

THE MARCHMAN

By

Karlene M. Kubat

He knelt over a recent mud flow on the slope of a pine-quilled ridge, examining a boot's print stamped in the shiny rivulet of mud. The nearly perfect imprint was clear and fresh in the maroon ooze creeping down from the volcanic throat of towering Mount Rubora. Standing up too quickly in the high elevation he rocked in dizziness and slammed one boot awkwardly into the soft mud. He cursed mildly, drawing back his foot and staring down. His mark was laid close beside the other he had found; the difference in the size of the prints surprised him. Alongside his print the other was much smaller and oddly lance-shaped, an unusual boot. He had no reason to doubt that he was tracking a Marchlander, yet doubt persisted. He was unwilling to accept the idea that anyone within these venerated boundaries would commit such an offense.

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In the early morning's first glimmer, someone bearing an old bloodletting weapon had shot the aging wild boar as he rooted for tubers left to winter in the vegetable fields. On the silvered grass, in sight of the high tinted windows recessed beneath the soaring trifurms of Solvauld Hall, he found the blood mingled with fresh droppings and recalled the sound he had heard in his sleep, melded into a dream. Giving himself over to the powerful instinct of defense he said nothing and went alone with a small stunning weapon, pursuing the beast as it plunged, maddened and bleeding, through the thick underbrush. Gradually the low growth thinned as he followed the animal's spoor into deep forest where tall close-growing firs shut out the light. It was not until much later, breaking out on a rough volcanic ridge, that he had found the unfamiliar human print, a mark that taunted him with its audacity.

For a time, the trail had again brought him down among the big firs. Soon he heard the echoing complaint of a raven curiously following him through the dense evergreen network high overhead. The mischievous bird waited in silence as he searched quadrants of sky-chinked branches until he found it. He stood looking up with a broad grin, imagining the scowling raven's cocked-head view of him: foreshortened man. Croaking a final warning from its high perch, the irritated old rascalion shook its black feathers, spread its wings and floated silently away.

"Come tell me what you find out there, prankster," he called softly after his hard-beaked critic. His voice was tempered with humor directed at himself. He was in his element, aroused beyond fatigue and unafraid.

Tramping along, now and then his mind pored over the obsolete data catalog of Marchland flora and fauna. The old record

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of what so precariously existed here needed updating, a new microlibrary of the variegated greens, of innocently heroic wild creatures free to hunt, to bicker and breed in rich sovereign forests like no others on the planet. But why must he consider records amidst all this green? Such records could not produce a single wren's feather much less preserve a forest. Preservation was his responsibility. He had sworn an oath not to shirk even the least of his duties, but present times were... For a brief moment the carefully controlled anger directed at his rapacious enemies overtook him. Willfully held at bay, the rising specter of their evil was lately proving more and more inescapable, they who in their rapacious schemes forever dogged his days.

A faint afternoon breeze shook down a few dry needles, sprinkling them silently over the brown forest floor, where sparsely captured sunlight swayed in delicate gold patterns. He drew deep breaths from this same current of humus-sweet air, watching it ruffle the fern clumps with a slow hypnotic rhythm. The quiet and relief of solitude spread over him with the visceral undiluted joy of an awed child in its hiding place, that essential need to be cut off from others; intoxicating concealment. With the momentary pleasure of this seductive weaning from heavier purpose, his inured old boots lightened and set him down swiftly in a deeper forest chamber. He had for once a realizable task: the challenge of certain exposure and confrontation. He stubbornly ignored a nagging question: why had his men not responded to the sound of the rifle? Was there sufficient defense of the March to welcome such carelessness as educational sport, or was he merely after a tantalizing wild goose?

With the raven's mocking warning ringing in his ears, he

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tracked on over the stark rising and dipping foothills of the great active volcano. His long legs bent and stretched against time that belonged to other missions, intricate and global, but which easily paled beside this spirited chase through a boyhood haunt of idle pleasures. As the reality of the boar's wound pressed in upon him, waves of renewed anger and curiosity rolled forth.

Before him danced a boarish vision: thin waltzing legs supporting a narrow body bristled with silver and black, well-proportioned and agile for a tough-shielded mass of over two hundred kilograms; the lower canines curling back toward trifling obsidian eyes, lethal tusks that could rip open a foe with one upward thrust of the big shaggy head; the large sensitively pricked ears and moist cartilaginous snout always nervously twitching, seeking. He knew and once envied this formidable old male who had long spurned the company of the roving herd.

Moving over a fingered pumice slope then down into a shallow ravine of dwarfed pines, he heard the second sharp report and hid himself. Adrenaline pumping, his sinewy hide and bone frame crouched in a drying green net of short-lived bracken. Thoroughly captivated by what he saw, he was held motionless by a peculiar mixture of fascination and ire.

With an antique rifle balanced across her khaki knees, she was hunched over the heaving beast, running her fingers through the coarse mud- and blood-caked mane, which had already begun its winter thickening. Floating faintly on the cooling late afternoon breeze came a thrilling dove-cooing croon. Slowly, as the sound prickled his skin, he realized that the communion came from her throat. Fine threads of pale hair adhered to the back of her neck in sweaty coils. Then her torso straightened uncannily, for he had

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made no sound, and stiffened as she turned completely around. The narrowed green eyes stared directly at him, emitting their own gleam of phosphor from within the hat brim's dark shade.

As he approached, she stood up with recognition and deep surprise, the rifle slipping into her lean-fingered left hand. These actions, done reflexively, were followed by a deliberate nod of respect. Half extending the stained right hand, she came toward him. She saw the unmercifully hard look he gave and let the hand fall, glancing back at the fallen boar now breathing heavily.

"He'll be all right," she offered almost inaudibly, yet he caught the difference in inflection. The Marchland sound was there but altered by a foreign influence.

He walked around the boar with his hand on his hip and his eyes traveling from the woman to the beast and back to the woman -- who had set off a curious admonitory signal in his head. Finally he knelt and put a hand against the animal's warm flank.

"You knocked him out with that antique?"

From where he knelt he could see that the brim-shadowed face was pale and tired, yet subdued by amazing chrysolite eyes of glass green, eyes with a gaze so direct they were almost insolent, but perhaps unknowingly so.

"He has parasites eating away at him."

"Parasites!" he exclaimed, standing up.

"There is a more technical name," she added, with the strange refined voice that continued to puzzle him.

"You know who I am, Jarl Wyld? It has been a long time." She fell silent and an amused smile played across her face, as though she were remembering something they both knew very well.

She had called him by the title that only Marchlanders used. Now it came to him and he faulted himself for the incredible slowness of his memory. She was of course Nev Churlwraith's daughter, Chloë. What was it Nev said she had become in her absence? A naturalist? Certainly not. He saw the irony of this, imagining the methodical, scholarly process of a vocation time had passed over. He was certain Nev had said naturalist. It mattered little. The narrow sole's imprint, which he had stalked so heatedly, was merely an assertion of prerogative, for hadn't a Churlwraith the same right here as a Wyld? He could not think what made him hold onto such anger. A certain instinctive precaution? Yet what threat might she imply? He was short with her, reluctant to have her back in the fold.

"Are the animals contaminated, then?"

"No," she answered, offering no explanation.

She had been unmistakably rebuffed by the revered benefactor of her homeland. Her face closed away all but the unguarded strain of fatigue as she waited gravely.

"Do you know what would've happened if one of my men saw you with that...that piece of junk...and if they hadn't recognized it as the clumsy anesthetic that it is? You might be in worse shape than this poor beast."

Now she was indignant, as one whose good intent has been shunted aside by insensibility. "Nev knows what I'm about...and Fox. Sorry, I could not swiftly lay my hands on such handy equipment as that stunner on your belt, Jarl Wyld...but...not *junk*, this fine old wall ornament served my purpose." She held up the rifle with an arresting defiance.

Jarl again; he would almost have preferred *Casimir*. Proudly

prostrate or bitinglly politic? he wondered.

"Then why didn't your brother tell me you were messing about? My own chief of security."

She pocketed her hands, the rifle balanced against her side, and stepped back with an incisive sidelong glance.

"It wasn't important enough to...to bother you. You've been following me? But why? Why would you--"

"I was awakened by an invasively noisy dream," he answered hard-voiced, and then regretted the disclosure. She was already mulling it over.

She lifted her hand a little in front of her, palm out, as a silent display of time out needed to complete her work. Kneeling down and reaching into her pack for a hypodermic gun and spray capsule, she set about her treatment.

"He'll last a while yet...and this will clear up." She patted the grizzled boar who quivered faintly. "But I wish the old fellow hadn't come so far."

"I could have done this," he said, shamed by her effort and fatigue. He knew that not he but his men would have done it, but to offer himself seemed a fitting apology.

"You!" She gave a short surprised laugh. "It would never have occurred to me...or that you would follow..." Her voice grew serious. "There's the old rule that Wylds must not expose themselves to danger, and if you thought that I--"

"If I followed that rule I'd never get out of bed," he said with scoffing voice and a toss of his head. "What I've been doing held no threat...as to what you've been doing..."

"Oh, one of the wardens could have done it...I suppose. Anyway I was up early, spotted him and...well, with plenty of

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unused knowledge from old zoology days off I went. My dose was too small...overcautious...made it myself. Had to give him another." She frowned.

"Sorry I muffed your introduction. Do I call you Doctor Churlwraith? You're not a zoologist?"

"No. No, I'm not," she said with laconic evasiveness. She threw her arms out toward the rough terrain. "All of these Marchland animals sometimes need a bit of care."

"Which they usually get," he answered curtly.

"What constant attention is needed to keep this all together."

"You insinuate inattention."

"Not at all," she protested.

"Oh, yes, it was there," he insisted. "What can you know about the March anyway? I believe...yes, the last time I saw you must have been...ah, weren't you a fledgling in pigtails chasing a peafowl...trying to steal a feather?"

She laughed. "I've come and gone more frequently than that...although rather quietly I know. I haven't forgotten how you always spoke your mind, Jarl Wyld."

There was a wryness in her voice as she gazed off where the blue ridges receded into the horizon like faded banners.

"Elsewhere there's really nothing like this left. Oh, the Mainland has its manicured wilderness parks, but nothing like this. I'd like to see it stay this way forever." She lowered her eyes with a slight embarrassment at her own impassioned voice.

"If you're still an idealist at your age -- which must be near thirty -- you'll live in frustration, Churlwraith."

A strange woman hidden beneath that hat, but displeased

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with him now he thought.

"I'm twenty-nine," she said evenly. "Idealism? I claim only a few principles...good for neighbors, yes?"

"Our neighbors hardly try to emulate the March...only to engulf it."

He took the rifle from her to examine it, then turned to the boar. "I really should have known about this old thief's dilemma, since he came so often to dinner. There was a day...but now there are...diversions." He stopped, his jaw clenched in a careful silence. "I can't watch every animal myself!" He felt a quick exasperation but gave a hard laugh, "I do have good men who know these forests."

"Let me point out a few things to them," she offered, probably without intending arrogance.

"*You* are indeed a Churlwraith." He was happy to impart a little friendly sarcasm. "The indispensable upholders of the eternal Wyld trust. Welcome, if you've come to stay." He felt certain she had not. "But I really hope you have outgrown idealism," he went on in a belaboring manner, thinking how she would mother the forest and pester his wardens, however long she remained.

"Actually...I do have a few useful ideals, but unlike yours they haven't much to do with...with the intrigues of our enemies, Jarl Wyld."

The boar was pawing the ground with spasmodic jerks, and he had knelt to examine it. Surprised at her answer he stood up, studying her in silence. She had misunderstood or passed over the simple intent of his remark and delved much deeper into his musings, where he wrestled with the reality of new intrigue, a thought she had struck as if she had read it where it lay. Wary

again he changed the subject.

"You prefer Wyllds as abstraction rather than flesh and bone." His voice was light and amused.

"No, Wyllds are...you're the protoplasm that holds the March together."

How clinically solemn and epic she was.

"Please, please, Churlwraith," he said, still with light voice. "I would expect only Great Mother Alba to speak with such heavy attention to destiny. It certainly isn't your calling."

"How can you..." she stopped, blushing deeply, with her hands held taut and unnatural at her sides.

He shook his head. "So you haven't outgrown it yet. Perhaps if we're not agreeable to one another at least we'll make each other play our parts well. Have at the March, *missionary*...but in the future I would appreciate hearing of any peculiar methods. You have my permission to carry a stunner if you wish. Here, take this one. Have yourself identified on the visugraph as in possession of it. But remember it also kills...very easily."

He spoke into his wrist messenger and in a few minutes a great violet sky crane appeared overhead with a low pneumatic hum.

"Why have you changed their color?" she asked in a high voice, tilting her head back and watching the lift descend.

"Times change. We can't have the bellicose Immix and Dagonites mistaking them for invasions of each other and blasting them out of the sky. Now they're carefully coded and obviously Marchland craft. That glow-color can't be duplicated. They've become known as Wylld Violet."

"Yes, I know." Her serious face broke into soft ripples of

laughter. But the pleasing laughter died as quickly as it had come, reverting to somberness.

"Where is Laelaps?"

His shoulders drew up irritably as he watched the lift claw enclose the boar, then signaled the pilot. Had Fox or Nev spoken to her of Laelaps, after his strict injunction for silence? He waited as the crane hauled up and moved away against the low western sun. Then, brushing at his dusty sleeves, he turned around. "Your family has spoken to you of Laelaps?"

"No. Why? He's always with you." She paused, mulling something over again. "You asked them not to speak of Laelaps...now you want to know if they've ignored your request. Something is wrong...very wrong. Laelaps is--"

"Unusual, this discernment...or is it clairvoyance?" he interrupted, deciding to evade her penetrating eyes.

"Focus...when it's anything to do with my homeland."

"Laelaps is dead," he said, with as much dispassion as possible. He was bent on revealing nothing to her, even though she had proven herself an unfailing Churlwraith.

She bowed her head, kicking the thick scuffed toe of her boot at a grainy orange rock. He was somewhat taken aback. Sorrow had added one more dimension to her.

"We'll hike to Zemi Plateau," he said, breaking the silence, "where the pilot can lift us off."

He wondered if she had planned to remain here in the severe cold of night or if her prescience had promised a rescue, perhaps precisely this return trip.

"Laelaps was your companion. It could only mean--"

"A subject best avoided," he interrupted again, with a

threatening edge in his voice.

They set off walking out of the scrub and across the barren pumice slopes, their feet crunching and sinking into the roughly blasted bits of tufaceous rock. The abrasive stuff seemed to rub against the tough fiber of his heart. He was irritated at this woman's ferreting clairvoyance, sorry to be reminded of his dog, and, try as he might to obliterate the feeling, once again deeply remorseful that his own life and the ending of it could bring others both satisfaction and death.

Ah, my poor old friend, unwittingly you died for me. The great bronze wolfhound came bounding toward him out of his memory. Laelaps, often seen in media stories prancing at the heel of his master, had become a Marchland trademark.

Not long ago in the late spring when the foothills of Mount Rubora were still held in the quiet paralysis of winter, a satellite-guided patrol computer deep within the humming control center at Solvult Hall had yielded a rare bit of information: an alien was wandering on the Marchland side of the border in the rugged country at the northwestern tip of Flaming Lake. Armed guards were dispatched to the area, dropping from Wyld Violet as close to the computer's pinpoint as safely possible. Laelaps was sent in with the guards to help round up the intruder, who tried at first to hide himself in a clumsy haphazard manner. The marked snow was deep, and a good deal of energy was expended in the final trackdown. The man was a Mezta, an Immix half-breed. He had been meticulously injured just to the point of a slow navigation, his face made grotesque by mysteriously brutal lacerations. Displaying what appeared a mock attempt to flee, the Mezta was cautiously brought to a modest fishing hut above the ice-covered shore of

Flaming Lake, where Wyld waited to interrogate him.

The lively voices of the men, as they removed their skis outside the hut, led Wyld to rise from a bench where he had just opened a cache of food to be eaten while he waited. He strode to the door, which flew open at his touch with the force of the wind's frigid blast. The short burly Mezta was obviously half Dagonite, but this did not necessarily mean that he had come from Dagon across the nearby border. He would have vaporized, and with merciful speed, had he attempted to cross either border, after prominent warnings, for the March might no longer exist without such stringent laws. A limb scan revealed no disengage code, which the few border crossers allowed must have implanted in their arms or legs. He had to have come from the sea, a nearly impossible feat, even discounting his bloody condition, the snow, and the rugged terrain. There was no evidence that anyone had accompanied him. As Wyld studied the Mezta, a repugnant notion asserted itself: the man had been programmed to injure himself. He was sure that in a deep brain scan a biocomputer would be detected. Whether detected or not, someone had rightly assumed the Mezta's injuries would stir Wyld's compassion, either for the injured man outright or for a man controlled to the point of injuring himself. Yet the man could be anything, a hot detonation with several alternative methods of destruction. If Security Chief Fox Churlwraith had been present he would not even have allowed Wyld in the same room with this Mezta. But Fox was on the Mainland, and the half-breed was not fully under the sway of a computer implant. He was suffering. Wyld wanted to help him, but also to learn whatever he could from the Mezta. Stepping away to summon a medic, he soon returned and began his questioning.

Tired and hungry Laelaps, who had not yet been given his customary ration of high protein, trotted up to the cache of food. He watched Wyld's fingers come to rest near the opened meal, and assumed that it was meant for him. With a cautious eagerness the salivating hound took a slice of meat delicately between his jaws and shook back his head, chewing hardly at all. Unaware of Laelaps, Wyld was looking at the Mezta, whose bruised dark eyes shone all at once with a naked glitter of fear. The Mezta's shaking hand stretched out, hovering for an instant over the sliced meat, then brought a slice to his mouth. Like the ravenous hound, he swallowed hardly chewing. Wyld thought at first that the Mezta must be starving. Then his eyes widened in horror as he saw where the half-breed looked. Laelaps was vainly trying to stretch his nose toward Wyld's boot. The dog was contorted on the floor, his long silken body quivering in a death rasp while a thin bubbling foam oozed from his mouth. He had only time enough to utter a strained whimper before dying. At his back Wyld heard the Mezta thump against the compacted dirt floor. His twisted and gasping face was already a mottled bluish white as the powerful toxin he had dispensed for Wyld stopped the Mezta's lungs and heart.

Now, on the snowless ribbed slopes of Mount Rubora, Wyld drove his boots harder and harder into the pumice, his stride increasing with a vehemence. From the corner of his eye he saw that Chloë Churlwraith's pace had also quickened, her lips moving in a silent rhythmic chant that matched her jogging feet. *She keeps her early training as a devoted academic acquires rote self-discipline.* He had practiced thus long ago at his own rigorous academy. One was taught to use whatever block could be extracted from the mind's useful store. Unusual qualities were emerging from this

troublesome meddler who walked beside him, but who had so expertly removed her awareness to a distant point: the uncanny prescience; the stern professional manner; the refined but unyielding assurance coupled with a determined masking of emotion. She was a single-minded practitioner of some lifework she would not discuss, perhaps an abstruse science, which would explain her long absence. Why had Nev always been so close-mouthed about her?

In the next instant he was startled to hear her chant take voice, her high intonations ringing clearly and eerily through the still mountain air. The sound was emitted as indifferently as the wild cry of a bird, apparently without self-awareness. Such oblivious concentration was enviable yet annoying. At last awakened by his critical stare, she fell silent, touching her forehead with an expression of regret.

He leaned toward her with a mocking query. "What in black suns is that gibberish?" He knew his impugning voice was merciless but had made no attempt to restrain himself.

She stood mute in the sliding red sun, thwarted but proudly aloof. Then, snatching her hat from her perspiring head in a flush of exasperation, she accidentally loosened a gathered mass of flaxen hair, which tumbled all the way to her slender waist. The extraordinary eccentric was at once transformed into a blameless vision, however willfully poised against the orchid sky. The probing green eyes, which he had thought so indelible under the hat's brim, caught the low flame of sun and turned to fire opals blazing out of mauve-tinted flesh.

Was it the color of the sky or her skin that made him recall coming upon a field of wind orchids in the western Gream Valley,

a field he had thought fallow, and how he had immersed himself in the sudden intoxicating sight as he did at this moment? Quietly drawing in his breath he compelled himself to look beyond her and down over the hushed Skeel Valley rolling out at their feet. Under a bleeding sun the long valley vibrated in a faint wind. The late afternoon light was slowly withdrawing, leaving behind only a cool and brooding twilight.

II

In Dagone at the teeming capital city of Wime, 240 kilometers north and west of the Marchland's citadel, Solvault Hall, the obese Premier Kele Umara sat behind his gleaming ebony desk. He was thoroughly tired of sitting there and fidgeted irritably, rubbing his bulbous red eyes then caressing his shiny hairless head with thick stubby fingers. He was listening to one of the data communiqués sent daily from his vicegerents around the state. This particular report came from Oshean, a seafood preparation center and the largest town on the Dagone coast. As the report droned on, touting the volume of processed menhaden, an important source of fine oil and fertilizer, Premier Umara several times found his mind wandering far afield. He must instruct again to keep these reports short, without disavowing their importance. Over half of the large processing plants were government controlled, and it would never do to make their managers feel insignificant, nor were they, for this was Dagone's most important and lucrative export. At last the report was finished and Umara, who faithfully listened to a sampling of such data, rose from his desk and strolled through the palm-lined glass solarium that looked down upon the city two hundred floors below. Wime's tallest

buildings were all mounted on computerized, stress-monitoring gyro-pivotal gimbals, giant rockers that could ably flex the buildings in high winds and stabilize them in ground tremors common to the island. The fog had lifted and blown away and fresh sea breezes were cleansing the air. Ant-like clusters of Dagonites could be seen massing and dispersing near the subterranean speedway slots.

The Premier at fifty-seven was shrewdly self-indulgent yet uxorious, doting upon his attractive wife. He was also ascetic in several ways, but not in regard to his epicurean cravings. His insatiable palate oozed with preparatory enzymes the moment he envisioned the delicacies awaiting him in his copious, well-staffed kitchen. But he was thinking now of his vice premier, a thought that seldom improved his disposition or his appetite. He could hardly tolerate the licentious habits of this indispensable profligate, who managed to carry out his duties almost too flawlessly while remaining one of the most dissolute individuals the Premier had ever known. *The only thing we have in common*, thought Umara, *is that we are both somehow descendants of the same outlaw bands who drifted ashore here centuries ago.* Enough musing. Tonight he would confer with Vice Premier Grabb concerning a subject of which he was sure Grabb was already intimately apprised.

Kele Umara called in his secretary, a fawning middle-aged man long devoted to the Premier, and requested the whereabouts of Vice Premier Grabb, who had a devilish habit of slipping away just when the Premier was too indisposed to be reached with the news of his departure. The obsequious secretary stood with all-knowing mouse eyes gleaming, his slightly tilted head turned aside in practiced submission.

"Vice Premier Grabb is on his way back from Sonna,

Premier, and asks for a conference with you. He suggests the baths at nine hours."

"Sonna!" the Premier exclaimed, and thought of his own shuttered and silent villa tucked within those restricted green-brushed hills rolling seaward. Ah, to aimlessly meander down the lazily winding footpaths, trails lined with sweet-flowered myrtle and slender dark-flamed cypress; and further north, to come blithely upon the bright-tasseled pleasure cabanas dotting the pale turquoise-splashed sands.

So that libertine has been on the leeward coast...no doubt with a valise full of indisputable reasons for his nefarious junket. How that preening pervert manages to fly away to sensual pursuits while I must remain here sweating over the affairs of state is beyond me. I'll have him roasting in a hot sweat of another kind soon enough.

"No, no, I'll not meet him at the baths. My food is hardly digested at that hour. In any case, a revolting idea. Send him to my videolarium half an hour after I've dined. Then you may leave us after affirming top priority seclusion."

For Kele Umara eating approached an esoteric rite linked with the maintenance of power. He would have been incensed had anyone compared his gormandizing to the vulgar and unconstrained habits of his vice premier. The Premier ate his evening meals alone and without interruptions. His indulged and dutiful wife Poppy had absolutely nothing to do with his private menu; this he carefully supervised himself, sometimes allowing his chef to surprise him.

After a heartening dinner of savory kelp bisque sprinkled with water chestnuts, and tender squid cutlets gently poached in dry amber wine, the Premier's sour nature had much abated. Owing to

his deep satisfaction with the subtly employed herbs bethmel and seli, which grew in the kitchen's dense roof garden, and which enhanced his senses with the pleasantness of an aphrodisiac, the Premier was inclining steadily toward a forgiving nature. In dubious anticipation of the Vice Premier's appearance he had denied himself a generous mug of good seaweed malt. The rich malt, normally the crowning touch of his supper, regularly wafted his girth from his dining chamber, with self-deceptive lightness, into the embrace of his oversized silver chaise lounge. There, his bulk halved by midnight shadows, he reposed in thought, suspended far above the lights of the city. Close behind the half-circle fenestration of soaring glass the turbid brown eyes turned slowly in the eclipsed head, occasionally focusing on a satellite flashing over his cantilevered balcony. This was his place of solitary scheming, where punitive measures were first conceived, the foreshadowing of things to come raining quietly down on fingered scapegoats and enemies of state, bathing them in the faint exudations of a night sweat.

Several evenings in the glass balcony had been devoted to ruminating over a certain intriguing possibility. Now Umara intended to bring his vice premier to the bank of this same idea and observe how he entered the water.

Vice Premier Rymon Grabb burst into the room with his usual flamboyant display of kinetic energy, striding to the windows to exclaim, with surely a false exuberance, how he had missed the nightly dazzle of the city. The lights from this structural height did indeed seem more spellbinding than even the myriad star belts of deep space.

"Yet the bright sands of Sonna perhaps dazzle you to

greater effusions," the Premier replied. *Or what slithers across them*, he thought. He pressed a button on the arm of his big silver chair, and a thick flexible video screen wall slid over the glass as Grabb stepped hastily back. Now the room, converted to soft indirect lighting, was toneless.

Grabb's iron-gray hair was perfectly coiffured. His well-kept, elegantly clothed body was in fact an excellent example of the effects of subliminal advertising coupled with excessive ego. He was used to seeing himself flash across video screens or rise much larger than life in public holographs. There were most certainly admirers beyond the informed circle who had not been dissuaded from believing Rymon Grabb the real premier.

"Rymon, I intend to go straight to the point. I rise early and my days are long. First, what did you want to see me about?"

"Oh, it can wait," Grabb said quickly, having donned a seriously attentive face along with his deferring attitude.

"Rumors have come to me that Casimir Wyld's wolfhound was poisoned. What information have you?"

"What a coincidence" Grabb said, "This was my subject."

"Who did it?"

"Probably Immix radicals. At least, they're good at initiating such tactics."

"But why do it?"

"Another Immix blunder. It was meant for Wyld of course."

"Is this more than conjecture?"

"A little."

"Let me know the moment you have something more substantial."

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"And now while we're on the perennial subject of Wyld, what do you know of his personal life these days?"

"Mostly what everyone else knows. He speaks quite frankly when he has something to say...as you certainly know. Otherwise he's unreadable. News is difficult. Marchlanders are loyal to a man and not inclined to gossip."

"Most would have dissipated under his -- can we call them burdens? -- long ago, but Wylds are harshly schooled. They've played with a radical gene. Some Dagonites have a foolish interest in...a certain regard, perhaps awe of him."

"As do a few Immix but assuredly not the ones who count." Grabb had affected a dismissive voice.

"You know that Wyld has reached his thirty-ninth year?"

"A month ago...young. Unfortunately, Wylds live an incredibly long time...if they meet with no accidents."

"Well, I see that no moss has grown over your Marchland data bank."

"I have a special interest in Wyld," Grabb said. The hard twist of his tight smile was the first sign of any imperfection in his smooth manner.

"Do you see where I'm leading, Rymon?"

"Wyld has as yet no heir."

"Exactly. In earlier times this would have suited us well." The Premier's eyes gleamed with a tempting destiny, for it remained a part of his heritage to think of drawing boundaries with the implements of war. "But now we must keep a low profile for Fedcartel. We must devise a less cataclysmic way to secure that vital hegemony over Immixia."

"Dagone should have taken Immixia before they acquired

the ray," Grabb said with insistent voice. "When I think of how our cowed predecessors meekly consigned our weapons to the slag heap before we had perfected the present system, I regret--"

"Rid yourself of that idea," the Premier interrupted with agitation. "I have. They were contaminants, and man is an animal who fights to the death. There would have been nothing usable left, nothing but a poison-pocked rock. We could have the March now with a fairly clean annihilation, but Fedcartel and the Mainland would never stand for it. No, we must subvert," he said with a cunning and satisfied grin. He was thinking of the female spider's lethal sting and how the victim could be sucked dry while the exterior remained deceptively whole. "Although the Genarch are nervous, we know that Wyld has years of time for heirs." The Premier waited for Grabb's thoughts to parallel his own.

"The Marchland Genarch have no power to speak of. They can use a family gene pool anyway. An obvious solution would be to supply him with a Dagonite mate, one devoted to our cause, and one whom he cannot refuse."

"Yes," the Premier answered in a high, excited voice, "but Wyld is of superior intelligence, not easily duped, and anyway the Genarch would never stand for it...would they?"

"Wyls have always had absolute sway over that sham Council of Marchland Elders. The Genarch is practically invisible." Grabb made no attempt to hide his disdain. Clearly, he was eager to work against Wyld with whatever plan was offered.

"It's rumored that Wyld has recently moved closer to a certain Mainland friend...an aristo."

"I know of her," Grabb answered with terse voice.

The Premier raised an eyebrow. "He may have preferred

his protégé, the Mezta woman."

Grabb's cheeks twitched with a prickling anger, and his mouth was set in a hard line. "A magnificent creature, until the affliction took her."

The Premier reflected a moment. They were only bringing to light old news that each thoroughly knew. "Well, it was certain the half-breed would die; one of the reasons I paid little attention. Wyld was a fool, taking in a Mezta."

"You didn't see her," Grabb answered.

"And where did *you* see her?"

"I can't recall now just where it was," Grabb said, staring off into space and wondering if his lie was evident.

"The only good I've ever attributed to the Marchland was that it kept Dagonites from cohabiting with the Immix, thus preventing the occasional accident of doomed offspring. Even though they don't live very long, they are a bane to the Immix," Umara said with an unsympathetic smile.

"Short-lived and extraordinarily exquisite," Grabb said, licking his lips.

Umara squinted at Grabb, finding his salacious nature utterly contemptible. "Is this an auspicious time to tempt that stoic Wyld blood?" he asked with irritation.

"We'd better hurry if that's what you have in mind. As a matter of fact, I've just thought of someone infallibly loyal and..." the Vice Premier touched his tongue to his thickish lips, which again repulsed the Premier. "She's more than appealing, really unforgettable."

Umara slapped his knee with a violent burst of anger that he had hoped to control. "Not one of your damned tarts, Grabb!"

His head brightened like a red-varnished egg, the rage augmented by his loss of composure.

Grabb wisely displayed deep umbrage. "Unfortunately, I have little in common with this lovely flower."

"Hardly credible that one has managed to escape," the Premier muttered, cooling slightly. "Very well then, I'll ask Poppy to prepare a select gathering, and amidst this human camouflage she and I will evaluate the woman's potential. Poppy is so accomplished at such gender tasks."

Umara eased back in his chair, his anger assuaged. He had planned to show Grabb a video of a woman he had in mind. Instead he would defer to Grabb's judgment for the time being. Dipping his hand into a shallow topaz bowl at his side, he extracted and swallowed a small green pill.

"We'll yet see this island pulled under one banner, but the effect on the progeny of those who intermarry is disastrous. If the unification came too soon we would have to enforce yet another even more astringent and unpopular birthing law. That lethal Immix gene is presently to our advantage but the dilemma must be resolved before long."

"I saw one of our biologists taking a breather at Sonna. He tells me that Immix geneticists are working feverishly. Of course they want to court Mainland blood."

"Not encouraging," Umara frowned. "We must try to prevent this until we're ready."

"We have already prevented quite a lot...with the collaboration of those same Immix radicals you so distrust," Grabb said with faint reproof.

"Useful sometimes but never to be trusted, even though

The Marchman

Premier Xheeva admits publicly that they're enemies of her government," Umara answered, assuming he had made his voice firm enough for his position on Immix radicals to be clearly understood.

His initially sharp interest had noticeably dissolved into an oscillant inattentiveness. Soon enough he waved the Vice Premier out of his presence and hurried to his spacious black sleeping chamber; there the swiftly diffused anodyne would work its miracle of sleep.

III

Polished by the wind and tempered by the sun, the dark green, gold-flecked granite of Solvault Hall shimmered in lazy afternoon warmth as the Skeel Valley crept belatedly toward autumn. The massive Hall, originally designed to harness the sun, was raised long before the present use of microwaved solar energy. Beneath its deceptively calm exterior pulsed the autonomous heart of a far-reaching financial and philanthropic network. At eye level the Hall's looming sprawl was imposing enough, but approached from the air it filled the mind with quickening excitement. Those who received the few coveted invitations to this guarded citadel could look down upon a singular geometrical achievement: triangular wings of transformable sizes and proportions strung together to form an asymmetrical star of three stories, whose middle had become a profuse interior garden domed over for inclement weather. The glittering roof of each triangle rose in a three-faced solar-collecting pyramid. On the west side were the main and largest wings, facing the gardens and lawns, which rolled down to the broad Ruddle River within a wide bend of its lazy

meander to the southeast. The two main wings, long sides running parallel, formed a wide entrance walkway with an arched glass roof that led into the domed interior garden, large enough to gallop horses around its perimeter -- an activity in which earlier equestrian Wylds had sometimes engaged. On the east side of the Hall the two rear wings of the irregular star were joined at their narrowest outside points by two very long three-storied buildings that held, among other key operational offices, an entire medical wing, a satellite-tracking bunker, and personnel of the Wyld compound. These two buildings met at right angles at the far side of an expansive park containing an arboretum of exotic trees and plants, some long extinct in their native lands, which Wylds had been prudently collecting for centuries. Groups of the tallest trees nearly obscured the lower outbuildings from the rest of the compound, although the park was contained entirely within the outer eastern walls of the star and its annexes. The lush and solicitously tended arboretum was reached from outside by an iron-gated portal built through the southern outbuilding, and this high gate was nearly always left open to accommodate personnel movement from the air traffic landing pads just outside.

A few hundred meters north of Solvault Hall in the shadow of tall cottonwoods, Wyld stood working his line in the trout-filled Ruddle River, one leg bent forward, his foot balanced on an underwater rock. Occasionally the shining spider-thread line snapped above his shoulder then whipped forward and sang out over the water. In this rare snatch of idleness his unsuitable shoes were thoroughly waterlogged, the freezing torrent continually released from the white glaciers high on Mount Rubora numbing to the bone.

The Marchman

The broad river gave the appearance of stillness, although it moved with a sweeping force, eddying here and there into dark pools glazed with quivering remnants of sky. Its lyrical swashing filled his ears with the peculiar parlance that generations of Wylds had been compelled to hear in every natural force: the stages of life and their forms, from elements of the single cell to man, crying out for reverence and stewardship. His water-gazing shifted for a moment to the meadows, forests, and mountains, and above him the thin blanket of atmosphere beneath which powerful stars only seemed tucked in oblivion. Here in the March was still the roughness of nature, quietly rounded by relentless Savers, the deadly Marchland defense satellites tracking the innocent blue dome through endless labyrinths of lasered data, like obedient guard dogs.

Resting now on his fitful trout line with a modicum of peace in a hovering tension, he sensed a presence at his back and knew as he turned that he would find Great Mother Alba there. She often appeared silently this way, with the same agile litheness that had characterized her youth. Perhaps chastened by the long ennobling winds of time, Alba, who was very old, still seemed blithely in possession of her girlhood. Her indomitable immersion in the mystery of being had always been a lively wrangle, touched with humor and grace, strength and wisdom. Long ago she had passed through the trials of self-inflictions and, in so doing, learned to endure the less ruinous inflictions of others.

Waving it first above her head she tucked a blue gentian into the brim of her hat, which covered a thick crown of silver hair. She wore a soft fawn-colored jacket and slacks and had drawn up her knees, binding them with her arms and presenting Wyld with a

quizzical softly lined face. Seldom did she make such effort on a facile whim.

He waded ashore and laid his tackle on the grass, throwing himself down beside it, very near where Alba leaned against the ribbed gray trunk of a great black cottonwood. Wyld stared up at the leaves just beginning to turn yellow.

"The little char know I'm no menace today."

"Chloë Churlwraith would not agree, I'm told."

"Ah, strange woman." Wyld sighed and fell silent.

"Don't mistreat her, Casimir. She's quite unusual but she was once your true equal in childhood mischief."

"I can hardly remember it, Alba, or her."

"Then you do see yourself getting older?"

"See, feel, and rejoice." He laughed with a pleasure-giving rancor and put out his hand to snap off a juicy stem of grass, rolling it between his fingers.

"When I see those wet, nearly blue feet I forget that you're a man of such wisdom."

"The cold clears my head. But you didn't come here to speak of my feet or my wisdom."

Alba tilted her head back and looked down her high cheekbones at her grandson, with amused condescension. "Ah, how your father lives in you. But my son had a greater sense of destiny when it came to women."

"Now it begins."

"Caz, I've said little."

"But your silence in the wrong places has been a persistently deafening polemic."

"Then I'll speak gently. I'm deeply worried."

The Marchman

"Why?"

"Oh, Caz, I don't wait in Solvault Hall for someone to come take my place without an ear to the ground."

"Many ears I'm sure, Great Mother, and what have they heard?" He bit down on the broken stem of sweet grass.

"You've been abroad several times in recent months. Perhaps it's an old school-mate you see?"

"Why ask? You know who it is."

"I'm trying to be delicate."

"You're never indelicate, Alba, even when you're raving...but I can't always answer so compliantly. By now you've noticed that."

"As for...Thame..." she said with hesitation, watching carefully as a vision of the orris-eyed girl clearly scalded her grandson's brain. "She came to me whenever you were away, hoping, I suppose, to get something from an old woman that would sustain her. But it was I who got from her. A remarkable girl. I've always thought that going abroad for a wife was very wise, but if it could have been so with Thame I would have approved."

This was high praise. Wyld said nothing, only blowing the grass stem from his mouth and leaning on his elbow. Had Thame by some miracle lived, theirs would not have been an easy union. Alba knew this. Thame was a Mezta fugitive from Dagona, which had enslaved her, and from her own country Immixia, which had permitted it. Both countries would have caused them endless trouble. *Damn them!* But marriage was never a consideration. Thame had wanted only a place to die in peace. The bond they had fallen into was gratuitous.

"Why haven't you brought your Mainland friend here?"

Alba asked with careful voice and an attempt at lightness.

"She refuses to come."

"What! What woman could turn down such an offer? She is unworthy. Look elsewhere."

Wyld responded with a thundering laugh. "Forgive me, Alba, but you're so quickly and righteously indignant. She's a Grenellev, as you already know, and just as stubborn as you. My Ursa is independent. She wants no part of imprisonment between two deadly boundaries. This job is really beginning to look dangerous to outsiders, you see."

"How can you speak so? We are Wyld birds in paradise." Her voice was a soft drawl, and her eyes gleamed with her old pun. "We have everything for a Grenellev. I studied with her grandfather long, long ago. Send her to me."

"Cannot...I'm sorry. She's convinced we're tyrants."

"The idea!...of course you're exaggerating. Why can't you be more serious about this? She wants you?"

"I think...yes."

"Well that sounds rather piddling to me. Is the creature blind and dumb?"

"On the contrary, clear-sighted and voluble," Wyld answered, still indulging in the pleasure of laughter.

"At least I've made you cheerful. In fact it seems to me you're far too light-hearted about this. I don't really see...but you *are* still so young...perhaps you..."

Wyld propped his elbows behind him and dropped his head back to drink from the insouciant bowl of sky that could promise and threaten with such beguiling irony. "What if there is no heir?" he said, still looking skyward.

The Marchman

"Don't tease, Caz. My heart is pounding. There have always been Wylds...all our hopes and dreams...the Genarch have come to me. The Elders are wondering if..."

"My dreams are...they go beyond even yours, Alba, but they're different."

"Do you really know what mine are? Casimir, you've always been difficult... I hesitate to say a problem...no, no, not a problem, but sometimes a worry."

"I don't want that, Alba. Ah, these damned patriarchal rules bedevil me. They've outlived their purpose...the eldest, the strongest, and the best."

"How lucky for us that you are all of those."

"I'm a link in a chain that binds me."

"You're a born leader, Jarl Wyld, and one who is revered. How fortunate that you're not merely an emblem."

Wyld lay back closing his eyes, his mouth set grimly. A wave of anger swept over him. For a few jeopardous moments he had allowed himself to feel impeded and impotent. When last he saw Ursa she had worn him down with opinionated accusations about a place and a way of life unknown to her. He remembered trying to placate her when she learned that in the beginning Wyld girls had been sent abroad, and that they conveniently married and stayed away. He tried patiently explaining that there had been no girls in a long time because of careful selection, but this only redoubled her anger and mistrust, until he swore that his father had thoroughly denounced the entire biased tradition. Now he related this incident to Alba.

"Then leave it to chance. If there's a girl teach her to tend the March--under such circumstances as these I doubt the

Genarch, who've surely seen Wyld women leading often enough, would care at all. But, merciful sun, produce a child and do it soon, or you must use the gene pool, and you know how the Genarch and all of the Marchlanders long for the old ceremony of birth, a glorious tradition that--"

"Dearest Great Mother, I can't be manipulated by long dead ancestors and old reactionaries living in the past who dream of birthing ceremonies. They're wise in many ways, and I love them, but they know little of how I butt my head against mountains of avarice and scheming...what it takes to prevent sabotage..." He stopped himself swiftly before he caused more worries.

"Yes, yes, they know. Remember, I'm the one who usually meets with them, listens to them. Casimir, it isn't just for us that you do this thing but for the island and perhaps beyond. I know you love the March, that you love it enough to--"

"I love it to myself," he said with a quick heat, "not to curse a wife and child with this old proprietary habit of Wylds...this bittersweet burden we carry."

"Burden? No, I don't believe that Ursa Grenellev means enough to you." Her grandson's face was averted so that she could not discover the effect of her remark. She knew that his loss of Thame had damaged him, that lovely creature so hungry to live.

"Oh, this is a wretched situation that only a good deal of time can mend, but there is no time. A rumor is afoot, Caz, that makes me tremble...poor Laelaps...he did not die a natural death as you told me...but was--"

"You were not to hear of this!" he scolded angrily. "Can I keep nothing from your ears? Alba, you must try to know a bit less. Let go of responsibilities that are mine." By omission, he had

indirectly frightened this treasured being. His mind hastened to produce a reassuring offering.

"I haven't pushed Ursa. I knew that if I did she would probably come. I wasn't sure..."

For a moment Alba's face closed like a pale moon hidden behind a rag of cloud, then her countenance brightened. "It becomes clear to me now. You're afraid that something will happen to Ursa. It's a premonition you've carried since Rane and Theka's accident. Always you manage to make a case of blame for yourself as you did then over your parents. You must stop these dangerous thoughts. And you could have done no more than you did for Thame. If you want Ursa, make her come and see what you are." Her voice was gentle but prodding as she studied her grandson with curious intensity.

The dusky sentiment appearing obliquely, fleetingly in Wyld's eyes went unnoticed. He was looking down moodily upon the dank moss carpeting the bank of the river. As he watched, a swollen, dripping clump of green was ignited by a dazzling drenching of sun. The sudden joyful sensation of light connected in his mind with a recurring sound above the water's lonely chortle, the ephemeral laughter of Thame, a high bell of laughter ringing through the forest.

He avoided looking at her silent cabin on Flaming Lake, even from a distance. But her grateful presence, vanished from the forest forever, had not left it an unbearable place; such would have been a pitiful legacy for all her joy of it. Thame had never known a wild, seemingly endless green like that climbing with unchecked abandon above Skeel Valley, stretching northeast into the rugged Scree Mountains and northwest over the slopes of the dozing giant

Rubora and beyond. From the moment Wyld took her into its dense sanctuary she had longed to live out her short life by the humblest resource, within the primal sway of the big trees. High up on Flaming Lake in the snug cottage he built for her, she lived in simple splendor with her collection of devoted animals gamboling at her feet. Thenceforth, the delicate crochet of green and brown, fur and feather, forest darkness and forest light played across his mind infused with another's impassioned vision: the thick-bodied soaring red cedars so enamored of sky, humming in soughing choirs on the wind, while their long, powerful shanks reached down through indistinct shadows and clove to the forest floor, exposed sepia roots digging deep, anchoring them against thrashing storms; the waltzing hemlocks spreading their ornate boughs of lace over rabbit warrens and spotted fawns; the conical blue firs where the last gray owls closed their moon-filled yellow eyes at dawn; and the resinous white pines feeding legions of chattering squirrels with the small seeds of their narrow cones. The seasonal fire of the deciduous trees brought Thame such delight that she was determined to know the character of every tree and bush, praising joyfully the blushing vine maples, the bleeding dark sumacs, and the red-berried mountain ash so favored by her winter songbirds. He once swore that all of nature's conceits and trickeries conspired just for her laughter: tall conifer larches she had thought evergreens startled her in autumn with a shower of blazing gold needles, setting off that high-hearted sound that rang no more in the forest but still sounded in his mind.

Wyld lifted his dark blond head, which had dipped for a moment like obscured solar heat sinking over a cold horizon. Beyond Alba's searching gaze his burning eyes focused on the edge

The Marchman

of the thick forest. Along with the vast riches of the Scree Mountain Gold Mines, Dagone and Immixia, whose meager unvaried forests were nearly depleted, wanted meters of Marchland wood to adorn their artificial pleasure centers. When it was carefully culled from the March's rich forests, none appreciated the fine grain and matchless utility of wood more than a Marchlander. But beyond their borders it was thought of only as raw timber, this swelling green intelligence forever humming the secret of some ancient riddle. He could not help smiling through his anger, while his lucid blue eyes remained carefully dammed waters of sorrow. The forest could defy nothing. It was indifferent to its prolific beauty, and equally so to its vulnerability, nor did it wait for reverent Wylds to prevail in dutiful vigilance. He knew that Alba was right. Wylds were beyond emblem; they were useful conservators of the present and the future. Their descendant blood coursed with fierce devotion to the pristine wildness that none but Marchlanders still prized above all human inventions.

IV

"You'll soon see how easy it will be."

Rymon Grabb was reassuring a woman in pale fine-spun silk who stood half obscured by luxuriantly flowering plants. Only the garnet outline of her curled hair sprang from the darkness, but deeper in the shadows the usually lambent amber-flecked eyes had momentarily captured a glint from some highly faceted luminosity. They shone out of the murky quarter with the glassy rime of terror seen in the eyes of wild animals trapped in beams of artificial light.

"You've no idea how I feel...just the thought of it," she responded in a nervously uncertain voice.

"You're an actress, a model used to appearances, and the daughter of esteemed citizens. You have nothing to fear. Don't ruin this chance, sweetheart," he coaxed. "You'll never get another. Across the room is a fat oyster with a very large pearl for you."

"The pearl is less interesting, Rymon, when we're talking about the rest of my life. And please, with all due respect, don't call me sweetheart. I'm a Dagonite citizen."

"Yes, you have principles...precisely why you're negotiable. Remember what I said, what's at stake for Dagonite and for you...what you'll achieve if you succeed. Come...he'll eat you up."

Kele Umara blinked over his crystal goblet as the tall female, molded sumptuously within the artful wrappings of a tasteful beige gown, came toward him borne on the arm of a foolishly beaming Grabb.

So this is the vaunted woman, a kind of red-blond hair, handsome indeed. What is her voice, coarse, high? Is she cloying, truculent? Pretend you're Casimir Wyld. Damned if I can manage it. The man is a conundrum. Nevertheless, thus far I believe he would be quite impressed.

Through a practiced mental legerdemain, all trace of the frightened animal had been supplanted by a soft and gracious aplomb as the young woman stretched out her lean arm, its wrist encircled by a single gold bracelet, and grasped the Premier's hand. There was in the grasp a precise pressure calculated to swiftly impart warmth, reassurance, and respectful submission. This, and the carefully intoned voice that followed, surprised even Grabb, fostering a new admiration. *The adventuress is artfully schizophrenic.* Had not a stronger drive superseded, he would have been tempted to embark on his own relentless mission of seduction.

"How it thrills me to meet you at last, Premier. But where

is your charming wife, whom we all admire so much?"

The Premier, gladdened by this important inclusion, waved a plump hand exhibiting a large ring of black argillite cut in the form of a leaping fish. His wife Poppy, who habitually kept an eye punctiliously attentive to her husband's signals, withdrew her dark wagging head from a lively cluster of bodies and waved back.

She advanced with swift and sure movements, sizing up the scene as she came. Her flowing taupe gown was drawn up in folds to the left shoulder, drawing attention to a striking, specially hybridized scarlet poppy pinned there. This witless poppy, created from the red field poppies of the Dagonne plains, was named the *Poppy Umara* and was her trademark.

"Dearest, I want you to meet this lovely Dagonne citizen, whom you'll quickly see is quite devoted to you. Her name is Fleet Fairmeed," the Premier said, his words dulcet as honey, although he actually thought Fleet's assumed name too stagy.

Poppy Umara extended both hands to Fleet, patting and squeezing with a maternal warmth as skillfully executed as the gestures of her subject.

"Why I know this enchanting girl. She's been flashing all about our bedrooms for months," she said, laughing mischievously.

"What?" Grabb exclaimed. He had nearly swallowed his chronically studied suavity in one horrified gulp.

"Holoplays and fashions of course. Oh, look. Rymon is such a startling shade of puce."

They all broke into comprehending rushes of laughter, sanctioned by Poppy, and with Grabb slowly joining in.

"Please, may I borrow her for a little chat before you bog her down?"

Grabb frowned, but Poppy was already moving away like a busy transit car starting just on schedule. The tall Fleet was propelled quickly ahead without time for her to impose her will upon anyone. As her skirt flapped smartly around her slender ankles, Poppy turned her white heart-shaped face back over her shoulder and presented her husband with wide iniquitous black eyes and a hasty long-lashed wink.

He shook his head with loving admiration, and lifted both hands in the air, signifying at once surrender and victory.

"What would I do without her? She does half my work for me and always with such verve and good cheer."

"I'm very fond of Poppy," Grabb remarked with quickly summoned enthusiasm.

The Premier raised an eyebrow in distaste. "What of the girl's family?" he asked. "Ah, but I'll soon find out."

"Her parents, the Fahbis, are prominent instructors at the Academy of Biota. Fleet's only sibling is a rather vain sort of fellow, though enterprising. He's in the tourist business at Sonna and Oshean." Grabb wisely neglected to mention any of the notorious brother's covert vices and unsavory corruptions.

"Ah, as to vanity, I'm sure you're an expert at detecting it, Rymon." The Premier laughed deeply, feeling the good wine sloshing warmly in his quivering belly. "The Academy. Excellent. This means they're firmly entrenched in state work and good citizens. What is their relationship with their daughter, I wonder?"

"They dote on her and she's devoted to them."

"Very good. She'll be less likely to desert her Dagoné precepts for an alien cause. Or do we underestimate the persuasive powers of Casimir Wyld?" the Premier said, only half jokingly. "I

certainly hope we haven't *over*estimated his reputed interest in such pulchritude. As to the fateful meeting, I've decided to hold a sort of good will encounter with Immixia, a meeting at which Wyld can be the arbiter of peace, a role he delights in. We'll convene at the Sonna complex. Poppy is going down next week to supervise the preparations. I do hope you're not tired of Sonna by now." The Premier could not resist this barb of sarcasm. He went on without waiting for Grabb's response. "This will be a splendidly catered, carefully guarded affair with my vice premier's new secretary most temptingly within reach. Wyld, being unfailingly politic and ever hopeful of a rosy status quo, never refuses to attend such events. Although I've never felt that he enjoyed them very much. This time we'll see that he does."

V

With inflated gestures springing from her love of imperium, Poppy began her skillful appropriation of Fleet by escorting her about the large buzzing room.

Abundantly positioned around its perimeter were a mix of semiprecious stone and clear vitreous settees with huge overstuffed tussah cushions. There were indistinct patches of botanic thalo green, framed by the trailing broad-leaved ligaments of gently swaying aerial vines, some presenting fragrant white flowers with thick yellow corollas.

The heavy aroma of interior blossoms was cloying to Fleet. She longed for Sonna where the merciful sea breezes diluted the ever-present scents of blooming and waning flowers to a tolerable degree of sweetness.

Small bands of elegantly clothed cabinet VIP's and their aides, together with the most favored rank and file of government,

moved over the crackled white tiles like hungry spotted flocks, ambitiously visiting one green watering hole after another. When Poppy entered each ring of attentive faces to present her new cat's-paw, the group grasped her hand greedily, taking Fleet's hand obediently, as though falling upon a choice sweetmeat favored by their queen.

At last Fleet was led away down a long olivine corridor, bearing on both walls along its entire length shadowy photographs that had been left unilluminated. In the dimness, one black and white face leapt out at Fleet: a man with fierce sable eyes, wolfish brows and a violently gaping mouth. The monstrous photograph made her falter for an instant in her step and drop her gaze to Poppy's swiftly moving feet. This silent, mesmerizing journey behind the rhythmically flapping skirt and softly clicking heels left Fleet unprepared for her sudden debouchment into a high-ceilinged slate-blue room with thick carpets the color of dried apricots. Her eyes traveled to the astounding clerestory windows where long velour drapes of the same apricot hue cascaded down, pooling on the floor. Beyond and below the glass, floated the winking bejeweled city, fairly shouting its pyrotechnic glitter into the dark velvet night.

Giving a terse command to the house unit, tight-lipped Poppy immediately opaqued all of the windows, explaining with a brisk laugh that she had no wish to compete with such an overwhelming panorama.

She poured two drinks of a delicately amber ferment into gold-filigreed goblets, and handed one to Fleet.

"Now let us chat," Poppy said. Her moist cherry-red lips softened, curving into a soothing smile of inducement.

The Marchman

Something unfingerable disturbed Fleet. It seemed that she had been talking forever, letting her strength ooze away as though her mouth were an unstoppable wound; yet she could remember little, thought in fact that the reverberating voice could not have been her own, that it came from an outer corridor, echoing in broken indistinct phrases. Her nervous fingers traced the filigreed gold on her goblet over and over as she talked. An unwarranted camaraderie streamed toward the focal white heart half-encircled by sprung black curls and studded with mysterious jet eyes, which seemed to grow larger and darker, its nonverbal, glistening red mouth pursing and clucking encouragement at her diffuse offerings.

Yes, my father...my mother...my brother... "What have I been saying?" she asked finally, putting her hand to her head, dazed and embarrassed that her rapidly flicking tongue had grown thick and torpid and her memory obtuse.

Poppy frowned and appeared to be scolding herself for something. "Lie down, dear. You're tired. Too much...that is...too much excitement. Close your eyes, rest. Now I've dimmed the lights. Sleep it off. I'll check in later."

Fleet had closed her eyes but opened them again in fearful dizziness. Her mind was soaring away from her as she clutched at the fabric of the heaving couch. Then at last her heavy body followed, slowly rising up, up where meteoric flashes buzzed within her reeling consciousness until she spiraled into a hole of deepest black.

VI

"A dash of compressed powder to make us smarter and another dash to make us wear better. I endorse Long-Life pills because I believe in the future." Alba was speaking *ex cathedra* from her deck chair at Shellreef, the windward summerhouse. "Besides, if I didn't approve these useful nostrums you would soon have me a stultifying reactionary, wouldn't you? An eccentric afraid in the frailty of age."

Nev Churlwraith lay as if his body had been hurled into his deck chair and held there by an invisible force. A large grin had just bloomed on his solemn face. He turned a glass of sweet lemon ice water in his hands as he watched a lone glistening wave rolling mildly, turning like a lazy porpoise in the bay below.

"You certainly can't be accused of frailty, and on the contrary, I often feel much older than you; the generation between us seems reversed. I long for the old days, and you look cheerfully to the future. At least you give me the courage to keep pressing forward."

"Nothing retrogresses but memory...nothing stagnates. Round and round it goes, but who is to say how a circle finishes itself out there...in here?" Alba waved her hand and drew it back to herself with amused reflection.

Nev shifted his weight around and pitched himself off the deck chair. He walked over and looked down at Alba's soft visage. She was ninety and there were but a few laugh lines on her face. Of course she was genetically long-lived. Still, she was a marvel, her youthfulness, her dauntless spirit. She returned his gaze with tear-bright questioning eyes of slightly faded blue.

"Come, out with it. I'll withstand whatever is on your

mind, Ned."

"I was thinking what a waste and how a man could profit from you now, Alba, alone with all your wisdom."

Her countenance changed but revealed no offense at the intimacy of his remark, although she teased to reaffirm her cherished independence.

"You must be aging, Nev; boldness in speech is a sure sign of it. I myself shamelessly use it to advantage."

She tossed her head, a gesture of youth that reminded Nev how great her beauty had been. "As for romance...ah," she drawled softly, "I don't need new fantasies, only the luxury of time for superb memories that get better and better. You see, looking cheerfully to the future is mainly done for my grandson. I don't have to long for the past; part of me lives there. Such regressing thought refines and it...yes, it..." Her voice trailed off as she envisioned her dead husband Brone coming to her across the veranda, that cocky Wyld grin flashing. For a moment, she withdrew as completely as if she had risen and gone to meet him, now staring fixedly out at deep blue Metiah's Bay. The bay curved in a graceful half moon and was named after Wrahm Wyld's beautiful wife, an Immix princess. But that was long ago in the beginning before the disaster, when the Immix were really another people, a wholesome and rather peaceful race, when not provoked by Dagoné marauders. The water had turned a stippled silver in the changing light. Alba breathed deeply, feeling the ecstatic burn of suspended memory. It gave pleasure as of something wonderful on the tongue and in the throat, luxuriant as tree-ripened mangoes, resinous, piquant, unforgettable -- the most delectable of fruits, the most delectable of memories: the assassinated Brone's constant

return, his prolonged approach, pacing off the pleasures of her life.

Nev Churlwraith's once passionately red and springy hair was turning gray, and the freckled skin of his ruthless oval face, although still smooth, was not yet geneticized from its winter. Today the rare jade eyes, often in the past flashing over some quick witticism of his own making, were strained and narrowed as if trying to see in the dark. While he traversed the terrace, his long-fingered hands slipped nervously in and out of his pockets, like pale searching spiders. He knew watchful Alba was presently lost in her own thought.

What is it, he wondered, that makes Churlwraiths and Wylds hang together so closely, always with that impregnable alloy of propriety and will running arrow-straight between them? He supposed it began long ago when the raw bond of indentured servant and master was forged, gradually evolving into something mutually beneficial. This enduring favorable history had finally transformed that bond into an unfettered loyalty that exceeded tradition. Of course, the maintenance of sovereignty was an aspect that held them fast together, a sovereignty carefully watched by others on the planet. This was power that looked deceptively facile, artfully created and sustained over a fragile base by complex maneuvers of the intellect. There were no blundering acts born of hasty and reckless emotion, which are the incipient causes of war. They had faced aggressive plots and skirmishes at their borders, but never had there been outright war. For this, Wylds had been revered and, in the more difficult times, worshiped. Thus, had Wyld heirs become easily the best chiefs. At first, the Marchland was an obscure tract of land run like a principality, dividing a remote island whose squabbles were hardly known to the rest of

the planet. Eventually, threats from close beyond its borders took serious shape, and the Marchland's impassioned defense brought Wylds and Churlwraiths firmly together in their protective roles. Yet in personal ways they remained restrainedly apart, as order dictated. For more than three centuries descendants of Wrahm Wyld's crew, who sometimes married among Mainland ancestors, gladly left the burden of leadership to the lineage of that original hard-principled Wyld, at whose right hand a Churlwraith had first stood and would always stand.

It must be so, Nev thought, lifting his mulling gaze from water to sky. His eyes, now a pensive beryline hue, were never so startling as his daughter Chloë's. Her eyes were mysterious even to him, sometimes evoking the full moon's phosphor eating like a green flame through the thin edge of a cresting midnight wave. All at once a vision of her amazing eyes, wide and staring and bereft of life, was forced upon him. This dreaded sequel to a familiar but emasculating fear caused his heart to leap in horror. *Is it fear above purgatives that keeps blood vessels clean?* he wondered. Then, like the Jarl constantly forced to think of defense, he searched rather cynically the unrevealing azure dome where squadrons of martial watchdogs patrolled, secure defense invisible in the gaseous glare of solarized space.

"We're both reflective today. Nev, do you realize how you're pacing? Are you departing or just exercising?" Alba asked, returning from her musings.

"Both," he answered, jolted from his pondering. "I'm due for a holo-conference at the Hall: economists. I should be going. Your grandson is a hard taskmaster," he teased.

"But he is deeply grateful for you, as I am and Rane was. I

continually assail you with effusive declarations of your worth. Have I become a parrot of worn out praise? It's all done in gratitude."

"For which I'm ever thankful. I'm just a bit tired."

He saw no reason to reveal anything unpleasant to Alba, although she was seldom delinquent in discovery. But to Wyld he would soon spill his roiling innards, at a ripe moment. Ah, the Jarl, the marvelous incisiveness and stony corporeality of him. How time had raced between boy and man, swiftly, often cruelly. Man and March had melded now into the Wyld enigma, a cross-feeding symbiosis. How many times the process and repeated itself. If Rane had lived he would not be disappointed in his son. He would welcome the irritating adamantine qualities that were Wyld attributes, hard pearls of ingenuity that sometimes made the Jarl nearly intolerable.

"Come, Nev, that furrowed brow is more than fatigue."

Alba was unrelenting when ferreting out information. He turned away to prevent her reading his face while he invented another subject.

"Alba, do you think when Wrahm Wyld deleted the islanders' battle lines, feinting power with such pitiful war machinery, and taking his crusty old boatswain, Brigg Churlwraith, out to pace off his own boundaries, that he knew about the gold?"

"So this is where you've gone. I doubt it. Who knows, and what does it matter? The first Wyld sanctioned no division of this island that had not already informally occurred. The island had never been identified by a single unifying name other than *The Island*. Even then Wylds were thought of as keepers of the peace, as were Churlwraiths. We've never been aggressors. Our

gratuitous gold has repeatedly bought our survival...continues to do so, it's undeniably true..."

"And bought much good for the entire planet...just idle speculation." Nev gave a short punctuating laugh.

But Alba was not to let him off so easily. It was a contention with her that he well knew.

"Remember that Captain Wyld was not a seeker of riches. His journals are clear. He was fleeing an inevitable fate at the hand of his half-brother who violated the laws of primogeniture. If he found gold before the merciful borders were fixed it matters little, although such wealth has made us grateful stewards. I believe we've used this fortuitous wealth more wisely than others might have. Wrahm Wyld was a rare and clever man, one I would like to have known. He kept the natives and pirates from each others' throats and prevented a bloody annihilation, a fate about to be realized when he arrived with his brave little crew."

"I will go to my death pondering Wylds," Nev said.

"I too, and Churlwraiths," Alba answered with a smile and an amused raising of an eyebrow. Then with a final quick rejoinder she added, "When people question intent I demand that they review history. We've kept the peace and traded fairly. The proof of pacific time is with us."

"And in wholehearted agreement I take my leave."

Nev began to speak into his wrist messenger, summoning a Wyld Violet.

"Wait. Go into the kitchen and ask Mea for the lovely flounder that favored my hook this morning." Alba sat up, shading her flushed face from the noon sun. "They'll make you a nice supper at the Hall. Ask Lela to prepare them as you and Casimir

like best and bring over Fox and Chloë."

Nev nodded politely and praised Alba's bounty, but his rarely vigorous appetite was never so diminished.

That evening the house mistress Lela's robust and smiling teen-aged boy came around for the third time with the great white platter of breaded fish.

"More flounder, anyone?" Wyld inquired.

"No thanks." Fox Churlwraith groaned, pushing back his chair. He smiled fondly at his long absent sister.

"Nor I," Chloë agreed, "but it was delicious."

Wyld studied her a moment upon hearing her low-voiced refusal. She was incurious and deceptively demure, with her astounding hair gathered carefully at the nape of her high-collared neck. She had hardly looked his way, which amused him. Could it be a subtle ploy for attention, or was she genuinely disinterested in flesh and bone reality?

"You've done well with your share of this flounder. I didn't think naturalists ate swimming things," he said.

"It wasn't swimming when I ate it," Chloë smartly answered. She had barely glanced his way.

He laid aside his fork and set his darkened blue eyes upon her again. In the forest she had judged him; he saw it. In his refusal to play his titled role she had found him wanting. The knowledge of this irritated him more than regressive judgments usually could.

"A while ago I heard you praise the work of biochemist friends. I thought perhaps you preferred the artificial, the, ah...nonviable foods of their lavish invention," Wyld continued, intending to foster a lengthier response.

"The Dagonites labor at such things. My colleagues and I are far more interested in saving imperiled viable matter from extinction," Chloë answered with flaming bright eyes.

Nev had been observing his daughter's flushed face. She was uncharacteristically sharp-edged and fiery. And Wyld was in a peculiar state that induced sarcasm--or was it disdain?--from his usually mannerly and amiable presence at table. Disdain for his daughter? She had particularly asked her father not to speak of her profession, but this treatment was unjust. He took personal offense.

"I realize you haven't heard of Chloë's remarkable work on Frontier IV, with the mutative effects on cultures in deep space," Nev said, knowing full well that Wyld had hardly remembered Chloë's existence let alone heard of her career. The knowledge had purposely been kept from him.

"Mostly classified and rather boring data," Chloë said, giving her father a searching look of warning.

She felt betrayed and dropped her eyes to the shining wild berries, large-drupeled and splashed with thick cream. She had discovered them that afternoon on a restless ramble in a deep thicket, bringing them in a stained kerchief to Lela for dessert.

Wyld watched Chloë as he was speaking to Nev. "I've not heard. I thought you said she was a naturalist." He could not resist taunting Nev for his secrecy.

"Did I? No, not exactly...well, a scientist."

"Interesting. Have you anything to do with any of the research projects we're funding on Frontier IV?" Wyld asked.

"No...I haven't." She remained unresponsive.

"I regret to say I haven't been invited to follow your career.

Tell me, if I may impose, why you have suddenly left it?...and why was I led to believe that you were here solely to meddle in the forest?" He smiled at having gained her full attention with a playful rudeness.

"Perhaps because I so clearly understand wild animals." Chloë had spoken softly but with sparkling sulfurous eyes.

Wyld paused in consideration. "And what am I to make of that?" he demanded, planting his wine goblet so swiftly the clear fluid sloshed onto the pale green cloth.

Fox Churlwraith blinked and drew himself up in his chair. He was a jovial but rather quiet fellow, with perfect even white teeth that were quite often pleasantly displayed, and owning his father's wiry dark red hair but with the wide-set amber eyes of his dead mother. He would have liked to ask the Jarl, in his usual frank manner, what brought on this strange crossfire, but he knew Wyld well enough to keep silent until there came a more peaceful lull and an inkling.

"Well?" Wyld looked around him, awaiting an answer from anyone, apparently disappointed at having banished levity.

Chloë stared with great unhappiness at her father, while unconsciously turning her dessert spoon round and round in the slender fingers of her left hand. She glanced at Wyld, the smooth skin of her soft mouth hard set.

"Jarl Wyld, I must ask to be--"

"Please call me Casimir," he insisted. "You've said it in my absence, I'm sure. I begin to remember you. What a strange little skulking shadow you were." His laughter was suddenly uncorked, pouring out like fast rippling wine.

Chloë dropped her head back and began to silently count

the long crystal prisms on the chandelier. Her pale throat shone milk white, a carotid faintly pulsing. Fifty-five over half way around. Were there exactly one hundred? She folded her napkin and stood up, having successfully screened out the rest of the conversation, which went merrily on without her. "Please," she tried against the inattentive noise of resumed banter, "excuse me." She left the dining hall and soon gained the veranda in long angry strides, her midi skirt swishing against the ever-present boots.

Wyld had pushed back his chair and gone to the window, with a quizzical smile on his lips. "Strange," he muttered, watching the slender figure disappear over the tree-shadowed lawn, the narrow chocolate skirt flapping rhythmically in a floating stride, as if wind-driven--home along the river.

"He's been terrible. I'm going to tell him," Nev said in a harsh whisper to his son.

"No," Fox answered. "Now is not the time."

"Come and eat these berries. They're wonderful," Fox called. "Nothing like wild berries."

"She hasn't much of a sense of humor, your Chloë," Wyld said as he came back to the table. He scooped up a mouthful of the bumpy darkling fruits and exclaimed, "At their peak. They taste of the woods and river."

"Lovingly plucked by my sister's agile fingers," Fox said with a taunting look.

Wyld hesitated, his spoon held midair, then glanced at Chloë's unfinished bowl. "I'm sorry she didn't enjoy the fruits of her labor. Pass me hers, I'll eat them."

VII

Sunring, the Churlwraith residence, was judiciously conceived at about the same time as Solvauld Hall almost a century ago. Resembling an ancient castle, its rising cylinders were visible from the Hall, prodding the sky above forest-bound Skeel Valley from their resting place near a wide sweep of the Ruddle River. Sixty acres and an abiding love of privacy separated Sunring from the dark green star of the Wyld compound. Hardly as massive as Solvauld Hall with its newer sprawling triangles, which housed the busy Marchland nerve center, Sunring was nevertheless an imposing edifice and an avant-garde example of its period. Walking in the upper valley the eye was often drawn to the tall cylindrical forms, seemingly upheaved from the sleeping land and left to smolder prophetically in the roiling river mists, like the horns of a great mythical beast. So solid and fixed in their milieu were the two glass-studded jet rooks, they appeared to extrude naturally from the planet's deep mantle. Their uppermost vertexes had been sliced away and fitted with roof pools. These high cisterns with their stored river water could be instantly sealed from the sky by sensitively reading thermistors that controlled protective diaphragms. Rainwater was also filtered into the building systems. Some water was diverted underground to lighted passageways with pollinated vegetable and flower beds. There, the time-signal hormones extracted from the plants' phloems induced them to flower and fruit many times a year. Wave-control glass soared from the base to the crown of each five-storied rook, conforming to their smooth structural curves and tapering to slender shards at each apex. The tinted glass strips were held by a thick exterior of refined obsidian that had gathered solar energy most efficiently

long before it was microwaved to the Mount Sorus collector.

There on its exposed bluff above the red-silted river, sometimes swimming in fog, sometimes seething in the sun's extolled fusion, sometimes backed by night's myriad star fires, the sheared black horns of Sunring seemed a phantasm of illusion, geometrically pristine and spellbinding.

Behind the low castle walls and capturing the western light were a small orchard and gardens with numerous stepped decks and shaded walkways suspended in lush green nets of shrubs and flowering vines. Hidden in one verdant corner at a work table, a chastened Chloë sat squinting over symbols glowing on her hand monitor. Soon the rustle of a house attendant lifted her surprised face to the last roseate streaks of dusk. Wyld's extraordinary arrival was abruptly announced.

She stood up in a flurry of agitation, folding her arms and clasping her elbows. In her excellent memory Sunring had always been a bastion of privacy, and Wylds, although quite welcome, seldom put in an appearance here. Visits usually went the other way and usually in answer to a hasty summons or an early invitation to a social event. The way Wyld seemed to revel in eccentric behavior was disconcerting and suggested a need for underhanded stratagems that Chloë found distasteful. For a moment she remained standing in thought. Perhaps his coming was about the request she had asked her father to make. On the strength of that welcome assumption she went gladly to meet him.

"Sweet," he exclaimed when she found him in the close-grown orchard of diminutive old pear and apple trees. He bit into a crisp fruit, wiping his mouth with the back of the same hand that held the pear. "I've probably eaten the last wild blackberries of the

season," he said, pointing the pear at her. "I'm afraid I ate yours too, and now I've stolen this perfect jewel from your garden."

"All yours. Everything we have is yours," Chloë answered in cool deference, but with no trace of guile.

This response was not quite what he had expected. Had she succumbed to the increasingly unpredictable streak in his disposition? No, not her. He had the feeling that this woman was about to ask for half the March's gold, or even somehow appropriate it, but with some exalted indisputable reason behind the theft. I know her, he thought, and I should warn her.

"They're not *mine*, Churlwraith," he scolded irritably, contemplating this new tactic. He remained with his head cocked to one side in a kind of amused rebuke. "Do you imagine that I...believe you think yourself a servant to the March...happily prostrate?"

Chloë bit her anger in half and went on with her killing kindness. "I'm glad to be home...rewarded here, thankful here." She had ended in a smoothly controlled voice but with revealing tightly folded arms.

Her words annoyed him very much. "In spite of Wylds, then?" he asked, watching her face close the way certain flowers did at night. He bit again into the speckled pear, this time with exaggerated flourish, but tasting nothing, as though the act were part of a stage direction and the pear a bland prop. Alas, sweetness superseded by the caustic.

"I don't see it that way at all," she answered.

She stood behind him, studying him with interest as he reached up and shuffled through the gilded leaves. His sleeves were rolled exposing the gold wrist messenger, the sinewy wrists,

and the blond hairs napping the forearms and shining red in the last sun. His rose-dusted white shirt stretched taut across the imperious back as he raised his arms, his hands playing deftly through the leaves. Unruly hair at the nape of his neck curled toward the collar. She waited, a faint smile forming on her lips.

"I suppose I'd better ask forgiveness for my insolence at dinner last night," he said without turning around.

"I too," she answered quickly, not to be outdone.

What? -- he turned now -- proud Chloë humbling herself to match his faceless apology, and she clearly the victim?

"I've come for an undeserved favor," he said.

She nodded without revealing her disappointment.

"I want you to help find a healthy piglet for Kele Umara's preserve. A peace offering. He fancies wild boars, feels a certain kinship with them." His eyes glittered with enjoyment. "And his forests are depleted, of course. We'll bring a young puma for the Immix. Will you oversee their capture? Two of our men, Jezz and Wirth, will do the work. Am I presuming too much? I know you're not a zoologist but you seem...at home out there."

"I'll be glad to help."

"You'll accompany the animals and me when I fly to Sonna next week...will you?"

"If you say so," she answered, smiling broadly at the disarmingly uncertain command.

"Won't you come in and have something to drink?" she added.

"I would...certainly I would, but I'm expecting a message from the Mainland. So I'll say good night...and thank you."

He had turned to go, carrying with him a plump scarlet-

tinged pear shaped like a long teardrop, for he was planning to try again for sweetness.

"Oh, Jarl Wyld." She counted on his return, for she needed just then to read his eyes.

"Yes?" he said, but did not even turn around.

"Hasn't my father...hasn't he spoken to you?"

"Concerning what?" he asked, now coming back to her.

"Ah, he hasn't."

"You're standing here before me...what is it?"

He was sorry he had asked, seeing in those phosphorous eyes that the moon was to be called down.

"I would like permission to converse privately with the Immix premier at Sonna."

"You! Why?"

For an instant Chloë thought of beginning a lengthy reply, the only valid answer, but she could all too easily envision the narrow avenue of attainment hopelessly blocked by a foolish wrangle.

"I think it would be better, much better, if you spoke to my father about this," she said. Her estimable father, she reckoned, was valuable security for her good faith. "Please...will you please speak to him?"

Her imploring eyes had caught a glint of the rising moon, and he looked away.

"You really expect me to agree here and now without any explanation...you do expect that?"

"No."

"Why should the Immix premier be interested in your words? What intrigue is this? Black suns! You've just arrived and

already you're a thorn."

"Jarl Wyld, I wish no inconvenience. You see...it's the culmination of so much work...something I absolutely must do." She stopped abruptly. "Please excuse me." Her voice held the faintest tremolo.

He watched her step silently back into the shadows and vanish before he realized that she was actually going. The undeniable autonomy of her will lingered on, like a pungent smoke continuing to burn in the nostrils long after it has flown on the wind.

VIII

Wyld had changed his mind and stayed at Sunring, invited there for dinner with Nev and Fox, but Chloë was absent. He took his Mainland message in Nev's private videolarium and was soon after joined by the circumspect elder Churlwraith.

"The time has come, I'm afraid, to speak of your enigmatic female offspring," Wyld said, after Nev had ordered the house computer to seal the heavy doors.

"I agree, I agree. There are some things that must be said."

"Nev, I hate to... I understand how much she means to you, but ever since she's arrived there has been a certain uneasiness...difficulties shaping. I've enough thorns in my hide. You must pull this one out."

"Casimir, I'm sorry. Chloë is a good, a remarkable person. I grieve...but that isn't the point, no, no. The point is that Chloë is bent on a mission. Yes, she told me that you called her missionary, and you were more right than you knew in this. She has achieved quite a high place for herself among her colleagues for her work at the colony lab out on Frontier IV...as I mentioned yesterday. But

after this -- if you'll please bear with me -- after her sojourn in space, Chloë was doing research involving certain genetic mutations of the '52 disaster. I had to see Fedcartel's Jemensch Group anyway, this time in the flesh, on some Marchland monetary adjustments. I saw Chloë but never got around to mentioning to you... You know we Churlwraiths always keep our affairs private...whenever possible."

Wyld, who had thrown himself down on a large pillow near a tall window across the room, was gazing up at the twilight spray of stars. Then in one swift movement he leapt to his feet and swept his arm around the room. "Have you activated your jammer?"

"Certainly, although I doubt we need it. The focus is on the Hall."

"And I doubt *you've* escaped focus. This is where my head of security lives...but go on."

"I wonder if I shouldn't call Fox."

"Surely he knows this."

"Fox always knows or is about to know everything. And isn't that what you expect from your head of security?"

"Then why call him now?"

Nev reflected quietly, unbothered by the silence, then shrugged and went on.

"Chloë often worked with mutants. A colleague decided that she was pushing herself dangerously. Chloë is...of course you're right, sometimes enigmatic. I really can't say what she is capable of withstanding, but quite a lot. She's not at all thick-skinned, really far too sensitive, but she's strong-willed--partly a result of her excellent training. Nevertheless, she would have had

to steel herself for this and other shocks..." Nev's voice had trailed off, and he became aware that the piercing blue eyes were leveled intensely at him from across the shadowy room.

"I spent some time with her worried co-worker, an immunologist...Dr. Neath. I believe his concern for Chloë was genuine. His feelings certainly went beyond respect."

A feathery bouquet of dried bell-shaped flowers stood on Nev's desk, thin stalks arranged by Chloë in an angular obsidian vase. Nev touched a tiny bell with his fingertip. "These are completely poisonous," she had said, displaying a less frequent defining laughter, "but so innocently pretty."

Nev's head jerked harshly as he again realized that he was under heavy scrutiny. He reached for an insulated carafe of hot wassail, pouring out two gold cups.

Wyld, who had begun to pace nervously over the sapphire carpet, took his cup and went again to the high window to stare at the sparkling river hurrying by under a skipping moon. *My subject is hidden away in this old carapace of mystery and security. Does she work...sleep? I sense only intrigue.* The barest outline of that far too-serious face slowly materialized on the surface of the river, shifting dabs of soft flesh, paling beside the startling cryptic eyes. A visionary?--once a pigtailed chaser of peafowls. Here his bipartite sentiment revealed both the leader who would ruthlessly pry and entertain profane suspicions, and the man who would cry privacy and personal freedom from the mountain tops, bearing the guilt for his expedient side.

Nev swung his big tufted chair around to face the spot near the window where Wyld had momentarily alighted.

"After her doctorate and various colony projects Chloë had

many offers. She chose a skimpily funded project with an obscure Professor Vale, an immunogeneticist who had read her thesis on control methods with a number of unique human leukocyte antigens. I don't know if this stuff interests you...but it figures prominently in..."

Nev saw that Wyld appeared riveted to the place where he had settled, intensely focused on the unfolding drama of Nev's strange daughter. He plunged back into his story.

"According to Chloë these antigens that inhibit or receive foreign substances in the body are being made to do incredible things. The professor was excited about her uses of these remarkable protein molecules and sought her out immediately. Vale was a mysterious person but brilliant beyond question. He was laboriously approaching a solution to the genetic problem of Immixia. In the process of working with virus antigens, he had laid to rest several recent chemically induced diseases, also cell-devouring hereditary diseases centuries old. As you know, a lot of those maladies went begging during the decades of toxicity. After the '52 disaster some simply recurred -- a bloody recrudescence only recently controlled, and, as I say, owing much to Doctor Vale.

"A strange accident occurred, apparently carelessness, but Neath is suspicious. Vale was far too professional to expose himself to a new and erratic reovirus, but he *was* exposed and his health began to fail. Death was slow and ravaging. He refused to die until he had shared his work with Chloë. Taking every precaution possible, she remained nearby until the end, talking, talking, waiting each minute to find signs of her own demise. I can only guess what toll this took. It could be that she knew she would not succumb, and she has always practiced self-suggestion when

facing the slightest illness. Praise be, she was spared, but resumed her work and the professor's, with an even greater zeal.

"Vale was cremated in absolute secrecy but somehow someone received a message, and a lone Immix woman came to Chloë, the professor's mother, it turns out. No one was aware that he was Immix except Chloë. Perhaps she sent for his mother. She hasn't told me that. Vale had lived a life incognito and apart from his race, hoping to remove the scourge visited upon his people in the last century.

"I tried to persuade Chloë to come home for a rest. She was thin but on fire, the kind of vitality that comes with total commitment. I couldn't have pried her out of there. She gave no indication of instability and insisted that she needed more time. Then suddenly, only a week ago and quite unexpectedly, she came home."

Nev fell silent, feeling the probing eyes upon him. He thought of the deliberate lacunae in his story. The account was true as far as it went, but he had not plumbed the full harrowing depths of his knowledge. Now, trying to evaluate the seriousness of his story's ellipses, tiny drops of sweat appeared on his forehead. He pulled out a dark kerchief, unfolded it shakily and wiped his forehead. Wyld continued to look at him with a perplexed commiseration.

"Have you told me everything?"

Luckily, Nev had a little more to say that would, by its volatile nature, circumvent the answer to the Jarl's question, for it was indeed the Jarl speaking now.

"There are many...many conceivable Dagon and Immix entanglements here," he replied, "and no end of conclusions to be

drawn. Fox has begun an investigation and will confer with you on its progress. But now I come to an amazing piece of information." Nev went to kneel beside Wyld, speaking in a softly urgent voice. "Chloë says that she has solved the breakdown of immunity. She vowed to Professor Vale that she would do just that. You see, she wants to go and work in Immixia, to seek out those like Thame who hide and wait for an untimely death."

"I cannot allow that." Wyld's eyes and voice were as firm and unrelenting as steel. "All of this changes things considerably."

"You don't want her to help?"

"I've dreamed of nothing but making everything right on this island, vain fool that I am...but I know the limits of reality. We must be neutral. That is our strength. If she were not coming from the Marchland...but still you must realize that her life would be in danger."

"Chloë wants the Immix premier persuaded to help her bring the Meztas into the open," Nev went on, trying to give the Jarl room in which to turn around. "They are horribly treated and ostracized, as you surely know. A major part of the general avoidance and cruelty is a massive guilt over helplessness. Her intention is to correct this. She could have that crucial meeting with your help."

Wyld sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. "Your very extraordinary daughter is quite naive in this. She won't even martyr herself, because she won't get that far. The Dagonites will never permit it and, for that matter, certain Immix apparently want half-breeds to stay as they are...even though it weakens the entire race. She could easily and quietly disappear beyond our reach. You know this. How can you condone it?"

"I must," Nev said with absolute conviction. His heated face revealed the depths of his emotion. He would never yield, for he was trapped by what he knew to be his own futility in the matter.

Wyld, who had begun another tack of protest, stopped mid-sentence, realizing suddenly what clouded incident had been needling his brain. He spoke into the gold RM, the Real-Time Messenger band on his wrist. Above a panoply of functions, it would alert-decode for only the named subject whose voice and code were in its program. "Fox, please find Chloë and bring her to your father's videolarium."

In a few minutes Fox appeared but without his sister.

"We couldn't bring her. I thought she was in her study. Now I'm told that she went into the forest with Jezz and Wirth...hunting animals at *your* request."

Wyld ran his agitated fingers through his hair and closed his eyes for a moment while the others waited. "She needn't have gone that very instant," he muttered, falling silent again.

"Fox, did you have your sister's photo placed on the visugraph?"

"Negative. I knew when Nev got through with his story you wouldn't want it there. By the way, you preempted two of my best men for that little camp-out."

Wyld grinned. "Fox, if the Dagonites were involved in the Vale death what do you imagine they know of Chloë?"

"Probably not much. We suspect Vale's death was caused by Immix radicals working with certain Dagonites. As for Chloë, she was carefully stripped of her identity because all of her projects were classified. Poor thing became a number in uniform, with a

Mainland forces regulation hat and dark glasses for the passage. Anyway, she was usually in her lab or quarters. Even her closest colleagues knew her only as Emerald. They all had pet names for each other but were officially identified by numbers. Neath only got ahold of Nevvy by a forwarded request through a proxy off-grid computer, and Neath, by the way, is not the doctor's real name. Even reality has another name there. Furthermore, when Chloë returned home she arrived incognito, traveling none too luxuriously with Marchland air freight."

"Very well done. But as for Sonna, she stays here."

"Let her go," Fox said with unusual forcefulness. "She'll be safe. I'll see to that."

"She wants to speak to Premier Xheeva. I can't have imbroglios like that. You can be sure both sides already have some skull-duggery in mind."

"Casimir, please, you must let her speak to the Immix premier," Nev implored with an unusually intimate plea.

He looked ravaged and pale; his white freckled fingers clawed the air as he spoke.

"There can't be such play here. Will you endanger the March? Your daughter? Your sister? Think what you ask."

"We can change her name and introduce her as our zoologist friend from the Mainland," Fox said. He had already begun thinking along these lines, certain that they would find a way to convince Wyld of the plan. "Credentials will be easy."

"Does Chloë really have a sound knowledge of animals?" Wyld asked.

"Yes," Nev replied. "She was originally trained in zoology."

"I'm curious, if your Chloë loves the March as she insists,

why she switched to a field of study that kept her away so long."

"It was an irresistible calling," Nev quickly answered.

"As a zoologist bringing your gift, Premier Xheeva will welcome her," Fox said, trying to steer the Jarl back to a favorable decision.

"You're right of course. The woman will gladly accept a wild animal into her country but allow a half-breed to be taken out as a slave." Wyld's voice was bitter.

"But the Immix leaders really want the genetic defect eliminated," Nev said. "There are only a few radicals who want to unite with Dagon. They're the ones who plot with the Dagonites."

"Yes," Wyld agreed. "But the Dagonites also want the defect eliminated so they can intermarry when the time is right for expansion. Their scientists want to offer the Immix that plum in exchange for closer ties. They simply haven't found the answer...and Chloë has. This is serious business, Nev. Your daughter takes a grave risk."

There were beads of sweat on Nev's forehead as he answered. "I know that but I have little choice. How can I thwart my daughter's work? It would be as if...as if I didn't value her life."

Wyld sat quietly with his head bowed a few seconds. "All right I give my permission. I hope I won't regret this. Fox, I hold you responsible for the entire technical production of this masque."

"As always," Fox answered with a broad smile of relief.

"We're grateful," Nev said, gripping the Jarl's arm.

IX

The frustration that had plunged Chloë so swiftly into the

forest vanished, as she knew it would, under nature's soothing moon-spun gauze. She asked the two able giants Jezz and Wirth to dispense with the small warmth-giving portatherm -- although its bulk was minimal -- reminding them of their thermal clothing, which she did not herself bother to wear. To camp out on the hard ground under the cold stars, with an old-fashioned fire of tree boughs, was far from privation for her. Permission to build a fire had been obtained from the Overseer Warden. "Once this was how man lived," she reminded her companions. She was dragging another of Wirth's collected fir branches gingerly over the fire, letting it fall into the red coals.

A flurry of sparks zigzagged heavenward and Chloë surrendered her thoughts to the magic holding power of flames -- the fusion of mankind's infancy that had first inspired, or at least accompanied, song and dance. She hummed softly, hardly aware that her voice was audible.

"Please sing," Jezz said as he rolled down his sleeves and settled by the fire.

The dark muscular Wirth, who rarely spoke, jammed his laser knife into its sheath and folded his arms in silent agreement that a song would be most welcome.

"Let me think a minute," Chloë said, lifting her face to the sky. Serenity streamed from the stars, and below the feathered edges of the tall firs shone a brushed gold in the firelight. She dropped her agile, thin-fingered hands into her lap, one atop the other palm up, and stared with dilated eyes until all external interference was eliminated from the spreading dimension of the present moment.

Jezz and Wirth let their cautious heads nod toward the fire

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as they dreamed into the curling flames. In their tranquilized state neither could have said at what instant the strange and mellifluous ballad had begun. At first a soft vibration could be felt on the skin, then the lyric swelled like the night-fluting throb of a solitary thrush, infusing the place with hallowed air.

Lead me stars to the tribe that has fathered
my dreams.
Let me dance in the light of their fires.
I have strayed from the place where their
honor redeems
To dark outlands where rivals conspire.
Let me fly from the storm at the edge of red
space
To blue canyons where masters recite.
I will throw down rich meed for a sign of
the race
That once offered brave deeds to the night.

Chloë stopped quite suddenly and listened. She had been watching a few satellites flash as she sang, but her prescience of an unseen presence plummeted her from the heavens to a shadowy point beyond the firelight. "Come join us whoever you are," she called into the dense forest.

Wirth jumped up first. Nothing stirred and no stranger came forward. Jezz stood by Chloë as Wirth plunged into the darkness. After a while, he returned with a silent and curiously satisfied shrug of his shoulders.

Jezz shook his curly blond head and laughed. "It was

probably an animal lured here by your voice...hoping to be caught. You can sing our gift prey to us."

Chloë smiled, thankful for such camaraderie. "Do you two love the March as I do?"

"We don't know how you love it," Jazz speculated.

"Ah, I see where your training lies, clever fellows."

"We're only hardworking roustabouts," Jazz answered with a laugh as he pushed the burning branches together.

"But you understand the subtlety of words."

"The Marchland is the best home on the planet," Jazz said. "The animals will be sorry to leave it."

Chloë had been studying the taciturn Wirth, who was stretched out thoughtfully with his arms beneath his head. "You're not wardens," she said to him softly, matter-of-factly, for she had already discerned that these two very special men were Fox's security agents.

The brows leapt up over the dark brooding eyes, and the full smooth lips curved into a comely fire-lit smile.

"I know the forest well enough," Wirth answered as he looked away toward the fire.

"As well as the Jarl?" she asked.

He turned his intriguing profile to face her. His dark eyes fastened upon her, involuntarily offering their warmth. "That I couldn't answer. The Jarl knows the March well."

"Has he really time to know much about the Marchland animals?" she asked, thinking of the neglected boar.

"More often now he has to trust others. His scientists and wardens are good...despite the neglected boar," he answered, with a knowing smile that surprised Chloë.

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Soon she lay in her cozy sleeping bag, trying to fall asleep. Usually she could will herself into a deep enough slumber to produce rest, but the growing anxiety at having left her research, even for a short time, was seriously eroding her concentration. Here, the indifferent universe's ticking clock continued to measure the finite.

Summoned to share breakfast Fox met a cheerful Wyld, Fox looking like an angry red bear.

"I assume you were in the forest last night and with your RM turned off again."

"You only assume?" Wyld responded with a grin. The accuracy of his security chief was a certainty.

For his own peace of mind, Wyld had taken a quietly humming little search craft out to a plateau near puma country. From there it was only a five kilometer hike to the bonfire.

He liked to feel the sinews in his legs pull and stretch as his feet came down on rough terrain; he liked the forest smell, the friendly stars, the bracing night winds. All of this was more than a pressure release; it realigned his vision and fed the force that carried him through all his days, days promising adversity alongside any pleasure.

Wyld knew as he retreated, his tall figure pausing on a moonlit rise, that Wirth had seen him. He also knew that this quiet man, quite experienced in life and only a decade younger than himself, would say nothing to Chloë. As soon as Wirth had seen who it was he turned back to the camp, never giving any sign of recognition.

Once again that lyrical voice had held him in its thrall. He

remembered how he had impugned Chloë's chant as gibberish, now admitting to himself that he had really been upset by the exclusions of his own unchosen path. It was *her* chosen path that had all but removed her from him. Yet he refused to deny himself thoughts of the possibility.

"All right, I know that you were there," Fox went on. "Please, Jarl Wyld, make my job a little easier. You know that you're much more than whatever impulse you feel at any given moment."

"Ah, yes, I'm symbol and buffer, and they bank on Wyld. Right? But, alas, a few mercenaries are always after my throat. You and I know that I'm only a man on stretched toes, and sometimes I turn off my RM...a pitiful gesture."

"Evasive poetry," Fox said, still mildly irritated.

"To you my rambles seem a careless luxury but they're something I need...something I will always do."

"With perhaps a terrible price when you're cut off."

"I'm sorry if I cause you undue worry."

Fox shrugged his shoulders. "Just please don't ignore the calls on your RM," he said, then offered a placating smile. He could not resist such agreeable humbleness from the Jarl who could so quickly turn to steel.

Now they talked of mundane things, the daily agenda: a review of market figures with Nev before he joined another monetary conference; an update on the Sonna meeting; a quick trip to the mines, which Wyld had just decided to make.

"Good," Fox said. "The men like to see you. They need the Jarl to thank now and then for their high standard of living."

"And I need them, every one of them," Wyld responded in

a gratified lighter voice. "Don't worry, old Dueler, I'll keep my RM on until I'm back."

"And even after that," Fox admonished with a gladdened face. He was especially pleased to see the Jarl in such good humor, after an unusually long spate of gloominess. The Jarl did have his winning ways

Returning from the mines Wyld found Chloë, Jezz, and Wirth disporting with their new wild captives in the large southern courtyard at the Hall. The piglet, flashing its white juvenile stripe, squealed and trotted away from the playful puma cub, who was snatched up by Wirth and laid in Chloë's lap. Wirth knelt quietly beside her holding the puma's paws, and Wyld saw that a warmth had sprung up between the aloof agent and Chloë.

"These two healthy creatures are not friends," Chloë said, her voice ringing with a more careless laughter.

Wyld descended the steps and lifted the squirming cub from Chloë's caressing fingers, then cradled it in his arms like a baby. He held it out before him by its scruff and stared into its eyes as it growled ferociously.

"These eyes remind me of Churlwraith eyes."

"And temperament you mean," Chloë replied, still in good humor.

"What do you think of that comparison, Wirth?" Wyld asked.

"I've seen no evidence of bad temper," Wirth replied, offering Chloë an ironic smile, a hint of something shared.

He had dutifully arisen when Wyld appeared, and was ready to take charge of the animals. They would be put in the care of the

wardens until the time of their journey.

Chloë followed Wirth over the cobbled courtyard, saying something that Wyld could not make out. They stood together in the still intense afternoon sun, with their long purple shadows stretching across the rough stones. Wyld studied the dark powerful form of Wirth paired with Chloë, who was like a pale and slender narcissus. When they turned to laugh at Jezz, who was attempting to corner the squealing piglet, now dashing madly helter-skelter, their gilded forms appeared sumptuously joined, as though consummated and eternally fixed in the clear spreading light. Wyld found himself discreetly, painfully looking away, as if he had stared through a private door accidentally left open.

X

Great Mother Alba had returned from Shellreef and taken charge of the domestic scene, deftly realigning the thousand household duties that had jogged a fraction off center during her absence. She had arranged this evening's dinner party on the west terrace as a balmy alfresco buffet.

The brazier fire glowed, competing with the last rays of sun emblazoned on a hyacinthine sky. Chloë stood near the brazier, extending her unadorned hands from her wine cape toward the mesmerizing hot coals.

"We had a blazing fire at night in the forest," she informed the well-fed guests.

There were three Mainlanders: two financiers and an admiring ruddy-faced general named Aveluck. Chloë was here mainly to present the persona of a Mainland zoologist, and to

familiarize herself with her new identity before meeting the Immix premier.

"Blazing satellites, a forest fire!" the General exclaimed.

"No, no, General Aveluck," Chloë corrected, finding the General's misunderstanding very amusing. "We built a fire with fallen branches and warmed our skins."

"Oh, I see. Rustic."

"I've never known a zoologist before. You're unusual, Doctor Kleeve," the squat banker remarked. Chloë had winced inwardly at her latest appellation. "Of course, I mean that in the most approving way. I think your fire was pleasingly romantic...the forest setting and so forth."

"Probably I was more a captive of atavism," Chloë answered. "Fires go back to first principles."

"Extraordinary," General Aveluck remarked. He had turned aside to swallow a red pill.

"My sentiments," Wyld shot over his shoulder at the General.

Wyld was seated with his back toward the others, which no one seemed to consider impolite. In such circles he had a seasoned easy decorum that made an artful union of the appropriate and the natural. His long legs were stretched out so that his sandaled feet could rest on a low stone parapet as he squinted toward the sun's red flame-out. Generals and bankers came and went at the Hall, and Wyld had no reason to court the present guests. He would never let himself be forced into playing a role that others expected. Endlessly circulating stories presumed to reveal his true nature, and in none would he have recognized a fragment of himself. At this particular moment he chose to take his cues from his physical

environment and from his own working chemistry. Both were in a happy state. He had just eaten good food and the horizon was in a brilliant flux of dusk.

Given the chance, Chloë studied Wyld's head of sun-reddened dark blond hair. Her eyes traveled to his back. This ever imperious back, fittingly clothed in a black tunic, was as unyielding to her as his troubling nature. She was frowning when she caught the eye of Fox, who sat back on the same parapet with his legs dangling over the side and his face angled toward Wyld and the others. Fox had been with Wyld a long time, but he was not without uncertainty, Chloë knew, at the Jarl's next move.

He smiled at his sister and her face broke into a special softness. Fox had maintained a concerned and deep affection for his sister over the years, often showing up at her quarters during his mysterious trips around the planet for or with Wyld. While checking on Marchland projects, he had even obtained clearance to visit her during her busy, perhaps on occasion lonely, sojourn on the space station Frontier IV. His sister had greeted him with fond delight.

The computer punctually switched on the indirect lighting, spangling the terrace with areas of midday leaf-green, and enlivening the colors of late summer flower beds with a brilliance fairly shouting at the twilight sky.

"Ah, the flowers are at their peak," Alba said with a contented sigh. "And I believe I hear...yes, a nightingale is trilling. Hear it? How distinct that sound is, as though one could just see those colorful notes traveling through the darkness, like the clever brown bird itself."

Chloë walked down among the luminous flower beds,

stopping to touch the shadowed petals of a deep wine rose while listening to the pulsing of the crickets.

"You seem tired, Doctor Kleeve," Wyld said as he came up behind her. He watched her shoulders draw up in distaste at the assumed name.

"Tired of...?"

"Well, restless then. You don't have to hang around here anymore. Why don't you get some sleep. We'll be leaving early. I'll make your apologies to the guests."

"Good idea," she agreed, then carefully in a softer voice, "I know Fox and Nev will be late. Please thank Alba." She stepped quickly away down the walkway.

"Wait, I'll walk with you," Wyld offered.

She held up her hand with nervous abruptness. "Your guests, Jarl Wyld. No harm for me in the March with only a quiet moonlit lane to walk."

"Then I'll call Wirth," he said, with immediate regret.

"No, please. Oh, no, you wouldn't disturb him. I'm already gone." Her voice came from deep shadows. The long wine cape fluttering out behind her was the last thing to be seen, like the curling tongue of swallowing night.

"Skye Kleeve," he murmured with some perplexity, then again rehearsed the name carefully aloud to himself.

The flight to Sonna in the Jarl's big ship, Wyld Violet I, was swift and smooth. Actually the Marchland entourage would be staying in the Wylds' elegantly simple cluster of dwellings known as Arrowmoon, just across the border from Sonna on the western

Marchland shore. From there Wyld Violet could make its quick hop to Sonna, returning nightly.

Unlike lush Shellreef on the eastern shore, Arrowmoon was located in a dry littoral region of spiked cactus, an occasional cypress, and warm coral sands. The helix-like structures, cast in blinding white stone, were set upon the sparse ground as artfully as if they had drifted there, like bleached softly eroded shells; their rounded cinnabar roofs looked from the air like whorls of terra cotta thrown on the wheel of a Marchland potter. The airy interiors were cool and soothing, with large, round, tinted windows and smaller louvered portals that let in the sea breezes with a simple voice command to the house computer -- freshening salty vapors drifting subtly through spacious open rooms with polished stone floors strewn with thick rugs, these woven of nature's ultramarines and sepias and creams.

"Arrowmoon has a new face," Chloë observed, touching her moist forehead as she walked from the landing pad. She stopped, glancing up the cactus-lined path toward the dazzling white buildings.

"Yes," Wyld answered, "the old structures out on the spit, while spectacularly placed, were erected on an unstable base and not secure. Although, I think you'll find the view from your room just as dramatic."

"What else has changed?" she asked, looking to the south.

"The SeaMarch labs have grown, but not the village, if that's what you meant. Clamhill is still as quaint as ever," he said, offering a reassuring smile. "The sort of place you would like, I think."

"Yes, I do like it," she said, glancing up at him and then

back at the interesting placement of the Arrowmoon buildings, which were stepped along a slight rocky rise, an island above vast sands.

"You're back on my right and Fox just to the left of me. Wirth and company are there off to your right. If you need anything just punch the blue button on your interface. I'm sure the computer has knowledge of most needs."

Incised in the heavy carved door of each building was the delicate linear replica of a shell. She saw that Wyld's door bore a Triton's Trumpet and hers an exquisite globular Harp Shell. These artfully natural touches were surely the result of Alba's buoyant good taste.

"It's now 8:15," Wyld said. "We have to be in Sonna for lunch, but before we leave we'll talk with Fox on the beach. Can you meet us down there in twenty minutes?" He pointed beyond a large cypress curling above a sand hill.

"I'll be there then, but I do need some help getting off my boots." She shaded her eyes and looked toward the porter coming down the path with the luggage. "I want to have my feet touch sand for just a little while."

"Come in. I'll do it," he said, throwing open her door and standing aside.

"Not you, Jarl Wyld!"

"Come in and sit down," he insisted.

She laughed and hung onto the glass arms of her chair as Wyld tugged at the tight fleece-lined boots. "I can't believe this."

"You think I've never pulled off a woman's boot?"

"But not a Churlwraith's."

"No," he answered, smiling at her blush.

"Ah...thank you. Now I feel free...much more so than during the interludes, because I'm home."

"The interludes?"

"Yes. Mainland government requires periods of leisure known as interludes for all high security workers. You must have heard of this. They flew me to restricted beaches in certain warm regions...ordered me to rest and play."

"Ah, yes...and did you...rest and play?"

"I rested... It was hard for me to be...disengaged."

As he listened he had been absently running his fingers over the still warm, soft fleece lining of the boots.

"And now how about a drink of something?" he asked, politely changing the subject. "The cottage is well stocked." He indicated a panel of buttons for the house unit as he spoke.

"No thank you. I don't need anything. Just a little water...I'm a bit warm." She touched her forehead.

"That I can accomplish," he said, standing up.

"I didn't mean for you to get it, Jarl Wyld. You're making me nervous."

She took the tumbler of cool water he brought, drinking while he knelt down to stand her fallen boots together. He remained beside her chair, resting back on one heel.

"You needn't call me Jarl. That's a strange carryover from old days. Homage to the boss, the need for authority."

"But really it's still the same...needed just the same. Everyone in the March calls you by that title. I think it's a good practice. It reminds me of who I am...and who you are." She spoke most earnestly, with that pleasant curl of accent falling over certain vowels.

"Strange. I doubt I've once forgotten who I'm supposed to be. And you," he said, looking up with searching eyes and thinking how tired she must be of strange identities. "Sorry, you'll have to remain Skye Kleeve for a while, the enigmatic zoologist...but at least...no longer a thorn."

Chloë pushed herself out of the soft fabric of the glass-framed chair and went to the window. Nature always readjusted her faltering sense of proportion. She watched a long green wave rolling beyond the dull shallows that had suddenly captured gray clouds. The wave streaked laterally, like a great morbid tear running across the faceless sea.

"I'm so thankful that you've permitted my request," she said slowly, without turning around.

He heard the bewilderment in her earnest voice.

"We're always speaking to each other from our backs," he said with a gentle laugh. He came and stood beside her, but she remained facing the sea. Then he saw that her hands were tightly clenched.

"Chloë, what is it?"

"Nothing...just a little anomaly of my own." She gave a forced laugh. "I'll be along in ten minutes."

When the door had closed she rubbed her taut arms and sat down, whispering a single incantation, a remedy upon which she often depended for relief.

Walking on the beach with Chloë and Fox, the earlier personalized aspect of Wyld was nowhere in evidence. His forewarnings were delivered in a peremptory manner with dispassionate cool blue eyes that unintentionally spurned even the

friendly sea.

"Premier Xheeva is a powerful, willful woman. She pretends to admire me and respect our right to exist, but she would like nothing more than to dispossess us, even if in the most swiftly humane way possible."

"We must be so confusing," Chloë speculated. "Nowhere else on the planet is there such a rare sector of land rather privately run, land operating as a country, and a neutral country at that."

Wyld did not respond to this temperate assessment of the Premier's supposed attitude concerning the March.

"Do you know much of Xheeva, Clover?" Fox asked, giving his sister a pet sibling name.

"Some. I've seen her. She visited once on Frontier IV and spoke at an otherwise unremarkable dinner. She was impressive." She remembered easily the tall woman with penetrating gray eyes and a strange swan-like voice. She had worn thick xanthin braids coiled regally on her head like a gleaming coronet. "A formidable physical presence who understands her role well, I would say, and who cares about her country...if not about Immix half-breeds -- if remediable, however, she would surely protect them."

"That is not the problem," Wyld amended. "For us, the problem is: will your work arouse the Dagonites?"

"If you expect the wrong political result do you then forestall the cure?" Chloë asked.

"Dagonites would," Wyld answered. He was irritated by the accusation in her voice. "They expect the cure to come from their quarter."

"They're too late," she replied with a healthy dose of professional conceit.

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"Try to stay away from Kele Umara," Fox advised his sister. "But, far more important, stay away from his wife Poppy. She can be deadly. Her favorite technique is to hustle her intended victim into seclusion, ostensibly for friendly chitchat, then ply her captive with jaw-loosening beverages. Don't eat or drink anything that everyone else is not offered."

"If Mwithe Xheeva agrees to accept your offer, I'll insist that you live in the Marchland and commute to Immix laboratories," Wyld said with a firm voice.

"I keep odd hours when I work and would probably need to live near the laboratory."

"Negative," Wyld answered. "I plan to lend you Wirth as an escort. He's a Surt Dueler and well trained." He saw Chloë's look of surprise and went on. "Most of us know Dueler's techniques here, certainly your brother; I provide you with this information simply to make you aware of the usefulness of my men."

She shuddered inwardly, her own smiling brother one of those touted international warriors; those who have learned with every twist of body and synapse of brain to deflect or abort by hand or with instrument their adversaries, and this through a grueling gamut of perilous assignments, actions that to her had always seemed regressively offensive. She stared with awe at her winsome brother, whose amber brown eyes glowed with the same old affection and concern she had always cherished. *Surt Dueling methods!* Well then, how elementary it was for Wyld to permit no search into the dark cranial birthplace of his perpetual strategies. One blocked another's attempt to probe the mind by using anger, verbal torment, or subtly physical disruptions of the opponent's

emotions. Sensing that her aversion had not escaped the Jarl's reading, she could only offer a faint smile of stinging respect. Now she saw these two remarkable men before her with broader vision. Their quiet strength was formidable, yet ultimately her own strong will reasserted itself. "You must realize that I cannot be so restrictively controlled," she insisted.

"And you must not become a pawn for blackmail beyond our protection," Wyld answered, with an imperturbed but unyielding voice. "As, in a manner, you once reminded me, there is more at stake here than ourselves."

"Yes, of course," she said, showing a twinge of shame. "It's only that when I get involved I don't like to leave my work. Sometimes I don't even sleep for two days."

"Clover," Fox said, showing an affectionately scolding concern, "maybe you could try a healthier schedule for a change and give yourself a little breathing room."

"Ah, such fraternal devotion," she teased. "Where have you been the last sixteen years when I might have tolerated a house mother?" She gave the husky redhead an innocent little push backward by flicking her slender fingers delicately against his chest.

Fox glanced at Wyld, perhaps for sanctioned indulgence, then picked up his sister, carrying her out where the tepid waves could swirl around her waist. There, he set her down.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "All right! All right, you'll have your fun." Her laughter flowed with high-pitched shrieks of surprise. "See what a good sport I am. But it could be a degree or two warmer. Ahhh!"

Wyld stood with his hands in his pockets, smiling and watching the two Churlwraiths cavort. After a while, he called out,

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in the indulgent manner of a watchful but amused parent, "Let's dress and be off."

With his tan slacks and rugged sandals, Wyld wore a deep violet tunic, only slightly darker than the dress uniforms of his circulating men. He was easy to spot in the group, for he was taller than most of his men, taller even than the wiry Immix who tended to ectomorphism.

From the corner of his eye he saw that Chloë had captured Mwithe Xheeva. He leaned against a low wall, pretending to stare out to sea, his tall frame partly camouflaged by a cluster of young palms as he watched the two women. They strolled across the wide lawn, admiring the gleaming peacocks pecking indifferently among the bluish grass blades. The two women gesticulated over some unknown subject, a few wary aides trailing after them. Presented earlier after lunch, the animals had greatly pleased both premiers and left them in ostensibly generous moods. Mwithe Xheeva grinned her approval from beneath her straw hat. Her large frame bore, somehow quite tastefully, a fluttering long foulard shift. Apparently she had not yet received the startling news. Wyld hoped that time would permit a gentle unfolding as he watched the Premier stop and incline her head. Chloë, in a plain ecru sun dress and sandals, looked like a young academy matriculant on a holiday. She was holding a frosty lime drink gingerly in her fingertips, as if the glass were hot. Then she suddenly deposited it on the tray of a passing steward, rubbing her hands together and pointing toward a stone bench. Seated, Premier Xheeva waved her aides back and bent her head to Chloë.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wyld. I'm told that no one outside

the March refers to you by your title. I'm Fleet Fairmeed--"

"That you are," Wyld said, barely concealing his annoyance at this interruption of surreptitious enjoyment.

"...secretary to Vice Premier Grabb. They've asked me not to return without you."

Fleet extended her shining copper arm toward an arrangement of chairs on the flagstones beneath the blue and gold oceanic frieze of a low bleached building.

There, under a gently flapping white and gold awning, rested the satiated and corpulent Kele Umara. He sat with one bare-ankled leg outstretched and the other diagonally bent like the posturing imperator of indisputable rank that he was. At his side sat Rymon Grabb with his toothy grin of attentive patronage very much in evidence. They beckoned and gestured toward an empty chair as Fleet Fairmeed laid her hand lightly on Wyld's arm.

This uninvited, faintly cloying touch automatically released a current in his brain, and he lifted the arm to wave, thus disengaging himself as he crossed the courtyard.

"You've met my able secretary?"

"Yes, a new addition, isn't she?" Wyld asked.

With no inflection at all the remark still insinuated the profligate reputation of Grabb, whom Wyld disliked and mistrusted more than any other Dagonite official.

Kele Umara, seeing the danger of a mistaken assumption, quickly took charge. "She's a most efficient person, if a little too serious, but I personally recruited her to keep Rymon in line."

"Ah yes, with prim and efficient Miss Fairmeed now monitoring my office, I get away with nothing anymore," Grabb added, cheerfully willing to inculcate himself.

"Be seated please, next to Casimir, Miss Fairmeed; he may have need of something," Umara said.

"I have need of nothing but your continued good will," Wyld answered.

"You'll have a good share of it if you assure me that my new piglet when grown will not migrate back to Marchland forests, as many of our animals seem to have done."

"I hope that isn't the only basis for your offer." Wyld's voice held an amused tone that might easily have been thought patronizing. "Only humans not carrying the correct code signal are detected at our borders, and detected even if they're wearing wild animal skins, I should add."

Umara squirmed a little, tapped his knee and frowned. "You see, Miss Fairmeed, what we have to put up with."

"I wouldn't call Mr. Wyld's effort at self-preservation reprehensible, but rather more an act of genetic necessity," Fleet adroitly explained, a comment apparently startling all three of her listeners.

Wyld was favorably stirred, despite his suspicion of such an attractive presence. Rymon Grabb was again lustful, this time for a beautiful apprentice who could ingratiate herself so expertly with a single sentence. Kele Umara mentally praised the verbal coup while marveling at a performance done so skillfully he himself had at first begun to doubt her sympathies.

"Ah, it seems you've found an ally," Umara remarked, affecting a convincing degree of disapproval.

"Encouraging," Wyld said, by now curious enough to appear indulgent.

But this time he allowed himself to take in the shiny

crimped hair -- a shade of blond that really tended to a pale russet against the copper skin -- and to assess the steady amber eyes that obviously found him pleasing. Nor did the round sensuous breasts escape his notice, for they quivered just beneath a gauzy embroidered blouse pulled temptingly down away from smooth oval shoulders. He could imagine the silky warm feel of those unblemished shoulders, pampered skin promising more delectation than tempting ripe fruit. Perhaps this is my piglet and my puma cub, he thought. But another possibility had already occurred to him. He offered a broad grin, searching Kele Umara's face and holding the cunning brown eyes in sway, clearly satisfied at having detected the tightly guarded answer. In many ways this man is a fool, he thought. Even his bait has more subtlety. He sighed. Would these games never end?

"Sonna is very pleasant," Wyld said, "but it provokes one to excesses. You've supplied me with fine delicacies for the palate, Premier, now what can you offer in the way of eroticism?"

The Premier was too astonished to reply immediately, and Rymon Grabb could hardly restrain his laughter.

"You're a most unusual man, Wyld, one who revels in the unexpected," Umara said at last.

"And you, Premier, should know that a too obvious strategy is not a good countermeasure for unpredictability."

"This is a little confusing. I would like to speak seriously a moment," the Premier said, hoping to veer from this course.

"I'm willing to openly discuss any subject you wish," Wyld replied.

"I'm afraid this subject is not new," the Premier said. Grabb, who saw what was coming, recoiled in utter

disappointment. Umara could never resist digging up the old sea-rights bone, and this was not the time for heating up the nearly congenial atmosphere. If Umara should also start requisitioning Marchland forests, another of his favorite contentions, all would be lost.

"My predecessor was too generous in allowing your father to declare off limits two hundred kilometers of sea the full leeward and windward length of the Marchland coast, and we now--"

"Excuse me," Wyld interrupted, his placid face gone to stone. "This agreement was made with Immix and Dagonite leaders generations ago and stands today as a generous compact on our part. Your limit is nearly the same around the entire perimeter of your coast. You would not have me believe you so rapacious as to covet our rather narrow marine harvesting rights? The Immix have seldom complained. As a matter of fact, we'd better save this discussion for Premier Xheeva's presence."

"The fishing rights I don't begrudge you, but it would greatly facilitate our trade with the Immix to have a legal passage closer to your shore without the rigmarole of official identification each time we approach."

"Undoubtedly so, and you might include commercial landing rights and trade express across the Marchland while you're at it."

"That should have already come."

"I don't like the absurd direction this conversation is taking. Nor, I'm sure, would Mwithe Xheeva...creeping up on her coastline a stone's throw from our shore."

Wyld had risen from his chair and glared down at Umara, causing a number of casually loitering Dagonite attendants to

spring to attention.

"Tut-tut, we must all come together under a single harmonious standard," the Premier urged with a pretentious show of propriety.

"And might that standard bear the national Dagonite symbol of a warship fluttering on its banner? Your aggression is poorly disguised in tattered humanitarian rags."

"Has war been declared yet?" Mwithe Xheeva asked in the croaking voice of a large bird, as Wyld turned to her.

"I see that you haven't lost your magnificent sense of humor, Premier Xheeva," Wyld said with friendly sarcasm. "I would never be selfish enough to consider war without sending you a formal invitation. I can't speak for Kele Umara, however. He wishes to finagle a more facile route to your shore."

"Does he? And behind my back as usual."

"Behind your back and over mine," Wyld said, his rigid posture reflecting the impatience in his voice. "He's been telling me that we must all bow to the Dagonite standard."

"That's not quite what I said."

"But more important, it's what you meant."

"Don't intone linguistic lessons to me, Wyld...you sanctimonious maverick...cunning as ever." Umara spoke in a low voice that would have easily swollen in rage had the occasion been different.

"A compliment, I believe," Wyld replied coolly. As emotional fires heated up he always moved toward a chilly pole of restraint.

He pulled up a chair for Mwithe Xheeva and sat down next to her, cursorily searching for subtle differences in her behavior

brought on by Chloë's revelation.

"Shame, shame," Premier Xheeva exhorted. "We must have containment in this happy and ephemeral triumvirate. The news corps await at the gate. They report it a miracle that we still speak to one another, you know."

"You've become very lighthearted, Premier Xheeva," Wyld said. "I approve the change."

"I'm hardly as entertaining as Premier Umara when you've riled him."

"He hasn't riled me. Not at all...not at all. Just clearing the air. Actually, I'm in quite good spirits."

"Well, in that case may I never see you angry."

"May you never have the misfortune, my dear Premier Xheeva. But we trifle here."

"Indeed we do. It appears I've arrived just in time to disabuse you of a trifling notion. And, while we're clearing the air, may I say that you Dagonites are much too truculent in matters that require delicate diplomacy."

"We are achievers."

"As are the Immix," Mwithe Xheeva said, drawing herself up with indignation. But she was smiling at the same time, and in her pearl-gray eyes Wyld detected a certain growing elation. The smell of euphoria had somehow mingled with the salty breeze that drifted into his nostrils. Across the warm land and beyond the rows of curling cypresses the deep sea was an utterly coruscating blue, yet a drowning blue.

Fleet, who had been talking in a soft voice with Rymon Grabb, fell silent, and Wyld felt her eyes upon him once again. He returned her gaze with a brazen smile.

"Come," Mwithe Xheeva said. "Come, Wyld. Come, Umara. Let's show the celebrity-mad planet our mirthful détente by swimming together in the ocean."

"Oh, no, no," Umara giggled, grabbing up an elegant, although battered, straw hat from a side table. "I'll go as far as the beach. "Here," he called to a waiting attendant, "bring my chair." He lifted his great pongee-clothed girth up, heaving a sigh.

"Bathe, Premier, with this sinewy specimen." He pointed to Wyld, who had removed his shirt, gladly preparing for a swim. "Bathe," he continued after them as they walked down to the rolling waves, "as though enthralled with yet another bogus marriage of convenience, while I applaud for the camera's evil eye."

Diving down deep, kicking hard and pushing on where the light beneath the reef paled into the altumal gloom, Wyld felt no pressure in his lungs, only a sense of relief. He heard the gentle dolphins calling cheerfully beyond the blurred wall of water and was heartened by their amiable voices, having often confided in them with a charming and guileless demonstration of friendship. The reef above him was closing, and he ascended. He swam in graceful long strokes, looking down at the reefed Sonna shelf through an aqua window of velvet sea. Thoughts of what had just transpired and what was about to transpire were oddly interspersed with the visual gifts the island reefs always set out. Hovering above the ornate jewel case of brightly colored teeming life, he found himself grinning crazily at the way he sometimes spent his time.

Mwithe Xheeva serpented behind him, her heavy braid streaming out above her back. She was a powerful swimmer with a taut, robust, carefully tended body. She beckoned to him, and they shot to the surface and rode the waves. The Premier shook her

head, sending spirals of crystal water beads flying off into the sun.

"Who is this morning star, Skye Kleeve?"

Wyld threw back his head in the hurting light and laughed with great pleasure at the epithet, so accurate, at the vision it called forth, and at the slightly bewildered Premier. This singular laughter had been rising in his throat all afternoon. "Just who she says she is."

"Either she is a cursed spellbinder or one of those strangely consecrated altruists. I detect no malice in her."

"There is none."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I'm not an altruist. Whether I wish it or not, my occupation precludes it. I didn't want her to come to you at all."

"Of course I can see that it would be more than an inconvenience for you. She came to you from the Mainland, seeking a way to me?"

"Yes."

Wyld pointed to a giant wave bearing down on them. They dove under just as it shuddered at gravity's limit and slammed down with breakneck force.

"Why did you let her come?" Mwithe gasped with greedy urgency when she had reached the surface and found him.

"Dagonites," he answered, spitting a salty stream of water into the air. "The Marchland deals in intelligence and gold. I've never reckoned which comes first. We're just going to reiterate here what we both know: Dagonites want to control you, you them, and the March is in between."

"Our offensive tactics are provoked. I've repeated this often enough. We would prefer a peaceful co-existence, but they

will never cease their aggressive plots."

He saw that her face was bitter and her voice defensive in a constricted, blameless posture.

"Do you think this remarkable Mainland scientist brings freedom or still more death to my people?"

"She brings you the ability to see for yourself."

"Perhaps...perhaps her panacea is not for us and must never come to light."

Wyld pointed to another large wave that would soon overtake them. "Can you hold that back any easier with a bloody culpable hand?" he shouted and dove deeply, angrily. He could burst his lungs with anger while a knifelike entity known as the soul split the sea with sorrow at the ravages of despotism.

Mwithe Xheeva was waiting above, impatient. "I don't see how this can benefit you. What if Umara finds out that you've sent her?"

"I haven't sent her -- she came to me with a will of her own. I don't fear Umara but you certainly know he must not find out anything."

"What irony," the Premier said. "If this news is true, I can free my people at last. We'd welcome new Mainland blood. It's quite exhilarating to ponder. But I may have to become the aggressor. We Immix are far more clever in subterfuge than the Dagonites."

"Doubtless, but it isn't all delicate ruse here. You also need warrior blood, the plundering mentality and unregenerate greed. Can you summon these malignancies in plentiful supply?"

"Are you without greed, Wyld? Have you never dreamed of ruling the island?"

The Marchman

"I dream only of keeping what we Marchlanders have, not to possess it but to preserve it."

"Noble, noble. Some believe it's too much for one man, this kingship you claim."

"You chafe at our success and allow yourself to be taken in by idle gossip. I lead with the sanction of Marchland elders and all those who people the March, as you well know. No one else has asked for my job."

"Oh, I'm sure they recognize your worth and share your bounty, but you must try to see our point of view. You are, after all, an anachronism, a relic of the past."

"How will you dispossess us, Premier Xheeva? Have you an Immix you'd like me to bed and breed with? No? Pity. You must get that fixed. Perhaps your new morning star will make an even contest of it. The Dagonites have no problem with their genes, none that is excusable, that is. And you may have noticed that the campaign to seduce me has already begun." His voice was sharp with acrimony at these familiar and tiresome accusations.

They dove under another steamrolling wave. He could see the displeasure on her green face as she came up from a somersault and climbed to the surface amid a furious flux of bubbles.

"Disgusting! You speak as though you're an impotent pawn," the Premier sputtered.

"I'm neither pawn nor impotent," he said with laughter. "I work obliquely. We'll not have the Dagonites desecrating the March just to spill their sperm in your land with *Unite and Conquer* as their vandalizing shibboleth. A Dagonite woman might temporarily suit both our methods. Naturally, such a pairing would

only serve as a diversion. I've not yet chosen to breed."

"You would marry a Dagonite?" The Premier's expression was of an outrage more severe than ever before displayed.

"I said nothing of marriage. That is a formal ceremony from which Dagonites are excluded."

"Very clever. You're too forthright. I wonder why. You really are amazing. I can't trust you of course. I'm quite sorry that you're in the way."

"But not sorry enough. One day, I hope before it's too late, you'll stop thinking of the March as something *in the way* and see it as the friendly green beneficence that replenishes the air you breathe...that strains only to endure while gratuitously protecting you from your own mistakes. Then...*only then* will you discover the virtue of its indifference to wasted efforts and bad faith."

"I do believe you're an integral part of that touted indifference, Wyld. Let's not be dashed by this oncoming wave."

But Wyld was already gone, shooting down where the laughing silver dolphins sang for no gainful purpose but their own private celebrations.

Mwithe Xheeva left the sea, looking curiously over her shoulder, as if she had encountered a fabled monster. Soon Wyld came upon the land and stretched out his long body, lying quietly a few meters from her chair. She watched as Fleet Fairmeed come sauntering across the warm sand to him, apparently driven as urgently as a persistent May fly. The conspicuous pairing made her frown, but in a little while the frown became a thin approbation -- she saw that Kele Umara was peering from beneath his hat with utmost interest, and Rymon Grabb seemed uncharacteristically sad.

"Please come up and have a cool drink with me," Fleet

coaxed. "We have a nice bar in the palm grove."

"Thank you. I don't drink anything but freshly squeezed oranges," Wyld answered without opening his eyes.

"We just happened to have some," Fleet persuaded, holding a towel wrap out with patient good humor.

"The man doesn't accept drinks, take drugs, sleep, or eat very much of anything. In fact, he's a myth!" Kele Umara called out with gleeful voice. "Such myths do nothing but seek to perpetuate themselves."

"Luckily, I never have to advertise," Wyld said, jumping up.

He could not resist winking evilly at Premier Xheeva as he was led away, and had no trouble guessing her response.

She pulled her hat down over her face and folded her arms beneath her firm bosom in matronly fashion.

Chloë Churlwraith, Skye Kleeve, Emerald, Clover, the Morning Star, and various other names and dehumanizing numbers -- why had he started with this list? -- was sitting on the grass at the other side of the palm grove. Near her, the darkly hirsute Wirth sat on the footrest of a shaded orange lounging chair. He was laughing, one of the most taciturn, inexpressive men Wyld had ever known. It was owing in large part to the rare green eyes of course. He never remembered just how it worked until he looked into them, but he knew how easily they could breach a stronghold. Poor Wirth -- but then, why poor? He seemed to be enjoying the loss of his defenses.

"Are you really going to squeeze oranges for me?" he asked Fleet, who stood in her crisp blue shift, poised for action behind the bar. The bartender, a pig-eyed, white-jacketed dumpling of a man, rolled his eyes skyward in disbelief. Overhead the palm

fronds fluttered with a lazy afternoon rhythm. Wyld felt a warm lethargy creeping into his overworked bones.

"Right before your very eyes," Fleet affirmed, her voice light and buoyant as the breeze.

In the shadows she seemed all heated copper and turquoise fluidity. Staring fixedly down at the shifting sun stripes dropping through slits of dark writhing palms, Wyld reminded himself how such a capricious afternoon spell could anesthetize, without the merest sip of manufactured stimulant. The gentle noise of the southing sea was merely further evidence of such a pleasantly reckless phenomenon.

"Please be quick, orange tender," he directed. "We must all fly away to Arrowmoon to ponder our hedonism until dinner."

"I've heard that Arrowmoon is very nice."

"It's uncomplicated and nice, yes, for which Great Mother Alba Blaize Wyld deserves most of the credit, although I designed the buildings. You'll have to come look before we leave."

"I'd love to."

"Then do," he said abruptly, intentionally leaving his invitation in vague limbo for the time being.

"You're a very pretty woman. I hope you don't really work for Rymon Grabb. I would hate to see any of his tarnish contaminate such bright metal."

"Forgive me, but that was impolitic. He is, after all, our vice premier."

"A dubious position, but an office cloaked in sinister purpose," Wyld said. "I don't like or trust the man and see no reason to disguise my feelings."

"One orange juice," Fleet said, handing Wyld a tall frosty

glass. "Do you drink a lot of these? Enough to make you caustic?"

"I thought I was being nice."

"From what I've heard I'm sure you are."

"You mean you think that now, in this rare moment, I'm Wyld at his best and the rest of the time a black sun?"

"Are you?"

"Of course. You won't catch me tampering with a myth."

"You are quite a myth, you know. I wonder what it is that makes your people serve you so faithfully."

"They're rewarded for their service and we all love the March together," he said with sharp sarcasm, inescapable because he was so utterly tired of this subject.

"Yet it's something more, I think."

"You'll have to ask them."

"Is it true they're all descendants of the original crew who arrived on the island with Captain Wrahm Wyld?"

"You teach that in your schools, I'm told."

"Yes, and I know that you're a fifteenth generation Wyld."

"I've no idea why Dagonites are so preoccupied with Wyld history...or Marchland history."

"I find it very interesting. I'm quite curious as to why these people stay in the March where life is, hmm, well rather primitive."

"They're free to leave at any time, but they seem to prefer a life that is what you mistakenly call primitive. Perhaps the planet's clamoring for artificiality repels them."

"Still, I'm sure you're not without modernity."

"Oh, we get by in our prehistory," he said with self-satisfied laughter. "We've reason to be thankful for highly sophisticated instruments, but we don't worship machines."

"And you don't allow settlers."

"Of course not. Our terrain is limited and fragile."

"But sometimes your people go other places to study and return with Mainland mates."

"Some do. More often they return to marry other Marchlanders. Sometimes they find mates where they've been sojourning and happily stay there."

"Clever but unfair."

"It has nothing to do with fairness; it is simply a matter of fact. There are no cruel restrictions on any Marchlander. They are intelligent and loyal."

"Do you think any man or woman your equal, Mr. Wyld?"

"Is this Dagonite humor? If not, I'm speechless."

"Somehow you seem very archaic in your approach to women."

"I doubt you know what any of my approaches are -- I have as many as there are women...but you'll never find one out since I've not had to approach you."

Wyld smiled teasingly at Fleet as she struggled to regain her composure. Then he beckoned to Chloë and Wirth.

"Let's take our leave of the Premiers now," he called.

"Before you go I invite you to listen to some of the new inventions of the Music Master in the pavilion this evening. And...perhaps you would care to dance," Fleet hurriedly invited, a little too urgently.

"We'll look forward to it," Wyld replied, reaching out to take her hand. He lifted it to his lips for a light kiss. "You see how archaic I can be," he said to the startled young woman.

The Marchman

"You weren't very much in evidence today," Wyld said to Fox. They were walking on the beach at Arrowmoon.

"Oh, I was around...observation and research." Fox offered a conspiring grin. "I chanced to meet a lowdown type -- the sort that naturally grabs my attention -- who turned out to be the brother of Fleet Fairmeed. Goes by the name of Nik Weaver; could be his parents insisted he use another surname -- if he were my son I'd insist. He's oily smooth; claims he runs legitimate tourist resorts. Afraid I've already got some ugly data on him," Fox said, showing some hesitance.

Wyld's eyes had narrowed and darkened. "Go on," he encouraged.

"It's rumored, actually more than rumor, that he buys young half-breed females from some trader in the Immix government, and uses them for a time as engaging companions in most of his resorts. Sound familiar?"

"And Fairmeed, where does she fit in?" There was a hard edge in Wyld's voice.

"So far she seems to be a sheltered lily. She's fond of her brother and I doubt she knows what he's up to. Her childhood was carefully monitored by staunchly patriotic and seriously academic parents, the Fahbis -- they're well known in science circles."

"Then I'll assume the best while remembering the worst. Fairmeed has apparently been enlisted to martyr herself for what she deems a noble cause."

"There are many women who would happily choose to martyr themselves in the same way," Fox could not resist

commenting.

"Fox, this Dagonite ploy will at least cast attention on me while your sister settles into her work."

"And you might even enjoy yourself," Fox added with gleaming yet faintly disapproving eyes.

"Let's keep this just between ourselves for the time being," Wyld proposed, ignoring the hard jest. "You know, I may have bought a little of Mwithe Xheeva's trust with this confidence.

"I did want to hear exactly how your sister's meeting went with Premier Xheeva."

"She's sleeping but I'll--"

"Ah, then let it go. Perhaps later tonight when we return."

"Will you be alone then?" Fox asked half seriously.

"If I'm not you'll certainly know about it." He put his hand on Fox's shoulder and grimaced drolly.

As Wyld came up the shell walk facing the sea, he glanced through one of the large tinted windows of Chloë's cottage. The window had not been opaqued, and he saw a hand stretched palm up and motionless over the side of the bed. He drew near and squinted boldly through the glass. Her long unwound hair was carelessly strewn over the pillow, and she lay uncovered on her back in a thin pale green eyelet that clung to the contour of her body. The body appearing as though offered up in blameless sacrifice, excruciatingly vulnerable to all of fortune's hazards. A nameless fear like heavy burning tar crept slowly through his body. He went to his cottage and ordered the master system Domestec to opaque the windows in Chloë's room. But against whom had he committed this act? He stood at his window in the ruddy-streaked dusk, frowning at the vitreous sea.

The Marchman

The sultry leeward night was awash with polyphonic waves of sound, artful phrasings of the Music Master's electronic legerdemain. The computer's introduction of basso profundo percussion rolled upward like a fiery belch from Mount Rubora, rarefied in drifting clouds to a soft resonance and pattering down through the sighing palms. Its tinkling sounds fell over the pavilion, imitating spring rain or the shattering of hundreds of paper-thin glasses.

"Cunning," Wyld remarked. "Not virtuosity but perhaps wizardry."

"What will you have then, a gentle rebec or a happy rondeau, a warbling flute or a furious concerto?" Fleet asked, flashing like a jewel in her stunning turquoise gown.

"I'll leave that to technical artifice," Wyld answered, "but this harlequin storm is hardly dancing music."

Fleet excused herself quickly and returned after a few minutes borne on the fluid notes of an old water ballad.

The guests lined up and joined hands in quadrilles, at once affecting highly exaggerated minuet progressions. Occasionally they broke apart into slow waltzing duos then reformed again.

Fleet was a soft malleable presence, adjusting to his slightest touch and moving with the rhythm as though each tone were at the root of her desire.

On the sidelines, at the apex of a stone dais draped with colored bunting, sat the titan Kele Umara, dressed in a cocoa raw silk tunic and slacks. His retinue of fawning bootlickers fluttered about like pesky gnats as they vied for the next trivial request. Umara was conversing merrily with Mwithe Xheeva, who dipped

and shook her stately gold-plaited crown over a pale beige dress crocheted with thousands of winking lapis lazuli beads. She was a woman of notable composure, whose hands rested peacefully in her lap and whose steady disposition revealed little or nothing of its assuredly heavy interior turnings.

Poppy Umara, indisputably in love with herself and somehow a little more bearable for it, stood nearby with her arms sweeping wide apart to reveal the fluttering gossamery sleeves of her purple silk gown, which was studded at the cleavage of her rotund little breasts with her customary red flower. She caught sight of Wyld with the svelte Fleet in his arms, and for an instant her scintillating panache drooped wistfully. She had stayed away from the meeting today, refreshing herself with sleep but also moodily averse to watching the encounter of Fleet and Wyld. The Marchland leader was the sole person she had coveted as her dancing partner, even though she realized the discomfiture of this pairing. Her diminutive form struggling like a wounded bird against the unhappily crouched lion would prove unsightly folly and offer buzz for wagging tongues.

"A handsome couple," Rymon Grabb whispered to Umara. Then he asked in an intentionally audible voice, "Have I your permission to dance with your wife?"

"I'm in such a good mood that I'll allow it," Umara answered. "Your dancing is, after all, superb." Umara was doubly pleased that he was cheerfully enough disposed to afford such generous praise.

"Please come with me, irresistible queen," Grabb said.

Poppy stretched out her arms and descended with a glint of raffishness in her jet eyes, which still followed Wyld.

After a time Fleet, who explained that she enjoyed small parties but generally shunned clusters of gallivanting people and sensed that he did too, managed to draw Wyld away to the beach. They strolled at the lapping edge of the warm phlegmatic sea.

"This is a soothing pastime," Wyld remarked.

"Are you bored?"

"No," he said, laughing, "pleasantly relaxed."

"I'd heard that you were a hostile sort. If you'll forgive me...I had imagined you as a rawish autocrat."

"That isn't exactly news," he said, taking her elbows and inclining his head to brush her lips lightly at first and then with more pressure as he felt her yielding mouth. "Very nice. You look so startled. Didn't you expect me to do that?" His expression was amused.

"Eventually...yes. It's hard to imagine the historical monument Casimir Wyld as someone I've just kissed."

"Let the two be separate," he said, bending to graze bare shoulders bathed most seductively in opal moon glow.

At the pavilion the murmuring guests turned their rapt heads. An attending susurrations of air flew across the spangled floor from the startled mouth of night. Chloë had stepped from the wax-flowered shadows and removed her black lace cape to dance with a slender auburn-haired man in a yellow suit. She wore a low-cut crimson gown that broke into flames under the colored lamps and shimmered over her lissome, round-breasted form like a rippling evening sun. With a naive unfurling of presence she inclined to the man, as innocent of her prime as a rare flower blooming amidst a pedestrian garden. Her throat was bound with a

single black band that bore a large emerald, her father's gift, which, although dazzling, was less provocative than her presently tourmaline eyes. The unknown wolf-eyed man, experienced nevertheless astonished, held her with cautiously eager fingers, as though he could hardly believe his good fortune.

Wyld, who had returned with his sultry companion to the edge of the pavilion, inquired after the unusual man in the yellow suit.

"Why that's my brother Nik," Fleet said proudly. "You must meet him. He's so urbane, clever with people. What a delicious woman he's found. Oh, isn't she the zoologist?"

"Yes. Excuse me one moment," Wyld said, already moving off. He went to one of his men and asked for Fox or Wirth, spotting Wirth simultaneously and swiftly making his way unswervingly around the dim penumbra of the pavilion.

"Get her away from that scum," he charged Wirth in a low but electric voice. "Do it now."

He returned, grinning and carrying two small glasses filled with a very fine dry sherry from his own flask."

"This is not orange juice," Fleet admonished.

"No, but it's almost as good," he replied, smiling. When he looked with narrowed eyes out over the edge of his tipped glass, Chloë was dancing with Wirth. She wore black thin-strapped shoes with delicate heels. Her shimmering-gowned body moved with an easy, unfaltering grace, like a doe brushing over a wet fern brake.

"Shh," Fleet giggled nervously, drawing Wyld through the cropped gardens behind the tawny strung-out blocks of the Umara

compound and up a steps sprayed with myrtle, to the door of her room. A peacock screamed below with the long curving cry of a woman in fright or pain.

"Do you really imagine that no one has seen us leave?" Wyld asked.

"No. No, they haven't. They're all too wrapped up in themselves."

"Possibly you're quite naive, but I won't discourage your illusion whatever its motive," he said, taking Fleet roughly in his arms before she had time to close the door.

"Wait! Wait," she said, pulling away to seal the door.

Something had given way inside her, and she was nearly paralyzed by the momentousness of her position. She knew very well that this stealthy act had to do with the cool deliberateness of patriotic duty, but it was a coolness that she could not seem to obtain. The precipitous screen of her agitated mind flashed with a vision of the boy whose eager devotion she had once so urgently welcomed. Every forward step since that vernal pairing had been an unconscious refining of its virginal purity, a yearning to reverse the motion, reliving that first dazed encounter -- something she had not understood until this moment. Where was he tonight, her young lover? It came to her with stabbing clarity that she would never get any of it back, much less return to finish it. A sharp needle of pain stung her chest, then the distinct moment of grief melted back into its familiar pool of essential deceptions.

In a short space of time she had fluttered moth-like into a charismatic but fiery aura -- how to obtain the acclaim and luminosity of this powerful star without getting singed? The unexpected, sexless hunger of her aggression crowded her senses.

If only to possess that special kind of immortality, basking in the celebrated eminence of Wyld; perhaps, she thought for a reeling instant, to share that coveted power, even to obtain the public adulation so facilely his.

"What is it?" Wyld questioned. But he instinctively understood the phenomenon he had caused -- it was merely one of many other times this peculiar reaction had manifested itself. Fleet had thrown herself down on the bed in a cold sweat. He sat nearby on the edge of the bed, displaying a regretful frown almost apologetic.

"I'm too...too excited," she lied.

Wyld leaned close to study her, compassion appearing suddenly in his eyes. "Fleet, do you understand what it is that you're doing?" His words had softened with concern.

"Fully," she answered, and he was surprised at the hard bravura of her voice and manner.

"Nevertheless, you have more than one thing on your mind," he insisted.

Thinking he would go, he straightened up, imperturbably reaching for his shirt.

As Fleet sat watching him in a soft fall of light, she began to see the tautness of his shoulders and the ripple of skin on his back as quite apart from history, just as he had asked her to do. She remembered how he had lain impassively on the hot Sonna sand, not as an eternal force but as a magnificently vital presence that would one day terminate. She reached out uncertainly to reaffirm that presence, and felt her hand tingle as he pressed it against his chest. He turned to her, making no further attempt at wise counsel, offering only a generous acquiescence. Her struggle with

patriotism, power, and prestige instantly ceased.

The hour was late when Wyld returned to Arrowmoon. He stood for a long time under a pelting steamy spray, idly watching beads of water form on the leaves of moisture-loving plants growing in niches around the spiraling white walls of his shower. In this attempt to empty his mind for sleep he had not succeeded; something still disturbed him. He decided to walk on the beach, remembering with a smile for Fox to put on his RM. Later, about to ascend the path from the fog-enclosed beach, he was surprised to encounter Chloë appearing out of the mist from the other direction. He glimpsed Wirth following a little distance behind her, likely a welcome duty. Wirth waved, handing Chloë her shoes and soon thereafter disappearing into his cottage.

"Shouldn't we all be sleeping?" Wyld asked. He had not wanted to meet anyone at this hour, and especially her.

"Apparently not all of us," Chloë answered. Her manner was alert and tireless, her voice cheerful.

She still wore her amazing red gown -- floating out of the fog barefoot, she had assumed a mythological splendor. She approached him with a childish candor, moving gingerly over the white shell path, her shoes dangling from her hand.

"When I have a rare evening like this, it's hard for me to settle down." She smiled, refreshingly sanguine.

"I wonder," he pondered on a sudden impulse, "may I come in for just a moment?"

"Of course."

"You don't have to let me if you're too tired."

"Yes, I do. Perhaps in a way you own my actions when I am asked to carry out your wishes. What is our status, we dutiful

Marchlanders?" she questioned in a teasing voice.

"I can't even think of an answer, let alone one equal to that," he said, too genuinely astonished at her hint of servitude to coax his brain into a clever retort. It did not escape his thought that she was perhaps so favorably disposed because of her success with Mwithe Xheeva.

"Fox said you wanted to talk to me. I didn't know if you were in your cabin on our return or not."

"No," he said, regretting his honesty, and at once uneasily aware of what her clairvoyance might reveal: that he had wrestled on a damp and perfumed bed.

"I suppose you wanted a recap of my meeting with Premier Xheeva." Her previously happy voice was far too controlled, even faintly sad, or was he overreacting?

"I did want a report. But all at once I'm certain I'm incapable of proper attention...and I'm keeping you up."

He saw the probing green eyes deepening, penetrating. A wary shot of adrenaline jolted him awake. "Don't!" he exhorted. "The contents of my head are not for review."

Her pale face bloomed with ruddy confusion. "Excuse me, Jarl Wyld, I wasn't...ah, but yes I was. Sorry."

There followed an almost physical grip of silence, congealing her sacrificial honesty.

"Why are you interested in creeping inside this, at the moment, disheveled mind?"

She started to speak, then shrugged aloofly without a word. This facile dismissal angered him, perhaps because his own feelings could not be so easily laid aside.

He was about to be inconsiderate, cruel, ultimately to

himself. "Are you humanly involved? Or do you merely put things under a microscope and...make cold calculations?"

"Possibly you have me confused with yourself."

"Have I?" How he had dampened her high spirits with his merciless attempt at distancing. "At any rate I'm going to bed now, before I ruin your perfect evening."

"You haven't ruined my evening...couldn't," she avowed with a hollow lightness as she walked him to the door.

"You're very unhappy with me. I am sorry...about us."

She frowned. "I may sometimes seem ungrateful and perhaps unsociable to you, Jarl Wyld, but I'm not...merely preoccupied. All I really want to do is return to my work."

"And so you shall. You'll charm the Meztas into recovery. Look what you've done to Wirth. He now laughs."

"Oh, please don't make fun of him. How could you? He's so loyal." Her voice was stricken with disappointment.

"I didn't mean to. I like Wirth very much...value him very highly. I apologize."

He reached out to still her flexing wrist, which so disturbed him, tightening his grip until he felt the muscles in her arm grow tense.

"Please don't." Her voice was softly imploring as she struggled to accommodate his agitation, carefully holding back more words in order to withdraw without provocation.

The patronizing deference and pity in her face greatly irritated him. But why did he persist in this impulsively volatile manner? He wanted... What was it that he really wanted? He leaned toward candescent green eyes flashing an inscrutable answer from the shadows. Of course, he knew full well. The impalpable

longing at once brought forth a current of jolting images both recalled and imagined: forest eyes glowing beneath a hat's shady brim -- irresistible even in their judgment; tumbling flaxen hair; a richly suspended moment of orchid skin; patiently plucked wild berries he ate with lust; the startling impression of a remarkable woman quarantined with contagion in a lonely room -- the farouche Churlwraith child once innocently chasing a peafowl, all too soon steeling herself for the onset of death.

"No, Jarl Wyld, we--"

Her head went back against the wall, startled jewel eyes opened wide. He silenced her refusal without words, covering lips cooled by sea mist, fresh as wild cress, the taste an instant addiction. Relentless, his mouth traveled over her face, opening against her throat. He felt the rush of coursing blood, either hers or his or both thundering noisily together. Returning to her mouth, he again proved its softly fusing reality, her equally fervent desire for a brief moment of truth, desire cruelly exposed.

He laughed and there was no more anger anywhere, his arms gathering up all of her fluid lightness, all of the surface shimmer playing over the elusive green depths. Standing with her in his arms he leaned back against the wall in a pulsing silence, his eyes closed, breathing an integral joy of completeness. Or so he thought in his privation, never denied anything but what he wanted most: this exquisite being with its rare intelligence -- the lush unreachable apple existing solely for the benefit of the future within. His tiredness had vanished. He was alert to every sense, striving to encompass the whole quick force driving this singular construction, Chloë: the seized golden apple high above, reached just as it was turning into the night's red star. She had appeared

unexpectedly from some uncharted quarter of space, where other lonely fires sparkle undiscovered in the eons between birth and death.

"I couldn't let you go unknown...not to me, not to yourself." He spoke as if the whole interior monologue had fallen upon her ears. Perhaps it had.

He stood in wonder, containing so much of her, while she neither spurned nor accepted, giving without giving within. Everything that he touched or that touched him somehow turned to this, to stillness and death. His heart silently promised and cajoled and cursed, seeking this one reprieve from the treachery of old patterns. Slowly her forehead nestled against him and her abandoned mouth brushed warmly over his throat. Relinquishment unbearable now, but the fast-beating wings of ascending joy simultaneously blew out the promise. The prized commitment hovering so near was precisely what he could destroy with the hazards of his office. He had what he could not have. He had won an independent spirit. He put her down, for once surprised at his own strength of will, because the wanting was like the need to breathe. Stepping back, he sank into the horror of his own destructive words, already forming.

"Tonight I seem to go from flower to flower." This done for good cause, he swore to himself, the best cause.

He heard the faint sound of hurt in her throat as she drew close to him and cast her open hand flat against his cheek, small pain for a great deal of it.

Rubbing her forehead with the offending hand, she struggled for control, uttering anguished words. "Now I've struck *The Jarl*. Do what you will."

"What I will I can't do," he answered.

The silence was deafening as he stood in the faint morning light, his cheek throbbing. She had not saved her anger but sunk it into one quick blow. Perhaps it was mercifully gone. But how could it be? He then realized that this was partly why he had detained her, to take his just deserts from his exemplar, the way Alba had meted them out long ago, with tears of regret for a naughty remorseless boy. He smiled as he left, a deeply hurting smile. Had it not always been the real thing rather than the fear of it that thrust him forward on his lonely path?

Shivering and coiled tight in a fetal curl against the abrasive floor stones, Chloë lay where she had thrown herself in misery, biting cruelly at her abused fingers, a brutal self-infliction born of anxious years, one that went unquelled for all the discipline it met.

When Wyld stepped over the sill in a late morning sun stripe, he found her there deep in sleep, also discovering the mark of his fingers on her thin wrist as he knelt over her. The furled calla face did not bloom under this grave scrutiny. He carried her to the bed where she moaned in trancelike protest, twisting her head to reveal indentations on her cheek, like scars, from the stone. He touched these marks lightly, his fingers continuing slowly over her hair. The marks of his fingers on her wrist surprised him. How could he have done that, held her so tightly? When she saw them how would she think of him? *Any way at all as long as she does*, an inescapable interior voice shouted. When he had seen the red mark on his face in his morning mirror he knew it would keep him slightly above the ground, and long after it vanished the memory of her would do the same. He lifted the offended wrist and held it a moment in a silent good-bye, a useless word. She slept on as

though drugged.

At noon the sun fairly scored the terrace with its yellow zeal. Chloë jumped up drenched in sweat and flew insensibly across the room, her body clumsily ahead of her mind. Hating the air conditioning, she had left it off. She flung open her door and stretched west toward the long windless beach, thinking with semi-conscious dazedness what a disturbing dream had caught her up in its net. Her left wrist flexing in the air was quickly drawn in. It seemed that her heart began to beat just then, and to beat faster and faster. How startling the faint blue marks of his fingers, but the wrist did not hurt. Slowly every detail of the night returned. She felt a deep shame to have revealed an emotion beyond her control. He would remain the Jarl, only that, the cruelty of his words cast aside. She slumped down in a white elastic deck chair and hugged her shoulders, shivering even in the relentless sun's blast.

For some moments she remained motionless, unseeing. Then her eyes focused on the movement of a lizard, a hooded basilisk creeping out from behind a squatty barrel cactus to absorb its required solar energy. The old dragon winked coyly at her. She smiled, feeling the tenderness of her mouth with a bitter wrench.

Is this where I'm to end? I must try to stay in Immixia. Where is everyone? How quiet it is against this roaring sea. She put her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes. *I must hurry, but first I must be calm.*

Almost at the same moment that Chloë opened her eastern door Wirth appeared. He was sullen and restless, refusing to meet her eyes except with furtive glances.

“The others have gone to Sonna. I'm taking you back to Sunring. The Jarl is giving you the cottage Trident, which is larger

and has better security.”

"It's his cottage. I'll be quite happy here."

"It has already been decided."

"Oh, all right, I'll concede for the moment, in the interest of future more important battles," she affirmed, knowing she appeared at once wan and irritable, changed.

Her night walk on the beach with Wirth, their cheerful conversation, had been nullified by the startling occurrence that followed. She had somehow failed to master it, not even tried, too immense. And one did not master the Jarl.

As she was gathering up her things to leave, the phone chimed. She hastily flicked on the switch but did not send her own image.

In an instant the Jarl appeared before her in alarming hologram.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Kleeve. Please turn on your laser if you're dressed."

She did so reluctantly and stood waiting.

"Thank you. Have you rested well?"

"Yes."

She shuddered at the violence and strain they had inflicted upon each other in the previous illusory night.

"I'm with Premier Xheeva, six thousand meters up in Wyld Violet, ostensibly looking at shorelines. Our message is securely masked, because the Premier wanted to speak with you before you leave. Regardless of what she says, you will not be residing in Immixia. Have a pleasant trip home."

In a few minutes Mwithe Xheeva's formidable presence filled the room.

"Hello, Miss Kleeve, I hope to meet with you next Thursday in the capital. I know you'll like Seche. There are excellent accommodations at your disposal, if you can only persuade Mr. Wyld. Why must he show such concern for an independent Mainland woman like yourself? Try some of that ample charm you possess."

Chloë's involuntarily harsh laugh became a pretense of clearing her throat. "I'm very much in favor of your offer, Premier Xheeva, for the sake of expediency, although for the time being the matter is out of my hands. I've come to you through the March and must abide by its rules. But I'm most eager to begin my work."

"She's unusual to me," the Premier said, turning to Wyld when Chloë had faded from the cabin. My women are more acquisitive, but this is quite natural with a burgeoning technocracy. She will be difficult to reward."

"Impossible. Her reward is her work. Perhaps your technicians can learn more than science from her." Wyld was fully aware of the indelicate innuendo.

"Learn from an arrogant Mainlander? You Marchlanders still have something to learn. We are the bread basket of this island, and our technology, although nothing to be ashamed of, has suffered because of Dagon. We waste time and credit on heavy defense."

"We all regret the need for defense," Wyld said.

The Premier gave a sarcastic laugh. "To arm, you simply scoop up your infinite gold and purchase the most sophisticated instruments the Mainland has to offer. You don't build Savers or Communisats; you have them built for you, stamped with your insignia and hurtled into the heavens to do your bidding. Your

gold beams solar energy to Mount Sorus. Your gold finances research. Your gold buys the far-reaching support of Fedcartel. Can you blame us for our envy? Should you be surprised that Immixia and Dagona alike begrudge your endlessly glittering resource brandished under our noses?"

"You're carried away in pretty rhetoric, Mwithe Xheeva. We do not brandish. Conversely, we keep the lowest profile on the planet. We are frugal, considering the insatiable grappling for goods that goes on all around us. We do spend money on research that we hope is beneficial to the planet and the Frontier Colonies. And we are a little proud of growing our own food, harvesting the sea and purifying our rivers, some of which enter your thirsty lands pure as birth itself."

"We're not ungrateful."

"We even try to keep our air not only breathable but fresh. Why do you begrudge us these strivings?"

"We begrudge you your gratuitous riches. I know of no subtle way to make this understood."

Wyld refused this answer with a wave of his hand. "That is a rationalization. Immixia isn't a poor country. But if our riches is gratuitous then ours is the most innocent proprietorship of all. I think what you really resent is our well-intentioned disinterest in you."

"Hah! You're the most condescending person I know. Your Savers, I suppose, are doves of peace whirling around the planet broadcasting messages of wisdom and love. Why do you not truly advocate peace and leave defense to your allies, as some small nations do? Can you intellectualize your weapons?"

"Ah," Wyld said, laughing heartily. "On the contrary, those

small entities who have put themselves in the care of larger powers have emasculated themselves by forfeiting autonomy. We economize a good deal in the March, but the practice rarely interferes with our defense. There we count."

"Count?"

"We count what we can plainly observe: the numbers of our enemies. Each is allowed but a few weapons, but they do the trick, clean killers, as we in our language of madness have all learned to call them. We adjust to those numbers accordingly, without frugality or theories of what might be needed. Our theories are stockpiled but our very rigorous defense patrols."

"You're a small country with a big defense, Wyld. Of all the leaders I've met, I adjudge you the one most qualified to command much more. This does not make me rest easily."

"I've more than enough to keep me busy, but thank you. I am honored."

"You don't really want the island, then, with all those deadly hunters aloft?" The Premier was intensely analytical again, with her usual frontal attack."

"We want the Marchland forever, or as long as the universe allows. Yes, we have hunters just as you do, and in this I am deeply sorry for us both, but Marchlanders aren't complete fools. Still, we endeavor to practice temperance. If you can withstand a sensitive pun, you might say we espouse the golden middle. That's all we want."

"And you might not say anything of the sort, which would ease my spleen considerably. I believe you gloat."

"No," Wyld asserted. He smiled patiently and returned to his seat, sitting forward a minute to rub his shoulders. "Deeds pave

the way for meaningful words, not the other way around. We can say what we have done."

"And sometimes deeds annihilate words," Mwithe Xheeva admonished.

"Yes," he answered, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"This is so."

Mwithe Xheeva had been studying the red mark on Wyld's face. Something about this shrewd man, the aloofness, the vehement sense of purpose mixed with a humble austerity, drew from her a stinging veneration. She could not imagine anyone putting even a small mark on Wyld without incurring a very great liability. She still thought him a bloodless foe. But as she watched she saw a deceptively pure delight soften his intense face.

"Did you know Marchlanders are among the few who still make musical instruments?" he asked, leaving her to wonder how this thought had come into play.

"All variations of sound can be synthesized on but one instrument." Her impatience was not disguised.

"What I was saying has nothing to do with the hollow perversions of sound clacked out on clacking machines that stuff the ears of your compatriots."

His baritone voice was so soft and clear that it took the Premier a moment to grasp the acidity of his remark. Then she twitched her thumbs in agitation.

"I tell you, Wyld, I'm long-suffering with you, but I would rather have used this time in pondering our separate definitions of the common good."

"That's what we're doing, Premier."

"Really? I thought I was again sitting at the foot of

condescension."

"Forgive me. You are known for your even temper, Premier Xheeva. I did not intend to preach, only to share the sanguineness of Marchlanders. Perhaps it's something we eat," he said, laughing playfully.

"And off you go again with your state of perfection. It's quite funny when you give it to Kele Umara, but not to me. Something you eat indeed. Our skilled scientists well understand the beneficial properties of growing things, but I doubt that herbs and vegetables will remove the genetic pestilence visited upon us by careless predecessors."

"And so we come full circle," Wyld said.

Mwithe Xheeva's structured mind would not allow him the tempering balance of humor. He well knew the pitfalls of a too serious nature, after years of stumbling into them. Finally, at what seemed the critical moment before each humorless dive, he had learned to laugh.

Today, Wyld reasoned, the Premier was as softened and ripe as she would ever be for his own frontal attack. As he leaned toward her, his leveling cold blue eyes were the only warning needed for the gravity of his next subject.

"Not long ago my trusting wolfhound was reduced to a lifeless hide by one of your countrymen."

Without blinking or flinching, the Premier tilted her head back so that her gray eyes appeared half closed. "I've heard of it. You accuse us?"

"Information points to you. Impeccable information as usual."

"Was he not an old dog?"

Her remark was cast aside with a scornful laugh. "We trifle here. I did keep him from aging because he was an indispensable companion. Our scanner showed him to be full of altatoxin, a highly refined poison that, you must know, produces swift narcosis followed by a shriveling death, even more extraordinary to observe in a human. They both ate food intended for me."

"What proof have you?"

Wyld then related the story of how the Mezta and Laelaps had met their deaths, but declined to reveal the source of his conclusion.

"This was really but a crude attempt on my life. Wyld Violet's flight lab was nearby and I would have been quickly revived." Wyld, although doubtful of this, wanted to stress his invulnerability.

"You've no idea who this creature was?"

"Our scanner revealed his chemistry. His name no longer matters. He was semi-programmed with a cranial biocomputer."

"You realize that he could easily have been sent by Dagonites," the Premier said without conviction.

"Was he?"

"I'm not entirely certain but I intend to find out."

Was this stern honesty a new guise? He wondered, could anyone, Chloë Churlwraith perhaps, look into that guarded visage and gain a glimmering of truth?

"And of course you'll let me know what you learn," he said. "Not that you've ever entertained the idea yourself."

"Versions of it have occurred to me."

"Thank you," he said, as gratified as if he had just been handed another toxic lunch.

XI

As Wyld Violet climbed higher and higher on the homeward flight, Chloë watched the rolling whitecaps harden into a thin white fiber dividing the aquamarine waters from the warm pastel tones of the land. Then came the fertile plains of the Gream Valley, watched over by snow-heaped Mount Sorus with its giant microwave collector. The huge solar-warmed collector filled the entire caldera of the old volcano, sixteen kilometers in diameter; it and another in the Scree Mountain Range to the northeast brought solar energy to the March from relay stations in space. In the northeastern foothills of Mount Sorus the forest began to thicken until the densely packed firs became rolling dark waves. Above this secretive green density rough and glittering Mount Rubora floated in smoldering mystery.

In the last few days the volcano had resumed its always expected thundering vibrations. Now it was belching steam from its swollen throat, priming for a grand pyrotechnic display after nearly seven years of silence. The ceremonial witnessing of these violent fulminations had an indelible place in her memories of childhood. Yet, until the recent tremors and emissions of hissing steam, she had not been reminded of the significance of this event in her ties with the March. Here in the pristine wild March, both harsh and fragile states co-existed somewhat amenably in nature's temperamental garden. Merciful Mount Rubora had never in recent times swallowed the forest.

There was a buffeting current of hot air as they passed near the mountain. The sharp rising and falling of the ship jarred and jangled her senses but made her smile. Clinging to the arms of her

seat, she dropped her chin against her chest and peered down with a side glance at the querulous mountain. When the magma finally reached the surface, when it spilled from the angry curled lip with its glowing dragon tongues of liquid fire... She was laughing, holding her hand collaboratively against the window -- how wonderfully exciting, spell-binding this dangerous fiery awakening.

Recorded by satellite, beamed around the planet, others would see something of it, but they would never know what it meant to be a credulous child standing on shaking ground, the sulfurous gas stinging eyes and throat. Only select observers, scientists, would be allowed into the March. They would test and measure and tamper with this mercurial old star cinder, but they would never really know how it felt to live within the shadow of this fitfully sleeping beast, to listen to the sudden warnings of its deep rumbling voice, to have grown up at the foot of such volatile indifference.

In the short distance left she sat deep in thought, her face at the window a pale contrast to the mountain's fury.

I'm awakening like the mountain, I too in a volatile state, awakening from the exact dream of science to the fragmented world of dreaming people, people who scheme against the Jarl; he who dreams his own far-reaching dreams. I lost control. I lost control. How loathsome to be raw, flaccid, helpless as a child at the very moment unbending strength is needed. His eyes are distant daylight moons that shine most boldly in the darkness of night. How does one learn to deal coolly with the endless oppressiveness of threat? No, I must not think of it. The day is bright. I must remember how to see clearly. My prescience has fallen from me, dulled by my long sleep with science. Now I am caught in the selfish and diabolical cross weavings of human intent. How small I feel, how very fallible, how close to everlasting stillness.

The Marchman

They were coming down now on the landing pad near Sunring. She looked about her as though she had awakened from a nap in an unfamiliar place. Wirth did not appear. How could she repair this strange unspoken breach in their friendship? As she came into the courtyard he was there at the door with her bag gripped in a powerful hand, his winsome face now hovering in a cloud of equivocation.

She touched the toe of her boot against his booted foot, almost as a child would test the temper of a surly playmate.

"What troubles you, Wirth?"

"Nothing."

"No, tell me, please."

"My generations here go back as far as Wyld's. The first was a bondsman."

"But none after that."

"No."

"Do you chafe at that history?"

"No, I remind you of it. My ancestor paid his dues."

She leaned forward on her toes and kissed his cheek. He responded with a cool mannerliness, only augmenting her need for his former warmth and gentleness. There clung to him the smell of the woods, not the sea. His quiet steady acceptance of things imparted an inviolate strength, a kinship with the healing powers of nature, to be emulated.

"The first Churlwraith here was bonded to Captain Wyld. It's a long time ago," she said, laughing.

Wirth looked into her sparkling moist eyes. "We should not do this."

"Why? I like you so much."

He continued to stare at her a long moment, his eyes sadly deprived. "You're the Jarl's."

Her eyes narrowed in a storm of protest. "I am no one's...*I belong to no one!*"

"You're Wyld spice and just as unpredictable. I've seen his face today and this." He lifted her bruised wrist, but his grasp was gentle. The honey lambency in his dark eyes played over her like a dying flame.

She felt a sickening wave of self-loathing sweep through her, hating her stammering voice. "He was tired and...it was all a blundering confusion. I didn't mean--"

"Never mind. Don't explain to me. I understand. We would all lie for him."

"Wirth, I value, I *need* your trust. I don't think of making you like a...a captive. Oh, why is this not easy? Between us there's a good thing to have." She searched his face as she spoke, but he had warily shut away his thoughts.

She clasped his arm. "Oh, Wirth--"

"No, don't touch, don't touch. You like to touch. I'm sorry but if we work together you must not."

She turned away and hurried inside, feeling deeply depressed, passing Nev with a mere wave of her hand.

"Wait a minute! Isn't the problem soluble?" He hurried over to give her a hug. "No, actually you look as though you fell off something a cut too high and haven't landed yet."

"That's it, I haven't landed yet." She smiled weakly. Then her voice changed, a low voice of serious conviction. "Nev, I need to get back to my work."

"I know, my darling." How he wished he could have made

her laugh. Her dulcet laughter was the finest elixir.

"Why didn't you warn me?" Wyld asked. He was sullenly pacing up and down in Alba's pale yellow sitting room.

"I sent a message as soon as I could, but it went unanswered. What's the difference? She can't be such an imposition. She's so lovely, and eager to see you."

Wyld shook his head. "The timing could not be worse."

"But now you needn't go to her; she's come to you. I like her, Caz. I've canceled my sail with friends without the least regret. I'm giving Ursa a nice welcoming party."

Wyld gripped his ribs and threw his head back with laughter. "Ahh," he groaned, "I can only laugh at this pathetic comedy. Why is that? Am I a cynic at last?"

"Don't pace. You unnerve me with this talk. Surely you don't expect me to explain your strange machinations."

"What excuse did she make for her change of mind, after refusing to set foot here?"

"Why *you*, of course. That isn't unreasonable. Don't you want this bright creature after all? It now seems to me that she is exactly right for you."

"Women, these *women*, what are they supposed to do for me, Great Mother? Entertain? Embellish? Finish? What? Give me an heir, you will quickly say. Yes, a sanctifying addition to our gene pool."

"Much, much more. You know this. The right woman will be all of the things you need."

"Yet I see them as liabilities, grasping and crazy with every kind of hunger. What do they know of me or care...but for my

position and wealth?"

"Ursa Grenellev does not really need your position or want it, as you yourself have indicated. It seems to me she's giving up a little for you, her carefree existence, her independence."

"But those are some of the very reasons she appealed to me."

"Appealed, you say? Past tense? What am I hearing? Wait until you see her. You cannot have forgotten such a creature."

Ursa was in the vineyard, prancing down the rows like a nervous filly, and popping grapes between her fleshy moist lips. Her mauve-gray, long-lashed eyes darted over the luminous vines in a searching manner both supremely confident and blithely expectant, commanding the leaves to part and reveal their best to her. Her thick mane of auburn hair flew back over her shoulders as she shook her head. The gilded long strands writhed to and fro like wind-teased spider threads shimmering in the noon sun.

She is too perfectly angular, he decided, studying her as she moved along in her violet-gray tunic and slacks, a pale color that would match her eyes. The wide sleeves were rolled, and her creamy arms parted the air around her with precise sweeping motions announcing her consuming vitality. She is a great refined bird who flies always in her own rare medium, he continued as he strode up behind her and took her in his arms.

"Ahh!" she screamed. "You frightened me out of my wits."

"That will be new. I've never seen you witless."

He kissed her a long welcoming kiss, and her arms came up around him, hands smoothing over his back. He held her away and studied her face, the long classic nose, thick lips, expansive liquid

eyes filled with a fetching, knowing playfulness. She was only slightly shy for their lengthy separation. *She means to stay.*

"What brings you to this abominable place?"

"Oh, Casimir, I'm so ashamed. Why didn't you tell me how wonderful, how *beautiful* it is here?"

"I thought I did."

"No, you didn't. Oh, perhaps you tried. Of course you couldn't. It has to be seen, to be inhaled and tasted."

He took a deep breath and looked around him, then bent his long fingers into a frame before his face. "Yes, I think I'm beginning to see what you--"

"Oh, go on with you. You're the March, a great part of it at least. When you leave I'm sure it's like an eclipse around here, although I do see you everywhere. I understand you so much better now."

"Do you?" he said with a quizzical glance at her.

"Casimir, what is it? Are you still the same for me?"

"Yes," he answered quickly and twined his fingers in her hair, giving a playful yank.

"You've hurt yourself I see." She reached out to touch the pale blue mark on his face, but he jerked back with an instant reflex.

"No, it was done to me. I was in a brawl. Seamy. You would not approve. But I gave as well as I got."

"You rascal," she said with high laughter. "I don't know whether to believe you or not. It sounds ridiculous."

"Always believe everything I tell you," he admonished with a smile more serious. "I like consistency. It makes life easy...easier."

"But not necessarily more credible," she said with penetrating but still untroubled eyes.

"I've missed your wisdom, even your cheekiness," he said, taking her hand. "Let's go for a walk."

"It's truly wonderful here."

Ursa waved her arms around her as they strode along. "There are buttercups by the river and black swans -- *silky* black swans. *Wonderful!* You have horses. *Horses!*" Her voice rose and fell in shrill squeals of delight. "Will you ride with me?" She leaned against his shoulder.

"Yes," he answered fondly, and walked with her like a husband, his arm around her waist.

A red swirl of dust came up from the landing pad as Fox and Nev, returning from the Scree Mountain Mines, waited a moment to disembark then stepped down. Fox was carrying a small black case.

"Well, if what you've told me is true, I'm glad she's come," Nev said. "But I'm still surprised that he left this business with the jeweler up to you, although all of Sykes' work is of an exquisite turn."

"I enjoyed it, a pleasant task," Fox said. "All I had to do was see her and I knew what to choose. Sophisticated yet soft, lanky and coltish yet every inch a woman."

Nev raised the brow over one pale eye and scratched the end of his freckled nose. "I see. Will you be able to keep the swill light tonight when you see her in this glitter?"

"Dueling sons! You always hit right at the spot, old man. By now I'm used to flies around the main course. I get my share.

The Marchman

The man has amazing control. He tries, I say *tries*, to be as continent as most Marchlanders. Sometimes I think he wishes I'd take them all away."

"But not this one, my boy."

"No," Fox agreed, grinning. His clear amber eyes dimmed perceptively. In the distance a freshly plowed field was dusted in late afternoon sun, about the color of her hair, he thought, spread over a pillow of green. But Nev really had him all wrong; he was only enjoying what any man would enjoy looking in her direction.

Almost immediately Wyld had observed Fox's attitude toward Ursa, and the task of picking out her gift, which he might have given to his secretary, he gave to Fox as a kind of tantalizing reward. He could himself have done the simple thing, but he preferred to spend the time with the subject herself. Ursa had a lively and infectious good humor, a deliciously light-hearted playfulness that could banish, at least for a time, a number of tediously drumming tribulations. He had somehow forgotten that to be in her presence was like awakening to a cloudless day of leisure?

And the day came precisely so. Before breakfast was even begun Ursa had already insisted on setting a time for riding with Wyld, for her a familiar and sociable pastime. They ate together on the sunny terrace with a brisk exchange of news, then he hurried through a few unavoidable duties with his secretary, and soon found Ursa making friends at the stables.

From birth she had moved, thought, and dallied in an easy and reassuring medium of wealth, loved and coddled and made to feel important and secure. Thus did the entire universe run on the beat of her heart, but this assumption came without audacity,

without altering her generous and thoughtful nature. As he watched her manicured fingers stroking her horse's neck, it came to him that in observing her attitude toward him he could learn things about himself that had never much concerned him, his standing or progress, for instance, as a suitably companionable being.

Wyld's horse, Malek, was a spirited but well schooled roan bay stallion, and his fondness for the animal was such that he would use only a light hackamore and a soft rein. He soon dismounted and walked beside Malek, explaining that he generally felt riding was an ignominious condition for the horse, hardly necessary and a rather selfish indulgence for the rider.

"You haven't changed," Ursa said with amusement. "Still coming up with ways to set yourself apart, somewhere out there among those implacable mountains."

His laughter was good-natured as he climbed back on Malek, and thereafter they moved along the west side of the chortling Ruddle in silence, until luxuriating Ursa decided to stop her horse.

Her knees up, her heels down, her head held at a jaunty angle, she was listening. A bird was performing a long and complicated fluting. They paused side by side, looking up at the wind-ruffled leaves of a large black cottonwood. Ursa's voluptuous mouth curled in a silent expression of joy. They both laughed softly, listening again.

Wyld dismounted and knelt to check Malek's hoof, cupping it gently in his hand and extracting a pebble. Malek turned and gave him an unmistakable look of thanks. He whacked the horse's flank lovingly, his hand sliding over the animal's sleek coat.

"It's so very nice here," Ursa said in a hushed voice. Her

large gray eyes seemed to Wyld to be filled with both present and future dreams, thoroughly settled conviction.

The sun burned through his thin white shirt, and he left Malek's reins on the ground to lean back against the shady cottonwood. Ursa remained in the saddle, her head back, her eyes closed, sleeping against a giant pillow of white cloud at her back. He folded his arms and stared at this impeccably beautiful auburn-haired woman, as he knew he was supposed to do, at her fine silk shirt, her elegant tan jodhpurs, and her gleaming chestnut boots. All at once an uninvited twist of memory had his hands tugging at another pair of boots. It was the first time Chloë really laughed with him. How important that had been, how rewarding the lyrical sound emanating from that extraordinary woman fully consecrated beyond his reach. He had finished it. He turned and slapped his palms against the trunk. The tiny green-feathered songbird flew out and darted into the sky.

Ursa awoke at once to find Wyld smiling calmly but with questioning eyes.

"Why do I feel the need to ask what changed your mind? It sounds callous, ungrateful, but after all the obstinacy I've met I do ask."

Ursa looked surprised. "Can't you guess the answer?"

"You've given in."

"What a terrible way to put it."

"You don't remember how stubborn you were. I'm a little dumbfounded."

"Good." She laughed without offering clarification, then urged her horse into a spirited gallop, calling something indistinct over her shoulder, which he thought was, as she might have put it,

cleverly indelicate.

He stood a moment shaking his head and stroking Malek's neck.

"Blond as sun-bleached wheat, lamby."

Bahta, the wiry octogenarian house mistress at Sunring, was brushing Chloë's long hair, in the large sitting room and study adjoining Chloë's bedroom. A dusty-gold late afternoon sun filtered through the partially opaqued glass, giving the shadowy, milky-jade room a soothing underwater indistinctness. Chloë was kneeling on the thick green and white carpet, her head dipping rhythmically under the flashing mother-of-pearl brush wielded by a well-worn hand yet strong and durable as the root of an old tree.

"It feels so good to have you do this, Bahta. If I could I'd come home every weekend just for this."

"Well then, take me over to Arrowmoon with you, sweet Clover. Who'll take care of you there? You'll eat that chaff concocted by Domestec, soul-shrinking food."

"I may not stay at Arrowmoon, Bahta. Besides, no one could survive here without you. Even the house computer would be lonely."

"Hah! You know the Jarl won't let you live with the Immix. Might as well give it up, lamby girl."

"Bahta, you could never think of me as a mature woman, even if I were hoary as an old boar, could you?"

"The changes of your body make no difference to me, child."

"Ah, I give up," Chloë said with mock exasperation.

"The poor Jarl. He's done for now his wife-to-be has come

to take over Solvault Hall."

"I look forward to meeting her tonight. Fox says she's lovely and clever. Alba says so too."

"Has no trouble finding lovely ones," Bahta said in her deep raspy voice. "Never did. Must be something special, or he's just getting tired. You take a good look for Bahta, at both of them. See what's what. I like to know which way the wind blows around here. Probably Alba's after him again to get a wife."

"Bahta, you old talebearer," Chloë said, chuckling softly, "you'll have to do your own news gathering."

At dusk Chloë walked slowly along the worn cobbled path that ran between the dark golden-edged oak park and newly cut grain fields. The stubble crackled softly with insects in the red gilt light. For a stretch, the path took her up atop the hurrying Ruddle's bluffs and into the aromatic cottonwoods.

Her cream boots clicked on the cobbles as her narrow ivory skirt, artfully hand-loomed by a woman who lived in a Scree Mountain hamlet, fluttered against her briskly moving legs. Woven along the hem was a very old legend done in silky, thin rainbow tapestry threads. The gifted Scree Mountain Weaver's Circle had preserved these symbolic old tales in generations of weaving. Above the skirt she wore a lace blouse with a scalloped neck, and a light Angora cape of soft eggshell white. Bahta had done her hair in a long wheaten braid that fell down her back. Escaped short wisps of extremely fine, almost translucent hair played around her face, like airy spirits borne on the gentle wind.

She had spent the entire day, which was for her a precious allotment of time, thinking deeply and gathering herself into restfully contemplative exercises. At last she was serene, her green

eyes no longer a wild sea but a calm reefed shore, her nervous hands steady enough. The concept of her work was now flush against the edge of an enclosing circle of endeavor. As she withdrew still further into a diminishing core of self, the personal steadily blurring into nothingness in the heat of her objective, her work would fill the circle like a bright dye, coloring motive with a single intense hue.

Wirth, who had been appointed her dutiful shadow, came across the lawn to meet her.

"You're early. I would have come for you."

His boots shone, his navy dress tunic and slacks expertly cut to fit his large frame. His eyes reflected only careful respect, yet he had undergone a change of attitude, allowing her to read whatever she found in him.

She lowered her eyes, and they walked on through the tunnel of vines into the courtyard, where laughter punctuated the dulcet fluting of the male nightingales.

Chloë removed her cape near the brazier flames and greeted Alba, then stretched out her lace-covered arms toward the fire and rubbed her hands together over the bright orange-red glow. She was not at all cold; it was only a gesture of habit, obeisance to the friendly fire.

Fox came to tell her how lovely she was, but he was soon again watching Ursa in her forest green dress, the gifts of gold he had selected for Wyld resplendent on her wrists and encircling her long neck.

Alba whispered, "Chloë, you've always loved fire. Do you remember putting your hand into those alluring flames when you were a child?"

"Oh, yes," Chloë mused with a high sparkling voice. "I thought the flames beautiful, that something so wonderful could never hurt. I remember the pain as if it were yesterday."

"Let me see," Alba said, turning over Chloë's right hand. "Ah, yes, the little scar, faint but there in the palm...and still you go to fire." She had keenly observed the blue marks on Chloë's wrist.

"Sometimes it comes to me," Chloë answered.

"I have nothing but admiration for you, dear one. You are one of the brave, the rarest of spirits."

Alba kissed Chloë's hand, noting that her grandson and Ursa were watching.

"Casimir, who is that?" Ursa asked. "Hasn't she stepped out of some antique gilt-edged storybook? Alba kisses her hand with such reverence. I want to meet her."

"Skye Kleeve, I'd like you to meet Ursa Grenellev."

Chloë looked up from the opiate center of the fire, where a visionary's musings could shape themselves. She smiled kindly and put out her hand to Ursa, but she was somewhat disappointed to be introduced with yet another name, and in her beloved homeland.

When she turned her bright smiling eyes on Wyld he felt himself tumbling into green pools of nothing but polite respect, much the same as Wirth had offered her.

"Notice what a circumspect man he is. He didn't say affianced; he didn't even say friend," Ursa scolded with jesting laughter. She took Chloë's hand, clearly sensing that she had met someone of importance.

"He would do well to say both," Chloë offered.

"I think you can tell me meaningful things. Take this glass

of Alba's incredible punch and come sit over here, where you will cheer these flowers," Ursa invited.

She looked at Wyld and commanded with light voice, "Please leave us, Casimir. I feel an enriching experience coming my way and I want no distractions."

Wyld hesitated, but Chloë's clement smile and nod brought dispensation. He went away across the courtyard to his favorite chair, which he positioned so that he could watch the two women through the unconverging patterns of a thick-leaved ficus.

Prepossessing Ursa was zestfully carving the air around her with her expressive hands. Chloë's supple hands lay in her lap as she nodded thoughtfully. Her pale rose lips moved with indiscernible enunciation's, and occasionally her white teeth shone in pearls of laughter that he would like to have caused.

He thought of her skull, how it was made and how it held the arcane intuitive fruit of her secretive self at its center, and the sockets where her phosphorous eyes were housed. The bones of her clavicle shone in a cross-light that bathed her bare ivory throat, where lately there had been a splendid emerald, superseded in brilliance only by her eyes. His head sank on folded hands resting on his chest, but the upturned pleasure-seeking eyes burned on divorced from all hope. Turning once he saw that Fox was looking in the same direction. A bemused smile played for an instant across Wyld's rapt attention.

After dinner, dutiful Chloë hugged Alba and whispered her excuses for an early withdrawal. She looked for Wirth, to say good-by, but he had vanished. Pausing with thoughts of Wyld, she then sent a rather daring message through a steward, and slipped away across the dim south veranda.

The night air was crisp, its sweetness borne on a soothing light breeze. Her feet brushed familiarly over the thick spongy lawn running below a hedge of profusely blooming honeysuckle. Soon the clear liquid burbles of the Ruddle filled her ears. Here, near the path to Sunring, she stopped, taking deep breaths of air saturated with dizzying floral ambrosia. She waited with a restless anticipation, half-listening to a chorus of frogs.

In a few minutes she saw Wyld approaching, his eyes searching through moonlight and shadow, his long stride conveying impatience. He came to straight to her, having glimpsed the ghostly patches of her skirt among the black leaves.

"Chloë?" he said in a low voice. "What is it?" He watched the broken white fragments merge into a whole being. "I was told you wanted to see me."

"Yes...thank you for coming.

"Jarl Wyld, there was something I wanted to say in private before I left."

He interrupted, holding up his hand, realizing that this was to be about their startling night at Arrowmoon.

"I was not intoxicated as you may have thought, but I was tired enough to be...sorry, no excuse. Or perhaps I *was* intoxicated...with...you." His voice had turned gentle. "I never intended... But how could you possibly have avoided being something more than...seductive?"

"Naïve is the word. But please let me finish."

"All right, get it over."

"I haven't waited here to attack *you*. It's only that I'm ashamed. I'm usually very good at handling--"

"Animals like me."

The Marchman

"No! I would never have said that. Handling my *self*. Why do you make it so difficult for me to--"

"Let me make it easy. We were both careless with our emotions. We hurt each other. Now we understand."

"If you will let me finish...I wanted to say that I respect you. Your cares are many. I wanted to say that I'm everlastingly grateful for Wylds and for the March--"

"You are politic," he said, laughing coolly.

"It never does come out right. Oh, how can it? If only I hadn't led you to the point of speaking so...and then if only I hadn't--"

She reached up reflexively and touched the place where she had struck so hard. He could hardly feel the touch it was so softly done. Impulsively, he closed his eyes and turned his mouth into the lenitive hand as soon lifted from his face. He could still feel the hand's tremor of shock.

He gave an apologetic laugh. "I was thinking that perhaps the cause could be the cure."

"Forgive me, Jarl Wyld. That was all I should have said. I want everything to be as it was."

"As it was when?"

"As it's always been."

"You are too idealistic, Chloë, perhaps a little too romantic. Please don't scold me with your look. I know you can accuse me of the same idealism, but mine comes and goes. Sometime we might have a long talk about *how it's always been*. Are you shaming *me* now, asking to be forgiven for what I fully deserved?"

"Please forgive...let us be friends," she implored.

"Why ask forgiveness for *my* cruelty?"

"One mistake should not invite another."

"When I said that you preferred Wylds as abstraction I was more right than ever I knew. You want heroes. Yes, I suppose it's desirable, while thoroughly imbued with the world of science, to have everything outside that world remain constant and untainted, including your myths. Would it surprise you to know that I think of you as heroic? You fit the mold much better than I."

"You're mistaken," she insisted. "The entire world needs heroes, brave and beneficial ones. I am not such a hero. My motives are far less complex...but I regret that my emotions...apparently are not."

He saw how deep the hurt had gone, and how it upset her to have shown it. Spinning away inside him was an evil delight at his ability to make her feel such strong and complicated emotion.

"I thought what I said that night would serve some higher purpose," he explained, bringing them back to the cause of their misery. "It was foolish and cruel."

"You wanted to make me dislike you," she discerned with a curiously sad smile.

"Did you...do you?"

"Of course not. Anger was only an instant response; it had nothing to do with my perception of you." Her voice was unnaturally casual. "The anger quickly passed."

"*Did* it?" he said with an unquestioning voice meant only to emphasize disbelief.

Her arms moved nervously at her sides. He had a sudden impulse to clasp them and hold them still, to bend her against her stubbornness, anything to end the disingenuous cool indifference.

"You do get under my skin...have gotten under my skin,"

he revealed, stepping back away from her.

For a long moment the sounds of the river rushed in to fill the silence, while neither made any attempt to move or speak. Then they both spoke at once, laughing and starting over with delicate politeness.

He could see her teeth flashing in the moonlight as she praised Ursa, expressing a hope that she would be safe on her homeward journey, that she would be happy later living in the March.

"So you acknowledge the presence of evil," he said with slightly taunting voice.

"It's only that in work and travel I've had to...I believe in caution. Please know I have no bad feelings, that I wish you happiness, will always hold you in high esteem. Good night." She turned to leave.

"Isn't Wirth coming? I've asked him to--"

"I've never been afraid in the March," she interrupted.

"Only dreams of other worlds frighten me here," she added with a laugh. "I used to..." She stopped at once, noticing that his attention was drawn away.

He had glanced toward the lighted Hall and angrily faulted himself for the gesture. She would have revealed something of herself, a revelation lost to him.

"Sometime we'll talk more...remind each other of our childhood," he apologized. "There are many--"

"Yes, sometime," she called softly over her shoulder, her voice empty of conviction.

Watching her go he considered her strength of will and how she ignored her own human frailty and personal needs.

The Marchman

Perhaps he could emulate that resolution and use it against his loneliness. She was able to lay aside everything but her work, to walk away from temptation because she was walking toward something much larger than herself. His path was similar but had to be laboriously cleared of harmful debris day by day. Her course was straight and certain, willfully all-consuming; his uneven course was fraught with perils, often demanding a cold heart of steel.

A wistful smile appeared at a sudden inner vision: he was standing off watching himself, as sometimes happened, and he saw a figure pared down nearly to the bone, standing alone in a field of hazard, but his tall body was metal not flesh, fixed in a storm with lightning playing over his surface in flashing blue arcs; there he stood and stood and nothing could fell him, but neither could any friend come near without possibly incurring a mortal wound.

Sometime, sometime, her boots echoed. His fist rubbed against his cheek, reining in a shouted response. He had been strictly and purposefully schooled, carefully trained. Never could he allow himself to pursue his brief indulgence, such pursuit a selfish, harmful act. Still, his voice shouted in silence. His fist opened, long fingers threading through a wave of shaded flaxen hair, thrusting it back from a pale forehead where ruinous solar fires sparsely touched. He listened to the clicking boots receding on the path, his rueful eyes cast in the dark regret of purposely forsaken choice. Then there was only the river, chortling, teasing, morosely sighing. He desired merely to lie down on the cool grass, but knew he could easily fall asleep there, dreaming hopeless dreams.

XII

Seche was a large but compact sky-reaching city with a rich sun-baked history. In bygone days a stream of foreign philosophers had strolled in scholarly reflection under the cool stone arches of its palm-shaded marketplace. But the learned philosophers were turned out and forgotten -- they had imprudently encouraged dissatisfaction. The city had its birth at the center of a wide and once verdant flood plain that had been, in pre-settlement times, the feeding grounds of migrating flocks, dense and noisy ravenous water birds. Given the Immix name for a magnificent species of long-legged crane, the town, Seche, sprang up on the north bank of a sweeping bend in the River Mwayla. The river flowed first in clean white torrents, descending in a southeasterly direction from the northeastern foothills of Mount Sorus, then in a lazy silty journey rambling across the red plains of Klove. On these plains, in days of old, the Immix rode in thunderous clouds to meet the plundering Dagonites in battle.

Like the Dagon capital Wime, Seche also had its modern towers and underground districts, all securely designed by reliable computer architects. But unlike Wime where a dated building could hardly be found, Seche had kept many of its more solid old structures, those that had withstood severe earthquakes, and they stood quiescently relinquishing their original grandeur under a morose glaze of soot acquired in the age of heavy pollution. The dark brooding mystery of these old buildings was augmented by the narrow, airless, often cobbled streets that ran between them. In recent decades, as the population far outstripped available living accommodations -- even with careful breeding --, interiors of these old buildings were necessarily restored, becoming choice habitats,

fashionable among those city dwellers who had plunged into a cult of nostalgia, yet often with only a scant knowledge of the rigorous past. This revitalized quarter, known as Palmbricta, now enjoyed spacious and lushly planted squares displaying honey locust and other lacy-leaved, pod-bearing trees, as well as path-strewn groves of towering palms, rustling in the humid, fluky southeasters frequently rippling in from the mercurial sea.

To these broad squares with their prized alfresco dining venues the Palmbricta residents flocked on foot, as to desert oases, to spend their mid-week rest days and summer evenings escaping the claustrophobia of their cramped old streets. It was this sultry bygone milieu of the time-exposed Palmbricta quarter that set the mellow ambiance of the entire capital, lingering illusively in the mind of every Seche dweller.

Chloë had never been to Seche. When she first alighted from Wyld violet with Wirth, she was greeted not only by Premier Xheeva's handsome male aide but by an alluring aroma suggesting burning cloves and fresh oranges, all mingled with the ferrous odor of red dust. She was transported to an underground speedway in a glass-enclosed shuttle that provided a brief polychrome glimpse of the enticements of bustling commerce. The obvious partiality to fruits, vegetables, and flowers delighted her, but in the few short moments of her shuttle journey she managed, with acutely discerning eyes, to see a great deal more. While there was scarcely poverty in Immixia, there were degrees of wealth. On the faces of those seemingly in the highest economic strata she caught fleeting hints of jaded carelessness.

There were Cavillers everywhere. These were the increasingly popular guilds of street players who acted out their

social frustrations and desires in energetic street performances. This practice had come about when Secherites of a more extroverted nature, tired of shutting themselves away from one another in suspicion, had gone out into the streets and cafés to mingle and commiserate. No more the Artificial Head games, where vision was forced into parallax until dizziness became a pathological disorder. And in place of a listless submersion in video screens the lively Cavillers rediscovered fraternity. Their personal dilemmas were transformed into verbal harangues that became more and more dramatic. Awakened and aware, soon both Cavillers and onlookers were claiming therapeutic release. Now, after a century of near emptiness, except during rush hours, the streets swelled and vibrated with activity in both the afternoons and evenings.

The colorful Cavillers in their strange masks and exaggerated posings were thought to serve an important social function, interacting with the perpetually nervous population and quelling unrest. The government, having quickly grasped their importance as distraction, sanctioned their usefulness and favorably supported them, providing performance bubbles in highly trafficked areas. Often passersby were invited to join in extempore. The acting groups had devised oriflammes with rallying colors and insignia, frequently displaying their talents and peeves in tournament playlets of florid hyperbole.

While their fame had spread over the island and even nudged the sophisticated Mainlanders into curiosity and investigation, Chloë had never been much interested. To her circumspect mind, schooled in the utilitarian tradition of abnegation and self-reliance, their cultish frenzy seemed a flight

from reasonableness. Supposing their methods to be superficial and vulgar, she had grudged them their abandon, but just now, seeing them in the flesh, she found them a quaint and lively form of entertainment. Here was the bold vitality of candid human exchange. It came to her that their strident wildness was a universally desired form of anarchy, however constricted and sustainable only in such glassy bubbles. Perhaps Cavillers had some cathartic value after all, even if they were not the banished philosophers.

The old royal palace, adjacent to modern government buildings, stood on a bluff just above Palmbricta and looked across the River Mwayla toward the South Bank where the horizon of ultra-modern buildings cut sharply into blue sky.

Chloë felt much more comfortable on this side of the river. Inside the stone walls of the palace she strolled with Premier Xheeva along an arcade of windows that faced the river. Their feet echoed on the polished mineral floors as they moved alongside giant potted jade plants. These carefully tended old plants enhanced the splendor of ancient beams and lintels carved entirely from semi-precious stones.

The Premier, a reserved study of authority in her sternly worn ash-gray suit, tested and probed her subject for signs of authenticity. Who was this so-called scientist who moved at her side with quietly serious dignity?

"You haven't decided about me," Chloë said with one of her unnerving penetrations. "I can tell you little of my work...but there is little you would understand. Your notion that I might be an impostor is a waste of time. Let me show you results."

"You are as incisively direct as the impervious Mr. Wyld,

Miss Kleeve. Are you perhaps related?"

"No," Chloë said, visibly stifling a laugh. "Forgive my disinterest in strategies, Premier, but time is slipping away from human lives. Please show me where I can work."

"We haven't discussed terms."

"There aren't any. I'm not interested in terms, only a suitable place to set up quickly."

"I find this too gratuitous to be credible."

"Do you mean that if I showed less interest in my work I would become more believable?"

"I myself am sometimes accused of pragmatism and of lacking a sense of humor, even of rudeness, Miss Kleeve, but it seems to me that you are far too serious and much too single-minded. Something ulterior drives you beneath that deceptively impersonal exterior. I may yet discover it.

"And now, despite what Casimir Wyld insinuates, we're not just chreotechnic-mad here -- we do have some leisurely diversions. Will you let me spend a part of this day showing you our pleasures, and also a living quarters that I believe would balance your work? After that you may begin. You will be given whatever you require."

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry if I seem brusque, Premier Xheeva. The success of my research has made me responsible for human life. It's hard to play when lives trickle like sand through idle fingers."

The Premier nodded gravely but could not disguise her annoyance at being driven so relentlessly to the point. Furthermore, she had been surpassed in compassion for her countrymen by a foreigner. She could not help remembering that Wyld had caused the same irritation.

The Marchman

In Palmbricta Square, Chloë and Wirth were taken to see Cavillers portraying a metaphorical roomful of blind people. With fulsome milk-white masks displaying curvatures where their eyes should have been, they proclaimed one another beautiful, expounding upon the virtues of appearances while accompanied by gross antics of society's miscalculations.

"Well, Doctor Kleeve?" Premier Xheeva asked, having at last decided to give Chloë her proper title. They were being hustled out of the performance bubble by aides deftly clearing a path through the curious crowd.

Chloë hesitated, smiling politely while the blue sky overhead seemed to rend with her impatience. Her opinion duly expected, she quickly searched for an inarguable reply. "The subject was handled well." She thought even this mild praise effusive. "A clever pressure valve," she added.

The Premier shrugged. "What *does* amuse you, Doctor Kleeve?" Her square face, appearing rectangular with the height of her coiled braid, was strongly set and insistent.

"I suppose unexpected foibles and sudden exposures of folly in day-to-day life are very amusing to me."

"A sadistic altruist. This is news."

"Not at all," Chloë protested, glad that the Premier could engage in humor. "I was thinking of...comparatively harmless, although often intricate, slip-ups by which people briefly lose their masks. But I'm not an altruist...merely a scientist."

"I see. *Merely* a scientist. Then you only want to see if your discovery works."

"I want to save lives."

"Isn't that altruism?"

"For me it's a normal reaction...without any label."

The Premier studied Chloë with a penetration bordering on rudeness. "You are modest...and yet there's something else... Well I suppose genius has its eccentricities," she pondered aloud, pleased with her left-handed compliment.

They were rushed off to a spacious sky-lit flat in Palmbricta, the Premier speaking at length on the scarcity of housing as they went along. The rooms were filled with gleaming antiques and patterned wine carpets edged with verdant arrangements of cascading plants. There was even an abundance of that precious rarity in Immixia: wood, rare xylem of several species, with richly polished grains inviting the hand's caress.

On one long trestle table, strewn at its center with a dark crushed-velvet cloth, rested an obsidian bowl piled high with exotic fruits. The room smelled faintly of wild berries and cedar. Hanging like snowdrops from fragile metal stalks, delicate glass lamps promised to bloom in the darkness with magical colored petals of light.

"How fortunate I'm not staying here," Chloë remarked. "I'd be tempted to dissipation."

"You don't find this flat livable, Doctor Kleeve?"

"Quite a perfect setting for a dilettante but...when I work I want only a little food and a bed...nothing to distract my thoughts."

Arrowmoon with its sumptuous modernity would be bad enough, she felt certain. She did not suppress an admiring smile, her voice fallen soft in the surrounding elegance.

"I feel so acutely the intense emotion once spent in this place."

"Why yes," the Premier agreed, "love in all its varied forms

is the most powerful of emotions. I'm sure it was here. I'm glad you've said this. I suspect your protector Casimir Wyld thinks the Immix incapable of love."

"Your growing population has not sprung from hatred," Chloë offered, amused at the Premier's obvious fascination with the Jarl.

"We must now control our population carefully," the Premier said. She sat down in a comfortable wine chair, resting her feet on a hassock, and appearing tired at last.

"How did you come to choose this flat?" Chloë asked.

"It was suggested to me by a close aide. I'm told it contains most of the items used in its decoration when the building was first restored."

Chloë looked around her with her hands clasped behind her back as if to say, I will touch nothing, but in the next instant her hand was reaching out to lift a small gold box just fitting within her grasp. On its lid was a relief of the sun very much like the emblem on the Marchland pennant flag that flew over Solvault Hall. The cool oily metal made her fingers tingle. Was it Marchland gold? Very likely. The box flashed in the natural light streaming from above, and Chloë dropped her head back to investigate its source. For a moment the curved skylight seemed to creak and strain under the weight of sheer quivering light streaming down upon her.

"You look tired," the Premier observed; it was a quick understanding borne of her similar condition. "Will you rest here at least the night? You'll see the stars above."

"No. No thank you. It's far too lovely for me." Chloë's eyelids trembled slightly. She brushed her hand over her forehead and retreated slowly toward the foyer.

"A pity. You seemed to fit so well in these rooms. They'll be waiting if you should change your mind.

"Now tell me, Doctor Kleeve, do you like old musical instruments as Casimir Wyld does?"

"I don't know about the...about Wyld, but I do like them. I once had an old mandolin that went with me here and there. I played it idly...but somehow it was lost."

"My aide will take you to an exhibit of these things on the way to the lab. If you find an instrument in the collection, one that strikes your fancy, you may take it for your own."

"Thank you, but I wouldn't take from your collection."

"Doctor Kleeve, I will be offended if you do not."

"Then I'll take something playable, if I find it." Chloë had quickly yielded, sensing a gesture toward the accord they must somehow establish, even if trust was out of the question. "This is very kind of you."

Wirth had been present in the long ornate hallway of the old building, pacing up and down as he waited to accompany his charge to the shuttle car. He frowned as he saw the look on her face. Upon leaving the apartment her countenance had flashed a hint of distress, and he knew that she was in some way much disturbed.

A fine old mandolin lying sadly neglected on a storage shelf was later found. Her fingers dusted it lovingly as she surrendered it into Wirth's keeping. As they moved among the poor little collection of forgotten instruments, she gradually learned from the laconic Wirth that he played both a flute and a guitar.

"Ah, look at this," he said, holding up a honey-grained guitar and strumming very prettily. She laughed with bonded

pleasure and warned him that she anticipated a performance.

His expression remained noncommittal, but soon shone with appreciation when Premier Xheeva offered him a fine old recorder. Lacking Chloë's circumspect hesitation, he was perfectly willing to rescue the instrument from oblivion.

The laboratory was at a place called Kiva some fifty kilometers to the southeast of Seche and only a few minutes away by air shuttle. Further south the Ruddle and Mwayla Rivers joined to form the wide River Kiv, which wound over flat terrain toward the bay in the steamy port of Radia.

This produced a quandary, for Chloë had been led to believe that the laboratory was to be on the west coast of Immixia near Arrowmoon. She wondered if this change had come for reasons of security. This big lab was almost entirely underground and heavily guarded. Wirth too showed signs of surprise, tacitly implying that he had been briefed on quite a different site.

Nevertheless, the lab was very much to her liking: hermetic, spacious, well-equipped and with an ample ward for her patients and even a room for her. If she stayed here she need hardly be aware of the time expended, until each day's work was completed to her own satisfaction.

Wirth watched her expression of enthusiasm as this idea took shape in her mind. His dark brows were furrowed in worry over the trouble ahead with the Jarl, not to mention her own safety. He was already intuitively convinced that the Immix had fashioned some scheme in presenting Chloë with the remarkable flat in Palmbricta.

Once airborne they decided to fly directly back to Solvault Hall. By the time they arrived Wyld had already received enough

data, transmitted en route, to make a decision: Chloë would have to commute from Sunring.

"She wants to stay at the lab," Wirth said to Wyld when they met in the gymnasium where Wyld was working out.

"Ah, evil genius!" Wyld exclaimed, smacking his fist into a punch-ball. "Let her sleep with her experiment then. Every two weeks she will come home. This must be done to establish a pattern asserting her freedom to come and go."

"I think she'll allow that."

"Have you changed your mind about her gentle nature?" Wyld asked with a taunting grin.

"She's gentle but has her turnings. I don't like to speak behind her back."

"You think less of her?"

"No...always more."

"You're loyal...to us both."

But Chloë you idolize, he thought, with a quickening heat of something he would rather have disavowed, something gnawing and coarse that effortlessly eroded his smooth reserve: a loathsome primal jealousy.

Ursa was somewhere near waiting for him, undeniably bright and voluptuous, her life dovetailing neatly with his. But just now, at the mention of Chloë, the soles of his feet and palms of his hands had released dull waves of pain like wounds inflicted under water, an autonomous undefeatable craving. To compound his discomfort, today a news report, originating from Dagon but transmitted via the Mainland, had called him a reigning chrysophilist. A chrysophilist! The crass maligners, as though he sat enthroned licking bars of gold. He hated for his Mainland

friends to hear this tripe from some hack's sensational lexicon. Ah well, he had heard other versions, but today his tolerance had been pushed to its limit.

The Hall shook slightly, as it had been doing lately under the spell of Mount Rubora's awakening wrath. He was suddenly moved to laugh at what seemed the relentless old volcano's commiseration.

"Fox has cleared the lab at Kiva already, Wirth. He says it's better, more secure, and that they're probably protecting themselves from their own radicals. But we were a little surprised, as they do rather cryptic experiments there. One wouldn't think they'd want an outsider nosing about in such a rarefied atelier."

"They might detain her when her work is finished," Wirth warned, with a personally motivated directness that irritated Wyld.

He began doing push-ups as Wirth stood sullenly by. At last he stood up.

"She'll have to return to Sunring before they're told her work is complete."

"Her assistants will probably know when the work is finished," Wirth persisted.

"Not necessarily."

Wyld felt a growing impatience. "I can't spend all of my time deliberating over this operation. We'll have to trust Fox."

He saw that this suggestion had not relieved the disapproving tightness in Wirth's jaw. Was the man determined to bring him down, to watch him wallow in anguish? He was not about to reveal his sentiments here, blurting out his fears over the hazards of Chlöe's work.

"We'll get this shaped into a cleaner maneuver. Fox is

working on it right now and I expect he wants to see you."

Wirth had stolidly listened, with a single grimacing blink of his eyes the only discernible movement. He bid his usual politely inscrutable good-bye and left.

Wyld looked at his watch and remembered that he was expecting a communication shortly from a participant in the new and still shaky deposit-backed barter system being tested. It bore constant watching and a concerted show of strong support, which he was steadily marshaling.

He thought of the intricate soft-handed but more and more blatant forms of ever-blooming international blackmail, of the subtle power shifts that came sliding in and out of play. There was scarcely time to consider Immix-Dagonite plotting, although it interfered with nearly every breath he took. Currently he was hailed as a shrewd manipulator, yet in other quarters designated a whipping boy for the blunders of others, namely a pack of Fedcartel supporters engaged in what could only be described as rapacious hoarding.

Concentration hard-riveted to the one assailable target, Wyld drove his fist against the punch-ball over and over again with a hot persevering rhythm. For a controlled moment his looming adversaries were down. He flung himself into a large soothe chair that began molding its contour to his outstretched body. Measuring his vital signs, the chair slowly brought him to a comfortable sitting position. He dropped his head forward, attempting a brief meditation.

Chloë paced in her room, gazing out her windows from time to time. Summer, soon fall, passing. The future held in thin

vials of glass rotating into the present. Clumps of saturated moss dripped like severed veins in the shadowy rain-showered woods.

She stared into her cheval glass at the external woman with the deceptively girlish long braid. *Who are you? Am I your captive or keeper?* She turned away, knowing that mirrors could abet delusional behavior -- the mind looking in confounded by the person looking out.

Domestec interrupted her concentration, pleasantly announcing that Wirth awaited her downstairs. She descended swiftly, without changing from her pale green robe.

He stood in the steamy solarium near the hybrid orchids of ruby with orange -- beauties that were the rarest plants within this lush glassed greenery, where Chloë had often hidden as a child. Through the leaves his dark head was half-illuminated by the skylight, as intriguing to her in this silent contemplation as a wild forest animal sniffing destiny.

"I've just won for you your desired imprisonment at Kiva," he announced, bouncing a pendulous orchid beneath flexed fingertips.

She rushed toward him, hugging him with irrepressible exuberance. "You've done the impossible."

"Please," he entreated, extricating himself from her arms. "It was not that hard...not difficult enough to deserve this kind of punishment."

"I'm sorry, Wirth." She backed away. "I'm so very grateful."

"You will have to return every two weeks."

"You're not coming with me tomorrow?" she asked, already sensing the answer.

"No, I've asked Fox to send others more suitable."

"I felt very secure with you nearby...but it cannot have been a very exciting pastime for you."

His eyes protested. "I'll come for you every two weeks, and of course any other time that you need me."

"Now that I see how influential you are with the Jarl, I'll ask one more favor of you. When I'm gone tell him that I'm not returning for three weeks. It will take at least that long to get set up. After that I promise to return every two weeks. Oh what a nuisance!"

Wirth was not happy about this. He would cautiously wait to plead her case, until he found the Jarl in a more favorable mood, perhaps when Ursa had warmed him to an amiableness with her velvet finesse. This new connubial climate settling over Solvault Hall pleased him in a number of ways, but he was not overconfident, for to him Chloë had no equal.

He studied the thriving rare orchids, so agreeably indifferent to their captivity, coaxed to rich excess in a carefully controlled environment. He was convinced that Chloë's complicated chosen path was alien and harsh. He pointed to the orchids and called as he left the solarium, "In Immixia you will have to outdo these pampered hybrids with more effort than is needed here."

Casting aside praise of comeliness, she knew that Wirth had meant cunning and intelligence were to be tested. She responded with unshakable confidence in her work, confidence sometimes mistaken for arrogance.

"I'll outdo them in all but appearance, which to them is all, but to me the mere gloss of what lies beneath."

She laughed at this and playfully speculated that the purposefully magnificent orchids, somewhere deep within their effectually encoded cellular recesses, must have registered a faint cry of indignation.

XIII

Shortly after Rymon Grabb arrived on the southeast coast of Dagon at the black-cliffed fishing port of Phinn, a robot submarine transported him to the secluded domicile of a man involved high in the unofficial circles of the Dagon government, a man whom Grabb saw from time to time when clandestine matters of state would benefit from this devious veteran's services.

The face of Leise Amboze once seen left an indelible imprint on the mind. It was the elementally distorted visage of perpetual snarl. Even in laughter the narrow black eyes, permanently thrust down at the inside corners and capped with dense sable brows, glowed with a saturnine expulsion of joy, while the nearly lipless mouth gaped and grimaced with malice. Grabb was reminded of a hooked and fighting shark each time he looked upon that devious face.

Here was a man who had bound all of his considerable talent over to a malevolent will, allowing corruption to seep to the surface, infusing his physical presence with a look of cold treachery. In his early years Amboze had plundered the sea carelessly to amass his fortune. Marine laws, even those of Dagon, meant little to him -- what did matter was how close he could sail to a violation without forfeiting his speed. In return for his theft the sea had blasted his body, sloped his wide shoulders and frosted his black hair to a salty white mane that grew coarsely down the back of his

arched horse neck. Despite this weathering, his virulent black eyes were always alive with greed and its necessary components of subterfuge. Nothing with a degree of usefulness in his ever burgeoning enterprises escaped his surveillance. His foremost and favorite asset was a sleek and sophisticated fleet of fishing boats that, while in various clandestine maneuvers, incidentally reaped profits from the sea that helped to feed the planet.

To stay the government's strictures of his illegal activities, Amboze had taken to loaning his services, his men, and in early days even his own strong arm to certain of the government's more stealthy operations. These audacious adventures on the high seas and its ports of call brought him an infamous notoriety with his victims as well as his client. Even now, in his late and comparatively restrained social phase, Amboze was known to do to an adversary with brutally punishing hands what his henchmen were more often compelled to do for him. He nearly always spoke in a low honeyed voice, and any victim who escaped the flaying hands could easily become fatally mesmerized by a soft berceuse, a cunning lullaby that deceptively sang his subject's doom.

Like Grabb, Amboze was unflinching in his belief that the end justified the means, and thus the two men had long maintained a mutually advantageous relationship; the varied resourcefulness and far flung connections of the one bought the official might and protection of the other.

Amboze kept a submarine home five kilometers off the north end of the reefless deep blue Bay of Phinn, finding life more private and healthful on the sea floor at eleven fathoms. Here at Squidhole were docked the fast moving little computer-controlled subs that serviced his fishing fleet and ferried visitors like Grabb

from Phinn Harbor.

In the large, dimly lit observation deck at Squidhole, the two men were renewing their acquaintance while relaxing in pliable soothe-chairs. Objective-charged Rymon Grabb gazed with mild interest out a broad and tall triangular window at a lighted corridor of cavorting fish. He took a sip of his potent marine malt and snatched a tidbit from one of the baskets filled with crisp herring spawn kelp strips; nothing new to Grabb who had favored them since childhood.

Nearly everything at Squidhole was somehow connected with the teeming sea, including the many varieties of food developed at the Amboze processing companies.

"Fleet Shuttle VII detected one of Wyld's gold-plated subs north by northeast yesterday. Speeding to the Mainland with another glittering cargo no doubt. A Saver watchdog warned them of our tail, and their captain howled with protest. The louder they holler the more precious their cargo. They're a jittery lot, those Marchlanders."

"We see to that," Grabb said.

He leaned forward, eager to retain the subject and lead into the reason for this meeting.

"Leise, we want to investigate the reported visit of an apparent Wyld protégé at Seche, and we have need of one of your cargo ships doing business in Radia."

"I'm surprised. I can't believe that Wyld is foolish enough to fall in with the Immix."

"We're not sure just how he's involved but this woman, reputed to be a Mainland zoologist, was put in touch with Premier Xheeva at the Sonna conference and has subsequently shown up in

Seche. We can't seem to uncover any background on her, and she's never before appeared anywhere with Wyld. Something is going on and naturally we're curious."

"I see no reason why it can't be arranged. I'm going to Seche myself with a special shipment, but I'm a little too conspicuous to do you much good now. Some of my wily young rogues get around there pretty handily, however, and might be useful."

"Yes, well they might. We can't always trust the Immix radicals to do our bidding, and we have a hard time keeping our men under cover there."

Amboze had risen to investigate a dense school of herring wildly flashing in frenzied escape from the milky-green corridor. He was leaning on one leathery hand at the window when a giant hammerhead swept into the corridor with a few small blade-like sucking fish in tow. Amboze was immediately excited.

"It's not often we see hammerhead around here, Rymon. Look at this hungry threat. He hasn't much to fear. See how the remora cling to him. Possibly he's an omen."

"If I took stock in such things," Grabb said with a venomous smile, "I'd make this revolting beast the harbinger of the Marchland's dissolution."

"Just wishful thinking?"

"Autocrats are out of favor," Grabb answered evasively, but he wanted to say more.

"Nevertheless, he's hardly out of favor in the March. I don't believe he's an autocrat...more like a revered king, as some say, and not about to hand over anything," Amboze speculated, certain his dismayed opinion of Wyld was far more accurate than

the vain and fanciful Grabb's.

Although it had now disappeared from view, Amboze was obviously still in the shark's sway and continued to search the corridor, reluctant to turn back to Grabb.

"Wyld is as bad for Dagone morale as he is for our purchasing power." Grabb's voice had gone uneven with contempt. "If we could topple him, or weaken his influence, we would not need to claim any more power over Fedcartel than Wyld presently arrogates."

"Is such personalized power transferable and will the Premier stick his neck out so boldly?" Amboze asked, still without turning from the window.

"It's not a matter of boldness but of need," Grabb answered, refusing to endorse Wyld's power or affirm Umara's position.

"Need or greed?" Amboze said, throwing back his head with a deep rumble of laughter, a malevolent sound bursting loudly forth and continuing to erupt for several seconds.

Finally his voice was sly and soft again. "If I help you will I have one of Nik's beauties when I come to Sonna?"

"Hand-picked by me," Grabb said with a broad smile.

At last Amboze turned from the window, having given up on another glimpse of the hammerhead. There was something he wanted from Wyld too, but this time he could not ask for Grabb's help.

XIV

In the rich Gream Valley southwest of Mount Sorus, the week-long annual harvest celebration was drawing to a close. The

Marchlanders' agrarian success -- their expertly tended fields, healthy animals and lush orchards -- brought them such enduring satisfaction they embraced the festival as a lively expression of their great fortune. Manifested by a surfeit of banqueting, song, and dance, the joyful old celebration was an observance that officially brought to a close the season of the Red Moon.

For as long as anyone could remember, Wylds had visited their Gream Valley residence for the Red Moon Festival, and Wyld had duly taken up the position of honored mentor once again. It was a tradition Marchlanders happily anticipated and expected. When still a small boy, Wyld had watched his father preside with prideful enthusiasm over the same gratefully attentive assemblage.

He could see his father clearly before him in the room where he now sat, the gaunt, earnest face, sympathetic gray eyes, and patiently assuring voice advising him of the many responsibilities that would one day be his.

The elder Wyld was a fair and kind, if sometimes rather stern, man who gave tirelessly of himself -- steadfastly committed to the March while allotting time to certain philanthropic enterprises. Earning international respect for his equitable and straightforward dealings, he had also inspired the friendship and devotion of renowned foreign personages. Often they were among the guests who came and went in the more relaxed seasons at the Hall. These revered leaders and scholars gradually drew the keen young Wyld into their broad and lively conversations. Along with discerning intellects, Wyld's parents Rane and Theka had possessed an unstoppable optimism, but, most important of all, they had imparted a depth of irreplaceable wisdom.

The death of his father and mother while flying between

Mainland cities was a nightmarish memory that Wyld could still accommodate only in short flashes -- perhaps it had been sabotage, an unconfirmed speculation. He was twenty-five at the time and moving vigorously, irreversibly away from the most carefree period of his life. Already he was assuming many of his father's burdens, but he was still unable to comprehend the load his father had carried until it was dropped overnight onto his shoulders. The long periods of freedom, the insatiable intellectual pursuits, the flexing of his young muscles in trials and sporting divertissements across the planet were abruptly curtailed. He was pitched at once, but mercifully with Nev at his side, into the yawning dens of international consortiums, and his attention was honed to the absolute maximum at the council tables of the hard-beaked Fedcartel hawks, ruthless traders and financiers who watched and waited for even the smallest blunder that would allow them to swoop down and clean his bones. But his father's rigorous discipline and example served him well, and where he lacked experience he feinted and studied and countered with resolution.

Wounded by his great loss and often moody, he listened for his father's voice and strove for the same fairness, decisiveness, and even optimism. And if he had not yet learned in earlier days quite how to steel himself against loneliness and a sense of abandonment, no one begrudged him an occasional quiet withdrawal. Eventually the sympathetic and adoring Marchlanders found in the younger Wyld the strength of the elder, taking this and the son as their own.

The farmers, discounting some rare and unforeseen natural disaster that could ruin their crops, remained in good spirits long after the harvest, which seemed to grow more bountiful every year,

much of this owing to a steady stream of new agronomic techniques -- most of these were achieved in the Marchland's own laboratories. They invited Wyld into their comfortable homes and often requested that he settle small family disputes, matters that he good naturedly took in stride and adjudicated as fairly as he could. He was not a little surprised when early on he found that his fair-minded decisions, once made, were taken as law and could override the decisions of the community elders. Thereafter he grew more thoughtful and earnest at this task.

The comfortable but modest Wyld dwelling in the Gream Valley was used to reciprocate the farmers' hospitality, and kept Wyld and his nonresident guests pleasantly in touch with life in this busy farming community.

On this golden late afternoon most of the popular festivities were winding down. A peaceful calm had nearly returned to the lovely old stone village of Sheaves on the narrow and winding Suklia River.

Wyld sat at the mahogany ancestral desk, entering some coded packets of monetary business into a small chip-case. The information was of an inchoate economic system, very classified, and could not yet be trusted to even the most inaccessible computer. He slipped the small case into his desk drawer, locked it, and sat back in his chair.

The nearby window was open wide. He inhaled deeply the sweet dry smell rising from the blond stubble fields running along both sides of the river and stretching to the horizon. He smiled at the sound of his Gream Valley house master Jon, who was warbling at the top of his lungs, an old operatic cantata that rose and fell alongside the clatter of his polished kitchen. Through the

tall crimson and cream-tufted hollyhock spears swaying beyond the window, he could see the men working in the square. They were preparing bundles of cuttings for the final bonfire celebration. He listened to catch their jeering humor and laughter as they worked.

From beneath the window a tanned and freckled young face suddenly popped up. Two large and determined blue eyes stared straight at him. Then another blond head appeared, obviously cast from the same genetic mold. Wyld was nearly always accessible to Marchlanders, and because they knew this they were seldom inclined to invade his spare peaceful moments without good cause.

The sister and brother apologized shyly but explained that their need was urgent. Thus they were soon standing, with fidgeting courtesy, in Wyld's cool den.

The walls were a dark wine color with a few mounted stone artifacts and photographs of Wyld and his parents with old Gream Valley friends. One photograph was of a gangling, thin-faced, towheaded boy with amazingly clear eyes and a broad grin setting off ruddy tan cheeks. Standing in bright sun, his shirt sleeves carelessly rolled, he held up by the hook, just at shoulder level, a fine speckled trout of handsome proportion.

The young girl, whose face was sensitively cast but robust and tan from outdoor work, went straight to the photograph as soon as it was discovered. Her wide mouth broke into a dimpled smile, illuminating the charming and healthful look of proud Gream Valley farming stock.

"This is you, Jarl Wyld."

"Yes, at about your age."

"What a wonderful picture," she said, blushing at her own

exuberance.

"It was a wonderful time, and it doesn't seem so very long ago." He came to stand beside her before the cherished photograph, with his hands clasped behind his back.

The boy Caz Wyld was quite someone else now, many transitions later, but this boy in this photograph was someone who lived on in an endless summer, someone he knew intimately and admired and revisited from afar.

"At your age there's hardly a thing that cannot be resolved," he said, and in this way led into the as yet unknown problem at hand.

It was quite a simple problem, but insurmountable with the unyielding position their father had taken. He insisted upon sending the bright young daughter to the Mainland for an advanced education, but she wanted only to stay and help run the farm. The boy wanted to study on the Mainland, and his mother agreed, but the father would not hear of it. He had no excuse save the very old tradition in many Marchland families of producing well-educated daughters and hidebound farming sons.

"What are your names?" Wyld asked.

"I'm Luna and he's Terre. I guess it's obvious we're twins. Our father is Mailo Sealle."

"Of course, I should have seen the resemblance at once, a good man, a reasonable man."

Wyld glanced at the strapping boy whose eyes pleaded for consideration while his identical sister did most of the talking.

"And what is it that you wish to study?"

"Marine science. I want to work at SeaMarch."

"I see, and have you an aptitude for this profession?"

The Marchman

"Yes...I feel I have." The answer was quick and firm.

"Shall I come to your house or will Mailo come to me?"

The boy and girl looked at each other, trying hard to hold down a rush of relief and swelling joy.

"Oh, he'll come to you, if you say. Father thinks so very much of you...and he's really good to us except for this one thing," the girl Luna said.

"Yes," Wyld answered with amused voice, "and this *one thing* happens to be all."

He sent the two away, promising to persuade the father, and even promising the boy no monetary problems at all, if the first term of study showed aptitude. He assured them that they were equally important to the March. The two squeezed his hand in turn and with bright and reverent eyes departed.

Wyld sat smiling at the youthful earnestness of the Sealle twins and then at nothing in particular. After a while his head turned slowly and his eyes fell upon the young boy holding the trout. Once again he felt the quivering weight of it in his hand, the warm sun upon his face, the joy so careless in his heart as, behind the camera's eye, his smiling parents proudly looked on.

XV

Impatiently anticipating her morning departure for Kiva and unable to begin anything constructive, Chloë took up her newly possessed mandolin and fingered it. Dinner was over and for the moment there were no pressing demands. She decided to take the mandolin and walk to a place where the Ruddle widened to a quiet silver mirror of sky. Plucking the strings as she went, she stopped them with her palm, tuned the strings and started over.

The honey-varnished mandolin would not come to Kiva with her; nothing would come but her clothes. It was this self-possessed *killing pace*, as some called it, that had earned her the respect of her colleagues, although she coolly refused commendation -- if one could not do otherwise how was it commendable?

On a rocky bank near a pocket of deep water she sank down, strumming with bent head. Above her a yellow canopy of smoky-sweet cottonwoods rustled in the breeze. Their luminescence flamed from the evening shadows, as if the leaves themselves were generating their own light.

Ready to add her voice to the high strings she tossed her head, flinging the long braid to her back. A solemn loon's cry came off the river, railing nervously against the strings at the same moment that Mount Rubora sent another tremor up through the ground.

Wyld, having just flown in from his sojourn in the Gream Valley, had not gone in to dine; instead, his feet had brought him near Sunring at a pace restless as the evening's breezy vagaries of decamped summer. He stopped to listen, now and then imagining a different sound, then turned toward the river, hastening along its high path. The source of his keen hearing and present agitation was very soon discovered below, strumming and singing in the fading light.

Tomorrow she would be gone from his safeguard without departing the realm of Wyld at all. His thoughts sifted through a roiling mass of startling new information.

How is it that a distant star unwittingly blooms and swallows the midday sun? The will is a free entity, always in flux, always dancing at a crossroad, he told himself. He cursed softly as his feet drove

him over the rocks to the very crossroad he pondered. He did have a valid reason to be here, having learned something astounding from Nev.

Chloë's father had just flown back from the Gream with him, having visited Wyld expressly to unburden himself of a strange and fascinating story. Perhaps he had done so because of Chloë's imminent flight into a dangerous arena.

Wyld thought of the fragile tangling threads of Dagone, Immixia, and Fedcartel. He thought of the designing Fleet whom he courted with such expedience, yet not without a certain fondness. Would his feet ever alight on a simple well-marked path? How rewardingly uncomplicated to be lying forgetfully in Ursa's comforting arms, playing gentle love games. But here he was, perilously far afield, yet where he had been willingly drawn. Who was this woman Chloë, whom he had sworn he knew so intimately, but from such a distance? Now, with Nev's startling revelation, mystery was piled upon mystery. Her courage and rare beauty were like a flame and he the moth.

He saw through the ruffling cottonwoods how she cradled the mandolin in her arms. When she paused he came near and gently took it away.

"Is my playing so poorly done you've come this far to remove the offending instrument?"

Even in the fading light, her amused eyes shone clear and bright as the sun-greened shore waters of Arrowmoon. It occurred to him that she knew things about him she had known for a very long time. Far more disturbing, since her return she had come to know some of the carefully guarded things intentionally withheld from others.

The Marchman

He held up the mandolin to scrutinize its patina.

"An old one."

"A gift long buried in Immixia."

His eyebrows raised a trifle. "Beware of foreign gifts." He looked earnestly into her eyes as he returned the instrument.

They stood without speaking, now straining to see each other in a cloaking dimness that had arrived all at once.

The ground shook under their feet. Chloë laughed. He could feel the laughter as he felt the quaking ground.

"Mount Rubora's threat only amuses you."

"That volcano is my truest critic," she answered.

"Are you happy to be going?"

"Happy? I'm relieved...more like pulling out a thorn. Very relieved."

Once he had called her a thorn, then an erstwhile thorn. And now again a constant needling pain.

They climbed up to the path and watched the glowing corona over Mount Rubora.

"I was just circling the volcano, but it will really be spectacular now in darkness...your fiery critic. Will you come have a look with me?"

She hesitated.

"It's frothing at the mouth. Smoky fumaroles. Fiery tongue lashings. Heady stuff. Perhaps a fitting good-bye," he urged.

She laughed a little. "I'm a child of that mountain," she acquiesced with a warming voice.

They walked back to the airfield and boarded a small Wyld Violet.

Almost immediately she regretted her decision and sensed something foreboding in the close air of the ship. She felt an inexplicably rapt grief, unable to turn away from his generations-of-Wyld carved face; limned against the glowing dials as he admitted his one-sided affair with the inconstant fire pit below. She understood very well Mount Rubora's irresistible molten charm, but for a brief moment she despised the vomiting slag heap beneath this suddenly fearful incarceration -- the mountain was also deceitful, had deceived her now. Slowly the foreboding dissipated, as she felt herself drawn to the volcano like a helpless lover.

Occasionally he would look away from the thrilling red core or the indicators holding their delicate pairing in suspension. He would look, piercing her to distraction with unembarrassed intensity, then soothing her with innocuous words of his volcano idolatry. Eventually the caressing voice remained, but the words had changed with a subtle artistry, trading the mountain's heat for her coolness.

He could barely endure her unyielding proximity in the eerie light. It tinted her closed face the hue of the unreachable drowned, leaving the cauterizing eyes in yet another alien opacity, black pupils in red volcano glow. Then he witnessed a quick smile of wonder, given to the mountain's shooting flare with the fresh openness of a brief alpine flower. He made rapid use of it.

"Lately...my thoughts are frequently interrupted by a feeling...no, the *certainty*," he took a deep breath, "that you are somehow fixed in my life."

He saw her wince.

"I'm sorry. I think of you. I think of my cruelty and how it was meant...and what you don't understand about it."

"I've forgiven...asked forgiveness," she implored in a near whisper, explaining more audibly but with a careful politeness, "It's late, Jarl Wyld, I have to return."

Her voice sounded foolish to her, dry and dull and severed from meaning, like ground-thrashing wings with nothing left but reflex. She could never have prepared for what was revealed, and no man would ever speak to her with such lyrical truth as that which soon followed.

"You want to pretend that you haven't heard me? You, with all of your courage? You, who so willfully expose yourself to death? You, who serenade wild animals? I tracked you with animal's blood and anger." He put his head back with a grimace. "Now you won't go away. I marvel at what you can ignore. We did want each other at Arrowmoon. I thought I could fix that...but I did not fix myself. You interrupt my business, pass through walls and skull without any awareness of it."

He laughed, an intended antidote for her stricken face, laughter as mild accusation of self-deception. The sound made an unbearable rending in her prized and ordered Marchland tapestry.

"There's no blame," he said, "not for what's happened, but perhaps for the way we deal with it."

He heard her gasp or sigh or sob or choke, or imagined some disintegrating sound arising from threatened order. Watching a molten artery burst and spew off Mount Rubora, he silently added it to his unburdening narrative, as though the torn artery were his own.

"I'm immunized against reason by what you've not seen fit to see...with all your fine clairvoyance. The combative insolence of you. You know behind this amazing screen," he touched her

flinching forehead with the back of his hand, "what is happening here...what you feel."

After Nev's incredible revelation he could hardly think of her in any one way anymore, if he ever had. He might not know all of the parts but it was the sum total that he wanted, the idea and the flesh and the mercurial, luminous intelligence. Her head back, her eyes closed, her self gone away -- the quietus of Chloë -- yet no less inescapable, this metaphorical mystery. At last a manifest sign of life: sad rivulets varnishing the death mask.

"I hope those are tears of compassion. Songbird for a grizzled forest animal, save a little tune for me. Squeeze a few tears over my wounds."

He brushed her cheek, touching his fingers to his tongue. Salty brine from his nemesis.

Flying on in a dark timeless capsule, he sat beside a silent form, contracted and closed, without seeing eyes or sentient flesh, cool and damp as freshly dug up stone.

"Here we are, Chloë."

The suspended captive awakened and flew out onto the landing pad, free at last and at once preparing her escape, gladly breathing natural air. *Salty air!*

"But this is Metiah's Bay!" she cried, looking around her in astonishment.

"That would have resolved nothing. Come."

He took her tight fist inside his hand and drew her along beside him in the dark air, down the softly glowing subterranean-lit path. A recalcitrant, wary creature who needed to be coaxed up onto Shellreef's dimly lit veranda, where they stood a fraction closer to the stars.

"Jarl Wyld, let me go home." Her voice was a woeful misery no other could have withstood.

"No." His voice was emphatic. "Not yet."

"Stop this please. I don't know how to do this."

"Yes, I understand...but you *do*. You know everything important, everything I want to hear you say, everything you need to say."

"Don't do this...I can't. I'm who I am because..."

She was coming apart at last, her pitiful voice pleading, disconnected but not to be spared, to be broken down until the place with the unnamed part was identified, then put back together wholly named.

"What? Nothing will happen...or change. Tell me."

She let go of his hand and put her shaking hands together in that curious self-annealing way of hers, palm pressed to palm, fingers of each hand curving away from the other. At last she lifted her head, looking straight into the frank eyes that let her search there, then out into the darkness where a phosphorous whitecap hissed.

"You know," she whispered slowly.

He watched the realization wash over her like a soothing warm sea, leaving resignation where dread had been.

"Nev told me, but *you* tell me," he demanded.

Waiting while she stood as though listening for something, he leaned forward to hear her low voice.

"I suppose it doesn't matter now. A long time ago the experimenter was the experiment. I remember the day so clearly, the day Nev took me for a walk along the Ruddle, an exquisitely bright autumn day. What fitful starts he made, and how I pitied

him. Pity...it does not always cancel sunlight. He stood in the beautiful day saying something like...because of my Immix mother - - the words were strange indeed -- I might not live long. I know he was right, even as it turned out. I knew then, but when you're fourteen...I was fourteen, and he didn't want to, but he was afraid to let me go on without knowing, taking chances... When you're fourteen and you've recently discovered..." She stopped, looking above, reaching for an answer as though the cold bright stars would bend and whisper the word: "Spring. Yes, I think I was in love with every living thing until that moment; perhaps even the young and remote Jarl Wyld." She looked at him. "I mean...I believed...I thought I could be you, even *you*. Everything was mine and possible. Nev has never forgiven himself for that day."

Her head slumped. Wyld made a move toward her but she held up her hand. "I can't cry over this now. It's all over, long over."

"I'll do it for you."

She looked closely and saw that his long clear eyes were unnaturally bright.

"Oh," she lifted her hand barely touching his sleeve, "why didn't you let me go without this?"

"I tried. I did try but it was impossible. It's good for you, isn't it? A little more freedom."

"Good for me? I have so much work to do...here I am doing what I never do...this miserable wailing--"

"Wailing is good. Too much control is just another form of enslavement. You've had the brains and fortitude to be your own redeemer." He shook his head, reproving her constraining self-control. "You triumphant half-breed love child. What a lot you've

saved. Haven't you?" he demanded. "Tell me you have."

"Yes, but... Oh, never mind. Yes."

"Then what?"

"I never told anyone. I was ashamed. There was a time when all I could see were approximations of death...getting ready for it." She gave a dry laugh. "The one thing you can't do. The others will be spared this." Her voice held an iron conviction. "That's what I'm good for now, all I'm good for. Not this...not this." She rubbed the back of her fist across her face. "I never intended this."

"Neither did I...but it isn't something you decide. Why did you cry in the ship when you won't cry now?"

"I wasn't crying for myself. I felt deep sorrow. I was crying for..."

"Me?" He put his hands around her neck, his long thumbs pressing her throat. "You've made a hard shell, but deep inside is a soft little animal, as green as the very spring you think you were denied. Who has seen the first spring, anyway? Isn't spring rebirth? Is this spring?" His mouth brought the question to hers harshly, then tenderly. "What is it in you, what in me? Is this spring? Is this? Chloë, I--"

Suddenly Shellreef's great seaward door was thrust open and they were bathed in a wide yellow strip of light.

"Casimir!" Ursa cried, stepping from within. "What has happened?"

"Ursa! What in black suns are you doing here?"

"I wanted to be alone to think while you were gone. Great Mother sent me here with Fox. Oh, Casimir..."

He looked sadly at Chloë, his green-eyed mystery, his

strange forest bird, his so many, many things, receding like the tide, fading in a ghostly chalcedony fog, leaving behind only an exquisite little broken shell.

Chloë rushed to the tall perplexed Ursa, threw her arms around her and kissed her impulsively on the cheek.

A kiss of betrayal, he wondered, or atonement for him, or for him through Ursa the undelivered prize of self? He waited with aching loins, looking at Ursa, magnificent in her chagrin, and was moved to laugh at them all, putting back his head with a great ironic sadness, laughing and wishing for more relief than humor could then achieve.

"I'll find Fox," Chloë said, then remembering her identity said no more.

"But he isn't here," Ursa said. "Casimir, are you going or staying?"

"Going." He gave no explanation.

"Will you return?"

"If you want me to."

"I didn't expect you..."

"Then call me later if you need me. We'll talk.

"I'll take you back," his solemn voice assured Chloë.

She turned quickly and began to sprint into the darkness toward the ship. How swift she was, flying out along the curved trajectory of lighted path, the sub-lit path glowing around her like fox fire in the thick night.

He caught up with her easily where the path divided a high salal brake, reaching out for her swinging arm and pulling her around to him, holding her still so that her pumping heart crashed against him like a strung animal.

"Just...just so you know." He was gasping, wrestling and kneeling with her on the ground, gently rocking her to the small sound of protest in her throat. He felt her arms slowly tighten over his back, felt her mouth opening against his, drinking all the marrow from his bones.

"How can I help myself? Can you tell me how...why?" he muttered, drawing her down upon the black-shadowed grass.

"Spring, you said." Her words were smothered. "Spring, you told me--" she tried again. "Spring, you--"

"Defender of Chloë against herself," he finished for her. The words ended there, euphoria in the ascendant, all too soon followed by the pain of relinquished possession.

They struggled to stand up, he catching her stumbling body. Then without speaking or touching more, they walked to the ship.

Wyld flew Chloë to Kiva, relinquishing a generous slice of his carefully ordered time. His men were aft. He wanted her alone. Now she was firmly set on the course of her old dream, fiercely independent, excited and somewhat playful, disturbingly, tangibly familiar to him, but no less unknown or mysterious.

"I could fly this ship -- with just a little practice. I've done before."

"It flies itself...but do it now." He decommissioned his screen and walked away.

"Jarl Wyld?" she called out, but there was no answer. He had gone into the lavatory.

She concentrated, studying the panel and setting her agile fingers to work. He returned quietly and stood behind her, smiling

as she cursed and bit her lip, nodding his head in agreement when she did something perfectly logical. In a few more seconds she had manually verified accurate computer programming, reset the course, and activated flight control readout. Sighing, she stretched out her legs and threw back her arms, emitting soft laughter.

"When did you acquire this little knowledge?" he asked, slipping into his seat.

"It was part of my Frontier training a long, long time ago. The only thing that bothers me while flying is a bit of claustrophobia, but only when I'm a passenger. I have it under control...mostly. Don't tell anyone."

"Who would I tell? What else can you do?"

"A great many useless things and...*think*. Yes, luckily I can think."

He swung his seat around and looked into her eyes with a steady knife-like gaze that caused her to fight a wild nervousness.

"Why do you look at me like this?"

"Hunger. I want to know you...*know* you. Everything you do is magic. You understand?"

"Jarl Wyld--"

"Stop that please."

"I can't it seems."

"A double star with one center of gravity is called by one name. Isn't that us going round and round? We could call us...indivisible."

"Please, you're playing dangerously. Ursa--"

"Ah, Ursa. Yes, Ursa, a beautiful strapping woman, a little spoiled but so inculpable. Everyone adores her. I do, of course. Even Fox does."

"Fox?"

"Yes, Fox. He doesn't quite know that he's in love."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"I expect it."

"You're generous."

He had not seen enough of this new laughing face. The exotic skin seemed concocted of purest cream petals turning on a summer morning. He wanted the laughter to go on but knew that his words would stop it.

"I could not be generous with *you* at all...if I were selfish enough to have you."

She frowned, unwilling to accept the insinuation.

"What I wanted to say is that Ursa seems exactly right for you."

"So it seems. Is that really what you wanted to say?"

"It doesn't matter."

The Wyld she was coming to know always sought to ruffle the smooth surface of things with rough truth. She had to turn away from him, her mouth about to ravage her fingers.

His arm came around her and pulled her hand down, holding it on her lap. "Don't, poor wretch. It's a bad habit...self-destructive. Don't hurt yourself. Don't be a dilemma. But you will, won't you? You *are*."

"Jarl Wyld--"

"Again? When you call me that with such deferring conceit you might as well spit on me, Churlwraith." His eyes flashed like sun on metal.

"I meant only respect. Jarl Wylds are emblazoned across my cerebral cortex forever."

The Marchman

"Good, if I'm one of them. But I'm the only Casimir. My mother was tired of hand-me-down names."

"Casimir, a beautiful name to say, a very ornate name, but it belongs to a private man whom I don't know. I don't know you." She looked sadly into his impatient eyes.

"I know only a man from a legend I prize, whom I once met in a forest. He might have killed me with only his eyes, or perhaps, according to old custom, put me adrift at sea in a little boat, let the sun rot my flesh and the Mako tear my bones clean. And all for shooting his forest beast with medicine and inquiring after his poisoned dog."

He recoiled as he listened.

"They are your animals too. You are very rough on me.

"How did you know Laelaps was poisoned?" His voice was deceptively smooth. "I don't remember telling you that."

"I thought you did. I don't know." She then realized it was not Fox or Nev who had told her. "I suppose it was instinct."

"Will you poison me, sorceress?"

The color left her cheeks and her eyes grew sad again. He pretended not to notice.

"Anyway, I rejoice at the way you say my given name. You, *scientist*, call me something endearing, a fitting punishment for letting you abandon me. I am sad."

"You'll soon recover."

"No," he insisted, watching her turn away. "Please have the courtesy to look at me. I said it at some cost."

She glanced at him then closed her eyes to escape.

"Fox used to brag about your leftover women."

In the hard silence that followed she opened her eyes and

saw that his lips were set in grim disappointment.

"Forgive my reckless tongue. I'll call you what I called you to myself when we met in the forest: *Xhiema*."

"An Immix word," he mused. "It means crocodile, not very endearing."

"I was angry...but...curiously enough, it is also a private love word." Her eyes blinked in surprise, startled at the implication of her teasing explanation.

He felt his hands and feet begin to sting, and then a flame of insatiable hunger spread from his loins out to the tips of fingers, which had started to reach for her. He rubbed his thighs and saw that she was blushing deeply, exquisitely.

"How did you manage to keep what you are?" he asked, running his fingers lightly over her flushed cheek.

She shook her head in angry frustration. "I don't know what I am...other than a scientist. Lately, I'm unable to keep anything."

"Can I have such an adverse effect on you?"

"*You*...have an astonishing effect."

He paused then decided to ask, "Were you...close to the Immix scientist?"

He watched gravity spread over her face as her thoughts closed away from him. With his governing abruptness he had brought them back to the blue reality of sky and curving planet...involuntarily back to death.

"You want to know if I--"

"No, I do not! I don't want your answer." His voice was apologetic. "How we play here," he observed, without disjoining himself from the entanglement he had invited.

"Do you favor the Immix?" His tone had purposely changed, taunting, and perhaps even contemptible.

Her body had instantly tensed. "Do I? Can you see it? If you can why didn't you know before? I'm a Marchlander to the center of my bones, a defender who would not wish to pit country against country. Now you doubt my loyalty."

And thus she sought to remind him that he was foremost a leader, and of the loyalty of those he led. He took no offense at her impudence, but stood up and knelt beside her.

"I think I'm only trying various ways to reach honesty, to get there and stay there." His voice had softened.

He pulled her down against him with a rough hunger, strong fingers holding the back of her head, loosening the pale coiled braid.

"Now there is nothing between us but our permeable impermanent skins. No paranoia, nothing but desire and hope." He ran his mouth over the silky braid.

She struggled against him. He let her go at once.

"You are...complicated. I--"

"No more so than you," he swiftly replied.

"You play with my feelings as though casually tuning an instrument. You, Ursa, your friends, play tantalizing mind games, I'm sure. I have spent my years pondering computer screenings, buried in thousands of microscopic layers--"

"How I wish you had spent a part of them with me, that all was settled and done, that we had lain together this morning in a happy well-deserved bed."

"Don't! No, please," she implored. But nothing she could say would dissuade him from the satisfaction of his honesty. Such

honesty could sometimes break stone.

"You misjudge me, Chloë. I have no time for the games you imagine. But certain games are daily invented for me, games that waste precious time."

"Not by me," she answered.

"Prepare for landing," the computer said, and startled them both.

Her face remained drawn, but she lifted her head and looked at him with guileless eyes. "A Churlwraith and a Wyld," she mused, shaking her amazed head with a faint smile. She had begun to understand what Wirth meant.

"Do you propose bondage?" he asked, hating the way she demeaned herself with awkward history and inane propriety.

"There is a line not to be crossed," she asserted.

"Where is it written? Self-pity doesn't make it, not for you. *Not for you!*"

"No! No, it isn't self-pity," she insisted.

It came to him then that, since she had wrested from him her permission to work with the Immix, there was nothing else she needed or wanted from him; but this total lack of want only augmented his desire to have her fixed in his life, forever needful of that permanent state.

"Ask me for something worthwhile," he said, suddenly tired of this wrangle.

"Let Wirth come to Kiva." Her voice was too quick.

His eyes narrowed, hyacinthine fjords in granite. He stood up as the ship settled, running his hands over unruly waves of dark blond hair with agitated fingers.

"I never asked him to leave you." He stood at a port

window, rubbing his eyes. "On the contrary, I asked him to guard you with his life. He chose to abstain."

Outside, the day held such brutally intense light that it stung deeply in his eyes.

"Wirth is perhaps callow in small ways, but so bright and loyal and trusting. Somehow I've hurt him."

"Wirth is a veteran Surt Dueler. He knows the ways of humans, the value of strength."

"He's strong, yes, but he bends like spring growth."

"I see. Then someone must guard him from you."

The steward came with her luggage and she followed quickly, averting her face.

"I won't go out with the men," Wyld said to her back. "Better Immixia does not know I'm here. Better for you. Tomorrow I have business on the Mainland."

She turned around respectfully to listen, and thought that he spoke with a briefly unmasked weariness.

"But first, other demands that require some genuine courtesy and finesse, qualities I seem to have misplaced," he went on, knowing that in her perceptiveness she would understand he was obliquely referring to Ursa.

"I'll try to see what can be done about Wirth for you."

"No, let it be," she reversed herself. "He's made up his mind. I've no right to ask."

She came to him and coolly put out her hand to shake. For an instant, anger at her stubbornly persistent formality made him want to shake her. Instead, he brought the proffered hand to his lips, but her aloof body nervously recoiled.

"You speak of games. Are you playing a game now?" he

asked, holding her taut hand. "Who is playing games?"

Her liquid eyes blazed. "A great deal has happened."

"Yes, it has. All this midnight wrangling, some intentional, and a glimmer of hard sun. Now we're parting without promises. But we cannot pretend nothing has changed us, overtaken us. How will it end? What does your uncanny clairvoyance tell you about this...condition?" He managed to smile with a gentle derisiveness that made her smile too. Persistent skill at overview, even at the most personally trying moments, again made him larger than life.

"I'm not very good at this." She was most ill at ease, trying to stay focused on her goal while holding back a new and diverging emotion utterly confusing to her. "I'm sorry that I--"

"I don't like it when you apologize...for anything." There was a quick irritation in his voice. He made a move toward her then stopped, struggling with the same dilemma that assailed her. Strong emotion ruled and he pulled her abruptly against him, rubbing his cheek over the top of her head. A few strands of her hair clung to his face.

"Time...*time!* I want to talk to you, listen to your voice, learn your ways...such a luxury."

For an instant he saw a credulous smile like that of a peacefully dreaming child cross her face. Her eyes were closed and she had mercifully let her head remain against his shoulder.

"Here," he said, with the hardened voice of the Jarl on his tongue. He clasped her wrist in his long fingers.

She felt something cool slipping over her hand: a finely engraved solid gold RM, designed by his master artisan Sykes to look and function deceptively like nothing more than a watch.

The Marchman

He encoded her voice and showed her how to send and receive satellite voice messages scrambled en route. "Not a useless bauble this. It is waterproof. Please do not remove it. Now we are linked by instant intrusion. What could be more annoying...or binding?"

She did not like to wear anything near her hands when she worked, but promised never to remove it and thanked him, using his given name. She inclined to him, again with more ambivalence, as he bent over her with the reward of his name on her lips. Overcome, she struggled to look away.

As she turned to go, he was confounded to find his hand reflexively reaching out to grip her shoulder, his tentative voice adding something more.

"Suppose I dream dreams without your consent...maybe even without mine?"

There was a crushing sadness in her eyes but a fleeting answer of emotion that jolted his heart. He realized that her censure of him was gone. At that moment he experienced an urgent impulse to carry her swiftly away from Immixia.

"I'll try to be worthy of the Jarl's dreams...or...or wishes," she vowed with gentle voice and a rewarding smile. She lifted his hand from her shoulder and held it a moment against her cheek, her own hand trembling.

His throat tightened in silence as he let her go, staring at the backs of her boots, remembering her slender ankles floating above elegant black evening shoes as she danced out of his reach at Sonna. He envisioned her deftly intimate hands fussing with microforms. He could still taste her, inhale the scent of her: the sensual sting of bittersweet fresh cress on her mouth, her haunting

scent drifting through the cabin, the delicate spice of small Arrowmoon waxflowers.

Cursing, he sank briefly into a bereft and hollow malaise. Then the video screen intoned a code, and he turned to it with unusual gladness. Yet, as he glanced absently at the flashing memo of a schedule already well known to him, he recalled the story Nev had imparted of her secret past.

A little more than three decades ago Nev Churlwraith had been in the Immix Capital of Seche. Sent there by Rane Wyld, he was doing Marchland business when he was invited down to a chief vicegerent's villa in the blinding white village of Islifor, on the heat-blasted southeast coast. It had been a mild and rainy winter day in Seche, and Nev, walking forlornly on the banks of the swollen River Mwayla, saw only sorrow in the roiling water's black wash.

His young wife was perishing in a sumptuously disguised Mainland Death House. Daily she slipped a little further away under the ravages of a highly toxic substance that had accidentally contaminated her body during one of her daring visits to Belligerents.

The Belligerents were a colony of mutant and defective people who had banded together in a contaminated planetary danger zone and refused to leave. But no authoritative body had ever tried very hard to get the Belligerents out of the village they had commandeered. There were vast regions of the planet consigned to similar lethally toxic and sometimes radioactive slag heaps. Widespread international fear left these irretrievable lands to their contaminated inhabitants.

There were many things that the Belligerents required while they struggled to live, and Nev's wife was continually instrumental

in providing for their needs. When one of her shipments of food was withheld because the air transport refused to fly into such a deadly toxic zone, she personally interceded, accompanying the food and supervising extensive offloading. Her well paid pilot escaped without incident, but she was fatally contaminated. While publicizing food distribution she had innocently ventured too far into a restricted area, a hazard zone that even the Belligerents considered off limits.

The Mainland clinic had warned her that her condition was irreversible, and she had bravely accepted quarantine until death, surrounded by her data bank of visual memories, her music, and a garden of her favorite Marchland flowers. Whenever this scene flashed before Nev, he was jolted by a consuming desire to fly to her and share her fate. She had ordered him to stay away, and Rane was keeping him busily occupied for just that reason.

Nev had spent the grimly drizzling afternoon firmly but gracefully pressuring the Immix to act on a delinquent trade agreement. Gradually the idea of the harsh, bone-piercing sun at Islifor pervaded his senses. He had begun to find everything he did absurd. On an impulse he sent his aides home and departed for the southeastern coast.

In the frond-whipped white oasis of Islifor, buildings were tumbled out in angular crystal-like forms on a bleached shelf above flat whistling sands. The tall date palms in hidden interior gardens writhed above burnt-orange roofs in a relentlessly thrashing mistral.

Inside the vicegerent's hexagonal villa, at a dinner table gleaming with crystal points of light and swimming platters of bright fruits and vegetables, he encountered his host's green-eyed daughter, Rimly Zyelyta.

There were no longer royal titles in Immixia, but Rimly was lovingly called Little Princess by her family and in private. Her mother was a princess and descended directly from the fey and impassioned old royal line of Xmucura ri Zyelyta, the name that Rimly retained.

She was clearly a favorite with the guests, all elderly people, who fluttered and bobbed with delight at her amusing observations. But the ring of her extravagant laughter through the dinner hall startled Nev. In his mournful state even to listen to such a mirthful sound seemed irreverent. Leaving his amber dessert wine untouched in its tall crystal vial, he excused himself as politely as he could, explaining a sudden need to lie down.

He was sweating profusely as he passed through a long open corridor lined with cages of shrill-voiced birds, and swept by the hot drying wind. In his room, filled with still, artificially chilled air, he lay with thumping temples, wishing he were back in the naturally cool Skeel Valley. To be sequestered there in loneliness now seemed preferable to the refrigerated rooms of this blast furnace. A terrifying image of Princess Zyelyta's glistening white teeth flashing over a pile of purplish mangoes kept drifting through his mind. In a while he heard a knock and gave a rasping answer as the door opened.

"You were failing as you left the hall," the Princess said. She was smiling as though his condition were only a small joke. "I see you Marchlanders have no stomach for the sun's storehouse at Islifor."

She handed him a glass filled with a deep rose liquid surrounding lumps of ice. It tasted bittersweet.

Through the louvers shading the window, he glimpsed

shadows and sun dancing together over the broad leaves of a dense enclosed garden. The large amethyst ring on her ivory hand winked as it captured a thin stripe of dancing sun.

He started to get up.

"No, lie back. Soon you will enjoy everything. It is all in the way you see. I see much in my small world."

She began stroking his head slowly with an airy touch. "But I have never seen such red hair." She gathered up the curls in her fist as he lay watching her in the strange filtered light, both amazed and soothed by her touch.

"What was that I drank," he asked a little sheepishly and in a faltering voice, for now the half-shadowed room full of reed chairs and golden-woven counters and chests was glowing orange without a discernible source.

"Perhaps it was a love potion," she teased with high hurting laughter.

She turned away from him, from what he supposed looked to her like indifference. He thought she would surely leave him -- his aloneness now an unbearable horror. That fearful thought made him reach for her arm and pull her down beside him, despair consuming propriety. There was not a hint of fear in her eyes, only longing. Awestruck, he kissed her.

"Forgive me," he whispered hoarsely.

"Why need I forgive? I would rather thank you. Your eyes are sad but a lovely sort of green, like mine," she observed, studying his face closely.

He saw that she was very young and sweetly bold, with a trace of petulance about her plump lips. Her hair curled intangibly around her oval face, hair airy as wisps of white cloud. The ache in

his head had become a distant painless beat. He longed to immerse himself in this pale untainted flesh and fragile bone. The inveigling wet mouth had tasted of something sweet, tart, perhaps the dinner melon's nectar.

Her delicate hands unbuttoned the collar of his tunic and stroked his neck with cool, palliative fingers.

In a flash of recognition he caught an ancient light of deliverance burning in her limpid eyes, green and wild and eager to encompass as the most incipient jungle. The sudden enormity of his craving was like that of an airless diver bursting upon the surface of the sea; it overrode all the previous dark days and every shred of remorse.

"I've drunk something," he muttered in a last feeble attempt to right himself.

"I have given you nothing but the juice of ripe persimmons," she assured him with careless abandon.

But the soft-fleshed bloom of this untrimmed young vision had already induced a narcotic state so like an erotic dream he no longer sought the truth.

She stroked his hair and whispered, "I'm lonely too. I'm tired of talking to fossils and caged birds."

He gathered her to him, laughing and rolling over and over on the pillows with a hazy joyous moisture in his dazed eyes. Solace beyond solace, mutual rescue, then addiction.

And thus their liaison began. He liked to imagine that she had chosen him for some salient attribute not of his own making, one that had dazzled her -- perhaps it was his crimson hair -- instead of a more likely reason: inchoate lust springing from a point in time when need must reach out and take what is near. Later,

when he considered their meeting, he little cared what the catalyst had been. Her devotion intensified to an all-consuming greediness for his total response, and he gave everything he could wrench from his troubled soul.

He still had to draw breath with the constant vision of a beloved wife whom, by sheer will, he had already released from life to mitigate the horror of her approaching death. Imprisoned in a limbo of ecstasy and dread, he allowed the Little Princess to become his drug. Nothing was bright or possible without her, and with her he managed to exist in an endlessly erotic present.

Princess Zyelyta obtained a flat in Seche by bribing a rapacious property agent, decorated it, she announced, for the art of pleasure, and trained her beloved's thoughts to the crossing of its threshold. And the crossings were many and frequent, for Nev undertook to handle all business with Immixia personally.

One day news came to Sunring that Nev's wife had called for him, and he went to her immediately. She was ready to end the pain that had become unbearable, end it mercifully without the useless stupor of drugs. While he was away, Princess Zyelyta's father discovered her to be with child. She refused to divulge the name of her beloved impregnator but, in her anger at her enraged father, blurted out that the child would be a half-breed. She had been thoroughly naïve. Unable to comprehend the enormity of her act in her family's eyes, she thought her revelation only a slight punishment for her father's anger. She was cruelly rushed to the Mainland and locked away until the time of Chloë's birth, whereupon the baby was left behind. Princess Zyelyta was then forced to marry an ambitious young diplomat of her father's choosing. She might have rebelled, but in her guilt-ridden lonely

grief she had lost the will to fight.

Whether Chloë was given new parents or left in a Child House -- where the scarcity of babies made them objects of devotion -- and how Nev found her was not revealed to Wyld. Somehow Princess Zyelyta had gotten word to Nev. Because his wife had died in a distant and solitary place, he easily embellished her death with the birth of a child. No one ever disputed this unrealistic claim. Alba saw to that.

Nev was never able to see the Princess again, for to present himself in any unofficial way would have cast aspersions on both Princess Zyelyta and his homeland. Much later, when Chloë reached womanhood, he told her that he suspected the Princess was dead, although he had never used any of the vast resources under his purview to investigate. He did not want to know, although he preferred to think of her as alive in some paradise of her own making, laughing at the utter strangeness of the world as she had so often done in his arms. Still, for him, Rimly Zyelyta remained a tenderly arousing memory too fragile for the harshness of reality.

With his two women gone, Nev stoically began to prepare himself for the loss of his third, the pale willow-eyed child of his abandon, herself often as much a mystery to him as her mother had been.

At twelve, Chloë still believed that she and Fox shared the same mother, a mother of whom she was deeply proud and whose exemplary life greatly influenced her conduct. Inured in self-sufficiency by the loss of her supposed mother, and her free-roaming kinship with nature, she soon asked to be separated from her tutor, who had declared her a prodigy. She wished to prepare

for a career in zoology, studying on the Mainland. Then, at fourteen while home on vacation, Nev discovered her to be a fiercely independent young woman. She laughed at her blooming womanhood and swore that she was as capable of successful achievement as any touted peer. Fearing she would unwittingly do something to dangerously impair her uncertain future, Nev decided the time had come for the dreaded revelation of her lethal birth. Afterward, she gave no hint of bitterness but quietly and willfully changed her field of study. In the ensuing years, both on the Mainland and in far-flung research satellite stations, she distinguished herself by a number of laboriously won biological coups, toiling on until her recent triumph -- she had remained inconspicuous in her highly classified work. Nev still anxiously questioned her assertion of health, imagining that the force driving her would hasten her death.

As Wyld pondered Nev's story, delivered in slow and labored yet astonishingly detailed and candid narrative, he thought how diligently Nev had carried out his work without ever a sign of his personal agony. Perhaps he would have been as stoic as Nev in the face of such misfortune, but not without a very grave effect.

Now his attention shifted to an impersonal struggle of international proportion as his schedule for the following week continued to flash on the screen. Halfway down he read: DAY IV: 10:00 HOURS TO CLOSE, FED MEET; V:10:00 HOURS TO CLOSE, FED MEET; VI: 10:00 HOURS TO ADJOURN, FED MEET.

The upcoming Fedcartel meetings were going to be a shake-up and he the unfortunate shaker. Certain members of Fedcartel were pushing for a broader credit system, a measure

especially favored in High Council by the Immix but also by the Dagonites, who sat only on the subordinate council and had, as yet, no part in the making of strategic policy at Fedcartel. Nev was in complete agreement that the new credit system advocated would only encourage further hoarding of gold, a rapidly growing trend already creating a dangerous inequity that threatened to destabilize the entire market.

Dagone, one of the planet's largest seafood processors, was blatantly warning that a sharp rise in food prices and a cutback in food processing would occur unless the new credit policy was adopted. Wylld openly called this extortion and insisted that Dagone was fooling no one in its attempt to force a seat on High Council as a conciliatory payoff.

The Dagonites did indeed have leverage with the international power brokers. Their gradual refining of seafood harvesting and processing techniques had produced palatable and nourishing foodstuffs and vital organic fertilizers. Along the way they had carefully built up a planetary demand for their various products, which was now irreversible without serious economic repercussions. None of the seasoned members of Fedcartel would readily forget the age of food scarcity their forebears had fought so hard to eradicate, this by a draining expenditure of research. Until they had mastered the science of continuous harvest in uniform climates, and developed methods of food synthesis to replace the food chain links that had been depleted or destroyed, things had looked very bleak for the masses.

Food shortage was an ever-present concern, and the Dagonites had a sizable corner on a huge and ravenous market. For Dagone the seat on High Council was an imminent reality that

would have occurred long ago had not their duplicity and disregard for ethical procedures brought the disapproval of conservative members of the Council.

Along with this inevitable acquisition of a seat, Wyld knew that the Dagonites would acquire vast privileges that included larger gold stores and greater planetary and extra-planetary control. If he could not keep them from a seat, at least he could continue to work at curbing their greed.

Wyld Violet's computer broke into his thoughts with the announcement of a landing approach over Solvault Hall, followed by a message that Ursa had returned to the Hall from Shellreef.

He bowed his head for a brief meditation, which was all that time permitted to carry him through the day.

XVI

"Please see that nothing is omitted," Chloë said from her laboratory desk. "Inclusion is very important. Check this list on your screen."

She spoke a password and the computer displayed the enumerations she had drawn up.

The assistant, a husky middle-aged woman named Helia, nodded and studied the list being transformed to her portable readout. Her serious gray eyes protruded slightly from a pasty round face. She moved away slowly toward the room adjoining Chloë's office, where a dozen half-breeds waited for a computer to interview them. Another dozen waited in the lounge.

There had been a short orientation speech for these young hopefuls, during which Chloë tried to allay their fears. Most were in their teens or early twenties, except for a small number in their

late twenties who were shown to be quite healthy. The breakdown of the immune system and onslaught of disease that generally manifested itself in the early thirties required a much more complex treatment for reversal, which Chloë's tightly controlled system was not yet prepared to effect on a large scale.

"You must realize that you are pioneers in this promising experiment, and that heretofore only a few cases have been tested. But in those early test cases where treatment began in time we have had complete success to date. Your timely participation will further verify these results."

Their hopeful but doubting eyes stared back out of a surliness worn like a harshly tempered covering of flesh, their hearts sclerosed by repeated cruelty. Their foreign genes had generally made them quite attractive and obviously much more physiologically varied than other Immix. The knowledge of their ephemeral lives had even provided a number of them with a sad radiance, a premature wisdom.

One surprising face caught her eye: the pale elfin face of a young girl who looked no more than sixteen. The girl wore rough work pants, and her iris-gray eyes flashed with disgust at having been bound over with this submissive group of guinea pigs.

The young woman's eyes darted continually around the room, and Chloë knew that she was thinking of nothing but escape. She could feel the waves of intense anger, see the fierce indignation, and feared for the girl's safety.

The unpredictability of such strong emotion held her temporarily at bay, until she could think of a suitable approach. The most obvious would be to share her personal history, but this she could not do. As she glanced from time to time at the

disturbed face surrounded by shaggy close-cropped hair, she pondered various ways of inviting trust. When the subjects were dismissed from the room, Chloë called the girl back and approached her.

"Hello. Let's see if I recall...you're Sayka aren't you?"

Her mouth grimly set, the girl barely nodded.

"Are your quarters comfortable?"

"My cell you mean?"

"Is it that bad?"

Sayka shoved her hands into her pockets and clenched her jaw with taunting bravura. "It's better than some holes I've been in. The worst thing about it is that I can't leave it."

"Do you know how much I want you to leave it?" Chloë asked. "Leave it and never have to hide anywhere again."

"Oh, stow it. You haven't got any power over me. You can't do anything worse to me than what's already happened. I'm dying, right? So get off my back."

"Eventually we're both going to die," Chloë answered with a calming voice, "but I hope neither of us for a very long time."

"Sure...easy for you to say."

As Chloë stood looking at Sayka's thin, anxiety-ridden body, she wanted nothing more than to take the girl into arms inured by harsh experience, holding her until she felt a measure of peace.

"So what do you want?" Sayka asked with a belligerent stance. "You want to educate a leader to control the pack for you? Not me. Do your own footwork."

"By only your few words, I can see how bright you are. Imagine what you could do with the long life I can help you live.

What I am in need of is your trust. I do need that."

"Oh right, well try and get it," Sayka said, shoving her waving hands back into her pockets and walking off.

For the entire time they had been talking, Chloë could empathically sense a heart's deep bruises, the overwhelming loss of hope. She stood a moment frowning, understanding so well the hurt and frustration and fear in the bitter girl. That palpable misery, once buried deep within herself, only accelerated her effort to win the girl's heart.

In the first week Chloë believed that a good day's work had been accomplished. She had not looked in a mirror for more than a few seconds, had not remembered what she ate or when she slept or when the sun was at its zenith.

The hours when the planet spun the solar fire to its opposite horizon were nearly as stark in the Kiva desert as light and shadow on small moons. The dun-colored adobe structure, squatting massively over equally massive sunken laboratories, defied the barren land with its ugliness. When she passed from the stinging light of day through Kiva Lab's thick tinted glass doors, down into the dark cavernous entrance hall, it made her think she was entering the belly of a giant beast sleeping off its gluttony in the heat. But below was a cool quiet world of efficiency.

Her western white-walled room had only a small opaque skylight. It was sparsely furnished with a deep blue chair and desk, a rectangular wool rug striped with black, white, and thin lines of red, and a rough flaxen coverlet on a narrow bed. It was still more than she required.

Sometimes late at night before retiring she sat at the blue desk with her hands folded, engaged in her only desired recreation:

thought. There was nothing on top of the desk or inside it, and she never did any work there. Her face softened in transport as her eyes mirrored a distant point. On the wrist of the left hand, raised over the blue desk top, the silent RM gleamed in the muted light.

During the day dignitaries and other scientists now and then poked their sterilized heads into the anteroom beyond the hermetic glass of her lab section, often trying with pantomiming gestures to coax her momentarily from her work, but she either waved them off or did not notice them at all. The polite banter with anyone but her subjects never took place. It was as frivolous to her as the leisurely walks in the morning sun or the night rides across the warm desert that her co-workers took. A quick evening walk around the surface perimeter of the lab building was all she permitted herself. As to socializing, she yielded only to the steady importuning of Mwithe Xheeva for conversation. The curious Premier was growing increasingly insistent with her repeated invitations to Seche.

Then one evening Sayka was found missing from her room, and soon thereafter caught fleeing across the squealing sand in the empty darkness. She was confined to her ward in a deep black depression, even denied the use of the recreation room, until Doctor Skye Kleeve discovered the reprimand and demanded that her rights be reinstated.

Chloë felt deeply responsible and had decided to dicker with the Premier. She would come to Seche for a weekend in the flat if Sayka would be allowed to accompany her to the Marchland on her next leave. There, away from the demands of her work, she hoped to win Sayka over, turn her around in her thinking and set her life on a positive path.

The agreement was swiftly met, almost too swiftly, but Chloë had enough to think about without pondering the hidden motives of the Premier. She considered her bargain one of her better stratagems for success with Sayka, and turned her attention to Sayka's medical record with methodic scrutiny. In the evenings she plotted a careful arrangement to keep her identity unknown to the girl upon reaching the March.

XVII

Wyld had gone to the Mainland and taken Ursa with him. For Ursa this triumphant return to her friends was another lively social event. She had won the highly elusive Casimir Wyld, a mysterious figure who, much to his regret, caused international speculation that made him a constant target of the news media. Notwithstanding her remarkable capture, Ursa would have to share Wyld for a time with the demanding members of Fedcartel.

In the cloud-backed chambers of Fedcartel's silver tower, Wyld debated his adversaries in long and enervating sessions on a plethora of heretofore tabled proposals and goals, the foremost being his nearly unassisted battle in keeping gold a fluid commodity.

When he spoke all eyes were riveted with blatant envy upon this enigmatic leader, whose lush and carefully tended homeland possessed the planet's richest veins of gold. Some looked with naked greed, others with grudging respect.

He had asked to make the closing speech with the single predominating motive of enabling stability; rising from his blue velvet chair he ascended to the podium with graceful celerity. He briefly touched upon the benefit of key policy decisions, then

paused a moment to look over the rows of waiting faces. There was the unproven and wily Dagon minister, appearing smug in his newly wrested seat on High Council; there also the placidly masked face of Immixia's wizened female minister of finance. Seated just below with his finance minister, was Wyld's smiling ally, the powerful Mainland Prime Minister, Morral Iceter. He turned his eyes to the attentive rows of the planet's most powerful figures, his concluding voice adjuring and admonishing, smooth and unhesitant, ominous thunder gathering behind his words.

"Members, let me clarify a decision by insisting that gold possesses an interesting duality, one that must be more thoughtfully understood even by this singular pool of sharp intelligence before me. It is a valuable utilitarian metal, used very much in extra-terrestrial industry because of its remarkable reflective and non-corrosive properties, but as a commodity on the international market it can quickly become highly corrosive, and when hoarded it swiftly assumes the volatility of a critical mass. It must be allowed to flow freely and expeditiously as a very honest counterbalance for the fluctuating scale of international needs. Over all the years of my memory, hoarding has never reached the harmful proportions of this moment. But whenever it *has* approached the present condition, a new credit system -- really an old one wearing a flimsy mask of redress -- always heralded as the be-all of modern finance and the end-all of economic sham...this new system has lumbered into the expedient foreground, and for tightened healing periods commerce flows on the fluky winds of empty promises. But today, you will learn, is different. Today as you leave the room and return to your financial terminals, you will find on your screens that the Marchland is calling certain credits due. We know very well who

the private hoarders are, and only those parties who have not kept their houses in order will be asked to liquidate at once. We are not at all oblivious to delicate interconnections, however, if unchecked, inevitable consequences would be far more severe. We have calculated very carefully in the matter of flagrant offenders. After the remedy has gone down and the diagnosed have forgotten the taste of the bitter medicine, you will find that you have been cured."

There was a moment of dead silence followed by a simultaneous sucking in of air. The eyes of stunned faces blinked in disbelief as Wyld bowed politely and made his way out of the gallery and into the great hall, where an aide waited. The recovery of voices in a shock wave of babble soon spilled from the chamber: *Unaccountable punishment which accrues to all nations...very ill conceived...ruinous audacity...disastrous ties...*

"Untrue, misguided members. You will all soon discover how to force restitution from the guilty, those who holler the loudest," Wyld muttered, his indistinct voice echoing down the empty hall while his aide nervously led him away.

When he reached the end of the corridor he heard a shuffle of rushing footsteps accompanied by loud voices. The aide hurriedly motioned him toward the opening door of a pneumator, which shot him to the conveyor level in seconds. In a few more minutes he was back in his hotel suite, his phone instantly switched off as he made for the shower.

Later, he stood thoughtfully in his soundproof suite, a circular room overlooking the city from a dizzying height. Below and beyond, all the familiar and discordant tones resounding throughout this heaving metropolis were swept up in a single

resonance, a wildly vibrating fork of monstrous noise. Resonating somewhere out there beneath the amassed quiver, was the lone honest voice, inventive and compelling. But it was the total sound that he was always prevailed upon to hear, although that wisely independent voice remained the only one for which he continually listened.

He placed a call to his friend the Mainland Minister, speaking only long enough to invite him to the gymnasium that adjoined his suite. He then dressed in a loose dark blue costume of floor combat and headed toward the familiar door leading to welcome diversion. Inside, he settled his tall frame down upon the resilient sparring surface, waiting in quiet meditation.

In a while, the sound of his men opening doors gently penetrated his deep river of peace. He turned, stood up and bowed as Prime Minister Morral Iceter approached, wearing his customary brown combat uniform.

The two friends had several years ago adopted the practice of sparring after Fedcartel meetings. Both were highly skilled masters of nearly equal ability. Iceter was perhaps at an advantage, having a lower center of gravity with a rugged stocky frame and thick brawny arms. His deceptively heavy body was surprisingly agile off the sparring floor, but in combat Iceter gave the impression of a man whose hefty form was carefully tuned for control and accuracy, an impression Wyld had long ago verified.

The opening attack was a bullet-fast reverse punch that stopped an inch from Wyld's eye. He had seen anger flash from his opponent's eyes and knew that Iceter had exercised great control.

Wyld smiled inwardly as he delivered a spinning back kick, which was instantly and painfully blocked. Under siege by a swift

combination assault as fluid and unbroken as falling water, his eyes dilated in steady concentration. With Iceter's kinetic fugue successfully deflected, Wyld was surprised to receive a knife-like edge-of-the-hand chop that could easily have broken his neck. His head shot up atop a fountain of pain. He felt a vibration of rage surging from Iceter's quick, straightforward attack.

The disciplined fight grew seriously hard and bitter with incredibly fast rib kicks and connecting back-fist strikes, but Wyld still would not succumb to violent retaliation. He was holding onto courteous tradition while Iceter made his point with a barrage of relentless blows.

Then an elbow strike brought blood trickling down Wyld's face. He felt a tremendous sense of joyous release as he delivered a lethal spinning heel kick, felling Iceter in a resounding sprawl.

He knelt over his opponent.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. You?" Iceter asked.

"I've never felt better," he answered, laughing as he tasted his own blood.

There was an unspoken agreement that Fedcartel never intrude on the sparring floor, yet in this instance the mood of the international consortium was very much in evidence. The Minister's wide brown eyes shone with an alternating concern and censorious anger.

Wyld gripped Iceter's hand and pulled him up. Shaking his head in place of scathing words, the Minister smiled faintly, bowed and turned to leave.

"Useful decisions have to work like reflex," Wyld called out, hurting far more at Iceter's abrupt departure than when in the

throes of combat.

Iceter hesitated. "And when they work...when they work that way they're called genius," he answered, again starting to leave but suddenly turning back. "You would have allowed me to kill you with this hand." He held up his hand. "What some would not give for that opportunity."

"I trust you," Wyld answered, compassion burning in his eyes and voice.

"Well, yes...but you should not," the deeply perturbed Minister admonished harshly. "You cannot be who you are, dare what you dare, and trust anyone."

He stood close to Wyld, disappointment clearly visible in his eyes. "There's something about you, Casimir, that makes even decent people wish you harm. Yes, I've seen it too often. Perhaps because you remind them that they cannot be you. But those decent ones suffer guilt with their unbidden desire to crush you. They are not the real danger, not the wild dogs that have acquired a taste for blood."

Wyld stood wiping the blood from his face in silence. He stared at his crimson fingers. It was strange this red fluid of life leaking from his body.

"You are every man's unrealizable dream. You manage to exist before a jungle of envy in a unique state of existence giving the impression of paradise. Perhaps it is safer to have only the dream. I myself do not envy you overmuch, Casimir, because I know enough to worry. It is the same Fedcartel you abuse that keeps wild dogs from your throat."

"So you say. And the same Fedcartel that caused me to enforce its dirty work. Morral, my friend, you did not worry

enough to vote against Dagon's seat on High Council." Wyld's voice was gentle, although slightly more restrained.

"Admitted," the Minister replied, smiling and bowing with theatrical flourish. "Sometimes one is compelled to do what is abhorrent and shameful, isn't it so?"

His feet moved noiselessly across the floor, to the place where his and Wyld's men had entered the gymnasium and were standing quietly by, then he turned to wave his hand. The men separated, more than half of them accompanying the exiting Iceter. The door slid shut in a huff of air.

Wyld sat for a time in the middle of the floor with his head bowed. The painful yet exhilarating tempo in his body gradually slowed to an even pulse. His thoughts began to drift away.

All through the busy days in this clamorous city the specter of an idea, which had much earlier begun to stalk him, appeared and disappeared without warning. It had to do with himself as a link in the long spiraling chain of man, a position to which he often succumbed in theory and one that he was presumed to have accepted long ago, but a position against which, from time to time, he also fought. He fought because he believed that it somehow interfered with control of the present moment, which was really the sum total of his existence. For this control he fought even his own genes, the very ones that would both forsake and extend him.

Now he called upon his strength to make these warring sides converge, because his genes were his only link with the future and because he wanted to believe, however vainly, that he could jog fate a hair off its dark course, thereby initiating the favorable ascent of a presently unruly humanity up through the millennia toward enlightenment.

The Marchman

On Pheasant Hill, where no pheasant had chuckled his mating cry for a very long time, but where it was said that hundreds of years ago male pheasants had actually strutted their virile opulence before their betrothed among wild grasses, Ursa's sumptuous apartment was resounding with voices and laughter.

When Wyld arrived he spotted her at once -- elegantly long-limbed as wind-tipped bamboo -- presently reigning at the center of a devout crowd. His gold glittered from the ample breast of her soft olive gown. He stood a moment, considering her with grateful satisfaction.

Then nearby he spotted someone highly repugnant whom he would never have expected to see here. A Dagonite sitting in a regal silver chair, his thick legs crossed, revealing silk stockings that disappeared under the trousers of a suit made entirely from the hide of a shark. The man propped one elbow on the chair arm and swiveled his leathery wrist in a most affected and self-important manner as he talked.

Eventually escaping the unflagging curious, who always pursued him, Wyld caught Ursa alone and asked, "What is that corrupt fishmonger doing here? Surely in a city this size you can find more suitable guests."

"Leise Amboze? He's an acquaintance of father's. He expected to find father here -- and he *will* be as soon as he comes unstuck from another obligatory party. Mr. Amboze is in town to celebrate his country's timely admission to High Council. He's quite an interesting person, I believe, and rather powerful I'm told, but you must ask father."

"I don't have to ask anyone. You cannot find that callous

bastard interesting; you're far too discerning. He's a cold-blooded malevolent brute with the stench of murder beneath his nails.

Sorry, I will not stay in the same room with him."

Wyld turned to leave, admitting to himself that the day had taken its toll.

"Casimir! I've never seen you so rashly discourteous. You would leave...just like that?" She had snapped her fingers to emphasize her astonishment. "Wait! Come with me. Are you tired? What is it? And your face. Another fight? I'm beginning to worry about you, my dear."

"I was sparring with Morral. That clip on my face is the only real thing that has happened to me all day."

They ended up in Ursa's private sitting room, which was a milieu of contrast: black and white tile floors strewn with long-fibered white rugs; checkered furniture; hundreds of black and white oddly cropped photographs covering the walls, many of them of indistinct, bizarre faces.

Wyld paced and stared at the obscure photographs with a grimacing expression. He had confronted them before, always uncomfortably; each time he saw them he was more disturbed.

"These murky faces all look like prehistoric fish squirming at the bottom of a muddy lake," he announced.

At last he threw himself down on a chaise lounge and placed bent arms behind his head, staring into space.

Ursa came to him, fanning out her long skirt and kneeling at his side in one graceful flourish. She took his face in her hands, watching the steely eyes soften.

"Ursa, Ursa...black suns, I'm afraid I will have to return at once to the March."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Why? Oh, I had so many things planned. Do you eschew my friends? Is it...it couldn't be because of Amboze."

"Not entirely. I cannot stay away this long right now. Not after what happened today. But you know if you choose to be with me...I can't have you consorting with people like Amboze. The man is my enemy. You don't like that I know, being given ultimatums, but I'm afraid it's--"

"No, I don't, but I do love and respect you."

"What does that mean altogether, my Urso, that you will condescend to be an agreeable mate...or some such thing?"

"I might."

She frowned and leaned on one elbow in order to observe Wyld more closely.

"Casimir, I've never mentioned that night at Shellreef. I'm sure you've had many...that you've never lacked for the attention of women, but if Skye Kleeve has been one of them I don't think I want to know. She's very different. Yes, I do like and admire her, but I think I envy her a little. She seems to have everything: intelligence, beauty, grace, but...something else..."

Wyld sat up, inwardly perplexed but manifesting only a reserved coolness.

"She's not *one of them* as you say...and you cannot envy her. No, don't ever envy her, you who have so much." He could not help a disparaging laugh directed at himself.

"What is it? Tell me?"

"I have nothing to tell you. You might learn more of her work some day. She is a thoroughly dedicated woman." He

shrugged, indicating that the subject was closed.

He was surprised to have Chloë introduced into his thought by someone else. He knew that he was different because of her pervasive spirit, and because she existed somewhere at this moment. She remained separated from everything else, in a sacrosanct region of his mind, behind high bars that he had made and through which he looked.

"Ursa, I must ask you not to tell Amboze anything about my family, my friends, my employees, or the March. It would be best if you avoid the subject of me entirely."

"Of course, I'll do as you say. But I probably won't see him again. We actually haven't spoken much. Is there really this much intrigue? Must it be this way?"

"Yes. Absolutely.

"And now getting back to my agreeable mate...if I asked you to come with me tonight, would you?"

"Oh...but, Casimir, you wouldn't. My guests... No, I know you wouldn't--"

"Come with me tonight."

"Casimir, you're teasing, testing... What are you doing?"

"I'm completely serious."

"Then of course I must decline. Oh, I want you with me. How cruel you are. You know I can't simply come away with you now...can you be doing this to make it appear I've slighted you? You no longer want me!"

Ursa threw back her long auburn hair and turned her raised head aside, then her entire body.

"Ah, what a good actress you are, Ursa. If you really wanted to, you could come with me this minute." He smiled at her

stubbornly rigid back.

"Is that what you want, a little love slave?"

"No...but wouldn't that be flattering?" Wyld laughed with great relish. "You're not coming then?" He took her in his arms and kissed her with warming desire.

"Umm," she muttered, pulling him down on the pillows. "I will come but not tonight. I will...I will but..."

Before he left Ursa, they quarreled again. Ursa then decided, with emotional impulsiveness and a frustration near tears, to turn their rather casual ongoing engagement into an unengaged period of hard consideration.

What this meant Wyld was not entirely sure. He thought she was attempting to force his hand, or dickering to have her mate without the responsibilities that came with him.

The music had begun and people were dancing when Wyld soberly reentered the party. He was hoping he could slip away unnoticed, but that rare occurrence had never yet been afforded him at such affairs. He was always set upon by the curious, who had seen his face too often flashed across news screens in conjunction with a remotely exotic place, and an unimaginably prodigal existence somewhere under a volcano. They appeared to expect something from him. He had never learned exactly what it was, much less desired to give it, and loathed the wretched condition. Still, no one had ever seen him flinch when cornered, as he was about to be again.

"Behold the Marchland King," an accented singsong voice intoned at his back.

His mind made a tight fist as he turned to Amboze. What conceivable words had he for this poisonous sea snake slithering

along the borders of his homeland? Ignominious that he should have to meet him privately in the home of his betrothed, for he still considered himself Ursa's affianced.

"Ah, the Dagonite pirate," he said with a curling smile of contempt.

He winked at a fashionable woman who had stopped to listen, an eagerly curious woman who had seen that his scornful sapphire eyes flashed with anger as he spoke.

Her hands fluttered. She searched for clever words, a witticism, an apt phrase, something that would reverberate in the Marchman's head, something startling. Perhaps she was already composing vaunting remarks to her friends of how Casimir Wyld had winked at her, taken notice of her. Alas, in her awe of him her coquetry vanished.

"Really," the woman managed, scoffing at Amboze with obvious dislike, "kings aren't announced by men wearing the skins of sharks."

Amboze dismissed her with a shrug, but Wyld made no attempt to hide his delight. He took the woman in his arms and danced her to the large ivory-scrolled doors of exit, where he kissed her on the cheek, his departure and the kiss noted and unduly interpreted by nearly everyone in the room.

"Good-bye, Marchman." The woman sighed, with moist enraptured eyes, her fingertips pressed dramatically to her cheek. *And he found me amusing enough to kiss*, she would be tempted to boast to her friends.

"Foolish, foolish woman," Amboze muttered as he watched from across the room.

He had hoped to provoke a rapier sharp verbal battle, and

imagined himself capable of shaming Wyld badly before the room's attentive occupants. Frustrated in retaliation, he glared daggers at the woman, while the fingers of his coarse hands opened and closed repeatedly, like the claws of an angry lobster. Even when precipitated by himself, he could not easily withstand a slight.

XVIII

"You were made for this special brand of warfare, Nev. That high-flown Mainland school of economics only tuned your strings."

Wyld had risen before the sun as usual and spoke from his historic old rosewood desk, where he sat monitoring the incoming results of the Fedcartel decree.

"Your capable hands played my strings. Don't give me all the credit, Casimir. Incidentally, I have a niece in the same school who could join my staff today and probably run circles around me with highfalutin theorems. I did learn many ornate laws in that school that have nothing to do with the strategy of bluff, threat, and twisted arms; less subtle arts that, nevertheless, take years to master."

"Exactly why you're so indispensable," Wyld affirmed. "Let your niece join your staff but don't imagine going out to pasture at your tender age."

"Not at all. I like my work. It has hardly ever ceased to be a challenge."

Nev studied Wyld for a quiet moment, then made an offer indicating the dark mood he had discerned. "You listened to me when I needed to unburden myself, now let me return the favor," he suggested.

"Morral is up in arms. I can't blame him. The Mainland has a lot of irons in the fire that may well melt down in the heat I've caused. I suppose it won't be too bad. But now that the Dagonites are vainglorious with their ill-gotten power they'll doubtless have something disruptive up their sleeves."

"Only muscle, no finesse," Nev answered. "They're novices, but they can still cause trouble, of course. Your consolation must be that you've taken an effective and necessary measure. That took guts."

"Unfortunately, they all seem to think I do this sort of thing with relish."

"Let them stew. Eventually they'll get it straight, and you'll have their gratitude in the long run for saving their necks."

Nev put his hand on Wyld's shoulder in a fatherly gesture and walked him to the door.

Wyld noted that Nev's mouth had begun to twist in the way that it did when he was about to say something delicate, or perhaps indelicate, but then he appeared to change his mind and turned back to his work with a wave.

Today Wyld was going to Sonna. He had agreed to meet Fleet Fairmeed there at a villa where she was staying. So unpopular was he at the moment, that had it not been for his supposed seriousness over Fleet he could not have safely visited Sonna. There was something else he had in mind, something he wanted to do while on the Dagon coast, which had actually precipitated this trip. This other matter had long festered in his mind, and Fleet had given him the chance to act. Conspicuously pairing with her was proving to be a wise and beneficial arrangement. He hoped that she was gaining some personal satisfaction from her scheming

strategy, because he had no intention of becoming valuable in any other way.

He looked for Fox but his ever prompt security chief was uncharacteristically making himself scarce until the moment of departure. The matter could wait. He would spend a few minutes with Alba, whose presence always added a special buoyancy to his day.

She was walking near the Ruddle in a sandy-bottomed meadow of dry grass. He caught up with her just where the river made a bend to the west, not far north of Sunring. Here she had come to gather a fresh crop of the mushrooms that always appeared in a savory dish at her table.

Beside her walked a chattering dark-haired young boy with brown eyes that filled his capricious face. He was the son of Nev's personal secretary, and Wyld saw that he was sending Alba into bright bursts of laughter.

"I love it when the sky is such a blue, and the way it meets this blond grass. Isn't it something?" Alba said.

"Yes," the boy answered cheerfully. "Hear the frogs? I have a small blue frog that Chloë lets me keep in the garden. When she was home I let her hold it."

"A nice treat," Wyld said, thinking with a smile that it was a special treat for the frog.

He put his large hand on the boy's head, and the boy looked up at him. His moist little mouth curved into a ready smile and his wide eyes crinkled happily over the feeling of pleasing, although he would not have understood quite how he pleased. His transient beauty and fresh sweet innocence were like a promise, suddenly kindling in Wyld the desire to make a child of his own.

He smiled dismissively at the complete selfishness of such a notion.

"Chloë showed me where to look for minks. They're so funny to watch. Don't know when she's coming back. She knows where the red fox goes."

Alba's big reed basket, which the boy had insisted on carrying, was dragging clumsily over the grass. He stopped, falling silent while he examined a tiny grass cut on a small soiled finger.

"Where do you wait for minks?" Wyld asked

"You know the great big rock that looks like a wolf's head? Near there. You crouch down and be quiet. They come along early in the morning or evening. I like the way they go in waves, like this." The boy drew his hand through the air making troughs and peaks. "They keep standing on their hind legs to sniff the air. They always come...usually."

"Indeed," Alba said with laughter.

"I'd like to have one, just for a while, but Chloë says they've got to be left alone. She says everything is happier in the March when you don't try to hold it."

"It's true," Wyld said with a fond smile. "Except of course for an occasional frog."

The boy set down the basket and danced off after a disturbed red-wing moth, lifting his small bare knees high. Soon only his bobbing head could be seen above the grass.

"Ah, there are some," Alba said, dropping to her knees and plucking off several tall cylindrical mushrooms that looked like porous chunks of pumice rock. "These fungi can't resist this sandy soil. One of the best things our botany lab ever did was to make them periodically fruit all year instead of only in the spring."

"Is he one of your confidants?" Wyld asked, grinning after

the boy, who was flying around the meadow with rapidly flapping arms.

"You'd be surprised," Alba said. "He fills in many a missing piece. He's wonderfully entertaining...also has an excellent memory and talks a blue streak. Fox would do well to enlist him."

"And probably will some day," Wyld responded.

He was just settling into an enjoyable conversation when he caught something in Alba's eyes that made him turn away, back to the boy. She next introduced a bold inquiry.

"Are you...involved with Chloë Churlwraith?"

Seeing that she was not to be permitted a reading of her grandson's eyes, she knelt over her work, laying the spongy mushrooms gently in the basket then brushing off her fingers and continuing to kneel, a shrewd supplicant.

"Alba, you're a wonder."

"I expect that's a kindness, but at least tell me it's none of my business."

"So you can imagine you've riled me to reveal things?"

"I'm so old that I'm lucky to imagine anything, but I suspect much more than a professional skirmish."

Alba shook her frosty head. "Diamond cutting diamond."

Wyld drew her up and examined her face at arm's length. Her blue shirt heightened the pale color in her eyes, which somehow managed to look both mirthful and sad. He held her to him and kissed her forehead.

"You've answered my question." Her perception glowed.

"I've done nothing of the sort."

"I suppose you know all about Chloë."

"I'm sure you do, Great Mother, with your sophisticated

network of information gatherers. Fox should employ *you*."

"And you've worked this all out?"

"I've worked out nothing."

"Jarl Wyld, you're exasperating."

"Why does everyone use that proprietary old title when perturbed? Even you. My own Great Mother!"

"It's our way of reminding you who you are."

"Who? Who am I?" Wyld demanded, remembering how Chloë had said nearly the same thing as Alba.

"You're the Jarl," Alba insisted.

"Then have a little respect," he teased with affection.

"Caz, dear, you know when you come to me I'm not going to dwell for very long on what I had for breakfast or the shapes of clouds. I haven't time."

"I know how cannily your mind travels. Anyway, I love you. That's all I came to say. I'm going now."

"Where?"

"Sonna."

"Black suns!" Alba threw up her hands in disgust.

"Where is that boy?" she demanded, stalking off with the basket held in front of her to part the rasping grass.

He stood watching her. She went along stubbornly, without looking back to receive his apologetic grin.

Soon his gaze swept the horizon, realizing that until this minute he had not experienced the crisp new season with its subtly recast light and hint of muskiness.

Phosphorous trees sent their internally combustioned flames over the distant foothills. The air was a flawless jeweler's lens, distilling sharply the grasses and the oak trees with their russet

The Marchman

leaves and gold-encrusted bark, distilling even the white-dusted mauve and crimson mountain ranges to the north and south, the luminous tall guardians clasping their deep roots under the Skeel Valley.

From season to season the open firmament and the secretive land hovered on an orderly spindle of movement, hovered on a lyrically vibrating axis, locked by invisible bands of gravity into the spokes of a great spiral galaxy.

His eyes dilated peacefully as he let his thought and vision carry him out into the slip stream of the rushing planet's energy, focusing on nothing but at once aware of everything; all of the sensuous pleasures of nature, singing its Marchland changes as it gathered him into its pulsing breadth and depth.

In this gingery state of awareness, where all was agitation beneath stillness, he felt alive and in tune with even a distant music, the harmony of planets, moons, and stars; these his thought encircled, ranging far out through dense magnetic fields and coming home as supercharged as particles of solar wind. Profound thought, the immeasurable quintessence of man, measured not even as a mere scintilla of cosmic dust, intangible yet capable of navigating light-years. How was it possible that he so effortlessly and swiftly piloted this transcendental brain machine?

The shrill cry of a hunting falcon broke his journey. He grinned broadly, sharing the curious falcon's wheeling freedom, following it as it studied his minutest detail.

Autumn's quiet settling in brought not only serene contemplation and quickening senses but creative stirrings. The bite of the morning breeze exalted with its arousing spice. The dry grass rustled with whispering riddles, a sensuous stir filling his inner

vision with rippling blond hair. His heart leapt and swelled, shooting blood through his body sharply as small arrows. Alba knew precisely what he wanted, as she so often did.

His RM glinted in the sun as a disruptive low tone summoned him to his departure. Here in this halcyon meadow he felt charged with purpose, enlivened by the natural enticements of wild beauty mingled with lofty dreams.

"Nev, I'm off to Sonna with Fox."

Wyld had interrupted the computer, Mentab, which would stop talking and listen at the sound of key voices.

"Hold on a minute, Mentab," Nev said as he followed Wyld out of the data room.

"Holding," Mentab answered cheerfully.

"Is something troubling you?" Wyld asked.

"You've noticed? I must be transparent as glass."

"Lately you are, yes. Since the day I returned from the Mainland you've been trying to say something."

Moving rapidly, Wyld ducked into a small, carefully appointed sitting room down the hall, calling over his shoulder, "I've enough time for a hasty unburdening. Why don't you come in here a minute."

He motioned for Nev to sit nearby as he threw himself into a high-backed pale green chair, his khaki traveling clothes looking distinctly out of place against the luxurious satin upholstery.

"I've always taken pains to keep my personal matters apart from everything," Nev said. "However, the difficulty increases. Have you...have you learned anything from Chloë about the condition of her health? Anything at all?"

The question was so loaded with insinuation and innuendo that Wyld almost smiled, but he knew that Nev was deadly serious.

Nev was sitting so pathetically straight in his chair, with his hands folded stiffly in his lap, that he reminded Wyld of a small boy who had just been told to correct his posture. What a striking child he must have been, Wyld thought, with his once scarlet ringlets and those drowsy shallow-water-green eyes. It was not from this often phlegmatic man but from her impetuous young mother that Chloë must have acquired the volatile nature that sometimes overwhelmed her and everyone else.

"I've learned nothing of her." Wyld answered with a warily tightening visage.

Anything he said would tend to cast him in a most unflattering light, yet that was not as disturbing as having to confront a matter he was trying to put aside. But now his compassion was all for Nev, who had suffered enough.

"Chloë acts like a person who means to go on living for a long time...will probably outlive us all," Wyld offered.

"I hope so. Indeed, I hope so," Nev said.

"You seemed to have become... I thought perhaps she'd confided in you. You see she wouldn't tell me if..." The pain in Nev's eyes had intensified and he sighed deeply. "Chloë needs much more than she allows herself. She's--"

"A very capable woman," Wyld finished for Nev, hoping to bring this subject, so disturbing to them both, to a close. Then a little more gently he added, "Nev, I'll do whatever I can to see that no harm comes to your daughter."

"Thank you," Nev replied without much conviction.

Wyld stood up, glad to have exigencies calling him swiftly

away. He touched Nev's drooping shoulder.

"Perhaps we'll talk further when I return. All right?" This was offered with a coaxing compensatory voice on the heels of his imminent departure from the room and the March.

"Yes," Nev called stiffly after the Jarl's back.

He knew where Wyld was going but not the double purpose of the rendezvous, although that added knowledge might not have sufficiently eased his displeasure.

"And what's the matter with you? The Churlwraiths are afflicted today," Wyld said to Fox when they had flown above the polychrome land for several minutes in rigid silence.

"Nothing," Fox said curtly.

"Vent your spleen, you sullen Churlwraith -- you've never been at a loss before."

"It's your business," Fox said, still tight-lipped.

"Out with it," Wyld demanded.

"All right. You have Ursa. I don't really see the point of this Fairmeed woman."

"I'd be surprised if you meant that. You've always known that Marchlanders don't fool around with Dagonites because of the risks, but emotion has blunted your good reason. We've talked before about the importance of Fleet. This liaison forces the open-mouthed Dagonites back on their haunches. It's they who've thrown her at me, remember? Then of course Premier Xheeva, who was purposely made aware of this ploy, feels in a small way privy to my confidence. Perhaps she's even convinced herself that she and I have colluded against Dagon. And this may also make it easier on your sister. Aren't I repeating myself?"

"And then there's Chloë," Fox continued with a sharp edge in his voice. "Just what the hell are you doing?"

So that was it. His red-faced loyal guardian had become a great murrey bear of agitation, confusedly trying to defend an uncertain territory.

"Ah," was all that Wyld said immediately.

There followed a long and resonating silence, as they watched a string of geese flying in a wide silver V over a dark forest below.

"Your sister is more resolute than you realize, quite independent...very capable of running her life without much help from us," he said at last.

Clearly the subject was being dismissed, and for the second time that day he observed a dissatisfied Churlwraith.

"Fox, I've worked out something that I did not have much time to plan, but I think we can pull it off. Perhaps you'll be a little more enthusiastic in your work now that you've something grown-up to do on this trip." He said this light-heartedly, grinning at Fox in his most winning manner, but it was a hard corner to turn.

The Churlwraiths had taken it upon themselves to initiate a menacing defense against a bewildering and paradoxical antagonist: their defender and the man whom they regularly and staunchly defended. They were quite obviously disoriented in this unusual maneuver. He could hardly blame them for their rancor, yet he could not escape the humor of it. *He* was the vulnerable one. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to help them and swore to himself that he would.

XIX

The palmy villa where Wyld met Fleet was on a reefed beach northwest of the Umara compound at Sonna. It was a choice spot of pastel sands encircling cone-shaped caverns; these turreted configurations were comprised of eroding rose stone, and washed through by lapping turquoise waters.

The water bubbled up near their feet as they sat under a flapping pink awning speaking softly. Wyld allowed Fleet to carry on most of the conversation, merely interspersing her commentary with a few questions. She related her sorrow at having no aptitude for the science world of her parents.

A wind-bent steward in a raw silk burnoose came toward them bearing a tray. His airy garment streamed out in the persistent seasonal wind, the Singe, which blew steadily from the southwest. As the man came closer Wyld saw that the rush tray contained, among other items, two iced glasses and a basket of very large oranges.

"So you want a caustic man," he quipped, reaching for the oranges.

His amusement was accompanied by a short juggling act. He tossed the oranges in a high loop with quick agile hands, until the Singe sent one straying into the sand at his feet.

"I want a happy man," Fleet responded in her sultry voice, "a man content enough to juggle oranges."

She bent over her task of halving the plump globes as Wyld sat admiring the grace of bent arms and nimble fingers. Her reddish-blond hair fell forward over half bare breasts.

"What an attractive woman you are."

She looked out at him without lifting her head, and the

exotic amber eyes glowed with appreciation.

"Surely you're used to such remarks. You must have many admirers."

"No. And I'm not used to anything the Marchman says."

She looked back toward the higher rock caverns as she spoke. "Must your men always hover around us? She frowned. "It's so public...being with you."

"Great Mother Alba won't let me leave the March without them," he replied with a quick gibe of sarcasm. "But they try to be as unobtrusive as your skulking men."

Fleet shrugged off this retort and went on. "I met a man the other day who knows your mistress." She slipped Wyld a darting glance.

"Which one now?" he asked, keeping his voice light and amused, rather flippant. He shifted his position a little so that he could look away down the coast.

"The one it's rumored you'll marry."

"There are many such rumors."

"Ursa Grenellev," Fleet flatly announced.

Wyld grinned a culpable grin. "And the man?" he asked.

"Leise Amboze. He's quite well known in Dagon and I believe in certain international circles. I'd never met him until recently. I once glanced at a startling early picture of him hanging in a hallway in Premier Umara's residence in Wime, but I didn't make the connection immediately. In the photo his hair was black as jet. What an intimidating man. Even when he's laughing I sense something..."

"Violent," Wyld offered. "As if you're in contact with an evil force...and you *are* in league...your country is."

"In league? I myself feel almost violent at that remark. And my country is not in question."

Wyld shrugged and asked, "How do you get on with Poppy Umara?" His discerning question had caused Fleet's lowered eyes to flutter, her lips to draw up in rigid distaste.

"Very well," she answered, but her jaw had tightened and her eyes burned as she handed Wyld the cool juice.

"I don't flatter myself that you've come here because you find me irresistible, Casimir. I'm sure that you wish to use me in some way." Her face had hardened slightly in accusation and concern.

For a few seconds Wyld flashed her a look of amazement, then with a derisive smile he jumped up and dashed straight into the sea. Fleet did not follow. When he returned she was sulking.

"Are you pouting?" he asked with laughter.

"You laugh at me." Her voice was bitter.

He only laughed harder.

"I laugh because it's you who hope to use me, idiot. You, at the bidding of your Dagon bosses. But of course we both know all of this. What happens next?"

"I don't know," she answered. She spoke with slow reflection. "Can one still fall in love?" Her softened voice was almost inaudible in the wind.

"Very pretty," Wyld said, "and right on cue."

Her hand went back and swung out at him but he stopped her quickly, having no desire to be punished in this way.

"Leave me. Leave my country," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"Apparently there's a very thin line between love and hate,"

Wyld said, still holding her wrist.

He watched as Fleet's protectors came jogging across the private sands out of nowhere, followed by his own men.

"Call them off, my lovelorn," Wyld advised. "Or this will be a mess."

Fleet raised a shaking hand and waved the men back.

"And now let's both apologize to each other for the things we've done and are about to do."

He took her in his arms. "This is for all the unseen eyes but especially for myself...and you can--"

"I know who you are, Casimir," Fleet interrupted with bitter disappointment.

"Who am I?"

"You're someone quite alone who will never allow anyone to mean very much to you." She ran her fingers over his arms, stripping off beads of water. "What a pity."

"I couldn't pretend to like you, Fleet. I'm not any good at that."

He saw how quickly this honest offering could please her, and went on to another intended subject.

"Isn't there a place somewhere south of here called Sandspell...a watering hole supposed to be the end of the rainbow in a traveler's dreams?"

"Sandspell? Yes, a very popular resort. My brother runs it."

"Can't we go there? I'd like to see it."

"I suppose we could," Fleet answered with a still unsettled voice. She stood frowning and squinting in the bright sun's glare. "Yes, I think that's possible."

Covering the entire surface of its amber promontory, Sandspell glimmered like a gigantic fairy-tale knickknack, towering over a green lawn scattered with olive, eucalyptus, and palm trees. It was built in the manner of a great stepped pyramid, and iced with a roseate shade of pink that shone through the trees from the speedway below like a glutton's dream of grandiose dessert.

The main lobby spiraled off into a small bustling city filled with every imaginable temptation for whiling away one's leisure. Here one might gamble or dine lavishly or be multifariously entertained. There were shops where one could purchase anything at all, from a gold-plated marlin to a ticket to an extra-terrestrial colony.

Wyld stood off to the side in an untrafficked area of the lobby partly obscured by thick vegetation. He watched the vacationers coming and going, while his plainly dressed men dispersed and covertly settled into an *amused-tourist* interest in their surroundings.

Fleet, in her fuchsia sarong, was not far out of his sight. She was leaning toward two lanky female friends who obviously belonged in this sumptuous milieu of façades.

After a while he joined Fleet. They walked into an open lounging room where stirring sea breezes mingled with a pervasive floral scent.

This semi-enclosed space was splashed with prisms of light shining from high pellucid lintels whose undersides amply supported thick trailing vines. All around them darted chattering colored birds, gathering nectar from a profusion of heavy-scented blossoms. Outside, water tumbled over a natural outcropping of

obsidian rocks, feeding an interior pool filled with small blue fish and spreading pink lotus blossoms. On one of the nearest clusters of obsidian a green lizard, its skin jeweled with raised spots of color, had immobilized itself in a spot of sun.

Fleet reached out to take Wyld's hand as they sat on a purple silk squab placed on a stone ledge. He squeezed her hand with a supportive smile and continued to watch the passersby, until at last he saw what he had come to see.

"Do people always stare at you so?" Fleet asked.

"Yes," Wyld answered with quick emphasis. His eyes still following his interest. "Everywhere except in the March. There I evoke very little amazement...besides it would be considered bad manners to stare.

"Let's take a room and stay here tonight," he said with a swiftly decisive voice.

"But why, when we have a lovely private villa at our disposal?"

"Just indulge me, please. I've never been here and I'm curious about the place. I want to capture one of Dagon's favorite pastimes." He had made the last remark solely to observe how Fleet would react, but she appeared not to understand at all what he meant.

"I had no idea you were so interested in Dagon. By the way, there are more than Dagonites here. Certain Mainlanders come here regularly."

"Yes. Why do you think they're so attracted?"

"Being near the sea in such luxury and with so many diversions, I suppose. I come here very infrequently. I usually stay at the villa." Her face reflected a sharpening wariness. "What do

you really think of Sandspell?"

"Unbelievable."

"Do you want to be introduced to anyone?"

"No! Please spare me. I merely want to pretend that I'm an ordinary visitor having a look."

Fleet's eyes bore a quizzical expression. "Whatever makes you happy. But I can't pretend with you that you're ordinary...nor will anyone else."

Later, after Wyld had conferred briefly with Fox in the palm grove, he found himself standing in a flamboyantly suggestive bedroom filled with pillows, huge mirrors, and probably listening devices.

He shook his head and muttered, "This is grotesque, but the sitting room was almost tolerable."

"It was your idea," Fleet said with embarrassment. "All of the rooms aren't like this. I'm certainly going to ask my brother about this one."

"Don't bother."

"You're right, I won't."

Wyld ordered the room system to shut off the lights. They stood in somber reflection, watching black palms writhe in agony below the sea terrace, while nest-bound gulls beat against the gray subfusc twilight with outraged cries.

"I was mistaken. Let's slip away right now," he said, "back to your prim villa. I feel like a fly in a honey jar."

Yes, back to the villa. His men were through here now, and at the villa they could easily disengage the hidden bugs and he could say his proper good-bye to Fleet. Away at once from the garish impertinence of profit-induced architecture, from the insensitive

and brutal always found in its midst.

News of his sister's visit to Sandspell was late in reaching Nik Weaver. The resort staff had assumed that he already knew of the brief visit. The news came to him by accident. He immediately left off his business at a northern resort south of Oshen, rushing directly to the villa where Fleet was still residing after Wyld's departure.

Very little about Weaver resembled Fleet, except perhaps a slight curve in his lean rather weakly set jaw and the long ficus-leaved shape of his eyes. They were flashing dark barbs of alarm at his sister as he paced up and down on the thick beige carpet.

Fleet was relieved to see him, even to see him in such a different way as she had just begun to do, realizing that the constancy of kinship had precluded a deepening knowledge of the vain, brooding stranger moving uneasily before her.

There was something she must clarify, something that had been echoing over and over in the back of her mind ever since she had spoken with her two female acquaintances in the lobby of Sandspell: "We haven't seen you around here in ages," the tall dark beauty had said as she eyed Wyld with good-natured envy. "Don't tell me Nik has installed his own sister in this castle of dainties?"

Nik acted as if he had no idea what was meant by the remark, yet at the same time demanded to know who had made it. There was a strangeness in his eyes and a coolness in his voice that pricked at her as a badly disguised malice. For the first time in memory she refused to share a piece of information with him.

"You don't need to know who said it, Nik," she tried, making her voice soft and pleading.

He slipped his hands into the pockets of his elegantly cut jacket, clicked his tongue softly, and shook his head from side to side in sly minatory insinuation, the intense dark eyes never leaving her face.

Fleet remembered staring dumbly at the chiding woman as her suggestive voice dissolved into silent surprise then blatant discomfort, perhaps regret at her carelessness. Both women hurried nervously on to other subjects. Even as Fleet walked away she could feel those eyes hard upon her, still holding amazed expressions of disbelief.

"Why in *the black abyss of Koma* did you bring Wyld to Sandspell?"

Nik employed an expression that had sprung up in their childhood during the fateful interstellar probes of the mysterious sector known as Koma, where an entire Mainland exploratory fleet had disappeared. It was a chilling imprecation that evoked dark despair.

"He was curious to see the place, having heard about it. That's all."

"Why say it that way: *heard about it*? What did he really say?"

"Nothing. Everyone's heard about Sandspell. What is this, Nik? You'd think Sandspell was a den of...of..."

Something ominous had strobed across her brain with a blinding awakening. She sank down upon the couch, running her hands spasmodically over the upholstery, a pattern of blue pheasants strolling among odd pale-petaled flowers.

Unable to look up, a nerve jumping in her neck, she stared and stared at the strange flowers, a sickness rising in her chest. These pointed flowers...were they a real or imagined species? Her

mother would have known at once. What a painstakingly dedicated scientist her mother was. Why could she not have been like that? *Nik! Nik! How could it be?* How stupid she was. How blind. Everyone knew. Wyld of course. Now she remembered hearing things here and there, ridiculous made-up stories of evil, but they were true after all. How was it possible that she had moved in this world of glittering surfaces without anyone ever telling her to her face? Was it because they thought she already knew and approved?

At last she lifted her head, looking into her menacing brother's eyes. Always she had thought his eyes beautiful, the warm color of ground cinnamon. These faithless, sly, smirking eyes, how many horrors had they actually witnessed, condoned or - - worst of all! -- perpetrated?

"Nik, oh Nik, my big brother," she whispered, at last crying out, "Not you! *You!*" Rising hysteria and a rage of bitter laughter ended with a gasp of pain. "I was proud, *proud* of you. Mother...father... How could you? Why?" The words choked in her throat.

"Our parents work for Dagon, and Dagon is Sonna and Sandspell as well as academies of science."

"No! *No!*"

"What a sheltered life you've led, pretty flower, *you* draping yourself in stylish clothes and teasing your victims with this svelte untouchable body. It's people like us who keep the government oiled and running, either with cunning or simple blind devotion. Welcome to the seamy side of the cunning."

Fleet stood up and shook her finger at him. "What you do is unspeakable. Unspeakable! Preying on the doomed and helpless, using them and flinging them away!"

"And what do you do? Never mind, baby sister, I know what you do. You're a special kind of government employee. High class. If I had Wyld here I'd break his--"

Fleet lunged at her brother, her maddened body a blur of coppery fire and disoriented rage.

For an instant his mouth gaped in surprise, then they slipped noiselessly to the floor, grappling wildly as he tried to restrain her fury.

"I suppose...they chose you...uh...because innocence is Wyld's thing...unsucked honey...in the flower."

He pushed her face into the carpet and held her there by the back of her head.

"Stop! Oh, stop, Nik!" she cried with muffled words.

Nik sat up, unhanding her with a savage impersonal grin. "Well, that's better. This is crazy. My own little sister. That damned Wyld. This is his doing. By the blackest hole in space, I'd like to make him--"

"Don't speak of him, you fool! You're no match for him."

"You're the fool if you've fallen for that one. You can't serve yourself. You're just a quivering pawn, all hot emotion -- that's something I know about, believe me I know plenty -- a pawn pushed back and forth across the board until you've forgotten what side you're on. Yes, you're the fool! You haven't a clue, not a clue of the kind of force that has you now."

His sharp glances darted over the listening walls as he pulled her close and whispered harshly, "Poppy Umara will grind you up and toss you into her husband's fancy stew. All you can do now is try to survive."

It was Rymon Grabb, not Premier Umara, who would soon

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learn of this incident, but nothing said or done here would surprise him. In a lifetime of government service he had eavesdropped on a large number of unusual conversations, generally managing to use them effectively at some future point; the usefulness of this family altercation had become clear to him at once.

In the vaulted master bedroom of Solvault Hall a dim corner lantern, suspended from the high ceiling, swayed gently on its gold chain in the otherwise darkened room. The ground beneath the braced Hall was sending up a shivering answer to Mount Rubora's insistent rumble. Thin gold wall stripes flashed against their dark blue field, as the lantern's unhurried trajectory passed slowly to and fro over their vertical rows.

Wyld lay on his air-cushioned bed, watching the shaded lantern's hypnotic sway for a moment, then he ordered the computer to turn off the light. Wakeful captive of a long abeyant night, he stared up through the high arched glass at the buzzing stars, explosive fires pulsing with increasing fervor in his involuntary consciousness, the inescapable eyes of incoming memory.

He had now seen, and his men clandestinely recorded, the half-breed female captives at Sandspell, their coded, monitoring ankle bracelets flashing above fragile golden slippers. There were male captives too, living out their short life spans in menial or more odious tasks.

The resort was the same monstrous stable that Thame had claimed so feverishly to have fled the very day he pulled her aboard his sailboat. How many others would have tried such risky escape? She had smuggled herself aboard a low-decked merchantman, with

the help of a sympathetic merchant seaman, and been lowered over the side near the invisible Dagon sea border. The seaman had waited until he saw Wyld's boat, mercifully flying the Marchland sun pennant.

The vision of this orris-eyed girl, long tentacles of coal-black hair streaming out in a rising wave, had so startled him that he thought he was hallucinating. Swept up below his deck she hung within the wave's upturned peak, a haunting, shell-white face incarcerated in a field of pale green plasma, like an antique painting steeped in myth. The frightened plea in the wide violet eyes remained imbedded in his soul. Those eyes with their summer evening changes of lavender were the last beauty in her face.

At some indistinct moment in the bottom half of night, when disturbing images began to roil out of focus, elliptic thoughts merged with dreams, and he was plummeted into a hard rapacious sleep. But no sooner had the peacefully loosened unconscious reached its pinnacle of comfort than he was cruelly set upon -- just at sunrise -- by a sharply enunciated message from the overseer computer Domotron: special air freight awaited him in the mail room.

He stretched his outraged body then sat up, swinging his long legs over the bed's edge and running his fingers through a tawny confusion of hair. Incessant yawning, which he had not the will to suppress, produced a flow of tears. He walked to the window and stood with one hand pressed between cheekbone and pane's edge, waiting for his body to acknowledge wakefulness. His blue eyes had changed to a somnolent chert, reflecting in the glass the pale slate, wind-swept corridors of the western sky. A few cranberry-red and orange leaves, luminous even in the early light,

rose up and rasped faintly on the pane in a last whisper of life and vitality.

On his way to the swimming pool he wondered why he had let himself drum out an infrequent night like that, a little more precious energy burned, when there were a number of perfectly good remedies for insomnia.

Diving in he swam the twenty-five meters underwater, exited at the other end of the pool and headed for a hot shower. He finished by pelting his affronted body with a needle spray of freezing water, at last pronouncing his cold-galvanized mind functionally conscious.

His trim workaday khaki and boots were laid out for him by the house master Derak, as they were each morning, the type of clothes depending on the computer's schedule, which Derak faithfully checked.

He dressed with swift competence and was soon stepping off the elevator at the Hall's underground level. In the humming cavern, where a staggering amount of Marchland freight arrived and departed with praiseworthy efficiency, Wyld was surprised to encounter Jezz, Wirth, and Fox.

They stood with bemused faces near a perforated crate that had been broken down to its final peel by two cautious freight employees. Because the freight was foreign and registered as a gift, it had been subjected to various electronic safety checks.

"What's inside?" Wyld asked.

"We assume it's a dog," Fox answered, grinning. "As long as that's all it is, fine."

"Fine!" Wyld exclaimed. "I don't think... Well, let the poor beast out."

The attendants stripped off the final layer, and a young silken-haired wolfhound stepped cautiously out. He stretched, shook his head and sniffed the air while eyeing the men with a polite sidling glance, as though trying to determine which was his new master.

"Well, hello," Wyld called. "Come."

The dog trotted obediently forward -- passing through a final scanner as he did so --, moving with a subtle grace that augured the return of Laelaps. He was quickly adjudged clean and healthy.

"Sit," Wyld ordered.

The dog sat at once, with dark amber eyes fastened patiently on this stern new figure of authority.

"You're a beautiful animal, that's certain."

Wyld knelt and placed his arms around the dog's neck, his caressing hands removing a small rolled note tied beneath the dog's head.

It read: "I am eighteen months old. I have no name. I am well-mannered, trustworthy, and will not disgrace this house."

Although the wolfhound was sent from a country famous for such purebred animals, it bore the name of no sender. Nevertheless, Wyld was certain that he knew who it was.

In a few days Premier Xheeva appeared in a holograph communication, and Wyld mentioned that her gift had arrived.

"Very good," she said, laughing. "Then it was no mystery to you at all?"

"No, but does this handsome male hound imply your hand in the death of Laelaps?"

"Not my hand. You must know that I would never

implicate an Immix, regardless of how I dealt with that person. Let us try to speak no more of this. We must consider the immediate future.

"By the way, Doctor Skye Kleeve is unstoppable. She drives herself and everyone else relentlessly. The staff must be doubled for two shifts, and I fear for her health. Can't you speak to her?"

"I can and will, but she's a resolutely single-minded person. As I recall, her vacation is overdue. I'll send for her. She may wish to return to the Mainland," he added.

"But can't you have her come to Seche for a rest? One of my advisors arranged a flat I thought irresistible, and she refused to spend even a single day there."

Wyld frowned and said tactfully, "I'll question her about it when she arrives."

"She did try to barter with me. If I allowed her to take a troublesome half-breed to the March on her next vacation, she would come to Seche for a short visit. Would you approve such a plan?"

"I think it unwise. A difficult patient only means that she's bringing more work with her. Black suns! I suppose she finds this arrangement necessary. I don't approve, but I would tend to respect her judgment."

XX

The first thing Sayka did upon their morning arrival in the March was to slip away after breakfast, disappearing quietly into the forest, with remarkable stealth and a half hour head start.

As soon as she was missed, Wirth was sent speedily after

her with the new wolfhound. Chloë and Wyld had gone off on their own search, in another direction.

In the afternoon, when they were tramping the foothills of Mount Rubora, Wyld saw that Chloë was falling behind and noticeably tired. This discovery jarred him from his detached state of pursuit, and he realized that he should never have let her engage in the search. They were on a sliding slope in among short alpine firs and there was no safe place for Wyld Violet to land. They would have to walk over this rugged terrain a good distance.

He cursed himself for allowing this wayward hunt in the first place. It was all simply the result of Chloë's sense of responsibility and nervous energy. If anyone had even bothered to check the computers they would probably find that Savers had already pinpointed the girl. Chloë had insisted that they not track Sayka down by satellite *like a criminal*, but there were plenty of men to do the job, not that Wirth would need a single one of them.

Still, Wyld knew why he had agreed to come. Somewhere along the way he had intended to set things straight with Chloë, determined to at last free them both from vague and impossible commitments. Now, with the immediate problem of her worrisome fatigue, the opportunity had passed.

Even the dauntless Chloë could not hide her condition, which she tried to mask with careless light-hearted banter.

"I've really no fear for Sayka with Wirth and that educated animal on her trail," she said, laughing just as her boot struck a rock and sent her weary body sprawling over the jagged pumice.

There was a faint trickle of blood on her cheek, but she rolled over gingerly and lay back on the cruel rocks, giggling over her clumsiness.

Wyld doubled back to help her up, and was reaching for the tail of his shirt to wipe her face when dizziness made her slip to the ground and lower her head.

"Chloë!" he exclaimed, swearing and catching her arm.

"I'll be all right in a minute. I shouldn't laugh so hard at this altitude."

"You're as feverish as a child who's stayed up too late...and you have no more sense than that child."

"Please don't be cross," she implored, staring up at him with an apologetic smile. "I know this is my fault."

"Part of it. And don't look at me with those pleading oceanic eyes...or there'll be two reckless children here."

She made as if to get up.

"Wait," he said, kneeling. "Put your arms around my neck. I'll carry you."

"Certainly not. I can walk," she insisted, sitting up straight.

"Get your arms around my neck or I'll put you to sleep with this thumb." He held up his dangerously clever hand with menacing certainty.

"How quaint," she scoffed.

"I'm not joking. You'll miss all the fun of my pitiful attention and go down this slope as ignominiously as a sack of potatoes...a much easier method for me actually, just to throw you over my shoulder." He slipped his long fingers around her neck and stared fiercely into her eyes.

Incipient protest dissolved into embarrassment. She felt certain that Wyld would do just as he said, therefore reluctantly allowed her light body to be gathered up.

He had already sworn to relinquish Chloë, but he was glad

to have her for a time near enough to seem within his personal province. The way his ideas about himself changed daily was a source of wonder. Getting knowledge about oneself was a painfully slow process, like groping between obstructive bars into a dark room. The learning came in bits and pieces, and it was often difficult to see how they would fit together, or if the dark room could accommodate harmonious pieces of truth at all.

He was glad of his age, glad that he had loved, that he had both failures and successes at his back, and glad of the self-discipline assisting him now.

He looked down at Chloë and regretted the stiff way she held her head away from him even though she was exhausted. He was sorry that he could so affect her, but readily understood her fear. Fear so often caused a repetition of mistakes, that stultifying fear the jailer of one's heart.

"Your tired mind is still working hard at something," he commented, guessing that she wanted the diversion of conversation.

"I was coming to realize that being in Immixia makes one think differently. Do you suppose civilization actually grows, improves at all, or merely reaches a certain point and slips back into the same errors? It's a subject on which so many great minds have theorized, but the experiment never gets finished in any categorical way."

"And never will get finished, because the process is an open-ended one. Unless of course we all get laid to rest for good. It's difficult to say how much we improve. Our technical accomplishments are confused with our progress at being humane. I like to think that civilization does improve, very slowly with many

regrettable setbacks."

"And I would like to agree."

"Do you want to hear my theory on improving mankind?"

"Please tell me," she invited, smiling and relaxing her head a little, adding to the relief of them both.

"It hinges on the human drama of the life cycle: first comes the brashness of youth, creative and often daring and fearless, but also careless -- too young and the brain has not even finished developing; then comes the disenchantment with life and a desire for comfort and stability, with the specter of death making faces in the wings; finally comes frailty and stubborn opposition to change at far too high a cost -- the future is gone and the past relived.

"So what's my answer, the remedy?" he asked, grinning down at Chloë, whose face had relaxed considerably as she was drawn toward the powerful magnet of sleep.

"As a scientist I can only speculate that the answer is a healthy longevity -- of course assisted by a comprehensive early education," Chloë said, trying to suppress a yawn.

"Exactly...less likely to repeat mistakes with a longer overview and early inculcation. Our humanitarian instincts may well have time to develop without lapsing into puerile delusions and the dread of imminent death. We'll have time to learn that our supposed enemies aren't so alien after all and deserve the same rewards we desire for ourselves."

"Once you called *me* an idealist," Chloë teased. But her agreeable manner held understanding and appreciation.

"Of course, but the ideal approaches real possibility, and..." He stopped walking and stood for a minute with his eyes cast over the hills, a determined smile playing over his face. "And I suppose

that's what continues to drive me forward. It seems simple enough, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, yawning again and with a sleepy voice, "What appears simple is always the most profound." Her head dipped under the weight of fatigue. "What about power and greed and the flawed ones...those who can never be changed?"

"Always a problem," he agreed, chuckling in dismay. "Perhaps they can be fixed too, or with such a long life will simply tire of their own foolishness."

Then he asked with scolding voice, "When did you last sleep?"

"I don't remember...suppose I've been keeping...rather irregular hours. I'm sorry. I'm...deeply interested in what you're saying but I..."

Her head slumped against the damp shirt beneath his open jacket. The jogging of his boots over rough terrain had lulled her to sleep, even though she had tried again and again to hold her eyes open.

It was appropriate, he thought, that his lofty private dream should be given to a sleeper, where it could percolate without willful adjustment. Such colossal transitions were revealed only in dream-like fragments, with no full sense of how the evolving whole would permute and finish itself. Perhaps he stood on the threshold of that hoped-for human advancement when mankind, truly heroic at last, would have its reward: an unprecedented kinship with the vast cosmos. Thenceforth, humans would push off into unlimited adventure of great proportions, for which only a very few imaginative prophets had just begun to prepare.

He laughed softly to himself. Chloë had a peculiar effect

on him that always set the wheels turning. He looked at her as if he were awakening from a dream himself, and was completely amazed to have her in his arms, this passionate fire of life, so vulnerable, so known and unknown, sleeping within his trust.

His foot crashed against a rock. He dipped low and rebalanced himself, holding her slight body effortlessly. Her eyelids did not even flutter.

She slept on when he placed her on the bed in the stone cottage, which he had built so many years ago for himself, never dreaming what solace the rough haven would provide. He had gone there often after Rane and Theka's deaths; in that regenerative cave of his own making, trying to realign a sense of purpose.

The place was always kept clean and tidy, but he called on his RM, requesting food and quilts and fresh clothes from Sunring for Chloë.

In a while he would hike to the meadow to meet the aides arriving in Wyld Violet. They would come and happily transform the cottage into an enchanting rest house for her; such human tasks they loved.

Meanwhile, he cut off dead fir limbs outside the cabin with his laser knife and built a small fire in the big stone fireplace, which his eager young hands had single-mindedly chinked firmly together. A chilly autumn evening descended over the alpine land. He glanced with concern at Chloë who lay in deep slumber covered only by his jacket. He was glad to be so readily resourceful, taking pleasure in improvising for her comfort.

Always after long periods of work and inadequate rest Chloë slept this way. Even much earlier when she was coaxed from her lab out on the colony and returned to the planet for an

interlude, her first few days of rest time were spent in a spell of total lassitude, sleeping away an exhaustion of which she had hardly been aware. For days afterward she would lie dreaming on a warm beach, sometimes fretting over her work, less often peacefully disengaged. Her sojourn in Immixia had been far more demanding, and once again she required a deep unconsciousness to recoup from the strain of sustained mental exertion. None of the events going on around her would disturb the soundness of her sleep.

Wyld pulled a rough pine chair near Chloë and sat down. He rested his right booted foot on his left khaki-covered knee, folding his arms over his blue shirt and studying her. Leaning forward he examined the small pumice scratch on her cheek. Her slender arm had fallen from the low bed, the fingers nearly touching the bare floor. On her wrist the gold RM glittered. Never had she used it to call him. Lifting the fallen hand he studied the fingers: short clean nails with white moons and a few ragged cuticles where she had nervously bitten. He kissed the fingers one by one and placed the hand back on the bed. Then in a low brooding voice he began a frank and unselfconscious monologue.

"Why did we come out here, you and I? We weren't needed at all but you must have your way, and I...I had begun to think you invulnerable. We were both a little foolish, as flawed human animals so often are.

"I did swear I would not jeopardize your honorably ordered life with the hazards of my own. But when I saw you again I knew it was an oath I would break. We're alike in some ways. We share a stubborn determination, a mulishness that will not let wrongful things stand...and we share a...a self-imposed loneliness. But, my splendid creature, you are afraid of this emblematic Wyld you've

made. And I'm afraid of you...afraid of diminishing your completeness, of leaving my fingerprints on your shining presence. Still, there's something...an implicit hope, not a lavish assurance, my forest bird, but essential. I see that you revere the March and therefore me. You're the March in me, so quickly in me. We're not a race or tradition to one another, despite what you uphold; we're of this time and place, but far outside convention. If I could find a way to make us safely one and keep us two, I would give anything allowed of me, share with you everything I know how to give. You could teach me more. But what have I except my confounding self to offer a rare creature like you?"

He stopped a moment, listening to her breathing and thinking. With closed eyes and relaxed face she was not as distracting, but all the more prized for her ingenuous withdrawal, for having slept peacefully in his presence.

"I could build you a laboratory, the finest of its kind. Would your eyes burn their phosphor an instant for me then, altruist? I've heard that I'm cold-blooded, but here with you, always with you, my blood disobeys the tenet."

Wyld got up to tend the fire, then returned to lean briefly over the softly glowing face, its response trapped in a heavy net of merciful sleep. He pulled his jacket more carefully around her and went out into the cold evening.

The young wolfhound was delighted to have a serious assignment in which his excellent nose was to be eminently involved. He bounded ahead, circling back occasionally to check on Wirth, who had already grown quite attached to his amiable scout.

Crossing the narrow footbridge they had tracked all day along the western bank of the Ruddle. Wirth had grown more impressed with the girl Sayka with each step taken. When she could do so without losing her direction, she had kept to the river and moved almost nonstop, keeping the brightest spot in the clouds, where the pale afternoon sun could not break through, always on her left; thus she moved in a nearly straight northwesterly direction.

Approximately fifty-five kilometers dead ahead, but around Flaming Lake on foot and over extremely hilly and rugged terrain, was the Dagon border. If she should ever chance to reach it she would be in grave danger, for the borders were monitored on both sides by lethal Savers. But Wirth wasted little thought on such an improbability. A chilly evening was drawing near. He, in his thermal gear, did not mind, but the girl would suffer exposure unless she could devise some means of protection, or unless she stumbled across the deserted cabin that Wyld had built for Thame on this side of Flaming Lake. He wondered how much the girl understood about this environment and why she had not gone southeast toward Immixia, although she would have been equally imperiled.

Near sunset he stopped to swallow a little water and a mouthful of synthesized protein. As he was finishing, the dog returned highly agitated and whined at his heels, then set off on a short run. Wirth was not surprised to find the dog heading for the Flaming Lake cabin. A search of the sadly vacant vine-smothered dwelling revealed that it had been broken into and a few things borrowed. Even in certain exhaustion, the wily creature was careful not to be found in an obvious place.

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The dog bounded off again, making his way along a precipitous rock face overhanging the lake. In the dim light Wirth found him looking intently, with low whining sounds, at a ledge halfway up that opened into a cramped chink in the rock. He smiled, knowing that the only route of escape was the one used in ascent.

The girl now had a stolen old blanket wrapped about her and had secured a safe and tolerable resting place. Wirth decided to wait for her morning exit. One cold night on a hard rock bed was better persuasion for surrender than anything he could offer in a shouting match. He returned to the melancholic cabin, made himself comfortable and slept.

Sayka's final morning descent was done with an agility pleasing to watch, and with her back to Wirth who stood with his arms folded. The silenced wolfhound watched with barely contained excitement and perked ears.

Noticing that she kept looking to her right as she descended, Wirth had only to approach carefully from the left and grab her as she steadied herself for the final leap to the ground. She recoiled instantly in shock and rage, but there was no escape from the one-armed grip in which he held her. He had learned long ago the usefulness of one free arm held in readiness for the unexpected.

"I'm not the enemy," he said, reluctantly tightening up as she struggled violently. "Even though you have not learned to recognize the difference."

"I have to relieve myself. Let me go."

"You've already done that. You came down earlier. Lucky for you there was a bit of moon; you could have broken your neck."

Are you hungry?"

"No. I won't come with you. I'll fight all the way. You'll have to kill me."

"I could put you to sleep, but to me that seems unfair. You're not a prisoner but you do have to return with me. I'll let you go, just hold you by the arm, and you'll walk beside me. I don't want to hurt you; no one here does."

The laconic Wirth knew that he had spoken enough, that the girl had surely heard her share of persuasive words; all of which meant little in her paranoid condition.

Glancing sideways he watched her as they walked, taking in her slender form, underfed and lost in a plaid shirt and rough woven slacks. Beneath the disheveled shortly cropped hair was the brittle set of a grief-stricken face. A wave of compassion swept over him as he considered what her life must have been, brutal enough to make her run away in a land she did not know, to a harsh and uncertain destiny.

He stopped and let go of her arm to take off his outer jacket. She stepped back as though ready for an assault.

"Here, put this on," he instructed, ignoring her belligerent stance.

She took it greedily, rapidly folding herself into it without any show of appreciation.

Wirth had reported on his RM that he was bringing Sayka in, but he did not yet call for Wyld Violet. At first he had wanted a chance with the girl to make it easier for Chloë, but now he wanted the girl's trust even more.

In the beginning, he had expected Jezz to do this job, thinking that his extroverted cohort would be better suited to the

task, but Jezz had another assignment. Now he had come to believe that he might be the one best suited to cope with this sullen creature. He turned to smile at Sayka, loosening his grip. Instantly she wrenched her arm free and sped down to the lake, dropping the large jacket behind her.

What in black suns! Was she going to drown herself? He would have to build a fire and dry their clothes. He would have to call Wyld Violet and come dragging in like a spent hound. He bore down on her in great angry strides just as her ankles touched the water.

He had her by her short hair, and she spun around swinging her fists furiously and screaming, "Let go! Let go! I'll drown myself. I'll drown myself before I'll be a bloody test rat in some bloody laboratory."

Even the wolfhound had joined in the excitement, howling and splashing with leaps of enthusiasm.

The big hand led her out of the water, still by hair that was so short Wirth could barely get his fingers into it, gripping the strands against her pale scalp. She screamed and kicked and swung her pummeling arms. Wirth took a dozen good blows. Better to let her get in a few, owing to someone, probably a number of people down the line. Finally he pinned her on the ground, staring straight into the strange silvered-lilac eyes, knowing she could easily read the dark anger and disappointment in his.

"Now you'll have to walk in wet shoes," he said against her ear. He shook his head from side to side and clicked his tongue in disgust. "You won't like it. They'll squish. They'll make your feet cold...chafe them raw."

After nearly six kilometers, Wirth sat down on a flat rock

for water and protein. Sayka drank but refused to eat.

"Would you have drown yourself?" he asked, eyeing her faintly quaking body drawn tightly up in defense.

"Sure. Yes. What's the difference? I'm going to die anyway."

"So am I, but not for a while I hope. You could stand a little meat on your bones, but if you're going to die any time soon I'm from Koma. Did you know you were heading north?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was going to Dagon to get my gold ankle bracelet."

Wirth gave her a long hard look.

"You wouldn't cross the border alive."

"So? Fine."

"What makes you think they'd want you for that purpose anyway? A skinny sinew like you."

Sayka turned her head quickly away, then back, glancing twice at Wirth with dejected eyes.

"I lost a lot of weight because I was running around so much. Always underground from one end of Immixia to the other."

"And they caught you."

"They never would have caught me! I can go anywhere. I never had a dog tracking me."

"Why did they catch you?"

"Just something stupid I did."

"Well, that's all it takes."

She was staring straight ahead, her face resolutely set. "I went to my mother's funeral...not much to it...just burned her up. I

went... It was a mistake."

Wirth lowered his head and sat silently for a minute, then reached into his pack. "I've got some salve in here that might make it easier walking. Let's check your feet."

He knelt down, removing the ill-fitting wet shoes made of a hard inflexible synthetic. She had no stockings. Her cold blue feet were chafed, the skin broken and red.

Something caught in his throat and his furiously clenched jaw began to ache.

"I might have to carry you the rest of the way." He looked up with a smile. "Would you mind that?"

The girl had had enough. At the next clearing he called Wyld Violet for a pick-up.

When the exhausted Sayka was brought into the flooding light of Solvault Hall's gleaming medical wing, she recoiled at once and looked around with narrowed eyes, evaluating escape, steeling herself for the next frightful event.

"You don't have to stay here if you don't want to," Wirth said, "but you ought to let them give you a checkup. They'll feed you and you can have a warm bath, fresh clothes and a soft bed. It sounds good to me."

"Where are you going?" Sayka asked.

"Nowhere. I live at the Hall. I'll come and see you in the morning...after your breakfast."

Sitting hunched in the chair, she looked small and forlorn. The carefully maintained hard veneer had been worn away by fatigue and pain.

"It will be all right," Wirth said with a soothing smile as he ruffled her hair. "You'll see."

Her pale eyes followed him down the hall and remained fastened on the door that slid shut behind him.

XXI

Chloë's distraught communication broke into Wyld's deep concentration as he worked alone at his computer desk in Solvault Hall.

"Jarl Wyld, can you come...fly up? Please?"

"What is it?" he asked, already heading for the door.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to alarm you. It's only that I...I need to talk to you."

"But you are talking to me."

"No, I must speak to you here. Please come."

Half an hour later, when Wyld finally entered the stone cottage after sending away the aide he had left near her door, he found Chloë standing nervously in the middle of the room, biting her fingers. She had been anxiously pacing.

"Here I am...Wyld: Chloë's flunky. You haven't rested enough and you're biting your fingers. What is it?"

His vigorous long-limbed presence filled the room as he stood with his arms akimbo, waiting and smiling with humor.

She gazed at him in disbelief then looked with surprise at the sudden warm ambience of her pine-slatted space. The yellow flowers beside her bed, the orange fire dancing near the rough hearth, the striped apples beside a green half-filled bottle of wine on the waxed trestle table, and the blue-starred quilt laid over the rocker; all harmoniously glowing with a fresh brightness, felicitous and suddenly stimulating, because he was there.

"I wanted..." she broke off and came to stand near him.

The Marchman

He remained motionless, his blue eyes boring into her, waiting for her to perhaps concede what he already knew.

She left him and went outside, turning slowly in a circle, staring at the white-dusted peaks, the feathered clouds, the silent dark firs with their drooping limbs sweeping over the path to the sky-filled tarn; all perfectly wrought and wondrously serene.

Wyld followed, ducking the cabin door -- he had made it too low long ago, but left it that way. Perplexed, he stood on the path, holding a long woolen cape that he had snatched up for Chloë. Perhaps he was mistaken.

"What in black suns is it?" he called, impatient, but wondering if he should summon a medic.

She walked toward him and stood in a most unnerving way. Her soft voice grew intense, thin yet clear, spoken for him but also to clarify something for herself.

"Those nights at Kiva when I sat unwinding my mind, I swore that I would never let myself too near Jarl Wyld again. I swore...I swore that I would behave."

Wyld was not overly surprised at their likeness of mind but could hardly restrain his laughter at the incongruous word *behave*, which presumed an authority and a rule quite opposed to anything the willful Chloë was likely to observe.

"Before you came just now, inside, outside, nothing was clear...darkness...in me. I thought I had dreamed..." She lifted her head and stared at Wyld, her eyes expanding with emerald light. "Was it...yes, two days ago I dreamed you were speaking to me. I awoke and you had gone. I felt a chill, slipping back into the rescue of warm sleep. It was some time later that you came and told me Wirth had found Sayka -- how glad I was. We ate the stew they

brought and drank red wine. I wandered around touching things. You sat by the fire...I thought you seemed content. This cabin with its yellow flowers was almost too much...so much. I dropped happily into sleep again, the way I sometimes do after a surfeit of work. Then I dreamed the same dream, that you were speaking to me...the same words. You did speak them?"

"Yes."

"Does it trouble you to know that I remember some of them...most of them?"

"Only if it troubles you."

"But it was more than words...so much more. It was a feeling I had as you spoke them. Such a feeling I've never had...floating in warmth, amniotic warmth -- feeling that secure...but when I awoke my heart was beating too fast. Everything was different. You were gone. You left me."

He smiled at her peevishness.

"I had work to do and you needed sleep. I left someone. You could have had whatever you wanted."

"But I wanted *you*...and you were gone!"

She threw back her head. Stray bits of loosely gathered-up hair, the color of harvest straw in the Gream fields, flew about her flushed face.

"I felt empty and...dull...nearly deprived of air and wretchedly infirm...something vital gone from me. I wanted you...*you*, as I've never wanted anything...anyone."

Her bewildered, nervous presence and deeply earnest voice -- a passionate voice of conviction joined with the irony of self-ridicule -- was a heady aphrodisiac. Such stunning honesty deluged his senses. Now they had both transgressed on their sworn

intentions. What had he done? What had *they* done? He turned away.

Her breath caught in her throat. He had gone away from her again, cruelly preoccupied with some curious detail of nature. Then she saw where he looked: a tawny young puma, cautiously aware of them, was slinking away from the tarn.

Wyld glanced once, twice, and again over his shoulder at her. At last the unwavering eyes pinned her with an emotion-filled voice powerful as anger, irrevocable.

"You have me, have had me since the day I found your footprint in the mud next to mine. I thought I'd made it painfully obvious. I don't think you realize the trouble you're in."

He drew the cape around her and fastened it under her chin without taking his eyes from hers.

"Wait here. I'll get my coat and we'll walk to the tarn."

But when he returned he saw her cape fluttering below on the path as she sped away in an elusive wildness.

He began to run, his long legs advancing without the impetus of thought, just as a wild stag's legs might blindly span a precipice on its way to a clash for rank.

Catching up to her he pulled her to him, whirling in a melee of cries and laughter that echoed far away off the lonely rims. Their panting breath came in white puffs against the divided sky, blue in the north and a changing dove gray in the south, a snow sky.

"I...will not...always...do your bidding," she gasped, her face a violent mix of pleasure and lung-bursting pain. She leaned back against a moss-encrusted trunk to catch her breath.

"Soft understatement...coming from such hard-cut

diamond.” He laughed, wrapping his long arms around the modest tree, pinning Chloë between himself and the trunk, kissing her until fine threads of her hair were caught up in the rough bark.

Her eyes shone a fiery ecstatic green, a flaming tropical depth that stood before and plummeted beyond the frosted blue mountains far-heaved at the cold sky's brink.

"This is the moment...that I could never imagine...no matter how I tried," he muttered as his mouth touched the face, the blooded throat, the tangled hair that was his joy.

They remained joined, independent of all memory and sorrow, rejoicing in one another until time was reduced to a single cream cloud drifting silently in the north.

Chloë, Sayka, and Wirth were strolling idly on a well tended farm in the fertile Gream Valley.

This valley, a mosaic of green foodstuffs and fulvous thick-headed grain stocks, depended heavily on the Suklia River for its irrigation. Generally the warm Singe only dropped its sparse moisture and blew itself out when it struck the rather barren side of the purple range that thrust up giant Mount Sorus to the east.

They had brought Sayka to the Gream because Chloë was not easily recognized here, and Sayka must not know her true identity until her work in Immixia was finished. Sayka was comfortable with nature, enjoyed animals, and could move about freely in the open Gream. It seemed unlikely to Chloë that Sayka would cause them further concern, after she had heard of Wirth's kindness to the girl from Sayka's own lips.

Wirth, noticing the startling difference of mood in his two companions -- Chloë, bright and ebullient; Sayka, sullen and

preoccupied -- disappeared momentarily, returning with something tucked inside his large hand.

"See what I have," he said to Sayka, kneeling down and opening his fist.

A tiny ball of palest lemon fuzz, with minuscule short cottony flippers hinting of wings, turned its bobbing head and made fearful peeping sounds, looking about it with the merest hint of beaded eye.

Sayka crouched down, her solemn mouth issuing a thin shriek of laughter heretofore unheard.

"Let me see it. Give it here." She took the baby chick carefully in her hand and rubbed it gently against her cheek. "What a silly little thing you are."

Chloë watched them, smiling with pleasure at Wirth's understanding, and at the picture they made: the dark head and close-cropped fair head bent together over the chick.

The girl had warmed to Wirth as she had to no other, her face blooming whenever he paid her some small attention.

Yet Wirth was merely being kind to someone he pitied. Chloë still sensed, with deep sadness, his hunger for her, a hunger she had helped in her exuberance to kindle, and a hunger that he now secreted in himself and openly shunted aside with cautious reserve.

Her thoughts brightened when she considered the plight of Sayka. It was within her power to offer the disturbed girl normalcy, at least in span of life, for Sayka's tests had just proved negative. The results of these tests had verified her theory, a confidential hypothesis that only she and the late Doctor Vale had posited, that a small number of half-breeds did not succumb to the lethal gene.

The clue came by way of an old discovery and her own persistent good health. This meant there were a few Meztas hidden away who had lived long lives with fear always at their backs, and who believed that they had somehow freakishly cheated death.

A century ago a simple way had been discovered to identify those people who were immune to most diseases, and they could be readily separated from the vast majority who must be immunized. These genetic markers had been a great breakthrough that led to an increasingly sophisticated era of preventative medicine, and to an intricate deconstruction and rebuilding of a complex but flawed multipurpose gene. This work had facilitated Chloë's triumph.

Sayka's new misery came from her awakening desire not only to live but to be cherished in life, a desire steadily dashed against the belief that she would soon die. Chloë knew only too well that the terrible clash of an anxious urge to get death over with and a stubborn will to live was an agony even the strongest heart could not long withstand. Now that her tests were conclusive she must speak at once and had brought Sayka here to do so.

She, who had once lived with imminent death, now had the knowledge and power to give Sayka an incredible release. This, coupled with her lofty emotional suspension in a rare medium with Wyld, filled her with a spirited optimism. Her face glowed with a rising elation that could not be brought down, and her laughter flowed over everything, flashing like a lively sun-spangled brook. This radiant enhancement did little to quell Wirth's adulation.

In the evening a fire of orchard prunings was permitted in the farmyard, a hot snapping blaze sending Chloë into a crimson reverie. She stood with worshipful hands extended toward the

rising sparks and flames.

Except at festivals, the smoke of fire was rare on the night breeze, for all fibrous materials were pulverized and returned to the soil. The Marchlanders, drawn by an ancient yearning for the soothing warmth and cleansing purity of fire, appeared with musical instruments. Now they could merrily serenade their guests in the leaping orange light.

Wyld, who had not been expected yet, stepped out of the darkness. The farmers murmured that the Jarl had come. Folding his arms he stood not far from Chloë, whose face was flushed and shining in the heat. The two neither spoke nor manifested any private sentiment, yet the magnetism of their attraction was as obvious to Wirth as the fire itself.

Sayka, withdrawn and sulky, had removed herself to a bench under a leafless tree, her ashen face cast in a hopeless dream. Through the branches a few stars glittered in a clear sky still holding a smoky topaz streak at its horizon. Presently Chloë went to Sayka and put her arm around the girl's thin shoulders.

As she began to speak to Sayka, Wyld drew discreetly near and watched with interest the changes of anger, shock, and finally a heady euphoria, still mingled with disbelief but now transforming the girl's face.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to tell you before you ran away," Chloë said with apologetic concern.

"I'm not," Sayka answered. "I'm glad." Her eyes traveled to Wirth, who was listening to the strange trading notes of an ocarina. "I'm glad. I'm glad! And all this time...all of this time..." Her voice broke.

"Sayka...this is one of the most important moments of your

life. You feel many things all at once."

"How do you know what I feel?" she cried, lifting her bowed head.

"I do...believe me I do. But now you have a healthy future and in a while you must decide what to do. Don't worry about it yet, but when you get used to the idea we'll talk again. I want to help you in any way I can."

"I want to work with you," Sayka announced with a willful exuberance.

"A wonderful idea, but you would have to study quite a lot."

"Then I will. What do I care how long it takes? Before, I had nothing."

Her face was ablaze with a determination that Chloë found completely disarming. She took Sayka's hand and together they watched some of the Marchlanders, who had linked up to dance slowly around the fire.

The dancers beckoned to their families and friends, and more joined in, coming together in a turning kaleidoscope of rhythmic hands and feet. Then a young tenor voice caused the skin of his listeners to quiver with pleasure as he sang homage to the land and the fire and the night.

After a while they began to pair off, and Sayka walked over to a small group of musicians containing Wirth.

Chloë returned to the bench, proudly watching her young charge. Sayka's shoulders no longer drooped. Her head was cocked at a confident angle, with a teasing expression on her rejuvenated face. Something she said made Wirth tilt his head and grin at her.

"How enchantingly you offer longevity," came a soft baritone voice from the shadows behind Chloë.

Her face burned and her hands tingled as she slowly drew her head back. Against the soft night sky loomed a dark silhouette merging with a tangle of black knotted branches. She sat quietly, with her head tilted back so that her eyes caught the stars and her throat the pale flicker of the fire. Although the breeze passed easily through her richly embroidered gauze blouse, she felt the cold only as an intensifying, throbbing pleasure.

"Come walk with me," Wyld offered with lowered voice.

She stood up a little unsteadily and followed the tall figure out along a dim fence row. The dry grasses rustled against their legs as they moved along single file, the smoke of the fire still in their silent throats. Crickets stopped when they approached and started up again at their backs. They halted a moment as a night hawk darted out of their path and twittered low over the sweet dusty fields.

When they had dipped down at last over a black rolling hillock, Wyld turned, lifting her against him in a long kiss. His leather jacket under her cheek smelled a pleasant machine smell, the aroma of Wyld Violet's cabin.

"How I wanted that, wanted you," he said, holding her trembling body tight inside his jacket. "My reward after a long, long day.

"In the morning I have to go upcountry to the mines, and you'll be gone a day before I'm back. Am I really going to let you go to that place again, I ask myself."

"Yes," she answered, trying to stand still and keep her voice calm. "My work isn't finished."

"It isn't nearly as safe as you think, a short distance away but deep into risk. When I consider the things that could happen I"

His words were stopped by Chloë's gentle hand.

"Don't speak of it please. I'm just going about my work...and I'm annoyingly well guarded."

"But in black suns by whom!" he said hotly. "I don't trust your Immix guards any more than Dagonites. Am I foolish enough to let you--"

"I'm going," she interrupted. "You've given me two aides. I thought we'd settled this. I can't keep fighting for what I've already won."

She stood, silently letting the calming darkness flow around them. Then she heard Wyld draw a deep breath of resignation. A wrench of misery stirred her voice.

"Jarl Wyld, I don't want to leave you."

He laughed softly. "You're entirely paradox: stony-willed yet full of passion. All right. I understand what drives you. Will you forget us, forget to come home?"

"No," she said, clasping her arms tightly around him and rubbing her face against his jacket. "I'll dream of homecoming."

"What about your waking moments?"

He bent his head over her, pressing his mouth to the smoke-scented hair that fell to her waist, this magical plaited hair that his hands had ached to touch in the firelight, that under his closed lids, branded in the recesses of his lonely mind, was a gleaming braid of fire, inescapable as twined hemp lashing him up in a sweet hot flame.

"I've something to say. Here. Sit." He took her wrists and pushed her gently down on the grass.

"We might freeze here," she posed with laughter.

He took off his jacket, kneeling beside her, but as he pulled it around her she protested.

"No, you need it."

"I feel no cold."

He squinted at her dark silhouette and reached for her hands, holding them a moment in silence. Then his voice came slowly.

"Chloë...Chloë Churlwraith, I've listed you on the Wyld Documents Terminal as my wife."

He felt her hands convulse and struggle to draw away, but he gripped them firmly, refusing to let go.

His revelation hardly resembled a proposal and was not praiseworthy. He could see how it might appear selfish, even pigheaded. After years of circumnavigating this one question, long strategies of avoidance, his resistance had ended in a single swift act, a *let's pretend* moment spent teasing the Documents Terminal in much the same way that a boy, perhaps one of his antecedents, might have carved his sweetheart's initials in the bark of a tree. After the deed was done, he stood looking at her name linked with his under the official seal, realizing with a resounding shock that to suffer its ill-omened removal -- a name that only his voice would ever be permitted to record -- was a loss with the magnitude and finality of death. This was why he held onto her protesting hands so tightly, with thousands of promises dancing unspoken on his tongue; the ones he most wished to make, those for her safety and well-being, were admittedly the most unpromising.

"But you never...and you're...aren't you..." She struggled for the word, "committed?"

"Committed to *you*," he said emphatically. "I meant no disrespect. You were not there to ask. I ask now."

"But it's already law. I had nothing to say."

"A law that you can make me rescind. Tell me to remove your name."

"I can't let you... I can't..."

"You said that you wanted me, then let it be for a while. It isn't public, and it gives me such pleasure. In some small corner of my mind I imagine that I've made you inviolable. Your name belongs there, does it not? -- just as you belong to the March...to me."

"You want to be my husband?" The meaning struck her like a blow, and her voice filled with incredulity. "Jarl Wyld, do you trust me so much?"

"Chloë, my wife, my *wife*...and -- if you like obscure titles -- Jarlina, I trust you with everything, March and man. Call me husband again: at last a title that suits me."

"My husband," she said softly with wonder. "Why do I let you do this? How can it be?"

"Chloë, an idea has just cudgeled my torpid brain. Come to Shellreef with me. I'll send them a message for supper, a ceremonial supper for two. Please?"

"I don't think..."

"Please," he said again, and she saw for the first time a reflection of the impatient and eager young Caz, a name that now only Alba used, a childhood name.

"Jarl Wyld," she said, her serious voice abandoned to a rush of laughing tones as she lay back on the crackling grass. "Jarl, Casimir, husband...playmate Caz."

The Marchman

"Yes...yes," he answered, rocked by the sound of her laughter.

He called Wirth on his RM and put him in charge of Sayka, asked one of his men to deposit Chloë's traveling case in Wyld Violet, then drew her up against him and along through the moonlit grasses toward the place where his ship waited.

The round, red, drunken moon-face hung fat and low, leering happily in its cups over the smoke-scented fields where they drifted in a silent daze, their feet barely touching the ground.

He squinted down at her and was amazed at the entire unending episode of Chloë. How had he known from the first moment he laid eyes on her that he would never be able, never wish to get free of her, this rich and complex mesh of mind and matter?

The full red skirt rustling over her boots was black under the moon, and his big jacket was slipping from her bare shoulders. He stopped, thinking to pull the heavy jacket around her, and found himself kissing her shoulders. Thereafter, whenever she smiled up at him he stopped and kissed her and had his kisses warmly returned and had to prod himself forward.

He thought of her as a singular admixture of the soft, fluid, and sweet, of the enduring, brilliant, and willfully infrangible, a combination of honey and diamond. Honey and diamond -- he smiled at this. From the beginning they had reified what is the rare stuff of fabulous dreams, what is never found, what he had never believed existed.

In the ship, he gave the computer coordinates for Shellreef. Without waiting for liftoff, he took her into his arms, and thenceforth completely into his life.

XXII

The dreaded scene of Fleet's reprimand was staged with excessive drama, as anything to do with Umara's wife always was. Fleet was called in and made to wait an hour in the antechamber of Poppy Umara's hexagonal wine and gray office.

When she was finally led into the inner sanctum, Poppy was standing before an early black and white photograph of her husband in uniform, an unflattering and ludicrously unnatural pose of belauded and decorated corpulence, which had been blown up to cover nearly an entire wall. Poppy wore a tailored black silk suit with a small red poppy bud tucked in the lapel. Her shining black heels clicked with martial authority as she stepped forward to offer a cold but gripping hand. She did not invite but ordered Fleet to sit down while she remained standing above her taller subject.

The shrillness of Poppy's voice always increased with agitation or impatience, and today she spoke with high clipped words and a merciless directness.

"Well, my dear, you haven't been much good with Wyld."

Fleet flushed to her throat, speechless at Poppy Umara's sudden shift from sisterly compatriot to tactless dominatrix.

"Really, Miss Fairmeed, is that a show of surprise? This endeavor has not been a diversion for your private fulfillment, you realize, but for Dagone's progression and ascent, *progression and ascent*. You must get Wyld in tow, or perhaps you'll have a new job in one of the resorts your brother manages so well. Do you see what I mean?"

"But...Premier Umara told me--"

"Oh, forget whatever it was. Our Leader abhors this business. He really is a softie when it comes to managing women...and quite oblivious to the Nik Wreavers of Dagone."

Fleet stared at the floor, her dazed eyes retreating in horror under half-closed lids.

"You're so much finer featured than that Mainland woman of Wyld's -- or so says Amboze at least," Poppy coaxed.

She was holding out a small branch, trying to suggest how good things might still become with a little more effort, a little more physical persuasion.

"Amboze?" Fleet lifted her head.

"Yes. Apparently he's noticed you."

Fleet shivered with abhorrence and made no comment.

"Well, can you do it?" Poppy demanded.

Stinging words of outrage were smothered by the panic burning in Fleet's throat. "I'll try," she said stiffly.

"No, no, you must say *I will*," Poppy admonished, waiting for the correction with a bullying impatience.

"I...I will," Fleet intoned in a faint voice and with deep self-loathing.

Her brother's words echoed painfully. How had she ever let herself come into this merciless harridan's clutches? she wondered, floundering in a drowning quagmire of shame.

Later that same afternoon, in Fleet's Wime flat, the intangible body of Wyld shimmered before her in holographic enticement. He had been summoned openly and urgently, in the throes of her demoralized state, a condition she now struggled to mask.

"You know I cannot come now, Fleet." There followed an

irritated silence. "However, I'm glad you've contacted me. I've wanted to tell you that we need to end this. You will not get what you want...and I've no wish to be a source of trouble for you."

"What trouble?" Fleet asked. She laughed and tossed her head in a way she hoped was both casual and tempting.

"Don't be coy. I hear an urgent insistence in your voice. I expect you're in trouble over me."

"Please," Fleet murmured, her reserve visibly crumbling away. Her red-gold hair flew wildly over the shoulders of her white satin dressing gown as she tossed back her head and began to pace. "Please come. I beg you. *Please!*"

"What can you hope to gain...only a little time," Wyld responded sadly. "Poor Fleet, you did not understand any of this...or you only half understood. Damn it! You were not taught to think, to question, only to accept and obey."

"You've destroyed me," Fleet cried, sinking to the floor, forgetting altogether the importance of maintaining an appearance. "Oh, I'm destroyed. How I hate you."

Her face was distorted with self-pity and tears as she rubbed the heels of her hands against swollen red eyes.

"Fleet, you've done it to yourself. Can you not see? It's called greed and was accomplished by self-deception. Listen, unfortunate woman, this communication is undoubtedly monitored, but go to Kele Umara anyway and throw yourself on his mercy. You are authentically naive in a devious gang of professionals...for that reason alone, consideration should be given. I'm not easy game. Please know that I'm deeply sorry for you...but not sorry enough for betrayal."

After Wyld's presence faded from the room, Fleet's

shoulders shook violently with uncontrollable weeping. Finally achieving exhaustion, she sat quietly on the floor, staring dumbly around her like a mildly sick child rudely awakened from the rescue of sleep.

She arose with solemn countenance and went off to bathe her face, applying heavy make-up to her puffed eyes. Next she sat on the edge of her bed, openly going through several connections on her videophone, with a resolutely jaunty voice and manner, until she made her contact.

"Mr. Amboze?" she inquired, with the slightest tremor of terror creeping into her voice. "As you see, it's Fleet Fairmeed. I'd like very much to speak with you in private."

"That was the Fairmeed woman asking to see me -- quite a beauty. What do you make of it, Rymon?"

They had been engaged in a rather complex scheme on the Squidhole observation deck when a signal of Fleet's hologram had called Amboze away.

Grabb frowned, trying to interpret the unusual call. "I don't know...unless...ah, that's it. Yes, I do know that this pretty bird is about to have her wings clipped for dallying in a certain matter of importance...if the trimming has not already happened. Somehow she's learned of your interest, maybe even through her oppressor...Poppy, that is...*darling* Poppy -- *that* cunning opiate flower I cultivate very carefully."

"Hmm, yes, that could be it," Amboze agreed.

His face contorted in a grin, but he said no more. He had mainly wanted Fleet because of her access to Wyld. He knew the task Fleet had been given and had entertained the idea of using her

in a plan of his own.

Not long ago Amboze had discovered that Marchland fishermen were using a remarkable device that literally called the fish into their nets; an invention born in the Marchland undersea research lab, SeaMarch, located just south of Phinn Harbor beyond the Dagon sea boundary. The SeaMarch researchers were also prominently responsible for helping to cleanse the sea after centuries of maltreatment. Amboze grudged them a phenomenal achievement.

Over and over he had watched a video made by his men: an entire school of albacore clearly wheeling about in the square blue frame and swimming suicidally into a huge gaping strainer that closed around them and lifted them handily to the surface. If he outfitted his fleet with this device, he could revolutionize his sea harvests, increasing them a hundredfold. At the first opportunity he would have readily pirated the experimental vessel, if he could have gotten away with it. But Marchland sailors were a clever and wily lot, elusive and well guarded, and public reprisal might have precipitated a lasting disadvantage.

As for Fleet, it was true she aroused his interest. She was not the kind of woman with whom he was known to consort, but he had wondered about her in a raw insensitive way, especially since she had Casimir Wyld's consideration. He could easily save her neck, but what value was she to him now if she had fallen into disfavor? He liked both subjects and objects maneuvered in his stratagems to have several levels of usefulness. Still, he would not fail to see her.

Wyld sat mulling over Fleet's distress call. How could she

possibly have imagined that her assignment would not interfere with their relationship when it *was* their relationship? Nevertheless, she was genuinely afraid and might be in grave danger. Because the risk in helping her involved the March, he considered this briefly then called her back with cautious inquiry.

"Fleet, are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered with cool embarrassment. "What a puppy I've been."

The hardness in her voice surprised him.

"You haven't decided on something foolish?"

"No, I'm only teaching myself to *think*," she answered in a tone of self-abasing sarcasm.

Wyld saw and heard deep emotional stress.

"I can help. I do have some leverage if you need it."

"I've a few ideas of my own, thank you."

Now that she knew for certain that their relationship was over, her pride and shame would not allow her to accept mediation from the man her country considered its foe. Poppy would relish such a mediation and use it to injure her further. She was terrified that her parents would learn of her disfavor and, worse, the reason for it.

Once again, quite naively, Fleet had decided that she was somehow intrinsically valuable, this time to Amboze, and that she could trade on the strength of that value without yielding anything of personal worth. She would meet with this powerful underworld figure and he would rescue her from the clutches of Poppy Umara.

"Get the thing done and you'll have my support and protection. No one of any importance in this government can

afford to oppose me if I choose to help you.

"How can I be sure of that?" Fleet asked.

Amboze threw back his head, producing a stentorian, condescending horse-laugh, which ceased abruptly as his contorted face closed down to a thin, very disturbing smile of menace.

"I seldom make arrangements like this, Miss Fairmeed. I don't have to. I know plenty of this government's secrets; it knows a few secrets of mine -- usually those planted to my advantage -- and it continues to enlist my services...the steel hand in the velvet glove, so to speak. Unfortunately, this time I can't dicker for government assistance. The zealous government is my competitor."

His voice was soft now and dangerously endearing, just as it had been when he first greeted her an hour ago and brought her into this small private study at Squidhole. In the presence of her nervous countenance the soft lullaby of words had coalesced into his idea for her usefulness, until she was made to see the entire scheme with fearful clarity.

At first she wanted to run, to escape even the thought of an act for which she felt neither the stamina nor the daring. But she knew far too much now to safely decline.

She looked out the thick round window framing Amboze's head, remembering that she was beneath the sea, trapped for the moment in the subaqueous cavern of an authentic monster. She recalled Wyld's warning. It was almost as if he had known her fate precisely.

This proposed clandestine operation, with herself necessarily its chief perpetrator, filled her with a chilling dread. If she failed and was exposed, Wyld could hardly show her more

mercy than Amboze. But if she succeeded, she would stand to gain, as a protégé of Amboze, a great deal more than her freedom from the clutches of Poppy Umara. A tempting vestige of greed lingered, and in her confusion she was incapable of summoning alternatives.

She had already set about casting a bitter, if rather puerile, hatred at Wyld and his life. He did not want her. Quickly she found that her feelings for him went beyond a single emotion. He had been sympathetic and acquiescing, if harsh and thoroughly straightforward with incisive opinions. Before falling under his sway she had assumed that he was a rich monarch jaded by easy access to everything desirable. Instead, she found a man who actually desired almost nothing material, someone capable of being alone for long periods, preferring it perhaps, someone who could spurn notoriety, and, worst of all, someone unreadable who could look right through her.

She wanted to punish him for his cool indifference, far more impossible to manage than outright rejection. Still, it was impossible to forget that he took not a hair more than she had offered. From the very beginning Wyld had clearly understood their ad hoc arrangement, and in this his shrewd experience far outstripped her own. Although she resented his facile power over her she was drawn to him, and the idea of besting him in his own closely marshaled realm greatly appealed to her. It would capture his attention at least, possibly even his grudging admiration. But could she do it?

Fleet had been staring for a length of time at a dark, undulating kelp-like form outside the heavy window. Now she realized that the snaking thick ribbon belonged to the round

sucking mouth of a parasitic lamprey that had attached its head to the glass. Looking away with disgust she found the narrowed black eyes of Amboze following her with salacious interest. A more immediate threat.

"This is a business arrangement," she said, barely restraining her anger. "A very risky one. I'm offering you a great deal."

"You might find I can do more for you than save your neck," he suggested with unmistakable lust.

His relentless overconfidence, insinuating a personal aspect to their relationship, disturbed her greatly.

Setting her jaw in the least encouraging manner, she turned briefly away, again fastening on the repulsive lamprey, an evil metaphor for the dark image of Amboze now unavoidably reflected in the glass. Emitting a slight gasp, she turned around with a forced smile, knowing her only protection was the horror of her future act.

XXIII

The urgent communiqué from the SeaMarch experimental vessel Catchsong caused Fox to emerge from the Hall's big videolarium highly agitated. As he hurried along engaged in rapid thought, his uneasy condition was intensified by a certainty of what the Jarl would do when notified of this latest Dagonite charade.

Fleet Fairmeed, who had mysteriously managed to get herself aboard the restricted Catchsong, was asking for asylum in the March. In an urgent hologram, she appeared appropriately pale and apprehensive, but Fox was sure that she had not arrived without invisible strings leading deviously back to the Dagon government. Wyld would show mercy, he was sure of it, and in Fox's working lexicon mercy was synonymous with trouble. All the

excellent machinery of Security was ineffectual in dealing with the persuasive power of a reparable human condition once it drew the Jarl's attention, for if Wyld had a weakness that was it.

Uncertified individuals, and especially foreigners, were strictly forbidden on Marchland experimental vessels, and the Catchsong was the most restricted vessel of all. Yet the captain swore that Fleet would have drowned had he not pulled her from her sinking pleasure craft. Fox issued rigid instructions for her confinement to quarters until she could be brought ashore, which, unless air-lifted, would not be for several days. The Catchsong was presently engaged in a comprehensive assignment in international waters.

Wyld would probably fly out there and bring her back, and then what? Her possible sojourn in the March, unlike Thame's, would present endless problems of which the mere contemplation began to give Fox a headache.

This seductive Dagonite was not to be trusted. Oh, Wyld would not fall for her trickery, but neither would he abandon her. And Fox was not entirely sure that he would have an easier time doing it any other way himself. There were too many holes in Fleet's story. If she were really in trouble why had she not chosen a Marchland vessel nearer her coast? There were a number of them. And how did she find the distant Catchsong so easily...get away so easily? The whole thing was so implausible it infuriated him.

After a few more minutes of reflection, Fox decided that he might as well relay the ominous news, along with his suspicions. Wyld was still at the Scree Mountain Mines, but he planned to fly over to Shellreef for the night and return to the mines in the morning. Fox could already hear the Jarl's concerned voice altering

his flight plan to a bearing in the northeast sea where the Catchsong cruised with its fugitive passenger.

But Wyld, unpredictable as usual, did not proceed at once to the Catchsong. Instead, he was soon stretching his legs out near the wide bay window of Shellreef, thereupon staring at the mercurial sea, which yielded few useful solutions to this new dilemma.

By the time the black and violet swells quivered in the last light coming over the hills, nothing seemed resolved. He took no calls, made no communications, and ate only a light supper of fish poached in wine and tarragon. Then, after summing up his decision alone in his chair before the black windows, he spoke again with Fox, finding his security chief greatly relieved. He would take Fleet and sequester her somewhere on the Mainland with friends, where she could do no one, least of all herself, any harm.

Once Wyld made a decision he never retraced the path that had brought him to it. He retired for the night and slept soundly, until he was awakened by an emergency call from the Catchsong at four in the morning.

Even when he was back on board Wyld Violet, his crew having programmed the flight for maximum speed, he was still not certain of the garbled news he was receiving. The messages from the excited Catchsong crew changed minute by minute. He knew only that Fleet was overboard in the dark sea. Finally, his concisely marshaling voice managed to bring forth some lucid information.

Fleet had complained of severe but undetermined pains and had been transferred to sick bay where the doors were easily unsealed. At some point in the early morning she had slipped out and was almost immediately detected in the most classified room

on board: the restricted operations center controlling and monitoring Singer: the fish-catching system that detected and called various species of fish directly into the maw of its large clamp-like nets. Fleet had quite foolishly been intent upon copying an entire bank of data containing Singer's design and working plans, by using a miniature drive she had smuggled on board.

Not a word passed from her lips after her capture, but she allowed herself to be led along docilely enough toward the bridge. Then an incredible series of events took place in such rapid succession that no one could immediately piece together the exact order. Fleet had broken free. While struggling to get away and pitch herself overboard, very likely to an anticipated Dagon rescue, Fleet was thrown against a pile of sharp metal strips waiting to be lasered into place as part of a new addition to the bridge. A harmless enough little gash was torn in her leg and went unnoticed as she cast herself into swells of roiling sea.

Wyld could hardly imagine Fleet doing all of this. She had not the stomach or even the strength for it. He had much less difficulty imagining the terror she must have felt. What fear and confusion had driven her to such a desperate act?

The humming airship hovered a moment, steadying itself over the Catchsong's lighted pad, then Wyld jumped at a run into the soft pink light and salty morning air.

"Do you have her or not?" he called as the captain hurried toward him, lifting his arms in distress.

"Yes, we just brought her aboard...only..."

"Only what? *What?*"

"You'd better come and see. Brace yourself, Jarl Wyld, it's bad."

Wyld squinted ahead of him at the steadily heaving portside deck, catching sight of a pale head of tangled long hair, the slack head rolling from side to side.

"What in black suns!"

His voice had turned to a gasp as he caught sight of the torn body and the pool of blood in which she lay. He cursed loudly as he rushed forward, the nausea in his chest rising to his throat.

The waiting doctor's hands were tightly clasped, and he stood doing nothing at all. "Those scavenging sharks have been with us for days," he muttered.

"Black suns, do something! This is barbaric," Wyld said in a harsh whisper.

Several deep bites had been taken of Fleet's body. One arm was nearly severed, and her gaping side, thigh, and legs were rapidly bleeding the life out of her torn form.

"I can't give her a painkiller in this condition. Her body is in shock," the doctor said, shrugging with regret. Drawing Wyld aside, he whispered, "It was no use...no use by the time we got her aboard. She's so torn up I would not know where to begin. It's amazing that she's still alive."

"Ay, Jarl Wyld, a sickening frenzy it was in the water with her screaming," the captain lamented while wringing his hands. "We killed as many as we could."

The gashes, teeth marks, and blood-soaked clothing of this once flawless body curdled Wyld's stomach and caused him to wince and reel with groans of rage. As Fleet's eyes found him he clenched his teeth, forging a smile out of his anguish. She tried to lift her head and speak. Impossible. He threw himself down in the

pooling blood, bending beside her white face and straining to hear her feeble words. The icy fingers of her one undamaged hand clung weakly to his warm throbbing fingers, her words coming in faint breaths.

"Sorry...Amboze wanted...Poppy wanted you...through me... Not this...to my parents...my ashes...at Sonna." Her eyes begged him to understand.

"I understand, Fleet. I understand. It will all be done as you wish. Fleet...ah, Fleet. Damn! Damn!"

His voice became invective at his own futility as he watched her attention drift away. Her strength at holding on this long was astounding, almost as if she had summoned the power to wait for him. He wanted to tell her...but what message had he to convey, even if she could hear him? There were no more words.

The blood in which he knelt was all around her, coating the deck in red. For what seemed an eternity but was only a few seconds, he hung onto her, willing an end to this tormented trickle of life. Then her fingers froze in his clenched hand, her eyes fixed upon the sky.

Wyld looked up. His pierced irises reflected the dome of rising morning light, where a great black frigate bird soared with spreading wings. Her eyes had seen the promise of a golden day, opening with a clear wrenching blue.

XXIV

The engineers at the Scree Mountain Mines were waiting to demonstrate to the Jarl an accelerated skimming process for gold tailings to be used in space technology.

Wyld was airborne on his way to the mines. In these rare

relaxed minutes flying above the March, the startling image of Fleet, smooth and comely then torn beyond repair, burst cruelly forth without warning. Her fresh memory and what he might have done for her lay alongside all the other sensitive scar tissues in his brain. The urn of her ashes stood in his study at the Hall, as a stark reminder of an unfinished task. In respect for her wishes her parents, the Fahbis, were told only that she had drowned. Her actual death was documented -- fully recorded via Wyld's open RM videogram, as well as by the Catchsong's camera eye -- this at the insistence of Fox, who wanted a record of everything Wyld encountered from the moment he boarded the Catchsong. In the rushing confusion, Wyld had never once thought of the open channel, but afterward when Fox discreetly asked him to listen to Fleet's barely audible words, he was reminded of how convincingly she had implicated Amboze and Poppy, and how her sense of right had prevailed over her loyalty to Dagone. This final accusation must become her retribution. He had known for some months that the fishmonger's men were blatantly trailing after the Catchsong. This devastating new information would augment his continuing crusade in High Council against Dagone's ugly tactics, which included the ruthlessness of its outlaw and currently touted luminary, Amboze. But now the ship was landing and these future endeavors were quickly laid aside. He looked down on the mining headquarters pad and saw the men waiting.

The impeccably managed Scree Mountain Gold Mines, humming along on the underpinnings of high technology, were pocketed in the secluded northeastern foothills of the tall and craggy Scree Mountain Range. Each peak in the range had a name peculiar to its appearance, history, or place in legend. Pointer,

The Marchman

Starbite, Redlid, Wyldstoneye, Bonethief, and Cloudmarcher were among the highest. On sun-strewn afternoons, these familiar giants sent their long, spreading shadows down over peaceful hamlets nestled in the foothills. Tall-roofed houses dotted the cleared green hills and drowsed within silent forest meadows of the Scree Mountain Valley. Each hamlet was a unique self-contained economy of quaintly indigenous architecture, merging functional comfort with the rainbow forge of stony mass and woodland fiber. In the highlands, the houses were wrought of the trees with dark umber shingles and intricately carved eaves, each lovingly carved pattern the distinctive design of its owner.

The valley, clothed perennially in an emerald cape of privilege, gradually descended to the mild windward shore, bathed all the way in squally changes of sun and rain. Here were cavernous stands of conifers that remained untouched, contiguous to nurtured harvest forests, monitored in growth and continually replanted. Here too were super-moist regions of dripping rain forests, fed daily by drifting sea fogs and generously blooming water-laden clouds sweeping in from the coast. The soil was rich and black with humus, spongy under foot and sweetly pungent to the nostrils, a perfect medium for the lush tangle of verdure that spread over the land in the cooling marine air. No Marchlander lucky enough to belong to and thrive in this unrivaled valley ever longed for anywhere but home.

Wyld loved this fresh, redolent upland country with its misty dripping forests, wandering trails for grazing herds of elk, the shy solitary moose introduced to high, swampy catchments, and foraging grunting bears fishing below the cataracts in the swollen white water streams. The region was similar to the Skeel Valley but

far wetter, and even the neatly hewn fences marking the hamlet clearings were bearded with moss and covered with water-beaded bending ferns. The fences were not meant to separate highland dwellers -- there were no locks on hamlet doors -- but merely to keep the forest animals from straying into the fields and gardens.

When the sun gilded the grasses and cornfields, the orchards and the great viridian conifers, it often struck myriad clear droplets of water caught in every holding space, blazing forth in spectral refractions that pulled the plummeting visitor into their dazzling spell. As his ship descended, Wyld always imagined that he was settling upon a vast open-faced mineral bed of flashing crystal forms.

With frequent trips to the mines, he visited regularly among the quiet highlanders. These soft-spoken Scree Mountain people had, along with their forest-wise stealth, a lean dry humor and an unbendable loyalty. They welcomed and venerated the Wylds as the source of their good fortune, and to their elders the Jarl was like a prized son entrusted with the family's destiny.

They grinned and walked proudly with him down their wildflower lanes into the deep shadows and resinous aroma of the forest, occasionally gently touching his arm or back and speaking tersely from barely opened mouths the names of the sonorous birds. Near and far throbbing notes sounded from the high boughs and echoed among the sepia columns of bark. The further up the craggy slopes their self-contained little hamlets meandered, the more refined their humor grew, and the more ringing and dizzying the laughter of the children in the thin, bright alpine air.

When the explosion in the third largest mine Bonethief III occurred, it was thought not coincidental that Wyld was present.

He had just made the rounds with two technicians and was exchanging banter with one of the chemists when the north wall of the lounge above the mine blew out. One technician was killed instantly, his neck broken, and the other seriously injured, but Wyld and the chemist were slammed nearly unscathed into a ruptured mass of soft lounge furniture. His undamaged RM sent an immediate distress code to Fox at SeaMarch. The code had indicated Wyld's general location.

Fox's voice came just as swiftly back on his RM: "Exactly where are you, Jarl Wyld?"

"Bonethief III...somewhere in the lounge rubble. I'm okay...a bad explosion...I'm afraid one of the technicians is dead...don't know the state of any others."

"I've got to decompress, Jarl Wyld, and I'll be there. Meanwhile, I'm sending others. See you soon," Fox assured.

Wyld emerged from the rubble coughing up refuse dust and bruised, although not yet as sore as he would be, but his mind working with the surety of an undeviating computer: *see that the men are accounted for and treated; that the fire extinguishing system is working; allow no news of the explosion to be disclosed anywhere --* Wyld had immediately thought of sabotage --; *assess the damage.*

As soon as they were located, Wyld Violet flew five injured men to the nearest hamlet clinic.

Two hours from the time of the explosion a thorough investigation was begun. All departing Marchland air travel was delayed, and the small number of foreigners in the March on business were politely sequestered for interrogation. Four people came immediately under heaviest suspicion, although their credentials upon entry had been rigorously checked. These three

men and one woman were internationally recognized vulcanologists, all experienced mountaineers who had obtained clearance for volcano observation near Mount Rubora. One of the men was missing.

Once again the new wolfhound was called into service. Near the explosion he played about nervously, his fieldwork running in a crisscrossing trail of confusing dead ends, but always at the base of a linked series of high rocks. These rugged basalt cliffs were near the location that a tracking satellite had indicated a human presence.

"This one is climbing, always climbing," Jezz said with irritation. Scaling rocks was not his favorite method of tracking.

At last, in the rough Bonethief wilderness beginning precisely above the perimeter of the mine, the scent was rediscovered, but much of the way was again inaccessible, blocked by sheer rock walls rising hundreds of meters straight up into a series of staggered overhangs. The precipitous angles of the rocks would make ascent a slow process, and possibly only for a result of dead trail.

At this point Jezz and Wirth decided to save time and energy. Wirth boarded a Wyld Violet that carried delicate heat sensing equipment, pinpointed the possibilities and had himself lowered to the likeliest spot. As usual he was right on target.

The night was clear, starry, and cold, but this was the sort of rigorous work on which Wirth thrived: a concentrated unemotional application of tactical skills. He scaled a wall, passing through an eerie pocket of vaporous air and out again into the sharp clarity of his stony parallel, body and brain working all the while in smooth, even harmony. He stopped and listened as a

sudden rapid blast of wind came whistling between the outcroppings, whining around corners and into clefts and hollows, then curling back upon itself and dying. In the silence he hung there, still listening and waiting. Then from above and off to his left he heard the clicking sound of a stone bouncing against the wall as it tumbled; another followed, knocked loose and pelting his arms and head with small splinters of rock. The acute elbow of rock at his left was all that separated him from someone in the process of descent. He edged over to the shielding elbow, belaying his rope and rappelling down quickly to a canted shelf at the base of his climb. He crouched there, waiting and thinking about his prey.

There would not likely be a conventional weapon, nearly impossible to bring in or get ahold of in the March. The explosives would have been an easier matter. They could be stolen, assembled at the mine and set off manually with a miniature portfire; there were plenty of those around. It would certainly take a mountaineer to get into Bonethief III, Wirth thought, for the mine was guarded by computers that showed little mercy for invasive troublemakers, and the only unguarded side was flush against the lower face of massive Bonethief crags.

The saboteur had gone up to escape detection and was now probably coming down for the same reason, and to ease the severe cold of the high altitude. Very likely the menacing hum of Wyld Violet had intimidated him enough to flush him out.

Wirth smiled. He would hate to be an enemy trying to get out of the March. Still, he was anticipating a rough struggle from someone in excellent physical condition, and his adrenaline was beginning to pump.

Apparently sensing some menace, the mountaineer had stopped. He could not have seen Wirth, who had moved over in the shadow of an overhang. Nevertheless, Wirth saw that the man's legs were working away from him and around the side of the rock face toward a small hanging glacier, one of the irregular ice masses that lay all summer in various shaded clefts and were again frozen solid. He had hoped to stay out of the unpredictable ice, and now sighed inwardly as he studied the little glacier glowing evilly in a thin slice of moon. He began to patiently unfurl and adjust his rope. There was still a chance that he would not be seen if he could pick his way around the far side of the luminous glacier, although he no longer had the advantage.

The saboteur tripped him as he stood up on the flat ledge of deeply laid ice, then directed his boot at Wirth's vulnerable temple. The boot never reached its mark. Wirth grabbed the offending leg with practiced agility and sent the man skipping over the ice in a flying, bouncing roll, until he was brought up short in a half sitting position against the rough wall. He remained hunched over, moaning in pain and holding his arm. The right wrist had broken when it struck a short spear of rock protruding from the ice. The brief contest was over.

Cinching up his assailant and preparing him for Wyld Violet's lift, Wirth thought of Sayka for the first time since her departure. He smiled. She had been a lot more trouble than this assailant.

Wirth could just make out the tears of pain glittering in the burly man's eyes as he insisted, "I was only rock climbing."

"A nice night for it," Wirth answered.

"Don't rough me up anymore, I'm in pain. What are you

going to do with me?"

"You will be treated and have your chance to explain yourself," Wirth said. The discussion was also over.

After he was anesthetized and questioned, it was determined that the saboteur did not himself know the origin of his assignment, only the name of an insignificant contact who had paid him handsomely for his rather literal downfall. He was a Mainlander but the Marchland had a reciprocal sentencing agreement with the Mainland, and eventually Wyld returned him there for incarceration.

The Jarl was deeply troubled that such a rare penetration of the March had been so easily effected.

"Yes, there was damage," he said, limping up and down before Fox and Nev, who implored him to sit down -- a flying chunk of cement had broken one of his toes --" and two of my valued men are dead, but this bloody business was more a retaliation than a crippling attack on the mines. Is this the beginning of something, a new phase of power maneuvers but with sinister old methods?"

"I don't think so," Fox speculated. "They had an easy chance and they used it. They won't have it again."

"How can we be sure of that without going wholly on the defensive? The idea of a tighter squeeze on our freedom here repulses me. If we're cautious and slightly paranoid now, imagine what more stringent measures portend."

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Fox soothed.

"That's right," Wyld replied, "let's not, but let's not forget to draw them. We have desperate enemies who want to make us hesitate and tread softly over their deceptions. I have a strong

feeling this explosion is linked to my decree at Fedcartel."

Along with an aching foot, he was feeling once again the heavy burden of responsibility in useless deaths.

"Both Immixia and Dagoné, however either is involved in this, will have monitored the explosion. Is it wiser to announce an accident or say nothing?" Fox asked.

"We'll say nothing," Wyld answered abruptly, adding no explanation for his decision.

Fox swiftly put into action a meticulous probe of the saboteur's contact, getting a little further down the line. Shortly thereafter, their minimal sources temporarily ran dry, although not before the investigation had led them to that great Mainland city over which Fedcartel's Council tower predominated in formidable splendor.

XXV

With Premier Xheeva's permission Chloë became Sayka's sponsor, sending her off to school on the Mainland, under watchful eyes of old academic friends who were henceforth to refer to her as Doctor Kleeve in Sayka's presence.

Chloë then plunged relentlessly into her work. Most patients had begun to trust her, even believe in a future. This new faith added to her high spirits and heightened her stamina, as she worked ever longer hours without sleep.

The close of two productive weeks found her at last briefly ensconced in the luxurious Palmbricta flat as she had promised. Something was wanted from her here that she did not yet wish to comprehend. Despite the uneasiness she believed that her work was important enough to insure her safety in Immixia, and, with

slight aversion, she waited for the indistinct feelings to take shape. But they remained in the form of a vague anxiety, constantly nipping at the edges of her awareness as she dutifully attended the delighted Premier's obligatory parties and dinners. Generally, her chaperone guards and Wyld's men were never far from her side, but sometimes, with a willful daring, she managed to elude them for a few minutes. The necessity of Wyld's frequently unannounced disappearances into the forest became clear to her. She was accustomed to being anonymous and often alone, and this continuing need was strong.

One evening she had actually managed to slip away from a rather tiresome gathering of government technocrats. She moved along with curious delight, among revelers drifting down a crowded street where a caviller's pageant had just dispersed. In a few minutes she discerned that she was again being followed, probably by an Immix guard. Merging with a raucous little cluster of partyers, she slipped quickly into an unlit doorway and watched her pursuer pass slowly by and then turn back. It was a woman, not much older than herself, with dark blond hair piled high and hands thrust deeply into the pockets of a black coat. The woman scanned the street, frowning and muttering an oath to herself. Then just as she turned to go, Chloë stepped forth defiantly, her cape whirling out in the clove-dusted night air. Under a bright globe of light, she stared hard into this lean woman's startled hazel eyes, perceiving that there were thoughts they shared.

"Were you looking for me?" Chloë asked.

"Yes. Yes, I was, and you shouldn't have eluded me."

"Have we met?"

"I'm Raina Lexik. You wouldn't remember me but I

accompanied Premier Xheeva to the Sonna conference. I'm one of her security advisors."

"I see, then you're following me on official business."

"No, Doctor Kleeve, business of my own. I must talk with you. Your flat would be a good place. I've taken care to see that it has no listening devices."

"Are you the one responsible for bringing me and the flat together?"

"An incisive question, but I shouldn't be surprised. Yes, I am that one."

"Then you're the one I've been expecting," Chloë said, smiling faintly, for the woman was now indeed surprised.

They sat under the softly glowing petal lamps, their bodies sunk deep into floral-patterned overstuffed chairs, their faces half hidden by the shadow-stripes of potted dwarf palms. The polite banter ceased rather quickly, and Raina leaned forward into a brighter perimeter of light.

"You'll soon see why this is an emotional moment for me. When I saw you at Sonna I began to discreetly follow you about in amazement. You were so involved with Premier Xheeva you never noticed my scrutiny at all. Now that I've spoken with you at close range I'm thoroughly convinced that my suspicions were correct. I believe that you are the daughter of my late half-sister."

Chloë kept the muscles of her face relaxed in willful control. She had known this would some day come to pass. Now carefully, carefully, she must restrain visible emotion.

"Your half-sister? And who might that be?" she asked, taking special care to suppress the eagerness in her voice.

"Rimly Zylyta. The family, especially father, called her

Little Princess. She took her mother's family name because she loved it, loved the entire royal line from which it came, and it really belonged to her."

"What a story. Do you also work for the Dagonites?" Chloë asked, but her words sounded hollow.

"That hurts, but I understand your caution. Would a foreign agent recognize your features...that nose...those amazing Zylyta eyes that glow in the dark...the chin, even your pretty mouth? All the Zylyta line. I wish I could have just your *eyes*. I was only a very young child when you were born, but eventually we in the family heard of Rimly's old liaison with the mysterious outlander. It was delicious family gossip in our young lives." She hesitated, leaning closer to Chloë. "I'm sorry...Rimly died ten years ago. She was painfully sensitive and gradually withdrew from... Your grandfather is still alive."

"Please," Chloë said, "You've gone beyond me." She was deeply disturbed but managed to smile with a pretense of calm. "You have something else to tell me."

"I see you have Rimly's remarkable but irritating clairvoyance, perhaps also her exhausting temperament, but you control it well. Are you a Marchlander?"

Chloë laughed with a dissuasive manner. "Ah, how you jump to conclusions. I will answer no prying questions about myself."

"I understand. You're doing exactly what I as a security person would advise you to do -- your position is complicated. Yes, I do have something else to tell you. But let me say a little more on this subject.

"At first I wanted merely to meet you. The Premier had a

new apartment, a model of surveillance selected for you, but I convinced her that it would be good to bring you here and investigate your motives, because you appeared to me a type more malleable in a romanticized environment."

"And she bought that?" Chloë said, laughing softly.

Raina held up her hand at Chloë's laughter. "I know. I lied. It amused her too. She believes you thoroughly unromantic."

"I'm neither thoroughly one nor the other," Chloë said, looking suspiciously around the room.

"This flat is clean," Raina insisted. "I wish you could believe that. No listening, no spying, Doctor Kleeve. I've seen to that. Perhaps some day we can talk of other things, but now I must warn you that a security leak has been discovered at Kiva. This the Premier does know about of course."

"Sabotage of my work?" Chloë asked with rising alarm.

"I hope not, but we can't remove the informer until we learn the chain of communication. We've doubled our already tight security there."

"May I know who it is?"

"I'm sorry, not yet."

"So it's all at risk, and with myself in ignorance."

"No. We're confident that we can keep things from happening at Kiva. But you must never again evade your guards as you did tonight. You're in danger and could be in even more if ever your true identity is learned. I'm sorry to say that half-breeds are sometimes...well, as you know, abused here. There's a faction in the government that even sells them to Dagon. We can't announce this right now of course. You see how I confide in you, like a sister...but I'm really your aunt. I'm so sorry for all of this."

"Don't apologize to *me*," Chloë said with a cool voice.

"I didn't intend offense.

"If anyone approaches you suspiciously, contact me at once. Use your wrist messenger."

"What?"

"The instrument on your wrist," Raina said, grinning and handing Chloë a small card. "Memorize this frequency where you can reach me. It works nicely. I know the sort of technology you're wearing well. That is my profession."

"And you do it well," Chloë complimented.

"I try. Some work is easy, some not so easy.

"There's one other thing I wanted to say. You might be interested to know that your mother and father used to meet in this flat."

Chloë lay back in her chair smiling, but her chest was constricting. Raina Lexik had saved up this startling news for her departure. She wanted to leave with the truth from her niece's lips. She would get nothing. Chloë impatiently tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair as Raina went on.

"Rimly once brought me here long after she was married. Strange...how she kept this place...unknown to her husband. I don't know how often she came here later in her life."

Raina turned her hazel eyes on Chloë. "You were surely conceived here."

"Please," Chloë said, sitting up straight to relieve her nervousness. "There's something I must know."

"Yes?" Raina asked, obviously thinking she had broken through at last.

"Was it the Immix who caused that accident?" Her face

was stern and adamant. "You see Professor Vale never made mistakes like that. He was murdered in a foul, foul way, a dedicated man who sacrificed so much. I cannot let it go."

"Do you think us so barbaric? Why would we let you come here and work if we had done it?"

"To stop my work," Chloë answered matter-of-factly.

"And why should we do that?"

"I don't know," Chloë pondered, unable to allay a deep sadness -- always involving Doctor Vale and her mother.

"Nor do *I* know...but I can tell you that in Doctor Vale's death we suspect the same faction involved at Kiva. I'm sorry to say these vile Immix radicals conspire with Dagonites."

For a long while after Raina had gone, Chloë sat quietly under one of the dimmed lamps, the soft pink light failing to mitigate the strain burning in her eyes. Finally reaching a deeper level of meditation, she relaxed somewhat, and the room came silently around her as she curled into the security of the big wing chair. Dark wood tones dissolved into wine shadows out of which sprang sharp points of light, reflections from cut crystal and small metal objects of high patina, selected by a hand that had coursed with her own blood. It was good to let her thoughts tumble out upon the stillness, to stare at nothing.

"Mother...Little Princess," she whispered, surprising herself with the exploring words. Her father had been here.

She pressed her thumb against her mouth, gnawing gently on the cuticle, and heard at once Wyld's attentive voice ordering her to stop.

Wyld! He had happened to her with the disorienting force of an accident, swift and critical. The full effect had not yet settled

over her. Weighted thoughts arranged themselves in various uneven patterns, and with each new accounting the Jarl and the March happened to her at another degree of angle, but it was she who moved. They stood at the center, inseparable, positive, episodic, and she was drawn around this highly charged nucleus not in a circle but in a strange elliptical path, like a reeling renegade star straining to overcome the gravity that held it.

Now she heard a sound she had not noticed here before, and rarely anywhere: an ancient clock ticking. How unusual to hear the short noisy clicks of measured time. The next sound was the wind, rushing over the humming skylight with a prescient, mocking laughter.

Loosening her hair and letting her braid fall she stood up, stretching toward the creaking glass.

In the bedroom, her hands moved dreamily over the coverlet, caressing the delicate white lace then sliding down the gleaming ebony wood of the old four-poster. After she had lain a while staring beyond the muted light of a small blue and white porcelain lamp, she sat up. Was this then the same bed her mother and Nev had lain in? She bit her lips, then the insides of her cheeks and finally her fingers as she lay back listening for another's breathing.

The room began to turn slowly, then more rapidly, until she was spinning down a variegated coil of resin-pungent rooms, crimson-spangled gardens, pillars of steel and glass hung in clouds, dead sun-blasted air, dark space, partings and homecomings, silences and voices, echoing voices. She watched herself, this other self. Who was she?

"Rimly, Rimly," a man whispered to her, a man breathing

heavily, a man in white linen with flaming red hair. She felt a quickening urge to be held and loved. It was...who? Was it Nev? She could not stop laughing and twining her fingers in his hair.

"Wake up, Doctor Kleeve! Please wake up."

"What! What is it...who...where am I? Oh, I'm--"

"Shh, it's very late, Doctor Kleeve. I'm sorry but we need you right away."

"Who is it? Helia? Is that you? Let me turn on a light. What are you doing here?"

"Doctor Kleeve, you must come with me quickly, quickly. There's been a breach of security at the Kiva lab. Your work has been confiscated and they're trying to remove the half-breeds. They are all being taken away."

"What? Oh! I was dreaming so deeply. I hardly know... Wait, let me...let me dress...let me awaken."

Chloë stumbled across the room, pulling on her boots and grabbing up a heavy woolen smock.

"Who? Who is trying to take them away? I don't understand. Wait. I think I must call--"

"No! There isn't time! Only you have the authority needed. I'll explain as we go, but please hurry. They'll soon be out of our reach. Hurry!"

With the lab assistant clutching her arm, Chloë ran into the fog banks curling through the night. They reached a long dark alley at the end of which a single source of light cast a circle of blood-red brick in the darkness. She was still drifting in and out of her dream while stubbing her toes on the uneven cobbles.

They halted at last near a speedway slot where the revolving stairs rumbled softly below an empty walkway.

"Wait. Where are the guards?" Chloë asked, looking back at the barren street -- Wyld's guards, the Immix guards, none of them in sight.

Helia stood still, waiting insistently as Chloë felt the pressure of the guiding hand tightening on her arm. She looked for the first time directly into Helia's blank eyes, eyes housed in their bulging sockets as inertly as frigid stones lying at the bottom of a sterile lake.

A sinking feeling of disgust came over Chloë, and her booted foot shot out striking Helia's calf. She heard the woman groan, as she wrenched and twisted her arm away from the tight grip. Looking quickly around, she saw that she was boxed into a canyon of impassable, impregnable stone and metal. Her only escape was the street behind her with the speedway slot, but as she turned to run something macabre and chilling caught her eye and held her hypnotically.

A pair of beetle-shaped heads, policing automatons, rose in unison from the endlessly escalating depths of the empty boarding station. The faces, except for the staring single focus of the jet eyes, were completely obliterated in the grotesque blue and red streakings of caviller's paint, and the big muscular bodies were bound tightly in oily black coverings like the skins of eels.

Chloë's hands shook violently as she stabbed at her RM and cried out. Everything was happening at once, in densely packed actions far above her control. Adrenaline poured into her system. She took a deep breath and braced herself, cursing bitterly as the giant androgynous forms seemed about to pass her by then turned sharply toward her. Of course these super beings, with their bio-computerized brains and long clawed arms hanging flexed, were for

her, just for her. She took a step backward as they closed around her, grabbing roughly at her arms and shoulders. "No!" she screamed, fighting wildly, stubbornly, until she felt a tiny sting in her arm and collapsed into a vacuous black vortex without thought or dream.

XXVI

Wyld was alone in the dark viewing room. His rigid lankiness rejected the comfortable form of his chair, his long legs drawn in and stiffened by intense concentration; his hands, although gripping the chair arms fiercely, were forgotten appendages. He was studying Chloë's clear image, riveted to it. Only his unblinking eyes worked, in unison with charging electric thoughts.

In the beginning, her strange incoming message with its mannequin image had been automatically recorded. It was nothing less than the chillingly articulate speech of a cool defector.

"I will always be grateful for your help in bringing me to Immixia, Mr. Wyld. Now all of my work there has really concluded. My research is important to many, and you will therefore understand why there is other work to do here in Dagon. It was offered and I accepted. I've never really paid attention to borders, only to people -- borders are only arbitrary lines. People are what matter, their safety and welfare. I have the opportunity to do a great deal here. Please tell my friends that if they expected me to honor other commitments I must be forgiven."

He switched off the tape and leaned forward with his head

in his hands, running his fingers through his hair. How many times had he watched it? He had lost track. Nev did not know yet, or Fox. They had an absolute right to know immediately, but it was far from a privilege.

...if they expected me to honor other commitments I must be forgiven.

He closed his eyes. It was easy now to see the face without the image. The lucid green eyes did not blink in hesitation. The intimate lips had not the slightest quiver of remorse. The agonizingly dulcet voice did not falter. The always nervous fingers did not twitch. How was it done? What trick? What deceit? What threat?

Chloë, you are more perfect than Chloë. What lies beneath? What have they done? Much less than I will do to them.

Not for a moment had he swallowed this heavy lie. His powerful counterweight was that last night with her at Shellreef, a consummation eclipsing any florid imagining. Falling into sweet reveries now was more than he could bear. He knew the truth. That was all.

If he were to unmask them by demanding with violent censure the return of his wife, would he hurt her, lose her? Before the eyes of those who knew him, all the major powers, the wife of Wyld would be ostensibly inviolable, as guarded as all public figures who were only too ready to combat such treachery, for an act against one was an act against all. Yet if some mistake, some intentional *blunder* occurred, of course with gravest apology and regret, Chloë would be lost to him forever. The rule was subject to hazard. He had let her walk into a trap, and the stupidity of it was eating away at his storied resilience as swiftly as fueled flames.

They could say her death was an accident. If this could

happen he saw no point in worrying about his future. If this irenic creature, this altruist, was to become a mere victim, then all his dreams were dashed against the evil that existed in himself. The evil was not hurtling over the planet; it was here in himself. Was he not animal man and therefore dark-sided, truncated, unevolved? Could he not annihilate them all? Feed them the same deadly fodder they stored in their own evil larders? That would end their greed, their hunger for more, end everything.

He laughed with feverish bitterness at the futility of his strength. Beyond his windows the March spread out its green belt, girdling the island with the abundant promise of renewable life. Before his eyes the luxuriance faded into a devastated prehistoric miasma filled with charred fragments and desiccated bones. Irreparable. Irreparable.

He stood up and his chair crashed over on its side. Where had he gone? What thoughts had he been entertaining here? A blinding rage over useless injury and a shackled need to act were poisoning his soul. He was afraid for her, emasculated, throttled, choking in a grievous fear.

Calling in Nev and Fox he studied them sadly, without blame or criticism, as they watched what he had to show. Their bleak faces held no doubt that Chloë was a captive. They agonized over the method. What power did they have over her to make her speak with such flawless conviction? She had shown no signs of torture. They must try to see her again and again until they learned how she was held and threatened.

After much evasiveness, Wyld was finally able to reach Kele Umara, who exhibited great discomfort and an unusual, near fawning politeness.

"You are holding Doctor Kleeve. I would like to speak further with her please."

Umara sat with his habitually slumping shoulders drawn up in a square of distaste. The enormous ebony desk before him had been designed to make his own mass more acceptably proportionate, but his majesty had soured to a bulky mass.

" *Holding?* No, no, we're not holding Doctor Kleeve. I really don't know about this. I believe she is quite busy. You will have to speak with Vice Premier Grabb."

"I am speaking to the man who is presumably at the head of the Dagon government, well apprised of all undercover treacheries," Wyld rebuked, barely reining in his terrible wrath and impatience. "If Doctor Kleeve is too busy perhaps a conversation with the members of Fedcartel Security will remove some of her work load."

"Mr. Wyld, do you threaten me?"

"However you say. Just bring out Doctor Kleeve."

"I'll see what can be arranged."

"And I will give you exactly fifteen minutes before I contact Fedcartel and declare this outrageous abduction an international concern." Wyld switched off his phone without waiting for a reply.

All attempts at diplomatic courtesy would now cease.

Fox, who had been jabbing at his hand monitor to arrange his thoughts as he often did, now came up with one feasible speculation.

"What hold have they over Chloë?" he asked, and then answered himself. "They don't know her family or friends, we assume, except for one. One who is most vulnerable, reachable, unguarded and expendable."

"The girl, Sayka," Wyld said. "It's Sayka!"

"I think so," Fox answered. "We'll send Wirth and company to the Mainland immediately to try and get her and bring her here. I hope we are not too late."

Fox turned to his father and, upon giving him a closer look, insisted that he take a sedative and lie down. Nev agreed to leave but only after their demand to see Chloë had been met. He insisted upon seeing her again.

As he waited, Wyld sat pondering how Chloë had been taken -- where were his men, *damn them!* Had she tried to contact anyone? There was something he wanted to do, but first he must wait to see her again. Umara must be skinning someone alive, he thought, for very soon Chloë appeared in hologram, and before fifteen minutes had passed.

She looked a little tired this time and too cheerful, an evaluation that the stress meter confirmed as Wyld talked. She was not being permitted a hologram of Wyld.

"Doctor Kleeve, are you being treated well?"

"Yes."

She made no attempt to elaborate and had obviously been warned to answer briefly.

"Do you really want to remain in Dagone?"

"I do."

Fox pointed at the flashing red light indicating the force of her opposing emotion.

"Your friends are surprised at your decision."

A quizzical expression passed faintly over her face, but she smiled weakly and did not answer.

"Can you travel freely?"

"I have no desire to travel."

Fox shook his head angrily.

"Mr. Wyld," she volunteered at last, "you must respect my wishes and leave me to my work."

She turned her head as though listening to someone and stood up.

"Your friends are with you...and...they agree with your desires," Wyld called to her in a rush of exasperation.

"Thank you, Mr. Wyld," she answered softly, then vanished from the room.

"That last remark of yours took its toll," Fox said.

Nev looked demoralized and grief-stricken. He stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at nothing.

"Go," Fox said, "take something and lie down. We'll call you when something develops."

"He'll be blaming himself again," Fox said when Nev had gone.

Wyld sat quietly in the dark shielded security room, while Fox waited patiently for some comment, some idea to be put forth. The air was heavy with thought until Wyld spoke.

"Would it help her or harm her to be my wife?"

"I haven't been able to decide," Fox replied with a cool voice. "I saw your entry on the Documents Log -- you know I'm necessarily linked to that site and made aware of any changes. I wondered if Chloë knew it was there."

"Damn you!" Wyld fairly shouted. "She's called me husband. You're as hard-hearted as any Wyld."

"They're not always hard-hearted; it's part of the myth," Fox said with a weak grin. "As for me, I'm kinder away from my

work."

"Which is practically never," Wyld replied, breaking the strain with a soft laugh.

The small bit of humor passed quickly away.

While Solvault Hall passed each night, a sensitive listening computer, under the command of Domotron, recorded all incoming communications, and Wyld had asked the computer to run through the last several nights, hoping to learn if the smallest fragment of a distress call had been picked up from his RM as he slept. This information would be vital in bringing about a Fedcartel investigation. He came up with two agonizingly distinct cries of the same word: *Xhiema*, recorded at four in the morning three days ago. The voice and word both tormented him and lifted his spirits.

In two days Wirth returned with a puzzled Sayka, who had been told only that Doctor Kleeve wanted to see her. Wirth questioned Sayka's guardians and reported that she had told them she was being watched, followed, and her actions recorded. Her guardians had assumed this measure was merely some of Doctor Kleeve's special security. Her fugitive life had made her wary and highly observant of everything going on around her, and Wirth was pleased with the care she took in relating her suspicions. The video had likely been shown to Chloë as proof of Sayka's vulnerability. Sayka had not yet been approached by those who watched her, giving Wirth the time needed to bring her safely to the Marchland.

"They're surprisingly clumsy," Fox commented. "The first rule in making a threat is to be in a position to carry it out, but of course they didn't want to risk drawing attention to themselves on the Mainland."

The Marchman

The superiority of the Marchland's sophisticated security force encouraged Wyld to contemplate more daring measures. Too much could happen to Chloë while Fedcartel Security rumbled slowly along. Plans were being expediently formulated for a Marchland rescue squad to strike swiftly and bring Chloë out, but first they had to find her exact location. The second transmission of Chloë's appearance was traced to Sandspell, and when they were allowed no further communication with her, they had to take the chance that she was still being held there.

For Fox, the ensuing battle was to dissuade the Jarl from his decision to lead the rescue mission. Along with this ongoing campaign, Fox was engaged in a daily struggle with Dagonites to have Chloë appear on camera, but whenever he made contact with an official who would speak to Wyld, the contact steadily maintained that Doctor Kleeve was their satisfied and busy guest. Because she was supposed to have come from the Mainland, Fedcartel, alerted by Premier Xheeva, had begun making demands on its behalf, and all of this was heating up internal dissension in Dagon. From near the beginning, Immixia had been in the fray, demanding the return of its visiting research scientist and trying to field angry shots from Wyld at its laxity in protecting his protégé. The snarling web of protestations and deceptions Fox was trying to untangle had hardly put him in a receptive mood for the Jarl's staunch decision to place himself at the vanguard of a dangerous mission; but Wyld remained adamantly committed and impatient to get moving. Meanwhile, Wyld castigated Premier Xheeva for allowing her security forces to keep valuable information from the men Fox had appointed to guard Chloë.

"I've been told that you, or at least your security people,

have known for some time that one of the lab aides was a spy, yet you kept this from my men, enabling the woman to get near Doctor Kleeve. I entrusted you with a valuable Mainland scientist. This ruinous omission I should have expected from a country selling its own citizens to Dagone." The bitter frankness of Wyld's voice cut across Premier Xheeva's apologetic words when she appeared in hologram.

"We're as eager to have her back as you, Mr. Wyld, and red in the face at our blunder. You know I don't approve of Mezta trafficking. We have been bombarding Dagone with demands. Umara is not at this moment in a very comfortable position. There's some question as to whether or not he is even in control. Suggestions have been put forth that his wife and Rymon Grabb are vying for his office, and rumors are circulating that the Premier is eating and sedating himself into oblivion."

"Rumors that black-hearted schizophrenic probably started himself. Don't be misled by the reputed impotence of a overfed beast about to charge, Premier Xheeva. The power is in its proclaimed seat. Umara has two pathological sides: one self-servingly and contingently moral, the other conveniently blind, therefore totally immoral, and he eats merely to keep them as far apart as possible."

Wyld was done with talking. He ordered a shakedown and implementation of the venerable Goldfish, two of his fastest submarines. He was plotting a course to the Sonna coast.

XXVII

When Chloë first awakened from her involuntary sleep she was lying on a bed in a small room with an adjoining bathroom; the room was empty except for a single polymeric chair and one dimly

glowing bar of white light running horizontally across the wall behind her narrow bed. Everything was a toneless dismal gray. Her head ached, and it seemed that every muscle in her body had been painfully strained to its limit. Her gold RM was gone and for the first time she realized how comforting Wyld's gift had been. Cut in the top half of the door leading into her room was an observation window with light coming from behind the glass. There was little consolation in knowing that a watcher regularly peered in at her. She lay very still, practicing autosuggestion to mitigate the pain in her head, in a while bringing herself slowly out of the palliative depths.

I'm caught, Jarl Wyld. You were right. But what do they want? What will they do with me? They've taken my clothes and put me in this plain woven gown as though I were a patient.

She saw a familiar face beyond the glass, and Helia entered the room. The door, a slab of metal, slid quickly back and locked into the wall. Ignoring Helia she lay back on the bed and closed her eyes, gliding expertly and swiftly into a state of deep hypnosis, reinforcing her engaged will in order to withstand questioning.

After a while she opened her eyes to find two men standing at the foot of her bed: one, short, powerfully built, and hairless, whose thick red fingers looked as though they were well accustomed to handling recalcitrant bodies; the other, a thin dark man who assured her he was a scientist like herself.

Helia got up from a chair where she had been sitting and bent over Chloë, at the same time pulling a small injection pistol from her pocket. The body-handler held Chloë down, and she felt the sting of another needle.

Words rolled straight toward her from far away, down the

sides of mountains and tumbling across streams, heavy words like chunks of stone, which she had to fend off with only her voice. She hurled the words back as quickly as they came at her, sometimes singing them, sometimes only whispering or muttering them, but adding no new words of her own. At last she slept, and the words rolled on, growing fainter and fainter.

Chloë awoke to the pressure of a hand on her shoulder.

"You can't keep that up long," Helia said. "All we wanted were a few simple answers. Why won't you tell us, Doctor Kleeve, and save yourself this. If only I'd gotten close enough to see what you were doing with the Meztas."

"It would not have...done you...any good, Helia. You are too stupid to...see what's before you...only good for stepping and fetching."

Chloë had gained a slight satisfaction from her slur, but her head ached and her tongue felt thick and clumsy.

Helia blinked then laughed. "You can't make me mad. I'm not the one who's caught."

"You will be."

"You're not a Mainlander, are you? That odd Mainland accent is phony, isn't it? Didn't Wyld send you? He's made some deal with the Immix."

"What nonsense. You people...couldn't imagine anyone doing anything without...an ulterior motive. You betray your own country. What a sorry creature you are."

Chloë turned her face to the wall.

"The island will be united...for the good of everyone," Helia proclaimed, with all the self-assurance of those who think at a base and simplistic level.

"Your definition of good...is evil. Go away, Helia. I've nothing to tell you."

Chloë was angry with herself. She had spent a great portion of her life in cautious secrecy, then walked straight into a trap. If only she had not been asleep and dreaming a dream so powerful that after she awoke it still held her in its sway -- in it she had become her mother. How ashamed of her Fox must be. It was horrible to consider the anger and frustration in Wyld's voice when he questioned her. He knew the glib words she had spoken were ridiculous; that was why it had been so easy for her to say them. He was not going to sit still for any of this -- now her fear was for him. Her present task must be to keep her mind free of that fear, to remain alert and ready for confrontation.

An idea came to her and she rolled over and sat up, causing Helia, idly dreaming in her chair, to spring to attention.

"I'll talk to you Helia...but you'll have to come over here and look me in the eye...explain to me how you can really believe in what you're doing."

"What kind of nonsense is this? Of course I believe in what I'm doing."

"Then why are you afraid to face me? Are you ashamed of what you've done?"

"Ashamed! I'm glad, proud."

Helia brought her chair and sat near the bed.

"Now if you'll tell me first what you intend to achieve with this...this subversion, I may be willing to give you some information."

"I told you. We work for unification, one government."

"Look at me and say that...or are you afraid to?"

Helia's myopic eyes fastened reluctantly on Chloë, who saw that Helia was willing to comply long enough to get her information. Showing a little respect for Helia's opinion had worked. Helia believed that she was about to get what the others could not; she leaned eagerly toward her captive.

"Why are you doing this? Think...think, Helia."

"I'm here to have the questions answered, Doctor Kleeve. I've told you why."

"But you haven't told me what your personal motivation is. If you answer me I'll answer you."

Chloë's fluid voice was changing, softening.

"Don't you really want to count for something, to have respect, to be important...to have my answers? Yes, I can see that you do." Her expertise at hypnosis was here quite facilely employed, her voice soothing and gentle as she held Helia's eyes in her hypnotic gaze.

"You want respect and admiration. You want to be someone who counts...important. You dream of respect and love...you will have it, respect and love, respect...love."

Helia was subtly trapped by the cogent, monotonic voice of a powerful practitioner of defensive mind control, unable to look away, mesmerized by the burning green phosphor of the caressing eyes and the steadily promising words.

"Close your eyes, Helia," Chloë whispered. "Think how you can have these things...the wonderful feeling of respect and love...so much love. Nothing will distract you from this wonderful feeling. Now you will sleep for a while."

Helia's eyelids fluttered shut and she sat motionless and smiling.

Chloë dragged Helia's chair slowly to the door, then stood her up and lifted her toppled head, holding her eye open over the iris-reader. The door slid open. She laid Helia back and moved out cautiously, down a dim hall. Reaching its end she pressed herself against the wall and peered around the corner. At the same moment a door behind her slid open and cruel arms pinioned her severely.

This time she was placed in a shadowy, foul smelling room the size of a small closet. It had one tight-fitting door and no windows. The only fixture was a toilet, and the floor was hard cold stone without space enough to stretch out. In the dimness she discovered that she could not stand without hitting her head. Clearly, this room was designed for torment -- when the guard bore his portable light away she met the full measure of her torture: chilling blackness.

Now her will was to be tested to its limit. If she succumbed to claustrophobia she was finished. She shivered, although the room felt airtight and smothering. Holding her hand a few inches from her eyes she strained to see. There was not a trace of light coming from anywhere. She closed her eyes and swallowed, taking her hands away from the wall and feeling along the floor. Her body slipped down to the floor, gradually arranging itself beside the bowl of the toilet. The long rough gown was carefully gathered under her for padding, and there she sat, propped against the wall with knees drawn up and head bent.

"Stupid," she whispered. "Careless. Stupid. How stupid!"

Stop. You must stop. This is negative. Remember you are in an unconfined universe, a place of indifference that might even be thought of as peaceful, an endlessly silent infinity in which you must join to find that peace. If

The Marchman

you keep your eyes closed and think freely you will be free, floating over liberating fields of light and form. Fill them with your thoughts of sweet-scented Marchland valleys and rolling rivers...the rivers...the sparkling valleys.

She awakened when the narrowest pencil of light blazed into her eyes with the pain of the sun's fiery blast. A tepid broth was pushed through the door. She refused it and took a sip of the water left her instead, then slept again and awakened and slept. Day and night melted into a long black tunnel of open-ended time, her thoughts and dreams blending into carefully schooled endurance.

A strong hand gripped her shoulder. Someone had opened the door and leaned in with a faint yellow light that stung her eyes. She rubbed at the numbness in her neck and shook her stiff legs.

"Come with me, pathetic beauty," Nik Wreaver said. "First to the girls in my salon to straighten up the mess you're in, a nice rest while they work. Doesn't this feel just like salvation? Then you're going to make a fine speech for your friends, with your most convincing words."

He lifted her up and drew her through the door as she shrank from his touch.

"How incredibly evil you are," she muttered, in a voice still thick with her merciful sleep.

XXVIII

Exiting his ground floor apartment in the northwest wing of Solvauld Hall, Wirth was surprised to find Sayka waiting hesitantly. It was an early hour and she looked sleepy, quite diminished beneath the high angulated ceiling.

"Well *hello*. What can I do for you?" Wirth asked.

Although modulated, his amused voice still reverberated clearly down the wide empty passageway.

"You can tell me what's going on around here. I had to insist that you wanted to see me to get this far. I thought I was to see Doctor Kleeve. I've had to miss my classes, and no one knows where she is...or will say. Have I...have I done something wrong?"

"No," Wirth said with a kindly smile. "You haven't done anything wrong."

His face grew serious. "I'm sorry, but you have to stay with us a while longer. It's for your own safety."

"Are they after half-breeds on the Mainland now?" Her voice was bitter and her lavender eyes flashed with sparks of a quick anger made habitual.

"It's more complicated than intolerance, I'm afraid. Come in. I have a few minutes."

Sayka walked in, looking curiously about her. Her face immediately registered surprise.

The spacious tan rooms were sparsely appointed with heavy museum pieces of shining dark mahogany resting on a thick titian carpet. The startling focal point was a row of tall windows that looked across the fog-banked Ruddle toward the northern forest and west to Mount Rubora, now obscured by low clouds.

"This is very nice, Wirth...very beautiful. I didn't think of you as living like this...or... It's like the rest of...well, the very little I've seen of Solvault Hall...so much fine old wood." She ran her fingers over a honey-blond guitar propped against a straight-backed chair. "The way I'd always heard of it...I never knew Solvault Hall could be anything like this...it's all so different...impossible to imagine any of it...impossible."

Wirth followed her with his dark assessing eyes as she moved deeper into the room.

She was thoughtfully studying his possessions. Her eyes turned from a large cluster of amethyst crystals that rested on a wooden tripod in the center of a marble-topped round table, traveling to Wirth and back to the dazzling purple quartz. Positioned around the room were several displays of both polished and uncut gems, shining minerals, color-tinted crystals, and striated rocks.

"Did you collect all of these yourself?"

Wirth nodded.

"Then you must have traveled far."

Wirth only smiled, watching her, appreciative of her quickly incisive appraisal.

Sayka continued her intense focus on the spacious room's contents, clearly absorbing, memorizing, the look and placement of each discovery. She moved about, touching a few antique books, caressing the back of his favorite chair, this in a manner he found a little unsettling.

"Please sit down," he invited.

She chose a tufted umber couch facing the windows, and immediately threw her head back, closing her eyes as her youthful pink lips parted to speak.

"Well, come and tell me the bad news. I'm used to hearing it. That's why I'm here...for bad news."

He sat on the edge of the couch, studying her with careful scrutiny while her eyes remained closed. She had changed, was freer and less self-conscious. The silvery plum sweater and slacks she wore accented her figure, fuller now and faintly arousing.

"I don't have the authority to tell you anything. I'm sorry. I know it seems that I'm always giving you orders without reasons. It's in the nature of my work."

She sat up, leaning close to stare at him with her chin resting in her hands.

"Are you one of the Marchman's tough indispensable champions? One of his mean *Surt* characters?"

He shook his head disapprovingly, his full lips curving into an amused smile. "There are no mean characters here."

"I'm not a child. Tell me what's wrong," she demanded.

"I can't. It has little to do with you, except that your life was in danger because of Doctor Kleeve. Now you are safe. In a while you can probably go back to studying."

"Then Doctor Kleeve is in trouble. Is it my fault?"

Her annoyance had swiftly changed to worry.

He saw that her tendency to paranoia made her arrive at the truth of Chloë's situation very directly. He shook his head.

"No, it isn't my fault, or, no, Doctor Kleeve isn't in trouble?"

"You're to blame for nothing. Please stop trying to get information I'm not at liberty to give."

Sayka burst into a furious harangue of disturbed complaint.

"Oh, I don't like any of this! Things keep happening to people near me. Now Doctor Kleeve... She's been so good to me...and *you* have... I'm tired of being shelved. Aside from...from my mother, you're the only ones who've ever treated me like a person. *A person!*" She stood up. "Oh, all right, I'll go...go mind my own business. I just needed to talk to someone...thought you would..."

Wirth's eyes followed her catlike leap to the windows. The intense white fog made a thin nimbus of light over the wild locks of her short-cropped hair, outlining a wistful profile with long drooping lashes.

He was saddened. Who had ever touched this lonely fugitive, held her, consoled her? Only her dead mother who had probably been equally forlorn. She was immured in a condition of hunger, loneliness, and persecution, which she hated, but the hate had somehow given her the strength to survive. Neurotic and unintentionally morose, she evoked a haunting fascination, like that of an ephemerally wandering butterfly deprived of a mouth for eating.

He stood up and in his stealthy manner moved silently to her back. Something -- he thought it was pity -- made him turn her around ever so gently, as though she might take nervous flight. He lifted her chin until her restive lavender eyes were caught and held, then leaned down and kissed her lightly.

It had begun as a consoling kiss of pitying compassion, but, with her surprising response, quickly turned into something else. With fearful swiftness he found himself kneeling with her in his arms before the bright swirling fog. He was stunned, holding her, kissing her with a hunger equal to her own. Part of this, he vaguely knew, was the hunger for Chloë so deeply buried. He held her out from him, staring in disbelief at her flushed, languorous face, then pulled her against him, kissing her, caressing her with his hands. He wanted her so badly that he pushed her away in a wave of shock coming like a fierce blow between the eyes. This young, disturbed schoolgirl, starting out with new life, new hope. How easy it was to do this, to succumb to careless instinct.

He ordered Domotron to open one of the tall doors made of heavy-framed windows, and stepped out on the high terrace into the chilling fog.

Sayka came out and stood behind him, putting her arms around him. He felt her head nuzzling against the middle of his back, her arms possessive and arousing.

"Go back. It's cold," he said, moving away from her.

"Wirth--"

"I'm sorry." He looked at her, shaken. "I only meant to comfort... *Damn!*" He took a deep breath. "Sayka, you weren't much help, little girl. I don't know what to say. Can we pretend this didn't happen?"

"*No!* Oh, no, I can't pretend. I wanted it to happen, ever since the day you found me in the forest. It's all right. I'd have let you go on just now. Why did you stop?"

"You're so young, Sayka...and innocent...even with all the hard knocks. Things aren't done this way in the March."

"I'll be eighteen next month. What does it matter anyway? In some ways I'm an old woman, and I know what I feel...what you felt."

"It isn't...wasn't love," Wirth said carefully.

"Then what I feel and what you feel aren't the same."

"They're the same, and neither is love. You're young and so...hungry. I don't want to feed that kind of hunger, not with you. I think too much of you."

"Oh?" She put her hand to her mouth and hurried toward the door, stopping there a moment and turning her hurting eyes upon him in anger. "Then who will? Do you care?"

"Wait!" Wirth called. "You don't understand yet what I'm

saying."

"I understand!" she cried, her voice a thin wail of humiliation.

He stood a moment, for once immobilized. When he shook himself loose from self-reproach and reached the hall, she had somehow managed to disappear with her strange catlike stealth.

XXIX

The elongated gold-sheathed pods of the Goldfish were imposing to Wyld, even as the waiting twin submarines hung motionless in twelve fathoms of water alongside SeaMarch Lab. Not only were the Goldfish unequalled in their curving rakish designs, but in their intelligence, for their packed cavities were implemented with manifold bits of information allowing them to think and act with minimal instruction. Rapidly digesting a great input of data, they regularly sped their trusting crews over silent unmarked paths beneath the wildest sea surfaces. They were the pride of the Marchland fleet, as revered by their crews as the friendly beluga cavorting off the island's northern shores.

In forty-eight hours the Goldfish would be ready to move out, heading east thence speeding south around Immixia, and finally turning east again into the western Marchland waters. There, after a long voyage of over five thousand kilometers, they would prepare to lay off the Sonna coast. Tucked beneath their foredeck bellies each Goldfish would be carrying a three-man mini-sub, the Portheus, and a small hard-working robot sub, the Seahorse. The Portheus I and II were reliable and elusive little scouts that could absorb even high-tech sonar and deflect any powerful water lasers, thereby remaining undetectable. This facility would make them

invaluable in the rescue mission, for they were compact and swift enough to rise quickly and move shoreward beneath Dagonite fishing or transport vessels.

The first task of the small subs in the Goldfish bellies would be to provide the men with access to a Dagonite ship. Most Dagonite merchantmen were of thirty meters or more and fully automated, running with very small crews. Once in control of such a vessel the Marchland sailors would obtain clearance, using the ship's own data banks, and bring themselves nearer the shore than the Goldfish could safely venture. The commandeered Dagonite vessel, under the pretense of minor repairs, could anchor quite near the Sonna coast, providing the men with a convenient base of operations and a means of escape that would not draw attention.

Wyld calculated the risks against the experience of his crews and their superior equipment. He was confident, even though the Dagonites were a formidable sea power with a hoard of attack matériel. The Marchland advantage would be complete surprise. The greatest element of chance was in finding the right vessel traveling to their approximate destination. They would have to monitor the open sea and roadstead, devising operational signals similar to those of communicating Dagonite vessels.

After an unstinting inspection and a few more detailed instructions, Wyld entered a shuttle sub somewhat larger than the Porthus. This vessel carried the undersea lab workers from the SeaMarch base to a mooring inside the shore base, which housed the surfacing machines where the longer term workers must attach themselves for a swift blood cleansing. On a pad near the shore base, he boarded Wyld violet I and flew over to Shellreef. He had left Solvault Hall ahead of time, giving Alba that much less chance

to fume at her sketchy knowledge of his disquieting voyage.

The Genarch had not been told of the mission, much less of his decision to accompany it. This act was, strictly speaking, a violation of their right to be alerted in times of danger, and this omission, along with her own fear for her grandson, deeply distressed Alba. It was a recorded law of the March that no Wyld ever unduly jeopardize his vital lineage, and certainly not until his chromosomes were banked, a law that Wyld understood and respected, but also disdained. Although his chromosomes were indeed held in storage, the traditional old method of reproduction through birth was an unrecorded law of primogeniture, as well as a ceremonial offering for the right to govern, which the Marchlanders, who themselves must obtain permission for such births, expected of the Jarl. The birth of a Wyld was cause for great celebration, a celebration that had not occurred in four decades.

Coming in still within the colors of the last rays of light, he saw Wyld Violet III, Fox's ship, parked off the pad, and wondered if his security chief brought more sinister news. He had not expected Fox to leave Sunring until early morning.

He hurried along the translucent walkway, which had already received the computer's command to glow faintly from beneath its surface, then suddenly paused to stare at the place beside the salal brake where he had induced Chloë to return his passion. The pale emotion-charged face appeared again to him and he felt her hands struggling against him, against her own abandon, struggling for the security and predictability of an ordered life. Grimacing, he looked up at looming white Shellreef, white only in his mind, for it was now tinted a sunset rose, tending toward the floridly indelible memories shimmering inside: their first and last

night together. No, not their last. He began to jog toward the veranda, partly in haste, partly to stave off the crippling emotion closing in on him.

Fox was waiting in the white-paneled solarium, whose semi-circular windows looked out on Metiah's Bay. He had his feet up on a green chintz footrest and was holding a generous tumbler of malt liquor. There was an air of provocation about the amber eyes, which also registered fatigue, and they appeared darker, perhaps because the face beneath the boyish freckles had paled and grown strained as worries mounted. Now he prepared to deliver more bad news.

"You remember telling me that Amboze showed up at Ursa's party? That set me thinking and I did some checking on Grenellev. I had Wirth do a little more while he was on the Mainland, and one of my men who stayed behind came back today with the last word. I've good evidence that Grenellev and Amboze were regular business associates. Grenellev may even have known about the mine blow-up."

"What! Grenellev? No, I can't believe that. Why would a respectable entrepreneur like Grenellev get mixed up with Amboze?"

Wyld stood at the windows, watching purpling Metiah's Bay as he waited to hear what his leaping mind had just begun to suspect.

"The usual reason...Amboze is loaded. Grenellev was badly hurt by our credit interdiction. Seems that he likes to hoard gold and run on top-heavy credit like some others."

"He was never on my target list."

"He was a dark horse on the gold market, had a flush

syndicate that included Rymon Grabb and Amboze. All dark horses who did their trading through the house name of Prad M. Teverjend."

"But Teverjend checked out as the president of a private company."

"Nevertheless Teverjend is a syndication with six nefarious arms and legs."

"Ah, I see. So the complete illegality of it never bothered Granellev?"

"Apparently not."

"I thought I knew Granellev, still believe I do. He's always been one of my friendlier critics, or so I thought. I know he thinks no man fit for Ursa. But there must be a longer story there. When I have the opportunity I'll do him the parting honor of accusing him to his face."

Knowing how Fox rather innocently coveted Ursa, Wyld found himself reluctant to ask the next question but did so.

"What about Ursa, is she aware of all this?"

Fox produced a knowing smile that was somehow mildly disapproving without being haughty or accusatory.

"That piece of information you'll have to get by your own devices. But that's another reason why I'm here. Ursa is at Solvault Hall."

"Black suns! You're full of good news. I didn't need this now."

"Well, you've got it."

Wyld snatched up Fox's frosty decanter and poured himself a tumbler full of malt.

"I'd like to finish this stuff off with a half dozen others and

spend the night here in peace and drunkenness."

"I wish I felt more peaceful," Fox grumbled, "and more like a friendly bash."

"It's raining hard on us, Fox. Do you sleep much these nights?"

"When I get tired enough."

Wyld downed another glass of malt and stretched out on a fan-backed white chair, which Alba and her decorators had caused to be heavily padded with more green chintz. He closed his eyes and brooded a while in silence, his long body shifting from time to time in agitation.

"We *will* get her out of there," he said at last.

"Not going to be easy," Fox warned with a sigh.

"They have our gold and they want more of it. Maybe I should trade it for her."

"You're getting drunk, Casimir."

"So are you, hail-fellow-well-met. I can tell by the choice of name."

Fox grinned, a grin that was all the more comely and ungrudging because it sprang out of such a sodden face.

"I'll tell you something that I'm not proud of, even though you must no longer care."

"You've been visiting Ursa," Wyld said softly. His head was back and his eyes closed.

"You knew?"

"I can still get some information without you, you rusty dueler. Why is she at the Hall? What does she know?"

Fox looked puzzled for a minute.

"Nothing of this mission. Of her father, I don't know. She

never showed much interest in the details of his various businesses, did she?"

"Not around me," Wyld said, with a sharper voice than he would have liked.

He was unhappy with himself, unhappy at how Fox's attention to Ursa rankled him, and now he had let it show.

"Casimir, I saw her only a couple of times when I was working on the mine sabotage business on the Mainland. I told her how I felt. She wasn't overjoyed."

"Foolish woman," Wyld said. "Let's walk," he added, irritably grabbing up his fleece-lined jacket.

"No thanks. It's colder than an ice-moon out there."

"You don't know what cold is, you soft jellyfish. Come on. Bring that decanter. No, leave it. No, bring it."

"One of your best features is your decisiveness," Fox said, getting up reluctantly and searching the room for his misplaced jacket.

They made their way haltingly along the edge of moonless Metiah's Bay and through a sandy pine grove, trading benevolent insults, lamenting their woes, finishing the decanter, and occasionally taking a jab at each other in a very loose-muscled, half-hearted fashion. Finally, with Fox's inhibitions waning, the match heated up.

"Can't you get it through that stubborn convolution of Wyld metal what it means to come with us on this mission?"

"I will be there...wherever... I'm neither steel nor merely a repository of Wyld genes...I'm a living, breathing human animal!" Wyld bellowed. "I'll hear no more of this!"

"You will!"

"Will I!" Wyld roared.

All the pent-up frustration helped along by the alcohol circulating in his veins amassed in his fist as he knocked Fox neatly into a sand dune.

Fox sat up, shaking his head with a crooked grin, then pulled off his boots, adding his feet to the implements of warfare, foggily aware that he must not harm the Jarl.

Wyld, who stood reeling a bit and smiling in disbelief, next found himself sprawling in a head-jarring dive. He sat up, brushing the sand out of his hair with a look that Fox could just make out in the soft light of a distant glow lamp as a seething ferocity. They grappled clumsily, drunkenly, rolling and punching until Wyld began to laugh. He lay back, his eyes crying with laughter as he surrendered to a band of gloating stars. Fox's mellow laughter, full of relief, came to him out of the shadows. Nothing much had been settled, only wild frustration temporarily tamped down.

They stood up together and continued arm in arm, supporting each other as they trudged back to Shellreef. They had come a long way on this cold and starry night, speaking now with dodging words of events long past, when days that were nearly as threatening, would they only admit it, had seemed interminably filled with friendly blue skies.

"Help yourself to a bed," Wyld called to Fox as, with an apologetic grin, he waved the worried and nightgowned house mistress Mea from his disheveled countenance. He stood for a moment on the second landing, watching Fox mount the stairs, then turned to his sleeping chamber, calling over his shoulder, "All I ask is that you think of nothing but success from now on, you drunken pessimist!"

XXX

Wyld stood at the long ebony table in the yellow ocher, mahogany-paneled study, where as a boy he had watched his father doing much the same thing. While waiting to see Ursa, who, unaccustomed to an early schedule, had not yet arisen, he was shuffling idly through copious printouts and parcels that could not be sent via satellite. Reluctantly he had flown back to Solvault Hall; this done even before the morning broke over calm Metiah's Bay, for, despite his reluctance, he was still eager to expunge whatever hurtful message lay beneath the carefully tended façade of his relinquished prize: beautiful, wounded, tenacious Ursa.

He paused and ran his fingers over a narrow box, which had cleared security but which bore an unfamiliar Mainland address. Tearing off the coarse wrapping and lifting the lid he plunged his hand beneath the tissues and instantly withdrew it, as though violently stung. He felt the blood draining from his face, his head thrown back, reeling with the swift poison of shock. Slowly he reached forward and lifted from the box a long, silky flaxen braid, bringing it to his mouth and rubbing it against his cheek. The fine smooth threads of gold burned his fingers as he stared at the severed end brutally cut from Chloë's head. He swept the box with everything in its path onto the floor and laid the braid gently down, all the while a stream of rabid curses bouncing off the silent walls and coming back to him like the rants of a delirious stranger. If he had been the slightest uncertain before, now he knew the utter depravity of those with whom he would deal. His head dropped, resting on the shining plait that was for him still a part of her. Then he closed his eyes, giving himself over to

exploding points of light that blurred and cleared and extended over the sharply focusing screen of his memory. Swiftly, he was transported to the arousing, sensuously eidetic scenes with Chloë on their single night at Shellreef.

She was dressed in a simple yellow wool long skirt and matching sweater, which she had brought to the Gream. The pale yellow made a fuzzy aura like winter sun over her shoulders. The only jewelry she wore was the gold wrist messenger, which she sometimes touched irritably, as if it were a manacle, and it was, yes, a felicitous manacle, a protective link that he wanted there on her wrist.

Something had come over her, the peculiarly impetuous demeanor of a lustrous bearer of messages from a distant and exclusive place, a place that could not be reached by sound wave or beam of light but only by intuitiveness and frame of mind. There, palpably there: the luminous spirit leaning across the table, offering him generous-hearted laughter, high laughter rushing over the copper bowls of enormous spiked white dahlias. She inhaled deeply, then swallowed his favorite wine, growing momentarily serious at his cogent marriage toast. Her radiant head was held back and the discerning eyes watched him with the slyly penetrating look of a forest dweller, one who always sees but is hardly ever seen. Next, the effortless grace of her flashing knife and fork, then a new facet, deceptively tame and becalmed, delicate shell ears receiving his vain overconfident words, her hands folded in rapt attention and the corners of her mouth curled in a cunning permission to lay himself bare. Thus did the glowing jade eyes steadily pilfer from his willing and desirous mind. Could she ferret out the index he was keeping there, the essence of Chloë: the more-

than-woman more-than-dream symbol of sacrifice and triumph, of splendid indifference to self?

He pushed his lightly touched food away over the white cloth, instead swallowing the citrine wine in his tall amethyst goblet. She shook her head politely at this, clearly regretting his abandoned supper.

"Once you deserted me at table." He paused, smiling playfully and asked, "Is that a pun?" Her ensuing laughter made him linger over the high warming sound. "I was eating your wild blackberries. How did I make you so angry?"

Her ringless fingers forked together in recollection, the hands then resting vulnerably palms up on the table.

"You were baiting me...will again, easily. You like that hot method, controversial debate. You've a way of..."

Her lips, curling around the thrilling sound of faintly accented words, stopped as he stared with what he knew to be an insolent fixation on her mouth. His eyes traveled to the wheaten hair piled at the crown of her head, gleaming and fresh as a harvest shock. A few wayward strands floated over the flushed white skin of her temples.

Rising from his chair he came around the table and stood over her, at the moment unaware of the intense, almost threatening aspect of his enthrallment. Consuming her with his riveted attention, his head inclined to a black-clothed shoulder. Her head, held straight, then turned to the side to gaze obliquely at his rising hands. She sat so fixedly still, yet he sensed the wildness of her heart as his hands began to undo the slippery mass of golden threads. Her downcast eyes hardly blinked as he wound the hair slowly around the long spindle of his hand. He gripped it in a fist

then let it fall, spreading over her shoulders.

"Your feet are bare," he said with a surprised ripple of amusement. He noticed that the toes of both feet were bent sharply into the carpet, as though hanging on.

"I had only my boots," she said against his laughter.

"Are you cold?"

He knelt and touched her cool foot, feeling the tense muscles and taking it in palpating fingers.

"No, not cold."

"Do you want to eat more?"

"No." She laughed. "No more thank you. I've shown my gratitude for this poor lobster's sacrifice. That neglected fellow on your plate deserved better."

"Leftover lobster is delicious cold," he said, taking her by the hand as she stood up. "Let's find a comfortable place and digest our food."

In his half-glassed sleeping chamber one floor directly above the bay-view sitting room, he lit a driftwood fire. It had been laid in the old stone fireplace, hardly ever used but an architectural relic his mother had loved.

"This is for you because you're a fire-eater," he teased as he worked the damper.

"Fire and the absence of fire...infinity and...death." She said the last word softly to herself, and her eyes widened as she stretched her hands toward the heat.

"And cold-blooded Wyld will soon be drenched in the heat of this infinity you praise." Chuckling at this and then falling silent, he watched her revel in the firelight, thinking how natural her thought, how readily he understood its path; it was intense and

relentless and yet to many others he knew it would seem strange and ponderous.

They heard an insistent scratching at the door and opened it to find the restless wolfhound seeking company. He trotted in and lay down on the hearth with crossed paws, immediately pacified by the flames.

"Doesn't he seem finely carved of wood and gilded with Marchland gold, lying in the firelight so still and proud? You're an ormolu dog," she cooed, laughing and stroking his neck.

"Ormolu...Ormolu," she whispered.

Ormolu raised his acutely sensitive ears, as though satisfied to have a name at last. His eyes followed her, and when she had settled herself on the bed he dropped his nose over his paws and stared again into the fire.

Chloë lay back against the midnight blue of the wide raised pillows. Her dilated eyes reflected the leaping hot blaze that brought her such pleasure.

But the same combustion that soothed and irradiated Chloë caused Wyld a sudorific discomfort. He pulled off his sweat-dampened tunic and cast it away from him.

When he lay back, half sitting against the pillows, she ran her fingers over his chest then placed her hand in the middle and lay her cheek over it, continuing to stare at the fire. Whenever her head moved her hair was dragged softly over his chest and made him think of dozens of small beating wings: fluttering, fluttering moths or butterflies, the pale summer blues that fed on flowers in their larval stage, excreting honeydew.

In a little while she pushed her head back to focus on his dreaming face, her eyes ranging carefully over such rarely contented

features.

So guarded had his countenance always been, first consciously and then from habit, it took a moment for him to allow her a reading of what was there. Then he candidly returned her gaze.

"What do you see?" His voice dissolved against the noisy snapping of the wood.

Her cheeks flushed at once with scarlet blood, a capricious chemistry inducing obvious dismay, but making her as irresistible to him as the fire was to her.

"Have you discovered that you're only a metaphor?" he chaffed with some amusement.

"Don't mix me then. I've had enough of it."

She was delighted with her remark, allowing the momentum of her laughter to lift her higher and higher until the fluid ripple of sound caused Ormolu to raise his head and whimper.

Until that moment Wyld had forgotten her connection with Immixia, even though it was what had brought her to him and part of what had drawn him to her. She was so much the March to him now that whenever he came home from a journey he also returned to the thought of her there, intertwined with Marchland history, no matter the length of her absence. From high above he could look down with deep pleasure upon the towers of Sunring, the black Churlwraith castle that seemed her point of origin, and yet she had begun somewhere else and there was a part of her reaching into Immixia, a part of which he knew little or nothing.

"I see this will take years...the way good wine is made. Some we'll undoubtedly spoil...all to the good of experience." His voice was patient, his smile unconcerned.

Chloë took his hand and studied it, turning it palm up and bringing it to her lips with the faintest pressure. He watched these movements with intense concentration, trying to search inside the delicately aligned skull.

"Wine," she said with thoughtful countenance, "one of the few things that time enhances. We shouldn't try to rush the flowering of some things, mysteries sleeping in time."

Now he saw her as furtive child, but furtive only in her escape from worldly taint; precocious, curious, half of her face in shadow half in the leaping fire, shining with a joyful mischief, the guileless celebration of all things, the child so alive in her. Before him was infant, daughter, woman, scientist, courageous finite being: Chloë. A part of him wanted, with utter selfishness, to have her as the best half of himself, and a part of him praised this unassailable mortal, apotheosizing her for her courageous ability to stand alone. By allowing him into her life she sacrificed a rich part of herself, giving him passage into another kind of love, an expanding frontier as bountiful as the March.

He kissed the top of her head, wherein he imagined the pitched battles of countless persuasive voices, not the least of these the urgent involuntary demands of unallied chromosomes. He kissed her warm rose-fleshed lips, parted so temptingly for mutual joy. He slid his mouth over hers repeatedly, existing by this act alone until he felt her body shudder, heard a low involuntary cry.

"Are you...*me* all right?" he asked, holding her head in his hands.

"Yes...just...just sometimes you're more...much more than... You're the symbol of my world. I can't--"

"No, no, no," he murmured, rocking her in his arms. "I'm

fool man...incredibly fortunate to have you here with me. Let's try to be a little like children now...in this unbelievable...*this!*" He held her, feeling a racing heart.

"Do you want me to sit over there across the room while you interrogate...*analyze* the stony frame and soft feather of me, alchemist?"

"No, please don't move." She uttered a throaty chirrup of laughter, like the contented ruffle of a bird securely hidden in a thicket. "I'm unused to attention, so much..."

Her voice died away, and then he heard his given name whispered in a soft erotic voice that caused his chest to fill with painful waves of adulation and desire. He knew and understood, relishing the heightened impulse of it, that he would always have to penetrate the protective armor of this independent self in order to reach the sweet unfettered center, the place where nothing would or need be qualified.

He looked into those discerning pools of green, while conceiving an unvoiced thought. *What we are here rises from a sanctuary of sleeping mysteries, all uniquely ranging far beyond the ephemeral, yet awakening now exclusively in us, opening at time's command. Do you know it, feel it too?*

"Yes," she whispered, watching his eyes rejoice. Hanks of her enlacing hair were grasped in his hands. In this way he drew her head back against the pillows and fit her to his self, to his life.

He looked up, his vision clouded, the objects of his study oddly disconnected and foreign to him. Domotron was speaking.

"Repeat please," he said with catching voice.

"I repeat, Jarl Wyld," came the soothing dream-like answer. "Ursa waits for you in the blue room."

He took up the braid, feeling it burn to the bone his shaking culpable hand, then sealed it in his desk and went to meet Ursa.

She was patting her hair and smoothing out her gray velvet dress before the heavy beveled mirror, which hung in the muted light of the cerulean sitting room. He had often seen his mother make the same gestures in the same mirror, and realized now that in these simple adjustments there resided a firmly abiding faith in the corrigibility of life, detail attended to as though everything must only improve. For a moment he found these self-attentive patterns of vanity linked with Mother vaguely comforting, and wondered if this was one of the reasons he had been drawn to Ursa.

She turned to him, her guarded but appraising eyes immediately finding a new facial injury, which provoked a maternal scolding.

"Is it an ongoing part of your life, all this violence?"

"Just exercise," Wyld answered, his fingers absently brushing over a small bruise. His head must have struck a rock or a shell when he fell under Fox's hefty blow.

The high private room where they met looked down upon the edge of the forest, a stone's throw away. Today it was a forest unrecognizable to him, a dank, mottled bluish-green of impenetrable layers, blurred with hoary mists.

Ursa's higher stressed voice unwittingly insisted upon his attention as she told him, with bluff and dissimulation pitifully obvious and beneath her dignity, that she had come to make one severing blow at whatever held them together.

She tries to be as meticulous in her relationships as she is in the care of her wardrobe, he thought, wants everything boxed, labeled and put away.

Does Fox know this, or would it matter to Fox, or would it even happen to Fox, because Fox is different? Each relationship is different.

His eyes stung as though filled with grains of sand. He tried to explain his feeling for her, the nature of his devotion, how near perfection it had been and how lacking in something vitally necessary, which he would not specifically define, not wanting to hurt her.

"I think you see it," he said.

"I've caught a glimpse. Casimir...I wouldn't have put you off so quickly if I'd realized how readily you'd agree. It's so...unflattering. But it's much easier when you have someone else. Skye Kleeve, isn't it? I--"

"Nothing is easy," he interrupted her. "I doubt it ever will be. *Easy* is compliance, passivity...I can't... I'm sorry, I never meant to mislead you. Sorry...sorry."

Ursa, her thoughts still coursing with accusation, watched him run his fingers back and forth through his hair then shake his head in short swift jerks, like an animal in pain or a man trying to dispel a seizure of paralysis. His eyes were different, distracted, slightly red. She studied him a moment, realizing all at once that he was suffering in a way that she could hardly comprehend and that she was adding to this great pool of misery.

"Casimir, what is it?"

"Nothing that concerns you," he said, forcing a smile.

"Only now you sense that I'm not a dilettante in an endless summer, as I might once have convinced you...at least for a time. Paradise is heavy work."

Would she have betrayed him? No, he wanted to think not. She cared for him in her way, wanted to be his precious ornament;

and he could have been her trophy in exchange for her devotion, for her saying and doing always just the right thing, this lovely bright ornament. What a waste. But why had her father not encouraged her to have his gold, or had he? He kissed her with a light dry kiss and told her he was glad they had talked but now he must go away on business that could not be delayed, and could they try to remain friends.

Ursa, seeing that he was unshakably preoccupied with whatever had taken possession of him, called after him as he left the room. Her voice was filled with a compassion she had hardly expected to offer. The words of her father came to her: "Wyld is a visionary; no matter how he professes to loathe idealism his visions are its dead center. In that vein, he will not survive."

She had been right in the first instance, although for the wrong reasons, about coming to this inescapably romantic place and suffusing her mind with its excessive layers of primitive green, yet her deep attachment to Wyld had really precluded a choice. Still, she could not seem to grasp the reason why so many wanted the Marchland to disappear when it so deserved to flourish. Surely Wyld was equitable with his gold, much more than fair; she knew many of the causes to which he had devoted not only gold but precious time and effort. Such stewardship was remarkable and exemplary.

People were always asking, demanding... How could they take with the one hand and attempt to destroy the giver with the other? Even her own father paradoxically seemed to wish the dissolution of the March, her father who depended upon her for the greatest share of his happiness and had never countermanded even the most outrageous of her demands.

The Marchman

She stared at Wyld with growing apprehension. Perhaps at this moment he has reason to expect his own ruin, she thought. Once everything had seemed so promising.

"Casimir, please!" she called out as he reached the door, "Don't add me to whatever troubles you. Really, my dear one...really I'm fine."

He came back to her, giving her agitated lithe body a brusque hug of gratitude, then departed without a word and without noticing her widening limpid eyes.

"Perhaps I won't go from you so easily," she whispered, a little surprised at her own words.

XXXI

The two Goldfish plowed silently through the dark viscous world of water, speeding over a cracked and ridged rind of sea bed, the opulent hermitage of browsing whales and whirling plankton and all that swam and mandibled and anchored in between these two extremes; the shelled and finned and clawed and jellied, warily coexisting, regularly digesting one another, ultimately dependent upon, but mostly oblivious to, this nether realm's hellish antipode: a place of blinding light and dry air. Deep down in the planet's torpid black brine, primal questions were answered gulp by gulp in a jawing, pulsing, flashing blur of neon life that advertised nothing but interior oxidation and ceaseless hunger. The two Goldfish delicately sensed their intrusion in this varied baroque biosphere of furtive and dissembling hierarchies. They interfered only long enough to pierce the tightly compressed waters, racing on without hesitation or complaint under the heavy burden of massive pressures and full acceleration.

Wyld sat at a table in his compact quarters, discussing routes, eventualities, and alternatives with Fox and the captain, who did little more than speak to the skillfully diligent Goldfish. Wyld's eyes, which only a day ago had seemed to Fox opaque and distant, now glowed with the heat of engagement. For the first time since Chloë's abduction, he had become an intensified version of his old assertive self, and he bore what seemed to Fox a dangerously excessive confidence.

When they were alone Fox began to speak, knowing that his stilted words were unwelcome, even inflammatory.

"The hour is past, I suppose, to argue that you risk too much this time in coming personally to the aid of the Churlwraiths?"

Wyld found this question, framed less in the line of duty than as a stubborn disavowal of his relationship with Chloë, a needling aggravation. Why did Fox do this? Was it merely instinctual protection or did he really think the union wrong, harmful? He responded at first with a tremor of anger born of hurt, then the perversity merely increased his determination. He offered a broad smile.

"Long past," he said, and the finality in his voice left Fox nothing but a sullen retreat. Long past, he continued to himself, since the day I found my Immixed spirit's footprint in the red mud next to mine.

The crews of the Goldfish had taken care to stay well outside Immixia's territorial waters as they rounded the island, trusting no one to keep their secret, but adding greater distance to their mission. Their success depended upon stealth and finesse.

With discovery, what a welcoming party the Dagonites

might have, Wyld thought. Alerted subversives in the Immix government would quickly reveal his intentions to Dagone, thus he had purposely told Mwithe Xheeva that he would communicate no more with her until he heard favorable results from Fedcartel. Premier Xheeva would think him raving mad in this attempt, primarily at exposing himself, yet he knew that she would applaud the rash exploit if it proved successful. Already she must be seeking answers to the riddle of Skye Kleeve, although he doubted that she knew of Chloë's Marchland connection.

What might be occurring at Sandspell at this moment was an area of conjecture he constantly skirted, pushing its paralyzing intrusion beneath the surface of his focused consciousness.

When the current plans were plotted, he went to the exercise room and worked himself into a state of exhaustion then showered and slept.

In the early morning, on the darkened bridge lit only by computer screens, he conferred with the captain, learning that they were just ahead of schedule. The captains had asked the two Goldfish to carefully monitor the traffic and stay well off the path of anything moving in their vicinity. Tonight they would surface for an hour under an overcast sky, shutting down quietly but ready for an emergency dive. The running lights were kept off, and Wyld could see nothing swimming past the thick starboard windows but flashes of bioluminescent creatures -- deep sea life grazing through the minuscule plankton lacery crocheted by the sun's light, nutrients wafted slowly down to nourish the sea bed with a rich geometric blanket.

The tumbling glowing bodies sparkled and died away, whirling in the inky blackness like flashing thoughts appearing

unannounced in the neurasthenic dead of night. Watching these iridescent creatures impounded in their black broth, wheeling and eluding one another with lightning dexterity, Wyld began to imagine that he was one of them, the enemy among enemies, executing and anticipating moves and countermoves of swift necessity. He thought of a war game he had learned as a child, where all the might of legions was quickly nullified by the mistake of a single warrior. But the game had rules by which the players abided, rules that the unscrupulous Dagonites were adept at breaking. And now they had caused him to break rules too, plunging him into a massing storm of circumstances with no predictable outcome. Dimly reflected in the glass, his blue gaze ranged the abyssal depths, intent constricting to the energized state of a flexed animal, all the senses drawn in upon a single objective. Slowly the compressed features relaxed, as he brought himself through trial waves of heavy mental exertion, until he saw before him once again only the bright dance of fortuitous sea life.

When he had earlier appeared on the bridge, Wirth had observed Wyld's rehearsal at the window with keen-sighted interest. Now Wirth stood, quiet and unobtrusive, studying a directional reading from a computer mounted on silver gimbals, and it was Wyld who studied Wirth.

He had asked to have Wirth aboard Goldfish I; unlike his other objectives, the reason was not entirely clear to him. He knew with certainty that Wirth was, as his name so accurately echoed, a man of incalculable worth, of course devoted to Chloë. His dark visage turned to meet Wyld's gaze. The two men nodded, looking directly at each other with a corresponding conviction requiring no spoken words.

The Marchman

Laying well off Sonna on the third day out, the Goldfish rested passively at thirty-two fathoms while the swift little robot Seahorses scouted the area. They were searching for a vessel heading in the right direction that could be pirated and brought near Sandspell. The Seahorses were released just before the Goldfish bottomed in suitable resting places, and had now been out working twelve hours.

Wyld paced on the bridge, glancing at the tracking screen each time he passed. Wirth stood immovably fixed in one spot with his arms folded, as was his habit in times of necessary patience.

"They're heading in," Fox said, straightening up in the seat where he had sprawled before the tracking screen.

Fearing interception, they had asked the Seahorses not to relay any information they recorded. Now the Goldfish would lift gently off bottom, and soon the Seahorses would be locked into place and commence feeding their data into the big computer that would instantly begin talking to the bridge.

The information divulged was not promising. Most vessels were loaded and heading full speed toward northern Dagon ports, but there was one vessel in a repair phase to the north and east of Sandspell. The Marchlanders had hoped to operate as near their border as possible, thus keeping the Goldfish safely to the south of Sandspell. If they chose to subdue the crew of the vessel in repair mode, they would be venturing dangerously far from their own border, into Dagon waters, and would also be gambling on the readiness of the vessel in question, which might be in need of extensive work. The decision was a crucial one. Should they scout

further, possibly coming upon a healthy craft in a much more advantageous position, possibly wasting time and finding nothing, or should they seize the vessel under repair and count on a swift recovery? Wyld weighed the question briefly and arrived at a decision in seconds.

"I think we should take the vessel under repair. Since our information tells us that the vessel is anchored alone without a relief ship, chances are its repairs are minor and either well on their way to being fixed or fixable by us. As for the Goldfish, we'll have to move them a bit further north than we'd like, but we'll use the Dagon vessel for escape anyway, and these fishing boats can move swiftly enough, with a head start, to outrun anything ready to chase us back to our subs." He paused while the others nodded in agreement. "Fox, you and Wirth and one other of your choosing can man Portheus II. I'll take one medic with me in Portheus I."

They all knew that the extra space in Portheus I was reserved for Chloë, but not a word of this was spoken and everyone seemed agreeable to Wyld's decision.

Alone with Fox, Wyld said, "Now let's talk one more time with the men you took to Sandspell with me, especially the two who managed to penetrate the lower catacombs of that ice cream palace. Bring them to my quarters and we'll take a final look at our rough blueprint and the layouts they recorded. Little did we know when we gathered this material for other purposes that it would later be used as the most valuable of all our rescue tools."

"Just one thing," Fox said. "You must agree to stay off the vessel when we seize it. We have plenty of men for that task, and we need our leader in a less vulnerable place."

"I've no intention of going aboard," Wyld said. "When

you're secured there, I'll be boarding Portheus for a fast run into the harbor."

Fox smiled with a small measure of relief.

Columns of bubbles streamed toward the surface as one by one the silver-suited Marchlanders left the diving wells of the two hovering Goldfish and pushed out into the opaque void for their ascent from beneath the Dagon vessel. Above, a welcome dusk began its camouflage and the still-warm Singe blew over a magenta-tinted sea, frothing the restless swells into whitecaps flecked with lavender and gold. The divers hurried to reach as near the surface as they dared, using the last rays of light to find the ship's anchor line, and rising quietly from below the broad-hulled fishing vessel; it was not as sleek as a merchantman but powerfully driven. They waited, bobbing in the starboard shadows, while one of the men searched for a relatively concealed area at which to shoot his grappling hook.

Four of the men were already topside and unsuiting when Wirth was forced to stun an alert sailor, spotting them from the quarter-deck and making his way slowly forward to sound an alarm. Fox had sternly warned his men to avoid gymnastic contests with these hardy but unrehearsed seamen. They were instructed to work fast, using their stunners when necessary to minimize damage and bloodshed. The seizure occurred at a fortuitous hour when the crew and captain were at mess and only the topside computer on watch. One man had missed his meal, perhaps having stayed for a time in his bunk with a sour stomach. This sailor, coming topside for air, had proved recalcitrant and tried to bring down one of the men by swinging a loose piece of cable around the Marchlander's

legs. He was swiftly given a carefully-measured cure for his bellyache, administered again by Wirth's stunner.

The balding, rosy-cheeked captain was astonished and indignant, although cautiously docile; he tried in vain to learn the meaning of this foolhardy piracy, which he swore his captors would never accomplish. "We're merely borrowing your vessel for a time," was the spare answer Fox supplied. The captain and his amazed crew were completely unprepared for such unusual tactics and, having no hope of retaliation, submitted to being bound and locked in their quarters under guard.

Fox went to work checking the computer log for any important data, including the vessel's repair status, and found that a robot computer was just finishing repairs in the engine room. He then ordered the computer to speak to its land base notifying of a temporary need to anchor in sheltered waters for minor external repair and giving its estimated new position as just off the small Sandspell harbor, which was used only by pleasure craft. From this point the Marchland crew could easily swim to shore, meeting Wyld and the moored Portheus crews in the early morning cover of darkness.

Although Sandspell was a twenty-four-hour casino and resort, most revelers did begin to settle down in the early morning hours, leaving only the hard-core gamblers stuck fast at the gaming computers. The Marchlanders did not expect to find security loose here, especially with Chloë's highly secret detainment, but at least their adversaries would be more easy to spot when the guests had thinned.

The Portheus drifted like flotsam into the half-moon harbor and moored alongside the shadowy exterior wall of a large

rectangular boathouse that appeared empty. Jezz, who had been chosen by Wyld because of his excellent medical training, unhatched and stepped out first, securing the sub and looking around to try and learn where the other Portheus had put in. Meanwhile, Wyld was checking to see that Portheus I had programmed itself for a departure along the same route that brought them into the harbor. After a final readout he shut down all systems but one, which was left at the ready for a swift breakaway, and drew himself through the hatch. There was still no sign of the other Portheus.

They stood on the walkway in their dress boots, casual slacks, and loose summer jackets, which just concealed the powerful little stunners attached to their belts, and the slim medic's pack worn by Jezz. Although Jezz wanted to wait for the others and had been so instructed by Fox, Wyld wanted to move off the walkway and look for cover further ahead, a little closer, always a little closer. Thus they moved slowly forward, with a worried Jezz sticking to the Jarl as if ordered to enact an extra invincible skin.

A spicy wayward breeze came shyly off the land and was quickly gulped up by the rising Singe. A burst of laughter sounded just ahead, as they stepped off the walkway onto a wide terrazzo path. They dove behind a thick row of cycads, the fronds arching over them like spraying green fountains in the artificial light.

Two men passed along the path, their movements broken by the swaying cycads -- sailors, from a chartered cruise, returning to their boat, waving their arms and delivering boisterous mimicry of their passengers: "My line is tangled. Oh, I lost my hat! Can't you get it back? Please move this horrid chair. Faster...go faster! Oh, how I love this mad conquering of the vast oceans," one deck

hand whined while the other slapped his stomach and bent over howling.

Wyld stood up, touching Jezz on the shoulder lightly and smiling. He stepped to the path's edge, keeping near the cycads, with Jezz close at his back. *As reluctant to see me move as I am eager,* Wyld thought, *but neither of us at all careless.* It felt good just to stand up and work his taut muscles after the cramped little sub.

They could see the soft light of torches burning on the precipitous incline they would soon be climbing, zigzagging upward away from the wind-snarled torch flames conveniently marking the easier path they must avoid.

Wyld's interior monologue, striving for coolness and patience, insisted on becoming a dialogue of neither.

This moonless night of intrigue seems innocent enough and deceptively pleasure-bound. It was an innocent night that snared you. I have only to get from here to there where you are; that I will accomplish. Do you remember Arrowmoon, when I pulled off your boots and brought you a glass of water? "You're making me nervous," you said. Yes, I did that, made you think of me. Nothing gave me more pleasure than to see that I could. Black suns, not because I'm an emblem! Because I am selfish, because I am thirsty, I brought you, am bringing you...let me always quench your thirst with mine, always bring you clear Marchland water, until we're too old to drink. I should never have let you go, but then I would have been your jailer. You are so vulnerable in every way. An altruist does not know how to survive, or knows but doesn't care, or cares but can't help it, is genetically marked...cannot help it. An altruist needs someone without realizing that need, someone to see to certain things...and that helpful someone must never strive for self-gratification...must be someone who...

He wanted to laugh derisively at what he had just learned about himself, what it was that he was willing to do. Small knives

The Marchman

of pain throbbed in his palms, causing his fingers to tighten against them. *For me, it must be this one time, just for you.* Then the worst thing he knew, which he had tried to throttle even in pervasive dreams, crept out of his unconscious before he could slam it back. *If only they do not yet understand what they have to do to you.*

They had reached the edge of the elevator platform where guests boarded and were lifted up the steep bluff, ogling tourists riding high above the azure sea in a glassed cage. Beyond the footpath tunnel, lined overhead with orange lights, the path of switchbacks continued up the hill. The arches of his feet began to burn with a pressing anxiety for haste. He started down the narrow tunnel alone, causing Jezz to swiftly dart around him, frowning and walking backwards in respectful protest.

"The others are coming. Please, wait, Jarl Wyld, we have to wait."

Fox had made it clear that the Jarl must wait for a phalanx of his men, not an easy command to follow with Wyld's overriding sense of immediacy. But now Jezz's face broke into a grin of relief. Wyld looked back and saw Fox and Wirth driving forward as if by the flaming breath of demons, and with the softly padded footfalls of the men rushing at their heels. Soon they were around Wyld and breaking out of the tunnel and away from the lighted path. They pushed their way hurriedly up the steep cliff side, climbing gingerly over loose rock and through shadows of spiked, flat-bodied cacti, circumventing giant dark blue boulders faintly dusted by the light of the flaming torches.

Gaining the top they paused to regroup for a few words whispered by Fox, then fanned out again just where the escarpment's crown began its gentle roll down into the lush

irrigated grass of the palm grove. Looming beyond widely spaced lawn trees, in what Wyld thought of as a generous darkness, stood some impoverished architect's massive folly: the neon-bright, pink whipped-cream pyramid of Sandspell, its capacious portico still athrob with romantic strains and electric flashes, like a winking love-sick mammoth harping plaintively in an abyssal sea.

XXXII

Waking from drug-disoriented sleep Chloë sometimes found herself, for a brief semiconscious moment, lying in her pale green room at Sunring, a child of no more than ten or eleven. In this spare time-slip, a contemplative young mind played with the morning dance of sun and shadow on familiar walls, while the clear sounds of river and forest inveigled her away to their pleasures. Then, with an evil jolt, the reality of utter darkness spread over her bright interior vision, smothering it altogether and compacting into a heavy lump of depression that lay congealing in her chest; there it conspired with her weakness, impeding the usefulness of the moldering air, which she forced herself to breathe in short gasps.

She would rub her numb legs and try to stretch her cramped limbs, telling herself, with a flimsy attempt at humor, that she was not very good at doing nothing. With the memory of her quarantine all too poignantly sharp -- she had been locked up with the rueful echo of her dead mentor repeatedly imploring her to finish their work, feverishly willing her his determination, holding her with his sad, languishing eyes glowing from within his glass shield. She well understood what it meant to be incarcerated, however comfortably she had been shut away before. But waiting in this constricting cold box filled with nothing but darkness,

waiting for a maddening transition from rational being to confused doddering animal, was a new experience. Was she being turned into a ghostly white and spindly thing, like a plant shut away in a closet? Would the color fade from her eyes? Then she would grope through this black medium until she became blind as the truly blind, blind as an eyeless fish in the sea's deepest trench.

On the day she had lifted her narcotized head to find it rising without the comforting weight of her long braid, her depression deepened. Plaiting her braid carefully in the darkness had become a soothing, reassuring pastime; she missed it with a jittery, maudlin emotion that must be quashed for its taunt of hysteria. She knew where the braid had gone, almost as if her mind had gone along with it. The Jarl had it now and he would... What would he do? Her head felt light and unattached as she ran her worrying fingers through the sheared hair.

Again sorrow and frustration at the failures of human mentality swept over her, and again she brought herself up short, refusing to give in. Life's convoluted paths are all mere extensions of the self, she insisted, and set about constructing a solipsistic tower of space-rending thought. Sometimes she remained aloft there, unassailable; sometimes she plummeted to the cold floor, but expansive thought was still her freedom, her immediate rescue.

Working tediously at autosuggestion she continued to reinforce her position to give no information under duress or narcosis. They had promised her Sayka's safety, and as yet her torture consisted solely of drugs and this crude dark room. It seemed that they had stopped putting drugs in her food. Apparently they wanted to hasten the departure of her sanity by keeping her eyes open in the dark. She knew that the smothering

black air was subtly making its inroads, changing her with an evil persistence, in ways that she was too weary to define or even notice. It took a concentrated effort to rise above flawed habits in the best of times, but here, her claustrophobia was fed a lavish meal designed to hasten its growth. Her elaborate life goal was slowly being reduced to an all-consuming desire to lay her eyes upon a beam, a scrap, a single thread of light.

She dreamed that all of her teeth fell out on a hard barren plateau, and that Wyld came and scooped them up, his large gold hand sliding in a half circle through the red dust. He held them out to her with a grin from which his own teeth shone like glittering peaks of snow. Staring into the lined palm she saw, with an acquisitive child's joy, that her fallen teeth were emeralds. But when she took them into her hand they became burrowing maggots, and she awoke with a scream to find her whirling black prison scarce refuge from the dream.

"They want to ruin me, Jarl Wyld", she muttered with a deep, painful anguish. "If I come out of here, *if* I come out of here, I'll be no good to you...no good to anyone."

Pressing her hands against her temples, she tried as she had each few hours to send out a hopeful message, but again the dispatch quickly disintegrated into jumbled words of outrage, falling wingless and broken within the range of her heartbeat.

Then at last the small metal door, through which her tasteless, often narcotized and mostly ignored food was daily shoved, was flung open. The blazing light she had waited for as for a lover, was thrust brutally into her face. Blinded and flattened against the wall with hands covering her eyes, she was roughly dragged and lifted from the room by a powerful female with large

hands that clamped onto her yielding arms, hands that took sadistic pleasure in compressing her thinning flesh against the bone. Muscles unused to working cried out in protest as she was propelled along the dank underground passageway, stumbling and with a heavy blindfold wrapped around her head.

The blindfold was unwound upon entering a tormentingly dazzling-bright suite of lavender rooms, everywhere hung with flashing gilt mirrors. There she was undressed and ordered to bathe, helped perforce, still blinking painfully, into a violet-tiled tub of scented warm water, then dressed in a gauze-thin white trouser and bra.

A plump owl-faced girl in a pink uniform came to manicure her nails. Then a slender young boy with round jade earrings dangling from a head of fuzzy orange hair was sent in to devise a coiffure for her disheveled head. His delicate torso was clothed in a long, dark-orange shift. There were six large-gemmed rings winking fantastically on his tendril-like fingers as he spread his hands and curled them under his round baby chin. He spoke no intelligible word, only giggling and shaking his head with mock despair as he muttered softly, "Ahhh...umm...ahh," while he worked.

Chloë resisted nothing, for nothing as yet disturbed her newly becalmed state. Even this garish room had become a temporary haven, for, as the pain in her eyes diminished, light bounced joyfully off every surface. Her gaze lingered on the shapes and dimensions and colors of ordinary objects, the comforting forms of chairs and tables and pillows.

Very soon she knew it was time to hone her thought. Each new action must be geared to a short-range goal that the current

turn of events suggested. Her only plan at the moment was to save her strength for the unknown purpose of this ludicrous grooming, making her into an alluring object.

The final touch, it was decided by her chattering attendants, must be a sequined pair of satin slippers eased carefully over her freshly painted toes. After this she was ordered to lie down and wait.

As soon as the door locked shut behind the buzzing retinue of flesh handlers, she slipped from the bed, quickly trying to slide open another door -- locked -- and searching for windows -- there were none. At last she placed herself bolt upright in a dull gridelin chair of bloated plastic, pressing her fingers hard against the ugly gray-violet surface, staring at the door and waiting.

In perhaps half an hour, a sly-faced servant entered with a glass of juice, ordering her to drink. She refused over and over, finally throwing the glass squarely into the center of the largest mirror, which shattered in a spreading circle of shards. The boy gathered up the glass pieces and went away without looking at her. Very soon the prognathus female with the large hands was back, accompanied by a woman whose most salient quality appeared to be brute strength. Chloë was wrestled to the carpet and given an injection over the useless protests of her controlled voice attempting reasonableness, asking for please no more drugs. "There are some narcotics that can kill me," she said as the needle shot into her arm. "Is that the effect my captors desire?" But the two only laughed and departed.

This new drug made her stumble and laugh feverishly over nothing at all. In between bouts of laughter and falling she cursed herself loudly with faltering words, while her entire body neared a

fearful state of paralysis.

I can't stop, I can't stop, she thought, as though watching herself from across the room. Moist palms -- were they hers? -- grasped her swimming head. The carpet rippled away from her dazed eyes as she slipped numbly to the floor, crawling like a torpid snail toward the bed, which was spinning off to the ceiling. Groping before her she pulled herself up onto the mattress that must be there, and flung herself face down over the lavender coverlet, just as the mirrors, walls, chairs, floor, and ceiling were gathered up into an urgently humming centrifugal flower that spun away, disappearing into a black field.

After some time she rolled over on her back, clinging to the covers with heavy gasping breaths and eyelids shut down tight to stop the room's mad journey. The reptile's earlier words to the large woman echoed over her: "Careful no bruises. Watch what you're doing. He will not like bruises." Her head pulsed from one level of numbness to another, higher and higher, taking her breath away, higher and higher, dangerously high.

"Where am I? I don't remember where I am."

A hand slid under her back. They were high above the planet now. She saw the Jarl's face rising above her and, fighting the heavy pull of gravity, slowly lifted her head to him. The ship crabbed, drifting away from their bodies, and she hung there with her head tilted, suspended only by the cool blue filaments of his eyes.

Opening her eyes she sat halfway up with great effort, trying to forge strength out of a strained grimace of pain.

"Damned good looking," Leise Amboze crooned. "Such white skin... They told me you were something, but I never

thought I'd get anything like this."

His hand passed over her damp breast and down the length of her body, the snagged mouth working at its infamous smiling snarl.

The muscles in her straining neck went flaccid as water. A part of her reached, strained back into another self, the self that watched in contempt as her body shielded itself with only a feeble offering of slurred words: "I'm... no-t...wha' you wan'...want...*don't*...drah...drud."

"What! Drunk, are you? *Damn!* I deserve better. Amboze Leise deserves better...but so smooth...this skin." He cupped his arm around her limp body, which slipped half out of his grasp and into semiconsciousness. Disgruntled, he threw her back onto the bed. "What a waste!" he shouted angrily as he moved away and left the room.

"We're sorry, Leise. This rarely happens, but you can see why we sent you here, can't you?"

"Useless. Drunk!" Amboze growled. "What makes you think this sort of thing interests me, Nik? I want a woman who's conscious."

"Of course," Nik said with an apologetic and cajoling voice. "I have someone who won't disappoint you. Come."

When Weaver had assuaged the ruffled Amboze with another companion, if unwilling at least wide-awake, he returned to Chloë's suite and stood with his eyes sliding over her deathly still form, his hands tucked into the pockets of his perfectly fitted pale linen slacks. A tormented little smile played over his lips, making him, with his neck stretched salaciously forward, resemble a weasel

driven near hazard by frustrated appetite.

Chloë was swimming beneath the surface of a flaming lake, in desperate need of oxygen, searching with a rising terror for a way to get through the canopy of flames. She coughed softly for air and opened her eyes, quivering with a strange malaise. The top of her head prickled in a rush of icy needles, but her body was burning with dry fire.

From the corner of the room a fan of light glowed with a freakish violet glare. Something was weighing against her side -- Nik Weaver's hand, pressed down against her as he crouched over her. Throwing it off she sat up, whirling in dizziness and pushing herself to the floor, propping herself against the bed. After this little effort she knew that she must vomit and swayed awkwardly in the direction of the bathroom, clutching at furniture to support her disobedient feet. Returning with halting steps, she was again dizzy and breathing heavily, her aching head rising feebly from her supporting shoulder. Weaver was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting. How could this detestable man remain here idly watching her demise? She attempted to ease past him to lie down, but he pulled her onto his lap. Too weak to struggle she leaned away at a clumsy angle, her head throbbing in alternating waves of pain and stupefaction. The drug had caused a violent reaction just now beginning its final physical abuse.

"Be nice, Doctor Kleeve. Skye, isn't it? My parents are scientists too, yes, dedicated to science, but damn cold...*cold!* Don't be this way. I can help. You won't have to go back down in the hole. I'll see to it."

"Get...away...*away from me!*" she demanded.

"You want to go back so bad?" He grabbed her pushing

hands. "Pecking bird...sleeping beauty, you should be thankful I'm agreeable. We can do things together. I'll show you. Even unconscious, you are something delicious."

Chloë lifted her head, giving him a look of dazed hatred.

"You--"

"Yes, while you were knocked out I could've already helped myself, couldn't I, sleeping beauty?"

"No!" she cried with weak voice, struggling to get herself off Weaver's lap.

He let her fall to the floor as a dry heaving pain wracked her body.

Rolling over, she spoke in a thin, quivering whisper with her eyes closed: "I've never wanted to...to destroy a living thing...until now."

"So it's back to the black hole. Well, let me know how you're making out, but I might not hear you screaming. You know Vice Premier Grabb is convinced that Wyld sent you to Immixia. He even suspects that you're a Marchlander, but they don't have anyone like you there, do they? I had the idea we should send Wyld one of these sharp little teeth every day, starting at the back of course, in case you decide to get talkative. Just a few words is all it takes: Who sent you. What you were doing. How you were doing it. Before we ruin that precious mouth, that soft... Tell me, would Wyld recognize these teeth...one by one? He might figure it out. Just tell me now."

He gripped her jaw with rough grasping fingers, turning something over in his mind with a nervous agitation, then let her go.

"It...means...nothing...nothing...to him." It had taken all of

her strength to say these few words and now her shaking head twisted oddly to one side.

"Nothing to get you back in pieces?" He laughed.

"What fools..." Chloë whispered. "Help...me...to the...bed. Let me...die there." Her breathing came very slow and labored.

"Oh, no, we can't have that," he admonished with disbelieving amusement.

"Allergic...drug...can't breath."

Her eyes rolled shut.

Weaver's smile dried up as he studied Chloë's blue-tinged face. His own terrified face went pale over her stillness. He lifted her to the bed and ran from the room.

A portly male doctor had administered a counteracting drug and was standing by as the reptile worked Chloë into a fleecy white robe.

The new drug made her fitful and unable to concentrate, but it quickly restored her breathing.

"You can't get away so easily," Weaver said as he came into the room.

He gave a high barking laugh that filled Chloë, who was now in a wildly nervous state, with a frenzied loathing.

She sat up, wringing her hands, and was pushed back as two men in blue jackets approached the bed. One carried a narrow case, fingering it in a way that made her cringe. The putative scientist quietly entered the room and stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded, waiting.

"Do you have anything to tell us?" Weaver asked.

Her hands twitched nervously at her sides, but she lay back stubbornly and closed her eyes, until she felt the bed slowly raising her to a sitting position.

In the next instant her clenched mouth was forced open and a heavy cold instrument thrust inside. She convulsed and moaned, but her body was pinned tightly against the bed. The invading instrument twisted and wrenched, twisted and wrenched interminably until she thought her head was being torn from her shoulders. The crunching sound of softly fleshed bone rubbing against bone sent shivering pain tearing through her head. The pliers were drawn out and raised triumphantly in the air. She saw the thin steel tips gripping a delicate porcelain molar bathed in a wash of red blood. A crimson trickle oozed from her mouth, mingling with her tears and dissolving into the pillow. A bitter rage shook her body as she turned her throbbing face to the wall, crying silently. And again she felt the prick of a needle in her arm.

She was drifting off, half aware of strange sounds in the room: a door thrust open, gasps of surprise, something falling and rolling across the floor, something shattering, strident voices coming nearer, then a thudding sound like ripe fruit striking the ground. The voices. *The voices!* Among them she imagined a certain voice that made her tired heart quicken its pace, but only for a moment.

When Wyld first visited Sandspell with Fleet he did so with the intention of providing an opportunity for his men to nose about in the principal underpinnings of Dagon's flourishing flesh trade. The men were instructed to collect whatever they might find of what Fox called "motivational data," that is, covertly gathered

information that could be used to induce a corporate entity or, in this case, an entire country to measure up to the ethics it claimed to practice. Wyld had pondered a long time on exactly how to eviscerate the Dagon power machine, hoping also to expose its radical Immix appendage, which had abused Thame. He had concluded that the only truly punitive measure would be a sharp curtailment, under the auspices of Fedcartel, of Dagon's sweeping and highly unprincipled trade maneuvers. But far from having its conduct censured, and despite Wyld's applauded but unassisted arguments to the contrary, the country had been rewarded for its lack of scruples with a seat on High Council, a seat giving it a new and swaggering sense of invincible might. Having already depleted its own territory, venturous Dagon was stirring aggressively, searching for other dominions in which to forage. It had already wrapped its tentacles around the bellies of the planet and was beginning to squeeze its victims with greedy and often sadistic pleasure. Those Dagonites who flouted human decency needed to be taught a lesson. The entire country needed to learn that the reward for flagrant inhumanity and menace was not inclusion but ostracism from the international community. Wyld had sternly warned Morral Iceter that he intended using every defensible means to see that Fedcartel abandoned its extravagant stance toward his unscrupulous northern neighbors, and with Dagon's latest outrage he would suffer no moratorium on his plans.

The more Wyld studied Sandspell, looming before him in the darkness, the more it came to represent all that was regressive and evil in Dagon. Yet this structure was only one small manifestation of Dagon's far-reaching negative power. He knew that if the building were razed to the ground this night the redress

would amount to nothing but a useless metaphor alongside the very real strangling effects of Dagon's swelling monopolies.

Long ago the hard task of appraising the Jarl's close-held moods had become an occupational requisite for Fox, and sometimes a hazard. He moved toward Wyld as reluctantly as he might approach a hostile search laser, his formerly winsome and readable face now frozen like Wyld's in a shadowed amber crystal of wrecked time. He had seen the bitter vengeance in the Jarl's eyes as they coldly reflected Sandspell's meretricious light. Thus he delivered his mandatory words in a formal and coolly disciplined voice.

"It can't be that I need to remind you of the law of the March, Jarl Wyld, the promise that all Wylds make to the elders and the people? I ask you one more time to wait more safely below."

"If you try to stop me now you'll have to violate that law yourself," Wyld answered. His voice carried an icy impatience that seemed to shout incaution.

Fox hesitated, and in that hesitation the necessity of a task he knew precisely began to elude him. He could not bring himself to override the Jarl's iron will, for it was precisely what he valued. If he attempted to restrain Wyld he risked disaffection, along with the severe diminution of something taken as inviolate. He would have to step over a boundary that might never be recrossed, losing his own strength and purpose in the process. With great fear for his leader clearly manifest, as well as frustration and anger at himself, he stepped aside.

"Let's get on with it," Wyld ordered in a harsh whisper, already moving shrewdly away from Fox and this tottering clash of wills. Indifferently sealing his own fate, he passed swiftly through

the dark grove, the men hastening to keep pace with his reaching stride.

At the sound of approaching voices they all drew back into the shadows. They were downwind of two burly guards patrolling with teeth-bearing hounds held taut on short leashes and sniffing wherever cameras did not monitor. There, they waited until the patrol moved to the far side of the grounds. In a few minutes the Marchlanders rushed forward with ever increasing urgency, heading for the northeastern wall facing the crashing sea.

At the wall they stopped and waited as Fox stood listening. For him, the invisible mimetic sea steadily keened a morbid whine beneath the gathering mists, heaving its echoing swells against the cliff side far below. But Wyld heard no prophetic sound; his unwavering attention was focused only on penetrating Sandspell.

They would not thwart the electronic eyes of the alarm computers guarding side entrances -- not an insurmountable difficulty for the Marchlanders -- instead choosing an entry that would get them more easily to their destination: the paste-jewelry swank of the secluded Mezta quarter. They had no way of knowing of the dark subterranean cubicle in which Chloë had spent a long portion of her wretched confinement. In any case, she was not there now.

The plotted entry took them over a high wall of pink stone, vented just beneath its coping with a double row of ornate quatrefoils. The inner face of the wall dropped into terraces running all the way down to the outdoor spa and partially enclosing it. The terraces were overspread with thick hanging gardens of sticky-sweet, flower-laden vines. At the base of the lowest terrace, between the garden and pool, a wide walkway bore the Sandspell

insignia: spread out upon a rectangular cerulean field within a gilt-edge was the tile mosaic of a damson-stained octopus, cradling in its many arms a supine, pearly-white sea nymph.

Outside the wall at the south corner stood a slowly rustling tall eucalyptus tree, which the men now scaled one by one, dropping from its pungent limbs as gracefully as spiders on threads and landing in the uppermost garden terrace. Crouching low they quietly descended through each level of the dense floral growth, arriving near one of the building's posterior vestibules. This antechamber provided ingress to a ground-level wing of the Sandspell pyramid.

The dimly lit vestibule was empty except for one young blue-jacketed attendant, half drowsing at his occupation and not present as much to guard as to assist in the needs of the spa's clientele. He was just leaving to fetch fresh towels for the only couple presently using the spacious lighted pool. They were floating languidly on their backs, muttering playful hushed words as they held hands and gazed at the stars and winking satellites crossing overhead.

Fox passed each of his men, hurriedly tapping shoulders as a signal to move. They slipped into the building's airy portico, weaving among the red ti plants lining the walkway. He glanced anxiously toward the pool, then moved off last behind Wyld. The silently rippling pool receding at their backs remained unthreatening, only a bright turquoise lozenge melting away in the dark throat of night.

"That was the easy part," Fox whispered to Wyld.

Now they had lost their camouflage of shadowy foliage and

would have to move openly within the lighted camera-monitored honeycombs of the big humming pyramid, meeting foes head on. They must begin their wary search, opening doors, when necessary with their laser knives, and swiftly stopping and hiding away each human hindrance.

As they neared the Mezta quarters they found no mounted cameras spying on the corridors, owing very likely to the prominent guests who visited there, including most certainly the Vice Premier.

It had been quietly noted among Fox's close-mouthed security forces that Grabb had fallen in love with Thame, and was about to remove her from Sandspell when she managed to flee his clutches, into the safety of Wyld's domain. Some said the Vice Premier had a poisonous hatred of Wyld and lived for a day of reckoning.

Wirth returned from a lone reconnaissance and gave his terse report to the waiting party.

"Had to remove one obstacle from our path. Next come the glass doors, the left branch of the main corridor, then the escalator down to the Mezta quarter, just as our map shows. I think..." he said, hesitating and looking at Wyld, "I know where she is...a hefty concentration of men in one corridor...not hiding their weapons. From the look of it I'd say they've probably got a lot more men stationed at the speedway gate...and around the main entrances."

"How badly are we outnumbered in the corridor?" Fox asked.

"Not bad...counted nine...but probably more inside the room."

"Most likely," Fox said, glancing at Wyld with concern.

But as the Jarl nodded in quiet agreement his gaze left Fox with the recurrent feeling of awe, for there was not a trace of emotion, only a cool unreadable reserve that might at any other time have broken into a smile. It was clear that the men saw and felt this unmistakable conviction of their leader too, and, as willing partisans of a just and necessary cause, were more ready than ever to do their task.

Fox had seen this moment of serene reserve come into play before, always unexpectedly at crucial junctures. Even in this tense instant he was seized with a tormenting itch of curiosity. Did Wyld intentionally steel his innards with that pure-carbon audacity he wielded, or was it a thing of which he was unaware? Was it linked to an autocratic gene that had long migrated in Wylds with the sole purpose of creating unflinching mettle?

"Someone's coming," one of the men whispered.

They stood for a silent instant in the open corridor, weighing the sound as it approached. Two voices.

Wirth exchanged one quick glance with Fox, then ran on noiseless boots directly toward the sounds. He moved with great speed, understanding the importance of surprise and intending to prevent a telescopic view of the Marchlanders and thus the chance to prepare for them or sound an alarm.

The two figures rounding the corner and sauntering along with their heads bent to one another gave Wirth a chance to choose his action. He stunned the first, a Dagoné aide who dropped to the dark yellow carpet with a barely audible thump. As the first fell, Wirth's agile hands were already reaching for the other, one hand restraining the arm that half rose in protest and using it as an instrument against its owner, the other hand clamping over the

mouth, then a second painful jerk to the arm to insure submission. Wirth had seen the identity of his prisoner at once, and as he propelled the man toward Wyld, he took pleasure in the Jarl's sardonic smile of recognition.

Wyld's men, who relished such rare moments as this, had to restrain an outburst of mocking laughter as they watched the shock and disbelief come into Vice Premier Grabb's face.

"Well, well...zero hour timing, Grabb, or have you been pacing up and down here all night wondering how to extricate Dagon from this latest stupidity? Never mind, I'm in a hurry. You can moonlight for us...pretty shoddy pay but it's all I care to offer...your life."

As Wyld talked he adjusted his stunner to its lethal dose with unmistakable flourish and aimed it at Grabb's neatly trimmed head.

Wirth removed his hand from Grabb's mouth, but kept the twisted arm in his tightened grip.

Still certain that no harm would come to him, Grabb began to laugh, prominently displaying finely capped teeth.

"You're insane to come here. A man of your supposed stature crawling like what you really are, a damned...ahhh!" Wirth had jerked his arm. "You can't really imagine that *you* are going to...you don't even trust your men to do your dirty...ahhh!" Another painful twist of the arm.

The night was warm. Wyld put his stunner in his belt, peeled off his jacket and threw it down.

"You won't get out of Sandspell," Grabb insisted.

"We got in easily enough, and if we don't get out you are going to be in very bad shape. You're in my cheap employ,

remember? Let's go. Not a word. I wouldn't hesitate to lay you out...in fact...don't tempt me."

Wyld pressed his stunner against Grabb's pulsing temple and smiled as the Vice Premier's raging face grew pale.

They burst upon the astonished corridor guards, behind the familiar and grudging voice of Dagon's touted vice premier, who nervously ordered the Dagonites to throw down their weapons and lie on the floor. One of the Marchlanders swiftly lasered through the abandoned door. They ducked inside, met by more weapons and men ready to fight.

Wirth hung back just long enough to put Grabb under careful guard then turned and started through the door. He saw that everyone was engaged in a struggle for control and that the Jarl, in a cool white heat, was holding his own in the middle of the fray. Then he saw a man leaning over the bed with a hypodermic gun raised high over the pillow where a tousled blond head was turned to the wall, and he fired. The man fell and lay still. Wirth thought he was actually going to reach the bed, even as he gripped his shoulder where a searing pain was burning high in his chest. As he went down he saw Fox disarming a muscular female guard and Wyld and Nik Weaver pointing weapons at each other. He fought with an intense concentration of energy to steady the spinning room and get back on his feet, and almost made it.

"Try using it!" Wyld threatened, stepping closer to the astonished Weaver.

"*Yow!*" Weaver exclaimed. "*You...here?*"

He had been about to drag Chloë from the bed and use her as a shield, but there was barely time to pull the weapon clumsily from his coat pocket.

Wyld watched the hand and weapon begin to waver with a grip far too rigid. He motioned his advancing men back. As Weaver's eyes followed that movement, Wyld's leg executed a lethal kick. The weapon skittered away across the carpet with such speed that Weaver looked incredulously after it. He spun around and reached again for Chloë.

She turned her head slowly from the wall. Wyld's narrowed eyes registered the blood on her mouth and the crimson-stained pillow. He reached out and his fingers coiled around Weaver's neck, dragging him back and slamming him against the wall with a loud thwack.

Chloë lifted her head in laboring slowness. "Don't," she whispered.

"She wants you to stop," Weaver groaned hoarsely from the floor.

"Like sweet black Koma!" Wyld roared.

"Let me...do it," Chloë muttered in a sudden flash of coherence, and began stubbornly pushing herself near the edge of the bed. "I..want to...do it."

She reached out for Wyld's weapon, her eyes burning with a feverish revulsion, trying to say more, but her head, stained with blood and tears, dropped on her chest. Faint with trauma and the dizzying residues of drugs, she fell back, sliding from the side of the bed to the carpet. One thinning white arm was flung out, still reaching above her head in a listless final attempt at retaliation.

Wyld let go of Weaver and strode to her, kneeling over her, his arms ready to lift her. At the same moment Weaver dove, with a last desperate effort, reaching for the long-nosed pincers

lying on the night table.

"At your back, Jarl!" Fox barked out with sharp warning as Wreaver grazed Wyld's shifting back.

Wyld turned in a blur of angry force, his hand held like the blade of an ax, snapping the radius in Wreaver's extended forearm with one crunching blow. Snarling and crazed with pain, Wreaver lunged again. "Enough!" Wyld bellowed. "Enough, base trash!" He cast the howling and cursing Wreaver away from him with such force that the man's neck snapped against the seat of a heavy metal chair.

"We've got to get out...now!" Fox shouted.

Wyld was leaning over Chloë, gently wiping the blood from her face. As he bent forward, lifting her carefully in his arms, Fox saw the spreading red stain on his shirt.

"Your back! Is it bad? I can carry her."

"I can't even feel it," Wyld said, rising with Chloë. "Let's go before it all breaks loose here. What about the men?"

"Wirth was hit. We're not leaving any behind...all I can tell you."

They caught up to the men, with long running strides. The band of Marchlanders had advanced down the corridor, with Grabb held fast to warn off whatever came their way.

"We'll take Grabb as far as we need him," Wyld said.

With each step Wyld felt his adrenaline-powered strength increase and flow through his arms and legs, until Chloë felt so light he had to keep glancing down to assure himself that she was really there.

They had neither the time nor inclination to leave the way they had come. Thus the Vice Premier's fortuitous presence

reluctantly carried them through the main entrance with little resistance. In the strained silence the chafing guards and a nervous staff were held in helpless abeyance, only a few curious guests still loosely afoot.

"We'll meet in different circumstances," Grabb's acid voice assured Wyld. He eyed his captors disdainfully but with no small humiliation, his bristling indignation tempered only by a strong urge for self-preservation.

The Marchlanders descended -- far too slowly for Wyld's patience --, grinding down the hill to the wharf in the big glass lift car designed to move at a sightseeing pace. Slowly, slowly, while some hindrance must be brewing back inside the ice cream palace. Beyond the wide curved windows the fuzzy yellow lights of the harbor glowed through a gauze of cloaking fog in the early morning darkness.

"You'll get your hour of accountability, but I want no dialogue with you now or ever," Wyld finally answered. His understated mood drew its evenness from the certainty of his sinister promise. "You'll have no soft explanation from me of what's owing. Justice is incomprehensible to you anyway. The sooner you're out of my sight the better."

"Likewise," Grabb muttered through rigid lips.

Wyld indicated that his discourse was finished by turning his back to Grabb, whose incensed mouth produced a taut smile of contempt as he stared at the spreading red stain on Wyld's shirt. Even with the present circumstances, he would have been roundly curious had he been able to see the focused expression on the detested Marchman's face. Oblivious to the wound or Grabb, Wyld was totally absorbed in watching for vital signs as he searched

for evidence of Chloë's breathing.

The men were all in fair enough condition to swim, except for Wirth, who had arrived in Portheus II anyway and would go back the same way with a little help.

"Get him aboard," Wyld told Fox, who was hesitating. "We'll be all right here."

Portheus I rode the rippling black water like an eager dolphin, champing at its hidden moorage as Wyld and Jezz came alongside. Chloë, who was slipping in and out of consciousness, now opened her eyes to stare in horror at the small hatch through which she must be handed in order to board the close-fitting minisub. Inside the slender pod Wyld could not stand up, and on the inward voyage his tall frame had already complained of the contortions needed to move forward and aft. After days of dealing with airless blackness and fending off claustrophobia, still dazedly uncertain of what captors had her now, the necessity of being swallowed up and stowed underwater in the sub's tight belly was more than Chloë could bear.

"No...don't," she whispered groggily.

"Sorry, we've got to get out now," Wyld said as he knelt by the sub and prepared to hand her to Jezz. "Our safety lies in escaping short-range finders until we can reach deep water."

"No...no more."

Unaware of her confinement in the small black cubicle, Wyld was puzzled to see naked fear for the first time in Chloë's face. His thoughts retraced something she had once said about a problem with claustrophobia. As he considered how to deal with this he heard her disjointed protest: "No more...no more dark holes...I can't." "What?" he asked, but a sudden understanding of

her previous treatment spread over his troubled countenance, followed by fierce anger.

He swore softly and brought her face against his chest, shielding her eyes while he jerked his head as a signal to Jezz, who was already reaching into his medic pack and bringing out a small hypodermic gun; it was quickly laid against her bare arm.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, just one more little sleep," Wyld said, cradling the disheveled head.

She looked up at him, startled, then the green eyes rolled back and their lids closed.

Portheus I and II remained surfaced, conserving their air as long as possible and plunging through the drifting whorls of heavy fog side by side. Four kilometers beyond the harbor the fog was lifting and, even in the early light, the dark slate demarcation of deep sea was clearly visible. Here they vanished beneath the surface and were soon speeding well out of reach of any shore patrol. But what ominous message had gone before them?

Wyld knelt at the panel watching the computer ticking off their course while Jezz worked at his wound, applying an antibiotic coagulant and sealer. His blood-stained shirt was carefully rolled under Chloë's head.

Bathed in the dusky red light of the Portheus, she lay still as fashioned marble, recalling to Wyld, with a most chilling clarity, a Mainland museum's exquisite red funeral arrangement of a wasted heroine of antiquity. Yet, for him, to look upon her was to affirm the life and vitality of her. He wanted her eyes to open upon him free of pain, to offer their revealing light as they had in the early morning hours of their night at Shellreef, where he awoke to find

the mysterious green depths studying his face.

"I thought at first I was dreaming," he had said. "I dream of you so often...always your eyes."

"I was remembering something I once saw, watching you one summer when I was fifteen," she had responded with a slow voice, then a fetching dreamy smile.

"I could not have been very interesting...not for the untamed Chloë Churlwraith."

"Oh yes. You were tan...lean...always in motion. You were swimming the Ruddle with a girl...and some others."

"Was I? Why wasn't I swimming with you?"

"You never swam with me. Once you showed me how to bait my hook, when I was six."

"I think I remember that...a nervous, wild little towhead with muddy fingers. Why didn't you join us when you were fifteen, instead of merely watching?"

"I would never have done that. You had a party of friends from the Mainland. I was lying in the reeds below Sunring, watching and wondering how it would be to swim with you and to...to speak the clever idioms of that Mainland girl. You wouldn't have noticed me...even if I had been forward enough to speak to you."

"I'd have listened. You were a sophisticated fifteen, were you not?...the combination of that precocious mind and your worldly education."

"But I couldn't have spoken to you with ease...even as much as I loved talking."

"Why not?"

"Because Wylds and Churlwraiths had already made you

into what you are...revered...worshiped by Marchlanders."

"A little worship now please," he had teased. Her laughter was a soft riff of playfulness, and he knew that it was he who worshiped.

"Enough fussing at my back, Jezz. Go check her pulse."

Glancing at the data screen periodically, Wyld reached into his pocket and took out the hard little tooth that he had snatched up from the night table in the hideous lavender room where Chloë lay. He rolled the tooth thoughtfully, angrily, in his palm while his own jaw ached at the thought of its removal. Though he knew it was caked with blood it appeared dark and colorless in the red light. He meant to suggest to her doctor that it be gently returned to its plushy point of origin, knowing the task could easily be accomplished. The thought of this small gesture possibly bringing her satisfaction gave him a moment of pleasure.

The computer screen flashed a warning; it was picking up a coded message from Goldfish I. Fox would be receiving it too. He punched out a code below the screen and the message began translating. The news was troubling. An unidentified sub much larger than the Portheus had appeared out of nowhere and was lying off the port of Goldfish I. Perhaps it had come from a camouflaged undersea moorage nearby, but what mattered was that it had found the Goldfish so effortlessly and that it had positioned itself between the two Portheus and one of their destinations. Meanwhile, the men aboard the borrowed fishing vessel were speeding toward Goldfish II, having already been warned away from Wyld's flagship. As a safety precaution the two Goldfish were waiting at some distance from each other, and it was possible that Goldfish II had not been detected. Each Goldfish could dock only

one Portheus sub, and Fox was now signaling Wyld to proceed to Goldfish II and berth, leaving his own mini-sub to contend with the threat near the flagship. Wyld disliked the idea of leaving the Portheus II in danger but did not hesitate to give his computer a new fix; he was worried about Chloë. She was already stirring, and Jezz was reluctant to administer even a mild calmativ lest her body reach a dangerous point of saturation.

Jezz came forward and spoke softly. "You'll do better with her now than I, Jarl Wyld. She's in a bad state of confusion...all the drugs...poor treatment."

Wyld hunched over and moved aft.

Her eyes were open wide and she was staring restively at the narrow belly of the Portheus where it curved down around her. He leaned over her, blocking her sight of the limited space.

"You?"

She questioned his presence as if she were moving through an illusory dream.

"Yes," he answered, lifting her fretful hands to his lips.

"I'm falling," she whispered with dry voice.

"No, you are not. There is no place to fall to or from. We're close at the center...safe. Trust me."

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment then opened them, blinking at what must be another deception.

"You've been swimming?" she muttered groggily.

"Swimming?"

"No shirt."

"Your head is lying on it."

"Sorry."

"You're not going to start apologizing again?" he said, and

saw with a rush of pleasure that a smile was being tried, but only for a moment.

Her head slipped carelessly to the side and something in her eyes clawed at his innards. She was letting him go, letting herself go, slipping back into suspicion, possibly traumatic hysteria. Her eyes blinked in dizzy confusion.

"Chloë?...it's Casimir. Please stay with me."

"No light...none...the dark...what?...everything red. I tried to keep them from...can't think in the dark...can't breathe...can't live!"

She sat up, pushing weakly at his shoulders.

"Let me go!"

Her spent body collapsed in fatigue against him, this image that pretended to be Wyld. But there was the aroma, like sweet resin, dry summer fields, and the smell of light hydraulic fluid that came into her nostrils, startling her and causing her to draw back unsteadily as she struggled to focus on his face in the disturbing red light. She put her hand to her head in bewilderment.

"Head hurts. A trick of mind...isn't it? Isn't it?"

She wriggled free from him and lay down, curling up in a fetal position with the outside edge of her index finger pressed between half-parted lips. Narcotized and restrained by a powerfully defensive paranoia, she would still not see what was before her, still not break out of the nightmarish ordeal of drugs and darkness...and the pain. How much had she withstood?

He tried to gather it all to himself as he knelt lightly clasping her shoulder, tried to intuit the wounded agent of defense furred deep and dark in her disbelieving mind. At last the crippled agent flew at him like an injured raptor pecking and clawing at his

heart.

"You...*you!* It can't be...you can't be him...he has no...Casimir Wyld has no hand...*none*...in anything I do."

"Chloë, look at me please. I am Casimir. This red light is safety...no dream, no trick. Trust me. Trust what you see here. Remember the forest? You were so angry at me...but I really didn't care. Remember your heart...full of spring...the cabin on the mountain? Who did you call?"

He gave up and lay down with her, holding her clenched body and stroking the back of her neck with gently palpating fingers. "Don't worry...don't. Just relax...try to sleep."

She muttered something inaudible then, without demon mistrust's consent, her feverish lips stung his shoulder. The very core of her nature could not mistake the truth.

Relief spiked into his heart. His careful mouth very delicately, solemnly, collected a long awaited redemption at every damp hollow and curve of her swollen face. "It will be all right," he promised. He held her gently, stroking her until she fell into a more natural sleep. After a while he crept forward to see if Jezz had any more news.

Goldfish II's captain, fearful of discovery, was actually closing the gap, moving toward them at maximum speed and ready for the Portheus berthing and a swift departure. But the serious threat to the men of his flagship and the Portheus II had hung in the back of his mind even as he tried to assuage Chloë's fears. He must do something to avoid a deadly encounter. Fox's minisub was no match for the mystery submarine. It was certainly armed and would soon be in visual contact. His hands reached out to send a coded message. Why had he not done it sooner? Fox must make

for Goldfish II at once, before he sacrificed himself and the others in Portheus II needlessly.

Wyld ordered the captain of Goldfish I to elude the mystery sub by whatever means he deemed most effective and to head home at full speed. This would draw the waiting enemy away from Fox. The splendid maneuverability, speed, and firepower of Goldfish I would allow the enemy only one hasty attack phase at most, and the flagship could easily limp home with considerably more damage than he anticipated. Next he sent a message to Fox to turn around and make haste.

In another twenty minutes both minisubs were standing just off Goldfish II. Fox docked first, and when the Portheus II was emptied of its passengers the faithful little sub was ejected. It had been programmed to return to SeaMarch's leeward lab off Arrowmoon and might very well do so if nothing tried to stop it. Next, Wyld and Jezz docked, locking into Goldfish II, unsealing their hatch and bringing Chloë quickly to hospital bay where the unconscious Wirth was already being treated. Once the Goldfish was underway there was not another vessel in the sea capable of matching her speed, and the northwest Marchland was soon off her port.

Goldfish I came into leeward Marchland moorage not long after its twin, but with a great rend in its portside far aft; the damage had been rapidly sealed off by its core computer. The Goldfish had handily outrun the Dagoné reconnaissance sub, but not before the initial attempt to vanquish it hit its surface-cruising fantail section as it executed a sharp port turn for the homeward flight. With one short-circuited computer bank shut down, an auxiliary system took over swiftly enough to execute successful

evasive maneuvers, keeping the home port a steady objective.

After examining the damage in dry-dock, Wyld went away more certain than ever that the Goldfish were the most proficient manmade travelers in the sea. In the ensuing days he would find himself wishing that the predictability of his Goldfish in times of crisis could be as easily found in humans.

XXXIII

Although Sayka was treated kindly enough, she was never allowed to investigate Solvault Hall unaccompanied. No one ever told her anything that she really wanted to know and, until this moment, she had not been permitted to see Wirth. She suspected that it was Doctor Kleeve, now up and about, who had made her visit possible, after she refused to return to school without a glimpse of him.

Most of the time she found that her defensive stance of belligerence was useless before Doctor Kleeve, even though it had become her standard method of dealing with adversity. In truth she sorely desired to emulate the character and graceful bearing of the doctor. If only she could learn to curb her fits of anger and stay her wild impatience -- to be strong and firm at the right moments, like the doctor, yet soft and understanding, also like the wise doctor, who was often closed and mysterious, yet also vulnerable and kindly generous with her time. Inevitably, Doctor Kleeve's manner made Sayka's angry resentment melt into a desire to please.

Sayka sat fidgeting beside Wirth's bed, waiting for him to awaken. The immediate electromagnetic treatment, which would stimulate regeneration, had again been administered to his

wounded shoulder, and he had been kept quietly resting throughout the morning.

She wanted to push the black hair back from his moist forehead and touch the tiny crow's-feet that, upon close scrutiny, she had discovered at the corners of his closed eyes, but even in sleep he seemed to censure her desires. She noticed faint dark shadow appearing on his chin and touched her fingers thoughtfully to her face -- if she lived with him his whiskers would burn her skin.

Opening his eyes Wirth produced a half-conscious smile at the pale, long-lashed image smiling back.

"You...still around?"

"I just wanted to see if you were really as ornery as ever," she said, with the guarded veneer carefully in place.

"Guess I am...nice of you. And...now...you're heading back to school?" His voice was heavy with sleep.

"Yes, today."

"Good."

"Does it hurt?"

"No...just trying to wake up. Been here long?"

"Not long."

He saw that she was nervous, sliding her hands over arms wrapped in a sea-green sweater and running her fingers through the short intransigent hair that stood up gamin-like on her forehead. Her violet eyes came briefly to his then darted away to the bed cover or the floor or the window and back again.

"Well..." she said at last, getting up and looking toward the door.

"I wonder...if you would still consider a favor?" he asked.

"What?"

"Make it to the top of your class. You can easily."

"Oh that. I will of course. But thanks...thank you for the confidence." She added the last more politely.

Still she lingered, biting her lips and moving nervously around the bed.

His dark eyes regretfully watched her façade crumbling second by second as his commiserating mouth curved in an encouraging smile, still not quite aware of how thoroughly his smile broke her fragile defense.

In the next instant she knelt down and pressed her face against his cheek with a sob.

"I thought you were...I thought they..."

She tried to speak, to smile through tears spilling on his cheek, but the strong impulse to cry prevailed.

It was then easy for him to see the extreme fragility beneath the tough layer of bluff. She broke hurtfully.

"Easy now, butterfly," he muttered in a drowsy low voice, "I've had overhauls before and probably will again."

As he spoke he ran the back of his free hand across her streaming cheeks.

"They wouldn't let me see you."

"It's just a procedure for security people." His voice had grown more even and precise.

"You're all I have."

"You have Doctor Kleeve. How can you forget her? And Wyld too -- good friends and powerful allies."

"But you..." She stopped herself and stood up. "I'm going now."

She made for the door without turning.

"The next time you see me at least I'll be on my feet," he called cheerfully. "Don't forget the favor."

"Sure," she said, then turning with conviction she offered a rare wide smile, a healthy smile of promise, set in a startling new face of youth and candor that filled him with a strange pride, as though she were his own creation.

"You're nicer slightly helpless," she called, laughing as the door slid shut.

He lay grinning for a while. Then he began to think about his conversation with Chloë...yesterday it must have been, her anxious visit.

"You're here because of my carelessness," she had said with a burst of anger directed at herself.

Her cheeks were thinner and the green eyes consumed her face like shadowy untended gardens.

"Don't punish yourself on my account. I'll take the blame for how I got here. It was my own carelessness, and that's more than I usually say."

He studied the weary ravaged face, more beautiful than ever in its flushed patina of remorse. The pale halo of severed hair reached in fine tendrils for the white-clothed shoulders that were forever drawn back against defeat.

He was surprised to find that he had not died for her like a lovesick schoolboy. Some lesser part of him in a remote corner did long for that kind of release, even as his words reaffirmed his strong grip on life.

"You're agonizing the way I used to every time I did something that landed me on my back. But when I finally got close

enough and had to...look death in its cold eye, I refused to go over any of it, to question anything I'd ever done. I just started from the place where I was glad to be alive and went on from there. That's the way I do it now."

"Wirth, if you'd been--"

"But I wasn't," he abruptly interrupted. "Got another extension."

In the heavy silence that followed, his desire to offer her further comfort overcame his taciturn nature.

"The things that happened aren't your fault. When they get further away...when more living gets heaped on top of them, you'll see it. You know it. You're just not well yet. But...I think maybe you're surprised at...how healthy your ego is."

His heart warmed. He had made her smile, an act that softened her face to an excruciating tenderness.

"Incredible, Wirth, that I once had the nerve to think I could..."

"What?"

"Teach you something."

"You have," he offered with a self-derisive laugh.

Then he saw that the worry in her face was surfacing again from beneath its comely mask, something that troubled her deeply.

"Eventually you have to turn and face whatever is at your back. Better sooner," he advised with care.

He now knew, in the wake of Wyld's painfully measured effort and staggering risk, exactly what she meant to the Jarl, and in this he could only revere the man he served. He grew silent as she stared at him with affectionate but sad eyes, that excruciating depth of green.

"May I kiss you good-bye?"

"You always have your way," he answered quickly.

"For what you've done and who you are, I thank you and love you and revere you," her soft voice offered, as she knelt and took his head between her cool hands.

He reached up with his good arm and removed a hand, holding it to his lips, then lay back and closed his eyes. He smelled the summer sweetness of her as she bent over insistently and touched his forehead with a generously appreciative caress. His eyes remained closed as her footsteps moved quietly away. The place her lips had touched felt like a smoldering ember about to ignite. He threw an arm over his eyes and wished for sleep.

When Chloë decided that she had had enough recuperation and pampering in her comfortable suite in the Solvault Hall clinic, she left as quickly and uneventfully as could be managed, choosing a day when Wyld was away.

A devoted visitor to her bedside, he regularly found her mute and unresponsive, possessed by a strange anguish and moody doldrums from which, he was disappointed to find, he could not lift her. Just before her unexpected departure he had cut short his visits, unable to bear the sight of her discomfort at his presence. Now at Sunring for over a week she had neither asked for him nor made any attempt at an explanation of her estrangement. He heard that she had come to say good-bye to Sayka, who was now returned with escorts to her Mainland school, and that she had also been to see Wirth, who was now back in his quarters ready for duty at Fox's discretion.

Because of all Chloë had been put through and because she was the only human who had ever dwelled in his mind with such relentless attachment to his destiny, he was quite ready to bear for a time the cruel brunt of her unsettling disposition, although not without frustration. A winter of ice would not erode his patience as much as the pervasive feeling that her dilemma was his to resolve if only she would let him. He had demonstrated over and over how eager he was to be of help, without response. Even the young interpreter of stress syndrome who saw Chloë regularly, a diligent and soft-spoken research fellow indebted to Wyld for his position, had not, when obliquely invited to do so, offered to shed any light on Chloë's mysterious withdrawal. The usefulness of this privacy between doctor and patient was clear to Wyld and he pressed no further, allowing the hurt of alienation to gnaw around the edges of a steadily insistent stream of work and travel.

Whenever he was gone for any length of time, recalling how Chloë had passionately resented his departure from the cabin beneath Mount Rubora, he always left messages for her with the appointments computer, succinctly noting where and when he could be reached. He did so again today before departing for the Mainland at the personal invitation of Morral Iceter.

As the ship rose through the chasing mists gathering in tattered bunches over the washed land, he looked down on Sunring with misgiving. The black Churlwraith castle upon which his eyes had so often smiled now seemed to quiver with opposing forces. For an instant he thought of turning back, of slashing his way, with all the driving momentum of his sharp anger, through the stony-cold wall she had thrown up around herself. His hand rose up, away from the data-rich electronic log he intended to peruse in

flight, reaching for the button near his seat that would summon a question from the android navigation core and compliantly send him back to Solvault Hall. The hand tensed for a second, then relaxed as Sunring slid away. *Wake up, please wake up*, his thwarted mind called. *There's little enough time in this life.*

He looked up, discovered Fox watching him and wondered if his perplexity was as obvious as it felt. Could Chloë's brother, by sharing her genes, read her motives better than he who had resolved to share her fate? What did Fox now know of *him* without need of consideration? Strange, this twinge of envy at a bond of blood -- another confrontation with that loathsome glutton jealousy; it would only press his countering nature into deferring at some point to Fox. *Ah, these interior strategies*, he sighed. *Can one subtract from a vertical continuum of the whole writhing mass, until a subterranean worm is found doing jealous ploys? Is all organic matter in all massive twittering galaxies subject to jealousy? Or are we reasoning animals the only victims of this pitiful disease?* On this gloomy day all was fatuous and foolish and wasteful of time.

He tossed the log to Fox, more to escape from his penetrating eyes than anything else, and said with a cunning smile, "Give this classified stuff another go and see if it's really fit for Iceter's enlightenment."

The miniature black log, swiftly accessible for review, would tell Premier Iceter a great deal, revealing the fate of Fleet Fairmeed and her last faltering words, clearly implicating both Dagone, in the form of Poppy Umara, and Leise Amboze. Iceter, like Marchland security, was fully aware that Amboze often assisted the Dagone government in matters of espionage. Amboze was acquainted with a number of Mainland officials and frequently

hobnobbed with certain members of the higher echelons who were less fooled by his pyrite glitter than willing to overlook his coarse and ruthless nature for their personal gain. Iceter was one of those unwilling, finding Amboze just as odious and dangerous a personality as did Wyld.

Wyld had no illusions that his invitation from Iceter was conveyed purely for diversion, although he had spent many pleasurable hours at Iceter's handsome country estate, the large house tucked in the margin of a blue water pocket on a seemingly endless northern sound. Kele Umara and his cabinet could not fail to squirm over the implications of this publicly announced visit, although it was reputedly in honor of Iceter's forty-fifth birthday. There would be a private discussion with Morral, then very likely a cordial social gathering limited to a few select friends.

Until the proper moment presented itself, Wyld intended to initiate no protest, but he was arriving well equipped to argue his case against allowing Dagone an unchecked hand on the international market. Iceter, the most powerful member of Fedcartel, was his friend and ally, but this did not preclude a rise of grudging Mainland sentiment against him. Much of this sentiment issued from financial ties with Dagone, and these quarters always tried to look the other way when Dagone misbehaved. Therefore his remonstrance of Dagone aggression must avoid emotional protestations and lean heavily upon the undeniable proof of misconduct at his disposal. Chloë's abduction and raw abuse would have been a trump card but, for her sake, he had decided to leave as much of her story untold as possible. Fedcartel knew only that the matter had righted itself -- thus far nothing had leaked to news sources. The Dagonites, although they would hardly bring it up

themselves, would certainly be mystified at the omission. He would leave this devastating piece of information dangling threateningly over their heads, hitting them hard on the hidden issue of female slave trade, which would be odious to all nations.

As to the Bonethief explosion, Fox had to buy that information with a hefty exchange of gold that would send the informers far from harm's door. It was all in the small and priceless black log, implicating both Grabb and Amboze. There was scant information on Ursa's father, although Fox's sources maintained that Grenellev had withdrawn from the syndicate before the explosion was planned. Wyld suspected that Ursa's father had been admitted for his reputable name and the connections of his daughter. Grenellev, being overprotective, vain, and more than a little jealous of Wyld, had swallowed the bait. When their paths eventually crossed, Wyld was of the opinion that Grenellev would fall back upon his old code of honor and come clean. Grenellev had reaped severe financial damage as a result of his illegal profiteering, and for this reason and because of Ursa, Wyld had a soft spot for the wily old gentleman.

The business of keeping the March inviolate and the officers of Fedcartel placated was a ceaseless job of subtle diplomacy, one that Wyld had honed to sharp precision over the years, establishing such unimpeachable credibility that on the rare occasions when he had to effect dangerously unpopular censure the painful act was usually tolerated. But these were trying times when nothing was certain except that Dagoné coveted the entire island with a bellicose perversity that bore constant watching. More vigilance was also needed for the schemes of sympathetic Immix factions. The Marchland, above all, must always remain vigilant,

never allowing the chance for an offensive maneuver. It was sure to come as some small encroachment, designed to appear accidental but serious enough to invite retaliation, for which the March could be openly blamed and attacked. Wyld had his own offensive, one that was as explicit as it was blameless: to present the wolf with the feathers in its mouth for the observation and castigation of all nations.

Only an hour had passed since Alba had bid her grandson good-bye. Their parting conversation was resoundingly recorded in her head, and she was sitting very quietly in order to deflect all her energy to the quickening process of thought; a wise old matriarch alone amidst the lustrous foliage of the Hall's domed garden, reflecting on the recent swarm of events. They had painfully besieged her troubled heart, attacking her fortress equilibrium like swirling clouds of stinging hornets. Her thin erect form, still clothed with uncharacteristic indifference in a blue morning robe, was drawn up within the high-backed encirclement of a pale yellow chair. Drifting momentarily across her field of concentration came the sweet smell of citrus. She looked up attempting to focus her pale eyes -- eyes still registering amazement -- on a point directly above her head. Hanging against the rain-spattered sky of glass were dark-leaved branchlets strung with plump spheres of miniature oranges. Her head turned slowly down again. Her hand moved up to tap the radiant nimbus of white hair, while her eyes stared absently toward the unconverged petals of a giant ice-blue hydrangea blossom. She was still reeling from the startling confrontation with her grandson over her recent discovery of Chloë's name on the Wyld Documents Terminal.

And how had she found it in the first place? When her mind refused to release the date on which Casimir's great grandfather had expired, the stubborn mind-slip irritated her greatly. She had finally given in and consulted the documents terminal. Well apprised of everything there, she rarely visited its comprehensive data bank. Was it mere coincidence that she had looked where she need not have looked, or was it something more? Perhaps it was indeed the storied intuition that had always kept her at least one step ahead of everyone at the Hall.

Before she spoke to her grandson she had tried to get clear in her mind what kind of mate Chloë might be or become and what this secretive act meant. Did his silence mean that it was not a valid commitment? How should she react, since she was apparently not supposed to know? And lastly, although not in degree of importance, there were the elders and the people, to consider.

Alba meditated long and hard and then, on the morning of his departure, called her inscrutable grandson to the sparsely appointed white salon -- a place for clarity, where significant family decisions were traditionally made or announced. There, finely sculpted vertical forms of creamy alabaster stood well away from the high undraped windows, the entire room acting as a splendidly clean frame for the changing chromatic vistas of the rugged highland valley.

He came, knowing -- she saw that immediately -- perhaps by the very room she had chosen, everything she would say or not say. His imposing figure at the windows obscured for a fearful moment even the familiar grandeur of the March, quite effortlessly diminishing her once unquestionable sway. Before this strangely

negative form she felt small and humble and useless for the first time in many years. She, who had always known everything at the Hall, was too much in her own mind these days, slipping, slipping back to the honeyed past. Her voice faltered with inward umbrage at the pity of self. Muscles, stretched taut over high cheekbones, quivered with the strain of holding back the slop of sorrow.

He turned around, and in a startled moment she saw the glowing blue eyes dissolving, pouring into the skull's sockets and burning through to the nearly identical cerulean patch of sky at his back. One look was all he gave, and came to hold her, ignoring her hand held up to warn him off.

"You mustn't worry," he said, stroking her hair.

"I don't know how to be...or what to say. You don't confide in me."

"I'm used to resolving things alone. It works best. And I like to spare you what I can."

"You've confused me so," she reproached, thinking how strangely it had come to pass that her head was lying there against her grandson's adamant breast.

"I did not mean to. You deserve only tranquility...the pleasures of rich memory. I try to keep you there...but you persist in knowing too much."

"I don't know *you*...do I?"

"You know more of me than anyone."

"Does she know enough of you...and you of her?"

His face closed and her heart sank. Now tears came.

"Alba, it will be all right."

"Where is she then? Why hasn't she come here to throw me out? A while ago I was questioning the felicity of your choice.

Now gladly would I welcome her, even though I still question... Casimir, dear, surely you know that her work is at the center of her life."

His sealed face offered not the least flinch of protest. Oh, it was worse than she had imagined.

"I was so angry with you. I've always taken, *held*, responsibility for things that hardly concern you. I had a list of important questions. I'll let them go, bite my tongue. Don't think I don't love and respect her. Do not think it. I always have. I watched her grow when you barely knew that she existed. I was sorry for that little Churlwraith, even sorrier when I learned of her royal death warrant. But she grew more beautiful and prodigious each time I saw her...a precocious wonder of flesh and spirit, and I knew she was destined for something extraordinary. I knew..." Alba looked with some remorse at her grandson's questioning eyes. "Long ago I went to great lengths to learn her history. I wanted to protect Nev, but perhaps it was also a prescience of this that drove me."

"There is nothing to fear," Wyld insisted as he gripped her frail shoulders.

"You insult me."

"Forgive me."

"Once I was almost as powerful as you."

"I haven't forgotten who you are, Great Mother Alba."

"Once I feared little, but I knew better than to fear *nothing*. Only a fool fears nothing." Her voice softened, pleading. "Your need for each other cannot be easily expunged, but do you love her enough to stop this...to save such private dedication from public demands and the constant scrutiny of others that flies off the backs

of Wylds...and Grenellevs? How do you love her?"

"These questions I've already laid to rest. She will hold her own. How do *you* love her?" Wyld asked in earnest.

"I love her with awe as one loves an altruist. Her father is incredibly rich and she cares not a whit. Her life is spared, secure; she knows this and still she risks all in self-denial, the servant of her exceptional brain, the exorcist of disease and despair. Will you impede this?"

Alba had drawn herself up to answer his question with a frank review he already well knew. He was all the more moved to smile with appreciation for her laudatory attack.

"Whatever unfortunate opinions you've arrived at to the contrary, I will always support Chloë's work completely and revere her professional standing. Her self-denial I would joyfully limit."

"You'll be compelled to make demands on her that she cannot meet without betraying her cause."

"Never."

"But what will you have?" Alba asked, and now the pity was for her grandson.

"All that I need," he answered with felicity and predetermined resolution.

She saw that there was nothing but hope in his face, a stubborn, consuming hope that fanned the red embers of fear in her heart.

"Alba, give your blessing," he said at last. His voice was gentle but assertive, not daunting or demanding but a willful entreaty.

"May you both live long and comfort each other," she whispered. Her voice had gone dry. She turned away and bowed

her head.

Ignoring her aloof withdrawal, Wyld clasped Great Mother's troubled body with unchecked devotion. Whatever her stance, he knew how well she understood. Her wrested sanction contained all the easement he required.

XXXIV

Kele Umara lifted his thick arm and shook a stubby finger at Rymon Grabb. The wide sleeve of his black silk pajamas fluttered slowly back and forth like a flag for a requiem. He was dyspeptic and nearly apoplectic with rage. Seeking an ally Grabb had confided in Poppy, who hedgingly divulged to her husband the story behind the Sandspell affair. With the level of news he was forced to hear, Umara was only too glad to have the story punctuated with Nik Weaver's fateful broken neck. For the Premier, territorial imperative was all-powerful, and the ignominy of Wyld in control on Dagone soil -- after strong-arming his way into Sandspell -- was unbearable. The idea of having his vice premier marched about like a damned hoodlum played havoc with Umara's stomach, although he cared nothing for Grabb's ordeal and even delighted in it.

Some of the foreign guests at the resort were already spreading the word on the Mainland that Casimir Wyld had been seen with an armed band of Marchland raiders carrying a blood-drenched woman from the main entrance of this high-end resort, while Vice Premier Grabb was held hostage in plain view. The news could not be validated, and official Dagone sources were calling it ridiculous. In fact, the story seemed so preposterous and invited such legal ensnarment that none of the major news sources

would touch it. Nevertheless, some of the sleazier video tattlers had gobbled up the story and were noising it about loudly enough to cause a profusion of inquiry and protest in the Dagon government's communications system, and a peristaltic reversal in Kele Umara's digestive tract. But confinement to his bed had not altered the force of his wrath. Even Poppy, who had expressed a shade too much interest in Grabb's vindication, found herself uncomfortably under extraordinary scrutiny.

"Unfortunately, he was too clever to take you off my hands permanently, Grabb!" Umara shouted.

"I don't think I want to listen to this," Grabb said, barely controlling himself as he brushed furiously at his lintless sleeves.

"Too delicate for your ears? You think you're indispensable, do you? Second in command and all of that misconceived tripe. Well there's a very long distance between my chair and yours. You'll listen all right, or you'll find yourself *way*, *way* at the back of the line, privy to nothing but the privy in no time at all. You have caused me and this government a giant pain in the ass...with your mucking about in harebrained delusions, as if the machinery of this entire country ran to service your self-indulgence."

Umara, having held himself back for a considerable time, collecting peccadillo after peccadillo into a large mound of decadence, was actually beginning to revel in his anger, almost welcoming a chance, but not the circumstance, for a massive reprisal.

"I haven't gotten the right story on your Fairmeed woman's death yet either, but she was found near a Marchland experimental vessel with a pleasure craft belonging to Amboze at her disposal.

And when Amboze is involved we have to dig down to the infernal bottom to get the right story, unless, of course, he's doing it for *us*. I expect it's more bad publicity for Dagone."

"I don't know about that," Grabb said, for once telling the truth.

As he stood at the foot of the massive bed, he remained silent and brick-faced, bereft at last of the placating grin that had brought him through many an Umara storm.

"You told me these resorts were vital...lucrative and well-managed. Now I find they were being run by a perverted pimp. Unauthorized collusion with Immix radicals to boot. Absolutely untrustworthy. Half of the lot double agents, reporting back to Premier Xheeva's little enemy coup waiting in the wings, the rest quadruple agents nailing anybody for half a kilo of gold."

"Some of them are extremely useful and very serious about joining Dagone," Grabb offered rather meekly.

"We don't need assistance from crazies."

"Sometimes Immix radicals are helpful, though," Grabb dared to remark.

"Why in the black abyss of Koma did you botch the handling of that scientist so badly? Baiting Wyld with puerile tactics like a pack of vengeful delinquents. Idiots! Morons!"

"Yes, that was a mistake," Grabb admitted.

He would rather Umara never found out, if he did not already know, how readily he had sanctioned the shipment of Doctor Kleeve's severed braid. Never had he dreamed that Wyld would respond with so bold an enterprise. If Wyld had implicated him openly, he was probably through already, for he knew that Umara would not hesitate to offer him up as a sacrifice. His face

contorted in hatred as he blundered on.

"She was quite an unusual case. And by the time we realized we'd have to...well, to..." His voice drifted off with relief. Why couldn't he just shut up? He had been about to incriminate himself further, when Umara's secretary made the mistake of entering the room with some piece of news he thought important enough to brave the fray.

"Try not to say anything more," Poppy whispered as she passed by Grabb. She went to the window and stood nervously imitating the Vice Premier by brushing vigorously at the sleeves of her cherry red dress, while staring down from time to time with feigned interest at a white bank of fog.

"Never mind. I don't want to hear whatever it is. It can't be good news. Get out!" Umara shouted at his dismayed secretary. "No, *stop!* Contact Amboze. I want to see him immediately.

"Now we wait," Umara went on. "We wait in the dark. And what is our defense? It's so full of holes that if I had you and your underlings chopped into a thousand pieces I couldn't plug them all."

The Premier heaved himself out of bed and rolled toward Grabb like a great red and black ball of menace. The hand pressed to his ailing stomach flew out and the stubby index finger shook wildly under Grabb's nose.

"You'd better think of some constructive countermoves, Grabb. Your profligate days are numbered. One wonders what else you're mixed up in that is liable to accrue to my account."

He reached into the pocket of his pajama top and tossed his head back to swallow a pill, indicating that he was finished by delivering a brief summation of his own bemoaned culpability.

The Marchman

"I know well enough where my fault lies, having left the weasel in charge of the henhouse."

"There's a warhead of lethal information here," Iceter announced, laying the innocuous looking miniature electronic log down on his desk. He kept his hand for a moment on the small black conveyance of revelations, and looked with a hard penetrating gaze at Wyld. "And you want me to open up the sky and drop this on Fedcartel?"

"The sooner the better," Wyld answered, with more steel in his eyes than the legendary Marchland stoic had ever exposed to Iceter.

"And what about Dagon? You had in mind they'd be there to catch themselves in the act?"

"Probably later. That way the members can devote more time to the Dagon representative..."

"Reeling with guilt?"

Iceter had finished Wyld's sentence with a question and with what seemed to Wyld far too much levity.

"I'm sorry, Morral, but this time the humor eludes me. You know what's in there. You can't imagine what it's like to fight that kind of endless battle for the right to mind your own business...just to exist."

"But I *can* imagine. I fight battles too, rarely as threatening to our actual existence, but many and varied battles...some for countries like yours."

"There *is* no country like the March," Wyld responded in a slightly indignant, matter-of-fact voice.

"Excuse me. You're certainly right about that." Iceter

apologized with a calming rise of his hand.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to come at you, Morral...rough days...rough days."

Wyld stood with his hands on his hips staring at a photograph of the two of them leaning off the stern of Iceter's fishing boat, with broad grins on their faces.

"That was a good day," he affirmed, turning to Iceter with a smile. "Rough days make good days very good."

Iceter's perceptive brown eyes smiled back agreeably, but they had not missed the bitterness. He waited for Wyld to settle again in his chair, then touched the volatile black log lightly.

"After what I've seen and heard in this, I can hardly blame you for getting exercised.

"On a slightly different subject...although not without a downside, the astringent measures you announced at the last meeting are showing some beneficial signs. I want to apologize for being too hasty in my assessment, Casimir."

Smiling warmly, Wyld looked steadily into Iceter's eyes and said, "Thank you, Morral. I'll tell Nev -- he and I were in complete agreement that it had to be done."

Iceter pointed to the wall of glass that made his study appear to hang in a vaporous coil of thin high mist. Below, the expansive sound was a bowl full to the rim with pearly sky vibrating peacefully toward a silver distance.

"Tomorrow we'll go far out there in old *Posbbucket*, drop our lines over the side, and I'll tell you what's come to me during the night."

"Good enough," Wyld answered with lifting spirits.

They swung their chairs around to face the sound and sat

talking of mundane affairs. But the ordinary black log, resting alone on Iceter's polished desk, spoke to them in a series of synapses in their harried minds, firing steadily away, refusing to shut down.

"And I suppose Ursa is the same as ever...beautiful and consumed with life."

"I'm sure she is," Wyld said with a vague smile.

"I'm anxious to see her again. Didn't you two really become acquainted at one of my parties?"

"More or less. She was always floating in and out of my awareness. We actually met much earlier. I take it you've invited her here tonight."

"Hanya invited her. You didn't know? We thought... Perhaps we've committed a faux pas."

Iceter looked surprised and a bit worried.

"No, it's all right. As far as I know Ursa and I aren't averse to seeing each another. It will be fine."

"I see," Iceter answered, still looking as if he had blundered gravely.

Not only was Ursa present but also the gifts of Marchland gold, prominently displayed above the frosted velvet nap of a plunging violet gown. For a while she sequestered her usually voluble self in the shadowy background, aloof eyes smoldering, mauve lips curling in a proud sulk, like a pendulous purple fruit hanging ripe and neglected at the foot of a dark garden. Then she stepped forth to make her mark, pausing near one of the carved onyx pillars on the enclosed terrace of heated glass, where nearly

everyone was gathered. In the soft indirect light emanating from the pillar's recess, her auburn hair glowed with a corona from the full moon, while the moon itself hung above the glass roof, peering in like a wry voyeur.

Fox, who had assigned himself an evening's casual duty, seemed to be of the moon's persuasion. His amber eyes stared out from the leaf shadows of potted lemon trees, toward a glass-embasured niche facing out on the sound. There, on a thick green damask seat, Ursa and Wyld had come together at last and were speaking in low voices. Was Wyld perhaps absolving himself once and for all of whatever obligations remained? His head was bent to Ursa so that Fox could not make out the expression on his face.

Suddenly Ursa stood up and stepped swiftly away. The look on her face was unmistakable. A radiant anger carried her blindly through the air-locked glass vestibule to the outside, where the deceitfully smiling moon poured its icy light over a brutally cold night.

She stood, rocking a moment in shivering astonishment beneath motionless pine boughs strung with crystals of ice. Her large eyes rolled over the moon-veneered sound without seeing it, as she quickly crossed her arms over her exposed breast to shut out the cold. A twig cracked behind her. She jumped in fright as her long heavy cape came sliding over her bare shoulders. She dug her fingers gratefully into the warm synthetic sable and turned around. Fox's big frame, well insulated in a thick facsimile of sheep fleece, consumed her startled vision.

"You ought to know the seasons in your own country, Ursa." Fox grinned, his breath coming in white puffs. "You can't come out half naked on one of your autumn nights."

The Marchman

"Dear Fox, watchful Fox, always tending others. I..."

One of the appropriate witticisms at which she was so adept died on her lips. She leaned back against the tree, one hand tearing at the gold necklace.

"Don't," Fox said, reaching out and stopping her hand. "I like it there. It's perfect for you."

"Is it? Not so perfect. You'd think you..."

Fox smiled in silence, looking at the moon burning in her questioning eyes.

"So," she whispered. "*You* chose my gold treasures. What else does he expect you to do for him?"

"I also bought them," he said, ignoring her question.

He pulled the cape around her with her arms wrapped inside and held her against him in a warmth she welcomed.

"When I realized what had happened between you and the Jarl, I went back and paid the artisan Sykes out of my own pocket. It gave me more pleasure than anything I've done in a very long time."

She stepped back in astonishment.

"I can't like you for doing that, Fox. You've embarrassed me and deceived Casimir. He trusts you."

"As well he should. We go back a long way. He knows what I'd do for him, duty or not, and I know what he'd do for me. But he wouldn't give me you...if it were possible."

"Give and take aren't the appropriate words for human emotions, intimate attachments. Apparently his...*interest* lies elsewhere," Ursa allowed herself with a bitter voice.

"You don't love him, not the way he needs it."

"How dare you say that! You've no right to--"

"I know that, but I can't be too polite with you or you'll roll right over me. You're terribly spoiled...but alas, irresistible. You want me to tell him about this?"

"Of course."

"It won't help."

"That isn't why... This isn't your affair."

"I can't help thinking so. It feels like it is."

Over Fox's shoulder, Ursa caught sight of Wyld's tall figure hesitating in the doorway. At last he had come to see if she had died in the ice. Her anger at him caused her to do an impulsive and uncharacteristic thing. She laid her head against Fox's chest. But he shrewdly guessed, by the quickening nervousness in her manner, that Wyld had come to find her.

"They say I have eyes in the back of my head," he muttered with amused sarcasm. "Let's do this right for him then."

With Wyld's figure still looming in the doorway, Fox brought her around behind the slender unobscuring pine and kissed her hard, without much personal satisfaction. She tried discreetly to free herself, but by that time Wyld was gone. Fox pinned her skirt to the trunk of the tree with his knee and kissed her again. Her eyes closed as her body now inclined toward him with surprising desire, but he moved away from her and put his hand around the back of her neck.

"There now...in you go." His voice was hard as he propelled her toward discordant laughter drifting through the slowly closing door.

"Don't worry, I *will* tell him about this."

A despairing bitterness caught him, and he yanked the necklace roughly toward him. She was held momentarily like a

bulking animal, her head pulled forward, her proud eyes glittering with unspilled tears. He dropped the necklace at once, swearing softly.

"What in black suns am I doing?"

He brought her against him and bent over her, kissing the back of her neck where her hands had flown to rub away the hurt of the chain. The rigid anger of her body had softened. She smelled of ginger flowers, this tall, radiant presence, filling his arms like no other woman. It was very hard to let her go. Her head dropped back to look at him, and he saw that her eyes shone with a dazed languor, the full lips smiling at last. This time he kissed her with a soft exploratory passion, his effort reciprocated. He stepped back very pleasantly surprised.

"Next month I'll come and find you in broad daylight," he warned with a grin. "You'll be warm and pampered, content and dominant in your house...maybe even up to your sportive games. I swear I'll come just once, if unwelcome never again, but if you look at me the way you're looking at me now you'll get exactly what we both deserve."

Ursa laughed, not her full exuberant explosion of laughter but a soft impassioned ripple of sound. He saw that she was shy with him for the first time.

The moon beat down between them on the frozen path, and they stood listening to the lonely cry of geese out over the shimmering water.

"A lost pair...but always together," Ursa murmured.

She turned and hurried back inside the vestibule, where she stood a moment in confounded silence, unaware of Wyld's eyes on her, watching her through the inside glass. Then she was smiling,

gracious and dazzling, as pale and smiling Hanya Iceter came up to clasp her hand.

"There are plenty of big rosy fish in here, Casimir," Iceter said, jerking his muscular forearm carefully back on the line, "but this is their smart season."

It was late morning in the sound and the tide was well in; the kind of day when the sun dawdles and feints behind a roiling cloud bank, winking and teasing brightly without ever dropping its seductive veil. The surface of the calm water was a glaring white. A cold chill hung over the boat, but their thermal clothes were warm and they were feeling no discomfort. Occasionally invisible geese honked on airy paths above their heads, reminding them of the spreading silence in which they drifted.

"This is what I cherish, no one handing me drinks, no damned helmsman. At least out here I feel like I have a little say in my destiny."

"I know what you mean," Wyld said with a disdainful laugh. "They're all out there, our protective shadows with their trusted killing sticks, patrolling our fates."

"If I didn't rave constantly I'd have them snagging my line."

Iceter's tone was mocking but good-naturedly tolerant. He leaned sideways in his bolted chair and pushed a thermos of hot mash whiskey toward Wyld.

"You aren't going to tell me you didn't know what Fleet Fairmeed was up to when you took her on?"

Wyld produced a sad smile. "I wouldn't be alive today with that kind of myopia."

The smile faded as the thought of Fleet jolted him. He

wanted to recall her beauty, the irony of her hopeful voice, but he could never quite get past the horror of the torn and bleeding body rolling on the Catchsong's deck, the waste.

"I'd certainly risk my credibility to say we never enjoyed our strange liaison. But we both knew that I was her assignment. I had an idea that if I kept this open line on Dagon plotting I'd prevent a lot of maneuvers from going underground. And I think for a time it worked. But it became...impractical, not to mention indecent."

"The woman wanted what she couldn't have?"

"I suppose she wanted what she was supposed to get."

"What about the Immix?"

"Premier Xheeva was privy to my method."

"Ah, a little left-handed diplomacy," Iceter said with a wink.

"Well, Xheeva has her problems with radicals."

"So it seems," Wyld replied in a noncommittal manner. He supposed that Iceter, with his powerful information network, at least knew something about a certain Doctor Kleeve, who indeed had a Mainland address but scarce little history here.

The question may even have been on Iceter's tongue as he looked into Wyld's expertly masked face, but a jerk on his line drew his attention to the plummeting weight of an angry fish.

Wyld reeled in his line and sat back, stretching his crossed legs over a hatch cover while Iceter went to work. He watched the man, smiling and thinking what a different person the Premier was here in his private bailiwick, less formal but no less artfully incisive.

Apparently Iceter had resolved to be nice and easy, and for some reason that sort of display generally made Wyld just a trifle more wary than he was with someone candidly picking a bone.

Well of course he knew the reason; it came from years of having to turn smiling enemies inside out in one's mind. The Premier was not an enemy. Moreover, he was obviously enjoying himself.

After a few quiet minutes of dancing line and flexing arm, Iceter grew amusingly verbal.

"All right come on. Come on in. Blazing stars...more line. This old boy's giving me a run."

Then there was another big slack in his line and he began reeling.

"Snap him up! Snap him up," Wyld called as he reached forward and put his hand on the net.

The long, silvery, hook-jawed fish came flying straight up into the air, an iridescent water-splashing projectile wildly flipping its tail, at last fatally leaping into the net Wyld was holding out.

"There's your dinner, Casimir. What do you say, above ten kilos? Not bad. Not bad. Bam! Out of your misery and into the ice."

"Sorry, old fellow," Wyld said, grinning at the brained fish. "Certainly nothing to be ashamed of," he offered in an admiring voice, handing Iceter the thermos.

Iceter was pleased. He took a long swig and tossed his head back with one arm thrown casually over the threaded lifeline.

"So, I think we should call a special session. This will lend more credence and gravity to the thing than waiting for normal procedure. And, as you say, we can let the Dagon representative in on the second run."

There it was, without any preliminaries, an arrow-straight return to the discussion of yesterday. His welcome decision, as usual, could not have been more concise.

Wyld nodded, half expecting Iceter to now broach the subject of Doctor Kleeve, about which he was assumed to hold some measure of curiosity. But the Premier apparently felt no inclination to extract further information concerning the abduction. He merely handed Wyld the laid aside fishing rod with a fraternal smile.

"Now where's my dinner? Aren't you going to try and top my catch? We've a large table to feed."

Wyld cast the line far out over the silver wavelets, set it, and threw a sidelong glance at the prepossessing head of his prudent and honorable companion.

The leader of a country whose infrastructure was vast and formidable, and whose trade and influence touched every corner of the planet, leaned back with hands folded placidly on his chest, his eyes ranging with pure satisfaction over a treasured microcosm of peace.

Wyld considered his thankfulness that Iceter was indeed heavily guarded, for even the vague notion of something happening to him produced a deep unsettling dread; the loss and chaos would be indescribable. He pulled off his hat to let the rising breeze chill his head and unseat the vile thought, then yanked irritably on his line. Why must his unruly mind do this, always racing ahead to a pitfall and looking down to see what viper waited? Remembering Alba's words, he smiled. It was the bane and breastplate of all responsible leaders that they never fear nothing.

Coming back to Iceter's decision, optimism raised Wyld's thoughts atop a boiling fountain of nervous energy. With the assistance of a forceful ally had he not reason to rejoice? Was not cohesive aid promised that would give him a chance to breathe and

to attend his muddled personal affairs? His mind kept roaring off above the unruly planet, while he sat intently striving to generate an interest in the unyielding water for the sake of his compliant friend. After all, the panoramic sound was stirringly beautiful and he was at liberty to enjoy a valued friendship. Yet seldom had he held so flimsy a rein on his impatience. Restless as the elusive fish spurning his bait, he desired to fly home at once, but could not with propriety do so.

XXXV

The winter sun embraced the land with so sweet and cloying an ornamental light that it drove Chloë nearly mad in the shadow-steeped recesses of her rooms. She found herself retreating there more and more frequently when Nev's eyes, following her anxiously about Sunring, set her nerves on edge. For a number of reasons, including the insistence of her doctor, she could not immediately attempt a return to Immixia, but the work begun there would not reverse itself in the meanwhile. Where did she fit here in her homeland? For once she felt aimless and uncertain how to proceed.

She got up from the small luminous screen at her desk, where she had been making curious symbols with her stylus all afternoon. These exploratory marks had begun to mystify even her as they blurred and wavered in an elusive dance. She could establish no middle ground on which to carry out her endeavors. Either she found herself pitched headlong into a trance with unaccountable hours slipping by or she was relegated to the protagonist in a play of the absurd, whereby she sought to resolve in various unsatisfactory ways the problems threatening to unhinge

her. With maddening repetition, her mind raced more and more erratically over familiar and tedious paths all leading back to an impasse. Meditation, which gave her only temporary relief, resolved nothing. The nervous cropping of her fingers had begun again. This was what came of sitting by an open window watching motes of dust drifting through the bright sun lanes carrying off her mind. There was no recourse but to go on another of her long walks, always duly noted and clucked over by all the inhabitants of Sunring. If they had nothing better to do, she would soon enough see them occupied with more consuming tasks.

For added warmth she pulled on long taupe stockings, and over them her heavy khaki trousers, then slipped into her soft-lined boots. She wore a warm thermal shirt beneath a synthetic angora sweater, and lastly donned a scarf and cap of the same pale gold as the sweater. When she stood before her cheval glass, she was surprised at the seriously drawn face of the stranger looking back. She practiced a large but counterfeit smile for the attentive audience waiting below.

At last she was in the forest, away from staring eyes and a gushing profusion of advice: take food; take care; don't go too far; don't tire, and on and on. Dear Nev was the worst offender of all. she had to insist that he not send someone traipsing after her. Today she would go far, as far she needed, as far as she could, until she had wrung this agony out of herself. Somewhere out there was an answer waiting.

She must approach the question from another angle and try to keep her emotions in check. Ah, but it was all emotion, all emotion from start to finish. Emotional pains, she had noticed, never touched the head; they were all in the chest or stomach,

hands or feet, even the wrists where blood pulsed so painfully close to the surface. At night, the beating of her heart kept her awake, something that had never before occurred. Emotion had enticed her from reason, but now even willfully employed reason was useless.

A brown rabbit scuttled out in front of her on the trail and froze, hunching down in a patch of pale sun. Its thick winter coat sparkled, revealing delicate ticks of white hair. Long shiny whiskers rose and fell as the little nose worked furiously. The large gleaming dark eyes blinked once, then the clenched ball of fur unwound and sprang away into the frozen weed cover of a dry clearing.

Watching the rabbit her eyes softened, her firmly set mouth relaxed in a becalmed and appreciative smile, the very smile she had earlier tried to achieve without success.

The hazelnuts were swollen and falling, their sticky little jackets paired on the ground in heaps for the frantic squirrels. The trail and the white-foaming mountain rivulets that poured across it were luminous with silently captured, randomly tumbling leaves. Through this pungent mulch and molder of softly descending winter, she trudged on, balancing herself over brook stones and shuffling through the crackling leavings of alders and vine maples. Anxiously burning off her misery, she paused only long enough to watch a wild creature sniffing the air, or listen to the cry of a highland bird in a treetop. These sightings were small islands of pleasure in a rising river of pain.

Gradually the forest came around her with a comforting embrace, the tall sighing trees as soothing as a mother's heartbeat. But soon the wind's song turned plaintive. The forest would not think for her or reason, only mourn.

The Marchman

In a while she realized that her breathing was coming too fast and she slowed her walk, looking around her. She was much higher. The air felt colder but she was not cold. It was mid-afternoon and she must be nearly to the cabin. Ahead, through a curving thick-matted tunnel of small alpine firs shone the blond grass of the clearing. In its midst, under the tall cluster of firs, stood the artfully made stone cabin, reflecting the dipping red sun.

How could she have come this far without knowing it, as if it were nothing? What had passed in her mind? Only a marvelous flight of breathing, of contracting and extending muscles. She had moved through a swift dream of flying branches gilded by a breaking sun racing around a galaxy in one big two-hundred-million-year sweep, wondrously pulling her with it. Soon the golden disk of fire would say good night and vanish. She would have grudged herself a bitterly ironic laugh had she strength enough left -- traveling in her small crucible of misery, she had resolved nothing, thought of nothing useful at all.

The door was locked. But why? It had never been locked. She looked through a window. Flowers in a vase. *Her* yellow flowers, withered and dried.

She sat on the stone steps in disbelief. Was it possible that withered flowers could do this? Leaning back she closed the offending eyes, taking a perverse pleasure in letting the tears slide down her cheeks, their cold trails marked by the wind. Her eyes felt too heavy to open. Why open them then? The door at her back and the stone steps had warmed all afternoon in the sun. The inconstant wind roaring through the firs came and went in a pleasant wash of sound. Very nice. Very peaceful. She dozed off.

Awakening with a cry of fear, she believed she was still in a

dream. It was dark. Something touched her. She had to struggle against whatever held her, to struggle hard, clumsy with sleep, until the smell came into her nostrils. A sweet, reedy, resinous woods aroma and the familiar smell of Wylde Violet's cabin.

He unlocked the door, drew her inside and began to rub her hands. So that was why she had moved so slowly, quite numbly -- she was gradually freezing in the alpine night.

"Cold!" he said, swearing and ripping off his jacket.

"You're so cold...too cold!"

"I'm all right," she managed rather awkwardly, through slightly paralyzed lips. She watched in dazed interest as he pulled off her boots and massaged her feet.

Quickly, he ignited a lantern and made a fire from the stored wood. When he had determined that Chloë was none the worse for her exposure, he called a very anxious Nev on his RM and sent his waiting men home. The cabin was warming, the moment fortuitous, and he intended to persist with the advantage.

"The door was locked," Chloë said, and rested her case, an assertion that seemed to explain everything.

"I'm sorry. If I'd known... I've come here to get away occasionally...after we...Marchlanders are so tidy, and I didn't want anything removed. Why have you come here?"

"I don't know. I hardly remember. I was walking..." She fell silent.

The room warmed steadily as the light of the crackling fire climbed the pine-slabbed walls.

She hunched forward in the wooden chair, his jacket still draped around her, hugging herself with her hands on her shoulders. He brought her the blue-starred quilt, then waited,

squatting on the hearth, stirring at the fire.

She had not yet looked at him with the straight-on gaze that was more often her way. Burying her face in her hands, she spoke in a low voice he had to strain to hear.

"I can't stay here."

"You can't be afraid of me?" he said with a laugh, and turned on his heel to stare at her.

"Not altogether...not as you think," she whispered.

The shorn hair that now almost touched her shoulders shone red-gold in the firelight, almost blending with the color of her sweater and neck scarf, which made him think it was long again and falling over her back. There was a wild bewilderment leaping out at him from the distraught eyes. He sensed with surprise that if he even stood up now, this strong, sensible creature would bolt away like a nervous wild doe. She was thin and pale, worked over by a strangely concealed anguish crying out for relief.

In order to stay crouched a few feet away he had to concentrate hard on what he wanted to achieve. Outside the wind cried gently against the cabin. He began to talk, reaching out to her alongside the wind's soothing voice.

"Strange how I've just recalled... Have you ever tried to remember what you were doing, thinking, on a certain day or hour or moment? The day a person of great value, whom you never chanced to meet, died after a long rich life. The hour of an early fall evening when a blizzard arrived unexpectedly and the ptarmigans were caught in the snow with brown feathers. A moment in summer when someone unknown came up against the edge of your life and left a bright impression that changed forever a part of who you were.

"More frequently I've tried to pick out certain memories from in between early comings and goings. I was a young idealist then, making conceited journeys. But I remember something clearly, an exquisite little cloth of threads woven from one dazzling encounter.

"I was twenty-four that year, the year I came home to warm summer in the March from a cool high place on the planet, where I'd gone to bruise egos with an autonomous little band of old school friends...an awesome assortment of quillet-tongued masters of the gyri, comrades who considered the avoided roads their breezeways. Clever and dangerous, valuable and resourceful young men and women who've gone on to do a number of useful and sometimes disturbing things.

"For several days in that lofty place I'd been happily, sometimes heatedly, engaged with those interminably talking heads when...at a certain hour I suddenly found I wasn't listening anymore. I was spinning off into a shadowy canyon far below our alpine hideaway, spinning on the spiraling downdraft of a big condor; it floated, I spun, and the torque of that spin pitched me into silence. I mean I had nothing more to say; after all that flash: entropy. With one slow beat of its broad wings, the condor accomplished more than any of us could with thousands of the most carefully selected words. I wanted to glide away like that powerful silent bird, to hear nothing for a long time, nothing but idly wing-stroked air.

"I took my feet down from the deck railing of our aerie, said my good-byes, hiked back to my ship in the meadow, and flew myself into a Marchland summer. But this is only an introduction to my bit of tapestry.

The Marchman

"When I arrived, I found more talking heads at the Hall...of a sager vintage, unquestionably, but nevertheless unwanted. I took some food and essentials on my back and set off along the river, walking all afternoon until I came to Otter's Eddy...that clever whorl of nature's eye where a wayward offshoot of the rapids curls back into a deep sandy bowl of sky -- I suppose we both know that ferny otter's pool well enough.

"It was the kind of day when...when the heavy, visibly quivering heat overlays the gold and green of the forest, and everything stops and waits in hushed abeyance for a little puff of cool air.

"I pulled off my pack, dry-throated and sweating, and started through the trees to the water. It flashed back at me a molten white sun...and something else. I stopped short, blinking...uncertain in that piercing light. But, yes, there was an invader in my sparkling haven. I thought for a moment that the March had forsaken me -- it never has. It was a young girl of...of fifteen, I imagine. Her hair was bound up with what I later saw to be a thin rope of twisted green fescue...and her clothes were all on the bank. Transfixed, I stared at her white body rippling beneath the water. Then her head broke the surface...a blooming cream lily...her eyes closed...perfect white teeth gleaming from her wet face...shining. I tried to think who it might be, aware that children of the Hall employees all knew where the eddy was -- although it was much further than they usually went -- but I could not recognize this pale girl.

"Singing a happy tune, she drifted slowly to the bank and stood up. I could not help looking, but I did turn politely to go before I was discovered...although I couldn't seem to go far.

Waiting in the forest, my mind replayed a brief span of images...projecting the shadow and light of a young woman in a pool...simple enough, yet a riddle in three dimensions...a snatch of privately artless life playing only itself, uncalled by any name...autonomous. Simultaneously it became a metaphor fleshed in flawless youth.

"She would be gone when I crept back, I told myself, because she wasn't there in the first place. But she *was* there, climbing gingerly over boulders, dressed in rumpled slacks and a casual blue shirt. She settled upon a flat hunk of basalt and took an audio book out of her pocket, turning it on and placing it beside her. Leaning back, the sun pouring pale honey over her face, she drew up her knees and listened. Her eyes were closed.

"Above the rising breeze I heard the book playing; it was a male reader but I could not make out the words. Curiosity had such a hold on me that I might have been a hungry bear drawn to the sound of a hive. What could this mysterious young nymph find engaging enough to bring to a place where no human word was needed? I, who had come here to escape the audacity of human noise, edged in closer to the boulder and heard what I thereafter memorized: *I stand up on hind legs and employ reason to decide my path, for the decision is mine, and so to be responsible for that choice and all it touches, to live and breathe the meaning of it, recognizing no intervening force save my own.*

"You cannot imagine how astonished I was to hear the powerful honesty of this old philosophy. I almost leapt from my concealment and revealed myself...until I realized that the book had been switched off and the startled girl was bounding away from the rock...hurtling with gazelle speed into the density of the forest.

"I knelt, amazed, watching her falling half-bound hair flying

above her back, wondering where she had come from and where she would go...but understanding one thing absolutely: she had *felt*, not *seen*, my presence. Occasionally I looked for her, but she had gone far away...back to her formidable regimen of study.

"The day I tracked you and your lucky boar's foil, you sensed my presence again. Then it came to me who the girl was. Now I have that forest fragment hanging beside the other...the inevitable, the fatal encounter. Such is my appetite that I search for more little glimpses of you in my past to feed the present moment. I knew you but did not know who you were. I know who you are...have known you, and still I look for you."

He stood up slowly and took a step toward her.

"Help me, Chloë."

She had risen from her chair, the quilt sliding to the floor, and stepped back quickly with grief-stricken face.

"Please," she whispered, "Your eloquence...it stings. There must be reason. I have to think...alone...to go."

And now she bolted for the door, forgetting the hour, the night and the piercing wind.

"Of course you can't go," he said, striding toward her.

"You want reason? Then stop this. It's dark, freezing out there. We're both tired. Stop this, Chloë."

"I can't...can't resolve it. Oh, I really can't stand much more."

Her face was breaking in a feverish leap to hysteria.

He grabbed her shoulders, tightening his grip as though his fingers had closed on nothing, and held her at arm's length, gently shaking her.

"I cannot stand it either, this stubborn madness of yours. I

let you go to Immixia because I thought I had to, to keep you. But if I can't have you anyway, what difference does it all make...all our suffering? I know it was horrible...*horrible!* What can I do? Tell me!"

"You can let me...go."

The steely, unmistakable irony in her words heated him to the bone. He held her tighter.

"No!" he roared. "You are the one. I will not let you go! I cannot let you go!"

He pulled her across the room to the long narrow bed, where he could have her all within his sway, reaffirming fact, wresting truth from the distortions of her toppled reason, and where he could free at last the violent force of longing so carefully caged between them.

"Tell me! Talk to me! Talk!" he demanded.

"I want to...I want to," she whispered in frantic misery, her mouth held against the fiercely demanding eyes.

He ran his fingers through her hair.

"Those cretins sent me your hair...*your hair!*"

His lips touched her feverish cheeks, her throat, the unstoppable velvet brook of mouth that brought words and kisses indistinguishable from one another to his parched domain.

"Jarl Wyld...I'm amazed...humbled at what you did for me in Dagon." "

"Do you still want me?" he asked, tormenting her with his complete accessibility.

She closed her eyes. He watched her lips caress each word. "I can think of nothing else."

"Then what in black suns is all of this?"

She pulled herself away from him and went to sit beside the fire.

"No, stay there," she called, and he lay back, staring impatiently at the rough-hewn ceiling beams.

She folded her hands on her lap and gazed into the flames. Her voice began haltingly.

"Yes, it was horrible. At first I was ashamed of my carelessness. But then it mattered little. I was ashamed of my species... There are scars, yes. But that isn't it. It's this. *This*: once, when I was there in the room where you found me, I awoke in a nauseous stupor from the drugs and found..." The aversion was clear in her face. "...and found Nik Wreaver leaning over the bed. He told me...told me... Oh, I'm hopelessly shy with you."

He was lying with one arm over his forehead, his eyes closed.

"Yes, you are. Some of me wishes it could always be that way. Talk. Nothing you say will change anything."

"He led me to believe..." She faltered again and swallowed, starting over. "He implied that he...and now I'm pregnant," she whispered. "I had never done anything to prevent...I had no reason to..." She dropped her head into her hands.

He could not make out the word she had spoken, heard only the despair in her voice, and leapt up to reach her.

"Now you're...what did you say?"

"Pregnant."

"Is this it then?" he asked, beginning to laugh with great relief. "All this time -- wasted time -- I thought it was something serious dark and deep that had ruined us." Now his voice pretended anger. "I was wrong to leave you alone so long. You've

used the time like a rope to hang yourself. What a pigheaded little martyr you are, hoarding up your misery in silence. Whatever you assumed, did you think it would make a difference?"

"It should. There's the March--"

"The March would go on with one less Wyld. But why haven't you blamed *me* for your *unfortunate* condition?"

"Can't you understand? I know the gender, even the state of health, but I can't be sure whose without... I could...but I don't want to know. If I listen to my heart you're...but then how can I...and I can't expect you to..."

"Expect me to what? Condone evil? Evil isn't born anew. It always has been, always will be...resides in everyone to some degree...except I cannot find any in you. You haven't forgotten what defines good?"

"Please don't lecture. Marchlanders expect--"

"What you have is ours," he interrupted, no longer able to bear her misery or enjoy alone what he knew. "You always say I'm the Jarl. Isn't he omnipotent?"

"Oh, if only I could find this amusing. I wish--"

"Remember how we talked that night at Shellreef?" he interrupted again. "You said you would welcome our child, even to suffer its birth. I couldn't imagine you hurting like that and said it was merely an old custom. You know better than most how easy it is, and how much safer, for an embryo to come to term pampered in a birth chamber. But when your answer came flying back at me I thought my father was speaking." He laughed. "You said that natural birth was as good a way as any to teach a Wyld the precariousness of existence, and besides, you boasted, Marchlanders would think you strong."

"Yes," she answered, basking for a moment in the pleasure of that memory. Then her softened face clouded. "But if...if you were not the--"

With an urgent dispelling of her words, he pulled her down to the blue and gold rug beside the hearth and held her so that he could see into her eyes.

"It's not the case. Happily, we've fulfilled the desires of the Genarch...of all Marchlanders."

She shook her head, unable to speak.

"Chloë, we did nothing to prevent a child. I was hoping to make certain you came back to me. As to the wretch whose neck I accidentally broke for you, he was irreparably sterile and impotent - - Fox's dossiers are always very complete. Probably that's why Weaver was such a perverted mess, but it's no excuse for what he became. Never mind that. It's over and we are beginning. This is ours. Isn't it a love child's love child?" he teased.

He wanted to see the fire of spring come back into her eyes. Then he saw the power of his words in her, saw how her cheeks dappled in a glowing blush. He pulled her to her feet and felt how differently she came to him as he turned slowly with her in a little half dance, murmuring his pleasure.

"Is it healthy?"

"Yes."

"You know the gender. Are you going to tell me what we've made?"

"Not even if you guess."

"Let it be then," he said, laughing at her willfulness as he slowly danced with her to the sound of the wind.

"Once I was a boy here with selfish motives, but

unwittingly chinking this place together for you...and *you*..." He held her away from him and saw how the green phosphor burned. "You were close down in Skeel Valley, lying low and nursing your considerable brain."

"I was a strange little girl. Sometimes...sometimes I wanted to be you."

He held her face and ran his thumbs across her cheeks.

"You thought you were better qualified?"

She smiled. "No. I admired you so...and that's what happens."

"Black suns, I knew so little of you."

"It's just as well. I've forgotten to thank you for your special gift...the most unusual gift I've ever heard of...or received." Her face was teasing, mysterious.

"Shall I try to read your mind? Or have you read mine? You even know of my gift?"

She touched her cheek. "My tooth."

"Oh, that. Let me see. Ah, yes, lucky tooth. A very practical little wedding gift for my wife."

"For the woman with everything...except her tooth."

He carried her to the bed, put her down and saw that her thrilling laughter had dissolved into a frown.

"Don't keep things from me. You've seen what happens."

"You know that I have to finish my work," she revealed gently, carefully.

"Not there!" he answered with emphatic voice. "You'll soon have an elaborately fortified laboratory near Clamhill. Your old friend Doctor Neath has helped me with the design. There's also a clever glass-roofed house adjacent to that costly fortress,

which ought to please your aesthetic eye. You can sleep there or think there or stargaze...sometimes even entertain your husband. You can finish with your Meztas in the March, half-breed. My gift to you. Cart them all over to Clamhill and put your genius to work...that is unless you want the Jarl to wear out his men, his fleet, and himself making rescues.

"How amazingly good you are to me. I'm happy...so happy to have my work near you...and still very much in awe of you."

"No, don't be that. I'm selfish."

"I *will* go back to Immixia one day soon...to explore the lost history of me." She gave a thoughtful smile. "I have an aunt...and some others..."

"Invite them here then. It's easier, Chlöe."

"Yes...I could do that. Perhaps I will."

She lay back, watching him with searching eyes in which there flourished an extravagance of green that badly wanted tending. It was a fervent, sun-snaring green that could always bring light into his shadows.

He unwound the neck scarf, rubbed it across his cheek, then hung it over the bedstead, and looked at her with a faint grave smile. After a while he spoke, knowing that she would hear both a lingering strain of impulsive youth and a Jarl's guarded sense of the impermanent.

"I don't want to think about *one day*, or even tomorrow. We'll put tomorrow off until spring has come and gone...if it ever goes...never *our* spring. Now this temperamental mountain holds us...the March is sleeping. There's nothing left for us to do but keep each other."

"Warm," she added softly, with a voice and manner more

seductive than she could ever have intended. Still, she had seen the hunger come into his eyes, and he watched her face flush an irresistible crimson.

"Scientist, my Chlöe, you *are* shy." An irrepressible laughter welled up in him and burst forth.

He was surprised to find her bashful arms held out to him, the clever hands so eagerly extended, as if reaching for her cherished flames. Amidst the rich lightness he felt a sharp knife of grief for her sacrifice, and for the unborn child's heavy destiny. But the piercing was cauterized with sudden unspeakable joy, the dawning realization that his laughter had become her fire.