proven himself incompetent.

What had he done to himself?

He concentrated on his perceptive sense, trying to sense what was going on inside his body. Images beat in on him with great force, imbued with a paradoxical clarity which made them harder to translate into terms his mind could comprehend. Nonetheless, he gradually built up a clear picture of his body.

All his organs seemed to be functioning, though many of his bodily

rhythms were drastically altered. But there were regions in his brain which eluded his attempts at perception, as though part of his forebrain was wrapped in a sort of mental shadow, a confusing darkness he could not penetrate. Yet within that darkness he sensed furious activity, a fire that was not a fire blazing.

Yag ta Mishraunal had blocked his— No! This darkness was new, was—wrong, somehow—and the shadowed areas were those he'd mapped out earlier as controlling the functions he'd now lost. This was something else, something new.

Something dangerous. If only he'd understood what Jan-asha had done to him when she'd cured him of his earlier paralysis. But he'd felt nothing then and without her memories he had no idea what to do.

And he definitely had none of her memories. What had he done?

He dug into Mishraunal's memories but they were too alien, too irrelevant, to help. Perhaps a complete understanding of Mishraunal's knowledge would have enabled him to deal with his present situation, but he was far from that kind of understanding. Too far.

He checked again for Yag ta Mishraunal, then probed cautiously at the shadowed region of his cortex, was rewarded with an agony worse than anything he'd ever experienced, comparable to the agony Mishraunal had felt during the Votrassandra attack.

No, he thought. It was the same; I tapped into the agony Mishraunal felt during the attack.

I don't understand.

The agony continued, spread. His body was dead and his every nerve was being burned from the dead flesh.

Then the pain was gone. He felt his eyes open, though he had not willed them to open, and though he felt them open yet he was still blind, still dependent on his sense of perception alone.

And the dark fire that was not a fire had uncoiled, escaped the shadows, was pulsing, spreading, flowing down into the free structures of his cortex. Lozan was a pool of liquid being in which the free cells of his brain were suspended, a sensitive liquid entity without protection from the searing darkness that burned him and drove him back, forcing him to abandon, cell by cell, the structures that had been part of him.

He was losing all sense of his body. The dark fire had taken his cerebellum, driven him from it; he had no sense of spatial orientation, felt no identity with the body that he could detect with his sense of perception.

He was a field of energy contained within and containing the free regions of his brain.

How much of his self was within the symbiote? Could he use it to take over the functions he had lost? He tried to remember the knowledge that had been his as Mishraunal, but even that was fading, fragmentary.

His hands. They were moving in a swift, complex pattern and his body was rising to its feet and walking. Walking smoothly, though he had no control of its actions, no knowledge of its destination.

He was gripped by an almost-memory, a sense of acting on decisions once clear but now forgotten.

Nervous impulses were running to and from the shrouded regions of his brain. Had he split himself off, was he some tiny part of Lozan that had lost contact with his greater self? If he could visualize the visual cortex, mold the plastic potential of his symbiote into a duplicate... No, he was losing touch with his sense of perception.

There. Visualize the whole thing, then shrink it to a single point. *Identify.* Make the proper connections with the rest of his brain— *So. Yes.* Now, reroute the impulses from his eyes into that point-source of consciousness-He could see the red disk of the lattice. There was an instant of intolerable pain; he had tapped Mishraunal's memories of the Votrassandra attack again. He was blind. *Again.* He had failed.

But if the part of his mind that was directing his body continued moving around without his control he could hurt himself badly. Perhaps if he tried only to damp some of the control impulses from the shrouded parts of his brain, keep his body motionless-He fell heavily and struck the blood-red floor with his head, then the agony was back, going on and on and on, blotting out everything.

When at last it was gone, he found himself stepping out of a teleportation lattice into a room he had never seen before. The room was huge, rectangular, windowless, filled with case after case of carved and faceted gems which coruscated with more than the glitter of reflected light. Lozan's body moved towards the far end of the room, where a single transparent case stood alone against the wall.

Lozan could not use the lattices to teleport himself, yet he had just done so. He had never been in this room before, yet he was moving through it as though he knew it well. Whenever he tried to regain control of his body, he was punished for his efforts.

He could resist the knowledge no longer; the mind motivating his body

was no split-off fragment of himself, no part of himself at all. His body was under the control of a functioning mind, but that mind was not his.

Whose, then? Yag ta Mishraunal's? Night's?

I trusted him.

The case opened to his fingers' touch. It was filled with dark glistening gems, black lotus flowers half the width of his hand. His hand took one of the flowers and placed it on his forehead, where it adhered.

Lozan went from case to case, selecting jewels without hesitation. A huge white lotus fitted itself to his bald crown.

Two curving bars of orange and black replaced his vanished eyebrows. His hands placed a flat yellow lozenge on either side of the black lotus. His ears were sealed with two milky plugs. Lenses of green crystal covered his eyes.

Around his neck snaked a coil of crimson and azure gems terminating in a tiny blue-black lotus. He placed a green lotus over his neck and a black lotus, smaller than the first and flecked with gold, over his solar plexus.

Removing his kilt, he placed a purplish-red lotus just above the place from which his penis jutted out. His penis was erect and the hands wound it with a rope of purplish-red gems. Bands of azure and crimson covered his wrists and ankles. Small opalescent disks were scattered over his body and an opalescent line traced the length of his spine.

From a case at the center of the room he took sharp amber-colored claws and fitted them to his fingers. He began to dance, moving with slow strange steps that never quite repeated themselves.

As he danced, his body's nervous system evolved strange, complex energy configurations. He could perceive the forces coming into existence, growing, focusing.

Mudra.

His body's clawed fingers sketched a complex gesture which left lines of slowly fading fire hanging in the air. His body laughed and, as it laughed, the shrouded mind's triumph escaped for an instant the shadows in which it had concealed itself.

And in that instant he knew her. *Janesha*. Of course.

Yag ta Mishraunal said she was dead. That I killed her.

Had that too been a lie?

Lozan was suddenly conscious of her presence.

—Lozan.

—[?]

—*I want your body. A body to replace the one you killed. —You killed yourself. This is my body. Mine.*

—*No longer. [Confidence/Arrogance.] I can expel you from that brain so easily—But I would prefer not to have to do it. I don't want to kill you.*

—*[Disbelief.] You've already tried to kill me once.*

—*I tried to absorb a human, not kill a Lha. Now that I know you for what you are, I would save something of you if I could. Preserve you as Yag ta Mishraunal preserved Mishraunal.*

—*Absorb me.*

—*Yes.*

—*No. Give me back my body. Have you forgotten the First Law? Or was that too a lie?* Unbidden, the memory of Yag ta Mishraunal as Lozan had last seen him returned to him.

Janesha picked the image from his mind.

—*He took the hawk?* He could feel her fear despite her barriers.

—*He did.* She answered herself and abruptly her thoughts were again shielded.

—*Lozan, I must have your body. I can destroy your mind or I can absorb you. But though I can destroy your mind almost without effort I would prefer to absorb you—to retain something of you, for you are Lha, my enemy through no fault of your own—and to absorb you I need your cooperation. The First Law is real; unless you attempt to absorb me I cannot absorb you. So the choice is yours: Cooperate with me or force me to destroy you.*

—*No.*

—*The choice was yours.*

With quick complex movements, she began touching his clawed ringers to the opalescent disks on his body, then began drawing lines on the surface of his skin, carefully avoiding any further contact with the disks. The jewels were flaming now and the flaming patterns were writhing, squirming over the body's flesh.

My flesh.

In a tiny area in his cortex, the darkness seemed to dissipate. A sweet voice—his own voice, yet soft and lulling— came fountaining out of the place where the darkness had been. The voice rilled him, gentled him, blotted out his fear and anger:

There is nothing to fear, nothing to fight against... softly, think about softness, rest, floating... your thoughts are slow, languid, joyous... listen to yourself, listen to your better self, your true self... gently... feel yourself here, know yourself here, here without memory, without plans, without fears... content... remember the joys you've always felt here among those who love you, who love you, those who cherish you as the gentle tide sweeps you away, away to joy...

The darkness was pulsing, throbbing, expanding, gently lapping at the free parts of Lozan's brain. Entranced, he drew back, relinquishing cell after cell, structure after structure. The shadows pulsed and sparkled, sang to him.

—Softly, slowly, without fear or anger... joy, only joy and the knowledge that you are cherished, loved, protected...

Lozan felt himself fading as the voice was fading, dimming, falling to an inaudible murmur, yet still it held him, still it filled him.

He felt himself dissolving into a pastel confusion. He tried to ignore it, to concentrate on the voice, but his thoughts and memories had become entangled. The darkness had become the night sky, was the flame Dusum held to a pipe of Dakkini slivers, was the shadow of Lavelle's hand on his old Go board; the voice was Dorjii's voice, Sren's voice, the voice of the bubble stream, *lying to him—*

Lying to him! Anger shattered the trance, brought him back to himself. All that remained of his physical self was a small knot of cells deep in his thalamus. The darkness was the night sky and the voice was the taunting voice of the bully who had just knocked him to the ground. Gaining strength from his fury he struck out at the darkness, picking up a rock and hitting the bully with it again and again while he pierced through the agony of the Votrassandra attack, pierced through the universe of blankness beyond it, fought the controlling will as he spat out his broken teeth and drove Janesha back.

He was falling. Three other boys were holding him down while the bully kicked him again and again. One of his ribs was broken. He squirmed and fought, keeping his teeth clamped shut, trying to get free, trying to get even one hand free so he could get at them, but they held him down and he had to get away, he was burning, burning—He was a dimensionless

point, fleeing, abandoning brain and body. Yet now that he was outside his body, his thoughts were clear again and from his new vantage point he could perceive the body that had been his, throbbing with powerful energies, sheathed in liquid fires. All his pain was gone. He could sense powerful forces seeking him, striking out blindly (how did he know they were blind? But he knew) and though he knew the forces should have destroyed him, he felt nothing. Something shielded him.

A wave of dark force struck the place which he had defined as his location but did not touch him. Had Janesha been blurring when she'd promised to destroy him?

No. His mind was working with cold clarity now, extracting meaning from his confused experiences.

He'd fled his physical brain and taken refuge in the energy configurations of his symbiote. Janesha couldn't get at him to destroy him because Yag ta Mishraunal had blocked all telepathic access to the symbiote.

Did that mean that Yag ta Mishraunal was not in league with Janesha? Could he count on the Lha's help when he returned?

Yes. But he had no idea when Yag ta Mishraunal planned to return.

The lines of fire faded from his body. Janesha was beginning to restore the lotus-gems to their cases. She spoke aloud; Lozan could perceive her words:

"I couldn't destroy you after all, Lozan, but without a body you'll die soon enough anyway. You're cut off from your life-force. All the life-force you took for yourself in those twenty-seven years. I have it now. Everything you do takes part of yourself now, Lozan, part of you. You won't have the strength to hold yourself together much longer. Can you feel it beginning yet—your memories getting dimmer, your thoughts fading, your will dissipating? Pretty soon you'll lose memory of this conversation, Lozan. Then you'll begin consuming yourself. You'll destroy yourself without any further help from me. Is that what you want, to eat yourself like a starving animal? Are you sure you still don't want to help me absorb you? Can you still hear me, still understand me? Lozan?"

He would not allow her to destroy him. He had to find a new source of life-force.

The pillars. He redefined his location and he was there. He could no longer sense Janesha. He redefined his location again, took up a position inside the brain of the girl inside the pillar closest to the silver bridge. He

expanded his awareness, trying to attune himself to her infinitely slowed, fantastically intensified consciousness. He could not attune himself, could not mesh with her. He was blocked. Yag ta Mishraunal's barrier. It had saved his life once but it would kill him now.

No. The fish. He said I could work with one of the electrical fish.

He redefined his location and was there, among the white stone and translucent globes. He could feel the fish-minds, simple, greedy, accessible.

He absorbed fish-mind after fish-mind until dead fish littered the surfaces of all the pools. He needed more. He reached out to a green fish in one of the floating globes, absorbed its mind. A tiny flash of satisfaction as he absorbed the fish's life-force.

The globe was only water, falling, splashing. Gone. If Janesha detected its loss, realized what he was doing—

No. If she'd detected him she would have reacted by now. He was safe as long as he kept from absorbing any more of the fish that helped maintain the structure.

He absorbed another fish. Another, his exultation fading. Each fish had so little life-force, so little of the energy that allowed him to tap the universal life. And without a body of his own to charge with life-force, that little energy he could absorb drained from him almost as soon as he took it.

There were only so many fish.

Could he pour himself into the brain of one of the fish? Would it hold him?

How long would he have there before Janesha found him and destroyed his host?

But he had no alternative. He entered the mind of a large blue-white fish with armored scales. It was ecstasy to have eyes again, to taste the water with his long barbels, to smell, feel, and hear. But the fish's brain was not adequate to house him. Life-force was still draining from him, though not quite as rapidly as before. He could feel his thoughts growing sluggish. Soon he would be unable to think, unable to plan.

He absorbed the lives of more fish, took from them the clarity he needed. Deep inside his swim bladder he could hear the sounds of the other fish in the pool in which he swam. Could he divide himself, inhabit a multiplicity of bodies at once?

A black fish with a flat body and long sinuous tail swam by. Lozan tried to project himself into it without losing his identification with his original host.

It was surprisingly easy. A moment of fitting himself to the new configuration, then he was in two places at once. His new acquisition was blind, sensing its environment through minute changes in the electrical field it generated, and its brain was far more complex and unfamiliar than that of his original host. But though it could contain more of his self than his first host, even the two together were insufficient. His thoughts were growing steadily fuzzier; it was becoming harder and harder to deal with the two sets of conflicting sensory data, neither of them familiar, and to control two entirely different bodies at the same time.

He parked his blue-white host on the sandy bottom of the pool so he could give it minimal attention, but despite its more complex brain his new host was a more primitive type of fish and had to keep moving to keep itself supplied with fresh oxygen. He set it swimming in a circle with the side of the pool always to its right.

He took over seven more fish, parking those he could on the bottom and sending the others to swim behind his second host. As long as the swimming fish followed the same endless course, he could coordinate them without too much confusion.

At intervals he sensed food appearing in the pool and would partially withdraw from his hosts' minds, waiting until they were satiated before reestablishing full identification. It was too difficult to try to coordinate all of them while they fed. Whenever he withdrew, more life-force would drain from him; to regain it he'd absorb the lives of fish in distant pools, then settle back into his routine, waiting for the time when Janesha would find him and destroy his hosts.

Yag ta Mishraunal found him first.

CHAPTER

11

It was while his hosts were feeding, when Lozan's identity was partially disengaged from theirs, that he first sensed Yag ta Mishraunal. Lozan's sense of perception had atrophied in the never-ending repetition of rest-on-the-bottom and swim-along-the-side; in the bodies of his fish, he had lost all sense of time and he had no idea how long the Lha had been

standing by the pool's edge, the crimson hawk perched on his outstretched wrist.

There had been something about the hawk... Lozan's mind was torpid, dulled by the never-ending draining away of his vitality that his life as a school of fish could only slow, never halt. It had been—a long time since he had had the energy for free thought. He couldn't remember if it had been Yag ta Mishraunal or some other that Janesha had feared.

—*Lozan*. The warmth was there, the candor, a flash of joyous brilliance in the sluggish dullness of his mind. The barrier, he realized, was no barrier against its creator.

—(?) He did not have the energy to frame a question.

— *We did not know Janesha was alive. We are sorry.*

— *What good are... My body. Give me my body. Give it back. —Later. You will get it back later. For now, you must wait. —Now. I need it now. I'm dying. I— Give it to me.'*

—*I was Mishraunal; I spent three million years dying. I remember. You can wait a little longer.*

—*No.*

—*It need not be painful. I can give you this hawk's body to use while you wait. Janesha designed it with a compacted brain of great complexity and though she modified it to be a trap for you I have corrected that. It is as good a brain as your human body possesses.*

—*I don't want... Yes. I'm dying. It's killing me, even trying to talk to you like this, it's— Help me. Please. I can't...*

—*Open yourself to me.* Clarity and focus flowed from Yag ta Mishraunal into Lozan.

—*Can you transfer your identity to the hawk yet?*

With Yag ta Mishraunal's life-force still flooding into him, Lozan attuned himself to the hawk, wedded himself to its nervous system. Yet the transfer was incomplete; some of him remained entangled in the lives of his former hosts. With little regret, he stopped their hearts and freed his trapped selves.

It was like coming home to the home he'd never had but always imagined to find himself once again in a single sight-oriented body with four limbs, and if two of those limbs were wings, wasn't that the fulfillment of a lifelong dream?

The hawk's mind occupied only a tiny structure in its capacious brain;

the rest was Lozan's and within it he felt whole and at peace. Within seconds, he had taken the knowledge he needed to fly from the hawk-mind and was aloft, wheeling and soaring, all else forgotten in the glorious freedom of flight.

— *There is no time for that now. You are needed.*

Almost reluctantly Lozan landed on Yag ta Mishraunal's wrist.

—*Do I get my body back now?* he asked, surprised to find that it no longer seemed quite as important as it had been moments before.

—*Not yet, but we must begin the process that will return it to you. You will accompany me while I talk to Janesha. Withdraw to the portion of the brain you share with the hawk's mind so I can shield you in a way that will not arouse her suspicions.*

Lozan relinquished control reluctantly. The world around him lost all color, feeling; he was once more totally dependent on his sense of perception.

I will leave the channel between us open.

With the hawk still perched on his wrist, Yag ta Mishraunal began to descend a spiral ramp into one of the tunnels. The faintly greenish water of the pool formed a cylinder around which the ramp coiled, and curious fish peered at them as they descended.

The tunnel ended in the red metal disk of a teleportation lattice. Yag ta Mishraunal made a complex gesture with the fingers of his left hand, stepped through the disk into the Place of Remembrance.

It shocked Lozan to perceive his body sitting crosslegged before the skull, a slight smile on its lips, its eyes closed.

No. Her eyes are closed. She's smiling. Not me.

Opening her (his?) eyes, Janesha stared up at Yag ta Mishraunal, ignoring the hawk on his wrist.

"You were gone a long time."

"I had to prepare someone for the Ritual. Everything went well?"

"I think so. I'm still confused about a lot of things, but everything's beginning to sort itself out. I'll have it all under control soon."

"Good. But I don't think you'll be ready for telepathic contact for a while longer, no matter how confident you feel. I'll leave you shielded."

"If you think that's best. Still, I should be ready for the hawk by now."

She stretched out her arm. The hawk flew to her, perched on her wrist.

"It's heavy."

But Yag ta Mishraunal was shaking his head. "You're not ready for the hawk yet. When I examined it, I discovered that Janesha must have been using it to practice maintaining her identity under difficult conditions. Probably she was afraid of ending up like the Lha in the colored robes. I'll have to reprogram the bird before it'll be safe for you."

No relief showed on Janesha's face.

"Do you remember Jomgoun?"

"A young Lha, a little younger than Janesha? I can't get a clear picture of her."

"Him. He comes of age today and it is customary among us for all Lha to attend a first Ritual. We are so few and it is such a rare and precious thing when one of us can transcend his human ancestry and take his place among us."

That's where she'll want to do it, Lozan realized. It'll give her the perfect opportunity to announce she's still alive and one of them. Just as if she was completing her own Ritual.

"I think you'll find that watching a proper Ritual will give you a less distorted idea of what the Ritual is really like," Yag ta Mishraunal continued. Lozan felt the words were directed more at him than at Janesha. "Experiencing it as you did, it must be hard for you to believe that it is not cruel, but joyous."

"It is hard to believe... You're sure Dorjii will not be selected?"

"Yes."

"Will I be able to perceive the Ritual, shielded as I am?"

"The shield is necessary for your protection. You should be able to sense enough, despite it, to correct your earlier impressions. Pay attention to muscle tensions and hormone secretions.

"I'll take the hawk with me." The hawk transferred itself to Yag ta Mishraunal's wrist and the three of them stepped through to the arena.

Music was all around them, throbbing and insistent. Janesha stood among the giants of the upper tier; Yag ta Mishraunal stood in the bottom tier.

— *What happened to the haze?* Lozan asked, as much to test his ability to communicate as to get an answer.

— *What you saw was the result of your untrained perception of the energies gathered here. Your shield keeps you from sensing most of them now.*

A stocky dark-skinned girl with a bald head was standing in the set of rings in which Lozan had once found himself. She could have been any of the female orphans whom Lozan had seen in the shaefi tubes. She looked up at the three tiers of Lha, then turned her back on them and prostrated herself to the triple statue of the Goddess.

—*She feels no fear.*

—*None? Not even of us?* For an instant, Lozan saw the Lha around him as he imagined the girl was seeing them, as grotesque monsters.

—*Then what does she feel?*

—*Pride that she has been chosen for mortality, regret that her best friend was not chosen with her, some embarrassment that she is naked—though she tells herself that it makes little difference because we are only S'in-je—and contempt for us. We are here to watch and envy her and she is very aware of that fact.*

—*But why Naming Day, all the promises, all the lies?*

—*We are in hiding and must keep our actions hidden. But more importantly, the preliminaries serve to intensify the human's experience of the Ritual—to intensify her pride and pleasure, not her fear or pain—and this intensification makes the Ritual more fulfilling to both participants. You will see.*

The iron-black being with the dancing mannikins on the pedestal of its neck was sitting to Yag ta Mishrauna's left. It seemed to Lozan that one of the figures bore a suspicious resemblance to himself, while the other looked very much like Janesha as she had first appeared to him in the arena.

The two figures were making love.

— *When do I get my body back? —Soon. After Jomgoun's Ritual.*

Two swellings appeared on the flat surface of the black being's pedestal neck. The skin split and drew back, revealing two moist eyes. The mannikins picked them up and trained them on the girl in the arena.

The standing Lha seated themselves with a single movement, Janesha following a calculated instant later. A Lha appeared in the second set of rings. He was at least four meters tall and a vivid chrome-yellow. In the center of his forehead a scarlet lotus glittered. A spiral of green and white

gems wound up his right forearm and a small black lotus glinted on his chest. In his left hand he held the skull-flower, the red gems flashing in its eight golden eye sockets, while his right hand gripped the Knife of the Ritual.

The girl turned from the statues of the Goddess to stare at Jomgoun.

The voice Lozan had heard when he'd faced Janesha sounded, repeating the same words.

—*What is she seeing now?*

(A boy dressed in red, his hair cut short, his whole aspect radiating strength and serenity. His eyes glow golden in his dark face and behind him the arena fades into golden mist...)

It happens so quickly. The girl and Jomgoun walk to the center, face each other over the white stone. The girl kneels, facing now not Night's triple figure but the watching Lha and says, "To You, O Goddess, I relinquish my life."

Lozan hears the truth in her voice.

She rises and Jomgoun hands her the knife. She makes a deep incision on the inside of her left arm and offers the bloody knife to the watchers. The blood is suddenly gone from the blade. Her wounded arm does not bleed.

Jomgoun takes the knife from her and hands her the skull-flower. She takes the cup and holds it beneath the wound. A single drop of blood falls into the cup. She kneels once more and holds the skull-flower in front of her, offering it to the watchers.

Jomgoun takes it from her and places it in the recess in the white stone.

She rises. All this time, her face has been transfigured by bliss.

She lies upon the stone. Jomgoun takes the blade and makes careful incisions in her limbs, neck, and body, working the blade back and forth so the blood flows freely. It runs down her body and into the waiting channels of the rock, dripping through the tiny hole in the stone and slowly filling the skull-flower. The knife's jeweled pommel and blade are blazing steadily brighter.

Yag ta Mishraunal suddenly links Lozan with the girl.

There is no pain, only a voluptuous lassitude. She sees Jomgoun as he is now, yet what she sees is no different than the Mother bending over her to take her soul and deliver it from Nal-K'am. The girl knows that everything in her existence has been only preparation for this moment of supreme

fulfillment and she is content. Her memories come alive for her and she relives them, relives her whole life, each incident dissolving into sacred all-forgiving flames which are sheer, unbearable ecstasy, growing, growing—

And as suddenly as it had come, Lozan's contact with her mind was gone. On the floor of the Place of the Ritual,

Jomgoun had begun to drink from the skull-flower. The girl held the knife poised over her breast, then plunged it into her heart. She was smiling.

For an instant, Jomgoun was shrouded in shadow, then the pure yellow of his body was broken by tracings of black and silver while some subtle change took place in the shape of his ears. His new colors reminded Lozan of some of the fish in Janesha's pools.

—She felt no pain.

—You told her she would be reborn as a human. You lied to her.

—Perhaps, but there was no cruelty in our deception. And she lives on in the only way a human can survive the death of its body. As part of one of us.

Jomgoun took the knife from the girl's breast. The blade was clean, its jewels again dull. The girl's body grew misty, indistinct, faded away. There was no blood on the stone.

—And Jomgoun, what does he feel like now? Like a god?

—He feels humble. For the first time he understands what it is to live life as a human being, for the first time he realizes what it means that he too participates in humanity and must transcend his origins.

—Link me to him.

—I cannot. He is one with Night. But prepare yourself: Janesha's judgment is at hand.

There was no sense of transition, but Yag ta Mishraunal and the hawk that was Lozan were in the set of rings that Jomgoun had been in a moment before. Janesha stood in the other set of rings, her mouth open in surprise.

—Remain here. Lozan felt small and vulnerable in his hawk's body. The black floor was cold beneath his clawed feet.

Yag ta Mishraunal left the rings, walked with measured deliberation towards the center of the arena. The light of the arena was suffused with drifting shadows. The watching Lha sat immobile, unmoving, like statues

of bright metal.

Darkness was gathering around Yag ta Mishraunal, solidifying, taking on substance around him, hiding him. Where before there had been an alabaster Lha, there was only darkness.

From the darkness Night spoke. "Janesha, your crime is known. You have taken into your hands the judgment which is Ours and Ours alone. You were of Us, and you have plotted murder against that which is of Us. Do you have anything to say in your defense before you are sentenced?"

"My defense? Why mock me with words—with 'defense, judgment,' as though We were human beings? Open Yourself to me, let me merge with You, then You will know what I have done, why I have done it. Then You will be able to judge me, if that is still Your desire. But not this, not these words, not this mockery."

"Our mind must remain closed to you."

"Then I killed him for nothing?" She paused, brushed at her upper lip, scowled. "I was dying there, in his mind. You think you know what it means to be absorbed and perhaps you do—when it is a human being who is being absorbed. But me—I was alone, alone for the first time in my life and I was dying. I was dissolving; he was destroying me. I killed him to survive.

"I gave him what choice I could—to let me absorb him or be expelled from his body. He refused to let me absorb him. I didn't want to kill him—I didn't even want to absorb him now that I've seen what it's like for a Lha to be absorbed— but I had no choice. I had to do it. Can't you understand that, You who have never known danger except through Mishraunal's memories, never known pain in Your own bodies? Look into me, experience the choices I faced, then judge me if You wish!"

She was poised, tense, waiting for a response. When none came, some of the life seemed to drain from her. "You have already condemned me. Yag ta Mishraunal told the boy so; I heard him. What else could I do? Appeal to him—when he himself once absorbed Mishraunal as Lozan absorbed me? He would have left me to dissolve!"

Some strength returned to her. "But I thought that if only I survived, if he was gone beyond recall, then You might let me live. I am Lha, a Lha who had to face alone and without guidance a choice none of You has ever had to face. If I chose wrongly—if I am flawed, incomplete, unworthy—make me over, help me become what I should be. I am one of You, part of You. You cannot cast me out. Let me merge with You again, even let me become one of those who wear the colored robes! Please let me

merge with You again."

"The boy is not dead."

"Not dead?" Her eyes caught the hawk, stared. "That's him? There?"

"Yes."

"Then I didn't need his body to survive?"

"No."

"I didn't know. Open to me, look within me. I didn't know."

"None of Us knew."

"But then"—she rallied—"why this mockery? He could have his body back without killing me. We could both survive. He could have his body and You could give me the hawk."

"You cannot have the hawk."

"You'll kill me then? Even though he's still alive?"

"No. We would never kill a Lha, even one as flawed as you, even a Lha who has broken every law of Our kind and broken every law from stupidity, without thought, without reason.

"Why did you have so little faith in Us? Why were you so sure We would condemn you to absorption? Why did you think We would condemn and kill you? Why? We could have given you a new body. Why were you so sure of your guilt that you put yourself beyond the reach of Our forgiveness?"

"But You did not know a Lha could survive without a body."

"No. But *you did*, for you had already done so. We could have programmed a slavebrain to absorb your mind so that you would have been the only minded entity animating its flesh. Or we could have removed that portion of the boy's brain housing your consciousness and grown you a new body around it."

Cut out part of my brain. For her. Lozan stretched his wings, scraped one claw slowly across the cool black stone. This was sounding less and less like the vindication he'd been promised, less and less like the judgment Janesha deserved.

She tried to murder me. And they were going to forgive her.

"On your own, without Our help, you proved yourself unable to act in any way better than a human would have acted. You must learn to act as a Lha, and learn to act as a Lha without Our support. So for you We have devised a special Ritual; you must learn to transcend your humanity by

living in isolation from Our presence until you can prove yourself Lha without Our help. Only then will you be allowed to merge with Us again."

Janesha slumped, defeated, exhausted. Seeing her, Lozan had to fight back sympathy, though her punishment seemed mild enough to him. All she had to do was learn to live the same way he'd lived all his life.

"In what body?" Janesha asked.

"In the body you now inhabit."

Lozan tried to yell, "Wait! No!" but all that he could force from the hawk's mouth was a shrill scream. — *Yag ta*

Mishraunal! he projected. *Wait. Please! Give her the hawk. I want my body back. You promised. You promised you'd give me my body back!*

"The two of you will share the same body," the voice that was many voices said.

—*No! I don't want her there.*

"Which is one reason why the two of you will share your body. You must learn to live together if you are ever to merge together into Our mind. Now that you, Lozan, no longer have Janesha's knowledge to draw upon, you will need instruction to fit you to Our way of life. Janesha will provide you with that instruction."

Shadow cloaked them, soothed them. They slept.

CHAPTER

12

Sometimes when Lozan saw himself reflected in a faceted crystal or a mirroring pool he would glimpse the flattened back of a huge crimson swamp spider clinging to the back of his neck, its mandibles and hollow legs buried deep in his flesh so that his blood flowed through it and its through him... The spider was always just a suggestion of crimson, a shape seen out of the corner of his eye as he turned his head.

In the center of an empty room with walls of dull black, Lozan sat staring with unfocused eyes at the opposite wall. A green lotus gem shone on his forehead.

—*(Mishraunal was running his fingers over two touch-tapes submitted to him by a blind, warty creature from a high-gravity world far from its parent sun. The creature would not be allowed to study on*

Rildan-)

—(Mishraunal examined the ruins of Pransitthaja. It was not worth rebuilding; a new city would have to be created. He concentrated on the wreckage, banished it.)

—(Mishraunal flew above the vast gray-purple jungle. He wore the twin bells and jeweled headband with which his kind had achieved partial control over matter and energy. A flock of white-winged birds burst from the jungle below and for an instant he wished that he too had wings, could fly without the use of mechanical aids.)

—(Mishraunal sensed the life-force of the aliens through the ever increasing agony. He reached out, took one, then the others, only when it was too late and he felt himself being taken realized that one of them was the alien Rilg for which they had waited so many eons—)

—(Mishraunal was a student, barely out of the egg, with the soft green tongue of the very young. He was being trained in associative cross-indexing and fluid categorization. There were only three other students in his class; for the ninth year Azeid had failed to meet its breeding quota—)

Lozan's concentration broke. The light in the lotus on his forehead flickered, died. Angry, he plucked it from his skin, then shook his head, trying to clear away his fatigue. He put the lifeless jewel in a pocket in his kilt.

Another wasted session. He could no longer find his way among Mishraunal's memories. It was as though what he had experienced that first night had been only the seed of what was to come, for ever since the Rilg memories had grown in detail and complexity, remaining separate from his own yet still a part of him, until now when he tried to probe them, he was lost in an infinity of branching associations, unable to follow any thought through to its conclusion without being diverted into something else.

Like a senile old man.

Janesha appeared. Her back seemed to be touching the wall; her posture exactly duplicated his. His eyes registered the presence of a slim amber-skinned girl with windblown hair even while his sense of perception told him he was alone. Though he knew her appearance was only an illusion tailored to deceive him, the sight of her affected him like Dakkini wood: he could feel his muscles tighten; there was sweat on the palms of his hands. An excitement he could not suppress, could not deny.

She smiled and the falseness of her appearance, the helplessness of his response, infuriated him. He remembered the arena.

—*Why can't you look like you really do?* he demanded, surprising himself with his anger. *I know what you are. What you really are.*

—*Doyou?* Her smile intensified but he could feel the anger behind it. *Good. I thought you thought I was a giant spider.*

—*No.*

—*I no longer have a form of my own, Lozan. You took that away from me.*

—*You lost it yourself.*

—*Perhaps. It makes no difference. But I am here to train you and so I have chosen a form which you find attractive.*

—*No.*

—*You don't? But I got it from your mind, Lozan.*

—*So? You can't change how I feel. Don't try. Don't try to lie to me.*

—*How would you know if I was lying to you? You reject everything I tell you.*

—*That. It's a lie. That's not how you look.*

—*It's how I look for you, Lozan. How you want me to look. Part of what I have to teach you is to harness and redirect your human sexuality, or you'll never learn to control your mind. When we grow me a new body, it'll have to be attractive to you and I have **to** prepare you to think of it as me.*

—*Don't expect it to happen any time soon.*

—*You need my help. Let me help you. Please.*

—*I don't want your help.*

—*If you let me help you, you can have your own body back.*

—*I'd rather keep it now. Why don't you crawl back in my head where I can't see you?*

—*Like a swamp spider?* Her bitterness reached into him, twisted at him, but he shut it out, readjusted his shield to shut out everything but her voice and image, over which he had no control.

—*Yes. Just like a swamp spider.*

She continued to smile. — *But I'm always in your head, Lozan, always*

watching over you, even when you're asleep.

—I hope it makes you feel less lonely. Leave me alone. I have work to do.

—You can't do it, Lozan, not without my mind to draw upon. That's why it's not working for you. You'll have to accept my help if you ever want to get rid of me. Why not now?

—Not now. Not even to get rid of you.

—You're too tired to work. Just give me a few seconds of control and I'll fix things so you'll never need to sleep again.

— You'd like that, wouldn't you? Just a few seconds of control. —So I can prove you can trust me. What are you so afraid of? —Nothing. But I don't want you doing things to my mind. —Then you'll have to get some sleep.

—I like sleeping.

—Don't try to lie to me. I know what your dreams are like.

—Then I hope you enjoy them as much as I do. She vanished.

Lozan stood up, stretched, then took the green lotus back out of his pocket and put it on his forehead. He sat down, positioned himself correctly, and tried to concentrate, but it was hopeless; he was too tired, the jewel remained dead. He put it back in his pocket.

In the month he'd spent here, he'd gained some control of his body's production of fatigue poisons but, even so, he was weak from lack of sleep. Since he'd first awakened in the

Hall of the Crimson Cloud he'd only slept nine—no, eight—times. While he slept, his body and mind were no longer under his conscious control, and though he'd been promised that Janesha would be unable to take control of either without his consent he found it impossible to trust such assurances completely.

It was not that he was afraid she'd try to steal his body again, or that she'd try to destroy his mind. Not now, not with Night aware of her. What Lozan feared was something more subtle—thoughts whispered to his sleeping mind, alien attitudes and values supplanting his own, his will to remain himself weakening until he gave in to her and—

And what? He had to admit he didn't know, didn't even know if what would happen would be good or bad. What he did know was that he had nightmares, strange complex nightmares filled with alien scenes and characters, with colors that were somehow evil, odors and sounds that

were subtly—frighteningly—wrong. He had dreams in which he watched, laughing, as he dismembered himself, dreams in which he gorged himself on the putrefying flesh of his own dead body, dreams in which there was nothing with which he could identify, sympathize, dreams frightening in their utter incomprehensibility. But worse than these were the sexual dreams, the couplings in which he was both male and female or in which he was an animal coupling with strange beasts while the S'in-je looked on, waiting until he was totally committed to his sins before they began to torment him. But it was the dreams of traitorous ecstasies, the dreams in which he reveled in his own violation, his own degradation, that frightened him the most.

Was Janesha forcing his dreams upon him or were they the result of some sort of seepage from her mind to his? Or were they his alone, the product of his attempts to deal without help with Mishraunal's absorbed mind?

He was too tired; he could push himself no further. He had to sleep. Soon. Something about the golden lotus island seemed more inviting than the rooms in which he'd been sleeping recently.

He stood in front of the teleportation lattice, moving his hands in the proper gestures while he visualized the one matrix he'd been taught, the one connecting the interiors and exteriors of these sealed buildings. He stepped through the metal, out into the open air.

In the jungle, he caught sight of the crimson hawk. The thought struck him; his exhaustion was purely physical, wasn't it? Wouldn't he be just as refreshed if he spent the time while his body was asleep awake in the hawk's brain? Maybe more refreshed, since there'd be no nightmares to torment him and Janesha wouldn't be able to get at him.

Was it safe to leave her alone in his body? *As long as I don't give her control, she can't take it for herself, even if I'm not there.*

And he'd be free of her, alone with himself at last. And if it worked he'd never be driven by the sluggishness of his tired thoughts to turn to her for help he didn't want. He could—

No. I'll have to let her in sometime. But not yet, not while he was still so weak, so ignorant, so easily fooled.

It was not his fear alone that made him want to keep her out of his mind. There was anger, too, anger and hatred and contempt. He despised her for her arrogant self-righteousness, her assumption that she understood him better than he understood himself. What right did she have to feel so superior? She couldn't even care for herself. She'd been

sentenced to her own company because she'd failed as a Lha— because she'd been the only Lha ever to fail as she had—and solitude seemed little enough punishment for what she'd tried to do to him. Let her endure it.

— *You are not here to punish me. Neither of us is being punished. We are here to learn to live with each other.*

She'd been eavesdropping on his thoughts again. He must have let his shield slip. He gestured with his left hand, tensed certain muscles of his face, restored the shield.

—*You're here to learn to live with yourself*, he thought at her.

—*Then why am I here, in the same body with you?* He had no answer.

The light was dim as he crossed the silver bridge, only the luminous twilight which passed for night illuminating the hall, and the fish beneath the surface of the water were merely vague shapes. Lozan wondered if they'd been programmed to stay where they'd be visible from the bridge.

He called the hawk to him. He lay down on the hard golden surface, surprised again at how comfortable it felt. He closed his eyes, located the hawk with his sense of perception, and transferred himself to it.

It was like an explosion of energy and awareness. His exhaustion was gone, abandoned. He could see his body sleeping peacefully.

For the moment he let the hawk-mind retain control of its body, content to be no more than a passenger.

He was flying back to the jungle. Through the hawk's eyes, the crimson cloud was only a veil of almost transparent pinkish mist and his host's eyes were perfectly adapted to the twilight. Hidden in the mist, *Lozan* glided silently just above the tree tops, watching for the birds and small animals which were his host's customary prey. But though Lozan enjoyed the hawk's hunting exhilaration, he did not intend to let it attack any birds. He had a sentimental fondness for birds.

The hawk saw something, swooped down on it before Lozan could react. The hawk perched on a branch while it devoured the small furry animal, bones and all.

I was too slow. I wouldn't have been able to stop it in time to save a bird.

When the hawk again took flight, Lozan was in complete control. Golden light was beginning to shine through the clouds. As it grew brighter, Lozan felt a sudden curiosity about its source. He began to climb, flying in ever widening circles, feeling the crisp air parting before

him.

His flight took him out over the lake. Far below he could see the golden lotus gleaming in the bright morning light, his body an insignificant splotch of brown at its center. He continued to climb.

For the first time he saw the Hall of the Crimson Cloud as a whole through his own eyes, was able to comprehend the full beauty of its design.

It's too beautiful. I could never do anything this— Like this.

He thrust the thought from him, continued to ascend. The floor was lost in the pink haze. Drifting tendrils of golden gas were beginning to appear, like threads of molten metal in a pink wool rug. The drifting gold glowed with its own soft warm light, but when Lozan's wing brushed a tendril it was shockingly cold.

Then he was above the pink, lost in the cold brilliance. Dazzled, intoxicated, he continued to climb.

An immense expanse of darkness overhead, cutting him off from the sky, closing him in. He had reached the roof of the hall, was trapped beneath it.

The hawk was untired. Lozan did not want to stop climbing. He circled around and around beneath the great dark domed ceiling, feeling its immense weight pressing down on him.

There was no escape from Janesha's hall, no way to climb free of it. And—there was no escape from Janesha. He would have to make his peace with her sooner or later, and the later he waited the harder it would be.

Pretending that he was protecting himself from her lies, he had been lying to himself. The changes he feared—how could he be sure that they weren't the very changes which

Night intended for him? There was no escape, no real evasion—he was here, in the Refuge, beneath a roof of stone, and he might have to live here for thousands of years. Denial was cowardice, lies. He began to spiral downward.

The Temple—he was here, in the Refuge, hidden beneath the Temple. He thought back, remembered what the Temple had meant to him, how he had feared and loathed it, and suddenly the hawk's body was alien and unfamiliar. The floor of the hall was beginning to reappear as he lost altitude, but now its very beauty made it seem strange and unnatural, incomprehensible. What could he have in common with the mind that could conceive *that*?

For a moment all he wanted was to be a boy again, lonely and angry and afraid, yes, but surrounded by things he understood, things he could master. Now that he knew he had no choice but to commit himself to Janesha, he felt a weariness, a despair of ever learning what he had to learn, that his earlier feelings had masked. He missed the fields and the swamps, the skies where birds flew free with no roof above them. He missed Dorjii, Dusum, even Sren.

The lotus island was becoming visible. By a trick of light, the bridge was invisible against the shimmering silver water. The golden flower looked totally isolated from the shore, and his body looked like a tiny spot of rot at its center. Lozan felt very alone, very incapable of facing Janesha. He altered his path of descent so as to land on the shore, not on the island.

He perched in a tree overlooking a pillar of pink crystal. His sense of perception revealed the girl suspended within him and he felt a fleeting pity for her, though he knew she was feeling no pain. Without warning, he thought, *Why not wake Dorjii?*

True, he was not even sure that Dorjii was in the Refuge or alive, but if he was, why not? Lozan was forbidden contact with Lha other than Janesha, but Dorjii was human, not Lha. And when they freed him, as Yag ta Mish-raunal had promised, they were going to erase his memories of the Refuge anyway. This would just give them a few more memories to erase. Dorjii could be a link with Lozan's past, a friend where he had none, until the time came when Lozan had progressed too far, become too inhuman. Then Dorjii could be returned to the outer world, could become an envoy to the planets of the Terran Hegemony. Lozan almost envied him.

That is, if he was still alive to be envied.

Lozan crossed the lake, perched on one of the inner petals of the lotus.

—*Janesha?*

—(?) A tiny girl with hair like dark flame appeared, seated on his sleeping body's forehead.

—*I think I'm willing to cooperate with you, if you'll help me with something first. But I need to know what you want from me.*

—*You'll give me full cooperation?*

—*What do you want me to do?*

—*I want a body of my own again. I want to be able to merge with Night again.*

—*I can't help you with that. Night put you here to learn to live your*

own life, without Her help.

—But I am also here to teach you what you need to know if you are to live among us as a Lha. I cannot begin to teach you anything until you stop shielding yourself from me and agree to share control of your mind and body with me.

—Will you leave me alone, let me be by myself, when I need to be?

—Yes.

—Then I accept.

—Are you sure? Think. You must cooperate willingly, and what you have so far agreed to do is only to allow me to help you. You must also agree to help me. You know that you are to be the judge of my progress, as I am to be the judge of yours. But what kind of judge

will you be? How fair have you been to me so far? You've done everything you could to make my life with you intolerable. How do you think it feels to share the body and mind of someone who refuses to see you as anything but a bloated swamp spider?

—I promise I'll do everything I can to help you, but that's all I can promise. I can't promise to change the way I think about you. When I think about you I think of you as a swamp spider, that's all; it's not a choice I made, it's just how I see you. Do you think I like it any better than you do?

—Yes. Because you did choose. Perhaps not at Jirst, but whose decision was it to accept that image of me without trying to change it, without trying to learn better? You chose to reject me, to learn nothing about who or what I really am, and you've been forced to live with the results of that choice. You must choose to open yourself to me, to merge yourself with me. It is as much for your own good as it is for mine.

But before you can open yourself to me, you must choose to accept me.

—Yag ta Mishraunal warned me I would be engulfed if I tried to merge with another Lha.

—Another evasion. All Lha are channels to Night, and hence dangerous to you. All except one: myself. Even in merging with me there would be dangers for you, but do you think I am unaware of them? My fate is linked to yours; I dare do nothing to harm you. What we do, we will do gradually, cautiously, taking no risks.

—Agreed.

—Good. But you spoke of a bargain and I have not yet heard what you

want from me, nor have I agreed to it. What do you want?

—I want you to find out if my friend Dorjii is still alive and here in the Refuge. If he is, I want you to bring him here and revive him.

He could feel her surprise. This time he made no effort to shield himself from her emotions.

—Why?

He tried to project his loneliness, tried to make her feel how empty he felt.

—I need a friend, someone to connect me with things the way they used to be. The way I used to be. So I can feel comfortable and relaxed, not always—scared. Alien. Like I don't belong here.

—But you're Lha—

—And Dorjii is human? True, but how much of a Lha am I yet? That's all in my future; right now I still think like a human and I need a human friend. I need Dorjii.

And I can tell—you look down on me because I'm still so human.

You're contemptuous of me. Don't try to deny it; it's obvious. Maybe that'll change when I get more like you, but I have to live here with you now, and here and now you can't supply the companionship I need.

—So you're not as independent as you claim.

—Perhaps not.

—I don't like it. He'll slow you down. He'll keep you human, and the longer you stay human the longer I'll be trapped here in your body.

—You'll have to take that risk. Otherwise I won't cooperate.

—How much are you going to tell him?

—Not about the Ritual. Or the Lha, or you. Not that I'm not a human being.

—What will you do when the time comes to grow me a new body? It'll take a long time. Months. And you won't be able to keep the changes in you secret. (Lozan lying on his back, a shapeless growth pushing its way out of his left side, growing larger, taking on form, developing a body, legs, arms, a head, becoming a slender girl with red-black hair and green eyes.)

—I won't let Dorjii interfere with what I've promised to do for you.

— With what you've promised to do with me.

— With you, then. You'll get your body as soon as possible.

— What if he's already dead? What if he was never brought here at all?

—I'll cooperate with you until I learn enough to check what you tell me for myself. After that I don't know.

—Agreed. Give me control. If I find him, I'll bring him to the Place of Remembrance.

CHAPTER

13

—How much longer?

—Soon. [A grid of coordinates superimposed on the image of a body in a shaefi tube.] You're shielding again.

—(Apology.)

—Better. Project (Images/Sensations/Feelings), not just words. Like Mudra.

—When? [Dorjii picking himself up off the floor, smiling at Lozan.]

—Soon.

Lozan set the tray of hot meatrolls on the floor by his unconscious friend. Dorjii lay still, scarcely seeming to breathe. When Lozan tried to probe his mind, he found only a frightening emptiness, like a bodiless hunger.

—What's wrong with him?

—You. You drained him of most of his life-force while you were in suspension.

—Like a swamp spider. (Lozan with his teeth buried in his friend's side, slowly swelling, bloating, as Dorjii shrivels.) Is he going to die?

—No. You may have saved his life. (Lha rejecting Dorjii in favor of orphans with more life-force.)

Lozan stared at his friend's healthy looking body, sensing the emptiness behind the closed eyes.

—*Can I give him back his mind? Give him some of my life-force?*

—*No. Let him eat and sleep, recover what he's lost like any animal would.*

—*Will he recover? Be like he always was?*

—*Probably. But you'll have to take control of him until he does, make him feed himself.*

Lozan tried to probe his friend's mind again, met only that terrifying emptiness.

With Janesha's help, Lozan took control of Dorjii's deenergized body. Lifting the food to Dorjii's mouth, he felt as though he were moving through thick frond-tree sap; as he chewed and swallowed the food it seemed only more sap, thick and tasteless. When the meal was over, he lowered Dorjii's body to the floor and returned to his own body.

—*He'll be like that for months. You'll have to feed him and clean up after him. I'll arrange his diet so there's little mess.* Lozan detected a hint of amusement in her thought.

— *Why are you so happy?*

—*Because he won't interfere with your progress until he recovers. And the more progress you make, the more you can help him to recover.*

Dorjii improved slowly. Within three weeks, he could feed himself on command and control his bowels if commanded to, but he was no more conscious of himself or his surroundings than a plant would have been. If food was put in front of him, he ignored it until *Lozan* commanded him to eat it, then spooned it clumsily into his mouth and chewed and swallowed it mechanically.

Within five weeks, he could answer simple questions but he seemed as mindless, as empty of self, as ever. He still would not eat unless commanded to do so.

"Where are you?" Lozan asked him once.

No answer.

"Do you know where you are?"

"No."

"Do you know who you are?"

"Dorjii."

"Do you want to know where you are?"

No answer. Dorjii had lost none of his memories, but they were without force, without meaning. He had no conscious thoughts and few dreams. Lozan soon gave up probing Dorjii's mind; he found the hungry emptiness there too painful. It was increasingly hard to remember Dorjii's courage, to see him as the friend he had once been, even to recognize him as a person. Feeding him was a routine requiring little attention and less time. Most of Lozan's attention was elsewhere, concentrated on what he was learning from Janesha.

At first they only practiced conversing mind to mind. Lozan slowly learned to drop his shields, to project the fullness of what he thought and felt without censorship and evasion, to encompass and accept the totality of her response in the same way. He no longer thought of Janesha as a crimson swamp spider; he had come to accept the body she projected for him as her true form. She was perhaps the only person he felt he had ever known, the only person he had ever believed to know him.

There were moments of relapse, of anger and suspicion and fear, when he'd lash out at her or close her out, but as the weeks passed such moments came less and less frequently and meant less and less when they did come.

And *Lozan* was changing, but the change was not a thing to be feared or endured; it was a growth, an easing, as if he were finally escaping from a life too cramped and bleak to one rich with possibility. As if he had lived all his life shut up in one tiny closet, afraid to leave the security of the dust and darkness, only to find that when at last the door was opened it opened onto the throne room of a palace, and the palace was his.

As Lozan learned what it was like to be Janesha, to feel as she felt and see through her eyes, he realized that, despite her awesome mental competencies and vast knowledge, despite the great size and mature development of the body in which she had first confronted him, she was somehow almost fragile, young and—innocent. It was a strange way to think of her, but it was the only word he could find for her openness, for the almost unquestioning trust he found in the deeper layers of her mind.

—*How old are you?* he finally thought to ask.

—*Sixteen standard years, about a year less by the Nal-K'am calendar.*

Somehow the fact that he was a year older than she made a difference. And as he learned more about what it meant to live in total openness and intimacy with another Lha, he realized that he could have had no real idea of what it had meant to her to be cut off from Night.

Her hunger to return to Night lurked behind her every thought,

intruded upon her every joy. Lozan found that, as he began to comprehend her anguish, to realize with what strength she endured her exile, the contempt he had felt for her inability to exist on her own vanished.

I was always so proud that I could endure so much more pain than other people. But all I ever knew were little pains, easy pains. Easy for me because I was Lha. Nothing was ever that bad for me.

It did not at first seem strange to him to find himself getting angry at the Lha for the way they were treating Janesha.

—It's not fair to punish you like this. Could any of the other young Lha have done any better?

—Lozan, I am not being punished. I am here to learn to bear the pain of my exile, to function as I should be able to function despite it. What I learn, we will all know. I did not understand this at first but now that I do I know how important it is. Nothing like what I tried to do to you can ever be allowed to happen again.

—But I know how to live without support from Night. Use my knowledge.

—You have no knowlege to share; your strength is only ignorance. Chordeyaen, Yeshes, Yag la Mishraunal—they all endured existence as humans ignorant of their true natures. Their experiences were useless to me. Not knowing something is not the same as knowing how to live with its loss.

One morning, as Lozan was setting a tray of food on the floor before Dorjii, Dorjii said, "Lozan."

"Dorjii!" Lozan was totally unprepared; he had almost ceased to regard Dorjii as a sentient being.

"Lozan," Dorjii repeated, then lapsed back into his silence. Lozan attempted to probe his thoughts, sensed something there that had not been there before, as though a little, a very little, of his friend had returned from some far-off place, but the hunger and the emptiness were still there, still too painful to endure. Lozan withdrew.

If I pry into his mind too much it'll change things too much, we won't be able to be friends like we used to be.

—What you really mean is, you won't be able to playact at being the same kinds of friends you used to be quite as easily. You're not who you were when Dorjii was your friend, Lozan, and you're not going to tell him who you really are now. You'll just be using him to play a game with yourself.

—In a way. But I'm still his friend; I still care for him and want to do what I can to make his life happier.

—Then don't awaken him here. He won't be happy in the Refuge. He can't be.

—I still need him. He's all I've got left of what I used to be. I'm not ready to let go of it all completely, not yet. Not quite yet.

That evening Lozan took a second tray of food with him when he went to feed Dorjii. He watched Dorjii's face closely while he ate his own meal but did not probe his friend's mind. Dorjii remained oblivious of him. Lozan finally fed him and left.

That night Lozan grasped for the first time the techniques necessary to use his Rilg memories. Before morning came, he could dip into Mishraunal's vast fund of experiences and retrieve any specific experience of whose existence he was aware, but Mishraunal's memories were available to him in much the same way that the books in a library would have been; he could consult them but they were not yet a part of him.

—Give yourself time, Janesha told him.

Dorjii- was still sitting staring at the wall when Lozan entered with his morning tray of meatrolls, but he was wearing the kilt that had lain ignored within easy reach for weeks. His back was to Lozan.

"Dorjii?"

Dorjii turned slowly, looked up at Lozan, then down at the tray of food Lozan had put beside him. He picked up a roll and ate it, chewing each bite very slowly. He picked up the other roll on the tray, ate it with the same slow deliberation.

"How long have I been here?" His words were as slow as his movements had been.

"Nine weeks. Do you remember anything, how you got here?"

"There was a thing. A tube. They put me in a tube and I—couldn't move. Everything was orange. Nothing moved, nothing changed, but it was like—Like there was a hole in me. Just a little hole, but I was draining out of it. That's all.

I just drained out of it until there wasn't any of me left anymore."

I did that to him. To six hundred people.

"You said I was here—nine weeks? It felt like... No."

"You've been here nine weeks," Lozan said. "Here with me. You were in

the tube for twenty-seven years. So was I. We were both in the tubes for twenty-seven years."

Dorjii looked down at the backs of his hands. "I feel so— but I don't look that old. And I—I can't be forty-three years old." He clenched his fists, looked up at Lozan. "I can't be."

"You're not. Neither am I. We didn't age when we were in the tubes."

"I could feel myself draining down that little hole... Lozan, I'm so weak, so— Not weak, but— Like there's a little Dorjii, like I'm just a little tiny Dorjii here inside my body and it doesn't fit anymore, there isn't enough of me left to fill it up, to be me—"

"You're you, Dorjii. It's just going to take you a while to get your strength back. You were asleep for twenty-seven years and it's going to take you a while to wake up again."

"Twenty-seven years. Sren—must be dead. The priests that told me mother and father were dead. Maybe they're dead, too."

His words were coming faster now, as he stared around the small square room, examined the black-silk panels with the green and white lotus flowers embroidered on them. "I wasn't asleep. I wasn't there at all. But I'm here now and—I don't understand."

"Lozan, where are we? Where is this? They dressed me in red and I knew they were going to kill me and then they killed me but now— What's going to happen to me? Please, Lozan, what's going to happen to me now?"

Lozan put a hand on Dorjii's shoulder, felt the tension knotting the flaccid muscles. "You weren't dead, Dorjii. You were just asleep, only it was a different kind of sleep. That's all. Just a different kind of sleep and it makes you feel a different kind of tired when you wake up. But you're safe here with me. Nobody will ever try to hurt you again. I promise."

"Are we—hiding here? From the priests?"

"No. We're somewhere else, somewhere where there aren't any priests. Would you like to see what it's like outside this room?"

"I looked and there isn't any door." He stopped, frowned. "How did you get in?"

"The same way we'll leave." Lozan gestured and visualized the proper matrix, then stepped through the teleportation lattice to the outside of the building. A moment later, Dorjii followed him.

"When I touched that red thing it was solid. Until you stepped through

it."

"It's a special kind of door. I'll tell you about it later, if you want. But first look around. This is the Hall of the Crimson Cloud."

To the left they could see a fountain half-hidden in the artful tangle of the jungle; to the right the black and green checkered plain stretched away into the distance. In the jungle, birds sang. Overhead hung the crimson cloud.

"Are we on another planet?"

—*Tell him yes.*

—*No.*

—*Why not? You're going to be lying to him about almost everything else and he won't remember anything you tell him after we erase his memories.*

"We're still on Nal-K'am, Dorjii. We're—we're in a place deep underground, where there aren't any priests. But it's not Hell down here at all. It's not a Heaven, not really, but it's like a Heaven. And this is all mine."

"No priests?"

"None. You're safe here. Come along and I'll explain it to you." He took Dorjii by the arm, guided him along a path leading into the jungle.

"Do you remember those tests we had to take just before Naming Day?"

"Yes."

"Well, because of them I was chosen for—to go here, underground. The priests don't know, they've got it all backwards, they think it's Hell down here."

"And me?"

"You were chosen to come here for a while, to learn what it was like to be here and what life here's really like. Then you're going to get to leave Nal-K'am, go to other worlds, tell people the truth about it here."

—*You're telling him too many lies, making things too complicated. Tell him he's on another planet.*

—*It's too late.*

—*I can blank his memories of what you just told him for you. Then you can start over, do it right.*

—*No. That would be—like I was Lha and he was just a human being.*

And I don't want it to be like that. Not with Dorjii.

—It would be kinder.

—I can't.

"There aren't any priests here?" Dorjii asked.

"None. You're safe here. It's like—we're adepts here, underground, Dorjii. Not like your father was, not like the adepts on Mig Mar, but adepts. I'm not an adept yet but they're training me. I'll be an adept someday.

"The reason we're down here is because—because the priests revolted against us and—took over. Took the planet away from us and perverted all our teachings and made the Goddess Night into a monster and made us come—down here where they couldn't reach us."

"What you're saying is, you're a priest of Night now but not the same kind of priest?"

—Blank his memories. Tell him he's on another planet. Or you'll have to keep on telling him more and more lies.

-No, I-That's Lha.

—Andy you want a human friendship. What kind of human friendship is all lies?

— We've spent our lives together.

"I'm training to become an adept. I worship the Goddess Night, but She's nothing like the Goddess Night the priests tell you about. That's all lies that the priests tell, like the lie that we're all dead and in Hell."

"I don't believe you," Dorjii said.

"Dorjii—"

"You're lying to me, Lozan. They made you a priest and now you're just like the rest of them."

— You've lost him. Unless you let me make him forget. —Do it. Put him to sleep and do it.

Lozan caught Dorjii as he fell.

—You tried to share too much of the truth with him, Lozan. You're trying to make yourself a little fantasy world in which you and your friend can be human beings together, but when you try to mix in any of the truth you ruin everything. If you want to live in a fantasy past for a while, fine, do it, but you'll have to make up a fantasy world to do it in.

Tell him he's on another planet.

—He'll be happier if he thinks he's on another planet. He always wanted to get away from Nal-K'am.

—That's right, Lozan. He'll be happier. And you won't have to keep on making up new lies all the time to keep him from hating you.

—Janessa, I know what I'm doing. I'm not lying to myself; I know I'm just pretending, acting out a fantasy. I know. But I need that fantasy because once it stops, once I really give up being a human being and become Lha, all Lha, then that's forever. It'll never end, Janessa, good or bad it'll never end, and that's frightening. It scares me. I need to rest, to give myself time. Time that's going to end. Something that I know is going to be over. Please. Help me.

—(Acceptance.) Do you want me to erase all of his memories of the Refuge?

—Can you erase them without—touching anything else, without learning anything more about him? The—fantasy—will be easier if I don't know that all I have to do is just ask you if I want to know if he's telling the truth. I want us to be human beings, together, lying and exaggerating and deciding to trust each other without really knowing—do you understand? Can you do it?

—I can make his mind do it to itself. But I don't understand; I feel something of what you feel but—you're shielding. You don't really want me to understand.

—I want you to understand but not to—share. It's like forever. If you're part of it then it's bigger than me, it doesn't end, I can't just-stop. Like being a Lha. If you share it, it's the same thing. Not separate. Not being a human being again, even a fake human being.

—Do you want me to give him some false memories of your escape from Nal-K'am together?

—No. I'll lie to him. That's a very human thing, lying to a friend.

CHAPTER

14

"It's beautiful here, on this planet," Dorjii said. A small stream crossed the path they were following, widening out ahead of them into a deep

quartz-bottomed pool. The path led into a clearing beside the pool. On the pool's far side, a small but noisy waterfall rushed over a cliff of smooth rock banded like a giant agate. In the clear water of the pool, black and silver fish swam. Lozan could feel the warm golden light from the cloud overhead on his bare shoulders.

"Yes," Lozan said. "Compared to here, Nal-K'am really was Hell."

"I don't— After that priest came to tell me that I was going to be chosen for the Temple. That's all I remember."

"The priest took me to a room where the light got all bright and swirly," Lozan said. "Do you remember that?"

"No. Just—I went through a door and it was light on the other side. That's all."

"They tried to make you into a priest, but you escaped before they could change you," Lozan said. "You got back to Lavelle somehow and told him what you'd learned, and he came and got me and brought the two of us here."

"Why can't I remember? I try and try and I can't remember. Just a nightmare, like I was dead but— Nothing."

"Lavelle told me you were injured while you were escaping. You hit your head or got hit on the head—I'm not sure. It took them a long time to cure you, get everything back right again. That's why you don't remember."

"Is that why my hair's so short? Did they have to cut it off to operate on me?"

"No. The priests cut it off. When they brought you here, all they had to do to cure you was put you in some kind of machine that made you sleep for three weeks."

"Until yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And this is—where? What's the name of this planet?"

"I don't know. It's a secret place, where some of the MigMartian adepts train people like Lavelle to go to strange planets and try to help the people there. They're going to be training us to go back to Nal-K'am."

"You said—I don't know why, it's so hard to remember things. You said they'd train me to be an adept? Like they're training you?"

"If one of the adepts here will accept you. But you once told me your father was training you in the Vajrayana Way."

"Yes. He wanted to, but he never really had a chance."

"There are no Vajrayana adepts here now, just Bon-po. I've been accepted by a Bon-po adept, but you'll have to wait until a Vajrayana adept comes and accepts you."

"How long?"

"I don't know, but probably not too long. They want us back on Nal-K'am so we can help the people there."

—*So many lies*, Janesha said.

—*Not now. Not until he goes to sleep.*

"Let's sit down here," Lozan suggested. They sat on the mossy ground, staring at the waterfall. An occasional insect would skim too close to the surface of the water and be snapped up by an alert fish.

A small blue hawk with a gold crest on its head and white wingtips swooped down on the pool, emerged with a struggling emerald fish. The hawk landed on the far shore and began to devour the fish.

Dorjii was watching the bird, fascinated. Lozan found himself caught up again in the memory of that first time he had seen Dorjii with a bird on his arm. It would be so easy; all he'd have to do would be to reach into the bird's mind, make it love Dorjii—

No. But why not? He couldn't lie to himself, pretend he was a human being, not when he could hear the thoughts of the birds as they flew through the trees, not when he could feel the insects burrowing through the mud. What he could pretend, what he was doing—he was making Dorjii happy, giving Dorjii a taste of the kind of happiness that Lozan would never again be able to share.

Yes. Lozan reached out for the hawk, impressed his command on it. The bird finished the fish, walked deliberately around the pool to Dorjii, and pecked him on the cheek.

Dorjii laughed, very quietly so as not to startle the bird. The hawk regarded him out of russet eyes. Dorjii slowly brought his arm around under the bird's chest and the hawk hopped up onto his wrist. Very slowly Dorjii lifted the bird free from the ground. When the bird remained perched on his wrist, he brought his other hand around, gently stoked its feathers.

The hawk gave a little screech of pleasure. Dorjii tried unsuccessfully to imitate it. The hawk screeched again and Dorjii tried to imitate it again. This time there was a faint resemblance between the two sounds.

Lozan laughed, quietly, so as not to startle the bird. Dorjii was smiling.

The hawk took flight. Dorjii watched it anxiously as it circled the pool and dived in after another fish, but he was smiling when the bird returned to his wrist and perched there to eat its catch.

"You seem to have a friend for life," Lozan said.

"I'll name him Ja-mi-zan," Dorjii said.

"He's the wrong color for the King of the Dragons," Lozan said.

"But he's got wings and scales—even if they are on his feet—and he eats fish."

Lozan spent the day showing Dorjii more of the hall. He avoided only the Place of Remembrance, where he would have had difficulties explaining Janesha's skull. Dorjii seemed curious and open-minded, impressed by the beauty of everything he saw. Ja-mi-zan stayed with Dorjii, riding sometimes on his arm or shoulder, flying sometimes overhead.

When evening came, they entered a room with a surabha in it. Dorjii stared for a moment at the painted screens covering the walls—Lozan could tell that they reminded him of the tutelary demons guarding the Temples and Shrines—then walked over to the surabha and examined the jeweled landscape inside the crystal.

"It's beautiful," he said, "but I thought you brought me here for dinner." He jumped back as two plates of food and two cups of tea snapped into existence on the woven-wire table cupping the globe.

"You did that?" he asked.

"Not really. The machine did it."

"But you controlled it." Dorjii fed a piece of one of his rolls to Ja-mi-zan.

"Yes."

Later that night, Lozan took Dorjii to the lotus island to sleep.

"For some reason I don't understand, this seems to be the most comfortable place I've found to sleep around here," he said.

"Where are you going to sleep?"

"I no longer sleep," Lozan said, suddenly unwilling to add yet another lie to the structure he had been building.

"More of the training you're getting from that mysterious adept?"

"Yes."

"Why haven't I seen him? Why haven't I seen anybody?"

"There aren't very many people here and they're all Bon-po. You're Vajrayana."

"So?"

Lozan reached back into the memories Yag ta Mishraunal had given him of his training on MigMar. "The Bon-po adepts are all hermits. They avoid contact with anybody else except when they're, well, working. Doing things for other people."

"This training," Dorjii said after a moment's thought. "Can you teach me some of it? You're not a hermit."

"Not yet. But you're Vajrayana."

"You could ask your adept."

"All right. The next time he allows me to ask him a question."

There was no reason not to ask Janesha; he had given up trying to pretend to himself that he could fool himself into thinking like a human being again. — *Do you think I could actually teach him something?*

—*You could try. Some of the techniques we use are adapted from things Yag ta Mishraunal, Chordeyaen, and Yeshes learned on Mig Mar.* Lozan could feel Janesha's disinterest.

"You know my father started to train me—" Dorjii began.

"In the Vajrayana. That might just make it harder. But I'll ask my adept. When he lets me."

Dorjii made himself comfortable and closed his eyes. Lozan left him there, with the hawk watching over him from its perch on a stone petal.

CHAPTER

15

It was as though everything he sensed became part of his body and subject to his will. It was a little like becoming a fish again, sensing the world around you by touch, living in intimate connection with everything you perceived. Like becoming a fish that had become the sea in which it swam.

—*How long have we been here?* Lozan demanded abruptly.

—*I don't know,* Janesha admitted. *Without my body, I have little sense*

of duration.

—I can feel the light on the roof of the building. It's late; Dorjii's already left the island.

—So? He won't hurt himself.

—He must be hungry.

—Not very.

—You're not—

—No. He just hasn't had that long to get hungry in. Use your sense of perception to locate him; that shouldn't interfere with your fantasy too much.

—It's not like that anymore; I know I can't even pretend to myself that I'm still human. But I still need him. Maybe to remind me I'm not human anymore. And I want him to be happy.

—He was never happy.

—Why? Why are we so cruel to them here? Why make them live in Hell?

—Camouflage. Human rulers are always cruel. And that other colony ship, the one we arranged for the Ojfworlders to find, was full of people following a leader who preached pretty much what we have our priests teach. We did not invent the religion of Night; we stole it and turned it to our own uses.

—Lavelie told me that humans would never build something as big as the Temple of Night.

— They might never have built it but we found the plans for something much like the Temple—only larger, of course, and not nearly as well designed on the inside—on the same ship. Its height was supposed to convince the damned of the total effort they had to make to escape Hell.

—I've found Dorjii. He's in the jungle with his hawk and a—I don't know what it is, exactly... (A small feathered biped, yellow and four-armed.)

—(?) A choolah. He must be truly good with animals to have tamed it; choolahs are natural, and they're very shy.

—Should we disturb him?

—As long as you're playing the bountiful god to him, you might as well make sure he doesn't get the least bit hungry. Give me control and I'll

teleport us to a lattice close to him.

"I couldn't find you when I got up," Dorjii said, his mouth full of barley pudding, "and I couldn't get into any of the buildings. I was hungry—Could you teach me to get in and out of buildings and use your magical cow and tree"—he gestured at the surabha—"to feed myself? I don't want you to feel you have to follow me around, taking care of me, when you could be learning some of those mysterious secrets your adept doesn't want to share with me."

"I haven't been permitted to ask him yet," Lozan said.

"When we were at Agad, you would never have let someone tell you what to do like that."

"There was no one at Agad I could trust to tell me to do only what would really be good for me."

"And you've found that someone here?"

"Yes."

"But while he's telling you what to do, do you think you could arrange it so I could feed myself and get in and out of those red door-things?"

—Janesha?

—I can make a slavebrain that would do that much for him. It'll take me three days, and I'll need complete use of your nervous system. You'll have to stay in the hawk.

—The isolation won't bother you?

-A little.

—I can return mealtimes and help you with Dorjii. Or will that interfere with what you're doing?

—It might slow things down a little but it wouldn't make very much difference.

"Well?" Dorjii asked.

"I think I can get my adept's help in making something that'll help you. But it'll take us at least three days and you'll have to spend that time on your own, though I'll meet you for meals. All right?"

"Yes."

Dorjii left and Lozan transferred to the hawk's body. He returned to his own body for the evening meal, then spent the rest of the night as the hawk.

At the morning meal, Dorjii asked him for some Dakkini wood.

—*Can we make it?* Lozan asked.

—*Easily. Give me control.*

A small log of Dakkini wood and a pipe snapped into existence. Lozan handed them to Dorjii.

"That machine. Can it make anything? Anything you want?"

"Within certain limits. Nothing big. Do you need something else?"

"No, but other people do. In a bad year, many of the people where I grew up starved. My uncle died that way. With this machine they could have been fed."

Lozan shook his head. "No. The surabha would have been useless to them. Only an adept can use it."

"How much training do you think you've had, Lozan? Less than a year? It takes longer than that to learn how to be a good beggar."

"Perhaps, but not many people possess the capacity to become adepts. And, anyway, the priests of Night would never allow it. If the people weren't starving to death, they wouldn't feel as if they were in Hell."

"True. Though Lavelle never mentioned this machine to me."

"Nor to me. But he never revealed that he was any sort of adept, until just before the end."

"I guess. Can you fix this thing you're going to be making me so it'll give me Dakkini wood as well as food?"

—*An extra half day*, Janesha informed Lozan.

"All right," Dorjii said when Lozan told him. "I'll spend my time back in the forest."

Lozan returned to the body of the hawk. He was discovering that long periods of existence in the bird's body helped sharpen his sense of identity with Mishraunal.

Dorjii was still in a Dakkini trance during the evening meal. In the morning, he asked for a Dakkini log at least half again the size of the last one Lozan had given him. He ate very little, saving most of his food for the birds and animals he was befriending. Lozan tried to press more food on him but Dorjii refused to eat any of it, just took more of it to feed to his new pets.

The next morning Dorjii was still groggy. Lozan gave him the log he

demanded with some misgivings, though to the best of his knowledge Dakkini wood was completely harmless. But Dorjii was beginning to worry him and he decided to look in on him sometime during the day.

The hawk was ravenous that morning, and Lozan found it impossible to concentrate on increasing his access to Mish-raunal. He hadn't given the hawk much chance to hunt during the last few days and had decided against taking it with him to meals, since Dorjii would have inevitably compared it to his own less impressive hawk.

Lozan flew the hawk out into the jungle and freed it from his control, reducing his role to that of a passenger in its brain.

Dorjii was sitting smoking on a fallen log which looked as though it had meant to fall exactly where it lay. Dorjii had already smoked almost the entire piece of wood, which surprised Lozan, who had expected Dorjii to pace himself so he could stay intoxicated all day.

Finally, when there were only three slivers of wood remaining, Dorjii put the pipe on the log beside him. He sat for a moment in perfect stillness, as though listening, then absentmindedly ruffled Ja-mi-zan's neck feathers with his right hand. A plate with food on it rested by his right foot.

Dorjii's eyes closed. He slid slowly off the log, upsetting both pipe and plate in the process. He lay sprawled unconscious while Ja-mi-zan, unconcerned, hopped around, tearing pieces off the meatrolls.

Though Lozan's sense of perception told him that Dorjii's body was functioning perfectly healthily, this was an effect he had never before seen from Dakkini wood. By rights, Dorjii should have still been in the rational stage of his intoxication, despite the high dosage.

A moment later, Dorjii opened his eyes. He smiled, started to get to his feet, then seemed to think better of it and twisted around to sit with his back propped up against the log. He put the Dakkini pipe back in the pocket of his kilt, then reached out and carefully put back on the plate all the food that he had knocked off it. Then he sat very still, waiting.

The choolah came swinging down out of the trees. It tugged at Dorjii's left arm with two of its hands, while it used the other two to snatch a roll from the plate. Dorjii scratched it behind the ears, and it curled into a ball by his side and seemed to go to sleep.

Two silver-gray hawks flew into the clearing and perched on the log. The choolah stuck its head out and chattered at them, then curled up again and ignored them. Dorjii fed each hawk a small piece of roll.

A large six-limbed carnivore with a bright blue muzzle sticking incongruously out of the coarse black hair that covered the rest of its face and body entered the clearing and padded up to Dorjii, who fed it the remaining rolls. It rested its heavy head in Dorjii's lap, half-crushing the choolah in the process. The choolah wriggled out from under it and scampered to Dorjii's other side, where it again curled itself into a ball.

These animals were already tame. Lozan realized that even that first time he had seen Dorjii charm a bird out of a tree, the bird had been one Dorjii had already tamed. Except, of course, for Ja-mi-zan, but the fish-hawk didn't count. How had Dorjii tamed the animals in the first place?

Curious now that his earlier fears for Dorjii seemed without basis, Lozan steered the crimson hawk into the clearing, then released his control over it and watched to see what Dorjii would do.

When Dorjii saw the hawk, he closed his eyes and held himself abruptly still. Lozan felt a feather-touch at the hawk's mind, a quiet caress, a suggestion of warmth.

Dorjii was telepathic.

Blurred images of the crimson hawk approaching Dorjii began to drift from Dorjii's mind to the hawk's, along with reassurances about the blue-muzzled carnivore which seemed, like the choolah, to be asleep. Lozan disengaged himself entirely from the hawk-mind and shielded himself against Dorjii.

—*Janesha, he projected, can you be disturbed?*

—*For an instant, no more.*

—*Could Dorjii be Lha? (The animals clustering around Dorjii/The feather-touch at the hawk's mind.)*

—*No. Instantly. His parents survived his birth and you drained him of his life-force while he was in suspension.*

—*What is he, then?*

—*A talented human.*

—*But then what makes us superior to them?*

—*They are ephemeral, with no control over their bodies or natures. They die.*

—*But does that make it right to treat them the way we treat them?*

—*The Ritual is kind. And the Religion of Night is their own invention.*

—The Rilg regarded the unChanged members of their race as their brothers.

—And were destroyed by them. We must not repeat their mistakes.

—Yet—

—Not now. Your friend, at least, is safe; we can discuss this later.

Dorjii was again asleep, a ribbon of drool running from the corner of his mouth. The animals were beginning to drift back into the forest. Soon only Ja-mi-zan and the crimson hawk remained.

He never told me. He had not thought Dorjii capable of keeping a secret from him.

—I've finished the slavebrain. You can return to our body.

—Janesha, they're loo like us. It's not right.

—(Dorjii lying unconscious, drooling.)

—Yes! Like Lha without training, without Night. Like I was.

—How do you plan to survive if you don't absorb humans? You'll have to absorb another mind soon and there are no non-human intelligences on Nal-K'am.

—I have thirteen years.

—No.

—(?)

— You would have had thirteen years if you'd had my mind to draw upon. Now with the two of us in one body we require a great deal more life-force than a single Lha would, and it will take still more life-force to animate a new body for me.

—How long?

—Less than a year. I'll need to absorb another mind on my own as soon as I gain my new body.

In the clearing, Dorjii opened his eyes. He picked up the scattered slivers of Dakkini wood and put them in the pipe. He smoked the slivers, pushed himself to his feet, and started walking. He stumbled repeatedly but kept going.

—He's going to hurt himself. Teleport us there.

—Give me control.

They met Dorjii coming around a bend in the trail.

"There you are," Dorjii said, looking at them with unfocused eyes. "I want some more wood."

"No. I've given you too much already."

"You're afraid to let me have any more," Dorjii said, attempting to twist the slack muscles of his face into a scowl.

"I'm just afraid you'll hurt yourself."

"No, you're not. You're afraid of what I'll see. But it's too late. I've been watching you, watching you when you're not around. The smoke helps me see. When you're with me you're Lozan, only not quite the real Lozan, but when you're alone you're not Lozan at all. You're something else. Like Lavelle told me about. You stole Lozan's body and you're just pretending to be him. Just like you're just pretending we're not in the Temple."

—Janesha, transfer lo (he hawk. I want to talk to him alone.

"Who am I now?" he demanded.

"You seem just like Lozan—only different, just a little different. But you're just being careful because you know I can see you now."

"No. I'm Lozan. But someone else sometimes shares my body with me. The adept who's training me. And I seem different because I've been learning new things, being trained to be an adept. That's all. I'm Lozan, Dorjii."

"Sometimes he wasn't there at all."

"I can—put myself into the body of that red hawk you saw," Lozan said. "That's one of the things my adept's been teaching me to do."

Should I just get Janesha to put him to sleep and make him forget again? Put him back in suspension where he'll be safe until I can get him off-planet?

"When I'm away from my body, I sometimes let the adept who's training me in the Bon-po use it," Lozan said. "I let her use it so she could make you the thing I promised you."

He reached into his pocket for the tiny black ovoid that was the slavebrain. "With this—" his hand coming out of his pocket, opening to show Dorjii the slavebrain—"you'll be able to make yourself all the Dakkini—"

Dorjii screaming, in his mind the scream, Dorjii screaming in his mind:—*HERE, IN THE TEMPLE, THE THINGS FROM THE VAULT—*

—Control! Janesha's command like a whiplash. He gave her control.

The screaming stopped. Dorjii fell. Slowly. It took him a long time to reach the ground, hit, sprawl. Lie there unmoving.

Dead.

— *You killed him!* Lozan snatched control of his mind and body back from Janesha. He knelt down, touched Dorjii's face.

Dead.

—*He betrayed us. There was no other way.*

The ground shuddered. There was a distant explosion. Another. Another.

—*We're being attacked! Merge us with Night!*

Lozan ignored her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, Dorjii."

—*Merge us!*

—No. But Night's dying thoughts thrust aside his flimsy barriers, filled him:

THEY ARE USING THE RILG AGAINST US. DO NOT ACTIVATE THE DOOR TO RILDAN. BREAK RAPPORT; TRY TO ESCAPE AS INDIVIDUALS.

(Jomgoun's headless body still leaking slow blood. In one hand he holds the skull-flower; the Knife of the Ritual lies half-hidden beneath his body. In the air above him a metal sphere three times the size of a man. Inside the sphere a man, his head completely enclosed by a jeweled helmet, and two octagonal green crystals. Inside each crystal a Rilg, the first gray, with many tentacles, the second white-furred, four-limbed, fanged.)

DYING, TRY TO—

(Chordeyaen, eyeless, the mannikins on his neck drooping like flaccid balloons, stands with fists clenched on a plain of white crystal. Three metal spheres float in the air above him; a fourth lies crumpled at his feet. A green mist forms around him, crystallizes. Two of the spheres vanish.)

Janesha was pleading with him for control. He gave her control, felt his hands stripping his kilt from his body, his mind visualizing a matrix as his hands moved in quick complex gestures.

Everything was orange, frozen. Still. He did not have a body. On every side of him endless rows of shaefi tubes, in each tube the nude body of a

hairless orphan.

—*I've shielded its with a layer of human-seeming thoughts, Jan-asha told him. We'll be safe here.*

CHAPTER

16

—*You killed Dorjii. But his anger, his loss, were receding, slipping from him, giving way to an emotionless rationality.*

—*There was no way to destroy the slavebrain implanted in him without killing him.*

Lozan examined her memories, accepted the truth of what she was telling him.

—*(Lavelle sitting with Dorjii in the tea shop.) Lavelle must have implanted the slavebrain in him.*

— *Yes. The Terrans must have discovered a way to enslave the Rilg. (The Rilg in the green crystals/The humans in the jeweled helmets.)*

—*(The green mist crystallizing around Chordeyaen?)*

— *Yes. Give me control; I can use your senses better than you can. A moment later:— They have the Rilg in some sort of suspension,*

like shaefi suspension, but they can use those jeweled helmets to draw on the Rilg's powers. They're trying to capture us, enslave us the same way. They've succeeded. There were too many of them, too few Lha.

—*Night?*

—*Dead.* It was a fact to her, something she had to take into consideration. She knew how anguished she would have felt had she not been in suspension, but that, too, was only another factor to be taken into consideration when making plans.

— *The helmets remind me of the old Rilg mechanical telepaths; they can't have much sensitivity. I think I could risk mental contact with one of the human operators if—*

No. A Rilg, it's trying to absorb life-force from the orphans in suspension but it doesn't realize that we're different. Merge with me— Memories floated to the forefront of their united consciousness at the Rilg-mind's touch, simple, human memories from Lozan's childhood. He

felt Janesha selecting from them and taking those she chose and fashioning them into a ball of amber fire into which the Rilg reached greedily—Only to be trapped as Lozan and Janesha's linked minds absorbed it as it had sought to absorb them, sucking out its vitality and the vitality of its human operator, drinking the flames of their lives and leaving a dead sphere to bob uncontrolled in the air of the Refuge.

— *We're lucky that sphere had only one Rilg.* Then the energy was cascading through them, the flaming rainbow ecstasy that swept them away despite their suspended state. New memories swirled through their minds as in another part of the Refuge the last Lha was taken.

—*Can we do anything to them?* Lozan asked when he was once again rational.

—*We dare not try. Every other Lha has been killed or taken. If we act against them, they will know that one of us is still free.*

Memories swirled through them.

—*Could we have been detected?* Lozan asked.

—*Possibly. I can't be sure how much they know. That Rilg's mind was strange... as though his will itself had crystallized. But he was still conscious in a way, just not—free. If we could free the other Rilg, perhaps with their help we could free the Lha.*

—*How?*

—*I don't know. Not yet.*

— *That Rilg we absorbed, can we preserve it alive like you preserved yourself after I absorbed you?*

—*No. It's already being assimilated. The suspension they had it in left it in very delicate condition. It's gone.*

Memories swirled, flamed.

Connected.

—*Janesha, Lavelle's directing the attack himself. If he succeeds in defeating us, he'll be appointed the new Governor. Can you make contact with his mind without giving us away? Hels wearing one of those jeweled helmets, though he's not controlling any Rilg himself.*

—*Yes.*

—*Can you influence him without being detected?*

—*Yes.*

The Governor's Palace glowed with a thousand soft shimmering colors. Light rippled and flowed over its dome and spires, its curving walls, sculptured columns, turrets, and minarets. Surrounded by landscaped gardens, groves of trees, pools, fountains, streams, and lawns of modified Ter-ran grass, it soared to a height of over two kilometers, yet for all its massive size it seemed almost too fragile to survive, as though it were a construction of spun glass which would come crashing down at the first breath of wind.

The Palace had been built in a single day. Work had begun on it even before the last Lha had been captured, so certain had Governor Lavelle been of his eventual success. Of course, the ruins of the Temple dwarfed his palace almost to insignificance but—

"For the moment that's all for the best. The Temple was alien—do you remember how I told you once that no human beings would ever build anything that many kilometers tall? The Palace's comparatively modest size will help make it clear to the people of the planet that they're free of Nal-K'am and that this is Jambu-lin, the World of Mortals. And when we destroy the Temple—in one day, the same way we built this Palace—they'll realize just how much more powerful human beings are than the aliens who ruled them were."

—*Can you listen behind his words, below his conscious thoughts?* Janesha asked.

—*It would have made no difference to him if we had been doing everything possible to help the humans we ruled. Any alien that thinks itself the equal of a human must be made to submit, any alien that thinks itself better must be destroyed. And yet he places very little value on any individual human's life.*

—*The rigidity of his beliefs betrays their origin; he has been conditioned so thoroughly that there is no way to change his attitudes without fast breaking his mind. That is why Terra gives him such complete control of this planet; he himself is completely controlled.*

They were sitting in a softly lit room with walls of a dark carved Terran wood. Governor Lavelle had shed the appearance of age he had worn when Lozan had first known him; his face was unlined, his body strong and youthful, his movements without the old man's hesitation they had once had. He wore a blue uniform and over it the green cape of a planetary governor; on the breast of his uniform, Jambu-lin, as it appeared from space, had been worked in jewels.

—*Prod him.*

"And you really expect me to take your place when you die? To become the Planetary Governor?"

"Of course. It's standard procedure to train a native to take over the administration of any rediscovered human world—though you won't be taking over until after I die, and I expect to live at least another two hundred years, so it's a little early to worry about it. I don't know of another case where the Terran Governor adopted as his son the native whom he intended as his eventual replacement, but I think it was a good idea and I'm glad I did it. Though, of course, it really worked out in just the opposite way; first I adopted you and later I discovered you were suitable gubernatorial material."

—*Janesha?*

—*It's all there. The memories of having thought about you for years, the decision to adopt you as his son when he found you in the shaefi tubes, the realization that you might have the abilities needed to succeed him and the decision to have you tested.*

—*Are you satisfied?*

—*I left no evidence of my tampering that any of them will be able to detect.*

"You know, the tests answered the one real question I'd ever had about you when they revealed just how much parapsychic ability you had. That's why you refused to spy on the priests for me, isn't it? Because you saw through me."

—*He's testing me. To see if the conditioning machines had the proper effect on me yesterday.*

—*Then pass his test.*

"I'd always had hunches, been good at guessing, that sort of thing. And I could tell that you didn't really want me to do what you were asking me to do, that you were hoping I'd refuse. But there was more to it than that. The priests—it wasn't that they scared me, not really, but there was something horrible about them, like they'd given up their humanity. I didn't want to become like that."

The Governor nodded. "That's what I thought. You didn't lack courage—you just saw through me. A useful ability in a future Governor—" He frowned suddenly. "But you need courage, too, courage to risk not only your own life but the lives of those you love for the good of humanity."

—*Another test, Lozan commented.*

— *Yes, but one of your basic personality, not of your conditioning.*

"You know how much I care for you, Lozan. And I cared as much for your friend Dorjii as I did for you. I didn't like asking either of you to enter the Temple, but I knew it was necessary and I did it.

"As Governor of Jambu-In, you will find it necessary to do many things which you will detest in your capacity as a private individual. Sometimes your actions will prove useless; sometimes your attempts will harm the very people you are trying to help. You will have to learn to live without regret, without shame, without regard for past failures. You will have to learn to consider yourself and those around you as expendable as Go stones, to be risked and perhaps lost if the pattern demands it, whether or not such action is pleasing to you as a private individual. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so."

"Are you sure? Did you know that we attacked the Temple as soon as Dorjii's message reached us, but that Dorjii was killed by the vampires as soon as he made contact with us?"

"Yes. That's why you've got that statue of him just outside the state entrance to the Palace."

"Yes. Dorjii is a hero, the first to die in the attack on the vampires. But what no one has told you, what no one but I will ever tell you and what you yourself will tell no one, is that we were about ready to attack anyway. Dorjii just speeded up our timing. If he hadn't contacted us, we would have attacked within the next month. And if he hadn't tried to contact us, he still might be alive today. Like you are.

"But once he used that thing implanted in his head, he was dead. It wasn't like the headbands we're wearing; it was grown for us by one of our captive vampires and it was a vampire, too. It would have killed Dorjii even if the Temple vampires hadn't."

"And you wanted to put one in my head, too," Lozan said.

"Yes. I would have had one implanted in my own head if I'd thought I'd have had any chance to use it. No individual is too important to sacrifice for the good of humanity. Not you, not I, not Dorjii.

"I sacrificed Dorjii for the good of humanity, yet as it turned out humanity derived no benefit from his death. And so he has a statue and you have lost your best friend while I—I have lost someone who might have been a son to me as you have become a son to me. Can you live with me, live with the knowledge that I killed your closest friend, and killed him

uselessly? Do you still want to become a Governor, knowing that you will make mistakes and that men and women you love will die because of them? Think about it. Don't answer immediately. Think about it."

He took a silver-gray allergy stick from a green case, touched its tip to the insides of his wrists. The stick left red welts. "There are compensations, of course—like the pleasure you'll be able to get from these sticks once we've got your body chemistry adjusted right—but they're minor compared to the responsibilities. It's the responsibility that has to provide you with your primary satisfaction in life. The service of humanity is its own reward—and almost the only real reward you'll get as Governor."

He touched the stick again to his wrists, returned it to its case.

Because of you Dorjii died. I helped kill him, Janesha helped kill him, but he died because of you. And for that I will never forgive you.

Aloud he said, "You did what you thought was right and I can't hate you for it. But I don't want to make any decisions like that now. Perhaps never."

"I don't expect you to," Lavelle told him. "Your tests show you possess the capacity to learn to make such decisions, but you've got a long time in which to learn to make them. As I said, at least two hundred years."

"Two hundred years? I thought you were exaggerating."

"I rather thought you did. But no, I wasn't exaggerating. How old do you think I am?"

"Well— Sixty years? You don't look that old, but if I spent as long as you say I did in that tube—"

"No. Totally wrong. I'm a longspanner; I'm closer to three hundred and sixty years old. All the people you've known have been mayflies, shortspanners—they live fifty, sixty, maybe even a hundred years and then they die. But there are ways to lengthen a man's life span, though population pressure makes it necessary to limit their application to those people truly important to humanity. And to their families, of course—otherwise, watching the people you loved get old and die while you just stayed the same would tear you apart. Anyway, you're part of my family now—and a gubernatorial trainee—so you've already been given your first longspanner treatment. It was part of that general immunization you underwent last week.

"Two more treatments and you'll have the physical capacity to try allergy sticks, but I'm afraid you'll find they're an acquired taste and it'll take you at least another three years to really develop a liking for them.

They're one of the-

A light flashed on a ring he wore on his left hand. He touched the ring to the jeweled headband he wore, concentrated a moment.

"Sorry. They're ready for us in the studio. Remember, you're to say nothing. You're only there to be seen with me."

"All right."

An unobtrusive blue-skinned servant opened the door to the corridor for them and they stepped out onto the moving surface. The shimmering floor began to pick up speed, hurrying them past walls hung with tapestries, covered with enamel and filigree, other walls still bare and undecorated.

The studio was an immense complex of white-walled rooms, filled with a confusion of men and machinery. Lozan watched as a black-robed priest was stripped of his mask and robes, confessed his sins before the holocameras. When it was his turn, he let one of the green-uniformed technicians position him behind and to the right of the Governor.

"People of Jambu-lin," Lavelle began, "you have heard the false priest confess to you the lies by which you have lived your lives. You have heard him confess that you are not damned and in Nal-K'am, but mortal living men just as I, Joseph Lavelle, your new Governor, am a living man. All your lives you have suffered and you have been told that this was only just, that your sufferings were punishment for the sins of your past lives and that it was Night alone who kept you from greater suffering.

"People of Jambu-lin, Mortal men and women, I say again that you have suffered all your lives for sins you never committed. I have come, as the representative of the Terran Hegemony, of mortal men united for the good of all humanity, to free you from this false tyranny.

"But it is not the priests of Night alone who are to blame for your sufferings. The priests were puppets, not of the false Goddess they claimed to serve, but of alien monsters—monsters worse than any of the S'in-je with whom they threatened you. Look upon their true forms—" Lavelle gestured with his left hand—"and see whom, see what, you have been enslaved to.

"The priests told you you were here to suffer and in that much, if only in that much, they did not lie to you, for you were here as cattle, for these monsters ate only human flesh, drank only human blood, and delighted only in torture.

"Jambu-lin—for that is what we have renamed your world, Jambu-lin,

the abode of Mortals—is a long way from any other human-inhabited world, and for many years we, the people of the Terran Hegemony, were ignorant of your plight. But when at last we learned of your degradation, of your suffering, we came in force and destroyed the monsters. Not one of them remains alive and their false priests will soon be executed, while you, Mortal men and women of Jambu-lin, are alive and, for the first time in your existences, free. Free to reclaim the heritage these monsters, these worse than S'in-je, stole from you.

"For we know who you are, where you came from. Many thousands of years ago, some children were stolen from one of the greatest of humanity's many worlds, from Mig Mar, the home of the enlightened of the Vajrayana and the adepts of the Bon-po. You are the descendants of those stolen children, found again at last. All humanity has been searching for you for three thousand years, and now that we have found you, be sure that we will cherish you and uplift you, that we will treat you with the love and understanding of a parent for his lost child.

"I am Joseph Lavelle, the representative of united humanity here on your planet and your new Governor. For the first time since the monsters stole your ancestors from Mig Mar, you are ruled by human beings, using human methods, for human purposes. For the first time in your history those who are charged with caring for you have your happiness and not your suffering as their goal.

"I am a man of Terra, the Mother World, from whence mankind spread to rule the stars. I am the Governor because the alien monsters who enslaved you left you in ignorance, without the knowledge needed to rule yourselves. But I am only your first Governor. After I die, I will be succeeded by Lozan Lavelle. Though he is my adopted son, he was born among you, he was raised among you, he is one of you. We rescued him from the Temple, where he was among those your alien masters had chosen for their tortures. He knows what it means when human beings surrender their freedom to aliens.

"Mortal men and women of Jambu-lin, I know it will be hard for you to tear the false Goddess Night from your hearts and minds, but you must be brave. Only humanity is worthy of your love, your faith, your devotion; only men deserve your respect. And you are men, not cattle, not aliens, not monsters—men, descendants of a noble race, the race destined to rule the galaxy. Be worthy of your humanity.

"The priests of Night told you your sufferings were part of the law of p'rin-las, that they were retribution for your past sins whose purpose was to teach you to achieve mortality. I, too, say that you can learn from your

sufferings here in what you thought was Nal-K'am, but the lesson to be learned is far different than that the priests would have had you believe.

"You are men, mortal men, human beings, and when you give up control of your lives to alien monsters you doom yourself to suffering. But you are free now, free to be human beings, free to find happiness.

"That is all I, Joseph Lavelle, have to say to you. Your suffering is ended."

"Got it," a technician said.

"Play it back." The Governor watched critically as his image appeared in the center of the white room and began repeating his speech.

"It's no good. Can the computer fix it?"

"No. You haven't quite caught the tone," a technician told him. "You've got to be able to make them feel the same authority in you that they're used to in the priests, without sounding like the priests. You'll have to try it again."

"I didn't like that priest, either. He didn't seem—degraded enough. Evil enough. Can the computer fix that?"

"That, yes, Are you ready to try your own speech again?"

"Let me see the corrected presentation of the priest. To give me the right feeling, so I know where I stand at the beginning of my speech."

It took four more tries before the computer had enough satisfactory material to synthesize a speech that would achieve the desired effect.

"How long until you can have your teams ready?" the Governor asked a man in darker green who was leaning against a wall, watching the technicians.

"My men are ready now," the man replied, straightening, "but most of our equipment hasn't arrived yet. It won't be here for another six days."

"That's too long. Can you handle Temple City with what you've got?"

"Working day and night for all six days."

"Then do it. But when your equipment arrives, I want you ready to move out into the villages."

Lozan and the Governor ate in one of the smaller state dining rooms, at a table of carved Flfarian blackwood that could have seated fifty. The Palace had been built in a day but that had been the shell alone, the parts of it which could be seen from outside; furnishing it was another matter and most of its rooms were still empty. Most of the private dining rooms,

game rooms, salons, galleries, and conservatories were yet to be completed, so Lozan and the Governor sat across from each other at a table more suited to a legislative dinner than to an intimate conversation.

The blue-skinned servants came and went, their feet gliding silently over the thickly carpeted floor. Lozan ignored them, concentrating instead on the food and on perfecting the formal table manners he'd learned from one of his en-cephalotapes. He'd been curious about the blue-skinned aliens when he'd first seen them, but when he'd probed their minds he'd discovered them so completely conditioned as to be little more than organic machines. They had been taken from their homeworld as infants and programmed so as to be unable to conceive of anything other than the routine of their duties.

"What effect do you think my speech will have in the villages?"

"Not much," Lozan said. "After all, they've believed in Night all their lives." It was almost too easy to read the Governor's expectations and say exactly what he was hoping or expecting to hear.

A blue-skinned servant set dishes of Elmarian spore-custard before them. Lozan took a bite and was surprised by the sensual feel of the wriggling spores in his mouth. The nearest analogue he could find to the sensation was some of the memories of the human sexual act he had gained when he had absorbed the Rilg and its operator in the Temple.

"The speech alone would probably have little effect," the Governor admitted, "though after the computer gets through with it it'll be a lot more effective than you'd think, from what you've seen so far. But it won't be presented alone.

"Teams of Terran social technicians will be visiting each village as soon as possible. They'll start by declaring the day of their arrival a general holiday and handing out free food and drink, all of it containing harmless euphorics which will greatly lower the villagers' resistance to suggestion. While, not at all incidentally, insuring that they have what will probably be the most enjoyable time of their lives.

"The technicians will play on the villagers' moods with music, subsonics, perfumes, and foul odors, with a thousand and one stimuli, then expose them to a presentation in which the holo we've just made will play only the smallest part.

"Then, just when the technicians have brought the villagers as close to acceptance of our message as they can, they'll create the illusion of Night Herself come to punish the villagers for their apostasy.

"The villagers will be terrified, of course—we'll make sure of that. They'll be sure that the whole thing was a test of their faith, a test which they've failed. But then, when their fear has reached its maximum intensity, one of the children of the village, whom we'll have taken aside and secretly programmed during the festivities, will denounce Night and laugh at Her, then pick up a stick—or whatever else comes to hand—and hit Her with it. And when that kills her, it'll have quite an effect on the villagers—not necessarily consciously, for we'll show them all it's a fake after we finish, but on some deeper levels."

"What are you going to do with the priests?"

"You still hate them, don't you?"

Lozan nodded, surprised to find that, however irrational the feeling was, he still did hate them.

"They've been too deeply conditioned ever to be anything but priests of Night. Getting them to confess like the one you saw tonight's a fatal process—we can keep them alive through the confession, but just barely. So we'll get some to confess and execute some publicly, but we'll probably use most of them to feed the vampires. Which seems only fair, considering."

"You mean they actually eat human flesh? I thought that was just a story."

"It is just a story, but what do you think you were doing in that tube? They were going to do something worse to you than use you for meat. They feed on men's souls."

"There's nothing about them on the encephalotapes I've studied."

"No, and I doubt there ever will be."

"There's a planet—we call it Nosferatu—about nine hundred light years from here. That's where we found the vam-pires, hibernating in tubes like the one we rescued you from. One of the vampires took over a human body somehow—we're still not sure how, though we think we're getting pretty close to the answer now. Anyway, the vampire escaped from Nosferatu, kidnapped thousands of human children, and brought them here."

"Yag Chan. The Pied Piper of Mars," Lozan said. "You told Dorjii and me about him."

"So I did. You forget, while you were resting there in that tube I had twenty-seven years in which to forget things. But the vampire that took over Yag Chan never went back to Nosferatu to try to rescue his fellow vampires, though he was free for over three thousand years. I guess

vampires don't have much loyalty to one another.

"Anyway, after that we were more careful. We carried on research with machines for centuries before we dared try using conditioned aliens, and then criminals.

"I'll give you more information later, but basically what we learned was that the vampires feed on some sort of life-force. They can drain it from a man even while they're in hibernation. But—you remember that priest in the studio, the one that confessed. We've developed a way to combine the methods we used on him—a chemical that utterly destroys individual volition, as well as a number of other things—with the way the vampires put themselves in hibernation.

"Before we managed to work out the technique we use now, a few MigMartian adepts tried to make contact with the vampires' minds but they all died in the attempt. The thing was, *after* we'd used our new technique on the vampires, *then* the MigMartians found a way to make contact with their minds. Or not their minds, exactly, not even their memories—we're just beginning to do that now—but we made contact with some center of the will that enabled us to control their actions. After a bit of experimentation, we managed to find a way for a human to mesh with a vampire and gain control of the vampire's powers.

"For a long time, only the MigMartian adepts could mesh with the vampires, but a few years ago, when we finally began to understand their minds, we learned how to make these"—he touched the headband he wore—"and the control helmets that enable a Terran without full adept training to control a vampire."

"Could I learn to do that?" Lozan asked.

"Of course. We took almost three hundred vampires alive and we were allowed to keep about eighty for ourselves. That makes us only the third human world with its own stock of vampires. Of course, there are a lot more on Nosferatu—hundreds of thousands, at the very least—and a lot on Mig Mar—but there aren't any anywhere else. Except here, and that means that in time Jambu-lin might well be the third most influential human world."

"Good."

"And you won't necessarily need a helmet to control them, either. You've got enough parapsychical ability to become an adept yourself, and just before we made our presentation I learned that the MigMartians have agreed to send a team of MigMartian adepts here to train you. They should be here in about eight weeks.

"An adept Governor with eighty vampires under your control—you'll be a force to be reckoned with, Lozan. A force indeed."

— *We can't face the MigMartians like this*, Janesha said in Lozan's mind. *We won't be able to hide my presence in your body.*

CHAPTER

17

Lozan lay on his back with his eyes closed, letting his couch massage him. He was listening to a conversation in another wing of the Palace, more than two kilometers distant.

"Yes, but I'm worried about Michelle." That was the Governor's wife, Margaret Lavelle, speaking while a machine applied the thick blue and green velvet of her sprayon. She'd been on Jambu-lin for two weeks now. Her two youngest daughters were due to arrive on the ship from Terra later in the day, and the mixture of anticipation and tension with which she awaited them was clearer to Lozan than it was to her husband.

"You know that even though she's my own flesh and blood I really know less about her than I do about Lozan. Conceived by artificial insemination—"

"It was your decision as well as mine."

"Of course it was but, damn it, all I've ever seen of her is a few holos and tapes, some psychometric reports, and I haven't even seen any of those in what must be three years now."

"Yes, of course. I understand exactly how you feel," his wife agreed while she hid the thermostat to her sprayon beneath another layer of velvet.

"You look beautiful," her husband told her. "It's hard to get used to, after all these years. But—looking back on things now, I don't think we should have had a child the way we had her. If we'd known that I'd have a chance to be assigned—but of course there was no way we could know, no way at all."

"And it would have been stupid to miss the chance for a child, with conditions on Terra what they are."

"I'm not arguing. There was no way we could have known better."

"Anyway, I'm worried about her. She didn't want to come here, you know."

"Why should she? She's never known me; I'm probably just a name and an old holo to her."

"You're her father."

"Still, why didn't you let her stay? She could always have come later. It's not that I don't want her here—I do, you know that—but she's only a year short of legal age and you could have arranged some sort of guardianship. If she didn't want to come—"

"I could have arranged a guardianship but I wanted to get her away from her friends. She's adopted Metallique now, and I don't like it."

"Metallique?" The Governor frowned, trying to place the term.

"A mayfly life mode. One we've encouraged to keep their population down. They wear metallic sprayon and try to appear expressionless—you'll see when Michelle gets here, I'm sure." She paused and regarded herself in the trumirror, rotating the image so she could see herself from all sides. The sprayon clung to her cosmetisurgically perfect body in swirls of shimmering blue and green.

"It's not just the fact that she's adopting a mayfly life mode, though that would be embarrassing enough. The problem is that the Metalliques are devoted to electroen-cephalostimulation."

"I thought that was illegal."

"It was. They had to change the law. Population pressure."

"Still, her longspanner conditioning will keep her from participating, won't it? So there really can't be anything to worry about."

"I'm afraid they've found a way around their conditioning."

"They? Who are they?"

"Her friends. I told you. She spends all her time with other failed Terran adept-trainees from the MigMartian academy. They're all longspanners who've adopted Metal-lique. I'm sure they've discovered a way around their conditioning."

"That's supposed to be impossible," he reminded her. "In any case, she'll find very little opportunity for electroen-cephalostimulation— There must be a better way to say that."

"It's called cephalization."

"Thank you—for cephalization here. No equipment."

"That's what I hoped."

"But tell me a little about this group of friends of hers. You say they're all Terran?"

"I think so."

"I've heard that the Hegemony suspects the MigMartians of discouraging non-Tibetans from completing their training at the academy. If they try to prevent Lozan from becoming an adept—"

"Joseph, we were discussing Michelle."

"I'm sorry; I thought we'd finished. After all, there's no danger of her getting involved in cephalization here."

"Nonetheless, I'm sure she'll be neither ready nor willing to take her place as a part of the family here."

"There's no hurry, is there? When I was her age, I was caught up in the revival of sadism—" he broke off, seeing his wife's expression. "I'm sorry. I forgot for an instant that you don't like to be reminded. What do you want me to do about Michelle?"

"I was hoping you could help me arouse her interest in Lozan. He's about her age, he's smart even if he isn't at all educated, and he's got an interesting looking face. Besides, you said he's about to start adept training."

"I doubt if she'll be interested in him."

"Why? He's not neutered, is he? Or homosexual?"

"No, but if Michelle's so bored with what life on Terra's got to offer that she's resorting to cephalization—and I'm not sure that she is; I have more faith in our conditioning than you do—what's she going to find in Lozan to interest her? I've told you how puritanical this planet is; I don't think the boy's had any sexual experience at all..."

—(!)

—What?

—*That's how we're going to grow me a new body. Inside that girl, disguised as a baby. (Lozan and the girl moving together in the rhythms of sex—she is faceless, a mere female receptivity. He climaxes, ejaculating not true semen but the fluid medium for a bio-construct which attaches itself to the wall of her uterus and begins to grow. The faceless girl goes through a seemingly normal pregnancy and the baby, Janesha, is bom. The baby grows into a slender woman with green eyes and red-black hair.)*

For a moment Lozan felt a hesitation, almost a fear, remembering the

idealized fantasies and Dakkini wood hallucinations which had been his only personal sexual experiences, then the mixture of fascination, embarrassment, and irrational fear was gone, banished by the wealth of sexual memories he had gained from the mind of the human in the sphere that he had absorbed when he had absorbed the Rilg it controlled. As those memories integrated themselves with his conscious experience, he realized a defect in Janesha's plan.

— *They take steps to prevent conception. A baby would be suspect.*

— *Their contraceptive methods must fail sometimes, by accident or design. We'll make sure they don't examine what happens too closely.*

— *What about the adepts? Can we continue to tamper with the minds of the people here without being suspected.-'*

— *That's the least of our worries. Besides, it's already too late; we have no choice. We don't have the time to think of something else; the fetus must be ready for transfer before the adepts arrive.*

You'll have to impregnate her by tomorrow. Give me control.

As Lozan concentrated on Margaret Lavelle, beginning the modification of her attitudes that would prepare her to welcome a pregnant daughter, he could feel the changes beginning in his body.

They waited for Umber and Michelle on a hillside of modified Terran grass. On Terra, as Margaret explained to Lozan, where even a longspanner could ordinarily spend only four days a year in any of the continental parks, a natural setting was considered the height of elegance. Rich men—and in this context rich meant that they owned at least one planet outright—entertained in tiny domed parks, the upkeep and taxes on which were greater than any other expenses they might incur. So Lozan and his foster parents sat on the grass, served from a hovering pavilion by blue-skinned servants.

One side of the Governor's tight synthavelvet trousers was white, the other black. His shoes were green, like the grass. Lozan was similarly dressed, in trousers of lemon and violet, his body a black filigreed with silver lines that made him look a little like a metallic skeleton. Margaret Lavelle was dressed in the blue and green sprayon she had been applying earlier.

Both the Governor and his wife were triumphs of cos-metisurgery, but to Lozan, who could perceive the scars and sagging tissues beneath their unblemished skins, their appearances were unpleasant, in much the same way as fecal odor imperfectly masked with cloying sweetness would have

been.

—No, Janesha informed him. *The smell of rotting meat.*

A hovercar appeared in the distance, a shimmer of brightness against the black backdrop of the Temple. Lozan could sense the excitement of one of its passengers, the studied disinterest of the other.

He plunged into their minds. Umber, the elder daughter, was the excited one. The openness excited her. She had always felt cramped in the close confines of Terra, in the domed cities that shut out the sun as well as the poisonous air.

She had been a failure as an artist there. Forced to work in miniature when she wanted to create monumental forms, she had been dissatisfied, unfulfilled. Here she would have the room she needed. She pictured huge works of art, works which would rival the hills in size. There would always be the tremendous bulk of the Temple to overshadow her creations, of course, but— No, they were going to destroy it. A pity: the sheer physical effect of such hugeness excited her.

In Michelle's mind, Lozan found a studied boredom, an elaborate disinterest in the world around her which masked her fear and anger and longing to return to Terra. She should not have been forced to come here, here where the unnatural openness, the distant horizon, the incomprehensible immensity of the Temple all frightened her. She could not bear to leave the close comforting ways of Terra, the solid comforting walls, the thronging people.

But she was here on this world, here to meet the father who had not even bothered to be present at her conception and the brother adopted without her consent into this family she did not want. Umber, beside her in the seat, was a vapid nothing and Michelle ignored her in the same way she would have ignored her mother, had she been present.

"Here they come," the Governor said to his wife, who had been looking in the opposite direction, away from the Temple, at a flight of red-winged garudas. There had been no birds on Terra for thousands of years.

Michelle felt empty, incomplete, and lost without Jason, Carla, Shino, Robert, Mischa. But more than she missed their friendship, she missed—no, she needed—the ecstasy they had shared. If she had been on Terra, she would be sitting with them right now, all their hands joined, concentrating as they concentrated until together they achieved with their minds alone what their conditioning prevented them from achieving any other way. But here, alone in this hovercar with Umber, she felt the emptiness, the terrifying void lurking behind and beneath ordinary reality

which had driven her out of adept training. She pressed a wombcube to her arm, felt the explosion of calming excitement.

The hovercar settled to the ground on the crest of the hill. Its canopy folded back and the two passengers stepped out onto the thick mat of grass. The sun burned white overhead.

Umber ran to embrace her father. She was tall and slender, with long hair and almond-shaped eyes, another triumph of cosmetisurgery. Her sprayon was of white velvet, its simplicity hidden in the cloud of shapes and colors projected by a device she wore at her waist.

Michelle stood outside the hovercar, making no move towards the other members of the family. She was small and muscular, with wide shoulders, a narrow waist and firm youthful breasts. She wore a sprayon of shiny metallic black which covered her hands and feet as well as her body. Her eyebrows had been removed and her face sprayed a shiny copper. It was a beautiful inhuman mask, totally expressionless. Her hair was a metallic silver, each hair tipped with an iridescent bead.

"This is Lozan," the Governor said to Umber. "And Lozan, this is my daughter, Umber."

They said hello.

Margaret Lavelle was talking to Michelle in a low voice. The Governor left Lozan and Umber and walked over to the others, bent to kiss his daughter, then thought better of it and said, "You must be my daughter Michelle. I've never seen you, and for that I apologize. All I can say is that I've been waiting a long time to meet you and I hope I can make our long separation up to you. Welcome home, daughter."

Michelle said, "Hello, Father," in an utterly disinterested voice. Her face remained an expressionless mask. The Governor smiled down at her, but *Lozan* could read the distress behind his smile.

Eventually the Governor led Michelle over to where Lozan, Umber, and Margaret Lavelle were discussing the statues of the tutelary demons and introduced Michelle to Lozan. They greeted each other, Lozan mimicking her impassive countenance and bored voice while subtly manipulating her reaction to him.

The Governor saw their apparent disinterest in each other and allowed his distress to show for an instant. Margaret would be displeased.

Michelle saw a MigMartian boy who seemed somehow very young, though actually he could not have been much younger than she was. His face was impassive, which she liked, but she could sense something behind

that im-passivity, an energy and aliveness that impressed her despite herself, though she was careful to let none of her reaction show.

After a few minutes' desultory group conversation, in which neither Lozan nor Michelle volunteered a comment that was not an answer to a direct question, the party began a tour of the grounds. They were on foot, the better to appreciate the beauty of the landscape, though floaters followed them, ready to pick them up if they tired. Despite Lozan and Michelle's manifest disinterest in each other, the Governor managed to split the party into two groups, his wife, Umber, and himself walking on ahead while Lozan and Michelle followed at a short distance.

Though the group in front was engaged in animated conversation, laughing often, Michelle maintained her bored pose. The wombcube's effects had worn off and she was once again fighting her fear of open spaces. For some reason, she was unwilling to dial another wombcube from her belt dispenser, so she had little relief from her distress until Lozan's mention of the fact that he was due to begin adept training in a few weeks distracted her. He saw the spark of interest flare up in her, fed it, and watched it grow as she realized that here, just possibly, was someone who could take the place of the friends she had left behind on Terra.

"I've had some adept training," she admitted, volunteering information about herself for the first time.

"On Mig Mar?"

"Yes."

"What's Mig Mar like?"

"Cold and—empty. Not many people, just... everything is too far from everything else and there's nothing in between. I hated it."

"I had a friend who wanted to go to Mig Mar and become an adept. He was killed by the vampires."

Michelle was silent a while, then said, "If they're sending six adepts to train you, they must think you have a fantastically high potential ability. Especially if they're Bon-po adepts. Bon-po are more interested in siddha, in powers."

"I think it's because I'm a gubernatorial trainee."

"No, I doubt it. Mig Mar's too proud. There must be something very special about you or they'd just have told you to come to Mig Mar. Did they rate your potential? They must have, if they accepted you for training."

"Yes. I'm a K'an-po. No one really explained what the term means."

"It means a lot of things, but in your case it just means you've got a very high parapsychic potential. Still, they wouldn't send six adepts from Mig Mar all the way here just to train a K'an-po. There must be something else, some other reason they're coming." Though she kept her elation hidden, she felt hopeful for the first time since leaving Terra. With proper training, a K'an-po could take the place of all the members of her group.

"The vampires?" Lozan suggested.

"Of course. They've come to study the vampires. You're only—well, partly their excuse." It was perfect. With the adepts busy with other things, she should be able to win him away from them when he reached the crisis in his training.

But without the circle, there was no way she could introduce him to the ecstasy, let him share in it before teaching him how to help her induce it. She needed some kind of hold over him, something to make him willing to break with the adepts when she wanted him to.

She realized she had fallen silent. He was looking at her. She rarely spoke more than a few words at a time anymore; it was becoming a strain to keep up her part of the conversation. She dialed herself a loquator, a drug whose effects she generally despised, then offered one to Lozan, showing him how to press the cube to his neck.

Lozan was telling her about the first time he had ever seen an unveiled woman when the answer came to her: sex. Of course. This was a puritanical planet, and Lozan could have had none of the supervised sexual training every Ter-ran child went through between the ages of eleven and fifteen.

He might even be a virgin.

He was, she decided a few minutes later. She remembered all the training she had had to enable her to distinguish sex partners from lovers, to avoid the patterns of dominance and submission that had been so fashionable a few generations earlier and had caused such problems. She understood the use of sex as a means of power, and though until now her understanding had been something of no interest, no more relevant to her real life than her understanding of viral medicine, yet the knowledge was there now that she had a need for it, and she could use it to bind Lozan to her.

She dialed herself a light aphrodisiac.

As the loquator and aphrodisiac reinforced each other, her conversation

grew steadily more animated, more intimate. Expression began to appear on her copper face and she began to touch Lozan in casual emphasis of her words. Lozan responded as she had hoped he would and she felt the growth of their chemically induced intimacy.

By the time they excused themselves and took a floater back to the Palace, the Governor and his wife were beaming.

CHAPTER

18

Michelle still slept, exhausted by their night's lovemaking, but Lozan only feigned sleep, as he had every night since Michelle had come to share his bed. Almost automatically, he monitored her sleeping mind and soothed her troubled dreams. Slowly, night by night, he was stripping from her that extra awareness the MigMartian academy had so disastrously awakened in her, that half-talent which only showed her the deceptivity of surface reality without giving her the means to penetrate to the substance beneath the illusion. She no longer awoke to stare helplessly up at the glowing ceiling, or to reach out for Lozan and hold him to her as if to reassure herself of their mutual reality. And as she lost her gift—lost it gently, imperceptibly, without realization of her loss—the world took on new richness for her, and she found her fear of the abysses lurking beneath her every thought receding. And for Michelle, sex was no longer a means to an end, a way of dominating Lozan; it had become lovemaking, one of the certainties upon which she based her new life.

A comfortable lie, to keep her happy.

Janesha interrupted Lozan's thoughts.—*The fetus is ready.*

—*Today then, at the execution?*

—*Yes.* Neither of them knew for sure whether Janesha would be able to leave his brain without help; she might have to be driven forth, as *Lozan* had once been. He reexperienced his own expulsion and exile, dipping into Jan-esha's memories whenever he found his own information insufficient.

The room pulsed with light, every surface flashing forth in a compelling rhythm which penetrated Michelle's eyelids and brought her painlessly awake. A cool breeze, containing a number of mild stimulants, blew through the room as the wall opposite their bed faded into transparency

and revealed the landscaped grounds of the Palace to them.

There was a tiny flash of crimson in a nearby grove of nearoaks. The hawk? There was nothing else with which Lozan was familiar that was quite that shade of red— He reached out, effortlessly encompassed the mind of the crimson hawk. It had been searching for him ever since its escape from the ruins of the Refuge.

For a moment, he considered keeping it at the Palace. He could say it was a bird Dorjii had trained.

—Twenty-seven years ago? Janesha asked. It's too unique; it might arouse someone's curiosity. You can't afford to keep it around.

— You could use its body if the fetus doesn't prove right.

—If we need it we can jind it again. I can do much more as a human being than as a hawk.

—I'll send it away, Lozan agreed reluctantly. He impressed the command on the hawk's mind.

The conversation had taken almost no time; Lozan and Michelle were still drifting gently down to the cushioned bedbase.

Weight returned to them. They lay still the prescribed moments, letting their bodies readjust, neither moving nor speaking. Michelle's copper face and silver hair shone in the bright morning light.

"Some music?" Lozan asked, kissing her.

"No. Not today."

"You'll have to show your true face today, you know. There can't be any confusion; the priests were masked and we are not. The distinction had to be kept absolutely clear."

"You're starting to sound like Father," she said. "I'll wear a white sprayon; no one will be able to tell the difference."

"Then why not expose your face?"

"If you'd grown up on Terra, you'd understand," she said. She closed the door of her dressing room behind her.

In his own dressing room, Lozan stepped through the sonic shower and put on the clothing that had been laid out for him by his valet—a one-piece blue uniform, a white cape with a blue and green representation of Terra on it, long white gloves, and white sandals which revealed the brown skin of his feet.

He dressed himself, preferring to avoid contact with his dead-minded

blue valet whenever possible. Though the cape had been designed with Jambu-lin's climate in mind, it still felt heavy and awkward. As he surveyed himself in the trumirror, he saw that his hair was growing back satisfactorily.

As he waited for Michelle in their dining room, he reviewed the recordings of his previous night's activity that the various surveillance devices had made. As usual, there was no need to edit them.

Michelle had designed the dining room herself. Every-thing in it was silver—walls, carpets, chairs, chandeliers, candlesticks, even the table off which they ate—and the red gleam of her copper spraymask was usually visible wherever she looked.

She entered, accompanied by a train of three of the blue-skinned servants. She was wearing a cream spraymask, and Lozan had to admit that from a distance it would pass for her natural skin. She had on a dark green gown which, while tight-fitting, had not been sprayed on and in which she looked and, he knew, felt uncomfortable.

"You look good," he said, changing her perception of the way the fabric felt against her skin to make it a little less irritating to her. "But not happy."

"I'm not." Two of the servants seated her while the third watched, waiting for any further commands. The three servants stood behind her chair while others served breakfast. As always, Lozan found the food unfamiliar—no two meals he had eaten in the Palace had been the same—but today the tastes and textures, the very appearance of the food revolted him.

"My spraymask will pass," Michelle said.

"Now that I see it, I'm sure it will," Lozan agreed. "The computers can modify the way it looks for the holos."

"I hate it."

"You really don't want to go, do you? It's not just having to appear in public looking a way you don't want to look."

"Of course I don't want to go. The whole thing's disgusting. Barbaric. But you, you're looking forward to it, aren't you?"

—Prepare her, Janesha advised. You may not be able to conceal your ecstasy completely.

"I've always hated the priests. I don't think you'll ever know what it's like to hate people the way I've always hated them," he said, finding that

far more of his hatred for the priests had survived in him than he would have suspected. He was looking forward to the coming execution with a savage expectation he dared not admit to Michelle.

Yet there were always the surveillance devices recording his every word, every gesture, for computer analysis. "You forget that I've been forced to attend hangings all my life, only until now it was the priests who were hanging people like me. I've seen them tear men apart on the blasphemer's rack. At one time," he admitted. "I would have liked nothing better than to put the noose around a priest's neck with my own hands, maybe tighten it just enough so he had a foretaste of what was coming—" he had her shocked attention—"then kick him free, let him hang, watch him gasping and turning blue on the rope. But now—" the lie came easily—"I wouldn't even go if I didn't have to go. But I don't have any more choice in the matter than you do."

"You shouldn't talk like that, about your feelings. About that kind of feelings. You should keep them to yourself."

"I'm talking about the past, Michelle, about the way things were before. Not about what things are like now."

"You still shouldn't talk about feeling like that."

"All the people you'll see are going to be feeling like that. Maybe a lot worse. I just thought you'd be better off prepared."

After they finished eating, they joined the Governor and the others below. Michelle left with Margaret and Umber in one hovercar. Lozan and the Governor took another.

"Remember," Lozan was told as the hovercar approached the square where the hangings were to occur, "place the knot just under the left ear when you tighten the noose. That way, when your man falls through the trap, the knot will be jerked around so it's just under his chin when he reaches the end of his rope. His head'll be thrown back violently enough to break his neck and he'll die almost instantaneously. I wish we could use a more humane method of execution, but the technicians tell me the people wouldn't understand it if we did. Anyway, it won't be like the hangings you're used to, where the priests used to let the victims dangle ten or twenty minutes before they suffocated."

You'd do the same, if your technicians told you it was necessary to get the right effect, Lozan thought.

A platform of synthetic pearl had been erected in one corner of the square. It was morning and the square was still in the Temple's shadow,

but from a sphere hovering high above the crowd intense white light flooded the scene. As the packed crowd reluctantly parted for the hovercar, Lozan was buffeted by the hatred and rage the Governor's psycho-technicians had aroused in the crowd's members.

Lozan and the Governor stepped out onto the platform. The crowd below was held back by low-intensity neural stimulators. Lozan looked down into the dark waiting faces, feeling the frustration and tension building towards its carefully choreographed release.

In the center of the platform, about five meters above Lozan's head, stood the scaffold. There was a single noose hanging from the crossbar, a looped rope of the same pearly white as the beam from which it hung.

Clustered around the base of the scaffold stood the other executioners, an uneasy knot of humanity picked as the representatives of Jambu-lin's victimized population. An orphan in his brown tunic, a civil administrator with the name of a distant village emblazoned on his breast, an old man in a ragged gray robe—

The old man was Sren.

Surprised, *Lozan* stared at him an instant before taking his place at the head of the line of executioners. Sren was about two thirds of the way back.

Sren was bent, gaunt, his deeply lined face furtive and fear-ridden. His left ear was cropped. A long number tattooed in faded purple marked him as a beggar.

Governor Lavelle had begun to talk to the crowd. From a newly constructed balcony on one of the buildings overlooking the square, his family watched, invisible among the minor officials.

Sren could not follow the speech, though he tried. His mind was full of senile confusion, choked with half-thoughts through most of which ran the scarlet thread of his hatred of the priests. Agad was a dim memory; he no longer remembered the crime for which he had been condemned to spend the rest of his life as a beggar, but he knew that his life had once been good and that the priests had taken his happiness from him. Obviously not trusting in his ability to remember instructions, the technicians had conditioned him for his part in the execution, and as the vivid pictures passed again and again through his mind he licked old dry lips.

Lozan could no longer hate him. He could only pity him.

The Governor finished his speech. Guards in somber blue pushed the people back, clearing a path through the crowd for a line of bewildered

priests, their arms bound to their sides beneath their cloaks. The priests made their slow way forward; in their dusty cloaks and rigid nightmasks they resembled sorry black birds, as isolated from each other as from the crowd that watched them with avid, hating eyes and struggled to get at them through the protective cordon of guards.

Lozan felt his hatred fading. Like Sren, the priests were objects of pity.

Lozan ascended the scaffold by the left staircase and waited as the priests were led up the steps leading to the lower platform. The guards selected the first priest to be hanged. The other priests huddled together as they watched the first victim hesitantly climbing the final set of stairs, their masks turned to Lozan as he adjusted the pearly rope around the priest's neck.

The Governor's amplified voice said: "He dies as he lived, not as a man, but as a priest of Night."

The priest said nothing, stood without moving. *Lozan* pulled the lever which released the trap-As the priest fell, Janesha absorbed his mind. Some of her ecstasy leaked through to Lozan and he smiled as the priest's dead body caught fire and burned, leaving only gray ash to fall from the gleaming noose.

Still smiling, Lozan descended his proper staircase. The Village administrator was waiting at the bottom and when Lozan stepped down onto the platform the administrator began to climb the staircase. A second priest was chosen. The executions continued.

As each body dropped, Janesha absorbed the priest's mind, so that what jerked and spasmed at the end of the rope was in every case a man already dead. Then—

—*I'm ready.*

—*Do you need help?*

—*No*, and she was gone from his mind. Now it was Lozan who absorbed the minds of the dying priests and felt the full flood of a Lha's ecstasy. He was still linked with Janesha, he still shared her thoughts and feelings as she lay curled in Michelle's womb, but he sensed a sudden change in their relationship, some difference other than that caused by their physical separation.

He would think about it later. Steeling his features to impassivity, he gloried in the sun-blaze of absorption.

Sren's turn as executioner came and the old man haltingly mounted the staircase. His hands were clumsy as he placed the noose around his

priest's neck, then it was all he could do to step back and pull the lever releasing the trap. The priest fell, jerked twice, and was still. Sren frowned. It had all been over so quickly.

Descending, the onetime orphanmaster found himself forced to take the stairs at a speed prescribed by the conditioning he had undergone. The memory of the dead priests, disappointing though the actual sight had been, was unnaturally vivid to him, still charged with the force of the conditioning that was forcing him to take the steps too rapidly. He missed a step and fell, snapping frail bones as he tumbled down the stairs to the foot of the platform, driving a splintered rib through one wasted lung. He was dying. Lozan absorbed his mind and he was dead. The guards took his body away.

Perhaps they'll erect a statue to him like they did to Dorjii.

During sex with Michelle that night, Lozan was still gripped by the ecstasy of the day. Though he could still sense Janesha's thoughts and feelings, she seemed far away from him in some way he could not quite define. It was as though he were alone with Michelle for the first time. On previous nights he had been the detached puppeteer, using his perfect control over his body's physiology and his ability to stimulate the pleasure centers of the girl's brain to give her the experience she most desired, but he had never gained more than a trivial pleasure for himself. His reactions had been feigned, his feelings more often than not dictated by the sexual mudras Janesha had him practice during the act. He had made himself the embodiment of Michelle's fantasies—fantasies which, in many cases, he had planted in her mind to facilitate a particular mudra—but he had never abandoned himself to the sensuality of sex.

Floating above the bed, Michelle's legs locked tightly around him, Lozan surrendered for the first time to his own sexuality. This time he was a participant, not a puppeteer, this time the touch and taste and feel of her was as exciting to him as he had always made his to her. Their lovemaking was violent in a way it had never been before, and when they finally floated together, spent, he felt a new kind of release, a quiet surrender that melted into his Lha ecstasies and left him fluid, warm, floating.

Later, feigning sleep beside her, he felt his mind expanding into those portions of his brain which had been occupied by Janesha. Before the Refuge, alone in his brain, he had not known how to use more than a fraction of its true computer capacity, but now, with his Rilg and Lha knowledge to draw upon, he could utilize it all. His perceptions became more acute, his intelligence more discriminating. New relationships were suddenly apparent in everything to which he turned his mind. He was

thinking as never before, and he was coming to realize that he was in danger.

Janesha. While prisoner in his brain, she could not have retained all the intelligence that had been hers when she had had a whole brain's computer capacity. And now, trapped in the undeveloped brain of a fetus, she would have even less free intelligence at her disposal.

Like I was in the fish. From now on, Lozan would have to be the one to plan and direct, Janesha the one to follow.

All their plans had been made while neither of them possessed the intellectual capacity which was now Lozan's. He began to review their past actions, looking for unsuspected possibilities, overlooked errors.

And found the fatal flaw in all their planning: the captured Lha knew who he was. The humans who had controlled the Rilg in the assault on the Temple would not themselves have been able to gain the information from the minds of the Lha they captured, but as soon as Governor Lavelle had told Lozan of the knowledge being gained from the enslaved Rilg—as soon as Lozan had realized that the human mechanical telepaths had been built with knowledge taken from Rilg memories—then he should have known his masquerade was doomed. And later still, when he learned that the MigMartian adepts were coming to study the Lha, then he should have realized the imminence of his danger.

How much longer? Though the adepts were not due for another week, Terra had long ago taken the majority of the captured Lha for her own, and nothing Lozan could do could prevent the secret of his identity from being discovered. His eventual discovery was a computational certainty. The only question was, how long did he have? And he did not have the information with which to answer that question.

There was no hope of concealing himself on Jambu-lin. He could flee to another planet, perhaps, but he had no knowledge of starships, no knowledge of the Hegemony's plans for expansion. At best he could only hope to repeat Yag Chan's mistakes.

Can I free the other Lha, hope that they can devise a better plan than I can?

He remembered the way the Rilg that he and Janesha had absorbed had disintegrated. And even if he could free them, what then? They were still only a fraction of the number that Terra had already defeated.

Defeated through their control of the Rilg. And there were hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Rilg, still suspended on Rildan. There was a

teleportation lattice in the Temple attuned to Rildan; Lozan could free the Lha, with their help free enough Rilg to regain control of Rildan, and with them all escape back here in overwhelming force.

The Votrassandra. A threat three million years unfulfilled. And the enslaved Rilg had been taken from Rildan by their human masters.

Lozan's senses reached out, encompassed the sixty-four linked slavebrains of the teleportation lattice. The slave-brains were still alive, still potent, but they were being studied by human technicians.

He activated the lattice, found it still attuned to Rildan. But how long did he have until the human technicians did something to the lattice on either end, destroyed the link?

Not long. Days. Another computational certainty.

There was too much he didn't know, too many possibilities he couldn't compute. Only one course of action seemed to offer any hope and he couldn't tell how deceptive that hope was.

Janesha had followed his reasoning, agreed with his conclusions. It was up to him. He felt cold, detached, driven. Without choices.

He left without awakening Michelle and took a hovercar to the Temple. The guards there recognized him and led him to the hall where the captured Lha were being kept. Yag ta Mishraunal was not among them, so Lozan finally selected an elder Lha with whom he was familiar through Janesha's memories. He convinced the soldiers in charge of the work being done in the Temple that he had the authority to have the Lha delivered to his rooms in the Palace, arranged to have it done.

On his way back, Lozan reached out to his foster-father's mind and planted there a memory of having authorized Lozan to take a vampire from the Temple for study. His tampering was clumsy, obvious, certain to be discovered by the first adept to examine the Governor's mind.

He made sure Michelle remained asleep, then accepted delivery of the lumpy green crystal containing the Lha he had chosen.

Unlike most of the other Lha, Yaws had retained an almost human form. But his mind was a frozen thing, as crystalline as the murky green stuff in which he was encased. He was aware after a fashion, but he was unaffected by his awareness; his senses still functioned, but there was no one present to interpret the information they conveyed. All the knowledge he'd amassed in his long life remained, but there was no animating entity left to make sense of it.

He was dead, Lozan finally admitted, an organic computer with psychic

powers. A thing. No longer an entity, no longer a being. No longer part of the Goddess Night.

The humans had been able to take the Rilg from Rildan because the Rilg were dead.

All the other Lha were dead. Only Lozan and Janesha survived to create a new greater Self, a new Goddess.

Lozan commanded the dead-alive thing in the crystal to try to absorb him. Yaws tried to absorb Lozan and Yaws was absorbed, melted into Lozan, became part of him.

It would be safer if he left none of the dead Lha to be used against him. Fighting his ecstasies, he reached out to Janesha, gave her precise instructions, then took a hovercar to the Temple, where he did what he could to make sure no technician did anything to harm the teleportation lattice while Lozan was on Rildan.

Michelle arrived at the Temple, Janesha looking out of her eyes. The real Michelle no longer existed; Janesha had absorbed her. There had been no time for pseudoembryonic development; the false fetus had had to change and expand, taking Michelle's body for its own.

Lozan felt a pang of regret, banished it; Michelle had lost her identity in a blaze of ecstasy. Her death had been more to her liking than her life.

We'll need all of them. All the humans of Jambu-lin, for the life-starved Rilg. Lozan had lived life as a human, had absorbed humans and experienced their memories as his own. There would be nothing to regret.

Lozan and Janesha absorbed the minds of their dead-alive brethren. There were too many crystal-encased Lha, too much life-force; there was no way they could absorb it all.

But they dared not leave any of the dead-alive Lha for the humans of Jambu-lin to use against them. At last they had the dead-alive absorb the dead-alive, precious wisdom, memories, experiences lost forever.

When there were only two dead-alive Lha left, Lozan and Janesha commanded them, absorbed them. The chaotic fragments of myriads of identities blazed brighter than their thoughts.

They could barely distinguish between past and present, their acquired selves and their true personalities, their thoughts and those of the dead-alive whom they had absorbed when they activated the teleportation lattice and stepped through to Rildan.

CHAPTER

19

Falling forever, never hitting bottom.

No. A sense of something around them. Floating in darkness.

Cold.

A spherical space, around it metal. In the center, themselves.

So cold. They clung to each other, lost in the multiplicity of new selves coalescing within them, the blazing memories, the myriads of eyes that were not eyes through which they had to look to try to discover who they were, who they might be.

A velvet needle piercing the confusion, driving relentlessly to the core, the center, the essence. A voice so soft, yet so chill, so much itself that there was no mistaking it, no chaos when it spoke:

— *You have it within you to become Votrassandra. You need only open yourself to (he change and we will take you for our own.*

Then it was gone and in their resurgent ecstasy all coherence was again lost.

Fragments of identity drifting, colliding, clinging to each other. A new center forming, desperately walling out the clamoring confusion. Lozan. Himself.

He tried to reach out to Janesha, could not tell if the chaos he encountered was in his mind or hers.

He retreated. It was easiest to think in simple terms, in human terms. He built walls in his mind, walls without doors and windows. He fitted the memories together, assembling a self. A self with gaps where parts of him had been, with memories and ideas that had never been his. He fitted them together and made himself a new Lozan.

Slowly *Lozan* brought more of himself, more of his multiplicity of selves, into the protected enclosure within which he clung to his identity, assimilated the memories, grew. He tried again to pierce through to Janesha but could not make it through the confusion and chaos to her.

But he still had his body, where his mind would not serve. "Janesha? Janesha, can you hear me when I speak to you?"

She continued to cling to him, did not reply. *She'll recover her identity,* he thought. *Sort herself out from the others' memories. It'll just take her*

longer. Because of Michelle and the pseudofelus. But he couldn't wait for her to recover; at any moment the humans back on Jambu-lin might destroy the teleportation lattice there.

It took him an interval to get his location and his mission clear once again in his mind. It was a temptation to wait, assimilate more subsidiary selves, find out what advice and help they could offer.

No, I don't have the time.

The teleportation lattice was hidden below the deepest tier of the smallest vault. The vault contained eighty-one tiers, each of which housed about twenty thousand Rilg in shaefi suspension.

Using as much of his mind as he could while still maintaining coherence, Lozan reached out for the bottom tier, trying to orient himself. It was a slow, fumbling process, but when he finally began to sense the configurations of the space around him he realized that what seemed to be to his right was really above him. There, about forty meters away, he could sense a vast cavity containing row upon parallel row of what he knew must be shaefi-suspended Rilg.

He refined his concentration, shutting out everything but a single capsule chosen at random. The capsule was about four meters tall and a meter in diameter, rounded at the top and banded with rings of jewels. Inside, floating in a thick cloud of orange, was a pale sinuous being with articulated fins and a ring of manipulatory tentacles around the base of its triangular neck.

Exultant, Lozan reached out for its mind, only to encounter void. The Rilg was dead.

Could he have been mistaken, confused? *No.*

He focused his attention on the inhabitant of another capsule. This Rilg too had been too long in suspension, was dead.

He tried a third Rilg. Dead. A fourth. Dead. A fifth. Dead.

In a moment of despair, he relaxed the rigid control he was holding on his mind, felt his coherence begin to go down before a tide of ecstasy and unassimilated identities. But he maintained his compartmentalization, managed to assimilate the identities and regain the coherence he needed to reach beyond himself.

Finally he found a Rilg in whom a trace of life still lingered, but it was so weak, so attenuated that it was almost nonexistent. He could not make the Rilg aware of his existence.

There were other living Rilg, but very few, and none in better condition than the first.

A memory he had gained when his control had slipped told him there was a way to transfer some of the excess life-force with which he was charged to a Rilg. But the method required actual physical contact, and he did not yet feel sufficiently in control of his faculties to risk teleporting himself up to the vault.

But there might be very little time left. How long had he spent floating chaotic? How long did he have before the Terran technicians destroyed the only means of escape from Rildan?

No, he thought, I am Lha, not Rilg. I can escape, create a new lattice.

If the Votrassandra did not prevent him. But that chill velvet needle that had pierced to his essence with its message did not frighten him as it should.

It could have been some sort of recording. It wasn't the same, not like I remember it. And they did nothing to keep the humans from taking the Rilg they enslaved off-planet. Maybe they're dead, gone.

Something intruded on his awareness. A black machine was gliding up and down the corridors formed by the parallel lines of Rilg capsules. The thing's conical body was covered with lenses, diaphragms, orifices, and electronic sensors of all kinds, and it moved in a welter of sonic and electromagnetic fields. At random seeming intervals, it would perform chemical tests on the floor of the chamber with a jointed appendage it extruded from the base of the cone.

A human patrol robot, here to make sure that no Rilg awakened spontaneously or was revived by an intruder. And if there was a patrol robot here, on the deepest level of the smallest vault, there would be one on every level of every vault. Lozan didn't know enough to attempt to subvert the machine, and it looked too alert to ignore, He would have to destroy it.

The memories he had gained from one of the human guards whose minds he had absorbed on Jambu-lin told him that machines of this sort were unarmed and that their primary function would be to report back to some central agency. And since the vault, like the Temple, was built of material impervious to electromagnetic radiation, that agency had to be somewhere inside the vault. Lozan would have recognized the Rilg-derived equipment necessary to control the machine by thought alone.

So there were humans inside the vault. They were still beyond the

present range of Lozan's perceptive sense and he did not dare risk any sort of telepathic contact; in his present state he would be sure to give himself away to an adept. With a minimum of attention concentrated on the robot, Lozan strove to increase the percentage of his potential mental capacity available to him. It was a slow process; anything that would have speeded it up would have resulted in at least a temporary loss of coherence and control, and he dared not take the risk; if there was an adept in the vault, he could easily give himself away. But he was making slow progress.

There! An electronic bleep and one, moreover, which Lozan could easily counterfeit. If the next one was identical-It was. *Watt*, one of his human memories informed him. *Make sure the interval is constant. You've got to get that right, too.* All eighty-one levels of the vault were becoming perceptible. The top nine were empty and there was a single man on the uppermost level overseeing the work of some hundreds of machines busy ten levels below him. Lozan was not yet sure he had regained the delicacy of touch he'd need to tap a human adept's thoughts in safety, so he studied the machines the man was controlling while slowly assimilating more of the fragmentary selves he had absorbed.

Machines were attacking Rilg capsules, doing something to them that involved both piercing their walls and injecting a complex sequence of chemicals into the interior, and bathing them in various sorts of electromagnetic radiation. Sometimes the jewels banding a capsule would flare for an instant with a weak, already dying fire; when they did, the orange gas inside the capsule would turn green and crystallize. More often, nothing happened, and the machines went on to try the next capsule.

A third bleep identical with the first two, with an identical interval between bleeps! Lozan could reproduce it easily enough. He visualized the wires he needed to sever in order to disconnect the machine's power source, then hesitated.

He still knew too little to risk putting it out of action, and his mind was almost clear enough for him to risk invading the mind of the man at the console. Better to wait, despite the overwhelming urgency hammering at him.

At last he felt he could risk contact. He reached out, insinuated himself into the man's mind—

Jomo Parsons sat at his console, nine levels away from the nearest vampire, and even so he was afraid. They said the vampires could suck the life out of a man, just floating there in their tubes. A man spent only four hours a day in the vaults and only fifteen days a tour here on Nosferatu,

but, new though he was, Jomo had seen the difference in the men returning from duty in the big vaults, seen the deadened luster of their eyes, heard their slightly slurred speech. He was glad he'd drawn duty here, in the smallest vault, where there were fewer vampires.

This was his first shift below, and he fingered the telltales in his clothing that would warn the men above if he died. His eyes traced the cables that led from his console to the breach in the wall, his frail, useless connection to the out-side. If a vampire got loose, he was a dead man, they all knew that, though the official story was that there hadn't been an escape in over a thousand years.

He didn't believe them.

A light glowed on his monitor board and sullenly he slipped the telepath band over his forehead. There was no sensation, but he could imagine the adept at the surface—safely far away, where the vampires couldn't get at him—pawing through his mind with greasy mental fingers. The light winked out and he removed his headband.

What was he doing here alone? It was small consolation to know that a force of vampire operators was waiting on the surface. If a vampire got loose, he'd be dead before help arrived. Why didn't they keep themselves down here where they'd be able to help him if he needed help?

I'm bait, he realized. That's all I am, vampire bait.

Lozan was elated, grateful to Jomo Parsons for his insight. The man was bait, all right, but the Terran adept's attempts at monitoring his mind had been so unbelievably clumsy and easily evaded that Lozan need not worry about them. He searched Jomo Parsons' memories for more information.

There were very few humans on Rildan, only the handful needed to supervise the collection and removal of the vampires and a small force of vampire operators and adepts ready to handle any escaping vampire or—to put a name to their real fear—any non-Terran trying to collect a few vampires for his own.

At any one time, the greater part of the Terran occupying force was on Warg, as the Terrans had named the next planet sunwards, where they lived sealed away from the poisonous environment in domes and underground cities. There also they kept most of their crystal-encased vampires and the alien and human prisoners with which they were fed.

It was an open secret that there were seven phoenix bombs buried in Nosferatu's crust. The bombs were the least of Jomo's worries; he figured he'd probably be dead long before they turned the planet into a short-lived

star.

If enough Rilg could be freed, the bombs could be located and disarmed easily enough, but Lozan was worried by the small size of the human garrison. He and Janesha had between them enough life-force for perhaps thirty Rilg, and the humans and crystal-imprisoned Rilg on Rildan would provide the life-force for perhaps twenty more, but fifty Rilg and two Lha could do little against the forces massed on Warg, especially since the Rilg were unable to leave the planet.

He had hoped to bring hundreds of Rilg through to Jambu-lin, overwhelm all resistance instantly, but he would have to hope that those few Rilg he could revive would be able to defeat the Terrans and maintain the lattice from their end.

How long until someone interferes with the lattice on Jambu-lin? He dared not test the linkage, dared not give the Terran technicians studying it any indication of its nature until he could bring the Rilg through to take control of it for themselves.

Jomo was due to make a random spot check on one of the levels he guarded. Lozan guided his hand to the correct button and the vision screen lit up, revealing that all was as it should be on the deepest level. Lozan made sure that Jomo would not check that level again this shift, then withdrew from his mind.

—*Lozan?*

—*Janesha.* She had gained enough control of her secondary identities to complete her physical transformation and regain the computer capacity she had once had. Though she had not bothered to alter Michelle's appearance, yet she looked in no way like Michelle. She was vibrant, alive, her every aspect expressing the full force of her inner self.

—*Ready?*

—*Yes.* Janesha put the robot out of action while Lozan teleported himself to the capsule containing the first of the living Rilg. Lozan felt a moment's disorientation; reaching back into Mishraunal's memories for the technique of transporting himself without use of a lattice, he had found himself confronting a host of incompletely assimilated memories of the act, each memory carrying with it a different personality trace and set of implicit attitudes. It made Lozan recognize how little of his true self he had regained.

But he had regained enough of himself to do what he had to do. He opened a channel between the unassimilated memories within him and

the Rilg. There was a moment in which nothing seemed to happen, then he could feel the Rilg actively reaching put for the life-force he was giving it. As the Rilg regained its mind and strength, Lozan felt his own mind begin to clear.

Lozan sensed the Rilg's long-dormant intelligence and purpose reviving, but, though he was in intimate contact with the emerging mind, there was no sense of the shared warmth he had felt in the rapports he had shared with Yag ta Mishraunal and Janesha. As the Rilg regained full consciousness, Lozan recognized that its augmented mental capacity was beyond his comprehension.

The Rilg gleaned from him all his knowledge, assimilated and began to make use of it in an instant.

—Good. We have succeeded. But you have concentrated too much on your manipulations and sensations, too little on the increased intelligence they make possible. Like all sexually motivated species, yours is essentially juvenile.

My intelligence is far greater than yours; give me control of your mind so we can accomplish our purposes.

Lozan was too deeply committed to hesitate; he gave the Rilg control. Suddenly he was elsewhere, facing another capsule, opening a new channel between his unassimilated selves and the Rilg within the channel. Then he was in front of another capsule, repeating the process.

Each time he revived a Rilg, he felt less confused, less chaotic, more able to function as himself. But his increased ability to function brought him no closer to the Rilg.

When a Rilg regained consciousness, it merged instantly with those of its kind whom Lozan and Janesha had already revived, to create a composite being in whose formation Lozan did not, could not, participate. The Rilg composite mind was not a separate Self with an identity of its own, as Night had been, nor did the Rilg retain their individual identities while merged with each other, as the Lha had done. Each individual Rilg seemed a mere component, a mere appendage, of the greater mind, yet that mind seemed to have no individuality of its own. Lozan found himself unable to comprehend it.

— Will you consent to relive your encounter with the Votrassandra?
—Yes. And the velvet needle pierced him again, drove through to his essence and proclaimed its unique identity.

That was the same message we received. But for us it was (Slimed

velvet/Soft rot/Mockery). But though our races are different, perhaps too different ever to truly merge, yet we share a common way of life, a common interest in survival. We can live as partners in the universe.

—But the Votrassandra? Lozan asked.

— We have too little knowledge. We can only hope.

It was time for the robot's report. The Rilg-mind counterfeited its signal.

—And the bombs? Janesha asked.

—They have been located and disarmed. (A new man sits down at the console, relieving Jomo Parsons.)

(!) The trap was more complex than you realized, young one, and we have been discovered.

The Rilg disappeared, nickered into existence again a moment later on the floor beside Lozan.

—You have nothing to fear. You did not know that a computer of which Jomo Parsons had been kept unaware was monitoring the vault, but your ignorance has done us no damage; we have already retaken the planet and made sure they had no chance to alert their off-world forces.

But now that Rildan is once again under our control we must escape it. You will precede us; your human forms should allay suspicion for the few instants it will take us to secure the lattice.

Lozan and Janesha found themselves floating in the darkness beneath the vault.

—Mishraunal was (not like that/warmer/more like us), Lozan projected.

—We never knew Mishraunal. Only Yag ta Mishraunal—only Mishraunal's memories as Yag Chan experienced them.

—Prepare yourselves. And then they were free. Not on Jambu-lin, not on Rildan, not anywhere. Free of space, free of time. Without limitations, without support, without need and fear. Experiencing a condition odorless, colorless, tasteless, but not empty. Full.

Alive. They felt a whisper not of ecstasy, for ecstasy would have been thick and cloying in comparison, but of something so subtle that no amount of it could be too much, no amount of it could warp the judgment. The whisper that was the stillness at the heart of the living universe was breathing through them but they were not being swept away by it; becoming one with it they were becoming more fully the selves they had

always been.

Returning to the stillness, the fullness, the life, that which always had been and always would be.

A question became apparent:—*Do you desire to merge with us?*

The Votrassandra. But if this was the reality of their existence, this subtle clean bliss, this freedom from all needs, from the necessity of preying on other beings, the necessity of stealing life-force to maintain one's own life—

Lozan remembered the Rilg, cold and hating, remembered the horror and revulsion with which they had greeted the merest hint of this clean bliss. He knew what his decision was, what Janesha's must be.

—*Through you we will bring redemption to the Rilg.*

A chill sweet breeze was blowing in Lozan's mind and, as it blew, Janesha—not the Janesha with whom he had entered the teleportation lattice, but the partial entity he had absorbed from her in and after the Ritual despite her struggles to maintain her identity—wrenched herself free of him and rejoined the true Janesha, completing her.

—*Janesha?*

—*Yes.* The two merged, melded, became a single entity as much Lozan as Janesha, as much Janesha as Lozan. Within that entity, every being whom either of them had ever absorbed began to take on shape and individuality. They were all there: Ugyen Dochen and his wife Tara, Lozan's parents, the hundreds of orphans Lozan had drained in the shaefi tubes, the priest and sister who had been Janesha's host-parents, the orphans she had drained of their life-force before she encountered Lozan in the Ritual, the Rilg the two of them had absorbed, and its human operator, the executed priests, Sren, the crystal-prisoned Lha, all reviving, all taking on new life. As each being separated itself from the entity they had become, Lozan/Janesha felt itself becoming a simpler being, felt itself coming closer to an elemental state of purity.

Lozan/Janesha and the entities that Lozan and Janesha had once absorbed existed now in a state outside space and time. There was no need of communication between them, no need of mutual examination; each was apparent to all the others. Without ceasing to be themselves, with no loss of freedom or individuality, they merged, and created from their totality a new entity.

To the new entity they had become, another entity became apparent, a passive, balanced, static being existing in an atemporal instant that

encompassed all time: the being that the Deviant Rilg had become when the other Rilg had attempted to remake them in their own image.

—Merge. Create me.

The two entities merged, became a being without need for life-force, one with the basic energy of creation, with the living stillness that always had been and always would be.

The past and the future were opening unto the new being and it knew what it was to do. There was no compulsion, no necessity; rather, it was as though those actions which it saw that it would take were the body which it animated, as though the future it foresaw was the substance of its being.

It existed in bliss.

Lozan's body rematerialized in the darkness of the Rildan lattice. The Rilg sensed the change in him.

—Janessa is with the Votrassandra, he told them in answer to their questions.

—And you?

—I have returned to you with the truth about their nature. What I know you can know, and knowing it you will never need fear them again.

The Rilg sensed the truth in the new entity, knew it for Lozan, knew that the change they could sense in him had not made him their enemy.

—Open yourselves to me and you can experience what I have learned and make it your own.

The Rilg-mind had no other hope. It opened itself to him.

—I am a bridge, the new entity told the Rilg composite as it invaded it. Through union with me, you shall become Votrassandra.

The new entity reached out, plucked the Rilg from their composite mind. Each individual Rilg found itself isolated, totally cut off from communion with its fellows, and yet no Rilg was alone, for the new entity was with each as it was wrenched from its place in the fabric of space/time. In the chill sweet fullness which was to the Rilg only sucking void, every being which each Rilg had absorbed regained its stolen individuality and was born again to freedom, and with every birth each Rilg felt that which it had made its very self ripped from it.

In burning agony, the Rilg gave up their stolen selves and died, and in the moment of their dying, in the still purity of that instant between life and nonexistence, the Rilg were given a choice and chose to be reborn

Votrassandra.

The new entity merged with the Rilg and with the Rilg's reborn victims, became the Votrassandra. It abandoned Lozan's body, reached out to the Rilg still in shaefi suspension, and forced choice and union upon them. It reached out with the cleansing fires at its command to the crystal-prisoned Lha on Earth and Mig Mar and in space, brought them death and choice, liberation and completion. It reached out to the Rilg crystal-prisoned and human-enslaved on Terra and Mig Mar and in the domed cities on Warg and brought them cleansing death, resurrection, and union. It reached back in time to the Lha that had died on Jambu-lin when the Terrans had defeated them, back to the Rilg that had died in their capsules of life-force starvation, and to each, in the moment of its dying, the Votrassandra brought liberation and union.

The Votrassandra reached back to the time of the Rilg empire and brought cleansing death and resurrection to the off-planet Rilg. It placed the barrier around Rildan, planted its message in the minds of the surviving Rilg.

It reached back to the Rilg who had experimented with the Choskt sense of precognition, through him to the entire race as it had existed then, and brought about the Change to which it owed its existence.

United, one being and many, the Votrassandra plucked Dorjii from the death of his body and showed him the future and the part he could play in its creation, then gave him Lozan's body for his own.

Dorjii stared down at his new body, up at the duplicate Lozan facing him. Behind Lozan, ruins of the Temple.

"Do you accept your future?" Lozan asked him. Dorjii nodded and the duplicate was gone, back to the stillness, the living fullness, back to await the end of time.

Dorjii paused a moment, staring at the ruined blackness of the Temple, then turned to face the Governor's Palace. He began to walk, the future burning within him.

He would tell Lavelle of what he had witnessed at the end of time, when that which humanity would become would join the Votrassandra and the evolved descendants of a billion other races in the creation and animation of the universe to come. He would tell Lavelle and at first Lavelle would not believe him. It would take years, but at last the Governor would believe, would help him carry his message to all humanity so that in the end the human race could carry the truth he proclaimed to the other sentient races in the universe.

He walked quickly but without haste, the course of his life-to-come as clear to him as the destiny of the universe. Somewhere to his left he could hear a bird and its mate calling to each other; in the thick grass of the Palace lawn hoppers sang. He smiled.