

# **Name of a Shadow**

Concord, Book 3

Ann Maxwell

1980

ISBN: 0-380-75390-1

*Spell-checked. Read.*

## **A STRANGE ALLIANCE UNDER DIAMOND SKIES**

Kayle—the Concord advisor with the power to link minds, he is torn between his oath of obedience and a loathing for all things Malian.

Ryth—representative of a legendary and complex race with astounding powers of perception, he falls hopelessly into a forbidden love.

Faen—a proud and bitter aristocrat known for her beauty and vengeance, she is the reluctant key to the secrets hidden in the shadows.

## **IT CAN BE DEADLY TO DISTURB THE SHADOWS**

Malia's prismatic atmosphere transformed sunlight into a vibrant fall of energy; on Malia, everything was more vivid, more varied, more vital. Even the shadows seemed alive.

Some of them were ...

### **I**

"ARE YOU THE SHARNN?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

Ryth entered the room with the lithe grace of a dancer or a Malian assassin. Kayle watched, orange eyes hooded; few people had ever seen a Sharnn in the flesh.

"I didn't know that Sharnn ever left their planet," said Kayle, gesturing to a sling for Ryth to sit in.

"Not much is known about Sharnn," said Ryth, his face changing with what could have been a smile.

Kayle's glance flicked over the tall man whose silver-green eyes compelled attention. Though Ryth was standing motionless, his floor-length cape seemed to stir subtly, twisting light into new shapes.

"That's why you interest the Carifil," said Kayle. "You're the first person from Sharn who has asked anything of the Concord." Kayle's dark face fell into the many creases of a Nendleti frown. "And what you've asked is—" Kayle's arm snapped out.—difficult. Probably impossible."

"But the Carifil will consider it."

"Yes. And in return, you will use your pattern skills to help us understand Malia."

"Before the Concord destroys it."

“If we destroy it,” corrected Kayle. Then he laughed, a thick and husky sound. “If I didn’t know the Carifil, I’d not waste another moment with you. Tell me, Sharnn, how a man from one of the Concord’s most simple cultures can help the Carifil to understand one of the Concord’s most complex and secretive cultures?”

This time, Ryth’s smile was unmistakable. He flowed into the sling without taking his eyes off Kayle. “May a simple Sharnn ask why you call the Malians secretive?”

“They’ve been Concord members for nine hundred years, yet we know nothing about them that the First Contact team didn’t teach us.”

“Perhaps,” said Ryth blandly. “But a secretive culture would never have allowed Maran’s Song to be heard by any but Malian ears.”

Kayle made a gesture of dismissal. “Maran’s Song is a great work of the mind, perhaps one of the greatest the Concord knows. It is the summation of crystal music. Any race would be proud to display such an achievement. And,” added Kayle dryly, “Maliens are nothing if not proud. Arrogant beyond belief.”

“Little is beyond a Sharnn’s belief.”

Kayle stared at the alien who sat so easily in the resilient sling. Ryth’s eyes shone greenly, lit by inner knowledge or amusement or strength; Kayle did not know which. He did know that Sharn’s culture was less primitive than it appeared, if Ryth was a product of it. And the Carifil had been so eager to study Ryth that they had promised him what was denied to every person in the Concord—entry to Malia.

“Do all Sharnn have your ability to find patterns where others find only chaos?” asked Kayle abruptly.

“Sometimes.”

“When? And how many?” demanded Kayle.

Ryth’s smile would have made anyone but a Nendleti uneasy. “A few,” said Ryth. “When they must.”

“There’s a saying in the Concord,” muttered Kayle. “As stupid as a Sharnn.”

Ryth’s smile increased until Kayle almost heard the Sharnn’s inner laughter.

“But the Carifil have a different saying,” continued Kayle. “As elusive as a Sharnn.”

“Are there similar phrases to describe Malians?” asked Ryth.

“You’re a hard man to insult,” said Kayle softly.

Ryth simply smiled like a Sharnn.

Kayle gestured in amused defeat. “The Carifil told me that you would ask seemingly random questions, but that I should answer in spite of confusion.” Kayle frowned again, disliking the elliptical conversation, sensing that the Sharnn was at least three questions—and answers—ahead of him. “The First Contact team agreed that Malia was beautiful beyond imagining; that Malians as a race and Malian aristocrats in particular had a primal allure that transcended cultural prejudices; that Malian culture was obsessed with sensual experience.”

Kayle waited, but Ryth did not comment.

“The First Contact team,” continued Kayle, “also had a saying about Malians.” Kayle stopped, apparently finished.

“And that was?” said Ryth softly.

“Trust a Malian to betray you.” Kayle’s orange eyes brooded over the Sharnn’s muscular frame. “Do you still want to go to Malia?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” said Kayle bluntly.

“Many reasons, none of which you would understand.”

Kayle’s eyes narrowed. “I suppose I earned that one, Sharnn. Now tell me why you want to go to Malia.”

“I want to hear Maran’s Song played on the Sandoliki sarsa.”

“Impossible. That song is never played on Malia.”

Ryth became absolutely still, savagely intent; for an instant nothing existed but the ramifications of that single fact, as his Sharnn instinct for patterns focused his mind. Then the moment passed and he was once

again just a tall man resting in a sling.

“Are you sure?” asked Ryth mildly.

Kayle’s fingers stroked the multi-textured surface of his robe as he tried to convince himself that no man could be as dangerous as Ryth had appeared to be for a single instant.

“Yes, Sharnn. It’s one of the few things I am sure of about that accursed planet.”

“Why is the song forbidden?”

“I don’t know,” snapped Kayle. Then, less harshly, “I once asked a Malian.” Kayle flipped back the sleeve of his robe to reveal a long scar down his forearm. “F’n’een almost killed me. I never mentioned the song again.”

“But not out of fear,” said Ryth, looking at the Nendleti with an intensity that should have been frightening. “You respected the Malian F’n’een, in spite of your hatred for Malians as a race. Perhaps you even loved her.”

“The Carifil told you more than I would have.”

“No one told me anything. Except where to find you.”

“Am I that easy for you to read?” said Kayle, sparks of anger leaping deep within his eyes.

“Easy? Not at all. But she was Malian, and an aristocrat.”

“She was F’n’een,” said Kayle simply, as though no other explanation was required. “But that doesn’t help you, does it?” Kayle made an abrupt gesture. “Just what is it that you want, pattern-man?”

“Maran’s Song.”

“Why?”

“A Sharnn game. I doubt if you would understand it. I don’t.”

“Teach me.”

Ryth’s green gaze turned inward, and when he spoke, it was in the tones of a man choosing words from a language that was impossibly limited.

“I might have ... lost ... something. If I did, it probably can be discovered on Malia.” Ryth hesitated, then shrugged, a muscular movement of his torso that made his cape ripple like water. “Until I know just what I’ve lost—if I’ve lost anything at all—I can’t explain more clearly.”

“You’ll have to do better than that, pattern-man.”

The edge of Ryth’s cape lifted restlessly, moving over itself with a sound like silk rubbing over amber.

“My pattern instinct works best when I’m not personally involved,” said Ryth. “But I am involved in this ... game.”

Kayle smiled, showing two rows of small, bright teeth. “You’re human, then. I’m relieved.”

Ryth smiled ironically. “The Carifil said the same thing. Then they told me what they knew about Malia and Malians. It wasn’t enough.”

“For what?”

“For a Sharnn conception.”

Kayle made a frustrated noise. “The more you talk, the less you say.” He stared narrowly at the supple man whose cape still moved restlessly, “Can you prove that you’re more than a mouthful of baffling phrases?”

“Yes—if you let me go to Malia.”

“You know that Malia is under secondary proscription?”

“Yes.”

“You know that primary will begin in no less than seven Centrex days and could begin sooner, without warning?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll risk your life for a Sharnn game—a concept?”

“What are Carifil and Concord if not aspects of a concept?” countered Ryth.

Kayle looked at Ryth for a long moment. Both men were so still that the sound of Ryth’s restive Sharnn cape seemed loud in the room.

“You irritate me, Sharnn,” Kayle said finally. “But not enough to let you die. I can’t recommend opening Malia to you. The Carifil can’t play a game where neither the rules nor the stakes are known to

us.”

“If,” said Ryth slowly, “I told you that I could lead you to a finder whose gift was not limited by time or space, would that be a stake worth Carifil risk?”

“Is this person Sharnn?”

“No.”

Kayle smiled, but his eyes were lit by something close to anger. “Is this another Sharnn game? The Carifil sift and resift races, looking for mental gifts, and then a Sharnn who has never been off-planet offers us the rarest gift of all. A finder. But this finder is not Sharnn.” Kayle swore in the hissing phrases of his native tongue. “My patience is gone, pattern-man,” he said disdainfully, turning away. “When I next look, you would do well to be gone, too. I speak now as a Nendleti, not a Carifil.”

Ryth did not move. Even his cape was still.

“And I speak as a Sharnn. F’n’een did not die on Skemole.”

Though Kayle’s muscles bunched beneath his orange robe, his voice was calm. “Every member of the Second Contact team died on Skemole.”

“F’n’een survived.”

“Impossible. The Carifil searched—and mindsearched—for survivors. Only two bodies were found. We found those who had assassinated the team. All dead. Very dead. Suicides. They knew the Concord penalty for murdering a Second Contact team.”

“F’n’een survived.”

“No. I knew her mind. I was the union for the Carifil mindsearch. I balanced the minds that searched, held them together. They did not sense F’n’een, She is dead.”

“F’n’een’s mind rolled back upon itself. Regressive shock. Her mind became unrecognizable and/or unreachable. The Carifil even have a name for that state. Q-consciousness.”

Kayle, his back still turned, said nothing.

“When she emerged from q,” continued Ryth, “she had changed, a change forced by hatred and the need to survive.”

“Go on,” said Kayle, his voice husky.

“Was F’n’een capable of killing?”

Kayle laughed shortly. “She was Malian. Raised in the code of darg vire—vendetta to the death.”

“A team member who died was her husband/mate/lover,” said Ryth, his voice as soft as the liquid movements of his Sharnn cape. “If F’n’een survived, what would she do?”

“Darg vire,” said Kayle, his husky voice clipped again.

“Yes. And twenty-three Skemoleans died. Not suicides. She is on Malia now. She is the Sandoliki Ti.”

Kayle’s body jerked subtly, but he did not turn to face the soft-voiced Sharnn who had become his tormenter.

“Are you telling me this so that I may die again when my mind-daughter dies again?” asked Kayle angrily.

“The Sandoliki woman is a finder.”

Kayle’s hand flexed in a gesture of negation. “Then she is not F’n’een. A gift as rare as that would have been discovered during her Contact training.”

“F’n’een—the Sandoliki woman—had not even entered her first maturity when you knew her. Some gifts develop only with time. Or severe stress.”

Kayle said nothing, but his bright robe moved in sudden jerks.

“Whoever the Sandoliki woman is or is not,” said Kayle harshly, “she can’t be allowed to die when Malia dies. Her gift and her genes are too valuable.”

“Yes ...”

Something in the quality of Ryth’s simple agreement brought Kayle slowly around. His orange glance flicked over to a wall where various times on the planet Vintra were coded in light.

“You interest me, Sharnn,” said Kayle at last. “If I survive tonight, I’ll take you to Malia.”

“If it’s a question of survival,” said Ryth, “perhaps I should come with you.”

Kayle smiled like a predator. “Yes, Sharnn, perhaps you should.”

Kayle stripped off his outer robe, reversed it so that orange was replaced by somber tones of purple, and pulled the robe back on. Ryth noted the three curved knives strapped to various parts of Kayle’s heavily muscled body, then the weapons vanished beneath the loose clothes. Out of sight, but not out of reach; the robe had conveniently placed slits.

With a rolling movement, Kayle settled the robe around his body. He glanced at Ryth’s cape. The cape seemed dulled, as though light no longer made any impact on the material’s drab surface. Ryth pulled up a loose hood that concealed everything but his silver-green eyes.

“Can you fight?” asked Kayle matter-of-factly.

“Yes.”

“Just yes? No elaborations, no tales of epic brawls?”

“No.”

Kayle half-smiled. “Good enough, Sharnn. Hand-held or projectile weapons?”

“Whatever is necessary. Though,” Ryth added, “I prefer faal-hnim,”

“Faal-hnim!” Kayle turned to face Ryth so quickly that his robe belled into rolling shades of purple. “How did a Sharnn learn that lethal discipline?”

“People come to Sharn,” said Ryth. “Some of them talk to the children. I was a child, once.”

Kayle made a sound that was half admiration, half frustration, but did not doubt that Ryth was a practitioner of faal-hnim’s difficult and deadly dances. It explained the Sharnn’s extraordinary grace.

“I suppose,” said Kayle dryly, “you once talked to a psi master.”

Ryth’s lips moved in silent laughter. “What little I know of the mental arts was taught to me by the Carifil. Very difficult concepts. And for a Sharnn of the Seventh Dawn, not particularly useful.”

“Oh?”

“The Seventh Dawn is a solitary discipline.”

Kayle’s mind reached out and deftly touched the fringes of Ryth’s awareness. For an instant Kayle sensed a savage radiance that was stunning, then the incandescence thinned to an apparently inexperienced mindtouch that concealed immense depths and distances and raw power.

\*Is mindspeech uncomfortable for you, Sharnn?\*

\*Just ... unexpected ... but each time it happens, I learn.\*

Kayle sensed their contact strengthening, stabilizing as the Sharnn’s protean mind found patterns in Kayle’s skill and learned from those patterns. Ryth learned with shattering speed. Between one breath and the next, his mind-speech clarified.

\*You learn very quickly, pattern-man.\*

\*I am Sharnn.\*

Kayle turned abruptly and walked to the door. Ryth followed, wondering if he had insulted the Nendleti—Nendleti pride was legendary. But as they descended the winding stairs of one of Vintra’s older kels, Kayle spoke in a husky whisper.

“Don’t you want to know where you might die tonight? And why?”

“I can guess,” said Ryth, unsmiling. “We are in Sima, capital city of the planet Vintra. We are probably going to Old Sima; it is the center of Vintran discontent. And danger.” While he spoke, Ryth’s eyes took in the shabby lilac walls and faded rose and cream murals that decorated the Access room between the street and the kel’s sleeping rooms. “As for why—” Ryth turned suddenly, but saw nothing more than a shadow slipping down the wall. “Someone must have promised you information about Malia.”

Kayle stopped. “Keep talking, pattern-man. What information?”

Ryth’s cape flared, then snuggled around his soft leather boots.

“I don’t know,” said Ryth.

Kayle blinked slowly. “You surprise me, pattern-man. I thought you knew everything.”

The Nendleti turned and walked around the Access platform. Blue energy blazed across the Access, and for an instant, Kayle’s eyes were as purple as Vintra’s smoldering moon. When the energy died, four people stepped off the platform. Their tight leggings and elaborately jeweled armbands proclaimed them

buyers of the sort who flocked to the scene of the latest human disaster, purchasing the wreckage of dreams at bargain rates.

\*Scavengers.\*

Kayle's scathing thought echoed in Ryth's mind, along with the implications of such people appearing on Vintra.

\*How do they know?\*

 Ryth mused.

\*They have the instincts of carrion eaters.\* Kayle twitched the hem of his robe aside as though to avoid contamination. \*They must be going to the kla'rre district. There was an outbreak of pekh there ten days ago. The survivors will need money to mourn their dead.\* Kayle's lips thinned in a silent snarl. \*Malia has much to answer for.\*

Ryth watched the scavengers vanish into Sima's seething lavender brick streets.

"Why Malia?" asked Ryth.

"Maia is the cause of Vintra's drastic decline. Vintra never recovered from the Undeclared War. Worse, Malia is sabotaging Vintra even as we walk these streets."

"Why?"

"If I knew, my work would be over. The Carifil asked me to study Malia and Malians before they are destroyed by the Concord. Unfortunately, Malia forbids alien visitors and Malians rarely leave their planet."

"Some aliens must be permitted," said Ryth. "No pattern is perfect."

Kayle laughed. "Maybe, pattern-man. But the Carifil never found the exception. That's why I'm here on Vintra, Malia's colony, learning by inference and extrapolation about the Malian mind."

"What have you learned?"

"That Malians have earned their extinction."

Yet Ryth sensed an echo of anguish that was the name F'n'een.

"If Malia's pattern is so obvious and so guilty, why do you need my skills?" said Ryth softly.

Kayle looked casually around the street. There were many people out and they walked too close for privacy.

\*The Carifil want to know why Malians could not adapt to the Concord's Sole Restraint. When we know that, the First Contact teams can look for the Malian syndrome in newly discovered cultures. Then we can simply proscribe that type of culture, rather than admitting it to Concord and then eventually being forced to eradicate an entire genepool.\*

Kayle's mindspeech slipped beyond the conversational level and became information wrapped in a rich complex of emotions.

\*Malians are too beautiful to destroy—yet we must, for they have twice ignored the Sole Restraint.\*

Then the emotions vanished, leaving echoes of sadness.

\*Yesterday, a Vintran spoke to me from behind a door, whispering about a strong man and a black-haired woman with eyes like ice. He said they were Malians who came to Vintra often. He said that when they were here, death followed Like the long shadow of night.

\*He said they would be in Old Sima tonight, on the Street of the Purple Blossom, in a cellar called Regret.\*

Kayle glanced sideways, but whatever reaction Ryth might have had was concealed within the folds of his Sharnn cape.

\*If what the Vintran said is true,\* continued Kayle, \*the Concord will have all the proof it needs to destroy Malia.\* There was weariness rather than triumph in Kayle's thought, resonances of regret that tore at Ryth's mind. \*And I pray,\* added Kayle, \*that the Allgod forgives my part in Malia's annihilation.\*

Kayle's mind withdrew. Ryth walked soundlessly, his green eyes noting and naming and correlating a range of details that would have astonished Kayle if he had known. Finally, Kayle emerged from his dark thoughts.

\*This Vintran,\* began Ryth slowly, feeling his way through a maze of pattern possibilities. \*Where is he now?\*

Kayle's ironic laughter was almost painful. \*Exactly, pattern-man. He was supposed to come to my h'kel tonight. But you came instead. I wonder if that is an even trade?\*

Ryth had no response for Kayle's laughter. Restless Sharnn eyes measured the subtle signs of disrepair in the black stone building facades and despair in the subdued faces lining Sima's sunbrick streets.

Vintra was tone on tone of purple, from lavender day to amethyst evening and dense violet-black night ruled by a huge purple moon. Even Vintra's sun did not banish the thousand shades of purple, for Vintra wore a thick atmospheric shell that absorbed almost all but the longer wavelengths of light. Because Malia, the Vintrans' first world, turned beneath a sky of incredible clarity, colonists had had difficulty adjusting to Vintra's light. Everywhere on Vintra, noon and midnight, artificial illumination glowed, but not enough, never enough to bleach Vintra's purple sky.

If the colonists had difficulty enjoying Vintra's extraordinary light, others did not. Vintra became famous for her eerie violet skies. People from all over the Concord came to be transformed by lavender light. They swam in lilac seas, climbed magenta mountains and ate heliotrope fruit whose sweet core was yet another shade of purple.

In a high window above Ryth and Kayle, a suncaller preened and sang a few notes, as though preparing its pre-dawn song. Ryth glanced up, but did not really see the bird. His mind had finally put into words an anomaly that had been nagging at him: colonists invariably brought native flora and fauna to their new homes, but nowhere in Sima had Ryth seen anything that did not fit seamlessly into Vintra's environment.

\*Where are the Malian plants, the animals, the living links with Vintrans' first home?\* asked Ryth.

\*Dead. The disparity in environments killed most. The few survivors were destroyed after the Undeclared War, when all things Malian became anathema.\*

Kayle sidestepped a group of revelers whose frayed robes displayed fuchsia slogans proclaiming the joys of chemical psychosis. Though the five people were too uncoordinated to be dangerous, other such groups had triggered twelve lethal riots and numberless street brawls in the few months Kayle had lived in Sima. The groups were both symbol and accelerator of Vintra's decline.

The streets narrowed when Ryth and Kayle approached the boundaries of Old Sima. Tourists rarely came here, for there was neither entertainment nor beauty nor commerce within the crumbling sunbrick structures. Most residents had abandoned the huddled kels after the third earthquake in the Year of the Suncaller. Only the human debris of a failing society remained, as dangerous as venomous fruit.

The Street of the Purple Blossom was little more than an alley twisting between sagging rows of lifeless kels. Only a few faded, cracked lightstrips alleviated the purple moon glow.

Ryth and Kayle walked carefully, twisting as the alley twisted, turning three-quarters of the way around old buildings, spilling out onto two brightly lighted streets and then setting off in another direction entirely, back into darkness. Further ahead, at the end of a long, shadowed tunnel, there was a glowing sign in the shape of a whirlpool. Though most of the letters were shattered or dimmed by a crust of dirt, enough remained to make out the word "Regret."

No one could be seen in the pooling shadows beneath the sign, yet the street suggested hidden life, breath held in anticipation of a moment that was long past.

\*Wait for a twenty-count, then follow,\* instructed Kayle. \*If my shy Vintran is here, I don't want you to frighten him.\*

Kayle closed out Ryth's unspoken objections with a deft mental twist, then moved down the rubble-strewn path with a speed and silence that belied the apparent clumsiness of his rolling Nendleti gait. After a rapid count, Ryth moved lightly through the darkness, avoiding clots of debris. Once again he tried mindspeech with Kayle, but the Nendleti's mind was as closed as a stone.

The Sharnn's pattern instinct clamored of danger. He looked at the alley ahead through narrowed eyes. The incandescent violet moon made everything appear gigantic, menacing, but that was not what had roused his instinct. There was something about the placement of debris that was no longer random. Ahead, Kayle was pursuing a zigzag course, seeking clear ground where he could walk without sending trash clattering.

Ryth tried mindspeech again, but it was as futile as shouting at the moon. Unease gnawed at him as Kayle slowed, picking his way among piles of trash that nearly overlapped each other. Abruptly, Ryth decided that silence presented the greater risk.

“Danger,” called Ryth softly.

Kayle flattened into a recessed doorway and effectively vanished. Ryth felt the Nendleti’s mental query sweep through him.

\*Where?\*

\*Six kels ahead, just by the cellar. See how the trash closes in? There’s only one way to walk. Cover your ears and eyes—and don’t move.\*

Ryth picked up a stone that was bigger than three clenched fists. He weighed the stone in his hand, learning its balance, then he closed his eyes and brought his arm around in a powerful throw. The stone shot through the gloom and landed in front of the Regret on the only piece of ground not covered by trash.

The alley fractured into noise and light and jagged fragments of trash sent flying by the force of the bomb. With a long rumble, the cellar called Regret collapsed in upon itself.

\*Kayle?\*

\*I owe you a life, Sharnn.\*

\*If you want to enjoy it,\* returned Ryth dryly, \*I’d suggest we leave this wretched trap to its shadows.\*

\*Agreed,\* came Kayle’s thought after a long hesitation. \*Nothing waited here for me but death.\*

Ryth sensed Kayle’s mind leaping out in search of something, but could not guess what. At Kayle’s silent command, Ryth turned and ran back up the choked street, his dulled Sharnn cape invisible in the dense shadows. In the distance, Sima’s inhabited streets glowed with Mac light.

\*Ambush ahead!\*

Kayle’s thought sent Ryth diving behind the nearest pile of rubbish. He heard a knife hiss past his ear and clatter against a sunbrick wall. As he rolled to a new position, he pulled a long-bladed hunter’s knife from beneath his cape. Then he sensed the attackers closing in and rolled again, just avoiding a steel-toed kick.

With superb timing, the Sharnn brought his knife up in a thrust that met flesh. A man’s pain echoed through the narrow street. Ryth sprang up, fighting in darkness, blind but for a sure sense of Kayle’s presence slicing at the attackers.

\*Alive, if possible,\* requested Kayle.

Ryth’s answer was to drop and roll through the attackers, hamstringing two who did not move quickly enough. When he rose to his feet, he felt Kayle at his back. Ryth’s foot shot out, connecting with a man’s chin. The man was unconscious before he fell to the ground. For a few seconds the narrow alley was silent, then there was a shadowy rush. Kayle and Ryth lashed out, blows meant to stun rather than kill. One man remained on his feet, circling them, dodging among the bodies of his fallen comrades in an apparently random dance. His face glowed as he fainted toward Kayle, bent over another man—and vanished.

\*Can you see him?\*

\*No.\* Ryth strained into the darkness.

\*He must have hidden his face in his robes!\* Kayle’s frustration seared across the Sharnn. \*I can’t even sense his mind!\*

Simultaneously, they dove and rolled in opposite directions. Ryth felt the edge of a robe on his knife and slashed upward. His knife slid away, deflected. The man leaped into darkness and was gone.

Ryth held his breath, listening. At first he heard nothing but his own blood pumping, then came the faintest sounds of a light-footed man running away. Ryth rolled to his feet and sprinted down the street, leaping over bodies and rubbish. Ahead the street twisted, then branched at right angles as it emptied onto two larger streets lit by lilac lights. He saw a glimpse of a dark shadow sliding into throngs of walkers and knew it would be useless to follow.

Ryth ran back to Kayle, and found the Nendleti studying the attackers by the thin beam of a light



pencil.

“Quickly,” said Ryth. “He might be back with better fighters.”

“Questioning won’t take long,” said Kayle dryly.

A narrow beam of light moved over the bodies of eight men. Each man’s throat had been cut. Ryth swore in the twisting phrases of Sharnn, then took out his own light pencil and began searching among the trash.

“Why?” asked Kayle.

“Flexible plastic. As many pieces as you can find.”

When he had enough plastic, Ryth rolled the attackers’ weapons into clumsy packages. Kayle watched, then gathered weapons with as much care as Ryth; at no time did either man touch the weapons. When all the weapons were wrapped, Ryth piled them in the center of a large sheet of plastic and knotted the sheet into a rude bundle. While Ryth worked, Kayle examined the bodies again.

“Anything?” asked Ryth, picking up the bundle.

“No. They are either Vintrans or Malians.”

“Malians?” said Ryth sharply.

“It’s possible, after what I heard yesterday about the two Malians.” Kayle swept the light over the corpses one last time. “Vintra was colonized less than ten centuries ago. Neither phenotype nor genotype has changed from Malia.”

“Do you think Malians would leave Malia to hunt you?”

“Why not? In a way, I’m hunting them. And apparently, I’m getting too close.” Kayle’s light slid from face to face, illuminating death. Then he switched off the beam. “You fight well, Sharnn, but I must insist on leading the way or carrying the burden.”

Ryth laughed silently and said in Malian, “I can think of no one I’d rather follow into danger.”

“So you know the Malian language—and Malian codes.”

“A little of both,” Ryth said. “Maran’s Song teaches a thousand patterns.”

“You interest me, Ryth,” said Kayle, his husky voice floating back from the purple darkness. “Just enough to let you try for Malia. If you find your exception to Malian rules, I’ll give you an exception to Concord proscription.”

Ryth and Kayle were the only passengers on the shuttle from Malia’s inner moon. Kayle was not surprised; even before the Concord had proscribed Malia, the planet was classified as xenophobic to a high degree. Malians had permitted no direct Access route for travelers to Malia’s surface, though almost all other Concord planets had several major Accesses and hundreds of minor ones on their surfaces. Malia had one personnel Access located on the inner moon. There were only ten freight Accesses for each continent on Malia. And that was all.

The scarcity of Accesses was not due to physical law or to recent proscription or to lack of potential trade and tourists. Rather, Malia simply forbade visitors and ignored the possibilities of commerce. Nor had proscription bothered Malians. Even when citizens had been permitted to leave Malia whenever they wished, few did. Except for those destined for Vintra, only three Malians had been recorded off-world in any century since Malia had joined the Concord.

But the Sharnn had found a crack in Malia’s apparent xenophobia. By Malian rule, people of any race who wanted to ask help from the Sandoliki Ti were permitted to spend one day on Malia.

Just one. And just once.

But that was a crack large enough for a Sharnn and a Nendleti to slide through.

Ryth sat quietly, listening to Kayle and correlating new information while Malia’s silver and turquoise sphere grew rapidly on the shuttle’s screen.

“Also,” continued Kayle, “you will receive no exemption from Malian customs. Be prepared for personal combat at any moment. And be prepared to kill. Although,” added Kayle, rubbing the textures of his bright blue robe between his palms, “I believe Malians usually ignore off-worlders so long as they are wholly discreet.”

“Usually,” murmured Ryth, “is hardly comforting, given Malians’ reputation as assassins. Did you

know Carifil Cryl?"

Kayle's face tightened into bleak lines. "Yes. I warned him. The Carifil still don't know how he got on the planet."

"The same way we did," said Ryth. "No other possibility fits."

"He was obsessed by Malia's crystal music," said Kayle.

"And Maran's Song?" asked Ryth softly.

"And Maran's Song," agreed Kayle, his voice heavy. "He had a theory about Malian culture that depended on a certain interpretation of Maran's Song. Until he heard that song played on the Sandoliki sarsa, he could not test his idea."

"Yes," said Ryth. "Concepts can only be tested at their sources."

"Cryl died at the hands of k'm'n Sandoliki Lekel."

"Did he hear Maran's Song before he died?" asked Ryth, his silver-green eyes suddenly hard with intensity. But Kayle did not notice, for he was remembering a dead Carifil.

"No."

"Are you sure?" demanded Ryth.

"Does it matter, pattern-man?" said Kayle irritably.

Ryth waited with the intense patience of a predator.

"Yes," Kayle said, voice rasping in the empty shuttle. "I'm sure he died without hearing Maran's Song. The death-cry of his mind was singularly unfulfilled."

Ryth sat back and resumed his meticulous visual inspection of each aspect of the shuttle. Kayle watched, then probed lightly at the edges of Ryth's mind. A cataract of savage energy nearly stunned the Nendleti. He withdrew, and only then did he realize that the Sharnn was using the shuttle, and whatever other facts/theories/guesses he had garnered, to analyze, correlate and extrapolate patterns of Malian culture.

For the first time, Kayle began to believe that the Sharnn might have a truly extraordinary gift, worthy of Carifil interest. Kayle watched covertly, fascinated, all through the long fall to Malia's surface. When the shuttle bounced and sideslipped on entering Malia's atmosphere, Ryth finally became aware of Kayle's concentrated interest.

"Nendleti philosophers," Kayle said quietly, "believe that the past, present, and future of a culture can be intuited from a single object." He smiled slightly. "Do you find this shuttle educational, sri Ryth?"

Ryth noted the Nendleti honorific "sri," but said only, "The shuttle is overwhelming. The lights alone," he gestured to an instrument panel whose information was displayed in colors rather than numbers, "tell me as much as the First Contact tapes."

Kayle eyed the panel, but saw only a rainbow of colors. To him, the panel was beautiful but essentially meaningless. To the Sharnn it was a revelation.

"Teach me," said Kayle.

Ryth's hands spread in a gesture of helplessness, but after a long silence, he spoke.

"I'll try." His words were slow as he picked his way through the limitations and pitfalls of the Galactic language. "How many colors do you see?"

"Perhaps fifty."

"How many colors are repeated? A few? Many? All?"

Kayle looked at the panel carefully. "Almost all. Especially the lighter colors."

"None are repeated," said Ryth softly.

Kayle started to protest, then decided against it. "Go on, Sharnn. I asked to be taught."

"I see what might be a few repeats, but the pattern tells me that my eyes are at fault. Otherwise, the instrument readouts would be repetitious or useless or both. So Malian eyes must see distinct color separations, receive distinct information. Therefore Malian eyes are capable of exquisite discrimination among the wavelengths of light.

"Maliens don't care that other races might be confused rather than enlightened by the instruments. In fact, Maliens don't care about other races at all. Not one aspect of this shuttle was designed for any but a Malian.

“Which tells me that Malians are indeed arrogant.”

Kayle snorted. “Is that all? I could have told—”

“No. There is a preference for curves over angles, textures over blandness, light over dark, space over enclosures, warmth over chill, comfort over safety, sensuality over personal distance—” The Sharnn gestured in frustration. “Galactic has no words to describe what this shuttle teaches me about the Malian culture, the Malian mind.” He looked around, his silver-green eyes lit by excitement. “Now I know—I know!—that Maran’s Song is more exquisite than I had realized, more seminal than anything but a Sharnn conception.”

Kayle sensed Ryth’s electric excitement; mental/emotional currents came from the Sharnn in waves that were almost painful in their intensity. Sensed, but did not understand. Kayle did not attempt to talk anymore until they landed at a small pad in C’Varial, Malia’s capital—and only—city. The shuttle area was surrounded by an immense park where plants from all over Malia grew in exquisitely arranged profusion.

There were no written signs directing visitors to various major compounds, kels or even the S’kel of the Sandolikis. Instead, there were “signatures,” patterns in flower and wood and stone, at the beginning of every path that radiated out from the landing area.

Ryth and Kayle stood just beyond their shuttle, transfixed by the pouring beauty that was Malia. The turquoise bell of the sky rang with pure light, light that defined and caressed each living color, each slow scented breath of flowers open in silky invitation, their fertile throats calling to insects quivering on diamond wings, humming promise of consummation deep within petal softness. And in the distance a fall of crystal music more pure than Malian light. After a long time, Kayle roused himself, but still felt as though he were folded within the soft body of a lover.

“Even the Allgod must envy Malians,” he said to Ryth, his voice husky with many emotions.

But Ryth did not hear. He was lost in a compelling sensual paradise. His fingers reached out in sudden knowledge, touched the tall singing flowers, stroked their turquoise throats with gentle fingertips. Flower throats stretched and pulsed slowly, deeply, until a cloud of silver pollen spilled out, covering his hand with perfumed softness. Faint crystal music called again, echo of flowers, pure sound, haunting, and he suddenly understood that he was hearing the fragmentary signature of a Malian mind.

Ryth turned toward the crystal notes with a questing intelligence that was almost palpable. Humming zamay flowers brushed their silken faces across his hands, humming, asking, but he neither saw nor felt their sliding caresses. Only music existed for him now, flawless notes calling, crystal longing, a song both superbly whole and crying for harmony, for an equal song to join with it against the loneliness of crystal echoes returning always the same, always diminished.

Ryth walked through ranks of flowers until his Sharnn cape was fragrant and bright with m’zamay, the aphrodisiac pollen of the turquoise zamay. Then singing flowers gave way to ebony nightvine, twined around itself and the powerful trunk of a huge tere tree. Beneath the tere’s high canopy of scarlet leaves, suspended from an invisibly fine wire frame, a miniature sarsa chimed its lonely call into every breeze.

Ryth stood beneath the fall of crystal music, his pollen-bright cape lifting on the wind, his mind totally caught by the possibilities of the sarsa’s song.

Kayle stopped several paces away, half-stunned by Malia’s sensual assault. Just when he felt as though he must scream to break Malia’s hold on himself and the Sharnn, Ryth turned toward him.

“Do you recognize her?” said the Sharnn.

“Her?” Kayle held his knuckles against his temples until pain brought a sense of sanity. “Her?”

“F’n’een.” Ryth’s eyes focused on Kayle with an intensity that made Kayle step back. “The pattern of her mind,” said Ryth impatiently, as though five words explained everything. And when he saw they did not, he spoke quickly, words and thoughts tumbling. “In the sarsa’s notes. The music. Don’t you hear? Her song, enigmatic and powerful, graceful and deadly swift and sensual, yes, sensual beyond all knowing. And so alone.”

Kayle listened to the Sharnn and to the wind-stirred crystals and almost heard, but not quite, yet he ached with a grief that was not his nor yet the Sharnn’s.

“That can’t be F’n’een,” said Kayle hoarsely. “She was young and her laughter leaped.”

“Laughter is in her past and future—hear its echoes turning and returning?—but her present is this song.”

Kayle looked at the Sharnn with something close to fear. “No. The song is not F’n’een.”

“It’s not your memory. But it is F’n’een as she became, as she is now. Magnificent.” Ryth turned in a swift movement that flared his cape, scattering m’zamay’s potent dust. “I will show you.”

Kayle followed Ryth and a winding path through night-vine and scarlet drifts of fallen tere leaves. Crystal notes pursued, driven by a fitful wind until Kayle wanted to run but could not because the Sharnn ahead walked with consummate grace and ease, unburdened by memories of laughter.

“Where are we going?” demanded Kayle finally, wondering if he could find his way back through the maze of branching and coiling paths. And wondering how the Sharnn had found his way at all.

“Wherever the Sandoliki Ti’s pattern leads us.”

“What pattern?” Kayle snapped, seeing more paths open out in a way he could only describe as random.

The Sharnn stopped and turned back toward Kayle. “That pattern,” said Ryth, pointing toward a single zamay humming against the polished strength of a black tere trunk. “Sensuality and power and separation. The Sandoliki Ti’s signature.”

Kayle looked and now saw the pattern repeated with variations in composition but not in theme. Sometimes the signature was so subtle that it was only after Ryth chose the path that Kayle recognized the pattern.

“How do people without Sharnn guides find their way to her?” said Kayle dryly.

“Malian aristocrats are trained in signature mazes. As for the others—the maze isn’t large. Sooner or later, those who really want to will find a way. Those who don’t,” Ryth’s hands spread and turned palm down, “must have had needs that were less than compelling.”

The path wound up a small hill, leading to a view of the glinting crystal domes and arches that was C’Varial. In Malia’s pure light each color was unique, flawless and the city was almost blindingly beautiful. It was as though the maze’s designer made one final attempt to deflect people away from the Sandoliki Ti by showing them the brilliant possibilities of C’Varial, wrapped in all the colors of life.

But the Sharnn barely paused. A sidelong glance was his only acknowledgment of C’Varial’s siren call.

“Wait ...” began Kayle.

Ryth’s backward look was a compound of amusement and impatience.

“You have no soul, Sharnn!” snapped Kayle, walking faster.

Still smiling, Ryth turned away, but he could not help looking again, stealing a second moment of C’Varial’s beauty. He would have killed his Sharnn cape for the chance to sit forever on this small Malian hill, savoring and solving C’Varial’s complex mysteries stated in patterns of clear color that shifted with the sun.

But all of Malia’s forevers were past, and he would need his cape to survive the few Malian moments that remained.

Silently, the Sharnn led Kayle to a landing area only large enough for a few three-flyers. The machines were silver, devoid of any status marks, and unlocked. With an assurance Kayle did not share, Ryth mounted a flyer’s ramp. Kayle followed, his orange eyes sliding from side to side as though searching for ambush. In silence, both men sat, fixed their crashnets firmly, and waited.

Within moments, the three-flyer quivered to life. It leaped off the pad, climbing straight into Malia’s turquoise sky while the land below fell away with staggering speed until everything ran together in a watercolor blur that was yet another form of beauty.

When the details of C’Varial were subsumed by height and the larger geographical patterns of river and valley, lake and hills and the distant portent of blue-black mountains, Ryth turned his attention to the interior of the three-flyer. Kayle waited, watching, but finally he had to ask.

“Are you sure that this will take us to the Sandoliki woman?”

“Yes.”

“How long?” pressed Kayle, glancing down, far down, to a surface that distance and speed had

robbed of meaning.

“I don’t know.”

“Thank the Allgod,” muttered Kayle. “There’s something in the galaxy that a Sharnn doesn’t know.”

Ryth almost smiled, but too much of his mind was focused on the rhythmic play of lights along the instrument panel. Their pattern was direct, almost boring, but it was information and Malian, and he needed every hint he could gather.

The flyer bucked and sideslipped through unseen turbulence.

“Could you fly this if you had to?” asked Kayle uneasily.

“It’s programmed. But if I had to. Yes. The pattern is very direct.”

For a long time, both men were silent, caught up in their own thoughts. After Malia’s overwhelming sensuality, the almost astringent interior of the three-flyer was refreshing.

Finally the flyer entered a steep slide that brought it down very close to the land on the far side of the mountains. Simultaneously, the flyer slowed, as though to provide its occupants with a detailed view of the devastation beyond the blue-black mountains.

Where they expected zamay and beauty, they saw a tenuous brown haze creeping up from the land, rock particles harried by a nameless wind. A ragged carpet of gold trees thinned into pale yellow, then became sand-colored skeletons with leafless branches stabbing the wind. Soon even the shorn trunks vanished and the land became a monotony of grey-brown stone and shallow grey-brown rivers thick with grit.

After tasting consuming sensuality, the land below was jarringly ugly. It was obscene. It was Darg Vintra, Vintra’s Revenge, legacy of the brutal Undeclared War between Vintra and Malia, colony and home world, daughter and mother. Vintran death raiders had destroyed, utterly and finally, the vast estates of the two strategists who had nearly brought Vintra to defeat. Tare and Jomen Sandoliki had died defending their home against an overwhelming force. An honorable death for the two generals, and an inevitable beginning for a bitter darg vire. But Tare had borne only two children for Jomen and those children were also ashes drifting in the wind.

Formerly fertile and thick with life, the Sandoliki Estates now were a monochrome wasteland cratered by old hatreds and furrowed by remorseless winds.

“If death had a face ...” murmured the Sharnn.

“Yes, it would look like that.” Kayle’s voice was thin, tight. His face wore bleak lines that matched the orange light in his eyes. “You’re wrong about F’n’een. You won’t find her living in this desolation. She loved green water and laughter. She would rather be dead. And is.”

But the Sharnn said only, “Check your harness. we’ll be landing soon.”

Kayle peered out through the dusty canopy. “I don’t see anything but bare rock.”

“Nor do I, but the lights tell me that—wait. The bench between mountains. The molecular fire passed over it. See? That blue-green streak below with a scarlet center.”

“There’s not much of it, is there?”

“The Vintran raiders were thorough,” agreed Ryth as the flyer lost altitude rapidly.

The flyer circled the landing area twice, giving sliding glimpses of ruined goldstone kels and abandoned gardens and one small wedge still intact, shining with colors. The flyer dropped at the edge of the fertile area, in a cleared spot marked by other landings. Kayle left his seat before the engine was entirely silent. With open impatience, he swept down the silver ramp.

Ryth followed more slowly, pausing on the ramp to taste the odd, almost rusty flavor of the wind blowing off Darg Vintra. But he soon forgot the wind, for the pad was surrounded by a circle of shattered crystal monoliths in every tint and tone of turquoise. One monolith remained upright, whole, carved in the image of a forgotten god with faceted eyes staring, waiting for a future to sweep closed the circle and begin anew, renewing rituals only the past could remember.

A random wind surged, belling Kayle’s robes, revealing the intricate design of Nendleti boots. Part of the curving motif was repeated by a deadly double-edged knife strapped to Kayle’s calf.

Ryth walked away from the ramp, felt the rust-tasting wind tug at his cape. The air was neither warm nor cold, merely dry, terribly dry.

“No,” said Kayle as Ryth approached. “Not F’n’een. Not here.”

The Sharnn made no reply.

“She was so beautiful,” sighed Kayle. “A living beauty like nothing I’d seen before or even imagined.”

“She was a child. Two maturities have passed. Vintra and Skemole have passed. Even the most beautiful children grow. And change.”

Kayle’s orange eyes brooded over the horizon where nothing lived, nothing moved but wind sifting the remains of dust enemies, old death.

“My people are sometimes violent,” said Kayle slowly. “Many Nendletis die for reasons few aliens ever comprehend. But never have we destroyed our enemy’s land. Honor cringes from the thought. The soul cringes from the deed.” His eyes closed. “How much hatred can one race hold?”

“Darg vire,” murmured the Sharnn.

“What?”

“Darg vire. Death vendetta. And then the Ti Vire, the Great Death, a seven-year vendetta waged by one woman against the entire race of Vintrans. But she did not die.”

Ryth walked slowly to a powdery path where wind snatched at the dust puffing away from his feet. After a few seconds, Kayle followed. As they walked, patches of faded blue grass appeared, then low cream-colored shrubs whose lacy fronds were heavy with dust. Finally the path twisted through a tere grove, just seventeen trees, all that had survived the molecular fire. Scarlet leaves rustled overhead and the subtle scent and sound of water drifted on the breeze. Kayle inhaled deeply, grateful for even this frail barrier against devastation.

“Think what it must have been,” said Ryth, low-voiced, haunted by the memory of a dead god’s eyes. “Flawless air and tere groves burning scarlet. Silver insects drifting like music over immense flower seas.”

For an instant Kayle saw with Sharnn vision, then he blinked and it was gone, leaving an anger that was as deep as it was unexpected. Blindly, Kayle walked toward a tiny clearing where an artesian pool breathed moisture into the sterile air. Sunlight spilled into the water, making the pool incandescent with silver light, silver-green currents sliding through enigmatic depths. With a shudder, Kayle threw off the last of his unbidden vision.

“A good omen at last,” Kayle said, an echo of anger still in his voice. “The pool is exactly like your eyes.” He glanced at Ryth and was satisfied that the Sharnn did not understand. “No matter,” said Kayle softly. “You’ll discover my symbols soon enough.”

“And you’ll make it as difficult for me as you can,” said Ryth, not adding that he understood Kayle’s anger because it was the echo of his own. So much lost ...

Kayle clapped his hands in sarcastic comment. “Already you’re unraveling me. But how shall I unravel you?”

“I’m as simple as that pool,” said Ryth softly.

Kayle’s orange eyes raked over the Sharnn. Ryth felt a lash of mindtouch before Kayle withdrew far more gently than he had come.

“My error,” said Kayle. “I took your words as a slight to my intelligence, and thereby missed your profound irony. Like a Malian, you understand that the only true complexity is found in exquisite simplicity.” Kayle let the last of his own anger slide away as he looked again at the deceptively transparent pool. “I’m ready to see her now. Even,” he whispered, “if she is F’n’een.”

They turned away from the slowly seething pool and followed the path out of the grove, through waist-high shrubs hung with fading bronze flowers and a vague scent of mint. Blue-black vines crawled over ruined walls, choked old rooms and gardens, hissed over Ryth’s cape when the path narrowed. Then the vines ended as though at an unspoken command. Beige rock walls rose abruptly, topped by a dome that shone like a mirror. An arched gate, or doorway, stood open.

“Invitation,” asked Kayle, “or Malian insult?”

“Think of it as a gesture of trust,” said Ryth, knowing as he spoke it was a lie.

“Or contempt. Is that possible, pattern-man?” asked Kayle dryly.

“Her dargs vire are legend.”

“Then I’ll be wary rather than insulted.” Kayle sent a faint thread of awareness seeking through the area. “Three,” murmured Kayle. “One psi. Hers, I assume. Unusual aura ... incoherent to me, yet very powerful. Fascinating. And,” sad triumph, “not F’n’een.”

Kayle stepped through the open gate with a speed that belied his chunky stature. He stood and listened intently, yet heard nothing more than wind rearranging dead leaves in the shadow of the wall. Just ahead, a mosaic walkway of carved stones wound among flowering plants and the murmurs of a tiny stream. Small animals ghosted through trees and shadows. A bird, scarlet as the leaves it lived among, called a liquid warning.

“Malian?” said Kayle softly, listening to the pure song.

“Everything here is Malian.”

“Then she, like most Malians, so fears alien life that she refuses to have any of it near her?”

When his question brought no answer, Kayle’s glance flicked briefly over the Sharnn, but Ryth seemed lost in the scarlet bird’s call. As the last note faded, the inner garden’s silence took on the quality of an absolute. With hushed steps, they followed the path, noting subtle changes as it approached the boundary of the inner garden. The colors of the carved stones merged into umber unity and took on the form of an oval. In the center of the oval was a polished silver frame, taller than a man. Varying lengths of clear native crystal hung motionless, suspended on fine silver wires. Crystal facets silently split sunlight into all the colors of desire.

“The Sandoliki sarsa,” breathed Kayle, approaching the instrument reverently, not even glancing through a small arch that opened into the Sandoliki Ti’s kel.

Nor did Ryth spare the arch more than a glance before he gave himself to the subtle patterns of crystal and light.

“The sarsa is old, very old,” said Kayle’s voice, near Ryth again.

“The Sandoliki name is older than the stones we stand on,” said Ryth absently.

“Tell me how such beauty can be created by such destroyers?”

“Most people believe it’s compensation.”

“You aren’t most people, Sharnn.”

Reluctantly, Ryth abandoned the fascination of the sarsa’s changing patterns. “Sometimes,” he said slowly, “people who know death intimately best appreciate the textures of life. Nendletis are justly famed for their esthetic nuances, as well as for their ferocity. Malians are known for their incomparable sensuality, as well as for their ruthless dargs vire. Paradox,” murmured the Sharnn. “Always paradox. And irony.”

Ryth turned and faced Kayle fully. The Sharnn cape whipped as a sudden gust of wind stripped the last bright motes of m’zamay from the cape’s peculiar folds.

“Ti Kayle—” began Ryth softly.

“‘Ti’, is it?” said Kayle. “And just what unpleasant bit of information are you planning to oil by using the Malian honorific?”

Ryth’s smile was a flash more sensed than seen. “Would you prefer to be called sri?”

The Nendleti snapped his fingers in a gesture of indifference/irritation/impatience.

“You hate the people called Malians,” Ryth said softly. “You have a full measure of Nendleti pride. You are a deadly fighter.”

The Sharnn paused, clearly disliking what he felt compelled to say. Kayle waited impassively, poised and curious and dangerous.

“Unless your Carifil conditioning curbs your Nendleti temperament, you’ll try to kill the Sandoliki Ti.”

Kayle moved suddenly, a quick flowing step that made his heavy purple robe lift on the wind. Again Ryth sensed uninvited mindtouch, but this time Kayle was gentle. With a hiss that was pure Nendleti, Kayle withdrew, no longer able to penetrate the Sharnn’s mind without hurting both of them.

“Teach me, pattern-man,” demanded Kayle. “The Allgod knows that you learn quickly enough!”

Ryth ignored the reference to his now impenetrable mind and said, “The Sandoliki will be conspicuously unarmed. Her robes will be so sheer that you will have no way of comforting your pride

with the idea that she is wearing concealed weapons. To underline that fact, she will also wear empty weapon holders. On Malia that is a deadly insult.”

Kayle hissed a Nendleti phrase. “Is there more?”

“Her servant will wear only one small knife.”

“And you claim her insults should be ignored?” said Kayle incredulously. “Teach me, pattern-man.”

“Her actions are not aimed at offending you, sri y’Kayle Menta Losu, Nendleti aristocrat. Her actions are a gesture of total contempt for the armed Vintrans who seek her aid, and for the Malian ruler who permits living Vintrans to walk this planet.”

Kayle frowned and Ryth listened to wind-harried leaves and waited for the Nendleti’s decision. Methodically, Kayle began stripping off his weapons.

“Do you approve, Sharnn? Not that it would affect me either way. I won’t wear more weapons than a servant!”

Kayle stacked his three knives in a large, deep wall niche made by a missing stone. Wordlessly, Ryth removed his knife and his Sharnn cape and placed both in the niche. Kayle studied the cape with new interest, realizing that Ryth classed it as a weapon. But the Nendleti said nothing, not even when Ryth slipped a thin silver m’sarsa from a loop on the sarsa frame and prepared to touch an instrument that was sacred to Malians.

Sunlight washed incandescent over the age-worn rod as the Sharnn raised the m’sarsa to the suspended crystals. The rod touched a long crystal and a deep, dear note sounded. Even as the crystal vibrated, Ryth touched the m’sarsa to other crystals, creating a ripple of music that evoked first a brook, then a tumbling stream, and finally a river, swift and potent, seeking an unnamed sea. The song was both whole and unfulfilled an echo of a cry for harmony that had first been heard near a hill overlooking C’Varial.

While the last notes resonated into silence, Kayle spread his hands in a gesture of respect. “You are a man of two gifts, sri Ryth.”

“Pattern is the essence of music,” said Ryth softly, his mind still savoring the perfection of the ancient Sandoliki sarsa. He replaced the m’sarsa carefully, then stroked the frame and m’sarsa with his fingertips. “A superb creation, superbly conceived.”

“And superbly played.”

Her voice was as low and resonant as sarsa crystal Ryth turned slowly toward the gate where she had appeared.

“I did not recognize your song,” she said as the wind rippled through her head veils and fragile mesh clothing, “yet I came. The sarsa has waited long for a man’s tempered touch.”

Though the wind flared through her scarlet veils, the planes of her face were never fully revealed. The lithe female lines of her body showed clearly beneath the loose scarlet mesh, yet the effect lacked invitation.

“I am called Ryth,” he said, bowing in the Malian style with hands clasped in front. “And my companion is called Kayle.” Without seeming to, Ryth watched for a reaction to Kayle’s name. “What shall we call you?”

“F’n’een,” said Kayle, before she could answer.

Her head moved sharply and the veil leaped. For an instant her pale eyes studied Kayle. Then the veil floated back in place as she turned toward the Sharnn.

“Do you also wish to call me that name?”

“It is a graceful name.”

“But it is not mine,” she said distinctly. “Call me Faen or call me nothing at all!”

“We regret offending you,” said Ryth, eyes narrowed, weighing her anger.

“We all take our names from the dead,” said Faen, controlling her anger.

“But that name offends you,” the Sharnn said, pressing gently.

“You are not Malians. Your ignorance cannot offend me. I will teach you a single Malian custom—and then you will never say that name to me again.”

Faen moved closer with a speed and grace that was almost shocking. In that instant both men



remembered that she was famed for her killing skills ... and that Sandoliki translated as “Deathbringer.”

But she stopped well short of touching either Ryth or Kayle.

“When you are mentally and emotionally and sensually tied with a person,” she said slowly, spacing each word as though they were children, “and you see that person die in violence and hatred, you never again speak the dead person’s name.”

“May I ask why?” said Ryth, voice low and eyes alive with an intensity that was uniquely Sharnn.

She turned to him, scarlet veils floating like firelight and her eyes the color of ice.

“The dead person’s shadow still lingers, for a time, following those who saw its substance die, following and seeking true life. If you call the name of a shadow, it steals some of your life.” Her silver eyes closed, then opened again, opaque with something beyond Sharnn concept. “You can die naming shadows.”

The wind gusted, Lifting veils and dead leaves, shifting robes and shadows with a dry rustling sound. The woman who was no longer called F’n’een saw a look of anguish and rejection twist deep within Sharnn eyes and heard him whisper what could have been a name, but he used the language of Sharnn and she could not be certain if his words fed a shadow or a dream.

“I was there when that child died,” said Faen in measured tones of certainty.

\*She is F’n’een,\* insisted Kayle inside Ryth’s seething mind. \*The aura may be a stranger’s, but the hands, the eyes, the voice. F’n’een.\*

\*Did she recognize you?\*

\*Yes.\*

“My companion meant no offense,” said Ryth in a thin voice. “He once loved a beautiful child called—her loss is an emptiness in him.”

“Accepted,” she snapped. “But you did not come to Malia to discuss death and the naming of shadows.”

Then she sensed his anguish and flinched in the instant before she controlled herself. Kayle, too, sensed Sharnn pain, and knew no more than she what was its source.

“We are seekers, Ti Faen,” said Kayle into the uneasy silence. “I am considering a ... partnership ... with another person. I would like to know if this person can be trusted. Can you help me?”

Faen’s pale eyes did not leave Ryth’s handsome, closed face, but she answered as though she spoke only to Kayle. “Normally, I have a time and a h’kel for such—but he played the sarsa like a Sandoliki reborn.” She stepped back with the swift grace that was still surprising, would always be surprising, and looked at Kayle for the first time since he had called her shadow.

“Do you have some object that the person wore or held often?”

Kayle reached into a fold of his robe and withdrew a worn leather sheath. An equally worn, beautifully crafted knife handle gleamed above the leather. Kayle had not been able to touch the Sharnn cape, but the Sharnn knife held no awe for him.

The bright flash of metal brought stillness back to the depths of Ryth’s eyes. Kayle wanted to ask what pattern had so hurt a Sharnn, but before he could form the words, Ryth spoke in his mind with an ironic amusement that made Kayle ache.

\*You would have made a galactic class thief, Ti Kayle. Did you steal my knife while I touched the sarsa?\*

Kayle’s only answer was a silent rush of compassion, a beginning of affection unfolding, for he had seen the Sharnn hurt and knew he was vulnerable. Human.

Faen hesitated before she touched the sheath with a single fingertip. A small sound of surprise escaped her, and her slim fingers curled around the sheath. When her eyes opened, they were focused on an infinity few people ever saw.

“Male. Unique. Enormously alive. Whatever he touches will hold his energy, radiant warmth like a vast sun.” She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “He can be trusted with your weapons, your honor, your life, your dreams. But do not betray him. He is relentless.” At an expert movement of her wrist, the knife flicked out of its sheath. Her fingers felt the blade as delicately as a sigh. “This knife has not enjoyed death, but has accomplished it more than once.”

She stood very still, eyes open yet impenetrable, fingertips poised on the honed edge while the wind stirred her scarlet veils. Then the knife whispered back into its sheath and her eyes focused on Kayle.

“Does that help you?”

“Yes ...”

“But you wish more?”

“Do you know more?”

Her hand reached out to the m’sarsa Ryth had used. As she touched it her lips curved in an unconscious smile of pleasure.

“Should I tell him?” she asked Ryth.

“He believes it is necessary,” said the Sharnn neutrally.

“And what do you believe?”

“I believe our ... partnership ... is necessary.”

Faen stood for a long moment with her eyes half-closed, fingertips caressing the silver m’sarsa, listening to the dry wind.

“You have a primal, savage energy,” she said, her voice an echo of music he had never heard, yet always known. “But that energy is controlled by a powerful mind. You are intensely private. Alone. Like a spring murmuring only to itself, yet bringing life to those who can find and drink from its deep waters.” Her fingers slid away from the m’sarsa, lingered over the supple leather sheath. \*There are so few things I can touch with pleasure.\*

Her lips had moved, but Ryth knew he had heard her more in his mind than in speech.

“Keep the knife.”

Her face showed surprise, then anger that she had revealed anything to him of herself.

“You don’t know what you say,” she said harshly. Then she turned toward Kayle and her voice changed once again to music. “Does that answer your needs?”

“My questions, yes. My needs are more clamorous than before. Why do you hide from me, F’n’een?”

Ryth moved to stop Kayle with a fierce speed that was like Faen’s. Then the Sharnn realized it was too late; if Faen wanted to kill Kayle, she had her excuse.

Faen stood with electric tension. Then her hand moved in a blur that swept off her veils.

“A child loved you once,” she said, her voice strained. “But do not trade upon that again.” Her eyes searched his face. “Look carefully. Do you see the child whose shadow you called?”

Kayle studied her face in silence. She stood under his scrutiny with no more self-consciousness than a statue. Her face had a perfection that was chilling, and her eyes were like ice caves, silver and turquoise and shadows and numbing cold.

“I hear her voice,” said Kayle finally, avoiding the name that enraged her. “I see her hands. The color of her eyes has not changed.”

Kayle’s words hung in the stillness.

“The child you remember is dead,” she said quietly.

“And only the Sandoliki woman survives?” asked Ryth. “A woman called Faen?”

The Sharnn’s questions were a subtle challenge that she ignored.

“I regret Kayle’s memories, but I can’t assuage them,” she said. “The child he loved is dead.”

“How did she die?” pressed Kayle. “Was it on Skemole, or on Malia, after the Undeclared War?”

“Does it matter enough to rake over old fires—and burn your fingers on hidden coals?”

“The child doesn’t matter,” said Ryth roughly. “The woman Faen is crucial to Malia’s future.”

She stared at him while silence stretched into danger, then her hand slipped up to the m’sarsa he had touched and danger thinned to invisibility.

“Come,” she said simply, turning away from both of them.

The scarlet mesh rippled around her legs, slid off smooth curves of flesh and empty leather sheaths bound to her thigh and ankle. The two men followed her into the huge impersonal mirror dome and up a winding black metal ramp. At the top, a large room commanded a circular vista of devastation. Kayle swore very softly at the naked ugliness of the land.

After a glance, Ryth ignored the view and concentrated on learning all he could from the contents of the room. No clear pattern emerged. Searching for one was like trying to hold a heavy, oiled ball on his fingertip; each time he sensed balance forming, the reality of it slid away from his touch.

"You wear the scarlet clothes of a Malian bride," said Ryth, as he sat cross-legged on a cushion. "Who is the woman Faen bound to?"

"I am the last Sandoliki. When I die, there will be no one to call my soul on the ancient sarsa." Her perfect lips framed a cold smile and her pale eyes searched Darg Vintra. "I am bound to the nameless wind that blows over the face of death." She looked into Kayle's orange eyes. "And I was once a child you loved. But that does not ease your grief, Kayle. The one you loved is truly dead."

"But the woman Faen lives," said Kayle carefully. "And hides."

Faen looked again at the wasteland outside the room. "Yes, I live, as Darg Vintra lives. Do I hide?" Her hands went out to the curving window where the fallen sun turned stone to blood. "No. No more than the ruined land hides. We are both known, both avoided. Justly so. No one seeks reminders of defeat." She laughed. "How they hate me as they sweat their fear and ask my help. They taste Darg Vintra's bitter wind and know their own impotence. They remember my dargs vire and know themselves for bloodless cowards."

Ryth felt his skin stirring as silence sifted through the room. The force of her hatred for Vintrans was as palpable as stone.

"What do you live for?" said the Sharnn finally, his eyes searching hers for the pattern he had not yet found.

"An honorable death," said Kayle's husky voice. "She is the last Sandoliki."

Faen faced Kayle and bowed in the Malian style. "Yes, Ti Kayle. An honorable death for the last Sandoliki."

\*Do you still think she can help you find whatever you lost?\* Kayle's thought was a mixture of anger and sorrow.

\*Yes. And in helping me, she might save her own people.\*

\*How?\*

\*The pattern is still beginning,\* returned Ryth, his Sharnn eyes half-open.

Ryth rose with a fluid motion that echoed her grace. He stood behind her, watching the red-gold light glow on her skin, listening to the slow beat of her breaths. So great was her confidence in her lethal skills that she made no move to change her seemingly vulnerable position.

"What are your pleasures, Faen?" asked the Sharnn, his voice as muted as the falling light.

"This is one. Evening is kind to Darg Vintra. That long shadow could be a tere forest breathing strength into the twilight, and the river could be sweet and green again."

Scarlet mesh whispered over the smooth muscles of her back as she half-turned toward him, revealing a profile as delicately curved as zamay petals.

"Another pleasure is touching a life force like yours—bright and rich and fiercely burning, yet not painful to me. Not painful."

"I would be complimented, but you enjoy my ... energy ... as impersonally as you enjoy the evening light."

She looked at him, a flash of clear silver in her slanted eyes. Then she faced away from him for long moments while brooding red-brown light flowed through the room.

"Sometimes," she said quietly, "I touch the sarsa skillfully and live again in a land not ruined, laugh with people not dead."

"Even the Great Destroyer's gift sometimes brings me pleasure. I have lost so much," she continued calmly, "that it pleases me to find what others cannot. I have found their living children and their lovers. Triumphs as sweet as my garden spring."

"And I've found their dead. Too often. Always the dead and the rusty wind shifting shadows."

Ryth watched evening sliding over the clean lines of her face, softening lips that had been full before they were narrowed by death.

"You're a prisoner," he said, unspoken emotion tightening his voice.

When she turned toward him, scarlet mesh flared around her as though angry at his body so close to hers.

“Am I?”

“Can you walk with us through that garden without someone warning Lekel the moment we step into the flyer?”

“So you know of Lekel, too,” she murmured.

“Have you any way of crossing Darg Vintra alone?”

“No. Nor do I want to go out among people. I am here. It is enough.”

“A prisoner’s contentment.”

“Believe what comforts you,” she said coldly.

“Then what I was afraid of is true,” whispered Ryth, a Sharnn’s sadness lining his full lips. “You can’t touch without agony, because your gift touches the timeshadow of minds and so few minds fit without tearing pain ....”

Kayle stared first at the Sharnn, then at the woman whose childhood he had loved. “Is that true?” he asked her hoarsely. “Are you, a Malian, unable to touch without pain?”

“Yes,” she said, voice torn between defiance and pain. “Yes! That, as much as Lekel’s jealousy, keeps me here, alone.”

“But why haven’t you killed Lekel?” said Kayle. “Then at least you would have the comforts of power.”

Faen smiled but there was no laughter in the line of her lips. “Lekel is a skavern, but there are worse to take his place.”

“She doesn’t want to rule Malia,” said the Sharnn before Kayle could speak

“You understand much, Ti Ryth,” she said. “Tell me why I don’t want to rule.”

Ryth hesitated, wondering at the limits to her pride. “Because you don’t trust yourself, Ti Faen.”

“Ryth—” began Kayle, warning.

“Because,” said the Sharnn relentlessly, “there is still enough hatred in you that you would enjoy having Vintra beneath your blade. Because you know that the only way to defeat Vintra would be a devastating surprise attack. Undeclared war. And if that happened, the Concord would reduce Malia to smoking slag. A dishonorable death for your people. Ultimate victory for your enemy.

“So you avoid the temptations of power and recall the past with crystal music and wait for an honorable death,”

Ryth watched Faen intently as the silence stretched between them. He was prepared to defend himself if he must, but hoped that time and death had given her control over her Malian reflexes.

“You understand too much. And not enough.”

Faen turned toward the darkness welling out of Darg Vintra’s seamed face. Then, with incredible speed, she spun and her hand locked around his wrist, numbing. His other hand shot out and curled around her throat, but before his fingers tightened he saw that her face was relaxed, and so beautiful that it made him ache.

\*She’s not trying to kill you!\*

Kayle’s silent warning came to Ryth at the same instant his fingers loosened and caressed her throat where they could have crushed it.

“Not trying to kill you,” she murmured, silver eyes closed, smiling beneath his touch.

When he realized that she had caught Kayle’s carefully directed mindspeech, Ryth closed his mind with a finality that amazed the Nendleti.

“Yes,” whispered Faen, speaking as Ryth’s thoughts formed, “I am as dangerous as I am beautiful.”

And the Sharnn understood that he had no barriers against her; she had repeated his thoughts as he looked at her, smiling and deadly. A surge of revulsion swept through him, a primal sense of violation. With an inarticulate cry she snatched her fingers from his wrist. They faced each other, equally controlled, equally dangerous.

“My regrets, Ti Ryth,” she said tightly. “I believed it was necessary.”

“Accepted, Ti Faen. Did you find what you sought?”

Emotions crossed her face too swiftly for even a Sharnn to read, and, when she spoke, her voice was resonant with grief and anger.

“Just what have you lost, Sharnn? What is the anguish dimming the core of your radiance? Is it the shadow you are afraid to name even in the safety of your mind?”

“I don’t know the name of whatever I lost,” Ryth said, voice divided between anger and unease. “Perhaps it had no name at all.”

“All shadows have names,” she said. “Learn your shadow’s name, Sharnn, or you will call it, unknowing, again and yet again until it becomes half-alive and you half-dead, for a shadow’s strength is a terrible thing.

“I know,” she said, leaning so close that he tasted her breath. “I know because I have been driven to naming shadows, touching them half-alive and me half-dead but still touching because I must. Touch.”

Ryth knew there was a pattern in her words, a pattern that would show him what he had lost, but he was too close and the pattern slid into darkness as she shivered and her eyes changed, pale turquoise in the dying light.

Faen stepped back soundlessly. “There was one name in your mind,” she said, voice calm, as though she had never spoken of shadows. “No fear tainted that name. Curiosity/affection/respect. Carifil.”

At Kayle’s involuntary breath, she smiled and faced him.

“As I guessed. A secret.”

“Neither secret nor often known,” said Kayle carefully.

“I wait,” she said, her voice cool, “to find out how a Sharnn discovered me, who the Carifil are, and how my finding whatever a Sharnn lost—if he lost anything—could affect the future of my people.”

Kayle smiled to himself, for he was learning more about Ryth with each breath he drew on Malia. “Tell her, Sharnn,” he urged. “If you can.”

Faen waited and watched the Sharnn’s changing eyes.

“The Carifil,” Ryth said finally, “are a group of unusually skilled people whose work and pleasure is solving Concord problems.”

“Group? Who rules them?”

“No one.”

“Unlikely.”

“But true,” said the Sharnn curtly.

“What planet do they belong to?”

“None.”

Faen’s fingers moved as though she were tempted to test the truth of Ryth’s words by touch. Instead, she brushed a raised area along the low wall. A hidden relay closed and the room glowed with warm light. She moved slowly, perfectly, conscious of his silver-green eyes. She turned toward him, smooth and graceful as a tall zamay, asking.

“Teach me.”

Ryth felt her sensual grace like a blow, but a Sharnn is nothing if not controlled. His expression did not change while he explained to her.

“Carifil loyalty is to the idea of Concord, but they hold no formal position in the Concord hierarchy.”

“What kind of problems do they solve?” she asked, her voice an echo of tall flowers singing, asking.

“All kinds of problems. Whatever fits individual skills.”

“Example.”

And he had none to give, for even a Sharnn’s control is not infinite.

“The Singers,” said Kayle into the electric silence. “Their problem was one that should interest a Malian.”

Neither Ryth nor Faen looked at Kayle.

“You know of the Singers?” pressed Kayle.

She turned toward him. “Rumor. Myth.” Her hand moved in an ambivalent gesture. “None of it comforting.”

“They sang on many planets,” Kayle said, his voice husky and his eyes alert. “Many people died. The

Singers who had sung vanished. The problem was to discover whether the Singers had planned the deaths and thereby broken the Sole Restraint.”

“Undeclared War,” said Faen, low-voiced, waiting.

“Yes. The Concord made little progress. The few available facts conflicted. Many Carifil worked on the Singer enigma. The time of primary proscription was nearly gone. Because there were so many bizarre, even frightening aspects to the Singers, the Concord Council voted extinction for the Singers. Thus, if the enigma were not resolved before the proscription expired, a possibly innocent, certainly unique race would die in the ashes of their once-beautiful planet.”

“Grotesque,” said Faen, and her hands moved restively across the cool mesh of her garment. “War is an honorable way to test—”

“I’m not here to debate cultural mores,” said Kayle coldly. “The Concord neither forbids nor encourages war among mutually eager enemies; the Concord’s only request is that off-planet personnel have an opportunity to leave before the killing begins.”

Faen’s eyes gleamed like ice in the tanned planes of her face. “You were telling me about the Singers.”

Kayle shifted his weight and the many textures of his heavy robe caught and held light. “There is little left to tell. Carifil unraveled much of the enigma, but it was the Singers who resolved it ... in a way we still don’t fully understand.” His keen orange eyes probed Ryth. “Someday, pattern-man, I’d like to have you work on that. But now we have more urgent knives to hone.” Kayle clapped his hands together once, softly. “The truth is this, Faen. Carifil prevented the Concord from destroying what it did not understand.”

“And you are a Carifil.”

“Yes.”

“What is your special talent?”

“Communications,” said Kayle blandly.

“And you?” asked Faen, facing toward Ryth again.

“I am not Carifil.”

“Brevity,” said Kayle, “but little information.” He leaned toward Faen. “Patterns. He found you by the patterns your gift made.”

Faen murmured something too low for them to hear. Then, more clearly, “I dislike being read like a black signature on white matrix.”

The Sharnn smiled without warmth. “So do I. But I know less about your pattern than you know about mine. I don’t know whether you’ll agree to help the Carifil understand Malia and Malians. Nor if you will help me find something that has no name, something that could prevent the extinction of your own people.”

Faen was too shocked by the word “extinction” to respond. Kayle was also shocked, but not by the impending death of a race.

“How,” demanded Kayle, “could a Sharnn have lost Malia’s innocence? For Malia is guilty of destroying Vintra—Malia has twice broken the Sole Restraint. Make no mistake about that, Sharnn. Malia is guilty!”

“Is that a Nendleti or a Carifil talking?” asked Ryth, his voice lazy and his eyes hard.

Faen looked from one to the other and remembered the pleasure and pain she had touched in Ryth, a Sharnn’s compelling presence. Her hand stretched out, palm up.

“I would ask this of Kayle if I could,” she said slowly. “But probably the process would be so destructive to me that I would gain no information.” She looked at Kayle with regret shadowing her silver eyes. “No offense intended, Ti Kayle. It is an impersonal fact.”

“Like sunset light,” Kayle said. “I’m not offended. I regret that anyone should have to shrink from simple touch. Especially a Malian.”

Faen’s face twisted, then became expressionless as she turned to Ryth. “Touch me when you answer my question. Does anything in the Carifil pattern suggest that they prefer any planet or race above any other?”

It was an easy question, one Ryth had answered for himself. Yet the thought of touching her brought

warring emotions that he could not—did not want to—name. But he touched her, palm warm over her warmth.

“No.”

“You have my respect, Ti Ryth,” she whispered, letting her palm slide away from his. “Touching me is repellent to you—” and when he moved as though to disagree she stepped back and her voice was weary. “No. No polite words of galactic Courtesy. Touching me gives you a feeling of violation. Disgust. Yet you went against your deepest personal prejudice and touched me because you believed it was necessary.

“You must need me very badly.”

“As does Malia,” said Ryth, his voice controlled, uninflected.

“Malia could survive even primary proscription,” said Faen indifferently. “Except for shortened lives, Malians won’t even notice the absence of Concord.” Her words were arrogant. And true. Kayle muttered about pride and bravado, and the Sharnn pointed out another possibility.

“What if the Concord decides to annihilate Malians?” Ryth said softly. “And you know they will, Sandoliki Ti. You know but refuse to know that Malians will die among the ashes of their once-beautiful planet.”

“We have not earned such a death.”

“Some believe you have. Ask Kayle.”

“No one who knows Malians could believe that,” Faen insisted, pride and scorn and the beginning of horror in her voice.

“But no one knows Malians,” said the Sharnn, eyes and body compelling her attention. “Teach us, Sandoliki Ti Faen. Find the essence of your people for us.”

“How?” she whispered. “No one not born and grown Malian can know our thousand moments, our essential soul.”

“I’m not sure how,” said Ryth, a difficult truth for a Sharnn. “But I’m sure there is a pattern. I have conceived of it. What I ask is possible, given time. But Malia has no time. You must come with us, Faen.”

“Leave Malia?” Her eyes searched the planes of his face for clues to the urgency that radiated from him, touching her though she did not touch him, “Do you mean that primary proscription will be enforced, all Accesses shut down?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Too soon. No more than seven Malian days. Then it will be too late, for all Malian Accesses will be shut down.”

Her face closed beyond even a Sharnn’s reading. Silence grew in the room until Kayle felt it choking him, but neither Faen nor Ryth moved so he did not move, merely waited until she turned away, scarlet mesh clashing softly.

“You’ll have my answer in the morning,” she said, and the mesh whispered across the floor. “Unless you’re afraid to wait that long?”

She walked off without waiting for their answer. Wordlessly, Kayle and Ryth followed the slow swinging of her scarlet mesh down the long stairway, through a wide curving hallway and into a circular h’kel. Compared to the h’kel they had just left, this suite was heavy with luxury. Finely wrought furniture and ancient tapestries, a miniature sarsa, delicate silver sculptures and two large beds burnished by age and care. Tiny metal tracks shone in the wood floor; at a touch partitions would slide out to provide privacy according to individual desires.

When Ryth turned to speak to Faen she was gone.

“I want to touch those tapestries,” said Kayle wistfully, “but I don’t want to ruin them for her pleasure.”

“Touch anything you want in this room,” said the Sharnn, admiring the ancient bed-frame with his fingertips. “She never uses this room or touches anything in it.”

“Are you sure?” said Kayle, hand outstretched to a vivid tapestry.

“Would you walk willingly into a room where clashing colors crawled off the walls and iron drums were beaten by madmen and gutted animals littered the floor?”

Kayle shuddered, his Nendleti esthetics outraged.

“That’s how this room must be to her. Too many people have lived and died among the furnishings. The dome, and everything in it, is machine-made, new. Untouched.”

“Ahhhh, Faen,” sighed Kayle. “No wonder you believe your gift is from the Great Destroyer.” He stroked the supple tapestry, a cool textured delight to his sensitive fingertips. “Malian objects are made as much to please the touch as the eyes. Magnificent.” He lifted his hand at a sudden thought. “But then why does she receive visitors in her untouched h’kel?”

Ryth tapped the miniature sarsa gently. A single high note, pure and haunting, hung in the stillness. He listened raptly, then replaced the tiny m’sarsa in its loop.

“She doesn’t. Usually.”

“Usually? Oh, your ... energy.” Kayle released the fold of tapestry and it sighed into place. “You should be honored.”

“Is the sarsa honored when we touch it?”

“A question to tease even a Sharnn.”

Ryth spun toward Kayle, but the Nendleti’s orange eyes held compassion rather than mockery.

“My error,” sighed the Sharnn. “There is something unsettling—if I had pursued her, invited her pleasure, then I would enjoy it too. But is it pleasure Faen feels when she touches me? Or merely relief at a lack of painful stimulus? Or—” He made a sound of frustration. “I’m far better with group patterns than individual ones. Especially hers.”

Kayle stroked the tapestry lightly, letting the subtly shifting textures feed his fingertips.

“Will she come with us?”

Ryth looked broodingly at the tiny sarsa. “The scarlet dress. No, I’m afraid she won’t.”

Kayle hissed and shifted to the privacy of mindspeech. \*Then I must force her.\*

\*Without insult, Ti Kayle, I give you less than even odds of taking her alive.\*

\*If you help me?\*

\*Three in five she lives. She is too quick, Kayle. I’ve never seen reflexes to match hers.\*

\*Have you looked in a mirror? No, I won’t argue. I’ll just use less than honorable means.\*

\*And make a deadly enemy of her.\*

\*I have many enemies. If any of her Contact training survives, she might come without hatred.\*

Ryth waited, sensing indecipherable fragments of thought/memory beneath the surface of Kayle’s mind-speech.

\*There is a word,\* continued Kayle, \*a mental override implanted in all Contact trainees. Only the Contact leader knows each trainee’s word. After their first mission is complete, the trainees are integrated. At the end of successful integration, the word is removed.\*

\*You know her word.\*

\*I was leader of the Skemole Contact team until an accident,\* Kayle lifted his sleeve to show the long knife scar, \*prevented me from leaving with them.\* Kayle smiled reminiscently. \*Even as a child, Faen’s reflexes were superb.\*

\*Are you enemies now?\*

Kayle’s soundless laughter rang in Ryth’s mind.

\*Not at all. The wound sealed our friendship as equals. Knife friends, as they say on Malia.\* Kayle let his sleeve fall into place. \*Two maturities is a long time. I hope her training holds.\*

\*So do I. I’d hate to provide the honorable death she seeks.\*

When they were asleep, she slipped out to the garden where the sarsa waited, moonlight gleaming over each facet until it seemed that crystal woke and breathed, beckoning. She lifted the m’sarsa a Sharnn had held and her lips moved in what could have been pleasure or pain or a feeling so intense it transcended either.

And light rippled off crystal, waiting.



Murmuring wordlessly, she replaced his m'sarsa and took two others from leather loops. She held the thin silver rods high over her head, offering them to the three soaring moons, receiving their benediction, triple light incandescent in her hands. She brought the m'sarsas down, touching crystal in a torrent of notes that released shapes of light called by ancient songs, timeshadows of former minds recalled by crystal music.

Just beyond, in the small tere grove heavy with silence and time, a shadow watched, waiting to be named, concealed among shadows that were no more than simple shapes pressed out of tere trees.

She did not sense hatred waiting, for she lived again in a land not ruined, touched again a man not dead, crystal music soaring.

In a room heavy with tapestries and time, a Sharnn turned restlessly, dreaming of light twisted into half-life, timeshadows of minds condensing, turning and returning with each perfect crystal note. His half-moaned protest rose no further than his lips, for crystal music pulsed in consuming moment and slid into half-fulfilled silence.

He slept again, dreaming only Sharnn dreams.

While she sank exhausted onto worn stones.

And a shadow wept.

## II

Faen found them in the garden, standing near the sarsa in the pearl light of early morning. The scarlet metal mesh of her long dress was very fine, hardly more revealing than loosely woven cloth; the metal was the color of new tere leaves, the color of new blood. Though her expression was remote, her silver eyes were aware of every nuance of their bodies.

"I owe you pleasure," said Kayle formally. "Never have I slept in such magnificence."

"Nendlet," said Faen, "has one of the few cultures in the Concord capable of appreciating the tactile complexities of Sandoliki Lere's tapestries."

"An artistry your own gift precludes you from enjoying," said Kayle sadly.

Faen made no response. Her eyes flicked over the garden, paused at the base of a huge tere tree, and settled on the sliding colored shadows thrown out of the sarsa.

"I can't leave Malia," she said abruptly.

"Why?" asked Ryth.

"I am the last Sandoliki." She looked at Ryth for a long moment, then her eyes slid back to the prismatic sarsa shadows. "My duty is here."

"Your duty?" countered the Sharnn. "Or your desire to die?"

Faen's lips drew back very slightly, hinting at her perfect, hard teeth without revealing them. "Maliens do not hide from death. Sandoliki do not hide from dying. Neither do we leave Malia."

"Not even to save your people?" said Ryth, then saw her eyes change as her lips had and he bowed smoothly. "Your pleasure, Ti Faen. I was slow to appreciate the depth of your needs."

"My—needs!"

"Your needs," repeated Ryth in the even tones of agreement. "Sentience has needs. We need you. You need the sarsa. The sarsa needs nothing, for it is not alive."

Faen gestured graceful agreement, but he sensed sliding laughter as dream fragments turned and returned in white light, telling him something he could not or would not grasp.

Kayle spoke one word, hissing syllables peculiar to the language of Nendlet. Faen's body went rigid. Her eyes deepened into pale pools of cold turquoise light.

"Why would you refuse me the honor of combat?" she said tonelessly.

"You fight too well, daughter."

"Is your life so precious to you?"

"Your life is," said the Sharnn, cutting across Kayle's gentleness. "You are no use to me dead. You—"

Faen's servant appeared beneath the arch. He walked over toward them, ignoring the sudden

silence. Faen made no move to acknowledge *him*.

\*Did he hear?\*

\*Probably.\*

A man stopped a few feet from Faen.

“Ti Memned calls, Sandoliki Ti.”

He backed away several steps, turned and vanished with the same muscular ease that had marked his arrival.

\*That one is a fighter,\* mused Kayle.

\*And the other one is either cook or poisoner,\* agreed Ryth.

\*Probably both. Hungry?\*

Kayle’s ironic laughter was heard only in Ryth’s mind—as was the seductive rustle of scarlet mesh rubbing over itself and Faen’s smooth flesh as she walked away from them.

“Who is Ti Memned?” asked Ryth when Faen was no longer in sight.

“Lekel’s first mate.”

“Faen’s friend? Equal? Enemy?”

“Enemy. Faen has no equals. Lekel took Memned only after Faen refused him publicly.”

“People have died for less overt insults,” said Ryth. “Second choices are usually unhappy ones.”

“According to rumor, Memned’s father was Vintran and her mother was a traitor.”

“Proof?” demanded the Sharnn, urgency coiled in his abrupt question.

“None. The people who passed the rumor died under Lekel’s knife,” said Kayle. “And Memned’s, of course. Only Faen escaped, and she is the last true Sandoliki.”

The Sharnn stood motionless, turning over each new fact in his mind, looking for patterns, or even possibilities. The stillness was disturbed by the thin whine of a flyer landing. Ryth made a sudden gesture of completion as the outline of a pattern condensed in his mind.

“I’ll bet that Faen is about to receive more servants or official visitors,” said Ryth softly. “When we stayed last night and made no move to leave this morning, Lekel must have become nervous.”

“We have until sunset—one full Malian day. But I’d be a fool to wager against you, Sharnn.” Kayle sighed. “I’ll need quiet for a time. The Carifil should know what we know, just in case.”

Ryth smiled wryly but said nothing.

“I’ll be in our room,” murmured Kayle, turning away. Then he stopped, as though remembering something. “Have you ever participated in a group mesh?”

“Not even a simple group link.”

“Is it tabu on Sharnn?”

“Only one thing is tabu on Sharnn.”

“Oh?”

Ryth smiled like a Sharnn. And said nothing.

The Sharnn’s smile faded as he faced the sarsa. A scarlet bird’s warning rang through the silence, but no answering call came. A second searching call ended in trilling unease. Ryth noted the calls absently while he stood before the changing, changeless crystals, absorbed in the play of light and color and motionless crystal facets, elusive patterns and promises, uneasy ripples of color, running together, running, warning—

The Sharnn threw his body aside with flashing speed, turning a death-blow into a thin line of red across his shoulder. His hand swept back, twisted suddenly. He heard the sound of wristbones snapping. A high scream tore the attacker’s throat as Ryth spun to face a man in Malian dress. Ryth bent and caught the assassin’s ankle. The man kicked with his free foot, driving rigid toes toward Ryth’s throat. But the Sharnn’s arm flicked sideways, the Malian’s knee snapped and the lethal kick found only air as the man sprawled on stone.

“I’ll kill you if I must,” said Ryth in Malian.

The man’s good hand clawed out, but pain made him over-eager. Ryth’s hard fingers twisted across the flailing arm. The result was a swelling wrist for the Malian; both men knew Ryth could as easily have broken the arm.

Ryth watched as the Malian tried to gather himself for another attempt. Then the man's body relaxed subtly, and triumph flashed in his eyes as he looked over Ryth's shoulder. Ryth threw himself down and to one side, at the same time pulling the injured man after him as a shield. Metal screeched as two star-shaped weapons ground lethal points across the stone courtyard. A third m'vire buried itself in the first assailant's back. The man gasped and went slack.

Ryth's eyes searched the grove where his mind told him two people waited, but he saw nothing. He gauged the distance to a nearby stone bench, threw off the assassin's body, and rolled toward the shelter of the solid stone. A m'vire hummed past his shoulder, slicing fabric as easily as it sliced air.

Ryth neither saw nor heard movement, yet a fifth m'vire flashed in a long, low curve designed to take it behind the bench. The curve was too shallow, but the meaning was clear; if Ryth moved away from the bench a m'vire would find him. And he was certain that one of the assassins was circling behind while the other kept him pinned down.

The Sharnn waited. Soon the person approaching would be within range of the other's m'vire. Ryth knew that he had to move in the instant before the person circling around was able to see him. Without giving an outward sign, Ryth gathered his body, then he sprang from behind the bench like a man diving into water. At the last instant he curled his body and rolled into a shoulder-high growth of shrubs and nightvines. He did not stop rolling until there was a wall of plants between him and the attackers. He listened for the space of two breaths, then soundlessly pulled himself along on his stomach until he was deep into the nightvine tangle, where bell-shaped flowers were half-open in the gloom and their creamy fragrance drenched his body.

He heard the hissing whispers of the two who searched for him. With exquisite care he gathered himself into a crouch and waited for the closer person to come within reach. A woman, knife ready, pushed slowly through the tough vines. The instant that she was hidden from her partner, the Sharnn brought her down with a single well-placed blow. He silently eased her body into the vines, then just as silently slipped through the vegetation, pausing only to listen for the remaining attacker.

A m'vire slashed through the vines, then, nearly spent, dug into Ryth's thigh. Even as his mind retraced the m'vire's trajectory, his hand reached, pulled the weapon free and sent it spinning back to its source. A startled grunt of pain broke the silence. Before the assassin could recover, Ryth was too close for a m'vire to be effective.

The man cursed and unsheathed a long, heavy knife. With his first lunge, the attacker proved that he was not as skilled with the knife as he was with the m'vire. Ryth's fingers locked around the knife wrist and yanked. At the same instant the Sharnn's heel smashed across the man's knee. Between one breath and the next, Ryth's assailant was helpless. The man crumpled into unconsciousness.

Ryth slipped back into the cover of the black vines, listening with mind and body. When he sensed no further attackers, he relaxed with a long sigh. And thought of Kayle.

\*Danger!\*

\*Kayle's answer was a silent chuckle, \*Danger? In a lone, lamentably inept assassin?\*

\*There are three in the garden,\* returned Ryth tiredly. \*And none of them lamentably inept.\*

\*Am I permitted to play?\*

\*I doubt if they feel like playing any more.\*

\*Greedy of you.\*

Ryth laughed aloud, a startling sound in the hushed garden. \*If they object to being questioned, I'll turn them over to you,\* he promised.

\*Then you didn't kill all of them? Excellent! I was sloppy with mine,\* added Kayle, a tangible sense of regret in his thought. \*Don't start without me.\*

\*Bloodthirsty Nendleti,\* muttered Ryth to himself, divided between amusement and respect.

\*Thank you,\* returned Kayle serenely.

Hastily, Ryth opaqued his thoughts.

Ryth pushed through the fragrant vine flowers to the area where the third assassin lay. He prodded the man in a particularly sensitive area; no response. The man was truly unconscious. With a swift motion, Ryth pulled the man up and over his shoulders. And swore when the knife-cut across his shoulder

opened painfully.

He walked across the courtyard toward the sarsa and dropped his burden next to the slack body of the first attacker. He returned to the tangle of vines for the woman. She was barely conscious. He carried her out of the vines and dumped her next to the two men.

“Skillfully played, Ti Ryth.”

Faen’s soft voice was totally unexpected, close. He spun to face her, fingers rigid with fighting reflexes. But she had moved as quickly as he and was out of reach.

“You are soft-footed, Faen,” he said, and deliberately turned his back on her.

“Thank you, Ti Ryth. May I approach you?”

“As you wish,” he said indifferently.

Careful not to make any quick motions, Faen moved as close as she could without touching him. Her pale eyes flicked over the blood staining his shoulders, his hands, darkening the back of his leg. There was no way to distinguish his blood from that of the assassins.

“I cannot tell the extent of your injuries, Ti Ryth. Can you remove your clothes without help?”

“Small cuts.” He faced her, his voice roughened by fatigue. “Nothing worse.”

“There is the possibility of poison ...” She waited, her stillness underlining her deference.

Without further argument, the Sharnn pulled off his clothes. In addition to the slash across his shoulder and the puncture on his leg, he was surprised to find other cuts among the various scrapes and bruises.

“M’vire,” said Faen briefly. “Coward’s weapon. May I approach more closely?”

“Whatever is necessary,”

She stood very close, not quite touching, yet he could feel her breath warm on his skin and he could count the dark lashes framing her intent, silver eyes. An involuntary response to her nearness shivered through him, a response that was quickly chilled by the memory of personal violation. He breathed deeply, and the scent of sunshine and blood and Faen swept over his senses.

“The knife cuts are clean, as are most of the m’vire cuts. This wound, though,” she knelt to look at the puncture mark high on the back of his leg, “has dark edges. Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“Twice coward,” she said, glancing at the unconscious m’vire thrower, “to use the paralytic poison.” When she turned back to re-examine the puncture, her hair fanned across his leg. “The vines absorbed most of the poison,” she said, reaching into a narrow pocket at the side of her clothes. “This salve will neutralize the rest. Pull the lips of the wound apart, insert the tip of the tube all the way to the healthy flesh and squeeze very gently. No more than a drop. Quickly. The poison must not spread.”

He gingerly lifted the small, needle-nosed tube from her palm. He tried to follow her directions, but the wound was too high on the back of his thigh.

“I will apply it if you wish,” said Faen, her voice expressionless.

He hesitated for a revealing moment, then dropped the tube into her open hand. She also hesitated and her fingers trembled slightly.

“This will not be pleasant for either one of us,” she said hurriedly, low-voiced. “You can no more curb your revulsion than I can curb my knowledge of it. You can help both of us by concentrating on something that pleases you.” She took a deep breath. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

And unbidden came the memory of her warm breath over his skin and the cool caress of her hair across his thigh. Faen’s breath caught raggedly, but her hands were swift and sure.

“Done.” She stood hastily. “The other cuts should be washed—a drop of this salve to a basin of water. Your shoulder will require closing tape. If you have no skill with tape, I’ll apply it.”

“I’m in your debt,” he said uneasily, wondering if she had caught his thoughts.

She turned away, then stiffened; Kayle stood nearby.

The breeze moved fitfully and dead leaves swirled across the stones. Ryth shivered and pulled on his loose, warm shirt.

“The cuts can wait until we’ve questioned the assassins,” said the Sharnn, half-expecting Faen to

object.

When she remained silent, he leaned over and grabbed the closest of the three attackers. The man hung limply in his grasp. Ryth checked for signs of life, then dropped the man.

“Dead,” said Ryth, his voice heavy with disgust.

“Not surprising, Ti Ryth,” said Faen. “Broken wrist, smashed knee, the long finger of a m’vire buried in his spine.”

Ryth glanced sideways at her for an instant and suddenly knew that she had seen the attack from the first move. Seen and done nothing to prevent his probable death. But then, she was Malian, and owed him nothing at all. Certainly not his life.

His fingers locked in the clothing of the m’vire thrower. The man was alive. Ryth pulled him upright and methodically began slapping him into consciousness.

“Why not the woman?” said Kayle. “She’s awake.”

“She’s the least important.” Slap. “This one knows who wants us dead. And why.” Slap. “He hired the others, planned the attack.”

“You knew of this before?”

“No.” Slap. “Pattern.”

Ryth paused long enough to glance at the woman. She was fully conscious, and could not have been more terrified if the Sharnn had been peeling flesh from her living body. The man groaned and his eyes focused. The fear he displayed surpassed that of the woman. A strangled word, a convulsion of muscles, and the man was dead.

Ryth dropped the corpse and grabbed the woman. He wrenched her jaws apart, but it was too late. Her body stiffened, then slid bonelessly from his grasp.

Faen bent over the woman and sniffed warily. “Sel.” She straightened. “Leave them for a hundred count. The poison will be harmless then.”

Ryth studied the three bodies, his face expressionless. Bronze hair lifting in a vagrant breeze, he counted silently. When he reached one hundred, he stripped the bodies, refusing Kayle’s offer of help. Each assassin’s clothing was removed, examined, and stacked neatly beside the body. Ryth examined the corpses with equal care, noting as he worked that all three had the subtle skin shadings of Malians—darker at the spine, lighter at the fingertips. The skin showed no trace of dye. Both men had the multicolored hair characteristic of Far Island Talian.

Ryth studied their hair closely, but found no sign of dye in any of the various patches of color. Whether pale gold, chestnut, or darkest brown, their hair was natural. Ryth let the last cool strand of hair slide through his fingers. Without appearing to, he watched Faen as he asked, “Is Ti Memned well?”

“The call was broken before I could speak.”

“Unfortunate,” said the Sharnn blandly.

Faen made a dismissing gesture. “If it was important to her, she’ll call again.”

The Sharnn’s smile made Kayle move restlessly.

\*Was Faen part of it?\* demanded the Nendleti.

\*I would take bets on either side. She saw, and neither warned nor fought.\*

\*She is Malian. Did you ask?\*

\*I didn’t know she was nearby.\*

\*She treated your poisoned leg.\*

\*And if I had known about the poison without her warning?\*

\*Yes,\* agreed Kayle reluctantly. \*Innocent or not, she had to tell you about the poison.\*

\*The broken call was improbably convenient.\*

\*Sucking zarfs!\*

Ryth’s smile thinned even further as he watched Faen. “Do Malian assassins routinely commit suicide?”

“Few have the choice,” said Faen. “In their profession the price of failure is death. It is a rare victim who has the skill to survive without killing.”

“Thank you, Ti Faen. But my question is not yet answered.”

When she understood the implied accusation of conspiracy, Faen's body became very still. "The assassin's code is intricate. Too intricate for easy answers."

"I await your instruction."

"On which aspect?"

"Sel."

"A potent, volatile poison derived from the roots of—"

"Did you know that I wanted to question the assassins?"

"I assumed as much."

"Did you also assume that they might be carrying sel?"

"No."

"Oh?" said the Sharnn, his voice lazy. "Yet you knew just what to look for when—"

"I do not buy my deaths."

"Ti Faen," said Kayle hurriedly, "no one suggested that you—"

Faen saw only Ryth, heard only the Sharnn's unfinished sentence. "After a battle," she said distinctly, "we allow fighters the thirteenth part of a day before we hold them responsible for the niceties of civilized conduct. A matter of common sense and body chemistry." She inhaled slowly and her eyes lost their flat silver sheen. "Assassins who are sent after persons of very high wealth, power, or birth carry sel. A precaution. If the assassins fail, if they are captured alive, they cannot embarrass the person who stooped to buy death.

"If they had attacked me I would have examined their mouths for sel. But I was not attacked."

"What if the assassins fail to use their sel?" said Kayle.

"There are worse ways to die. They know it."

"Interesting," murmured Kayle. "Then assassins never survive a failure?"

"Did yours?" she asked curtly.

"How did you know?" demanded Kayle.

The metallic mesh in Faen's garment hissed with her impatient movement. "The middle knuckle of your left hand is slightly swollen. Your robe is torn on the right sleeve. Your body smells of recent danger."

"You miss nothing," said Kayle, admiringly.

"I'm Malian," she said curtly, looking back to Ryth. "Are you through with the bodies?"

"Can you tell us anything more about them?"

"More?"

"I examined them. I know they are Malian," said Ryth, showing the effort it cost him to be patient. "The men have a Far Island Talian phenotype. The men are used to working together. The woman is new to their operation. All four came in one flyer. Either they already knew the people of your household or they were given excellent descriptions of Kayle and me. Or both."

"The woman," said Faen. "Look at her left hand."

Ryth moved over to the woman and examined her hand carefully. It had the callouses he expected of a knife fighter, a few thin knife scars, and two barely healed cuts at the base of the palm. Nothing unexpected. He said as much to Faen.

"The fresh cuts."

"Yes?" said Ryth.

"Oath cuts."

"Teach me."

Faen hesitated. When she spoke, her voice was a savage mixture of pride and hatred and anger, but hatred most of all, for the subject was Vintrans. "The inverted vee shape means 'death to Vintrans.' I was the first to use it. It was during the Ti Vire."

Wordlessly, Ryth examined the hands of the other assassins. If he looked carefully he could discern faded vee scars beneath more recent, random lines. He looked at Kayle.

"Mine wore gloves," said Kayle.

"A strangler," said Faen, eyes opaque with old memories. "Wire?"

“Yes,” Kayle sighed. “Shall I go check him?”

“He’ll be the same,” said Ryth. “But we’re not Vintrans.”

“So you say. Yet you used a word to take my honor, something Vintran armies tried and failed to do.”

Faen turned away abruptly and walked to the sarsa. She lifted the m’sarsa and the longest crystal, called vire, belled deeply four times. A servant appeared, the man who walked like a fighter. Or an assassin. Faen turned her head toward Ryth.

“Do you want hands and hair?”

“No.”

Faen gestured to the servant. “Their weapons, n’Qen, to Ti Ryth. A fourth,” she glanced at Kayle, “in your h’kel?”

“Yes.”

“That one belongs to Kayle.”

“No hair or hands,” said Kayle. “Just the weapon will do.”

N’Qen bent to gather the weapons. His posture was subtly awkward—and the Sharnn’s hands flashed out, fingers digging into n’Qen’s flesh. N’Qen remained bent, not breathing, paralyzed by the pain of Ryth’s fingers grinding nerves against bone. Kayle’s boot sent a black-bladed knife spinning out of n’Qen’s numbed fingers. The Sharnn’s hand moved slightly and n’Qen gasped with returning breath. Kayle hooked his thumb over n’Qen’s lower jaw, holding it open.

“If you would be so kind as to examine him for sel,” said Ryth blandly.

Faen’s eyes were as pale as the shimmering vire crystal. She stepped forward to examine n’Qen’s mouth.

“Upper left, inside,” she said, stepping back.

“Remove it,” snapped Ryth, watching each movement of her body.

“I touch no one.”

Ryth increased the pressure until n’Qen passed out. Kayle removed the flesh-colored sel capsule. He placed the knife and capsule carefully aside, beyond either Faen’s or n’Qen’s reach.

“May I?” said Kayle as n’Qen stirred sluggishly in Ryth’s grasp.

The Sharnn moved his hand in curt agreement. Then, “Wait.” He stared coldly at Faen. “Do you know of any other means for an assassin to defeat questioning?”

Faen smiled humorlessly. “He can refuse to answer. Or he can lie.”

N’Qen’s eyes opened, dark with fear and hate.

“He’ll talk,” said Kayle, “one way or another. Who hired you to kill us?”

N’Qen said nothing.

Kayle’s fingertips flicked over n’Qen’s eyes. The touch was too light to bring real pain. A warning.

“Who hired you to kill us?”

N’Qen said nothing, then screamed.

“Who hired you to kill us?”

Silence, a high scream, then silence again as n’Qen fainted.

Faen’s lips thinned into parallel lines of distaste. “Useless. Unless you enjoy it, of course.”

She turned away to replace the m’sarsa in its holder. She did not turn back.

“What do you say, pattern-man?” asked Kayle. “He’s yours, after all.”

Ryth shifted his grip on n’Qen’s sagging weight. “He might break before he died,” said Ryth after a thoughtful pause. “But I doubt it. Even if he did, by that time he would swear to anything to stop the pain.”

“I agree. I’m afraid I’ll have to rummage about in his mind. Not my specialty. Rather uncomfortable for both of us.” Kayle moved so that his back was not turned toward Faen. \*I’m not going to bet my life on old training. Watch her.\*

\*Always.\*

Kayle effectively vanished as far as Ryth’s mind could discern. N’Qen’s weight seemed to increase with each breath, and the extended silence was a pressure behind Ryth’s eyes. He became aware of the

stillness of dry tere leaves hanging on wasted stems, waiting for wind and freedom. But the breeze was frail, barely strong enough to stir unattached leaves, and the hanging leaves must wait as Ryth waited, motionless.

“Faen and Lekel.”

Kayle’s voice was no stronger than a fallen leaf, thin with exhaustion.

Faen turned and her skirt flared urgently. Ryth let n’Qen slide onto the stones and stepped forward to support Kayle.

“Over here,” said the Sharnn, guiding Kayle to a bench carved out of smooth golden stone.

Kayle sighed and his body sagged against the cool surface. “Not my ... specialty,” he repeated, his voice barely a whisper.

“You should have let me help.”

Kayle’s hand moved in a limp gesture of negation. “No training. Would have ... killed him. Injured you. So few minds fit together at all.”

“Did you find any answers?” said Ryth, staring intently at Kayle’s exhausted face.

“Your eyes ...” Kayle’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Glad I won’t have to fight ... Sharnn.”

Ryth’s hand gently squeezed Kayle’s shoulder. “No, you won’t have to fight me.” He examined Kayle closely; the Nendleti’s eyes were focused again and his muscles looked less slack “Better?”

“Better,” said Kayle, but his voice was still too thin.

A leaf scratched across stone, moved by the swinging scarlet hem of Faen’s long dress. Ryth’s body leaped with readiness as he spun to face her fully. But she was not within reach.

“Ti Kayle?” she asked Ryth.

“Tired. Just tired.”

“Then let him rest.”

“He’s not tired enough to welcome death.”

Faen’s hand reached out as though she would have comforted Kayle, then dropped back to her side even as Ryth moved protectively between Faen and Kayle.

N’Qen groaned. Ryth looked over at him, then at Faen, too close to Kayle.

“Stand by the sarsa,” Ryth said to Faen.

“Request or order?”

“Whichever moves you.”

“The thirteenth part of a day,” said Faen, turning away. She did not turn back until she reached the sarsa. “Are you sure this is far enough?”

“No, Ti Faen, I’m not sure. I’ve seen you move.”

“Then I shall sit.” Faen smiled slowly, a smile that mocked his caution. “A child could control me from this position.”

Ryth looked at the dead assassins, at n’Qen struggling against pain, felt Kayle’s exhaustion and the subtle agony of his mind. The Sharnn strode toward Faen and crouched over her. When he spoke he sensed Kayle flinching. With a surge of impatience the Sharnn shut out Kayle’s mind.

“I’m neither Malian nor Nendleti,” said Ryth harshly. “I take no pride in the people I have killed.” His eyes searched hers but found nothing beyond a sense of waiting. “I am Sharnn. I have more interesting things to do than fight fanatics. But,” he added, each word hard and distinct, “to save Kayle I will fight you if I must, kill you if I must.”

“If you can,” she murmured, undisturbed.

“Ah yes ... your famous dargs vire.”

“They don’t worry you.” Statement, not question.

“They do worry me. You are always in my mind, Sandoliki Ti, and my mind is needed for other matters.”

“I am not the same as my dargs vire.”

The Sharnn looked at her changing silver eyes, at her hair burnished and sleek and black and her skin glowing through the cool metal mesh of her dress.

“Aren’t you?” he asked softly, “Then I need not worry about Kayle, too weak right now to defend



himself against your killing skills.”

N’Qen groaned again, but both ignored him.

“I no longer kill for hatred,” she said, her eyes almost white with suppressed emotion. “And I never killed for pleasure. If you are half what Kayle said you were, pattern-man, you already know that.”

“Yes,” the Sharnn said distinctly. “Pattern-man. But you have no pattern. Except death. Shall we fight each other now? Your choice, Sandoliki Ti.”

“I have no reason to kill you.”

“When did a Malian need a reason?”

“You tire me, Sharnn. But that is no reason to kill you.”

“And no reason to let me live. Not good enough, Sandoliki Ti.”

Faen’s lips twisted scornfully. “Do you want me to guarantee your safety?”

“I would prefer friendship, but that is alien to you. I’ll settle for your guarantee that you won’t attack Kayle or me without warning.”

“The word he spoke was meant to guarantee that. Will that guarantee work both ways?”

The Sharnn’s face showed his surprise. “Of course.”

“Of course? That’s not what your eyes told me.” Her face was unreadable. “A truce, then. For today?”

“For every day.”

She measured him for a long moment, until her eyes changed, drawn by Sharnn eyebrows arched beneath thick bronze hair, intense green eyes slanting above the strong planes of his face and his mouth, as perfect as a Malian’s. A mouth she could not touch, even lightly, even once, for he despised her. Again she heard the Great Destroyer’s laughter and again she asked why, but there was no answer, nor would there be.

Faen’s eyes closed and she made a slow gesture with her hands that meant both agreement and dismissal. Then she laughed, echo of the hard laughter she had heard in her mind.

“I’m glad I amuse you, Sandoliki Ti.” The Sharnn straightened with a fluid movement and walked over to the groaning n’Qen. “Are you finished with him, Kayle?”

“Yes. He knew nothing of the other assassins.”

The Sharnn dragged n’Qen to his feet. “Walk. It will ease the pain. Move your arms like this. Yes. Now your shoulders. Good. Walk.”

N’Qen stumbled around the courtyard, supported by the Sharnn when necessary. After a few minutes n’Qen could walk by himself, though he lacked his former grace.

“What will you do with him?” said Faen when the Sharnn passed near the sarsa.

“Nothing.”

N’Qen lurched and would have fallen if Ryth had not caught him.

“Do you hate n’Qen that much?” she asked.

“Hate? I’m giving him his freedom.”

“Then you are more cruel than a Malian. Far more cruel.”

The Sharnn looked at Faen and knew she meant each word.

“Lekel’s skill is legendary,” said Faen, her voice soft and chilling.

“What does Lekel have to do with this?”

“N’Qen is Lekel’s vire son; Lekel could do no less for him than he did for the most important of his prisoners.”

Ryth looked at n’Qen’s young face, blank with fear, and felt the horror that shook the assassin’s body.

“Did Lekel put him here to kill your guests?”

Faen made a gesture of total indifference. “Whether his vire father knew or not is of no importance. N’Qen has failed as an assassin; he must redeem that failure by honorable death. Death by torture is honorable, if he does not die too quickly. Death at your hands is also honorable—and hopefully swift.”

“No,” whispered the Sharnn. “There must be another way.”

His mind raced, seeking a pattern that did not end in death. “If I take him off-planet?”

Faen sighed "N'Qen!"

Her voice cracked with command. N'Qen's eyes focused on her reluctantly.

"Did you leave hostages with Lekel when you came to Darg Vintra?"

"My wife ... my daughter and son."

Faen's pale eyes moved back to Ryth. "If he lives and you live, his family dies. It is the Malian way to ensure cowardice is not passed on."

The Sharnn looked questioningly toward Kayle, who was walking slowly toward them.

"N'Qen is yours," said Kayle hoarsely, "but if you won't kill him, I will fight you for the right."

"N'Qen," said Ryth harshly. "N'Qen!"

N'Qen's eyes focused in response to the commanding voice. "Kill me."

He read the decision in Ryth's eyes and smiled as the edge of Ryth's hand descended in a blur of power.

Ryth lowered n'Qen's body to the stones. For a long time he looked at the man he had not wanted to kill. When he looked up, shadows moved in his eyes, cold and empty. He saw the sudden fear in her eyes and he ignored it. Nothing seemed important but the corpse of the man who had smiled at death descending, a pattern ugly to a Sharnn.

Without speaking, the Sharnn retrieved n'Qen's knife and put it in the simple leather sheath at n'Qen's thigh. The sel capsule he ground into the stones with casual indifference to the poison's potency. He shifted n'Qen's dead weight across his shoulders and set off toward the flyer strip. He made the trip four more times; four more bodies. Neither Faen nor Kayle spoke, only watched, for the Sharnn's eyes were those of a man not quite sane.

When Ryth completed his last trip, he came and stood before them. His clothes were dark with others' blood and bright with his own. He stood within reach of Faen.

"Release her from the word."

"So you can kill her?" said Kayle. "Sorry, my friend. No."

"Release her," repeated Ryth, his shadowed eyes fastened on Faen's emotionless face.

"We need her."

The Sharnn waited, unmoved. His body was both relaxed and poised, a predator crouching. "Release her."

"There is no need to release me," said Faen. "The word's hold died on Skemole."

Faen and Ryth measured each other, tension rising between them like the tide of an invisible wild sea.

"At this instant you would like to kill all things Malian," she said, her soft voice riding on the waves of tension. "I know. I have felt like you. And I have learned that though I kill and kill and kill I cannot bring back one smile, one tear, one brief touch from the past. Only the sarsa can do that.

"Go to the sarsa. Go and call back the soul that was you before n'Qen died."

The tide surged, broke ... and drained away until it became only blood dripping from Ryth's fingertips, a Sharnn's blood falling on ancient Malian stones. As he watched the vivid drops, his eyes slowly changed back to silver-green, clear and without shadows.

"Release her," he sighed, and felt Kayle's mind in his, uncertain. "Trust me," said the Sharnn, closing his mind.

He felt Faen's fingertips brush his face, breathed the fragrance of her hair, sensed compassion like a cool caress through his ragged emotions. An instant, and the presence was gone.

"Take him away from here," she said to Kayle. "Malia will destroy him."

"I doubt it," said Kayle.

Faen turned on him so swiftly that her robes flared out, scattering fragrance as well as scarlet light.

"You don't understand! Four assassins and sel and hostages. Lekel's vire son can only be avenged by Ryth's death."

Kayle smiled coldly. "The Sharnn has proved difficult to kill."

"Ryth is strong, yes, and fierce and skillful, but anyone can be killed, Kayle. Anyone! The next flyer could carry ten assassins, twenty, fifty. Do you think so little of Ryth that you want him to die on Malia?"

"Why do you care?" asked Ryth softly.

“Malia is too strong for aliens.”

“I’ll survive,” said the Sharnn curtly. “Release her.”

Faen turned to leave and a hissing word followed her.

“You are released,” said Kayle simply.

Faen turned slowly around. “I was never held, Ti Kayle. But thank you for your trust.” She hesitated, then looked at Ryth. “Quickly. Whoever sent those assassins will be expecting a report.”

“Probably,” said the Sharnn, unconcerned. “I may have to wear my cape before our day is up.”

“This isn’t a matter of honor,” said Faen scathingly. “Nor are you Malians to care if it were!”

Ryth shrugged, and pain raced as his shoulder wound bled again. “We need you. We’re staying.”

Faen’s eyes burned with suppressed anger. She moved toward him, her crimson clothes restless in the wind. The thin whine of flyers descending disturbed the garden again. A scarlet bird called once, twice, then silence spread uneasily. The Sharnn looked only at Faen, walking toward him with the gliding ease of an assassin. She stopped just beyond his reach and looked at him for a suspended moment.

“Your shoulder,” she said.

“It’s not the first injury I’ve ever had,” said Ryth, “nor the worst.”

“But you will fight better with it taped.” She tilted her head up to him and her flawless lips were pale. “For you will fight, Sharnn. And die. What can I possibly tell you before sunset that is worth dying for?”

“Ask me just before I die.”

Faen’s eyes changed, silver tarnished by certainty of his death and her fingers moved swiftly over his lips, light pressures and sliding caresses that were phrases in t’sil’ne, Malia’s tactile language.

He flinched away, more in surprise at his own leaping response than in fear of whatever she might find in his mind. But she knew only that he flinched. She stepped back, eyes like white flame burning against the night of her unbound hair.

The scarlet bird’s warning trilled through the grove as yet another flyer whined onto the pad. Then the bird called again, high and urgent, a song as exquisite as sarsa music.

Faen closed her eyes and for an instant the clean lines of her face seemed to blur.

“My error,” she said, her voice flattened of all music, all echoes. “My regret. T’sil’ne is a Malian experience and to you my touch is—”

Her hand moved abruptly and she stepped further back, unseeing, wanting only to forget the last few moments. Her bare foot came down where an assassin had died, blood half-dry on ancient stones. She screamed, voice raw with pain, and threw herself aside, landing with a balance that was reflex only, for her mind was reliving the searing instant of death by sel.

Kayle reached out, unthinking, barely touched her before he remembered, and she would have screamed again at his touch but she bit her lip until blood flowed the color of new tere leaves, bridal scarlet, and she swayed, fighting for control.

Kayle turned on Ryth. “Hold her,” he snapped. “Your touch pleases—”

“No!” Faen’s voice was a ragged cry of pain and memory of revulsion she needed to forget. She must forget. “No.”

“But—”

“No,” she said hoarsely. “You don’t understand what you ask of me. Of him.” Her slim fingers trembled through her hair. But when she spoke, her voice was calm again, and toneless. “Shall I touch you, Kayle. Shall I rape your private mind? Would you enjoy that? Would you stroke my lips and whisper loving thanks?”

Kayle’s eyes closed; he had no comfort for her truth.

“Tell me, Kayle. Tell me how much you would like touching me.”

Then she laughed, a sound worse to hear than her scream.

“Stop it!” snapped the Sharnn, angered by her pain, not understanding her pattern, for it was too close to his. And he did not understand that, either.

“Think about it, Kayle,” she said. “Then send the Sharnn away. Out of reach.”

“What about Malia’s future?” asked Kayle.

She leaned toward the Nendleti, her face unsmiling and serene. “We let the poison fruit grow. If it

must be eaten, we will eat it to the core.” Her pale eyes cleared, now more crystal than silver, more turquoise than either. “The dead can only destroy the living. Send the Sharnn away, where his radiance can shine forever, fierce and alive. Forever.”

Kayle turned away from the truth in her eyes, and the beauty. He looked over at the tall Sharnn whose shoulders and hands and chest wore blood both bright and black. Malia had nearly killed him once. Would he survive the next time?

Ryth saw Kayle’s face change.

“No,” the Sharnn said, moving abruptly back from both of them, his body flexed in subtle warning. “I need Faen’s skill. She and I can work together. Without touching each other. At all.” He stared at Kayle, then back into the transcendent stillness of her eyes. “Agreed?”

Something moved deep within Faen’s stillness, grief or laughter or both in harmony. “Pattern-man. Life is so easy for you.” At the Sharnn’s abrupt gesture, she added negligently, “Oh, I agree. Yes. So wonderfully easy.”

And she laughed in sad amusement while he pulled on his bloody shirt.

The scarlet bird’s warning rose and fell in superb urgency as another flyer landed. Faen tilted her head, eyes closed, listening. Then her lips shaped an answer that was inhumanly beautiful. The Sharnn leaned toward her, his every sense absorbed. Another call came from the grove, a pure rill of music that she answered, soft lips gleaming, alive, throat pulsing and he swayed closer, bending over her, almost touching, wanting only to drink from her lips the tere bird’s song, until he remembered and his face twisted. There was nothing personal in her allure, no special invitation to him. She was simply a Malian aristocrat, sensual and compelling in the extreme. She was Faen.

And he was a fool.

He shuddered, awakening the slash across his shoulder, but both fresh pain and blood were welcome. In control again, he stepped back, away from her. When the last exquisite note soared beyond hearing and her eyes opened once more, neither his face nor his body showed his desire for her.

One day only. Once only.

But the Sharnn rebelled and then understood how deeply Malia had rooted in his senses. And Faen.

\*No!\*

He did not realize he had linked with her, mind touching mind, telling her that he would not leave.

“You must,” she said, hands spread in mute pleading. “There are too many. They will kill you.”

But even as she spoke, her mind called to him, inarticulate with joy at hearing an echo return changed, stronger. Then she realized what had happened and closed down her mind with a skill that exceeded his ability.

“Kayle,” she said, turning to the Nendleti with an urgency that flared her long dress. “Tell him he must leave.”

Kayle’s acute ears caught both the accents of desperation in her voice and the sounds of people approaching through the tere grove.

“He must leave,” she repeated. “He must live.”

“No time,” sighed Kayle. “He has chosen.”

Faen looked from one to the other and realized the futility of argument. With startling speed she moved to the wall. Her fist smacked a hidden relay and the outer gate snapped shut, creating an apparently seamless wall. Her hand moved again, hovering over a hidden comnet relay. Once activated, everything said or done on either side of the wall would be amplified and transmitted to every point on the surface of Malia.

“The moment I activate the comnet, you are my servants.”

“Servants?” said Kayle.

“Yes. As such, you might be allowed to stay. Or at least to leave alive.” Her eyes raked over Ryth and she said, mind and voice, “Agreed, Sharnn?”

He shrugged and bled again. “Agreed.”

And both knew the agreement held only so long as he was permitted to stay; he had no intention of leaving without what he had come for, though to remain was death.

“Follow my lead in everything, pattern-man. Everything!”

Faen’s hand swept over the relay. The atmosphere changed subtly, so subtly that only a Malian would have noticed. Or a Sharnn who had begun to conceive of being Malian.

They heard the sounds of people approaching the outer gate. There were low murmurs of surprise when the men realized that the wall was sealed against them.

Faen called out, her voice hard with the certainty of imperial power. “I am the Sandoliki Ti. By what right do you crowd my space?”

There was a long hush while the men on the other side of the wall digested the implications of her demand.

“Apologies and regrets, Ti, May we inquire if you are ... alone?”

“You may not.”

Silence. Then, “We are honored by your voice. We have told Sandoliki Ti Lekel of our honor. He has instructed us to honor your presence with our bodies.”

Faen’s mind snarled a Malian curse. But when she spoke, it was in the incisive tones of the imperial voice.

“Honor me at a greater distance or my servants will have your hair and hands.”

Ryth heard the shuffle of people withdrawing, but not very far. Faen’s teeth flashed in a cold smile as she blanked the comnet.

“They won’t fight?” asked Kayle softly, incredulous.

“I am a problem for the k’m’n Sandoliki’s Imperial Guards,” said Faen, satisfaction brittle in her voice and smile. “I am the last true Sandoliki. There is only one death price to equal killing the last of a family; if I die at Lekel’s command, everyone related to him by blood or marriage would be slaughtered within hours. Lekel himself would die very slowly, ministered to by all the skills of the First Assassin.”

Kayle turned to the silent Sharnn whose blood welled and ran down to drip slowly onto dry Malian stone. With an angry gesture, Kayle indicated the wound.

“Let’s see it.”

Ryth began to object, but something in the Nendleti’s hard orange eyes stopped him. With a smooth movement that mocked the very idea of injury, Ryth pulled off his loose outer shirt. Beneath a veneer of blood his muscles slid and coiled with undiminished strength. He turned his back to Kayle and stood motionless beneath Malia’s pouring light.

Before Kayle could step forward, Faen was there, standing between him and the Sharnn, close enough to Ryth to sense the warmth of his body but not touching him. Her silver eyes measured both his strength and his wound.

“Twist toward Kayle,” she said, and flinched subtly when the long cut pulled apart in a travesty of a smile.

But Ryth did not flinch, for pain was not a new concept to a Sharnn of the Seventh Dawn.

Faen spoke, looking back at Kayle. “Deep, but not crippling. No muscle or major blood vessel completely severed. With healing powder and tape—”

“—he will live to be killed by Imperial Guards,” finished Kayle bitterly. “Thank you, Ti Faen.”

The powerful hum of a nine-flyer filled all the silences of courtyard and garden. Kayle looked at Ryth as the flyer vanished beyond the tere grove. Sudden quiet told them the flyer had landed.

“Well, pattern-man, what now?”

“All things are equally probable.”

With a dissatisfied grunt, Kayle turned to Faen, but she merely stood, watching the Sharnn. Pain moved like lightning through her eyes and her fingers traced a t’sil’ne phrase near his back, but not touching. Not touching.

“Strap on your knife, Sharnn,” she said, her voice devoid of the emotions that burned behind her silver eyes.

He turned to face her but she would not meet his eyes as she gestured to the niche where his knife lay. He went to the niche and strapped on the knife. His hand stroked the restless, shimmering Sharnn cape, but did not remove it; she had only mentioned the knife. He pulled on his bloody shirt and turned to

face her. She neither spoke nor looked at him, and into the hush came the tere bird's warning.

Faen did not answer.

The call came again, only to be answered by silence. The scarlet bird called yet again, flawless song rising and falling as though perfect beauty would compel an answer.

But Faen's lips did not move, and the tere bird's answer came from beyond the wall, crystal music from a small sarsa, a man's song composed of passion and pain and unexpected silences. The song's impatience was surpassed only by its strength, its pain only by its silences. And through all was woven sensual power, skilled consummation. The core of melody was as seductive as the trembling throat of a ripe zamay.

"Lekel," murmured Faen, and she whispered a Malian phrase too low for Ryth to hear. Then she turned to him and spoke as clearly as the tere bird's final call. "Listen to me, laseyss."

Though the word was unfamiliar to Ryth, the urgency of her beautiful voice riveted his attention.

"I listen," he said with equal softness.

"There are many ways this day might end, and I will try each one of them—do you believe me?—I will try each one before I try the last. But if I must," she leaned toward him, face tilted up and her eyes holding his, "if I must try the last, you must help me. If I lift my arms, then you must come to me, kneel beneath my hands and think of the most delightful thing you know."

The Sharnn's body tightened subtly, but she continued as if she had not noticed, low-voiced, relentless.

"If we come to that last ending, then remember—remember and believe—that whatever I do is honorable. You must not show revulsion. You must not! Then you will live to call my song on the sarsa. Just once, laseyss. Once is not too much to ask, even of a Sharnn."

She turned her face away, but he saw sadness pooling in her eyes and thought he heard her say again the word that he did not understand.

"Laseyss?" he said, his voice a harsh whisper. "What is that word?"

Faen's only answer was a variation of the tere bird's song, an eerie threnody that went no further than him. Then she changed as he watched, withdrawing, eyes more dark than silver, body poised, deadly as sel and far more potent. With a blur of speed she activated both connet and gate.

K'm'n Sandoliki Lekel's entourage waited just beyond, where nightvine and cream flowers coiled, their scented strength and patience pervading the rust-tasting wind. A tall woman dressed in the burnt orange of Lekel's guards walked forward with the confident stride of a fighter. With, dazzling skill she slipped two long knives out of their sheaths and presented the weapons, hilt forward, to Faen.

"Sandoliki Ti Lekel honors Sandoliki Ti Faen," said the woman formally.

"How pleasant for the k'm'n Sandoliki," said Faen, giving Lekel the lesser title as she waved the knives away with a negligent fingertip.

A man's indulgent laughter leaped above the suddenly motionless guards. Then they divided to allow a man's passage. Tall and lean, fair-haired and supple, Lekel came forward with a stride that made his orange robe shift like wind-driven flame. He stopped only when another step would have caused a collision with Faen. Then he stood so near to her that the edges of his robes slid over the scarlet mesh of her hem. Only Ryth sensed the pain/anger that sprayed through her at the contact, yet she did not retreat.

"Your tongue was always your most interesting weapon," said Lekel, his brown eyes moving over her with tangible hunger.

"It's the only one you've dared to test," Faen said coldly.

Lekel laughed and lifted his hands as though to hold her face between his palms, but again he stopped just short of actual touch.

"Your hatred is sweeter than any woman's love," he murmured.

Lekel's lips were so close to Faen's that she could feel his breath, but she could not move back without touching his hands curved around her face. Ryth felt her pain and pride and something deeper than either that would have responded if it could, for she was Malian and must touch and could not, so she stood proud and helpless and angry between Lekel's hands almost touching her rage.

Ryth became absolutely still, savoring the death that awoke inside him, stretching as it had not

stretched since Sharn until the garden quiet became absolute, a slow revolving of the moment around the renaissance of Sharnn anger.

“Little sister,” breathed Lekel, “when I taste your—”

But Faen was gone in a sinuous blur of speed that took her beyond Lekel’s reach and close to the Sharnn’s stillness. She pulled Ryth’s savage radiance around her like an invisible cape.

Lekel’s dark eyes raked over the Sharnn who was as beautiful as a Malian and as deadly, but no Malian had eyes like that, silver and green, rage turning. Lekel forced his attention back to Faen, but before he could pursue her, another woman walked forward and stood just behind his arm. She was as tall as Faen, but nothing more of her could be seen, for she wore robes in every shade of maroon, and head veils so thick that they masked all but her grace.

“I am honored to hear the Sandoliki Ti Faen’s voice,” said the woman, her own voice totally lacking intonation. “When our call was cut off, I worried that something might have gone ill with you.”

“Disappointed, Memned?” said Faen, an expression of contempt arching her lips. Her eyes flicked back to Lekel. “And why do you accompany that thin copy you call your wife? Have you lost some of your loving Vintrans?”

The loathing in Faen’s voice when she said “Vintrans” was enough to make Ryth’s skin tighten.

“Not lately,” said Lekel with a cold smile. “But I see you’ve found two for yourself.”

Faen’s eyes went white.

“Apologies and regrets, de f’mi ti,” Lekel said, with a slight bow. “I know you would not permit Vintrans so close to your warmth.”

Ryth watched the two Sandolikis, sensed the long-flowing currents of rage and humiliation, desire and revenge that colored every word spoken between them. And the Sharnn wondered why she had not killed Lekel long ago.

“De f’mi ti?” repeated Faen, her lips curving in a cruel smile. “And just how would you know that I am a great sensualist? The one time you touched me was scarcely a pleasure for either of us, n’ies?”

Lekel’s eyes darkened to black as old pain twisted in them. She saw, and smiled.

“Condolences, Memned,” she murmured to the woman hidden behind maroon veils. “Even a Vintran deserves better than a rapist.”

The garden became absolutely still as everyone waited to see if Memned or Lekel would challenge Faen. Then the rustle of Memned’s heavy veils broke the moment. Lekel’s fingers moved beneath her veils in quick t’sil’ne phrases and she leaned toward him, fingertips on his lips, answering.

“I’ll have to accept your word for that, Sandoliki,” said Lekel coldly. “Yours is the greater experience with Vintrans.”

Faen merely smiled, though her eyes were still white. And Lekel stared at her with real need, torn among anger and hunger and regret until he sighed very softly.

“There are two here,” said Lekel, looking only at Faen’s perfect lips, “who have stayed longer than—”

“Not so,” interrupted Faen. “They have until the moment of sunset. And their need is great. One of them I owe from the past when another lived in my skin. I would help him, but it needs more than a day.”

“No.”

“But—”

“The Sandoliki Ti Faen remembers our agreement?”

From the change in her eyes, Ryth knew that at least one possibility had just been destroyed.

“The Sandoliki Ti remembers,” she said. “No seeker may stay with me for more than one day, and only once in three hundred. Including the k’m’n Sandoliki Lekel,” she added with a coldness that was worse than a knife.

“As for sunset,” began Lekel, “they have murdered five—”

“Not murder,” said Faen, her voice an imperial whip. “One for one and one for four.”

“Four?”

“The Sandoliki Ti Faen witnessed it,” said Faen formally. “The Sandoliki Ti Faen celebrates a Sharnn called Ryth.”

Lekel's eyes narrowed darkly; but he did not look at Ryth.

"I am keeping him to guard the privacy of my spaces," said Faen. "As my servant, he is free to stay."  
Wind surged out of the tere grove, flapped robes and veils.

"You have just killed him," said Lekel.

Three of his guards leaped outwards, forming a triangle around Ryth, two in back and one in front. So great was their haste that they miscalculated their distance from Faen. The wind lifted a fighter's robes, snapped it across the back of Faen's legs. When she sensed the other's aura, she cried out with pain. Before Lekel could speak, Ryth's foot caught the offending guard on the temple. As the man crumpled, Ryth spun, body and hands blurring with the speed of his movements. Two blows landed as one and the Sharnn stood alone.

No more than an instant had passed since Faen cried out. He sensed a flash of triumph from her and knew that she had permitted that painful touch and cried out for a reason he did not yet know.

"They are alive," said Ryth coldly, "because the Sandoliki Ti Faen doesn't need their miserable deaths. But if they impinge upon her space again—"

"I'll kill them myself," said Lekel.

Ryth knew that Lekel meant it; that Faen's pain was Lekel's pain; that Lekel would have killed to avoid the slightest discomfort for Faen.

"He fights like a Malian," said Lekel, turning to Faen.

"He fights for me."

"No." There was regret in Lekel's voice almost equal to his jealousy. Almost, but not quite. "No, my Faen. No man for you but one I choose."

"Then remember," she said, voice bittersweet with triumph, "that it is you who have chosen!"

Faen turned toward Ryth, lifting her arms in a gesture that was both imperious and disturbingly sensual. Slowly, like a wild animal drawn against his deepest instincts, the Sharnn came to her and knelt beneath her hands.

"Your knife, de f mi Ryth."

Like her gesture, her voice was both commanding and smoky with desire.

Ryth drew his knife from beneath his shirt with startling speed. The worn metal flashed in the sun as he turned the knife so that the blade pointed away from Faen. Her slim hand grasped the hilt. With a movement as swift as his, she cut away the shoulder of his shirt with the tip of the blade. The long, slightly curved wound showed red in the sun. Just beyond the major slash were two shorter cuts, signature of a m'vire. Blood welled slowly from deep within the longest wound.

He thought he heard Lekel call her name, but it was too late, had been too late from the moment she had first known Ryth's seething radiance. She knelt in front of him and her proud head bent until her lips were close to his ear and only he could hear her words.

"Life is never easy, pattern-man," Faen said softly. "By Malian rituals I may either kill you now ... or touch you. Your choice."

Ryth stared into the silver eyes so close to his, but saw neither triumph nor malice, only the immense compassion he had sensed once before. She knew what her touch cost him. And her. He closed his eyes, answering her so softly that she could have imagined rather than heard the words.

"Touch me."

"Give yourself to the ritual, Ti Ryth," she breathed into his ear as she laid his knife on the stone between their bodies. "Lose yourself in its inevitable pattern. And help me, Sharnn. It will be the last time."

She sensed the power within him surge to meet whatever came. His eyes opened green and deep and calm. Her hands trembled slightly, but only he was close enough to see. Her fingertips brushed his forehead and her voice echoed zamay and night and desire. While she spoke, her fingers moved over his flesh in the light touches and subtle pressures of t'sil'ne, making him come alive with an awareness that was beyond words.

"You have thought of me ... seen me ... heard me ... spoken to the core of my life," she said, her voice like a song. "Now I speak to yours."



She bent over his shoulder in a cool cascade of black hair. Her lips on his wound sent shockwaves of conflicting emotions through him, as did her soft apology for such intimacy. When she straightened, her eyes were tarnished but her fingers continued to stroke in ancient ritual.

“Blood shed for me, deaths brought to me—”

He saw that her mouth was no longer narrow, but full and red, his blood on her lips that spoke sweetly, relentlessly, and suddenly he understood the ritual, was aware of a deadly pattern.

“—life giving life to me. I cannot fight him who brings life.”

Her hand dove between them, raised his knife in a flashing arc meant to open her own throat, but his hand was moving before her fingers touched the hilt. He tried to deflect the blade entirely, but her skill and speed were too great. The knife hissed across her shoulder and blood flowed down her scarlet robes.

Faen’s angry cry was lost in the collective gasp of the watching men. Before she could fight, she found her face held in the gentle vise of his fingertips speaking to her flesh while his resonant voice compelled a different end to the ritual.

“You have thought of me ... seen me ... heard me ... spoken to the core of my life.

“Now I speak to yours.”

His hands tore the mesh of her robes, revealing the red line of blood. She moaned softly when his lips touched her wound, but when she tried to fight him she found herself helpless in the grip of his mind. His mental presence shocked her more than his touch. When he lifted his head, she saw her blood on his lips and knew she was defeated. His fingertips touched her with the incandescent skill of a Malian lover.

“Blood shed for me, deaths brought to me—”

Her eyes closed and she would have escaped into unconsciousness but he did not allow her even that.

“—life giving life to me. I cannot fight her who brings life.”

His fierce presence swept away her half-formed protests. When his lips again touched her wound, the knife slid from her hand and fell onto the stones. Her head bent over his wounded shoulder, then lifted to him. Their lips met, their blood mingled. Her whole body trembled, but her voice was that of the Sandoliki Ti.

“Blood of my blood, there is only life between us now.”

The savage ritual was complete.

Ryth pulled Faen to her feet, then released her. He sensed her weakness in the faint swaying of her body, yet her head was high and proud as she looked at Lekel. Ryth followed her glance, and saw that Lekel was a man who would gladly kill.

“The Sandoliki Ti has spoken,” said Lekel harshly. “Malia rejoices.” He stared at the Sharnn with palpable hatred. “And you—”

“He is Sandoliki Ti Ryth,” said Faen, coldly, and only Ryth sensed the effort it cost her.

Lekel paused and his lips jerked. “Sandoliki Ti ... Ryth!”

The Sharnn bent to pick up his knife, but Faen was faster.

“This is mine, now.”

She rose and faced Lekel again, Ryth’s knife in her hand and her mind flat with exhaustion, but not her voice.

“Near-sister,” began Lekel.

“No,” she said gently, implacably. “I am no longer your potential mate.”

Lekel’s face changed and the possibility of death bloomed like an invisible flower.

“No insult,” she said formally. “Merely fact. The Sandoliki Ti may have only one mate.”

“De f mi—” he said, voice rich with emotion.

“No.” Her eyes looked through him. “Never.”

If Lekel had sensed her exhaustion, he would have challenged her, but Lekel heard only her unyielding words, saw only her remorseless eyes. He wanted her more than he had since the day he inadvertently drove her off Malia, but he had learned much since that day. He bowed to her and to Malian tradition, but his eyes were like hands touching the warmth of her flesh.

Faen could not look away, for to do so would shout her weakness. “Though you are only distant kin,” she said, “I will permit you kin question. Has Sandoliki Ti Ryth insulted you or your family’s honor in any way?”

Faen’s words were a traditional invitation to challenge Ryth for any past slights. Lekel’s desire to make that challenge burned behind his eyes.

“And when I win?” Lekel said softly.

Faen’s smile was more cruel than any words. “I will kill you.”

“I won’t fight you, Faen. For if I win ...” Lekel sighed and controlled his voice as he addressed Ryth. “No past insults have been noted.”

“Witnessed and completed,” said Faen; then she blanked the comnet.

Without a word, she turned and walked through the small arch into the sanctuary of her machine-made kel. Kayle and Ryth were only a half-step behind. The arch door hissed closed behind diem.

Without looking at either man, Faen opened a door to a long, narrow room with curving walls and ceiling. While Ryth and Kayle hesitated on the threshold, Faen’s fingers danced over a panel made of textured strips and glowing lights. In response to her touch the room seemed to change, walls and ceiling receding and sunset light slanting through a sky that had never known rust-tasting wind, where the smell of ancient tere groves drifted above scarlet leaves and a river flowed swift and sweet and green through a land not yet ruined.

Kayle moved as though to follow her.

\*No,\* ordered the Sharnn curtly. \*Give her space.\*

She seemed to walk into the distance, swallowed by the tricks of light and scent and space, and the Sharnn’s thoughts were a compound of respect and regret and a desire so pervasive that it was as omnipresent and unnoticed as the air they breathed.

\*Marvelous,\* thought Kayle, eyes wide as he examined the seamless illusion created by the h’kel. \*Like our omni-synth.\*

The room was a valley edged by jagged blue-black mountains wearing crowns of ice. The wind from their summits was pure and bright, rich with the promise of sanctuary. Tere leaves stirred in the wind with a sound like water flowing, a sound that was echoed by the river itself, blue-green pools and silver rapids linked by transparent shallows gliding over smooth black stones.

There was a flash of red as Faen stripped off her clothes and spread her fingers to the clean, sun-swept air. Her hair burned blackly in the embrace of sunset light.

Ryth swayed unknowing as Faen knelt by the river. Silver drops of water sprayed from her fingertips and he thought he heard her laugh or cry but he could not be sure which, for a cloud of unbound hair concealed her face like a baffling pattern. Her pattern.

“Do you know her pattern yet?” asked Kayle, echoing the Sharnn’s thoughts.

“What does laseyss mean?” countered Ryth.

Kayle hesitated, shocked. Then he smiled. \*Will you play a child’s game with me, Ti Ryth?\*

returned Kayle, riding out the storm of demand from the Sharnn until Ryth shrugged, accepting.

\*Yes.\*

\*The rules are simple. Imagine something of great value to you. Something rare and unique and absolutely compelling. No—don’t tell me what you have imagined. Just imagine it. Ready?\*

\*Yes,\* thought Ryth, and the single word crackled painfully in Kayle’s mind.

\*Now imagine that you have two choices. I will give you what you have imagined, your laseyss. You may keep it for a few moments of time, after which it will be destroyed utterly; or you may release your laseyss untouched with the full knowledge that though the laseyss remains intact, you might never hold it. Which do you choose?\*

\*Release.\*

\*A quick answer. Too quick? Remember, if you held your laseyss, you would at least have memories.\*

\*I’d have the memory of destroying it.\* Ryth’s impatience seethed painfully. \*Bitter comfort. I prefer

to let go of my ... laseyss ... and have the knowledge that somewhere in the universe something precious to me survives.\*

Even as the Sharnn's thought formed, his face changed. \*You have taught me, Ti Kayle. I am grateful.\*

\*I've only taught that which you previously taught me—where your own pattern is involved, your skill is erratic.\* Kayle weighed Ryth's expression, but could not be sure.

With an inward sigh, he risked Sharnn anger. \*What happened in the courtyard?\*

Only Kayle's six maturities of discipline kept him from crying out at the force of Ryth's mind, flaring just an instant before the Sharnn's control solidified again.

\*Faen almost found her honorable death.\*

The light in the room deepened to ancient gold as the sun nestled against the shoulder of a black mountain. As though their meeting set the world afire, the sky became streaked with scarlet incandescence.

\*She called me laseyss.\*

And so perfect was the Sharnn's control that Kayle wondered if Ryth was human after all.

\*She could not leave Malia,\* continued the Sharnn. \*I could not stay. But I would stay, and die. She refused my death and insured her own. Lekel could not force Sandoliki Ti Ryth to leave Malia.\*

Light ran like fire over Ryth's features, making the mask of Sharnn control even more formidable. But Kayle was Nendleti, and Carifil.

\*Perhaps she saw her death as the only possible solution ... ?\*

But the Sharnn did not respond, unless shadows twisting deep within the green of his eyes was an answer.

\*What happened, Ryth? I understood only the result.\*

Kayle waited for an answer, and only his restrained breathing revealed his unease as he watched a Sharnn test the edges of his own control. Then Ryth's bleak eyes searched the spreading shadows by the river, but could not find her.

"The pattern," said Ryth aloud, yet somehow as quietly as a thought, "is quite simple. Malia has a tabu against the extinction of family lines. Malia also has an absolute requirement for total revenge. Given the paradox, there has to be a means of neutralizing dargs vire."

"Marriage," murmured Kayle.

"Simple, but not easy. What if one or the other partner is unwilling to end the darg vire? Can you think of a way to force a Malian to consummate what is perceived as a dishonorable act?"

"No. If the Malian can't kill you, he'll kill himself."

"Exactly. Lekel forced Faen into a dishonorable position. I prevented her from killing herself." And though the Sharnn did not speak, his thought scored Kayle's mind. \*I did not know myself or her or the moment that we faced each other or that I should have held her sooner ...\*

"Teach me," urged Kayle softly.

The sun was like a great eye, blinding, and all the colors of incandescence poured over the room, making even shadows seem alive. A part of himself that Ryth had never known reached out to her, but she was beyond even that, hiding in the incandescent illusion until the moment passed and every shade of red claimed the sky while shadows pooled, again lifeless.

"Faen is the last Sandoliki," whispered the Sharnn. "Lekel loves her, wants her, but he is no fool. Her reflexes are quicker than his. If the marriage knife were laid between them, one of them would die."

The Sharnn's eyes never left the place where he knew Faen to be, though little could be seen as light drained from the illusory sky.

"Then we came and asked to stay and she wanted us ... me. Lekel cannot, will not, fight her. But he could have me killed." Ryth's body moved, a ripple that hinted at strength that he had not yet used. "Faen knew, as surely as any Sharnn, the many ways the pattern could end. She tried every pattern that would let me live and failed but one, the one that would take her life by her own swift hand.

"And that was the last one left. There are two honorable ways for a Malian to evade a marriage ritual," said Ryth between his teeth. "Kill the other. Or kill yourself. She would not kill me. I stopped her

from killing herself.

“And then I held her, a Malian ...”

In silence he watched the last scarlet streaks drain into a darkness that was as impenetrable as his mind.

Later, surrounded by true night, the sarsa sang with sensuality, half-life and half-death mingling, disturbing shadows and Sharnn dreams alike.

### III

Stone kels, mostly ruined, fanned out from the dome, separated from it and each other by gardens and walls that were also mostly ruined. Only a wedge-shaped piece of the compound was reasonably intact. Faen’s dome occupied the narrow part of the wedge; the flyer pad was on the flared edge. Between were the courtyard, garden and tere grove.

In the immensity of the goldstone ruins, the living wedge seemed pitifully small, the dome even smaller. But Malian maze artistry had made the interior of the dome into a whole world that was complex enough to tease even a Sharnn’s pattern skills.

Ryth paused when the hallway he was following curved against a woven arras that probably concealed the entrance to another hall. Ryth turned away, then turned back as he solved the maze’s mystery. He slid the heavy arras aside and stepped into a h’kel that took up almost an entire floor of the multi-level dome.

Off to one side of the room was a transparent column surrounding an interior garden bright with turquoise zamay. When Ryth walked near, the tall flowers trembled and hummed and stroked their soft petals across the unfeeling column wall, asking. Ryth stopped, fingertips reaching and remembering a smoldering fall of m’zamay across his hands. But before he could find the entrance to the garden, he saw Kayle sitting just beyond the reach of sunlight, staring at the zamay with unseeing eyes. He was wearing a Carifil psitran around his forehead, but his mind was no further away than a rainbow insect flitting inside the clear column.

Tactfully, Ryth allowed his cape to make a small noise, just enough to capture Kayle’s attention without startling him. Kayle looked toward the noise, but did not see Ryth. The Sharnn walked forward until sunlight blazed over his bronze hair. Kayle’s mouth twitched in surprise.

“Incredible,” murmured the Nendleti. “If you wore your hood, you would be invisible. Why would a solitary Sharnn need such a cape?”

When Ryth glanced down at his Sharnn cape, his face echoed Kayle’s surprise. For the first time, Ryth realized that his mind must be very much on edge; the cape was in its fighting mode. As he walked toward Kayle, the cape swept around Ryth’s bare feet, concealing, curling, twisting light into shapes that eyes could not comprehend, so the mind registered nothing.

“When I was young,” said Ryth, “I lived in the wild places of Sharn.” The cape surged and flowed as though casting for a scent of danger. “This cape confuses scent as well as sight. Claws and thorns and other weapons slide off it. It is warm when ice shatters in the high reaches, cool when rock smokes in the white desert.”

“May I?” asked Kayle, his sensitive fingers stretched toward the cape.

“Of course.”

With a fluid motion, Ryth released the cape and laid it across Kayle’s lap. Kayle’s eyes measured Ryth’s tall, hard figure, the liquid ease of movement and muscle, and the new knife strapped against his abdomen. In no way did Ryth show recent injury, for Sharnn capes healed as well as concealed.

“Unusual textures,” murmured Kayle as he turned his attention to the object across his lap. “Neither smooth nor rough, but never the same.” His fingers paused. “Dense without being heavy, fine without being flimsy.” Sensitive fingertips probed, then stroked, enjoying. “Remarkable and elusive, like everything else I have seen from Sharn.” Then, sharply, “Are you expecting trouble? Is that why you wear a cape you consider a weapon?”

“A Sharnn cape becomes ... restive ... unless it's worn from time to time.”

“Oh?” Kayle's eyes probed the luminous folds of the cape. “Then it's an animal? Or perhaps a plant?”

“Both. And neither.”

Kayle snorted. “Is it alive?”

“Sometimes.”

“Parasite?”

“Symbiot. Sometimes. And sometimes it is merely a cape that likes to lie in the sun.”

Kayle laughed softly. “And sometimes it's a weapon, n'ies?” added Kayle, using the Malian interrogative.

“N'ies,” agreed Ryth.

Delicately, Kayle savored the unique feel of the Sharnn cape. For a few moments the cape was passive, pliant. Polite. Then it flared out and settled around Ryth's shoulders with a rustling sigh.

“It was ... limited ... in the niche,” said Ryth, as though apologizing for the cape's abrupt departure from Kayle's touch. “And it ... knows ... it has only a small time before I return it to the niche.”

Kayle seemed not to have heard. Even as Ryth spoke, the Nendleti's eyes flattened with sudden rage. Ryth waited, sensing that Kayle's mind was elsewhere. Then the Nendleti's broad lips twisted around silent curses. Ryth tried to catch the edges of the thoughts that Kayle was receiving, but the psitran was a pattern he did not yet understand.

Finally, Kayle jerked the psitran off. His blunt fingertips massaged his forehead, though the psitran had left no visible marks. Quietly, passionately, Kayle reviled all things Malian. Ryth waited, listening with mounting unease, trying to reconcile Kayle's barely controlled hatred of Malians with Faen's luminous reality.

But the reconciliation was beyond Ryth's ability to conceive, for if Kayle were right, Malians were inevitably, irrevocably evil. And if Kayle were wrong, Malia would be destroyed out of blind prejudice.

Kayle could not be right, for Faen was Malian.

Kayle could not be wrong, for the Carifil were not blind.

“Tell me,” demanded the Sharnn finally, his voice harsh with the futile circling of his own thoughts.

“Four more of my people died on Vintra.”

“How?”

“I don't know. All I know is that five mind-linked Carifil couldn't contact either one.”

“Why do you blame Malians?”

Kayle's eyes went opaque and he weighed Ryth as though he were a stranger.

“Why shouldn't I, Sharnn? I told my people to learn all they could about Malia and Malians. The longer they were on Vintra, the closer they came to proving that Malia was behind Vintra's troubles.

“My people followed rumors and hints and found bits of truth condemning Malia.”

“I listen,” said Ryth with an intensity that stilled even his Sharnn cape, as he waited for Kayle to tell him that Malians were evil and Faen was Malian.

“Explosives,” Kayle said succinctly. “A compound peculiar to Malia. Malians use it in mining the core crystal found deep in Malia's granitic rocks. The explosive leaves a unique stress signature on the granite that is too distant from the center of the explosion to crumble.”

“Go on.”

“Vintra's major aqueducts all pass through blackstone granite at some point in their lengths. Wherever aqueduct and blackstone meet, aqueducts have shattered beyond hope of repair.” Kayle's knuckles dug into his knees, massaging muscles coiled to attack, but there was nothing to fight, except himself. “Because blackstone is always found in heavily faulted areas, it was assumed that crustal movements had destroyed the aqueducts.”

“But the crust didn't move?”

Kayle gestured abruptly. “Oh, it moved, Sharnn. Many times. It might even have shattered an aqueduct or two. But it did not leave behind a cone-shaped stress pattern in Vintra's blackstone highlands!”

The Sharnn's eyes became more dark than green, unfathomable. "Is there anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"There are other possible explanations. Vintrans were Malians once. The explosives could have been exported to Vintra."

"Vintra and Malia have no trade."

"There are other ways."

Kayle made a sound of disgust. "Explain pekh, then. A disease endemic to Malia, a disease that somehow ravages whole districts of Vintra."

"Again, Kayle, Vintrans were Malians once. The colonists probably brought the disease with them."

"Then why did it only appear recently—and only in the wake of a 'dark-haired woman with eyes like ice.'"

Though neither spoke, they both thought of Faen, and of the Concord saying: Trust a Malian to betray you.

"There are other incidents," continued Kayle, his husky voice as hard as a file. "Each follows the same pattern. Disaster for Vintra; Concord investigation and discovery; death for the Concord agents who did the discovering. Their deaths—as much as the evidence they gathered—brought proscription down on Malia."

Ryth closed his eyes, thinking fiercely of what he had just heard, grabbing its pattern and shaking it until the weakest elements sheared off.

"Not one agent survived?" he asked abruptly.

"None."

"The odds against all of them dying accidentally are—"

"Practically infinite," Kayle said grimly.

"Then we must assume that your agents were discovered and watched."

"Yes."

"Then," asked the Sharnn reasonably, "why weren't they killed before they discovered evidence damning to Malia?"

"Concord agents aren't stupid, Sharnn," snapped Kayle. "They simply outwitted their pursuers long enough to do what was required."

"Every time? Without fail? Every agent?" Ryth paused, letting his questions hang in the silent h'kel. "Maliens aren't stupid, either, Kayle."

"What are you trying to say?" demanded Kayle. He stood up with a savage motion that was as threatening as an unsheathed knife. "Are you telling me that Malia is innocent?"

The Sharnn's cape snapped out invisibly, but stopped short of touching the enraged Nendleti. Ryth shrugged and the cape rippled back around his feet.

"I'm merely saying that nothing you have told me irrevocably condemns Malia. Also," added the Sharnn softly, "you are blaming yourself for deaths you could not have prevented."

Kayle turned away with a soundless snarl. His muscles bunched beneath his flowered robes, but Carifil conditioning overrode the Nendleti's innate ferocity.

"You're probably right, pattern-man," said Kayle tightly. "But by the Allgod's orange eyes, I wish you would tell me something useful!"

"Isn't Malia's possible innocence useful? Or do you wish Faen and her people dead?"

"No," Kayle said, his voice hoarse. "Not again ... F'n'een. But think, Sharnn. Think! Malians can no more help their primal allure than you can help responding to it. Does that make them innocent?"

"No. Nor does it make them guilty."

Kayle groaned softly. "That's what they said, but—"

"They?"

"The Carifil." Kayle sighed deeply and was silent for long moments while he disciplined his seething emotions. When he spoke again, he was more Carifil than Nendleti. "Perhaps if we knew exactly how these last four died. The others simply vanished."

Ryth's eyes snapped with questions that Kayle did not see, but answered anyway.

“When an agent disappears in a district that collapsed in seismic heaves or succumbed to a devastating epidemic or flood or—” Kayle made a savage gesture, but his voice was controlled. “It is reasonable to assume that the missing agent died in the same way and at the same time that the native population died. N’ies?”

Ryth hesitated, then agreed. “N’ies. But the agents’ bodies were not found?”

“Under the circumstances of mass death,” said Kayle dryly, “it isn’t surprising.”

Ryth frowned and his Sharnn cape hissed across the smooth floor. “Reasonable, yes,” he murmured. “But inevitable?” The cape shimmered, no longer invisible, brilliant with sliding colors, a thousand possibilities. “Did the agents leave anything behind before they went to die on Vintra? Something personal—jewelry or weapons or touchstones.”

Kayle pulled on his psitran and disciplined his thoughts, reaching out to distant Carifil minds. Very quickly, he had an answer for Ryth.

“Whatever the Carifil can find will be sent here, wrapped in misa silk to limit contamination by other auras.” Kayle fixed his impenetrable orange eyes on Ryth. “Anything else?”

Before Ryth could answer, Faen stepped noiselessly into the sunlight radiating through the garden column.

“Send their bodies to me,” she said, “if you find them.”

Neither man answered, but simply watched her. She was no longer dressed in the scarlet of a Malian bride, A cape the color of zamay petals fell from her shoulders to brush the floor. Beneath the cape she wore a matching fabric that fitted as well as her own skin. Her black hair was coiled on top of her head. At her ears and ankles hung tiny, blue-green crystal bells that chimed softly as she approached the column.

Kayle watched and marveled at the control that had kept the bells silent when she entered the room. Ryth noticed neither the sound nor its absence; he sensed that the bells were symbolic, and wondered what new pattern was emerging.

“Their bodies?” repeated Kayle slowly, watching the weaponless woman who approached him wrapped in turquoise and crystal sound and deadly grace. He wondered how long she had stood in silence, listening, and how much she had understood.

“What are bodies but the temporary repository of life energies?” she asked. “When the energy has gone, the body becomes merely an object like a touchstone or a knife. But better for our purposes than either one. On the body, the patterns of life are deeply, intimately engraved. I can learn more from a corpse than a knife.”

Kayle closed his eyes and sent the macabre request out to waiting Carifil. And almost hoped that the bodies would not be found.

“I prefer not to work where I sleep,” said Faen to Ryth. “The conflicting energies are unpleasant.”

“Of course.”

“We’ll use the fourth h’kel.”

Ryth turned and walked toward the arras, following the tiny whisper of crystal bells. Faen glided ahead, down the hallway to a lower level where the freight Access glowed. She indicated the area surrounding the Access with her hand. Her fingers brushed a panel and the outer walls became translucent, then glowed with a medley of muted colors that were soothing without being monotonous. One-third of the oval h’kel was marked off by an abrupt change in the pattern of the soft floor covering.

“Mine,” said Faen briefly, pointing to the smaller area. “There are misa-lined cupboards along the wall. Whatever you bring should be stored there.”

“I know.”

He watched her and his eyes were caught by the delicate beauty of crystal bells trembling at the ends of fine gold chains. From her coiled black hair rose a rain-sweet scent.

“Is your private h’kel satisfactory? Untouched?” she asked.

Something in the quality of his silence made her turn sharply toward him; bells swung and chanted against the curve of her neck. She searched his silver-green eyes.

“Those bells,” he said sharply. “Aren’t they usually worn by the dead?”

“Bells are also worn by the injured, the ill, pregnant women, and unwilling mates.”

“Why?”

Faen smiled slightly. “An ancient custom, Ti Ryth. The dead are hung with iron bells to prevent their shadows from stalking the living. For the injured, ill, or pregnant, crystal bells warn everyone that the wearer is temporarily removed from the ranks of fighters. An unwilling mate wears crystal bells—and fights—until the willing mate removes the bells.”

“Then the bells are meant to warn of hostile presence?”

“Yes.”

“Take them off whenever you want,” said Ryth dryly. “I noticed that you can move in perfect silence with or without bells.”

Faen moved her head and tiny bells swung, ringing. “They are symbol only. You know that I’ll not kill you. Laseyss.”

“It sounds more like hatred when you say it.”

“Does it?” She smiled without warmth. “The price you pay for an unwilling mate.”

“We’re not mates.”

She looked at him out of enigmatic silver eyes. Her earrings trembled with small crystal stirrings.

“By your rules, Sharnn, we are not married. By Malian rules we are bound until death.”

“You almost fainted when I touched you in the garden,” said Ryth slowly, his eyes noting each nuance of her body, “yet you insist we are mates. Do you want to be my wife in fact as well as in ritual?”

He waited for her response with an intensity that would have surprised him if he had been aware of it, but he was aware only of perfect, expressionless lips and blue-green crystal bells brilliant on gold chains.

“How could I want that?” she said with double-edged amusement in her voice. “You’ve made it clear that I repel you. My touch would destroy you more surely than any knife. That’s the secret of the warning bells, Sandoliki Ti Ryth. A crystal certainty warning you to stay beyond the reach of my Malian sensuality.”

Faen turned her back on him and walked to her part of the room, leaving behind the haunting sound of crystal. He watched her consummate grace and his eyes were narrowed as though he looked into the core of blazing white light. Her pattern was as elusive to him as dream-fragments, as frustrating as trying to catch a shadow.

But at the thought of catching shadows, his mind spun away, refusing a pattern condensing, because he did not want to conceive of shadows as another Sharnn once might have.

“Many of these cupboards are full,” said Faen, her surprise jarring him out of his unwelcome reverie.

“Weapons,” he said curtly. “Kayle and I took them from men who attacked us on Vintra. In the red cupboards are the weapons we took from the men who attacked us here.”

“You learned my kel’s maze very quickly, pattern-man. But that’s just as well, for surely you would not want to follow me everywhere.”

She glided down the row of cupboards, barely touching them, knowing they were full of death.

“It won’t be pleasant for you,” began Ryth.

“Little is, Sharnn.” She looked at him, then resumed her walk past the cupboards. “I’ve touched violent death many times,” she said carelessly.

But the subtle tightness of Faen’s body belied her indifferent tone. As many times as she had touched it, violent death was still a fresh agony to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, voice and eyes lit by a depth of feeling that surprised both of them.

She turned so swiftly that her earrings chimed. “You have done nothing to me that requires apology, Sandoliki Ti. My gift comes from the Great Destroyer, not you.” She turned back toward the cupboards. “Shall I begin now?”

“Has he told you what we want?” asked Kayle, walking noiselessly into the room.

“No, but I can easily guess,” said Faen. “I doubt that I’ll be much aid.”

Kayle’s eyes asked a silent question as he joined Ryth.

Faen’s hand waved toward the waiting cupboards. “You know they’re dead, because you killed them. You know they’re assassins, because they tried to kill you. And you know where and how they



died.” Her fingers moved and the blue-green gem flashed. “I could probably tell you more by looking at the weapons than by touching them.”

“Names?” prompted Kayle.

Even as Faen answered, Ryth moved his head in the negative gesture of Sharnn.

“Names mean little,” said Faen slowly. “Our only real name is discovered each time we die and forgotten each time we are born. We’ve had many shadow names; we’ll have many more. Only shadows are owned by names.”

She walked toward the cupboards, allowing her bells to sigh and chime.

“Are there any living relics here?”

“No,” said Kayle regretfully.

Faen said nothing.

“Can you distinguish between Malian and Vintran?” asked Ryth.

Faen’s lips twisted into the lines of loathing that appeared whenever she thought of Vintra. But her answer was honest, though very reluctant.

“I doubt it,” she said curtly. “Vintrans are animals, but they once were men.”

“Can you distinguish between Malians and most other races?”

“Yes.”

When Faen approached the first cabinet, Ryth crossed to a recorder panel set with clear control studs. His fingers swept over the controls. Shades of rose and gold and silver bloomed among the studs. Ryth watched the changing light; within seconds he could predict the next pattern. He turned away and watched Faen, exquisite and unpredictable.

\*If she doesn’t speak aloud,\* cautioned Kayle, \*be ready to enter her mind. I can’t.\*

Faen touched the first blue cupboard. A tongue of silk-covered wood slid out; on it was a blue steel, double-edged knife that gleamed against the pale misa silk.

“Malian made, probably from the Snow Continent. No guild marks. The owner was either not an assassin or had yet to complete meega.”

“Meega?” said Ryth.

“Professional death contract,” said Faen curtly. Her fingers moved above the knife, not touching. “Very little energy. Difficult to read.” She traced the blade with a fingertip lightly touching. “No deaths here.” Her fingers came to rest on the hilt. She grimaced, but did not lift her hand as a dead man’s thoughts/emotions poured into her.

“Young,” she continued. “Male. First meega.” Faen’s lips and voice thinned. “Impatience, then ... shock. Exploding shock, numbing. So quick he is so quick I can’t—” Faen’s eyelids flickered. “Darkness and peace and” her breath caught “slicing pain, blood warm and pouring, pouring ... trickling, seeping ... gone ...”

She lifted her hand and wiped her fingers on her cape.

“Someone cut his throat while he was unconscious,” she said tonelessly, and nudged the wooden tongue with her finger until the cupboard folded up, concealing the blue knife but not the memories.

The next cupboard contained another knife. It, too, was double-edged blue steel. But unlike the first knife, it looked old, much worn by the honing rod and scarred by other blades. On the hilt three words were engraved.

“Malian made. Ice Continent. Red Dawn assassin’s guild.”

Her hand hovered just above the weapon. “Little energy.” Fingertip touched blade. “No deaths here.”

She frowned, puzzled, and touched the blade more firmly.

“Perhaps he favored other weapons,” said Kayle, “and used this knife only in emergency.”

“Perhaps,” said Faen dubiously. “But the knife appears old.”

“Just appears?” said Ryth. “Doesn’t it feel old to you?”

Faen laid her palm on the blade. “No. There is but a light smear of minor emotions, superficial, overlaid by a single fear of pain. None of the energies have penetrated deeply. The knife has been casually handled by several people. The last one to hold it either had a very negligible aura or held it only

long enough to die.”

Kayle’s brown face puckered with surprise. “You’re sure?”

With a swift, impatient movement, Faen pressed the hilt of the knife against her forehead. Her eyes were wide and pale, fixed on past death and her lips spoke a dead man’s words.

“Waiting, waiting—the knife has no balance—coming alone, ready—throw!”

Faen took the hilt away from her forehead and flipped the knife end over end in her hand. “He was right; the knife is badly balanced. In spite of its scars, the weapon is newly—and badly—made.” She tossed it back onto the cupboard, which promptly folded and vanished. She stared at the cupboard and murmured, “Curious. Few assassins would knowingly take a bad weapon on meega.”

“How did that one die?” said Kayle.

“The same. His throat was slit while he was unconscious.” She moved her head suddenly, sending crystal sounds into the stillness. “There is one benefit to the puzzling matter of new knives. The less energy the objects have, the less they affect me.”

“And the less you learn?” asked Kayle.

“Yes. But if the energy is too great,” she said, “I’m overwhelmed and it takes much time and endurance to learn anything.”

Ryth watched as Faen opened the third cupboard. The third weapon was a blue steel knife that had no deaths on its blade and only a few shallow emotions on its hilt. Faen worked her way rapidly down the blue cupboards. All the knives were similar—new, largely untouched, no deaths on the blades, owners died with a second smile carved beneath their chins.

The last blue cupboard unfolded noiselessly. As expected, the knife was Malian blue steel, Ice Continent. But the guild marks were those of the White Dawn.

Faen reached out to touch it casually, then stopped, fingers well above the blade.

“This one is different. Very strong.”

She scrutinized the hilt more carefully. There were other ideographs running around the hilt. Her swift intake of breath made earrings jangle.

“What is it?” said Kayle, staring toward the knife, impatient to be closer but respecting her need for space.

“The owner of this weapon was a warrior of the Ninth Circle.”

Kayle hummed appreciatively and made a sign of respect. Faen’s finger moved closer to the blade, but did not touch the smoky metal. “Many, many deaths. Many years, hard years, war years, Malia and white dawns streaked with blood.” Faen lifted her finger and took a slow breath. “No recent deaths.”

“How long?” asked Ryth.

Her head jerked and crystal rang painfully. “One year ... maybe more. She was old, many maturities.”

“She?” snapped Kayle. “No woman attacked us on Vintra!”

Faen did not hear. She stood very still, eyes shut, gathering herself to touch the seething emotions permeating the old knife. With a silent sigh, she touched a single fingertip to the hilt of the knife. Her breath hissed through her teeth and her body jerked, but her voice was controlled, emotionless.

“Discipline and blood and desire. Give or receive death. And at last she received. Death by wire, splintering the Topaz Arcade.” Faen lifted her finger and let out her breath. “The Topaz Arcade is part of the Trembling Mountain y’Kel, part of the Sandoliki Compound. She died on Malia, not Vintra.”

“No women attacked us in that back alley on Vintra,” repeated Kayle slowly. “At least, I believe there were no women. It was dark, and we fought quickly.”

“But,” said the Sharnn, “we are certain that none of the assassins died by wire.”

Faen brushed the hilt again and her body swayed like zamay. “There is something,” she said, frowning. “A dark tide boiling, powerful. More powerful than any aura I’ve ever felt, except—did you handle this knife, Ryth?”

“May I?” said Ryth, gesturing to her area of the room.

“My husband need never ask to enter my space.”

Ryth said nothing while he inspected the knife. Its tip had a backward curve ending in a needle point

that had been broken off.

“No,” said Ryth, not recognizing the broken tip. “Kayle must have picked up this one. But very carefully.” Ryth looked back to Kayle, who gestured confirmation. “No flesh met blade.”

Faen watched the knife as though it might come alive at any moment. “If Kayle did not touch it, and you did not touch it, some other man did. A man of stillness and stealth and ... power. Yes, power rising and writhing like a shadow ... hungry ...” Her eyes were opaque, seeing an ugliness her voice refused to describe.

The Sharnn felt coldness move through him, unwanted pattern, but his voice was calm as he asked, “Malian?”

Faen shuddered. “I don’t know. I hope not.”

“Was the knife obtained on Malia?” asked Kayle.

“Probably,” said Ryth. “Few Malians ever leave the planet.”

“And fewer assassins,” added Faen.

“If Lekel sent them?” prodded Kayle.

Faen looked at both men, wrapped the knife and moved to return it to the cupboard.

“Wait,” said Ryth, his voice oddly strained. “How did the man die?”

Faen’s lips thinned at the urgency she sensed beneath his calm. “He is alive—as much as any shadow is. If I haven’t imagined him entirely.” She snapped her fingers with impatience. “The woman’s death blankets everything. I’ll have to get beyond it to the few instants he held the knife. If he held it at all. What I sensed may simply be her knowledge that a man killed her.”

“But then how did the knife end up on Vintra?” asked Kayle reasonably.

Slowly, Faen approached the knife again and curled her fingers around the hilt. Her body cringed, then stiffened. Her fingers tightened until her hand trembled, but still she said nothing.

Ryth touched her mind with incredible delicacy. The trembling of her hand stopped and he sensed fatigue like an enormous tide rising in her mind. He realized then that she should never have been allowed to touch and live so many deaths at once.

“There is only one way,” she said coolly.

“Faen—”

But even as he spoke, she raised the hilt to her forehead, pressed the metal into her flesh as though to force a joining. Her slender body went rigid and her blue-green ring burned with a clear, hard light.

“Waiting—” she whispered hoarsely. “Waiting, old hands, are they still fast? Soon, soon, soonsoon NOW and THRUST and—”

Faen screamed horribly, a shriek that gurgled into choking silence while her straining body arched backward and a thin red line blazed across her throat as though an invisible wire tightened lethally.

Ryth drove his mind into hers as he knocked the knife away from her forehead. He wrenched her mind out of the knife’s lethal past with a bolt of thought/emotion/demand that was a force as stunning as the death she had unlocked. Caught between the two conflicting imperatives, her mind tried to shake itself apart.

Instinctively, the Sharnn reinforced his call with the compelling resonances of t’sil’ne. Mind and voice and body united in persuasion, gentle fingertips and palms and lips and thighs compelling her attention, holding her in a soft net of undemanding pleasure.

Slowly, slowly, the death scream faded to a jagged memory. He traced the wire mark on her throat with the tip of his tongue, transforming the brand of agony into spreading pleasure. Her mind stopped fighting and relaxed, barely conscious, focused entirely on the superb beauty of his touch.

He sensed the fragile link growing between them. He moved delicately, lips and tongue and fingertips strengthening the bond. She stirred, warm sigh and luminous eyes, fingertips stroking lines of fire on his throat, sliding across his chest, tangling softly in the breath from his lips. Her scent and taste swept across him like a blow, releasing a hunger for her that was overwhelming.

The depth of his response shocked him into stillness, his mind closed as a stone. She sensed only a massive emotional surge, then complete withdrawal. She felt the tears on her face but could no more stop them than she could forget being touched with such haunting skill.

“Next time,” she whispered raggedly, “don’t.”

She sensed his surprise and sudden anger and some other emotion that he was barely holding in check. Disgust, she assumed. In rage and humiliation, she spoke directly into his mind.

\*Do you think I like feeling your revulsion? Do you think it pleases me to feel like bird slime to be scraped off your sleeve?\*

Then Faen realized that she had used mindspeech. Her eyes slitted.

“Some day I will be able to kill you, Sharnn. I look forward to it!”

“Faen,” he said, his voice thick with restraint, fingers reaching for her sweet skin. “I wasn’t—”

The edge of her hand flashed and only his Sharnn reflexes saved a smashed wrist.

“No more of your lying fingertips!”

The Sharnn’s own frustration blazed until his eyes were green stone and shadows. “As you wish, Sandoliki Ti.” He turned his back on her and went to stand next to Kayle on the other side of the boundary line.

“Did you learn anything, Faen?” said Kayle. “From the knife,” he added when she turned on him with feral swiftness.

Faen stared at Kayle for a long moment, then the flat white of her eyes deepened into pale blue crystal. “I think a man killed her,” she said evenly. “He is still alive.”

“The throat-cutter?” said Kayle to Ryth.

“Yes.” Ryth glanced sideways at Faen. “Could the White Dawn Guild identify that knife, tell us who the owner was and when she died?”

“Yes ...”

“But?”

“If she died during meega, no one will talk.”

“Not even for the Sandoliki Ti?”

“For no one.” Faen glanced at the coded light display around the bottom of the freight Access platform. “It’s late on the Ice Continent,” she said, reading the shifting color codes off the display. “Tomorrow?”

Kayle curbed his impatience and agreed reluctantly. Ryth said nothing, merely waited, but he did not know for what. Faen ignored them and stretched with an odd rippling movement that was part of the ritual dances of faal-hnim. Her muscles flexed and relaxed in counterpoint to her chiming anklets. With a small sigh she finished stretching and walked toward the red cupboards.

Ryth grappled with the impulse to tell her of her beauty, black hair and gold skin flowing to crystal murmurs, but all he said was, “Shouldn’t you rest?”

“Only the last weapon was difficult.”

But for all her outward calm, Ryth sensed the strain that pervaded her body, the reluctance to touch yet more ugliness and violent death.

The first weapon she found was n’Qen’s.

“Malian,” said Faen tonelessly. “Made on the Copper Coast. Assassin of the Green Rain Guild.”

Her fingertips traced the blade without touching it. “Few deaths. None recent. Good energy.” One finger touched the hilt. Her hand shook, then steadied and her voice took on the tones of one reciting a lesson. “Fear and despair and shame,” she murmured, eyes closed, lips pale. “I’m too young to fight him he is so quick too-quick-caught. Must die NO KILL ME I CANT PLEASE ahhhh ... so quick.”

Faen withdrew her hand and looked at the Sharnn. “He died thanking you.”

Ryth’s expression was bleak, closed.

The remaining weapons told little, in spite of their consistently high energy levels. When the cupboard folded around the last m’vire, Faen staggered slightly, then stood with arms braced against the cupboard, head down, fighting off the sensory overload that was pushing her into unconsciousness.

“She uses herself too hard,” said Kayle.

“That is the only way to learn the limits of her talent,” said Ryth. “She has neither equals nor superiors to teach her.”

He went to Faen and lifted her in his arms. Her earrings and anklets chimed among the folds of her

cape as he carried her to a nearby pallet. Dazed, she turned her head toward his warmth, murmuring against his hand; crystal bells caught in her hair, chiming in tangled black. Gently he freed the earrings, curling his fingers around the cool bells until they were captive, silent. He reached out to smooth away the lines that death had etched in her face, then remembered her flashing hatred at his touch. He opened his hands and let the earrings chime against her soft skin.

“It appears that my touch destroys you, Faen, rather than yours destroying me,” he murmured. Though her eyes showed a silver rim beneath black lashes, she neither heard nor spoke.

“Well?” demanded Kayle.

Ryth stood up with barely controlled ferocity. “Give her space!”

Kayle stepped back hastily. “Regrets, Sharnn. Is she all right?”

“She needs a few moments. Alone.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” snapped Kayle.

“You’re more familiar with psi talents than I—you teach me,” said Ryth coldly.

“But you know more about Faen than anyone does.”

Ryth looked quizzically at Kayle.

“You’ve touched her mind,” said Kayle. “I can’t even listen to the edges of it.”

Ryth shifted uneasily, preferring to remember the textures of her flesh rather than the sliding depth of mind-touch. Then he tried to remember nothing at all.

“We’ll have to watch her,” Ryth said. “The demands of her talent are many and complex; more than I had conceived of, perhaps more than I can conceive of. But this I know—the rewards of her talent are meager.” His lips thinned and the clean planes of his face hardened. “Do you know what we’re asking her to do, Kayle? Do you really know?”

“Teach me.”

“She died vicariously many times today. The first knives weren’t bad, too little energy to carry the full emotions of violent death. But the White Dawn knife ...” Ryth’s body flexed, rejecting the agony he had sensed as Faen choked on cold wire tightening. “Don’t permit her to read objects alone. Ever.”

“You struck her, then held her like a lover,” said Kayle bluntly. “Why?”

“The knife’s energies were strong, too strong, so strong that when she pressed the hilt to her forehead the past overrode reality and she became the White Dawn assassin at the moment of dying.

“Faen would have died if the knife had stayed against her forehead. She would have died with a crushed throat and a bleeding wire mark around her neck.”

Kayle shuddered. “I won’t let her read objects alone.” He blinked and his orange eyes fastened on Ryth. “Did she want to die? Is that why she lashed out at you?”

“No.”

Kayle waited, but the Sharnn said nothing further. “Are you sure?” pressed Kayle.

“Yes.”

“Teach me.”

“No.”

Kayle’s body became perfectly still, a predator crouching, then he let his breath out to fill the silence.

“I would help you if I could,” said Kayle softly. “Remember that, Sharnn,”

“And her?”

“If I could.”

“Then pray to your Allgod that we don’t kill each other before you learn what the Carifil wish to know.”

Ryth turned abruptly and strode to another part of the dome, the fifth floor, which had a large h’kel with neither tapestries nor furnishings. In other cultures, such a room might have been used for conversations, art arrangements, games, meals or meditation. In Malia, it was used for faal-hnim.

Ryth spread his cape in a sunny niche, then walked to the exact center of the room. He stood, flexing large and small muscles. Kayle watched from the door, riveted by the sight of a Sharnn poised in the opening moments of faal-hnim, the dance that contained every lethal movement known to three hundred races of man.

The intensely disciplined flexing warmed and stretched every muscle in Ryth's lean body, preparing him for the strenuous dance. He had chosen the slowest, most demanding mode of faal-hnim. He moved as though wading against a viscous force. Each muscle stood out with separate strain and his skin shone with sweat.

The Sharnn did not notice Kayle's rapt attention, nor Faen's later appearance. He had given himself over to the stylized imperatives of faal-hnim, lost himself in the flowing leaps, sudden kicks, and intense stillnesses of the dance. His concentration was a force as savage as the controlled surge of his strength, his power and grace like deep water bending over rock.

Faen and Kayle watched wordlessly while Ryth executed a difficult series of moves known as Falling Leaves. When the last gesture was complete, the Sharnn flowed directly into another demanding series known as the Viper and the Bird.

"He has rare stamina," said Kayle softly, though he knew that mere words could not break Ryth's concentration.

"And beauty," said Faen, silver eyes measuring his disciplined body. "I've watched many people dance the Viper and the Bird, but never with his ease. I've seen only one movement more graceful."

"What was that?"

"Ryth's diving roll to avoid the m'vire."

Faen watched the Sharnn with singular concentration, her own body unconsciously flexing in echo of his. When he began the extremely difficult moves known as h'Nym Unfolding, she smiled and her body shivered in subdued excitement.

"He should dance with crystal music," she whispered.

"He should stop," said Kayle curtly. "He asks too much of himself."

"No," said Faen. "He must ask, for who else can? You'll never see his equal."

Kayle's eyes brooded like coals over the Sharnn, still moving with the inevitable grace of water. "Some people could better him in individual moves."

Faen's hands clapped once, hard, contempt and dismissal. "No single person could surpass him move for move. He understands the imperatives of faal-hnim; he knows that if you give yourself to the dance, it will give you perfect balance and strength. You become faal-hnim, the poised infinite."

"He knows the patterns," agreed Kayle.

"Yes," said Faen, bitterness thinning her lips. "To the Sharnn it is all black letters on white walls. Perhaps that's why he feels so few emotions."

"Not every pattern is easy for him," said Kayle. "His own eludes him. And yours."

"My pattern repels him."

"He has an unusual way of showing it," muttered Kayle, vividly remembering Ryth's body speaking to her flesh.

Faen's breath hissed as she, too, remembered. "Malia's tactile language is simply another pattern," she said coldly. "He lies very skillfully with his body. Better than a Malian whore."

Kayle measured her closed expression and changed the subject. "Did you feel that there was anything unusual about the first weapons you touched?"

"The Ice Continent knives?"

"Yes."

"The weapons didn't fit," she said indifferently, still consumed by the Sharnn's beauty.

"Teach me."

Faen sighed and looked away from Ryth. "Ask the Sharnn what chance there is that a group of Vintran—or even Malian—assassins would all carry new knives from Malia's Ice Continent."

Kayle grunted. "Very small, I'm sure. What about the mixture of guild marks?"

"Irrelevant. Assassins work together, no matter what their guild."

Kayle rocked thoughtfully up on the balls of his feet, apparently lost in watching Ryth. Then he said softly, "May I ask the Sandoliki Ti a few questions?"

Without looking away from Ryth's supple body, Faen said, "So long as the topic is not Ryth."

Kayle's smile flickered briefly. "It isn't. What happens when you touch something? Do you receive

sounds? Pictures? Emotions?”

“What do you receive when you remember something?” countered Faen.

“It varies with the type of memory.”

“Exactly. And the type of mind remembering.” Faen sighed and flexed her body, feeling the call of faal-hnim. “Sometimes I receive emotions, which I try to name. Sometimes it’s a vivid picture/name, like the Topaz Arcade. Sometimes it’s symbols—very difficult. Sometimes it’s phrases spoken or thought under extreme stress.” Her hands met and fingers twisted together. “When the person is dead, what I invariably receive are the moments leading up to death. The dying.”

“And the death?”

“No. Simply the process of dying. At death, their energies stop disturbing the flow of time.”

“Is vicarious death painful or frightening to you?”

“Death is a sweet release. Dying, though ... so many unpleasant ways to die. I’ve experienced most of them.”

“How many sessions like today can you take?”

Faen’s body moved restively. The crystal earrings stirred and rang. “I don’t know.” She hesitated. “I think I knew the White Dawn assassin. Or the killer. The aura was ... intimate, familiar,”

“Is that why her death affected you so deeply?”

“No. She could have been a stranger. It was the wholeness of her energies—” Faen’s fingers moved in a swift gesture of dislike. “Like sinking sand along the riverbed, her energies could swallow unsuspecting lives.” Faen’s fingers unconsciously rubbed the faint red welt that circled her throat. “Next time,” she said slowly, “I’ll limit touch to fingers, not forehead.”

“Does it make that much a difference?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” She tossed her head impatiently and bells clashed. “It is enough that it does.”

As though called by crystal, Ryth awoke from faal-hnim and focused on the two waiting people. Before he could speak, Faen walked forward and gave him three energy tablets.

“They aren’t the traditional z’khn,” she murmured, silver eyes measuring energy spent in the sweat shining and flowing over his skin, “but they’re far more effective.”

“Thank you.”

“It is small payment,” she said, turning away, “for the pleasure of watching power and sensuality dance the faal-hnim.”

The Sharnn stared at Faen’s back and chewed the tablets slowly, but when the last particle was dissolved, he was no closer to understanding her than he had been before. He was tempted—very tempted—to caress her and test the depth of her desire to kill him. Just as his muscles coiled with unspoken impulse, the freight Access warning sounded. As one, Faen and Ryth and Kayle ran toward the Access room. Ryth read the message in the coded lights and activated the receiver switch. An opaque sheet of electric blue energy flared across the Access platform. When the light died, thirty misa-wrapped bundles decorated the platform. To Ryth’s relief, none of them was large enough to be a corpse. He reached out toward a package.

“No,” said Faen quickly, “Don’t handle anything unless you must.”

She gathered up the packages into neat piles and carried them into the workroom.

\*Is it possible that she learned so little from the weapons we took on Vintra?\* asked Kayle while they followed her.

\*The weapons were not what they seemed,\* Ryth returned. \*Practically untouched.\*

\*So she said ....\* Kayle’s thoughts turned uneasily. \*But why would anyone trouble with such a ruse?\*

\*Malian weapons used on Vintra. Malia gets blamed for whatever happened.\*

\*You evade the point, pattern-man. Why would anyone bother to insure that the weapons were barren of auras—unless our throat-slicer knew in advance about Faen’s talent.\*

Ryth’s negation was too quick, too thoughtless; the Sharnn asked a blunt question, as much to

distract himself as to gain information.

\*Don't you trust her?\*

\*Should I?\*

 countered Kayle. \*She is Malian. And I remember a Vintran whispering about a black-haired woman with eyes like ice.\*

Ryth closed his eyes and Sharnn emotions stretched. A pattern turned deep inside his mind, an instant of shadows at the core of incandescence; then his radiance shredded darkness beyond recall of memory. He spoke in Kayle's mind with the precision of a machine.

\*Possibility: she is working to destroy Vintra; therefore, she deliberately misled us with the knives. Possibility: she is not working to destroy Vintra; therefore, the knives were a million-chance accident. Or; the knives were gathered by someone who hoped the mere fact of Malian manufacture would be enough to condemn Malia. Or—\*

\*Enough!\*

 interrupted Kayle curtly, wondering if the Sharnn was hiding behind the pouring thoughts. \*I want to be sure she isn't lying to us. Stay in her mind.\*

\*No.\*

\*Why?\*

\*Mindtouch with Faen, even the lightest touch, is a very intimate experience. Not something for the uninvited.\*

\*Does mindtouch with me bother you?\*

 pressed Kayle.

\*We don't touch each other's mind—not really.\*

\*What do you mean?\*

\*When I touch her mind, I feel her breath and heartbeat and blood moving in mine, and her memories sing in my own.\*

Kayle was too shocked to answer; he carefully thought about nothing at all. Until, finally, he sighed. \*What you describe is the beginning of fusion, Ryth. It's a process that's far deeper, far more complex, than mere mindspeech or even mindlink.\* He paused and the Sharnn sensed a turmoil of unformed thought. \*Be wary, Ryth. Fusion can be dangerous, especially when one person is unwilling.\*

\*How is it dangerous?\*

\*I don't know. I've never been able to fuse.\*

\*But your talent—\*

 Ryth grappled with his elusive thoughts. \*If you can't, how can I?\*

\*It requires two to fuse,\*

 returned Kayle dryly. \*I've never found the second.\*

Ryth's response was shock, then a shattering of all thought while he examined what he had learned to see if it belonged to any known patterns. But even when his mind opened again, the Sharnn asked nothing more about mindspeech, mindtouch, mindlink or fusion. Nor did Kayle press, for Faen had stored the last package safely and was ready to begin again.

Ryth reached for her mind—and touched a blaze of fear/anger/pain that made him reel. At the core of her feelings was an explosive demand for privacy, a demand she reinforced by shutting down her mind and refusing to work.

\*My error,\*

 murmured Ryth into her closing mind. \*My regret.\*

\*What's wrong?\*

 demanded Kayle, sending with his thought a picture of Ryth's face suddenly lined by pain.

\*Faen requires mental privacy. She now has it.\*

Kayle hissed a Nendleti curse.

Faen did not look at either man. She walked over to the wall of cupboards, touched the first one in the pale green section. A tongue extruded. On it gleamed a small silver chain. Slowly Faen moved her hand above the necklace.

"Vivid energy. Intensely female. Neither Malian nor Vintran. Brilliant and quicksilver and—" Faen stopped. Puzzlement flickered over her face. Then she continued. "Young, very young—"

Ryth glanced at Kayle, saw the Nendleti's brown face creased by sorrow that deepened with each word Faen spoke.

"—and dead."

There was a stroke of anguish from Kayle. Ryth touched Kayle in the Malian way, fingers speaking



of loss and memories.

“She died to save another,” said Faen as her fingertip warmed the cold chain, “a man whose touch was her last memory. She died with a poisoned m’vire buried in her throat and screams splintering around her, not her screams but others screaming and running while he held her blood flowing between his fingers too fast and she smiled and others ran, trampling and yelling and she died, blood overflowing his hands.”

Without looking up, Faen said, “Her energy pleases me. What was her name?”

“Concord Agent Linaire.”

“Did her man survive?”

“No,” said Kayle briefly.

“How did he die?”

“I hope that you can verify what we guessed,” said Kayle. “We never found Lsite’s body.”

“Then maybe he lives,” said Faen with sudden fierceness. “Maybe—”

“No.”

With a long breath, Faen released the second cupboard. In it was a headband of indestructible narhide. Bits of precious metal were woven into the leather, making a sly design that hinted of something marvelous hovering just beyond reach. She smiled without knowing why.

Ryth stared intently at the headband, trying to decipher its teasing pattern. Then his lips twitched with silent laughter.

\*I would have liked him, Kayle.\*

\*How do you know that belonged to a man?\*

\*I hear his laughter in the pattern.\*

\*In the pattern? Or in her thoughts?\*

Before Ryth could answer, Faen spoke.

“Male,” she said softly. “I wish you could hear his laughter. He loved life.”

The smile drained from her face when she touched the headband. Again, puzzlement flickered. The Sharnn brushed her thoughts so lightly that neither one of them realized it. He sensed a haunting aura of familiarity calling out from the headband—as it had from the necklace.

“Neither Vintra nor Malia. He died—” Her fingers curled around the headband, tightened convulsively and she gasped, “—died by poison—at the foot—of the Blue—Shrine!”

She dropped the headband just as Ryth grabbed for it. Slowly, she regained control of her voice and breathing.

“Are you sure it was poison?” asked Kayle.

“Yes. L’shu.” She shuddered away from what she had felt. “L’shu on an ice dart. Cowards! I weep that my enemy breeds such cowards!”

Kayle waited, then asked, “What is the effect of l’shu?”

“It causes restricted breathing followed by paralysis,” Faen said evenly. “Unless an antidote is given, death comes. Very slowly.”

“Is the drug easy to detect?”

“Nearly impossible. At normal temperatures, l’shu volatilizes in less than a ten-count.”

“Thus the ice dart,” said Ryth.

“Yes.”

“Where and what is the Blue Shrine?” said Kayle.

“Blue Shrine?” repeated Faen, puzzled.

“You mentioned a Blue Shrine just before you dropped the headband.”

Faen rubbed fingertips against her forehead. “Blue Shrine. Blue. I don’t remember saying it.”

“Do you always remember?” asked the Sharnn.

“Yes, unless I’m too tired to—” She cursed and grabbed the headband with a speed that defeated Ryth’s restraining hand. “Blue—yes—” She gasped hoarsely and her body jerked. “Too steep—too—HELP—ahhh Linaire—” Faen’s head jerked and her earrings jangled harshly. “Close and so blue—falling—” laughter, sudden and bitter “at the Blue—God’s—feet.”

The headband slipped from her fingers. "Blue God," she murmured in confusion, "Blue God."

"Was he Ribollian?" asked the Sharnn suddenly.

Kayle blinked. "Yes."

"Isn't their Blue God the symbol of sky, of space, of freedom?"

"Yes," said Kayle, eyes intent on the Sharnn.

"The Blue God's shrines are placed at the entrance to all Ribollian Accesses."

"But he didn't die on Ribolli," said Kayle heavily.

"Vintra," interrupted Faen, her eyes dazed with sudden memories. "He died on Vintra at the foot of the blue ramp leading to Sima's third Access." She closed her eyes and her shoulders sagged. "Yes, the third Access, the freight Access. Ahhh, Great Destroyer, what did you do to make him attempt that way out?"

"Freight Access?" Kayle grimaced. "That's certain death."

"I thought that, once," said Faen with a thin smile. "I survived it."

"So that's how you escaped from Vintra," said Ryth.

"Yes." She gestured to the headband. "He hoped to escape with precious knowledge, but the ice dart found his back."

"What did he know?" demanded Kayle.

Faen made a frustrated, negative gesture. "The headband isn't enough. Bring me his corpse,"

"I can't. We never found Lsite's body."

She rubbed her fingertips over her drawn face in an unconscious gesture of awakening. With a sigh she tapped the next cupboard. It unfolded around a worn gold ring. Faen's fingers approached the ring tentatively, and again a haunted expression crossed her face.

"What is it?" asked the Sharnn gently.

"I don't know. Each of the objects—" Earrings cried as she shook her head. "I don't know!" She touched the edge of the ring. "Female. Bright energy. Sensual and quick." The fingers lifted and Faen frowned.

"Malian?" asked Ryth. "Vintran? Other?"

"That's it!" she cried, eyes narrowed as she looked back on her past. "That's what I was asked each time!" She turned to Ryth and her eyes burned like silver flame. "I've touched these people before."

"I thought you touched no—" began Kayle.

"Not physically," she snapped, her eyes never leaving the Sharnn's attentive face. "I touched something of theirs. I've sensed them before."

"For whom? And why?"

"People come to me," she said, with a dismissing gesture.

"Do you remember who brought—"

"No," she said impatiently. "Only the objects I touch are real. The people who bring them are less than shadows."

"What questions did you answer?" said Ryth, green eyes compelling her to look deeply into her memory.

"The same question you asked—were the people Vintran, Malian, or alien."

The Sharnn's eyes stared through her for a long moment, then his full lips twisted in a bitter smile.

"Tell me, Kayle," he said softly. "Did your agents pose as Vintrans?"

"Of course," snapped Kayle. "That was the only way to get freedom of movement on Vintra. But their cover was as perfect as Concord talents could make. The agents knew the language and the land and the traditions as well as any native!"

"And their minds?" prodded the Sharnn gently. "Could their minds fool a finder?"

Kayle made a sound deep in his throat, a sound that was both answer and apology to the dead. Faen looked at him, then back to Ryth. Her eyes were dull beneath black lashes; she knew she had been used to condemn people to death. She looked away and touched the ring.

"Poison," she gasped, controlling a throat spasm with difficulty. She snatched her finger back.

"Symptoms?" snapped Kayle.

“Convulsions that broke the neck and spine.”

“Does the poison resemble the effects of a native disease?”

“It is a poison first, then a disease,” answered Faen.

“Teach me,” Kayle said harshly.

“I can’t I don’t know the structure of pekh,” she said dully. “I only know it is endemic to Malia.”

Faen put her finger through the ring. Her breath caught in her throat; she cried out hoarsely and tore the ring off her finger. “She—agony. Glass on floor. Cut. And later, between convulsions, she wondered how they knew.” Faen’s fingers squeezed together and she whispered to the gold ring, “A horrible way to die.”

When Faen reached for the next cupboard, Ryth wanted to stop her, wanted her to rest until the hard white lines left her face, but he knew she would refuse. Someone had used her; she would find out who. And then she would kill the person who had so little respect for the Sandoliki Ti.

As object followed object, death followed death, Faen seemed to thin before their eyes. Her voice became ragged and her hands trembled constantly, but when the Sharnn argued she snapped her fingers in contempt and reached for yet another cupboard.

The object inside was a hammered gold armband set with five Mivayli firestones.

Faen’s eyes widened as though she recognized the band. Her finger brushed it, then retreated. She squeezed her eyes shut and her body quivered. Every aspect of her cried out with a need not to touch again. The two white lines on either side of her mouth deepened and sweat shone on her face. She raised her hands to her lips and moaned very softly.

“Faen,” said Ryth. “Faen?”

Her only answer was a single tear that supped from an eyelash to the corner of her mouth.

\*Faen?\* Gently, then with growing power, the Sharnn asked to know what was wrong. \*Faen!\*

She sought him with the same reflex that drove a freezing animal toward warmth. He went to her quickly, hands reaching, skill and strength and warmth touching. She shivered at the warmth of his palm on her forehead. For the space of a breath she accepted, then she withdrew.

“The band belongs to Sandoliki Ti,” she said. “He—” Her voice broke, but no more tears escaped from her dark lashes.

Ryth felt the waves of her grief sweep through him and wanted to cry out but could only bow beneath the knowledge that she wept mind and body for a man.

\*Who is he?\* Ryth demanded of Kayle.

\*Relle, her dead husband.\*

\*Dead? She spoke as though he lived.\*

\*He does—in her mind.\*

“I’m sorry, Faen,” Kayle said. “If I had known, I would never—”

“Accepted,” said Faen, her voice low and colorless. There was no way you could have known. Did that armband belong to a man named Ino?”

“Yes.”

“Relle and Ino exchanged armbands. A ritual from Ino’s culture.” Her voice squeezed to a whisper. Then her head came up and her voice strengthened. “When Relle ... died ... he wore Ino’s armband. A woman tore it from Relle’s arm and gouged out the five unsleeping eyes of friendship.”

Ryth looked at the five gems, unwinking in the gold band.

“I killed that woman. Very slowly. She died cursing her greed for firestones. But Relle ...” Faen closed her eyes. “Ino is dead, wearing Relle’s armband. More than that I can’t tell you, unless I hold the armband until I am free from the shockwaves of Relle’s death. And from the memory of our life.”

The Sharnn sensed that Faen did not want to be free, for in her memories she lived again in the world of tactile sensuality, a world her talent had closed to her. The more he examined this new aspect of her pattern the more angry he became, but the pattern of his own anger puzzled him, so he said nothing and showed nothing, closed and silent as only a Sharnn can be.

A whistling sigh from Kayle pulled Ryth out of his thoughts. In unspoken agreement, all three of them turned toward the next cupboard, wondering if any cupboard held more for them than a futile reliving of

past death.

No cupboard did. By darkness Faen was brittle and worn, knowing only that she had been an unwitting tool for a coward, a murderer. Nor were Ryth and Kayle much calmer; they ate in silence, went to separate h'kels in silence and struggled for sleep in silence, each knowing that every agent had died a murderer's victim. No accidents. Just murder by stealth and shadow.

When Faen was sure that both men slept, she took off her crystal bells, pulled on her scarlet bridal robes and slipped silently out into the night. The breeze whispered around her, stirring dead leaves into a semblance of life. Three moons curved across the night, moons as brilliant as her eyes and the sarsa bathed in silver mystery. With barely subdued excitement, she freed two m'sarsas from their loops and drew the rods across her lips, hot breath flowing across silver.

"Call him back," she whispered, lips brushing metal "Bring him back to me!"

The m'sarsas glowed in triple moonlight and struck music from waiting crystal. Notes became a song, a man's song created every day of his life, summation and soul; she called to him with all her need and sarsa skill.

And he answered.

The Sharnn woke instantly, completely. He held himself utterly still while mind and body searched for whatever had awakened him. Moonlight flowed into his h'kel, bringing silver across the room, lighting each curve of wall and pillow. No one else was near. He let his breath out slowly, but could not return to sleep.

With a stifled curse, he swept off the sleeping robe. Moonlight poured silver down his naked flesh. The wall opened at a touch, bringing to him the smell of rust and ancient stone and hidden midnight flowers. He lifted his arms to the cool beauty of the night, felt the lazy stirring of his body. He smiled, then the smile faded. Faint music shivered through the silky darkness, ghost chimes from a sensual past.

A breeze sighed over him, music through his hair. But the breeze was replaced by crystal desire singing to his blood, whispering to his mind. He pulled the music fiercely to him, demanding its pattern. Then fire raced through him and he ran out into the night. He slipped through abandoned gardens, eyes blinded by a vision of the sarsa, silver and black and diamond bright, three moons pressing out triple shadows, triple life, black velvet warmth of her breath. He threw his head back and laughed and moonlight ran like water over his awakened flesh.

Across the compound, Faen stood in front of the hanging crystals, arms spread. In her hands two slender m'sarsas burned with sensual heat. She swept the wands across the waiting crystals and music leaped, a firestorm of pure desire. The exultation that shook her came to him like lightning and he knew he must find her, be with her. Touch her.

The Sharnn took a stone pathway gleaming under the moons. He ran on the path inside the circular compound, past abandoned kels and ghost gardens, seeking a way to the living outer garden where sensuality trembled like a field of zamay unfolding. Tantalizing crystal sighs fired his body, but the path shied away, bending back toward ruins and darkness and a maze that had no exit.

He stopped, breathing lightly, feeling the patterns of maze and compound and three-faced moonlight. Six circular walls, now little more than tall rubble heaps overrun by war and nightvines' embrace; two inner circles, walls nearly intact, surrounding emptiness but for the wedge of land leading from the green spring to the sarsa and ending at the dome. He was opposite that wedge.

Crystal notes mocked pattern skills and licked tongues of fire through his mind. His green eyes raked the remnant garden until he found a choked side-path that twisted among trees holding withered leaves up to the three moons and the taste of rust and he was running again, running through Sandoliki ruins, brittle gardens and stone mazes, running and never retracing a step, never hesitating, for he might have placed each stone himself, might have known every turning, might have been born solely for this night, this garden, this unfolding moment.

The path was a faded ribbon curving past dry fountains and dying trees until a pale scent of water sweetened his throat and a living stand of ancient tere trees bloomed ebony against the silver light. The dense moon-shade of the grove folded the Sharnn in subtle beauty, slow caress, held him though he wanted to reach her, held him though he writhed to be in the clearing with her where moonlight poured

over the sarsa like pale fire, making each crystal a jewel carved but of living light. Crystal chimes resonant with time and the passage of lives called to him, but he could not penetrate the shadow pattern; he was pushed back by moonlight and a barrier made before he knew her, scarlet mesh flowing black beneath three moons and her body an echo of lightning.

The m'sarsas burned with motion, beauty that defied pattern just as she did. With an inarticulate cry he sagged against the thick shadows and ached to touch her, ached to understand, and finally succumbed to the unmeant seduction of slow chords drifting over him, harmonies older than tere or garden, older than ruined lives, ancient notes telling of the binding of man to woman.

Then he knew the pattern and could not even cry out his rage. Too late to flee, strength tangled in shadow while night poised, spinning in a vortex of moonlight held between gentle hands, pouring past and present together, and she laughed deep in her body and wept deep in her body and stroked the sarsa with tireless skill so that she lived again in a land not ruined, laughed again with people not maimed, lay again in the arms of a man not dead ... touched him, touched Relle condensing beside her, tall and vivid, passionate strength bending over her and strong hands singing ecstasy to her flesh, her warm lips speaking against his cool silver skin, her life pouring out so that shadow became substance and Relle bending—come closer can't you come closer to me RELLE CANT YOU—

And Ryth's wrenching mental cry.

Relle's silver shape twisted, black light shook and the longest crystal boomed, vire crystal, death crystal shaking apart. Relle's song, song and death and death and song and death, screams raging in her mind and in Ryth's closed throat as her fury scourged them and he knew the beating heart of loss and darg vire.

M'sarsas swept like lightning across one hundred crystal faces. Violence exploded, searing, until both Faen and Ryth were subsumed by the vire crystal's tolling death, death tolling until moonlight shattered into Faen swaying while the smallest crystals wept of former lives, living shadows, life pouring into darkness that shadows might condense into life until a Sharnn screamed beneath three moons.

And silence like a ragged sigh.

With shaking hands Faen hung the m'sarsas in their loops and sank to the ground, weeping in a seething mix of frustration and grief and rage. The Sharnn sagged to his knees, mind reeling in the sudden release of compulsion, too shaken by what had happened to do more than stare at her.

Slowly he realized that she once again wore bridal scarlet. She wore scarlet for a shadow called by the sarsa, ghostly synergy of life and non-life bound by the compelling near-life neither alone could create. Hidden somewhere in those hundred sightless crystals was uncanny vision, consummation of all desires, all patterns, all.

Relle was not dead. Not always.

Nor was Faen always alive.

Anger replaced weakness in Ryth's body. He went to her, contempt and rage growing with each step. Hearing his approach, she pulled herself to her feet, silver eyes as blank as sarsa crystal. She pushed waves of black hair out of her face and stared defiance at him.

"Think, Sharnn," she said, voice streaked with rage. "Think what it means to be Malian and be barred from touch!"

The hard edges of his contempt broke and his anger flickered, for he knew that she lived every instant in a unique, pervasive agony.

"Yes," she whispered, measuring the change in his lips and eyes. "Yes. Yet you drove him back. Even the Great Destroyer does not hate me that much. Sarsa memories may be a shadow, but when you are thirsty, the shadow of water is better than real sand."

"If Relle lived—truly lived—you could not touch him without agony," said Ryth, his voice hard with a certainty that she could not deny, pattern-man and Sharnn.

Faen made an involuntary noise and put up her hands as though to attack—or ward off an attack.

"Relle is lost to you," said Ryth brutally. "You can't even touch the timeshadow of his mind without agony, can you? Can you?"

Faen stared at his face, hard in the triple moonlight and his eyes a fierce green. And knew he was

right. What she called with the sarsa was her own creation wearing Relle's face.

"Why?" said Faen raggedly. "What have I done to you?"

"Relle is dead," said the Sharnn, his voice cruel. "What you do is obscene."

A sudden stillness transformed Faen's body, a warning as clear as a shout. "How easy for you to say," she hissed. "How easy for the Sharnn who has never known emotion, much less consummation." Her left hand moved up as though to push her hair aside again and she whispered, "How very easy."

Her hands slowly brushed the back of her neck. A throwing knife leaped to her fingertips. Her hand snapped down and the knife hissed through moonlight, but Ryth had begun to move the instant her hand passed beyond her hair. Even so, the knife scored his neck as he dove toward her. His arm lashed out, sweeping her feet off the ground. With a sudden twist in midair, she righted herself and landed just beyond his reach. She laughed, throat taut in the moonlight, scarlet mesh black and hissing around her knees.

"I'm free of you, laseyss. I'm free!"

"Are you?" he said, eyes never leaving Faen's poised body, for even though she was at the edge of exhaustion, she was speed and death waiting. "And what of your truce word?"

"I promised only a warning," she said, breathing quickly, circling him with flashing moves, eyes and lips too pale for life. "I moved at half-speed, warning you. You're very quick, my almost husband."

The Sharnn's answer was to move with blurring speed, hands reaching for the woman, who cried aloud her anger when she realized she was too tired to break away. Her eyes darkened as he held her pinned between his body and his arms.

"Tell me," he said angrily, lips tasting her face, "isn't this better than Relle's cold touch?"

The impulse to kill convulsed Faen, but Ryth only laughed and tightened his arms.

"That's not what your fingertips told me this morning," he said. His lips caught hers and she coiled against his arms, testing the strength of his hold, searching for a weakness.

"You're too tired to fight me effectively," Ryth said huskily. "And I'm too smart to try you when you're rested. I'll let you go soon," he said, smiling, his teeth a slash of light below his eyes. "But first I want you to know something. Use your talent, my dangerous wife. When you responded to my touch this morning—"

Faen's back arched with the force of her fear. Every fiber of her screamed to be free, not to have to hear that she was repulsive to him, not to have to feel his crushing withdrawal from her touch. She shook with fear of him and the night tripled with moons swimming in black and her tired body falling.

"—my own response shocked me." He laughed, lips warm against her throat, arms painfully tight to contain her disciplined struggles.

Her muscles convulsed again, straining against his presence, against the fire that burned across her nerves wherever their bodies met, and it seemed that their bodies met everywhere.

"I'm going to let myself feel just what I felt this morning when your body came alive beneath my hands," he said, pinning her head so that she must look at him. "Are you ready to read me, m'zamay?"

"No," she gasped, trying to shut down her mind and her senses, but she was Malian and he was skilled. "Please don't! I know that you loathe me. I felt it the first time. I don't need to feel it again. Please don't make me. My error! My regret!"

Faen closed her eyes and tears of humiliation and anger glowed silver in her black lashes. In her desperation she reached out with her mind, trying to make him understand, believe. \*Please! I regret!\*

\*Read me!\*

His demand sliced through her exhausted defenses at the same instant that his hands and tongue spoke intimately to her flesh. Half in despair, half in rage, she answered his sensual assault with a supple movement of her body that was a slow, twisting pressure against the center of his desire.

She had expected revulsion against the caress, had tried to brace herself for his annihilating disgust. But what she found in his response was passion, pure and overwhelming, exploding through her. For a white instant she came fully alive, mind and body unfolding, reaching for him and touching—then with a strangled cry she fainted between his hands.

He held her while moonlight bled back into garden night, held her and fought to control feelings he

had never conceived of. The moment of total sensuality had been shattering; neither one of them had been prepared for such sharing.

The Sharnn lifted Faen and carried her into her h'kel, murmuring apologies against her hair. He lowered her to her sleeping pallet, gently smoothed the night robe around her and rose to leave. After a few steps he went back, gathered her against his body and buried his face in her night-scented hair.

His mind delicately touched hers, found only relaxation and a deep sense of anticipation. Reluctantly, he subdued his body; She needed rest, not lust.

Ryth's thumb traced the seam of her heavy scarlet clothes. The mesh hissed apart. Gently, he pulled the cold metal cloth away from her golden skin. He longed to let lips and tongue trace curves on her flesh, probe different textures, greatest warmth, but he allowed himself only three lingering kisses before he covered her softness with a robe.

Lips smiling with the taste of her, he knelt to breathe once more the moonlight tangled in her hair while he tucked the sleep robe around her. But the robe fell away and her arms slid around his hips.

"Don't leave," she whispered. "At least let me touch you as you just touched me."

She rubbed her cheek against the hard strength of his leg in a gesture of pure sensual pleasure.

"No, m'zamay," he said gently, stroking her neck and shoulder. "My kisses were promise, not demand. Sleep. I don't want to push—"

He forgot what he had been saying as her teeth nibbled delicately. She laughed with delight at his response.

"It is said," she murmured, "that a Malian faints only once, and only for a lover's skill. Do not worry, my Sharnn. I won't leave you again."

He felt the cool fall of her hair across his thighs and the soft heat of her mouth as she opened to him all the moments of Malian ecstasy.

## IV

Faen stretched with a slow smile. In the instant between sleeping and waking she searched for an explanation of her pervasive sense of well-being. Then Ryth stirred, tightening his hold on her and drawing her against the length of his body. Her fingers moved on the inside of his arm in slow pressures that told of pleasure and peace. Reassured, Ryth relaxed his grip. Faen rubbed her palm down his chest and abdomen and thigh with undemanding intimacy and was answered by a sleepy caress across her breast.

"Sleep," she whispered in his mind, touching his eyelids with light fingertips and sending feelings of warmth and ease.

She slipped out of the shared sleeprobe and dressed in a brief green pull-up. She hesitated over the crystal anklets and earrings, then put them on; it was Ryth's prerogative to remove the bells. She stretched her body in rippling prelude to faal-hnim. As she did every morning, she went to the empty h'kel. But this morning she smiled.

A few minutes later, Ryth found her there, black hair and golden body shining as she went through the fluid movements of Sliding Water. To execute that particular series without sound was difficult; it was nearly impossible while wearing crystal bells.

The sight of the bells gave him a sharp feeling of displeasure. Then he remembered that the willing mate must remove the crystal warnings. In his mind he removed the irritating jewelry and gathered her skilled sensuality against his body.

Smiling, the Sharnn admired Faen's beauty and always-surprising strength—and was grateful that he had caught her on the edge of exhaustion the night before. Her timing, poise and balance were extraordinary today. Only once did he hear the faintest whisper of crystal bells, and that might have been an echo of his memory. Then he sensed Kayle standing nearby, watching Faen.

"You look serious," said Ryth softly.

"I am," returned Kayle, his mindspeech deft, almost secretive. "If you ever fight her, go in close, where your strength can counter her coordination.\*"

Ryth's answer was a feeling of lazy amusement.

\*Don't be so confident, Sharnn,\* returned Kayle with a crackle. \*Were it not for her throttled sensuality, she would match you cut for slice! Although,\* he added, \*today she certainly is not moving tightly.\*

\*Yes,\* agreed Ryth, watching her and remembering the feel of midnight hair and warm fingers, a knife scoring his neck ... fingertips and tongue and body calling flesh to flesh with shattering sensuality, and her ecstasy as he lived and died and was reborn inside her searing softness.

Faen's head fell back, her body arched, and Ryth remembered her unconscious between his hands, moonlight pearling her lips and eyelashes and his own strength stunned by what they had revealed to each other.

Kayle's breath whistled as he sensed just a vivid fragment of Ryth's memory. \*I envy you as a candle must envy the sun. Every Galactic's dream is to know the white instant of full Malian sensuality.\* Then at Ryth's swift apology for accidental broadcasting, Kayle added, \*You have shown me the edge of the dream, the living consummation of all Malian arts. Are all Sharnn so sensual?\*

\*People of Sharn are whatever they can conceive of being. That is our gift, our joy, and our despair.\*

Ryth's mind closed and he moved lithely into the h'kel, matching Faen's grace.

Kayle watched them with the intensity of a connoisseur, memorizing every detail so that one day he could share their disciplined beauty with them mind to mind, his gift to their mutual discovery. Intensity became fascination when he realized that they were transforming the lethal motions of faal-hnim into the slow rhythms of sensual play.

When they had finished the Sliding Water series, they stood facing each other, breaths mingling. Ryth's hands lifted to her face and his fingertips wove gently through her hair. When he removed his hands, the earrings were gone. He lowered his body, fingertips tracing down until he found the anklets. His fingers flexed, gold chains snapped. Crystal cried once, then no more. When he stood again, turquoise bells glittered mutely in his palms.

"I would like to grind these to dust," he said slowly, eyes searching hers. "But I'll keep them to remind me that there are patterns I can't conceive, even when they are closer than my own lips. Especially then." One long finger traced her smile. "In fact, there are some things I never even suspected."

He felt the sensation that began at his fingertip and raced throughout her body, felt it as though he lived inside her smooth golden skin. To feel the depth of pleasure his touch gave her was almost as shattering to him as the instant she had fainted.

He laughed shakily and held her at arm's length. \*You must help me, my Malian bride and teacher. I don't know how to control what you—what we—\* He smiled and tried again. \*How do Malians cope with this?\*

Faen shivered and he knew as certainly as if she had shouted that she wanted to kiss the hands holding her. \*Maliens don't control sensuality. We worship it. But this is more. It's mindtouch. The kind of mindtouch that penetrates more deeply than any lover, and I become you, you become me, and we—\*

She shivered again and gently, very gently, stepped back from his hands. Both felt the heat of his palms sliding down her arms. With a fleeting mental caress, Faen turned away and spoke quickly to Kayle.

"Will you join us for breakfast? Ryth promised to make me something from Sharn."

"Delighted," said Kayle. As he followed them out of the room, he added casually, "Ti Memned called while you were asleep."

"Did she," murmured Faen, watching Ryth sort through her provisions with the speed of a professional thief. Deftly, he combined several ingredients.

"She wanted," continued Kayle, "to know if the most seductive Sandoliki Ti Faen's recent ban on visitors included those who had dire and immediate need of her most precious, most unique—"

"Enough," said Faen dryly. "Give me the meat and leave the fat for scavengers like her."



Kayle smiled. “She wants to know if you’ll resume reading objects.”

Faen said nothing as she watched Ryth’s sure movements. With a broad, heavy knife he sliced and flattened several strips of dough. “I trust,” she said finally, “that you told her to go suck zarfs.”

Ryth wrapped the resilient dough around fruit slices and poured a clear orange sauce over.

“I told her that, among other things. She was rather shrill when she disconnected.”

Ryth picked up the fruit rolls and tucked them into a heat niche. “Call Memned back,” he said, “and tell her that the Sandoliki Ti Faen is always pleased to aid people who need her talent.”

Kayle’s head jerked toward Ryth. “Nonsense! We can’t have Faen wasting her strength on others, no matter how worthy their needs.”

“Or unworthy?” asked Ryth with a feral smile.

Kayle’s orange eyes slitted. “Teach me.”

“I want you to send at least eight Concord assassins to Vintra,” said Ryth. “Give them the best backgrounds you can, but get them in place within two Centrex days.”

“Impossible. A decent reality takes more time.”

“As long as there are finders like Faen, there is no such thing as a decent background.”

With a quick movement, Ryth skimmed the food out of the niche.

“There should be little danger,” added the Sharnn. “As soon as someone brings an agent’s object for Faen to read, you’ll warn the agent to get off-planet.”

“What if ‘someone’ murders first and questions later?”

Ryth divided the fragrant, steaming food into three turquoise crystal bowls. “That’s why I want the agents to be assassins.” He handed out the bowls. “They should be harder to kill.”

“Not for a Malian assassin,” said Faen, sniffing her food appreciatively. “Or even for a Vintran, animals though they are.”

“Concord assassins aren’t flowers,” said Kayle dryly. Then he fell silent for a long moment. “All right. I’ll send out the assassins. Then I’ll follow whoever comes here asking about—”

“I’ll follow,” corrected Ryth. “My pattern awareness will keep me out of most traps.”

“But—” began Kayle, then stopped. The Sharnn was right. “Fine,” said Kayle in a clipped voice. “We’ll both follow.”

“And leave Faen’s back unguarded?”

“Just because you caught me when I was exhausted—” began Faen heatedly.

“Not at all,” said Ryth, kissing the inside of her wrist. “But now that you are no longer the last Sandoliki, you are vulnerable to Lekel’s ambitions.” His fingertips remained on her wrist, savoring the smooth pulse just beneath her skin. “I don’t want to lose what I have just found.”

“Nor do I,” she shot back. “Who guards you?”

The Sharnn said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

“Ryth is right,” said Kayle heavily. “If he fails, you are still our best hope of finding the next person to follow. You must stay here and help the Carifil who will replace us.”

Faen made a disdainful noise and looked over at Ryth. “Kayle is a good fighter, husband. But he can’t keep me from doing what I must.”

Kayle smiled triumphantly. “Just so. I don’t plan on staying behind, either.”

The Sharnn looked from one to the other, started to argue, then appeared to give in.

“Eat your vrrri,” he said to her mildly. Then call Memned.” And to Kayle he added, “When you’re through, get those assassins in place.”

For seven days a slow stream of seekers came to Darg Vintra holding hope in their hands—scarves or rings or rubbing stones—anything that might tell Faen that what they had lost could be regained. A few sought treasure, but most wanted only to find a special person.

No one brought anything belonging to a Concord agent.

In his role as body servant to the two Sandolikis, Kayle’s eyes swept the public h’kel, searching each person for an assassin’s reflexes. Of the four seekers who waited, none seemed dangerous. But a good assassin would be as inconspicuous as dust.

\*I wish Carifil were here,\* grumbled Kayle as Ryth entered and gestured to the next seeker.

\*Lekel would never permit it.\*

\*Lekel can suck zarfs!\*

\*He has the mouth for it,\* agreed Ryth. \*He also controls the Access.\*

Kayle vented a surge of frustration. Three Carifil were sitting on Malia's inner moon, waiting for Lekel's permission to come down to the planet. In an emergency, they would simply take over the shuttle, but until then they were obeying native regulations.

\*Mim is lashing me,\* thought Kayle, rubbing his temples. \*She wants to try coming in as a seeker.\*

\*With a one-day limit?\*

asked Ryth as he indicated a sliding door and followed the seeker inside. \*Remember what happened to us?\*

He added dryly, \*Sandoliki Ti Faen is only permitted one mate.\*

Kayle sighed as Ryth closed the door.

"Sit there," said the Sharnn quietly, indicating a floor cushion. "I'll take your package to her."

The seeker, a woman old before Ryth was born, reluctantly released the package. At the narrow end of the long, wedge-shaped room, Faen sat on another cushion. Ryth put the package in front of her and unwrapped it. Gold bells—earrings and wristlets and anklets—rang with piercing sweetness. They were the personal jewelry of an aristocratic child, worn before the child was trained for combat.

Ryth watched intently as Faen bent over the bells. Sometimes what the objects told her was cruel and sickening; then he would snatch her hand away and hold her until his presence neutralized the gruesome reality she had touched. Most often, the objects were merely unpleasant.

Faen's slender hand hovered over the gold before descending with the delicacy of a falling petal. She shuddered lightly, then relaxed. The Sharnn let out his breath; this was not one of the bad ones.

"Child-woman," murmured Faen. "Clear energy. Gone away, far away."

The old woman whimpered.

"Frightened and ... blurred ... triple lives." Faen's fingers curled and bells sang in the silence as they rolled across her palm. "Ahhhh ... yes ... three. She carries two in her womb and is the third."

Faen's eyes opened, brilliant with interior distance.

"She is alive and pregnant and healthy," said Faen. "Do you need more?"

"Where?" said the woman in a dry voice that was barely above a whisper.

With a sigh, Faen reached out, scooped, bells in both hands ringing as she swayed with conflicting energies.

"Empty ... ahhh, Great Destroyer, I did not know you made land so empty and charcoal dark plants crackling, purple sky and clear stones so silver blinding under amber sun huge so cold ..."

Faen released the bells in a rush of sound. The old woman sobbed dryly while Ryth's fingertips fed information into the subtly textured nodes of a Malian computer.

"There was a feeling of heaviness," said Faen tiredly. "I think it was due to gravity rather than pregnancy; the sense of blurred lives was very faint this time. It was the moment she first saw her new planet, so the impressions were vivid."

The Sharnn tapped two more nodes, then waited. Planet maps slid out of a slit into Ryth's hands.

"Fifteen known planets match your reading."

One of the maps whispered into place in front of Faen. She picked up gold bells in one hand and touched the map with the other. Nothing. Ryth took that map away and put down the second. Nothing. The third. The fourth. Fifth. Eighth. Eleventh—and her finger zigzagged over the map, eyeless seeking and finding.

Faen's fingertip jerked and held and bells fell from her other hand.

Ryth marked the map. Gently he gathered her hands in his and smoothed away the residue of antagonistic energy. Her face relaxed into a smile as her lips brushed across the back of his hand.

Then Ryth gathered up the bells and the map and turned toward the old woman. "She is on Scitleint, third continent." At her look of confusion he explained. "The Access code is in the left quadrant, the galactic map code is in the right. N'ies?"

"N'ies," said the woman slowly.

The Sharnn helped her to her feet, handed her the jewelry and map, and led her back to the public

kel.

“She always loved her brother too much,” muttered the old woman to herself. “Too much ...”

Ryth watched her leave, then looked at the next seeker, a tall man who could have been in his second or sixth maturity. He wore the tight leggings and hip-length cape of a Malian farmer, but his face was masked, except for his forehead. There flashed gint marks, the tattoo of a non-combatant, despised by all, even those who also wore gint. Gints were considered less than alive; in Malian, gint meant shadow.

At Ryth’s gesture, the Gint got up and strode across the room. When he—or it, as gints were called on Malia—came closer, Ryth stiffened as though the man were truly a shadow, cold and black and thin as a blade. The Gint’s bearing was at odds with the avowed meekness of the tattoo. And there was something else, an impossible flash of familiarity in the Gint’s black-green eyes.

“Sit there,” said Ryth curtly, staring past the Gint as Malian custom demanded.

Faen looked up, saw the slash marks of gint and that the man was neither ill nor crippled nor otherwise incapacitated. Distaste tightened her lips.

“Its presence degrades the very meaning of Sandoliki,” she said curtly. “Take what it brought so we can get it out of here quickly.”

Ryth disliked turning his back on the Gint, but he did so with apparent indifference as he put the Gint’s package in front of Faen. The plastic wrapping came off easily. Beneath it was misa silk. Beneath the silk was a leather headband made on a planet six million light years from Malia.

\*There are many other possibilities,\* cautioned Ryth at the surge of excitement he sensed from Faen.

Faen’s only answer was impatience. Her hand shot out—and she gasped as agony lanced through her. Quickly she reduced contact to a single fingertip.

“Female. Strong energy. Alive ... ? Yes. But unconscious. She is—not—on Malia.” Faen lifted her hand and looked through the Gint sitting at the far end of the room. “Does it hope for further information?”

Ryth sensed the Gint’s leaping hatred at Faen’s scornful use of the impersonal pronoun. For a moment the Gint was utterly quiet, the stillness of a predator. Then a very rough voice asked, “Is the woman Malian or Vintran or some other race?”

Triumph flashed from Faen’s mind to Ryth’s, but she showed no outward sign as she barely touched the headband again.

“She’s one of Kayle’s people?” asked Ryth.

\*Yes, Telelell, I think. What should I tell it?\*

\*They probably have been questioning her under torture or drugs.\*

\*They have. Pain was the first thing I sensed.\*

\*Tell the Gint the truth. They may know anyway. This could be a test for you. After Vintra, they sure as zarfs suspect Kayle and me!\*

With a show of lingering over the headband, Faen said, “Neither Vintra nor Malia. If it wishes a particular planet—”

“No,” said the Gint, interrupting her rudely and turning away from her to leave.

The insult could not be ignored. With incredible speed, Ryth caught the Gint, flipped it, and held a wrist over its throat until the Gint passed out. When he was certain that the Gint was unconscious, Ryth pulled out his knife.

Faen watched with real indifference, then observed, “The insult wasn’t worth death.”

“Agreed,” said the Sharnn.

The knife flashed as Ryth began shaving the Gint’s head with short, vicious strokes. Dark gold curls fell next to dull black ones. He did not disturb the mask.

“Should I try to read it?” she asked, sitting on her heels close to him, watching.

Ryth had been asking himself the same question. And had no answer. “What will happen?”

Faen made a curt gesture of dismissal.

“M’zamay,” he said, fingers stroking her arm, “what will touching it do to you?”

“I don’t know,” she said tightly. “Since the time of the Ti Vire I have touched no living

person—except you.” She began methodically folding the misa square that the headband had been wrapped in. “And the others I touched only with a sharp knife.”

She placed the thick misa square on the Gint’s chest, carefully put her fingertip on the silk—and collapsed with a blinding mental scream.

Ryth caught Faen at the same moment he drove his mind into hers. He found only the stillness of absolute negation; something she had sensed was so abhorrent to her that she was wiping the memory from her mind. It would be as though she never had touched the Gint at all.

With gentle hands the Sharnn eased her onto the floor, murmuring praise and love to her indrawn, tightly curled mind. Outside of her mind he cursed in the twisting epithets of Sharn. When he looked up, Kayle was there, radiating a desire to kill whatever had caused such pain.

\*Faen?\* demanded Kayle.

\*Healing herself.\*

\*What happened?\*

\*She touched it.\*

\*Stupid!\*

The force of Ryth’s snarling explanation made Kayle grimace. \*Not stupid,\* amended Kayle. \*Necessary. Will she sleep long?\*

\*A sixth part, maybe longer.\* Ryth picked up Faen. \*Keep the Gint unconscious until I get back. It’s waking now.\*

\*Is it?\*

Kayle’s predatory satisfaction made Ryth smile. He left the Gint to Kayle’s skilled hands. Quickly he took Faen to her h’kel and placed her on a sleeping pallet. With a lingering caress he wrapped the sleep robe around her, then ran back to Kayle. The Gint lay slackly on the floor.

“You must have leaned rather hard on its throat,” observed Ryth.

“Not so hard as I wanted.”

Ryth knelt and finished shaving half the Gint’s head.

“The black is dyed,” said Ryth as he wrapped a few dull black coils in misa silk, then added a few of the deep gold curls.

He gave the silk to Kayle, scattered the remaining hair over the Gint and then dug his fingers into the Gint’s abdomen, twisting hard. Pain brought sudden consciousness. The Gint stared at Ryth with eyes that echoed agony and something more, black-green shadows sliding in familiar depths, familiar in the instant before negation wiped recognition from memory. Gone, but not without a trace. The Sharnn sensed a haunting need, consuming hunger, as though a shadow called for life from the other side of hope.

For a moment, the Sharnn felt Malia spinning beneath him, then he wrenched his mind and forgot, totally, every instant but the one before him, staring into the shadow depths of the Gint’s hopeless eyes.

“If the Sandoliki Ti Ryth sees it before its hair grows out, it will die. N’ies?”

“N’ies,” said the Gint hoarsely.

The Sharnn stood and turned his back on the intimacy of the Gint’s knowing eyes. He sensed a cry deep within his mind, core deep, and he reached out to Faen but she was still coiled in upon herself, unknowing, unable even to cry out.

“It is gone,” said Kayle after a moment.

“Good,” said Ryth, allowing his eyes to focus on Kayle.

Kayle looked at the square of misa Ryth had given him. “Why didn’t you just twist the information out of it?” said Kayle.

“Wouldn’t have worked. Assassin trained. I could feel it in the muscles.”

“That gint?” said Kayle incredulously. “An assassin?”

Ryth shrugged impatiently. “The tattoo was painted.”

“But—”

“Can you think of a better disguise?” snapped Ryth. “No Malian ever looked deeper than the tattoo. A gint is nothing. A shadow of life.”

“Yes,” said Kayle doubtfully, “but no Malian or even Vintran could bring himself to wear a coward’s mark. Not for any reason. In fact—”

Kayle stopped at a gesture from the Sharnn. Both men stood and listened to the thin sigh of a speeding flyer.

“Did you put a follow-me on that flyer?”

“On every flyer,” said Kayle dryly.

“Tell Faen—” The Sharnn made a slicing gesture and swore in his native tongue; what he had to say to Faen could not be said by another.

“Wait,” said Kayle quickly. “When Faen wakes up—”

“The Gint will be long vanished. The follow-me will only broadcast for a tenth part of a day.”

The Sharnn turned away. Kayle stretched out his arm. Ryth went far beyond his reach in a single fluid leap.

“I wasn’t—” began Kayle.

“I know.”

The Sharnn turned and ran with long, rapid strides.

“At least protect yourself with your cape!” called Kayle, but Ryth did not hear.

The Sharnn ran swiftly to a waiting eight-flyer. The machine was Lekel’s acknowledgment that Faen was beyond his sensual reach and therefore no longer needed to be kept a virtual prisoner.

The flyer leaped into the rusty wind. Red-brown land, deeply seamed and shadowed, blurred beneath the speeding machine. Ryth had little to do; the flyer was programmed to lock onto the follow-me signal and the scanner was automatically monitoring any communications. To prevent discovery, Ryth’s larger eight-flyer moved at a greater altitude.

The dry stone of Darg Vintra gave way to the fertile flower belt of Malia’s temperate zone. From high up, the land was a watercolor blur of cream and turquoise and gold with the velvet black of nightvines like a net holding the flowers away from crimson fires that were tere groves reaching for the pale turquoise sky.

Small towns and settlements appeared and vanished, their creamstone and russet brick buildings blending with the grain and flower land. Eventually the towns seemed to run together until Ryth was flying over the fifty-one clan compounds whose creamstone heights were the nucleus of C’Varial, Malia’s greatest—and only—city.

Ryth stared at the apparently random, yet subtly patterned, city below. In the center of the compounds, crouched on a high hill, was the y’Kel of the Sandoliki Clan. By law, it should have been Faen’s home, but the immense weight of history/emotion that the y’Kel bore made it virtually uninhabitable to Faen.

The follow-me’s signal shifted in pitch, indicating that the flyer had landed. Ryth’s grip on the controls tightened as he realized a compelling reluctance to confront the Gint again, perhaps this time to find out more than even a Sharnn could conceive.

Ryth realized that the one-flyer had passed the shuttle pad and gone on to the Sandoliki Compound. The one-flyer had landed at the center of Malian government.

Ryth set the flyer down close to the follow-me’s signal. He flipped a lever, sending a beam of energy that reduced the follow-me to dust. Then, using the same beam at a much lower energy, he carefully scanned the one-flyer for signs of life.

The Gint—or someone—was still inside. Ryth smiled grimly, guessing that he/it did not want to be seen with a half-shaved head.

Soon the one-flyer opened and a man climbed out. His cape swirled with wind and movement and Ryth had an instant of familiarity, a sense of having seen before. Then the instant passed and the man became someone wearing an elaborate headdress that had formerly been a hip-length shirt. The man’s forehead was innocent of any blazing gint marks, yet Ryth had no doubt that the man was his quarry; the stride was longer, more open, but it was permeated by the same subtle arrogance that had sent a warning tingle through Ryth at Darg Vintra.

Unnoticed, Ryth followed the man through the wide, flying arches of translucent creamstone that

marked the boundaries of the Sandoliki Compound. With each step closer to the Topaz Kel, the creamstone changed subtly, becoming nearer and nearer in hue to the brilliant gold-brown that blazed from the transparent crystal walls of the famed Topaz Arcade.

Ryth's pattern instinct automatically appreciated the artistry of Sandoliki construction; without touching, he knew that the textures changed as subtly as the hues. Nearby, zamay lifted petal throats, singing, asking. The man Ryth followed stopped and looked around casually; his black-green eyes dismissed Ryth bending over a trembling zamay as pollen poured silver-bright over Ryth's palms. With a glance, the man stepped sideways and vanished through a hedge of nightvine and moonflowers.

Ryth counted ten before he slipped through the hedge at a different spot. He found himself in an intricate garden maze of the type used to train aristocratic children in textural nuances. There were no true paths, nothing but an almost subliminal sequence of colors and textures that led to a single exit. For a Malian child, the garden was a difficult, yet delightful experience. For the Sharnn, it was an exercise in pattern skills that taxed his patience. Yet Ryth could not help but savor the exquisite progression of textures as he came closer and closer to the maze's exit. Once out, he found himself in the Topaz Arcade, a section of the y'kel reserved for Lekel's family and intimates. The man he followed had vanished. Ryth searched the soaring arches and curving tiers of windows for an exit or an opening or anything that would give him a clue to the man's direction, but the windows looked down on him with seamless brilliance and the tangle of nightvine and scarlet tere that separated arch from wall had no openings.

The Sharnn could see no one, yet a thousand people might see him. He remembered a skilled White Dawn assassin whose last sight was the Topaz Arcade. He sensed someone approaching from behind and turned swiftly.

The speed and poise of the Sharnn's turn acted as a warning to the four who approached. They slowed and watched his hands very carefully. Ryth returned their scrutiny while facts fell into a deadly pattern: the four had expected to find someone here; they did not recognize him as a Sandoliki; they would attack him; and they probably had other warriors nearby.

The Sharnn's mind raced through probabilities, but none gave much hope of escape. With a mental shrug, Ryth faced the four. One of them spoke to him in the round tones of a respectful stranger. Ryth would have been pleased had he not guessed that the man was stalling for time.

"We are unknown to each other—"

"Of course!" returned Ryth in the icy tones reserved for highest aristocracy.

Then the Sharnn flipped open his metal-cloth cape, showing that he was weaponless. As a gesture of contempt it had few peers. Now the four people facing him must decide whether Ryth was of a status that made his insults not only palatable, but pleasurable. The insult was a gamble, an attempt to disconcert the would-be attackers. Perhaps even to dissuade them.

But even as he moved, the Sharnn read decision on the other man's face. They would attack him as soon as they were ready.

"Our error," said the tall one coldly. "Possibly our regret."

"Not possibly, Gint," Ryth said in deadly insult. "Certainly."

Even as he spoke, the Sharnn leaped and lashed out with his foot. Heel met head with an audible snap. The tall man flew backwards into his friends, spoiling the balance of their attack. Ryth dove and rolled to avoid a knife. Still rolling, he lashed twice and sent one of the men into screaming retreat with arm and leg broken; strangler's wire fell from nerveless fingers and coiled on the stone walk. The remaining two retreated slowly.

Ryth fainted in their direction, then spun around—only to see five people advancing on him. Three of them carried strangler's wire and in the Sharnn's mind a White Dawn assassin looked at the Topaz Arcade for the last time before she died with a bleeding wire mark on her throat.

The hedge quivered in accidental warning. Ryth dove and rolled away just as three more men slid into the Arcade. Now there were ten assassins closing in on three sides. Whoever the Gint was, he took few chances; the Topaz Arcade was a well-designed deathtrap.

With all the discipline and power he had, Ryth sent to Faen a warning of the Topaz Arcade. As he

sent, he carefully backed away in the only direction open to him. He knew that someone would be closing in from behind, but every instant he remained alive increased the chance that Faen would receive his message.

\*Where are you now! Exactly!\*

The clarity of Faen's demand surprised the Sharnn, but he responded with a vivid mental picture of his location. Then Ryth's time was gone. A m'vire hummed by his diving body. The metal star sliced through a wrist-sized vine and quivered in a tere trunk. Ryth rolled to his feet and yanked out the m'vire. With split-instant aim, he sent the m'vire humming into an enemy's throat. Three knives leaped for the Sharnn. He threw himself aside, but could not evade all three. One missed, one tangled in the metal threads of his cape, and the last made a painful arc across his thigh. He bent and grabbed the two knives within reach. Even as he straightened, one of the knives leaped out of his hand and sped toward the closest assassin. She sensed the danger and jumped; the knife went into her abdomen instead of her heart. Ryth's second knife turned over and over in the sunlight, a long throw at the person Ryth sensed sneaking up behind him, hidden by one of the many hedges twisting through the Arcade. A cry of pain told Ryth that his aim was accurate but not deadly.

No more knives or m'vires came toward the Sharnn. The attackers had learned that Ryth was too deadly to give any weapons. At an unseen signal, the seven remaining assassins spread out until they had surrounded him. The hedge quivered and vomited more people, more weapons, too many for one man no matter what his skill.

Without realizing it, Ryth called out to Faen, pouring images/emotions of laughter and peace and sensuality and sorrow and raw rage at the end of love, a sending as richly textured as their joining had been. Then his mind closed totally and he focused himself on killing as many as he could in the time he had left. The hedge jerked again, but Ryth was too busy to look. He waited until the circle around him had shrunk, waited until the sudden tensing of bodies told him they were getting ready to rush, then he threw himself up and backwards in one of faal-hnim's most difficult and deadly moves. When his body reached the peak of its upward arc, Ryth tucked himself into a ball, turned, then snapped open at the instant that his spinning force was the greatest. His feet descended on two assassins. Between one instant and the next, two men died.

Three other assassins leaped on the Sharnn before he could roll completely clear of the crumpled bodies. Knives and knees struck, seeking the soft parts of Ryth's body. In a haze of pain, Ryth drove rigid fingers against a woman's throat, killing her and throwing her at the man whose knife had broken on stone between Ryth's legs.

The Sharnn's body was slippery with sweat and blood from cuts he had never felt. He threw himself aside as yet another man leaped, knife and knees and sudden death. The man hit Ryth's arm with numbing force, but the knife missed Ryth's throat. The Sharnn raised his uninjured arm for a lethal chop. Before he could bring me edge of his palm down, the man grunted and fell slackly forward. A knife glittered in his back. Ryth yanked the weapon free and silently thanked the over-eager assassin who had killed one of his own.

Nearby a man screamed, a sound of intolerable pain. Out of the corner of his eye, Ryth saw a short, powerful figure leap into the air and lash out with both feet. Ryth recognized Kayle in the instant that both blows connected, breaking two necks. Then Ryth realized that the knife he held was a Nendleti knife, curved and serrated.

Two assassins leaped for Kayle as a third drew her arm back to throw a knife. Even while Ryth's mind called a warning, a turquoise blur somersaulted past the knife-thrower. The exquisite timing of the strike was as much Faen as the fact that the assassin died before she touched the ground.

The Sharnn rolled to his feet, left arm hanging uselessly, right arm lashing out with a heavy Nendleti knife that cut through bone. He stood wide-legged, shouting at the remaining assassins in the corkscrew phrases of a Sharnn poet, celebrating Faen's lethal beauty as she leaped and kicked and spun and kicked. Then he was in her mind and she in his. He threw the heavy knife with utter certainty, metal hissing past her motionless body. The knife drove into the shoulder of a strangler whose wire had just slipped over Kayle's throat. With a running leap, Faen flipped her body in a deadly cartwheel that ended

with an assassin's broken back.

The Topaz Arcade was suddenly very quiet. Automatically, Ryth and Kayle and Faen drew together, backs to each other, eyes searching for more attackers. But the only assassins they saw already lay on the ground, dead or nearly so.

Ryth felt a soaring moment that Faen could have named, one of a thousand, but he knew only that he was alive in a place littered with death. He threw back his head and crystal arches rang with the wild laughter of Sharn.

Faen moved close to him, warming mind and body with his laughter, his arm a hard strength holding her close. Only the sliding darkness deep in her eyes showed what touching those others had cost, that and standing in a place crowded with past and present emotions. But as he held her, her eyes cleared to a pale turquoise that matched the shimmering metallic pull-up she wore. Then her clothes shimmered, lifted and became his Sharnn cape, drifting around his shoulders, healing.

\*How—? he asked in her mind.

"Kayle gave me a stimulant that would have made a tere grove dance the faal-hnim," she responded, eyes pale, reflecting the pearl longshirt that she had worn beneath the Sharon cape.

As Ryth's anger scorched through Kayle's mind, the Nendleti involuntarily raised his hands. \*Carifil suggestion, not mine! She's all right. Ask her.\*

Ryth touched Faen's mind and felt the familiar sliding-soaring sensation as their minds met and melted one into the other. Deep within he sensed the echoes of earlier horror, but nowhere did he find or feel the jaggedness of true injury.

"How did you know where I was?"

Faen's laughter was as sudden and clear as a desert spring. \*Have you forgotten my talent? You'll never escape me, laseyss. I can follow you with the ease of an iron needle following a magnet.\*

Ryth bent over her and tasted her beauty for a long moment. Not far from their feet, a woman groaned and jerked. Reluctantly, Ryth released Faen and went over to the woman. When she saw him, she said hoarsely, "G'el n'si!"

The words meant "Mercy, warrior!" and at one time had been a call for a clean death. Time and changing customs had transformed the phrase into a statement of neutrality; the person who called out declared that he or she was not fighting at that moment. The fact that the woman used the words told Ryth that his death had not been bought by name; the people he fought were more warriors than assassins.

"N'si g'el," agreed Ryth, feeling better with each moment that he wore the cape.

Though she had a broken arm and a dislocated knee, the woman managed to pull herself upright. Ryth ignored her, instead bending over a tall man who was only an arm's length from her. The Sharnn probed with rigid fingers and was answered by a reflexive twitch.

"Your clumsy friend is still alive," said Ryth to the woman. "Get him back to your guild. He is our gift to the fools who believe many indifferent fighters equal one good one." The Sharnn stood smoothly. "And tell the person in the hedge that he will die very slowly if he moves at all."

"G'el n'si," said a man's voice, resonant with power and ease.

"N'si g'el, Lekel."

The hedge shivered and Lekel strode into the Topaz Arcade. His black eyes dismissed Kayle, slid away from Ryth—and devoured Faen.

"You fight more beautifully than I remembered, m'zamay."

Faen's lips thinned at the intimate endearment. With exquisite deliberation, she turned her back on Lekel. Her skilled fingers moved over Ryth's face and chest and lips, speaking clearly of invitation and response. Smiling, the Sharnn smoothed his palm down her body in a lingering touch that left no doubt of their mutual desire. His cape shimmered like m'zamay, caressing her ankles.

Lekel was very still while he fought the jealousy twisting through him. Fought and won; when he spoke, he made no further claim to an intimate relationship with Faen.

"The Sandoliki Ti Faen's visit is as unexpected as it is pleasing."

Faen made a gesture of such indifference as to border on insult. "You guard yourself well, Lekel. Are



the knives of Power and Discretion weighing too heavily in your sheaths?"

Unconsciously, Lekel's hands went to the two knives strapped one to each thigh, symbols of his rule as well as two of the most ancient artifacts known on Malia. The carved gold hilts had a luster that came from centuries of use. At the center of each hilt was a large blue-green gemstone, shaped like a sleepless, transparent eye. A slightly larger, more deeply carved stone was worn by Faen.

"The knives are perfectly balanced when I wear them," said Lekel. "But you wouldn't know about such balance and power, would you?"

"Sometimes," said Faen idly, "you remind me of a skavern—nothing alive would deign to live in the slime pit that is a skavern's nest, yet he guards that pit as though it were the most delectable home in the known universe."

The insult was too clear to ignore; Lekel's face became an expressionless warning.

\*Gently,\* urged Ryth.

\*Why?\* shot back Faen. \*He's none too careful of my preferences!\*

\*He's carrying a rather obvious intent for you.\*

Faen's only response to Lekel's visible desire for her was contempt.

\*Because he wants you?\* asked Ryth, puzzled by the depth of her rejection. \*Surely that's no insult.\*

\*Because he never wanted me enough to risk his life fighting me!\*

\*Did Relle?\*

\*We were bound to each other before we were combat trained.\*

\*Be polite anyway,\* suggested the Sharnn. \*I need Lekel in an agreeable mood.\*

\*Then kill him.\*

Faen turned toward Lekel. "How is your first wife, Memned?"

"My only wife is well," said Lekel, obviously surprised by Faen's courtesy in asking.

"My error. I forgot that you imitated the Sandoliki customs by having only one wife. But then," she added, "you have little choice. Few women would be second to a Vintran."

Lekel's body shifted into a subtle crouch. "You go too far with your contempt, Faen."

"Are you challenging the truth—or me?" She cocked her head hopefully. "Both, perhaps?"

Lekel struggled with his anger, and the pain her contempt gave him. His handsome face settled into grim lines. "I will settle for your apology."

"You're too generous," said Faen softly, her eyes clear as ice.

And that was all she said.

"The thirteenth part of a day," hissed Lekel, giving Faen the license granted to one who has just fought—and biting off each word as though it tasted of skavern.

Faen turned and leaned against Ryth in sensual invitation. "Was there something you wanted here, de fmi ti?" she said in a husky voice. "You have only to ask."

\*You can be a hooked thorn, m'zamay,\* answered Ryth, tracing her lips with the tip of his tongue. \*Will Lekel help us now?\*

Her tongue answered his as she stretched against him. \*He can help us or die. His choice.\*

Smiling with a sensuality that matched hers, the Sharnn loosened her braided hair. "What I want, m'zamay, is a man one hand shorter than I, two hands less broad in the shoulders, black-green eyes, and—" his fingers gently rubbed against her scalp "—half his black and gold hair shaved off." He lifted a coil of her perfumed hair to his lips and inhaled appreciatively. "When I last saw this false gint—"

At the word "gint," Lekel jerked.

"—he was fast-walking down this very—"

"No," said Lekel, voice flat and urgent. "Not here. The acoustics of the Arcade are part of its fame."

Lekel turned away abruptly, but his obvious agitation removed any taint of insult. They hesitated, then followed him carefully, eyes searching for ambush.

Lekel led them beneath transparent golden-brown arches carved by ancient masters, through twisting black hedges of nightvine laced with scarlet from fallen tere leaves, through breezes dense with zamay's aphrodisiac pollen and paths soft with myriad drifting petals and fragrances.

No one spoke; no one made any noise at all. They moved like thoughts along the perimeter of the Arcade and deep into the Abandoned Gardens of the Ninth Sandoliki. As they threaded through a maze of trembling, singing flowers, a cloud of silver insects rose and glittered around their hands like a jeweled rain before settling again on the silver centers of the blue-green flowers. A clean, sweet scent filled the air. Petals gave way to the hushed beauty of a tere grove, trunks black and polished with age, leaves blood red with youth. Deep in the grove a scarlet bird called and was answered by Lekel's rippling whistle. The bird called again, a sweet descending note of peace. Suddenly Ryth sensed that this grove had been the favorite place of Faen's childhood, that she chose her perfume after its special blend of fragrances—and that she was disturbed by Lekel's intimacy with a place that was part of her.

Lekel turned toward them. "What do you know about the Gint?" he demanded.

"Is that what you call him?" said Ryth lazily, but his mind was working on new patterns with a speed only Faen could appreciate. "He's not a true gint. He has the abdominal muscles of a highly trained assassin and the stealth of a shadow."

"Where did you see him?" Lekel's black eyes shone with hidden emotions. "How did you get close enough to touch him? And why didn't you kill him when you had the chance? Tell me!"

Faen swayed closer to Ryth, touched him unconsciously. He had a fleeting, blurred sense of a Ninth Circle symbol overlaid by the slash marks of gint, but when he tried to focus in her mind, the thought disappeared into the shield Faen had built against what she had discovered the moment she touched the Gint's body. Without knowing why, the Sharnn moved uneasily, rejecting what he had not yet discovered.

"I'm not at your command," observed Ryth in a carefully neutral tone.

Lekel's eyes became as polished and opaque as old tere bark, but in the end he bowed to the simple truth of Ryth's words.

"My error." Lekel paused, then added ruefully, "Very much my regret. You are the Great Destroyer's own fighter." His eyes went speculatively to Faen.

"Yes," she said, smiling. "He fought me—and then I fainted at the beauty of his touch."

Lekel was Malian, and proud. But he was also a realist. They saw his eyes change as he began to accept the finality of his loss; Faen was as much beyond his reach as though she were dead.

"The man you call the Gint," said Ryth into the silence, "came to Darg Vintra this morning. He asked for a moment of Faen's talent, and received it in spite of the slash marks on his forehead."

Lekel smiled sardonically. "Were you gracious to the Gint, Sandoliki Ti Faen?"

Oddly, Faen did not rise to his teasing. Something close to sorrow moved over her lips, as though she at last had realized that Lekel wanted her as much as she wanted the Sharnn. She could not add to the pain she saw turning deep within the k'm'n Sandoliki's clear black eyes.

Ryth spoke, sensing that Faen might inadvertently make a gesture of compassion that would only anger the proud Malian ruler.

"Instead of being grateful that she expended her energy for a mere gint," said Ryth quickly, "it insulted the Ti Faen. As the insult was small, I merely shaved half its head."

"Did it offer to fight you?" asked Lekel curiously.

"It didn't have the chance," Faen said.

Lekel moved his shoulders in the unconscious reflex of a man who has an intolerable burden dragging at his back.

"What do you know of this gint?" asked Ryth with deceptive softness.

Lekel's face closed and he said nothing. The Sharnn waited with outward indifference, knowing that somehow the Gint must have offended Lekel and escaped unpunished. Such things were difficult for a Malian to speak of.

"Ti Lekel is a fighter and a sensualist of great fame," Kayle said delicately. "But even a Sandoliki is sometimes unlucky ..."

For the first time, Lekel really noticed Kayle.

"I don't know you, alien," said Lekel. The bluntness of his statement was an invitation for acquaintance rather than an insult.

“Ti Kayle,” Faen said dryly, “taught me faal-hnim when I was training to become a Concord agent.”

Lekel made a graceful gesture of respect. “May Malia please you, Ti Kayle.”

“As well as I please her,” said Kayle smoothly.

“He knows our customs better than any outsider except Ryth,” Faen said, examining the pattern of light splintering deep in her blue-green ring.

Though she said no more, her tone clearly implied that Lekel would insult either man at his own peril, no matter how subtle the attempt.

Lekel smiled ironically at Faen, then said to Kayle, “You honor us with your presence, Nendleti warrior.” He made no reference to the esthetic aspect of Nendleti culture, an omission that was as much test as insult.

“Ti k’m’n Sandoliki Lekel is most kind,” murmured Kayle, deftly reminding Lekel that he was only a Sandoliki by k’m’n—courtesy.

Lekel smiled slightly. “As I expected—the men who walk near Faen have sharp knives.” He dropped his hands abruptly, ending with a gesture that could have been an appeal. “As the Destroyer wills. I’ll tell you what I can. But if I find out that you are knife friends with the Gint; I will help the two of you die very slowly.”

Lekel looked over their heads at the red tere leaves licking against the turquoise sky. Then, with a suddenness that made his yellow cape flare, he turned to look behind his back. Nothing was there but the rain-scented breeze ... yet he stared for a long moment, analyzing shadows as though he did not believe there were only four people listening beneath the huge tere tree.

Faen snapped her fingers impatiently. “Unless your gint is truly a shadow, we are alone here.”

The Sharnn’s body tightened, but he said nothing and no one noticed.

There are many who believe he is just that,” Lekel said. “The shadow of Malia’s dead pride, slain by Vintrans and now stalking across the land while we call its name.” Lekel’s disturbingly handsome face twisted, then smoothed into uncanny expressionlessness. “I do not share that belief. But too many rally around the inverted vees.” He gave Faen a sidelong look out of brilliant black eyes. “Far-cousin, it was a bleak day when you began the Ti Vire.”

“It was a bleak day when I ended it!” she snapped, Jabbing two fingers of her left hand downward in the sign of Ti Vire. “Vintrans are alive today to spread stupidities about gints and shadows.”

“Must it be Vintrans?” asked Ryth.

Faen spun on him, pale eyes blazing. “Maliens do not use shadows. Or gints!”

Without responding, the Sharnn looked back at Lekel.

“I wish I had Faen’s faith,” was all that Lekel said.

“Silence!” she hissed. “You don’t know what is at risk!”

But when Lekel asked for an explanation, she turned away, unable to speak about Malia’s threatened destruction.

Lekel made a cutting gesture of dismissal. “The Gint has killed six of my knife-friends.”

Faen turned back and compassion transformed her face. “I regret. Do you know why they died?”

“Ask the Great Destroyer,” said Lekel bitterly. “All six were necessary to my rule. Two were D’corl, advisors for whole continents. Three were Listeners and the last—” Lekel’s eyes became narrow and very black “—the last was my f’mi. She was more than a sensual companion, though. She was a Listener of rare skill. From the oddest rumors she could glean the most useful facts. Vintra was her specialty.” Lekel’s hands cupped, then parted as though he poured something out. “I am empty.”

“May I know her name?” said Ryth.

“Cy’mari’ne, White Dawn Assassin of the Ninth Circle.”

Ryth spoke into the sudden silence, his voice casual in spite of his leaping pulse. “Did her killer take anything?”

“Hands, hair and knife,” said Lekel with outward calm.

“You’re sure that the Gint—”

“Yes. Three witnessed her death. The Gint’s black and gold hair,” added Lekel dryly, “is distinctive. Most Maliens have one or three hair colors, not two.”

“Vintrans?” asked Kayle.

“The same. Physically, we have diverged very little in the centuries since Separation.”

“Do you believe,” said the Sharnn slowly, “that someone on Malia is trying to end your rule, using the Gint?”

“Yes. Until today, I was nearly certain that it was the Ti Faen.”

“Why?”

“I knew of no one else who could kill a Ninth Circle assassin. One attacker, alone.”

“But the Gint is a man,” said Kayle.

Lekel made a subtle gesture of ambivalence. “Is it?”

“Yes,” said Ryth. “I threw him, held him, twisted him,” added the Sharnn. “He was undoubtedly male.”

Lekel snapped his fingers. “Then there is an unknown man,” and he looked harshly at Ryth, then Kayle, “who fights at least in the Ninth Circle and who kills my knife-friends and then vanishes into the shadows.”

“We’re the wrong size,” said Kayle, smiling blandly.

“There are moments when I suspect myself!” snapped Lekel. “Even with more guards in the y’kel than zamay, the Gint managed to slip through and strangle Cy in the Topaz Arcade.”

Lekel stared over their heads, seeing the death of his f’mi beneath the splintered bronze light of ancient arches.

\*By wire,\* Faen’s thought tumbled into the Sharnn’s mind. \*By wire and her knife jerking down, knife-tip breaking on carved stone and death.\*

Ryth shook his head at the force of the images that came with her thought.

\*I felt the wire. He kills on two planets. False gint indeed.\*

\*Two?\*

\*Pattern-man,\* dryly, \*who else could have evaded both you and Kayle while cutting his companions’ throats? He was the last one to touch her knife before you found it in one of Vintra’s garbage alleys.\*

\*No ...!\*

\*There’s no doubt,\* began Faen, then sensed Ryth’s mind sliding out of reach.

“What if the man is Vintran,” Ryth said tightly, “rather than Malian?”

“It’s possible,” conceded Lekel with barely veiled impatience.

“Would it also be possible for the man to move freely between the two planets?”

“You have a particular person in mind?”

Ryth’s lips thinned into silence.

Lekel’s knife hand made a slicing gesture. “I know every man who uses Malia’s Access.”

The Sharnn waited.

“What day were you thinking of?” Lekel asked, his tone telling Ryth of displeasure at information withheld.

“The last four days.”

Lekel smiled sourly. “Too easy, Ti Ryth. No one has used the Access in that time. Surprised? Or don’t you believe? No matter. Ask your friends on the inner moon if anyone has been through while they sat and drew designs in the air.” Lekel stopped, suddenly remembering something. “You say you followed the Gint here? What was his flyer like?”

“One-flyer, silver, no status designs.”

“There are thousands like that.”

Ryth shrugged; there was nothing he could do about that. And he was becoming more impatient and suspicious with each moment that Lekel failed to do the obvious thing. Finally, Ryth forced the matter.

“Shouldn’t we be searching the compound for this man? We’ve wasted—”

“Nothing,” cut in Lekel, smiling sardonically. “Since the first chime of the hidden bells, my guards have been combing the gardens and Arcade.” He touched a disc on the end of a heavy gold chain. Ryth recognized a transceiver beneath the delicate filigree design. “So far, they’ve found only you and Kayle

and Faen. And death, of course. A lot of that.”

“Have they searched Memned’s h’kel?” said Faen coolly.

Lekel hissed a curse and ignored her. “Every h’kel is searched every time that gint is seen. But he vanishes like a shadow in a moonless moment.”

\*What now?\* asked Kayle, sending an image of a blind man dodging lightning.

\*Did you bring the false gint’s hair?\*

\*Yes.\*

“If we can’t be of further use to you,” said Ryth, “we would like to rest. I assume we have the freedom of the city and the y’kel?”

“Of course we do,” said Faen before Lekel could answer. “We are Sandoliki Ti. If we wished to shatter each arch, all he could do is praise our strokes and strength!” She turned to Lekel, her face expressionless. “N’ies, my most distant cousin?”

“N’ies,” said Lekel coldly. “The Ti Faen, her husband and her servant are welcome in any h’kel in C’Varial or the whole of Malia.”

“I am honored,” murmured Ryth.

Lekel said nothing.

In silence they walked back to the Topaz Kel. No one, alive or dead, was in the Arcade garden where they had recently fought. Only a few broken plants and the scent of crushed flowers told of violence. Lekel walked swiftly, yellow cape lifting in the breeze of his passage. With his tight black pull-up, his gold knives of office, and his lean, hard body, he looked every bit the warrior/ruler he was.

Ryth watched narrowly, and wondered why Lekel had never fought Faen. The Sharnn doubted that it was a matter of courage; Lekel was a formidable man.

The k’m’n Sandoliki made a fluid gesture with his arm, indicating a scimitar-shaped cluster of buildings.

“If you wish my kel, Ti Faen, you may have it. Otherwise, the Turquoise Kel is yours. No one has stayed there since Relle died. No one but you ever will.”

Ryth sensed horror coiling around the proud woman beside him. He knew that she would rather die than enter that kel—and that she would suffer agonies before she showed weakness to Lekel.

The barest hint of a smile curved Lekel’s perfect Malian mouth; he knew, and was looking forward to making Faen ask him for something.

“In my culture,” said Ryth easily, “the home of the first husband is tabu to the second. Although this is Malia rather than Sharn, there are some tabus I am not comfortable ignoring.”

Lekel smiled slightly, appreciating the speed and tact of what was probably a lie.

“Of course,” murmured Lekel. “The Creamstone and Gold Kel is also unoccupied. It is not as intricately carved—”

“Thank you,” said the Sharnn quickly, then added, “the y’kel fascinates me. I intend to explore every finger of it. I’d dislike doing it over the dead bodies of your guards.”

This time, Lekel’s smile was as thin as a blade. “N’ies, Ti Ryth. I will warn them.”

With a swirl of sun-bright cape, Lekel strode off, leaving them in a garden smelling of bruised flowers. When Kayle began to speak, Ryth’s mental warning silenced him.

“If Lekel has the area wired against intruders, he might also have it wired to pick up speech.”

At Ryth’s gesture, Faen led them to the Creamstone and Gold Kel. It was a series of rooms strung like beads on a creamstone necklace circling an inner garden. In the center of the garden was a mutated tere tree with rich brown bark and bright bronze leaves. Everywhere in the h’kel, colors ranged from translucent cream through gold and bronze to darkest brown. The variety of tones and textures would have tested the subtlety of a Malian master. Or a Sharnn.

\*What of this place?\* asked Kayle. \*Is it wired?\*

The Sharnn looked at the myriad patterns of light, spirals and circles, cones and spheres and every simple curve known to man.

\*Any one of those designs could hide an amplifier or a funnel or a Taranarkan energy sponge,\* pointed out Ryth. “Make appropriate verbal comments and limit real discussion to mindspeech.\*”

The Sharnn passed similar instructions on to Faen. While they traded esthetic observations concerning the stunning simplicity of the kel, Kayle and Ryth looked for traps. But the beauty of the rooms kept distracting them. With a mental curse, Ryth turned to Faen for help. She was pale and tight; sweat sheened lightly on her golden skin.

\*Old auras?\* he asked.

\*I'm handling it,\* she returned curtly, matching strides with him.

\*Would you rather work outside?\*

\*Little difference. The kel has been continuously occupied for many thousand years. The very stones of the gardens—\*

Faen's thought ended abruptly. She shuddered and moved lithely aside. \*A woman died. Long ago. Ambush.\* Faen turned and walked to the h'kel they had just left, a room composed entirely of a single shade and texture of goldstone sculpted into shallow curves and subtle hollows. Even for a Malian aristocrat, the h'kel was very difficult to appreciate, much less comprehend. Thus it had been occupied less often than the others.

\*I can work here.\*

\*Can you work using only mindspeech?\* asked the Sharnn.

\*I don't know. As soon as I touch, I am ... taken over.\*

She held her hand out. At Ryth's silent prompting, Kayle put a small, misa-wrapped package in her palm. Faen sat cross-legged on the cool stone floor and peeled back the silk until curls of gold and dull black hair were revealed. In no way did she show her absolute abhorrence of touching something of the Gint.

\*What do you want?\* she asked. \*Location?\*

\*Yes. M'zamay, are you sure? I remember what happened when—\*

\*Hair is less than flesh,\* Faen returned crisply, but her eyes were haunted and she sensed that he was as reluctant as she. With a feeling of conflicting imperatives, she reached out and barely touched a tight, dark gold curl. \*No. No! It can't—\*

Faen's left hand wrapped around Ryth's wrist in a punishing grip, but he did not protest.

\*What can't be, m'zamay?\* he asked gently, but her ability to answer was gone, for she had wiped out the second touch of the Gint as quickly as the first. But not as completely; she retained enough contact to receive information.

"Male. Black violence. Cold death." She shuddered. "I did not know such existed. A shadow. Consuming and so hungry only a world could feed it."

\*Where is he?\* demanded Ryth silently. \*Turquoise kel? C'Varial? Malia?\*

"No and no and no."

She shuddered again and again and he did not know whether she was replying to his questions or to the information that seethed within the dark shine of the Gint's hair.

"Gone away. Gone—to—blue light and falling—Vintra."

Ryth took the curl away from her and smoothed the fingers that had held it. Though he was comforting her, her face was bleak with negation. Then her expression cleared as she forgot what she had sensed, just as she had forgotten the instant her finger touched the Gint's chest.

\*Blue light and falling,\* mused Ryth. \*Kayle, ask the Carifil at the moon station whether the Access has been used.\*

\*I just did. The Access hasn't flared since they arrived.\*

The Sharnn's negation was more forceful than Faen's had been. \*No. Not Malia!\*

\*What do you mean?\* demanded Kayle.

There was no answer. For a spinning instant, it was as though they saw a pattern condensing around them like a shadow sucking light into chill darkness. Both Faen and Kayle cried out at the agony and rage and rejection they tasted in the Sharnn's mind before it closed so completely that even Faen could sense only his presence, not his thoughts or even his emotions. She looked at him, saw only the hard face of a stranger whose eyes were more black than green.

\*What is it, laseyss?\* Faen whispered at the edge of his mind.

A stranger's eyes looked at her, Sharnn eyes with neither comfort nor compassion lighting their shadowed depths.

"Kayle," she breathed. "Can you reach him?"

"No," he said, very softly. "Wholly opaque."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Kayle sighed, then shifted positions so that he was within reach of Faen and Ryth and had a clear view of the doorway. "Can you make yourself sleep?" he asked in a normal tone.

"If I must."

"Good. Rest while I watch."

"What about—"

"I don't know," said Kayle curtly. Then he softened his words with a gentle gesture that would have touched her if he could. "Don't worry, little daughter. Give him time."

Faen's dark eyebrows rose in skeptical curves, but she curled up along Ryth's thigh and sent herself into sleep. As soon as Kayle was certain that she truly slept, his eyes showed a fear he had denied to her.

Eventually, Kayle became aware of the Sharnn's hard green gaze.

\*You're back.\* Kayle looked at him intently. \*And what pattern did you find?\*

Shadows coiled and slid at the bottom of Ryth's eyes and his full lips flattened. But he answered, aware of Faen's trusting warmth along his thigh.

\*Someone is accelerating Vintra's decline and placing the blame on Malia.\*

\*Decline?\*

Ryth moved his head in Sharnn's gesture of assent. As he did, light struck sparks out of his bright bronze hair.

\*Not unusual for a colony on a world without endemic intelligent life,\* explained Ryth. "Often, the lack of such life proves that certain aspects of the planet are hostile to intelligence.\*

Kayle grunted. \*Malia's Concord representative already tried that argument. We found it unimpressive.\*

The Sharnn smiled thinly. \*Does that make the argument false?\*

\*Give me proof,\* demanded Kayle. \*Proof that even a Vintran could accept.\*

\*Or a Nendleti who hates Malians? Regrets, Kayle, but I have only my Sharnn pattern skills.\*

\*And a Malian lover. Not good enough, Sharnn. Nendletis aren't the only people who have little use and less love for Malians!\*

Ryth thought nothing for a long moment while his sensitive fingers stroked the cool blackness of Faen's hair. She stirred, rubbing her cheek against his thigh, half-smiling, and her beauty was like a knife inside him.

\*You would destroy this?\*

asked the Sharnn, wonder and anger struggling in his thought. \*You would murder—\*

\*Stop it! I, too, have loved a Malian. But that isn't enough. Vintra is dying, strangled by Malia.\*

\*Prove it,\* returned Ryth, an echo of Kayle's earlier anger. \*Prove it so that even a Sharnn can accept.\*

Kayle's hands moved in a slow gesture of sorrow and compassion.

\*You are all too human, Sharnn. When your flesh is involved, you overlook the obvious.\*

Ryth waited, motionless but for his fingers tasting the smooth perfection of Faen's hair.

\*The Gint enters and leaves Malia with impunity.\* Kayle's compassion fought with the harsh truth he was trying to give to the Sharnn. \*Only Malians are permitted such freedom.\*

\*But a secret Access—\*

\*Which must be in Lekel's y'kel,\* responded Kayle pointedly. \*It would seem that not only is the Gint Malian, he has friends in very potent positions. Perhaps even the k'm'n Sandoliki himself.\*

Though the Sharnn's thoughts were neutral, his rejection of the argument was apparent in the very set of his shoulders and lips. Kayle was closed completely out of Ryth's mind.

"Then teach me, pattern-man," said Kayle aloud, cuttingly. "If not my way, then how? And who? And why?"

But the Sharnn's eyes were dark again, inward-looking, and what they saw displeased Ryth more than Kayle's sarcasm. The Sharnn shuddered, evading a pattern whose persistence was matched only by its ugliness. His cape flared, twisting light into invisibility.

"What is it?" asked Kayle, his husky voice both gentle and compelling. "What won't—or can't—you tell me?"

Ryth's eyes were opaque, attention receding to an interior vanishing point as though he had not or could not hear.

\*Vintra.\* Ryth's thought, devoid of emotion, slid into Kayle's mind. \*My gint is there.\*

\*Your gint?\*

 asked Kayle gently, afraid to disturb the seething emotions he sensed gathering in the Sharnn. \*Why is he your gint?\*

The Sharnn did not answer and Kayle found himself alone in a room with a sleeping Malian and a Sharnn who was invisible inside his cape. Except for his eyes, Sharnn eyes more black than green, where shadows pooled more thickly than patterns.

## V

Light flared over their faces, limning each in a harsh blue blaze that recalled myths of star demons. When the Access energy ebbed, Faen and Kayle emerged in all the warm tones of humanity. Only Ryth remained apart, as enigmatic as a Sharnn god ... and more dangerous. His Sharnn cape wrapped around his body, clinging, then fanned as though in a breeze, but there was no breeze.

The three of them stepped off the Access platform into the receiving room of their luxurious Vintran h'kel.

"Do you think Lekel believed we were going to Sharnn?" asked Kayle.

The Sharnn made a gesture of complete indifference.

Faen glanced sideways at him, then answered Kayle. "Probably. I told him that I would be on t'kirl."

"T'kirl?" asked Kayle.

"An ancient custom," explained Faen. "A way to heal wounds between the families of newly bound couples. Each goes to the other's family and asks if there are any unpaid insults between them. If so, there is ritual recompense. When everyone is satisfied, we breathe m'zamay and move with crystal music and laugh while moonlight pours through the black lace of tere groves."

Kayle smiled at her longing tone. "It sounds like a custom Sharnn would appreciate."

Faen looked narrowly at Ryth. His face was composed of forbidding planes and angles, dark and baffling.

"I doubt that Sharnn cares about Malia's customs," she said coolly. "But t'kirl gave us the only reason to leave Malia that Lekel could not question." She glanced at Ryth again. "How long do you suppose the Sharnn will go on acting like a castrated zarf?"

Before Kayle could frame a reply, Ryth's long fingers traced apologies down Faen's body. Her senses leaped in answer, though her talent warned her that the Sharnn stranger was still there, waiting beneath the warmth of his smile. Yet she could not help replying, fingertips kneading the muscular curves of his neck and shoulders.

"Where are the Carifil?" asked Ryth, rubbing his lips against her skin as though he had forgotten her special textures and fragrance.

"They came before us," she replied while her fingers paid extravagant compliments to his hair and lips. "I never got closer to them than the room where they had waited."

"Very bad for you?" said the Sharnn.

"Not exactly bad," she said, nibbling on his fingertips. "Just very strong. Very distracting."

"Don't I distract you?"

Her answer was a lithe Malian movement that made his breath catch. The last of the cold stranger evaporated in a flash of sensual heat. Yet even then she sensed an aching shadow of pain deep inside him.

\*What is it, laseyss?\*

 she asked again.



\*A pattern. A pattern that kills Malia. Or—\* His mind closed.

\*Or what?\*

\*No. Not until it is the only possible pattern. And even your Great Destroyer wouldn't be that cruel.\*

The Sharnn held her with a strength that would have been punishing, had it not been a pale reflection of his inner turmoil. Her lips gentled him until his arms loosened slightly. With a silent apology he released her and looked at their surroundings, seeing them for the first time. He sang through his teeth in Sharn's expression of admiration for sheer excess.

"Is that really a pool I see?"

Kayle smiled while his fingers stroked a tapestry that had a hundred textures and a few bold colors.

"Vintrans have clay eyes," Faen said scornfully, dismissing the obvious colors with a glance.

The Sharnn's jade green eyes cataloged the room's patterns in swift, consuming glances while he walked across ankle deep fieldfur to the transparent expanse of pool that occupied one large h'kel. The water's alluring warmth made him smile.

\*Do you like water, m'zamay?\*

 he asked silently, sending a swirl of sensual possibilities with his question. Faen laughed low in her throat and started toward the Sharnn.

"Later, children," said Kayle, accurately reading their intentions.

"Just a few moments," asked Faen, voice and body swaying toward Ryth.

"Malian moments are legend in the Concord—and Sharn's ought to be," said Kayle dryly.

With a rueful smile, Ryth took Faen's hand and led her away from the fluid temptations of the pool.

"The rooms don't seem to bother you."

"No, they don't!" She frowned and Ryth sensed her reaching out. "These rooms have hardly been touched. It doesn't feel like Vintra at all. No ... purple."

Kayle made a gesture of mock submission. "You were right, Sharnn. As always."

"It wasn't a difficult calculation," said Ryth. "Less than one millionth of one percent of the Concord population could afford to stay here. Total privacy is expensive."

Faen laughed and stretched as though to embrace the h'kel. "The Great Destroyer's smiles are few, but appreciated. I am reluctant to bring others here."

Kayle's eyes deepened into orange embers as he listened to an inner dialog. Then he smiled sadly and spoke. "Carifil—profound sorrow—that their auras disturb the magnificent Ti Faen."

"I share their sorrow. In time—" she gestured ambiguously. "In time I may be able to enjoy them. I'm beginning to enjoy you, Kayle. You are very distinctive, strong textures and deep silences. Difficult, but rewarding."

A look of surprised pleasure softened Kayle's normally blunt features. "I have rarely been so praised." Then, smiling wryly, "I assume that I'm something of an acquired taste?"

Faen clapped her hands together once, approval and respect. Then her smile faded as she gathered herself for what she must do. She looked over at the Sharnn and made a gesture of assent.

"Are you sure?" he said slowly. "You had a shock this morning with the Gint and the assassins, plus you're not used to the Access shifts. And the shuttle ..."

For a moment they both remembered the shuttle ride to Malia's inner moon. The Sharnn's self-absorption had been so great that he had not been aware what it was costing Faen to lie on a shuttle couch permeated by hundreds of conflicting auras. By the time he had noticed, she was sweating with the effort of holding off the hammering energies. He had pulled her onto his couch without a word from either his mind or his lips, but even that uneasy silence could not diminish her relief.

\*I'm sorry, m'zamay. It was cold comfort I gave you.\*

\*Much better than none at all. Believe me. I know.\*

Kayle waited until he sensed their mindspeech end, then said, "Carifil Mim would like to see both of you personally. She would also like to share mindtouch with both of you, but realizes that is possible only with Ryth."

Faen's smile was too quick, too brittle. "Invite her in, Kayle. I'll be glad to meet more Carifil."

But for all the civility of her words, Faen stepped back until a gentle pressure from Ryth's arm made

her realize her retreat. He caught the edge of her wry thought that meeting Mim could not be worse than fighting assassins in Lekel's gardens.

Mim must have been waiting nearby, for she appeared at the h'kel's entrance almost immediately. Kayle greeted her, mind and body, with the affection of one who had known Mim intimately for many maturities. Though she was dressed in the concealing purple robes of Vintra, Ryth knew immediately that she was Nendleti; that powerful rolling gait could not be disguised. Her dark skin, bronze hair and pale orange eyes, coupled with the strength of her face, made Mim attractive to both Ryth and Faen. She acknowledged the Sharnn's mental compliment with a swift mindtouch that was as decisive as her walk.

"Thrice-wife," murmured Kayle, touching her bright hair with both his palms, "these are the two friends you have picked over my mind to know."

"Thrice-wife?" said Faen.

Mim answered in a voice that was intriguingly soft and husky. "Nendleti aristocrats marry once for political imperatives, once for sensual pleasures, and once for mental stimulation. Thus most Nendleti have three wives or three husbands. My thrice-husband and I found all three needs answered in each other." Even as she explained, she weighed Faen's physical appearance with eyes that missed nothing. When it seemed that Faen would ask another question, Mim said, "I would be honored to tell the Ti Faen whatever she desires, but ask that such telling be delayed." She glanced doubtfully at Kayle. "Are you sure?"

"Faen is very resilient," said Kayle. "And—we need her."

Mim noted the dark shadows and lines of stress on the elegant Malian profile, and wondered if Faen should work at all. But though the tall, powerful Sharnn beside Faen plainly wanted to object, he said nothing. Mim looked a question at Kayle, who signaled for silence in their private language.

"I dislike using anyone as harshly as Faen has been used," said Mim bluntly. "But because the need is great, I'll condone this unaesthetic rush."

With a speed that made them blink, Mim pulled a string of misa-wrapped articles out of her robe.

"These fifteen things belong to Carifil. Would you arrange these objects in order of least displeasing to most displeasing?"

With a reluctance she could not conceal, Faen took the string and began unwrapping the packets. She glanced once at Ryth, and he immediately knelt beside her.

"Do they understand," Faen said, fingers hovering above the objects, "that my preferences are as involuntary as the color of my eyes?"

Mim smiled wryly. "Child, not everyone loves the taste of bgli or the smell of nyko or the feel of misa or the sound of crystal music. Others would kill for the chance to experience any one of those things. No Carifil will be offended if he or she does not suit your particular senses."

Pale eyes weighed the sincerity of Mim's words for a moment, then Faen began touching the objects quickly, biting her lip in an attempt not to reveal what she learned. In spite of that, words rumbled out.

"Smooth and cool and lethal," as she brushed a platinum hair-band. "Gentle. Hidden," as her fingers barely touched a lock of silver-blue hair. "Ahhh, yes, this one! A knife spinning, brilliant and deadly and warm, so warm."

Ryth took the object—an earring made of three blue metal chains, set with brilliant blue-white gems—and put it to one side. As Faen murmured directions, he arranged the other objects. Within a very short time, it was finished. Only one object had made her flinch; three had pleased her and all had displayed rich, bright energies that were clean and easy to read.

"Done," said Faen, rubbing her fingertips delicately over Ryth's palm, more out of new habit than old need.

Kayle bent over the row of objects, picked up the earring that had so pleased Faen, and flipped it to Mim.

"When I saw you without it," he said gruffly, "I thought you had negated all three of our marriages."

Mim responded with a Nendleti phrase that made Kayle laugh softly.

"That was for the Vintran alley where you nearly negated all our marriages," said Mim, fastening her nuptial earring in place. "I owe you three lives," she said to the Sharnn.

“He repaid them all in the Topaz Arcade,” Ryth said, giving her a vivid mental picture of Kayle’s knife appearing in the back of an assassin and Kayle’s powerful arms sweeping much larger assassins into oblivion.

“Thank you,” she said huskily. “We’ve been apart physically so much that I rarely have the pleasure of seeing him fight.” She smiled. “But that will probably be remedied on Vintra.” She eyed the line of objects. “How many of them were unacceptable, even for short periods?”

“That one,” said Ryth, knowing Faen would be reluctant to answer. His finger flicked a green scarf. “Only in an emergency.”

“Unnecessary,” said Kayle. “We expected all of them to be unacceptable.” He looked at Faen speculatively. “Perhaps if you touched more people who had undergone Carifil integration ... ?”

Faen shrugged in excellent imitation of Ryth. “Is this getting us closer to that gint? I keep remembering the Concord agent who was tortured into unconsciousness.” She made a frustrated gesture. “I should have brought something of hers when I followed Ryth, but I only thought of his cape. I didn’t know we’d go to Vintra.” Her lips flattened over the word Vintra and she made a disdainful gesture.

“Could you find her if you had something to touch?” said Mim, looking intently at Faen.’

“Perhaps. It would depend on my stamina,” she said matter-of-factly. “I could at least narrow the geographical possibilities.”

“You followed and found Ryth easily,” said Kayle.

“Ryth is laseyss.”

There was nothing Kayle could say to her flat statement. In silence, he watched Mim hand yet another misa-wrapped package to Faen.

“Jsyl’s favorite river stone,” said Mim. “She used it for meditation.”

“Jsyl?” Faen asked. “Is she the one? Was it her headband the Gint brought?”

“Yes.”

“Maps?” asked Faen, looking from Ryth to Kayle.

“No,” said Ryth ruefully. “I was so wrapped up in my discovery that I forgot to tell Kayle.”

“Discovery?” asked Mim.

The Sharnn said nothing, and his eyes refused questions.

“Maps,” said Kayle, going to an antique, chest-high desk and tapping open the center slit. “Maps of the Ten Continents, Myriad Isles and Fifteen Seas. Also, section-by-section maps of any area can be ordered through the room computer.”

“Privacy coded?” said Ryth.

“Automatic erase unless otherwise instructed.”

“Good,” Ryth looked at Faen. Her eyes were pale and her skin drawn; yet when she sensed his attention, she gave him a smile of breathtaking promise. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Jsyl must be enduring far worse,” said Faen, resuming her cross-legged position on the floor.

“Why didn’t she call out to us?” wondered Mim aloud.

“She was taken by surprise,” said Faen.

“The others?” asked Kayle.

“Off-planet,” said Mim crisply.

Ryth put the river stone within reach of Faen’s right hand and the map beneath her left.

“Remember,” he said urgently. “Location only. Try to block out all other information.”

“Of course,” she said, but her eyes told him that nothing obstructed the flow of information, ever.

“Location,” he said again, touching her cheek and lips gently with his knuckles.

She rubbed her cheek across his hand, then put one fingertip lightly on the green river rock.

“Female—barely conscious—they’re coming again, oh don’t—”

“Location only!” Ryth commanded, shaking the grip the stone had on her mind.

“Not—there,” she whispered, brushing aside the map beneath her left hand.

Ryth yanked the map away and slid a second one under her hand. He continued, demanding focus on location and changing maps until her body jerked.

“Yes—”

“Nimar’k’n continent,” said Ryth, holding out his hands for the series of maps that covered the fifth continent, quadrant by quadrant.

“At least it is not on the other side of the world,” said Mim.

Ryth ignored Faen’s stumbling words of pain and terror by continuing to place new maps beneath her fingers as quickly as she rejected the old.

“Yes!”

“Fifteenth quadrant,” snapped Ryth.

Kayle put that series of maps in Ryth’s hands.

“Program section maps of Sima,” said Ryth quietly, easing a map beneath Faen’s shaking hand.

“This city?” said Mim. “But Jsyl entered through the Klylmi Access.”

Ryth put another map under Faen’s hand and tried to batter encouragement through her monolog of agony. “Just do it!” he snapped. “Pattern.”

“Error and regret,” Mim said, turning away quickly, but Kayle was already punching instructions into the standard Concord room terminal.

“Scale?” she said tersely.

“Begin at 1,000:1, then 500:1, then 100:1, then 50:1,” answered Ryth, shifting maps in a hiss of plastic sheets.

Faen made a sound as though she were fighting for breath. Without hesitating, Ryth forced in beyond the edges of her mind, and found his own body convulsed in pain, slippery with sweat and agony.

“Quickly,” gasped the Sharnn, wrenching his mind free. “She can’t last much longer. I won’t let her!”

“She?” asked Mim. “Do you mean Faen?”

“Both!”

Faen’s low cry, followed by a hoarse word brought Ryth’s concentration totally back to her.

“Sima,” he hissed. “Begin with section eighty-nine.”

“But you’ll miss—” A look from Ryth silenced Mim’s objection to taking maps out of order; she quickly decided she would not care to cross wills with the Sharnn where Faen was concerned. “Eighty-nine,” she agreed briskly. “City center.”

Faen’s voice had fallen to a hoarse mutter of words distinguishable only to Ryth. Her body jerked, trembled, and her breath came out in a long sigh. She relaxed and her words became more distinct. Ryth delicately merged with the edges of her mind.

“Praise the Twelve Hawks of the Seventh Dawn,” murmured the Sharnn, making a strange gesture with his right hand. Then, “Jsyl has escaped into mirva—what you call q-consciousness.”

“You’re sure?” said Mim, skeptical in spite of herself; it was too convenient, just when Faen’s difficulties seemed to be at their greatest.

“Faen cannot fake her responses,” said the Sharnn grimly. “Look at her.”

The pale fire of Mim’s eyes measured Faen. Sweat was drying on Faen’s body and the twisting tension of her muscles had almost vanished. Her breathing was slow and deep and regular.

Ryth switched sector maps in the sudden silence. “Jsyl no longer hurts,” said Ryth, moving maps again after a negative gesture from Faen. “She no longer fears.” New map. “Her body and mind have let go of all but the most enduring need—survival.” Another map. “But we don’t have much time. Q can be lethal.”

“Yes. Here.”

Faen’s calm assertion echoed in the suddenly voiceless room, Ryth picked up the map.

“Give me the ninety-sixth section, 500:1. Begin with the green code area.”

Mim’s blunt hands flew over the computer studs. Plastic maps began whiffing into the receiving tray. As fast as they came, Ryth put them under Faen’s hand, but it was still an agonizingly slow process.

“Yes. Here. Right here.”

Ryth snatched up the map, scanning the area where Faen’s finger had pointed. “Now give me green code, 100:1. Begin with—No. Give me 50:1, c-sub-d. Then work in a left-circle around that center. N’ies?” Then, realizing he had used a Malian word, he added, “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Mim, fingers a blur of instructions over the studs.

Seven maps later, in the b-sub-c area of the city Sima, Faen's finger came down on a series of circles that indicated a large cluster of vertical kels that had been popular with Vintra's first, nervous colonists.

"There."

Her hand covered an area called Old Sima, with a population of perhaps 30,000. It was a cluttered, seething place, crammed with the oldest buildings in the oldest city on the planet. Kayle looked at it with a deep frown.

"An unaesthetic area," he said with a mildness that was belied by the distinct quiver of his nostrils. "Built out of flarebrick and blackstone. Home of most of the disease and random violence in Sima." His voice dropped into pure contempt. "They should burn it down to the decaying granite that supports it."

Mim frowned at the irregular circle Kayle had drawn on the map. "I had hoped—" She stopped and snapped her fingers restlessly. "If we take you there, Faen, could you narrow the area further?"

\*

"That's too—" began the Sharnn angrily, but Faen cut across him.

"I received a few clear impressions of her surroundings. I will try."

The urgency in Faen's voice aroused Ryth.

\*What is it, m'zamay?\*

Her only reply was an evasive sliding away from mindtouch. He pursued.

\*Faen, what did you see through Jsyl's eyes?\*

He held the contact, demanding and finally getting a cool reply.

\*It was too quick. Not focused. Something even a pattern-man might mistake or misunderstand.\*

\*Try me.\*

The mildness of his thought was inviting, as was the warmth curling out to her from him. And with the warmth, the cape sliding over her skin in a caress that was as sweet as it was surprising. Faen stroked the cape, almost smiling, but her mind was still withheld.

\*Give me time, laseyss. For now we must each hold our secrets until they're proved true or false beyond all doubt or error. N'ies?\*

\*... n'ies ... But tell me this. Did you see a shadow?\*

Fear was her only answer. The Sharnn looked up and found Kayle and Mim watching intently.

"Fascinating," murmured Mim. Then, to Kayle, "Apologies, sri. I didn't believe there was a mind I couldn't force, but you were right. Faen and Ryth are impenetrable when they want to be." She looked at both of them. "Are you finished?"

"For the moment," said Ryth.

"Regrets, Ti Faen," said Mim. "I would have left you here to rest, but we still need your skill."

"We may need more than that," said the Sharnn dryly.

He went to the baggage chute, pulled out a soft leather rollup and rummaged through it. He removed several knives. Kayle watched for a moment, then began sorting through his own luggage and strapping on weapons. Mini's look went from one man to the other, then to Faen.

"When a Sharnn wearing a cape starts arming himself," said Faen, "so do I."

"Without insult, thrice-wife," Kayle said, "I would be pleased if you would wear weapons. Many weapons."

At Mim's baffled look, Ryth explained. "The Gint seems to arrange odds of at least fifteen to one in his favor. His assassins aren't unskilled, as Kayle can tell you."

"I thought those guards belonged to Lekel?"

"Perhaps. But they fought to the Gint's benefit."

The Sharnn said nothing more, letting Mim conclude what she wished as to Lekel's guilt or innocence in the question of guards. With a very thin smile, Mim caught the weapons Kayle threw to her.

When they stepped out of the hotel, they stepped into a world composed solely of different tints, tones, shades and intensities of purple. It was as though neither blue nor red were allowed to exist in an uncombined state.

Faen shuddered when the brooding light washed over her, making her eyes white as ice and her hair

darker than the space between the stars, She hesitated for a long moment, fighting not to show her loathing for the very light that spread over Vintra's surface.

The Sharnn's hand touched her, smoothing her robe that no longer was clear turquoise.

\*M'zamay?\*

Ryth's soft question went through the tightness of her mind. Though Vintra ruined all colors for her, his presence was still a savage radiance that even a mauve sun could not diminish.

\*Is it the people?\* he asked, pulling her hand beneath his Cape until her fingers spread against the muscles of his chest.

\*No.\*

\*Memories of Ti Vire?\*

\*No.\* She laughed raggedly. \*It's the light! Can you understand that, Sharnn?\*

Ryth's cape flared restlessly. \*So that's why your Ti Vire lasted only seven years.\*

\*I had to escape ... all the colors of hell ... there's no honor in dying insane.\*

The Sharnn cape licked out, comforting. Faen almost smiled as she caught a soft fold between her hands. Then she realized that Kayle and Mim were waiting with little patience. The cape drifted from Faen's fingers when she gestured curtly for Kayle to proceed.

The four of them rode the city shuttles as far as they could and used lavender slidewalks until those fell into disrepair. Then the Sharnn led them deep into Old Sima, twisting through trash drifts and around garbage heaps slimed with age. The kels surrounding them grew higher, older, more ramshackle. The crowds that they had seen in the newer part of Sima gradually dwindled to nothing; only the furtive shadows of native scavengers spoke of other life. Occasionally a cry would echo among the leaning kels, but no one could be sure whether the sound was human or animal.

"Is this the same place you were ambushed?" murmured Mim in a voice that went no further than their ears.

"No," said Kayle with an equally muted voice. "It looked much like this, though. Vintra must have lost a lot of people in the Undeclared War, to have abandoned so many large kels to howls and slinkers."

"But the maps," said Mim, "showed this area as densely populated."

"The maps must have been very old."

The Sharnn halted, staring at the canted kels as though seeing them for the first time.

"Not old maps," said Ryth softly. "Most of these kels haven't been abandoned that long; The garbage is not yet dust. But even so, this area could easily have held twice the population the map gave. Perhaps the war did cost Vintra too much."

"Not war," Faen said, her voice soft yet rasping with inner strain. "Disease. Pekh. Many died here, heat and coma. Many, manymanyMANY—"

Ryth grabbed Faen and held her until she stopped shivering.

"It just came in a wave—all those deaths," she whispered. "Thousands and more thousands. Didn't you feel it?"

"Just a distant sense of many small patterns ending and a great one continuing. It didn't tear at my emotions as it did at yours."

Faen laughed shakily. "The wave is past, now. I'm whole again."

Ryth let go of her slowly and turned to Kayle. "Epidemic, not war."

The Sharnn turned and led off down an alley that seemed gloomy in spite of Vintra's huge lavender sun hanging directly overhead. As Faen followed, her eyes searched every purple shadow for life. Kayle and Mim stayed close to the ripple of sickly turquoise that was Faen's robe. Even as Ryth walked, his cape changed into a semblance of the loose two-color robe of a Vintran city dweller.

A few of the tall kels surrounding them took on an air of habitation. Leashed suncallers preened in open windows, fragments of conversation glittered through the brooding lavender silence, less garbage slumped in the shadows, and there was an occasional flutter from a ragged robe. Once, footsteps followed them. They turned, saw a pale flash of eyes, then nothing except the sound of footsteps running away, fading, gone.

As one, Faen and Kayle and Mim turned their robes inside out, a trick used by poor Vintrans to

keep one side of their robes unstained for special occasions. The inside of the robes was much less bright; should anyone see Faen or the others from a distance, they would look like faded residents of the ramshackle kels.

Ryth hesitated, then reached out to Kayle's mind.

\*One-way link.\*

The Sharnn's blunt invitation/demand was surprising; he had always displayed a disinclination to anything more intimate than simple mindspeech.

\*You want me to ride your mind?\* asked Kayle, still uncertain.

\*Yes. Faen will take all my attention soon. I don't want the distraction of separate mindspeech with three people. Keep Mim informed. Ask her to be our eyes and ears. And please be very small in my mind, Kayle. Otherwise, it could be impossible for Faen.\*

Kayle's mental presence seemed to thin and dissolve among the interstices of Ryth's mind. With growing surprise, the Sharnn realized that this was how Kayle linked disparate minds, sliding among energies until he had woven new connections of incredible subtlety.

\*My greatest respect, Ti Kayle.\*

Kayle's answer was a distinct sense of smiling ease deep within the Sharnn's mind. Tentatively, Ryth reached out for Faen.

\*We're approaching b-sub-c.\*

There was a feeling of confusion and discomfort, followed by surprise.

\*Kayle?\* asked Faen.

Ryth swore silently, and sensed distant consternation. \*Can you tolerate it?\* he asked.

\*It—it's like a veil over your radiance. Not painful, just ... dimming. It won't hurt me.\*

\*Good. Do you sense anything else?\*

\*Nothing.\*

Ryth unwrapped Jsyl's river stone and held it out to Faen. She touched it, closed her eyes and concentrated. Ryth watched her muscles cord with effort, but when he urged her to use herself less harshly, she ignored him.

"She's still—" Faen's body swayed like a compass needle, turning between kels, "—there. That way!"

Faen's blindly pointing finger indicated a huge kel, half-full of people and alive with the iridescent purple wings of suncallers.

\*Inside?\* asked Ryth, doubting that Jsyl would be hidden in an inhabited building.

Faen's answer was a biting need to be moving. Ryth pulled her around the building at a near-run.

\*Again!\* he demanded.

A small hand closed over the rock Ryth held. Faen swayed, her upraised arm pointed down a long, unappetizing alley between leaning rows of very tall kels with sagging blacktree facades.

The Sharnn's pattern talent washed through him like adrenaline; a thousand traps waited in the too carefully piled rubbish heaps. Nor would any of the other approaches be any better. The Gint liked odds heavily in his favor.

"Flarebrick and purple suncallers," murmured Faen, voice rising, "running down walls faded and cracking and quiet so quiet—Help me!"

Faen's scream died against Ryth's hard hand. He snatched the stone away from her and called to her mind.

\*Faen. Faen! Which kel?\*

With a long shudder, Faen opened her eyes, surprised to see she was at the mouth of an alley instead of on a cold floor with someone approaching, someone familiar and hated, a woman who wielded power with a vengeful hand.

Then Faen realized that the Sharnn was deep inside her mind. She banished the mental picture before the woman's face could be more than a suggestion of shape and color.

"No!" said Faen, wrenching away from him. "No!" Then she controlled herself and pulled his arms around her, breathing apologies against the hard muscles of his neck and pouring warmth into his mind.

The picture of a woman approaching did not appear between them again, yet Ryth sensed a fear growing in Faen, a fear unlike any he had sensed in her before. A fear like his own for Malia and for the loss that had brought him to her, a finder. Suddenly he had to know if Faen had seen the shadow that had haunted him off Sharn.

The Sharnn spread through Faen's mind like a golden net, gathering up every vagrant thought, but he could not make the link any deeper, could not touch her memory of a shadow/woman approaching, could not touch the core of her fear. She told him it was Kayle's presence that separated their minds, but the Sharnn sensed it was a reflex born of terror and survival. When he truly pressed her, driving himself against her evasions, Faen fought back with deadly potential.

\*G'el n'si,\* came Ryth's careful thought as he retreated. Then, \*M'zamay, I need what you're hiding.\*

\*Not yet,\* she responded, both plea and command. \*Not yet!\*

\*Trust me.\*

Ryth sensed two Faens locked in combat; one calling to him as to her second self, and the other seeing him as a dark-eyed executioner.

And he could press her no further, for she could be right. He could be the death of her people.

Ryth gathered Faen beneath the folds of his cape. For a moment her body remained rigid, then she melted against him until her sensual presence sent waves of pleasure through him. With a slow twist, she stepped out of his arms; her movement was promise and regret and apology.

\*Give me the stone, laseyss.\*

For an instant the Sharnn wanted to refuse, wanted to hurl the stone into a rubbish heap and turn his back on everything but her warmth. But he put the cool stone in her palm. Deep in her mind and his, below even Kayle's reach, they shared the inarticulate hope that they would not find their separate fears.

When Faen's hand closed around the stone, she was torn out of his mind. She stumbled forward.

Ryth's arm went out to support her and to hold her back until he checked the narrowing alley for traps. But there were no bombs this time, only pits lined with ragged shards of glass and mounds of rubbish oozing poisonous gases. To Ryth's eye and mind, each carefully placed danger was another sign pointing to the Gint.

Faen turned toward the front of a building where a long-dead artist had painted purple suncallers flying against Vintra's moon. Some of the birds appeared to be running down the flarebrick walls where the heavy black-wood facade faded and cracked and sagged.

Without hesitation, Faen stepped forward into the kel—and tripped over a strategically placed bit of rubble. With a bone-deep rumble, part of the facade sheared free and hurtled to the entrance floor. Only Ryth's reflexes saved Faen from being crushed beneath the heavy fall of stone and wood. He wrenched Jsyl's talisman out of Faen's hands.

\*The kel is a trap!\* he called in her mind. \*Trap! N'ies? You stumbled over a trigger that brought down half of the facade. Do you really need this stone any more?\*

Slowly, sanity replaced agony in her silver eyes.

\*She's out of q-consciousness. Dying.\*

\*I know. Her dying sucked you into the stone. It's too dangerous for you!\*

\*Hold on to me,\* demanded Faen, grabbing the stone before he could stop her.

The Sharnn picked up Faen and his cape wrapped around her so that it was impossible for her to move or cry out. Her body convulsed in death throes until the edge of his hand smacked against hers. The stone dropped from her fingers and crashed to the floor.

\*We're standing—on top of her!\* groaned Faen. Then she succumbed to the strain of touching a dying mind. Her body went limp as she retreated into a form of q-consciousness.

The Sharnn glanced around, hoping to see ramp or stairs, anything but a downshaft; he would trust the kel's creaking machinery only if the alternative was immediate death. Along one curve of the elliptical kel was a shadow suggestive of an arch or door. He shifted Faen's weight across his shoulders and ran toward the shadow. Before he reached it, Mim passed him.

\*She felt it would be better,\* came Kayle's bland explanation. \*I agreed.\*



\*But the traps—!\*

Kayle's response was an image of Ryth carrying Faen as he tried to fight off an ambush. Ryth knew Kayle was right. The falling facade had surely warned any guards who were present.

\*Tell Mim not to go through any doors or down any narrow paths until I've checked.\*

\*Done.\*

Mim waited near the top of a narrow ramp that twisted into the purple gloom below. The ramp was steep and studded with tread latches; it was meant for machines rather than men. Ryth, Kayle and Mim stood on the brink, barely breathing, listening with mind and body.

\*Mim senses nothing.\*

\*Jsyl?\*

\*Just once. A flash of agony when q-consciousness ended.\*

\*Is she dead?\*

\*Perhaps. Or perhaps she just went back into q.\*

As though Faen were no more burden than an extra knife, the Sharnn bent and picked up several fist-sized chunks of flarebrick rubble. With a snap of his wrist he sent one chunk ricocheting down the ramp. Before the first piece completed the spiral descent, the second and third were caroming after it. There was no response.

When the bits of rubble stopped rolling, Mim looked up at Ryth. He gestured caution. Mim dropped lightly into the gloom. Kayle counted three and leaped after. Ryth waited for a five count. To his relief, there was nothing more dangerous than shifting rubble the whole twisting length of the ramp. He quickly picked his way down, balancing Faen across his shoulders.

The sub-surface room stretched away on all sides, huge, unpartitioned, and cluttered with defunct service machinery. Yellow-white lightstrips burned in tepid imitation of a sun the colonists would never see again.

Kayle and Mim stood with their backs to each other, watching.

Faen's head moved restlessly against the Sharnn and she moaned. Her eyes opened nearly opaque, dulled by something that was nearly death. Ryth eased her into a standing position, holding on to her until he felt her strength and awareness return. With a motion that was almost awkward, Faen pulled free of his support.

"Jsyl is dead." Her thought was thin and distant.

\*Did that faceless woman kill her?\*

Faen's flesh of panic was so quickly smothered that the Sharnn could not be certain he had sensed it at all.

\*I don't know who killed Jsyl,\* answered Faen calmly. "She died without thought.\*

\*How did she die?\*

\*She was strangled.\*

Deep in his mind Ryth felt Kayle's sudden feral alertness; if Jsyl had been strangled, her killer had to be nearby. Yet Mim had sensed nothing, no one, and Mim was highly skilled at sensing and forcing entry into minds.

They all heard the faint rattle of debris slithering over the floor above their heads. Mim and Kayle spun back toward the ramp, scrambling through rubble in an attempt to catch whoever was fleeing. An attempt the Sharnn knew would be futile. He leaped, caught a heavy metal conduit, and swung up to an air-exchange. Through the dull plastic mesh he saw nothing; yet the faintest sounds of a man running came back to him.

An instant later Kayle and Mim appeared, running with a speed that surprised the Sharnn. He watched, though he was certain that all their speed would be useless. He had been the fastest runner of the Seventh Dawn, but the shadow they were chasing had eluded him.

Ryth swung down and landed lightly beside Faen.

"Let's find Jsyl's body."

Faen hesitated. Her eyes dimmed as she remembered things she would rather forget. "Yes, I

suppose I must touch her, if only to find out—” Faen’s voice dried up. She swallowed and began again. “Jsyl was kept near a tall, black machine with rust running down its sides. Very old. As old as the lightship that brought Malians here. She—” Faen closed her eyes. “She watched that machine until she went blind. And the floor—the floor was cold and uneven and had splinters of white glass like shattered eyes watching her die.”

Faen looked at the smooth floor beneath her feet. “Poor Jsyl,” she murmured. “The Carifil told her nothing. She didn’t know why she died.”

“Do any of us?”

Faen glanced at Ryth, startled by the bitterness in his tone, but his back was to her and he was running between mounds of rubble and rusting metal, looking for a single black machine. He found several before he found the one Jsyl had known. The floor here was broken, crumpled by the same seismic shudders that had tilted the tall kels of Old Sima.

The Sharnn looked around carefully. His hard green eyes missed nothing, but he learned nothing new. Concord Agent Jsyl had been tortured and strangled by an expert—or experts, if what he believed was true. Except for the places where Jsyl’s thrashings had disturbed old patterns of grime and debris, nothing showed that the area was at all different from any other part of the kel.

Nor was there a body for Faen to touch and learn from.

The Sharnn’s mind closed while he struggled against the pattern that was becoming more clear and more ugly with every moment. Facts and questions he had never wanted to know or ask clawed at his unwillingness. Either the Gint had a pattern gift to equal a Sharnn’s, or someone had warned him about Faen’s presence on Vintra. Was that someone Lekel? Or did Faen already have proof of Malia’s guilt? Was she playing a game too subtle for a Sharnn who had succumbed to the white moment of Malian sensuality? Could he trust her with Vintra’s future? Could he trust himself?

“You have a stranger’s mind,” said Faen. “Closed and cold.”

“At this moment, I would not share my thoughts with an enemy, much less you.”

“Then I’m not your enemy?”

“No.” He held out his arms in spite of the uncertainty cutting at his mind.

“And you’re not Malia’s executioner?” she asked faintly.

“No,” he whispered against her rain-scented hair. “No.”

Faen did not fight the grip that held her painfully close, filling her senses with his strength and his breath warm in her hair. She moved bonelessly against him until their bodies drove away Jsyl’s tortured cries, drove away death and fear and agony. They held each other with aching force, as though if they held hard enough, nothing could ever divide them.

But when they finally released one another, they were further apart than before, separated by unspoken fears, shadows haunting their eyes.

Mim and Kayle found them standing silently, fingertips touching and moving in t’sil’ne. The Sharnn turned to face Kayle, but said nothing, for there was nothing he wanted Kayle to hear.

“What did Faen learn from Jsyl’s body?” said Kayle, his voice harsh with the frustration of a failed hunter.

“The killer took Jsyl’s body with him.”

Kayle swore explosively. “He must have known about Faen.” He looked at her, but Faen’s white eyes stared through him.

“Perhaps,” said the Sharnn. “And perhaps he merely took Jsyl’s body to increase the mystery of her disappearance.”

Kayle started to ask a silent question, but found Ryth’s mind totally unapproachable; if the Nendleti had not been looking at Ryth, Kayle would have sworn no one was there. Mim’s efforts brought the same result; Ryth was as impervious to her as a stone.

“You’ve changed,” said Kayle in blunt displeasure.

“Sharnn can become whatever they can understand, whatever they can conceive.”

“What made you ... conceive ... of such mental defenses?” asked Kayle.

“It was time,” said Ryth, his eyes green and deep with the infinite possibilities of Sharn.

“Is it time for you to become a finder like Faen?” asked Kayle sardonically.

“Sharnn can be anything, but not everything.” Ryth turned his face to Mim. “You did not sense the killer’s presence?”

She moved abruptly. “Maliens are a frustrating race. Above a certain level of potential their minds are an enigma to me. The whole time I waited on Malia’s inner moon, the only Malian minds available to me were of the dullest sort.”

“So the Gint is Malian,” said Kayle. “That’s why Mim didn’t sense him earlier.”

Faen stiffened, then forced herself to relax, but her whole body radiated subtle protest.

“Perhaps,” said the Sharnn blandly. “Or perhaps he is Vintran. Or perhaps he is something else entirely.”

“Are Vintrans difficult for you?” Kayle asked Mim.

“Not as often.”

“Perhaps,” said Ryth, “Vintrans don’t have as many minds of the requisite complexity to inhibit—”

Kayle interrupted the Sharnn with a rude noise. “From pattern-man to perhaps-man. It’s clear to me that Malia is guilty.”

“There are alternate possibilities for everything that has happened,” said Ryth without heat.

“Tell me, perhaps-man, what the chances are that Malia is not guilty.”

Ryth ignored Kayle’s sarcasm. “Even if there were only seven chances in one hundred—”

“That few!”

“If,” repeated Ryth emphatically, “if the chances were only seven in one hundred that Malia were innocent, that is not certain enough to condemn a race of intelligent beings to extinction.”

“The kind of certainty you’re looking for doesn’t exist,”

“But it does, Kayle. It must. I have conceived of it, understood its necessity, and I am Sharnn. I shall find that certainty.”

\*What will Faen do if Malia is guilty?\* asked Kayle, and his mindspeech carried too many emotions to name. Then Kayle felt a hollow falling away, as though he had slipped into a downshaft. The Sharnn’s mind was again closed and cold.

Ryth knitted the fingers of his right hand through Faen’s left and brought her palm to his lips. “The Ti Faen needs rest,” he said, his voice as smooth and polished as the exterior of his mind. “We can learn nothing further here.”

His enigmatic eyes watched Mim and Kayle, but neither one objected, for neither one wanted to fight him. The four of them scrambled up the ramp, and out into the ground floor of the leaning kel.

Faen stumbled in the gloom and rubble; though she caught herself with surprising grace, the Sharnn reached out and lifted her off her feet. She protested, low-voiced, then let her forehead rest against the slow pulse in his neck. Her hair rippled down his arm like black water as he carried her through the dull sunlight and slanting purple shadows of Old Sima.

“We must talk, m’zamay,” said Ryth, mopping up the last drops of their meal with a small piece of lavender bread.

Faen, still sleep-drugged, began absently cleaning her sticky fingers with a damp cloth.

Ryth took the cloth from her. “On Sharn,” he said, delicately licking her smallest finger clean, “this is the best part of the meal.”

Faen shivered with pleasure as his tongue moved between her fingers. “You should have been born a Malian,” she said, her low voice like another tone of the twilight glowing in the room.

“Perhaps I once was.” His teeth slid across her palm and pressed together gently at the base of her thumb; then his tongue moved again over her fingers. “But it does not matter how I was born, m’zamay, for I will surely die a Malian.”

“No—!”

“No?” asked the Sharnn, pretending confusion. “Does it tickle?” His tongue flicked around her fingertip. “I should take all my food from your hands,” he said, voice low. “It tastes so much sweeter.”

“Don’t,” said Faen, as much moan as word. “You are Sharnn, not Malian. Sharnn! Whether Malia

lives or ..." her voice faded to a lightless whisper.

"Dies," he finished, kissing the soft golden pulse inside her wrist. "Shall we talk now, m'zamay?"

"You call me m'zamay," she said with a ragged laugh, "yet you are far more seductive than the silver dust in the center of the zamay flowers. M'zamay." She shivered as he sucked lightly on her finger, tongue caressing in a way that promised other pleasures. "I can't think with you so close."

"You don't need to think, my Faen," he said, his breath soft on her breast as his hand parted her robe, "Just tell me—" his tongue made slow small circles, "who Jsyl saw before she died." His body moved swiftly, holding her sudden struggles in a vise of skill and power. "And I shall tell you—" his teeth closed with melting gentleness "—why you spent such a lonely shuttle ride. And then we—" his fingers moved surely beneath her robe "—will undress each other and I will teach my beautiful Ti Faen how Sharnn use a warm pool.

"Talk to me," he whispered.

"It's not equal," she cried. "I'm helpless between your hands and you—"

"And I," he interrupted hoarsely, "am helpless when I so much as think of you. Shall we die because of it?" he asked, fingers warm with her warmth. "Or shall we talk to each other?"

"And say death to Malia."

Her words hung in the room like the ringing of a vire crystal.

"Are you so certain?" he asked, drawing her close, comforting and seeking comfort.

"Aren't you?" she asked, her silver eyes dark and her fingers warm inside his cape, touching. "Weren't you sure—" the back of her hand rubbed lightly against his hard strength "—when we left Malia?" Her teeth closed over the Sharnn cape, impatient with the half-life dividing her skin from his. "What did you discover on Malia, laseyss?"

Faen's whisper was as soft as her tongue between his lips and beneath his robe her hands kneaded down his back, counting and caressing each sliding muscle. Ryth groaned and gave himself up to her gliding tongue and for long moments they lived only where they touched one another.

"I—" they said simultaneously, then smiled.

But their smiles faded as they watched each other and the amethyst dusk streaming through flawless glass.

"I'm afraid," Faen said simply. Her eyes were molten silver and her voice was thick. "If I condemn Malia with my words, no death could be painful enough for me, not even Ti Kiirey-g'ii, redemption by agony." When she looked down, her black lashes made ragged shadow arcs across her cheeks: "There is no possible redemption for such a traitor as I would be, a Sandoliki Ti who delivered her people to kh'vire'ni, death without honor or vengeance."

Wordlessly, the Sharnn put his knife in her hands and lifted until sharp metal creased the pulse swelling in his neck. It was the ultimate Malian gesture of trust.

"Unless you, the Sandoliki Ti, have planned and executed Vintra's decline, nothing you say can irrevocably condemn Malia."

The knife dropped from her fingers and fell soundlessly onto the velvet floor.

"That proves nothing," she whispered. "You know I could not kill you."

"Even to save your planet?"

The agony that wrenched her made him curse the question, and its necessity.

"Listen to me," said the Sharnn, his voice rich with shared pain. "What I said was the truth. Unless you are guilty—"

"I'm not," she said, then added sadly, "and I am." At his stricken look, she tried to explain. "If Memned is guilty, every Malian is equally guilty."

"But—"

"No. Let me finish while I have the courage." Faen's fingers clamped together until the skin around her knuckles turned pale gold. "Jsyl saw Memned."

"Many people have seen Lekel's wife," said Ryth gently.

"Not as torturer." Faen's fingers loosened and lay slackly against her thighs. Her voice was a thin tumble of words. "She's very skilled. Even Lekel is not better and he has known much torture, both in

the giving and the receiving. That's how he became k'm'n Sandoliki while I fought Ti Vire.

"Oh Vintra," she moaned, "why were you ever hung in Malia's future? Why did Maran sing?"

The Sharnn looked at her eyes staring sightlessly into a past he had never known and did not comprehend. Yet he must comprehend or they both were lost.

"I do not understand." Ryth stroked her fingers until the clammy feel of fear dissolved into the warmth of their skins sharing textures. "Talk to me, my Faen. Teach me."

"I am—I was—the last Sandoliki. Have you never wondered why Lekel rules?"

"It was enough for me to know why you did not rule."

"Lekel was Relle's vire brother," said Faen, her voice a monotone. "Though Relle and I were bound with the first words we spoke, Lekel wanted me. If not as wife, then as f'mi. He was determined to be my first lover. I was not yet fourteen, below the age of full combat training. Or passion. He was twice my age, and highly trained. But he was vulnerable, as a hungry man is always vulnerable. He did not truly believe I would refuse him.

"He'll not forget that instant. He took no woman, willing or otherwise, for many days. By the time he recovered, Relle and I were husband and wife.

"We were also off-planet, training to become Concord Agents."

"Ti Lekel must be a formidable fighter," said Ryth, more to himself than to her, "to have driven you off Malia."

"Yes," she said unflinchingly. "Even then, five assassins could not hold him. Children such as Relle and I wouldn't have made Lekel take a second breath. I knew that and ran, but I did not want Relle to know. For in spite of lust, Lekel and Relle were true knife-friends as well as vire brothers."

Her hands stirred, slim and strong, and her fingers curled around his wrists.

"When I first saw Kayle move, I knew I had met a warrior to give even Lekel pause. Kayle taught me many things, deadly things. And I learned. Great Destroyer, how well I learned!"

"I know," said Ryth, kissing the fingers wrapped like choking vines around his wrists. "I know, m'zamay."

"Not everything. Not yet." Her fingers loosened, leaving arcs where nails had scored flesh, and neither noticed, for they were focused in each other's eyes. "When Skemole murdered Relle, I was carrying his children. I felt a hatred such as I'd never imagined. I screamed death oaths to the Great Destroyer. And was answered." She closed her eyes and then opened them, blind silver suspended in purple twilight. "I initiated darg vire on Skemoleans. They were murderers, not warriors. Sly and malicious and foul. I killed them all."

Faen looked at her hands. "It was so easy. The room where Relle died in pieces was filled with their raw energies. A black explosion of knowledge and then I knew where each murderer was. I knew! So easy. Easy. Ah yes, the Great Destroyer had answered my oaths."

Her laughter thinned into an eerie echo of descending night.

"I stole gems enough to lose myself among the Accesses of a thousand planets. When my time was near, I returned to the Sandoliki Estates to bring life to Relle's children among the thousand moments of Malia that were their heritage. The Sandoliki had thought me dead with Relle; they feared the Concord would demand me to punish my darg vire. Sandoliki Jomen hid me in the most remote part of the Estates, the part where the sacred sarsa was kept. The part that became Darg Vintra.

"It was there that I began to learn the price asked by the Great Destroyer for the death of Relle's murderers. I could touch only my children. I could speak only to my children's minds. I turned to the sarsa ... and sensed something I still do not understand. But the m'sarsas were like white-hot metal, energies that seared me. I could not play for long."

She sighed so deeply that her hair slid forward, veiling her face until her hand pushed the heavy mass away.

"Lekel did not believe that I could not endure touch. He came to me, testing. I was too impatient. My reflexes gave away my deadly skills. He fought only long enough for me to touch him."

Faen's memory lived in Ryth's mind. Lekel, lithe and swift, weaponless, facing her, and their feints and counter-feints were blurs of speed and power until his arm deflected a death blow and she

screamed, a scream of agony such as even Lekel had never before heard, and the scream dulled his eyes with a pain like hers as he began to believe that she would never faint with pleasure at his touch.

“He believed, then,” said Faen. “He knew that the price I had paid for avenging Relle was to be forever barred from touch.

“Lekel’s plan to become a true Sandoliki by marrying me was ended. His ambition choked him. He was pale when he turned his back and walked away from me.”

“Not just ambition,” said Ryth, smoothing the back of her hand with his cheek and remembering Lekel, tall and potent, hard with passion and jealousy. “He wanted you, Faen. Even now. The Great Destroyer must smile to see Lekel’s hunger for you.”

Faen’s fingertips slid along Ryth’s thighs, gentle pressures and promises.

“Perhaps. But he killed seven men whose only transgression was to amuse me. They did not touch me. No one touched me except my children, but the older they grew the less I could touch even them. And Lekel there, always, until I demanded that he leave or fight me.” Her lips curled. “He left.”

“Not from fear,” said Ryth, shifting his weight to his side without taking his eyes from hers. “He did not want to see his touch give you agony. I believe he loves you. I know he wants you.” And Ryth gasped involuntarily as her fingers surrounded him like gentle flames.

“He wanted to rule Malia,” Faen said, releasing him slowly and trailing her fingertips across his stomach. “After Darg Vintra, I was the last Sandoliki—and I wanted only Ti Vire. Malia needed a leader, so a k’tē kiirey was called.”

The Sharnn watched while night folded around Faen like a dark dream. He did not know where her words were leading, nor did he care; for this instant it was enough that he felt her alive between his hands.

“Do you know what k’tē kiirey is?”

“Teach me,” he murmured as his palms savored the soft skin at her waist.

“When a ruler dies and there is no true heir, the people who believe they should rule Malia challenge each other. Survivors challenge survivors until only seven remain. Then it begins. Malia’s most renowned torturer, the Kiirey Ti, uses his skill on each of the seven. The last person to break becomes Malia’s ruler.”

“And Lekel was last?”

“Yes.”

“I saw no scars, no signs that he was ever maimed.”

“The Kiirey Ti would never be so crude.” Faen sighed as her eyes watched Vintra’s moon rise and breathe tainted light through the darkness. “More than seven years after k’tē kiirey, I returned to Malia. Though no Sandoliki, Lekel was a strong ruler. I wanted solitude, not a Sandoliki’s duties. We agreed that Darg Vintra would be my home.

“So I went back there to my memories, back to the sarsa and back to the thing that I had sensed in its music, the thing that I had to have. I wore the m’sarsas strapped to my skin like weapons until their searing energies no longer made me grind my tongue between my teeth. Only then could I play crystal music. Only then could I hear my children’s laughter, see their blue eyes, and have Relle around me silver and warm.”

Defiance rippled through her stillness, but Ryth was undisturbed. He held the woman now; whatever the sarsa had held was past.

“Today,” Faen said, “I can call them shadows of my imagination and need, and theirs. Whether they were real or not ...” She waited, but he did not speak. “Were they?” she demanded, suddenly fierce.

“I don’t know.” Then, “I don’t want to know. Unless it affects Malia’s guilt or innocence.”

“How could it?” she asked, then laughed bitterly. “How could it not? The sarsa is Malia’s soul. If Memned is guilty, we are all guilty, even the shadow songs of Malia’s past Maran’s Song.”

“Even if Memned is partnered with the Gint, does that make Malia guilty? I have heard you say that Memned is Vintran.”

Faen sat up suddenly, ignoring the robe that slid off her shoulders onto the floor. With tangible intensity she thought about what he had said, but after a moment she rejected it.

“Lekel could not marry a Vintran,” she said with a finality in her tone that left no room for doubt. “Memned is merely a woman to lie in my place, a shadow of me with dark hair and light eyes. Humiliating for her, but she accepted the position with sheathed weapons.”

“Why?”

“She desires power the way most Malians desire touch. As Lekel’s wife, she has it. Especially now that his advisors are dead.”

“Where did she come from?”

“The Ice Continent, I think.” Faen made a dismissing gesture, “Does it matter? All that matters is that Jsyl saw Memned as the enemy who tortured her into q-consciousness. Not even a pattern-man can wriggle off the point of that truth!”

Ryth’s skin gleamed in the wine-tinted night as he sat up beside Faen. His eyes held her motionless, the eyes of a man who had called a shadow’s name. Then he put both name and shadow from his mind with a finality he had learned from her.

“Tell me, laseyss,” Faen whispered. “What did you discover on Malia?”

“I don’t know.” The Sharnn sat unmoving, a statue carved out of descending night. “Because I don’t want to know.”

“What could be worse than Malia’s death?”

“Knowing I had caused it.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“Is it?” Mauve shadows slid across the Sharnn’s shoulders as he leaned toward her. “I hope so, m’zamay,” he murmured, tongue between her lips. “But I dream of a shadow, hungry. He has my eyes, my face, my—”

Faen’s skillful mouth blurred his words. After a long moment she relented, a last caress, then she moved away.

“When Vintra orders Malia’s death,” began Faen.

“No! Even now the pattern is not inevitable. There is still room for an innocent Malia. There is still time to catch a shadow.” Silence congealed and he reached blindly for her. “There must be time!”

Faen’s throat tightened as she held his face between her palms. “You share none of our guilt.”

“Malia is not guilty.”

“The Concord disagrees. You must leave me, laseyss. You are not a Malian, to die when Malia dies.”

“I became a Malian when I kissed my blood on your lips.”

The Sharnn stood, lifting Faen with him. Her body moved, slow and supple, sliding down his body, sinking to her knees while his breath thickened in his throat.

“There is time to teach me about Sharn and pools,” she murmured, touching him with her tongue.

The Sharnn’s fingers rubbed through her hair, holding her so close that her breath became another land of caress. “There is nothing I can teach you,” he said hoarsely.

But he was wrong. In the sliding warmth of the pool, he taught Faen that a Malian can faint twice for a Sharnn lover.

## VI

“Malia,” said Kayle, orange eyes brilliant in the early light, “is guilty.”

“Perhaps,” said the Sharnn. His tone showed his utter weariness with the argument. “Nothing I’ve told you irrevocably condemns Malia. We don’t know much more than we did before.”

“But we do,” countered Mim, her voice quick and husky. “We know that the Gint kills Concord agents for a Malian master.”

“Do we?” said Ryth. “We only know that the Gint uses a minor Malian Access. Not the same thing at all.”

“Ryth,” said Kayle gently. “If Faen were not Malian, would your arguments be the same?”

The Sharnn turned on Kayle so quickly that the Nendleti took an involuntary step backward.

“Were Vintra the condemned planet,” said Ryth coldly, “would you be so eager to close the circuit?”

An uneasy silence filled the room while the three of them examined each other and their own private prejudices. Malia’s unpopularity among Concord planets was a fact. Ryth’s fusion with Faen was also a fact. Somewhere between the two facts was truth, but not even the Sharnn knew where it lay.

“This doesn’t have to separate you and Faen,” said Kayle, carefully. “Faen’s talent is unique, and uniquely useful to the Carifil. We need her and her genes, no matter what her people’s fate. The Carifil will insure that—”

Soft, bitter Sharnn laughter overrode Kayle’s words. “Do you really believe that the Sandoliki Ti Faen would let her people die alone?”

“She didn’t care enough to rule them,” snapped Mim.

“She could not rule them.” Ryth spaced each word with icy precision. “Malian state rituals are tactile.” He looked from one to the other while silence expanded in uneasy ripples. “Yes, you finally begin to see the pattern. In spite of her isolation, Faen is every breath the Sandoliki Ti. She lived in virtual exile, in the center of a land destroyed by hatred, so that she would be available to those of her people who needed her talent. She loves her people and planet as few rulers do.”

Kayle sagged with a weariness as deep as Ryth’s. “With each word you make it harder to believe her innocence, much less Malia’s. You would do anything to keep Faen alive. Anything. And I can’t condemn you for that, though I should.”

The Sharnn’s hand went out until his fingertips pressed Kayle’s arm in slow t’sil’ne. “Do not worry about your honor or Faen’s or mine, Ti Kayle. I will find my shadow, my gint. Then, if Malia must die,” Ryth spread his hands in a gesture of emptiness, “she must die.”

Faen appeared in the opening to Kayle’s h’kel. Her body and voice were rich with the aftermath of sensuality and sleep. “Laseyss,” she said, her eyes brilliant with compassion and premonition, “you cannot find what someone has so carefully hidden. No one but you and I want the truth about Malia. And even I can’t find it.” Her beautiful face turned toward Kayle. “How soon will my planet be under proscription?”

“Malia is under secondary proscription now.”

Faen closed her eyes. When they opened, they were as dull as mercury. “I must go back.”

Kayle’s hand reached for her until he remembered, then he let his arm drop. “It is merely a warning to non-Malians that the planet is dangerous.”

“Vintra has been put under tertiary proscription,” Mim pointed out.

“For good reason,” said the Sharnn angrily. “Too many people die here!”

“And who is to blame for that?” countered Kayle.

“Prove it!” said the Sharnn, his face hard and dangerous.

“Ryth, we don’t have to prove anything any longer,” said Kayle. “The odds against Malia’s innocence have climbed to the point that the Concord has no choice. We can’t wait for Vintra to die before Malia is stopped. And punished.”

“Malia,” quoted Mim, “is a disease that must not spread any further among the healthy planets of the Concord.”

“That sounds like a Vintran,” said Faen, her voice perfectly controlled.

“It was.”

“Do you really believe that Malia is evil?” asked Ryth.

“What Mim believes does not matter.” Kayle’s voice was thick with a mixture of emotions too complex to easily name. “It’s over, Ryth. It was over the moment I told them Jsyl was dead.”

“What of the Carifil?” demanded Ryth. “Will they sit on each others’ fingers while a possibly innocent race is murdered? A race they could have saved?”

“We don’t rule the Concord,” said Mim when Kayle was silent. “We are merely specialists who help when asked.”

“Or when you insist?” said the Sharnn sarcastically.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But we do not rule, Sharnn. We do not rule.”

“I’m sure that is a great comfort to Malians.”



“Would you have us subvert the idea of Concord?” demanded Mim. “Would you have us poison the possibilities of many races because you are complement to a woman born of a doomed race?”

“I don’t ask for Faen’s life or mine or Malia’s! I simply ask the Concord to be certain that Malia’s guilt is the only possible pattern. Possible, Ti Mim, not probable. Possible! Is that too much to ask?”

“I’m sorry,” said Kayle, voice so changed as to sound like a stranger. “Malia is too well hated. Vintra has outgrown xenophobia, especially since the Undeclared War. Today, Vintra is an integral part of the Concord, economically and culturally. And Malia—is not.”

“A pattern of prejudice that would embarrass a child,” said Ryth icily.

“No system is perfect.”

The Sharnn laughed in cold agreement.

“When,” said Faen, “will primary proscription begin for Malia?”

Kayle’s eyes went to a wall display where flickering numbers divided time according to Centrex and Vintran customs. He hesitated, then decided it was too late for Faen to do anything. “In the next Centrex unit.”

But Kayle had forgotten Faen’s incredible speed. Before the last word left Kayle’s lips, the edge of Faen’s hand descended on Ryth in a totally unexpected blow. He fell soundlessly to the lush floor, unconscious at the instant he knew he had been hit. She leaned over the Sharnn with swift grace, touching her fingertips to his lips in silent goodbye.

Kayle leaped for her, foot lashing out in a blow meant to stun. But Faen was no longer there. The instant Kayle’s muscles bunched, she somersaulted backwards, out of reach. Before Mim could move, Faen was out of the room. They ran after her, but came no closer than the fierce blue flash of the Access.

Kayle stood and looked at the empty platform, swearing bitterly as the afterimage of Faen’s leaping body, burned behind his eyes. Mim touched the back of his hand.

“I should have known,” said Kayle thickly.

“You couldn’t have stopped her,” Mim said. “I’ve never seen such speed.”

The lights around the platform blinked and switched to a different code, beginning a new Centrex unit. Eyes dull, Kayle stared blindly at Faen’s death sentence.

“Malia just began primary proscription.” Kayle’s lips twisted bitterly. “The Carifil just lost their finder. The Sharnn just lost his—we’ve all lost, Mim. Shlan t’e riu, F’n’een, Faen. Breathe the white wind.”

“What of the Sharnn?” Mim said softly.

“Faen’s blow was precise. It merely stunned him.”

Mim hissed. “Don’t pretend thickness, thrice-husband. What will the Sharnn do now?”

Flame leaped suddenly in Kayle’s orange eyes. “Be grateful he isn’t Malian, Sri Mim, or he and Faen would give the Concord Ti Vire such as it had never known nor wanted to know!” The flame died and Kayle seemed to shrink. “But he is Sharnn, and there is kerdin little he can do. Malia’s personnel Access is cut off from the rest of the Concord now. Even in a lightship—if he could find one on Vintra—it would take months to reach Malia. By then, Malians will be no more than a raw smear across the Concord’s self-esteem.”

Kayle’s body jerked as though it wanted to move in all directions and found none open. Mim’s blunt hand rubbed firmly down his spine.

“It isn’t your fault that Malia is doomed,” she said. “It isn’t your fault that Malians could not abide by the Sole Restraint of the Concord.”

“I know, Sri Mim,” said Kayle in a haunted voice. “But what if Malians are not guilty? What if we allow Vintrans to rain fire on an innocent people?”

Though the Sharnn did not make even the smallest sound, the two Nendletis turned swiftly. Ryth made no move toward them, simply leaned against the wall, eyes almost black with fury.

“I tried to—” began Kayle.

“I know.”

Ryth’s voice was strangely calm. His too-dark eyes flicked over the empty platform and changed time code. For an instant his mind leaped with deadly energy. Mim cried out, as much in pain as fear. Then the energy ebbed. Except for an eerie aura of violence licking around him, the Sharnn seemed to be

no more than a tall man leaning against a wall of mauve crystal. Yet Mim clung to Kayle, half-stunned by what she had barely sensed.

“Carifil own and control the Accesses, don’t they?” asked the Sharnn, but his tone made it clear that he already knew.

Kayle looked at Ryth closely; the Sharnn seemed as calm as a sunrise lake.

“Why do you ask?”

At Kayle’s blunt question, stillness seemed to gather around the Sharnn, flowing into him, sucking light out of the room.

“Yes,” grated Kayle, stepping between the Sharnn and Mim. “Carifil control the Accesses. But we cannot break primary proscription.”

“Cannot or will not?” Ryth laughed over Kayle’s sudden anger. “Ti Kayle, sri Kayle—I’m not asking any more from the Carifil than the freight Access codes of C’Varial and Darg Vintra.”

“That’s suicide.”

“Faen survived it.”

“Faen is Malian. A Sharnn genotype might not.”

“My risk. The codes, Kayle. I haven’t much time. Vintra will be eager to destroy the prey it ran to ground.”

“Take the Access to Nirensif,” Kayle said quickly. “Then a fast lightship to Malia. It would take—”

“—more time than Malia has,” Ryth said in the tones of a Sharnn who has considered and rejected all patterns but one. “The codes.”

“I won’t give you the means to kill yourself.”

Again stillness flowed. The Sharnn’s hooded eyes watched Kayle with a stranger’s disinterest.

“I am Sharnn,” said an utterly calm voice. “I know how cultures are built—or destroyed.” He smiled as his mind knifed into Kayle’s with frightening ease.

\*Give me the codes.\*

\*Or you’ll kill me?\* shot back Kayle, his thought wrapped in contempt.

\*No.\* Gently. \*No, sri. I won’t even hurt you. Or Mim.\*

\*Then what will you—\*

Mindtouch fractured into fear as Kayle caught just a vague outline of what a Sharnn’s stillness could become.

\*You don’t want to know,\* answered Ryth. \*Nor do I!\*

With a wrench, the Sharnn ended mindtouch. Only then did Kayle realize that the Sharnn had also held Mim within the coils of his uncanny mind.

“I can get the codes without you or Mim. But you could save me time.”

With pointedly careful movements, Mim shaped a psitran from the intricate wire mesh that had restrained her thick bronze hair.

“Mim—” said Kayle, reaching for her.

She deflected his hand with the gentle touch of a mother shooing away a child.

“The Sharnn has found his white wind,” she said, placing the psitran around her temples. “Who are we to say he may not breathe it?”

With a slow gesture of resignation, Kayle turned his back on both of them.

“Are you dying simply because Faen must?” said Kayle in a grey voice.

The Sharnn’s laughter made Kayle turn back in surprise.

“Sri Kayle, do you really think that Faen returned to Malia merely to die like a tame zred?”

Kayle turned fully around, legs spread as though to take whatever blows might come.

“Yes, my new-old Nendleti brother,” said Ryth, “she will get many hands and heads on her way to Memned’s mind.” Ryth smiled at the knowledge dawning in Kayle’s luminous eyes. “And I—I will help Faen conceive of new ways to make Memned speak and regret that she shortened the most satisfying pattern of all. Memned will scream to hurry the moment of Malia’s death. And her own.”

In the spreading stillness the Sharnn’s slow, even breathing was the only sound or movement. Mim was lost to her distant communications and Kayle was lost to his own bitter thoughts. Then Ryth’s hand

moved over Kayle in the slow pressures of t'sil'ne, again calling Kayle his brother.

"The pattern is not burned in stone," said Ryth in an attempt to comfort him. "Memned might break before she dies."

"Would that prove Malia's innocence?" said Kayle sadly.

"Or guilt," said the Sharnn indifferently. "Either way, the pattern would be complete, knowable. Isn't that what the Carifil wanted?"

"Not at the cost of your death!"

"Each pattern has a price."

"Is Memned's slow death the price of your life pattern?" snapped Kayle.

"It could be," said the Sharnn, but his tone said that it was not.

"Then why do you return to Malia?"

The Sharnn's green eyes were unreadable in the slanting shadows and shifting light. When Ryth smiled, Kayle looked away.

"Sharn could be responsible for Malia," said Ryth softly. "So if Faen must die, it will be with me inside her, kissing my blood on her lips."

Kayle flinched, but could not conceal the light that stirred deep in his orange eyes. The Sharnn saw, laughed softly and again touched Kayle like a brother.

"You're more Malian than Sharnn, now," said Kayle in a strained voice.

"Am I? How little you know Sharnn, brother."

Kayle grabbed Ryth's arm with bruising force. "You said, 'If Faen must die!' If!"

"There are seven chances, seven patterns left to live. Malia only needs one."

Kayle looked deep into the Sharnn's eyes and sensed wildness reaching and expanding, while stillness flowed, pouring into primal green eyes. He sensed the Sharnn's lazy, almost amused, indifference to the power awakening in his mind. It was merely a single aspect of what a Sharnn could be.

\*Ryth—\* began Kayle, a final gasp of uneasy sanity that was washed away in reckless laughter. Kayle succumbed to the savage power that he sensed in his new-old brother.

In intimate, elastic silence they waited for Mim to get the codes to Malia's freight Accesses. Finally, Mim lifted the psitran off her broad forehead and sighed wearily. When she opened her pale orange eyes, a single look at Kayle told her of his decision. She folded her hands into round fists and said, "C'Varial or Darg Vintra? The Carifil will reactivate them, keyed to my psitran."

"C'Varial," Ryth answered. "As close to the Turquoise Kel as possible."

"Will the food h'kel be close enough?" purred Mim.

Ryth laughed with delight. Together they rolled up their luggage and set off for the nearest large freight Access. Faen would have recognized it; she had seen this Access through the timeshadow of a dead man's mind. The Sharnn, too, sensed something that made him check each dense purple shadow with unusual care. But today nothing dangerous waited for them except the Access itself. The Sharnn cape flared and rippled, as though stretching. Then it settled like soft cloth around his powerful legs.

"Darg Vintra's code first," said Ryth, throwing their luggage onto a square.

Mim's quick, blunt fingers sent the luggage on its way. Then she stroked in the Turquoise h'kel's code, added a brief hold count and leaped to the platform with the two men. The three of them joined minds, reinforcing each other. And they waited.

The universe peeled away in a climbing blue explosion. Blue lightning raked across senses and centuries, eons of blue more brilliant than a god's eyes, blazing blue violence that consumed them, churned them, spat them out bruised and sick on a small square platform far away from Vintra.

The Sharnn's body jerked and rolled as he fought for control of himself. His mind was a mass of shattered blue energy; a universe had poured through him and he through it. With a final spasm, he caught the pattern of his sickness, twisted it and forced the wheeling blue out of his mind.

Groaning, Ryth flopped off the platform and onto the carved crystal floor. He stared at the winking patterns, wondering if it would have been easier if he had begun closer to Malia. Then he realized that it would have made no difference; all distances were equal to the force that made the Access possible.

A small sound from the platform told him that Kayle or Mim was fighting into consciousness. Ryth

forced himself to his knees, reached out and dragged first Mim, then Kayle, off the platform. He helped them to breathe until the last of the sickness left their knotted bodies and they slept. Though he tried to stay alert, he too slid into unconsciousness.

The Sharnn was the first to wake. He leaped up, horrified at the wasted time and wondering why they had not been discovered. Then he remembered that the Turquoise Kel was tabu to all but the Sandoliki Ti Faen.

He looked around, grimacing at the pain that lanced through his mind and body with each movement. He half-fell, half-knelt, by the Nendletis. Both were unconscious, but seemed otherwise normal. By the time he had cleaned himself and them and the h'kel, Mim was moaning her way into consciousness. Elegant and obscene epithets tumbled off her broad lips as she rolled to her knees, head hanging. She tried mindspeech, but it was incoherent.

"Kayle?" she said hoarsely.

"He'll come out of it soon," said the Sharnn, lifting his hand from the pulse in Kayle's thick neck.

"I can't use mindspeech."

"That will pass. I barely remembered where I was at first. Now I remember more than I want to."

Mim's lips twisted in sardonic agreement. "Travel not fit for a zarf."

She shook her head hard, as though to fling off the last shards of cutting blue energy. Blood oozed from her lip as she fought not to cry out her pain. Watching her, Ryth realized that the trip had been worse for her than for him; and he guessed it had been worst of all for Kayle.

"Faen?" asked Mim, wiping blood off of her lips.

"Not here."

"Malia?" Mim's husky voice grated. "Is Faen on Malia?"

"She must be. My mind's just too shaken to find her."

Experimentally, Ryth tried mindtouch with Mim. He winced away at the moment of touch; her pain was excruciating.

"Better than it was," she said curtly.

"Can you remember yet?"

"The fool that I was?" Mim laughed harshly, then bit her lip against the pain. "Too clearly, Sharnn. Too clearly. I hope your plan is worth our payment."

"Plan?" The Sharnn's smile was lopsided. "Faen's plan is the only one that matters now. And I don't know what it is."

"Guess."

Kayle groaned.

"Memned," said Ryth. "If I were Faen, I would very much desire a talk with that skavern."

Kayle groaned and gagged until expert pressures from Mim's fingers short-circuited the nerves sending messages of pain and nausea.

"What is your status here?" Mim asked Ryth while she gently rolled Kayle's head to loosen his rigid spine. "Can you go wherever you want without difficulty, and we with you?"

"When Faen was with me, yes. But since proscription—I don't know."

Mim grunted and massaged down Kayle's spine. "You don't know much, Sharnn. Yet my thrice-husband trusted his life to your skill. Sri Kayle," she added, "has a genius for dangerous impulse."

"He's not alone in that," said the Sharnn wryly.

Kayle's orange eyes opened slowly. His broad face creased with pain, yet he smiled to see Mim safe and well, smiling at him in return. He swallowed with difficulty and glanced around; intricately carved crystal walls splintered light into every possible shade of turquoise.

"We're here," said Kayle weakly.

"Surprised?" asked the Sharnn.

Kayle smiled slightly. The smile died as he pulled himself into a sitting position; even Mim's fingers could not vanquish the slicing pain. The Sharnn watched him uneasily, not liking the yellow hue of Kayle's skin.

“I’m all right,” snapped Kayle, correctly interpreting Ryth’s look. “I’ve felt worse the morning after too much chaay.”

He rolled to his hands and knees, head hanging. In spite of Mim’s knowing fingers pressed against key nerves, Kayle cried out at the pain behind his eyes.

Abruptly, the Sharnn decided. He stood and went to the h’kel’s computer. As though he had handled its subtly textured surfaces all his life, he stroked in his request.

“That will probably register in Lekel’s kel,” commented Mim.

“I know.” The Sharnn’s intent green eyes never left the pulsing lights that answered his sure fingertips. “Darg Vintra’s computer has not been activated since Faen returned to Malia. She’s not there.” He worked over the machine’s changing surfaces again. “Nor has the Creamstone and Gold Kel—”

“Then where is she?” hissed Mim.

There was no answer. The Sharnn’s face was lined with effort as he reached out with his mind for Faen. It was like building a bridge of straw; just when he sensed something, a far side to aim at, the bridge collapsed. He kept trying, fighting what he assumed was the after effect of a coarsely focused Access shift, fighting until sweat gathered and rolled down his rigid body.

He could not find her.

The Sharnn opened his eyes. Mim was watching him, hope and resignation reflected in her pale orange eyes.

“Nothing,” Ryth said.

“Then she’s not on Malia.”

“My mind is still—”

“No,” said Mim flatly. “Your mindcall was as loud and clean as any I’ve ever heard. She is gone, somewhere out In the Concord. Free. And we are captive on a doomed planet.” Mim’s smile twisted in bitter humor. “Trust a Malian to deceive you, Sharnn. You have just joined the group of otherwise intelligent beings who have succumbed to Malian sensuality. Malians’ primal allure is the real reason they are so well-despised by the rest of the Concord. For Malians are immune—and we are not!”

The Sharnn turned inward and did not answer.

Kayle said something soft and low and hurried to Mim. The hissing Nendleti phrases piled up like dry leaves in the room, shifting and rustling with each gesture. The Sharnn ignored the heaped phrases, focusing instead on the ugly pattern Mim had pointed out to him.

Yes, it was possible. More possible than Malian innocence. He had never known fusion with another, never known what it was to be complemented by another mind; he could have mistaken transcendent physical pleasure for something else.

Stillness surged in the room, a whirlpool of darkness, and Ryth suspended in the still center of lethal possibilities—a Sharnn conceiving of absolute evil. A Sharnn who could become whatever he could conceive.

The spinning moment passed, but the dark stillness remained in the Sharnn’s eyes.

“Call out to the Carifil,” he said harshly to Kayle. “Tell them to activate the freight Access and get you off this planet. Quickly!”

Though Ryth said no more, they knew that the Sharnn was thinking of molecular fire.

Kayle silently pulled his psitran into shape and placed it on his forehead. Long moments passed while he struggled to communicate. Wordlessly, Mim put on her psitran and joined her mind with his. But the expression on their faces told Ryth that something was wrong.

“Neither Kayle nor I can control our psitrans,” said Mim, her voice hoarse with exhaustion. “They will have to be re-focused.”

“How long will it take?”

Kayle smiled wryly. “An instant. All we need is an omni-synth.”

“The closest omnisynth is on Centrex,” said Mim bitterly.

The Sharnn held out his hand “Give me a psitran. I was less affected by the transit.”

Mim turned aside disdainfully, “You of all people should know that you can’t use another person’s pattern. Don’t be more of a fool than she made you!”

The Sharnn's cape writhed darkly, but all he said was, "How much time before Vintra will be permitted to burn Malia?"

"We should have at least three Centrex days," said Kayle, but neither his mind nor his voice displayed much confidence.

The Sharnn began to speak, then stopped, shaking his head sharply, haunted by a piercing memory of Faen that was so immediate it was similar to mindtouch. He reached out, felt an instant of falling away, like dying, and then it was gone.

"Are you well enough to fight?" demanded the Sharnn abruptly.

"We're breathing, aren't we?" snapped Mim.

"Somewhere in the Topaz Kel is a personnel Access. Unregistered. So long as the freight Accesses are activated, I'll bet that this secret one also is."

"It would be untraceable, with the freight energies going," mused Kayle. "It probably siphons those energies for its own secret operation."

"Let's hope it's doing just that," the Sharnn said, turning toward the doorway.

The Sharnn led them across a pale courtyard of turquoise stone, then beneath a translucent creamstone arch. Beyond that was a garden, zamay alive with wind and trembling song, asking. When he stepped among the zamay blooms, a feeling of Faen's presence sliced through him, a feeling as compelling as her touch. He stumbled and choked off her name before it left his lips, changing its soft sound into a curse as he crushed zamay throats beneath his feet.

The sensual scents and textures and colors of Malia nearly overwhelmed the Sharnn. In every radiant black shadow he saw her hair swaying with its own secret life; in every flash of crystal light her eyes watched him; in every silken breath of wind she slid around him with a sigh.

"Ryth?" said Kayle, touching his arm.

The Sharnn flinched away, unable to bear a touch that was not hers.

"Nothing," he said tonelessly, brushing aside flowers as soft as her lips. The feeling of dying came again, then left as suddenly as a thought. The insistent sense of her presence was gone.

The path Ryth followed turned in a graceful curve and vanished into the twisting embrace of nightvine. The thicket made a murmuring tunnel overhead, sibilant with wind and life. The air became fragrant and humid, as intimate as two joined bodies. The tunnel widened and lifted to form a secret bower with a ceiling of tere leaves spreading scarlet benediction over the ground. In the center of the space, a pool pulsed with the rhythms of a hidden spring.

And zamay trembled with hope.

With a sudden movement, the Sharnn knelt and thrust his hand into the living pool. Warm water slid up his fingers and palm, lapped gently at his wrist. Even as his senses responded, understanding crystallized in his mind, and he knew that this secret place was consummately Malian. The garden and pool and perhaps the very earth had been designed to expand sensual possibilities.

To be alive on Malia was to finally understand the essential sensuality of life. And to glory in it.

Slowly, the Sharnn lifted his hand out of the water, feeling the pool's nearly sentient reluctance to release him. Each soft drop clinging to his fingers shone like a separate world, heavy and round with life.

"She is here," the Sharnn whispered, almost blinded by the gleaming drops. "There is no other planet like this, no other place to live. Or die." He raised each finger to his tongue and licked off the sweet warmth of water. "Yes," he said, smiling. "Yes."

He lifted his arms as though to embrace the silent trees and he laughed softly. Kayle and Mim looked at each other, trading silent worries. The Sharnn saw and smiled but did not explain; the pattern was so new and pure he could not describe it, only feel.

With long, supple strides Ryth led them out of the Turquoise Kel's beauties and into the sudden flawless light of Malian noon. When they emerged from the ebony embrace of nightvine, a guard straightened in surprise.

"Take us to Lekel," Ryth said, with the casual arrogance of a true Malian aristocrat.

The guard struggled with her desire to ask Ryth's name, then she recognized the tall Sharnn.

"Apologies and regrets, Sandoliki Ti Ryth."

Ryth made a dismissing gesture, not in the least showing his relief that Lekel had kept his promise and warned his guards of the new Ti's right to go anywhere he wished.

"If the Sandoliki Ti Ryth would be so gracious as to wait in the garden," said the guard in the rising tone of one who requests without a hint of demand.

"Send food and drink," said Ryth by way of agreement.

While they ate, the honey light of Malia's late afternoon poured over the hushed gardens of the Topaz Kel. In silence, they let the exquisitely prepared food work its simple magic on their bodies. By the time the guard returned, they felt as though the freight Access were no more than a distant, fading nightmare.

Lekel was in the listening h'kel. Formerly, the room had been used for meetings between Sandolikis and their advisors. Now, ancient crystal ikons shimmered next to ultramodern communications devices. Beneath the silence was a hum of power that was less heard than felt in the bones. Ryth looked around appreciatively; only a Malian could integrate such disparate elements into a pleasing esthetic whole.

"I'm honored," murmured Lekel, his black eyes and voice quick with curiosity. "And surprised. Ti Faen thought she would be the last one in before primary proscription began."

Ryth sensed the others' relief that Faen was on the planet. But the Sharnn was not relieved. Not only could he not sense her, Lekel's subtle hostility crackled like distant heat lightning.

"My equipment," continued Lekel, "didn't register anyone other than Ti Faen arriving on the inner moon."

Lekel paused, inviting explanation.

"We came to be with Faen," said the Sharnn, ignoring Lekel's invitation.

"Oh?" Lekel's eyes became even colder. "I didn't know Ti Faen was in C'Varial, much less in my h'kel."

Ryth gestured with a negligence he did not feel. "She's not at Darg Vintra. Nor is she in the Creamstone and Gold Kel. Naturally we assumed she had come here. You may be only k'm'n Sandoliki, but you are nonetheless her closest blood kin."

"Closest—then it is deathtime," Lekel turned away abruptly.

Ryth was not insulted by the view of k'm'n Sandoliki's powerful shoulders; he knew that Lekel was working to control himself.

"What Faen told me is true?" said Lekel, his voice strained. "Vintra will be allowed to destroy us with molecular fire?"

"Yes."

The Sharnn hesitated, then walked over to Lekel and carefully touched him as he would an equal who is not yet friend or enemy. Lekel stiffened at the Sharnn's tangible sympathy, then relaxed as Ryth's skilled t'sil'ne subtly reassured.

"What has Malia done to deserve the Concord's wrath?"

There was neither plea nor self-pity in Lekel's question, only the timeless cry of sentience baffled by unearned death. At that instant the Sharnn was nearly certain that Lekel was not the architect of Vintra's decline, but that certainty did Malia no good.

"The Concord," said Ryth softly, "believes that Malia twice has broken the Sole Restraint against undeclared war."

Rage flickered deep in Lekel's eyes. "Vintra's problems can't be excreted in Malia's scented gardens. Vintra's problems are her own—and inevitable."

"Why?"

"Look around you," demanded Lekel, wide-spread hands gesturing to every part of the shimmering crystal h'kel, to the gardens beyond, and to the glowing moment when time was suspended in the flawless cinnamon sky of Malia's evening. "Each Malian life is divided into one hundred aspects, one thousand moments. To a Malian, the names of those aspects and moments are purest song." Lekel's caressing voice soared and fell, whispered and resounded as he named just a few of Malia's moments. "N'amari, ss'iel'ma, f'm'oir'li ... I can't translate those names or those Malian moments into the Galactic language or experience. No one can."

“And if simple language eludes translation, what of the minds that shape and are shaped by Malian moments? Can those minds be translated? Can they be wrenched out of one context, thrust into another and expected to blossom like zamay?”

“No and No and No,” Lekel said, his voice tolling like a vire crystal. “Impossible. Yet Malia is being blamed because transplanted Malians are dying on their ugly purple planet.”

“Vintra,” said Mim’s husky, yet biting, voice, “is hardly ugly. It has thousands of purple islands floating on lavender seas, magenta mountains as potent as viero wine, amethyst clouds and a moon as pink as a child’s laughter. Vintra is one of the most beautiful planets yet discovered.”

“Not to a Malian.”

“Not to you, perhaps,” she snapped, “Other Malians were not so blind.”

“A Malian,” countered Lekel, “would have to be blind to live in Vintra’s gloom.”

“Clay eyes,” muttered Mim.

Lekel laughed with arrogant certainty, “I’ll match Malian color discrimination against any race in the Concord. Especially Vintrans.”

“Lekel would win,” said the Sharnn before Mim could respond, “Vintrans have difficulty with the shorter wavelengths of light. It’s probably more a cultural than a physiological trait; by Malian standards, Vintra has a somber sun. Never having seen sixty shades of cream, Vintrans would have difficulty distinguishing among them. Think about it, Mim—Vintra’s evolving language has far fewer words for light colors than Malia’s language; And no more for the dark colors.”

“Vintra,” said Kayle. “Means purple.”

Lekel smiled sardonically. “It also connotes gloom and madness, among other things.”

The Sharnn’s green eyes narrowed in sudden speculation. Planet names were like the air everyone breathed—so often used as to be taken for granted, yet containing items of crucial import.

“What other things?” asked the Sharnn in a deceptively bland voice.

“Depression, disease, debility, and dishonor,” said Lekel succinctly. “When we say that a person lives in a vintran kel, we mean that he is dead to the radiant possibilities of the senses.”

“Isn’t that a recent saying—just since the Undeclared War?” asked Ryth.

“Darg Vintra,” corrected Lekel automatically, giving the war its Malian name. “No, the saying is as old as Malians’ aversion to purple.”

“Does Darg Vintra have any meaning beyond its obvious one—Vintra’s Revenge?”

Lekel made a curt gesture. “The Sandoliki Estates. Or what remains of them,” he added with sudden, palpable hatred.

“Nothing more?” prodded the Sharnn, his pattern instincts aroused.

“The subject is distasteful.”

Ryth ignored the Malian phrase signaling an end to a topic. “Death neutralizes all distaste.”

“And we are about to die?” Lekel’s smile would have been cruel, had it not been directed as much at his own mortality as it was at theirs. “Since you have come here to die, de f’mi ti, I will tell you. But only because you are de f’mi ti, and here.”

“Supreme sensualist,” translated the Sharnn with a half-smile. “I am supremely complimented.”

Lekel’s elegant bow reinforced the compliment. “Any man who can make the Sandoliki Ti Faen faint twice deserves whatever wretched ornaments I can hang on his penetrating truth.”

Ryth returned the bow with equal elegance and ease, but his eyes were intent on more than courtesy.

“Darg Vintra,” said Lekel, then stopped. After a sigh he began again. “When the Concord discovered Malia, we were a race whose only dream was a life long enough to discover and savor each of Malia’s thousand moments. The Concord’s extender drugs gave us our dream without diminishing our fertility. Though we limited ourselves to two children, we foolishly overlooked the fact that we would still be alive when our children’s children had their own children, and on and on, more and more, generation piling on generation until we were breathing each other’s air like lovers.

“We developed new disciplines, new harmonies. We tried to appreciate and even prefer the nuances of tiny gardens, circumscribed vistas, shrinking personal space. Malians died in duels or ambushes brought on by incidents that were as simple and complex as fertilized ova. Many, many died. But not



nearly enough to make room for the relentless generations.

“We call that time Vintra Morata.”

“Strangling purple,” said Ryth. “I’ve heard that phrase, in a song. Maran’s Song.”

“Yes.” Lekel’s lips flattened and he made a gesture of abiding shame. “By the time the Malian rogue Tikleli discovered Vintra in a stolen lightship, Malian society was disintegrating. We birthed more rogues than f’ mis, raised more criminals than de f’ mis ti.”

“Each race,” said the Sharnn carefully, “had a difficult time adjusting to extended lives. That is no requirement for shame.”

“For lesser races, no. But we were Malians. And we were out of control, a purple storm destroying zamay and mountains alike. There is,” Lekel added in a strained whisper, “no greater shame for a Malian than to destroy randomly, with neither plan nor purpose nor finesse.”

Beyond the translucent topaz wall, a scarlet bird called and a shower of silver insects descended into the singing throats of zamay flowers. Petals folded in, protecting. Unmated insects ticked against the windows, ticked and ticked again, then flew into the condensing night in search of singing flowers.

Lekel watched the brittle silver wings, his eyes reflecting darkness and silence and the possibility of death. Every line in his body spoke of control, of long discipline. His nostrils flared minutely in response to a wisp of fragrance that few non-Malians would have noticed. When he moved, it was with a liquid grace that recalled the hidden spring of the Turquoise Kel.

“A Sandoliki was born, Sandoliki Ti Maran,” said Lekel, his voice low. “She grew and saw and knew that slaughter or another planet were our only options. As Vintra had no sentient life, the planet was ours by right of discovery. We desperately needed its land and food and space. We had lightships to take us there. We had the resources to begin a second world.

“We had everything but the desire to leave Malia.”

Lekel looked blindly at the garden while it receded into night.

“I thought,” said Kayle, “that Malians eagerly colonized Vintra.”

A bleak smile divided Lekel’s face. “Few descend willingly into gloom and madness.”

“Then how—” began Mim.

“A lie,” said Lekel harshly. “A lie of such infinite beauty that it became more compelling than truth. A lie expressed in sarsa music, the most brilliant composition of our entire esthetic history.”

“Maran’s Song,” hissed the Sharnn, his body suddenly fully alert.

The Sharnn’s words spread through the h’kel. Slowly, Lekel turned and focused on the Sharnn’s uncanny eyes.

“Yes. That song. It was only played once on Malia. It divided us into Malians and Vintrans. So that all might live. Maran’s Song.” Lekel’s voice jerked. The subject was not one that pleased a proud Sandoliki. “Summation and exhortation. Maran’s Song.” The name was a curse. “Maran’s Song. A lie. All a lie. Vintra offered nothing more to Malians than a slow death far from their exquisite moments.

“Maran knew this, knew it as surely as she knew that she would die on Vintra because she was too much a Sandoliki to let her people die alone.”

“Was there something lacking in Vintra’s atmosphere or soil?” asked Mim. “Or a slow poison that caused the decline?”

Lekel’s unpleasant smile became equally unpleasant laughter.

“Vintra was one of the Great Destroyer’s better creations,” said the k’m’n Sandoliki. “There was nothing wrong with the planet—for anyone but a Malian. And millions of Malians were going there, compelled by sweet lies sung on the Sandoliki sarsa, and all minds listening, deciding, and some dying.”

“If Vintra were that lethal,” said Mim, confused, “the Concord would have proscribed the planet.”

Lekel looked at Mim pityingly, for she could not understand. She was not Malian.

“There was nothing wrong with Vintra,” repeated Lekel calmly.

“And everything wrong with Malians,” the Sharnn said, his voice clear and hard.

“Now, de f’ mi ti,” murmured Lekel, “you know why Maran’s Song is not sung on Malia. And you know the real meaning of Darg Vintra.”

“The revenge of madness,” said Ryth softly. “The Undeclared. War—Darg Vintra—was an act of

madness. It was madness for Vintra to attack Malia.”

Lekel bowed again and said nothing, for there was nothing left to say.

“Vintra attacked Malia?” said Mim skeptically. “But—”

A look from the Sharnn silenced her. Kayle waited, sighed, and tried a different approach.

“What is wrong with Malians, that they can’t live on Vintra?” asked Kayle.

“Malian culture is too integrated to be excerpted successfully,” said Ryth, “too satisfying to be abandoned, and too dependent on the physical attributes of Malia to be transplanted.”

“Too rigid,” said Mim.

The Sharnn smiled. “Is the sun too rigid because it burns for us every day?” His smile faded. “Malians are alluring to us because they are sensually integrated. They seem arrogant to us because they don’t need us to complete their lives. But we long for their thousand moments, and we hate them for what we cannot be.”

“Do you mean that Malians have everything they want or need on their own planet?” demanded Kayle. “Is the Concord truly extraneous to Malians?”

“Culturally, intellectually, sensually—yes,” said the Sharnn.

Kayle glanced at Lekel for confirmation. The tall k’m’n Sandoliki made a gesture of respect toward Ryth. “The Sandoliki Ti was born a Malian, no matter what the planet of his parents. Except for the dubious blessing of extender drugs, Malia has neither need nor desire for Concord.”

Ryth watched Kayle closely, measuring the effect of each word. “You once asked me why the Malians were xenophobic,” said Ryth to Kayle. “You wanted to know what the Malians thought the Concord would do to harm them. The answer is that Malians aren’t afraid of the Concord—they ignore us because they don’t need us. They don’t think about us at all.”

The Sharnn glided closer to Mim, looming over her powerful Nendleti body.

“That’s why you hate Malians, isn’t it? They don’t care about Concord or Carifil, mankind’s future or lack of it. We simply don’t exist for them. That is Malia’s unforgivable sin. And that is why we will destroy them.”

“You’re forgetting Vintra,” said Mim coldly.

“Kayle,” said the Sharnn, without looking away from Mim’s pale orange eyes, “which planet do you now believe had better reason for initiating the Undeclared War?”

“Vintra.”

“Which planet has more reason to exterminate the other planet?”

“Vintra.”

“Which planet—”

“Vintra!” interrupted Mim, her husky voice grating. “Vintra, Vintra, Vintra! Now prove it, pattern-man. Prove it!”

“Are you sure you want me to?”

The Sharnn’s soft question brought a wry smile to Mim’s face. “I’m not a fool, sri Ryth. But someone has to take the unpalatable viewpoint or the three of us might overlook a crucial argument. I’m glad my presentation is convincing.”

Ryth bowed. “Apologies and regrets, Ti Mim.”

“Unnecessary.” She turned on Lekel and asked bluntly, “What proof do you have of anything you have told us? Particularly, what proof do you have that Vintra initiated the Undeclared War? And why didn’t you accuse Vintra at the time?”

“A Malian wouldn’t have to ask.”

“We aren’t Malians,” said Kayle, his voice calm and cold. “Teach us.”

After a long silence, Lekel made a dismissing gesture. But he explained.

“We could not accuse colonists who had no future, because we had tricked them into emigrating to insure our own future.” Lekel stared at Mim with pitiless proud eyes. “Such an accusation would have been a dishonor greater than Maran’s Song. And if we did lower ourselves to accuse, who would have believed us? The Concord would have laughed as we pleaded, but they would not have helped. They wanted Malia to be guilty.”

“And we are, but not of that crime. We are guilty of a much more subtle wrong than violating the Sole Restraint against undeclared war. We are guilty of dooming half our people so that the remainder might enjoy the entire spectrum of Malian moments.”

“Are you so sure of your guilt?” asked the Sharnn softly. “I’ve heard some of Maran’s Song. Its pattern is not that of deliberate deception.”

Lekel’s arm moved in a sweeping gesture of indifference. “You have not heard it on Malia! And would it matter if you had, if you were right? The result is the same, de f’mi ti. We live among our thousand colors of ecstasy and they die among their thousand shades of madness. Naturally they want revenge. The Concord will see that they get it.”

Mim shook her head like an animal emerging from water.

“Wait,” she said, palms pressed to her temples. “That freight Access scrambled our brains. What about the proven incidents of sabotage? What about the Gint? And Memned? If Vintra is dying of inner decay, why—”

“Memned?” said Lekel, his voice suddenly hard. “What does my wife have to do with Vintra?”

“Excellent question,” Ryth said, pointedly moving between Lekel and Mim. “Concord agents have been murdered on Vintra. One of them died looking at Memned.”

“Are you suggesting—”

“Nothing. We’re hoping that where there are questions there are also answers,” said the Sharnn.

Lekel’s eyes closed and he stroked his textured sleeves with sensitive fingertips as though nothing were more important than touching each thickness of thread in the order of its weaving; and perhaps nothing was more important, for Lekel was Malian and Sandoliki and the cloth’s textures were as riveting as sarsa music.

A dying silver insect ticked against a transparent pane while Malia’s night descended with icy stealth. Relays closed, sending warmth and golden light blushing through crystal walls. The hundred subtle shades of orange in Lekel’s robe seemed to leap like tiny flames, consuming his fingertips. He sighed and murmured what might have been one of a thousand names. But his eyes when they opened were remorseless.

“Most Malians know nothing of Vintra. Memned does. Vintra’s doom is always with her. Therefore, she is more thoughtful of Vintrans than most Malians. By some, this is taken as an aberration that can only be explained by”—Lekel’s lips twisted in distaste “—calling her a Vintran.”

“You would never knowingly marry a Vintran,” said the Sharnn.

“So you understand even that?” Lekel asked, ignoring Ryth’s slight emphasis on the word “knowingly.”

“You pity and abhor Vintrans. It would be like marrying a skavern.” The Sharnn paused, listening, but heard nothing; not even one insect remained to tick futilely against glowing walls. “Yet, such knowledge as Memned has might bring guilt and then hatred. Isn’t it possible that she so hates Vintrans that she decided to hasten their inevitable extinction?”

Lekel’s silence was long and considering. “My wife,” he said slowly, “is ... limited ... for a Malian. I did not choose her for what she is; rather, for who she appeared to be.” Lekel’s full lips thinned into a bleak line. “But she is Malian nonetheless. Vintrans have so pitifully few moments. No Malian could reduce those moments by even one.”

Mim moved with restless urgency. “Yet we are almost certain she is involved with the Gint.”

Ryth’s mental warning, coupled with Mim’s own training, saved her from Lekel’s blow.

“G’el n’si!”

Ryth reinforced his shout with a mental stroke that brought Lekel up short. The k’m’n Sandoliki put his hands to his forehead, fighting unexpected pain. Then he staggered as the pain vanished.

“N’si g’el,” said Lekel hoarsely.

“Apologies and regrets,” murmured the Sharnn, but his cape lashed.

Lekel looked at him warily and said nothing about the lightning presence he had almost sensed in his mind. “Accepted.”

“Mim spoke only what we believe to be the truth,” said Kayle.

“No Malian aristocrat could abide a man who flaunted gint,” said Lekel coldly. “To even hint that—” Rage rippled along his muscles, but he did not move. “It is impossible.”

“Then we have a problem,” said the Sharnn, and the very softness of his voice increased Lekel’s wariness. “Either your understanding of Malian capabilities is in error, or Memned is not—”

“No!” Lekel’s voice grated across the glow of light. “Don’t say it, Sandoliki Ti Ryth. Don’t force me to kill Faen’s joy.”

Stillness flowed into the Sharnn, a slow spiral turning in utter silence.

“Play a child’s game with me,” invited the Sharnn, his voice gentle in spite of the force radiating around him.

“Yes.” Lekel’s voice was ragged and his eyes never left the dangerous presence that had become Ryth. “Teach me, de f mi ti.”

“Accept as true what you have said about Malians and what I have said about Vintra.”

“Accepted.”

“Accept as true that there is a black-haired, pale-eyed woman involved with the Gint.”

“... accepted.”

“Accept as true that the woman is either Faen or Memned.”

“Impossible!” exploded Lekel. “That’s—”

“A child’s game.” Ryth watched as Lekel slowly relaxed, accepting the unpalatable game he had agreed to play. “Knowing both women as you do,” continued Ryth, “which one would be more likely to abide the Gint?”

Silence stretched until it trembled like zamay, but still Lekel did not answer, could not, until finally logic and his own honesty forced him into reluctant choice.

“Memned.” He sighed, and repeated his wife’s name. “Memned. Not Faen. Never. The leader of Ti Vire wouldn’t be able to partner with a gint.” Lekel made a gesture of baffled helplessness. “Yet—Memned?”

“Perhaps there is a third explanation,” said the Sharnn. “Perhaps she can teach it to us.”

“Perhaps,” said Lekel, black eyes dazed as he tried to focus on the impossible. “We can only ask.”

Lekel took the shortest route to Memned’s h’kel, leading them through an elliptical inner garden surrounded by luminous crystal arches carved with ancient gods. The compelling scent of Malian night swept over them, telling of folded zamay and swaying tere, secret warmth hidden within piercing chill. A sound escaped the Sharnn as Faen seemed to condense around him, perfect lips speaking urgent, soundless imperatives. His mind called to her with tearing force, and was answered by a flash of dark agony such as he had never imagined. His eyes opened blind to the black-silver beauty of Malian night, blind to the three people staring at him, blind to everything but Faen’s image writhing and fading around him until only simple moonlight remained to mock the agony echoing through his mind.

He did not call to her again.

“Are you well, Sandoliki Ti?”

Lekel’s respectful question recalled the Sharnn to a different reality.

“Yes,” said Ryth raggedly, his mind still grappling with a pattern he was afraid to pursue to conclusion. But the pattern became clear, too clear, and his throttled cry burned in his throat.

“Ryth,” said Kayle urgently, “what’s wrong?”

The Sharnn’s eyes shone hard with reflected moonlight. He looked at each of his three companions as though weighing them in a secret balance. While they watched, the Sharnn changed. It was as though he had coiled back upon himself to become darker, thicker, stronger, more deadly. At that instant, all three were ready to fight for their lives, and none expected to win.

Then the coils loosened, allowing them to breathe once more.

“Faen,” said the Sharnn softly, as though she stood next to him.

Lekel and Kayle and Mim waited, wanting to know more, but afraid to ask and risk a Sharnn’s anger.

“Something has driven Faen into q-consciousness. Yet even there she is not at peace.”

They stared, but could not see Ryth’s features. His cape was a darkness surrounding him like dense

smoke and inside the darkness violence waited.

“Where is she?” said Kayle.

“Near.”

The Sharnn’s voice held such certainty that Lekel involuntarily looked around, expecting to see Faen walk into the night garden.

Slowly, the Sharnn’s eyes focused on the k’m’n Sandoliki. “Perhaps Memned’s explanation will include what has happened to the Sandoliki Ti Faen.”

Lekel’s body tightened until muscles coiled, “Is Faen in danger?”

“Yes.”

Lekel spun and strode toward a glowing arch.

“Is Memned the cause?” demanded Kayle of Ryth.

“Memned. Or my gint, my shadow, my—”

Violence seethed around the Sharnn, a depth of violence that shocked Kayle. Ryth’s eyes waited, deceptively clear, like a spring in the center of an ancient tere grove.

“She should be safe in q,” said Kayle quickly.

“Q is a desperate retreat, barely one breath from death,” said Ryth coldly. “Q is total flight from stimulation. How much of that do you think someone like Faen can tolerate before she goes mad, or takes that next breath?”

Kayle’s mind closed as he tried to imagine the silent, monochrome infinity of sensory deprivation, where an instant and an eternity were equal because time is measured by the senses and no senses existed in q. And Faen was Malian.

“Hurry,” muttered Kayle.

The pervasive scent of zamay thinned as they hurried into the warmth of the Joxsha Kel. Like Lekel’s robe, the crystal and creamstone walls of the kel were made of more shades of orange than anyone but a Malian could discern. While they walked, shades of orange leaped and flickered and burned in a symphony of silent fire.

“It’s like living in the Allgod’s eye,” murmured Mim, the orange of her own eyes intensified by the sliding shades of the kel.

But Lekel did not hear. He turned abruptly and left the kel for a narrow side garden. There was a brief scent of blooming nightvine, a brief bite of chill air, and then Lekel led them into a large kel where a thousand tints and tones of blue arched overhead. From the elliptical room, corridors led away like spokes; each corridor presented a gradation from lightest to darkest blue.

Lekel gave them no time to appreciate the subtleties of Malian color artistry. He led them at a near-run down a corridor that began more pale than Faen’s eyes and ended as darkest midnight blue. So perfectly were the blues graduated that in no place could a change of hue be discerned.

With an unconscious flourish, Lekel pulled aside a translucent tapestry and strode into a hidden room. The somber blues surrounding him swayed in currents of candlelight. The tall candles were almost black; their bodies were scented with nightvine and their flames burned more mauve than gold. Except for scattered cushions, the room was empty.

The Sharnn stared beyond Lekel, trying to guess the function of the room, but his pattern sense was baffled by the shifting, scented flames. After the clean chill of the garden, he found Memned’s room stifling.

Lekel crossed the room and yanked aside a monochrome blue wall hanging with textures that shimmered and spoke in the changing light. Beyond the fabric was an indoor garden. In the center of the garden stood a sarsa, gathering and concentrating moonlight over its thousand crystal surfaces.

Ryth stared at the sightless facets and wondered whether the sarsa answered Memned’s touch with silver ghosts and silent ecstasies. Then he realized that only a finder like Faen—or Maran—would have the mind and skill to combine with the sarsa in unguessed linkage, probing self and past alike.

Lekel crossed to the sarsa in two strides. Every motion spoke of impatience, yet his fingers held the m’sarsa delicately. The wand flashed in the moonlight and six descending notes summoned Memned as clearly as if Lekel had called her name. The last low note trembled in the silver light, then dissipated like a

sigh.

There was no answer, though they could hear the summons resonating through every crystal wall in the kel. The Sharnn had only to look at Lekel to know that Memned's absence was unexpected.

"Where is the Vintra Kel?" said Ryth abruptly.

"We call it the Kemir Kel." Lekel's voice was strained, but insistent. "Kemir."

"Purple or blue-red, call it what you will," snapped the Sharnn. "Where is it?"

"No one lives there. It was built only to complete the spectrum. No sane Malian could be expected to live in it."

"But Memned uses it occasionally, doesn't she?"

"Opposites refresh," said Lekel. "It proves nothing."

"No one said that it did."

Lekel turned away from the Sharnn's too-knowing eyes. The k'm'n Sandoliki crossed two connecting gardens at a pace that was nearly a run. The second garden was oddly ragged, almost abandoned, as though even servants felt uneasy among the unfolding purple foliage. But under the silver and white moons, the plants were merely black on black without even a shadow of purple madness.

At the end of the garden rose an arch, its faceted curves refracting moonlight into countless violet flashes.

Lekel stopped and turned to Ryth. "Whatever happens," Lekel said, his voice low but clear, "Memned's flesh is mine."

The Sharnn hesitated only an instant. "Her flesh is yours."

Without another word, Lekel vanished beneath an amethyst arch. The Sharnn leaped to follow, running silently beneath ancient arches and moonlight until the Kemir Kel rose out of darkness, its twin-peaked roof like the wings of a great bird.

Even in the flawless light of Malian day, the kel's myriad purples would have suggested a burden of secrets and regrets; in the attenuated light of moons, the Kemir Kel's brooding atmosphere was almost malevolent. Strokes of magenta light fell like blows across the lavender floors and each shadow was a sluggish condensation of purple. The air was thick, barely stirred by slow maroon currents.

Yet the Kemir Kel was also compelling, the very heart of mystery illuminated by random shards of pure violet light.

The heavy scent of nightvine coiled around Ryth as he followed the fading rustle of Lekel's robe brushing over the floor. The smell of nightvine became stronger, darker, almost palpable. Lekel pulled aside a tapestry and for a moment was silhouetted against tiers of tall candles that burned with clear purple flames.

The room was furnished with cushions, low lounges, and amethyst sculptures in arrangements that were not quite random. Everywhere, tall candles burned until their eerie light and scent became as much a part of the kel as its rolling tones of purple.

In the center of the room stood Lekel, head bent as he spoke to a woman whose golden skin was transformed to deepest rose by the alchemy of dark candlelight. When she turned toward Lekel, her black hair billowed out, alive with purple lights. She lifted a small, beautifully formed hand and stroked Lekel's face in skilled t'sil'ne. Her eyes as they watched him were as white as ice.

The Sharnn fought to breathe air that had congealed in his throat, fought not to call out Faen's name, but most of all he fought not to kill them both as they stood in the warmth of each other's breath. His cape whipped soundlessly, twisting and writhing, seeking.

She turned again and walked closer to Ryth, moving with the silent grace of a shadow. Vague light washed over her face, concealing its lines in shifting magenta tones. When she looked into his eyes she stepped back, afraid.

"You agreed," said Lekel to the Sharnn.

As she turned to look at Lekel, a sudden draft outlined her profile with a flare of candlelight. In the heightened illumination, the lines of her face were subtly blurred, wrong. Not Faen.

The Sharnn stepped back. "You didn't mention that your wife so resembled mine," he said harshly. "Especially by candlelight."

"I assumed you knew," said Lekel, releasing his grip on his knife, "It's hardly a secret."

"Yes," said Memned, her voice toneless. "It's common knowledge that I am less beautiful than Lekel's first choice."

"Beauty varies with desire and custom," said the Sharnn.

"You are very tactful, Sandoliki Ti Ryth," said Memned, her voice as expressionless as still water.

The Sharnn glanced around the h'kel, making sure that Memned was never out of his sight. For all the information he gained from her unreadable face, she might as well have been heavily veiled. "I'm unfamiliar with the pattern of the kel," he said casually. "Where are you keeping Faen?"

Memned's moment of surprise passed so quickly that the Sharnn could not be sure he had seen it.

"Keeping? No one keeps the Ti Faen. The Ti Faen does precisely as she pleases."

The Sharnn gave Memned a long, considering look while he sent lightning mental directions to Kayle. \*Tell Mim to try Memned's mind. Force it if possible, but don't damage her memory. Be ready to fight Lekel.\*

Ryth looked from Memned to the powerful k'm'n Sandoliki. "I agreed that her flesh was yours, but her answers belong to me. N'ies?"

Lekel hesitated, then spread his hands. "N'ies. If she knows any answers."

Memned turned toward her husband, her beautiful face expressionless. "You give way to a man who is not Malian simply because your Faen might be in danger? The more she scorns you, the more you—"

"Enough," said Lekel, cutting across what was obviously an argument so often chewed over that all juice was gone. "Do you know where Faen is?"

Memned almost smiled. And said nothing.

"I'm not asking for myself," said Lekel, his voice a mixture of anger and gentleness and regret. "I'm asking for the Sandoliki Ti Ryth."

"And I am refusing. I—ohhhh!"

Lekel supported Memned, preventing her from tumbling to the hard crystal floor.

"What is it, Memned?" asked Lekel, lips close to her black hair. But her limp body did not respond to his whisper. His fingers found the pulse on her slender throat. "A simple faint ... but why?"

"Good reason," said the Sharnn quietly.

Only then did Lekel notice that the two Nendletis were standing close together, orange eyes burning as though they could see beyond Memned's controlled exterior to the truth inside. Lekel remembered the instant of pain that had staggered him when he attacked Mim and he guessed that something similar had happened to his wife. But he could not fight back, trapped as he was by the warm weight of Memned lying across his arms.

"You fight like skaverns," he said bitterly.

The Sharnn said nothing. He watched the Nendletis intently, sensing that something was wrong. At last Kayle blinked and his round orange eyes slowly focused on Ryth.

"Mim can penetrate, which is more than we had hoped for, given her difficulty with Malian minds.

"But?" prompted the Sharnn, trying to curb his impatience.

"But I can't join their minds, because Mim can't get beyond Memned's outer consciousness. It's like being on a huge oiled ball. No place to grab and hold, no traction. You just slide and lunge and slip until you're sick with dizziness and you're no closer than you were when you started."

"You get no information?"

"We get too much! All of it, one huge seamless ball and no way to sort it out. No reference points, no—"

"Pattern?" suggested the Sharnn.

Kayle's eyes narrowed. "Too dangerous. You might end up worse than I was with n'Qen."

"And I might not. One way Faen dies, we die, Malia dies. The other way—anything is possible. Everything."

Suddenly the Sharnn swung around and crouched in a single motion that was both beautiful and deadly. Lekel stopped his attack in mid-stride.

"You're too close, k'm'n Sandoliki. Back up."

Lekel shifted Memned's weight and carefully walked backwards.

"Drop the knife," said Ryth. "Yes, that one. It shines so beautifully beneath her black hair."

The knife dropped loudly in the silence.

"Listen well, Lekel. I will find my answers if I have to tear your wife's memories into single instant shreds." The Sharnn's words were as distinct as the muscles corded in his neck. "You may fight me, if you must, after I have my answers. If you move one step before that, I will force your mind and kill you where you stand. N'ies?"

Lekel's black eyes searched the Sharnn's face and found neither uncertainty nor weakness. With a long breath, Lekel agreed.

"N'ies." Then, coldly. "May I sit?"

The Sharnn made a cutting gesture of indifference. Slowly, Lekel sat, holding Memned across his folded legs. For an instant, candlelight shifted and spun over her still face; it was like seeing Faen through deep water, blurred and unattainable. In spite of his control, Ryth must have made a noise, for Lekel looked up from Memned's shadowed face. Something oddly like pity crossed the k'm'n Sandoliki's hard features.

"Do what you must, de f'mi ti," Lekel said, looking away. "Your loss is greater than mine."

Ryth closed his eyes, blotting out the woman's face that was both strange and too familiar.

"Ready?" asked Kayle.

The Sharnn took several slow, deep breaths, then responded with curt mindspeech.

\*Ready. What do I do?\*

\*Absolutely nothing.\*

The Sharnn laughed bitterly. \*I should be able to manage that.\*

\*It's the hardest thing of all,\* responded Kayle, and put a warmth into his thought that radiated through Ryth's ragged nerves. \*Very good,\* encouraged Kayle. \*Very, very good, just keep—ahhh, don't fight me. You're too strong, Sharnn.\*

\*I'm not fighting,\* insisted Ryth, then realized that he was indeed waging a reflexive struggle against the presence seeping toward the center of his mind. With a silent apology, the Sharnn concentrated on his need to link with Mim.

\*Better ... better.\*

There was a moment of vague vertigo, tiny pains.

\*You've changed, Sharnn. Amazing—truly amazing. Powerful, still, and vastly patient.\*

\*The last thing I feel is patient,\* returned the Sharnn, with a lash of restlessness that made his cape seethe.

Kayle's only answer was a vanishing chuckle. A feeling of crisp air and crackling coolness grew in Ryth's mind, accompanied by tangy, spicy scents. The total effect was as invigorating as diving into cool water.

*Thank you. You are like ghostsailing the edge of a nova,* The intimacy of Mim's response shocked Ryth. She was behind his eyes, whispering through his brain and her body lived by his rhythms. Nowhere did he sense Kayle.

*You won't, as long as the link goes well. He is bridging all our differences. Without him such intimacy would be impossible. We're too different, you and I. You are as powerful and flexible as life itself. You change even as I breathe. Always becoming.*

*I am Sharnn.*

*I begin to fear what that means ...*

*Don't. I am human.*

*I'll hold on to that, sri Ryth. You do the same!*

With no more warning than that, the Sharnn found himself hurled into Memned's mind. He could not sense Mim, except in the speed with which he oriented himself in the uncharted territory of an alien mind. He knew he was looking for something in particular, but he could not visualize what he sought. The difficulty did not disturb him; he correctly assumed that Mim would guide him whether he sensed it or not. He concentrated on Memned.



What Kayle and Mim had perceived as an oily ball, the Sharnn perceived as a grey sea troubled by conflicting currents and random winds. Waves came tall and narrow, wide and short, wedge-shaped and no shape at all. He both hovered above and floated on top of the sea, simultaneously aloof and a part of the unbalanced forces that made Memned what she was.

He stayed there, feeling/seeing/sensing. He was not aware of Kayle or Mim or time or even himself. His whole being was focused on learning the pattern that created the impenetrable grey surface that heaved below and around him.

Slowly, patiently, he discovered similarities and opposites, catalogued conflicts and accords, endings and beginnings. The waves seemed no longer restless, but energetic, no longer amorphous, but inevitable. The very next wave would be a long wedge that—

The sea exploded and he tumbled headlong into a maelstrom of voices and motions and scenes/memories shouting/requiring that he see/hear/touch/know/be NOW until he felt himself fracturing into a hundred selves trying to meet a thousand impossible demands.

*I can't!*

*I can. Let me.*

*How?*

*Let go.*

With a soundless cry, the Sharnn stopped trying to conceive of and thereby become everything at once. There was a time of spinning nausea that seemed endless. When it was over, his body beat with Mim's rhythms and he watched through Mim's eyes. He tried to communicate with her, but lacked the necessary skill. Vertigo returned, overwhelming.

*Don't try to talk to me, unless I miss something vital.*

Wisely, the Sharnn made no attempt to respond to Mim's command. He willed himself into passivity and watched, fascinated, while Mim deftly slid down through the storm of Memned's mind, always down, further and further, until voices faded and memories thinned into raw energy, force and counterforce in the changing yet changeless dance of life.

Something moved toward the play of energy. A tenuous veil spread across it, surrounding, melting, then combining with a fierce crackle of pain that was gone so quickly that it did not even make a memory. The Sharnn's impatience leaped, for he guessed that Mim's mind had finally joined with Memned's.

*Be very still. She is difficult.*

The Sharnn sensed will gathering, shaping into an unavoidable command to remember—

FAEN

And Memned remembered.

*Midnight and white moon racing, tere trees bending in a black wind, moaning and he was waiting for Memned, there, cape fanned in the black wind, bending down and touching her, murmuring Faen's name in tones of hatred darker than wind or night or tere trees bending down.*

The memory slid away before they could see the man's face. Ryth controlled his impatience with difficulty; he sensed that he had seen that man before, in darkness, cape billowing like black laughter.

FAEN

For an instant the three-way intimacy heaved and tossed like an unruly animal while Memned fought Mim's implacable command to focus her flow of memories on Faen. But Mim's greater skill kept Memned under tight control and the restless surges of energy condensed into

FAEN

*A scarlet form more graceful than water, swaying, transforming the simple act of walking into a dance as beautiful as faal-hnim, black eyes watching with hopeless longing and a shadow dragging behind, dark imitation carefully trained but never equal never*

FAEN

*Ebony and silver night, warm as a lover's breath and the sarsa brilliant beneath pouring moons while Faen touched it with a skill that made her shadow weep and flee until he stepped out, black-green eyes blazing, the core of night consuming Memned until she no longer regretted*

*shadow-life lived for him.*

*Even shadows find something like passion. Shadows, like gints, can be more than they seem.*

*FAEN*

*Creamstone and Gold oddly drained, flattened, monotonous, and Faen waiting, brilliant blue-white eyes accusing her, Faen saying its name with disgust curling her perfect lips until they were separate condemnations and Faen's hair like a summer night sweet and warm and as black as Faen's contempt for Memned's shadow life and shadow lover.*

*But shadows can conceal more than they outline. Light and brilliance drained from Faen's eyes and her features slackened, all but the perfect lips that somehow still shaped contempt for shadow Memned who finally stood above, looking down on her unconscious image like looking in a mirror, only better, much better.*

*Laughing as she dropped the tiny dart pistol next to Faen's unconscious beauty. And later*

*FAEN*

*a scream that shattered all hope.*

*WHERE*

*A sickening swirl of purples*

*IS*

*condensed into*

*FAEN*

*lying in deep violet light where tall candles guttered thickly, a room of purple shadows where one shadow lived and laughed and gloried in her superior image screaming just once before the stubborn retreat into self, frustrating all attempts to force a return to consciousness and agony.*

*A single scream. Too thin a revenge, even for a shadow.*

*There would be more deaths later, of course. Vast deaths. A whole planet. But Faen's death was special; it must be as perfect as a flawed imitation could make it.*

*Then the shadow would become substance and Faen would be nothing at all.*

Reality shifted with a sickening lurch. The Sharnn found himself breathing with his own rhythms, seeing with his own eyes.

*Do you have enough, pattern-man?*

*Yes.*

There was a feeling of breathless acceleration, then a sense of being totally alone. Hollow. Conflicting emotions shook him until he slowly expanded into all the abandoned spaces of his mind. And realized that Kayle's hoarse voice was drumming in his ears.

"—hear me? Do you know me? What is your name? Do you know where you are? Can you hear me? Are you—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Sharnn, his voice ragged, as though it had not been used for a long time. He shook his head, flinging off the last of his sensory daze. "I'm all right." Ryth turned on Lekel, who had not moved during the long, long interrogation.

"Where is the violet room?"

Lekel eased Memned onto some cushions and stood without the least sign of stiffness. "It will be easier if I take you there."

Ryth looked at Kayle. "Memned?"

"She'll sleep, as will Mim. And as you should. Let me go to find Faen. Joining minds is far less exhausting than what you did."

"Can you bring Faen out of q?"

"No one can, Ryth. Not even you."

Without a word, the Sharnn turned and started after Lekel. At the first step, the room began to slide into darkness. Ryth caught himself and straightened before Kayle could reach him. The Nendleti said nothing, but his knowing eyes did not miss one sign of the exhaustion that had turned Ryth's muscles to sand.

*\*You would be easy game for Lekel right now, Ryth. Even with your cape.\**

\*Which is why he won't touch me.\*

Kayle watched doubtfully as the Sharnn walked out of the h'kel with uneven strides. But by the time he caught up with Lekel, Ryth's powerful body had restored rhythm, if not grace, to his movements.

The two men walked side by side, saying nothing, not noticing brooding lavender corridors, pools of magenta light framed by amethyst columns wearing the faces of long dead gods. Nor did either man notice startling silver eyes, Maran's eyes, a maroon ikon brooding over the slow dance of violet tapestries turning in the minor wind of two men's passage.

"May I ask?"

Lekel's soft question penetrated the Sharnn's concentration as no loud demand could have.

"You may."

"Did she—my wife—tell you why?"

"Jealousy," said the Sharnn, "and something more. I'm not sure yet. The pattern is still forming."

"I would not have believed Memned capable of taking Faen."

"She wasn't. She shot Faen with a projectile weapon."

Lekel's stride broke and his handsome face settled into lines of darkness. "K'm'n Sandoliki Memned used a projectile weapon?" asked Lekel carefully.

"Yes." The flatness of Ryth's tone left no room for comfort. "Anesthetic or poison darts. Then torture."

"I can't believe—no Malian aristocrat would use—" Lekel bit off his thoughts abruptly. "Is Faen alive?"

"Probably, Memned had planned an elaborate ritual of revenge. She hasn't had time to carry it out."

"K'te kiirey. Ordeal by torture. In that, at least, Memned honors her Malian ancestry."

Ryth said nothing, but the sudden violence that radiated from him made Lekel walk very softly until the end of the corridor was reached.

There," said Lekel, indicating a dark triangular opening to Ryth's right. "There is a special room at the end of the hall. H'kel n'ma sey. The room with no exit."

The Sharnn turned and walked silently into a purple hall. At random intervals lights bloomed behind crystal panels, casting mauve shadows across the way. Exhaustion congealed in the Sharnn, slowing him until only will drove his body toward the flickering maroon light at the end of the triangular hall.

She lay in the center of the small, six-walled room. Her bed was a dais draped with utterly smooth fabric. Candlelight flowed over the drape until it shimmered and pulsed in imitation of life. She looked too pale, too attenuated to be alive, but he sensed the tiny breaths that were too far apart and too shallow to disturb the stillness of her body. Remembering her single scream, he expected to find a ghastly injury, but her skin was as flawless and fine-textured as the drape she lay on.

Beside Faen's head was a small glass table holding delicate instruments whose purpose the Sharnn immediately guessed. His hand lashed out, smashing the table and its contents and opening a long cut across his palm. He quickly looked away from the debris, not wanting to know the instruments' exact patterns, not wanting to conceive of their precise use, for he had promised Memned's flesh to Lekel.

Though the Sharnn knew it was futile and probably dangerous, he could not help calling once to Faen's hidden mind. There was no answer, unless it came as a subtle tightening of her muscles that passed as quickly as a sigh.

The exhaustion Ryth had held at bay finally claimed him; he moved toward her like a man walking under water. Only a Sharnn's will could have forced his cut hand to lift until blood fell like black tears onto her lips. Then the room began to melt and run into impossible purple shapes. With infinite care the Sharnn lay down beside Faen and gathered her against his body. When the sweet scent of her filled his senses, he let everything else spin away into a darkness that knew no shades of purple.

## VII

The Sharnn stirred and woke, tangled in Faen's warmth. She murmured against his skin and stretched languidly. For a startled moment she realized that she was in the torture room of the Kemir Kel,

but then she felt him next to her and relaxed beneath lavender shadows. Though Ryth felt weakness like water in his veins, he pulled her closer. Over his shoulder she saw the shattered table and smashed implements of k'te kiirey. The roughness of his palm and his blood dry on her lips told her what he had done. And then she remembered why she had returned alone to Malia.

"I wanted you to live forever," she whispered. "Laseyss."

He said a Sharnn phrase that had no translation, and she was comforted. With a long sigh she accepted their deaths. Both heard the tapestry slither aside, but neither moved.

"You look like easy meat," Kayle said, letting the tapestry fall back into place.

The Sharnn smiled. "Try me."

Kayle laughed shortly. "You've taught me two things, Ryth. It is fatal to underestimate a Sharnn; and it is impossible to overestimate a Sharnn."

Ryth pulled himself upright. The h'kel became a kaleidoscope of purple tones, spinning and running together.

"I've taught you wrong," said Ryth, laughing weakly.

"I doubt it."

Kayle walked across the room. His rolling, powerful gait was oddly suited to the pale violet light that radiated through the room's mosaic of colored crystal panes. Kayle set the tray he carried within reach of both of them.

"You brought a psi out of terminal q. The Carifil want to know how."

Ryth frowned, trying to remember the moments since he had emerged from Memned's mind. Then he saw Faen's lips and knew.

"His method," said Faen, "would only work between Malian lovers."

"Is that true?"

"Not quite," said the Sharnn. "If the lovers were complements, their race would not matter."

Kayle sighed. "We were afraid it was something like that." His sharp orange eyes went from Ryth's hand to her lips. "Was the blood necessary?"

"We are Malian," said Ryth.

"Are you? Or is she becoming Sharnn?" Kayle smiled at Ryth's startled glance. "Think about it while you eat, pattern-man."

Ryth looked warily at the triangles of food and tall glasses of viscous liquid that Kayle had brought. But when Faen reached for both with a delighted sound, the Sharnn began to eat.

"Lekel said that these were the most concentrated forms of food known to Malians," said Kayle, watching Ryth eat with growing greed. "You'll need your strength. We've got to pry Memned loose from some answers. Without you, we can't really penetrate her indifference."

Ryth grimaced at the thought of re-entering the maelstrom of Memned's mind.

"I don't think we'll have to go all the way in again, Ryth. It's just that we don't know which answers we've found. That is, which questions. Or—"

Kayle hissed a selection of Nendleti phrases that the Sharnn winced to translate.

"You mean," said the Sharnn, "that you don't understand what Memned told us last night?"

"Precisely." Kayle waited impatiently while Faen and the Sharnn licked each other's fingers clean, then drank the last drop of pale turquoise liquid. "Ready?"

Ryth slid off the dais, prepared to catch himself, but the room did not spin away from him. Surprised, he looked at the empty tray with new respect. Faen saw and smiled and said nothing. He curled her hand across his as he took her into his mind and gave her exact memories of what had happened in Memned's mind.

"How much," he asked Kayle, "did you see/hear/feel of what Mim and I found in Memned's mind?"

"All of it."

"The man Memned met beneath the moon and tere trees?"

"Yes."

"I believe that was the Gint."

Faen's hand tightened in his. and she stirred uneasily within his mind. "There were no marks on his

forehead.”

“The light concealed more than it revealed,” said Ryth.

“But,” protested Faen, “even in moonlight, gint flashes like crystal.”

“Two possibilities,” countered the Sharnn. “Either he wore no gint that night, or she does not think of him as gint and therefore literally did not see his marks. Remember, we saw only with her eyes and knew only with her mind. Probably, he was not wearing gint. The alternative requires an integrated act of will that is almost certainly beyond Memned’s capacity.”

“Gint marks are tattooed. Permanent,” insisted Faen.

The Sharnn spoke gently to her, knowing that even to think about gint was disgusting for a Malian. Especially a Sandoliki Ti.

“They are supposed to be, yes. But gint can be painted on and oiled off, n’ies?”

Faen’s shudder of distaste was involuntary and total. “N’ies. But what kind of Malian warrior—no! What kind of creature could endure gint for even a moment?”

Faen’s face twisted at the thought of a Malian who could overcome a cultural trait that was as ingrained as sensuality.

“If that man was the Gint—” prompted Kayle.

“Then he was using Memned,” said Ryth.

“For what?”

“Destroying Malians.”

“But Vintrans are the ones dying.”

“All living things are dying,” the Sharnn said dryly. “Some more quickly than others. As of this moment, all Malians will die before a few Vintrans.”

Faen’s nails pressed against his arm, leaving crescents of pain that she felt the instant he did, as though it were her own arm, not his. She rubbed the marks away, but could not so easily erase the thought of a despised Gint bringing down a proud race of warriors.

“Then you believe the Gint is Vintran?” said Kayle.

“Does it matter?” said Ryth.

“Can you prove that he’s not Malian?” snapped Kayle, impatient with Sharnn evasions.

“Only by inference. Pattern.”

“Not good enough.”

“No.”

The three of them walked silently into a room where Lekel and Mim waited with Memned. Cushions in every tint of purple were scattered through the room and black candles rose like gaunt shadows. As one, both Nendletis withdrew to the cushions nearest the entrance. There they could hear and see everything, as well as guard against intrusions.

The Sharnn looked from Memned to Faen and back again. Even in the brighter light of day, their resemblance was uncanny.

“Come to me,” said the Sharnn.

Not until Memned walked toward them was the difference apparent; she lacked Faen’s perfect grace. When Memned came very close, other differences came into focus. Her profile was slightly less sharp, her eyes were slightly less slanted, more white, and her lips lacked the fullness of Faen’s. Memned’s hair was black, but less brilliant than Faen’s, lacking both the blue and blue-white lights that slid endlessly through Faen’s hair.

Wordlessly, Ryth compared the two women, always to Memned’s detriment. It was not simple prejudice that shaped the Sharnn’s conclusions. Memned was like a master forgery; though superbly executed, she lacked the resonance of the original. It was as though a forger’s skill had stretched her essence beyond its elastic limit. Something about her was subtly wrong.

With a smothered exclamation, the Sharnn stared at Memned even more closely. His intensity was such that she pulled back.

“No,” he said. “Closer.”

With a barely perceptible tremor, Memned obeyed.

“Stand there.”

The Sharnn’s gesture indicated an octagonal window where pale lavender light was so bright that it almost had no color at all. “Lekel.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to touch my prisoner, your wife. I will not—”

“I know, Ti. You won’t hurt her flesh, for it was promised to me.”

Gently, Ryth lifted Faen’s hand out of his. She made no objection; like Ryth, she feared what even vicarious touching of Memned would do.

If Memned objected to being touched, she did not show it. Not once did her lovely, expressionless face change; not once did her lips shift, not even when his finger traced their lines with an almost sensual delicacy.

“Incredible,” he murmured, pushing a mass of black hair aside and lightly kneading his fingertips over her scalp. “Nearly perfect. I didn’t know that such skill—” He stopped abruptly, fingertips pressing against the lower curve of her ears where they met her skull, then just above her hairline again. “Close your eyes.”

Though the Sharnn used no courtesies, his voice was not harsh. Memned closed her eyes and stood without flinching while he tipped her head back and his fingertips traced every aspect of her eyes.

“Yes,” said Lekel as he walked up and stood next to the Sharnn. “She’s undergone reconstructive growth. There were many firestorms in the war. She was in one of them,”

“Is that what she told you?” asked Ryth, his fingertips as light as breath over her skin.

Lekel made a careless gesture. “Perhaps there was an accident, perhaps not. She would not be the first Malian to enhance her beauty; It is a matter of neither great pride nor great shame.” He nearly smiled. “And it was well worth it, n’ies?”

“Such skill,” murmured Ryth, stroking the seamless perfection of Memned’s face. “I didn’t know Malia had such skilled regrowers.”

“Malia doesn’t.” Memned’s flat voice was as deliberately expressionless as her face. The effect, paradoxically, was one of barely restrained violence. “I went to Lirkleml.”

“You must have been badly injured,” said the Sharnn. “Or very wealthy.”

“Neither.”

“What did you look like before you went to Lirkleml? Were you simply ugly?”

“No.” Something flickered deep in her white eyes, a swift change that was gone before it was fully perceived. “I was the most beautiful woman on ... in my country.”

“What did you look like before you went to Lirkleml?” repeated the Sharnn softly, relentlessly.

Darkness flickered like a shadow turning in the center of her eyes. “The same. No real change. The same.”

“No,” said the Sharnn softly, and his fingertips traced each point as he named it. “Your eyes did not tilt quite so much, nor were they so wide. Your ears were slightly larger, set higher. Your chin was less triangular. Your hair was less full and probably another color.” His fingertips stroked her neck and shoulders and breasts. “Shall I go on, Memned?”

The shadow condensed, a point of darkness in her too-pale eyes. But she said nothing.

“Your neck was slightly fuller, and your breasts much fuller.”

“My hips,” she said, interrupting, “were as round as zamay seeds and my back—” She stopped. “Does it matter?”

“What color was your hair?”

“As blue-white as Malia’s sun. And my skin ... my skin was darker than amber and more smooth. My eyes changed color like sarsa crystal.” Her words continued, at odds with her indifferent tone. “When I walked, women envied and men followed. All but one woman and one man.”

“Faen and Lekel.”

“Yes,” said Memned, looking at the Sharnn for the first time. “And he was the one I wanted.”

“So you had yourself regrown in the image of Lekel’s desire.”

Something like pity crossed Faen’s face. She found she could no longer look at Memned or Lekel.

The Sharnn's touch comforted Faen briefly, then was withdrawn.

"I had myself regrown in her image," repeated Memned.

But her voice was subtly hollow now, wrong.

"Was it your idea?"

Memned said nothing. Lekel's hand slowly stroked her arm, an expression like Faen's softening his perfect Malian features. Memned did not acknowledge the gesture with as much as a glance. It was as though Lekel did not exist, the h'kel did not exist, nothing existed but the soft-voiced Sharnn and his compelling eyes as green as hers were white.

"Was regrowth your idea?" repeated Ryth.

"Yes."

"No." The Sharnn smiled sadly. "No, Memned. You loved yourself then. Who asked you to die and be reborn a shadow of Faen?"

Memned's lips turned down briefly, then straightened into their former expressionless line.

"It was necessary."

"For whom? Who sent you to Lirnklem?"

"No one. Myself."

"A man?"

"No one."

"The Gint."

"No."

"You died for a shadow, Memned, a shadow who could not conceive of—"

Memned laughed suddenly, an eerie rising sound that stopped his words. "You are wrong," she whispered. "So wrong. He is more than a shadow."

"Who," said Ryth, a flick of scorn in his voice, "is this nameless paragon wearing the marks of cowardice?"

"You'll know his name just before you die!"

"I won't care then," said Ryth. "You've told me what I already knew. The man who made you a shadow of life is the same man who flaunts gint."

Malevolence suddenly radiated from Memned with the clarity of a scream. "That's a small victory, dead man!"

Her eyes changed, and her self-control broke between one breath and the next. Lekel's hands tightened on her arms, for he sensed she would spring on the Sharnn and force her own destruction. She seethed at the strength restraining her, twisted in his grip, then became very still, only her shattered white eyes alive, moving.

"But why?" said Faen. "Why Vintra? I can understand that you would enjoy peeling me from life one scream at a time—but Vintra?"

"You ask?" Memned said, with a sideways glance at Lekel that was more chilling than her smile. "You, who declared Ti Vire on an entire planet?"

She smiled again, but refused to look at Faen; had refused to look at her from the moment Faen had entered the room. The Sharnn had an eerie feeling that Memned really did not see Faen at all, for shadows could not see substance.

"The Ti Vire," said Faen carefully, "was not the same as what you have done to Vintra."

"No," agreed Memned, smiling blindly at the purple fall of light beyond Lekel's strong hands. "My Ti Vire is better. Mine will be a total success. My name," she said, her voice thinning and climbing, "will live longer than yours, longer than Maran's, longer than any Malian name or any—" She stopped abruptly and began to hum to herself.

"Not the same at all," said Lekel hoarsely, beginning at last to understand what his obsession with Faen had cost Memned, himself, Malia. "Faen and Maran fought for the thousand moments of their people. You—" His voice hesitated and they watched him change, withdraw, recede before their eyes. "You have killed your people, Memned. All but a few of our moments are gone. Only one sra ti, one great moment is left to us."

“Death,” hummed Memned, more to herself than in answer to the man she no longer saw.

“That pleases you?” asked the Sharnn.

Memned looked at him in a restless movement of white.

“Death pleases every shadow.”

“Just death? Any death?”

“The enemy’s death,” she murmured, then hummed and looked at her fingertips as though they were fascinating new growths.

“Who is the enemy?”

The Sharnn’s question went through Memned like a shockwave. When it passed, so did the shattered look in her eyes. They were clouded now, nearly opaque.

“Who is the enemy?” repeated Ryth softly.

She looked at him as though he were an apparition. “Enemy?” she inquired politely, tonelessly. “I have no enemies. Merely friends who left before I was born. And after.”

The Sharnn balanced her enigmatic answer in his mind for a long moment. He sensed something vital buried in her hauntingly irrational response, but the core of meaning eluded him.

Memned hummed softly to herself, sending uneasy chills through everyone who heard. Ryth looked at Kayle and both silently thanked their separate gods that she had not gone insane while they were in her mind. Faen listened, flesh stirring, to Memned’s distorted yet familiar melody, a tune she recognized but could not name.

“It’s time for you to leave,” suggested Ryth softly. “You don’t want to be here when Malia dies.”

“Leave?” Memned said, tilting her head as though listening to a distant voice.

“Yes,” murmured the Sharnn, leaning closer to her until his lips nearly touched hers. “He’s waiting for you on Vintra.”

“Do you know him?” she asked, looking vaguely around, never quite seeing any of the people who stood near her. “He isn’t here now. He told me I was more beautiful than ... I believed him once ...” Memned made an oddly hopeless gesture. “Didn’t I? Did I believe?” She looked imploringly at a spot just over Ryth’s shoulder where nothing but purple light moved. “Do shadows believe?”

The Sharnn’s face twisted but his voice remained steady, compelling. “Ask him. He’ll remember.”

Memned’s face cleared. She smiled with a child’s uncomplicated delight. “Oh, yes! He’s so good. He knows everything.”

Memned tried to walk forward, but was stopped by Lekel’s grip. She neither turned nor spoke, just waited. With a small sound, Lekel released his wife. She stepped out from between his hands as though nothing had ever held her. Lekel stood and watched her graceful back for a long moment. Then he slowly lowered his hands. Ryth thought he heard Lekel call out, but the Malian’s handsome face never changed and Ryth could not be sure.

They followed Memned’s progress through shifting purple tones; a shadow in billowing pink robes, soundless and swift, hurrying toward a child’s answers, answers that would irrevocably condemn the adult, for if she led them to a secret Access, Lekel could no longer doubt that she had conspired to kill a planet. Memned paused only once, to push against a mauve wall until a section turned on a concealed pivot. She all but ran down a narrow passageway into a circular h’kel. Such hidden rooms were common in all kels, for Malians understood the rewards of seclusion. But Lekel looked at the wall with a startled expression on his face; it was obvious that he had known nothing of this h’kel, much less the Access which shed such clear blue light over the center of the room. He watched his wife with dark intensity, but neither his face nor his body revealed what he was thinking.

Then Lekel leaped toward Memned. His hand snaked out and wrapped around her wrist with a force that made her body jerk. She pulled away once, hard, then stood as passively as a tethered animal. After a moment, she began to hum again, a tune that Faen could name now, a song it was forbidden to sing on Malia. Maran’s Song.

Ryth went immediately to the Access controls, never forgetting that Malia’s life might be as short as their next breath. The controls were a combination of standard Concord and hastily-rigged Malian textures that baffled him.



“Have you further need of her answers, Sandoliki Ti Ryth?” asked Lekel with a respectful gesture.

“No,” muttered the Sharnn absently, his mind focused on the puzzle of the controls. “I’ll let the Concord Council question her.” He looked up, beyond Lekel’s shoulder. “Faen, have you ever used controls like—No!”

The Sharnn leaped, but too late. The edge of Lekel’s hand met Memned’s neck with a clean snap; she was dead before she fell across her husband’s outstretched arm. Sharnn curses grated like sand between Ryth’s teeth, but he made no move against Lekel. In Malian terms, Lekel’s action was both inevitable and admirable.

“No,” snapped the Sharnn, gesturing curtly to Kayle. “My carelessness killed her as surely as Lekel’s blow. I was too concerned with the Access to realize that I was speaking her death sentence.” A bitter phrase twisted his mouth. “Lekel owes nothing to the Council. Certainly not Memned’s life.”

Kayle stepped back, breathing slowly until the tension oozed out of his body. A look of defeat settled onto his lined face.

“I understand,” he said, gesturing toward the dead woman, “but will the Council? Everything we’ve seen and heard only hangs Malia higher, tighter. We can’t prove even now that she was a—“

\*Quiet!\* The Sharnn’s mental command scored across Kayle’s mind. Then, much more gently, \*Lekel will try to kill you if you call Memned a Vintran.\*

\*But he killed her himself! He knows she was at least the most despicable kind of traitor, if not an enemy born and schooled.\*

\*Lekel is Sandoliki. It is his duty to kill anyone—anyone—who calls questions upon the Sandoliki name.\*

\*Even when the questions are answered by irrefutable truth?\*

\*Especially then.\*

\*I don’t understand.\* Kayle looked at Memned; her sightless white eyes reflected a different reality. \*And I don’t want to.\*

“She earned her death,” said Faen, guessing what lay behind Kayle’s unwinking orange eyes.

“But she died too soon!” Kayle gestured abruptly to Mim. “We have a Council to convince, sri Mim.”

Mim’s whole body registered doubt, but she stepped onto the Access platform next to him. “They have already decided.”

“Yes.”

The Nendletis waited with outward patience while Faen deciphered the hybrid controls.

“Two-way,” she said, looking up. “Vintra only.”

“To a major Access?” asked Kayle.

“Yes.”

“Praise gaimo,” muttered Kayle, “Ready!”

Faen’s hand swept down and the two Nendletis vanished in a blaze of pure blue energy. She turned and looked at Lekel. He stood unmoving, Memned’s dead weight unnoticed in his arms, his dark eyes as unseeing as hers. Then Faen realized that Lekel had almost loved his shadow wife. She reached out in impulsive t’sil’ne before she remembered what it would cost. Her hand fell to her side.

“You are blessed,” Faen said gently. “You had no children to die between your hands.”

Lekel’s eyes slowly focused on Faen. “Yes. I am blessed.” With a weary gesture he closed Memned’s white eyes.

The Sharnn looked from Faen to Lekel and knew a moment of horror when he understood the meaning of Faen’s words: Memned’s crime against her people was so great that the punishment would not end with her; it would extend to her blood kin of the first degree. Lekel must kill them all. Memned, her parents, her sisters and brothers, her children. His own.

“Blessed,” Lekel whispered as he kissed Memned’s eyelids, lips and hands in ceremonial farewell. Then he let her slide away to lie floor, a huddle of rose cloth surrounded by shades of purple. “She told me her parents died in the war and she had neither sisters nor brothers. Doubly blessed.”

The k’m’n Sandoliki stood motionless for a long moment, drawing himself inward, concentrating on

what had to be done.

“Will they,” Lekel said finally, indicating the empty platform, “be able to help Malia?”

The Sharnn’s body moved in a gesture of ambivalence that needed no words.

“I see.” Lekel turned toward Faen. I have no right to ask anything of you, Ti, but I do.”

Faen waited, pale eyes unreadable, body poised as though for battle or flight.

“Find the Gint for me, Ti. His flesh is mine.”

Faen looked away from Lekel to where Ryth stood, dark and silent, waiting for something only a Sharnn could name.

“The Gint’s flesh is yours,” agreed Ryth slowly, “but his answers belong to Sharnn. To me.”

Lekel made a swift motion that seemed to cast away Memned’s body, the alien Access, the twisting purple shadows. “Why?” he asked, his voice shadowed by pain in spite of his Malian control “Why?”

“No,” said Faen quickly, cutting across what could have been a Sharnn’s answer. “Ti Lekel, I will speak with the truth of your own pulse ... if you let me.”

“You have never called me Ti.” His dark eyes searched her face, but what he sought was not there, could never be there. He accepted her compassion with a wisdom that was born when Memned’s neck broke beneath his hand. “Speak as my pulse would, Ti Faen. I will not challenge the beat of truth.”

“Ryth was in her mind,” said Faen, not using Memned’s name, for to do so would be to call her shadow. “Mindlink is a moment rarely known by Malians, but it exists nonetheless. Do you believe my words?”

Unconsciously, Lekel touched his forehead where pain had exploded at a single look from a Sharnn.

“I believe.”

“The Sharnn saw her memories with her own eyes—tere and zamay, night and wind, Cream-stone and Gold.”

“I believe.”

“Tere leaves were the scarlet of flowing blood, zamay like my eyes at dawn and the night wind tasted of desire.”

“I believe.”

“All that and more she saw, felt, tasted. But in the crescent room, she saw only four of the thirty-nine shades of cream.”

Lekel stared off into a distance that existed only in his mind. There, memories and desires and regrets locked in painful battle. Not once did he look at the dead woman lying at his feet, for she existed now only in his mind and in those few of the thousand moments they had shared.

“As blind as a Vintran,” Lekel whispered to himself. “She and I together. Blind.”

His eyes focused again on the living woman who had cast a living shadow. The resemblance was so great that his throat closed around feelings he could never acknowledge, for his dead wife was surely a Vintran.

“I believe.”

For many moments, only purple shadows moved, coiling and reforming with each shift of tapestry and light. Lekel watched without seeing, watched as though he would never see again. Then his eyes focused on the Sharnn.

“The Gint’s answers are yours, Ti. They have always been yours, haven’t they? May they comfort you more than my answers comforted me.”

“I am honored,” said the Sharnn.

Lekel laughed curtly. “By a Malian without eyes?”

Faen flinched and looked away from the ruins of a pride she could have loved and once had hated and now would have to remember until she saw his moment of death and he became a shadow whose name she could never call.

The Sharnn heard her call Lekel’s name in her mind and took one step that brought him closer to both of them.

“Vintrans were Malian once,” Ryth said over Faen’s silent cry. His eyes, strangely luminous against the shadows, compelled Lekel’s attention, as did the cape swirling, alive with light. “What shame is there

in marrying a woman who once was a Malian?"

Anger hardened the k'm'n Sandoliki's face, then anger drained into humility. "I've earned your mockery."

"I am not mocking you." The Sharnn's eyes were like shattered green crystal in the thick light. "It is your guilt toward Vintrans that makes you despise them. Vintrans are no less than Malians. Had your dead wife been raised under this culture, this sun, she would have learned minute discriminations among tints and tones. But she was not, did not and so you who have been blessed count your thousand moments and despise her few."

"You hate Vintrans because you know that you, too, could be twisted and flattened into Vintra's limited mold."

"Never! Malians are—"

"No different!" The Sharnn leaned forward, poised, and his cape hissed, underlining each word. "There is no irrevocable genetic difference between Vintrans and Malians. They are the same!"

Faen looked from one to the other, trying not to think about the truth of Ryth's words, for she was Malian, and the best she could feel for Vintrans was pity. Yet she knew the Sharnn was right, there was no real difference, none, and part of her wept for the shadow lives of all Vintrans.

Lekel stood braced as though to receive more blows. He turned to Faen almost imploringly, but there was no comfort in her pale turquoise eyes, no shelter from the truth. She sketched a t'sil'ne phrase in the air between them.

"The Sharnn is right," she said softly.

Only Ryth sensed the cost of those four words, only he knew of the silent tearing deep within her as she acknowledged blood kinship with a people she loathed.

Lekel had no response to her truth. He had learned too much, too quickly, and none of it pleasing. The present had more cutting edges than a m'vire, and the future promised worse, but the past—the past was his, always, unchanged and unchanging, charged with the Malian imperative of darg vire.

"You will lead me to the Gint, n'ies?"

Faen stretched out her hand, stopped just short of touching. "N'ies. I will lead you." It was the only comfort she had to offer, for the k'm'n Sandoliki had lost more today than even she could find. "N'ies, Ti Lekel."

The Sharnn's body jerked and his hands flew to his temple. "His hair," grated Ryth. "Do you still have the Gint's hair?"

"Yes," answered Faen. "Why—"

"The Access. Both of you. Now!"

"But—" began Lekel.

The Sharnn swept both of them onto the platform. Blue energy leaped up to meet them, surrounding them with cold light. Deep inside their bodies something lurched once, twice, and they fell/soared for an endless instant until the galaxy shimmered and spat them out on a distant Access platform.

"Regrets, k'm'n Sandoliki," said the Sharnn, releasing Lekel. "We had little time."

"And you used every bit of it," said Kayle, walking into the room. His mahogany skin glowed richly in the pale tangerine light of an alien sun. "You're a hard man to reach, Sharnn. Seven mindlinked Carifil barely dented your awareness." He looked at Faen and Lekel disapprovingly. "Ryth insisted that you finish your discussion/argument/realization without being disturbed."

The Sharnn smiled slightly, but his eyes were cold. "The moment was Malian. They either understood Memned's nature then or not at all." He glanced around the room, assessing its shape, the style of its furnishings, and, most of all, the distinctive quality of its light. "Centrex."

Kayle stared at the Sharnn, wondering how Ryth could recognize a planet he had never seen before.

"And that," Ryth added, looking at a transparent cube that was taller than he, "must be the Carifil omnisynt." "

"One of them," agreed Kayle. "How did you know?"

"There's no other way Faen can track the Gint."

"Your logic eludes me," sighed Kayle. "The omnisynt's major function is information synthesis. Its

minor function is coordinating the Accesses.”

“I know.” Ryth glanced around once more, then asked, “The Council?”

“Fighting Vintra’s representative. Even now, molecular fire is poised.” Kayle looked uneasily at Lekel. “If the Council knew that both Malian Sandolikis were off-planet—”

“If the Council knew anything at all,” said Ryth coldly, “it would not matter where the Sandolikis were.”

Kayle snapped his fingers. “It would have been easier with Memned alive. Once she admitted to them that she was—” He stopped and looked warily at Lekel.

Lekel gestured curtly. “She was Vintran.”

“You knew?” hissed Kayle. “You knew and didn’t suspect that she was undermining Malia by seeming to destroy Vintra?”

“I knew nothing, then,” Lekel said with deadly quiet. “I refused to see beyond her resemblance to Faen. I was a willing fool.”

Kayle’s skepticism was plain. “Is it possible for a Malian to make such a mistake in discrimination?”

The Sharnn laughed softly. “Possible? It’s inevitable. If you believe that every Vintran is somehow as clearly marked as gint in sunlight, then you will certainly fail to identify Vintrans when you meet them on Malia, without marks.”

“I wish the Council believed that. But they believe Malia’s representative and she insists that a Malian could not marry a Vintran.”

“Not knowingly,” agreed the Sharnn.

Kayle’s body rippled in an expressive gesture of angry frustration. “Nor can the Council believe that a Malian can’t recognize a Vintran?”

“Would they believe me?” asked Faen. “Or Lekel?”

Kayle’s eyes deepened into burnt orange. “No, sri Faen. They assume you will say anything to survive.”

Faen radiated sudden danger, like a beast crouching and switching its tail. But her voice was uninflected and smooth.

“I do not lie or cringe or lick dirty fingers for a few more moments of life. Nor does Ti Lekel. We are Sandolikis.”

“The Concord Council,” said Kayle tiredly, “won’t believe—” He stopped, appalled at what he saw leap inside her pale eyes. “

“The Concord Council will believe whatever comforts them,” said Ryth, touching Faen with a sliding caress that stilled the wildness behind her eyes. “But I ... suggest ... that Malia not be destroyed before we find the Gint.”

Though the Sharnn did not say or do anything, Kayle felt suddenly chilled. “Is that a threat?” he asked bluntly.

Ryth smiled like a Sharnn and said nothing.

Faen’s thin question separated the uneasy silence. “How much time does Malia have?”

Reluctantly, Kayle looked away from the Sharnn. “No one knows. Carifil—and a few Council members—are fighting against Vintran demands.”

“And losing,” Ryth added coolly.

With a motion that belled his umber robes, Kayle swung back to face the Sharnn. “Yes. Primary proscription was enforced earlier than we had expected.”

“But you’re not surprised,” said Lekel, contempt lacing his voice. “Malia is not well liked among Concord planets.”

Kayle turned so that he faced both the Sharnn and the k’m’n Sandoliki. “If Malia had not been so closed to the Concord, you would have been given much more tolerance. And time! It is easier to kill strangers than to kill a people you have lived among, shared laughter and salt and children—”

“Galactics,” interrupted Lekel calmly, “have no moments worth a Malian’s time.”

“A matter of opinion,” said Kayle curtly.

“Only to a Galactic.”

Kayle hissed his anger. “Has nothing penetrated your arrogance? Don’t you know that—”

“Enough,” said Faen coldly, remembering when purple shadows had coiled and choked Lekel with unwanted knowledge. “By what right do you demand a Sandoliki’s moment of humility?”

“I am trying to help.”

“Then get your foot off his throat!”

“I never thought to live the moment,” murmured Lekel, turning to her, “when the Sandoliki Ti Faen stood with her back to mine, fighting my attacker.” He made a flowing gesture of gratitude that was as graceful as his tone was bitter. “The moment was almost worth the discoveries that preceded it, Faen. Almost.”

“I regret,” said Faen softly, her voice husky with then-futile past, “much that has happened between us, Ti Lekel.”

“But,” Lekel said, without accusation, “you would change none of it.”

“I am what I am. Even now, I cannot touch you.”

Lekel closed his eyes; his handsome face seemed to blur, then settled into new planes of acceptance. “And I regret—ah, little sister, how much I regret!—that moment when I tried to force you. Had I not driven you off Malia—”

Lekel held out his hands, palms up, mutely asking forgiveness. Without hesitation, Faen stretched out her hands, palms down over his, so close but not touching the warmth of his flesh.

“I once blamed you for what I had become,” Faen said, “for cutting me off from my shared Malian moments. But a Sharnn taught me that what I became was as inevitable as dawn.” She searched Lekel’s perfect Malian face with eyes that were ice blue in the alien light. “I will give you the Gint, older brother. It’s all that I can give you.”

Ryth felt the regret in her voice and would have touched her, but the only touch that could have eased her sorrow was Lekel’s, and that touch was beyond bearing. He watched her slim hands hover just over the long fingers and hard wrists of a man she had almost hated and nearly loved.

As though at an unseen signal, their hands slowly moved apart. At the last instant, Faen allowed one fingertip to brush the pulse beating beneath the skin of Lekel’s wrist. So great was her control that only Ryth knew the anguish that exploded through her at the touch. Then, as though she had done nothing extraordinary, Faen turned and spoke calmly to the Sharnn.

“I’ll need maps.”

Ryth indicated the tall cube with a glance. “That’s the known galaxy in three dimensions. All you need is a guide.”

“That’s not a room computer,” said Kayle dryly. “It is incredibly complex. Five linked Carifil—” Kayle stopped, then snapped, “Have you used an omnisynt before?”

“No,” said the Sharnn. Then, smiling. “All my life.”

“Sharnn is another word for impossible!” Kayle said with a sound of disgust. “All right, pattern-man, I won’t even give you a single suggestion about the ways to use an omnisynt.”

“And you hope it scrambles my brains.”

“It can’t scramble what isn’t there. When you’ve failed, I’ll link you to the five who might be able to help you.”

Ryth laughed softly. “Be ready to shut down Accesses, my skeptical friend.”

Faen waited, apparently not hearing, showing neither fear nor anticipation in her pale eyes, merely the patience of a predator. In her hands was the misa bag she had taken from a pocket in her turquoise robe. The crimson bag seemed to shimmer and burn in the alien light of Centrex. She watched, slowly turning the bag on its cord, as the Sharnn went to a small, sharply curved alcove close to the transparent cube. The alcove walls were translucent and absolutely flawless. Behind them was part of the omnisynt’s machinery, only a small part, for the omnisynt ran beneath the planet’s crust like a tideless sea.

There were neither wires nor attachments in the alcove, simply an allform chair covered by totally light-absorbent cloth. All of the Sharnn’s contact with, and all of his control over, the omnisynt would come from an energy net created between himself and the machine.

Ryth sat in the chair and waited until it adjusted into a semi-reclining position that did not inhibit his

view of the cube. When he was so comfortable that he no longer was aware of his body, light began seeping into the alcove. First came the long wavelengths, colors so dark they were heard as much as seen.

Yet Kayle knew by the rapid progression through the spectrum that the omnisynth was satisfied that Ryth's eyes were discriminating among colors that did not exist for any but the Malian race of man. Kayle glanced at Faen, at her rapt face and motionless body, and he realized that she was inside the Sharnn, seeing with his eyes ... or he with hers. Or even both, a fusion of complements that created new abilities and insights.

"They're together, aren't they?" said Lekel quietly.

"Such a small word for what—yes, they're together."

"That's a moment I'll never know."

"Not with Faen," agreed Kayle softly.

"Not with any woman."

"You have many maturities to search."

"Many maturities." Lekel's lips twisted in what could have been a smile. "And no more moments."

The cube blazed with a soundless tumult of colors, colors sleeting across all visible squares and shards of light that had no name in any language. Kayle started for the alcove, then realized that whatever he could do was too late. He looked from Ryth to Faen, but saw nothing on their faces, neither agony nor pleasure nor even the least awareness that the silent explosion of colors had been unusual. The only difference he saw was that the Gint's hair now was out of the silk bag and tangled between Faen's fingers.

Kayle muttered the eighteen names of a Nendleti god, and stared intently at the cube. After many long minutes of watching colors run and leap and pour over shapes half-melted, barely revealed, Kayle quit trying to make sense of the omnisynth's display.

At that moment a man's masked face shimmered in the cube. Gint marks flashed and black-green eyes seemed to see through the universe into a single room lit by the radiance of a Malian fused with a Sharnn. Both Lekel and Kayle unconsciously assumed a fighting stance in response to the message in the Gint's restless eyes. Then the Gint faded, leaving only a nebulous glow of gint marks and the memory of malevolence condensed into two staring eyes.

Kayle could not control a primal shudder, but Lekel leaned forward, fingers outstretched and curving, yearning for his enemy with a desire greater than any lover's.

"Not Vintra," said Faen, her voice oddly changed, almost doubled, as though she spoke through two throats to make a sound like the echo of harmony. "Not Malia. He is—"

The colors in the cube pulsed and twisted, impressionistic, suggestive, surreal, evoking desiccation and brittle cold and black sky ablaze with a billion perfect stars. Along the side of the cube closest to the Sharnn, numbers appeared, more densely packed than stars, each number a Concord planet code.

"Magenta sun ... like a sea lapping horizons ... sunrise at the end of time."

Even as magenta light washed through the cube, numbers vanished, planets whose sun was not the exact color seen by Faen/Ryth and the timeshadow memory of the Gint.

Kayle watched numbers vanish with each impression/evocation of temperature and wind and gravity and pressure. Without looking away, he unwrapped his re-focused psitran and smoothed it into place. When the numbers diminished to thirty, he silently alerted the Carifil who were going to pursue the Gint with Faen/Ryth's unwitting help. Through Kayle's eyes the Carifil watched, poised, waiting for a single number to remain on the face of the omnisynth.

Eight numbers.

"—black ice streaked by the crushed bones of long dead animals and sand like powdered tere in moonlight—"

Seven numbers.

"—small, so small, and perfect. Like silk and zamay petals soft-slippery, growing low—"

Five.

"—and smelling of sunlight trapped millennia ago, a whole living floor tight with spines—"

Even as a number faded, the cube convulsed with colors.

“Gone. Away. So far, aggh!”

Faen jerked and staggered.

“Heavy!” she groaned. “Too—”

Numbers flashed, only to be lost in another convulsion of colors. Faen muttered and forms condensed, exploded and condensed again. Kayle swore in the hissing phrases of Nendlet.

“He’s jumping all over the kerdin galaxy,” snapped Kayle in answer to Lekel’s fierce question. “How could he know? How?”

But no one answered, for the only Sharnn in the room was immersed in the omnisynth and had not heard.

“Four,” murmured Kayle. “Five.”

Colors pulsed, slowed, began to condense into forms. Then the forms shattered into yet more colors.

“Six.” Kayle’s muscles bunched. “He’s got to be near his limit.”

The light in the room flared through every possible mutation of yellow.

“Seven.”

And every manifestation of green.

“Eight I don’t—”

And blue.

“Incredible!”

Slowly, other colors seeped into the cube, other sensory impressions. Lekel glanced impatiently at Kayle.

“What—”

“The Gint went through nine Access shifts,” interrupted Kayle without looking away from the cube. “Now his synapses are overloaded. He’s resting on some planet.”

Lekel smiled slowly. “Soon his flesh will be mine.”

“Maybe. If his recovery time is fast, he’ll jump before we identify the planet.”

“And then?”

Broken rainbows bled thickly over the half-shape, half-shadow of a man.

“We wait until he clogs his synapses again—and hope we’re faster than his recovery.”

“How long?” demanded Lekel.

Slowly, two dark ellipses condensed in the cube, two black-green shapes almost like eyes.

“I don’t know,” hissed Kayle impatiently. “It depends on his strength. And theirs!”

For the first time since Faen had touched him, Lekel looked at her. His Malian glance detected fine lines of strain around her blue-white eyes and perfect lips, but he could not see if Ryth was similarly affected; the Sharnn was all but concealed by the radiance that twisted through the alcove. With a last long look at Faen, Lekel turned back to the cube.

“How,” said Lekel, low-voiced, “did the Gint know he was being followed?”

Irritation and strain made Kayle’s naturally husky voice almost raw. “I don’t know. I don’t seem to know anything important, least of all how Ryth or Faen or Ryth/Faen have turned that omnisynth into a magic window!” Kayle made a sharp sound of frustration. “Regrets, Ti Lekel. You aren’t the only one asking me questions.”

Eyes, wholly black now, restlessly searching, sliding over the people in the room as though they were invisible.

“—hot-orange dust—and cinnamon-tasting-oily air, sticking, rolling—”

Colors jerked and ran together as the Gint made yet another Access shift.

“We think,” said Kayle slowly, sorting through the many voices in his mind, “that the Gint has enough psi to know that he is being followed, but not enough to know that the pursuit is mental.”

“So?”

“So the Gint is wearing himself out with multiple Access shifts—”

Silver bubbled up and shattered into lime triangles streaked with ice.

“—when one shift at a time, then a rest—”

Pale sand with golden spheres melting into crescents that drained into mocha ..

“—would work just as well.”

Like pictures snapping through a child’s learning wheel, colors flickered and changed.

“Seven,” Kayle said. “Remarkable stamina.”

“He’ll wear out his reflexes.”

“All the easier for us.”

“I don’t want him weakened,” hissed Lekel. “I wouldn’t touch an enemy who was less than whole.”

“Don’t worry,” interrupted Kayle angrily when colors whirled yet again. “His recovery time is as extraordinary as his stamina. By the moment they corner him, if they corner him, the Gint will be rested and ready to fight.”

What Kayle did not say was that nine Carifil would reach the Gint first.

Lekel murmured a Malian phrase and smiled. “It will be satisfying to carve permanent gint marks on his forehead.”

Reds surged, peaked and washed back in a slow fountain of pulsing color. Drops flew away, darkened, ran into viscous pools of black, two pools, eyes straining outwards toward an enemy sensed but never seen.

“Light,” said Faen/Ryth’s voice, speaking another man’s perceptions, “so light floating and-my-head-so-light!”

A masked face appeared, blurred; neither alien backdrop nor numbers identifying planets accompanied it.

“What’s wrong?” said Lekel.

“Probably his nervous system is too overloaded to respond to anything less than an extreme environment. And what he doesn’t sense, she can’t relay. Or,” added Kayle grudgingly, “Faen could be tiring. Or Ryth.” He stared as though he could will the cube into focus. “No one has ever used the omnisynth this long, or with such excruciating finesse. If only—”

“Yes?” urged Lekel softly.

“If only she could tolerate a mesh,” said Kayle with a harshness that surprised Lekel. “We have Carifil who could pour strength into her. Into them.”

“She is a Sandoliki. She will endure until the enemy is dead.”

Kayle made a cutting gesture. “They both already have endured more than either of us could guess.”

“Of course,” said Lekel calmly. “They are the Sandolikis Ti.”

Suddenly, gint slashes radiated out from the center of the cube. His tightly masked face focused into rectangles and squares dominated by penetrating eyes.

“—blue.”

Colors jerked once, twice, three times; his eyes appeared again, glazed, unable to see beyond half-open lids, the eyes of a man exhausted or utterly mad. For long minutes there were only those eyes and spinning colors that slowly congealed into outlines suggesting clouds or ocean waves.

“Thin and dry,” Faen/Ryth said, echo of harmony, haunting. “Moonstones and wind calling through white amber vines.”

The cube became tone on tone of white and near-white, beige and cream and sand and the Gint standing like a shadow against the pale land. Down one face of the cube, numbers appeared, as thick as the sensations flooding over the Gint.

\*—sweet-musk-and-lightning-smoke—\*

No numbers vanished, for even an omnisynth and a Sharnn could not penetrate with any certainty the truth inside the Gint’s sensory storm. The voice of Faen/Ryth became ragged, dissonance instead of harmony, eerie and oddly moving.

“Tired. Rest. Just one moment. Smell sun-smoke hurts.”

Half the numbers vanished. Kayle’s breath hissed with expectation and Lekel’s body flexed, but neither spoke, for neither wanted to miss the words spoken by her/his frayed and lovely voice.

Blue-white light sleeted through the cube as the unknown planet’s sun appeared from behind a passing ice cloud. The Gint’s eyes winced shut, but Faen/Ryth had already seen more than either could



put into words.

“Sun. So potent. To live flattened beneath that brutal light.”

More numbers winked out. The face of the cube was not crowded anymore.

“And the smell of lightning over a city made of glass.”

All but fifteen numbers vanished.

“Sliding wind song, higher, always higher, keening while white birds soar with black beaks open to the sky.”

Thirteen numbers.

“Cold and thin like high mountain air, but the glass city is low, crouched between plain and white-rolling sea.”

Six numbers.

“Saffron river, rigid above and coiling below, fanning through pale tundra and the sweet-musk-lightning smell of crushed vine, a perfume like no other—”

The cube went black as all but a single number faded. With a ragged sigh, Faen let the Gint’s golden hair drift to the floor. As though she were wading through syrup, she went to the alcove, where iridescent light no longer played. She knelt and laid her forehead against Ryth’s arm. He neither moved nor spoke. Nor did he have to; their minds were still one.

Silently, Kayle demanded to know what had happened. He met a wall of resistance that he knew could not be breached. “Sharnn!” he cried. “Do you have him?”

“Yes ...”

“Where?” demanded Kayle.

“Where they make the most exquisite perfume in the galaxy.”

“Zamir!”

The Sharnn laughed hoarsely, as though his body had had all the humor squeezed out of it. But his voice spoke of strength returning. “Zamir,” he agreed.

Ryth and Faen flexed their bodies, restoring circulation with the subtle rhythms of faal-hnim. To Kayle’s critical eye, it was clear that both of them were drained by their manipulation of the omnisynth and the timeshadow of the Gint’s mind. But even as Kayle watched, their movements became more integrated, more fluid.

“How long,” asked Kayle quietly, “before you’ll both be able to identify the exact location of the Gint on Zamir? The Carifil tell me that there are at least twelve personnel Accesses on the planet, as well as excellent surface transportation. The longer we wait, the further from an Access he can run.”

The Sharnn seemed unconcerned. With no haste, he and Faen and Lekel walked to the Access platform. While Kayle waited for them to mount, a feeling of unease grew in him. Then he realized that they were standing together, and he guessed the truth.

“You aren’t going to let me come, are you?” Kayle asked tightly.

“No one and no thing can get off Zamir by Access,” said the Sharnn calmly. “And only three people can get on. Regrets, Ti Kayle.”

“Why?” Kayle said angrily. “Why won’t you let us help?”

“You have. You will again,” said the Sharnn. “But first, Lekel must have his moment.”

“You’re insane. If Lekel should miscalculate and kill the Gint before he talks to the Council, Malia is lost! You’re betting an entire planet on one man’s skill.”

“I know.” The Sharnn’s voice was hard. He made a gesture of odd helplessness and said too softly, “But not the man you think.”

“And you do it anyway,” hissed Kayle. “Why?”

Faen turned with a suddenness that fanned her turquoise robes. For the hundredth time, Kayle realized that she was a Malian—and even more dangerous than that, a Sandoliki.

“It is Ryth’s kirl gift to me.”

Kayle stared at her, unbelieving.

“A marriage present? You asked a planet for a marriage present?” He turned back to Ryth. “I can believe the arrogance of a Malian Sandoliki in asking, but I can’t believe the arrogance of a Sharnn in

giving! What right do you have to risk a planet as a gift?"

Lekel's voice, cool and amused, cut across the silence. "Why should it matter to you who risks Malia? Or why? Your beloved Concord condemns Malia to kh'vire'ni, death without honor, and you spread your hands in acceptance. Yet when the Sandoliki Ti Ryth offers Malia kh'vire, you wail like a gutted skavern."

Kayle's orange eyes moved over the three of them, then centered angrily on Ryth. "Are you sure, Sharnn? Is there a pattern in this beyond disaster?"

"There are always patterns, even beyond disaster."

But the flatness of Ryth's voice gave Kayle no comfort. Faen touched the Sharnn's wrist with a delicate fingertip. "Kayle cannot understand, laseyss. Malia is ours to risk, not the Concord's. Ours to destroy. Ours to create. That is the meaning of each Malian moment."

Her fingers lifted and moved in liquid t'sil'ne that almost caressed the Malian perfection of Lekel's body.

"If I could accept your seed, Sandoliki Ti Lekel," she said softly, her voice resonant with echoes of ancient ritual, "I would, duty and pleasure combined that your greatness not be lost to generations unknown."

Lekel's face changed as he tried to conceal what her words gave back to him. And then he smiled as though for the first time, or the last, and Kayle stared unbelieving; he had not known that a man could be so beautiful

"I release you from all duties, little sister," said Lekel, his voice like zamay. "All our moments are numbered, all named. When we meet again, it will be for the first time."

Lekel's fingers flickered through a t'sil'ne phrase that almost touched her. The motion was too fast for Ryth to read, but not for Faen. Though her eyes darkened, her smile matched Lekel's in beauty.

Before anyone could move, Lekel leaped onto the platform and vanished in blue fire. Kayle made a futile motion, then accepted what he could not change.

"How will he find the Gint?" asked Kayle with a calm that did not conceal his rage.

"The Gint is waiting for him where the river joins the white-rolling sea," Faen said, her eyes focused inward on a shadow memory.

"You warned the Gint," said Kayle, statement rather than question.

The Sharnn seemed abstracted, as though absorbed by an inner argument.

"Warned?" said the Sharnn, "Yes, a long time ago, before I knew Faen."

"Make sense, Sharnn!" hissed Kayle. "Will the Gint run?"

"He chose to fight, though he did not know it then, nor whom he would face."

The tangible grief in Ryth's voice only angered Kayle more. "Spare your Sharnn tears. The Gint does not deserve them!"

"Are you sure of that?" asked the Sharnn, his voice soft, deadly.

Kayle's rage evaporated. "Teach me."

"There's no more time."

Faen and Ryth leaped onto the platform. Just as blue energy surged, Faen's fingers moved in a t'sil'ne phrase that comforted Kayle, though he did not know why or how.

Zamir's air had the keen edge of a fighting knife, but neither Faen nor Ryth was bothered by it. Ryth's cape protected him; her senses were so overwhelmed by the smell of white amber vineyards that she could feel nothing else for a moment. The Sharnn oriented himself with a glance. The solar extraction factories glittered to his left, the ice-rimmed sea to his right, and the vineyards all around, but for one coiling line where a yellow river gnawed through ice to the sea. Though it was midday, the sky overhead was blue-black with bleak stars glinting down.

Faen shivered, drawing her robes more closely around her. In the nearly monochrome landscape, she stood out like a turquoise exclamation point. Ryth, however, was nearly invisible in his baffling Sharnn cape. The cape stretched out, surrounding Faen and pulling her close, warming her, while Ryth's eyes searched. Then he saw a vivid stroke of orange along the margin of the river. Lekel was running lightly, rapidly, though scarlet streaked his orange shirt.

"I don't see the Gint," said Faen, straining forward. "Did he run from us after all?"

"No," said Ryth, remembering a twilight Vintran alley where an invisible shadow had moved, slitting throats. "Sometimes he's very hard to see."

There was pain in the Sharnn's voice, a bleakness to equal the sky. It was as though a pattern that had begun with many possibilities had narrowed into a single grotesque strand. Faen turned to him but though she was standing within his arms, he was almost invisible to her. Only his eyes escaped the muffling, changing cape, his eyes so like a Malian spring, with shadow currents sliding deep within.

"I lost," he whispered bitterly. "I conceived too late, and lost your planet."

With an abruptness that startled her, Ryth pulled away and leaped off the open platform. He ran down the curving river path so quickly that she could not close the distance between them, only keep it from growing any greater. He did not answer her mindcalls. All around, white amber vines writhed, taking hard light and air and ice and transforming them into a single overwhelming perfume. The compelling smell of white amber permeated their clothes, their skin, their flesh, as inescapable as a Malian's revenge. Or a Sharnn concept.

A cry tore through the vines, a scream that slid up the scale in one long ululation. Lekel's orange shirt swung and jerked as though he were fighting his own shadow. Faen could not see the Gint, though Lekel's vire cry told her the prey must be near.

\*Ryth—!\*

The urgency of her need penetrated his shields. She was too focused on Lekel's cry to realize that the Sharnn's mind was raw and cold and deadly to anyone but her; she only knew he had finally heard her.

\*Can we reach him in time?\* she demanded.

Though the Sharnn knew that Lekel would never ask for help, he ran faster, until the neat rows of vines blurred. Ahead, Lekel spun and leaped high, incredibly high, and his foot lashed out with lethal potential

\*I can't see the Gint!\*

Faen's frustrated cry went no further than her own mind before she realized that she could not see Ryth, either, though she could hear the staccato of his running feet. The shifting, flaring Sharnn cape perfectly blended Ryth's body into the writhing vines.

\*Can you see the Gint?\* she demanded.

\*Sometimes,\* he answered, the contact so thin that she wondered if she had imagined it.

\*Show him to me,\* she said, touching her knife. \*Just once.\*

And in her thought was the knowledge and agony of Lekel's dying and the certainty of her own revenge.

\*No.\*

The Sharnn's refusal shocked Faen. \*His flesh is mine!\*

\*No.\*

As they closed with the molten orange of Lekel's clothes, they could see half of the battle. Lekel's half. A dance like wildfire in a high wind, each surge capable of burning to the bone, but never making contact before the invisible wind twisted away. Blood streaked Lekel's clothes, slowed his leaps, slurred the superb hues of his strength. Only his knife was untouched. Unblooded.

Instinctively, Faen watched the ground for unattached shadows. She saw—or almost saw—the shadow, but knew that it would be nearly impossible for one man to fight. And Lekel would not ask for help.

Faen wondered how he had survived the uneven contest for longer than its first instant. Unknowing, she cried encouragement to Lekel, praising the brutal beauty of his skill.

The shadow thinned, then fattened, and dust puffed up behind Lekel. He staggered, turned with shocking speed and the pale sun burned on his blade. He lunged, speed and grace and death, but the knife slid away. Lekel sagged as blood poured down his body, warm and heavy and far too much.

Two eyes shone darkly as the Malian and the Gint looked at one another, killed and killer, bound in the terrible intimacy of death. Silently Lekel slid to the frozen ground.

A cold breeze parted the vines and then even the shadow vanished.

But Ryth was there, bending over Lekel.

“Where is the Gint!” Faen screamed.

“Gone. As we agreed. Free.”

Faen shuddered but did not protest; a Sandoliki keeps a bargain, even with a gint.

“What is he, Ryth?”

The Sharnn’s eyes were green-black and as bleak as the grinding sea. “I have conceived too much,” he said harshly, turning his back on her and looking again at Lekel.

The k’m’n Sandoliki was motionless beneath the red folds of his clothes. Ryth looked at the blood congealing beneath the blue-black sky, then he bent and picked up Lekel’s body with as much care as though the Sandoliki could still feel pain or pleasure. When he passed Faen she reached out, but her fingers touched only air, for she preferred the painful memory of Lekel’s living beauty beating for just one moment beneath her fingertip.

Around them white amber vines writhed silently, showering their fragrance on substance and shadow alike.

## VIII

Kayle looked from Faen to the Sharnn. Both had refused to talk after their return from Zamir. Food and stimulants had restored their strength, but the Sharnn’s eyes were darker, as though light moved less easily through their green depths.

“You lost your gamble,” Kayle said bluntly.

Neither one answered. Nor was it necessary. They had returned without the Gint’s answers. Vintra had won. Tomorrow Malia would die.

Killed by a Sharnn.

“You once told me,” said Kayle, staring at Ryth, “that there were patterns even beyond disaster. Was that truth or merely a Sharnn evasion?”

“It was true,” said Ryth wearily, “but Sharnn truth is not the same as Sharnn concept.”

“Then make it the same!”

The Sharnn’s eyes became almost opaque with inner argument, silent calculations that spun and leaped until all but he felt time passing on the shadow wings of Malia’s approaching death.

Suddenly the Sharnn’s whole body stretched until he stood with legs and arms spread, fingers wide as though to grasp the impossible. The room seemed to shift and slide, light wheeling around him, braided radiance twisting until he stood as a still focus of spinning energies.

Then he laughed, and they sensed echoes of light more beautiful than light itself. A blink, and the room was normal, neither pouring light nor transcendent echoes and each person again cast a shadow.

Ryth spoke slowly, as though the need for urgency had passed. “With Carifil help, how many minds can you mesh?”

Kayle’s orange eyes sparked as they searched the Sharnn’s strangely compelling face. “I don’t know,” said Kayle, his constricted voice reflecting his bafflement at Ryth’s transformation.

“Then talk to me about variables.”

Kayle paused, looking into Ryth’s brilliant green eyes with a feeling he could not describe. “Training and receptivity are the two greatest. Given those, I could even join Faen with a Vintran.”

Ryth ignored Faen’s shudder. “Good,” he murmured, and Kayle felt absurdly pleased. Then, as though it were unimportant, the Sharnn added, “Can Mim penetrate the Malian mindset now?”

“Yes, with Carifil help. You taught us how, Sharnn, though Memned was mostly a Vintran. What we learned enabled us to reach even you on Malia.” Under Ryth’s calm, encouraging glance, Kayle expanded. “It’s a matter of immense delicacy, of exquisite timing, of weaving among the intricate rhythms, of ... of ...” Kayle stopped, spreading his hands. “There are no words to describe it.”

Ryth’s smiling lips moved and Sharnn phrases burned for an instant behind Kayle’s eyes.

“Yes,” said Kayle excitedly. “Yes! That’s exactly what happened!” Then excitement oozed out of his

voice as the phrases faded, leaving behind not even an echo. “Just get them in the right mood, Sharnn, and I’ll mesh them.”

“Hundreds?” said Ryth quietly. “Thousands? And more, many more?”

“No. Too dangerous. If we pass a certain threshold—and we don’t know what the threshold is—we get Unity. No one can control Unity. It’s the kind of chain reaction that is the fear of every psi.”

“How is uncontrolled Unity dangerous?”

“If it doesn’t disintegrate spontaneously, it bums out every mind in the mesh.” Kayle’s eyes looked haunted. “Only a few people are unlucky enough to survive.”

Kayle’s eyes slid away from the Sharnn’s knowing gaze. The fear of Unity was built into every psi at the level of survival reflexes, as basic as pain. But the Sharnn was not every psi.

“What are you planning, Sharnn?” asked Kayle, a curious mixture of reluctance and excitement in his voice.

“A Sharnn moment,” said Ryth softly. “The moment when we either conceive of the impossible, or we die.”

The Sharnn stood silently, waiting, as mysterious and compelling as life itself. Faen’s fingers moved intimately, tingled with his response and a shared moment that only a Malian could name. He smiled for her alone, but his words were for Kayle.

“We must convince the Council of what we know is true: Vintra is sabotaging itself and blaming Malia.”

“Only someone who understood—really understood—both cultures could believe that. And,” the Nendleti added bluntly, “no one but a Malian understands Malian culture.”

“I do,” said the Sharnn. “So do you ... sometimes. So will they. We’ll teach them, Kayle, you and I and Faen. And they will learn.”

“Mindlink,” whispered Faen, guessing, disbelieving, appalled at the very thought of such intimacy with anyone but the Sharnn.

“Impossible,” said Kayle flatly. “Even with your pattern skills, Malian culture is far too intricate to be taught in a gulp. The psi who tried it would die raving like a zarf. Impossible.”

“I have conceived it,” said the Sharnn simply. “And Faen will help me.”

Ryth leaned over her until his lips brushed hers, murmuring Sharnn phrases that she suddenly understood. She cried out once, then his radiance healed the pain of his words.

“The sarsa,” she said slowly.

Kayle’s eyes narrowed with uneasy speculation. “Teach me.”

The Sharnn waited for Faen to speak, but she was lost within herself and what he had asked her to do.

“I conceived,” said Ryth hesitantly, searching for Galactic words to equal Sharnn concept, “that the sarsa, touched by a supremely skilled musician who has certain mental energies ... affinities with the sarsa’s resonance spectrum and timeshadows ...” The Sharnn’s voice faded and he gestured abruptly, frustrated by the limitations of a language that viewed reality very differently than a Sharnn.

He began again, simplifying to the point of insult. “The sarsa can link minds, even mesh minds, below the level of awareness. It draws energy through the link/mesh and uses that energy to create ... images. These visual/aural/ mental resonances act as a force that meshes present minds with the timeshadows of former minds, former ...” Ryth made an exasperated sound. “Galactic is a very limited language,” he observed sourly.

“Galactic alone is more complex than any nine languages together,” said Kayle. “Only one language ever surpassed Galactic in complexity—the language of the Singers.”

“Did you understand anything I described?” asked the Sharnn impatiently.

“You plan to use the sarsa as an aid to linking/meshing the untrained, probably unwilling, minds of the Council. You’re insane, of course.”

Ryth shrugged, a muscular movement that was distinctively Sharnn. “I suppose your understanding is complete enough for our purposes. Faen will bear the brunt of the assault.”

“I won’t be alone,” she said, her fingertips stroking the sliding muscles of Ryth’s arm. “You will be

with me, closer than my own blood.”

“When?” said Kayle.

“As soon as we can get the Council on Malia,” Ryth answered.

“That will be difficult. The planet is under primary proscription.”

“Tell the Council,” said Faen, “that they will hear Maran’s Song played on the Sandoliki sarsa, Malia’s soul.”

Ryth almost heard the questions hammering at Kayle, but all the Nendleti said was, “The Carifil will convince the Council.” He fixed his eyes on the Sharnn. “Do you know—really know—what you’re going to do to Faen?”

The Sharnn’s face changed and it was as though he had never conceived of laughter. Faen’s soft voice slid between their anger.

“He has not hidden any patterns from me, Kayle. We have already forgiven each other and ourselves. We are ready.”

“To die,” sighed Kayle. His eyes brooded over Faen’s deceptively fragile face and pale glowing eyes. “Are you sure, daughter? There is no need for either you or Ryth to suffer and die.”

When Faen finally spoke, her voice was husky with memories and regret. “For many years I had the privilege of being Sandoliki Ti. Yet I did nothing. I drank from Malia’s well and gave nothing in return. Not love, not duty, not even gratitude. I owe my people a last chance, however small.”

“If they knew the danger to you,” said Kayle, “if they knew that we would allow you to survive Malia’s death, they would release you with blessings.”

“Yes. And that is why I must return to Malia.”

Kayle’s eyes closed and the sense of hammering questions ended. “As you will. It will.” When he opened his eyes and looked at Ryth, he could not help but wonder how a man felt who asked his complement to undergo a terrible dying. Then he saw darkness twisting deep within Sharnn eyes and wondered no more.

Kayle touched Ryth with gentle hands. “How can I help?”

Ryth accepted the touch, returned it. “Teach my Sharnn curiosity about Unity. Can the Carifil control it?”

Kayle moved minutely, as though uncomfortable deep within his mind. “Once, on a planet called Tal-Lith, Carifil ... guided ... a Unity for a very short moment. But the people were uniquely focused. Their world was melting around them and they thought they had seen their God.” Kayle shook off the reservoir of Carifil memories that even now could make him shudder. “It’s not an experience that Carifil want to repeat,” said Kayle. “But, as only the Councilors will be involved, there’s no risk of Unity.”

Faen looked at Ryth and knew ... and said nothing, for measured against certain extinction, no risk was too great, not even Unity.

The seamed face of Darg Vintra raced below the flyers. In the lead flyer, Kayle and Mim sat silently, unmoving, appalled by the ruined landscape and the rusty wind.

“Now I believe,” said Mim, her low voice husky with unspoken emotions. “A people who could do this could do anything.”

“Vintrans were Malians once,” Faen said hollowly. Her fingers clenched on Ryth’s thigh. “Once and always.”

The thought of Vintrans still repelled Faen, an ingrained cultural aversion nearly as strong as a survival reflex; Ryth lifted her hand and rubbed her knuckles across his lips until her fingers relaxed.

The land grimaced and bled shallow streams thick with rock dust. Long shadow fingers crept out of blast furrows, a dark, soundless welling that joined fingers to hands and hands to arms until the body of night materialized over the destroyed land.

In the distance, lit by the last direct light of Malia’s incomparable sun, the ancient tere grove of the Sandoliki Estates leaped out of darkness, a red flame burning against the blind welling of shadows. Faen leaned forward, silver eyes drinking the silent cry of color. When the last ray faded from the highest scarlet tree, she breathed the name of a moment. With new tranquility, she leaned back, eyes closed, lips

like two tere leaves curving around a white flower.

Neither Faen nor Ryth looked behind, where Carifil and Councilors filled nine flyers. Since the flyers had sliced through the final high pass and skimmed low over the face of Darg Vintra, none of the Carifil had spoken. After seeing galaxies of silver insects glittering over blue-green zamay seas, after being caressed by winds fragrant with desire and moist with promise, the blasted face of Darg Vintra was shocking to the point of obscenity.

While the flyers circled the living remnants of the Sandoliki Estates, Councilors' comments began to filter through the listener in Ryth's flyer.

“—never believed—”

“—after such beauty, too. Malia is the most beautiful—”

“Did you say there was no warning before the molecular fire?”

“—died. Except for her, of course. I wonder if they were as cold as she is, or half so beautiful. But then, all Malians are beautiful. Too beautiful for—”

“Darg Vintra? Vintra's Revenge. It's taken from the Malian darg vire, meaning death vendetta. Remember her Ti Vire—”

The Sharnn listened to summations of Malia and Malians, accurate and inaccurate, but did not use his flyer's override to comment; he wanted the hideous contrast between Darg Vintra and Malia's living beauty to seep into the center of the Councilors' minds. Only then could they begin to appreciate the tenacious hold Malia had on the psyches of its people; only then could they take the first minute step toward a grasp of Malian esthetics, a grasp that would normally take several maturities—if it were possible at all.

A grasp that he was going to attempt to teach them in the space of moments.

He would have help, of course. Faen and the sarsa, and Malia itself, all her people, all of them seeing/hearing their Sandoliki sarsa. He only hoped that Faen was correct, that the comnet built into the sarsa garden would carry subtleties as well as tones, nuances as well as chords. And that the Gint would hear and be held, a shadow caught in the intangible vise of Unity.

But that was only Sharnn hope. Not conception.

Ryth rubbed his lips over the soft skin of Faen's hand, unaware that his grip had tightened. Even without that pressure she would have known his mental unease, but other than a gentle return pressure on his lips, she did nothing to disturb him. She knew that he had a separate peace to make, a peace that included a shadow that he did not permit himself to name, much less conceive, in the center of his mind.

The flyer sideslipped down, down, until it was below the sudden thrust of the Western Wall. The flyer knifed between ridges until it burst over the tilted bench of land where Faen's metal shelter crouched among golden stones buffed by ages of sun and wind.

The ten flyers landed as one. At the edge of the landing site, shattered crystal made heaps of blue-black shadows that were shot through with secret glimmerings. In the radiant twilight, a surviving crystal god smoldered with turquoise mystery, wind-pitted eyes staring into a future that never came.

When Ryth and Faen stepped out of their flyer, the scarlet bird called, high and sweet, piercing the gathering night. Faen paused, and her lips shaped a flawless answer, a rising trill more haunting than twilight and tere and shattered gods. The Sharnn bent over her, held her as though she were twilight sliding through his fingers.

Kayle led the Councilors down a path glowing with the phosphorescent bells of blooming nightvine. The flowers' subtle fragrance strengthened with each step until the crushed petals underfoot were overpowering, almost narcotic; no matter how penetrating the smell, the Councilors could not get enough of it. Then the scent vanished, absorbed by living tere bark. The sudden change brought both relief and regret, one of the myriad sensual paradoxes that was the core of Malia's unique appeal. Kayle led the Councilors into a towering tere grove where dry leaves whispered underfoot and living leaves swept the sky with separate fans opened against the first brittle stars. He stopped when he reached the deserted courtyard where the sarsa waited. Wordlessly he gestured to stone benches and gnarled tere roots carved into inviting curves.

“The Ti Faen will not approach the sarsa until the third moon rises.”

The Councilors looked around the garden, eyes sliding off a sarsa made nearly invisible by twilight. Tere leaves drifted down, still velvet with recent life, a soft benediction with a fragrance like dawn. Though the Councilors represented thirty-five planets ranging from the blue seas of Lirl to the fused deserts of Verlael, each person was silenced, wordless, because no one had words to describe the unique beauty of tere leaves and wind and twilight sliding into night. The Councilors moved little, and then softly, as though the moment and the night were exquisitely fragile.

And then they moved not at all, for Malia could only be described or felt in superlatives, excesses of hyperbole that finally left the mind stunned and quiescent until another moment subsumed the first and surfeit became wonder once more.

Kayle watched them, measured their awe in their unnatural stillness and the brilliance of their eyes. Nor did he disturb their meditations, for he remembered his own first moments on Malia, his certainty that he had been reborn into a world of infinite sensual possibilities. The newness had faded with time, but not the fine edge of anticipation; that never dulled, for Malia renewed wonder with each breath.

C'Varial Ti rose, the first moon, a clear turquoise crescent that towed behind it a second moon, a pearl half-circle whose rich glow equaled that of the larger moon. As light from the two moons mingled and filtered through tere leaves, the sarsa seemed to stir. Tiny glints, echoes of light, movement unexplained yet certain, subliminal presence too tenuous to be known.

As one, the Councilors turned and faced the sarsa. They watched, unblinking, waiting for something they sensed but could not name.

The third moon rose, a silver disc called C'Sarsa Ti, full and flawless, pouring silver light down until a thousand silent facets blazed and the sarsa split its husk of darkness.

The soundless explosion of light was received by sighs of pleasure and pain mingled. As though satisfied, the sarsa's radiance dimmed subtly, becoming a silent symphony in all the tones of silver. At that moment, like a memory of a dream, the exquisite voices of tiny crystal bells chimed in the tere grove.

Faen walked into the moonlight, her feet soundless on worn stones, her graceful body swaying just enough to make carved crystal earrings cry softly. Kayle heard the tiny chimes and knew why she wore them, and knowing, wept. Others wept, knowing only that the bells also cried. Ryth moved behind the soft-ringing bells, his Sharnn cape rippling with a half-light half-life that answered the sarsa's gleaming silver. His fathomless Sharnn eyes searched the courtyard, a single green glance that dismissed even as it recognized that the enemy was not here, for he had heard chimes grieve for her child, his child, the child who could die without knowing the moment of birth.

He did not know if even Malia was worth the life of their unborn child.

Faen stopped in front of the sarsa and a pulse of light lit her face. She stood unmoving, moonlight and sarsa glow tangled in her hair and robes until both seemed alive with silver energy and her earrings burned with light so pure it had no color, only presence. When she finally spoke, her voice was an echo of that light and her earrings clashed and sparked, marking her words.

"You are not Malians, yet you will soon know Malia as few ever have. You will know all our secrets, and the secrets of our deadly shadow, Vintra."

The Vintran representative stirred and would have protested, but the Sharnn looked at her and her words died unspoken.

Faen's arms lifted in a gesture almost like worship and her fingers touched the sarsa's shining crystal surfaces. Then fingertips sought and found four slender m'sarsas.

"In Malian, sarsa means soul, and souls always precede the life that grows to recognize it.

"This sarsa is older than the Sandoliki name we give it, older than the Malian who named and numbered our first moment, older than the stones worn smooth beneath your feet."

Faen breathed deeply and light shimmered.

"What the sarsa gives to us, we give to it in return, and then it returns to us In a cycle ever new, ever renewing. Each Sandoliki creates changing yet changeless song, the echo of an individual being, an individual soul realized in music. This song we give to the sarsa while we live. This song the sarsa returns to our children when we die."

Ryth remembered a man's song and a man's shape condensing out of moonlight. Remembering, he



stirred, and the Sharnn cape curled around his calves like liquid light. For the first time, Faen looked beyond the sarsa to the waiting Councilors. Her eyes paused over Wys, the Vintran representative, then moved on, searching for something she did not find.

“You don’t understand, do you? Only Wys, and her fifth-parents were Malian, once.”

Tiny bells rang, fierce, impatient.

“Some cultures have monuments to recall their past; some have teachers or dreamers or machines; some even have gods. Malia has the Sandoliki sarsa. It is the repository of Sandoliki memories, Sandoliki minds.

“Tomorrow you will take all Malian lives. But tonight I will give you Malia’s soul!”

Faen’s arms dropped, sweeping the four m’sarsas across crystal faces. Music shimmered in the clearing, complex resonances older than tere or garden, older than sun-worn stones, ancient notes recalling the first Sandoliki.

It was a woman’s song, supple and savage with the certainty of life.

The sound swelled, divided into separate harmonies, children unfolding, growing and then a new song slowly consuming all others. The longest crystal hummed with ominous resonance, dark harmonies shivered. The clash of battle shook the sarsa and moonlight ran down long crystals like ghostly blood.

Cacophony faded into a new song, oddly thinned but still powerful: a child, old beyond reason, strength and cunning of a savage mountain beast. Other melodies flowed into the child’s swift rhythm and were consumed by his enormous power. The longest crystal, the vire, shimmered vengeance and death. A fully-grown man led lightning armies across the moonlight night. The song ended in a crystalline shriek of agony. The vire crystal tolled the death of the second Sandoliki ruler, then trembled into silence. High notes sighed into separate songs, slowly forming, melody coalescing into a new generation.

Ancient songs poured out, each different, each created by a separate Sandoliki, summation of individual souls flowing in ghostly pageant. Some songs were brief, cut off in first harmony, and for them the vire crystal tolled and tiny crystals wept. But always there were more, sisters and brothers, man and woman, children swelling into separate songs, fading beneath the surer rhythms of the strongest of their generation as a new Sandoliki rose to power and fought and lived and died while three moons arced across the outer darkness.

The songs subtly shifted range, quivered in eerie harmonics, as Malians discovered other races could cross the darkness to new worlds, to Malia. Concord scouts rode lightships to Malia, bringing seven more lives for each living Malian, until children stood next to parents seven times removed.

Until Malians were too many and moments were too few.

A rogue Sandoliki rode a stolen lightship to other worlds and found one, unnamed, a shadow of Malia where purple coiled and flowed.

But to him, it was beautiful.

But for him, it would have remained a shadow with no name.

The vire crystal boomed as Malians killed each other in endless duels, rolling thunder while crystals cried and sensuality sank into a mire of flesh, t’sil’ne replaced by knives, too many people and too few moments, shadow esthetics crowding out the thousand names of transcendence.

Then a woman was born in a shower of perfect tones, a lilting hope that began Maran’s Song, the forbidden song of Malia.

Sandoliki Ti Maran, leader of the old race, mother of the new, creator of a song that was known throughout the Concord for its torrential power and exquisite nuance.

Known, but not understood, for only Malians understood the meaning of Maran’s Song, Malian secret, Malian shame, Malian flaw at the core of perfection.

Few artists could play Maran’s Song adequately on any instrument. None but Maran had ever played it on the Sandoliki sarsa. And Maran had shared her song only once, for all her people, an entire race focused in unknowing Unity so that it might divide itself into substance and shadow, Malian and Vintran, thereby saving one and perhaps the other.

But the Councilors knew nothing except that for the first time in Concord history aliens listened while the Sandoliki sarsa spoke. They were completely caught, suspended in the space between notes as her

four m'sarsas called intricate music out of triple moonlight, each movement a sure touch, each note a flawless aspect of the sweeping whole, Maran's Song cascading until their breaths sighed out unknowing and their blood surged with Maran's rhythms, Maran's hopes, Maran's triumphs, Maran living again in her song and in them, timeshadow of her mind touching and links forming, deepening, a mesh balanced by a Nendleti whose skill was as great as his fear.

At the first breath of the Councilors' linkage, the Sharnn fused with Faen, saturating her mind with his presence as he saturated her senses with his touch, protecting her from minds outside his own.

He discovered more than just her mind held in the net of his radiance. Each crystal note called another timeshadow, touched a past mind, shadows and music and moonlight twisting, condensing, glowing woman-shape turning, silver-eyed Maran, laughter and a timeless murmur of greeting as other shapes shimmered, returning, called by Faen and the Sandoliki sarsa.

It was then that Ryth realized that the sarsa braided present and past, mind and timeshadow, drained a little life from one and a little death from the other, eerie synthesis of energy and time.

Maran's Song soared on the wings of a thousand past minds, ten thousand, and Malians again gathered in ghostly concourse, murmuring of moments known only in legend, whispering of solutions known only in hope, addressing everything but the name of a shadow found by a rogue Sandoliki.

Maran stood and named the shadow, ignored its vices, called each of its virtues with piercing notes, sang of uncrowded futures for all who followed her to Vintra, moments beyond numbering, beyond naming.

Half of the Malians came to her, half-Malians followed her to half-life on a planet that contained every shade of madness known to Malian senses. But Maran believed that a shadow could have substance, if only its name were sung superbly, its shadow moments discovered and cherished, named, for, once named, those moments would change perceptions until Vintra became more real, Malia less so.

Maran was almost correct, almost as great as her song. But the new Vintrans lived too long; they remembered too well; they taught their children too much about the planet they had left behind, the culture they could not achieve, the perceptions that had become unattainable ... and the haunting resonance of one thousand names, Malian moments Vintrans would never know.

Maran died among the shards of her dream, pouring her life over their merciless edges, but not enough life, not enough death, for the shadow had been named and once named, became half-alive, half-aware, wholly craving.

The vire crystal shuddered, shapes twisted, moonlight shook with hatred as the sarsa exploded with undeclared war. Darg Vintra. Separate songs leaped and shattered, songs truncated by the vire's awful toll, genealogy of song and Sandoliki death, death and hatred, hatred and black light blooming, molecular fire and Ti Vire, Sandoliki song and death and hatred and death until throttled screams tore each throat and the clearing felt the consuming pulse of darg vire, hatred shared in common, Malian and Galactic alike.

Too late Kayle realized that, just as Mim had learned from the Sharnn the key to Malian mind patterns, the Sharnn had learned from her the way to force minds into linkage. Now the Sharnn reached out in expanding concept, sweeping up minds all over the planet, minds already focused on Maran's Song, Malia's song, the song of their past and their only possible future. \*Too many!\* screamed Kayle's mind. \*Too fast!\*

There was no response from the Sharnn's driving mind, unless it was the sarsa's atonal cry as Faen's hands jerked and m'sarsas chattered across crystal faces. Shadows seethed. The fabric of reality tore. Instinctively, Kayle poured himself into the dissolving mesh, mending rents through which shadows leaped, craving.

Faen steadied and the sarsa's moonlit notes drove shadows back, triple moonlight poured silver chords over smooth stone, harmony soaring, binding mind to mind in triple intimacy of past and present and future.

*FUTURE ... ?*

Evolving Unity's question echoed through the velvet night, Unity shaped by sarsa's clear energy, held by sarsa's clear focus until Unity stirred just once and Faen screamed and the scarlet bird shrieked with

Sandoliki agony as Faen withered beneath the consuming energy of Unity awakening.

(Losing her.)

(No!)

(Let us help.)

(Carifil?)

(Yes.)

(Take the Councilors. They blur us.)

The impossible weight of Councilors vanished. The Sharnn flexed, driving back Unity a mere fraction, a fragile margin where Faen sought and found surcease from hammering intimacy, too many memories, too many fears, too many hopes and lies and minds all hammering, clamorous, cacophonous in their greed to speak and see and above all

*NOT DIE*

for they had heard crystal summation, chords of urgency and despair and truth.

Unity coalesced, still seething, becoming, controllable so long as to focus did not falter, so long as Faen could call song on Sandoliki crystal, guiding massed minds until she was no longer needed, or until she broke beneath the freezing wash of intimacy, Unity.

(Cold.)

And Ryth stood behind her, body covering hers, fingers warm over hands numbed by silver m'sarsas' hum, pouring warmth into her exhausted chill, giving her more than he had, more than he could conceive, because there was no other choice but extinction. The Sharnn cape fanned out, licked soundlessly against the brilliant sarsa as though seeking warmth, light, any energy to power the driving need of two fused minds desperately warding off Unity, for if the focus was subsumed, Unity would implode and crush all its living minds. Sharnn cape clung, draining timeshadow energies until the sarsa dimmed, past pouring itself into the present.

The truth of sarsa music was not dimmed; it chimed unremittingly, focusing. Maran's Song had ended, its last chords blending into a disintegrating Vintra, a two-dimensional race staggering toward a three-dimensional extinction they could not understand, much less avoid.

Unity listened. Its heavy center was now intelligent, integrated, saturated. Only the edges seethed, finding and aligning new minds, seeking completion in a dynamic process even a Sharnn could not conceive.

But Ryth had conceived of the intelligent center, of living minds able to sweep through the reservoir of knowledge held by each member to find the solution to survival. Or at least to find what he had lost so many years ago, on Sharn.

Delicately, the Sharnn conceived of Vintra's disasters, disasters guided by a shadow with no name ...

A clap of energy shook the clearing as Unity demanded individual knowledge, the discovery of those minds who had conspired to kill Malia by seeming to kill Vintra, individual acts of commission and omission that added up to the death of a race. For Ryth/Faen knew that Memned and the Gint alone could not have shaped Malian extinction. There must have been others, many others who had helped, knowing or unknowing that it was toward Malia's death they labored.

It was to find these minds that Faen had dared Unity. It was in search of these minds that the sarsa poured out its eerie cry of hate and betrayal ... these minds and one more, unnamed and unknown. Except to a Sharnn.

Unity listened and decided. With the unflinching eye of necessity, Unity examined each of its component minds for complicity.

And found—

One of Lekel's advisors who had traded integrity for a few tangled moments with Memned. It was he who betrayed Cy, Ninth Circle Assassin and Lekel's f'mi. When the compromised advisor became suspicious, Memned smiled and touched him again, explaining that it was Vintra's death she worked for, Vintra's extinction. Though the concept of extinction was anathema to Malians, he believed her because he wanted to. And said nothing.

Memned's body servant who knew of the illegal Access, knew Memned worked against the k'm'n

Sandoliki and, knowing, did nothing, for Lekel had refused to share a moment with her.

Many guards who had many times seen Memned in Vintran costume and looked away from her because they feared Lekel more than they loved Malia.

And more, too many more, found and weighed in a savage instant, annihilated with a ruthlessness that appalled Carifil and Councilors alike. But there was nothing the Carifil could do; it took all their strength and skill just to withhold the Councilors from Unity's consuming imperatives.

Even while the last shockwaves of death quivered, Unity realized that it had achieved only a fragment of its purpose; survival was not yet assured. Carifil screamed against Unity's decision, but Ryth/Faen smiled, guided, and Unity came to Vintra like a thousand dawns, soundless and searing.

For Vintrans were Malians once. And always.

Now the edges of Unity were heavy, satiated, a whole people ingested. Questioned. Now the vire crystal tolled for Vintrans, long rolling thunder as mind after mind fractured beneath the demands of Unity. Thousands died, each giving up a separate piece of the catechism of hatred, dream of Malia's death.

(Enough!)

But the Carifil cry went unheeded while Unity ransacked minds, seeking an answer as whole as itself

(No more!)

and a retribution as complete as a Sharnn concept.

*COME TO ME SHADOW MAN*

Thousands more died, until the edges of Unity writhed, crumbling, and shadows slithered up, muffling sarsa's radiance, reaching for the driving focus of Unity.

The Sharnn cape thinned, surged impossibly wide, flaring until the clearing was drenched with light. The sudden radiance left no hiding places, even for a shadow.

The Gint stood behind Faen/Ryth, limned against the darkness of ancient tere.

Faen/Ryth turned away from the sarsa to face the Gint while Unity's rage twisted through clearing and grove, wrenching apart light to reach a shadow. The m'sarsas slipped and jerked in agony over the wrong crystals. The spaces between notes became long, longer, too long, until even the vire's attenuated hum drained into silence.

Unfocused, Unity heaved. People on two planets died shrieking mindlessly.

The Gint reeled beneath the backlash of Unity's savagery. His writhing cape blurred at the edges and he vanished but for dark eyes a fraction closer to Faen/Ryth with every breath, every mindless death.

Carifil demand was a scalpel among Unity's axe blows, a skilled slash that scored across Faen/Ryth, demanding.

(Focus!)

(But—Gint)

(Now! Or Unity will kill you before the shadow can!)

As though pulled in pieces, Faen/Ryth jerked back to the sarsa. Ancient crystal cried arrhythmically. Then his hands covered hers and strengths fused once more, seamlessly, a new whole. A song poured out, a song never before heard, never played, never conceived until the moment Unity wrenched apart light to reach a shadow.

Faen's song, sung by Sharnn and sarsa.

It was not a song of rage and seeking and annihilation. It was a song of completion, of two halves rejoined in a whole that could survive better than either half alone. The song climbed through light and darkness and distance alike, drenching the crumbling Unity with the timeless possibilities of survival.

The Gint clawed closer to Faen/Ryth while they poured their energy into Unity's flaws, filling spaces with music as the shadow came ever closer, invisible but for black-green eyes and Ryth/Faen's certainty that the Gint crawled closer, for the Sharnn had conceived of everything, even death and the shadow oozing closer to Ryth's heels.

Unity shuddered, enticed by the sarsa's sweet chiming of Malians and Vintrans rejoined, neither extinct, one people again, all past moments numbered and named, meeting for the first time. Unity consummated.

And two eyes sliding closer.

(can you)

Hand closing invisibly around a hidden knife.

(no choice)

Strong arms pulling a thick shadow closer.

(just an instant)

Killing knife's silver smile.

(yes go kill it)

The Sharnn left Faen in a leap, spinning in mid-air while his cape clung to his feet, turning away a knife's killing smile. The knife slashed upward, where the Sharnn would have been if he had not separated from Faen.

But even while Ryth leaped, Unity filled Faen's margin. Focus fractured. Faen was driven screaming to her knees and m'sarsas were frozen in mid-stroke. The Sharnn was gone.

Vanished.

Like the Gint, Ryth had become a mere thickening of the air, a subliminal sense of presence. But Ryth was even less accessible than the Gint, for Ryth did not need eyes to see, eyes whose shine betrayed presence. Memory and reflexes and faal-hnim became a low driving roll. His cape whipped out, fastened onto the edge of shadow and yanked, tearing. Ryth's knife appeared, vivid in moonlight the instant before steel flashed beneath the edge of the Gint's invisibility, seeking and finding and burying its cold blade in the center of warmth.

The Gint's scream was a thin and anguished sound echoed by the sarsa's atonal shriek until Faen and Ryth fused again, forcing chilled flesh and cold crystal to create joyous song, a compelling explosion of music.

With a blind reaching, Unity turned to the song, fragments flowing together, bound by moonlight, shaped by music. For one terrible moment Unity focused and saw/felt/knew that all survival imperatives had been met except one.

With vast gentleness, Unity dissolved.

The m'sarsas slid from Faen's numb fingers and clanged over cold stone. She searched for warmth, for strength, for her other self, but he was gone beyond reach of her eyes or mind.

And then the Sharnn was visible, within reach, bending over the Gint. She touched Ryth and moaned, unknowing, for the agony in his mind was too great for anyone to bear.

"Ryth!" She leaned toward him, arms reaching out, not touching. "Ryth ..."

Ryth did not hear her, for he was speaking in the spiral phrases of Sharn poetry.

And the Gint answered.

The exchange took only moments, long enough for a man to die. His outline writhed, slurring over light and darkness alike; then the Gint lay dead inside the husk of a Sharnn cape.

"Sharnn—" whispered Faen hoarsely. "It—He—Sharnn."

"Yes."

Ryth stood with the uneven motions of an old man. He glanced down at the shadow now wholly visible, powerful even in death, black-green eyes staring back at moonlight. The Councilors stirred, waking, saw a dead man and a dimmed sarsa and three moons untouched by either Sharnn death or Malian salvation.

Wys walked slowly over to Faen, going around the dead man who was the essence of Vintran hatreds. She did not give so much as a sidelong glance to acknowledge the Sharnn who had died trying to make her people as complete as a Sharnn concept.

When Wys spoke, her voice was raw with knowledge she had never wanted and still could not accept. "Vintra and Vintrans belong to Malia. To you, Sandoliki Ti. I ask more mercy for my people than we would have given to yours."

"T'mara'hki," said Faen slowly. "Though you will never transcend the shadow, your children might walk in three dimensions."

"My children will die on Vintra," said Wys bitterly.

“Only if you wish it. You are welcome to return to Malia. All of you. It was your planet, once.”

“But ... what is our punishment?”

“Vintrans are not Malians. Do you need more punishment than that?”

Wys’s eyes darkened, but she said nothing. All Vintrans had just enough of Malia left to appreciate and desire that which was beyond their grasp: one thousand Malian moments, named and numbered and most of all lived. Wys lifted her face to the triple moons and her Vintran eyes saw only grey shapes. She breathed deeply, smelling nothing, and her skin felt only a single texture of chill out of the eleven distinct textures of this night that any Malian child could have named.

But Wys’s mind sensed more, so much more, just beyond her ability to grasp. With a cry she turned away from Faen’s compassionate silver eyes.

The rest of the Councilors followed Wys out of the garden, feet soundless on worn stone. Though it was superfluous, they would return to Centrex to pronounce Vintra’s guilt, Malia’s innocence ... and their own secret agony that they were not Malians.

As quietly as leaves, Mim and other Carifil began to gather around the Sharnn. Each face showed lines of anger, exhaustion, and a need to know that was greater than anything else. Silent questions pressed against the Sharnn, questions that were both delicate and inexorable.

Ryth looked up, his eyes flat and indifferent, his Sharnn body revealing a weariness that went beyond simple exhaustion. When he looked down again, even his Sharnn control could not mask his grief.

“He was a great Sharnn,” said Ryth tonelessly. “But he conceived only of shadows.” Ryth’s lips twisted in what could have been a smile but was not. “Yet what a conception it was, my gint, my shadow. So nearly perfect. So nearly complete.” Ryth looked up again, seeing nothing, no one. “He fell in love with his conception, with Memmed and her shadow life. He became captive to Vintra’s hatreds, essence of shadow.” The Sharnn moved his hands suddenly and his fingers gleamed blackly with his brother’s blood. “He died trying to make shadow into substance.”

Kayle walked closer, though he flinched at the possibilities turning deep within Sharnn eyes.

“Teach me,” said Kayle huskily. “There is time, now. N’ies?”

The Sharnn cape snapped out like the living animal it almost was, then subsided at a quiet thought.

“N’ies,” agreed the Sharnn at last, stroking his cape, fingertips hypersensitive, appreciative, a gesture so Malian that it made Faen weak with desire.

“Sharnn,” continued Ryth slowly, voice echoing emotions that had no words, “Sharnn are nothing. And everything. We are what we can conceive of being.”

The cape moved over him, consoling, a sound like silk rubbing over amber.

“When the Sharnn permitted First Contact with you,” said Ryth, “we thought that new conceptions would evolve from the new questions you would bring. And so it was, mysteries and enigmas and tantalizing wisps of the beyond, enough to compel generations of Sharnn.”

Unconsciously, Ryth sighed, remembering the innocence of a race that had not known what he knew now. “Malia, with its uncounted textures, uncountable subtleties, was the most intriguing of all the new experiences Concord brought to us. Except for the Carifil, but I had not conceived of you then, and you do not mention yourselves in loud voices ...”

“But,” said Kayle, groping to sum up the conversations ringing in his mind, “no Malian ever went to Sharn. How did you know of Malia?”

The Sharnn smiled, but there was neither light nor laughter in the line of his lips. “Musicians,” he said succinctly. “Musicians from Markaran. They played what they knew of Maran’s Song, what little even their great skill could conceive.

“Because music is important to the Concept of the Seventh Dawn, my ... family ... heard the Markarans. Maran’s Song claimed us, the mystery of a complex history half-finished, all possibilities open. Many mutually exclusive concepts were possible, many paradoxes, many terminations.” Ryth’s voice thinned into the bittersweet sarcasm of a Sharnn. “Maran’s Song was a joyous enigma wriggling with paradoxes, more difficult to disentangle than a nest of Sharnn capes.”

Ryth stopped, but the silent pressure had not abated; he would have to say it all to the final twisting word—all but the name, and that he would not say.

“We listen,” said Kayle.

Faen moved closer to Ryth, still not touching the man who had fused with her, completed her and himself and never once mentioned the deadly Sharnn whose blood now sank between the cracks of ancient Sandoliki stones. Her silver eyes were baffled, splintered, as though Ryth were still beyond her reach, invisible inside his cape and alien Sharnn concepts.

“He,” said Ryth, gesturing to the dead man, “saw Vintra as Malians did, as even Vintrans did, as Maran’s Song did—shadow days and shadow places, shadow lives and shadow faces.

“He conceived only of shadows. And, inevitably, became what he conceived. His conception eliminated possibilities, terminations, required certain acts to complete Maran’s Song.

“I conceived of a different ending. After the custom of Sharnn, he and I ... played ... a game to test the perfection of our very different concepts.

“My concept was stronger.”

The Sharnn’s apparently calm summation incensed Faen. “He nearly destroyed Malia! You knew—and trusted no one, told no one! Not even me!”

As Ryth turned to face her, his bloody hands moved in a gesture of odd helplessness.

“Why did he want Malia’s death?” Faen demanded, her silver eyes as narrow as new moons.

“Malia casts a shadow rather than being a shadow,” said Ryth. He searched for understanding in her eyes but saw only cold silver. His voice flattened even more and the green of his eyes drained into shadows. “He was trapped in his own concept. He hoped that if all Malians died, Vintrans would become real again—and so would he. Then he would be free, whole, alive. Able to conceive once more.”

“But it—the Gint—was all too real!”

“To all but himself, yes.”

Ryth looked at the blood congealing on his long fingers and said nothing more.

“Then he was as insane as his dead lover, Lekel’s wife,” said Faen flatly. “Insane.”

“Not by Sharnn standards. But he is surely dead.” Ryth’s voice thinned and suddenly he showed the immense effort it took him to talk. “I hope my brother learned that it is futile as well as foolish to conceive only of shadows.”

“Your—brother!” For the first time, Faen really looked into the Sharnn’s eyes. She saw that they were too dark, nearly black, as though light no longer moved through their depths. She had seen those eyes before, shadow eyes. Their bleakness answered more questions than she had ever wanted to ask.

“I understand too much,” Faen said hoarsely.

It was as though he had not heard her, as though now that he had begun to speak he must finish.

“I left Sharn because it was my ... turn ... to test my concept. Though I could not find my brother, I knew he was out there, either Malia or Vintra, but I did not, could not, believe that he had lost control of his concept. That he had become part of it and I would have to kill him before he killed a planet, a people. I refused to conceive of that.

“Yet some of me knew, must have known, for I deliberately chose to become part of my own concept.” He looked at Faen, totally, his whole being focused in a moment of such yearning that Carifil linked to lock out Ryth’s anguish. “I could not let Malia die, for I had found there something even a Sharnn had never conceived.”

Ryth looked away from her perfect lips hard with moonlight.

“I sought the solution to my own and Malia’s problems without knowing that my brother was the core of both.”

“When did you know,” she said, her voice as colorless as sarsa crystal.

“I’ve suspected since five men died in a Vintran alley. A Sharnn cape is almost the only way such stealth could have been achieved. Almost.”

“Pattern-man—” began Faen, her voice hard with disbelief.

“Gently, daughter,” said Kayle. “Ryth’s pattern gift fails when he is part of it. You, of all people, should know that.”

Faen looked away, her face suddenly expressionless. “And then? When did you know?”

“When he lost me in the Topaz Arcade, I almost knew. The cape again. I almost conceived. Almost, but not quite ...” Ryth looked at her with eyes that were no longer green. “Even when I touched him, shaved his dyed hair, I—I could not conceive of my brother trapped among shadows he had named. Even when I knew. I. Could. Not. Conceive.”

And Faen remembered her own mind reeling after touching the Gint, a shadow, his brother, and sensing something of Ryth’s pouring radiance, light-shot shadow shining and her mind refusing to acknowledge, to know, and darkness exploding in welcome oblivion. Even when she woke in Ryth’s arms, she had refused to know the impossible link between her lover and a gint.

She was as willfully blind as he.

In spite of her pain, Faen’s hand moved over Ryth’s bare arm in t’sil’ne curves that spoke of realization and need. With an inarticulate sound, the Sharnn gathered her fingertips together and held them against his lips. Still afraid of mindtouch, he murmured against her palm.

“My limitations and my brother nearly destroyed your people, yet you don’t turn away from me.” Ryth looked at her with eyes that again conceived of light. “I did not hope for such forgiveness.”

“From a Sandoliki?” The sweet-sad irony of Faen’s laughter rippled like his cape. “It is one of our thousand moments. T’mara’hki, the moment when we forgive all, even ourselves ... the Malian name for unity.” Her fingers moved within his grasp, silent pressures that spoke of everything he had conceived and more, for she was Malian. “Your brother didn’t divide Malia into substance and shadow, the living and the merely existing. Without that division, the Gint would have had nothing to mould with his deadly concept.”

Faen leaned toward him, unsmiling and serene, her long hair redolent of zamay and night. “Don’t take onto yourself more than is deserved.” Then she smiled slightly. “And I will tell you how much that is.”

Faen’s hand moved, supple and warm, devastating. The Sharnn cape opened, allowing her closer. Kayle waited for a long moment before he gave in to Carifil pressure.

“You told us that you had lost something. You found it?”

“Yes,” said the Sharnn, his voice thinned in spite of Faen’s warmth spreading through his body. His eyes lingered over the face of his dead brother, a face that could have been his. Faen’s body moved, comforting.

“It was just a game, n’ies?” Ryth said softly. “A Sharnn game.” Then he spoke again in sinuous Sharnn words that no one but he understood ... or wanted to.

As though impelled by Sharnn curses, the Carifil silently left the clearing. One by one they vanished into the tere grove’s rustling intimacy. At the edge of the fragrant darkness, a Carifil stopped and turned toward them.

“I regret your brother’s death,” Kayle said haltingly.

Ryth’s cape pulsed once, a wash of dull silver, then it was as still as the windless night.

“My brother died long ago, on Sharn, when he named all of his shadows.”

Kayle looked for a long moment at them, standing so close that they were one, and hoped that one day he would understand both of them, or either. But not now, in darkness except for triple moons and sarsa.

“Breathe the white wind,” said Kayle softly, Nendleti farewell.

Then Kayle turned and walked into the grove where tere and zamay and Carifil waited.

Faen’s head moved and her earrings sang of a child still alive within her. She pulled Ryth’s hands down, holding them against the unborn life.

“Kayle still doesn’t understand,” said Faen.

Ryth’s hands moved, knowing as only a Sharnn’s could be. “Galactics,” murmured Ryth against her neck, “believe that the universe is beyond human conception. And Sharnn believe that the universe is shaped by human conception.”

She turned in his arms to face him, alive as only a Malian could be.

“It will be the greatest game in Sharnn memory to find out which concept is stronger,” whispered Ryth, breath warm against her lips.

“And the most dangerous?” Faen said, breath returning his warmth.



“Always.”

The Sharnn cape licked out, folding around Faen with a strength as gentle and unyielding as Ryth’s body. She moved sinuously, warmth sliding over warmth in a seamless joining.

The cape blazed with a light that cast no shadows.