

**THE DUSHAU TRILOGY#3**

# **OUTREACH**

**JACQUELINE LICHTENBERG**

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Cover art by Ken Ban-Popular Library books are published by Warner Books, Inc. 666 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10103

n9 A Warner Communications Company Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January, 1986

10 987654321

To Mary Brice.

May She Rest in Peace.

Never has a mother been more deeply loved.

## **Acknowledgments**

My deepest gratitude goes to the large number of friends who have supported me and my family throughout the adversities of this very difficult year when unexpected trips added to scheduled trips put me on the road for more than half the year, and behind schedule the rest of the time.

If it weren't for Katie Filipowicz, former editor of *Zeor Forum*, and her incredible dedication in proofreading without her reading glasses, this book would not be finished yet.

I need to thank Kerry Schaefer for taking over editing and distributing the Sime/Gen fanzine *Ambrov Zeor*, and Cheryl Gloger for taking on the Sime/Gen fanzine *Zeor Forum*, and Karen Litman, editor of the Sime/Gen fanzine *Companion in Zeor* for keeping the mail from stacking up over my head this year.

Those who read and commented on this manuscript deserve battle ribbons and decorations: Anne Pinzow, executive editor of *Ambrov Zeor*, heroic taper of *Doctor Who*—the television program which inspired this trilogy along with Andre Norton's *Star Rangers*—and staunch personal friend of my family; Kerry Schaefer, a writer of considerable insight; my daughter Gail, a stringent critic; and Katie Filipowicz, who sacrificed the chance to read the whole novel at once in order to comment chapter by chapter.

And then there are all those who supplied the support necessary to keep going through the most frustrating of times: my husband Salomon, who definitely wins the Purple Heart and several awards of valor; my daughters, Gail and Debbie, who have had to get along without "Ma!" for long periods through

some of their toughest high-school years; my father, who accepts me when I need accepting; and my dearest friends, Anne Pinzow, Katie Filipowicz, and Roberta Mendelson. Roberta has read and commented on the Dushau to good effect. She, Anne, and Katie have all pitched in to teach my daughters the graces and skills, spending many hours doing what I could not when I could not.

Yet another invaluable group has been the dear friends scattered about the country, who have written or called me with news of new vampire novels or other items of good cheer, or who have shown me their manuscripts. Sometimes I really need a "good read." I expect some of these gems to turn up on the stands soon.

There is one other source of inspiration for this trilogy that I'd like to recommend you read: John Brunner's novel titled *Polymath*, which is about the ecology of colonizing planets.

I learned about kinesiology from Kelly and Polly Freas at Maplecon, in Ottawa, Canada, in 1984. I do hope readers of this book will look up this technique and try it out. It's real.

And, of course, I must acknowledge the contribution that John Nathan Turner and all the other creators of the television show, *Doctor Who*, have inadvertently made to this project. The use of Zen and other philosophies within an adventure format, the confrontation with such issues as what holds the universe together, the difference between good and evil, and the essence of companionship make this apparently trivial children's show into a literary classic.

I'd like to offer my gratitude to James Frost, my editor at Questar, for his patience and faith.

And there is no way to repay such wonderful people as Andre Norton, who wrote *Star Rangers*; Katherine Kurtz, who didn't really intend to read DUSHAU at all, but did, Jean Lorrh my sometimes co-author, who never does less than her best and won't let me slack off, either; Jean Airey, who showed me depths of The Doctor I'd never have found by myself, and Marion Zimmer Bradley—who is just plain magic.

These and many other sources of energy, including the Ineffable, have made this book possible.

To comment on this or any of my other novels (I do read and ponder every comment) or for information about current availability of novels in my Dushau, Kren, or Sime/Gen Universes, and/or information on the various Sime/Gen fanzines, send a self-addressed stamped envelop with your specific request to:

**AMBROV ZEOR**

Dept. D-3

Box 290

Monsey, NY, 10952

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## LAWS OF SYMMETRY, PARITY, AND POLARITY

### TENTH OBSERVATION OF SHOSHUNRI

**"The Law of Parity requires that some energies, when Inverted, remain symmetrically unchanged. Others, however, change sign. It is incumbent upon the Incarnate to assess this property correctly for each energy dealt with."**

### -SECOND OBSERVATION OF SHOSHUNRI

**"Polarization is the Law of Nature which reveals the essence of Completion, for as the positive pole generates the negative, or as victory generates defeat, and the profane generates the sacred, or the group generates the individual, so does identity, the sum of many generations, generate its own adversary, and so does the Observed generate the Observer. Destroy one pole, and**

**the remaining one will regenerate its opposite, to complete itself."**

### THIRD OBSERVATION OF SHOSHUNRI

**"The Laws of Nature are .symmetric around a central axis of reflection. He who travels that axis reaches Completion."**

**From: *Purpose and Method* by: Shoshunri, Observing Priest of Aliom**

### JINDIGAR'S OLIAT

**Protector                      Receptor**

female                      male Venlagar

Eithlarin                      (Zannesu)

(Trinarvil)

**Center** Jindigar

**Formulator                      Inreach                      Emulator**

female                      male Zannesu                      female

Darllanyu                      (Venlagar) Llistyien

## **Outreach**

Krinata

### FUNCTIONS OF OLIAT OFFICES

**Inreach:** holds the pattern of intensities of the linkages.

**Protector:** resonates to all factors balancing an ecology and understands the protective strategies appropriate in a particular environment and uses them to protect the Oliat.

**Formulator:** perceives the underlying patterns that connect the balanced forces; can extrapolate results of an imbalance. Relates data to formulate patterns and find meaning.

**Emulator:** grasps the inwardness of a species or system while the Protector deals with the outwardnesses. The Emulator can bring a species' self-perception *inside* the Oliat so that understanding is on an unconscious level.

**Receptor:** reacts to incoming signals, thus causing the whole Oliat to respond to changes in the balances around them.

**Outreach:** the output portal for the Oliat as a whole or for the Center. The Outreach is the only Officer able to speak aloud.

The Outreach may speak for the whole Oliat as if it were one mind, or for the Center alone.

**Center:** synthesizes all data into a clear picture of the environment, the individuals, and all the relationships between them. It is the Center's responsibility to bring the Officers of the Oliat closer to Completion through the exercise of accurate observation.

## **ONE**

### **Wedding Trial**

The Aliom Temple was already set up for the weddings. Jindigar, at nearly seven thousand years of age, had been married at all four of his previous Renewals. But even so, a tense awe and shivering anticipation were settling over him, as if he'd never known a woman's urgent touch.

But he was remarrying his first wife, the most deeply satisfying. He should be serene and confident, leading the others, as was expected of a Priest of Aliom.

Restless, he paced the length of the Temple hall, keenly aware of the smell from the freshly polished wood paneling. The gleaming walls reflected the ceremonial fire in the circular hearth at the end of the room near the entry.

The door was open on this early spring morning, mixing , the alien scent of the reviving world with the strange perfumes of native wood smoke, but little light filtered around the interlocking, curved walls of the entry tunnel.

At the opposite end of the windowless hall, on what the humans called a staircase that went nowhere, four hooded marriage flames danced in their smoked-glass containers amid the symbols of Aliom, displayed on the steps one above the other. At midnight Jindigar had kindled the wedding flame for Darllanyu just as the three other men had for their mates. And she, with the other women, had concealed the flame. That had been his moment of commitment to the remarriage. Why was he so agitated now?

He paused at the edge of the marriage circle, below the skylight. The rays of the morning sun were focused by the slanted panes above him to set the crushed white gravel of the marriage circle to glowing visually, even for Dushau eyes, so ill adjusted to this world's sun.

But to his other senses, from below the crushed white gravel, from deep in the center of the planet, a fountain of pure white energy, the energy of the planet itself, erupted upward, flowing out through the skylight and dissipating in the air above the Temple. The marriage circle was laid over the worldcircle, at the point where the energy of sun and planet met, the condition necessary to create life.

At noon he would reveal the marriage flame and carry it into that circle, where Darllanyu would extinguish it. If the nonvisible light from the worldcircle increased, it would show that they were close enough in harmony, in shaleiliu, to transform physical light to spiritual light, and they would be married. He knew it would happen. Just gazing into the circle made him eager to get it over with.

But before he dared think of success at his marriage trial, he had to Dissolve his Oliat, releasing the seven of them from the psychic bonds linking them into one mind and enabling them to interpret the complex ecology of this world.

To bring them safely through Dissolution, he must remain unmoved even though the gonads at the base of his neck throbbed insistently at any thought of Darllanyu. He told himself sternly that he wasn't near being fertile yet. His fingers were still nailless, and the nail beds didn't even itch.

*But when I'm fertile and an Active Priest again, the Historians will stop trying to lure me away from Aliom.* Jindigar discarded that thought instantly. His Priesthood was intact. He had no reason to fear temptation. They couldn't force him to become a Historian. He wouldn't court Renewal and sacrifice his Oliat to avoid confrontations.

He paced around the circle. *Am I running from my personal problems by Dissolving my Oliat now?* The colony still needed an Oliat's ecological advice, but things were stable now. They'd manage until he could train a new group. His Oliat, however, had been trembling on the brink of Renewal all winter. To continue would be irresponsible.

An astonishing sense of relief washed through him as he reaffirmed that decision. But it was quickly replaced by needles of anxiety as he resolved to surrender to Renewal, and suddenly everything in him wanted to clutch at the Oliat. *Maybe it's just that if I quit now, I'll have failed at Center?* His Oliat had never achieved a precision balance.

If he was running from his personal problems, he didn't know which way to run. But such strident panic was a primary symptom of Renewal onset, which made him very dangerous as Oliat Center, an Office requiring precision judgment. The only way to bring it under control was to marry Darllanyu and raise children. And that settled it.

The sound of a door opening startled him. He turned to see five of his Oliat's Officers enter the Temple from the temporary living quarters the Oliat shared off to one side of the Temple. They came in, men circling one way and women the other. They wore the Aliom ceremonial vestments woven from native fibers, bleached and dyed to symbolize the brightness of lightning, the Oliat signature. Jindigar, as Center of the Oliat, wore white, symbol of origins and endings, for white light was composed of all wavelengths.

A warmth stole through him. These people had become his zunre—closer than blood relatives—for they had shared the Oliat bond. They saw with each other's eyes, heard with each others' ears, knew with each others' hearts. Dissolution would leave them separate but could not sever that bond.

His gaze was drawn to Darllanyu as she led the other two women to seat cushions around the fire. She

glided as if carried on air. The floor reflected her costume, so she seemed to float at the tip of a flame. Jindigar feasted on the rich indigo of her skin coloring. She seemed like a creature out of legend, an apparition passing through the world but not of it. *How could I merit such a wife?*

But he needed her. He dared not dwell on how much he needed her. Then he saw that she wore the gold arm band he had once given her. His heart swelled with a flutter both familiar and strange until he had to look away.

When they had all settled around the hearth, Darllanyu strummed random chords on the whole she had made from native woods. He joined them. His own whole, left to him by his teacher, Lelwatha, was on his seat, next to Darllanyu. He cradled it in his lap, the feel of the satiny finish of the antique urwood sending thrills up his arms.

Struggling to subdue his hypersensitivity, Jindigar fought to ignore Darllanyu's faintly suggestive aroma and not to think about the activities that would be theirs later today. With the inward communication of the Oliat, Jindigar assured her, //Krinata will be here in a moment. Then we can begin the Dissolution.//

His Oliat wasn't fully convened—for the past year Jindigar had kept the seven of them divided into two duos and a trio for training. But the linkages were well enough activated that they all received the conversation. //You know I don't want her at our wedding. It's bad enough that none of our former mates are here to officiate—//

Something of Jindigar's hurt must have reached her. She broke off, curbed a soothing gesture, and explained, //What she does to you frightens me. She's an ephemeral. I don't want to get any closer to her. We're so vulnerable now!//

Feeling her fear for him through the link, Jindigar knew she couldn't bear to see him hurt any more than he could bear her pain. And she had good reason to fear. At his last Renewal he had taken an ephemeral woman, Ontarrah, into his home, and on four occasions even into his bed, because he could not bear to part from her. His wife and their children had accepted Ontarrah—even loved her—and had grieved deeply at her death, taking disabling mental scars. For that he had been exiled from Dushaun until this Renewal—and now he could not go home.

//Dar, because Krinata is Ontarrah reincarnated, we are both determined not to repeat that mistake.//

At that moment Krinata Zavaronne walked through the front entry. She was wearing the same lightning-flash vestment the others wore but cut to fit the human female form, somehow making her diminutive frame seem statuesque. Overall, she projected the impression of the Lady Zavaronne attending Prince Jindigar's wedding. If any of them noticed, though, she'd be deeply offended. The Allegiancy Empire was dead, and with it Krinata had buried her title—but try as she might, she had not been able to bury her heritage.

She took her seat opposite Jindigar. Her black eyes, danced in the firelight. Her short black hair hid the human ear paps, and she sat facing him so he couldn't see the jutting profile of her chest. If it weren't for her hair and pinkish-white skin, she could almost pass for Dushau.

//I plan,// she said, unable to hide her hurt in the silent medium, //to leave right after the Dissolution. I do have my own wedding to prepare for, and Cy will be anxious.//

Cyrus Benwilliam Lord Kulain had been courting Krinata circumspectly since they'd met. As a professional Oliat Outrider, he knew his job was to protect the Oliat, which meant to protect Krinata from any hint of sexual arousal. Unfortunately, with humans in love, that wasn't possible. Cyrus's feelings and Krinata's unsuppressible responses had been a major factor in destabilizing Jindigar's Oliat.

//Custom,// argued Zannesu, Jindigar's Inreach, //is for marriage to be witnessed by one's zunre. You are zunre to us, Krinata.// He was to marry Eithlarin, Jindigar's Protector, and the most sensitive of his officers.

Yet Eithlarin was not a weak person. She challenged Darllanyu. //Perhaps Zannesu and I will marry first, so we may enjoy the company of our zunre.//

//I understand Darllanyu's feelings,// Krinata put in quickly. //I'd welcome you all at my wedding, but it wouldn't be healthy for you. If I were Dushau, I wouldn't associate with ephem-

erals, either. So I'll leave as soon as I can.// Her words were brave, but her heart was torn.

//Ephemerals grieve too,// commented Jindigar, needing to tell her he knew how she felt. //It hurts them just as much as it does us, to lose a friend.// That similarity was one reason Dushau feared association with ephemerals—especially during the openness of Renewal onset when new friendships went so deep they could last a lifetime. But ephemerals rarely lived a hundredth of a lifetime. No Dushau could survive such a high frequency of loss and remain sane.

He felt her reaching for him through the link, as if trying to console him while facing her own bereavement. For the first time in nearly two years, she'd face the world stripped of the Oliat's global awareness. She'd feel naked, alone, cold—shattered to her core. But she didn't flinch. She added, levelly, //Cy will be waiting with the medics, in case I need treatment for Dissolution shock. Trinarvil is outside with the other wedding guests. She'll escort me to the gate—afterward. So let's get on with it.//

Trinarvil, Dushau's Ambassador to the Allegiancy, had turned out to be their most proficient medic. Jindigar knew he could trust her to treat Krinata if necessary. And he also knew that humans preferred swift partings.

He nodded human-fashion and activated the duo linkage that unified himself and Krinata, preparing to convene the Oliat for Dissolution. But he stole a moment of privacy in their duo, to tell her, //I would have stayed with you the rest of your life—if I could have. But none of us can be trusted anymore. If we don't Dissolve now—//

///I know. You explained how we're already deep into the safety margin. You must go to Renewal seclusion now. I want you to go. Ephemerals have done you enough harm. But that doesn't make it any easier to say good-bye.//

In the intimacy of the duo, Jindigar saw himself through her eyes and her emotions. His indigo-napped skin shone in the suddenly bright light, for human eyes were so much more sensitive in the yellow band. His white garments sparkled, making him seem huge and otherworldly. She hardly noted the lack of external ears on his skull but dwelled instead on his seven-fingered hands, seeing a sensualness in the musician's strength.

He drew back, suddenly realizing that she wanted to feel his napped skin stroking her face, and there was nothing" innocent in it. That strange attraction had always been there between them, but it was only lately, since Dar had stirred him so deeply, that he was physically aware of it—and vaguely repelled. But Krinata was the most beautiful, courageous, and compassionate person he had ever known. He could not hurt her, so he didn't let her see that he'd noticed.

//You have Cy. He'll make a good life with you.// By the time he could once again tolerate ephemeral company without the danger of close emotional attachments, he would be dealing with their grandchildren—or perhaps another reincarnation of Krinata.

//I can't imagine life without Cy. But he's not you. You once told me Renewal can be a harsh judge of souls. I hope it will be kind to you...//

In Renewal, the Dushau body was restored to youthful health while the soul assimilated recent lessons. //The emotional instability will subside in a few years. Raising children can be an immensely vitalizing experience. I recommend you try it. I know Cy wants to.//

//I expect we will try it.//

//Ready?//

//Yes—just—remember me, just as I am now.//

//Count on it.// And he gentled her into the Office of Outreach for the entire Oliat, the only one of them who could speak aloud when they were convened. //Outreach,// he called her formally, then opened the full seven-way Oliat linkage, calling each of his officers to function.

He braced himself, expecting the usual discord as the half-trained officers struggled to work with the larger group. In spite of the woefully inadequate performance of his Oliat, he was about to achieve the rank of Retired Center, to become an Observing Priest with Active status.

And then he noticed that the linkages had settled into place with neat precision. *Just when there's no time left, they finally get it!* His eyes met Dar's, and on his signal, they fingered the subsuming chord, a musical analogue to the soundless vibration of the carrier wave of the universe, which should be a constant background to Oliat awareness. But he had always had to use the music to approximate a balance.

Now he used the whole sound to adjust the tensions of the linkages, as if he were tuning whole strings. For the first time he felt each of his officers actively reaching out toward one another, hungrily seeking the full precision awareness. The harmonics grew stronger than they had ever experienced. Frustrated, he knew that if they had another year, they might make a real Oliat out of the half-trained pentad that had grudgingly accepted Krinata and himself to form this shaky heptad calling itself an Oliat.

As the whole sound died off, the soundless subsuming chord remained and grew to permeate their awareness. It was the first time that had happened for his Oliat, and Jindigar marveled at the new sensations claiming him. His Oliat was in perfect harmony with the universal carrier wave, and in that first, very precious, moment he experienced the very definition of shaleiliu: not just congruent or harmonious, but a precision attune-ment to life itself.

His eyes met Krinata's, and they shared a memory: the day he had struggled for hours to define shaleiliu for her and had finally reminded her of the time she had questioned him about the purpose of life, the nature of death, the spiritual and material structure of reality, the origin and end of existence, and his identity within that structure and process, and he had responded by showing her a hologram of a lightning flash accompanied by the whole chord. "That *sound* is the shaleiliu hum and expresses the relationship among all those concepts.

It is the sound lightning makes when it propagates through air. It is the carrier wave that indicates that the universe is constantly being created and sustained." He had told her, but she hadn't grasped it.

Now tears of joy stung her eyes as she discovered what he had meant. He had served in many Oliats, so the chord was familiar to him, but from Center it was far more intense, for only the Center was aware of all the forces they observed and how each was a perfect harmonic of the shaleiliu hum.



Fully possessing his Oliat at last, feeling very much closer to Completion, he let his awareness spread. Outside the Aliom Temple, many Dushau waited for the signal for the weddings. They occupied a grassed area within a circle of saplings that separated the Historians' Temple from their own. The crude log buildings had survived the winter admirably, but they planned to build more permanent stone structures as soon as possible.

Beyond the temple square, spread the Dushau compound. Close by was housing for those not in Renewal and an embryonic business and manufacturing district. Off to one side an interior wall protected the Renewal compound where housing was already being built with children, schools, and attendant services in mind. The entire Dushau area was now enclosed by a palisade of logs overhung by tall shade trees.

On the other side of the Aliom Temple, at the far north corner of the Dushau compound, was the inner gate, and beyond it, the enclosed area where they traded With ephemerals. From the outer gate of the trade area, two graveled paths led to the houses where the other four species of the colony dwelled. Farther to the north were the fields, barns, and corrals. Today, smoke rose from the kiln as pottery was fired, and the moisture-laden air carried the scent of the tannery from across the river.

The Oliat's perspective showed them all this at once, while they were peripherally aware of the cliff rising over the colony's west side and the river winding by at the eastern border. The river came so near the Dushau back gate that they could hear its rain-swollen current as well as the raging waterfall that cascaded over the cliff nearby, turning their one electrical generator, then feeding the river.

Beyond the northwest edge of the colony, an area at the base of the cliff was packed with the skeletons of flying fortresses and spaceships, their only technological support.

Nearer the colony, high up on the cliff face, a cave had been enlarged by the Holot, the heavily pelted, six-limbed species who seemed mammalian but didn't suckle their young. They used the cave for making food for their infants.

Far to the southwest, the Oliat awareness picked up a storm brewing. On the plain above the cliff, shrubs bloomed, filling the air with a sticky, irritating pollen that clogged everything, coating all exposed surfaces with gum.

Jindigar drank in the experience of his Oliat's full global awareness, something he had lived millennia only imagining. Now, at the very moment when he'd grasped the fringes of its possibilities, he must relinquish it. He could, for the first time, fully appreciate the reason a Center's Oliat career ended with his Oliat. One could easily become addicted to this and become unable to survive as an individual.

He felt the others savoring the beauty of this final union, comparing it to how they'd striven and suffered before to garner just a fraction of the information now flowing through their multiconsciousness. Now that they'd tasted it, they yearned to refine their focus, to know every microbe in the Cassrians' hatching pond, every denizen of the river, every disease destroying the fish hatchery, every parasite attacking the sprouting fields—how all these fit into the single ecology they were building out of disparate imports and native life forms.

But he had to curb their eagerness to explore this new awareness. He tuned the linkages closer to the shaleiliu chord, letting them vibrate, soaking up the energy of the unheard sound. The Dissolution that he had been so afraid of would not be at all difficult, now that he had them balanced. He worked those linkages, one at a time, and then in pairs, tediously tuning and retuning, until he felt the wavering, desolidifying shimmer that signified impending Dissolution of the linkages.

A stray thought surfaced. Now Trinarvil would not serve in his Oliat—as she had predicted she would one day. This whole year, everyone had regarded Krinata as just holding Trinarvil's place until she was well enough to work Oliat. Trinarvil's prophetic gift had never failed before.

And then it happened.

A screeching, clattering wave of tiny bodies blackened the sky, coming into their sphere of awareness from the northeast. Swiftly, the animals poured into the side of the cliff north of the settlement, into the Holot's cave. Two Holot females emerged from the cave mouth, clicking flyers diving at their eyes and throats. One of the women went down, sprawling at the edge of the cave mouth near the ladder. Instantly, she was covered with a black blanket of crawling animals yammering in sudden triumph.

Jindigar abandoned the Dissolution and let the clarity of the linkages resume. //That's a hive-swarm. We've got to stop them—or there won't be a Holot infant left alive.// He tore out the door, Krinata just ahead of him, the others following, their personal concerns forgotten.

The searing sunlight blinded them through Krinata's human sensitivity, but they kept running, gradually forming around Jindigar in the Oliat pattern, Krinata as Outreach in the lead. Seeing this, the Dushau waiting outside for the weddings to begin parted to let them pass. Some Dushau qualified to act as Outriders fell in around them as they caught up to a crowd of Dushau heading for the north gate.

The sky was aswarm with the flowing mosaic of tiny bodies moving as if commanded by one brain. Above the rush of wings and the clicking, twittering, and clattering sound of the animals, they heard screams of anguish, shouts of former military commanders rallying a defense, and finally, the searing crack of weapons fire.

*No!* the Oliat protested as one mind, and Jindigar half heard Krinata's echoing of that. The blinding pain of burned animals plummeting out of the sky was added to the panic of the colonists on the defensive. The Oliat shuddered.

Jindigar held them firm, not daring to reduce their sensitivity. As one, they pounded around the curved ends of interlinked walls that formed the inner gate and emerged into the walled courtyard outside the gate. Their ephemeral Outriders, led by the Lehiroh, Storm, and the human Cyrus Benwilliam Lord Kulain, half dressed in his wedding finery, fell into step around the Oliat, replacing the Dushau guards. Jindigar didn't even break stride but headed around the curved ends of the outer gate and onto the trail leading northwest, toward the cliff face.

As they ran, the weapon fire increased. A section of the invading swarm peeled off and attacked their attackers. A few animals penetrated the shield of fire and flew, claws extended, beaks slashing, at the heads of the colonists behind the weapons.

The colonists' valiant effort did not distract the swarm from its main target, though. Above them, in the mouth of the cave, another Holot woman went down under a living blanket of the small beasts, her fur torn away, her eyes pecked out. Below, the Holot men raged, aiming futile barrages of fire into the swarm that stretched in an arched cone all the way to the eastern horizon.

Jindigar detected an animal intelligence in that swarm—cohesive but not truly coherent—guiding this warrior vanguard to seize a haven for the new hive. All of this planet's higher life forms were organized into hives, and spring was a time of swarming.

He increased his pace, closing with Krinata and Cy. After a year of harsh pioneering life, they were all in good condition, but the humans were tiring fast. He chose a spot and left the path, forging out toward the cliff and the cave—trying to get some distance between them and the frantically firing defenders. Then he

brought the Oliat up short. Without pausing to let them catch their breath, he set the linkages wide-open again—hoping their increased balance was still his to command.

It was. The shaleiliu hum was still with them. Within two heartbeats, Venlagar, as Receptor for the Oliat, had steadied into a better focus than he had ever achieved before. The roiling ferment of life forces flowing around them resolved, and Jindigar breathed a sigh of praise to Venlagar—his strongest officer.

Without reasoning it through, Jindigar simply Received that this swarm of clicking quasi-rodents was here because, months ago, the colony had—on the advice of a subform of the Oliat—discouraged several other hives from settling near the colony. They had accidentally created an ecological vacuum—and the Holot had topped it off by sending out an irresistible reek of *food* on the winds. Thus the hive entity perceived this as their rightful dwelling place.

Krinata whimpered deep in her throat and sagged against Cyrus, who threw Jindigar a piercing look. Jindigar ignored both touch and glance, and reset the linkages, muting the information flow to Krinata. She could not modulate for herself. During her first encounter with full Oliat awareness, she had nearly lost her sanity. She was the Oliat's weakest officer.

"//Cy, //" said the Oliat through Krinata, "//the Guard Commander must order cease fire. They're making it worse. //"

Subliminally, Jindigar realized he'd chosen to send Cyrus as much to separate him from Krinata as to convey the message. But he concentrated the Oliat awareness now on the living black wave undulating above them in stunningly beautiful patterns.

Jindigar turned the maintenance of the linkage level of the Oliat over to Zannesu, his Inreach, then pulled his Emulator forth. //Llistyien, we must become as the swarm above; full resonance. //

Llistyien had let herself become part of that perceived beauty, one with the life-dancing surging rhythmically above them. She Emulated that rhythm for them, making it part of the Oliat self-perception, and the subtle magic of the Oliat took over. An Oliat was an observer—perceiving only, never acting on the environment.

To the entire Oliat Jindigar announced, //Shoshunri's Second Observation!// Everyone but Krinata knew he intended to use the Law of Nature, which decreed that no observer left the observed unaffected. He brought the Oliat's attention onto the swarm and carefully noticed how out of place they were. The Holot cave would not yield food, the locals were hostile and would no doubt raid for eggs, and there just wasn't enough room.

Long, long beats of time passed as the defenders continued to fire. Part of the pattern the Oliat now observed was the argument between Cy and the Guard Commander, a Cassrian who didn't believe in the Oliat's powers and who had never trusted Jindigar. Finally, the Commander leveled his weapon at the unarmed Outrider and spat, "You're interfering with our operations. I told you to move!"

"Has the Oliat ever let you down?" Cy did not flinch but merely returned the Cassrian's gaze levelly.

"That's not the point—those things are killing people!" whistled the Commander in a reedy but trained voice.

"The point is to stop them. Firing at them is obviously not doing any good. May as well fire at a smoke cloud."

The Cassrian waved a claw-hand, then clicked it against his carapace in frustration. "What else is there to

do?"

Cy drew himself up to his considerable height, somehow looking authoritative despite his formally decorated shirt flapping over his work trousers. "If you can't trust the Oliat, then trust me. I will take full responsibility, and if necessary, I will deal with Terab."

Cy had no true official standing in the elected hierarchy of the colony, but he had been head Outrider to the Oliat that had preceded Jindigar's. He was known and respected among the earliest settlers, but this Cassrian was one of the later comers.

Nevertheless, Cyrus Benwilliam Lord Kulain had been raised to both military and civilian command.

The Cassrian was no stranger to dealing with humans. It took only moments for him to realize that he'd been outclassed. He raised his weapon and signaled the cease fire.

Jindigar and the Oliat felt Krinata's glow of admiration, which quickly threatened to make Cyrus a hero. That sent a discomforting prickle through Jindigar, and he distracted them back to the job.

Enraged by their dead dropping all around them, the flyers suddenly discovered that their opponents had become defenseless. As one, they bent to furious destruction.

//How can we attract their attention?// Darllanyu, in the Office of Formulator, had the answer. He opened to her and let her create within their field of observation an image that was both there and not there. It was not illusion, for it had been there, and had been real, a year ago and was still part of the colony's identity, an image lurking in the back of everyone's mind.

Over their perception of the colony, Darllanyu Formulated the dome of a giant hive, a dome of gray blocks, the dwelling of the dominant intelligence of this plane! they called Phanphihy. Eithlarin, Jindigar's Protector, added her strength to that projection—for the hive's dome was its means of protection, and this image had been a gift of the Natives to be the colony's protection.

Gradually, the fury of the swarm's attack abated, and one section at a time, the flying wave broke off and swept around in a circle, their instincts confused. Their primitive vision showed nothing changed. Scent and sound showed nothing changed. Yet somehow the group mind controlling them finally sensed a wrongness. Their species did not coexist with the dominating intelligence.

The formation swept around and around, clicking loudly, their wings slapping the wind. They formed a vertical cone with its point right over Jindigar's head. He shifted now, to bring Venlagar's Reception into play.

Venlagar Received the bloodied corpses and the fierce rage of the offworlder warriors. A clickerhive did not belong here. Life here would mean destruction.

Jindigar reflected that only on Phanphihy, a planet that was virtually an Oliat itself, could his amateurish Oliat close the circuit between observer and observed without Inverting the Oliat function. Here even the lowest of beasts could read other species' perceptions.

Seeking another cave suitable to the clickerhive, Jindigar, directed Venlagar's attention north along the cliff face. At the extreme edge of their range of perception, a good three days' walk to the north, they found a deep cave high up on the cliff. Jindigar *observed* that cave as if they were being tested for an Aliom Degree, stretching their newly enlarged range to the utmost.

He forgot their problems with impending Renewal, forgot the awkwardness of using a human Outreach, forgot the pre.-carious condition of the colony, brushed aside the very concept of self-defense, paid no

attention to how this mess was his responsibility, and *observed* that cave's perfection as a clickerhive home.

None of them noticed the intensifying of the noon sun beating down on them, none of them shivered when the cliff shadow engulfed them, and none of them felt the chill spring rain sluicing down at sunset. Around them, Storm and Cy kept everyone away as the colony resumed cautious movement, tending the wounded, collecting the dead from under the shadow of the circling cone of death, and retiring under their roofs to watch from their windows.

The last daylight was fading when the cone of hive warriors flattened, then lifted and began floating northward, filling the sky with their patterned dance, letting instinct draw them toward a suitable home.

Just beginning to feel the strain himself, Jindigar realized that Eithlarin and the others, less conditioned to this kind of work, were beginning to waver. Determined, he held the Oliat perception steady until the leaders of the swarm arrived at the designated cave. Only when Venlagar Received the warriors possessing the cave did Jindigar reach for Zannesu's grip on the linkages. The Inreach was shaking with fatigue, and Jindigar had to pry loose the youngster's grip—reminding himself that despite the polished performance they'd turned in today, this was still a collection of untrained beginners wishing they were a real Oliat.

Finally in command of the levels again, Jindigar brought his Oliat down from the intense awareness focus, letting the individualities emerge as much as possible, short of adjourning his Oliat.

Breathing easier, he allowed the sense of triumph to surface at last. They had finally worked a full function.

He coughed. He felt drained and weak, and suddenly a whirling blackness billowed up from nowhere, enveloping his Oliat. Disoriented, he just had time to realize that it was Krinata's mind surrendering to unconsciousness and to feel Storm catch him as he fell. *That was a mistake. I should have adjourned us.*

## **TWO**

### **Krinata's Fever**

*Hiding in a huge hollow log, rotted out to a thin shell. Outside, the giant anthropoid covered with tufts of stringy gray hair prowled hungrily, sniffing and nudging at the log. All of them—the surviving Outriders included—quivered with shameless fear. Vistral was a shattered planet, the ecology hopelessly upset. Everything was ragingly hungry, no longer selective about diet.*

*They had seen three Cassrians in their scouting party eaten alive, their exoskeletons cracked open at the thorax and their organs sucked out by the gray giants. A similar fate awaited them all, if anyone so much as moved while the predator lurked outside. Rescue had been too long in coming.*

*Someone sneezed—*

A convulsive wave of terror engulfed them, throwing them up out of the nightmare, the sound of the sneeze still ringing through Oliat consciousness—hut which Oliat?

Jindigar awoke, sitting doubled over, the aftermath of the sneeze smarting through his air passages. Coughing, he realized he was still Centering his Oliat, with one of his officers reliving an episode from a previous Oliat. He groped to control the linkages again.

//It was Eithlarin!// Zannesu recovered first and scrambled out of bed to her side. //The Vistral

nightmare.//

They were in their quarters adjacent to the Aliom Temple hall. They must have been carried here and put snugly to bed. The large room, built to accommodate the seven of them, was compartmentalized by thin veils of indoor shrubbery lit by the skylight and the windows high up the walls. While Jindigar couldn't see all his officers, he sensed their disorientation as their awarenesses swept the room.

In the great fireplace at the far end of the room, a new fire licked at a tree-trunk-sized log. A pot of hot cereal steamed on the warmer hearth next to the teapot, which filled the room with the aroma of a native herb. To one side of the fire there was a hole in the wall that would be a door to their new indoor plumbing facilities. It was covered over with a rough-woven tarpaulin. Fingers of chill spring wind swirled amid the overheated air from the fireplace.

Jindigar sneezed again, realizing his body was fighting a microbe invasion allowed to take hold during their long exposure. In an hour or so he'd be fine.

As they all began to stir, sitting up, wrapping blankets around themselves, it occurred to him that it had been more than a day since they'd eaten anything. They had gone to the Dissolution on the usual fast. *Small wonder Eithlarin's having one of her episodes.*

He dragged himself to his feet and went to kneel beside Zannesu, who was comforting the Protector as best he could.

//I'm sorry,// Eithlarin apologized, still shaking.

//It isn't your fault,// assured Zannesu. //We'll work through this as soon as we're married. It won't take much once we're through Renewal onset. Next time you work Oliat, you won't be like this.//

She glanced at Jindigar. //It's unprofessional to inflict such things on the other officers.//

He'd known from the start that she had no business working Oliat with the scars from her previous Oliat experience un-healed, but he admired her courage in coming to Phanphihy to *be* a colonist after witnessing the destruction of a colony that had disrupted its planet's ecology. And she had known there was no therapy facility here. But then, it wouldn't have been much better on Dushaun.

She had been the only survivor from Vistral, Of the three officers who had been lifted off the planet, one had gone episodic, retreating into his farthest memories and totally losing touch with current time. The other had died in the aftermath of Dissolution shock brought on when the predator had touched an Oliat Officer and thus broken into the psychic linkages, flooding them with predator's ferocity.

Eithlarin alone had been tough enough to survive with nothing more than occasional nightmares. But they made her a threat to Jindigar's Oliat. No Dushau could resist the arousal of such atavistic terrors, for their species was evolved prey, scavengers who had learned to run rather than light predators, and to glean the predator's leavings. Eithlarin's unhealed terrors made the whole Oliat unusually sensitive to break-in trauma.

No one blamed Eithlarin except, perhaps— Jindigar whipped around, searching Krinata's bed. Everyone else was sitting up, doing waking exercises. But Krinata lay swathed to the eye brows in blankets, tossing feverishly. Very little came to him along the Outreach linkage.

Rising stiffly, he glanced at Dar, who seemed as well as the rest. He and Krinata were the only ones suffering fever. He sent his gladness along the linkage to Dar but went to Krinata. Darllanyu stifled an irrational hurt, telling him, when she knew he'd felt it, //It's Renewal. I can't control it. I don't want the

Oliat— *her*—to claim you now://

// Renewal has affected the linkages too, // Jindigar told them all. //We shouldn't be getting this much emotional texture across interfaces.// lie knell beside Krinata. Her pale skin was flushed pink—human blood was red, not purple. *Dilated blood vessels trying to cool her?* Her skin did feel warmer than it should, though damp.

Krinata squirmed away from Jindigar's touch on her forehead, and instantly her dizziness swept through the Oliat. //She should have a medic's attention.//

Here was yet another reason it was insane to use a human as an Oliat Officer, even temporarily. The Dushau immune

system had never met anything it couldn't handle quickly and permanently. Jindigar resolved to take much better care of Krinata in the future—but was afraid he wouldn't be able to. He hadn't deliberately abused her this time. Yet their lives were dependent on her beating this disease.

He tucked the blanket around her, reflecting that humans were evolved predators. She didn't seem so fearsome now, but he knew she could be deadly. How many times had her aggression saved his life? How many times had she risked her life and honor to save his? He supposed he would count them someday, but he would also have to count the times her best efforts had sent them to the brink of destruction. There was no other individual in the cosmos whom he admired more, and none whom he feared more.

//Jindigar!//

Darllanyu's plea pierced him. They had all followed the gist of his feelings, though not his thoughts. But none of them had lived through what he and Krinata had. He glanced at the high windows where spring lightning danced across the rain-darkened sky. Moving Krinata through that would only make matters worse. //Don't worry,// he assured them. //I wouldn't think of bringing a human medic in here. It would destroy the worldcircle, and I don't think any of us can tolerate an invasive touch.// After that nightmare, even Trinarvil would jeopardize them.

He coughed again. //Very likely whatever has attacked Krinata is a mutation of what I'm fighting.// They'd brought the microlife of their interstellar civilization with them, and it had long since developed the knack of mutating to live in new metabolisms. Throughout the galaxy, standard practice was to use Dushau blood to make antibodies effective for other species.

//I think Krinata can be brought sufficiently close to consciousness so we can adjourn fully, // he decided. //We're straining her system even now. Dissolution would be better for her,

but we'd need her active cooperation. So I'll go to the lab and have serum made for her.//

They argued, but there was really no choice. Darllanyu stayed out of it, disqualifying herself because of her feelings. As Eithlarin applied cold towels to Krinata's face and neck, and Jindigar gathered up the linkages to work the adjournment, Darllanyu finally commented, //The wedding flames have burned out. We'll have to start over now.//

//It will be a while until Krinata's well enough,// cautioned Jindigar, feeling her anguish as well as his own cold emptiness. Darllanyu was the deepest into Renewal onset, the most unstable. Everything in him yearned to surrender to her, to let her systems trigger his own. //We mustn't let this loose among us now. Come, it will help a little to be adjourned.//

His link to Krinata was dull and wispy, though her eyes were open a crack and he could feel her mind struggling to orient. He shut down all the linkages to match that one, then summoned the image of spaceship pressure hatches closing across each corridor that stretched between them.

It was Krinata's visualization of adjournment. They had adopted it for this Oliat because none of their symbols worked for her. As he finished dogging the hatches, each of them returned to individual awareness with only subliminal assurance that the others existed. But any trauma one of them suffered would blow the hatches wide-open. Even separated, they shared holistic awareness, a residual that made linear, vocal speech very difficult. They could speak with close associates and zunre who could be trusted to grasp their meaning, but speech with strangers would remain difficult.

Yanking on some clothes, Jindigar took a rain slicker with a deep hood and plunged out into the torrential downpour. He met no one. The graveled walks were awash in spots, and before he reached the north gate, he was soaked and chilled again. He came out into the walled courtyard and surveyed the place.

Around the enclosing palisade, warehouses and offices had been built where ephemerals traded with Dushau who were not in Renewal. Business was suspended today while the community cleaned up from the battle with the clickerhive.

To his left, against the west palisade, a long building was divided into single rooms, each with its own outside door and smoking chimney. It housed the seven Oliat Outriders when they were on duty.

Rain poured off the roof that slanted down over the rough wood porch. Bentwood chairs were scattered against the wall out of the worst of the wet, and in one of them sat Cyrus Benwilliam, feeding shreds of clickerbeast meat to a young pet piol.

The parent piols had come with them across the galaxy, adopting Jindigar and caring for him with great propriety. Here, they had settled beside the fish-farming pond and proceeded to try to populate the planet with piols. It seemed the species' goal was to provide a personal pet piol for every sapient in the galaxy.

As Jindigar sloshed to the porch and paused to scrape mud off his boots on the rail provided, Cyrus looked up. His first reaction at the sight of Jindigar was fear—that Krinata was dead, the Oliat shattered. Jindigar's manner dispelled that, but the human sensed that something was wrong. As he searched Jindigar for a clue, the piol snatched the remaining meat and ran off to roll merrily in a puddle and pretend that his prize was a fish.

The human was too professional to speak to Jindigar until spoken to. Jindigar wanted to reassure him, but the words wouldn't come. He hadn't realized how much harder it would be adjourning from Center than from any other Office. Before they'd balanced, it hadn't been this hard.

Grasping the difficulty, Cy called over his shoulder, "Storm! Jindigar's here—I think they've adjourned."

The end door opened, sending a shaft of light out into the gloomy morning. Storm, one of Jindigar's closest ephemeral friends, his most trusted Outrider, squinted out at Jindigar, then turned and shouted, "It is Jindigar!" He stepped aside to admit the Center. His professionalism was unimpeachable, yet Jindigar had to set his will not to turn and retreat. *How am I ever going to do this?*

He shed his slicker into waiting hands, telling himself it would be easier once he broke that initial barrier. This was yet another reason no one dared serve at Center twice. It could become impossible to rejoin normal society.

The room was cozy, a fire going and food steaming. To the left, a door opened into the adjacent room,



and beyond, Jindigar glimpsed other doors open down the row of rooms, the other Outriders gathering quickly. The four Lehiroh men were co-husbands whose wife had died when Jindigar's ship had crashed on this world. Cyrus and two other human men, trainees, completed the complement of Outriders.

Jindigar understood that Storm and his co-husbands had an agreement with a Lehiroh woman who had just borne them a son, conceived before it had been decided to train the full Oliat, and before Storm's crew had come back to work, tabling their personal life. The decision to Dissolve had freed them to resume relations with the woman and to dare the joy in the care of their child. All four of the men had well-developed breasts from nursing, and Jindigar knew that the baby had to be here somewhere unless the woman had him today.

The human trainees were the last to come in and were quickly taken aside by the other Lehiroh as Storm maneuvered Jindigar to the fireplace, his back to the near strangers.

*This is for Krinata*, Jindigar told himself. *She's done more than this for me*. He rehearsed the words in his mind, then forced them out at Storm. "We adjourned."

Comprehension and a bit of relief flushed his humanoid features. When not lactating, the Lehiroh males could easily be confused with humans. Jindigar rested both his hands on Storm's shoulders and said, "Krinata has fever."

"No! I was afraid of that. I should have put a coat on her even—"

"No. Could have destroyed our focus—destroyed this colony! Storm—I go to the lab."

"For a blood specimen?" He grinned but politely kept his predator's teeth behind his lips. "Cy, get your coat. We'll go along and explain to them for Jindigar."

Minutes later, they trudged down the path that skirted the cluster of ephemeral dwellings. Each species was building in its own pattern. Several hundred people still lived in huge common units, for winter had interrupted the projects,

On both sides of the path, foundations had been laid for buildings that would house their rebuilt technology. The Dushau Historians had already resurrected dozens of basic crafts and manufacturing processes from the depths of memory. The ephemerals were versatile and talented enough to learn many such skills. By their most optimistic timetable, the Historians figured it might only take a thousand years to attain space travel again. But, with setbacks such as the clickerhive moving in on them, it could take twice that long.

They passed the houses and skirted the livestock corrals and barns, which showed little activity except for the waspish Cassrians at necessary chores. They enjoyed the rain but hated the chill, and called complaints back and forth in their multi-pitched, whistling voices.

No one worked the fields. They were too marshy even for the light step of the Cassrians. Jindigar resisted the impulse to bring the Oliat to focus on the life in those fields. Phanphiyh had a vigorous microlife, and he knew mutant forms were already finding the offworld crops very tasty. If they'd made an error in estimating that process as they had in banishing the minor vermin only to thus attract the killer clickerhive...

"Storm—the Dissolution. We can't do it now."

"Not until Krinata's well. We understand."

"No—the Holot infants."

"True—they are already very hungry. But nobody expects you to—everyone knows you can't go on."

"We must—only without experienced Outriders...."

Cyrus had paced along behind Jindigar, knowing that his straggle to revive his speech faculty would be easier with someone he'd known longer. Now Cyrus put in, "I won't quit until Krinata can."

Jindigar was pleased with himself when he was able to turn and acknowledge that. To Storm he added, "Your child needs you. I will accept other Outriders you may train."

"No," said Storm. "One careless step by an Outrider and you might all die. There are others willing to nurse the baby. We'll see this through."

Jindigar knew the others who would take the baby were not of Storm's religion, and it would pain him to give the child up. But Storm generally spoke for his co-husbands, as Jindigar did for the Oliat. Jindigar added, "It should only be a day or two until we find a food for the Holot infants that won't attract another clickerhive."

They had come to the spaceship graveyard, and to the bottom of the ramp leading into the ship they had powered with salvaged parts. As they climbed that ramp, Jindigar turned to survey the colony. More than two thousand had survived the winter. Dushau had brought them to Phanphihy to fulfill the grand vision of Raichmat's Oliat—the first offworlders to explore this planet.

Jindigar had been Raichmat's Outreach, his first exploring Oliat Office. Finding the Native hive-dwellers building a civilization from their multispecies hives and knowing how the hives' psychic gift would be exploited by the fledgling Empire, Raichmat's had decided that, to protect them, they must establish a Dushau colony on Phanphihy. From that idea had grown the vision of the Dushau-dominant multicolony. Though the multispecies colony form had been successful on many worlds, if one species was present in larger numbers, Dushaun had never colonized. Here, however, it was apparent that the multicolony was the only form that could work. And it was time for Dushaun to establish a colony.

But of the seven Raichmat's Officers who had pledged to come here, only Jindigar, the youngest of them, had made it.

*No point dwelling on that.* Ducking into the open hatch, Jindigar led the way to the medical lab. The room was divided by a counter behind which lab benches were strewn with equipment. He would have preferred to do the specimen processing himself, but there were several competent Cassrians and Lehiroh at work. Storm explained their mission to a white-smocked Cassrian whose carapace decorations showed his military service rank.

The Cassrian's face, though immobile, revealed much to Jindigar's awareness. There was awe for the Oliat and a measure of fear of Cyrus, who had faced down the Cassrian Guard Commander. Nevertheless, the technician extracted a specimen of Jindigar's blood expertly, without the slightest squeamish-ness at handling an endoskeletal arm, then vanished into an adjacent lab to process the specimen for human use.

Jindigar was feeling fine now, so his antibodies for this disease were high enough that there would be no mistake, even though they had no Sentient computer to oversee the process. Waiting in the clean, mechanized environment, Jindigar felt a peculiar relaxation stealing over him, a rush of nostalgia strong enough to take his breath away.

*Onset' instability again!* But he admitted that the rustic life had already begun to wear on him. He wanted to go home. Very soon now this lab would be gone, and for centuries to come, they would have

nothing like it. This is what it meant to be a colonist—not just exile, but exile from the very roots of being.

He shook himself and paced, ignoring the concerned glances of his Outriders as he worked to suppress the Renewal-based alienation. It was the main reason Dushau had no colonies. Deepest consciousness rejected any world but Dushaun itself during Renewal.

After a time, the Cassrian returned with an injector loaded with a vial of colorless fluid, "This should do it if she's fighting any relative of whatever you picked up."

"It's a good guess," assured Storm. "Krinata has spent most of her time with Jindigar."

The Cassrian supplied them with a human-care kit, one of the few left. "If she doesn't rally, try this. But—"

"We know," said Cyrus. "There aren't many kits left."

After the off world supplies were gone, they would have to rely on what they'd learned to gather and process from the countryside. They had quite a sophisticated pharmacopoeia already, but without an Oliat to develop native medicines, the death rate would soar.

The trip back to the Dushau compound was made in an increasing downpour. As they passed through the outer gate, they found a Holot wrapped in a formless slicker pacing back and forth on the porch of the Outriders' quarters. The Holot • was reared up on the hindmost pair of limbs, the upper pair clutching the drenched slicker tight about the head, the middle pair fastidiously hidden beneath the cape.

"Ah, there you are!" called the Holot, and Jindigar recognized her voice—the chief executive of the colony's ephemeral government.

"Terab!" called Storm, preceding them.

By the time Jindigar and Cyrus reached the porch, Storm had briefed her. She pushed her slicker aside with her two middle limbs. The steamy odor of her wet fur around her barrel body assailed them all. The damp bothered the Holot, but the day would seem warm enough to her. "There's a meeting this afternoon in the big barn—and the committees want the Oliat to attend."

Terab was nominally head of the colony's government, but power was spread through committees elected by each species. In designing the structure they had blended ideas from all five species while trying to avoid the dead Empire's mistakes. The result, Jindigar felt sure, would not last long—but it didn't bother ephemerals that things they built didn't last.

"The Outreach is very sick," answered Cyrus for Jindigar. "The Oliat is adjourned, but I really—"

Jindigar stayed him with a hand. "We cannot attend."

Terab made the Holot grimace that bespoke satisfaction. Her snouted face was mobile and expressively beautiful for those who could read it. "I told them as much, but they insisted I come—"

"I'm glad." Jindigar summoned the effort—less now than it had been—to tell her, "I cannot speak to them, but afterward—we must talk."

- "There's to be an investigation—why the clickerhive picked on us—why we were caught unprepared—what we can do to prevent it happening again—and most of all, what we can do now to feed our children. There will be more births soon. And Jindigar, half the colony is having nightmares again—of the attack by all the animals of the plains. They wanted me to ask the Oliat if Chinchee and that

hivebinder of his are about anywhere, putting ideas in our heads. People have been seeing that ugly gray dome over us."

"Chinchee is not near—" answered Jindigar, wanting to claim full responsibility. *They* had re-evoked the hive-dome image. But even with Terab, an old and trusted friend, he could not summon the words.

Storm interrupted. "You'll have to wait for their report on the clickerhive until Krinata can deliver it. "

As if it only now penetrated, Terab asked, "What's wrong with Krinata?" They had fought then- way across a continent together, bandaging each other's hurts, calming each other's terrors. Terab was as much Krinata's friend as Jindigar's.

Storm launched into an explanation, shouting a little against the sound of another downpour. Cyrus handed Jindigar the medical kit, saying, "Go—we'll be here when you want us— unless a flood washes us away."

In the Aliom Temple, the fire was still burning in the hearth by the door. Jindigar hung his slicker to dry and cut across toward the door of the Oliat quarters before he noticed Darllanyu, wearing rough-worn field clothes, standing at the edge of the marriage circle, her indigo skin like a black shadow against the white gravel. She tossed gravel back into the circle and dusted off her hands. Jindigar paused, suspended between the urgency of Krinata's illness and the aching hurt tearing at his mate.

Darllanyu turned, and her eyes drew him forward.

"Dar—no. Not now." Suddenly he hated the Priest's disciplines that gave him the strength to deny her.

"You must Dissolve—or Dismiss me, at least. Perhaps Trinarvil can take my place. I can't do it, Jindigar."

She was closer to the critical point than he. He had counted on that to pull him into active Renewal quickly, the swift rush of hormones forcing them both over the threshold into acceptance of this alien world. But—"Trinarvil is still too ill. If I let anyone go, it's Dissolution—and the Holot children will starve."

"Zannesu convinced us of that—after you left. I thought— I thought I could—but—I can't. Wisdom is to know your limits. I'm a danger—to all of us."

*I can't*, wasn't usually in Darllanyu's vocabulary. He recalled how she'd looked when they'd found her outside the hive up on the plateau. She and Cyrus had been the only survivors of Avelor's Oliat. She'd been emaciated, too weak to walk, but she had recovered her spirits before her strength. Within a few weeks she had joined another Oliat, of Jindigar's fabrication—and lost two of her fellow officers to death-trauma during the battle against the Imperial troops who had chased him and Krinata to this world. And then the pentad remaining had accepted Jindigar and Krinata to become Jindigar's Oliat. Darllanyu had endured more than anyone could expect, and that had catapulted her into Renewal. If she said she couldn't, she couldn't.

Jindigar tore his eyes from the white circle and gestured his acceptance of her evaluation. *He* had to go on, with or without an Oliat. He could not reach Completion if he abandoned his responsibilities. So she would have to find another mate—this time. "I want you, Dar, more than I've ever wanted anyone. But I'll arrange a Dismissal."

The loss heavy in him, he turned to the Oliat room where Krinata lay. Zannesu was wiping Krinata's face with a cold towel while Eithlarin massaged her feet to stimulate her natural disease defenses.

"She's worse. Did you get it?" asked Zannesu.

Jindigar produced the injector and the medical kit and let Eithlarin administer the injection. "Dar is resigning."

That created a stir. The barricades Jindigar had erected to partition the Oliat were holding—almost too well. Venlagar wilted onto his bed. Of them all, he was the farthest from active Renewal, which was why Jindigar had placed him as Receptor. "Then we can't go on," sighed Venlagar.

"Not as an Oliat," replied Jindigar.

"You going to try to hold a hexad?" asked Llistyien, her incredulity leaking through the barriers to Jindigar.

"It does sound absurd," agreed Jindigar.

"How long can a Center work so unbalanced?" asked Venlagar.

"Ordinarily, quite a while," supplied Zannesu. "But not under these circumstances."

Jindigar watched him but didn't ask if that meant he'd not stay with a Center who was trying it.

Venlagar asked, "Can we find a Holot infant food that won't attract clickerswarms fast enough so you can rejoin Dar?"

"I doubt it. A hexad isn't as fast as an Oliat."

From the doorway Darllanyu spoke, lips compressed. "Using pensone, I can make it—at least to find them some food."

Jindigar let the shock wash through him, hardly daring to let himself shudder. Pensone would suppress Renewal, and they did have some. But the side effects—Dar might be rendered permanently sterile. She'd surely have trouble conceiving or carrying to term this Renewal, for pensone would leave her less able to absorb nutrients and could cut centuries off her lifespan, if she survived the withdrawal of the drug. Psychotic or suicidal behavior was not unusual when going off pensone. And those were the mild effects. "That stuff is poison!" Somebody whose life was Complete might dare it, but... Jindigar admitted to himself that he'd waited six thousand years for a child of hers—he could wait another thousand if he had to, but the idea of losing the chance altogether hurt too much.

Venlagar intervened in a level tone, knowing, as they all did, why Jindigar was not reacting as a Center. "Naturally Jindigar feels threatened by your suggestion, Dar." He turned to Jindigar. "But I think we all know that this mess is our responsibility. It isn't as difficult for me to say this as for the rest of you—so I'll say it first. So long as I can hold so much as a duad, I'll continue."

Zannesu looked into Eithlarin's eyes over Krinata's flushed, freckled face. But Eithlarin spoke for them. "What if we continue to make mistakes?"

"We probably will." Jindigar told them everything Terab had said, finishing with the nightmares resurfacing among the ephemerals. "With the fine balance you gave me yesterday, I should have known that would happen, and I should have found another way. This Oliat at its best is not trustworthy. Trying to rectify the error that brought the clickcrhive may only make matters worse." He wondered what Terab would say when he reported that the Oliat was the source of their trouble. He doubted if any ephemeral hail ever heard of an untrustworthy Oliat.

Krinata's eyes drifted open and focused. Disoriented by the adjournment, feverish, she accepted the cup Eithlarin held for her but asked vaguely, "What happened?"

Jindigar sighed as they all launched into different explanations. In the end, it would be up to Krinata. After a taste of what Oliat balance had done to her health, she might not be able to face it again. *But if she withdraws—Dar won't have any reason to destroy herself with pensone.*

### THREE

#### A Simple Job

The Holot infant was fretting miserably with hunger, her six limbs thrashing against her mother's body despite the blanket muffling her downy form.

Jindigar had assembled his Oliat in the Holot cave for this operation. The vats for making the slurry of curdled herbivore milk to feed the Holot infants were clean now; all the putrefaction caused by clickerhive beast droppings had been steam-cleaned away.

Under no circumstances would the committees of the other species allow the Holot to continue making their baby food. Jindigar had reported, through Krinata, just how and why the clickerhive had descended on them. They had accepted that the Holot food had lured the animals, but they discounted the Oliat's role in the original error. Ephemerals regarded such fallibility as a norm, refusing to take it as a sign that the Oliat had gone as far as it could.

"Jindigar," Terab had said, "people resent the Oliat for quitting just when you're needed most. They're beginning to distrust Dushau altogether."

Terab had recounted the acrimonious interspecies rivalry at the joint committee meeting, declaring that if the Oliat couldn't find a solution to the Holot problem, the colony would surely split. She was Holot, and emotionally involved, but even so, Jindigar believed her. He had brought his Oliat into the field once more, knowing this would only convince some ephemerals that they were quitting by choice, but also knowing that,

as Krinata had insisted, "If the colony falls apart, we may as well not bother to survive  
Dissolution—because we won't live long."

Terab came over to Krinata and addressed the now-reconvened Oliat through her. "Everything is ready as Jindigar's requested."

Cyrus maintained his vigilance beside Krinata, having seen that she was wrapped in an extra cloak for work in the chilly cave. Jindigar felt the human male's protectiveness and barriered himself against the sexual overtones Cyrus couldn't suppress.

Surveying the cave one last time, Jindigar used Oliat perceptions, not vision, for the only lighting was a yellow flame. The committees' representatives were clustered around the sun-bright cave mouth—upper-class Cassrians with carapaces engraved and inlaid with precious gems and a few Lehiroh, humans, and Holot who might once have been aristocrats or tradesmen.

Apart from them stood a group of Dushau who had volunteered to interact with the colony's government. Trinarvil, their head of medical services, was not among them. Her health was too fragile for her to become involved. But Threntisn, their chief Archivist, was there recording the event into the great memory pattern passed from Historian to Historian down the ages from the dawn of Dushau history. Jindigar himself had carried that particular Archive, sealed and entrusted to Jindigar at death by Grisnilter. The seal had broken, but Jindigar had delivered the Archive intact to Threntisn, who was trained to handle it safely.

Threntisn and the other non-Oliat Dushau wore photo-multiplier filters to see by firelight. Jindigar felt the

Historian's recording gaze settle upon him as he responded to Terab's report through his Outreach.  
"//Thank you, Terab. Cy, you may close access now.//"

They had all seen the Oliat or its subforms working in the settlement. They knew that during this operation there could be no information exchange with the Oliat. The Outriders would see that the officers remained undisturbed.

Cyrus signaled, and the other Outriders came to attention. Before reconvening and balancing, Jindigar had explained to the Outriders that they were now more vulnerable to distractions. He had not told them of Eithlarin's episode or that Darllanyu had wanted to use pensone on herself while Krinata had flatly refused to be a party to it. The others had supported their human zunre, saying that if Darllanyu felt she couldn't do this undrugged, then they'd better Dissolve.

As the intensity of her current hormonal surge had abated, Darllanyu had agreed to work drugless, but Jindigar had resolved to keep his attention away from Krinata as much as possible while timing this operation for the natural trough in Dar's cycle. They had all agreed, knowing the risks, for he had explained it, telling them plainly, "If we ever reestablish contact with Dushaun, I'll be brought up on charges for allowing this."

So Jindigar was not surprised when the Oliat trembled nervously in his grasp, balance among them and attunement with the world around them eluding him. He felt Krinata's heart leap with apprehension and shut down the open channel to her awareness lest it upset everyone else. Krinata turned to him, alarmed.  
//Jindigar- don't. I can do it.//

//Relax,// advised Jindigar. //Only the Outreach can do this first part of the operation. But let me set it up for you.// He focused on Zannesu, his Inrecach, whose job it was to hold the balance among the linkages once Jindigar had set it. //Do you want to try to reinforce Center's pattern?//

Zannesu had never done this maneuver before, but he tackled it with a calm professionalism. Jindigar felt his strength supporting his own and gradually developing the pattern they had chosen, wide-open to Krinata and the Receptor, Venlagar, but closed to the others, protecting their most vulnerable officers. Jindigar was prepared to proceed without seeking the shaleiliu hum, but it came as he and Zannesu worked together.

He wasted not a moment basking in it but, rather, turned directly to Krinata.

With the link to her wide-open, Jindigar caught her oddly human conception of the linkages—transparent tubes that connected the officers to Jindigar and among themselves. The tubes carried colored fluid from one to the other, representing the information flow. Sometimes the fluids glowed brightly in wide tubes, and sometimes the tubes were constricted, the fluids diffuse or bubbling with turbulence. At the moment, the links from Center to Inreach, and through Inreach to Outreach, as well as the Center-Receptor link, glowed bright rainbows, while the others were dulled.

In Krinata's mind, she was now on another plane of existence, as in a dream, holding on to her link while high pressure fluid spewed out, battering her mercilessly. She hung on with all her courage, unable to absorb even the relatively small amount of data she was getting from the Receptor. Jindigar wanted to cut down the amplitude to her, but knew he could help only by making this brief. The Oliat operations which lost touch with contiguous reality often turned to nightmare for her, for she did not yet grasp *where* the Oliat existed and worked.

With them barely stabilized, he told her, //All right, Krinata, go.//

She turned, Cyrus at her right, and went to the Holot mother, hands out to take the infant. Jindigar

braced to soak up the shock for Eithlarin, reminding her, //Protector, this is not a break-in. We need to read the child.//

//I know!// she snapped, then apologized, adding, //The poor little thing is starving.//

//Don't think about it,// advised Jindigar, //focus on how well Holot protect themselves.// He turned to Llistyien for her Emulation of Holot characteristics. Grasping the essence of Holot motherhood, Jindigar did his best to bring those elements up in Krinata, despite her lack of Emulator's experience. Handling the Holot infant, whose sharp claws and teeth could rend human flesh and whose xenophobia was irritated by hunger, Krinata now welcomed every clue Jindigar could give her.

She touched the infant in just the right places, soothed with the right strokes, reassured with the right sounds, ignoring the raw throat the gutturals gave her. Lacking a second pair of arms, she did her best to cradle the small body against her. Soon the infant quieted.

Now came the dangerous part, for through Krinata's nurturing touch, the awareness of *infant*, small striving potential of life, was throbbing through the Oliat. *Definitely not the operation to hand an Oliat on the brink of Renewal*. Swallowing the taste of his own fear, Jindigar prompted Krinata, //Now Venlagar must touch her too.//

Venlagar shivered—even Venlagar, the farthest from Renewal. But they couldn't afford to stop now. //You must open to her, Receptor.//

Venlagar's deep indigo eyes searched Jindigar while his Receptor's sense examined the Oliat's balance, but a Receptor didn't judge the Oliat's internal condition. It was his business to keep the Oliat sensitive to the environment.

Venlagar cupped his arms around the squirming, fretting form in Krinata's embrace. The feel of four supporting arms calmed the infant even as the Receptor focused on the voracious hunger within.

Krinata kept her own grip firm, having no trouble now concentrating on the baby. Jindigar got the distinct impression that this was the first time she'd ever held such a young child, and for her, the enhancing Emulation of motherhood was a journey of self-discovery. For Darllanyu it was no first. Her arms ached to hold the young thing, and memories fought to claim her attention. //Steady, Dar. I'll make this quick.//

Jindigar let Venlagar's Reception of the infant's incessant hunger flood through them. Her needs, her burgeoning growth, her striving for life became a part of them. Through the baby's senses her mother's love and growing fright for her child's life also became a part of them. The pressure of the life force,

binding them all, surged through the open Receptor and possessed the Oliat.

Jindigar signaled Zannesu. //Now—to Llistyien.//

Together they reorganized the pattern of energy flows so Llistyien was as wide-open a channel as Venlagar, and Krinata was again isolated from the full power of Oliat multiawareness. Jindigar stole a second to reassure Krinata, //Well done!// and Darllanyu: //I'm not trying for precision. It won't be much longer now.//

Then he caught up the linkages from Zannesu and turned the Oliat out, toward the world of Phanphiyh, seeking the shaleiliu between the Holot hunger and the world's abundance.

It was the simplest of Oliat exercises. Out there, the life forces surged with determination equal to that of the Holot. The spring had brought renewal to this world, but the Holot were not of a piece with it.



The Oliat subforms, strive as they had throughout the winter, had not brought the offworld settlement into tune with this ecology. The colonists and Phanphihy had only one thing in common—the propagation of new life, the raw enthusiasm for survival, the upsurge of the cycle of renewal.

Reaching for the point of shaleiliu, Jindigar traced that commonality, absorbed now in a Center's task and momentarily oblivious to the dangers, gratefully accepting one last gratification before Renewal forced him to reorder his priorities. He surrendered to the infant's hunger and frantic need for the safety of *home*, casting about for the fulfillment of that need.

All at once Darllanyu echoed that need, her concentration disrupted by a burst of Renewal hormones. She lost attunement with Phanphihy, alien and unreal. Reflexively, she raked the Oliat linkages for the one secure anchor, the wellspring of life, the core energies of Dushaun itself, *home*. Jindigar, tied to her at depths beyond fathoming, was swept along, his perceptions shifting. The spring lifetide of Phanphihy akin to home, but yet alien, became a looming menace.

He could not separate his perception from Darllanyu's.

Through him, her convulsive rejection of this world suffused the Oliat. In a whirl they all lost the attunement with Phanphihy, the shaleiliu hum deserted them, and the Oliat balance disintegrated.

Fighting panic, Jindigar forced his eyes open but saw only darkness fraught with sinister gleams of dark red against black—rocks, vats, beings—alien beings. The Oliat multiawareness brought him insane fragments of images through his officers' eyes and an overwhelming sense of revulsion.

Old, basic drills taking hold, Jindigar sought his Outreach's linkage and opened to it, reinforcing his Oliat's baseline. Her human vision showed the cave walls, gray with glints of white and blue. The vats shone bronze. The fire spread a radiance by which he could see Venlagar holding the Holot baby—and he could feel Krinata's arms cradling the infant's warm softness, her innermost being melting into a nearly orgasmic yearning for a child of her own, something she had never been interested in before.

Venlagar, under the confusing onslaught of the disintegrated balance, staggered backward. Krinata caught the baby up from Venlagar's grip and whirled to stare at Jindigar, eyes glittering, mouth open showing pale white teeth and blazing fury, as if he'd violated her most sacred being. //How *dare* you! Get out of my head!//

Around them, officers reeled, sagging to the ground, caught by their Outriders, whose touch would not be felt as too intrusive. Darllanyu, gravitating toward the child, got her hands onto the infant, blasting the linkages with a Formulator's perception of the baby's need. Krinata pulled back possessively. Jindigar, all his being wanting only to touch the worldcircle energies of Dushaun, nevertheless drove himself toward the infant, wondering briefly if he was Center enough to save them from this.

Krinata wrenched the baby from Darllanyu's grasp, heedless of the infant's slashing claws, but she pulled too hard. She staggered back, stepped on Cyrus's foot, overcorrected, and lunged forward into Jindigar. Clutching the baby to her to protect its fragile body, she twisted aside as they all fell, toppling Storm with them.

Despite Cyrus's effort, Krinata's head hit the floor. The human vision dimmed, as if Krinata were losing consciousness. Then everything went wild.

Fighting panic, Jindigar found himself isolated outside the Oliat linkages, detached as if surveying his own Oliat from some astral vantage, connected to them only by a slim thread. And Krinata was at their Center now.

His officers, thrashing in panic themselves, clutched at the artificial Center as if she were their own.

She knew little of that. Her whole attention was on Jindigar floating bodilessly in some other dimension. There was an urge in her to snap that tenuous link to Jindigar and send him to Incompletion-death. *As I once sent Takora.*

Will paralyzed by that thought, he was unable to plead with her. In all of his dealings with Ontarrah/Krinata he always ended up at her mercy, helpless, seriously wondering if he had earned Incompletion-death by virtue of stupidity. All his fear of this entity burgeoned upward, and it seemed an insanely rational fear.

Then, with a mind-wrenching twist, without time to think that this was death, he fell into the familiar Office of Outreach. In that moment the shaleiliu hum surged through the Oliat— Krinata's Oliat—with a brash new power, zooming their awareness in on the single point of harmony between Phanphihy and the Holot's hunger, restoring a shaky attunement to the planet.

The locus was on the plain above the cliff—a hive of pollen-gatherers whose main staple was the sticky pollen now being produced by the abundant grasses. From this, a certain tree sap, and their own saliva, they made a syrupy suspension of nutrients for their own use—and as a gift to make allies. The Gifter hive, alive with spring's furious activities, was bound, as all Phanphihy hives, through a sensitive group conscious-

ness. As the Oliat browsed over their identity, the hive paused— as if on one held breath.

In that instant of precise clarity the Oliat found the syrup compatible with the Holot infant's needs—but without Jindigar at Center to judge the matter.

Krinata's will drove them, her bottomless compassion for the baby, her nurturing impulse that would not let anything or anyone go hungry, her emotions, wakened by Emulation, and fueled by her human metabolism's eternal state of quasi-Renewal. The Oliat's response reverberated. *The young must be cared for. The purpose of life is within the young.*

Dimly, Jindigar noticed the committee onlookers near the cave mouth murmuring among themselves, nerving themselves to intervene while the Dushau there hastened to restrain them.

Then the soundless tone that bound Krinata's Oliat dopplered away, the Oliat's balance wobbling in Krinata's grip before she could finish the evaluation. Worse, she lost the distinct identity of each of the Offices, the discreet links connecting them swelling and blurring, almost as if about to Dissolve, but instead leaving them aswim in a miasma of wild energies.

But it was Jindigar's Oliat. Summoning all his will, he opened a clear, firm link to Zannesu, assigning him to Inreach again and, by that act, taking Center. //Zannesu, can you tolerate the link to Krinata at Outreach?//

A surge of horror came back through the link, but Zannesu replied, //Since I must, I can.//

Jindigar turned his attention to his other officers, and one by one, called them. //Outreach. Inreach. Receptor. Emulator. Protector. Formulator.// Shaping and holding the balance, relying on the vague attunement to Phanphihy that Krinata had brought them, he told them, //We have a job to finish. We must tell the Holot about the Gifter hive and negotiate with the Gifters for the colony.//

Krinata's touch on the Outreach link came in strong, commanding, competent—the touch that had held them with a towering strength from Center. As Jindigar set their goal before them, human perceptions

faded back into the Oliat awareness, and all the surprising strength disintegrated. Suddenly helpless, she cried out, rolled away from Jindigar, and curled around the now-struggling baby. Cyrus scrambled around in front of her.

Not daring to think how close they had come to annihilation, Jindigar shut down the linkages to the merest whisper. He was afraid to attempt an adjournment when they all needed the stability of the open links.

Turning into Cyrus's embrace, Krinata buried herself as if scrabbling for protection. Cyrus pried the frantic infant from Krinata's grip, ignoring the bloody gashes it inflicted on both of them, and rose to return her to her mother's arms. The instant the baby was out of touch with the Oliat, everything shifted. Krinata, overloaded beyond tolerance, could only clutch at Cyrus and sob uncontrollably.

Torn between duty and compassion, Cyrus emitted a low groan and enfolded her in his arms, knowing he couldn't protect her from what assailed her, but unable to withhold that small comfort. He stroked her head with trembling fingers.

Jindigar, oddly bereft at Krinata's turning from him, could not blame the Outrider for being human. And somehow Cyrus's touch came to them through Krinata as balm for raw nerves, which soothed Jindigar's sense of loss. Mindful of Eithlarin's irrational sensitivity to break-ins, and feeling Darllanyu's response as he reacted to Krinata, he explained, *III* must recapture Krinata's attention, or we are all lost.// Even an Outrider's valid touch could be disruptive. And with his mate warm in his arms, how long could Cyrus remain only comforting?

//Go ahead,// Darllanyu told him tightly.

Jindigar widened the link to Krinata, demanding her attention, trying not to feel justified in it. //Krinata! Listen! You didn't do that. Takora did.//

//?/?// She turned to him, eyes widening.

Her sobs quieted, and he added the only reassurance he had.

//You haven't the skill to grab Center like that—and then do— what you did. Takora did. She was a Center. If she'd balanced with another Oliat, she wouldn't be able to do anything else *but* grab for Center at the first chance.//

For a moment Jindigar thought he was getting through to her, for she muttered, "//Takora... //" Then, more strongly, //What do I have to do to prove to you I was Takora!// Her eyes went out of focus, her face went slack, and an unnatural stillness settled over her.

Jindigar sat back on his heels in shock. *She still believes she was Takora?* But Dushau simply did not reincarnate. He and Krinata had put the Takora personality to rest a year ago. She had seemed to accept all her Dushau-like manifestations, from playing the whole to functioning in Oliat subforms, as part of the Takora memory-nexus she'd absorbed from his mind by accident. She hadn't manifested anything but the most rudimentary Outreach skills since then.

But when they'd first landed on Phanphiyh, Krinata had been carrying a memory-loop seared into her mind at the insanity-crazed death of Desdinda. To Krinata it had been like being possessed by a devil bent on killing Jindigar. Desdinda had been laid to rest permanently, but Krinata didn't have the strength to face anything like that again.

And now, in a moment of paralyzing panic, Takora had taken total control of Krinata—as if she were

more than just an acquired memory-nexus and would have to be excised.

Jindigar squatted down next to Krinata and touched her cheek. //It's not like Desdinda.. You only have some of my memories of Takora from when I was her Protector.// Jindigar had broken Aliom law when he had Inverted Takora's Oliat, to Dissolve it. But he'd done that because Takora was already at the verge of death and was too weak to Dissolve her own Oliat. She would have taken them all with her to Incompletion-death had Jindigar not acted. But that one act had branded him Invert for life, and many Aliom practitioners had not forgiven him, even though as Center he had kept his pledge not to Invert this Oliat. //Krinata—it's all right now,// he pleaded, hoping it was so, trying not to think of the feeling he'd had as he'd floated above his Oliat, watching her at Center with the power to send him to oblivion. *But she didn't.*

As Krinata stared fixedly off into space the rest of his officers began to collect themselves. Zannesu hunkered down opposite Jindigar and passed a hand in front of Krinata's eyes. The entire Oliat should have felt her avoidance reflex, but there was nothing. Zannesu met Jindigar's eyes, seeing only by Oliat awareness. //She's—not there.//

But the link was still there. //She's alive.//

Zannesu came around and pulled Jindigar to his feet. //This is just another reason we shouldn't have taken her as Outreach, Jindigar. No human—//

Darllanyu interrupted. //We can't blame her. I should have taken pensone. I told you I couldn't do without it.//

//But we've all survived, and we learned a lot about ourselves and about humans we'd never have experienced otherwise,// noted Eithlarin. //Which makes us all that much closer to Completion.//

Venlagar rose with the help of his Outrider and did what Jindigar had not dared. With both hands on Krinata's shoulders, he coaxed her away from Cyrus and brought her back into the group. //Whatever we may do next, Krinata is part of us now. I admit she gave me the horrors—but we knew she'd be our weak point. Considering that, she's done remarkably well. We're all alive, aren't we? And that's because she, as a human, was able to attune to this planet when we weren't.//

That should have been Jindigar's speech, but he was pulling himself away from another dread. *Suppose I can't capture enough of her attention to Dissolve?* If her mind had snapped, they could all die, sucked into her madness.

Just then, the stirring and muttering among the onlookers at the front of the cave gave way to a cry of alarm voiced by some human or Lehiroh man, and suddenly the cave was filled with the strident buzz of myriads of tiny wings.

Venlagar, Receiving, gave them the picture. High up on the plateau above them, the overmind of the hive Krinata had contacted had—in true Phanphihiy fashion—adopted the pseudo-hive below and decided to feed the neighboring young. The hive workers were now transporting—bead by tiny bead—a quantity of their syrup to the stores of the pseudo-hive.

The hive consciousness was aware of huge lumbering creatures just within the cave mouth, thrashing about and flailing at the stream of laden transporters it had sent. It commanded the warriors and workers to avoid the slow creatures. Before long, the huge animals had lumbered out of the cave, fleeing as if afraid of attack. Strange.

Indeed, as had come to the hive's awareness, the food cells were empty—the young must be starving.

This would be a true alliance, good for the hive, for these creatures could spread and nurture the seeds of the pollen plants.

This was an Emulation level dangerous even for a fully balanced and secure Oliat. Jindigar pulled them back from being immersed in the hive mentality of the insectoids. The committee representatives were shouting at each other as they fled.

The Oliat was isolated without an Outreach. But they had done their day's work. The Holot would be fed—if he could only find a way of telling them so.

He scooped Krinata's tiny body up in his arms and felt a moment of fear as Cyrus blocked his way, locking eyes with him, his unspoken fear for Krinata like a wall between them. But then Storm intervened, taking Cyrus by the shoulders and turning him away. "Listen to me! You can't help Krinata. She's one of them now. They don't dare let a human medic touch her. Jindigar will know what to do."

Jindigar was aware of the bunching of Cyrus's muscles against Storm's Lehiroh strength, but it was the fierce conflict of friends with a deep caring that was, in its way, so purely male, it bridged the species gap and united them. At last Cyrus yielded and turned his face away while Jindigar carried Krinata out of the cave, the other Outriders closing around the moving Oliat, ignoring the flight of insects overhead because the Oliat did.

Outside, daylight was waning in a cloud-speckled sky, but there was enough light to see the path down the cliff face. Ruff, Storm's co-husband, insisted on edging past Jindigar and taking the path first, clearing off every bit of gravel Jindigar might slip on.

The Outriders left them at the outer court of the Dushau compound, and Jindigar forged through the inner gate and on down the residential streets to the central plaza. The plaza was defined by the Aliom Temple, the Historians' Temple, the administration building and the medical services center. All about, people paused among the saplings and new grass to gaze after the Oliat with grave concern or total lack of surprise that it was the human who had collapsed.

Jindigar carried Krinata on through the hospital and right into Trinarvil's office where he laid his Outreach on a bench and turned to peer up at Trinarvil, who was standing in the middle of the floor between the bench and her desk.

Trinarvil had always seemed old to Jindigar, but in these past months, she had become worn and haggard as well. Catapulted into premature Renewal, her body was rejecting most of the nutrients of this world, regardless of what native foods she ate, a common result of loss of attunement. Her sleep was fraught with nightmares, her days haunted with a sickness only those who had known exile from Dushaun could guess at.

She was much too ill, yet the Oliat needed her, needed an Outreach they could trust—if only for a very short while. And Trinarvil was an experienced Oliat Officer. If she could only accept this world—even if just as superficially as the rest of them had—they could use her for the brief while it would take to Dissolve.

Kneeling beside Krinata, who simply stared catatonically at the ceiling, Jindigar looked up at Trinarvil, knowing she would understand his plea.

And she did. But she only shook her head, the sadness in the etched lines in her face growing to a bleak hopelessness as she gazed upon Krinata. Then she went to the door, weaving her way through Jindigar's other officers, and called some orders to those outside.

Blankets and hot water were brought for Krinata. Trinarvil let them know implicitly by her movements rather than by attempting speech, that she wanted Llistyien to Emulate Krinata into the Oliat—to evoke within the Oliat the closed mental loop the human was trapped in.

Jindigar's first impulse was to reject that utterly, but then he saw what she was pulling out of a storage cabinet behind her desk. Trundling the heavy battery pack behind it, she deployed the only vibration therapy machine still fully operating. It was a long, silvery box with four tall poles that telescoped out of it in various directions. Two of them were color projectors and two were sound projectors.

Jindigar had no idea how a human might respond to such a standard -health-adjusting procedure. But could it really be harmful? Especially in link with six Dushau? Yet what else could they try? Before long, the committee people would have the army up at that cave, spraying it with fire or smoke to rid it of the insects trying to help them.

Trinarvil's people brought in cots for the other six Oliat Officers and strapped them down so they wouldn't hurt themselves.

Jindigar signaled Zannesu, and they opened the linkages just enough to let Llistyien attune to Krinata and Emulate. It took her three tries to overcome the fear of the darkness possessing Krinata's mind, Jindigar insisting that what was happening to Krinata didn't resemble the Dushau malady of being lost in the episodes of memory. Then Jindigar, with all his Oliat, went down into Krinata's darkness, a depth of stillness where thought locked against thought and paralyzed the mind.

Jindigar never knew what happened. They told him later that it had taken nearly an hour for them to come out of it.

But it seemed to him like the very next thing he knew, the room came swimming into focus, and residual scraps of thought evaporating from the edges of consciousness seemed cast in the piquant human symbolism whereby Oliat linkages became tubes, information came in colors, and almost anything could have phallic import or monetary value.

Strength was pouring into him like a tangible fluid, and he was glad to be strapped down, for everything whirled crazily. He applied himself to balancing the linkages, vanquishing every shred of Krinata's private memories that might have leaked into his memory, and synthesizing the multiawareness into coherent meaning. He'd never noticed how much mental effort it took to do that. But as he grew stronger he rolled his head over and found Krinata's eyes staring into his own.

## **FOUR**

### **Trap**

Krinata's eyes were human, with three concentric circles, the center one being a single pupil contracted to a mere point against the searingly bright Dushauni lumps. The irises were black, shot through with structures that had no relationship to vision. And the whites were newly bloodshot, showing strain and illness that tore at Jindigar's heart.

Bandages spotted her arms, chest, and neck, where the baby Holot had savaged her furless skin. Trinarvil knelt above Krinata's head, palpating her cervical vertebrae and testing for abnormal nerve-current patterns throughout her body. Someone must have mentioned the fall Krinata had taken. The human spine was notoriously delicate.

Eithlarin writhed to consciousness and, gasping, twisted to see that it was Trinarvil handling Krinata. She took a deliberate relaxing breath and schooled herself to patience as she saw Zannesu start awake and groggily fumble at his restraints, needing to get to her to comfort her. Jindigar made a mental note to

inform Trinarvil of Eithlarin's escalating break-in sensitivity if his Protector didn't do it herself. But most of his attention was on Krinata. //You're going to be all right now. It's over.//

//Jindigar?// she marveled. //Where—how—//

As she conceived of questions the answers came to her within the Oliat perception but too fast for her stunned mind. He started to rise, to go to her, but fell back under the restraining straps. Trinarvil released him, and he rolled off to kneel beside Krinata as Trinarvil went to shut down the irradiators. //Just a moment, and we'll adjourn,// he reassured Krinata, //but first, can you speak for us?//

She coughed her throat clear. //I guess so. Go ahead.// Jindigar worked the restraints away from her chest and helped her sit up as she reported for them, "//Trinarvil, we must inform the committees that the new invaders of the Holot's cave are , only donating an appropriate food for the infants. They mustn't be molested!//"

The medic took that in, then stepped to the door to send a messenger. By then, all the officers were moving. Jindigar felt the unsteadiness in their legs as they helped one another up. Darllanyu sat on the side of her cot, head cradled in her hands, her blue turban coming unwound. She pushed it off, revealing the elegant shape of her skull as she fought the remnants of the hormonal surge that had driven her out of attunement with Phanphihy.

Her awareness of Trinarvil's debilitated health lanced sharply through the Oliat along with her fear that they'd all die that way—in slow agony. The emotion almost shouted the thought, *Where will I get courage like Trinarvil's?*

Raked by the untoward intimacy with Darllanyu, Krinata burst out, //Jindigar, why didn't you tell me the links allowed such obscene access into an officer's feelings!//

//They aren't supposed to,// responded Jindigar, struggling to adjust the balance to give them all privacy, while at the same time reassuring Darllanyu that they would help each other through that adjustment. //It's happening because we're beyond the safety margin. But to become Center one must first hold all the other offices, several times, under different Centers, to learn how to observe another's privacy when the other has no way to defend it.//

She rubbed her face, her ears moving oddly with the rest of her scalp as Darllanyu's fear faded into the background. //But I don't know what was real, what happened, what I imagined, what anyone else imagined and forced into me!//

//What do *you* remember?// asked Jindigar.

//I don't know—I—I lost myself. I couldn't—I don't — Jindigar, what if—but no, I was Takora, but I'm not Takora now. I'm Krinata—I'm me! I'm *only* me! Takora didn't take over the Oliat, / did!// She shivered. //Jindigar, how can you stand it at Center?//

He sat beside her and hugged her, wrapping her blanket around her, only just now realizing what it must have been like for her, her brain not even able to cope with Outreach, to suddenly be Hooded with all the data a Center deals with. //Yes, you're Krinata, only Krinata. Your mind is your own and all of one piece. No ghostly invaders like Desdinda, no insanity, just you. You will always have, deep in your unconscious, the Takora memory- nexus you got from me. But, *you* -took Center. It felt like somebody else because you used the Takora memories you've isolated in your unconscious. That isolation's not bad. The human mind can't deal with the millennia depth of the nexus any more than I could deal with Grisnilter's Archive when I carried it.// *It's Threntisn's Archive now*, he reminded himself.

His eyes met Darllanyu's over Krinata's black hair, and he noted what a pale blue Darllanyu's teeth had turned. She was not well. Her discomfort at his sympathy for Krinata was intolerable. He got up — but dared not go to Dar. If he dared offer her so much as a touch, he'd never be able to control what came next.

Jindigar's dilemma increased Krinata's anxiety, too, but she was still caught up in her own problem. //Jindigar—why can't you acknowledge that I *wax* Takora? Really-- not just by acquired memory?//

Jindigar's breath caught in his throat. In a flash he was again swaying on the end of an intangible tether, gazing out over an Oliat that was his own, yet not his—Krinata, who could barely tolerate Outreach, at Center and balancing.

What if it were true? What if she had been Takora?

The very notion was staggering. It would mean that the entire theoretical foundation of Aliom science was riddled with errors: the concept of the purpose of life, the meaning of existence, the shape of the universe—everything was based on the idea that Dushau did not reincarnate as ephemerals do but had only one chance to complete the maturing of personality. Oliat work was part of a system aimed at Completion. To die Incomplete was to vanish from existence. And Oliat experience confirmed that this was indeed what happened to the Dushau who died Incomplete—as Takora had at his hand. *But she had been doomed, anyway.*

Takora's death was an old, well-resolved issue. But he admitted it was a burden to his spirits. *Do I deny she's come back because I can't bear to face her?* In the turbulence of onset there was no way to determine that.

Sensitive to Jindigar's condition, Zannesu interrupted. //Krinata, none of us can deal with this now, and everyone's waiting....//

Krinata leapt to her feet. //Cyrus!// The picture burning through her mind was a memory, Cyrus peering into her eyes anxiously, his hands warm on her shoulders, trembling but tender, a nuance that bespoke leashed passion, inflamed by Jindigar's luring her attention away. //He thinks—oh, no!// Her need to allay Cyrus's fear commanded the Oliat.

The Oliat responded, striving to perceive the Outriders' barracks, almost as if she were at Center again, but Jindigar had no heart to restrain them.

The barracks shimmered into focus. It was dusk. Storm and Cyrus were on the porch, the others inside preparing supper. Cyrus sat dejectedly on the edge of the wood porch, his fingers driven into the mass of wild, tightly curly blond hair framing his weathered face, his feet scuffing the mud.

Storm paced. "I wish I could help you calm down."

"It isn't your wife who's in there having God knows what done to her!"

"They know humans! They cured the virus—"

"Yeah, and now look."

Storm dropped down beside Cyrus. "We agreed to stick this out with the Oliat. This just isn't like you, Cy."

"Sure, 'Lord Kulain' shouldn't have any base feelings! Mustn't sully the Kulain name! Well, all that died with the Allegiancy, and it was past time too!" He thrust himself to his feet and stalked off to the end of



the building, halting to stare at the fence but obviously not seeing it.

The Oliat withdrew reflexively. It was too personal a scene and none of their business. Simultaneously Krinata flinched from it, appalled that she'd instigated the same kind of intrusion she'd objected to.

Jindigar gripped the linkages, ashamed at his momentary weakness. //Krinata, it's not something we're doing. It *happens* because of our instability.//

Venlagar suggested, //We should adjourn.//

//Yes, hurry,// added Krinata. //Let me go to him!//

Jindigar complied. Reaching to Zannesu, he brought them back into balance and opened the linkages into an even pattern. Then, using Krinata's image of airlock hatches closing off the links, he separated their awarenesses and came up to full individual consciousness just in time to hear them all say aloud, in unison, "//Adjourned.//"

Trinarvil sighed loudly. She was seated at her desk, the office door shutting away the babble of her curious assistants gathered in the hall outside. The apparatus had been put away. One Dushaun-spectrum lamp was lit, powered from the waterfall south of the Dushau compound. Jindigar noted how the light sent waves of profound relaxation through his whole body and took that as a measure of his personal dysattunement to this world. When Renewal truly took hold of him, he just might become as ill as Trinarvil.

"I've got to—" Krinata started, heading for the door. Then she paused, looking over her shoulder at Jindigar. "Is it all right?"

He nodded, saying, "Trinarvil, can someone escort Krinata to the Outriders and explain vibration therapy to Cy?"

She rose. "Escort, yes—explain—we can try." She followed Krinata to the door and spoke a few words to someone outside.

Krinata hesitated in the doorway. "Jindigar, Takora... no. It isn't important right now. Think about it, please."

She left, and Trinarvil returned to her desk carrying a tray with mugs of hot soup, which she passed out. When she sat down with her own, Krinata's was left steaming by itself.

*The Outriders will see that Krinata eats something*, he reassured himself. None of them had eaten since dawn. The soup tasted splendid. Subliminally he was aware that although the mug she drank from had been made on Dushaun of Dushaun clay—not the Phanphihy product the Oliat had been served in—Trinarvil found the native herbs and roots foul. He sat up straight, staring. He shouldn't have had that awareness, fully adjourned. Testing, he found no leakage. But he had spoken aloud to Trinarvil right after adjournment—without effort. And Eithlarin had endured her touch on Krinata. Could she be ready—?

His eyes met the medic's, the swirling indigo pattern showing she was focused on him, aware of their rapport. She was Oliat-trained, though it had been centuries since she'd worked. And she had predicted that she'd serve in his Oliat. Her prophecies always spoke true.

Into his hopeful silence she said, "No, Jindigar—I'm too old." She set the mug down and shoved it aside with a clear rejection. "I've failed to adjust to this world."

"Trinarvil, our situation couldn't be worse." And he described in Oliat shorthand how Krinata had

grabbed Center. "An Oliat with two Centers can't Dissolve. If you could replace her—just for a day—I could Dissolve easily. And—through the Oliat you could make world attunement."

"And if I couldn't? What Krinata almost did to you would be nothing by comparison."

Theoretically she was right. He glanced at Darllanyu, curled around her mug and into herself, and was tempted to do or say anything to get Trinarvil to agree to help them.

"Isn't there someone else?" asked Trinarvil. "If you're not going to work, it doesn't take a great deal of skill to hold Outreach during Dissolution."

"I've tested every Aliom student here. There isn't one who could tolerate anything more than a tetrad now. If one of them volunteered, it would take at least another year's nonproductive drill in subforms before I might attain enough of a balance to Dissolve. Trinarvil, you can see we don't have a year."

She didn't deny it. "You don't trust Krinata—even if she gives her word not to do that again?"

"I've had experience with—" He'd never told Trinarvil about the Desdinda loop and all the promises Krinata couldn't help but violate because she had the "Aliom strike"—the trait that caused instantaneous, uncritical reaction in an emergency and, when properly trained, always resulted in an optimal resolution. From all the promises Krinata had violated they had both learned that she would always "strike" under stress, promise or no promise, though she was not well trained. They had given up on promises.

He started over. "I do trust Krinata. But I made a mistake in taking her into Oliat. I should have known that the Takora nexus had to surface—and cause her to 'strike' for Center." Which was odd considering that the nexus had been lifted from his own mind and thus could not encompass the Center reflexes—because he, himself, hadn't had them when he'd been Takora's Protector. The nexus could contain only that part of Takora he could accept—just as his own Oliat was absorbing his qualities, filtered through their own limits.

He fell silent, wrestling with the idea of a Dushau reincarnating as an ephemeral.

Darllanyu stood up. "It's not Krinata that has to be replaced. It's me. Krinata only reacted when I lost attunement and blew the balances. Don't blame her." Without even glancing at Jindigar she left the room, but a swirling turbulence wafted behind her.

Jindigar was on his feet before he thought, but Trinarvil stayed him with a gesture. "She needs some time alone." And the unspoken implication was clear—*certainly not with you too close by!*

She was right, but Jindigar was afraid what Dar might do if left alone long enough to realize that they were trapped. The pensone dose she'd planned to take was still at the Temple, and it offered at least relief enough to die in peace. He *had* to go to her—but he dared not. Her need—his own need—tore at him, eroding his will to endure. He needed Dar's deep understanding. Her presence would be more enriching than the Dushauni lighting. And such things always worked both ways. He had to go, yet he dared not.

He found himself poised in the open door, staring after Darllanyu, his Oliat tensed to stop him, when the Historian Threntisn emerged from a group gathered at the other end of the hall. They'd no doubt been speculating on the Oliat's problem. The Historian approached warily. Jindigar made himself meet Threntisn's gaze as Trinarvil looked over his shoulder and called, "Greetings, Archivist."

"Greetings, Healer. May I speak to Jindigar's?"

"We have adjourned," said Jindigar, finding suddenly that the words had to be forced into a straight

sentence. He retreated into the office and busied himself collecting the mugs, lingering over Dar's where she'd abandoned it half full on the floor by her seat. He had to get hold of himself.

Zannesu met Threntisn. "We listen, Historian."

"I seek a formal courtesy. The odd occurrences in the cave today—it's said that despite dysattunement, you've found a food for the Holot. It's vital that this be recorded in the Archive, so I've come to request a debriefing—"

Jindigar rose to stare at the Historian. He was bareheaded, even in the evening chill, and by the Dushauni lighting, his skin showed the indigo of young middle-age. The skin nap of his face and head was sleeked down. His nose was almost as sharp-bridged as some humans'. His eyes, wider set than most Dushau's eyes, gave him a wary look. But Jindigar's raw sensitivity picked up the bottomless depths of Grisnilter's Archive. He had a poise, an intensity, that characterized Archivists— and hadn't been in Threntisn a year ago. Hosting Grisnilter's Archive had changed him and had not catapulted him into Renewal.

In the painful silence Trinarvil said, "I doubt if the Oliat can do an Archive debriefing. Their health is—•"

Jindigar interrupted her, forcing out words by averting his eyes. "It could be dangerous—to the Archive, Threntisn—but if you're willing, we will."

The others stirred in alarm. He turned to them and said, "If we are doomed, what we have learned must be preserved— even though it means reliving it."

"Jindigar!" exclaimed Trinarvil. "Krinata couldn't—"

"Does any of us know what a human can or cannot do?" He stared her down and turned to Threntisn, whose eyes gleamed . with the eagerness of a true Historian, and Jindigar had an idea. He turned his back and fixed his gaze on Zannesu as he addressed Threntisn, explaining in layman's terms how Krinata's grabbing of Center trapped them in Oliat.

Threntisn had grieved his son in the full linkage with Jindigar and Krinata. He knew of the Takora nexus. "Takora was surely experienced at debriefing to an Archive."

"But Krinata has never worked Outreach at a debriefing, and she has been a professional Oliat debriefer, responsible for making publishable recordings from Oliat memories. She might become disoriented, confused—anything might happen.

"But it's worth the risk," continued Jindigar. "If we can record her grab, I can study it in slow motion and high resolution to discover how to Dissolve us safely." The memory would reside in the Archive but would not be accessible to Historians. It was an Oliat function trace, available only with Aliom keys. If he'd had such a tool last year, he could have saved Krinata a lot of suffering.

"Alternatively," put in Trinarvil, "reliving it could kill you all."

"It didn't the first time," argued Eithlarin, but without conviction.

Jindigar came to Trinarvil's desk. "Since you can't replace Krinata, what else should we try?"

"Do you really think," said Threntisn, "that you can convince Krinata to do it for us?"

Jindigar turned and spoke directly to the Archivist. "Yes. Don't underestimate her courage."

"Then we'd better get started. It'll take some time to set it up." He glanced at Venlagar and Llistyien.

"Jindigar's right—I must protect the Archive carefully. It will take me at least a day to shut it down and another day or two for a Conclave to put me into the best state for this. Can you afford to wait that long?"

*Too long*, thought Jindigar. They ought to do this *now*. But Darllanyu could not work tonight—or even tomorrow. And she had to fight her battle alone—for any attempt by him to help her would only fuel the forces she was straining to subdue.

Threntism moved about the office, inspecting the medical charts on the walls, peering into the cabinets, handling the restraining belts on the cots, as he planned aloud. "I'll have a team of Historians tune the apparatus. Trinarvil, we'll provide you space for your vibration therapy in case Krinata freezes again. So we'll need extra power lines—" He scanned Zannesu and Jindigar. "I'll get on it right now."

He was at the door when Jindigar said, "I'll let you know definitely by dawn if we decide to do it."

And then the Historian was gone.

Jindigar turned to Eithlarin. "It would be good if you could find that pensone before Dar does. The rest of you—the Historians will need help focusing the equipment—" He sighed. "I've got to talk to Krinata."

When Jindigar arrived at the Outriders' barracks, all doors were closed against the evening chill, and smoke was flowing aromatically from the chimneys. Without trying he knew she was in Cyrus's room—alone with him. As he hesitated, aware that she knew he was here, Storm's door opened, and one of Storm's co-husbands, Ruff, heaved a basin of wash water out to the side of the building. A baby fretted within, then quieted.

As he turned to go back inside Ruff noticed Jindigar and froze. Then he poked his head in and whispered, "Storm, it's Jindigar!" He came out onto the porch, easing the door shut behind him, then waited for Jindigar to speak.

"Don't disturb Storm," said Jindigar, knowing he was nursing his baby. "I have to see Krinata."

"She's—" Ruff's gaze went to Cyrus's door.

"I know. I'll wait."

"Oh." Ruff had never been voluble. He, as Storm's other co-husbands, Pece and Tallar, always had Storm do the talking. Now he said only, "We're here if you need us."

"Tell Storm we aren't—able—to deal with the community. Terab should be informed—we have survived, but we can't work."

Ruff answered, "I'll tell him." Then he was gone.

Jindigar drifted along the porch and leaned against one of the poles. Cy's voice was raised in annoyance at Krinata for offhandedly using a Dushaun expression, shaleiliu. Her higher pitched voice came through clearly, explaining that she'd only meant "very good," or "all right." But Cy was in no mood for a language lesson.

At last he shouted, "I can't deal with you!" He ripped open the door and stalked out onto the porch, fairly vibrating with unreleasable energies. Krinata caught the door before it crashed into the wall. Cyrus spotted Jindigar and straightened, tugging his dull green field tunic into place, his bare forearms showing bandages to match Krinata's, though he wore them as if they were the heavy gold armlets of rank bestowed by the Emperor. "Did you need us?"

Jindigar reassured him, relieved at how easily the words came this time. "No, I must speak to Krinata—" "Cy hasn't touched—" she started, defensive.

"I know," Jindigar said, forestalling her. He'd have known if the Outrider had made any advances toward her.

Jindigar admired Cyrus—easily a mate for Krinata. He smiled, his best human imitation, and told him, "As Center, I must apologize for letting my Oliat eavesdrop on you and Storm earlier."

"Forget it. Krinata already explained."

"Then let us assume it never happened." Jindigar was carefully formal, for he had known Cyrus only a year, and sexual jealousy wore many guises among different cultures. Possibly Cyrus didn't even know what was eroding his temper. "But may we address the issues raised by the incident?"

Embarrassed, Cyrus gnawed a lip. "It's not necessary—but come in if you like. It's chilly out here, and dark."

"Thank you," replied Jindigar, and followed them inside.

The room was a duplicate of Storm's, except that it had only one window. It was on the rear wall opposite the door and had a view of the compound's palisade but was shuttered now. A merry fire burned in the corner fireplace next to it. There was a rough-hewn table and chairs, a bed and washstand, and a curtained shelf for storage. On top of the shelf lay a reader with a large stack of cartridges. Empty cups stood on the table amid the remains of a light meal.

There was a hint of an offhanded, courtly manner in Cyrus's movements as he offered Jindigar a seat, then busily lit a few more candles to aid Dushau vision. "Would you like something to eat?" he asked, gathering the litter.

"No, thank you. I've actually come here to ask Krinata to risk her life—again. But before I do that—I believe I owe you—" He shrugged, portraying his helplessness, keeping his attention on Cyrus while Krinata settled warily into another chair at the table. "I owe you an explanation."

Cyrus turned a chair and straddled it as a Holot might.

"Look, if anything, I owe you an apology." His gaze raked Krinata in the forbidden intimacy he could not resist, and suddenly Jindigar knew that the Outrider was not fully aware of what was driving him.

Jindigar focused strictly on Cyrus, Emulating him lightly to pick up the nuances. The lives of his officers depended on this one human. Consciously Cyrus understood that he must not arouse Krinata in Oliat. But his eyes revealed an unconscious, confused and hurt, compulsively reaching for her, only to be rebuffed in favor of a man who could only use her ruthlessly.

Krinata's lips tensed, betraying her inner struggle. Torn apart by the pain she was causing Cyrus, how could she possibly bring them through the debriefing alive? Jindigar had to soothe Cyrus's unconscious to alleviate Krinata's pain and let her concentrate.

Cyrus's unconscious had to know that Jindigar did not regard Krinata as just an ephemeral—trivial and peripheral to his life—but that she *mattered* to him as *a person*. Even ephemeral Outriders had only been allowed to know Dushau who were between Renewals, so while they had been *told* it was different during Renewal, they believed Dushau incapable of personal relationships. Cyrus had to learn otherwise—and quickly. He had to learn on a nonverbal level that Krinata was not rebuffing him but only

delaying, and that Jindigar loved Krinata so much, he wanted her to have a proper mate.

Jindigar told him, "You owe me no apology for your feeling for Krinata. It is a beautiful thing, an expression of life. It is how I feel about Darllanyu. And she about me. Neither of us would look at another—in such fashion."

"See? I knew that. So I owe you an apology."

"On the contrary," countered Jindigar quickly. "What is between Krinata and me—" He had to meet her eyes now, wishing he had the Oliat link to reassure her. "We are more than zunre. Arid there is a threat there."

She paled. Cyrus choked, unbelievably, "Are you trying to tell me you love Krinata?"

Jindigar smiled again, hoping his teeth hadn't turned as pale as he felt them to be. "I love all my zunre—and my Outriders as well. Cy, you are as special to me as Krinata is. And more—for you are special to Krinata. It takes more than love to make a mating. Krinata can't be mate to me, nor I to her." It was true. The particular awakening that came to him with Dar's touch was not there with Krinata. Yet *something* was. He had learned, with Ontarrah, that there was nothing but bitter pain to be had from that lure, for it could not deliver what it promised.

"I never thought—I mean—of course you couldn't—"

The embarrassment was back, and Krinata would have been squirming except for the aristocratic upbringing of the Zavaronne. To confront that tension and force Cyrus to become conscious of his deeper feelings, Jindigar rose and circled Krinata's chair. He put his hands on her shoulders, and watching Cyrus, he stroked her neck—the bare human skin having only the slightest fuzz of soft hair that tickled when it got between the sensitive nap that was a part of his skin, not a dead excrescence that remained attached.

He opened himself further to the human Emulation so her body did not seem repulsive, and watched Cyrus fighting the male reflexes that were both social and biological. He was treading hard on Cyrus's territory, the sanctity of which wasn't even under Cyrus's own control—but was a function of Krinata's will. The Outrider was not prepared to face his vulnerability, certainly not at the hands of a nonhuman.

Unable to tolerate Cyrus's building discomfort and clearly alarmed at her physical response to Jindigar's deliberately sensuous touch, Krinata looked up and protested, "Jindigar, you shouldn't—" Her eyes told him how she had wanted this from him but now no longer did.

Yet he continued to caress her throat meaningfully, giving Cyrus time to absorb her response to him and her rejection of that response. His hand trembled with suppressed memories of Ontarrah—those four heartbreakingly disastrous experiments—and he hoped the only memory of that left to Krinata was her frustrated yearning for what could not be. *A yearning for a Dushau's renewing touch might plague a Dushau reincarnated as an ephemeral.*

He flinched from the thought and said aloud, "Cyrus, this is safe for me—even though right now Darllanyu is at the very brink of giving in to Renewal. If I were to do this to Eithlarin or Llistyien, Darllanyu would feel it. And if I were to touch Darllanyu so, most of us would be dead within the hour." He knelt beside her chair and turned her face to him, feeling the heat of embarrassment flush her cheeks. "You arouse me, Krinata, but *not* like Dar does." *Has she told Cyrus of Ontarrah?*

"I love you, too, Jindigar—" Then she looked at Cyrus, stricken. "But that doesn't mean I love you less!"

"I never challenged that—I never thought—"

"No, you didn't think," said Jindigar, forcing himself to abandon Krinata before his response did get out of control, and Dar felt it. He took his chair again, assuming a nondefensive posture. "You felt—and sometimes feelings are more accurate than the plodding linearity of thought. The Oliat *feels*, Cy. Everything—all at once. That's why it'd be as dangerous for us if you were to touch Krinata as it would be if I gave in to Dar. And that's why, in the cave, it was my duty as Center to take Krinata away from you."

"I understood that even before the medic explained how the entire Oliat had to be treated to help Krinata, because you're all tied together when you work."

"You understand, but you still feel threatened," countered Jindigar gently, "because I *wanted* to take her from you— because I am a rival—for Krinata—but not for your mate."

"Jindigar!" protested Krinata.

"Please, listen," he urged her. "Cyrus, you and I must confront the fact that we feel like rivals."

Jindigar Emulated human maleness, supporting it with his own emerging maleness as much as he dared, and let Cyrus see how Krinata mattered to him.

Over that subtext he asked, "Now do you understand how far this has gone? I can't bear to hurt Krinata. I can't bear to see her hurt—and she will die—we all will—if I can't Dissolve us safely. I don't know how to do that yet, but I do know that there's no hope without your help." And he outlined to them both the idea Threntisn had given him.

"Debriefing to an Archive?" asked Krinata. Even she, as a professional debriefing officer, had never known the original usage of the equipment the Dushau had modified for ephemeral use.

"Yes. Now I must ask you a question, Cyrus. Do you believe I love Krinata? Treasure her life beyond my own?"

Cyrus gazed at him, all primal, threatened male peering out of intelligence-haunted eyes at the alien rival, for Jindigar was showing him the fierce emotions Krinata roused in him. It dawned on him that his feeling for her was similar to how he'd feel about any of his ex-wives if they were here to officiate at his wedding, using the way they aroused him to ease him through onset and give him to Darllanyu in reasonably decent condition.

He pushed the pungent nostalgia aside and concentrated on Cyrus, for the human was finally accepting his own instinctive recognition of Jindigar as a rival. Perhaps no human could ever accept that such rivalry was to be enjoyed, forming the deepest bonds of friendship, but at least he now knew that Jindigar— a nonpredator—could be a rival without being an enemy, without hurting the one he loved, and thus, without tempting him to break Outriders' vows.

"Yes, Jindigar. I believe you do love her. What do I have to do?"

Jindigar reached across the table and gripped Cyrus's callused hand, Emulating human tactile communication to convince his unconscious. "You love her as much as I do. You treasure her life as much as I do. Protect her by giving her into my keeping. As mate to my zunre, you become my zunre, too—closer than family. Trust me. Our lives depend on it."

"Jindigar," asked Cy, "are you saying Krinata's doomed unless I give her up to you?"

"Yes. She must be mine—and only mine—for these next few days. I'll protect her as you would yourself. Then she will be yours and I'll retire to the inner compound and no longer be a factor in your lives."

Jindigar, gaze locked with Cyrus's, saw that he had Cyrus's understanding. *To have, one must first surrender.* It was not a male attitude, but Cyrus was not only male. He was human, and the male in him, confronted and acknowledged at last, was now mollified enough that the human could dominate.

Into the protracted silence Krinata said tentatively, "This may be the wrong moment to mention it, but I am not a possession to be bartered for."

Cyrus broke his gaze and turned to Krinata, babbling hastily, "I didn't mean—I know—of course, you're—I mean, naturally it's up to you."

Jindigar rose and circled the table, resetting all the muscles in his face and body as he shook himself out of the Emulation. "I'm sorry, Krinata. I do not regard women as chattel to be bargained for. Can you imagine how Dar would react to that?" He paused to let the absurdity sink in, then pointed out, "But she knows how the line between identities blurs in mating— how part of one becomes part of another, in order to create a new identity. A mate becomes a temporary proprietor of one's soul." *A gateway to Completion.*

Cyrus rose and paced to the other side of the room, his mind engaging now that Jindigar had veiled the primal energies. "Jindigar, were you just Emulating? Or were you telling the truth?"

"Both. Look at me," he prompted. "Do you still see barely contained arousal? A man who *possesses* this woman and will protect her with his life because his life is hers?"

With all the years of his field experience Cyrus studied Jindigar and saw only an adjourned Center. At last he shook his head. "I don't know what to believe."

"Any Dushau would be able to see it in me. It isn't gone because I can't make it go away. But there's lots more there to be read. I am frightened as I've never been before. At any moment, without warning, my Oliat may collapse. And that's not merely an idea to me. It's happened to me, with Kamminth's—"

Krinata went to Cyrus. "I told you about how the Emperor destroyed Kamminth's, when Jindigar was trying to change Offices to be their Outreach." She, no doubt, remembered vividly how they had collapsed in convulsions in the Imperial Palace courtyard, all but three of them dying instantly.

The one image from that moment that Jindigar could not banish was Lelwatha's body, twisted in the rigor of death by shock. He had left Jindigar his whole and his music, along with the feeling of beauty.

Cyrus faced Krinata, his hands behind his back, his stance no longer so vibrantly tense with denied impulses.

Krinata said, "I don't agree with your primitive psycho-sexual analysis. Love isn't possession. Love is acceptance." She tossed a glance at Cyrus. "And I can accept both of you. So don't fight over me, all right?"

"An Outrider doesn't fight with an officer," replied Cyrus, eyeing Jindigar significantly. "An Outrider fights for the officers."

"Then these officers had better get back to work," observed Krinata. She pulled on her wrap but stopped at the door to watch Cyrus finish cleaning the table. "You really do understand now?"

He glanced up, head cocked to one side. "It's all right, Krinata, go ahead. Just teach me that word next



time."

"Shaleiliu? It's another word for marriage, isn't it, Jindigar?"

"In your case—yes—I believe so."

As she led the way outside she asked, "I wonder—does that constitute a Priest's blessing?"

"Aliom Priests don't give blessings, Krinata. I thought you knew that."

Before she could answer, Storm called from the other end of the building where his room was. "Jindigar! I'd like to talk to you for a moment."

He sent Krinata on to re-join the others and reassure them that she was willing to attempt the debriefing. "We have all of tomorrow to teach you the routine," he told her. "It's a little different from your old job."

Storm waved him into the warmth of his room. The baby was gone, but clothes, blankets, and cleverly handmade toys were everywhere. The connecting door to Ruff's room was ajar, but apparently Ruff, Pece, and Tallar were gathered in the next room with the human apprentices. Jindigar noted how they had vacated the room next to Cyrus's, the doors closed, affording privacy despite the thin walls.

Storm's corner fireplace gave off a pleasing warmth; the candles, a dim light. Without even asking, Storm poured a mug of tea for Jindigar. "This is the kind you like. You probably need it after that."

Jindigar laughed. "Cy's not hard to talk to."

"He's very professional—but Jindigar, he's going to pieces." The Lehiroh sat down across the table from Jindigar, cradling his own mug of tea.

"I don't think it's that bad."

"He was shouting at Krinata! Oh—he's not Lehiroh, but I've known enough humans to recognize a critical level of sexual tension when I see it. I tried to help him—he wouldn't let me touch him. Some humans are like that. So Orel went to him—but he thinks of her as female, and that's even worse. If the Oliat has to call us to work again—frankly, Jindigar, this is very hard to say. Cy is the best—I mean, the *best* Outrider I've ever worked with. But right now I don't trust him. His temper is hanging by a thread. And he won't do anything to help himself."

Trying to think what to say, Jindigar drank some of the tea. Orel was the mother of Storm's baby. Obviously they all loved Cyrus, but being Lehiroh, they weren't upset by a mere sexual rejection. They were simply worried for a dear colleague, and Storm, knowing from vast experience that Dushau hardly noticed such things, felt it his duty to consult the Oliat Center.

"Storm, it's not that Cyrus won't help himself. He can't. Not any more than I can help myself right now. But only another couple of days at the most—and I'll Dissolve without ever calling on you again. And you may find that Cy has made some peace with himself now."

"Should we try approaching him again?" asked Storm with the intonation that asked, *You mean, you convinced him to find another outlet?*

"You can ask him why he refused. You may find it's just that right now, anyone but Krinata is simply repulsive."

"I could understand that. But if that's the case, I think we'd better replace him on the team."

"I wouldn't put it to him that way. Krinata needs him—and he's her Outrider. You know Cy. He rants about the aristocracy being dead, but he's Lord Kulain through and through. Nothing in the galaxy will induce him to abandon a responsibility, but especially not this one—to the Lady Zavaronne." *And Krinata's the same way.*

Storm ran a hand through his hair and flipped it back. "Well, I guess you can see that I've never really gotten into cross-species sexuality, especially not with humans. But—I'll have to talk to Ruff. I suppose we'll have to seduce him somehow. The problem is, none of us know that much about humans, and I don't think our trainee Outriders would help."

"It might be better just to wait a few days—the whole problem should be resolved by then."

Storm looked at him sideways, then shrugged, "I'm not going to inquire about Dushau personal habits, but if you think it's possible to ignore a thing like this for a few days, we've just found another time-scale discrepancy between Dushau and ephemerals. Jindigar, that man's going to break, one direction or another—in a matter of hours. I just want to see it do no harm."

Summoning his human Emulation for a moment, Jindigar thought that perhaps Storm was right. Jindigar's exercise had given Cyrus some peace, but the previously aroused sexual energies had not been grounded out. In fact, Cyrus might be more sexually volatile now that he was in touch with his primal drives. Jindigar conceded, "Running your team is up to you. If you can work it out, so much the better. But I really can't see us having to call on you again. Right now I'm afraid to convene at all."

They fell into a discussion of the Oliat's technical problems that lasted over three mugs of tea.

When Storm saw Jindigar to the door, he was grave and reserved. Jindigar felt that there was much news of the ephemeral world that Storm was withholding. After the tedious dealings with ephemerals of the last few hours, Jindigar felt himself utterly uninterested in the affairs of the rest of the community. He knew that was a bad sign but also that it was a perfectly natural development.

*If only, when news of Krinata's death reaches me, I can be this uninterested.*

## **FIVE**

### **Cassrian Hatchery**

Krinata tackled the debriefing theory professionally, and Jindigar suddenly felt that his scheme was going to work. He found some Aliom students with experience on the debriefer, and Threntisn consulted the Archive for the method of tuning the machines without the aid of a Sentient computer. Then he went into seclusion, barricading his Archive from any possible intrusion by the Oliat.

Darllanyu returned to them calm enough to ask Krinata, "How is Cy?"

"He understands now," she answered with certainty.

"Don't ever hurt him, Krinata," pled Darllanyu. "He nearly killed himself saving my life when we were trapped in that hive. He deserves the very best that life can give."

"I know he does."

With sudden insight Jindigar realized that Dar felt about Cy very much as he felt about Krinata. One day he'd have to ask if she'd known him in one of his previous incarnations.

Jindigar swallowed churning emotions, none of which were appropriate to the debriefing drill they had yet to master. "Krinata, I'm going to relax the adjournment and let you maintain the linkage pattern—" That

was the Inreach's job. Krinata didn't have the training, but during debriefing, she had to handle it. He warned the others, "If she fumbles, I'll reinstate adjournment quickly, so brace yourselves."

Llistyien sighed, "Good thing I didn't eat this morning. This always make me nauseous."

Zannesu said, "I agree. Jindigar, are you sure I shouldn't take Outreach for this one?"

"It wouldn't work," insisted Jindigar, not thinking about all the horror stories he'd heard through the years. "Ready?" And he put them through the drill.

When, after four tries, Krinata had not managed it, he set Llistyien to Emulate *human*, bringing up the ephemeral point of view for the Oliat. This limited them severely both in the span that constituted "now" and in the spread of territory that was "here." It became very hard to see purpose in what they were doing, so that as they repeated the drill a fatiguing sense of futility settled over the Dushau Officers.

But Krinata's spirits rose. //Why didn't you tell me that was all you wanted!// She redoubled her efforts, each try yielding a fraction more success that only whetted her appetite for more. Jindigar had used this method to teach her before, but they had never tackled anything this complex.

It took the entire day until Krinata finally held steady three tries in a row, and Jindigar adjourned and sent them all off to exercise away the tension and to sleep.

But he was too keyed-up to retire. He had spent the whole day focused on Krinata, yet at Center, he could not avoid awareness of Darllanyu leashing back surges of possessiveness with all the discipline at her command. She had triumphed over her need for a mate's care—this time. He admired her strength in winning that battle while a part of him squirmed in pleasure at how much she wanted him. Mostly, though, he wanted to hold her close and make sure she'd never have to fight such a battle again.

He wandered outside into the twilight evening. A balmy breeze wafted up from the river, a kind breeze laden with moisture and fragrant with night-blooming flowers. He set out to walk the perimeter of the compound. If he went into then-quarters now, he would surely tell Dar how he felt—and that could be disastrous.

He strolled toward the wall dividing the compound for the comfort of those in Renewal. It was shorter than the outer wall and not as sturdy, a token wall to be honored by those not in Renewal. One day it would probably be replaced by the more usual hedgerow that signified, *Here children play and youths try their strength*.

On top of the wall near the gate a young piol sat erect, nibbling busily on something held between two paws, almost as if waiting for the children to come out to play. He recalled Cyrus feeding the piol on the porch. The Outriders had made a home of their on-duty quarters, the kind of home one should only make inside a Renewal park.

He toyed with the idea of going inside. The central gate was constantly open, just two sections of wall overlapping in a curve. He'd never seen with his own eyes what they'd built in there. Unbidden, the rules of courtesy for entering a Renewal park rose to his mind. There were no children, let alone youths, here yet. So he would simply have to keep his eyes off mated women and not discuss the affairs of the world as if they were as vital as children.

Given his state of mind, that wouldn't be difficult. He really belonged over there more than he did here. He stood staring at the gate, knowing that to breach it now would give license to his desires. His will could be swamped, and he might not regain the objectivity needed to Center.

Twilight faded. Night swallowed him, but he shunned the automatic Oliat awareness that replaced vision, confronting the alien dark of this world. Then he heard the singing.

Faintly at first, wafting this way and that on the evening breeze, the voices of dozens of Dushau women joined in the old, familiar harmonies of the Aliom evening chants as they walked to the site of their Temple. A painful warmth rose in his chest. Even without an Active Priest, Aliom was organizing a community.

He hadn't thought about it in more than a thousand years, but suddenly he yearned for the daily routine of Renewal—walking to the Temple at dawn, chanting the men's songs,

giving the dawn music lesson, conducting the mealtime study, training and teaching drills, and theory classes, coming home to play with his babies or joining them in silent discovery of the universe, feeding his children, dancing and playing sports with his youngsters—and giving dayclose table ceremonies for his family, dancing and singing with his wife—and the tight cycle of commemorative days altering the content of the routine but not the daily rhythm.

They would have to make new commemoratives. He quailed before the size of the task. He would have no one senior to him to teach him. He couldn't lead this community.

But the distant music swept him back into visions of sweet days filled with routine, building a secure world for growing minds. How beautiful it was to dwell with family, every shared event deepened by shared insights into the errors of old habits. How wonderful to share the unfolding evolution of a mate's soul—waking each morning not quite sure *who* this person would be today, or who you, yourself, would be.

He appreciated the truth of the old saying, "Children give birth to the parents." Raising Darllanyu's children would make him a completely different person than he could become raising any other woman's children.

Even knowing that much of their time here would be spent constructing buildings or producing basic goods, he was ready to get started. But he could not enter those gates alone.

As he stood captivated by the distant women's song, their voices faltered. Softly he sang the tune, as if to teach them. They needed an Active Priest. And—if any of them were to survive adjusting to this planet—they needed him to ignite the complementary worldcircle in the Active Temple. Its ruddy glow would be perceptible only to die Aliom-trained, who could enter the Temple, but the influence of the pair of circles would vitalize the whole community. They could use the circles to help those fighting dysattunement. Pregnant women would come to the Active circle to dedicate their children to Completion.

He saw Darllanyu, pregnant as could be, standing in that rosy glow, happily leading the women's chant. The image faded. He scrubbed his face with both hands, hoping, though he had no gift, that this was prophecy.

"Jindigar?"

It was a very tentative whisper, and Jindigar turned to find Threntisn hesitating at a distance. "We're adjourned."

Threntisn approached, hands tucked into the deep pockets of his loose black jerkin. He was wearing a dark turban with a deep purple shirt and trousers, making himself virtually invisible. Jindigar could sense the presence of the Archive, a glittering swirl, muted now by the wards placed around it for tomorrow's

debriefing. He knew what it was like to carry that Archive but not what it might be to feed it data and watch it grow, to ask it questions and find answers put there lifetimes ago by custodians long dead and forgotten.

"Do you recall the Century Song?" asked Threntisn.

"You know I was raised in a Historian family. How could I not?" The children's song enumerated the centuries of a life leading to Completion, assigning a lesson to each century, a challenge to be conquered. It had been one of Jindigar's favorite songs.

"Will you teach it to your children?"

"I'll let you do that when you come into Renewal," answered Jindigar mildly, not liking where this was leading.

"Will you come with them to lessons?"

"If necessary. When they're very young."

"Jindigar, don't evade. If you get out of this alive, you'll be lucky. Aliom isn't taking you to Completion. And—I admit I'm impressed with how you protected Grisnilter's Archive. With training you could be an Archivist."

"And where would I get an Archive? You've got the only one on Phanphihy."

"Oh, Phanphihy will produce its own Archive one day."

"A new Archive's Eye will open? You can't predict that!"

"Certain historical stresses surround the opening of all the Eyes we know of. The signature is with us, Jindigar, but none of our trainees has any real talent—the kind that runs in your family. We need you."

"No, Threntisn." *Is there any way to make him stop this?* Jindigar had known and cherished too many ephemerals. His mind was riddled with grieving scars too painful to touch, and the loss of Krinata was going to be the worst. Lacking wholeness, he could never work the Historian's path. With the muted dazzle of the Archive dancing so near him, Jindigar thought, for the first time in a long time, that maybe he had made a mistake, choosing Aliom. But it was a choice made and could not be rescinded. Threntisn knew that but apparently could understand it no more than Jindigar's father did. "I have too many scars—too many memory blockages."

"You're young yet. We could train you around them."

Threntisn only wanted to give him hope, something to live for so he'd fight harder to extricate himself from the trap that held his Oliat. The Historian didn't understand the anxieties his offer raised, for a Priest gave his whole self to the Aliom, forsaking all other possibilities for Completion. Gently Jindigar replied, "Perhaps you could train me, but I told you once, I'll enter the Historians' Temple the day you become an Aliom Priest."

"And, as I said, perhaps that means we'll go down to dissolution/death together." He shook himself and turned away, saying, "I didn't mean to be so gloomy. I'll try to be more cheerful tomorrow." He went toward his own Temple where he would no doubt spend the night preparing for the debriefing.

Jindigar walked until nearly midnight, wanting to lose himself in simple physical activity. When he came into the Oliat "quarters, the room seemed hot and stuffy, but everyone else was asleep. He found a dinner

plate left aside for him on the warmer hearth, a napkin made of the rough-woven native cloth folded into a tent over it—Krinata's work. There was dried fruit; tea; hard, thin bread; nuts. Each of his officers had left him a portion of their favorite food.

The next morning, they convened and went over to the Historians' Temple. No Aliom practitioner would be allowed within the Historians' sanctum, any more than a Historian could be admitted to the Aliom building now that the worldcircle had been ignited. But the debriefing apparatus had been set up in a fieldstone addition to the Historians' Temple, a large room that had its own entry, so they need not pass through the sensitized space.

They entered an alcove divided from the main room by a shimmering beaded curtain. Beyond that veil the debriefer was working, and Dushauni light filled the room beautifully. As Krinata paused to don dark glasses Jindigar examined the newly laid power lines, scavenged from some spaceship. They snaked across the floor and out a window, toward the power plant by the waterfall. Power regulators had been spliced in, for the waterfall's jury-rigged system produced unsteady current.

One of the Historians met them and, seeing Jindigar eyeing the heavy line, commented to Krinata, "It was difficult to get permission to black out the community this morning, but we're drawing the entire power output."

"//Then let's make it count, //" they replied through Krinata. From her voice Jindigar judged that the balance they had struck in the Aliom Temple ought to hold.

They followed the Historian through the curtain. The field-stone walls were undressed, the windows high and opaque, the floor of kiln-fired brick. The gleaming equipment brought from Dushaun seemed grafted onto the primitive setting. Control room couches had been brought in for the officers and set up in the configuration of the Oliat array.

Threntisn was already in his place, on the opposite side of the debriefer's large, circular optical membrane framed by a carefully tuned forcefield torus. Attendants were fussing over the connections to his bodyfield, and as they watched, the optical membrane cleared, then sparkled in readiness.

Jindigar, even with full Oliat awareness, could barely sense the presence of the Archive now. In theory he knew what had been done. The Archive itself did not exist inside the Historian's brain but was attached to Threntisn's mind through the locus at its center called the Eye. The Eye of the Archive opened into an *elsewhere* where space and time were not defined—a place before birth and after death. Around the Eye a multidimensional quasi-spacial structure was erected by the Historian to organize data, but that structure, too, didn't exist within the brain. It existed on the kind of nonmaterial mental plane where the Oliat linkages existed.

In the right mental state it was possible to travel such planes and function there as if they were real. But that was a handy fiction created by the mind to rationalize a nonrational experience.

Threntisn had placed himself in that mental state and had closed all the Archive's portals, working now through only one, and that one was tightly focused on the optical membrane and the other sensory inputs feeding into his bodyfield from the pickups the Oliat would wear.

Krinata took her place as any veteran Outreach might. Her outward poise never deserted her, but Jindigar could feel the flutter of tension within her. //Steady,// he urged as they settled into their couches and secured themselves with the spaceman's restraints. //Threntisn has complete control of the Archive now. We won't fall into it. Nothing like that can happen this time, Krinata.//

The Dushauni lights were dimmed, so most of the illumination now came from the optical membrane. Historian technicians began their age-old tasks, and for Jindigar it became— despite the bizarre setting—a soothingly familiar rhythm. As each of them settled helmets, foot contacts, and hand grips, a technician balanced the input circuits to clear the membrane again, using that clarity to measure Threntisn's readiness to tune another input channel. The Archive could take the Oliat's full data throughput, but Threntisn couldn't. Most of the data had to bypass his conscious mind.

The debriefing chamber was like a spaceport traffic control room or a singing meditation, picking up the essential rhythm of body and world, 'blending them to shaleiliu—to perfect harmony.

As the last of the contact checks died away Jindigar told Krinata, //Now wait for Threntisn's question—he's doing the job you used to do when debriefing an Oliat to make a prospectus for a newly discovered world.//

//I know,// she replied impatiently. //We went all through that.//

Krinata had been a master of the debriefer used by Survey to make living brochures of colonizable worlds. She'd confessed that it had never occurred to her that Dushau hadn't created the debriefer merely to make Oliat memory visible to non-Dushau.

Suddenly Jindigar remembered how she had evoked his reliving the tornado that had killed Kamminth's Outreach, Taaryesh. He had been Kamminth's Receptor at that time, but by the time Krinata had debriefed Kamminth's, only three officers had been left alive, and Jindigar had taken Outreach. The reliving of Taaryesh's ungrieved death had nearly destroyed Jindigar. He hadn't thought until this moment how hard it must have been on Krinata—for at that time she had already begun to exhibit Oliat function sensitivity. Only, he hadn't known it until months later.

*Spontaneous awakening of ability from contact with the debriefer would make sense if she was, indeed, Takora reincarnated.* And that ill-fated debriefing had been her very last use of the equipment until now. She'd never mentioned it, but it must be on her mind. //Krinata, it won't be like Taaryesh. It will be vivid for us, yes—but real, not nightmarish. Relax and let Threntisn frame it for us. Just hold the linkages and let the data flow.//

Darllanyu felt his concern for Krinata. She shifted uncomfortably. //What's taking that Historian so long?// Absently Jindigar kneaded his chair arm to relieve the nagging itch of his nail beds. He stared at his inflamed fingertips and refused to check Darllanyu's restless hands as he answered, //Threntisn is being cautious—wisely so, considering what happens when I tangle with that Archive.//

//Let's not dwell on that,// suggested Venlagar.

Then Threntisn's question came directly through their Outreach: *How did you know the clickerbeasts were attacking the Holot?*

The whole-Oliat response was engaged. With the Inreach focused on past experience, and the Outreach holding the current links, data flooded up out of their global memory into the current links, then flowed out through Krinata and onto Threntisn's screen as visual patterns while his Archive assimilated the Oliat's subtextual data.

To the Oliat it was real again: their first experience of the shaleiliu hum, their bright anticipation of Dissolution shattered, and the sky blackened with screeching, yammering, clicking bodies swarming toward the cliff face and the lip of the cave where the Holot fought them and lost.

The entire scene unreeled, skillfully directed by Threntisn's prompts. *Why did you respond?* And when

they had controlled -the swarm, *How did you induce them to leave?*

Jindigar, at Center, separated the remembered data into levels, allowing facts to go into open file for any Historian to access, and then grading the Oliat's experiences so Aliom trained researchers could retrieve it.

He had never done this before, and in his concern for his officers, he had forgotten that he, himself, was entering new depths. One mistake and someone using the Archive might have data dumped into his nervous system with such speed that it would destroy his mind. It suddenly occurred to him that generations of Aliom Priests had debriefed to this Archive. It probably contained everything he'd need to train himself to his next level and lead this community properly.

Deeply relieved, Jindigar marshaled his full concentration, mastering another Center function. He hardly noticed when Threntisn segued into questions about the search for a new food source, and Krinata and Venlagar once more held the Holot infant in their arms.

The Historian led them through the search. Jindigar carefully separated the knowledge they had gained of the Holot and the Gifters from the Oliat's inner experience. He noted the point where he and Zannesu had shifted the linkage patterns to Llistyien, insulating Krinata from the data flow.

Only this time, of course, she wasn't insulated. She had to handle the outflow to the debriefer, grip the linkage balances, and relive it all with them—discovering now what had been going on outside her awareness. Jindigar could not spare her a moment's thought, though, as he sifted and sorted, assigning levels.

//Not long now. Brace yourselves, here it comes, Dar,// he managed as Threntisn's final question echoed through them.

*And why did you collapse?*

Jindigar had told him to finish with that one, but now he regretted it. They were all exhausted, and he heard Darllanyu whimper softly as the memory of her loss of attunement swept through the Oliat, their current reactions worsened by three more days of increasing sensitivity.

The optical membrane showed the cave seen through human eyes as Jindigar had sought orientation in his Outreach. The inner level recorded the feel of her body against him as they fell, Krinata holding the squirming Holot baby as they and Storm toppled together to the hard floor of the cave.

Then the membrane went black—optical membranes in service never did that. Jindigar thought the instruments had jammed at the shock of a Center being displaced, but then, with the memory of Krinata's takeover, Jindigar floating above them, came a twisted, distorted image lit in dull shades—Krinata's visualization of the Gifters' hive on the plain above the cliff. . Jindigar didn't know if Threntisn had ever dealt with human I vision, and he was sure it would give the Historian a headache, | but there was nothing he could do. That had been the Oliat's perception.

Her vision took over the data flows, as if she again usurped his position. The Oliat relived that moment of stark panic when Krinata took Center. Jindigar's touch on the data flow into the Archive froze, tangling the data feeds, but he lived the confrontation with the Takora-image. Held fast by linkages, by duty, by nameless terror, Jindigar stared into human eyes that held Dushau vistas.

For a moment it seemed that he could recarve history and reach out to accept her as Takora, his Center, a profoundly attractive woman. He could fall into her Office of Outreach, and they could pick up where her death had left them. She could Dissolve, and then they could discuss mating according to the



proverb, *How good it is for zunre to mate together!*

With a frightful shock memory resumed, and Jindigar snapped into the Office of Outreach. The membrane image shimmered and became Jindigar's remembered glimpse of the committee onlookers clustered near the mouth of the cave. Then the Oliat linkages disintegrated in Krinata's grip and the membrane went black again.

They relived Jindigar's struggle to re-form the Oliat linkages around himself. Eithlarin, fatigued, tried to thrust aside those memories and live secure in the now of Jindigar's full control. Zannesu and Darllanyu also fought off the memories, but Jindigar summoned his last strength and held them to it a moment longer, hoping to record Krinata's inner processes as she realized what she had done—and perhaps how and why she'd done it. He prompted her by sending—as he had warned her he would—his impossibly cruel words that had triggered her breakdown. //Krinata! Listen! You didn't do that. Takora did.//

Krinata twisted on her couch to look back at him—and he saw himself through her eyes, a dark indigo form, earless head, a wide grimace showing pale blue teeth—too pale—large, wide-set eyes marbled and unreadable. She saw the seven long fingers of each of his hands, fingertips swollen provocatively with the developing nails. Overlaid was the image of himself in the cave, pulling her attention back to him, his lips parted to show the pale white teeth of a corpse.

Abruptly Krinata thrust aside her hand grips and flung herself sideways out of the headset's field, sprawling half off the couch and onto the rough brick floor.

But Jindigar was ready. He had prepared them all, and now he moved with a swiftness that taxed his inexperienced officers. Before Krinata's shoulders had struck the floor, he slammed the seals shut, forcing them into adjournment.

Darllanyu and Zannesu stiffened but did not cry out. Venlagar and Eithlarin struggled loose to tend the others as Jindigar scrambled to Krinata's side. He arrived just as one of the Historians admitted Trinarvil through the bead curtain, and another pushed her equipment—already set up and humming—from behind a screen.

Threntisn, couch and all, was whisked away through an inner door, contact lines clattering to the floor after him. Jindigar extricated Krinata from the contacts. He gathered her to him, saying aloud, "Come on now, you can do it. It's not the same as the first time. You didn't actually take Center. It was only a memory—like having an episode. Krinata? Come on."

Her eyes opened, and she gazed up at him. He had to remind himself sternly that the whiteness of her teeth was permanent, and natural, even in health. Her circular pupils were wide-open, but there was intelligence in her expression. The pulse at the base of her jaw was strong, her breathing deep. "Krinata, it was an Oliat debriefing."

She nodded, but on the next breath, as Jindigar signaled Trinarvil to cut the lights, Krinata began to sob. The convulsive breathing and copious flow of lubricating fluids was, in humans, tied to the production of pain dampers in the central nervous system. As alarming as the process was, it was hardly ever fatal. He found himself emitting the sound that would begin the analogous process for him, and it wasn't long before they all followed suit. They had survived one last supreme test.

An hour later, not even having taken time for a meal, Jindigar had Threntisn begin the replay work. The Historian had come without hesitation when Jindigar sent for him, knowing that the Oliat was desperate. But his teeth were not a healthy blue, and even adjourned, Jindigar could sense the headache pounding through his nervous system. Exposure to the human senses was hard enough on the Oliat-trained. A Historian had no experience of aliens.

Jindigar worked at the optical membrane nonstop for hours, cuing up ever more narrow time segments of that crisis point, asking for any and all cross-references from the Archive— sifting every obtuse theory ever proposed to explain Oliat functions. He used skills he hadn't touched in three Renewals and wished for his Sentient computer, Arlai.

He went over and over the ground, then covered it again, but could find no way at all for an Oliat with two Centers to survive Dissolution.

They gave up at midnight, met again at dawn, and drove themselves all the next day. Never had two minutes of history been analyzed with more care. Yet there was no answer. Jindigar, desperate now, thought hard about the Aliom-keyed areas of the Archive. If the answer wasn't in the two minutes they'd recorded, then it had to be in the reserved area. This was perhaps the oldest and, largest Archive still active. If anyone had ever stumbled on a way, it had to be here.

He told Threntisn's apprentice, "I'm going to evoke some of the deeper keyed areas and search by association to our primary recording." He pointed to the optical display before him. "According to this, there's a lot of material there. Tell Threntisn this may take awhile."

Jindigar arranged himself in the recliner and took the hand contacts again. Relaxing, he ran through the drills to summon within his bodyfield the keys he had been given. Simultaneously he reran the two-minute recording planting associative search markers *a/l* through it. The Archivist had to do the rest.

He waited as images overlaid each other on the optical display, and emotional contexts played through him at random. Presently sequences began to surface that made sense. Jindigar drank most of it into his memory for later use but sifted topic after topic for anything relevant to Dissolving. But there was nothing on the dual-Centered Oliat.

*There has to be something!* He had one more key he knew but had never been authorized to use because he had not yet Centered and Dissolved. It would be dangerous for him, but ... resolutely he invoked the Observer's key.

With the suddenness of a flash flood data poured into his consciousness, scorching nerves, streaking dizzily by. It felt like driving into an obstruction at full speed and being catapulted through the air spinning end for end.

He grabbed at an image of a convocation of Oliats, and suddenly he was in an Active Temple on Dushaun. The rosy glow of the worldcircle turned the white garments of the five Oliats assembled there to light pink and somehow made visible the linkages that bound four of the Oliats into a single unit, a meta-Oliat. The fifth Oliat had two Centers, two whole sets of linkages lacing them together.

the shaleiliu hum was so intense, it made Jindigar curl in on himself, tensing against it as if it threatened to dissolve him. It was coming from the four-fold Oliat and was focused on the fifth Oliat assembled on the worldcircle itself. *I've found it!*

The soundless vibration turned his muscles to jelly, melted his bones, invaded his mind. He fought to remain with the scene, drinking in all the data recorded in the peripherals. But in the end, before he'd grasped much of the technical background, his will collapsed.

In that moment his bodyfield lost the key he'd used to access the Observer's level, and he found himself on the recliner once more, facing an ashen-gray display that pulsed sickly.

"He's not breathing!" exclaimed a technician.

"Neither is Threntisn!"

Teams converged on them, grabbing away the contacts,

stretching them out, forcing air into them. Jindigar had no strength to resist. Everything went out of him with the knowledge that the only help for them was utterly beyond their reach. A four-way meta-Oliat could be formed only of the most experienced officers and had to be Constituted by a commission of Complete Priests who could manage to link the Centers. Serving in a meta-Oliat was a legendary privilege, for the range of perception was not just a planet or a Solar System but the entire cosmos. It was the shortest, but the most dangerous, path to Completion, for very little was known about the mechanism. Not many experiments had been done, for theorists were leery of the effects of the linkage between Observer and Observed.

One datum had stuck in his mind, though. Of the four times a meta-Oliat had been Constituted to Dissolve a dual-Centered Oliat, it had succeeded only once. And nobody knew why. At least, that was where the data in this Archive left off. *There has to be something else. There has to be.*

"There's something else," Jindigar was still insisting raggedly as Venlagar and Zannesu carried him back to their quarters. Jindigar, driven, had wanted to go on, but Threntisn's attendants had called a halt.

Slumped on his cot, Jindigar looked around at his officers. As bad as the last couple of days had been for him, they had been many times worse for his officers—waiting, feeling the creeping inner pressure that wouldn't slack off, and with nothing to do but depend on him to find the answer. He couldn't even tell them what he'd found. He wasn't authorized to know it himself. And it did none of them any good.

They had no choice but to try the Dissolution and let it go as it would. But he knew how it would go. The moment *his* links blurred, Krinata would take over. Krinata wasn't Takora—even if maybe she had been once. She couldn't do a Center's job. She had lost her grip on his Oliat because she couldn't cope with the ever-shifting energy patterns and in-

formation flow. Even if she knew how, her human body wasn't conditioned to it.

*One more fumble and we're all dead. What am I going to do?*

He stared at them. Zannesu was stirring something in a pot hung over the fire, Eithlarin writing in her diary, Venlagar napping—probably dreaming of his wedding day if the way his throat was working meant anything. The gathering Renewal tides were affecting even Venlagar, his steadiest officer.

When Jindigar had come in, Darllanyu and Llistyien had been teaching Krinata a tune on Jindigar's whule. They had stopped, but Krinata was still seated cross-legged on the table, the whule cradled in her lap, Llistyien seated in the chair before her. Watching Jindigar, Krinata passively let Llistyien try to wrap her four fingers and barely opposable thumb around the fretboard to cover a chord that would strain a Dushau's grip.

Jindigar was about to suggest that they transpose the key when voices erupted outside. One female Dushau voice rose above the others in clear Standard. "You can't go in there! That's a consecrated Temple, don't you understand! You shouldn't even be--"

Jindigar leapt to his feet, as everyone else started to move. He thought he heard the rumble of a human or Lehiroh man's voice, not a sound he'd ever heard inside the compound. Krinata was the only ephemeral allowed this far.

"I can't do that," answered the Dushau as Jindigar crossed the Temple floor and approached the front

door, realizing it was Trinarvil defending them. "The Oliat must not be disturbed—"

He identified Storm's voice this time. "Jindigar will be furious with you if you don't let me speak to his Oliat. You don't know what's just happened—"

Jindigar wound through the curved entryway and emerged onto the porch of the Aliom Temple beside Trinarvil, the Oliat hanging back in the shadows behind him, Krinata at his heels.

"What has happened?" asked Jindigar, ignoring his fatigued numbness.

Storm answered from the ground in front of the porch where he stood surrounded by six nervous Dushau who had closed in to escort him back out to the gate. "The Gifters laid eggs in the Cassrians' hatching pond, and their grubs ate Cassrian eggs, leaving a rotten mess that killed the other eggs. The committees had the lab create a fungus that kills the Gifters' eggs but not Cassrian eggs or hatchlings. It was supposed to stay in the pond; only tonight, they found a mutated version of that fungus growing on the corn sprouts. It killed corn even faster than it killed Gifter eggs. Jindigar, without the corn Lehiroh and humans won't survive next winter. We're too low on vitamin supplements."

*And where will their fungus spread next?* Scanning the group of Dushau gathering around them, Jindigar asked Trinarvil, "You knew this?"

"Yes, but Jindigar's can't cope with it."

Krinata, a trained ecologist, muttered, "I'll bet it was, a native phage that invaded the fungus and turned it."

Jindigar glanced around, agreeing with a gesture. Darllanyu, hidden back in the shadows of the tunnel entry, asked, "Are ' we going to have to work this?"

Zannesu reassured her. "We—can't----- "

She shook that off. "If we must—we must." Every one of them, despite the tight adjournment, knew that she held the vial of pensone in her hand like a talisman. "We can't abandon the colony at such a moment."

Eithlarin possessively edged closer to Zannesu but did not contradict Dar.

At Trinarvil's behest two Dushau Outriders moved to escort Storm toward the outer gate. In a sudden decision, driven perhaps by the long hours of tedious, fruitless effort of the last few days, Jindigar called out, "We'd like him to wait in the debriefing room. We must discuss this."

Trinarvil looked at him as if he'd gone into Renewal mad-

ness, and he thought she would overrule him. But she sighed and went after the group around the ephemeral intruder. "I'll go get a Historian to let us in. Wait."

Jindigar turned to his Oliat, leading them back into the Temple. "I don't want to convene and search the colony's situation, but I think we must interview Storm. The debriefing room is the only place in here where we can talk comfortably. I don't want to go into the outer court."

"Jindigar—if we have to..." repeated Darllanyu.

"Don't be too quick to become a martyr," he cautioned, but inwardly admired her courage.

"I want to come with you," said Krinata.

"Not necessary. I can talk to Storm."

Venlagar offered, "Listyien and I can come too. Zannesu and Eithlarin could stay with Dar."

It was too logical to be argued with—Center, Receptor, Emulator, and Outreach teaming to deal with the external while Inreach, Protector, and Formulator dealt with the internal. Standard practice. *Why urn I resisting?* He didn't know, so he said, "Come, then." *But we are not going into the field again.*

They dressed against the growing evening chill and went over to the debriefing room, which was now lit with the new candles that gave off a better light for Dushau eyes. Two apprentice Historians stood guard over the equipment while Trinarvil watched Storm sitting nervously on the end of one of the couches. Seeing Jindigar, Storm rose.

Jindigar waved him back to his seat and perched on the edge of an instrument panel opposite him, adopting an informal, friendly tone. "I couldn't invite you into the Temple. But I'm glad you came."

"I didn't want to come into the compound at all—I know you don't like it. But they wouldn't deliver my notes to you—I knew they weren't getting through."

"If they had," he admitted brutally, "I doubt I could have responded. Things have not been good for us."

"I figured they would have told me if you'd Dissolved."

"Krinata would have come." *If she survived.* "Now tell what has happened. Every detail."

The trained observer rendered his report in crisp, terse, factual sentences that elaborated on the summary he had given before and ended with a message from Terab, sent both as friend and committee executive. "She said to tell you that unless some Dushau can help, before the colonists all starve, they will storm the Dushau compound—even the inner one. I don't believe that, Jindigar, but she said I was too out of touch, working for you. She says you have to come and talk to them."

Terab knew as much about Renewal as any ephemeral, except perhaps Krinata. She knew what she was asking.

He looked around at the room, still ready for him to resume work with Threntisn. But there was nothing they could do until the Historian recovered.

In sudden decision Jindigar stood, summoning strength from somewhere deep inside. "Right now, then." He wasted no energy dissuading his officers from accompanying him, and Storm, as always, had anticipated their needs. The Outriders were waiting for them at the gate. Jindigar inspected Cyrus dubiously but noted how Storm accepted him into the working order without comment. But Cyrus favored the knuckles of his right hand, and one of the human Outrider trainees had a matching bruise on his jaw. On closer scrutiny it seemed that all the human Outriders had been in a brawl recently.

Storm noticed Jindigar's appraisal and offered, "Humans have their own methods of problem solving. I'm not worried. They've been behaving as the best of friends for the last two days. I judge we can trust them—now."

They sent a runner ahead to warn Terab, and they all started out across the settlement to the Council offices at the center of the cluster of dwellings.

Terab arrived just as they did, stood back warily until Storm had announced the Oliat adjourned, then invited them into her office—a room almost identical to Storm's quarters. Jindigar noticed the slate-rock and chalk set up at one end of the porch where daily work assignments were posted. At one side of the

door there were message pigeonholes for the group leaders and, on the other, a board for posting official announcements.

Inside, Terab's office had two desks, seating for different species, charts covering the walls, and some record storage cases. An open door in the rear wall led to a porch that ran the length of the back of the building. A fireplace at one side held a banked fire that Terab poked to life and built up as the Outriders helped by lighting candles.

Terab turned from the fire and straightened, her two upper hands joined while her middle hands fidgeted with her loose-fitting jacket. They had all lost too much weight this winter. But there hadn't been any rationing riots.

"Jindigar—I never thought to talk to you again," she said, coming to the desk doing him the honor of remaining up on her hind limbs.

Jindigar returned the honor by seating himself on a floor throw. For long, serious conversations Holot preferred to sit on the floor. She scuffed another floor throw into position before him and dropped to four legs, lowering herself with the creakiness of age as Jindigar gestured the others to chairs and said, "Storm tells me you fear for all our lives."

"The Oliat made a terrible mistake. No one here has ever heard of an Implant Oliat making such a mistake. Some are saying it was done on purpose because the Dushau are planning to leave, abandoning all of us to this world. Some are saying that this world is unlivable—and you knew it all along."

That sounded like the rumors the Emperor had been spreading about the Dushau in the final days of the Empire. "These 'some'—are they the soldiers?" asked Jindigar.

A detachment of the Emperor's own troops had tracked Jindigar's party to Phanphihy and had attacked the settlement a year ago. But Phanphihy itself had defeated the troops, inducing in them nightmares and debilities until their own fatigue-generated errors destroyed their equipment.

"It started among the soldiers," admitted Terab. "But it's spreading. The medic has been reporting an increased call for sleeping aids. If we don't do something soon, we won't live to starve. Phanphihy will lash out at us, like it did before."

*How could things have become this bad in only a few days?* When he had decided to Dissolve the Oliat, the colony's situation had been precarious but stable.

Terab couldn't follow his thoughts, he reminded himself. He had to speak aloud. "Tell me, do you think the concept of the multicolony is not viable? Are the others unable to understand the Dushau requirements or to accept our contribution of knowledge and skill as sufficient?"

"It's not that, Jindigar. What the Historians have accomplished so far, in resurrecting basic technology and teaching it to us, surprises everyone. We never knew your Historians were useful. But colonists have come to think of an Implant Oliat as the only key to success. Now they feel betrayed and abandoned. Some of them don't understand that Dushau are just flesh and blood, fallible mortals like the rest of us."

"What would it take to convince them that we're committed to this world in our own life-or-death struggle?"

"Nothing short of a graveyard filling as rapidly as ours." True, fewer Dushau had died so far, and more than half the colony's number was Dushau. Yet Jindigar knew that a higher percentage of Dushau were in critical condition, struggling with the countertides of Renewal and world-alienation. "It just takes us

longer, Terab. But in the end the toll will be heavier on us."

"The end will come faster if something isn't done to silence the cynics. They need a graphic demonstration of Dushau loyalty to this colony. They're blaming all our troubles on you folk—even our being here."

"That we can't escape responsibility for," admitted Jindigar. Except for the soldiers, everyone here had been rescued from the Imperial edict condemning all Dushau sympathizers to death.

"Tomorrow, when the news about the corn blight hits, someone is sure to say it was Dushau sabotage."

"That's ridiculous!" snorted Storm, forgetting himself for the moment. "They stand to lose as much as we do."

"Insanity," said Terab heavily, "attributes insane moves to others. Jindigar, we need an answer to this mess—and an explanation of why it happened. It doesn't have to be the real reason—it just has to be plausible enough for people who don't understand ecology to believe."

The people here had not been prepared to become colonists. They hadn't the basic education. Now that the shock of displacement and the daily terror of running for their lives was over, all they wanted was a return to their comfortable, safe existence. Jindigar was in total sympathy.

"The explanation is simple," said Krinata. "We—"

"Krinata," interrupted Jindigar, not wanting to discuss their dual-Center problem with someone who could only interpret it as a power struggle.

But she rushed on. "Terab, we misjudged the Gifters for the same reason we have no business trying to balance at all. Too many of us just aren't well enough to do this work." She tossed a defiant glance at Jindigar, as if to say he should be ashamed for doubting her discretion.

But Jindigar was just as unhappy to cite physical illness as an excuse for the inexcusable. Many another Oliat had performed at and beyond the brink of death. Besides, none of them were really ill. Yet he would not contradict his Outreach. "The fact remains, we did bring the Gifters, and they have killed Cassrian eggs." He recalled the moment when they had grasped the solution to the Holot's problem, and that had somehow communicated to the Gifters' hive-mind. Krinata's grip on the Oliat failed before they could deep-check that decision. That was no excuse. He had sent word not to molest the Gifters bringing baby food for the Holot. He was Center. He was responsible. He sighed. "It is reasonable to expect the Oliat to rectify the mess we've made."

"Terab, if we have to convene again," said Krinata, "the Dushau too near Renewal will have to take a drug—which may impair fertility—or worse. If they'd used it before, maybe we wouldn't have fumbled that reading of the Gifters, but they didn't because the damn drug can destroy them."

Terab swore a spaceman's oath. Staring, she muttered, "I didn't know a drug could delay Renewal."

"Side effects make it useful only in a life-or-death situation," Jindigar volunteered. "This seems to be one."

"Jindigar," said Terab seriously. "Don't let them do it. We'll cope with this somehow."

"How?" challenged Jindigar flatly.

"I don't know, but if people knew—"

"Would they believe?" asked Jindigar.

"The problem," said Krinata, "is that people don't take Renewal seriously. They think the Dushau just take a long vacation and expect the rest of us to support them while they indulge their whims. It isn't like that, Terab. Almost half the Dushau are deathly ill right now, and even so, they are working double-shift days, driving themselves mercilessly."

Solemnly Terab commented, "You're the only one who's ever seen any evidence of that. All we see are the fine products that come out of the Compound, the Dushau who come to teach us crafts we've never heard of, or the Oliat silently performing miracles behind the wall of Outrider guards." She fixed Jindigar with a stare. "If this colony is going to work, I think those walls have to become permeable—people have to *see* that you're putting as much into this as we are, that you take equal risks. Then maybe I can get them to pull together and solve this blight problem."

Jindigar couldn't imagine what more they'd care to see than they'd seen in the cave—an Oliat collapsing in the middle of a task. That wasn't a rare enough sight for them? Of course, it seemed to them that the Oliat had survived. "Do they have to see someone die, Terab?"

"Don't go getting ideas! I'll not be having any sacrifices around here!"

*But what else could reconvening his Oliat be but a sacrifice?*

Someone would die this time, and when it happened, perhaps he, unlike Takora, would be quick enough to cut the links and free his officers to their own fates.

There was surely no other answer to be had. He had plumbed the depths of the Archive tracing and found nothing. He couldn't just sit and review the same two minutes of history over and over while the colony starved—and worse, loosed into this innocent world a microlife construct unsuited to the world, perhaps uncontrollable within this ecology—perhaps creating another disaster such as Eithlarin had witnessed on Vistral.

He took a deep breath and let it out, then said, "I'll need the lab specs on that fungus, then we'll want to view the Cassrian hatching pond—and does anyone have specimens of that blighted corn?" He swung around to meet the gazes of Llistyien and Venlagar. They knew, as well as he did, that they had no choice.

## **SIX**

### **Break-in**

While word of the new crisis spread through the Dushau community and delegates went out to confer with ephemerals, Jindigar and Krinata spent the evening studying the lab work on the pond infestation and the fungus. Even without a Sentient computer the ephemerals had taken only a few hours after discovering the pond invaders to mutate and produce the fungus from a stock fungus used for pest control purposes on many Cassrian worlds. It should have been safe. But something had gone wrong.

*Phanphihy just doesn't want us here?*

When Jindigar found his thoughts drifting in such a perilous direction—as if the Phanphihy delusion were taking hold of him as it had the Imperial troopers—he laid the study aside and went to talk to Trinarvil. He found her in her office with Zannesu and Eithlarin, discussing the side effects of pensone.

As Jindigar entered, Trinarvil broke off and looked up. "You're determined to take them into the field again?"

Jindigar replied by reciting his findings. "We must consider our options very carefully," he said. He spoke



directly to Zannesu, who had prudently taken a seat as far from Eithlarin as he could. Both of them now had inflamed fingertips, just as Jindigar did. He put his hands behind his back. "I won't demand this of anyone."

"One dissent and we don't go?" asked Zannesu.

"That's right," answered Jindigar.

Trinarvil closed the folders before her. "Blood chemistries show that pensone will increase Eithlarin's break-in phobia. She's unstable, Jindigar, and Zannesu is such a close shaleiliu with her that he resonates to it."

"But Zannesu also stabilizes her," Jindigar pointed out. "We must rest before deciding. Trinarvil, could you run blood chemistries on all of us tonight?"

She pushed to her feet and leaned over the desk. "Certainly, but I can tell you the results right now. Inconclusive."

He knew she was right but didn't know what else to do. The next morning, they discussed it all again and voted unanimously to work. Jindigar sent word to Threntisn that he wouldn't be searching the Archive and took his Oliat into the Temple where he presented them with Trinarvil's estimates of their individual need for pensone according to then- blood hormone levels—notoriously unreliable in early onset because the glands produced surges of hormone at irregular intervals. It was just such a surge that had conquered Darllanyu in the Holot cave.

Darllanyu looked at the slip with her results on it, then folded it. "I told you before. I won't go into the field without pensone. I almost killed us all last time."

Jindigar sagged. People who had used pensone usually gave up engendering their own children. And he'd so wanted Darllanyu's children. A barren first mating such as they had shared in their First Renewals often left that nagging, unfulfilled feeling they had both endured for more than five thousand years.

On the other hand, their lives depended on each others' stability. And they would have to deal with the Cassrian reproductive process this time.

The morning sun beaming through the skylight illuminated the far end of the Temple where the Hand of Fire stood—a carving made of Phanphihiy wood. It was a Dushau hand, where each of the seven digits began as a bolt of lightning striking out of thin air, converging to form the palm of the hand in which nestled a bowl of water—with a live fish swimming in it. On the table beside it was a small plate of Phanphihiy glass with the tiny pensone capsules arrayed on it. Next to that was a stack of empty glass plates, none any bigger than the palm of a hand.

"I think," said Jindigar, "that we should test ourselves for dosage. Anyone who merits a two-capsule dose *both* by kinesiology and blood test will take it. Reasonable?"

No one objected. Jindigar went first, taking an empty plate and putting one capsule on it. He took it to the worldcircle under the skylight.

The white gravel of the wedding circle had been cleared away, revealing the large wood carving of the Oliat symbol inlaid into the floor, an X balanced on the point of an arrow. When the officers took their places on the symbol, they stood within the worldcircle.

His Oliat's first official function had been the opening of the worldcircle, thus consecrating the Temple. Jindigar remembered how they had arranged themselves on the symbol that day. All Aliom practitioners

qualified to help had surrounded the circle. Unsure how Krinata would affect the process, he had focused the Aliom community into one single mind-entity and sealed the world-energy leakage oozing up through the Temple floor in a foglike haze.

Then, with the Temple floor sealed away from the world, Jindigar had made himself a gateway for the world's energy, letting it erupt upward through him and sending it on up through the skylight and up into the life sphere of the planet. Much to his surprise, when they stepped out of the new worldcircle, it continued to spume energies skyward, and the rest of the floor remained clean of any static.

His gaze rested on Krinata now. *Either Krinata is Takora, and Dushau do sometimes reincarnate, or a worldcircle does not always dissipate when stepped on by someone not trained in Aliom.* He wasn't prepared to choose between these basic tenets right now. Perhaps he should ignite a testing circle to see if other humans could walk on it.

He stepped into his place on the center of the Aliom symbol, feeling the tingle all over his skin nap, like bathing in an electric field. Only it had a deeper, healing effect very disturbing on the threshold of Renewal.

Jindigar held the dish cupped in the palm of his hand, cradled against his waist, and held his other arm straight out in front of him, palm down. "Ready, Zannesu."

Zannesu touched Jindigar's outstretched hand and applied a measured force. Slowly Jindigar's arm sank toward the floor. By sheer willpower he was able to stop it at about a forty-five-degree angle. Adding a second capsule made Jindigar's arm collapse instantly. Two capsules would be a poisonous dose for him right now.

Jindigar tested Zannesu, then Zannesu and Llistyien tested everyone else—except Krinata. Darllanyu's arm was strengthened to rock steadiness by three capsules and collapsed by four—the only one of them to exceed Jindigar's standard.

"Before you take it," said Venlagar, "let's test the Oliat with it."

"But that puts Krinata in it," objected Zannesu. "Of course, it's poison to her. We'll have no strength."

"It'll test our collective balance," said Jindigar, though such principles didn't always transpose neatly to other species.

The Oliat joined in a line, arms circling one another's waists, Dar at one end and Krinata at the other, Jindigar in the middle. Dar put the pensone down while Jindigar coached Krinata to heft a fire shovel, holding it at arm's length.

The shovel barely cleared the floor. "I can't lift it!"

"Good," replied Jindigar, and let up on the adjournment seals as he suggested, "Now, see if you can lift it."

She strained, and the shovel wobbled up waist-high. They were not in good balance. //Dar? You can go ahead.//

She held the pensone to her, and Jindigar signaled Krinata, who raised the shovel again, exclaiming, //My God!// Her arm rose to shoulder height, supporting the shovel easily.

Zannesu observed, //Maybe we can do this after all.//

As Darllanyu took the drug and waited for it to take effect, it Jindigar busied himself with Zannesu and Krinata, setting the foundation linkages. //Now, Krinata, I'm going to set the choke-link to you, so you won't have to carry the brunt of this. You'll *be* Outreach, completing the Oliat balance and allowing us to function, but you won't be able to speak for us, and you'll hardly feel what we're doing.// *If we were a glorified heptad before, now we're a crippled one!*

Earlier Krinata had agreed to the choke-link, a training device that was essentially a demotion for her. Jindigar felt tears stinging behind her eyes. Krinata, Lady Zavaronne, regarded fidelity as Aliom did—another meaning of shaleiliu, the congruence between what one said and what one did, what one alleged and what was fact. But she knew her word wasn't strong enough to bind her actions. //Krinata, I know you won't ever willingly take Center again. But you have the trained reflexes of a Center, and those reflexes will *act*. It would be the same for me.//

She nodded. //Let's get on with it.//

Momentarily Jindigar wondered why he'd ever considered Krinata their weakest officer. He had to exert himself to keep any pace she set. He turned to watch Darllanyu seated cross-legged in the center of the worldcircle, shivering a little as the drug took effect.

He felt the pressure abating even as he watched, producing in them both a sickening emptiness. It was a measure of how deeply they had linked themselves—even without the wedding. Her eyes met his, and he wasn't sure he could compete in her league, either. But, oh, there was an exhilaration in the idea of showing her how easily he performed the greatest feats. And therein lay a danger, for adolescent bravado could not be permitted in a Center.

Zannesu put a hand on Jindigar's elbow. //Eithlarin says if we get out of this unscathed, she'll offer to bear children for you two.//

Touched to his core, Jindigar had to turn away, bury his face in his hands, and hold his breath against the keening wail of pain that rose in him. He forced it aside and turned back to his zunre. Krinata was right. They should get this over with quickly.

Accompanied by their seven Dushau Outriders plus Storm's whole crew, the Oliat arrived at the pond just before noon. The sun was bright in a clear sky, the breeze softened with the breath of summer. The pond had been dug out deeply, the dirt stacked all around to form a protective embankment. Water from an underground stream fed the pond, then drained into the river beyond. Wooden stairs led to the flat top of the embankment where a crowd had already gathered.

As they climbed the outside stair mating calls of flyers filled the air. Young piols chased around in circles, their primary mating game. Parent piols with litters were well established in nesting holes on the inside of the embankment above the pond. There were eight of them now, and two gravid females, all of them fat on the fish appropriated from the Cassrians' pond. Nobody minded, for they cherished the Cassrian eggs more than the Cassrians did.

Jindigar put the animals out of his mind. Leaving the ephemeral Outriders with the crowd at the top of the embankment, the Oliat descended the two flights of wooden stairs and the winding trail down into the bowl holding the pond. The odor of putrefaction trapped in the deep cup holding the pond was overwhelming.

At the bottom of the trail a large wooden platform had been built out over the placid water on piles, while an end section of it floated like a raft. At irregular intervals around the floating platform there were small weather-tight sheds. The Cassrian officials were gathered on the solid platform. Together with the representatives of the various Councils, they made quite a crowd.

On the floating platform Trinarvil and her medics had set up a first-aid station for the Oliat in one of the sheds. Its door now stood open, revealing a stack of Cassrian furniture shoved into one corner near a hole in the floor. Water sloshed through the hole as people moved about. Trinarvil's crew had jigsawed seven cots into the shed, barely leaving room for themselves and some of the irradiating equipment and battery packs.

Next to the shed's open door, Threntisn sat in a chair, surrounded by four of his apprentice Historians who were fussing over him while he irritably pushed them aside. His teeth were too pale, and he looked shaky enough to be confined to bed. *I'd no idea I'd put that much stress on him. If I hurt the Archive* — Jindigar quelled that pang of fear and guilt. He couldn't afford distractions now. Besides, if it were that bad, Threntisn wouldn't be so determined to record this event that he had to be carried to the scene.

As he made his way out onto the floating platform, Jindigar glanced back up at the spectators on the top of the embankment. Storm's Outriders mingled with the Cassrians and the handful of others but remained vigilant.

Jindigar had chosen to work under Dushau guard this time, because with the Outreach nonfunctional, they needed the Aliom-trained Dushau. Storm's crew, as expert as they were, could not perceive the linkages directly, nor feel the Oliat attunement. And as well trained as the ephemerals were in field first aid for an Oliat, his own people under Trinarvil would be faster, surer, and more accurate. With Eithlarin's increasing break-in sensitivity seconds could count.

When it had been explained to Storm—"This Oliat would *never* ordinarily be convened off Dushaun"—he had readily agreed to keep his crew out of the way—but he had refused to wait in the barracks, saying, "Jindigar, there are reasons you've always chosen ephemeral Outriders for work off Dushaun. And this isn't Dushaun."

Touched by the loyalty, Jindigar hadn't argued.

Gathering his officers at the floating end of the platform, Jindigar cautioned, //Mind your footing. With Krinata choked off it's easy to become dizzy.// But they needed the space, and it helped to be in closer contact with the water they had to attune to. Jindigar, though, noted how their weight—so much more than fourteen Cassrians would weigh—sank the plat-

form. But if they didn't move much, they wouldn't get their boots wet.

//Venlagar?// prompted Jindigar when they were all set.

The Receptor had been eyeing the scummy water with distaste, and as soon as Jindigar called in the link, the entire Oliat felt why. The natural steady state here had been thoroughly disrupted. All higher life forms in the water had died, and now the microlife proliferated unchecked, feasting on the flesh of more evolved beings—on the fish floating belly-lip on the surface, bloated or already disintegrating into a gelatinous scum, and on the Cassrian eggs that would never hatch to bring joy to their parents.

Resolutely Jindigar steered them away from that thought. //Llistyien, have you noticed that the Cassrians are not very upset?//

His Emulator answered, //Cassrians form no parental bond until they claim a hatchling. I never Emulated Cassrians before.// The Cassrian attitude toward their eggs engulfed the Oliat. The pond was the future of the community, nothing more. They did not feel as Dushau would about a nursery.

The Cassrian eggs had not been the only higher life in the pond—in addition to the Gifters' eggs, there had been swimmers and shelled bottom crawlers, amphibians and plant life in a carefully constructed

balance, designed to support the emerging Cassrian hatchlings. Darllanyu, Llistyien and Zannesu had been the Oliat trio that created that design, but being only a trio, they'd been unable to anticipate the arrival of the Gifters.

//Watch now, and you will learn how a full Oliat foresees the disruption of an ecology by peripheral forces.// Jindigar guided the focus lower, narrowing on the microprocesses of the putrefying pond, letting his trio discern how the pond had been irresistible to the Gifters and how an Oliat would have thus become instantly aware of the Gifters' existence. Routine extrapolation showed how the Gifter eggs had to intrude, and the ecosystem, which included the colonists, had to respond, creating the fungus.

Having learned in the Holot cave how precarious his Oliat balance was, Jindigar had not intended to open the Oliat into lull attunement with Phanphihy. But as they grasped the inner mechanics of the pond life, Phanphihy seeped into the Oliat gestalt consciousness, so that the relationships binding colony and world evoked an exquisite shaleiliu.

Everyone took the perception in stride except Eithlarin, who confused it with Vistral, the devastated world of her nightmares, and saw the mad proliferation of microlife in the pond as an ugly, revolting, and disgusting menace, far beyond the Oliat's ability to cope with.

For one second, as the Protector saw herself as the victim of overwhelming natural forces, the Oliat became the dead eggs eaten by myriads of tiny creatures, being invaded and consumed, degraded.

As if they'd done the drill a thousand times, Jindigar and Zannesu functioned in perfect concert, closing the link to Eithlarin as her Outrider caught a whisper of what had happened and—as no ephemeral Outrider would dare—shook her hard to break her fixation while Jindigar and Zannesu reestablished the balance of the Oliat. Jindigar felt Krinata tense to go to Eithlarin's aid, surely expecting Eithlarin's shock to slam through the Oliat as if it were a break-in.

But the Outrider's touch was sure, and Eithlarin mastered her panic, turning wide eyes to Jindigar in apology.

Simultaneously, up among the spectators, a scattering of grim newcomers worked their way through the crowd and came clattering down the stairs. Storm, gathering his crew with shouts, wormed his way through the press and started down the stairs after the others.

Ignoring them, Jindigar opened the linkage to Eithlarin, letting Krinata share their awareness for a moment. //Easy. Steady now. No harm done.// He sent Krinata a human smile and choked her link down again before she could react, trying not to think how frightened he was of her. //Now, Receptor, let's scan, placing the pond in its proper perspective.//

They flashed into a wider, but more superficial, focus and Received the Gifter hive on the plain above, shaleiliu to the pond's system, for the Gifters had lovingly deposited their eggs in the hatchery of their new allies. The pond was also shaleiliu to the syrupy substance so industriously made by the Gifters to feed their own young—ah!

One of the serious puzzles) of Phanphihy fell into place. The Gifters were dimorphic, alternating their generations between flyer and amphibian. Flyer eggs hatched into amphibians whose young would be flyers. The amphibians were loners who did not form a hive and thus had no protection unless some other hive would take them in—paid by Gifter syrup.

At the end of summer, when the amphibians were ready to reproduce, the Gifters expected the host hive to gather the eggs and return them to the Gifter hive for hatching. It was so simple, just another one of Phanphihy's symbiotic chains. It should have been apparent to the Oliat when they first contacted the

Gifters.

On the plain above them, the plains grasses were almost tall enough to hide the hive now. But the Oliat awareness caught the gleaming damp surface where the Gifter builders had enlarged the hive. Above the gray hump of the structure, little flyer warriors churned angrily in cone formations, waiting for the signal to attack an enemy. Gravid layers were already crawling over the surface of the large hive, thwarted instincts creating confusion. Unless something were done soon, the hive would send out its warriors.

Feeling their urgency driving like the beat of his own heart, Jindigar found the need for a functional Outreach overwhelming. He had to tell them, //The Holot must build the Gifters a pond up on the plain and stock it with river fish for them in return for the syrup.//

But Zannesu kept the choke-link to Krinata tight, so she barely felt Jindigar's message. She turned to eye the Center questioningly, compelled to speak, but having no idea what had to be said.

Jindigar curbed frustration. They would report to the community later. Now they must discover how to control the fungus. There was no way to avoid it. He would have to take them out of time-sync. Reluctantly he announced, //We're going up-perspective. Eithlarin, brace yourself—//

He directed Venlagar's attention deep into the pond's microlife to anchor them in the now, then brought his Formulator and Emulator into the time-sync configuration. He felt Darllanyu's support holding rock-steady now that her concentration wasn't riven by hormonal surges. She was the only one except himself who had done this in the field before. And she had actually done it as Formulator, while he had never tried it as Center.

Gently he raised the perspective until past, present, and future formed a unified whole, just as the interlocked bio-systems had been clear to the Oliat gestalt.

The first hatchlings of the Gifter eggs had eaten some Cassrian eggs by dissolving a hole in the shell. The tailored mutant fungus, invading swiftly, had infected the Gifter-amphibian hatchlings. It took root on the tender young skin and grew until it covered the tadpole, and the skin sloughed off, leaving the tadpole to die in agony.

There was nothing like it on Phanphihy. The native beings had no defense. The fungus not only killed Gifter amphibians, it devoured all the native pond swimmers.

The Oliat saw the seething death-pond as joined in a single system to the withering cornfield where a new, landborne secondary imitation of the fungus covered the plants. In the corn-field the sprouts peeked up from the dark soil in rows of light green. Rusty dots of fungoid growth covered the shoots. Jindigar guided the Oliat focus deeper, observing from the three-time perspective of past, present, and future, as the native and offworld life forms fought to coexist. Tuning carefully to both the parent pond-fungus and the plant-fungus, he addressed his Oliat. //We need to find how to eradicate the fungus—without turning Phanphihy against all outsiders.//

In response Llistyien Emulated the hive structure—the huge gray dome that covered the offworld colony and declared to all Phanphihy's collective consciousness that here was a hive sheltering a multispecies cooperative, living just as the dominant sentient species of Phanphihy lived.

Eithlarin joined the Protector's function to the Emulator's, and the dome took on substance—for it was protection and protective coloration.

//This should keep the hives from turning against the colony,// suggested Eithlarin. //I can hold it now, so you can search.//

Cautiously Jindigar tested their attunement to the planet. The Oliat was still accepting the planet as comprehensible, the hives of flying creatures, land herbivores, hunting carnivores, tree dwellers, and burrowing kinds as friendly to the colony-hive.

Satisfied that they were solidly grounded in a benign world and that Venlagar had them firmly anchored in time, Jindigar opened the linkages among the six of them, still keeping the Outreach link choked off. He let the total attunement steal over them, observing with a wistful satisfaction that the great tone, the carrier wave of the universe, was there for them again, louder, firmer, surer than it had been in the Holot cave. They were truly an Oliat.

His joy was echoed by his other five officers—and he wished Krinata were part of this moment. *Jindigar's Oliat*. It felt much as he imagined Completion would feel.

They became one with the entire pattern, which was the biosphere around them, and with the world force—the intangible spiritual force of this planet that sustained them. Jindigar kept their window into time only a few days wide, their geographical range no larger than a day's walk in every direction. He focused Venlagar on Receiving the development of the fungus.

In clear images generated by Receptor and Formulator working in perfect tandem, Jindigar saw the lab on the ship where the fungus was redesigned. Two Lehiroh and a Holot worked in protective coveralls over the micro equipment. A simple workaday job—gone awry. For within the potion they presented to the committees some of the fungus starter wasn't properly stabilized.

Simultaneously the Oliat was aware of how the fungus-choked pond had lain dead and rotting in the sun with flying scavengers plucking the floating carcasses up and making off with them—landing in the cornfield to feast, leaving their fungus-loaded droppings behind at the end of the day. And in the moist, sun-warmed soil the unstable fungus had mutated, producing the variety that could—and did—live on corn.

Darllanyu Formulated an image shaleiliu to that. In one of the barns the Lehiroh had built a nut press to extract oil. They had found the pungent oil from a tree nut to be a spice that made native foods palatable to Lehiroh and enhanced their ability to absorb nutrients from Phanphihy's produce.

Darllanyu's forward-time image showed Cassrians and humans bent over the corn plants, dobbing that oil onto the leaves of the plants and soaking the ground around them with it. As if in time-lapse display, they saw the fungus dying, the corn growing strong and healthy and bearing huge ears of beadlike seeds the humans fed on gladly.

Jindigar took in the awarenesses of his Oliat, then cast their perceptions wide again—checking and double-checking as he had not been able to do in the Holot cave. He had to see what would happen if all three solutions were implemented at once.

Darllanyu Formulated the image of the Holot tending a Gifter hatching pond on the plain above, while below, the Cassrians covered their pond with the Lehiroh's spice oil to kill the fungus. Meanwhile the cornfield likewise was saturated in the oil.

The Oliat found instantly that the Lehiroh, lacking their supply of the oil, would suffer an increasing vitamin shortage until the next nut harvest. And with so many of the men lactating, they couldn't afford even temporary anemia.

Jindigar widened the time perspective to several months. Instantly it became clear that the ripening fruits of spring would solve the Lehiroh nutrition problem. It was not as good as the nut oil, but the Lehiroh infants were sturdy enough even at birth to survive well.

Still hesitant, thinking of the disasters his work had inflicted on the colony so far, Jindigar checked again, then verified it all one more time. At length Zannesu commented, //This is a beautiful world, Jindigar. But it seems it's the beauty of your Oliat's balance that fascinates you.//

Abashed, Jindigar noticed that Eithlarin and Zannesu were feeling the strain—for Jindigar, stabilized by Darllanyu's having taken the drug, had been able to ignore all the truly glorious springtide forces abroad in the world, while Eithlarin and Zannesu were all too aware of them.

Llistyien, likewise more interested in the renewing lifetides, was tiring under the strain of holding the hive-dome image she held with Eithlarin.

Jindigar admitted, //Our previous failures have shaken my confidence. But—//

Then it happened.

One moment, they were in perfect attunement, anchored in the now of the pond waters and the myriad events occurring there but aware of the past and the future all around the colony. The next moment, images flashed wildly through consciousness, shattering their clear pictorial impression of the world, one distorted image overlaying another forming menacing patterns that ripped at sanity. Jindigar caught one sharp view of a horridly distorted Holot face peering into his eyes—no— into Krinata's eyes—snarling.

Clutching at his link to his Outrider, Jindigar felt the Holot's upper hands crushing her shoulders as he shook her. Her head wobbled on her shoulders, her visual field pitching about insanely. The wildly distorted view out of human eyes fought with the Oliat awareness now fragmented, incoherent, invaded. Even through the choke-link Krinata's terror flooded the Oliat.

//It's a break-in!// Jindigar told them, wishing that were reassuring. With fourteen Outriders in the field how could anyone have been allowed to touch one of his officers?

He groped toward Zannesu's awareness, trying to regain command of the linkages and bring them back into now-sync.

Zannesu responded sluggishly. Jindigar barely had hold of the linkages when Eithlarin's Protector reflexes engaged.

She threw a picture of the Holot shaking Krinata onto the inside of the dome image above them. The rest of the Oliat saw the distorted horror of snarling, sharp-toothed, predatory Holot smeared across the gray dome. It was feral, raging at them. Its emotions-reverberated through the Oliat, intensified somehow by being squeezed through the narrow channel from the Outreach: *distrust, fear, fury*.

Eithlarin's awareness collapsed into a maelstrom of terror pressing in from outside the Oliat. Space and time distorted. Phanphihiy turned into a seething pit eating away at the colony.

Eithlarin gave one convulsive shudder, trying to reject the invading malevolence, and then suddenly she pitched them all into nightmare. Above them the dome image split open like the tree log on Vistral, and a gray, hairy, clawed hand reached in to grab at them.

//She's episodic and hallucinating!// Jindigar told them, lighting to wrench free of her power.

But he could only gape helplessly as the hand closed around Eithlarin's neck.

Zannesu cried, //Jindigar! Help her!// just as Eithlarin screamed.

**SEVEN**



## Gamble

Eithlarin clutched at her neck as if to wrench the ugly gray fingers away. Heedless of everything else, she twisted against the hold of her Dushau Outrider, who was the only barrier between her and the edge of the floating platform. Her screams tore through Oliat consciousness on every level, invading past time, echoing into the future.

The filthy gray fingers grated damply against Jindigar's neck, the coarse hair penetrating between his skin nap, torturing his sensitized nerves. Simultaneously he felt the same gigantic, clawed hand closing over the most precious area of Darllanyu's neck. Violated to his core, he roared in outrage. His Oliat joined him, disgust overwhelming their natural paralysis before a predator's attack.

Twisting against his own Outrider, Jindigar glimpsed Krinata. The insane Holot's upper hands clutched at her neck. She bent backward, clawing at his grip. Through her eyes he saw the Holot snarling into her face, revealing teeth like the Vistral predator's, his redolent breath as hot as the winds of Vistral. *Must break the feedback!*

//Eithlarin! It's only a Holot!// pled Jindigar, afraid of what he'd have to do if she didn't respond. He put everything he had down his link to her. //Eithlarin—we're on Phanphihy!// *But which is worse?* The Vistral menace was only a hungry animal, but the Holot had been driven insane by a planet that rejected intruders.

Eithlarin fought Jindigar's call as if it, too, were nightmare.

The more forceful his demand, the more wildly she strained against her Outrider until at last she broke loose and sprawled, skidding to the edge of the platform where fetid water sloshed over her face.

Zannesu struggled against his own Outrider, trying to reach his mate. The Outrider looked from Jindigar to Krinata and yelled, "Should I let him go?"

The platform lurched, sending Jindigar and his Outrider to their knees. Krinata went down under the Holot's assault, her strangled scream trailing off, for she had no more breath. She couldn't respond to Jindigar's need to tell the Outrider to hang onto Zannesu.

Jindigar groped for the linkages, amazed that the choke-link to Krinata still held, despite the images hammering through it from the Holot—the malevolent grin of Phanphihy's flowers, the constant rain of poisonous pollen, the conspiracy among dumb animals to destroy anything the offworlders built, and over all, the hives of the intelligent Natives creeping eerily through the night, pulsing with evil—evil that had taken over the Oliat.

*The Oliat has to be destroyed—destroyed!*

*NO!*

As Jindigar fought off the Holot's emanations Krinata's Dushau Outrider, helpless before the wrath of a predator, could only yell at the Holot to stop. This was why an Oliat never used Dushau Outriders when off Dushaun.

*Where's Storm!*

The platform was a churning, seething mass of scuffling, struggling bodies. Jindigar climbed to his feet, searching. Past-time showed him the ephemeral Outriders plunging down the stairs after the ominous intruders and making for the platform. Their images smeared as they breasted the wave of violence erupting in the wake of the intruders who were attacking the Oliat. The Holot in the lead of the intruders

yelled at Krinata repeatedly, then, in frustration, grabbed her and shook her, his hopeless rage transmuting into a catharsis of violence.

In present-time, the Outriders formed up and moved like riot police, working their way to the Oliat. *Too slow.*

Jindigar ripped the control of the linkages from Zannesu's frozen clutch.

He choked down the linkage to Krinata even more tightly, knowing he chanced throwing them all into shock by cutting her link. The remorseless flow of Phanphihy's malevolence abated but, oddly, did not stop. At the same time Eithlarin V primitive terror burgeoned through the inner silence, louder and louder, commanding them.

Darllanyu slumped down and curled on her side, hands clamped over her head, pleading through silent sobs, //Jindigar, stop it. Make her stop....//

That one plea drove him wild. Without thinking he opened his link to Eithlarin, determined to stop her. //Eithlarin!//

But she was fleeing through the corridors of her own mind, chased by that monstrous, hairy hand, detached from its arm and sailing through the air after her while the beast pursued, gesturing with its arm that ended in a bloody stump. Free of its huge, lumbering body the hand was faster than Eithlarin. It gained on her rapidly.

Zannesu joined Jindigar's desperate call. //Eithlarin!//

She turned, and they thought she'd heard them, but all she saw was the filthy animal hand looming at her. Without warning she surrendered to the nightmare image, giving in to it totally, no longer fighting the threatened fate.

//No!// cried Zannesu, plunging after her into her private memory, into Vistral and all that had come before it in her life—for she was lost in her own memory.

Jindigar had only witnessed that total surrender once before, but he recognized it. //She's episodic.//

No one heard his pronouncement.

As one, Venlagar and Llistyien sagged to their knees, faces slack with the same retreat that had claimed Eithlarin and Zannesu. As Venlagar failed, the Oliat's anchor in the outside world slipped free. Venlagar fell away into a memory he shared in common with Llistyien, romping through a bright meadow on Dushaun where they happily trained flocks of colorful Patrol Birds to guard the high-spirited youths of the city. Darllanyu, her strength gone, was about to retreat into her own past, surely to drag Jindigar with her. He had to save them from Eithlarin's retreat. *I have to do it.*

But he knew he could never do such a cruel thing. *No! Never again!* To save them all he had to—just as he had once released Takora from her panicked clutch on the Office of Center, consigning her to Incompletion-death. *I can't!*

He could still hear Takora's despairing cry of terror. He still felt his own stark hopelessness when Krinata had displaced him to float out there helplessly. *How can I do that to Eithlarin?*

But she was dragging his Oliat to an ugly death. *Maybe I can hold her,* he told himself, and before he could think more about it, he throttled down the link to his Protector to a thread, a line with no diameter but maybe strong enough to hold her. Simultaneously he opened wide to all the others.

Eithlarin spun free, drifting into the void of her own memories—into the chaos of untime.

Jindigar called the others to their Offices. //Krinata, Zannesu, Darllanyu, Llistyien, Venlagar!// *Oh, steady Venlagar, please, be our strength now!*

With Krinata came the full blast of the Holot's perception of Phanphihiy. Suddenly Eithlarin's hold on the hive-dome image above them shattered. The dome cracked and fell toward them. The chunks of dome melted into an oily ichor that coated them with putrescent goo.

Jindigar gagged. But he held on, refusing to sever the line to Eithlarin and shatter his Oliat. //Venlagar! The dome was never material—this isn't real! Venlagar, we must not Receive Eithlarin or the Holot!//

Venlagar gave them one clear view of the bird training field, Llistyien dressed in wisps of summer clothing, running with the ultimate feminine grace, beguiling the fledgling birds with the glowing beauty of a pure spirit so that battalions of them held the starving monsters of Vistral off at the horizon, keeping the meadow safe. Neither Jindigar nor Zannesu could have turned from such a scene where their mate was in danger. Venlagar wrapped it in fog. Perception shifted. The platform shimmered into view around them, filled with knots of battling forms—and no birds.

Zannesu fought like a wild thing—refusing reality, determined to go after Eithlarin. //Inreach!// demanded Jindigar.

//No! Jindigar, no!// begged Zannesu. //Let me go!//

But Darllanyu and Llistyien began to recover. Dragging themselves to their feet, they teamed to sort the images clogging the links, rejecting the Holot's distorted view of Phanphihiy and the remaining echoes of Eithlarin's nightmare. They brought into focus the platform, the stinking water swirling around them, coating them all with real filth, and Krinata's red-tinged vision of snarling Holot. But under it all a thrumming distortion of reality beat through the links.

Zannesu collapsed, keening out a wail of unresolvable pain. A Lehiroh saw him go down and aimed a vicious kick at him. His Outrider threw his own body over Zannesu's, taking the full force of the kick, ribs giving way. The two human Outrider trainees moved in on the Lehiroh attacker.

Cyrus and Storm teamed up and threw one last Lehiroh Imperial trooper into the pond, then leapt onto the back of the Holot who had Krinata. Krinata's Dushau Outrider seized the chance and wrenched her free. Wrapping himself around her, he rolled with her toward the middle of the platform, cradling her vulnerable head and neck in his hand.

The rest of the Oliat felt the pressure on their necks let up and, with Krinata, drew a long, delicious breath. The Holot's break-in ended. The reverberating horror died away.

As the ephemeral Outriders fought, most of those on the platform joined their defense of the Oliat against the few attackers. Quickly a space cleared around the Oliat.

Almost all the attackers, Jindigar noted, had once been of the Imperial force that had chased them to Phanphihiy and attempted to annihilate them. They were the only ones who, had once succumbed to the Natives' psychic attack, the hive's ability to induce psychotic terrors in their enemies.

Had the Oliat's mistakes caused enough despair to trigger the psychotic cycle in them again? He noted that the attacking ex-Imperials were largely Cassrian and Holot, the two species most affected by the recent disasters, *flow could I have missed anticipating this?*

The ex-Imperials were outnumbered, but they were combat-trained and driven by desperation. The

battle raged, friend against friend, ally against ally.

A Cassrian, arms and legs flailing, arced over Jindigar's head and splashed into the slimy water. All around the platform swimmers were thrashing about or trying to climb back into the fight. They stirred up such a stench that some people lay writhing in the throes of acute nausea. Jindigar saw one Holot in the water, fur matted with muck, towing an unconscious human toward the edge of the pond where others waited to haul them out.

In their protected space Jindigar recaptured the attention of his officers. //Zannesu, we can't save Eithlarin this way. Can you help me command the linkages?//

He tore his gaze from Eithlarin and turned haunted eyes on Jindigar, but a measure of acceptance was there now. //I'm sorry. I'll try.//

Zannesu steadied down. Jindigar reorganized the links to the other officers, screening Krinata again but not reinstating the choke-link. They were still in the high perspective, scanning past and future as well as present, microscopic as well as macro. As he cut the data flow to her Krinata began to stir, kneading her throat and coughing. //Jindigar?//

//Eithlarin's episodic. Can you speak for us?// He had never exposed her to a five-axis spread before. Every time she tried to move, dizziness assailed her. She saw everything through a haze of other images overlaid and couldn't tell micro from macro, or past from future.

//Can you make it stop, Jindigar?//

//In a moment—but I'll have to cut you off again. Can you do it, Krinata? Just for a minute?//

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and groped her way into the Outreach's function. //Go ahead.//

//Trinarvil!// Krinata's voice croaked. She tried again. //Trinarvil!// It came out as shrill as a Cassrian's voice, but this time it penetrated the noise.

Trinarvil's medics had been working their way toward the Oliat, clucking in and out of the battle with uncommon courage. At Krinata's call they dashed across the last space to surround her. Jindigar briefed Trinarvil in rapid jargon that Krinata's throat strained to articulate.

As the Outreach's voice was heard people turned to listen, and the last of the lighting subsided. Her final words fell into a silence broken only by the splashing of swimmers and the sloshing of water over the platform.

Trinarvil turned to the crowd and announced, "The Oliat has been gravely injured. We need more space here."

The ephemeral Outriders, Storm in the lead, moved into a flying wedge, their stances belligerent, their attention on the crowd as they opened a corridor to Trinarvil's shed. Jindigar helped Eithlarin's Outriders get her into the medic's station. She was quivering in every muscle, her whole body trying to curl in on itself. But he still had the whisper of contact through the wire-thin link. They were still an Oliat.

Inside the shed Jindigar noted that Threntisn's chair had been moved to place him just inside the door—out of the action but able to view it all. They edged past him and deposited Eithlarin on one of the couches. Then they told Trinarvil, //We must report before attending to Eithlarin—if anything can be done for her.// //Krinata, can you make it that long?//

//If I keep my eyes closed, maybe. What is that stuff, Jindigar—uck!//

lie tried to dim the micro and past-time data feeds and sharpen the present/macro for her as he explained that she was seeing the microlife of the pond churned up now by all the swimmers. Meanwhile Trinarvil told the Oliat, "No—the report can wait." She examined Eithlarin's eyes. "She's critical."

Jindigar looked to Zannesu. Shaking all over, the Inreach gathered all his remaining strength. //My behavior shames me. I will not obstruct my Center further. If Eithlarin dies before we can report, she—and all of us—will have died for nothing.//

Jindigar replied warmly, //You have nothing to apologize for—I'd have done the same had it been Darllanyu.//

He said through Krinata, "//We must report before the Gifters attack.//" Hearing the words she spoke, Krinata twisted to look at Jindigar—saw him covered with crawling amoebas and quickly closed her eyes. //Attack?!//

//I'll explain.// Jindigar gathered them back toward the doorway where Storm's crew formed a living barricade in front of the Dushau Outriders.

He sent Krinata up beside Cyrus, who was nursing a hand bloodied as if he'd smashed it into Cassrian chitin. //Krinata, I must stay open to Eithlarin's condition. If you sense any change, pull back. I may have to act suddenly. Can you handle it?//

// Yes. If that stuff is just Venlagar making like a microscope, I can ignore it. It's not nearly as bad as a Holot with bad breath trying to choke me.// It was pure bravado. Her stomach was in knots, her head swimming, her knees weakening, and her neck was aching like fire. But he wasn't going to let her know he saw, for she valued her image of competence, if not in front of him so much, then in front of the others.

He scanned the crowd gathered tightly beyond the Outriders. People were tending their injuries and peering into the shed to see what was happening.

Zannesu had a firm grip on the linkages, while Venlagar anchored them to reality. The Oliat became aware of the buzz of the Gifter hive up on the plain growing ominously, while the corn blight festered rapidly in the warm sun. There wasn't much time.

Jindigar addressed the crowd in Krinata's voice, describing what they'd discovered about the Gifters and how the Holot must pay them. "//As soon as they see you preparing a pond for them, they will understand. The hive-mind is primitive. It sees its interaction with us as a kind of mating dance. As long as our moves are of that dance, they will respond without hostility. We teased them with a pond and took it away. Now we must provide them another.//"

A burly Holot male Jindigar recognized as one of the ex-Imperials pushed through to the front and called, "Why should *we* take your advice? We took your advice before, and look what happened Why did you bring us to this crazy world? To starve our children and torture us to death?"

There was a rising growl of agreement—not all Holot, either. "//This is not an insane world. It holds no grudges, knows no vendettas. But we are guests here and must abide by our host's customs. The Oliat is learning those customs. We have made errors for which our lives may already have I men forfeited. Would you ask that of us?//"

A Cassrian voice, double-toned and reedy, untrained in Standard speech, called, "We demand it! You've destroyed us!"

"And they've saved us!" answered a gruff Holot male. It was Irmils, Terab's mate. A general wave of

agreement supported him, especially among the Lehiroh community.

Terab on me forward and roared them to silence. "We can't afford civil war! Last night we voted to go with the Oliat's advice one more time. I say we get to work on it right now!"

Terab began to lead an exodus toward the stairs, to retarget the energies of the crowd, but the Oliat called, "//Terab, wait! We also know how to stop the blight.//"

The Holot soldier edged away from Irnils. "Don't listen. We can't trust the Oliat. They wouldn't answer me the first time I asked! It took them this long to think up a lie!" It was the Holot who had choked Krinata, his fur torn out in patches, a bloody gash showing on his cheek.

The past-time axis played back what the Holot had been yelling at Krinata, when she couldn't hear him. He had demanded a cure for the blight and a way to keep it from spreading to the Holot crops. That's all.

//Easy, Krinata. He's no monster. Just scared.//

//I know,// answered Krinata, swallowing hard and facing the real Holot before her, not the distorted horror that had attacked her from the depths of the Oliat gestalt, part Holot, part gray-furred ape.

Terab commanded the crowd's attention. "The Oliat couldn't answer because they were working—and never has any Oliat taken on a harder job! Have you ever heard of an Oliat working with double-guard before? Have you ever seen an Oliat with Dushau Outriders before?"

Jindigar glanced at Storm. Obviously his Outriders had taken it on themselves to instruct Terab.

The soldier outshouted her. "They just wanted to put o» a good show after getting us into this mess. You can't trust a Dushau;—they don't care how long things take. And what kind of Oliat has a human in it?"

Argument erupted everywhere. The crowd, now swollen by those who had dragged themselves out of the pond, was about evenly split between doubters and supporters of the Dushau. Jindigar took that moment to say softly to Terab, "//We don't have time for this. Terab, listen. You must commandeer the Lehiroh cooking oil.//" And he told her how it must be applied to destroy the com blight, and how to supplement the Lehiroh diet until the next oil-nut harvest.

By then the shouting match showed signs of new violence.

Inside the shed, Trinarvil called, "Jindigar's, you've got to refocus! Now!"

But it was too late. Without warning the wiry link to Eithlarin stretched, then thinned to gossamer. That which was the essence of Eithlarin hurtled off around a dimensional corner.

The Oliat's sevenfold balance leaned askew—as if the Oliat would pour through the hole in space left where Eithlarin had been.

Zannesu cried, //No!// and dove once more into the void after his mate, dragging the Oliat faster into oblivion.

//Venlagar!// called Jindigar, //You must transform to In-reach — let Zannesu take Receptor to hold her! Krinata, you *must not* interfere!//

Dimly Jindigar was aware of the Dushau Outriders moving them back into the shed. Storm's crew jostled the crowd away from the entry to close the doors. He felt Zannesu grasp the plan to transform Offices and acquiesce as Venlagar took up the linkages—for Zannesu was already half into the Receptor's

Office, straining to Receive his mate. As the transform took effect Venlagar gripped the link to the Receptor and kept Zannesu from following Eithlarin.

As the link to Hillarie became more elusive, and the two officers flipped their links end for end in the dance of-transformation, Jindigar—wholly inexperienced at doing this from Center fought to keep his Oliat from shattering, certain that the strain would pull his very body apart.

He was hardly aware of his Outrider pushing him down onto a cot. He heard a smothered whimper from Krinata on the adjacent cot. He rolled over and reached for her, feeling her bewilderment. //Steady. We're going to be all right.// The human skin was clammy, and she was trembling—a different sort of nervous reaction in a human but still dire enough: plunging blood pressure. Shock.

He gathered her to him, reinforcing their link, opening to her as if her skewed sensory impressions were no threat to his precarious grip on sanity. Then he groped for his new Inreach. It was a peculiar sensation, rippling unsteadily through the contacts. The transposition hadn't been properly done, nor was it yet wholly complete.

And the five-axis perspective in time and magnification confused things even more, threatening Krinata's sanity. //Yen-

lagar, Zannesu!// He called them to their new Offices and threw everything wide-open to reach for Eithlarin, using that barest whisper of a linkage to complete the Oliat pattern. He ignored the shimmering static that came down his Protector's link, drowning out the last trace of the shaleiliu hum. Krinata's strength was fading. In three desperate, rough maneuvers he slammed them back down to groundstate awareness—here and now, macro-conscious.

He felt Krinata shudder horribly with each shift in consciousness. Darllanyu only took it, hanging on grimly. Llistyien fought nausea at the sudden transposition, but as their awareness came back to single perspective, Venlagar and Zannesu settled into their new Offices, relieving a great deal of the strain.

Jindigar built the Oliat pattern again, finally bringing Zannesu into balance, his initial panic beginning to subside.

//Jindigar, help her!// pleaded his new Receptor, and let them all feel the bewildered confusion coming down the tenuous link from Eithlarin, who had fled her own intolerable memories and deserted the world-plane, but was held back from the sweet oblivion of death she sought by the Oliat link.

Trinarvil was kneeling at the head of Jindigar's cot, gesturing as if trying to attract Krinata's attention. "You must let her go!" she demanded in an urgent whisper.

//No!//

"Then we'll lose all of you. How long can you hold—"

Feeling every bit of Zannesu's anguish, Jindigar answered as if it were Darllanyu out there. "//As long as we must—as long as she can.//" Sometimes—rarely—people returned from that far place. *But she has chosen it.*

Trinarvil put one hand on Krinata's forehead and looked into her eyes. "Jindigar—can you hear me?"

//Yes,// answered Krinata, her voice husky.

Jindigar was aware of her body warming now despite her clothes, which were dampened by splashed pond water.

"We've got to take Eithlarin to the worldcircle. If she and Dar are in the circle when Dar's dose of pensone wears off, Renewal may lure Eithlarin back. Can the Oliat move?"

"//Yes,/" they answered, Krinata's voice breaking this time. She clung to Jindigar, burying her face against him, as if he were her only anchor to reality.

Jindigar's eyes met Cyrus's. He held Krinata against him, wishing he could soak up the shocks still washing through her system. *Hut at least she's alive. I haven't broken my promise to Cyrus yet.*

//Let Eithlarin go, Jindigar,/" said Zannesu wearily. Jindigar had set the links so that Zannesu was the only one really in touch with Eithlarin. //She can't make it.//

They were in the Aliom Temple. Eithlarin, shrouded in folds of white, lay on an elevated platform within the worldcircle, which was bright of itself but cast no light to see by. Jindigar, Krinata, and Zannesu sat around the rim. Venlagar and Llistyien had gone to cat, while Trinarvil was trying to help Darllanyu purge the drug from her system fast enough to do Eithlarin some good.

//You don't mean that,/" answered Jindigar. Dusk cast dense shadows through the skylight. This was a dark world—depressing. Would Dushau eyes ever adjust? He could "see" Zannesu only via the Oliat senses or through Krinata's human night vision. Did Eithlarin want to return to such a world? Should he wish that fate on her? With his aching fingertips he strummed a random chord on his whule. //But even if you meant it, Zannesu I couldn't let her go. I'm going to keep vigil until Darllanyu is free of pensone, and then we're going to give Eithlarin one last chance to return to us—to this world—to you.//

//There's probably been brain damage. I'd rather die Incomplete than make her suffer that.//

His implication was clear—that Jindigar wanted to recall Eithlarin only to spare the rest of them the risk of her death. //Renewal may repair the brain damage—if she has someone to love her, to stimulate her, to recast her body, to serve her anew. Does she, Zannesu?//

//You know she does. Jindigar, I would have killed you in that moment when you cut her off! How can you ever trust me again?//

//No Dushau would have behaved differently, my zunre. There isn't an officer of this Oliat who would hesitate to work with you. When the time comes, we'll all be in the circle, and we'll unite in our call to Eithlarin. If we can bring her to us—even just a little closer—we'll try to Dissolve and let you bring her to Renewal.//

It sounded so simple. But even in the Archive Jindigar had found no record of an Oliat using the forces of its officers' Renewal in any way, least of all to Dissolve.

Venlagar, Inreach now, intruded on the linkages with the aroma of stew and a fresh grain bread concocted by the humans. //If you're to have the strength to do it, Zannesu, you'd better come eat. Sure you don't want some, Jindigar?//

//In a while. Go ahead, Zannesu. I'll watch her.//

He rose. //If you have to let her go, Jindigar—do it gently. Her suffering is so pointless.// The new Receptor went toward the inner door to their living chamber, his steps heavy, his weariness dragging at them all. Only part of him had given her up. The rest fought the loss, and the battle consumed all his strength, for he knew he was her only anchor to the Oliat.

As the door closed behind Zannesu, Krinata rose and circled Eithlarin. Jindigar picked up her view of Eithlarin's form—the dark indigo skin almost invisible in the twilight, making it seem as if the soft white



robe floated empty over the white circle.

Jindigar lifted the linkages from Venlagar, aware of Krinata's bizarre human conception of the process—the two of them playing cat's cradle with a loop of string. He damped the pattern to prevent his perception of Krinata leaking through to Darllanyu, or anyone else, then passed the links back to his new Inreach, who fumbled a bit.

Then he let himself watch Krinata moving around the circle. She was so well attuned to Phanphihy and the Oliat mat her step left no trace where she passed over the worldcircle. He let the daring thought surface. Could his Oliat have lasted so long and accomplished so much if it hadn't been for Krinata being a solid anchor, as no Dushau could have been on this alien world?

Krinata folded herself gracefully down beside him and commented, //If Eithlarin dies, she'll probably reincarnate—just like I did. Maybe she can be my child.// She reached familiarly for the whole that lay across Jindigar's lap. As he surrendered it she insisted, *III* didn't just lift Takora's memories from you—and I didn't learn the whole just from your tutoring, either. Jindigar, I remember being Takora. I know what it's like being Center. I know what you went through, saving my Oliat— Takora's Oliat. I know what you're facing now with Eithlarin. I want to help.//

Clumsily she plucked out a melody, her nails rattling lewdly against the strings. She grunted and silenced the sound. //Well, knowing how to do it doesn't mean being able to do it with hands of a totally different design, no more than knowing the Center's job makes me able to Center. Jindigar, please accept that. I was Takora. Or tell me what will convince you.//

Her being the real Takora returned would surely explain the way she evoked a peculiar fear and impossible fascination in him. But most of that could come from her having been Ontarrah. //The simple, obvious explanation isn't always the correct one.//

//Don't quote the Observing Priests at me! I'm trying to tell you that I know you handled Eithlarin correctly. You were slow—and you were clumsy—but that's just lack of experience. Your judgment was sound. And when you could finally make yourself do it—you did the right thing.//

//I didn't know you were aware of what I did. I had the Outreach link choked down pretty tight.//

She sighed and strummed a perfect chord progression. It sent a crawling sensation up his spine, for it was one that Takora had practiced incessantly. //Jindigar—it's awfully hard to explain. Consciously all I remember is that Holot face distorted by an overlay of Dushau perception—your eyes see in so many directions at once, but humans have only one retina per eye. My memories of being Dushau have images that seem normal to my human memory—but when the Oliat lets me see through Dushau eyes, my brain feels split—and my eyes feel like they've come uncoupled and are looking in opposite directions at the same time—like Dushau eyes.

//Even after you choked down my link to nothing, I still saw him as a devil from hell because I was seeing him from six other points of view—and all of them Dushau. I think that's because / am a Center too. You see, *your* link to your Outreach was shut down—but / seem to have forged links to the other officers of my own—as a Center. Maybe it happened when I tried to take over from you—but, anyway, they are there. I can feel them, even if you can't.//

//You can feel----- // That would certainly explain why he hadn't been able to control the distortion for Krinata, or to shut down the feedback between her image of the Holot and Eithlarin's image of the beast that had killed her zunre. The second set of links, operating out of sync with his and uncontrolled, would explain why Llistyien retreated to running with animals, a vague shaleiliu. Her innate optimism had turned flight from terrifying predator into training predator birds to defend her from

nightmare.

A second set of links might even have contributed to driving Eithlarin episodic. *Not that it's Krinata's fault. I should have known those links wouldn't just disappear after the cave.* Yet Krinata could be just imagining her own links. Imagination was her primary talent.

//Well,// she continued, strumming firm chords, //I know you did the right thing because even after you opened the choke-link, I had no impulse whatever to take over your Oliat. Takora's experience is in me—far more experience than you'll ever have as Center—and her experience says you did right.//

//Krinata—if you really were Takora, you'd never have let yourself be caught up in the Oliat linkages, and you'd certainly *never* have become Outreach to my Oliat. Never in the memory of anyone alive today has a Center been foolish enough to rejoin an Oliat.//

//Not even as Center,// she agreed, //for that would be the attempt to recapture past peak experiences—to create stagnation. The result would be a falling out of the Office of Center into another office—and the Oliat would perish.//

Fie had never told her that. //Where did you learn that?//

//Takora learned it—from Nushitan, her teacher. And Takora taught you—on the planet Riish, in the middle of a torrential rainstorm. I don't remember any more than that. Where's Riish? I've never heard of it.//

//I don't know offhand where it is,// he answered absently. //I'd have to ask Arlai.// But the Sentient computer was dormant, inactivated, nothing more than a metal box among Jindigar's most precious possessions.

//Jindigar, what would it take to convince you?//

//I think,// he admitted as it slowly came to him in chilling waves, //I think I am convinced. I just don't want to admit it. But there's no way you could have grabbed Center that one time if you didn't have both Takora's knowledge and her experience. And you didn't get her experience from me—because I don't have it.//

//I didn't have it, either, at first. I think you were right when you said I'd just picked up some of Takora's memories from you. But somehow those acquired memories wakened more. And now it's different, Jindigar. Sometimes—only sometimes—I *am* Takora.//

//Do you feel these—extra—linkages into the Oliat even now?//

// Not really. They're only there when there's a crisis.//

//If I see you command those linkages, exhibiting Takora's style, I think I'd have to admit you are Takora.// *But it doesn't matter. There's no way on Phanphihy to Dissolve an Oliat with two Centers, and whether she was Takora or not, we are an Oliat with two Centers.*

When Dar was ready, they'd make their try for Eithlarin. They had all agreed on that. And he had promised Zannesu that if he could get the full pattern of linkages operating, he'd try for Dissolution. He had been thinking he might still save them all. But if Krinata really had been Takora, or even just had Takora's Center experience, at least some of them would die.

He had to accept that. The time had come when he had to deliberately sacrifice some lives that others might survive to Completion. Yet everything in him shrank from it. Even the chance that some of them

might reincarnate as ephemerals didn't help. *I will not choose who lives and who dies, but I will not survive if Krinata dies.*

//Look—// offered Krinata, //I shouldn't have said anything. I—the human in me—thought it might make you feel better to know that someone understands. Jindigar—you're carrying too much of a load for all of us. It's not right.//

//A Center would know—I'm only doing the Center's job.// He wanted her ignorance of that to be proof she was only empathizing in the human way—imagining it all. Aliom science rested on the bedrock idea that Dushau could not reincarnate, and Aliom science was their only way out of this trap. He dared not start doubting it now.

She moved a little closer to him. He could feel the heat of her body as she replied, //I do know. That's the problem. Once I made the same mistake—taking on too much of a burden. I collapsed under it, endangered my Oliat, and you had to do— what you did. Now it's as if you're compelled to relive my mistake.//

//If that's the case, Krinata, and you must cut me off to save the others—then do it.// He turned to face her. //I mean that. *You* are going to survive this Dissolution.//

She struck the shaleiliu chord on the whale, the chord that summoned the Oliat to session, then she pushed the instrument half into his lap, taking his hand and guiding it to touch the resonating chamber. //This is a manifestation of the carrier wave of the universe, and it seems to be telling me, right now, that you and I go to Completion together—or neither of us goes. If I have to send you off into death, somehow we will meet again and do it all again, until we finally get it right. But I don't intend to do it wrong again this time, Jindigar. This is my Oliat, as it is yours, and I don't intend to lose any of us. Think of it this way—if I'm Takora, then I'm a Center, yes, but I'm a Center who never Dissolved—so I'm still legitimately part of an Oliat. Maybe that's why I couldn't resist.//

That, too, would explain a lot. //But there's no way to determine if you *are* Takora.//

//The Dissolution will prove it to you, one way or another. I'm not worried. I just don't want you hurt.//

Touched beyond words, he put his arm around her shoulders. He could feel the human bone structure under her jacket as her clean hair moved lightly across his bare forearm. She turned her face up to him, a white oval in the darkness. There was absolutely nothing Dushau about her, nothing even faintly suggestive of female. Yet a guarding knot inside of him loosened. He felt tension draining from his neck muscles where the glands stirred comfortably. He let his aching fingertips sound the whale strings, suggesting a more intimate melody, mid was not surprised when Krinata's fingers finished the tune of the lovers' song.

Slowly, as if she were fighting an impulse stronger than she was, her hands slipped upward over his chest and sought the sensitive points at the base of his neck with the unerring accuracy of the sexually mature Dushau. But there was a tentative innocence to her exploration that was more erotic than the most experienced bride's touch.

He felt his lips form words put of a softly expelled breath. "Oh. Krinata, no..."

If she were truly Takora—truly a Center—she would know better than to court such a danger. But even if she'd been Takora, she was now human and facing death. Were her needs really so very different from those of a Dushau?

But even if it would help her, it was stirring him and so it must stop. He would have to find the strength.

Suddenly Krinata jerked up, staring into the darkness behind Jindigar. She shrank from what she saw there. Jindigar turned, half afraid that she was hallucinating, tapping into Eithlarin's world somehow.

Between them and the fire at the far end of the room was the silhouette of a Dushau woman, and Jindigar knew instantly that it was Darllanyu. As she moved toward them he also knew that she'd heard the melody of lovers plucked by Krinata's fingers in tandem with his own unmistakable touch on the strings.

Sharing music on that level was a very great intimacy that he had not yet permitted Dar. And she had certainly noticed that he'd cloaked himself and Krinata in privacy from the rest of the Oliat. He rearranged the linkages to include Dar, bracing, for he knew she was now almost free of the drug. The languid comfort Krinata had evoked in his body evaporated before the sharp heat of Dar's presence.

He stood up to confront her, gathering the poise of the Center around himself, but feeling more like an Active Priest than anyone competent to work Oliat.

Darllanyu announced, //Trinarvil says she'll be here before midnight to give Eithlarin the stimulant—and then we'll try our plan.// Then she shifted her gaze to Krinata.

Darllanyu could only be seeing a shadowy hint of Krinata, but through Oliat awareness she knew what they'd felt. The strain was evident as she asked, //Jindigar, is there any reason for me to wait for you after Dissolution?//

Unexpectedly Jindigar was paralyzed by a rush of alarm, as if he stood in a ship that had suddenly lost internal gravity. Krinata answered in the tone and cadence of Takora, //Only that you are his mate. It's gone too far, Darllanyu. If you leave him now, he won't mate this time. Don't do that to him— please don't.// She gathered her jacket around her and cut across the Temple to the front door.

Darllanyu turned to stare after her, astonishment suffusing the now open linkages. Several moments later, as Jindigar was still frantically searching for something to say, Darllanyu observed, //If she really is Takora, she knows that since I can no longer have children, you may as well choose the mate best suited to you.//

His heart pounded wildly at the mere thought that she might leave him. But then, what of her, if Krinata had to kill him? //That mate is still you, Dar.//

//Do you regret that?//

//No. I thought you understood that I'd learned that lesson when she was Ontarrah.//

//Then why does she attract you so? Why is this happening? I'm not going to be even semirational about it much longer. Explain it to me, Jindigar.//

//I can't. I don't understand it. But as soon as we Dissolve, she'll be out of our lives. Just let me have the chance to prove that to you.//

//Why me, Jindigar?//

//Because you're so beautiful and you do things to me that no one else has the power to do. Krinata's right—I've chosen you. There won't be anyone else this time. I thought it was mutual.//

//It was. Or, at least I thought so, until I saw what Krinata is to you. Jindigar, if you'd chosen me, it wouldn't be possible to respond to Krinata like that.//

//It isn't the same!// he insisted.

//Maybe not biologically, but psychologically it is. Otherwise, why did you choose to cut Eithlarin off when Krinata was the actual source of the disruption? You could have cut Krinata off. Even if Krinata had died, it wouldn't have hurt her—she'd only reincarnate again. But Eithlarin has lost her chance at Completion!//

//She's not dead yet,// argued Jindigar doggedly while his mind gnawed at the insidious question Dar had posed. Even if prompted by onset-induced jealousy, it was a good question. Krinata/Takora approved of his choice, but that was no evidence that he'd been right.

//Dar, much of what a Center has to do is done on perception of shaleiliu, using the Aliom "strike." Maybe I was wrong— maybe I can't risk Krinata just because, on some level, I do believe she was Takora—and I can't do that to her twice. I almost couldn't do it to Eithlarin. It was a "strike," Dar. There's no reasoning behind it. No way to judge it this soon.//

//You're not really answering me.//

//When you've been Center, maybe we can discuss it.//

//Why do I get the impression that you've discussed it with Krinata?//

//Because I have. Center to Center.//

//Jindigar!//

She felt that a part of him did not belong exclusively to her, which, in Onset as she was, seemed an intolerable threat. Jindigar already felt the same about her. Dwelling on it would only make it worse. He tried again to explain in terms a non-Center could grasp. //I set a close, tight link to Eithlarin. *She* chose to go—wherever she is-// He turned to Eithlarin, opening the linkages so Dar would feel the gaping void and the whispering static of the link. //We all had a part in what's happened. An Oliat, more than any other bound entity, is an integrated singularity. The Center can't do anything the Oliat as a whole doesn't do. No officer's needs prevail, and no officer is free of the consequences.//

Darllanyu shuddered and turned away, as if wishing she could control the linkages and close off her awareness of Eithlarin. //All right. You've made your point. I did beg you to stop Eithlarin. I shouldn't have done that, any more than you should have allowed what—you just allowed with Krinata.

But I'm not qualified to Center. I didn't know what would happen to Eithlarin if you shut her away enough to protect the rest of us. I didn't mean her any harm.//

//Neither did I. But I knew what might happen.//

//I'm ashamed to admit,// she confessed, transfixed by the input of Eithlarin, //that I'm glad it's her, not me.// She hugged herself, her inflamed fingertips absently scratching at the gold armlet Jindigar had given her. //If it had been a choice of me or Krinata—who would it have been?//

lie clamped off all the linkages, isolating his groan within himself. That was the question he had not dared ask.

//A Center has to make choices, Jindigar,// she reminded him gravely. //You're going to have to decide which of us lives and which of us dies. If—because of what you once did to Takora, you can't or won't sacrifice any of us, then just like Takora you're going to take your whole Oliat to Incompletion-death with you.//

//No!// he answered without thinking. //Krinata, at least, must live through this.//

Darllanyu concluded, //So, you would have cut me off to save Krinata. That's honest, anyway. Jindigar, has it occurred to you that you're behaving this way because you've spent too much time among ephemerals—too much time Emulating ephemerals? You don't know what it is to be Dushau anymore. Maybe you'd better use that phenomenal ability of yours to Emulate a Dushau and find out what it's really like!//

With that she gathered herself and almost ran out the front door, taking the path inward toward the Renewal park, where she'd be sure not to encounter Krinata.

## **EIGHT**

### **Swarm**

Watching Dar go, Jindigar shut down his link to her, making sure she knew she had privacy now. And then he was totally alone except for the wisp of Eithlarin's presence.

He'd often been told that to be Center meant to stand alone, but he'd never suspected what it would be like.

He sank down on the periphery of the worldcircle and stared up at the white blur that was Eithlarin. Had he been wrong to do this to her? There was no one to ask. It would be more than a thousand years until he might ask a Complete Priest from Dushaun. //Oh, Eithlarin—come back to us!//

*As if Eithlarin's return would make everything as it had been!* That was a kind of fallacy typical of ephemeral thought.

Was Darllanyu right? Could his very thinking have been warped by too much time among ephemerals? Had he adopted the short-term outlook, forgetting how a small error propagates through time to become a major disaster? The harm to Eithlarin was already permanent and would propagate through all her zunre, all her community. As an Inactive Priest, he should serve that group, not harm them like this. Had he decided to cut Eithlarin off only because he was becoming Active and interested only in the personal, or had he lost his priesthood?

He could hear his father asserting with that overwhelming aura of true knowledge, *You're a Historian, Jindigar. You've never belonged to Aliom.*

Trembling, he leaned over and placed his hands on the worldcircle, feeling for the vibration of this world, the stamp of its individuality. His hands were dark shapes against the whiteness. The pure flowing energy shimmered and blurred around all fourteen of his fingers, the distortion showing that he, unlike Krinata, was holding himself away from Phanphihiy. At his level of the priesthood he should be superficially attuned to the world he was on at all times.

*Why am I holding myself from Phanphihiy rather than leading the community to attunement?*

A chill clamped at his heart. In his fear of fighting the dysattunement battle he had overlooked how vital his personal attunement was, not just to his Oliat but to the community. Perhaps he, himself, was the disruptive source of all their errors. The act of Inverting the Oliat function, as he had done when he sent Takora to her death and as he had done so often to save Krinata from ephemeral death, produced a disruptive backlash in the Invert's life—so that a period of errors, disasters, and bad judgments ensued. Was that the source of their problems? Simply Inversion splashback? If so, there was no cure but to ride it out, taking care not to Invert again. And <so far he had kept his pledge to this Oliat not to Invert them.

But Inversion wouldn't cause a loss of the Priest's attunement to Aliom the way omission of his priestly duties could. That omission could be the real reason he couldn't make a Center's decisions properly.

He knew what he had to do—unknowingly Darllanyu had said it. He must Emulate a Dushau. He must do the most basic of a Priest's exercises, the Emulation of himself at his own induction, in order to attune himself and all who resonated with him, to Phanphihiy.

Despite all of Raichmat's zunre's careful plans, he was the only Aliom Priest who had yet made it to Phanphihiy. Only he could do this for them—and he had not done it in all the time they'd been here. True, he could only do the Inactive Priest's Induction—the rest would have to wait. But even that—even that, he had avoided. *Why?*

The others didn't know of his omission—they didn't know there was anything to be done. Very few of those who elected to learn Aliom and train in Oliat ever became Priests. An Aliom Priest forsook all other disciplines, for Aliom filled the whole of life—in Renewal and between. One had to be very sure one could attain Completion in Aliom; one had to sense shaleiliu between the self and Aliom before taking that drastic a step, because the dedication, once made, could not be forsaken.

Jindigar had made that dedication gladly and had never regretted it. Then why—why had he neglected this duty?

As he struggled to frame that question a pall of lethargy sapped his will, damped his thoughts to stillness, immobilized his body. This inability to move or think was his species' method of hiding from predators. But this predator was a thought—a danger to life, perhaps, but still only a thought.

He fought his own will, wrestled with instinct, and won glimpses of what he feared: Krinata time and again wrenching control of his life from him as they fled the Empire; Ontarrah invading his family, inadvertently wreaking havoc among those he loved, Takora making him choose between Inversion and Incompletion-death. And all of them were Krinata. Icy fear transfixed him, fear of Krinata. *What if she really is Takora?*

Well what if she was? He gazed into the white of the worldcircle and knew why he had neglected his disciplines. *What if I reach for my priesthood and find nothing—because Aliom is an illusion—because Krinata has forced me to see through that illusion?* There was only one way to find out whether Aliom still held anything of value for him.

With it tremulous sigh he farfetched back and back into memory, threading his way around the familiar scars of pain that littered his experiences, and found the day of his induction into the Aliom Priesthood. He Emulated himself at that moment, integrating his young self with his present self.

He became young again, just past his second Renewal. He knelt down in the worldcircle of the Inactive Aliom Temple in Therdiv. None of his immediate family had come to witness this most solemn moment of his life, still insisting he'd return to Historian's training. But his young self was brashly confident that he had found his own straight path to Completion. *What if I was wrong?* He had been wrong about one thing. It had not been so easy or so straight.

The thrumming of a hundred whules echoed in the vaulted hall. The white-clad Observing Priests surrounded him. The Senior Priests made a double line before him, a pathway to the eastern portal of the Temple around which were arrayed the symbols of Aliom: the lightning flash, the hand whose fingers were generated by lightning, and whose palm held life, the Oliat X balanced on the point of an arrow.

Through the portal behind the X came the Complete Priests in Oliat formation, dressed in black over pure white, each wearing one pure color of the spectrum. As they marched forward to surround the worldcircle he stretched out prone. They arrayed themselves in spectral order. The young Jindigar had not been instructed in what to expect—only to remember it always so that he might learn its meaning.

Four of the Senior Priests, those just short of being Complete, took hold of his limbs and pulled until he was spread-eagled into the form of the Oliat X. They suspended him above the white worldcircle, facedown above infinite white.

And then the whole music ended. The silence, despite the packed Temple, was profound. He'd imagined that the induction would be another formal questioning where he'd publicly declare his allegiance to Aliom, or perhaps another grilling where they asked seemingly superficial questions that required deep, abstract answers. But this—it was silly.

Perhaps that was the test—to see if the candidate had any common sense? He tried to raise his head to tell them that he'd gotten the point and they could stop now—but his eyes were glued to the whiteness beneath him. His initiation robes hung from his body, fluttering as if in a breeze—but not a breath of air stirred. His body was overheating. He couldn't squirm—his limbs were numb. And there was nothing but whiteness that invaded his senses and possessed his mind.

A sudden, piercing panic thrilled through him. They were doing something to him, something that would change him forever. He'd said he'd wanted it—but he'd no idea it would be done to him, not something he promised to do to himself.

But he would have done it to himself if they'd given him the tool to do it with. He'd decided that, though at the time he'd thought in terms of the other initiations where the candidate did something symbolic to himself, such as nicking the flesh to draw a drop of purple blood or blindfolding the eyes to sharpen other senses or binding the will with an oath.

His older self balked, no longer confident that his elders knew what they were about. But the memory played on relentlessly as he surrendered to his captors, letting the whiteness swallow him. Emulating, Jindigar could not prevent the youth's confidence from becoming his own again.

And then the colors started. Braids of rainbow hues stirred through the whiteness—as if he were looking down on the tops of clouds touched just so by the sun, stirred by the winds, and wafted into rainbow swirls.

Suddenly he was looking down a long tunnel—falling up it—racing along it—falling out of the universe—into the heart of Dushaun. In one mind-searing flash he was part of the complex of forces generating life out of the elemental stuff of the planet and its sun, generating the star and its planets out of the plasma of the cosmos.

He stood outside reality and watched it forming in accord with the well-ordered Laws of Nature. He became one with the whirling lifestream that generated the Laws. There was nothing that was not Jindigar, yet Jindigar was only a component. He was only a Jindigar who would one day, if he could Complete, join The Jindigar.

He had been named Jindigar—Eternal Reverberation—but only now did he discover what it meant. The Completion of Jindigar would sound a chord, like shaleiliu, that would ring from one end of time to the other. The Complete Jindigar was part of the Completion of the lifestream itself. It was part—and yet it was the whole.

As with all things in Aliom, the part contained the whole, and the whole was only a part. The part and the whole, the individual and the group, the Observer and the Observed, Dushau and ephemeral, Dushaun and Phanphihiy, Incomplete and Complete—the relationships were so clear to him at that peak moment that The Complete Jindigar could look upon the Incomplete and see the walls of fear dividing his mind, keeping him Incomplete.



His inner fragmentation was reflected in everything around him, just as Shoshunri's Second Observation predicted. That's why nothing his Oliat did worked. His Oliat's failures hadn't been caused just by splashback from his past Inversions but also by the fears dividing him.

The fear had started when he had first suspected that Krinata was in fact Takora reincarnated as an ephemeral.

*Because, if Dushau reincarnate as ephemerals, then all of Aliom is invalid. Which means my experience at my induction was only illusion, which can't lead to Completion. In fact, if Dushau reincarnate, it isn't even necessary to pursue Completion with such dedication.*

He had admitted his fear aloud, but the saying had blocked his appreciation of meaning. It was a lesson. True work is done in silence. *How could I have forgotten that?*

He had indeed Emulated humans too deeply, too often, too persistently. Perhaps he had been reaching out toward Krinata, who could not come to him. To the degree that he could not reach her, he feared her. He had to touch her, to close an open circuit that was draining away his vitality. He had to dispel the fear of her, the fear of how helpless her every act made him or, perhaps, the more basic fear of being helpless before overwhelming force.

That was the one salient lesson toward which Oliat training led—that being passive did not mean being ineffectual. This was the step he had to take toward Completion before he could Dissolve his Oliat and become an Observing Priest. When he had done it, he'd be able to give up Oliat work without the poignant regret he'd always felt at the thought of leaving Oliat behind forever.

The colors of the Complete Priests blended into the whiteness of Dushaun's worldcircle, and Dushaun's whiteness blended vibrantly into the whiteness of Phanphihy, the part into the whole, Observer into Observed, and all of it faded rapidly as the induction Emulation ended.

As an Active Observing Priest, it would be incumbent upon him to comb the tenets of Aliom for fallacies and truths and to teach by Observing what he found. He had always known that, but now he knew with thunderous revelation that it was up to the Observers to challenge every tenet, and even to rewrite them. *Every Observer has discovered at least one fallacy—in order to become a Senior Priest.* He couldn't think of a single exception, yet never had anyone made a special point of it.

*Is anything I believe correct?* He had once told Krinata that she had to develop an epistemology. But, true to Shoshunri's Second Observation, it was he, himself, who needed to reconstruct his entire epistemology, for clearly his fears had kept him from Observing many important things.

Shoshunri was famous because he had codified the epistemology of Aliom, but *every* Senior Priest had made some contribution. Aliom was not infallible, nor was it Complete. It offered no safe refuge from overwhelming force. Nor had anyone ever made a secret of that.

Aliom viewed the universe holistically, and Aliom itself was holistic. An error in one premise, such as "Dushau do not reincarnate" did not necessarily invalidate the whole any more than one malfunctioning brain cell incapacitated the whole brain. The validity of Aliom was not threatened by Krinata being Takora.

And when Krinata had the chance to cut him off, as he had cut off Takora, she hadn't done it. Krinata, herself, was no threat to him.

The trouble her actions caused him was probably the result of his Inversion of her Oliat. And what he really feared was the incredible force he had unleashed with that Inversion. The splashback from that

force was naturally overwhelming. He would simply have to grow strong enough to absorb it and damp it down, or wait it out. It wasn't something to fear, it was something to cope with and learn from. It was a real threat only if he was too afraid of it to Observe it properly.

He had been tying himself in knots over nothing.

*How absurd to fear truth.* He couldn't imagine where he had picked up such a twist to his thinking. It was totally out of character. Darllanyu had known him long enough to be disturbed by the change, and—*No wonder Grisnilter was so worried about me! He must have thought Aliom had taught me to fear truth. But then, why would he have trusted me with his Archive?*

Again revelation shattered him. Every brush with the Archive made him *want* the Archive, undermining his priesthood—because carrying an Archive was initiatory, like the Aliom induction. It wrought permanent change. *Grisnilter did that to me on purpose!* And Jindigar had been vulnerable because of the blind spots his fear of Krinata created.

Well, no more. He was ashamed of what he'd put his people through, but it would end now. He would make the Center's decisions as necessary, and he would face what he had to face to finish with Oliat, for, he realized, he had just received his induction into the Observing Priesthood.

Peace throbbing silently through him for the first time in far too long, Jindigar came to full awareness. As always after this discipline, he was cold. His dark indigo hands lay spread before him, the pure energy of the world rising through them now without distortion. *I have joined Dushaun and Phanphihiy.*

On the worldcircle, a short way in front of his hands, were two bare feet, Dushau feet, female feet—dark, dark indigo feet; elderly feet, but the toes were slightly inflamed with budding nails. Still struggling to focus his eyes, Jindigar forced movement into his neck and followed his gaze up the two trousered legs, and up and up to find Trinarvil looking down at him, her face in repose, radiant.

As his eyes made contact she effaced herself and bent to place both her hands, palm down, on the ground before him—doing homage to the Active Priest, saying by that silent gesture, "You have, by the exercise of your craft, given the world into my hands and shown me how I'm a part of it."

Jindigar had not intended to perform in that role. He had done his discipline to maintain himself and the community at large, as an Inactive Priest must, not for the service of any individual, as the Active do. *I mustn't become Active yet.*

He pulled his hands back from the circle and rose stiffly. It was nearly midnight. Without disturbing him his Oliat had assembled in the Temple, and now they closed in around him poised to work, as if there had never been strife among them. His exercise had steadied the Dushau, but he couldn't guess what had brought Krinata peace with herself.

He had not felt them around him so harmoniously since the moment before the planned weddings when they began to Dissolve. There had been risk then. Now it was almost certain that someone would die. Deep revelations aside, he was ruefully aware that he still would not accept any deaths. Some stubborn part of himself was convinced that there was a way for all of them to survive. *But there isn't.*

He took the linkages and brought them into balance, tuning now for the shaleiliu hum, strongly perceptible under the static of Eithlarin's nebulous link. And even amid the static, that ineffable tone appeared. His Oliat strained to expand awareness, but this operation required compressed awareness, so he let them encompass only the area right about the settlement, carefully keeping to the macro-scale.

On the plain above the cliff the Holot had made a good start at creating a pond, though darkness had

now stopped the work. Near the cliff edge, at the head of the rope and winch lift, the Holot had left their digging tools as a sign to the Gifters that they would return. The lift platform rested at the bottom of the cliff, the ropes slack and beaded with moisture from the fog off the river. The Gifters were asleep now, too, but it was clear to the Oliat that the Gifter hive was accepting the Holot gift.

The cornfields were dotted with barrels of Lehiroh oil, and some of the rows had already been treated. A crew of exhausted Lehiroh, humans, and Cassrians worked by torchlight to treat the rest of the field as well as the Cassrians' pond. Otherwise things were very quiet, the night's stillness broken only by an occasional nocturnal hunter's cry. If nothing else happened, the colony would survive very well indeed.

Jindigar felt that he should run a full check on the entire colony, searching for the seeds of the next disaster, but there was no time and no strength for that. As beautifully as his Oliat was functioning now, there was no way to guarantee that they could keep it up for long. And they might cause more harm than they could prevent by lingering. So he brought them back, focusing in closer and closer.

Across the square that separated the Aliom Temple from the Historians', Jindigar sensed Threntism sitting on the Historians' porch, watching the Aliom Temple by the meager light of the moon, knowing what they were trying.

In the worldcircle before them Trinarvil administered one last drug to Eithlarin, then gathered her things and stepped out of the marked area. She didn't go far, however, but stood to watch from the shadows as the Oliat drifted into the world-circle, forming up with Eithlarin in the Protector's position.

Jindigar scanned his officers. Krinata was relaxed enough to accept the bizarre mixture of images from the Oliat's multi-awareness. Llistyien and Venlagar were the most stable, and this time, when Jindigar set the linkages and turned them over to Venlagar, the Inreach didn't fumble.

But Darllanyu was a nexus of foment. Zannesu, in the Office of Receptor, was already fighting his response to Bar's desire, unwilling to stir up the needs that had twice sent him after Eithlarin. //Zannesu, in this operation you must permit yourself to respond. I *know* how hard it is, but for Eithlarin you must. Dar is going to Formulate Renewal, and Llistyien will Emulate it for us. You will Receive that force, making it part of the Oliat.//

//If we let that loose among us, we'll never stop it, Jindigar,// warned Venlagar, glancing at Llistyien.

//We're not going to stop it. Eithlarin will have to Protect us. She will return for that—to Protect for Zannesu. The very force of Renewal itself will draw her. And it will be no trick. The force of Renewal will disrupt the linkages and destroy the, Oliat—through Dissolution, I hope.//

//We've discussed all this, and we agreed to try it,// Darllanyu reminded them impatiently. //We must risk it.//

Habitually fighting the symptoms of onset, Jindigar curbed an impulse to promise, *I will keep you safe*. And then, though he did not utter the words, he let the feeling possess him, savoring it as he let her presence suffuse his awareness. Her eyes sought him. Rapture engulfed her.

Happiness shook Jindigar. He yielded, his neck throbbing with a sweet ache at once familiar and strange, urgent and fearsome.

The Oliat braced for the grating shock of dysattunement. Jindigar groped for the world attunement and found that the circle still resonated with the fading overtone of Dushaun he had evoked. Familiar, comforting, it let them take life from this alien world and hope for a home.

A wondering moan of relief and hope escaped Darllanyu's lips, and Jindigar returned his attention to his Formulator. //We want to hold at this level—the very urge to go on is the power we need to summon Eithlarin. Zannesu?//

//I've never Received anything from within the Oliat before.//

Zannesu had been thrust into an Office beyond his training, but he was already resonating to Dar's Renewal, straining after Eithlarin, who, frustratingly, was not responding.

//May I show him the inner Reception?// asked Llistyien,

and, at Jindigar's assent, Emulated a Receptor focused inward at the Oliat while at the same time Receiving externally as Zannesu was Receiving Eithlarin.

Barely breathing, Zannesu aligned with Llistyien, and suddenly the Oliat lost all external awareness except for the narrow thread of Krinata's human senses. Llistyien shifted to Emulating Renewal—which was hardly necessary considering her own condition. Krinata gasped. Jindigar's glands pulsed. Venlagar groaned. Zannesu emitted an uninhibited mating cry that somehow harmonized between the shaleiliu hum and the Eithlarin link static.

It built faster than Jindigar ever dreamed possible. He never knew how he found the fortitude to focus them outward to Eithlarin. //Protector! Danger!//

And she responded.

Eithlarin, biological instincts a mere memory to her disembodied psyche, nevertheless strained toward her mate, fending off Llistyien and Darllanyu as if they were rivals.

The linkages shuddered with forces wholly unsuited to the Oliat channels, building until the linkages wobbled and quivered, like out-of-tune whale strings interfering instead of making music.

Eithlarin stirred, eyes fluttering open. Zannesu checked his automatic step toward her, and hovered, Receiving her totally. She turned toward him, her linkages into the Oliat strengthening as the Oliat pattern itself blurred with the vast energies surging through them. Zannesu tore at his shirt collar, his glands engorged.

Darllanyu took two steps toward Jindigar, reaching for his neck with fingers that offered tender relief. The energy built, destabilizing the Oliat instead of Dissolving it, wiping away the shaleiliu hum. But there was no way he could stop it. Whatever happened now, happened.

Suddenly the linkages prickled with human surprise. Jindigar flicked a glance at Krinata, and his gaze locked with hers. His breath caught in his throat as he saw himself through her perception, tall shadow within shadow against searing whiteness, vast, commanding, powerful, mysterious, and forbidden. Wanted but forbidden.

She closed her eyes and thrust a question along the linkages together with a faint sound that grew rapidly. //What's that?//

"Natives!" It was Trinarvil's voice, carrying to them from outside where she stood on the Temple porch, and she yelled the warning. "We're under attack!" An alarm bell began to toll.

And then they all heard it. It was a howling, chattering babble, stretching from their very porch into the far distance. Trinarvil ran back through the portal and turned as if to fend off an attack. Six shadowy forms boiled from the entry way. Hardly pausing, they knocked Trinarvil over. A mob of shadows erupted out

of the doorway. They headed straight for the worldcircle as if they could sense it.

With every step one of the outsiders took the circle dimmed. Their footsteps took on a vague luminescence. Then, as the vanguard reached the circle, it shimmered and smeared out until the whole floor was permeated with Phanphihy's energy, just like the rest of the world.

The subtle hint of Dushaun that had held them in attunement with Phanphihy vanished.

Heedless of the stunned Oliat Officers, the intruders charged onto the spot where the circle had been, jostling the officers this way and that. Sobering waves of shock washed through the Oliat. Buffeted by howling Natives, Zannesu staggered, catching sight of two huge shadows smashing into Eithlarin. As if waking from paralysis, he let out a roar that set the roof beams vibrating and dived across to Eithlarin, grabbed her off the elevated platform, and rolled away from the attackers.

Jindigar's link to Eithlarin stretched tight, draining all the energy in the links. Then it snapped with a sudden finality— everything that was Eithlarin fleeing the one nightmare she could not tolerate, break-in. She vanished as if she had never been.

Eithlarin was dead before they hit the floor.

The shock of the snapped link to their Protector hit them hard. Jindigar, as Center, took the brunt of it but couldn't prevent it from going through him to all the others. Without his volition his body staggered toward Darllanyu, compelled by pure, physical need to protect her. But she was surrounded -by Natives stamping and howling in a frustrated war dance. His knees buckled, and he dropped to all fours amid a forest of legs. Feebly he groped for the linkages to shut down the channel to Krinata. He *had* to protect her from the Dissolution shock.

He was hardly aware of the room filling with frantic bodies, barely conscious of the reek of unwashed Native hive-dwellers, the most intelligent four-species symbionts in the galaxy.

"Jindigar!" Two gentle hands shook Krinata. Dushau hands. "Jindigar, listen. Call me to Protector! Jindigar! I can do it! I have the attunement!"

He forced his eyes open against the crashing pain in his head, his spine, the searing spasms of his internal organs. His senses were raw, as if flayed of every protection. The dim room was too bright, the babble deafening, the odor paralyzing. Hands scrabbled at his skin, feet kicked at him. And it was all alien, too alien.

"Jindigar! I have the attunement. Take me to Protector!" It was Trinarvil shaking Krinata. He needed Trinarvil. The Oliat needed her. He put his hands out to her and called weakly, //Protector!//

The protests from the others came only as silent agony. They had lost attunement, the world turning into an infinite, formless menace. And they couldn't let go of Eithlarin.

Zannesu crouched over a lifeless hulk. Eithlarin's presence was gone—simply gone.

//Trinarvil! Protector!// repeated Jindigar with grim determination. She turned to him, put her hands out in response, and answered steadily, //Center.//

He forged the link to her, following the line that relieved the crashing, stunning pain. Weakness enveloped him, and he lay curled on his side, panting helplessly. But the Oliat steadied as if of its own accord. A new note had been added, deep, calm, vibrantly alive, and stable beyond belief, reasonably at home here. This was maturity.

The texture, complexion, and identity of the Oliat changed then, as it must with each change in officers.

Trinarvil Protected. Gradually understanding replaced helpless horror, inducing attunement in them once again. It wasn't hard. They'd only lost it momentarily.

Jindigar expanded their awareness. The room was filled with unwashed bodies, stinking of fear and flight. Weapons flashed in the last flickers of the dying fire in the pit at the other end of the room. The Native hive's warriors brandished spears, hatchets, and other throwing tools. They were of medium size, covered with a heavy winter pelt, and favored traveling on all fours, apelike. Their upper pair of limbs branched at the elbow into one forearm with a hand at the end of it, and another with a paw with retractile claws. Their main clothing was their weapons harnesses.

Among them were a few of the rustlemen, as Krinata had dubbed them. They were the most intelligent of the hive-dwellers, evolved from the predatory rustlebirds. They were covered with the quasi-feathers or evolved scales that caused the rustling sound when they moved. They stumped about the unfamiliar space of the room trying to bring the warriors to order with piercing screeches and gestures. Several of the rustlemen carried on their shoulders the little, carapaced hive-binders, the telepaths of the hive who created the hive's group mind and defended it.

The warriors milled about, as if bewildered, stomping repeatedly at the place where the worldcircle had been, as if infuriated at being cheated.

The cacophony outside rose. Energy weapons fired over the roar of voices. The settlement's defenses had mobilized. Death permeated the Oliat perceptions.

//Zannesu!// The Receptor still bent over Eithlarin's body, rocking back and forth. //Zannesu! Receptor! We have to stop this!//

With incredible effort Zannesu dragged part of his attention back to his Office. Jindigar focused the Oliat's awareness outward toward the cliff, setting Zannesu to Receive what was happening, carefully gentling Trinarvil into Protector.

On the upper cliff edge, the last of the hive-dweller Natives were climbing down the ropes of the lift onto the settlement below. And the reason for their panicked flight was now evident to the Oliat. Right behind them came a pack of ravenous carnivores such as Jindigar had never encountered before. They were wiry-pelted and went on all fours, but they had long, snouted heads that ended in a suction appendage. The forepaws appeared to be nearly as dextrous as hands. As the Oliat focused on them one of them grabbed one of the small, exoskeletal hivebinders, cracked the carapace, and sucked the shell dry-without bothering to kill the Native first.

Briefly perception blurred. The tiny telepath's agony blanketed the hive-mind and the settlement with a spasm of distorted horror and creeping dread. Then it was gone. The settlement's militia, drawn mostly from the ex-Imperial troops, went wild. They fired indiscriminately into the hordes of Natives now streaming toward the Dushau compound.

Within the compound itself, people ran in every direction. Some fled the encroaching predators. Others dashed to rescue mates or restrain those in the irrationality of Renewal onset from mindless, suicidal attacks on the invaders. A few, desperate, set fire to buildings in the Natives' path, hoping the primitives would stop out of fear. *At least there aren't any children yet!*

//Darllanyu, can you Formulate the dome image around the Temple?//

She sat up, dashing blood from a cut on her mouth, struggling for self-possession. She didn't answer him,

but the dome image wavered hazily over them.

//Protector, see if you can pick that up and use it.//

Trinarvil had not been on the planet when the colony had used that image to repel the all-out attack of the hives, but she had heard the story. Llistyien brought Emulation into play behind her efforts, and soon the gray blocks of a Native hive-dome were almost tangible above the Temple.

It took longer than Jindigar had expected for the invading hive to react. Their hive-mind was in chaos, convulsing with deaths. But finally it penetrated: the dome above them was not their dome. They were in someone else's hive.

The hivebinders riding the rustlemen's shoulders reacted first, twittering and nipping at their partners. A profound disturbance ran through the invaders, and within moments the commands of the rustlemen had triggered a mass exodus.

As the last of the Natives *squeezed* through the doorway, Jindigar got to his feet. //We've got to expand the hive-dome to enclose the entire compound.// He helped Zannesu up, cradling the Receptor away from the sight of Eithlarin's limp body, urging, //Come, Receptor.//

Outside, chaos reigned in the lanes of the compound. Several buildings were on fire, lending an eerie flicker to the growing dawn light. A military flare went up, burst, and shed white light over all. The Oliat wove that radiance into the image of the dome, expanding it, adding details of aging, stains of droppings, scars of old battles won. With every detail of realism the invading hive's retreat hastened.

## NINE

### Chinchee Returns

The hive-mind noticed that the strangers' hive-dome was invisible. Panic seized the hive's warriors. Outside the Dushau's will led compound, the stream of hive-dwellers reversed in their tracks and poured north, along the base of the cliff. But here and there individual Natives regarded the illusion-dome as a perfectly ordinary thing, apparently aware of the colony's right to it.

Gradually the hive-mind accepted that pragmatism, and the rout became an orderly retreat to regroup around the spaceships parked at the northern edge of the colony's territory.

The Oliat, still numb with shock compounded by Zannesu's ringing denial *of* his loss, watched in growing horror as the advance warriors stormed the open hatches of the ships, showing every sign of taking permanent possession.

Flatly, tonelessly, Zannesu warned, //I need to hate them. She didn't deserve that. Why—*why*, Jindigar? Why did it happen like that? Ten minutes—just ten minutes more and she'd //

*Incompletion-death is always senseless. It is failure, pure and simple.* Or so Aliom seemed to imply. Maybe he hadn't understood. Or maybe Aliom was wrong. //I don't know if I'll ever find an answer for you, my zunre. But as long as I live, I will try. One thing I am sure of, though—to hate the Natives is to throw oneself after Eithlarin.//

//It was my fault. I couldn't hold her.//

Something in Zannesu's tone hit a nerve. Eithlarin's inex-

orable retreat, the sudden, shocking *loss*, the excruciating need to act—*If I had been faster, held harder, thought more clearly— she'd be alive.*

*Guilt. He feels guilty—but there was nothing he could have done.* It came to Jindigar with a sense of creeping horror. *I have held that kind of guilt about Takora—all these years it's been in me, and I never knew it. I thought that, because I did the best thing, that I had to consider it the right thing. But the truth is, I don't.* He could not tell Zannesu what he had been told—that he need not feel guilty because no one could have saved her.

Surprisingly Krinata added the comment that lightened Zannesu's anguish. *//Look at it this way.* Eithlarin gave us one invaluable parting gift. By truly heroic effort, so very typical of her, she returned to us when we needed her. She loved us and knew we loved her. Even if it was in her—*fate*, maybe—to die incomplete, she wanted us to know it wasn't our fault. Personally I don't see how such a selfless act could earn her anything but good from the universe.*//*

It was the strangest thought ever planted in Jindigar's mind. He wasn't sure he wanted it to germinate. It could lead to suicide in misguided causes. Yet he could find no flaw in Krinata's reasoning. He knew why. The carefully constructed epistemology he'd relied on for judgment had suddenly been wiped out. *Everything* had to be rethought from scratch, and at the moment that was all he wanted to do. *Onset symptoms! I'm in no condition to be a Center.*

But for the moment Zannesu stabilized. Jindigar called them to work and, with Krinata's permission, choked down her link again, invoking their normal multiawareness. *//Receptor, Protector, Emulator—we must expand the dome image over the whole colony—including the ships. The hive must not settle among the ships!//*

As his Oliat responded the shaleiliu hum returned, all trace of static gone. But, after what they'd done to themselves, how long would it take for hormonal surges to build again?

Jindigar lifted the linkages and refocused the Oliat's attention outside themselves, hoping for the best.

Despite the recent acrimony, the colonists formed up to defend their homes against this new menace. Trinarvil, so much nearer Completion than Jindigar, Observed the shaleiliu engulfing the ephemerals. *She should be Center.*

Jindigar followed her lead, focusing the Oliat on the shaleiliu generated among the colonists, and his Protector gratefully seized upon it and used it to spread the dome image out over houses, barns and fields, and the Cassrians' pond, everywhere that men and women stood shoulder to shoulder to claim their homes.

In Trinarvil's hands Eithlarin's worn, aged, and spotted dome of uninspired gray blocks became a wondrous miracle whose beauty flashed directly to the soul's very core, like the Aliom lightning. To experience that immanent beauty directly, not filtered by life's accumulated emotional barriers, was more than the younger officers could bear.

*//Protector!//* called Jindigar, breathless with excruciating joy, *//We're not ready—not ready for this!// Have to extend that dome over the ships!*

But Trinarvil was lost in rapt contemplation of the glory of existence and the adoration of home life. Jindigar sensed that she was carried into it by a Renewal hormone surge set off when she finally touched Phanphiyh and found it welcoming her. Knowing that her mature ability to find every faint hint of shaleiliu was what his Oliat had lacked, that Trinarvil could have been to his Oliat as Lelwatha had been to Kamminth's—Jindigar still had to stop it.

He had to fight the seductive lure of her vision—for that was what life should always be. Three times he tried to bring himself to act. Finally, knowing that he simply could not match Trinarvil's mature strength,



he resorted to slamming the Pro-lector's link down to a narrow band.

Everyone protested the sudden loss of the ineffable.

//What?// asked Trinarvil, bewildered. Then, //Oh, sorry. I guess I'm out of practice.// The dome image solidified over the colony, a lovely thing, freshly scrubbed and sound enough to last a generation, but no longer divine, and not yet covering the ships.

Suddenly lightning flashes of human vision pounded into the Oliat consciousness like shards of broken mirror rammed through the choked-down Outreach link.

A lone Native warrior leapt high into the air before Dar. He snarled his battle cry. Two hands gripped the neck of Lelwatha's whale. Two muscle-knotted arms held it cocked at full backswing. The heavy sounding chamber swung directly at Dar's head.

Dar's face froze in horror.

The whale hurtled toward her eyes. The Oliat watched it through Krinata's human eyes, the antique urwood glittering in the first rosy light of dawn. The linkages carried Dar's view of her own face reflected in the distorting roundness of the wood, looming larger, paralyzed with fright.

Jindigar saw that the impact would come before the warrior even touched ground again.

And there was no Outrider on station to guard his Formulator, his mate. On a wave of explosive primitive rage Jindigar leapt to deflect the blow.

The massive whale glanced off his open hands, sending paralyzing pain up his arms. The strings rang discordantly. Then the whale smacked into the side of Dar's head, sending flint shards of pain through the Oliat. She hit the ground in a third burst of shocking pain that propagated through the linkages.

Zannesu Received their pain. Llistyien Emulated pain. Venlagar, as Inreach, was unable to reset the linkages alone. He could only hold them wide so the pain bounced back and forth, redoubling with each circuit. //Jindigar!//

Jindigar felt his knees buckle but didn't feel the sharp gravel under his hands because of the smarting pain growing ever louder as it seared up his arms again and again, amplified and echoed by the Oliat. His head hit the ground in one last numbing shock, adding to the pain of the blow Darllanyu had taken. Wildly growing pulses of pain shot through his skull. Only Krinata remained on her feet.

Dimly Jindigar sensed Dushau struggling toward them across the stream of retreating warriors—Dushau Outriders. Another Dushau hurtled through the air, tackling the warrior who had stolen Lelwatha's whale. The Dushau landed asprawl in front of Jindigar, scrabbling desperately for the whale. Jindigar saw a dark turban worn with a deep purple shut and trousers. *Threntisn!*

The warrior rolled over supine and clubbed Threntisn with the whale. Then he used the instrument as a staff to climb to his feet. He gave a bloodcurdling yell and charged through the approaching wall of Dushau, sweeping the whale before him in vicious arcs. Two large piols that had joined the chasing around as if it were a mating dance got into the warrior's way. He stumbled, jabbed at the animals with the whale, and el bowed a Dushau out of his way.

The last thing Jindigar saw before vision failed was Krinata taking off after the warrior at a dead run. Her voice rose in an ululating shriek of predatory fury that barely reached them through the constricted Outreach linkage.

Ever-increasing pain drowned Jindigar, and he knew it would not stop until the energy was grounded. With his last strength he reached for the link to Trinarvil.

//Protector!// he called.

//Center!// she gasped.

//Inreach!//

//Center,// replied Venlagar weakly.

Jindigar finished the roll call, announcing, //On my signal each of you must channel all the pain to me.//

The pain was transformed kinetic energy—the blows from the whale, and their falling to the ground. Trapped and amplified by the magnification function he had set into the linkages to enlarge the dome, the energy now made it impossible for Jindigar to reset and damp it out. And it grew with no theoretical limit, for it drew now, not just on their physical bodies, but also on the shaleiliu hum.

This would not just Dissolve the Oliat, as when he drew on the hum deliberately, but it would soon topple the Oliat into an Inversion. They would be set to affect the environment, not just Observe it. The Inverted Oliat would remanifest the energy in kinetic form. But the energy had been so vastly amplified, it would explode out from the Oliat like a bomb and would kill hundreds as well as the Oliat, Threntisn, and the Archive.

Jindigar set himself to prevent that. He had seen this done only once, in a demonstration. He told himself it was possible, therefore he could do it. Theoretically any energy could be grounded into a planet core.

Without considering what a slight error might do to his nervous system, he summoned a visual memory of the inside of the Temple and the inlaid Oliat symbol, which was all that was left of the worldcircle.

Theoretically a skilled Priest should never need to step into a worldcircle to contact the life matrix of the planetary energies. Once ignited, a circle always existed, at least in potential. He sought for it, and the very instant when he thought he felt it, he called in the energies. //To Center!//

A flooding rush of unendurable agony cascaded through his nerves, and he was sure he couldn't do it. Despair weakened ' him, magnifying the pain. He had no choice. Feebly at first, then with increasing will, he grounded the raw energy into the very soil of the planet, into the mantle, and down into the molten core where it would be stored and used to produce life, not death.

He sank in molten liquid, churned by magnetic energy. His soul shrank, compressed to a dimensionless point. But the pain was gone.

Outside his body, apart from all physical concerns, he melted into the heart of/ the planet, falling inward to a point that encompassed the universe, encompassed Dushaun. The vibra-

tion of *home* called to the elemental stuff of his soul, gathering the scattered wisps together into the colorful, complex identity that was a Jindigar.

*Welcome.* Bright, comfortable light. Beauty—constant beauty. And *there*—right *there*, beckoning, was The Jindigar—a few short steps and he'd be Complete, able to join The Jindigar. It was all his now—he had only—

*But what will happen to my Oliat if I leave now?*

It had been drilled into him for centuries: Centers cannot die Complete without Dissolving; Observing Priests cannot die Complete without Observing their personal truths to transmit them to others; Seniors cannot die Complete without forsaking Completion; and the Complete cannot die Complete without initiating the cycle.

He had never understood it before, but he knew now that no stage could be skipped. There was no easy way, no single feat, to earn Completion.

Gathering himself from the ends of the universe, he shrouded himself in the soothing energies of Dushaun. *How can I leave this?* Clinging to the precious feeling of *home*, he nevertheless forged his way back to the center of Phanphihy and struck upward toward his Oliat, like a diver surfacing from the depths of the ocean into sparkling sunshine.

Whiteness spewed upward around him into a fountain that erupted skyward and sent him tumbling, falling, falling faster and faster, until he landed back in his body with a shock that forced a grunt from his lungs.

He sat up.

He was among his Oliat. Morning sunshine spilled over the nearby roofs to warm his toes while his head was still in the shadow of the Aliom Temple. The greensward around them was churned into raw muck. Some of the young trees had been pulled over despite their mooring lines, and young piols were swarming over them curiously.

All the warriors were gone and so were most of the Dushau. Black smoke rose from several buildings where fires were being put out. Underlying that was the Oliat's global awareness of the immediate surroundings dominated by the brilliant plume of the re-ignited worldcircle within the Temple.

But that plume of white energy was different. There were definite overtones of Dushaun among the distinctive patterns of Phanphihy. This time it wasn't just a fading tinge but strong pulses that formed the character of the circle.

Alarmed that the new circle might attract the Natives again, Jindigar drew the Oliat attention outward, searching for the hive-dwellers.

They were digging a circular trench around the spaceships. Already a circular mound of dirt guarded the ground they claimed as their own. Unlike animal hives where specialization reigned, the Natives had turned out all hands to erect their defense line. Warriors labored beside the intellectual rustlemen while the tall, white-skinned species that were the craftsmen and heralds directed the efforts. The tiny, exoskeletal hive-binders were grouped in the middle of the array of ships telepathically weaving the shattered remnants of then- hive-mind back into a cohesive whole. Already that hive-mind was able to send waves of psychotic horror at the colony.

As the Oliat's attention swept the hive some Natives glanced south, toward the Aliom Temple, shrinking from the pluming energies and the impulses it evoked, determined not to make the same mistake again. The hive-mind was fighting a last-ditch battle for survival, confused that the huge hive-dome they had found was not openly welcoming.

Jindigar was astonished that the dome illusion had held.

The hive, however, seemed to consider it just another part of this alien place where they'd had to claim ground. The hive had scoured their new home clean of all invaders—the lab technicians in one of the ships had been slaughtered, leaving equipment running—and the hive would not—could not— flee again.

Too many had died. The rest were wounded or too exhausted to go any farther. And still the colonists grouped around the symbolic bulwark of the hive's trench. The fields were littered with dead Natives, killed by the openly hostile colonists.

*Why hasn't the hive unleashed its psychic weapon?*

Sluggishly the Oliat responded to the Center's curiosity, following the connections to the plain above the cliff where a few scattered Natives lay dying, and a few of the badly wounded still dragged themselves toward the cliff edge, knowing they could never make it down.

Ignoring the wounded Natives, the hive-bleeders that had driven the Natives across the plain were now bunched for an all-out assault on the Gifter hive. The Gifters were so small, the hive-bleeders did not just suck them dry—they ate them whole. The Gifter hive, however, had not yet been breached.

A troop of Holot in scarred Imperial body armor advanced against the flank of the hive-bleeders. All the able-bodied Gifters were in the air, diving at the hive-bleeders, harassing them and occasionally killing one. But they were losing against the voracious predators who could swipe one of the winged creatures out of the air, crush it, and eat it before other Gifters could rally to its defense.

As the Oliat watched, the armored Holot opened fire with flamers—probably the last of the weapons still functional. The stench of scorched hive-bleeder flesh rose to mingle with the wood smoke from the Dushau compound, and the thready screams of the hive-bleeders came to the Oliat's ears.

Fatigued, the Oliat only shuddered, recoiling from the scene, too weary for the suffering to penetrate. But the Native hive-mind, aware through its dying members up on the plain, glowed with satisfaction, feeling safer by the moment—not because hive-bleeders were dying, but because their new neighbors could vanquish such a deadly threat and were willing to do so for neighboring hives.

Only let one colonist's hand be lifted against the Natives, the Oliat knew, and the hive would lash out with their final weapon. The ex-Imperials would go mad.

Jindigar groped for his Outreach, needing to tell the colony how precarious the truce was.

Krinata's eyes showed him the outer court of the compound and the Outrider barracks. In the yard they'd set up a rough field hospital consisting of upended crates for tables and blankets spread on the ground for beds.

On one pallet a Dushau lay with his forearm across his chest, bleeding darkly where rough bone ends jutted through the flesh. Storm was stripping a crate down to make splints while two other Dushau prepared a litter. Beyond them, a Cassrian was bandaging a human's ankle. Two Lehiroh women were tending each other's burned hands while a Holot Jindigar recognized as the new herbalist was laying a fire on the stone hearth that formed the center of the yard, preparing to brew up some remedies in quantity.

Krinata sat cross-legged on one of the blankets near Storm. Cyrus blotted a cut over her eye. She stared into the distance, oblivious to his ministrations. The moment the link opened, she gazed around, amazed. Cyrus sat back on his heels, a look of exquisite relief on his face.

*//Krinata, are you all right?//* asked Jindigar, having no idea how much of the pain the Oliat had suffered had gotten through to her, or what such pain might do a human mind.

*//Jindigar?//*

*//Yes, of course. Can you speak for us?//*

She blinked, and the scene before her penetrated, the Oliat's global awareness carrying a sense of urgency. //I—I guess so. Jindigar—I hit him, but I lost it.//

//What?// he asked, not following her thought.

//The whole.//

He felt tears sting her eyes and trace dirty streaks down her face. She caught back her breath and stifled the reaction. Jindigar remembered seeing her take off after the warrior. *Krinata hit that warrior?* The Oliat hadn't even felt it through all the test. If they had—//Krinata, you mustn't ever do anything like that again.// *If she was ever Dushau, there's certainly little trace of it left! Those warriors are at least three times her size!*

//I won't. I promise. It was awful. And he got Lelwatha's whole!//

//No time for that now. We must report.//

She took a deep breath and placed herself at his disposal, "//Cy, we have a message for Terab.//"

"Storm!" called Cyrus. "The Oliat! It's not Dissolved! She's not in Dissolution shock after all!"

"What? Krinata? I mean, Jindigar?" Storm handed the splints to one of the Dushau building the litter and came to kneel beside Krinata. "You're alive? From the way Krinata was—"

//Please listen.// Jindigar drew on all his officers to describe the Native hive's condition and stance. He tried to make it a crisp, professional report despite the fatigue overtaking them all. Llistyien was unable to stand, and Dar was leaning against her Outrider, one hand over the bloody lump on the side of her head.

//Have you got all that?// finished Jindigar.

The human and Lehiroh nodded simultaneously, then Storm commanded cryptically, "Cy, go get him. Jindigar, I think there's more to this hive turning up here than just the hive-bleeders chasing them."

Prompted by the Oliat's weariness, Krinata raised one hand to forestall Storm's enthusiasm. Jindigar noted, as the hand came into her field of vision, that the fingers were shaking. Storm noted it, too, and apologized. "I wouldn't hold you here except that it's very important."

Just then a door clattered. Krinata's hearing picked up softly padding bare feet on wooden stairs. With supreme effort Krinata turned and saw one of the stark-white, incredibly tall humanoid Natives coming toward them. The scarred ears on top of his skull seemed peculiarly familiar. His crossed harnesses—the only clothing he wore—marked him as a Herald. One arm was in a sling, but he carried a hivebinder on his other shoulder—something the Oliat knew was very unusual.

As he came out of the shadow of the wall, Krinata and the Oliat recognized him at the same time.

//Chinchee!//

This was the Herald they had found wounded and dying in a Native hive smashed by the Imperial troops who were searching for them. Nursed back to health, he had refused to leave them. When more Imperial troops had been closing in on Jindigar's party, Chinchee had led them to refuge inside another Native hive. The Imperials had located them, anyway, and had attacked the hive. In the ensuing action many had died, and the hive, sorely wounded, had expelled Jindigar's party and two other offworld prisoners, Darllanyu and Cyrus.

Later Chinchee and his stray hivebinder had been taken prisoner by Imperial troops, who also attacked

the colony and captured Jindigar, Krinata, and many other settlers. When all the hives of the plain had attacked the troopers, Chinchee had helped the colonists form the psychic union that created the image of the hive-dome over the settlement and convinced the massed hives of Phanphiyh that the settlement—and the Imperials—were just another hive.

Now the Herald had brought them some new neighbors. Dangerous neighbors.

At last recognizing Krinata, Chinchee loosed a barrage of Cassrian whistles and clicks. Through the Native's accent and Krinata's human hearing Jindigar barely distinguished the morphemes *for friend* and *welcome*.

But the Cassrian female medic set aside her bandages and came toward them excitedly. "Was he only parroting like an animal, or did he really expect us to believe that was a peaceful and friendly approach?"

Her voice was well schooled to the single-toned interspecies language, so Jindigar had no trouble understanding her, but there was no time to explain the Herald's talent and function. //Llistyien—//

//I'll try,// replied his Emulator.

//It was unreasonable to ask such precision work of her after —""all she'd been through. //I'll help,// Jindigar offered, and worked with her to establish Emulation of Herald, Cassrian, and human, while at the same time calling the Receptor to focus. Jindigar's own work was sloppy. Zannesu's shock was wearing off, the pain and horror of his loss sinking in. Darllanyu was in a daze. Even Venlagar could barely manage to grip the linkages as Jindigar set them. But gradually the meaning of what Krinata was witnessing came through.

"Friend!" piped Chinchee repeatedly. "Scared. Need help." And each time he repeated it he added several whistled versions of Jindigar's name.

While he went on ever more urgently the others argued the meaning of his message, occasionally pleading with Krinata to say something.

Finally Jindigar opened to his Outreach and, hampered by inflexible human articulation, sang out in the Native's language, "//Jindigar can hear you. Remember Oliat?//"

Krinata coughed at what those few phrases did to her throat while all the rest stared at her, amazed. Chinchee stopped in mid-phrase, dashed up to Krinata, threw himself down prone in front of her, and, with the hivebinder scurrying onto his back, did three push-ups. Everyone who had not been with them on the trek across the continent from the desert where *Ephemeral Truth* had crashed, laughed. But those who had been there when Chinchee led them to the hive refuge lined up to do push-ups back at Chinchee.

//Jindigar, I don't think I can do it.//

//Relax, Krinata. I doubt Chinchee expects you to.//

But the Native was obviously delighted with the others' response. As he rose to his feet he warbled, "Oh, Great Jindigar, your hive will prosper, your memory will tunnel through eternity. Your generosity will be recorded for all time."

"What did he say?" asked someone.

"Wait," admonished one of the Dushau. "Let the Oliat question him."

Storm added, "Somebody go get Terab. She's probably in the field, trying to prevent an all-out attack on the Natives."

Peripherally the Oliat knew that was exactly what Terab was doing. And she was succeeding. Apparently people had finally begun to grasp that little could be gained on this planet by frontal assault. Or perhaps the Imperial troopers who had experienced the wrath of the hivebinders were unwilling to stir that up again. "//Tell her, //" called the Oliat, "//that our attack on the hive-bleeders has made the Natives less hostile toward us. //"

One of the Lehiroh women with burned hands turned to go, saying, "I heard your report. I'll tell her."

Chinchee carolled, "Did I hear a familiar name? The name of Greatfursixarms?"

//You are the most talented of all Heralds, Chinchee. The name of Terab is far greater than Jindigar's, for she speaks for this hive, not Jindigar, and not the Oliat. She will decide if this new hive can stay. //"

"Newhiveswarm cannot leave. Cannot move again. Greatfursixarms must know. Swarmed at startime, and settled new land on the plain. Built hive-dome, began new life." Chinchee's voice took on the cadence of a bard reciting a long series of great historical events, for Heralds were also the newsbringers of the hives. "Flood waters came, high and higher, swift as wind, shattered hive-dome. Survivors flee, across plain, into strange land of hive-bleeders. Chinchee come, fight hive-bleeders, lead newhiveswarm to safety with fellow hive-people. Newhiveswarm need friend, need help, need peace. Here, Chinchee, Jindigar, made peace. Here, newhiveswarm find peace we made here."

*All so logical!*

//Why did the newhiveswarm smash into our hive and hurt and destroy? //"

Chinchee folded to the ground, his knees sticking out at an angle, his head drooping. Through Llistyien Emulation the Oliat knew this was shame. His voice was tremulous as he told them, "Hive-mind, stripped of hive, so many dead to plainwater, so many dead to hive-bleeders, so many dead to newlifemaking, younghivemind broken, hurting, terrified, sensed throb of newlifemaking, sensed safe goodplace. Chinchee is Herald, not of younghivemind—not of hive. Herald cannot command hive."

He was trying to keep his story simple, but even so, Jindigar knew they weren't getting all the nuances. One thing was clear. The worldcircle itself had attracted the swarming hive irresistibly. The Oliat's projection of Renewal energies into the circle had probably triggered the swarm's headlong dash toward what they perceived as the oasis of safety the Herald had promised them. And they had been too mad with the need to settle again in time for new births to heed Chinchee's objections.

//We understand now, Chinchee. //" Krinata's voice cracked on the high note, and she doubled over in a fit of raw, throaty coughing.

"Is she sick again?" It was Terab striding into the outer court on four legs. She was wearing a field worker's cloak over a tool harness and carrying a small grenade-thrower under one arm.

While Cyrus explained, Jindigar told Krinata, //I'm sorry. If anybody else could have done that //

//It's all right, // she returned. Cyrus handed her a cup of tea the herbalist had brewed, and she accepted it gratefully. It soothed her throat, and she could speak again by the time Terab was ready to hear what Chinchee had to say.

Folding her walking legs under her, Terab faced them both and heard the Oliat out before objecting, "I don't care how, but find some way of explaining to him that they've got to move. We don't want

neighbors that can blow our minds to spacedust. We can't let them have the ships. 'Specially not now.'

"//Chinchee is learning Cassrian. In a few weeks he may be able to negotiate some sort of access treaty. That's the best I think you can hope for.//" It seemed a forlorn hope-. For all Chinchee's skill as a Herald, he knew nothing about different cultures on his own world, let alone assimilating different species. He'd never have enough Cassrian to handle something delicate like this.

"Krinata—" started Terab, then corrected herself. "Oliat, listen to me. While you were saving Eithlarin, four people have come down with Krinata's Fever—" She broke off again to apologize, "Krinata, if you can hear me, I'm sorry, but that's what they're calling that fever you had after the clickerhive attacked us. The lab just identified the mutated strain that's turned up now. It's a bad one, Jindigar—*vectored* across species, different life stages, too complicated for an old spaceship captain to understand. But one thing's sure—it's got a short incubation time.

"The children are malnourished—it's going to hit them hard. And the Lehiroh are frightened for those nursing infants—because they've sacrificed their oil. What drugs we have are on those ships. The lab was working on Jindigar's blood and asking for more Dushau blood. We thought we had it under control—but now... And one way or another we've got to rescue those lab techs."

Overwhelming despair swept through the Oliat, sapping the very last of their strength. Krinata buried her face in her hands, needing to cry and not daring to unleash the turbulence among the Oliat. //Jindigar, oh, Jindigar.//

Cyrus pulled his hand back from touching her and offered, "I'll make them change the name. It wasn't your doing, Krinata."

"//She knows,//" answered the Oliat with Krinata, and Jindigar added, "//Terab, your lab techs are dead. And—we lost Eithlarin.//" Reception wavered as Zannesu recoiled into himself. Jindigar closed down his link to Receptor as much as he dared and told the Oliat along with the ephemerals, "//We can't, Terab. We simply cannot.//"

He'd said that before. He'd lost credibility as, time after time, they'd responded to new emergencies. He saw it in Terab's dark eyes as she gazed at Krinata. But then Krinata met her eyes, and Terab believed. Jindigar could see it, even though Holot was not included in the multieniulation. Stricken, Terab looked into failure, final and absolute. But she said, "I'm sorry. I thought—since you were still functioning, I thought..."

"//Trinarvil has been able to take Office—but only very temporarily.//"

Terab understood something of the problems Dushau had with colonizing. She accepted that. "You've done enough miracles for us. I guess we're on our own now." She rose. "I'll send someone to find Shorwh. Maybe he can get through to Chinchee." To the Outriders she said, "Take care of him. He may be the most important Native on this planet."

As they watched her leave Jindigar addressed the two Dushau with the litter. "//It doesn't seem that Krinata can walk back to us.//"

They left Storm to set the other Dushau's broken arm and carried Krinata back to the Temple.

After a few hours' rest under Trinarvil's therapy lamps, some solid food, and endless amounts of herbal potions, they were able to join Zannesu in grieving Eithlarin. It helped, but even by late afternoon of the next day, Zannesu was still glassy-eyed and sluggish in his responses. Jindigar didn't want to adjourn, leaving him like that, and didn't want to try the Dissolution until Zannesu could work.



They were gathered in the Temple near the new, enlarged worldcircle, their Dushau Outriders on guard outside the front entry. The Oliat formed up around Jindigar in working array, silting cross-legged on the floor. Jindigar surveyed his officers, clean and neatly bandaged, dressed in carefully patched clothes. None of them were in much better shape than Zannesu. It was a good thing, he reflected, that they had worked past exhaustion, considering the forces they had stirred up among themselves, trying to save Eithlarin.

There wasn't a trace of sexual energy left in any of them. Perhaps it would leave them in peace until they'd Dissolved.

Jindigar put it to his Oliat. //My judgment is impaired.

I'm no longer fit to Center.// Jindigar glanced at Dar. The feeling of Dushaun emanating from the worldcircle was strong enough to set off whole trains of association for them both. It wouldn't take much to stir any of them again. //But it seems to me that we'd best not delay any longer.//

Krinata objected. //The colony needs us. Isn't there some way we can at least go and talk to the hive? I don't want to go out there to live with *that* sitting on the doorstep—and with the fever loose...//

Venlagar answered, //It isn't up to Jindigar and Darllanyu to deal with these matters right now. It really isn't their responsibility—nor Zannesu's, either. That's a fact they're having a hard time facing too.//

//I can't face it,// announced Darllanyu, looking straight at Jindigar. //Krinata's right. We should at least try to discover something to help.//

//I have made too many wrong decisions in the midst of operations. I don't dare take you back into the field.//

Darllanyu turned to the worldcircle. //And do you call *this* a wrong decision?//

//I didn't *do* this! It just—happened. I didn't know it was even possible to bring one world through another world's circle!//

//Listen to yourself,// argued Darllanyu. //You performed according to the highest Aliom ideals—you executed a "strike"—acting and reacting perfectly. You've worked three thousand years to develop that ability. Why should you be surprised when it produces the very serendipity Aliom promises?//

Trinarvil passed her hand through the zone above the circle. //Dar, I don't think he realizes what he's done. He hasn't suffered much, yet, from dysattunement.//

//He may never now. Maybe no one will.// Darllanyu rose and stepped into the circle, her form instantly enveloped in the shrouding whiteness.

Jindigar's breath caught in his throat, for despite the bandage slanted over one side of her head, she was the image of the bride awaiting the marriage trial. He almost didn't register Trinarvil's comment. //Maybe it's not a myth that Dushaun was colonized.... Jindigar has discovered a way it could have been done! He's brought through to Phanphihiy that overtone which we think of as Dushaun, but which is really from our planet of origin. I wonder if even Threntisn's Archive has anything on that!//

Darllanyu moved out of the circle, and Jindigar released his breath. She came and folded herself down before him. Her nearness sent a strange new kind of quiver through him, and he knew, suddenly, that he'd taken a giant leap into Renewal with the Eithlarin operation.

//Jindigar, I maligned you that night, before we tried for Eithlarin. You are nothing less than an

accomplished and dedicated Aliom Priest. No one else could have done this. I trust you—in the field—or anywhere.//

//No, Dar, you were right. I've discovered that a lot of people I haven't been listening to may have been right about me all along.// *Like my father, for example.* Jindigar was acutely aware of Krinata. He had the linkages open evenly, trying to rest their nerves. Krinata, sensing an intimacy in their words, was feeling embarrassed, as if she were eavesdropping. //Zunre, I've begun to have the kind of self-revelations that generally come beyond the onset of Renewal. Dar's insights into the deeper truths about me are very valuable to me. I want to spend this Renewal with her.//

//And I with him,// responded Dar formally, as if they had never made the announcement before.

Their eyes met, and all the friction was gone between them. Perhaps they would now settle easily into full Renewal. The promise made Jindigar eager enough to have forgotten the precarious position of the colony. But Darllanyu finally saw the change in him and pulled back, moving to the Formulator's position. //But first we must discover what can be done about I he hive, Chinchee doesn't stay anywhere very long. When he leaves, the colony will have no means whatever of talking to the hive. With communication there's a chance for an alliance.//

//And it's up to us to find a way to communicate, // concluded Krinata, //before we Dissolve.//

There was a set to her features and a hardness in her gaze that made Jindigar feel she was about to challenge Center again. //You don't know what you're saying, Krinata. You're talking about suicide—group suicide. If we go on, there'll be no hope for any of us to survive Dissolution.//

Very calmly Darllanyu questioned that. //How do you know we haven't passed that point already?//

## TEN

### Historian's Method

Darllanyu gazed steadily at Krinata, illicit Center whose presence already condemned at least some of them to Incompletion-death. The Formulator's dread was so cold, it was a calm that spoke as loudly as the riotous sensuality her condition broadcast through the links.

His mate's chill acceptance tapped a still quietude Jindigar hadn't known was at the center of the gibbering fear knotted inside him. He confessed with growing astonishment at the deeply mature tone of his voice, //I don't *know* I haven't long since sacrificed all our lives, just by accepting Krinata into Office. There is no way to predict what will happen when a dual-Center Oliat tries to Dissolve. *Sometimes* a few officers survive. I have been hoping to minimize our losses—only hoping.//

He felt Dar's scrutiny rake through him, reassessing him, and simultaneously her very identity shifted, sending starbursts sparkling through the linkages. *So that's what it looks like when Renewal compels realization of an error.* An Oliat couldn't function in the field with such disruptions to the linkages.

//Why hope?// challenged Darllanyu. //Remember, our objective is not to survive but to implant a colony—a Dushau multicolony, the first of its kind. Raichmat's zunre agreed this is a necessary step for Dushaun. We are moving in a riptide of history. And always at such points, some die that the concept may live. Jindigar—maybe the Historians have a healthier attitude toward Completion than Aliom. Maybe we shouldn't cling to ourselves so much as to the currents that are carrying us.//

Jindigar flicked his attention to Krinata. They all knew she considered herself Takora/Ontarrah reborn, but they didn't know how close he was to accepting that as a fact. //Dar, you don't believe that if we die, we will be reborn ephemeral?// *So sacrificing our lives for this colony would be so trivial that to*

*refuse to do it would be such a crime against the Laws of Nature that we'd lose our chance at Completion.* He couldn't accept that.

*//I think,//* she replied, *//we must admit that we do not know what we don't know. But we must act on what we do know—our objective—to begin a society where Dushau and ephemeral are bound into a single unit designed to protect this world from the galaxy, and the galaxy from this world, until they can be united into one. Raichmat's Oliat knew this planet could not be colonized except by Dushau, but that even we could not survive here as a single species. Raichmat's knew what the price would be. You were Outreach to Raichmat don't you remember?//*

He remembered. It had been a daring vision rejected by the rest of Dushaun because so many Dushau would die Incomplete in any attempt to colonize. But he had known that in such a project—the welding of disparate species into a whole, the protecting of the helpless, the riding of the currents of evolution—lay his Completion. He had known that ever since the day he'd first met a living ephemeral.

Through the open linkages the thoughts and emotions of the others became his own. Venlagar and Llistyien at last confronted the possibility that Krinata really was Takora. Trinarvil puzzled over why, if one Dushau had become ephemeral, no others had ever been identified. Zannesu deplored his eagerness to offer his life, knowing it stemmed from the amputation of his mate but finding no surcease in that. And Krinata restrained her impulse to lead them into one more effort, as if she were Center.

*//I am Priest and given to the processes of Aliom. Dar, without benefit of priesthood, has seen what I could not. Paradoxical as it seems, / have no other way to Completion but to give my life to this deflection of the stream of history, as if I were Historian too.//* The truth of what he'd just said burst upon him through a dam of resistance he hadn't known was there. He saw his own death and knew he had to surrender to it with no thought of surviving. *Is this what Takora went through?*

He saw a quizzical smile touch Krinata's lips, but she politely concealed her sharp white teeth. Suddenly she was no longer restraining herself from Center, for she knew he was committed now to the same course that she was.

*//I am not Center anymore, zunre,//* Jindigar told them. *//I can't lead in this, for I am too Active to see anything but my own point of view.//*

Llistyien answered, *//It's our point of view too. Very seldom has an Oliat been called to such a task, but it's not unprecedented. Jindigar, the Dushau species will die out if we stagnate on Dushaun.//* She gestured at the new worldcircle. *//With this the colony has a real chance. But if we can't accept that there is no Completion for us, that we're called to serve our species, then the colony will fail and there will be no Completion for anyone.//*

Trinarvil agreed. *//I have pursued the Healer's path to Completion: working at the performing and creative arts, learning all the cosmogonies, magicks, and sciences, and even doing the regimens of all the priesthoods, including, most recently, the Ambassadorial. I had no idea it would lead me to the Healing of a nine-species community. But there is one thing I have learned in Healing—it is not something that is done to you but something you do to yourself. I am of this community and of this world—and so I must do what is necessary to Hail.//*

Krinata stated, as if she really understood, *//It's up to Center to decide what's necessary. The Center's job is to guide the officers along Aliom toward Completion. And, Jindigar, whether you're still qualified or not, you're our Center—and you must decide; not us—not a vote—you. I'll abide by whatever you decide.//*

*//A promise, Krinata?//*

She frowned. //No—a prediction.//

//And how would Takora decide?//

//That's not fair,// she objected.

//I know.// Takora had once opted to take her Oliat with her to oblivion. Would she do it again?

Finally Krinata met his gaze. //Takora's had no vital objective worth seven lives to achieve. We do.//

She was right—a habit with her. And he had resolved to make the decisions a Center must. //You've all been lulled into a false sense of security by the dangers we have already survived. We're not talking about danger now, we're talking about certain death.//

A somber stillness settled over them all. They were unanimously willing. But it was his decision. He knew what he had to do, but his worst regret was that by doing this he'd be violating his Priest's vow to Cyrus to return Krinata to him. It would be the first major breach in his integrity since his Inversion. *What does it matter? I'm giving up Completion, anyway.* But something in him stubbornly refused to believe that. *If there's any path out of this, it lies straight ahead.*

//We go into the field. On pensone. Trinarvil, will you get the vial?// He adjusted the linkages so Trinarvil wouldn't be bothered with multiawareness and announced, //Meanwhile we'll survey the situation. This Oliat will succeed before we die.// *Why did I add that? My promises aren't worth anything anymore.*

//Good,// agreed Krinata. Then she offered, //Besides, we have to get the whole back. Lelwatha would never forgive Jindigar if he lost it to someone who couldn't play it.//

Darllanyu asked, //Jindigar, is that why you like humans?//

//One of the important reasons, yes.//

A warmth suffused the linkages and made his Oliat whole, as if they had just met the real Krinata, the Krinata who had dragged him across the galaxy, saving his life time after time, refusing to give up no matter how hopeless it became. Suddenly it became very hard not to hope they would survive.

Refusing to let the feeling grow, he flung their awareness wide, encompassing the entire settlement. The colonists had worked in shifts to construct an assault on the hive's position. Now deep furrows were clearly visible in the ground, leading from the river to the ships—water channels that were almost ready to be flooded.

On the ground just beyond the new trenches an arrangement of large wooden shafts and levers was being raised upright. It was a catapult with a person-sized basket at the top of the throwing arm. A thick cable led from the basket off toward the south—to the power station at the waterfall. A Cassrian was strapped into the basket, both arms wrapped around his head as if the swaying of the basket made him ill. '• ,,

The area where the ships were parked was now encircled by a solid barrier of dirt and rocks compacted into the classic foundation for a hive-dome.

The Oliat could see why the hive had gravitated to the shipyard. By chance the ships had been parked around a central monster of an orbit-to-orbit vessel that had been floated down by tenders so it could be cannibalized for parts. It jutted above the large ships next to it, which in turn dwarfed the smaller ships around them, and the whole array formed a dome-shaped outline.

Not one ship was still spaceworthy, but in every one, the Natives who were not working on the

hive-dome or digging the well in the middle of the dome area were building fires and preparing food they had brought with them.

At even intervals around the new dome foundation, clusters of hivebinders faced outward, vigilantly. The hive-mind behind them was shaky but recovered.

Zannesu interpreted his Reception. //They don't know what Terab is up to, but they understand that those trenches are meant to be a threat.//

//She'll have to break their foundation before she can get the water around the bases of the ships,// observed Jindigar, wondering how long the crude generator could electrify the ship's hulls—and how much real damage that might possibly do. They could only plant one cable at a time, and the Cassrian who rode the catapult with that cable would never return.

//Why such an elaborate scheme?// asked Darllanyu.

//It seems,// answered Jindigar., //that our ephemeral allies have finally discovered that attacking in force doesn't work on Phanphihy. They probably think the primitives won't understand what hit them.//

Terab, plastered with half-dried mud, came onto the field leading a party of burly Holot. They carried charges of chemical explosives in all four arms and walked on their hind legs, stepping carefully. A demolition crew.

The hive had not missed their approach. Below the rim of the foundation, warriors, unsure of what sort of attack they faced, crept bravely to the point targeted by Terab's party.

//Jindigar, we've got to stop them!// Krinata gathered her legs under her, as if to make for the door. But then she halted, and Jindigar sensed the conflicting impulses in her. Determined not to usurp Center again, she looked back at Jindigar.

He adjusted the Outreach link so she got only a comfortable trickle of information but told her, //There's nothing we can do but watch. Even if we could get there in time, we aren't stable enough yet to work on a battlefield.//

Before Terab's demolition crew reached the foundation, the warriors leapt out at them, throwing weapons flying and spears thrusting. The universe spun into an insane distortion—the hive's defense.

Reeling from the mental impact, dodging their attackers, the demolition crew swarmed onto the barrier. One by one they placed their charges and turned to flee. The warriors, unaware of their danger, attacked the fleeing Holot.

The hivebinders increased their efforts. Suddenly one of the demolition crew hurled his explosives aside and went after one of his fellow Holot. The Oliat saw the hideous monster he fought so heroically. Three other Holot scabbled to disarm the charges they had just placed, deluded into believing that they were about to destroy a priceless work of art. Nearby a Holot female, with gleaming teeth bared, heaved at an invisible monster and stood up straight, as if in victory. Then, sanity once again in her eyes, she glanced around and saw Terab leading a pitched battle against the warriors.

With quiet dignity the Holot female bent to the charge primer, and Jindigar knew what she was doing. Frantically he grabbed up the linkages and pulled in the Reception.

The horror he felt and the horror he anticipated joined as the explosion erupted. Their own flesh tore apart. Chunks of themselves went flying, showering blood onto the ground.

Cringing, Jindigar yanked them free and sent the Oliat spinning into blackness. The horror followed them, churning the blackness with nightmares. Jindigar gripped the linkages and focused on the worldcircle, tapping into the balm of Dushaun. Then he eased them back to limited awareness.

Krinata slumped to the floor where, she stood. The others knelt or hugged themselves. The hive's defense redoubled in volume. Anchoring to the worldcircle, Jindigar, inspired by desperation, organized the linkages so their multiawareness cross-checked each perception and accepted only what seemed the same to all of them, sifting reality from hallucination.

It made an incredible tangle of the linkages, but within moments the others pushed upright, blinking hard at Jindigar as they sorted out this new function. Real images became extra-bright translucencies surrounded with white halos of world-circle energy. Hallucinations appeared transparent and pale next to the real—but sometimes there were many layers of hallucinatory images. *If I could have done this for Eithlarin....*

Only Krinata still felt the warped reality eating at the edges of her mind. //I'm sorry, Krinata, // Jindigar apologized, //but if I opened any further to you, the data flow would be more confusing to you than the distortion. //

She shoved her hair back from her face and shook as if to divest herself of something wet and unpleasant. //It's all right— as long as I know it's not really real. //

Venlagar asked, working hard to hold the unique pattern Jindigar had set, //Can you manipulate the Oliat like this? //

Observing what he had created, Jindigar didn't give himself time to think but merely took up the linkages and called, //Receptor, we must find out what has happened. //

Zannesu fumbled about until he focused on the hive again. The last dirt clods spattered down. All the ex-Imperials kept their heads down until it stopped, but a few colonists looked up too soon and were hit with rocks and dirt. As if out of nowhere, water coursed into the channels the colonists had dug. It tunneled through the hole the explosion had ripped in the hive's dome foundation and spread out among the ships» The ground, already saturated from spring rains, soaked up very little, and most of the water formed a puddle around the base of the lab ship.

Soon water backed up in the channel. An innocent-seeming piece of wood began to float in that water- It lifted a lever and set off a chain reaction. Ultimately the catapult fired.

The Cassrian and the end of the cable went flying toward the lab ship—the only ship powered up to supply heat and light within, the one ship likely to contain the most vulnerable members of the hive.

Now everything depended on the Cassrian.

But this one must have been an acrobat or a stuntman. He landed square on the sloping hull and anchored himself with fittings taken from a vacuum suit. His task was extremely simple—clamp the electrical contacts into place. But when he did, he would be the first to die.

Several times, as they watched, it seemed he would abandon the task to chase phantasms of horror that opposed him while the real adversary, six warriors and two rustlemen, closed in from below, climbing handholds on the ship's skin. The Cassrian battled with rapidly weakening movements, as if his initial feat had taken up all his remaining strength. But, with only seconds to spare, the Cassrian overcame his personal demons and plunged the cubic home.

Instantly he stiffened, then tumbled down the polished hull.

Below him, the eight Natives screamed and died.

Those who ran to help them were caught in the current and died. Those inside the ship, not knowing they were insulated from the danger, rushed out to see what was happening, touched the hull and died. The entire hive was gravitating toward the charged puddle. Three hivebinders cautiously advanced toward the stricken and died. At the same instant the horror broadcast flicked off, and reality settled in around them.

The hive-mind stopped the headlong rush to the rescue of its dead it ml dying. Natives danced around the edges of the puddle, feeling the tingle of electrical charge through the damp ground. Then the generator at the waterfall blew.

A column of black smoke rose from the generator shed, but the Natives didn't connect that with the cessation of deaths. They circled the puddle, sniffing and babbling at each other.

The colonists picked themselves up and congratulated each other as they gathered their dead.

// Why?// It was Krinata, scrubbing at her face with her hands as if to dispel the last nightmare. //Why did Terab let them do that? Jindigar, two people killed themselves to deliver a relatively minor blow to the hive. Why?//

Jindigar plucked his cross-check linkage pattern apart and reassembled it into a standard global search. It wasn't an Outreach's function to formulate such questions, but Darllanyu was only a split instant behind her with the correct formulation.

It didn't take long. In the houses and in one barn that had been designated a hospital, people lay tossing helplessly in the grip of Krinata's Fever. In less than two days, while the Oliat had struggled to recover, fully a quarter of the colony had come down with it—and a dozen bodies of all four ephemeral species had been laid out for burial.

Several were infants.

But no Dushau. *Some ephemerals must feel the Oliat has deserted them because we don't care—the fever hardly touches Dushau.*

Krinata's thoughts flew toward Cyrus and the Outriders. //Krinata, take care. Outreach must retain exterior contact.//

//I'm sorry. I've got to know!// She got to her feet again, making for the door. Then she stopped. //Jindigar, please!//

It took every bit of discipline Jindigar had to keep from flickering the Oliat awareness into a search for the Outriders. //Of course, Krinata. Take your place.// He waited for her to resume her position as Outreach, feeling what it cost her. His Oliat might be doomed, but Jindigar wasn't going to throw their lives away by laxness in the most basic safety rules separating officers' functions.

At the very instant she reached her position he broke, and opened the linkages wide in a full global search for Cyrus and the Outriders.

He found them together, in Storm's cabin in the outer courtyard of the compound. Storm was seated on the bed, knees gathered to his chin, arms tightly binding himself together as if he might fly apart from grief.

In the crib beside the bed the Lehiroh's baby lay, unbreathing, a flush of fever still suffusing the skin,

though the features were slack in death.

Cyrus leaned weakly against the doorjamb, blocking the door into the adjacent room. His upper lip was damp with beads of sweat, and his shirt showed dark stains. "Maybe this doesn't help," he said, "but I'm glad his mother didn't have to live to see him die. It would have killed her, Storm. Ruff, you tell him."

Ruff was bent over the tiny body, tenderly composing it for the burial. Only the slight trembling of his hands showed the tightly coiled emotion within him. But as Cyrus spoke he glanced up at his human colleague, left his job to one of the other co-fathers, and went across the room to him. "Cy! You shouldn't be out of bed! We can't afford to lose you too. Think of Krinata - -think of the *Oliat*."

Storm roused himself to gaze at the two, and as Ruff eased himself under Cyrus's free arm to help him back into the other room, the front door rattled to an insistent touch. One of the other humans opened it, then stepped back, asking, "Threntisn?" His eyes shifted. "Isn't that—"

"Chinchee. Yes. May we enter?"

"We're quarantined," called Storm.

"I have had the disease," announced Threntisn, "and Chinchee is unlikely to acquire it until it mutates again."

Storm waved them inside, saying to Ruff over his shoulder, "Put Cy to bed and see that he drinks more of that concoction that brings the fever down."

Threntisn glimpsed Cyrus and stopped them. "This concerns you, most especially Cyrus. When I heard that you had contracted the fever, I knew it would endanger the *Oliat*. They have not Dissolved yet, but when they prepare for the effort, they will become aware of your condition. Krinata will be affected—the *Oliat* could be endangered."

"We've told him that, but he won't stay in bed," explained Storm, casting a frustrated look at his human colleague but paying no attention to Chinchee.

The Native, with his hivebinder on his shoulder, crept closer to the infant's bed to look down on the stillness there. He watched the Lehiroh who was wrapping the body. Solemnly the Native gestured in the air over the baby, then relaxed as if a grave but necessary chore had been completed. Finally he turned to study Cyrus, comparing him to the infant, comprehending at last that the adult human had the disease that had killed the infant Lehiroh.

The *Oliat* gathered that such cross-species diseases were common on Phanphihiy.

"I have devised a plan," announced Threntisn. "I have retrieved the techniques necessary to operate the lab machinery. I can create the appropriate serum from my own blood and inoculate Cyrus. If I do so as the hive watches, they will come to understand why we demand our ship back."

"You'll never get near them!" protested Storm. "Terab's trick didn't even impress the hive."

"Chinchee assures me that it won't move, no matter what Terab does," answered Threntisn, "but it may give us the lab ship."

"You can talk to Chinchee?" demanded Cyrus. "His Cassrian isn't good enough to let him understand much, but he is anxious for the hive and the colony to negotiate. That seems to be a Herald's function, and Chinchee feels he has failed. I think he'll do his best to get us into the hive area—the rest I believe I can manage."



"Chinchee," asserted Chinchee, confirming that he understood he was being discussed. With one hand he stroked the hivebinder on his shoulder, while in Cassrian whistles he said, "Go. Now."

"Wait now," countered Threntisn in good Cassrian. As a Historian, Threntisn had to be skilled in many professions. He probably could "manage" the lab. But Jindigar couldn't figure where his crazy scheme had come from.

Then he remembered Dar's comment on the Historians' view of Completion. Threntisn must see himself as assisting at the birth of a new civilization, Completing all Dushau, not just himself. But carrying the Archive, Threntisn wasn't free to risk his life. On the other hand, Historians were such mystics, shunning the simple, rigorous derivations of Aliom. How often had he heard Complete Priests say, *Never extrapolate a Historian's future actions. They delight in confounding us.*

"Cyrus, will you chance it with us?" asked the Historian.

"Don't do it," advised one of his human comrades.

"I would if I could walk that far," said Cyrus, and coughed weakly. "Besides, I'm in quarantine."

"We have a litter outside. We'll carry you. The medics have authorized it. The quarantine isn't working." Outside, four Dushau waited with a litter. The rest of the yard was empty.

"What do you think, Storm?" asked Cyrus. "I can hardly see across the room, let alone think."

"They'll kill you. Remember what it's like inside a hive? Chinchee couldn't help us then. What can he do now?"

"This is a different hive. If they don't kill us first, will the plan succeed?"

The four Lehiroh scrutinized Threntisn and agreed. "Very likely," said Storm, but the Oliat picked up the unspoken undertone, *If you had Oliat backing.*

Cyrus pushed away from the doorjamb, steadying himself on Ruff's shoulder. "All right. I'm ready."

"I'm coming, then," grunted one of the humans, and the other also prepared to leave.

"No," said Cyrus and Threntisn in unison.

Storm argued, "The Oliat might want us."

"Not likely," said Threntisn. "But Cyrus and I will enter the hive alone. We must be no threat. We merely wish to demonstrate a point."

"He's right," agreed Cyrus, making his way to the front door. "You all wait here. I'll be right back." Then he pulled away from Ruff and stood straight, facing them with a cocky grin. "Besides, I have nothing to lose." And he fainted in a boneless heap.

//Cy!// Unable to restrain herself any longer, Krinata surged into the balanced linkages, filling them all with her sense of urgency.

Jindigar gathered control and snapped, //Outreach!//

Krinata struggled against herself until she once more occupied the delimited position of the Outreach. But her jaw was clenched against the need to seize control, to rush out and do something.

The linkages crackled with her human tension, and for the first time since his grieving of Eithlarin, Zannesu broke out,

//Jindigar! No—not again. Not to Krinata too. Don't let it happen! She doesn't deserve to lose a mate!//

He felt the same sympathy for Krinata in Darllanyu, as if all her hostility toward Krinata had gone. He could hardly bear the sudden yearning that seized him. Never in all his Renewals had he experienced such an overwhelming need for a particular mate, as if Dar promised some inconceivable delight. And now, before he had it, he had to relinquish it.

Then Darllanyu shifted awareness to his physical presence, returning his gaze. It was as if energy flowed from her into his innermost being. As he drew his next breath the Observing Priest he would soon become noted that this signaled the fulfilling of their marriage trial, for only in shaleiliu could two mate so.

Trinarvil, herself glowing with arousal, returned with the pensone and interrupted without apology. //I recommend a five-hour dose, which we can repeat if necessary. We all need it, except Krinata.//

They took the capsules she doled out and swallowed them hastily.

They caught up with Threntisn near the hive's perimeter. As they approached, the Historian lifted Cyrus's blanket-wrapped form off the litter and carried him draped across both arms like a child. Not noticing the Oliat, Threntisn paced behind Chinchee, who danced toward the hive's guards, gyrating and hooting in the formalized Herald's approach to a strange hive.

As he moved, two older piols—the pair that had come with Jindigar—scampered out of the new water-filled trench leading from the river and welcomed their old friend Chinchee by racing around his feet in a mating chase.

Ignoring the animals, the litter attendants fell back, turning to deal with Terab and the colonists who were gathering— apparently ignorant of Threntisn's plan.

The Oliat, surrounded by their ephemeral Outriders—plus Krinata's Dushau Outrider substituting for Cyrus—moved as a well-drilled marching unit, gathering stares until, finally, a cheer rose from a group of humans and quickly became a general chant. "Jindigar's! Jindigar's! Jindigar's!"

Hearing that, Threntisn turned, registered astonishment, then acceptance of the Oliat as he resumed his progress.

Jindigar gathered the linkages to guide Zannesu's Reception ahead to the hive boundary. As they watched, the hive's warriors deployed in well-drilled order behind the mound that marked the hive's perimeter. They bristled with spears and throwing hatchets. The air throbbed with one convulsive shiver of horror—a tentative warning, declaring that the hive's spirit had not broken under the recent assault.

Behind the ranks of defenders a few rustlemen gathered, consulting with each other as they observed Chinchee. The Herald had led this hive to catastrophe and was no longer trusted. But there was something else.

//The rustlemen are moving too slowly,// noted Llistyien simultaneously with Jindigar.

//Inreach,// called Jindigar. //Emulator is correct. We need a microfocus on the rustlemen.// These beings were the key intelligence of the hive. Jindigar left the linkage pattern he'd already established in place and added another level of awareness focused on the rustlemen, with a time perspective several days deep into the past. Carefully protecting Krinata from the flow, he handed the second pattern over to Venlagar gingerly, dreading a fumble.

//Relax,// responded his Inreach. //I've got it.//

Jindigar turned his attention to Zannesu, who Received a clear picture of what had happened. Rustlemen, examining the corpses of the technicians, had also handled the virulent specimens they had been working on. The insidious offworld disease had promptly mutated to live in them. The rustlemen had absolutely no resistance. *We've brought death to this world when we only meant to protect it from ruthless exploitation.*

The warriors leveled spears at Chinchee and forced him to stop. Jindigar kept on marching, even when Threntisn halted.

He brought the Oliat to a stop just a few paces behind the Historian and sent Krinata ahead to whisper to Threntisn, "//The rustlemen have Krinata's Fever.//"

Threntisn pierced her with a glance, flicked his eyes over the Oliat, and then silently acknowledged the datum.

Chinchee danced up to the barrier where a section was a bit lower than the rest—the erstwhile doorway—and deposited his hivebinder on the beaten-down soil. The hive sent one of its own hivebinders forward. The little carapaced beings walked on two limbs toward one another, waving their clumsy hands at each other.

//Listen!// prompted Zannesu suddenly, and brought them a lilting melody, a whisper on some other plane of awareness.

Jindigar seized the linkages and chased that elusive signal, bringing the Formulator and Emulator to bear on the meaning of it. //A mindtune—another way they have of communicating,// identified Trinarvil. //Not hostile.//

//It's not information,// volunteered Darllanyu.

//Content is emotional,// reported Llistyien. She brought it through, flooding them with the hive's inarticulate apprehension, sharp skepticism, and feelings of betrayal, desperation, despair, and a rabid determination to fight to the last life for this final resting place.

Krinata, who had remained forward, just behind Threntisn, glanced at Cyrus as he stirred deliriously. //Center, may an. Outreach make a suggestion?//

//For communicating—certainly.//

//I once overheard you playing the whule in mourning for Lelwatha—his last composition. Do you think the hive would understand that?//

Jindigar studied the hive. Llistyien, who had captured a fair semblance of an all-hive Emulation, rendered her verdict. //They have a sense for tonality that doesn't seem very alien— for ephemerals.//

//There doesn't seem to be any way to make them understand that we can cure the disease if we can get inside the ship,// mused Jindigar. //So we'll try this. Krinata, get Chinchee's attention and see if he'll let you pick up his hivebinder— but be careful. Their sting is lethal to humans.//

//I know.// She advanced to where the Herald squatted, watching his hivebinder.

//Try to relax your throat, Krinata, or this may hurt,// Jindigar warned, then piped softly in Cassrian, explaining what they wanted but not why.

Chinchee turned as Krinata spoke, his huge saucer eyes wide in his stark white face, his ears standing straight up on top of his skull, giving him an attentive look. Seeing that his hivebinder was not making much progress, Chinchee plucked him from the humped dirt barrier and deposited him in Krinata's arms.

Krinata stroked the sleek shell of the hivebinder. She'd handled him before, but few of those memories were pleasant. Jindigar felt the small creature reaching toward Krinata, throbbing with loneliness and despair. Even though Krinata held him, the tiny being was lost in the mindsong of his fellows, a lament for their brothers in fullsong.

The Oliat automatically began to pursue that odd concept, but Jindigar restrained them. He settled them onto the ground behind Krinata, sitting cross-legged, as if to play the whole. He fetched the tangible memory of his whole, its satiny urwood finish, the long fretboard that lay just so, the perfect balance, the bow that fit his hand as if made for him. He had to vanquish the feel of it smacking into his arms and smashing into Dar's face.

Then, quite deliberately, he pulled Darllanyu into the memory. She, too, had exulted in that treasured antique whole, its tone, its obedient response to the musician's every whim. She Formulated it for the Oliat, and Llistyien Emulated the playing, holding the whole-hive Emulation as well.

Jindigar expanded the deep contact with the rustlemen to include the other three species of the hive, seeing that they were not yet affected by the plague. But they were so exhausted and despondent that general vitality had reached a critical ebb. This hive had been set into its spring reproductive cycle before they were flooded out. Now those pressures forced them to stay and fight a hopeless battle with their new neighbors, with no time to grieve their dead.

He brought that knowledge into the music welling up from his memory, just the way Lelwatha had taught him, and he channeled that music out through Krinata just as he would speech but high up in that band where the mindtunes wafted to and fro, lamenting the inevitabilities of life and death.

At first the Oliat's music clashed with the Natives' silent , song. But then Krinata became lost in her own memory—that first time she'd heard Jindigar play.

Every bow stroke evoked in her an echo of the pain he'd felt at the loss of so many zunre, at the loss of Kamminth's Oliat, of Lelwatha, Kamminth's Emulator. With every delicately plucked string, with every strummed chord, Krinata recreated every response Jindigar had put into the piece, that one time he'd played it in farewell to Lelwatha.

Jindigar's losses, Krinata's losses, the Oliat's loss of hope for survival, the colony's bleak acceptance of wholesale death blended and became one with the hivebinders' lament. Obliquely Jindigar chided himself for never suspecting how well Krinata read his music that day. He had unknowingly turned himself out naked before her. Now they must do the same before four alien species that might not understand.

Unashamed, Krinata bent forward and, as she had hardly dared when she'd first heard Jindigar play, she let herself cry for the one who suffered so, for anyone and everyone who suffered—for Lelwatha and Jindigar and the colony and the hive. The Oliat rode her wave of emotion.

Lelwatha had gauged the length of that exquisite passage so perfectly that just when none of them could tolerate it another moment, the piece moved into the final segment, one rising arpeggio bringing them up over the peak of agony and down into the quietude of forever. Spent, they rested with Lelwatha in the radiant peace beyond Completion where hope need not be, painful, nor joy etched out of the knowledge that it must be followed by despair.

Jindigar dwelled on the final note, letting it sound through the linkages, refining the Oliat's balance.

For a long time the hive's mindtune was silent, and Llistyien, still a little breathless, judged, *III* don't think it meant anything to them.//

The afternoon shadow of the cliff had long since covered them. Threntisn shifted, obviously tiring of holding the weight of the human in his arms. He knew only that the Oliat had tried something, but his patience was wearing through.

"//Wait,/" the Oliat cautioned him through Krinata.

As if that were a signal, the hive warriors parted, opening a narrow lane into the hive. Chinchee confidently retrieved his hivebinder from Krinata's lap and marched forward into mat opening, urging Threntisn to follow with a Cassrian command.

Jindigar scrambled to his feet. //Let's see if they'll let us in too.//

As Trinarvil and Ruff, her Outrider, crowded up behind Threntisn, the warriors narrowed the opening, clearly excluding the Outrider. //Jindigar?// she asked.

//They distinguish between Oliat and guards—and they don't want guards.// Through Krinata he said to Ruff, "//Let's not make an issue of it.//" No Center in his right mind would take an Oliat in without any Outriders. But they had already commended their lives to the community.

One by one the officers passed through the lane and followed Threntisn to the lab ship.

## **ELEVEN**

### **Hiveheart**

The two piols scampered up the ship's ramp, threading between the feet of two warriors who followed Threntisn and Chinchee. One of the warriors tripped over the animals. Their squeals of surprise stopped everyone. Handing his throwing spear to his comrade, the warrior bent to capture the two animals, and Jindigar's breath caught in his throat. These piols had been all he had to cling to during some of the hardest times of his life.

But the warrior rose with one piol tucked gently under each arm, their claws neatly immobilized. He edged past the Oliat and deposited the animals on the muddy ground, giving each a firm, instructive pat on the rump that sent them off to dig happily in the mud. Jindigar didn't need Oliat awareness to see that the piols had already made themselves at home among the Natives.

They all resumed their climb toward the ship's lock. As they approached the opening a new mindsong intruded on the Oliat's awareness, different and deeply disturbing.

At the top of the ramp two warrior guards leveled then-spears, barring entry to the ship. Chinchee protested, and an animated discussion ensued, which was interrupted by a truly huge rustleman female, a Rustlemother, decked in harnesses and leathers covered with thousands of tiny polished jewels that rattled together musically with every movement she made. *She* came out of the interior of the ship, lit from behind by the ship's emergency lights. She moved jerkily and braced herself with one hand against the bulkhead when she reached the lock. It wasn't just her advanced age. She was not well.

Zannesu, as Receptor, wanted to search for her exact position in the hive's hierarchy, but Jindigar throttled that impulse and set the Oliat in ground-state awareness, pleased to feel the steady, sure beat of the shaleiliu hum confirming the balance of his Oliat. //We may have to respond to unpredictable events. Curiosity can be satisfied later.//

She parted the guards and admitted them, but then ordered the guards to follow. Apparently the hive had

no idea of their goal or purpose but was simply standing aside to see what they'd do.

Threntisn led them through dirt-smudged corridors directly to the main lab where Jindigar had come to donate a blood specimen for Krinata. He stopped in the space between the door and the clerk's counter, fighting despair.

The place was a shambles. Clearly the technicians had defended themselves well. Movable lab equipment had been swept from the tops of fixed counters, and some portable tables had been overturned, chronometers smashed, but many of the drawers and bins had been locked, as had the doors to some of the side rooms. Dark stains that could only be blood were smeared on the sides of cabinets. The floor was strewn with fresh dirt ground in by many feet. A place had been cleared in the middle of the room and stones laid for a hearth fire, which now smoldered dully, coating everything with soot.

And the whole place stank—not the cozy hive redolence they'd encountered where they'd taken refuge on the plain, but burning synthetics, meat seared over open fire, suppurating wounds, illness, and the close pungency of unwashed bodies still reeking of terror, desperation, hope, grief, and something else that pierced through the rest insistently.

//This can never be replaced!// Trinarvil's despair nearly overwhelmed the Oliat.

Jindigar demanded more curtly than he intended, //Emulator, how does this look to the hive?//

The alien den had been made marginally livable, but there were few amenities. Yet it was the best shelter available for the hiveheart. The mind-gatherers in fullsong were desperately grateful for the shelter, even if they lacked food and water. In the other barely livable chambers of this deserted hive, the mind-singers were being tenderly cared for, though they called forlornly for the hivemothers, thwarted in their need to spur the hive's regeneration. Nothing could convince their bodies that the newhive had been displaced from the home they'd built, that it wasn't safe yet to make new life. And so the hive-mind allowed them a sparse few hivemothers to satisfy instinct, and curtailed their complaints with stern discipline.

//That explains the different mindsong we found here,// concluded Zannesu. //Jindigar, we don't belong in here.//

//Steady,// cautioned Jindigar. //We have to see this through. The pensone should hold for long enough.// He diverted their attention to evaluating the Rustlemother's status. She moved laboriously after Threntisn when he finally pushed through the gate in the counter and picked his way carefully over the slippery, dirt-covered floor. She was beyond the age where the fullsong could affect her, and so she exercised authority over the hiveheart. From the way her attendants fussed about her, they obviously knew she was deathly ill, and the hive could not afford to lose her.

Yet now a new hope glimmered in the depths of the hive-mind. This strange hive segment from their hostile neighbors seemed to be offering a truce of some sort.

Hoping to find a way to reinforce that impression, Jindigar focused on Threntisn. The Historian carried Cyrus straight across the lab to a small back room where he deposited the Outrider on a treatment table. Jindigar, ignoring the assortment of curious Natives gathering around them, assembled the Oliat around the doorway.

Checking the human's condition and securing the blanket lightly around him, Threntisn glanced toward Trinarvil as if hoping the medic would take charge. But, of course, Trinarvil could not function so in Oliat. He fixed on Krinata and asked, "Jindigar's, are they going to let me do it?"

"//They are waiting to see what you are going to do. Move slowly.//"

Threntisn edged out of the room and surveyed the useless mess in the main lab. His stance and expression showed that he was working an Archive access. He set off across the room, stepped around the fire, and punched a lock code to open another side-room door. On ship's emergency power, the door opened very slowly. It wouldn't be long before the power failed.

Threntisn glanced inside, then, satisfied that he had the right room, he turned and called to Chinchee in Cassrian, "Tell them to wait. I will show them something." Then, as Chinchee burst into twittering motion, he added, "Jindigar's, I think we can do it." And he disappeared inside, closing the door behind him.

Controlling evidence of her weakness, the Rustlemother settled next to the fire. Seven or eight of Chinchee's kind rushed to rekindle it for her comfort. The others burst into discussion both vocal and on some hive-mind level that leaked through to the Oliat along with the insistent call of the hivebinders in heat.

Jindigar's knew now what the hivebinders outside had lamented so. Their brothers were suffering, and because of their unfulfillment, the hive would die. But the hive was dying, anyway. They had no more strength to fight. They had admitted the strangers because they had nothing to lose and because the strangers' hive segment had seemed to understand what it was to lose all. Possibly Chinchee was right, and the strangers did wish to enter the hive to heal.

Threntisn took longer than the technician who had processed Jindigar's blood. Jindigar kept the Oliat standing around the door to Cyrus's room, concentrating on shutting out the ever more insistent hivebinders' fullsong, and consequently they lost track of the hive's reasoning.

Abruptly a mental silence descended, and a small group of hivebinders appeared in the hatchway, dragging Lelwatha's whale. They arrayed themselves before the Oliat, as if they intended to form a team to play the long, complex instrument laid before them.

But they didn't touch it. A whisper of another mindsong reached through the Oliat's defense. Jindigar asked Zannesu, //Can you filter that out of the fullsong background?//

It expanded to occupy their whole attention, and it was unmistakably Lelwatha's composition. Hesitantly, with many clumsy searchings for the right fingerings, the mind-gatherers arrayed before the whale plucked out a laborious, but accurate, rendition of the opening notes.

Clearly this was a bid for friendly dialogue. Jindigar itched to go to the whale and demonstrate the sounding of the piece. Instead he told his Emulator, //Llistyien, we must discover their motive for doing this.//

His Emulator brought the hivebinders' viewpoint up, washing them in the obscure symbology. Instantly Darllanyu Formulated an interpretation. The hive-mind figured that the strangers' hive-segment had come here to console the hivebinders in fullsong via their remarkable mindsong. When the strangers' segment had not resumed its mindsong inside the hiveheart, the hivebinders had brought the odd instrument, which had been captured by a valiant warrior, hoping it would stimulate the song.

The hivebinders faced the grotesque mind-singers now, puzzling over the continued silence, trying to reawaken that moment of mindsong they had shared while, in the background, the fullsong resumed, urgent, demanding.

//We can't do Lelwatha's Lament again,// warned Trinarvil. //I won't be able to Protect us with the fullsong in the background.// Renewal undermining her stability, she had reacted very strongly to Lelwatha's composition and expected to lose control this time. *Especially*, thought Jindigar, *if I actually play it on his own whale.*

He realized with sudden compassion that Trinarvil and Lelwatha must have known each other intimately, for the very thought of him aroused her further. *None of my business.* The links were leaking personal information again, despite the pensone, and Jindigar could not shut it off.

Zannesu's grieving for Eithlarin had begun to form a tough scar around the pain, but the wound where his mate had been amputated had not healed yet. However, there was still life in him, despite their suicide mission. Stirred by forces beyond his control, he eyed Trinarvil with speculation and hope. Who could fail to be attracted to her mature vibrancy?

Trinarvil's awareness of Zannesu's condition was sharp enough to pierce the veil of pensone. At the same time Jindigar could feel Darllanyu fighting to keep her eyes off his own neck. Venlagar buried his face in his hands and forced his itching fingers not to stray to his aching glands.

Krinata, embarrassed by inexplicable physical sensations, concentrated madly on how much her feet hurt in the higher gravity of Phanphihiy. //Jindigar,// asked his Outreach, //what's going on? The pensone can't be even half worn off yet.//

Before Jindigar could answer, another awareness raked through the Oliat linkages—almost, but not quite, like being scanned by another Oliat.

Zannesu winced away from the crude intrusion. //The hive-mind! Venlagar, watch out!//

The hive-mind tugged at the linkages, plucking them loose from Venlagar's grip.

Stunned, Jindigar struggled to get a new grip on the linkages. But the hivebinders seemed to have combined to lift the linkages out of Jindigar's control.

It was not an attack. There was no malice in it, only innocent curiosity. The moment of nascent arousal had finally struck another familiar note for the hivebinders, who knew that the survival of their hive might well depend on figuring these strangers out. The rustlemen had to know what their motives were. The hivebinders had studied the linkages binding the strangers and now felt no compunction in candidly probing into them, as if there could be no such thing as a private or personal matter.

Jindigar had never felt anything like it. Nor had he ever dreamed he could react to such an intrusion with amused calm. *Since I consider myself dead already, very little can threaten me.* It was an odd sort of freedom. His Oliat had not completed its mission, and so he would not permit it to be stolen from him. But he did not resist with his ordinary stridency, telegraphing to his opponent that he was indeed seriously threatened and therefore half beaten already. *I never knew how much I feared death.*

It was another deep-Renewal insight and had no place in the affairs of a Center.

But something of it communicated to the hivebinders. Their probing went from demanding to respectful. Then they withdrew, leaving behind a poignant sorrow over the Oliat's dreadful affliction and a reverence for their nobility in the face of such a fate.

The hivebinders climbed onto the whule, sitting erect with their hand limbs clasped before them, here and there a leg draped over the side to keep the bowl-shaped sounding chamber from rocking. They buzzed with a mindtune offering sympathy and hope, apologizing for misunderstanding why they had come, and promising to help the strangers overcome their insensitivity to the vitalizing of the fullsong.

In response to the hive-mind's insight a new group of hive-binders appeared at the door. They had glints of bright red and orange in their carapaces. With scarcely a pause they rushed eagerly into the room, projecting their mindsong before them, targeting now on the Oliat, rather than on any of the members of



their own hive. Their glee at the hive-mind's having finally lifted the harsh and unreasonable discipline restraining their fullsong infused it with a new vigor.

Jindigar seized the links to his Receptor and Protector and wove a tighter defense against the intrusive signal. But the proximity of the singers intensified the song. It beat through his filter.

//Brace yourselves!// warned Llistyien in tandem with Darllanyu.

Understanding didn't help. The alien rhythm beat through them in ever-increasing waves as the little beings poured all their frustration into it.

Jindigar frantically ran through a desensitizing procedure he'd never had a chance to teach his Oliat. He wrapped them in a cocoon spun of their own linkages, a tangle worse than he'd built to filter the hallucinations. As fast as he worked, the fullsong eroded his efforts, seeping into their nerves, hitting reflexes that triggered vital glands deadened by the drug.

The Dushau felt sick, but Krinata, unprotected by drugs and unable to benefit from Jindigar's complex cocoon of linkages because her brain couldn't handle the data flow, could not resist the song. She turned toward Cyrus.

Muttering deliriously, her mate fought free of the blanket he was wrapped in. Driven by her human response to the forces of Renewal, she drifted to her mate's side and bent to tuck the blanket around him. Before Jindigar knew what she intended, she blotted Cyrus's damp forehead with one corner, seeking with all her heart to ease his suffering and heal him.

//Jindigar—// warned Trinarvil, trembling with a sudden need to support Krinata's effort through Oliat function.

Krinata's intent in her action, to affect the outcome of an illness, was perilously close to a kind of symbolic Inversion of the Oliat. But, lost in the grip of the fullsong, she had all but forgotten that the Oliat was balanced and working and that she could draw the rest of them after her.

With a sudden, determined effort Jindigar snapped them all to attention. //Krinata, we must warn Threntisn of the hive-heart's function. Then we've got to get out of here.//

Krinata glanced at Trinarvil, then at the hivebinders, and the fog cleared from her eyes. Shuddering a little, she tore herself from Cyrus and with more than one backward glance went to the lab door. Just as she arrived the door opened, revealing Threntisn holding a loaded injector. "I've got it," he announced in Cassrian, then searched for Chinchee, puzzled when the Herald wasn't visible.

At Threntisn's first words the fullsong cut off on a note of bewilderment. All around the room, tangled piles of Natives, twined together in mutual enjoyment, ceased their activities, stunned by the sudden interruption. In one far corner Chinchee struggled up among a group of his own species, his harnesses and wishes of rank discarded, his white skin smudged with the dirt from the floor. Threntisn recognized him, anyway, and called out, "Tell them I am ready now to show them why they must leave this ship to us."

Jindigar could hardly believe that the Historian was oblivious to what had been going on in this room. But Threntisn wasn't in Renewal. And he was intent on the miracle he was about to demonstrate. He cut straight across to the treatment room and administered the dose to Cyrus while Chinchee self-consciously attempted to recoup his dignity.

Satisfied with Cyrus's condition, Threntisn turned, saying, as if expecting Chinchee to be standing right

behind him, "Tell the Rustlemother here that it will take a while before she sees a change, but — " Surprised that neither Chinchee nor the Rustlemother was looking over his shoulder, the Historian cut off. He looked down to find many hivebinders gathered in the doorway, observing his every move, reporting to the hivemind. His gaze lilted, searching for the Rustlemother, who was slumped by her fire, apparently asleep.

As he watched, the elderly female toppled to the floor, the platelets that made up her skin rustling audibly and the myriad accoutrements of her office clattering against the floor as she fell

Two warriors and several of the white-skinned craftsmen dashed to her side while Threntisn darted a look at Krinata. "Jindigar's, you should have told me the leader was sick too! This could be our chance!" Looking neither left nor right, he went to a locked cabinet, found a blood specimen extractor, and strode directly to the Rustlemother's side, edging out some of her attendants as he called to Chinchee, "Tell them I am a friend. I will help her."

Jindigar had his Oliat nearly paralyzed in the net of their own linkages, and as swiftly as he worked, he could not disentangle them quickly enough to shout a warning.

The hivebinders could move as fast as a Cassrian when they chose. The entire complement of them in the room, seeing the giant alien using his sting on their Mothering-one, swarmed all over Threntisn and stung him first.

While the Dushau system could handle most toxins with dispatch, the sheer volume of poison brought Threntisn to his hands and knees. The hive-mind, seeing it as an attack by peace-heralds who came to get help—help that was freely given—recoiled in shock.

Chinchee let out an ululating wail of protest and dashed forward, throwing his body into the strenuous contortions of Herald's speech, begging the hive to halt the attack on Threntisn. But it was too late. Threntisn slid down and lay prone, unmoving"

Jindigar finally unlocked the last crosslink and addressed his Receptor. //We need to monitor Threntisn's life functions— if he still lives.//

Zannesu, understandably off-stride, gave them too much amplitude. Threntisn's vital functions flashed through the Oliat, dominating their own united heart and respiration rhythm. As Llistyien was overwhelmed by the Reception, her Emulation of the effect of the toxin on the Historian's nervous system awakened similar responses in the Oliat.

Jindigar was as helpless in the grip of the toxin Emulation as if he'd been stung himself. Spontaneously the contact with Threntisn became a link. Aghast, Jindigar watched the link transform and deepen of its own accord into a meta-Oliat link, as if Threntisn were the Center of an allied Oliat.

*It's the toxin, thought Jindigar, repelling panic. It's just an illusion.* Threntisn would not touch Oliat functions for anything in all creation. Me was Historian, through and through, set on guarding and maintaining his Archive. *Unless my meddling has damaged something!* Jindigar recalled all the times he'd struggled to sift the data properly during the debriefing and how he'd gone too deep into territory he wasn't authorized to tap, when he'd searched the Aliom files for a way to Dissolve- and *found a meta-Oliat function.*

But there was no time to think. In a flash the new meta-link Fastened into Jindigar, as if attracted to him. The link opened into Threntisn and beyond Threntisn into the rest of the Archive, as if the Archive were Threntisn's Oliat.

A familiar terror gripped Jindigar as he thrashed against the forces that swept him up out of his body and into the intangible regions where Archives and Oliat linkages existed. The thick darkness flowed inexorably, carrying him and his Oliat toward a glowing aperture, an Archive Gate.

Breasting that current in an effort to belay their fall, Jindigar glimpsed the structure around the aperture, a glistening network of colored jewels defining a tesseract that warped away into unimaginable dimensions. Windows on its faceted sides showed scenes that enticed the unwary, for they were traps that protected the Archive from unauthorized entry. They had to stay away from those windows.

Not only had Jindigar once carried this very Archive, he also had worked with its reserved Aliom sections, and he'd debriefed to it in link with his Outreach, who had once been lost in it with him, and, who had, together with him, been rescued by Threntisn.

Now the new link that bound them to Threntisn quickened the Archive with welcome, as if it recognized them. *I wouldn't put it past Grisnilter to have taught it to recognize me!*

The Gate dilated, inviting Jindigar to enter, to travel the pathways and chambers to the core, to the Archive's Eye, the origin of the Archive, and the point at which all Archives joined, the point at Infinity where all existence touched non-existence, the Historians' fabled Gateway to Completion.

As dangerous as he knew it was, as forbidden as it was to an Aliom Priest, Jindigar was drawn forward by a gripping pang of nostalgia, a need he'd never known was in him. Concurrently he was aware of Krinata paralyzed in the grip of remembered terrors, wanting to break away from the Oliat and flee but refusing to yield to Dushau instinct, which would be human cowardice.

I am *Center*, he told himself, *in Office and working to a purpose*. He groped for that solid anchor, struggling to find reality again. And as he found it their headlong rush toward infinity slowed. *II Must reset Receptor's focus. II*

He lifted the Oliat linkages, but before he could reset them, a vaguely familiar disturbance loomed out of nowhere, permeating the linkages. //The hive-mind!// identified Trinarvil. Simultaneously the hive-mind snatched the linkages out of Jindigar's grasp, the sudden distortion cutting off the shaleiliu hum, leaving Jindigar stunned.

The moment Jindigar's resistance slackened, the Archive pulled them in faster. Shocked by the loss of the linkages, Jindigar was unable to check their uncontrolled fall into the Archive Gate. He and his Oliat were swept into the voracious maw of the Archive as if they were just another datum to be recorded, classified, and stored. But, behind him, attached by the nebulous tissue of the Oliat linkages, came the hive-mind, as bewildered as it had been when its members had been electrocuted.

Reflexively Jindigar fought to regain his linkages, acutely aware of the alarming overload of data pouring into Krinata from the hive-mind and of the acute shock overcoming his officers at a strange touch on the links. But the hive-mind was bigger than the Oliat, stronger, older, and determined to survive.

Suddenly it all made sense. The Dushau had come here to protect the Natives, but this planet would tolerate no intruders,

just as an Archive would not, just as an Oliat would not. They could not protect the Natives unless they *became* Natives. Then Jindigar saw the answer. *The two Archives, hive and Dushau, must be joined.*

He didn't stop to reason it through but acted in the manner of Aliom's "strike," and for the first time it was totally effortless.

Dimly Jindigar was aware that he was using skills he'd garnered from the Observers' level of the Archive, skills beyond him despite his millennia of Oliat experience. He reached out to reinforce the meta-link with Threntisn while at the same time he offered the same sort of meta-link to the hive-mind, luring it closer until he could repossess his own linkages in exchange for the meta-link, setting that link into the central core of the hive-mind—with a sure, fearless touch. As if he knew what he was doing.

His own linkages settled back around him again, and he tuned for the shaleiliu hum he'd come to rely on. He wasn't prepared for the roar that blasted into their consciousnesses, shaleiliu hum as loud as if they were inside the sounding box of a whale.

He tuned it down as best he could, but still it was like working inside a robofactory where noise was not controlled. To gain control he had to balance the trinary Oliat. //Archive Master! Hivemaster!// He called the co-Centers.

Threntisn's response was sluggish, bemused by the toxin that warped his sense of reality. //What a strange place... the walls speak... but with respect. Come then, Walls, I will be your Archive Master. Come, we will record you for all time to read.//

The hive-mind, bewildered by this turn of events, responded, //We Record!//

But the responses alone were enough. Jindigar solidified the hive, the Archive, and his Oliat into a trinary meta-Oliat, announcing, *III* am meta-Center.//

His own officers scarcely knew what was happening. Oddly enough it was Krinata who first understood and found her place as meta-Outreach.

The data flow waxed to a stupendous volume, long since overloading her human brain. She had given up trying to apprehend it all. By some obscure mechanism of the human mind she was able to ignore the incomprehensible and organize the rest of the incoming data into familiar patterns. Jindigar, afraid that her endurance was limited, yielded to her metaphors, letting this un-space take on the forms she imposed on it.

He turned to the hive-mind. Its Whole Memory stretched off to one side, a snaking tunnel like a telescoping tube with events depicted on its walls as living plays of the great historical events of the hive. Newhiveswarm brought with it the Whole Memory of its parent hive, a memory that stretched back eons into the dim reaches of pre-intelligence. The Rustlemother who held the Whole Memory could transmit it and add to it just as an Archivist could, but she was ill and dying, making the scenes dim and listless.

The Archive surrounded the Oliat and the hivemaster, plucking insistently at the hints of data coming from the hive-mind's vast memory. Left alone, the Archive would devour the less sophisticated hive-memory. Jindigar forestalled this by invoking the Oliat's global awareness and baiting the Archive with a flood of data.

The lab was filling with awestruck Natives, too aware of the burgeoning Archive swallowing their Mind to attend to the fallen Rustlemother, nearly crushed under the weight of the stranger. Even the hivebinders in fullsong had suspended their compulsive call.

Jindigar opened out to include the settlement and the plain above. He fed all the data to the voracious Archive while he tried to shake Threntisn out of his stupor. //Threntisn! You've got to help! Archivist! I can't do this alone!//

Just when despair overtook him, Jindigar heard a familiar hail echoing down the chambers of the Archive, //Jindigar!// He whirled around within the Archive space to find Threntisn arrowing toward him, propelling

himself through the kaleidoscopic shapes of the Archive's chambers by the power of his own will, not riding helplessly on the voracious currents of the Archive. His progress seemed erratic but nevertheless purposive. *Perhaps the hivebinders' toxin is wearing off at last!*

Through the meta-link he told the Archivist, //We must form a single unit of Archive and hive-memory—then we must open a channel between them so the hive-mind can understand that we can cure the disease that's killing Rustlemother— who is like an Archivist. She carries the Whole Memory of the hive!//

Puzzled, the Historian hesitated. //You can't talk to me. You're balanced.//

//Never mind that now,// pled Jindigar. //The Rustlemother's your colleague, Threntisn. Your instinct was right. We must save her or the hive will become a mere collection of individuals—all that data lost!//

The Historian's image blinked slowly. Still fighting the toxin, he wasn't quite able to grasp it all. But his eyes went to the long tube that represented the hive-memory. A Historian's cornucopia, its tail snaked off toward the Gateway into the Archive while the wide-open end faced them. The open end was screened by a blurred area that sometimes seemed to be one Native species and sometimes another; occasionally an amalgam of them all. But in Krinata's metaphor the shifting image represented a composite being, the Hivemaster.

Jindigar opened a data flow to the Historian along the meta-link that bound the ternary Oliat. Gradually Threntisn comprehended. //A channel to the hive—of course. But I wouldn't know how, Jindigar.//

//Let's do it this way,// suggested Jindigar, and directed Krinata, as meta-Outreach, to approach the hivemaster.

She eyed the zone of mixed images, then returned, //That's a hole into the hive-memory. It's an infinite tunnel. I could fall down it forever!//

She had fallen through such a hive-memory with him once, while trying to save his life. It had been one of the most terrifying experiences she'd ever endured. Jindigar knew, through the long intimacy of their linkages, how she had overcome the terror by simply putting it behind her, saying, *I'll never do that again*. And he was sending her into it again.

//You can't fall in while we're meta-linked,// he assured her, knowing that logic had nothing to do with phobia. But he carefully explained his plan.

Krinata glowed with skepticism, but she moved out into the vaguely defined space between Oliat and hive-mind. Jindigar sent Threntisn out with her, coaxing him into the meta-link with Krinata, urging him, //Now go ahead and explain to the hive-mind what you were trying to get Chinchee to tell them when you were taking the Rustlemother's blood specimen.//

Krinata approached barely close enough for her projection to reach the hivemaster, then, glancing nervously at Threntisn, she squirmed as the other meta-Center spoke through her, "// I—we—want to be your friend, Hivemaster. As I have healed one of our sick, I—we—can heal your Rustlemother and save your Whole Memory.//"

Threntisn twisted to gape at Jindigar. //Save the Whole Memory? Jindigar—how could I follow—be understanding—//

//You're reading Oliat data,// explained Jindigar confidently while he quailed inwardly. *He's a Historian!* Bemusedly Threntisn accepted that, perhaps still affected by the toxin or maybe absorbing Krinata's

unquestioning attitude. As if it were all routine, the Historian formulated a method Jindigar could never have imagined. //Let us show you what is wrong with Rustle-mother, how it was our doing, and how we can cure her.//

With a dramatic gesture Threntisn reshaped the Archive chambers about them, confronting the hivemaster with a panorama of scenes recorded in the Archive, scenes explaining the concepts of communicable diseases, scenes of the development of immunology, scenes explaining the rapid mutation of certain microorganisms so they could cross species lines, and the rapid and efficient control methods available in the ship's lab.

It was a virtuoso performance by a true Archive Master, and Jindigar was about to heave a sigh of relief and turn his attention to how to get them all out of this when the hivemaster rumbled ominously, sending only confusion down the meta-link.

//Llistyien, can you Emulate the hive-mind?//

Jindigar felt her trembling at the very idea, still clenched up tight around herself, expecting annihilation momentarily. But, with Krinata performing her Office as if nothing unusual had happened, Llistyien straightened and brought the hive-master's rumble to the Oliat as a clear expression of bewilderment. As elementary as Threntisn's presentation had been, the hive simply didn't comprehend.

//Dai, are you with us?// asked Jindigar tentatively.

//I'm trying,// she answered, and Jindigar felt the linkage waken. He suppressed a surge of alarm at the clear tinge of Renewal she had been suppressing. *If the pensone is wearing off, we've been in here for hours!*

//Formulator and Emulator, in tandem,// called Jindigar, resetting the linkages and handing the pattern over to Venlagar. //We have to translate the Archive data Threntisn is presenting into terms the hive can comprehend.//

They had no idea what those terms might be, but Jindigar ignored that and set to work. His Oliat would discover the right casting. Hastily trained beginners, they had nevertheless developed into a fine-tuned instrument. The shaleiliu roar that surrounded them attested to that. This entire trinary Oliat was in lime with some universal force.

//Steady now, and we can handle this,// Jindigar coaxed. Then he blended his Oliat linkage pattern into Threntisn's meta-link. //Show us how the display is evoked. We must translate for the hive-mind.// The Historian hesitated—control of the Archive functions was strictly Historians' responsibility. But then he overcame the trained reflex and allowed them access to the imaging mechanism.

Jindigar worked through Threntisn's touch, schooling himself not to yearn to take control from the Historian. But he couldn't deny it was a long-sought thrill—all that data at his personal command. There was nothing like it in Aliom. And there was something else—some vast, profound insight that beckoned just beyond the tantalizing horizon. It was something Threntisn and all Historians seemed to share, something Jindigar wanted with all his heart and soul. But it was not for an Aliom Priest.

Keeping his distance, Jindigar used Krinata to Outreach the Oliat's translation directly to the Historian, not through linear vocalizing but through a direct, multidimensional interface.

//Jindigar, don't—I can't.// Krinata winced away from the contact, as if it were a deeply personal violation.

Jindigar stanching the flow of data. //Krinata—// But, feeling her reaction, he couldn't ask it of her.

Threntisn shuddered. //I'm sorry, Krinata. I never realized, a human—I mean—//

Jindigar interrupted, *///* don't think I can adjust that sort of full spectrum meta-link to a narrower channel, but I'll try.//

//We have to do it, don't we?// Krinata asked. When no one answered, because not one of them could ask it of her, she told Threntisn, //I'm game if you are. Afterward we'll just pretend it never happened.//

He looked to the hivemaster, squirming impatiently. The Rustlemother was dying. //Jindigar, I want you to know that a Historian carries just as strict a confidentiality code as the Aliom Priests do. I won't even know that I know anything I get about you from her, until you tell me.//

*I didn't realize—oh. Krinata!* But they had to. He worked to narrow the channel, excluding the personal, but it wasn't effective because so much of the understanding of the universe is based on the personal. *And how much confidentiality can one expect from a hive that barely comprehends individuality?*

Jindigar barely found the strength to continue recasting the images, substituting hive Natives for the people in Threntisn's story, showing which were workers, craftsmen, scholars, and explorers or Heralds. They showed planetary civilizations as hives and microbe species as hiveless marauders. The concept of microscopic life was remarkably easy to get across—the concept of independent individuals simply could not be translated. So Jindigar let the developing science pass as the work of a communion of hive-minds. But he meticulously cast the closing scene in the ship's lab, dirt-smudged floor, campfire, and all just as it was now, with Threntisn in the role of technician, dressed in the belts, headdress, and sigils of a master craftsman.

When they were done, the hivemaster's rumble had turned thoughtful. Jindigar dispelled the crosslink between Krinata and Threntisn, sensing Krinata's relief as his own. He felt almost as if he'd forced her into an intimate act. He needed to break down and beg her forgiveness, pledging to protect her body and mind from any such invasion. The very idea of her pliant body clasped in his arms set him to trembling. *Time's running out. I'd better not even look at Dar.*

The hivemaster finally stirred, seeming at last to have comprehended their plan to help the Rustlemother. The long cornucopia that was Krinata's image of the hive-mind squirmed about, as if searching for the exit from the Archive.

*How does one Dissolve a meta-Oliat?* Jindigar had only the vaguest idea, but the standard procedure wouldn't work in this case. Neither of the other two entities were truly in Oliat. If they did "Dissolve," they would totally self-destruct.

Before Jindigar could work up a plan, the hivemaster turned and dived down the throat of his own tunnel-memory, turning it inside out, swallowing himself to turn end over end, lunging toward the Gate at which they had entered, dragging the Oliat behind.

Reacting faster than Jindigar, Threntisn closed the Gate ahead of the behemoth, telling the Oliat, as it drew him along in its wake, //That's not an exit!// He shook at the meta-link joining them as if it were a noisome animal stuck to his flesh by sucker pads. //Let me go! If he breaks out, he could pull the Archive inside out.//

Thrashing, the Historian stretched the meta-link, dragging them backward, while ahead, the hivemaster drove toward the solid wall of the Archive, stretching the meta-link in the other direction, as if determined

to break through to freedom. *If those links should snap...*

The shaleiliu roar rose to a higher pitch as the links stretched. //Threntisn, if you can reform the Archive around the hive-master so that it is headed for an exit, while I release the meta-links that bind you both to me, perhaps we will separate without harm and let the hivemaster go on his way.//

It was a desperate plan, but Threntisn apparently didn't sense that. He began shifting the environment around them, giving them the illusion of hurling through the Archive toward the Eye. His control was steadier now, the toxin apparently wearing off at last.

Jindigar told Venlagar, who was strained to the breaking point with the extra weight of the meta-forms, //Inreach, we need to take on energy from the shaleiliu hum. Give me the links one at a time.// Then he warned his officers, a peculiar sense of calm steadying him, //Brace yourselves. One way or the other, this will be our last attempt at Dissolution. But no matter what happens to us, the Archive and the hive must go free of it.//

Then, one by one, starting with the meta-links, Jindigar plucked the linkages from Venlagar's grasp and infused them with the shaleiliu roar until it thrummed through them all. As he induced the correct pitch into the linkages the thundering vibration took over the Oliat. The links that bound the three entities shimmered, becoming indistinguishable from that background carrier wave of universal energy.

*I don't believe this. We're actually dissolving.* Maybe there was more than one way to use a meta-link to Dissolve a dual-Centered Oliat.

As the moment approached when Jindigar would have no further control over the linkages, he became hyperaware of Krinata. She was the center of a tangled knot of infinitesimal colored threads—*the links she claimed to have to my officers*. As he watched in amazement her links grew stronger, more organized, as his own dissipated.

## **TWELVE**

### **Dissolution**

//Jindigar! Stop it! I can't make it stop!// Krinata thrashed among her linkages, as if trying to extricate herself, but only succeeded in tangling herself more deeply, reinforcing the hold her own links had on her.

*//I don't know how!// She had Center's links all the time. She told me and I didn't believe her.*

His officers strove to deny Krinata's links, too, and to stay with the Dissolution of Jindigar's, hoping against all hope that they'd survive. Then, gradually, each of them succumbed to despair, for Krinata's links held them bound to each other in another Oliat—Krinata's Oliat—with Jindigar as her Outreach. *She really is Takora!*

The shaleiliu hum, once loud enough to pulverize bone, was fading fast, for her links were unbalanced. Jindigar ignored the sickening whirl the change of Office made of his mind, knowing that the effect was ten thousand times worse for her. He had to think. If she could manage a balance and begin Dissolution, Jindigar would find himself in the same position she was in now, snared in a spontaneously activated network of linkages, for part of the energy his links had soaked up had come from her links—which had been hanging on the edge of nebulosity, not quite thoroughly formed.

When an Oliat formed, it was bound by emitting energy—grounding it into a planetary core. An Oliat was stable because it sat at the bottom of a potential energy well. It had to absorb energy to disassociate again.



Krinata's links had formed in the Holot cave, but he had prevented her from grounding the energies and actually taking Center. *Which Takora wouldn't want to do, knowing the dangers. This is something that's happening against her will.*

When Jindigar had invoked Dissolution, his links had stolen energy from her links, causing her links to fall into solidity. If she tried to Dissolve, she'd soak energy out of his links again—and they'd go around and around forever.

//Jindigar!// Krinata twisted, turned, and pulled, rejecting the potent intimacy of the Center linkages as if it burned, rejecting the position of Center, for it didn't belong to her anymore. *She really is Takora! I didn't destroy her!*

Needing to relieve her suffering, he grabbed for his linkages «. again. Only, they and the meta-links were now too insubstantial, having soaked up too much energy from the shaleiliu hum, like ice melting, then boiling away. *You can't pick up a handful of steam.* But his links were more like live steam compressed in a network of pipes.

Nevertheless, they carried a doubled anguish as Krinata struggled against her linkages and, at the same time, relived the moment Takora knew that she was trapped at Center, unable to Dissolve. She knew that as a result of her own bad judgment, her death would take her Oliat with her. It all flooded down her Center-Outreach link. His own link to his Outreach resonated with the same emotion. *Trapped.*

Jindigar lived it with her: the moment he had realized Takora's was doomed, and this moment when he knew Jindigar's was likewise doomed—by his own bad judgment. The Laws of Symmetry, Parity, and Polarity are inescapable Laws of Nature. But how many more times would they have to live it? Could even death end it? *I must—I must end it!*

Along Krinata's own link to her Outreach he told her, //Takora—Takora, you must calm down. You've got the links. You must manage them.//

Her panic froze into a shocked stillness. A startling thrill of pleasure coursed through her linkages, captivating her of-

ficers. She gasped, //You—you know now? You believe?// All the linkages pulsed with that too-intimate contact that shouldn't be there. She told him intently, as if everything depended on it, //Jindigar—Jindigar, listen. I forgive you. I want so very much for you to forgive yourself. Please, try to forgive yourself.//

For the first time in all the times she'd told him that, Jindigar heard. It seared through him like a lightning strike, so fast that he didn't have time to brace against it. And in the wake of that flash came a feeling of warm lightness. For the first time he experienced being Center. A knot he had hardly been aware of melted inside him, a tight reluctance to abandon Center, an Office he'd not really held until this moment. *There are no shortcuts to Completion.* //Takora. Takora—thank you.//

//If I'd had the courage, Jindigar, I'd have begged you to release me as you did the first time. This time I don't need courage because I know it isn't the worst possible fate. If you can save the others by killing me, then do it. I *can't* take Center—Jindigar, I mustn't do it!// She hesitated, then added, //Just tell Cyrus I regretted leaving him.// With that, a serenity suffused her linkages, a peace that made him believe her.

And out of that peace an idea struck. It was almost as if he could grasp the entire pattern of the symmetries of the universe, as the Oliat grasped the pattern of an ecology. Before the clarity could fade, he reached for contact with the worldcircle and made himself a conduit for those energies, intending to pump that energy into the double network of linkages binding them. His Oliat had not been formed on Dushaun, nor had Takora's second Oliat been grounded into Dushaun's worldcircle. They were both of

Phanphihiy more than anywhere else. The energies should be compatible.

They didn't need much. The shaleiliu roar had already provided most of the Dissolution energy. But the dual-Oliat with meta-links attached required an enormous amount of energy. And *all* the links had to be saturated—all at the same time.

The meta-links had stretched to the breaking point before shimmering into the high-energy form but still held. Jindigar felt astonishment from Threntisn.

Threntisn stared transfixed as the open Gate he had been trying to direct the hivemaster through filled with the white glow of the worldcircle. A tendril of whiteness wisped through the Gate, threading through the longitudinal axis of the cornucopia representing the hive-memory, through Jindigar, and through Krinata. The shaft of worldcircle light shot along the meta-link right into the center of the Archive and the Eye.

An electrifying surge lanced through them all when that wispy tendril touched the Eye, for it completed a circuit between the core Infinity at the center of Phanphihiy and the Eye of the Archive, which also opened into Completion, the Infinitude where all was One.

But instead of gushing entirely into the links that bound Krinata's Oliat, the energy of the worldcircle shot through the structure of the Archive itself, as if the Archive hungrily drank in the Dushaun component of the new worldcircle. The superstructure of the Archive became a dazzling array of thin lines dotted with colored jewels glowing brighter and brighter, winking and flashing all around them in receding perspective—tesseract joined to tesseract, warping aside into the wildly unimaginable space that was bigger inside than outside.

The hive-mind, unaware that such beauty might signal danger, gave itself wholly to the primitive, exquisite, uninhibited thrill of direct contact with the worldcircle—the illusory lure that had drawn them across the plain. //Chinchee didn't lie!//

The hivemaster checked his thrashing effort to escape from the trap which was the Archive and turned end over end again to regard Jindigar and Threntisn with ever-increasing amazement.

Each hive species basked in the sensuous glory of the fountain they had regarded as a mirage when it disappeared as soon as they got to it, and reappeared when they retreated. The sensitive hivebinders flinched at full exposure to the Dushaun energy carried by the new circle, but then they succumbed to the lure of pure rapture as they basked in the intensified flow of Phanphihiy's energy. Jindigar recognized the mindvoice of Chinchee's hivebinder, boldly leading the others to release their long pent-up fullsong.

*I wonder what the Active Circle will be like for them?*

Hut the hive knew nothing of that. Tasting the worldcircle energies through its hivebinders, the hive concluded in a joyous inductive leap, //It is through you, and only through you, that we may have this. We accept your peace gifts of health and life. We offer in return the peace-binding to One.//

Without pause the hivebinders unleashed the full power of their mindsong, reaching out to bind all—Native and stranger, Oliat and colonist—into one mind, throbbing with the seductive fullsong—an innocent offering of shared joy and final understanding.

Seeing the meta-links as just another form of bond, the hivebinders grabbed them up to weave them into the group mind. But the meta-links were at a much higher potential energy. The instant the contact was made, energy drained from the meta-links into the hivebinders' newly forged network. The meta-links resolidified—only the hivebinders had created a new meta-link, joining four Centers—Jindigar, Krinata,

the hivemaster, and Threntisn/Archive.

A new tonal wave, a shaleiliu hum octaves deeper than anything Jindigar had ever imagined, shook them—more felt than heard invading Krinata's unbalanced linkages and creating a painful subtone, as if one instrument in a huge orchestra was out of tune.

The Archive's recording of the meta-Oliat had held only a pale shadow of this eruption from the roots of existence. Its sheer intensity was frightening. The Archive itself resonated to the unsound with a powerful kinship, just as the Oliat links resonated to the shaleiliu hum and Dissolve.

Something deep in Jindigar responded, aching and straining toward the raw energy, yet also shrinking from the searing,

stretching, bright pain it ignited in his brain, blurring everything. *Only a Complete Priest could tolerate much of this!*

Simultaneously the hivebinders drew greedily on the unlimited worldcircle energy, channeling it into their song. As they did, more and more Dushaun-tinged energy spilled into the Archive and drained into the Archive's structure, which began to shimmer as Dissolving Oliat linkages did.

//No!// came Threntisn's roaring denial. //Not the Archive!//

Abruptly darkness enveloped them. Disoriented, Jindigar discovered that the worldcircle current was gone. Threntisn had slammed shut the gateway, cutting off the current. The hivebinders wailed in protest.

The hivemaster howled in shock at yet another betrayal.

The Natives' reaction cut off as the Archive whirled and spun around them, images flashing by in a searing, dazzling blur. Then everything slammed to a stop, and Threntisn propelled them toward another gateway.

Krinata's old freefall phobia lanced through her linkages, infecting them all and injecting a new panic into the hivemaster. Without warning the hivemaster twisted and dove at Threntisn.

The last Jindigar knew, the Historian disappeared into the shifting images of the hivemaster and down the shaft of the cornucopia of hive-memory, as Jindigar had once fallen with Krinata.

And he and Krinata were falling, too, the Oliat they shared clustered around them, enmeshed in Krinata's unbalanced linkages. The meta-links joining the dual-Oliat to the Archive and hivemaster shimmered with energy that now drained back from the higher-potential of the Archive, dimming the Archive's structure. And that draining seemed to be under deliberate control. *Threntisn is doing that—but how?*

The meta-link stretched and stretched, soaking up more and more energy. Finally it gave—not with the expected lashing snap but gently—Dissolved away by the intruding energy,

taking the excruciating deep shaleiliu hum—and all the pain— with it.

Without transition Jindigar found himself aware of his body once more, chilled through, head aching as if his brain were too big for his skull. He was sprawled awkwardly on the dirt-smeared floor of the lab. Krinata's aching limbs and painful returning circulation wrung groans from all the others of the Oliat. None of them were quite certain which Oliat they held Office in. But they all lived.

In the split instant Jindigar had to assess that and note that the hivebinders were now grouped in ranks five deep on the other side of the embers of the campfire, the fullsong hit them with redoubled intensity, a

paean of rejoicing carried on a rising wave of worldcircle energies thrumming with the seductive overtones of Dushaun, home, and love.

In the fullsong Jindigar could hear the young voices of his children as they would sing to the accompaniment of his whale. He could feel the tender warmth flooding him as Darllanyu would gaze at their firstborn, as he had seen Storm tending his child. Jindigar yearned for the pride of sheltering his new family, so they could grow stronger and wiser than he. He felt Darllanyu's response to his need echoing back at him through his own Oliat's link to her. And then they shared the cold knowledge that they had taken pensone.

Sobered, Jindigar realized that the hivemaster had returned the worldcircle energies, the source of ecstasy, to the hive-binders, and now they were lost in the urges common to all life, determined to share their precious delight with everyone.

Fighting the lure of the fullsong, Jindigar pried his eyes' open and blinked against oddly doubled vision as he searched for Threntisn. He remembered that moment of total astonishment as Threntisn had stared directly out of his Archive's Gate and into the full, onrushing current of the worldcircle energies—just exactly as a Priest was exposed to it at induction.

//Jindigar, he's not dead!// Krinata dragged herself toward Threntisn, who was still sprawled beside the Rustlemother.

She lay unmoving, but the Historian stirred slightly at Krinata's approach.

Krinata knelt and put out one narrow five-fingered hand but didn't dare try shaking him, not sure what the contact might do to the Oliat—or to the Historian.

//Threntisn!//

Through the thickening veil of the fullsong Jindigar heard Krinata's voice harmonizing with his own as they both spoke— she as his Outreach, and he as hers. *This can't last.* "//Threntisn!//" repeated Jindigar, getting his feet under him, trying to ignore the insistent warmth spreading from glands awakened by the fullsong. *The pensone is gone.* He stepped around the whale the hivebinders had abandoned and went toward Krinata, unsurprised at how weak he felt.

Threntisn moaned, feeling for his head as if not sure it was still there. He was covered with dozens of ugly clots of blood where the hivebinders had stung him. He sat up, squinting to focus his eyes. With difficulty he identified Krinata. "Jindigar's?"

Jindigar wasn't quite sure what to answer as he hunkered down next to Threntisn. He found himself replying as Krinata's Outreach, "//We didn't think you'd survive!//"

Threntisn looked from one to the other, comprehension dawning. Then his eyes traveled to the ranks of hivebinders undulating in unison behind them, and he rubbed his ears, closed his eyes, and said with suppressed panic, "Jindigar—I can hear them!"

Jindigar probed with Oliat perception. "//It's a link—a bond, Threntisn. Not a meta-link but more like an Oliat duad subform bond.//" At least Threntisn wasn't physically responsive to the fullsong. He was still much too far from Renewal to be troubled. "//But—how can a Historian... Threntisn, you've become an Aliom Priest!//"

Threntisn's eyes flashed open but went unfocused in that typical Historian's gaze as he checked the Archive. "I've got—the Whole Memory of the hive in the Archive! But, Jindigar—"

they've got the Archive too. That's how—but this isn't possible—it's not..."

Suddenly the Historian's gaze slid past Jindigar. Jindigar turned and found Cyrus swaying in the doorway of the treatment room, clutching the cowl of the airtight seal. Threntisn grinned human-fashion, with all the ease of an Emulator, and announced as if he'd just come from a high-level diplomatic conference with the hive, "The hive sees you have recovered. They're going to let me cure the Rustlemother! Come, Cyrus, I'll need your help." Glancing down at the comatose form of the Rustlemother, he retrieved the blood sampler he had filled before the hivebinders stung him and added, "We must hurry."

The Outrider flipped his hair back, fingered his stubbled chin, and gazed at the lab with dismay. Then, on rubbery legs, he padded across the floor to the campfire.

Jindigar wasn't sure if he was responding to Threntisn's plea for help, or if he was arrowing toward Krinata, influenced by the hivebinders' inaudible but compelling song.

Absently helping Threntisn to his feet, Cyrus said over his shoulder toward Krinata, who was still kneeling between Threntisn and the Rustlemother, "Jindigar's, should I go with Threntisn or am I on duty?" Then his eyes fixed on Krinata, and something different about her awakened a blaze of hope. He bent as if to cup her shoulders in his hands, to finally take possession of his wife, but Outrider training held. He asked, "Arc you Dissolved? Is it over?" It didn't take an Emulator to see that the human was affected by the hivebinders' fullsong whether he could hear it or not.

Krinata could find no words, but Jindigar rose and answered through her, "//We are still bound.//" The two Oliats, like the hive and the Archive, were linked, interlinked, and cross-linked by such a tangled webbing that Jindigar could see no way out for them.

Krinata turned to look up at Jindigar, and all her longing for Cyrus sharpened by the fullsong poured through the link and out along the double pattern of linkages into all the officers. Darllanyu moaned.

Both sets of Oliat linkages thrummed deeply to the hive's fullsong, blotting out Threntisn's voice explaining to Cyrus what had happened as he dragged the human away toward the lab room.

On a surge of fullsong too powerful to resist Jindigar became lost in Krinata's large black eyes, swimming in her pain, pierced to his core by her dashed hopes. Shame overwhelmed him. He, who had been regarded as prince of a whole species, had not fulfilled his promise to Cyrus, while Cyrus, lord of a minor Territory, and Krinata, Lady of Zavaronne, had lived up to their titles.

Her face, turned up to him, was white against the black of her gracefully swaying hair. Her face was a work of art, her body a statement carved from health and vigor strengthened by adversity. Her proportions bespoke subtle harmonies. Her movements flowed from some secret fastness beyond mortal knowledge.

From that fastness she had looked gently into his soul and granted him absolution for the worst of all crimes.

Shivering with awe before a greatness he could never attain, Jindigar sank to his knees before her, able only to efface himself and hope to be granted the touch that would be life itself.

*It's the fullsong.* He had never felt this way except at the threshold of his wedding trial.

He swallowed, acutely aware of the sensitized tissues of his throat and neck, the glands throbbing mercilessly. Without volition his hand drifted toward Krinata's cheek. //Takora—I wanted you—I always hoped one day—//

She shied from his touch, hardly letting his fingers brush her lips. //It can't be, now—it can never be.// Her eyes shifted toward Darllanyu, bringing several ambiguous linkages into play. Under the stimulation of the fullsong each officer responded, setting both networks of linkages shimmering, blurring into one another. Jindigar was as aware of the delicious tremor pulling Darllanyu toward him, as he was of Llistyien and Venlagar reaching for one another, and Zannesu stroking Trinarvil's throat in plaintive question, and Trinarvil agreeing, //I will teach you, youngster, how this is done. And then— we will see.//

Jindigar curled his fingers into his palm, hoping the pain from the tender, developing nail roots would break him out of it, but still he could not take his eyes off Krinata. He swallowed again, finding the unmistakable taste of arousal seeping from long-unused glands. The fascination of that ache echoed in five other Dushau throats grew to override all thought of the Oliat's predicament. Jindigar reveled in the deft female touches easing two other throats over that first, delectably painful, stretching.

Darllanyu was ready. He had only to reach for her. Her lingers had nursed him through that very first Renewal onset when there had been real pain that had dashed arousal after arousal to nothing. He would not put her through that again. His fingers yearned to show her what they had learned since that first crude eagerness. But the very thought of Dar's touch set the linkages to wobbling unpleasantly, driving his eyes back to Krinata; where they rested and feasted hungrily, the linkages singing a promise.

His breath came in short bursts, in sync with the human pattern. He felt her aching marvelously in a very different place. But it was very much the same sensation, a body's way of demanding, *Join with me.*

All at once he needed her as he had never needed another in all his life. And it was mutual. The forces loose in the Oliat drove them together, urge upon urge, wave upon wave, insisting that the two Centers must become one.

Krinata's human fingers floated to his fisted hand and hesitated. Jindigar's diaphragm locked as he waited for the touch of human skin. With exceptional sensitivity she uncurled his lingers, her touch on his swollen nail beds unbelievably intimate. Then she cradled her cheek in the palm of his hand, positioning his longest finger at the point under her jaw where the most sensitive female gland should be, and a single tear leaked from her eye. //I love you too. I always have.//

His response came from his whole body, his skin raising in tiny bumps, straining for contact. His hands slid down around her throat—but there was nothing there except corded muscle and stiff tendons. He knew there was no receiving tube under her tongue, either. He would only hurt her terribly if he let his hungry lips join hers, for he could not stop the reflexes now.

//Jindigar—// prompted Darllanyu, ready to take him and extract all that his glands could produce.

He had promised her. He had lit the marriage flame for her. He would not—did not want to—forsake Darllanyu. But he could not tear his gaze from Krinata. The Oliat would not let him tear his gaze from Krinata. //Dar... // It came out as half groan, half plea.

Darllanyu's seven-fingered hands reached for his neck from behind. The filaments of her skin inserted themselves among the filaments of his skin, and she held the touch at that distance, seductively stimulating, infinitely promising.

The special warmth spread in waves from every gland she stroked, and through the linkages he felt Darllanyu's glands responding and knew the incomparable sensation of mutual gratification. He wanted to turn and stroke her throat, lock his mouth over hers and let it finally happen, but he could not break away from Krinata. It was as if the very linkages had tuned to the fullsong, rich with overtones of the worldcircle and Dushaun, hot, urgent, and demanding that they satisfy each other.

Krinata was perfectly still with his hands around her neck, his fingers brushing her rubbery skin. Her eyes were half lidded, her lips parted in the barest hint of a Dushau woman's invitation. The round humps of her mammary glands strained her shirt as she gasped with each of his movements. And with each aching wave through her body, oddly enough, her linkages came closer into balance, the strain on the dual-Oliat lessened. And faintly—oh, so faintly—under the fullsong came the shaleiliu hum, not the deep, grinding bass the four-way meta-Oliat had produced but the higher octave of Jindigar's own Oliat.

That unheard sound tingled through their flesh. Krinata shivered, her skin prickling into little bumps. He knew that in a human it didn't signify the ultimate sexual arousal, but when Jindigar's fingers hesitated, she moaned in protest. Never had any woman meant more to him. Never had any woman's plea—sure been more important to him.

So he didn't flinch when Krinata's left hand rose to the base of his neck, seeking the sensitive spot Takora would know very well. And it was Takora's touch. Relief spread through him, and behind it came a wondrous adoration.

At last he was flung into the upward spiral of final arousal, hardly noticing Dar's fingers freezing at Krinata's boldness. He surrendered to Krinata, barely aware when her tentative touch shifted to a firm, mature search for her own gratification from his responses. He didn't care—he didn't care about anything but that marvelous touch that derived its own pleasure from him.

The Oliat shuddered with him, urging him on. But it was slow, much too slow. The linkages were soaking up most of the energy that should have propelled him into climax. He felt only Krinata's peaking sensitivity, felt the incredible satisfaction her fingers found in touching him—felt Dar's gratification as if Krinata's fingers were her own—felt Takora joining them, making them whole.

Dar's body came against him from behind, her cheek against the side of his head, her hands guiding Krinata's knowledge-ably, needing him to go on as much as he needed it, but he could get no farther. None of them could tolerate this anymore.

He had to end it. He sought to wrench free and turn to Dar, but he only managed to move his hand from Krinata's cheek to Dar's fingers. Dar's mouth brushed his cheek.

And that was finally enough. His tongue tensed against the roof of his mouth, and his jaw fell open to release the bony tubes thrusting themselves upward from the floor of his mouth in the most powerful and satisfying reflex. He wanted Darllanyu with the perfectly startling need of the very first full arousal.

Yet he could not take his hands off Krinata, and he was afraid he'd forget, in the final moment, to avoid strangling her. It had been a long time since Ontarrah.

The three of them and the other two couples behind them hung at full extension, throbbing with primal need, yet not culminating, for all the energy drained into the linkages, raising their vibration. The volume of the hum escalated with every straining urge toward fulfillment.

//Jindigar!// sobbed Darllanyu, unable to take it anymore. //To me! You must.// Her frustration ate at him as much as his Own, and as much as Krinata's.

All at once it came to him. Krinata held the key to their release. *She*, the other Center, was barely aroused. She enjoyed arousing him, but now she craved more from him than his touch on her neck could give her. Shaking with unresolved tension, Jindigar forced his hands to slide downward, closing his eyes to concentrate on the human sensations through the linkages, trying to convince his hands to seek lower for her sensitive places. He had to do it. He was aflame with a need to feel her responding to him.

Darllanyu's whimper of strangled protest lanced sharply through him. *She* needed his touch—and he needed more than that from her. But if he turned to Dar, it would send the Oliat into wild oscillations and disruption as it had when they'd called Eithlarin back.

He let his hands cup Krinata's breasts and felt the linkages respond, smoothly heading for Dissolution. He focused on her pleasure to swamp out his physical revulsion. She couldn't help what sort of body she had. He wanted his hands to tell her that her body was as beautiful as she was, as treasured as she was. She was everything that a woman should be.

His hands remembered the skills they'd learned to please Ontarrah, and without volition they dropped lower and lower. Her face tilted up to him, mouth open, inviting as she became wholly caught up in what he was doing. And it felt so good to do it to her.

The linkages fairly hummed with new energies, new tones and undertones, adding to the complex shaleiliu chord.

Suddenly the linkages tapped into the worldcircle directly. In that same moment both sets of linkages expanded to the ends of time, then contracted toward Jindigar and Krinata, compressing them together. For eternity all he knew—all any of them knew—was that at last, at long, long last, the intolerable tension gripped tighter, and then ever tighter, so good, so very, very good. In sudden, swift, satisfying rhythm, it broke into wave after wave of the delicious, anticipated catharsis.

They gave themselves to it gratefully, Jindigar glad he had lived to enjoy the end of Renewal onset once more.

But curiously he was still alive, as if something held him tight. There was still that nagging, doubling sensation, and the subliminal impression of a tiny white point embedded somewhere in his consciousness.

Melting onto the dirt floor, Jindigar buried his face in his hands, the taste of human saliva bright on his lips. The interior of his mouth rearranged itself with dismaying swiftness. He was dimly aware from the lack of a particular taste that the catharsis had not been the slightest bit physical. Yet, impossibly, he felt drained, at peace, specifically in the way he had not felt since last Renewal.

Probing as for a sore tooth, he found that the linkages were gone. And he was still alive. It took a considerable while for that to sink in.

Worried about Krinata, he struggled to focus his eyes and found Threntisn injecting the Rustlemother with serum. His other officers were picking themselves up, arranging their clothing and brushing off dirt, marveling to each other that they had all survived. They were totally inconspicuous among the dozens of Natives packed densely all around them. Some of them were still very involved in one another, while others were matter-of-factly preparing to return to work.

In front of Jindigar Cyrus knelt and pulled Krinata against him. She was crying and laughing simultaneously, and there was no blood on her mouth, *I didn't hurt her*.

Cyrus's eyes met Jindigar's, and the human gave a tentative smile. But his eyes betrayed pain. How much had Cyrus seen? Would he ever understand?

Jindigar turned to scoop Dar up beside him, at last able to place his hand on her neck—where it belonged. Very deliberately, in Cyrus's sight, he raised Dar's face to his and covered her mouth with his own, putting all his long-denied yearning for her into the contact, trying to let it explain that he had not chosen Krinata—and never would. The touch didn't have the import it would have carried but a moment ago, for she, too, was relaxed now. But neither did her mouth taste of satisfaction.



*None of us had a physical release?* The curiosity faded more rapidly than he could form the thought. All that mattered *was* the surge of mutual response engulfing them. Whatever release they had shared wouldn't last long. Soon they could enjoy each other fully. And in private.

Before they could get too involved, Jindigar broke away and told Cyrus, with the greatest sense of satisfaction that he had ever known at fulfilling a vow, "Krinata's yours now. Just as I promised. It's not that I don't care for her, Cyrus. Don't ever think that I did—what I did—without caring for her. She is precious to me beyond all measure—" To Krinata he added the final words of the Aliom divorce celebration, "I'll never stop caring."

She met his gaze levelly. When she intoned solemnly, "Through all of what must yet come, what has been will be as a flame extinguished," he knew she recognized his words.

Everything that they'd ever meant to each other passed between them again. And somehow he knew they, were each thinking how very beautiful it was to give an ex-spouse into the keeping *of* such a fine new mate.

"I don't think I like it," said Cyrus, "when you look at her like that."

Jindigar confessed, "I was thinking how very, very beautiful your woman is. But, Cyrus, I was thinking *your* woman."

He turned to walk Darllanyu toward the door, more eager by the moment to reach the Renewal compound to rekindle their marriage flame. But Dar pulled back toward the human couple. "Wait---I want to say good-bye."

As she stepped back toward them she pulled her gold armband off. Handing it to Krinata, she said, "I want you to have this. It's been very precious to me for a very long time. Takora— understands."

Krinata held it as if it were a fragile egg. "Oh, no—Dar— you it isn't—isn't it the First Renewal gift Jindigar...?" Her eyes went to Jindigar, and he nodded, wondering how she knew. She shoved it back at Dar. "I can't, really...."

Dar put her hands behind her back. "It's yours, because you have given me another First Renewal—a gift too precious to even speak of." She turned away, then hesitated, adding, "Krinata, you've got to explain it to Cyrus—all of it. He really has a right to understand. And don't forget—my *zunre* are always welcome in my home." Then she came toward Jindigar, and his relief at that movement was incredible.

Threntisn covered the Rustlemother with a blanket and rose to follow Dar to the door. "Jindigar—wait. There's something something about you—Darllanyu, may I?" He gestured imperatively, signaling Jindigar to move aside as if he were tin apprentice caught doing something naughty.

Jindigar, feeling too mellow to protest, went, grateful that at last he seemed to be over the emotional turbulence of onset. Perhaps now he could get on with the business of being their Active Priest and putting the Temple in order for the training of new Oliat. And soon there would be children to teach.

Threntisn cupped his palms around the edges of Jindigar's eyes and peered into them. Out of nowhere there came a peculiar response that made Jindigar flinch.

"Hold still!" demanded Threntisn, his voice sounding doubled.

And it came again, raw, discordant, Jindigar wrenched his gaze aside and turned away, protesting, "Don't—what are you doing?"

Threntisn stared at Jindigar, awe on his face and wonder in his voice. "Are you hearing and seeing double?"

"So what? After what we've been through I'm not surprised."

"Close your eyes."

Trinarvil pulled Zannesu over to watch Threntisn's examination, medical interest overcoming Renewal momentarily.

Exasperated but humoring the Historian, Jindigar closed his eyes.

"Do you sense a bright dot or a spot of light floating off behind your vision somewhere?"

"Well, yes—Threntisn, it may be centuries before we understand what happened to us—it violated all kinds of theory. If we suffer a few nervous aberrations for a while, that's a small price to pay for our lives. Renewal will heal it all. Don't worry."

"Renewal won't heal this," returned the Historian ominously. "Jindigar, that light is a new Archive's Eye, just opened and not properly sealed and structured yet. That's why you're seeing and hearing double—you don't have the training to handle it."

"Archive's Eye..." repeated Jindigar.

"I don't think you appreciate how rare an event this is," Threntisn went on. "It happens spontaneously maybe once in a hundred generations, and then only to trained Historians who have just given up an Archive. It usually happens only when there's been some great pivotal event to—oh." He looked around at the Natives who were gathering to watch the knot of colonists.

Jindigar put in, "I come from a Historian family. I know what you're saying..... "

"Can you hear them?" Threntisn's eyes flicked back to Jindigar, "Does your Archive pick up any of that?"

"No," denied Jindigar, wanting to deny the whole concept. All he was interested in was Dar and raising a family.

"They're saying that this is not a Historical event at all but an evolutionary one. The longest Whole Memory doesn't reach back to when the last species was added to the hive. Now they've added five new species all at once. We are a new thing—a completely new thing on the face of this planet, a nine-species hive. A new Whole Memory—a really big Whole Memory is required."

Dismay crept over Jindigar as he began to believe. "Threntisn, I can't—I'm a Priest, not a Historian. I told you that once before."

"Yes—but as I recall, you also told me that you would become a Historian when I became a Priest. And according to you, I have."

"Apparently. But I don't have the gift of prophecy. That's Trinarvil's—"

He traded glances with the Healer. "You *did* predict this, Jindigar. We've all heard you say it any number of times when the Historians' persistence annoyed you."

"I'll train you to erect the Archive around your Eye," offered Threntisn, "if you'll train me to handle this duad."

Jindigar surveyed the Natives silently watching them. Through Threntisn's link to the hive-mind they all understood what was going on in their hiveheart. Jindigar agreed to the exchange, adding, "It seems that's the nature of this planet, combining disparate types to mutual benefit. If we wish to live here, we must learn the local ordinances of the Laws of Nature."

*But no matter what, I am an Aliom Priest.*

### **About the Author**

Jacqueline Lichtenberg was born in 1942, three months after Pearl Harbor. She grew up in the fifties with all the potentials of nuclear power and all the sf novels of the horrors of mutation. With a degree in chemistry from the University of California at Berkeley, she worked abroad for a while, then got married and settled down to raise children and write sf novels.

She won early acclaim for her *Star Trek* fan fiction, the Kraith Series, with a nomination for the Best Fan Writer Hugo, and was primary author of the Bantam paperback, *Star Trek Lives!* as well as the founder of the Star Trek Welcommittee.

At the same time she was selling stories in an sf universe of her own, Sime/Gen. The second novel to be published, *Unto Zeor, Forever*, won the 1978 Galaxy Award for spirituality in science fiction. In addition to the three fan-originated amateur magazines dedicated to Sime/Gen, there are now eight novels in the universe, three co-authored with Jean Lorrh, and one Jean Lorrh original. Jacqueline plans many more books in this universe.

Her FIRST LIFEWAVE universe was the result of editorial interest in something other than Sime/Gen, as was the current DUSHAU TRILOGY, and she would like to work in several other universes, as well as trying her hand at television writing.

She is the winner of the 1985 Romantic Times Award for Best Science Fiction Writer and says, "I enjoy blending romance with a touch of the occult and a strong science motif to ask hard questions about life's most basic relationships."

Currently, she runs the Science Fiction Writers of America Speakers' Bureau, and is the one to contact to hire an sf writer to lecture to a group. In her spare time she gives tarot and writing workshops, attends *Star Trek* and sf conventions, and pursues studies in subjects such as vampires, Arthurian legend, astrology, *Star Trek*, and *Doctor Who*. She serves on the Board of Directors of the North American Time Festivals, Inc., which put on *Doctor Who* conventions, but she has had to put aside many fan activities in order to keep up with her book contracts.