

The Jaws Of Menx

Ann Maxwell
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A STRANGE, ASCENDING HOWL ECHOED FROM THE MOUNTAINS ...

Shiya looked at Rhane and said, "They're coming."

Standing in the gloom, waiting uneasily to meet a legend, Rhane asked, "I don't see any restraints. How do you control them?"

"I don't."

Suddenly Rhane wondered if this was what Lor Jastre had meant when he asked Shiya if she had an unpleasant accident prepared for Rhane. Ifreskans were no myth, they were among the most intelligent, savage predators on the known planets. With rising anger, he turned on Shiya, reached for her.

"Don't move!"

Something in her voice penetrated his anger and he stood absolutely still.

"Slowly, very slowly, turn your face toward the rocks. You won't see anything, but the reskans are here."

He did as he was told and at first saw nothing. Then the top of the nearest boulder leaped off and landed less than a hand's length from him, and Rhane found himself staring into the eyes of a Menx reskan, the eyes of death—

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Rhane examined the slender, long-fingered woman who stood so quietly within the pool of light just outside his room. It was too late for a casual caller; nor was she dressed in the manner of Siolan women.

"How may I please you?" said Rhane, using the neutral words of Galactic Courtesy.

The woman's elegant hands moved in a gesture of gratitude and, oddly, regret. When she spoke aloud, it was in the language of Siol, his native planet.

"First Son's First Son, I am Meriel. I would share images of the planet Menx."

Rhane could not control the quick tensing of his body at hearing the name of Menx, deathplace of two en Jacaroens. He examined the woman more closely, but neither her clothes nor her words revealed her planet of origin.

"Images?" asked Rhane in unaccented Galactic, refusing the stranger's offer of his native language.

"Yes." The woman called Meriel almost smiled. "May I touch your hand, Rhane en Jacaroen, and share images of Menx?"

The woman's request was made in Siolan, couched as a petition from a member of the ruled class to one of the rulers. An en Jacaroen could not refuse the request. Even so, Rhane hesitated, searching his instincts for any sense of personal danger. His reluctance showed in the slowness with which he extended his left hand.

Meriel's long, long fingers closed around Rhane's wrist, and the world exploded into images of the planet where Rhane's father and half brother had died. He saw khi in bloom, a silver lake smoking in the dawn, blue-black boulders holding up the empty sky, and his father's eyes, yellow-gray, and Cezine's just gray. Menx. The sound of children's laughter and the silence of death.

After the first overwhelming moment, Rhane realized that the images were his own memories of his half brother's young laughter and the silky feel of Shiya, alien Shiya, more alluring than any child had a right to be. Cezine laughing, melting, dying. Dead.

Rhane yanked free of the woman's grasp. She did not resist, though his roughness must have hurt. When she smiled, Rhane looked away, not wanting to see such sadness.

"Yes, you are Rhane en Jacaroen. You, too, have learned that Menx is another name for death." Meriel's voice changed. She spoke in perfect High Galactic. "Forgive the intimacy, although I did warn you."

Rhane was too shaken to speak or even to examine the ramifications of the woman's words. With an effort, he met her glance. Though he was taller than the Concord average, he had to look up slightly. Her eyes were neither purple nor blue but rather a restless combination of both, like Menx skies.

Suddenly Rhane sensed great age, an intuition that seemed to spread through him from the wrist Meriel had held. He bowed to her in Siol's reflexive respect for longevity. Her fingertip touched his forehead in proper response.

At the instant their flesh met, images passed too rapidly for Rhane to assess, yet somehow he knew that she had answered all of the questions he was going to ask.

"What—who are you?" asked Rhane, struggling to control his voice.

"I'm a Carifil." Meriel paused, then almost smiled when Rhane showed no comprehension. "Wait." She held up a long-fingered hand. "Think about the word 'Carifil' for a moment."

Rhane thought. At first there was only an inchoate sense of borrowed memory. He repeated the word in his mind, trying to focus his thoughts. Knowledge crystallized, prismatic with the colors of a thousand planets. Carifil. A combination of unusual mental gifts and unflinching discipline. Carifil came from every planet but owed allegiance to none. Their loyalty was to the ideal of a Concord of Planets, a Concord whose first article of faith was that each race had a unique, invaluable contribution to make to the future of intelligent life, a contribution that must be nurtured and protected. That, at least, was the ideal. The reality was sometimes a planet like Menx

"Menx," said Rhane. "You're here because I requested use of the Menx Access."

"Yes." Meriel paused. "Concord made a mistake with Menx."

"A mistake? How?"

"That's what we want to know," said Meriel dryly. "In two Centrex months, Menx will be offered—and will refuse—Concord membership. We'll survive that, naturally. But Menx won't."

"Scavengers," said Rhane, distaste flattening the customary depth of his voice.

"Exactly. Once Menx's Century of Protection ends"—long fingers hesitated—"the Menx Access will be destroyed and the planet will be abandoned. Scavengers will come down in lightships. Menx is temperate, varied and metal-rich. A prize for cultures that require conquest or expansion or simply change."

Unconsciously, Rhane moved his head in a curt gesture of rejection. Like the Carifil, he believed that each planet, each culture, was both pragmatically and philosophically vital to the Concord.

"Why?" demanded Rhane. "Why would Menx refuse to join the Concord?"

"We don't know."

"What about their T'aeln mentor? Can't Lor Jastre influence his Menx wards to accept Concord?"

Elegant fingers moved ambiguously. Meriel's eyes shifted from blue to near-purple, reminding Rhane vividly of Menx's twilight skies.

"The T'aeln mentor is trying to convince the Concord that Menx should be proscribed or at least prohibited until the source of Menx melting sickness is understood and eradicated. Thus, the question of Menx's acceptance or rejection of Concord would not arise," she said.

Rhane tried not to think of Cezine, his half brother, melting into shapelessness and death, his last moments lost forever on an abandoned planet. The woman's lips shaped another sad smile. She spoke in a language Rhane had never heard, and her fingers rested for an instant on his wrist. Comfort spread from her touch, radiating through him.

"I know," she said softly, sadly. "Your half brother melted on Menx."

"He was alone," said Rhane. "No en Jacaroen was there to bring his last cup or his death moments back to Siol. No en Jacaroen has even stood where Cezine died."

Rhane's hands flexed in unconscious emotion. When he realized what he was doing, he concealed his

hands in the enormous pockets of his Siolan desert shirt.

"I doubt that anyone but an en Jacaroen could appreciate what Cezine's unrecorded death means to the en Jacaroen nation," Rhane said carefully. "And to Siol. The lack of Cezine's death moments threatens our very history. It's a loose thread that could unravel everything back to the beginning of time. No en Jacaroen has ever died so ... alone."

"Yet you waited eight years to return to Menx."

The implicit question tugged at Rhane's control. "I explained that to the Council."

The woman waited.

"By Siolan law, only an adult is qualified to understand and enshrine an en Jacaroen's death," said Rhane, his voice flat. "Normally, I wouldn't have been considered an adult for seven more Siolan years. But rumors of Menx reached Siol. We were afraid that Cezine's deathplace would be lost to us before I came of age." Rhane moved with barely restrained impatience. "In more than one hundred thousand years of civilization, Siolans have learned that even dogma must sometimes bow to necessity. My training was rushed. I was declared adult. I petitioned for use of the Menx Access. I'm waiting for my answer."

"The Council refused your request."

Meriel's soft voice curled around Rhane like a shroud. His hands jerked out of his pockets.

"They can't do that! Don't they understand? I must go! Our history is more necessary than other planets' religions. Our en Jacaroens are our—our—" Rhane groped for Galactic words to convey Siolan necessity.

"Gods?" offered the woman.

"No. We have other gods. The en Jacaroens are Siol's binding force, men and women whose ancestors stretch back into unimaginable time. Their deaths are as important to us as their lives, for without one the other is meaningless, and then we are meaningless, too."

Rhane looked up slightly, searching the woman's face for signs of understanding. "Surely the Council can accept that, even if they can't understand it."

"The Council understands that there is only one direct living descendant of the RA Jacaroen. You. What if you die on Menx?"

"There are five secondary and seventeen tertiary lines of en Jacaroen descent," said Rhane tightly. "Shall I recite their names and priorities?"

The woman's laugh was small, almost wistful. "What of your own moment of death? Who shall carry it to the en Jacaroen shrine if you die on Menx?"

Rhane had no answer. The woman's eyes seemed to search beneath his skin, probing for words that he did not have.

"What if I guarantee that your death moment is not lost?" she asked.

"Impossible," said Rhane. "The quest is mine. It can't be shared. I must go alone to Menx."

"Physically, yes." The woman's long fingers seemed to trace enigmas in the lime-green light. "There is another way. You have an unusual shape of mind. Very promising, though equally difficult."

Rhane frowned, baffled and uneasy. "Mind? Do you mean—?"

Psi.

Meriel finished Rhane's thought for him, then withdrew as deftly as she had come. Even so, the inarticulate, untrained outburst of Rhane's thought/emotion made her wince with pain in the instant before she shut him out.

"A very unusual shape of mind," she repeated. "Doesn't Siol train psi in its citizens?"

"No."

"Is psi tabu?"

"No."

The woman waited, silently asking.

"We don't believe in psi," said Rhane curtly.

"Oh." Her tone was that of a person who had just been told that someone did not believe in gravity. "Fascinating." Then, hastily, "Apologies and regrets, Rhane. We didn't know. There are so many planets, so many societies, so many beliefs ... so little time since you requested use of the Menx Access. We

meant no offense.”

“There is no offense between citizens of the Concord,” said Rhane, automatically using the correct phrase from Galactic Courtesy. “We of Siol recognize that beliefs vary among worlds. We’re not threatened by what other cultures believe.”

“Neither threatened nor instructed,” murmured the woman. “Ah, well, I suppose inflexibility is better than hostility.” She tilted her head aside as though listening to distant music. Her long fingers moved in counterpoint to her thoughts, agreeing and disagreeing with equal elegance. “Yes,” she murmured to herself, “we can only try.”

Rhane shifted his weight, not bothering to conceal his impatience. The doorway hummed slightly, reminding him that it had been held open for an unusual length of time. With abrupt decision, he stepped back and gestured the tall woman into his suite. The door hissed shut, closing out the pale-green light of Siol’s eighth and largest moon.

Silently, Rhane set out the thorn wine and sand bread that Siolan ritual required every guest be offered. Meriel drank and ate quickly, binding herself to Siolan custom, and binding him as well.

“The Council voted against your request,” said Meriel, holding the thin carved crystal glass that was now empty, “But the Carifil control the Accesses. If you agree to help us, we’ll see that you get to Menx.”

“Help you? How?”

“Information,” she said succinctly.

“I doubt that I can tell you anything that the T’aeln don’t know about Menx.”

“The T’aeln don’t seem to know anything useful.”

Though Meriel did not move, Rhane sensed a strand of danger as clearly as though it were wire drawn about his throat. In the instant that the feeling passed, he realized that the danger did not involve him. The woman was merely angry with a situation that she was powerless to alter. Her feeling of impotent rage was one Rhane understood; he had felt it too many times since Cezine had died alone.

“In fact,” said Meriel, continuing as though the moment of anger had never intervened, “the T’aeln have no interest in the highland tribes and their god myths. Normally that wouldn’t matter—more than seventy percent of the population of Menx live in the flatlands. But the situation is no longer normal. It’s imperative that we know more about the highlands.”

“Why? The First and Second Contact teams didn’t think it was necessary to go beyond the beginning of the mure forest.”

“We thought we would have time, all the time in the Concord, We were wrong. Now we have to learn why we failed, quickly, before Menx is abandoned. Then perhaps the same mistake won’t be repeated in the future, and another world won’t have to be left to scavengers.”

The elegant fingers moved restlessly, as though with a life of their own.

“You are one of the few Concord survivors of that planet,” she said, her voice low but clear. “We need every bit of information you have.”

Rhane thought of the eight years since his father and half brother had died on Menx. The planet had been far from his mind, deliberately so. By choice and necessity, he had spent the years preparing himself to be the RA Jacaroen, hereditary alter ego of Siol, and symbolic focus of Siol’s continuity.

And now Menx was here again in the form of an alien woman, asking him to remember all the things he wanted to forget.

“I don’t know much more about Menx now than when I left eight years ago,” Rhane said. “I’ve concentrated my studies on my own planet’s history. A history,” he added, “that is quite extensive.”

“You’ve regularly requested Menx data.”

“My teachers have, yes. They knew I’d have to go back for Cezine’s death moments.”

The woman’s fingers touched the empty crystal glass, then closed around it with a precise strength that was reflected in her voice.

“Tell me what conclusions you’ve reached about Menx.”

“Conclusions?” said Rhane, startled. “None.”

A shadow of amusement crossed Meriel’s face. “Your mind is more complex than you realize, even

though it's not wholly formed." Her fingertip rubbed over the rim of the crystal glass, leaving behind a musical vibration. "Opinions, then. Surely you admit to having them?"

She looked up, probing Rhane with alien eyes.

"Menx is irrational," Rhane said, dismissing the words even as he spoke them, "but that's to be expected of a theocracy."

"Irrational. How?"

Rhane allowed impatience to creep into his voice. "As a whole, the lowland society is only a few steps above survival. There's little margin of fat. Yet they ship nearly one quarter of their crops to the highlands—and get nothing in return! The caravans come back empty, not even the clinking metal that passes for local credits to show for their journey."

"The crops are a tithe to the living gods of Menx."

"That's what the Contact teams decided."

"But?" prodded the woman gently.

"A tithe is like any other form of taxation or tribute. It must be a survival positive or the culture will collapse. Yet the highlands give no service in return for the lowland tithe. There's no benefit to the lowlands that equals their loss of food."

"None that we know of," said Meriel.

Rhane's shoulders moved in a Siolan gesture of impatience. "Anything that's worth nearly one quarter of a society's output is worth Concord attention."

"The T'aeln mentors disagree. They say the highland gods are legend and superstition, nothing more."

"Surely it wouldn't have been difficult to ascertain what actually happened to the lowland 'tithe.'"

"Odd, isn't it," murmured the woman, holding the glass up to the light, "the T'aeln disregard of Menx cultural dynamics."

"T'ael is noted for its xenophobia," said Rhane shortly. "Or perhaps they are simply contemptuous. They have reason to be. Though Siol is justly proud of its hundred thousand years of en Jacaroen civilization, that's less than half of T'ael's unbroken cultural history." Abruptly, Rhane's voice changed. As an en Jacaroen, he appreciated historical ironies. "The oldest, most arrogant race in the Concord," he said, "joined by circumstance to what is probably the youngest and most defensive race—Menx. Not an easy marriage. I wonder why T'ael didn't let some other planet guide Menx into Concord. It would have been better for Menx, at least."

The sound of Meriel's finger moving over thin crystal shivered in the room, reminding Rhane that he was not alone. He heard her soft laughter.

"I'm pleased," he said coolly, "that I amuse you."

"Not you, young en Jacaroen. The T'aeln race. They have ninety-seven words for insanity—and seem to practice all of them."

Rhane, remembering his brief stay on T'ael, could only agree. "They're obsessed with insanity. Or is it sanity that compels them?" He smiled slightly. "Did you know that many of those ninety-seven words describe physical appearance? They believe that sanity and phenotype are inseparable."

Crystal hummed gently beneath Meriel's long fingers, reminding Rhane of the Menx wiris his father had pursued so relentlessly.

"Over two hundred thousand years of unbroken civilization ... who is to say that the T'aeln are wrong in their beliefs?" asked Meriel without looking up from the crystal glass. "They've made an exhaustive study of their own genes."

"Perhaps sanity and phenotype are indeed inseparable," said Rhane dryly, "but only on T'ael. Their prejudices about physical appearance make life very uncomfortable for those of less than master T'aeln phenotype."

"Like the Menx?"

"T'aeln are impartial—they believe everyone is inferior to them. The people of Menx aren't especially despised."

"Or loved?"

Crystal sang again, softly. Rhane caught himself listening with too much intensity, as though the

vibrations of a ceremonial glass could tell him why Meriel was deftly leading him to talk about a time and a people he wanted to forget.

“What do you want from me?” he asked with an abruptness that was the prerogative of a future RA Jacaroen. “All my memories of Menx and T’ael are simulcubed in the Concord files on Centrex.”

“All?”

Crystal trembled with delicate music. Rhane did not want to remember. Shiya had been young, but Menx years were not the same as Siolan. She was neither child nor woman, rather a fascinating combination. He did not blame himself for wanting her. He did blame himself for what happened. He should have known—

“Some of my memories had no historical context,” said Rhane, his voice untroubled in spite of his inner turmoil.

The woman’s breath came out in a sigh that was echoed by crystal vibrations.

“If you were to go to Menx—”

“You said the Council refused—”

“If you were to go to Menx,” repeated Meriel, overriding Rhane’s objection with a single hooded glance, “you would need a guide. The girl who helped your father—what was her name?”

“Shiya,” Rhane said tightly.

“Yes. Shiya. She has built a home on Mure Lake.”

Meriel’s eyes watched intently, but Rhane showed nothing of his inner emotions. He left his sleepless brother by Mure Lake. He also had left Shiya, but she had been asleep, smiling. His young brother was dead, and Shiya was alive.

“I doubt if Shiya would agree to guide me,” said Rhane evenly. “I understand that the shayl’m are avoiding all off-world contact now.”

“Yes. Very much yes. Yet there is always a way. Are you familiar with the shayl’m custom of death debt?” asked Meriel, her voice as neutral as Rhane’s.

Rhane frowned, trying to remember, but all that he could think of was Shiya’s body lit by flames and then Cezine’s face, light and shadow and sorrow.

“No,” said Rhane. “I don’t remember it.”

“If you leave a child in the care of a shayl’m tribesman, and the child dies, the tribesman owes you a death debt. Not necessarily money,” said Meriel, accurately assessing Rhane’s distaste. “A service. Anything you chose. As your half brother died while in the care of—”

“I can find my way to Mure Lake without a guide,” interrupted Rhane coldly. “Besides, eight years ago Shiya was no more than a child herself. She was not responsible for my brother’s death.”

“By Menx standards,” said Meriel, “Shiya was an adult.”

Rhane knew he could hardly argue that point. “I can find Mure Lake without a guide,” he repeated. “It’s the planet I’m having trouble getting to, remember?”

Meriel ignored Rhane’s abrupt manner. She turned the glass in her hands, staring at the light thrown off by carved crystal facets. The glass coruscated, turning faster and faster while her hands faded into shadow and her voice spoke softly.

“Mure Lake is only the beginning. Cezine died in a highland region known as the Jaws of Menx. The exact location is called the Fountains of Madness.”

Rhane felt uneasiness crawl like a many-legged insect over his spine. The brilliant crystal turning, the woman’s alien voice, the room in shadow.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

“The Fountains are just beyond a highland city called Shaylmir,” continued Meriel in her soft, relentless voice.

“Lies. Why are you lying to me? No alien ever has gone beyond First Pass, much less over the Ghost Pass into the Jaws of Menx. As for that city—‘Shaylmir’ means ‘Home of the Gods.’ It’s a pious legend with no more reality than the mythical Menx reskans.”

“You’re very sure,” said Meriel. “Have you been to the Jaws of Menx?”

“Have you?” retorted Rhane.

“No. But I’m certain something is there. Did you know that a Concord medical team went to Menx to study melting sickness?”

“Yes.”

Rhane’s answer was as harsh as his thoughts of Cezine alone on an alien planet, melting into hideous death. The woman did not notice Rhane’s grimace; her focus was turned inward and her words were as unflinching as the lines around her mouth.

“The medical team found that melting sickness was unrelated to the Access locations. Melting sickness doesn’t come from a lethal blend of Menx and Concord viral life.”

Rhane listened, trying desperately not to remember what he knew about melting sickness ... Cezine.

“Melting sickness is endemic to Menx,” continued Meriel, “but not to the lowland cities. It spreads down out of the highlands, out of the Jaws.”

“How?” said Rhane. Then, “The caravans.”

“Probably. We can’t be sure. Volunteers from the medical team set out for the Jaws. Three of those volunteers were Carifil.”

Rhane was drawn out of his own memories by the sharp keening of crystal beneath the woman’s fingers.

“What did the Carifil discover?”

“Death.” Meriel’s voice thinned, then resumed its normal low tone. “Not right away, of course. Their skull transceivers worked long enough for us to trace their progress through the Mountains of Light, from First Pass to the Ghost Pass, and on into the very center of the Jaws. There, one by one, the transceivers failed. Skull transceivers are powered by the individual’s bioelectric field. If the person dies, so does the transceiver.”

“Melting sickness?” asked Rhane after a long silence.

“Probably. One of the team was showing symptoms before First Pass. But more important even than their deaths is the fact that all psi communication with them stopped after the Ghost Pass. The three Carifil were still alive, but we could not touch their minds.”

Meriel’s unwavering stare made Rhane want to look away.

“You don’t understand, do you?” she asked.

Meriel’s pale fingertips touched Rhane’s shoulder. Desolation moved within him, an emptiness that began to fill with fear. Her fear. In that instant he knew there was no explanation for the absence of contact with the three Carifil. Even if they were in a deep coma or had folded in upon themselves in total mental retreat, some vestige of energy would have remained to tell their psi monitor that they were alive.

Yet there had been nothing. There was neither precedent nor rationale for such a failure of mental contact.

“Melting sickness?” asked Rhane again.

“Possibly,” said Meriel, but her fingertips told him that she did not believe in such a simple explanation.

“Then what?”

“We don’t know. We believe,” she said and paused, letting the silent communication of her touch stress that belief was not fact, “that the answer is in the Jaws of Menx. Many answers are there, including, perhaps, the answer to Menx’s rejection of Concord.”

Meriel’s touch seemed to burn through Rhane’s thin desert shirt with a heat that owed nothing to sensuality. Images poured through his mind too quickly to count or comprehend. The flood ended abruptly, leaving a residue of certainty in Rhane’s mind: melting sickness spread down from the highlands rather than up from the Accesses; mental contact ended somewhere in the highlands; and Cezine had died in the very center of the Jaws of Menx.

“Impossible,” whispered Rhane. “How did he get through the Ghost Pass? Even my father gave up trying to reach the Jaws.”

“Cezine died at the Fountains of Madness,” said Meriel.

Rhane looked through her, absorbing her words. The Jaws of Menx. Melting sickness. Shaylmir. Cezine. The Fountains of Madness. Death. It could not have been worse. Now he understood why the

Council was so sure that he would die on Menx that it had risked Siol's wrath by refusing to let him use the Menx Access.

"How do you know Cezine died in the Jaws?" demanded Rhane after his long silence.

"Lor Jastre told the Council while it was weighing your request."

"He told the Council, but not me. Why not?"

"Would it have made any difference in your petition?"

"No." Rhane felt suddenly tired, besieged by circumstances he had never asked for and could not evade. He pushed aside his feeling of resentment. He had enjoyed the privileges of being an en Jacaroen; now he must take up the responsibilities. "No," he repeated. "I still must go. If I can't retrieve Cezine's death, the hundred-thousand-year en Jacaroen rule ends. Siol will have to adjust to the se Jacaroen or even the gan Jacaroen, and neither clan is noted for stability. There would be war. Do you understand now?" he asked softly, focusing on the alien woman who had told him of his death sentence. "I must try. A clan that can't match lives with deaths isn't fit to govern itself, much less a world."

"Does power mean so much to you?" asked Meriel, her eyes indigo in the room's bland white light.

"No. I'll rule as my father did—symbolically. Other en Jacaroens will hold practical power."

"But you're taking a suicidal risk to ensure your own succession. All that, for a mere symbol?"

"My life against the continuity of Siol's history. A fair balance."

"To a Siolan."

Rhane shrugged. Other races died for their gods or their dreams or their greed or because one moon eclipsed another. He did not expect to understand the imperatives of other cultures, nor did he expect his own to be understood.

"Everything is moral somewhere in the universe," said Rhane, repeating the Concord creed of tolerance, "and nothing is immoral everywhere."

Meriel's lips shaped a thin smile. "In a few maturities that thought won't comfort you." Then, before Rhane could respond, she said, "You're willing to risk death for Siol's unbroken history. Are you willing to change your ideas of reality for Siol?"

"Of course," said Rhane impatiently.

"Of course." Meriel's voice was both sad and gently mocking. "Don't be so certain, young en Jacaroen. Most people find death easier than change."

"I'll do whatever I must to stand on Cezine's deathplace," Rhane said. His voice was emotionless, utterly certain.

Meriel's eyes seemed to penetrate as deeply as her touch had. Rhane had a distinct feeling of being measured on an unknown scale. Then Meriel's eyes closed and she said a phrase Rhane did not understand.

"What?" asked Rhane.

"Nothing," she sighed. "A prayer, a curse, a benediction. Nothing at all." Her eyes opened clear and hard and very blue. "Prepare yourself for change, Rhane en Jacaroen. We can't make a Carifil out of you in the time we have," she said grimly, "but we can guarantee that by the time we're finished, at least one Siolan will believe in psi."

Rhane's yellow eyes narrowed, concealing his reaction. "How will that benefit Siol?"

"You'll go to Menx as you hoped, but with one difference. I'll touch your mind, see Menx as you have seen it, learn what you have learned about Menx."

"And Cezine?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We'll teach you how to use your mind. Then I'll know if you are dying, and if you die ... if you die I'll be with you, in your mind. I'll take your death moments to the en Jacaroen shrine, a sharing such as Siol has never known in its hundred thousand years. Would that satisfy en Jacaroen necessity?"

"My death shared ..." murmured Rhane. "What about you? Won't being in my mind when I die affect you?"

Meriel's eyes seemed to withdraw. "Yes," said the woman simply. "I'll be affected."

Though Meriel said no more, Rhane sensed that her risk would be almost as great as his, "Is Menx so important to you?"

"Understanding Menx is."

"I can't guarantee that I'll give you enough information to understand Menx."

"And I can't guarantee that mental contact will be possible in the Jaws."

Rhane hesitated, watching the crystal turn brilliantly within the woman's hands.

"Are you certain that I have enough psi?" asked Rhane at last.

Meriel almost laughed. "More than enough. More than I have."

Rhane looked up, startled, but the woman said nothing more.

"Do whatever you have to," said Rhane abruptly, "but get me to Menx."

Meriel's hand moved; crystal spun through the air. Rhane caught the glass expertly. Before he could say anything, the woman had gone, leaving him alone in a silence punctuated by the sharp cry of crystal beneath his fingers. He turned the glass over and over, staring down at its brilliant shroud of light, wondering what he had agreed to.

II

It was nearly sunset when Rhane first saw the Mountains of Light. Range after range they rose, serrated walls of stone and ice that separated the highlands from the lowlands where Menx cities coiled like creamy snakes along the humid river margins. The mountaintops burned orange and gold, lines of flame frozen against an amethyst sky.

Beneath the flyer the land lifted in long, gentle swells that gradually became the foothills of the Mountains of Light. The countryside was open, but no signs of people showed. Menx was thinly populated, with most of the people concentrated along lowland rivers. Except for droves of wild loris, Rhane had seen no signs of life since midday.

Yet he had the uneasy feeling that he was not alone. He put the flyer on hover and looked back through the transparent canopy. His intent, pale eyes saw neither movement nor a telltale flash of metal. Behind him there was only empty sky and a rumpled plain of smokegrass motionless beneath the orange light of a falling sun. Ahead, nothing moved up the long rise into the wooded foothills. He was definitely alone. Whoever had been following him had given up when he crossed into the tribal lands of the shayl'm.

Rhane pulled a caplike arrangement of metal and crystal wires onto his head. The psitran was still new to him, a tool and a concept with which he was not really at ease. He glanced, around once more, quickly, then settled back into his straps and concentrated on the code that would link him to Meriel.

The contact was immediate and clear. Rhane wondered which of the thousands of Concord planets Meriel was on, then rejected the thought as irrelevant. He focused his mind on the highly compressed mental language of the Carifil. With his simple matrix of mindspeech went multilevel images and emotions, an edited version of the hours since he had stepped into an Access on Siol and emerged an instant later on Menx.

I was followed until I crossed the Shadow River. Apparently that was the boundary separating lowland from highland Menx. The flyer still works, but it won't be long before I'm walking.

There was a pause while Meriel digested Rhane's sensory impressions, as well as his haunted feeling of other life watching him and the undercurrent of angry rage of Cezine's death that the very smells of Menx provoked in Rhane.

No questions, responded Meriel, but her words were rich with sympathy and concern. Then, almost at the level of reflex, *Guard your back*.

The contact dissolved, leaving Rhane alone again. He pulled off the psitran and pressed key points along its glistening structure. The psitran reshaped itself into an armband that fit snugly beneath the sleeve of his shirt.

With long, hard fingers, Rhane rubbed through his hair to his scalp, trying to ease the headache that had not left him since the moment Meriel had begun his education into the demanding intricacies of psi.

Six Centrex weeks had passed since then, or 5.24 Siolan, but he was on Menx now, and must think in Menx terms. Nearly seven weeks, then. Seven weeks of neuro-learning and intense mental gymnastics to utilize the psi potential he had inherited from a mother he had never seen.

At least, he assumed it was his mother's legacy, for his father had lacked even the low-level empathy common to most races of men. And Cezine ... who knew what Cezine might or might not have become if he had survived Menx?

Deliberately, Rhane turned his mind away from the unhealed wounds of the past. But it was not as easy on Menx as it had been on Siol. In Rhane's mind Menx and Cezine were inextricably mixed, murderer and murdered.

Rhane forced himself to look ahead to the place where the Mountains of Light leaped out of the twilight, their peaks fiery with a day that had long since fled the plains. With a weariness only partly due to the strain of adjusting to an alien planet, Rhane pressed the flyer's yellow go-bar.

The machine shifted from hover into forward motion with a thin whine. The change in the engine's sound told Rhane that the flyer was approaching the end of its range. On Menx, city technology did not function beyond a certain altitude. Menx gods did not welcome those who came riding on machines.

Rhane chewed on a handful of nuts native to a world that was light-centuries distant from Menx. The nuts contained nourishment and a mild stimulant. He needed both. The Concord immunization medicine had reacted badly with his metabolism, costing him two weeks of acute illness and reducing his margin of safety to nothing. In sixteen Menx days, the Century of Protection would be over. Scavengers would descend. He had to be off-planet before then.

With subtle shifts of his body, Rhane eased muscles that still ached from the aftermath of exotic fevers. As he did, he cursed Menx's omnipresent, irrational religion. A quick shuttle flight into the Jaws and back would have accomplished his goal with a minimum of risk. But he might as well wish that Cezine were still alive, that there were no death moments to collect.

The Mountains of Light lifted incandescent heads above the horizon. Rhane's eyes kept returning to the jagged lines of upthrust rocks. He had seen many planets, many varieties of geography, but the Mountains of Light called to him as nothing had but Siol's endless deserts.

The mountains were first to receive light, last to let it go. Such shining isolation seemed to require a presence greater than that of mere man. Add to that the violent weather shifts created by the mountains themselves, and the hallucinations brought on by oxygen deprivation in the high passes, and the result was the shayl, the mythical living gods of Menx.

That was what the official Concord survey had concluded after First and Second Contact, but Rhane could not help remembering the first time he had looked at the mountains eight years ago. He had felt as though they returned his scrutiny, if not his admiration. Even now he felt irritable, ill at ease, as though the mountains watched him. It was an absurd thought, mingled somehow with the knowledge that Cezine's ashes had been blown throughout the ramparts by restless alien winds.

The whine of a warning signal dragged Rhane out of the unfinished past. A quick glance at the control grid showed him that he had only a few minutes before the flyer would reach its final stop high in the foothill forest.

Reflexively, Rhane glanced over his shoulder once more. He saw nothing unexpected. He silently cursed the flyer's unsophisticated scanning equipment and his own inexperienced psi. With a final, unconvinced glance over his shoulder, Rhane settled himself for the landing.

Like every other aspect of the flyer, the landing process was automatic and relatively primitive. The ground skids touched with a jolt that made Rhane appreciate the safety harness that he wore. He unstrapped quickly, collected his backpack and stepped down the scarred plastic ramp that the flyer had extruded on landing.

The air was cool and light, revitalizing after the dense wet heat of the lowlands. Rhane stretched, restoring suppleness to his body after the long flight. Though he appeared to be fully relaxed, his eyes surveyed the nearby land with the cold attention of one who intends to survive the ambushes of circumstance and man.

A wind exhaled out of the dense mure forest, causing a thin stirring of gold leaves. The tall upland

smokegrass around the flyer bent gently, randomly, responding to the wind that played around the edges of the mure trees. From a nearby grove a wiri called in musical notes. A distant wiri answered softly. With a rainbow flash of wings, the first wiri flew toward the answer, calling with melodic urgency.

Satisfied that there was no immediate threat, Rhane pulled on his backpack. He had spotted the overgrown trail that led to Shiya's lakeside home. As he walked beneath the golden mure trees, he wondered if there were any watchers, or if the silence was as empty as it seemed.

Moving quietly, Rhane followed the dim track between trees whose black trunks were wreathed by amber vines. Soon the trail all but vanished. He began to wonder if Meriel was wrong; it looked as though no one had been on this path since the long-ago summer when he and Cezine had gone eagerly toward a meeting with the half-civilized alien child who was their father's guide into the ecological wonders of the Menx highlands. Rhane had been twenty-three, six years older than Cezine. At the time, those six years had been an enormous gap separating childhood from adulthood, yet there had been unusual affection between the half brothers. With his emerging adult perspective, Rhane had sensed that in a few years the gap between Cezine and himself would shrink to insignificance, a mere blink in life spans that would stretch across at least six hundred years.

But for Cezine there had been no six maturities of living. He did not survive to measure the miracle of Concord extender drugs. An unlucky, unlikely event had killed him, a disease that was impervious to the immunizations Concord had developed from the life forms of several thousand planets. The fact that other off-worlders and many Menx had also succumbed to that first unexpected epidemic of melting sickness was no comfort to Rhane. He had not been there to hold his younger brother. He had not been there to gather Cezine's last cup, his last words, his death.

Only Shiya had been with Cezine, alien Shiya, offspring of Menx, child of the shayl myth. She had been no older than Cezine. What comfort could she have given to a boy whose life had unfolded into a universe of withering indifference?

Rhane stumbled over a root and automatically caught himself. Resolutely, he put away thoughts of Cezine, reserving his attention solely for the overgrown trail. He walked quickly into the mure forest until it seemed to divide before his long strides and flow by him like a river of gold. He was enclosed in color and silence, and then he heard alien songs sung by invisible wiris. The songs were extraordinary, haunting, almost human in their emotion. Like his father, Rhane wondered what kind of evolution could evoke tragedy from the mouths of animals. Had they sung like this for Cezine? Did they sing for him now?

The path curved and the forest fell away, giving Rhane a sudden view of mist and water. Shiya's lake was twelve strides away. He heard the soft murmur of tiny waves and he remembered the afternoon Cezine and Shiya had played in the shallows. He had laughed to see their bodies burnished by sun and water, laughed and then leaped in to join their play. For a time he had shared Shiya's alien, quicksilver world and Cezine's enormous innocence. For a time all their differences had been dissolved in translucent water.

But the lake of his memories was gone, replaced by today's lake, different, older, concealed beneath a rising pale mist. He could hear no laughter, and sunlight was retreating up the flanks of distant mountains.

A question bird spoke suddenly, flying from tree to tree, glaring down at Rhane and called repeatedly in a clear, rising note that demanded the intruder's identity.

Rhane sensed something, movement or mind or both. A presence. Every reflex screamed danger, but he turned with apparent casualness, taking care to step into a deep pool of shadow as he moved. He stared into the forest down his back trail, but saw only attenuating sun and shadow patterns swaying in an invisible breeze. The air smelled of spice and crushed vine leaves and mist. He sent a careful metal probe into the forest. He sensed only the certainty that something was there, a certainty that had begun the moment he had set foot on Menx.

Motionless, Rhane waited by the lakeshore where he had once played. His Concord survival suit and his brown skin blended well within the shadow of the forest. The question bird flew closer, made bold by Rhane's sudden immobility. Fixing the human with a suspicious red eye, the bird opened its mouth and asked its sweet, imperious question. Rhane waited silently. He was tempted to try a more forceful probe,

then decided against it. Though no one expected to find psi on Menx, the Carifil had taught him that psi was always possible and often unpredictable—as it had been in his own case.

The bird's stiff lips parted, showing its ebony chisel teeth as it called yet another question. An answer came this time, the same note in a lower register. The new note was repeated four times, each call separated by longer pauses, like echoes returning from a greater and greater distance. The question bird stretched its clawed wings and calmly began to feed, gnawing at the mure bark between its feet.

There was a sudden shiver of yellow leaves. A woman stepped toward the path where Rhane stood. Rhane's yellow eyes narrowed as he focused on the woman. Then a glitter of rainbow wings against her neck made him catch his breath. A wiri rode her shoulder. The tiny animal looked directly at him for an instant, then whistled softly and seemed to vanish as the gold of its body blended perfectly into the woman's clothes.

The woman, too, was difficult to see. Even when she moved, the random gold and dark patterns of her clothes melted superbly into the forest background. When she was still, she was nearly invisible. She looked neither young nor old, and he could not sense her mind at all; she was no more than an extension of the sunset, a presence like distant fire.

Suddenly Rhane felt odd, off-balance, as though time had twisted back upon itself. He shut his eyes, realizing how very alone he was, one man on a planet that had proved deadly to aliens, one man whose brief Carifil training was as fragile as the blue ferns uncurling into the first misty hint of night. One man poised between lake and forest, day and night, present and past. Alone.

"Step out of the mure shadow, off-worlder," said the woman in excellent, unaccented Galactic. "I don't like talking to a hidden face."

Reluctantly, Rhane stepped out of the concealing gloom.

"Rhane!"

Rhane suddenly realized who stood in front of him.

"Shiya ...?" said Rhane, unable to accept that mere time could have affected the change between the child of his memory and the woman who stood before him. He spoke slowly, trying to fit past and present into a coherent whole. "You're older than my memories ... and more beautiful."

Shiya made an involuntary movement, almost as though to hold out her hands to the man who had risen out of the past as silently as mist off a hidden lake. Then she stepped back and became utterly still, watching him.

"Death ages what it doesn't take," Shiya said distinctly. "You, too, have changed. Why did you come back to the planet that killed your father and brother?"

Rhane could not name or mindtouch the emotions that churned just beneath Shiya's control, like a river turbulent beneath its winter lid of ice; but he was certain that the emotions were there. He returned her scrutiny with his own, measuring the present against the past.

Like most Menx, Shiya was tall and quick, nearly as tall as Rhane. Her skin was brown, her body slender and hard. Her hair, braided into a protective cap, showed every color from auburn to pale gold. In the twilight of forest and mist, her eyes were very dark with glints of copper.

The alien girl who had stirred two brothers' desire long ago had more than fulfilled the promise of her nascent womanhood. He did not blame Cezine for wanting her with all the force of a boy's first taste of his own manhood. No, he could not blame Cezine

"Why are you here, Concord man?" Shiya's voice was cool, as though she had taken his silence for disapproval. "Do you too wish to die before your time?"

"I came to see the place where my brother died before his."

"Menx no longer welcomes aliens," said Shiya bluntly. "Even if we did, the place where Cezine died is beyond your reach."

"I'm not asking for welcome." Rhane paused. He disliked what he was going to say, but knew that it was necessary. She would not volunteer to help him. "There is a death debt owing."

The wiri on Shiya's shoulder stirred. Even in the near-darkness beneath the trees, the animal's wings glittered. The creature crooned softly, a sound as soothing as water lapping at the shore.

"Cezine," whispered Shiya, her voice no longer hard.

The wiri cried out in a pure fall of sound that was too beautiful to be a scream.

Rhane took a step toward Shiya, regretting his request and the pain it had obviously caused. But before he could say anything, Shiya spoke.

"I accept the death debt." Her voice was flat. "What do you require of me?"

Rhane knew then that it was too late for hesitation or regret. It was done. "Take me to the place where my brother died. I must go there and back to Siol before Menx rejects Concord."

"Impossible."

"Why? Are the Fountains of Madness tabu?"

"Not in the sense you mean," said Shiya.

"Then why?"

"Simply to reach the Ghost Pass takes eleven days by borsk. To reach the Fountains ..." Shiya's voice hesitated, then resumed its former flatness. "Sixteen days, probably more. Borsks are slower than a man walking."

Rhane tried to throttle the despair he felt rising in his throat. Sixteen days. Was Siol's continuity to be destroyed simply because borsks were lumbering beasts incapable of a decent speed?

"I'll walk," Rhane said through the tightness of his throat.

"Not over the Ghost Pass. You'd be unconscious long before you reached the summit."

"There must be a way!"

Echoes of Rhane's desperation disturbed the wiri. It shifted its wings and peered at Rhane out of luminous blue eyes. It sang sweetly, compelling his attention, telling him of sunlight and warm water and drifting on a khi-scented wind. In spite of himself, Rhane listened and felt the grip of desperation loosen.

"There has to be a way," Rhane said, his voice controlled again.

Shiya stared at her wiri, then at Rhane. The wiri hummed, unconcerned by Shiya's scrutiny. Rhane was not so unaffected, but he did not show the effort it cost him to wait for Shiya's answer.

"I'll do what is possible," said Shiya at last. She glanced oddly at her wiri. "Signal tells me that more is possible than I would have believed. I hope it's enough."

Rhane did not understand anything except that Shiya had agreed to take him to the Fountains of Madness.

"Can you tell me why I must lead you, and probably myself, to an early death?" asked Shiya.

Rhane's relief was so great that he dismissed the warning in her words. "I must perform an en Jacaroen ritual that will assure the continuity of Siol's history."

Shiya absorbed Rhane's explanation in baffled silence, then sighed. "'Stand not between a believer and his shazir,'" she murmured.

"Shazir?" asked Rhane, unfamiliar with the Menx word she had used.

"God."

Rhane started to explain that the ritual sprang from political rather than divine necessity, but decided that Shiya would not understand. Menx couched everything in religious terms. If that satisfied Shiya, there was no need to explain further.

"You've picked a difficult time to appease your gods," said Shiya. "Shayl'm die of diseases brought by people like you. Even Shayl have died. Will your own gods be satisfied with thought rather than action?"

"Would yours?" said Rhane dryly, not expecting an answer.

"Some of our shazir—gods—see no division between thought and action. But most"—Shiya's hands moved ambiguously—"most see the universe on their closed eyelids, all and nothing at all. They are the easiest to appease, because they don't care."

"My gods," Rhane said emphatically, "divide thought from action. I must stand where my brother died."

"Ahhh," sighed Shiya, her voice softening. "It's a great misfortune to attract the notice of a demanding god. I pity you, son of Siol."

Rhane's eyes questioned silently, intently, as pale as the yellow moon rising beyond the lake.

"I'll take you into the Mountains of Light," said Shiya, "as I once took Cezine. And you will learn, as

Cezine and I learned, that no one passes unchanged through the Jaws of Menx.”

Cezine’s death hung between them, more real than moon or lake, expanding outward like the mist.

“Is that a threat?” asked Rhane quietly.

“It’s a fact. You’ll stand where your brother melted into death. May your gods be pleased by the results.”

“I’m in your debt—” began Rhane, but before he could finish the phrase from Courtesy, Shiya interrupted.

“No. I’ll accept no debts but the one I’ve claimed. Cezine.”

Shiya turned and walked into the mist.

Rhane hesitated before following her. He looked into each curl of mist, each pooling shadow, straining to see something he could not name. Menx made him both angry and uneasy. He resented being here, forced to confront Cezine’s memory in every twist of moisture writhing off the lake. Although he felt no immediate sense of danger, the very air seemed charged with ... imminence. Something was happening, or had happened so long ago that only reverberations remained, echoes and a malaise that gnawed at his mind.

Rhane stared at the mist as though its voiceless silver tongues were speaking the name of every off-worlder to die on Menx. He turned away, afraid that if he stayed he would hear Cezine’s name—or his own. In the distance, Shiya took a question bird’s cry, reshaped it subtly, then returned it to the mist and evening. Silence spread like twilight through the trees.

Abruptly, Rhane strode after Shiya. His reappearance along the trail set off the question bird again. Rhane tried to imitate Shiya’s liquid whistle, but could not. The bird’s sweet demand continued without pause, and Rhane walked on, cursing himself for lacking the correct answer to even such a minor Menx question.

Shiya was waiting farther down the path where it curved back toward the lake. Just beyond her was a multileveled dwelling built partly over the water. When Rhane approached, she turned and walked into the house without a word. Rhane hesitated, then followed.

The lakeside home was a curious blend of primitive Menx and advanced Concord technology. The communications device received and transmitted complete simulations, yet the decor—a mixture of native wood and stone and open spaces—was apparently static, though some inner walls and floors changed on command.

Rhane started to ask Shiya what made one expression of technology acceptable to the gods and another not, when a sound like a good-natured flute distracted him. He stopped, looking for the source of the rippling music. Shiya walked around a curving wall into another part of the house.

Rhane hesitated and would have followed, but another ripple of music called to him. A small explosion of color riveted his attention. He walked over to an open window. There, poised on the transparent sill, was a creature not much larger than his hand.

When Rhane approached, the wiri snapped open its four wings. Thousands of tiny prisms shattered light into minute, brilliant rainbows. The wiri watched Rhane out of violet eyes too big for its body. As it cocked its sleek head, another phrase of song tumbled from its oddly human mouth.

But for all its liquid music, Rhane sensed that the creature was uneasy. He stopped moving and concentrated on not frightening it away. He had never been this close to a wiri. He wondered if even his father had.

“You’re a little beauty,” Rhane said softly, using his most disarming voice. “I won’t hurt you.” Slowly Rhane extended his hand, thinking and speaking very gently. “Are you tame, little one? And are you as soft as you look?”

The creature turned its head from side to side, showing erect tasseled ears of the same silky gold as the rest of its body. It leaned forward, using its long, velvety tail as a counterweight. Instead of sniffing Rhane’s hand, the wiri put a four-fingered paw on either side of Rhane’s thumb. Rhane felt a shiver of mental touch. Automatically his newly trained defenses closed, leaving only the most superficial level of his mind open. In spite of his surprise, he managed to reassure the odd creature clinging to his fingertip.

With a sound between music and laughter, the wiri flew up to Rhane’s shoulder and began nuzzling

his neck. Its tail wrapped snugly around his ear. Rhane smiled and stroked the golden animal with a fingertip. The creature was even softer than it looked. It hummed at him, radiating feelings of pleasure.

“You must be a pet,” Rhane said, delighted by the tiny animal’s trust. “Do you have a name?”

The wiri looked at Rhane out of huge violet eyes.

“Rhane? Did you see a little beggar—”

Rhane turned toward Shiya’s voice. She was standing close to him, staring intently at the wiri humming against his throat. She touched the creature’s head with the tip of her finger, then frowned.

“It’s a wiri, isn’t it? Like yours? I didn’t think they tolerated strangers,” said Rhane. “Did you call it Beggar?”

Shiya looked as though she would say something, but did not. Then, almost absently, “Yes, that’s a wiri. The wild ones live by picking parasites off large animals, usually reskans.”

“No wonder wiris are small,” muttered Rhane. “Picking ticks off a myth is a hard way to eat. But it explains Beggar’s—” Rhane stopped abruptly, realizing that Menx had no word for psi.

“Explains what?” asked Shiya.

“Oh, the wings,” said Rhane quickly. “And the pseudo-hands.”

Shiya waited, sensing the inadequacy of Rhane’s explanation.

“I didn’t see any wiris in the city,” said Rhane.

“Wiris live only near shayl, and shayl live only in the highlands.” Shiya stared at Rhane, both puzzled and oddly intent. “Wiris are god creatures.”

There was a long, subtly uncomfortable silence before Rhane said, “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. You don’t believe in our gods, yet that beggar nuzzles and hums against your neck.”

Rhane stifled a flare of impatience with Shiya’s superstitions. The explanation for the wiris’ absence from the lowlands was probably quite simple. If the flatland Menx believed that the wiris were creatures of Menx’s capricious gods, flatlanders would avoid wiris, fear wiris and finally hate wiris. Sensing hatred, the wiris would flee.

“Beggar knows I won’t hurt it,” Rhane said curtly.

As if in agreement, the wiri crooned and snuggled closer. Shiya hesitated, then shrugged, a Concord gesture learned long ago from Cezine.

“If you can handle a reskan as well as that wiri, we may survive the trip through the Jaws.”

Rhane’s finger paused just above Beggar’s head. “A reskan? A Menx reskan?”

“Is there another kind?” asked Shiya dryly.

“But they’re myths.”

Shiya said only, “Would you rather ride borsks?”

“Impossible,” said Rhane curtly. “They’re too slow.”

“Then we ride reskans, unless you want to spend winter eating ice in a shayl cave. Even on reskans, we will have the gods’ own time getting in and out of the Jaws before the Ghost Pass closes.”

Rhane shrugged. If he had to ride a myth, so be it. He had only sixteen days. Fifteen, now; this one was nearly over.

“I thought,” Rhane said finally, “that only a Menx god could ride a reskan.”

“And I,” countered Shiya, “thought that only shayl could tame wiris. ‘Each day a new reality.’”

Rhane smiled crookedly. “I hope my reskan agrees.”

“If your reskan doesn’t, you’ll have no choice but to wait until spring. A lori might get you close to the base of the Ghost Pass before the first howler ices the peaks, but a lori can’t survive the altitude of the pass. Neither can you, unless a reskan or a borsk does the work.” She smiled wanly. “I hope your gods understand human limitations.”

Rhane silently wondered if Shiya knew the difference between biological limitations and cultural tabus. For the hundredth time he wished for a shuttle that was not limited by pious mechanics.

The sound of a comunit’s signal interrupted Rhane’s thoughts. Shiya listened to the rapid pulses of sound for a moment before she turned away, speaking over her shoulder as she did so.

“Leave your pack in the south room. I’ll be in the back of the house when you’re ready.”

“What about your wiri?” asked Rhane, when the animal refused to leave his shoulder as he peeled off

his pack.

“It flies where it chooses,” said Shiya. “It is of the shayl.”

Rhane watched Shiya’s retreating back and tried not to think about the suspicions crowding his thoughts. The child that he had known was scarcely visible in the adult. Shiya was fully in the thrall of the idiosyncratic Menx religion. She was a shayl’m, the self-styled “children of the gods.” The shayl’m, composed of disparate highland tribes, had been indifferent to First Contact and the invitation to join the Concord of Planets. But lately, indifference had shaded into overt hostility at the presence of off-world unbelievers, who were blamed for the epidemics of melting sickness.

The fact that Menx melting sickness had no counterpart on any Concord world made no impression on the native hostility, nor did the fact that the disease was particularly deadly to off-worlders. The only exception seemed to be the T’aeln, who were mentors to Menx during the Century of Protection following First Contact. Perhaps the ninety years the T’aeln had so far spent on Menx had served to build up their immunity to the disease, or perhaps they were naturally immune. Whatever the cause, the T’aeln had a 67 percent recovery rate from melting sickness. Menx natives had an 81 percent recovery rate. The other races of man had no measurable recovery rate; everyone who contracted the disease died, and died very horribly.

Rhane looked around the twilight room and hoped that the latest Concord immunization worked better for him than its predecessors had for the research team and Cezine. Always Cezine.

The wiri whined uneasily, sensing Rhane’s shift in mood. Realizing what had happened, Rhane stroked the little creature while he worked to control his emotions. He told himself that he was not responsible for Cezine’s death, that nothing could have kept Cezine alive. Sometimes he even believed it, but that did not diminish the rage that he felt. Cezine had died too young, too alone, his father dead and his older brother light-years away, too far to know Cezine was dying, too far to catch even a word from his dying mouth.

The wiri throbbed raggedly, distressed by the emotions seeping through Rhane’s newly learned mental shields. A golden paw stroked Rhane’s cheek just above his short gold beard. The touch startled Rhane out of his bleak reverie.

“I wonder if the Carifil know about you,” murmured Rhane.

The wiri chirruped questioningly, feeling yet another shift in Rhane’s mood.

“Yes, you. You sense the least little wisp of emotion just like an empath monitor.”

Rhane concentrated again on ordering his mood, using what the Carifil had taught him, accepting rather than rejecting his jagged emotions. The acceptance was neither complete nor permanent, merely a step in the continual process of integrating his unhealed past with his unexpected present.

After a time, the wiri began to sing softly to itself.

“Never an unspoken mood,” said Rhane, touching the wiri’s gold fur. “That could get to be a nuisance, Beggar.”

The wiri blinked, not at all worried by the words, for the man’s emotion was one of wry indulgence. With a smile and a final light touch, Rhane ignored the wiri riding on his shoulder and went in search of Shiya.

III

Rhane found Shiya in a soft-floored room that had two walls of jigsaw stone and lacy blue mist ferns, three walls of open windows, and a wall composed of rivulets of water that formed a restless tapestry. Near the narrow pool made by falling water was a cascade of creamy flowers accented by the indigo stars of khi blossoms. Scattered about the room were pockets of fist-sized glowballs that gave off pale gold light.

One of the walls had a slight bulge which was the comunit simulator. In front of it the floor had humped up to provide comfortable lounging. Shiya reclined against a carnelian swell of carpet, but she was far from relaxed. There was an aura of barely leashed violence about her that stopped Rhane in the room’s entryway, beyond the radius of the comunit’s pickup.

“—bri th’li,” said a man’s voice, using a Menx term of extreme intimacy.

Shiya’s hissed reply was a single Menx obscenity.

Rhane stayed beyond the pickup range, listening while voices wove in and out of the rippling water sounds, sounds that disguised identity and meaning until the absolute flatness of Shiya’s tone knifed through the liquid murmurings.

“The identity of a man who may or may not be in my home is no concern of yours, Lor Jastre.”

Rhane’s shock at hearing the T’aeln mentor’s name was so great that he made an involuntary movement toward the comunit. Lor Jastre was one of the few T’aeln of master phenotype who had managed to overcome his culturally ingrained xenophobia to the point that he could participate in the varied intercourse of Concord races. Lor Jastre had devoted nearly a full maturity to helping Menx and the Concord reach a mutual understanding of the other’s worth.

As the son of a family which had served the Concord for one thousand years, Rhane appreciated the sacrifice entailed in taking a man of immense sophistication and effectively limiting him to a planet whose sophistication lay far in the future. Yet Lor Jastre had chosen to be on Menx. Rhane wondered why Lor Jastre had made that unlikely choice. Rhane’s father had likened Lor Jastre to a marvelously adapted fish that had determined it must fly. Even if the fish somehow managed to distort scales into feathers, the result was more travesty than achievement. Insanity.

Rhane had to admit, though, that Lor Jastre had done an adequate job of being mentor to Menx; he had managed to learn about Menx culture without forcing T’ael’s much higher culture onto the natives. It was unfortunate that Lor Jastre’s achievement was exceeded only by his arrogance, and his intelligence only by his cultural conditioning.

Rhane listened a moment longer, then sighed silently. He would have to confront the T’aeln, a confrontation that Rhane had hoped to avoid. It was an uncomfortable thing to owe an unpayable debt to a man you could not always bring yourself to like. For a moment, Rhane wished he shared his dead father’s utter fascination with all things T’aeln.

Rhane took two quick steps, bringing him into range of the pickup. As he sat down, Beggar stirred, creating a flurry of color. The three-dimensional image of Lor Jastre that was seated in front of Shiya turned toward Rhane. Except for a very slight transparency, the brown-skinned, yellow-haired simulation was exactly like having Lor Jastre in the room.

“And who,” said Lor Jastre, tilting his head toward Rhane, “is the Menx who wears a shayl creature on his shoulder?” Then recognition came to Lor Jastre. “Rhane!”

Lor Jastre leaned forward and reached out as though to verify Rhane’s identity by touch. Immaterial fingers came toward the wiri. Beggar’s wings snapped out, then folded back along golden fur when no contact was felt.

Lor Jastre stared at the wiri with the intense yellow eyes of a T’aeln master, then at Rhane, then at the wiri once again. Abruptly, Lor Jastre straightened. His eyes were brilliant with suppressed emotion.

“My dear, fiozak sister would have liked to see you,” said the T’aeln, using a T’aeln word that denoted very mild insanity.

“Apologies and regrets to Lor Sostra,” answered Rhane formally. “I remember with great pleasure the tour of T’ael that she condescended to give me. I wasn’t aware that she was on Menx.”

Lor Jastre dismissed the apology with a small movement of his fingertips. “My sister was ever fond of tangentially insane acts. I’m sure your presence on T’ael was a great amusement to her.”

“So am I,” said Rhane, remembering the uncomfortable companionship of a master T’aeln who laughed at convention and never considered the psychic cost to her guest. Yet, in spite of being a pariah, Rhane had enjoyed being on T’ael, breathing the air and walking on the earth of a planet that had known nearly three hundred thousand years of unbroken civilization. “Is Lor Sostra on Menx?” pressed Rhane.

“She would have been if she had known of your presence. You please her.”

Rhane said nothing. If this had been a purely personal trip, he would have deserved the oblique reminder of debt that Lor Jastre was giving him. But it was not a personal trip and the reminder was irritating.

The simulation of Lor Jastre moved forward again, staring at the wiri until Beggar’s tail curled more

tightly around Rhane's ear. Lor Jastre smiled narrowly and retreated.

"A true wiri," Lor Jastre murmured. "I wonder if Lor Sostra will be amused by the result of her mizak." This time, Lor Jastre used a T'aeln word that denoted reprehensible conduct associated with monomania. Then, realizing that his murmurings were being transmitted to others, Lor Jastre faced both Rhane and Shiya and began speaking in the neutral tones of a professional diplomat. "My admiration is yours, Rhane en Jacaroen. Few natives can tame a wiri. I know of no aliens who have been so ... fortunate."

As though the wiri sensed it was being discussed, it preened with elaborate casualness, scattering glints of pure color with each move.

"I have heard rumors," continued Lor Jastre, "of surzak. I'm told that a Siolan is going into the Jaws."

Rhane ignored the insult implicit in Lor Jastre's use of a T'aeln word that could only be translated as "insane excrement-eater."

"Yes, I'm going into the Jaws."

Rhane's blunt answer seemed to surprise Lor Jastre. It was not in keeping with the formalities that were as natural to T'ael—and Siol—as breathing.

"When?" asked Lor Jastre, matching Rhane's directness.

Rhane glanced aside at Shiya. Without turning toward the simulation, Shiya answered. "Tomorrow. Riding reskans."

"Reskans!" said Lor Jastre. Then, realizing the sharpness of his tone, he repeated mildly, "Reskans." He laughed. "Ah, little Shiya. Do you never tire of latzak Menx jokes, bri th'li?"

Shiya returned Lor Jastre's indulgent laughter with a flat stare. She said something in a shayl'm dialect that neither man could translate. Beggar took flight, singing in a tone so high it was almost a scream. The wiri vanished out the open window.

From the mure forest a reskan called in an ascending howl. Rhane could not control the primal rippling of his skin; yet for all its savagery, the reskan's call was more song than scream.

A second reskan called in a supple tenor that was both beautiful and fierce. Rhane sensed that the second reskan was female, singing for him, and he did not know whether to smile or hide. When he turned toward Shiya, she was smiling.

"Do you recognize that sound?" said Shiya. "Few other than shayl have heard it and lived to share their discovery."

"Reskans," Rhane said curtly. Then, before Shiya could say anything, he added, "The second one is female. She knows I'm in here."

Shiya's coppery eyes reflected surprise, then thought. Her hands made a slow gesture of acceptance and wonder.

"You should have been born on Menx," she said softly. "I believe you will ride that reskan. If you do, we may survive the Ghost Pass and the wandering shazir."

"No," interrupted Lor Jastre. "I won't allow it, Shiya. Too much is at risk."

Shiya shrugged. "That is a matter for the gods—as is Rhane's desire to enter the Jaws." Shiya's tone indicated that the discussion was ended. "We leave tomorrow."

"A matter for the gods," repeated Lor Jastre, thinking quickly. He turned his head toward Rhane, then back toward Shiya. "Shazir? What possible interest could shazir have in an alien?"

Shiya said nothing. Her face was set in unyielding lines. Her lips suggested a distinct distaste for the conversation and the image of Lor Jastre.

"By your own gods, Shiya, think!" said Lor Jastre, his finely controlled voice like a whip. "We recently lost another Concord team in the Jaws and must presume that they've succumbed to a new epidemic. As if that weren't tragic enough, you're proposing to kill the last direct descendant of Siol's oldest and most powerful dynasty. Don't you realize that Siol is immensely powerful within the Concord?"

"We didn't ask for Concord—or for T'aeln meddlers." Shiya's voice was cool, controlled, hinting of danger.

Before Lor Jastre could answer, the reskan called again in alien imperative. Rhane had the distinct feeling that he was being summoned.

“No,” muttered Rhane so softly that even the comunit pickup was defeated. “I’m not going out into the dark looking for a carnivorous myth, no matter how beautiful your voice is. I might find you. Or more likely, you’d find me. I may be stupid, but I’m not suicidal.”

The reskan called again, high and wild, a sound almost like laughter. Beggar burst through the open window and landed on Rhane’s shoulder in a flash of rainbow colors. Though the wiri had been gone only a few moments, it trilled a greeting song into Rhane’s ear. The song was both loving and subtly whimsical. When it ended Rhane smiled, tickling Beggar with a fingertip. He looked up to find both Lor Jastre and Shiya staring at him.

“I don’t know what the shazir have to do with Rhane,” said Shiya dryly, “or he with them, but it’s clear that some connection exists. Agreed, Lor Jastre?”

Lor Jastre said nothing, though Rhane could almost sense the racing thoughts and emotions beneath the T’aeln’s handsome brown face.

“Come now, T’aeln meddler,” prompted Shiya. “You must agree. When was the last time you heard a wiri sing love songs to an alien? For that matter, when was the last time you heard a wiri sing at all?”

“Never. One has never sung for me.”

Rhane sensed both wistfulness and vindication beneath Lor Jastre’s—words.

“They never will,” Shiya said, her words soft and her smile mocking. “They’re shayl creatures. And so, apparently, is Rhane.”

“Spare me your shayl insanities,” snapped Lor Jastre. “They’ve already cost Menx more than it can afford.” The T’aeln mentor looked broodingly at Rhane. Nothing disturbed the silence, not even the minute rustle of wiri wings. “I can’t permit you to go with her,” Lor Jastre said slowly.

Rhane hesitated a long time before answering, conscious of a debt that began with Lor Sostra and culminated with his father’s and half brother’s death. Lor Jastre had been immensely helpful to the en Jacaroen family after the disaster of losing a young, vigorous leader. Despite T’ael’s fabled contempt for the lives and sensibilities of other races, Lor Jastre had insisted that both dead en Jacaroens receive a Siolan resurrection service on Menx that was commensurate to their high rank and wealth on Siol.

When Rhane had been found on T’ael and informed as to what had occurred on Menx, Lor Jastre had not permitted Rhane to repay him for the great cost of such rituals. Lor Jastre had also left Menx to personally place the last cup to touch the RA Jacaroen’s lips in the en Jacaroen state shrine. He had even taken the time to dictate as complete a moment-of-death history as was possible, satisfying the needs of the en Jacaroen scribes and giving the en Jacaroen clan a few years in which to educate Rhane before sending him back to Menx to retrieve his half brother’s death.

Rhane had never asked for such kindness, nor did he understand why Lor Jastre had given it. Nonetheless, by all the codes of Siolan aristocracy, and common as well as Galactic Courtesy, Rhane was deeply indebted to the master T’aeln. Defying Lor Jastre was unthinkable, yet Rhane knew he must do just that. Before he could be named RA Jacaroen, all en Jacaroen lives and deaths must be balanced.

“I’m sorry, Lor Jastre, but I must go into the Jaws of Menx,” Rhane said, his voice troubled. “I acknowledge my debt to the Lores of T’ael, but I can’t repay it with obedience on Menx.” His fingers stroked the quiescent wiri on his shoulder in a slow counterpoint to his words. The tiny animal sang sad descant harmony to Rhane’s unspoken regrets. “This trip was given to me to do. I can’t evade it.”

“Has it to do with the death of the RA Jacaroen?” asked Lor Jastre, his voice rich with a subtle tangle of emotions.

“No,” sighed Rhane, caught between past gratitude and present imperative. “No. You handled every necessary ritual with a depth of tact that is still celebrated on en Jacaroen feast days. Such delicacy would scarcely have been required from an en Jacaroen, much less a—” Rhane stopped, not wanting to insult the other man.

“A yellow-eyed T’aeln,” finished Lor Jastre. He chuckled at Rhane’s discomfort. “Don’t worry. What inferior races call us in insult, we call ourselves in pride. To be born yellow-eyed on my planet is a mark of great distinction and an assurance of great power. Our ruling class is bred with a care that no

Concord planet can appreciate—except, perhaps, Tau.”

“My father should have been born on T’ael,” Rhane said, remembering the RA Jacaroen’s eyes, more often clear gold than gray, startling against his dark brown hair.

“In most lights,” said Lor Jastre, his voice and expression haunted, “your father had very human eyes. Yours are even more human, as human as mine.”

Rhane did not know how to respond to the T’aeln’s odd remark. Beggar snuggled against Rhane’s beard and sang soft praises into the silence. Lor Jastre watched, his expression so divided among emotions that the result was no emotion at all. The T’aeln’s yellow eyes brooded over Siolan and wiri for a moment longer, then switched to Shiya.

“How did you persuade the wiri onto Rhane’s shoulder?” asked Lor Jastre suddenly.

“I?” Shiya laughed humorlessly. “I was as surprised as you.”

“Then why is the wiri on his shoulder?”

Shiya shrugged. “Who knows the mind of a shayl creature?”

Lor Jastre made a swift, controlled chop with his hand. “Gods living among men.” Lor Jastre made a sound that was close to a snarl. “I am sick past death of hearing about that!”

Shiya’s smile was both enigmatic and chilling. “But you never listen, do you? You, my sneering mentor, couldn’t see a god walking on your toes unless the god had yellow eyes and was born on T’ael. *Chizak.*”

The hissed T’aeln epithet shocked Rhane, but Lor Jastre only smiled. “I keep waiting for serat challenge, bri th’li, but it does not come.”

Shiya ignored Lor Jastre with a completeness more insulting than any epithet.

“It’s just as well,” continued Lor Jastre. “You’re too beautiful to kill.”

Shiya’s body became utterly still, wholly controlled. “I don’t have yellow eyes and hair, T’aeln. I can’t be beautiful.”

“We aren’t on T’ael.”

“You’re always on T’ael,” said Shiya. Bitterness curled like a whip around her words. “And never more than when you are on Menx!”

“Surzak.” Lor Jastre turned to Rhane, dismissing Shiya with a movement of his fingertips. “Do you know that Concord protection does not extend past the range of lowland technology?” he asked, switching his attack from past gratitude to future safety.

“Yes.”

“Do you know why?”

“Every Concord planet runs its planetary affairs according to the rules of its own societies, however bizarre or dangerous those rules may be for off-worlders.”

“But Menx isn’t a Concord planet. Not yet. Probably not ever.” Lor Jastre’s yellow eyes searched Rhane’s face. The T’aeln’s voice was almost rough. “Did you know that Menx wants to refuse Concord?”

“Yes,” said Rhane. Questions crowded his tongue, but he could not ask them. Suddenly Lor Jastre looked old, almost eroded, worn beyond endurance by an impossible task.

“Do you know that the Century of Protection ends in fifteen Menx days?” asked Lor Jastre.

“Yes.”

“Latzak!” snapped Lor Jastre. “You know, yet you come and babble about a trip into the Jaws of Menx. Perhaps you don’t know what happens after Concord Protection ends.”

“The Concord withdraws,” said Rhane tightly. “The Accesses are destroyed. Scavengers descend in lightships.”

Beggar’s song became a series of sharp, minor-key cries, as though the wiri were in pain; but Rhane did not notice, for he was in the grip of his own pain.

“What if you don’t get off in time?” demanded Lor Jastre.

“My risk. My regret.”

“Your death.”

“Possibly.”

“Latzak. Utterly latzak.”

Rhane said nothing.

“The difficulty increases,” Lor Jastre said softly. “Every epidemic, every day, it increases. We T’aeln are grieved—ah! what a pale word for what we feel! Menx slips away from us every day, every plague, every death. We want Menx to survive. We have done what we could, we’ve done more than we believed we could, yet Menx slips like water through our cupped hands.”

“I came here knowing the risks,” said Rhane. “Concord people who go into the highlands—the shayl lands—know that they are going beyond the protection of either Menx or Concord. The Menx were quite explicit on that point, and Concord agreed. Anyone, Menx or Concord, who tries to enter the highlands assumes all risks and all responsibilities for the consequences.”

“Yes,” agreed Lor Jastre, his voice almost bitter, “the Concord made unusual concessions for Menx.”

“Unusual? Perhaps, but not unique. Other—”

“Yes, yes,” said Lor Jastre impatiently. “Other worlds, other places, other times, other races. The Concord did not do Mens any favor by making an exception of the safety of the shayl lands after First Contact.

“It would have been better,” Lor Jastre continued softly, “if Concord had listened to the counsel of T’aeln sanity and agreed that Menx was not in a position to benefit from membership in the Concord. Then First Contact never would have been initiated, much less Second Contact. Menx should have been proscribed. There would have been no epidemics, no deaths, no refusal, no abandonment.”

Lor Jastre smiled sadly. “Other times ... and none of them now.” He stared at Rhane with yellow eyes that would not be denied. “Don’t go, Rhane. Don’t die in the Jaws of Menx.” The golden light of glowballs washed over Rhane, making his eyes as yellow as a T’aeln master’s.

“I must go,” said Rhane. “I’m sorry. Lor Jastre, but I must.”

For a long moment Lor Jastre stared at Rhane, whose fair hair reflected the incandescent gold of glowballs.

“How like a T’aeln,” murmured Lor Jastre. “And the eyes so yellow, so human ...”

Lor Jastre’s hand lifted to his own head, where T’aeln hair shone like citrine. Then his hand dropped lifelessly into his lap. For a moment he was utterly still, eyes closed, face lined by a sadness that Rhane could neither measure nor understand.

“I will go with you,” Lor Jastre said. “Maybe then you won’t have to die.”

“No,” said Shiya, her voice hard, preempting any answer Rhane might have made.

Lor Jastre ignored Shiya. His yellow eyes fastened on Rhane. “You said you can’t repay your debt with obedience. Would simple gratitude be possible? The type of gratitude that would allow me to go along with you? If I were with you, protecting you, perhaps you would begin to understand that to go into the Jaws of Menx is ... chizak ... a type of insanity that is beneath even you.”

Though Lor Jastre had been careful not to use “chizak” as an epithet, anger tightened Rhane’s face. Of the ninety-seven degrees of insanity recognized by the T’aeln, chizak was the least acceptable. The word had connotations that were both criminal and obscene.

“If it means that much to you,” said Rhane harshly, “then you are, of course, welcome to accompany me. As you pointed out, it’s the least I can do for you.”

Lor Jastre ignored the grudging aspect of Rhane’s invitation. With a gesture of acceptance, the T’aeln leaned back, smiling.

“Which reskan will he ride, Concord man?” Shiya’s laugh was short and unpleasant. “No quick answer?” Shiya reached out and picked a ripe khi blossom out of the cascade of flowers. She held the blossom out to Beggar. The wiri leaned toward it and keened hungrily, but refused to take it from her hand. “Then are we to ride borsks and freeze before we reach even the lowest reaches of the Ghost Pass?”

Rhane said nothing.

“Make up your mind, Concord man. Or are you going to be like this foolish wiri, refusing food because the hand that offers it is not beloved? Do you have to love the voice that speaks in order to hear

the truth?”

Beggar keened softly, rubbing its tasseled ears against Rhane’s jaw.

“Poor little wiri,” murmured Shiya. “You can’t help what you are, can you?” She pressed the khi blossom into Rhane’s band. “Feed your wiri. Its hunger is as painful as the dream of a shazir.”

Rhane held out the blossom to Beggar. The wiri snatched it with a fluting cry and buried its face in the blue-black khi petals. Tiny crunching sounds floated up to Rhane as the wiri ate the spicy seeds. Shiya smiled with a softness that transformed her. Rhane could only stare at her, remembering a time eight years ago. But as she turned to face Lor Jastre, both her smile and her beauty faded, leaving only a cold intelligence.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Shiya said, reaching for the cutoff lever. “We don’t have time for futile conversation. First light comes early, even in late summer.”

“No,” said Lor Jastre quickly. “You won’t win that easily. I’m coming with Rhane. I’ll ride one of your loris.”

“Even you,” said Shiya coldly, “must realize that a lori can’t go over the Ghost Pass.”

Lor Jastre made a gesture of dismissal. “We have only the word of a shayl for that.” He gave Shiya a cold glance, then looked at Rhane. “Doesn’t it strike you as odd that she want to take you, alone, into the most dangerous place on Menx? Could it be that she has something unlucky planned for yet another en Jacaroen?”

Shiya became as still as a crouching predator, then she controlled herself with an unpleasant smile. “Come along if you must. I won’t mourn your death in the Ghost Pass.”

Shiya snapped down the cutoff lever, leaving only silence divided by soft ribbons of falling water.

“Chizak.”

At first, Rhane did not separate the hissed word from the rippling water sounds. When he did, he turned toward Shiya, wondering why she loathed the man who had spent nearly a century helping her people. But before he could ask a question, Shiya turned toward a panel that controlled the house. Her fingers moved quickly, programming a standard Concord food computer.

After a moment of silence, Beggar chirped. Its small hands tugged at Rhane’s bronze hair, exploring his scalp. Rhane plucked Beggar off his shoulder and held the wiri in his cupped hands.

“I haven’t been here long enough to acquire mure ticks or rock lice, Beggar. I don’t even have a thread mite from Siol’s deserts to offer you.”

The wiri’s violet eyes studied Rhane unblinkingly. Small gold throat muscles trembled and plaintive notes poured forth. Rhane offered the wiri several khi flowers out of the cascade, but none of them were ripe. Beggar’s song shifted into a pathetic minor key.

“All right, I’ll see what I can find,” Rhane said, laughing. “I can see why Shiya named you Beggar.”

Beggar sang in tremulous counterpart to water falling.

“What do you feed your little beastie?” asked Rhane when Shiya turned away from the wall controls. “If I don’t give it something, its sad songs will have me in tears.”

Shiya smiled slightly. “It’s not my wiri. I’ve never fed it from my hand.”

“But it was in your house and you’d named it Beggar.”

“It was not in my house, it was at my window. I call every wild wiri beggar because they depend on a reskan’s generosity for food.”

Rhane stared at Shiya, looking for signs that she was teasing him. He saw, and sensed, only that she was telling the truth.

“Look,” said Rhane reasonably, holding out the wiri that snuggled in his cupped hand. “This isn’t a wild animal. Obviously Beggar belongs to somebody.”

“Yes,” Shiya said, looking from the wiri to Rhane. “You.”

The backlash of Rhane’s anger made Beggar stir. Four wings created a flurry of rainbows before the wiri subsided once more.

“I could keep on asking foolish questions,” said Rhane, “or you could save time by explaining what you’re talking about.”

“Flights of wiris live in close association with reskans,” said Shiya in a patient voice. “A pack of

reskans lives in close association with me.”

Shiya’s lips pursed. A long, lilting whistle poured out. The clear sound floated from the window upward into the dusk. Beggar leaned toward Shiya but did not offer to leave Rhane’s hand.

“Naturally,” continued Shiya as though there had been no interruption in her explanation, “there are several flights of wiris living near this house. The wiri you call Beggar is from the flight that follows Kahsah’s pack. In fact”—Shiya whistled again, beguilingly—“Beggar is Kahsah’s favorite wiri. That’s why I will team you with Kahsah, though she’s never accepted a rider before, not even me. Females rarely do, especially a leader.”

Rhane had the dizzying feeling that, given the proper background of information, what Shiya said was logically inescapable. Unfortunately, he had not been given that background and the logic escaped him. The only thing that did not escape him was the wiri preening itself on his palm.

“You’re saying,” summarized Rhane carefully, “that Beggar was once wild, but has decided to become my pet?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Shiya shrugged. “Who knows the mind of a shayl creature?”

Rhane made an exasperated sound that was lost in the arrival of a flight of wiris. As though they sensed the tension in the room, they darted and hovered over the sill like antic rainbows before they settled on the transparent support. Even then they hummed uncertainly, sounding like a distant, leaderless choir. Rhane counted between seventeen and thirty-seven before he gave up.

A last wiri darted through the window and settled on Shiya’s shoulder. Her expression softened into lines of affection that painfully recalled to Rhane a time eight years past. Ignoring him, Shiya crooned nonsense to Signal. It returned her attention with a happy song. Shiya blew gently on the wiri’s tasseled ears. Radiating pleasure, the wiri leaned closer to Shiya’s lips.

“Signal is Nahst’s wiri, and mine.”

“Signal?” repeated Rhane. “What an odd name.”

Shiya smiled slightly. “Not to a shayl, Concord man. To a shayl that name is compliment, blessing and prayer in one.”

Rhane suppressed a flash of irritation. It seemed that a Menx made religious enigmas as inevitably as wiri wings made rainbows.

“Wiris,” continued Shiya, “give warning if a shazir is nearby. Then I run to my reskan and hide. Our gods aren’t always dangerous, but they are always unpredictable.”

Rhane started to ask what Shiya was talking about, then decided not to. It galled him that someone of Shiya’s innate intelligence could swallow her cultural god myths ungreased by even the least coating of rationality. Abruptly he changed the subject.

“What has Lor Jastre done to you, or do you merely hate all T’aeln who want to bring Concord to Menx?”

When Shiya spoke, she shocked Rhane. He had remembered the Menx culture as being circumspect about sexual matters, but Shiya was not. Perhaps the highland Menx had different customs than the lowland Menx, or perhaps Shiya was too angry to be polite.

“We were lovers until I realized that in T’aeln terms—and in Lor Jastre’s—it was an act of bestiality.” Shiya’s coppery eyes were as metallic as her voice, as unflinching as her words. “Do you understand, Concord man? He could have copulated with an animal and not been any more censured by his peers than when he lay with me. To Lor Jastre, everything that is not a yellow-eyed T’aeln is a beast. But I,” she said fiercely, “am not an animal to be abused and then abandoned!”

In the electric silence, Rhane was overwhelmingly aware of Shiya as a woman, of brown skin sliding over supple muscles while Shiya paced the room, her body burning with anger and the memory of desire. The vanished sun was reborn in her hair, red-gold, molten, alive, and her voice a searing echo of passion. He stared, unable to believe her transformation from ice to heat.

Shiya gave Rhane an unreadable glance as he slowly walked toward her. He sensed her warmth, smelled the mixture of khi flower and sunshine that surrounded her like invisible light.

“I remembered you as a child,” said Rhane, not touching the woman who was so close to him. Then, in spite of himself, “No, that’s hardly the truth. I remembered a girl who was becoming a woman. I wanted that girl as fiercely as Cezine did.”

“You left.” Shiya’s voice was without inflection, like the night.

Rhane looked at her eyes, dark now, concealing rather than revealing her thoughts. “I loved both of you,” he said.

Rhane’s fingers touched the slightly tilted eyebrows that arched above her copper eyes. For an instant sensuality burned. Shiya jerked away.

“Do all Concord men have a taste for sodomy?” asked Shiya carelessly.

Rhane sensed the old anguish and fury that seethed beneath her words. He realized then that she must have given Lor Jastre more than her body, much more than the T’aeln had asked for or wanted, perhaps more than Lor Jastre could even comprehend.

“No, Shiya ...” Rhane’s voice was filled with weariness for a past that had taken so much from both of them and given so little in return. His hand dropped to his side. “No. Concord men prefer women.”

“Odd. T’ael belongs to the Concord, doesn’t it?”

Shiya’s words echoed the darkness that was expanding out of the corners of the room, claiming Shiya.

“Apologies and regrets,” said Rhane, using the formal intonations of Galactic Courtesy. “If there was insult, it came from ignorance rather than intent. Nor did Lor Jastre wish to insult you, Shiya. The T’aeln custom of latlik is not what you believe it is.”

“Would you be a latlik?” Shiya asked scathingly.

Rhane’s lips shaped a ghostly smile. “That would depend on the T’aeln woman who asked me. If she had half your fire, I would bury myself in her as greedily as Beggar buried itself in the khi flower.”

“The woman would think of you as no better than an animal. Latlik!”

“I would have much less status than a husband or even a servant, but that would hardly make me an animal. A latlik is simply someone who does not fit the master T’aeln phenotype, but who is nonetheless physically desirable to a master T’aeln. Granted,” Rhane said dryly, “the T’aeln masters are supremely arrogant in their assumption of superiority to other phenotypes.”

“You would be an animal,” said Shiya, cutting across his Concord tolerance with her scorn. “An animal. Nothing more. I know, I was one until I ... changed. H’shayl taught me what I would rather not have known.”

Rhane began to argue, then realized it was futile. He could not untangle in moments the emotions of years, but he could try not to be like her, snarled in the fruitless past. To begin with, he could ignore the sensuality that burned beneath Shiya’s chilling intelligence. Yet, once discovered, her sensuality was as subtly pervasive as the twilight scent of khi. Had he not been so blinded by the past, he would have seen Shiya more clearly when he arrived, and Cezine less so.

“I regret,” said Rhane neutrally, “that my words brought anger instead of understanding.”

The phrase from Galactic Courtesy was both polite and distant. Rhane did not move, yet it was as though he had stepped back until he was beyond reach. His expression was merely polite where it had formerly been alive. Shiya closed her eyes.

“And I,” Shiya whispered, “I regret much also, Rhane ... yet only a fool tries to breathe yesterday’s wind.” Her eyes opened, copper and shadows sliding. “What a pity that we’re both fools.”

Shiya’s words were spoken so softly that Rhane was not sure whether he had heard or imagined them. He lifted his hand until his fingers touched her cheek.

“Shiya ...”

But Shiya was retreating, lost in darkness and the sounds of water falling, and he was alone.

IV

A flight of wiris chimed in the distance, waking Rhane. He sat up, listening until the tiny harmonies were subsumed by the call of a reskan whose tenor voice seemed indisputably feminine. Kahsah. Beggar

sang a piercing rill of notes. The reskan howled again, and was joined by at least three others. The primal chord made Rhane's nerves shiver with a mixture of pleasure and fear.

Beggar's answering song was almost meaningful, like a language forgotten since childhood and then heard once again in a marketplace. When the song ended, the wiri sat with its head cocked, obviously waiting for an answer from somewhere beyond the room.

A whistle floated through the waning night, expanded to fill every curve of Rhane's awareness. The sound was as pure as a child's heartbreak. Even as Rhane turned toward the doorway, he was remembering a day eight years past when Shiya had transfixed him with the eerie beauty of her whistle.

Shiya stepped into the room carrying a tray whose lacquer finish glowed in the dim light. As she approached, Rhane saw that the tray held a tall, slender cup.

"You're awake early," said Shiya. Her voice was tired, as though her night had not been spent in sleeping.

"Who could sleep with Beggar pulling on his hair and Kahsah howling encouragement?"

"How did you know it was Kahsah?" she asked, reaching for a cup. The very quietness of her question betrayed her intensity.

Rhane shrugged. "A guess. I don't know your reskans."

"Don't you?" Without looking up, Shiya held out the steaming slender cup. "Who are you?" she asked. "What are you?"

Rhane's hand stopped just short of the cup. He sensed personal danger as clearly as he sensed heat radiating from the liquid.

"You know who I am, and what," Rhane said carefully. "Rhane en Jacaroen, Siolan."

"No. The Rhane I knew could not tame a wiri or distinguish among reskans like a cloud-calling god. Are you a shazir come to torment me for taking a dying alien boy into the Jaws, holding him while his life melted and then burning what death left behind and throwing the ashes to the wind?"

Shiya looked at Rhane. Her face was serene in the gentle light of the glowballs, her eyes measuring and deadly. "I knew that ashes and wind are reserved to the gods, but I gave them to an alien who could see no more than a godless flatland Menx. That was blasphemy, yes, I admit it, but it is worse than blasphemy for a Menx mind to take over a Siolan body. Who are you? Whose mind hides beneath the body of Rhane en Jacaroen?"

The threat in Shiya's voice was as sharp as the hunting knife she had half drawn from its sheath. Rhane was no stranger to combat; he had a grim intuition that the woman kneeling at his feet would be a deadly opponent.

"I am Rhane," he repeated evenly. "No more, no less. Just Rhane."

"Then why do wiris sing for you now, but not eight years ago?"

Rhane wondered if he should try to explain the psi-sensitive nature of wiris to her, but decided against it. Her culture would only be able to interpret psi as a power of gods or demons, and he was neither.

"They didn't sing for you, either, eight years ago. Like you, I've changed," said Rhane simply. Then, hearing how inadequate that explanation was, he added, "I was just through the first stage of maturity when I came to Menx. My body had developed fully, but my mind was just beginning to grow." He smiled disarmingly. "It seems that your shayl creatures didn't like an adolescent Siolan, but do like the adult of the species."

"Cezine," said Shiya fiercely, "would Cezine have beguiled a wiri had he lived?"

Rhane's nerves tightened, triggered by the intense strain in Shiya's voice. For a moment he wondered if she was rational.

"I don't know," Rhane said, his voice gentle. "Each mind grows differently."

"Such a simple thing he wanted," whispered Shiya, "just to touch a wiri. But I couldn't give even that to him when he lay melting, the sickness taking his hands, his eyes ...

"And then you came back and tamed a wiri. You, alive and changed. Cezine dead, unchanging. You, a T'aeln lover. How the gods must have laughed to leave the worthless branch and take the sweet fruit."

"No more," said Rhane harshly. "You had no right to Cezine's death, no right to his last words or the

last cup to touch his lips. And you have no right now to sing the refrain of my own grief and guilt as though it were a song written just for you!”

A long, charged silence filled the room, a silence that even Beggar dared not disturb. Then came the soft sound of a knife sliding back into its sheath.

“It’s not a serat matter,” sighed Shiya. “Changed, but still Rhane.” Though her words were sure, her voice was not. “I’m sorry. It’s not your guilt I sing, but mine.” She made an odd, half-choked sound. “Take it,” said Shiya, pressing the steaming cup into Rhane’s hand.

Rhane hesitated before accepting the cup.

“Are you afraid it’s poisoned, Concord man?” asked Shiya.

Rhane grimaced and swallowed the hot drink in a gulp, barely tasting the bittersweet brew. “Better poison here than melting sickness in the Jaws,” said Rhane as he handed the empty cup back to her.

Shiya flinched as though Rhane had slapped her. “Now it is you who sing my guilt-song. Yes, I could have blessed Cezine with a quick death, but I believed—I *believed*—I could find a shayl to cure him. And when that was not possible”—her voice sank to a strained whisper—“I wrapped what death had left and carried it through the Jaws of Menx, crying for a shazir to resurrect what once had been ... Cezine.”

Rhane wanted to ask what Shiya meant, but was afraid. She was not entirely sane on the subject of Cezine.

Nor was he.

Beggar landed on Rhane as silently as a moonbeam. Rhane offered the wiri a sip from his cup, but Beggar politely refused. The wiri seemed content just to be clinging lightly to Rhane’s shoulder, stroking his cheek with a tiny golden hand.

Shiya touched the wiri’s head, “Poor little Beggar. It’s learning that there is more to a man than warmth and food.”

Shiya’s lips pursed and a low, distinct whistle emerged. Beggar harmonized, leaning toward her whistled song in obvious yearning, but not leaving Rhane’s shoulder. Shiya smiled sadly.

“Whistle to your wiri, Rhane. It needs cheering.”

“I can’t whistle.”

“The Rhane I remember couldn’t whistle, either,” she said, “but he could make a flute sing like a god.”

“I haven’t touched a flute since I gave mine to Cezine.”

A shadow of pain twisted across Shiya’s lips. She left the room so quickly that it took a moment for Rhane to realize that she had gone.

The reskan called Kahsah howled again in a prolonged tenor cry that sounded like a canyon wind. Rhane could have answered her if he had had his Siolan flute, but he had left it behind eight years ago. Though Cezine had never played well, he had been convinced that he could tame a wiri with just the right sequence of notes.

A pure, ascending whistle called Rhane out of the past. He followed the sound until he was out in back of the house on a trail leading away from the lake. All around him huge stones humped up out of the darkness, turning aside the forest. Beyond the rocks, in the opening created by the boulders, Rhane saw what he had only sensed before—the land was rising relentlessly, like a great wave surging against the granite body of the Mountains of Light, surging and finally breaking with a force that tore dense forest into a ragged veil flung across high ridges of stone.

Dawn, still distant from the lake, had separated the highest peaks from the sky above and the night below. Nowhere in those ebony ranges did Rhane see a break or even a hint of one. Menx passes were hidden, difficult, and the worst of all was the last. The Ghost Pass.

A strange, ascending howl brought Rhane’s attention from the peaks. Shiya was standing nearby, nearly invisible until she moved, her hands cupped around her mouth and her head held in an attitude of listening. After a few moments, she tilted back her head and called again. This time her howl rose into a sound that was nearly a whistle, a sound that penetrated the forest silence like lightning through night. Yet for all its power, the sound was not harsh.

The answer that came made Rhane's skin stir. No human throat had formed that eerie reply, a tenor howl that was quickly joined in a harmonic chord with at least four other voices. The howls soared up into whistles, then expanded into savage screams that transcended human ability to imitate or understand. There was a long beat of silence followed by a burst of incredible harmony, then silence again.

Shiya dropped her hands and looked at Rhane, a twin shadow in the double moonlight. "They're coming."

Rhane stood uneasily in the gloom, waiting to meet a myth. The unreality of the situation was almost amusing, until he realized that he had seen no fences, nothing to divide the reskans from the humans. Was this what Lor Jastre had meant when he asked if Shiya had an unpleasant accident prepared for another en Jacaroen?

"Are they coming here?" asked Rhane, trying not to show his unease.

"Yes. But you won't see them unless they wish it."

"I don't see any restraints. How do you control the beasts?"

"I don't."

Rhane waited, frozen. If reskans were not a myth, they were among the most intelligent, savage predators on the known planets. Suddenly all that Rhane had heard or suspected about shayl'm hostility to the Concord crystallized in him. He turned on Shiya, reaching for her. As he did, Beggar screamed and took flight from his shoulder.

"By the Nine Gods of Siol, do you think I'm so stupid as to—"

"Don't move!"

Something in Shiya's voice penetrated Rhane's sudden anger. He stood absolutely still.

"Slowly, very slowly," said Shiya in a normal tone, "turn your face toward the rocks to my right. You won't see anything, but the reskans are here. Believe me. They're here."

Rhane turned slowly and stared into the predawn silver-and-shadow shapes. At first he saw nothing. When he was about to risk a question, the top of the nearest boulder leaped off and landed less than a hand's length from him. Transfixed, Rhane found himself staring into the black crystal eyes of a Menx reskan.

The beast was long-necked, blunt-muzzled, tailless, and easily as tall at the shoulder as Rhane. Muscles coiled and surged beneath skin that was supple, finely scaled, almost transparent in appearance. The animal's four powerful legs ended in clawed yet flexible feet. The forward set of the reskan's eyes left no doubt that this beast spent more time hunting than being hunted. An omnivore by necessity and a carnivore by preference, the Menx reskan was unmistakably a climax predator.

"Suurrooo," crooned Shiya. "Suurrooo." Without changing her calm tone, she said to Rhane, "Don't move or talk. You worried Nahst when you turned on me ... suurrooo ... but he won't harm you unless I ... suurrooo ... signal attack. Suurrooo, Nahst, suurrooo."

Rhane looked at the big predator and wondered how anyone had ever survived to tame the first reskan. Nahst's long neck stretched toward Rhane. Hypersensitive nostrils flared wide as the reskan drank the mixture of exotic scents that clung to the off-world man. Oddly, the reskan seemed most intrigued by the spot on Rhane's neck where Beggar had clung and nuzzled. Nahst nosed the area, whuffed out a mass of collected scents, and set to work trying to lick off Rhane's skin. The reskan's tongue was long, black and persistent.

Shiya let out her breath in what could have been a sigh. She grabbed Nahst's ears and dragged his head away from Rhane.

"Enough. You're sloppy as a borsk," Shiya scolded.

The reskan turned, stared into Shiya's eyes, then made a lazy, incredible leap that ended on top of a boulder three times as tall as Rhane. Ignoring the humans, Nahst turned around several times and—vanished. The instant the reskan was still, he became a part of the black boulder,

"You can move and talk now."

"Thank you," said Rhane, letting out his breath. "For a moment there, I thought that Nahst was cleaning me up for dinner."

Shiya almost smiled. "You can thank the wiri for that."

As though called, Beggar flitted out of the gloom and landed on Rhane's shoulder again.

"Oh?" said Rhane. He eyed the wiri suspiciously. "What did Beggar have to do with it?"

"When a wiri is particularly content, it exudes a distinctive scent. Humans can't smell it, but reskans can. They love it. It's their reward for holding still until a wiri has eaten its fill off their hides."

Rhane rubbed his neck, still moist from Nahst's insistent tongue. "Then Beggar can kerden well find another perch," he muttered, though his tone lacked rancor.

"Oh, no—Beggar made it much easier for you. I'm beginning to believe a Concord man will ride a reskan. Can you really see them?" said Shiya.

"Them?" asked Rhane slowly.

Rhane turned and faced the boulders again. After several moments, he thought he discerned three other reskans. Perhaps four, but it was very hard to be sure.

Then Rhane realized that he was reaching out toward the boulder field with his mind as much as his eyes. Instantly he withdrew the unintended probe; Beggar might conceivably be sensitive to more than moods. Until he knew more about the wiri, he would have to be extremely careful how he used his mind. It was even possible that the reskans themselves had a type of psi that deflected attention. That would explain their phenomenal ability to fade into the landscape between one instant and the next.

Rhane checked his suspicions against what he had absorbed during his brief training period before being brought to Menx. He had learned nothing that conflicted with or supported his suspicions. That did not surprise him; he was beginning to realize how little the Concord had learned about Menx during the planet's Century of Protection. The lack of information was exasperating, but not unique. Even planets that had been Concord members for thousands of years had surprises left for ecological and cultural researchers.

"I see four," said Rhane. Then, "No. Five."

Startled, Shiya said curtly, "Point them out."

Rhane pointed. As he did, he described the boulders that the reskans lounged on. Shiya stared at Rhane, ignoring the rocks where she saw reskans with an ease that came from innate skill and long experience.

"There are five," said Shiya harshly. "Cezine would have given his heart to see just one."

Rhane's face became as expressionless as moonlight while he fought the pain and anger brought by her words. The pain subsided, but the anger remained. Beggar shifted, flared diamond wings, then gradually relaxed. Rhane was still angry, but he had succeeded in keeping his emotions from leaking out. He took a grim satisfaction in that success, but he did not trust himself to answer Shiya. He had earned the guilt he felt, but she had not earned the right to evoke it.

"Have you ever ridden anything but a machine?" said Shiya, her voice edged with contempt for all Concord things.

"Yes."

"What," she said, more demand than question.

"A skeyamort," said Rhane in a clipped voice. "A jicorro. A taman. A mecora'nial."

"Enough," interrupted Shiya sourly. "If you can sit a mecora'nial, you can sit a reskan." At Rhane's surprised look, Shiya smiled unpleasantly. "Yes, this little Menx savage knows about mecora'nial. I studied under a yellow-eyed T'aeln mentor."

Shiya looked away from Rhane's yellow eyes toward the rocks where reskans waited. "It's time, Concord man," she said, her voice cold. "It's time to get it all done, finished, no more than ashes blowing."

Though Rhane neither saw nor sensed a signal, Nahst flowed off his boulder and stood within reach of Shiya. Another reskan followed. While he watched, Shiya strapped two packs onto its back. When she finished, the reskan vanished. A third reskan appeared and stood close to Rhane. The animal was as big as Nahst. Though there were no outer differences, Rhane knew this reskan was a female. Kahsah.

"Take the harness out of her mouth."

Shiya's words were as much a challenge as an order, but Rhane's control of his anger was so rigid that Beggar did not even stir. He gathered several of the dangling straps and tugged gently. The reskan's

mouth stayed closed. Only the black lips moved, lifting slightly to reveal ice-white teeth. Rhane hesitated, then gambled. He eased the hold on his mind and used a very light probe to assess the reskan's mood.

If the wiri sensed Rhane's tenuous mental overture to the reskan, it gave no sign. Relieved, Rhane strengthened the probe, all the while increasing the pressure on the straps.

The reskan's teeth closed more tightly, exactly matching Rhane's pull. Rhane stared into the reskan's clear black eyes, saw tiny flecks of blue dancing ... and felt a distinct sense of play. Kahsah was quite deliberately teasing him, but her game was so utterly lacking in malice that Rhane was amused rather than irritated. He yanked suddenly, hard. The harness stayed embedded in the reskan's wide smile.

"She's stronger than I am," said Rhane blandly, "and she knows it. Quicker, too."

"That's your first lesson in reskan riding. Remember it." Shiya's voice warmed subtly. "Kahsah."

The harness dropped into Rhane's hand.

"Kahsah leads Nahst's pack," continued Shiya. "She is cooperative rather than obedient. If you don't understand the distinction, she'll teach you. If you don't learn, you won't ride."

Rhane looked at Kahsah and believed every word Shiya had said. With an inward reluctance, he began straightening out the supple straps. The harness was made of tough, nearly transparent gut.

"This won't make Kahsah any easier to see," commented Rhane.

"You could make the harness as bright as a wiri, but you still wouldn't see if the reskan didn't want you to."

"I suppose they make mountains disappear, too," said Rhane sarcastically.

"No. They leave such games to the shazir."

Rhane smiled before he realized that Shiya's remark was not meant as a joke. With a soundless sigh, he reminded himself that religious fanatics had no sense of humor regarding their gods.

"Now what do I do?" said Rhane, holding out the untangled harness.

"Put it on Kahsah."

"I assumed that," said Rhane, biting down on his anger. "Does it matter which end is up?"

"That's between you and Kahsah," said Shiya, turning toward Nahst.

"Listen, you cold-mouthed—" began Rhane angrily, then checked his words but not the emotion behind them. Beggar fled from his shoulder in an explosion of rainbows. Kahsah hummed deeply, disturbingly. Rhane controlled himself; when he spoke again it was in a careful, emotionless voice. "I didn't force you to take me into the Jaws. You accepted for reasons of your own. If you've changed your mind, or"—sarcastically—"if your gods have changed theirs, I'll leave and find my own way to the place where Cezine died."

The silence that followed Rhane's words stretched until he became aware of wiri songs carried from the forest by a gust of cold wind. The surrounding mure trees shuddered and flexed their limbs until leaves strained against ebony twigs, wild to be free, flying on moonlight and the wind. Then the gust passed, leaving behind only coolness and a few yellow leaves floating among fragments of song.

Shiya spoke in a voice so low that Rhane had to lean forward to hear. Though she was speaking to him, her eyes were fixed on the distant ranges of the Mountains of Light, where peaks flamed in a dawn that had not yet reached the mure forest.

"I care for neither you nor your Nine foolish Gods, but I am bound to both by the dead weight of the past, of what we were.

"Years ago you showed me the beating heart of laughter, Concord man. I worshiped you for that, just as Cezine worshiped me for ... what? I never knew. In the end, our separate gods failed us, Cezine and me alike. I was too wild to be worshiped and you were too tame. Only Cezine was ripe, but no one worshiped him until it was too late.

"I had thought it all dead with him, a matter of the past, finished. Then you came to me, a sweet-voiced ghost wearing Cezine's face and body, your own laughter, and your eyes accused me as Cezine never had, even while he lay melting between my hands like my tears.

"I couldn't find a shayl to save Cezine, or a shazir to resurrect him. But he worshiped me almost as much as he loved you, so I'll do for you what I can, and for myself.

"And wish I could change the past as it has changed me."

Shiya turned away from the mountains to face Rhane. Her eyes were as clear as a wiri's song, and as alien. He felt the world turning beneath his feet, the past turning, spinning, a crystal glass in a god's hands.

"The shayl'm have a saying," Shiya continued calmly, as though she had never spoken of the past, of Cezine and death. "He who would ride a reskan must first catch it." Her glance dropped to the harness dangling from Rhane's hands. "If you fasten what is in your right hand around Kahsah's neck and forehead, and what is in your left hand just behind her front legs, you'll have caught your reskan. Fasten it carefully. Too tight and she won't tolerate it, too loose and it won't do you any good."

Rhane looked from the straps in his hands to the reskan waiting close by. Rhane's eyes measured the calm, huge animal who was watching him out of eyes as deep as space.

Kahsah waited until the neck straps were almost fastened, then calmly shook off the harness. Rhane picked it up and untangled the straps. He was vaguely aware of Shiya off to his left, putting harness on Nahst.

Rhane tried several more times to put the harness on Kahsah. Each time she shook it off.

"Kahsah," said Rhane softly, picking up the harness yet again, "I already know you're bigger, stronger and quicker than I am. If you're half as smart as I think you are, you're as bored with this silly harness game as I am. So," Rhane stood in front of Kahsah's black eyes, no longer trying to harness the reskan, "what in Siol's Nineteen Hells are you trying to teach me?"

The reskan's stubby ears curved toward Rhane's voice. Kahsah's huge, yet oddly delicate nostrils flared, sucking in every scent associated with Rhane. It was as though she smelled as much as heard his words. The blue tongue of a mature female reskan licked across Rhane's neck where the wiri had snuggled.

"Sweet devils of Siol," muttered Rhane, "I thought Nahst got all of it."

But in spite of Rhane's unease at being licked by a long-toothed predator, he stood still for Kahsah's attentive tongue. The reskan's nostrils quivered and she made a tenor sound that Rhane sensed was approving. Her tongue vanished back behind its double wall of long white teeth.

"Anything else you want?" asked Rhane wryly. "Or are you ready to go?"

Rhane realized that his nose suddenly itched. Well, not itched, exactly, and not exactly his nose. Without thinking, he reached out and gently rubbed the edges of Kahsah's nostrils. When he realized what he was doing—and why—he stood frozen, his fingers just touching the reskan's incredibly soft skin.

After a moment, Kahsah nudged his fingers impatiently. A quick sideways glance assured Rhane that Shiya was too busy with Nahst to notice the odd communication that had occurred between him and Kahsah. He returned to rubbing the reskan's nostrils, marveling at their delicate suede texture almost as much as he marveled at the subtlety of the reskan's communication.

Kahsah crooned softly, her eyes half-closed as she concentrated on Rhane's touch. When she was satisfied, she nudged the harness and held her head in an attitude of waiting. Quickly, Rhane fastened the harness around her long neck. He fumbled at the buckles behind her powerful legs, but the reskan stood as patiently as a stone wall until the straps were snugly fastened.

As soon as Rhane was finished, he allowed a very guarded mental probe into the reskan's awareness.

All right? he asked silently.

Rhane waited without knowing precisely what he expected, but he would not have been shocked if the reskan had turned and spoken to him in High Galactic. But nothing happened, not even a vague sense of attempted mental communication. Rhane glanced over at Shiya, who was watching Kahsah as intently as he was.

"Get on," said Shiya, without lifting her glance from Kahsah.

Rhane put his hand on the tall reskan and eyed the narrow foot loops dangling behind her muscular shoulders. He could hop around, put his foot in the loop and then flail about until he managed to drag himself onto the reskan's back. He could, but he would rather not. It would be easier on both of them if Kahsah would lie down.

The reskan sank into a crouch.

Rhane swore softly in the private language of Siol's kings. He stroked Kahsah's velvet nostrils in

silent thanks. She blinked at him wisely ... or was it merely that the wind was cold across her eyes? Rhane shook himself and swung onto Kahsah before she could change her mind. He mounted in a single motion, careful to control his body at all times so as not to thump along the reskan's spine and ribs. He had learned the hard way that most animals resented a sloppy rider.

"Gracefully done," Shiya said. "But Kahsah is spoiling you. A crouching reskan is as easy to mount as a stair."

Shiya put her hands on Nahst's harness and leaped. She settled on Nahst's back as lightly as a wiri. Unlike Kahsah, Nahst was not crouching. Rhane stared, silently doubling his former estimate of Shiya's strength and agility. Menx native and Menx reskan were well matched.

A high, taut scream cut across the fading night. The scream was inhuman, compelling. Kahsah froze. At the same instant, Rhane sensed an ... absence. The change was so minor, and so subtle, that he could not even name what it was. The feeling was rather like not sensing his own heartbeat; he knew that he still lived, but the soft rhythms of his body no longer existed in the background of his awareness.

Then Rhane became aware that he no longer could see Nahst and Shiya, though, he was certain they had not moved from the area immediately in front of him. Even as he tried to focus on the spot, his glance slid away. He tried again, but found it nearly impossible to keep his attention fixed.

The scream was repeated, long and thin and urgent. It was answered from the place where Shiya should have been. The answer seemed to come out of the air itself.

Rhane stared, concentrating on the part of the trail where his eyes and mind did not want to focus. After an effort that left him sweating into the cold gloom, he saw the shadowy outline of a reskan and a rider. Further effort filled in the outline, until another high scream tore through gloom, forcing his attention upward where a pale bird soared against the pewter sky.

The world shifted minutely. The nameless feeling of absence left as subtly as it had come. Simultaneously, Nahst and Shiya reappeared. Rhane felt almost certain now that the reskan's camouflage was as much mental as physical, and extended to cover the reskan's immediate surroundings. Not so much invisibility as nonexistence. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became.

That certainty, on further reflection, gave Rhane little comfort. Why would an animal as large and savage as the reskan need such a sophisticated ability to hide? Was there something on Menx that could so threaten a reskan? And if so, how had the various Concord teams overlooked an entity that had to be at least as dangerous as the reskan?

"I wish you could talk, Kahsah," muttered Rhane. "I'm beginning to wonder if sickness was the only problem the medical team met in the Jaws."

Kahsah gave a sighing yawn and stretched, scraping her claws across stone with a chilling sound. She radiated power and assurance. The white bird's erratic screams seemed to disturb her no longer.

"I know there's no danger from that kerden bird," said Rhane, "but what about the next time? What do reskans hide from?"

If Kahsah had an answer, she did not share it.

The bird was suddenly silent, soaring up until it vanished. Nahst turned and reached Kahsah's side in a single bound.

"A flyer landed," said Shiya.

Before the last word left Shiya's lips, Nahst made a tremendous leap, then flattened out into a long running stride. Rhane grabbed the harness just before Kahsah exploded into a ground-devouring run.

Wind ripped tears out of Rhane's eyes, blinding him. He dug deeper into the harness with hands and feet, wishing that a bridle were part of the reskan's equipment and at the same time knowing that a bridle would be useless. Reskans were not obedient. Worse, they seemed to cooperate according to rules that Rhane did not understand.

Rhane ducked low and closed his eyes. Even with them open, he could not see. If Kahsah leaped over rocks or fallen trees, he would not be able to brace himself in time. Nor could he slow the reskan's terrifying speed. All he could do was hang on.

Kahsah swerved around a huge boulder, nearly unseating Rhane. In desperation, Rhane reached out to the reskan's mind, hoping to establish enough rapport to anticipate her movements. The contact he

established was far deeper than any he had attempted before, but Kahsah either did not notice or did not care.

Soon Rhane knew which direction Kahsah would leap, could anticipate her abrupt changes of speed, and found himself enjoying Kahsah's fluid strength as much as she did. Rhane bent low, becoming part of Kahsah's powerful body even as he had become part of her mind. Menx legend and Siolan symbol raced through the forest, scattering brilliant flights of wiris into the predawn silence.

V

A flyer gleamed dully in a small clearing that straddled the only road into the Jaws. Rhane stared, trying to make out figures in the gloomy light.

"Lor Jastre," said Shiya finally. "And one other. And loris! How did he know mine were gone?"

"Loris?"

"Yes," she said angrily. "I wasn't planning any more trips this summer, so I left my loris in their low pastures."

"You didn't mention that to Lor Jastre."

"No kin of his died in my care."

Shiya dismounted and strode toward the flyer. Rhane hesitated, then slid off Kahsah and followed Shiya. A cluster of glowballs flared into life in the clearing. Beneath the white light and rippling black shadows, Rhane saw Lor Jastre, seven loris, and a woman.

The woman was standing beneath a cluster of glowballs mounted on a pole. She was dressed in folds of blue material that shimmered and drifted with every movement. Her hair was long, unbound and deeply black. She had white skin and eyes as blue as Siolan water jewels. Though the woman was shorter and more full-bodied than was considered attractive on Siol, she had a potent sexual appeal that transcended Rhane's cultural conditioning.

Lor Jastre distracted Rhane's stare with a greeting, but made no move to introduce the woman. Shiya began arguing with the T'aeln in a voice too low for Rhane to follow. He glanced at the woman again, then looked away, not wanting to commit a breach of Courtesy.

After Rhane stood in the smokegrass for a few moments, he realized that the reskans were also present. Their outlines solidified gradually, as though they were precipitating out of the dawn.

The woman gave a startled cry and froze. Kahsah, who happened to be closest to the stranger, gave her a glance and then looked away. The woman ran to where Lor Jastre was arguing with Shiya. Both of them ignored the T'aeln woman. Without speaking at all, she stood just behind Lor Jastre, glancing over her shoulder at Kahsah. The reskan vanished.

Kahsah reappeared less than an arm's length from Lor Jastre. The mentor's mouth froze open, his arguments forgotten. He stared at Kahsah in disbelief. Shiya, too, seemed first startled, then puzzled, and finally amused. Kahsah faded again, only to materialize on Lor Jastre's opposite side. She clicked her teeth to get his attention. Lor Jastre made an involuntary sound and spun toward the reskan. Shiya did not bother to conceal her amusement.

"Kahsah," said Rhane, recognizing the sly tangent of the reskan's thoughts, "stop playing with him. Please."

Kahsah gave Rhane a long, unwavering glance. He held firm. She clicked her teeth together once, sharply, then sauntered off to join Nahst.

"I thought most people couldn't see reskans," snapped Rhane.

Shiya smiled, the line of her lips echoing Kahsah's pleasure. "Outside of the Jaws, and when it serves the reskans' purpose, they can be as obvious as mountains."

Rhane's expression was both baffled and apologetic as he turned toward Lor Jastre. The woman was holding onto his arm, her eyes wide with unspoken fear.

"It's all right, Jul," said Lor Jastre in T'aeln, removing his arm from her grasp. He patted her almost absently. "Go back where you were."

Jul's eyes never left Lor Jastre's face while she backed up to her former position. Except for a very

brief glance in Rhane's direction, she did not seem to notice him. She did not look even once at Shiya, nor did Shiya look at her. With every action, Jul proclaimed herself to be a superbly trained latlik.

"There's no point in arguing," said Lor Jastre in Galactic, picking up where Kahsah had interrupted him. "I have my own supplies and animals."

"Including the latlik," said Shiya.

Lor Jastre made an impatient motion toward Jul. "It goes where I go."

"It?" Only when they looked at Rhane did he realize that he had spoken aloud. "Apologies and regrets," said Rhane, resorting to the formalities of a Galactic Courtesy in order to cover his confusion.

Lor Jastre looked almost irritated, then he smiled slightly. "Neither Siol's language nor its customs are like T'ael's. Nor is Menx." He gave a swift, strange look to Shiya. "No other language has an appreciation of such niceties of pronoun usage as does T'aeln." His hands moved in an elegant gesture of dismissal. "Not even Galactic is as precise as T'aeln language in that area."

The woman called Jul stood watching Lor Jastre with complete attention. She gave no sign that she was aware that they were indirectly discussing her.

"Didn't Lor Sostra instruct you?" Then, before Rhane could answer. Lor Jastre continued. "There are twelve personal pronouns in the T'aeln language. They denote various levels of status. To simplify, all T'aeln status ultimately derives from a being's suitability as a progenitor. Only the most desirable beings have a personal pronoun that designates sex.

"As I would never consent to impregnate a woman of inferior genotype, the pronoun I use in reference to Jul avoids any sexual designation."

"I ... see," said Rhane, his mind trying to take in the implications of such a complex caste system. Lor Sostra had discussed T'aeln castes only by implication. "Galactic has no pronoun to reflect Jul's status within T'aeln society?"

"Wrong," snapped Shiya. "The word 'it' is an accurate reflection of the reality of latlik. Neither sex nor status. A thing. It."

"Shiya—" began Lor Jastre, his handsome face drawn into lines of impatience. Then he made a curt gesture and turned toward Rhane. "Shiya lacks the sophistication to understand the subtleties of T'ael's ancient culture."

Rhane glanced at Shiya. Her face was as expressionless as that of the latlik Jul.

"The Menx language reflects this lack of subtlety, as does Galactic. Thus, when I use Galactic with you or Shiya, I'm limited to your cultural possibilities, human or animal. Because it's difficult for me to think of Jul as anything but latlik, I referred to it—her—by a pronoun that sounded rude to you. Forgive me." Lor Jastre smiled and held out his hands. "It's been so long since I've spoken to anything but Menx or latlik, I've forgotten how I sound."

Rhane automatically put his palms on Lor Jastre's. The T'aeln skin was dark, smooth, slightly warmer than Rhane's.

"No forgiveness needed," said Rhane. "It was my own lack of perception that caused the misunderstanding."

"You underestimate your perceptions," Shiya said before Lor Jastre could speak, "or else you're as much a fool as Lor Jastre believes."

Shiya turned away from Rhane and the T'aeln mentor, to the piles of equipment stacked by the flyer. She sorted through Lor Jastre's equipment with a quick, disgusted commentary.

"Telescoping cot. Snugglewool. Knives and forks and sorkas. Whole meat and foaming drink. A divided tent! Do you think this is a pleasure jaunt—that we go to the Jaws out of boredom rather than need?"

"Perhaps Lor Jastre is simply guarding against getting caught by an early storm," suggested Rhane uncomfortably, remembering the two slim packs that were all Shiya had brought.

Shiya made a rude noise. "If he takes this mess along, he'll be caught by the next three winters." She looked sideways at Rhane. "Do you still insist that Lor Jastre come with us?"

"Yes," said Rhane, remembering his father's death moments enshrined on Siol. "There is a debt between us," Rhane added, his voice as closed as his face. "I don't expect you to understand that."

“No more than you understand the debt between you and me. So be it, Concord man. May this trip make an end to such debts.”

With decisive movements, Shiya continued sorting through Lor Jastre’s equipment. When she was finished, the stack to be left behind was five times as large as the one to be taken.

She had permitted Lor Jastre and his latlik necessities, but not one comfort. When the T’aeln objected, she ignored him.

“But you haven’t even left us enough food,” said Lor Jastre, his voice rough with frustration.

“There are plenty of concentrates,” said Shiya.

Lor Jastre followed Shiya while she hefted various pack sacks, measuring their weight with experienced tugs.

“Concentrates,” snapped Lor Jastre, “are for emergencies. Even a Menx should be able to comprehend that. What if we get caught by an early mountain howler?”

“We freeze.”

Shiya secured two packsacks across an uncomplaining lori. She cinched everything in place with a series of smooth-sided knots while Rhane watched closely, memorizing each motion. Abruptly, Shiya spun and confronted Lor Jastre.

“Listen with both ears, chizak,” she said, low-voiced and cold. “We use emergency concentrates because this is an emergency. We wear survival suits because our survival is at stake. We go light and we go fast because we’re fools for going at all. If you don’t like it, don’t go.”

Shiya turned to the next lori, only to find Rhane had already begun packing it. She watched, tested a knot here and a strap there, adjusted one shoulder pad and then moved on to the next lori. Lor Jastre stared after her, but said no more about equipment and understanding.

The second moon set, washing the land in a wave of blackness. In the south, three stars rose slowly, a triad of incandescent blue and yellow and orange that would change to fierce silver as the sun climbed in the sky. The three stars would precede the sun all day, a glittering premonition of its awesome light.

“The shayl are running,” said Shiya as the blackness thinned beneath the triangle of stars. “We should be running, too.”

Kahsah’s tenor howl electrified the waiting reskans. The loris whined nervously. Jul made a startled sound, looked at Lor Jastre and waited with clenched hands for him to notice her. Rhane started to reassure her, but she ignored him, having attention only for Lor Jastre.

The T’aeln glanced at Jul and made a quick gesture with his hand before mounting his own lori. Jul turned toward her lori with an expression of mingled fear and determination. Though loris were small for riding beasts, Jul was hardly bigger than a child herself. Mounting the lori would not be easy for her, nor would sitting on its wide, muscular back be comfortable for her short body.

The rising sun flooded the world with gold, making Rhane’s eyes as deeply yellow as a T’aeln master’s. He watched Jul’s inexperienced struggles for a few more moments, then abandoned Courtesy in favor of common sense. He stepped forward and swung Jul easily up into the saddle. He received a startled glance from her blue eyes, a tiny nod of recognition, and then it was as though he were invisible again.

“You’ll spoil it—her,” called Lor Jastre from his lori. Then he smiled slightly. “I hadn’t realized Jul would have difficulties. Loris are such squat beasts. But then, so is Jul.”

Lor Jastre looked at his latlik. A subtle signal passed between them. She turned from the T’aeln to Rhane.

“I am favorite of your notice,” Jul said in broken High Galactic.

“As I am favored by yours,” responded Rhane in the same language.

Jul glanced away nervously. Lor Jastre spoke in rapid T’aeln, too fast for Rhane to understand. Whatever was said appeared to reassure the latlik. She turned back to Rhane with a smile more beautiful than the sunrise.

“It was kind of you to help me,” Jul said in Middle Galactic, a language with which she was more at ease. “I’m so clumsy with animals and I didn’t want to inconvenience the Lor Jastre.” She touched Rhane’s cheek above his gold beard. “Thank you.”

Rhane could not help staring at the black-haired woman who was leaning slightly toward him, her voice as inviting as her caress, her eyes endlessly blue. It was as though Lor Jastre's rapid words had transformed Jul. The sexuality Rhane had sensed when he first saw her was nearly overwhelming now.

With an effort, Rhane managed to keep his voice merely polite while he said the proper phrases. When he looked away from Jul, he saw Lor Jastre smiling approvingly. Shiya, however, had a cynical curve to her lips that made Rhane uncomfortable. She walked over to where Rhane stood and leaned lightly against the length of his body.

"That's just the beginning of her skill, Concord man," Shiya said, her voice even more promising than the latlik's had been. "*The* Lor Jastre will be pleased to have Jul demonstrate the rest of her talents." Shiya smiled slowly while her fingertips traced the curve of Rhane's lips. "You see, a well-trained latlik is a thing of much pride to *the* Lor Jastre."

With a speed that surprised Shiya, Rhane took her face between his hands. She tried to pull back, but was unable to move her head at all. His thumbs traced the slanting lines of her cheekbones with more gentleness than he had intended.

Rhane released her and walked quickly away, his hands burning with the tactile memory of her skin. There were other memories too, and he wanted none of them.

Kahsah materialized beside Rhane. She whuffed over Beggar, forgotten on Rhane's shoulder. So long as Rhane did not radiate emotion, the wiri could be omnipresent without being obtrusive. It was a survival characteristic shared by all wiris.

Beggar flew up and landed between Kahsah's blunt ears. Whistling in obvious invitation, Beggar looked down at Rhane. The man measured Kahsah's tall back and tried not to sigh. Kahsah crouched and looked up at Rhane with what he would have sworn was a smile. A feeling like laughter echoed distantly in his mind as he swung onto the reskan's muscular back.

Kahsah rose to her feet, gave a low whistle and started across the clearing without waiting for a signal from Rhane or Shiya. Rhane glanced back uncertainly. Shiya was directly behind him, followed by a reskan carrying their few supplies.

The loris followed well behind the reskans. Rhane wondered how the shorter animals would keep up. Though strong for their size, loris were not noted for speed. As he watched their deliberate walk, Rhane began to understand just how much the sturdy loris would slow the pace.

As though Lor Jastre had also realized the same thing, he brought down his riding whip along the lori's haunch. The stroke was carefully measured, no more than a firm request for greater speed. The lori shifted into a fast walk that was peculiar to the lowland animals. It was not a comfortable gait to ride, but it matched the pace of the long-legged reskans.

Around them the light swelled until mure leaves glowed like a million yellow eyes. Question birds called insistently. Shiya's clear whistle floated up in answer until silence returned to the forest. Once, a cloud of brilliant-eyed wiris flew around the small caravan, circling and calling in sweet chiming voices. Kahsah whistled, dispersing the wiris like windblown leaves.

The temperature rose with the sun. Rhane unfastened the upper third of his survival suit, letting the strong breeze blow across his skin. Overhead, the sky was a lavender window etched with shimmering cloud designs that changed even as Rhane watched.

Except for random fragments of conversation between Lor Jastre and Jul, Rhane could have been alone in the measureless mure wilderness. The mountains were an unseen presence hinted at by the subtle incline of the land. Once, in a clearing made by smooth gray, boulders, Rhane caught sight of barren peaks lifted above a blue-white haze compounded of distance, moisture and heat waves rising. The Mountains of Light could not have looked more distant if they had been on one of the four moons of Menx.

As morning slid into afternoon, Rhane's body protested the relentless riding. Except for a brief break to allow the T'aelns to switch to fresh loris, Kahsah had not stopped once. Like the others, Rhane had eaten and drunk out of the light pack he had tied onto his mount's harness.

By evening, Rhane's body was a mass of aches. His mood was so unpleasant that Beggar had retreated to the farthest point on Kahsah's head. When the reskan finally stopped, Rhane slid down

thankfully, staggered when his legs buckled, and hobbled off into the forest.

When he returned, Lor Jastre was dismounting stiffly from his lori. He walked up and down beside the trail with uneven strides, muttering behind his teeth. Rhane did not bother to translate the searing combination of T'aeln and Galactic; it could not have been worse than his own thoughts on dismounting from Kahsah.

The latlik, however, was more than merely sore. Jul collapsed beside her lori, unable to walk at all. After a rapid exchange in T'aeln, Lor Jastre pulled Jul to her feet and walked her toward a dense stand of smoketrees. Though Jul said nothing more, her skin was unnaturally white.

Supper was quick and nearly silent. Even Lor Jastre confined himself to no more than a sarcastic comment about concentrates and Menx cuisine. No one bothered to answer. Lor Jastre and Jul fell asleep immediately after eating. Shiya, being the least affected by the long ride, went to check on the loris.

Rhane struggled with his conscience before finally giving in to it. He unwrapped the psitran from his arm, wove it into its most potent shape and sent out his silent, searching call.

When the response came, he compressed the findings of the long day into multilevel mindspeech and waited for a reply.

The answer when it came, was troubled.

What you've discovered about the reskans' extreme refinement of camouflage suggests many possibilities, none of them welcome. However, since a rider is included in the camouflage, the risk is not unacceptable. The reskans, after all, have managed to survive rather nicely in spite of whatever they hide from. I envy you. It must be fascinating to ride a myth into the jaws of an enigma.

Rhane's response was a full sharing of exactly what it felt like after a day of myth-riding. Meriel ignored him.

The discovery about Shiya and the T'aeln mentor is less happy, however. At this point, their past relation does not affect your mimax. However, if Lor Jastre slows you too much, you must consider abandoning him. Your mimax is now 17-68, conditional.

Rhane thought quickly, reassessing his chances for success. At worst, he had only seventeen out of a hundred chances of succeeding—and surviving. At best, he had sixty-eight. And even that was conditional.

What caused the downward shift? asked Rhane. *The reskans?*

No. If you had no rapport with the shayl creatures, your mimax would be 2-13, conditional.

Rhane winced. *What's wrong, Meriel? What have I missed?*

Your feeling of being watched. The itch at the back of your eyeballs, as you call it. That indicates either a specific and continuing psi probe by a highly gifted individual or a nonspecific and pervasive level of psi in the general population. Probability greatly favors the latter, although nothing else you've said indicates such psi talents. Unless, of course, "shayl" is another name for "psi."

Then why can't I sense it in Shiya, for instance, as I do in Beggar and even Kahsah?

Shields, came the succinct response.

But when I reach out to her there is none of the feeling of a shield, no slippery opacity, no sense of something hiding or waiting just beyond my probe.

A sense of wry, wordless amusement came to Rhane through the link. *We've also tried. Even mind-linked, we sensed nothing. It's an enigma to puzzle even a Sharnn,* agreed the Carifil. *Nonetheless, the mimax for you must be refigured on the basis of your information. As that calls for a synthesizer of greater talent than mine, your mimax is conditional until such a synthesizer can be found.*

At least no new epidemics have been reported in the cities, continued Meriel.

Did the other Carifil feel ... watched? asked Rhane.

One did. Psi varies with the individual.

That isn't much help, shot back Rhane. Then he silently apologized, realizing that his physical

discomfort was making him both abrupt and unfair.

I'm sorry, Rhane. When I've found a synthesizer, maybe I'll have something useful to tell you.

The link dissolved before Rhane could respond. With a weary gesture he dragged the psitran off his head. His fingers fumbled before he finally found the correct pressure points on the mass of wires. Silently, swiftly, the psitran coiled around his upper arm and melded into a seamless whole.

He looked up and realized that Shiya was sitting close to him, watching him.

"I was meditating," said Rhane quickly. "A god-ritual."

Shiya moved uneasily. "My mother often sat like that—before she changed."

"Changed?" said Rhane. Then, remembering that many races referred to death simply as change, he said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to recall the dead."

Shiya's left hand made a ritual gesture of warding off that contained more sadness than fear. "She may still live. My father was Concord. He died on Menx. After that, my mother tried very hard but could not fight the transformation into shazir." Shiya's voice was matter-of-fact, as though she were talking of packs and loris rather than gods and impossibilities. "Before her powers overtook her, she gave me to the Black Ridge shayl'm and went into the Jaws as all h'shazir must."

"You're saying that your mother was a ... god."

"Yes." Shiya looked at Rhane with searching amber eyes. "It's not an uncommon thing on Menx, to have a god for a parent."

"Shayl'm," said Rhane slowly. "Children of the gods. Literally."

"Yes."

"Are you, then, a god?" asked Rhane, keeping his voice neutral.

"No. No mountains leap for me, nor do my footsteps turn from gold to fire and then back to dirt again." Shiya shivered involuntarily and repeated her gesture of warding off. "To be shayl is difficult enough. I pray I'll never be shazir."

"I don't understand," Rhane said quietly.

"For a man who tames wiris and rides reskans, you don't understand much. And you believe even less."

Shiya's voice became more cool and distant with each word. Rhane suspected that her patience with his disbelief was as limited as his patience with her faith in god myths. He watched covertly while she drank from a subtly patterned mug. Her throat was smooth, curved, brown, and her braided hair echoed the bright flames.

"What did your Concord tell you about the shayl, besides that they were gods? They aren't," she said flatly, "even by Concord standards. Only shazir have that power."

"The Concord didn't tell me much because there is little known. They only mentioned shayl, not shazir. They believe shayl are probably either a separate species—"

Shiya moved her head in an unconscious negative gesture.

"—or the remnants of a very ancient civilization that was once potent and is now moribund." Rhane glanced again at Shiya, but her sharply etched profile next to him told him nothing. "Either way, the shayl are culturally different from the flatland Menx. The differences have been grossly—" He stopped, not wanting to offend Shiya further. "Probably," he said tactfully, "the differences between lowland Menx and highland shayl were enlarged upon. People have a tendency to seize minor differences and ignore boggling similarities. Regrettable, but very human."

Rhane shifted his weight, looking sideways at Shiya as he did so. Her face showed no emotion at all.

"Through the centuries," continued Rhane, then stopped again, suddenly hearing himself as she must hear him—sophistication and sliding superficiality. "Differences were reinforced by geographical isolation," he said crisply. "Myths grew. Gradually, the idea of the shayl as distant, living gods became the central myth of Menx religions. Now they are called shazir?" he asked, turning toward her.

Shiya said nothing.

Rhane spoke in his most gentle voice. "The idea of living gods is not unique to Menx, Shiya. Menx has simply developed that idea to astonishing lengths."

"The word gods came from Concord, not Menx," said Shiya. "Our word—shayl—simply means

power.”

“Power,” Rhane said dryly, “is all that separates gods from men.”

Shiya’s only answer was a sad smile.

“You spoke of a transformation,” said Rhane. “Shayl to shazir. What did you mean?”

“The true word is shayl-zir, meaning power without referent.” Shiya looked at Rhane, her eyes reflecting night and flames. “I see that doesn’t mean anything to you.” She groped among Galactic words, searching for one that would explain what she meant. “A shazir is a god who can’t or won’t control the timeshadows or the overlapping realities.”

Shiya looked intently at Rhane, sighed, and tried again. “Think of the shazir as ... insane. All the times and all the possibilities of the universe exist in their minds simultaneously. These possibilities ... leak out ... wherever the shazir happens to be. Some shazir even have the power to make any possibility more real than the probability we call reality. The results are often dangerous to us, sometimes beautiful and always unpredictable.

“Some shazir can change the world with a thought.”

Rhane controlled both his expression and the astringent comments that burned on his tongue. He had learned long ago that the only thing more futile than arguing dogmas was believing in them.

“How does a shayl become a shazir?” said Rhane after the silence became uncomfortable.

Shiya sat without answering, as though she had not heard Rhane’s question. Her face was troubled, her eyes dark. He watched light and flame-shadows slide over her, defining and then concealing the graceful lines of her body.

“There are no rules of shayl to shazir, no patterns that I have found,” Shiya said, staring at the flames. “And I have looked. I have hunted those patterns more carefully than I ever hunted reskans.

“I didn’t want to be shayl, but I find that I’ve become one. I tame wiris and speak to reskans. I can accept being shayl, even being outcast among the people I grew up with. I can accept that because I must.”

“But not shazir,” she whispered. “Not shazir!”

Rhane looked at Shiya, disturbed by the change in her voice. Her body too, had changed, tightened, and her expression was as alien as the twin descending moons. When she met his eyes he was almost afraid.

“Do you understand, Rhane? Can you? We’re all one people, highland and lowland, except that some of us are doomed to power. Some are different, but we don’t know how or why.”

Her fingers closed convulsively around each other. Her voice became clipped, rapid, emotionless.

“Lowland Menx are less likely to have god children than highland Menx. Highland Menx, who you know as shayl’m, are children born of shayl, but usually highland Menx are little different from their lowland cousins. Usually, but not always. Gods are born to shayl’m much more often than they are born to lowland Menx.

“Shazir are rarely born to lowland Menx, sometimes born to shayl’m and often born to shayl. Most often, though, shayl become shazir as they grow older ... transformation. We call it h’shazir, the time spent in and out of shazir until the change is complete.”

Shiya turned toward Rhane. Her skin was stretched over the bones of her face in an expression of waiting that was far too old for her years.

“I did not want to become shayl, but that is what I am. I don’t want to become shazir, but I’m afraid that is what I will be.”

Shiya’s eyes were bleak, haunted. When she turned away, it was as final as though she had never looked at him at all. Without thinking, Rhane reached out and put his hand over her clenched fingers, trying to call her back by simple touch. He felt sudden and unbearable fear. Her skin was cool, as though she had withdrawn all her energy, hoarding it for some grim inner reason.

In spite of Rhane’s turmoil of emotions—her fear and his own anger at a religion and a believer whose ritual beliefs destroyed rather—than renewed—Rhane wanted to comfort Shiya. Gently, Rhane loosened Shiya’s fingers. He lifted her hand and rubbed it against his beard and cheek, warming her cold skin. The gesture was almost automatic, left over from a time when Cezine and Shiya had warmed their

cold hands while they teased Rhane about the beard that he had grown during the long Menx summer.

Even when Shiya's fingers were no longer cold, Rhane continued rubbing his cheek against them, lost in an inner world where half-formed memories twisted like silent mist shapes rising from the body of the past. Gradually the shapes condensed into ... *a day eight years ago, children's voices echoing across a sunset lake. Cezine's shriek when Shiya doused the golden flame of his hair beneath the water of the lake. Rhane, waist-deep in indigo water, laughing at Cezine until Shiya's hands wrapped around one ankle and Cezine's around the other. Their instinctive knowledge of leverage offset his greater size and strength, sending him down in a fountain of spray and laughter.*

Rhane came up spewing water and threats that were answered by cries of delight from Cezine and Shiya. Silver arcs of water flew up as he pursued the two quick bodies, water drops like another form of laughter glittering against the amethyst sky.

The fading blaze of sun was replaced by a campfire that leaped toward the stars, limning Cezine and Shiya in molten orange and scarlet and gold, water sliding down their smooth bodies. Cezine said something that was captured by the crackling fire, but Shiya's laughter eluded the flames, spreading through the twilight like the song of hidden wiris.

Rhane stared, caught by the grace of the Menx child, a beauty that was as sinuous as the flames mirrored by her hair. Shiya's laughter changed as she became aware of him. She returned his look with eyes that were more woman than child, intensely aware.

The night wind gusted, sucking up an incandescent spiral of sparks. For an instant Shiya was a swirl of fire and darkness, then she shivered and held her hands out to the twisting flames, a child once more.

In the uncertain light, Cezine stumbled over a rock. He would have fallen if Rhane had not caught him. Cezine's skin was clammy. Belatedly, Rhane realized that the lake had been colder than he thought. Cezine was nearly drained of warmth.

Rhane snatched up a towel and began rubbing Cezine. When he was finished, Rhane fastened Cezine into a sleeping robe and told him to sit by the fire.

Shiya watched silently, shivering from time to time, trying to wring water from her long hair without getting her skin any wetter than it already was. Rhane found another towel and began drying her with brisk, gentle motions. She stood quietly, holding her hair aside, still shivering when he was finished and had fastened a sleeping robe around her.

By that time Rhane was dry himself, except for his thick hair, which sent cold rivulets of water gleaming down his skin. He ignored his own chill, worried by the trembling he sensed beneath Shiya's skin. But when he moved to rub dry her hair, she refused to stand still until he had wrapped himself against the deepening chill of the highland evening.

In the end, they made a game of drying Shiya's hair. Shiya held separate strands near the fire's dancing heat while Rhane combed and wove elaborate tales about webfooted water dragons nesting in the hair and nibbling on the ears of children who were foolish enough to sleep with wet heads. Before her hair was dry, Shiya was helpless with laughter at the whimsical word pictures Rhane drew.

Across the fire, Cezine stretched out, and seemed to sleep. It was Rhane who brushed Shiya's hair until it leaped and clung to his hands as though it were alive, Rhane who gathered the silky mass into braids as gently as though he were weaving fire itself ...

"Whenever my hair was wet I thought of your foolish web-footed dragons," said Shiya.

Rhane was too surprised by the congruence of their thoughts to do more than stare at Shiya. He became aware of her hand still curled in his, and of the fact that he had been rubbing his cheek against her fingers as though it were eight years ago. He realized that for her, too, tactile memory had vividly evoked the past.

"Is that why you returned to Menx?" asked Shiya, her expression but not her beauty concealed by the dying flames. "Did you come back so that Cezine might live again?"

"Cezine is dead," said Rhane harshly. "Nothing can change that."

"I know that," said Shiya, "but do you?"

Without answering, Rhane pulled his sleeping robes around him and lay down with his back to the fire. He was awake for a long time, remembering another night, another campfire, when Cezine had been alive.

And so had he.

Finally, Rhane slept, only to dream of jaws closing over his bones while his flesh melted and his mind screamed to a god eight years dead.

VI

By the fourth day, Shiya had led them over the first range of the Mountains of Light, as deep into Menx highlands as any off-worlder had been, except the ill-fated medical team. And Cezine, of course, always Cezine.

The land had a feeling of height. The air was cool in the shade, icy in the night and clear at all times. Mure was giving way to hardy smoketrees whose luminous gray plumes were an index of the transition from lake to mountain country.

The trail Shiya had chosen avoided the infrequent clusters of shayl'm population. She knew the tribesmen were hostile to off-worlders, particularly to T'aelns. Once Rhane had noticed a farm far below the trail, buildings clinging to the terraced sides of a narrow stream valley. Occasionally he had caught glimpses of the broad, less direct caravan road that wound through valleys and around ridges, always seeking the least strenuous route through the mountains.

Like the shayl'm villages, Shiya had been distant and silent. Lor Jastre had been the opposite. He had amused Rhane with the range and sophistication of a T'aeln mentor's observations about man and the universe, treating Rhane almost as an equal; at least, as much an equal as any T'aeln could ever treat a non-T'aeln. In spite of his irritation at having to invite the T'aeln along, Rhane found himself both fascinated and charmed by Lor Jastre's conversation.

"Tell me," said Rhane when the trail widened enough to allow Lor Jastre to ride alongside. "How did you come to be a mentor to Menx?"

Lor Jastre made an elegant, ambiguous gesture. "I come from one of the few master families and clans which aren't disturbed by the presence of other races. In fact, it was one of my clan who originally discovered Menx."

Rhane could not help showing his surprise. "Very few T'aeln are galaxy-class explorers," he commented.

"Yes. It's considered insane, but still ... acceptable." Lor Jastre flicked his fingertips, dismissing the question of his family's sanity. "There was a Concord lightship very close by Menx. If my mother's sister had not discovered the planet, the Concord surely would have. It makes one believe in the inevitability of Menx's discovery, doesn't it?" said Lor Jastre, his tone oddly bitter.

"If only we could convince the Menx of that," said Rhane, thinking of Menx's refusal to accept the reality of a galaxy peopled by other races.

"Impossible."

Lor Jastre's left hand described a sad, graceful arc and vanished into a large pocket. He withdrew an egg-shaped object that fit easily in his palm. His hand flexed slightly. The sound of a highly trained choir floated up from the egg. The music was smooth, soothing, almost hypnotic. The sound vividly reminded Rhane of Fiertten, whose etched-metal tile streets overlaid so many thousand years of civilization.

The memory was not wholly pleasant. Rhane had never forgiven himself for drinking Fiertten's superb history while his father and half brother found their separate deaths on Menx. Fiertten and guilt were inseparable in Rhane's mind.

"I wish that my father could have seen Fiertten," murmured Rhane, thinking aloud. "But he was so sure that he was just hours away from solving the mystery of Menx's musical animals. I wonder if he found his answer before he died."

Lor Jastre's face moved as though to subdue some emotion heaving beneath his civilized exterior. "Death finds all answers," he said harshly.

The quasi-crystal egg breathed music, smoothing over the rough silence.

"I haven't heard one of those since T'ael," Rhane said, listening to the soaring music that seemed too grand to have been reproduced by the unimposing egg. "Almost everyone in Fiertten carried one."

Lor Jastre glanced at the quasi-crystal as though he were surprised to find it in his palm. His fingers closed almost guiltily over the egg, softening the chorus in midnote.

"Yes," said Lor Jastre, returning the music egg to his pocket with a distracted, yet somehow furtive motion. "T'aelns need music. We always have." He smiled strangely. "It keeps us sane."

"You'd better not let Shiya see that," Rhane said. "She won't tolerate certain forms of technology."

"Yes," said Lor Jastre, his voice still distracted. "I know."

With visible reluctance, Lor Jastre silenced the egg. The memory of the RA Jacaroen's death seemed to upset Lor Jastre more than it did Rhane. The T'aeln rode quietly, tightly, obviously still disturbed. Rhane reached over his shoulder where a flute rode in a narrow leather sheath. That kind of music, at least, was welcomed by Menx's idiosyncratic gods.

The flute came easily out of its sheath. Even now, three days after Rhane had awakened to find the flute by his side, he could hardly believe that he once again held his old instrument. It was like awakening into a dream, but the cold touch of metal as his fingers grasped the flute was a reassuring texture of reality.

With a small smile, Rhane remembered how clumsy he had been three days ago with the flute, an ineptness that had owed much to emotion. He had seen Cezine in every gleaming curve of metal, Cezine like a colored shadow sliding away as Rhane turned the flute over and over in his hands, flesh warming dead metal.

Shiya had watched Rhane's first fumbling efforts with the flute with queer intensity. Finally he had let former skills mold his fingers, allowed long-unused reflexes to call a quick pattern of notes out of the flute. The past had risen then, threatening to strangle him on memories of Cezine, but his fingers had danced of their own will, bringing music into the cold day.

After only a few minutes, Rhane's memories had silenced him, but not before he had sensed a slackening of Shiya's intense scrutiny. He had guessed then that the flute was a final test of his identity; no matter what further differences emerged between Rhane-past and Rhane-present, Shiya would no longer question that he was indeed Rhane.

Rhane's fingers skimmed across the burnished metal flute. A ripple of melody poured out. Beggar cocked its head, ears erect, and sidled across Rhane's shoulder toward the metal tube. The wiri's inquisitive chirp was precisely echoed by the flute. Beggar's wings snapped out with a flurry of rainbows. The wiri's throat trembled until complex melody tumbled out. Rhane copied the sounds exactly.

Beggar stood on tiptoe and sang peremptory notes. Rhane echoed the first few, then stopped teasing the indignant creature. He wove a strand of melody that was complementary to the wiri's song. Beggar burst into music with an exuberance that reminded Rhane of Cezine. Cezine had loved to hear Rhane play the flute. Rhane had played for Cezine, and then for the half-wild Shiya, songs made and remembered in that last, long summer of their childhood.

Beggar's song faltered into silence. The wiri abandoned Rhane's shoulder to land between Kahsah's ears. Without being aware of what he was doing, Rhane folded away his emotions. The feelings of sadness and rage and regret still existed, but they were not perceptible even to the hypersensitive wiri. Providing a cheerful—or at least tolerable—emotional surface to his thoughts was more difficult, but Rhane succeeded after a time. Soon such concealment would become as much an automatic reflex as breathing. The wiri was an excellent teacher of mental discipline.

With soft notes, Rhane apologized to the wiri. Beggar stirred between Kahsah's ears. Round purple eyes opened and fixed on Rhane. Beggar spread its wings, scattering intricate colors, and landed once again on Rhane's shoulder, singing wistfully.

Rhane played a teasing flurry of notes. The wiri cocked its head, making its ear tassels quiver. Rhane repeated the notes. Beggar wove a simple harmony, then paused expectantly. Before Rhane could repeat or elaborate upon Beggar's efforts, Kahsah whistled a minor key variation of both Beggar's and Rhane's tunes. Rhane listened, lifted his flute and began to play in earnest, giving himself over to music as he had

not done since Cezine died.

Soon wiri, reskan and human were producing three-part harmony, oblivious to the startled stares from the other riders. As Rhane played he forgot his tired body, his newly and uncomfortably stretched mind, Menx epidemics and enigmatic gods, and most of all he forgot the sadness and rage and guilt that had been Cezine's unwitting legacy. For a magic time Rhane and the world were once more young, newly made, the flute both extension and evocation of the blinding innocence of a summer eight years gone.

At last Rhane's lips and fingers tired. He opened his eyes, surprised to find himself riding on a reskan rather than on the exquisite transformations of song. As he moved to stretch arms cramped from holding the flute, he realized that he and Kahsah were wearing flights of wiris like living cloth over their bodies.

Rhane looked into the startled emerald eyes of a strange wiri which was perched on his flute. The wiri whistled a treble note, then vanished in a flash of rainbows. The rest of the wiris, several hundred of them, lifted in dazzling swirls of color. Soon Rhane was alone but for Beggar and Kahsah.

A screamer called in the distance, shattering the silence. The reskans vanished, only to reappear almost immediately. It was as though they flinched in the instant before they realized that there was no danger.

The screamer shrieked again. Kahsah tilted back her head and howled. The other reskans joined in, creating the primal harmony that made Rhane's skin move and tighten.

Nahst appeared suddenly, taking up a guard position just off Kahsah's left flank. After a short time, Rhane heard the distant yet familiar whistle of a young male from Kahsah's pack. Kahsah answered with a descending tenor cry, then began walking down the trail as though nothing had happened.

"What was it?" asked Rhane.

"People moving on the caravan road," Shiya answered. "By this time of year, the shrines and warehouses should be empty and the pilgrims gone." Her mouth tightened. "I hope they're not here to leave god children."

Nahst leaped away before Rhane could question Shiya further. Lor Jastre came alongside again, urging his lori with measured flicks of his riding whip. In spite of the fact that each lori only had to carry a rider for part of a day, the animals were visibly fatigued; Shiya had not slowed the pace to accommodate loris.

"What's wrong?" asked Lor Jastre.

"Shiya said something about a god road, shrines, warehouses and—children?" Rhane said. "Do you know what she meant?"

"We must be coming to the Shrine of the First Madness," Lor Jastre said, staring intently at the point farther down the trail where the forested ridges fell away. "I didn't think it possible to get here so quickly," he muttered. "That doesn't leave much time."

Lor Jastre swore in T'aeln, then seemed to remember Rhane's presence. "Shrines and babies," said Lor Jastre, his voice tight with disgust. "Every culture has its crawling secrets, I suppose. I've only heard rumors of the shrines, but even rumors are based on fact. It would be better if they weren't."

"What do shrines and babies have to do with ugly secrets?"

"The so-called god road was built so that lowland goods can be transported to the shayl'm," said Lor Jastre evasively.

"Trade goods?"

"More in the nature of tribute."

"For what? The shayl'm aren't numerous or powerful enough to threaten the lowland Menx."

Lor Jastre's smile made Rhane uncomfortable, but all the mentor said was, "The lowland Menx seem pleased with the arrangement. They leave goods for their gods. And they also leave their repulsive mongrel children."

"Sacrifice?" demanded Rhane, startled out of his ingrained tolerance for cultural diversity. "I don't—that's difficult to accept, Lor Jastre. Cultures that require human sacrifices turn and devour themselves long before they reach a stage where they could benefit from Concord membership."

Lor Jastre's face looked old, harsher than Rhane had thought possible of refined T'aeln features. "If

you remember, Rhane, the T'aeln who discovered this planet argued against First Contact, much less membership for Menx.”

“Then why was First Contact initiated?” demanded Rhane.

“The standard machine surveys and eventual clandestine contacts revealed nothing that Concord apologists couldn't explain away—may their facile tongues rot in their mouths!” Lor Jastre looked at Rhane with bitter intensity, then looked away, his eyes focused on something only he could see. “Menx should never have been found. Once found, Menx should have been put under a class five proscription. But Concord apologists won't see that until it's too late. Menx will die horribly because T'ael's inferiors can't see the truth until it blinds them.”

Vivid yellow eyes turned on Rhane. “I had hoped you wouldn't be one of the blind.”

Lor Jastre's eyes were clear, pitiless, almost mad. “So play your flute, Rhane en Jacaroen. Play to make the gods weep, for they'll be too busy to cry when the scavengers descend.”

Lor Jastre's hand tightened on the lori's broad rein. The animal dropped behind, sinking like a stone into the mountain silence.

The trail widened, descended in a long sweeping curve. At the bottom the trail opened abruptly onto a road marked by hooves, boots, wheels and the distinctive prints of reskans. Shiya studied the tracks for a long moment, seemingly confused. She jerked her head in irritation, making her hair shimmer red-gold in the sun. When she became aware of Rhane's steady scrutiny, she spoke to him for the first time since dawn.

“Lowland carts, pilgrims and, later, a journey coach,” Shiya said, indicating the relevant tracks. “Then, reskans. One was ridden, but I don't recognize the track. I thought I knew all the reskan riders in the Black Ridge area.” She moved her head in irritation again. “At least we won't be burdened by any god children.”

“Why?”

“The shayl who came to the shrine after the coach will do what is necessary.”

“The shayl?” asked Rhane, examining the tracks again, trying to see what he had missed that had told Shiya that shayl were present.

Shiya looked amused. “You might as well look at your own tracks. Or didn't you realize that anyone who rides a reskan is, by definition, shayl?”

Nahst flowed out onto the road, cutting off Rhane's startled questions. Rhane sat numbly on Kahsah, realizing that the longer he stayed on Menx, the less he understood of its people, religion or language. “Shayl” was as slippery a word concept as he had encountered in any culture. The only consolation he found in the situation was that the shayl—whomever or whatever that meant—the shayl who had preceded Rhane into the shrine was apparently responsible for dealing with any god sacrifices that might have been left there. Rhane tried not to wonder what Shiya had meant by doing “what is necessary” when faced by the “burden” of a god child.

Kahsah followed Nahst down the road toward the shrine, walking smoothly so as not to disturb her preoccupied rider. On either side of the road were wooden posts carved with elegant, cryptic symbols inset with hammered gold. Beyond the posts was a building constructed of translucent green stone. Like a flower in the sun, the shrine unfolded in a series of open curves. Surrounding the structure was a grove of rare emerald mure trees. A clean, deep river joined trees and translucent shrine within a single, silent arc before the river curved away to become a lake whose dark surface was unmarked by wind.

Rhane shivered, caught between fear and an excitement he could not name. The shrine was as perfectly conceived as any structure he had ever seen, the setting as beautiful as a reskan's cry. Neither shrine nor setting was the result of mediocre aesthetic tradition, yet Rhane had been told that Menx culture was considered inferior in aesthetic development to the Concord norm.

As Kahsah carried Rhane between emerald mure trees and polished ebony river, he could not help wondering if anyone from the Concord had seen the lambent building. The more he looked, the more he became certain that no Concord person had ever seen the shrine, or word of its green magnificence would have reached beyond the planet. At the very least, the shrine must deflate T'ael's calm assumption of its ward's grossly inferior status, for the building's fluid curves were strongly reminiscent of Fiertten's

intimidating architectural perfection.

Rhane looked backward toward Lor Jastre, wanting to see the mentor's reaction to the shrine's serene perfection.

"Flawless, isn't it," commented Rhane, his voice carrying clearly through the emerald hush beneath the mure trees.

Lor Jastre's eyes flicked away from the building as though from something obscene. "T'aelns don't separate form from function," he answered in a tone of complete loathing. "The building is an abomination."

"Then something is surely skewed," said Rhane. "To me, the shrine recalls Fiertten. It lacks only music."

As though summoned, flights of wiris spiraled down from the mure leaves, calling to each other in harmonies as delicate as Fiertten's wind chimes. Lor Jastre shuddered, a single convulsive movement of negation. With a harsh shout, he flung his arms out, startling the wild wiris. They fled on silent wings.

"Was that necessary?" demanded Rhane, then stopped at the sight of Lor Jastre's face; The mentor's yellow eyes were feral, his lips divided over an ivory gleam of teeth. He looked at Rhane without recognizing him. Rhane's skin contracted, yet even as he felt himself shrink away, he knew that Lor Jastre's fear was greater than his own.

Rhane closed his eyes, not wanting to see more. He pitied Lor Jastre. He pitied anyone whose psychic integrity depended on believing that others were invariably and irrevocably inferior. He did not know how the T'aeln would reconcile the superior shayl shrine with the belief that Menx natives were inferior beings.

Though Nahst and Shiya were nowhere to be seen, Kahsah stopped at the fifth of the shrine's nine entrances. Rhane dismounted without looking at Lor Jastre. As Rhane entered the building, the pack reskan came and lay across the entrance, plainly excluding Lor Jastre and Jul. Rhane did not object; he had seen enough of the T'aeln mentor for the moment.

Rhane walked quickly, hurrying through exquisite passageways, hardly noticing light that varied from emerald to gold, as clear as distilled water. He walked faster, driven by something unseen, but sensed just beneath the threshold of conscious awareness.

Shiya! What is it?

When Rhane realized that his cry had been mental rather than verbal, he broke into a run. She was no Carifil to talk by mindspeech, yet obviously there was great need.

"Shiya!" he shouted, his voice turning and returning to him in a thousand shades of green.

Uneasiness surged around him like an invisible tide, sucking at his strength, tugging, rising until he was choking, suffocating and he could no longer call out with mind or body. Kaleidoscopic impressions came as he ran—crystal light and jade shadow, smokeless fires burning whitely, smell of summer and moons rising, silent falls of sunlight richer than beaten gold, silence and his racing feet combined into an eerie heartbeat that always accelerated, racing to meet an unknown horror.

Then the passage opened into a huge chamber and Rhane knew what horror was. Shiya stood over a huddle of green cloth that was a child. Light poured through the open ceiling, ran like hot gold down the knife that Shiya had drawn above the child's breast. He could not call out, he could only reach for Shiya with mind and body, but she was too far away, the knife too close, and his battering thoughts slid off her mind as though she were made of stone rather than flesh.

In a last, despairing effort, Rhane threw himself at the knife in a long, running dive. Shiya spun toward him, her body tense, straining as though she were lifting a massive weight, her eyes copper in the clear light. A terrifying feeling of danger came to him. Shiya vanished. A blow from behind knocked him aside, though he had neither seen nor sensed anyone else in the shrine.

Rhane rolled across the floor until he smacked into an oval stone dais similar to the one the child sacrifice was tied to. Stunned, Rhane tried to roll to his feet. An invisible force pinned him against the cold stone. As he gathered himself to lunge again, he felt the warm rasp of a reskan's tongue across his neck. The sensation was so unexpected that it paralyzed him.

Rhane squinted, trying to see the reskan that must be just in front of him, holding him down with a

massive paw on his chest. As he looked, he felt the vague reluctance of his eyes and mind to focus that he had come to associate with a reskan in camouflage. Though he could not see it, he was certain that Kahsah was his captor. He squirmed against her invisible presence, trying to evade her grasp.

Teeth replaced tongue on Rhane's neck, denting but not breaking his skin. He lay utterly still. The pressure eased, then vanished. He realized that the terror he had felt when Shiya turned toward him had also disappeared at the same instant.

And he could see Shiya again. Her back was toward him, her body trembling with strain. With agonizing slowness her shoulders turned until her face was in profile. She could have been an ikon carved of gold and amber. Little of humanity was left in her face. Her arm jerked away from the child, cutting its ties without harming its flesh.

The urgency that had sent Rhane running through the shrine ebbed with a soundless sigh, leaving only exhaustion behind. He pulled himself to his feet with no interference from Kahsah, and walked unsteadily to where Shiya leaned against the child's stone dais. Shiya shivered fitfully and her breath came in jerks. Her eyes when she looked up were dark with the reality of a horror that he had only sensed at a distance.

Shiya?

Rhane touched her arm with gentle fingertips. A swirl of images engulfed Rhane—mountains he had never seen, songs he had never heard, people he had never known with faces that were kind and terrible, inhumanly removed; and pervading all a compassion and grief that knotted his mind with pain.

Shiya moved wearily. His fingers slid off her arm; the images stopped.

Shiya ...

There was no answer, not even the sense of another mind.

Rhane was almost afraid, but whether for her or himself he did not know. He did know that he had briefly touched Shiya's awareness, that she had been prepared to kill the child, and that she had expected to be driven insane an instant after. But the sacrifice had not happened. She was neither murderer nor insane; nor was she the same person who had raised a knife over a helpless child and seen the center of horror.

"Why?" asked Rhane softly, insistently, his pale eyes going from child to Shiya to child again.

Silence was his only answer.

VII

"Why?" shouted Rhane.

As though his shout at Shiya were a trigger, flight after flight of wiris exploded into the air overhead. Only then did Rhane realize that the chamber was lined with transparent perches and open to the sky. He had neither seen nor heard the wiris before that moment, but they must have been present, hundreds of them, as noiseless and invisible as Kahsah.

Two wiris broke away and landed on two suddenly visible reskans, Nahst and Kahsah. Whatever danger had existed in the shrine had obviously passed. Rhane glanced warily at Kahsah, less than an arm's length away. She whistled to him more sweetly than any wiri, but the tactile memory of her teeth on his skin kept Rhane from responding. He rubbed his neck and felt anger burning in him.

"Was that helpless child meant as a sacrifice to your gods?" asked Rhane in a calm, vicious tone.

"Serat," said Shiya faintly.

"Serat," spat Rhane. "Is that a shayl'm word for sacrifice?"

Shiya's lips twisted into a tired smile. "In a way, yes. But not in the way you mean. Not that way at all. The sacrifice would have been mine as well as the child's. Mine more than the child's. Serat is a trial where truth is found when the winner catches the loser's soul."

"Explain," demanded Rhane in the clipped, imperial voice of a RA Jacaroen.

Shiya bridled, then made a weary gesture of indifference. "Kahsah didn't kill you, though you nearly killed us all. Therefore you must be worth something." Shiya smiled narrowly. "Perhaps you merely taste good."

Rhane barely held onto his temper. Seeing his anger, Shiya smiled unpleasantly.

“Are you really listening to me, Concord man?” she asked coldly. “Or will you be like Lor Jastre and hear only what pleases you?”

Without waiting for an answer, Shiya reached out and peeled off the outer layer of green cloth covering the child. Rhane saw black hair braided with green beads, closed eyelids ringed with green paint, and an unrecognizable symbol tattooed on the cheek toward him.

There was no expression on the child’s face; she could have been any age from seven to sixteen. She reminded Rhane of the inhuman faces he had seen in the backlash of Shiya’s mind. Although the child’s eyes were closed, Rhane had the uneasy feeling that he had been seen and ... dismissed? No, not that definite. Merely seen through closed eyelids.

Rhane’s mental defenses closed completely, seamlessly, even though he was certain that the girl had not attempted the least tendril of mental contact. His reaction was as reflexive as a reskan going invisible. He looked away from the uncanny, unmoving child.

“So,” murmured Shiya, staring at Rhane with intent copper eyes. “You sense it even now, after I’ve divided her from herself. Then why did you try to interfere? Didn’t you feel the danger?”

“I felt urgency,” said Rhane in a strained voice. “I ran through the shrine. Then I saw you about to kill a helpless child. I tried to stop you—” Rhane hesitated, remembering that the sense of overwhelming danger had come only *after* Shiya had turned away from the child. “Do you mean to tell me that we were in danger from a child tied to a stone altar?” he demanded incredulously.

“She was born shayl. Now she is h’shazir, becoming shazir.”

“She was born a god?” said Rhane, grappling with the slippery concept of shayl.

“She was born with power,” said Shiya patiently. She gestured toward the girl’s face. “The shayl symbol was tattooed on her right cheek soon after birth. See how her growth has distorted the symbol’s proportions?”

“How did they know she was shayl?”

“Wiris, probably. They sing for shayl babies. The symbol on her left cheek,” continued Shiya, “is freshly painted. It’s the symbol for shazir.”

Rhane waited. Shiya made an impatient gesture.

“Didn’t you hear me, Concord man? Shazir!” Shiya looked at the girl, who had not moved, then lifted the blanket over the closed, uncanny eyes. “She’s on the edge of puberty and h’shazir at once, changing every day, fading into and out of shazir, and then back in, deeper each time, becoming more shazir as her body matures. She was terrified by the changes. And her people were helpless, not even a shayl to aid them. They shouldn’t have kept her at all, not even for one week. They know the danger of an obviously shayl baby.”

“Perhaps,” said Rhane cuttingly, “her parents didn’t want her killed for the greater glory of Menx’s bloodthirsty gods.”

“You understand even less than a T’aeln.”

“Do I? You would have killed that child, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. Serat.”

“Menx gods are excremental, fully suited to the alimentary tastes and attributes of Menx believers,” said Rhane, disgust making each word separate, distinct. “Knowing that, is there anything else I need to understand?”

“If you understand so well,” Shiya said coldly, “tell me why I didn’t kill that child.”

Rhane opened his mouth to reply, then realized that he had nothing to say. He did not know what had prevented Shiya’s knife from finishing its descent. Certainly his headlong entrance into the chamber had not.

“I don’t know,” said Rhane finally.

Rhane’s admission seemed to surprise Shiya.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t quarrel with Kahsah’s taste. Certainly no T’aeln ever admitted ignorance to a Menx.” Shiya looked at Rhane for a moment more, then took a long breath. “I didn’t have to kill the girl because I managed to block her from shazir. She isn’t a danger to us or herself now, she can’t call other

shazir to her and she can't become one herself. Yet. The block is only temporary. We must take her with us. She must go to Shaylmir. Perhaps even to the Fountains of Madness."

"I don't believe that a halfling girl can be so dangerous that—"

"Do you think that reskans ride only to amuse themselves?" snapped Shiya. Her voice dropped a notch, becoming even more scathing. "You don't believe in gods and you don't believe in shazir. Tell me, Concord man—do you really think you're the most powerful thing in the whole quivering universe?"

"No, But I don't think reskans hide from a child."

Shiya smiled grimly. "You don't think at all, Concord man. What else was there to hide from in this shrine?"

"What could she do to a reskan?" demanded Rhane scornfully. "Or to us?"

"Everything. Anything. Nothing. Turn us to gold or air or clear shadows. Make us immortal or murder us, make twelve of us or ignore us entirely. Who knows the mind of a shazir? I don't. I only know that I never again want to attract the attention of even a h'shazir!"

"But you controlled her."

"She's h'shazir, in and out of shazir," said Shiya patiently. "I'm wholly shayl, complete with wiris and reskans." She hesitated, then shrugged. "And a Concord shayl who helped almost as much as he hindered."

"Helped? How?"

"She knew you wanted her to live. That reassured her, for she, too, wanted life. Even an almost-god clings to what is familiar. Reassured, she was easier to control." Shiya's voice became ragged. She lightly touched the cloth concealing the child's face. "Will you praise or damn the life I spared?" she asked softly. "Ah, little one, may I never see you in the high places, mindlessly turning wind into wine."

Shiya shuddered and looked away, her eyes haunted with memories of other times, other shazir. Then she bent and lifted the child off the cold stone. Though the girl's weight was small, Shiya staggered. Rhane steadied Shiya, then gently took the child into his own arms. Even holding the girl, Rhane could not sense her mind. She was as mentally absent as a reskan in camouflage.

"Did you break the child's mind?" asked Rhane, his voice casual in spite of the emotions seething just beneath his question.

"Break it? No. I merely blocked the expression of her power for a time."

"Power? Do you mean psi?" said Rhane, using the Galactic word because Menx language lacked an analog for psi.

"Psi? What's that?"

Rhane swore silently, realizing that all that was needed in order to keep a secret was a lack of words to describe it. Nor should he be surprised that T'ael had never discovered their ward's gifts. As a race, T'aelns were nearly psi-null. There would have been little need and less reason for them to discuss psi with their Menx wards. Even among the races of the Concord, useful, controllable psi was a rarity.

"Psi. Mental power," said Rhane, slowly turning and walking out of the lofty chamber. "For example, the ability to speak over a distance without words or to see without eyes or to heal without medicine."

Shiya frowned. "I can't do any of those things, and I'm shayl."

"But when I touched you—" began Rhane, remembering the images that had poured through his mind when he had touched her.

Then Rhane realized that incident proved nothing. It could have been his psi alone that had breached her innate mental barriers. He felt a lash of frustration, for the presence of psi would resolve many Menx enigmas. None of his frustration leaked beyond his own mind, however; Beggar's training had been thorough. Rhane had mental barriers that would have amazed his Carifil teachers.

"Never mind," said Rhane mildly. "It doesn't matter." He glanced down at the child whose face was hidden by the elaborately woven green cloth. "Will she wake up soon?"

"I hope not. I don't have the strength to fight her again."

"How will she ride?"

"In front of me. Or you. If you position her, her reflexes will take over. She's not really unconscious, just ... removed."

Rhane shifted the girl's weight slightly. She was very light, but a "removed" rider could not help but slow them down.

Ten days.

"By the Last Word," snapped Rhane suddenly, "I wish that the other shayl had taken her!"

"Melting sickness has changed much in the highlands. Too much."

"What do you mean?"

"The first duty of any shayl under any circumstances is to do what is necessary for the children of the shrine. The other shayl did not. That has never happened before. Ever."

"Perhaps the shayl was injured or sick."

"Perhaps," said Shiya, but her tone was unconvinced. "If so, we should have found his body in the shrine, a warning to the next shayl who tried to deal with that child."

Shiya stumbled over nothing more than a jade shadow, and automatically reached out to Rhane to catch herself. In the instant of contact he sensed anguish, a numbing fear-desolation that threatened to overwhelm him. Without thinking, he shifted the child to one arm and put the other around Shiya, giving comfort as well as balance. She shivered and moved closer to him.

Beggar and Signal flew out of green shadows thrown by carved ikons. The wiris landed together on Shiya's shoulder, singing softly of laughter and delight. Though Shiya seemed unaware of the wiris, Rhane sensed an easing of her cold fear.

Shiya said nothing more, even after Rhane helped her up onto Nahst. When he suggested that she should rest, she merely held out her hands for the h'shazir child. He unwrapped the cloth so that the girl could ride astride, then wrapped the cloth around her like a cape. Though the child's eyes remained closed and she seemed unaware of her surroundings, she balanced on the reskan with no difficulty.

Lor Jastre glanced once at the shrine child, then quickly away. Without question or comment he mounted his lori and fell into line. It was as though the child did not exist. The mentor's reaction was so final, so complete, that Rhane caught himself looking over his shoulder to be sure that the child did indeed exist.

Kahsah set a quick pace as the road wound up toward the terminus of the valley. Clouds gathered and rolled among the peaks in a soundless ballet. Then the clouds darkened, enlarged, billowing out to fill the afternoon. Lightning rode the expanding cloud shapes, splitting gray into incandescence. Thunder belled between ridges until the ground cringed at the repeated blows of sound. Even the thick-leaved mure forest offered little protection against light or sound.

Anticipating the cloudburst, Rhane tried to urge Kahsah off the road and into a dense stand of yellow mure. The reskan ignored him as completely as Lor Jastre had ignored the presence of a child from the shrine.

Suddenly, Kahsah swerved to one side, avoiding a wagon that was turned sideways across the road. One wheel had broken off, making the wagon cant toward its rear. The cover had been ripped off by wind, allowing part of the cargo to spill out onto the muddy road. Several tightly woven bags were split at the seam, sending bright tongues of orange grain across the road.

Lor Jastre looked at the wasted grain. His mouth tightened into lines of distaste. "Only utter abzaks would leave grain to rot."

"Perhaps the storm took the tribesmen by surprise."

"Abzak," repeated Lor Jastre.

A long wind howled down from distant black peaks, prowling the rutted roadway in immense transparent leaps, roughing up ditch water that had been ice at dawn. Rhane narrowed his eyes against the wind's bitter strength, but even that was not enough to shut out the sight of what waited ahead. The Ghost Pass lay in the distance, a ragged notch that barely dented the ebony wall of the Mountains of Light. There were other passes to be crossed before that one, but none was steeper, higher, colder or more dangerous. The Ghost Pass stood alone, as deadly as a reskan's smile.

"You won't cross it alive," said Lor Jastre, following Rhane's glance. "The snow will come."

"I have no choice but to cross."

"Turn back," said Lor Jastre curtly.

“No.”

“Latzak.”

Rhane automatically translated the T’aeln word: “insanity inherited from a latlik father.” He ignored the insult. He looked past Lor Jastre to the obsidian mountain peaks that had been swept clean even of ice by the ferocious wind. The peaks rose dark and jagged, forbidding. Looking at them, Rhane could not argue with Lor Jastre the sanity of trying to cross the Ghost Pass.

“Latzak!” repeated Lor Jastre.

“T’aeln culture is obsessed with insanity,” Rhane said evenly. “Your problem, not mine.”

“But you are—” Lor Jastre made a choked noise and stopped speaking. His fingers closed convulsively around his soothing music egg, but he did not bring it out of his pocket.

“I’m what?” prompted Rhane, preferring an argument to his own thoughts of Ghost Pass, melting sickness and death moments ... Cezine’s and his own.

“You’re latzak.”

Rhane almost smiled. “You can’t insult a Siolan with T’aeln epithets.”

“Not insult,” said Lor Jastre, his voice strained. “Fact.”

Rhane turned quickly. His eyes searched Lor Jastre’s hard brown face. “What do you mean?”

“Your eyes ... so human now. Yellow. Like hers. Like mine. T’aeln.”

“What in the Nineteen Hells are you babbling about?”

“Your mother.” Lor Jastre’s tone was calm, but he had the music egg out of his pocket now, humming against his palm as sweetly as any wiri. “My sister, Lor Sostra.” Then, seeing that Rhane still did not comprehend, he said slowly, distinctly, as though speaking to a deaf idiot, “Lor Sostra was your mother.”

“I don’t—” Rhane’s voice broke. “My mother died when I was born,” he said finally.

Lor Jastre’s laughter was as cold as the wind. “Lor Sostra will be amused to know that. She always wondered what death was like.” The egg keened minor harmonies. “That was her problem. Wondering. She wondered what it would be like to raise a latlik’s child, secretly. She found a yellow-eyed alien latlik and mated. But your eyes were nearly white at birth. No secret.

“I took you while she slept and sent you to your father. She never knew that you hadn’t died. Years later she decided to come back to Menx and work with me again.” Lor Jastre sighed. “I didn’t know your father would bring you back with him. She saw you and knew. Your damned changing eyes. Yellow. T’aeln. To punish me she took you, a latzak, to sacred Piemen.”

Beggar stirred uneasily, warning Rhane that his emotions were beginning to seep out. He brought his mind under control with a sweeping skill that would have surprised his Carifil teachers. With a tiny ripple of sound, Beggar snuggled against Rhane’s neck and slept, as unobtrusive as the collar of his suit.

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Rhane, relieved that he could speak normally.

Lor Jastre’s lips twisted into a travesty of a smile. “Not out of avuncular pride, I assure you. If Lor Sostra’s ... conduct ... were known, she would be barred from any position of power on T’ael, and possibly even the planet. The Lor clan would finally be ruined. You see, Lor Sostra’s phenotype is perfect. Therefore, her sanity must also be perfect. If it isn’t there are no certainties left. Chaos.”

“According to T’aeln myth.”

“Not myth. Fact. Perfect phenotype, perfect sanity. How else do you think we’ve kept T’ael stable through the changing millennia? Unlike other planets, we’ve been able to immediately see who was or was not fit to rule. We’ve had no mad leaders to plunge us into chaos and regret.” Lor Jastre looked imploringly at Rhane, then made a gesture that outlined despair. “You don’t or won’t or can’t understand me. Listen to me, latzak. T’ael is what it is. Menx is what it is. Don’t meddle in what you can’t comprehend. Go back to Siol. If you stay here you’ll die as your father died, as your brother died.”

“I must have Cezine’s deathplace.”

“No!” Lor Jastre turned with a feral quickness that surprised Rhane. “Don’t lie to your mother’s brother. I know why you go into the jaws. For Concord, not for Cezine. What if I tell Shiya? Have you thought of that? Will she help you when I tell her that you’re collecting evidence to ensure the death of Menx?”

“That’s not true—” began Rhane angrily.

Lor Jastre’s hard laughter overrode Rhane’s protest. “But it *is* true, latzak. You just don’t know it yet. You won’t know until you’re in the Jaws, and then it will be too late for Menx. Go back, son of my sister.” Lor Jastre leaned over until his fingers wrapped around Rhane’s wrist with paralyzing force. “I don’t want another yellow-eyed man to die on Menx! Go back!”

“I can’t. Cezine.”

There was no answer for that. There never had been. Rhane and Lor Jastre rode on in silence as clouds thickened and danced overhead.

Nahst walked behind, moving carefully so as not to disturb Shiya or the motionless green bundle in front of her.

VIII

Kahsah threw up her long neck to send a howl scaling over the wind. Rhane’s skin moved, tightening. He listened, but no howl answered the primal call. Nahst appeared beside Rhane. Shiya spoke curtly to Lor Jastre, sending him back to Jul, whose lori was threatening to bolt.

“What is it?” asked Rhane, speaking softly, as though afraid of being overheard by the shrine child riding with Shiya.

“Reskans. Perhaps wild.”

A distant howl interrupted Shiya. The sound coiled up the scale, then slid down into wind and silence. Rhane recognized it as the voice of one of Kahsah’s pack, a young reskan that acted as scout.

“Not wild.” Shiya’s voice was clipped, urgent. “The reskans have shayl with them. Their scent is clear. But they don’t answer. Why don’t they answer?”

“Maybe the wind is wrong,” said Rhane. “Maybe they answer and we just can’t hear them.”

Another howl came to them from a different direction: Kahsah’s second scout.

“Shayl’m,” said Shiya succinctly. “Something is wrong. Tribesmen are waiting for us ahead. Afraid.”

“Ambush?”

Shiya almost smiled. “Only a reskan can ambush another reskan. Those tribesmen are shayl’m, not shayl. They’re afraid of reskans.”

“Yet they’re waiting for us?”

“They’re waiting for something. They’re angry and afraid. They sweat their emotions into the wind.”

Shiya gripped the child closely. Kahsah and Nahst moved forward as one, their gait a fluid lope that left the loris far behind. Kahsah’s scouts materialized along the rutted road. The four reskans ran, almost soundlessly, leaping potholes and wide puddles with disdainful ease.

The reskans slowed only when they came to the area where a recent landslide had blocked all but a ragged edge of the road. Rhane sensed an instant of vertigo. The reskans vanished before his eyes. Rhane strained to see Shiya, then decided it was not worth the effort.

When Kahsah surged around the last landslide debris, Rhane saw the waiting shayl’m. There were at least thirty, perhaps as many as fifty people. Wagons, some mired in the mud, were off to one side of the road. No animals were in harness. Loris and huge borsks milled slowly. Cargo and supplies were scattered around. Apparently the wagons had been unloaded in a hurry.

Rhane felt a quiver, as though the ground had shifted minutely. Kahsah was out of camouflage, as was Nahst. Even without that warning quiver, Rhane would have guessed that the reskans were visible; a wave of sound came from the grouped shayl’m. There was a flurry of hands as the shayl’m made ritual obeisance to the presence of shayl.

A woman strode out from the massed shayl’m. She was dressed in the heavy clothes of a herder, but wore the long ivory earring of a leader. She made curt obeisance to Shiya, who was closer than Rhane to the tribe. If she knew that the green bundle in front of Shiya was a child of the shrine, she made no sign.

“You have further needs, shayl?” asked the woman, her voice an uneasy mixture of submission and defiance. “Tell me what else you seek and I’ll spare you the trouble of turning my wagons inside out.”

“Further needs?” said Shiya. “Have I taken from your generosity before this moment?”

The woman looked closely at Shiya for the first time, then made an ambivalent gesture. "I haven't seen you before now, but those who ride reskans don't always choose to be seen."

"What's wrong?" Shiya asked bluntly. "Cloud Mountain shayl'm are noted for their civility, yet your lips twist around common politeness as though it were green fruit."

"Weren't you just here?" said the woman, returning Shiya's bluntness.

Shiya's eyes narrowed. "No."

The woman hesitated, plainly divided between calling Shiya a liar or accepting her words without proof. In the end, the tribeswoman did neither.

"There was a visitation," the woman said tonelessly. "Five shayl and at least that many reskans. They said that some shayl'm were bringing in lowland machines. I said we had no forbidden cargo." The woman flicked her fingers in unconscious anger, then rested her hand in the coils of the long whip she wore at her belt. "They didn't believe me. They searched some wagons, then left without warning."

Rhane wondered if the arrival of Kahsah's pack had had anything to do with the searchers' sudden departure. Apparently Shiya wondered, too.

"How long ago did they leave?" asked Shiya.

"Not long. We hadn't even started to clean up when you came."

Signal moved from its perch, between Nahst's ears. Tiny rainbows glittered as the wiri flew to Shiya's hand in a flurry of wings.

"Cloud Mountain woman," Shiya said clearly, "stand by my knee."

Reluctantly, the woman approached Nahst. The other shayl'm gathered together more tightly and muttered among themselves. They oozed closer to their leader in unconscious protest. Kahsah gave them a long, black glance, then lazily began rubbing her muzzle against Rhane's leg. Each movement of her head pulled black lips away from her teeth.

Kahsah, chided Rhane, you're frightening them.

Kahsah stretched her long, flexible neck and yawned, revealing rows of ice-white teeth.

The shayl'm moved no closer. Rhane felt a distinct pulse of satisfaction from Kahsah. She turned and stretched her neck toward a rock bush that had not yet been picked clean of its bright-green berries. Though Kahsah seemed to be ignoring the shayl'm, Rhane knew that she was not. He also knew that the rest of the pack had invisibly circled the muttering crowd.

"Cloud Mountain woman," continued Shiya formally, extending the hand where Signal clung, "look at the wiri and be calmed."

Signal's wings opened and colors flashed. The woman stared, fascinated by her proximity to a wiri's legendary beauty. Signal blinked emerald eyes and whistled sweetly. The woman was completely captivated. The lines of fear and anger that had tightened her face vanished into a wide smile.

"Touch my hand," said Shiya softly, coaxingly, sweet counterpoint to Signal's song. "Don't be afraid. My wiri likes you."

The woman's hand went slowly toward Shiya's finger. As soon as flesh met flesh, Shiya spoke again. Her voice was still soft, but it compelled where it had formerly coaxed.

"Do you carry machines, Cloud Mountain woman?"

Signal exploded into flight in the same instant that the shayl'm leader's angry protests poured out.

"Never! No Cloud Mountain shayl'm would desecrate the—"

"Silence!" Shiya's voice was like a knife. Her fingers soothed the ruffled wiri clinging to her hair. "I believe you."

"There is no guilt here!" insisted the woman. "Search every wagon, shayl creature. Search until shazir are sane and then begin the search again! You won't find anything unlawful in *my* cargo."

Shiya looked sharply at the woman. "Not in your cargo, no, but in another tribe's cargo? Is that what you're hinting?"

The woman's head jerked so suddenly that the ivory earring struck her jaw. Her lips tightened; plainly she had said more than she thought wise.

"Answer me," snapped Shiya. "Who is carrying forbidden machines into the Jaws?"

"I don't know."

Shiya cocked her head while Signal chirped a note. "I believe you. Who do you suspect of carrying machines into the Jaws?"

"No one. It's forbidden."

Shiya made an exasperated sound. "Then why do you think wagons are being searched?"

"Ask the shayl," the woman flared. "They're the shadow of the gods, not me."

Nahst turned his head until his eyes were less than a hand's length from the tribeswoman's face. She was visibly frightened but she did not back up. Rhane admired her courage, if not her common sense.

"Are there forbidden machines in the Jaws of Menx?" demanded Shiya.

"I don't know."

"Then what do you know, Cloud Mountain woman?" asked Shiya in a hard voice that warned of a shayl's anger.

"I've—I've heard whispers, that's all. And the shazir"—the woman made a ritual gesture of warding off—"the shazir are waking so fully that even wiri music can't soothe them back into sleep. You have reskans. You can hide from a god's terrible eyes. We have nothing but our prayers, and they're not reskans to hide us!"

In the silence that followed the woman's tumbling words, Rhane heard the choppy rhythms of loris in full gallop. Lor Jastre and Jul approached the wagons at a pace that sent mud flying. They stopped close to Rhane, as though uneasy at the proximity of so many shayl'm.

When the shayl'm saw the newcomers were neither shayl nor shayl'm, the tribe's mood went from fear to anger. A sound came from the Cloud Mountain shayl'm that made Rhane grateful for each of Kahsah's bright teeth.

"There!" said the woman, pointing at Lor Jastre. Her ivory earring trembled with the rage that shook her body. "There is the sacrilege! T'aeln demons! Alien unbelievers who fly their sky-splitting machines where decent shayl'm tremble even to crawl! No wonder the shazir wake!"

The woman's hand snapped out from her belt and the long whip leaped toward Lor Jastre. Jul's lori lunged forward, startled by its rider's brutal heels. The lash meant for Lor Jastre scored across Jul. Before the supple whip could be recoiled, Rhane leaned forward, caught the whip and yanked it out of the tribeswoman's hand. No sound came from Jul, in spite of the bleeding line drawn on her cheek by the whip's long tongue.

Silently, Lor Jastre examined his latlik's wound. His fingers were sure and very gentle. When he finished, he caressed Jul's lovely face and murmured something that went no farther than her ears. She smiled radiantly and bent to kiss his hands.

Rhane turned angrily toward Shiya. "You knew what that whip was capable of—why didn't you stop her?"

"If I'd known that Jul would take the lash," said Shiya coolly, "I would have. As for Lor Jastre ..." She shrugged.

With a disgusted motion, Rhane sent the whip into the mud.

Lor Jastre turned away from Jul. "Thank you, Shiya," he said sarcastically. "Your concern for my latlik touches me."

The Cloud Mountain woman edged toward the whip that Rhane had flung aside. Kahsah shifted her weight, pinning the whip beneath one of her large feet. The woman straightened and pointed a shaking finger at Lor Jastre. Her voice was resonant with humiliation and rage.

"Before your kind came, the shazir slept deeply, disturbed only by their dreams or careless shayl. Now the shazir wake and walk and sickness spreads. We're dying, melting, and we can't even scream our horror for fear of waking an even worse doom." She laughed thinly. "It would have pleased me to see what doom a T'aeln's screams would have called down!"

The crowd of shayl'm roared with a single terrible voice. At the same instant, Shiya felt the child in front of her move beneath the muffling green wraps.

"No," whispered Shiya. "No. I can't do it alone!"

The Cloud Mountain shayl'm looked from Shiya to the slowly seething green bundle in front of her.

"H'shazir?" demanded the woman, looking at Shiya and pointing toward the muffled child. "Is that

shrine child h'shazir?"

Shiya's hand closing over her knife was all the answer that the shayl'm woman needed. With a low sound, the woman turned and fled, followed by every one of the Cloud Mountain tribe. The backlash of their terror was like a blow.

The green cloth trembled. A bare, slender hand appeared. Rhane remembered the eerie moment when he had been seen through a child's closed eyes. Before the memory was complete, he felt his mental defenses closing until his mind was as seamlessly self-enclosed as an egg. The earth shifted subtly as the reskans vanished.

Too late. Even through his shields, like heat searing through steel, Rhane sensed something burning, raw terror consuming everything it touched with soundless, horrifying finality. The shell of his defenses began to blur, melting, terror focusing like a great lens to crisp his writhing, helpless mind, cooking him.

Something screamed, piercing the terror, excruciating pain.

Beggar? Was he destroying the sensitive wiri with his mindless fears? He must control his fear. Yes. Control. Why should he be afraid? The world was cool, not burning, and she was merely a child, shrine child, frightened by changes she could not comprehend—merely a child like Cezine. Cezine who had sometimes wakened screaming with a child's shapeless terror, shivering and whimpering in Rhane's arms while he soothed and stroked and spoke soft reassurances until finally fear became no more than a pale memory and Cezine sighed, a child sighing and sleeping once more.

Cold wind blew over Rhane's sweating face. He sat without moving, a quiescent shrine child in his arms. Beneath him Kahsah stood absolutely still, as though she feared even to breathe. Slowly, Rhane opened his eyes. He was surrounded by reskans ... and wiris, more wiris than he had ever seen, countless wiris radiating silence and rainbows, their eyes every color he had ever imagined, pure and unspeakably beautiful.

Rhane looked at the h'shazir in his arms. The green cloth framed a fragile face, eyebrows as dark as night, lips relaxed, the face of a sleeping child, though it was not sleep that claimed her, not sleep as he knew it. With gentle care he wrapped the cloth so that the child would be protected from the harsh wind ... and the wind from the harsh reality of shazir.

Rhane's hands trembled as he rearranged the child so that she could sit in front of him with the minimum of support. He felt her body flow, plastic, into new lines of balance. He withdrew his hands and realized for the first time how thin, flat, depleted he was. He had never coped with a powerful, uncontrolled telepath before. And there was no doubt of the child's psi. Her sustained emotional blast had nearly burned out his mind. He understood now why shazir were feared. He also understood that he must contact the Carifil immediately. They knew how to deal with psi. He had been lucky twice—once here, once at the shrine. He could not count on luck again.

Shuddering, Rhane admitted to himself that he was not sure that seraf was wrong; the child could be deadly. But he could not bring himself to kill her while she sat helpless, blinded by her own mind. No, he could not kill her now. Not yet. But tomorrow ... ?

Rhane slumped tiredly, his mind a chaos of unanswered questions, suspicions and fears. Why was the latent, powerful psi of some Menx unknown to the Concord, and apparently even to the T'aeln? Did the shayl really kill all shazir? Was that the "power" Shiya spoke of—the socially sanctified right to kill? Or perhaps shayl power lay in natural mental shields that allowed the shayl to survive long enough to kill or soothe the lethal terror of a child in the throes of becoming an inordinately powerful psi? H'shazir. Neither child nor god. Yet.

Rhane's head ached in waves that spread throughout his body, hammering his nerves. Even after the most strenuous sessions with a Carifil teacher, his mind had not felt so bruised. Slowly, stumbling over words, he repeated the simple phrases he and the Carifil had created to help him shape and use his own mind.

After a time, the phrases reduced battering pain to the simple rhythms of blood moving through his body. The residue of terror drained out of him, leaving behind weakness and the taste of tarnished silver.

When Rhane opened his eyes again, he realized that Shiya had taken the child and was supporting him as he swayed drunkenly on Kahsah's back. The wiris had gone as silently as they had come; the only

color left in the world was the fire of her hair. Though Shiya said nothing, her eyes were dark with anxiety. His attempted smile did little to reassure her.

“May you dream only your own dreams,” said Shiya distinctly.

With the ritual salute of shayl to shayl echoing in his mind, Rhane shuddered and drew himself erect. Lor Jastre, too, had heard her words. He looked at Rhane with mingled horror and sadness. Rhane looked away. He had no energy for Shiya’s compassion or Lor Jastre’s repugnance.

“I have to contact—to meditate,” Rhane said, sliding off Kahsah. “I must be alone.”

“Alone? It’s not safe,” said Shiya, looking toward the bundled shrine child who sat motionlessly on Kahsah. “The Cloud Mountain shayl’m are out of control. Their massed emotion or the child’s burst of emotion might have attracted other shazir. At times like these, shayl must stay close, touching each other, doubling and redoubling our strength.”

“Alone,” said Rhane wearily, not wanting Lor Jastre to see the psitran. “I must be alone,” he repeated, walking slowly toward a blue clump of tall rainberry bushes.

As Rhane walked, Beggar stretched its wings, then settled back into an inconspicuous gold blur against Rhane’s neck. Signal called once from Shiya’s shoulder, but received no answer. Shiya touched her wiri and whistled soft consolation. Rhane barely noticed the sounds that followed him; nor did he see Shiya’s peremptory protection of his privacy when Lor Jastre would have followed.

The rainberry bushes were dense, flexible. Their supple, oily leaves moved over Rhane’s bare face and hands like cool caresses. He pushed to the center of the thicket and sat amid the pervasive smell of spice. The psitran fit perfectly onto his forehead, suddenly as much a part of him as yellow hair or brown skin. He closed his eyes and repeated key phrases, focusing his mind. Then he sent out the call that would alert Carifil Meriel to his need.

The call went no farther than his own skull. He tried again and again, his weary mind hammering against its unexpected cage, hammering, trapped, flailing futilely. Nothing.

Rhane would have screamed his frustration if he had not been too tired. Too tired even to use a psitran effectively. It should not have been possible to be that tired, but it was; the proof was in the echoing emptiness that should have been richly compressed communication. Tired. Too tired even to think.

Rhane flung his arms out as though to shake the bars of an immaterial cage. Flights of wiris fled from his arms in startled dissonant Even Beggar flew up, complaining in sharp crystal notes then settling back and chiding Rhane softly for his careless disregard of tiny wiri bodies.

“Then don’t sit on my arms,” muttered Rhane, but his fingertips soothed the ruffled wiri even as he spoke. Beggar crooned acceptance of Rhane’s tactile apology. The other wiris, however, had vanished completely. “Where are your friends?” asked Rhane, stroking Beggar’s ear tassels.

Beggar whistled a bright melody that was entirely off the subject.

“I agree,” muttered Rhane. “It doesn’t matter where they are. Nothing matters but getting through to Meriel, and I can’t do that right now. I wish you could put your tiny little mind to work helping me.”

Beggar looked at Rhane out of enormous violet eyes. The wiri sang of friendship and love and the astringent scent of rainberries. In spite of his frustration, Rhane smiled.

“I like you too,” he said, stretching his arms carefully so as not to disturb Beggar. His failure to contact Meriel no longer seemed a matter of overwhelming concern. He blew a warm current of breath over Beggar and laughed softly when the wiri leaned toward him. “Little creature, if I survive Menx, will you go off-planet with me?”

Beggar’s only answer was a tiny gulp that was a wiri’s yawn. The wiri fell asleep almost immediately, clinging to Rhane’s collar with a delicate, unbreakable grip.

Rhane walked slowly out of the thicket. Shiya was waiting for him, mounted on Nahst with the shrine child in front of her. When Shiya saw Rhane, relief softened the hard lines that fear had drawn around her mouth.

“Is being alone that dangerous?” asked Rhane.

“You’re an odd shayl, to ask such a question.” Shiya hesitated, then apparently decided to explain. “Close to the Jaws, certain forms of ... meditation ... are dangerous. As emotion is dangerous. But

Beggar was with you, so it must have been all right.”

Rhane knuckled his forehead, trying to diminish the ache that had returned and threatened to swell until it filled his skull. He knew he should sleep until he was strong enough to contact Meriel, yet he also knew that he could not ask Shiya to stop. It was imperative that the h'shazir be turned over to other shayl while she was still controllable.

“Let's ride,” Rhane said, his voice ragged.

“Are you sure you're ready?”

“Do I have a choice?” countered Rhane with a curt gesture toward the green-wrapped child.

Rhane mounted Kahsah sluggishly. In spite of his clumsiness, Kahsah made no protest. She moved back onto the road with exquisite smoothness, making travel as easy as possible for her exhausted rider.

Rain came down, blurring into late afternoon and a sunset whose orange-violet shadows slowly focused into the leaping points of a campfire. Rhane sat near the warmth, not remembering how he had arrived there. He was dazed, uncomprehending, sensing inchoate fears gather like night around him. He did not notice when Shiya pointedly sent Lor Jastre and Jul far from the fire where their nightly acrobatics would not disturb Rhane.

Rhane sank onto the cold ground, struggling weakly against the nightmares stalking him. His last memory was of Shiya lying down next to him, holding him as he had held the shrine child. He breathed deeply of her khi-scented hair.

“Dream only your own dreams,” said Shiya, her voice a soft command.

As though Shiya's words were the release and haven that Rhane had been waiting for, he let go of consciousness and fell into profound sleep.

IX

Rhane woke at dawn with blurred memories of Shiya's voice and body, warm reassurances against the shapeless fears of night. He moved drowsily, reaching for her, but he was alone.

Beggar trilled into Rhane's ear. For all its beauty, the song was an urgent demand for attention. Kahsah's low, nearby call sent adrenaline coursing through him. He got up in a rush, looking for Kahsah, seeing nothing until an odd instant of dislocation told him he was within the reskan's camouflage. He extended his arms slowly until he touched Kahsah's smooth hide. He still could not see her. Never had reskan invisibility been so thorough.

Using only his tactile sense, Rhane mounted Kahsah. The reskan gathered herself, then exploded into a full run. She did not stop until her fluid leaps had taken Rhane deep within a cluster of boulders that gathered on the mountainside like eroded tears. Apparently Kahsah was not going to depend solely on her camouflage for safety.

A pressure along Rhane's leg told him that he was not alone; another reskan was very close, rubbing against Kahsah's side. Rhane concentrated, trying to see beyond the reskan camouflage, but a hammering inside his head forced him to stop. Apparently he had not fully recovered from the struggle with the shrine child.

Hard, demanding fingers closed over Rhane's leg. He sensed an instant of Shiya's fear like a cold gust of wind, then her fingers lifted and he felt nothing. He wanted to whisper questions to her, but knew that would be foolish. He imitated Shiya, body and mind enclosed, motionless.

A faint smell of khi washed over Rhane. At first he thought that it came from Shiya, then he realized that the wind was blowing from him toward her. The scent of indigo khi was coming from the frozen peaks. Which was impossible. Khi could not grow out of rock and frozen water.

Silently, impossibly, tendrils of scent curled down to Rhane.

Dawn slowly drained night from the sky, leaving a translucent purple shell arched over ebony mountains. A cloud of wiris poured out of the sky, singing as they spiraled down toward Rhane. Their flight drew complex symbols across the crystal sky, delicate tracteries of intent that unfolded like a flower, silently surrounding the central enigma which was shazir.

Rhane watched, enthralled by the harmony of song and flight and dawn. Gradually he felt peace seep

into him, engulfing him in a long sigh of release. Rhane blinked and the world returned, wiris and crystal sky and peace gone. He saw Kahsah's blunt ears and wise black eyes as she turned to scratch her lips on his boot. Nahst and Shiya condensed beside him.

"Do reskans really hide from wiris?" asked Rhane, bemused and a bit shaken by the perfection he had witnessed. Was it illusion, or was Kahsah illusion, and Shiya with her hair like fire ... was it all illusion?

"No," said Shiya, her voice trembling. "There was a shazir. It must have sensed the child's timeshadow. The shazir was benevolent, or at least neutral. The wiris lured it away. They'll hold its attention until it disappears."

"Disappears? You mean like the reskans?"

Shiya made a negative gesture. "Shazir don't hide. They just go back to other dreams, other realities."

"That's a relief," said Rhane bitingly, his head throbbing as though he had never slept. "I'd hate to face anything that could send a god into hiding."

Beggar whistled a melody almost as soothing as Shiya's nighttime touch had been. Rhane felt his nerves uncurl. The headache diminished into a vague memory of discomfort, then vanished as thoroughly as any unseen god.

"What about Jul and Lor Jastre?" asked Rhane, suddenly remembering the T'aelns. "Where are they hiding?"

"I hope they're still asleep."

At Rhane's shocked look, Shiya said dryly, "Lor Jastre knew the risks of the Jaws. He may not have believed in them, but that's his choice." She made a dismissing motion. "Besides, shazir are rarely attracted to non-shayl minds, in spite of all the tribal legends." She looked directly at Rhane. "Beggar woke you because alien or not, you're shayl. You belong with your wiri and reskan when shazir dream beyond the Ghost Pass."

Shiya gathered the h'shazir more closely to her body. "If we ride hard, we'll reach the Ghost Pass by dark. Tomorrow, at dawn, we'll begin the crossing. By sunset we can give the shrine child to the shayl who can best help her transition into shazir. Then I'll take you to the Fountains of Madness."

"She sleeps?" asked Rhane, indicating the child.

Shiya shrugged. "I don't know where the h'shazir's mind is. It's enough that it isn't here."

Nahst turned and descended the mountainside in a series of low leaps. Shiya rode the reskan easily, despite the h'shazir she held in front of her. Rhane slid off before Kahsah could follow. With quick motions, he formed the psitran into its most potent shape and composed his mind to contact Meriel.

Beggar warbled and rubbed against his ear. Rhane tried to brush away the distracting presence of the wiri, but other wiris fluttered down out of the dawn, chiming earnestly, their eyes more beautiful than any jewels Rhane had ever seen.

Wings scintillant with rainbows, the wiris flew gracefully around Rhane's head, creating patterns of breathtaking beauty while Beggar's song wove in and out of Rhane's consciousness. Coherent thought was impossible. The patterns changed subtly, as did Beggar's song. Sweet melody slid into descants of regret and fear, warning him of something waiting beyond, of silence unfolding, of shazir.

The wiris descended, clinging to Rhane's psitran, singing, warning. He tried to concentrate, but could not. Kahsah called commandingly, demanding that he mount and they follow Nahst.

Rhane yanked off the psitran in disgust, scattering startled wiris. He knew that if he did not mount Kahsah, she would go without him. He would have to wait for a better time to contact Carifil Meriel.

With a single, savage motion, Rhane mounted Kahsah. The reskan carried him quickly through a dawn that was cloud-streaked, radiant and cold. Ice glinted from every shadow, combed every depression in the road with slender, frigid fingers. Overnight, the smoketrees had changed; each plume was tightly coiled around its core, its exterior sheathed in diamond ice. The ice would melt in the autumn sun, but the plumes would not unfurl until spring.

The camp was little more than scattered ashes and packs waiting to be loaded on patient loris. At the far side was Lor Jastre with Jul close by, talking while their loris' breath rose in opaque clouds. The

T'aelns' words were a meaningless murmur punctuated by Jul's occasional clear laughter.

Rhane's glance moved quickly away. He did not feel like facing Lor Jastre just yet. The idea of a T'aeln uncle was difficult to accept. Not so much the truth of it, but the moment-to-moment reality of a relationship that meant much on Siol and little at all on T'ael except shame for the proof of an inferior mating.

Rhane would have preferred not to believe that Lor Sostra was his mother, but such a link explained the otherwise inexplicable—his invitation to see T'ael and Fiertten, Lor Jastre's concern for an en Jacaroen death rituals, and Lor Jastre's affection for a particular en Jacaroen called Rhane. It was the affection that made matters most difficult for Rhane; he had neither the time nor the desire to adjust to Lor Jastre's complex reality.

Frost and lacegrass crunched delicately beneath Kahsah's feet. Today the sun would burn hotly enough to banish frost, but the cold would return by darkness, sooner each day, bringing with it ice and wind and winter's great storms. Rhane was grateful that he would not be on Menx to see it.

Lor Jastre mounted his lori and urged it over toward Rhane. The lori moved slowly, its diminished strength apparent in each step.

"It's foolish for you to continue," said Rhane, using the least offensive of all the T'aeln words for insanity.

"Don't presume upon our relationship, latzak," said Lor Jastre. His mouth narrowed until all suggestion of softness was gone. "Or do you have so little respect for the man who placed the RA Jacaroen's death cup within the en Jacaroen's shrine?"

Though Rhane neither moved nor spoke, Kahsah threw up her long neck and howled in savage challenge. Beggar exploded into flight. Silently cursing the hypersensitive animals of Menx, Rhane struggled to control his rage. Kahsah's howl returned, quadrupled in savage harmony.

"The past is beyond reward or redemption," Rhane said. Each word was distinct, polished. "I live in the present."

"Lor Jastre's eyes were yellow, unblinking. Then he laughed aloud. "You're young, Rhane en Jacaroen. And wrong ... so wrong. The past curls around us like a huge wave, becoming the future as it breaks, hurling us against each other, grinding us down until there is nothing left, not even memory."

Rhane fought against the cold pity in Lor Jastre's yellow eyes, the unflinching eyes of T'aeln master, descendant of the oldest civilized race known to man. Lor Jastre spoke softly, relentlessly, as though he knew what Rhane was thinking.

"Young races—and young people—don't like to think about extinction," said Lor Jastre, triumphant and sad at the same time, "but we T'aelns know. We've ridden time's grinding wave while the voices of friends and lovers and dreams were devoured in the wave's mindless roar. But T'aeln masters survived. We survived when other cultures, other races, other planets were ground to nothing at all.

"If you live long enough to judge us, remember that. We survived."

Lor Jastre's hard hands tightened on the reins. The lori turned back toward Jul, waiting for her yellow-eyed T'aeln master.

Rhane looked away, toward the Ghost Pass, but it was hidden. Clouds had curled down, bringing with them nets of rain and lightning to throw around the tiny caravan struggling toward the peaks.

Rain hammered down with a million cold fists. Rhane sealed his survival suit and settled in for a miserable ride. Shiya, too, rode hunched against the storm. The h'shazir in front of her seemed comfortable, or at least indifferent. The shrine child did not move at all, even during the most dazzling bursts of lightning and sound.

"This is girzak!" yelled Lor Jastre, flogging his lori until it caught up with Kahsah. "Stop this madness!"

"Have you noticed that reskans don't wear bridles?" said Rhane. "Kahsah will stop when and where she wants to. If I don't like it, I can get off and walk."

"Miserable surzak beast."

Lightning made a brilliant net across the mercury sky. Simultaneously, thunder shattered the air, reverberating among stone ridges, battering mountains and men with equal ease. The loris cringed and

refused to be goaded forward.

Rhane did not notice either the loris or the icy rain. The first white instant of lightning had outlined someone lying in a low point of, the road while rainwater pooled around. Rhane flung himself off Kahsah. He reached the tribesman in two strides. Even as his hand closed around the man's shoulder, Rhane wondered if the man was dead. There was an unmistakable stillness, a boneless huddle of—

Boneless.

Rhane had never seen melting sickness, but he had no doubt that he touched it now. Flesh gave beneath his fingers like cold jelly. Rhane's stomach convulsed, but he set his teeth and forced his body to obey his will. It was barely possible that the man was still alive. Possible, and if true, terrible.

Rhane tried to ease the man onto his back, but only succeeded in twisting the upper torso like a half-wrung rag. Melting sickness had left the tribesman with no more skeletal integrity than a sack of mud. There was no doubt that the man was dead.

With an uncontrollable shudder, Rhane looked away, fighting not to vomit, not to think. Had it been like this for Cezine? Had his brother's bones gone first in slow dissolution, accompanied by tendon and muscle and other tissue until his eyes were no more than obscene ellipses quivering in a collapsed face?

Rhane stood and flung his head back to the cleansing storm, screaming his brother's name above the pealing thunder, screaming until the world was nothing more than lightning strokes of pain and Cezine's name turning and returning, deafening. And then his own name, commanding, demanding his attention, a different kind of thunder.

There was an eerie instant when Rhane felt the world spinning out from beneath his feet while rainbows hummed radiant colors he could not name and reskans held him in the clean black center of their eyes and Shiya whistled, creating a silence that was seamless, perfect.

Slowly, Rhane opened his eyes. The reskan pack surrounded him, watching him through the thousand eyes of rain. Wiris clung to the reskans' powerful bodies like silent wet jewels, and they also clung to him. He had a fragmentary memory of harmony, wiri and reskan and a whistle—Shiya?—so pure that it was the heart of silence.

"Was it like that for Cezine?" demanded Rhane hoarsely, staring at Shiya with eyes that she did not want to meet.

"Don't think about it yet. You must not lose control of—"

"Was it like that?" he yelled, but his voice was so raw that he made barely more sound than a ragged whisper.

When Shiya did not answer, Rhane grabbed her shoulders, fingers digging into her flesh, demanding. The answer came as though Shiya's flesh were lightning blazing across his nerves, searing into his mind. He saw Cezine with her memory, her eyes ...

... a boy with hair like sunlight, eyes like twilight. He worshiped her as new grass worshiped rain, needing her for his very life but demanding no more of her than she gave just by being alive. She had not recognized his worship at first, learning it too late, when she held him while the first wave of melting sickness swept over him, leaving him feverishly whispering his dreams, his hopes, his worship of a young girl-god with hair of fire.

She had held him before, known his body and he hers. To her it had been as simple and transient as swimming in cool water on hot afternoons; to Cezine it had been as complex and eternal as a galaxy turning about its own center in vast contemplation.

She listened helplessly to his adoration, knowing she should flee Cezine's sickness as the other Menx had, flee a hideous way of dying. Yet she could not leave him praying in an empty shrine. He had turned away from his older brother, his beloved smiling idol, to offer himself at her indifferent altar. And now he was praying to a helpless h'shayl. At least she could stay there, touching and comforting while others fled.

Cezine was dying. Changing. Melting. Saying nothing more, even in whispers, for muscles no longer flexed, tongue and larynx and eardrums were flaccid, useless. The heart survived, beating, and the lungs. They moved just enough, too much. He lived when he should have died, when he could neither move nor speak. And then his eyes melted, leaving him deaf, voiceless and blind, his

mind horribly alone, horribly intact.

Memory was quick but melting sickness was not. She had time to try every Menx cure, every Concord medicine, every futile prayer. She had time to drive two borsks through the Ghost Pass, scourging them mercilessly while she watched Cezine melting, always melting, dissolving beneath a flexible casing that was no longer skin, merely the chemical reaction of disease and air. She wanted to slash his skin, letting it all drain away, his life and her guilt; but she believed in the shazir.

One borsk died on the far side of the Ghost Pass. The second borsk went berserk, yet still could not escape her. She was implacable, as insane as the animal she rode using a knife as her whip. The descent into the Jaws was slippery with the orange blood of a borsk. The cliffs echoed her insane prayers and apologies and imprecations.

The shayl heard her, but could not help.

She tied the shapeless huddle that was Cezine to the borsk and scourged the dying animal the length of the Fountains of Madness, shrieking for shazir to bend time back to the moment when drops from a cool lake had sparkled like laughter against the sky, to bend time until she was young again and Cezine alive.

If any shazir heard her, none answered. She screamed her demands and Cezine's name, words and name and finally only one word, Cezine, a long ragged cry that ended in blackness.

When she awoke she saw herself reflected in a wiri's eyes. She rode a reskan out of the Jaws of Menx.

She was shayl and Cezine was dead.

Rhane let go of Shiya as though his hands had held burning metal. Lightning danced overhead, futilely pursued by slow thunder, but Rhane neither saw nor heard. He had touched Shiya for barely more than an instant and had lived the last days of Cezine's life. He knew—*knew*—how it had felt to carry Cezine's dissolving flesh, to sink a knife into a dying borsk's flank in order to drive it over the Ghost Pass, to slide on bleeding feet over icy rocks, to hear a voice crying madness to the wind and realize it was your own voice ... and not care.

"You were in my mind," said Shiya, ignoring the rain that slid over her cheeks.

"Yes."

"Is there an end to questions now?" asked Shiya raggedly. "Do you finally understand how it was with Cezine?"

"Yes ..." He knew. He did not have to go to the Fountains of Madness after all. He could go home. Home.

Involuntarily, Rhane looked at the corpse of the tribesman who had died. Shiya followed his glance. She did not have to say that Rhane's life probably could be measured in days, perhaps weeks. No one knew the incubation period of melting sickness, and the course of the disease varied dramatically from victim to victim.

Rhane stared at the tribesman. If the new Concord immunization failed, his future was lying before his eyes, boneless. Cezine.

Rhane looked away from the tribesman. Lightning exploded across the sky. In the eerie afterglow, Shiya's eyes were almost fluorescent.

"It was wrong for me to claim a death debt. I share whatever guilt is attached to Cezine's death," Rhane said quietly. "Not that it matters. I'll probably share his death, too."

"Your Concord immunization might protect you," said Shiya.

But Shiya's tone said she was remembering that only Menx and T'aeln had survived melting sickness.

Rhane shrugged. It did not matter now. Nothing mattered but contacting Meriel and giving her Cezine's death moments. After that he could turn his back on the Jaws of Menx and go home. Shiya would be free, Lor Jastre would be pleased, all debts would be paid.

Yes. He would contact Meriel.

Without a word to anyone, Rhane walked away from the narrow road. When he was out of sight, he leaned against a wet boulder and put on his psitran. An icy drizzle condensed on his bare head, but he

did not notice. Grimly, he reached out for Carifil Meriel's mind.

It was like trying to punch straw through stiff mud. Just when Rhane thought he had succeeded, the straw of communication bent or broke, leaving him only the frustrating sense of almost having made contact. He tried again and again, but the emotions of the day had totally exhausted him; and Beggar was warbling beautiful melodies in his ear, distracting him. Kahsah answered the wiri with a ripple of superb harmony.

Rhane cursed, but it was impossible to stay angry with either the reskan who had followed him or the beguiling wiri who would not be quiet.

"It's just as well, I suppose," said Rhane, rubbing Beggar with a fingertip. "My mind's too ragged to do justice to Cezine's death moments. Besides, by tomorrow, who knows what else I'll have learned?"

Then, thinking of what he had learned today—shazir and Cezine's death and his own probable end—Rhane laughed humorlessly. "I can hardly wait for tomorrow."

In spite of Rhane's frustration, he was oddly relieved. He did not want to face the moment when he must decide between Shiya's needs and en Jacaroen requirements. In spite of every risk contained in the Jaws of Menx, he did not want to leave Shiya alone with the deadly shrine child.

As Rhane mounted Kahsah, he knew he had abandoned his efforts at contact too quickly. He also knew that if he had succeeded in reaching Meriel, he still would have had to go on to Shaylmir. It was the least an en Jacaroen could do for the alien woman who had preserved Cezine's death moments so superbly in her mind.

Long after Beggar hummed itself to sleep against Rhane's neck, Rhane rode into the increasing chill of day. Clouds dissolved, revealing a peach-colored morning moon in a bottomless lavender sky. By afternoon, a second moon had risen, the color of beaten silver. It pursued its slower mate across the afternoon sky.

Alone, Rhane rode on, barely noticing that the road had dwindled to a trail where wagons could not pass. He was tired of the company of his own thoughts, yet he could not bring himself to slow Kahsah, inviting someone to ride alongside. He did not want to face Jul's silent screaming fear of the sickness he had touched, to see Lor Jastre haunted by inexplicable guilt each time he looked at Rhane; and worst of all, to see Shiya's too-knowing eyes measure him for the first signs of insidious death.

Beggar woke and crooned softly against Rhane's neck, but Rhane's thoughts rang with names rather than melodies; Cezine, Shiya, Lor Jastre soundlessly shouting guilt and Lor Sostra laughing cruelly, Rhane melting, he was melting

X

The Ghost Pass hung overhead like an abstraction in metallic shades of gray. The pass itself was little more than a shallow notch strewn with boulders, and clouds that swirled out of nothing, vanished, and reformed once again, driven by invisible winds.

The steep trail forced even the reskans to work, using their powerful haunches to negotiate a route that became more precipitous with each step. The loris were stumbling, nearly at the end of their legendary endurance.

Rhane drew the thin, biting air into lungs that could not seem to get enough no matter how often or deeply he breathed. If he had had to walk, he was not sure he could have managed it, yet he knew that plodding borsk caravans, driven by men on foot, went over the Ghost Pass from the moment the melt opened the trail until the first great howler buried the pass in snow. Even now there were recent signs of the plodding herbivores; the trail was dotted by random piles of dung crusted over with a skin of frost.

Unconsciously, Rhane fingered the open face seals on his survival suit. Though the temperature was cold enough to freeze flesh, there was neither snow nor ice on the blue-black talus slopes of the Ghost Pass. The winds still blew out of the dry, cool interior plateaus. But soon the lower plains would also be cool, the atmospheric balance would shift, and winds from the Turquoise Sea would blow, heavy with water. Then moist air would rise to frigid heights, and blizzards would quarter the Ghost Pass on white feet.

Rhane twitched the shayl riding jacket more firmly around his hips. Since the meeting with the Cloud Mountain shayl'm, Shiya had insisted that he wear the outer garments of a shayl, so as not to appear a flatlander. In fur hat, jacket, split hide pants, with snowskins disguising his off-world boots, and riding a reskan, Rhane looked as much a native of Menx as Shiya.

With a conscious effort, Rhane slowly filled his lungs, giving his knitted native face mask time to take the icy edge off the air. If it got any colder, he would have to close the face of his survival suit. The day seemed dim, with unexpected flecks of darkness. Rhane wondered if it was only the altitude that was affecting his vision; certainly Lor Jastre and Jul did not seem bothered by the altitude, though Shiya was looking gaunt. An image of a boneless corpse crystallized in Rhane's mind, sharper than the frost-split rubble that lined the trail. With an effort that sapped his strength, Rhane banished the image.

Rhane pulled out his flute, anxious for the sound of something other than his own thoughts. It took a while to get the knack of playing in wind gloves through a slit in his face mask, but Rhane persevered. His shortness of breath chose the songs for him; soft, light, with long pauses: Beggar, Signal and the rest of Kahsah's flight rode on Kahsah, whistling muted harmonies, fascinated by the pure alien sounds.

When Rhane finally stopped playing, unable to spare any more breath for his flute, the wiris continued their songs until the altitude took its toll on their tiny lungs. Rhane dozed fitfully, pulled in and out of nightmares by a keening wind.

Kahsah stopped, sending a minor-key call back down the slope. Shiya's whistle returned, buoyed by a rising wind. The wind was from a new quarter, still frigid but less thin, carrying in it a hint of moisture.

Rhane stared around, his eyes glazed by oxygen deprivation and fatigue. Kahsah had led the group to the margin of a small ice field. Where the ice had melted back during the summer, rocks were covered by a hardy, black single-celled plant life that the loris promptly set to scraping off and gulping down. For water to grease their meal, the loris crunched the sun-rotten ice, which wore patches of algae like thick scabs.

At Kahsah's subtle urging, Rhane slid off and stumbled to the nearest flat rock. Shiya dismounted close by, pulling the child down after her. Nahst, Kahsah, and the other reskans loped off around the edge of the ice field and disappeared.

"Is something wrong?" asked Rhane, peeling off his unnecessary jacket to make a groundcover for the h'shazir.

Shiya eased the child onto the jacket and wrapped the green blanket tightly. "Hunger," she said, sinking down next to Rhane with a sigh. "They've had only plants since leaving Mure Lake. They should find ice-eaters around here."

Rhane looked dubiously at the dirty, pitted ice field that seemed lit from within by a lavender-blue glow. He doubted if anything big enough to fill a reskan's stomach could survive on algae and ice water.

"The ice field is much thicker than it looks. It's riddled with caves where ice-eaters live and algae grows. The reskans will eat well," said Shiya, correctly reading Rhane's dubious expression. She rubbed her eyes and squinted against the light. Signal flew down and landed lightly on her neck. Without turning away from her scrutiny of the glittering ice field, Shiya smoothed the wiri's wind-ruffled fur. "The other reskans were here."

"Other? You mean the ones that searched the Cloud Mountain shayl'm?"

"Yes." Her hand gestured toward the margin of ice field. "See those bright, nearly white parallel marks? Reskan claws made those. They scrape down the ice, breaking off chips and gathering algae. They must have been in a great hurry to settle just for plants. This is the only accessible ice field for hunters until the Ghost Pass is crossed."

Signal flew off in the direction Nahst had taken. Rhane squinted past his headache but could see nothing more than dark patches of algae. He turned to say something. The movement made him dizzy. His thoughts shied away from the grotesque corpse that haunted his silences, but the corpse would not be ignored.

"Cezine," Rhane said, groaning softly. "Oh my sad gods ... my brother." He looked up and saw Shiya staring at him, her copper eyes close, concerned. "Tell me," he said. "Tell me what it was like for Cezine. How it began."

“The melting sickness?”

Rhane did not answer. He did not have to.

“He was weak,” said Shiya tightly. “Short of breath. Dizzy.”

“Yes ...” whispered Rhane in horror.

Shiya snatched Rhane’s hand, peeled back his glove and ground her thumb against the bones on the back of his hand until he cried out. She ignored him. Holding his hand slanted toward the best light, she watched his skin change as blood flowed back into the area she had squeezed so harshly. When the skin finally resumed its normal dark coloration, Shiya touched the back of his hand with her cheek in silent apology.

“It’s the altitude, no more,” Shiya said, her words certain, but her voice almost fearful.

“How can you be sure?”

“Look,” Shiya answered, offering Rhane’s hand for his inspection. “There’s no mark where I pressed, no difference. One of the earliest signs of melting sickness is the blood—it breaks out of its vessels at the least pressure.”

“Always?”

Shiya looked away, obviously deciding whether or not to lie. Then she closed her eyes against the sight of his hand, where a bruise might form a moment or a day from now.

“Almost always,” said Shiya in a strained voice. “We don’t know enough about melting sickness to be completely sure. But,” she added fiercely, “the shayl know *mountain* sickness very well. As sure as wiris sing, you have that!”

Rhane propped his elbows on his knees and let his head sink into his hands. The sound of someone making careful progress across the rubble of frost-shattered rocks made Rhane look up. Jul appeared with two tiny cups, one in each hand. She extended them to Rhane and Shiya.

“Lor Jastre says that only a gurzak would go farther. Even so, there’s no need to suffer. Here. A medicine from T’ael. We have many mountains. Very high. We know how to help our bodies adjust.”

“No wonder you two look so bright,” said Rhane sourly.

He took the tiny cup. The medicine it held was pale-green, viscous, smoking slightly in the chill. He sniffed and was reminded of a desert wind, dry and acrid, pungent with herbs.

“It tastes unusual, no worse,” said Jul, laughing lightly. “Lor Jastre told me that most Concord races have taken it to no ill effect. Sometimes it makes people sleepy, but that passes.”

With a half-defiant gesture, Rhane lifted the tiny cup to his lips; he could hardly feel worse than he did now. Bitterness filled his mouth for an instant, then mellowed to the brackish taste of blood.

“Thank you, Jul.” Rhane looked at Shiya, who was studying the medicine with a peculiar expression on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve heard of this medicine, but this is the first time I’ve been so honored.”

“You ride with a yellow-eyed alien,” said Jul simply, indicating Rhane with a gesture of second-highest deference.

Shiya said something unflattering in the Black Ridge dialect of her childhood, but she drank the medicine to the last sticky drop.

Lor Jastre came up to them, his pale eyes gleaming oddly in the reflected light from the ice field.

“You’re turning back,” said Shiya, more statement than question.

“Yes. The loris”—Lor Jastre made a dismissing gesture—“are nearly done.”

Shiya said nothing as she watched the loris stagger along the ice field’s margin. She was surprised the poor beasts had lasted this long. It was as high as any lori she knew of had ever climbed.

“Let them rest until Rhane and I leave,” she said. “Then ride down and don’t stop until you reach the smoketrees. Even if an early howler comes, the trail below there never stays blocked more than a day or two at this time of year. Take two-thirds of the concentrates with you. The remainder will get us over the pass. There are only a few places where you can go wrong. The first is—”

Lor Jastre made a cutting gesture with his hand. “Tell me that later. First I must talk to Rhane.”

Shiya shrugged and licked her sticky lips. “Talk, then.”

“Alone.”

Rhane looked up at Lor Jastre. Shiya closed her eyes and put her head in her hands. Obviously she did not intend to get up and leave. Nor did Rhane see any reason why she should.

"I'm too tired to get up and she's too tired to leave." When Rhane tipped his head back to look up, he had to squint against the bright, mist-diffused light that made the T'aeln's face so hard to read. "What do you want?"

"I want you to listen to me as though your life hung on my words—for it does. Make no mistake, Rhane en Jacaroen. You will not survive the Jaws of Menx. No alien ever has."

"Tell me something I don't know," Rhane said tiredly, trying to rub away the headache that was numbing his brain.

"You will be murdered by the shayl," said Lor Jastre flatly.

Rhane looked up with a jerk. The incautious movement sent sudden pain lancing behind his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it," Lor Jastre said, glancing meaningfully at Shiya, who gave no sign of hearing. "Think about all the things that don't make sense."

"Such as?"

Lor Jastre stared for a long moment at Shiya, but she did not so much as look up.

"Such as the fact that Shiya's animal so conveniently permits you to ride where no non-Menx can follow. The fact that she, who hates all non-Menx, is nonetheless willing—eager—to guide you into the Jaws, the heart of Menx religious mysteries."

"She feels she owes me a death debt."

Lor Jastre laughed cruelly. "That's one way of putting it."

"What does that mean?" said Rhane, knuckling his temples in an effort to drive out the pain that came with each heartbeat. "Speak plainly. I'm too tired for riddles."

"Is it you she owes a death debt to, or is it her own kind? Your father was close, so close, to solving one of Menx's most crucial mysteries. He slipped off a cliff in a rockfall, though it was the dry season. Didn't that strike you as odd?"

Rhane's eyes narrowed until they became a mirror of Lor Jastre's, citrine slits glinting in the light.

"Then there was your half brother, Cezine," continued the T'aeln.

Lor Jastre paused as though tasting the flavor of Cezine's alien name. Although Shiya did not move, Rhane sensed her tension.

"Go on," Rhane said, his voice echoing the warning of his yellow eyes.

Lor Jastre's hands moved in T'ael's elegant gesture of reluctance and regret, but his eyes were unflinching. "This is difficult for you. But you must know. There was no general outbreak of melting sickness when Cezine died. Isolated incidents, perhaps, but no epidemic until several weeks later."

Lor Jastre held Rhane's eyes, yellow on yellow, and came as close to pleading as a T'aeln master could.

"No one saw Cezine except Shiya," said Lor Jastre. "Only she saw his supposed illness progress to death. There was no body, not one single scrap of flesh for us to analyze. She burned Cezine and threw his ashes into the autumn wind. Such a scattering is reserved only for Menx gods, but she gave it to Cezine. Was it to honor him, or to destroy the truth of his death?"

Rhane struggled to get to his feet. Shiya's hand wrapped around his wrist, holding him down.

"Let him finish," said Shiya, her voice thick. "You'll learn more from his lies than his truths."

Lor Jastre made an ironic gesture of respect toward Shiya. "Is that how you lured Cezine to his death, by making him believe everyone lied but you?"

Rhane freed his wrist from Shiya's grasp and sat alone, staring up at his uncle's eyes. "Why would Shiya want me dead?"

"Knowledge," said Lor Jastre succinctly. "Your father was close to a central truth. Perhaps even gray-eyed Cezine saw more than he should have. But you, you ride a reskan and sing with wild wiris. What do they tell you, Rhane? Too much, I'm sure. Far too much. You must die unless you come back with me."

Lor Jastre's hand slipped into his pocket and closed around the soothing music egg. Muted

harmonies filtered through the cloth. Shiya moved involuntarily when she realized that the T'aeln had brought forbidden technology to the gate of the Jaws.

"Turn it off," Shiya whispered in a strained voice. "The shazir—"

Lor Jastre ignored her. "Will you go back?" he asked Rhane, eyes and voice compelling.

"If you believe Shiya murdered my father and my brother, why didn't you act before now?"

"She would simply claim serat right," said Lor Jastre. He removed his hand from his pocket. Harmony thinned into silence.

"Serat right? What's that?" asked Rhane.

"A license to murder," said Lor Jastre.

"I don't understand."

Lor Jastre smiled sardonically. "I know. There's much that you don't understand, latzak. When the shayl—or is it the shazir?—decide that someone needs to be returned to the black womb, a shayl with serat right kills the offender. It's a god matter that is beyond Concord law. More to the point, it's beyond even lowland Menx law. No one knows when a shayl might invoke serat right. That's one of the reasons that shayl are exiled to the highlands. Their presence, understandably, makes non-shayl nervous."

Rhane turned toward Shiya. "Is that true?" His words were slow, his tongue thick, but his headache seemed to be receding with each breath. "Is it true?" he asked again when Shiya did not answer.

"Serat right exists," said Shiya slowly, as though her tongue were unresponsive. "It's not spoken of with non-shayl."

Rhane tried to measure Shiya's expression, but had difficulty in focusing clearly. The world tilted slowly. With a sigh, Rhane settled onto the ground and leaned back against the rock, hardly noticing its sharp edges. His headache was definitely receding. The relief from pain made him almost weak.

"Come back with me," said Lor Jastre, sitting on his heels in front of Rhane and taking Rhane's chin in his hand. "I saved you once by letting you go to Fiertten. Let me save you again. Come back with me and live."

"I ... can't," mumbled Rhane, his tongue lolling over even those simple words.

Lor Jastre touched Rhane's cheek and whispered, "Why did you have to have yellow eyes?"

Lor Jastre stood up abruptly. "Tell me how to get out of this chizak pass," he said to Shiya.

Shiya blinked and ran her tongue thickly across her lips. Rhane, watching her through heavy-lidded eyes, knew how she felt. It was as though his mouth had become as viscous as the lime medicine he had taken. He felt his body relaxing endlessly, sinking into the rock. He no longer had to fight for every molecule of oxygen and his head no longer felt as though it were being hacked apart with dull knives.

Rhane dozed while Shiya's instructions to Lor Jastre wove in and out of his condensing dreams. The dreams became a spiral of colors, one melting into another to create a third which turned back upon itself and its creators, making yet another color.

"... path below the slide ..."

The colors curved again, spiraling down, yellow to orange, curves tightening, viscous.

"... lightning killed ... tree ..."

Shiya's voice slowed even more, as thick as the lime-green syrup that had tasted so dry, so slow, so dark, orange to brown tightly curled, purple born, flowing down.

"... can't ..."

Purple and brown coiled together, squeezing into black, all colors becoming a single seamless midnight, soundless but for a distant ululation born of urgency. Something was coming, closer, running, calling to him in the strident octaves of terror.

Rhane struggled against the enfolding midnight, forcing open his eyes, trying to bring chaos into focus. On a slope opposite the camp, dirt spurted up and small rocks rattled against each other for no apparent reason. He stared stupidly, trying to understand what invisible force was at work.

Invisible—reskans! Rhane lashed his drugged mind into a semblance of coordination and was rewarded by a shadowy view of three strange reskans charging down a steep slope toward camp. Their riders were bent low, moving as an extension of their mounts. Metal glinted in each rider's hand.

The terror that had called Rhane out of his stupor intensified until it became a rending, silent shriek.

He closed his eyes, shutting out everything as he tried to soothe the madness hammering against his mind; but he could do nothing, for to touch that mindlessness was to be sucked into it.

The child. The child was waking.

Rhane gathered enough concentration to begin crawling toward the h'shazir, even though it meant letting the reskans slide back to invisibility as they leaped into camp. The girl's green blanket trembled and jerked. Her soundless, soulless cry was corroding his sanity. He must hold her, soothe her. He must reach her somehow. He crawled toward her, saw the child thrash violently, then go absolutely still. The scream in his mind ended.

Peace returned, endless, empty.

The click of claw against rock was Rhane's only warning. He threw himself aside just as a reskan's paw descended in a cruel arc. His sudden motion changed a smashing blow into a glancing one that sent him rolling against a boulder. He lay there stunned and bleeding, but alive.

Rhane clawed his way to his feet. He heard Lor Jastre's shout, Jul's scream cut off chillingly, and Shiya calling her reskans. He wiped blood from his eyes with one hand and pulled out his trail knife with the other. The reskan that had attacked him turned with deadly grace; the rider bent low, calling encouragement. With a feeling of rage and despair, Rhane held his knife blade up, ready to strike. He had no chance and he knew it. He also knew that at least one shayl would learn what it meant to ambush an en Jacaroen.

Lor Jastre called again, his voice wild. In his hand was a slim white tube. He ran toward Rhane, cursing, squeezing the bottom of the white tube. Pale-violet light shot out, ionizing the air between Rhane and the attacking reskan. The reskan turned violently, nearly throwing its rider. A boulder at the edge of the campsite smoked and cracked apart with a sound like a scream.

"Stop!" yelled Shiya, running toward Lor Jastre, who continued to shoot even though the danger to Rhane was past. "Turn it off! My reskans are out there!"

Just as Shiya kicked the weapon out of Lor Jastre's hand, there was a terrible animal shriek from the edge of camp. The pack reskan staggered out of invisibility, a hole burned through its body. Lor Jastre's hand moved with incredible speed, knocking Shiya to the ground, where she lay in a nerveless sprawl.

The reskan that had attacked Rhane spun back toward him. Rhane shook blood out of his eyes, tightened his grip on the knife, and waited. When the reskan leaped at him, Rhane threw himself to one side, slashing at the reskan's legs as he did so. A casual swipe from a massive paw smashed Rhane into the rock. The world exploded into bloody fragments. The last thing Rhane heard was Kahsah's cry of insensate rage.

The sound of a flyer slicing through the thin atmosphere woke Rhane. For an instant he thought he was back on Siol, waiting at the shuttleport. Then pain came to him and he remembered. He shook his head. The pain was like the flyer's scream.

The next time Rhane woke it was to ice water dripping slowly down his face. He tried to open his eyes, but could not. He moved, then cried out in pain. He remembered, and tried to raise his knife but could not.

"Don't move yet," said a voice, dry and hoarse yet somehow familiar.

"Shiya?" His own voice was a croak, unrecognizable.

"Yes."

Rhane tried to look toward the voice, but his eyes would not open. Turning his head brought a white stab of agony.

"Be still," said Shiya curtly.

Shiya's hands moved over him, probing deftly, causing no more pain than was necessary in her search for major injuries. She found none. With a muttered phrase of thanksgiving, she turned her attention to his bloody face.

"I can't see," said Rhane.

"Wait. I think it's just blood crusted over your eyelids."

Rhane felt a wet cloth across his eyes. Gently, patiently, Shiya washed away the caked blood.

“Open your eyes.”

Rhane blinked. Light the color of blood flooded his senses. For a moment he thought his sight had been damaged, then he realized that it was sunset.

“Can you see?” asked Shiya anxiously.

Rhane glanced around. The first thing he focused on was the green-wrapped child. He reached out toward the blanket, only to withdraw at Shiya’s single word.

“Dead.”

“Dead?” said Rhane, still dazed. He remembered the rending terror that was cut off and the bottomless peace that had followed. “Why?”

“They couldn’t control her.” Shiya swore with a coldness that was more shocking than any hot anger. “There was no right, no serat necessity. The shazir know that. Her murderer will die in the Jaws of Menx.”

Rhane remembered another scream that had ended too soon. “Jul?”

“Dead. Her throat was slit.”

Rhane closed his eyes, afraid of seeing too much. “Lor Jastre?”

“He drugged us and then he ran,” said Shiya bitterly.

“He had no reason,” began Rhane, then stopped at the sound of Shiya’s anger.

“He did not want you to go into the Jaws! You wouldn’t listen!” Shiya laughed again, a sound as bitter as the wind. “Well, you won’t be going through the pass now.”

“No, nor Lor Jastre. Jul’s dead.”

“What’s a latlik to a T’aeln master?”

“By the Silent God, Shiya, think what you’re saying! The child, too, was murdered!”

“The latlik meant more to him than any ‘mongrel child.”” Shiya’s lips twisted over for Jastre’s words.

Rhane made a sweeping negative gesture. “I don’t believe it. We must look for him. He could be in the rocks, hurt, dying. Even dead. And then all of Menx would answer.”

Shiya’s smile made Rhane uncomfortable. “The reskans are tracking him. If he is here, they’ll find him.”

“Where else would he be?” asked Rhane, impatient with her hints and hatred.

“I heard a flyer,” was Shiya’s only answer.

“It was the sound of pain, no more,” said Rhane harshly.

Slowly, Rhane tried to sit up. The world darkened and began to slide away. His ribs felt as though they were made of fire. He repeated the phrases taught to him by the Carifil until his mind comprehended something other than pain. Slowly the world brightened and stabilized. He realized for the first time that Shiya’s face was streaked with blood, some of it still fresh.

“Are you all right?” Rhane asked. “Let me look at your head.”

Shiya seemed on the point of refusing, then she knelt close to him. He washed the cut as gently as he could, though his hands felt clumsy. The cut ran from her temple beneath her hair. Her braids had protected her from the worst of it. Rhane parted her hair carefully, making sure that the cut was no worse than it appeared. She smelled of sunlight and khi and blood, a combination that made him light-headed.

“It’s not deep,” said Rhane. “It’s clean. Must have been a very sharp rock you fell on.”

“The cut came from a T’aeln master’s ring,” said Shiya matter-of-factly.

Rhane remembered seeing Lor Jastre strike Shiya. “He didn’t know it was you. He only knew that someone had disarmed him. He must have panicked, grabbed a lori and spurred it back down the mountain.”

“Panic?” said Shiya derisively. “Not that one. And the loris are dead, throats slit.”

“We have to find him,” said Rhane, trying to pull himself to his feet with the aid of a waist-high rock. The pain in his ribs exploded into a burning shower of colors. He set his teeth and tried again to stand. “He’ll never make it back down.”

“Neither will you unless we harness your ribs. They aren’t broken, but you’ve bruises enough for twelve people.”

While Shiya scavenged the loris’ harness for straps, Rhane tried to piece together what had

happened. The ambush had been well planned; the ice-field hunting ground was the only place where people and reskans were separated. Even the wiris had been off-guard, dazed by the altitude. For the last half of the climb, Beggar had done little more than cling to the small tuft of hair between Kahsah's ears. Signal had been no better. The rest of the flight had ridden the pack reskan like a bright patchwork blanket. Only Shiya's unusual intimacy with her reskans had saved the two of them from Jul's fate—and the child's.

Shiya returned, straps dangling from each hand. She helped Rhane unfasten the top of his survival suit. He shivered in the cold wind and tried not to breathe, for each breath had become agony. With swift efficiency, Shiya strapped Rhane's ribs, using pieces of the dead child's blanket for padding. When she was finished, his agony subsided to a dull ache that echoed every breath.

"Thank you," Rhane said with a shallow sigh. He eased himself away from the rock. "Did you see which direction Lor Jastre took?"

"No. I didn't wake up until Nahst put a chunk of ice on my neck."

"Kahsah," said Rhane suddenly. It did not seem possible that anything could harm the big reskan, but he felt a sudden fear at her absence. "She wasn't hurt, was she?"

Shiya looked at Rhane strangely, caught by the emotion in his normally controlled voice. "She was afraid for you, too. She wanted to kill the other reskans, but she stood guard over you until Nahst could wake me. The other reskans escaped."

"You were unconscious," said Rhane, "How do you know what Kahsah did or didn't do?"

"Nahst wasn't unconscious."

Rhane bit off his immediate words of disbelief. He was still learning the extent of her rapport with her reskans. The more he learned, the more he was baffled by her apparent lack of psi. He wondered if the Menx had a new, entirely unexpected turn of mind, one the eluded Concord or even Carifil definition.

"Nahst has found Lor Jastre's trail," said Shiya. "He is—wait!"

Rhane listened intently, but heard no hint of reskan howl, no obvious means of communication between woman and animal.

"Lor Jastre went south, along the blue talus slope. He left no blood, so he's probably not injured. His trail ends in a stink of heat and fuel and metal."

Rhane remembered the dream of a flyer, a sound he had equated with the pain that had awakened him. "A flyer? But they don't work beyond the flatlands."

"This one did." Shiya sensed Rhane's disbelief. "The flyer's control is a simple one, based on atmospheric pressure. A man of Lor Jastre's technical skills wouldn't find it difficult to adjust or remove the control and take the flyer anywhere he wished."

"Yes," agreed Rhane reluctantly. "But for the mentor of Menx to break tabu ..."

"Who would have known?" Shiya shrugged. "He left us for dead. We may be. The raiders took all our food."

"The pack reskan," said Rhane slowly. "Lor Jastre killed it trying to save me from a raider's reskan."

Shiya made an impatient noise. "That reskan wasn't trying to kill you or you would have been torn into as many pieces as there are rocks in the Ghost Pass. The reskan was only playing with you. As for Lor Jastre—he's a marksman. What he aims at, he hits."

Shiya waved away Rhane's attempt at argument. "Believe what you wish," she said tiredly, "but please believe this—the highlands have gone mad."

Shiya looked beyond Rhane as a sudden gust of wind keened across the ice field. Ice clouds burned purple against the pewter sky. The air was cold enough to numb exposed flesh.

"The weather, too, has changed," said Shiya. "A storm is building." She made a gesture of disgrace. Fear showed in her voice for the first time. "But most of all the shayl have changed beyond understanding. A shazir was killed today, but no shayl caught her soul."

Rhane felt a chill that owed little to the wind. "What do you mean?"

"No. I'll speak no more of serat things," Shiya whispered. "I'm alone and winter is coming."

Kahsah and Nahst materialized, silent as the twilight. Wiris fluttered out of the air beside the reskans, but not one wiri sang. Rhane looked at the reskans looming enormously out of the engulfing night, and his

skin rippled with a fear as old as death. Everything that Lor Jastre had implied broke over Rhane in a black wave.

As though Kahsah sensed Rhane's fear, she hummed questioningly and breathed over his hands, inviting him to scratch her lips. Automatically, Rhane lifted his hands. As his fingertips rubbed against the reskan's wrinkled lips, he felt fear ebb. Whatever truths or lies Lor Jastre had spoken, Rhane was sure that Kahsah had no wish to kill her rider.

"You really believe Lor Jastre's lies, don't you?" Shiya said wonderingly. "Yet you stay with us." Shiya paused, trying to reconcile the impossible. "Rhane, Lor Jastre drugged us, making an ambush possible, then escaped in a flyer he had hidden nearby. Don't you realize that?"

Rhane chose his words with care. He knew Shiya loathed Lor Jastre, and he knew why; yet truth was more complex than hatred. "Someone who hates Lor Jastre would see it as you do. But the drug he gave us was for mountain sickness. And it worked. We're no longer half dead for lack of oxygen." Rhane smiled thinly. "I still ache, but not from altitude. And Jul did warn us that we might get sleepy if we took the drug."

"Sleepy!" said Shiya. "That's a soft manner of expressing it."

Rhane would have shrugged, but the straps made it impossible. "A latlik is trained to avoid unpleasant truths. As for the flyer, I think Lor Jastre never intended to ride back down on a lori if he couldn't talk me out of going on. He simply meant to wait until we were over the pass, get the flyer and go back to the lowlands."

"Why do you make excuses for him?" asked Shiya.

"Because I can't think of one tiny shred of a reason for Lor Jastre to want my death," said Rhane tightly.

"Then you believe him? You believe that I want you dead?"

"No. But," continued Rhane softly, "all shayl aren't you, Shiya. Can you speak for the others?"

"Once I could have," she said, then made a bitter gesture toward the dead h'shazir, "but no more. Do you trust me in spite of that?"

"Yes," said Rhane, thinking of Cezine, of her grief and a death debt she had accepted more willingly than he had imposed it.

"Then go back," said Shiya bluntly. "Kahsah will take you. I can't guarantee your safety any longer."

"And you? Aren't you going back?"

"The shrine child must have a shazir's funeral, ashes and wind. Only then will we be safe."

"But she's dead," said Rhane. "It's over."

"No one caught her soul."

Shiya's face was closed, distant. It was clear that she did not want to speak of the matter at all.

Rhane knuckled his temples, trying to clear his mind of the residue of drugs and the dragging weight of exhaustion. He needed to think clearly, to plan what was required of him by Siol and Carifil, Shiya and himself. Eight days left—or was it nine, or seven? They all ran together in the rain, boneless, like the tribesman—and a h'shazir who was not quite dead enough.

The psitran was a warm band around his arm. He started to unwrap the metal-crystal wires, but knew that trying to contact Meriel was futile. His concentration was so ragged that even if Meriel were standing on his toes, he doubted that he was capable of coherent mindspeech.

"Go back," said Shiya. "I want no more death debts."

"Maybe," sighed Rhane, then he winced and tried to ease his ribs. "First I must rest."

"But—"

"Whether I go back or forward," Rhane said reasonably, "I'm not moving until I've slept."

"You must go back," said Shiya, staring at the dead loris and the murdered h'shazir. "Too much has changed. You'll die if you go into the Jaws of Menx."

"It's comforting that you and Lor Jastre agree on one thing," Rhane said dryly.

"I go into the Jaws because I must, for the shrine child, alive or dead. But you," whispered Shiya, "is it Cezine that drives you?" She bent over Rhane, almost touching him. "Is it Cezine? Listen to me," she rushed on before Rhane could answer, "Cezine forgave us for not returning his worship, a forgiveness I

never earned and you never noticed. If you're here to find his forgiveness you can go back, for you've always had what you seek."

For an instant Rhane saw himself reflected in Shiya's copper eyes, shadows and a lavender-red sunset. The present drained into the past with a soundless rush. He was with Cezine again, sitting in the leaping shadows of a campfire, seeing adoration reflected in his half brother's eyes, an emotion that was equaled only by Cezine's worship of Shiya. Cezine so young and so alive, Menx a magic world wreathed in possibilities, reflecting incandescent love and laughter.

Then it was gone in a cold wind and another sunset draining into night.

"I'm searching for more than Cezine's forgiveness," whispered Rhane sadly, "and less. I wish ..."

Rhane's voice faded, pressed into nothingness by the weight of the present. He and the past changed with each day, each reforming the other, the world changing while he looked at himself reflected in another's eyes.

And now he was alone.

"Yes," Shiya said, shivering. "It's lonely when the world changes."

XI

The darkness was without shape, turbulent with gestating nightmares, a terrifying silence in the wake of truncated screams. Something was bending down, mouthing enigmatic demands, reaching for him, engulfing him—

Rhane sat up in a rush, breathing as though he had been running rather than sleeping. Beside him, Shiya twitched and whimpered, held by impossible demands bending over her. He shook her out of sleep. Beneath the nacreous descending moon, her eyes opened as dark as the nightmares pursuing her.

"What is it?" Rhane demanded.

Shiya stared at Rhane without recognition, dazed by the nightmare he had called her out of. Then she took a ragged breath and tried to smile.

"Nothing," Shiya said, "it's nothing. Just the echo of a shazir's dream. It happens all the time in the Jaws." Shiya pulled Rhane back down beside her, curling up against him with a sleepy sigh. "Dream only your own dreams," she murmured against his shoulder.

Shiya was asleep before Rhane could answer the ritual phrase. The words had meaning for him now—too much meaning. He lay on his back and watched the last moon's slow descent into false dawn. An icy wind keened down out of the Ghost Pass, stirring rock dust and memories, leaving behind a restlessness born of unease.

Shiya did not awake when Rhane slid out of the sleepprobe. He shivered as he pulled out his psitran. It was a moment before he attempted to send out the code. His ribs nagged at him in pulses of pain that only subsided enough to make their return all the more uncomfortable.

Concentration was very difficult, but Rhane sat in the cold and wind, reaching out to the glittering stars. The first, false aspect of dawn accompanied his thoughts like subtle harmony, compellingly beautiful, a duet of shadows and splendor, like two wiris singing perfectly. The duet strengthened, flexed and then scattered into fascinating syncopation, becoming Beggar and Signal whistling in pure distracting counterpoint.

His concentration torn among the rhythms of song, the relentless ache of his ribs, and fatigue, Rhane abandoned his attempt to contact Meriel. He crawled back beneath the sleepprobe, promising himself he would try again, after he was more rested, in the true dawn when light and warmth flooded the highlands.

Dawn was stark and brittle with ice. Silently, Shiya and Rhane gnawed at strips of half-frozen, half-carbonized lori, washed down with tepid algae soup. Rhane chewed with more determination than hunger, trying not to think, of Jul's frozen body buried beneath hastily gathered rocks and the dead h'shazir strapped to a reskan that had never carried more than its own skin. Little more than trash remained of the camp. Almost everything of value had been taken or destroyed by the raiders.

Rhane stood, moving tentatively, then more freely. His ribs felt better than he had expected, considering restless hours wedged between rocks and reskans. The discomfort had been ameliorated by

Shiya's breath warming his neck when she curled against him in the shared confinement of the remaining sleepprobe.

Eight days.

Absently, Rhane rubbed the back of his right hand beneath the trail glove. The ache persisted. He pulled off his glove. A bruise lay across the back of his hand, spreading like an incremental dawn.

"Ready?" called Shiya.

Rhane stood motionless, unable to answer, staring at his hand. Slowly he pulled on the glove. Eight days. Barely enough time to get back to the Access. But should he go there, dragging melting sickness with him, spreading it like the bruise on his hand?

"Ready," answered Rhane softly, decisively.

He would go on, over the Ghost Pass, because a bruise was spreading over his right hand. He would go to the Fountains of Madness because he was afraid he could never go home again.

Scarlet light and jet shadows merged into Shiya walking noiselessly toward him.

"Are you ready?" asked Shiya, close to Rhane yet hidden by angular rock shadows.

"Yes."

Without looking toward her, Rhane drank the last soup from the telescoping cup and fitted it onto his belt with his other tools. The reluctant pack reskan appeared, grumbling in its muscular throat. The reskan was only half-grown, almost clumsy beneath its unaccustomed burden.

Carrying the h'shazir's corpse would slow them, wasting time that Rhane was afraid he no longer had. He feared the melting sickness spreading through him, dissolving him. He did not want to end as Cezine had, in the glittering shadow of the Fountains, melting into death.

But Cezine had not been half T'aeln. And even so, some of the medicines Shiya had given Cezine had slowed the course of the disease. With T'aeln genes and shayl medicine, might not even Cezine have lived?

"Why?" said Rhane, pointing toward the shrine child's corpse. "It will slow us too much."

"She didn't have a shazir's death, but she'll have a shazir's funeral."

"Couldn't it wait, as Jul's rites must wait?"

Shocked, Shiya stared at Rhane. "The child's soul wasn't caught!"

Rhane slowly mounted Kahsah. When the most urgent pain in his ribs had diminished, he spoke again, choosing each word with care. "Will her funeral change that?"

"It must be done," repeated Shiya. "Her soul is frightened. She's not mature enough to accept an echo of light as her only reality. Nor is she powerful enough to have other realities. As long as her body exists it will call to her. When she finds she can't have it, she'll be insane with fear and rage. Once the body is burned there will be nothing but ashes driven across the face of Menx. She'll be free. And we'll be free of her!"

"Then burn the body right here."

"How?" said Shiya.

Rhane remembered their tiny dung fire, hardly enough to melt a cup of ice. Lor Jastre's weapon had disappeared with him. Rhane had not brought anything tabu into the mountains—except, perhaps, the psitran, and he could not use it to make fire.

Without a word, Rhane urged Kahsah away from the campsite and the reskan that bore the remains of a terrified child.

Kahsah led the reskans between even higher cliffs of blue-black stone whose feet were buried in drifts of jagged rubble. There was neither river nor stream nor glacier to round the stones, only relentless changes in temperature that gradually cracked even the most obdurate rocks, sending their sharp fragments sliding down to anonymous talus piles.

Grimly, Rhane clung to Kahsah's harness, trying to anticipate and avoid the jolts that came when Kahsah was forced to leap or scramble over loose rock. Beggar rode between Kahsah's ears, its tiny golden hand-paws firmly buried in a tuft of the reskan's steel-gray pseudo-hair. From time to time the wiri's musical snore was echoed by Signal or by the somnambulant wiris on the half-grown reskan that carried the h'shazir's corpse.

The trail narrowed until Rhane wondered how a laden borsk could possibly pass. The rock walls on either side were rubbed nearly smooth, with occasional streaks parallel to the trail where metal harness buckles had ground against stone. The altitude was such that even the reskans were panting.

The more narrow the trail became, the higher it rose, twisting like an animal in pain. There was nothing ahead but sterile rock, angular shadows and a sky as empty as death. The reskans clawed up a final slope, squeezed out between frost-broken boulders, and stood panting on the edge of the world.

Rhane stared, hardly able to believe the height and number of serrated mountains falling away to the horizon on all sides; and ahead, the enormous lavender plateau that was like a tongue lying in the Jaws of Menx. The view was almost too immense, too austere, yet the land beckoned irresistibly to anyone capable of facing it without flinching.

For a timeless moment, Rhane drank the uncompromising wine of the Jaws' highland beauty. It was almost worth dying for. Almost. But then, perhaps he would not have to die. Half T'aeln and the other half shayl. Or were both the same? T'aeln. That was what mattered—T'aelns had been known to survive melting sickness.

Rhane sat dizzily on Kahsah, clinging to his newfound T'aeln heritage with a need more acute than mere pride.

Kahsah stood with her great head lifted into the ice-tipped wind that swirled through the Ghost Pass. Kahsah's flanks moved heavily, working to suck in enough thin air to meet the demands of her body. Rhane slid off, easing Kahsah's burden. Beggar did not open even one violet eye when Rhane dismounted. The wiri seemed sunk in its altitude daze, incapable even of sparing breath for a snore.

Breathing shallowly to ease his ribs, Rhane walked toward a frost-shattered rock that was the color of twilight. The pack reskan slowly went by, draped with Kahsah's flight of wiris, their wings folded until there was only the barest hint of rainbows sparkling among the small golden bodies.

Asleep. Every one of the beguiling, distracting creatures was asleep.

Rhane reached for his psitran, hoping the wiris were too dazed by altitude to disrupt his concentration with their diabolical harmonies. His fingers fumbled but the psitran quickly took shape. With an impatient jerk, he pulled back his hood and put the psitran in place.

Even before Rhane sent the code, a response came. Contact was immediate, almost overwhelming.

In his relief at finally establishing contact, Rhane released an explosion of sensory impressions, memories, speculations, emotions and questions. The result was a tangled mass of data rather than the coherent, multilevel torrent of information that was the customary manner of Carifil communication.

After that first shapeless, almost involuntary burst, Rhane tried to bring his mind around to a disciplined report. Only then did he sense that there were at least five other minds lined with Carifil Meriel.

Why? asked Rhane, an involuntary twitch of the mind rather than a focused question.

Contacting you has been ... difficult. The reply was a blend of grimness and bleak humor and something that quivered like relief.

Guiltily, Rhane reviewed his inadequate attempts at contact. Mindspeech fragmented into images of fatigue and wiris' distracting harmony.

Meriel's response was a focusing of interest that was almost painful. *Wiris?*

The question was a command. Again Rhane attempted to report in a coherent manner, narrowing the information to exclude everything but the unique shayl animals. To Rhane's chagrin, the result was nearly as amorphous as his first burst. It was impossible to separate wiris from what had happened to him on Menx, for wiris were as omnipresent as air.

Repeat memories of the h'shazir and the times you attempted to contact us, urged Meriel, her mental voice oddly attenuated. *Quickly—trouble—maintaining—*

Contact thinned, then returned like an echo, only to fade again, Rhane sensed still more Carifil struggling to help maintain the link. He poured himself into sending the information Meriel had requested, working until sweat saturated his bound ribs, but communication faded in and out with a rhythm that was impervious to his needs. The rhythm strengthened with each split instant, beating with syncopated imperatives, permeating his mind until there was no thought, only rhythm, intricate rhythm wound around

a wiri's potent song.

Rhane opened his eyes and saw Beggar on his shoulder. In his lap a flight of wiris swayed, wings spread, throats pulsing with irresistible rhythm. Rhane wanted to sweep the sweet, distracting animals to the ground, but lacked the energy.

The damage was done. The link with the Carifil was lost and Rhane was too tired to renew it.

With a disgusted curse, Rhane pulled off the psitran and wrapped it once again around his arm. Only then did he sense Shiya's intense scrutiny and remember hearing her whistle, as sweet and clear and maddening as any wiri's song.

"You must listen to the wiris," Shiya said urgently.

"Listen?" Rhane swore and pulled up his hood against the cold wind. "Who can help but listen? With them carrying on, I can hardly think, much less meditate."

"Your meditation must lack shayl discipline," snapped Shiya. "The wiris interfere only with the kind of loose thoughts that might attract shazir."

Rhane's hands paused over the survival suit's face seals. "Do you mean that wiris instinctively interfere with psi?"

"Psi?" Shiya dismissed the alien word with a curt gesture. "Wiris prevent shayl from attracting the notice of the gods. Without wiris, we'd be prey to every shazir. Each shayl has a wiri. That's how we survive in the Jaws."

"Only shayl have wiris," began Rhane.

Shiya responded as though Rhane had asked a question. "Of course only shayl have wiris. What use would flatland Menx have for a wiri? They rarely have thoughts that go beyond their skin even when they touch one another."

The ramifications of Shiya's words went through Rhane like lightning. He remembered all the times when he had touched her, even casually, and had sensed ... something. A doubling of his own emotions? Or perhaps, the presence of her mind? He had assumed only his own psi was at work, but now he was not sure.

"Let me try something," said Rhane.

Rhane's hand snaked out and wrapped around Shiya's wrist before she could respond. Immediately he felt a deepening of his own confusion, plus an exasperation that was more than his own. He searched his own emotions carefully, trying to discover where he ended and Shiya began, wondering how often in the past he had touched her and blended emotions/ thoughts without realizing it. His psi experience was recent, and limited to the highly skilled Carifil. Meriel's mind had the structural integrity and discipline of a crystal; there was never any doubt about where her mind ended and his began.

Amazing. Rhane's thought was barely complete when it was answered.

Is it? How, then, do shayl communicate on Siol?

Why didn't you tell me sooner? demanded Rhane, ignoring her question.

Touching is not a casual thing between shayl. Shiya's thought was cool, distant, though she did not move to evade either his physical or mental touch. *It didn't occur to me that you were ignorant of what happens when we touch.*

Humiliation surged as Shiya remembered the flashes of desire she had felt. Because she did not have the skill to limit communication, Rhane knew her thought/emotion the instant she did. He put his lips on her wrist just above her gloves, where a thin band of skin glowed like dark honey in the sun. Deliberately, he held his desire for her focused in his mind.

Shiya shivered, as much at his thoughts as at his touch. Her fingers trembled, curling against his lips in slow caress. In that instant, Rhane wanted Shiya with a fierceness that shook them both, for it was her desire too, reinforcing his.

"I think," Shiya said hoarsely, "that we were both h'shayl that summer night when my hair curled around your hands. I've never forgotten the resonance of your touch—nor forgiven myself for not feeling the same when Cezine touched me. I understand now. He was not shayl, even to the least degree."

Shiya looked over Rhane's shoulder, her copper eyes brooding on the rubble of the Ghost Pass. Suddenly terror leaped from her fingertips to his cheek.

“What is it?” demanded Rhane, his voice loud with her sudden, shared fear.

Quiet! Shiya’s fingers dug into Rhane’s shoulder as harshly as her terror dug into his mind. *Be quiet or we’ll die! Nahst! Kahsak!*

Even as Shiya called, the reskans came. Rhane felt the world shift subtly and knew he was within the field of reskan camouflage. In spite of that he turned very slowly, careful to dislodge no pebble to give away his position. He followed Shiya’s glance to a rubble heap just to the right of the descending trail.

It was all Rhane could do not to cry out. Where sterile shards of rock had been, enormous flowers bloomed, looking like a crowd of shayl’im with painted cheeks. Water leaped in scintillant display, leaving diamond streaks on flower faces. The scent of soft-petaled khi swept over Rhane, exhilarating, terrifying. Columns of light leaped up to support the shifting moons of Menx. He saw the moons resplendent on crystal pillars against a starless midnight sky.

Before Rhane’s mind could reject the possibility of black skies at noon, the moons and night were gone, sucked back into petals the color of dawn, and water ran down into the hole at the center of the universe. Flowers swayed and called out in fragile petal voices, crying fear, melting, flowing pinkly down to the center where the incomprehensible waited. The last tiny voice died, leaving behind nothing, not even an echo. The rocks where flowers had bloomed were gone.

A cold wind gusted, tugging at Rhane and Shiya, parting invisibly around the invisible reskans. Rhane’s thoughts were a jumble of fear and questions and a flat disbelief in his own senses.

What was that? asked Rhane in a burst of demanding thought that rocked Shiya.

A shazir, what else?

Shiya’s thought was a controlled whisper, telling him even the intimacy of tightly shielded mindspeech was dangerous.

Is it gone?

As though in answer to Rhane’s question, a slender golden mure tree grew out of the ground less than six strides from him. He did not need Shiya’s warning to know that they were in deadly peril. He closed his eyes and concentrated on thinking of nothing, on being nothing, less than thin mountain air, nothing at all.

It was as though Rhane had not closed his eyes. He still saw the mure’s golden leaves move to the same fitful wind that tugged at him, mure leaves like molten sun, incandescent, each leaf a separate yellow flame dancing on the tips of ten thousand gnarled fingers. An ancient mure tree stood alone in front of them, a thousand branches reached out, yellow leaf flames swaying sinuously, a song like distant storms swirling around its crown.

The tree vanished, leaving behind ten thousand yellow tongues murmuring of things no human wanted to hear. The murmuring grew louder, less coherent, a babble of possibilities that quickly became a cascade, then a torrent and finally a floodtide rising, its immense wave curling higher and higher and breaking into white, grinding everything in its path.

Rhane did not know whether his eyes were opened or closed; he only knew that he and Shiya had joined with reskans and wiris in a desperate merging that enormously strengthened their ability to withstand the shazir’s presence. The immense wave passed over them, tossing them like seaweed, pulling at them but not tearing out their roots.

There was a joyous cry of welcome as the wave passed, a sense of overwhelming emotion. Reality unraveled, time lurched dizzily, then reality was knitted up again in a pattern more pleasing to the shazir.

Wind howled like a triumphant reskan, snatching rock dust into the air, turning grit into gold beneath the autumn sun. A perfect glittering spiral grew, changing from gold to a rainbow turning upon itself, more sound than color, harmony both savage and infinitely subtle.

Silence came, more thunderous than any sound. There was a sense of something awesome opening its eyes, looking through reskan camouflage. Rhane and Shiya flowed more deeply into one another and waited to die, crushed by a shazir’s undivided attention.

Wiris sang, voices like carved jewels suspended in the ebony void of silence, radiating spikes of pure color. Where the spikes crossed, new colors were born, impossible colors that shimmered and beckoned, alive with irresistible rhythms.

The shazir's attention shifted ponderously, like a mountain turning on an oiled pivot. Relief shot through Rhane and Shiya, but it was short-lived. The wiris were dazed by the altitude; their song, for all its beauty, hinted at the raggedness of exhaustion.

One wiri fluttered to the ground, unable to sing any longer. Without conscious thought, knowing only that the song must continue, Rhane slid his flute out of its scabbard. He ignored his own terror and the cold biting at his face. With a smooth motion, he put the flute to his lips and began to play, following the wiris' lead, becoming a pure voice singing of infinity to an invisible shazir.

Gradually, gratefully, the wiris surrendered their voices to Rhane's flute! One by one they fell into exhausted silence. Kahsah's whistle began softly, filling the void left by faltering wiris, harmonizing with Rhane as she had done on the trail. Nahst joined in, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence. Though still soothing, the song deepened, becoming a river where before it had been a stream.

Shiya's whistle joined with Rhane's flute in sure harmony, as though he sang with two voices. The reskans whistled in subtle counter-rhythms that strengthened the lyric fascination of the song.

Without pause, humans and reskans worked to deflect the shazir's attention with subtle walls of music. Almost imperceptibly, the weight of the shazir's presence shifted, following the song until it turned back upon itself. Like a snake swallowing its own tail, the shazir once more became engorged with itself, caring about nothing else.

The shazir vanished.

Wait! screamed a small voice in their minds. *Wait for me!*

The shrine child scrambled past Rhane, her mental cry a knife turning in his mind. Before he could reach out to her, she seemed to explode into flame. Earthbound lightning leaped over rocks, leaving enigmatic symbols scored across stone. The h'shazir laughed.

And vanished.

Rhane held onto himself as though he were the motionless center of an insanely turning universe, but it was not enough. Reality was cracking, peeling away from him. A dead child lived again, her laughter echoing and reality sloughing away in great sheets that threatened to crush him.

A whistle that was as painful as a whip slashed through Rhane's rising panic. Shuddering uncontrollably, he opened his eyes on a world that could never again be the same.

"That was a dream," said Rhane, his voice ragged.

Shiya's laugh was as frayed as Rhane's voice. "Not unless 'dream' is another word for 'shazir.'"

"That's not what I meant," said Rhane harshly, angry for no reason other than that the world had not asked him before it changed irrevocably. "It only happened in my mind. An illusion," he said fiercely. "Just an illusion!"

"Are our gods, then, so different from yours?" asked Shiya.

Rhane stared at the ground. Resting on his boot was a mure leaf, each vein etched finely. The leaf was carved from a single perfect gem that caught and twisted light into yellow flame. The gem was cool in his palm, as impossible as the shrine child running down the slope.

"Does the Concord know about this?" asked Rhane, staring at the gem and trying to keep his voice from climbing into fear.

"Of course," said Shiya, looking at him in confusion. "So did you before you ever came into the Jaws."

"But—but the shazir are *real*."

"Aren't your gods real, too?"

"Not like—*this*," said Rhane, holding the perfect, impossible leaf up against the light. "Are all shazir like that one?"

"Some wear bodies like ours, some wear fantastic shapes, some aren't visible at all except by what they do. Some are more powerful than others." Shiya's hands spread in a gesture of ignorance, "Perhaps all shazir are nothing but aspects of an invisible unity rather than separate entities. I don't know. Does it matter?"

Rhane tried to think of all the things that Shiya had told him about the shazir, things he had considered no more than faintly ridiculous god myths; but he could think of nothing except a dead girl living once

again, and a yellow jewel burning, cool in his palm.

“Cezine,” whispered Rhane. “That’s why you took Cezine into the Jaws.”

When Shiya did not answer, he knew she was remembering a boy who had died and a dead shrine child who had come alive again, running down the slope into an unimaginable future.

“Is she really alive?” asked Rhane.

Shiya’s only answer was to look toward the half-grown reskan that had carried the child’s body. The reskan’s burden was gone, the pack straps hanging like an empty glove. Rhane followed her glance and felt a cold deeper than the wind crawling over him.

“She looked like us,” said Rhane distinctly, “but she was one of them.”

“Sanity is the only difference between shayl and shazir.” Shiya’s voice was calm, as though she were discussing the merits of one song over another. “Shazir are quite insane. Always.”

“You sound like a T’aeln,” snapped Rhane before he remembered that Shiya’s mother had become shazir, and that Shiya feared her fate would be the same. “I’m sorry,” Rhane said quickly. “I don’t know what to think. But I’m sure that there’s a greater gap than sanity between you and—that!”

“What is sanity but a shared reality?” Shiya said, searching Rhane’s eyes for understanding. “Shazir rarely share reality with us. They have so many realities to choose from. If they do share our reality, it’s not exclusive. Something from their other realities always spills over—flowers and moons and a night before the stars were born. That’s why we try not to attract shazir attention; sometimes we aren’t able to survive their realities.”

“The shrine child. Is she dead again?”

Shiya made an ambiguous gesture that ended in a light caress across Rhane’s cheek. “I don’t know if what we call death is an aspect of shazir. At the very least, the child is no longer afraid.” Shiya smiled wanly. “I wish I could say the same for me. We were lucky, Rhane. Without your flute ...” Her voice thinned and then gathered strength again. “Without your flute the shazir would have *looked at us*, forcing us to share its many realities.”

Rhane thought of the shazir’s grinding, turbulent, overwhelming attention and felt fear squeeze sweat out of him. He did not know what a shazir’s realities were like. He did not want to know.

The leaf glittered like laughter in Rhane’s palm. He started to fling away the leaf, but could not. He had never held anything half so beautiful.

“Is it dangerous?” he asked, holding out the incredible carved gem.

“Anything left by shazir is much prized. It may vanish or turn to dust, though; or it may endure forever.” She touched the perfect leaf shape with her fingertip. “Beautiful.”

Rhane looked at Shiya’s face, noticing for the first time that her forehead was unblemished. Not even a pale line remained to mark the blow from a T’aeln master’s ring.

“Why?” whispered Rhane, tracing Shiya’s healed skin with his fingers.

“Who knows the mind of a shazir?” said Shiya, her tone suspended between gratitude and fear. “They’ve been known to kill rather than heal. To them, death is just another way of curing pain.”

Shiya closed her eyes, then opened them quickly, as though to orient herself in a shifting reality. “The sooner we get out of the Ghost Pass, the safer we’ll be. The wiris aren’t much use to us at this altitude,” she added dryly, “as you might have noticed. They should have sensed the shazir long before we did.”

“Oh?”

“Wiris were put on Menx to do more than pick parasites off reskans,” said Shiya. “Wiris are hypersensitive to thoughts and emotions. Shazir radiate both. The wiris are supposed to warn us, hide our minds, and then beguile any shazir who comes close enough to see through reskan camouflage.”

Rhane looked at Beggar, clinging to his shoulder in a stupor, and at the rest of the flight draped at random over the reskans.

“Wiris muffle your psi,” said Rhane slowly, looking at the innocent little creatures sleeping on the reskan. “Without wiris, you wouldn’t have to touch each other to exchange thoughts.”

Shiya made a gesture of warding off, as though Rhane’s words were dangerous or evil.

“Wiris keep our thoughts in our skulls—and shazir’s thoughts out! Without wiris we would be as insane as any shazir.”

Beggar whistled sweetly, and was answered by Signal. The wiris were recovering. They were not yet strong enough to deflect a shazir, but they had more than enough power to frustrate Rhane's attempts to contact Carifil Meriel.

Now he understood why mental contact ceased inside the highlands—now that it was too late.

"If I left the highlands," said Rhane slowly, "would the wiris let me think as I wish?"

"Uncontrolled?" said Shiya, repeating her gesture of warding off. "No. Never. You must understand, Rhane. A shayl without a wiri is a danger to everyone."

"Even in the lowlands?"

"Beggar will stay with you, always, everywhere. When you die or become h'shazir, Beggar will wait in the mure trees outside the Fountains of Madness, waiting for your return. Beggar will wait for you forever. Wiris never die."

Rhane ignored the despair creeping through him and fastened onto the one fact, the one possibility of contacting Meriel that Shiya's words left him.

"Wiris don't go to the Fountains of Madness?" he asked.

"No. Wiris won't enter the valley of the Fountains."

Rhane's fingers traced the form of the psitran, silently reassuring himself. Contact was possible. All he had to do was to reach the Fountains of Madness before melting sickness incapacitated him. The mind was the last thing to melt

Absently, Rhane stroked the back of his right hand where the dark bruise ached and grew. So much to digest, to rearrange in his mind, ready to give to Meriel. His death moments, Cezine's. Meriel must know everything. Not only for Siol's life, but for the Concord. Wiris and shayl and shazir. Menx. What would become of the people who bred gods as routinely as clouds bred rain?

Painfully, Rhane mounted Kahsah. With the shazir leaf cutting into his palm, he rode down out of the Ghost Pass and into the Jaws of Menx.

XII

The wiris revived dramatically with the reskans' sliding descent into thicker air. Rhane watched Beggar's renaissance with a mixture of frustration, affection and curiosity.

"Your father used to do that," said Shiya, coming alongside Rhane as the trail widened.

"What?"

"He used to sit and brood over wiris. He was fascinated by them."

"Obsessed is a better word," said Rhane.

"But he was right. They aren't like other Menx animals."

"How?"

"They don't die. They don't have offspring. They have no sexual differences. And your father said that except for eye color, wiris could have been clones. They're identical down to the whorls and ripples of fur growth."

"Clones. Was that his exact word?" asked Rhane, touching Shiya.

With Rhane's touch came his emotions. Shiya searched Rhane's eyes for the reason behind his sudden intentness, but discovered nothing. He was more skilled in mindtouch than she, and more closed to her.

"I think clone was the word," she said hesitantly, thinking of all the old Galactic words the RA Jacaroen had taught her.

Shiya closed her eyes, remembering. Rhane sensed her searching back through her memories to a long-ago summer when she had believed that life was forever.

"You were on T'ael," said Shiya slowly. "I was still upset that you'd gone without a word after we—" Shiya stopped, then continued, holding her voice as though it were fragile. "Your father was talking about Menx, what a wonderful, irrational ecology it had. Yes," she said quickly, before Rhane could ask. "Irrational was the word he used."

"Go on," said Rhane.

“Other off-worlders doubted that reskans or even wiris existed, but not your father. He was patient, so incredibly patient. He stalked wild wiris in the forest, hearing them but never able to trap one. In the end, I think it was his overwhelming longing that brought the flights to him.”

“To him? You mean that the RA Jacaroen was shayl?”

“No. He had no special wiri like your Beggar or my Signal or my mother’s Rainbow. Several flights of wiris simply ... allowed ... him to come close, even to handle them. I guess that wild wiris hunger for human contact. There are so many more wiris than shayl.”

Shiya looked away from Rhane, remembering. “That night, Lor Jastre came to the campfire with a message from you. He told your father that you were enjoying your tour of T’ael.”

Rhane smiled thinly. Enjoyment was an odd word for the combination of exaltation and unease that had marked his stay on T’ael.

“Your father was envious of your trip.”

“I know,” said Rhane quietly. “His specialty was ecology, but his passion was social history. You know that T’ael is the oldest civilized planet in the Concord? Sometimes I think my father loved T’ael and its history more than he loved Siol, more than he loved anything. But he also resented T’ael’s longevity.”

Rhane looked beyond Shiya, where dawn was flowing down from the Mountains of Light. His eyes were focused on the past, though they reflected a day that was not yet wholly born. He sensed Shiya watching herself and the dawn, twin reflections in his yellow eyes. T’aeln eyes.

“Lor Jastre,” continued Shiya, “was amused by your father’s envy. Lor Jastre said your father’s eyes weren’t quite yellow enough to pass on T’ael, though they had been good enough on Menx. Then your father baited Lor Jastre with parallels he had found between the T’aeln—‘the epitome of a civilized race,’ he said—and the Menx.”

“I don’t think my father meant to disparage Menx,” said Rhane.

Shiya continued as though she had not heard. “They argued quietly, believing that Cezine and I were asleep. Lor Jastre said something about insanity. Your father laughed at him.”

“And then?”

“Lor Jastre was upset. I could tell, because he took out his music egg—you’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

“Yes. On T’ael, they’re as common as wiris are here.”

“That’s what your father said. He laughed at Lor Jastre and called the egg a mechanical wiri. Then he stopped and looked ... strange.”

“Strange? How?”

“Just strange. Your father said that maybe the wiri was a Menx music egg. Then he laughed and laughed. But Lor Jastre didn’t think the joke was funny.”

Shiya stopped and closed her eyes. When they opened again, she was focused wholly in the present.

“Is that all?” asked Rhane, vaguely irritated that one of the RA Jacaroen’s last nights had been spent in such a trivial pursuit as baiting a T’aeln master.

“Lor Jastre left,” said Shiya simply. “Your father stayed awake for a long time, staring into the fire, muttering about T’ael and Menx, obsessions with sanity and music. I couldn’t make any sense out of it. I don’t think he could, either.”

Rhane remembered his father’s habit of mumbling scraps and fragments of whatever new theory was taking form in his mind.

“And then?” asked Rhane quietly.

“I fell asleep. When I woke up, your father had gone back to the high forests. Three days later he was dead.”

“And I was in Fiertten, where he would have died to be.”

“That was no fault of yours.”

“No virtue, either. I owe my invitation to my yellow eyes. What a pity my father’s eyes were not quite the right yellow.”

Rhane grimaced, wishing that he had known of his father’s theory sooner, when Lor Jastre had been at hand to answer questions. But he had not known, and any questions he asked Lor Jastre now would

have little to do with a summer night long ago.

With an impatient movement, Rhane shrugged off the painful tentacles of a past he could neither accept nor ignore.

“How do Menx explain the fact that wiris are different?” said Rhane curtly.

“Some say wiris were created by the first shayl to protect us, and to modulate the shazir. Others say that wiris came from a shazir reality rooted in the Fountains of Madness. That’s why the wiris won’t go there—they’re afraid of being sucked back into a reality that doesn’t include Menx.”

“Legends,” said Rhane, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice.

“On Menx,” said Shiya, “legend is sometimes another word for truth. Or have you so quickly forgotten the attention of a shazir?”

“No,” said Rhane. “No. I think that will be the last thing I forget before I die.”

Rhane rode on in silence, no longer wanting to probe the past or even the present. He fixed upon the future, the moment he would stand where his half brother had melted. Then he could contact Meriel and give to her the death moments of Cezine en Jacaroen.

And there he must stay until he died of melting sickness or survived, for only within the glittering Fountains of Madness would Meriel be able to reach into his mind, sharing his death that she might turn again and share with Siol all that remained of the last direct descendant of the RA Jacaroen—a memory in the mind of an alien woman.

But if he survived, what then? Even if he healed as rapidly as he had sickened, he doubted that there still would be time to get to the lowland Access before Menx was abandoned. What would he do then?

With a silent curse, Rhane pulled his thoughts away from a future that might or might not extend beyond the Fountains of Madness and concentrated instead on his most urgent requirements: shayl medicine and freedom from wiris. If there was any future beyond that, he would deal with it when he met it.

The world tilted in a way that had nothing to do with the steep trail. Kahsah was in camouflage, avoiding something only a reskan could sense. She stood utterly still, black nostrils flaring against the lavender sky, narrow blue tongue tasting the wind.

Rhane wanted to look back over his shoulder to see if Shiya was close, but he did not move. If Kahsah thought that absolute stillness was required, Rhane would be still.

Yet impatience goaded him. Time. Kahsah was wasting time, and he ached with every breath, every movement. It took all of his control not to at least try mindspeech with Shiya to find out why Kahsah was so skittish when the wiris were utterly placid. But even the motionless release of mindspeech was denied to him; unless he was touching Shiya, the wiris smothered all mental contact in the same way that they had made mindspeech with the Carifil impossible.

Kahsah blew out a long breath and resumed her progress down the twisting, precipitous trail. The occasional pieces of stone that she dislodged fell for a long time before they struck lower rock ledges and ricocheted down until sound was swallowed by distance.

Rhane found it hard to believe that shambling, wide-bodied borsks could traverse the trail at all, yet the signs of caravans were everywhere. Steel-shod borsk feet had worn down rock until the trail was a smooth, shallow depression zigzagging down the gray stone flank of the mountain, a narrow lifeline joining lowland Menx with their highland gods.

The trail curved around a huge gray thrust of rock and dropped down into a long ravine. There, protected from the scouring winds, dwarf smoketrees grew in a waist-high thicket. A trickle of meltwater ran down the center of the ravine, then spread to make shallow pools. The last pool was larger than the others, deep enough to look almost black.

Just above the center of the pool a curl of light floated, captured inside a crystal whose faces were a series of polished, lambent curves. The crystal was more beautiful than anything Rhane had ever imagined, an apparition no bigger than his hand. The crystal dissolved as he watched, then reformed in accordance with some delicate interior rhythm. The crystal’s new shape was even more exquisite than before, more luminous, dissolving and reforming in lucid fascination.

Rhane dismounted without looking up from the crystal. As Kahsah leaped away, Beggar whistled

what sounded like a greeting and dove into the dark water. The other wiris joined in a cheerful rush of color and sound. They darted like prismatic shadows just beneath the water's surface, then emerged and spread their wings to dry.

The crystal changed, pearl to silver to cerulean, reflected in a thousand drops shed by wiri wings. Each crystal transformation astonished Rhane, for each seemed utterly new, incredibly beautiful.

"What—?" began Rhane, but words evaded him.

Shiya almost smiled. "This is the Ghost Pond," she said. "And that,"—her hand waved casually toward the crystal—"is the Ghost."

"Is it alive?"

Shiya's hands opened to include all possibilities, favoring none. "It has always been here, marking the real beginning of the Jaws of Menx."

"Is it shazir?"

"Of course."

"May I touch it?"

"I don't know. I tried to once, when I was younger than the shrine child."

"What happened?"

"The Ghost was never where my hand was." When Rhane looked puzzled, Shiya added, "Like the base of a rainbow, the Ghost moved without really moving at all."

Rhane looked at the crystal, changing as he watched, unattainable. Shazir. Without realizing it, his fingers went to his pocket and closed around the cool, impossible mure leaf that a shazir had left on his boot. But he did not look at the leaf. The Ghost was too beautiful. He was unwilling to look away, perhaps to miss a shape that would never again appear.

Still watching, he shivered in the flat sunlight, wondering if there was danger in the crystal's fluid transformations. For the first time he began to appreciate what living among gods might entail. The Jaws of Menx was a place where real or unreal, possible or impossible, was a matter of divine opinion, and that opinion was subject to drastic unannounced changes.

On Menx, rational and irrational were the same word.

Shazir.

Rhane forced himself to look away from the Ghost, wondering what other, perhaps less benign miracles would routinely occur in the Jaws.

Shazir.

Shiya's touch brought Rhane out of his uncomfortable speculations. Some of what he was feeling leaked to Shiya in spite of his constant, unconscious strengthening of his mind shields.

"Why does the Ghost disturb you?" asked Shiya. "Can't you sense that it's harmless?"

"But other manifestations of shazir might not be," said Rhane dryly.

Shiya said nothing. Her touch, however, told Rhane that she did not share his generalized anxiety about shazir and the Jaws.

"How can you be so calm?" he snapped, his voice sharp with too many suppressed emotions.

Shiya shrugged. "Shazir are no more unpredictable or deadly than floods or rockslides or howlers or sudden jerks of the ground. Do you go in constant fear of those things?"

"Of course not. They're just part of living on a planet."

"And shazir are just part of being in the Jaws of Menx."

"I'll never adjust to it," said Rhane flatly.

The reskans condensed in front of Rhane. Their blurred outline told Rhane that they were in camouflage, invisible to all but their shayl. He reached up and rubbed Kahsah's creased lips. His hand came away sticky. Keening softly in her throat, Kahsah licked the blood from his fingers, nuzzled him, and burped immodestly. Her pale-blue tongue moved around her face, cleaning off the last of what had been a satisfactory meal. Rhane tapped his fingernails against her teeth and praised her softly.

"You've already adjusted," said Shiya, laughing. "Look at you. An invisible reskan just slobbered blood over your hand. Do you run shrieking? No. You play with her teeth and tell her what a fine killer she is."

Rhane smiled, then laughed in spite of himself.

“Good,” said Shiya softly. “The gods may have given us wiris, but we had to steal laughter for ourselves.”

Still smiling, Rhane turned his back on the fascinating, unsettling Ghost. He mounted Kahsah awkwardly, favoring his ribs and his right hand. Beggar spiraled down like a leaf in a lazy breeze. The wiri landed on Rhane’s shoulder and snuggled against his beard.

Rhane sat, flexing his right hand, hardly aware of the wiri; but Beggar sensed Rhane’s bleak thoughts. The wiri began to whistle melancholy notes, a sliding lament to all the moments that might have been and never would be. The song was like a knife slicing through appearances to the aching reality of grief.

“What’s wrong?” said Shiya, fighting a sorrow that was as contagious as laughter had been. “Rhane?”

Rhane rubbed his sore hand, not knowing how to answer her. Then he peeled off his glove and the answer was written in the bruise smeared across the back of his hand.

Shiya’s face did not change, but her wiri screamed. Closing her eyes, Shiya sat without moving for long moments. Gradually, Signal’s scream faded into a monotone keening, then into a silence disturbed only by restless wiri wings.

“If we got you off-planet—” began Shiya quickly, her eyes still closed, her body still tight with her silent struggle for self-control.

“And spread melting sickness throughout the Concord?” said Rhane huskily. “No, not even if I were certain that Concord science could save me. And I don’t think it can.”

In the silence, the small sounds of Rhane pulling on his glove seemed very loud.

“How much time do I have before I can’t move?” asked Rhane, his voice cold, almost indifferent.

Signal keened distress and flexed her wings, but did not fly away. With a defeated gesture, Shiya opened her eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said finally. “It changes so much with each person. I can get medicine from the shayl. It helped Cezine ... for a time.”

“And if the medicine doesn’t work for me?” said Rhane roughly. “How much time do I have?”

“More than either of us wants,” she said raggedly, “and then I’ll have to—”

“Yes,” said Rhane impatiently. “I know. But if I’m too weak to go to the Fountains by myself, I want you to drag me there.”

Shiya’s head came up with a jerk. Signal shrieked and fled to the tuft between Nahst’s ears. “What good would that do you now? You can’t possibly live to get Cezine’s last moments to Siol, much less your own. The en Jacaroen line will die with you on Menx.”

“I made arrangements before I ever came to Menx,” said Rhane evenly. His hand closed over the psitran that was wrapped around his arm. “You get me to Cezine’s deathplace. Then you’ll be free of the en Jacaroens. No debts. No regrets. No past. Nothing but the future.”

Rhane stopped, remembering that Menx’s future was likely to be both brutal and brief—the planet scavenged and its people destroyed by slaughter and slavery.

As though Shiya knew each of his thoughts, her lips drew into a thin, sad smile. “You can’t do anything for my world,” she said. “Worry about helping your own world before mine kills you.”

Rhane did not answer. He could think of no words to equal Shiya’s unflinching assessment of the future. He had an impulse to tell her about the Carifil, about his hope that they would somehow help Menx, but he kept silent. False hope was worse than none at all. The Carifil’s ability to help Menx depended upon him, and he was melting, cut off from mind-speech by wiris who only wanted to protect him from a shazir’s crushing attention.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Shiya. Her hand brushed across his cheek and eyelids and lips, telling him of sadness and a rage she had just begun to measure, echoes of Cezine and a future that would never be hers, the past curling over her, grinding her to nothingness in a white wave curling down, breaking ...

I’ll give you Cezine’s deathplace. Shiya’s thought touched Rhane’s mind as easily as her fingers touched his lips. *But I wish we had more to give each other than death!*

Shiya’s rage seared across Rhane’s mind, a stroke of agony as brief and fierce as sheet lightning.

Before he could respond she had withdrawn so totally that mindspeech was impossible, even though she was still touching him.

Kahsah turned and regained the trail in a single bound, taking Rhane out of the ravine. Rhane did not look back to the crystal hovering over the last dark pool. The lambent transformations of the Ghost had become less compelling to him than the bruise spreading across his hand. In so much, at least, he had adjusted to the Jaws, becoming a part of its routine miracles.

The trail gradually became less steep, the blue-gray smoke-trees less stunted by wind and rocky soil. Ice ferns uncurled stubby fronds into the thin air. Small, hidden animals whistled harsh warnings to each other, then retreated deeper into their chill burrows.

In the distance, Rhane saw other trails join with the Ghost Pass trail until it widened into a road again. Threadlike tendrils of smoke lifted skyward, marking caravans or villages where shayl'm lived among scattered mure groves. Kahsah ignored the branching trails that led to inhabited areas and loped on into the lavender distance where no smoke rose against the sky.

By evening, reskans and riders were dazed with fatigue. The first autumn moon rose, no larger than Rhane's fist, as white as a wave breaking, so bright that his eyes refused to look at it. Kahsah's breath turned silver, and steely glints moved across her muscular body.

Shiya's whistle divided the rhythmic sounds Kahsah's feet made on the smooth road. The reskan slowed, then stood in the moonlight, wreathed in the silver billows of her own spent breath.

Nahst appeared alongside, his outline blurred more by reskan camouflage reflex than by moonlight. Nearby, a shazir's dream of a smoketree reached toward the moon. Instead of gray, the long wispy leaves of the tree were deep-red and quivering with music, ruby tongues singing inhuman harmonies.

"Back by the lake, when you urged my debt upon me," Shiya said softly out of the darkness beside Rhane, "I should have told you that the Mountains of Light weren't the only obstacle between you and Cezine's death."

Silence gathered like night around Shiya, increasing the distance between Rhane and the woman he had barely begun to understand, as he had barely begun to understand shazir ... and Menx.

"Go on," said Rhane, knowing that some response was expected of him, but not knowing what.

"I didn't believe we would get this far," said Shiya bluntly. "No off-world person ever has."

"Except Cezine."

"Yes. Cezine. My debt and your future." Shiya's voice was bitter. "It would have been better if I'd never tied him to a borsk and goaded it over the Ghost Pass. Better if I'd killed him in the yellow silences of Mure Lake. Then you would be back on Siol, placing Cezine's death moments in the en Jacaroen shrine."

"You might as well wish that Siol didn't care about the death of an en Jacaroen."

Shiya's laugh was as bitter as her voice. "I've wished that many times! What a bizarre world you come from, Concord man."

Rhane glanced at the seething quasi-life of the ruby smoke-tree and laughed aloud. Shiya's first response was anger, then a smile twisted across her lips and she laughed tiredly.

"Yes," Shiya said, "but I still wish ..." Her voice unraveled into silence. When she spoke again, it was in the tones of someone who had put aside futile wishing. "I took Cezine to the Fountains of Madness." Her voice continued without pause, as colorless as moonlight. "I believed that the Fountains were the best place to attract a compassionate shazir, so I lashed my borsk into a frenzy and drove it beyond the guardians."

There were many questions Rhane wanted to ask, but was afraid that if he did, Shiya would refuse to talk at all. Even through moonlight and reskan camouflage the strain on her face was clearly visible.

"I wasn't shayl, then. Only a hint of h'shayl. The guardians let me go as they let all non-shayl go. 'Stand not between a believer and his shazir.'

"But I'm shayl, now. For me, today, the Fountains of Madness are closed." Shiya turned to face Rhane. Her eyes were hooded, reflecting not even a spark of moonlight. "And the Fountains are impossible for you, too. You are shayl."

"Will you deny me Cezine's deathplace?" asked Rhane ..

Beggar's wings flared open, dripping pale rainbows, warning of the emotions that seethed beneath Rhane's quite face.

"No." Shiya's voice thinned with the Jaws' pitiless requirement for self-control. "No. But the wiris will. They won't risk the balance of shazir just to let an alien shayl blunder into the Fountains of Madness."

"Is the trail to the Fountains difficult to find?" asked Rhane.

"No. There is only one road."

"Take me as far as the guards. I'll go alone from there."

Shiya made a weary gesture of rejection. In the harsh moonlight even her hair seemed lifeless, its fire quenched by cold and distance. Rhane wanted to reach out and hold her, breathing warmth and life back into her.

"No," Shiya said grimly. "My debt will not be paid until you stand where Cezine died and I give to you all of the memories I've worked eight years to forget. But I couldn't forget, any more than you."

Rhane shivered with a cold his survival suit could not ease. He looked away from Shiya, unable to bear the silent pain written on her face. His eyes were drawn to the ruby smoketree, but its thousand tongues flickered with a life he did not want to confront.

Shivering, Rhane closed his eyes and saw nothing at all.

XIII

"How much farther?" asked Rhane when he could no longer bear the sound of the singing smoketree.

"Shaylmir is just beyond that range of hills."

"Shaylmir?" Rhane's breath shortened. "But that's just a legend."

"So are reskans," said Shiya, "to flatlanders."

"But—"

"Shaylmir is as real as that smoketree over there. More important, Shaylmir is the only place on Menx I can get medicine for you."

Rhane looked at the ruby undulations of the smoketree. For the first time he noticed the ripples of condensed red that rose from base to leaf tips and then seemed to leap toward the moons. The subtly rhythmic pulses recalled the quasi-life of the Ghost. Swiftly, Rhane looked away, back toward Shiya. An unusually bright ripple of color threw her face into red relief.

"All right," said Rhane. "Shaylmir is real. Real people live there. People like you."

"Yes."

"Is there a way around the city?"

"Why? The shayl who live there are accustomed to stranger things than an en Jacaroen on a Menx reskan."

"I can't go there."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Shiya, her words clipped, almost contemptuous.

"I'm carrying melting sickness. Isn't that something to fear?"

Shiya dismissed his words with a curt motion of her hand. "Melting sickness has been to Shaylmir before, many times. No highland shayl has died of it since the first epidemic eight years ago. And only a few died then. It was different for the shayl'm, though. That's why I've avoided caravans and villages even though we're out of food."

Rhane sat in stunned silence, trying to absorb the implications of her offhand explanation. "Only a few died in the first epidemic and no shayl has died since? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then highland shayl must have a natural—" Rhane stopped. There was no Menx word for immunity. "Shayl must have an inborn ability not to catch melting sickness," finished Rhane lamely. "The Concord should know about that. Concord scientists could develop an—" Rhane stopped again, balked by a language that lacked all but the most rudimentary medical vocabulary. Even the word "epidemic" was a Galactic word that necessity had introduced into the Menx language.

“Concord scientists could use shayl to develop a means of making all people impervious to melting sickness,” said Rhane.

“But the Concord already knows.”

“Impossible,” said Rhane flatly, remembering the useless inoculation he had received.

“Lor Jastre knows,” insisted Shiya. “After your father died, Lor Jastre came to Mure Lake. He told Cezine and me about a new disease spreading out of the Jaws. He gave Cezine something to drink. I remember it very clearly, because it was the most beautiful blue color I’d ever seen, more beautiful than a wiri’s eyes.”

“Didn’t Lor Jastre give you any?”

“No. He said females required a different drink. Mine was pale orange, like the moon, and bitter.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Rhane. “Melting sickness isn’t sex-linked. Your immunization treatment should have been the same as Cezine’s.”

Shiya made no reply. Concord science was as irrational to her as the ways of the shazir were to Rhane.

“Wait,” said Rhane suddenly. “Are you sure that Lor Jastre told you the sickness was spreading out from the Jaws?”

“Yes.”

Rhane wanted to believe Shiya was lying, but could not. She did not know enough about the causes and cures of disease to make up one coherent lie, much less several. But a T’aeln ... that was different. T’ael’s highly inbred society had necessitated an early and detailed understanding of human diseases.

“Do you know how many Menx—and Concord—lives were lost before the medical team figured out the source of melting sickness?” asked Rhane, his voice harsh in a throat that had become too tight. “And Lor Jastre knew all the time? Why in the Nine Gods’ Nineteen Hells didn’t he tell us!”

As Rhane listened to his own words echo in the silence, he felt ice condense along his spine. T’ael had not wanted Menx to be offered Concord, but T’ael’s recommendations had been overridden. Was it possible that the T’aeln had discovered the existence of melting sickness, and perhaps even a cure, and had said nothing in the hope that the disease would force the Concord to proscribe Menx?

“When Cezine died and you came down out of the Jaws”—Rhane swallowed past the anger constricting his throat—“what did Lor Jastre say about Cezine’s useless immunization?”

“Immunization?” asked Shiya, stumbling over the unfamiliar word. “What is—”

“That pretty blue drink,” snapped Rhane. “Did Lor Jastre say why it didn’t work?”

“He just smiled and said that medicine is like shazir—unpredictable.”

“But yours worked.”

Rhane heard his own voice, almost accusing her of complicity, as though she had drunk what would have given Cezine life.

“Yes, I lived,” agreed Shiya tonelessly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No. You’re right,” interrupted Shiya. “I should have died. Everything would have been different then. Better.”

Shiya looked up at the night. The combined illumination of the two moons made her eyes glow oddly.

“I didn’t understand about Siol and death moments and the en Jacaroen shrine,” said Shiya. “Lor Jastre did. He wanted to kill me when he found out where I had taken Cezine to die. He said Siol would force you to come back, and then you would have to die. For once, he spoke only truth.”

Shiya looked at Rhane, her eyes dark again, reflecting nothing but a past she did not want to remember. She spoke wearily to Kahsah in the Black Mountain dialect. The big reskan stretched out into a long stride that devoured night and distance.

The wind divided around Rhane, blowing coldly past his face. He did not close his suit against the increasing cold, nor even notice the drop in temperature. He was oblivious to everything but his own churning thoughts. His only conclusion was that either Lor Jastre had played a cruel trick on two children, or he had withheld from the Concord knowledge that would have saved countless lives.

Only the latter possibility made any sense, and then only if Rhane credited the T’aeln mentor with a

chilling pragmatism: so many thousand deaths in return for a medical proscription of Menx. Many Concord cultures—Siol among them—would accept such a solution to the problem of Menx as inevitable, if not wholly admirable.

But one of those deaths had been Cezine. T’ael, not Menx, had initiated the solution. T’ael, not Menx, was sacrificing Menx citizens in the name of Menx’s future. That came very close to violating the Concord’s Sole Restraint.

Rhane admitted to himself that it was possible that Menx was the leader and T’ael the follower. Possible, yes, but probable? Would Menx culture permit lethal epidemics in the present to ensure a future free of both Concord and the threat of scavengers? Hurriedly, Rhane reviewed what recent experience had taught him about Menx culture, as well as what he had absorbed through neuro-learning. It was not enough. He could not decide if Menx would condone or even comprehend such harsh pragmatism.

Impatiently, Rhane ransacked his knowledge again, knowing that part of his difficulty was that he had discounted much of what he had learned of Menx social dynamics as being mere religious fakery to cover the machinations of those people who held secular power. Distant, living gods were immensely helpful to city politicians who did not want their policies questioned. The flatlanders’ pious insistence that all real power came from Shaylmir had seemed so self-serving as not to require real investigation.

Now, however, the myth of Shaylmir would have to be reexamined. If Shaylmir, the City of the Gods, was not a myth, perhaps Shaylmir’s political ascendancy was also not a myth. Perhaps all power did emanate from the Jaws of Menx.

With a skill that had become second nature, Rhane mentally suggested that Kahsah drop back beside Nahst.

“Shiya.”

Slowly, Shiya turned toward Rhane. Tendrils of wind-whipped hair flew across her face like a ghostly veil. She said nothing, but neither did she look away from him.

“When Concord team members asked the city Menx who would decide whether or not to accept the Concord, the flatlanders usually answered, ‘The Gods.’ Sometimes the Menx simply said, ‘Shaylmir.’ Is that the truth? Do the people of Shaylmir actually rule the planet?”

Shiya looked away. She was so long in answering that Rhane was afraid that she would refuse to talk at all. Finally she sighed and tried to capture the restless wisps of hair. Then, with a discouraged gesture, she faced him again.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘rule.’ Shaylmir isn’t concerned with the price of grain or the problems of getting water to the cities, or repairing roads or relations among different regions. Shaylmir doesn’t care whether people live in one city or another, whether they farm well or badly, whether they have fifteen children or none at all, whether they are hungry or full, sick or healthy.”

“What does Shaylmir care about, then?”

“Shayl. Shazir. Shrine children. Serat.”

“And what about the Concord? Will Shaylmir decide whether to accept or reject Concord?”

Shiya hesitated, then said, “Yes. Shaylmir will decide, because shazir is affected.”

“The lowland Menx want Concord. What if Shaylmir decides to reject Concord?” said Rhane quickly.

“The flatlanders will never speak of Concord again.”

“Why?” demanded Rhane. “Why would flatland Menx let a few highland shayl control the planet?”

“City Menx can’t cope with their shayl children, much less their shazir. Shaylmir can. Before Shaylmir was built, shayl children were killed as soon as they were discovered. But a shazir baby,” said Shiya grimly, “can defend itself. Our civilization was almost destroyed by shazir before flatlanders learned to heed Shaylmir.”

Malevolent music curled around Rhane, horror sung in a scale impossible to man or animal. The skin on Rhane’s arms contracted, sending surges of terror over his body. He did not need Kahsah’s camouflage reflex or Beggar’s sudden disappearance to tell him that a dangerous manifestation of shazir was near.

A huge cloud of wiris swept overhead, turning and soaring on a black wind. Even in the attenuated

moonlight, the wiris' wings were incandescent with color, an explosion of beauty that was fluid, changing, fascinating. Hidden by scintillant wings, malevolence tried to take shape, solidifying with each terrifying beat of music. The wiris sang intricate counter-rhythms, disrupting the music as Beggar had so many times disrupted Rhane's concentration.

Fights of wiris boiled around the manifestation and turned back upon themselves like an enormous eddy, surrounding the spectral music. Silence unfolded like a huge indigo khi. The wiris disappeared as swiftly as they had come, taking with them whatever horror they had caught in their net of color and silence.

Beggar swooped down and landed on Rhane's shoulder. With the wiri equivalent of a yawn, Beggar breathed a few notes of song and fell asleep.

The silence was absolute. With shaking hands, Rhane yanked open his survival suit, letting the wind take away sweat and the stench of fear. He did not know what aspect of shazir had tried to solidify out of darkness and double moonlight. Nor did he want to know. His stomach twisted and the acid residue of fear climbed in his throat. He was nearly overwhelmed by the need to vomit, as though that act would purge his memory as well as his stomach.

Shiya's fingers trembled around Rhane's wrist.

"Are you all right?" asked Shiya, her voice as constricted as her throat.

"Yes." Rhane heard the uncertainty in his own voice and spoke again, more convincingly. "Yes. It was just so unexpected."

Shiya laughed weakly. "Malevolence like that always is. I wonder what kind of reality the shazir found that required such an evil response."

"You wonder. I don't want to know," said Rhane flatly. He spat several times, trying to remove the taste of fear from his mouth. The taste stayed, an acid reminder. "Does that happen often?"

Shiya's only answer was a shrug that ended in a shudder. Suddenly, soundlessly, nacreous footprints appeared between, the reskans. The apparitions shone and shimmered in the darkness at shoulder height. The reskans stopped. The pearly footprints went on ahead, then winked out all at once, leaving behind a smell of lemon. Beggar opened its eyes, chirped irritably, and went back to sleep. The reskans resumed their ground-devouring stride.

Rhane released his breath in a long sigh. The anticipation and reality of shazir were exhausting him. The reskans were getting tired from constantly maintaining some degree of camouflage as well as holding to a hard pace. Even the wiris were subdued, snatching naps between confrontations with shazir.

Drowsiness began to numb Rhane's perceptions, yet each time he began to doze he was jerked awake by fear. The landscape was rarely without manifestations of shazir. Some were beautiful, some abhorrent, some simply there. All were unnerving to anyone accustomed to an ordered, predictable world.

"See that green column?" asked Shiya, gesturing toward her right.

Rhane turned and looked. A slender jade pillar rose into the sky until it seemed to touch the third moon. As with the Ghost, light lived within the pillar, turning and curling like slow exhalations made visible in icy air.

"That column," Shiya said quietly, "is the oldest manifestation known to shayl. Older than the Ghost."

"Does it have a name?" asked Rhane, counting the slow pulsation of light.

"Beginning."

"What?"

"We call it the Beginning," said Shiya. "It's more than two thousand cycles old."

"Is that all?" said Rhane, oddly disappointed. Siol had artifacts whose age was measured in hundreds of thousands of years; and a Siolan year was nearly a tenth longer than a Menx cycle.

"We're a very young race," said Shiya simply. "I realized that when your father told me that T'ael has been a member of Concord for as many cycles as my people have history."

Unbidden, the memory of the shrine formed in Rhane's mind. Such sophistication and refinement of line spoke more of the culmination of millennia of artistic tradition than the first efforts of a raw young race.

“How old is the shrine?” asked Rhane.

Shiya gestured again toward the column. “The same.”

“You mean that they’re both manifestations of shazir?”

“Oh no. The shayl built Shaylmir and the shrine at the same time. The column simply appeared after Shaylmir was finished.”

Rhane thought of the cities of the lowland Menx. There were seventeen major cities and hundreds of minor ones. No Concord team member had found either artifacts or verbal memories from a time more than a few thousand years in the past. Yet the shrine simply did not fit into such a truncated history.

“Have your people ever studied their own past?” asked Rhane.

“No.” Shiya’s voice was clipped, almost forbidding.

“Is it tabu?”

Shiya did not answer. Rhane waited, then asked again.

“No,” said Shiya finally. “It’s not tabu.” Then, before Rhane could ask further questions, she added bitterly, “Lor Jastre is amused by what he calls our ‘nothing’ history. Even your father—” Shiya’s words stopped abruptly.

“Yes?” said Rhane, his voice gently encouraging.

“Your father said that Menx had no use for systematic thought, whether it was in history or physics. With living gods, he said, what use is logic or science?”

Rhane’s eyes were drawn again to the green column where light moved in ghostly coils. Nothing about the column was explicable in terms Rhane—or his father—could be comfortable with. The column was irrational, as were all manifestations of shazir. Some, like the wiris, were beguiling. Others, like the shrine child’s new life, were so bizarre as to preclude explication. How could Menx thinkers develop a rational biology or chemistry when there were more exceptions than rules?

“My father didn’t mean to insult you,” said Rhane slowly. “It’s simply improbable that Menx would develop any rational scientific theory at all. But you have. Your city Menx have a technology that is quite sophisticated, especially considering the shortness of your civilized history.”

“The technology was given to them by aliens,” said Shiya.

“Not entirely. When First Contact was made, Menx had a technology that was both extensive and efficient. And that,” he mused, “is as irrational as anything ever devised by shazir!”

“What do you mean?”

“When you find something odd, how do you explain it?”

Shiya shrugged. “We don’t. No one can know the mind of a shazir.”

“Exactly. Confronted by anything new or old, odd or common, Menx just shrug and consign it to shazir. Yet science, which is the basis of any technology, assumes that all events have a rational explanation that can be uncovered by rigorous investigation.”

“I’d like your science to meet my shazir,” said Shiya dryly.

“That’s just it,” Rhane said in an exasperated voice. “The presence of shazir should have precluded any scientific development. I could understand the Menx all getting together to pray for light at night, but I can’t see them developing the habit of rational thought that is required to make artificial light. Not when shazir are so spectacularly irrational.”

Shiya shrugged again. Though she did not say so, Rhane suspected she either did not appreciate the paradox at the center of Menx life or was indifferent to it. That, too, he could understand. If he had been raised on a planet where water flowed uphill as often as down, he would be either amused or bored by an alien’s insistence that water should only flow downhill.

The green column pulsed in quiet counterpoint to Rhane’s thoughts. The light seemed to bathe the moon in a pale-green glow. Though the third moon had moved in the sky, the column seemed always just beneath, as though the moon were balanced on the column’s jade light. Beyond the moon, the black arch of night engulfed all but a few stars.

Suddenly Rhane felt bitterly alone. He was accustomed to a sky that was alive with a billion stars, brilliant with the sense of other worlds, other peoples, other histories. Menx was terribly isolated, separated from the rest of the galaxy by its position at the tip of a long spiral arm, prevented even from

visual contact by an enormous black nebula which occluded most of Menx's night sky.

Fear turned inside Rhane's mind, a cold echo of the black nebula. He found himself clutching the psitran so hard that its metal bit into his flesh. Even then, he felt the psitran's outline without real recognition, as though it were residue of a half-remembered dream. He felt his own past unreeling from him like a shiny ribbon, slipping through his knotted fists, leaving him no reality but the present, no future but madness and Menx.

Abruptly Rhane looked away from the column and the night. The Carifil had warned him that something like this might happen. A man alone on a planet, beyond reach of familiar things, tended to immerse himself in the alien reality until perspective and identity were lost. Even experienced First and Second Contact people had that problem. It was one of the reasons Meriel had insisted that Rhane report twice a day.

Rhane laughed silently, humorlessly, yet the thought of Meriel leached out some of the night's strangeness. Menx was bizarre, sometimes terrifying in its irrationality, but it was also a part of the complex chain of interrelationships known as Concord. Though he was lonely, he was not wholly cut off from his own kind.

Reluctantly, Rhane's fingers loosened their grip on the psitran. He flexed his right hand unconsciously, trying to ease its soreness. When he realized what he was doing, he peeled back his glove. The bruise looked very black in the moonlight, spreading from his knuckles to his wrist.

Almost impatiently, Rhane pulled up the glove. He knew if he stopped to look he would find other bruises on his body, smudged warnings of blood vessels that were too fragile to cope with sudden changes in pressure. That would pass, unfortunately. Unfortunate, because hemorrhage was at least a relatively quick death. But melting sickness was not merciful. Soon the blood vessels would change again, becoming stronger as bone became weaker. Then the muscles would begin their slow process of liquefaction and his skin would become leathery, and he would be like that man by the trail, like his half brother, Cezine. And he would die like Cezine, abandoned and alone.

Rhane yanked his thoughts away from himself, cursing his loss of control. He had nothing to gain by dwelling on his truncated future, and the last days of his life to lose. He must fasten onto what he could do for Siol in the time that remained to him, and for the Carifil. And perhaps even for Menx, his murderer.

At the very least, his death moments would not bring shame to the en Jacaroens.

The night came alive with phrases of wiri song, a soft chorus of possibilities and excitements and greetings. Beggar trilled a musical reply, as did Signal. Like brilliant wind-swept leaves, wild wiris appeared and scattered back into darkness, leaving behind echoes of exquisite harmony.

"It's not much farther," said Shiya, her voice close in the darkness.

Rhane realized as Shiya spoke that the reskans had been climbing for some time, working their way over the ridge of land that divided them from the legendary City of the Gods. Even now, Rhane found it difficult to believe that he was going to see Shaylmir.

Kahsah's powerful stride devoured the last bit of upthrust land. She stood at the lip of a steep river valley, drinking the wind with an open mouth. Rhane stared at the city that hung on the opposite side of the valley like a vast flight of wiris.

Wind moved through the deep valley, bringing with it sounds of music, but Rhane did not hear. He was caught up in numbing disbelief. He blinked, then blinked again, unable to accept what he was seeing.

"Fiertten," he breathed.

Like a work by a master sculptor, Shaylmir stood in a multidimensional harmony of color and shape and sound. Nothing of the city was random, nor was it stifling in its balance. Shaylmir's proportions were both inevitable and exciting. Ribbons of light accented the city's daring asymmetry, drawing Rhane's eye first to one aspect of Shaylmir's beauty, then to another and another until his gaze returned to its starting point.

"Fiertten," said Rhane again, his voice almost harsh in the stillness. "That's Fiertten!"

Shiya glanced at him, then looked back at Shaylmir clinging to the steep valley sides in a series of dazzling assertions. She did not bother to respond, for Rhane's words were so ridiculous that no reply was possible.

“Shiya!” Rhane leaned over and grabbed her arm roughly. “That city is Fiertten!”

With Rhane’s touch, his certainly and bewilderment and the first stirrings of his fear swept through Shiya.

“I’m going mad,” whispered Rhane, his gloved fingers biting into her flesh. “Melting sickness and shazir are separating me from my mind.”

“No,” countered Shiya quickly, “you’re as sane as I am. Shaylmir just reminds you of another city. That’s all.”

“That’s. All.” Rhane’s laugh was ragged. “Shiya, Shiya, Shiya. Just. Another. City.” Rhane’s voice climbed and broke. When he spoke again, it was with a desperate calm.

“Tael’s Fiertten is one of the most aesthetically advanced cities in the Concord. Fiertten is a city with a history that’s more suitably measured in eons than centuries. Fiertten is the culmination of time, so much time that I can name the years but I can’t comprehend their passage any more than I can comprehend shazir. I can only accept both—and wonder which is the greater impossibility!”

Roughly, Rhane rubbed his hands over his face. When he looked up again, Fiertten/Shaylmir was still there. “I’m insane,”

Though Rhane’s voice was calm, Shiya trembled, for he was touching her again and the emotions shaking him were echoed in her.

“In all the Concord,” Shiya said weakly, “surely it’s possible that two cities resemble each other?”

Rhane’s silent denial exploded through Shiya, but his voice was flat.

“Resemble? Yes, but not to the point of identity. By the Lips of the Nine Gods, *that city is Fiertten!*”

“But it can’t be,” said Shiya simply.

“That’s how I felt about shazir,” Rhane shot back, bittersweet satisfaction in his voice. “But shazir is real and that city is Fiertten.”

“No.”

“Tell me,” snapped Rhane, “where those blue lights converge”—his left hand jabbed toward Shaylmir—“are the buildings finished with tiny yellow tiles whose glaze never dulls?”

“Yes,” said Shiya, staring at Rhane rather than the city, almost afraid.

“And are the tiles numbered—”

“Yes.”

“—one for each year, each child—”

“Yes.”

“—named and counted, set in a pattern of heart-stopping beauty that—”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Shiya screamed, snatching her hand out of Rhane’s grasp and covering her ears with her palms.

Shiya’s reaction had an oddly calming effect on Rhane. His mind had not fragmented: Shaylmir was Fiertten. All that remained now was to explain how a city that was the culmination of uninterrupted ages of civilization could also have been created by a race whose history was less than three thousand years long, a blink in time.

The most logical explanation was also the most impossible; that T’ael had built a replica of sacred Fiertten on the profane earth of Menx.

Absurd. Yet—

“Who built Shaylmir?” asked Rhane curtly.

“The shayl,” said Shiya, her voice as clipped as his.

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ten years ago?” he suggested sarcastically. “One hundred? A thousand? Two—”

“It’s the oldest thing we know. More than two thousand years.”

“Where did shayl live before Shaylmir?”

Shiya shrugged. “In the Mountains of Light, I suppose.”

“Like the shayl’m? Dragging borsks through one pass after another? Living out of wagons?”

“Yes.”

“No other cities were built before—”

“No,” snapped Shiya. “I told you. Shaylmir is our first city. The lowland cities came soon after.”

“From being nomads to—that.” Rhane’s hand waved across the brilliant face of the city. “From barbarian to cosmopolitan in one blink. No, Shiya. It’s just not possible.”

“I am not lying,” said Shiya, spacing her words precisely.

Shiya’s voice was distant, her face closed. Rhane leaned over to touch her when he answered, wanting to be sure that she understood more than the surface of his words.

“I know you aren’t lying. I also know that someone must have lied to you in the past. There is no doubt that the T’aelns built Shaylmir.”

Shiya’s rejection of Rhane’s words was a lash across his mind. He released her arm, then renewed the touch in spite of the pain it gave him. Beggar and Signal awoke at once with uneasy whistles. Reflexively, Shiya controlled her emotions so thoroughly that Rhane had to concentrate to sense any reaction from her at all.

“Like Lor Jastre,” said Shiya coolly, “you believe that we Menx aren’t capable of anything beyond crudeness. *But we built Shaylmir.*”

Shiya’s arm slipped out of Rhane’s grasp. Nahst stepped sideways, putting Shiya beyond Rhane’s reach.

“You misunderstood me,” said Rhane.

Shiya did not turn to look at Rhane or acknowledge his words in any way. Not for the first time, Rhane cursed the chance that had given Menx a race of arrogant, xenophobic T’aelns as mentors for the delicate process of Concord. The thought of Lor Jastre’s reaction to Shaylmir was Rhane’s only balm. It was a pity melting sickness would kill him before he saw Lor Jastre’s superiority shatter on the truth of Shaylmir.

There was no doubt in Rhane’s mind that Menx was an offshoot of T’ael, T’ael that sneered at all other planets and all other peoples as inferior. How or why Menx came into being Rhane did not know, but he was certain that the roots of Menx were firmly buried in T’aeln history.

Silently, Rhane urged Kahsah forward. For the second time in his life, he approached the sacred city of Fiertten.

XIV

Dawn came to Shaylmir in a silent rush of lavender light. The city changed before Rhane’s eyes, transforming itself from a brightly painted cosmopolitan to a shy recluse whose creams and golds blushed at the warm touch of day. Memories of Fiertten told him that Kahsah was going toward one of the residential areas of the city. But his place of Fiertten’s hushed orchestras, Shaylmir had a continuous cry of wiris woven through the subliminal rumble of borsks and wagons on distant caravan streets.

Kahsah ignored the temptations of pools and fountains and khi vines knotted with ripe flowers. She even ignored the red-furred fish rising among silver bubbles. The reskan walked slowly, as though reluctant to reach her destination. Once she stopped entirely, turned, and gave Shiya a long, enigmatic look. Then, still reluctant, Kahsah turned onto a wide street whose curving walkways were empty of all but a few brightly clothed shayl.”

Kahsah stopped before a building that was made of the same pale-green, translucent stone as the shrine on the far side of the Ghost Pass. In Fiertten the building was used as a retreat for master T’aeln whose lives were dedicated to music, the highest form of sanity known to T’ael. Rhane did not know what the building was used for in Shaylmir.

Flight after flight of wiris soared above the lambent green curves of the building, thousands of wiri voices melded in song. For a moment as Rhane listened he was a child again, rapt, believing that tears were temporary and laughter inevitable, that dreams became truth as certainly as water slid down to the sea.

The moment passed and Rhane remembered where he was, and why.

Wiris scattered like leaves in a cold gust of wind. Song fragmented, then reformed in a minor key, wan and distant as stars drowning in the dawn. Kahsan's great head lifted and her tenor lament poured into the sky. Rhane sensed her seething emotions as clearly as his own. He tried to comfort her, but could not. There was no comfort in the purple dawn spreading like a bruise across the sky.

With a gesture that was becoming reflex, Rhane gently rubbed his right hand. It was always sore now, always worse when he looked at it, so he no longer looked, merely touched, and did not notice the sour taste of dread and fury that had burned in his throat so long that it was a part of him, spreading like the bruised dawn.

Kahsah's howl rose unendurably, becoming a scream that echoed Rhane's silent, suppressed rage at the disease consuming his body but leaving his mind free to measure the degradation of encroaching helplessness. His greatest fear was not that death would come, but that it would come too slowly.

Invisible reskans joined Kahsah in savage harmony, pursuing her voice in a torrent of sound that seethed with rebellion and threatened to explode into tearing violence. Rhane knew that the reskans' harmonic scream should chill him, but he felt only an exhilaration so fierce that it shook his body. The reskans' scream held a greater truth than wiris' beauty.

Make her stop!

Rhane felt Shiya's fingers clamped on his arm as painfully as he felt her demand in his mind. His answer was a searing, incoherent negative.

You must! demanded Shiya. Stop her before you both go mad!

With Shiya's urgent thought came fragments of memory, bloody glimpses of reskans gone berserk when their riders went insane. The chords of rebellion swelled in a contagion of anarchy that swept through Rhane, demanding that he, too, throw back his head and scream. He felt breath gathering in his burning throat, demanding release.

At the last instant Rhane realized what was happening. Kahsah was deeply embedded in his mind, sensing each time he raged silently beyond the reach of even Beggar's sensitivity; but no one could remain silent forever without going insane.

Kahsah was screaming because he could not.

Roughly, Rhane shook off Shiya's hand and concentrated on controlling Kahsah. After a long struggle he managed to reach her and himself.

Enough, Kahsah. But thank you.

Silence broke like thunder. Kahsah's wide blue-black eyes regarded Rhane for a long, long moment. She hummed uncertainly. Her teeth closed around the toe of his boot in what he had come to realize was a reskan caress. He leaned forward and scratched her lips.

I'll try not to drag both of us into madness.

Rhane's thought was balanced between acceptance and a savagery that he was helpless to entirely erase. But the savagery was muted, for he was an en Jacaroen, with an en Jacaroen's duties yet to do.

When Rhane looked up, five shayl were standing in an arc in front of Kahsah. Wiris clung to their shoulders and fluttered silently overhead.

"Leave the city. Your presence is a wind across the calm surface of our sanity."

Deliberately, Rhane removed his right glove, revealing a bruise that stretched from his fingertips halfway up his arm. He heard Shiya's gasp of denial, and for a terrible instant Cezine bloomed between them, mouth open in a soundless scream. Then both the moment and the memory were banished by Shiya's control.

"I won't disturb you long, as you can see," said Rhane.

One of the shayl stepped forward, staring up at Rhane with eyes as dark as Kahsah's. As the shayl's head turned, his polished jade earring burned in the rising sun. The hand that touched Rhane's bruised flesh was the deep gold of a mure leaf folded against winter. The shayl's touch was as brief as it was light.

"Another alien shayl came to Shaylmir to die of melting sickness," murmured the shayl.

"Another? How many have you seen?" demanded Rhane.

Wiris flared nervously, scattering rainbows off their wings. Overhead, Beggar called in plaintive

notes, wanting to return to Rhane now that the reskans were quiet, but sensing Rhane's still-unruly emotions. Rhane held out his hand to Beggar and coaxed the wiri onto his palm. He stroked Beggar with a calmness that only Kahsah knew was a lie.

The shayl gestured approvingly as Beggar rubbed its chin on Rhane's thumb, then climbed to his shoulder and preened itself in obvious contentment. Kahsah watched Rhane with unblinking midnight eyes, then deliberately looked away.

"How many aliens have you seen?" Rhane asked in a neutral voice.

"Thirty-seven aliens crossed the Ghost Pass on borsks."

"The medical research team," said Rhane. When the shayl said nothing more, Rhane asked, hoping where there was no hope, "Where are they now?"

"Dead."

"All of them?" asked Rhane, trying to force the savage disappointment out of his mind and voice.

"All."

Rhane sensed an almost feral alertness that did not come from the shayl who had touched him. He looked at the faces of the shayl in front of him. Each wore a single jade earring inscribed with intricate gold symbols. Their clothes were similar in their bulkiness, pants and long sleeves padded against the cold exhalations of autumn. When the shayl moved, tiny gold balls sewn onto the hems of shirts and pants jingled sweetly. Their faces varied in age and color, but all shared the expressionlessness that came from a lifetime of carefully calibrated emotions.

"I've come to Shaylmir to gather death moments—my half brother's, and my own."

"You're too late for all but the last," said one of the shayl, her voice faintly touched by irony.

Rhane looked closely at the woman, wondering if she was the source of the malevolence he had sensed. She returned his look with eyes that were pale, as yellow-white as the hair braided on her head. Her single earring was slender, indicating that she had less authority than the other four shayl, whose earrings were large enough to require a thong around the ear to support the heavy jade.

"No," corrected Rhane softly. "I'm too early for all but Cezine."

At the mention of Cezine, a palpable surge of emotion swept the shayl's wiris. There was a discordant chorus of plaintive chirps, then the shayl clamped down on whatever emotion had disturbed them. They turned as one to confront Shiya. With a defiant gesture, she jerked off the hood that had concealed her flaming red-gold hair.

"You are Shiya. You were forbidden to return to Shaylmir," said the shayl who had first spoken to Rhane.

"There is a death debt between Rhane and me. Cezine."

"Repay it some other way," said the pale-eyed woman.

Shiya looked at the woman, who seemed more powerful than her slender earring would indicate.

"Rhane is called by his Nine Gods," said Shiya simply. "Even you, Makire, must stand aside for that."

"Alien gods," snapped Makire.

"Are they? Or are they merely a distant manifestation of shazir?"

The woman called Makire looked angry, then thoughtful. Shiya smiled with something close to cruelty.

"You can't always drive the truth out of Shaylmir," said Shiya. "I'm half alien, and shayl. He is wholly alien, and shayl. Who is to say that his gods are less than yours?" Shiya smiled again. Signal keened uneasily, shifting on tiny gold feet. "Will you drive me out again?" asked Shiya flatly.

"No," said Makire, pity clear in her voice. "Rhane has seen Shaylmir. Once again you have dragged a dying alien the length of the Jaws. Once again you ask for what can't be."

"Can any shayl be alien to Menx?"

Shiya's question made the woman look away. The woman's blue-eyed wiri sang softly, trilling comfort against a wisp of white hair.

"Could an alien make a female reskan sing?" continued Shiya relentlessly.

"Female!"

All five shayl turned and stared at Kahsah. She yawned, revealing the pale-blue tongue of a mature female reskan.

“We weren’t told this!” said a shayl who had not yet spoken. As he looked from Rhane to Kahsah, a shadow of fear moved across his round face. “To let a female’s rider go mad with melting sickness—!”

Makire’s hand snaked out and grabbed the man’s wrist. Though her grip was hard enough to bruise, the man’s face did not change.

“There is no question of our ‘letting’ the alien go mad,” said Makire quietly. “The disease is beyond our control.”

“Is it?” said Shiya, her voice flat. “I’ve heard whispers that melting sickness strikes only those who disagree with the House of the Unfolding Silence.”

Rhane stared at Shiya, too dumbfounded to speak. If melting sickness could be controlled—

“You’re alive,” said Makire, displeasure clear for an instant in her flat voice, “and you disagree with us.”

“I’m half alien. An exile. My opinions don’t matter in Shaylmir, for all that my mother is shazir.”

“You were the Lor Jastre’s latlik,” said Makire, the very blandness of her voice more insulting than any words could have been.

“Yes. I was.”

Shiya’s voice was absolutely neutral. Rhane touched her hand. He tried to counter the humiliation she felt by reminding her of laughter and sunset lakes and flame-colored hair that curled around his hands. She lifted his right hand to her cheek, ignoring the ugly bruise melting across his flesh.

“The House of Unfolding Silence should learn compassion from you,” Shiya said, her husky voice carrying easily to the five shayl. “I caused your half brother’s death and will cause yours, yet you comfort me.”

The man whose wrist was still held by Makire moved uneasily. She glanced at him once, then deliberately released his wrist.

“Johim,” said Makire, forcing the man to look at her, “you forget that death is but a pause between songs. Without pauses, the music of life would be indecipherable. Insane.”

“Fragmented melodies don’t please or distract shazir,” said Johim, his voice correctly neutral but his lips thinner than they had been a moment before.

Makire’s answer was a smile that passed before she turned to face Shiya again.

“The House of Unfolding Silence welcomes you and the alien shayl called Rhane. We’ll make the time he has left as comfortable as our knowledge allows.”

The five shayl stood aside as one, revealing a broad walkway that led to the building beyond. A connected series of pools and fountains murmured musical invitations. Wiris wheeled and darted, chasing bubbles with quick rainbow wingbeats. The water was clear and hot, sending silver streamers of warmth into the brightening sky.

The thought of being able to soak his bruised body in the pool almost made Rhane weak. Suddenly he was aware of every ache, every gnawing pain he had closed out of his mind during the long ride to Shaylmir. With a sigh, he began to dismount.

Kahsah moved sharply, catching Rhane’s weight as though he had been falling. The result was as though he had not moved to dismount at all.

What’s wrong. Kahsah? asked Rhane.

Kahsah turned and looked at him. With delicate care, she caught the toe of his boot in her teeth. Rhane scratched her lips, then went to dismount again. Kahsah sidestepped quickly, keeping Rhane’s weight centered on her muscular back. Rhane probed her mind with all the skill he had, but found no sense of malice or play. Mystified, Rhane looked toward Shiya.

“Kahsah,” said Shiya, her voice coaxing rather than commanding.

The big reskan ignored Shiya. When Rhane tried to dismount again, Kahsah again outmaneuvered him. Shiya looked from the stubborn reskan to the five shayl. Though their faces showed nothing, Rhane sensed their dismay.

“I’m afraid I can’t accept your generous offer,” said Rhane dryly. “Kahsah has become addicted to

my music.”

The wiris surrounding the shayl let out a dissonant chorus and whirled around the shayl. Signal cried out sharply and would have fled, but Shiya’s quick touch calmed her wiri.

“He doesn’t know what he said.” Shiya looked from Rhane to the five shayl, who waited with a feral alertness that was not confined to just one of them. “He doesn’t know,” Shiya repeated firmly.

Makire gestured curt agreement. “I don’t sense shazir about him.”

“We didn’t sense it with the alien woman, either, and she—”

Johim’s words stopped at Makire’s swift touch. Rhane turned toward Shiya in exasperation.

“I’m sick,” he said grimly. “I’m very tired. I’d give one of the Nine Gods’ Last Words for a chance to soak in a hot pool, and Kahsah won’t let me get off because I haven’t played my flute for her today. Now you’re acting as though I’ve broken some enormous tabu. What is happening?”

Shiya tried to smile, but it was not successful. “Shayl who are becoming shazir ...” she began, then her throat closed into silence. She swallowed. “H’shazir’s reskans become a ... part ... of them. With the male reskans, it’s dangerous if you’re close by, but mad reskans aren’t hard to avoid. They lose their camouflage reflex. With the females”—Shiya tried again to smile and again could not—“with the females it’s different. They control the males.”

Rhane tried to make sense out of Shiya’s words, but his mind kept being distracted by the mist rising seductively off hot water. He scratched Kahsah’s lips absently and tried to focus on what Shiya was saying.

“Do you understand?” Shiya asked.

“No.” Rhane heard the abruptness of his voice and sighed silently. “I’m afraid there are many Menx nuances that I don’t understand.”

“Female reskans rarely accept riders,” said Shiya patiently.

“Yes. You told me that.”

“Female reskans are leaders,” continued Shiya, her voice neutral yet somehow compelling his attention. “They dominate the males and the half-grown with their minds. Only the males too old to breed are able to deny a female. Domination rather than cooperation is the female reskan’s natural state.”

Rhane waited, rubbing Kahsah’s dark lips where they rested on the toe of his boot.

“He still doesn’t understand,” said Makire.

Wiris fluttered and sang disjointedly before settling back onto the shoulders of their shayl. They clung haphazardly, ready to fly at the least current of emotion.

“On Menx, the female reskan rules,” continued Shiya. “If she howls, the males howl. If she hungers, the males hunger. If she goes insane, every male within reach of her mind goes insane. Now do you understand?”

Shiya’s hand closing around his wrist told Rhane more than her words. Fear coursed through him, her fear, fear that if they believed he was h’shazir he would be killed before he could take Kahsah with him into insanity.

Serat. The word was repeated in Rhane’s mind again and again in a drumroll of fear. *Serat is when we kill one in order to save many.*

Rhane covered his confusion and sudden fear with an elaborate shrug.

“I’m tired, not h’shazir. And Kahsah merely wants to hear me play my flute. Is that such a terrible thing?”

Without appearing to, Rhane examined each shayl face for signs that someone saw beyond his casual exterior. Other than a very careful scrutiny of Beggar, the shayl showed no unusual interest in Rhane. Quietly, desperately, Rhane reached into Kahsah’s mind to reason with her. So complete was Rhane’s control that Beggar crooned softly to itself, not suspecting the urgent communication that was taking place beneath its golden feet. After a long silence, Kahsah released Rhane’s boot and crouched to make his dismount easier. The shayl began talking among themselves once more. Makire gestured peremptorily toward Shiya and Rhane. With a clumsiness that seemed to increase with every step, Rhane followed Shiya down the inviting walkway.

The wind gusted, hiding Rhane in a swirl of steam from the pools. Kahsah’s desolate tenor cry

soared above the placid water sounds and made the skin on Rhane's arms stir. From every direction, reskans mourned in unison. Melancholy wrapped around Rhane like a shroud, tangling his feet. He stumbled, then turned back toward Kahsah.

Shiya took Rhane's arm as though to support him. Instantly her fear poured into him.

No! If you go back, they'll claim serat right on you.

But Kahsah—

Kahsah is fine! Shiya pulled on Rhane's arm. *She's free to hunt and play in the fountains of Shaylmir. She can do whatever she likes here.*

Except stay with me.

Kahsah's howl thinned to a keen that wove in and out of the writhing mist. The other reskans fell silent, leaving Kahsah's cry to haunt the morning without even the hesitant companionship of an echo.

Please, thought Shiya desperately, come inside. They're watching us. She smiled and said in a clear, carrying voice, "Lean on me, Rhane. You're too tired to walk alone."

Rhane smiled in return—"Thank you"—but his thoughts were like ice. *If they're so eager for an excuse to kill me, maybe I should take Kahsah's advice and stay outside.*

Incoherent despair flowed from Shiya to Rhane. *But the only way to the Fountains of Madness is through the goodwill of this House.*

You got there without it.

I wasn't a shayl dying of melting sickness.

Shiya's sharp rejoinder deflated Rhane, reminding him of the vast weariness he had been holding at bay. Stumbling slightly, he turned to face the luminous House of Unfolding Silence. Slowly he walked past fountains murmuring of liquid pleasures and fluid warmth. He discovered he was grateful for Shiya's support, but kept his gratitude hidden deep in his mind along with the fear he felt at his own ebbing strength.

Seventeen gates swung wide on oiled pivots as the shayl approached. The gates were green, translucent, carved with sweeping symbols that eluded translation. The scent of late-blooming khi curled out in silent welcome through the open gates.

Rhane stumbled between the pillars of the nearest gate, drawn by the promise of a tall, khi-draped fountain. The scent of khi swirled invisibly around him, drowning him. With a long exhalation, he sank to the stone at the base of a fountain, his face bathed by drifts of warm spray.

The gates closed silently behind him.

XV

Rhane saw Lor Jastre's hand as though through clean, swift water, wavering in and out of clarity. The T'aeln's long fingers held a tiny jeweled bottle over the lips of a sleeping boy. Slowly, inevitably, the bottle tipped forward. Sticky fluid dripped down, blue, so blue, drop by drop falling onto the boy's lips.

Screaming soundlessly, helplessly, Rhane lunged for the bottle but was batted aside by a huge yellow ring, as yellow as a T'aeln master's eyes. Lor Jastre had known he was watching, he had always known, always been prepared, plans laid, decisions made, Cezine dying, melting ...

Why?

The fingers flowed into a smile, pity clear in each curve of lip, scorn in each hidden tooth. T'aeln mentor smiling, and latliks dancing in grotesque ingratiating.

Writhing, screaming without sound, Rhane flung himself at the smile. It vanished, but laughter remained, laughter and a body melting, Cezine melting, hideous, pleading for death but no shazir heard, none bent down in sweet annihilation. Soundlessly Rhane screamed for Cezine's health or his death. No one heard. Cezine dissolved. Alone.

Death moments lost.

As his own death moments would be lost and Siol—Siol would disintegrate into chaos, devastated by a T'aeln mentor's smile,

The hand returned. The bottle tipped. Sticky fluid dripped onto his lips. His. Not Cezine's. His! Rhane hurtled into consciousness. His struggles knocked aside Shiya's hand, and sent a beautifully carved bottle flying into the water tapestry at the far side of the room.

"At least," said Shiya, "your strength is coming back. Be still while I get more medicine."

Rhane grabbed Shiya's wrist. Even half delirious, he could see that the bruise on his right hand had shrunk to less than half its former size.

"Cure?" he asked, his voice hoarse with urgency and lack of use.

"No." Shiya's response was swift and uncompromising. "But it will help you through the bruising stage. You'll be strong enough to go to the Fountains of Madness."

Shiya pressed his hand very lightly and went through the water tapestry to another room. She returned with another bottle. The aftermath of the dream made Rhane want to cringe away. He was unreasonably relieved to see that the medicine was the same reddish copper as her eyes. He drank it quickly.

"Your dreams," began Shiya, then paused when Rhane shuddered.

"My own," he said thickly. "They've been my own dreams, not shazir."

"I know." Shiya took a slow breath. "But why, then, do you fight what your mind is telling you?"

Shiya handed Rhane a glass that seemed to be wrapped in green light. He sniffed, then drank the cool water.

"My dreams," said Rhane, turning the glass in his fingers broodingly, "are only telling me that I'm afraid of melting sickness. I already know that."

"Lor Jastre—"

Rhane looked up sharply.

"Yes," said Shiya, answering the unspoken question in Rhane's narrowed yellow eyes, "I touched your dreams. Sharing fear is the least I could do for you."

Rhane set aside the glass and waited for Shiya to continue.

"Lor Jastre," she said again. "You see him as Cezine's murderer. Why?"

"Do I?" said Rhane, startled. He tried to remember his dream, but his conscious mind shied away from returning to the helplessness and terror he had so recently escaped.

"It was Lor Jastre's hand you saw pouring blue liquid onto Cezine's lips. The ring he wore—"

"No!" Sickness and fear twisted through Rhane. "No," he said again, but even as he did he knew that his dream was born of truth rather than darkness, a truth he did not want to confront. "No ..."

Shiya waited, her copper eyes searching, alert. She carefully held her hands away from Rhane, as though she knew that he must meet his own truths alone.

"Lor Jastre," said Rhane, then stopped. His rage unfolded slowly, as dark and terrible as his dream. "Lor Jastre murdered Cezine."

In the distance wiris called as sweetly as crystal chimes, but Rhane did not listen. He was consumed by the voice of his own rage, increasing with each heartbeat, each realization. Shiya waited, making no sound, her face reflecting his rage and her own fear. She reached out, almost touching his gaunt cheek.

"Tell me," Shiya said gently, her voice so beguiling that Signal sang in soft counterpart against her neck.

Beggar flew through one of the high wiri windows that made intriguing patterns of light throughout the House. The wiri sang delighted notes of greeting and nestled against Rhane's beard. Beggar's song became an uncertain tremolo as it sensed just a fragment of the turmoil Rhane felt. The wiri lifted its tiny hand-paw to Rhane's cheek and whistled questioningly.

With an immense, almost unconscious effort, Rhane curbed his emotions and murmured soothingly to Beggar. The wiri's whistle slid up and down the octaves of delight.

Shiya sighed. "If Beggar accepts you, you're sane. Tell me what you saw in your dream."

Shiya leaned toward Rhane, as lovely as a reskan's song, and as alluring. His hand touched her fiery hair, and he wished that either the past was different or the present. Then he sighed, knowing that there was no escape from the future that had been born eight years ago.

"Tell me," murmured Shiya.

Rhane's fingertips slid down Shiya's unbound braids.

"Yes," he said, "I'll tell you everything but why. Because I don't know. Why."

Rhane wanted Shiya to know everything that he felt, every hope, every suspicion, every fear and every certainty. He took her hand between his. The warmth and strength of her fingers told him how cool his own flesh was, and how slack. He ignored the signs of his illness as he had ignored so many unpleasant things in the past.

"Cezine died in the first lowland outbreak of melting sickness," Rhane said. "It was the first, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Shiya, her throat tight. "Yes, it was the first."

"Yet Lor Jastre already knew that melting sickness spread down from the Jaws rather than up from the Access as the Concord first assumed. Am I right? Did Lor Jastre say eight years ago that melting sickness came from the Jaws?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone else at the camp fall ill when Cezine did?"

"I don't remember. They all fled when Cezine—when they saw him change."

"Yes, yes," Rhane said impatiently. "But did anyone else in the camp get melting sickness at that time?"

"No," Shiya said, "not until later. And then they died like grass bending in a great wind."

"Cezine fell sick at the same time the first outbreak occurred in the Jaws?"

"Yes," Shiya said after a long pause. "We didn't bring sickness. People were already dying when we entered the Jaws."

"Then sickness came to Cezine and to the Jaws at about the same time?"

"Yes."

"Even though the Mountains of Light were between them."

"Yes ..." Shiya's voice faded into puzzlement. "I never thought of it that way before. And there was no epidemic in the lowlands until later."

"You were too young to think coherently. He counted on that when he fed Cezine blue death. What followed was a nightmare no sane person would want to remember, much less dwell on in a search of incongruous facts."

"But I survived. I wasn't even really sick. Just a fever. And I bled easily."

The memories came in fragments, each sharper than the last.

"You were given life," said Rhane flatly. "Immunity."

Shiya's eyes were dazed. "But why?"

Rhane laughed humorlessly. "He wanted you." The bitterness in Rhane's voice increased. "Apparently I have more in common with my uncle than yellow eyes."

The water tapestry at the far end of the room shimmered, stopped flowing, then trickled to life again behind the figure of a tall, thin man.

"Yes," said Lor Jastre sadly, stepping into the pattern of light thrown by wiri windows, "we have more in common than either of us wants to admit."

Lor Jastre gave Shiya a single, oblique glance, then crouched on his heels next to Rhane's pallet. He measured Rhane with yellow eyes that missed nothing.

"Your right hand," said Lor Jastre, holding out his own.

Rhane obeyed, the reflex of a lifetime's obedience to Courtesy.

"Too late," sighed Lor Jastre, stroking Rhane's bruised flesh with surprising gentleness. "I'm sorry, Rhane. This time I can't save you."

Though Lor Jastre had little or no psi ability, his touch permitted Rhane unexpected access into the T'aeln's mind—as once, years ago, Shiya had found the unpleasant truth of latlik in Lor Jastre's touch. The truths that Rhane found were not comforting: Lor Jastre's unhappiness was both sincere and deep; Lor Jastre had killed Cezine with neither grief nor guilt.

Rhane jerked his hand away. Beggar exploded from his shoulder with piercing shrieks. Shiya retreated into the twisting silver shadows of the water tapestry while Signal joined Beggar's screams. The

wiris landed on a high window ledge, where their restless movements sparked rainbows that flashed and multiplied as several flights of wiris darted through the open windows.

“They’re attracted by emotion,” Lor Jastre said, admiring the graceful wiris.

“You murdered Cezine.”

Lor Jastre looked at Rhane with unblinking citrine eyes. “He was too interested in wiris. Like your father.”

“My father—” began Rhane.

Lor Jastre continued talking, oblivious to everything but a moment eight years ago. “I stood on the cliff and listened to your father talk about wiris. He knew. Too much. Even his yellow eyes couldn’t save him.”

“You killed my father.”

“Of course.”

Lor Jastre’s voice was faintly surprised, as though he assumed that Rhane had always known. Lor Jastre stood up in a single controlled motion that reminded Rhane of how quick the T’aeln could be, how deadly.

“Why?” whispered Rhane. Then, almost shouting, “Why?”

Lor Jastre stood with his back to Rhane, looking up at the seething wiris. The T’aeln continued speaking as though he had not heard Rhane’s furious demand.

“I gathered his drinking cup, his touchstone and his last words and placed them in the en Jacaroen shrine. For you, Rhane.” Lor Jastre turned, graceful, lithe, deadly. “For you. I would have brought even the boy’s cup, his sparkling necklace, his childish words to Siol’s shrine, but she took him to the Fountains of Madness, and even the Lor Jastre can’t go there.”

The T’aeln’s face changed subtly. “I did what I could to save you, my yellow-eyed latzak,” said Lor Jastre softly. “I did more than I should have. I risked—”

Lor Jastre’s elegant hand moved in a chopping motion. The yellow ring stone glittered with a restless fire that echoed wiri wings. His voice hardened with disappointment and a contempt that encompassed himself and Rhane.

“You don’t understand,” said the T’aeln in a dry voice. “I can see that. I should have expected no more from a latzak, no matter the color of its eyes.”

Rhane wanted to speak but could not. Wiris sang in sad chorus; each soft phrase wove delicately among the liquid sighs of water falling, pale silver ribbons and song joined into a melancholy tapestry glinting with sudden sparks of fear.

“They know, don’t they?” murmured Lor Jastre. He turned and watched Rhane with clear yellow eyes that Rhane did not want to meet, yet could not evade. “There is this to hold as you die. You have seen two Fierttens.”

“That isn’t enough,” said Rhane.

“It’s more than most get.” Lor Jastre smiled tiredly, softening the lines of his handsome face. “And I’ll take your death moments to Siol, though only your Nine Gods know how I’ll explain my presence in the Jaws. Is that enough for you, latzak?”

Lor Jastre’s voice caressed the last word, making it an endearment rather than an insult.

“You murdered my father and my brother,” Rhane said, spacing each word. “I want nothing from you. I would kill you if I could.”

“And Siol? What of your planet? Will you let your latzak genes doom your world to chaos?”

Rage and necessity battled in Rhane, creating an emotional backlash that made the wiris cry discordantly. Lor Jastre looked at the wiris, then back at Rhane, whose angular face showed nothing of the emotions tearing at him.

“My death moments aren’t enough,” said Rhane evenly. “Siol must have Cezine’s too.”

“That can be arranged.”

Lor Jastre’s voice was both cynical and weary. It took Rhane a moment to understand what the T’aeln was really saying.

“Lies? Would you place lies in the en Jacaroen shrine?” Rhane struggled up, half sitting, supporting

himself on his elbow. “Is that what you did for my father? Lies?”

Lor Jastre’s face changed. “No. What I said was true, as far as it went. He fell—”

“He was pushed.”

Lor Jastre’s lips twisted but his voice remained even. “—and his fall triggered a rock slide. I climbed down to him. It was too late. His eyes,” whispered Lor Jastre, “yellow eyes. He asked the question we all ask of death. Why. He died.”

The dry retelling of his father’s death had the effect of calming Rhane. He had seen the shrine’s recorded simulation of Lor Jastre telling the same story so many times that the words had taken on the soothing aspects of a litany.

“That, at least,” said Rhane, lying back again, “is truth.”

“I will do as much for you,” said Lor Jastre, his voice shifting with curious emotion. “Your words, your cup ... and what else? What possession do you prize?”

Light-headedness shivered through Rhane, the first effects of the medicine Shiya had given him. Strength would come, but only later. Now he was weak, a mure leaf turning in the wind.

“The leaf,” sighed Rhane.

“What?” asked Lor Jastre, leaning close to hear.

Shiya came forward soundlessly. The shape of the shazir leaf was hard against the flexible fabric of Rhane’s survival suit. She pulled out the leaf and put it on his palm. The leaf lay there like a tiny yellow pool, reflecting serenity and the endless passage of time.

The T’aeln’s narrow hand moved over Rhane’s. Lor Jastre held the leaf against the light pouring down from wiri windows.

“Shazir,” breathed Lor Jastre. “Music condensed into substance and color. Exquisite. A sane object for an en Jacaroen who is also T’aeln.” Lor Jastre looked at Rhane with an emotion akin to pride. “Very sane.”

It was the highest praise a T’aeln could give or receive. Rhane listened to it as though from an immense distance, echoing and reechoing. The warmth of the leaf returning to his palm was almost shocking against the chill of his own flesh.

“I’ll leave it with you,” said Rhane. “And my cup.” Rhane’s fingers fumbled at his belt, then closed with increasing certainty around the cup. Strength was coming back to him, a warmth like dawn. “Take them.” At Lor Jastre’s look of surprise, Rhane added, “I trust you that much, at least. Uncle.”

Lor Jastre smiled oddly. “The cup and leaf can wait,” he said, putting both in Rhane’s hand and folding Rhane’s fingers over them, “until you die.”

Rhane’s laugh was soft, genuine. “Take them now. As you said, even *the* Lor Jastre can’t go to the Fountains of Madness.”

“No.” Lor Jastre’s voice was soft, yet could be heard clearly among the muted harmonies of restive wiris. “No. I must be able to take your words to Siol, to stand in your deathplace. No less would be accepted for the last en Jacaroen.”

“What does Siolan ritual matter to a T’aeln master?” said Rhane bluntly.

“You wouldn’t understand,” said Lor Jastre, his eyes nearly opaque.

“In spite of my yellow-eyed sanity?”

“There are already two planets at risk,” said Lor Jastre softly, leaning closer to Rhane with each word. “Will you insist on making it three?”

The ramifications of Lor Jastre’s words brought rage rather than understanding to Rhane.

“I’ll die where I please—where *I* please—not where a yellow-eyed zarfsucker wants me to.”

Although Rhane did not raise his voice, wiris whistled piercingly and whirled into rainbow flight. Lor Jastre did not even spare a glance for their bright distress.

“I had hoped,” said the T’aeln, bending down even farther, voice gentle, “that you would be as much T’ael as Siol. But perhaps it is better this way. Quick. Clean.”

Lor Jastre’s hand blurred with the speed of his attack, but Shiya was faster. Her heel thudded into Lor Jastre’s shoulder, knocking him off his feet. Even as Rhane realized that Lor Jastre had meant to kill him, the moment was past.

“That’s twice you’ve caught me by surprise,” Lor Jastre said, rolling to his feet swiftly. “It won’t happen a third time.”

The T’aeln came forward, crouching slightly, long arms ready to strike, hands ready to kill. Shiya moved to meet him, displaying the same deadly grace as Lor Jastre.

Rhane pulled aside the heavy sleeping robe and crawled toward Lor Jastre. Overhead, wiris screamed continuously, shrilly. A tenor howl overrode the wiris. Kahsah. Other reskans screamed, bloodlust quivering in each note, reflecting and reinforcing Rhane’s rage.

Shayl rushed into the room, twelve moving as one beneath clouds of wiris. The shayl stood suddenly, fingers or shoulders touching. Rhane felt as though a great hand were closing around his mind, squeezing until emotions were forced back inside. Nothing but passivity was possible.

Silence came like thunder.

Rhane looked up. The ceiling of the room was alive with wiris and more wiris, a seething blanket of gold bodies. It was so quiet he could hear the tiny scraping of claws and wings as wiris jostled to make room for other wiris still pouring in through the high windows.

The lack of sound was oppressive, emotion compressed into silence, waiting to explode. Pain danced like lightning behind Rhane’s eyes, but he turned his head toward Shiya in spite of it. The tight lines of her face told him that she, too, was in the agonizing grip of silence.

Lor Jastre looked no different. He was standing very still, his eyes measuring. Ten shayl left the room, and with them most of the wiris. As Rhane watched, he realized that all the tension had oozed out of Lor Jastre. There would be no further attack. Slowly, Rhane stood up, bracing himself on widespread legs.

The two remaining shayl stepped forward, fingers linked with each other. Rhane looked at their faces, then quickly away. Their eyes recalled the shrine child, innocent and somehow frightening, unused to focusing in the present.

“I declare serat right on that man,” said Shiya in a strained voice. Her hand, pointing toward Lor Jastre, trembled as though it were supporting a great weight.

The closer of the two shayl turned and focused slowly on the present—Shiya. Rhane stared, but saw no earring glinting in the shadow of the shayl’s unbound black hair. Then he looked at the shayl’s eyes again and realized that no material sign of power was needed.

“You are ... ?” The man’s voice was dry, unused, very soft.

“Niyasa vl Shiya alat Fmolt,” said Shiya formally.

“Ahh ...” The man’s sigh was like an echo of the tension seeping out of the room. “Niyasa’s daughter, child of the alien Fmolt. Like her, you are a fire burning. Like him, you are distance and ice. Shiya. I am Gire. And this”—he gestured toward the woman beside him—“is Tyma.”

Gire sighed again and turned his face toward Rhane. The dark eyes changed indefinitely. He looked at Rhane as the shrine child had once looked at him.

“Shazir,” whispered Rhane, speaking aloud without realizing it.

Gire’s interest sharpened painfully. Rhane retreated behind his mental shields, shutting down his mind with a finality that had become reflex. The shayl seemed to sway toward Rhane. Once again Rhane was the focus of a potent mind’s searing interest. Pain came, burning, radiating through his shields, but this was no child who only needed comforting. This was Gire, mature, alien.

Desperately, Rhane evaded the heat, thinking of bottomless lakes, icy heights, cold seas, erecting imagery like walls around the searing intent of the shayl.

“Shayl,” murmured Gire. “But different.”

The heat became a soothing coolness.

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Tyma’s voice, very near to Rhane. “Alien.”

Rhane opened his eyes and saw the two shayl standing so close to him that their breath was a warmth across his cheek. Their eyes were clear, dark, full of curiosity. Human.

“You are ...?” Gire’s voice was dryly approving, encouraging.

“Rhane en Jacaroen.”

Gire’s eyes flicked toward Lor Jastre. The T’aeln made a slight gesture.

“So ... Lor Sostra’s son returns to Menx,” murmured the woman.

The man and woman looked again at Lor Jastre. “The father wasn’t T’aeln or Menx?”

“No,” said Lor Jastre, his voice tight. “He was a Concord citizen who died on Menx.”

“So.”

They looked back at Rhane, dismissing the RA Jacaroen with a single soft syllable. Anger curled out from Rhane’s control.

“I’m also the half brother of Cezine.”

“Cezine.” Gire and Tyma turned as one on Shiya. “You are *that* Shiya. Why have you come to rend our harmonies with your impossible discordant demands? Weren’t you told never to return to Shaylmir?”

“Yes.”

Though they waited, Shiya said nothing more.

“And?” prompted Gire in his dry voice.

“I owed a death debt to Rhane. His Nine Gods require that he stand where Cezine died while I give his mind Cezine’s last moments. Cezine died among the Fountains of Madness.”

“His gods?” said Tyma, glancing obliquely at Lor Jastre. “Do aliens have shazir?”

“No.” Lor Jastre’s voice was uncompromising. “Their gods are no more than elaborate lies.”

Rhane sensed that an important point had been scored in a game he did not understand, yet must win.

“I’m shayl,” said Rhane quickly. “Who is to say whether or not my gods are less than your shazir?”

“Indeed,” Gire faced Lor Jastre with a half smile on his dark, seamed face. There was a hint of challenge in the shayl’s voice. “You said the Concord knows nothing of shayl or shazir, that Concord citizens are nothing more than flatlanders expanded across the sky.”

“Rhane is half T’aeln,” muttered Lor Jastre, each word strained. “That’s why he’s shayl.”

Rhane looked between the T’aeln and the two shayl, sensing currents of longstanding discord but not certain what their source was. Nor did he know why being half T’aeln was connected to being shayl.

“So ...” The woman’s sigh was a reluctant acceptance of Lor Jastre’s point. “We’re still alone in a flatland universe, struggling with highland gods.”

“No.” Shiya faced their eyes with an unflinching strength that Rhane envied. “There are Concord shayl whose parents aren’t Menx—or T’aeln, if that matters.”

“Matters?” Lor Jastre’s laugh was chilling. “You’re such a child, Shiya. You can’t see the truth though it looms larger than the Mountains of Light. As for alien shayl”—Lor Jastre made a contemptuous gesture—“that’s just more Concord myth.”

The woman looked between Lor Jastre and Shiya. “Those alien shayl you spoke of,” she said, ignoring Lor Jastre as she focused on Shiya, “was one of their parents T’aeln?”

“I don’t know,” said Shiya, obviously surprised by the question. “Why?”

“If there are alien shayl—which I doubt—” said Lor Jastre coolly, “their genes are partly T’aeln, and thus nothing new.”

“No.” Rhane’s voice was harsh against the harmonies of the remaining wiris. “There are Carifil who are shayl and whose genes have never been within light-centuries of either T’ael or Menx.” Gire and Tyma looked mystified, said nothing. “Don’t you understand?” demanded Rhane, exasperated with Menx insularity. “T’ael, like Menx, is xenophobic. There are no more T’aeln genes scattered around the Concord than there are Menx genes.”

Neither Gire nor Tyma spoke. It was as though they had not heard.

“Don’t you know anything about T’ael?” asked Rhane.

Tyma smiled slightly. “More than you, young shayl.”

“Then you know that T’ael has what amounts to an absolute tabu against having children by aliens. Such a child is considered proof of insanity, and there is no greater T’aeln crime than insanity.”

“Nor more frequent,” muttered Gire. “But then, Menx aren’t exactly aliens, are they?”

Gire glanced obliquely at Lor Jastre, who showed an instant of fury before his self-control returned.

“You agreed that silence was necessary, Gire,” said Lor Jastre coldly. “It is the only oath a shayl makes. Or do you consider yourself wiser than your ancestors, wiser even than the first shazir?”

Gire waited a long moment before answering. “I’m only one shayl,” he sighed. “And I agreed, long

ago. But if you've lied ..."

"Nothing," Lor Jastre replied harshly, "can change the basic truth of Menx. Nothing. Not even a T'aeln master's lies. If I've lied. Think about that very carefully, Gire."

Gire turned to the woman next to him. "Tyma?" he asked softly.

Tyma hesitated, then gestured reluctant capitulation. "Lor Jastre is rude, but right. Nothing can change the reality of Menx except shazir. Yet"—she turned almost eagerly to Rhane—"are there truly alien shayl?"

"Yes." Rhane's voice was flat, certain.

Lor Jastre made a sound of disgust. "He's chizak, in spite of his yellow eyes. He believes that smoke is fire. I've never met a Concord shayl in my six maturities as a citizen."

"You've rarely left T'ael or Menx," said Rhane coolly. "And how would you know when you had met one? You aren't shayl yourself."

"By their wiris," said Gire, giving Rhane a disappointed look.

"Only Menx has wiris."

"Only Menx?" Both shayl shivered, swayed away, as though repulsed. "How do you keep yourself under control? And your shazir—do they roam free, making and unmaking each moment?"

"It's different off Menx," said Rhane quickly, realizing as he spoke that his words left too much unsaid. "Our shayl train themselves or are trained by others."

Gire and Tyma traded a look that said more clearly than words that they did not—could not—believe Rhane's words.

"Alien shayl are myths," Lor Jastre said. "Myths."

"No," said Rhane quickly. "Ask your tribes. Ask Makire!"

"Makire?" Gire said, so sharply that uneasiness ran in currents of discord through the wiris. Gire blinked and his voice became smooth again. "What does Makire have to do with this?"

Lor Jastre met Gire's black eyes and said nothing.

"When she saw Rhane," said Shiya, "Makire said, 'Another alien shayl come to die in the Jaws.'"

"Another?" asked Gire and Tyma together.

"There were at least three, perhaps more," Rhane replied quickly.

Tyma looked from Lor Jastre to Rhane and then to Shiya. The old shayl's glance swept back to Lor Jastre. "Tell me about Makire and alien shayl."

Lor Jastre almost smiled. "There aren't any alien shayl."

Tyma made a sound between a hiss and a sigh. "An ambitious Makire and a reluctant Lor Jastre. And you," she said, turning suddenly on Shiya, "what's driving you to serat?"

"Lor Jastre," said Shiya. "Lor Jastre stands between me and a death debt. And he caused a h'shazir to be murdered, with no one to catch her soul."

Gire turned on Lor Jastre with a swiftness that made wiris cry. "Did you?"

"The closer Rhane got to the Jaws of Menx, the more he learned about wiris. Like his father and half brother, he was discovering too much. If the death of a mongrel child would make him turn back, it was a small price."

"Wiris," sighed Gire.

"Yes," said Lor Jastre.

XVI

In the long silence that followed, Rhane realized that he was holding his breath. Slowly, softly, he released it, yet still no one spoke. Beggar rubbed its head along Rhane's shin in a quiet bid for affection.

Rhane plucked Beggar off his shoulder and set the wiri on his palm. Beggar's whistle was so soft that only Rhane could hear its beauty. The wiri nibbled on Rhane's thumb and looked at him out of huge violet eyes.

The room was as quiet as though no one had ever spoken, or ever would.

What connection is there between wiris and the murder of my father and half brother?

The unspoken question glanced off Beggar. The wiri's awareness was too elusive for contact unless Beggar initiated it. As though sensing Rhane's disappointment, Beggar hummed a minor-key melody.

You come and go, no more noticed than my pulse. A part of me. You sense moods ... and manipulate them. Yes. You.'

Beggar showed its delight at Rhane's undiluted attention by singing joyously, yet very softly. The wiri quivered with pleasure, when Rhane smiled.

You teach emotional control more thoroughly than any Carifil, and more quickly, continued Rhane, listing the characteristics that he considered most outstanding in wiris, trying to figure out what secret the wiris had that was worth being abandoned by the Concord in order to keep. Certainly it could not be the animals' mental abilities. Only a psi or a shayl would know that such abilities even existed; yet his father had discovered the wiris' secret, and his father was neither psi nor shayl.

What did my father discover? asked Rhane.

Beggar blinked. It whistled a pure note, but that did not answer Rhane's question. He felt Shiya's fingers lightly touch his cheek. Instantly, she knew his surface thoughts. Her own thoughts poured into him in return.

Those weren't the kinds of questions your father asked. Don't you remember? He would sit by the fire, listening to distant wiris, and it was always the same: Why this animal in this place?

Every planetary ecologist asks that question, responded Rhane with exasperation. *That's what they're taught to do.*

Your father found the answer.

And died for it.

Beggar's melancholy whistle brought back Rhane's attention to the present. He looked up suddenly, realizing that he was the focus of shayl and T'aeln interest.

"What did it tell you?" asked Lor Jastre.

"Nothing worth being murdered for."

Rhane's words were harsh against Beggar's smooth whistle. The wiri's wings flared. It keened to itself in the beginning of distress. Rhane soothed Beggar as automatically as he suppressed the expression of his emotions.

"What," said Rhane, ruffling the wiri with a teasing fingertip, "is there about wiris that is worth murdering for to keep secret?"

Silence was Rhane's only answer. The wiris on their perches were still, no rainbow flash of color to mark their life.

"Even if you tell me," said Rhane, tickling Beggar, "you won't have to murder me." He held out his bruised right hand. "Remember? I'm already dead."

Beggar sang glissandos of pleasure, testimony to the thoroughness of Rhane's self-control. Before either shayl could speak to Rhane, Lor Jastre moved forward one quick step.

"No, latzak. Not even a dead man is told that secret."

"Why?" said Rhane reasonably. "It can't do any harm"

Lor Jastre's handsome face was drawn tight. He began to speak, then made a cutting gesture and said nothing at all.

"Why?" persisted Rhane.

"Why does a dead man care?" countered Lor Jastre, his voice showing weariness for the first time. "It's an old, old secret that has nothing to do with you or Siol."

"I disagree," murmured Rhane. "That secret has cost Siol a RA Jacaroen." He blew on Beggar. The wiri's ear tassels lifted and quivered in the warm wind. "That secret will cost Siol its en Jacaroen continuity, which in turn will bring on war, chaos and ruin."

Rhane looked up suddenly, his eyes very yellow, his voice deceptively mild. In his palm Beggar sang of pleasure and soaring delights.

"The wiris' secret has everything to do with Siol," Rhane said. "Tell me."

"No."

Beggar's song faltered for an instant, then lifted to new heights. In the distance Kahsah screamed

chillingly. The two shayl looked at Rhane with the beginning of fear; he had seduced a wiri with the pleasure of his emotional radiations and at the same time his deepest mind contained a rage great enough to electrify a female reskan.

Shiya stared at Rhane, her hand outstretched but no longer touching him. Rhane turned away from Shiya and Lor Jastre. He faced the two shayl, who stood with their fingers linked.

“Does Lor Jastre speak for you?”

Gire and Tyma exchanged a look. Neither spoke.

Rhane swore softly in the language of Siol’s kings. As though his words signified pleasure rather than rage, Beggar wove melodies among Rhane’s bitter phrases. Kahsah screamed again, closer this time.

“Listen to me, you fools,” said Rhane, his voice bland. “I don’t know why Lor Jastre murdered twice to keep the wiris’ secret, but I do know that it was for his benefit, not yours.”

Rhane’s look swept over the two shayl with a contempt that he did not bother to conceal. “Don’t be bigger fools than you have to be. You must have realized by now that no master T’aeln cares about anyone except another master T’aeln. If Lor Jastre killed to keep a Menx secret, then T’ael has more to lose than Menx if the secret is revealed.”

Gire’s dry voice broke the silence at last. “Our interests in this are identical.”

“Impossible,” said Rhane flatly. “Only another T’aeln master would be allowed such an equality of interest.”

Gire and Tyma stood motionlessly, seamed faces blank, fingers tightly locked. They did not look at Rhane, Lor Jastre or each other. It was as though they were not in the room. With a sound of disgust, Rhane turned back to Shiya.

“Is my use of the Menx language so poor that they don’t understand me?”

“You speak very clearly,” said Shiya, her voice troubled, her copper eyes searching the two shayl for some clue to their withdrawal.

“Then why do they ignore me?”

Beggar whistled a high questioning note. With an effort, Rhane reassured the wiri until it hummed to itself in contentment.

“Shiya,” said Rhane, not looking up from Beggar’s huge eyes, “tell the shayl what you sensed when you touched Lor Jastre years ago, when you were h’shayl, and his latlik.”

“No.” Shiya’s voice was a whisper.

“Even for Menx?”

The question seemed to have a hundred aspects, none of them appealing to Shiya.

“Why?” whispered Shiya.

“Obviously Gire and Tyma don’t believe that T’aeln arrogance is such that no one—*no one*—but a T’aeln could be considered an equal.”

Signal keened softly from among Shiya’s braids and rubbed its golden head along Shiya’s ear. The wiri’s mournful sounds penetrated the two shayls’ barrier of indifference.

“She can’t tell us anything new about T’aeln contempt,” said Gire, his voice dry, his face compassionate as he looked from Shiya to Lor Jastre. “We’re less than latlik to the T’aeln. Animals.”

Lor Jastre’s mouth was drawn into impatient lines, as though Gire’s words meant nothing to him, or were so obvious as to not require comment. With a growing feeling of bafflement, Rhane looked from the T’aeln mentor back to the two Menx shayl.

“You know,” Rhane said, “yet you trust him with the very survival of your planet?”

Gire smiled oddly. “The survival of Menx is the survival of T’ael.”

Rhane’s harsh laugh made Beggar cry, but Rhane no longer cared for the tiny animal’s peace of mind. “T’ael will survive if Menx is abandoned by Concord. But Menx won’t.”

“Menx survived before we were discovered by the Concord,” said Tyma, “We’ll survive a lack of Concord interest as well.”

With the first stirrings of horror, Rhane suspected that the two shayl did not understand that abandonment was a death sentence. He turned on Lor Jastre with a swiftness that sent wiris into wild flight.

“Don’t they know about abandonment?” he demanded fiercely.

Lor Jastre dismissed Rhane with a flick of T’aeln fingertips. “Menx will be proscribed, not abandoned.”

Rhane stared, not able to believe what he was hearing.

“And even if it were abandoned,” Lor Jastre continued, his tone denying the possibility while in the act of stating it, “shazir would protect the highlands from scavengers.” Lor Jastre’s smile was both sad and cruel as he turned toward the shayl. “Won’t they, Gire?”

“Shazir don’t like to be disturbed,” said Gire, his voice containing a gentle rebuke, “as you’ve told the Concord many times.”

“Yes,” agreed Lor Jastre. His face changed subtly, showing a great weariness. “Yes, many times.”

Slowly, Rhane felt the enormity of the situation penetrating his disbelief. “Menx will die ... do you realize what you’re doing?” he asked, turning toward Lor Jastre. “Menx will die, but not shazir. And make no mistake: shazir are *real*. They have powers that we don’t know, that we can’t know! What will they do when their only anchor is gone?”

Lor Jastre looked at Rhane with contempt and curiosity. “So you believe in shazir and the moderating power of shayl. Yes, I can see you do. You’re the Concord’s first convert to Menx religion. Latzak, of course. Possibly even chizak.”

“I wish you were psi,” Rhane responded evenly. “Then you would know what I’m talking about.” He spoke slowly, pronouncing each word with extreme care, as though communication were merely a matter of perfectly formed sounds. “I saw flowers spring out of bare rock, then vanish. I saw a sapling no bigger than my hand grow into a towering, gnarled mure tree holding up half the galaxy. I saw each leaf become a yellow flame. Then I saw the tree vanish and a dead shrine child leap over the rocks until she became lightning and vanished like the flowers. Everything gone—flowers, tree, child, flames. Everything but a single jeweled leaf. This leaf.”

Rhane held out the yellow gem on his palm. The leaf seemed to create light, radiating more than it gathered in. Lor Jastre watched the leaf, fascinated.

“They’re marvelous craftsmen, those shazir,” murmured the T’aeln. “Pity they refuse to trade with anyone but shayl.”

“Craftsmen?” repeated Rhane in a rising voice. “Trade? Are you as stupid as you are arrogant? Shazir are precisely what, the shayl say they are!”

“Gods.” Lor Jastre’s voice was contemptuous. “Shazir are bred and whelped like any other animal. I know *that* only too well.” His mouth flattened into lines of pity and repugnance. “But I suppose a belief in gods and resurrection is inevitable for a dying latzak. Poor latzak. It’s a great shame you aren’t as T’aeln as your eyes.”

Even as Rhane opened his mouth to reply, Tyma’s voice cut across his anger.

“Save your strength for that which is possible,” said Tyma dryly. “In ninety-nine years we haven’t changed Lor Jastre’s opinion of shazir. But then, he never leaves this House when he’s in the Jaws. He sees nothing but shayl.”

“As if that matters,” said Lor Jastre, smiling thinly. “I’ve brought my special flyer to the Jaws many times and never disturbed a cloud, much less a shazir. If you want to limit yourself and your technology by a chizak religion, I won’t stop you. To expect me to join you only proves the depth of your insanity.”

“You’re insanely lucky,” said Rhane. “I wouldn’t ride a flyer out of here to save my life.”

“Spare me your fervor,” said Lor Jastre. “I don’t bring my flyer here very often.” He grimaced. “I detest coming here. It sickens me to see obscenity enshrined in Fiertten.”

“Fiertten. You admit it.”

Lor Jastre’s half smile was his only answer.

Rhane looked from the T’aeln to the two shayl, and then to Shiya. She looked as baffled as he felt.

“Does any of this make sense to you?” demanded Rhane.

Shiya’s hands moved in a negative gesture that was echoed by Signal’s flashing wings.

“Chizak is not a strong enough word to describe this,” said Shiya. “I don’t know who is lying—and I’m afraid that no one is!”

Rhane closed his eyes, feeling suddenly helpless. The medicine was restoring his strength, but he was afraid that his mind had been affected. With an effort he gathered his thoughts and faced the two shayl again.

"You don't seem suicidal," Rhane said slowly.

"We are very determined to survive," Tyma said softly.

"Good," snapped Rhane. "Then you'll accept Concord."

Slowly, sadly, Tyma's hands moved as though pushing away a heavy obstacle. It was Menx's most emphatic negative gesture.

"That's insane!" Rhane blurted, then realized that he sounded like his unwanted uncle. "Why?" he asked Tyma. "Why?"

Tyma's hands moved again, pushing away, but Gire was speaking in a dry, distant voice.

"People would come," Gire said, "no matter where we put the Access. The flatlanders want that. They want more to life than fear of shazir. I don't condemn them for that, but it can't be.

"And the Concord," Gire continued, his eyes focused on Rhane with an intensity that was uncomfortable, "the Concord, which doesn't believe now, would eventually discover, as you discovered, that shazir are as real as sunlight and thunder, as real as Shaylmir and Fiertten, as real as T'aeln contempt and blindness. Then Concord people would come to Menx no matter what we or the Concord wished. They would come to touch the gods. And the shazir would be ... disturbed."

Gire's dry voice faded into a silence broken only by the susurrations of the water tapestry.

"We didn't ask to be discovered," Tyma said, her voice unexpectedly angry, her dark glance slanted toward Lor Jastre. "We argued against it. We foresaw this."

"T'ael had no choice. As a good Concord member," said Lor Jastre sardonically, "we're required to report all discoveries of intelligent life. Unfortunately, Concord standards of intelligence are broad enough to accommodate even Menx. Insane, of course, but unavoidable," said Lor Jastre with odd emphasis.

"A Concord scoutship was only days away from discovering Menx. Remember that, Tyma, and rail against the inevitable rather than against T'ael."

Rhane knew that he was hearing echoes of an old, old argument. He sensed that it was connected somehow to Cezine's death and his father's, his own illness, the two Fierttens and whatever secret lay between the wiris' scintillant wings. But whatever connections there were eluded him, leaving only a desperate feeling of his own limitations, his own mortality.

"Why was it necessary to turn loose melting sickness on Menx?"

Gire's glance shifted from Lor Jastre to Rhane. "Ask your own Concord. The disease came from them, not us."

"Wrong," said Rhane flatly. "The disease is found only on Menx."

"It spreads from the Accesses."

"No. From the Jaws." Rhane turned swiftly on Lor Jastre. "Tell them, T'aeln. Tell them! Tell them how you gave my brother death with one hand and Shiya immunity with the other."

"You're mad," said Lor Jastre. "Melting sickness is a disease brought by contact with Concord citizens."

"You told Shiya that the disease came from the Jaws."

"Why would I lie to her?" said Lor Jastre reasonably.

"Listen to me," said Rhane, turning toward the two shayl, who were watching him with a focused intensity that was painful. "The Concord medical team that was here traced the spread of the disease to the Jaws. That's why they came over the Ghost Pass."

"Latzak," said Lor Jastre, dismissing Rhane.

"Listen," said Rhane to the shayl, "listen to me. Lor Jastre doesn't want Menx to be part of the Concord."

"We know that."

Their calm acceptance only angered Rhane. "T'ael tried to have Menx proscribed on grounds of cultural frailty. Inferiority."

"Yes."

“For whatever reason, T’ael is determined to cut off Menx from all intercourse with other races.”

“Yes,” said Tyma, “we know. We approve.”

“Did you also approve of murdering one in twelve of your people?” shot back Rhane.

Silence. Then the shayl’s attention shifted to Lor Jastre.

“Melting sickness,” continued Rhane relentlessly, “is an unnecessarily gruesome method of dying.”

“It is also,” Lor Jastre said calmly, “a certain road to Concord proscription. A less grotesque disease would be less feared.”

The two shayl seemed to shrink into themselves. Their linked hands tightened painfully. They said nothing.

“You,” said Rhane to Lor Jastre, “have just admitted that you can control melting sickness.”

“Did I?” Lor Jastre almost smiled. “I merely pointed out that even the most violent storm brings fresh water.” The T’aeln’s face hardened. “Even if your assumption were correct, if I could indeed control the disease, your own case is too advanced to benefit from my putative knowledge. That is a truth that has no double meaning and no escape.”

Kahsah’s howl coiled around the room. She was just outside the huge House, prowling invisibly, searching for Rhane. Her howl was answered by too many reskan voices to count. The harmonics were extraordinary, dangerous. Rhane had a wild desire to throw back his head and join the primal chorus.

Lor Jastre listened intently, his yellow eyes as feral as any reskan’s howl. He knew what would happen if Kahsah found him at a moment when Rhane’s control was lax.

“Because you are what you are,” said Lor Jastre as the howling died away, “I’ll give you a choice. A clean death now, with everything necessary done for Siol’s continuity; or a grotesque death, and nothing done for Siol.”

“I’ll take melting sickness over T’aeln kindness.”

Lor Jastre’s body became very still, then at last he let out his breath in a long sigh. “I must learn that water is always wet and latzaks are always insane.” He turned to Gire. “Set up the simulator equipment as I showed you.”

“I don’t think—” began Gire.

“I know,” interrupted Lor Jastre sardonically. “That’s why I’m here. The Concord will require more than a T’aeln mentor’s anguished retelling of your refusal to join Concord. Gather the House together, mumble something appropriately bizarre, and record it on the simulator. I’ll pick up the cube in two days and put it before the Concord’s Menx Council within three days.”

“The simulator’s energy might disturb—”

“Would your House rather explain to the Concord in person?” interrupted Lor Jastre coldly.

“No,” said Tyma and Gire together. “Impossible,” continued Tyma. “If we stopped deflecting, modulating, the shazir for even a moment ...” Her voice died into horrified silence.

“Yes,” said Lor Jastre, his voice brittle with contempt. “I understand that you have to watch your chizak siblings very carefully.”

The T’aeln turned to leave, but found his way blocked by Shiya.

“Serat,” she said quietly.

Lor Jastre laughed. “Do you really wish death for a lover, bri th’li?”

Shiya’s body changed subtly, becoming somehow more compact, more poised. She did not move back even when Lor Jastre came so close that his breath was an unwanted warmth across her cheek. Overhead, wiris flashed, crying in scales of distress.

“Chizak.”

Shiya spoke so softly that for a moment Lor Jastre did not realize what she had said. When he did, he smiled.

“Little Shiya,” Lor Jastre murmured, and his hands moved intimately over her flesh, “bri th’li. Will you never learn that an animal can’t insult a T’aeln master?”

Rhane made an inarticulate sound that was lost in Kahsah’s savage scream. Nahst’s scream followed, joining Kahsah’s in an eerie duet that continued until it seemed that the world was made only of savage sound. When silence came, it was almost stunning. Wiris moved in a restive mass of gold

punctuated by disturbing flashes of color.

Shiya attacked so swiftly that Rhane gasped, but Lor Jastre was not surprised. He parried her blow skillfully, although almost not quickly enough. Immediately she pivoted beyond his reach, still blocking his exit from the room.

“Serat,” said Shiya.

“Yes,” sighed Gire and Tyma together. “Serat.”

Nahst howled triumphantly, drowning out even Kahsah’s cry.

“I’m not bound by your demented rituals,” said Lor Jastre.

“Then leave,” suggested Tyma. Smiling.

The reskans howled with increased savagery.

“Those beasts would tear me to scraps.”

Gire smiled. “Yes.”

“Why,” said Lor Jastre, glancing from one shayl to the other, “do you suddenly want me dead?”

“One in twelve,” said Tyma succinctly. “Dead.”

“It was necessary.”

“Probably,” sighed Gire. “But we weren’t consulted.”

“And if I had discussed it with you?”

“We would have agreed, eventually. Better one in twelve than all.”

“Then why—?”

“Even animals like to know why they’re dying,” said Gire.

“And there is always this,” said Tyma. “What else haven’t you told your Menx pets?”

Lor Jastre’s face became expressionless.

“A great deal, I see,” murmured Gire. “If Shiya wins, we’ll find out when she catches your soul.”

“She’ll lose.”

“Then we won’t be any worse off than we were before, will we?” asked Tyma. She smiled again. “And you, Lor Jastre, will have learned that animals often have teeth.”

XVII

Rhane followed Tyma’s bent back with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. He had not seen Shiya since yesterday, when she had declared serat on Lor Jastre. Nor would the other shayl speak to Rhane on the subject of serat. He could only assume that there would be a religious trial of some sort, after which the guilty party would be excommunicated, or perhaps executed.

As Shiya was innocent, Rhane did not worry about the outcome.

Slowly, Tyma led Rhane to a room whose shape and colors were identical to the shrine room where he had found Shiya leaning over the shazir child. The memory made Rhane pause and glance around uneasily.

Green on green, the walls rose in circular ranks suggesting a multilevel maze. Where the ceiling gave way to the sky, the walls shaded into gold, echoing the countless wiris that were descending to perches that covered the highest walls like transparent quills. Not one wiri sang.

Silently, Tyma indicated a place for Rhane to sit. The chair was new, woven of deep-blue material, as out of place in the sacred room as he was. Rhane began to object, noting that there were no other chairs. Then he accepted the difference. He was weak again, weaker with every breath. When Tyma had told him that the medicine was effective only the first few times it was taken, Rhane had refused any more. He was saving the medicine for his trip to the Fountains of Madness,

“When do I present my evidence against Lor Jastre?” asked Rhane quietly, looking around for mediators or judges or whatever was the Menx equivalent.

Tyma turned away without answering. He took her arm.

“My planet’s continuity is at stake. I don’t want to lose merely because I don’t understand what the serat ritual requires of me.”

“Nothing.” Tyma looked at Rhane out of bottomless black eyes. “Nothing at all. You’re here only to

witness that Shiya did not shrink from the death debt you claimed of her.”

“I never—” began Rhane.

“The time for arguing debts is past,” said Tyma. “Now it is time for serat. Say nothing. Do nothing. Watch the repayment of your debt.”

“Only if Shiya wins,” muttered Rhane.

“Isn’t her death repayment enough, one for one? Or do you require greater vengeance?”

“Vengeance?” Rhane tried to struggle to his feet but could not; he was weaker than he had admitted, even to himself. “Shiya’s death won’t help me,” he said hoarsely, “and a dead Lor Jastre couldn’t answer your questions—or mine—or the Concord’s. Don’t yap about death to me, old woman.” He sank deeply into his chair. “Let’s get this—over with,” Rhane said, gasping. “As soon as Lor Jastre—is forced to tell the truth—tell me—is it a drug you use—to catch his soul?”

Tyma’s smile was twisted. “We use a shayl.” Her old hands trembled. She pulled off the cap covering her white braids and let them fall free. They barely brushed her shoulders. “When my braids are as long as two hands laid tip to palm, I’ll be serat again. It will be my fifth time. I hope to die before then.”

Before Rhane could ask any questions, Tyma turned and vanished into a group of shayl who had arrived so silently Rhane had not noticed.

Breathing heavily, Rhane slumped in his chair. “Sing for me, Beggar,” he sighed, reaching up to his collar to stroke the little wiri. “I need your sweet songs.”

Beggar was gone. Rhane’s fingers fumbled at his collar, then fell uselessly into his lap. He had an impulse to unsheathe his flute and shatter the stifling silence with rude screels, but had neither the breath nor the strength for anything but the anger that was consuming his mind as surely as the disease consumed his body.

With shaking hands Rhane took out one of the three tubes of medicine Shiya had given him. He pried up the stopper, slowly lifted the tube and drank. He did not have any more time to wait. He must go to the Fountains of Madness today, no matter the outcome of the serat trial.

The last drop of bittersweet liquid fell onto Rhane’s tongue. Methodically, he emptied the other two tubes, then fell back, exhausted and frightened. He had not realized he was so weak. He looked at his right hand. No bruises showed, but that was not a good sign. He had passed through the bruising stage of the disease very quickly. Too quickly.

A robed figure entered the room. In spite of the floor-length folds of purple cloth, Rhane recognized Lor Jastre. The T’aeln’s arrogant stance was unmistakable at any distance, under any circumstances. Slowly Lor Jastre turned in a full circle, his eyes searching the large room. When he saw the chair set apart from the other-shayl, he bowed sardonically.

“Once I thought that circumstance and bad luck might make you my judge,” called Lor Jastre, his deep voice carrying clearly in the silence. “I was wrong. If it is any comfort to you—and it would be to a sane man—your death and hers will ensure the continuity of a great race, and possibly a lesser one as well. If you had accepted my offer, the number would have been three. Siol.”

The distance was too great for Rhane to project his weakened voice, but Lor Jastre understood Rhane’s refusal still held.

“Latzak,” called Lor Jastre with sad affection. “Only latzak in spite of its master T’aeln eyes.”

Lor Jastre turned away and faced the twelve shayl. “Let the insanity begin. I’ve no patience for the rituals of demented animals.”

The shayl ignored Lor Jastre. From the far end of the room came the chilling sound of reskan claws scraping over a stone floor. Nahst entered, walking as though he expected to be attacked or to attack any instant. On his back rode Shiya.

Nothing that was familiar remained of Shiya. Her dull trail clothes had been replaced by a riding robe that was the precise color of Menx blood. The soft, thick cloth lapped against the floor with whispering sounds that made Nahst’s claws sound even more harsh. Her hood fell in fuchsia folds around her shoulders, but her flame-colored hair was gone. Her head was smooth as a polished stone, glistening with oil.

Nahst scented Lor Jastre. The reskan's great head swung toward the T'aeln. Nahst's scream sent waves of distress through the wiris.

"Suurrooo, Nahst," crooned Shiya. "Surrooo."

Shiya dismounted and stood opposite Lor Jastre, about three strides away. In spite of Nahst's hostility, Lor Jastre did not give ground. Neither Shiya nor Lor Jastre spoke.

Gire and Tyma stepped forward. They murmured phrases in a Menx dialect that Rhane could not understand. Shiya and Lor Jastre answered as one. Shiya swept off her robe with a single movement that sent the cloth swirling around Nahst's head. Quickly, Shiya secured the robe, blinding Nahst.

The reskan responded with a camouflage reflex so intense that even Rhane could not penetrate it. With soothing noises, an invisible Shiya led an equally invisible reskan away from the gathered shayl.

The atmosphere changed, thickening, closing in, stifling. Rhane moved his head in subconscious protest. He felt as though he were in a box with the lid coming slowly down. He struck, out with his mind, and at the same instant realized that the sense of enclosure was mental rather than physical. He had felt something similar to this before, when the shayl had burst in on him and Lor Jastre and Shiya.

Weakly, Rhane rolled his head toward the twelve shayl. They were not looking at him. Rather, their attention was focused toward the invisible Nahst. Rhane sensed deep currents of reassurance flowing and a song sung as much in silence as in sound.

Imperceptibly, Nahst condensed out of the pauses between the notes. Shiya, too, became visible. She was back at the center of the room, standing quietly, waiting. She was wholly naked, her brown skin glistening with oil, waiting. Lor Jastre removed his robe and confronted Shiya. He was as naked, oiled and silent as his Menx opponent.

The lid was descending, slowly, inevitably. Rhane felt himself being divided from his emotions in spite of his silent struggles to keep the lid from closing. He was being herded out of his accustomed mental spaces and confined to a much smaller area. He still felt emotions, but at a distance, observer in his own mind rather than participant. All urgency was gone.

(It begins.)

Rhane waited, as quiet as the words that had been spoken in his mind ... faceless wiris, colored eyes and wings, waiting. He expected the voice to sort and stack his memories like plastic cards, one stack for Lor Jastre, one against, an untidy pile of speculations in the center; then stacks from Shiya and Lor Jastre measured against each other's and his own. But nothing touched his mind again. He was boxed mentally, held by transparent walls. He could move within his confinement, but he could not escape it.

Then he saw Shiya and Lor Jastre begin to circle each other with deadly grace, each controlled movement proclaiming the true nature of a serat trial.

(no)

Rhane wanted to rage and scream against the stupidity of serat, the deadliness, wanted to hold his knife against shayl throats until the uneven contest was stopped and evidence gathered in a civilized manner ... but his emotions were like lightning on a far horizon, too distant for even the repercussions of thunder to be felt.

(stop stop stop)

Shiya's foot lashed out, only to slide harmlessly off Lor Jastre's oiled thigh as he spun away. She did not attempt to follow. The silent circling resumed, broken only by the muted pad of bare feet against the warm stone floors, the occasional shocking thud of fist or foot against flesh. Each moment brought Lor Jastre fractionally closer to Shiya, where his greater reach and strength could be used to best advantage. Only her quickness kept him away from her.

(stay away)

Lor Jastre's long arms moved slowly, as though he were capable only of strength, not speed.

(liar)

But Shiya knew that the T'aeln's speed was deceptive, as deadly as his longer reach, his stronger body. She spun away, her hand moving in a feint that forced him to give back the fractions of space he had stolen from her.

They moved continuously, their feet light against the large, dark circle of stone that was set aside for

serat. Lor Jastre's hand struck with a speed that blurred movement. Shiya pivoted away and her heel landed on his thigh with a dull smack. The T'aeln grunted, but evaded a second kick with undiminished ease. They resumed their wary circling.

Rhane saw the bruises beginning to discolor both bodies. Shiya's marks were larger, darker; she moved with a slight limp. Lor Jastre saw the hesitation and laughed softly.

"It doesn't have to be to the death, bri th'li. If you were my latlik once more—"

"You'd murder me just as you did Jul," said Shiya, "for no better reason than to make a lie look like truth."

"It almost worked," said Lor Jastre. "He almost turned back."

(watch him)

Lor Jastre struck so quickly that Rhane could not distinguish the separate moves. It seemed impossible for Shiya to evade the blows, but somehow she did. A diving roll took her past Lor Jastre, back to the center of the dark circle.

Shiya's movements were fractionally slower and her limp was more pronounced as she came to her feet. Lor Jastre lunged for her, only to find himself yanked over her shoulder and sent flying. He rolled back onto his feet before she could follow up her momentary advantage. A line of bright-maroon blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

(good)

Sweat was beginning to dilute the effectiveness of the oil. Grasping hands did not slide away so quickly, nor were kicks as easily turned aside. Both Lor Jastre and Shiya were breathing hard, giving lie to the seeming effortless of their swift moves. Shiya's breathing evened out until it was again inaudible. She wove back and forth, feinting, testing.

Lor Jastre circled slowly, his body weaving in answer to her feints. He was still breathing hard, gulping air with an avid mouth. The advantage of his greater strength was rapidly giving way to her greater endurance, just as her quickness offset his longer arms. Lor Jastre had counted on catching her before he was too tired to press the advantage of his larger body. But he was losing strength with each sawing breath. He would have to force the moment.

(keep away shiya keep)

Without warning, Lor Jastre leaped for Shiya, feet first. His long legs scissored, sweeping her feet out from under her. She tried to roll clear, but could not; she was tangled in his legs.

Lor Jastre leaped up. His heel struck her side with a force that echoed sickeningly.

(no no no)

Shiya rolled with the blow, over and over, leaving patches of blood where her skin had split across her broken ribs. Her roll was uneven, awkward, owing more to desperation than training.

Rhane felt himself tearing, but it was so far away, no pain, no urgency, nothing but a slow tearing away of hope, strand by strand dividing, dissolving, dying.

(cezine)

Lor Jastre leaped after Shiya, his body poised for the single blow that would end it all, one instant tearing the future irrevocably from the past. His foot came back, then forward as his heel flashed toward her skull.

(shiyaaa)

Rhane's attenuated mental scream fluttered like an insect caught in a sticky web.

Shiya heaved her body over once again, a last convulsive roll that deflected Lor Jastre's lethal blow. His foot came down in the center of a bright patch of her blood. With a startled cry, Lor Jastre fell to the floor, striking with enough force to drive out his breath. He lay there gasping, too dazed to get up immediately.

(shiya can you)

Shiya forced herself to her knees. Each movement was painfully slow, much slower than the blood sliding down her ribs to her thigh, covering her left leg, dripping onto stone.

The soft sound of skin against stone warned Shiya. She collapsed to the floor and rolled on her back, barely avoiding Lor Jastre's attack. She caught Lor Jastre's left foot as it whipped by the spot where her

head had been an instant before. In spite of the pain to her ribs, she twisted, heaving upward against him, trying to throw him off his feet.

Lor Jastre's back arched and his arms waved in a frantic, one-footed effort to keep upright. Shiya's leg hooked around his right ankle. She jerked the ankle toward her and at the same instant gave a hard upward shove against the foot she still held captive.

(yes)

Lor Jastre had no time to break his fall. His skull smashed against stone with a sound that was horrible, final. Shiya gave a strangled cry and took the dying T'aeln's face between her hands.

The room seemed to rush away from Rhane, withdrawing down an interminable green tunnel. Wiris clung in stifling array, silence waiting while a mind screamed in terror and confusion. Silence curled around the cry, engulfing it as surely as wiris had engulfed the malevolent manifestation of shazir that had condensed outside the City of the Gods.

Silence unfolded slowly, opening like an enormous flower. The mind was gone.

Rhane heard someone cursing and beating futile fists against flesh. He realized it was his own voice, his own fists, his own flesh. He pushed out of the chair and walked to the circle where Shiya held a dead T'aeln master between her hands.

Shiya looked up. There was no recognition in her eyes.

"Shiya."

Her head tilted back and a chilling sound came from her throat. He reached out for her. Tyma struck aside his hand.

Fool. Do you want to release his soul? Does his death mean so little to you?

Tyma's scorn forced Rhane's dazed mind into awareness. He tried to yank his wrist away, but her grasp was surprisingly strong.

I know, came Tyma's scathing thought. You don't understand. If you quiet your jiggling ignorant alien mind, I'll tell you what happened. And then you'll cry for the easy ignorance you'll never have again. Tyma's soundless laugh condensed like ice inside his mind. She caught his soul quite nicely. Very thorough for a first serat—quit jiggling and hear me! You'll learn the cost of ignorance and your own death debt.

Rhane became suddenly still, body and mind, as Tyma's words/demands/emotions sliced through his barriers of disbelief.

Do you mean, Rhane replied, that the fight between Shiya and Lor Jastre is still going on? That death only changed the arena? Is that it? Rhane's demands battered the old woman with a strength that surprised both of them.

Shiya holds Lor Jastre's mind within hers. It will live for a time, then it will leak away. Or perhaps it will be absorbed. I've experienced serat four times and I'm still not sure whether their minds vanished or became so integral to my own awareness that I can't find them anymore. Perhaps one is the same as the other

Rhane's horrified attempt at withdrawal made Tyma even more angry. Her bony fingers locked punishingly around his wrist.

You killed four minds, began Rhane.

Tyma cut agonizingly across Rhane's mind. *Would you have let the shrine child live? Let her annihilate every mind she touched? Would that have been more pleasing to your Nine ignorant Gods?*

No ... But whether that was answer or rejection, even Rhane could not decide. He made a conscious effort to throw off his own horror. *No. An en Jacaroen knows that what is necessary isn't always what is most pleasant.*

Weariness rose in Rhane like a cold tide, a fatigue that had little to do with disease. He looked at Shiya. Tyma released his wrist.

"If only I'd known," he whispered. "By the Last Word, Shiya, I swear that I wouldn't have asked this of you. Not for Cezine, not for me, not even for Siol."

Shiya's frozen, tormented face did not change.

Wiris lifted into flight, turning and soaring, rainbow fragments adrift in the wind. One wiri spiraled down from a transparent perch. Scintillant wings quivered as the wiri settled onto Tyma's shoulder. The tiny animal peered at Rhane. Its eyes were the color of flames, the color of Shiya's shorn hair.

"Shiya ..."

"She can't hear you." Tyma's voice was neutral once more, emotionless. Shayl.

"Help her," said Rhane, half demand, half plea.

A wiri whistled plaintively, hovering just in front of Rhane. Beggar. Delicately, the wiri landed on Rhane's shoulder, rubbing along his chin with tiny, happy cries.

"We can't help her," said Tyma.

The long silence was filled only by the departing whisper of wings. When Rhane spoke again, it was with the neutral voice of Shaylmir.

"Why can't you help her?"

"Serat."

"That doesn't help me—or her."

"You aren't of Menx. You don't understand." Tyma's long exhaled breath was like a sigh. "Some of the souls we catch are very strong, utterly insane. Shazir. Yet we must try to understand them. We must. Try." Her indrawn breath was slow, thin. "We must try to know shazir, the other side of ourselves, our children, our future. But too many minds catching one soul fragments it. We learn nothing but our own ability to destroy, and we already know that.

"So we go one by one. Serat."

Rhane watched Shiya's contorted face for a long time before he asked the question that was as inevitable as it was unthinkable.

"What if Shiya isn't strong enough to subdue or absorb or whatever it is she must do with Lor Jastre's mind?"

"She'll become insane."

"And then?"

Tyma's thin fingers twitched. "If she isn't dangerous to the minds of other shayl, we'll care for her."

"And if she's dangerous?"

"Serat," sighed Tyma.

"But she can't even defend herself!"

Beggar trilled and fanned its wings uneasily. Rhane soothed the wiri by dividing it from his emotions as he had been divided during the serat trial. Within a short time, Beggar was humming complacently.

"Shiya can't defend herself," Rhane said neutrally.

"Neither can a shazir baby—physically. Yet whoever catches that soul risks his own life as surely as if the opponent were a grown reskan. That's the meaning of shayl, and of serat."

The soft sound of skin against stone alerted Rhane. Shiya was standing, feet wide apart, braced against something only she could see. Sweat and oil and blood made enigmatic designs on her skin, but could not conceal the appalling marks of combat. Her right knee was grotesquely swollen, her right side distorted by crushed ribs, her left temple so bruised that it looked as though half of her face was in shadow.

Most ominous of all was the soft pulsing of blood through a deep gash at the base of her neck where Lor Jastre's hand had separated skin and sinew and bone. Blood flowed down, concealing bruises beneath a glistening patina that did not dry, blood dripping down onto the warm stone floor.

Tyma followed Rhane's glance, saw the pulsing blood become a pool increasing by drops, spreading across the stone.

Her cool fingers touched his hand. He felt compassion and regret as he heard her voice in his mind.

She won't suffer long. Even now, she feels little.

When Rhane realized what Tyma meant, he cried out in spite of his control and the muffling wiri minds still perched on gold walls.

As though drawn by the intensity of his emotion, Shiya turned toward Rhane. For an instant her eyes focused. Though she was not touching him, her ragged cry for help burned in the same deep place within

his mind that only Kahsah had touched before. He tried to answer her in the same way, but she faded, leaving only a distant tremor of urgency and need.

Very gently, Rhane removed Tyma's fingers from his hand and shooed Beggar toward a high perch. "I'm going to touch her."

Tyma moved as though to intercept him, then realized it was futile. "Too late," she said softly. "Lor Jastre's soul is tangled in hers now. You can't release it."

Rhane ignored the old woman. With hands that trembled, he touched Shiya as he would have touched burning metal, cringing in anticipation of pain.

Her skin was shockingly cool. He felt only that, nothing else, no quicksilver sense of Shiya's mind, no jagged terror, no wounded mind locked in annihilating battle. Nothing.

Rhane probed lightly, then more deeply, increasing his force by increments until he touched the edge of her awareness—and the world fell in on him. His mind fled in pure survival reflex. He swayed, sweating and shaking and fighting for air, while wiris gyrated around him in glittering discord. Grimly, Rhane gathered his mind for another attempt. Again he probed, again wiris echoed his hoarse scream. And yet again.

He could not help her. The shayl could not or would not. Only the Carifil had the skill. If he could reach them.

"Let her go," said Tyma. "If there is peace in death, let her find it."

XVIII

Rhane brushed past the old woman to a low wall where Nahst waited, his head low, blinded by swaths of blood-colored cloth. With impatient fingers, Rhane yanked off the muffling robe.

Guard us.

Nahst crossed the room in two long leaps. He put his body between Shiya and the remaining shayl, watching them with predatory intentness.

Methodically, Rhane used his trail knife to rip long strips off the bottom of the riding robe. He walked back to Shiya, trailing streamers of fuchsia cloth. As he worked to bandage her injuries, he kept a wary eye on the shayl. In spite of the strength the medicine was restoring to him with each moment, he knew he could not overcome one shayl, much less twelve.

The shayl made neither mental nor physical attempts to interfere with Rhane. They spoke softly among themselves, their words punctuated by uncertain bursts of wiri song. Rhane understood enough of their words to realize that the shayl considered him insane, but probably harmless. Probably.

From a tube in his survival belt, Rhane squeezed out a small amount of paste. The substance warmed into transparency in his palm. He pressed his hand against the gash that still bled rhythmically on Shiya's neck, immune to the pressure he had applied.

Rhane counted the slow breaths before he lifted his hand. The bleeding had stopped. Carefully, he bound Shiya's ribs in the cloth he had torn from her riding robe. As he worked, he was grateful that she seemed to be beyond the reach of physical pain.

Nahst snarled a warning. Rhane looked up and saw Gire approaching with small steps.

"Is this an alien shayl ritual?" asked Gire's dry voice.

Rhane secured the last strip of binding before he answered. "Yes," he said, lying in a calm voice. "Corpses with open wounds offend each of my Nine Gods."

Beneath Rhane's words his mind called steadily, urgently, summoning Kahsah. There was no answering cry, no sense of her savage presence. Too many wiris.

Nahst snarled again.

"Suurrooo," murmured Rhane, imitating Shiya's reassuring tones.

He touched Nahst absently, his mind still summoning Kahsah. The moment his fingertips met reskan flesh, Nahst's howl pealed through the room, summoning Kahsah in a way that even wiris could not interdict.

Kahsah answered with a voice that made the shayl mutter uneasily. They linked hands in soundless

concourse. Rhane watched and knew that they believed him dangerously insane. They would not let him live to touch a female reskan, dragging her into his insanity, her mind acting as a catalyst to drive mad every male reskan within range.

Wiris poured into the room, summoned by shayl. The atmosphere seemed to thicken, muffling sound and emotion.

Kahsah's howl stalked the silence. "No," said Rhane, trying to fight the silence he sensed condensing around his mind, squeezing. "I'm not a threat to you!"

"You ride a female reskan," said Gire. "You're insane."

"But I'm not insane," Rhane said, his voice reasonable in spite of the fear tearing at his throat.

"Your wiri has left you."

Rhane's hand flew to his right shoulder. He remembered that he had shoed Beggar off before touching Shiya.

"Beggar," he called, holding out his hand. He bent his mind away from Kahsah's savage call. *Beggar!*

No wiri broke from the wheeling ranks overhead. The shayl seemed to sigh. They closed in by fractions, bound by a ritual he did not fully comprehend. Their minds were united, stifling, strangling. Silence was folding around him.

Rhane yanked out his flute, tearing the top of the sheath. His teeth clicked against metal. The sounds that came out of the flute were more squawks than song. He gathered his control and his breath and tried once more.

Sounds as pure as hope lifted toward the wiris. The notes blended into a melody that rippled sinuously, turning and twisting, seeking a single violet-eyed wiri among the mass of tiny bodies.

Beggar darted down, fascinated as always by the flute's alien beauty.

Compelled by the song, wiri after wiri swooped down to Rhane's burnished silver flute until he was wrapped in a seething robe of wiris. Although all came close to him, only one dared to perch on his shoulder and stroke his neck with the boldness of familiarity.

Rhane let the last pure note dissipate among the sibilant wings. The wiris hovered, staring at the silent flute, pleading with eyes that were every color man had ever seen, urging him to play again. When Rhane slipped the flute back into its sheath, the wiris flew up, whistling mournfully among themselves.

A tiny golden head rubbed along Rhane's chin. Beggar peered at him out of enormous violet eyes. The wiri's mouth curved around a whistle of delighted greeting.

"My wiri," commented Rhane, stroking Beggar with a fingertip, "is quite satisfied with my sanity."

The shayl watched Beggar nibble on Rhane while its golden fur quivered with pleasure in the warm breeze of Rhane's breath.

Kahsah called searchingly. She had found Nahst's scent trail and was following it through the baffling green mazes that surrounded the center of the House. Soon she would be within the green curves of the serat room.

The shayl looked again at Beggar; the wiri was trilling love songs to an alien shayl. There was a soundless discussion among the shayl.

"Sane," murmured Tyma, summing up.

"For now," added Gire. "But—"

Whatever objections Gire had were lost in the sounds of reskan claws rasping on stone. Kahsah crossed the room invisibly and crouched beside Rhane almost before he realized her presence. Without a wasted motion, Rhane lifted Shiya onto the reskan and mounted behind her.

"Where are you going?" asked Tyma.

"Where we were always going. The Fountains of Madness."

"Wiris don't sing there," said Gire.

"I know."

"What else do you know about that place?" asked Gire.

Rhane did not answer. Gire leaned forward, touching Rhane. For an instant Rhane shared Gire's memories of people who had gone to the Fountains as adults and returned as children, people who had

returned after an absence of a hundred years, people who had returned utterly mad, babbling of khi and eternity; but most people had never returned at all. Then, like an echo of laughter, came a memory of a child who had come back with luck running out of both hands. The child, of course, was mad.

Gire stepped back, ending the communication. Rhane wanted to dismiss Gire's thoughts as no more than pious myths and blatant lies fabricated to protect the sacred Fountains. Yet he could not help wondering how much was true, and hoping that none of it was.

"Luck running out of both hands ..." repeated Rhane.

"If Gire promised you that," said Tyma, "he lied."

"He promised me nothing except the mind of a shazir."

"And still you go?" asked Tyma, a faint flush of curiosity giving color to her normally flat voice.

"Old woman, what other choice do we have?"

"Die here, now, with certainty. Who knows what the Fountains will give you? Who knows the mind of shazir?"

Rhane hesitated, then tightened his hold around Shiya's unresponsive body. "Whatever the Fountains offer," he said slowly, "can it be worse than the melting sickness that will overtake me and the agony that has caught Shiya?"

"I don't know if it can be worse," sighed Tyma. "No one knows the mind of shazir."

Kahsah turned away, walking with the strides of an aroused predator. Nahst followed, his head close to Shiya's leg, touching her from time to time, trying to reassure her or himself or both. As Kahsah flowed beneath the jade arch dividing the serat room from the maze, Tyma's voice came to Rhane for the last time.

"Dream only your own dreams."

Rhane wondered if that was possible in the Jaws of Menx. Without looking back, he raised his arm in a RA Jacaroen's gesture of farewell. Kahsah walked smoothly into the maze's green shadows. She turned and twisted through passageways without hesitation, following a track only she could discern.

Outside, the sun was bright, hard, painful after the diffused light of the House. Rhane winced and shaded his eyes. Then he looked up to measure the passage of time by the sun's arc. As he did, he saw that the storm season had finally begun. A line of clouds was condensing across the sky, dividing autumn from winter.

Huge, purple, boiling around inner forces too powerful to contain, massed clouds danced on the back of a sea wind that had risen too high to contain its heat and moisture. Lightning leaped repeatedly in brilliant attempts to balance invisible equations. Thunder rumbled, too distant to be more than a prophetic murmur of discontent. Soon the storm would expand to fill the sky and its violent truths would be shouted in peal after peal of thunder.

Rhane glanced away from the half-shadowed, too-brilliant sky. Beneath a seething canopy of clouds, he rode Kahsah along the street that led out of Shaylmir to the Fountains of Madness. The reskan's claws clicked harmlessly off high-gloss tiles whose million faces were unmarked by the minor passages of men and seasons.

When there was a crossroad, Kahsah chose the steeper, narrower way each time, until they were zigzagging up the face of the cliff where Shaylmir clung. Above rose a truncated cone, remnant of a volcano that had once towered above the highlands and now was little more than a memory.

At the base of the ruined mountain a long rift opened. Once it had been incandescent, forming and reforming with every sulphurous breath of the volcano. Now the rift was a narrow valley warmed by the scalding outpourings of the Fountains of Madness. The Fountains were hot, brilliant, impervious to the seasons, welling up endlessly from a wound in the planet's crust that had never healed.

Kahsah's long neck lifted as lightning sizzled across the ragged mountaintop. At first Rhane thought it was the white flare of light that had attracted the reskan's attention, then he saw that her nostrils were fully extended. She drank the sudden cold wind sweeping down from the broken mountain.

The world tilted minutely, then straightened. Rhane sensed he was invisible once more, caught in reskan reflex.

What is it? asked Rhane, not expecting an answer but unable to stifle the question.

The smell of khi curled out from the wind, enveloping him in the scent of shazir.

The wind gusted, bringing with it an expanding perfume and countless wiris. Their wings glittered as brilliantly as their song, surrounding shazir. Silence unfolded within the heart of their music. The wind gusted again, sweeping away scent and song, sweeping away everything except the silence that was always present, touching everything, always ... waiting.

Kahsah held to her camouflage reflex. The higher she climbed, the more tightly she drew her invisibility around herself and her riders. That was Rhane's only assurance that he was on the correct trail, climbing up step by step toward the ruined base of a volcano whose diminished heart had been tapped to power the simple engines of the City of the Gods.

If the heart of the volcano was deeply submerged, its soul was clear for the brave to see. The scalding Fountains of Madness leaped and twisted in time to rhythms unmeasured by man. Usually the hot breath of the Fountains was taken away by the wind, leaving water drops to burn naked in the sun, a billion prisms dividing light into pure colors.

The Fountains of Madness had never been counted, never individually named. They simply existed, unknown. Above them the ruined mountain slept. Below them Shaylmir lived, clinging to cliffs like a flight of wiris.

Rhane steadied Shiya in front of him as he had once steadied the shrine child. He spared few glances for the trail ahead, leaving it to Kahsah's superior judgment. The city seemed to slide back as Kahsah loped toward the valley of the Fountains. Rhane had not seen anyone for the last two levels. It was as though he were alone on Menx but for Shiya and the reskans and lightning probing purple clouds.

Ahead, the figures of two people materialized out of the shadows cast by the seething sky. Kahsah threw up her head and howled a challenge, but neither person noticed. The reskan moved closer to the travelers. Their clothes were lowland, and had once been costly. Now they were merely rags covered by filthy journey capes.

As Kahsah closed in, Rhane stared intently, trying to see the people in the pre-storm gloaming. Like their clothes, their faces had once been beautiful. Now they were seamed, worn, distorted. The taller figure cradled something shapeless in his arms.

Rhane looked away from the man, not wanting to see any more.

In spite of Kahsah's and Nahst's clicking claws and audible breaths, the people did not look up when the reskans invisibly passed. Both people kept shuffling forward, head down, obsessed with whatever drove them to the base of a forbidden mountain where they would confront their greatest hopes, their worst fears, would face themselves in the billion prismatic drops of the Fountains of Madness.

The wind flexed, scattering grit from the road. Shaylmir was behind now, no more than a memory, one among many memories fading before the reality unfolding beneath Kahsah's driving feet. Lightning arced overhead, shattering the mid-morning gloom.

Rhane glanced over his shoulder. The two people had vanished. Shaylmir was a hand-sized rainbow, insignificant beneath a dark-purple expanse of clouds. Wearily, Rhane realized that he would not reach the Fountains before the storm reached him.

The wind gusted again, bringing with it cold knives of sleet. Rhane wrapped the riding robe more closely about Shiya, knowing it was not enough to turn aside the storm's icy attack. Lightning hissed in nets of brilliant white. Rhane closed the seals of his suit and prayed the storm would be as brief as it was violent.

Kahsah's pace increased in spite of the steepness of the trail. Soon the reskan was running with long, even strides. Nahst ran just behind her, a mercury shadow with eyes darker than the storm.

Ice fell, white and silver, numbing where it did not draw blood. The trail vanished, but Kahsah's pace increased. Rhane held Shiya with one hand and the riding harness with the other. He crept down into Kahsah's mind, deeper with each stride, until he was a reskan running over ice, surefooted and savage, enduring.

Wind shrieked, clawing a hole in the clouds. Sun came down like a continuous fall of lightning. Rhane rubbed his head against Shiya's riding cape, scraping off ice. He saw that her hood was crusted with ice,

as was her skin where the hood had opened beneath the hard fingers of sleet. She shivered continually, yet seemed unaware of it. Her eyes were half open, wholly vacant.

Rhane shuddered and fought against his impulse to force Shiya into awareness. He knew he could not help her mind. All he could do was keep her body alive until the Carifil could help her.

With a sharp jerk, Rhane threw back his head, letting icy air chill his face. Beneath him, Kahsah ran swiftly, devouring the trail. Her breath came out in great white gusts that were ripped away by the wind. Rhane held on with a determination that matched the reskan's endurance.

Gradually, the terrain changed, becoming more level. Up ahead, amid gleaming swaths of hail, Rhane saw the stand of golden mure where the guardians waited. The trees grew out of the narrow mouth of the valley where the Fountains gushed.

Rhane squinted against the hard glitter of ice and light-shot shadow, trying to see buildings or gates or reskans, anything that would tell him the number and placement of the guards. He assumed that the shayl would let him pass; but Menx had also taught him the worthlessness of most assumptions.

No matter how Rhane stared, he saw nothing but the mure trees, leaves polished gold and branches glittering where hailstones fractured sunlight into tiny rainbows. The distant trees were oddly disquieting. In spite of their beauty, there was something wrong about them, as though reality had been tilted subtly and all certainties were draining down toward oblivion in the dark ocean of time.

Rhane looked away from the trees and the valley mouth they protected. Slowly, a reluctance to go on rooted in him, a sliver of doubt that grew and thickened, stifling his mind.

(Back. Go back. Go.)

Like a metronome, repeating. Pushing him, slowing Kahsah. Then Rhane realized that the guardians of the Fountains were not men.

(Go. Back. Go. Back.)

Rhane pushed in return, whittling away at doubt, attacking each stifling layer of hesitation, pouring his own will into a different command beating savagely in Kahsah's mind.

Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.

The reskan's stride steadied, then lengthened until she was running with her belly skimming the ground, her black lips open to the ice-tipped wind.

Rhane heard a song of haunting sadness, passionate regret. He felt again the grief he had known when he was told his father and Cezine were dead on a distant planet while Fiertten turned beneath his heedless feet. Grief consumed him, eating away at the foundations of his will. Kahsah's stride faltered.

The unevenness of Kahsah's stride jolted Rhane out of grief. Beggar was perched on his shoulder, singing sadness into his very soul. Deliberately, Rhane shouted, drowning out the keening wiri song. When the song hesitated, he snatched the wiri off his shoulder and stared into Beggar's clear violet eyes.

"I'm going on, Beggar. With or without you."

The wiri opened its mouth. Tragedy poured out in a rush of agonized song.

"Stop it!" cried Rhane, feeling his will crumbling again. He could not hurt the fragile wiri. He must—

(Go. Back. Go. Back.)

Caught between irreconcilable needs, Rhane felt his mind being compressed, stifled, silence curling around him and squeezing. With utter clarity, Rhane knew that if the silence folded around him, squeezing down, when it unfolded again there would be nothing left, nothing.

Rhane's scream was echoed by Beggar's piercing cry of distress. The wiri flew off Rhane's hand, not able to endure the man's despair.

Mure trees exploded into countless wiris, more wiris than Rhane could believe, much less comprehend. It was as though he were back in the Ghost Pass watching a mure tree burst into fire, but this time each leaf was a living wiri rather than a licking flame.

Wiris whirled in a massive formation, a keening gold wind whipping around him, surrounding him. A wiri darted down, skimmed across Shiya's shoulder, then flew up again with a desolate cry.

"Signal," murmured Rhane, realizing that he had not seen Shiya's wiri since the House of Unfolding Silence. "Signal! Come back! Help her!"

A tendril of the golden wind curled down. Signal circled once, then vanished in an explosion of

rainbow wings. Rhane called again, futilely. A wiri could not endure the touch of insanity, and Shiya was undoubtedly insane.

Kahsah swept beneath the leafless black trees. Rhane saw sun pouring through the barren branches overhead, branches that were black crystal, translucent, perfectly formed, nearly alive. Shazir. Like the wiris.

The immense cloud of wiris moaned in desolate harmony, calling to him, wiris like yellow fire burning against the sky, soaring and turning on a wind felt only by shazir, calling warnings and regrets in chords that made Rhane's soul shiver. The massed wiris turned as one, climbing up, molten in the sun. They vanished.

The pressure to go back was gone, like the wiris, gone as though it had never existed. Signal gone. Beggar gone, Black branches barren overhead. Empty sky. Silence.

Time and the earth seemed to fall away on either side of Kahsah's rushing feet. The stand of mure trees was behind, fading, one more memory of a past he could not change. Rhane wanted to look back, to watch the countless wiris condense out of sunlight and shazir until the black branches again hummed with life. He wanted to look back, but he did not, afraid to give the sweet-voiced guardians a last chance to bend his soul, afraid to hear again Beggar's lonely cry, Signal's desolation, echoes of the past, and the future coming toward him with every reskan bound.

Rhane held more tightly to Shiya, wondering if she knew her wiri was gone and at the same time knowing that it did not matter, nothing mattered but the Fountains of Madness and the fatigue rising in him again, a cold tide turning, sickness returning to claim him.

Kahsah was spent, her breath boiling whitely, her stride uneven.

Stop, Kahsah. The wiris are gone. I can contact the Carifil now.

The reskan raced on, ignoring Rhane's command.

Enough. One place is the same as another, now.

Rhane distinctly sensed disagreement. Kahsah lengthened her stride with a determination Rhane could not affect. He gathered Shiya against him. She was no longer shivering. Ice glazed her cheeks and fingers, and made white streaks in the fuchsia folds of her robe. Like the shrine child, Shiya rode without thought, a body barely animated by a mind whose awareness was focused elsewhere.

Silver plumes of steam twisted into the sky from fissures hidden in the shattered black rock. The wind gusted, tearing away the plumes. Rhane felt the cooling breath of the steam vents blown over him by the wind. He expected to be assaulted by a vile smell, but none came, only the mixed odors of heat and rock, a vaguely metallic flavor.

Ice coated the edges of the vents and glittered in hoarfrost deposits where steam had cooled and frozen into delicate geometric gardens. The rocky trail wound among vents and gently steaming pools whose ice borders looked like narrow crystal necklaces. Some of the pools were shallow, the cool residue of steam and cracks where water trickled out. Other pools were hot, deep, twisting down and down to the hidden places where rock flowed like thick water.

The land seemed to sigh and moan softly to itself. Rhane knew it was only air moving through concealed vents, flowing in response to minute changes in the underlying magma. He knew, yet he could not suppress a shudder of primitive fear. It was as though the land were alive, breathing beneath his feet, waiting.

Kahsah turned and scrambled up a huge fall of rock that bisected the trail. The sound of water came to Rhane above Kahsah's labored breathing. Ahead, the narrow valley was filled with fountains, a forest of water columns swaying, crowned with diamond spray, silver streamers of heat rippling in the wind. Morning could be heard but the sound of water falling.

Rhane's eyes searched the narrow valley for any sign of movement. Like a blind man at a light concert, he sensed the presence of something beyond his ability to grasp. He saw no one, yet was certain someone waited nearby. Someone from his past.

Then Rhane saw in the distance a group of five fountains and knew why he had a feeling of familiarity. He had seen those fountains before, in Shiya's mind, the scalding end to her hope of shazir intervention. Cezine had died among those fountains. He was suspended in every drop of water, drifting in every

breath of wind ... Cezine.

In those five fountains was the past Rhane could not change and the future he did not want to face.

Kahsah stumbled forward, carrying Rhane closer to the fountains whose size and shape varied with each moment, each fluid pulse. The trail was difficult, strewn with rocks of every size, rocks the shape of men, of children, faces lifted in wonder and fear, stone eyes forever open to the dazzling transformations of the Fountains of Madness.

The resemblance of rock to man was not random. Each rock had been shaped into discomfiting likenesses of people sitting, standing, crawling, fallen, people driven by desperation or insanity to worship at the uncertain altar of shazir.

Rhane was among them, one of them.

XIX

A few of the statues were dressed in lowland styles long out of fashion. Most were dressed as shayl, faces hidden in the stone folds of hooded riding robes. Some statues were bent, old, others were of young men and women, and still others were ageless, suspended by the timeless skill which had captured humanity in stone.

The statues came in as many sizes as people have hopes. No matter where Rhane looked, every rock had a face that was revealed and concealed in the same moment, watching him when he was not watching them. Even stones that had been eroded into shapelessness had a haunting claim to humanity, an attenuated echo of awareness.

Alive.

The stories Rhane had scorned as pious nonsense seemed to whisper to him from every rock, every fountain, Shiya's voice telling him ...

"When my father left, my mother became h'shazir. Before the change was complete, she went to the Fountains of Madness, as all h'shazir must. She didn't come back. Now her wiri waits as wiris have always waited for their vanished shayl, waiting in the sacred mure outside the Fountains."

"... shrine child's wiri is waiting for her, if not here, then there, in the valley of the Fountains. The wiri can't bear the child's insanity—If she dies or becomes shazir, her wiri will go to the sacred trees and live forever—Wiris never die, only shayl do."

"... flatland pilgrims worship shazir, go to the Fountains to plead or command or flatter that which they can't comprehend. Most never attract a shazir's attention. Those who do never come back. Frozen in some shazir's mind, they stand along the trail to the Fountains."

"One day the shazir will forget or grow bored or ... something changes. Then the flatlanders held by that shazir will crumble or run free, be children again or dust or nothing at all, not even a memory. Who can say what happens? Who can know the mind of a shazir?"

Kahsah crouched among the five fountains where water pulsed and danced in intricate rhythms. To her left was the statue of a boy. The boy's hair was yellow, his skin brown, his gray eyes too old for Rhane to bear. He wanted to touch the drawn face, but he was afraid.

He was afraid his fingers would touch more than stone and he would finally go mad.

Shiya's head turned by degrees, as though the boy called to her. Slowly her eyes focused on the statue. Rhane sensed a letting go, a deep sigh that could have been Cezine's name.

"They heard me ... after all," she whispered.

"What are you saying?" demanded Rhane, horror growing in him. "That isn't Cezine. You burned his body and threw his ashes in the wind. I saw it in your mind!"

Shiya sagged in Rhane's arms, entirely supported by him.

"Shiya!" shouted Rhane. "Is that Cezine? Answer me!"

She slipped from his arms like water flowing down.

SHIYA!

Her weight pulled him off Kahsah. He twisted as he fell, trying to avoid landing on Shiya. His

sheathed flute rang musically against the statue, but Rhane did not hear. He crouched over Shiya, trying to shake her into consciousness. He might as well have shaken the statue.

Very gently, Rhane let go of Shiya and stood up. His hands and her robe were sticky with congealing blood, her blood. The gash on her neck had opened again sometime during the ride from Shaylmir. She was beyond the simple remedies stored in his trail belt.

Rhane opened his survival suit, yanked out the psitran and prodded it into shape with a patience that was no deeper than his fingertips.

“Don’t worry, Shiya,” Rhane said in a strained voice as he worked over the psitran. “I’ll get through to the Carifil and they’ll send a shuttle for you and if the shazir don’t like it they can suck zarfs.”

Rhane jerked the psitran into place with hands that felt as if they were made of water rather than bone and flesh. He sent out the coded query/demand to Meriel. There was no answer, not even a distant shiver of awareness. He tried again, hurling the signal outward with all the strength and skill at his command. No response. Nothing. It was as though he were in a soundproofed cave, shouting to deaf people on the other side of the world.

Rhane yanked off the psitran and examined it. The shape was inevitable, correct. The supple wire-crystal structure was intact. There was no reason it should not work. He replaced the psitran and called out again and yet again, silent mental cries that bounced back on him, shattered echoes whose every fragment cut deeply into his mind.

Desperately, Rhane examined the psitran again, trying to ignore the burning pain that threatened to incapacitate his mind.

“The shape is right,” he muttered. “I’m strong enough. The wiris are gone. What’s wrong?”

Rhane’s words seemed to echo around him as his voice died into silence. A horrible certainty grew in him. He had badly misunderstood the wiris’ absence. There were no wiris because no wiris were needed. The Fountains of Madness were a trap—or a haven—for shazir, and the gate was guarded by wiris, more wiris than he could count in a lifetime.

“Enough wiris to modulate shazir ...” whispered Rhane, remembering fragments of shayl conversation, explanations he had dismissed because he did not understand. “Shiya schemed and fought and suffered to bring me to the one place on Menx where I absolutely can’t contact the Carifil. It was all for nothing ... nothing at all.”

Rhane’s laughter was soft at first, then it rose with a wildness that fed upon itself, expanding. He knew he should not laugh, but he could not stop.

“Did you hear me, Shiya? For nothing!” He gasped with laughter and nudged her with the toe of his boot. “Lor Jastre. Can you hear me? You won. You. Won. Menx lost. Siol lost.

T’ael—what did T’ael gain? Was the secret worth it? Was it worth two planets?”

There was no answer.

Rhane turned away so suddenly that he lost his balance. He caught himself on the statue, and found himself staring into gray eyes he had never hoped to see again. Cezine.

“Was it worth it?” Rhane asked the statue, his voice reasonable, his eyes wild. “Surely your shazir knows? Tell me.”

There was no response, no flicker of awareness beneath Rhane’s hands. He lunged against the statue, trying to break it, beating on it with his fists, kicking it.

“Tell me!”

The statue remained upright, rooted in certainties Rhane could not topple. At last, exhausted, Rhane turned away from the statue. He saw nothing but rock and fountains and Shiya. Only the fountains moved, only they seemed alive. He was alone.

“Kahsah? Where—”

His frantic glance saw only more rocks, statues dark against the dancing fountains.

Kahsah!

No tenor howl answered his call. The reskans were gone with no more than a distant rattle of loose rock to mark their passage. Wildly, Rhane started after them. He had taken only one step when his foot turned underneath him. He fell backward, into the statue. His flute banged insistently on stone.

With an inarticulate sound, Rhane yanked the flute out of its sheath. He drew back his arm to fling the silver tube into the scalding pool at the base of the five fountains. At the last moment he hesitated. His arm dropped. He looked at the flute, turning the cold metal over and over in his hands, staring at his own distorted image sliding endlessly down polished silver curves.

“Can you tell me anything I don’t already know?” he asked.

With the uncertain motions of an old man, Rhane sank down, propping himself against the indifferent statue. He looked once at Shiya, then quickly away. He did not need to be reminded of the extent of his failure, the cost that others would pay long after his own pain was ended, his dying moments and words witnessed only by the wind.

Siol’s last chance for continuity gone.

Rhane lifted the flute to his lips and blew a single clear note. He paused, half expecting to hear Beggar or Kahsah echo him. There was nothing. Beggar was waiting in the mure trees with countless other wiris, waiting as they all waited for their shayl to return. And Kahsah ... Kahsah had brought him to the place that she saw embedded in Shiya’s memory and in his own mind. The reskans had fled while he raged over a stone image from his past.

Rhane’s fingers moved over the flute, transforming thoughts into music that wove among the sounds of wind and fountains.

Siol lost. Reskans gone. Shiya ... lying very still, her burning hair gone, never to curl like flames around his hands, warming him. He had left her asleep eight years ago, the taste of her still sweet in his mouth, her wild khi perfume still clinging to his body. He had gone to the place where Cezine slept just beyond the fire; but Cezine had been awake, his gray eyes opaque. A stranger’s eyes. No words had been spoken, for there were no words possible.

The flute cried softly of betrayal and regret, guilt deepening with every beat of silence.

That was the moment Rhane had decided to accept Lor Sostra’s invitation to see the most perfect civilization in the Concord. He had gathered his belongings quickly, walking softly around the fire, watched by a stranger’s gray eyes. His flute was last to be packed, a slim weight that was as much a part of him as his hands. Cezine had always wanted the flute, too young to realize that it was the man, not the instrument, which created music.

He walked around the fire one last time, the flute gleaming in his hands. He bent over his unsleeping brother. Cezine’s gray eyes were open, staring through Rhane. He placed the flute across his brother’s slight body and left for Fiertten without a word spoken.

Cezine died.

Rhane lived.

The flute sang of emptiness that time had never filled, the lingering taste of khi and passion, Cezine’s willful refusal to accept what could not be changed ... Shiya had chosen Rhane.

The smell of khi pervaded everything, a dense sensual presence. Radiant, blue-black, trembling with possibilities, flower after flower bloomed, pouring out of the silver flute and sliding over Rhane like warm mouths.

A part of Rhane’s mind shivered away, crying voicelessly of danger and shazir, but he did not put down the flute. He was in the grip of song, held by something he could not comprehend: the music had taken memory and turned it, offering him a new view of the past.

Shiya had chosen him. He had not seduced her away from his younger brother. Cezine had been balanced on the brink of sexuality, a boy yet, too young to satisfy either Shiya or himself, too old not to want her. But Menx years were not Siol years; Shiya was a woman and she had chosen a man.

Where was the guilt in that? Where was the gray glance that had haunted him for eight years, telling him that Cezine had died alone, wounded by his older brother? Would Cezine have lived any longer or died any less alone if it had been his hands tangled in Shiya’s hair that night?

A clear, high note soared up, answering Rhane with many echoes. His vision shattered into many images, each one a separate possibility rooted in the past and flowering in a present that had never been. He saw his last night on Menx eight years ago repeated from every angle, every possibility; what would have been if Cezine had truly slept or if Shiya had not wanted Rhane or if he had refused her or if Cezine

had understood or if, or if, or if, if—

And endless stream of possibilities bloomed, scented with khi and shazir.

But in each possibility Cezine died. In only one possibility Rhane lived. Did he really want to change his present life for one of those other deaths?

Rhane's music quivered with fear and regret and a fierce desire for life.

The multiple possibilities vanished, leaving only the tantalizing scent of khi. Part of Rhane wept, knowing that Cezine was dead, but it was sadness crying rather than guilt. He was free. And so was Cezine, no longer frozen in the prison of his older brother's mind, his boyish being no longer chained to another's unchanging guilt.

The song lifted in a sweet progression of notes that seemed to have no limit, soaring impossibly on the wings of shazir.

Khi curled around Rhane, tickling his senses, reminding him of Shiya then and Shiya now. Regret was a melancholy fall of music twisting down, down, so far down that it ached in his throat.

He had left her asleep, not a word to soften his abrupt leaving. As though her gift of self had brought only indifference or disgust. He had been angry with her because he had been too guilty to be angry with Cezine.

Shiya had known that. Somehow she had known, the first bud of her shayl swelling even as his desire had swelled. Before, he had touched her as he had Cezine, with a brother's gentle roughness. Neither Rhane nor Shiya had known of their mutual state of h'shayl. They had not known that when they were in shayl the most casual touch penetrated all facades. He might as well have shouted his sudden desire for her—and she might as well have shouted her consuming response.

He had not known about shayl, then; she had not known her own changing awareness. Two h'shayl, innocent as the wind; and as irresponsible.

The flute keened, apologizing to the woman-child who had tried to win Rhane's forgiveness by saving his brother. Cezine, his gray eyes hurt, forgiving, worshiping. In a moment of shayl she had touched Cezine and had known his terrible, innocent demands of her: she was his god.

She gave him what she could, but it was not enough. It was not life.

Cezine's death was not her fault, but she would die because of it, alone as he had been alone, loving someone who could not love in the same way. Did it have to be that way? Was that the only possible reality?

Rhane swayed toward Shiya, music and mind reaching, melody and thoughts merging, reality turning while khi bloomed in a soundless explosion. Vertigo and the sound of Shiya screaming, Lor Jastre's yellow eyes opening, his thoughts condensing as cold as his contempt.

Latzak.

Shazir. Shiya's thought was a shiver of hope, a flash of fear. *Shazir.*

Two words for insanity. Two points of view. Two realities. But shazir subsumed all definitions, all categories, all realities.

Shazir, repeated Rhane.

Lor Jastre's laughter made Rhane's music twist uncomfortably, knotting his fingers until song became dissonance.

Do you know who your sacred shazir really are? asked Lor Jastre, each word a knife turning, slicing.

Rhane's mind became totally still, poised on the point of revelation.

Shazir are mizak, surzak, latzak, chizak—

Rhane sighed a flat note that cut across Lor Jastre's harsh melody. *T'aeln names. T'aeln insults. No revelation. Nothing.*

Not names, countered Lor Jastre. *Reality. Shazir are bastard T'aeln, imperfect spawn of obscene matings. Do you understand now—latzak?*

Lor Jastre's smile was an arc of pain and compassion scoring across Rhane's mind. He retreated, shrinking from discovery, but Lor Jastre pursued, pain and compassion mingling.

Before Concord, T'ael was as secure as T'aeln masters could make it. We knew ourselves. We

knew what phenotypes would produce sane children and what rules would produce sane results. There were accidents, of course, mutations and quirks we hadn't allowed for. That was to our benefit; it kept us alert, alive.

Then Concord came. Hundreds of races, thousands of phenotypes, billions of genotypes. Some matched our rules perfectly, some less perfectly. Children were born. Many were sane, almost all, but the ones who weren't ... we had no words for their aberrations. We do now, of course. Many words.

When we realized what was happening to our race we closed our Accesses and tried to purge our gene pool of Concord obscenities. The Concord called it xenophobia. We knew it was survival.

The music trembled with Lor Jastre's relentless thoughts, Shiya's spinning emotions, Rhane's fear of what Lor Jastre would teach them that they did not want to know.

(don't)

But Lor Jastre was in Shiya's mind and she was in Rhane's, and no inner plea could deflect the cold torrent of T'aeln history, Shiya's ancestors and Rhane's.

We killed our own children, the ones who were chizak. Insane children; obscene, yes, all of that. But they were our children and we killed them. There is a word for those years of slaughter, a word no T'aeln ever speaks.

The flute recalled the past in ragged measures of horror and necessity, terror and the helplessness that came when even murder was not enough.

They kept on being born. Surzak, mizak. The ones that had been sane enough to hide, sane enough to mingle, sane enough to have children who also appeared sane. They looked no different.

The horror of those years still screams in T'aeln nightmares. We couldn't kill all of them. Even when we found them, we didn't want to kill all of them. Yet we could not live with them, either. We could not live in a world where today, tomorrow and yesterday were only opinions that could be changed on the whim of ... our children.

T'ael's whole philosophy, our ancient civilization, was founded in the certainty that sanity followed phenotype. And it did, until Concord was involved.

If only they had looked different—

So you withdrew from contact with other races, thought Rhane slowly, and slaughtered, and discovered that killing wasn't enough. The genes were too thoroughly dispersed in your race. And then?

We survived, returned Lor Jastre grimly, answering the distaste in Rhane's sharp song, grim thoughts. We survived at the cost of everything but our lives. Frightened societies aren't flexible. And we were frightened—of ourselves, of our children, of a future we hadn't asked for and couldn't comprehend.

The flute sang with plaintive phrases, seeking answers to questions they had all asked in the privacy of their minds, hearing echoes of their questions in the minds of others.

A future we hadn't asked for and couldn't comprehend.

Shiya's awareness flexed and her thoughts condensed in the spaces between music. Khi bloomed, overwhelming, invigorating.

You discovered Menx long ago, thousands of years. Shiya's mind seemed to stretch, grasping intuitions as elusive as the past. You exiled your children and called them animals.

We thought it was better than killing them.

Menx is T'ael's dumping ground. Shiya's thought was both bitter and despairing. We're nothing but your fears cast in mud.

Poor bri th'li. I loved you as much as any T'aeln could. I should have killed you when I killed Cezine. It would have been kinder. And you,—the T'aeln's yellow eyes focused on Rhane—would it have been kinder for you? Lor Jastre's thoughts became distant, amused, too painful to bear, yet Shiya and Rhane had no choice but to bear them. For all my yellow eyes, I sometimes wonder if I'm sane.

Rhane felt the T'aeln's thoughts shattering and the flute crying of dreams and worlds lost, reality turning, reality a great faceted ball suspended in a shazir's mind, glittering, turning

Yellow eyes. Son of Siol. Son of T'ael. More Menx than either, riding a reskan with a wiri on your shoulder. Lor Jastre's thoughts curled around the flute's intricate music, laughter expanding, wildness growing. A wiri to keep a Menx sane. A music egg to keep a T'aeln sane. A flute to keep a bastard Siolan sane. So obvious. Your father laughed, taunting me, a T'aeln master. He heard Menx's and T'ael's history sung by a biological music egg. He was ecstatic. He did not understand why the secret must be kept. Why he must die.

T'aeln pride, suggested Shiya. T'aeln arrogance.

Survival, sighed Rhane, understanding Lor Jastre and wishing he did not. It was easier not to understand. Menx history is a secret known only to T'aeln masters. If the nonmasters knew, they would be shattered. Yellow-eyed sanity is their only buffer against disaster. So long as they believe in it, and so long as it is mostly true, T'aeln culture survives. Without it, T'ael and T'aelns die.

I thought your father would understand that, continued Lor Jastre. Siol's necessities aren't so different from T'ael's. You place your faith in an unbroken record of en Jacaroen lives and deaths; we place ours in the master phenotype. Without your en Jacaroen continuity, Siol will be rudderless. Your people will survive that. It won't be pleasant, but they will survive. They are flexible enough to change.

But T'ael is brittle. T'ael can't survive the end of master certainties. If our society shatters, who will seek out and exile the insane children? Who will bring back shayl to restrain the rare h'shazir baby?

No one, sighed Rhane. Disaster for you. A race lost to the Concord.

Your father didn't understand. He would have shouted our debased genes to every world.

My father hated and envied T'ael almost as much as he loved it. And he loved T'ael more than he loved his own world or his own sons.

Mizak, Lor Jastre thought wonderingly. Possibly even surzak.

No. Simply human.

Shiya's thoughts gathered, then surrounded Lor Jastre's with predatory intent. What of Menx in all this? What future have you designed for us? Why did you ever expose us to Concord?

There was a Concord lightship less than three planet days away. Discovery was inevitable.

You should have destroyed the lightship!

We couldn't.

So you set Menx up to be abandoned. Rhane's thought was as clear and hard as the flute itself, as potent as the overwhelming scent of khi.

We tried other things first, everything, but the Concord didn't understand. They saw only the flatlanders, and didn't even understand them.

You showed Concord only the flatlanders, corrected Rhane.

I could hardly show them shazir, returned Lor Jastre sardonically. And I warned the Concord. I told them that flatland Menx couldn't answer for their highland cousins. I even warned—

Lor Jastre's thoughts turned grimly upon themselves and froze. What I did doesn't matter. Menx will be abandoned. T'ael will find another world for our misbegotten children. Siol will probably find a new symbol of continuity after a few hundred years of civil war. And what does any of it matter to us? Lor Jastre's laugh climbed up unmusical scales. We're dead. Aren't we?

The flute's scream was agony. Rhane willed his fingers to stop, his lips to close, but they did not. The scent of khi was a sea wave swelling, breaking, grinding, and the blue-black flowers were soft hands wrapping around him, pulling him down beyond the reach of time or life.

Rhane fought, attacking each petal hand with searing phrases of song until the flute was white-hot, burning with his refusal to accept that facet of reality turning. Not yet. He would not give up yet. Reality was still turning within a shazir's mind, revealing other facets, other possibilities, and one of them might be life, not death. Not death.

The flute's plea was more exquisite than a flight of wiris. Soaring over impossible scales, the flute

called to the core of shazir turning.

And was answered.

Reality turned, faster and faster, throwing off shattering bits of light, scintillating with all that ever was or could be, blinding possibilities spinning faster, faster, impossible to choose from, turning too fast to see one possibility alone.

Rhane's moan was both song and despair. He needed a billion eyes to see a single possibility. So much to see so little.

(stop turning)

One possibility he could have. Just one. A single brilliant fragment of that vast spinning ball.

(too much, I can't see just one)

The flute wept in minor keys of hopelessness. Everything had been offered, the universe in a single infinitely faceted sphere, each possibility a shard of light thrown off by the scintillant whole.

Catch one possibility.

(which one, I can't see)

Quick. Take one. It will be all your yesterdays, all your tomorrows, every now you will ever know. Choose. It's spinning faster, ever faster. All the light is flowing together, all possibilities are becoming inseparable. That's death, the great simplifier.

(no)

Only life separates, distinguishing among infinite variety with infinite awareness. Choose now. Choose.

Spinning. Faster. Faster.

Infinite flashes of light thrown off. Spinning, blending, blurring together.

(was that life for Siol I saw?)

faster and

(life for Menx there?)

faster

(even for T'ael? for us?).

fasterfasterfasterfast

(LIFE)

The ball stopped spinning. Light shattered into darkness and the taste of blood.

Rhane licked lips that were raw from rubbing over metal. He blinked. Five fountains danced beneath a cloudless arch of night, supporting a single moon. Rich silver light and the warm breath of the Fountains poured over him, and over the body of a woman whose head rested on his leg. He stroked her hair as it cascaded across his thigh and fell onto the dark stone ground.

"Shiya ...?"

Rhane's voice was dry, husky, barely a whisper. It did not disturb the woman whose pulse beat steadily beneath his hand, her body warm, alive. In the moonlight a thin scar gleamed at the base of her neck.

Shiya.

Her mind turned, seeking his. Finding him, she smiled and slept again. He did not wake her. The wonder of her hair curling around his hands was enough Rhane looked up, sensing another presence. The graceful lines of the Fountains condensed out of the moonlight, echoed by the tall figure of a woman standing in front of him.

Meriel.

Rhane did not know that he had spoken her name until she touched him. Her relief swept over him like a wind. With it came a feeling of urgency and waiting, a long time, waiting.

"I dreamed," sighed Rhane, answering the question Meriel had not asked.

"I know. When I first came here I touched you. For an instant I touched ..."

"What?" said Rhane, unable to hear her voice among the fluid whispers of the Fountains of Madness.

Meriel's face shifted, echoing the transformations of water. "Every tint of madness, every tone of sanity, the overwhelming scent of khi and shazir. Colors and shadows of colors reaching back into time,

an immense ocean and a long wave breaking, churning whitely.”

Rhane listened to Meriel’s voice, hearing resonances of Lor Jastre and Shiya and himself in every word, remembering a dream.

“The face of the wave was thick with people whose time-shadows swept back into the past like colored streamers, merging into the ocean universe of time, minds reaching back.”

Meriel’s voice paused, remembering horror and hope and futility. “People struggling to stay afloat on the breaking wave of the present. The wave changing, always changing. People drowning, dragged down by the weight of their attachment to the past.

“Dying. Dead. And others, others thrown forward, no attachments, nothing, tumbling into a future that was too shallow to support the burden of their existence. Dying. Dead.

“A few people, so few, their timeshadows neither dragged nor impelled, but centered them securely in the present. Those people rode time’s wave with radiant certainty.”

“The grinding wave ...” Rhane’s voice barely rose above the murmuring Fountains of Madness. “Lor Jastre. You saw him in my mind.”

“I saw only a white wave grinding. Lor Jastre is dead. The shayl told me. You killed him when Shiya fell during the serat trial. Don’t you remember?”

“I killed him?” Rhane sighed. “And Cezine? The RA Jacaroen? Do they live on this face of reality?”

Meriel’s expression changed with the fountains, silver and shadow. “Should they?”

Rhane turned the flute, watching pale moon images flee across the flute’s blue-black surface. Indigo, not silver, the scent and color of khi condensed into a thin metal tube turning in his hands, hands that were strong and whole, untainted by sickness. The moon shadows slid away faster and faster, became a spinning ball with infinite facets glittering.

“What happened, Rhane? Do you remember? I touched you only for an instant, and only once. It was all I could bear.”

The billion billion possibilities.

“I called a god,” whispered Rhane, “and we ... dreamed.”

Rhane’s words returned to him, borne on the warm exhalations of the Fountains of Madness. He shuddered.

“No, not that at all. I went crazy, that’s all. I thought Shiya was dead and I was dying and—I went a little bit mad. I’m all right now, though. All right.”

Rhane’s words turned among the dancing fountains, echoes of silver light. He remembered a single shard of brightness, one brilliant face of infinitely faceted reality, all faces equally possible, and he had chosen. One. But that was just a dream. He must remember that. He must keep the realities from overlapping, or he would be as mad as every other shazir.

(chizak)

Rhane smiled sourly. It would take time to accustom himself to Lor Jastre’s sardonic echo, but that was the reality he had chosen. Eventually the T’aeln’s echo, like all echoes, would return to the silence that had given it birth. Time.

“How long have I been here?”

“What is time to a shazir?” asked Meriel softly, watching him with wise Carifil eyes.

Rhane forced a smile. “I’ll ask the first one I find.”

“Is that how you want it?”

Reality turning, possibilities glittering endlessly, equally.

“That’s how it must be.”

“The Century of Protection ends at dawn,” said Meriel, “if that’s what you need to know.”

Rhane glanced up at the sky. The last moon was descending. Soon the Three Shayl would rise, three stars leading the hot sun of shazir across Menx skies. Scavengers would descend, disturbing the hard-won balance of reality for shazir and Concord alike.

“No,” said Rhane, grabbing Meriel’s wrist. “Listen to me.” With his touch came a highly compressed torrent of information/emotion/speculation, but he spoke anyway, emphasizing. “Lor Jastre was right. Menx must be proscribed!”

Meriel flinched under the torrent of mindtouch, discovery. “Melting sickness,” she said in horror, knowing as Rhane knew, “melting sickness came from T’aeln laboratories. Deliberately. Murderous.”

“Inevitable,” said Rhane.

“They should have told the Concord,” said Meriel, mere words embedded in a flow of negation.

“And sacrifice T’ael to their insane children once the secret was known?”

Meriel waited, swaying beneath the force of Rhane’s mind.

“Menx must be proscribed to all but T’ael,” said Rhane distinctly, “and T’ael to all but Menx. An outbreak of melting sickness on T’ael would provide the justification for proscription,” continued Rhane, ignoring both her rebellion and his own, for he knew what must happen, which facet of reality must be chosen. “The dual proscription will limit the spread of T’aeln genes—and shazir.”

Meriel’s mouth twisted with distaste, but she was Carifil; she did not cast aside a necessary reality merely because it was not a perfect one.

“My shuttle is outside the valley,” Meriel said quietly, all hesitation past. “I’ll use the spacecom to contact Centrex. Before dawn, Menx will be proscribed. T’ael will be proscribed as soon as its epidemic of melting sickness is confirmed by Concord medics. And we will never speak of this again.”

Meriel withdrew, moving soundlessly, one shadow among many, silver and black flowing together, blurring, turning faster and faster.

One. Just one.

Shiya stirred and sighed. Rhane felt her movements as he would have his own, another dimension of reality, his time-shadow reaching back, and hers, radiant, inseparable, balanced on the long breaking wave. He lifted her hair to his lips, losing himself in the potent scent of khi. Her hair was cool and sweet, luck running endlessly out of both his hands.

Rhane’s soft laughter rose, mingling with the liquid conversations of the Fountains of Madness.

About the Author

ANN MAXWELL lives in Southern California, with her husband, Evan, and their two children. She has coauthored a number of books with her husband on subjects ranging from historical fiction to thrillers to nonfiction. *The Jaws of Men* is Ann’s fifth science fiction novel. Some of her earlier works have been recommended for the Nebula Award and nominated for the TABA Award.