

BEST OF FOOLS

Jean Lorrah

"Why do you introduce me as Tonyo?" demanded Zhag Paget's young protege. "My name is Tony."

"That's a Gen name," Zhag replied.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I *am* Gen."

"I mean, it's an out-Territory name," Zhag explained.

"In case you hadn't noticed..." Tonyo repeated, voice and energy field dripping sarcasm.

Zhag sighed. "It makes you sound like a Wild Gen."

Annoyance resonated in the boy's field as he threatened, "You want to see wild? Dammit, Zhag, I'm *me*, you don't own me, and you can't change my identity!" Abruptly he got up and stomped out, a frequent response to their disagreements. Was Tonyo used to someone who wouldn't listen?

The Gen went only as far as the woodpile. Zhag picked up his shiltpron and went to sit on the rickety steps of his house. Snatches of melody churned up in his mind, disconnected phrases that would not form a tune. He plucked the notes anyway, knowing that music often soothed away his Gen's annoyance.

Tonyo was chopping wood for the cookstove Zhag had never used--the extent of his "cooking" was to make tea over an oil burner. The Sime had learned to avoid disparaging comments about Gens and sharp instruments. He didn't want to provoke the boy again, but he was relieved when Tonyo carried the wood inside and returned to sit at the other end of the step. Tonyo's nager--the field of life energy that surrounded all humans, Simes like Zhag and Gens like Tonyo--precisely echoed the notes Zhag played.

Zhag let go of the senses he shared with Gens, except for hearing, and zlinned the boy with Sime senses. Perhaps Tonyo's golden field would provide the inspiration to compose something. Anything. Just one more song before he died.

Or killed.

Zhag was prepared to die, but if he were to kill again--
That's need depression talking, he told himself. The loss of creative energy was the worst effect of Zhag's chronically unsatisfied need. When Tonyo was nearby--and not frustrated--he could almost...almost...feel normal.

But normal for Zhag was creating new music, not merely playing at Milily's Shiltpron Parlor. Since Tonyo had joined him, he frequently felt well enough to improvise--as the Gen was doing now, vocalizing variations around

Zhag's new riff. But Tonyo had not warmed up his voice. He reached for a note--and missed. His field followed his voice out of tune, a jolt to Zhag's wide open systems. When he next skidded flat, Zhag stopped playing.

"Follow your nager with your voice."

"What?" Gen confusion.

"Your nager has perfect pitch," Zhag explained. "You think of yourself as a singer, Tonyo, but it's your field Simes 'listen' to."

"I know that," the boy said.

"You *know* it, but you don't *feel* it," Zhag told him. *The way I know I will never kill again, but can't feel it--can't trust that I'm not deluding myself.*

"Well, I'm Gen!" Tonyo protested. "I can't zlin."

Zhag searched for words. "When you were listening, your field matched every note--before you started singing."

Tonyo pondered. "I was *thinking* those notes."

"That's it, then, isn't it?" Zhag suggested. "Follow your *inner* voice."

The Sime played the riff again--then deliberately raised the key. The Gen met the challenge nagerically, but when he tried to follow with his voice, it cracked. He waved a hand. "I know. I'll get it. Play it again."

Zhag did...and Tonyo's voice sailed up the scale, well above his normal range before it cracked again. Unmindful of Zhag's wince, the young Gen laughed. "This is wonderful!"

"Not to me!" Zhag said through gritted teeth. "You're still thinking about your voice."

"But it's my voice I'm trying to improve," Tonyo said with impeccable Gen logic...something that theoretically couldn't happen when he was speaking Simelan. The boy frequently managed to be equally dense in either language.

Zhag had no words to explain what he could have demonstrated to another Sime. "Try again," he said, "and...focus on your field instead of your throat."

Tonyo echoed the riff in different keys, voice and nager in synch until he ran out of his range and again shredded Zhag's nageric comfort. Oblivious to the Sime's reaction, he asked, "What's the rest of the song? Does it have words?"

"There isn't any more," Zhag told him. "I haven't been able to compose since-- For a long time now. At this time of month it's not possible anyway."

"Maybe after your transfer," Tonyo suggested. "When's your appointment?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"No wonder you don't feel creative." Tonyo got up, stretching. "We're out of food." This close to hard need, the boy's hunger made Zhag faintly ill.

"It's market day," said the Sime. "Come on--let's get you something to eat."

Zhag had to wonder how he could keep the Gen. It wasn't so much the risk of having a high-field Gen nearby--Tonyo was as easy to be near as a Householding Companion. But Zhag's earnings at the shiltpron parlor would not pay his Pen Taxes--Selyn Taxes, as they were called since Unity--and also feed a growing Gen. Until there were new laws, Tonyo was here only as a visitor. Since using up his small supply of money, he was dependent on Zhag...unless he became a selyn donor.

It was the obvious solution. Tonyo had donated twice before arriving in Norlea, but donating selyn, the life energy that Gens produced and Simes needed to live, would reduce Tonyo's glorious field. No low-field Gen Zhag had ever zlinned could hold a roomful of Simes spellbound.

They had been performing together for over a month now, drawing more customers each week. Zhag had wangled a raise out of Milily, but not enough to keep his Gen fed, let alone clothed. The denims he wore today were practically threadbare.

In the public forum of Norlea's market, Tonyo kept his nager carefully neutral. Nevertheless, when the boy stopped at a citrus stand Zhag sensed bristling annoyance in Sime customers. Tonyo picked up a lemon-- "You!" It was Zhag the proprietor addressed. "Make your Gen stop squeezing the fruit!"

Feeling outrage rolling off Tonyo, Zhag stepped between him and the vendor, saying, "He's not my property."

Zhag won a smile from Tonyo--but sneers from nearby Simes. One muttered, "Don't *look* like Householders," for Zhag referred to Tonyo with the pronoun for a male Sime...as, despite protests, he called the boy by the Simelan version of his name.

Zhag said, "Tonyo is a guest in Gulf Territory. Under the law he has the same rights as a Sime."

"Shenned *Tecton* law!" said a woman in bright calico. "Can't kill Gens anymore, but we don't have to live with 'em!"

Mutters of agreement were backed with nageric static. Tonyo, wide-eyed but with his field under tight control, put the fruit back and edged away.

Zhag shared the boy's consternation: there were always Gens in Norlea's streets. Usually they were ignored, but today the ambient nager rang with hostility. These juncts didn't care where the boy came from--to them he was need denied.

Life denied.

Zhag had not killed for far longer than most Simes, nor did he want to. He had chosen another way two years before Tonyo wandered into Milily's and brought that shining nager to brighten Zhag's ever-bleaker existence.

Simes always gravitated toward Tonyo, but usually it was a positive response. The only Gens his age they saw were breeders on the Genfarms,

Companions in the Householdings, or the few living with disjunct or nonjunct families. Until very recently, most in-Territory Gens were raised on Genfarms, sold for the kill as soon as they began producing selyn...and never allowed to learn Gen defenses against Sime attack.

While many Simes wished nothing had changed, most acknowledged that it had to: even by capturing Wild Gens, Sime Territory governments could not provide sufficient kills. Raids across the border brought retaliatory strikes by the Gen army. If nothing changed, eventually all the Gens would be killed...and the remaining Simes would die.

There was a solution: Simes called channels could take selyn from Gens without hurting them, and transfer it to other Simes so they did not have to kill. But for those addicted to the kill--the vast majority of Simes alive today--channel's transfer meant never knowing true satisfaction again.

And...it meant an early death.

Zhag trailed Tonyo through the market. As long as his Gen was near, he could avoid feeling life draining heartbeat by heartbeat. But his comfort was an illusion--he would never draw Tonyo's selyn, unless the boy became a Companion in a Householding. If he were ever tempted to attack the untrained boy...one or both of them would die. What a shidoni-doomed choice: to satisfy his selyn needs, he must give up the musical partner of a lifetime. But he had so little time--how could he part with the one thing that made life tolerable?

Besides, Tonyo had come to Gulf Sime Territory in pursuit of music. The way he told it, when he donated at Keon, the Householding near the north territory border, they had done everything short of locking him in a killroom to make him stay. So he had avoided Norlea's Householding, Carre.

Tonyo stopped at the stand run by the local Genfarm. Here he was waited on by another Gen, a breeder male by the look of it, well fed, strong, and alert enough to total prices with an abacus. The local farm produced healthy Gens. Prime kills.

But those days were over. For now, the Genfarmer could sell his Gens' selyn. But if, as the Tecton wanted and everyone else feared, Gens were made free citizens of Gulf Territory, they would be paid for their own selyn.

The Genfarmer would lose his means of earning a living.

Verl, the Genfarmer, was a patron of Milily's--but while he might appreciate Tonyo's performance, Zhag could zlin that he didn't like him acting as good as a Sime.

Tonyo chose the cheapest goods, but still had too little to cover the cost.

If Milily would pay Tonyo--

Well, that was not going to happen. The boy counted out his coins, and Zhag handed him as much as he dared put toward Tonyo's keep. The boy understood Selyn Taxes; he knew Zhag was not holding out.

With a frown, Tonyo set aside nut butter and cheese. Zhag said, "You

require protein, Tonyo."

"Pasta and rice are cheaper," the boy said. "I'll go fishing tomorrow--cook and eat 'em down by the river, so you don't have to zlin it."

But you'll be gone for hours! Zhag forced down panic. Tonyo's field unconsciously locked onto his own, soothing and steady. "That's...a good idea," Zhag managed.

"We'll talk about it later," said Tonyo, and turned back to his purchase.

Their funds would almost cover it now.

Selyn fields reflected emotions, not thoughts--Tonyo was making a decision, but Zhag assumed it was what else to put back. Then the Gen said,

"Verl, we're good customers. Let us have this for the money we have, and we'll buy you a porstan next time you come into Milily's."

The worker Gen gasped. To suggest that a Gen buy a drink for a Sime-- Even Zhag was shocked.

"Control your Gen!" Verl said through clenched teeth.

When Zhag made no move to discipline Tonyo, Verl added, "Get away from my stand. I don't sell to Gens or Genlovers!"

Nager hard as diamond, Tonyo began, "My money's as--"

"*Your* money?!" The furious Genfarmer pulled a whip from his belt. The worker Gen hid under the table, emanating fear--emotion every junct Sime craved.

"Tonyo--don't!" Zhag warned as Simes gathered.

But the boy had had enough. His field drew in upon itself, as if drained from within. Zhag knew what was coming and forced himself to stop zlinning.

Three Simes dropped bonelessly to the market floor.

Verl flicked his whip, caught Tonyo around the upper arm, and sent him careening into Zhag. The musician did not have the mass to hold him, and they went down in a heap.

The Sime sat up, wincing at the pain of Tonyo's whip cut. Tonyo immediately focused inside himself. His pain left the ambient, but blood trickled down his arm, pluming selyn, as he helped Zhag to his feet.

Without Tonyo's brilliant field masking it, the worker Gen's panic throbbed a siren song. A man with an eyepatch knocked the Genfarm table over--but a woman snatched up the cowering Gen. It squealed in terror as Sime tentacles grasped its arms--and then in pain as the one-eyed man tried to tear it from the woman's grasp.

Zhag's attention was torn between the kill about to happen and Tonyo's reaction to it. The boy had grown up in Gen Territory--had he ever *seen* a kill?

Zhag had to zlin, every sense alert to get Tonyo out of the market alive. Tonyo froze, nager damped almost into nonexistence. *Keep it that way,* Zhag willed.

Verl's whip snaked about the Sime woman's arm, lashing her lateral

sheaths. Zhag shared her gasp of pain--but she hung onto the Gen's other arm. The one-eyed man slashed the edge of his hand down on a sensitive nerve point.

As the woman bent over her injured arms, Verl flicked his whip back--
The man gripped the keening Gen from behind, tentacles lashing Sime and Gen arms together. Zhag felt Tonyo's relief. *He thinks a Sime can't kill from that position!*

The Gendealer raised his whip--
The one-eyed Sime pressed his lips to the back of the worker Gen's neck. The keening became a screech--

The whip came down--
Killbliss split the ambient. Junctcs screamed frustration.
Zhag howled in despair as pain/fear/ecstasy ripped through his nerves.
Tonyo's skin crawled.

Verl's whip slashed the killer, who dropped the corpse to turn and fight. Other Simes converged, some lashing out at one another, but more turning toward--

Dizzy with denial, Zhag lurched toward the luscious fear borne on the golden field he knew as *his*.

Another Sime cut between Zhag and his prey. A growl rose in his throat. He knocked the other aside, reaching for the promise of satisfaction denied so long, so long--

Something inside Zhag whimpered. But something else exulted.
His hand found the Gen's arm, tentacles seeking killgrip. *Mine!*
Zhag's laterals licked out toward perfect terror. *Tonyo!* He recognized sole satisfaction--as his soul rejected it.

His knees gave way.
The Gen went down with him. Zhag couldn't let go--he needed the selyn, the fear, the pain.

But not the kill! *Never again!* On a wave of sheer shen, he fell into blackness.

Zhag fell unconscious, pulling Tony Logan down with him. Shaken out of his shock, the Gen realized: with any other Sime, he would be dead--and it would be his own damn fault!

If a Sime attempted to draw selyn from a frightened Gen, the resistance burned out the Gen's nervous system. Zhag had torn himself out of the commitment caused by Tony's fear.

But Zhag's frail old systems could not take many such shocks. Shame replaced panic. *My fault, my fault.*

Abruptly turned from protected to protector, Tony looked up at converging Simes. *I know how to handle Simes*, he reminded himself. Their laterals licked out of their sheaths, zlinning him...and that made them

vulnerable. Zhag was out cold--he couldn't hurt him any more than he had already done.

Tony slammed the ambient again as he had learned to do at Keon. All around him, Simes fell unconscious.

But those still on their feet were angrier than ever. He had only moments before they were on him--

Tony slung his mentor over his shoulder, wincing at the pain from his whip cut, and sought an escape route.

"This way!" called a voice.

Tony slid through a tent flap that was raised, then closed behind him. As his eyes adjusted, he made out two Sime women, calm, dressed in neat shirts and trousers, no weapons visible.

He laid Zhag down on a grass mat. The older woman exclaimed, "He's unconscious! Greet, run to the pharmacy for some fosebine."

The younger woman dashed out the front of the tent as Tony knelt by Zhag. Their rescuer lowered the front canopy, but there was enough light for Tony to examine his friend.

The musician had the beginning of a black eye, scratches and whip cuts on his neck and hands, nothing that looked serious. But what about internal damage? "Zhag?"

"Stop that!" the woman scolded. "Wait for the medicine. What kind of Companion are you?"

"I'm not," said Tony. "Zhag's been sick, and I'm afraid he's badly hurt." He looked up. "It's my fault. I know how powerful my field is, but I panicked when I saw the kill."

"You're a Wild Gen!" the woman said in astonishment.

"I'm Tony Logan, from Heartland Gen Territory. Can you tell why Zhag isn't coming to?"

"You moved him while he was unconscious."

"They were trying to kill us."

"You they want to kill," the woman corrected. "Him they just want to murder. He may want to murder *you*, though."

The Simelan word "kill" was reserved for what Tony had just seen in the market--caused not merely by Sime need for selyn, but by the addiction to Gen death agony. Zhag had overcome that addiction, said to be harder to break than the worst drug dependency, long before he met Tony.

And Tony had triggered the craving for Gen fear today, when Zhag was in need. *What a fool I am!* "It was the first kill I ever saw," he said. "I still shouldn't have reacted. Zhag shouldn't have had to--" he realized that he had the right to say the forbidden Simelan word, as it was what had literally happened, "--shen himself to protect me."

"He'll forgive you for that," said the Sime woman. "It proves his disjunction is true. But then you moved him."

Tony still did not understand, so he just sat back on his heels and radiated confusion.

Sure enough, the woman explained. "Unconsciousness disrupts a Sime's sense of where he is--I can't explain it in Gen terms. Worse than the worst hangover you've ever had. And your friend will have disorientation on top of shen."

"Should I have left Zhag to the mercy of that crowd?"

The woman sighed. "Obviously you couldn't. And you didn't move him far. You're lucky they're fighting among themselves instead of hunting for you."

Tony looked around. Although he could hear shouting, the booth must be selyn shielded. Most of the market booths had canopies, but this one was a complete tent. Again he didn't have to ask. The woman told him, "My other daughter is Gen, as is Greet's husband. But we had the sense to leave them home today."

Zhag moaned. Tony focused his attention on his mentor, knowing his field soothed the fragile Sime. He pushed damp dark hair off the musician's pale forehead.

The frail body shivered, then arched into a convulsion. Tony pulled Zhag's belt off, doubled it, and wedged it into the Sime's mouth so he would not bite or swallow his tongue. The only other thing he knew to do was to examine Zhag's tentacles.

At full extension, the four handling tentacles on each wrist would reach the tips of the fingers. Normally they twined in graceful patterns about the hands, but Zhag's now stuck out stiffly over and under his clenched fists.

The small, pinkish gray laterals moved, though, retracting into their sheaths on either side of the Sime's wrists, then thrusting out on a gush of ronaplin, the selyn-conducting fluid. Zhag dripped the stuff when he performed, for shiltpron music required nageric as well as physical manipulation.

But Zhag was not performing now. "He's voiding selyn!" the Sime woman informed Tony.

Zhag had no selyn to spare. "Tell me what happens," Tony said, and held his hands close to, but not touching, Zhag's forearms. *Rest on my field. You're safe. No one will hurt you. You don't have to fight anymore.*

"That's amazing," said the Sime woman. "You say you're not a Companion?"

"Has he stopped voiding?" Tony asked, although as Zhag's laterals retracted and stayed in their sheaths, he was pretty sure he had achieved his goal.

"Yes. He's coming out of it."

The younger Sime woman returned with a vial of liquid. "The police are breaking up the fight."

Zhag's eyes opened a crack and immediately shut again as he groaned, putting both hands to his head. Tony followed Zhag's hands with his own, thinking soothing thoughts. The Sime gagged as he pulled the belt from his mouth, but after a moment whispered, "You're still here."

"I'm so sorry!" Tony told him. "I never meant to hurt you. Here--this will make you feel better."

After a moment Zhag allowed Tony to support his head and accepted the vial. "Fosebine?" he asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah--that's what they called it."

Zhag upended the vial and swallowed the contents in one gulp. He made such a face, Tony was almost tempted to laugh.

But the medicine worked. Tension drained from Zhag's face and body. His eyes finally opened beyond slits. "How did you manage not to get killed?"

"I was so worried about you, I forgot to be scared. Zhag, I'm sorry I lost control. I never meant to hurt you."

"I meant to *kill* you," said Zhag.

"No you didn't. The others did, but you shenned yourself rather than harm me." Seeing Zhag ponder that, he repeated what the woman had said, "It confirms your disjunction. I would trust you anywhere. I just hope that after this, you can trust *me*."

"You got us both out alive," Zhag replied. "You'd never seen a kill before, had you?"

"No."

"I hope you never do again." Then the Sime looked past Tony to their rescuers. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Halpern's Ironmongery," the older Sime woman replied, introducing herself as Eliza Halpern, her daughter as Greet. Then she demanded, "What were you thinking, to bring a Wild Gen to the market today? Any Gen, for that matter?"

"What's special about today?" asked Tony.

"It's turnover day for half of Norlea!" said Greet.

Turnover occurred when a Sime used up half a month's supply of selyn, and began the descent into need. It made Simes edgy and irritable--and explained why once the temptation disappeared they had turned to fighting each other rather than hunting Tony for selyn they didn't actually need.

"Why would so many Simes be on the same transfer schedule?" he asked.

"The Last Kill," Eliza replied.

"Of course," said Zhag. "I'm sorry, Tonyo--I forgot about that. I'm on a different schedule."

"What's the Last Kill?"

Greet explained, "When the Unity Treaty was signed, the Tecton set a date after which no more kills would be allowed. That was two and a half months ago."

Tony still didn't understand. "Why would so many kill on that one day?
They couldn't all be in need at once."

Greet said disapprovingly, "Every junct who could afford to pay for an
extra kill wasted enough selyn to...enjoy it."

Eliza took up the story. "Juncts hate channel's transfer--'fake kill' they
call it--and put it off as long as possible. Most of them have stayed on the
same schedule for the past two months--so today they all hit turnover."

"It will happen every month," added Greet, "until their cycles drift
apart."

"Or till they all disjunct," said Tony. He had studied up before coming
in-Territory: junct would reach a physical and psychological crisis six
months or so after their last kill. Then there would likely be worse scenes
than what had happened in the market. If not for his fight with his father,
Tony might have stayed home until that time was over.

Some Simes, he had been told, would die, forbidden to kill but unable to
accept channel's transfer. But most, he understood, would come through as
Zhag had....

The two women stared at him...and then at Zhag. Eliza asked, "Tony,
when do you plan to go home?"

He sensed something in the unexpected query, so he answered honestly.
"When I can show my dad I'm making a living at music. Maybe I'll visit for
Year's Turning."

"Visit?" the Sime woman questioned.

"My work is here, with Zhag. He can't go into Gen Territory--it'll be
years before people trust that Simes don't kill anymore. Even my mom was
scared when I came into Gulf, and she was born here! If she'd seen Zhag
today, though--"

Eliza turned to Zhag. "How long do you think you can lie to this young
man?" she asked. "If he finds out the truth from someone else, how can he
continue to trust you?"

"What...truth?" Tony asked. "Zhag?"

His Sime friend swallowed hard, and then answered, "For most junct
Simes...disjunction is not possible."

"But...the Tecton promised--"

"It was the only way to get the Gen governments to sign the Unity
Treaty," Greet said.

"You can't break the treaty in less than a year!" Tony protested.

Zhag shook his head, gasping at the pain the movement caused him.
"We won't break the treaty. Four or five months from now...junct Simes will
start to die."

"Why can't they disjunct?" Tony asked. "You did."

"So did my husband and I," said Eliza, "but it's only possible in First
Year. Our youngest Simes will survive...but junct who changed over more

than a few months ago will die."

Her daughter took up the story. "My sister and I never worried if we turned Sime or Gen--we wouldn't kill, and we wouldn't have to flee across the border like your mom did, Tony. We turned out one of each, and I married a Companion from Carre, so we have two Gens in the family."

Eliza added, "Our whole Territory would have disjuncted in another generation or two. Then we could have made a sensible treaty with the Gens. But last year, before we were ready, we faced the extinction of the human race. It's a bad choice, Tony...but it's the only one."

"Oh, my God," Tony whispered. "No wonder the juncts want to kill me--and murder Zhag. We're going to be alive in a few months, when they're all--"

Milily was junct. Their customers--all his new friends, the women he had--

"You let me make friends with people who're gonna be dead in six months!" Tony accused. "When were you planning to tell me, Zhag--when the shiltpron parlor was empty?"

"They won't all die," said Zhag. "Not that soon. I'm still alive after more than two years."

Tony realized...Zhag was far too old to have been in his First Year as a Sime two years ago. "...what? You don't kill. You certainly proved that today."

"That's right." Zhag's eyes fixed on Tony's. "It's almost a year since I killed, and I never will again."

"You said two years."

"I decided to disjunct two years ago. I didn't know I was too old. A year ago, to save my life, the channels tricked me into killing. I made them swear never to do it again--I would rather die. Eventually...I will."

Tony's head was spinning. Not knowing what to ask, he settled for, "What happened six months after you killed?"

Zhag frowned. "I'm not proud of it, even though Thea says I should be." "Thea?"

"A channel in Carre. She ceded me her Companion. Janine. I burned her. I...couldn't overcome the junct need for pain."

"But you didn't kill this Janine?"

"No. She says Companions expect a burn once in a while. I still hate what I did--I don't *want* to crave pain, Tonyo!" Tony saw tortured truth in Zhag's eyes as he continued. "I don't know if a Gen can comprehend, or even a nonjunct Sime. *I* am disjunct. My mind. My heart. *I will not kill*. But my body demands it. My mind and heart are stronger than my body."

Had Tony found his music in Zhag--the music just out of reach his whole life--only to lose it so soon? "How long do you have?" he asked, harshly controlling his sense of betrayal.

Zhag shrugged. "Months. Maybe another year. I don't think about it. Your field helps immensely, as does my music. You...will be my legacy. The music will live on in you, Tonyo...if you are willing to stay with me."

Tony wasn't surprised at the time frame--Zhag had that pinched, tired look Tony's grandmother had developed in the months before she died. If Zhag had a year, how much he could learn in that time! "Of course I'll stay," he replied. "Just--don't hide anything else from me, all right?"

Zhag managed a weary smile. "All right."

Someone raised the front tent flap--a Sime in the uniform of the local police. "Miz Halpern? You all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Officer," Eliza told him, "but we've got injured customers who require transportation to Carre."

"There are some channels here--" the policeman began.

"Zhag has all the help that can be given here. Waiting for a channel would just delay getting him to the infirmary."

"Sure thing, Ma'am," the officer agreed, and a few minutes later a buckboard pulled up before the tent. Tony squeezed himself between his friend and some barrels and boxes, and took Zhag's hands. Warm, dry handling tentacles lashed around his fingers. When Zhag's small moist laterals licked out of their sheaths, the Gen slid his hands up toward the Sime's elbows to allow them to connect.

"Zhag? What else can I do?" His friend was growing steadily weaker, and Tony bent close to hear him.

"Sing...to me." Zhag's soft voice trailed into silence.

Tony tried to ease the tightness in his throat before launching into one of the songs they performed every night:

"Taxes goin' higher,
Last month I sold my horse.
Border's too far for raiding--
How could things get worse?
Ol' Mizipi rising--
Flood and hurricane--"

His voice cracked, and Zhag gasped.

Tony remembered what Zhag had tried to teach him that morning: let his voice follow his field. But his "inner voice" was as agitated as the Sime he was trying to soothe.

Zhag could zlin through the enforced calm Tony had pasted over his worry. He saw his anxiety reflected in the Sime's pinched features...just as his anger and annoyance--the tone of his inner voice in the market today--had triggered anger and annoyance in surrounding Simes.

With shocking clarity, he recognized his power and responsibility. *He*

had started the fight in the marketplace... out of sheer ignorance. His stupid pride in being what Simes called a Giant Killer Gen. Did he *want* a Sime to die at his hands? That would make him...as junct as any Sime.

His enemy was neither Sime nor Gen: it was ignorance. Ignorance had nearly killed him today, and badly hurt Zhag. Tony determined to end his ignorance as rapidly as possible.

Putting his mind at ease set Tony's field at ease. Zhag relaxed, tentacles loosing their frantic grip.

Tony began to sing again, following his now-peaceful inner voice. Zhag's frown melted, although Tony knew it was less from the clear notes than from the peace in his nager.

When they pulled up at Carre's infirmary, two women ran out, one Sime, one Gen.

"Zhag!" gasped the Sime woman, jumping onto the wagon. To Tony she said, "Don't move," and extended her laterals to zlin the interaction between the two men.

She turned a brilliant smile on Tony. "Oh, thank God! Zhag--where did you find him?"

Zhag opened his eyes. "Thea," he whispered.

"What have you been doing, you fool?" she asked.

"It's my fault," Tony replied. "Can you help Zhag? He's awfully weak." His Gen Territory accent once again drew that curious reaction.

"You're not a Companion?"

"I'm a musician, like Zhag," Tony replied. "Will he be all right?"

"He will now. Can you relinquish him to me? We'll take him into the infirmary. Janine will care for him while I do a deep contact on you--but I'm sure already."

Tony followed the channel's instructions as they carefully moved Zhag inside. Thea deep-zlinned Zhag, then gave him more medicine and left him in Janine's care. She took Tony into a treatment room, where she dealt with his cuts and bruises.

"Zhag will be fine once he has transfer," Thea told Tony. "He's off-schedule by almost two days--his injuries aren't enough to account for that much loss."

Tony told her about Zhag's convulsions and voiding.

"You shenned him?"

"No--he did it to himself. I take full responsibility, though. Now that I've seen a kill, I'll know better than to react if it happens again."

"Shen!" she swore. "How many Gens were killed? How many others saw and were traumatized?"

"I only saw one kill, and I was the only other Gen there."

Thea frowned, her eyes unfocused as she zlinned Tony's reaction when he remembered. "You were frightened."

"It was the first time I actually saw a Sime kill a Gen."

"How did Zhag react? To your fear?" Thea asked.

"He...started to attack me," Tony carefully recalled. "Before I got control of myself, he shenned out."

"You're sure? You didn't shen him?"

"No." He searched his memory, knowing details were important. "I wasn't exactly *afraid* when I saw the kill. Not for myself. It was--a chill up the spine because what I'd only heard about was really happening."

"It doesn't matter," said Thea, "especially with a field like yours.

Simple startlement can provoke killmode."

Tony nodded, looking down at the bruises on his arms. "I know *now*. But in the market I didn't understand--I certainly wasn't afraid of *Zhag*--I never have been."

"You have no reason to be--today Zhag proved our worst fears: he'll suicide-abort before he'll kill."

"Suicide? Is that why he was voiding selyn? Thea...what did I do to him?" Tony asked.

The channel put a hand over his. "You provoked him--but if he were in good health, he could have handled it. Now, though, his systems are so fragile that aborting sent them into chaos." She gently squeezed his hand. "What I zlinned in that wagon is that you are the only reason he survived."

"Yeah, but I'm also the reason he's so sick. I didn't know I shouldn't move him."

"You didn't know? Where are you from?"

"Heartland Territory."

"How in the world did you get to Norlea? The Tecton is doing out-Territory Companion training in the Sime Centers."

"I'm not a Companion," Tony repeated. "I know, I know--every channel that zlines me wants me to move into a Householding, but I came here looking for Zhag's music."

Thea looked into his eyes. "Would you be willing to be *Zhag's* Companion?"

"What would I have to do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Give him transfer. Otherwise, not much more than you're already doing. Less, actually, as he will get well with the right transfer mate."

"Get well? You mean he doesn't have to die of disjunction?" Tony asked eagerly.

"That's right."

"Yes!" Tony said at once. "I mean, we can work together? I don't have to live in a Householding?"

That smile again. "We'll train you, but Zhag needs you with him. He's a junct channel, so he *will* have occasional problems--but if you can bring him through psycho-spatial disorientation, you can handle just about anything. I

know you can do the job. What concerns me is your commitment. What if you decide to go back to Heartland Territory?"

"Hajene," Tony said, using the term of respect for a channel that he had learned at Keon, "I'm young, but I know what I was meant to do with my life. Zhag *is* the music I came here for. I can't think of anything to keep me from staying, but I have to be sure I understand. Why me? Why hasn't Janine or another Companion already done what you say I can do?"

"Because Zhag is a channel, like me. It's much harder to find him a matchmate than it is for a renSime." RenSimes were the majority of Simes, who were not channels.

"And a matchmate," he wanted to be sure, "can keep a junct Sime from dying if he's too old to disjunct?"

"Yes. Keon and Carre are trying to match as many Simes as we can before people begin dying. But we are at a huge disadvantage."

"Not enough Gens," Tony realized.

"Not enough Gens who are not frightened. The least fear, the least resistance, and there will be a kill."

Tony thought a moment. "And not necessarily of a Gen. I nearly killed Zhag today."

She didn't correct his terminology. "It's Zhag's responsibility, not yours. But when you give him transfer, you *are* going to have to take some responsibility."

"Just tell me what to do."

"In transfer, Zhag has to be completely open to your feelings. It doesn't matter if your fear is *for* him rather than *of* him. Fear will trigger killmode--and Zhag will abort. Weak as he is, he won't survive shen a second time."

"I'm not afraid. Zlin the truth of it."

She nodded. "It's hard to believe you didn't grow up in a Householding. But can you handle the paradox? Zhag *needs* a killmode transfer--it's the only way to satisfy him physically. But emotionally he will reject it--if you trigger killmode, he *will* abort," she repeated.

"Then what should I do?" Tony asked in frustration.

She sighed. "How often have you given transfer?"

"I've donated twice."

"Donated?" Thea asked. "Your field is in synch with mine, responding like an experienced Donor's--and you're telling me you've never given transfer?!"

He shrugged. "I can do it. I met kids twelve or fourteen years old who are Companions in Keon. I'll bet you've got some here, too. All the Companions say transfer's the best thing--"

But Thea shook her head vehemently, hands out, palms toward him, tentacles tightly retracted. "No, no--you can't force killbliss on an injured

channel in disjunction crisis as your First Transfer! Shen and shid! I was worried about convincing Sectuib when I thought you were experienced! We'll find someone appropriate for you today, train you over the next four weeks, and next month you and Zhag can try it."

"What happens to Zhag *this* month?" Tony demanded.

"We've brought him through crisis before. Janine is his closest match here, but we'll probably want to overmatch him." She sat back and looked Tony up and down, shaking her head as if what she saw contradicted what she zlinned. "You slightly overmatch him now, but we'll give you a conservative match this month--no risk of knocking you out of synch with Zhag. But you've got to experience a channel's draw without having to control the transfer at the same time."

"Thea--I'm young and strong and healthy. Zhag is old and weak and sick. He can't hurt me."

"You may be right--but Sectuib won't risk Zhag's hurting you...and I won't risk your hurting Zhag."

Tony remembered his decision on the way to Carre. There were too many things he had to learn. Thea continued, "Don't go near Zhag before his transfer, so he won't fix on you again--but I want you there, high-field, immediately afterward. Then we'll tell him you'll give him transfer next month."

"Why didn't he ask me?" Tony wanted to know. Then he realized-- "Oh, shit. I told him I didn't want to be a Companion. I meant that I wouldn't go off to a Householding, not that I wasn't willing to give him my selyn."

This time Thea's smile was wistful. "Self-destructive attitudes are typical of disjunction crisis. Zhag surely recognized a potential matchmate...you did, too, and just didn't know what you were feeling. Well," she shrugged, "we have to deal with the existing situation. Zhag is always terrified of hurting his Donor. You'll have to seduce him--but I expect that will be easy enough. Sectuib should be back soon. He'll verify my readings and schedule your training."

Thea gave Tony a clean shirt. "I'll put your old one in the rag bin. Go wash up before you meet Sectuib. Can you read Simelan well enough to follow the signs to his office?"

"Sure. My mom made sure that if I changed over and had to run to Gulf, I wouldn't be illiterate."

"Smart mom," Thea told him.

He didn't tell her how angry his father had been--or that his mother regretted making it easy for her son to leave home.

Tony took advantage of hot water and soft towels, and felt much more ready to be presented to the head of Householding Carre. It wasn't much of a presentation--the Sectuib in Carre stole a few minutes to deep-zlin Tony, confirm Thea's diagnosis, and assign his first lesson after he had transfer

with a channel named Sansee. Apparently he wouldn't even meet Sansee until their appointment.

"Now go over to the refectory and have something to eat!" Sectuib told him in dismissal. Tony suddenly remembered that he was still hungry.

But he hardly noticed what he ate--his mind was on Zhag. The Sime musician was more than a skilled shiltpron player. There were others who played amazing music...but not the music of Tony's soul, the rhythm and harmony always just beyond his reach...until he touched its reality in Zhag Paget.

It was an hour till Zhag's transfer. Tony wanted to see his friend, but understood that he would make matters worse. Still, he couldn't help wandering back toward the infirmary.

Simes were leaving, bandaged, provided with transfer if necessary.

Householdings had first gained wary acceptance among juncts because of channels' healing ability. Local Simes came to rely on them, got to know the Gen Companions, and some, like Zhag and the Halpern family, chose to leave the kill behind. But most of these Simes were junct, and in months or a few short years would be dead. But what could Tony do, other than save the one Sime he could?

He entered the infirmary through the twisting corridor that served to buffer nageric fields. Nevertheless, he held his own field in tightly, not knowing whether he might encounter injured Simes around the corner.

The lobby was empty except for two channels: Thea and the Sectuib in Carre. Their backs were to Tony as they bent over a chart--Zhag's chart, he realized as he heard the Sectuib say, "He's fixed on Tonyo. Neither you nor I can imitate that field of his, and it's a sure bet Janine can't."

"Then it has to be Tonyo," said Thea.

"No," said the Sectuib. "We could lose both of them." He raised a tentacle to forestall her protest. "You zlinned the potential in that boy. Zhag managed a clean abort this afternoon, but he has no strength left. A botched abort would surely kill him...and it could leave Tonyo crippled for life."

"Nerve damage," Thea agreed with a sigh. "He might never regain nageric control."

I could lose my music! Tony realized, and clamped down hard lest the two channels zlin his reaction.

But...if Zhag dies, I lose it anyway, he realized.

Could he make the Sectuib understand that, or was the man a Sime version of Tony's father, unable to comprehend music as a sacred vocation?

Zhag understood. But Zhag was dying.

Before he could gather courage to try to make his case to the stern Sectuib, though, a Gen came running from another corridor.

"Sectuib--Hajene! That woman with the torn lateral is voiding--Jaramee can't stop it!"

The two channels disappeared down the corridor with the Gen. Tony went to the desk and picked up Zhag's chart. The clipboard was thick with pages of hasty penmanship, but on the top sheet he made out a list of medications. He recognized only fosebine--and a note that "patient resists intil and trautholo," whatever the hell that meant.

And at the bottom, "Condition: critical."

There was a mark beside the word "Prognosis:" as if someone had started to write something. *Terminal*, Tony realized. *Zhag's life. My future. It all hinges on this moment.*

Nobody trusted his commitment--not even Zhag. Consciously, Zhag had been trying to train him so that he could go on after the musician was dead...but unconsciously...Thea had said Zhag recognized his matchmate, but dared not hope--

Zhag has to trust me always to be there for him. That's why he wants me to use the Simelan version of my name--to show I'm not some Wild Gen who will go running across the border at the first provocation. Zhag's the other half of my creativity. Our lives are lived to the same rhythm, the same harmony. If I deny him...I deny myself.

Tonyo put down the chart, and went to Zhag's room. Janine still sat by the bed, concentrating. Zhag was asleep or unconscious, barely breathing.

Janine looked up. "Go away!" she whispered sharply. "You'll ruin the work we've done!"

"Thea needs--uh, requires you, Janine. She and Sectuib are trying to help a patient with a torn lateral."

"She wouldn't send *you*!"

Tonyo looked into the Companion's eyes. She *had* to understand. "Take your time finding her," he said, "and then say you believed me."

"Tonyo--leave, please!"

He stood his ground. "Tell me you can save his life, Janine. Swear you believe it, and I'll go."

She bit her lip, and tried to stare him down...but she couldn't. "And if you die?" she asked.

"My conscience, not yours. But I won't die, and neither will Zhag. You're Gen. You understand what Simes can't."

After a long moment, she nodded, and rose carefully from her chair beside the transfer couch. Tonyo ignored the chair and, relying on Janine's experience to ease the transition for Zhag, sat in the channel's position on the specially-constructed couch. He was supported in position to grasp Zhag's forearms, and, when the time came--

Janine bent and kissed Tonyo's cheek. "Good luck!" she whispered, and was gone, leaving Tonyo once more where he belonged. It reminded him of sitting on the steps of Zhag's house as they had that morning, but with their roles reversed. Now it was Tonyo who had to find the way to make Zhag

understand, by that same instinct with which Zhag had taught him to follow his field with his voice.

Before Tonyo even touched him, Zhag's chest rose and fell in a deep breath. *Yes, Tonyo willed, I have what you need, Zhag--I'll share it with you, just as we share our music.*

He played their music in his mind. His joy when he heard new sounds from Zhag's shiltpron, the lessons he had learned-- What music they would make--new music they would compose together, the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Perhaps Zhag sensed the music in his field...Tonyo took heart when a small smile touched the corners of Zhag's mouth.

He slid his hands forward, aligning their arms in transfer position.

Zhag's tentacles lay under the skin along his forearms, sheaths visible because he had almost no flesh to hide them. But they did not emerge from the wrist openings, nor did his hands grip Tonyo's forearms.

Tonyo felt for the tentacle roots. Where was the reflex point--?

He pressed gently around the root of each tentacle. The handling tentacles emerged and wrapped around his arms, but the laterals remained stubbornly sheathed. It seemed cruel to heighten Zhag's need--worse, he'd been told, than any Gen hunger--but he was there to assuage it. Zhag should feel something like the pleasure of hunger just before a good meal.

Tonyo conjured up his hunger of an hour ago, along with the music that always drew Zhag's laterals forth. In his mind he played the sad and difficult songs that demanded all of Zhag's virtuosity...the songs of need.

The small, sensitive laterals licked out of their sheaths and settled on Tonyo's arms. He smiled. *Now--let's do this!*

Zhag's eyes opened, at first unfocused, then fixed on Tonyo. All his effort could not take his voice above a whisper. "Tonyo--no!" Weakly, he tried to pull his arms away--but his tentacles remained seated.

"Shut up, Zhag," Tonyo told him. "Just *feel* it!"

He ignored the protest in Zhag's eyes, his feeble attempts to escape, keeping the Sime under control by sheer power of will. Something inside him erupted with anticipation. *This is even better than our music!* it told him, and he leaned forward to touch his lips to Zhag's.

It was not a kiss. Twice Tonyo had performed this act with Tecton channels, an impersonal touch that completed the circuit for the transfer of selyn. In those transactions he had felt nothing except vague disappointment.

With Zhag he felt hope and exhilaration.

When need turned him inside-out, he rode the music like an ocean wave. He was pure energy, blissfully pouring life and warmth into the welcoming void. It was perfect harmony, exact counterpoint-- A peak of pleasure, another, and then-- What--? Poignant ebb-- No! Not enough!

He struggled, needing more, denying that need in crashing discord.

What more could there possibly be?!

He caught the panting, terrified Gen in a woodland clearing. Need clawed at his vitals--need for the fear of the Gen writhing and screaming under his tentacles. He pulled it to him, glorying in anticipation of the kill.

He pressed his lips roughly to the Gen's whimpering mouth. Terror sang through his nerves--pain--sweet death agony burned away his need. Giddy with satisfaction, he let the husk of the dead Gen drop carelessly from his hands and tentacles....

He was alive!

Warm hands loosed their grip on Zhag's arms and fell away. A head rested heavily against his neck. Fresh, clean, soap scent filled his nostrils. He was brimming with life, but--

His vision was obscured by fallen sunlight. It took a moment to recognize Tonyo's blond hair--he never looked at the boy, always consumed in his golden nager. But now...nothing.

The door opened. Thea and the Sectuib in Carre entered--and stopped so abruptly that Janine, behind them, almost ran into the two Simes.

Tonyo raised his head, blue eyes wide with awe.

"You're alive!" Zhag gasped.

The Gen grinned. "I've never *been* so alive!"

Carre's Sectuib stepped forward, laterals extended. "What the shidoni-doomed shen happened here?"

Zhag was too busy taking stock of himself to answer. His pain was gone, along with his need. He had a sense of well being so alien he couldn't respond to it. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, and...he couldn't zlin.

"Tonyo--what have you done to me?" he asked. "I haven't felt like this since--"

"The last time you killed?" Tonyo asked. "You can say it, Zhag. You don't ever have to do it again."

But that wasn't it. As Zhag changed focus to the trio on the other side of the room, a wave of vertigo swept over him.

"What's wrong?" Tonyo gasped.

"Nothing serious," said the Sectuib, zlinning them. He shook his head.

"God protects fools and children."

"Zhag's alive!" Tonyo protested. "That's more than you could promise."

"Tonyo!" Zhag put a hand on the boy's arm...and felt his ability to zlin return as he sensed the pulse-pulse-pulse of selyn production. He had been wrong--Tonyo was storing far less selyn than before their transfer, but his field was no less vital. He would be able to perform tonight.

"Thea," the Sectuib was saying, "zlin this. You will probably never see

anything like it again."

"What's wrong with Zhag?" Tonyo asked anxiously.

A chuckle escaped the channel's attempt to be stern. "You burned him!" he told the Gen.

"...what?" Tonyo and Zhag spoke at once, then looked at one another.

"How could a Gen burn a Sime?" Zhag asked in confusion.

"Tonyo is what the juncts call a Giant Killer Gen," the Sectuib explained.

"I know," Zhag said. "Otherwise I wouldn't allow him to work around the juncts at Milily's."

"Here we call them Natural Donors--Gens who instinctively control transfer. Being in control eliminates fear. Of course they still require training," he added with a sharp glance at Tonyo, "because *they* can harm Simes."

"Zhag needed pain," said Tonyo. "I...felt it."

"I don't doubt it," the Sectuib replied. "But next time deliver something like your pain when the whip cut you today."

Tonyo blushed. "Oh. Zhag, I'm sorry. I'll learn to do it right."

"It couldn't have been more right," Zhag told him.

"Tonyo," said the Sectuib, "you know that, as a channel, Zhag has a dual selyn system?"

"Yes."

"You filled his primary and secondary systems, and when he wasn't satisfied, you forced more selyn into his primary system against his resistance. It's only a slight burn--and Zhag, you feel strange because your fields have never been unbalanced in this particular way."

Zhag's secondary system, which Tecton channels used to provide transfer and he used to play the shiltpron, often contained more selyn than his primary system, which stored selyn for daily living. He couldn't remember ever having it unbalanced in the other direction. "Tonyo, I can correct the imbalance if you'll let me touch you again."

Immediately, his Gen reached out to him. Zhag settled his tentacles, laid his head on Tonyo's shoulder, and let the two systems level. The movement of energy erased the effects of the burn, and Zhag felt even better.

Had he ever felt this good in his life? He wanted to run, to dance, to play his shiltpron--but first, "I'm hungry!" he announced in astonishment.

Tonyo laughed. "Let's go to the refectory--I was too worried to eat much earlier."

"I'll have to have an accounting first," the Sectuib said, and Zhag's good cheer disappeared. Numbly, he submitted to deep contact, unsurprised to hear that he had received more selyn than last month. "You're still in the same category," the channel reassured him.

"Yeah--but early," he grumbled. He counted out the carefully hoarded

coins while Janine made notes. The Sectuib deducted the collection fee, and held out the rest to Tonyo.

The boy made no move to take it.

"You were paid for your donations, Tonyo," said Thea.

"I can't take money for what Zhag and I just did. I'd feel like a whore!"

"Take it," said Zhag. "You can eat for the next month."

Tonyo frowned. "Can't we have a private arrangement, with no money changing hands?"

The Sectuib explained, "The government will collect Zhag's taxes, no matter what. We never used to do accounting inside the Householdings--I've got couples who've been transfer partners for years. But the new laws apply to everyone."

Tonyo reluctantly accepted the money, but did not put it away. "It's your money," he said to Zhag.

"You earned it, Tonyo."

"Zhag, it's not *right*. We did it together--the way we play music together. At least take half."

"Shen it!" Zhag snapped. "I'm beholden to you for my life! Isn't that enough?"

Thea said, "Zhag! That's post syndrome talking."

Zhag felt guilty at the boy's crestfallen look--but he also felt the anger, along with a hundred other emotions he had been incapable of expressing for nearly two years.

But Tonyo was in the grip of Gen post-syndrome, unable to feel bad for more than a moment. "Zhag," he said, "I know it bothers you to need me to stay alive...but isn't it more important that you *don't* need me to keep you from killing?"

At the boy's words--he *felt* it, no more doubt or questioning! The most important thing was completely in his own control. Zhag's mood flipped back to exhilaration, carrying him even higher than he had been a moment ago. Tonyo grinned--and Zhag realized it was in response to his own expression.

And when he thought his mood could not go any higher, Janine held out the receipt form for Tonyo to sign...and he saw the boy write "Tonyo Logan." The Simelan version of his name. *He's going to stay!* And Tonyo looked up at him as if he felt and shared the overwhelming emotion it caused in Zhag.

The Sectuib left Thea and Janine to explain to Tonyo what to do as Zhag's pent-up feelings surfaced.

"I know what Zhag requires," said Tonyo. "He'll work it off on stage tonight." He turned a charming smile on Thea. "Why don't you and Janine come to the performance?"

Zhag expected an automatic refusal--Householders did not frequent shiltpron parlors--but to his surprise Thea said, "I can't promise...but I'd love

to see you perform."

After a stop at Carre's refectory, where Zhag actually enjoyed eating, they started walking home. Zhag had had to conserve energy for so long, had been so weak, that he wanted to run--almost felt he could fly. As his steps speeded, Tonyo scurried to keep up. "We have time to get there," the Gen protested. "We don't go on for nearly two hours."

"I'm ready to play right now," Zhag told him. And just because he *could*, he turned cartwheels down the street, then backflipped back to his Gen.

Tonyo laughed delightedly. "Are you gonna do that on stage tonight?"

"Maybe. I don't know *what* I'm gonna do."

Tonyo watched him with a puzzled look. Out of the blue, he asked,

"Zhag...how old are you?"

"Six," the musician replied.

"Oh. Well, how old were you when you changed over?"

Out-Territory Gens figured age from birth, Zhag remembered. "Almost fifteen."

Tonyo was wide-eyed. "I thought you were at least my dad's age. You're only four years older than I am!"

Zhag laughed at his astonishment. "I feel like a child--as if I didn't even know the kill existed."

Tonyo pondered for a moment. Then, very seriously, he said, "That's because you gave it to me."

"Gave what to you?"

"The kill," Tonyo replied. "During transfer. Thea said you'd shen out if you felt killmode, so I guess you made me feel it instead. Was that your First Kill?"

"Tonyo, what are you talking about?"

The young Gen frowned. "I was Sime," he said, "chasing a Gen through the woods. I caught it...and I...killed it."

Zhag zlined Tonyo's emotions, the rush of anticipation, the glee at his victim's terror, the bliss of the kill...

"Shen," he whispered. "Tonyo, you *can't* know those feelings!"

"I got them from you."

Zhag shook his head. "I've never hunted. All my kills were...regulated." A chill ran up his spine. "It doesn't matter," he decided, not wanting to know how a Gen could get such a feel for Sime experience. "It was what you...needed...to be able to give me that transfer. Lucky for me you have a vivid imagination, yes?"

Tonyo nodded, accepting. How long would he continue to accept Zhag's word, especially when the Sime had no idea what he was talking about?

"Come on!" said Zhag, as they entered a lane overhung with ancient oaks. He caught a branch, and swung from one tree to another. When he hung upside down by his knees from the last one, he finally got the laughter

he wanted from his Gen.

"You're not even out of breath," said Tonyo. "I could use some of that
Sime energy for singing."

"You sing just fine." Zhag chuckled, landing on his feet beside the Gen.
"Tonight I'll be able to hear you without working at it. I hope Thea can
come."

"So do I," said Tonyo.

"You think she's after you, like all the others?"

"Not Thea!" Tonyo protested. "Can't you tell she's in love with you? I
knew it the minute I saw you together."

The Gen's words made Zhag feel warm. The ravages of disjunction
might not be erased with one good transfer, but--

Suddenly, his mind and heart were flooded with melody. Tonyo's field
responded in harmony, and Zhag laughed in pure joy. They were about to
create something unique--something he could never have composed alone.

"Come on, Tonyo!" he urged, eager to have his instrument in his hands. "We
have a new song to finish before showtime!"