

# PSIREN

By Joan D. Vinge

Scanned & Proofed By MadMaxAU

\* \* \* \*

I don't know why she came that evening. Maybe it was for the reasons she gave me, maybe not. If I'd known her mind the way I used to, when I was really a telepath, maybe everything would have come out differently.

But I might as well have been a blind man, falling over furniture in silent rooms, with just glimmers of gray to show me there was still a world outside my own head. And so I didn't even know she was there until I heard her voice, "Knock knock." Jule never used the stairs, so I never heard her coming. She didn't need to. She'd just be there, like some nightwisp who'd come to grant you a few wishes. I didn't mind that she came in first and knocked afterwards; we'd shared too much for that.

I climbed down from the sleeping platform high up under a constellation of ceiling cracks. "How're you?" There was a time when I wouldn't have needed to ask.

"Lonely." She smiled, that quirky, half-sad smile. I stared at her, my eyes registering her for my mind because my mind couldn't see her. Black hair falling to her waist, gray eyes deeper than the night; the bird's nest of shawls and soft formless overshirts wrapping her long thin body. Protection . . . like mind layers. At least they were in bright colors now, pinks and purples and blues instead of the dead black she'd worn when I first met her. She was pushing thirty standards, had more than ten years on me, but she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Because I'd seen her from the inside. Nothing would ever change the feeling I had for her—not the future, not the past, not the fact that she was married to another man.

"Doc will be back in a couple of days."

"I know, Cat." Her forehead pinched; she was angry—at herself, for letting need show.

"Somebody's got to mind the mindreaders," I said. "And you're better at it than he is." She glanced at me, surprised and questioning. "I remember how your mind works," I shrugged. "So does Doc. You've got the empathy, he's got credentials. So he hustles the cause, you hold the fort." *And I sit up here pretending to be one of his healers, instead of one of the cripples.* "You're lucky you miss him

. . . and so's he." I moved two steps to the window set in the thick slab of wall. Looking out I saw the building straight across the alley staring back at me, black ancient eyes of glass sunk deep in its sagging face. I listened to the groans and sighs of the one we stood in; the real voice of buried Oldcity, not the distant music in the streets. I refocused on my own reflection, a ghost trapped inside the grimy pane—dark skin, pale curly hair, green eyes with pupils that were vertical slits; a face that made people uneasy. I looked away from it.

"Sometimes it feels like the Center is becoming my whole life, consuming me," Jule was saying. "I need to break away for a while and let my mind uncoil. I wondered if maybe you felt that way too." She wondered: Jule, who was an empath, who knew how everyone felt; who *knew*, who didn't just guess. Everyone but me.

It wasn't just the Center that was consuming me, even though I spent all my time here watching over it. It was the rotting emptiness of my mind. "I don't have anything to uncoil."

She looked at me as though she'd expected to hear that. But she only said, "You have a body. You ought to let that out of here once in a while."

"And do what?" I tried to make it sound interested.

"Go out into Oldcity, see the parts I've never seen . . . parts you know."

My skin prickled. "You don't want to do that."

"Prove it."

"Damn it, Jule, it ain't—*isn't* anything you want to see. Or anything I want to see again."

She nodded, folding her arms, drawing herself in. "All right. Then can you take me somewhere I do want to see? Give me a fresh perspective for a few hours, Cat."

I dropped the print I'd been reading onto the windowsill. "Sure. Why not?"

She picked it up as I moved away, looked at the title. "CORPORATE STRUCTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEDERATION TRANSPORT AUTHORITY." She looked back at me, half smiling.

"Not bad for a former illiterate'?" I said. She blushed. She was the one who'd taught me to read and write. I picked up my jacket from a corner of the floor. *Only a year ago. A lifetime. Forever.* "You know something?"

She raised her eyebrows.

“Stupidity is easier.”

She laughed. We went down the creaking stairs, through the silent rooms of the Center for Psionic Research, and out into the street.

The streets of Oldcity were bright and dark: the bars and gambling places and whorehouses were lit up like lanterns; the heavy glass pavements were inlaid with lights that followed you wherever you walked, down the narrow alleyways between the walls of buildings almost as old as time. None of the light was real light, it was all artificial. Only the darkness was real.

Oldcity was the core, the heart of the new city called Quarro, the largest city on the world Ardattee. Every combine holding on Ardattee had grown fat when the Crab Nebula opened up and made it the gateway to the Colonies. Then the Federation Transport Authority moved its information storage here and picked Quarro to set it down in, and Quarro became the largest cityport on the planet by a hundred times. Earth atrophied, and Ardattee became the trade center of the Human Federation, the economic center, the cultural center. And somewhere along the way someone had decided that the old, tired colonial town was historic, and ought to be preserved.

But Quarro was built on a thumb-shaped peninsula between a harbor and the sea; there was only so much land, and the new city kept growing, feeding on open space, always needing more—until it began to eat up the space above the old city, burying it alive in a tomb of progress. The grumbling, dripping, tangled guts of someone else’s palaces in the air shut Oldcity off from the sky, and no one lived there any more who had any choice. Only the dregs, the losers and the users. It was a place where the ones who wouldn’t be caught dead living there came to feed off the ones who couldn’t escape.

I walked with Jule through the wormhole streets that tendriled in toward Godshouse Circle, the one place in Oldcity where you could still see the sky. For years I’d thought the sky was solid, like a lid, and at night they turned the sun off. I didn’t mention it, as we pushed our way through the Circle’s evening crowds of beggars and jugglers and staggering burnouts. But I looked up at the sky, a deep, unreachable indigo; down again at the golden people slumming and the hungry shadows drifting beside them, behind them, a hand quicker than the eye in and out of a pocket, a pouch, a fold. I felt my own fingers flexing, and my heartbeat quickening.

I pushed my hands into my jacket pockets, made fists of them. Once a Cityboy, always a Cityboy...I felt Oldcity’s heavy rhythms stir my blood, make dark magic in my head; my body filling with the hunger of it. Hot with life, cold as death, raw like a wound, it left its scars on your flesh and its brand on your soul. A hollow-eyed dealer was sliding between us, selling the kind of dreams that don’t

come true in a voice like iron grating on cement. *It still shows. They can smell me.* I shoved him away, remembering too many times when it had gone the other way.

I turned off of the Circle into another street, not saying anything; my face stiff, my mind clenched, hardly aware of Jule beside me. The dark, decaying building fronts faded behind walls of illusion: Showers of gold that melted through your hands, blizzards of pleasure and sudden prickles of pain, fluorescent holo-flesh blossoming like the flowers of some alien jungle. The heart of the night burst open here in sound that took your sight away, hard and blistering, sensual and yielding, shimmering, pitiless. You could drown in your wildest fantasies right there in the street, and I heard Jule crying out in wonder, joy, disgust, not knowing her own emotions from everyone else's.

But it was all a lie, and I'd lived it too many times, hungry and cold and broke; seen the ones who went through the images, through the doors where the fantasy turned real, and left me standing there—all beauty, all pleasure, all satisfaction running through my hands. Reality was no one's dream in Oldcity. Suddenly I knew why I'd never made this trip, why I'd stayed like a monk in a monastery at the Center since I'd come back here...suddenly I was wondering why the hell I'd done it now.

A hand was on my arm, but Jule was drifting ahead beyond my reach. I turned, wanting to see a stranger; the past looked me straight in the face. The hand ran down my sleeve, a heavy hand with sharp heavy rings; the soft ugly mouth opened, showing me filed teeth. "Dear boy," it said, "you look familiar."

"I don't know you." Panic choked me.

"Boy ..." wounded.

"Get away!" I jerked free, ran on through the phantoms of flesh until I collided with Jule.

She steadied me, staring at me and past me, frightened. (What's wrong?)

"Nothin". It's nothing. I just—" I shook my head, swallowed, "Ghosts."

Without another word she took my arm and pulled me through incense and pearls: The nearest door took our credit rating and fell open, letting us past into the reality. And suddenly there was no floor beneath us, no walls, no ceiling; just an infinity of deepening blue like the evening sky, shot with diamond chips of light tracking away toward an endless horizon. Our feet moved over a yielding surface that didn't exist for my eyes, and with every step my body came closer to the dizzy brink where my mind swayed now. But we reached a low table, with seats like cloud; all around us other cloudsitters watched us walk on air. The sound of their voices, their laughter, was dim and distant. Patternless music flowed into the void, a choir of

spirit voices weaving their conversation into its fabric.

As we settled at the table a slow mist rose, curling between us; I felt it tingling against the skin of my face, rising deeper into my head with every breath. The pungent cold of glissen was in it, along with a flavor I couldn't name, that made my mouth water. You could get arrested for this out on the street. My hands were trembling on the transparent table surface; I watched the trembling ease as the glissen began to make me calm. "What is this place?" I took deeper breaths, letting it work.

"It's called Haven." Jule was still searching the room with her eyes. She sighed, as if her inner sight saw only peace and quiet. She looked back at me. "I thought you needed one."

I smiled, half a grimace, pulling at a curl behind my ear. "I didn't—didn't know it would—come back at me like this. Like ... I don't know." I looked up again. "I've never been in one of these places. Never." My eyes traveled. "Maybe that's the problem. Everything's changed for me, Jule, but I don't believe it. I could *leave Oldcity*—" My hand clenched.

She didn't answer, only looked at me with her storm-colored eyes, until I almost thought I could feel her mind tendrils into mine the way it used to. I felt it soothe me, felt her sharing without question.

"Cat, you heard me, outside."

The way she said it made me say, "What?"

"When I asked you what was wrong, I didn't speak it."

"Yes, you did."

She shook her head. "I never got it out of my mouth; you answered me first."

"But I—" I looked away, back, dizzy with infinity rushing at me. "It—happened? I read your mind? And I didn't even know?" I felt cheated.

She nodded. "That's why it did: because you lost control."

"The first time—" *since I killed a man*, "since we came back from the Colonies. More than a year." *Of living in solitary*... I let my mind reach, trying to feel it: the unfolding, the opening out—

She frowned, straining. "You're cutting me off, Cat. Don't—"

"I'm not trying to!" I hit the table edge; my voice made heads turn. I sank back into my seat. My mind was like a knot.

“Sometimes I’ve felt you let go, for a second; sometimes you almost—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You can’t keep it buried. You’ve got to start facing up to the fact that you are a telepath—”

“Not any more.”

“—and you work with me, with us, helping others like us. You’re making yourself a martyr to problems we’re all trying to face. I want to help you, but you aren’t doing a damn thing to cooperate!” The anger and frustration startled me; I couldn’t feel them.

“It’s not the same!” My own frustration fed on hers. “The rest of them live in a hell made by somebody else, just because the deadheads hate our guts. Nobody else made my hell.”

Jule’s eyes dropped. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I can’t help feeling—responsible for the way things are for you now. It’s just that when I remember what you had—”

“You think I don’t remember?” A silence apart from the music and the room settled on us. I remembered times we’d sat like this in the past, when I was a thief, and she was afraid; before we’d learned to trust each other more than any two human beings had the right to. Before I’d saved her life and Siebeling’s by ending someone else’s—and lost it all. The music and the awareness of unreal distances around us came back to me slowly, as the glissen numbed my memory. “What do you do in this place, anyhow?”

Jule lifted her head, tension still in the half-smiling corners of her mouth. “I don’t know. Meditate?”

I glanced down at the data bracelet covering the old scar on my right wrist. My credit balance had dropped a hundred points. I looked at it again. “Whew. It better be more than sitting on clouds.”

Jule glanced down at her own bracelet; her fist pressed the center of her chest. There must have been a time when a hundred credits didn’t mean anything to her. But that was somewhere in another life, and now whenever she thought of money she thought of the Center first. “I guess you don’t do anything in Oldcity without considering the consequences,” rueful.

I nodded. “That’s your first lesson. The second one is that most of the time you don’t get the chance to think about it.” She started to get up, and I thought

about going out into the street again. “Wait—till we know if there’s anything else. We’re paying for it.”

She didn’t object. She settled back into her seat; we began to talk, but not about what had just happened. The glissen began to make our words slur and our minds wander. After a while the murmuring choir music faded. In the blue distance ahead of me a dark opening appeared like a wormhole from another universe. A figure came through it, walking softly on air to a place in the center of the cloudsitters. “We welcome you to the Haven.” The figure bowed, wrapped in dark folds glittering with stars; I couldn’t tell whether it was male or female, even from the voice. “We hope your time here has been one of tranquility and peace. To further deepen your experience we give you the Dreamweaver, who will open to you the secret places of your soul.”

I glanced at Jule, rolling my eyes; but she sat half turned away, watching the act as though it mattered. The figure raised its arms and folded in on itself, disappearing. The crowd gasped. I jerked, wondering whether we’d seen a teleport. But Jule turned back and said, “Just a projection.”

I shrugged. All done with mirrors. As I sat watching, a light began to fall from above us, a captive star drawn down out of the night. It settled where the projection had been, and as the light faded there was total silence in the room. I waited for more cheap tricks, wondering how they ever got enough of the audience back to this place twice to make it pay.

As the light faded I began to make out another form inside it, a human body. I kept blinking, trying to clear the dazzle out of my eyes. It was a child ... it was a tiny, fragile woman, lost in a shining silver robe. Her arms were bare, hung with bands and bracelets showing colored fire; her skin was no color I’d ever seen before, burnished brass. But her arms were as thin as sticks, and the bones stood out like a scream along their length; her face was a shadowed skull.

Her head twisted like a doll’s head until she was looking toward me, at me alone. The touch of those sunken eyes was a blow. I shut my own eyes, not knowing what I was seeing, afraid to see it. I kept them shut for a long minute.

It was the light—the light playing tricks on me. When I looked at her again there was no ugliness, no suffering in that face. But there was a strangeness—something alien about its flat planes, the coloring, about the way her body fit together. *Alien*. I leaned forward, trying to meet her eyes. She looked at me, and they were green, impossibly, translucently green. Our eyes locked; in my mind I saw her seeing the same eyes, like jewels trapped in the matrix of a face that was too human, my face...

I read confusion, a silent cry in her look. She twisted her head away again, searching the crowd as if she needed a hiding place. But infinity was an illusion; the

audience held her captive with its anticipation. I almost thought she shimmered, began to disappear . . . caught herself, in control again. Jule murmured something across from me, but I didn't listen.

The Dreamweaver put her hands up to her face, but it was only a gesture, a sign of beginning. Something like a sigh moved through the crowd . . . something like a whisper formed in my mind. I shut my eyes again, trying to hear the image clearly: the soft, fragile-colored dream that echoed palely as a ghost in my mind's darkness. I strained toward it, trying to make it clear, to share what made even the blind, deaf, and empty deadheads all around me gape and dream and squirm in their seats.

“Cat. Cat!”

I opened my eyes again, blinking; whispered, “Damn it, Jule—”

Her face twisted with pain. “I want to leave. I have to leave.”

I couldn't focus on her; the echoes wouldn't leave my mind alone, calling, promising—“I can *feel* her, I can almost—”

Jule put her hands to her head, and tears started in the corner of her eyes. “I can't stand it, Cat. Please!”

Laughter rippled across us and through us: the cloudsitters, lost in another world, one I wanted to share so much it hurt.

“It hurts!” Jule gasped.

“Block it, then,” trying to keep my voice down, trying to ignore hers.

And suddenly she was gone. Into the air. “Jule!” The one or two people nearest me jerked and swore. I stared at the empty seat across from me. She'd teleported, she'd left me behind; she'd wanted to get away that much. *Why?* Why would she run from this? But the whispers were smokey and seductive now, I couldn't keep my mind on her, couldn't keep it away from them. . . .

The Dreamweaver held the room inside a spell for what seemed like hours, but wasn't. A part of my own mind felt the passing of time, a dim clock marking seconds to the beating of my heart. My concentration and my need fell inward until I was as lost in seeking as the dreamers around me were lost inside themselves.

But dreams end, and the time came when the mindsong faded like dawn, growing fainter, paler, farther away . . . until all that was left to me was my own mind lying. The light in the room was brightening into sunrise; feeling it through my lids, I opened my eyes. The Dreamweaver was drowning in light until I couldn't look at

her, couldn't see her, felt the light wash me with physical heat— And she was gone. The light imploded, left my eyes dancing with phosphenes. The other cloudsitters began to shake themselves out, murmuring and gesturing toward the empty center. There was no ap-plause, no calling out for more. Dazed by glissen and drugged with wonder, they stood on air and began to drift toward the door.

Someone passed through my line of sight like a rainbow. I caught at his arm without thinking; felt the electric prickle of the charged cloth and let go of it again. He turned to look at me, seeing worn jeans and a leather worker's jacket, the only kind of clothes I felt comfortable in; seeing the plain tight curls of my hair, the half-homely strangeness of my face. He couldn't make me fit in. ... I saw him figure me for some rich eccentric. I realized he was right, in a way, and I grinned. He smiled, a little uncertain.

“Is—uh, is the show always like that?”

He nodded. “But the dreams are always changing.”

“Is there anyone here besides us? I mean, who runs this place? Who owns it? Where are they?”

He shrugged. “I never see anyone. But I've no doubt they watch over us all from the other side of the sky.” He waved vaguely at infinity. His eyes were glassy.

“What about the Dreamweaver? Who is she? Where does she go? I want to ... want to ... thank her.”

He laughed. “She sees into our minds; no doubt she sees our gratitude there. Who knows where she goes, or who she is? It's all a part of her mystery. Knowing too much would spoil it.” He leaned forward, sharing a secret. “Anyway, she's not human, you know.”

I felt my face close. “Neither am I.”

He half frowned. “That's not funny.”

“I know.” I looked back again at the emptiness where she'd been; feeling the empty place in my mind. He drifted away. The room was darkening around me, infinity reaching an end, walls closing in with almost a physical pressure. I followed the rest of them out into the street, not thinking about where I was this time, but only about tomorrow—about remembering this place, and coming back to it again, and again.

I walked back to the Center through Oldcity's night without seeing any of it. I climbed the ancient circling stairs at the rear of the quiet building to my room. And as I opened the door I remembered Jule again, remembered her coming here and

how our evening had started; how it had ended, when she left me at the Haven without a goodbye. *Why?* But I wasn't ready yet to go to her and find out. Because it would mean sharing what had happened to me, and I wasn't ready for that; not even with Jule.

I stretched out on my sleep platform, staring at the ceiling. My long-pupiled stranger's eyes tracing every crack, even in the darkness. *Alien.* She was an alien, the Dreamweaver—and that was why she'd been able to reach into every mind in that room at once and start them all into fantasies. Why she'd even been able to crack the tomb I'd buried my own mind in. No one else I'd met since I'd lost my telepathy had even come close—because I was only half human. The other half was Hydran, like she was, and that half came with Psionic ability that no one I knew could touch. All human psions had some Hydran blood, but in most of them it was generations thin—from the time before humans had decided to hate the only other intelligent race they'd ever encountered.

My mother had been Hydran; my mother was dead. My life after that had been living proof that nobody wanted a Hydran halfbreed—until I'd met Jule and Siebeling. But even they hadn't been able to make me a telepath again.

And yet the Dreamweaver had looked at me and known, and even holding dozens of other minds, she had made a blind man see.

I rolled onto my stomach, pushing the heels of my hands into my eyes; seeing stars, *God, oh God!* feeling tears. I ground them out. After more than a year working with other psions crippled by human hate, proving to them just by existing that they could be worse off than they were ... to have this happen! To feel alive again, to *feel* the presence of another mind reach into mine. The pain of returning life was the sweetest torture I'd ever known. The Dreamweaver ... I had to find her; had to let her know . . . *let her know* ... a heavy peace began to settle on me as I touched the memory again . . . *find her.* . . .

\* \* \* \*

It was daylight when I opened my eyes again; another artificial day of Oldcity street-lighting. I blinked and squinted in the band of glare that lay across my face; sat up, feeling excitement hot and sudden in my chest as I remembered. I tried to remember how long it had been since I'd felt anything but a dim, tired ache, morning after morning. I pulled on a clean smock over my jeans and went downstairs.

I'd overslept. Jule was already there, passing out hot drinks to the day's first handful of miserable-looking psions who'd come for their ration of human contact—something I should have been doing for her. She jerked as I came up beside her, catching her by surprise. I took the drinks out of her hands, keeping a mug of bitter-root for myself. "Sorry. Why didn't you call me?"

She looked at me with an expression I couldn't read. "I didn't know you were here."

"Jule, I want to take the day off."

Her face pinched. "Cat, not today. It's half crazy around here without Ardan. Mim and Hebreth can't handle it without you."

*The hell they can't.* I opened my mouth to say it, changed my mind. I sighed, and shrugged. "If you need me. ..."

She smiled. The smile stopped. "Yes, I want to talk about last night. Later. ..."

I nodded and went back to work. The morning passed in a haze of going through the motions, setting up control exercises, watching them happen, listening to a new day's complaints from the 'paths and 'ports and teeks who were trying to come to terms with the freak mind talents that were tearing up their lives.

And then I was alone with Jule in Siebeling's broom-closet office, sitting on the corner of his perfectly organized desk and drinking soup. I watched Jule sipping at her own cup, sitting in his chair; watched the kinetic sculpture on his desk, afraid to let my mind focus. The sculpture was lifeless, nothing more than a tangle of metal without Siebeling here to make it dance with his mind the way he did. You could tell what sort of mood he was in by what it was doing.

"Last night ..." Jule said finally.

"Why did you leave?" The words sounded hard.

She leaned back, the chair re-formed around her. "Be-cause it was...*painful.*" She bit her lip. "I felt a—"

"It was beautiful! Everyone there, everyone in the room— she made them let her into their minds and love her for it! And she—she—"

"Touched you." Jule nodded.

"Yeah." I looked down.

"The strength of her sending—"

"She's Hydran."

"Yes." Jule's eyes traced my profile. "Even you couldn't resist her."

"You couldn't either." I leaned forward. "But why run away from it? It ought

to make you happy to see a psion in control, strong, proud.”

“She wasn’t in control; she was afraid! She was there out of fear, need, helplessness, compulsion ...” Jule’s knuckles whitened against the cup. “All that and more, inside the pretty lies. Cat, I know what you felt last night, and how much it meant to you. But inside she was screaming, she couldn’t stop it; and I couldn’t listen to it.” Her body shud-dered, and soup spilled.

I lowered my own cup slowly onto the desktop. “I don’t believe it.” But Jule wouldn’t lie—wasn’t lying. I shook my head. “Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then if anybody ever needed our help, she does. But she appears and disappears—how can we reach her?”

“There is a way,” meaning mind to mind. She took a deep breath. “But I can’t face it, Cat. I can’t block her sending. And I’m not even sure she’d listen. There’s something else she needs more.” Her hand moved in an empty circle through the air.

“Does that mean you won’t try?” My hands tightened.

“It means that I want someone else to try. Someone she might respond to, who’s protected from what’s inside her.”

Me. I was the one she meant. There was something I might be able to do that no one else here could. . . .

There was a knock at the door. Jule called, “Come in,” and Mim came in. She looked from Jule to me and back again. Mim was a telepath, a student psi tech; she could have told Jule anything she needed to without ever opening the door. But they did it the hard way, because of me.

“What now, Mim?” Jule looked tired suddenly.

Mim rubbed her hands on her pants, frowning. “There’s a Corpse out front, who wants to speak to Whoever Runs this Freakhouse. He’s going to ask us about corporate crime and using psionics for brainwashing. He’s also scared we’ll rape his mind while he’s here.” Her mouth twitched, her blue-green eyes were as cold as the sea.

“All right: I’ll make him feel like we’re all angels.” Jule pushed her head into her hands, leaning on the desktop. “Corporate Security looking for blood, that’s all we need. Damn it! Why don’t the deadheads leave us alone? . . . Cat, where are you going?” She called after me as I started for the door.

“Hunting.” I pushed past Mim and went out.

\* \* \* \*

I spent the rest of the day, and as much time as I could steal of the days that followed, searching and asking around the Oldcity streets...getting nowhere. I'd known all my life how the information root system grew in Oldcity, thick and tangled; sending shoots up into the light among the shining towers of Quarro. Now I had money to back me, something I'd never had before; a key to Oldcity's hidden doors that had always been closed to me. But still I got nowhere. Whoever controlled the Haven, and the Dreamweaver, wanted it kept a secret.

And meanwhile I went back again and again, like an addict, to drop another hundred credits at the Haven's door and sit on clouds and needles, waiting. Until infinity would open once more and show her to me, let her reach out to me and into me, touching my need. And every night I tried to catch her eyes, complete the circuit, give her something in return—just my name, just my gratitude, *Ask me, ask me for anything*. But there was never an answer, never a sign that she felt anything. Her control was complete, and I was a blind man asking her to let me guide her. I wondered if she laughed at me, somewhere behind the inhuman peace of her face. If she was suffering there was no sign of it. Any suffering was mine, anger and frustration eating at me until it was all I could do not to get up from where I sat night after night and cross the space that separated us like the barrier in my mind. Always knowing that if I ever tried it she'd disappear, and I'd never see her even this way again.

There were other regulars in this place. I got to know them by sight, although none of them ever talked about why they came, or what they felt, sharing the forbidden fruit of telepathy. Some of them were even combine or Transport Authority officials, wearing power and arrogance like their fine upside clothes. And they were all perverts. Most of them probably swore they hated psions when they were back in the daylight; most of them probably did. Jule said they hated psions because they were afraid—and because they wanted what we had. I'd never believed her, until now. You could satisfy any hunger in Oldcity, if you had the price. If you were willing to pay enough, you could even call it entertainment. I tried to find a little pleasure in watching their faces get soft and slack from glissens and psidreams.

And one night, watching, I saw something happen I'd never seen before. At the end of the regular show, after the Dreamweaver had disappeared and the crowd was drifting toward the door, the hologram host came back through the crack in space and caught one of the guests with a word. The man nodded, lighting up like a lottery winner, and followed it into somewhere else. I started after them when I saw them disappear. But as soon as I did infinity went black ahead of me; a soft, clammy wall of nothing was suddenly between me and the place I was trying to reach. I

turned back, disgusted, and went out with the rest.

The lucky winner was back the next night, as if nothing had happened; but he wore a strange smile when he watched the Dreamweaver appear. And a couple of nights later I saw the same thing happen to someone else. Again I tried to follow; again I ran into a soft wall. Somehow, a few of the ones who came here were being chosen for something extra; but no one would tell me what, if I didn't already know. And no matter how often I asked her with my mind, the Dream-weaver never answered me.

\* \* \* \*

Siebeling had come back to the Center, in the meantime. I figured when he finally called me into his office that it would be to tell me what Jule had begun telling me with looks and frowns, if not with words: That I was spending too much time and money and getting nowhere. That maybe I'd taken on something impossible, and was too damn stubborn to admit it. Jule was with him when I entered his office; standing, looking uncomfortable. Just like I felt. "Doc?" I said, making it half a question.

He glanced up at me. His face was the same as ever; only more tired. He was a plain-looking man, and the clothes he wore were even plainer—but there was something about him, a quiet determination that made you pay attention. "Jule told me about your experience with the Dreamweaver. I take it the two of you had very different reactions." He leaned forward; his hazel eyes searched my face.

I nodded, leaning against the closed door, running my fingers along the seams of my smock.

"You want to talk about it?"

"You've heard it all." I glanced at Jule, not able to keep the accusation out of it. She met my eyes; something darker and more confused than resentment was in her own.

"I've heard that the Dreamweaver is Hydran. That for Jule her sendings are a cry of pain. That you can't feel the pain—but you feel something. And so you keep going back for more. True?"

"Yeah." I stared at my feet, at braided straps of scuffed leather. Resentment was pushing hard inside my chest, the sound of his voice taking me back suddenly; making me remember old times, bad times, before we'd seen the inside of each other's minds, and our own.

"Why?"

*What's it to you?* I almost said, almost let my own doubt turn me back into a scared street punk. I took a deep breath and raised my head. "I want to help her. Jule says she needs help—and nobody else wants to try."

"*Can* try," Siebeling said softly. Jule's face was turned away, and I understood a little more.

"Then why do you want me to stop?"

"I didn't say that." Siebeling leaned further across the hard, shiny desk top, and I could see his tension. The kinetic sculpture was tumbling and ringing softly. I remembered his first wife, who'd been Hydran too, who'd died when he wasn't there to help her. "I just want to know what you're getting out of this for yourself." It wasn't an accusation. Only a question.

I shrugged. "I dunno. I ... that is, it's what we're here for. It makes me feel like I have a purpose. A reason. It makes me feel alive—"

"Knowing someone exists who can prove that you are."

"Yeah." I looked down again.

"There's nothing wrong with that. You're only letting her help you." He glanced at the sculpture; it reversed direction. "But what's going to happen if you can't help her? If she won't be helped? Can you let it go, or is this thing an obsession?" I finally began to let myself believe that he only meant what he said.

"I can handle it." I let my hands hang loose at my sides. "If I have to forget her, I will." *But I won't have to.* My fingers twitched.

Siebeling smiled at Jule. She matched the smile without really meaning it, because she knew he wanted her to. I wondered if we were all thinking about his first wife then, and what had happened to her. "Then I don't see any reason not to continue; at least until you've reached a decision. As you say, it's what we're here for." Several kinds of longing were in his voice.

"Thanks." I opened the door and went out, not wanting any of us to have more time to think.

\* \* \* \*

But that night the Corpses came back; three deadheads in matching gray, looking more like businessmen than police. The Transport Authority had taken what had once been separate corporate police forces and made them its own here in Quarro. The Corpse who asked most of the questions was a Transport Special Investigator named Polhemas; his coming in person meant that the matter under investigation was

making a lot of people upside sweat. . . . And it meant that even though Dr. Ardan Siebeling was a teek who didn't try to cover it up he was still Dr. Siebeling, who had a few friends Up There.

But the Corpses were looking for someone who could pick the brains of important officials and researchers and sell what they found to the most interested party. Not just the usual combine political backstabbing, but something with under-world roots. They were looking for psions; and here we were in the middle of Oldcity, right where they'd expect us to be.

We spent hours arguing the truth and our right to exist; the way we'd had to do so many times since we'd begun the Center, and probably would have to do forever. They didn't leave until the time of the Dreamweaver's show was long past. I went up to my room and stayed there staring into the darkness, like a burnout aching for a fix.

And the next night it happened again. Just as we were closing Polhemas showed up, his hired help pushing the door back into my face. This time they'd come to pick on me. They wanted to blame their troubles on the Center, because that was easier than thinking; they were going to pry into the cracks until they could. And I had a record that matched just about anybody's opinion of bad. Jule and Siebeling wouldn't leave me alone for the questioning, which meant that Polhemas was going to give us three times the grief; but I was grateful anyway. We stood together in the office while Polhemas sat in Siebeling's chair, daring someone to object; while he demanded to know what I was doing here, what I was *really* doing here, what I did in my spare time, whether anybody could prove that, prove I wasn't moonlighting, prove I was really a mental burnout and not a galactic arch-criminal. . . .

Some other time I might have enjoyed watching a Corpse on the wrong track making an ass of himself. But the questioning went on and on, he talked down to and over and through me, while I watched the minutes crawl past up on the wall until I'd missed the Dreamweaver's show again. Until I couldn't sit through one more insulting question, couldn't listen to Jule or Siebeling make one more soft answer in my place—

I pushed away from the wall, “Listen, Polhemas, maybe you never get sick of this shit, but I do. So I've got a record: if you know that, you know it's been sealed. If you've got anything fresh on me, then do something about it. Otherwise, try a different datafile. I've got a Corpse commendation on record too—just like they do,” nodding at Siebeling and Jule. Just saying it made me stronger. “That means I don't have to—”

“Shut up, freak,” one of the other Corpses said.

Polhemas glared at him. “Is that true?” He asked Siebeling the question.

Siebeling nodded, with a smile only I could see in the corners of his mouth. Once we'd worked together for the Federation—been used by it—against a psion renegade who kept slipping through its hands. We'd stopped him; that was how I'd learned what I could really do with my mind. I'd killed him . . . and that was how I'd lost it all. "Even we have served justice in our small way." Siebeling said. His smile said we were still waiting for justice to give us some-thing in return.

Polhemas glared at Siebeling then and back at me. "I don't like your attitude."

I opened my mouth, saw Jule stiffen. I closed it again; watched the sculpture clattering on Siebeling's desk. "The matter isn't closed. I may still close this place down before it is." Polhemas gestured his men into line and went out into the Oldcity night.

"He knew about the commendations," Jule said finally. "There was no surprise in his mind ... he knew all about us before he came here. But it didn't matter to him."

Siebeling grunted in disgust.

I looked up at the time again, and didn't say anything.

The third day was business as usual; I went through the motions, counting the hours until the Center closed and the Haven opened. But then Jule was beside me, her face drawn with a strange tension, as if she were holding her breath. "Cat, there's someone here to see you."

I followed her out to the front reception area, holding my own breath; somehow knowing without knowing who it was I'd see there.

The Dreamweaver stood near the entrance, melting into the dark-beamed wall while the Center's regulars circled past, some of them not even seeing her, some of them staring and edging away as though they were seeing a crazy woman. My skin prickled. One of the telepaths across the room started to moan; Hebreth pulled him through into another room and closed the door. Jule's face was rigid when I glanced at her.

But I didn't feel anything except hope swelling inside me; didn't see anything but a tiny frightened woman holding herself together with her arms. She wore a loose cowled smock and pants, rich cloth, all in brown. Her hair that had been a haze of spun gold was buried under a heavy beaded net. Only her face, the color of burnished brass, showed her alienness. Her eyes were waiting for mine, as green as emeralds.

We stood face to face at last, and suddenly my mouth was too dry for words.

I nodded.

“This is Cat,” Jule said, because something had to be said. She caught my eye, asked me, begged me with her look to *Go away, take her away, far away from here please—*

“What are you doing here?” I got the words out at last.

The Dreamweaver kept her eyes on my face, hugging herself, as if it was all she could do to hold herself here. “You didn’t come. Twice.”

I felt myself blush, hot and sudden. “I—I couldn’t. I wanted to, but I couldn’t. I would’ve come tonight.”

She blinked, her arms wrapping her harder. “Truly?”

I nodded again. Jule turned and walked away too quickly. “That’s why you came here? How did you know—how did you find me?”

“You told me. Every night I heard you. Showing your self to me, showing this place. Saying, ‘Come, come please’—”

“You heard.” I swallowed a hard knot of joy. “I—listen—I mean, do you want to go somewhere? Somewhere we can—talk?” *But talking is so hard, useless, when two minds can share the space of one and you only have to know.* “Some-where else, quiet, away from here.” I waved a hand, wishing that somehow I could make the whole Center disappear.

“Yes.” Her face eased and turned eager to be gone all at once.

“Is there a place—?”

“Yes,” almost impatiently. She led me outside and along the street to a cab caller. One of the upside bubbles was drift-ing toward us over the crowds almost before the silence started to make me feel like a fool. We got in, she said, “Hanging Gardens” into the speaker. I felt something I couldn’t name, that almost choked me. We were going up—out of Oldcity, into Quarro. I’d never been upside in all the time I’d worked at the Center—hardly been more than a kilometer from the place itself, even here in Oldcity. I swallowed and swallowed again, as the cab carried us in toward Godshouse Circle and then rode an invisible updraft into the light of day, the real world. The air brightened around us as the shadowed, twisted underside of the city fell behind and below. The air got sweeter, clearing the stench of a thousand different pollutants out of my lungs. I only knew them now by the fact that they were gone. The corporate crown of Quarro shone around us, the silvered, gilded, blued towers mirroring endlessly flowing images of more reflecting more and somewhere the sky caught up in it, bluer-on-blue and cloud-softened. I thought about the first

time I'd seen the city I'd spent my whole life inside of, out the window of a Corpse flyer, under arrest . . . not even two years ago.

The cab set us down again almost before I'd finished the thought; the Hanging Gardens were above Godshouse Circle, like the rim of a well whose waters had gone bad. We climbed out; the cab docked me for the whole fare, and I realized that she wasn't even wearing a data bracelet. If I hadn't had mine on no cab would have taken us up from Oldcity.

The gardens rose and dropped away on all sides of us; manmade tiers of living land growing, flowering, spreading, shading. Islands in the sky, worlds-in-a-bottle, each of them a living miniature of a homeworld somewhere in the Federa-tion. I followed the Dreamweaver along the curving walk-ways that spiralled through the air between one suspended island and another. The spring breeze was sharp and biting, the arch of sky above us was bruised with purple clouds. There weren't many other walkers on the paths.

Her silence began to get on my nerves until I remembered that a Hydran didn't need the useless small talk humans needed to bridge the emptiness between them. Words were an emphasis, or an afterthought—the contact was already, al-ways, there. Knowing she didn't need the words when I did didn't make it easier. But she seemed to be moving toward something, not just moving for its own sake, and so I kept my words and my thoughts to myself.

We came out at last in a garden where the green of tendrils and crescent leaves was shot with veins of silver, the wind making them shimmer, fade, brighten as though reality was something always just beyond the limit of my eyes. I looked back at the Dreamweaver, seeing that she'd reached the right place at last. *The right place* . . . because there was something of this place in her, about her, something not-quite-seen.

“Your homeworld,” I said. My own voice startled me. “A piece of it. Koss Tefirah,” squinting at the plaque beneath a silver-skinned treeshrub.

She nodded. She sat down on a low bench sculptured out of stone, touching the crystal-flecked surface with copper-gold hands.

I stood a minute longer watching her, thinking about how small she looked, how fragile, cupped in the hands of stone; how much like a child or a flower or a piece of down carried on the wind. Nothing like Jule, who was tall, taller than I was, thin but with a man's kind of lean strength. . . . And yet everything like Jule on the inside, lighting my darkness and making me see hope again. Sharing a strength with me that she couldn't afford to give, but gave anyway because I needed it. . . . even when her own need, her own fear, were more than she could live with.

I jerked out of the thought, not knowing where it had come from—from what

Jule had said or from something lying deep in my own mind. The Dreamweaver looked at me, her green eyes shifting like the green on every side. I looked down into them, seeing the same healing strength that had held Jule together when the world was pulling her apart. Seeing the strength that had been my mother's once, too, and the eyes... And seeing those things, knowing someone like this should never have to use that kind of strength just to keep herself sane, I knew that I would do anything for her, anything at all— My knees got weak and I sat down on the bench, keeping just out of reach, hers or mine, I wasn't sure. I looked away across the floating glade in a half-blind glance; seeing the swaying boneless treeshrubs and the flowering vines that softened the hard underside of the next tier above us. The air was sweet and musky with the scent of them, like the scent of a woman's skin—I swallowed, wondering if it was her doing this to me, or the place, or if I'd just gone a little crazy hiding from life down in my Oldcity room. "How— how long've you been gone? From Koss Tefirah, I mean?" still not looking at her. *Oh God, can she hear me? Stop it stop it you damn fool—*

"Many years." Her voice was suddenly small and dreary.

"And so you come here, trying to hold onto the memories." I twisted my hands on the stone seat. "Doesn't it make you sad?"

She turned toward me abruptly. "Yes. Yes—" turning away again. "It makes me sad. But still I come ... I don't know why."

"Because you think someday you'll find what you're looking for here. What you lost."

She stared at me, and out of the corner of my eye I could see that she was afraid.

"No. I'm not reading your mind. Just my own." I shrugged. She didn't speak but I knew she was asking. My hands hung onto each other in the space between my knees. "I—I miss a place, a life, a right, a—a—" hating my stupid, clumsy words, "*—belonging. Me, too.*"

"How long are you gone?"

"A long time. A lifetime."

She frowned her confusion. "Where is your home?"

"I don't know." My hands fisted. "Here: Oldcity! I mean, I was born here. I lived my whole life here . . . thinking I was only human, and wondering why people kicked my ass all the time. But I went away, to the Colonies, and I met—some of our relatives. And they made me proud of what I really am—half Hydran." I looked back at her finally, letting her see my eyes that were as green as emeralds, as grass,

as her own. “But that half of my life, I lost it before I ever had a chance to learn...And now I’ve come back to Oldcity, and I keep waiting for some kind of magic to show me the way home. Only it never happens. Because it’s not Oldcity I’m looking for, and it won’t ever give me what I want.” Every word of it was true, and I wondered why I’d never seen the truth before. “But it’s all I’ve got.”

She nodded, her face pinched, her eyes shimmering, drowning. I noticed something wrong with the eyes then—the pupils were open almost halfway, black depths pooling in the green. We were sitting in bright sunlight, and they should have been no more than slits, barely visible.

*What are you on?* I almost asked it ... but no matter where either of us thought we belonged, we belonged to Oldcity now, and in Oldcity you didn’t ask. Instead I said, “Why? Why did you come here, why do you stay?”

“Relocation.” The smallness, the dullness, the loss came back; the single word hit me like a fist.

*Relocation.* One indifferent, empty word that held a world of rage and suffering and loss—the grief of a life and a whole people torn apart. Once Koss Tefirah had been her people’s world; the way Earth had been home to humans. But Earth hadn’t been enough for humanity; like roaches, like flies, they’d spread out across the galaxy to other worlds. Some of the worlds already belonged to another people, the ones the humans called Hydran; naming them for the system Beta Hydrae where first contact was made—and for an ancient Terran monster with a hundred heads.

The Hydrans were humanoid enough that they could even interbreed with humans; their only real difference was in having psi talents that made most humans deaf and blind by comparison. Some early xenobiologists even called the human race a world of defective Hydrans, psi mutes. It wasn’t a very popular idea with the rest of humanity, especially when some empire-building combine wanted to strip the resources of a Hydran world. The FTA would oblige them, one way or another, and because the Hydrans’ psionic ability had made them nonviolent, getting rid of them was easy. They lost their lives, their rights, their homes . . . they lost everything. And they couldn’t—wouldn’t—fight back. I took a deep breath, and another, before I could say anything more. “I’m sorry.” Something stupid. “At least—at least you’re the Dreamweaver. At least you make them come to you hungry for the dreams they’ve lost themselves, and willing to pay. Even if it’ll never be enough.”

She didn’t say anything. Her fingers traced the folds of her smock over and over. Twitchy. Mindless. Not in peaceful silence, any more. Birds were calling somewhere far below us. I noticed again that she didn’t wear a data bracelet. Without a data bracelet, you didn’t exist on this world.

“How do you get here on your own?”

“I teleport.” Her lips barely moved.

“Oh.” Pure-blooded Hydrans could do nearly any form of psionics there was a name for. Most human psions couldn’t. I couldn’t. All I’d ever been any good at was telepathy. But once I’d been *good* . . . better ... the best.

“What happened to you?”

“What?” I looked up.

“Why is your mind like that? What have they done to you?”

I felt my own eyes drowning suddenly, blinked them clear. “Somebody made me see myself without illusions, once. I killed him for it.”

“Murder?” Her voice filled with thick horror.

I shook my head. “Self-defense.” I made myself go on looking at her, knowing that no true Hydran could kill an-other being and survive. Their own empathy destroyed them. “I’m human enough to kill. But I was Hydran enough to pay for it.” *And pay, and pay...* knowing I would never forget the white agony of death that had burned out my senses and left my mind a wound that would never completely heal. “Scar tissue. That’s all I have now . . . except when you send your dreams out to me. I’ve been trying for so long just to ... thank you.” It died in whispers. “Why . . . how . . . all those others and still you knew, you touched *me*.” I almost touched her, but only with a hand. “Why?”

“You were different, you and the woman. Not like the rest—” I heard her disgust. “I looked at you, and I felt you different from all the rest, even from her, and so alone, more alone than anyone could be.”

“It’s not so bad,” lying.

“But you came back, over and over. I felt you thanking me, and calling me, and asking me things I could not answer. Until you stopped coming.”

“You heard me—” I straightened, feeling the stone grate against my back, “and I heard you. Could we be that way now—talk mind to mind, not words?”  
*Please, please.*

“No.” She shut her eyes. “You aren’t like the guests, the empty minds. You focus sharply, clearly. But then your own mind’s hand covers its mouth, and you make less than a whisper. And your mind’s hands cover its ears, even though I am shouting. . . . Even to talk like humans with you is easier. Forgive me.”

"It's all right ... I shouldn't have asked." My hope curdled, and I was glad then that it wasn't easy for her to see my thoughts. We sat together without thoughts or words, listening to the wind speak and the leaves answer.

"You are called Cat. Why?" Change of subject.

"It's my name." I relaxed finally, smiled a little, settling into the seat.

"Is that all?" She bent her head; beaten-gold earrings winked at me. "Cat?"

"It's all I need." I shrugged.

"But it is an animal." Curiosity and protest.

"Have you ever looked at a cat, at their eyes? They see in the dark. Their eyes are green, and the pupils are long slits. Like mine; like ours." I laughed once. "I picked it up on the streets. It fits."

She nodded slightly to herself. "I see. You keep your real name hidden. The humans don't do that, because their minds are hidden already."

"Real name?" I shook my head. "I don't have any other. Maybe once . . . but not any more." I felt an old loss cut deeper. "I'm not hiding anything." *But you are, damn it, you are.* "What about you? I don't know any of your names."

"Ineh. Call me that."

"Is that your real name?"

"No." Her hands stroked the bench, never quiet.

My mouth twitched. "Oh."

"I could not show you that name. You would have to see it in my mind's heart."

"Oh," again. I couldn't decide whether to get annoyed or get angry, so I didn't. "You're telling me that I'll never know you that well."

She didn't answer.

"Why did you come to see me, anyway?"

"You stopped coming to see me." She glanced up, her pupils wide and black. "And then I had a sending that you would help me."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. A sending...precognition. The wild card power. Nobody who had it could control it; they could only learn to sift images when they came, try to pick the true ones out of the static. "How? How can I help?"

"I don't know."

"What's wrong that should be right?"

"Nothing." Her pupils like black pools of emptiness swallowing the sun said, *liar, liar.*

I laughed again, frustrated. "Is it the Dreamweaver, the Haven—do you want out of it?" I remembered what Jule had said. No answer again. "What is it, are you afraid to tell me? I owe you a debt. Let me pay it."

"I have no right." She looked away, searching the glade for enemies, or an escape.

"I want this. Ineh—" I caught her hand, like a handful of bones; jerked, but then it was only a hand, soft-skinned, pulling free. "Who owns the Haven? Have they got some-thing on you, is that what you're afraid of?"

"Stop it! Stop!" She held herself rigid like a shield.

I stopped.

"I should not have come to you. If they find out they would keep you from seeing me." Her face fell apart. "You can't help me, I was wrong to speak of it. Promise me that you will not ask me any more."

"It's drugs, isn't it?" It had to be the answer; how else could any human hold someone like her, and make her obey?

"No." *Yes, yes,* her eyes said.

"Yes."

She wavered, losing substantiality, going—

"No, no wait! Don't—" I reached out, caught her arm, felt it solidify into flesh again. I let her go, sitting back. "I'm sorry, I should've known better. We are what we are. It won't happen again." I kept watching her body still held like a shield, her closed face; my own face promised her.

She let herself loosen, nodding. "I cannot share with my own people, or with

the humans. But you are both and neither . . . when I see you I will not feel so alone. Will you come in the evenings to my show?"

I moved against the bench, feeling uncomfortable. "Look, Ineh . . . this is hard to say, but I can't keep coming forever. I don't have that kind of money."

"No?" She looked at me as though she couldn't understand why not.

"No." I shook my head. "Do you even know what it's like to be poor?"

"Yes." She looked through me. "My people were poor when I came here. But that was a long time ago. . . ." As if it didn't matter any more.

"And you're not poor any more. What about the rest of them? What about your family?"

"I don't know. I don't know where they are."

Anger rose in me again. I swallowed it, and said, "That doesn't seem to bother you much either."

"No. It is a long time. . . ." She shifted listlessly. "Before my people came here we shared a life, we shared our minds' hearts. But the humans took our life away, and in this place no one shares anything. There was nothing left for us. We stopped sharing. We stopped wanting to. Because what was the use? There are better ways to stop pain."

*And you know the best.* I grimaced. It wasn't hard to see where her life had gone from there; or to see the possibilities some Oldcity user had seen in her, that had put her into this trap. But I only said, "I know."

Her eyes came back to me.

"I'll come to the Haven when I can. But I can come here too, it'll be better that way. Just let me know, somehow. I'll get the time off."

She nodded. "Come to the Haven soon. I'll know then."

I stood up, not needing to be told that she was leaving. "Promise me this isn't the last time."

(I promise.) The words whispered into my mind. And then she was gone.

\* \* \* \*

When I got back to the Center, Siebeling called me into his office again. Jule came

with me, and together they asked about what had happened. And suddenly I didn't want to tell them. "We talked. About things—you know," shrugging. "What we are, who we are. She's lonely, she's lost her people."

"Where is she from?" Siebeling asked. I couldn't know what he was thinking, but he must be thinking about his dead wife not about Ineh. He couldn't see *her*, he wouldn't understand her kind of trouble the way I could. . . .

"Koss Tefirah. She was relocated here."

His face turned down.

Jule said, "Did she tell you why she came to the Center?"

"She missed me." Somehow even that was too personal, too much. I could imagine what I would have been getting from her mind: she couldn't cope with this, she couldn't understand any more than he did, maybe she was even jealous of me for doing what she couldn't. . . .

"Is that all?"

"I guess it's something," I said, resenting it. "It's a beginning." I knew then that I wouldn't say the rest, the whole truth. This was my affair, *mine*, and I'd handle it myself because I was the right one, the only one who could. "I'll be seeing her again; and not just at the Haven." Daring them to stop me. "I'm going to help her, I know it. She knows it." *Everybody knows it!* wishing that everyone could.

Siebeling glanced at Jule and back at me. They didn't say anything. The kinetic sculpture on his desk stopped dead in the air.

\* \* \* \*

I met Ineh in the Gardens more than once in the next couple of weeks, and watched her at the Haven. Watching her now, knowing that drugs fed her the dreams she was feeding to the crowd, I hated the place; hated myself for still needing them, even while I was trying to stop them. But nothing else changed. When we were together she never let me any closer.

Then one afternoon at the Center Mim came up to me with a strange, glazed look on her face. "Message for you."

"Huh?" I straightened up from the storage cabinets. Her hands were empty. "Where is it?"

She tapped her head. "In here. What are you, deaf?" The joke had teeth and it bit me hard. "Somebody's screaming her brains out for you, trying to tell you she

wants you *now*. Make her stop, damn it! And tell her not to use my head for a call box in the future.” She started to turn away.

“Where’s Jule?”

“Out.”

I let out the breath I was holding. “Mim—”

She turned back, still frowning.

“I’m sorry.”

She grimaced. “Just find her before she puts every ‘path in the building into an epileptic fit. When I say this is a pain, I’m not kidding.”

“I’m going out.” I left the uncalibrated meters lying help-less on the table and started toward the door.

“Hurry!” She threw it after me.

I left the building and headed for the cab caller. Ineh was waiting there for me. I hadn’t expected it.

“Why didn’t you come to the Center?” It came out more sharply than I’d meant it to.

She shook her head. “They don’t want me there. So I called you,”

“Next time use the phone.” I pushed the call button.

She stared at me, looking tiny and miserable and alone.

“I’m sorry.” I bent my head. “It’s just that when you call me I’m the last to know, in a place like that.”

She still stared at me. The cab came finally, and I was glad.

We sat together in the Koss Tefirah garden. I asked her, finally, “Why did you call me, anyway?” Hoping there was a good reason, afraid of what I was going to feel like if there wasn’t.

“I was unhappy.”

My hand tightened over the stone arm of the bench. “About what?”

She shivered like a plucked string. “Nothing.” Her own hands twisted, always moving.

“About what?”

She didn’t answer. (Nothing.)

“Damn it, Ineh! You can’t tell me ‘nothing’ forever! Either you trust me or you don’t and if you don’t I don’t know what the hell I’m here for!”

“I can’t. I can’t tell you. I’m afraid—”

“For you or for me?”

“I’m afraid!” She crushed her eyes shut, and her fists, and her mind.

I unlatched my data bracelet, let it fall into my hand. “Open your eyes. There’s something I want you to see; I want to show you something.”

Slowly her eyes opened, and her fists. She looked at me, tensing.

I held out my wrist. A band of scar tissue circled it, naked and alien. “See that?”

She nodded.

“A bond tag did that.” I turned away from her, pulled my jacket up and my shirt loose. The sun felt warm on my skin; I remembered the feel of another sort of fire on my back. ... I let her look at the scars. “That’s what it means to wear one.” I pulled my shirt down again, turned to face her. “I was shipped to the Colonies as contract labor. If it hadn’t been for the people who run the Center I’d still be there. I’ve been somebody’s slave, Ineh.”

She touched my wrist with cold fingers.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I must give a private performance.”

The words hung in the air between us like crystal beads. I felt the answer to the question complete its circle before I could even ask. The strangers I’d seen at the Haven, disappearing after the show, going on to something more—a private performance.

“It’s different than what you do in the show?”

“Different ... the same . . . more.” Her hands pressed her arms inside her long sleeves.

“When is this next ‘performance’? After the show?” It was dusk already.

“Yes.” Her fingers dug into the flesh of her arms. “I don’t want to go. I don’t want to—”

“Then don’t go. Stay with me. We’ll protect you.”

“No, they’ll come for me. They’ll find me; nowhere is safe from them!”

“Ineh, that’s what they want you to think. It’s not true, not if you don’t want it to be.”

“It is! I see it in their minds.”

I broke off, not sure any more whether she was fooling herself, or I was. “What about the Corpses? We could go to them—” Even the word left a bad taste in my mouth.

“No!”

I could have argued it, but I didn’t. Suddenly I was remembering Polhemas, and why he’d come to the Center.

Ineh stiffened where she sat, looking past me. There was no one else anywhere near us. “They’re coming. They’ll find us together. I have to go—”

“There’s no one—”

“I feel them!” She stood up, and I knew that in another moment she’d disappear.

“Wait, where—? Where can I find you?”

“In Ringer’s End. Thirty-five—” She wavered, and was gone. I sat on the bench alone, waiting for whatever happened next. The stars were starting to show through, and a sliver of the lower moon. About five minutes later a middle-aged man and woman, upside gentry, came into the glade, walking slowly. They looked at me a little longer than they might have; but no longer than anyone dressed the way they were would look at someone dressed like me, in a park at dusk. They went on, murmuring something I couldn’t hear. Thinking thoughts I couldn’t hear. Were they the ones? Or were they just her fear showing; or just an excuse? I sat twitching until they’d passed, and then I went looking for a cab.

I got to Ringer's End as fast as I could. For Oldcity it wasn't a bad looking street: at least it was clean, and almost quiet. I could hear the sea. I found the building entrance, but no one answered when I buzzed. It was almost time for the Haven show; I couldn't make myself stay there waiting, with no proof that she'd ever even been there. I left Ringer's End and went to a weapon shop, where I got myself a stungun. Then I chased the hour across town to the Haven.

I went through the Haven's doors again, hiking across infinity, not even noticing any more that I walked on thin air. Time mattered, not space—and time was shrinking in on me all the time. I sat down, leaning back away from the glissen mist, not wanting anything to dull my mind. My fingers beat seconds on the empty tabletop, out of rhythm with the gibber-ing background voices. I'd never noticed before how much like a dirge the music sounded.

At last the usual show began, and I held my breath until I saw Ineh coming out of her cloud of light. As soon as she was a solid reality I started, (Where were you? Where the hell did you go? What's happening; tell me what to do!)

And in the frozen moment before she began, my waiting mind filled with an echo of numbers, a combination ... I saw that it unlocked the secret of the invisible walls and would let me pass through. (Why? Why?) But she didn't answer, and I couldn't let myself wonder too much. There weren't any answers now, only the soft whispering of her soul reaching out to me, the knowledge that in another hour someone might be using it for a private playground. The seconds crawled past me, space-time warped out of shape in this strange dream-land; her performance went on forever—and was over before I had time to realize it. The guests were on their feet, shuffling out, the room was darkening behind them.

I got up, stood trying not to look like I was waiting, until most of them were gone. The invisible wall was moving up on me, pressuring me to leave. ... I said the numbers, and the wall of darkness swallowed me up.

Beyond it there was nothing but a corridor—blank, gray, empty. I blinked, shaking off the feeling that I'd walked through a wet, open mouth. At the far end of the hall was a door. I walked toward it, still not quite believing that I'd come this far. I put my hands into my pockets, feeling the stungun cool and smooth in my palm. The door at the end of the hall didn't have a knob or a plate. I pushed it, and it swung open. Beyond it was more darkness—an alley.

I turned, looking back over my shoulder. Behind me, the entrance I'd come through had become a solid wall. I had the feeling it wouldn't let me back again. And there were no other doors; at least none that I could see. (Ineh!) I shouted her name with my mind, but there was no answer. This time I wasn't expecting one. I'd been shown the door, and Ineh— Ineh... The door was still open. I went through it.

A heavy fist came down across my shoulders, clubbing me to my knees.

Grease and grit skidded under my hands, scrap-ing my palms, and then it was somebody's foot in my side throwing me back against the wall. The hands on my jacket dragged me up, knocking me against the cold peeling surface until my brains rattled, pulling away and coming back to hit me again, everywhere, and I couldn't seem to make any part of me work well enough to stop them. . . . Until the hands let go again at last and I slid down into the trash.

“Keep away from her, freak—” His foot in my ribs, underlining the word. “Or the next time they won't find your body.” The foot came after me one last time.

Somehow I brought up my hands and caught his leg, twisted under him with his own motion and jerked him off his feet. He fell past me onto the pavement, coming down like a condemned building. I thanked God he hadn't landed on top of me. I hauled myself up, the stungun in my hands; revers-ing our positions and a lot of other things. “Hold it.”

He was trying to get his feet under him. He stopped when he saw the gun.

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“You know who.” I tried to stand straighter and not listen to my body. “I ain't got much time. Are you gonna make this easy or hard?”

He laughed, giving me the answer.

I could see the features of his face clearly now. It looked like he'd landed on it. I wondered how much he could see of mine. I grinned and spat blood. He knew what I was. If he was like most psi-haters—“Did they tell you what kind of 'freak' I am—did they tell you I'm a 'path, like she is? I can turn your brains inside out, read everything you ever thought of, back to the day you were born. It hurts like hell . . . I'll make sure it does.” I grinned wider, hurting like hell. “You gonna give me what I want, deadhead, or do I rip it out of your skull?” I frowned like I was concentrating hard; watched his face turn to jelly.

“All right, all right!” His head dropped, but he was still staring up at me with white eyes from under his brows. “They took her to Kinba's.”

“Where's that?” I knew the name; I tried to keep my voice steady.

“Outside the city.”

“What's the co-ords?”

He told me.

“Access codes?”

He told me that too; his own voice wasn't too steady.

I spat again. “You sure about that? Maybe I should take a look.”

“It's true!” He threw his hands up again, shielding his face, as if he thought that could stop me. “Jeezu.”

I nodded. “Okay. I think I believe you.” I hugged my aching stomach with my arm. “Thanks, sucker.”

His own arms came down, and already his face was hardening again. “You ain't a path! You didn't even sense me waiting. You can't—”

“I know.” I pressed the button on the stungun with my thumb, and he went to sleep.

I went out to the street to find a cab. No one looked twice as I pushed my way through the crowds; a stumbling punk who drooled blood was business as usual in Oldcity. And the cab didn't ask questions when I shoved the woman aside and got in, just, “Destination?” I let myself collapse as it took me up over the crowds, heading for the world upside; heading for trouble.

The cab carried me out a long way beyond the southward limit of Quarro, on along the thin peninsula between pincers of sea gleaming like gunmetal under the light of the two moons. I tried to keep count of the wealthy estates winking like stars, hiding in the darkness down below. I remembered seeing mansions on the threedy somewhere a long time ago. I ached all over and felt lonelier than I'd thought I knew how to.

After a while the cab dropped down again, and the world came back at me in a rush. An estate opened out below, like a holo-still blown up out of all proportion: I couldn't quite make myself believe what I saw tumbling down the steep hill slope, layer on layer of broken crystal pulsing with light. The cab didn't veer off as it came down; the codes worked.

And then I was standing on the landing flat, staring at my own reflection haloed by the cab lights—tiny and shattered, repeating over and over in the crescent of facing walls. A lens opened in the smooth surface, and someone came through. It was the hologram host from the Haven. There was no cloak this time, and I decided finally that it was a woman. “Are you real this time?”

She half-smiled. “You've seen my show. You didn't like it?” She hesitated,

as if she was listening to something I couldn't hear. "That stungun you carry is useless here. This house is weapon-sealed, of course. So why don't you toss it away." She flicked a hand. The words were all hard surfaces and sharp edges, like the house behind her.

I shrugged, and took the gun out of my pocket. I threw it away into the dark, bloodstain-colored grass. I wondered how many other eyes were looking me over, all up and down the spectrum.

"This is a private estate, boy. Why are you trespassing here?" Her voice swatted me like a bug: not even worth a threat. I had to admire her ice.

I had to match it: "Ineh wants to see me."

The flat line of one brow quirked. "Ineh? You've come to see Ineh? Then you're that one . . . ?" Her fingers darted out at me like a snake's head. "All right. Come in and see her, then." Her smile ripped me to shreds.

I smiled back, tasting a little more of my own blood. "Thanks." I followed her in through the opening iris, jaws full of glass teeth; heard it ring shut behind me. I took a deep breath. She led me through room after room that probably made the Five Worlds Museum look sleazy. "You know, I used to be a thief myself. What did I do wrong?"

She looked at me; she didn't smile.

There didn't seem to be anyone else in any room we passed. This was the private estate of Farheen Kinba, one of the dark gods who ruled Oldcity's underworld. I thought about what it would be like to live in a place like this all alone . . . knowing all the time that alone was the last thing we were right now.

We took a lift down and down into a part of the house sunk deep into the hillside. And there were all the rest of the bodies, the rest of the eyes that weren't already watching me; there was even Kinba himself. They were watching someone else, through a wall of mirror-backed glass: Ineh.

The room she sat in was almost empty of anything else; the walls were a silent gray-green, and so was the carpet. She sat in a hard, straight-backed chair, its arms and legs carved with eye-twisting tangles of vine until it almost seemed to be growing up and over her, holding her prisoner.

And across from her in a cushioned recliner, not touching her in any way, lay a man. They both wore long white robes, like shrouds; but from what I could see of his heavy face and his soft, thick hands, he was somebody who was used to having too much of everything. His eyes were shut, but he wasn't asleep. He was dreaming. . . . I watched his face, the expressions that stretched it, warping rubber; his body

tightening, jerking once, shifting. Ineh's face moved with her own shaping and sharing of his dream, but the emotions that moved it weren't the same. Her body was as rigid as the chair that held it, trembling with strain. Her eyes were shut, and I saw the wet silver tracks of tears lying on her cheeks.

I closed my own eyes, shut off all the outside senses I could—trying to reach what was happening out there with the one left inside. I felt whispers and mutterings, muffled cries, pressing my mind against the wall of glass that lay inside my own head. I held my breath, forgot my body and where it was. . . . Ghost images began to form, began to pull at me. Cold raw hands began to dig into my brain: This was a man with hungers that had never been satisfied, never could be. Hungers that had driven him to a position of power only a few others ever reached, given him all the pleasures that still weren't enough. And now he had the powers of the Dream-weaver to play with. She wasn't leading his dreams, she was following them, letting him fix the rules and being forced to play by them. The power he'd always wanted, to dominate and humiliate and use—the freedom that the laws of society kept him from ever really getting his fill of—all that was his now, his to dream about, with Ineh as his tool and his victim.

(Ineh! Ineh!) I screamed her name silently, trying to break through. But she was caught up in his nightmare; her mouth opened in her own silent scream. I pushed through the knot of watchers to the transport wall, beat my fists against it. "Ineh!" but the surface was solid, the sound recoiled. Ineh didn't move.

Hands caught my arms, dragging me back into the real world. The group of watchers around me were suddenly all watching me, their faces half slack, half ugly. I realized they'd all been listening to what I'd just heard; a bunch of goddamn voyeurs peeping through the keyhole into somebody else's mind. Two or three of the faces I recognized from the past, Kinba himself and a couple of Oldcity's other first citizens, all looking businesslike and respectable in drapes of watercolor silk. There was a stranger dressed the same way, but looking uneasy. The rest I didn't recognize; but I recognized the type.

And there was someone else in the room, sitting to one side while the others stood, with a remote on his knees. Right now he was leaning forward, muttering some kind of message into it. He stopped, looking up, not at me but at Ineh again, and his eyes got glassy. He didn't seem to fit in with the rest, and I knew the look on his face too well. He was a telepath—a corporate telepath. Some combines used them for security, though most were too paranoid to use a 'path who was good enough to really pick brains, including their own.

And this one was communicating with Ineh, getting messages that no one else here was getting. ... I looked back at the stranger who was dressed for business, and suddenly it all fit. The Corpses were right: Somebody was using psionics to pick brains. It was happening right here in front of me, and the victim never even knew it. Ineh must have screened every crowd at the Haven, picked out the customers whose

minds were crammed full of secrets to be sold to the highest bidder. And this was how she pulled them out.

Kinba turned to the woman. “Hedo, what is this?” He waved a hand at my face. He was wearing a sapphire as big as a cockroach on his middle finger. “Why did you bring him here?”

“It’s Ineh’s freak; he got past Spoode. I thought such determination ought to be rewarded. And I thought you might like to ask him how many others know he’s here.”

I saw Ineh slump over the far arm of her chair. I tried to pull free, but Kinba’s bodyguards held me with no trouble. I felt something slip over my wrists behind my back and tighten, pinning them together. Kinba smiled at me, a tiny twitch pulling his mouth against his perfect teeth.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” I said.

The hand with the sapphire ring slapped me. I shook my head, feeling fresh blood in a warm trickle down my cheek. “Mind your tongue or I’ll have it cut out.” His voice was white and cold like his face. “If you prefer to keep it, you half-breed abomination, perhaps you’ll consider telling us who else knows you’re here?” The rest of them had stopped watching Ineh, and their faces were grim.

I kept my own eyes on her, felt my body trembling. “The Corpses know. They know about the Haven and what you’re doing with it—”

He held up his hand. I stopped. “We’ll see.” Some of the faces began to look worried; but not his. The combine man kneaded his hands together. A door was opening in the next room. Two men were shaking the slug awake, hauling him off his couch. The woman called Heddo went to Ineh, helped her to stand, leading her out after the others were gone. The corporate telepath stared at me as if he’d just noticed I was there; glanced at his boss, who frowned. He looked back at me, confused, and I tried to make him react somehow. He looked down again at the remote in his lap, his shoulders hunching. Kinba’s bodyguards led me out of the room.

We went back up in the lift, back into the main part of the house; into a room looking out on the night and the long ruddy slope of the hill. Ineh was already there. She sat gulping something from a cup, her robe soaked and stained, her movements jerky. And yet she was more beautiful, almost shining; not because of what had happened, but somehow in spite of it. I shook my head again, not understanding what I was seeing. She looked up then and saw me, froze as she saw what I looked like.

“Ineh,” the woman said, “see who came for your performance.”

Ineh still sat frozen. She didn't answer. Her mouth quivered.

"I'm okay," I said. "I've come to take you back with me. The Corpses know everything. If anything happens to me or you, they know who to blame."

"Ineh, is he telling the truth?" Kinba strolled past me to where she sat, ran his maggot fingers through her hair, mas-saged her neck.

I felt her touch me with her mind: a hard clumsy blow that tore the tight-woven defenses I couldn't control apart. I tried not to resist, holding out trust, hope, reassurance, not even bothering to hide my lie. Trusting her—

"He told no one." Her voice was flat. "He is here alone, no one knows what he's done."

Kinba's hands dropped to her shoulders, patted her lightly; all the hidden tension had gone out of them. His laughter was loose and easy. I was just exactly as stupid as he'd figured I was. "You see, good people, there was nothing to worry about," heavy on the *nothing*.

I looked down at the floor, twisting my hands against the hard edges of the binder.

"Ineh, I'm disappointed." His hands squeezed her shoulders. "Is this quixotic idiot really your idea of someone who's going to change your life?" She grimaced, but didn't answer. "Well, here he is. You did well enough for us just now. But you seem to detest it, you resist it so. That impairs your usefulness. I always said our relationship was one of mutual need, not slavery. You could leave any time you chose. Would you like to go away with him?" She looked up, her face caught in the middle of half a dozen different emotions. "You've given us years of loyal service. Shall I repay you now ... let you go away with him? Of course if you do, you'll be losing the—privileges of our partnership. Are you ready to lose all that? Or do you want to stay on, safe and protected, and ... let us get rid of him?"

I couldn't believe that she was really listening to what he said, any more than I believed for a second that he was offering her a real choice. But she stared up at him like she was seeing God. Then she looked at me for a long minute, without letting me through into her mind. She looked out the window at the empty night, and the minute stretched into two, into eternity. My mind ached, waiting for her to choose, even while I knew it was no choice and at least one of us was going to die.

I looked after her out the windowed wall at the sky ... just in time to see the windows dissolve like a film of ice in the sun, the sun bursting in on me, my sight going red-gold-white-black before I could shut my eyes. Then all hell broke loose—shouting and curses and noises I didn't recognize, bodies slamming into me, knocking me down. By the time I blinked my eyes clear, there was a Corporate

Security cruiser hanging beyond the slagged windows and the room was filling up with Corpses.

And Ineh was on her knees beside me, pulling at my arm. Her voice was high and broken, I could barely make out what she said. “Cat, Cat...they come to arrest us, to take us away!”

I sat back, trying to get my feet under me. “Get out of here, Ineh! Now, while you can—” A Corpse had spotted us, was starting toward us through the forest of shifting bodies.

“Where, where can I go? I’m afraid—”

“Somewhere they won’t be looking! Anywhere. Go on!”

“You—?”

“I’ll be all right. Go on!”

She disappeared; I felt the soft inrush of air that followed. Neat gray legs stopped short beside me. I heard the Corpse swear, and looking up I saw Polhemas. I started to get up. He reached down and caught the front of my jacket, hauling me onto my feet.

“Where did she go?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play brain-damaged with me.” The polite official front was gone. “You’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“Me?” I jerked at my cuffed hands. “Come on, Polhemas, you think I did this to myself? You know I didn’t have anything to do with them—” I bent my head at the rest of the room.

His hand was still clenched on my jacket front. “I knew you were lying when you told me you didn’t know anything, back at the Center. That’s why I had a tracer put on you. And it led us right to the answer.”

“You think I didn’t know you were following me? It would’ve been damn stupid to walk into this all by myself if I wasn’t involved; that’s what you figure, isn’t it?” I tried to stare him down. I hoped he couldn’t see my ears burning. “I’m not stupid,” *just crazy*, “and I wasn’t lying to you. But I was smart enough to see a few things you overlooked, while you were spending all your time trying to blame this on the Center. Face it, Polhemas, I’m the hero here. You can’t turn it inside out.”

His face turned redder than my ears, and his hand on my jacket jerked me forward. But then he grunted and let me go. He was going to be hero enough himself to keep him from making a case of proving I was wrong. I let my own breath out in a sigh. He looked me over again, looking hard at my bruised face. Then he turned me around and released the binder on my wrists. “Why didn’t you just tell us what you learned? If you wanted to be a hero that would’ve been enough. Why risk being a dead one?”

I pulled my hands forward and rubbed them. “Why should I do you any favors? What have you done for the Center for Psionic Research lately?”

He ignored that. “It was the Dreamweaver, wasn’t it? Where did you send her—where is she?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere you won’t find her. You can drug me all you want but I can’t tell you more than that.”

“We’ll find her.” It was a threat.

I caught his arm. “Why don’t you leave her alone? They made her do it, she didn’t want to. That’s why she came to me, for help. She’s suffered more than that mindfucker ever did—” pointing at her “guest” standing sullen and confused while two Corpses questioned him. “He’s the one you ought to send up. If you’d seen the inside of his head you’d kill him on the spot.”

Polhemas looked at the slug and back at me without saying anything. His eyes were still cold and empty.

“Look, you’ve got what you want. Leave us alone...Maybe it never occurred to you, but we’re just trying to live like everybody else. Give us a goddamn break! We gave you what you want; we’ve earned it.”

He didn’t answer.

I let go of his arm and turned away. The corporate telepath was looking at me from across the room, where his boss’s voice was getting louder and louder. His face was full of fear and despair; I could see it, but I couldn’t feel it. I started to walk away.

“Nobody said you could go anywhere,” Polhemas said.

“Try and stop me.”

He did.

\* \* \* \*

It was hours later before I was free again, walking back through the streets to the Center, feeling the steel and stone of all Oldcity weighing down my heart. Polhemas had asked me a thousand questions about everything I'd seen, heard, over-heard, thought or guessed. I'd told him everything I could, because it didn't matter any more and I only wanted to get out of there. It was only after I'd left the detention center that I let myself realize he hadn't tried to force anything more out of me about where Ineh had gone. It surprised me, because it meant that he must have listened to something I'd said before. But either way it didn't really matter; because Ineh was gone, and I didn't know where. How the hell would I find her; what would she do—what would I do?

The Center had long since closed for the night when I reached it. But there was still a light on somewhere inside, so I went in the front entrance instead of taking the back way up to my room. Jule and Siebeling stood waiting for me in the empty hall; I almost walked past them without seeing them.

“Cat?”

I stopped, shaking my head. They came toward me when I didn't move. Siebeling lifted his hand, and across the room the lights brightened. Their faces showed pools and lines of shadow, their tired eyes looked me up and down. Siebeling caught my jaw with his hand, gently, turning my face right and left.

“Did Corporate Security do that to you?”

“No.”

“What happened?” Jule asked. The question didn't stop with my face.

“I fell down.” I tried to pull away, but Jule held my arm.

“Wait, Cat.” She stood in front of me. “You've been trying to pretend that you're the only one who's involved with the Dreamweaver's problems; but you're not. You're not alone in this. You're not alone in the world—for better or worse.”

“You weren't exactly killing yourself to help me out.”

“That's hardly fair,” Siebeling said. “You didn't give us any information. You didn't tell us the kind of problems that were really involved, the kind of people, the danger. You went off on a suicidal crusade against Evil, and you damn near got just what you were asking for! Didn't it ever occur to you that—that—” he broke off, “that we can't read your mind, Cat.”

“I never thought about anything else. That's the trouble.” I looked down, my

arms hanging heavy at my sides. “I’m sorry. Maybe I’ll start appreciating what I’ve got left, now.”

*Now that it doesn’t matter any more, now that it’s too late.* “How’d you know what happened? Were the Corpses here?”

“No.” Siebeling leaned against a seat-back. “They haven’t been here.”

“They haven’t? Not at all?”

He shook his head.

I laughed, a choked sort of sound. It meant there might be something decent in Polhemas after all, and I wasn’t ready to believe it. “Then how did you know?”

“Ineh told us,” Jule said.

*Ineh?* The word wouldn’t form in my mouth. “Where— where is she?”

“Up in your room. I had to give her a sedative to help her keep control; she’s sleeping now.” He touched his head. “You know she’s an addict, Cat—?”

I flinched. “I know. What’s she on, Doc?”

“Trihannobin.”

“Nightmare.” I felt the blood drain out of my face, “They call it nightmare.”

He nodded. “And it takes you for a hard ride. It’s a kind of nerve poison. Most people don’t use it for long; they gener-ally stop when it kills them.” His face was as empty as my own.

“I went for a ride once.” The memories came without my wanting them to. “I thought I was in heaven. I didn’t eat or sleep for three days. And then it wore off.” I kept my eyes open, kept looking at their faces: proving that I was here in the present, that I’d really come through it. *Nightmare . . . that’s why they call it nightmare.* I could still see the hospital ward through their faces, the nutrient bath shining on my skin like sweat, the straps. . . . They hadn’t cared enough to make it easier. “Give her something to make it easier—”

He shook his head, looking down.

“Why not?”

“She’s Hydran, Cat... I can’t predict how it would affect her. She doesn’t react to the drug the way a human does, or she’d be dead by now. If I tried to

counteract it without doing an analysis, I could make it worse for her..." He sounded helpless; I wasn't used to hearing him sound that way.

"I guess I want to see her now."

He nodded, and the three of us went upstairs.

I was the first one into the room, Ineh sat waiting, watch-ing, from my bed platform. Her arms were locked around her knees, her fists were clenched tight. Her face was clenched too; I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"We may need restraints," Siebeling murmured to Jule.

"No." I looked back. "If she needs it I'll do it; I'll hold her." I realized as I said it that I was going to do more—that I was going to do everything. Not because I wouldn't share it with them, this time, but because I couldn't. Ineh would lose control again, and when she lost it completely I'd be the only one left who could stand to be near her. "You'd better get out of range while you can."

They looked at each other, and at me. This time they didn't argue. They left the room.

"Hello, Ineh," I said softly. She didn't answer. I moved across to the bed platform, climbed up and sat beside her, trying to keep my face calm and easy. "Thank God you came here," thinking that she had more sense than I did, to trust Jule and Doc when I hadn't. "I just about went crazy wondering how I'd find you." I reached out to touch her arm. Her body jerked away; I didn't know whether she'd meant it to or not. "Sorry." I looked down at my hands, up again. A hard knot was forming in my throat. "I know, it's already starting. Don't be afraid."

Her eyes fixed on me, wild and glassy, as though she was listening to a lunatic. She licked her lips. "I need my dream tonic. Help me."

I shook my head. "Not that way. I've been through this, Ineh, and I came out the other side. I'll help you. Trust me. Let me in, let me share the—"

Something blinding hit me behind the eyes, fed back along the nerve-paths to the ends of my senses—all her power, focused on me and driven home by fear. I cried out, holding my head. And I saw her clearly, at last: not the Ineh I thought I knew, but the Ineh I'd seen in ghost glimpses when her concentration slipped, when she couldn't make me see her the way she wanted the world to see her, and I'd fallen through it into the way she was. The nightmare Ineh, brittle bones, sunken eyes, wasted flesh. *The nightmare*. The nightmare already beginning—Disgust and hatred filled me up like the urge to vomit: Ineh's loathing for the thing she'd become in her mind, was becoming with her body; a filthy, crawling, drug-infected ruin, born to pain, deserving pain, terrified of pain but trapped inside it with no escape,

trapped—

*Trapped.* I'd be trapped with her in this nightmare journey of pain and more pain, pain until you wailed, howled, beat yourself senseless against walls to get away from it. Your hands ripped your own flesh, your legs wouldn't hold you up, your body betrayed and humiliated you in ways you never dreamed of and you didn't even care... When I could sit up again in the hospital there was a corpse in the mirror, I saw a corpse and I screamed and I can't go through it all over again I can't—!

I threw myself down from the platform, away from the sight of her. I almost shouted for the others, almost started for the door; almost ran—out of the room, away from her and the power of her pain and myself.

But instead I turned back, and looked at her. She hunched forward, burying her face in the stained whiteness of her robe, dragging isolation over herself like a shroud. There was no reaching from mind to mind now; I'd shut her out of myself, and she wasn't trying to get back in.

And I was going to leave her that way. I was going to leave her alone and prove to her that there was nobody on this world who wouldn't betray her; that there was no one she could count on; that no matter what she tried to do, because of what she was it would turn against her... That if she reached the other end of this road through hell she'd only find that it hadn't been worth the trip. I was the only one who could share the journey, who knew the roadmarks, who could make her believe there was a reason to survive it. But I was going to leave her here alone and run from her problems; just like I'd done to myself. . . .

I climbed back onto the platform. I kneeled beside Ineh, put my arms around her huddled body, feeling her muscles knot and quiver. "I'm here, I won't leave you. You can count on me—" My voice broke.

A wall of blind hatred slammed into me, locking me out. Hopeless pain was all that was left, all that was real to her now, eating her alive from the inside. She wanted to die; and she would. I had to break through to her again, somehow, before everything imploded.

And there was only one thing still working her mind. If I could turn the rage that was holding me out into a tool to let me in... "All right!" I shouted it into her face. "You hate me, you want to blame it all on me. But you dragged me into this, you set me up to do what you didn't have the guts to do yourself. Then you lost your nerve, and I got the shit beat out of me. If I was going to stop believing in you, that should've done it. But I didn't; I didn't give up on you. I kept on until you were free. You're *free*."

"If you have to hate, remember where you were before you came here tonight!"

Remember who did it to you, who turned your gift into something sick and dirty. If you want to shut somebody out of your life, shut them out. If you want something enough to die for it, make it your freedom. If you want to hate somebody let it be Kinba!" I shook her. "Don't let them win. We don't have to let the goddamn scum of this universe destroy us. Let it out, the hate ... the pain will go with it. Let me in—" (*Let me share your pain,*) pushing myself aside, trying to loosen my mind, to forget any other thought, and just once let the emptiness go unguarded.

Ineh jerked upright, tears streaming down her face. She opened her mouth. And screamed. The scream went on and on, pouring out of her like blood.

My mind burst open as the images smashed into me, losing all control as she lost all control. Not even my own mind any more, but a stage in darkness for the Dreamweaver's night-mares: Agony from a million neurons like live wires snapping ... the taste of gall, the stench of putrefying flesh, my ears screaming, knives of light slashing my eyes, agony that filled all time and went on and on and on. ... Cancer flowers spreading, the face of the torturer with a thousand faces, petals opening endlessly changing out of control controlling body, soul . . . Kinba, white yielding *inevitable* cajoling soothing *strangling striking tearing destroying*/\*flash shatter hot blades broken glass\*/Hedo, oblivion's water food of gods of dreams *hands of ice edge of knives*/\*screaming blackness eyes torn from sockets\*/ Body of a slug mind full of worms bursting like a boil, endless floods of diseased image that went on and on, no escape from filthy minds, stupid, greedy, blind, empty empty minds—mutilating *her* gift denying her self, suffocating her soul in their soul-darkness until she was only a thing used by things. . . .

(*I know, I know...* Struggling up out of her nightmares, dazed, torn, falling back, into my own: In the mines, breath-ing poisoned air, beaten starved buried alive in the freezing guts of an alien world. No rest, no hope, no night or day . . . no escape, no end except a dead end. Warm bodies, cheaper than cold machines. No one caring if you lived or died, until finally even you didn't care, betrayed, abandoned, a thing used by things...)

Hate them I hate them!!!/\*Stars\*/ Kinba, Hedo, an endless wheel flickering changing *offering betraying humiliating tor-menting* ... no one in all the space of the living who was not there to torture/\*ripping forcing violation death\*/ Let me go oh let me die! die! die! Ruined, infected, weak degraded coward!! No reason to live no reason no no

(*Her hands* from another world, the real world, flailing, clawing, reaching for my throat; *my body* sprawled against her own, holding it down, holding the hands away from her face, from finding a weapon. The false light of a new day breaking, showing me the truth—life was the nightmare, and there was no waking out of it. This was real, and reality was no one's dream. They sang it in the streets ... the streets of Oldcity, the faces of a lifetime glaring down like floodlights, smothering me in spit and blows and ugly laughter: City-boy, halfbreed, bondie, scum. All *shouting*

whispering thinking it . . . their hands fists, their feet on my neck; taking what they wanted, over and over, and never giving a word, a touch, no friendship, no kindness, no reason—

(“Let me help you.” *Jule . . . Jule*, saying four words that I’d never heard from anyone before, touching my mind with gentleness, making me see the world in the mirror and not hate it any more. There was a reason, there *was*. . . . *Ineh! Listen, listen to me*, fighting upstream against the flood of two rivers. *It doesn’t matter what happened, none of it, none of them. What they did to you, or me, it isn’t us, it hasn’t changed the truth—* Repeating it over and over and over and getting nowhere; losing strength, losing— *You have a gift, reaching out to the world, reaching out to me, so many that need it, really need it. Not sick, only like you are or I am, sick of hatred and pain—*)

Hatred pain/\**nails thorns iron*\*/ nothing else real, no one not evil ugly empty *human!* . . . herself, evil ugly human corrupted . . . I want to die! let me let me go—

(*Not human! No, you aren’t, you never will be—they’ll never let you be; be glad of it. Remember who you were, remember your real people, everything you shared with them—*)

Nooo! wild anguish, denial, terror— (*Yes! You belong to your people, you can help them, share with them—*)

No no *gone* lost abandoned betrayed— Herself, themselves, betrayed, lost. . . . Faces, loved faces torn away; torn apart by parting, minds torn apart families torn apart, lost in the endless darkness of space lost forever, forever, pain going on forever lost in pain. . . .

(Lost in my own pain, my people lost to me, lost in the endless darkness, lost forever . . . *No! stop . . .* terror, pain, memories, screams echoing in an alley-end—in a child’s ears, in a child’s mind. . . . *Stop, stop it!*)

New world harsh ugly gray prison walls gray minds hunger hatred fear . . . minds sharing *shriveling breaking sealing shut, closing out hunger hatred loss each other giving giving less, giving nothing, giving out giving in . . . betraying, abandoning, surrendering—*

(*It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. Find your way back, they’ll take you back; they have to. Only one thing, one thing could never be forgiven.*)

Too far! Too long, too much shame filth ugliness! Never return, never forgiveness enough for so much shame. Only death only death forgives!

(*No. Not death—only death never forgives. Only death is never forgiven. . . .* Choking, suffocating, fluid: my mind filling up with blood—no *no—No*

*forgiveness*. No death for a killer no help for a cripple—*me, not you! My punishment, my guilt, my shame!* The weapon lying in my hands and the haired in my soul and an enemy inside my mind showing me that I had no right to pride or love or loyalty, halfbreed scum I ought to be dead! Like my dreams my memories *my mother in an Oldcity alley*, screaming and screaming inside my head until I can't hear anything at all. . . . She died, and I couldn't save her. She died inside my head and I didn't, and that made me human enough to hate and kill. No matter that it saved a life, two lives, three—my own. . . . I could, I had to, I wanted to—*I did*.

(Mind inside mind exploding like a star, burning out cir-cuits senses soul . . . lost in a rain of black ashes falling through silence. Silence and blackness—no light no sound no way back to the land of life . . . dead inside my own body. Lie down and die, murderer, betrayer, failure! black ashes to drown in, ashes blood death only death forgives, darkness, darkness soft and deep, drowning. . . .)

*Light* breaking like sunrise, streaming through the choking fall of death. *See death*, see it for Nothing, absence denial loss fear escape—lifeless beautyless emptiness . . . *Light* growing stronger, surrounds crystalizes dissolves darkness—(*I remember, I remember* being wrapped in light, Jule, Siebeling, mind joining mind strong enough to drive out any pain) . . . *Light* rising suffusing, golden, opening onto sky, endless ruffled fields of whiteness, clouds (*snow* the snowfields of another world, remembered world, spring green mountains rising impossibly from snow against a sapphire rain-washed sky: proving beauty still existed, trust, friendship, love). . . . Death destroys us, hate/pain makes us blind; but those things still exist, still live and are true within us without us. True beyond us—true because of us, true between us, nothing hidden now, my name written on my heart, read it, read it and show me your own, let me in. . . . *Light* growing stronger brighter incandescent, dissolving pain, hatred grief, loosening bonds setting free, dissolving into the universal heartbeat promise refuge peace, peace, peace. . . .

\* \* \* \*

I woke, and waking was like a dream. I moved through slowtime, the room flowed around me like honey as I lifted my head. Ineh was beside me, eyes shut, barely breathing. Nothing reached me now from her mind, but one of her hands was locked inside my own like a double vise; my arm was raw with scratches. Slowly I knew that my hand was aching with cramp, my whole body was locked in a cramp, my skin burned and the room stank of sweat and sickness. Ineh's face was bruised and hollow, her hair snarled like weeds; her own genuine body lay beside me, wasted by drugs. There was nothing hidden now; but I couldn't be sorry, only glad. Nothing was hidden between us; nothing hidden from our-selves. She had shown me the name hidden in her soul, and shown me my own; we had shared the understanding that surpassed all truth. I could see again—and everything I saw was beautiful. I let my head fall back, my empty mind was full of peace, and I slept.

\* \* \* \*

When I came to again there was no one beside me. I reached out with my mind, groping, and found nothing. Then I believed it. I dragged myself to the edge of the platform and looked down—had to shut my eyes. There was a sound like a sigh, and when I opened them again Jule was standing there. *Jule* ... I kept trying to see Ineh.

“She’s safe,” Jule said, and smiled. “She’s all right.”

I grunted, and let an arm drop down.

She squeezed my hand, helped me down from the platform and into the bathroom. I drank six cups of water while she peeled off my stinking clothes. Then she pushed me into the fresher and disappeared again. I stood inside until it turned my raw skin numb and tingling, until I could tell that I had legs to stand on. It felt like a long time since I’d used them.

It was a long time. The readout on the clock said three days. I pulled on a tunic and drank some more water, trying to sort out my mind.

Then Jule was back again, with food. Eating it gave me a little extra time. Finally I said, “Is she with you?”

She nodded. “With us, yes. Ardan’s treating her; she’s in bad shape physically.”

“I know. It’s all right? She doesn’t—?” I touched my head, looking at her.

Jule shook her own head. “It was her suffering that I couldn’t bear. The worst of that is past; I can protect myself from what’s left. But it will be a long time before she believes she has any control—over herself or her life. She’s going to need all the help we can give her; all the shared strength.”

*Do any of us really control anything?* But I only said, “Half a lifetime doesn’t heal in a night. Nothing’s that easy. But the worst is over, like you said. And I’ll—we’ll be here, to show her how much good she can find in . . .” Something in Jule’s face made me stop. But I didn’t ask. With my heart beating too quickly, I let my mind go loose, trying to feel what was wrong. And got nothing. Nothing.

“Cat? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I mean—*nothing*,” feeling my face collapse; feeling my mind as tight and hard as a fist. “Did you—was there anything?”

She looked at me, confused. Then, “Oh.” No.

“It didn’t last.” *Didn’t last, didn’t last, didn’t, . . .* Ech-oes, was that all she’d left me? (Jule, feel it, for God’s sake, *feel it!*)

She blinked, twitched.

I leaned forward, tilting my stool. “Did you . . . ?”

She nodded slowly, starting to smile. “I felt something. I felt something.”

“Yeah?” I settled back; knowing I should have realized that Ineh wasn’t the only one whose healing wouldn’t finish in a night. . . . “At least there’s something. Hope.” *A crack in the wall.* A beginning, now that I’d finally accepted that guilt would only die when I did. I sighed, looking back at Jule. “What did I say wrong about helping Ineh?” Asking; just asking.

Jule stood up, turning away from me. “She doesn’t want to see you again.”

“What?”

“She doesn’t want to see you.” Her voice got weaker instead of stronger.

“Why? Why not?” I stood up, following her. “We shared—everything.”

“That’s why.” She turned to face me, finally. “She isn’t ready, she isn’t strong enough to deal with what that meant to both of you. You saw things about her that made her wish she was dead, Cat. Things she’ll be working to forget for the rest of her life.”

“But she knows things about me—” *things that made me wish I was dead,* “things even you don’t know. She doesn’t need to feel any shame with me. What she knows about me—”

“Is more than she can bear. Not added to her own problems. Not right now.” She frowned, not with anger, not at me.

“So she needs time, you mean. In time she’ll want to see me again. . . . A long time?”

She nodded.

“I see.” A long time before a Hydran could face a halfbreed who couldn’t face himself. A long time before he’d ever be able to do even that. A long time, a long cure, a lot of memories like bandages . . . a lot of proving I had a right to be alive. “I can’t stay here anymore.” Jule didn’t say anything. I went to the window, stared through the dark ghost trapped there in the dirty pane. “At least I’ll know she’s got you—at least she’ll have the best friends anybody could ask for, to help

her through if I can't." I traced lines in the dust on the deep sill. Glancing down, I saw that I'd written C-A-T.

"You've already done the most important part, alone. You saved her sanity, Cat."

I shook my head, wiped my name out in the dust. "You've got it backwards. She saved mine. I thought I could handle it, I thought I could make her believe in herself. But I couldn't. I was the one who broke. And she had to come after me and drag me out of my own death wish."

"But you showed her she could use her talent in ways that were healing, not degrading. And then you gave her a chance to prove it. You showed her that she isn't the only one who's suffered . . . and survived." Her voice touched me softly.

I glanced over my shoulder. "How much did you—did you—?"

She shook her head. "None of it. I couldn't. We're all afraid of something in our lives ... of meeting the past head-on. But Ineh knows that, and I understand it, now. We've begun to find common ground. She showed me enough . . . she showed me how much you gave back to her."

I took a long breath, leaning against the casement. I could hear Oldcity's voice through the window: feel its reality gritty under my hands. I looked out and up, seeing nothing but walls. Somewhere up there was a garden where the sweet breath of spring moved silver crescent leaves; farther above two moons, hanging in the sky like lanterns... "She's got a gift, Jule. For healing, for reaching even somebody like me. She could help her people here, who've lost everything. Maybe she could give them back some of what they lost—not their life, but maybe their pride. Make her believe that, will you?"

"I'll try. And so will Ardan."

I remembered his first wife, his own common ground, and nodded. "Yeah. That's fine. She'll do fine. ..." I turned around, to look back at the room Ineh and I had gone through hell in together: Cracked, cramped, peeling; with a couple of cheap holos of somewhere better on the walls to make it even more depressing. Only one thing in the room that was beautiful, besides Jule; one thing that was beautiful and mine—a small Hydran crystal globe sitting on the bookshelf table, that Siebeling had given to me. An image of a nightflower bush lay inside it, black petals striped with silver repeating like a starry night.

I went to it and covered it with my hand. It was warm, not cool; it always was. I closed my eyes and felt for it with all my mind, felt it tingle and stir with the psi-tuned energy I was calling... But when I opened my eyes the nightflower was still there. Once I'd only needed to touch the warm surface and wish, to change the

image inside. The nightflower had been there for most of a year, ever since Siebeling had given it to me. *A promise*, he'd called it. "Give this to Ineh for me. Say it's—a promise." I cupped the ball in my hands.

Jule came to my side, put her arm around my shoulders. Dimly I knew that she was trying to reach me. I held my mind as loose as I could...felt warmth belief hope sorrow trust love; a drop of nectar, a whisper of a poem where before there had only been the silence of the grave. Feeling what they had only been able to tell me: that they loved me, that they wanted to help me; that they were responsible for the way I was, and they would be responsible for making it right again.

"But it's not your responsibility." I moved away from her, gently. "It was my choice; I killed a man. I have to pay for it, I have to make it right with myself."

"You can't give up now, Cat, just when you've—"

"Jule," I said; she stopped. "You don't understand. You want to help me; I know that. You tried—you did help. But now I know I'm the only one who can make the trip. You can't carry me; you don't need to: I'm not a cripple. I can walk." *Someday I'll run*. I looked down. "And I guess it's about time I got started."

"You're really going to leave here, then." Not a question; a dim barb of dismay caught in my mind.

I nodded, not really sure of the answer until I'd made it; realizing then that I'd been certain all along. "It's better if I do. Better for Ineh. Better for me. Better for everyone."

She shook her head, but she didn't deny it. I moved back to her and put my arms around her. We held each other for a while, not saying anything. Her body was warm against mine, made real by the touch of her mind. "I'm sorry. ..." she said finally; but I wasn't sure why.

I let her go at last and moved back to the window; looking out again because I had to.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't care. Maybe it doesn't even mat-ter." I shrugged. "I mean, what have I got to lose?" Up there somewhere two moons were hanging like lanterns in the sky; and beyond them were the stars.

## ***AFTERWORD— PSIREN***

*“Psiren” is actually a sequel to a novel I wrote, Psion. Publishing schedules and story commitments being what they are, however, it got published before the novel did. I had promised George R. R. Martin that I would do a story for the fourth volume of his New Voices anthology, in which I was due to appear, having been nominated for the award in 1976. Committing yourself to writing stories to a deadline is a lot like making a deal with the devil (although the editor and the author probably disagree about which role they’re in), especially if you happen to be a very slow writer, like I am. I had made the mistake of agreeing to do several stories for different editors around the time I was due to write this one, and I’d also committed myself to attending a number of science fiction conventions. My personal life was also in a lot of turmoil, not a little of which was due to planning a wedding (my own). I needed a story idea that I thought would flow easily.*

*At the time I was also preparing to start revising Psion, a classic “trunk novel”—something I’d written long ago, before I had any ambitions about becoming a published writer. (I’d had the “restless urge to write” for years.) For some reason, I couldn’t forget about the characters, and after nearly half a lifetime I still wanted the novel published—although not in the form it was in.*

*I’d sold Psion with the understanding that it would be extensively revised, but I hadn’t realized how much revision I would really decide to do when I sat down and reread it (It’s gratifying to a writer to look back on old work and see exactly what’s wrong with it—it’s proof that you’re improving.) I’d always felt that I’d like to write a series of stories about the protagonist of Psion, following him through his life; the idea for “Psiren” was to be the first of them. I thought that it would be simple to write “Psiren” because I had the background and the main character already.*

*But as I tried to write it, I realized that, if it was going to be consistent with the revised novel, I had to do all the background work for the novel before I could finish the novella. As a result, it took a lot longer to finish the story than I’d anticipated. (I wasn’t alone in causing George to do a lot of groaning. I once got into a good-natured debate with one of the other writers from the anthology about whose story was really the one that held it up the longest “Mine!” “No, mine—” Strangely enough, it was very comforting. But it has made me cautious about how quickly I agree to sell stories that I haven’t written yet. It’s a luxury to be able to finish something before you sell it, but some-times it’s also a necessity.)*

*And despite the amount of backgrounding I did before finishing “Psiren,” there were still some discrepancies that occurred by the time I finished Psion. As a result, I’ve made some minor revisions in this version of the story to make it consistent with the novel and to make the background clearer for readers who haven’t read the novel already. (I strongly believe that sequels should stand on their own as stories as well and not have to depend on anything else for the reader’s comprehension and enjoyment)*