

K.D. WENTWORTH

THE EMBIANS

AFTER SETTING THE AUDIO recorder for the night, Shayna wraps her fingers through the wires of the treetop blind and stares into the heavy darkness, straining to catch the next mating display the instant it flares. Just beyond the ragged edge of the rain forest, the unseen ocean hisses against the shore and salt hangs in the sultry air. Somewhere out in the sweltering sea of black, a small animal squalls and dies in the jaws of some nameless predator.

Flash of electric-green with orange diagonals. Melds into the yellow of fresh lemons. Softens...fades....

Darkness.

Cerulean blue. Swirls of carmine that suffuse with purple, brightening as though they will explode.

Darkness...darkness.

Shayna sighs. "They're so incredibly complex, so varied. If I could just sort the nuances into a key, I know I could make my thesis work."

Her expedition partner, Mae, dutifully records the mating displays on the night-cam in every wave-length from ultra-violet to infra-red for later analysis. She is eight years older than Shayna, working on her doctoral dissertation, rather than a mere master's thesis. Her movements are careful and methodical, everything always labeled, thought out, planned. Shayna understands herself to be more intuitive, knowing when an answer is ready, it will surface from the depths of her mind like an offering. Until then, she must wait, absorb data, allow her subconscious to analyze and correlate.

Mae shifts on the camp stool, so close in the narrow blind, Shayna can feel the heat of her skin, while out in the hot, tangled night of a world that has never known a moon, or tide, or the chill embrace of snow, the serpentlike embians slip through soft-fleshed trees and serenade each other with light. In the daylight, they appear vaguely humanoid, with similar number and placement of limbs, but their flesh is so dense, their bones are only cartilage, and they are as sinuous as eels. Their skin is a mottled gray-green and they rarely attain five feet in height. They produce no intelligible sounds.

"You might as well pick a different thesis and be done with it. Those displays are no more a language than wolves back on Earth howling at the moon. They're just mating lures." Mae jerks. "Over there!"

Acid-red. Sharpens to actinic violet that hurts the eyes. Flash...flash. White afterimage.

Darkness.

Shayna lifts sweat-soaked hair off her neck, impatient for the next display. "I think they're arguing. He's ready for her, has been for hours, but she's playing coy."

"How do you know it's mixed pair?" Mae asks, calmly sensible as always. "Other teams have documented male to male pairings, as well as female to female." From the first moment they met at the university funding this study, Mae reminded Shayna of a redwood that has stood for a thousand years and is no longer capable of surprise or wonder. "They're acting on instinct," Mae says. "When the time is right, they'll come together."

Come together. Such a pale expression for the incandescent union of embian or human. Shayna's fingers tighten until the blind's wires cut into her skin.

Impossible blue-black hovering on the edge of ultra-violet. Shot through with sparkles of green. Expands...expands. Flash of red.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Shayna's pulse leaps, settles into the alien rhythm of the lights. She turns to Mae. "He's dying for her, and she's laughing, climbing just out of reach."

"Quit projecting." Mae's voice is curt, impatient. She leans away from the damp, sweaty touch of Shayna's thigh.

Muted green. Swirls of magenta.

Pale rose. Pool of lavender.

Darkness.

Compromise, thought Shayna. One relents, so the other bides his time. In the end, they will find a way to understand each other.

Olive.

Lime.

Darkness.

Red, Shayna thinks, fountains of orange-gold. White so hot it would burn you to ashes.

Glimmering pure green.

Darkness... darkness...darkness.

The minutes pass, stretch into tens. Night hangs over the rain forest like a suffocating black shroud. After an hour, Mae exhales and clicks off the night-cam. "I think that's it for now. We might as well pack it in."

"Wait!" Shayna feels on the edge of understanding something vast and complex. She senses unseen colors lurking out there, waiting to be discovered, interpreted, felt. There are worlds within those colors, epiphanies too large for the conscious mind to enfold. Her hands knot together. "There might be a few more."

"Look, the only pair within range found each other." Mae's voice is exasperated. "What more do you want?"

What she wants, with a fierceness that frightens her, is something of her own, something not observed and written down in neat piles of notebooks, or catalogued on a computer screen, or stored as a visual record. She wants Mae's hand tracing the contours of her bare shoulder, craves Mae's perspiring body sleeked against her side in the loneliness of the night while outside the rain patters down and, inside, recycled air whirs. From the beginning, though, Mae has made it quite clear she does not waste her time on petty matters of the flesh with anyone, man or woman. Mae is all business, inviolate to everything but concerns of the mind, and her first rejection of Shayna's overtures was so painful, Shayna cannot bear to risk a second.

Her face hot, Shayna switches the lantern on, and then; by its pristine white glow, pulls up the trap door and climbs down to the dark tangle of the forest floor alone.

SHAYNA SLEEPS restlessly in the confines of her own bunk until noon, Aelta's noon, that is. The days are longer here, like the steamy, languid nights, and few creatures of any real mass stir under the blazing cauldron of the yellow-white sun. Inside the small research bungalow on the forest floor, though, the conditioned air is blissfully cool, allowing sleep or activity, whatever the hour.

Mae awakens even later and emerges from her room, rumpled and blinking. Her short ash-gold hair is plastered to her forehead. She is all muscles and planes, sense and organization. She stretches and smiles wanly. "We got some good footage last night."

Sitting at the metal kitchenette counter, Shayna nods over unsweetened coffee.

"I want to go to the cliffs and film the burrows again," Mae says. "My last tapes were too dark."

Shayna finds herself reluctant to return there, although it is safe to walk the jungle in the daylight. Embians are nocturnal and the local insect population disdains the alien taste of human skin and blood, but the sight of the sleepers curled into tight fetal balls, the light-generating organs on their chests pale and lifeless, disturbs her. When she looks at them so vulnerable, she feels

guilty for spying on their love-making night after night.

"I have some transcriptions to make." Her hands tremble as she picks up her cup.
"I'll meet you in the blind later."

The displays begin early, while the air still is suffused with light the shade of dark honey and the embians are barely visible.

Plum. Starburst of amber. Ochre.

Darkness.

Watching the embians is the only time she feels real anymore. Shayna rakes her fingers back through sweat-sheened hair. If only they could install fans or air-conditioning in the blind, she would stay here all night, every night, but the embians have preternaturally sharp hearing. Conversation does not bother them, but the least mechanical sound drives them to perform their dazzling mating rituals elsewhere in the rain forest's steamy privacy. The night-cam and audio recorder, small as they are, have to be heavily shielded. Shielding the entire blind would be inordinately expensive, and the university that funded them subscribes to the long tradition that fieldwork should be difficult and uncomfortable.

She clicks on the sound recorder and sets it on the floor between her booted feet. The other camp stool remains empty. She envisions her partner with a broken leg, or perhaps a concussion, lying helpless and in pain among the trees' exposed, pulsating roots so that Shayna would be forced to trace her by the signal of her personal transponder. She sighs. Mae wouldn't be so distant, so self-sufficient then. The wire screen creaks as she leans back and wonders what it would be like if people spent half as much time learning about each other as they do trying to understand the embians.

Aquamarine.

Darkness.

A trill pierces the silence, full of loss and longing. What do they seek from each other, she wonders. A lifetime of commitment, or only a moment of ecstatic union? Do they raise their young together, or abandon them to survive on their own? Why do the males seek each other out at times, and then court females at others? So little is known of them except these dazzling displays of light.

Flash of peach. Intensifies to orange. Shot through with yellow lines that bleed into each other.

Darkness...darkness.

Mae pulls herself up the ladder, closes the trap door and drops, panting, onto her stool. "Sorry I'm late." She clicks off the lantern. She smells faintly of sweat, overlaid by a heavy floral soap, jasmine. "I was so filthy that I

showered when I got back, but now I'm wringing wet again." She laughs ruefully.

Indigo. Mottled with gray. Fades....

Darkness.

Shayna stares hard out into the liquid blackness, feeling the heat radiating from the woman at her side. Her own skin burns with its nearness. "I was getting worried."

"Look, I said I was sorry!" Mae's tone is stiff. She scrapes the camp stool toward the far corner.

Cinnamon. Saturated with blood-red.

Darkness.

Blue-violet. Brightens....

Darkness...Darkness.

"Never mind." Shayna remembers touching the damp curve of Mae's cheek, and how Mae recoiled that one, terrible time she dared that minor intimacy.

Red-violet.

Lilac.

Darkness.

Purple, strong and true, piercing the night like a beacon.

Darkness...darkness...darkness

"I'd rather be here than anywhere else in the universe." Shayna stretches languidly. "It's like being on the edge of a wonderful secret, something no one else shares."

Mae exhales. "Your first assignment is usually like that, but then the newness wears off. And sometimes it can be just bloody miserable. On my last trip out, there was this asshole, William, who wouldn't take no for an answer. He was always after me, you know, rubbing up against me, touching me, and I hate to be pawed like that. It was so damn humiliating."

Shayna's gaze is drawn to a different quadrant of the rain forest as another display begins.

Sapphire.

Darkness.

She leans her head back, half-closes her eyes. "If -- you were an embian, what color would you be?"

"Hmmm...." She can almost hear the slow smile spreading across Mae's face. "Silver, I think, like moonlight on the ocean. What about you?"

No moon rides these Stygian skies, one of the things Shayna misses most. Arms braced behind her head, she stares up at the ice-bright stars. "The hottest shade of vermilion I could find."

Jade.

Darkness.

"So, what do you think -- two males, two females, or a mixed pair?" Mae asks. "I can check the infra-red tomorrow when I review the tape and see who's right."

Burst of cobalt. Explosion of red-violet. Fades....

Darkness.

Glimmering pool of pine-green. Expands. Shower of cadmium-orange.

Darkness.

"Two females," Shayna says.

Mae leans toward her, redolent with jasmine. "Why?"

"Because they're coming together so fast, no games at all, just inquiry and prompt resolution."

Aqua.

Sea-blue.

Darkness.

There is a momentary flash as Mae checks her watch to mark the time. "Okay, I'll let you know tomorrow."

Azure so intense the eye must look away.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Shayna tries to sleep, but colors flow like rivers behind her eyelids, unadulterated greens melting into raging, violent blues, oranges that erupt into an energetic sea of yellow-white. What is it the embians say out there in the darkness? What do they promise each other with each new pattern?

She tosses, presses her hands over hot dry eyes, tries to blank her mind, compose herself for the balm of sleep, but the colors intensify until she can taste them on the back of her tongue, hear them ringing in her ears. They mean something. She slips out of her bunk and sits on the edge, pushing her fingertips against her temples. Red throbs along her optic nerves, seeps deep into her brain. Amber melds with her unconscious. Violet sings.

Finally, she turns on the light and searches the stores. Somewhere in the station she has seen sets of colored bulbs for the lanterns, used as lures in the earliest studies when others besides herself had postulated the lighting displays possessed meaning. The embians never responded to static decoys, though, and, after dozens of unsuccessful trials, the bulbs had been abandoned in favor of the more traditional forms of observation.

Two hours before dawn, she finds a set of four: red, yellow, blue, and green, a severely truncated vocabulary, but perhaps enough to begin. She takes four extra lanterns and eases outside into the sticky, hot night air, leaving Mae soundly asleep. Sweat immediately trickles down her temples and pools between her breasts as she follows the well marked path to the blind, but then hikes beyond it into the virgin forest to hunch at the bottom of a great, fleshy tree oozing vinegar-scented sap.

The air has the consistency of heated sludge, down where the night breeze cannot reach. Her lungs labor to inhale, exhale. She kneels between protruding roots as knobby as knees, and, by the bland light of the white bulb, changes out the other four. She turns on the green and waits. Mating displays usually start just after dusk and intensify until midnight, tapering off after that, but a few embians roam until dawn, searching for something -- she wishes she knew what.

The sodden heat of the night coils inside her, like a snake about to strike. She swings the lantern over her head, then turns it off, trying to approximate their initializing rhythm. Green, she thinks hard at the embians.

Whir of insects. Creak of trees shifting in the breeze. Rustle of mouse-small feet.

Ochre.

Darkness.

Her heart thumps. They never make the same response twice in a row. Her hands shake as she selects red this time, holds the lantern aloft for ten counted seconds before turning it off.

Darkness.

The night presses in as she tries to be patient. Out of sight, the ocean whispers against the sand. Her back itches and she tastes salt on her lips. She wishes for a moon, something, anything to lessen the unbroken power of the

night.

Auburn. Streaked with ruby. Transmutes to shimmering jade.

Darkness.

She selects yellow, then hesitates. What if she unknowingly says the wrong thing and drives it away? Reaching for calmness, she begins with yellow, adds the blue, then turns off the yellow and waits a few seconds before she extinguishes the blue.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Mint-green crowned with violet spangles. Brightens... brightens.

Darkness.

The display brings tears to her eyes; it's exquisite. She can never match its eloquence, never reply properly. She's so limited, so --primitive. She raises green and red together, holds them up until her muscles shake with fatigue poisons.

Darkness.

Something weaves through the trees now, close enough to hear the whisper of flesh against foliage. She massages her aching shoulder and huddles against the enormous root, staring into unrelieved obsidian.

Mulberry. Fades to rust. To silver. Fades....

Darkness.

It's so close now, no more than a hundred feet away, and she panics. This is the most important meeting of her life; she cannot bear to fail. She turns on all four, saying redblueyellowgreen.

Darkness...darkness....

The soft leaves rustle inches from her face. Something slim, blacker than the night itself, regards her through the darkness. It exhales the same subtle alien spice as the trees and the mud. Amber. Pale green. A female, taller and more slender than the males, with characteristic blue stripes on her throat.

Darkness.

Trembling, Shayna raises yellow.

Pale-daffodil.

Darkness.

This is obviously a conversation, if only she knew what they were saying to one another. She switches the yellow off. A dry hand caresses her face. Smooth as silk, more solid than human flesh, it slides along her cheek, trails across her lips, down her throat. Icy heat rushes through her. She is lost, drowned in red-gold, tasting cinnamon, musk, and something else, something alien and yet almost familiar. The night whirls and she is somewhere else, not here anymore, not in her body.

Metallic gold, brighter than the sun.

Gold, she thinks, yes, gold! She embraces it, folds herself about its

icy-hot center, consumed by its richness, giving all she has until there is nothing left. Gold, yes, gold.

"Shayna!"

The sharp, worried word winds through the trees, penetrates the protective wall in her mind. She starts, finds herself curled about a cool firm shape, the way one spoon fits another. The embian female stirs within her embrace, gazes up at her with enigmatic ebony eyes. The deflated light-organ lies mute on her chest.

Shayna's heart races as she tries to remember. Gold, there had been gold, rich as melted butter, and then something more, she can't say what, only that it was immense and cold and fiery, all at the same time. She pulls the embian closer, thinking gold.

"Shayna, answer me! Are you hurt?" Mae's breathless voice is closer now as she crashes through the brush.

The embian frees herself gently from Shayna's hands, then slips away, gray-green hide blending instantaneously with the trackless riot of tree and bush. Shayna folds empty arms over her breasts and rocks there on her knees, suddenly, terribly alone.

"My God!" Mae fights her way through a hanging vine and then stops, looming over her. "Are you all right?"

The muted sunlight, filtered through layer upon layer of vegetation, catches her fair hair and transmutes it to spun gold. Shayna squints up at her. Gold, she thinks and reaches up to touch the gleaming strands. Mae backs out of reach, her face both angry and afraid.

Shayna drops her empty hand.

"What were you doing out there in the bush? It took me two hours to find you, even with the transponder, once I realized you weren't down at the cliffs." Mae's voice vibrates with anger. "Pull yourself together, dammit." She fits Shayna's trembling hands around a mug of coffee. "We have four weeks left on

this grant and I have no intention of leaving early."

Shayna stares into the cup. Deep brown, swirled with lighter streaks of creamer. What does it mean?

"Drink that, then take a hot shower." Mae paces the kitchenette. "I'll manage both the audio and the visual recordings myself for a few nights while you get some extra rest."

She tastes the steaming coffee, but it's only hot, not icy at all. It should be both.

"It's getting dark." Mae pours herself a cup of coffee, then blows on it. "I have to get out to the blind. Are you going to be okay?"

The table is unpainted aluminum, burnished to a high sheen. Shayna spreads her fingers across it, studies the puzzling contrast of pink flesh on gray metal.

"I have to go!"

"Yes," Shayna manages, her eyes still on her hand. "I'll -- be fine. Don't -- don't worry."

Mae shoulders the night-cam, but Shayna doesn't look up. Words are shallow, like water poured across pavement, one molecule deep and ten yards wide. Because words can mean almost anything, depending on context and inflection, she realizes now that in reality they mean nothing.

Once the outer door closes, she waits a few minutes, then collects the four lanterns with colored bulbs. She studies each in turn, touching them with wondering fingertips, red, blue, green, yellow. Grateful for their purity, she pulls the transponder bracelet off her wrist and leaves it on the table.

Outside, it is raining and a thousand scents vie, wet mud, astringent sap, rotting leaves, a dank musky fungus that has eaten into the nearest flesh-tree beside their bungalow. After only a few steps she abandons the trail and battles her way into the dripping darkness, using momentary flashes of the white bulb as her guide. It will not be the same tonight, somehow she is sure of that. What embians have to say is a symphony, rather than a droning one-note song. It would take a hundred lifetimes to perform all the parts.

Her rain-soaked shirt catches on the branches and she tears it loose. Finally, she stumbles across a hollow with a crooked stream at its heart which feels right somehow. She stops, lights a color at random. It gleams blue, strong and true. She counts the seconds, then turns it off.

Darkness... darkness...darkness

Sky-blue slashed with pink. Softens. Starburst of burgundy.

Darkness.

The display was so far away, she could barely distinguish the pink qualifiers. She lights green and yellow, swinging them overhead, one in each hand.

Darkness.

Off to her left, between the original display and herself, another answers. Chartreuse. Flash of blue-white. Black afterimage.

Darkness.

Two responses, herself and another. How do they choose in such a situation? Do they go to the closest, or pick the more interesting of the two conversations? She hugs her knees, waiting.

Closer. Opalescent white. Tarnishes to pewter. Fades.

Darkness. Her hands shake as she rushes to answer before the other can, crying out red!

Even closer, almost at the same second. Mauve banded with copper.

Darkness.

Closer still. Ivory. Dissolves into rose.

Darkness... darkness..., darkness

It's obvious she cannot compete with the second embian's stylish complexity, but the dark silence drags on and so she finally raises yellow and red together.

Pale gray. So near she can make out the black outline of the torso behind it.

Darkness.

Alabaster the second answers and she hears the swish of bare feet through mud.

Darkness.

So pale tonight, she thinks, and then selects white without much hope. They complement each other, while she is alien, less than nothing to them, babbling like an infant without understanding.

A squat embian emerges from the wet leaves, a red-banded male, his eyes black holes in his head. His muscles swell in sleek bands beneath his skin. His hands are short and powerful. They regard each other by the light of the lantern.

Marble-white.

Cream. A second male, more slender, his neck-bands only a faint scattering of red, slips up from her right, more hesitant, less sure of himself. He coils around the flesh-tree, his movements graceful as an anaconda. Rain patters down from above in a sudden flurry.

They have come for each other, she thinks, not for her, and extinguishes the white bulb. She picks up the other four, slides her hand over the wet shapes of the trees behind her in order to back away and leave them to make what they can of this night.

Two pairs of smooth hands touch her face, her neck, her arms, her breasts. Lean, hard bodies press against her, one on each side. She is drowned in a sudden burst of white, brighter than ermine, more pure than ivory or marble, sweeter than alabaster, white which burns down into the secret part of her that is self, sings along every nerve, fire and ice blended into one glorious rush that leaves her unable to breathe.

White is the center of the universe, she thinks, a bridge of light into a realm she's never dreamed existed. White, all along and forever without knowing she has been white.

SHE WAKES to the tangible presence of darkness, which inhabits the forest like a prowling black beast. The sultry breeze is its breath, stirring the leaves over her head, whispering. The muddy hollow where she has lain with the embians still bears the shape of their bodies, but they have slipped away.

White sizzles behind her eyes, on the threshold of meaning. She sags back against the unseen vegetation, warm rain dripping down her forehead, and traces the hurricane of colors in her mind...coral...flashes of amethyst...long winding streamers of sapphire that twine through her thoughts, giving her glimpses of an inaccessible country deep within, occasionally felt but never known, always heretofore a dark and secret place.

Embian minds are not organized as a human's; they have communicated that much to her now. They think, but not in human ways, not in cause-and-effect strings, stimulus and response, logical progressions, but in great rivers of sensation and memory and association that combine in unexpected, synergistic ways and cannot be learned in coherent segments, only experienced.

She brushes the worst of the mud off and heads for the bungalow by the light of the white lantern. Without a path, she wanders for a time, her soaked clothes clinging to her thighs and shoulders, lost in the maze of towering flesh-trees, until she changes lanterns for some reason she cannot name. The blue bulb reaches back into her mind, remembers the feel of the bungalow, the exact amount of pull it exerts, how it lessens when she turns away from it, increases when she turns back. She half-closes her eyes and feels the way, not stopping to think or analyze, just following the blind sense of home.

Mae is waiting, fuming, blonde hair plastered to her skull by the rain. She clenches the discarded transponder in her fist. Mud coats her bare legs up to

the knees.

Shayna stands in the open door with the blue lantern in her hand, the remaining four cradled like children against her breasts.

The other woman wilts into the nearest chair. "I've made allowances for your age and lack of experience up until now, but I won't put up with this irresponsible behavior anymore." Her voice is choked.

Shayna sets the lanterns aside in the corner, well out of harm's way. Each one is precious beyond measure.

"Why are you wandering that hellacious forest alone--at night, by God? Do you really want to die?" Mae runs spread fingers back through her wet hair.

"I'm only beginning to understand." Shayna perches on the arm of Mae's chair. "But it is a language, just like I thought."

"This is serious, goddammit!" Mae jerks to her feet. "What could those animals possibly have to say out there in the bloody darkness that's worth risking your life?" Her blue eyes brim, bright with unshed tears.

Shayna wants to tell her about the wonders she's experienced, gold which melts your heart and makes the sun sing, white bridging the way to Heaven itself, but there are no words for such things between humans. "What about your dissertation?" She grasps Mae's hand. She feels brown, with a touch of violet. Yes. She tightens her fingers and works to phrase this in brown so she will understand. "Solving this puzzle could make your career."

Mae stares at her trapped hand as anger and curiosity vie in her eyes, feeding upon each other. "All right," she says finally. "I'll give you one chance to convince me, but you have to promise that you'll give up this asinine wandering by yourself after tonight, if I don't agree."

Shayna nods, then gives the white lantern to Mae, carrying the other four herself. The minute they step outside, aqua brims behind her eyes, brightened with sparkles of lime. Interesting, if she only knew what it meant, but it is too soon. She's still growing, changing, learning.

At first Mae leads, but then she stops beneath the blind at the end of the path. "How -- much farther?" she asks hesitantly.

The dark presses in, warm and thick, scented with sap. Shayna feels in auburn squiggles how close Mae is to bolting. "This is far enough." She extinguishes the white lantern, then fumbles in the darkness to select another at random. It shines out red and she is content. Red hints at deep considerations boiling just below the surface, an admirable opening.

Darkness.

After waiting ten minutes for a response, she tries again. Yellow.

Darkness.

"This is stupid." Mae hunches over her ribs, closed and disbelieving, as always.
"They never answer static lures.

Far out in the forest, almost hidden. Violet. Flare of indigo, so deep, it's almost black. Fades.

Darkness.

"Now what?" Mae asks. Shayna displays red and yellow.

Darkness.

Periwinkle, banded with blue. Bursts of white.

Darkness.

"Christ, that was a lot closer!" Mae rises. "That's enough."

"No," she says. "You need proof." Periwinkle...Shayna reaches down into that part of her that knows without logic, understands without reasons, and feels for an answer. Without conscious thought, her hand selects white and red.

Darkness.

"I said I've had enough!" Mae wrenches at her arm.

Dusty rose brightening to salmon.

Darkness.

"That one was almost on top of us!" Mae's voice rises. "Stop it!"

White, Shayna answers.

Darkness.

"All right, stay here! Let it tear your head off when it finds out you can't satisfy its needs, or maybe it will screw you anyway. Have you even considered that?"

Umber. Shot through with pale yellow.

Darkness.

She feels the embian's approach like a bath of red-violet. "If you leave," she says evenly, "you'll never understand." She displays whiteyellowred. A massive

shape, much larger than any embian she has ever seen, is silhouetted black against a patch of stars through a gap in the trees. Topaz.

His skin is cool silk. Topaz swells like a nova, enveloping them in the now familiar ice-fire and beyond that, showing them an opening of some sort, egress from the stultifying boundary of conscious self...emergence, freedom. Mae cries out wordlessly as searing topaz binds them to each other and the male and the rain forest and the ocean and the wind, alters the pathways in their brains so they will never be alone again, never apart, always and forever touching. Topaz.

Shayna awakes curled against the male's chest. Mae's ragged breathing rasps in her ear. The pale-gray dawn filters down through the trees, illuminating Mae's pallid, unconscious face. The male blinks at her. Shayna sees azure behind his black eyes, mauve in the set of his head. Moving delicately, he eases away and disappears into the trees.

Mae groans, drags a hand across her forehead. She seems olive to Shayna, mixed with a bit of plum. She touches her face.

The other woman bolts up and her eyes are terrified. She crosses her arms over her breasts, struggles for breath. "Where -- wh --" She is trembling so hard that she cannot make the sounds.

Shayna cradles Mae's head. "Gone," she says, "but there will be others, and their gifts will be just as wonderful."

"No," Mae forces between chattering teeth. "It's l-like -- being shattered, then jammed b-back together with the pieces all in the w-wrong places."

She helps Mae back to the cool, dry air of the bungalow, bathes her, then puts her to bed with a cup of hot broth. Mae shakes so badly that she has to be fed, spoonful by spoonful. Her trembling lessens until finally her eyelids sag, but minutes later she wakes, crying out, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Orange?" She buries her face in her hands. "Please, God, not orange!"

Shayna sits on the bed and cradles her again, her skin tingling where Mae's lean body touches her. Orange is not so bad, she thinks. Orange explodes warm on the tongue, cools the back of the throat, fire and ice, like all other colors, an invitation to abandon restrictions of flesh and soar in other dimensions of the soul.

"Shhh," she whispers. "Think of cinnamon instead." She pictures cinnamon, heavy and quiet, full of backwaters and still ponds, like late afternoon on a sweltering summer day.

Mae's body heaves with her efforts to stop sobbing. Her face presses against Shayna's shoulder. Shayna feels cinnamon seeping into her thoughts, tingeing the river of her grief. They have both lost something in the process of growing, like shedding an outgrown skin, and this is harder on Mae because her thoughts have always been so rigid, locked into logic and order. Letting go of such

crutches must be as painful as being born. When the ship returns in four weeks, she and Mae will take home the knowledge they have gained here, and perhaps teach a few selected others the colors of the soul as they are meant to be experienced, not at a distance through the ratified isolation of the conscious self, but through immersion in those secret places shrouded in darkness until now, that part of the mind where the embians have always lived. She leans against Mae and the other woman gradually quiets. When they had known only their surface selves, they were too different, she, with her fear of rejection, and Mae's avoidance of intimacy. But now they have been set free to find that place deep inside where what they wanted from each other and from life was always the same, where it is possible for them to be together.

Shayna nestles close, fitting against Mae's side perfectly, just as she had always known she would. They are one flesh now, one mind. Emerald, she thinks, feeling the surge of greenness under her skin, behind her heart, beneath her fingernails, acceptance of otherness, settling into place.

Mae exhales and rests her flushed cheek against Shayna's neck. Her slim fingers twine through Shayna's. "Emerald," she agrees in a sleep-fogged voice and closes her eyes.