

The Quantum Rose

Catherine Asaro, 1999

I

Ironbridge

First Scattering Channel

Kamoj Quanta Argali, the governor of Argali Province, shot through the water and broke the surface of the river. She tilted her face up to the sky, a violet expanse punctured by Jul, the sun, a tiny disk of light so brilliant she didn't dare look near it. Curtains of green and gold light shimmered across the heavens in an aurora borealis visible even in the afternoon.

Her bodyguard Lyode was standing on the bank, surveying the area. Lyode's true name was a jumble of words from the ancient language Iotaca, what scholars pronounced as *light emitting diode*. No one knew what it meant, though, so they all called her Lyode.

Unease prickled Kamoj. She treaded water, her hair floating in swirls around her body, wrapping her slender waist and then letting go. Her reflection showed a young woman with black curls framing a heart-shaped face. She had dark eyes, as did most people in Argali, though hers were larger than usual, with long lashes that at the moment sparkled with drops of water.

Nothing seemed out of place. Reeds as red as pod-plums nodded on the bank, and six-legged lizards scuttled through them, glinting blue and green among the stalks. A few hundred paces behind Lyode, the prismatic forest began. Up the river, in the distant north, the peaks of the Rosequartz Mountains floated like clouds in a haze. She drifted around to face the other bank, but saw nothing amiss there either. Tubemoss covered the sloping hills in a turquoise carpet broken by stone outcroppings that gnarled out of the land like the knuckles of a buried giant.

Kamoj exhaled. What she felt wasn't unease exactly, more a sense of troubled anticipation. The afternoon hummed with life, golden and cool. Surely on this beautiful day she could relax.

Still, as much as she enjoyed swimming here, invigorated by the chill water and air, perhaps it was unwise. She had her position as governor to consider. Kamoj glided to the bank and clambered out, reeds slapping her body.

Her bodyguard glanced at her, then went back to scanning the area. Lyode suddenly stiffened, staring past Kamoj. Then she reached over her shoulder for the ballbow strapped to her back.

Surprised, Kamoj glanced back, across the river. A cluster of greenglass stags had appeared from behind a hill, each with a rider astride its long back. Sunrays splintered against the green scales that covered the stags. Each animal stood firm on its six legs, neither stamping nor pawing the air. With their iridescent antlers spread to either side of their heads, they shimmered in the blue-tinged sunshine.

Their riders were all watching her.

Mortified, Kamoj ran up the slope to where she had left her clothes. Lyode took a palm-sized marble ball out of a bag on her belt and set it in the sling on the targeting tube of her crossbow, which slid inside an accordion cylinder attached to the bow string. Drawing back the string and tube, she sighted on the watchers across the river.

Of course, here in the Argali, Lyode's presence was more an indication of Kamoj's rank, and her desire for privacy while she swam, rather than an expectation of danger. And indeed, none of the riders across the river drew his own bow. They looked more intrigued than anything

else. One of the younger fellows grinned at Kamoj, his teeth flashing white in the streaming sunshine.

"This is embarrassing," Kamoj muttered. She stopped behind Lyode and picked up her clothes. Drawing her tunic over her head, she added, "Thashaverlyster."

"What?" Lyode said.

Kamoj pulled down the tunic, covering herself with soft gray cloth. Lyode was still standing in front of her, with her bow poised. Kamoj counted five riders across the river, all of them dressed in copper breeches and blue shirts, with belts edged by feathers from the blue-tailed quetzal.

One man sat a head taller than the rest. He wore a midnight-blue cloak with a hood that hid his face. His stag lifted its front two legs and pawed the air, its bi-hooves glinting like glass, though they were a hardier material, hornlike and durable. The man riding it gave no indication he noticed its restless motions. His cowed head remained turned in Kamoj's direction.

"That's Havyrl Lionstar," Kamoj repeated as she pulled on her leggings. "The tall man on the big greenglass."

"How do you know?" Lyode asked. "His face is covered."

"Who else is that big? Besides, those riders are wearing Lionstar colors." Kamoj watched the group set off again, cantering into the folds of the blue-green hills. "Hah! You scared them away."

"With five against one? I doubt it." Dryly, Lyode said, "More likely they left because the show is over."

Kamoj winced. She hoped her uncle didn't hear of this. As the only incorporated man in Argali, Maxard Argali had governed the province for Kamoj when she was young and was shifting his role to that of advisor now that she had reached her adulthood.

Lionstar's people were the only ones who might reveal her indiscretion, though, and they rarely came to the village. Lionstar had "rented" the Quartz Palace in the mountains for more than a hundred days now, and in that time no one she knew had seen his face. Why he wanted a ruined palace remained a mystery, given that he refused all visitors. When his emissaries had inquired about it, she and Maxard had been dismayed by the suggestion that they let a stranger take residence in the honored, albeit disintegrating, home of their ancestors.

However, no escape had existed from the "rent" Lionstar's people put forth. The law was clear: she and Maxard had to best his challenge or bow to his authority. Impoverished Argali could never match such an offer: shovels and awls forged from fine metals, stacks of dried firewood, golden bridle bells, dewhoney and molasses, dried rose-leeks, cobberwheat, tri-grains, and reedflour that poured through your fingers like powdered rubies.

So they yielded -- and an incensed Maxard had demanded Lionstar pay a rent of that same worth every fifty days. It was a lien so outrageous, all Argali feared Lionstar would send his soldiers to "renegotiate."

Instead, he paid.

With Lyode at her side, Kamoj entered the forest. Walking among the trees, with tubemoss soft under her bare feet, made her more aware of her precarious position. Why had Lionstar come riding here today? Did their lands now also risk forfeiture to his wealth? She had invested his rent in machinery and tools for farms in Argali. As humiliating as it was to depend on a stranger, it was better than seeing her people starve. But she didn't think she could bear to lose any more to him, especially not this forest she so loved.

Drapes of moss hung on the trees and shadow-ferns attended their trunks. Far above, the branches formed a canopy that let only stray sunbeams reach the ground. Argali vines hung everywhere, heavy with the blush-pink roses that gave her home its name. Argali. It meant vine rose in Iotaca.

At least, most scholars translated it as rose. One insisted it meant resonance. He also

claimed they mispronounced her middle name, *Quanta*, an Iotaca word with no known translation. The name *Kamoj* came from the Iotaca word for *bound*, so if this strange scholar was correct, her name meant *Bound Quantum Resonance*. She smiled at the absurdity. *Rose* made more sense, of course.

Not all the "roses" in the forest were flowers, though. Camouflaged among the blossoms, puff lizards swelled out their red sacs. A shaft of sunlight slanted through the forest, admitted by a ruffling breeze, and sparkles glittered where the light hit the scaled lizards, the scale-bark on the trees, and the delicate scale-leaves. Then the ray vanished and the forest returned to its dusky violet shadows.

Suddenly a thornbat whizzed past her, its wings beating furiously. It homed in on a vine and stabbed its needled beak into the red sac of a puff lizard. As the puff deflated with a whoosh of air, the lizard scrambled away to safety, leaving the disgruntled thornbat to whiz on without its prey.

Powdered scales drifted across Kamoj's arm. She wiped off the shimmering dust, wondering why people had no scales. Most everything else on Balumil, the world, had them. Scaled needles fat with water nestled among the leaves, and roots swollen with moisture churned the soil. The trees grew slowly, storing water and converting it into energy as a bulwark against summer droughts and winter snows. Seasonal plants had other methods of survival. They lived only in spring and autumn, but their big, hard-scaled seeds could lie dormant for long periods, until the climate was to their liking.

If only people were as well adapted to survive. She swallowed, remembering the last winter, when nearly a fourth of Argali had died in its blizzards and brutal ices. Including her parents. Even after so long, that loss haunted her. She had been a small child when she and Maxard, her mother's brother, became sole heirs to the impoverished remains of a province that had once been proud.

Glancing at Lyode, Kamoj wondered if her bodyguard shared her concern about seeing Lionstar on Argali lands today. A tall woman with lean muscles, Lyode had the brown eyes and black hair common in Argali. Here in the shadows, the vertical slits of her pupils had widened until they almost filled her irises, like black pools. She carried Kamoj's boots dangling from her belt by their laces.

"Do you know the maize-girls that work in the kitchen?" Kamoj asked.

The older woman glanced at her. "Three children? Tall as your elbow?"

"That's right." Kamoj smiled. "They told me, in solemn voices, that Havyrl Lionstar came here in a cursed ship that the wind chased across the sky, and that he can never go home again because he's so loathsome the elements refuse to let him sail again." Her smile faded. "Where does all the superstition come from? Apparently most of Argali believes it. There is some story he's centuries old, with a metal face so ugly that if you look at it you'll have nightmares."

"I'm not sure." Lyode paused. "Legends often have their seeds in truth." With a dry smile, she added, "Though with the maize-girls, who knows? The last time I talked to them, they tried to convince me Argali is haunted. They think that's why all the light panels have gone dark."

Kamoj chuckled. "They told me that one too. They weren't too specific on who was haunting what, though." Legend claimed the Current had once lit all the houses in the Northern Lands. But that had been centuries past. In fact, in the North Sky Islands the Current had died thousands of years ago. The only reason one light panel still worked in Argali House, Kamoj's home, was because before Kamoj's birth, her parents had happened upon a few intact fiberoptic threads in the ruins of the Quartz Palace.

The threads were only one part in the panel, which used many components, all linked by cables and threads that extended into the walls of the house and to the few remaining sun-squares on the roof. No one understood anymore how any of it worked. Lyode's husband, Opter, had replaced the fiberoptics. Opter didn't know how the panel worked either, nor could he fix damaged components. But given undamaged parts, he had an uncanny ability to figure out how they fit into gadgets.

"Hai!" Kamoj grimaced as a twig stabbed her foot. Lifting her leg, she saw a gouge between her toes welling with blood.

"A good reason to wear your shoes," Lyode observed.

"Pah," Kamoj muttered. She enjoyed walking barefoot, but it had its drawbacks.

A drumming that had been tugging at her awareness finally intruded enough to make her listen. "Those are greenglass stags."

Lyode tilted her head. "On the road to Argali."

"Come on. Let's look." Kamoj started to run, then hopped on her good foot and settled for a limping walk. When they reached the road, they hid behind the trees, listening to the riders.

"I'll bet it's Lionstar," Kamoj said.

"Too much noise for five riders," Lyode said.

Kamoj grinned. "Then it's fleeing bandits. We should nab them!"

"And just why," Lyode inquired, "would these nefarious types be fleeing up a road that goes straight to the house of the central authority in this province, hmmm?"

Kamoj laughed. "Stop being so sensible."

Lyode still didn't look concerned. But she slipped out a ball and readied her bow.

Down the road, the first stags came around a bend. Their riders made a splendid sight. The men wore gold disk mail, ceremonial, too soft for battle, designed to impress. Made from beaten disks, the vests were layered to create an airtight garment. They never attained that goal, of course. Why anyone would want airtight mail was a mystery to Kamoj, but tradition said to do it that way, so that was how they did it.

On rare occasions, a stagman also wore leggings and a hood of mail. Some ancient drawings even showed mail covering the entire body, including gauntlets and knee boots, with ball bearings in the joints to allow for ease of movement, and a transparent cover over the face. Kamoj thought the face cover must be artistic fancy. She saw no reason for it.

Her uncle's stagmen gleamed today. Under their mail vests, they wore bell-sleeved shirts as gold as suncorn. They also had gold breeches and dark red knee boots fringed by feathers from the green-tailed quetzal. Twists of red and gold ribbon braided their reins, and bridle bells chimed with the pounding motion of their greenglass stags. Sunlight slanted down on the road, drawing sparkles from the dusty air.

Lyode smiled. "Your uncle's retinue is a handsome sight."

Kamoj didn't answer. Normally she liked watching Maxard's honor guard, all the more so because she was fond of the riders, most of whom she had known all her life, just as she was fond of her uncle. Maxard's good-natured spirit made everyone love him, which was why a wealthy merchant woman from the North Sky Islands was courting him despite his small corporation. However, today Maxard wasn't with his honor guard. He had sent them to Ironbridge a few days ago, and now they returned with an esteemed guest, someone Kamoj had no desire to see.

The leading stagmen were riding past her hiding place now, the bi-hooves of their mounts whipping up scale dust from the road. She recognized the rider in front. Gallium Sunsmith. A big man with a friendly face, Gallium worked with his brother Opter in a sunshop, engineering gadgets that ran on light, like the mirror-driven peppermill Opter had invented. Gallium also made a good showing for himself each year in the swordplay exhibition at festival. So when Maxard needed an honor guard, Gallium became a stagman.

Down the road, more of the party came into view. These new riders wore black mail, with purple shirts and breeches, and black boots fringed by silver feathers. Jax Ironbridge, the governor of Ironbridge Province, rode in their center. Long-legged and muscular, taller than the other stagmen, he had a handsome face with strong lines, chiseled like granite. Silver streaked his black hair. He sat astride Mistrider, a huge greenglass with a rack of cloud-tipped antlers and scales the color of the opal-mists that drifted in the high northern forests.

Still hidden, Kamoj turned away from the road and leaned against the tree with her arms crossed, staring into the forest while she waited for the riders to pass.

A horn sounded behind her, its call winging through the air. Startled, she spun around. Apparently she wasn't as well concealed as she had thought; Jax had stopped on the road and was watching her, the curved handle of a flight-horn in his hand.

Kamoj flushed, knowing she had given offense by hiding from him. Her merger with Jax had been planned for most of her life. He had the largest corporation in the northern provinces, which consisted of Argali, the North Sky Islands, and Ironbridge. Argument existed about the translation of the Iotaca word *corporation*: for lack of a better interpretation, most scholars assumed it meant a man's dowry, the property and wealth he brought into marriage. A corporation as big as Jax's became a political tool, invoking the same law of "Better the offer or yield" as had Lionstar's rent.

Ironbridge, however, had given Argali a choice. Jax made an offer Kamoj could have bettered. It would have meant borrowing every last bit of wealth owned by even the most impoverished Argali farmers, but besting the amount by one stalk of bi-wheat was all it took. Then she could have turned down the offer and repaid the loans. She had been tempted to try. But Argali was her responsibility, and her province desperately needed this merger with flourishing Ironbridge. So she had agreed.

Jax was watching her with an impassive gaze. He offered his hand. "It will be my pleasure to escort you back to Argali house."

"I thank you for your kind offer, Governor Ironbridge," she said. "But you needn't trouble yourself."

He gave her a cold smile. "I am pleased to see you as well, my love."

Hai! She hadn't meant to further the insult. Limping forward, she took his hand. He lifted her onto the stag with one arm, a feat of strength few other riders could have managed even with a child, let alone another adult. As he pulled her up, he turned her so she ended up sitting sideways on the greenglass, her hips fitted into the space in front of the first boneridge that curved over its back. Jax sat behind her, astride the stag, between its first and second boneridges.

The smell of his disk mail wafted over her, rich with oil and sweat. As he bent his head to hers, she drew back in reflex, before she could think. Although Jax showed no outward anger, a muscle in his cheek twitched. Taking her chin in his hand, he pulled her head forward and kissed her, pressing in on her jaw until he forced her mouth open for his tongue. When she tensed, he clenched his fist around her upper arm, holding her in place.

A rush of air thrummed past Kamoj, followed by the crack of a bowball hitting a tree and the shimmering sound of falling scales. Pulling away from her, Jax raised his head. Both the Argali and Ironbridge stagmen had drawn their bows and had their weapons trained on Lyode. Kamoj's bodyguard stood by the road, a second ball knocked in her bow, her weapon aimed at Jax.

All the stagmen looked uncomfortable, poised to return Lyode's fire, yet holding back. No one wanted to shoot Kamoj's bodyguard. The Argali stagmen had grown up with her and Gallium was her brother-in-law. The Ironbridge stagmen knew her as guardian of their governor's betrothed. However, neither could they ignore that she had just sent a bowball hurtling within a few hand spans of the two governors.

In a cold voice only Kamoj could hear, Jax said, "Your hospitality today continues to amaze me." Shifting his attention to Gallium Sunsmith, he spoke in a louder voice. "You. Escort Lyode back to Argali House."

Gallium answered carefully. "It is my honor to serve you, sir. But perhaps Governor Argali would also like to do her best by Ironbridge, by accompanying her bodyguard back."

Kamoj almost swore. She knew Lyode and Gallium meant well, and she valued their loyalty, but she wished they hadn't interfered. It would only earn them Jax's anger. She and Jax had to work this out. Although their merger was weighted in favor of Ironbridge, it gave control to neither party. They would share authority, she focused on Argali and he on Ironbridge. It

benefited neither province if their governors couldn't get along.

She spoke to Jax in a gentle voice. "Please accept my apologies, Governor Ironbridge. I will discuss Lyode's behavior with her on the walk back. We'll straighten this out."

He reached down for her injured foot, bending her leg at the knee so he could inspect her wound. "Can you walk on this?"

"Yes." The position he was holding her leg in was more uncomfortable than the gouge itself.

"Very well." When he let go, his fingers inadvertently scraped the gash, and she stiffened as pain shot through her foot. She held her silence and slid off the stag, taking care to land on her other foot.

As she limped over to Lyode, bi-hooves scuffed behind her. Turning, she watched the riders thunder up the road to Argali.

Jul, the sun, had sunk behind the trees by the time Kamoj and Lyode walked around the last bend of the road, into view of Argali House. Legend claimed the house had once been luminescent pearl, all one surface without any seams. According to the temple scholar, who could read bits of the ancient codices, Argali House had been grown in a huge vat of liquid, on a framework of machines called *nano-bots*, which were supposedly so tiny you couldn't see them even with a magnifying glass. After the house was complete, one was to believe the machines simply swam away and fell apart.

Kamoj smiled. The old scrolls were full of absurdities. Jax had shown her one in his library that claimed Balumul, the world, went around Jul in an "elliptical orbit" and rotated around a tilted axis. This tilt, and their living here in the north, was purported to explain why nights were short in summer and long in winter, fifty-five hours of darkness on the longest night of the winter, leaving only five hours of sunlight.

One year consisted of four seasons, of course: spring, summer, fall, winter. More formally, they called it the Long Year. A person could be born, reach maturity, wed, and have a family all within one Long Year. For some reason the scroll described this as a long time: hence the name. For an even more inexplicable reason, Kamoj's ancestors had partitioned the Long Year into twenty equal time periods they called short-years. So each season was five short-years in length. People rarely bothered to say "short-year," though. Instead, they used the word year to refer to the short-year and always used Long Year when they meant the time it took for all four seasons to pass.

Although Kamoj followed the convention, it made no sense to her. Why call it a "short-year." It wasn't an actual year, after all. The scroll claimed this odd designation came about because a short-year on Balumul was close in length to a "standard" year.

Standard for *what*?

Still, it was more credible than too-little-to-see machines. Whatever the history of Argali House, it was wood and stone now, both the main building and the newer wings that rambled over the cleared land around it. Huge stacks of firewood stood along one side, stores for the winter. Bird-shaped lamps hung from the eaves, rocking in the breezes, their glass tinted in Argali colors, rose, gold, and green. Their radiance created a dam against the purple shadows that pooled under the trees. Here in the road, a fluted post stood like a sentinel, with a scalloped hook at its top. A lantern, molded and tinted like a rose, hung from the hook, its warm glow beckoning them home.

They walked along the low wall that enclosed the house and entered the courtyard by a gate engraved with vines. Five stone steps ran the length of the house, leading up to a terrace, and five doors were set at even intervals along the front. The center door was larger than the others, stuccoed white and bordered by hieroglyphs painted in luminous blue, as well as the usual Argali colors.

As they neared the house, Kamoj heard voices. By the time they reached the steps, it had resolved into two men arguing.

"That sounds like Ironbridge," Lyode said.

"Maxard too." Kamoj hesitated, her foot on the first step.

Above them, the door slammed open. Maxard stood framed in the archway, a burly man in old farm clothes. His garb startled Kamoj more than his sudden appearance. By now her uncle should have been decked out in ceremonial dress and mail, ready to greet the Ironbridge party. Yet he looked as if he hadn't even washed up since coming in from the fields.

He spoke in a low voice. "You better get in here."

She hurried up the steps. "What happened?" Had Jax been more offended than she realized?

Maxard didn't answer, just moved aside to let her into the entrance foyer, a small room paved with tiles glazed white and accented by Argali designs.

Boots clattered in the hall beyond. Then Jax swept into the foyer with five of his stagmen. He paused in mid-stride when he saw Kamoj. Then he went past her, over to Maxard, towering over the younger man.

"We aren't through with this, Argali," Jax said.

"My decision is made," Maxard answered.

"Then you are a fool." Jax glanced at Kamoj, his face stiff with an emotion she couldn't identify. Shock? He strode out the door with his stagmen, ignoring Lyode.

Kamoj turned to her uncle. "What's going on?"

He shook his head, his face impossible to read. Lyode came up the stairs, but when she tried to enter the house, Maxard stretched out his arm, putting his hand against the door frame to block her way. He spoke with uncharacteristic anger. "What blew into your brain, Lyode? Why did you have to *shoot* at him? Of all days I didn't need Jax Ironbridge angry, this was it."

"He was mistreating Kamoj," Lyode replied.

"So Gallium Sunsmith says." Maxard frowned at Kamoj. "What were you doing, running around the woods like a wild animal?"

Kamoj stared at him. She always walked in the woods after she finished working in the stables. Maxard often came with her, the two of them discussing various projects for Argali or just enjoying each other's company.

Quietly she said, "Uncle, what is it? What's wrong?"

He blew out a gust of air. "Wait for me in the library."

She studied his face, trying to fathom what troubled him. No hints showed. So she nodded, to him and to Lyode. Then she limped into her house.

The centuries had warped the library door arch beyond simple repair. Kamoj leaned her weight into the door to shove it closed. Inside the library, shelves filled with codices and books covered the walls. The lamp by Maxard's favorite armchair shed light over a table there. A codex lay on the table, a parchment scroll made from the inner bark of a sunglass tree and painted with gesso, a smooth plaster. Glyphs covered it, delicate symbols inked in Argali colors. Kamoj could decipher none of the writing. But as she took responsibility for Argali, Maxard had more time for his scholarship. He was learning to read.

Behind her the door scraped open, and she turned to see her uncle. With no preamble, he said, "I've something to show you."

Puzzled, Kamoj accompanied him to an arched door in the far wall. The storeroom beyond had once held carpentry tools, but those were long gone, sold by her grandparents to purchase grain. Maxard fished a skeleton key out of his pocket and opened the tanglebirch door. Unexpectedly, oil lamps lit the room beyond. Kamoj stared past him -- and gasped.

Urns, boxes, chests, gigantic pots, finely wrought buckets: they all crammed the storeroom full to overflowing. Gems filled baskets, heaped like fruits, spilling onto the floor, diamonds that

split the light into rainbows, emeralds as brilliant as the eyes of a greenglass, rose-rubies the size of fists, sapphires, topazes, amethysts, cats-eyes, jade, turquoise. She walked forward, and her foot kicked an opal the size of a polestork egg. It rolled across the floor and hit a bar of metal.

Metal. *Metal*. Bars lay in tumbled piles: gold, silver, copper, bronze. Sheets of rolled platinum sat on cornucopias filled with fruits, flowers, and grains. Glazed pots brimmed with vegetables, and spice racks hung from the wall. Bracelets, anklets, and necklaces were everywhere, wrought from gold and studded with jewels. A chain of diamonds lay on a silver bowl heaped with eider plums. Just as valuable, dried foodstuffs filled cloth bags and woven baskets. Nor had she ever seen so many bolts of rich cloth in one place: glimsilks, brocades, rose-petal satins, gauzy scarves shot through with metallic threads, scale-velvets, plush and sparkling.

And light strings! At first Kamoj thought she mistook the clump thrown on a pile of crystal goblets. But it was real. She went over and picked up the bundle of threads. They sparkled in the lamplight, perfect, no damage at all. This one bundle was enough to repair broken Current threads throughout the village, and it was only one of several in the room.

Turning to Maxard, she spread out her arms, the threads clutched in one fist. "This is-it's-is this *ours*?"

He spoke in a cold voice. "Yes. It's ours."

"But Maxard, why do you look so dour!" A smile broke loose on her face. "This could support Argali for years! How did it happen?"

"You tell me." He came over to her. "Just what did he give you out there today?"

He? She blinked. "Who?"

"Havyrl Lionstar."

Hai! So Maxard had heard. "I didn't know he was watching."

"Watching *what*?"

"Me swimming."

"Then what?"

Baffled, she said, "Then nothing."

"Nothing?" Incredulity crackled in his voice. "What did you promise him, Kamoj? What sweet words did you whisper to compromise his honor?"

Kamoj couldn't imagine any woman having the temerity to try compromising the huge, brooding Lionstar. "What are you talking about?"

"You promised to marry him if he gave you what you wanted, didn't you?"

"*What*?"

Anger snapped in his voice. "Isn't that why he sent this dowry?"

Kamoj stared at him. "That's crazy."

"He must have liked whatever the two of you did."

"We did nothing. You know I would never jeopardize our alliance with Ironbridge."

Her uncle exhaled, his anger easing into puzzlement. "Then why did he send this dowry? Why does he insist on a merger with you tomorrow?"

Kamoj felt as if she had just stepped into a bizarre skit played out for revelers during a harvest festival. "He what?"

Maxard motioned at the storeroom. "His stagmen brought it today while I was tying up stalks in the tri-grain field. They spoke as if the arrangement were already made."

It suddenly became clear to Kamoj. All too clear. Lionstar didn't want the ruins of an old palace, or the trees in their forest.

He wanted Argali. All of it.

Strange though his methods were, they made a grim sort of sense. He had already demonstrated superiority in forces: many stagmen served him, over one hundred, far more than Maxard had, more even than Ironbridge. With his damnable "rent" he had taken the first step in establishing his wealth. He even laid symbolic claim to her province by living in the Quartz Palace, the ancestral Argali home. Any way they looked at it, he had set himself up as an authority to reckon with. Today he added the final, albeit unexpected, ingredient -- a merger bid so far beyond the pale that the combined resources of all the Northern Lands could never best it.

"Gods," Kamoj said. "No wonder Jax is angry." She set down the light threads. "There must be some way I can refuse this."

"I've already asked the temple scholar," Maxard said. "And I've looked through the old codices myself. We've found nothing. You know the law. Better the offer or yield."

She frowned. "I'm not going to marry that insane person."

"Then he will be fully within his rights to take Argali by force. That was how it was done, Kamoj, in the time of the sky ships. Do you want a war with Lionstar?" Dryly he added, "I'm not sure my stagmen even know how to fight a war."

"There must be some way out."

He spoke carefully. "The merger could do well for Argali."

She stiffened. "You *want* me to go through with it?"

He spread his hands. "And what of survival, Governor?"

So. Maxard finally spoke aloud what they obliquely dealt with in every discussion about the province. Drought, famine, killing seasons, high infant mortality, failing machines no one understood, lost medical knowledge, and overused fields: it all added up to one inescapable fact, the long slow dying of Argali.

With the Ironbridge merger, their survival might still be a struggle, but their chances improved. At worst, Jax would annex her province, making it part of Ironbridge. She intended to do her best to keep Argali, and continue as its governor, but if she did lose it to Ironbridge, at least her people would have the protection and support of the strongest province on this continent. Although Jax didn't inspire love among his people, he was an intelligent governor who earned loyalty and respect.

And Lionstar? He might have wealth, but that didn't mean he was a good leader. For all she knew he would drive Argali into ruin, famine, and death.

"Hai, Maxard." She exhaled. "I need time to consider this."

He touched her arm. "Go on upstairs. I'll send a maize-girl up to tend you."

"Lyode always tends to me."

"I need her elsewhere tonight."

She scowled. "You? Or Jax?" When he didn't answer, she swore. "I won't have my people flogged." She spun around to the door. "If you won't tell him, I will."

Maxard grabbed her arm, stopping her. Then he held up his other hand, a tiny space between his thumb and index finger. "Ironbridge is this close to declaring a rite of battle against us. I've barely thirty stagmen, Kamoj. He has over eighty, all of them better trained." He dropped his arms. "It would be a massacre. And you know Lyode. She would insist on fighting with them. Will you save Lyode and Gallium from a few lashes so they can die in battle?"

Kamoj swallowed. "Don't say that."

His voice quieted. "With the mood Ironbridge is in now, seeing you will only enrage him. He can't touch you, not yet, so Gallium and Lyode are the ones he will take his rage out on."

Kamoj gritted her teeth. Knowing Maxard was right made it no easier. She wondered, too, if

her uncle realized what else he had just said. Not yet. Softly she asked, "And after the merger, when the rages take Ironbridge? Who will pay the price of his anger then?"

Maxard watched her with a strained expression, one that reminded her of the wrenching day he had come to tell her the bodies of her parents had been found, frozen beneath masses of ice in a late winter storm. She had never forgotten it.

He spoke now in the same aching voice. "Does it occur to you that you might be better off with Lionstar?"

She rubbed her arms as if she were cold. "What have I seen from Lionstar to make me think such a thing?"

"Hai, Kami." He started to reach for her, to offer comfort, but she shook her head. She loved him for his concern, but she feared to accept it, lest taking shelter from the pain would make it harder to face her responsibilities when that shelter was gone.

Maxard had caught her off guard with his insight into her relationship with Jax. Her uncle had always claimed he delayed her merger to give her experience at governing, lest Ironbridge be tempted to take advantage of a child bride. Now she wondered if it might have also been because Maxard had a better idea than he let on about the difficult life she faced with Jax. As an adult she had more emotional resources to deal with it.

But Maxard hadn't guessed the whole of it. Kamoj knew from her own experiences what would happen to Lyode and Gallium. The only difference was that in this case Jax would have one of his stagmen mete out the punishment rather than taking care of it himself, in private, with only Kamoj as witness -- and recipient. She had never spoken of such incidents to Maxard, knowing that if he found out, he would have broken the betrothal no matter what price Argali paid. Kamoj couldn't let that happen. She would never set her personal situation over the survival of her people.

"Can you talk to Jax?" she asked. "Mollify him? Maybe you can keep him from hurting them."

"I will do what I can." He watched her with concern. "This will work out."

"Yes. It will." She wished she believed it.

After she left her uncle, she walked through the house, down halls paneled in tanglebirch, then up a staircase that swept to a balcony on the second floor. At the top of the stairs she looked out over the foyer below. The entrance to the living room arched in the right-hand wall, enough of the room visible so she could see a chandelier hanging from the ceiling like an inverted rose, flickering with candles. It reflected in the table beneath it, drawing gleams of green and blue from the polished tanglebirch.

Behind the table, a light panel glowed in the wall, the last working one in all the Northern Lands. When it failed, a thousand new light threads would do them no good. Even Opter Sunsmith couldn't fix a broken panel. The knowledge had been lost long ago, even from the Sunsmith line.

Kamoj turned and walked along the balcony to her room. She opened the door into a chamber warm with candlelight. It glowed on the parquet floors, worn furniture, and her old doll collection on the table, her one concession to sentimentality. Her bed stood in one corner, each of its four posts a totem of rose blossoms and fruits, ending at the top with a closed bud.

A voice spoke behind her. "Ev'ning, ma'am."

She turned to see Ixima Ironbridge, a young woman with a smudge of flour on one cheek. Jax had sent the maize-girl to Argali last year, so Kamoj could get to know her. That way, when Kamoj went to Ironbridge she would bring a familiar face with her, someone who already knew the province. The thoughtful gesture had both touched and confused Kamoj. How could Jax be so considerate one moment and so harsh the next?

Ixima spoke in her heavy Ironbridge dialect. "Shall I be a'helpin' you change, ma'am?"

"Thank you." Kamoj sat on her bed. As Ixima knelt to take off her boot, Kamoj said, "Can you treat cuts?"

"I donnee know." Ixima slid off the boot and peeled away the sock. Kamoj winced as the cloth ripped away from her toes. Her foot must have bled during her walk and then dried her sock to her skin. Lifting her foot, she saw dirt ground into the gash.

"I should soak it in hot water," Kamoj said.

"I donnee see how a'rubbun' it would help," Ixima said. "You rest, hai, ma'am? Tomorrow it be feeling better enough to scrub."

Kamoj knew she should treat the cut now. But she was tired and had much to consider. Besides, she always healed well. Tomorrow she would tend to it.

After Kamoj was settled in bed, the maize girl darkened the room and left, leaving one candle flickering on the window sill. Kamoj lay on her back, her hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling. If she refused the Lionstar merger, it would placate Jax but break the law. If Argali and Ironbridge combined forces, they would have an army almost equal to that of Lionstar. But if Lionstar attacked, Kamoj would have to send people she loved into a rite of battle, including Maxard and Gallium. A good chance existed they wouldn't come home.

She knew what she had to do. As she made her decision, she felt a sense of lightening. She had no way to guess what Lionstar intended, but no matter what happened, never again would Jax raise his hand or quirt to her. Never again would he use the lives and well-being of her people as a weapon against her.

It was a bitter victory, given what she had seen of Lionstar, but it was all she had.

II

Lionstar

Second Scattering Channel

Kamoj squinted at the mirror while the threadwoman fussed over her. She heartily disliked formal clothes. Leggings and a farm tunic were more comfortable. But today was her wedding and at one's wedding one wore a wedding dress.

This dress had the weight of tradition behind it, not to mention the weight of impractical amounts of cloth. Her mother and grandmother had also worn it. Dyed the blush color of an Argali rose, it fit snug around her torso and fell to the floor in drapes of rose-scale satin. Hand-made lace bordered the neckline and sleeves, and her hair fell in glossy black curls to her waist. The Argali Jewels glittered at her throat, wrists, and ankles, gold circlets designed like vines and inset with ruby roses. She hadn't expected ever to wear them. She had been on the verge of selling them, in fact, to buy grain threshers.

With tugs and taps, the aged threadwoman tightened the dress at the waist and tried to make it stretch to fit Kamoj's breasts. She cackled at her reluctant model, her eyes almost lost in their nest of lines. "You've no boy's shape, Gov'ner. You be making Lionstar a happy man, I reckon."

Kamoj glowered at her, but the seamstress was saved from her retort by a knock on the door. Kamoj limped across the room in her unfamiliar shoes, heeled slippers sheathed in rose scale-leather. She opened the door to see Lyode.

Her bodyguard beamed. "Hai, Kamoj! You look lovely."

"It's for my wedding," Kamoj said.

Lyode's smile faded. "Maxard told me."

Kamoj dismissed the seamstress, then drew Lyode over to sit with her on the couch. The older woman started to lean against the back of the sofa, but jerked when her shoulders touched the cushions and sat forward again.

Watching her, Kamoj said, "You've huge bags under your eyes."

"I had -- a little trouble sleeping last night."

Kamoj wasn't fooled. But Maxard must have mollified Jax to some extent; otherwise Lyode wouldn't have been able to move at all.

"How is Gallium?" she asked.

Gently Lyode said, "He's all right, Kami. We both are."

Kamoj crumpled her skirt in her fists. "I hate all this."

"Hate is a strong word. Give Lionstar a chance."

"Lyode -- "

"Yes?"

"About tonight ... " Although in theory Kamoj knew what happened on a wedding night, it was only as vague concepts. But she felt awkward asking advice on such matters even from Lyode.

"Don't look so dour." Lyode's face relaxed into the affectionate grin she took on at the mention of her own husband, Opter. "Weddings are good things."

Kamoj snorted. "You look like a besotted fruitwing." When her bodyguard laughed, Kamoj couldn't help but smile. "How will I know what to do?"

"Trust your instincts."

"My instincts tell me to run the other way."

Lyode touched her arm. "Don't judge Lionstar yet. Wait and see."

At sunset the Argali coach rolled into the courtyard, pulled by four greenglass stags and driven by a stagman. Shaped and tinted like a rose, it sat in a chassis of emerald-green leaves. Unlike Argali House, which had only legends attesting to its construction, the coach was inarguably one surface with no seams, glimmering like pearl. Its making was so long in the past, no one remembered how it had been done.

Watching from her bedroom window, Kamoj heard the door behind her open. She turned to see Lyode framed in the archway, the bodyguard dressed in her finest shirt and trousers, with her bow on her back.

"It's time to go," Lyode said.

Kamoj crossed the room without a limp. She felt nothing in her foot now: it had gone numb. She had soaked and cleaned the wound this morning, but it remained swollen. Normally she would have paid more attention, but she had too much else to think of now.

Maxard was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She smiled to see him. Today no lack of splendor would shame Argali. Her uncle's mail vest gleamed, a gold contrast to his black hair and eyes. He wore a suncorn shirt, wine-red suede breeches, and a belt made from green, gold, and red quetzal feathers. Green feathers lined the tops of his gold knee-boots, and a ceremonial sword hung at his side, its scabbard tooled with Argali designs.

As Kamoj descended the stairs, her uncle watched with a smile that showed both pride and sorrow. When she reached him, he said, "You look like a dream." His voice caught. "Just yesterday you were a child. When did all this happen?"

"Hai, Maxard." She hugged him. "I don't know." It was true. She had been a child; now she was an adult. Nothing separated the two. It gave her an inexplicable sense of loss. Why? Why should she want more time as a child?

She knew the stories, of course, of the rare child who took longer to reach adulthood. Rumor claimed Jax Ironbridge's youth had stretched out far longer than normal. At her age he had still been an adolescent, tall and gangly, with only the first signs of his beard. He continued to grow long past the age when most youths reached maturity. He came into full adulthood well after most men his age -- and by that time he was taller, stronger, and smarter than everyone else.

With Maxard and Lyode on either side, Kamoj left the house. A group of her friends had gathered in the courtyard, young women with rose vines braided into their black hair. They waved and smiled, and Kamoj waved back, trying to appear in good spirits.

Gathered around the coach, ten stagmen sat astride their mounts, including Gallium Sunsmith. A smudgebug fluttered into the face of one stag and the animal pranced to the side, crowding Gallium's greenglass. As the rider of the first animal pulled back his mount, his elbow accidentally bumped Gallium's back. Kamoj saw the grimace of pain Gallium tried to hide, just as Lyode had done when she sat back on the couch.

Kamoj's smile faded, lost to dismal thoughts of Jax. As she passed Gallium, she looked up and spoke softly. "My gratitude, Goodman Sunsmith. For everything."

He nodded, his face gentling. Lyode opened the coach door, and Maxard entered first, followed by Kamoj. Lyode came last and closed the door, shutting them into the heart of a rose. The driver blew on his flight horn, and its call rang through the evening air. Then they started off, bumping down the road.

The three of them sat in silence, at a loss for words. The coach rolled slowly, so the people walking could keep up with it. Even so, it seemed to Kamoj almost no time passed at all before it came to a stop.

The door swung open, framing Gallium in its opening. Beyond him in the gathering dusk, the golden face of the Spectral Temple basked in rays of the setting sun. Kamoj's retinue of stagmen and friends, and now many other villagers too, stood waiting in the muddy plaza before it.

Lyode left the coach first. Kamoj gathered up her skirts and followed, but in the doorway she froze. Across the mud and cobblestones, a larger coach was rolling into view. Made from bronze and black metal, it had the shape of a roaring skylion's head with wind whipping back its feathered mane. Every burnished detail gleamed. The eyes were emeralds as large as fists. Kamoj wondered where Lionstar found such big gems. Argali's jewel-master had checked and double-checked the ones in his dowry. They were real. Flawless and real.

As soon as the coach stopped, its door opened. Two stagmen came out, decked out in copper and dark blue, with cobalt diskmail that glittered in the sun's slanting rays. Sapphires lined the tops of their boots.

Then a cowled man stepped down into the plaza.

Kamoj shuddered. Lionstar towered over everyone else, easily the largest man in the courtyard. As always, he wore a blue cloak with a cowl pulled up over his head. Only black showed inside that shadowed hood; either he had a cloth over his face -- or he had no face.

Maxard took her arm. "We should go."

His touch startled her into motion. She descended from the coach, onto a flagstone that glinted with mica even in the purple shadows. Her heels clicked as she crossed the courtyard, stepping from stone to stone to avoid the mud.

The Spectral Temple, also called the Special Functions House, was a terraced pyramid with a staircase climbing its left side. Rays from the setting sun hit the stairs at just the right angle to make a snake of light curve down them to the statue of a starlizard's head at the bottom, creating a serpent of radiance and stone.

On the front face of the temple, a huge starlizard's head opened its mouth in a roar, forming an entrance. Its front four legs stretched out on the ground, its back legs were braced against the slanting wall, and its tail coiled around the base of the pyramid. As Kamoj watched, a sunray hit the lizard's crystal eyes and arcs of light appeared on either side of its head, an effect created by the temple's ancient architect to mimic the Perihelia spirits, sometimes called Sun Lizards or Jul Lizards, that guarded the temple.

True sun lizards appeared in the sky as partial halos of light on either side of the sun, like pale rainbows, with a long serpent's tail of white light extending out from them. Their favored time was near dusk, as the bright, tiny Jul descended to the horizon, scantily dressed in wispy clouds, while the sky overhead darkened to a deep, deep violet. During winter, when ice crystals filled the air, Perihelia and Halo spirits graced the heavens in arcs and rings, and even

appeared around the head of a favored person's shadow when it lay across a dew-covered expanse of tubemoss at dawn.

Lionstar's group reached the Jul Lizard first. He stopped under the overhang of its fanged mouth and waited, his cowled head turned toward Kamoj. She came up with her retinue and they stopped. After they had all stood that way for several moments, she flushed, wondering what Lionstar wanted. Didn't he know he should go in first?

One of Lionstar's stagmen spoke to him in a low voice. He nodded, then turned and entered the temple with his retinue. Relieved, Kamoj followed with her own people. No one spoke. She wondered if Lionstar could even talk. No one she knew had ever heard him do it.

Inside, sunset light trickled through slits high in the walls. Stone benches filled the interior, except for a dais at the far end, where a polished stone table stood. Decorating the table were carvings of Argali vine designs, those motifs known as *Bessel integrals* in ancient Iotaca. Genuine rose vines and ferns heaped the table, filling the air with fragrance, fresh and clean.

Around the walls, more garlands hung from statues of several Current spirits—the Airy Rainbows, the Glories, and the Nimbi. In the wall slits above the statues, light slanted through faceted windows with water misted between the double panes, creating spectral arcs of color. Music graced the air, from breezes blowing through fluted chambers on the ceiling, hidden within bas relief depictions of the Spherical Harmonic wraiths. Today it all seemed unreal.

As the retinues and villagers sat on the benches, Kamoj walked to the far end of the temple with Maxard at her side and Lionstar preceding them. The priestess, Airysphere Prism, waited by the flower-bedecked table. Taller than average, Airys had dark eyes and glossy black hair that fell to her waist.

When Lionstar reached Airys, he turned to watch Kamoj. At least she assumed he was watching. His cowl hid his face. Even when she reached him, she saw only darkness within that hood, perhaps a glint of metal.

Maxard bowed to him. "Argali welcomes you, Governor Lionstar."

Lionstar nodded. After an awkward silence, Maxard flushed, though whether from anger or shame at the implied insult in that silence, Kamoj didn't know.

Finally her uncle took her hands. "May the Current always flow for you, Kami."

She squeezed his fingers. "And you, dear Uncle."

Maxard swallowed. Then he let her go and left the dais, going to sit on the front bench with Lyode.

"It is done?" Lionstar asked.

Kamoj almost jumped. His voice was deep and resonant, with a heavy accent. On the word "is," it vibrated like a stringed instrument.

Airys blinked, the vertical slits of her pupils opening wide in the shadowed temple. With her large eyes and delicate features she looked almost ethereal herself. "Do you refer to the ceremony?" she asked.

"Yes," Lionstar said.

"It hasn't begun." She took a scroll from the table and unrolled it. Glyphs covered the parchment in starlight blue ink and Argali colors. She offered it to Lionstar, and he took it with black-gloved hands.

"Governor Argali," Airys said. "Give me your hand."

After Kamoj extended her arm, Airys took it and said, "In the name of Spectra Luminous I give this man to you." She turned. "Havyrl Lionstar, give me your hand." When he complied, Airys took a vine from the altar and tied his and Kamoj's wrists together, bedecking them in roses and scale-leaves. Looking up at Lionstar, she said, "You may read the contract now."

Kamoj waited for him to decline. No one ever actually read the contract. Only scholars knew how to read, after all, and only the most gifted knew ancient Iotaca. Most people

considered the scroll a fertility prayer. Kamoj had her doubts; Airys had managed to translate a few parts of it for her, and to Kamoj it sounded more like a legal document than a poem. She supposed lovers preferred to see matters in terms of moons and fertility, though.

In any case, the groom always returned the scroll. Then the wedding couple spoke a blessing they had composed themselves. Kamoj hadn't written anything and she doubted Lionstar had either, so they would simply go on with the ceremony.

Except they didn't. Lionstar read the scroll.

As his voice rumbled, indrawn breaths came from their audience. Kamoj doubted anyone in Argali had ever heard the blessing spoken at a merger, let alone with such power. Lionstar had a deep voice, with an unfamiliar accent and the burr of a vibrato. It also sounded slurred.

When he finished, the only sounds in the temple were the faint calls of evening birds outside.

Finally he said, "This ceremony, is it done?"

Airys managed to recover. "The vows are finished, if that is what you mean."

He gave her the scroll. Then he untied the vine joining his and Kamoj's wrists and draped it around Kamoj's neck so the roses spilled over her breasts. She stiffened, jarred by the break with tradition; they weren't supposed to undo the vine until they consummated the marriage. Before she had a chance to speak, he took her elbow, turned her around, and headed for the entrance, bringing her with him.

Murmurs came from the watchers, a rustle of clothes, the clink of diskmail. Belatedly Kamoj realized he had misunderstood: he thought the ceremony was over when it had hardly begun. But the rest was only ritual. The vows were said. Argali and Lionstar had their corporate merger.

They came out into a purple evening. It happened so fast Kamoj barely had time to catch her breath before they reached Lionstar's coach. Lionstar stopped, looking at something over her head, and she turned to see Maxard coming up to them, flanked by Lyode and Gallium.

Lionstar spoke to her uncle. "Good night, sir."

Kamoj wondered what he meant. Was "good night" a greeting or a farewell?

Maxard bowed to him. Lionstar nodded, then motioned to his men. As he raised his arm, his cloak parted and revealed his diskmail, a sapphire flash of blue. What metal he did use, to create such a dramatic color? One of his stagmen opened the coach door, and Lionstar put his hand on Kamoj's arm, with the obvious intent of passing her into the coach.

It was happening too fast. Kamoj balked, turning from Lionstar, and went over to Lyode. As she and Kamoj embraced, Lyode murmured, "You're like a daughter to me. You remember that. I will always love you." Her words had the sound of tears.

Kamoj's voice caught, muffled against her shoulder. "And I you."

Stepping back, Kamoj turned to Maxard. But before she had a chance to bid him farewell, Lionstar took her elbow and drew her toward the coach. She almost pulled away again, but hesitated. Antagonizing the man who had just taken over Argali would be a poor start to their merger. She gave Maxard a farewell glance and he nodded, his and her eyes both wet with unshed tears.

Then Lionstar passed her to one of his stagmen, who handed her up into the roaring lion. Its interior was somber, panelled in black moonglass wood and upholstered in dark leather. A window showed in the wall by her seat. Turning to watch Lionstar enter, she saw another window in the door behind him. Yet from outside, no windows had shown at all.

As a stagman closed the door, Lionstar sat next to her, his long legs filling the car. His cloak fell open, revealing ceremonial dress much like Maxard's, except in darker colors. The coach rolled forward, and Kamoj looked out the window, to catch a final glimpse of her home. But the "glass" was fading into a blank expanse of wood. Alarmed, she turned to look out Lionstar's window, only to find it had gone away as well.

With such a dark interior and no lamps, it should have been pitch black in the coach. But

light still filled it. She bit her lip, wondering where the luminance came from.

"Here." Lionstar tapped the ceiling. His voice had a blurred quality to it.

Puzzled, she looked up. A glowing white strip bordered the roof of the coach. It resembled a light panel, but made as thin as a finger and flexible enough to bend.

"That's what you were looking for, wasn't it?" he said. "The light?"

How had he known? "Yes."

He nodded, then reached into his cloak and brought out a bottle. Shaped like a curved square, it was made from dark blue glass with a gold top. He unscrewed the top, lifted the bottle into his cowl, and tilted back his head. After a moment he lowered the bottle and wiped his hand across whatever he had for a face. Then he returned the bottle to his cloak.

Kamoj blinked, catching a whiff of rum. Then Lionstar turned and slid his arms around her. With one black-gloved hand, he rubbed the lace on her sleeve, rolling it between his fingers. Then he folded his hand around her breast, under the vine of roses, and pressed his lips against the top of her head while he caressed her.

Embarrassed and flustered, Kamoj sat utterly still. But his hand soon stopped moving. In fact, after a few moments, it slipped off her breast and fell into her lap. His whole body was leaning on her now, making it hard to sit up straight. She squinted up at him, wondering what to do. While she pondered, he gave a snore.

Her new husband, it seemed, had gone to sleep.

She gave him a nudge. When he made no objection, she pushed him into an upright position. He lay his head back against the seat, his mail-covered chest rising and falling in a deep, even rhythm. Just as she started to feel grateful for this unexpected reprieve to absorb her situation, he tried to lie down again. The coach didn't have enough room for his legs, so he stretched out on the seat with his feet on the ground and his head in her lap. Then he went back to snoring.

Kamoj scratched her chin. Of all the possible scenarios she had imagined for their ride to the palace, this wasn't one of them. She stared at his cowed head in her lap, the hood lying across his face. Was he truly as hideous as everyone claimed?

For a while she resisted her curiosity. The longer he slept, though, the more the thought nagged at her. How would he even know if she looked?

Finally she could take it no more. She tugged on his cowl. When he made no protest and showed no sign of waking, she pulled more. Still no response from Lionstar. Emboldened, she brushed the hood back from his head -- and nearly screamed.

He had no face.

No eyes, no nose, no mouth. Just metal. His head was man-shaped, with the contours of a face, but instead of skin and human features, he had only silver scales.

"Hai," she whispered. She drew in a shakey breath. So. Now she knew.

As her pulse calmed, she took in more of his appearance. He had human hair. No, not human. It too had a metallic cast. Thick glossy curls spilled to his shoulders, a mixture of gold, bronze, and copper, with silver at the temples. It was glorious. She had never seen those colors, though. Some farmers in Ironbridge had yellow hair, but nothing like this multi-hued mane.

In fact, it fit his name almost too well. A remarkable coincidence, that someone named Lionstar happened to have such a leonine mane, like the skylions of the upper mountains, with their six-legged scaled bodies and feathered manes. Then again, maybe his ancestors adopted the name because such hair ran in his line. People had done stranger. She was named for a plant, after all, and the Current only knew what Quanta meant.

Kamoj brushed a finger over his curls. He kept on sleeping. At least she thought he was sleeping. How did one tell when a person had no eyes? In any case, he gave no evidence he disliked her touch. She slid her hand deeper into his curls. Hai. They felt as good as they looked.

As she stroked his hair, her fingertips scraped his face. The metal felt smooth under her skin. She ran her finger down to his jaw and pushed the scales.

His face slipped.

Kamoj jerked away her hand. When he still showed no sign of waking, she leaned over and peered at the metal. It had indeed moved. She pushed it again-and it crumpled, uncovering a stretch of skin.

A mask. He was wearing a *mask*. She almost laughed in her relief. She hadn't married a man with no face after all.

Sliding her finger along the mask, she peeled it away from his head. It came off like a flexible skin, revealing a face that was unusual, but human. He was nowhere near as old as rumor claimed, only about forty, perhaps a bit more. His features were handsome, with high cheekbones and a straight nose. His lashes lay long against his cheeks, in a lush gold fringe, real metal, soft enough so they probably didn't irritate his eyes, but still unlike human hair. His skin had a gold tinge. When she touched his face, though, the skin felt warm. Human. His lips were full. Sensual. She ran her finger along the lower one and it yielded under her touch.

His breathing sounded strained, and dark circles of fatigue showed under his eyes. She also smelled the rum more. The mask had helped hide the odor on his breath before, but now it filled the coach, mixing with the scent of the scale dust.

As his breathing grew more labored, Kamoj became alarmed. She spread the mask back over his face, but no matter how she placed it against his skin, she couldn't get it to stay.

Suddenly he moved, rolling onto his back to look up at her. He croaked words in a language she didn't understand and clawed at the mask. Dismayed, she pushed it into his hand. Before he could put it on, his entire body went rigid and he began to choke, his fingers clenched around the crumpled metal skin.

A siren pierced the air, coming from nowhere Kamoj could see. Frantic now, she pried the mask out of his fist and pressed it against his face again. Still it wouldn't stay.

The coach lurched to a stop so fast it threw both she and Lionstar onto the floor. The door slammed open and two stagmen jumped inside. One pulled Kamoj back out of the way while the other knelt by Lionstar. The second stagman had another mask in his hand, this one firmer, and translucent, with a tube connected to a metal cylinder. He set the mask over Lionstar's face and a hissing noise filled the coach.

Kamoj tried to pull away from the stagman holding her, but he wouldn't let go. She looked up and saw him staring at the mask she held. Then he called her a name, one she had never thought anyone would say to her. A stagman behind them opened his mouth to chastise the man who insulted her. Then he saw the mask she held and whatever he had meant to say died on his lips.

A groan came from the floor. Turning back, she saw Lionstar breathing from the new mask. The stagman gripping her arm relaxed, though not enough to let her pull away.

Lionstar sat up, holding the mask in place. When his man tried to offer assistance, the governor shook his head. So the stagman withdrew, stepping out of the coach. Lionstar stood up, one hand braced against the wall, bending his head so it didn't hit the roof.

He moved his mask aside and spoke to the man holding Kamoj. "Let her go, Azander."

"Sir, she took your breathing skin off," Azander said.

Lionstar waved the mask. "Curiosity's nay murder. Go'n. Drive us home."

"Yes, sir." As Azander backed out of the coach, he gave Kamoj a hard look. She recognized the warning. If she hurt Lionstar, Azander would see that she paid for it.

Within moments they were rumbling along the road again. Seated next to Kamoj, Lionstar leaned back and closed his eyes, holding the new mask over his face, with the metal cylinder at his side. She wondered if he really believed she had taken off his other mask out of curiosity, or if he suspected what Azander almost said, that his new bride had tried to murder him.

Sitting up again, Lionstar took out his bottle and fumbled with it, trying to open it one-handed. Finally he dropped the mask in his lap and used both hands to open the bottle. He drank deeply from it, his throat working as he swallowed.

When he finished, he handed Kamoj the empty bottle. "Put top back'n." Then he put his mask over his face again, holding it with one hand.

Kamoj replaced the top, wondering if he always drank this much. Maybe that was why he didn't care that he lived in the ruins of a palace.

The new mask covered only his mouth and nose, giving her a view of his eyes. They were large, and a remarkable color, dark violet. Red and violet, actually; they would have been beautiful if they hadn't been so bloodshot. Even stranger, though, were the pupils. Rather than vertical slits, his were round. Although odd, the effect wasn't unpleasant. In fact, it had a sense of "rightness" that puzzled Kamoj, an inexplicable familiarity.

Right now those unusual eyes were watching her. Lionstar pulled aside his mask. "Why'd do it?"

She knew what he meant. "I wondered what you looked like."

"You could have just asked."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it would hurt you."

He nodded. Then he lay his head back and closed his eyes. After a moment the mask fell out of his hand and into his lap.

"Governor Lionstar." Kamoj shook his shoulder. "Your breathing skin." When he opened his eyes, blinking at her, she gave him the silver mask. He tried pressing it into place, with no more success than she had managed earlier. He squinted at it, then flipped the metal skin over and tried again. This time it stayed in place, leaving his face a smooth sheen of silver, with black ovals for eyes.

"S better," he mumbled. He laid his head back and the ovals closed, taking away that last vestige of humanity.

III

Pacal

Scattering Kernel

They rode for an hour, Lionstar sleeping while Kamoj sat in bored silence. Finally the coach rolled to a stop. Azander opened the door and took in the scene, Lionstar dozing, Kamoj holding the empty bottle. The stagman didn't look surprised.

Leaning inside the coach, Azander shook Lionstar's shoulder. "Prince Havyrl. We be home."

Kamoj blinked at the archaic title. Prince? Of *what*?

Lionstar's eyes opened, black on silver. "What?"

"Home," Azander repeated. "You and your bride."

"Bride?"

"Yes, sir. Your bride."

"What bride?"

Azander tilted his head toward Kamoj. "The Governor of Argali."

"Oh. Yes. Of course." Lionstar sat up, rubbing his hand through his hair. "See to the stags."

"Yes, sir." Azander backed out of the coach.

Lionstar followed him out into the night, which was lit by a faint radiance. As Kamoj stepped down from the coach, he offered his hand. Taking it, she thought she felt callouses under his glove. That made no sense, though. A man of his power would hardly have the callouses of a farmer.

Then she turned around -- and froze in astonishment.

They were in the courtyard of the Quartz Palace. Gone were the crumbled ruins covered by tangled vines, briars, and roses. Now the rose-quartz palace gleamed, restored to its full beauty and more. Long and narrow, with a terrace that stretched its length, it had nine evenly spaced entrances. A tower reached up at each end, topped by red turrets. Bird-shaped lamps hung in the windows and from the eaves, making the walls glow. Above it all, the aurora borealis shimmered in the sky, curtains of gold and pink luminance undulating across the heavens.

"Sweet Airys," Kamoj whispered. "It's lovely."

"S'pretty," Lionstar agreed.

He took her elbow and led her toward the steps that went up to the terrace. The double doors in the center swung open and more radiance spilled into the night, backlighting three people. She recognized two as villagers from Argali, a man and woman, each of normal height, both dressed in servant's clothes.

The third person came out to meet them. Tall and gaunt, with a craggy face and short graying hair, the woman was like no one Kamoj had ever before seen. She wore a form-fitting gray suit made in one piece, with gray knee-boots. A patch on her shoulder showed an exploding star within a triangle.

She met them half-way down the steps. Lionstar nodded to her, and they all walked up the stairs together. Although the woman looked hale and fit, her breathing was growing labored, as if she had just run a race instead of walking only a few steps.

At the top of the stairs, Kamoj froze. A few paces away, a shimmer of light hung in the open doorway.

"S even nicer inside," Lionstar said, mistaking her hesitation.

No one else seemed bothered by the curtain of light, and Kamoj didn't want to look foolish. So she took a breath and walked with them through the shimmer. It clung to her like a soap bubble, sliding over her face, hair, and clothes.

The entrance foyer looked as she recalled, a small room with tiles on the floor enameled in Argali rose designs. Except now the tiles were whole and the walls smooth, each brick snug with its neighbors, none showing their former chinks and cracks.

Lionstar peeled off his mask and Kamoj tensed, afraid he would choke again. But no one else acted alarmed. In fact, she had never tasted such pure, rich air. It made her dizzy, almost euphoric.

The tall woman was breathing normally now. She asked Kamoj a question, but Kamoj had trouble with her heavy accent. The woman was speaking Bridge, Kamoj's language, but she used the same odd dialect as Lionstar. Like Lionstar, she also mixed in words from Iotaca.

The woman tried again. "Are you all right, Governor Argali?"

Kamoj stood up straighter, trying not to feel intimidated by the woman's unusual height. "Yes."

"She's fine." Lionstar waved his arm at the two Argali servants. "Jus' like them. Fine."

The woman glanced at him, then at the bottle Kamoj still held. She spoke to Lionstar in another language, her voice tense. Lionstar answered with a scowl, then turned away and took Kamoj's arm. He led her to an archway across the foyer, where another shimmer curtain hung. Kamoj held her breath as they walked through it, but nothing untoward happened.

The air in the Entrance Hall, on the other side, felt as pure as in the foyer. New panels of mellow sunglass wood covered the walls. She had never before seen the paintings Lionstar's people had hung here, scenes of the Argali countryside. He must have commissioned them

from the villagers, which meant he was supporting the Argali economy.

Then she saw the other additions to the hall. Light panels -- light panels! -- glowed near the ceiling.

Lionstar was watching her face. "'S good, yes?"

"Yes." She had never expected this generosity. He didn't even own this building he had refurbished. Then it occurred to her that perhaps it wasn't such generosity after all. He did own the palace now, as well as everything else that had belonged to her family. Including her.

They walked down the Entrance Hall, accompanied by the two servants and the tall woman. The hall ended at a gleaming ballroom that stretched to their right and left. Radiance from its chandeliers reflected off the walls and parquetry floor, yet she saw no candles within the chandeliers, only shimmers of light.

They crossed the width of the ballroom to another archway that opened into the Long Hall, which ran the length of the palace perpendicular to the Entrance Hall. Moonglass paneled its walls and a dark carpet covered the floor. Lamps set in rose-shaped molds glowed at intervals along the walls.

Lionstar set off down the hall, still holding Kamoj's arm. The tall woman easily matched his stride, but Kamoj and the servants almost had to run to keep up.

Lionstar didn't stop until they reached a door at the east end. Then he turned to the others. "You can go. I'll take her up."

The tall woman spoke. "Perhaps Kamoj would like to meet the staff. Look at the palace. Have dinner." Dryly she said, "Catch her breath."

"Who?" Lionstar asked.

"Kamoj," the woman said.

"Who's that?" he asked.

This isn't happening, Kamoj thought.

The woman stared at him. "Your *wife*."

Lionstar turned to her. "Kamoj? Is that your name?"

"Yes," Kamoj said.

"'S pretty," he said. "Like you."

"She hasn't even had a chance to unpack," the woman said.

"Unpack what?" he asked.

"Her suitcases. Trunks. I don't know." The woman looked at the two servants. "Whatever her belongings came in."

"She donnee have any, Colonel Pacal," the plump woman said.

The tall woman looked startled. Turning back to Lionstar, she said, "Saints above, Vyrl. Didn't you arrange for her things to be brought up?"

"If it hasn't been done," he growled, "then do it."

The woman blinked at him. Then she turned to Kamoj and spoke gently, as if Kamoj were a child instead of a grown woman. "Do you have things you would like? We can send someone down to Argali House in the morning."

Kamoj nodded. "Thank you. Lyode will know what to send."

"Lyode?" the woman asked. "Is that a person?"

Lionstar scowled. "Dazza, stop interrogating her."

Kamoj wished they would decide what to call one another. Was the tall woman Dazza or Colonel Pacal? Was Lionstar a governor or a prince? The tall woman had called him Vyrl. A shortened version of Havyrl, probably. Perhaps if she thought of him by a nickname, it would

make all this seem less intimidating.

Vyrl dismissed the servants and Dazza again, and this time he glared until they left. Then he pushed open the door. The staircase beyond spiraled up inside the tower at this end of the palace. Although the steps had been repaired, the rough stone was otherwise untouched. The only windows were slits high on the walls. No glass showed in them, just the light curtains.

They climbed three flights to a landing. Vyrl opened the door there and escorted her into a spare chamber only a few paces across, its stone walls polished but unadorned. Its inner door opened into a large, austere bedroom.

Kamoj had last seen this suite with snow drifted across its broken floor. Now the floor was whole, a smooth expanse of stone with no rugs. The walls were also bare stone, except for two crossed swords over the bed. No fire burned in the hearth, yet the room felt warm. The tanglebirch furniture was new: a solid desk, chairs, and a wardrobe against the far wall, all made from wood with blue and green highlights in scale patterns. The bed on the dais to their left had always been there, but now its posters were repaired and varnished, its covers and canopy new. In the wall next to it, a door stood ajar, revealing a corner of the bathing room. Everything was clean, fresh, and devoid of ornamentation.

One unexpected touch softened the decor; across the room, a curtain made from strings of sparkling beads hung in an archway.

Vyrl squinted at the room. "'S not so good for a wedding night, is it? Solar told me this."

"Solar?" Kamoj asked.

"One of the housemaids." Vyrl led her to the beaded archway. "She said she'd prepare a place for you." He pulled back the beads, moving aside for her.

Kamoj stopped, both charmed and awkward with his offer to let her enter first. Deciding it would be ruder to refuse his courtesy than to precede him, she walked into the small room.

She saw the difference immediately. This room felt warm in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. Tapestries softened the walls and the delicate sunglass furniture sparkled. The shutters across the room were open, revealing a stained glass window with a rose in its center. To her right, a comforter lay on the floor, and posts rose from each of its corners, totems like those on her bed at home. Kamoj wondered why they put the bedding on the ground. Then she remembered. This chamber had been a second bathing room. Vyrl's people must have filled the small pool with mattresses for her bed.

"This is all for me?" she asked.

"Can't be for me," Vyrl said. "I'd break those chairs if I sat in them."

She almost laughed, but held back, unsure if he meant it as a joke. Jax never joked about himself, a subject he considered of great weight.

Watching her, Vyrl smiled. It gentled his entire face, making him look like a farm boy. He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her into an embrace. "Ever since yesterday, I've been thinking about you. I still can't believe you agreed to this." Then he bent his head to kiss her.

Flustered again, Kamoj stood still while his pressed his lips against hers. The rum smell of his breath clogged her nose.

Vyrl lifted his head. "Is it that bad?" Wincing, he said, "I am as rude as Dazza suggests, yes? I'll go clean up." He tilted his head at a wardrobe against the wall. "Will it harm your dress to go there tonight? Tomorrow the housemaids can tend to it."

The wardrobe, an antique called the rose cabinet, gleamed now. Someone had even redone its carvings, and a mirror bordered with frosted vines hung on one door.

"Camber?" Vyrl asked.

It took her a moment to realize he meant to say her name. "Kamoj," she said, too disconcerted to stop the correction before it came out of her mouth. Too late, she realized what she had done. Tensing, she started to raise her arms, to shield her face.

But Vyrl didn't hit her. Instead he reddened, as if embarrassed. "My sorry, water sprite. I'm

terrible with names." Taking her shoulders, he kissed her again. "Don't go away." Then he spun on his booted heel and strode out of the room. The bead curtain swung in his wake, clinking and sparkling.

Kamoj blinked, even more unsettled now. She pushed her hand through her hair, mussing the vine of roses that hung around her neck. Then she went to the curtain and looked out. The main bedroom was empty, but she heard water running in the bathing room. She slipped off her shoes so she could walk without being heard. As she limped to the entrance, pain stabbed her heel. Crammed in her shoe, her foot had gone numb, but now that she had freed it, the wound began to hurt again.

Under her push, the foyer door swung open as smooth as oil on glass. She crossed the entrance chamber and edged open the outer door.

Guards.

Two stagmen stood posted on the landing, Azander by the door and another man several paces away by the wall. She had seen the arrangement before, with Jax's bodyguards outside his room when he stayed at Argali House.

Azander looked down at her. "Be there a problem, Gov'ner?" Although his accent wasn't as thick as an Ironbridge dialect, it wasn't pure Argali either.

"Nothing, thank you." She closed the door, uncertain herself what she had wanted. Why did they guard Vyrl in his own bedroom? To ensure she did him no harm? That seemed rather silly, given his size and strength compared to hers, especially now that he didn't need his mask. Besides, they were outside and she was in here. Perhaps they were there to keep her from leaving.

She returned to her room and undid her dress, letting it fall in a heap of satin around her feet. It left her standing in her wedding silks, a translucent pink underdress that came to her knees and pink stockings held up by lace garters. Lyode had claimed such underclothes would evoke pleasant reactions from her groom. Kamoj didn't see why, but she had figured it was worth a try.

She scooped up her dress -- and nearly passed out when she stood up. Black spots floated in her vision. The air was too thick, so rich it made her giddy. She swayed, waiting until her head cleared. Then she put away her clothes in the rose cabinet.

Feeling self-conscious, she sat on the bed and sank into its billowy comforter. It ... it was hard to keep her eyes open. She lay down and let them close, just for a moment.

IV

Stained Glass Moons

Eigenstate Interactions

A crash woke Kamoj. She sat bolt upright, trying to fathom her surroundings. As she came more fully awake, she remembered. She was at the Quartz Palace.

Groggy from sleep, she got up, went to the window, and pushed open the stained glass panes, hoping the night air would clear her head. Outside, the East Sky Mountains slumbered under their carpet of trees.

Three of Balumil's six moons were visible. The Elder Brother shone high in the sky, almost full, casting blue light over the world. The Wild Stag made a ragged green shape just above the trees, lagging behind his brother. For every four times the Elder Brother crossed the heavens, the Wild Stag only managed three. The Brother always presented a serene face to Balumil, passing with regular precision through his phases. The Wild Stag knew no such civilized behavior. Chaotic and unpredictable, he changed both shape and size as he tumbled through the heavens, varying from an uneven disk to a squashed sausage.

The auroras were quiescent, making it one of the rare times Balumil's faint ring showed in the sky. Kamoj could just make out the gold thread curving up from the horizon in the southeast and back down in the southwest. The gibbous disk of the Shepherd Moon glistened pink above the ring. From the positions of the moons, she guessed she had slept seven hours. Dawn was still a long time away: in mid-autumn the days split evenly, thirty hours of darkness and thirty of light. During this season, she usually slept twice at night, once during the hours after sunset and then again in the hours before dawn.

A puffbug flew against the shimmer curtain in the window and stuck. With a frenzied beating of its scaled wings, it freed itself and trilled off into the night, its golden puff vibrating as it sang. Curious, Kamoj pushed her hand through the shimmer. The curtain stretched along her arm like a film. When she pulled her arm back inside, the shimmer clung to her skin, returning to its original shape.

Kamoj closed the window. So odd. For all the beauty Vyrl had restored to her ancestral home, he also brought these strange changes.

Where was Vyrl? The fountain still gurgled in the bathroom. What if he had passed out and fallen in the water? Azander already suspected her of foul play against her husband, and many people knew she had dreaded this merger. If something happened to Vyrl, she was the obvious suspect.

Kamoj limped into the main bedroom and went to the bathing room. The door stood ajar, but no one answered her knock. She nudged it all the way open, revealing a chamber larger than hers, though still smaller than the main bedroom. A pool filled most of it, tiled in pale blue squares enameled with roses. In its center, the sculpture of a rose opened to the ceiling. She remembered crawling into that bowl as a child and playing with dried leaf-scales that had drifted into it. Now water surged out of the fountain and cascaded down its sides.

A larger-than-human statue stood at the corner of the pool, the figure of a quetzal, that bird named for a mythical creature on a mythical world no one had ever seen. This statue was actually a great stone chair, its scaled head raised high, its back designed from its feathered wings, its upper legs as armrests, its middle legs encircling the seat, and its lower legs as the base of the statue, along with its glorious feathered tail.

Sprawled in the chair, a naked Vyrl was sound asleep.

Kamoj blushed. She didn't know whether to stay or leave. She saw what had caused the crash that woke her. Blueglass shards from a shattered bottle lay scattered around the base of the quetzal. The bottle must have slid out of Vyrl's hand, probably resting on an edge of the statue, gradually slipping, until it fell. His legs were braced against a ridge in its base, his muscles tense even in sleep. It was apparently all that kept him from sliding into the pool.

Picking her way through the glass, Kamoj went to Vyrl. She couldn't stop staring at him, at his broad shoulders and chest, his narrow hips, his long legs, all well-muscled, his skin flushed with health, his magnificent hair tousled around his handsome face. The lamp light made his metal lashes glitter. For all her attempts to imagine his appearance, it had never occurred to her that he might be beautiful.

But did he always drink this way? She thought of Korl Plowsbane in the village, old before his time, wandering with his bottle. Kamoj balked at believing the same of Vyrl. Even if he was like Korl, he couldn't have been drinking that heavily for long. He seemed too healthy. Perhaps he had simply been edgy today over the impending merger.

Still, what she had so far seen didn't look auspicious. She inhaled, letting her nostrils widen so their membranes captured every stray scent under the odor of rum. She caught traces of trees and ferns, a hint of sun on scale-leather, even a lingering trace of Vyrl's disk mail. It all mixed with a strong soap smell and another scent harder to define, a masculine smell she liked. Drawn by Vyrl's scent, she stopped closer and rubbed her fingers along the knuckles of his hand where it lay on his thigh.

"Higher," he said drowsily.

Kamoj snatched back her hand. He was smiling at her, his eyes half open.

She flushed. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He sat up straighter, rubbing his eyes. "How long have I been in here?"

"A few hours."

"Ah." His gaze wandered over her body. Mortified, Kamoj realized she was wearing nothing but stockings and a translucent underdress. Then again, given his "clothes," she was overdressed.

Vyrl grinned. "You look beautiful." He slid out of his chair, and she jumped back, losing her balance as she put her weight on her injured foot. Teetering on the edge of the pool, she flailed her arms.

With unexpected grace, Vyrl slid out of the chair and caught her around the waist. Holding her bent over his arm, he leaned down to kiss her. Startled, Kamoj just stared up at him.

He stopped, then straightened up, bringing her with him. "Don't you ever smile?"

"Well -- yes. Of course."

Vyrl stepped away from the pool. "Maybe we should -- *ah!*" He lifted his foot and pulled a shard of glass out of his heel. Blood welled up from the cut. With a grimace, he stuck his foot in the water and swirled it around until the blood washed away. His graceful way of moving made her think of a greenglass stag.

He smiled. "Either that's a compliment to me or an insult to the greenglass, I'm not sure which."

"How do you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Know my thoughts."

"I don't." He took her hand. "Come on. Let's go somewhere with less glass."

They picked their way through the shards and went into the main bedroom. Although he walked reasonably well, several times he put one foot down on the other and stumbled. When they reached the dais with his bed, he stopped, said, "We should do this right," and hefted her up into his arms.

Hai! The last thing Kamoj wanted was a half-drunk man carrying her up stairs. "It's all right," she said. "I can walk."

He started up the dais. "You hardly weigh anything."

They made it to the top with no mishaps, but then he tripped. He took a huge step forward, lunging for the bed, and tossed her across it as he lost his balance. She hit the mattress with a thud, pillows tumbling around her head, and Vyrl landed on top her. Her breath wumped out with a muffled "oomph."

"Ai," Vyrl muttered, rolling off her. "My sorry, Chamois."

This time she was too flustered even to think of correcting the name. When he pulled her into his arms, she stuttered, "Maybe you should, uh, call a healer." She knew she was talking too fast, but she couldn't stop. "For your -- for your, you know. Your foot."

"My foot?" He smiled at her. "Why?"

"It's just, mine swelled -- Vyrl! What are you doing?"

"Looking at my beautiful wife." As his hands moved, he slid lower along her body. Then he closed his mouth around her breast and suckled her through the glimsilk of her underdress.

Kamoj flushed, blinked, said, "Oh, my," cleared her throat, and coughed. Then she sighed and put her hands in his hair, tangling her fingers in his curls.

Some time later she murmured, "You're different than I expected."

He came back up, cradling her in his arms. "How is that?"

Too late, she realized how her answer would sound: *I thought you would be cruel.* She tried to hide the thought, imagining a blanket to cover it. "You're younger."

Vyrl grinned. "Such sweet words." He fingered the garter that held up her stocking. Then he sat up and tugged the lacy ring off her leg. Setting it on his palm, he squinted at it as if it were another life form. "It's pretty," he said. "But who'd ever think to make such a thing?"

"I don't know," Kamoj admitted. Lyode had given it to her.

Vyrl set the garter on the bed. Then he touched her thigh where the garter had held up her stocking. "So soft ... " Taking her stocking by the toe, he pulled it off through the gold circlet around her ankle. "And soft here -- saints almighty, what is that?"

She wished he would go back to showing her what was soft. "What?"

Vyrl peered at the sole of her foot. "This is serious." He lay on his back and stretched out next to her, reaching his arm out to a tanglebirch stand by the bed. He so distracted Kamoj, she barely noticed him press a panel on the nightstand.

A drowsy voice came out of the air. "Colonel Pacal here."

"Hai!" Kamoj sat bolt upright and clamped her arms over her breasts, looking around for the owner of the voice.

"I need you up here," Vyrl said to the air.

The woman suddenly sounded awake. "On my way."

"For flaming sakes," Vyrl said. "Don't say it like that."

"Like what?" the woman asked.

"Like 'What has he done to that poor girl?'"

"Is she all right?"

"Her foot is hurt."

"I'll be right there."

"All right. Out." Vyrl pushed the panel again.

After the room remained silent for several moments, Kamoj's pulse calmed. "Who was that?" she asked.

"Dazza." Vyrl drew her back down next to him. "My doctor."

"What is a doctor?"

He tugged apart her arms and pulled them around his waist so she was hugging him. "Healer."

"But where is she? We're the only ones here."

Kissing her, he murmured, "She's coming."

After several moments of discovering that she liked kissing Vyrl far more than she had ever liked kissing Jax, Kamoj moved her lips to his ear and spoke shyly. "If someone is coming up here, shouldn't we get dressed?"

"Ai ... " He sighed. "I guess so."

While Kamoj sat up, pulling her dress into place, Vyrl went to the wardrobe across the room and took out a blue glimsilk robe with iridescent green and gold highlights. As he was putting it on, a knock came from the entrance foyer. Tying his sash, he crossed the room and opened the door.

Dazza stood outside in rumpled trousers and a shirt, her hair tousled as if she had just pulled herself out of bed. She had something in her hand, Kamoj wasn't sure what. A large black book? As the doctor entered the suite, she glanced at Kamoj, at the stocking on the bed, and at Vyrl. Then she reddened. It didn't surprise Kamoj that the colonel looked like she wished she were someplace else.

"It's her left foot," Vyrl said.

While Vyrl leaned against the bedpost with his arms crossed, Dazza sat on the bed and

lifted Kamoj's foot. Her awkwardness vanished as she focused on the problem. "Did you treat this cut?" she asked Kamoj.

"I soaked it in water," Kamoj said.

Dazza looked up at her. "Right away?" When Kamoj shook her head, the doctor said, "If you ever get a cut like this again, clean it as soon as you can." She set down Kamoj's foot and opened her "book." Its top lifted like a box, revealing tubes and squares. When Dazza touched a small square, ghost pictures appeared above the box, rotating in the air, each with a different view of a woman's body. Red and blue lines veined one, another showed a skeleton, and a third internal organs. Kamoj had heard tales of how the ancients made ghosts dance this way, but until now she had never believed them.

Dazza studied symbols flickering on the rectangles on her box. "You're a healthy young woman." She snapped a featherless black quill off her book and bent over Kamoj's heel as if she were going to write on it.

Kamoj jerked away her foot. "What are you doing?"

"Numbing the area." With a gentle touch, Dazza tugged back her foot. "So it won't hurt when I drain the wound."

Although Kamoj found that hard to believe, the pain did indeed recede after Dazza wrote on her heel with her quill. The doctor kept working, though Kamoj couldn't see what she was doing.

"Gods," Vyrl said. "That's a bad one."

Intent on her work, Dazza said, "If we hadn't caught it in time, she could have lost the foot."

Kamoj blanched. No wonder it had hurt so much when Jax jabbed it.

"Kimono?" Vyrl said. "Are you all right?"

Dazza made an exasperated noise. "Saints above, Vyrl. Her name is Kamoj."

He reddened. "My sorry, Kamoj."

Smiling, she said, "It's all right."

Dazza withdrew her quill, catching drops of blood from its tip with her finger. She cleaned Kamoj's heel with a white mesh and then removed a new quill from the box. When she pressed a knob on it, a spray came out of its tip and coated Kamoj's sole.

"The nanomeds will aid the healing," Dazza said. "Then they'll dissolve in your bloodstream."

"Non-muds?" Kamoj asked. That made no sense.

"Nanomeds," Dazza said. "Each has an active moiety linked to a picochip -- " She stopped, watching Kamoj's face. Then she said, "They're like machines, but so small you can't see them."

"Nanobots?" Kamoj asked.

"Say again?" Dazza asked. "I have trouble with your accent."

"She said nanobots," Vyrl said. "She's speaking Iotic."

Kamoj stared at him. He understood Iotaca? Then again, he had read the contract scroll at their wedding, which was written in pure Iotaca. Maybe he could clear up the mystery of what the blasted thing said.

Dazza, however, also looked puzzled. "Why do you say it that way, as if she used a different language for 'nanobot'? Everything we've said is in Iotic."

Vyrl shook his head. "You and I may be speaking Iotic, but the people here don't. Or not pure Iotic. Their 'Bridge' language is a dialect."

It would never have occurred to Kamoj to describe Bridge as a dialect of Iotaca. The differences seemed too extreme to call them two forms of the same language. But then, to the people of the Northern Lands *any* change was extreme.

"Nanobot is a word from the temple language," Kamoj said.

"I haven't heard enough of your temple language to be sure," Vyrl said, "but I think it's what we call classical Iotic. That contract I read at the ceremony was written in it. What Dazza and I are speaking now is modern Iotic."

Dazza regarded him with curiosity. "You speak the classics?"

"I learned them when I was a boy," he said.

The doctor looked impressed. "You must have had a good education."

He shrugged. "There were no schools where we lived, so my parents brought in tutors from offworld."

Kamoj wondered what he meant by *offworld*. Whatever it was, she too found the result impressive. "I can pronounce words and phrases in Iotaca," she said, "but I don't understand it all. Like *nanobot*. I know the word but not the meaning."

"Do you know what 'molecule' means?" Dazza asked. When Kamoj shook her head, Dazza said, "It's like a tiny machine. A nanobot is designed for a specific duty. Different types have different duties. The ones we carry in our bodies, that help make us healthy, we call nanomed. Each one has a picochip attached to it, a quantum computer." She paused. "Think of it as a brain. The picochip tells the nanobot what to do and how to make more of itself. If you put a lot of them together, their chips combine into a what we call a picoweb. A bigger brain."

Kamoj blinked. "You put all that in my foot?"

A smile gentled Dazza's face. "I did indeed. Three types of nanomed, in fact. Two help ferry nutrients and structural materials to the wound and maintain your physiological balance while you heal. The third catalyzes molecular repair processes."

"Catalyze?" Kamoj asked.

"Helps them go faster."

"Is she going to be all right?" Vyrl asked.

"She'll be fine by tomorrow." Dazza snapped her quill into her box. Concentrating on her displays, the doctor said, "She should stay off that foot for the rest of the night, however."

Vyrl started to speak, then just smiled. Kamoj flushed. Walking clearly wasn't what he had in mind for the rest of the night.

Dazza closed the lid of her book-box and looked up at Vyrl. "Did you talk to Azander after you arrived?"

"Not really," Vyrl answered. "Why?"

"He said you were followed by Ironbridge stagmen."

"Ironbridge? Why?"

"Azander seemed to think you would know."

"I've no idea," Vyrl said.

His response disquieted Kamoj. Ironbridge was nothing to ignore. What was Jax up to?

Watching her, Vyrl sat on the bed. "What is it, water sprite? What troubles you about Ironbridge?"

Dazza drew in a sharp breath. Startled, Kamoj glanced at her. The colonel had the look of a healer whose patient had just showed signs of a recovery the healer had feared would never happen. It made no sense to Kamoj. Vyrl wasn't sick, at least that she could see. Except for the rum. But he wasn't drunk now, and all he had done was ask her about Ironbridge.

He hadn't noticed Dazza's reaction. Intent on Kamoj, he said, "Talk to me."

"It is forbidden," Kamoj answered.

"To talk to me?"

"For me to talk of Ironbridge."

"Why?"

"Because you and I have a dowered merger."

"Why does that make a difference?"

She wasn't actually sure why tradition forbade discussing other bid candidates with the winner of a hostile merger. Rules changed in situations like this, when the balance of power tipped so far in favor of one party. "Hostile" was probably the operative word; if she spoke about Ironbridge she could aggravate Vyrl and so bring harm to herself, Argali, and Ironbridge.

"It is forbidden," she repeated.

Vyrl glanced at Dazza with an expression that clearly said: *Can you do something with this?*

Dazza considered her. "If Prince Havyrl gives you permission to speak about Ironbridge, can you do it?"

Vyrl made an exasperated noise. "She doesn't need my permission to talk."

Kamoj looked from Vyrl to Dazza, at a loss to understand the strange hierarchy of authority here.

Dazza tried again. "Can you talk to me about it?"

"No," Kamoj said.

"Who can we ask?"

Who indeed? Maxard, perhaps. He hadn't married Vyrl. He was less likely to incur Lionstar wrath by talking about Kamoj's relationship with another man.

"My uncle," Kamoj said.

"We can send someone to Argali tomorrow." Vyrl grimaced. "Which'll be forever with how long the nights here last."

Kamoj wondered what he meant. Nights weren't long in autumn, not compared to winter, when snow covered the world and blizzards roared down from the North Sky Islands.

Dazza was watching her. "This is about your customs, isn't it? All of you here, you're afraid of showing disrespect. That's important. Respect. To custom, to authority, and to the land."

Relief settled over Kamoj. Dazza understood. "Yes."

Vyrl blinked at the doctor. "Where did you get all that?"

With a scowl, Dazza said, "From talking to your ever-so-patient butler the last time you went riding during one of your binges. I wanted to know why no one stopped you."

"Don't start with me, Dazza."

"Why? Because you happen to be more sober now than you've been in weeks? You're going to kill yourself."

Vyrl ignored the comment. "What did my butler tell you?"

Dazza tilted her head at Kamoj. "They all feel that way. I think they're genetically engineered to obey authority. I've never known such a docile, cooperative people."

"They have armies." Vyrl paused. "If you can call thirty farmers who practice ritualized swordplay every now and then an army."

Kamoj wondered why he found that strange. An incorporated man's stagmen rode in his honor guard when needed and otherwise worked to support their families. Ironbridge had the only army that trained all year round. Only Jax could afford to pay a good wage in every season.

Given what she had seen in the past two days, though, it wouldn't surprise her if Vyrl had his men training all year too, while he supported them at a rate ten times greater than anyone

else without even realizing it. Most of his staff and stagmen obviously came from Argali. She and Maxard employed the best in the village, so Vyrl must be drawing from the outlying hamlets, which were even more impoverished. By hiring locals instead of his own people, he had been supporting her province even prior to their merger.

"Their 'wars' are more like arguments," Dazza was saying. "In the rare instances when they do fight, it's a ritualistic ceremony. Ironbridge is the only province with real calvary or troops, and they're more of a police force. I doubt you could convince these people to defy authority even if you paid them to do it."

Kamoj blinked. What an odd notion. Why would anyone pay them to be defiant?

Vyrl smiled at her. "They wouldn't. It was just a manner of speech." He didn't see Dazza's startled look; by the time he turned back to the colonel, her face had resumed its normal mien.

"I'll send someone down tomorrow morning to talk to Maxard Argali," he told her. "See if we can untangle all this."

"I think that's a good idea." Dazza packed up her book. She smiled at Kamoj, gratitude on her face. Why? Kamoj saw nothing she had done to make the doctor grateful.

After Dazza left, Vyrl lay back down on the bed. The bags under his eyes had darkened again.

"You look tired," Kamoj said.

"Just a headache. I should have asked Dazza for something." His scowl came back. "But then I would have to listen to her harp on 'my drinking.' Tell me she can 'treat' that too. As if I have a problem. It's ridiculous. I have a few drinks, I go to sleep, I'm fine."

Kamoj knew he wasn't fine. But she had no idea what to say. All she could think of was, "I can rub your head."

"That would be nice, Kamoj." He paused. "Is that right? Kamoj?"

"Yes." She drew his head into her lap. As she massaged him, he sighed and closed his eyes.

After a while he said, "What you said before, about us having a 'dowered merger' -- what does that mean exactly?"

"Merger is perhaps not the best word." It implied a more balanced partnership. "Your corporation absorbed Argali."

He opened his eyes. "My what?"

"Your corporation. It was far too big for us to best."

He sat up, facing her. "I don't understand. It was a dowry. I know that's the word. Our anthropologists double-checked. The dowry is the property a man brings to his wife at marriage, right? Drake told me that in your culture, inheritance goes through the female line, and that the women court the men. To get a highborn wife, you need a good dowry. So I, uh, got one."

Dryly she said, "The man is usually more subtle in making his interest known."

He squinted at her. "I don't actually remember what I did. I think I told my stagmen to clear out a storeroom and send the contents to Argali House. I almost fell over when they said you had accepted it."

She stared at him, unsure which stunned her more, his manner of instigating the take-over, or the extent of his corporation. "That was only *one* stockroom's worth of your dowry?"

"Well, yes, I guess you could put it that way." He studied her face. "I don't understand how the idea of a corporation got mixed up here with a dowry. You make it sound like I bought you."

That was, in fact, how it felt. Kamoj doubted he would appreciate her saying it, though, so she hid the thought by imagining a blanket over it. "It seems normal to me." She tugged on his arm. "Come lie down again."

His face gentled. "I won't argue with that." He lay down, putting his head in her lap, and closed his eyes. As she rubbed his head, she thought what an irony it was that a merger certain to become a legend may have been a whim born of a drinking binge. Would he regret it tomorrow? What if he changed his mind? She had no wish to return to Jax. He might not want her anymore. If Ironbridge spurned her, Argali would starve, and even if Jax wanted her back she would still be humiliated by the Lionstar rejection.

Vyrl spoke quietly. "My father told me something when I was young: If you plant in the wrong place, you still have to tend the crops."

"Was he a farmer?"

"Yes."

"Am I the wrong place?"

"Gods, no." He opened his eyes. "You're like sunlight. I was lucky. What if the beautiful nymph I saw rising out of the river turned out to have a personality like shattered glass? But regardless, it's my responsibility to see this through now. I would never humiliate you."

Relief trickled over her. She also rather liked being compared to sunlight.

His grin flashed. "I'm glad you like it."

Blushing, she said, "How do you know everything in my mind?"

"I don't." When she raised her eyebrows, he added, "Usually I just pick up emotions. My ability to do even that falls off with distance, roughly as the Coulomb force."

Coulomb force? "I don't understand."

"It's complicated."

Her voice cooled. "And I am too slow to understand?"

"Kamoj, no. I didn't mean that. I just don't know how to explain it, except as I learned it."

"Then explain it that way."

He hesitated, as if unsure how to proceed. "I've an organ in my brain called the Kyle Afferent Body. The KAB. It's too small to see without magnification. Certain molecules in it, that is, certain bits of my KAB, undergo quantum transitions according to how they interact with the fields produced by the brains of other people. That means -- well, I guess you could say my KAB varies its behavior according to what it detects. Those variations determine what neural pulses it transmits to certain neural structures in my cerebrum, which interpret the pulses as thought." He stopped, watching her face. "I'm not doing this very well, am I?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't understand some of your words."

He tried again. "My brain can pick up signals from yours and interpret them. The process isn't all that accurate, so it's easier to get emotions than thoughts. It only works close up because the signals aren't that strong."

Although the words made more sense this time, it sounded as strange as before. "You do that with me?"

His voice gentled. "For some reason you're more open to me than most people. I felt it that first time I saw you, when you were swimming. You were so beautiful. So alive. So *happy*."

She smiled. "So naked."

Vyrl laughed. "That too."

She went back to massaging his head. After a while his lashes drooped and his breathing deepened. Then he jerked, and opened his eyes. When they closed again, he forced them open. Watching him struggle, Kamoj wondered why it was so important to stay awake.

The third time he started to fall asleep, he rolled on his side and pressed his lips against her leg. Distracted, she stopped rubbing his head. He was peeling off her other stocking, kissing her thigh as the silk slid away. After he had pulled it all the way off, he slid his hand back up her leg. "Your skin is even softer than glimsilk."

Kamoj reddened, flustered again. "Ah. Uh. Oh."

For some reason her idiotic response made the corners of his mouth quirk up. He sat up and pulled her into his lap. "I always thought I liked this room austere. I never realized before how cold it is."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "It would look softer in moonlight."

"Morlin," he said, "turn off the lights."

"Their web contacts aren't complete," a man said.

"Hai!" Kamoj sat up with a jerk and yanked her dress down over her thighs.

Vyrl stroked his hand down her back. "It's all right. He won't bother us."

"He is here? *Watching?*"

"'He' is just a computer web. I call him Morlin." Vyrl hesitated. "The name was supposed to be after an ancient Earth wizard, but I think I got it wrong."

"I'm having trouble completing the contacts," Morlin said. "The molecular engines that repair the fiberoptic cables in this wing stopped replicating centuries ago."

Kamoj pressed her fist against her mouth. Morlin didn't exist, yet he was here.

"I suggest you reconsider trying to use the original web in the palace," the voice continued. "These problems continue to -- "

"Morlin," Vyrl said. Watching Kamoj, he added, "We'll deal with it later."

It was quiet after that. Whatever Morlin was, apparently he answered to Vyrl. Gradually, as Vyrl explored her body, Kamoj relaxed against him. She breathed in his scent, spice-soap mixed with his own natural smell.

"Connection established," Morlin suddenly said. The lights went out.

"Hai!" In reflex, Kamoj jerked up her hands to ward off a blow.

"It's nothing," Vyrl murmured, stroking her hair. In a louder voice, he said, "Morlin, shut up."

Kamoj made herself lower her hands. "Does he obey you?"

"Well, yes, you could say that." Vyrl gave her a curious look. "It's just your computer. We're using the old web in this building. Parts of it, anyway. Some of the components are too decayed. Their repair bots failed a long time ago."

Kamoj wasn't sure what he meant, but she knew the palace had been in abominable shape when he rented it. That Vyrl repaired her ancestral home meant more than she knew how to say. She had always longed to do it, but she could hardly have used precious resources to fix a building when babies in Argali needed cereal.

"Look," she said, gazing over his shoulder.

Vyrl turned to look. A ghostly image of the stained glass window in her chamber stretched across the floor out here in the main bedroom, laid there by moonlight slanting through her room. Sparkles glistened in the image, from where the light hit the bead curtain.

"It's beautiful," he said.

She slid off the bed and held out her hand to him. He took it, his face gentling. Together they crossed the room, their fingers intertwined. When they entered her chamber, strings of beads trailed along their arms. The window glowed with light from the Sister Moon.

As Vyrl laid her on her bed, moonlight cast shadows on his robe, making him look as if he were cut from onyx. His callouses felt nubby on her skin when he peeled off her underdress. Then he paused, kneeling between her legs. Too self-conscious to meet his gaze, she sat up and took off his robe, shy and unsure, trying to act self-assured. She didn't succeed, but he seemed to like how she touched him anyway. She couldn't look at his face because -- she wasn't sure why. If she looked, he would somehow acknowledge her touch, making her too embarrassed to continue.

Kamoj tried to relax. Most women her age were already married, even mothers. Lying down, she reached her arms out to Vyrl. When he stretched out on top of her, he supported his weight on his hands so he didn't crush her under his body.

He took their lovemaking slow and gentle, giving her as long as she needed to relax. Even so, when the time came, she tensed up. It was *tearing* -- she wanted him to *stop* --

He went still on top of her. "Kamoj -- ?"

Hai, she thought, mortified. If she kept this up she would still be a virgin after her wedding night. "It's all right."

Vyrl handled her even more gently after that. The moons shifted in the sky, their light casting a stained glass rose on the floor. He murmured against her ear, saying her name over and over, and right this time. His intensity increased, until finally he drew in a breath and blew it out, the stream of air wafting tendrils of her hair around her cheeks. Then he relaxed on top of her, still murmuring, his voice a soft current of sound against her ear.

After a while his murmurs trickled into silence and he lay still, one hand curled around her breast. He breathing deepened, until eventually it came with a faint snore at the end of each breath.

Kamoj blinked. Apparently they were done. Although the experience had been pleasant, after the initial pain, it seemed incomplete. Was this why Lyode extolled marriage? Certainly it was nice, but Kamoj didn't see why it made her usually no-nonsense bodyguard smile like a besotted fruitwing. Kamoj wondered if in her shyness, she had somehow overlooked or missed the important part.

Vyrl felt heavier now that he wasn't supporting his weight. She nudged him until he rolled off her and stretched out along her side. Then she turned onto her side, her body spooned into his, her back against his chest. He slid his arm around her waist without a break in the rumble of his sleep.

Kamoj drifted in a doze, like the fever-sleep of a delirium, her body so sensitized that she felt air currents whisper across it. She felt restless. Incomplete. Sometimes she awoke to find herself rubbing her own body.

When Vyrl's arm shifted, at first she thought he was restive in his sleep. Then he slid his hand down over hers. As she moved against his hand, he kissed her neck, his teeth playing with her necklace. Whatever he was doing, he knew how to do it well. She felt as if she were trying to climb a peak she couldn't reach. Then the release came, like a crest with many bumps. It spread to the rest of her body, until she lost control and cried out.

When she calmed, Vyrl murmured, "Sweet water sprite."

Kamoj wanted to say soft words too, call her husband beloved and other endearments. Yet she didn't feel she knew him well enough. So strange, to be so intimate, yet so unfamiliar at the same time.

Languor settled over her like a downy quilt ...

Kamoj wasn't sure what woke her. The moonlight had dimmed, both the Sister and the Far Moon having finished their voyages across the sky. The sense of drowsy satisfaction had also left the room.

She rolled over. Vyrl was lying on his back, staring at the canopy above them, a fixed stare that saw nothing. The tendons in his neck had pulled taut, and his jaw had clenched so hard the bones stood out against his skin.

"Vyrl?" She pushed up on her elbow. "What's wrong?"

He jerked his head. Then he sat up, his face contorting.

And he screamed.

It shattered the silence. He sat with his fists clenched on his thighs, his face twisted until she hardly recognized him.

Boots pounded in the main bedroom. "Prince Havyrl!" a man called. The bead curtain rattled as Azander and the other bodyguard swept it aside and strode into the chamber. Scrambling to her knees, Kamoj yanked on Vyrl's robe, covering herself.

Vyrl showed no hint he saw any of them. Staring straight ahead, he worked his mouth like a man in a nightmare trying, with horrific futility, to scream again.

Azander knelt by the bed and shook Vyrl's shoulders. "Prince Havyrl, wake up! You're all right. It only be the nightmares. Wake up!"

Vyrl swung his fist so fast, Azander had no time to duck. Vyrl hit him in the chin, and the bodyguard flew over backward, hitting the floor with a thud.

"Get out!" Vyrl said. "Now."

Azander stared at him, holding his chin. Then he jumped to his feet and the two bodyguards left fast as they had come.

Kamoj slid back, away from Vyrl, until the wall stopped her retreat. Had she been mistaken about her new husband? But no. This was different from rage. Something was wrong, very wrong. He leaned forward, his arms wrapped around his stomach, as if he hurt somehow, not a physical hurt, but something else.

She didn't know how long they sat that way. Finally she moved closer to him. Then she waited. When he neither objected nor showed anger, she came the rest of the way to his side. He turned to her, moisture gleaming under his eyes.

She touched his wet cheek. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He took a breath. "Go back to sleep."

Nothing? He had just split open the night with his scream. She wanted to offer comfort, but she feared it would anger him instead, a risk she couldn't take, not when the well-being of Argali depended on his good will. So she did as he asked, lying down with her eyes closed. She heard him put on his robe, then heard the bed creak and felt the mattress shift.

Kamoj opened her eyes. She was alone. She put on her underdress and got out of bed. Her footsteps made no sound as she crossed to the curtain and peered through the beaded strings into the main bedroom.

Vyrl had opened the window above his desk and was sitting in his chair, staring at the night, his body silhouetted against the sky. He raised a bottle to his lips, and the cloying smell of rum drifted in the air.

Watching him, Kamoj knew that whatever troubled Vyrl, it went far deeper than the rum could reach. What had happened to give a man of such power the terrors that haunted his dreams?

V

Binge

Higher Level Eigenstates

Early morning light filled Kamoj's room. Jul had yet to rise above the forest, so no rays slanted in the window, which someone had opened while she slept. She lay alone staring at a tapestry on the wall across from the bed. The hanging depicted two fierce women in warrior garb engaged in a duel over a youth. They were facing off in a forest clearing, one with a bowball cupped in her palm, her arm raised to throw it. Their young man stood leaning against a tree with his muscular arms crossed, looking appropriately dashing. He also looked rather disconcerted, which Kamoj suspected was closer to the truth of whatever legend had inspired the tapestry.

She felt lethargic, unable to face the day. She had watched Vyrl for more than an hour last

night, afraid to intrude on his solitude. Exhaustion finally forced her to choose between sleeping on the floor or returning to bed.

Still, lying in bed solved nothing. She got up and went into the main bedroom. It was empty of Vyrl, but two trunks stood against the foot of his bed. Her trunks.

Her mood lightening, she went over to the trunks. The first held her clothes and the second had personal items, including the dolls from her childhood collection. She picked up her favorite rag doll, enjoying the familiar feel of its yarn hair against her cheek.

"Governor Argali?"

Startled, Kamoj looked up. A housemaid stood in the doorway of the entrance foyer. She must have been on the landing outside, waiting for Kamoj to wake up. "I heard you opening the trunks," the woman said. "Would you like help dressing?"

Kamoj reddened, embarrassed to be caught holding a doll. Lowering it, she said, "Not today. But thank you."

"Yes, ma'am." The woman bowed and withdrew.

Putting away her things took several hours. Then Kamoj went to the bathing room. Someone had swept up the glass and opened the window, letting sunshine in and the rum smell out. Bracing herself for icy mountain water, she slid into the pool. What she felt was even more of a shock: warm water. How? She saw no steaming stones or other heat sources.

Then she remembered her heel. Holding onto a claw of the quetzal statue, she pulled her foot out of the water. All she saw was healthy pink skin with a slight bruising. That rapid healing impressed her as much as all the other marvels she had seen here.

After her bath, she ran naked back to her chamber, racing across the main bedroom. She wasn't sure why she ran. Vyrl had seen her without her clothes, and besides he wasn't here. But she ran anyway. For all she knew, Morlin watched everything.

In her room, she started to take out a tunic. Then she changed her mind and put on a rose-cotton farm dress instead. It gave her pleasure to think Vyrl might enjoy how she looked. None of her dresses fit anymore, though. Her breasts plumped out the neckline, the waist was too tight, and the skirt barely reached her knees. She pulled up lacy ruffles from her underdress to cover her breasts and tugged her underskirts down until their ruffles swirled around her knees. Then she pulled on grey leggings made from Argali wool, followed by her suede farm boots.

Kamoj left the suite and paused on the landing at the top of the stairs. She was hungry, but she wasn't sure where to find the kitchen. She also had to find Vyrl, to discuss Argali. Theirs was a tricky situation, one with no precedent that she knew. The union of provinces through a dowered merger of two governors was almost unheard of. She and Jax had agreed to split their time between Argali and Ironbridge. With Vyrl she had no idea. He could demand control of Argali or leave it to her, tax her province to death, shower it with riches, ruin it, or ignore it.

She descended the stairs, listening to the forest, the wind in the trees and the blue-tailed quetzals calling, even the trill of a gold-tail. Flaring the membranes in her nostrils, she inhaled the scents of the forest and its scale dust. It wasn't until she reached the bottom that she heard the voices. As she walked down the Long Hall, they resolved into an argument between Vyrl and Dazza.

"I can't," Dazza was saying. "I haven't the equipment."

"Don't treat me like a stupid farm boy," Vyrl said. "The *Ascendant* has more than enough facilities. It's a flaming city."

The voices came from the entrance foyer. Kamoj hesitated in the Long Hall, near the entrance to the chandeliered ballroom, unsure whether to stay or leave.

"These aren't simple alterations," Dazza told him. "I would have to change your lungs and hemoglobin, redesign the way your body absorbs oxygen and carbon dioxide, and add filters for impurities. Who knows what side-effects it would cause? I couldn't even begin until I made a thorough study. Surely you realize the magnitude of what you're asking."

"Contact the *Ascendant*," Vyrl said. "Tell them to send down what you need."

"The web systems in this building aren't sophisticated enough to run the equipment," she said. "If you want me to work on you, we have to do it on the ship."

"No!"

Dazza spoke in a placating voice. "Vyrl, listen. Why change your body? Doesn't the respirator let you breathe in comfort?"

"I don't want a metal face."

"You *asked* for metal. It doesn't have to be that way. If it bothers you, we'll redesign the mask."

He made a frustrated noise. "The people here don't need respirators. If I'm going to live on this planet, I want to go out without anything."

"Why? Is this temporary exile worth such drastic changes to your body?"

Kamoj tensed. Temporary exile? Vyrl was going to leave Argali? What did that mean for her people? For herself?

She walked through the ballroom and stopped in the doorway to the Entrance Hall. Vyrl and Dazza were at the other end of the hall, in front of the entrance foyer. Azander and two other stagmen were standing back from them, trying to accomplish the impossible by being simultaneously attentive to their liege and oblivious to his argument.

"I told you what I wanted," Vyrl told Dazza. "Do it. I'm going riding."

"You're in no condition to ride -- "

"Contact the *Ascendant*, damn it."

Dazza crossed her arms. "And if I refuse?"

"Don't push me, Colonel."

She exhaled. "Vyrl, stay here. Let me give you something to deal with the alcohol. Or let it work out of your system. When you're sober, we'll talk modifications."

"You're not putting more of your bugs in my blood." He grimaced. "Those bloody things never die."

"Nanomedes aren't bugs. And meds designed to flush out alcohol do 'die.' They dissolve after a few -- "

"No," he said.

She scowled at him. "If I alter your body so you can live on this planet unaided, you'll need even more self-replicating meds than the ones you carry now for health maintenance."

"Fine." With no warning, he spun around and strode up the hall, straight toward Kamoj. His sudden attention caught her off guard. She hadn't even realized he knew she was there.

A farmhand must have given him the clothes he was wearing, an old white shirt, soft and worn with washings, and rough pants tucked into scuffed boots. Although Maxard wore old clothes when he worked the farm, it was still the garb of a highborn man. It startled her to see the wealthiest man in the Northern Lands, possibly on all Balumil, dressed like the poorest farmer.

Before she could react or retreat, he reached her. He didn't even stop, just slid his arm around her waist and swung her around, then pulled her with him as he headed back down the hall. His long legs covered ground so fast she had to run to keep up with him.

He stopped in front of Dazza. "My wife and I are going riding." Propelling Kamoj ahead of him, he stalked into the entrance foyer. He left her in the middle of the chamber while he went to where his cloak hung on the wall like a patch of evening sky.

Kamoj pushed her hand through her hair. What if she refused to go with him? Perhaps she was naïve, but she didn't believe he would do anything more than leave her behind. The idea of his going alone bothered her more. Could he safely ride, as drunk as he seemed right now?

Suppose he fell from his stag and broke a limb? Or worse? She didn't know how it worked with his people, but among her own, a man thrown from a greenglass could die alone in the forest before anyone found him.

Vyrl smacked his palm on the wall, and a block of stone slid to the side, revealing a cubical cavity. He pulled out his silver mask. Crumpling it in his hand, he swung around and looked at someone behind her. "Bring Greypoint out front," he said.

Turning, Kamoj saw Azander by the great double doors of the entrance. A bruise purpled the stagman's chin where Vyrl had hit him last night. Azander pulled back the heavy bolts on the doors and leaned his weight into the left one until it swung open, letting blue-tinged sunlight pour into the foyer. Then he walked through the shimmer curtain, out into the autumn day.

Dazza spoke from the foyer's inner archway. "Vyrl, at least let Kamoj ride her own stag. She'll be safer that way."

"Safe from what?" Vyrl swung his cloak over his shoulders, the blue cloth swirling through the air like a swath of midnight-blue sky. "Military witch-doctors who want to fill my blood with bugs to stop me from enjoying a drink, but who refuse to fix my body so I can goddamn breathe?"

"Don't go riding," Dazza said. "Wait until you're sober."

Bi-hooves clattered on the flagstones outside. Vyrl came over to Kamoj and took her arm. Pulling her with him, he strode through the shimmer curtain, out into the sunlit courtyard.

Dazza called from behind them. "Vyrl!"

When he turned to the colonel, Kamoj's hope jumped. Would he change his mind and go back?

Dazza was standing in the palace entrance now, behind the shimmer curtain. "Your respirator," she said.

He watched her, the mask still crumpled in his fist. Then he spun around and drew Kamoj over to where Azander held a stag ready. The animal was huge and muscled, with gigantic greenglass antlers that shaded from emerald at their base into silver tips. Despite the stag's great height, Vyrl swung up onto its back with mesmerizing grace. Greypoint pranced sideways, shook his head, and stamped his four front legs. Then he stilled, becoming a statue as he looked down at Kamoj. His eyes, huge and green, with vertical pupil slits, stared at her with unsettling intelligence.

When Vyrl motioned, Azander put his hands on Kamoj's waist and lifted. At the same time, Vyrl reached down and grabbed her. He hauled Kamoj up in front of him so she straddled the stag, her flared skirt foaming over her thighs and knees. It happened so fast it made her dizzy. Or maybe it was the air, so thin after the palace. Vyrl held her around the waist with one arm, his mask clutched in his fist, while Greypoint danced under them, agitated with Kamoj's unfamiliar weight.

Suddenly the greenglass reared on his back legs, rising up, up, and up to his full height, his front four legs pawing the air, their scales splintering the light. Clangs filled the courtyard as he crashed his bi-hooves together. He threw back his head and bared his fangs, the opaline teeth glittering like daggers. And he screamed at the sky.

For one frozen instant Kamoj couldn't move, terrified she would fly off the greenglass. From this height the fall could break her neck. Then she grabbed its antlers, their velvety green scales slippery in her hold.

"Damn it!" Dazza shouted. "Vyrl, don't do this!"

The greenglass came down, jerking his head until Kamoj released his antlers. Vyrl's labored breaths rasped behind her. Kamoj twisted around to see him staring at Dazza, his face flushed. As Greypoint danced beneath them, on the verge of rearing again, Vyrl yanked a narrow slab out from his cloak, a rectangle covered with lines and symbols. Extending his arm, he pointed the slab at Dazza. "You can forget about having your orbital monitors track me, Colonel. I'm setting up a jamming field -- " He pressed a blue light on the slab. " -- now."

Dazza paled. "We want you here, Vyrl. What if something happens and we can't locate you?"

"Is that all any of you think about?" he rasped. "What you want?" He thrust the slab back in his cloak and grabbed Kamoj's shoulders. "*Look* at this. My wife. A farm girl like a virginal sex goddess out of an erotic holomovie, and all she asks is a simple life, a husband who doesn't beat her, and the freedom to walk in the woods. Did it ever occur to all your generals, politicians, and strategists that maybe that's all I want? That what I want might actually *matter*? Or are you all too busy plotting how to use your oh-so-valuable prince to give a flaming damn what I think?"

He jabbed the stag with his heels and Greypoint leapt forward, racing for the forest. Vyrl held the reins with both hands now, his arms around Kamoj. He was gasping, choking as if every breath hurt.

"Vyrl!" she shouted. "Put your mask on!" The wind carried away her voice. Desperate, she shouted in her mind. *Vyrl! Your mask!*

His arm moved and his breathing stopped. Dismayed, she twisted around-and stared into a face of silver scales. Jerking at the sight, she lost her balance. Vyrl caught her as she fell, but he misjudged his strength and almost shoved her off Greypoint in the other direction. She turned around and hung onto the stag's neck while they raced through the iridescent trees.

The dirt path they followed sloped upward, trees towering on either side, branches meeting overhead. Despite the cloudless day, thunder rumbled above the forest. Kamoj stiffened, wondering what other "marvels" Vyrl's outburst would call up.

"It's just a shuttle engine," he muttered against her ear. He slowed Greypoint to a walk and prodded him off the path, into the woods. The stag had calmed, his fire eased by the race. He trotted between the widely-spaced trees, his six legs moving with such smooth coordination that Kamoj barely felt the bumpiness of his bi-hooves hitting the ground. His muscular, long-legged grace reminded her of Vyrl.

They went deep into the mountains, always headed upward. Every now and then an "engine" grumbled overhead. Each time the sound came, Vyrl tensed, and each time it faded he relaxed again.

Eventually Kamoj said, "Where are we going?"

"Away. Until they find me." He sounded tired. "Actually, they always know where I am. But usually they let me come back on my own." He paused. "Except today I took the jammer. They'll have more trouble this time."

"Jammer?"

"What I pointed at Dazza," he said. "It works best against electromagnetic sensors."

"Lector's senses?"

"It confuses the things they use to find me." His voice slurred. "Neutrinos are harder to fool, though. They go through anything. But this jammer is a real beaut. It can create false shadows to throw off even neutrino sensors."

"Oh." Kamoj wondered if the rum made him babble, or if his words had some actual sense.

"What do you think is this Current you all worship?" Vyrl asked. "Electromagnetic radiation. Light. Those threads in your light panels are just optical fibers."

That gave her pause. In Iotaca, *Optical Fiber* was the full name of Lyode's husband, Opter Sunsmith. If their line ran true, their children would inherit the sunsmith talents. Opter's brother Gallium Phosphide Sunsmith worked in the sunshop with him. Other provinces had other gifts, such as the Amperman and Ohmston lines in Ironbridge. The Argali temple was dedicated to sun spirits, like the Glories and Airy Rainbows, but Kamoj had always seen them as guardians or even servants of the Sunsmith line, rather than deities.

"Why do you think we worship the Current?" she asked.

"Don't you?"

"The Current just is. Like rain, clouds, and sun."

"Not *like* the sun," Vyrl said. "It *is* the sun. Well, not just the sun. But light."

"Of course, Prince Havyrl."

"Don't call me that."

"That?"

"Prince Whatsit. You're my wife. Call me Vyrl."

"Yes, Vyrl."

"Why are you so formal? Last night, I even thought you were afraid -- " Suddenly he stopped. "Saints almighty. I am an idiot."

Kamoj blinked, again caught off guard. Never, in a hundred Long Years, would Jax have ever said such a thing about himself.

"You had no choice, did you?" Vyrl said.

"Choice?"

"About the marriage. Bloody flaming hell. I should have seen it before. That wasn't a dowry. It was a purchase order." He pulled Greypoint to a halt and dismounted, swinging his leg over the stag's back and landing on the ground with leonine grace. Greypoint danced sideways, and Kamoj had to grab the bridle to keep from falling.

Standing with his back to her, Vyrl looked normal, a man with a mane of tawny hair. Then he turned and she saw the silver mask on his face. She tensed, almost as unsettled now by that blank expanse of metal as the first time she had seen it.

He peeled off the mask. "I hate this thing."

"Vyrl, no. You need to breathe."

"You must hate me."

"I don't hate you." Every time she thought she began to understand him, he went off on a rant again.

He crumpled the mask. "You think you have to say that."

Although she meant what she said, his words gave her pause. Had Jax asked if she hated him, certainly she would have denied it. Otherwise he would have hit her.

Vyrl was concentrating as if she were a tangle of threads he was trying to unravel. "I'm not going to beat you. Gods, Kamoj, I would never do such a thing."

Her face gentled. "I like being with you. It's just ... "

"Yes?"

"I don't understand you."

Vyrl gave her a rueful smile. "That makes two of us." He pressed the mask onto his face, then came over and reached for her. As he helped her off the stag, she put her arms around his neck and hugged him. He held her with her feet dangling in the air while he pressed his lips against her hair.

"I have a place out here where I go to be alone," he said. Then he set her down on the ground and took her hand.

They went to an outcropping of moss-covered slabs half-buried in the ground. Bridle bells clinked as Greypoint followed them. Vyrl stopped and rubbed his mount's neck, pressing on the scales in that way greenglass stags liked. Greypoint stood quietly, patient while Vyrl removed the bridle and tended him. The stag pushed his long snout against Vyrl's palm, nipping at his fingers with fangs that could have torn Vyrl to pieces, had Greypoint wanted. Then the greenglass took off, running in a graceful six-legged lope among the trees.

Vyrl glanced at Kamoj. "Don't worry. He'll come back."

She spoke softly. "I know." Greypoint's behavior told her far more than Vyrl realized. After working all her life in the glasshouses stables at Argali, she knew greenglass stags. Greypoint was wild, never broken or tamed. A gifted stagman might attract the interest of a wild stag, but never one as high-strung and powerful as Greypoint. That the animal freely chose to follow Vyrl impressed her more than all Vyrl's wealth, titles, and palace repairs.

Vyrl led her through an opening in the rocks into a small cave. It had a roof half again as tall as Vyrl and a floor of packed dirt, with boulders jutting out here and there. He knelt at a platform beside the entrance and ran his fingers over its dark surface. Despite all the wonders Kamoj had seen here, it still stunned her when lights appeared within the platform, glowing and winking. A hum began, and a shimmer curtain appeared in the entrance of the cave, blending into the rocks on either side.

Vyrl sat back on his heels. "The generator will bring the atmosphere to normal. Normal for me, that is."

She stood just inside the entrance. "Why can't you breathe the air?"

"A lot of reasons. Too much carbon dioxide. Too little oxygen. All the scale dust in it." He seemed distracted, either tired or depressed. "The irradiation from your sun is lower than the human standard. That means it doesn't give Balumil as much light. The extra carbon dioxide helps keeps the temperature up." He touched the mask on his face. "This concentrates oxygen and filters out CO₂. It also filters out impurities that gives gamma humanoids a severe form of asthma. Fatal, in fact, if we breathe it too long."

"Gamma humanoid?"

"Like me." He pressed his palm against his chest. "I can tolerate the air here for a short time, but some people can't bear it even for a few seconds."

"It doesn't bother me at all."

Vyrl smiled. "You're a theta." He took off his mask and dropped it on the console. "Your lungs have filters that mine lack. Your people's hemoglobin was redesigned and your circulatory system responds to different partial pressures of oxygen and carbon dioxide." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "This world is almost uninhabitable for those of us without your modifications, especially during winter and summer. That's why your ancestors wore space suits."

"Space suits?"

"You know those pictures of ancient stagmen in full-body diskmail?" When she nodded, he said, "Those are space suits."

She poked her finger into the shimmer curtain. "And this?"

"It's an airlock. It surrounds the cave." He paused. "I'm not sure how to describe it in a way that would make sense to you."

"Tell me in your own words then. I like to hear them." Now that she knew he wasn't mocking her ignorance, she found a beauty in his words, the promise of knowledge and wonders.

"The curtain is a membrane," he said. "A modified lipid bilayer." He tapped the platform. "This applies an electric potential to it. There are enzymes in the membrane, like keys, but so tiny you can't see them. They fit certain receptor molecules. Certain locks. Different potentials activate different keys. When a key opens a lock, it changes the permeability of the membrane." He paused, lines of fatigue deep on his face.

"Are you all right?" Kamoj asked.

"Yes. Fine." He stood up. "Right now the membrane won't let air pass, but water can diffuse through it just fine. The generator recycles our air, so we don't suffocate. It also seeds the air with nanomedes that take dust out of the air."

Kamoj thought of the firepuff fly that had stuck to the shimmer in her chamber last night. "The curtain lets us pass through it."

"On this setting, yes. We're easily strong enough to push through it. Your body becomes

part of the interface, keeping the seal." He pressed the heels of his hands against his temples. "A picoweb within the membrane remembers its original form, so after you pass, the curtain returns to normal."

"Vyrl, are you sure you are all right?"

"It's just a headache." He pulled a bottle out of his cloak and unscrewed the top. Then he drank deeply, tilting his head back as he swallowed.

Watching him, Kamoj felt a sense of helplessness. Her only experience with anyone who drank this much was Korl Plowsbane. Would Vyrl become that way, decimated and dulled, with no family or friends, only the bottle he loved above all else? She had no idea what to do. She had seen how angry he became if Dazza even mentioned it.

He walked across the cave, his boots scuffing up swirls of iridescent dust. The generator hummed, making its nano-meds to carry the dust out of the air, so it wouldn't kill her husband.

Vyrl turned to her. "That day at the river -- you have no idea. I was so close to going after you. Just one bodyguard you had, to my four stagmen." He raised his hand, palm up. "'But no,' I thought. 'Do you want her to hate you? What of honor? Decency? All that.' So I courted you. Or I thought I courted you." He took another swallow of rum. Lowering the bottle, he spoke with self-disgust. "Seems I raped you anyway."

"That's not true." How could he be so empathic and not see that she liked him? She had never wanted Jax to touch her, but after Vyrl's gentleness last night even the thought of Ironbridge revolted her.

"I *knew*, damn it!" Vyrl said. "I knew you wanted me to stop last night. You even cried it in your mind." He sat on a hip-high boulder and took another swallow of rum. "Self-delusion is remarkable, isn't it? I convinced myself you wanted me."

"You weren't deluding yourself," she said.

"You think you have to tell me that. Because I *bought* you." He let the empty bottle slide out of his hand. It hit a half-buried rock and broke into pieces. Watching her, he said, "You aren't bound to me, Kamoj. You're free. I'll have the *Ascendant* move our base to some other place. We'll tell your people -- hell, tell them what? That I went back to my own 'land' and will send for you. Then we'll send word I've been killed. That way you'll be free of me without being humiliated."

"Killed?" She couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Imperial law recognizes unions made in the colonies, even the rediscovered ones like this. That means we're married by my law as well as yours." He spoke awkwardly. "I'll have someone arrange divorce papers."

How could he speak her language, yet say so much she didn't understand? Enough made sense, though. He meant to dissolve their merger. The realization stabbed like broken glass. With news of Vyrl's "death," Jax could claim the widow. Ironbridge would get everything: Argali, the redone palace, Morlin, all of it.

Kamoj went over to him and toed aside the broken bottle. Shyly, she put her arms around his waist. "Stay with me."

His arms went around her. "You don't have to say that."

"I know." She hesitated. "Unless you want to go."

"Gods, no." His hand moved over her hair. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Even after last night?"

"Especially after last night." She tried to recapture her feeling from then, so he would too. Rubbing her cheek on his chest, she inhaled his scent. Then she reached for him with her hand, seeking to give to him what he had given her. As she held him, he brushed his lips over the crown of her head and stroked his palm down her back, over her curls. After awhile, he pulled off the scarf she used for a belt and helped her fold it around him. Tensing with his

release, he exhaled, then he murmured words from an old Argali harvest song: "So soft is her touch on grain full with nectar ... "

Smiling, Kamoj looked up at him. As he relaxed against her, his eyelids drooped. Their metal lashes made a glittering contrast to the dark circles under his eyes.

"Let's lie down," she said. "I'm tired." She wasn't actually, but Vyrl obviously needed to sleep. Why he fought so hard against it she had no idea, but perhaps he would do for her what he wouldn't do for himself.

"All right." He straightened his clothes, then stood up and swung off his cloak. It swirled through the air and settled on the ground. As Kamoj sat on it, he watched her like a greenglass mesmerized by night lamps on a coach. "So pretty ... your dress. That color. What d'you call it? Rose? 'S nice the way you fill it out -- " He suddenly turned red. "Ai. I'm rambling. What an idiot you married."

Kamoj couldn't help but smile at his boyish expression. "No, you aren't. Don't ever say that." She patted the ground. "You lie down. I'll rub your head."

"Won't argue with that." He lay down and put his head in her lap. As she massaged his temples, his eyes closed. Within moments his breathing had settled into the steady rumble of sleep.

Watching Vyrl sleep, Kamoj wondered how to understand him. He spoke like a highborn man, dressed like a farmer, carried a title, had a laborer's callouses, moved like a dancer, and had a stagman's gift with greenglasses. The silver in his hair and the lines around his eyes suggested he had reached his forties, yet he had the powerful physique and vigor of a younger man. His wide-open emotions and beguiling flashes of mischief made him seem almost boyish.

Beneath all that, though, buried also under his mood swings, his drinking, and his tormented dreams, she sensed a slumbering satisfaction with life that came from well-advanced years, not for everyone, but for some. He obviously wasn't happy now, yet for some reason she believed she picked up a deeper contentment, the kind it took a lifetime to form. Was she imagining it?

"Vyrl, what are you?" she murmured. Elderly, middle-aged, or young? Prince or farmer? Athlete or stagman? Drunkard or wise man? Or all of that? Brushing back his hair, she decided she would simply try to accept him for himself.

After a while she moved out from under his head and lay down beside him. Outside a quetzal called and another answered. Branches creaked in the wind. She could imagine the woods, ancient trees nodding together, their heads lifted high above the ground. If she were a bird, she could rise out of the forest and see it rolling in wave upon iridescent wave through the mountains, beneath the limitless violet plain of the sky.

VI

Sword And Ballow

Perturbations

A shudder racked Vyrl's body, waking Kamoj. Deep in his dreams, he made a strangled noise, his face clenched. She pushed up on her elbow and massaged his head until he calmed.

When he was resting well again, she went outside and stood watching the forest. Morning had passed, bringing them into early afternoon. Overhead an "engine" rumbled. She wondered if it knew Vyrl was here.

When she returned to the cave, she found him sitting up. Although fatigue still lined his face, he looked more rested.

"Is there anyone out there?" he asked.

"I heard an engine. I didn't see anyone, though." She sat cross-legged in front of him. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What are you a prince of?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, really. I'm just a citizen of the Skolian Imperialate. It's about nine hundred worlds governed by an assembly of elected counselors."

"You are not a prince?"

"I've the title. But it doesn't mean much." He considered her. "Tell me what you know of Balumil's history."

She thought of the stories she had learned as a child. "Long ago the Current gave light and warmth to our houses. And voices." Like Morlin, she realized. Vyrl had given the Quartz Palace back its voice. "Sailors brought the people here on ships that flew above the sky."

"That fits."

His response surprised her. She would have expected him to smile at their fanciful tales. "How does it fit?"

He rubbed his neck, working out the kinks that came from sleeping on the ground. "The ancient Ruby Empire established this colony. That's why I know your language."

It didn't surprise her that their language had remained constant enough for him to understand. Her people never changed anything. Change brought upheaval, upheaval threatened revolution, and revolution was anathema.

But still, it had been a long time. "The sky sailors vanished five thousand years ago."

"That's when the Ruby Empire collapsed. Five thousand standard years ago."

"Standard years?" That sounded like the scroll in Jax's library.

"About the length of the year on Earth, or on the world Raylicon. Just a bit more than one of your short-years." He stretched his arms. "Originally we all came from Earth."

Earth. The word had an odd familiarity, in the same way as did the pupils of Vyrl's eyes. "What is Earth?"

Softly he said, "Home, Kamoj. For all of us. Green hills, blue sky, sweet fresh air."

His words evoked a sense of ancient mysteries, of mythical quetzals without scales flying in an eggshell blue sky. "If home is a place called Earth, why are we on Balumil?"

Dryly he said, "Many people would like the answer to that." He pushed a lock of his hair behind his ear. "About six thousand years ago, around 4000 BC, an unknown race moved a population of people from Earth to the world we call Raylicon." Anticipating her next question, he said, "We don't know why. They disappeared without so much as a 'Sorry about this.'" He shrugged. "My ancestors eventually developed interstellar travel and went searching for their lost home. Although they never found Earth, they built the Ruby Empire." A grin flashed on his face. "But Earth found us. Just a few centuries ago."

"Is that how your people were able to return to the stars?"

He scowled, obviously offended. "Of course not. We relearned interstellar propulsion ourselves, well before anyone from Earth showed up." Then he laughed. "Ai, Kamoj, what a great surprise it must have been. When Earth's emissaries reached the stars, they went looking for alien cultures and found us instead, their own siblings, busily rebuilding empires. Gave 'em one hell of a shock."

Smiling, she said, "You look quite smug about that." When he chuckled, she asked, "And Balumil was a colony of your Ruby Empire?"

"That's right. We've been reclaiming the old colonies and settling new worlds. We call ourselves Skolia now, though, or the Skolian Imperialate."

She tried to fit it together. "How are you a prince?"

Vyrl shifted his weight. "My mother descends from the Ruby Dynasty."

"Ruby Dynasty? From the Ruby Empire?"

"That's right. The House of Skolia."

"Skolia is your family name?" When he nodded, she spoke quietly. "You are a great man, to rule nine hundred worlds."

He looked uncomfortable. "It's a meaningless title. My family hasn't ruled anything for thousands of years. I'm just a farmer."

She sensed unspoken subtleties in his words. "Dazza's people hold you prisoner because you have value to them."

He stiffened. "I'm not their prisoner." When she just looked at him, he said, "They have their reasons."

"Good reasons or bad?"

The question seemed to surprise him. "Valid reasons."

"Why?"

After a pause he said, "The Ruby Empire had a thriving slave trade. My ancestors in the Ruby Dynasty outlawed it. That was one reason the old empire fell. The Traders went to war against my family." Tiredly he said, "Now it's all started up again, even worse than before."

She tensed. "Is that why you are a prisoner? Is Dazza a slave trader?"

He appeared taken aback by the question. "Good gods, of course not. Dazza Pacal is a colonel in the pharaoh's army, the oldest branch of Imperial Space Command, the Skolian military. The army dates back to the Ruby Empire. One of my ancestors, the first Ruby Pharaoh, founded it."

Relief washed over Kamoj. "So it is your people who are holding you captive."

"If you mean, did ISC bring me here, the answer is yes." He shifted his weight. "I wouldn't use the word 'captive.'"

"Then why won't they let you go?"

"Members of my family have neural structures that make our brains more sensitive to certain atomic and molecular interactions. What I told you last night. Our ancestors were designed that way." At her puzzled look, he said, "It means we can power Ruby machines that have survived the millennia. We haven't relearned the tech yet, but we can use what we have."

"This is a thing of value?"

"Very much. It allows us to access universes with different laws and characteristics than the spacetime we inhabit. Relativity as we know it has no meaning there."

She gave him a dubious look. "These odd-sounding things have value?"

Vyrl smiled at her expression. "Indeed. They make possible almost-instant communication. Signals are otherwise limited by the speed of light."

"You mean by the Current?"

"That's right." His grin flashed again. "We can beat the Current, Kamoj. It gives ISC a speed and precision the Traders can't match." His smile faded. "It's the only reason we've survived against them."

That he could beat the Current impressed her. No wonder his family had such great value to his people. "But where is the rest of your family?"

This time his silence stretched out so long she wondered if she had given offense. Finally he said, "My father came from another of the rediscovered colonies." He spoke with difficulty. "He was a simple man. A farmer. But he was also that one in a trillion, a Ruby psion." Anger leaked into his voice. "We're thoroughbreds, exotic and rare. For reasons our geneticists don't yet understand, attempts to make us in the lab fail." He shrugged, a gesture all the more

eloquent for its attempt to indicate a nonchalance he obviously didn't feel. "But my parents could have children. So the assembly made them do it."

"Hai, Vyrl." She watched his face, trying to understand the shadow on his mood. "And your ISC needs you to protect your people?" When he nodded, she asked, "What about Earth? Do they fight too?"

"They stayed neutral during the last war. But they provided protective custody for my family." He pushed his hand through his curls. "The problem was, after the war ground to a stalemate, Earth refused to release us. I'm the only one they don't have. ISC keeps me guarded because they fear I will be kidnapped or assassinated otherwise."

"I see. I think." Kamoj tilted her head. "Your own people hold you prisoner to keep you from being held prisoner by the allies who were supposed to protect you from being taken prisoner or murdered by your enemies."

He gave a rueful laugh. "That about sums it up."

She took his hand. "Why did you come here?"

His fingers curled around hers. "I asked ISC to let me live in an agrarian culture similar to that of my homeworld, Lyshriol. A place where life revolved around the land and the harvest."

"So you really are a farmer."

His face gentled. "Yes. It's all I've ever wanted to do."

That she understood. Lifting his hand, she kissed his knuckles. He pulled her into his arms and they sat in silence, listening to the rustle of the forest.

A twig cracked.

Vyrl swore under his breath. They stood up, and he went to the entrance, where he paused to one side, poised and tense.

A man stepped through the shimmer. He wasn't one of Vyrl's guards, however. Rather, he wore the garb of an Ironbridge stagman. An archer. He had his bow up and aimed at the place where Kamoj and Vyrl had been sitting just seconds ago.

Vyrl didn't wait to see if the man meant to attack or only threaten. Lunging forward, he yanked the bow out of archer's hands. When the startled stagman clenched his fists together and brought them up under Vyrl's chin, Kamoj tensed, afraid the archer would snap back Vyrl's head and injure his neck. But Vyrl twisted with an easy grace, making even the agile stagman look clumsy. The blow just glanced off his cheek.

Then Vyrl hauled off and socked the archer. Staggering back, the archer hit the wall and knocked his head on the rock. As he slumped to the ground, Vyrl lunged forward and pulled the man's sword out of its sheath with a hiss of metal. While Vyrl stepped back, holding the sword, the dazed archer looked up at him.

"Does Ironbridge know you're here?" Vyrl asked.

The stagman rubbed his face, recovering himself. Moving stiffly, he stood up and brushed off his clothes. Then he turned to Kamoj and said, "Slut."

As Kamoj's mouth fell open, Vyrl said, "Call her that again and you won't have a tongue any more. What's the matter with you?"

The man snorted. "Be quiet, boy."

"Oh." Kamoj finally understood. "Vyrl, he thinks you're a farmhand."

Vyrl regarded him. "Is that true?"

The stagman had the sense to start looking worried. "Yes."

"I'm Havyrl Lionstar," he said. "And if you ever call my wife a slut again, then after I cut out your tongue I'll hang you upside down from a tower of the Quartz Palace and let the bi-hawks peck out your eyes."

Kamoj wondered if he were serious. The stagman stared at him for a full count of five

before he remembered himself. Then he dropped to one knee and lowered his head so his hair fell forward, leaving his neck bare. "I have no excuse, Governor Lionstar. Use my sword."

Vyrl made an exasperated noise. "I'm not going to cut off your head. Get up and tell me why you were skulking around my woods."

Moving with obvious, albeit belated, humility, the stagman stood up. "Please accept my most abject -- "

"Just answer the question," Vyrl said.

"I was riding to the Quartz Palace, bringing salutations from Ironbridge on your wedding." The man paused. "When I came by here, I saw the bridle and thought a rider was in trouble. I investigated and heard voices. I recognized the woman." He glanced at Kamoj, then quickly shifted his gaze to Vyrl. "I heard her call you a farmer and your agreement. It seemed that given the, uh, appearance of this matter, I ought to apprehend -- I mean -- what I thought -- "

"I get the idea," Vyrl said. "Why are you up here? The road to Ironbridge is on the other side of the palace."

"I was coming from another errand for Governor Ironbridge."

Vyrl motioned toward the entrance. "Outside."

The man obeyed, his back stiff, either with fear or shame. Kamoj didn't believe for one second Jax had sent "salutations." He was having her watched.

As Vyrl followed the stagman, he nodded to Kamoj. At first she wasn't sure what he wanted. Then she remembered. The mask. He couldn't do something as simple as walk into the forest without endangering his life.

She retrieved the mask and also Vyrl's cloak. With her arms full of Argalian wool, she stepped out into a breezy afternoon. Vyrl and the stagman were standing about twenty paces away, Vyrl still holding the sword. He looked as if he was threatening the stagman with the man's own weapon, but as Kamoj came closer she realized he was only giving the archer directions to the road.

It didn't surprise her that Vyrl intended to let him go. The archer looked tense, though. Disbelieving. That didn't surprise her either. Had one of Vyrl's stagmen attacked Jax, Ironbridge would have sent the attacker to prison, possibly even executed him.

Then, in her side vision, she saw the trees move. "Vyrl!" she shouted. "Look out!"

Vyrl spun around just as a bowball hurtled toward him, the kind with an arrow embedded in the marble. It slammed against his side, the arrow stabbing deep into his body. Then the weight of the falling ball yanked out the arrow, pulling shreds of muscle with it.

As blood spurted from the wound, Vyrl staggered, and the stagman lunged to regain his sword. He almost recovered it; Vyrl was already injured, and the stagman was well trained. But Vyrl handled the weapon like an extension of his body. Metal flashed in the dappled forest -- and Vyrl thrust the blade into the stagman's chest.

"No!" Dropping Vyrl's cloak, Kamoj ran toward them. A second bowball whistled through the air and hit Vyrl. He was moving, so it missed his heart and slammed into his chest below his shoulder. This time he managed to grab the shaft of the arrow before the falling ball ripped it out of his body. The weight of the ball broke the arrow, leaving its upper end embedded in his muscles.

A great roaring noise filled the forest, and the cry of a siren. With shock, Kamoj realized the siren was coming *out* of Vyrl's body. Wind thrashed the trees overhead.

As Kamoj came up to Vyrl, another ball hurtled between them. Vyrl tried to shove her away, to safety. "Stay back!" He had to shout to be heard above the noise.

He sank to his knees, his face contorted with pain. Blood soaked his shirt and pants, and the stagman lay dead at his feet. No, not dead; blood still pumped out of his wound. But Kamoj recognized mortal injuries: neither Vyrl nor the stagman would live much longer.

Dropping next to Vyrl, she pressed the mask over his face, trying to make it stay as he gasped for air. Before she had it in place, someone grabbed her arm and yanked her back. Twisting around, she found herself looking up a second Ironbridge stagman, another archer, almost certainly the one who had shot Vyrl. She struggled as he dragged her back, but she couldn't pull free. Frantic, she threw the mask at Vyrl -- and saw it hit the ground beyond his reach.

"Let me go!" she shouted at the stagman.

His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear him. The whole forest was in motion now, come alive, trees parting overhead while the wind roared.

Incredibly, Vyrl made it to his feet and stumbled toward them, his hand clutched on his side, blood running over his fingers. Then he fell, barely managing to put his hand out in time to cushion the impact. His face had gone pale, a mask of death to replace the silver mask that lay beyond his reach.

"*Let go of me!*" Kamoj shouted. Wrestling in the archer's grip, she looked up --

And froze. A giant black and gold bird was cutting a swath through the trees, blasting away scales and dirt. The roar of its descent drowned out even the siren from Vyrl's body.

As soon as the bird landed, its mouth gaped open. *People* ran out of its throat, Dazza and others in gray uniforms, all sheathed in shimmers that molded to their bodies. Two Lionstar stagmen came also, Azander and another man. The unfamiliar Lionstar man raised his arm and pointed a tube at the Ironbridge archer that held Kamoj.

"Ah -- " With a stunned expression, the archer collapsed. The Lionstar man looked disconcerted, as if he hadn't been sure what would happen when he did whatever he had done with the tube.

Kamoj tried to run to Vyrl, but one of the shimmer-sheathed strangers caught her and held her back. The other healers were kneeling around Vyrl. As one of them placed a translucent mask over his face, Dazza worked dials on a cylinder connected by a cord to the mask. Two other healers lifted him onto a stretcher.

Impossibly, the stretcher rose off the ground on its own. Grabbing its ends, the healers ran for the metal bird. Dazza went with them, running by the stretcher. Two more of Vyrl's people laid the dying Ironbridge man on a second stretcher and followed the first group. The siren from Vyrl's body still rang throughout the trees.

Kamoj struggled in the grip of the healer that held her. "Let me go with him!" she shouted. When he only tightened his grip, she screamed, "*Let me go!*"

Still running, Dazza glanced back. "Let her come," she called. Then she disappeared into the bird's throat.

The instant the healer released her, Kamoj took off. She had no time to consider the consequences of running into the mouth of a giant metal bird. Its jaw was already closing. She barely had time to race inside before it snapped shut behind her. Two more steps took her through the throat -- and into a nightmare.

The bird's stomach was a demon's nest of tubes and metal curves, surfaces that gleamed, light panels, other things she had no names for, looping coils and projections like clawed hands.

Suddenly the bird lurched. Kamoj lost her balance and slid to one knee, her shoulder hitting the metal "wall" that lined the beast's gut. A roaring filled the air and the bird vibrated around her. As it grumbled and boomed, a great invisible hand shoved her against the wall of its stomach.

The Lionstar stagman who had knocked out the Ironbridge archer knelt on one knee at her side, his presence both reassurance and an offer of protection. She managed to incline her head in gratitude. He nodded back, his face as pale as a white-skeeted snowlizard. She suspected he had no more love of riding in the innards of giant metal birds than did she.

A few paces away from them, Vyrl lay on a pallet enmeshed in coils and jointed metal arms. The siren coming from his body abruptly cut off, leaving a calm broken only by the muted

clinks and hissing of the bird's guts. The Ironbridge man lay on another pallet, surrounded by healers. Kamoj couldn't tell what was happening with him, or even if he still lived.

Vyrl, however, was very much alive. He had ripped the mask off his face and was grabbing at a tube Dazza kept trying to press against his arm.

"I won't be put to sleep like some wild animal!" he told her.

"Stop fighting," Dazza said. "It will drive the arrows deeper into your body."

Either he didn't hear or didn't care. He kept struggling, until finally the healers fastened down his limbs with straps. Still he fought, his face flushed as he strained against his bonds. It terrified Kamoj to see him that way, like a man possessed.

"Prince Havyrl, you have to hold still," a man said. "We can't get the arrows out." In almost the same instant, Dazza said, "The sedative isn't working," and another man said, "I'll try Perital." As the man pressed a tube against Vyrl's arm, Vyrl swore, the tendons in his necks as taut as cords. His eyes rolled back into his head and his body went rigid -- no, not rigid, it was *jerking* --

Someone yelled, "What the -- ?" and a new siren went off. In the same instant, Dazza shouted, "Give me an air-syringe!" while a woman said, "Saints almighty, what kind of neural map is that?"

Vyrl's entire body spasmed against the restraints, convulsing back and forth. As Dazza slapped another tube against his arm, someone else said, "I'm reading discharges all over his brain," and another healer shouted, "We have to clear-damn! The arrow punctured his lung."

Kamoj rocked back and forth, agonized. Vyrl was dying and she was helpless to do anything. Even his healers couldn't stop the demon that wracked him like a stick-man made of twigs.

"Give him more meds!" Dazza said. "Double-dose the chest wound."

"He's got too many in his body already," a man said.

"Do it!" Dazza ordered.

A woman said, "Heartbeat and blood pressure dropping below critical levels. Colonel, we're losing him."

"No. Gods, *no*." Dazza gripped the pallet. "Vyrl, come back! Don't let go. Not *now*. Not after you've come so far."

"The nanomed concentration in his blood is too high," a man said. "They're starting to break down his tissues."

"Clean them out," Dazza said. "Neutralize *now*!"

Vyrl stopped jerking. As his body went limp, a healer said, "Neural inhibition working. Neurons fatiguing." Riding on the tail end of her words, a man said, "His right lung collapsed," and another said, "Med concentration decreasing."

Dazza glanced at a man bent over a panel of lights. "Can we save the lung?"

"The meds got to the puncture site before we flushed," he said. "I've got the pneumothorax under control and regeneration around the wound is taking."

The colonel nodded, then turned to a woman who was studying a collection of ghosts above a silver platform. "What happened to him?" Dazza asked.

"That was a *grand mal* seizure," the woman said. "A generalized tonic-clonic attack, like an epileptic convulsion. I haven't tracked down the cause yet."

"There!" a man said. He held up the arrow that had been in Vyrl's chest. When Kamoj saw blood gush out of Vyrl's wound, bile rose in her throat. It wasn't the blood; she had tended injured farm hands with wounds just as serious. But it had never been her husband before, bleeding away his life. His lung had *collapsed*. How could he survive such wounds?

Someone said, "We have the second one," and held up part of another bloody arrow. Kamoj hadn't even realized part of that one had stayed in Vyrl's body. Other healers attached

patches to the inside of his elbows while a man pressed a tube against his neck.

"Colonel, I've got what caused his seizure." That came from the woman bent over the silver ghosts. "The last sedative, the Perital, interacted with the alcohol in his bloodstream. It set off a reaction in the series-N nanomedes he carries, which acted on the psiamine receptors in his brain. With all those extra neural structures he has up there, it was too much. His neurons started firing like mad and the excitation spread." She glanced at the doctor. "His brain went into overload."

Dazza nodded tiredly. "Log the whole cycle, Lieutenant. Next time we'll know."

A man's voice came out of the air. "Colonel Pacal, shall I take the shuttle up to the *Ascendant*?"

"Yes," Dazza said.

"No," Vyrl whispered.

Dazza leaned over him, two tears running down her cheeks. "Holy saints, Vyrl, don't you ever stop arguing?"

Opening his eyes, he looked up at her. "Never want ... see that medical bay again."

Her voice gentled. "We need its equipment."

"Everything you need ... at palace."

"I'll feel better with you on the ship."

"Won't go back there."

"I can have Jak Tager meet us at the docking bay -- "

"No! Told you. Don't *need* him."

"Vyrl, I'm sorry. But I want you on the cruiser."

His eyes closed. "Then the hell with you."

"Doctor-Colonel," Kamoj said.

Dazza looked up. "Kamoj? Are you hurt?"

"No, ma'am." She tried to make her voice calm, so Dazza would listen to her, but it made the words come out stilted. "If you break the spirit of a greenglass, you can still force it to serve you. But it will serve neither willingly nor well. Break the king of the stags and the entire herd dies."

"What the hell?" a healer said. Another said, "She's just a kid. She's probably scared."

"No." Dazza was watching Kamoj. "I know what she means." She pushed her hand through the silver tendrils of her hair. Then she said, "Major, change of orders. Take us to the palace."

The disembodied voice said, "Will do, ma'am."

Kamoj closed her eyes with relief. When she opened them, Azander was watching her from the other side of the bird, where he stood against a wall. He nodded as if to thank her for intervening on Vyrl's behalf. Then he dropped his gaze to indicate respect. She swallowed, grateful he saw her as an ally now instead of an enemy.

"Colonel Pacal." One of the healers working on the Ironbridge man spoke. "We've a problem."

"What's wrong?" Dazza asked.

"We're having trouble replicating this man's erythrocytes. We need a transfusion from someone native to this biosphere."

"Do you have a compatible donor listed in the files?" Dazza asked.

"We aren't sure." The healer glanced up at Azander. "Can you try? You're the closest match."

Azander nodded, seeming to understand the odd words. He moved away from the wall and

knelt by the Ironbridge soldier. The healers attached tubes to his arms that went to their various machines. Silent and tense, they concentrated on their displays, their faces furrowed as they studied the flickering ghosts.

Suddenly one of them said, "It's good."

With obvious relief, the healers made more adjustments to their boxes, then used the tubes to connect Azander with the dying stagman. Soon red liquid was moving through the tubes. Azander remained utterly still, like a statue, staring at the liquid as it flowed, his face pale. With a jolt, Kamoj realized his *blood* was in those tubes.

Finally a healer said, "We have replication." Others went to work on Azander and his blood stopped flowing. Soon they had him free of their machines.

"Will your patient survive?" Dazza asked.

A healer working on the Ironbridge archer said, "It looks like it."

Kamoj stared at them. Who were these people, that they could give life to a man who for all intents and purposes was already dead?

Turning back to Vyrl, Kamoj saw he had succumbed to the sleep makers. Or she thought he had. Then he mumbled something.

Dazza leaned closer. "Again?"

"Kamoj," he said.

"She's here," Dazza said. "We're going to the palace."

"Good ... " Vyrl's breathing eased into sleep.

He looked so pale. But Kamoj saw no blood, neither on his body nor spilled onto the bird's guts. In fact, she couldn't see his wounds at all. Where ragged gashes had rent his body, now new skin showed. Then she realized the "skin" was a bandage.

"Colonel." The voice came out of the air. "We're coming into the palace."

Dazza glanced at the healers around the Ironbridge man. "As soon as we have Prince Havyrl off the shuttle, take your patient up to the *Ascendant*. I don't want him anywhere near the palace until we figure out why the two of them were trying to kill each other."

An odd sensation came over Kamoj, as if she were falling. The bird jolted and its dull thunder stopped. In a whoosh of air its mouth gaped open, leaving only a shimmer. Sunshine poured into the stomach.

With the Lionstar stagman at her side, Kamoj walked through the mouth. Incredibly, they came out onto the courtyard in front of the palace. The stagman glanced at her and spread his hands, the disquiet on his face mirroring what she felt. Only moments ago they had been in the forest.

The healers brought Vyrl out on the floating stretcher, with a silver sheet over his body. Servants threw open the doors of the palace and the healers strode inside.

Kamoj slept in a sitting position, leaning against the headboard of the bed. Vyrl lay next to her, either asleep or unconscious. Each time she awoke, she saw Dazza in an armchair by the nightstand, watching Vyrl, dozing, or studying images in her book-box.

Sometimes the colonel spoke to the nightstand. Different voices answered, most in unfamiliar languages. A few used their odd Bridge dialect. Dazza discussed Azander's *paramedic* training with one, saying she wanted more of the household staff to learn it. Another voice told her the Ironbridge stagman was recovering on the *Ascendant*. Later someone said a delegation from the *Ascendant* had gone to Ironbridge to speak to Jax.

From what Kamoj gathered, it sounded like Vyrl's people were holding the second Ironbridge archer in Argali, until they decided what to do about his shooting Vyrl. Apparently the Lionstar stagman had knocked him out with a sleep weapon. Kamoj didn't understand how a tube could carry sleep or how a person could throw that sleep at others, but nevertheless, it had

happened.

She was dozing when a rustle of sheets woke her. She opened her eyes to see Vyrl jerking, restless with his dreams. Dazza sat slumped in her chair, asleep, but when Vyrl groaned she snapped awake. The doctor took one look at him, then opened her case and removed a black tube. She stood up, leaning over Vyrl as she brought the tube to his neck.

"Wait," Kamoj said. "He hates that."

Dazza exhaled. "I know. But if he jerks like that, it could tear open his wounds."

Vyrl's fingers curled into claws. His breathing had grown ragged and his forehead contorted as if he were in pain.

"There might be another way." Kamoj slid the pillow out from under his head and put herself in its place, sitting cross-legged with his head in her lap, his curls spread across her legs in red-gold profusion. Then she massaged his head. As she worked, his face relaxed and his breath slowed to an even rhythm.

"Well, I'll take a launch off a lily-pad," Dazza said.

Kamoj looked up at her. "Ma'am?"

Smiling, Dazza said, "It seems you're effective alternative medicine."

Kamoj hesitated. "May I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"That sound Vyrl's body was making today, when he was hurt. How did it do that?"

"He has an implant," Dazza said. "If he's in trouble, it sets off alarms, including the siren. It also activates a neutrino beacon. That's how we found him." She paused, her head tilted as she considered Kamoj. "May I ask a question?"

It felt odd to have the doctor request permission to seek information. Kamoj had no idea what position "colonel" occupied in the hierarchy of things, but Dazza clearly ranked high among Vyrl's people.

"I will answer to the best of my ability," Kamoj said.

"Why did Vyrl try to kill the Ironbridge man?"

"Because he tried to kill Vyrl."

"The Ironbridge soldiers claim they acted in self-defense." Dazza settled back into her chair. "We've done scans on them. They're both telling the truth as they see it."

"Didn't know who I was," Vyrl mumbled. He opened his eyes and looked at Dazza, his gaze bleary.

She leaned forward. "How are you feeling?"

"Lousy." He closed his eyes. "Flaming sedatives."

"I'm sorry," Dazza said. "But I had to do what I thought necessary." With the look of someone who already knew what response she was going to get, she added, "That's why I've posted Jagernauts as your bodyguards. You will have two with you at all times, even in the palace. Right now they're on the landing of this suite."

His eyes snapped open. "Damn it, Colonel. I'm tired of privacy being a luxury I'm forbidden."

She crossed her arms. "What did you expect? That ISC would stand by while you steal state-of-the-art special operations gear, ride off in a drunken rage, and almost get yourself killed?"

Vyrl scowled at her.

In a quieter voice, Dazza said, "Why would an Ironbridge archer try to kill you?"

After a pause, Vyrl answered. "Because of what he saw. It probably looked like I was threatening the other Ironbridge man with his own sword. And I had Kamoj. The archer was defending his partner and Kamoj's honor. Or else he thought like the first one, that Kamoj was

committing adultery with me."

"Adultery?" Dazza asked. "With her own husband?"

"Interesting concept, yes?" Vyrl hesitated. "The stagman ... ?"

"He will live," Dazza said. As relief sped across Vyrl's face, she added, "You damn near killed him. Why did you stab him? He was just trying to recover his weapon."

"Why do you think? Someone shot me. Then this one lunged at me. I reacted in reflex."

"I hadn't realized you knew how to use a sword like that."

He shrugged. "I learned on Lyshriol."

"You trained with swords on your home planet?"

"All highborn boys do there. It's part of the culture."

"It just seems so -- " Dazza squinted at him. "Barbaric."

Vyrl scowled. "What, if I crisped him with a laser carbine, that would be civilized? Hell, we could be really civilized and have the *Ascendant* drop an antimatter bomb on Ironbridge."

Dazza didn't answer, and Kamoj could tell Vyrl's words bothered her. She had been prepared to hate Dazza, after what Vyrl had told her this afternoon. Instead she kept remembering Dazza's tears, so uncharacteristic of the craggy colonel, when the doctor realized Vyrl was going to live.

"What I don't understand," Vyrl said, "is why Ironbridge stagmen are prowling around my woods."

Dazza glanced at Kamoj. "Would you feel more comfortable if I told him?"

Kamoj nodded, wondering what Dazza knew.

"Told me what?" Vyrl asked.

"We sent people down to talk with Maxard Argali," she said. "It seems your bride was betrothed to Jax Ironbridge."

Vyrl stared up at Kamoj. Mortified, she averted her eyes.

"Their marriage was arranged years ago," Dazza said. "Apparently Ironbridge is quite fond of her."

Kamoj almost gagged. If Jax was fond of her, she would hate to see how he treated people he didn't like.

Vyrl spoke gently. "Look at me, water sprite." When she met his gaze, he said, "I'm sorry. I should have realized a woman such as yourself would already be spoken for."

She wished she could disappear into the woodwork. Vyrl glanced at Dazza and tilted his head toward the door.

"Uh-ah, yes, well." The colonel stood up. "I have to check in with the *Ascendant*. I'll look in on you later."

When Kamoj and Vyrl were alone, he said, "I truly am sorry. I figured there might be others, but I assumed if something was serious, you would refuse my offer. It didn't occur to me that you would have no choice." After a moment he added, "Or maybe I didn't want it to occur to me."

"You established your bid legally," Kamoj replied. "No one could match it."

"I don't get it," Vyrl said. "How did the concepts of slavery and a dowry get mixed up together here?"

"Slavery? What do you mean?"

"Don't you hear what you're saying? I outbid him for you. How can you not hate me?"

"You did nothing wrong."

"I bought another human being. That's wrong. On top of which, it was a woman who had already given her word to another man." Dryly he added, "A woman younger than most of my granddaughters."

Granddaughters? Older than her? Surely she heard wrong.

Then again, Jax was Vyrl's age and he had illegitimate children everywhere, some of them adults with their own children. That, she realized, was what bothered her. Not that Vyrl had children but how he came about them. With Jax she had almost managed to convince herself she didn't care what he did. With Vyrl, an agony of jealousy rose in her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She stopped massaging his head. "Nothing."

"Something about my children," he said. "Their mother?"

"Men can marry only one woman here. Perhaps in your Imperial court it is different."

He laughed. "Concubines and court intrigue? Gods, Kamoj, that isn't me. I may have more titles than I know what to do with, but I'm still a farm boy from nowhere. All I ever wanted was my wife, my family, and my land."

She spoke with care. "Then you are widowed?"

"I married my childhood sweetheart when we were kids." In a voice soft with sorrow, he added, "Ten years ago she took a fall in the Backbone Mountains. She died instantly."

"Hai," she murmured. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago." His voice gentled. "We had many good years, twelve beautiful children, over forty grandchildren so far, and gods know how many great-grandchildren." He paused, squinting at her. "I get mixed up which of the new ones are grandchildren and which are great-grand. There's even a few great-greats in there."

She stared at him. "But you are so *young*."

"People marry young where I come from. I was fourteen." He laughed. "When I told Dazza that, she nearly went through the wall. Legal age in the overall Imperialate culture is twenty-five, and the average number of children for a conventional couple is two. By the time I was 'legal,' I had six children."

It didn't sound odd to Kamoj. In her experience, people married young and had as many children as possible, with the hope that at least some would survive until adulthood, and perhaps, if the family was lucky, even prosper.

But the numbers and his age still didn't fit. She struggled to work it out. Although she was better at mathematics than most people, she usually had wires with beads to do problems as difficult as this one. No matter how she looked at it, she kept coming up with the same impossible results.

Finally she said, "Even if your children married as young as you did, I don't see how you could have so many descendants, especially great-grandchildren and great-greats."

"Why? I'm sixty-three."

Her mouth fell open. "What? No. That can't be."

"It's true." He grinned. "But if you want to tell me how young I look, I won't object."

She smiled. "You can angle for compliments all you wish, my handsome husband. But I still don't understand. How can you look so young?"

"Good genes and exercise, I suppose. Also, the nanomedes in my body do some repairs, enough to help delay aging." He hesitated. "Did you really mean what you said this afternoon, about wanting me to stay with you?"

"Yes."

"Even though you could have your betrothed back if we arranged for me to 'die'?"

"Jax Ironbridge is a -- " The word slug tempted her, but she held it back. No more

appropriate word came, though. She kept imagining a slug making its way through the mud.

Vyrl laughed. "You can compare my competition to all the slimy creatures you want."

"I would never speak ill of Ironbridge's good name."

"Your tact is laudable." He closed his eyes. "I like your worm images better, though."

She stroked his forehead. "Lionstar Province has no worms."

A guilty look passed over his face. "I don't really have a province on this planet."

"Of course you do."

"I do?"

"Argali and our villages." She thought of Azander. "Your stagmen come from outlying hamlets, yes?"

"That's right."

"Most of those hamlets were originally part of the North Sky Islands. But they've become unattached." It appalled Kamoj, actually. Rather than trying to support villages so distant and so impoverished, past governors of the Islands had ignored them, until finally, after many generations, the villages lost all association with their former province—and with that, their last hope of survival. "If their stagmen are your sworn liegemen, then you are also now the authority in their villages."

He opened his eyes. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"A union such as ours is a merger. A business arrangement. In marrying me, you agreed to help support my people."

"In other words, responsibilities come with power."

She took a breath. "Yes."

"Such as?"

"Food. Work. Tools. Shelter." Softly she said, "Survival."

Vyrl considered her. Then he reached out and pressed a turquoise stone on the nightstand.

A voice floated into the air. "Colonel Pacal here."

"Dazza, when is Morlin coming back up?" Vyrl asked.

"I'm not sure. The techs are replacing the fiberoptics. Is there a problem?"

"No. I just need some information."

"Maybe I can help."

He scowled. "Yes, but Morlin never argues with me."

Dryly Dazza said, "What are you about to do that you think will start an argument?"

"Do you remember our decision to minimize interactions with the native culture here?"

"Yes."

"Well, we may have a problem."

"What problem?"

"It seems that by marrying Kamoj, I've set myself up as a sort of sovereign in Argali."

Dazza made an exasperated noise. "That's hardly what I call 'minimizing interactions.'"

"I want to send some techs to the villages."

"Why? The villages have no tech for techs to work on."

"That's the point. These people have a killing winter coming. We can heat their houses."

After a pause, Dazza said, "I'll assign a group to it."

"Discreetly, though. I don't want to scare anyone. Dress them in native clothes and send some of my stagmen with them."

"All right."

"Some of the houses are old enough to have web systems -- "

"Vyrl." Her voice had a warning note. "Don't push it."

"Can you go down to Argali too?" he asked.

"Me? Why?"

"See if they need medical help."

Her voice turned dry again. "In case you've forgotten, I'm an ISC colonel. I have responsibilities."

"Oh. Yes. Of course."

The silence stretched out. Finally Dazza said, "I have some residents up on the *Ascendant* who are just out of medical school. They could benefit from the experience."

Vyrl smiled. "Good."

"We should send agriculturists too," she said.

"We already have one." His voice grew animated. "Dazza, listen. I've been working on quad-grains. Give me a few years and I could engineer crops and livestock that would increase production here tenfold."

"We don't have a few years."

"Just think about it."

She exhaled. "All right."

"Good." Vyrl grinned. Then he yawned and turned his head until his lips touched Kamoj's thigh.

Tears gathered in Kamoj's eyes. Softly she said, "Thank you, beautiful lion."

"Vyrl?" Dazza asked.

"I'm sleeping," he mumbled.

"Ah," the colonel said. "Good-night, Governor Argali."

Kamoj blinked at the phrase. "Good-night?" When no answer came, she said, "Dazza?" The nightstand remained quiet.

So she stroked Vyrl's hair and watched stars move across the patch of sky visible through the window on the other side of the room. Could he truly warm their houses in winter? Heal their ills? Help them grow ten times as much food? It was remarkable how, when life seemed to reach its worst, things could turn about this way. Surely all would be well now.

Surely Vyrl wouldn't drink anymore.

VII

Above The Sky

Integration

"Water sprite, wake up."

Kamoj moved, then groaned. It felt like pins and thornbats prickled her legs, where she had folded them under her body. She didn't remember sliding out from under Vyrl, but she was sitting next to him now, her hands tucked between her knees. Moonlight poured over the bed.

Vyrl lay watching her. "I need you to do something for me."

She smiled, imagining his hands on her body. "Anything."

"In the second drawer of my desk. There's a bottle I need."

Her good mood vanished. "You don't need that."

"I can't sleep."

"Dazza could give you -- "

"No!"

"But -- "

"I don't need Dazza's damn sedatives."

"I can't get you the bottle."

His voice hardened. "Why not? You have two legs. You can walk the ten steps it would take to reach the desk."

"The rum hurts you."

"After two days you claim to know me well enough to dictate what is and isn't good for me?"

"Vyrl, no. That's not what I meant."

"Then get it for me." His voice gentled. "Just for tonight. To help me sleep."

"I can't. I -- I'm sorry."

His gentleness disappeared. "Then get out of my bed."

"But I -- "

"*Get out.*"

Stunned, Kamoj slid off the bed and ran across the room, her bare feet slapping the stone. Inside her chamber, she dropped onto her own bed. Moonlight shone through the window, creating a swath of pale colors across the floor.

A grunt came from the master bedroom, followed by the rustle of blankets. Kamoj froze, listening.

A gasp, labored but brief.

Silence.

Was he having trouble breathing? It was hard to believe he had suffered a collapsed lung only this afternoon. She started to get up, then hesitated. *Get out*, he had said. If she walked in and he was fine, she would look like a fool.

The crash of shattering glass broke the silence. She jumped up and ran into his bedroom.

Vyrl was kneeling by his desk, wearing only his sleep pants, his chest bare, except for the bandages, his arms wrapped around his body. Shards of broken glass covered the floor, glinting in the moonlight. A pool of rum was spreading under the desk.

Kamoj went over and knelt in front of him. Up this close she saw tears on his cheeks, just as she had seen them last night after his nightmare. She wondered if his waking helped at all or if his night terrors recognized no boundaries between sleep and reality.

Stretching out his arm, he pulled a strand of her hair away from her lips. "Touch me, Kamoj. Let me feel you. See you. Smell you."

She reached for him. "Always. Whenever you want."

Instead of responding, he grabbed the desk and pulled himself to his feet. The window above the desk looked south, over the Lower Sky Hills that fell away to the plains. Staring out at the mountains, he spoke in a distant voice. "I've a younger brother. Kelric."

She stood up, trying to understand his mood. "A little brother?"

"Little?" He gave a short laugh. "He's huge. Joined ISC."

"Is he here now?"

"No. The war took him away."

Kamoj lifted her hand, meaning to touch him, to offer comfort. Then she hesitated, unsure what he needed or wanted. Uncertain, she dropped her hand again.

"I have a lot of brothers," he continued. "Althor. I always admired him. Looked up to him. He joined ISC too. Jagernaut."

"Jagernaut?"

"Cybernetically enhanced star fighter pilot. Like Kelric. Like those new bodyguards Colonel Pacal gave me."

"Althor is a soldier too?"

"Was." In a wooden voice, he said, "ISC gave him a beautiful funeral."

"Hai, Vyrl. I'm sorry."

He kept on, as if unable to stop. "There's my sister. Soz. We were closest in age, out of ten children." He finally turned to Kamoj. "You look a little like her."

"She is also a soldier? Like Dazza?"

"Dazza served under her."

"Where is she now?"

"Blown to dust."

"Vyrl, I -- I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" His words came like leaded rain. "My brother Eldrin is still alive. The Traders captured him. You know what they do when they catch one of us? No, never mind. You don't want to know. My aunt and her son, they're gone. Prisoners, maybe. Dead, probably. Then there is Kurj, my uncle. War leader before Soz. She took over after the Traders killed him."

"I'm so sorry." It sounded useless, saying that over and over. She had lost only her parents and that had torn apart her world. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose most of a large family.

He walked away, across the room. Bathed in pale light from the Far Moon and the aurora borealis, he climbed the dais. Then he turned to face her. "I'm a good farmer. You want crops with better yields? Bi-hoxen that can better survive your winters? I can work it out. That's what I wrote my doctorate on, the application of genetic engineering to crop and livestock development. I've had Morlin running DNA simulations here."

"I don't understand what you're trying to tell me," she said.

"Farming." He stood in the moonlight like a statue, the planes of his chest stark in the colorless radiance that filled the room. "I've always loved it. You know where I got that? From my father. He loved the land. And he loved us. His children." His voice broke. "At least I was there when he died."

She went to him then, joining him on the dais. Gently she said, "How did it happen?"

He rubbed his palm over his cheek, seeming surprised to find tears there. "Old age. Old wounds." Dropping his hand, he said, "My father spent his last days with his family, in our family house, on our home world. The Allied military let us have that much."

"Allied?"

"The Allied Worlds of Earth." Bitter now, he said, "They were 'kind' enough to let us live in our own homes. Of course, Earth now controls the entire planet where we live."

"Earth? I don't understand."

"I told you this afternoon. Our 'allies' betrayed us. They won't let my family go." In a quieter voice he said, "They believe that without my family to power the Ruby machines, ISC

won't risk another war. Earth fears that otherwise my people and the Traders will destroy civilization, the way the Ruby Empire was destroyed, five thousand years ago."

"But if you were their prisoner, how are you here now?"

"None of my family could get offworld."

"But you're *here*."

He looked away from her, out the window across the room. "Do you know what my father's dying wish was? His gruesome dying wish? That his coffin be launched into orbit around the planet."

"Orbit?"

"Above the sky."

"Like the moons?"

"Like the moons. He wanted to be a moon."

"But why? If he valued the land -- "

"He loved it. The land. The harvest. The seasons." Vyrl turned back to her. "Going into orbit terrified him."

"But you said he asked to go there."

"That's what he told our jailors." A muscle in his cheek jerked. "We held his true funeral in secret, to do what he told my mother he really wanted. We cremated his body and spread the ashes over his land." He swallowed. "Then my family took his coffin to the starport."

"Why, if he wasn't in it?"

"The Allies didn't know that. There was a body, one their sensors registered as his."

She stiffened. "No."

He went on, inexorable. "Our family physician on Lyshriol was an ISC agent. He installed an intravenous system inside the coffin to feed me. Made the coffin vacuum tight. So I could breathe. Put in a web system to deceive probes. I weigh more than my father, so he streamlined everything. Same for the web, not because of weight, but to minimize the risk of detection. It didn't even have a voice mod for conversation. He didn't want to use drugs in an unmonitored environment, but finally he agreed to sedate me, so I wouldn't get claustrophobic." His voice cracked. "It would only be for one day, after all."

"They buried you *alive*?"

Flatly he said, "My mother made a heartbroken plea to our jailors. Said she couldn't bear to think of her husband in that cold wasteland. In compassion for the beautiful bereaved widow, they agreed to let an ISC ship recover his casket from space. In honor of his wishes, it would spend one day in orbit, and then ISC would make the pickup." He paused. "By the time I awoke from sedation, I would be safe on the *Ascendant*."

Relief poured over Kamoj. "It was a trick! To get you away from your enemies. And it worked."

"Yes. It worked." His cheek twitched. "With just one little glitch."

"Glitch?"

"An Allied bureaucrat stalled the pickup." In a quiet voice, he added, "No one told my family. The Allies didn't want to upset them. But minutes after the launch, someone somewhere along the line changed his mind and said they wouldn't give up the body."

Kamoj felt as if her stomach dropped. "No."

"Don't look so grim." He flexed his fist, jerkily opening and closing his hand. "Negotiations to recover the body began even before I woke up."

"You woke up inside the coffin?"

"Yes."

Kamoj tried to imagine it, buried alive, with only a box separating you from the sky and stars, knowing something had gone terribly wrong, that you were *here* when you should have been there, safe and free.

Vyrl swallowed. "Do you know what 'sensory deprivation' means? No sound. No sight. No taste. No smell. No weight. After a while I couldn't even feel the inside of the coffin. And my mind -- I couldn't -- as a telepath, I need to be close to people to pick up anything. My mind opened up, searching for anyone. Anything. *Anything*. I was wide open and there was *nothing*."

"How long?" she whispered.

The brittle edge of his voice broke. "Thirty-one days. When the team on the *Ascendant* finally got me out, I was screaming, raving insane."

Kamoj had no idea what to say. No words would take away this horror, no touch heal it.

"Don't look so dismayed," he said. "They took care of me. Treated me. Hell, it even helped. To a point." His head jerked. "But the psiber centers in my brain went dead. ISC got their precious Ruby psion, but they broke him in the process. Turned me into a crippled telepath." He swallowed. "Except when I sleep. Then my mind opens up like in the coffin. But this isn't space. People are all around. So I go into telepathic overload. If they isolate me and I can't pick up anything, I start to scream again." Dully he added, "And every time Dazza sedates me, all I can think is that I'll wake up in that coffin."

"There must be some cure -- something -- "

"The rum deadens my brain. It lets me sleep."

She took his hands. "Surely some other solution exists. Can't Dazza and her people help you?"

"They can all go to hell."

"But -- "

His voice hardened. "Two people on the *Ascendant* knew my father's body wasn't in that coffin: the special operations officer assigned to the mission and General Ashman, the ship's commander. They could have ended it any time by revealing that a living man was out there. ISC would have lost me back to the Allies, but I would have been free from that nightmare." His fists clenched. "They wanted me any way they could get me, and to the hell with my sanity."

"Hai, Vyrl." She thought she understood now, both his pain and the desperation that drove his military to such an extreme. Gently she said, "When did you start to feel thoughts again?"

"With you." With an obvious effort, he relaxed his hands. "You're wide open to me, water sprite. I felt it that day I saw you in the river."

Kamoj remembered Dazza's face when the doctor had realized Vyrl was picking up his bride's thoughts. Joy. Hope. Elation. All signs of a healer whose patient had begun a recovery she feared would never happen.

Vyrl took her hand and climbed onto the bed, drawing her with him. As they lay down together, the quilts enveloped them in billowy cloth, soft from many washings and fragrant with the scent of spice-soap.

She touched his damp cheek. "We have a saying in Argali: 'Tears wash clean the debris of the heart.'"

"I'm not crying." Another tear slid down his cheek. "I never cry. Only children do that."

Kamoj thought of all the tears she had held in over the years. "Maybe children know better than we."

His voice caught. "Ai, water sprite. Something inside me is breaking. I don't know what, only that it's thawing."

"Like ice on a lake in spring."

He pulled her into his arms. "Be my spring, Kamoj."

Night curled around them, quiet and foggy. As they made love, a low-lying cloud seeped in the window. Afterward they lay together, drowsing, their heads together, Vyrl's lips touching her hair.

Some time later he said, "Look. The Lion came up."

Kamoj opened her eyes. The fog in the room had reached as high as his desk, but their view of the window was clear. The Lion constellation was stalking across the sky, his head thrown back, his mane flowing in a wind of stars.

"See the star in his front paw?" Vyrl said.

"The yellow one?"

"Yes. That's a sun of my home world. It's why we made up the name Lionstar."

"Lionstar isn't your real name?"

He gave her a guilty look. "It isn't even close."

"What are you called?"

"A lot of nonsense."

"Tell me."

"You don't really want to hear it."

She smiled. "But I do. The whole thing."

"All right. But I warned you." With a grimace, he said, "Prince Havyrl Torcellei Valdor kya Skolia, Sixth Heir, once removed from the line of Pharaoh, born of the Rhon, Fourth Heir to the Web Key, Fifth Heir to the Assembly Key, and Fifth Heir to the Emperor."

Kamoj blinked. "So many names."

He touched her cheek. "And you?"

"Just Kamoj Quanta Argali." It didn't sound nearly so impressive as his.

"Quanta?" He laughed. "Ai, Kamoj, you're a bound quantum resonance."

It relieved her to see his spirits lighten, even if his words were odd. "You think my name means resonance too?"

"Argali refers to a Breit-Wigner scattering resonance. It comes from the Iotic word *akil tz'i*." He paused. "Actually *akil tz'i* originally meant leash. It's used now for resonance. Some people say it derives from a Mayan language, but no one really knows."

Kamoj knew nothing about "Mayan," but she had no doubts about her own language. "Argali means vine rose."

"Not really. It just got mixed up with another Iotic word, *akil tz'usub*, which means vine runner."

Just like that, he took away her entire name and gave her a new one, without even realizing it. "What does 'Mayan' mean?"

He pushed up on his elbow to look at her, as if her appearance could give him a clue to his own past. "My people have tried to determine our origins by comparing our languages to those on Earth. Some similarities exist between classical Iotic and Tzotzil Mayan. Other of our words suggest we came from the Mediterranean or Near East. But no matter how you look at it, none of it makes sense, unless my ancestors were shifted in time as well as space. Our history on Raylicon goes back six thousand years, and at that time no culture on Earth even vaguely resembled that of my ancestors."

"Then how can you be sure about the language?" She shook her head. "Scattering resonance? It makes no sense."

"It's like when you roll bowling balls on a table and they bounce off each other." He lay on his side again. "Particles do that too."

"Particles? You mean dust?"

"Smaller. Much smaller. And they can change state."

"What is 'change state'?"

"Deform, spin different ways, that sort of thing."

"This is what 'resonance' means?"

"A resonance is when one ball captures another."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Vyrl, I have never heard of bowballs capturing each other."

He laughed. "Just try to imagine it. The balls don't bounce apart right away. They collide and stick together for a while. That's the resonance."

"Why would my name mean such a thing?"

"I don't know." he admitted. "What are some other common Argali names?"

She thought about it. "Sable for women. Maxard for men."

"Maxard could refer to a maximum. What is your uncle's full name?"

"Maxard Osil Argali."

"Osil means life. Maximum resonance lifetime?"

Kamoj didn't see what sense that made either. "What about Sable?"

"I don't know about that one. It just means black."

"It is a contraction of *Metastable state*."

He stared at her. "That can't be coincidence! *Metastable state* refers to a resonance." He looked inordinately pleased with this strange statement. "You're all named after *scattering* processes. Wait until I tell Drake."

"Drake?"

"The anthropologist on the *Ascendant*. He's been trying to make sense out of the name 'Jax.'"

Kamoj stiffened. "What about Jax?"

"It's actually an acronym. Jks."

"Yes. I know. But Jax is easier to say."

"Jks. They're *quantum numbers*. For a free particle. *J* is angular momentum, *k* is energy, *s* is spin." He snapped his fingers. "Jax Ironbridge is a free particle! Actually, he's one term in the partial wave expansion for a free-particle plane wave."

"Good for him," Kamoj said dourly.

His smile faded. "My sorry. That was insensitive."

Free particle indeed. All she knew about Jax was that she no longer needed to suffer a pendulum of emotions, swinging between fear of his temper and relief for his tenderness. Which was fine with her.

After that they lay in silence, side by side, their heads together. Kamoj was almost asleep when Vyrl made an odd choked sound.

She opened her eyes. "Are you all right?"

He wiped sweat from his forehead. "Yes."

"Shall I get Dazza?"

"No." He pressed the heels of his hands against his temples. "I'll be fine."

"I can rub your head."

He glanced at her. "Yes. Thank you."

Kamoj sat up and took his head into her lap. As she massaged him, his eyes twitched beneath his closed lids. But after only a few moments he said, "Maybe you better not."

"There must be something I can do."

"Get me another bottle. From the kitchen. That one I broke is the last I had up here."

"Please don't -- "

His face went stiff, like the precursor to an explosion.

"Wait," Kamoj said. She couldn't bear the thought of his rejecting her again, a second time in one night. But how could she do what he asked?

Then it occurred to her that if she went downstairs, she might find someone who could give her advice. "I'll go to the kitchen."

He relaxed. "Thank you, Kamoj."

She put on her underdress and a robe, and left their bed. As she tied her sash, she crossed to the entrance of the suite, wondering what she would find on the landing outside. Vyrl's new bodyguards, stagmen from the *Ascendant*.

She eased open the outer door, trying to project a confidence she didn't feel. Moonlight filtered onto the landing from a window in the stairwell. The two men posted outside were huge, bigger even than Vyrl. They wore black, with no diskmail, only jackets, pants, and knee boots. Metal bands gleamed on their upper arms, and the leather guards on their wrists glinted with metallic ribbing. Each man also wore a black bulk on his hip, not a sword or dagger, but something else with a handle and snout.

Then Kamoj realized one of the stagmen was a stagwoman. Massive and muscled, she stood taller than most men of Balumil. How did Vyrl's people grow so big?

Both guards were watching her. From their intrigued looks, one would have thought she was some rare, exotic flower instead of an ordinary farm girl.

The man spoke in accented Iotaca. "Can we help you, Governor Argali?"

"I need to go to the kitchen," Kamoj said.

He smiled down at her. "Tell Morlin what you need. Then you won't have to walk down there in this cold."

"Isn't Morlin gone?"

"Most of the system is down. But you can use the intercom to page someone in the kitchen."

"I don't wish to bother anyone. But thank you." Self-conscious, Kamoj nodded to them as she would to her uncle's stagmen. Then she started down the stairs. To her relief, neither of the giants tried to accompany her.

No lamps or candles lit the stairwell, but moonlight slanted in through the window slits-white light, which meant more than one moon was up, and probably the aurora as well. She reached the Long Hall on the first floor without seeing anyone. A few lamps burned on the walls, but the corridor was empty. Further down, light slanted out of rooms here and there, on either side.

The first of the lit rooms was empty. In the second, a housemaid was cleaning the floor. Kamoj found Dazza in the third. The colonel was sitting on a sofa, reading an odd book with glowing hieroglyphic symbols on its surface.

Dazza looked up as she entered. "Good evening."

Kamoj hesitated just inside the doorway. "My greetings, Colonel Pacal."

"Did you want to talk to me?" When Kamoj nodded, Dazza closed her book and motioned to a chair by the sofa. "Please. Be comfortable."

Kamoj came in and sat on the edge of the chair.

The colonel smiled. "What is it, child?"

Child? Kamoj stiffened and said nothing.

After a moment Dazza asked, "Have I offended you?"

Kamoj made herself relax. She hadn't come here to bristle at people. "I need your help, ma'am."

"What can I do for you?"

"It's about rum."

Dazza pushed her hand through her hair, mussing the grey curls. "Is it rum? Or someone who drinks it?"

Kamoj twisted her hands in her lap. "He wants me to bring him more."

"Don't do it. Please."

"He will send me away."

"He won't."

"He says he will."

"He doesn't mean it."

"How can you know?"

Dazza's face gentled. "I do believe he's already in love with you."

"He can't be," Kamoj said matter-of-factly. "We don't know each other."

"Apparently it happens this way sometimes, with telepaths."

"Happens?"

"Falling in love."

"Everyone falls in love."

"Not like Vyrl."

"Why is he different?"

Dazza set her book on the couch. "Psions have more neural structures in their brain than other people. Vyrl, especially. He feels everything more. Add in that emotional artistic temperament of his and you get real fire."

Her words surprised Kamoj. Vyrl didn't strike her as emotional, but as capable of deep emotions, which she wouldn't have called the same thing. She liked the way he expressed himself, open and warm, full of dash. She wondered, too, what Dazza meant by artistic temperament.

"Fire?" she asked.

The colonel smiled. "They used to call it 'love at first sight.' That turned out to be a misnomer, though. It's more 'at first thought.'"

Wryly Kamoj said, "We have such a saying. 'Love under the Wild Moon.' It is because this love makes your life chaos."

Dazza gave a rueful laugh. "Yes, I can see that."

"But why 'at first thought?'"

"The fields produced by his brain couple to an unusually large degree with yours. His mind interprets that interaction in a pleasant way." When Kamoj shook her head, Dazza tried again. "The process of thinking creates fields in your brain. You can't see them, but they can affect what is nearby."

"Like a magnet?"

Dazza gave her a surprised look. "Well, yes, actually, in a sense. The various fields your cerebrum produces are more complicated and less intense, but the basic idea is the same."

"And Vyrl reacts to mine?"

The doctor nodded. "When people are near each another, the fields interact. Usually the effect is minor, even negligible. But every now and then two people hit a resonance. Combine that with a strong physical attraction and you can get intense emotion in a remarkably short time. Over the long term, it can create an exceptional bond." Dryly she said, "Poets call it a love 'deeper than the sea' or 'wider than the sky.' 'Quantum resonance' may sound less romantic, but it's more accurate."

Kamoj blinked. It sounded like Dazza meant Vyrl's actions were more than a drunken whim, that something special about she, Kamoj, had drawn him to her. It unsettled her to discover just how much she wanted that to be true.

Feeling awkward, she said, "He is also important to me. But each time it seems he will be all right, he wants to drink again. I had thought he would stop."

Softly Dazza said, "I wish it worked that way."

"Can you help?"

"I can treat his withdrawal symptoms. And his craving. But I can't make him want to quit." She spoke in a quiet voice. "I'm trying to reach him. But in the end it must be his choice."

"Can't you give him something to make him stop?"

Dazza shook her head. "I don't think so. I could inject nanomedes that would interact with alcohol to make him sick every time he drinks. But if I force him to quit that way, it won't stick. In the end all I would probably achieve is to earn more of his resentment." She grimaced. "Besides which, if I did it without his consent, I would be breaking the law and endangering ISC relations with the Ruby Dynasty."

Kamoj nodded. She and Maxard had often had to juggle politics with expediency for the sake of Argali. "Vyrl doesn't seem like someone who would drink so much."

"Apparently he never had much interest in it prior to -- " The colonel stopped, then said, "to a sickness he suffered."

"He told me about the coffin."

Dazza stared at her. "He *told* you?" When Kamoj nodded, the doctor said, "He's refused to speak of it with anyone else."

"If he can talk to me, can't he stop drinking too?"

"It's not that easy. His body expects it now. Stopping will make him sick."

"You can help him with that."

She nodded. "Yes. But mentally he also depends on it. He thinks he can't survive without it."

"He can."

"Vyrl doesn't believe it." Dazza exhaled. "I wish I could make him see. Few people could survive what happened as well as he has. It's even more remarkable because his being a psion amplified the experience, gods only know how much. Something had to give. I hate what the alcohol is doing to him, but it could have been a lot worse. He hasn't tried to commit suicide. And incredibly, despite everything, he came through it with his mind and personality intact."

"He thinks the rum does that for him."

"Please, Kamoj. Don't give it to him."

She twisted her hands together. "He gets so angry."

"I know. But you must refuse."

"This is easy for you to say. You don't share his bed."

The colonel blinked. "Well, no. I've my own husband."

Kamoj doubted Dazza had ever suffered the humiliation of being banned from her bridal bed.

"I am the one who must live with him."

Dazza spoke carefully. "No one will force you to stay in this marriage if you desire otherwise."

"Your ISC wishes Vyrl and I didn't wed, don't they?"

It was a moment before Dazza answered. "It is true that the marriage complicates an already complicated situation."

"You will all leave here, yes?"

"Yes. Probably soon."

"What happens to me then?"

"The choice to come or stay is yours."

"Is it?" Kamoj made a conscious effort to keep her voice even. "Vyrl has set himself up as the authority in Argali. If he leaves, it will bring great shame to my province." And to her. "Especially given the way he became governor."

"Surely a way exists to let you save face."

Kamoj made an incredulous noise. "More must be saved than 'face.' Argali is *dying*. Why do you think I was betrothed to Ironbridge? Lionstar humiliated Ironbridge, and if Vyrl leaves, he humiliates Argali as well. If I stay here alone, what happens to the merger? To my province? To my line? Unless I am pregnant when Vyrl leaves, I will have no heir. If I am pregnant, and alone, my uncle will feel honor-bound to stay as guardian to the child, as he did for me. If I leave with Vyrl, Maxard will stay to govern Argali. Either way, Maxard cannot marry his lady in the North Sky Islands. Both Argali and the Argali bloodline, one of the oldest in Balumil, will end."

Dazza leaned forward. "Rest assured, Vyrl would never leave you without the full resources of his title and name. And he can return for visits."

"You think politics will play attendance on visits?" Or loneliness? Bitterly Kamoj said, "Perhaps it doesn't matter. If Vyrl goes, Jax Ironbridge will probably seek his place. Vyrl could return to find his wife taken, and his child too, if we have one." She swallowed. "Given the circumstances, I suspect Ironbridge would eliminate the heir of a rival."

The colonel stared at her. "Saints almighty, Kamoj, we would never let that happen. Don't you understand your position? You are a Ruby consort. Do you have any idea what that means?"

"No."

Dazza paused at the blunt response. In a gentler voice, she said, "Your marriage gives you the highest standing a person can have among my people. ISC would never strand you, your family, or your province." She hesitated. "Assuming it is your wish to remain married to Vyrl rather than Ironbridge."

A voice came from behind them. "Colonel Pacal?"

Dazza looked past Kamoj. "Yes?"

Turning, Kamoj saw the *Ascendant* stagwoman in the doorway. "Prince Havyrl wants to know what happened to his wife," the guard said.

"Hai." Kamoj stood up. "I will be right there."

"Governor Argali," Dazza said. When Kamoj turned, the doctor added, "One more moment, if you don't mind."

Kamoj sat down. "Yes, ma'am?"

In a soft voice Dazza said, "Gods know, I may be letting my hope run away from me. But I do believe Vyrl wants to quit." She paused, watching Kamoj. "If he can just make it one day without the rum, it's a start. Don't bring it to him. Please."

Kamoj swallowed. "I will do my best."

Gently the doctor added, "And if he isn't ready to stop, don't blame yourself."

Kamoj nodded. Then she stood and went to Vyrl's bodyguard. The woman bowed, then accompanied Kamoj back to the tower.

Kamoj reentered the suite to find Vyrl sitting on the edge of the bed. He watched as she walked up the dais to him.

"Where is it?" he asked.

She stopped in front of him. "I didn't get it."

"Who were you talking to down there? Dazza?" When Kamoj flushed, his voice tightened. "Your laws say you're supposed to do what I tell you, don't they? So get it for me."

"You don't mean that."

"Don't tell me what I mean." He started to get off the bed. "I'll go myself."

"Vyrl, no." Kamoj pushed him back. "You were almost killed today. You shouldn't be up at all." She took his hands. "Listen. I'll rub your head. We can hold each other. Every time you want a drink, we'll make love. So many better ways exist to sooth your demons than soaking them in rum."

Despite himself, his mouth quirked in a smile. "I like your cures a lot better than the ones Dazza comes up with." In a gentler voice he said, "But I don't need this 'cure,' water sprite. It does more damage than what it is meant to fix. If Dazza told you otherwise, she's wrong."

Kamoj lifted his hand and bit at his knuckles in a gesture of affection common throughout the Northern Lands. "Please."

Instead of answering her, he said, "Men do that where I come from." He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, pressing his teeth against them. "Like this."

"Only women do it here."

He pulled her to stand between his legs, his arms around her waist. "Women this, men that. All these 'rules' exist and they're different everywhere. Do you know what I think? That under all those rules, people love the same. They find their way to each other no matter what."

She put her arms around him. "I can't bear to see you hurt yourself."

"I just need a drink. It helps. Not hurts."

"It's drowning you."

"That's flaming nonsense, Kamoj. Did Dazza pressure you to do this?"

"No one pressured me. I know what I see."

"Now you're a medical expert?"

"I don't need to be."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "If you won't get it for me, I'll go myself."

"Vyrl, please. It's destroying you."

"How the hell would you know?"

"Cursing at me won't change the truth."

"It's your truth. Not mine."

"You almost *died* today. Because of the rum."

It was a moment before he spoke again. When he did, he surprised her. "I never used to drink. I don't like the taste of it."

"Not even now?"

"Not even now."

"Then don't drink it."

His anger flared. "I can stop if I want."

"Then why don't you?"

"I don't want to."

"So why do you care that you never used to drink?"

"I don't care."

"Then why bring it up?"

"Damn it, Kamoj, let it go."

Her voice caught. "I wish I could make your night-demons go away. But I can't. Neither can the rum." A tear ran down her face. "I don't want you to send me away. But I can't do what you want."

He watched her, his face unreadable. "Don't sound like this."

"Like this?"

"Like your heart is breaking."

"Just one night. Stay away from it for one night."

He didn't answer, just pulled her closer until her head lay against his shoulder. She wasn't sure if he offered affection or couldn't bear to look at her. For a long time they held each other, he sitting, she standing. Gradually she began to hope it would happen, that tonight he would turn from his blue bottle.

He drew back to look at her. "Very well."

Her hope surged. "Yes?"

"I'll send one of my bodyguards for it."

"No."

"If you really wanted to be a good wife, you would help me."

"I won't help you kill yourself." She squeezed his hands. "You've already made it more than halfway through the night. You only have a few more hours."

His face was set. "If you won't help, I don't want you here."

She felt as if he had slapped her. But she forced out the words. "All right." She let go of him. "I will have my things sent back to Argali. I can leave in the morning."

A muscle in his cheek twitched. Then he turned and stabbed his finger at a jade leaf on the nightstand. Defeat washed over Kamoj, made all the worse by the way her hope had built.

A voice came into the air. "Doctor Pacal here."

Kamoj froze, watching Vyrl. He had an odd startled look, as if he had surprised himself.

After several moments Dazza said, "Vyrl? Is that you?"

"Yes. Never mind. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Are you all right? Do you have any pain?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Vyrl -- "

"I'm fine."

"I can come up."

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. Good-night."

"Call me if you need anything."

"I will."

After a while Vyrl said, "Are you still there?"

"Yes," Dazza said.

"I don't ... I mean, I'm fine. But I -- " He fell silent. Kamoj wondered if Dazza was waiting with the same held breath as she, afraid to speak for fear of saying the wrong thing.

Finally he said, "You can treat withdrawal symptoms from alcohol, can't you?"

Dazza spoke quietly. "Yes. I can help."

"Can you come up here?"

In an infinitely gentle voice she said, "I'm on my way."

Vyrl touched the leaf again. Then he sat staring at the wall. Finally he turned to Kamoj. "Just for the rest of tonight."

Tears pooled in her eyes. "Yes. Tonight." In the morning they would deal with tomorrow, and when the time came, with the day after that, one day at a time.

VIII

Dragon's Breath

Rearrangement Collision: Ionization and Recapture

The buzz of a bottle-beetle blended with forest sounds, quetzals calling and wind blowing. The translucent radiance of dawn filled the room. Kamoj's mind gradually sorted out what had awoken her. Someone had said her name.

Turning her head, she saw Vyrl sitting on the bed, dressed in a work shirt and old pants, his hair mussed as if he had been out in the wind.

He leaned over and kissed her. "You're all ruffled and warm under there."

She smiled drowsily. "How long have you been up?"

"A few hours. I had trouble sleeping."

"Did Dazza's medicine help?"

He nodded, still leaning over her, his hands on either side of her shoulders. "I feel like a stardock crane ran over my head, though."

Kamoj touched his cheek. It was the only way she knew to tell him how much it meant to her to see him sober this morning. She feared if she spoke of it, she would disrupt his precarious equilibrium. So instead she said, "What have you been doing?"

"I was down in the old throne room."

"Throne room?"

"Downstairs," Vyrl said. "The hall on the other end of the palace. We haven't finished restoring it yet."

It sounded like he meant the Hall of Audiences. "What are you going to do with it?"

He started to answer, then stopped. Sitting up straight, he said, "I'm not sure. I was deciding how to resurface the floor."

"The floor?" Kamoj wondered what he was trying to tell her. She tried to hold back her yawn, but it came anyway. It had taken her hours to doze off again last night, and then her

fitful dreams had kept her restless.

"Go on and sleep," Vyrl murmured. "It's barely sunrise. I have to talk to Drake anyway."

Her eyelids drooped. "Drake?"

"Drake Brockson. He's the chief anthropologist on the *Ascendant*. I asked him to put together a summary of his studies on this world."

"What does he say?"

Vyrl hesitated. "He thinks the original population here was breeding stock."

"You mean our animals?" She pulled the covers up around her neck, content in their warmth. "Bi-hawks have two stomachs."

"The animals weren't the primary subjects."

"What was?"

"People."

"Bi-people," she mumbled. "Some people have double stomachs, you know. They can go longer without eating."

Vyrl didn't answer right away, and she had just about fallen asleep when he finally spoke. "Yes. That was the intent."

"Intent?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Hmmm ... " Just having Vyrl nearby soothed her. Perhaps Dazza was right, that she and Vyrl had some invisible effect on each other. "Yes ... "

He spoke in an awkward tone. "Drake thinks your ancestors were engineered to be the ideal slaves."

What? She opened her eyes. "How can he say such a thing?"

"Everything points to it."

"Points how?"

He spoke quietly. "Your people's docility, your drive to please authority, your reluctance to engage in battle or rebellion, your physical beauty and heightened sexual response, your ability to work for long hours in excruciating conditions of climate, atmosphere, poverty, and lack of food -- it all fits the models."

She pushed up on her elbow. "It can't be."

"Even your names support it."

"Our names?"

He nodded. "Each line has its talent. Ironbridge produces electrical wizards, like the Ohmstons. Argali has Sunsmiths. By building your expertise into the brain, your creators avoided having to educate you. In fact, they probably designed you to have trouble learning anything else. Smart slaves are dangerous."

It made more sense than Kamoj wanted to admit. Uneasy now, she asked, "And my name? Resonance?" When he hesitated, she said, "I want to know."

Vyrl touched the jeweled chain around her neck. "Human nature prefers freedom. In slaves, that urge must be constrained. Drake believes the Argali line was an experiment designed to create humans less resistant to bondage. The 'resonance' is an allegory. Your creators wanted to increase the lifetime of a metastable bound state."

Kamoj frowned. "And Jax?"

"He probably descends from the owners. The free state. It's unlikely they all managed to leave here when the Ruby Empire collapsed."

Knowing she might have been bred by Jax's ancestors to work herself to exhaustion was

enough to make Kamoj that much more determined to sleep. Then it occurred to her that Vyrl had invoked more of their ownership customs than Jax ever did.

He stiffened. "I don't own you."

"Our laws say you do." Kamoj hesitated. "If a man's corporation is larger than the woman can match, she becomes his property. It isn't only marriages. We couldn't match your rent, so we had to give you the palace."

"A corporation isn't a dowry."

"Then what is it?"

"The word derives from classical Iotic." Vyrl paused. "It means a group that, as a body, has the powers, privileges, and liabilities of an individual. Corporations can buy, sell, and inherit property."

"As you bought me."

He flushed. "I would never consider you my property."

She spoke with care. "It is almost unheard of for a man to offer a governor a dowry she can't match. With such a merger, his authority extends to her entire province. It is the only way, besides inheriting the title, that a person can become governor. That you were already a leader makes it unprecedented as far as I know."

He shook his head. "You're the leader of Argali. I'll help if I can, but you're the one qualified for the job."

Taking a breath, she forged ahead. "Would you sign a contract to verify that arrangement?"

"Of course."

A wave of relief spread over her. She wondered if he had any idea what his answer meant to her. Jax's refusal to sign such a contract was another reason she had delayed the Argali-Ironbridge merger. "I will have a judge prepare the documents."

"All right." He hesitated. "I'll be down at the Ridge."

"You mean the palace tri-grain fields?"

"Yes." Shifting his weight, he added, "I told Jak Tager I would talk to him."

Kamoj remembered the name. Dazza had spoken of Tager during their ride in the giant metal bird. "Is he a doctor?"

"Psychiatrist. A healer of emotions." Vyrl's shoulders tensed under his work shirt. "It can't hurt just to show him a few crop variations I'm working on. I don't have to talk to him again if I don't want to."

"I'm glad, Vyrl." She felt a curious sense of release, as if his words had lifted a weight from her. She let her eyes close.

"Kamoj?"

She opened her eyes half-way. "Yes?"

"This morning I went riding with my bodyguards. We saw some people practicing folk dances in the village."

She yawned. "Probably rehearsing for the harvest festival."

"Some were men."

Her eyes closed again. "Men do the Reel of the Greenglass Stags. They stamp their boots a lot in that one. In the Sun Lizard's March they spin torches in the air. And they do partner dances with the women ... "

She was almost asleep when Vyrl said, "Then it is accepted for men to dance here?"

With a sigh, she tried to wake up. "Of course. Why?"

"I just wondered." Leaning over, he kissed her. "Sleep well, water sprite."

As Vyrl's footsteps receded across the room, she drifted into the downy embrace of sleep.

A smell of burning scales woke Kamoj. The early morning sunlight had a dirty cast to it. When she widened her nostrils, she almost gagged on the stench of ashes. She slid out of bed and ran to the south-facing window.

To her left, the East Sky Mountains towered in forest-carpeted peaks. Before her, the Lower Sky Mountains spread out in fields and then fell away in wooded hills to the distant flat lands, where villages dotted the aqua-blue plains and rivers criss-crossed the land in silver threads. To the west, the Argali Mountains descended in great wrinkles until, out of sight, they reached the village of Argali.

The mountains roared in flames.

Forest fires blazed in the Argali and Lower Sky Mountains. Billows of smoke rose from peak after rolling peak, and tongues of dragon's breath threatened the flat lands. If the outlying hamlets of Argali weren't already burning, they would be soon -- and then Argali itself.

The floor under her feet vibrated. A giant bird of gold and black metal roared over the tower, shaking the building with its passage. It arrowed south, where other birds soared over the fires, their metal plumage aglitter in the sunlight. One released a purple cloud that billowed across the flames. The burning orange tongues cowered, beaten back, then flared anew, relentless in their advance.

"Sweet Saints," Kamoj muttered. Why had no one woken her up? She had to get out there to help. She had no doubt Vyrl's first reaction had also been to join the firelines. Was he out there now, or had the *Ascendant* ordered his return to its fortress above the sky, forcing him to safety against his will?

Kamoj ran into her chamber, to the rose cabinet where she stored her clothes. As she paused to open it, she saw herself in the mirror, a young woman with a wild mane of black curls that poured down to her hips. She wore only a translucent underdress, her nipples outlined against the pink silk. Rubies and gold glittered at her neck, wrists, and ankles. Collar and cuffs? Was that the origin of these family heirlooms? She gritted her teeth, knowing she would never see her wedding jewels the same way again.

Metal clinked on stone in the master bedroom.

"Vyrl?" Kamoj went back to the bedroom, to see if he had news. The suite, however, was still empty. She checked the landing outside, leaving the foyer doors open, but found no one there -- either.

Inside the suite, she heard metal scrape stone again.

Puzzled, Kamoj went back into the bedroom. Still she saw no one. She walked to the window --

And froze.

An iron tri-hook gripped the sill like a huge dragon's claw, piercing the shimmer curtain. Even as Kamoj watched, a hand came over the sill and slapped onto the wood. Then a woman pulled herself up into view, a husky archer dressed in Ironbridge colors. She hauled herself up onto the sill in one smooth motion.

Kamoj wasted no time on questions: she spun around and *ran*. As she raced out onto the landing, she heard boots thud on the floor in the suite. She ran down the tower stairs, her bare feet slapping the steps. Why hadn't Morlin warned her of the intruder? Was he still "down," whatever that meant?

At the bottom of the stairs, the door to the Long Hall was jammed open by the body of an elderly butler who had probably been coming to warn her about the fires. When she saw the gash in his head, she dropped to his side. Mercifully, he still breathed, unconscious but alive.

The sounds of pursuit grew louder above her, boots pounding on stone in the stairwell. Kamoj scrambled over the butler and ran down the Long Hall. She couldn't outfight or outrun

the archer, who had both height and body mass over her, but she knew these mountains far better than Jax's people. As soon as she made it outside, she would easily lose her pursuer in the forest.

Bodies lay in the hall up ahead, two maize-girls, bound and gagged. For a instant Kamoj feared they were dead. Then she realized no point existed in binding or gagging dead people.

Far up the corridor, near the maize-girls, an Ironbridge stagman stepped out from a doorway.

"Hai!" Kamoj skidded to a stop. Whirling around, she saw the archer striding toward her from the other direction, the woman's long legs covering ground fast. Kamoj ran straight at her, trying to reach the nearest doorway before the archer reached her. She made it and ran into a sitting room filled with gold and white furniture. Bronzed sunlight poured through its floor-to-ceiling windows, the promise of escape. She raced toward them-

Someone grabbed her around the waist. As Kamoj yelled, the archer swung her around, lifting her feet off the floor. Half-carrying, half-dragging Kamoj, the woman strode back into the Long Hall, where the stagman met them. When Kamoj tried to shout for help, the stagman shoved a sponge in her mouth and tied a gag around her head, while the archer held her arms pinned. Then her captors each grabbed one of her upper arms and took off, forcing her to run between them or be dragged.

In seconds they were outside, racing across the courtyard. A cart waited for them, hitched to four blueglass bi-hoxen, bulky six-legged mammoths with sparks of sunlight flashing off their scales. The stagman climbed onto the driver's seat, a plank of wood set across the front of the cart. Kamoj caught only a glimpse of his actions, being otherwise occupied in her struggles with the archer. The woman hefted Kamoj up and threw her into the back of the cart, between two rolls of carpet, by a coil of rope. As she vaulted in after Kamoj, the cart jolted into motion. Kamoj tried to scramble out of it, but the archer shoved her back down on her back.

The stagman looked around, the reins of the bi-hoxen gripped in his hands. "Tera, keep her still."

Tera, apparently the archer, just grunted as she and Kamoj wrestled. Kamoj raked her fingernails across Tera's arm, drawing blood. Then the archer flipped her onto her stomach and yanked her arms behind her back. Kneeling on Kamoj's legs, she bound her prisoner's wrists together with the rope.

The bi-hoxen plodded on, oblivious to the struggle, pulling the cart up into the North Sky Mountains.

Ancient trees towered over the path, clogged with moss and Argali vines. Black-scaled thornbats hissed among the foliage, searching for puffs to skewer with their needled beaks. Their high-pitched cries echoed in the hoary forest. Except for the rare Argali rose or puff lizard, the trees hunkered in dark hues, their scaled iridescence subdued by the weather. A misty drizzle was falling, mixed with fog that glinted from the scale dust suspended in it.

The cart rolled on, jolting up the narrow path, crushing vines and roses under its wheels. Tera sat next to Kamoj, as she had throughout the ride, silent, watching her captive. Bound and gagged, Kamoj had shivered at the start of the trip, until Tera wrapped a carpet around her shoulders.

Kamoj glanced at the boda-bag on Tera's belt. She had neither eaten nor had anything to drink since yesterday.

For a while Tera watched Kamoj watching the boda-bag. Then the archer spoke, her Ironbridge dialect so strong Kamoj could barely understand her. It sounded like, "Be you still o'piece, move I yer quieter?"

Kamoj nodded, hoping she had guessed the correct meaning of the question: *will you be quiet if I take off the gag?*

Tera removed the gag, then pulled the sponge out of Kamoj's mouth. The archer took the

boda-bag off her belt and unscrewed the top. Tilting its narrowed end to Kamoj's lips, she squeezed the bag, making wine squirt into Kamoj's mouth. As much as Kamoj disliked the harsh mead brewed in Ironbridge, she disliked her searing thirst even more. She sucked the bag dry.

When Tera lowered the bag, Kamoj said, "Will you untie me?"

The driver answered, what sounded like, "Maybe a'can," to which Tera responded, "Lector, we cannee risk her a'run." Kamoj wasn't sure if *Lector* was an oath or the driver's name; either way, it came from a contraction of *Electromotive Force*. Legends painted Lector as a great hero who converted humans into energy. Why converting people into energy was heroic, Kamoj had no clue, but the name was popular in Ironbridge.

"I won't try to run," Kamoj said. She almost meant it; she had no idea where they were now, besides which, she would be even colder wandering in the woods than sitting here under a carpet. Even so, she was willing to try an escape.

She didn't fool Tera, though. The archer made no move to untie her. "Out there you be peat for Argali vines," she said.

"Look," Lector said. "That wild greenglass again. I'd spend a Long Year to catch that beaut."

Kamoj looked, and saw a huge stag keeping pace with them, half-hidden in the trees. She doubted Lector would have success with this greenglass. Greypoint would never allow anyone but Vyrl to ride him. And it was Greypoint following them, she was certain. But why? The Current only knew what the animal had thought yesterday when a giant metal bird took away Vyrl. Had Greypoint been pacing the woods since then, undecided whether or not to return the Quartz Palace?

Tera was watching her. "The animal follows you." She grinned, showing teeth browned from chewing cabarque leaves. "We caught us a forest nymph guarded by the king of stags, heh?" Her smile faded. "Or else we caught us a witch."

"Donnee talk of Argali that way," Lector said.

Tera answered something about, "vile business" and "Lionstar," to which Lector nodded in agreement.

Their words were an unwelcome reminder to Kamoj of Vyrl's dismal reputation. No one had trusted him before and now he had trampled their customs. All in the Northern Lands would have the same thought: if a stranger could overthrow Argali and humiliate even Ironbridge, no one was safe. Jax must have marshalled that fear to augment his army, bringing in archers like Tera who usually served on a highborn woman's bodyguard. He would have left enough archers and stagmen to protect Ironbridge and taken the rest with him. While Vyrl rode on Ironbridge, Jax was somewhere up here, high in the mountains, sealing his plans for Argali.

As the bi-hoxen plodded onward, Kamoj brooded. Would the *Ascendant* help Vyrl find her? *Could* they find her? She had no concept of what the *Ascendant* could do, no referent to understand either it or its people. Besides, either Lector or Tera would go back and hide their tracks. Probably Tera. She had a venerable name, one that originally derived from the Volterra line in Argali, though the Volterra penchant for travel had long ago spread it across the Northern Lands. Volterras had a knack for solving problems that involved a preferred direction. They made good trackers.

Groggy from hunger and drunk from mead, Kamoj fell into a daze, watching the trees go by. The cart finally rolled into a high mountain clearing. Saturated in mist, a camp lay before them, black tents with purple tassels hanging from their roofs. Stagmen moved about the clearing, cutting wood, mending clothes, cleaning weapons, tending campfires. They all wore boots and fur-lined clothes, protection against the sleet that drizzled from the overcast sky.

When Tera tugged the carpet off Kamoj, a blast of freezing air cut through Kamoj's underdress to her skin. Then Tera pulled her out of the cart. As Kamoj's bare feet hit the iced ground, she gasped and jerked. With her hands tied behind her back, she lost her balance and fell against the cart.

Lector came over to her. He lifted Kamoj up, settled her in his arms, and then set off into the camp, carrying her with one arm under her knees and the other behind her back. She

gritted her teeth against the stares of the encamped army. Her rose-hued dress was the only bright color in the camp, and she knew glimsilk glowed on overcast days. It was like a beacon drawing attention to her loss of status. Jax had stripped her of authority in both a literal and figurative sense.

Lector stopped at a large violet pavilion with black tassels hanging from its fringed roof. When he nodded to the two stagmen posted outside its entrance, the taller man inclined his head and went inside the tent. Kamoj was shivering uncontrollably now, her dress frozen in the sleeting rain.

The flap lifted, releasing a puff of warm air. The stagman looked out at them. "He meets with an advisor now. He be calling you when they finish."

Kamoj stared at him. Did Jax mean to freeze her?

"Sweet saints, man," Lector said. "She cannee survive this cold."

Another stagman inside lifted the flap, releasing more warm air. "You may come now," he said.

As Lector carried Kamoj into the tent, warmth closed around her. She closed her eyes, hating herself for the gratitude she felt. Did Jax plan these things, or did he just have an inborn instinct for controlling people?

Silk panels hung on the walls, violet, silver, and black for Ironbridge. Rugs covered on the ground and a bed made up with purple velvet stood in one corner. On the floor, braziers with iron grates gave out heat that rippled in waves, distorting the air above the scrolled grills.

"Over there," a man said. *That* voice Kamoj knew. Jax. Looking over her shoulder, she saw him sitting with a judge at a table across the tent. He returned to his meeting without acknowledging her.

Lector set her on a pile of furred blankets near a brazier. As he covered her with the furs, she craned her neck to look at Jax again. Unexpectedly, he was watching her. When he realized she had caught him doing it, he turned away, focusing on his advisor, who was struggling to decipher a map.

Heat from the brazier warmed Kamoj, melting the ice on her clothes. She began to feel again: rivulets of water ran down her neck from her hair, Lector's jacket scratched the skin of her arms, and waterproofed fur rubbed her thighs. Closing her eyes, she soaked in the warmth. She knew she was passing out but she didn't care. Exhausted, she let darkness carry her into oblivion.

IX -- IRON ROSE

Internal Bound States

In the drowsy contentment of first waking, Kamoj reached for Vyrl, her husband. She found only empty air. Opening her eyes, she looked up -- at Jax Ironbridge.

Her serenity vanished. She was lying on Jax's bed, her arms free now. The tent was empty except for the two of them. It was also dark; the only light came from dimly glowing braziers. She had no idea how long she had slept. A heavy, slumbering night had fallen outside.

Jax was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning his weight on one hand while he watched her. His hair hung around his face, straight and black, with streaks of grey. He wore a governor's clothes, rich and well-tailored: violet shirt, black suede pants, and black knee boots edged with silver fur. The silver-thread design of a bridge decorated the cuffs and collar of his shirt. Kamoj wondered which of his mistresses had embroidered it.

"How long have you been there?" she asked.

"A while." Leaning forward, he stroked her hair away from her eyes. "You looked so pretty

sleeping. An Argali rose."

Argali. *Argali*. She jerked away from him. "You *burned* it."

His smile vanished. "Perhaps next time you will think before you humiliate Ironbridge."

She pulled herself into a sitting position. "How could you do it?"

Jax watched her with focused intensity. "If your former husband has any wits about him, he will evacuate the villages in time."

Former? "Lionstar and Argali have a merger."

A muscle in his cheek twitched. "It's being dissolved."

"You can't do that."

"Of course I can." He trailed his finger across her lips. "I have a gift for you."

The change in subject disoriented Kamoj. "What?"

"I had intended it as a wedding gift." He paused. "But I will give it to you tonight, even if we won't sign the contracts until tomorrow."

"Contracts?"

His voice hardened. "I learned a great deal from the *Ascendant* delegation that came to Ironbridge. This Drake Brockson, the man they call an anthropologist -- he and I talked a long time. He has concerns about what he calls 'our native sovereignty.' Lionstar's actions here disturb him."

Although Kamoj knew the judges of her own people would side with Jax in this, she had expected disinterest from the *Ascendant*, perhaps even help. It hadn't occurred to her that Vyrl's behavior might have offended his own people as well as hers. At least they had been helping with the fires. Was Argali burning even now?

"Are the -- " Kamoj stopped when she saw Jax's mouth tighten. She recognized the warning signs.

Jax stood up, the dim light casting shadows across his body as if he were a living statue. He had Vyrl's height and musculature, but the resemblance ended there. Where Vyrl was tawny, alive like the land in autumn, Jax evoked stone and iron.

A tanglebirch chest stood at the foot of the bed, carved with bridges and rivers. Jax went to it and took out a black lacquered box. "Ten years ago I traveled with some of my stagmen to the Thermal Coast, where the ships sail in." He came back and sat next to her again. "I got this from a merchant who sailed from another continent." Setting the box in her hands, he added, "I've kept it for you."

Kamoj almost flinched. Given the circumstances, how could she accept a gift from Jax? Painfully aware of him watching her, she lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in a bed of gold velvet, lay a porcelain egg, exquisitely designed, with silver filigree curling over it like lace.

She spoke awkwardly. "It's lovely. But I can't accept -- "

He touched his finger to her lips. "Look inside."

Still she hesitated, but when irritation flashed across his face, she undid the latch on the egg. Gold velvet lined the interior, and jewelry sparkled within it, two earrings and a long necklace, all made in the Argali design, gold vines inlaid with ruby roses.

"Sweet saints," she murmured. "They're beautiful."

"Indeed." Jax picked up the earrings. Holding back her hair, he inserted the earrings himself, with an expertise that suggested a long practice of putting jewels on women. The rubies dangled against her neck, clinking together, their tiny bells making soft chimes.

He held up the chain next, letting its rubies glitter in the dim light. "Kamoj, you've truly a lovely stone as your namesake."

She swallowed. "You are kind to offer me such a necklace. But I can't -- "

"It's not for your neck." He laid his palm against her waist. "It goes here. Actually, with a waist as small as yours, it will rest on your hips. Women in Thermali wear them under their clothes. It's very pretty."

"Oh." She didn't want to know how he saw what women in Thermali wore under their clothes.

Jax set the egg and the box on the floor. He let the chain slide through his hand, until it pooled on the velvet spread in a shimmer of gold and rubies. Then he got up again and went back to the chest. This time he took out a braided cord made from glittering scale-hemp, with tassels on each end. Threads of beaten gold and bronze wove through the braid, and jeweled dust powdered its surface. It resembled the old farm belts she often wore, except instead of being functional, this was designed for beauty.

Jax stood by the chest, watching her with a shuttered look. "I had this made when you and I were betrothed."

Kamoj had no idea how to respond. Never in a decade of Long Years would she have imagined Jax indulging in the sentimentality of these beautiful gifts. "You are too generous."

"Am I?" He returned to the bed with slow, deliberate steps and sat next to her. Taking her hands in his, he wound the cord around her wrists. Then, with a jerk, he tightened the belt. "Am I, pretty rose?"

Kamoj flinched as the cord bit into the rope burns on her wrists. "Jax, don't."

"Why?" He twisted the belt tighter. "Is what I have for you not good enough now you've had his wealth to play with?"

"I didn't mean that." Her eyes watered from the pain. "What are you doing?"

"Giving presents to my love." His voice sounded clenched. "To the woman who humiliated me the moment a richer man made her a better offer."

"You *know* I had no choice."

"You had a choice. You could have said no." His lower eyelid twitched. "You think it was hard for you, being carried through my camp like an unwilling bondsgirl? How do you think it was for me, having you walk away, knowing you were going to another man's bed after I had waited almost your entire life for you?" Incredibly, his voice shook. "It happened so *fast*. One moment I was looking forward to seeing you and the next you were gone."

She stared at him, stunned by the depth of his reaction. "I -- I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. You're mine again." Gritting his teeth, he added, "Except he had you first."

"Jax, please -- "

"Please, *what*?" Then he slapped her across the face.

"No!" Kamoj tried to lift her arms, to protect herself, but he held her wrists down with the cord. "Don't!"

"You want me to stop?" He hit her again. "How could you do it?"

"Jax, no!" Kamoj stuttered as he struck her a third time. "Stop. Please."

Reaching to his boot, he pulled a knife out of it. "Whether it happens again is up to you."

"What are you doing?" She tried to jerk away from him, but he held her in place by the belt around her wrists. With methodical strokes he sliced up the belt, shredding the gift until it was no more than a pile of raveled glittering threads.

Her voice caught. "Jax -- "

"No." The blade glinted as he lifted it in front of her. Then he cut the shoulder straps of her dress. "I will hear no more."

Staring at the knife, Kamoj swallowed and remained silent. Jax laid her on the bed. His blade felt like ice as he cut away her dress. She stared at the tent overhead, at the cloth

shaking with falling snow. A tassel hung from its highest point, bobbing back and forth. She focused on it, trying to numb her mind to the blowing snow of Jax's touch.

Some time later he fastened the gold chain with its ruby roses around her hips. His hair brushed her face, the scent of his astringent shampoo wafting in the air, mixed with the tang of his sweat. His clothes scratched her skin, the buckle of his loosened belt scraping back and forth on her thigh. She built a dome of ice in her mind, a place where she hid in numbing cold.

Later, he lay still. Eventually he rolled off her and sat on the edge of the bed, his booted feet planted on the ground, his elbows on his knees while he stared across the tent, lost in thought. Then he undressed and laid his clothes in a neat pile on the nightstand. Numbly, Kamoj wondered if he always undressed afterward instead of before, or if this was a game he played with her emotions.

When he saw her looking at him, he smiled. "Curious?" His voice had quieted, as if he had spent his rage with his passion. He pulled down the covers under Kamoj and slid into bed with her, then drew the soap-scented velvet over them both. She felt an absurd relief that the blankets were Argalian wool and the sheets spice-cotton, instead of exotic silks.

That was when she started to shake. Why, she didn't know. It was over. Done. Yet now her icy protective numbness cracked wide open and she shook like a vine during a storm.

"It's all right," Jax murmured absently, pulling her into his arms. After a while he added, "Perhaps Lionstar did me a favor."

"A favor?" Her voice sounded hollow.

"I got you two years earlier than I expected."

"Oh."

"What will he do now, do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Attack Ironbridge. Perhaps he will be killed." A chill edged his voice. "Imagine it, Kamoj. Your marauding lover from the stars stabbed through the way he stabbed my stagman."

She knew the *Ascendant* would never let Vyrl risk his life. But she couldn't rid her mind of the image: Vyrl in agony on the battlefield, bleeding to death.

Jax turned her over onto her side, with her back spooned against his front, a bitter parody of her wedding night. He drifted to sleep with his thumb hooked in the chain around her hips.

X -- THE RIGHT OF INQUIRY

Three-Particle Scattering

"Something is wrong with her," Jax said. "She won't wake up!"

Another voice said, "She's tired, Governor Ironbridge."

Kamoj opened her eyes. Sunlight filtered through the sides of the tent. A rumpled Jax stood by the bed, looking as if he had thrown on the first clothes he found, a white shirt, black pants, and black boots. She recognized the stocky man with him: Elixson, an Ironbridge healer.

"When did she last eat?" Elixson asked.

"Yesterday morning?" Jax asked. "I don't know."

Elixson stared at him. "That's at least sixty hours. Probably longer, I would guess. She needs food."

Jax looked unconvinced. "I've gone longer without eating and not even noticed."

"She only has one stomach. She's needs sleep too. If you keep her up -- "

"Your opinions are noted," Jax interrupted, his voice cold.

The healer flushed. "Yes, sir."

"You may go."

Elixson bowed to Jax, then headed for the entrance of the tent. But as he was lifting the flap, Jax said, "Healer."

Elixson turned back. "Yes, sir?"

"What should I feed her?"

Relief flickered over the healer's face. "Bland foods, for now. Bread. Tea. Anything more exotic and she could get sick."

"Very well," Jax said. "Go tell the cook."

After Elixson left, Jax sat on the bed next to Kamoj. When he saw her looking at him, undisguised relief poured across his face. He hadn't even fastened his shirt yet, leaving it open to the icy air. Had her inability to wake so rattled him? Whatever the reason, it relieved her that his mood had gentled.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Hungry," she admitted.

"When did you last eat?"

"The day before yesterday."

"When did you last brush your hair?"

Her hair? What was wrong with her hair? "I don't know."

"Rest as long as you need. The cook will send breakfast." He kissed her, then stood up next to the bed. "I'll be back this afternoon."

Kamoj fell asleep even before he put on his cloak. She woke when a bondsgirl left her a tray with food. She ate the grain, rolls, and soup, then went back to sleep.

Cramps woke her the next time. Curled under the covers, she held her stomach until the pain subsided. Then she slept again. When next she awoke, the light had dimmed, and the roof sagged, heavy with snow. The braziers had gone dark. The air on her cheeks felt cold, but under the covers she stayed warm.

She rolled over to see Jax sleeping on top the covers. It wasn't his presence that surprised her: many people slept during early afternoon. But his cloak had fallen open and all he wore under it were his thin clothes. He still hadn't laced his shirt, leaving his chest exposed to the chill air. Did he even feel the cold? Such people existed, those almost unaffected by the killing climate. Vyrl claimed they had been bred for it, to better serve their owners. It suggested part of Jax's heritage came from slaves. No wonder Vyrl's people dreaded these *Traders* they fought, if Jax was a watered-down version of them.

He opened his eyes. For a moment he simply watched her. Then he sat up, rubbing his face. He got off the bed and went to the chest again, this time pulling out an armload of clothes.

Self-conscious, Kamoj sat up, holding the covers around her body. Jax came over and dropped the clothes on the mound of her body in the bed. The scent of spice-soap and new cloth wafted around her, fresh and clean.

"I need a bath," she said.

He nodded, then went to the tent entrance and spoke to someone outside.

Soon a bondsgirl appeared, carrying a vat of steaming water, towels and wash cloths, and a tray of soap. After the girl left, Kamoj looked at Jax, wishing he would go too.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Can you -- " She stopped. Would he hit her if she asked him to leave? "I'm cold."

Jax touched her arm. "You've ice-bumps." He slopped a cloth in the steaming water, then wrung it out and pressed it against her face. Warmth spread its relief through her skin. But then Jax pulled away the blankets, letting in the chill of the air.

As Jax soaked the cloth again, Kamoj crossed her arms over her torso. "You don't have to wash me," she said.

"I know." He soaped up the cloth. "I like to."

He washed all of her, from her face to her feet, and dried her off with a towel. Then he chose a black silk scrap from the clothes, an underdress unlike anything she had ever worn, all bows and lace, its top a corset that pushed up her breasts and whittled her waist. He pulled the corset so tight she could barely breathe. Then he chose a velvet dress made from the same dark purple as his shirt and pulled it over her head. The dress covered her from neck to wrists to knees. Its flared skirt swirled around her legs, but the bodice fit so tightly she couldn't raise her arms. He finished with grey leggings made from Argali wool, then smoothed her hip chain into place over the wool and pulled down her skirt.

Leaning back on his hands, he surveyed his work. "You're beautiful, Kamoj. Ironbridge colors suit you."

She gritted her teeth. "Thank you."

He gave her knee-boots, purple suede-lined with silver fur. After she put them on, he pulled her up to her feet by the bed and drew her into an embrace, folding his cloak around her body. It came to just under her eyes, like a veil of dark Argalian wool. As always when his mood eased this way, she felt intense relief mixed with another emotion harder to define. It ached within her, so extreme it hurt. Hate? Or love? It felt far less pleasant than anything she had experienced with Vyrl. But no one had ever promised love would be pleasant.

A chime came from outside, a mallet hitting a small gong. Jax raised his voice. "What is it?"

His stagman stepped inside the tent. "The panel be here, sir."

Jax motioned Kamoj at the bed. "You can sit there."

Uneasy, Kamoj sat on the edge of the bed and folded her hands in her lap. The stagman let two people into the tent. The man she knew, an Ironbridge judge, one of Jax's advisors. The woman wore the robe of an Ironbridge priestess. Although the designs embroidered along its sleeves and hem resembled spindly hieroglyphs, the codices named them with different words. *Circuit diagrams.*

Jax, the judge, and the priestess all sat at a wooden table across the tent. Parchment crackled as the judge brought out his scrolls. The three of them were soon deep in a discussion. Kamoj felt dizzy from fatigue and lack of food, and barely able to breathe in the tight clothes, but she struggled to concentrate on their words.

They first considered the legal situation Jax faced. No precedent existed where a merger was so precipitately lost after so many years of investment. It was inconceivable -- until it had happened. They intended to draft legislation to make sure it never happened again. As much as Kamoj agreed, in principle, that they needed laws to prevent someone from disrupting their lives as Vyrl had done, it made her own situation no easier.

The *Ascendant* was a complication. Apparently its minions believed their laws applied to her people. Yet neither Jax nor his advisors feared reprisals. In fact, they seemed to consider the *Ascendant* an ally, albeit a wary one. For some reason its legal people wanted to know if Kamoj had consented to sleep with Vyrl. As far as she was concerned, her marital bed was none of their business. What they should have been worrying about was the economic disaster Vyrl had precipitated in the Northern Lands by yanking Argali out of its merger with Ironbridge, all the while planning to leave her province and her people.

When Jax began to tap his riding quirt against his palm, Kamoj recognized the sign of his anger. Nor was it directed only against her and Vyrl. Jax had no grounds to censure Maxard for bowing to Lionstar, so instead he and his advisors spoke of other matters, making Maxard sound incompetent, unfit for any position of authority. They started on Lyode next, calling her

morals into question, and spoke of taking her away from her husband so she couldn't have children. Kamoj understood Jax's message: unless she cooperated, those she loved would suffer.

When they moved onto Vyrl, she almost gagged. They planned to claim he raped her in a drunken fit. The *Ascendant's* people had translated the contract scroll Vyrl had read at the wedding. It was indeed a merger contract, with gibberish about commercial licenses, zoning ordinances, business insurance, and property. Vyrl apparently could be held to its terms, which included provisions to negate a merger made through coercion.

Jax and his advisors all signed the document that annulled the Argali-Lionstar merger. When the judge said the *Ascendant* required Kamoj sign as well, Jax penned her name. Then they wrote down every term of the Argali-Ironbridge merger and signed that contract as well. Finally the judge rolled up the scrolls and put them in his valise. They all stood and talked a bit more, speculation about when the riders sent to Argali would return with news of the fires. Then Jax dismissed them.

When Kamoj and Jax were alone, he came over and smiled at her. "It is done, pretty rose. Ironbridge and Argali are merged."

Kamoj just looked at him. She had known all her life that someday this would happen, but she had never expected it this way, stripped of her power and freedom, with her province in flames. Had Jax deceived her all these years? Perhaps. But she suspected it would have been different had Vyrl never interfered. Did Vyrl and his people have any idea how much damage they had done? Did they care?

Jax rummaged in the chest and brought out a silver brush with rose-colored bristles. He sat next to her, more at ease now, as if penning his claim to her lands, heritage, authority, and self had eased him.

He showed her the brush. "When you and I were betrothed, Maxard gave me a small inheritance your mother asked you be gifted with on your wedding day. This was part of it." He rubbed a curl of her hair between his fingers. "Shall I brush it for you?"

She stared down at her hands in her lap. "All right."

He spent a long time with her hair, easing out the tangles with an ease she doubted came from taking care of his own hair. Then he brushed hers in long, slow strokes, from the crown of her head to her hips. Eventually he slid his arms around her waist and kissed her neck.

Outside, the gong chimed. Jax grumbled under his breath, then called, "What is it?"

"A rider came back from Argali," a voice answered. "He says it be urgent he speak with you."

"It had better be urgent," Jax muttered. He went to the entrance and pulled aside the flap. "Come in."

An Ironbridge stagman entered and bowed. "My apologies for disturbing you, Governor. But I thought you should know. They've doused the fires. Lionstar be riding up here now."

"The fires are out already?" Jax asked. "All of them?"

"Aye, sir. It be the metal birds. They spray a liquid that swallows flames."

"How did Lionstar find us? Tera hid the trail."

"He rides that wild greenglass. The spirit animal."

Kamoj blinked. Greypoint had fetched Vyrl? She had never heard of a greenglass doing such a thing.

"How many men does he have with him?" Jax asked.

"Seventeen stagmen. The rest ride to Ironbridge." He squinted at Jax. "A woman be with him too."

"Really?" Jax looked curious. "A bondsgirl?"

"I don't think so. An older woman. Grey and craggy. Not at all pretty."

Jax nodded. "You've done well. Get my mount and have sixty stagmen ready to ride."

After the man left, Jax turned to Kamoj. "So. He comes. Sooner than we expected but still too late."

"You're taking sixty men against seventeen?" she asked.

"Sixty stagmen and you." He spoke in a deceptively soft voice. "Make no mistake, Kamoj. You will let Havyrl Valdoria see that you are my dutiful and willing wife. If ever I believe you are even thinking otherwise, you will regret it." He shifted the quirt in his hand. "If you ever try to go back to him, I will do more than burn Argali. You will watch Maxard and Lyode die."

Kamoj wrapped her arms around her body. "I'll do what you want. Just don't hurt anyone."

"That is up to you." He took off his cloak and threw it on a chair, then went to another chest and took out his sword belt. She wondered what good he thought a sword would do against the *Ascendant's* defenses. Not that it mattered. Jax had already defeated Vyrl using the *Ascendant's* own laws.

Saints, but she wished she had spurned the Lionstar merger. Vyrl's people would never have let him attack Argali, even if such had occurred to him, which she doubted now. But how could she have known? Every one of his actions had sent a message in the ways of her people, carrying threats of violence and war.

Jax took her to the entrance of the tent. As he lifted the flap, Kamoj tensed. They both had on only flimsy clothes, and his shirt was still unlaced, open to the air.

"Don't you need your cloak?" she asked.

He pushed her forward. "It will just get in the way."

Outside, freezing air blasted them, and the sky pressed down like a lid of pewter. The camp was busy with people. At one fire, a bondsgirl poured a steaming drink for a stagman, her smile shy and her gaze averted as he closed his hands around hers on the mug. Her yellow hair suggested she came from one of Ironbridge's poorer districts.

Kamoj's parents had forbidden the Argali army to use bondservants, and Kamoj and Maxard maintained that ban. Although in theory both Jax and the governor of the North Sky Islands allowed it, only Ironbridge could actually afford them. The indenture usually lasted only a few years, but that didn't change the fundamental nature of the servitude. After what Vyrl had told her, Kamoj understood better where the practice originated and why it made her so uncomfortable. When left to their freedom and their starvation, the slaves had fallen back on the only ways they understood. They enslaved one another.

Across the clearing, a group of greenglass stags stamped their feet while stagmen tended them. By the time she and Jax reached the group, Kamoj was shaking from the cold, her breath coming in puffs of icy white condensation. A boy brought a huge stag forward, Jax's mount Mistrider. The animal shook his head, his antlers glinting like glass, his opaline scales ghostly in the mist. He stared down at Jax with green eyes slitted by vertical black pupils. Mistrider's wariness made Kamoj wonder how often he had felt his master's quirt through his supple hide of jeweled scales.

Using a stool called a stagmount, Jax swung onto Mistrider. The greenglass stamped and snorted, coming so close to Kamoj that she jumped back. When Jax motioned, she stepped up on the stool. Jax helped her up onto the stag, settling himself between the front and middle boneridges so Kamoj could straddle the animal in front of him. Mistrider picked up her tension, prancing beneath her, growing more and more agitated.

Suddenly the stag reared, his front and middle legs pawing the air, his bi-hooves clanging together like crashing symbols. With Mistrider all the way up on his powerful back legs, Kamoj and Jax were high above the ground, at the height of two tall men. Kamoj gasped and clutched the base of his scaled horns, the only "handles" available.

Holding her around the waist, Jax yanked her hands away from the antlers. "Never grab a stag that way!"

Mistrider came down, his bi-hooves pounding the frozen ground. Before Kamoj could catch her breath, the animal reared again, his head thrown back, his iridescent fangs barred. The

stag screamed at the sky, a long, high cry that pierced the muted day. He crashed his hooves together again and again, until Kamoj feared they would shatter. Jax kept his arm tight around her, holding his reins with the same hand, his grip the only tether that kept her from flying off the animal.

With his free hand, Jax snapped his whip against Mistrider's flank. "Hai!" he shouted. "Be still!"

The stag came down and danced furiously to the side, invading the area around four other animals. They skitted away, stamping their feet and keening in quieter versions of the scream Mistrider had used to challenge the clouds.

The call of a flight-horn winged into the sky. Another horn answered, then a third. Moving together, the group headed into the forest, the animals falling into the intricate, complex rhythm of their six-legged trot. The riders took the traditional formation, half in front of Jax, half in back. Ever restless with tradition, Jax prodded Mistrider to the head of the company.

As they penetrated deeper into the woods, the noises of the camp faded. The mist suffocated sound, curling around the ancient trees. Drops of water clung to the needles. Scale dust glittered everywhere, in the air, in the mist, on the plants. Vines hung in great loops, draped over branches and twisted around trunks and fallen logs. Scaled ferns grew among the trees, their lacy heads nodding under the shifting weight of the bud-lizards that clung to the underside of their leaves, a motion all the more eerie because no wind disturbed the woods.

Kamoj saw the other riders before she heard them. She caught glimpses of stags and diskmail among the trees. Jax called out and the Ironbridge company halted, fanning out in a semi-circle several rows deep, with Jax at its center.

The Lionstar company emerged from the mist and stopped twenty paces away, greenglass stags mingled with prismatic scale-trees. Vyrl's two bodyguards flanked him, clad in black, from their boots to their heavy jackets. Both Jagernauts rode stags, huge animals big enough to support their bulk. They sat on their mounts with an ease that unsettled Kamoj, another indication of how Vyrl's people so easily bent her way of life to theirs. Dazza and Azander rode on either side of the bodyguards, and the rest of Vyrl's stagmen fanned out from them in a much smaller semicircle than the one formed by Jax's men.

Neither Vyrl nor his people wore breathing masks. Light sheathed their bodies instead, like the shimmer curtains. Vyrl's clothes were gray with soot and his hair fell in disordered curls to his shoulders.

Kamoj's vision blurred in a haze born of fatigue, hunger, exposure, and lack of breath. She clenched her teeth against the cold. Vyrl was watching her, his face strained as if he were struggling to hear a distant song in the trees. She tried to make her thoughts placid so he wouldn't feel them.

Azander spoke. "Lionstar acknowledges Ironbridge."

The stagman on Jax's right answered. "Ironbridge acknowledges Lionstar."

"Lionstar invokes the Right of Inquiry," Azander said.

Behind Kamoj, Jax's hair rustled as he nodded his agreement to the Inquiry. His arm tightened around her waist and he shifted the quirt until its tip rested on her thigh. She understood the warning.

"Proceed with the Inquiry," Jax's stagman said.

Vyrl spoke directly to her. "Kamoj, was it really your choice to go with Ironbridge?"

Her choice? Like ice water on her face, she realized how it must look: at the first chance, she returned to the people who had been at her side for most of her life.

"Do not presume to speak to my wife," Jax said.

"She isn't your wife," Vyrl said.

"The papers were signed this afternoon," Jax said. "Your contract is annulled."

Vyrl stared at him. "You can't annul an Imperial contract."

"Perhaps you should read your own laws. A merger made through coercion is not legally binding."

"She wants to stay with me," Vyrl said. "She told me."

"You have witnesses to this?" Jax asked.

Vyrl looked at her. "Tell them."

Kamoj wanted to disappear. She tried to take a deep breath, but the boning of her underdress cut into her ribs.

"You have your answer," Jax said.

Anger sparked in Vyrl's voice. "That's because you have her too terrified to speak."

"If you came to this Inquiry to throw insults," Jax said, "I don't see much point in continuing."

Dazza spoke quietly. "Vyrl, perhaps we should -- "

"I won't leave without her," Vyrl said.

"We can discuss this more privately."

"No.

"Vyrl -- "

"I said no."

Dazza exhaled. "All right. Kamoj told me herself. Her marriage to you puts her in an almost impossible position. If she signed an annulment, then given her history with Ironbridge and the circumstances surrounding your merger with her, no Imperial court in its right mind will honor your claim to Argali."

He clenched Greypoint's reins. "I'm not 'claiming Argali,' damn it. I want my wife back."

"Legal won't see it that way," Dazza said.

"They'll do whatever I tell them."

Her voice cooled. "Yes, you could use your titles to take what you want. But you would be forcing the courts into breaking laws meant to protect cultures such as this from exactly this sort of mistreatment. I suggest you think long and hard about the consequences. Once it's done you can't reverse the damage. And believe me, Vyrl, the political fallout of abusing your position that way would be ugly."

Vyrl stared at her. "I'm not the one breaking laws." He turned back to Kamoj. "I know you don't want to stay with him. Tell them, Kamoj. *Tell them.*"

She could still hear Jax's words: *I will do more than burn Argali to the ground. You will watch Maxard and Lyode die.* She struggled to project feelings of contentment, but her mind kept replaying the nightmare of the previous night, the roughness of Jax's hands on her ribcage, or kneading her thighs the way a cat prepares a place to sleep, or clenched on her arms as he pinned them to the mattress.

"You *bastard!*" Vyrl's voice exploded at Jax, and Greypoint danced under him, on the verge of rearing.

Jax spoke mildly. "Is something wrong with you, Lionstar?"

Greypoint tried to move toward Kamoj, but one of Vyrl's bodyguards grabbed the reins, his hands a blur. Kamoj hadn't believed a person could move that fast. Vyrl swore at the man, and the guard's hand dropped to a tube hanging from his belt, one of the weapons that put people to sleep.

Kamoj saw several Ironbridge stagmen exchange glances. If Vyrl kept acting this way, Jax wouldn't need to discredit him. Vyrl would do it all by himself.

Dazza, however, was focused on him. "What did you think you picked up?"

Vyrl spoke tightly. "He comes from the same stock that produced the Traders. Think about it."

She glanced at the Jagernauts. "Did you get anything?"

The man said, "There's so much hostility between Prince Havryl and Governor Ironbridge, it's swamped everything else."

The woman nodded. "Governor Argali is frightened. But I'm not sure who she fears, us or Ironbridge."

Jax spoke in a cool voice. "As strangers here, you may not realize the insult you give with this discussion." He stopped for a well-timed pause, then touched Kamoj's hair in a show of reassurance. "Of course this causes my wife concern, particularly given what she has recently endured."

Vyrl ignored him. "You don't have to stay with him, Kamoj. We'll protect you."

The way he had protected Argali? She kept her mind numb.

"Damn it," Vyrl said. "You aren't bound to him. You have free will."

"I want you to stop harassing my wife." Jax took a breath, like a man provoked past reason, yet struggling to remain calm. Then he used his soft voice, lowering it as if he spoke only for Kamoj, yet still loud enough for the others to hear. "I am sorry. But there seems only one way to resolve this. I must ask you to speak." He paused. "To the *Ascendant* woman."

That startled Kamoj. He wanted her to talk to Dazza? It made no sense.

The colonel spoke in a gentle voice. "Kamoj, did you sign the Ironbridge contract of your own free will?"

"I can't write," Kamoj said. "Jax signed it for me."

"That's not legally binding," Vyrl said.

"Did you understand the documents?" Dazza asked her.

"Yes," Kamoj said. The shorter she made her answers, the less chance she had of provoking Jax.

"Did you object to the signing?"

"No."

"Were you coerced?" Dazza asked. "Threatened? Did you at any time express the wish to return to Prince Havryl?"

"No." Kamoj answered only the last question. Did they actually believe she would acknowledge being threatened in front of the person who had done it and sixty of his armed soldiers?

"She's too frightened to say anything," Vyrl said.

Jax spoke coldly. "Lionstar, if you persist in violating the procedures of this Inquiry, Ironbridge will withdraw."

Suddenly Kamoj understood why Jax wanted her to talk to Dazza. Although she knew the colonel outranked everyone, the others must see her as an enigma. Women with authority rode with bodyguards. If a woman formed a merger with an incorporated man, he usually offered the services of his honor guard as part of his dowry, but only after they were married. Nor was Dazza an Archer. By coming alone with Vyrl and his stagmen, Dazza put herself on the level of a bondsgirl. When Jax let her question Kamoj, he undermined Vyrl's authority by taking the Right of Inquiry away from him and giving it to someone perceived as having no authority at all.

"Kamoj can speak to whoever she wants," Vyrl said. "You don't own her."

"Of course I own her," Jax said. "The contracts are signed, and this time for a dowry beyond the ability of Argali to match."

As soon as Jax spoke, Kamoj knew he had finally made a mistake. It wasn't only Vyrl who

reacted: Dazza and the Jagernauts also stiffened.

"This world is a member of the Skolian Imperialate," Vyrl said. "We may not have instituted formal assimilation procedures yet, but you are still under our umbrella. Slavery in any form is illegal according to our laws. If you signed a contract that makes Kamoj your property, you're in trouble."

Jax's hand clenched on his quirt. "You can't ride in here and demand we change customs thousands of years old because it suits your purposes. According to your own people, your laws require your government to work with ours to find resolutions to societal clashes without destroying our cultural sovereignty. Perhaps it has escaped your notice, Lionstar, but I am the government here." Malice touched his voice. "Besides, the moment you married Kamoj in one of our temples, according to our ceremonies, with that obscene dowry you sent her, you became her owner. It would appear you too are 'in trouble.'"

"She isn't anyone's property," Vyrl said.

Kamoj couldn't bear to listen any longer. She knew Jax. Beneath his control, his rage was growing. She was the one who would bear the brunt of it.

"Jax, I want to leave," she said.

His voice softened. "Of course." In a louder voice he said, "Ironbridge invokes a Close."

"I'm not leaving without Kamoj," Vyrl said.

Dazza spoke quietly. "If she doesn't want to go with you, do you really intend to force it?"

Vyrl stared at Kamoj. "We can protect you from him. Just say the word." His voice caught. "I can offer you the stars. All he can offer you is a lifetime of fear and pain."

Jax spoke evenly. "Answer him, Kamoj."

"I am the dutiful and willing wife of Ironbridge," she said. Was that enough? Would they leave her alone now? Did the people she loved have to *die* before they would listen?

"We can protect you," Vyrl said. "All you have to do is *ask*."

Kamoj felt Jax move the quirt. "I want to stay with my husband," she said. "Governor Ironbridge."

"No." Vyrl clenched Greypoint's reins. "No."

"She gave you your answer," Jax said. "What else did you expect? That being forced to spend a few days with a complete stranger, a man whose only interest was in assaulting her, would supersede a lifetime of dedicated companionship?"

"She never wanted to marry you," Vyrl said.

"Are you stupid?" Jax asked. "She told you what you wanted to hear. It is you that she fears, Lionstar."

Vyrl watched Kamoj. "Is that true?"

Jax stroked her hair as if to comfort her. "It's all right. Answer him. Then we can go home."

"Yes," she lied. "It's true."

Vyrl stared at her. Then his expression closed on itself. Quietly he said, "Good-bye, Kamoj."

Good-bye. The word echoed in her mind. Good-bye.

Vyrl motioned and his party reformed around him. When he pulled on Greypoint's reins, the stag danced toward Kamoj. It shook its head, once, twice, three times. She recognized the pattern. Many a greenglass went through that same dance with his young, herding them to where he thought it best they go.

Vyrl rubbed Greypoint's shoulders and pulled the reins. The stag kept trying to dance toward Kamoj. The third time Vyrl pulled, Greypoint relented and turned with the rest of the company, heading into the woods.

Good-bye. He was going. Forever. As Greypoint receded into the mist, dismay broke

through Kamoj's deadened thoughts.

Behind her, Jax's muscles relaxed. He leaned his forehead against the back of her head and whispered, "It's over, pretty rose. We can go home now. Finally." Then he straightened up and pulled on Mistrider's reins, bringing the stag around.

Kamoj swallowed. Home. It was done. She and Vyrl had bounced off each other and hurtled away.

That was when she snapped. She had no idea if it was her first true act of free will or a mental breakdown born of her depleted condition. She only knew that she broke inside. Leaning to the side, she strained to see around Jax. Her body protested every move: bile rose in her throat, pinpricks danced on her skin, pain thrummed in her head.

Then she shouted, "Vyrl! Don't go!"

XI -- THE BURROW -- *Resonance Lifetime*

Jax swore and yanked her back in front of him. A roaring filled her head, produced by her act of rebellion. Spurred by Jax's quirt, Mistrider ran through the trees like fog blown by the wind. Jax called to Lector and the stagman pulled alongside, their mounts running side by side.

"Take her to the burrow," Jax said. He passed Kamoj over to Lector's stag without even slowing down. Seated in front of Lector, Kamoj felt numb. Jax wheeled Mistrider around and took off, disappearing into the mist and the darkening night.

Lector rode hard through the trees. When Kamoj shivered, he pulled his cloak forward, around her. What had possessed her to call Vyrl? He had seventeen stagmen and Jax had sixty, plus forty more in camp. Ironbridge would slaughter Lionstar. Then again, Vyrl's people had their *Ascendant* weapons. They might slaughter Ironbridge. Either way, people would die.

When the fading light turned the mist a darkling pearl color, Lector slowed his stag, letting it find its own way. Finally he stopped. As he jumped down, his cloak swirled away and icy air clapped around Kamoj.

He eased her off the greenglass, sliding her down to the ground. "We cannee ride any longer. It be too dark."

She tried to nod, but the day's drizzle had turned to snow and she was shaking too hard. Watching her, Lector removed his cloak and gave it to her. As she wrapped it around her body, he tapped his stag with a signal to wait. The greenglass stamped its feet and bared its teeth, its breath curling out of its nostrils, heavy with a spiced musk odor, adding condensation to the fog.

Lector led her forward into the darkness. The scents of the wet forest permeated the air, eddying and flowing around them. Even after Kamoj contracted the membranes in her nose, she was swimming in a sea of smells.

She pulled the cloak tighter. "We need shelter."

Lector leaned down. "Eh?"

"Shelter." Her teeth clattered together from the cold. "We need shelter."

"Aye." He guided her around an upended tree with moss hanging from its roots. They approached the looming shadow of a hillside, closer and closer, until its darkness folded around them. When Kamoj reached out her arms, her hands brushed over dirt walls laced with roots.

"You best wait here," Lector said.

She stopped, listening to the tread of his boots. A spark jumped in the air about ten paces away. Then a sphere of light appeared, with Lector at its center holding a lamp. They were in a burrow with earthen walls held together by networked roots. The wavering light threw shadows on the walls, revealing bags of food in one corner, along with a blanket.

"It inna so bad, heh?" he asked.

"Lector, let me go," she said.

"I cannee do that, Gov'nor Argali."

"What if I just left?"

"I would have to stop you, ma'am. I'm sorry. I be liege to Ironbridge. I cannee fail him."

Kamoj hadn't really expected otherwise. She doubted she could have survived in the forest anyway, on this freezing night, dressed as she was, having eaten only one meal in over two days.

Lector set the lamp on a ledge formed by a tree root. Then he took the blanket from the corner and spread it on the ground. "For you, Gov'nor."

"Thank you." She sank down onto the blanket, grateful for the solidity of the ground. "Are you cold?"

He settled himself on a large boulder near the entrance. "Heh?"

"Cold." She offered him the cloak. "Aren't you cold?"

"Please keep it, ma'am. Cold never much bothered me."

Like Jax. Unlike Jax, however, Lector seemed to notice when it bothered others. Grateful for a bulwark against the chill, she wrapped the cloak around herself again.

Lector stretched out his legs and leaned against the wall. "I can tell you what makes ice on my spine. The magics in these woods. You be better off without Lionstar. That demon prince would trap your soul."

"I don't think it's magic, Lector. It just looks that way. And Lionstar is no demon."

"Heh?" Lector leaned forward. "Who is the demon?"

Her voice caught. "Me. I caused these problems."

"Why do you say that? You hanna done nothing." His voice gentled. "This madness will end. You will see."

She swallowed. "It's kind of you to say that."

"I've a daughter your age. When I look at you -- " He shook his head. "It be a father's nightmare."

The sound of dirt skittering across leaves came through the entrance, followed by the tread of boots. Lector stood up and drew his sword.

"Step and call," a woman said.

"Come," Lector said. Sheathing his sword, he stepped aside to let Tera and a stagman enter, followed by a taller man. Jax.

The Ironbridge governor glanced around, his gaze scraping past Kamoj as she got to her feet. To Lector he said, "Did you have any trouble?"

"None at all, sir."

"Good." Jax sat on a boulder. The soldiers sat then, too, Lector on the other boulder and the others on the ground. With five people crowded into the burrow, Kamoj stayed on her feet, pressed against the earthen wall.

Jax regarded Lector. "I need your counsel."

The stagman sat up a straighter. "It be my honor."

"I must decide a course of action," Jax said. "Everything has changed now."

"What happened, sir?" Lector asked.

"Lionstar insisted I let him speak to Governor Argali." Jax made an incredulous noise. "Seventeen stagmen and one old hag, and he threatens me. When I gave the order to my

archers to fire, it was like ordering the slaughter of bi-hoxen."

Kamoj dug her fingers into the wall. The question *Is he dead?* hung in the air like a mist-o'-mime.

"What did they do?" Lector asked.

Jax leaned forward. "One of Lionstar's bodyguards drew his weapon so fast it made a blur. An essence came out of its end. It made orange sparks in the air. The tree he pointed it at exploded in a burst of orange light. Lionstar's other bodyguard swept her weapon through an arc and more trees exploded." He grimaced. "As fast as an archer can knock a ball, his bodyguards could have killed my entire company."

"It be sorcery," Lector said. "I feel it in these woods."

"It just looks like sorcery." Jax considered Lector, then the others. "Do any of you read?"

Hai! Kamoj wanted to shake him. How could he talk about reading now? Was Vyrl alive or dead?

"I can read and write my name," Lector said. "My wife's name too, and those of our children. I know a few other words."

The other stagman spread his hands. "I cannee read at all."

"I be knowing my name," Tera said.

Jax looked disappointed, but unsurprised. Kamoj wondered what it was like for a man with his intellect to live in a place where almost none of the population could even read, let alone offer him an educated discussion.

"A codex in my library describes weapons similar to Lionstar's," Jax said. "They rely on something called 'particle physics.' The source of the orange light is a sub-electronic particle called an abiton, the antiparticle of a biton. It has a rest energy of 1.9 eV and a charge of 5.95 raised to the negative 25th power. Whatever that means. And this charge is called *Coulomb*. It's the same as the name in the Amperman line, I'm sure of it. The gun uses a magnet of 0.0001 Tesla and its accelerator needs a radius of five centimeters." He held up his hand, his thumb and forefinger a short distance apart. "This is a centimeter."

The others remained silent, watching him as if his words were an incantation.

"If his people have these weapons," Jax said, "they may well have other devices described in the old codices."

"It be a bad omen," Lector said.

"Is it? Or the promise of the future?" Jax rubbed his chin. "Then there is Lionstar's language. He speaks pure classical Iotic."

"You mean Iotaca?" Lector asked.

Who cares what they speak? Kamoj thought. Tell us what happened.

"That's right," Jax said. "The temple language."

"But no one understands it any more," Lector said.

Jax shrugged. "That's only because the ancient glyphs are different from the ones we use now. And the temple priestess has a different accent than Lionstar. I have trouble understanding the priestess, but Lionstar is easy."

"I cannee understand him at all," Lector said.

"Your dialect is more removed from Iotic," Jax answered. "Classical Iotic was the language of the highborn here, in the days before the Current died. Lionstar probably inherited it the same way I did, as a nobleman descended from an ancient line." He paused. "But I don't think it's the native tongue of his people. Petrin told me that on the *Ascendant*, the crew spoke a language he didn't -- understand."

Petrin? It took Kamoj a moment to figure out he meant the Ironbridge stagman Vyrl had stabbed, the man the metal bird had taken to the *Ascendant*.

"Yet they all speak Iotaca to Lionstar," Lector said.

"They are his lieges," Jax pointed out.

"He does seem to have authority," Lector acknowledged.

Kamoj began to relax. If Vyrl had died, surely Jax would have said something by now.

"It's more than his authority," Jax said. "He's *valuable* to them, beyond being their prince. His people would kill every one of us to protect him, if it became necessary. And how do they move so fast? What do they have inside their bodies that lets them do that?"

"It be a bad affair," Lector said. "Like that old sorceress who rides with him."

"They don't use sorcery," Jax said. "Just knowledge we've forgotten." Longing showed on his face. "What must their armies be like? It stretches the mind to imagine it."

"I cannee imagine it, sir."

Jax exhaled. "We had better try. We have to know what we're fighting." He glanced at Kamoj. Although she averted her gaze, it wasn't before she saw his pain, the vulnerability toward her that he hid almost as soon as it escaped his defenses.

"None of Lionstar's party were close enough to decipher my wife's outburst," Jax said. When she looked up, he was talking to Lector again. "But it has spurred the *Ascendant's* people to investigate. They are bringing an 'Arbiter' tomorrow to resume the Inquiry. If we don't cooperate, they threaten to use force."

"If they be so powerful, why do they hesitate with this 'force'?" Lector asked.

"They don't want to exacerbate the situation," Jax answered. "Apparently I'm one of the leaders they expect to deal with when they institute 'formal assimilation procedures' here."

"I donnee understand that," Lector said.

Dryly Jax said, "Nor do I." He fell silent and the stagmen waited. Finally Jax said, "Well, Lector, what do you think?"

"Sir?"

"Give me your opinion on the situation."

"You must never give in to Lionstar. It would weaken your authority."

"My thought also." Jax blew out a gust of air. "But by the Current, man, how do I maintain authority here?"

"I donnee know, sir. But you must."

Disappointment flickered across Jax's face, but he seemed unsurprised. Although he glanced at the others, he didn't seek their counsel. It didn't surprise Kamoj. What could they say? He was so far beyond them in intellect and education that his asking for their advice was like Vyrl asking her how to sail a sky boat.

Finally he said, "My wife and I will remain here tonight, in case Lionstar violates the truce his people set up and tries to find her. I will need the three of you on watch outside."

"It be our honor," Lector said.

Jax nodded, then dismissed them. After the soldiers left, the governor continued to sit on the boulder, staring at the ground. Finally he looked at Kamoj. "Come here."

She walked over to him. Even wrapped in Argalian wool she was still shivering.

"Why are you wearing Lector's cloak?" he asked.

"I was cold. He gave it to me."

"Delicate Kamoj." Bitterness edged his voice. "Pretty delicate rose. I truly am a fool, because I still want you."

"Jax -- "

"No." He shook his head, denying whatever remained unspoken on her lips. "Tomorrow you

will be asked to sign the merger and annulment contracts before witnesses, with an X since you can't write your name." He regarded her with a steady gaze. "You will do this, Kamoj. I will tolerate no more betrayals."

She swallowed, afraid to voice her question yet needing the answer anyway. "And if I refuse?"

Softly he said, "Then I will kill you, Kamoj. I will see you dead before I let these conquerors take what belongs to me."

XII

CONSENT

Multi-Channel Scattering

A voice pulled Kamoj awake. For the past few hours, she and Jax had been sitting against a wall of the burrow, dozing. She couldn't truly sleep, though. Hunger and thirst gnawed at her. Just the act of breathing had become a torment, a battle against the constriction of her clothes. The cold felt as if it had permeated to her bones.

Jax also slept fitfully. He had neither cloak nor jacket, and he still hadn't bothered to lace his shirt. Frost lined the hairs on his chest. His quirt, sword, and leather sword-belt lay at his feet.

"Governor Ironbridge," the voice repeated. A stagman stood within the shadows by the burrow entrance.

Jax stirred, then sat forward, rubbing his eyes. "Lector? Come here, man. What is it?"

Lector came over and knelt by him. "You had the right of it, sir. Lionstar attacked the camp. There was fighting."

"I don't suppose Lionstar is dead by any chance?" Jax asked.

"No, sir. No one died."

Jax rubbed his neck and shoulders. "What is the situation?"

"We did as you said and made use of the spelled box the *Ascendant's* minions gave you."

"Did anyone answer?"

"Indeed," Lector said. "The *Ascendant* sent a metal bird. It took away Lionstar and left ten of those large *Ascendant* stagman who wear black. They be at the camp now."

"Ten?" Jax tensed. "As conquerors or protectors?"

"We donnee know. They say nothing."

"I want you to send a message to the *Ascendant*," Jax said. "Tell them I've changed my mind about this Arbiter of theirs, that I'm willing to go with their first choice after all."

"Sir?"

"They chose a woman. I refused." Jax pushed back his hair. "This is the message: 'His honor, the Governor of Ironbridge, accepts the *Ascendant's* first choice of Arbiter. Although he has discomfort with this, as women don't serve as judges here, his wife would feel more comfortable talking to a woman.'"

Kamoj stiffened. She had never said that. She had no desire to talk to anyone. She just wanted this to be over.

After Lector left, Jax turned to Kamoj and drew her into his arms, pulling Lector's cloak around them both. He spoke against her hair. "You are so warm under here."

She wondered how his body worked, that he thought her warm when she felt so cold. If

only he had a kindness to match his physical strengths and prodigious intellect.

"This is why he attacked my camp," Jax said. "He knows I'm alone with you." His voice sounded strained. "How does he do it, Kamoj? How can he see what is in your heart so much better than I?"

"He feels emotions," she said.

"His bodyguards do also, don't they? To a lesser extent."

"I think so."

Bitterness touched his voice. "Shall we give him more emotions to feel, ones he can get from you tomorrow at the Inquiry?" His hand moved over her breast. "The feelings of a man and his wife together?"

"Jax -- "

"Jax,' *what?*" His voice hardened. "A lifetime we've built together. Then in one day you throw it all to a stranger who invades our land, steals our loved ones, mocks our ways, and plunders our dreams." He gritted his teeth. "You pushed me too far tonight, calling for him. I can't just let it pass."

As he reached for his belt, Kamoj tried to shield herself with her hands. Her tight sleeves stopped her from lifting her arms, but soon it didn't matter. Jax wanted no cloth protecting his target. He showed her the ways of his quirt and belt, their every texture and nuance, then held her in his arms and showed her the ways of himself, giving her memories meant to torment Vyrl as much as please himself.

Later, when he had fallen asleep, she tried to blank her mind. To forget.

The Ironbridge camp took form out of the morning's misty light. Stagmen were everywhere: Ironbridge in violet and silver, Lionstar in copper and blue, *Ascendant* in black.

Kamoj rode on Mistrider in front of Jax, flanked by Lector and Tera on stagback. She could imagine the sight they made, emerging out of the prismatic mist, otherworldly and antediluvian on their shimmering greenglass mounts. With such a small party, they would appear vulnerable to Vyrl's people, helpless natives come to face a rampaging sky-boat prince. She wondered if Jax had planned it that way.

She felt dazed. In the last three days she had eaten once and slept only a few hours. The chill penetrated her bones. Jax had given his word: she could eat and sleep after the *Ascendant* people left. She didn't doubt he meant it; one reason he inspired loyalty from his people, even if they also feared him, was because he kept his word.

Twelve soldiers waited outside Jax's pavilion, four each for Ironbridge, Lionstar, and the *Ascendant*. As Jax and his party rode up to the tent, three boys appeared, running up to meet them, staghands in breeches and heavy furs. After Jax and Kamoj dismounted, the youths led away the greenglass stags. The Ironbridge and Lionstar stagmen bowed while the *Ascendant* soldiers watched Kamoj with a disturbing intensity. Were they trying to read her emotions? *I am a lake*, she thought. *A flat lake. No ripples.*

An Ironbridge stagman spoke. "The Inquiry awaits inside."

Jax nodded. Kamoj wondered how he had arranged to have Vyrl wait for him. A morass of conflicting authorities surrounded them here, complex and intricate.

Flanked by stagmen, they entered the pavilion. Braziers warmed the tent, and the sudden increase in temperature made Kamoj queasy. The Inquiry waited at the table where Jax had signed the contracts yesterday. His priestess and judge were already there, along with two strangers, a man with black hair and an older woman. Shimmers covered the strangers and they dressed like Dazza, in grey bodysuits with the exploding sun insignia on one shoulder. They and Kamoj were the only ones with no weapons: all the stagmen carried swords, and the *Ascendant* soldiers had snouted weapons on their belts.

Everyone at the table stood up as Jax entered. He ignored them, glancing around the tent. Vyrl was nowhere to be seen.

A rustle came from behind them. Turning, Kamoj saw eight soldiers entering the tent, four from the *Ascendant* and four in Lionstar colors.

A man with iron-grey hair walked among them.

He towered over the stagmen, massive in build, with a face of granite-hewn lines. He too wore the grey uniform, but his had gold ribbing on the sleeves. His presence riveted attention. Kamoj needed no introduction to tell her this man carried authority. The force of his personality filled the tent.

Next came Vyrl, with two bodyguards, huge men in Jagernaut black who seemed to be holding him prisoner as much as protecting him. Seeing him, her heart raced. Neither he nor Jax spoke: instead, they stared at each other, their hostility almost thick enough to see.

Vyrl had no weapons, or ceremonial clothes and diskmail. In fact, she had never seen garb such as he wore: grey trousers with a crease down each leg and cuff at the bottom; a white sweater with a high, folded neck; and shoes with no visible seams. The fabric of his pants was so fine she couldn't see the weave. She knew of no one who could sew such a flawless garment.

At the table, the woman from the *Ascendant* spoke. "It would be best if the weapons remained outside the tent."

There was a shifting of weight, feet moving, hands sliding on hilts, the crackling of brazier. Kamoj waited for Jax to refuse. If he or his stagmen gave up their weapons, Ironbridge relinquished what share of authority it had so far managed to retain.

Incredibly, Jax removed his sword belt and handed it to one of his stagman, then nodded for his soldiers to remove theirs. After an awkward silence, Vyrl told his people to disarm. The man of power from the *Ascendant* watched the exchange with an intent gaze that Kamoj suspected missed nothing. When he glanced at the two men guarding Vyrl, the Jagernauts, they gave slight nods, acknowledging whatever unspoken order he had just made. When the other twelve soldiers left the tent, the two Jagernauts remained behind.

Jax considered them, and the bulky black weapons on their belts, the "antimatter guns." Then he looked at the *Ascendant's* people, his accusation obvious without his uttering a word.

The woman spoke. "Given the conditions of Prince Havyrl's arrest, his guards cannot remove their guns while they are standing guard on him."

At the word "arrest," satisfaction flickered on Jax's face. He made no further dispute. It surprised Kamoj, given his intent to establish authority. That was done with behaviors that displayed the expectation of obedience. But then, such methods would do little good here, given the superiority of the *Ascendant's* people in everything from weapons to physical size to clothing. This battle would be fought in more subtle ways.

Besides, Jax was still armed. He had shown her the knife this morning as he hid it in his boot. It didn't matter that one knife was nothing against "antimatter guns." If he stabbed her with it, she would still be dead.

Everyone stood, waiting. Then Vyrl sat down, across the table from Kamoj. She eased into her chair, trying to hide how much it hurt to move or sit. The man of power from the *Ascendant* sat next, followed by everyone else. A rustle came from the tent entrance and the twelve soldiers reentered, all unarmed now.

A new person came with the soldiers. Dazza Pacal. As she sat at the table, the Ironbridge judge frowned and glanced at Jax. Yet again, Jax made no protest. Instead he nodded to the colonel as if it were perfectly natural for her to attend an inquiry that concerned his personal life and had nothing to do with her. Of all people, he was the last Kamoj would have expected to show such flexibility.

The unfamiliar *Ascendant* woman spoke. "I am Major Tulain." She nodded to the man of power. "General Hamilton Ashman."

Kamoj froze. Ashman. *Ashman*. Vyrl had told her that name. General Ashman commanded the *Ascendant*. This was the man who had made the decision to leave Vyrl buried alive above the sky.

"I will serve as Arbiter for these proceedings," Major Tulain continued. "Is this acceptable to all parties?"

Jax spoke quietly. "Ironbridge accepts."

"Yes," Vyrl said.

The Arbiter waited. When the silence became awkward, she said, "Governor Argali?"

Kamoj tensed. Now what?

"Major Tulain." Jax paused. "A woman in Kamoj's position, that is, in a merger such as ours, won't speak at a proceeding such as this."

"Unless he gives her permission." Vyrl's voice grated. "As her owner."

Jax tried to look patient. Tulain glanced at Vyrl, then back at Jax. "Is that true?"

"Prince Havyrl chooses to see our lives through the filter of his experiences," Jax said. "Although this is understandable, given his condition, it makes no sense to confuse our customs with those of the people you are at war with, a people we have neither met nor had any connection to at all."

"Confuse hell," Vyrl said.

Tulain gave him a warning glance. Then she spoke to Jax. "Your willingness to adapt to our procedures for the benefit of Governor Argali has been noted and appreciated. However, we can't proceed with this hearing unless she participates."

Kamoj waited for Jax to refuse. Instead he turned to her and spoke softly. "Please. Feel free to speak."

She gritted her teeth. He made himself look so reasonable, a leader trying to do the best for his wife and people. In his own way, that *was* his intent. But, if she said something he didn't like, she would pay for it later.

"I want Governor Ironbridge to speak for me," she said.

"I object," Vyrl said.

"She has the right to make the request," Tulain said.

"What's wrong with all of you?" Vyrl said. "Can't you see she's afraid of him?"

"Perhaps it isn't me that she fears," Jax said.

"Like hell," Vyrl said.

The Arbiter held up her hand. To Kamoj, she said, "In this Inquiry you are under the protection of Imperial Space Command. No one can force you to do anything you don't want." Gently she added, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Kamoj said. Why did they all talk to her as if she were a child? It made no difference. She had seen how well they "protected" her from Jax. Her body ached from their protection.

"All you have to do is ask," Tulain said. "But the request must come from you."

"I understand," Kamoj said.

"Do you still wish Governor Ironbridge to speak for you?"

"Yes."

"Damn it," Vyrl said. "Major, can't you see she doesn't believe you?"

Tulain considered Kamoj. "We *can* protect you. No one can hurt you." She paused. "That includes Prince Havyrl as well as your husband."

"He's not her goddamned husband," Vyrl said.

Tulain turned to him. "Perhaps it would be better if we address that question through proper Inquiry procedures."

Vyrl scowled, but said nothing more. Ashman watched it all with piercing concentration,

letting his minions probe while he analyzed. Kamoj suspected that he was, by far, the most dangerous person in the room.

Tulain's assistant set a black book-box on the table, then opened it to reveal a sheaf of parchments. Tulain lifted the top paper. "The question," she said, "is whether or not these contracts were willingly signed by Kamoj Argali. Her signature is in your hand, Governor Ironbridge."

"Kamoj can neither read nor write," Jax said.

"Is she aware of what you signed for her?"

"Of course. She was here when we discussed it."

"Prince Havyrl contends you coerced her agreement."

"Prince Havyrl is mistaken."

As the questions continued, the scene blurred for Kamoj. All she could think of was how much she wanted to sleep. But the Inquiry ground on and on. They covered every detail of her life since the day Vyrl had seen her in the river. The picture that formed was twisted around, yet nothing was false. She *had* said she dreaded the Lionstar-Argali merger. She *had* removed Vyrl's mask in the coach. He *hadn't* known her name, or even remembered he was married.

Then came statements from the palace staff. Vyrl's servants went far beyond the expected fealty. Again and again they expressed their devotion to him. They spoke of humane working conditions, of wages that allowed them to climb out of poverty, of Vyrl's talent with grains and livestock, his innovation with crop rotation, his cleverness in using the tiny flying lizards to aid the crops. All spoke of his kindness. Although Jax sat quietly, Kamoj felt his growing anger. He had never expected this.

But every statement stumbled when it came to Vyrl's drinking, his moods, his tormented nights. With his marriage to Kamoj, the stumbles became lurches.

Tulain read the comments of the housemaid who had come to help Kamoj the morning after her wedding night. "She looked so scared," the maid said. "So vulnerable. And she be clutching a doll. A *doll*. Like a little girl. I know his Highness be a good man, I know it truly. But this-I don't know what to say."

In the silence that followed, Jax said, "Kamoj and I weren't to marry for at least another two years."

Kamoj stiffened. What game was Jax playing now? He had constantly chafed at the delay in their marriage.

"Under the laws of our people," Tulain said, "she can't marry for another seven years. That's about eight of your short-years."

"What?" Vyrl stared at the major. "What are you talking about?"

Jax snorted. "Perhaps you need to learn your own laws, Lionstar."

Vyrl ignored him, his attention on Tulain. "She can marry when she's twenty-five."

"That's right," Tulain said.

"But she is now."

Everyone just looked at him. Finally Dazza said, "Vyrl, Kamoj is eighteen years old."

"That's impossible," he said. "Look at her. *Talk* to her. She's a grown woman."

"Her people were engineered to mature early," Dazza said. "To increase the span of their useful years as slaves. That trait manifests in Kamoj. She is more mature, in both mind and body, than what we associate with her age. Also, in this culture people marry at a young age. Kamoj is actually considered old for a bride. But legally she *is* a child."

Vyrl sagged back in his chair. Watching him, Kamoj felt his defeat. He knew how he looked. He glanced at her and flushed, as if he believed she too thought him a monster. She wanted to reassure him, but she knew better than to speak. Maybe he would sense her feelings,

maybe not. He never seemed to catch them fully, only in pieces, and what she felt now, more than anything else, was tired.

Tulain picked up a blue paper and glanced at Vyrl. "This is your conversation with Colonel Pacal when you took Governor Argali riding." She scanned it, then read, "'Look at this. My wife. A farm girl like a virginal sex goddess out of an erotic holomovie, and all she asks is a simple life, a husband who doesn't beat her, and the freedom to walk in the woods.'"

When Jax turned his head away, Kamoj didn't think he was acting. Vyrl's words probably did offend him, though not for the same reasons everyone else looked uncomfortable. Jax considered it his right to beat her.

"It's not the way it sounds," Vyrl said. "I was drunk."

"It also says your stagman Azander had a bruise on his face where you hit him." Tulain paused. "What exactly did you mean by 'a husband who doesn't beat her'?"

"Saints almighty, Major, I was in the middle of a convulsion when I hit Azander." Vyrl's fist clenched on the table. "If you want to know what I meant about beating, ask him." He stabbed his finger in the air, at Jax. "He thinks it's his right. In bed, no less."

Jax rose out of his chair. "You will not speak of my wife that way."

Vyrl stood up. "She's not your wife."

"Gentleman, sit down," Ashman said.

Jax took a breath and let it out. Then he nodded to Ashman. "My apologies, General." He sat down, leaving Vyrl standing. After an awkward moment, Vyrl sat down as well.

Kamoj hated this. Jax was making Vyrl look worse and worse. Neither Tulain nor Ashman seemed disposed to speak in Vyrl's defense and she didn't dare. Dazza, however, could. Kamoj looked across the table, trying to send a silent plea to the colonel.

Dazza blinked at her. Then she turned to the Arbiter. "Major Tulain, a fairly easy way exists to establish the truth of at least some accusations being made or implied by both parties in this disagreement."

"Go on," Tulain said.

"I can examine Kamoj," Dazza said. "If she's been mistreated, I'll know. And I can probably tell by whom."

Jax tensed. "My wife has suffered enough indignities at the hands of you people. I will tolerate no more."

Vyrl leaned forward. "Are you afraid of what they'll find?"

"Why don't we ask Governor Argali?" Tulain said.

Kamoj gritted her teeth. She didn't want anyone touching her. The idea of being "examined" was revolting. All she had wanted was for Dazza to speak in Vyrl's defense.

"Why can't you all leave her alone?" Jax said. "Hasn't she suffered enough?"

Tulain regarded Kamoj. "Governor Argali, no one will force you to be examined. But you have the right. If it shows you've been mistreated, it could change the nature of this hearing."

"Change it?" Kamoj asked.

"At the moment," Tulain said, "the only evidence supporting Prince Havyrl's contention you are being coerced is that the servants at the palace were bound, gagged, and unconscious. Governor Ironbridge claims you asked they be restrained to keep them from stopping your departure. No one saw you leave, Morlin was down, and none of our orbital facilities were monitoring the palace at that moment. Our attention was on the fires and Prince Havyrl."

The fires. What was next in the path of Ironbridge's vengeance? "I want to stay with Jax," Kamoj answered. "I've told you that. Can't any of you hear? What else do you want from me?"

They were all watching her now: general, colonel, major. Too many titles. The priestess was frowning and the Ironbridge judge's face had gone hard.

Vyrl spoke softly. "Kamoj, last night you shouted for me. Why? If you wanted to stay with him, why did you call me back?"

"You misheard," Jax said.

"Everyone heard her," Vyrl told him.

The Arbiter spoke. "Prince Havyrl, you are the only one who thinks he understood her actual words."

"Damn it!" Vyrl hit the table with his fist. "I heard it because she *said* it."

Jax sighed. "What my wife shouted was an oath. I'm sorry this is so hard for you to accept, Lionstar. You heard what your overwrought mind wanted to hear, not what she said."

As Vyrl stood up, his face flushed, the Arbiter said, "Prince Havyrl, please. Sit down. Your outbursts help nothing."

Vyrl clenched his fists, but he sat down. Kamoj couldn't focus on his face. The room was dimming around her.

The Ironbridge judge spoke. "Governor Argali has repeatedly stated her wish to remain faithful to her husband. What more do you people require before you stop tormenting her? The only reason this Inquiry exists is because Havyrl Lionstar refuses to believe the truth. He is the one who took her to his bed without her consent."

Diskmail clinked, and Azander appeared at the table. The Arbiter glanced at him, then at Vyrl and Jax. When neither made an objection, Tulain spoke to Azander. "Yes?"

"I be sorry to interrupt," Azander said. "I wish to make a testimony."

Jax blinked. So did everyone else. Kamoj wondered what Azander was doing.

"What do you wish to say?" Tulain asked.

"When Prince Havyrl be near to dying in the large metal bird, Governor Argali spoke for him. She convinced them to take him home instead of to the *Ascendant*."

Tulain nodded. "Yes, we have that in your testimony."

"But it not be said proper on that parchment you read," Azander said. "It mattered to Governor Argali that he be well treated. The caring for him, she has it."

Dazza spoke to the Arbiter. "I know what he's saying, Cara. And he's right. I've seen it too. Kamoj has worked miracles with Prince Havyrl, reached him when none of us could even come close. His well-being genuinely seems to matter to her."

Jax spoke with unexpected affection. "Of course it matters to her. That is the kind of person Kamoj is. She cares about everyone. It is one of the many reasons her people respond so well to her." His voice tightened. "That Lionstar took advantage of this doesn't excuse his behavior."

Vyrl stiffened, but this time he controlled himself. None of the others seemed to know how to respond.

General Ashman spoke to Vyrl. "Did you know she was like that?"

"Not when I married her," Vyrl said.

The two of them kept looking at each other, fighting their own private war, which Kamoj suspected had been going on long before she met Vyrl. Finally Vyrl stood up. His guards tensed, and several Ironbridge stagmen dropped their hands to their belts, reaching for swords they no longer carried. Vyrl ignored them and walked away, stopping only when he reached a brazier near the edge of the tent.

He turned and spoke to Ashman. "Imperial Space Command went to great lengths to get me, lengths so extreme it boggles the mind. Why? Because I'm a great leader? A vital member of ISC? A brilliant strategist? No." He tapped his head. "Because I'm a Ruby *telepath*. So why do you doubt me now when I say I *know* what that thing" -- He pointed at Jax -- "is doing to Kamoj?"

"Because you've been in a telepathic catatonia for over a year," Ashman said.

Dazza spoke quietly. "Vyrl, she's the first person you've responded to since you came on board the *Ascendant*. How can *you* be sure of your reactions?"

He lowered his arm. "I'm sure."

"You're the only one who has picked up anything about abuse." Dazza motioned at his bodyguards. "They haven't."

"They aren't Ruby telepaths."

Ashman glanced at the Jagernauts, who had moved to stand near Vyrl. "What are you getting from her?"

"Fatigue," the first man said. "She desperately wants this Inquiry to end."

The second man nodded. "She resents ISC presence here."

That's right, Kamoj thought. She had given her answer and they had to respect it. More than anything, she wanted to *sleep*. She stood up, intending to demand an end to the Inquiry. Before she had a chance even to form the words, the world went gray and tilted sideways. The floor came up at her. Jax jumped to his feet and caught her as she collapsed. Sagging against him, she heard voices, something about Elixson, then more voices.

"Keep that hag away from her!" Jax ordered.

"Ironbridge, don't be a fool," Vyrl said. "Colonel Pacal is a healer, better than any you have here in camp."

Jax lifted Kamoj into his arms. Then the fresh smell of his bed enfolded her. Someone had washed the covers. Jax made a blur above her, wavering in a grey mist. Lying on her side, she let the mist thicken until she could no longer see him.

A change in the pitch of voices brought her mind back into focus. Jax and Vyrl were standing a few paces apart now, by the bed, their faces flushed, their voices rising in volume.

"-- think you can take whatever you want," Jax said.

Vyrl clenched his fists at his sides. "That problem is yours, Ironbridge, not mine."

"Argali is none of your business."

Vyrl stepped forward, raising his fists. "We have laws -- "

"Don't threaten me." Jax put his hands against Vyrl's shoulders and shoved him away.

They came together like wrestlers, grappling with each other. Jax stumbled back, and with a crash he fell across the Inquiry table, knocking over a lantern. He and Vyrl wrestled, locked together, Vyrl closing his hands around Jax's throat.

The Jagernauts were also moving, so fast their bodies blurred. One grabbed Vyrl and the other Jax, both guards straining as their captives resisted. They yanked Vyrl and Jax apart, one of the Jagernauts holding Vyrl by the arms, the other holding Jax.

Vyrl swore, struggling in his guard's iron grip. For an instant Jax looked too stunned to respond. Then he tried to jerk his arms away from the giant who had caught him, a move he could easily have managed with a stagman, had one of his soldiers been stupid enough to try restraining him. It made no difference to the Jagernaut. Only when Jax quit fighting did the *Ascendant* stagman let him go.

"You have no right," Kamoj said. She wasn't sure who she spoke to: Vyrl, Jax, or the people from the *Ascendant*. Perhaps all of them. She wanted everyone to leave. She tried to get off the bed, but her body wouldn't respond. It occurred to her that if she didn't eat soon, she would die.

The bed creaked. Then someone lifted her head into his lap, just as she had often done with Vyrl. She rolled onto her back and looked up to see Jax's face above hers. Kneeling behind her, he held her head on his knees while he stroked her hair with the same inborn rhythm she had used on Vyrl. A bruise was purpling his face and a large tear made a ragged hole in the shoulder of his shirt. He looked far more vulnerable than Vyrl, who stood at the end

of the bed flanked by his gargantuan bodyguards with their antimatter weapons.

Jax raised his gaze to Ashman. "Why don't you all go back to your starships and leave us alone?"

The general spoke quietly. "You will have to let my doctor examine Governor Argali."

"No," Jax said.

Kamoj swallowed. "Jax ... I don't feel well."

He stroked her hair. "Elixson can take care of you." Glancing at his healer, he said, "Why is she sick?"

"She needs food and rest," Elixson said.

"I fed her," Jax said. "Just as you said. Right after we spoke."

Elixson stared at him. "Sir, the Current has gifted you with an endurance well beyond normal folk, that you can go a day and more without food, walk through sleet and never notice, or ride for days without rest. Your wife is a hearty young woman, but compared to you anyone is fragile. You must learn to account for that. She has to eat four times a day, at least two of them full meals. She must sleep at night and wear warm clothes when she is exposed to the weather."

Dazza spoke in a cold voice. "Governor Ironbridge, exposure and starvation are considered methods of coercion."

"You don't call what you people are doing coercion?" Jax looked around at them. "Sending Argali a corporation I could never match even if I worked at it my entire life? Playing with the future and well-being of the Northern Lands as if it were nothing? Attacking my camp during a 'truce.' Threatening us with your soldiers and your weapons and your 'assimilation?' How many *times* does Kamoj have to tell you she wants you to go away?"

Dazza spoke softly. "Why, Kamoj? If you're sick or in pain, I can help."

"We don't want your help," Jax said.

Kamoj thought of the knife in Jax's boot and said nothing. She heard the rustle of camp outside, the snort of a greenglass, the shuffle of boots. Her mind was beginning to dissociate from her body.

Dazza pulled off her belt. Or not the entire belt, but part of it. When she ran her hand along the strip, it changed itself, turning into a flexible tube.

The colonel spoke to Jax. "This fires a needle that contains a drug. It won't harm you, but it will put you to sleep almost immediately."

Several Ironbridge stagmen started toward her. As soon as they moved, Ashman motioned to Vyrl's bodyguards and they stepped forward.

Jax shook his head at his stagmen, a sign for them to back off. Relief flickered on their faces. Kamoj knew they would have defended Jax if he hadn't stopped them, but against the Jagernauts it was obvious they had no chance.

Jax spoke bitterly to Dazza. "So you lied about carrying no weapons. Why is it that I have no surprise at this deception?"

Kamoj could see how vulnerable he felt. He hid it well, but he more than anyone understood the capabilities of the *Ascendant's* minions. No one seemed to realize the danger in making him feel trapped. They had left him no outs, and she was the one who would pay for it.

As Dazza raised her sleep tube, Kamoj felt Jax reach into his boot. Kamoj tried to roll away, but he held her in place. Then he slapped the knife against her throat.

"The only way you will have her," he told Vyrl, "is as a corpse."

Everyone in the tent froze. After a moment, Dazza spoke carefully. "Governor Ironbridge, don't hurt her."

"Kamoj, sit up," Jax said.

She dragged herself up to her knees, and Jax pulled her between his legs, so they were both kneeling, she with her back against his front. The flat of his blade chilled her neck. When he shifted position, the knife's razor edge nicked her skin. Vyrl stood at the foot of the bed, watching them, one fist clenched at his side. His bodyguards had their hands on their weapons, and Kamoj had no doubt they would protect Vyrl even if it meant her death.

Major Tulain spoke. "What do you want us to do, Governor Ironbridge?"

Kamoj wondered if even Jax knew the answer. What could he do except kill her? Then Vyrl would kill him. Then what?

Jax said, "Where is Baldarin?"

"Who is Baldarin?" Tulain asked.

"The archer who shot Prince Havyrl," Jax said. "Your people were holding him in Argali pending the decision on whether or not to 'press charges.' Where is he now?"

"He's still in Argali," Tulain said.

"What about the fires?" Jax asked. "Didn't you evacuate him with everyone else?"

"Argali didn't burn," Tulain said. "Only one outlying village was lost. We put out the other fires."

Jax made an incredulous sound. "It is truly amazing, what you people do. Stop fire in its tracks, fly above the sky, heal mortal wounds in a day. We are nothing to you, just a bunch of barbaric ex-slaves." His voice hardened. "I want to know what this means, 'pressing charges.'"

"It is part of our laws," Tulain said. "If Prince Havyrl chooses to press charges against the archer, the man will go on trial for attempted murder."

Kamoj felt Jax turn toward Vyrl. "Are you going to 'press charges'?" he asked.

"No," Vyrl said. "He can go free. Whatever you want."

"Good." Jax turned back to the Arbiter. "I, however, would like to press charges."

"Against who?" Tulain asked. "And for what?"

"Against Prince Havyrl Torcellei Valdoria," Jax said. "For the attempted murder of my stagmen last night, when he attacked this camp during a truce. I also want to file suit with your civil authorities to protest the way Prince Havyrl and your ISC have treated my people." He pointed at the Inquiry table with his free hand. "I want the evidence from this Inquiry made part of the record."

"Your testimony is being recorded," Tulain said. "So your charges are in the official record."

"That's not good enough." Jax motioned at Vyrl. "Your army would do anything to protect him. Without some guarantee, my comments will never make it past this tent."

General Ashman had his full concentration focused on Jax now. No clue of his thoughts showed on his face, but Kamoj suspected that even if no one else had yet realized it, the general was beginning to understand how much they had underestimated Jax.

"You have our guarantee of due process," Tulain said.

Jax snorted. "As I had your guarantee of a truce last night?"

"We're making full recordings of this Inquiry," she said. "We will provide you with copies of those recordings and a web system to verify them, as well as equipment to contact whomever you wish to represent your case."

"Not good enough," Jax said. "I have no way to stop you from setting your machines to break after you have what you want."

"What is it you would have us do?" Tulain asked.

"When your people returned my stagman to Ironbridge," Jax said, "a delegation came with him. Including a man called Drake Brockson. He told me he was part of an organization that represented worlds like ours in the Imperial Assembly, to ensure we weren't mistreated. I want

you to contact him. I want his representation."

"Professor Brockson is an anthropologist, not a legal counsel," Tulain answered. "He can't represent you."

"Then he will find me someone who can," Jax said.

Ashman spoke. "No."

Vyrl swung around to him. "What?"

"I will not submit to threats," the general said.

"Damn it, Ashman," Vyrl said. "He's not bluffing. He'll kill Kamoj."

"The answer is no."

Jax moved the knife on Kamoj's neck, "You have fifteen seconds to contact Brockson."

Tulain stared at him. "You would kill your own wife? The woman you've fought this entire conflict for? Doesn't that defeat your purpose?"

"Nine seconds," Jax said.

"If she dies," Tulain said, "you have nothing."

"Seven seconds."

"Are you willing to give up everything," Tulain asked. "Your realms, title, freedom, possibly your life?"

Jax turned the blade so its edge lay against a large vein in Kamoj's neck. "One second."

"Ashman, do what he wants!" Vyrl's voice snapped out. "Now."

Jax paused, his knife against Kamoj's skin. Ashman turned to Vyrl, the two of them locked in a silent battle Kamoj knew had nothing to do with her or her world.

Still watching Vyrl, Ashman spoke in a harsh voice. "Major Tulain, contact Brockson. Have the transcript of this Inquiry transmitted to him."

Kamoj almost sagged with relief. Jax turned the knife, setting the flat of the blade against her neck.

Tulain contacted the *Ascendant* using her aide's book-box. Watching her "upload files," Kamoj felt a dazed detachment, as if she were an observer in a distant place. The knife made a bar of ice against her throat. No one spoke. No one moved.

The blow came from behind. Kamoj glimpsed a Jagernaut, not one of Vyrl's bodyguards but someone else. Jax must have caught sight of his approach, because he was already jerking away his arm when the Jagernaut grabbed for it. The Jagernaut caught cloth instead, ripping Jax's sleeve. He had also fired a sleep weapon, but either it missed Jax or had no effect; he kept moving, yanking Kamoj back on the bed until they faced the Jagernaut as well as everyone else.

"Liar," Jax spat at Ashman, stabbing his knife down at Kamoj's heart --

"NO!" Vyrl shouted. In the same instant, Tulain said, "Wait! Brockson is transmitting his reply."

Jax froze, the tip of his knife touching Kamoj's bodice. "And?"

A man's voice came into the air. "Governor Ironbridge, this is Drake Brockson. I will take your case and find you legal representation."

Watching General Ashman, Kamoj saw his sour look. Apparently Brockson's word was good.

Jax must have seen it as well. Softly he said, "Good." Then he let go of the knife.

The blade fell down Kamoj's front and onto the bed. Holding her around the waist, Jax sagged forward, letting his head rest against hers. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "If it makes a difference, I couldn't have done it. I meant what I said, but I misjudged. I could never have killed you."

"Saints almighty," someone muttered.

Jax held onto her, rocking back and forth, a ritualistic soothing motion Kamoj knew well, having often lapsed into it herself. With the same inbred instincts, she stroked his arms where he held her around the waist, offering comfort.

Dazza watched them with a strange expression, as if what she saw was breaking her heart. She raised her sleep tube and the expected hiss came from it. Although Jax stiffened, he made no further protest. When Kamoj felt his weight slump against her, she knew he had passed out.

Ashman turned to Vyrl. "You said he wasn't bluffing."

"I wasn't sure," Vyrl said. "I couldn't take chances."

"Damn you, Valdoria," Ashman said. "With Brockson on the case we can't keep it quiet. Do you have any idea of the diplomatic and political repercussions this mess will create?"

"What would you have me do?" Vyrl asked. "You said it yourself. I've been in a telepathic catatonia. I couldn't be sure if he would kill her."

Kamoj extracted herself from Jax's embrace and shifted her position so she was behind him. Sitting cross-legged, she laid his head on her knees, just as he had earlier done with hers. When she began to massage his temples, everyone stopped talking and stared at them.

Vyrl looked as if his heart were being torn in two. Walking forward, he spoke softly. "Kamoj, you don't have to do that."

She cradled Jax's head, too dazed to answer.

As Vyrl knelt on the bed, Dazza warned, "Leave her be."

Vyrl shook his head. "She needs -- "

"Valdoria, don't be an idiot," Ashman said. "Touch that girl again without her consent and I'll throw you in the brig myself."

Vyrl looked up at Ashman as if he wanted to punch him. But he stood up, moving away from Kamoj. Ashman's words echoed in her mind. *Consent. Consent. Consent.*

"Governor Argali needs to eat," Elixson said.

"Can you get her something?" Dazza asked. "Plain broth, if possible."

Elixson spoke to a stagman and the soldier left, the entrance flaps swinging back and forth after he was gone, back and forth, back and forth ...

Kamoj swayed. Her arm was growing numb from supporting Jax's head. She shifted his weight, easing him to a new place.

"Gods," Dazza whispered.

Puzzled by the shock in the colonel's voice, Kamoj tried to focus on her. Dazza was staring at her arm. Looking down, Kamoj saw that when she had moved Jax's head, it had dragged the sleeve of her dress up past her elbow. There, in humiliating detail for everyone to see, was her shame, the bruises and welts that covered her skin.

Vyrl spoke to Ashman. "Now do you believe me?"

Dazza sat on the bed and spoke gently to Kamoj. "Governor Argali, I won't touch either you or Governor Ironbridge without your permission. But if you will allow it, I can treat those wounds." She swallowed. "And any others you have."

"Will it hurt?" Kamoj asked.

"I can anesthetize the area. What I did with your foot the other night. You won't feel anything."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing." In a healer's gentle voice, she added, "I'll make the hurting stop."

"Yes," Kamoj said. "Do that."

"We need to separate you from Governor Ironbridge. It that all right?"

"No."

"We won't hurt him."

"What will you do with him?"

"He's just sleeping," Dazza said. "We'll leave him here with his healer. He'll wake soon enough."

Kamoj looked up at Vyrl. "You told me that you would protect me last night if I asked for your help. I asked. This is what happened. If I ask again, will I get hurt again?"

Vyrl sat on the bed, ignoring Dazza's warning look. "If I could take back last night -- " His voice caught. "I can't change what happened. But I can promise it won't happen again."

Moving with care, Kamoj set Jax's head on the bed. She slid closer to Vyrl and nausea swept over her. She waited for it to subside, then moved another hand span. The nausea surged. She was dimly aware of everyone watching her, but she didn't care. Right now all she could deal with was this journey of hand spans.

After an eon of starts and stops, fighting nausea, she came close to Vyrl. She looked up into his face. "I want to go with you." Reaching her arms out to him, she said, "Take me home."

Vyrl folded her into his embrace. No one spoke. No one told him to let her go. No one made a sound. His scent soaked into her, from his hair, his body, and his clothes. Tears ran down her face, but she didn't make a sound as she cried.

XIII

ROSE POOL

Asymptotic State

Moonlight lit the bedroom, flowing through the window above the desk. Kamoj sat with Vyrl, leaning against the headboard of the bed, surrounded by pillows, he still wearing his *slacks* and *turtleneck*, she in a farm tunic. The room's warmth and the potions Dazza had given her lulled her into a doze ...

Voices woke her. Opening her eyes part way, she saw the room was lit now, and Dazza had settled into her usual armchair by the bed.

" -- won't let you leave the palace," the colonel was saying.

"Why?" Vyrl asked. "Where do they think I'll go?"

"Nowhere," Dazza said. "That's not the point. It's a house arrest. The only reason Ashman let you come down here at all was because now that we know the truth, we realize it's better for Kamoj. But if you leave the palace, he'll order your return to the *Ascendant*."

"What, so he can 'throw me in the brig himself?'"

The doctor spoke quietly. "He acts in the best interest of the people. Your people."

Vyrl was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I know that. It doesn't make it any easier."

"If we could settle this mess with Ironbridge, Ashman would be a lot happier."

"Ironbridge doesn't want to settle. He wants to punish me." Anger edged Vyrl's voice. "He's a real piece of work. You would think after five thousand years, the owner genes would have disappeared here."

"Why? Genes aren't altruistic." Dazza tilted her head. "But you know, about forty-five percent of his DNA traces to slave stock. In some ways he's the ultimate product of the

breeding program. His endurance is incredible. Can you imagine the metabolism he must have? He also has a triple stomach. How does it fit in his body? I would love to examine him. His DNA is like nothing I've seen."

"How do you know his DNA so well?" Vyrl asked.

After an awkward pause Dazza said, "From Kamoj."

Vyrl swore. "I can't believe she's letting him get away with it. How can she insist we don't use the evidence against him?"

Dazza answered in a quiet voice. "She and Governor Ironbridge love each other."

"Love, hell."

"They've a long history." The doctor paused. "I doubt he was violent all the time. Erratic positive reinforcement can be remarkably effective. The more he withheld his love, the better it must have felt when he finally gave it to her, and the harder she probably tried to attain it."

He made an incredulous noise. "Why isn't she *angry*? Why am I the only one who wants to see that bastard drawn and quartered?"

"She *is* angry," Dazza said. "What do you expect her to do, Vyrl? She's been in this situation almost her entire life, with no out, at least not in her view, as Argali's future leader. She probably felt she had to repress her anger for the survival of her people. She's not going to show it in ways you expect. She might turn it inward, become moody or withdrawn. Or she may lash out at you."

"Me?" He sounded startled. "Why me?"

"Because you're here." Dazza's voice gentled. "And because she trusts you. She knows you won't strike back."

He blew out a gust of air. "What should I do, then?"

"Just be yourself. Doctor Tager is going to work with her, but she will still need time. Don't pressure her."

"I won't."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Dazza said, "Gods know, I wish she would press charges."

"Maybe Jax would bargain," Kamoj said.

Dazza jerked at the sound of her voice and Vyrl jumped.

"You're awake," Vyrl said.

"How are you feeling?" Dazza asked.

"Better." Kamoj regarded her. "If I threaten to 'press charges' against Jax, he won't know I'm bluffing. He might reduce his complaint." It would infuriate him to discover an Inquiry could investigate what he had done with her in his bed. To lose face that way, in front of his people, was something she knew he could never tolerate.

"It might help," Dazza said.

"It will," Kamoj said. She knew Jax.

Rain drummed the window like an impatient giant. Lightning flashed, followed by a crash of thunder. Kamoj gave up being stoic and slipped out of bed. The beads in the archway clacked when she walked through them. In the main bedroom, rain pattered against the shimmer curtain in the window. As she climbed onto Vyrl's bed, a flash filled the room, followed by thunder, like a giant clapping his hands around her head. She scrambled under the covers and yanked them up until only her eyes showed.

"Hmmm." Vyrl slid his arms around her. "It's good to have you back." He sounded half-awake. "I had thought ... "

"Yes?"

He hesitated. "That you annulled our marriage because you found out I was crazy."

"It isn't annulled. And you're not crazy."

"Damaged, then."

"Nothing is wrong with you."

Vyrl opened his eyes. "Don't look at me with blinders, Kamoj. Just because I haven't had a drink in a few days doesn't mean I no longer have a problem. It will be with me for the rest of my life even if I never take a drink again."

"Everyone has problems." She brushed her fingers over his cheek. "Yours are on the outside. Under them, you're a good person. Jax looks good outside, but underneath he's cruel. You're trying to solve your problems and he doesn't think he has any. He's the one who is damaged, Vyrl. Not you."

Pressing his lips against her hair, he murmured in a voice so soft, she almost didn't hear him. It took her a moment to realize he had said *thank you*, not in words but in her mind. Oddly enough, it felt natural, not alarming at all.

Aloud, all he said was, "I filled out the forms to alter my visa."

"Visa?"

"Permission to let me live on Balumil. Right now it's a technicality, since I'm in ISC custody. But eventually I will need documents for permanent residence here."

Kamoj stared at him, afraid to hope, afraid she had misheard. "You will live here? Always?"

His face gentled. "Yes. Of course."

"I thought General Ashman wouldn't let you stay."

"I do have to leave soon, for a while." He shifted her in his arms. "ISC is planning a mission to take my home world of Lyshriol from Earth's forces. They need me to pull it off, not only because I know Lyshriol, but also because the Lyshrioli people will follow me." Tightly he added, "But ISC can't hold me for the rest of my life, controlling where I go and what I do. I will come back, Kamoj. Soon."

She made herself ask, "What about your family? Your farm. Your children. Their children." And on down the generations that called him patriarch. "Your life."

He kissed her forehead. "I've already lived that life. Argali needs you, its governor, but my children are all grown."

"Hai, Vyrl." She hugged him, unable to find words to express her appreciation for the gift he had given her. Despite his attempt at nonchalance, she felt the depth of the love he shared with his family and knew how much he would miss them.

Vyrl sighed, holding her close. She turned her head up for his kiss, but he only brushed his lips over her hair. She hesitated, unsure now. Did he no longer want her because of what had happened with Ironbridge? Or because she didn't feel ready yet to be a wife to him? It unsettled her how much she needed to believe he would still want her when her emotions had healed.

He kissed her forehead. "Of course I do." Awkwardly he said, "You are just so young."

Dryly she said, "You, who married at fourteen, think *I'm* young?" She touched his cheek. "I've no interest in how your legal people count time. I neither think nor love like a child."

Softly he said, "And can you?"

"Can I?"

"Love. Me."

"Hai, Vyrl." Raising his hands to her lips, she kissed his knuckles. "Always."

His smile gentled his face. "I too, water sprite. Always."

For a while she lay in his arms. Then she asked, "Your people take longer to grow up, yes?"

He nodded. "Apparently your bodies pass through childhood faster than ours do. Your brains establish neural connections at a quicker rate, so your minds mature faster."

She could tell he was leaving out something. "But?"

He spoke quietly. "You lose a child's mental flexibility and learning capacity sooner. It limits your intellectual development. Which was probably the intent. It's why your people have so much trouble with education, why you struggle with complex concepts, and why you had trouble maintaining a more advanced civilization here."

Disappointment flooded her. "You mean I can never learn to read?"

His voice gentled, "Kamoj, I think you could learn anything you set your mind to."

"I hope so." She laid her head against his and closed her eyes. Thunder rumbled again, more distant now, less threatening ...

She awoke alone in the dark. Then she heard a splash in the bath chamber. Going to investigate, she found Vyrl swimming laps in the pool. Moonlight poured through the stained glass window, filling the room with ghostly gem colors. The radiance reflected off the water and made patterns on the tiled walls.

Kamoj was struck again by his athletic grace. She recalled his question: *it is accepted for men to dance here?* And Dazza had referred to his "artistic temperament." Watching him, it finally made sense. Of course. Vyrl liked to dance. She had no doubt he did it well. Yet for whatever reason, it wasn't accepted for men where he came from. Such a simple matter, but it was something she could offer in return for his leaving his home to live on Balumil. Here he could dance if he wanted.

She imagined him at the harvest festivals, swinging her around in the central square of the village, or in the Dance of The Skylions, surrounded by the rest of Argali's people, everyone whirling beneath the aurora borealis. No more cowl and cloak, no more metal mask. Perhaps he would always have to wear a shimmer that sheathed his body, but once her people knew him, knew the good man beneath it all, they could accept his differences.

As Kamoj knelt by the pool, Vyrl swam over to her.

"We have skylions in the mountains," she told him. With a grin, she added, "I've heard it said they don't like getting wet," and gave him a hearty splash.

He caught her hand. "Ah, but nothing is so beautiful as a rose covered with dew." Then he yanked her into the pool.

She thrashed to the surface, spluttering. "Hai!"

He grinned. "I get clumsy sometimes."

"Clumsy, hah!" She splashed him again, then took off like an ottermock, arrowing under his body as she blew bubbles at him.

They played in the pool for a while. Then they held each other as they drifted around the fountain, passing in and out of the moonlight. When they nudged against the stairs, they settled on a step, their bodies submerged in the water.

So they sat in each other's arms, their healing begun.