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Dear Andre,

I was able to work from the computer and so did not have to delay to get my hands on a 'hard copy' of the story.

I added a paragraph (top of P. 12) explaining about the power-born (cusp people). I decided against surprise on her part since so people and family oriented a race would have discovered long since the connection between birth date and various personality aspects, but I did stress that no one could explain why this should be so. I also followed your very excellent suggestion about adding a brief 'epilogue' with the two visitors. I think it makes precisely the perfect ending for the story even on its own, apart from the anthology.

As usual, I'm sending this to you via overnight mail.

Truly,
Pauline

P. S. The word count is approximately 9,266.

*There is a little to recognize
Cancer — no "typical"
mechanisms — very "rare"
like a report.*

"Seed of the Crab"

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out

The Wheel of the Stars had turned, and The Alpha and The Omega of Ylembric returned at last to the twelve planets which were the site of their great experiment. On each carefully chosen world, they had seeded one, and only one, of the basic personality types whose mixture formed the populations of all creation. Now was the time to see how those seeds and the worlds under them had flourished, or if they had borne fruit or even germinated at all, to see if one or more or all the types could exist alone, isolated from the balance and aid of the rest. *Change beginning, what did they see?*

Cancer provided, perhaps, the greatest challenge. Of all the signs, that of the Crab seemed least fitted for survival, much less advancement, when set on its own.

The planet itself was beautiful and should supply all that was necessary for the success of an anyway viable race. It was a water world, with vast, fair, wild seas surrounding three continents, or two and a half, really, since one was but an enormous island among many other islands. All three major landmasses sported shallow, broad inland seas, huge lowland lakes and mountain lakes small in diameter but so deep as to qualify as bottomless, lakes bluer than the finest sapphire. Rivers of every sort drained them from those so broad that one bank was not visible from the other on a clear day to streams and tiny rills not a foot across at their broadest points.

Topography was equally varied. Much of the land was high, but the mountains were gentle and green, either heavily forested or covered with lower growth that allowed the walker full view of the fabulous vistas opening out on every side. There was lower country in plenty as well -- rolling hills, great plains, even some expanses of swampland. The shoreline both of the ocean and of the larger interior bodies of water, was extensive.

A myriad of creatures, animal and vegetable, had arisen to fill

the numerous niches offered by their rich mother world, and this remained true despite the coming and rise of the experimental species. Whatever they might or might not be, Cancerians were neither murderers nor rapists, not of themselves and not of the world given into their charge.

That the race had both survived and prospered was obvious. What the off-worlders saw before them was a vital, active society, not any strangulated, broken band of perpetual primitives barely eking out an existence for themselves. What else it was besides was theirs to discover.

The great bulk of the population lived on the largest continent, the central one, with its good land and mild climate. Only the very strongest chose to brave the rigors of the High North, those or a few failures who thought to hide there and who suffered greatly before returning again to the care of their families, whose help they inevitably received, however distant the relationship between them and those taking charge of their lives. The small southern continent was too hot to be of interest to any significant number of people.

Despite the fairly dense population level, especially in the coastal regions, the land itself had not been disrupted. Home and family were paramount in Cancerian thought and society, an orientation so powerful that it kept both individual dwellings and the cities into which most were organized human in scale and accepting and nurturing of other beings. These people would not tolerate, indeed could not bear, life in the sterile, metastasizing cancers that were human habitations in other places.

Their love of beauty and growing things was apparent in their low, well-kept dwellings. Nearly without exception, all of the houses, even the small ones displaying little sign of wealth, mirrored pride and care and offered a warm if sometimes shy welcome.

Many were set near manufacturing and other business centers, whose buildings were equally attractive and well-maintained. The people of Cancer were not technologically advanced in comparison with those of some of the other signs, but industry had a big place in their lives. It was not viewed as an enemy, a necessary evil, but shared place with the many arts and was a source of honor for owner and worker alike. Whatever was made was useful and beautiful after the fashion of its kind, and it was almost invariably well constructed. When one affixed one's name to a product, then that item had to be a credit to that name. Anything less was simply inconceivable for them.

Prosperity and the comforts accompanying it were to be earned, but this was not a stupid people. Very early in their history, they had come to realize that there would always be those among them who would never be able to assume much or any responsibility for their lives. These unfortunates received love and care, for to abandon them would be unthinkable, but they were penalized in other ways for the good of all their race. Because it had also been recognized that a viable and fair land could not exist with too large a human population living upon it, and eventually would not be able to support that population at all, the number of children any couple could conceive was strictly limited. To those who proved they could excel in some field or fields of life, the right to engender and raise up to four children was granted. Most pairs had two. Those who could find no place for themselves either at home or in business were denied parenthood. The effect of good upbringing upon enhancing a child's strengths and minimizing his weaknesses was too well known to risk allowing flawed adults to mar the development of the young, thus unnecessarily fashioning more of their own ilk.

For much the same reason, marginal cases rarely received the

opportunity to reproduce themselves. Steady partners generally would not take to themselves those with poor home or business histories, understandably not wanting to have to bear the entire responsibility for maintaining the home themselves.

Most Cancerians married young, and the nurturing and caring aspects of the relationship were even more strongly acknowledged than its procreative purpose, so that the ceremony of union was considered and known as an adoption.

The partner who remained within the home, even if it were under the complete protection and support of a more active spouse, enjoyed the equal respect of society at large. These were nearly always the males. Custom played a large part in that, of course, but the females, the women, had always shown a stronger portion of practical zeal for the physical advancement of their families and homes and so had proven better fitted -- and more willing -- to take upon themselves the inconveniences of work bringing them outside those homes.

All children, male and female, received the same sound, very broad education, and all were tested in early adolescence to see if they were suited for general office or factory work or if they would do better in the gentler environment of the home or in the discipline and usually relatively solitary labor demanded by the arts, assuming the talent to advance there, which many Cancerians possessed. No formal examinations were given to determine executive or scientific ability, which generally surfaced later in a young person's life, though many pointing signs might be present at a very early age.

So, too, did the traits marking the power-born. These -- and more than 70% of them were women -- possessed a strength of character, a decisiveness, that went far beyond that normally found in the usual Cancer personality, even those of the highest type, save

when some life situation had forced the development of those powers in one basically capable of supporting them. Such people became the movers, the leaders, in whatever areas of life and endeavor that talent and desire moved them to pursue.

So much did The Alpha and The Omega learn easily, but then they were stymied. All this worked well in theory and appeared to work well in fact, but the test of any society was in its effect upon the individual, how it met -- or thwarted -- his or her specific needs and goals, how it permitted him or her to develop under its rule. They needed a subject, one subject, to study, and the choosing of a single representative of this race was not a simple matter, not if they were to do person, people, and their own experiment justice.

Cancerians led very quiet lives. They disliked turmoil and disruption, all of them, strong and weak alike. Violence was almost, even entirely, unknown. So were most other crimes and actions likely to arouse great conflicting passions, and their political and other leaders were no more moved to try such tactics than the least active of their constituents. For the Ylembric visitors, that was a major problem. A system's or a personality's worth was not shown when all went smoothly but in its resiliency when the unexpected, generally the unpleasant unexpected, struck, and Cancer's people were extraordinarily poor creators of the sort of situations they needed to aid their cause now.

Fortunately, type does not rule life itself or chance, and an incident occurred which supplied the disruptive spark they required.

It was an accident, though tinged with something darker, and it could have become a tragedy had it not been for the courage and determination of one man. The visitors remained on the site, ever invisible, listening and absorbing information, and soon had what they believed they wanted.

With that knowledge to guide them, they sped away to the dwelling of the individual they had at last been able to choose for their subject.

The two entities soon approached the long, red-roofed building whose size and large grounds proclaimed its owner to be a person of distinction and wealth.

They paused at the low fence separating the cultivated land inside from the wild but no less lovely greenery flowing down the mountainside, then passed through the wall and paused there to examine the beautiful garden surrounding them.

Both were well satisfied. The woman they had decided upon was one of life's successes as her people understood the term, not its failures. It would be instructive to observe how she reacted to the news they knew would soon reach her, whoever carried it, and how she would respond either to the request for information or for aid.

#

Their subject was neither old nor very remarkable in appearance. She was not really plump but was round and rather soft in body and was robed in an uncharacteristically short, sleeveless sea green garment that ended just above her knees. It looked cool, a necessity in this heat, which was high even so early in the day. Her face was pretty and nicely framed by long brown hair casually caught at the neck by a white ribbon. The eyes were large and were of a striking blue-violet color, by far her best and most interesting feature.

They should be bright, full of life and life's satisfaction, if the evidence of her other features spoke true, but now they were shadowed, pensive, and it was with a sigh that she sat upon the low marble bench nearest her. The seat was one of several set about this upper terrace for the convenience of those who wished to watch the ever-changing ocean below or to study the many-tiered gardens

extending down the steep mountainside from the house to the very edge of the pale golden sand. Each level contained plants progressively more salt tolerant and more capable of withstanding the strong, sharp gales that blew in from the sea with some frequency even at this mildest time of the year.

It was fortunate for Kelda Silversign that she was not aware of the off-worlders' presence either on her property or in her mind. There was trouble enough on her now without having to deal with that strangeness as well, that and the responsibility of standing as representative for all her race which their visit per force put on her. Last night's confrontation had been an unpleasant one, and she was still very upset after it, even more so if anything. She hated argument, disagreement of any kind, but sometimes the need for firmness was inescapable, in business and to preserve the integrity of the home. Her parents' deaths in that accident eight years ago had left her with three young brothers to raise. She had to fulfill her duty to them even in its less pleasant aspects.

Her head lowered. The previous evening had been particularly bad, though, hard on Carls and hard on her. She could understand his feelings and sympathized with them totally. He had always loved and idolized his older cousin and found it impossible to believe ill of him. Carls could not really think badly of anyone, much less a young man who was kin, and close kin, of theirs and whom he thought he knew so well.

Perhaps he was right. Keeth was the son of their mother's only sister, and refusing him access to the house and its inhabitants was like...it was like amputating part of one's own body.

No. She knew even as the thought formed that she had acted correctly and that, having made her decision, she must now stay with it. Keeth Lunarchild was no influence to have around an

impressionable, easily led young man.

Carls was basically as fine a boy as one could wish to find -- gentle, loving, helpful, intelligent, responsible in his own way, although facing a significant decision was likely to paralyze him, at least temporarily. He had never actually failed to perform as he must when presented with the need to choose and act, not when on his own. When he was with Keeth, he tended to follow the elder youth, sometimes on rather unwise routes.

She could not really blame him for that, either. Her brother was simply a good person who was somewhat lacking in judgment when it came to others. He would never think to wrong anyone else and could not imagine, gut level, that anyone would try to abuse him. As a result, some of the strays whose causes he had championed were less than worthy of the interest he invested in them.

Their cousin was a prime example. Keeth was indecisive and changeable in the extreme, incapable of sticking with any course once the inevitable difficulties inherent in following it manifested themselves. Sadly, he did have talent, a lot of it, but he had fled his teachers when they had tried to impose the discipline an artist's life demanded only two months after beginning instructions. He had then pleaded -- eloquently -- that he be allowed to help other painters place their works since he lacked the strength of will to join their ranks himself, and his parents had borrowed from her to set him up in a studio. Within six months, the reality and sheer labor of running one's own business had driven him away from it.

Somehow he had tested out as acceptable for factory work last year despite his earlier complete failure in the official career studies given to every young Cancerian and had secured a place for himself in a local company. It was not one of hers, of course. She had not permitted him to apply to any of those, for she could not in

her heart believe the shallow young man would succeed even at that simple level and did not want to put one of her managers in the position of being forced to reprimand or discharge one of his or her employer's kin.

It had been the celebration following his placement that had caused her to separate the two cousins. They had gotten so drunk that they had crashed Carls' carpet, totally demolishing it and barely escaping serious injury themselves.

Her eyes darkened. She wished she could believe that was all there was to it.

Even as a child, Keeth had been spiteful and more than a little jealous of Carls' more comfortable circumstances, to the extent that she had once caught him in mischief he had begun expressly to throw blame on the younger boy who was his shadow. His parents had punished him so severely that she had believed all such tendencies must have been chained in him, but now she was no longer sure. Keeth detested the conservative steel gray magic carpet which was the only one she would permit Carls to use, believing as she did that sporty flying platforms inclined young drivers to recklessness. Why had they taken that one instead of his own flashy red racer? She still shivered inside when she recalled the look she had glimpsed on him when the judge had been dressing her down after the accident for her lack of control over her charge. There had been such satisfaction, such pleasure, hungry, unwholesome pleasure, in it...

She had both temporarily grounded Carls and told him he would have to keep away from his cousin after that since they could not be trusted together. The driving privileges, she had reinstated after six months as promised, but she still refused to give Keeth welcome. Perhaps she was indeed being unreasonable, but deep within her heart, she felt that she had chosen well, that this course was the correct

and necessary one, and she had long ago learned to heed this inner voice of hers.

The woman pressed her small, slender fingers to her eyes. By the great mother ocean, she was tired! She was never meant for any of this. She had not been power-born and thereby endowed with special strength and vigor. Rather, she was so much the homebody and dreamer that she had been declared unsuitable for either factory or simple office work when she had undergone the obligatory testing, much to the unvoiced but too easily guessed disappointment of her parents.

All the same, she had risen to the need when life had dealt her family its blow and riven both her parents from them. Although there had been others expecting and prepared to do it, she had followed the wish she had often heard them express and had taken over the running of the vast multiregional company they had built between them. She had been trained for that despite the results of her testing, since there were great differences between menial and high-level labor, and no one examined a child for executive ability. She had been resolved not to betray their trust in her, not in the business bearing the family's name or in the more congenial and conventional job of maintaining their home and nurturing and completing the rearing of their three young sons, her siblings.

She had not done badly with either task, Kelda thought in momentary pride. The company had grown and prospered under her care, and her brothers, well no one could ask for much more in them. They were all a credit to her and to those who had given them life. Two had already been adopted and now had homes and young families of their own, and by all signs, it would not be very much longer before Carls would go with his Linna.

Her lips tightened. As he had pointed out so sharply last night, whether he received Keeth or not then would be entirely up to him and

to his bride. She would have no recourse at that point but to put her trust in the steadying influence of marriage and in Linna's discretion. -- Surely, that would be enough, along with the solid, loving upbringing he had known, to keep him out of trouble. He was, after all, a man, or almost a man, and was every day assuming more of the ways appropriate to that state.

Sadness rose up inside her. His going soon was inevitable, and she would miss him. This was a big house to share only with four cats and an ever-shifting population of wild things to whom she gave temporary shelter and healing when that was required.

She would be free at last to adopt for herself once Carls did go, but she did not even want to think about that. People would find it very odd, of course, if she did not, and did not do it quite quickly after her long responsibility to her brothers had been discharged. Indeed, there were many who thought it strange that she had not chosen a husband during these past two years. She herself desired such a relationship, but there was no one, quite literally no one, with whom she wanted to share her life in that fashion. There was no one she would even consider.

It was not that she was too proud, that she believed her wealth magically made her superior to the men around her. Kelda had been old enough to observe and remember what her parents had known together, how they had worked as true partners in business and even more so in life. She wanted the same thing for herself, would accept nothing less, and she knew full well that her hope of finding anything approaching it was so slight as to be well-nigh nonexistent.

Her parents, father and mother both, were power-born. That was not terribly uncommon for a woman, but for a male to receive those gifts was a very rare occurrence indeed. Men simply were not as a rule born in the first few days of the month.

No one, not Cancer's wisest philosophers or ablest scientists, could understand why the time in which a child was born should affect his talents and abilities, should lay strength upon him or weakness, but there was no doubt that this was so and had been since the first awakening of their race. Those, women and men, who came into life when a month was very young were marvelously blessed, to the point that they were known as the power-born. They were strong of character, able in whatever field they chose to pursue, decisive -- and the men among them nearly inevitably joined forces with women of their own type to form almost unconquerable unions such as that from which she had sprung.

Unfortunately, she herself was but an ordinary daughter of Cancer, of the higher type, perhaps, but probably more because of circumstance and her upbringing than from any particular virtue of her own. She did not know any man with the qualities she sought, and even if she should encounter one and he was as yet unclaimed, she knew she had very little hope of drawing him to her, wealth and position or no.

She sighed and stooped to pick up the heavy basket she had brought outside with her. It was filled with huge, hard-shelled nuts, each one the size of a small child's head. Kitty would be wondering what had happened to her if she stayed here gathering clouds any longer.

The path down had been graded for easy travel, with low, broad steps set where necessary to smooth the transition from one level to another. It was so designed as to provide an unbroken view of the ocean and beach, although that was not true of all the gardens through which it traveled. They had been created to offer many closed, small spaces, little private kingdoms of varying moods and differing beauty. Thus it was that she stopped, and her invisible

guests with her, when she was about three-quarters of the way down. A carpet had just swept around the northern shoulder of the mountain framing the Silversign cove and was even at that moment settling on the beach.

The Cancerian frowned. Her beach. No one could or should be denied ready access to the sea, but there were many large and excellent public facilities all along the coast. What sort of person would violate the privacy of somebody's home?

She could see the platform clearly, and of a certainty, she did not recognize the machine, nor did she know familiarly anyone who would own one like it. This was a broad, long, slow five-seater with a large, square windscreen and strong safety webbing on the rear seat to hold children or packages securely in place, the standard type of transport favored by the vast number of those of moderate means among Cancer's citizens. It was not a recent model, either, although she could not have named its year of manufacture. Unlike her brothers, Kelda found no fascination in mechanical devices and cared or thought little about them as long as they took her where she wanted to go in reasonable comfort and without undue delay.

Her frown deepened. That was a clumsy landing. If the driver was drunk as well as a trespasser...

Kelda Silversign straightened. He was leaning on the controls, his head on his arm, as if in great weariness. His hands appeared to be either thickly gloved or bandaged.

Shame and disgust filled her. Had some poor person come here needing help only to find anger and rejection, even if just in her mind?

She hesitated no longer but raced down the remainder of the path. As she reached the beach, she dropped her basket and kicked off her slippers, which would have slowed her on the loose sand.

The newcomer came erect as she approached. He was approximately her age or a little older, moderately tall, she saw, and nicely though slightly built. His hair and eyes were dark. They looked almost black against the presently much too white skin. His features were firm and should have been pleasant, but they were strained now, as if he were both exhausted and in considerable pain.

He was definitely hurting! His hands were indeed bandaged around the palms. The fingers were free, but they were a fierce red color, and several were severely blistered. Burns.

There was no ring of adoption and no sign that one had been cut away from the scorched flesh. No spouse or children to be notified, then, though he probably had parents or at least siblings.

"Here, let me help you into the shade," she said as soon as she had come within easy speaking distance. "Once you're comfortable, I'll call for some proper assistance."

"No need," the dark-eyed man assured her quickly. "I've already received emergency aid. The rest can wait."

"A drink to strengthen you, then?" Kelda asked, studying him doubtfully. "We have wine and stronger spirits."

"No, though I do thank you." He lifted his hands. "I'll have to take something to ease these soon." His shoulders squared. "Miss Silversign?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm Kelda Silversign."

"Please forgive this intrusion, Miss Silversign. I'm Brian Oceanside..."

A chill gripped her heart. "Of Oceanside's Rainbow Fabrics?"

"The same line, but well out from the owners, I assure you. I'm merely a department manager at their dying plant."

"Keeth!" she half hissed.

"He is your kinsman, then?"

"Yes, certainly. My cousin. -- What has he done?"

Brian's eyes lowered. This would not be easy, but it would be best to get to it directly.

"There's been a fire at the plant, a bad one. We haven't been able to locate him..."

Her hand went to her mouth as she whirled away from him.

"Keeth! Poor, hapless Keeth!"

"No, Miss Silversign," he began hastily, realizing his mistake, but then he was silenced and the little color remaining to him drained from his face.

A great, blunt form was rising out of the gentle waves, a snake of nearly unimaginable size. Another joined it almost in the same moment and others after that, four others.

Not serpents, he realized an instant later. They were tentacles, feelers fixed around the monstrous mouth that thrust itself into the air even as he watched.

Great mother ocean! It could close over either or both of them and take them up whole!

Hardly pausing to think, he flung himself upon the woman, trying to draw her back, out of the sea beast's reach, but as quickly as he moved, the tentacles were faster still. They enveloped the pair, surprisingly gently but firmly drew them apart, and then, still holding both suspended in mid air, the creature began to withdraw out into the bay from whence it had come.

"Kitty, no!" Kelda commanded. "No! He brought me sad news but did not cause the sadness, and later you scared him, little pet. He was only trying to help me, to keep me safe."

The great creature stopped swimming and carefully lowered them to its head in a manner obviously well familiar to the woman.

"Easy, Kitty!" she warned with alarm, which she had not

shown at all during their actual abduction. "His poor hands are hurt, pet. Don't get the salt water on them."

She smiled reassuringly once she was firmly standing on the animal's huge head, comfortably steadied by the tentacle still encircling her waist.

"Don't be afraid. Kitty won't hurt us. She just felt that I was upset and then misunderstood what she saw when she surfaced."

"Kitty?" His expression would have been comical had it not been for the fright he had received. Under these circumstances, she could only admire his control and restraint.

Kelda nodded. "She's a pussyfish, you see, though she's no fish at all really but a mammal like us. She's harmless, too. Big as she is, she eats only vegetation, seaweed and the like."

"I am aware of that, Miss Silversign," he responded sharply. "I am also aware that pussyfish are classed as totally wild, completely untamable, by every authority in the field."

"Kitty's not tamed. She's a friend, that's all."

The woman's smile was soft. "My brother Carls and I found her when she was little -- little for her kind anyway. -- She'd been thrown ashore by a huge ninth wave during a particularly violent storm and was nearly done when we got to her the following morning. We spent the next two days and nights taking turns walking her around the shallow part of the bay over there on the other side to keep her breathing and properly hydrated while she recovered from the shock and battering she'd taken. Luckily, there were no real injuries, or we couldn't have saved her for all our care.

"Anyway, she took up residence in the deep water outside the cove and comes in several times each day for a treat or to play."

"Do you always talk to her like that, as if she were human as well?"

"Of course, and to any other creature with whom I happen to be dealing! I wouldn't insult anything by mouthing gibberish at it."

"Nor would I. I talk to animals myself, but without getting anything like the response I just witnessed. Was that just coincidence, or does she always react like that? Do other beasts, too?"

"Kitty's extremely intelligent. Don't let her size and appearance blind you to that, but, yes, animals do seem to recognize what I'm saying to them or thinking. They always have." She gave a little sigh. "I wish I had the same ability with them. I'd rather that gift than just about any other I can imagine offhand."

As she was speaking, Kitty set them on shore. Kelda fetched the basket she had dropped and brought it back to the water's edge. Eager tentacles reached out to her, and she handed each one of the big nuts, which was promptly carried to the mouth and neatly inserted into that vast cavity. One remained, and this she tossed seaward. Kitty deftly caught it before it had traveled more than half a foot. This, too, she ate, then the big sea creature slid beneath the waves and in another moment had vanished completely from sight.

Kelda Silversign turned to face her visitor.

"Very well, Mr. Oceanside. She's gone now. I think you had best tell me about this fire and-and Keeth."

Brian's look of amazement at the abrupt change in her manner caused her to bridle.

"Did you imagine I was such an emotional defective that a distraction could cause me to forget a kinsman's danger? -- I may not be in your class, Mr. Power-born, but what I've been able to accomplish with my company should be evidence enough that I'm no incompetent all the same!"

He looked sharply at her. "I never suggested that! And how did

you know..."

She tossed her head impatiently. "A guess. I lived long enough with such people to recognize one."

Her eyes bore into his. "Don't make me ask about my cousin again. You say there was a fire and that he's missing, but you seemed about to indicate that he's not...not..."

"He isn't dead, or shouldn't be," the man assured her swiftly. "The blaze was confined to one room. Damage there was extensive but not to the point that we would not be able to recognize human remains in the rubble. We found none, and you can well believe that we searched."

"Yet he's missing?"

He nodded. "We need to talk to him, or I do. There are a number of questions open, and he may be able to supply a few of the answers. Besides, the media are waiting to confirm his safety before releasing the story. No one wants to cause his family needless anguish."

"Have you been to his parents' home yet?"

Brian shook his head. "This place was closer. Since he's frequently stressed his tie with you, I'd rather hoped to find him here." His face tightened. "I don't want to go before his mother and father with this kind of tale if I can possibly avoid doing so."

"A rather wise decision under the circumstances," she told him bluntly. "You made a proper mess of delivering it to me. If you have to see them, I suggest you tell them he has information you want about the fire and casually ask if he's at home."

"I know. I'm sorry about that," the man replied contritely, flushing. "I tend to be too direct at times. That's one of the reasons I've risen no higher than I have."

"The blaze, what can you tell me about that?"

"Not much, unfortunately. Not the kind of detail I need to try to prevent a repetition of it anywhere else.

"Luck went against us right from the start. There was a partial power outage, leaving the basic lighting and current intact but knocking out part of the support services, including the air coolers and, unknown to us, the emergency systems in several parts of the plant."

He saw her frown and answered grimly. "Yes, there'll have to be some redesigning done in the wake of all this. We just need the knowledge to make the right job of it.

"The fire began in the small automachinery room leading into the hall in which the bulk of my people were working. There was no alarm, nothing to let us know anything was wrong, until the smoke and heat penetrated our area. Our own alarms activated, but by then, the flames had gotten a strong hold and were both completely out of control and already eating their way in to us."

"Your fire doors?"

"They were on one of the blown circuits. They were well maintained, praise all we count as holy, and I was finally able to close them manually and then start the water sprays going."

"That's when your hands were burned?"

He nodded. "The doors are metal, and the fire had been licking them for some time." His mouth tightened, and she could almost feel the shadow of horror pass over him. "I had thought my job was done then, but with the concentration I had to give to what I was doing and with the roar of the fire and the pain and my fear, I simply had been unaware of what was going on in the rest of the hall. When I turned around to make my own escape, I found my people still inside, clustered frantically around the exit. It had been locked from the outside."

"What!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in fury, thinking of the stringent safety regulations governing her own facilities.

"It wasn't by plant policy. We'd all come in by that door. I have no idea what activated the bolt. Maybe it was the same force that killed the systems inside, maybe the ensuing heat, maybe some vibration. That's the chief reason I need to talk to Mr. Lunarchild. If it's a design problem or something else correctable, I want to know it now, before I submit my report and make my recommendations."

"Why should Keeth be able to tell you anything? He isn't a watchman."

"No. He also isn't a very good worker, and I had him on probation for leaving his position unattended on a number of occasions. I'm just hoping he might have seen something that could prove useful to us."

"But what makes you think he wasn't..."

The man sighed. "Because he was in charge of that automachinery room. No one died in there, and had anyone been present during the fire, he would have been killed. Even had he been there at the very start and run for it, he would've had time to warn us."

"You're sure..."

"I'm certain that your cousin left that room alive, yes," Brian replied firmly.

He was glad that he could do so. He did not want to hurt this woman, not any more than he knew he inevitably must. Kelda Silversign's mind was sharp, all too capable of taking facts and analyzing them for the good and the ill they held. Power-born or not, she very obviously was in command of her life and had not hidden herself and her perceptions away within the shell surrounding the soul of every Cancerian. She would not be long in realizing the

extent of the responsibility her kinsman might have for the fire and for its potential consequences.

"How did you get out?" she asked. "Help broke through to you?"

He shook his head. "The others would have reached us soon, right enough, but we daren't wait. I smashed the skylight that's part of every hall in the complex, and we climbed out onto the roof and from there down. It had been designed to serve as an emergency exit, and the ladder was close by. It took a little while, but I was able to see everyone safe."

"Where many hurt."

"No, no one seriously. I'm about the worst."

"You made your rescuers bandage your hands only partially like that?" she asked. If he had not, and insisted pretty strongly on it, the job was inexcusable.

"Yes. I had to be able to drive. I said I was going to my own doctor. I also told them I believed I was allergic to a number of sedatives, or they'd never have left me get away without that."

Kelda felt sick herself with the weariness and pain she saw in him. Brian Oceanside had done so much and suffered so much, and it was for nothing, at least this part of it. It was like Keeth to boast of his relationship with the wealthy and respected Silversign family and neglect to mention the breach between them. The department manager would not find him here.

He would find rest and care. She would contact her cousin's parents and, if necessary, get her brothers, all three of them, working to check out his haunts, which they knew better than she did, but this man was not going to leave her house until he was truly fit to do so.

The strength of her determination surprised her a little, but

before she could begin to analyze it, the sound of a carpet, one flying low and very fast, jerked her attention fully back to her surroundings.

Both she and Brian could see the platform clearly as it approached. It was slender and short and a blazing scarlet color -- the carpet of a very young and rather irresponsible person of comfortable means. At least, she could not imagine anyone bearing the weight of a home traveling about in such a flamboyant thing, an opinion borne out by just about everyone with whom she was acquainted who owned one like it.

The driver she knew, and joy surged through her heart at the sight of him. Keeth! She did not even mind that his too-fast landing showered them with damp sand. It was quite apparent that he was sound out, completely unhurt.

"Keeth!" she called to him before he could so much as step off his platform. "Praise all we cherish! You're all right!"

He smiled, gratified and surprised by the intensity of the obviously real emotion on her, but he saw her companion then, and his expression darkened.

"What's he doing here?" he demanded. "Carrying tales about me?"

"Brian's my guest. He came to see me in the hope of finding you, before he or someone else had to go to your parents. -- We couldn't be sure you'd escaped unhurt until we'd seen you."

"Well I did," he replied curtly, although her answer had mollified him somewhat. "Now he can go."

"Brian's my guest," Kelda repeated, "and this is my home. Besides, he does have some questions to ask you. You might have information that could prevent another such fire, maybe a fatal one the next time."

Keeth eyed the department manager suspiciously. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have any idea how it started, Mr. Lunarchild, what might have set it off, or even precisely when it began?"

"No. I don't." The scowl marring his usually handsome face darkened even further. "I wasn't there, if that's what you're really asking. It was hot, and the air coolers were down. I took a walk for myself. -- There's a nice little park for the employees to use at lunch," he explained to Kelda. "It's well away from the buildings and screened from them by some fine old shade trees. I settled down under one of them and ate an early meal."

He raised his head defiantly.

"That gives the excuse you've been waiting for, Oceanside, but I don't care. It was no kind of a job anyway. Not interesting and important like Kelda's. All I did was go from one automachine to another checking gages and seeing that they were doing everything they should. Nothing ever went wrong to liven up the day even that much, and when the air coolers weren't working very well or not at all, it was a misery in there. -- It's summer, damn it, Kelda, and this--friend of yours wouldn't even let me have a day off now and then. He said I'd already taken everything to which I was entitled."

He glared at the other man. "Factory work is for moronic mental defectives, not someone of talent like me!"

His cousin frowned to hear that. "No. It's for people, and they're in the majority, who want to support themselves in a manner that doesn't drain resources they prefer to hold for other, more important things. It is definitely wrong for you, though, and I'm wondering how you ever managed to pass the admittance exam."

He shrugged. "That? I'm no fool child now. I knew the answers they wanted to hear."

"Keeth! Those tests are as much to protect the candidates from making the kind of mistake you did as they are to protect potential employers." She shook her head. "Blowing that job is bad, Keeth. No steady woman or girl's going to want to have anything to do with someone with a work record like yours."

"So what? I don't want to spend my life slaving for a few little rooms and a patch of posies anyway."

The woman took a deep breath.

"You didn't start that fire, did you?"

"No! What do you think I am? How could you ever imagine..."

"I didn't, but I wanted to hear you confirm it, and before a witness outside the family."

Brian nodded. He believed the young man, but another question had come to him that Keeth might not be able to answer so satisfactorily.

"You did lock the work hall door after the fire began, though, didn't you?"

"I had to do that! When I got back, the whole automachinery room was burning, and I knew you'd all come piling out at any moment and grab me. I had to have time to get away."

"By the founders of the first homes, man, there were over twenty men and women in there!"

"Ah, I knew you'd get them out. The water sprayers' keep you safe anyway. In fact, it was rather funny imagining all of you looking like so many drowned field mice..."

"The sprayers did not work," the other man informed him coldly, holding up his hands. "We very nearly did not get out."

"I am sorry!" he exclaimed, horrified, "but how was I to know that? I never would've bolted the door if I had."

"What do you intend to do now?" his cousin asked him quietly, overcoming her shock and dismay by sheer force of will.

"I've got that figured out. I need help real bad, someone to take care of me, but if you'll just adopt me, everything'll be fine. I'm willing to forgive what happened before."

Her lips parted, and for a moment she was struck silent.

She found her voice once more. "Keeth! Even if you weren't too young for me, our blood's far too close."

"That only matters if you plan to breed," he told her impatiently. "You're not so young any more, Kelda, not like the girls I'd look at if things were better. You should be glad to have the attentions of a handsome, virile man like me."

She was surprised by the anger that flashed across Brian's face, but awareness of it did help her control her own. It was good that something did, for there would be no point in her lashing out at her kinsman.

"It wouldn't work, Keeth," she said wearily. "You've made a mess of your life thus far, and you wouldn't do any better with a marriage."

Too late, she saw Oceanside's warning shake of his head.

"Look," Kelda began, "we can talk about it properly up at the house..."

"No! You're as bad as Carls! You're worse! You only want to trick me until you can call the personality medics down on me!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked in complete exasperation.

"I went to your brother. He was supposed to be my friend, but instead of helping me when I told him what'd happened, he ordered me to get out of his sight and said I deserved to have the medics lock me away for the rest of my wretched life!"

"That was wrong of him," she told him quietly. "It was his disappointment talking -- he'd looked up to you for so long -- but he had no right to come down on you that hard. You can't help being what you are."

"No, and I'm staying what I am, too. I'm not letting anyone change me."

"You know a person can't be changed unless he wants to change," she reasoned patiently, "but you should try to get at least the discipline to take up painting seriously. You've closed every other road now."

"Not quiet, Cousin. You see, I've been thinking about this. People're welcome in the High North, and no one bothers them with questions about any silly mistakes they might have made down here."

That took her aback. "Life is rough there..."

"Not for someone with the money to buy himself a new name and the basic comforts."

As he spoke, he bent and retrieved a small, squat glass bottle from the storage box beside his seat on the carpet.

"See, this proves I've planned this out. I brought it along, well, stole it actually, in case you wouldn't be willing to help me freely. It's from the lab at work, and if I drop it, there's none of us going to worry about medics or fires or anything else."

Brian Oceanside had remained silent throughout the exchange both because he had no right to interfere in it and because he hoped to glean some more information from his former subordinate. Now he stiffened. He recognized the purplish liquid sloshing dangerously in the flask the distraught man was holding.

"Lunarchild, don't be a fool," he hissed. "You don't even have to drop that for it to go up. Put it down before you kill us

all."

"It-it'd be a whole lot better than getting dragged away and blamed-blamed for everything... I never set that fire..." Keeth was almost sobbing, but there was no mistaking the determination on him. "Now we're going to fly up to the house and get lots of money and extra fuel capsules, and then we'll go north, all of us."

The woman's head snapped up.

"We'd never make it! The most of the way's over water, the wild ocean. The slightest gale, and we'd be thrown down like-like Momma and Da were."

"It's a good carpet. -- We're going. I can't just leave you two behind to tell on me before I have a chance to disappear."

He motioned with his hand and stepped back almost into the water so that neither of them could come close enough to try anything against him.

"Oceanside, you drive. Kelda'll ride behind with me, and if you pull something, I will break this."

Kelda was weeping, crying piteously, and Brian's burned hands balled in impotent fury. It tore him to see her in such terror, to watch her crumble like this before that worthless...

His breath caught, and he fought to keep his expression blank.

In that instant, Keeth did lose his hold on the bottle, in sheer surprise as a black tentacle closed about him, pinning his arms to his sides in a punishing, vise-tight grip. A second caught the missile before it could strike the sand.

"That's the girl, Kitty!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in a relieved but perfectly normal voice. "Give me the bottle now."

The woman gingerly took it and very carefully replaced it in the padding in which her cousin had transported it.

While she was attending to that, the prisoner recovered from his

initial shock. He screamed in terror at finding himself high in the air, looking down into the pussyfish's enormous mouth, and he kept on screaming.

Kitty did not like the noise. She shook him sharply. The screams only increased in volume, and she brought him down into the ocean with a resounding splash.

Kelda turned quickly at the sound and the simultaneous return of silence.

"Don't drown him, pet. Let him up. I'll try to stifle him for you."

The big animal obeyed reluctantly. Before her cousin could open his mouth to do more than sputter, Kelda called out to him.

"Keeth, be still, will you! She won't hurt you as long as you stay quiet. -- Brian, keep an eye on things while I get some rope and call for help. Then you can instruct me on how to tie him up, and we can all go back to the house like civilized people and wait for the peace officers there." She hesitated. "You do know how to bind someone, don't you?"

He gave her a broad smile. "Yes, I can number that among my many strange skills."

"Good. -- Kitty, you listen to my friend Brian until I return. I'll bring another treat for you, too, little pet. You really deserve it for this."

#

Kelda sat back in the big winged chair that was her usual choice, letting it take her weight. Her head lowered. The excitement and commotion was over at last, and she felt exhausted, totally drained.

Poor, weak, broken Keeth! It had all been horrible, a living nightmare for all of them, but she did not see how she could have acted otherwise to preserve her home and spare the family, his as

well as her own, from much worse, how else she could have preserved life itself.

"What will happen to him now?" she wondered aloud. She might never like Keeth, but he was kin, and he was so pitiable.

"He'll have to be held for a while for observation and a decision made as to whether to prosecute or not depending upon the results. -- He's very unstable, Kelda, dangerously so."

The man flushed when he realized how he had addressed her. "I'm sorry, Miss Silversign..."

"Kelda, please," she said impatiently. "We did face death together, or the possibility of it anyway," she added realistically.

Her eyes narrowed.

"I'm being remiss. You belong in your room and your bed. -- How're the hands."

"Not too bad."

In truth, they hurt abominably, although they had been covered with healing and antiseptic salves and properly dressed. The pain was temporary, nothing to concern him. The capsules Kelda's physician had left with him would soon bring him ease, but he wanted to postpone taking them for a while longer.

He watched his hostess closely.

"That was quite a performance," he said dryly.

She shrugged. "I do some amateur theatricals, and I'm told I portray emotion quiet effectively." Her eyes shadowed. "I was calling Kitty with my mind, like I often do, telling her we really were in trouble and explaining about the explosive. I didn't want Keeth to suspect I was up to anything, and so I acted like I was terrified. It was easy since I was."

"So was I. --- You handled it all perfectly."

The woman sat up.

"I thank you, but that truly is enough talk for tonight," she told him firmly. "I want you to be fresh and completely rested when we begin our negotiations."

"Negotiations?" he asked blankly.

"For your employment terms, of course. Your present organization quite obviously doesn't appreciate what they have in you, or you'd be an ocean more than a mere department manager. I'd say, just as a guess, that your superiors are afraid of giving more authority to a power-born lest he wind up taking it all."

The tightening of his expression told that he'd come to a very similar conclusion himself, and she did not believe he was fool enough not to grab a better opportunity if it came before him, even if loyalty to his distant kin had held him back from seeking to make a break before now.

"I have no such fears. I need someone who can take charge. There are a number of projects I've had in mind for some time, but I've been afraid to tackle them alone, and I've lacked the person to help me develop them. I believe you're precisely what I need, and I don't usually misread anyone I intend to put into a top-level job."

She smiled then, her expression brightening wonderfully.

"Do you think you could work with me, Brian Oceanside, closely and long-term?"

The man needed no time to ponder his answer.

"I know it well, Kelda Silversign. We have nothing whatsoever to discuss with respect to that."

#

A smile that was suspiciously like triumph radiated from The Alpha of Ylembric's whole being.

Well, my associate, she asked, does that put your question to rest?



P. M. Griffin
582 Sixteen Street
Brooklyn, NY 11218

July 26, 1988

Miss Andre Norton
1600 Spruce Avenue
Winter Park, FL 32789

Dear Andre:

Here is the mss. for "Seed of the Crab."

I concentrated on the 'subjects' of the study and kept The Alpha and The Omega completely out of the story once they had arrived on the scene. If this is not suitable, or if the tone or my use of them is not right, let me know, and I'll revise the tale.

This is the first time I've written a shared theme like this without having seen previous stories, so I realize I might have missed the mark on the spirit of the anthology. However, it was a very enjoyable story to do -- I liked playing with the different personality types, or some of them, possible on a Cancer world, and I hope you find reading it equally pleasurable.

Let me know your reaction.

Truly,

P. M. Griffin

P. S. As the story now stands, it contains 7,952 words according to my spell check.

"Seed of the Crab"

P. M. Griffin
Sweet's
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Two beings, invisible entities almost purely spirit in nature, approached the long, red-roofed dwelling whose owner they had chosen to study, hoping thereby to gain a more personal insight into the workings of this world's society and of the people who had given rise to it.

They paused at the low fence separating the cultivated grounds inside from the wild but no less lovely greenery flowing down the mountainside.

Do we go on as we are or assume some corporeal form? the Alpha of Ylembric inquired in thought of her companion and fellow ruler.

As we are, I think, he replied, although there is little to fear in terms of violence from these people. The fact that they appear to take no pleasure in killing or causing pain is one of their better and more endearing traits. We can always return later in human form or in that of some animal if we so choose.

He passed through the wall and paused there to examine his surroundings. A moment later, the other had joined him.

A beautiful garden, she commented. These Cancerians may not be very advanced technologically, but their homes are all fair, even the smallest that we have seen. Perhaps that is just where their priorities are and where they have concentrated their efforts.

Hopefully, we shall soon be able to answer that, the Omega answered, although he made no secret of his doubts. Perhaps some of those they had engendered for their great experiment could stand alone, rise from the seed he and the Alpha had sown here so long before and manage their affairs and their planet's without the balance and help of the other basic personality types, but Cancerians... That he simply could not bring himself to believe. To his mind, they were the weakest, the least survival-oriented of all.

That they had come as far as they had seemed little short of miraculous.

Yet advance they have by every sign we have seen, the Alpha reminded him with some amusement. There is nothing uncivilized or primitive in anything we have observed thus far. -- Withhold your judgment a while longer, my colleague. You know that we learn best from the observation of individuals.

That, he responded ponderously, is why we have come to this house.

The Alpha knew him and refused to let herself be nettled by his tone. Do you think anyone will come, or come soon?

Of course. If not the injured man, than some other. We heard them say the boy is her relative. -- It should be a good test. Cancerians are family-oriented by all we have seen, and we shall be able to observe how she reacts to this news.

She will naturally be upset...

We are here to study, he warned, recognizing the sympathy rising in her. If we intervene this time, we shall only succeed in corrupting her reactions. Remember, this woman is obviously a person of importance, a success and not one of life's failures, but anyone can function well while all goes smoothly. We must find out how she responds to unanticipated stress.

I know all that, his companion responded regretfully.

She would have said more, but her attention fixed suddenly on the house. Get ready! She comes now!

#

Their subject was neither old nor very remarkable in appearance. She was not really plump but was round and rather soft in body and was robed in an uncharacteristically short, sleeveless sea green garment that ended just above her knees. It looked cool, a

necessity in this heat, which was high even so early in the day. Her face was pretty and nicely framed by long brown hair casually caught at the neck by a white ribbon. The eyes were large and were of a striking blue-violet color, by far her best and most interesting feature.

They should be bright, full of life and life's satisfaction, if the evidence of her other features spoke true, but now they were shadowed, pensive, and it was with a sigh that she sat upon the low marble bench nearest her. The seat was one of several set about this upper terrace for the convenience of those who wished to watch the ever-changing ocean below or to study the many-tiered gardens extending down the steep mountainside from the house to the very edge of the pale golden sand. Each level contained plants progressively more salt tolerant and more capable of withstanding the strong, sharp gales that blew in from the sea with some frequency even at this mildest time of the year.

It was fortunate for Kelda Silversign that she was not aware of the off-worlders' presence either on her property or in her mind. There was trouble enough on her now without having to deal with that strangeness as well, that and the responsibility of standing as representative for all her race which their visit per force put on her. Last night's confrontation had been an unpleasant one, and she was still very upset after it, even more so if anything. She hated argument, disagreement of any kind, but sometimes the need for firmness was inescapable, in business and to preserve the integrity of the home. Her parents' deaths in that accident eight years previously had left her with three young brothers to raise. She had to fulfill her duty to them even in its less pleasant aspects.

Her head lowered. The previous evening had been particularly bad, though, hard on Carls and hard on her. She could understand his

feelings and sympathized with them totally. He had always loved and idolized his older cousin and found it impossible to believe ill of him. Carls could not really think badly of anyone, much less a young man who was kin, and close kin, of theirs and whom he thought he knew so well.

Perhaps he was right. Keeth was the son of their mother's only sister, and refusing him access to the house and its inhabitants was like...it was like amputating part of one's own body.

No. She knew even as the thought formed that she had acted correctly and that, having made her decision, she must now stay with it. Keeth Lunarchild was no influence to have around an impressionable, easily led young man.

Carls was basically as fine a boy as one could wish to find -- gentle, loving, helpful, intelligent, responsible in his own way, although facing a significant decision was likely to paralyze him, at least temporarily. He had never actually failed to perform as he must when presented with the need to choose and act, not when on his own. When he was with Keeth, he tended to follow the elder youth, sometimes on rather unwise routes.

She could not really blame him for that, either. Her brother was simply a good person who was somewhat lacking in judgment when it came to others. He would never think to wrong anyone else and could not imagine, gut level, that anyone would try to abuse him. As a result, some of the strays whose causes he had championed were less than worthy of the interest he invested in them.

Their cousin was a prime example. Keeth was indecisive and changeable in the extreme, incapable of sticking with any course once the inevitable difficulties inherent in following it manifested themselves. Sadly, he did have talent, a lot of it, but he had fled his teachers when they had tried to impose the discipline an artist's

life demanded only two months after beginning instructions. He had then pleaded -- eloquently -- that he be allowed to help other painters place their works since he lacked the strength of will to join their ranks himself, and his parents had borrowed from her to set him up in a studio. Within six months, the reality and sheer labor of running one's own business had driven him away from it.

Somehow he had tested out as acceptable for factory work last year despite his earlier complete failure in the official career studies given to every young Cancerian and had secured a place for himself in a local company. It was not one of hers, of course. She had not permitted him to apply to any of those, for she could not in her heart believe the shallow young man would succeed even at that simple level and did not want to put one of her managers in the position of being forced to reprimand or discharge one of his or her employer's kin.

It had been the celebration following his placement that had caused her to separate the two cousins. They had gotten so drunk that they had crashed Carls' carpet, totally demolishing it and barely escaping serious injury themselves.

Her eyes darkened. She wished she could believe that was all there was to it.

Even as a child, Keeth had been spiteful and more than a little jealous of Carls' more comfortable circumstances, to the extent that she had once caught him in mischief he had begun expressly to throw blame on the younger boy who was his shadow. His parents had punished him so severely that she had believed all such tendencies must have been chained in him, but now she was no longer sure. Keeth detested the conservative steel gray magic carpet which was the only one she would permit Carls to use, believing as she did that sporty flying platforms inclined young drivers to recklessness. Why had

they taken that one instead of his own flashy red racer? She still shivered inside when she recalled the look she had glimpsed on him when the judge had been dressing her down after the accident for her lack of control over her charge. There had been such satisfaction, such pleasure, hungry, unwholesome pleasure, in it...

She had both temporarily grounded Carls and told him he would have to keep away from his cousin after that since they could not be trusted together. The driving privileges, she had reinstated after six months as promised, but she still refused to give Keeth welcome. Perhaps she was indeed being unreasonable, but deep within her heart, she felt that she had chosen well, that this course was the correct and necessary one, and she had long ago learned to heed this inner voice of hers.

The woman pressed her small, slender fingers to her eyes. By the great mother ocean, she was tired! She was never meant for any of this. She had not been born in the early cusp and thereby endowed with special strength and vigor. Rather, she was so much the homebody and dreamer that she had been declared unsuitable for either factory or simple office work when she had undergone the obligatory testing, much to the unvoiced but too easily guessed disappointment of her parents.

All the same, she had risen to the need when life had dealt her family its blow and riven both her parents from them. Although there had been others expecting and prepared to do it, she had followed the wish she had often them express and had taken over the running of the vast multiregional company they had built between them. She had been trained for that despite the results of her testing, for her parents had believed there were great differences between menial and high-level labor, and no one examined a child for executive ability. She had been resolved not to betray their trust in her, not in the

business bearing the family's name or in the more congenial and conventional job of maintaining their home and nurturing and completing the rearing of their three young sons, her siblings.

She had not done badly with either task, Kelda thought in momentary pride. The company had grown and prospered under her care, and her brothers, well no one could ask for much more in them. They were all a credit to her and to those who had given them life. Two had already been adopted and now had homes and young families of their own, and by all signs, it would not be very much longer before Carls would go with his Linna.

Her lips tightened. As he had pointed out so sharply last night, whether he received Keeth or not then would be entirely up to him and to his bride. She would have no recourse at that point but to put her trust in the steadying influence of marriage and in Linna's discretion. -- Surely, that would be enough, along with the solid, loving upbringing he had known, to keep him out of trouble. He was, after all, a man, or almost a man, and was every day assuming more of the ways appropriate to that state.

Sadness rose up inside her. His going soon was inevitable, and she would miss him. This was a big house to share only with four cats and an ever-shifting population of wild things to whom she gave temporary shelter and healing when that was required.

She would be free at last to adopt for herself once Carls did go, but she did not even want to think about that. People would find it very odd, of course, if she did not, and did not do it quite quickly after her long responsibility to her brothers had been discharged. Indeed, there were many who thought it strange that she had not chosen a husband during these past two years. She herself desired such a relationship, but there was no one, quite literally no one, with whom she wanted to share her life in that fashion. There was no

one she would even consider.

It was not that she was too proud, that she believed her wealth magically made her superior to the men around her. Kelda had been old enough to observe and remember what her parents had known together, how they had worked as true partners in business and even more so in life. She wanted the same thing for herself, would accept nothing less, and she knew full well that her hope of finding anything approaching it was so slight as to be well-nigh nonexistent.

Her parents, father and mother both, were cusp-born. That was not terribly uncommon for a woman, but for a male to be born at that time was a very rare occurrence indeed. Those who were normally — carried all the marks bestowed by such a birth, for good and, of course, occasionally for ill. They were strong of character, able in whatever field they chose to pursue, decisive — and they nearly inevitably joined forces with women of their own type to form almost unconquerable unions such as that from which she had sprung.

Unfortunately, she herself was but an ordinary daughter of Cancer, of the higher type, perhaps, but probably more because of circumstance and her upbringing than from any particular virtue of her own. She did not know any man with the qualities she sought, and even if she should encounter one and he was as yet unclaimed, she knew she had very little hope of drawing him to her, wealth and position or no.

She sighed and stooped to pick up the heavy basket she had brought outside with her. It was filled with huge, hard-shelled nuts, each one the size of a small child's head. Kitty would be wondering what had happened to her if she stayed here gathering clouds any longer.

The path down had been graded for easy travel, with low, broad steps set where necessary to smooth the transition from one level to

another. It was so designed as to provide an unbroken view of the ocean and beach, although that was not true of all the gardens through which it traveled. They had been created to offer many closed, small spaces, little private kingdoms of varying moods and differing beauty. Thus it was that she stopped, and her invisible guests with her, when she was about three-quarters of the way down. A carpet had just swept around the northern shoulder of the mountain framing the Silversign cove and was even at that moment settling on the beach.

The Cancerian frowned. Her beach. No one could or should be denied ready access to the sea, but there were many large and excellent public facilities all along the coast. What sort of person would violate the privacy of somebody's home?

She could see the platform clearly, and of a certainty, she did not recognize the machine, nor did she know familiarly anyone who would own one like it. This was a broad, long, slow five-seater with a large, square windscreen and strong safety webbing on the rear seat to hold children or packages securely in place, the standard type of transport favored by the vast number of those of moderate means among Cancer's citizens. It was not a recent model, either, although she could not have named its year of manufacture. Unlike her brothers, Kelda found no fascination in mechanical devices and cared or thought little about them as long as they took her where she wanted to go in reasonable comfort and without undue delay.

Her frown deepened. That was a clumsy landing. If the driver was drunk as well as a trespasser...

Kelda Silversign straightened. He was leaning on the controls, his head on his arm, as if in great weariness. His hands appeared to be either thickly gloved or bandaged.

Shame and disgust filled her. Had some poor person come here

needing help only to find anger and rejection, even if just in her mind?

She hesitated no longer but raced down the remainder of the path. As she reached the beach, she dropped her basket and kicked off her slippers, which would have slowed her on the loose sand.

The newcomer came erect as she approached. He was approximately her age or a little older, moderately tall, she saw, and nicely though slightly built. His hair and eyes were dark. They looked almost black against the presently much too white skin. His features were firm and should have been pleasant, but they were strained now, as if he were both exhausted and in considerable pain.

He was definitely hurting! His hands were indeed bandaged around the palms. The fingers were free, but they were a fierce red color, and several were severely blistered. Burns.

There was no ring of adoption and no sign that one had been cut away from the blistered flesh. No spouse or children to be notified, then, though he probably had parents or at least siblings.

"Here, let me help you into the shade," she said as soon as she had come within easy speaking distance. "Once you're comfortable, I'll call for some proper assistance."

"No need," the dark-eyed man assured her quickly. "I've already received emergency aid. The rest can wait."

"A drink to strengthen you, then?" Kelda asked, studying him doubtfully. "We have wine and stronger spirits."

"No, though I do thank you." He lifted his hands. "I'll have to take something to ease these soon." His shoulders squared. "Miss Silversign?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm Kelda Silversign."

"Please forgive this intrusion, Miss Silversign. I'm Brian Oceanside..."

A chill gripped her heart. "Of Oceanside's Rainbow Fabrics?"

"The same line, but well out from the owners, I assure you. I'm merely a department manager at their dying plant."

"Keeth!" she half hissed.

"He is your kinsman, then?"

"Yes, certainly. My cousin. -- What has he done?"

Brian's eyes lowered. This would not be easy, but it would be best to get to it directly.

"There's been a fire at the plant, a bad one. We haven't been able to locate him..."

Her hand went to her mouth as she whirled away from him.

"Keeth! Poor, hapless Keeth!"

"No, Miss Silversign," he began hastily, realizing his mistake, but then he was silenced and what little color remaining to him drained from his face.

A great, blunt form was rising out of the gentle waves, a snake of nearly unimaginable size. Another joined it almost in the same moment and others after that, four others.

Not serpents, he realized an instant later. They were tentacles, feelers fixed around the monstrous mouth that thrust itself into the air even as he watched.

Great mother ocean! It could close over either of them and take them up whole!

Hardly pausing to think, he flung himself upon the woman, trying to draw her back, out of the sea beast's reach, but as quickly as he moved, the tentacles were faster still. They enveloped the pair, surprisingly gently but firmly drew them apart, and then, still holding both suspended in mid air, the creature began to withdraw out into the bay from whence it had come.

"Kitty, no!" Kelda commanded. "No! He brought me sad news

but did not cause the sadness, and later you scared him, little pet. He was only trying to help me, to keep me safe."

The great creature stopped swimming and carefully lowered them to its head in a manner obviously well familiar to the woman.

"Easy, Kitty!" she warned with alarm, which she had not shown at all during their actual abduction. "His poor hands are hurt, pet. Don't get the salt water on them."

She smiled reassuringly once she was firmly standing on the animal's huge head, comfortably steadied by the tentacle still encircling her waist.

"Don't be afraid. Kitty won't hurt us. She just felt that I was upset and then misunderstood what she saw when she surfaced."

"Kitty?" His expression would have been comical had it not been for the fright he had received. Under these circumstances, she could only admire his control and restraint.

Kelda nodded. "She's a pussyfish, you see, though she's no fish at all really but a mammal like us. She's harmless, too. Big as she is, she eats only vegetation, seaweed and the like."

"I am aware of that, Miss Silversign," he responded sharply. "I am also aware that pussyfish are classed as totally wild, completely untamable, by every authority in the field."

"Kitty's not tamed. She's a friend, that's all."

The woman's smile was soft. "My brother Carls and I found her when she was little -- little for her kind anyway. -- She'd been thrown ashore by a huge ninth wave during a particularly violent storm and was nearly done when we got to her the following morning. We spent the next two days and nights taking turns walking her around the bay to keep her breathing and properly hydrated while she recovered from the shock and battering she'd taken. Luckily, there were no real injuries, or we couldn't have saved her for all our

care.

"Anyway, she took up residence in the deep water beyond the bay and comes in several times each day for a treat or to play."

"Do you always talk to her like that, as if she were human as well?"

"Of course, and to any other creature with whom I happen to be dealing! I wouldn't insult anything by mouthing gibberish at it."

"Nor would I. I talk to animals myself, but without getting anything like the response I just witnessed. Was that just coincidence, or does she always react like that? Do other beasts, too?"

"Kitty's extremely intelligent. Don't let her size and appearance blind you to that, but, yes, animals do seem to recognize what I'm saying to them or thinking. They always have." She gave a little sigh. "I wish I had the same ability with them. I'd rather that gift than just about any other I can imagine offhand."

As she was speaking, Kitty set them on shore. Kelda fetched the basket she had dropped and brought it back to the water's edge. Eager tentacles reached out to her, and she handed each one of the big nuts, which was promptly carried to the mouth and neatly inserted into that vast cavity. One remained, and this she tossed seaward. Kitty deftly caught it before it had traveled more than half a foot. This, too, she ate, then the big sea creature slid beneath the waves and in another moment had vanished completely from sight.

Kelda Silversign turned to face her visitor.

"Very well, Mr. Oceanside. She's gone now. I think you had best tell me about this fire and-and Keeth."

Brian's look of amazement at the abrupt change in her manner caused her to bridle.

"Did you imagine I was such an emotional defective that a

distraction could cause me to forget a kinsman's danger? -- I may not be in your class, Mr. Cusp-born, but what I've been able to accomplish with my company should be evidence enough that I'm no incompetent all the same!"

He looked sharply at her. "I never suggested that! And how did you know..."

She tossed her head impatiently. "A guess. I lived long enough with cusp people to recognize one."

Her eyes bore into his. "Don't make me ask about my cousin again. You say there was a fire and that he's missing, but you seemed about to indicate that he's not...not..."

"He isn't dead, or shouldn't be," the man assured her swiftly. "The blaze was confined to one room. Damage there was extensive but not to the point that we would not be able to recognize human remains in the rubble. We found none, and you can well believe that we searched."

"Yet he's missing?"

He nodded. "We need to talk to him, or I do. There are a number of questions open, and he may be able to supply a few of the answers. Besides, the media are waiting to confirm his safety before releasing the story. No one wants to cause his family needless anguish."

"Have you been to his parents' home yet?"

Brian shook his head. "This place was closer. Since he's frequently stressed his tie with you, I'd rather hoped to find him here." His face tightened. "I don't want to go before his mother and father with this kind of tale if I can possibly avoid doing so."

"A rather wise decision under the circumstances," she told him bluntly. "You made a proper mess of delivering it to me. If you have to see them, I suggest you tell them he has information you want

about the fire and casually ask if he's at home."

"I know. I'm sorry about that," the man replied contritely, flushing. "I tend to be too direct at times. That's one of the reasons I've risen no higher than I have."

"The blaze, what can you tell me about that?"

"Not much, unfortunately. Not the kind of detail I need to try to prevent a repetition of it anywhere else."

"Luck went against us right from the start. There was a partial power outage, leaving the basic lighting and current intact but knocking out part of the support services, including the air coolers and, unknown to us, the emergency systems in several parts of the plant."

He saw her frown and answered grimly. "Yes, there'll have to be some redesigning done in the wake of all this. We just need the knowledge to make the right job of it."

"The fire started in the small automachinery room leading into the hall in which the bulk of my people were working. There was no alarm, nothing to let us know anything was wrong, until the smoke and heat penetrated our area. Our alarms activated, but by then, the flames had gotten a strong hold and were both completely out of control and already eating their way in to us."

"Your fire doors?"

"They were on one of the blown circuits. They were well maintained, praise all we count as holy, and I was finally able to close them manually and then start the water sprays going."

"That's when your hands were burned?"

He nodded. "The doors are metal, and the fire had been licking them for some time." His mouth tightened, and she could almost feel the shadow of horror pass over him. "I had thought my job was done then, but with the concentration I had to give to what I was doing

and with the roar of the fire and the pain and my fear, I simply had been unaware of what was going on in the rest of the hall. When I turned around to make my own escape, I found my people still inside, clustered frantically around the exit. It had been locked from the outside."

"What!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in fury, thinking of the stringent safety regulations governing her own facilities.

"It wasn't by plant policy. We'd all come in by that door. I have no idea what activated the bolt. Maybe it was the same force that killed the systems inside, maybe the ensuing heat, maybe some vibration. That's the chief reason I need to talk to Mr. Lunarchild. If it's a design problem or something else correctable, I want to know it now, before I submit my report and make my recommendations."

"Why should Keeth know anything about it? He isn't a watchman."

"No. He also isn't a very good worker, and I had him on probation for leaving his position unattended on a number of occasions. I'm just hoping he might have seen something that could prove useful to us."

"But what makes you think he wasn't..."

The man sighed. "Because he was in charge of that automachinery room. No one died in there, and had anyone been present during the fire, he would have been killed. Even had he been there at the very start and run for it, he would've had time to warn us."

"You're sure..."

"I'm certain that your cousin left that room alive, yes," Brian replied firmly.

He was glad that he could do so. He did not want to hurt this woman, not any more than he knew he inevitably must. Kelda

Silversign's mind was sharp, all too capable of taking facts and analyzing them for the good and the ill they held. Cusp-born or not, she very obviously was in command of her life and had not hidden herself and her perceptions away within the shell surrounding the soul of every Cancerian. She would not be long in realizing the extent of the responsibility her kinsman might have for the fire and for its potential consequences.

"How did you get out?" she asked. "Help broke through to you?"

He shook his head. "The others would have reached us soon, right enough, but we daren't wait. I smashed the skylight that's part of every hall in the complex, and we climbed out onto the roof and from there down. It had been designed to serve as an emergency exit, and the ladder was close by. It took a little while, but I was able to see everyone safe."

"Where many hurt."

"No, no one seriously. I'm about the worst."

"You made your rescuers bandage your hands only partially like that?" she asked. If he had not, and insisted pretty strongly on it, the job was inexcusable.

"Yes. I had to be able to drive. I said I was going to my own doctor. I also told them I believed I was allergic to a number of sedatives, or they'd never have left me get away without that."

Kelda felt sick herself with the weariness and pain she saw in him. Brian Oceanside had done so much and suffered so much, and it was for nothing, at least this part of it. It was like Keeth to boast of his relationship with the wealthy and respected Silversign family and neglect to mention the breach between them. The department manager would not find him here.

He would find rest and care. She would contact her cousin's

parents and, if necessary, get her brothers, all three of them, working to check out his haunts, which they knew better than she did, but this man was not going to leave her house until he was truly fit to do so.

The strength of her determination surprised her a little, but before she could begin to analyze it, the sound of a carpet, one flying low and very fast, jerked her attention fully back to her surroundings.

Both she and Brian could see the platform clearly as it approached. It was slender and short and a blazing scarlet color -- the carpet of a very young and rather irresponsible person of comfortable means. At least, she could not imagine anyone bearing the weight of a home traveling about in such a flamboyant thing, an opinion borne out by just about everyone with whom she was acquainted who owned one like it.

The driver she knew, and joy surged through her heart at the sight of him. Keeth! She did not even mind that his too-fast landing showered them with damp sand. It was quite apparent that he was sound out, completely unhurt.

"Keeth!" she called to him before he could so much as step off his platform. "Praise all we cherish! You're all right!"

He smiled, gratified and surprised by the intensity of the obviously real emotion on her, but he saw her companion then, and his expression darkened.

"What's he doing here?" he demanded. "Carrying tales about me?"

"Brian's my guest. He came to see me in the hope of finding you, before he or someone else had to go to your parents. -- We couldn't be sure you'd escaped unhurt until we'd seen you."

"Well I did," he replied curtly, although her answer had

mollified him somewhat. "Now he can go."

"Brian's my guest," Kelda repeated, "and this is my home. Besides, he does have some questions to ask you. You might have information that could prevent another such fire, maybe a fatal one the next time."

Keeth eyed the department manager suspiciously. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have any idea how it started, Mr. Lunarchild, what might have set it off, or even precisely when it began?"

"No. I don't." The scowl marring his usually handsome face darkened even further. "I wasn't there, if that's what you're really asking. It was hot, and the air coolers were down. I took a walk for myself. -- There's a nice little park for the employees to use at lunch," he explained to Kelda. "It's well away from the buildings and screened from them by some fine old shade trees. I settled down under one of them and ate an early meal."

He raised his head defiantly.

"That gives the excuse you've been waiting for, Oceanside, but I don't care. It was no kind of a job anyway. Not interesting and important like Kelda's. All I did was go from one automachine to another checking gages and seeing that they were doing everything they should. Nothing ever went wrong to liven up the day even that much, and when the air coolers weren't working very well or not at all, it was a misery in there. -- It's summer, damn it, Kelda, and this--friend of yours wouldn't even let me have a day off now and then. He said I'd already taken everything to which I was entitled."

He glared at the other man. "Factory work is for moronic mental defectives, not someone of talent like me!"

His cousin frowned to hear that. "No. It's for people, and they're in the majority, who want to support themselves in a manner

that doesn't drain resources they prefer to hold for other, more important things. It is definitely wrong for you, though, and I'm wondering how you ever managed to pass the admittance exam."

He shrugged. "That? I'm no fool child now. I knew the answers they wanted to hear."

"Keeth! Those tests are as much to protect the candidates from making the kind of mistake you did as they are to protect potential employers." She shook her head. "Blowing that job is bad, Keeth. No steady woman or girl's going to want to have anything to do with someone with a work record like yours."

"So what? I don't want to spend my life slaving for a few little rooms and a patch of posies anyway."

The woman took a deep breath.

"You didn't start that fire, did you?"

"No! What do you think I am? How could you ever imagine..."

"I didn't, but I wanted to hear you confirm it, and before a witness outside the family."

Brian nodded. He believed the young man, but another question had come to him that Keeth might not be able to answer so satisfactorily.

"You did lock the work hall door after the fire started, though, didn't you?"

"I had to do that! When I got back, the whole automachinery room was burning, and I knew you'd all come piling out at any moment and grab me. I had to have time to get away."

"By the founders of the first homes, man, there were over twenty men and women in there!"

"Ah, I knew you'd get them out. The water sprayers' keep you safe anyway. In fact, it was rather funny imagining all of you

looking like so many drowned field mice..."

"The sprayers did not work," the other man informed him coldly, holding up his hands. "We very nearly did not get out."

"I am sorry!" he exclaimed, horrified, "but how was I to know that? I never would've bolted the door if I had."

"What do you intend to do now?" her cousin asked him quietly, overcoming her shock and dismay by sheer force of will.

"I've got that figured out. I need help real bad, someone to take care of me, but if you'll just adopt me, everything'll be fine. I'm willing to forgive what happened before."

Her lips parted, and for a moment she was struck silent.

She found her voice once more. "Keeth! Even if you weren't too young for me, our blood's far too close."

"That only matters if you plan to breed," he told her impatiently. "You're not so young any more, Kelda, not like the girls I'd look at if things were better. You should be glad to have the attentions of a handsome, virile man like me."

She was surprised by the anger that flashed across Brian's face, but awareness of it did help her control her own. It was good that something did, for there would be no point in her lashing out at her kinsman.

"It wouldn't work, Keeth," she said wearily. "You've made a mess of your life thus far, and you wouldn't do any better with a marriage."

Too late, she saw Oceanside's warning shake of his head.

"Look," Kelda began, "we can talk about it properly up at the house..."

"No! You're as bad as Carls! You're worse! You only want to trick me until you can call the personality medics down on me!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked in complete

exasperation.

"I went to your brother. He was supposed to be my friend, but instead of helping me when I told him what'd happened, he ordered me to get out of his sight and said I deserved to have the medics lock me away for the rest of my wretched life!"

"That was wrong of him," she told him quietly. "It was his disappointment talking -- he'd looked up to you for so long -- but he had no right to come down on you that hard. You can't help being what you are."

"No, and I'm staying what I am, too. I'm not letting anyone change me."

"You know a person can't be changed unless he wants to change," she reasoned patiently, "but you should try to get at least the discipline to take up painting seriously. You've closed every other road now."

"Not quiet, Cousin. You see, I've been thinking about this. People're welcome in the High North, and no one bothers them with questions about any silly mistakes they might have made down here."

That took her aback. "Life is rough there..."

"Not for someone with the money to buy himself a new name and the basic comforts."

As he spoke, he bent and retrieved a small, squat glass bottle from the storage box beside his seat on the carpet.

"See, this proves I've planned this out. I brought it along, well, stole it actually, in case you wouldn't be willing to help me freely. It's from the lab at work, and if I drop it, there's none of us going to worry about medics or fires or anything else."

Brian Oceanside had remained silent throughout the exchange both because he had no right to interfere in it and because he hoped to

glean some more information from his former subordinate. Now he stiffened. He recognized the purplish liquid sloshing dangerously in the flask the distraught boy was holding.

"Lunarchild, don't be a fool," he hissed. "You don't even have to drop that for it to go up. Put it down before you kill us all."

"It-it'd be a whole lot better than getting dragged away and blamed-blamed for everything... I never set that fire..." Keeth was almost sobbing, but there was no mistaking the determination on him. "Now we're going to fly up to the house and get lots of money and extra fuel capsules, and then we'll go north, all of us."

The woman's head snapped up.

"We'd never make it! The most of the way's over water, the wild ocean. The slightest gale, and we'd be thrown down like-like Momma and Da were."

"It's a good carpet. --- We're going. I can't just leave you two behind to tell on me before I have a chance to disappear."

He motioned with his hand and stepped back almost into the water so that neither of them could come close enough to try anything against him.

"Oceanside, you drive. Kelda'll ride behind with me, and if you pull something, I will break this."

Kelda was sobbing, crying piteously, and Brian's burned hands balled in impotent fury. It tore him to see her in such terror, to watch her crumble like this before that worthless...

His breath caught, and he fought to keep his expression blank.

In that instant, Keeth did loose his hold on the bottle, in sheer surprise as a black tentacle closed about him, pinning his arms to his sides in a punishing, vise-tight grip. A second caught the missile before it could strike the sand.

"That's the girl, Kitty!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in a relieved but perfectly normal voice. "Give me the bottle now."

The woman gingerly took it and very carefully replaced it in the padding in which her cousin had transported it.

While she was attending to that, the prisoner recovered from his initial shock. He screamed in terror at finding himself high in the air, looking down into the pussyfish's enormous mouth, and he kept on screaming.

Kitty did not like the noise. She shook him sharply. The screams only increased in volume, and she brought him down into the ocean with a resounding splash.

Kelda turned quickly at the sound and the simultaneous return of silence.

"Don't drown him. Let him up. I'll try to stifle him for you."

The big animal obeyed reluctantly. Before her cousin could open his mouth to do more than sputter, Kelda called out to him.

"Keeth, be still, will you! She won't hurt you as long as you stay quiet. -- Brian, keep an eye on things while I get some rope and call for help. Then you can instruct me on how to tie him up, and we can all go back to the house like civilized people and wait for the peace officers there." She hesitated. "You do know how to bind someone, don't you?"

He gave her a broad smile. "Yes, I can number that among my many strange skills."

"Good. -- Kitty, you listen to my friend Brian until I return. I'll bring another treat for you, too, pretty pet. You really deserve it for this."

#

Kelda sat back in the big winged chair that was her usual choice,

letting it take her weight. Her head lowered. The excitement and commotion was over at last, and she felt exhausted, totally drained.

Poor, weak, broken Keeth! It had all been horrible, a living nightmare for all of them, but she did not see how she could have acted otherwise to preserve her home and spare the family, his as well as her own, from much worse, how else she could have preserved life itself.

"What will happen to him now?" she wondered aloud. She might never like Keeth, but he was kin, and he was so pitiable.

"He'll have to be held for a while for observation and a decision made as to whether to prosecute or not depending upon the results. -- He's very unstable, Kelda, dangerously so."

The man flushed when he realized how he had addressed her. "I'm sorry, Miss Silversign..."

"Kelda, please," she said impatiently. "We did face death together, or the possibility of it anyway," she added realistically.

Her eyes narrowed.

"I'm being remiss. You belong in your room and your bed. -- How're the hands."

"Not too bad."

In truth, they hurt abominably, although they had been covered with healing and antiseptic salves and properly dressed. The pain was temporary, nothing to concern him. The capsules Kelda's physician had left with him would soon bring him ease, but he wanted to postpone taking them for a while longer.

He watched his hostess closely.

"That was quite a performance," he said dryly.

She shrugged. "I do some amateur theatricals, and I'm told I portray emotion quiet effectively." Her eyes shadowed. "I was calling Kitty with my mind, like I often do, telling her we really

were in trouble and explaining about the explosive. I didn't want Keeth to suspect I was up to anything, and so I acted like I was terrified. It was easy since I was."

"So was I. -- You handled it all perfectly."

The woman sat up.

"I thank you, but that truly is enough talk for tonight," she told him firmly. "I want you to be fresh and completely rested when we begin our negotiations."

"Negotiations?" he asked blankly.

"For your employment terms, of course. Your present organization quite obviously doesn't appreciate what they have in you, or you'd be an ocean more than a mere department manager. I'd say, just as a guess, that your superiors are afraid of giving more power to a cusp-born lest he wind up taking it all."

The tightening of his expression told that he'd come to a very similar conclusion himself, and she did not believe he was fool enough not to grab a better opportunity if it came before him, even if loyalty to his distant kin had held him back from making a break before now.

"I have no such fears. I need someone who can take charge. There are a number of projects I've had in mind for some time, but I've been afraid to tackle them alone, and I've lacked the person to help me develop them. I believe you're precisely what I need, and I don't usually misread anyone I intend to put into a top-level job."

She smiled then, her expression brightening wonderfully.

"Do you think you could work with me, Brian Oceanside, closely and long-term?"

The man needed no time to ponder his answer.

"I know it, Kelda Silversign. We have nothing whatsoever to discuss with respect to that."



P. M. Griffin
552 Sixteen Street
Brooklyn, NY 11218

August 1, 1988

Miss Andre Norton
1600 Spruce Avenue
Winter Park, FL 32789

Dear Andre,

Here is the updated version of "Seed of the Crab." It's larger now (9,142 words), which better suits the size specifications.

The change, of course, is the beginning, the first 6 pages. There were only some phrase changes from the point that Kelda appeared to fit the added material. I did change the term 'cusp-born' to 'power-born' since the Cancerians would recognize these special people but not that they had been born in the early cusp.

As I said yesterday, my computer can handle changes readily, so if this still isn't what you want. Please let me know your reaction.


I hope you are now feeling entirely yourself and back to work at a normal (but saner!) level.

Truly,

Pauline

"Seed of the Crab"

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the numerous niches offered by their rich mother world, and this remained true despite the coming and rise of the experimental species. Whatever they might or might not be, Cancerians were neither murderers nor rapists, not of themselves and not of the world given into their charge.

That the race had both survived and prospered was obvious. What the off-worlders saw before them was a vital, active society, not any strangulated, broken band of perpetual primitives barely eking out an existence for themselves. What else it was besides was theirs to discover.

The great bulk of the population lived on the largest continent, the central one, with its good land and mild climate. Only the very strongest chose to brave the rigors of the High North, those or a few failures who thought to hide there and who suffered greatly before returning again to the care of their families, whose help they inevitably received, however distant the relationship between them and those taking charge of their lives. The small southern continent was too hot to be of interest to any significant number of people.

Despite the fairly dense population level, especially in the coastal regions, the land itself had not been disrupted. Home and family were paramount in Cancerian thought and society, an orientation so powerful that it kept both individual dwellings and the cities into which most were organized human in scale and accepting and nurturing of other beings. These people would not tolerate, indeed could not bear, life in the sterile, metastasizing cancers that were human inhabitations in other places.

Their love of beauty and growing things was apparent in their low, well-kept dwellings. Nearly without exception, all of the houses, even the small ones displaying little sign of wealth, mirrored pride and care and offered a warm if sometimes shy welcome.

Many were set near manufacturing and other business centers, whose buildings were equally attractive and well-maintained. The people of Cancer were not technologically advanced in comparison with those of some of the other signs, but industry had a big place in their lives. It was not viewed as an enemy, a necessary evil, but shared honor with the many arts and was a source of honor for owner and worker alike. Whatever was made was useful and beautiful after the fashion of its kind, and it was almost invariably well constructed. When one affixed one's name to a product, then that item had to be a credit to that name. Anything less was simply be inconceivable for them.

Prosperity and the comforts accompanying it were to be earned, but this was not a stupid people. Very early in their history, they had come to realize that there would always be those among them who would never be able to assume much or any responsibility for their lives. These unfortunates received love and care, for to abandon them would be unthinkable, but they were penalized in other ways for the good of all their race. Because it had also been recognized that a viable and fair land could not exist with too large a human population living upon it, and eventually would not be able to support that population at all, the number of children any couple could conceive was strictly limited. To those who proved they could excel in some field or fields of life, the right to engender and raise up to four children was granted. Most pairs had two. Those who could find no place for themselves either at home or in business were denied parenthood. The effect of good upbringing upon enhancing a child's strengths and minimizing his weaknesses was too well known to risk allowing flawed adults to mar the development of the young, thus unnecessarily fashioning more of their own ilk.

For much the same reason, marginal cases rarely received the

opportunity to reproduce themselves. Steady partners generally would not take to themselves those with poor home or business histories, understandably not wanting to have to bear the entire responsibility for maintaining the home themselves.

Most Cancerians married young, and the nurturing and caring aspects of the relationship were even more strongly acknowledged than its procreative purpose, so that the ceremony of union was considered and known as an adoption.

The partner who remained within the home, even if it were under the complete protection and support of a more active spouse, enjoyed the equal respect of society at large. These were nearly always the males. Custom played a large part in that, of course, but the females, the women, had always shown a stronger portion of practical zeal for the advancement of their families and homes and so had proven better fitted -- and more willing -- to take upon themselves the inconveniences of work bringing them outside those homes.

All children, male and female, received the same sound, very broad education, and all were tested in early adolescence to see if they were suited for general office or factory work or if they would do better in the gentler environment of the home or in the discipline and usually relatively solitary labor demanded by the arts, assuming the talent to advance there, which many Cancerians possessed. No formal examinations were given to determine executive or scientific ability, which generally surfaced later in a young person's life, though many pointing signs might be present at a very early age.

So, too, did the traits marking the power-born. These -- and more than 70% of them were women -- possessed a strength of character, a decisiveness, that went far beyond that normally found in the usual Cancer personality, even those of the highest type, save when some life situation had forced the development of those powers

in one basically capable of supporting them. Such people became the movers, the leaders, in whatever areas of life and endeavor that talent and desire moved them to pursue.

So much did The Alpha and The Omega learn easily, but then they were stymied. All this worked well in theory and appeared to work well in fact, but the test of any society was in its effect upon the individual, how it met -- or thwarted -- his or her specific needs and goals, how it permitted him or her to develop under its rule. They needed a subject, one subject, to study, and the choosing of a single representative of this race was not a simple matter, not if they were to do person, people, and their own experiment justice.

Cancerians led very quiet lives. They disliked turmoil and disruption, all of them, strong and weak alike. Violence was almost, even entirely, unknown. So were most other crimes and actions likely to arouse great conflicting passions, and their political and other leaders were no more moved to try such tactics than the least active of their constituents. For the Ylembric visitors, that was a major problem. The test of a system's or a personality's worth was not smoothness but its resiliency when the unexpected, generally the unpleasant unexpected, struck, and Cancer's people were extraordinarily poor creators of the sort of situations they needed to aid their cause now.

Fortunately, type does not rule life itself or chance, and an incident occurred which supplied the disruptive spark they required.

It was an accident, though tinged with something darker, and it could have become a tragedy had it not been for the courage and determination of one man. The visitors remained on the site, ever invisible, listening and absorbing information, and soon had what they believed they wanted.

With that knowledge to guide them they sped away to the dwelling

of the individual they had at last been able to choose for their subject.

The two entities soon approached the long, red-roofed dwelling whose size and large grounds proclaimed its owner to be a person of distinction and wealth.

They paused at the low fence separating the cultivated grounds inside from the wild but no less lovely greenery flowing down the mountainside, then passed through the wall and paused there to examine the beautiful garden surrounding them.

Both were well satisfied. The woman they had decided upon was one of life's successes as her people understood the term, not its failures. It would be instructive to observe how she reacted to the news they knew would soon reach her, whoever carried it, and how she would respond either to the request for information or for aid.

#

Their subject was neither old nor very remarkable in appearance. She was not really plump but was round and rather soft in body and was robed in an uncharacteristically short, sleeveless sea green garment that ended just above her knees. It looked cool, a necessity in this heat, which was high even so early in the day. Her face was pretty and nicely framed by long brown hair casually caught at the neck by a white ribbon. The eyes were large and were of a striking blue-violet color, by far her best and most interesting feature.

They should be bright, full of life and life's satisfaction, if the evidence of her other features spoke true, but now they were shadowed, pensive, and it was with a sigh that she sat upon the low marble bench nearest her. The seat was one of several set about this upper terrace for the convenience of those who wished to watch the ever-changing ocean below or to study the many-tiered gardens extending down the steep mountainside from the house to the very edge

of the pale golden sand. Each level contained plants progressively more salt tolerant and more capable of withstanding the strong, sharp gales that blew in from the sea with some frequency even at this mildest time of the year.

It was fortunate for Kelda Silversign that she was not aware of the off-worlders' presence either on her property or in her mind. There was trouble enough on her now without having to deal with that strangeness as well, that and the responsibility of standing as representative for all her race which their visit per force put on her. Last night's confrontation had been an unpleasant one, and she was still very upset after it, even more so if anything. She hated argument, disagreement of any kind, but sometimes the need for firmness was inescapable, in business and to preserve the integrity of the home. Her parents' deaths in that accident eight years previously had left her with three young brothers to raise. She had to fulfill her duty to them even in its less pleasant aspects.

Her head lowered. The previous evening had been particularly bad, though, hard on Carls and hard on her. She could understand his feelings and sympathized with them totally. He had always loved and idolized his older cousin and found it impossible to believe ill of him. Carls could not really think badly of anyone, much less a young man who was kin, and close kin, of theirs and whom he thought he knew so well.

Perhaps he was right. Keeth was the son of their mother's only sister, and refusing him access to the house and its inhabitants was like...it was like amputating part of one's own body.

No. She knew even as the thought formed that she had acted correctly and that, having made her decision, she must now stay with it. Keeth Lunarchild was no influence to have around an impressionable, easily led young man.

Carls was basically as fine a boy as one could wish to find -- gentle, loving, helpful, intelligent, responsible in his own way, although facing a significant decision was likely to paralyze him, at least temporarily. He had never actually failed to perform as he must when presented with the need to choose and act, not when on his own. When he was with Keeth, he tended to follow the elder youth, sometimes on rather unwise routes.

She could not really blame him for that, either. Her brother was simply a good person who was somewhat lacking in judgment when it came to others. He would never think to wrong anyone else and could not imagine, gut level, that anyone would try to abuse him. As a result, some of the strays whose causes he had championed were less than worthy of the interest he invested in them.

Their cousin was a prime example. Keeth was indecisive and changeable in the extreme, incapable of sticking with any course once the inevitable difficulties inherent in following it manifested themselves. Sadly, he did have talent, a lot of it, but he had fled his teachers when they had tried to impose the discipline an artist's life demanded only two months after beginning instructions. He had then pleaded -- eloquently -- that he be allowed to help other painters place their works since he lacked the strength of will to join their ranks himself, and his parents had borrowed from her to set him up in a studio. Within six months, the reality and sheer labor of running one's own business had driven him away from it.

Somehow he had tested out as acceptable for factory work last year despite his earlier complete failure in the official career studies given to every young Cancerian and had secured a place for himself in a local company. It was not one of hers, of course. She had not permitted him to apply to any of those, for she could not in her heart believe the shallow young man would succeed even at that

simple level and did not want to put one of her managers in the position of being forced to reprimand or discharge one of his or her employer's kin.

It had been the celebration following his placement that had caused her to separate the two cousins. They had gotten so drunk that they had crashed Carls' carpet, totally demolishing it and barely escaping serious injury themselves.

Her eyes darkened. She wished she could believe that was all there was to it.

Even as a child, Keeth had been spiteful and more than a little jealous of Carls' more comfortable circumstances, to the extent that she had once caught him in mischief he had begun expressly to throw blame on the younger boy who was his shadow. His parents had punished him so severely that she had believed all such tendencies must have been chained in him, but now she was no longer sure. Keeth detested the conservative steel gray magic carpet which was the only one she would permit Carls to use, believing as she did that sporty flying platforms inclined young drivers to recklessness. Why had they taken that one instead of his own flashy red racer? She still shivered inside when she recalled the look she had glimpsed on him when the judge had been dressing her down after the accident for her lack of control over her charge. There had been such satisfaction, such pleasure, hungry, unwholesome pleasure, in it...

She had both temporarily grounded Carls and told him he would have to keep away from his cousin after that since they could not be trusted together. The driving privileges, she had reinstated after six months as promised, but she still refused to give Keeth welcome. Perhaps she was indeed being unreasonable, but deep within her heart, she felt that she had chosen well, that this course was the correct and necessary one, and she had long ago learned to heed this inner

voice of hers.

The woman pressed her small, slender fingers to her eyes. By the great mother ocean, she was tired! She was never meant for any of this. She had not been power-born and thereby endowed with special strength and vigor. Rather, she was so much the homebody and dreamer that she had been declared unsuitable for either factory or simple office work when she had undergone the obligatory testing, much to the unvoiced but too easily guessed disappointment of her parents.

All the same, she had risen to the need when life had dealt her family its blow and riven both her parents from them. Although there had been others expecting and prepared to do it, she had followed the wish she had often them express and had taken over the running of the vast multiregional company they had built between them. She had been trained for that despite the results of her testing, since there were great differences between menial and high-level labor, and no one examined a child for executive ability. She had been resolved not to betray their trust in her, not in the business bearing the family's name or in the more congenial and conventional job of maintaining their home and nurturing and completing the rearing of their three young sons, her siblings.

She had not done badly with either task, Kelda thought in momentary pride. The company had grown and prospered under her care, and her brothers, well no one could ask for much more in them. They were all a credit to her and to those who had given them life. Two had already been adopted and now had homes and young families of their own, and by all signs, it would not be very much longer before Carls would go with his Linna.

Her lips tightened. As he had pointed out so sharply last night, whether he received Keeth or not then would be entirely up to him and to his bride. She would have no recourse at that point but to put

her trust in the steady influence of marriage and in Linna's discretion. -- Surely, that would be enough, along with the solid, loving upbringing he had known, to keep him out of trouble. He was, after all, a man, or almost a man, and was every day assuming more of the ways appropriate to that state.

Sadness rose up inside her. His going soon was inevitable, and she would miss him. This was a big house to share only with four cats and an ever-shifting population of wild things to whom she gave temporary shelter and healing when that was required.

She would be free at last to adopt for herself once Carls did go, but she did not even want to think about that. People would find it very odd, of course, if she did not, and did not do it quite quickly after her long responsibility to her brothers had been discharged. Indeed, there were many who thought it strange that she had not chosen a husband during these past two years. She herself desired such a relationship, but there was no one, quite literally no one, with whom she wanted to share her life in that fashion. There was no one she would even consider.

It was not that she was too proud, that she believed her wealth magically made her superior to the men around her. Kelda had been old enough to observe and remember what her parents had known together, how they had worked as true partners in business and even more so in life. She wanted the same thing for herself, would accept nothing less, and she knew full well that her hope of finding anything approaching it was so slight as to be well-nigh nonexistent.

Her parents, father and mother both, were power-born. That was not terribly uncommon for a woman, but for a male to receive these gifts was a very rare occurrence indeed. Those who did normally carried all the marks bestowed by such a birth, for good and, of course, occasionally for ill. They were strong of character, able in

whatever field they chose to pursue, decisive -- and they nearly inevitably joined forces with women of their own type to form almost unconquerable unions such as that from which she had sprung.

Unfortunately, she herself was but an ordinary daughter of Cancer, of the higher type, perhaps, but probably more because of circumstance and her upbringing than from any particular virtue of her own. She did not know any man with the qualities she sought, and even if she should encounter one and he was as yet unclaimed, she knew she had very little hope of drawing him to her, wealth and position or no.

She sighed and stooped to pick up the heavy basket she had brought outside with her. It was filled with huge, hard-shelled nuts, each one the size of a small child's head. Kitty would be wondering what had happened to her if she stayed here gathering clouds any longer.

The path down had been graded for easy travel, with low, broad steps set where necessary to smooth the transition from one level to another. It was so designed as to provide an unbroken view of the ocean and beach, although that was not true of all the gardens through which it traveled. They had been created to offer many closed, small spaces, little private kingdoms of varying moods and differing beauty. Thus it was that she stopped, and her invisible guests with her, when she was about three-quarters of the way down. A carpet had just swept around the northern shoulder of the mountain framing the Silversign cove and was even at that moment settling on the beach.

The Cancerian frowned. Her beach. No one could or should be denied ready access to the sea, but there were many large and excellent public facilities all along the coast. What sort of person would violate the privacy of somebody's home?

She could see the platform clearly, and of a certainty, she did not recognize the machine, nor did she know familiarly anyone who would own one like it. This was a broad, long, slow five-seater with a large, square windscreen and strong safety webbing on the rear seat to hold children or packages securely in place, the standard type of transport favored by the vast number of those of moderate means among Cancer's citizens. It was not a recent model, either, although she could not have named its year of manufacture. Unlike her brothers, Kelda found no fascination in mechanical devices and cared or thought little about them as long as they took her where she wanted to go in reasonable comfort and without undue delay.

Her frown deepened. That was a clumsy landing. If the driver was drunk as well as a trespasser...

Kelda Silversign straightened. He was leaning on the controls, his head on his arm, as if in great weariness. His hands appeared to be either thickly gloved or bandaged.

Shame and disgust filled her. Had some poor person come here needing help only to find anger and rejection, even if just in her mind?

She hesitated no longer but raced down the remainder of the path. As she reached the beach, she dropped her basket and kicked off her slippers, which would have slowed her on the loose sand.

The newcomer came erect as she approached. He was approximately her age or a little older, moderately tall, she saw, and nicely though slightly built. His hair and eyes were dark. They looked almost black against the presently much too white skin. His features were firm and should have been pleasant, but they were strained now, as if he were both exhausted and in considerable pain.

He was definitely hurting! His hands were indeed bandaged around the palms. The fingers were free, but they were a fierce red color,

and several were severely blistered. Burns.

There was no ring of adoption and no sign that one had been cut away from the blistered flesh. No spouse or children to be notified, then, though he probably had parents or at least siblings.

"Here, let me help you into the shade," she said as soon as she had come within easy speaking distance. "Once you're comfortable, I'll call for some proper assistance."

"No need," the dark-eyed man assured her quickly. "I've already received emergency aid. The rest can wait."

"A drink to strengthen you, then?" Kelda asked, studying him doubtfully. "We have wine and stronger spirits."

"No, though I do thank you." He lifted his hands. "I'll have to take something to ease these soon." His shoulders squared. "Miss Silversign?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm Kelda Silversign."

"Please forgive this intrusion, Miss Silversign. I'm Brian Oceanside..."

A chill gripped her heart. "Of Oceanside's Rainbow Fabrics?"

"The same line, but well out from the owners, I assure you. I'm merely a department manager at their dying plant."

"Keeth!" she half hissed.

"He is your kinsman, then?"

"Yes, certainly. My cousin. -- What has he done?"

Brian's eyes lowered. This would not be easy, but it would be best to get to it directly.

"There's been a fire at the plant, a bad one. We haven't been able to locate him..."

Her hand went to her mouth as she whirled away from him.

"Keeth! Poor, hapless Keeth!"

"No, Miss Silversign," he began hastily, realizing his

mistake, but then he was silenced and what little color remaining to him drained from his face.

A great, blunt form was rising out of the gentle waves, a snake of nearly unimaginable size. Another joined it almost in the same moment and others after that, four others.

Not serpents, he realized an instant later. They were tentacles, feelers fixed around the monstrous mouth that thrust itself into the air even as he watched.

Great mother ocean! It could close over either or both of them and take them up whole!

Hardly pausing to think, he flung himself upon the woman, trying to draw her back, out of the sea beast's reach, but as quickly as he moved, the tentacles were faster still. They enveloped the pair, surprisingly gently but firmly drew them apart, and then, still holding both suspended in mid air, the creature began to withdraw out into the bay from whence it had come.

"Kitty, no!" Kelda commanded. "No! He brought me sad news but did not cause the sadness, and later you scared him, little pet. He was only trying to help me, to keep me safe."

The great creature stopped swimming and carefully lowered them to its head in a manner obviously well familiar to the woman.

"Easy, Kitty!" she warned with alarm, which she had not shown at all during their actual abduction. "His poor hands are hurt, pet. Don't get the salt water on them."

She smiled reassuringly once she was firmly standing on the animal's huge head, comfortably steadied by the tentacle still encircling her waist.

"Don't be afraid. Kitty won't hurt us. She just felt that I was upset and then misunderstood what she saw when she surfaced."

"Kitty?" His expression would have been comical had it not

been for the fright he had received. Under these circumstances, she could only admire his control and restraint.

Kelda nodded. "She's a pussyfish, you see, though she's no fish at all really but a mammal like us. She's harmless, too. Big as she is, she eats only vegetation, seaweed and the like."

"I am aware of that, Miss Silversign," he responded sharply. "I am also aware that pussyfish are classed as totally wild, completely untamable, by every authority in the field."

"Kitty's not tamed. She's a friend, that's all."

The woman's smile was soft. "My brother Carls and I found her when she was little -- little for her kind anyway. -- She'd been thrown ashore by a huge ninth wave during a particularly violent storm and was nearly done when we got to her the following morning. We spent the next two days and nights taking turns walking her around the bay to keep her breathing and properly hydrated while she recovered from the shock and battering she'd taken. Luckily, there were no real injuries, or we couldn't have saved her for all our care.

"Anyway, she took up residence in the deep water beyond the bay and comes in several times each day for a treat or to play."

"Do you always talk to her like that, as if she were human as well?"

"Of course, and to any other creature with whom I happen to be dealing! I wouldn't insult anything by mouthing gibberish at it."

"Nor would I. I talk to animals myself, but without getting anything like the response I just witnessed. Was that just coincidence, or does she always react like that? Do other beasts, too?"

"Kitty's extremely intelligent. Don't let her size and appearance blind you to that, but, yes, animals do seem to recognize

what I'm saying to them or thinking. They always have." She gave a little sigh. "I wish I had the same ability with them. I'd rather that gift than just about any other I can imagine offhand."

As she was speaking, Kitty set them on shore. Kelda fetched the basket she had dropped and brought it back to the water's edge. Eager tentacles reached out to her, and she handed each one of the big nuts, which was promptly carried to the mouth and neatly inserted into that vast cavity. One remained, and this she tossed seaward. Kitty deftly caught it before it had traveled more than half a foot. This, too, she ate, then the big sea creature slid beneath the waves and in another moment had vanished completely from sight.

Kelda Silversign turned to face her visitor.

"Very well, Mr. Oceanside. She's gone now. I think you had best tell me about this fire and--and Keeth."

Brian's look of amazement at the abrupt change in her manner caused her to bridle.

"Did you imagine I was such an emotional defective that a distraction could cause me to forget a kinsman's danger? -- I may not be in your class, Mr. Power-born, but what I've been able to accomplish with my company should be evidence enough that I'm no incompetent all the same!"

He looked sharply at her. "I never suggested that! And how did you know..."

She tossed her head impatiently. "A guess. I lived long enough with such people to recognize one."

Her eyes bore into his. "Don't make me ask about my cousin again. You say there was a fire and that he's missing, but you seemed about to indicate that he's not...not..."

"He isn't dead, or shouldn't be," the man assured her swiftly. "The blaze was confined to one room. Damage there was

extensive but not to the point that we would not be able to recognize human remains in the rubble. We found none, and you can well believe that we searched."

"Yet he's missing?"

He nodded. "We need to talk to him, or I do. There are a number of questions open, and he may be able to supply a few of the answers. Besides, the media are waiting to confirm his safety before releasing the story. No one wants to cause his family needless anguish."

"Have you been to his parents' home yet?"

Brian shook his head. "This place was closer. Since he's frequently stressed his tie with you, I'd rather hoped to find him here." His face tightened. "I don't want to go before his mother and father with this kind of tale if I can possibly avoid doing so."

"A rather wise decision under the circumstances," she told him bluntly. "You made a proper mess of delivering it to me. If you have to see them, I suggest you tell them he has information you want about the fire and casually ask if he's at home."

"I know. I'm sorry about that," the man replied contritely, flushing. "I tend to be too direct at times. That's one of the reasons I've risen no higher than I have."

"The blaze, what can you tell me about that?"

"Not much, unfortunately. Not the kind of detail I need to try to prevent a repetition of it anywhere else."

"Luck went against us right from the start. There was a partial power outage, leaving the basic lighting and current intact but knocking out part of the support services, including the air coolers and, unknown to us, the emergency systems in several parts of the plant."

He saw her frown and answered grimly. "Yes, there'll have to be

some redesigning done in the wake of all this. We just need the knowledge to make the right job of it.

"The fire started in the small automachinery room leading into the hall in which the bulk of my people were working. There was no alarm, nothing to let us know anything was wrong, until the smoke and heat penetrated our area. Our alarms activated, but by then, the flames had gotten a strong hold and were both completely out of control and already eating their way in to us."

"Your fire doors?"

"They were on one of the blown circuits. They were well maintained, praise all we count as holy, and I was finally able to close them manually and then start the water sprays going."

"That's when your hands were burned?"

He nodded. "The doors are metal, and the fire had been licking them for some time." His mouth tightened, and she could almost feel the shadow of horror pass over him. "I had thought my job was done then, but with the concentration I had to give to what I was doing and with the roar of the fire and the pain and my fear, I simply had been unaware of what was going on in the rest of the hall. When I turned around to make my own escape, I found my people still inside, clustered frantically around the exit. It had been locked from the outside."

"What!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in fury, thinking of the stringent safety regulations governing her own facilities.

"It wasn't by plant policy. We'd all come in by that door. I have no idea what activated the bolt. Maybe it was the same force that killed the systems inside, maybe the ensuing heat, maybe some vibration. That's the chief reason I need to talk to Mr. Lunarchild. If it's a design problem or something else correctable, I want to know it now, before I submit my report and

make my recommendations."

"Why should Keeth know anything about it? He isn't a watchman."

"No. He also isn't a very good worker, and I had him on probation for leaving his position unattended on a number of occasions. I'm just hoping he might have seen something that could prove useful to us."

"But what makes you think he wasn't..."

The man sighed. "Because he was in charge of that automachinery room. No one died in there, and had anyone been present during the fire, he would have been killed. Even had he been there at the very start and run for it, he would've had time to warn us."

"You're sure..."

"I'm certain that your cousin left that room alive, yes," Brian replied firmly.

He was glad that he could do so. He did not want to hurt this woman, not any more than he knew he inevitably must. Kelda Silversign's mind was sharp, all too capable of taking facts and analyzing them for the good and the ill they held. Power-born or not, she very obviously was in command of her life and had not hidden herself and her perceptions away within the shell surrounding the soul of every Cancerian. She would not be long in realizing the extent of the responsibility her kinsman might have for the fire and for its potential consequences.

"How did you get out?" she asked. "Help broke through to you?"

He shook his head. "The others would have reached us soon, right enough, but we daren't wait. I smashed the skylight that's part of every hall in the complex, and we climbed out onto the roof and from there down. It had been designed to serve as an emergency exit, and

the ladder was close by. It took a little while, but I was able to see everyone safe."

"Where many hurt."

"No, no one seriously. I'm about the worst."

"You made your rescuers bandage your hands only partially like that?" she asked. If he had not, and insisted pretty strongly on it, the job was inexcusable.

"Yes. I had to be able to drive. I said I was going to my own doctor. I also told them I believed I was allergic to a number of sedatives, or they'd never have left me get away without that."

Kelda felt sick herself with the weariness and pain she saw in him. Brian Oceanside had done so much and suffered so much, and it was for nothing, at least this part of it. It was like Keeth to boast of his relationship with the wealthy and respected Silversign family and neglect to mention the breach between them. The department manager would not find him here.

He would find rest and care. She would contact her cousin's parents and, if necessary, get her brothers, all three of them, working to check out his haunts, which they knew better than she did, but this man was not going to leave her house until he was truly fit to do so.

The strength of her determination surprised her a little, but before she could begin to analyze it, the sound of a carpet, one flying low and very fast, jerked her attention fully back to her surroundings.

Both she and Brian could see the platform clearly as it approached. It was slender and short and a blazing scarlet color -- the carpet of a very young and rather irresponsible person of comfortable means. At least, she could not imagine anyone bearing the weight of a home traveling about in such a flamboyant thing, an

opinion borne out by just about everyone with whom she was acquainted who owned one like it.

The driver she knew, and joy surged through her heart at the sight of him. Keeth! She did not even mind that his too-fast landing showered them with damp sand. It was quite apparent that he was sound out, completely unhurt.

"Keeth!" she called to him before he could so much as step off his platform. "Praise all we cherish! You're all right!"

He smiled, gratified and surprised by the intensity of the obviously real emotion on her, but he saw her companion then, and his expression darkened.

"What's he doing here?" he demanded. "Carrying tales about me?"

"Brian's my guest. He came to see me in the hope of finding you, before he or someone else had to go to your parents. -- We couldn't be sure you'd escaped unhurt until we'd seen you."

"Well I did," he replied curtly, although her answer had mollified him somewhat. "Now he can go."

"Brian's my guest," Kelda repeated, "and this is my home. Besides, he does have some questions to ask you. You might have information that could prevent another such fire, maybe a fatal one the next time."

Keeth eyed the department manager suspiciously. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have any idea how it started, Mr. Lunarchild, what might have set it off, or even precisely when it began?"

"No. I don't." The scowl marring his usually handsome face darkened even further. "I wasn't there, if that's what you're really asking. It was hot, and the air coolers were down. I took a walk for myself. -- There's a nice little park for the employees to use at

lunch," he explained to Kelda. "It's well away from the buildings and screened from them by some fine old shade trees. I settled down under one of them and ate an early meal."

He raised his head defiantly.

"That gives the excuse you've been waiting for, Oceanside, but I don't care. It was no kind of a job anyway. Not interesting and important like Kelda's. All I did was go from one automachine to another checking gages and seeing that they were doing everything they should. Nothing ever went wrong to liven up the day even that much, and when the air coolers weren't working very well or not at all, it was a misery in there. -- It's summer, damn it, Kelda, and this--friend of yours wouldn't even let me have a day off now and then. He said I'd already taken everything to which I was entitled."

He glared at the other man. "Factory work is for moronic mental defectives, not someone of talent like me!"

His cousin frowned to hear that. "No. It's for people, and they're in the majority, who want to support themselves in a manner that doesn't drain resources they prefer to hold for other, more important things. It is definitely wrong for you, though, and I'm wondering how you ever managed to pass the admittance exam."

He shrugged. "That? I'm no fool child now. I knew the answers they wanted to hear."

"Keeth! Those tests are as much to protect the candidates from making the kind of mistake you did as they are to protect potential employers." She shook her head. "Blowing that job is bad, Keeth. No steady woman or girl's going to want to have anything to do with someone with a work record like yours."

"So what? I don't want to spend my life slaving for a few little rooms and a patch of posies anyway."

The woman took a deep breath.

"You didn't start that fire, did you?"

"No! What do you think I am? How could you ever imagine..."

"I didn't, but I wanted to hear you confirm it, and before a witness outside the family."

Brian nodded. He believed the young man, but another question had come to him that Keeth might not be able to answer so satisfactorily.

"You did lock the work hall door after the fire started, though, didn't you?"

"I had to do that! When I got back, the whole automachinery room was burning, and I knew you'd all come piling out at any moment and grab me. I had to have time to get away."

"By the founders of the first homes, man, there were over twenty men and women in there!"

"Ah, I knew you'd get them out. The water sprayers' keep you safe anyway. In fact, it was rather funny imagining all of you looking like so many drowned field mice..."

"The sprayers did not work," the other man informed him coldly, holding up his hands. "We very nearly did not get out."

"I am sorry!" he exclaimed, horrified, "but how was I to know that? I never would've bolted the door if I had."

"What do you intend to do now?" her cousin asked him quietly, overcoming her shock and dismay by sheer force of will.

"I've got that figured out. I need help real bad, someone to take care of me, but if you'll just adopt me, everything'll be fine. I'm willing to forgive what happened before."

Her lips parted, and for a moment she was struck silent.

She found her voice once more. "Keeth! Even if you weren't too young for me, our blood's far too close."

"That only matters if you plan to breed," he told her impatiently. "You're not so young any more, Kelda, not like the girls I'd look at if things were better. You should be glad to have the attentions of a handsome, virile man like me."

She was surprised by the anger that flashed across Brian's face, but awareness of it did help her control her own. It was good that something did, for there would be no point in her lashing out at her kinsman.

"It wouldn't work, Keeth," she said wearily. "You've made a mess of your life thus far, and you wouldn't do any better with a marriage."

Too late, she saw Oceanside's warning shake of his head.

"Look," Kelda began, "we can talk about it properly up at the house..."

"No! You're as bad as Carls! You're worse! You only want to trick me until you can call the personality medics down on me!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked in complete exasperation.

"I went to your brother. He was supposed to be my friend, but instead of helping me when I told him what'd happened, he ordered me to get out of his sight and said I deserved to have the medics lock me away for the rest of my wretched life!"

"That was wrong of him," she told him quietly. "It was his disappointment talking -- he'd looked up to you for so long -- but he had no right to come down on you that hard. You can't help being what you are."

"No, and I'm staying what I am, too. I'm not letting anyone change me."

"You know a person can't be changed unless he wants to change," she reasoned patiently, "but you should try to get at least

the discipline to take up painting seriously. You've closed every other road now."

"Not quiet, Cousin. You see, I've been thinking about this. People're welcome in the High North, and no one bothers them with questions about any silly mistakes they might have made down here."

That took her aback. "Life is rough there..."

"Not for someone with the money to buy himself a new name and the basic comforts."

As he spoke, he bent and retrieved a small, squat glass bottle from the storage box beside his seat on the carpet.

"See, this proves I've planned this out. I brought it along, well, stole it actually, in case you wouldn't be willing to help me freely. It's from the lab at work, and if I drop it, there's none of us going to worry about medics or fires or anything else."

Brian Oceanside had remained silent throughout the exchange both because he had no right to interfere in it and because he hoped to glean some more information from his former subordinate. Now he stiffened. He recognized the purplish liquid sloshing dangerously in the flask the distraught boy was holding.

"Lunarchild, don't be a fool," he hissed. "You don't even have to drop that for it to go up. Put it down before you kill us all."

"It-it'd be a whole lot better than getting dragged away and blamed-blamed for everything... I never set that fire..." Keeth was almost sobbing, but there was no mistaking the determination on him. "Now we're going to fly up to the house and get lots of money and extra fuel capsules, and then we'll go north, all of us."

The woman's head snapped up.

"We'd never make it! The most of the way's over water, the

wild ocean. The slightest gale, and we'd be thrown down like-like Momma and Da were."

"It's a good carpet. -- We're going. I can't just leave you two behind to tell on me before I have a chance to disappear."

He motioned with his hand and stepped back almost into the water so that neither of them could come close enough to try anything against him.

"Oceanside, you drive. Kelda'll ride behind with me, and if you pull something, I will break this."

Kelda was sobbing, crying piteously, and Brian's burned hands balled in impotent fury. It tore him to see her in such terror, to watch her crumble like this before that worthless...

His breath caught, and he fought to keep his expression blank.

In that instant, Keeth did loose his hold on the bottle, in sheer surprise as a black tentacle closed about him, pinning his arms to his sides in a punishing, vise-tight grip. A second caught the missile before it could strike the sand.

"That's the girl, Kitty!" Kelda Silversign exclaimed in a relieved but perfectly normal voice. "Give me the bottle now."

The woman gingerly took it and very carefully replaced it in the padding in which her cousin had transported it.

While she was attending to that, the prisoner recovered from his initial shock. He screamed in terror at finding himself high in the air, looking down into the pussyfish's enormous mouth, and he kept on screaming.

Kitty did not like the noise. She shook him sharply. The screams only increased in volume, and she brought him down into the ocean with a resounding splash.

Kelda turned quickly at the sound and the simultaneous return of silence.

"Don't drown him. Let him up. I'll try to stifle him for you."

The big animal obeyed reluctantly. Before her cousin could open his mouth to do more than sputter, Kelda called out to him.

"Keeth, be still, will you! She won't hurt you as long as you stay quiet. -- Brian, keep an eye on things while I get some rope and call for help. Then you can instruct me on how to tie him up, and we can all go back to the house like civilized people and wait for the peace officers there." She hesitated. "You do know how to bind someone, don't you?"

He gave her a broad smile. "Yes, I can number that among my many strange skills."

"Good. -- Kitty, you listen to my friend Brian until I return. I'll bring another treat for you, too, pretty pet. You really deserve it for this."

#

Kelda sat back in the big winged chair that was her usual choice, letting it take her weight. Her head lowered. The excitement and commotion was over at last, and she felt exhausted, totally drained.

Poor, weak, broken Keeth! It had all been horrible, a living nightmare for all of them, but she did not see how she could have acted otherwise to preserve her home and spare the family, his as well as her own, from much worse, how else she could have preserved life itself.

"What will happen to him now?" she wondered aloud. She might never like Keeth, but he was kin, and he was so pitiable.

"He'll have to be held for a while for observation and a decision made as to whether to prosecute or not depending upon the results. -- He's very unstable, Kelda, dangerously so."

The man flushed when he realized how he had addressed her. "I'm

sorry, Miss Silversign..."

"Kelda, please," she said impatiently. "We did face death together, or the possibility of it anyway," she added realistically.

Her eyes narrowed.

"I'm being remiss. You belong in your room and your bed. -- How're the hands."

"Not too bad."

In truth, they hurt abominably, although they had been covered with healing and antiseptic salves and properly dressed. The pain was temporary, nothing to concern him. The capsules Kelda's physician had left with him would soon bring him ease, but he wanted to postpone taking them for a while longer.

He watched his hostess closely.

"That was quite a performance," he said dryly.

She shrugged. "I do some amateur theatricals, and I'm told I portray emotion quiet effectively." Her eyes shadowed. "I was calling Kitty with my mind, like I often do, telling her we really were in trouble and explaining about the explosive. I didn't want Keeth to suspect I was up to anything, and so I acted like I was terrified. It was easy since I was."

"So was I. -- You handled it all perfectly."

The woman sat up.

"I thank you, but that truly is enough talk for tonight," she told him firmly. "I want you to be fresh and completely rested when we begin our negotiations."

"Negotiations?" he asked blankly.

"For your employment terms, of course. Your present organization quite obviously doesn't appreciate what they have in you, or you'd be an ocean more than a mere department manager. I'd say, just as a guess, that your superiors are afraid of giving more

authority to a power-born lest he wind up taking it all."

The tightening of his expression told that he'd come to a very similar conclusion himself, and she did not believe he was fool enough not to grab a better opportunity if it came before him, even if loyalty to his distant kin had held him back from making a break before now.

"I have no such fears. I need someone who can take charge. There are a number of projects I've had in mind for some time, but I've been afraid to tackle them alone, and I've lacked the person to help me develop them. I believe you're precisely what I need, and I don't usually misread anyone I intend to put into a top-level job."

She smiled then, her expression brightening wonderfully.

"Do you think you could work with me, Brian Oceanside, closely and long-term?"

The man needed no time to ponder his answer.

"I know it, Kelda Silversign. We have nothing whatsoever to discuss with respect to that."

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