

THE GORGON FIELD

Kate Wilhelm

"The Gorgon Field" was purchased by Shawna McCarthy, and appeared in the August 1985 issue of Asimov's, with a cover by J. K. Potter and an interior illustration by Stephen L. Gervais. Wilhelm is another writer who doesn't appear in Asimov's as often as we'd like, but each appearance has been significant, including her story "The Girl Who Fell into the Sky," which won a Nebula Award in 1987. Kate Wilhelm began publishing in 1956, and by now is widely regarded as one of the best of today's writers. Wilhelm won a Nebula Award in 1968 for her short story, "The Planners," took a Hugo in 1976 for her novel Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, and won yet another Nebula in 1988 for her story "Forever Yours, Anna." Her many books include the novels Margaret and I, Fault Lines, The Clewisten Test, Juniper Time, Welcome, Chaos, Oh, Susannah!, Huysman's Pets, and Cambio Bay, and the collections The Downstairs Room, Somerset Dreams, The Infinity Box, Listen, Listen, Children of the Wind, and And the Angels Sing. Wilhelm and her husband, writer Damon Knight, ran the famous Milford Writer's Conference for many years, and both were involved for many years in the operation of the Clarion workshop for new young writers. She lives with her family in Eugene, Oregon.

Wilhelm's work has never been limited to the strict boundaries of the field, and she has published mainstream thrillers and comic novels as well as science fiction. In recent years, she has become particularly well-known as a mystery novelist, with a long series of novels and stories about the detecting team of Constance Leidl and Charlie Meiklejohn, a series that started in the pages of Asimov's with the story "With Thimbles, with Forks, with Hope," and has gone on to include well-known mystery novels such as The Hamlet Trap, Smart House, Seven Kinds of Death, The Dark Door, and Sweet, Sweet Poison. The Leidl and Meiklejohn stories have been collected in A Flush of Shadows. Wilhelm's other mystery novels include Death Qualified, The Best Defense, and Justice for Some.

In the engrossing story that follows, one of the best of the Leidl and Meiklejohn stories, she shows us that although it's a detective's duty to follow a path into the heart of even the most complex of mazes, getting out of the labyrinth again once you get in may turn out to be the most difficult and dangerous part of the job...

Constance took the call that morning; when she hung up there was a puzzled expression on her face. "Why us?" she asked rhetorically.

"Why not us?" Charlie asked back.

She grinned at him and sat down at the breakfast table where he was finishing his French toast.

"That," she said, pouring more coffee, "was Deborah Rice, ne'e Wyandot, heiress to one of the world's great fortunes. She wants to come talk to us this afternoon, and she lied to me."

His interest rose slightly, enough to make him look up from the newspaper. "About what?"

"She claims we know people in common and that we probably met in school. I knew she was there, it would be like trying to hide Prince Charles, I should think, but I never met her, and she knows it."

"So why did you tell her to come on out?"

"I'm not sure. She wanted us to come to her place in Bridgeport and when I said no, she practically pleaded for an appointment here. I guess that did it. I don't think she pleads for many things, or ever has."

It was April; the sun was warm already, the roses were budding, the daffodils had come and gone, and the apple trees were in bloom. Too pretty to leave right now, Constance thought almost absently, and pushed a cat away from under the table with her foot. It was the evil cat Brutus who had always been a city cat, still wanted to be a city cat, and didn't give a damn about the beauty of the country in April. He wanted toast, or bacon, anything that might land on the floor. The other two cats were out hunting, or sunning themselves, or doing something else catlike. Brutus was scrounging for food. And Charlie, not yet showered and shaved, his black hair like a bush, a luxuriant overnight growth of bristly beard like a half mask on his swarthy face, making him look more like a hood than a country gentleman, cared just about as much for the beautiful fresh morning as the cat. Constance admitted this to herself reluctantly. He had been glad to leave the city after years on the police force, following as many years as a fire marshal, but she felt certain that he did not see what she saw when he looked out the window at their miniature farm. On the other hand, she continued the thought firmly, he slept well, and he looked wonderful and felt wonderful. But he did miss the city. She had been thinking for weeks that they should do something different, get away for a short time, almost anything. There had been several cases they could have taken, but nothing that seemed worth the effort of shattering the state of inertia they had drifted into.

Maybe Deborah Rice would offer something different, she thought then, and that was really why she had told her to come on out.

"My father," Deborah Rice said that afternoon, "is your typical ignorant multi-millionaire."

"Mother," Lori Rice cried, "stop it! It isn't fair!"

Constance glanced at Charlie, then back to their guests, mother and daughter. Deborah Rice was about fifty, wearing a fawn-colored cashmere suit with a silk blouse the exact same color. Lori was in jeans

and sneakers, and was thirteen. Both had dusky skin tones, although their eyes were bright blue. The automobile they had arrived in, parked out in the driveway, was a baby-blue Continental, so new that probably it never had been washed.

"All right," Deborah said to her daughter. "It isn't fair, nevertheless it's true. He never went past the sixth grade, if that far. He doesn't know anything except business, his business." She turned to Constance. "He's ignorant, but he isn't crazy."

"Mrs. Rice," Charlie said then in his drawly voice that made him sound half asleep, or bored, "exactly what is it you wanted to see us about?"

She nodded. "Do you know who my father is, Mr. Mei-klejohn?"

"Carl Wyandot. I looked him up while we were waiting for you to arrive."

"He is worth many millions of dollars," she said, "and he has kept control of his companies, all of them, except what he got tired of. And now my brother is threatening to cause a scandal and accuse my father of senility."

Charlie was shaking his head slowly; he looked very unhappy now. "I'm afraid you need attorneys, not us."

He glanced at Constance. Her mouth had tightened slightly, probably not enough to be noticeable to anyone else, but he saw it. She would not be interested either, he knew. No court appearance as a tame witness, a prostitute, paid to offer testimony proving or disproving sanity, not for her. Besides, she was not qualified; she was a psychologist, retired, not a psychiatrist. For an instant he had an eerie feeling that the second thought had been hers. He looked at her sharply; she was studying Deborah Rice with bright interest. A suggestion of a smile had eased the tightness of her mouth.

And Deborah seemed to settle deeper in her chair. "Hear me out," she said. Underlying the imperious tone was another tone that might have been fear. "Just let me tell you about it. Please."

Constance looked at Lori, who was teasing Brutus, tickling his ears, restoring his equanimity with gentle strokes, then tickling again. Lori was a beautiful child, and if having access to all the money in the world had spoiled her, it did not show. She was just beginning to curve with adolescence, although her eyes were very aware. She knew the danger in teasing a full-grown, strange cat.

"We'll listen, of course," Constance said easily to Deborah Rice, accepting for now the presence of the girl.

"Thank you. My father is eighty," she said, her voice becoming brisk and businesslike. "And he is in reasonably good health. Years ago he bought a little valley west of Pueblo, Colorado, in the mountains.

Over the last few years he's stayed there more and more, and now he's there almost all the time. He has his secretary, and computers, modems, every convenience, and really there's no reason why he can't conduct business from the house. The home office is in Denver and there are offices in New York, California, England. But he's in control. You have to understand that. There are vice-presidents and managers and God knows what to carry out his orders, and it's been like that for twenty-five years. Nothing has changed in that respect. My brother can't make a case that he's neglecting the business."

Charlie watched Brutus struggle with indecision, and finally decide that he was being mistreated. He did not so much jump from Lori's lap as flow off to the floor; he stretched, hoisted his tail, and stalked out without a backward glance. Lori began to pick at a small scab on her elbow. The fragrance of apple blossoms drifted through the room. Charlie swallowed a yawn.

"I live in Bridgeport," Deborah was saying. "My husband is the conductor of the symphony orchestra, and we're busy with our own lives. Admittedly I haven't spent a great deal of time with Father in the last years, but neither has Tony, my brother. Anyway, last month Tony called me to say Father was having psychological problems. I flew out to Colorado immediately. Lori went with me." She turned her gaze toward her daughter. She took a deep breath, then continued. "Father was surrounded by his associates, as usual. People are always in and out. They use the company helicopter to go back and forth. At first I couldn't see anything at all different, but then ... There's a new man out there. He calls himself Ramon, claims he's a Mexican friend of a friend, or something, and he has a terrible influence over my father. This is what bothered Tony so much."

Constance and Charlie exchanged messages in a glance. Hers was, *they'll go away pretty soon, be patient*. His was, *let's give them the bum's rush*. Deborah Rice was frowning slightly at nothing in particular. And now, Constance realized, Lori was putting on an act, pretending interest in a magazine she had picked up. She was unnaturally still, as if she was holding her breath.

Finally Deborah went on. "Tony believes Ramon was responsible for the firing of two of his, Tony's, subordinates at the house. It's like a little monarchy," she said with some bitterness. "Everyone has spies, intrigues. The two people Father fired alerted Tony about Ramon. Tony's office is in New York, you see."

"That hardly seems like enough to cause your brother to assume your father's losing it," Charlie said bluntly.

"No, of course not. There are other things. Tony's convinced that Father is completely dominated by Ramon. He's trying to gather evidence. You see, Ramon is ... strange."

"He's a shaman," Lori said, her face flushed. She ducked her head and mumbled, "He can do magic and Grandpa knows it." She leafed through the magazine, turning pages rapidly.

"And do you know it, too?" Charlie asked.

"Sure. I saw him do magic."

Deborah sighed. "That's why I brought her," she said. "Go on and tell them."

It came out in a torrent; obviously this was what she had been waiting for. "I was at the end of the valley, where the stone formations are, and Ramon came on a horse and got off it and began to sing. Chant, not really sing. And then he was on top of one of the pillars and singing to the setting sun. Only you can't get up there. I mean, they just go straight up, hundreds of feet up. But he was up there until the sun went down and I ran home and didn't even stop."

She turned another page of the magazine. Very gently Charlie asked, "Did Ramon see you when he rode up on his horse?"

She continued to look at the pages. "I guess he saw me run. From up there you could see the whole valley." Her face looked pinched when she raised her head and said to Charlie, "You think I'm lying? Or that I'm crazy? Like Uncle Tony thinks Grandpa is crazy?"

"No, I don't think you're crazy," he said soberly. "Of course, I'm not the expert in those matters. Are you crazy?"

"No! I saw it! I wasn't sleeping or dreaming or smoking dope or having an adolescent fantasy!" She shot a scornful look at her mother, then ducked her head again and became absorbed in the glossy advertising.

Deborah looked strained and older than her age. "Will you please go out and bring in the briefcase?" she asked quietly. "I brought pictures of the formations she's talking about," she added to Constance and Charlie.

Lori left them after a knowing look, as if very well aware that they wanted to talk about her.

"Is it possible that she was molested?" Constance asked as soon as she was out of the house.

"I thought of that. She ran in that day in a state of hysteria. I took her to her doctor, of course, but there was no evidence that anything like that happened."

"Mrs. Rice," Charlie said then, "that was a month ago. Why are you here now, today?"

She bit her lip and took a deep breath. "Lori is an accomplished musician, violin and flute, piano. She can play almost any instrument she handles. It's a real gift. Recently, last week, I kept hearing this weird, that's the only word I can think of, weird music. Over and over, first on one instrument, then another. I finally demanded that she tell me what she was up to, and she admitted she was trying to recreate the chant Ramon had sung. She's obsessed with it, with him, perhaps. It frightened me. If one encounter

with him could affect her that much, what is he doing to my father? Maybe Tony's right. I don't know what I think anymore."

"Have you thought of counseling for her?" Constance asked.

"Yes. She didn't cooperate, became defensive, accused me of thinking she's crazy. It's so ridiculous and at the same time terrifying. We had a good relationship until this happened.

She always was close to her father and me until this. Now ... You saw the look she gave me."

And how much of that was due to adolescent string cutting, how much due to Ramon? Constance let it go when Lori returned with the briefcase.

"One last question," Charlie said a little later, after examining the photographs of the valley. Lori had gone outside to look for the cats; she had asked permission without prompting, apparently now bored with the conversation. "Why us? Your brother has hired detectives, presumably, to check on Ramon." She nodded. "And you could buy a hospital and staff it with psychiatrists, if you wanted that. What do you want us to do?"

She looked embarrassed suddenly. She twisted her watch band and did not look directly at them now. "Tony had a woman sent out, a detective," she said hesitantly. "Within a week she left the valley and refused to go back. I think she was badly frightened." She glanced at Charlie then away. "I may be asking you to do something dangerous. I just don't know. But I don't think the detectives looking for Ramon's past will come up with anything. They haven't yet. Whatever secret he has, whatever he can or can't do, is out there in the valley. Expose him, discredit him, or ... or prove he is what he claims. Father named the valley. The Valley of Gorgons. I said he's ignorant and he is. He didn't know who the Gorgons were. He named the valley after the formations, thinking, I suppose, the people turned to stone were the Gorgons. He hasn't read any of the literature about shamanism, either, none of the Don Juan books, nothing like that. But Ramon has studied them all, I'd be willing to bet. It will take someone as clever as he is to expose him and I just don't think Tony's detectives will be capable of it."

"Specifically what do you want us to do?" Charlie asked in his sleepy voice. Constance felt a chill when she realized that he had taken on the case already no matter what exactly Deborah was asking of them.

"Go out there and spend a week, two weeks, however long it takes and find out what hold he has on my father. Find out how he fools so many people into believing in his magic. Prove he's a charlatan out for my father's money. I'll be there. You can be my guests. I've done that before, had guests at the house."

"Will you take Lori?" Charlie asked.

"No! She'll never see him again! This fascination will pass. She'll forget him. I'm concerned for my father."

Their tickets had arrived by special delivery the day following Deborah's visit, first class to Denver, where, she had told them, they would be met. Their greeter at Stapleton had been a charming, dimpled young woman who had escorted them to a private lounge and introduced Captain Smollet, who was to fly them to Pueblo in the company plane, as soon as their baggage was available. In Pueblo they had been met again, by another lovely young woman who gave them keys to a Cadillac Seville and a map to the Valley of Gorgons and wished them luck in finding it.

And now Charlie was driving the last miles, according to the map, which had turned out to be much better than the road maps he was used to. Deborah had offered to have them met by the company helicopter which could take them all the way to the house, and Constance had refused politely, and adamantly. She would walk first. The scenery was breathtaking, sheer cliffs with high trees on the upper reaches, pifions and stunted desert growth at the lower elevations, and, watered by the run-off of spring, green everywhere. All the peaks gleamed with snow, melt-water streams cascaded down the precipitous slopes, and it seemed that the world was covered with columbines in profuse bloom, more brilliant that Constance had dreamed they could be.

At the turn they came to next they were warned by a neat sign that this was a dead-end road, private property, no admittance. The woods pressed closer here, made a canopy overhead. In the perpetual shadows snow lingered in drifts that were only faintly discolored. They climbed briefly, made a sweeping turn, and Charlie braked.

"Holy Christ!" he breathed.

Constance gasped in disbelief as he brought the Cadillac to a stop on the side of the mountain road. Below was the Valley of Gorgons. It looked as if a giant had pulled the mountain apart to create a deep, green Eden with a tiny stream sparkling in the sunshine, groves of trees here and there, a small dam and a lake that was the color of the best turquoise. A meadow was in the center of the valley, with horses that looked like toys. Slowly Charlie began to drive again, but he stopped frequently and the houses and outbuildings became more detailed, less doll-like. And finally they had gone far enough to be able to turn and see for the first time the sandstone formations that had given the valley its name. It was late afternoon; the sunlight shafted through the pillars. They looked like frozen flames-red, red-gold, red with black streaks, yellow. ... Frozen flames leaping toward the sky.

The valley, according to the map, was about six miles long, tapered at the east end to a blunt point, with two leg-like projections at the western end, one of them nearly two miles long, the other one and a half miles, both roughly fifty feet wide, and in many places much narrower. The lake and several buildings took up the first quarter of the valley, then the main house and more buildings, with a velvety lawn surrounding them all, ended at the half-way point. The meadow with the grazing horses made up the next quarter and the sandstone formations filled the rest. At the widest point the valley was two miles across, but most of it was less than that. The stream was a flashing ribbon that clung close to the base of the cliffs. There was no natural inlet to the valley except for the tumbled rocks the stream had dislodged.

A true hidden valley, Constance thought, awed by the beauty, the perfect containment of a small Eden.

Deborah met them at the car. Close behind her was a slender young Chicano. She spoke rapid Spanish to him and he nodded. "Come in," she said to Constance and Charlie then. "I hope your trip was comfortable, not too tiring. I'm glad you're here. This is Manuel. He'll be at your beck and call for the duration of your visit, and he speaks perfect English, so don't let him kid you about that." Manuel grinned sheepishly.

"How do you do?" Constance said to the youth. "Just Manuel?"

"Just Manuel, Senora," he said. His voice was soft, the words not quite slurred, but easy.

Charlie spoke to him and went behind the car to open the trunk, get out their suitcases.

"Please, Senor," he said, "permit me. I will place your things in your rooms."

"You might as well let him," Deborah said with a shrug. "Look." She was looking past them and the car toward the end of the valley.

The golden globe of the sun was balanced on the highest peak of the formations. It began to roll off; the pillars turned midnight black with streaks of light blazing between them too bright to bear. Their fire had been extinguished and the whole world flamed behind them. No one spoke or moved until the sun dropped behind the mountain peak in the distance and the sky was awash in sunset colors of cerise and green and rose-gold; the pillars were simply dark forms against the gaudy backdrop.

Charlie was the first one to move. He had been holding the keys; now he extended them toward Manuel, and realized that the boy was regarding Constance with a fixed gaze. When Charlie looked at her, there were tears in her eyes. He touched her arm. "Hey," he said gently. "You okay?"

She roused with a start. "I must be more tired than I realized."

"Si," Manuel said then and took the keys.

Deborah led them into the house. The house kept changing, Charlie thought as they entered. From up on the cliff it had not looked very large or imposing. The bottom half was finished in gray stone the color of the granite cliffs behind it. The upper floor had appeared to be mostly glass and pale wood. Above that a steep roof had gleamed with skylights. It had grown as they approached until it seemed to loom over everything else; none of the other buildings was two stories high. But as soon as they were inside, everything changed again. They were in a foyer with a red tile floor; there were many immense clay pots with greenery: trees, bushes, and flowering plants perfumed the air. Ahead, the foyer widened, became an indoor courtyard, and the light was suffused with the rose tints of sunset. The proportions were not inhuman here; the feeling was of comfort and simplicity and warmth. In the center of the courtyard was

a pool with a fountain made of greenish quartz and granite.

"Father said it was to help humidify the air," Deborah said. "But actually he just likes it."

"Me too," Charlie agreed.

"It's all incredible," Constance said. They were moving toward a wide, curving staircase, and stopped when a door opened across the courtyard and a man stepped out, leaning on a gnarly cane. He was wearing blue jeans and a chamois shirt and boots. His hair was silver.

"Father," Deborah said, and motioned for Charlie and

Constance to come. "These are my friends I mentioned. They got here in time for the sunset."

"I know," he said. "I was upstairs watching too." His eyes were on Constance. They were so dark they looked black, and his skin was deeply tanned.

Deborah introduced them. He did not offer to shake hands, but bowed slightly. "Mi casa es su casa," he said. "Please join me for supper." He bowed again and stepped back into what they could now see was an elevator. "And you, of course," he added to his daughter and the door closed on him.

"Well," Deborah said with an undercurrent of unease, "aren't you the honored ones? Sometimes people are here a week before they even see him, much less have a meal with him." She gave Constance a searching look. "He was quite taken with you."

"Does he have rheumatoid arthritis?" Constance asked as they resumed their way toward the stairs, started up.

"Yes. Most of the time it's under control, but it is painful. He says he feels better here than anywhere else. I guess the aridity helps."

The courtyard soared to the skylights. On the second floor a wide balcony overlooked it; there were Indian rugs on the walls between doors, and on the floor. It was bright and informal and lovely, Constance thought again. It did not surprise her a bit that Carl Wyandot felt better here than anywhere else.

Deborah took them to two rooms at the south-east corner of the house. There was a spacious bathroom with a tub big enough to lie down in and float. If they wanted anything, she told them, please ring. She had not been joking about Manuel being at their disposal. He was their personal attendant for the duration of their visit. Dinner would be at seven. She would come for them shortly before that. "And don't dress up," she added at the door. "No one ever does here. I'll keep on what I'm wearing." She was dressed in chinos and a cowboy shirt with pointed flaps over the breast pockets, and a wide belt with a

huge silver buckle.

As soon as she was gone and the door firmly closed, Charlie took Constance by the shoulders and studied her face intently. "What is it, honey? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. That's what's wrong, nothing is. Does that make any sense?"

"No," he said bluntly, not releasing her.

"Didn't you feel it when we first got out of the car?" Her pale blue eyes were sparkling, there was high color on her fair cheeks, as if she had a fever. He touched her forehead and she laughed. "I felt something, and then when the sunset flared, it was like an electric jolt. Didn't you feel that?"

"I wish to hell we were home."

"Maybe we are. Maybe I'll never want to leave here." She spoke lightly, and now she moved away from his hands to go to the windows. "I wish we could have had a room on the west side. But I suppose he has that whole end of the house. I would if it were mine."

"It's just a big expensive house on an expensive piece of real estate," he said. "All it takes is enough money."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. That's not it. All the money on earth wouldn't buy what's out there."

"And what's that?"

"Magic. This is a magic place."

They dined in Carl Wyandot's private sitting room. Here too were the decorative Indian and Mexican rugs, the wall hangings, the pots with lush plants. And here the windows were nearly floor to ceiling with drapes that had been opened all the way. He had the entire western side of the second floor, as Constance had guessed he would. When she saw how he handled his silverware, she knew Deborah had been right; they were being honored. His hands were misshapen with arthritis, drawn into awkward angles, the knuckles enlarged and sore looking. He was a proud man; he would not permit many strangers to gawk.

The fifth member of the party was Ramon. Thirty, forty, older? Constance could not tell. His eyes were a warm brown, his face smooth, his black hair moderately short and straight. He had a lithe, wiry build, slender hands. And, she thought, if she had to pick one word to use to describe him, it would be stillness. Not rigidity or strain, but a natural stillness. He did not fidget or make small talk or respond to rhetorical questions, and yet he did not give the impression of being bored or withdrawn. He was dressed in jeans

and a long-sleeved plaid shirt; in this establishment it appeared that only the servants dressed up. The two young men who waited on them wore black trousers, white dress shirts and string ties. They treated Ramon with perhaps a shade more reverence than they showed Wyandot.

Charlie was telling about the day he had run into one of the arsonists he had put away who was then out of prison. "He introduced me to his pals, told them who I was, what I had done, all of it, as if he was proud. Then we sat down and had a beer and talked. He wasn't resentful, but rather pleased to see me again."

Carl Wyandot nodded. "Preserving the order of the cosmos is always a pleasing experience. He had his role, you had yours. But you can't really be retired after being so active, not at your age!"

He was too shrewd to lie to, Charlie decided, and he shook his head. "I do private investigations now and then. And Constance writes books and does workshops sometimes. We stay busy."

Deborah was the only one who seemed shocked by this disclosure.

"Actually I'm planning a book now," Constance said. "It will deal with the various superstitions that continue to survive even in this super-rational age. Like throwing coins into a fountain. That goes so far back that no one knows for certain when it began. We assume that it was to propitiate the Earth Goddess for the water that the people took from her. It has variations throughout the literature."

"To what end?" Carl Wyandot asked. "To debunk or explain or what?"

"I don't debunk things of that sort," she said. "They are part of our heritage. I accept the theory that the archetypes are patterns of possible behavior, they determine how we perceive and react to the world, and usually they can't be explained or described. They come to us as visions, or dream images, and they come to all of us in the same forms over and over. Civilized, educated Westerner, African native who has never seen a book, they have the same dream images, the same impulses in their response to the archetypes. If we try to bury them, deny them, we are imperiling our own psyches."

"Are you not walking the same ground that Carl Jung plowed?" Ramon asked. He spoke with the polite formality of one whose English was a second language, learned in school.

"It's his field," Constance said. "But it's a very big field and he opened it to all. His intuition led him to America, you know, to study the dreams of the Hopi, but he did not pursue it very far. One lifetime was not long enough, although it was a very long and very productive lifetime."

"Did he not say that good sometimes begets evil? And that evil necessarily begets evil."

"Where did he say that? I don't recall it."

"Perhaps I am mistaken. However, he knew that this inner voyage of discovery can be most dangerous. Only the very brave dare risk it, or the very foolish."

Constance nodded soberly. "He did say the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The risk may be in coming across the shadow that is not only darker than you expected, but larger, large enough to swallow you."

Ramon bowed slightly. "We shall talk again, I hope, before your visit comes to an end. Now, please forgive me, Don Carlos, but it is late."

"Yes, it is," the old man said. "Our guests have had a very long day." One of the servants appeared behind his chair; others seemed to materialize, and the evening was over.

"Thank you, Mr. Wyandot," Constance said. "It was a good evening."

"For me as well," he said, and he looked at Ramon. "You heard what he called me. Please, you also, call me that. It sounds less formal, don't you agree?"

Deborah walked to their room with them. At the door she said abruptly, "May I come in and have a drink?"

Someone had been there. The beds were turned down in one room, and in the other a tray had been brought up with bottles, glasses, an ice bucket. Charlie went to examine the bottles and Constance said she wanted coffee. Deborah rang and it seemed only an instant before there was a soft knock; she asked Manuel to bring coffee and then sat down and accepted the drink Charlie had poured for her.

"You just don't realize what happened tonight," she said after taking a long drink. "Father doesn't usually see strangers at all. He doesn't ask them to dinner. He doesn't introduce them to Ramon. And he doesn't take a back seat and watch others engage in conversation. Skoal!" She drank again, then added, "And Ramon was as gabby as a school girl. Another first. He said more to you tonight than he's ever said to me."

Manuel came back with coffee and Deborah finished her drink and stood up. "Tomorrow when you wake up, just ring for breakfast. That's what we all do. No one but the managers and people like that eat in the dining room. Wander to your heart's content and I'll see you around noon and give you the grand tour. Okay?"

As soon as she was gone, Charlie turned to Constance. "He was warning you loud and clear," he said.

"I know."

"I don't like it."

"I think we're keeping order in the cosmos," she said thoughtfully. "And I think it's better that way. Now for those books."

They had asked Deborah for everything in the house about her father, the history of the area, geology, whatever was available. Deborah had furnished a dozen books at least. Reluctantly Charlie put his drink aside and poured coffee for himself. It would be a while before they got to bed.

It was nearly two hours later when Constance closed her book with a snap, and saw that Charlie was regarding her with brooding eyes.

"Wow," he said softly.

"The biography?"

"Yeah. Want me to paraphrase the early years?" At her nod, he took a deep breath and started. "Tom Wyandot had a falling out with his family, a good, established English family of lawyers back in Virginia. He headed west, looked for gold in California and Mexico, got married to a Mexican woman, had a son, Carl. He heard there was a lot of gold still in Colorado, and headed for the mountains with his wife, Carl, two Mexican men, an Indian guide, and the wife of one of the men. At some point a gang of outlaws got on their trail and the Indian brought the party to the valley to hide. A few nights later the outlaws made a sneak attack and killed everyone but Tom Wyandot and the child Carl. Tom managed to hide them among the formations. The next day he buried the rest of the group, including his wife, and he and the boy started out on foot, forty miles to Pueblo, with no supplies, horses, anything else. They got there almost dead. Carl was five."

Constance's eyes were distant, unfocused. He knew she was visualizing the scenes; he continued. "For the next eight years Tom prowled the mountains, sometimes taking Carl, sometimes alone. Then he died, and it's a little unclear just how. Carl was with him, on one of their rambles, and Carl returned alone. He said his father had fallen over a cliff. He led a search party to the location and they recovered the body, buried him in Pueblo, and Carl took off. He turns up next a year later in Texas, where he later struck it rich in oil."

Constance pulled herself back with a sigh. "Oh dear," she murmured. "Carl bought the valley in nineteen thirty. He started construction in nineteen forty." She frowned. "I wonder just when he located the valley again."

"Me too. But right now, what I'm thinking is that my body seems to believe it's way past bedtime. It won't have any truck with clocks."

"The idea is to bake yourself first and then jump into the lake," Constance said the next day, surveying

the sauna with approval.

"No way. You have any idea of the temperature of the lake?"

"I know, but it'll have to do. There just isn't any snow around."

"That isn't exactly what I meant," he said acidly.

"Oh?" Her look of innocence was a parody; they both laughed. "I'm not kidding, you'll really be surprised. You'll love it."

They wandered on. Swimming pool, steam room, gymnasium, Jacuzzi, a boathouse with canoes and rowboats ... One of the other buildings held offices, another was like a motel with its own coffee shop. There were other outbuildings for machinery, maintenance equipment, garages, and a hangar. The helicopter, Charlie remembered. It was impossible to estimate the size of the staff. They kept catching glimpses of servants—the males in black trousers and white shirts, the females in gaily patterned dresses or skirts and blouses. They introduced themselves to several of the men Deborah had called the managers, all in sports clothes, all looking as if they were wearing invisible gray suits.

"It's a whole damn city," Charlie complained. They had left the main complex and were walking along a path that was leading them to a grove of cottonwood trees. Ahead were several cottages, well separated, very private. They stopped. Ramon was coming toward them.

"Good morning," Constance called to him. "What a lovely morning!"

He nodded. "Good morning. I intended finding you, to invite you to dinner in my house. It would give me honor."

Charlie felt a flash of irritation when Constance agreed without even glancing toward him. He would have said yes also, but usually they consulted silently, swiftly. And why was Ramon making it easy? he wondered glumly. He knew damn well they were there to investigate him. Ramon bowed slightly and went back the way he had come, and they turned to go the other way. Charlie's uneasiness increased when it occurred to him that Ramon had stalled their unannounced visit very neatly.

When Deborah met them at noon, she had a jeep waiting to take them to the gorgons. The first stop was at a fenced area at the far end of the meadow. Inside the fence, smooth, white river stones had been laid in a mound. A bronze plaque had been placed there. There were the names: Beatrix Wyandot, Pablo and Maria Marquesa, Juan Moreno, and Julio Tallchief. Under them the inscription: Massacred July 12, 1906.

"Father left space for his grave," Deborah said. "He's to be buried there alongside his mother. Then no one else."

This was the widest part of the valley, two miles across. The mountains rose very steeply on both sides in unscalable cliffs at this end, exactly as if a solid mass of granite had been pulled open to reveal the sandstone formations. They started fifty yards from the graves.

Constance studied the columns and pillars; when Deborah started to talk again, she moved away from the sound of her voice. She had read about the formations. The largest of them was one hundred eighty feet high with a diameter of forty-eight feet. The pillars soared into the brilliant blue sky with serene majesty. They appeared even redder than they had at a distance. The rubble around the bases was red sand with silvery sagebrush here and there. Larger pieces had fallen off, had piled up in some places like roots pushing out of the ground. She had the feeling that the formations had not been left by the erosion of the surrounding land, but that they were growing out of the earth, rising of their own will, reaching for the sky. The silence was complete here. No wind stirred the sage or blew the sand; nothing moved.

There was a right way; there was a wrong way. She took a step, then another, another. She retreated, went a different way. She was thinking of nothing, not able to identify what it was she felt, something new, something compelling. Another step. The feeling grew stronger. For a moment she held an image of a bird following a migratory pattern; it slipped away. Another step.

Suddenly Charlie's hand was on her arm, shaking her. "For God's sake, Constance!"

Then the sun was beating down on her head, too hot in this airless place, and she glanced about almost indifferently. "I was just on my way back," she said.

"Did you hear me calling you?"

"I was thinking."

"You didn't hear a thing. You were like a sleepwalker."

She took his hand and started to walk. "Well, I'm awake now and starved. Is it lunch yet?"

Charlie's eyes remained troubled all afternoon and she did not know what to say, what to tell him, how to explain what she had done. She had wandered all the way back through the gorgons to the opposite side, a mile and a half at least, and if he had not actually seen her, she might still be wandering, because she had not heard him, had not even thought of him. She felt that she had entered a dream world where time was not allowed, that she had found a problem to solve, and the problem could not be stated, the solution, even if found, could never be explained.

Late in the afternoon Constance coaxed Charlie into the sauna with her, and then into the lake, and he was as surprised as she had known he would be, and as delighted. They discovered the immense tub in their suite was large enough for two people. They made love languorously and slept for nearly an hour.

A good day, all things considered, he decided when they went to Ramon's cottage for dinner. It had not escaped his attention that Constance had timed things in order to be free to stand outside and watch the sunset flame the gorgons.

Tonight, Ramon told them, they would have peasant food. He had cooked dinner—a pork stew with cactus and tomatillo and plantains. It was delicious.

They sipped thick Mexican coffee in contentment. Throughout dinner they had talked about food, Mexican food, how it differed from one section of the country to another, how it differed from Central and South American food. Ramon talked charmingly about childhood in Mexico, the festivals, the feasts.

Lazily Charlie said, "You may know peasant food but you're not a peasant. Where did you go to school?"

Ramon shrugged. "Many places. University of Mexico, UCLA, the Sorbonne. I am afraid I was not a good student. I seldom attended regular classes. Eventually each school discovered this and invited me to go away."

"You used the libraries a lot, I expect," Charlie said almost indifferently.

"Yes. Señor, it is understood that you may want to ask me questions."

"Did Mrs. Rice tell you she hired us?"

"No, señor. Don Carlos told me this."

"Did he also tell you why?"

"The little girl, Lori, saw something that frightened her very much. It worries her mother. And Señor Tony is very unhappy with my presence here."

In exasperation Charlie asked, "Are you willing to simply clear up any mystery about yourself? Why haven't you already done it?"

"Señor, there is no mystery. From the beginning I have stated what I desire. First to Don Carlos, then to anyone who asked."

"And what is that?"

"To own the valley. When Don Carlos lies beside his mother, then I shall own the valley."

For a long time Charlie stared at him silenced, disbelieving. Finally he said, "And you think Don Carlos **will** simply give it to you?"

"Si."

"Why?"

"I cannot say, Senor. No man can truly say **what is in the** heart of another."

Charlie felt the hairs on his arms stirring and turned to Constance. She was signaling. No more, not now. Not yet. Abruptly he stood up. "We should go."

"Thank you," Constance said to Ramon. "We really should go now."

He walked out with them. The night air was cold, the sky very clear with more stars visible than they had ever seen in New York state. A crescent moon hung low in the eastern sky, its mountains clear, jagged. The gorgons were lost in shadows now. But the moon would sail on the sun path, Constance thought, and set over the highest pinnacle and silver light would flow through the openings....

"Good night, Sefiora," Ramon said softly, and left them.

They did not speak until they were in their room. "May we have coffee?" Constance asked Manuel. There were many more books to read, magazine articles to scan.

"It's blackmail," Charlie said with satisfaction when Manuel had vanished. "So what does he have on Don Carlos?"

Constance gave him a disapproving look. "That's too sim-pie."

"Maybe. But I've found that the simplest explanation is usually the right one. He's too damn sure of himself. It must be something pretty bad."

She moved past him to stand at the window. She would have to be out at sunrise, she was thinking, when the sun would appear above the tumbled rocks of the stream and light up the gorgons with its first rays. Something nagged at her memory. They had looked up the rough waterway, not really a waterfall, but very steep, the water flashing in and out of the granite, now spilling down a few feet, to pour over rocks again. It was as if the sunlight, the moonlight had cut through the cliff, opened a path for the tumbling water. The memory that had tried to get through receded.

Manuel brought their coffee and they settled down to read.

A little later Charlie put down his book with disgust and started to complain, when he saw that she was sleeping. He took her book from her lap; she roused only slightly and he took her by the hand to the bedroom, got her into bed. Almost instantly she was sleeping soundly. He returned to his books.

He would poke around in the library and if he didn't find something written about Wyandot by someone who had not idolized him, he would have to go to Denver, or somewhere, and search further. Wyandot and his past, that was the key, he felt certain. Blackmail. Find the leverage and confront both blackmailer and victim and then get the hell out of here. He nodded. And do it all fast.

The next morning he woke up to find Constance's bed empty. He started to get up, then lay down again staring at the ceiling. She had gone out to look at the formations by sunrise, he knew. He waited, tense and unhappy, until she returned quietly, undressed and got back in bed. He pretended to be asleep and in a short while he actually fell asleep again. Neither of them mentioned it that day.

She insisted on going to the gorgons again in the afternoon. "Take some books along," she said in an offhand manner. "I want to explore and I may be a while." She did not look at him when she said this. Today they planned to ride horses and eat sandwiches and not return until after sundown.

He had binoculars this time and before the afternoon ended he found himself birdwatching. Almost angrily he got to his feet and started to walk among the gorgons, looking for Constance. She had been gone for nearly two hours. Abruptly he stopped, even more angrily. She had asked him to wait, not come after her. He glanced about at the formations; it was like being in a red sandstone forest with the trunks of stone trees all around him casting long black shadows, all pointing together at the other end of the valley, pointing at the spillway the stream had cut. It was too damn quiet in here. He found his way out and stood in the shade looking at the entire valley lying before him. The late sun turned the cascading stream into gold. He was too distant to see its motion; it looked like a vein of gold in the cliffs. He raised the binoculars and examined the valley slowly, and even more slowly studied the spillway. He swore softly, and sat down in the shade to wait for Constance and think.

When she finally appeared she was wan and abstracted. "Satisfied?" he asked and now there was no anger in his voice, only concern.

She shook her head. "I'm trying too hard. Want to start back?"

Manuel came with the horses, guaranteed gentle and safe, he had assured them earlier, and he had been right. They rode slowly, not talking. Night fell swiftly here after the sun went down. It was nearly dark when they reached the house and their room again. Would they like dinner served in their room? Manuel had asked, and after looking at Constance, Charlie had nodded.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?" he asked her after Manuel had left them.

"I don't know."

"Okay. I thought so. I think I'm onto something, but I have to go to Denver. Will you fly out in the helicopter, or should we plan a couple of days and drive?"

"I can't go," she said quietly, and added, "don't press me, please."

"Right. I'll be back by dark. I sure as hell don't want to try to fly in here blind." He grinned with the words. She responded with a smile belatedly.

He summoned Manuel who nodded when Charlie asked about the helicopter trip. "Si. When do you want to go?"

And Manuel was not at all surprised that he was going alone, he thought grimly, after making the arrangements. Constance went to bed early again. He stood regarding her as she slept and under his breath he cursed Deborah Rice and her father and Ramon. "You can't have her!" he said silently.

The managers had been in the swimming pool; others had been in the dining room and library. Constance finally had started to gather her books to search for some place quiet. Manuel gently took them from her. "Please, permit me," he said softly. "It is very noisy today."

She had had lunch with Deborah Rice. Tony was coming tomorrow, she had said, and he was both furious and excited. He had something. There would be a showdown, she had predicted gloomily, and her father had never lost a showdown in his life. Deborah was wandering about aimlessly and would intrude again, Constance knew, would want to talk to no point, just to have something to do, and Constance had to think. It seemed that she had not thought anything through since arriving at the Valley of Gorgons. That was the punishment for looking, she thought, wryly: the brain turned to stone.

She was reluctant to return to her rooms. Without Charlie they seemed too empty. "I'll go read out under the gorgons," she said finally. At least out there no one bothered her, and she had to think. She felt that she almost knew something, could almost bring it to mind, but always it slipped away again.

"Si," Manuel said. "We should take the jeep, Senora. It is not good to ride home after dark."

She started to say she would not be there that long, instead she nodded.

Charlie had been pacing in the VIP lounge for half an hour before his pilot, Jack Wayman, turned up. It was seven-fifteen.

"Where the hell have you been?" Charlie growled. "Let's get going."

"Mr. Meiklejohn, there's a little problem with one of the rotors. I've been trying to round up a part, but no luck. Not until morning."

He was a fresh-faced young man, open, ingenuous. Charlie found his hands balling, took a step toward the younger man, who backed up. "I'll get it airborne by seven in the morning, Mr. Meiklejohn. I'm sure of it. I called the house and explained the problem. You have a room at the Hilton-"

Charlie spun around and left him talking. He tried to buy a seat on another flight to Pueblo first and when that failed, no more flights out that night, he strode to the Hertz Rental desk.

"I'm going to rent a plane for Pueblo," he said, "and I'll want a car there waiting. Is that a problem?"

The young man behind the desk shrugged. "Problem, sir. They close up at seven down there."

"I'll rent a car here and drive down," Charlie said in a clipped, hard voice. "Is *that* a problem?"

"No, sir!"

By a quarter to eight he was leaving the airport. He felt exactly the way he had felt sometimes, especially in his last few years with the fire department, when he knew with certainty the fire had been set, the victim murdered. It was a cold fury, a savage rage made even more dangerous because it was so deep within that nothing of it showed on the surface, but an insane desire, a need, fueled it, and the need was to strike out, to lash out at the criminal, the victims, the system, anything. He knew now with the same certainty that the pilot had waited deliberately until after seven to tell him that he was stranded in Denver. And he was equally certain that by now the pilot had called the valley to warn them that he was driving, that he would be there by midnight. And if they had done anything to Constance, he knew, he would blow that whole valley to hell along with everyone in it.

"Manuel," Constance said when they arrived at the gorgons, "go on back to the house. You don't have to stay out here with me."

"Oh, no, Senora. I will stay."

"No, Manuel. I have to be alone so I can think. That's why I came out here, to think. There are too many people wandering around the house, too many distractions. If I know I'm keeping you out here, waiting, that would be distracting, too. I really want to be alone for a few hours."

"But, Senora, you could fall down, or get lost. Don Carlos would flay me if an accident happened."

She laughed. "Go home, Manuel. You know I can't get lost. Lost where? And I've been walking around more years than you've been alive. Go home. Come back for me right after sunset."

His expression was darkly tragic. "Senora, it is possible to get lost in your own house, in your own

kitchen even. And out here it is possible even more."

"If you can't find me," she said softly, "tell Ramon. He'll find me."

"Si," Manuel said, and walked to the jeep unhappily.

She watched the jeep until it disappeared among cotton-wood trees that edged the stream at the far end of the meadow, and only when she could no longer see it did she feel truly alone. Although the mornings and nights were cold, the afternoons were warm; right now shade was welcome. She selected a spot in the shade, brushed sand clear of rocks and settled herself to read.

First a history of the area. These were the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, named by the Spanish, long since driven out, leaving behind bits and pieces of their language, bits of architecture. She studied a picture of petroglyphs outside Pueblo, never deciphered, not even by the first Indians the Spaniards had come across. Another people driven out? Leaving behind bits and pieces of a language? She lingered longer over several pictures of the Valley of the Gods west of Colorado Springs. Formations like these, but more extensive, bigger, and also desecrated. She frowned at that thought, then went on to turn pages, stopping only at pictures now. An Oglala Sioux medicine lodge, then the very large medicine wheel in Wyoming, desecrated. The people who constructed the medicine lodges could not explain the medicine wheel, she read, and abruptly snapped the book shut. That was how history was written, she told herself. The victors destroy or try to destroy the gods of the vanquished, and as years go by, the gods themselves fade into the dust. The holy places that remain are turned into tourist attractions, fees are charged, guided tours conducted, books written about the significance of the megaliths, or the pyramids, or the temples, or the ground drawings. And when the dust stirs, the gods stir also, and they wait.

She began to examine a different book, this one done by a small press, an amateur press. The text was amateurish also, but the photographs that accompanied it were first rate. The photographer had caught the gorgons in every possible light. Brilliant sunlight, morning, noon, sunset... Moonlight, again, all phases. During a thunderstorm. She drew in a sharp breath at a picture of lightning frozen on the highest peak. There was one with snow several feet deep; each gorgon wore a snow cap. The last section was a series of aerial pictures, approaching from all directions, with stiletto shadows, no shadows at all.... Suddenly she felt vertiginous.

She had come to the final photograph taken from directly above the field of gorgons at noon. There were no shadows, the light was brilliant, the details sharp and clear. Keeping her gaze on the picture, she felt for her notebook and tore out a piece of paper, positioned it over the photograph. The note paper was thin enough for the image to come through. She picked up her pencil and began to trace the peaks, not trying to outline them precisely, only to locate them with circles. When she was done she studied her sketch and thought, of course, that was how they would be.

She put her pencil point on the outermost circle and started to make a line linking each circle to the next. When she finished, her pencil was in the center of the formations; she had drawn a spiral. A unicursal

labyrinth.

Slowly she stood up and turned toward the gorgons. She had entered in the wrong place before, she thought absently, and she had not recognized the pattern. Knowing now what it was, it seemed so obvious that she marveled at missing it before.

She walked very slowly around the gorgons to the easternmost pillar. Facing the valley, she saw that the low sun had turned the stream to gold; the shadows at her feet reached for it. She entered the formations. There was a right way, and a wrong way, but now the right way drew her; she did not have to think about it. A step. Another.

She did not know how long she had been hearing the soft singing, chanting, but it was all around her, drawing her on, guiding her even more than the feeling of being on the right path. She did not hesitate this time, nor did she retrace any steps. Her pace was steady. When the light failed, she stopped.

I could continue, she said silently in her head.

Si, Ramon's voice replied, also in her head.

Will it kill me?

I do not know.

I will go out now.

Si. There was a note of deep regret in the one syllable.

It doesn't matter how I leave, does it?

No, Senora. It does not matter.

She took a step, but now she stumbled, caught herself by clutching one of the gorgons. It was very dark; she could see nothing. There was no sound. Suddenly she felt panic welling up, flooding her. She took another step and nearly fell over a rock. Don't run! she told herself, for God's sake, don't try to run! She took a deep breath, not moving yet. Her heartbeat subsided.

"Please, Senora, permit me." Ramon's soft voice was very near.

She felt his hand on her arm, guiding her, and she followed gratefully until they left the formations and Manuel ran up to her in a greater panic than she had felt.

"Gracias, Madre! Gracias!" he cried. "Oh, Senora, thank goodness, you're safe! Come, let us return to the house!"

She looked for Ramon to thank him, but he was no longer there. Tiredly she went to the jeep and got in. Although it was dark, there was not the impenetrable black that she had experienced within the formations. They swallowed light just as they swallowed sound, she thought without surprise. She leaned back and closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

At the house they were met by a young woman who took Constance by the arm. "Senora, please permit me. I am Felicia. Please allow me to assist you."

Manuel had explained the problem with the helicopter and she was glad now that Charlie was not on hand to see her drag herself in in this condition. He would have a fit, she thought, and smiled gratefully at Felicia.

"I am a little bit tired," she admitted. "And very hungry."

Felicia laughed. "First, Don Carlos said, you must have a drink, and then a bath, and then dinner. Is that suitable, Senora?"

"Perfect."

•••

Charlie was cursing bitterly, creeping along the state road looking for a place where he could turn around. He had overshot the private road, he knew. He had driven over forty miles since leaving Pueblo, and the turn was eight to ten miles behind him, but there was no place to turn. He had trouble accepting that he had missed the other road, and the neat sign warning that this was private property, dead end, but it was very black under the trees and he had missed it. And now he had to turn, go back even slower and find it. It was fifteen more minutes before there was a spot flat enough, wide enough to maneuver around to head back, and half an hour after that before he saw the sign.

No one could work with the New York fire department and then the police department as many years as he had done without developing many senses that had once been latent only. Those senses could take him through a burned-out building, or into an alleyway, or toward a parked car in a state of alertness that permitted him to know if the next step was a bad one, or if there was someone waiting in the back seat of the car. He had learned to trust those senses without ever trying to identify or isolate them. And now they were making him drive with such caution that he was barely moving; finally he stopped altogether. A mountain road in daylight, he told himself, would look very different from that same road at night. But this different? He closed his eyes and drew up an image of the road he had driven over before-

narrow, twisting, climbing and descending steeply, but different from this one that met all those conditions.

This road was not as well maintained, he realized, and it was narrower than the other one. On one side was a black drop-off, the rocky side of the mountain on the other, and not enough space between them to turn around.

"Well, well," he murmured and took a deep breath. This road could meander for miles and end up at a ranch, or a mining camp, or a fire tower, or in a snowbank. It could just peter out finally. He let the long breath out in a sigh. Two more miles, and if he didn't find a place where he could turn, he would start backing out. His stomach felt queasy and his palms were sweating now. He began a tuneless whistle, engaged the gears and started forward again.

"You know about the holy places on earth, don't you?" Don Carlos asked Constance. He had invited her to his apartment for a nightcap. Ramon was there, as she had known he would be.

"A little," she said. "In fact, I visited a couple of them some years ago. Glastonbury Tor was one. It was made by people in the megalithic period and endures yet. A three-dimensional labyrinth. I was with a group and our guide was careful to point out that simply climbing the hill accounted for all the physiological changes we felt. Shortness of breath, a feeling of euphoria, heightened awareness."

Ramon's stillness seemed to increase as if it were an aura that surrounded him and even part of the room. If one got close enough to him, she thought, the stillness would be invasive.

"I saw Croagh Patrick many years ago," Don Carlos said. "Unfortunately I was a skeptic and refused to walk up it barefooted. I've always wondered what that would have been like."

"The labyrinth is one of the strongest mystical symbols," Ramon said. "It is believed that the evil at the center cannot walk out because of the curves. Evil flows in straight lines."

"Must one find only evil there?" Constance asked.

"No. Good and evil dwell there side by side, but it is the evil that wants to come out."

"The Minotaur," she murmured. "Always we find the Minotaur, and it is ourself."

"You don't believe that good and evil exist independently of human agencies?" Ramon asked.

She shook her head.

"Sefiora, imagine a pharmacy with shelves of bright pills, red, blue, yellow, all colors, some

sugarcoated. You would not allow a child to wander there and sample. Good and evil side by side, sometimes in the same capsule. Every culture has traveled the same path from the simplest medicines to the most sophisticated, but they all have this in common: side by side, in the same medicine, evil and good dwell forever intertwined."

"I have read," she said slowly, "that when the guru sits on his mountain top, he increases his power, his knowledge, every time a supplicant makes the pilgrimage to him. In the same way, when children dance the maypole, the center gathers the power. At one time the center was a person who became very powerful this way."

Ramon nodded. "And sometimes sacrificed at the conclusion of the ceremony."

"Did you try to lure the child Lori to the center of the gorgons?" Her voice sounded harsh even to her own ears.

"No, Sefiora."

"You tried to coax me in."

"No, Sefiora. I regretted that you stopped, but I did not lure you."

"Don Carlos is a believer. Why don't you use him?"

"I wanted to," Don Carlos said simply. "I can't walk that far."

"There will be others. Manuel. Or the girl Felicia. There must be a lot of believers here."

"Perhaps because they believe, they fear the Minotaur too much," Ramon said.

"And so do I," she said flatly.

"No, Senora. You do not believe in independent evil. You will meet your personal Minotaur, and you do not fear yourself."

Abruptly she stood up. "I am very tired. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go to bed now."

Neither man moved as she crossed the room. Then Ramon said almost too softly to hear, "Senora, I was not at the gor-gons this evening. I have spent the entire evening here with Don Carlos."

She stopped at the door and looked back at them. Don Carlos nodded soberly.

"Constance," he said, "if you don't want to go all the way, leave here tomorrow. Don't go back to the formations."

"You've been here for years," she said. "Why didn't you do it a long time ago?"

For a moment his face looked mummified, bitter; the expression changed, became benign again. "I was the wrong one," he said. "I couldn't find the way. I felt it now and then, but I couldn't find my way."

There was a right way and a wrong way, she thought, remembering. A right person and a wrong person. "Good night," she said quietly, and left them.

She stood by her windows in the dark looking out over the valley, the lake a silver disc in moonlight, the dark trees, pale granite cliffs. "Charlie," she whispered to the night, "I love you." She wished he were with her, and closed her eyes hard on the futile wish. Good night, darling, she thought at him then. Sleep well. When she lay down in bed, she felt herself falling gently into sleep.

Charlie pulled on the hand brake and leaned forward to rest his head on the steering wheel, ease the strain in his neck from watching so closely behind him with his head out the open door. Suddenly he lifted his head, listening. Nothing, hardly even any wind to stir the trees. All at once he admitted to himself that he would not be able to back out in the dark. The backup lights were too dim, the road too curvy with switchbacks that were invisible, and a drop-off too steep, the rocky mountain too close. He had scraped the car several times already, and he had stopped too many times with one or two wheels too close to the edge or even over it. He had thought this before, but each time he had started again; now he reached out and turned off the headlights. The blackness seemed complete at first; gradually moonlight filtered through the trees. It was all right, he thought tiredly. He could rest for a while and at dawn start moving again. He pulled the door shut, cracked the window a little, and leaned back with his eyes closed and slept.

When Charlie drove in the next morning, Constance met him and exclaimed at his condition. "My God, you've been wrestling with bears! Are you all right?"

"Hungry, tired, dirty. All right. You?"

"Fine. Manuel, a pot of coffee right now and then a big breakfast, steak, eggs, fruit, everything. Half an hour."

Charlie waited until they were in their room to kiss her. She broke away shaking her head. "You might have fought off bears, but you won. I'm going to run a bath while you strip. Come on, hop!"

He chuckled and started to peel off his clothes. She really was fine. She looked as if she had slept better than he had anyway. Now the ordeal of trying to get back seemed distant and even ludicrous.

Manuel brought coffee while he was bathing; she took it the rest of the way and sat by the tub while he told her his adventures.

"You really think someone moved the sign?" she asked incredulously. "Why?"

"Why do I think it, or why did they do it?"

"Either. Both."

"It was gone this morning, back where it belonged. I think Ramon didn't want me here last night. What happened?"

"Nothing. That must be breakfast." She nearly ran out.

Nothing? He left the tub and toweled briskly, got on his robe and went to the sitting room where Manuel was finishing arranging the dishes.

When they were alone again, and his mouth full of steak, he said, "Tell me about it."

Constance took her coffee to the window and faced out. "I don't know what there is to tell. I had a nightcap with Don Carlos and Ramon and went to bed pretty early and slept until after eight." She came back and sat down opposite him. "I really don't know what happened," she said softly. "Something important, but I can't say what it was. There's power in the gorgons, Charlie. Real power. Anyone who knows the way can tap into it. That sounds so ... stupid, doesn't it? But it's true. Let me sort it out in my own mind first, okay? I can't talk about it right now. What did you find?"

"Enough to blow Ramon's boat out of the water," he said. At her expression of dismay, he added, "I thought that's what we came here for."

There was a knock on the door and she went to answer it. Deborah was there, looking pale and strained.

"All hell's about to break loose today," she said when Constance waved her in. "Charlie, I'm glad you're back. Father's in conference, and then he's sending his associates to Denver to get together with company attorneys or something. And Tony's due in by two. Father wants to clear the decks before then for the showdown. You're invited. Three, in his apartment."

An exodus began and continued all day. The helicopter came and went several times; a stream of limousines crept up the mountain road, vanished. The loud laughter was first subdued, then gone. Yesterday the managers had all been supremely confident, clad in their invisible gray suits; today, the few that Constance had seen had been like school boys caught doing nasty things in the lavatory.

And now Charlie was probably the only person within miles who was relaxed and comfortable, wholly at ease, watching everything with unconcealed, almost childish interest. They were in Don Carlos's apartment, waiting for the meeting to start. Tony Wyandot was in his mid-forties, trim and athletic, an executive who took his workouts as seriously as his mergers. He was dark, like his father and sister, and very handsome. Constance knew his father must have looked much like that at his age. He had examined her and Charlie very briefly when they were introduced, and, she felt certain, he knew their price, or thought he did. After that he dismissed them.

Charlie sat easily at the far edge of the group, watchful, quiet. Ramon stood near the windows, also silent. Carl Wyandot entered the sitting room slowly, leaning on his cane, nodded to everyone and took his leather chair that obviously had been designed for his comfort. And Deborah sat near him, as if to be able to reach him if he needed help. She and Tony ignored Ramon.

Tony waited until his father was seated, then said, "I asked for a private meeting. I prefer not to talk business or family matters before strangers."

Charlie settled more easily into his chair. He would do, he thought of Tony. Direct, straight to the point, not a trace of fear or subservience, but neither was there the arrogance that his appearance hinted at. Equal speaking to equal.

"I doubt we have many secrets," his father said. "You hired detectives and so did your sister." He inclined his head fractionally toward Charlie. "Go on."

Tony accepted this without a flicker. "First, I am relieved that you've ordered the reorganization study to commence. I'll go to Denver, naturally, and stay as long as it's necessary. Three months should be enough time." He paused. "And I find it very disturbing that you've already signed papers about the dispensation of the valley." His level tone did not change; he kept his gaze on his father, but the room felt as if a current had passed through it.

His father remained impassive and silent.

"You have sole ownership, and you can dispose of your property as you see fit," Tony went on, "but a case can be made that this is an unreasonable act."

Deborah made a sound, cleared her throat perhaps, or gasped. No one looked at her.

"I did not believe that you could be so influenced by a stranger that you would behave in an irrational way," Tony said, his gaze unwavering. "That's why I hired the detectives, to find out exactly why you were doing this. And I found out." He paused again, in thought, then said, "I think we should speak in private, Father. I did find out."

"Just say it."

He bowed slightly. "Ramon is your son. The trail is tenuous, not easy to find, but once found, it leads only to that conclusion. He came here and claimed his share of your estate, and that's why you're giving him this valley."

This time Deborah cried out. "That's a lie!"

Tony shook his head. "I wish it were. I had my agency check and double-check. It's true. Father, you were trying to keep the past buried, protect us, yourself, and there's no need. You provided well for him over the years, took care of his mother, saw that he had opportunities. You owe him nothing. A yearly allowance, if you feel you have to, but no more than that."

Ramon had not moved. Constance glanced at him; his face was in deep shadow with the windows behind him. She recalled her own words: the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. Deborah was twisting her hands around and around; she looked at Charlie despairingly, and he shrugged and nodded.

"Father," Tony said then, his voice suddenly gentle, "I think I can understand. There's no record of the marriage of your father and mother. You were illegitimate, weren't you?"

For the first time Don Carlos reacted. His face flushed and his mouth tightened.

"But don't you see that it's unimportant now?"

"Haven't I provided for you and your sister?"

"We all know you've been more than generous. No one disputes that."

"And you would turn the valley into, what did you call it? a corporate resort? Knowing I detest the idea, you would do that."

"Not right away," his son said with a trace of impatience. "Places like this are vanishing faster all the time. You can hardly find a secluded spot even today. I'm talking about twenty years from now, fifteen at least."

Don Carlos shook his head. "The business will be yours. I have provided a trust for Deborah. Ramon can have the valley. Do you want to pursue this in court?" His face might have been carved from the granite of the cliffs. His eyes were narrowed; they caught the light and gleamed.

He would welcome a fight, Constance realized, watching him. And he would win. Tony flinched away finally and stood up. He had learned well from his father; nothing of his defeat showed in his face or was detectable in his voice when he said, "As you wish, Father. You know I would not willingly do anything to hurt you."

When he walked from the room, Deborah jumped up and ran after him. Now Charlie rose lazily from his chair, grinning. "Is he really finished?" he asked.

Don Carlos was looking at the door thoughtfully; he swung around as if surprised to find anyone still in the room. "He isn't done yet," he admitted. "Not quite yet."

"Congratulations," Charlie said, still grinning. "A masterful job of creating a new heir. I would not like to be your adversary."

The old man studied him, then said in a quiet voice, "Are you exceedingly brave, or simply not very smart? I wonder. You are on my land where I have numerous servants who are, I sometimes think, too fanatically loyal."

Constance was looking from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Let me tell a different story," Charlie said. "A group of people arrives at the top of the cliff, where the stream starts to tumble down into the valley. Two Mexican men, two Mexican women, a child, a white man, and an Indian guide. They can't bring horses down that cut, not safely, so they hobble them up there and come down on foot. Looking for gold? A holy place? What? Never mind. A fight breaks out and the white man and the child survive, but when he climbs back out, the horses are gone, and from that bit of thievery, he gets the idea for the whole story he'll tell about bandits. It works; people accept his story. And now his only problem is that he can't find the valley again. He dies without locating it again. Why didn't he kill the child Carlos?"

Don Carlos sighed. "Please sit down. I want a drink. I seldom do anymore, but right now that's what I want."

Ramón mixed drinks for all of them, and then he sat down for the first time since the meeting had started.

Don Carlos drank straight bourbon followed by water. "Have you told Deborah any of this?"

"No."

"It was as you guessed," Don Carlos said finally. "I was back in the formations and didn't even hear the shots. I came out and he was the only one; the others were lying in blood. He raised the gun and aimed at me, and then he put it down again and started to dig graves. I don't know why he didn't shoot. He said from then on I was to be his son and if I ever told anyone he would shoot me too. I believed him. I was five."

"He killed your mother," Constance said, horrified, "and your father."

"Yes."

"How terrible for you. But I don't understand what that has to do with the present."

Don Carlos shrugged. "How much more have you guessed, or learned?" he asked Charlie.

"He couldn't find the valley again, but you did. I suspect there was gold and that it's under the lake today." Don Carlos nodded slightly. "Yes. You took away enough to get your start, and later you bought the valley, and the first thing you did was dam the stream, to hide the gold vein under many feet of water." Again the old man nodded.

Charlie's voice sobered when he continued. "Years passed and you preserved the valley until one day Ramon appeared. Was he hired as a servant? A business associate? It doesn't matter. He read that history and looked at the waterway and drew the same conclusions I did. You felt that the gorgons had saved your life, there was a mystical connection there. And he found how to capitalize on it." He was aware that Constance was signaling, but this time he ignored it and said bluntly, "I have as much right to call you Daddy as he does."

Don Carlos smiled faintly and lifted his glass, finished his bourbon. "You're a worthy adversary," he said to Charlie. "Will the others unravel it also? How did you discover this so quickly?"

"Ramon left a good trail, just hidden enough to make it look good, not so much that it can't be found. He did a fine job of it." He added dryly, "If you spend enough money you can make the world flat again, enough to convince most people anyway. I spent only a little bit and learned everything Tony's detectives had uncovered, and it hit me that if a man of your wealth really wants to hide anything, it gets hidden. I didn't believe a word of it."

Constance looked at Ramon in wonder. "You left false evidence that makes it appear that you are his son? Is that what you did?"

"Si."

"When?"

"For the last two years we have been working on this."

She felt completely bewildered now. "But why? What on earth for?"

"I knew Tony would investigate Ramon," Don Carlos said. "As soon as he found out I intended to leave the valley to Ramon he would hire investigators to find out why. I tried to come up with something else, but I couldn't think of anything different that he would accept as a good enough reason. He won't talk in

public about his father's illicit sex life. I don't want a fight or publicity about this."

"And if you told the truth," Constance said in a low voice, "they could press for a sanity hearing, and probably win." She felt a wave of disgust pass through her at the thought of the hearing, the taunting questions, the innuendoes.

"They might have won such a hearing," Don Carlos said just as quietly as she had spoken.

"And maybe they should have had that chance." Charlie sounded harsh and brusque. "This valley is worth ten million at least, and you're giving it away because he says there's power in the gorgons. Maybe Tony should have his chance."

"Senor," Ramon said, "come to the gorgons at sundown today. And you, Senora. This matter is not completed yet, not yet." He bowed to Don Carlos and Constance and left the room.

They stood up also, Charlie feeling helpless with frustration. "We won't be able to make that," he said to Don Carlos. "Give him our regrets. We're leaving."

"We'll be there," Constance said clearly.

Don Carlos nodded. "Yes, we'll all be there." He looked at Charlie. "I ask only that you say nothing to my daughter or son today. Tomorrow it will be your decision. I ask only for today."

"You're not even offering to buy us," Charlie said bitterly.

"Mr. Meiklejohn, I am extremely wealthy, more than you realize. But over the years I have learned that there are a lot of things I can't buy. That was a surprise to me, as it must be to you, if you believe it at all."

Charlie's frustration deepened; wordlessly he nodded and stalked from the room with Constance close behind him.

"That was brilliant," Constance said, walking by Charlie's side along the lake front.

"Yeah, I know."

"We're really not finished here." She was not quite pleading with him.

"Right."

She caught his arm and they came to a stop. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have to see it through and I can't say

why."

He nodded soberly. "That's what scares me." He never had doubted her, never had thought of her with another man, never had a moment's cloud of jealousy obscure his vision of her. And he knew she felt the same way about him. Their trust in each other was absolute, but... He knew there were areas in her psychic landscape that he could not enter, areas where she walked alone, and he knew that when she walked those infinite and infinitely alien paths the things that occupied her mind were also alien and would not permit translation into his mundane world. Standing close to her in the warm sunlight, a gleaming lake at one side of them, luxurious buildings all around, cars, helicopters, computers, servants by the score available, he felt alone, abandoned, lost. She was beyond reach even though her hand was on his arm.

He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. "It's your party."

She blinked rapidly. "We should go back to the house. Tony scares me right now."

They stopped when Tony and Deborah came into view, heading for the area behind the boathouse. Tony was carrying a rifle; Deborah was almost running to keep up, clutching his arm.

She saw Charlie and Constance and turned to them instead. Tony continued, stony-faced.

"What's up?" Charlie asked pleasantly.

"He's going to do target practice. Kill time." She laughed with a tinge of hysteria in her voice.

"Well, I'm looking for a drink," he said, so relaxed and quiet that he appeared lazy.

She walked with them, studying the path they were on. "Tony's so much like Father. It's uncanny how alike they are."

They all started a few seconds later when a shot sounded, echoing and chasing itself around the granite walls of the valley for a long time.

"He's as violent as Father must have been when he was younger," Deborah said as they started to walk again. "More so, maybe. Father is said to have killed a man back in the twenties. I don't know how true it is, but it doesn't really matter. People who tell the story know it was quite possible. He would kill to protect his interests, his family. And so would Tony."

"So would I," Charlie commented.

Constance shivered. Years ago Charlie had insisted that she take self defense classes far past the point

where she felt comfortable with them. "If anyone ever hurts you," he had said, "you'd better take care of him, because if you don't I'll kill the son of a bitch and that will be murder."

Another shot exploded the quiet and then several more in quick succession. It sounded like thunder in the valley. They paused at the house listening, feeling the vibrations in the air, and then entered.

The fountain splashed; the red tiles on the floor glowed; an orange tree in a pot had opened a bloom or two overnight, and rilled the air with a heady fragrance. It was very still.

Deborah paused at the fountain and stared at the water. They had started up the wide stairs; her low voice stopped them.

"When Tony and I used to come here, we just had each other, we were pretty close in those days. He was Lori's age when he ... when something happened out there. He wouldn't talk about it. He was ashamed because he ran and left me behind, and everything changed with us after that. Just like with Lori. I don't think he's ever gone back. And he shouldn't go back. That target practice ... he claims an eagle has been snatching chickens. He says he'll shoot it on sight." She bowed her head lower. "How I've prayed for an earthquake to come and shake them all down, turn them to dust!" She jammed her hands into her pockets and walked away without looking back at them.

In their room Constance watched silently as Charlie unlocked his suitcase and brought out his thirty-eight revolver. She went to the window then. "Charlie, just for a minute, accept that there might be some force out there, some power. Tony said places like this are vanishing, remember? He was more right than he knew. They are. What if there are places where you can somehow gain access to the power people sometimes seem to have, like the inhuman strength people sometimes have when there's an emergency, a fire, or something like that."

He made a grunting noise. She continued to look out the window. The sun was getting low, casting long shadows now.

"If people can manipulate that kind of power, why don't they?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "New priests drive out the old priests. New religions replace the old. The conquerors write the books and decide what's true, what's myth. Temples are turned into marketplaces. Roads are built. Admission is charged to holy places and the gum wra, ?rs appear, the graffiti... But the stories persist in spite of it . il. They persist."

She looked at him when she heard the sound of ice hitting a glass. His face was stony, unknowable.

"When we lose another animal species," she said, almost desperate for his understanding now, "no one knows exactly what we've lost forever. When a forest disappears, no one knows what marvels we might have found in it. Plants that become extinct are gone forever. What drugs? What medicines? What new

ways of looking at the universe? We can't really know what we've lost. And this valley's like that. Maybe we can't know what it means today, or even next year, but it exists as a possibility for us to know some day, as long as it remains and is not desecrated."

He picked up the two glasses and joined her at the window where he put the glasses on a table and took her into his arms. He held her very close and hard for a minute or two and then kissed her. "Let's have our drink," he said afterward. "And then it'll be about time to mosey on downstairs." And he tried to ignore the ice that was deep within him, radiating a chill throughout his body.

•••

Manuel drove them without a word. He was subdued and nervous. Ahead of the jeep was a Land Rover moving cautiously, avoiding the ruts in the tracks, easing into and out of the holes. Deborah and her father were in it. Also ahead of them was Tony on a horse, in no hurry either. He had a scabbard with the rifle jutting out.

Manuel stopped near the stream where he had parked before, but Deborah drove her father closer to the formations and parked within fifty feet of them. Manuel got a folding chair from the car and set it up; he brought a large Indian blanket and placed it on the back of the chair and then looked at Deborah with a beseeching expression. She shook her head. Silently he went back to the jeep, turned it and drove toward the house. Tony was tying his horse to a hitching post near the mound of the graves.

Don Carlos walked slowly over the rocky ground; there was a line of sweat on his upper lip when he reached the chair and sat down. No one offered to help him, but they all watched until he was settled. Probably, Charlie thought, they knew better than to try to help. If he wanted help he would ask for it politely, matter-of-factly, and unless he did, they waited. A worthy adversary, he thought again. He had no doubt that Don Carlos had killed, maybe more than once, and that he would not hesitate to kill again if he had to. Don Carlos knew, as Charlie did, that the world was not always a nice place.

Tony drew nearer. He and Charlie eyed each other like two alley cats confined in a too-small space, Constance thought, watching everyone, everything closely.

She heard a faint singing and glanced about to see if the others were listening too, to see if Ramon had approached from behind the gorgons. Charlie's expression of lazy inattention did not change; no one moved. They didn't hear it, she realized. The singing was more like chanting, and louder. The earth rolled away from the sun and caught the light in the stream at the far end of the valley and turned the water to gold. A dagger of golden light slicing through the cliffs, pointing the way.

It was time. She touched Charlie's arm. When he looked at her, she said softly, "Don't let them follow me. Please wait. I'll be back."

The ice flowed through him, tingled his fingers and toes, froze his heart. He nodded silently. Their gaze held for another moment, then she turned and walked toward the entrance of the gorgons. He had known this was her part, just as she had known; he had been braced, waiting for this. He had not known he would be frozen by the icy fear that gripped him now. She did not look back at him when she reached the right place. She took another step and was out of view. He let out his breath.

A right way, a wrong way. Her pace was steady this time, unhesitating. It was as if the wrong way was barred to her, as if she were being channeled only the right way. The chanting was all around her, inside her; it had an exultant tone.

I'm here, Ramon.

Si, Senora. I was waiting for you.

Sunlight flowed between the highest pillars, spilled like molten gold downward to touch the path before her. Then the sunlight dimmed and the shadows became deep purple. She continued to walk steadily.

"Look!" Deborah cried, and pointed toward the top of the gorgons.

For a second Charlie thought he saw a human figure; it changed, became an eagle. That damn story she had told, he thought angrily. When he looked back at the others, Tony was at the scabbard, hauling out the rifle. The twilight had turned violet, the shadows very deep and velvety. Charlie watched Tony for a second; very soon it would be too dark to see him. He drew his revolver and fired it into the air. Deborah screamed. Tony straightened, holding the rifle.

"Drop it," Charlie said. "Just let it fall straight down and then get back over here."

Tony walked toward him with the rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Put it down," Charlie said softly.

"I'm going to shoot that goddamn eagle," Tony said. His face was set in hard lines, his eyes narrowed. He took another step.

"No way," Charlie said harshly. "My wife's in there and I don't want any bullets headed anywhere near those formations. Understand?" Tony took another step toward him. Charlie raised the revolver, held it with both hands now. His voice was still soft, but it was not easy or lazy sounding. "One more step with that gun and I'll drop you. Put it down!"

He knew the instant that Tony recognized death staring at him, and the muscles in his neck relaxed, his stomach unclenched. Tony put the rifle down on the ground carefully and straightened up again.

"Over by your father," Charlie said. He glanced at Don Carlos and Deborah; they were both transfixed, staring at the gorgons behind him. Tony had stopped, also staring. Deborah was the first to move; she sank to the ground by her father's chair. His hand groped for her, came to rest on her head. He took a deep breath and the spell was over.

"It's going to be dark very soon," Charlie said, hating them all, hating this damn valley, the goddamn gorgons. "Until the moon comes up I'm not going to be able to see a damn thing and what that means is that I'll have to listen pretty hard. Tony, will you please join your father and sister? You'd better all try to make yourselves as comfortable as you can because I intend to shoot at any noise I hear of anyone moving around."

Deborah made a choking noise. "Father, please, let's go back to the house. Someone's going to be killed out here!"

Tony began to walk slowly toward them. "You shouldn't have interfered," he said. He sounded very young, very frightened. "I would have ended it."

"Tony, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I brought them here. I wish I'd never seen them, either of them." Deborah was weeping, her face on her father's knee, his hand on her head. "This isn't what I wanted. Dear God, this isn't what I wanted."

Charlie sighed. He felt a lot of sympathy for Tony Wyandot who had come face to face with something he could not handle, could not explain, could not buy or control. In Tony's place he would have done exactly the same thing: try to shoot it out of the sky, protect his property, his sister and father, his sister's child. He would have brought the rifle, but he would have used it, and that made the difference. Don Carlos would have used it, too, if he had decided it was necessary. He had seen Tony take defeat before, with dignity, but this was not like that. He knew that no matter what else happened out here tonight, Tony would always remember that he had not fired the rifle.

Tony reached his father's side and sat on the ground with his knees drawn up, his arms around them. The crisis was over.

The light had long since faded, and with darkness there had come other changes. Constance did not so much think of the differences as feel them, experience and accept them. Her feet seemed far away, hardly attached to her, and her legs were leaden. Each step was an effort, like wading in too-deep water. The air had become dense, a pressure against her that made breathing laborious. She walked with one hand outstretched, not to feel her way, but almost as if she was trying to part the air before her. She saw herself falling forward and the thick air supporting her, wafting her as it might a feather, setting her down gently, an end of the journey, an end of the torture of trying to get enough air.

Senora.

I'm here, Ramon.

Si.

It is very hard, Ramon. I'm very tired.

Si. But you must not stop now.

I know.

Another step. It was agony to lift her foot, to find her foot and make it move. Agony to draw in enough air and then expel it. And again. She was becoming too heavy to move. Too heavy. Stonelike.

"I have to stand up," Don Carlos said. "I'm getting too stiff."

"Do you want to go to the car?" Charlie asked. "You could turn on the heater." They could have turned on the lights, he thought, and knew that even if it had occurred to him earlier he would not have done it.

"No, no. I just want to stand for a minute and then wrap up in the blanket."

"Father," Tony said then, "let me take you back to the house. Keeping vigil in the cold can't be good for you."

"I'm all right," his father said gruffly. "It won't be much longer, I'm sure."

"Father," Tony said after a moment, "don't you see how they're manipulating you? Ramon obviously offered Meikle-john and his wife more than Deborah agreed to pay them. This isn't going to prove anything, freezing our butts off out here in the cold. Meiklejohn," he said in a louder voice, "I'm going to the car for a flashlight. I intend to go haul your wife out of there and be done with this." There was the sound of shoes scraping rocks.

Charlie sighed. "Tony, knock it off, will you?" he said wearily. "You know I won't let you do that or anything else."

"Sit down, Tony," his father said. It was a father-to-son command, a voice that expected to be obeyed.

Silence hung over them all. "Whatever you say," Tony finally agreed. "This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

Charlie loosened his grip on his revolver. Tony was vacillating from the kid who had had his universe shaken to the middle-aged man who could not allow himself to embrace a new belief system, and it

obviously was a painful jolt with each switch. He had tried to destroy it and failed, now he had to work even harder to deny it. Charlie couldn't stop feeling that Tony was more in the right than his father. So Constance and Ramon would stroll out eventually and what the hell would that prove? He scowled into the darkness. Meanwhile he intended to preserve order in the cosmos.

There were more stars every time he looked up, as if veil after veil were being removed; he never had known there were so many of them. The moon hung over the house, fattening up nicely night after night. And what if she didn't come back? He checked the thought, but there it was, fully formed, articulated in spite of his efforts to suppress it.

What if she found something, after all? Something so wonderful that she couldn't turn her back on it. What if the power she was looking for turned out to be malevolent? He closed his eyes for a moment and then looked at the moon again, trying to make the jagged edge turn into mountains instead of badly torn paper.

She had not completed a movement for a very long time. She had started another step, but it seemed not to end no matter how she struggled. And now she could hardly breathe and the lack of air made her head feel as distant as her feet and hands, and everywhere in her body there was pain, more pain than she had known she could endure.

Will she die?

I do not know.

She didn't know how hard it would be.

One never knows that.

But you did it.

Si. Over a long period of time. Each time the way one has gone before is easier.

You took the photographs of the gorgons, didn't you?

Si. And I told Manuel to make certain you saw them.

Twenty-eight pillars. A lunar month. That is very holy, isn't it?

Most holy.

And one must start at sunset and arrive in moonlight. Is that right?

That is correct.

She's taking another step. Actually she hasn't really stopped yet. But it's so slow and so hard.

She forced her leg to move again. Another step. Each step now was a victory in slow motion. So much resistance to overcome. Again she saw herself falling, floating down, down and she yearned to rest in the heavy air, not to move, not to hurt. Another step. The chanting was in her bones; she wanted to chant, too, but she had no breath. The image of herself letting go, falling, was becoming realer each time it came back. It would be so good, so good to let go, to let the heavy air float her to the ground where she could rest.

"What on earth will he do with the valley?" Deborah asked. "Not a resort or anything like that. But what?"

"He'll start a school," Don Carlos said. He sounded faint, his voice quavering a bit.

Charlie thought of Ramon teaching kids how to walk among the gorgons. His hands clenched hard and he consciously opened them again, flexed his fingers.

"And Constance," Deborah said, almost plaintively, almost jealously, "why her? What is she doing in there with him?"

"She felt the power and didn't run away," Don Carlos said in his faint voice, as if from a great distance, as if his strength were failing too fast for the words to be said. "She is willing to accept the power that she doesn't understand, and through her Ramon will... He needed someone to walk the path while he waits. And I... I'll be able to rest knowing the valley is in his hands. Good hands. He'll see that it isn't desecrated, he'll have the strength to take care of it. After tonight he'll be able to teach others."

"What difference does it make?" Tony demanded. "Let him do what he wants with the rotten valley. I sure don't intend to spend any time here ever again."

Charlie nodded. The denial was complete. Tony had saved his soul the only way he could. Everyone was clearly visible with the moon almost directly overhead and brilliant. The dimensions kept changing with the changing light, he thought. Right now the valley looked as wide as a plain, and the house close enough to touch. His eyes were playing tricks. He had slept so little the night before, and the altitude was strange.

For nearly an hour he had been fighting the idea that she really would not come back, that when it became daylight he would have to go in after her, and he would find her huddled at the base of one of those pillars. Twice he had started to go in, and each time he had forced himself to stop, to wait. He got up and stretched and started to walk toward the meadow, anything was better than sitting on the rock

much longer.

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When I was a little girl I was so certain that if I could be Beauty, I'd recognize the nobility of the Beast with no trouble at all. How I wanted to be Beauty.

I am sure you recognize evil very well.

Not as well as I should. What if she does this thing tonight, and uses what she gains for evil?

His laugh was gentle. We talked to you Senora. We measured your reverence for the power here. If we were wrong then one of us will certainly die this night.

Is this an evil thing, Ramon? To let her walk the path in ignorance, is that evil?

You are not ignorant.

But I'm here and she's there alone.

That is your choice.

No. I can be one or the other.

There is no other, only the one.

Now she knew she had to stop, she could not go on. She shuddered. She put out both hands so that they would break her fall. And she heard her own voice very clearly, "Another step, Constance. One more. Come on!"

One more. Suddenly she was dazzled by silvery light. It struck her in the face like a physical substance and she could see out over the valley in all directions. She laughed.

At the hitching post Charlie turned and came to a dead stop, even his heart stopped. In the center of the formations, on top of the highest of the gorgons, were two figures, Constance and Ramon, shining in the moonlight. He felt the world swim out from under him and caught the post for support, closed his eyes very hard. When he opened them again, the figures were gone. He raced back toward the gorgons. When he got there, Ramon was emerging carrying Constance.

Very gently he transferred her to Charlie's arms. Charlie watched him walk to Don Carlos and lean over him. It was very clear in the moonlight. After a moment, Don Carlos stood up.

"I didn't ask for this," he whispered, and his voice carried as if he were shouting. "I made no demands, asked for nothing."

"It is given," Ramon said. "Now we must get the Sefiora to the house and to bed."

"Is she going to be all right?" Don Carlos asked.

"Si. She is suffering from shock right now."

And Don Carlos moved without his cane, Charlie realized. Constance stirred and pressed her face against his chest. She sighed a long plaintive breath.

Are you sure, Sefiora? You don't have to go back now. You can stay here.

Oh no! I give it all to you, Ramon. I don't want it. I told Charlie I'd come back. That's what I want.

You can never give it all away, Sefiora. Some of the power will cling to you forever. Some day perhaps you will come home again.

She took another deep breath, inhaling the familiar smell of Charlie's body, and she let herself go, let herself fall into the sleep she yearned for. Charlie walked to the car with her in his arms almost blinded by tears he could not explain or stop.