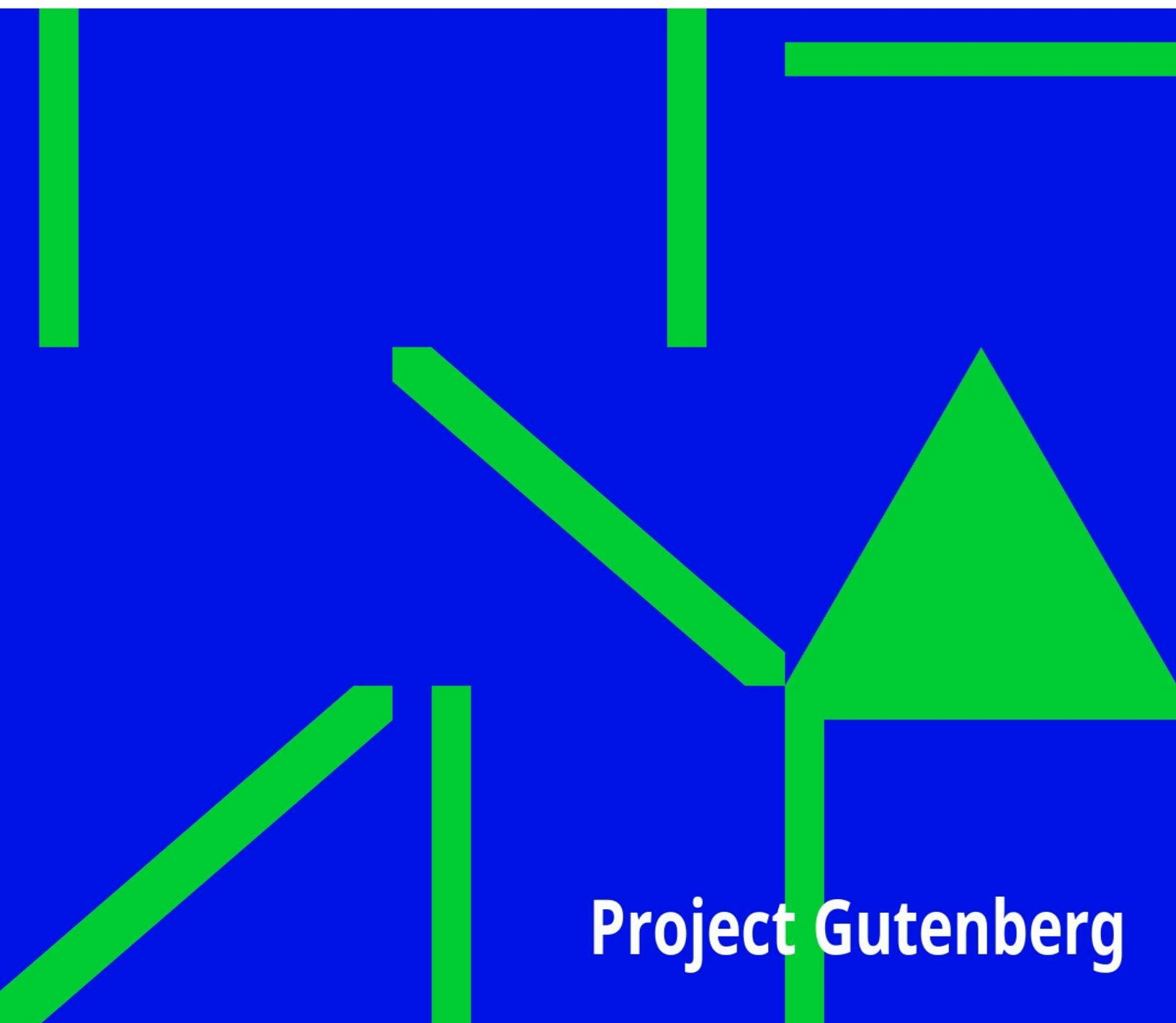


The Mantooth

Christopher Leadem



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(Science Fiction/Fantasy)

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THE MANTOOTH

In loving Memory Edward and William, gentle cousins

PART I

Sunrise in the Valley

My words cannot say it if the heart will not feel it.

—Jeremiah, son of Kalus

Chapter 1

Kalus* was wakened that morning by the sound of stalking footsteps. Reaching instinctively for his spear, he raised himself slowly and turned to face the sound.

*which means, 'The Carnivore.'

There before him, shrouded in the shadows of early morning, he perceived an ominous silhouette. It was Akar, the lone he-wolf that had followed his tribe for some time, living off the gnarled scraps of meat that the hill-people left behind after every kill. Kalus had often wondered what unaccountable circumstance caused it to leave the safety of the pack to strike out and fend for itself.

At first he was relieved. For this was only a scavenger, probably hoping to steal an unguarded morsel and slink away unseen.

But his instincts told him otherwise. There was something unnerving about the way the beast just stood there, as if unsure of its own intentions. Even in the dim light of the cave's entrance he could see that it had not eaten for many days. Arching ribs protruded sharply through an emaciated chest, and his eyes were wild with the blood-lust of a carnivore.

Something stirred deep within the young tribesman as he realized the true hopelessness of its plight. Cut off from the pack it could not hunt successfully, and there now, it stalked a prey it had no chance of killing. For all around him his comrades lay sleeping, and if aroused, they would kill the intruder without hesitation.

Reaching into a crude deerskin pouch slung across his shoulder, he pulled forth a long strand of cooked meat. Holding it outward enticingly, he motioned toward the terrified hunter.

Slowly, haltingly, the shadow moved forward, too near death from starvation to be cautious. When it was close enough Kalus tossed the meat gently into the air, where it was snapped up quickly by the waiting jaws of the hunger-crazed wolf. Smiling inwardly, he reached into his pouch once more and prepared to repeat the procedure.

Suddenly from behind him came the sound of angry voices. Whirling about he saw that the tribesmen had woken, and seeing the wolf, had armed themselves to attack. The frightened creature turned, but found there was nowhere to run. Barabbas, leader of the hill-people, had blocked the entrance to the cave and stood there waiting, a long spear clasped in his hairy hand. Forming a circle around the intruder, the tribesmen began to converge. Helpless, the wolf rolled over in the dirt, as if to beg for mercy. But the tribesmen showed it none, continuing to advance.

But then a strange thing happened, something that had not been seen on Earth since the disappearance of modern man from the continent. Not understanding why, or even how he did it, Kalus stepped forward and uttered the first word spoken since the day of destruction when all human tongues had been silenced.

'No!' he cried angrily. And that was all he said.

A deep silence filled the chamber as his comrades cowered back in disbelief. The he-wolf slipped out silently—grateful, but puzzled as to why he had been

spared.

Regaining their senses, the hill-people's astonishment was quickly turned to anger and resentment. For many months they had grown wary, and suspicious of the young, tawny-haired hunter. They could not understand how this youth could be born of their own flesh, and yet still be so completely unlike them. For the color of HIS hair was light, and his eyes were a deep blue. And what of his peculiar desire to be on his own? Unlike the others he did not seem to need the protection of the clan, nor sometimes even to want it.

It was Barabbas who confronted him first. Speaking through primitive sign language, he told Kalus he was angry that he fed and protected the intruder, and that if he wished to remain among them, he would have to come to accept the ways of his people. Shaking his spear menacingly, he added a final note of warning to his primitive demands.

To the end of his days Kalus would not understand what was about to happen next. But in that moment of high emotion, it was as if something in the true nature of his comrades had been revealed to him for the first time. The darkness and evil of their merciless aggression now repulsed and infuriated him, as if some grotesque and twisted visage. Bitter, roused beyond words, he let out a cry and leapt wildly toward the brutal hill-man.

Surprised but not defenseless, Barabbas met the attack head on. Whirling his weapon with savage skill, he struck Kalus square in the face with the butt of his spear. Stunned, Kalus fell to the ground, and before he could move, found the point of Barabbas' spear held threateningly only inches from his throat.

And so, as quickly as it started, the battle was ended. Though a stern and forceful leader, Barabbas was not without compassion. Combining sign language with angry, animal grunts and gestures, he told Kalus he must now leave the tribe and never return. For by questioning the authority of its leader he had committed the one act of disloyalty that could never be forgiven. The other males huddled silently behind him, adding their mute support.

It was only then that Kalus realized the full significance of what he had done. Though Neanderthal and ape-like, the hill-people were the only family he had ever known. Looking to the back of the cave he saw his mother whimpering softly in dismay, and the other women clutching tightly to their children, as if

uncertain as to what it all meant.

Searching the faces of the men, he found sympathy but not forgiveness. He had been banished, and knew he could never return.

Utterly confused and dejected, he turned and walked slowly through the opening and down the shallow, sandy incline which led to the grasslands below. Looking back one final time, he felt a warm tear trickle bitterly down his reddened cheek. For he knew that his destiny had been changed forever, and that life could never again be the way it was before.

Chapter 2

Truly alone for the first time in his life, Kalus wandered aimlessly, trying to put back the pieces of all that had happened, and think of the things he must now do to survive. Though rarely forced to do it, he knew he was capable of hunting on his own.

But hunger was not the real danger. The valley in which he lived was full of game, but as a result, was also full of predators, many larger and more powerful

than himself. He also knew that some were highly specialized killers, and ruthless in their struggle to survive. Most would kill him without hesitation if they thought he had encroached on their hard fought, territorial boundaries.

His mind filled with such thoughts, he was easily startled by the sound of padded footfalls behind him. Whirling about he saw that it was only Akar, and that this time there was no danger. His belly glugged with the fresh meat of a recent kill, he now followed the man-beast more out of curiosity than anything else. He was deeply puzzled by the presence of a lone cave-dweller, and even more so when he discovered it was the same creature who had saved his life only hours before.

For Akar, unlike his primitive ancestors, was a being capable of rational thought. And though resembling in appearance the gray wolves of northern Canada, that was where the similarity ended. Although unable to formulate intricate patterns of thought, the wolves of the Valley had long since existed in well-defined clans, not unlike the wolves of Kipling or Tolkien. The two studied each other a moment in silence.

Then suddenly both man and beast stiffened, simultaneously aware they were no longer alone. Kalus' sensitive hearing had detected the hissing breath of a nearby predator, while Akar's keen nose (he heard the breathing as well) now caught the thick and unmistakable scent of a Commodore. Not wishing to remain and discover its source, the wolf darted quickly away, leaving the man-child alone with his fears.

As the rasping hiss grew louder and nearer, Kalus headed instinctively for higher ground. Trapped among the shadows of a narrow canyon he was unable to see his pursuer, but knew from the sounds of shuffling stone that it was gaining on him rapidly. Moving to the craggy bluff upon his right he began to climb, hoping his enemy would be unable do the same.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. Emerging from the darkness the nightmare took a shape. Raising itself stiff and hunched to the top of a massive, sunlit boulder, it took flesh as an enormous reptilian carnivore, like a tiny lizard slowed, and swelled to immense proportions. Throwback to the rock-climbing monsters of an age long forgotten, it moved among the lesser stones with terrifying grace. Desperate beyond words, Kalus began searching wildly for shelter.

His efforts were not in vain. Coming to a crumpled shelf jutting out of the rockface, he spied a small opening just ahead and to his right, and with the giant reptile just a few short yards behind, rushed headlong and breathless into the welcome shadows of a small cave.

But the danger was not yet passed. Though unable to fit the whole of its body into the small enclosure, the lizard was not so easily defeated. Forcing its head into the mouth of the cave it shot forth a long, snake-like tongue, hoping to catch the man-beast as a frog might capture a fly. After several narrow misses, Kalus realized that his only hope was to delve deeper into the ever-increasing darkness of the cave. His eyes not yet accustomed to the failing light he moved cautiously, not wishing to exchange the present danger for that of a blind fall. Feeling his way slowly along the grainy, lichen-covered walls, he tried to be certain of each advancing step.

But in spite of all his caution he slipped, and found himself plummeting downward through illusory darkness, a silent scream ringing in his ears. Seconds later he landed abruptly. His last thoughts before losing consciousness were that something must have broken his fall. For he had dropped a considerable distance through the blackness of an underground shaft, and knew that by all reason he should have been killed.

*

Hours passed, as the Mantooth's subconscious struggled to keep him alive. A severe blow to the back of the head had brought him to the point of death, and only sheer desire and a tireless will to survive could save him now. Such was a daily occurrence in the Valley—nature's way of separating the weak from the strong.

But Kalus had always lived up to such trials in the past, and this was to be no exception. Fighting his way back to consciousness, he opened his eyes to find himself lying on his back in a bed of cool moss covered with furs, his wounds being treated by the soothing hands of a woman-child. Raising himself weakly, he turned as if in a dream to look upon the face of his redeemer.

She was, without question, the most desirable female he had ever seen. Young and fair, her sun-streaked hair and gold-flecked green eyes were highlighted and

contrasted by skin of bronze and trinkets of silver. Her muscles were smooth and round; the outline of her breasts showed full beneath a woven garment the likes of which he had never seen. Her raiment, indeed her very face tones and gestures, appeared to him strange and exotic, and it seemed apparent that she had come from a land far away. Using simplified gestures, he tried to ask her who she was, and what hidden passage it was that he had found. For he sensed that he was still deep underground, and was puzzled by the dancing firelight and warmth all around him.

'Not now,' she whispered softly.

Giving him water from a clay vessel, she motioned for him to lie back and rest. Though he still had many questions he obeyed willingly, knowing that his strength was all but gone. Lying back painfully he tried, and finally succeeded, in falling asleep.

The girl remained beside him on the covered lip of rock that formed her bed, looking up at the shaft and wondering at the impossible coincidence. She reached out once, as if to touch his brow, but drew back the hand when she saw that it was trembling. She gazed at him thoughtful and misty-eyed, wondering.

Chapter 3

Kalus had slept poorly, dreaming of lizards and spiders, and for several terrifying moments after first awakening, could not determine where the dreams ended and reality began. Sylviana had watched his troubled sleep, and tried to wake him gently when his limbs began to tremble.

But the girl, gifted from birth with the power of speech, could not begin to understand the anguish that a mind without words was subjected to at such a time. There could be no gentle self-reassurances, no soothing thoughts or voice of comfort from within. Only her presence, and the apparent safety of the chamber, helped bring him back slowly from the wordless world of darkness and terror in which his spirit seemed to linger. She put a hand to his shoulder but he

only pushed it away, sitting up and looking about him bewilderedly.

Sensing that the time had come for him to be given some answer to his unspoken questions, the girl tried speaking to him slowly, using the primitive analogies she hoped he would understand.

'My name is Sylviana,' she began. 'This place you have found is called Trialis (a purely fictional name, spawned by the need of the moment). It is a holy place—the temple of our father, the Sun.' She turned and pointed toward a long, altar-like projection of polished stone that jutted unnaturally from the worn granite behind it. Several feet out from its base, ringed by a circle of stones, burned a small fire. This in turn cast dancing images of light and shadow back upon an oval mirror, tinted blue-black and mounted securely into the wall above the slab. In truth they were neither altar nor mirror, but the girl could think of no other way to explain them.

Not that it mattered. Her words were entirely lost upon the young outcast. He had listened intently, seeing that she wished to communicate, but could make no sense of the seemingly infinite barrage of varying sounds and expressions. He shook his head and looked at her ruefully, an expression that betrayed more of himself than he knew.

Realizing that her words meant nothing to him, she decided to summon the Spirit (for so he called himself), to see if His words held true. Helping Kalus to his feet, she led him slowly and gingerly toward the altar.

He offered no resistance. Instructing him to remain behind her, she stepped carefully past the flame and ascended the three steps leading to the polished projection of stone. Approaching the mirror she hesitated, as if afraid or unsure, then reached out over the stone and touched her fingers lightly to the glass, activating the machine. As the unseen circuitry behind it whirred and came to life, a message was carried by thin beams of laser light deep into Space. She waited a short time, then spoke.

'Great Spirit,' she began, 'Though I do not know your name. Come and be among us. For the man-child has come, even as you said that he would. But I am confused, and he doesn't seem to understand the words I speak. I'm terribly afraid that I will do something wrong and drive him away, and be left alone in

this place. . . forever. Please, if you're really who you say you are then come and show yourself to him. Say something to make him stay. Please, you must make him stay.'

Though he could not understand the words, Kalus felt the desperation with which they were spoken, and saw plainly that they somehow dealt with him. Her softness was unlike anything he had ever known. What could it mean?

A moment later a deep silence fell over the room, and in the gentle tension it brought, an outside presence was felt. Barely noticeable at first, and then undeniably, the two felt another dimension being added to the room. The colors around them grew suddenly brighter, edged with gold, and in the back of their minds they felt the vicarious sensations of a great, bodiless spirit swooping downward from the heavens, like a giant eagle diving towards the Earth. The room became dark, all save the misty blueness of the mirror. The fire dimmed, as if on cue, and a pinpoint of brilliant light appeared at the very center of the glass. There it grew in size and intensity until the magnitude of its brightness forced Kalus to shield his eyes and look away. Sylviana stood motionless, face turned and arm raised, disbelieving. For until now the Spirit had spoken to her only as a voice, a signal translated into words by the machine. The image was dimmed to a tolerable brilliance. She lowered her arm.

Then a different Voice was heard, deep and alive, like the whisper of the wind and the roar of an ocean. It was an eternally resilient and yet melancholy sound, time-wizened and thoughtful, never fully joyous or sad.

'Sylviana,' it began solemnly. 'Sylviana, I have come. Your vigil has not been in vain. For the Mantooth has been brought to you, even as I said that he would. Be at peace, I will speak to him now as you ask.' Seeming to turn its attention toward Kalus, the Voice began again. And somehow, though not miraculously, he understood.

'Come, look upon me, young one, and do not be afraid. There is much that I would say to you.' Slowly Kalus turned back toward the glass, beholding for the first time a sight that few men had ever seen. There before him, floating gently amid the vastness of heaven, he looked direct and unhindered into the glowing white-light majesty of a living dwarf star. And whether the true source of the transmission or not, the image itself was real.

Steady and unwavering, the Voice continued. 'Long ago, when my heart was younger, the being that became my flesh gave birth also to many orbiting spheres. Most were stillborn, as is often the way of heaven. But three lived on. These have been called by men Venus, Mars and the Earth. Each in its own way and in its own time was capable of bearing and supporting new life. But of the three, the one called Earth was fairest. Like a fertile womb it lay sleeping, a perfect cloud-veiled globe of wide red lands and mighty oceans. Already the throbbings of life could be seen, as tiny colonies of cells swam restlessly among themselves, waiting only for direction. It was here then I chose to sow my seed, that life should come from life, and my spirit be continued.

'So it was that after a time very long and yet very short, creatures of flesh came to swim in Earth's oceans, later to walk upon the land. But still I perceived a great void: there were none to look back and wonder, as I did, at the mystery of Universe which had spawned them. And so, as if it were always meant to be, Man came forward, in truth more of himself than by any action of mine. He was by far the most gifted of Earth's children, with hands freed to toil and mind free to think. He was a wonder of perception and dexterity.

'But man possessed a terrible flaw, a fault unforeseen in any of my eager, nuptial thought. Because of his greater intelligence, man perceived that he would one day grow old and die, a certainty unknown to his animal brothers, only guessed at by the wisest. Realizing this, he could also foresee the inevitable sorrows of sickness and despair, along with a host of imagined terrors his mind could not even give names to. It was from this knowledge that the Demon was born: the Demon of Fear.

'And this fear eventually destroyed man. Through all his generations he could not overcome it. Great men rose up, and some who were more than men, to challenge the demon and cast it aside. Victories were won, but they were not lasting. Always the fear would change shape and rise again, equally hideous, and often more powerful than before.

'It was in its way a glorious struggle, and at times it seemed that Eternity held its very breath, as ten thousand eyes from above looked down to see the forces of good and evil do battle in such broad and sweeping strokes. But the cost in human suffering was enormous, and after so many years I knew in my heart that an end was drawing nigh upon it. For Nature carries its own purposes, and will not be denied in the exercising of its sharp and merciful will.

'So it was that on a day whose horror I shall never be able to block from my thoughts, the evil that had grown in Man finally and decisively overcame the good. The mind that was given to create, used its cunning instead to devise weapons so powerful and heedless that nothing on Earth could stop them. And when fear took the hearts and minds of the multitudes they were unleashed, thoughtlessly, one in answer to the other, until all reasons for the conflict were lost among the fury and panic of destruction.

'Only a handful survived. Six billion voices cried out to me, to save them from the onslaught. But I haven't the power, young ones..... I haven't the power.' The air grew thick and heavy around them.

'The seed of Man was all but destroyed, left to sleep for centuries in the blackened voids of Time. It slept, and even had I wished to I could not of my own will revive it. Only Nature heals the wounds of time.' The Voice paused, as if gathering itself for a final effort.

'But now the flame is alive once more, cradled in your young and willing hearts. I implore you both, for the sake of those who struggled so long and hard before you, spread that flame anew. Feel the one passion that can yet save us, the one emotion that moves even the coldest distant star: the perfect glory of human love.

'Indeed, it is the one gift I have left to give you. Even now my time grows short, for this place is no longer mine to command. Kalus, I would ask that you take to your heart the young woman, Sylviana. Be to her strength and shelter, for she is dearer to me than any words can hope to express.

'But you must both know, I can promise you nothing. Your survival must depend on your ability to learn from the ways of Nature, and upon your will and desire to endure. Kalus, as it is still within my power, I return to you now the gift of speech. Use it wisely. Farewell.'

Then both voice and spirit were gone, and only Earth-life remained in the chamber.

'Wait!' cried Sylviana. 'You can't leave me here, please. Come BACK.'

But even as she spoke the image in the mirror faded, and a narrow beam of

violet light shot forth from its place in the glass. Coming to rest in the center of Kalus' forehead, it seemed to hold him there against his will. He felt his whole body tingling with an electric sensation that centered at the base of his spine, intensifying as it reached the smooth-folding membranes at the uppermost portion of his brain. His mind churned with unfamiliar sounds and images, as if a thousand tiny doors had suddenly burst open from within, flooding a dark chamber with new and unimagined light.

Then the feeling was gone and the beam released him. The firelight returned with its dancing glow, as Kalus slumped to the ground. Recovering himself enough to be awe-struck, he turned to the girl for whatever explanation she might offer.

'It's all right,' she said reassuringly, though not at all sure herself what it meant.

Deep in her own thoughts, she still hadn't noticed the wolf, who had slipped in through the darkness once more to be with the woman-child he had befriended. Sensing her mood it had not tried to attract her attention, but waited patiently instead a short distance from the altar. Kalus saw him. He pointed.

Grateful for the intrusion, Sylviana descended the steps and went to greet him. Going down on one knee she gently stroked the soft, silver-gray fur, ruffling his ear and gazing into the peaceful, intelligent eyes. He seemed to readily accept the presence of the man-child, and now reminded her more of a harmless pup than of the savage predator she knew he must be in the world outside. It was Akar, of course.

'It's all right,' she began again, turning back to her human companion. 'He won't hurt you. The wolf is my friend.'

'Yes,' answered Kalus without thinking. 'I know him well—'

'Sylviana!' he stammered. 'I speak! My mind is all around me. How can these things be?'

'I'm not sure,' she replied honestly. 'But I'm grateful for your company all the same. I've been here alone for so long....' She stopped when she saw the weary, washed-out confusion of his face. Though far from happy herself, she realized that in this moment his need was still greater.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered sadly, eyes to the ground. 'You have enough to think about already.' Slowly the words came to her. 'Try not to worry. Things will work out for us, you'll see. Right now you should eat, then I'll check your bandages and you can sleep a while longer.' He nodded gratefully.

Sitting weakly on one of the steps, Kalus let his mind go blank. Sylviana went to prepare a meal as best she could, and the he-wolf retired to a favorite corner to lie down. For the moment, at least, all was as it should have been.

A very rare moment, indeed.

Chapter 4

Kalus woke feeling strangely insecure. It was a feeling he had known before, and one he had come to respect. Rising quickly, he instinctively scanned his surroundings. At first he could not remember where he was. The events of the day before had struck so suddenly, and with such sweeping change that he found his mind racing, trying to put back the pieces of all that had happened, and think

what he must now do in answer.

Slowly it came back to him. The piled furs on which he sat had been placed for him there by Sylviana, the young woman-child who lived in this place, some sort of wide underground passageway. She had nursed his wounds and spoken strangely of a land he would never see. Of the rest he was still quite uncertain, but at least sensed that he was safe, a knowledge that helped quiet his fears, and soothe the angry horde of questions that kept pounding at his brain. Looking across the room he saw that the girl lay sleeping a short distance away, lying in a similar bed among the shadows of the far wall. She had tried to make him sleep there instead but he refused, it being so foolishly placed beneath the unprotected shaft. At her feet rested the he-wolf, Akar, the creature most largely responsible for his present plight. Seeing him Kalus remembered his banishment, an event which had yet to make its full impact upon him. He shook his head in dismay.

HOW WILL I STAY ALIVE? he found himself asking. EVEN THE WOLF BARELY LIVES, AND HE IS BY FAR A GREATER HUNTER THAN I.

Though the thought itself was depressing, Kalus marveled at how quickly and clearly it had formed in his mind. Forced to live without the certainty of words, all previous thought patterns had of necessity been based around images and memory, a slow, tedious process that had almost always stifled him in any attempt at higher thinking. He thought of the god whose voice he had heard—was that part real or imagined?—and of its strange powers inside him. BUT WHAT DID IT ALL MEAN? The question was too much for him. He put it from his mind.

His thoughts returning to his own survival, he began to search the chamber for food. The girl seemed well fed, and there must doubtless be a reason. He had known upon sight that she was not a hunter. Her eyes showed no trace of the desperate aggression so permanently ingrained in the predators of the Valley. There was a certain look a seasoned carnivore developed, a hardened gleam, hungry and haunting, that identified it instantly to others of its kind. Sylviana's eyes were peaceful and trusting, something which had puzzled him from their first meeting. And though he could not put the feeling into words, a part of him deeply resented the apparent ease with which she survived. HER body was clean and unscarred. Her stomach was full, and her muscles smooth and round. He knew without looking that his own body, though young and strong, bore

countless reminders of his own, day to day struggle.

Finding no food in the curving, main chamber, he turned his attention toward a high arching gateway that led deeper into what he now recognized as a large cave. Though he had not been certain the night before, the soft light of an early morning sun now clearly illuminated its entrance, behind him and to his right, removing any fear that he had fallen into some dark and treacherous underground maze.

But the sheer size of the alcove he now entered, gave rise to a whole new series of questions, the answers to which he feared he would not like. For all around him lay great mounds of treasure, and strange artifacts his mind could not begin to identify. Piled bronze and silver coins, chalices studded with diamonds and emeralds, rusting weapons of every shape and description met his eyes.

Yet these were not what puzzled him. Such things could also be found along the banks of the river which led to the Island. No, again it was the sheer size of it all which troubled him. For both the entrance to the frontal chamber and the arch he had just passed through, were easily large enough to give passage to creatures infinitely more powerful than the girl. Why had they not claimed the shelter as their own, or at the very least, made short work of both the girl and her wolf companion?

Searching among the shadowy back reaches of the cave, he found his answer. There in the darkness, packed together in thick, faintly luminous clusters of yellow-green wax, lay several large deposits of sebreum, self-synthesized food of the giant praying mantis.

'So that is why she is so well fed,' he scoffed, though deep inside he trembled. 'She has been living from the labors of another creature's food supply.' It also explained why no predator, no smart predator at least, had ever dared enter the cave. He knew that somewhere just outside it, in plain sight for all to see, the massive creature had left its unmistakable mark of possession—the jagged outline of a pyramid, burned into the rock by the acidic secretions of special glands in its throat. It was a mark none would dare question, and to trespass in such a place meant certain death.

For the Mantis, though not the largest, was without question the strongest and most widely feared monarch of the Valley. Its triangular jaws could sever trees in

an instant, and the sharp rows of teeth on the instep of its foreclaw could tear even the thickest hide to ribbons. He also knew that it must soon return to claim the shelter, and would not hesitate to kill them all if it found them still lingering near its jealously guarded treasure room.

Kalus paced nervously, trying to resolve an irresolvable conflict within him. Sylviana had said the night before that she could never leave this place, that she was somehow protected here from the perils of the outside world. Every instinct and emotion he possessed told him not leave her. But the Mantis..... He had no way of knowing that even now the question was being rendered academic.

Hearing Akar's deep growl, followed by a scream, he rushed wildly back toward the frontal chamber. Fearing the worst he drew out his crude stone knife. But at the thought of the Mantis it began to feel very small and useless in his hand. He turned the bend of the enclosure.

Though the creature he found there was not the one he expected, the danger was equally great. An enormous woolly land spider, too primitive to understand the markings above the cave's entrance, stood motionless on the ledge just beyond it, peering into the shelter with cautious uncertainty. Searching for a home, food had not been its main objective. But Kalus knew it could change its mind at any moment, and was quite capable of devouring them all.

'Sylviana!' he cried desperately. 'To the shaft through which I entered..... Quickly!'

But the girl, seeing the real-life manifestation of her darkest imaginings, could not find it within herself to turn and run. Instead she stood paralyzed in the center of the floor, staring with total disbelief into the eyes of certain death.

Only the spider's cautious hesitation saved them. Seizing her by the arm, Kalus forced her hurriedly toward the opening above her bed. Here the wall sloped sharply to meet it. Helping her up the pitted incline, they entered a broad and irregular chimney in the rock. Followed by the girl he began winding his way up through the spiraling, almost vertical passageway.

'Wait!' cried the girl, regaining her senses. 'What about the wolf?'

'He will have to fend for himself!' retorted Kalus angrily. Taking her by the arm once more, he forced her onward.

Seeing a pale yellow light filter down from above, he finally relented, slowing their pace. Stopping to rest on a narrow ledge far beyond the point where the spider could reach them, he felt his heart pounding uncontrollably. As it did so it sent angry waves of blood pulsing sharply through his veins, aggravating the deep head wound he had sustained the day before. The pain, though not excruciating, combined with the fear and frustration of the moment to form the totally negative and inescapably fatalistic frame of mind which had haunted him since childhood. All his thoughts, worded and otherwise, now seemed to crash in upon themselves like the breaking of a wave, crushing and smothering every positive impulse, every hopeful thought inside him. Hanging his head in a gesture of forced surrender he breathed heavily, mouth open, and waited for the feeling to pass.

Seeing his despair, Sylviana was moved in a way she could not explain. Having lived most of her life in sheltered seclusion, all such powerful emotions had existed for her only in books, and always seemed somehow pretentious and unreal. To see it now in undeniable reality, affected a dual response within her. She felt at once both selflessly compassionate, and selfishly afraid. Again she thought of her friend.

'Kalus?' she asked softly, trying hard not to upset him. 'What will happen to the wolf?' He started to answer gruffly, but seeing her anguish, mellowed his tone.

'He will be all right,' he said. 'Akar knows the ways of escape like no other..... The spider has the mind of an ant. He is not in danger.' Though he had stretched the truth, he hoped she would believe him. In his heart he knew that the wolf was probably dead, or at best, trapped in some dark corner of the cave, hoping the spider would not find him.

But if he intended to calm her he had failed miserably. Something he said unknowingly, had upset her even more. 'Are all the insects of your world as large as the spider?' She asked sincerely, hoping to God the answer was no. The thought of a swarm of giant ants had sent a chill straight through her.

'Insects?'

'Crawling things with many legs.'

'Of course not,' he said, shaking his head at her ignorance. How could she have lived so long and still know so little of the ways of the Valley? But he was no

longer angry with her. The intensity of the pain dying down, he had actually begun to derive some new sort of pleasure from hearing the sound of her voice.

'Except for the spider and the mantis,' he continued, 'They rarely grow to be much longer than your hand.' Though the answer was hardly reassuring, at least she sensed that he meant well, something she had not been at all sure of before.

'Come,' he said, feeling unusually benevolent. 'There is a small cave just ahead. We will be safe there.' Taking her by the hand, they climbed the remaining distance carefully, coming at last to the wide, shoulder-high cavity that had given him refuge once before.

He searched it quickly before letting the girl enter. But finding it uninhabited, he helped her up, then lay down and basked in the first real safety he had known for several days, seeming to take no further notice.

But Sylviana could find no such release. Crouching on one knee in the light of the smaller cave's entrance, she could think only of her friend, the gentle wolf, trapped beyond all help in the lower cave.

Realizing there was nothing more she could do, she remained there in uncertain melancholy, her mind buried deep in her thoughts.

Chapter 5

Peering down at the entrance of the larger cave, Sylviana kept her vigil. Kalus had long since fallen asleep, something which troubled her deeply. She could not understand how he could be so indifferent about the fate of her only friend. She herself had remained on the lip of rock just beyond the smaller niche for what seemed an eternity, and still had seen no sign of either wolf or spider.

She had passed much of the time by studying the awesome landscape that opened so broadly before her, her first unobstructed view. And she could summon just enough geology and topography to be both puzzled and intrigued by the inexplicable diversity of it.

To the left of them, due south at a distance of roughly five miles, lay a massive

sandstone ridge, descending from a high central erg in two long arms that reached out west and southwest beyond the edge of sight. Eroded by wind and water, it reminded her most of photographs she had seen of Monument Valley in the west, though not so old or well defined.

Then there was the phenomenon of the line of granite cliffs from which she now surveyed the valley. As nearly as she could tell it ran directly north-south at an altitude varying from five- to fifteen-hundred feet. At its base, directly below them, a shallow gorge crept slowly southward to end in a shadowed overhang at the foot of the sandstone ridge. How the two lines of vastly divergent rock had come together to form such a neat corner she could not guess. Perhaps violent flooding had deposited the sand during a great turmoil of the sea, then left it to slowly age and weather through the intervening centuries. How many she dared not even think. The contrast between the two was like day and night.

And to the southwest there occurred yet another bizarre conflict. Directly in front of them, across the gorge, lay a vast and gentle-hilled grassland, dotted with muddy pools and small clusters of wide, African-looking trees. Large herds of grazing animals sauntered across it at a distance which defied close description. But at the foot of the sandstone was only cactus and desert prairie. The meeting of the two, in a long zig-zagging line between rows of opposing hills, was awkward at best.

And farther west, beyond the savanna larger hills appeared, covered with trees and high bramble, leading away out of sight. The horizon to the north was similar, but here the hills were sharper, velveted with pine, and broken by stark projections of weather-worn granite, apparently the oldest and most natural part of the Valley. That is, she thought, they seemed the least out of place.

She tried hard to read its subtle clues, but still the riddle of conflicting landscapes eluded her. The only certainty was that the nuclear holocaust had been everything its foretelling prophets had said it would be: a complete annihilation of the world she had known, with a savage and unpredictable rebirth.

Like echoes of a mournful dream, all manner of warm and painful memories now seemed to come to her from out of the day, phantoms of a past too beautiful to be real. She thought of her peaceful home in the wooded, northeastern town. Her father, her friends. All dead. Why had she been left to go on living? She

remembered the words of the Spirit: 'glorious struggle,' and 'the flame within.' But where was the glory when all she could feel was pain and emptiness? Where was He now? And as she looked out upon the scene that Nature played before her, she realized for the first time and with crushing certainty that life was finite. Physical reality . . . was real. The message hammered into her relentlessly: all things must one day pass. She would die, as a hundred billion creatures had died before her. DIED.

It all became too much. Seeking escape, her mind returned to the present. But that only made her think of her friend, the gentle wolf, still trapped inside the cave, still in great danger. And as the sun continued to set far in the west, turning sky to purple and clouds to pink, she had all but given up hope when the downward spiral of her thoughts was broken by the gentle tremor of wings overhead.

The sound seemed to come from above and behind her, moving with deliberate slowness toward the nearer reaches of the sandstone ridge, now painted a deep orange-red and pocked with growing shadows. Straining her eyes in the failing light, she thought she saw a large, multi-winged creature land gracefully atop a weathered crag that shot up high above the rest. But in the distance and gathering darkness she could not be sure.

'Kalus!' she whispered loudly. 'Come quick, there's something out there.'

Startled but alert, the man-child rose instantly. Moving to join her at the entrance, what he saw filled him with fierce pride. For there in the distance, perched majestically in dark silhouette against a fading sky, his eyes perceived the outline of the Mantis, undisputed monarch of the Valley. Even at that distance he could read its features clearly: the stately upper body, the foreclaws held so effortlessly, and the smallish, triangular head, pivoting easily to scan the domain that was his and his alone.

'The Mantis!' he exclaimed, trying hard to keep his voice down. 'Now we will see what happens to those foolish enough to cross him!'

*

The Mantis remained motionless, breathing hard. Though capable of flying great

distances, the sheer weight of its body made such journeys an exhausting ordeal. He was weary to his very heart. But the Mantis was also a master of stamina and self-discipline. He knew he had only to rest a short time and his strength would come back to him.

He had landed on the ridge intentionally. It had been many days since he last slept in the cave, and he wanted to be sure there was no danger. Not that he was afraid—in his conscious thought he feared nothing. He simply had no desire to encounter a powerful enemy before regaining his full strength. But as the breaths began to come easier, he felt his antennae tingling with anticipation. Somewhere. . . somewhere near, he sensed the presence of a spider. The vibrations seemed to come from the direction of his cave.

Realizing the failing light worked against him, he knew he would have to act quickly. Unfurling his four translucent wings, he lifted himself slowly into the air. Hovering closer, he searched for clues while reading the subtle currents of air that curled gently across the windface. He stopped once in mid-air, turned, then surrendering to wind and gravity, swooped down upon the broad ledge that bordered the entrance of the cave.

Resting for a moment just beyond its gothic arch, he felt a sullen anger rise within him. Though not a vindictive creature, the thought of an enormous land spider keeping him from the rest and shelter of his lair sent waves of liquid anger pulsing sharply through his veined and veinless body. He did not try to stem the feeling, knowing that in certain measure it gave him strength. He simply allowed the bitterness to occur inside him, strong and distasteful, then waited for the long wisdom of his mind to diffuse it. He did not bemoan his fate, nor think to question the will of the Nameless. He knew what he was, and what he must do. Summoning a courage born of countless similar encounters, he drew in his foreclaws and entered the cave.

Surprised and alarmed, the spider reacted in the only way it knew. Feeling trapped, it rushed directly at him. The Mantis methodically yielded his ground, leading it out onto the ledge.

Once out in the open the spider slowed, and the two adversaries squared off, each in its own way trying to assess the relative size and strength of the other. To the Mantis it was just another battle, dueling a foe it had fought many times in the past. But to the spider, still young, it was an entirely new and utterly

terrifying experience. Though not intelligent enough to recognize the mantis as its mortal enemy, every instinct it possessed warned of extreme danger.

Moving to the place on the ledge he had prepared for just such a conflict, the Mantis dug his four hook-clawed hind legs into carefully etched footholds in the rock. Swaying from side to side he tightened his grip, extending his foreclaws to the limit. Then pawing the air like a boxer, he stood ready for the spider's charge.

In a way he almost felt sorry for it. He could see that it was young and inexperienced, and as such stood no real chance against him. But he also knew that it was his place in Nature to kill it. There could be no moral question here, only death for one and survival for the other. And the Mantis had no intention of dying.

Confused and afraid the spider charged. The Mantis simply waited for it to rush blindly into his outstretched foreclaws, then clamped down sharply on the thorax joints of its first four legs. Holding it securely in place, he used his superior height to bring down powerful jaws upon its vulnerable forehead. From there it was only a matter of ritual. The acidic saliva softened its thick outer skeleton, while the razor-sharp triangular jaws tore away with frightening precision. The tarantula strained mightily, but could not free itself from the mantis' vice-like grip.

Death was painful but swift. In a matter of seconds the spider's eyes and forehead were gone. It felt a moment of searing pain, followed by a shudder, and the darkness and terror were gone forever.

Dragging the lifeless corpse to the rim of the ledge, the Mantis flung it wearily into the gorge. His limbs trembling with exhaustion, he turned and strode slowly to the safety of his lair. Reaching the entrance, he thought he caught a glimpse of shadow dart past him and into the gathering night, but by then could no longer care. Sleep was all that mattered now—sleep, and then food. And then sleep again.

*

'Death to the spider!' proclaimed Kalus, trying hard to keep his voice down. 'Long life to the Mantis, protector of all who live in Valley.' He turned and

started to reenter.

'Kalus?' asked the girl tentatively. 'Don't you feel even a little sorry for the spider? I mean. . .he is dead now.' She felt compelled to say something, though she wasn't sure that was it. He stopped and considered this, puzzled.

'Sylviana. You misread my emotions. It is not hate for the spider but love for the Monarch I feel. Without him none in the Valley would be safe, even for a short time. Still, it is hard to feel sorrow for one who could so easily and thoughtlessly take my life. But perhaps that is the way of things. To the wolves—'

'Oh my God. Kalus. What will happen to him now?'

'Sylviana,' he answered coldly. 'Not only do you know nothing of the ways of this land, but your eyesight is poor as well. If Akar was still in the cave—he is not—there would be no danger. The wolves are ancient allies of the mantis.' He spoke proudly now, filled with the knowledge that he alone among his people knew of this relationship. 'The wolves, like all hunters, are hurt by the presence of spiders. When one is spotted by the pack, a runner is sent to bring the Mantis. Then the others keep it in sight, until the Monarch arrives to kill it.'

The girl had listened, but only enough to know when he had finished speaking. She was still deeply concerned about her friend.

'What do you mean he's no longer in the cave?'

'Just as I said,' he replied without looking at her. He was far too excited by the presence of the Monarch to let her childish ignorance upset him. 'He slipped out just before the Mantis entered.'

'Then we should call to him, let him know where we are.' Kalus could only shake his head at his companion's needless worry. 'He knows where we are. He just doesn't want the Mantis to know it too. Or did you not know he could kill us even more easily than the spider?' Again he was surprised by her reaction. She seemed hurt and afraid. 'Don't worry,' he added more softly. 'He will come to you before the night is over. You should not worry for him so. He has been guarding his own life far longer than you and I.'

'I'm sorry,' she confided. 'It's just that this is all so new to me. I don't know what it means sometimes. . .and I'm scared.'

'That is not a bad thing. I too am scared, but do not let myself think it. We are safe here, for this night at least. You should sleep. We have many hard choices in morning.'

She did not answer, but looked into his eyes as if searching for something. Then she turned, lowered her head, and moved past him into the shelter. Finding a place where fewer stones piqued the floor, she crouched and looked back at him, unsure. Kalus remained motionless, returning her gaze. Finally she lay back and turned away, her eyes misting.

'Kalus?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you. . .for saving my life.'

'You forget that you fed me, and cared for my wounds.'

'Still.....' She let her voice trail off.

Without further speech Kalus seated himself just inside the entrance, watching her wistfully as she drifted off into sleep, protected from outside danger by his own life, and by the pervasive and all-encompassing presence of the Mantis.

Chapter 6

Akar entered soundlessly just before dawn, the rabbit clenched securely in his teeth. Purposely avoiding the man-child, he moved instead to the place where his mistress lay sleeping. He placed the kill in front of her, gently nudging her with his snout.

Startled from an uneasy sleep the girl bolted stiffly upright, choking back a scream. Seeing her friend she subsided, but too late to prevent a confrontation.

Alerted by the sound Kalus had woken, and was in no mood for the treatment he was about to receive from the wolf.

'He's brought us a meal,' he said contentedly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The girl still hadn't seen the carcass. He pointed.

'Oh, take it away,' she said in disgust, repulsed by its sunken eyes and contorted expression. 'Take it away.' Coming closer Kalus started to reach for it, but was halted by the bared teeth and fierce snarling of the wolf.

'It seems he wants you to have it.' He paused a moment, thinking. 'Your friend has a short memory,' he said coldly, pretending to lose interest. 'When he was hungry I shared my meat with him.'

In the split second it took for Akar to look up at him, Kalus reached in and snatched up the carcass. The wolf started to go after him, but found the jagged point of Kalus' knife held threateningly between himself and the kill. As he backed away the two squared off, Kalus on one knee and the wolf standing. Akar began to circle, looking for an opening. But the man-child turned with him, keeping the point of the knife between himself and danger. The girl cried out in desperation.

'Stop it! Please, stop it!'

She had tried to understand the reasons for violence in the harsh world she now encountered, but to see her only two companions ready to tear each other apart over a blood-stained carcass, was more than she could bear. Bowing her head between clutching arms like a frightened child, she wept bitterly. But the tears brought no relief, only deeper anguish and despair.

Seeing her distress the two stopped circling. Akar went to try and comfort her, while Kalus moved indifferently to a protected corner to gut and skin the carcass. He would undoubtedly have been more sympathetic had he not been hurt several times already by giving in to similar emotions. He was far too angry now to think of anything but his own survival. Akar no longer tried to comfort his friend, who only kept pushing him away. Regaining her composure, she glared bitterly at both of them.

'Why do you have to BE like this? Why can't you just leave each other alone?'

Akar had not understood the words, but their meaning was clear enough. Putting away his pride, he stepped slowly and deliberately toward the man-child's unmoving form. Coming closer he drew a line in the dirt just in front of him, signaling his desire for a truce. If Kalus crossed the line with one of his own it would mean that the truce had been accepted, if only for the moment.

But Kalus did not answer with words and gestures of humbled acceptance. Moving his hands in simple patterns he knew the wolf would understand, he told him instead that he was angered to the point of violence by his ingratitude, reminding him that if it had not been for his own, selfless actions, neither he nor the girl would be alive at all. He then drew another line in the dirt, not across the mark Akar had made, but parallel to his own body instead, signifying dominance, and made it clear that the wolf could either accept the truce under these terms, or fight him to the death then and there.

Akar was curiously gratified by the man-child's response. In truth he had not forgotten his compassion, but wanted to be sure that he was worthy of trust. Goodness and compassion were one thing, courage in the face of danger quite another. To say that he had wholly staged the conflict as a test of the other's spirit would be incorrect; but once it developed into such he did not try to stop it. Akar had lived too long to give his allegiance easily or in haste. Crossing Kalus' line solemnly, he rolled over on top of his own, blurring it into obscurity.

Realizing what this meant Kalus relaxed, nodding gratefully. Though he knew the wolf had no intention of being dominated, he accepted the gesture nonetheless. His body weak from adrenalin's flow, he could not have backed up the threat if he wanted to. He did not. The truce was accepted. He reached out an open hand, letting his new-found ally learn its scent beyond the point of any doubt. The wolf then went back to the girl while Kalus returned to the task of skinning the rabbit, trying to keep his hands from shaking as he did so.

'You see,' he said, speaking as much to himself as to the girl.
'Things are not always as they first appear. Your friend was only testing me. Now we are brothers, as we could not have been before.'
She nodded halfheartedly, not at all sure she believed him.

'You won't fight anymore, will you? Please promise me you won't.'

'We will not fight.' He continued his work.

There was a pause in which neither spoke. Finally Kalus broke the deadlock with a question. He truly wished to know its answer, but also disliked the awkwardness that silence had placed between them.

'Sylviana. You speak as one who comes from far away. Are you then from the Island?'

'What island?'

'The Island of Ruins across the water.'

'No..... No, I don't think so.' She struggled now, trying to find the words to tell him that she came not only from a different place, but from a different time as well. It didn't matter. She wasn't going to have the chance. In their preoccupation with themselves the three had forgotten the Mantis. Awakened by the noise of their scuffle, it climbed toward the inadequate shelter even as they spoke.

It was Akar who sensed his presence first. Though he could not be certain of the scent, the wind being in the opposite quarter, the low, scratching sound of hooked claws searching for footholds was unmistakable. He did not try to run, nor even to alert the others, but went without hesitation to wait for the monarch at the entrance of the niche. He only hoped the Mantis would remember him.

'What is he doing?' asked the girl. At the same moment Kalus heard a loosened stone sent plummeting to the bottom of the canyon. Its dry echo sounded sharp and clear below.

'Sylviana, listen to me carefully.' He spoke firmly, moving closer. 'The mantis is coming toward us. Do not cry out—he probably won't hurt us. But you must do everything I say without questions.'

'Go on,' she whispered intently, surprised by her own courage.

'When the Mantis appears at the entrance you must act helpless and afraid, but afraid of him and not of me. Also, do not try to speak. Akar will speak for us. Here, he draws closer. When you first see him, hold on to me tightly, as if shocked and startled. We must make him think you have never seen him, and had no knowledge this mountain was his. Now. Prepare yourself!'

When the Mantis' head finally did appear, leering in at them ominously, she

found doing exactly as he told her infinitely easier than not doing it. She clung to him as if possessed, and the Mantis' first glimpse of them was exactly as Kalus had wanted it. Akar stood submissively to one side, allowing the Monarch an unobstructed view. After studying the three closely, he gestured for the wolf to follow him to the broad ledge outside the larger cave. Akar obeyed unquestioningly, snaking his way carefully down the sharp incline.

'What will he do now?' asked the girl, moving with Kalus to watch from the stone lip that ran like a low parapet just beyond the entrance of the niche.

'I do not know. He will want to know why we are here, but after that I cannot say. But I think if he was going to kill us he would have done it already.' The girl was quietly stunned by the calmness with which he said the words.

Once down on the ledge, the two communicated in a way known only to themselves: Akar through a series of short barks and body movements, the Mantis through subtle movements of his antennae, foreclaws and upper body. Kalus could only guess at their meaning. Roughly translated, this is what passed between them.

Skither (The Mantis)- Wolf. Was it you then that snuck from my cave like a thief in the night?

Akar- Yes, mighty one. I was trapped inside by the spider.

Skither- But why were you in the cave at all? Have you lost all respect for my sovereignty?

Akar- No, master. I was protecting the woman-child, to whom I owe my life. I do not understand her words, but she speaks of having woken from a long sleep, and finding herself in your lair. I tried to make her leave it many times, but she believes she is somehow protected there by gods I do not know. When I told her the cave was yours, she wished only to remain there until your return. She is deadly fearful of the world outside your domain.

Skither- Do not flatter me, wolf. I have not grown so old as to be feeble and weak of mind.

Akar- Forgive me.

Skither- Tell me, then. Does she speak of having come from the long silver box?

Akar- Yes, I believe it is so. What does this mean?

Skither- I'm not certain. Three moon-cycles past I was journeying far to the north and west among the mountains that grow there. At the base of one such peak I found a broad and unnatural tunnel that led deep into the earth. Searching it for spiders, I came across a chamber filled with many strange and beautiful things. I forgot all else for the wonder of it. But the thing I would most have for myself was the long silver box. Inside it was the body of a woman-child, your mistress it seems. She was fair of face and skin, and I grieved for her. I tried to touch her, but was stopped by a film which was there, and yet was not there (fiberglass). Breaking free the webs that held her (life-support tubes and wires), I brought her here to my cave, thinking she was dead.

But this passing is not important now. You and she are both welcome on my mountain. It is the man-beast I do not trust. His kind are treacherous and unpredictable, and they carry with them the fire that kills.

Akar- But he is not like them, Master. He is an outcast, like myself, and worthy of trust. To him also, and more deeply, I am indebted for my life.

Skither- It seems you owe your life many times, my friend. How is it that the brother of Shaezar has come to lead such a perilous existence?

Akar- ... Shaezar is dead, killed by a rival while I was away. I could not serve in a pack whose unwanted leader had slain my true brother, so I set out to live on my own. The days have indeed been perilous, but I have vowed never to return.

Skither- This is evil news you bring me. Shaezar was a wise and noble leader. I grieve for him. It seems that many things have changed in my absence. (A pause). Very well, then. Send the man-beast down to me. I would have words with him.

Akar (sadly)- As you command it.

Moving to the northern and uppermost portion of the ledge, Akar looked up to the place where the others stood waiting. Barking sharply three times in succession, he summoned the man-child to come down.

'What is he saying?' asked the girl.

'The Mantis wishes to speak to me. I hope that is good. Wait for me here, I will return as soon as it is safe.'

Feeling terribly small and exposed Kalus began to descend, running quickly through his mind all the things he wanted to say, while trying to muster the courage to say them. Stepping weak-kneed out onto the ledge, he felt his heart pounding, and as he approached the Mantis' awesome form, felt both hope and despair arise with equal strength inside him. His mind raced. Had he read the moment correctly? Did he dare ask for refuge? How would they live if the Monarch refused him? The moment was upon him; there was no time to ponder.

Bowing low, he saluted the Mantis. Using modified arm and wrist movements he hoped the other would understand, he signaled the following words.

'Great Leader,' he began. 'I am called the Carnivore. Do you read the meaning of my hands?' The Mantis nodded.

'I am sorry for my presence on the mountain. As an outcast, I wished only to live in the safety of your shadow, but was pursued here by a Commodore, and forced to take refuge in the smaller cave above your own.' He pointed, adding after an intentional pause. 'It seems they have grown bold in your absence.' He looked up quickly, but the Mantis didn't flinch.

'Great King,' he continued, anxiety rising with each coming gesture. 'I am no longer one with my people, and live without a home. The same is true of the female you saw with me. I would have her as my own, but she is not yet able to protect herself in the wild..... There is something I would ask of you.' Still the Mantis did not move. There was no putting it off any longer. He would have to ask him now.

'I know why you have gone away,' he began nervously. 'And why you must leave again soon..... The mating of the spiders has reached its middle season, and will not end for many days to come. You and your god-friends have many battles yet to fight.'

'Why do you speak this lie?' signaled the Mantis angrily.

'Where do the hill-people hear such a thing?'

'My people know nothing of this,' he answered, as calmly as he could. 'And I would never tell them. Your secret is known only to me, and I tell no one. I swear it.'

Skither remained motionless, puzzled by the presence of the strange and knowing child. Utterly intrigued, he searched the back of his mind for the meaning of their encounter.

'What is it then you would ask?'

'Since you are called again to the holy task, your lair will again be left unguarded. I would ask that you allow the three of us to remain here on the mountain, in the smaller cave above your own. Though each of us alone are small, together we could create the illusion that you had not left it.'

'But how, and for what reason do you do this?'

'My friends and I have only a short march of days before the Commodore must sleep, and many other predators follow the herds to the South. If you allow me, I could turn our shared need into shared help.'

'Go on.'

'I have learned in my youth to make a sound like the flutter of your mighty wings. And Akar could descend daily to the grasslands in plain sight, as if your messenger to the wolf packs below.'

'How would you make this sound?' Skither was perplexed, and felt an odd sense of antiquity as he gazed upon the complex and far-reaching intelligence of one so young. And he had not failed to note the subtle differences of his appearance: the knowing eyes, the smoother, more refined features. SO UNLIKE HIS PEOPLE, he thought. AND THE GIRL. What could it mean? His thoughts were broken off as Kalus answered.

'The sound is made by stretching a skin between two trees, then soaking it with water and leaving it to dry in the sun. When it has tightened between them it is beaten rapidly with club-ended sticks, making a sound like the rhythm of your mighty wings.'

'But how will you use it here, where there are no trees? And why do you think that my enemies will believe it, when the sound comes from only one place?'

'It can be built on a frame,' he answered. 'And moved to different places along the ridge. That way the sound can be sent echoing down the canyon, and seem to come from many places at once.'

Skither looked down at him thoughtfully. His first instincts told him never to trust a man-beast. But these were difficult times. Yielding to the unspoken Tao he consulted the wind, to see what hidden message it might carry.

A cool breeze swirled about him; the valley grasses swayed with a golden, browning color on the plains below. He felt the seasons changing. But more than that he felt his world changing, yielding slowly to some new order in which he was to play no part. It was not the first time. The feeling had often puzzled (and frightened) him. There could be no denying the double reason for their meeting: the air was charged with it, the mind echo of *deja-vu* all around it. Searching deep within himself, he felt the autumn of his life full upon him. He felt the world he had known growing old. He felt his own weariness, and again the premonition of impending death..... But what did the Nameless ask of him now? And how would he answer the man-child?

'You have given me much to consider, small one. But this decision must be seasoned with time and careful thought. Now I must rest, as you should well know. Go again to the place where I found you. Do not leave it until I have summoned you with an answer. Do you understand my words?'

'Yes, Monarch. Your kindness will not soon be forgotten.' Feeling relieved but still pensive, Kalus started to leave. An upward thrust of the Mantis' foreclaw stopped him.

'Yes, master?'

'How many summers have you known?'

'Twenty-one, master.'

'And in what season were you born?'

'In mid-winter. Why do you ask it?'

'Twenty winters ago I saw a sign in the heavens and marked it well. I saw the light of its second full moon surrounded by a misty halo which seemed to reach down towards the earth. Another, smaller halo erupted suddenly, and three stars passed through it as they fell from the sky, all in the same direction, and each within a breath of the other.' Now it was Kalus who did not understand.

'But how does this passing touch me?'

'I think that perhaps one day you will answer that question for me.'

The Mantis turned and retired to his lair. Kalus stood watching for a moment, then turned himself and retreated toward the shelter of the smaller cave: wondering. Akar had already passed that way before him.

Chapter 7

The hours passed slowly. Using the wood Akar had brought him, Kalus built a small fire and they divided the cooked meat between them. Sylviana had protested slightly, but given in when informed that regardless of the Mantis' decision, there could be no more free meals of sebreum.

There was an air of restless tension in the small enclosure. For though being banished from the mountain did not mean certain death, it did mean a much harder and more treacherous life. Both Kalus and the wolf knew just how difficult living without a home could be; Sylviana could only imagine it.

Akar had not forgotten that he and the girl were already welcome to remain there, but he kept this knowledge to himself. His friend needed the companionship of her own kind, and he had made a pact of mutual protection, however tentative, with the man-child. And Akar was a creature of his word.

As morning yielded gradually first to early, then to late afternoon, the three had still seen or heard nothing of the mantis. Exhausted by his seasonal battle with the mating spiders, he lay unmoving and death-like in the larger cave below them, buried in the deep, recuperative sleep of an insect.

With time hanging heavy around them, Kalus and the girl were given the chance, denied them by the turbulence of previous days, to study each other more closely, and to ask, if they would, the unspoken questions that had been forming in their minds. Kalus had finished with the carcass by mid-day—cutting and shaping the skin, sharpening the ribs against the rock to make bone needles—but showed no sign of interest in talk, moving instead to look out from the entrance, apparently deep in thought. Sylviana watched him there in the sunlight, with the wolf sleeping peacefully beside her, as she gently stroked his fur.

For the most part she studied his primitive attire, crudely made, but not without a certain atavistic grace. His primary garment consisted of a large skin, possibly that of a buck, cut and worn like a sleeveless, thigh-length coat. Worn with the fur side in, it closed in a narrowing V across his chest, and was bound about the waist by a band of tied leather. Long slits at either hip allowed his legs their freedom of movement. Beneath one of these as he crouched could be seen a tanned and soft-beaten loincloth, tied off with a knot at the crest of the splayed and sinewy leg closest to her. His boots were made of some furrier hide, silver-black in color, and tightly bound to his calves by crisscrossing leather thongs. He also wore thongs about his neck and wrists, a sharpened clamshell hanging from

the former, the strands dangling loose in the case of the latter. Decorative in appearance, they were in fact purely practical, serving many purposes as need arose. He also wore the buckskin pouch, along with a drinking skin from which he rationed water for the two of them, Akar being free to pursue it as he might. As for the man himself, his hair was light brown and wild; a short and irregular beard wrapped a face whose stern features implied a determination and experience beyond his years.

Nor had she failed to note the striking body beneath, endowed very probably with more supple and functional strength than any she had ever seen. More than once she felt her eyes trail across it—the knotted arms and shoulders, the well shaped thighs and buttocks—very much attracted.

But it was this same strength of mind and body, infinitely desirable in a tamer soul, that brought home so consistently her own helplessness against him. That he could overpower her at any time was obvious, that he had not yet tried to do so of little comfort. She wondered if perhaps the presence of the wolf alone protected her. And the hardest thing was that she did respect him. All his actions seemed to indicate a courageous and unselfish character. But his morals? She suspected (correctly) that he had none.

But in truth she need not have worried. The idea of rape was so foreign and unnatural to his existence that the thought never occurred to him. As was the way of his people, he intended first to feed and protect her, to establish his claim and earn her trust, and only then to take her, willingly, as his mate. And in his own mind at least, he had begun the process already. His desire and timid affection for her bound him to her more closely than she knew. At last he broke away from the entrance and came inside. The wolf stirred.

'It will be hard if he refuses us. Very hard.' He sat opposite her against a nook in the wall and once more destroyed all preconception. His face was worried and drawn, full of very human emotion. Again she felt the presentiment of inescapable reality: that here before her was true Man, stripped of all pretense, reduced to his simplest terms.

At length he looked up at her, and seemed anxious to communicate. Indeed, his eyes almost pleaded for some reassurance. She thought to herself, then offered a simple question.

'Kalus? What are the rest of your people like?' He shifted positions, drew one knee toward him, then answered.

'They are no longer my people. I am banished..... For what they are like, I don't know how to tell you. I can only say they are not much like me.'

'In what way?' Finally she had something.

'They act more and think less. I think they are closer to the true predators than I.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well. Let me think how to say it.' A pause. 'My name is Kalus, which stands for Carnivore, or Great Hunter. My father made it for me, hoping that such a name would give me strength. I am strong, Sylviana, but not, I think, in the way he wanted.'

'Go on.'

Again he struggled. 'I draw no pleasure from the hunt. I don't understand. To my people it is the proudest and most important thing they do. But to me it is often ugly, and I kill only to live. Also. . there are times when I do not want to be aggressive. Like now. If the Mantis would let us stay here, I would trade that safety for all the meaningless battles..... Perhaps I am just a coward and a fool.'

'No,' she said emphatically. 'You're not.' She had to restrain herself from going to him then and there. Why did his anguish move her so? 'Maybe you're just better than they are. You feel things they can't.'

'I do not feel better. I thank you for saying it, but I do not think it is so. Barabbas, my new father..... It is easy for me to speak with you and say I do not love the hunt. But he must feed and protect many others. Please believe me, that is not an easy thing.' She let it go at that, sensing an undercurrent of anger, or something, in his words.

Kalus was silent for a time, lost among his thoughts. But as the daylight began to fade, he too felt the need to know something more of his companion. Largest in his mind was the question of her origin, since it carried with it the one answer which truly mattered. Could she ever be his?

'Sylviana. You say you are not from the Island. How then did you come here? In all my years I have heard of no other tribe for many miles around, surely none so fair of face and skin, that wear such garments.' The girl looked down, and realized for the first time how odd her own clothes must seem to him: the gauze top, the worn and fading denim jeans. And her hair, somewhere between blond and brunette, with streaks of both. Silver earrings and bracelet. But these thoughts were as a passing shadow on her mind. How could she possibly tell him the truth of her existence? Somehow she had to try.

'This is so hard. A lot of it I don't know myself.' She looked across at him. 'Please be patient, and let me choose my words.'

'It's all right. I am patient.'

After several halting starts, she saw there was no other way but to tell him straight out. Let him understand or believe what he would.

'A long time ago, many hundreds of years I think, there were infinitely more people on earth. Our civilization had advance so far, that we could build or do almost anything. We lived in cities as high as this mountain, and many times as broad, all over the world.

'Unfortunately, one of the things we built the best were weapons, devices to..... Well, the argument was that they were to protect ourselves. But really, they had no other purpose than to kill. Some of the more primitive of these are in the Mantis' cave, though I have no idea how they got there.' It was useless.

'We destroyed ourselves, Kalus. I don't know how else to say it. I suppose there were reasons for the War, and in fairness I don't think either side wanted it. But it happened all the same. We launched weapons that could kill millions of people from thousands of miles away, and go on killing years after..... I don't know why I was left alive.' DON'T CRY. 'All my friends and family are dead. Everything I knew is gone.' Kalus answered softly.

'Is that what the voice in the mirror was trying to tell me?'

'I thought you had forgotten.'

'I do not forget, Sylviana. And I think of things more than you know. I am not one of the lesser animals. I am only different from you.'

'I'm sorry.' Again she hung her head.

'Don't be sorry for things that are not wrong. You have your sorrows and I have mine. Do not think of it now. There is only one more thing I must ask you.'

'What is it?'

'Why did you not die with the others? And living, how have you not grown old? Is your flesh so different from mine?'

'No, Kalus. It's very much the same.' She felt weak and tearful, but also a strange determination to see it through. An unusual emotion for her: direct rebellion against despair.

'My father was a scientist, a man of learning. Somehow he knew the war was coming. Maybe I should have known it, too, but try to understand. My friends and I had lived with the threat of nuclear destruction all our lives. It just didn't seem real.....

'My father used all the money he had saved since my mother died, to build a shelter in the Canadian Rockies. And he was involved with several of his colleagues, other scientists like himself, in cryogenic research: a way of putting people into a deep sleep, like hibernation. 'Just before the missiles starting falling..... My father took me up in his plane. We listened, horrified, to radio broadcasts of the destruction of the cities, and of the spreading fallout. He told me that he wanted to put me into a suspended state, which would keep me alive until..... Until what, I couldn't imagine.'

'My mind just couldn't accept what was happening. I was terrified, and told him I didn't want to leave him. But he said it was the only way. When we landed, he said that he was sorry. He had to drug me, I guess, because the next thing I knew I was in something like a casket with my father leaning over me, crying, and telling me he loved me.'

She broke down, turned against the stone wall, and wept. Kalus looked at her, and but for the iron discipline he had learned, the alternative to which was death, would have gone to her and comforted her as best he could. As it was he felt more stirred than at any time since his father's death, and quietly vowed that he would stay with her, and protect her until the end.

Sylviana recovered somewhat, looked back at him, and seeing the confused sympathy of his eyes, concluded.

'I woke in the Mantis' cave, with no idea where I was or how I came here. I've been alone for nearly three months. But for the Voice, and later, for Akar..... I nearly lost my mind with fear and loneliness.' She suddenly realized the wolf was no longer with them, and that full night was falling. She let her thoughts collapse.

Kalus could not hold himself back any longer. 'You're not alone anymore.'

Her eyes sought out his, but they were hidden among the deepening shadows of the nook. With only his limbs clearly visible, he looked like some phantom sage of the darkness, at once frightening and reassuring. 'But you must not feel it now. Feeling is for when the body is safe, and we are not. Now you should sleep..... I will guard you.'

She moved further into the cave and lay down. But though she tossed and turned for what seemed an eternity, sleep remained the distant dream of a child.

'Kalus?' No reply. She sat up and turned back toward him. 'You wouldn't hurt me, would you? Please say you'd never hurt me.'

'Of course I would not hurt you. Why do you think I stay?' He added after a time, sounding cold and irritable. 'Go to sleep and trouble me no more. I have much to think on.'

Now what had she done to upset him? Feeling more lost than ever, she swallowed hard and turned away. She lay down again, and perhaps an hour later, fell at last into exhausted slumber.

*

Long after the wolf had returned and lay sleeping beside her, Kalus remained wide awake, crouched at the edge of the shaft, listening. He studied the slow, deliberate breathing of the giant insect, trying to be certain. When he was as sure as he could be that the creature was still asleep, he began to descend.

He felt hollow as he went, partly from fear, and partly from the will-crushing desperation of the act now forced upon him. He was angry at having to be short with the girl, and once more felt bitterly abandoned and betrayed, though by whom he could not have said. And then came the voice that told him such an act was unnecessary—that he risked all their lives for nothing—the cruelest lie of all. No. He knew what must be done.

But always now his thoughts returned to fear; with every step the feeling grew. By the time he reached the floor of the Mantis' cave, terror had completely overtaken him. But still he went on. He HAD to have a weapon. The Mantis might banish them that very morning, and without it they were naked and helpless. And he knew that whatever prayers he might offer, to the God he did not know, no one could save him now but himself.

*

Later that night he returned, alive but nearly paralyzed with fear. Unable to overcome the emotion, he went to the girl. Touching her face with the back of his trembling hand, he woke her gently. He could no longer fight back the tears as she turned to face him.

'What is it?' she asked. 'What's wrong?' He tried to tell her what he was feeling, but it was all too much. Rising to a sit beside him, Sylviana took his face in her hands and tried to understand. Then she took his head tentatively to her shoulder, where he wept like a brutalized child. Feeling awkward, but very warm, she stroked his gnarled hair and rocked him slowly.

When morning came it found them still anxious and afraid, but infinitely closer than they had been only hours before.

Chapter 8

The Mantis appeared at the entrance of his cave about an hour after sunrise. Kalus and the wolf had waited by the opening of the smaller enclosure, and knew without being told that he was ready with an answer.

Seeing them high above, Skither raised one foreclaw and summoned them to come down. As they drew closer he stepped out slowly toward the center of the ledge. He wanted to choose the right words.

He exchanged simple greetings with the wolf, nodding passively at Kalus. He addressed Akar first, and after several minutes the wolf nodded his understanding and moved to wait at a far corner of the ledge, without giving any indication what the answer had been. Turning his attention to Kalus, the Mantis signaled his words slowly and carefully.

'Son of the hill-tribe, I have made my decision. I have thought long on your words, and on other things you do not know. Understand, I have good reason to mistrust your kinsmen. But Akar tells me you are not like them, and I accept his judgment.' He stopped for a moment, genuinely moved by the man-child's countenance: the troubled face, exhausted by hope and fear alike.

'I have decided to let you stay, young one. But under the following conditions. You will remain in the smaller cave, using my own only at greatest need. Further, you must be prepared to leave it upon my return, twenty days, perhaps more. You may fool my enemies for a time, but it is unwise to think you could hold them off longer. I will circle the mountain twice, giving credence to your sound-making device. Beyond that you are on your own. I will give Akar the rest of my thoughts. He stands in my place while I am gone. Heed him well, I do not place my trust in him lightly..... Do you hear my words?'

'Yes, master. I am grateful.' He wanted badly to leave, but the Mantis' knowing gaze would not release him.

'Is there nothing else you would say to me?'

Kalus' heart sank. He KNEW! Despair overtook him at the last.

'I— I took from your cave a weapon. Please believe me, it was not for myself alone. If you had banished us from the mountain..... I have only this knife.' He threw it weakly to the ground.

Skither waited patiently, and at length Kalus looked up at him. Again he signaled slowly. 'Be at peace. I am not angry. You may keep the sword, and one other weapon of your choosing.' Kalus stared in disbelief.

'You please me, Kalus, though you do not know it. I see that you learned long ago the lesson of self-reliance. Now you must learn a harder lesson still: when to trust. What you did this night took great courage; you have not changed my mind against you. Only. Hear me, Kalus, I do not give my thoughts easily. Sometimes it is better to trust, even at the price of great pain..... Your heart will know. But do not carry the weight alone. It will crush you.

'That is all. Be at peace.' Kalus lifted the knife and moved away. But as he walked stiffly toward the steep but passable incline, he felt love for the Monarch swell his heart to bursting, and hard tears pushing at his eyes. As he climbed to rejoin the girl, Akar went with Skither into his cave to receive further instruction. Sylviana met her new friend on the parapet.

'What did he say?'

Kalus did not answer at once, but took her by the hand and led her to the one place in the enclosure where both could stand without stooping. Reaching it he embraced her, but did not cry. He backed away, then sat down to gather his thoughts.

'We can stay, until his return, at least.'

She knelt before him. 'What about the sword?'

'I was right. He did see me. But he is not angry, and he said that I could keep it. He said I was very brave.'

'That's because you are.'

'No.' He looked across at her sternly. 'Sylviana. You must know, this is only a beginning. I am grateful for your compassion last night, and I am in your debt. But there is still much work to do, and much danger. There are so many ways that the Wild can beat us..... And we must be prepared to leave here in twenty days.'

'Yes. I know.' Her tone was lowered. 'But at least you're not alone.' She reached

out and touched his beard with the back of her fingers. He moved the hand away, but without anger or secret pain. It was morning still.

Chapter 9

'Sylviana, come here. This is something you must see.' She went out and stood beside him on the parapet. Skither was preparing to leave.

He stood solid with legs spread and hooked claws clinging, his abdomen expanding and contracting as he prepared for the single thrust that would send a massive burst of air through the small opening in his purposely dislocated jaw.

He let the final breath gather inside him. Then spreading his wings for balance, he exhaled in a quick and powerful motion. The result was a whistling sound so loud and shrill that it wounded the hearing even through covered ears. All the Valley seemed to hush in its aftermath, an echo of silence, as if all life for miles around had stopped its breath to listen. Indeed, thought the girl, even a creature that did not know the massive killer from which it emanated, would be sure to stay far clear of the place from which the sound had come. The Mantis rested for a short time, then repeated its territorial warning.

Akar returned out of the larger cave as Skither's breathing became normal once more. After several minutes he nodded imperceptibly to the wolf, then spread his wings and took off slowly. He circled the mountain twice, swooped low down the canyon as if in anger, then turned westward at the sandstone ridge and moved steadily out of sight. Sylviana stood watching Kalus, whose eyes gleamed with some fierce emotion that was beyond her experience, but not her ability to feel. He was silent, lost in some world of his past, then spoke.

'It will be a long time before the Commodore ventures so far from its hole, to steal the flesh of those yet living.'

With this he seemed to come back to himself. He turned to the girl, contented. 'There is much work to do.' He reached above and behind her on the rockface to the place where he had set the pelt to dry. 'Have you ever worked with leather or fur?'

'Yes, a little.'

'Good. Take my knife and see if you can cut four long strands from the skin, each about as wide as your smallest finger. They need not be straight; they are only for binding wooden poles. I go to the valley to fetch them. Do not leave here until I return.' He began to descend, remembered himself. 'The sword....' He passed her and reentered their tiny island of space, emerged with the sword, unsheathed. Its well-preserved edges looked sharp in the sunlight.

'Be careful,' she said.

'I am always careful. Akar will come with me.' He took a lock of her hair in his fingers, and would have kissed her if he knew how. He whistled for the wolf and started down.

'Kalus?' He turned. 'Won't you need an ax to cut the wood?' He could not hide his smile in answering.

'I don't have to cut it. I steal it from the beaver.'

The two hunters met on the broader ledge and descended into the shadows of the gorge, leaving the girl with only the large rabbit pelt and Kalus' jagged knife, in truth not much improved from the museum relics she had studied as a child. She moved to a small, relatively smooth stretch of stone just inside the entrance, and laid out the fur upon it. She sat down and tried to work, but after several tentative starts had only succeeded in shredding one corner and cutting her finger on the knife. There seemed no safe way to grasp it, no soft or unsharpened place anywhere on it.

'Oh, this will never work.' She sat there on the stony ground, angry and frustrated, sucking her finger and cursing this backward, half-animal world.

But then an idea came to her. She tried to suppress it, but again the strange and uncharacteristic stubbornness crept over her. She moved to the dark fissure of the shaft and looked down, deliberating. After several minutes of internal bickering, she reached her legs out over the side, lowered herself to the first shelf, and began to descend.

*

Kalus and the wolf returned late in the afternoon. Sylviana had not been idle. As the man-child laid five straight and sturdy poles on the floor by his accustomed sleeping place, he found there waiting for him four long and curving strands, spiral cut from the skin to assure greatest length and thickness. The girl returned his questioning gaze, held up a long hunting knife in its leather sheath.

'If you can steal a sword, I can at least take a few things to make my life more

bearable.'

He looked past her on the floor to see one of the furs from her former bed, folded over and half filled with treasures she thought to keep. He asked to see the knife. He withdrew it from its sheath and gazed at it admiringly, not at all upset. Instead he nodded his approval.

'You have done well. He said we could take one other weapon, and I see that you have chosen the best.' He gave it back to her. 'What are the other things? Will he miss them?'

'I don't think so. It's just a few books, some bowls, and a flask for carrying water. And this.' She pulled the fur closer, fished around inside it for a moment, drew out a small whet stone. 'It's for sharpening steel.'

Again he smiled. 'You have done very well. I will make a hunter of you yet.' She put out her arms to embrace the wolf, who pulled away, though gently. Akar went again to the entrance.

'How did it go with you?' she asked Kalus.

'Your friend is very clever, though his heart is not in it. He drew away the beavers while I took the poles. The female——' He laughed. 'She was so angry. I think she would have killed me if she got the chance.'

'Killed you? A little two-foot long beaver?'

'Two feet?' he winced. 'Perhaps the beavers of your world are only that long, but I promise you, these were larger than any wolf.'

She studied him, disbelieving. A bizarre thought had just occurred to her. 'Are you telling the truth?'

'Why would I lie?'

She threw back the upper fold of the fur, searched among the books. She quickly found what she was looking for: PREHISTORIC EARTH, ESSAYS AND ILLUSTRATIONS. She checked the index, thumbed the yellowed and clumping pages.

Her mind fell back into itself. Sure enough, sketched there in relative detail against the background of a large den, was the figure of a great prehistoric beaver, '.....eight to twelve feet in length.' Recovering herself, she moved hastily to sit beside him.

'Do they look like this?'

'Yes, more or less.'

She flipped through the stiff, distending pages—Mammals of the Pleistocene. She stopped at a pair of saber-toothed cats, lurking hungrily near a tar-pit. 'What about these?' Have you seen them?'

'Yes, but it is not a good likeness.'

Her mind raced so that she hardly heard him. Was it possible? Had life reverted to its primitive, violent stages before Man, evolution in reverse? Her scientific education told her no, it couldn't happen. But was anything impossible here? She doubted it. She turned the pages again, stopped at the illustration of a lesser species of cave-bear. Again she showed him the book.

'Yes, I have seen them, though they live mostly to the north and west. But it is not a good likeness.'

Exasperated: 'Why, Kalus? Why isn't it a good likeness?'

'Because the bear is standing—in life a bear only stands when it is going to fight—and still he is only a head taller than the tribesman. I tell you, the bears of the north are much larger.'

'Tribesman?' In her haste she had failed to note the two fur-clad Neanderthals which stalked it, spear in hand, from behind a group of rocks. The face of the nearer was hard and set, with swept-back cheekbones and heavy, prominent brow. Eyes animal, and yet not animal. The caption said something about, EARLY MAN IS BELIEVED TO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY HUNTED.....

'No. It can't be.' Her eyes went wide. 'Your people look like this?' This time he had no reservations.

'Yes.'

She sat there numb. The realization of the truth had quite overwhelmed her. Mindless, soulless animals returning to the form of their primitive ancestors were one thing. Men.... But it was more than even that. For the first time in her life she knew, really knew, that Man had once been caught in between, neither fully instinctive nor rational, animal nor human, left to cross the tenuous bridge alone, and for thousands of years. The intensity of their fear, and answering determination, must have been terrifying.

And at what point did he develop a clear mind, and immortal soul? She nearly wept at the thought: Man's immortal soul. As opposed to the mortal, unfeeling animals. What a sad and sorry farce. She looked first to Kalus, then at the wolf—who stood regarding her from the entrance, feeling, but not understanding her pain. She turned again to Kalus. One last hope.

'But you don't look anything like that.'

'And I don't look like my people. It is the greatest mystery of my life, and the reason they mistrust me.' She rocked herself a little, beyond the point of tears. The man-child waited.

'What is wrong?'

She found she could not answer with words, though the thoughts had come easily enough: too easy, like vague fears taking shape and becoming familiar from the smokes of a half-remembered past. He seemed to sense this, or something like it, and to know that whatever it was she was feeling, he could not help her now. Not yet.

He continued his work, notching the poles with hard strokes from the side of his stone knife, as she moved bewilderedly back to her place. But often as he worked he would look over at her, stirred strangely by her dismay at simple truths he had long since been forced to accept. He thought of this, and it puzzled him. At length he said:

'I cannot always let myself feel things. I hope you understand that. Perhaps, you must feel them for me.'

She glimmered softly with marble eyes and said, 'Yes,' but her mind was far away. One phrase only kept echoing inside it, gathering deeper associations as it fell, like a leaf, into place.

THE LIFE OF AN ANIMAL.

Night came, and they slept.

Chapter 10

Morning came slowly, as it will in a cave facing westward, and Sylviana stirred to find her companions long since wakened. The wolf remained on his guard by

the door, while Kalus continued work on a spear. He had labored far into the night preparing the shaft, the narrowest and straightest of the poles he had brought. He was just fitting his stone knife into the etched groove at the top, to serve as a spearhead, when he became aware of her.

'Did you sleep well?' he asked without sarcasm.

'Yes.' She rose from the fur, pushed back her hair and took a long drink from the steel flask, which Kalus had filled. She felt safe and rested as she brought it down again, no longer oppressed by the curving, serrated walls and close proximity of her friends. A deeper, and more necessary sleep she had not known for days uncounted. 'Thank you.' She screwed back the cap, set down the flask and went outside.

Kalus held the long point in his hand, adjusted it several times in the slot. When he had marked the best fitting in his mind, he withdrew it and placed one edge against a flat rock on the floor, then drew out his round hammer-stone and carefully chipped away at either side of the base. It was delicate work. One mistake, one overzealous stroke, would render it useless as a spearhead. He did it well, refitted the point in the groove.

Lastly he took the long strand that had dangled for weeks from his wrist, the hide of a buffalo, poured water over it, and wrapped it as tightly about the shaft as his strength and its thickness would allow. When he had done and undone this several times, he finally found the best pattern, and with a grunt of exertion took the remaining length and forced it down between wood and stone, sealing the tie. Sylviana returned with the wolf as he held it up and studied it with tired satisfaction.

'What will you do today?' she asked, though the spear (and her stomach's emptiness) should have told her.

'We hunt bigger game, if the wolf is willing. Rabbit is good for the short hunger, but we need tools and clothing for the winter..... And meat.' Was there a trace of fierce lust in his voice as he said the word? Or was it hers in the hearing? She didn't like the implications.

'If you were going to hunt, shouldn't you have done it earlier in the day?'

'If I had gone out earlier, I think I would have been the hunted and not the hunter.'

Let the big cats make their kill. Let hyenas strip the carcass. Let them all stay contented within their boundaries and only threaten to kill me. I am patient.'

'Oh.' She stood rebuked. 'When will you go?'

'As soon as I am finished with this.' He took the spear to the center of the enclosure, held it firmly in his hand. He checked it for balance, found the best grips, tested the grain and strength of the wood by leaning it heavily against the ground. 'Good.' He faced the wolf. Shall we hunt together?'

Akar raised up and gestured toward the entrance. Sylviana, on an impulse:

'Can I go with you? This place is beginning to get to me.'
Sometimes it was better to confront ones fears.....

His answer surprised her. 'Yes, if you want to. Three bodies are better than two. But bring the knife and stay very close. I don't want to lose you.'

With the sun a hand's breadth shy of noon, they set out.

Chapter 11

The company returned exhausted, with several hours of daylight and much work still ahead of them. Kalus had gutted the antelope before starting up the ridge, but climbing the pathless slope with such a burden had proven an ordeal nonetheless. By the time they reached the ledge outside the Mantis' cave, he could go no further. His legs and shoulders ached, threatening spasms, and the wound at the back of his head throbbed with pain each time his heart beat heavily, which for the past two hours had been almost constantly.

Setting down the kill, he looked up at the remaining distance to the smaller enclosure. He thought of Skither's instructions, but could only shake his head.

'We skin the carcass here,' he proclaimed, breathing heavily. 'What the Mantis does not know, cannot trouble his sleep.' Lifting the carcass one last time he brought it inside, into the relative safety of the larger cave. Akar and the girl followed him in, too tired themselves to protest.

Akar lay down immediately in the coolest place he could find. He had run close to thirty miles that day, much of it flat out, and nursed emotional, as well as physical fatigue. Neither he nor Kalus had ever hunted one with the other, and the experience had not been easily productive. It was true that between them they could bring down larger game, but their timing together was far from perfect. The wolf could not begin to remember how many times he had circled the smaller herds, trying to drive the stragglers to the place where Kalus waited with his spear. The toil was frustrating and often dangerous, as this predator or that would react to his unorthodox, and therefore unacceptable presence.

But the real danger had come while stalking the plains elk. Instead of bolting when he appeared, the herd leader had turned on him suddenly, nearly grinding him into oblivion against the side of a large boulder. Even now he shuddered at the sight of those enormous antlers, coming at him with such startling speed and agility.

He thought then, very deep inside himself, of how easily the pack had hunted such game in the past, and of the honor and respect they commanded. This in turn led to burning memories of his brother, and of the murdering half-breed that had brought the pack to such shame. The injustice of it all was more than his mind could accept. It tore him up inside, and he couldn't get it out.

He wanted to KILL him. He wanted to kill him.

Sylviana was almost in a state of shock. If Kalus had intended to sober her opinion of what they were up against by exposing her directly to it, then he had resorted to overkill. Never had she felt so helpless and exposed as in the presence of that ever-changing panorama of landscapes and formidable creatures. It was like a bad dream without waking: being in some monstrous zoo, and then finding that the bars of the cages had suddenly disappeared. Like but unlike the prehistoric mammals she had dreaded, inexplicably mixed from the family of continents, they were, in a word, overpowering.

She had not been so frightened by the large herd animals—these gave an air of self-satisfied indifference—as she had been by the fierce predators that hunted, literally, right alongside them. Kalus had said not to worry, that there was an unspoken understanding when on common ground and in times of abundance (he had stretched the truth). But it was hard to remain calm while looking up sandstone hills at mountain cats seven feet long, with dark traces of mane dragged across impossibly muscular shoulders. She thought of the subtly changed hyenas, probably the most unnerving of all, that had swelled like a tooth-edged tide of hatred to the very limits of their borders, snarling and threatening. And Kalus, shaking his spear in answer, and crying out like an animal himself.

And finally the kill, after so many hours. . .she tried to block it from her mind. But she could not. There it was right in front of her: Kalus driving the spear deep into the antelope's shoulder as it ran past, the sudden look of terror in its eyes as it fell. Then the way he had ripped the knife from her hand and slashed its throat without hesitation. True, he had ended its suffering quickly. But why did they have to kill it at all? And what was the point, if this world was so utterly wretched and cruel? Again the questions came much too easily. The answers did not.

By the time Kalus finished skinning the carcass it was nearly dark. They (or rather he) then decided to cook it there as well, rather than risk the long climb in darkness. The girl halfheartedly suggested they take it up through the shaft, but this too was impractical. They built their fire near the back of the curving frontal chamber, concealing the flames. Kalus made a crude spit from wood gathered earlier, and began the long, slow process of cooking the meat in strands, that nothing would be wasted.

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After a time the smoke gathered above them at its height, trailing and wisping across the vaulted ceiling to the entrance, forming pools, or rising like an upward fall through the shaft. Sylviana lay emotionless on the bed, and watched it flow out like a river of vapor. After what seemed a long time she heard Kalus' voice calling her to eat. 'I'm not hungry,' she said. He came and sat beside her on the bed.

'You must eat.' She looked at him. 'I know today was very hard for you. I know you don't like to kill..... We will try to gather berries and water plants tomorrow, but I cannot promise it. Please, Sylviana. You must try to be strong just one more time.'

Her eyes finally saw him, and yet again he was not an animal, but human like herself, suffering the same pain and empty confusion. For what little that was worth.

'All right.'

She got up and sat with him on the floor. She ate from the wooden bowl without relish. But still the food gave her sustenance. Kalus watched her, saddened, then rose and walked into the chamber beyond. He returned a short time later, his bowl filled with the green, sweet-smelling sebreum. He placed it in front of her.

'I know it's not easy for you.'

'But the Mantis.'

'Has a heart the same as I do. Eat.' She regarded him weakly, blinked from the smoke, then lowered her head and ate.

Kalus returned to his cooking as the fire grew less, and after perhaps an hour went to sit beside her on a flat stone near the entrance. She stared out into the formless darkness beyond, a fur wrapped around her for warmth. But still she shivered. They were silent, then he spoke.

'The Cold World will be coming soon. Winter. Already the days grow short, and the evenings cool. It is the time of year I like best. We will be safer then.'

'Safer. How?'

'The herd animals travel south in search of living green, and the predators must follow. We will be able to move about more freely.'

'But how will we eat?' She didn't want him to stop talking.

'We will eat.' Silence. 'I feel more at peace in the Cold World. For there, if a man is strong, he can breathe the free wind unafraid. Only the hardest predators remain, and among them is respect.'

'What about your people?'

'They will follow the herds, as they always do.'

'Then how do you know what the winter is like? Or will you go with them?'

A hurt, disbelieving look came over him. 'NO.' He felt frustration pushing back at his own will to live. 'These past three Winters I have lived alone.' He looked out, and thought he might know what she was feeling.

'I have known loneliness, too, though perhaps it is another kind. Your sorrow is for friends and ways that have died. Mine is for companionship that I have never known. Because to my people I am what this world is to you: something beyond their experience. And because of that they fear it, and mistrust..... I would be your friend, Sylviana, but I don't always know how.' She turned, and in the shadows his face looked worn and grim: there was no doubting his pain. She lowered her eyes to the ground.

'I just don't understand,' she said, half in a whisper. 'I don't understand it at all. Why was I brought here and left to go on? Sometimes I think it was just to have one illusion and then another stripped away, till there's nothing left but the struggle to survive and not go crazy. And when the last of my illusions are gone..... What then, Kalus? What's left?' He thought for a moment, deeply, then raised his head and answered.

'Life.' He touched his breast. 'What is here inside us. Perhaps that is not so much. Or perhaps it is everything.' He turned to face her. 'I cannot always let myself grieve, Sylviana. Can you see that?' She nodded. 'But if you have to cry, I will try to comfort you. . .as you once did for me.'

She felt a wall give way inside her. She didn't answer, but slowly put her head to his chest, silently begging to be held. And finally the tears came. He held her warmly, feeling so many things. At length she drew back, and held his eyes with hers. There was only one way out of this desert. Here and now.

'Kalus..... Will you sleep with me tonight? Not to make love——' He put a finger to her lips. He knew what she meant. They stayed there by the entrance a while longer, then went together to the bed.

Akar ate solemnly, without pleasure, then returned to the isolated hell of his thoughts.

Chapter 12

Morning came softly by the riverbed, with a cool northeastern breeze that rustled the changing willow leaves and sent long waves of golden brown across a gentle sea of grass: the Savanna. The boy stood silent on the northern bank at the meeting of the shallow, stony stream and the wider, more placid river, breathing deep the autumn air and gazing out over the pearling waters with a look of

boundless wonder. For his was the magic of youth among the hill-people: man enough to take in more than the sum of his surroundings, animal enough to feel the bliss of a mind free from distraction.

He had wandered far from his sleeping comrades, just as his friend the estranged one used to do. He found himself thinking of Kalus now, and wondered vaguely, perhaps a bit sadly, if he was still alive. Not that the thought was deep or the pain acute. But it did seem unfortunate that he had to be cast out, when maybe he was not so strange after all. Shama missed him.

Hearing a twig crack behind him, he stiffened. Whirling about, he searched the sloping embankment with startled curiosity. A lone wolf stood at the crest of the hill, not forty yards away. He wondered what it was doing so far from its established hunting grounds. Even as he did so another head appeared, followed by a low, snaking body. The two did not move, but stood rather in ominous silence, peering down at him intently.

But they could not be stalking him. There was no reason.

But then an even larger wolf appeared, standing in dark majesty between the others, a full head taller than either. On closer inspection there could be seen some flaw in him, some change. The head was larger and the ears wider. The snout was shorter and a dark, bristling mane like that of a horse could be seen as he lowered a haunting mask toward the tribesman. Black streaks ran down from it across his haunching shoulders, the yellowish thrust of the upper body yielding gradually to that of an unchanged wolf. And he was strong, unnaturally strong. His slitted eyes were fierce and full of hatred: Shar-hai.

The boy took first one step, and then another, upstream away from them, trying not to show how helpless and afraid he really was. He moved laterally, not wanting to turn his back. They were coming after him now, gaining speed with each crouching step. He started to run, but a loose clump of grassy mud gave way beneath the weight of his foot, splitting his legs apart beneath him. He fell forward stiffly, landing half in the water and half on the sandy shore.

The three were upon him in an instant. He tried to call out for help, but his terror-filled cries were too feeble to pierce the oncoming wind, and were carried away before they could reach his sleeping comrades, less than half a mile away. He felt a sharp burst of pain at the back of his neck, followed by an icy

numbness. Then all sensations blurred and faded. A silent blackness engulfed him, and he was no more.

The two dark wolves, the guard of Shar-hai, stepped back in bloody triumph, howling their defiance to the skies. Yet slowly the stir of the kill was dispersed, and the birds in the willows sang untroubled.

Kalus had been awake for almost an hour. He had risen to find the wolf gone, but gave it little thought. Akar had his own life to live as well, and he had not failed to note his companion's dark mood the night before. He could not fully reason its source, but knew that it must be something fairly serious. For the wolves were stoic and infinitely survivable creatures, who rarely let emotion get the best of them. Returning from the smaller enclosure with the four poles and his sword, Kalus thought back to the day of his banishment, and realized for the first time that Akar's gesture of submission in the cave—rolling over in the dirt—had not been a plea for mercy. . .but an act of acceptance. An acceptance of death. He shook his head at the irony, though the word meant nothing to him. He had no regrets.

He sat down on a stone inside the entrance and worked quietly and steadily, peeling long strips of bark from the poles, to use along with the strands of rabbit fur, to bind them together into a frame. Sylviana stirred dreamily beneath the covers of her bed and he smiled, then rose to greet her. Her face was to him as a flower in the desert, or a piece of fruit hanging from the tree when one is very, very thirsty.

His steps were checked halfway by a familiar but unsettling sound: the hollow wail of human breath through a conch-shell.

'What was that?' asked the girl, stretching, now awake. The sound came again, faintly louder.

'I must leave here,' he answered. 'One of my people is in trouble. I will return as soon as I can.'

'Kalus, wait—'

He took his sword from its sheath and left the cave and bounded down the slope toward the ravine, then up again and on to the flat lands beyond.

*

Akar hesitated outside Kamela's lair, a stone-lipped hole cut into the hillside. This far his progress had gone unchecked. His nose low to the ground, he searched the fern-scattered earth and outlying bramble for unfamiliar scents. He thought it unlikely that she would take another mate, willingly at least, but if he were to have any real chance of freeing her, he had to be certain. He found at first only the day-old scent of an elder female, then traces of an altered musk that turned the blood to poison in his veins.

Suppressing inner violence, he entered the dank and root-lined swell to find her lying ruefully in the dirt, nursing her one remaining cub. Seeing him her eyes glowed life for moment, then dulled, as if recalling some bitter and irreversible truth. She rose and stood before him, brushing his ear with her snout, then stepped back and addressed him in the ancient and subtle language of the wolves.

'Brother of my husband,' she said quietly. 'I am heartened to see that you live and flourish, but I fear that your time here is wasted. Shar-hai will never allow you to take me. He draws too much pleasure from seeing the house of Shaezar in ruin.'

'Wife of my dead brother,' he replied with equal detachment. 'I am alive but do not flourish. How could I live in peace with the chosen of my heart brought to shame?' He turned away, then gestured toward the cub. 'What of the others?'

'They are dead. The half-breed has killed all males he has not taken to himself, or has need of now.' Bitter silence. 'Why have you come?' He loved her too much.

'I am going to challenge Shar-hai for leadership of the pack. His pride will not let him refuse me. While his attention is drawn, you must flee with the cub to Skither's cave. It is the one place he dare not follow. There you will be safe among friends.'

'But he will kill you.'

'Yes, or I will kill him. Either way I cannot forsake my obligation to the pack, or to you. Do not dispute me, Kamela, I stand now in my brother's place. You must be ready to leave as soon as you hear the sounds of our battle. Travel as far and as fast as you can; carry the cub if you must. We will not have another chance.'

.. 'Very well.' Her voice was soft and without hope. 'I will do as you say. Who are the friends I am to meet?'

'A woman-child and her mate. She was brought here by Skither, and is like no other. Her companion is Kalus, of the hill-tribe.'

'Such as these?'

'Yes. They are to be wholly trusted.' He broke away and went to the entrance, looking worried and weary of talk. 'Where is Shar-hai? When does he return?'

'He is said to be hunting with his guard near the Carak, though there is no shortage of food. But that has never stopped him from killing before.' Akar felt a strange premonition as she said the words.

'Why so near the hill-tribe?'

'I do not know. He has been gone since nightfall.'

He thought of Barabbas. 'So be it.'

*

His legs were weary and his mind was full of doubt. Perspiration poured from his brow to the chill of the wind, and his head and lungs ached from the exertion. But he ran on. Nearing the joining of rivers he saw his younger brother standing on the far side with the conch-shell raised, still summoning wildly. He began to wade the shallows, his sword raised above him. He saw that his brother was crying. The current welled up around his neck.

Then he saw the body. He fought back a strangling burst of sorrow that in those

waters might well have killed him.

His brother had seen him. Fighting the current, Kalus again found his footing among the northern shallows, then waded in stubbornly. He dropped his sword on the bank and went to the body of Shama, still half in the water, and lifted and carried it gently to the root-covered ground beneath a willow. Setting it down as he would his own child to sleep, he stood back. He could not escape the pain. His face was wet, and he turned to face his brother.

'Who did this thing?' he demanded, with uncontrolled violence in his hands and in his heart. His brother felt the same emotion.

'The wolves who you protect.' He was not awed by the sword, or by age.

'Be silent or I will kill you!' flashed Kalus' hands. 'You know Akar would not do this. WHAT wolves!'

'The Changed One and his guard. I saw them taste Shama's blood while he yet lived..... Barabbas has gone to find the others.'

'But why was Shama so far from the cave?' He wept outright.
'Why was he here alone?'

At last Komai looked into his eyes, and realized again his brother's limitless capacity for pain. 'I do not know, Kalus. We made a hunting camp not far from here. Shama wandered away from it while we slept..... You must go, brother. If Barabbas finds you here he will kill you.'

Kalus took his brother's hand in his and pressed it to his heart.
'I go to the northern hills. I will kill the half-breed if I can.
Goodbye.' There was nothing more. He set out.

He made for the north, and so great was his anger and purpose that all creatures who saw him let him pass unchallenged. He was only dimly aware that two tribesman, one very large and strong, had passed him to the west, moving toward the place where Komai stood in lonely vigil. He did not care.

But as he walked his heart-sickness and rage yielded slowly, reluctantly to reason. He was not swayed in his resolve to kill Shar-hai—who might next come stalking one yet dearer—nor spared any measure of the bludgeoning

sorrow and guilt. But with each mile he thought more of her, and of their indescribable communion the night before. And as the land became more broken and the granite-boned hills a nearer mark, he found more and more than he wanted to live, a desire that chafed against his hatred, and crossed his will to act. He whirled the sword in blind fury about him, but could not make the conflict go away. He had never been needed before.

He walked, now passing the mesa that had once, in what seemed another world, been his home. And he thought, and tried to think, what must be done. WHAT MUST BE DONE. And how to do it.

Where was Akar? How long before Barabbas would follow? Surely in this they were not enemies. Which path would the Changed One follow? Surely he feared the hill-tribe, and would not pass directly in front of their cave. He was grateful that his head no longer ached and his breath came easier. He thought of his mother. SYLVIANA.

Such ran the jumble of his thoughts, and the feelings which rose all the stronger for his efforts to control them.

The wolves, he decided, must have passed on the far side of Carak mesa. They would follow a small, tree-blinded stream to the hills. The Hill. There could only be one. I DON'T WANT TO DIE.

'Sylviana.'

*

Kalus sat crouched and still among the twisted bramble that grew, overshadowed by oak and maple, at the base of the hill. He had reached the narrow vale first and seen them coming, as he thought, from the west. He had positioned himself uphill, and downwind of the gentle fold through which they must pass, betting his life on the skills he had learned as a boy.

They turned the bend and came closer, scenting the wind. And as he watched, the man-child was struck, and weakened in will, by the size and unswerving gait of Shar-hai, whom he had seen before only from a distance. Now he was less than a hundred yards away.

Suddenly the great head stopped in mid-air, turning left and then right: searching. At the same moment his guard lowered their noses to the ground and angrily, anxiously swept the earth about them. Kalus' heart froze, but even as it did his fingers wrapped more tightly about the hilt of his sword. The two fanned out fifteen yards to either side, then doubled back upon their own path. It was not his scent they had found.

They snarled and tore the ground with their feet, waiting to advance. For the scent of the true wolf they recognized, and hated. Only Shar-hai looked about him, sensing, but not seeing, something else. He too was aware of Akar. His lip curled slightly and a rumble of distant hatred crawled out.

They advanced up the hill.

Chapter 13

The sky was deep and blue and bare of clouds. The sun shone down bright and unhindered, but its warmth was fleeting, carried away by the fretting and inconstant late October wind. Dry and fallen leaves were whisked up quickly into whirlwinds, only to be abandoned with equal suddenness, left to drift back to earth as they would. The aged and wind swept granite thrusts bore countless

lichen edged crevices, filled with the same brown and lifeless needles that covered the ground wherever rock or pine, or holly did not. The air was cool and clear, but altogether void of fragrance.

The meeting place had been well chosen. A wide and shallow bowl at the very crown of the Hill, carved by nature from the rock that formed its bones, it commanded an unobstructed view for miles in all directions. Beyond the reach of all but the hardiest pines, it lay bare and open to the sky above. Here sun by day and star by night were free both to see and be seen by the descendants of a race as old as conscious thought upon the Earth.

It is a fitting place to die, thought Akar solemnly. He rested now upon the southern promontory which stood out from the edge of the bowl like the horn of a saddle, waiting for his foe to reappear from the cover of overhanging branches into which he had vanished from view. By now he must surely be aware of his presence. But he knew Shar-hai would do nothing in haste.

So arching his head skyward like the wolves of old, he let out a long, dispassionate howl, issuing his challenge to whatever ears might choose to hear it. He felt new strength and courage coming to him from out of the Hill, from the roots of stone and past, and he vowed again not to surrender his spirit until every chance to kill or injure the usurper had been utterly spent.

Now less than two hundred yards away on the slope below, the guard responded with angry growls and defiance. For they still detected only one forbidden scent. Only Shar-hai showed restraint, held back by the measured caution of one who had lived his life in subtle but constant fear of retribution.

Not that he feared Akar's challenge. He had no intention of abiding by any rules or code of honor in dealing with his brave but foolish opponent. He knew that if at any point he faltered, his guard would not hesitate to join the fray.

But still he was uneasy. He had slept poorly two nights before, and trembled in the shadows of a dark vision.

In his dreams—he had not slept again since—he walked through a bleak forest of eternal night, the black trunks of the trees gnarled and twisted like misshapen statues, wrapped about the feet with a chill mist that rose to a fog and blanketed the horizons, giving all distance a feeling of timelessness and endlessness.

He walked alone, feeling lost: hungry, no matter how many times he killed. He stalked and slew first one beast and then another, with none to rise up against him, and none to mourn the loss of the fallen.

And finally, after an endless, meaningless search, he thought he had found it, the thing he hungered for. A child, white and innocent and soft. It had fled before him on sight, flying first down, and then up, a long bare hill. He pursued it in ecstasy, in torment. Closer and closer, his body growing weaker, almost sexually, his legs sometimes moving in place, as his desire became more desperate. He was almost upon it when—

A terrible Angel of Death stood before him, wrapped in a cold and deadly light, a flaming blue weapon in its hands. He tried to stop, but something pushed him forward, irresistible: driven like a piece of meat onto the stake. He cried out in a voice that was almost human.....

Upon waking he had heard yet again the hoarse words of the hyena bitch who bore him, as she lay dying, abandoned, in the snow.

'Wreak your vengeance well, son of Shar, and fear not the wrath of your brothers. For no creature of the wild shall ever slay you. Neither river, nor mountain, nor lion; but only a man. Beware the dark masters who walk erect, with the eyes that burn of a world that will never be.....' And he had raised his head in spite of himself, alone in the night, and howled his anguish to the wind.

But here, now, there was Akar to deal with. It all seemed so pointless. For try as he might, he could not make his hatred flare against him as it had against Shaezar. They were much alike. But yes, he would kill him. And kill again, until the emptiness of his soul had been sated, or had itself been devoured.

He emerged with his guard into the clearing that stood before the southern rise of the promontory. There he was met by the remaining males of Shaezar's pack. There were only four: an aging outrider, two yearlings and a one-eyed five year old.

Seeing Akar standing straight and proud above them, the four were faced with a difficult choice. If there had been but one more seasoned male among them, perhaps they could fight. But as it was they stood no real chance against the monstrous half-breed and his treacherous companions, themselves both large and fierce.

Akar looked down on them with compassion, for their dilemma had been his before them: whether to serve a hated leader, or to make noble but vain rebellion against him. The hackles of the guard were raised, and there was scarcely contained rage in their throats. Shar-hai addressed the wolf.

'You have issued your challenge, small one. Will you remain there above us, or come and meet your death in the arena?'

'We will do battle soon enough, my unnatural brother. But first I will speak to those whose souls remain.' And there was in his voice something so solemn that it stilled the fires of the two, and granted him with Shar-hai this last request. He spoke in a dialect they only half understood.

'Do not despair, you that remain. Even if this battle is lost, the marauder cannot last much longer. He defies all that is quietly strong with every step he takes. Nature will not allow it. His death draws near.'

With that he turned, and leapt down into the arena behind. Shar-hai was there ahead of him. And for all their snarling threats and lunges, his guard could not keep the others from pushing past and up the curving stone trench that led into the meeting place. One female joined them there as well.

Akar fought valiantly, summoning all the courage born of despair, and all the strength and guile he could muster. He fought in the only way he could—refusing to allow Shar-hai to use his greater size and strength to advantage. Each time the two would bolt together, rising from impact with heads writhing and bared teeth crashing, he would slide off quickly and not be broken back, slashing as he did at the flanks of the other before retreating. In this way he bought time for Kamela, holding off the death clash as long as he could.

But soon, as he knew he would, Akar began to tire. His lunges at the legs and ribs of his opponent had done little damage, while the constant pounding on his own neck and chest had begun to take its toll. Rising together yet again he remained there, suspended, and aimed for the throat. He could not get past the others flashing jaws, then was broken back.

They clashed again, Akar off balance, and it was only through a supreme effort that he held up against the weight and strength. He slipped away, and this time Shar-hai lunged at his exposed shoulder. The wolf turned sharply back into him, trying to seize his front leg; but he was away. Akar ran a short way, then turned.

They rose together, the larger reaching greater height, forcing him down. He slipped away. Again. One of the guard suddenly lunged at him, biting deep into his hind leg before the one-eyed male drove him away. They bickered and fought. Shar-hai was on him again, tearing at his ear. They rose. Again.

Slowly they kept fighting and Akar was losing strength and it seemed to him that the world became a blur of yellow teeth and he was caught in a circle of foes whose names he had forgotten, and it was like a dizzying whirlpool or being caught in a ring of fire with the heat and smoke choking him and all he could do was fight back against the one who kept attacking him.

And as the horror of it grew and desperation drove reason and consciousness from him, he became cruel and savage like a dying animal. And for a time this desperation gave him strength. But soon he knew that this growling bitter hatred that was the fire beneath living creatures and which he was feeling only now, was second Nature to Shar-hai, and what he would be feeling very soon now that he was cut and in the midst of insurrection. And it was true. Perhaps only seven minutes had passed before Akar had nothing left and his foe was still strong. So hideously strong.

The knowledge of Death came to strangely to Akar, as his spirit weakened and he knew the end was near. And it was familiar, so familiar. It filled him with a dull horror that was the essence of all the nightmares he had tried to forget. He knew he would die, and if there had been time it would have filled him with a great sorrow. But there was no time. And he was ready to quit when he remembered Kamela, and knew that he must fight a while longer.

Then sensing his weakness, Shar-hai reached a foreleg across him as they rose, and with all his weight and strength crushed him to the ground against a jutting stone. Akar gave a short yelp of pain as he landed and something in his shoulder gave way. And he knew he could rise no more.

*

Kalus had heard the sounding of the challenge, but it meant nothing to him. He kept looking back toward the lower lands and wondering. But when he heard the sounds of battle, and saw the female running past with the cub but looking back many times, he understood.

'Akar!' he thought dismally, pounding his head in anger and self-loathing. 'Why didn't I know it before?'

It all came to him in an instant: the outcast wolf, the murderous usurper, Akar's underlying despair. And he knew and felt a quiet dread creep over him. Because he could not wait.

He ran now, all hiding behind him, up the hill toward the place where he knew Akar was fighting for his life, and for the life of the female he loved. He thought of Sylviana and nearly stopped—he looked back—then continued up the hill with the sword in his hand. His pledge, and the threat of a dangerous enemy left unchallenged, drove him on.

After a time he tried to pace himself, knowing he would have nothing left. But still he pushed as hard as he dared. He reached the clearing, now unguarded, and looked up at the promontory. He could not rush in blind, with the battle so close, but must have some advantage at least. So he moved to a place where the rock was scarred and began to climb, that he would not be wholly without protection.

But his limbs trembled as he went, and when he reached the top he went to the edge overlooking the arena and cried out his rage and fear in a voice that was more like a roar than something human.

*

Shar-hai turned from where he hovered over the fallen wolf, and looked up.

His heart froze. For there above him, framed and distorted by the sun, stood the apparition of all vengeance: the Angel of Death from his dream. He stepped back and away, and for the space of three breaths, had neither strength nor control of his limbs.

But Shar-hai had not lived so long against the apparent will of Nature by being timid or a fool. He moved out from the path of the sun, and saw not a fiery angel, but a man—-young and fierce and desperate, but still only a man—who bled the same blood, and could also be killed.

Kalus leapt down into the circle. The guard would have gone after him, but they

could not. The aged male and the one-eye stood before them, threatening, with the others not far behind. They felt no love or allegiance for any man, but this one protected their fallen leader. And they knew not whether they did something brave or foolish, but only that the moment was too much and they must do it.

Shar-hai began to circle, and to try to understand the strange weapon, while Kalus felt his heart pounding and the sweat from his palms making his grip clammy and the sword hard to hold. Finally the waiting and fear became too much and he rushed at him, slicing the air with the blade. But Shar-hai slipped away easily and circled behind him before he could turn.

Kalus whirled to face him. Wielding his weapon with courage but little real skill, he repeated the attack again and again. Fruitless. The weight of the sword was too much and his grip seemed feeble, and his legs still trembled from the weakness of the climb; and his foe would not remain stationary, or venture within the cutting sweep of his sword.

But he was strong and determined, and confronted by death and he knew it. He kept the half-breed in front of him, breathed slowly and deeply and shook with bitter rage as he clenched his teeth and moved forward again. He swept the blade in a flat, circular motion. But again he missed, and the guard drew closer, snarling and lunging. He felt sweat come over him, and the cold chill of knowing he had stepped too far. And for all his years of learning he could not contain the frightened rage that sent him chasing and cutting in wild circles and angles while the half-breed leapt aside, rushing in short bursts and avoiding the blade, with the hatred of his eyes burning ever deeper.

Then Kalus felt the presence of Death like a grim truth, or a sinister shadow eclipsing his soul, till all he could feel was a raw, animal terror. And finally in his desperation he missed badly and slipped down on one knee, and Shar-hai rushed in and tore at the back of his calf before he could whirl the sword's hilt, with his elbows hooked, and strike him feebly and too far in the arc of the swing across the jaw. And still Shar-hai was nearly upon him before he could thrust the weapon between them, holding the top of the blade with his other hand which now bled with a sharp pain. And as the wolf stepped back and began to turn, the tortured muscles at the back of his leg made it hard to stand.

But he knew he must stand, and he still had a little courage left. So he rose and faced his foe, who was through with running, and tried to aim a blow at his head;

but his hands would not stop shaking. So he made one last swoop and ran in the direction it carried him, and for all his shame at leaving Akar his one thought was to break free of the circle and run, so hard and so far.....

But Shar-hai rushed up behind him, and his teeth found their mark in the soft flesh and tendon at the back of his knee. Kalus reeled and fell forward, the sword flying from his grasp. And he knew it was the end. He covered his head with his hands and cried out, and waited for the rush of tearing, yellow teeth.

*

Shar-hai stood for a moment catching his breath, stood glowering over the man-child whose weapon he had truly feared. Not for nothing had the hyena bitch warned him of men. This death he would not savor. It must be swift and final.

He thought he heard a rustle behind him, and one of his guard spoke in alarm. He turned his head as the point of a spear, wielded without passion but with skill and fell purpose, split his shoulders precisely and buried itself in his heart.

*

Trembling with fear, Kalus opened his eyes slowly. Why had Shar-hai not finished him? Why was he still alive?

The first thing he saw was the body of his foe, large even in death, lying on its side, the shaft deeply embedded. But the next thing he saw puzzled him still more, was yet stranger. He saw the hunched and grizzled form of Barabbas standing not five yards away, looking at him with tears as large as droplets running down his cheeks. In all his years, Kalus had never seen him cry. But that was not quite true.

Something in the nerve-heightened sense of the moment, and in the strong man's broken expression, brought home with sudden clarity the memory of a day that lay buried among the horrors of a past he had tried to forget. The day of his father's death.

It had been less than seven years. In the midst of a scourge of spiders, hunger and scarcity of game had forced the tribe far to the west, beyond any boundaries or even point of recognition. After a long and fruitless day's search, the men at last spotted three large deer, feeding in a clearing on a long hillside surrounded by trees. They had broken into groups, to circle and surprise them. His father and his brother, still a boy, had gone alone to the far left-hand side where the clearing ran through a sunken gap, to cut off that way of escape.

But as they drew nearer the prey, from their respective paths the others had heard the sounds of sudden, deep growling and forgotten the deer, who scattered as they left cover and came running to the place where his father was being mauled and dragged by a bear, also far from its home, with his brother stabbing futilely with his tiny spear and crying and screaming as his father made no sound. And the men had killed it in a fierce battle, but his father lay bloodied and unmoving.

Barabbas had stood for a long time—alone, shaken but not from fear—then had taken the two of them aside. His heavy hands said simply, 'I am your father now.' He had turned to walk away, then turned again and said, 'I am sorry.' A sob made him breathe heavily and drop his head: a single tear. And that was the only emotion he had allowed himself to feel.

Now, as Kalus watched him, it was as if a veil had been lifted and he saw him for the first time, not as the hard and untouchable leader, but as a man—real, and therefore vulnerable. And he remembered other things as well. All the times Barabbas had gone hungry so that others could eat, the way he always stood foremost in times of danger, risking his own life to defend them. He felt his pain. And he found himself fighting back tears as he rose.

'Why are you crying?' he said feebly. Then remembering, he signaled with his hands. 'Why?'

And Barabbas misunderstood, as the wolves and tribesmen stood in silent truce around them, the guard deserted, and he thought Kalus asked, 'Why did you not let him kill me?' This was too much for him. He clenched his hands around nothing and bowed his head, and felt as if he stood at the center of a vast desert where nothing and no one could touch him and all he could do was fight and not win.

'How could I?' he signaled clumsily, ashamed. His large eyes and matted hair

faced downward, then looked up again, almost pleading. 'I killed him because you are my flesh. You are my son; I will never have a son. Because I cannot breathe or sleep when I think you are alone and in danger, and I know it is my fault.'

'I was afraid Carnivore; I am often afraid. I also knew of this killer.' He moved a hand toward the ground, toward the still figure of the marauder who had ended Shama's life. 'When I saw the wolf among us in the cave, I forgot all reasons..... But I should not want to kill Akar. I should not reward your courage with banishment. I am sorry, Carnivore. I am sorry. I grow old, and afraid of dying.' And he covered his face with his hands.

And Kalus wept, because he felt the same emptiness. He wept for weakness and fighting and death, and feeling so much. And he went to Barabbas and took down his hands, and awkwardly embraced him. And Barabbas did not know what to do, but only that he loved his son who was crying, and that he was not alone anymore. His own tears still fell, but now for love, and he felt the great emptiness filling slowly, and all the while Kalus said strange words.

'Forgive me.'

Then Kalus backed away, drained of all emotion, and went to see if Akar was all right. Then he turned back to his father, still feeling though he had nothing left.

'We are allies,' he signaled. 'I will always fight for you. I love you, my father, you are stronger than I. Do not be ashamed.' And Barabbas no longer felt old and foolish, and as he turned to face the others, felt no shame. They stood silent, as the wolves stood silent, and Kalus knelt beside his friend, forgetting his own injuries.

Akar tried to raise himself off the damaged shoulder but could not. He slid down in anguish. And Kalus lifted him and laid him on his undamaged side, then felt the shoulder gingerly for broken bones.

Finding none he turned to Komai, and one other, and asked them to help him make a stretcher. His brother was the first to come and kneel beside him, laying down his spear and taking off a heavy fur he wore wrapped about his shoulders. Another offered his spear, and they wrapped the fur carefully around the two shafts. Barabbas watched them quietly and smiled, though not on the outside, as Kalus signaled to his brother.

'Help me take him to the Mantis' cave.'

The two of them lifted the stretcher, and began to walk toward the stone channel to descend. Akar was still in great torment of mind and body, and it was all he could do to raise his head to the pack, which he must now rule, and tell them:

'You must go to the South alone. I will follow when I can. Be cautious, hunt together, and hold fast to hope.' And Kalus, limping but proud to walk, with his brother behind him carried the stretcher down the hill.

The others followed.

PART II

The Cold World

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao The name that can be named is not the eternal name The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth The named is the mother of ten-thousand things.

Ever desireless one can see the mystery Ever desiring one can see the manifestations. These two spring from the same source but appear as opposites And this seems to us darkness

Darkness within darkness The gateway to all mystery

—Lao Tsu

Chapter 14

The first snows of December fell gently, blanketing the valley in a thin veil of white and quiet stillness. With most of the larger beasts gone, and others soon to follow, it was a time for the lesser creatures of the vales to once again show themselves and become a part of the living world. For at last the change had come, and the dangers grown less. The weather was mild and predictable. The cold was not yet piercing.

It was a time when young foxes, weary of caution and hiding, were free to forage among the brakes and hedges unafraid, leaving behind them tiny craters in the snow. Northern rabbits, now splotching white through their seasonal brown, could also be seen moving easily through the tree-ringed meadows, stuffing themselves to soft roundness in preparation for the cold and hungry days

ahead. Only the sounds of late-migrating geese disturbed the stillness, passing over but not touching the thousand microcosms below, alone unto themselves.

It was but a brief respite. And through all their simple and wordless joys of freedom, the creatures that remained knew it must be used as a time of preparation—that the Cold World would soon be upon them. Kalus spent the gradually shortening days in tentative hope and lingering doubt, and wondered at the growing emotions inside him, brought alive and set in inevitable conflict, he imagined, by the girl. He had never felt life so close around him, and the feelings it brought were not without their measure of apprehension and uncertainty. So he cut and gathered wood, made and refined tools, smoked meat and packed it with wild salt in the depths of niches and fissures he had discovered in the mountainside above them. Then covered the hiding places with stones.

Every pelt, no matter how small, was saved and turned into winter clothing by the girl, who seemed to be more adept at such things than he. Sometimes Kamela would hunt with him, to help provide for the wolves, but always with a dull and hopeless look in her eyes that Kalus felt very deep in his heart. The long scar on her underside, which he had seen only once, while she slept, could tell him only a part of the tale. And of the rest she was closed even with Akar.

But most of all he thought of Skither, and wondered when he would return.

Sylviana lay propped on her elbows, her favorite fur half in and half out of the entrance of the smaller cave, looking down on the snow-dusted grasses with misting and faraway eyes. Her mood triggered by the scene, she was thinking of the fragile water domes she had toyed with as a child, all alone in the unused bedroom of her grandmother's house. Christmas. Her mind conjured the room before her: the massive four-posted bed, the mahogany dresser crowned with photographs of aunts and uncles, the lace-curtained and frosting windows. And she remembered one in particular, a Nativity scene, her favorite. She remembered the way the tiny flakes would sift softly through the water and onto the roof of the manger, only to be swept away again as she lifted the glass dome and shook it. The water would swirl like a sudden wind, then the flakes settle slowly.....

She was aware of movement on the plains below. Her eyes focused, and she saw Kalus walking back towards the mountain through the snow-covered grasses, turning his head from side to side, watching. Though he would never admit it, she knew he was worried over Skither's extended absence, and about its bearing on their safety and their future. He stood at the edge of the gorge, looked up at her, then descended the steep half-path of stone and was swallowed up in shadow. Her mind returned fully to the present.

They had moved to the smaller enclosure as soon as Akar was able, expecting to be there only a short time; but the Mantis had not returned. Nearly six weeks had passed since his departure, and the girl, at least, had begun to think he never would. But if ever she mentioned the possibility to Kalus, he grew sullen and cold; and she had decided at length to put the thought from her mind, and let Nature run its course. Still, she couldn't help wondering how it would be if the larger cave were truly theirs. She had grown very fond of, or at least accustomed to, the safety of the mountain'—their word for the higher, tooth-shaped rise in the ridge of granite cliffs—and leaving it now for the uncertainty that lay beyond was not a thought she relished.

Kalus made his way up the slope to the Mantis' ledge, paused for breath, then continued. Climbing ever closer up the path, he smiled at her with half his face, and reaching the parapet, passed by her and went inside. The pup, roused from its attentions to a small bone, wagged its tail and ran to greet him as always. Akar sat up gingerly on his two furs near the back of the enclosure. Kamela was off somewhere alone. The girl rose after a time, ducked her head and followed him in.

He sat cross-legged on the floor with the pup in his lap, thinking. She knew that look. Something (more than the ordinary) was troubling him. After a short silence she asked simply.

'What's wrong?'

'Skither should have been back by now. The weather is growing too cold, and still he doesn't come.' Sylviana said nothing. He looked at her. 'I know. I feel it too. This place is too small for so many to live. If he doesn't return soon I will try to find us another place.' She hesitated. 'What about the lower cave?'

'Perhaps. But not yet.' He set down the wolf pup and drew his legs together with

his arms, sat gnawing at his knees and looking worried.

The girl moved behind him and began to massage his neck and shoulders. He reached up a hand as if make her stop, but instead took her by the wrist and turned to face her. His deep blue eyes studied her with an unreadable expression. Dropping to one knee in the way now familiar, she stroked his open forearm tentatively.

'Are you angry with me?'

'No.' He shook his head, kissed the back of her hand. He drew back into his former attitude and remained silent for a time, occasionally rocking himself and staring at the floor. Finally, as with great effort, he said the words.

'I'm confused.'

'About what?'

'The Mantis. And you.'

'Why me?'

'You make the world so much closer. I can't run, or close my mind anymore. Almost, I can't hide from the questions..... I can't speak of it now. Not yet.'

Sylviana knew he would say nothing more. Again she stroked his arm, felt his hand encircle her wrist, then rose to prepare a meal.

*

That night as they lay together among the furs that made their bed, Kalus moved close beside her and buried his head against her chest. Though they had slept together many times, he had not yet tried to make love to her. In his instinctive way he sensed she was not ready, and in fact this voice inside him was correct. He still, in part, represented to her the harsh world from which he came, a world she was not ready to fully accept, or give herself up to. But this was not what held him back now. A fear that he could not understand—the fear of losing the things he had found—haunted him now as it had for weeks, seeming to

intensify with each passing day.

Sylviana stroked his hair, now smooth, and felt him warm against her. They lay thus for several minutes, until she realized he was crying. She took his face in her hands, not understanding.

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly, shaking his head and clearing his eyes. 'I didn't mean to frighten you.' She took a deep breath and rolled onto her back in frustration. But still the warmth that was in her made her reach out and touch his face, his neck.

'The only thing that frightens me is not knowing what you're feeling. You never tell me. You keep it all inside. I know it hurts, Kalus, a lot. But you have to try. I'm not going to judge you, or think you're weak.... I care for you very much. In my way. . .I love you.' Kalus gripped the edge of the fur and curled it tightly in his hand, as if needing to use his body over mind. The night was quiet and still around them.

'I don't know what we'll do if he doesn't come back.'

'Well, what are our choices?' She truly wanted to know, and she thought it might give him something concrete to discuss. She knew, or thought she knew, he didn't deal well with abstractions.

As he spoke the words, Kalus felt reluctance giving way. Almost it came as a relief to let go. And as he spoke it took his mind from the place they were, and into something like a dream, however real, that gave him some escape from himself. Though his worry was not abated.

'I've thought about returning to Carak Mesa, where my people live in warmer weather. There are several caves, joined by short passageways, and one chamber that is large enough for all of us. It is dry, and gives some protection against the wind.

'But it is too hard to defend,' he continued. 'Even with a man guarding each entrance, we had to keep our fires burning brightly and our weapons close at hand. Barabbas held it more through intimidation than anything. Perhaps we could block all but one entrance. But the rock is like hard white earth filled with pebbles—'

'Limestone,' interjected the girl.

'Yes, and not always firm to brace wooden poles and stones across.' His gaze returned from the low roof. 'Do you want to here this?'

'Yes, very much.' Even this brief scenario had given a clearer picture of his life among the hill-people than all the shy, abbreviated accounts which had come before it.

'There are other caves, along the ridge farther north. But they are not large, and too close to the bottom of the gorge. I don't like to think that other creatures could crawl down on me: being below the level of the land. Then there are the earth-holes dug by the wolves in the Northern Hills. With Akar —the pack has gone to the South, as I told you—it would be all right for us to live there until Spring, perhaps longer.

'But there also, there are too many unknowns. The great bears come farther south in Winter, crossing the Broad River far to the west, where it is shallower and stony. Their violence, when enraged, is like no other creature. My father was killed by such a bear. . .and the thought of finding you, dragged out across a hillside..... That is what I fear above all else.' He released a troubled breath.

'The sandstone ridge, the caves to the south, are of stone even worse than the Carak. And there the mountain cats rule. I don't know where else to go.'

'What about Skither's cave?'

He shook his head. 'Even if Skither has gone to another place (the thought that he was injured and unable to return, was something his mind could not accept), the entrance is much too hard to defend. Perhaps we could block up this passage with stones.' He pointed toward the smaller opening. 'But what can we do with an entrance so high as the one below? That is the same reason we cannot stay here. Soon all creatures will know that Skither is gone, and then the shaft becomes the thing impossible to defend.' This was the chance she had waited for, but now she felt reluctant to speak.

'I think..... I know a way we could barricade the entrance, and make the larger cave safe.' His eyes narrowed upon her turned form, silhouetted against the patch of starry sky beyond. 'It would be hard work, and you would have to let me help you. But it can be done.' Again, though his own shape was lost against the back

of the enclosure, she felt the deep and sullen trepidation inside him. 'We don't have to think about it now.'

'There is a real way? That you have seen?'

'Yes.'

After an interval of silence he moved away, as if to sleep. But soon the great emptiness and restlessness came over him again. Hardly knowing why, he moved closer and put his arm across her, feeling her body against him. He lay still for a moment. His heart beat heavily, and slowly his hand found its way to her breast.

Sylviana felt this, more aware perhaps than he, of the feelings that lay behind it. She felt his gentle, yearning caress, closed her eyes peacefully and yielded to it until she felt the hand stop, tremble slightly, and he moved away again.

'No, Kalus. It's all right.'

Through the stir of her emotions a feeling of sudden, firm resolve came over her. She stood up, reached down to her waist, and took off her blouse. She unfastened, and slipped out of her faded jeans. She removed her underclothes more slowly, her own heart beating heavily, and lay down beside him. And shyly, and affectionately, and longingly drew him close.

His heart thundering, he pulled away his own garments and surrendered to the torrent inside him. His last words as emotion and sensation overpowered him were strange, yet he spoke them with all his soul.

'I need you. Sylviana!'

And her name flowed like water through the piercing of his heart.

Chapter 15

A light snow fell from the silent soft grayness of the sky. Sylviana stood on the parapet with the fur wrapped around her, immersed in a feeling of peace and attachment to her world such as she had seldom experienced. She watched Kalus on the ledge below, unaware of her eyes, studying the high entrance to the Mantis' cave and pacing uncertainly. At first, as it often did, her mind questioned his mood. How could he not still feel the warmth and purposeful beauty of their love-making, the gentle gifts that Nature was bestowing on them even now?

But as she continued to watch him, a feeling of contented understanding had so overwhelmed her doubts as to make them appear small and mean, a source of reproach and beneath further consideration.

For here, she then expounded, was a creature untainted by civilization or corrupt society, his roots in the earth, his feet sometimes painfully touching the ground beneath him, free (indeed unable to do otherwise) to react naturally and honestly, like a graceful and intelligent animal, to the world and circumstances around him. Therefore, her thoughts continued, his hopes, fears and yearnings were a direct outgrowth of that world. His morals, free from religious preconceptions, were dictated to him solely and directly by the needs of Nature.

Her last thought came to her as a culmination, almost an orgasm, of all the others that had come before it, tying them together and giving them still greater meaning and significance. Her lover lived, the more so because he did not know it, the deepest and purest human existence: that of spiritual yearning, and animal desire.

She pulled the soft fur tighter, massaged one arm with the other, and looked out across the plains. The snow had all but stopped, and far out over the western hills her eyes caught movement against the clouds. It might have been an eagle but for the unnatural, straight ahead motion of its flight.... Her heart sank. Slowly but steadily the flying shape drew on, till there could be no doubt. Dejectedly, she called down to her companion.

'Kalus.' His head jerked towards her. 'You'd better come up here.' He turned a quick half circle and drew his sword as if expecting danger. Finding none, he looked up at her with a questioning gaze. Her arm pointed out over the grass- and tree-pocked drifts of the savanna. Seeing what she saw, but not appearing to, he sheathed his sword and began to climb. Not until far past the halfway point did he look up from the stone in front of him. Misunderstanding, she pointed

again.

'Put down your arm,' he said in guarded tones. Soon he stood on the parapet beside her, and only then looked out at the lowering sky. The girl spoke.

'It's Skither.'

'No. It's not.'

'Then who?' He shook his head.

Soon she too could see that it was not the mantis they had known. It was smaller, and flew with greater speed but less grace. Also, the feel of it was different. It was very close now, perhaps a mile off, and though it struggled in a growing tailwind, its wing-plates ruffling badly, it seemed determined not to rest until it had reached the mountain, where clearly now it was heading. Finally it crossed the gorge and landed roughly on the ledge, its brownish-green armor looking unnatural against the stone and snow. Kalus, whose tracks showed plainly about the entrance, set his jaw and said nothing. Akar limped out of the enclosure and stood between them, studying the young mantis.

It remained motionless, head down and breath coming hard, oblivious to anything but its own fatigue. Finally raising its head, it studied the tracks briefly, then turned towards the three of them with no outward sign of surprise. At length it raised an unsteady foreclaw and signaled someone, apparently Kalus, to come down. Through her confusion and alarm, Sylviana suddenly noticed that its other forelimb was severed just below the first joint. One of its antennae was also missing, and it seemed to stand only with an effort.

Kalus took a step forward but was stopped by Akar, who took his wrist gently but firmly between his jaws. Kalus relented, and let the wolf pass instead. Akar made his way to the path, and taxing the wounded shoulder only at greatest need, began to descend. But in an angry rocking motion that clearly showed its displeasure, the mantis waved him off. It raised the intact foreclaw once more, this time pointing undeniably at Kalus. He turned to the girl.

'I don't know what this means. But he will not kill me like this. It is not their way.' He gave his head a severe shake, and made his way down the slope.

Stepping out onto the ledge as he had once done before Skither, Kalus felt less

awe but greater danger. Not yet an adult, the creature before him was a mystery. And young and hurt and exhausted, there was no way of knowing..... Stopping at a distance, Kalus began to signal a greeting.

Brushing off his half understood formalities, the mantis came straight to the point. 'I am only a messenger,' he began, 'Sent by others to relay this news. Skither is dead, killed by a mating pair as he tried to draw them out to the place where others stood waiting.'

Kalus' heart sank, as if a part of himself had died as well. He hardly noted what followed, and only much later was able to piece it all together in his mind.

The seasonal battle in the desert spawning place had been fierce and desperate. Apparently Skither had half expected such an end, for he left word with his comrades of the man-child and his mate, leaving these instructions for them:

'The cave is now yours, along with everything in it. This, my messenger, will remain here until he is well enough to move on. Be of good hope, and continue.'

But Kalus stood in empty disbelief. He could not believe, for all that he held to be strong and unchanging had been suddenly, irrevocably cut out from under him. Skither had been more than a symbol to him, he had been a living god—strength and courage and wisdom personified. If he in all his prowess could be broken, then what chance did he himself have against the ceaseless ravages of his world? The question was too much for him.

In all his days he would see only two more of the noble creatures. Their time on earth running out, it was perhaps a small comfort to know that the reign of their enemies was also passing. A thousand years of radiation and unlimited carrion had raised the tarantula to its huge proportions. But now, like the mantis, who had grown of Nature's necessity alongside it, the giant spiders were an archaic and dying race. And though each year the gathering was larger—as if some last instinct called all in desperation to the place of spawning—each time the number of eggs left untouched (by the mammals which had come to prey on them) was smaller. And without the ensuing cannibalism among the hatchlings—out of which several hundred would be reduced to perhaps a dozen—those that survived were more feeble, easier for both the mantises and natural attrition to kill. An era born of the violence of men was slowly passing.

Kalus turned without ceremony or awareness and made his way back to the path.

He climbed without feeling, or knowing where he was, and heard a voice inside him say it was all right, he still had the woman.

Then all at once he felt the fullness of what he had learned, and knelt down and leaned forward against the cold indifferent stone. His arm gave his eyes no comfort.

Skither was dead.

Sylviana watched him with apprehension. She had felt an unreasoning terror as he stood before the wounded insect; but now a fear more akin to reality, and therefore duller and deeper, presented itself. She could not know what was said to him, but she knew him well enough to understand at least a part of what he was feeling. Some grim news (or threat) had been passed on to him; and because he had been weak, because he had surrendered to emotion, because he had made love, he was being punished, and blamed himself. Such were the scars that his life had left upon him.

When at length he looked up at her, she knew that her fears had been realized. The closeness and love that had been in his eyes so few hours before, were gone. All feeling had left him, and he was again trapped in the world he did not understand.

His guiding star was gone.

Chapter 16

The next morning when Kalus woke, he felt, through the pain and loss, a resurgence (and need) of life and hope. The cold had crept beneath his fur while he slept, and all around him hung a chill moist air that called for action. He still cared for the girl, there were other lives linked to his own, and he knew he must continue. Skither had told him he must.

So he rose and walked out onto the parapet. Sylviana was there ahead of him, her eyes tearing from the cold and lack of sleep, wrapped in the same fur that now seemed more a refuge than a friend. And though he was sorry he couldn't,

he did not touch her. She turned to him a face that understood, but hurt the more because of it. He pretended not to notice.

'Has the mantis come out yet?'

'No. Akar tried to go to him. I think he hurt his shoulder again. You can see him —' She pointed just inside the larger entrance, to the place where the wolf waited on its haunches.

'Yes, but it was not done foolishly. We must move there anyway, and secure it for ourselves as soon as possible. We will have to work very hard, and you will have to help me.' Again his emotions had become an unreadable maze. Sylviana lowered her head and sighed, and the breath the wind blew back through her disheveled hair was clearly visible.

>From this, as well as other tokens, Kalus knew that the first real storms of winter were not far off, and tried to gird himself for the arduous labor to come. He was ready to break his back and his heart to construct the shelter Sylviana had described, but all pleasure had gone out of the thought.

It was still morning when the young mantis emerged, looking little better than it had the day before. From the long ripple in the underside of its abdomen, both Kalus (who had descended) and the wolf could see it had not eaten. But when Akar, as best he could, asked if he would not stay a day longer and partake of the food that Skither had left him, he was curt to the point of menace.

'I will not dishonor his memory in that way.'

'But surely—'

'I will not dishonor his memory!'

And so, without formality or warning cry, without perhaps the proper preparation, the creature opened its wings, raised itself into the air, and left them forever. Its form grew small and disappeared into the west like a drowning branch carried past by a river. And the river flowed on, unchanging.

Then Sylviana climbed down and stood beside them, trying to be a part of, or at least to understand, what had happened.

'What did he say to you?'

'That he would not eat, or remain another hour. He seems determined to prove that he needs nothing and no one.'

Trying to think in the vernacular of that world, she put in timidly.
'He will be very strong someday.'

'If he lives.' She said nothing more.

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As if in imitation, Kalus determined to begin the work at once. Using one of the poles from the neglected frame, he carved a handle for the rusty ax-head the girl had found. He sharpened its cutting edge as best he could, and with the sun at its height, set out to begin felling trees.

Sylviana went with him, along with Kamela, for warning and added protection. He cut and pieced an entire tree before he would let himself rest. Then together he and the girl carried a twelve-foot section back to the cave, he bearing most of the weight on his shoulder, asking only that the girl come behind and steady him.

And so the long toil began.

Sylviana's plan, which he modified only slightly, was to build a three-sided barrier of interlocking logs, like an open letter C. Its ends would rest just inside the arch, gradually narrowing as they rose, nearly flush, against the inner walls of the entrance. It was to be reinforced from within by stout beams, and by the strength of these, as well as by its own girth and weight, to form an impenetrable barrier against both the elements, and the fiercest predators. A single, windowless door would pierce the forward wall, and the entire structure be sealed inside and out with mortar, and at the edges, with bricks of stone. Sylviana had read a book as a child in which a family of pioneers had built a log cabin, using only the materials provided by Nature. And now the memory of it served her well.

So Kalus cut, and they both carried, till she thought her back would break and Kalus die, where he stood, of exertion. She could not know that what pained him

far more than the ceaseless labor (he had worked as hard before) was the fact that he was using all his spiritual, as well as physical reserves.

Because a man can work as hard and diligently as he must, to the extreme limits that mind and body will endure, so long as he has a reason, and a need to do so. And when it is done to provide food and shelter for the lives entrusted to his care, he can work harder and more selflessly still. But take away his reason, his hope for some kind of betterment, however distant, and the strongest, most determined man becomes rootless and lethargic. Tasks and dangers he thought little of before, become as tedious and harrowing as a literal fight for life. Kalus continued because he knew, as every animal does, that he must continue. But as the work sapped his strength and the emotional wound caused by the death of Skither bled unchecked, he became first weary, then angry, then through the ceaseless, hopeless repetition, empty and indifferent.

Sometimes when he felt weakest he would look at the girl, and remember the beautiful thing they had shared. And for a time these memories of warmth and desire would sustain him. But soon all fantasies of a peaceful and prosperous future became nothing more to him than a carrot dangling at the end of a stick, though he possessed no such metaphor to help him understand. And he had no psychologist to tell him that by submerging his grief and distancing himself from the girl he was hurting himself, and stifling the healing forces of time and close companionship. He cut, and carried, and shaped and fitted, sometimes in blinding snow, stopping during daylight hours only to hunt, or to look over what had been done. Because he had no choice.

And slowly the shelter went up. Pine and birch and gnarled oak, he laid them down and made a refuge of their bones, as dark thoughts tormented him.

But the shelter went up. And the night the frame was completed, and all work done save the filling in of cracks, the heaviest storm of the season moved in and piled three feet of snow outside it, blocking them in with drifts up to twice that high. Without warning or ceremony, their new home had been christened.

The next morning Kalus had not the strength to force open the frozen door, and sat alone by the fire for hours, speaking to no one, feeling nothing but weak and shivery exhaustion. The Cold World, which he had said he loved, was upon them.

Chapter 17

That night the two slept together for the first time since word of Skithier's fall. Kalus had no strength even to touch, and was moved not at all by his lover's gentle caresses and quiet words, nor even by the tears he wiped apologetically from her eyes as she said, 'I understand.' From this more than any other token, he knew that the blows absorbed of a lifetime had finally taken their toll. He was like a hurt fighter, hanging on, half waiting for the knockout blow.

He woke feeling little bitter, his emotions still dazed and floundering, to find the girl reading quietly on the stairs that led to the silent altar. The sight reminded

him of their first meeting, when he had nearly died a physical death. Perhaps this dull anguish was not as bad.....

Then he saw Kamela, and his hopelessness returned. It was almost as if she longed for death, in any form. There was no other way to read the blank despair of her eyes. Akar rested stoically beside the girl, his own thoughts hidden from view. Only the pup was stirring, poking impatiently at her mother's underside and whining plaintively for food. None had eaten meat for several days, and the she-wolf's undamaged breasts were dry.

Sylviana rose and came closer, gently brushing his hair with her fingers. 'I have to hunt,' he said flatly. Then suddenly as she turned away he pulled her close and buried his head against her.

'Forgive me,' he said. And with those words a flicker of feeling came back to him.

'It's all right,' she said. 'Let it out.' But he could not let it out. His body would not allow the expenditure. '... When do you have to hunt?'

'In the afternoon, when the sun is warmer and I am stronger. I feel so weak.' He shook his head to fight off a tear of exhaustion. 'Is there any water left?' She brought it, along with a half-filled bowl of sebreum. He ate readily, though his body cried out for meat.

She sat beside him on the bed, speaking softly and brushing out his hair. It did not matter what she said. Her voice was like music, and her nearness and touch a therapy no money could buy. And like a sleeper woken by a lover's kiss, he began to respond. His body was still very weak, but Kalus was a creature whose heart held the key to all survival.

And he began to remember that he was, in fact, a survivor. The fiery vigor of his soul spoke words of endurance and starting again. In the middle of a sentence he reached over and kissed her with his lips, teeth and tongue, and half playfully, half longingly, bit her cheek.

As he drew back, knowing he had not the strength, he was struck by the look she gave him, her face so close. And he was jarred to his very bones by the realization. . .that she wanted him. WANTED him.

All his life, the best he had hoped for was a companion who would tolerate him, and be grateful for his strength and affection. But in Sylviana's eyes there was a longing as deep and real as his. Perhaps she even loved. . .HIM. In his current state it was almost too much, and he became afraid. Again, through the wild hopes she inspired in him, he felt the fear of losing her, or of being killed himself. His face could not hide the intensity of what he was feeling.

'What is it?' she asked. 'What's wrong?'

'I don't know. I.... You know that I am weak now. Is that all right?'

She took his head to her chest in an outpouring of emotion as primal as any she had ever known. 'Yes. It's all right.' And in that moment of honesty and total surrender, she did love him. But she too backed away, because they were not yet in a place to feel love all the way. She cleared her eyes, breathed in and stood up straight.

'Right now you're going to eat again, and I don't want to hear about rationing. You've been putting out for weeks, and it's time you took something back in. Then you're going to lie down and rest. Understood?' He nodded, and touched her hair. Then she took his bowl and went into the back.

He too felt the need to surrender, and to trust, as Skither had told him. He remembered his words. 'Do not carry the weight alone. It will crush you.' Yes, he felt nearly crushed. Whatever end would come of it, this day at least he must let go.

So when he had eaten he lay down on the bed, and asked Sylviana to sit beside him. She did, and to pass the time he asked her a question suggested to him by the altar, the dulled mirror, and the memory of his first days in that place.

'How did you come to befriend Akar? I've often wondered.'

'You're not asking just to make me feel better?'

'No, truly.'

She was more than willing to recount the one glad memory of her long vigil, alone in a strange land with danger and confusion all around. 'Well. To say that I was distraught those first few weeks..... Try to understand. The first thing I saw

when I finally mustered the courage to go out onto the ledge, was some kind of big cat dragging down a horse at the very edge of the ravine. I got so scared I didn't know what to do. The cave seemed little enough protection, but at least there I could hide. I know you must have thought me a coward.'

'No, you were wise. And the big cat did you a favor.' There was no sarcasm in his voice.

'Anyway. Once I figured out that sebreum was something I could eat, as much as I cursed myself for it, I just couldn't make myself go out into that world. Then there was the Voice, telling me to stay there, and wait for some kind of sign.

'I was alone and scared and miserable. That anything at all could walk through the open entrance and tear me apart was obvious, and it really started getting to me. The few animals I saw when I stood just inside it seemed reluctant to venture too close, but that wasn't much comfort. And of course I had no idea why.

'But one night, just as the sun was setting, I caught a glimpse of something slip down into the ravine from the far side, which had always before been the line they wouldn't cross. I hoped my eyes were playing tricks on me, and I didn't see or hear anything else for a while. But some kind of other sense told me I was in danger, and that whatever it was I had seen was coming closer. I got so scared I ran to the bed and hid beneath the furs, as if that was any protection, and found myself shaking like a leaf.

'I couldn't just lie there, and when I realized how stupid and helpless I was being, I got angry. So I decided to go into the back and dig out some kind of weapon. It may have been my one real moment of courage.'

'There have been others,' he said quietly. She turned towards him, and wondered why these simple words meant so much. 'Go on.'

'All right. I went into the back and found the hunting knife. I was so determined and angry that for about thirty seconds I forgot to be afraid. It was a wonderful, defiant feeling.'

'Yes.'

'Unfortunately it didn't last. I walked back into the front to find a big, gaunt wolf

staring me down, bristling and snarling. It was Akar, but he didn't look at all the way he does now. His ribs practically stuck through his skin with hunger. His side was gashed and caked with mud and dried blood..... It was horrible.

'I screamed and practically threw the knife across the floor. I just couldn't take it. I dropped to my knees, shaking and crying like a mad thing. I fell forward on my arms and just lay there, covering my head..... I thought my life was over. But Akar never moved.' She gazed across at her first companion, eyes glistening.

'Do you know what it's like to expect death and find friendship? He was hurt, Kalus, badly. And half starved, I'm sure. He could have killed me so easily, to save himself..... I looked up after maybe five minutes, to find him just watching me, with all the hatred gone out of his eyes. He came closer and I thought I would scream again, but he stopped.

'The rest doesn't need to be said, I guess. But you have to know, I've never been so moved in all my life as when he finally came up to me, and I realized he meant no harm. Just to have a friend, to hold and touch, after all that fear. To not be alone anymore. You can't know how much that meant to me.' She lowered her head and cried silently, and Kalus found to his dismay that a tear had escaped his eyes as well.

'I know,' he said. 'That is how I felt when Barabbas saved me.' He wanted to say that she would never be alone again, but he couldn't.

Chapter 18

The escape and release were not lasting. Almost the moment Sylviana stopped speaking, he felt the cold dread of what he must do return from its small distance. He must leave this safe place and hunt. And though under present circumstances the odds against him were appalling, he knew he had to try. If the reserves of salted meat were tapped too soon, the sebreum not rationed, they would all starve in the cold heart of Winter. Trust, and wishing it otherwise, could not alter the fact.

'I must go,' he told her. 'Keep the door shut and bolted until

I return. This is a dangerous time.'

'Why? I thought most of the predators were gone.'

'There are always stragglers, and outcasts. They do well for a time, but with the coming of deep snow find they cannot hunt, or even retreat. Near starvation makes them desperate, and they will attack almost anything.' These words, along with the anxious body language she had learned to read in him—taut expression and deep, determined breathing—frightened her.

'Be careful.'

'Of course. I will take Kamela, if she will come.' He put on his heavy winter robe of buffalo skin, buckled the sword around it, and went to the door.

Kamela rose to follow, but Akar limped down from his place beside the altar and tried to interpose his body between her and the way she wished to go. Words passed between them which could not be understood by the others. Kalus saw only that Akar sensed some danger, to Kamela in particular, and did not wish them to go. But the she-wolf growled sullenly and pushed past him. Akar, who knew her thoughts, relented.

'You leave love behind you,' he said solemnly, and returned to his place. Her eyes followed him, and she looked to the sleeping form of the pup. Then turned away almost sorrowfully. She had felt love even then, and it was more than she could bear.

Kalus could not at first open the door. After several frustrated attempts he set down his sword, threw off the fur and angrily set to work. He pushed, pulled back, cursed and set his full weight against it.

At last the snow and icy jambs relented, and they went out into the windy sea of powder. They passed through the gorge, and out onto the table-like plain.

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Kamela could not block the images from her mind; they rose in their full intensity before her. The death of Shaezar, whom she had learned to love. The

brutal rape by Shar-hai and his guard. Then the murder of her two sons, too small even to understand what was happening. A line of horror had been crossed inside her, from which there was no returning.

They struggled together through the snow, these two whom life had wounded, the wolf mortally, the man to within the balance of a hair, though he still had hope. Kalus, knowing her pain, cut the best swath he could, and Kamela followed behind him. The wind had distributed the snow unevenly, so that in some places movement was relatively easy, in others, nearly impossible. The thick overcast of the sky threatened further storm, and the white of the accumulated snow could not fully illuminate the darkened landscape.

They traveled north where Kalus hoped, though his heart was sickened by it, to find a frozen deer among the outlying forests. They really had no other chance. The plains animals were gone, live deer were too swift, and no rabbit or fox would be stirring in the extreme cold of this day.

So he trudged northward, chilled and sweating, using strength his body did not have to give. His stomach felt hollow and sickly; his muscles trembled with fatigue. But he knew (or thought) the alternative was despair, and his mind was not clear enough to perceive the danger. So he continued.

And as he pushed on, farther and farther beyond the limits of endurance, it was as if he passed through a veil and walked, literally, into another world. Time and distance became confused. . .and still on his feet he dreamed of straggling columns of men, plodding through a frozen countryside. Ragged blue uniforms clung to their backs, to his. Wounded and sick, with helpless eyes searching both sides of the road, fearful of ambush. A comrade addressed him in French.....

He stumbled forward in the snow, recovered himself. The world was quiet and deathly still. Kamela stood beside him, tense and erect, ears raised and eyes searching. They had wandered into a recession between wooded hills, where the snow was thick and visibility difficult. A pine branch released its burden of white, and suddenly he felt it too. They were being watched. He had led them into an ambush.....

A dark shape flitted between trees on the eastern slope. A low, impatient growling was heard. Kalus drew his sword to make a stand, but Kamela would not let him. She bolted toward the slope even as a rush of movement erupted

there. Two thin and ravaging wolves, along with three hyenas, broke from cover and began to converge upon the line she made, straight for them.

Her motive was simple. Her own life meant nothing, and the man-child need not die. Also, there was the chance for revenge. She ran toward death free and unafraid.

Kalus hesitated, unsure of enemies behind, and by the time he turned and made up his mind to follow, it was too late. They were upon her, harrying and tearing in a scene made horrible and slow-motion by the snow. Yet somehow she snarled free and lunged at one of the wolves, who had stumbled. The others tore into her side and back legs, but her teeth had found their mark, and her last desire was fulfilled. The brutal Armus, black wolf of Shar-hai's guard, fell gasping and bleeding, his throat cut. As Kamela surrendered willingly to death.

She was gone, and Kalus knew it, and the worst part was that his mind had already begun to accept it. Raging at his weakness and cowardice, he rushed toward the scene of her bloody debauch.

But for all his reckless will and hatred, his body simply would not respond. He had not gone twenty paces before his heart and lungs screamed in revolt, and all strength left him. At the same moment the hyenas left their kill and savagely blocked his path. Their bristling, snarling warnings said as clearly as words. 'Be gone, or we will kill you, too.'

And as he stood helpless, mustering all his courage just to stand and look imposing, the remaining wolf rushed past them and would have attacked. But the others would not follow, and he was reluctant to face Kalus' sword alone. By her final act of defiance, Kamela had saved his life.

The hyenas returned to the still body of the she-wolf, and bickering among themselves, began to drag it back into the forest. The companion of Armus stood for a time beside him, as if expecting him to somehow shake off the stroke and rise again. But soon he saw that the wound was mortal, and knew his own life was in danger if he stayed. The hyenas would turn on him next, and he had no illusions about what would happen to the body of his friend. He turned to the northwest, and disappeared beneath the silently whispering pines.

Kalus was left alone with the dying wolf. And as he watched its terrified eyes grow dull slowly like a fire that had burned itself to nothing, he felt he watched

his own death as well. He had failed again, miserably, and felt all chance for survival, and the will to continue, evaporate. He fell to his knees in exhaustion, and heard the lone wolf at its distance release a long howl of despair. Night fell, and darkness was all around him.

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Walking back alone was perhaps the hardest thing he had ever had to do. In his darkened state he felt he had no reason to live, but some stubborn and unvanquished voice told him he must return. Weak and trembling, genuinely ill, he had no other goal but to reach the cave and collapse. Digging deep, time and time again, he searched for the will to go on, just a little farther, holding the image of the girl like an icon and a Quest before him. Many times he stumbled, and had to rouse himself to keep from lying down to sleep, and die, in the snow. So weak and pathetic had his movement become that two jackals thought to attack him, and had to be driven back, though they followed the rest of the way.

At long, impossible length he reached the gorge path and slithered down. Upon reaching its base he could not at first rouse himself to continue. A great wall of despairing fatigue seemed to stand before him, on top of him, and in his bones, an impenetrable 'No' formed of unendurable stone. He was tired, and the weight was too much.

His one desire at that moment was to sleep and say goodbye. Just sleep. Sylviana would understand. After all, she still had Akar. Together they could fly with Skither to the Island, and all would be well. And he smiled, because Skither was not dead. That was only a dream. Together they rode on his wings, above the parting clouds.....

Through the delirium he heard a confused sound of high yapping barks and deeper, more terrible growls. Then he felt a tugging at his shoulder and finally, the cutting of teeth. He jerked forward in dismay, expecting to be assailed.

But the call to life had come from Akar, who stood guarding him quietly in the darkness, stood waiting for him to revive, stand, and make the final effort. Kalus raised himself slowly, let out a groan of pain and loss, then followed him up the merciless incline.

At length a door was opened in front of him and a feverish light streamed out. He fell forward. Perhaps someone caught him; perhaps they did not.

He knew nothing more.

Chapter 19

Kalus revived (or came to) the next morning, but could not at first remember where he was. The events of the day before had struck so suddenly..... Again he lay in the bed of cool moss, covered with furs, his wounds being treated by the soothing hands of a woman-child. He turned as if in a dream to look upon the face of his redeemer.

But no, that was long ago. Now the woman-child was his friend, his mate. Was it possible? Why was the chamber so cold? And what of the wolf-cub that lay nestled beside him? As the cloud of amnesia, like a blow to the head which

jarred him to another time, slowly cleared, he remembered. And understood. The images of Kamela's death came back to him with feverish clarity. He shivered, and a burst of physical panic made him bolt upright, scattering the furs and startling the cub. The girl took him by the shoulders and forced him back down. Unprotected, his skin felt icy cold, and his body ached with a dull, yellow pain.

One by one the furs were replaced on top of him. He did not fight, but clung to them as if to life, and tucked the edges beneath him to block out the cold. The need to struggle back to warmth was so great, and so immediate, that his mind had no time for despair, or the full realization of his plight. He shivered, and sucked his aching teeth and thought of nothing. At length he slept, though fitfully and full of dark dream.

He woke to find his worst fears come true. He was weak and ill, trapped in Winter, physically unable to fight for his survival. There was little food, and now no chance of getting more. The woman-child he loved, and the pup whose life was now his responsibility, would perish alongside him. All was ended. He had failed.

But all was not ended. That would have been too simple and absolute. They still had the reserves, though tapping into them so soon went against all his instincts, and roused the already powerful voices of fear inside him. And though to one who has never had to survive, literally, day to day, these emotions may seem mere words, to Kalus they were as powerful and menacing as the physical threat of a lion. How much more of this could his spirit endure? To rise, again and again, from the decimations of this world, to go on without hope for so long, never seeing the end of the tunnel.

Because a man who finds the tight-rope of his existence drawn so fine, the abyss below him so deep and terrifying, can never see the natural and benevolent forces that may (or may not) come to his aid. But the dangers and possible means of his downfall, wrapped with fear and based on past experience, are as clear to him as the struggling flesh he inhabits. For truth and fear exist only inches apart, and fear, by its very nature, will always seem the stronger voice. Men have faced this same darkness for thousands of years, and many fallen before it. And the darkness never ends.

Kalus felt, as he always had in times of deep struggle, the eternal desire for life that calls a man to action in the face of danger, and courage in the face of

despair. But he also felt something altogether new, or at least, never before felt at this level of intensity. He felt a flat and empty indifference that told him all such effort was futile, even laughable, in the eyes of the gods who tormented him. Just as a laboratory animal that can endure no more torture will simply stop eating and slowly die of shock, he too felt that he had been punished long enough, that any reasonable bounds of endurance had been long since passed, and that the hopeless games of this world no longer held any meaning for him. He saw only death: his father mauled by a bear, Shama torn open by Shar-hai and his guard, who had themselves been dragged back to earth. Skither, who had died alone in a stinking hole at the hands of mindless brutes, protecting others who were heedless. And at the last, when his spirit had nothing left, Kamela, who had perished to save his own, meaningless life.

The truth now seemed so clear to him that he was amazed he had not seen it before. All the useless struggles ended in death, either quickly, or in humiliating sickness and old age. All earthly bonds were passing, torn asunder by the whims of Nature and uncaring Time. And therefore all life was futile. Still worse, it was absurd. A man who possessed real courage only wasted it in endlessly trying to continue. Let him take that courage instead and say, 'Enough! This torture must not be allowed to continue. If I cannot choose the manner of my life, I will at least choose the manner, and time of my death.' Kalus knew nothing of existentialism, or the other fashionable philosophies of men. He knew nothing of the religious fears of mankind, or of his angry, despairing pride in himself. He knew only that his heart was broken, and he wanted to die. The dull and hopeless look that had fixed itself in the eyes of Kamela, became his as well.

He no longer cared, and had lost all fear of death.

Chapter 20

The wind howled outside them and the chamber held no warmth. His body shivered and coughed, and excreted the pain that knew no bounds. Sylviana

moved the fire closer to the bed, then tried to seal out the wind that stole through the cracks in the barrier.

It was hard and frustrating work. But rather than crumble to see Kalus laid so low, and become cold and distant, she sensed that responsibility for their survival had been shifted onto her, and she responded. Through all the trials, all the highs and lows that she had endured the last year of her life, she would have thought she'd have nothing left, and that such a crisis would be her final undoing. But she was wrong. A quiet strength and maturity had been growing inside her, and now she put it to the test.

Forming the mortar to fill the cracks required effort and endless perseverance. The hard earth below them, packed solid for so long, was reluctant to be uprooted and mixed with melting snow beside the fire. And the straw that was called for was simply unavailable. So she took dry pine needles, ground them up, and mixed them in by hand. The only large bowl they possessed—a curving palette of stone—held only a small amount compared to the number and size of the cracks she must fill, and it was heavy and awkward. Then the mortar itself seemed not to want to stay where it was put. It took constant adjustments in the mix and in her technique just to find a half workable formula. Her hands were cold and ragged and pricked by countless needles, and there was no one to encourage her or appreciate the effort. Kalus was oblivious, in sleep or in waking, and Akar was off somewhere alone. The pup followed her with its eyes and occasionally whimpered for food. That was all.

But that was not what mattered. The man she cared for, and who had done the same for her many times, was sick and helpless. She stayed with the task all through the night, until the work was done. Then at last, wearily, she made her way to the bed and knelt beside him. His fever still burned, and the cold drafts that pulsed down through the shaft still troubled him.

She thought to make up his bed somewhere else, but realized that laying him on the cold floor might be worse. She looked over through the shadows at the dais beneath the altar, but could not think how to bring the fire close enough.... The pup, lonely, hungry and confused, moved beside her and looked up at her with pleading eyes. She comforted it as best she could, then gently roused her companion.

'Kalus?'

'Yes.' His voice was flat, though he shivered.

'Later today I have to go to one of the reserves of meat, for the pup at least. Then maybe move you to the dais, if that will help. Where is the nearest of the reserves?'

He shook his head without a sound. Misunderstanding, she got angry.

'Why not? Don't you even care about the pup?'

Again he shook his head, and said in a hoarse voice. 'Too dangerous.'

'Damn,' she said. 'Damn it all.' True, bitter frustration had caught her at last, a destructive anger which found no release. She stood up and paced wildly around the room. He knew what she was feeling, and it troubled him.

'Where is Akar?' he asked.

'I don't know,' she replied, her anger turning swiftly to concern, then bordering on panic. 'He's been out since last night.' It would be the last straw if something had happened.....

She stiffened, hearing a scratching sound at the door. Fearing the worst, her mind made no connection until she heard a sharp bark, and Kalus said. 'It's the wolf.'

As she forced open the door against the onslaught of snow-laced wind, she slid down, shivering in the cold and wet. Akar slipped past her. When at last she recovered herself and rose and closed the door, she leaned back against it to face him, her emotions strained to the limit.

When she saw what he carried she knelt down and embraced him and wept. Though weak and injured himself, his mobility hampered still further by the snow, somehow he had done it. A large rabbit lay on the floor beside him.

'How did you do it?' she stammered. 'When we needed it most.' Again she buried her face against him, in her exhaustion unable to stop crying.

'Because he has the heart of a champion,' said Kalus, himself both moved and ashamed. The help unlooked-for had arrived, and they would live a little longer.

Chapter 21

The next day Kalus felt a little better. The small portion of meat he had been able to push past his swollen throat had calmed his delirium, and seemed to help his

body generate a little warmth of its own. But he was still very sick, and any attempt to get up and move about was met with failure and a stern rebuke from the girl. She didn't realize, and possibly shouldn't have, that to Kalus being helpless was the equivalent of being dead. This attempt at the least physical exertion, walking, was his way of rejecting fear and trying, impossible as the task seemed, to turn away from the inner darkness that told him his life was over.

Because Kalus, too, had great heart. No matter how many times he was broken, he had always been able to rally somehow and go on. The problem now was that he had lost sight of that faith and hope, the belief that no matter what happened, he would always find a way to survive, and keep the spirit alive inside him. His confidence in himself, at best of times uncertain because of the severity of the roads which led to manhood, was all but extinguished.

There had been so little margin for error in his life, and worse had come to worst so many times, that he could not help but wonder if he possessed some terrible flaw, some shortcoming which made failure inevitable. But when he looked at this more closely, he knew in his heart that he had always done his best: that he had taken the only paths open to him, that he had never quit, or expected anything to be easy or free.

What was it then that defeated him? To this he had no answer, only frustrated rage that having no release, turned inward upon itself. The bitter maze of his emotions had joined together into a tightly knotted and irremovable clot, blocking out all light and making life, even the simplest continuance, seem utterly impossible.

And yet another element had been thrown into the balance. He had discovered, almost suddenly, the depths of his love for Sylviana. And while this might have comforted him and been a source or quiet strength, two nagging fears had risen alongside it, which in his present state seemed undeniable. First, though he knew she cared for him, and in her way even loved him, that was now, when her need was greatest and there was no one else to choose from. What if someday there were others? And secondly, of more immediate concern, he felt he could not take care of her, or give her the things she needed to live. His every attempt had ended in failure and near disaster, and he clearly saw the price it cost her. He felt for this reason, and others like it, that he had no right to think of her as his own, a belief which galled his animal self to no end.

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As all of this passed inside him, Sylviana continued to work quietly away, doing everything she could think of to stabilize the temperature of the enclosure. First she took pine branches they had used as a blind outside the barrier, and placed them in a careful thatching pattern inside the shaft, here at the bottom where it was narrowest. This still allowed the smoke to pass up through it, if more slowly, but also kept out much of the wind, especially the sudden gusts which seemed to trouble him so.

Then she made a canopy of the projecting altar above his bed, stitching together a patchwork of smaller skins to hang down from it. She also heated stones beside the fire, and placed them by his side when he slept.

But perhaps the wisest and most beneficial thing she did for him in those days, beside not giving up herself, was to read to him. It occurred to her that one of the things that made his life so difficult was the fact that his deepest thoughts remained isolated: he didn't know that other men felt the same emptiness, and confronted the same unspoken fears. So she dug into the long, enclosed bookshelf that lay half buried in a corner of the treasure room, until she found works of fiction and philosophy which seemed appropriate. She then read to him fragments of each, asking which he preferred.

He was cold to the idea at first, not understanding, and expressed no preference. But she noticed that his eyes became puzzled and alert at the first chapter of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls,' and that he seemed to want to ask questions, but did not.

So she read him several chapters each day, until at last he began to open up, and to ask her. Had men really lived that way? Why did Robert Jordan not take the woman he loved far away from the war? And was it really possible to feel the earth move beneath them when they made love?

And slowly, as always, quietly, the profound pain and beauty of true literature began to work its haunting and healing magic upon him. His thought no longer bounded by the physical reality around him, he found in books a way to escape and look beyond himself, into worlds he had never dreamed of, and to empathize with struggles and disillusioning he had imagined did not exist outside himself. Simply put, he became connected to the souls, singular and collective, of humanity.

And to know the woman held all these things in her mind and in her heart, put him almost in awe of her. And in truth, she herself received more from the living pages than she had ever done before. Now that her own life had become so real, she discovered (probably something she knew, deep down) that the truly great writers did not exaggerate the intensity of human drama, or the power of their own emotions, but only spoke honestly and without dilution of the worlds that they had known. Dickens especially she loved, because he made her feel the joys and terrors of children, who from the outset of life had experienced sorrow and loss, when her own childhood had been so safe and full, the death of her mother notwithstanding. And she, too, began to see Kalus differently, and to understand some measure of the invisible pain he felt.

At times it was almost too much, for both of them, to look at life so closely in the midst of danger, and he would ask her to stop, or she would set down the book she read silently to herself. Such was the power of those days. With the intensity of Nature's relentless backdrop, emotions were tested like ship's rigging in a gale. And both knew, despite the woman's stubborn optimism, that it would take more than all their courage for the ship to still float brokenly at the morning of calm sea's return.

Invaluable time was passing, and Kalus' illness refused to heal. His body had been pushed beyond its limits, and a virus for which he had no defense (for it was carried by the girl) had entrenched itself in his lungs and intestines, spreading pain and chill weakness throughout. An unfair battle had been joined inside him, one in which will alone was not enough.

The man-child's hand was forced, and all power to choose taken from him. He must learn patience in the face of starvation.

Chapter 22

Two weeks passed, following much the same pattern: Kalus trying to fight back against sickness and despair, his inner fire burning ever lower, a continuing downward spiral. And the girl, trying to hold on to hope enough for both of them. But despite the books and her new-found courage, she too began to feel numbed by the incessant howling of Winter, that raged like a mindless brute

outside their doors, reaching in with deadly fingers at the slightest opportunity. She was puzzled also by Kalus' inability to recover from what seemed to her a simple, if severe, virus.

But if she was puzzled, Kalus was devastated. His entire existence, from youngest boyhood, had been based around hardihood and the ability to overcome wound, sickness and depravation. In his world those who could not do so perished. All the hard lessons he had learned, centered around one simple and unalterable necessity: self-reliance. And here he was, flat on his back, unable to fight or recover, unable to support even himself, let alone those he cared for. He was less than useless, a drain on their efforts, on their need to reject him and go on. Never had he known such helplessness.

But here the words run out. It was not a single catastrophic event, nor a succession of smaller devastations, which led him to his moment of destruction, but a lifetime of endless conflict, broken dreams and dark, twisted, hopeless roads. There was nothing left to say or feel. He simply could not go on. As Sylviana read to him the last chapter of Hemingway, the futility of life congealed into a single, inescapable blade that no longer hovered at a distance, but stood poised like a needle above his heart. All was black, and like Kamela before him the very throbbing of his heart, with its surges of love and hope was the final, crushing despair.

He waited until the girl was asleep, then put her knife into the soft flesh beneath his ear and began to cut downward, a sinister, sweeping smile.

But the pain was greater than he imagined, and something yet stronger stayed his hand. It wasn't that he lacked the courage. But if felt so very, very wrong. After all the battles he had fought and the hardships endured, all the times that death had been beaten back. . .to be his own undoing..... The instinct to survive had been too deeply ingrained. He dropped weeping and bleeding on his face, writhing in unquenchable anguish.

He still might have bled to death, but for the constant miracle that lived on unnoticed in their midst: the blind desire and yearning of youth, embodied in the new and emerging life of the pup. His elbow landed hard on one of its paws as it slept, and knowing nothing of hopelessness and death, it simply did what its senses told it to. It cried out.

Roused by the sound the girl came closer, lifted aside the canopy, and after a moment of helpless terror, turned Kalus onto his back and with shaking hands worked to stop the bleeding.

*

But the damage had been done. With that last paroxysm of emotion, all feeling left him. He was not only resigned to death, he believed the process had already begun. As the girl watched helplessly, he became like a critically abused child, neither eating nor speaking, without expression or sorrow or movement. His spirit was already dead, and waited only for the body to follow. The girl wept openly on his chest, but the seeds of his heart refused to grow. His tale was over, a tragedy.

On the third day he asked for a sip of water, told the girl that he loved her, and asked her to forgive him. She said nothing and he went to sleep, expecting never to be wakened in this world again.

*

But just as the spirit is not slave to the body, neither does the body cease to function simply because the will commands it. Though he had given up on life, life had not yet given up on him. Death, if he truly desired it, wasn't going to be that easy.

Chapter 23

The night was bitter and stark, with hard stars like countless pin-pricks staring lidless upon the Earth. The world itself was equally sharp, trees frozen, rocks cracking with the cold. But one creature, not yet versed in Night's supremacy, struggled on against the icy stillness.

The yearling tiger moved drunkenly forward, at intervals collapsing upon its injured hind leg. Weak from hunger and loss of blood, the dizziness was becoming chronic. It lay for a time where it had fallen, licking the hard snow and fighting, instinctively, to remain conscious. Though born to withstand the numbing cold there were other dangers, and death, a thing it did not understand but instinctively feared, was not far off.

Somehow it had wandered into a cleft between high walls. Forward or backward, it could not now recall. It regained its feet and struggled on. All bearing and sense of direction lost, it suddenly found itself confronted by a steep incline, rising darkly from the soft blur of white. Too young to know genuine despair, and too far gone to think otherwise, it began to climb. It sensed light, or warmth, or something ahead. All reason and strength slipped away as the world became level again, and it staggered forward unthinking, nothing more than a moth drawn by flame.

Something unyielding blocked its path, and now it smelled food. It scratched feebly and let out a mournful growl. Then all sense faded, and it fell into the drifting snow.

*

Sylviana heard a scratching sound at the door, then something that sounded as if the night itself had been given bitter voice. Akar was not with them, and the only image stark enough to penetrate her malaise, and therefore seem real to her, said that it was the wolf, wounded and probably dying. She went shaking to the door, worked free the bolt, and thrust it open. There she saw something large and unfamiliar, heard (whether in reality or delirium) something akin to a vicious growl: the voice given teeth. She took a step back, and screamed.

It was perhaps the one sound which could have roused him. Kalus sat bolt upright, weak but stable, and called out to her.

'Sylviana!'

He felt the cold wind rushing past. The door was open. She was in danger. He stood with difficulty and made his way towards her, holding on through the dizziness that sought to rob his will. He stood beside her, leaning heavily against the door-frame, and stared out into the night. She had regained her rationality, and now looked down upon a wounded and half-starved predator.

Pity stirred at last in Kalus' heart, as if a sign had been given and understood. There was no time to question, or debate whether his own life was worth saving. Here was a creature, young and without guilt, who would die if he did not act.

'Sylviana. Help me carry him in.'

'Are you all right?' She looked hard at him, and he answered honestly.

'I'm not the one who matters now. Will you help me?'

She nodded vaguely and together they lifted the tiger as best they could, bringing it inside. Though fully six feet long, in its ravaged condition it couldn't have weighed more than two hundred pounds. But it was limp, lifeless weight, and the best they could manage was to lay it just inside the barrier.

'It's all right,' Kalus panted, head down. 'This is a snow tiger. He won't need much more heat than this. It's more the mangled leg, and starvation.' He looked across at the woman-child, and perceived for the first time the dismal state into which she herself had fallen, a malady of the mind, which had then spread to the body.

He felt ashamed, and frightened, and glad all at once. He was needed, and his desire to live had somehow returned from its shallow grave, embodied in the weakened, but far from dead creature at his feet.

And his own body, he knew from deepest instinct, was not yet ready to surrender. On the contrary, it had made a small recovery. The two-day fast and stubborn, death-like sleep had emptied his throbbing intestines, and given his natural defenses time to adapt and regain some measure of their innate strength. He was still very sick, but maybe now.....

The words, 'Forgive me,' played upon his lips but had an empty, useless feel. He went to the door, closed it, and though cold and aching he said to her. 'Please don't lose hope. I'm going to make it all right for us, somehow. Some way. You stood by me these past days, and I..... You are a woman. I will earn your trust, and repay my debt in full. I am yours.'

He embraced her and asked her to lie down in his bed. He then wrapped the buffalo robe around him, tended the fire, and brought her food and water. 'Sleep,' he told her. 'In comfort and in peace. I feel a little stronger, but I will do nothing foolish. I must tend the tiger's wounds, and if Akar returns with meat, feed us both. Then you and I will sleep together. I love you. Be well in your heart.' He shook off all emotions of weakness and sorrow, and set out to do what must be done.

Akar returned a short time later. After studying the tiger uncertainly, and looking hard at Kalus, he set down his burden, part of a kill stolen from a badger. It was not much to look at, but from it Kalus was able to carve and cook a pound or two of meat. He divided portions for all the company, then placed the remainder in a bowl, along with the cooked blood, beside the big cat, still unconscious. He then cleaned, repaired and wrapped its wounds as best he could, laying it more comfortably on the floor. He knew that in taking it among them, and especially in binding one of its limbs, he risked confusing and provoking a creature capable of doing them great harm. But he had an unspoken faith that it was not yet old and hard enough to hate without reason, or to see as enemies all those unlike itself.

Not wishing to squander the unexpected turn of his fortunes, or the quiet courage that had risen inside him, he lay down without further exposure beside the girl, wrapping the furs thickly around them both. Waking, she said in a soft and pleading voice.

'Don't leave me here. Please don't ever leave me.' He answered without words, holding her close and caressing her tear-stained hair.

Again they had found each other, and Kalus knew that in their bond lay the one real hope of his survival. She made him want to live.

Chapter 24

When the snow tiger woke from its perilous sleep it found cooked meat in a dish beside it, warmth all around it, and the burning ice gone from its fur. But it also saw strange creatures, an unnatural barrier, and the calculated stare of a wolf. He tried to lift himself quickly, felt something catch at his leg. He was overcome by the same intense dizziness, then yielded against his will to the pull of gravity. He lay helpless on his side, looking at the others with wide-eyed fear and uncertainty.

'No one move,' said Kalus, rising cautiously from his seat beside the fire. Sylviana took hold of the pup, which had begun to growl and yap, and silenced it as best she could. Akar might have been a stone in between, but for the

narrowing fire of his eyes.

Kalus moved slowly to the door and opened it. It was cold and black outside, but the wind had subsided. He began to move carefully towards the tiger. It growled at him and curled its upper lip, but the great head would not be supported. It lowered to the earth as before.

'It's all right,' said Kalus reassuringly. 'I won't hurt you.' He took a piece of meat from the bowl, and set it a few inches from its mouth. Then feeling the cold, he moved back to the door and began to close it. Again, as he thought it might, the tiger reacted. It felt trapped and closed in. He began to move away, but then thought of something else. Going to the opening, he went outside and brought in a piece of crusted snow. This he placed as close to its mouth as he dared, then closed the door and returned to his place beside the fire.

'Snow is the most constant part of its existence,' he explained to the girl. 'And I think it needs water even more than food.' Together they watched, hoping for the best.

As the man-child hovered about it, the tiger's eyes had followed his every movement. Now it turned its senses, heightened by physical extremity and need, toward the objects placed in front of it.

The big cat hesitated, then reached out its tongue and licked the hard snow. Again. Then stretching out his neck, he took the blessed substance in his teeth and brought it closer. And chewed off a small piece.

Kalus smiled quietly, remembering a time not so very long before, when he had shared his meat with Akar. And this time there was no one to angrily question his will, or rebuke him for showing compassion. This in turn gave him a cautious feeling of pride and independence. He looked around him, seeming to remember that all of this was now his, and that if he could but live to see it, the world still held much for him. In that swift moment of emotion, he felt an almost exaggerated desire coursing through his limbs, as if in compensation for his illness. His thoughts returned to find the girl watching him, eyes glistening. She spoke.

'You're thinking that you finally have something to call your own.'

'YES. How did you know?'

'Because..... I've been waiting since I've known you to see that look. To see you look at ME. Don't you know what you have?' At that moment the tiger, seeming to revive a little, stretched forward and rolled one forepaw beneath its head, and with a last glance at the others, began to study the proffered meat more closely. As Kalus looked on, understanding at the last, it took the first piece in its jaws, chewed tentatively, then swallowed.

'Yes, Sylviana. I have hope.' As the tiger moved itself weakly over the bowl and began to eat, he wrapped the fur up around his eyes, overcome.

'I love you,' was all he could manage.

Chapter 25

Sylviana rose the next morning to find Kalus standing in the open doorway, looking out across the snow. The big cat had somehow gained its feet, and lumbered toward him uncertainly. She started to warn him, keeping her voice down only with an effort. But when he turned towards her, his eyes were calm. He took a step back and away from the entrance, and the tiger soon stood in his

place. Its gaze moved back and forth between the Wild and the man. Clearly it was not much recovered. Unable to maintain the effort, it slid down to an unnatural sitting position, with the bandaged leg splayed wildly. It let out a growl of pain, and struggled to rise again. Succeeding only partially, it clawed and clutched its way out into the snow. From there it could go no further, and lay where it had fallen, pulling itself to a more natural position and breathing heavily. Kalus said something in a steady voice, then reentered and closed the door.

'Won't he die out there?' asked the girl.

'No. Not from the cold at least. He's so hurt and confused, I wanted him to know at least that he is free.' He came closer, and she saw that he was shivering. She put another fur around his shoulders and made him sit by the fire, which she then repaired.

'He means a lot to you, doesn't he?'

'Yes. Perhaps even more than Akar did to you.'

She sat beside him. 'How do you mean?'

'In him I see myself, and I can love.... It's not his fault that he's helpless now. He's only trying to survive, friendless and lost.'

'But you're not friendless.'

'I know.'

She saw that he wrestled with strong emotions, and said no more. At length he took her hand, kissed it, and asked her.

'If Akar is not successful today. . .or even if he is. Could you go to the second reserve again?'

'Yes. But why, if Akar brings us meat?'

'He hunts for you, myself until I am better, and the cub. That is burden enough. Please believe it is best. The tiger needs meat, and he must take it from me.' Again, though she did not understand, she knew that deep currents were at work

in him.

A short time later Akar did return, carrying in his mouth some kind of field-bird. As Kalus let him in the wolf took it not to the girl, as was his custom (he had not even acknowledged the man-child's presence), but instead went to a corner by himself and lay down with it, plucking out the feathers with his teeth, and eating as if he were alone in the chamber. The pup, upon waking, jumped down from the woman's bed and approached him, her tail wagging in eager solicitation. He did not rebuff her, but made her wait until he had eaten his fill. Then he rose and went out again, passing Sylviana without gesture or affection, bristling slightly as he drew a sullen half-circle past the tiger. The woman closed the door again, confused.

'What was that all about? What was he trying to say?'

'Something he's been telling us for weeks, since the death of Kamela, and before.'

'What?' She knew, deep down.

'That he must leave us soon. That his place is with the pack, his real kindred. They need him now as much as we do. I think that only his shoulder—'

'It's not TRUE.' She sat down on the floor, a forlorn bundle in a world made suddenly colder. 'He wouldn't leave us like this.' She tried to rationalize, arguing with whom she did not know. 'You're not able to hunt.'

'No, but I will be soon, with as much chance as he. And you can live on sebreum.'

'But Alaska,' she insisted (the name she had given the pup).

'He knows I will not let her starve. I'm sorry, Sylviana. But his place is with his own kind.'

'It's not fair.' Her eyes would not stop filling.

Kalus picked up the fur she had discarded, and gently replaced it around her shoulders. He put his hand on her head shyly, feeling unworthy, and unable to do more. But beneath his breath he made this vow.

'So long as there is life inside me, you will never be alone.'

He moved away, unable to face the apparition of Winter's resistance to his life and to his dreams. To love so deeply, and with so little hope.....

*

Kalus fed the tiger with the reserves the woman-child brought him. Akar returned at nightfall and she spent the night beside him, crying softly, and loving more than ever the friend she feared to lose. He did not resist her.

Kalus slept alone, vowing again and again his devotion, fearing to hear himself speak.

Chapter 26

The next morning Akar rose early, and in the darkness of first morning, stood above the sleeping form of his mistress. Her soft breathing, the smell of her.... He would not have believed he could feel so much. And as the light grew slowly, calling him away, still he remained there, wistful and sad, wishing only there was some way to tell her. At last she stirred, reaching out for him in a troubled dream. Not finding him she sat up quickly, fearing he had already gone.

She saw him, and sank back into herself. She began to cry, feeling their imminent parting as only a woman can. She covered her eyes, ashamed of her weakness and unable to face him.

This was too much for him. Knowing no other gesture, no longer caring if he betrayed himself by emotion, the wolf pushed at the arm with his snout, and as she lowered it in surprise, nestled his forehead against her. She said his name, embracing him and pouring out her heart. All the pain of this new world, all the loneliness and fear, found outlet and meaning in his love, which now she clearly felt.

And at length as she released him, she felt drained but no longer empty and wounded. A breach had been mended in her soul by his sudden expression of warmth, and though Akar might have said it differently, he felt much the same. Stepping back, he gestured toward Kalus' sleeping place, then reluctantly, toward the door. Understanding, she got up and ascended the steps of the dais, pulling aside the patchwork of furs and waking the man-child.

He was not asleep, nor had been for some time. But he played the part assigned to him, feigning ignorance of what had stirred him to the root.

'Akar has to leave,' she said quietly. 'He wanted to say goodbye.'

Kalus stepped out from the low shelter and went to bid farewell to his friend. He went down on one knee before him, and looked into his eyes. There was no need for words between them. Both had given life to the other, and would do so again. No debt was owed or felt, only the bond of true allies, and their common love for the woman-child, which no words could express. Still, Kalus felt moved to make some sign. He reached over and touched her throat, then said with his hands:

'With my life.' Understanding, the wolf simply lowered his head in acknowledgment. Then he gestured toward the door.

'I guess he really has to go,' said Sylviana. Again she embraced and caressed him, so reluctant now to let go. Then straightened resolutely and went to the door. She opened it herself, and without further ceremony he went out into the Wild, leaving a stream of memories behind him.

The young man and woman remained silent in the doorway, watching him disappear slowly into a mist of half-lit snow, lost in thought. Because they

realized that a page had been turned in their lives, just as one day their lives would end and the book continue. And feeling this to its depths, all veils torn aside, they knew what it was to be human. Sylviana recalled the poignant line from the Shakespeare sonnet:

'To love that which you fear to lose.'

Then their thoughts once more focused on each other.

*

'You're not going to try to hunt today?' Kalus had begun to dress heavily, and even now wrapped the sword-belt around him. Though his eyes were determined, as they had been on the day of Kamela's death, there was something in his manner that was not at all the same. He was less tense, and his breathing more regular. Small comfort that it was. 'You're in no condition.'

'No, but I've been thinking. Last winter I tried setting traps, different kinds for different animals. They do not bring in large game, but are more.... I don't know how to say it. Less aggressive and dangerous. And with the reserves almost gone, we must live one day at a time. I do not like living without some cushion, no matter how small, especially when it is not my life alone I have to think of. But I have done it before, and never failed utterly. Fear and despair are my enemies now.'

'It's good to hear you say that, Kalus, it really is. There's only one thing wrong with that whole line of reasoning.'

'What's that?'

'Don't misunderstand me. I feel for the tiger, too, and I want him to survive. But how can you possibly feed him and us too? He must eat more than the three of us put together. Akar was right in that, at least.'

'I don't misunderstand, but there is something I haven't told you. I think Akar knew it also. It is part of the reason he left when he did. Two males, natural competitors—there would have been friction between them.'

'You've lost me.'

'Well. It is true that the first and deepest thing I feel for the tiger is compassion. But if that was all I felt, I would not take him among us. Love cannot exist without survival.'

'Then why?'

'I take a small chance in feeding him, and treating his wounds. You have seen that I make it a point to feed him myself. I am not being entirely unselfish. I know something of the ways of his kind.'

'Go on.'

'You see, they do not live in packs like the wolves, or with their mates like the saber-toothed cats. But they are not completely alone, either. They coexist, if that is the right word, and keep loose contact with others of their kind.'

'Yes,' said Sylviana, beginning to understand. 'I remember something about that from zoology. They're a much more social animal than was first believed.' He nodded, though the words were unknown to him.

'So you see, since this one is still young, and has lost touch with his kindred—or he would not have come so far to the east—it is not impossible that since I shared my meat with him, he would do the same for me. He would not bring it here, any more than one tiger would take its kill to another. But if another comes on the scene, they are willing to share. And Sylviana, never have you seen such a Wintertime hunter.'

Once more she began to feel a quiet respect for his experience, and knowledge of his world.

'But how long before he's able to hunt?'

'He is young and strong, and unless I misread him, very determined. There are no broken bones. Perhaps ten days, perhaps twenty. In any case, you see that I cannot let him die.'

'Yes.' She squeezed his arm, seeing that he was about to go. 'Be careful.'

'Yes. I will take the wolf. It is time she learned of the world beyond these walls.'

It felt strange to her to hear him speak of the pup as a wolf. She herself called it Alaska, and he had always before used pseudonyms such as cub' or pup'. But looking at her now, standing and watching them quizzically, she saw that the slight creature Kamela had brought them, was indeed a babe no longer. Her limbs had begun to grow long, ahead of the body, and her gaze, though still childish, was growing keener and more aware. And she remembered that this was in fact a wolf, and not a dog.

'When you come back, will you tell me why Akar didn't take her with him? If you know. I have an idea, but I'd like to know what you think.'

'When I return, I will be glad to speak of it.' He became suddenly shy. 'And to be with you.' He went to the door, called to the cub, and went out. Sylviana closed the door behind them.

His thoughts being thus absorbed, Kalus did not realize until he reached the end of the ledge and saw the broad, irregular tracks leading downward, that the tiger was gone. At first this upset him, both for his sake and its own. But as he entered the ravine and began to mentally prepare for the lands beyond, he had no choice but to let it go. It was beyond his control.

'So be it.' But this did not keep him from noting that its tracks went southward down the gorge, and that if they rose again to left or right, it was beyond the edge of his sight.

The cub stayed close to him instinctively, and they made their way first up the steep slope, then out across the rolling white and camel-hair lands.

*

Kalus returned to the gorge as the sky grew dark and ominous. There was no sign of the tiger, and his own time in the cold had been devoured. He shivered and coughed in the growing wind, and the voices of caution would not be gainsaid. The rules of this new affliction he had learned the hard way. The rules of the Cold World he knew by heart. And as he lingered a moment, straining his senses for any sight or sound, even the cub seemed anxious, looking about it and

at the threatening sky.

'All right,' he said gruffly, as much to the nameless as to anyone. 'Chase me back into my hole again. Tomorrow I'll be back.' He gained the ledge, and the doorway beyond.

Sylviana greeted him with an embrace that surprised him. He had not expected it, for one thing, and had forgotten how much this simple contact was worth. And he remembered too, for all the day's frustrations, his deep affection for her. If only he could bring them all to some safe place.....

'Are you well?' he asked her.

'Well enough, now. I don't like the look of that sky, though, or the sudden drop in temperature. I'm worried about Akar.'

'And I for the tiger. He's gone off, you know.'

'Yes. I'm sorry.'

He shrugged his shoulders unconvincingly. 'There's nothing I can do about it now. I couldn't make him a prisoner.'

He took off his warm wrappings, refitted the one-piece garment, then sat down on the steps of the altar and began sharpening his sword. But all at once he cast away the whet-stone, a hard and bitter edge on all his features.

'It's not fair,' he said. 'I wanted him to live..... I wanted him to be my friend.'

Sylviana studied him wordlessly, touched and taken back, as ever, by the power of his primal emotions. And when he looked up at her, she saw again the restless and hungry expression that so haunted her. She turned away, drawn to him as on a chain, yet afraid. Why did he move her so?

'I didn't want to lose Akar, either. Sometimes if you love someone, you have to let them go.' Now it was she who was unconvincing. And all at once, he wanted her.

Kalus rose, all his sorrows and reawakened desires now focused with total singularity upon the object, the living being of his love. He moved closer, and

took her by the shoulders, and turned her towards him. There was nothing else in all the world.

'I want to make love to you.'

He kissed her, and stripped away the barriers between them, and touched her with the roots of his being, overflowing like a well-spring upon the earth. She had not the strength to resist him, and soon lost all desire to do so. He led her to his bed, and together they breathed deeper air than they had for many days.

*

Later that night, as they slept side by side, Kalus dreamed that he rode across a vast expanse on the back of a great horse, its silver mane flying in the wind of its speed. Then as the sun set the land became dark and he walked alone, till in the dense and shadowed underbrush there was a rustle of movement, and a great cat called his name.

And waking, he heard the sound again. He pulled aside the patchwork of furs and moved across the room, afraid the sound would fade into unreality. He threw a log quickly on the dying fire, and went to the door. And opened it.

The snow tiger stood before him, a fierce storm howling all around it. Leg bleeding and weak from hunger, it remained motionless. But still it stood, and wanted to come in.

'What is it?' asked his lover, peering out from the canopy of stone.

'A miracle,' he pronounced, blinded by the water in his eyes and in his heart. 'The tiger has come back.' It lumbered in woozily, and he closed the door behind it.

Chapter 27

Thus began a period of relative calm for the reshaped company. Slowly the tiger's wounds healed, and slowly, as he became wiser and more proficient at setting them, Kalus' traps became more productive. The reserves were emptied and there was never much to spare. Their existence was strictly one day at a time, and face tomorrow when it comes. But what was absolutely needed, the bare-bone necessities, were through constant effort and exertion, one way or another obtained.

And though Winter was hardly on the wane, neither could it increase or outdo the storms it had already hurled against them. The fortress they had made of Skither's cave, as well as the yet dearer fortresses of mind and body, continued to withstand and endure. And their collective will remained unvanquished.

And in late afternoons and evenings, when the day's work was done and nothing more could be bought by their labors, there was time for reading, conversation and quiet thought. The tiger, once it learned it was free to do so, often went out into the night, if only to rest just beyond the safety of the lair; and this, along with Akar's absence, left a natural void which must be filled with more human pursuits. Even the cub would turn peaceful, either tired out by the day's doings, or engaged in some quiet pursuit of its own, chewing at a bone or piece of leather, or simply working out in dream the wonders and perils of its world.

For Sylviana it was both comforting and painful to recall herself through books, and to reveal to Kalus for the first time, the beauty and torment of Man's elevated walk upon the Earth. That it should now be all but extinguished was to her an unspeakable and inexpressible tragedy. Yet she had learned from Ursula LeGuin years before (though at the time she had not understood it), that the only way to deal with the horror of a shattered past was to face it, and call it by its true name. And she told herself that in her heart, if nowhere else, lived the memory of much that was noble and good.

For Kalus the various narratives, histories and philosophies, continued to open a whole new world before him. And though it was at times a pleasant and enlightening escape, on the whole his reactions to modern society were not unlike the woman's first impressions of the violent world outside their door. It held wonders, yes, and on occasion, profound beauty and wisdom. But the accounts of civil war, totalitarian regimes, torture, famine, real and effectual slavery, environmental pollution and industrial greed, excited in him the same horror that the imagined swarm of giant ants had once roused in Sylviana.

Sometimes these responses troubled her, and she felt called upon to correct his deficiencies in perspective and defend her race. But at other times his naive and disbelieving comments cut frighteningly close to the truth. He accepted and took for granted none of the vast pretenses and self-important doctrines in which humanity clothed itself, and was therefore able to see a larger picture, or certainly a different one, than that which she was accustomed to.

For to him Man was not the only, or even the most important species on the planet, let alone the center of the Universe, and sole concern of the Nameless. It was perhaps for this reason that he had not been shocked when Sylviana told him that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and not the other way around, or that the stars were themselves suns, parenting similar worlds of their own. To him Man

was not the separate creation of a God unhappy or impatient with Nature. To his mind, if she understood him correctly, evolution was quite miraculous enough, and brought him closer to, rather than farther from, believing in a Universal being. And he assured her that nearly every animal was capable of some measure of thought and feeling, as real and meaningful to its existence, as the painful dreams and aspirations of men.

At first he offered few opinions of his own, only gut-level reactions when they would not be silenced, which the woman-child must then decipher on her own. Not only did he feel unqualified to do so—the very word philosophy' intimidated him, seeming a thing reserved for larger and more important persons—but also, some other sense told him that it was unwise to speak or pass judgment upon things he did not fully understand.

But after a time, having whole days to mull over what he had learned (when hunting, trapping and working did not require his full attention), he began to speak and question at a level which surprised her. Not only would she have believed him incapable of such subtle thought and inquiry, but she had always assumed that he would consider such pursuits frivolous, and beside the immediate point of survival. Such was not the case. His mind and spirit hungered, just as the body did, to be nourished and fulfilled. And in some ways this spiritual hunger was more acute, since it had been so long denied.

His two favorite writer/philosophers, to judge by the number of times he asked her to read them, were Ernest Hemingway and Lao Tsu. And this apparent contradiction puzzled her. She could not imagine two more directly opposed outlooks, or approaches to life. But when she asked him about this, he answered more simply and clearly than she would have believed possible. It was a cold night, but warm beside the fire, somewhere near the apex of winter. Even the tiger remained indoors, sleeping in its accustomed place just inside the barrier. The cub rested quietly beside the man-child, while he gently stroked her chest and side. Life was all around him, and he felt it deeply.

'I think that the two ways, if I can call them that, are just the two sides of a man's life: like day and night, summer and winter. They both spring from the fountainhead of Life, both are necessary; they only seem different, as Lao Tsu said. He understood the need to yield to Nature, and Hemingway the need to fight back. They make me think of Skithier and Barabbas. There are times when one is right, and times when the other—'

'To everything there is a season,' she broke in suddenly, understanding and taken back by the apparent ease with which he had arrived at one of man's profoundest insights. 'And a time to every purpose under Heaven.'

Upon hearing this he became so animated, and insisted so fervently that she read to him the entire passage from which this was taken, that despite misgivings she brought out a tattered Gideon's Bible and read to him the verses from Ecclesiastes.

*

'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.'

*

Kalus was awe-struck. 'Are all the things in that book as true and wise?' he asked. 'Who is its author?'

This was exactly what she feared. More than one newly opened and vulnerable heart had fallen into the trap of blind acceptance of this, and other religious works. Whether Christianity was the true faith or not, whether one true faith existed, was not the point. The religious doctrines of humanity were simply too broad and powerful to impart to one in his position: sensitive, struggling and searching. And in this she showed wisdom or her own.

'I'm afraid not, Kalus. And it doesn't have one author, it has many. There are people who believed everything in it to be the truth, suppressing all other voices,

even to the point of overriding their own experience and common sense. But I'm not one of them.'

'There are really people who would do that? Contradict the lessons that Nature has taught them? I don't understand.'

'That's because you don't know what was at stake to them, or how deep such feelings run.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm afraid I can't say it in just a few words, and I don't want to try. If you really want to learn about different religions, I'll teach you what I can. But it really should be done slowly. Or you could be hurt.' She spoke now from first-hand experience.

He was silent for a time, his thought roused and his curiosity almost unbearable. But he too had learned caution, and he respected her judgment. One last question.

'Can you tell me one thing at least? How could any book make a man not listen to his heart?'

She took a deep breath. 'Well. What if I told you that you could live forever, and never be separated from the ones you love. Wouldn't that make you willing to listen, and learn how if you could?'

'Of course! But no one lives forever..... DO THEY?' The gleam in his eyes was unmistakable.

'No one knows, Kalus. And that's why men cling to religion. That, and the desire to do good. But that's enough for tonight, really. All right?'

At first her words had no effect, then. 'Yes,' he answered absently. For his mind was submerged in questions that had drowned far more learned souls than his.

In the coming battle he retained only one advantage. His life had been too hard, the beginnings of his dreams too dearly bought, to be long deceived and pacified by illusions. His feet were too painfully aware of the road beneath them, and his hands too calloused from the Herculean labors of survival.

But this could not protect him from Fear, when cast in this new, metaphysical light.

Chapter 28

Several days, perhaps a week, passed in much the same outward manner. But Sylviana, with her now practiced eye, began to observe a subtle change in him, and this troubled her. Always now when his attention was not required for some physical task, his eyes and mind seemed to rove about him, as if expecting the

walls to come suddenly to life and undo him. She began to fear that despite all her caution she had given him too much to think about, too many questions to grapple with. And she wondered what hidden Pandora's box she had opened inside him.

Her concern was well justified, and her guesses not far from the truth. Two things had occurred simultaneously which had made him very uneasy. And in his mind, once more isolated, they seemed indelibly linked, a kind of hard message from the nameless God, which he must unravel and accept.

The first thing that troubled him was the rebound of harsh winter weather. For a time the days had turned relatively mild, and he had secretly hoped that the worst was passed. But his optimism was premature. The Cold World was a long way from spent.

The second occurrence, inevitable though it might have been, was the discovery, real or imagined, of a spiritual world to parallel the physical. Always before the wind had been simply wind, the sun, sun, and his environment, with its natural currents and disturbances, just and only that. If forced to give a name to these patterns and fluxes of life and death, he would merely have said Nature', or the ways of the Valley'.

But with the introduction of religion into his thoughts and observations, came its often inseparable counterpart: superstition. Was there an intelligence behind the winds and storms around him, the dangers and trials of his world? For if so, clearly they bore him no good intention, and possibly considerable malice. Why now, when he was hurting and most needed mild weather, was he confronted by the harshest Winter he had ever experienced?

But this was just the tip of the iceberg. If there truly was a God, then why the innumerable and inexplicable tragedies of his life, both great and small? And most poignant of all to him: WHY WAS SHAMA DEAD? All the other deaths and injuries he had known could perhaps, with an effort, be rationalized. But why a mere child, healthy and intelligent, with his whole life ahead of him?

He did not forget the other miracles of his life: the fact that he had been born at all, that he had survived the many pitfalls of his existence, and come against considerable odds to find the woman-child, whom he loved. He remembered the Voice, but could not make its words correspond to those of the Bible.

And why, now, did he feel as if some tangible force resisted and sought to undo him? What was his sin? Was it because he refused, out of ignorance, to acknowledge the power and supremacy of the one true God? If he obeyed His rules and precepts, would He then smile upon him, and make his life more bearable? And the final nail, as it always has been, was the burning question that neither Sylviana, nor anyone or anything else could answer for him. Was the spirit eternal, and if so, was there a way to come to paradise after death, and be reunited with the ones he loved?

It was for him a crushing burden, feeling that his decision, his answer to God, held the key not only to his own spiritual salvation, but to that of those he loved more than his own life. It was for this reason that he could not open his heart to Sylviana. She did not believe; she had said so. But what if she was wrong? Surely if such a being existed, He must be obeyed and appeased. God the Father. Was he then like Barabbas, a stern and forceful leader?

It was all too much for him. How could he, an ignorant hunter and trapper, come to grips with the maker of the stars? Perhaps God was right to curse him and laugh at him. He was small, foolish and evil.

Kalus was on the verge of despair. His body would not heal, and the Cold World would not relent. How much longer could he trick himself into going on, when he was eternally being resisted and punished because of his ignorance?

It was a cold and cheerless night, as he climbed slowly up out of the gorge with his meager prize: a small rabbit, that by some fluke had not died immediately in his snare, but had to be killed after hours of torment and fear. He had all but decided that he could no longer live this way, that he must hunt as a man or perish. But even this small dignity was not afforded him, since still the others must eat.

He stepped back onto the ledge with the cub beside him. The tiger was gone. He knocked wearily on the door, his body aching, and after a short time which seemed far longer, Sylviana opened it. Her face was full of concern, but he had not the strength to pretend that things were better than they were.

He cooked the rabbit without a word, and divided out the portions. The three ate silently, and even the cub seemed subdued, sensing her master's mood. Kalus placed the tiger's share outside the door, wrapped his fur tighter, and sat like a

troubled stone before the fire. Sylviana could stand it no longer.

'Kalus, what is it? What's wrong?'

'I can't talk about it,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'Why are you shutting me out again?'

'Sylviana, please.' Her tone changed when she saw his eyes. Pain she had seen in them, and anger. Even resignation to death. But this pleading, tearful sorrow, as if his spirit was cornered and in torment.....

'It's all right,' she said softly, kneeling beside him. She wanted to comfort him with caresses and kind words, but something held her back. Better to let the dam burst on its own.

'Well, can we talk about something else?'

'If you like.' He mastered himself, became calm.

'You never told me about the wolves: why Kamela was so bitter, and why Akar left the cub behind.' Here, he thought, was a chance to escape his own feelings.

'It's a long story,' he began, 'And many parts I don't know for certain. But from things I have learned, and from things I knew before, I think I can tell you this much.' He shifted positions, trying to lessen the discomfort in the small of his back.

'For Kamela, I believe her tragedy was two-fold. First, if I read the signs right—I knew something of the pack before the coming of the Changed One—I believe that Akar was her first love. He had chosen her to be his mate, and she him.

'But the pack must be ruled by a single master, and that master, Akar's brother, had also chosen her. There are many things a leader must consider, and emotion is not the first concern of wolves. Shaezar claimed her, and she yielded to his will.

'Akar could not, would not cross his brother, but he was deeply hurt. In bitterness he left the pack for a time, and it was then that Shar-hai made his move. He killed Shaezar, fairly or unfairly, and took his place as leader. For Akar the result

was true banishment, and unforgiving self-reproach. For Kamela..... Shar-hai must have made her life a living Hell. You have seen the long scar on her underside.'

'NO.' She spoke truly.

'She did her best to hide it..... I believe that she was brutally raped, probably more than once. Also, it is very rare to have only one cub. I think that Shar-hai and his guard must have killed the others. He let Alaska live because she was no threat to him, and might provide further amusement.'

'My God, that's awful.'

'Yes. That is why she was not afraid to die. She still loved Akar, of that I am sure. And he loved her. But she could never overcome the shadow that was left on her soul. You cross a line, Sylviana. . .and everything becomes so black.'

She sensed that he was close to breaking. But for all her pity, she knew what she must do. One last push.

'But why did Akar leave the cub with us? It seems so cruel.'

His eyes flamed at this. 'The true wolves do nothing out of cruelty. It was for her own safety, and to leave a part of himself with you.' He got up and began to pace, an uncontrollable rage rising inside him. 'CRUEL?' he fumed, throwing off the fur like an unwanted burden, and waving his arms as if struggling in a net. 'I'll tell you what's cruel.....

'Skither lives his whole life, an unselfish warrior for the good, and dies by violence far from his home. Kamela does what is expected of her, Akar does what he feels in his heart, and both are punished and bereft. An eight year old boy——' He wept. 'An eight year old boy, Sylviana, makes the one mistake of his life..... And he is KILLED for it. While your God.....' All at once he let out a roar.

'WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!' he shouted at the walls. 'What gives you the right to make hard rules, and pass out life and death in judgment? You are not wise, you are not strong. YOU ARE NOT GOD! I reject this fear! I reject this lie! I will not serve the fearful creation of MEN!'

And suddenly the burden was lifted. He stood shaking, his face wet. But in that brief moment when the life inside him had shouted back at the Night, rejecting it and all its works, he was free, and once more true to himself, to the God that was in him. His doubts remained, but he would not follow that tortured path one step further.

Sylviana went to him and embraced him, this time without reservation. His grateful arms wrapped around her. He dried his eyes against her neck and shoulder, then stepped back, looking down.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I feel as if I've condemned us all.'

'Or saved us. Don't you see?'

'But if you don't believe, and I don't.....'

'I never said I didn't believe in God, Kalus. I just don't believe in religion. Faith is about Faith. Religion is about control.'

'But——'

'Listen to me, Kalus. You don't have to punish yourself to believe in something positive, something larger than yourself. You don't have to choose between Hells.'

'But the Bible——'

'Was written, translated, and ALTERED by men. Saint Paul may have been a good man, but he never ever met Jesus; and I believe that Saints' Jerome and Augustine distorted Christ's words almost beyond recognition. Between them, and with lots of help from the Catholic Church——Jesus never said anything about chastity, or that the bodies God gave us were inherently evil——they set loose a fear of devils and damnation that was the scourge of the western world for two thousand years: from the slaughters of Charlemagne, to the Inquisition and the Holocaust.

'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' THAT'S what Jesus said, and THAT'S what I believe. There is truth everywhere——in Shakespeare, in Dickens, in YOU. You know as much as anyone, about your own life, infinitely more.' She softened, and put a hand to his cheek. 'Trust your heart, Kalus. That's

what it's there for.'

He looked into her eyes, and the light of day came back to him. 'You are very wise. I should have come to you sooner.'

'Some lessons we have to learn for ourselves. You taught me that.'

'Do you think....' He struggled again, before the question that lay behind all others. 'Do you think that you could ever. . .love me, Sylviana?'

'I'm beginning to think I could. Now go wash off that grime, and I'll show you.'

'Aren't you afraid—'

'Tonight you have to be afraid of me. Now go wash yourself, before I do it for you.'

He went to the basin, and as the water splashed across him, felt both body and spirit cleansed. From here forward, he vowed, he would choose life over spiritual death, love over fear. This life was the only one he knew, his mind and heart the only guides he would ever have in it. And as he half-tearfully dried himself, he felt moved as he rarely had been. He went down on his knees, clutched his hands before him, and said to the nameless God.

'Thank you for my life.'

Again the two made love, and for Kalus the beauty and release were no less than on their first such communion. Sylviana knew only warmth and pleasure and affection, and as she drew him near, rejoiced to feel the life and strength that were in him, even now.

And in the heart and essence of their love, was the essence of true God: the Universal, and unnamable spirit within all Life.

Chapter 29

The tiger padded silently through the forest, eyes and ears keen for any sign of game. The hunger in his stomach drove him, as well as the hunger of his heart. His hind leg, he knew, was not up to an extended chase. But stalk he could, and hunt he must. The man-child fed him and gave him shelter, but more and more his restlessness grew. For he was a creature of the wild forests, and he heard their primal call. Even now, amidst the cover of thickening pine and mottled oak, he felt yet too exposed, and longed to plunge into some limitless wood where clearing and field were the exception, and not the rule. Such a place had once been his home, and must be again.

A black bear he had already passed, but this was neither prey nor foe. If it had confronted him he would have fought it, and almost surely have won. Yet he was glad when it saw him coming and moved away. This forest was not his: there was no need to stake a claim. And seeing it he recalled his fight with the grizzly, when in youthful ignorance he had stood his ground against a more powerful foe, then been a step too slow, or too proud, in retreating.

It had nearly cost him his life, as wounded and almost lame he had been pursued by the raging beast for miles on end. In his crippled state he could barely keep ahead of it, and this seemed to goad it on. Till at last he gained an unknown, freezing river and half stumbled, half swam his way across it. Even now the sounds of cracking ice, the final break and splash into the death-like waters, swimming desperately, clawing out again and scrambling forward.... Without his broad, padded feet to spread his weight upon the ice, without his clinging claws, alive with the frightened desire of youth, he would surely have perished.

But now that the brush with death was past, he was not afraid. Those who learned fear from such a trial quickly lost the will they needed to live. Those who learned caution and still greater determination, these were the hunters, the great cats who survived.

Coming to the crest of a long hill, he looked down upon a gentle valley, at the center of which lay a clearing along both sides of a swirling stream. Just at the edge of it on the far shore, beyond which the forests rose once more to dominate, stood a tall buck and his troop, three females and their half-grown young. Engaged in eating bark and pawing through the snow for saplings, at that distance and with their eyes they could not have seen him.

Immediately he crouched, and in his wordless way, formed a plan. The wind blew from right to left, with the stream, and to cross it silently.... He snaked out of sight among the trees, and began to descend at an angle to his left. Coming to a place where the stream bent towards him, he followed it a short way further, then quickly and quietly waded across. He heard the buck sing out as he reached the farther shore and scrambled up, and feared that his chance was lost. But stubbornly he dove among the trees and made his swift, circling way towards the spot.

>From ahead of him now came the sounds of conflict, a muted knocking and scraping of antlers and the angry, conch-like cries of the bull. Drawing hard upon

the clearing he discovered the reason. It was not because of him that the herd-leader had spoken in warning. Another buck, younger but nearly equal in girth, had come upon him, and thought to steal away his harem. In this he was premature, since neither doe nor female fawn would be ready to mate until Spring. But such mistakes are often made, born of the cold and bitter isolation of a solitary male in Winter.

Nature plays no favorites, nor does the hungry predator. The females had seen the big cat's approach, and with their young fled swiftly and silently into the wood, leaving the two bulls locked in oblivious combat. The tiger leapt over a fallen tree, forgetting his pain, and charged across the open space toward them.

The herd leader saw him coming, and stepped back. The young male in his blind fury did not, and perceiving hesitation on the part of his opponent, thought to charge again. It was his last mistake. The tiger leapt full upon him, knocking him to the ground, and before the buck knew what had happened, his throat was held fast and his life's blood ebbing.

The herd leader turned quickly to see what had become of his charge, then with a last look at the predator and his fallen foe, moved to join them. He did not run blindly, nor fully turn his back. But neither did he dare a brave show. Not for nothing had he lived to sire offspring.

The yearling stood poised above his kill, looking about him cautiously. He felt neither sadness nor elation, only the openness around him, and a sullen determination not to surrender his prize. Taking it firmly by the scruff of the neck, he dragged it back among the timbers. Lifting it across the same fallen trunk he had leapt in pursuing it, he set it to rest in the hollow just beyond, and once more looked around him. No sight or sound broke the silence of the afterkill.

It was only then that he let himself rest, and remembered his hunger and his pain. His leg ached dully and his muscles tried to knot. But these could be denied. His hunger could not. Licking a spot on the carcass as he would a bosom friend (the feelings were not dissimilar), he lay down and began to eat, and once more to feel pride and confidence in the strength he possessed.

He had made, with help, the long climb back. He would endure.

*

Kalus stood at the beginning of the plain. In one hand he held the snares he meant to set, but in the other was his spear, which stubborn optimism had told him to bring. And at his feet were the tracks of the tiger. Studying them more closely, he saw that despite the sharp climb up from the gorge, there was no blood from its injured hind leg, and only a trace of a limp. The cub sniffed at the familiar prints, recognizing their scent.

Kalus felt a sudden surge of desire. An impulse had come to him, and he acted upon it at once. Hiding his traps behind a stone, he dropped down on one knee beside the cub. With his hand he indicated the tracks, then the line they followed into the distance.

'Alaska. These tracks. Avatar. We follow. AVATAR.'

The cub looked back at him, confused. But after repeating the gestures, the name of the tiger, and finally, walking along its visible trail, Kalus made her understand. Nose to the ground, she began to pursue the trail ahead of him, always urged to greater speed by her master. Together they covered the distance swiftly, running whenever the snow and his strength permitted it.

For Kalus knew the tiger had set out the night before, and he had only the daylight to find it.

If only its hunt had been successful.

*

It was perhaps midday when he stood at the top of the same long hill, looking down with lesser eyes upon the valley and the clearing by the stream. He had begun to despair of his chances, knowing it would take nearly the rest of the day just to make his way back to the warmth and safety of the cave. Almost he had let the hill turn him back. But he, too, felt the stubborn need to persevere.

Here, if he read the signs right, the cat had suddenly crouched and begun to stalk. His shielded eyes strained against the blinding white, up and down the

stream, searching for any further sign. But all such effort was defeated by the hard glare of the noon sun. Perhaps if he made his eyes like a quiet pool, in which any movement would be as a pebble dropping into glassy waters.....

Movement. His eyes shifted to the source. Again. The branches of a leafless tree, no, the tree itself, moved under the weight of some large animal, disturbing the snow-layered pines around it. At the edge of the clearing, on the far side of the stream. A short distance in front of it the snow had been mangled and stained, as by a recent kill.

He cut a swath straight towards it, risking much that the creature in the tree was his own, self-named Avatar, proud hunter of the frozen woodlands. He came to the stream, and lifting both his garments and the startled cub, waded across. The shaking of branches had not ceased, and now as he gained the far bank and set down the cub, a muffled growl was added to it. He froze, spear lifted. But the sound had been neither sudden, nor seemed in any way to correspond with his movements. And at last, his eyes describing the scene, he lowered his spear with a surge of pride and gratitude. It was his ally, the tiger, struggling to lift a large buck into the crotch of a trembling beech.

'Avatar!'

The great cat gave a sudden snarl, and dropping its prey, loosed its hold on the tree and leapt down to face him. All done in an instant, and with such angry determination that the man-child's eyes went wide, and he took a step back in spite of himself.

The tiger, too, felt a moment of confusion. For here was something not stamped into the racial memory of instinct. Kalus it knew, as the creature who fed and protected him at need. He felt an association to him, even a kind of closeness. But he was also the first creature to disturb him at his part-eaten kill, and those feelings were strong and immediate.

Kalus seemed to understand this, because he stood silent and made no further move, staying the cub, who would have stepped freely to the meat her friend had provided.

The tiger looked at the tree, then at the man. He vaguely recalled his mother, coming upon the scene of another tiger's kill, and the way it had first snarled, then yielded, allowing her to eat..... At last he solved the puzzle. Searching the

forest behind him for any sign of danger, he moved away from the buck and remained standing, patient but alert, leaving the other to eat his fill.

Kalus came forward steadily, and with a further greeting, began to cut away at the untouched back legs (which a more experienced predator would have eaten first, but which were ideal for his purposes). He worked hard and diligently with the hunter's knife, trying at the same time not to jerk the carcass, which might arouse the tiger, at intervals shooing away the cub.

He felt as he did so an almost irrational need of haste, which went beyond his concern for the tiger or the long journey home. He could not have explained it. There was time to meet his ends. No, it was more the aggressiveness of the act itself which put him on his guard. After so many days of caution and yielding, to have been so bold, and come to such a reward..... And whether superstition or sixth sense, his one desire at that moment was to take his portion and be gone.

As the last stubborn tendon surrendered its hold of the second leg, he straightened his back with a sudden glow of pride and happiness. He wanted to walk right up to his companion, a thing which he had never done, and box his ears in relief and brotherly affection.

But in the same instant the shadow behind his fears took flesh, as with a mad crash a large grizzly split through a wall of bushes, not forty feet away. And as it growlingly surveyed them with but a moment's consideration, the tiger recognized his old enemy.

Fear rose instantly in the man-child, but stronger was his cornered rage. A mindless brute, who knew nothing of his struggles and yearnings, blindly sought to steal what had cost him so dearly, and in so doing, rend or even kill both himself and his closest companions. Knowing that to run would be the greater danger, and goaded by his passion, he lifted his spear and cried out in fury, standing his ground and preparing for the inevitable charge. The tiger seemed to feel much the same emotion, for it too snarled threateningly, and even began to move forward.

But in the dim perceptions of the monster there also burned dark fires. This land was his, as was any in which he walked, and he would not be defied. His victory over the tiger still lived in him, and the man-child was beyond his experience. He was a prince of power, and aggression his only creed. Coming close in short,

growling breaths, he raised up his quivering bulk for battle, and on his hind legs advanced toward the tiger.

Whatever the poetic or philosophical may say, in Nature, as well as in Man's darkened nature, strength is often (and only) by cornered strength defeated. As the full eight-foot carriage of the bear began to lower toward the mortal and extinguishable flesh of his friend, Kalus felt the terrible white fire that lives in every creature whose dearest are threatened, take hold of him. And as the tiger drew back and raised its extending claws in answer, he drove his spear deep into the grizzly's brawny neck and shoulder. Nor did he draw away in the face of its fury, but drove in against the scruff, pinning its head while the tiger's slashing blows fell unmercifully.

Pulling back the shaft as the spearhead lost its bite, he drove it this time into the bristling shoulder, and with a strength he would not have thought in him, from both point of pain and pressure, drove the thousand pound menace onto its side.

This was all the tiger needed. Slashing and biting, braving the peril of its roaring jaws, he tore away at the vital streams of his foe until they spilled recklessly, and the raging heart that drove them was betrayed in a self-defeating carnage of red. The bear lurched forward, dying.

Kalus stepped back, panting, his heart near exploding with the effort and fear, while the tiger yet leered over his fallen enemy, unsure of its end. Then the bear's eyes faded, and all was silence.

The cub whimpered out from its hiding place, looking to Kalus for some sign of reassurance. He knelt down and caressed her head against him, feeling much the same need himself. Then turned to face his ally, feeling a fierce kinship as deep and true as any he had ever experienced.

At last the tiger stepped back, and raising its head, gave a growl of pride and possession that told any who cared to listen that this land was his, and his alone. Kalus stepped back, acknowledging this, and with a surge of bittersweet emotion, realized that his friend had ascended to the magnificent freedom of a creature of the Wild. . .but also that it no longer needed him.

'You've done it,' he said quietly, and with such feeling that the pent-up emotions burst forth in a flood of tears. Then he shook off all weakness, lifted the legs of the deer, and looked one last time at his friend.

'Fly well, my Avatar. My spirit is always with you.'

Kalus turned sadly toward home, and followed by the wolf, was away.

Chapter 30

It was a quiet morning, and for the first time in weary days uncounted, a truly mild one as well. The sun shone warm and wet, there was little breeze, and this time, Kalus knew, it was no illusion. Winter was on the wane. If he had possessed a calendar, the day might have been called March 12.

And though the inexorable changing of the seasons brought with it new concerns and dangers, he resolved this day to feel some small satisfaction in his victory over the Cold World. Perhaps victory was not the right word, since the primal elements knew no intelligence, and felt no pain. Still.....

Sylviana came out to join him on the ledge, which through the softening snow, was once more discernible as the same from which she had first surveyed the confines of her new existence, and the untamable world that was to be the only home of her adulthood. Putting her hand through Kalus' arm and nestling against him, both felt emotion stir inside them, as sleeping dreams and fears alike, awoke to the possibilities of the coming Spring.

The two looked at each other. And without speaking, both knew that the mountains they had been forced to climb were too high, the valleys they had endured, too abysmal and black. Somehow a quieter space must be found, where they could rest and recover their spirits, and climb no higher feeling than gentle warm affection and peace. Such, at least, was their desire.

'I miss the tiger,' said Kalus quietly. 'I knew he would have to go. But still.'

'I miss Akar,' she began. Then suddenly striking upon the heart of her emotions. 'I miss my FATHER.' Tears welled in her eyes. 'He never knew, because I didn't. . .how much I loved him.' She lowered her head and cried silently. 'How could I have been such a fool?'

Feeling awkward, for all their time together, he gently took her hand and rubbed it. For a time neither spoke. Then he said sincerely.

'If there is a God, he knows now.'

She looked up at him, so grateful, then embraced him with all the mingled love and sorrow for persons and places forever lost, and others found. He held her warmly, and after a time he added.

'At least the season is mild and safe. Perhaps the safest of the year. We will be free to move about with less worry.'

'And a month from now?' she could not help asking. Then she looked up quickly, hoping she had not repaid his kindness unfairly.

'It's all right,' he said, knowing her enough by now to read this in her face. 'In a month I will think of something else. I ask only this: that you don't punish yourself for what is gone, and what can never be.... Don't worry for the future, at least today.'

'All right.' She turned toward him, taking both his hands in hers. 'Did I ever tell YOU, Kalus? That I love. . .you?' She looked into his eyes, her spirit naked before him.

'Yes, my sweet Sylviana. Though you never said the words like this, you told me many times. You showed me.' He struggled. 'You know that I would die for you —' She put a finger to his lips.

'Live for me, instead.' And they quietly embraced.

A moment later, Sylviana saw beyond his shoulder the outline of what appeared to be a stalking predator. The image yet unresolved through her tears, it dropped slinking down into the gorge.

'Kalus. Something's coming this way.' He turned quickly, and she pointed. He drew his sword, and put her behind him with his arm. He was about to tell her to withdraw, when something in the shadowy movements struck a familiar chord inside him. His eyes brightened, then he smiled outright. Once more the mad happiness engulfed him.

'It's Avatar!'

'Yes.'

'And there's no trace of a limp. He's moving the way a great cat should. See him climb!'

But as the striped form drew on, showing no sign of either fear or recognition, she felt a tremor of doubt. Surely the tiger they had known was not so large and supple. Yet as it slowed its movements and broke again into sunlight, she recognized the eyes and striped markings of their friend. Before she could ask, Kalus answered her.

'He's nearly full grown now. A few more months and no grizzly will dare to stand up to him.' Looking at the powerful creature so close at hand, she found

this easy to believe. For all her familiarity and trust, she could not help but feel a certain awe and fear. Even the muscles in Kalus' arm tensed involuntarily, as it came to a halt perhaps a dozen feet away. But the tension was not lasting. Sheathing his sword, he spoke its name and began to advance toward it.

But at this the tiger turned away curiously, as if to retreat. Once more he gestured and spoke to it, but upon trying to come closer the result was the same.

'I think he wants me to follow him. I don't understand his urgency, but I think that I should. Will you be all right?'

'Yes. Be careful. What about Alaska?'

'Keep her here with you, until I find out what he's trying to tell me.' Turning one last time. 'I love you.'

'Go on, will you? And watch where you're going, you're going to break your neck.'

'All right. Goodbye.' He slowly disappeared among the shadows of the gorge.

*

The tiger had begun by leading him southward along the bottom of the gorge. He kept waiting for it to turn away westward, or double back upon its tracks, since the sandstone hills that formed the southern border of his world were the unsleeping realm of the mountain cats. And though the tiger was the match of any unaltered creature of the winter forests, these powerful, saber-toothed throwbacks were not to be tested. And at the point where the sandstone and granite ridges met..... He could not even think about that. With every step he became more leery, and whispered as loudly as he dared for the tiger to stop and turn back. But to his utter dismay, it held fast to the deepening gorge until the end.

Like a nightmare Kalus' felt his fears surround him, and all hope and safety slip behind. The walls at either hand became too steep to climb. His messenger and guide, who for its own sake he dared not abandon, refused to heed his warnings. The shadows grew deeper, and up ahead he began to describe, half in fearful

imagination, half in stark reality, the outline of the darkest shadow that yet lived in all the Valley. Like a hole broken in the side of some ancient subterranean dungeon, straight ahead of him, larger than natural life, he saw the yawning blackness of the Commodores' cave. Only once before, as an adolescent, had he observed it, from the high western wall. And when the side-winding, forty foot reptile had sauntered out, tasting the hot summer air with its tongue, he had run like the fleetest antelope, oblivious to the singular (and dangerous) spectacle he made, his one desire to be as far from the killing serpent as possible. His more recent encounter had only galvanized his fears.

Yet here he was, after years of struggle on the brink of a personal victory, with love and hope in sight, being drawn irresistibly to the one place above all others that he was loathe to go. Indeed, it was the peril of these Winter-sleeping creatures that made him most uneasy in thoughts of the coming Spring.

His anger and fear merged into maddening exasperation, but still the tiger plodded forward, heedless. It reached the dark overhang of sandstone and gazed back at him. Yet again he repeated the gestures of withdrawal, made unable by the consequences to speak. The tiger nodded its understanding, or seemed to, but then to his horror and final consternation, dove headlong into the grinning maw of death.

Once again Kalus was faced with the terrible choice: loyalty to one he loved, or survival for himself. He stood trembling on the threshold, frozen with fear and burning with inner conflict. He looked back upon the sunlit world and thought of his home: of his woman, and the cub. But what kind of home would it be if he abandoned his friend at greatest need? Swallowing hard a cry of rage to deaf gods, he drew out the ready steel of his sword, and plunged into darkness.

*

The hollow funnel of the passage had been worn flat by the years, and by the constant passing of the inscrutable reptiles. Kalus saw and heard nothing—only the pounding of his heart, and the gentle rasp of his fur boots against the life-dry sandstone. He moved by sense of feel and air, in times of doubt probing ahead of him with the sword. How far ahead the tiger had gone he had no way of knowing. And more and more he began to feel that if he must come upon the scene of its shadow-sprung peril, he would at least come upon it after, and in

silence. He crouched lower and (if possible) stalked more quietly, advancing in a state of warlike readiness.

How far he walked he could not say. But suddenly, or perhaps only made sudden by the final acceptance of a half believed message from his eyes, he became aware of a soft light in the distance. This morning-like glow held fast at the edge of sight, and as he drew closer, began by slow degrees to reveal its source. Ahead of him the funnel reached its narrowest point, a squarish hole still broad enough for five men to pass abreast, that opened into a deepening expanse. Coming toward the rising, hard-rock lip of it, he went down on his belly, crawled forward, and looked over into the heart of the thing he feared.

There are times when a man's worst fears are justified, and when he cannot, with any hope of survival, confront them. But often through patience, perseverance, and the fullness of time, the antithesis of his life can be worn down, altered, or made in the end less terrible. And while it is the height of foolishness for any man to laugh in the face of death, neither must he deify the many smaller deaths of Fear.

There in the sunken center, the stage, as it were, of this vaulted subterranean amphitheater, stood the tiger on a patch of sandy earth, among a tangle of living scrub. A soft and warm light shone down on him through a broad opening in the stone overhead. Nor was it a mere hole to the world beyond. Through one of the many wonders of Nature, a vein of crystalline quartz interceded, allowing the sun's light to pass, while gathering and holding a fair measure of its warmth.

All these things he observed in the time it took for his eyes to adjust to what seemed a blinding glare, though in reality it was many shades lighter than the unfiltered sunlight. He had not yet seen the shadows: the tiger was not alone.

There, stretched lengthwise amid recessions in the descending, stair-like levels, as if the whole of a deceased family among the layered shelvings of a crypt, a full score of the dreadful reptiles lay sleeping. It was a sight to freeze the blood, but for one odd detail which their considerable girth clearly illustrated. **THEY DID NOT BREATHE.** Or if they did, it was so infrequently that in the considerable time he watched he never saw it. No heave or swell of the elastic ribs and dry, loose-fitting skin could be seen, even where an entire flank stood out against the unshaded light from above. **BUT SURELY THEY WERE NOT DEAD.** No sign of decay could be seen on them, nor any apparent cause of

death.

Sylviana had told him of the aquatic lizards of the Galapagos Islands, who when diving for the sea vegetation which sustained them could hold their breath for an hour or more, even stopping their heartbeat to do so. But even this did not fully explain the phenomenon by which these enormous, cold-blooded creatures could remain suspended for the nearly six month period when the world outside became to them untenable, or reveal the inner clock that told them to wake once more, and slowly revive into a living state.

The tiger, who had discovered this place on that first, bitter wandering from the man-child's cave, being drawn by its warmth and shelter, had no need for such questions, and simply accepted the fact. He had returned one time since, and in his animal way reasoned that these, like all hibernating creatures, would not be stirring until the weather turned warm. And now that the time had come for him to return again northward, to the long forests where Winter hardly waned, he desired to give some last gift to his friend, who had helped bring him back to the world of the living. This gift was the magic of the green, budding cactus which on that troubled night had opened his mind to show him that his own feelings, as well as the strange company who had taken him in, could be trusted. He looked up at the Kalus placidly, waiting for him to come down.

Kalus stood regarding the scene some moments longer. Though he slowly reasoned that the danger was remote, or at least not immediate, a den of dragons, be they live, dead or sleeping, is not to be entered lightly. And he could not imagine why the tiger had brought him here. At last he began to descend, though warily, all the time watching the silent shapes for any sign of movement or consciousness. There were none. He came to the dry, earthy disc in the bowl's center, and approached the tiger. His expression and body language were taut as he said. 'Why, Avatar? Why, of all the places you have ever been, did you bring me here?'

In mute reply the tiger carefully took one of the buds in his teeth and plucked it free, as on that night he had done, seeking the moisture and sustenance within. Then began to chew, curling his lip and tongue in reaction to the bitter taste. But the taste had been bitter on that first night as well.

Kalus knelt to examine the plant, and the special part that his friend had eaten.
YOU BROUGHT ME HERE TO TASTE THE FRUIT OF A GNARLED

DESERT? he thought curiously. For so it seemed to him. But looking into the deep, mysterious eyes of the tiger, and again at the strange plant he had never seen, he wondered. Using the hunting knife he carefully cut away several of the buds, placing them in his pouch. He was tempted to put the last in his mouth, but something warned him off. Not until I am free of this place, he thought, and the tiger seemed to understand.

Together they withdrew, to ride the dragon's wing.

*

The four of them stood again on the ledge, the cub jumping playfully at the tiger's face. Avatar patiently eluded the mock biting, and pushed her away with softened claws. Like Akar before him, he too found it hard to leave them, and still harder to expression the affection and gratitude he felt.

Retrieving the cub, Kalus knelt directly in front of him and gently, cautiously stroked the great head. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I understand your silence better than many who can speak. I know you have to leave. And I'm proud, so very proud that I could help you, and be a part of your life. I will never forget you.' He put his face against its shoulder, and let a few tears pass. 'It's the way of it, my friend. But wherever you go, a part of me will always follow.'

The tiger stood still, confused, but he did not pull away. Again their eyes met, and in that moment it seemed that the two worlds, animal and man, could truly touch. The tiger pulled back slowly. Kalus raised himself and took a deep breath.

'Goodbye,' said Sylviana. 'I know you can't understand. . .but you gave back to me someone very dear.'

The tiger turned and retreated down the slope, as human eyes felt again the bittersweet flow of mortal life.

Chapter 31

It was evening before Kalus said anything to Sylviana of the morning's adventures. First there had been work to do, then he felt reluctant to worry her. Finally, as they sat side by side on a flat stone before the diminishing fire, she asked him.

'Where did Avatar take you?' For an answer he reached into his pouch and took out the cactus buds, and laid them on the stone between. 'Did you ever see these, or hear of them? They come from a desert plant that is like but unlike others I have seen. He was very intent on my eating them—he risked much—but I

wanted to talk to you first.'

She took one in her fingers, and held it up against the light. 'If I didn't know better..... They look like peyote buttons.'

'What are they?'

'A hallucinogenic cactus, used by the Native Americans in dances and religious ceremonies. It's a kind of drug, if that's the right word for something found in Nature. It's supposed to open the mind, and let you see things beyond the physical reality.'

'Is it a kind of magic, then?' He was fascinated and intrigued that the tiger had experienced this elevated state, and wanted him to feel it, too.

'I guess you could call it that. But one very dangerous to the young, or to anyone who doesn't know what they're doing.'

'Have you ever eaten them?'

'No. I've smoked marijuana, which is safer..... But Kalus, these can't possibly be peyote.'

'Why not?'

'Because if the tiger had eaten them he'd have gone crazy: he wouldn't have understood. He wouldn't have been able to think it through.'

'And maybe for that same reason he wasn't afraid. You still don't see it, do you? An animal's mind isn't less than ours, only different. He lives in his world as clearly, and understands it as well, as you and I. He is not a half-wakened child.'

'Well, assuming all that's true, and that this is peyote. Do you think you're ready for it? Because I promise you, it would take your mind to places it's never been. It could be very frightening..... Now you're scaring me.'

Indeed, he had all but stopped listening, gazing instead with fixed intensity upon the mystical substance before him.

'I want to try, Sylviana, if only for the pains it cost me to bring it here.' He

looked at her intently. 'Where Avatar leads, I want to follow if I can.'

'I can't stop you, but.... Oh, Kalus. I'm so afraid you'll hurt yourself. And after all we've been through.'

He saw the wisdom of this, and her deep concern. 'What if eat just one, and you are here with me?'

The endless conflict between safety and wild freedom once more presented itself. Both felt it clearly. She hesitated, then said.

'If we do it, we do it together.'

'All right.'

Kalus put a bud in his mouth. Sylviana did the same.

'This is amazing.'

Roughly an hour had passed, and these words so broke the stillness that it seemed as if Kalus had then and there invented speech. And indeed, so far as concerned the virgin sea on which they now sailed, eternal and boundless, these were the first words, and he and the woman-child, the true Adam and Eve.

For some time now he had remained as a near statue, only his eyes and forehead working, studying in alternate wonder his hand, the circle of stones, then the altar and mirror behind it. Sylviana watched him, feeling the same awe of the experience, and perhaps to a greater degree, the accompanying danger. She answered simply.

'Yes.'

Her voice, like a pebble in a pool, touched the glassy waters of his spirit, sending out ripples of thought and feeling which seemed as endless as the pool itself. Regaining his center, he became placid with the wisdom of silence, until the shoots that stirred within him were ready to blossom once more in true speech.

Sylviana was becoming concerned, but he had not forgotten her.

'All my days,' he said finally, 'I've judged life by the pale shadow of it in which I've often been forced to live, never guessing that the heart. . .the very bones of it. . .are ALIVE.' He paused.

'It seems to me now, as it did when I was a child, that no hope, no dream is ever fully lost, so long as the least fragment remains alive inside you. It becomes like a seed—sleeping, dormant. But not dead. Until, if we can endure, and fight our way to a better place where sun and water yet flow, it is called gently back to life.'

He looked at her, tears streaming down his face. 'I am alive! And you, my endless miracle. Are alive, and here with me.'

She took his hand, so close, and pressed it to her lips.

'Be gentle, my loving Kalus. Be gentle. There are still so many wounds.'

Never, it seemed to him, had she spoken more truly. For he now felt in the wrenching of his heart, as surely as if the flesh itself ached and bled, the many scars that lay across him. He became quiet, and put his head against her, knowing that for all his yearning, patience alone would heal him, and make those forgotten dreams possible.

Time passed.

At length Kalus raised himself, understanding, and better able to handle the heightened state of his senses, feeling once more like a peaceful sea from which the gale has passed, softened and grateful.

'Thank you,' he said to her. He took a deep breath.

'Are you all right?'

There was something more than womanly concern in her voice. An intense curiosity had taken hold of her, as if she too pondered some great riddle of her past. The questions twirled like serpents about the object she now surveyed.

'Yes. What are you thinking?'

'I've been looking at the mirror,' she said, gazing at it still. 'All this time we've taken the altar, and the visions of that night, for granted, perhaps because the questions were too deep, and they frightened us..... But what does it all mean, Kalus? What's BEHIND it?'

Turning toward the singular apparatus, which like her he had left aside until this night as simply too much to contemplate, he was again drawn by its silent mystery. But in his more earthy, less ethereal way, he took the question literally. What lay BEHIND it? And stirred at last to physical action, he took from his pouch the round hammer-stone and approached the blue-black mirror, which seemed to waver in strange patterns before him.

As the woman watched, he tapped first along the rock immediately surrounding the glass, then above, and around the altar. There could be no doubt: the sounds were hollow. Some hidden chamber lay beyond. He turned to his companion.

'Shall I break the glass?'

Again she felt an inner turmoil. But her need to know was so great.....
'Yes.'

He shielded his eyes with his arm, much as he had on the night when together they heard the Voice. . .and hurled his stone into the heart of it.

With a crash the mirror burst. And when she dared to open her eyes again, her first reaction was disappointment. Only a hole remained, lined about the edges with jagged bits of glass. But forbidding and tooth-like as these appeared, they could with care be removed, and the passage rendered safe. This Kalus set out to do, protecting his hand with a small skin and pulling out the pieces one by one, unable yet to penetrate the gloom of what lay beyond.

'Bring me the torch,' he said to her.

But now the girl became suddenly timid. Seeing the result of her handiwork, she wondered if in her restless curiosity she had not tempted the undoing of all Faith.

'It's all right,' he said, somehow knowing her thoughts. 'If a belief can be so easily destroyed, by the least physical reality, it is not worthy of the hope we place in it. I would rather put my faith in something that can be trusted.'

Her eyes pleaded.

'I know,' he said more quietly. 'Nothing is that simple. But the miracle of the Voice is not banished yet. Bring me the torch, and we'll see what lies beyond.'

Slowly she calmed the surge of religious fear, and took from its mount on the wall the torch that they had made. She handed it to him as he continued to reach across the polished granite, removing or brushing aside the broken glass that remained. He then moved the torch from side to side, trying to see.....

'There is a room, about the same size of the upper cave. But it is higher, and filled with objects I don't know.' Taking the fur canopy from his bed, he folded it and used it to line the edges, still rough, of the opening. Then tossing the light in gently ahead of him, he mounted the altar. And passed within.

'I'm coming, too,' came the woman's voice after him. Perceiving no immediate danger, he wedged the torch into an opening, and helped her through the empty, oval space. Upon regaining her feet, the girl looked around her. . .and gave voice to her dismay.

'Computers.' And so it was. One entire wall of the square-cut chamber consisted of nothing but the sterile MACHINES: voice and thought analyzers, communications and memory, species, mythology, and logic sequencers. The woman felt used, betrayed.

'All that time in the cave, alone and afraid. My only hope was the voice that spoke to me through the glass. To know that it was reading my thoughts and secret hopes, and telling me to remain there..... Just MACHINES. All a terrible hoax.'

'Not all, my sweet Sylvie, and not terrible. The warnings they spoke were true, and may have saved your life. And in the end, I did come to you.' He put his arm around her.

'And is it not a miracle after all? Think of it. I was born fully human, on a night when stars fell from the sky. Then Akar comes to me in Barabbas' cave: I see a terrible vision, and am made an outcast. The Mantis finds you in the mountains of the North and brings you here. We are brought together.' He turned towards her. 'Even if machines could accomplish all or part of that, so many miracles had to come first. Life on Earth. The Universe itself, rather than a great, formless

void.

'What are the odds of it?' he continued. 'That you and I should be standing here now, alive and still young, with love and hope, and the chance to make a better life. Is that not miracle enough?'

'I know what you're saying. And of course you're right. It just felt better. . .I don't know. . .to think that God was watching me. That He loved and cared about ME..... I'm going to miss that.'

'When I was a child, I thought as a child,' he quoted. 'When we are young we need such illusions, such security. And who is to say what does and does not exist in the world beyond our sight? Not I. Here I stand, surrounded by wonders I could not dream of. To think that a light from a machine could reach inside my mind, and give me the power to speak.'

At this the woman suddenly stirred, and drew away from him. She examined the machinery more closely, confounded, overwhelmed. It wasn't possible.

'What is it, Sylviana?' Still for a time she could not speak, trying to follow the rapid, and incredible chain of thought.

'My father was a scientist,' she said finally. 'And I knew something of on-going research. This technology: the fire that burned from nothing, the ability to read my thoughts..... And the violet beam, GIVING YOU THE POWER OF SPEECH. Kalus, unless I'm dead wrong. This equipment, and the altar. . .weren't left here by men! We haven't advanced nearly this far.'

With this her weary despondency left her. She was consumed instead by the eager, questioning thought that her father had passed on to her almost without her knowing it: Science, the study of the visible God.

Examining the back of the chamber, she found a steep passage carved into the rock, after a single bend to the left, leading in a straight line upward and eastward. But surely carved' was not the right word. The walls were smooth as glass, the floor rippled, as if to accommodate some creature which had used the uneven surface to enter and return..... The slanting tube rose far out of sight—to the top, she imagined, of Skithier's fifteen-hundred foot mountain. A score of masons couldn't have done the fine work in twenty years.

'What does it mean?' asked Kalus, lost in the wake of her discovery and unable to follow.

'The oldest question of all, Kalus. Is there life among the stars? But here, let's follow the passage and see where it leads. I'll tell you more when I know more.'

Now it was he who became trepid, not understanding. She couldn't help herself. She laughed.

'Oh, did I look as foolish when you broke the mirror? There's no reason to be afraid. I'm sure there's no one here now. Machinery this advanced could have been working completely on its own for centuries.'

She took his hand, and together they made their way up the long, arrow-straight passageway, pacing their steps and resting often, so as not to exhaust themselves in the climb and have nothing left. And yet at each pause their sense of wonder, as well as the now tenable magic of the peyote, only seemed to increase.

For so, too, do Science and the indescribable beauty Nature walk—the study and living manifestation, respectively, of the enigmatic Spirit of the Universe.

And as they stepped out at last onto a high platform open to the stars, both felt it so clearly. The sabled dome of sky, scattered with living diamonds, throbbed and pulsed, undeniable: Eternity's Breath.

And though they found nothing more alien or fantastic than a smooth, half-crater floor, opening unbarriered on the East, still, this was more than enough. The vastness of the sky reached like a limitless ocean, islanded by countless suns and unseen planets.

And on the nearer, more tangible horizon, its pounding surf just audible in the distance. . . . Kalus' heart caught in his throat. How it called to him! Earth-mystical, everlasting, unvanquished by the follies of men. . . he saw it as for the first time. Endlessly living.

The Sea.

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They remained there until morning, speaking or in silence, taking in the enormity of life, and thinking things they'd never thought before.

While the silent stars watched.

PART III

The Island of Ruins

Though nothing can bring back that hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in
the flowers; We will not grieve, rather find
Strength in what remains behind....

—William Wordsworth

Chapter 32

Sylviana strolled easily along the beach, the cub running playfully up ahead of her. As she walked the cool ocean breeze wrapped her face and body in its blanket of moist freshness. The water-pocked sand beneath her felt cold and invigorating. Tiny trills of foam nipped at her feet as if demanding her attention, before returning in hissing protest to the sea.

At long last, she thought, they had come to a place where this simple pleasure, a

walk in the open air, did not mean exposure to imminent peril. High walls of stark, weather-beaten stone protected the cove from behind and to either side, reaching long tendrils out into the water. And between its arms and hollow chest a strip of sand, perhaps a mile long and a third as deep, lay open to the sea and sun. Lack of game, as much as the forbidding walls, kept the predatory threat of the land animals away from them. So Kalus had told her.

For this same reason he had never considered the margins of the sea as a home of any duration. But on that night when he felt its call so strongly, remaining upon the high watch until the fiery sun had risen from its depths to light the land, Sylviana had spoken of the many ways that food could be obtained there. His restless thought needed no other prompting. In the following weeks they had taken what they needed and could carry, and come the gray stone distance to the north and east, to live. That Kalus had another reason for doing so he kept to himself, a seeming contradiction to the intimate closeness of those days. But he knew the symptoms of his heart and would not cross them. Not yet. He was afraid, and at the same time drawn, to the thing he did not understand.

The girl watched happily as Alaska made a reckless charge back through the surf, crashing the shallow water against her chest with the inexhaustible energy of youth. Having lived more than half her life among humans, it seemed a perfectly natural thing to do: running in joyful frolic toward the outstretched, clapping hands of her soft, female friend. And as she came to a sudden, impulsive halt, shaking the cold water from her fur, she took little notice as Sylviana turned a puzzled gaze far out across the waters. It only meant that her friend no longer wished to play.

Sylviana couldn't believe her eyes. IT HAS TO BE AN ILLUSION, she thought. SOME KIND OF MIRAGE. But still the image lingered. Perhaps a half mile out, a lone human figure had just emerged from the water and propped itself gracefully atop a tiny islet, a mere rock at the edge of the continental shelf, which had somehow survived the weathering of the years.

At least it looked human. Just at the distance where eyesight begins to fail and imagination to fill the void, the creature looked strangely surreal: something from an ancient legend of the sea. Half blocked from her vision by the stone, only its naked back and blondish mane were visible. These seemed human enough. But she was sure she remembered something odd about the way it emerged. . .the way it moved. . something.

But suddenly her eyes descried a far more substantial form, undeniable. A huge, black dorsal fin split the surface of the water like a knife, then began to move in slow patient circles around the speck of land and shelter. Incredibly, the lone figure seemed not to notice.

Like wildfire, the thoughts and fears chased each other through her mind. MY GOD, ANOTHER HUMAN! PERHAPS THE LAST. AND A SHARK! I'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING! Cupping her hands in front of her mouth, she inhaled as deeply as her anxiety and thumping heart would allow, and shouted in desperation:

'Look out! Stay out of the water, there's a shark!' It was no use, the north wind and crashing surf devoured her feeble warning. Trying to master her panic, she took several deep breaths, and cried out at the top of her lungs.

'Shark! Shark! Stay out of the water. A SHARK!'

This time the creature reacted. Turning towards the sound, it returned her startled gaze with one of its own, revealing for an instant a young, almost childish face. Then to her horror, it leapt into the water immediately beside the giant killer. Frozen in terror she could only watch, unable to move or think. She didn't breathe.

Reaching the orca's back, the young male mounted quickly and was gone.

Still on the shore, Sylviana stood incredulous. The boy must have seen it. Had he really grabbed hold of the fin, or had she just imagined it? Her eyes detecting motion farther out, once more she beheld the impossible pairing. This time there could be no doubt. A young boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen, had resurfaced with his mount, a massive killer whale. Clutching with hand and foot both the dorsal and pectoral fins, his limbs spread spider-like against the surging torso, he rode as if he had been born to it.

In fact, he had.

*

'Kalus!' The girl came running to the place where he stood tacitly shaping a net,

surprised he hadn't heard her shouts. He saw her but did not immediately react, half knowing what she was going to say. She was going to tell him she'd seen a water-child. He waited patiently, hoping she would understand.

'Kalus,' she repeated, closer and out of breath. 'I saw another human. . .or something that looked like one. It saw me and dashed off to sea, on the back of a killer whale!'

'Yes. I know.'

'You saw it, too?'

'No, but I have seen them before.'

She looked him full in the face, perplexed. 'You knew there were other humans, and you never told me? My God, Kalus, why?'

'Because I was afraid.'

'Afraid of what?' she demanded.

'Afraid that if you knew there were others, you would have less need of me. That you would not love me as much, always wondering.....'

'Oh, Kalus, that's so unfair! How could you think so little of me?' But even as she denied his words, she knew they held a grain of truth.

'I'm sorry,' he said. Finding no other expression, he repeated.

'I'm sorry.'

For a moment she had forgotten him, and the effect her resentment would have. Now she looked at him, at the weary, washed-out face of long ago, and remembered.

'OH.' She came behind and wrapped her arms around his chest and held him tightly. 'It's all right. I understand.'

With little further speech the two worked on the nets until night forced them back into the cave, a small hollow bored into smooth stone twenty feet above the sand. It was neither spacious nor comfortable, but Kalus did not intend to remain

there long.

Both knew, as later in the dead of night he opened his heart to her, that they must leave the roots of their past and strike out to a new destination. To the Island, where Kalus had often marked the smoke of fires, and where he hoped to find some answer to the questions that unsettled him, not the least of which was the riddle of the Children of the Sea.

Chapter 33

The beauty of the Sea was not lost on him, for all his preoccupation with the Island. Every day it revealed new wonders, and more and more he came to realize that it was not only a home and harbinger of infinite life, but a living, tangible thing unto itself. When Sylviana told him it had been the birthplace of life on Earth he was not surprised. When she remarked that little seemed to have

changed, despite the nuclear holocaust, he believed, and felt quietly reassured.

But he also saw clearly the darker, more savage aspect of the waters, which the poetic (usually from the detached safety of an untroubled ship or peaceful shoreline) often seemed to overlook. For if the Valley had been ruthless and produced, with few exceptions, a grim array of thoughtless, thankless creatures, their only creed survival of the fittest, then the Sea was the very creator, and composer of the theme. Fierce, desperate mating followed by birth in huge numbers, of which not one in a hundred reached adulthood to fight and breed again, seemed the unbroken rule of this world without shelter, where life and death chased each other like madness, and none were immune.

One morning he watched as a pair of tiny animals, some forgotten offshoot of the hermit crab, dueled at the bottom of a small, clear tidal pool for the affections of a waiting female. Not only was their battle as cruel and fierce as any he had ever seen on land, but the speed and nature of their movements was so reminiscent of the small, poisonous spiders of the Carak that he, an immense land animal infinitely safe upon the inaccessible rock, had unconsciously recoiled in fear and disgust.

On another occasion a smallish gray shark, deceived this far north by an alluring current of warm water, became entangled in one of the nets they had strung at the end of a natural jetty. When dragged ashore with the meager catch that had lured it, its death struggle had been so ferocious that it haunted Kalus' sleep for weeks afterward. Hopelessly entangled, drowning in a sea of air, it had nonetheless thrashed and snapped for what seemed a eternity, destroying the net and reeking such havoc that the startled fisherman, had he been able, would gladly have thrown it back into the sea. And even when it finally expired, the razor-sharp teeth and leering jaws had presented such a frightening specter that he refused, instinctively, to touch it.

Reluctantly Sylviana had admitted that this behavior, either in killing or being killed, was in no way exceptional among sharks. And far from being the archetype of its race, this relatively small and undeveloped creature could not begin to match the rakish refinements of the Blue, the Tiger, and the ineffable Great White. That they preferred to feed upon the dead and dying, that they usually left substantial, uninjured creatures alone, was robbed of all comforting assurance by the fact that their perceptions were so dim, their mental development so limited, that the actions of a given individual in a given situation

could in no way be safely predicted. Like life itself, there was just no telling. From this experience these thriving, thoughtless killers became for him the very symbol of the dark, violent side of nature that had always so terrified and appalled him.

'There must be something more to life,' he said, on the thirteenth night since their arrival. They sat before a driftwood fire in the sand, protected from the wind by the high north wall, a short distance from their cave. With the stars above and the soft murmur of the waves before them, there was peace and sadness enough in his heart to speak of it, and to admit the vague emptiness he found so hard and painful to express. For he knew that she felt an emptiness, too.

'All the birth and dying,' he continued, 'The endless struggle just to survive, and to create new beings to struggle and die when you are gone. It is very hard for me to say this, Sylviana, but there are times when I think Nature is very cruel, and I can see no wisdom in living only by her laws.'

'But aren't you the one who's always saying that the societies of men must have failed because they had forgotten the simple goodness of Nature, primal virtue' and all of that? That society had overridden the subtle ways of the Tao, creating its own, alternative order in which Man's will alone was powerful? That there were no natural, softening influences to prevent man's ignorance and violence?' Her words seemed mockery, but there was a reason for them. She was trying to draw him to the heart of the matter, which could be difficult when he became thoughtful and began to withdraw.

'You know I've said these things, and you know I still believe them. But why couldn't men do both: raise themselves above the endless struggle, and still have the thought and compassion to put away war and racial hatred, to feed and clothe and give medicine to those who need it? Why does it have to be one or the other?' There was no answer to such a question. Impatiently, she stirred the fire with a stick.

'Aren't you really trying to tell me that you've decided to visit the island at all costs, and that you're afraid of what you might find there?'

'Yes,' he replied dourly, confused.

'Why are you so threatened by the Children? From everything you've told me, they sound even more primitive than the hill-people.' For a moment his eyes

flashed, but he knew she meant no insult.

'Because I think there could be some other colony on the Island as well.' Her eyes became suddenly large, and she turned toward him intently. He continued reluctantly.

'I told you I've seen the smoke of campfires, and as many as twelve riders at once making toward the island at sunset. But I've also seen other lights, bright and unnatural, and broad beams that split the night..... I don't know what they mean.'

As she heard this her heart beat suddenly faster. It was all too fantastic. Old voices and dreams that she had thought dead and in the past, surged recklessly to life inside her.

'We've got to go there! We've got to find out.'

'Yes.' He paused, watching her intently in his turn. 'I'm sorry I couldn't tell you all at once. It was a lot to think about.'

'I understand.' She got up and began to pace restlessly, breathing too deep, unable to control it. 'Oh, Kalus, I feel as if I'm going to burst.'

'I'll be there with you.'

'Yes. YES.' Like a child she ran and wrapped her arms about him.

But later that night, unable to sleep and watching his familiar form beside her in the darkness, she was dismayed by a strange voice that told her she wished she was going alone. Even as he had said, she began to wonder how deep, how true, how honest was their love? And for the first time in many months she felt the terrible uncertainty of the dreamer who has wrapped all hope and affection about the shoulders of a single lover.

IS THIS THE MAN I WANT TO SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE WITH?
And as much as she wanted to say yes, she couldn't. Because she didn't know.

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In the chill hour of dawn Kalus woke, and in turn looked upon the sleeping figure into whom he had poured his life's blood. To see her lying there beside him, breathing evenly, her face warm and softened like a child's, was all that he had ever asked, or ever could ask, of the Nameless. His love for her in that moment, when he knew, or feared, that her loyalty to him would soon be put to its severest test, was almost unbearable. Thoughts of a life without her he could not begin to face, and he, too, felt a moment of doubt.

'Sometimes if you love someone, you have to let them go.' She hadn't meant the words then, but what if now..... If their love could not stand, in the bright and hard light of day, then the efforts of a lifetime were in vain. For if she, who knew him to the depths of his being—his trials and broken dreams, his personal weakness and indomitable strength—if she found in him nothing to love and cherish and hold on to, then who in all the cold, lonely world ever would?

If he had known the full quotation, or she the effect its partial phrasing would have on him, perhaps they could have talked it out, and both found in these simple but profound words some solace:

'If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it is yours. If it does not, it never was.'

And if, in that moment he had woken her, perhaps she would have seen in his eyes a depth of love that put aside all questions, and in the returning echo of her heart, sealed their bond forever. But he did not wake her, because he was afraid. And she never told him the full quote, because like so many of life's precious and irretrievable moments, it was gone forever.

He couldn't cage her, and he knew it. She couldn't love him fully without knowing. So be it.

So it was.

Chapter 34

It had been decided that they should build a boat. The only questions left to them were what kind of vessel it should be, and whether to cast off directly from the cove, or to build the craft some distance upstream along the banks of the Broad River, and follow its currents through the delta which then spilled to either side of the Island.

Two considerations made Kalus choose the latter course. First there was the problem of acquiring the wood. There were no trees of substance within a mile of their rock-bound haven, and no way of transporting the farther wood here. Second, neither he nor the girl had sufficient experience in ship-building to put an adequate vessel to sea, and perform the long, slow tack against both wind and

current, northward. And though building the craft upstream meant exposure to the returning land animals, this danger, at least, he understood and could in some measure anticipate. For he knew without being told that only a fool takes to the sea unprepared.

So for the first long days, until Kalus understood well enough to continue on his own, they made the journey together to the riverside clearing where he had cut a single trunk of elm. Eighteen feet long, it would be halved and hollowed out, later to be lashed together into a sturdy, double canoe. James Michener had described such a boat in his tales of Hawaii, and Sylviana had never forgotten. Nor had she dreamed in those easy, carefree days at Ithaca College that she would one day be drawing her very existence from the precious knowledge such men passed on.

'Great fullness seems empty, yet it can never be exhausted.' So Lao Tsu had said, and more and more in these uncertain days he was proving the most trustworthy guide. Her life had become like a precious ring dropped into a shallow stream: the thrashing of her hands only muddied the waters, and made it impossible to find. Let the stream flow and cleanse, let the sediments sink back. Then, and only then, could she see what lay at the bottom.

But if Sylviana felt the need and desire to surrender, Kalus experienced a vastly different emotion: raw and intolerable frustration. He could not understand why Nature seemed to resist him at every turn, in an endeavor which he knew must be put forward and carried out. And the conditions in which he was expected to pull off this miracle were appalling. He had neither saw nor plane nor adze, every day the threat from the returning animals grew, and yet somehow he must construct a boat in which to trust the very lives of those he loved.

Each morning he would rise, his back aching from the previous day's labor, and make the five mile journey across rock and open land to the small clearing, there to struggle and shape until the sun began to set. Then the journey back, to a place he could hardly think of as home, and a life which began to seem more and more alien, without the roots of his past. The girl massaged him, encouraged him. But since the night of his full disclosure a subtle wedge had been driven between them, intensified by Kalus' need to concentrate all his energies on personal safety and construction of the craft.

It reminded her at times of the way he had spent himself in constructing the

barrier to the Mantis' cave, and its later effect on him. But she kept this to herself, knowing that previous labor had been essential as well, and completed not a day too soon. Hidden fires drove him, and if they tended to turn him in upon himself there was little she could, or possibly should do to change it. He became once more an enigma to her, and at times it seemed they met at nightfall like loyal strangers, cast upon a desert island and enjoined, of necessity, to live and work, and carry out disparate dreams of love, together. It was a cold metaphor, perhaps, but there was no denying it. He had been to her, literally, the last man on Earth. And she to him? The fact that he truly loved her, and would have if given the choice of thousands, he could not tell her, and she didn't ask. His love was primal, unquestioned. And though she too had felt these pure, gut-level urgings, she was reluctant to be bound by them, when there were so many other things to consider. And to look at it from every possible angle didn't help. The questions only brought more questions. Only time, and trial, would tell.

In the end Kalus' will proved stronger than the knotted wood and lack of tools. The boat was finished and rigged, and the moment was at hand. They waited for a day when the winds were not contrary, then set out together for the clearing, the vessel, and the mystery that lay beyond.

Chapter 35

The double prow of the canoe floated gently in the swirling backwater of the launch, its stern still bound by gravity to the sloping earth of the bank behind. The supplies (what there were of them) had been loaded, and the make-shift sail unfurled from the high, horizontal yard. There in the shelter of trees, and running

parallel to the wind, it rocked gently against the mast as the newly tied ends waved fitfully, showing every sign of readiness.

But Kalus, looking out upon the wide, sweeping waters and thinking of the still greater pool beyond, could not bring himself to force the vessel farther. His emotions were running much too high, and the fear of the unknown wrapped about him so thickly that he could not shake off its clinging dread and despair. And despite the presence of the girl and the cub, he felt as small and helpless and alone as he ever had. Courage alone would not forge this crossing. He needed guidance as well.

And in this he showed not cowardice, but wisdom. For we are all at the mercy of winds and currents we cannot always see or understand, and those who strut about pretending to be in firm control, are usually in such control all the way past the maw of death, and into the belly of unmaking.

'Sylviana,' he said finally. 'It may be foolish..... I would like to say a prayer first.'

She was surprised by the request, but in no way opposed. She felt much the same uncertainty. So without kneeling or folding hands, whose gestures he had never learned, he bowed his head and spoke in deepest earnest.

'Nameless God. Perhaps you cannot hear me, or perhaps you laugh at my weakness. I do not wish to ask you this. But I am just a small and simple man; I cannot control all things. The waters into which I lower this boat seem cold to me, and I am afraid. Please, if you care and can hear me, bring us safely to the Island.'

He paused, and for the first time in many days the woman was intently aware of his existence. His eyes closed hard and his hands folded together unknowingly. This was coming from the heart.

'I do not wish to die,' he continued. 'But if one of us must die. . then let it be me. For I could not live without my Sylviana. She is my life.' He choked back wretched tears until he felt a soft pressure against him, and sweet arms enfolding his gnarled head and scarred shoulders.

'Don't,' she said gently, reproaching herself for her coldness. 'I'm here with you. I'm with you.'

But to her surprise he did not return this overture. Instead he stepped back, shook his head severely, and said to her. 'I thank you, Sylviana. And I am sorry for this moment of weakness when I must be strong. But whatever you feel for me, it must not be pity.'

'I only thought—'

'No. Not now. The passage we are about to make is perilous, and we must put all our thought and effort into it. There will be time for emotions later. There is no other way. Are you prepared?'

.. 'Yes.' He moved away from her and lifted the balking cub, placing her in the left-hand shell, where the woman would ride. 'We must be off.'

Without further speech they pushed the craft the remaining distance, then clambered in to take up their positions near the back of the parallel hulls, there both to paddle and steer, using only the awkward, bladed shafts that he had made.

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Almost at once Kalus perceived the most serious flaw of his construction. The vessel was too heavy. As soon as they left the dreamy backwater he knew it. The catamaran-like craft responded to the current, and as the sail slowly filled, to the wind as well. But it often moved (or failed to move) with a will of its own. The strokes of their paddles, and even with the girl joining him for a time in the right-hand shell, were barely enough to move them a safe distance from the shore. A less auspicious beginning was hard to imagine.

And the boat was horribly slow to tack, or even move to counter the wind. This concerned Kalus more than anything. For at the meeting of the Broad River and the River of the North—in the wide water-tract of the delta—the southward flow of the latter would try to carry them away from their destination, and out into the open sea. He had cut the hulls as sharply as possible in lieu of a keel, and even leaned them slightly outward at the girl's suggestion. But rudderless, keelless, this was not enough. The best he could manage with the now deployed steering oar was a straight line eastward, by precious yards slowly gaining the center of the stream. How he would hold it at the meeting of the two rivers and

the open sea he could not imagine, though he exhausted his mind in trying. His fear and sense of helplessness grew with each passing moment.

Strange to say, Sylviana's impressions at this early stage of their journey were nearly the opposite. To her the waters had a soothing, almost hypnotic effect. Kalus had not told her the possible complications of the voyage, being uncertain himself; and for reasons all her own she felt a naive (and perhaps misguided) assurance that all would be well. The river was broad and quiet and tranquil. The sun shone bright in an open sky lightly touched with cirrus, and a great adventure was at hand. Everything was so wide open and free: alive, still young, and in the future. The world of her past seemed to slip behind with the running coast, so easily, leaving hardly a trace of memory. But for the presence of Kalus and the pup, she would almost have believed all the tribulations of the War and the Valley to have been nothing more than a bad dream, from which she was finally waking.

But the sight of Kalus brought her back: the look of worried consternation, his desperate struggle as he wrestled with the steering oar. She watched him for a time, unwilling, and it all came back.

Only once, on the first day she hunted with him, had she witnessed this kind of ruthless determination, and through it, felt the harshness of the world that had shaped such creatures: what he had called the hungry, haunted look of a predator. So severe were his efforts, so wholly single-minded, that despite her resolve to face the crossing bravely, his unspoken fears began to rub off on her. And the rising walls to either side of them, the quickening current they now entered, turned the world ominous and forbidding once more. Almost she resented him for it, as if his actions had somehow changed the very nature of the stream.

As for Kalus, he had said his prayer, and now set out with every weapon at his disposal to make it unnecessary. Self-reliance remained the golden rule of his existence, and he knew that all their lives were in his hands. The hands of the Nameless, if they existed at all, were a thing beyond his (or any man's) control.

But there was no more time for such thoughts. The Broad River was broad no longer, its shore no longer peaceful and forested. Great cliffs rose up on their right, the last reaches of the granite ridge. To the north the gray rock was not as steep, but its effect on the river was the same. All its wide and lazy waters now issued with great force through a deep, narrow channel scarcely sixty yards

wide, falling nearly twice that distance in less than a mile. The result was a horrific, white-water chute, now drawing them swiftly to itself. Kalus' harsh voice cut through the growing roar.

'Tie down the cub,' he commanded, 'And then yourself. Take solid hold of the paddle; we've got to keep the boat running straight. And for anything short of death, DON'T LET GO OF THE PADDLE. Now!'

Half stunned, hardly knowing where she was, Sylviana obeyed him. She made the whimpering pup lie down, and bound her securely. Then with shaking hands she tied the waist-rope about herself. She straightened and took hold of the shaft, both knuckles and face turning coldly white. She glimpsed at Kalus, who nodded gravely. This danger they both understood.

Several times through the roar and spray of their passage, the boat tried to whip about and dash itself against the rocks, or turn sideways to be rolled and lost. But each time, one of the rowers would pull forward with desperate strength while the other steered or slapped back at the water till the blade finally dug in against the fume: straight ahead, blocking out the screaming fear, determined.

And when the smoking mists cleared and the chaos died away, as the tract broadened and the waters smoothed again just as swiftly, their craft remained, unbroken and undaunted. Kalus gave a cry and shook his fist at the sky, while the girl wept. Another obstacle had failed to defeat them.

But Kalus was given no time for celebration, and he knew it. Soon they would enter the delta, and the meeting with the more voluminous North River. Immediately he threw down the paddle and took up the longer, stouter steering oar. The sail was heavy and wet, bunched unevenly along the yard; but with supreme, unyielding effort he tried to angle the craft into the wind, which to his dismay now turned nearly straight from the North.

The mast gave a troubled groan; the right hull and stern sank dangerously low in the water. But that was all. He could change the direction of the prow but not their course. The hulls' edges simply would not bite and drive them forward. For all his cursing the craft barely held center. And soon the North River would be upon them. Sylviana raised her dripping face, her chest heaving both with oxygen and emotion. And for all her trauma, she felt a swift and stark moment of recognition. Creeping feelers of memory had been pushing at her consciousness

for weeks, since they came to the cove and she caught her first glimpse of the Island in the distance. Now their message hammered through.

The island that lay before them, broad and flat across the muddy waters of the delta. . . was the ruin of once proud New York City. The river to the north was the Hudson.

She gazed at it in a stupor of disbelief. Not a single scraper touched the skies of Manhattan, only mangled upheavals of stone and steel. The City had been stripped to a foundation of jagged, broken teeth, then left to endure ten thousand years of weathering.

NEW YORK! All this time, feeling at the ends of the earth, she had been less than twenty miles from the place of her birth. It was too incredible to accept, too unlikely to be anything but the truth. Her spirit swooned at the sight of it.

But whatever the Christian name of the river they now encountered, to Kalus it might as well have been the Finger of Satan. The two currents merged into an uneasy bay, lapping slowly but steadily south-eastward. He redoubled his efforts with both sail and paddle, striking furiously at the water till the veins of his forehead seemed ready to burst. But he could not fight the devilish pull.

Away! It carried them away! With all Sylviana's help, he could draw no closer to the Island. The SEA lay beyond, nothing but the sea! Dear God, it was slow, certain death that awaited them! In the final measure he had failed, miserably and utterly. He tore down the Judas sail and fell forward and surrendered to despair.

They were lost.

Chapter 36

But in his despair and hopeless fear of it, Kalus had forgotten (or never knew) that the Sea could also be benevolent. The Sea, which has ways and currents of its own, and to whom the incoming waters were hardly a ripple of sand in the Sahara. The fresh water currents subsided, and the waves of the Atlantic took over. Subtler, more profound, at worst they would have cast them back upon the mainland. But by a distance no greater than the trunk of a fallen tree, he had set their craft far enough east to be held by the confines of a far greater stream. Sweeping northward along the whole coast of America, washing even the pebbles of Nova Scotia before turning eastward toward Britain and the European

main: the subtly altered, and miraculous Gulf Stream.

For a long time it seemed the boat moved not at all. And lost in sorrow and dark reverie, none of its passengers stirred. Only the cub seemed alive, whimpering in the wet bottom of the shell until the woman untied her. At length Kalus rose, to apologize with broken heart for killing them all.

But the words were never spoken. Somehow the boat had turned about, and no longer faced southward. For a time he wasn't sure, afraid of some trick..... Yes! If the vessel moved at all it was north and a little east. They had missed the southwest facet of the Island, but if they paddled with strength and good hope, perhaps they might still affect a landing on its more easterly shores. He was no sailor: he had neither the skill nor the vessel for sailing. But strength still lived in his arms, and fires still burned in his heart. He turned to Sylviana.

'Have you any strength left?' he asked her. 'The current no longer bears us ill, but I think we must still approach the Island on our own.'

'I'm exhausted, Kalus. I feel half drowned..... Can I rest a while first?'

'Yes. If you can steer just a little, I will try to row for both of us.' The woman-child set her paddle listlessly in the water, steering with it as best she could, until pride and returning stamina enjoined her to paddle on her own.

They continued on in this way for several hours, resting at intervals, gradually, so gradually drawing nearer the rocky shoals of the great island. Kalus now began to search for a less dangerous strip of beach, confident that if such could be found, by hook or by crook they would reach it, and effect some kind of landing.

So engrossed was he in searching the coast. . .that for a long while he did not notice the great fin that had risen to starboard, and began to parallel their course at a distance neither great nor small, cunning with the patience of a predator. It was not until it turned and began to bore in on them, as the girl caught her breath and froze in terror, that he saw it.

But once seen there was no forgetting. Black and straight as an ebon keel, it cut through the swells with effortless grace, a torpedoing, half-defined shadow beneath it. No small, Child-bearing female this, but a magnificent bull fully thirty feet long, its knifing dorsal as tall as a man.

And then the blackened knife, like a periscope, sank beneath the level of the waves, and did not reappear. Kalus unfastened his spear, moved forward and stood up in the bow—awed, but fiercely determined to defend his own. All was quiet and still.

Then suddenly (or so it seemed, for the motion was not performed in haste) a great head appeared in front of them, rising perpendicular out of the water, lightly touched by the lapping swells. Above patches of white, dark eyes studied them darkly. The orca seemed to be asking himself, almost casually, were they worth the trouble? Aboard the suddenly diminished craft, the cub set loose a peal of frightened barking, while Kalus showed the whale clearly the point of his spear.

Without haste the creature returned to a swimming posture, and with a rough spout somewhere between laughter and a sneer, began a last, intimidating circle—though whether it intended to attack was not clear, since it drew no closer.

Then to the bewilderment of the company another, smaller fin appeared, as if to join in the kill. But it was not so. Coming between the bull and the tiny ship, the female nudged him almost angrily, then butted him outright in the side. The male at last relented. The two swam off, leaving behind them a riddle that only seemed complicated, because of its simplicity.

Perhaps nowhere else in Nature was the difference between male and female more pronounced, or more in harmony with their world. They were a mated pair: the bull nearly twice her size, aggressive and indomitable. And the female: more subtle, more compassionate (if that is the right word), strong and sure enough to act on both convictions. Either one alone could be powerful and self-sufficient. Together, nothing could withstand them, true champions of the Sea.

It was Sylviana who spoke first, feeling more acutely the need to talk that comes after tension and danger. Kalus, conversely, remained with his jaw set, trembling and pale, but with the spear clasped firmly in his hand. He did not at first seem to hear her.

'I was never so scared in my life,' she said. No reply.
'Kalus?'

He turned to her, not seeming to know who she was, then answered with half his attention, perhaps a bit coldly. 'Not even before the giant spider?'

.. 'No. Not really. Then I didn't believe what was happening..... Are you all right?' At last his eyes and mind focused, and he too felt the need.

'I have been better. How many shocks am I supposed to be able to face in one day? I feel I've lived a year in just these few hours.' He released a sigh, almost a groan, laying aside for a time his resolve to keep an emotional distance from her. . .until she decided. 'I'm sorry for what I said about the spider. It was thoughtless.'

'It's all right. You're allowed to be human, you know.'

>From the tone more than her words, Kalus knew that he had stung her, and that she did not quite forgive him. Again he felt that she was holding him responsible for the harshness of his world, as if it were somehow his fault. Again the chasm opened between them, and now he was too tired to fight it. Imperceptibly he shook his head, breathed out, and returned his attention to the shoreline.

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They were now less than a mile out, and the half-forgotten, ruinous landscape once more absorbed them.

All was flat on a large scale, and crumpled on a small: hard, bitter rock like cubes set on edge, careening madly this way and that. Within its valleys were patches of earth, green with grass and weeds, punctured ever and again by corroded girders and iron masonry-bars, to which clung bits of ornamental stone and naked, crumbling concrete. Trees were scarce and never large, their greatest numbers clustered in isolated patches a short distance from the coast, which seemed to have received the largest deposits of earth.

Sylviana easily saw what she had always known, that the skyline of Manhattan had been built upon solid bedrock. For this reason alone had the Island survived at all, blasted as it must have been by successive nuclear explosions. And with this she realized suddenly where the deposits of earth had come from. Besides the fact that the continental coast had been ravaged..... Long Island was gone! Just GONE. Nothing but ocean stretched eastward as far as the eye could see.

And this made her see, vividly, what she had hitherto thought of and imagined as

little as possible. While her father had whisked her away and put her to sleep, like an enchanted princess, in the Canadian Rockies, an entire world had been pounded and burned to death. And the remote, less habited places of the globe had been no better off, their children, both man and animal alike, left to die and distort in the slower ravages of radiation poisoning. She did not even know how her father had protected her from the fallout, or indeed, if he had been able. Horrible thought! Would she one day die of cancer, too?

The only comfort, and it wasn't much, was that it had all happened so long ago: that the hurts had long since been healed. But what was Time, really? Had the Island forgotten? The grim hunks of marble, were they not tombstones, the remains of a pillaged graveyard? Were the gnarled trees not alive with the ghosts of the past? She could not elude the pain, or the bludgeoning sense of complicit guilt.

Had he wanted to, Kalus could have torn her apart in those moments merely by pointing, as if to say. 'Is this the humanity you mock me with? Is this the world and way of life I should mourn?' But he said nothing because he, too, seeing her spirit crushed so completely, felt through her the reality and pain of the score of books she had read to him, and realized that every book ever written was but a grain of sand in the vast desert of human struggles and emotions. Six billion intelligent beings at once sharing the globe. . .and then this. He wanted to wrap her in his arms, and shield her forever from the horror. But he could not. 'I wish this day would end,' was the best he could manage.

But the day would not end. For good or ill, there remained yet one more scene for them to witness. And this, a vision of the inextinguishable nature of life, was in that hour both a joy and an indescribable sadness to behold. As the boat rounded a high promontory, a hidden inlet was revealed to them. Sylviana gasped, and Kalus lifted his spear in alarm. But there was no danger. No physical danger at least.

Thirty-three naked human forms sat, or stood, or lay placidly like seals among the rocks and mossy earth of a steep embankment, with the ruins of the United Nations building standing in broken silhouette behind them. And before them, in the deep and still waters of the inlet, a dozen fins and sleek backs rested peacefully while others moved, as if on guard, among the waters farther out. It was impossible that the whales, at least, should be unaware of their slowly logging craft; but apparently some understanding had been reached. The guards

came no closer, and the Children showed no fear.

And children they truly were: none exceeded the age of sixteen. Their bodies had no hair, only the scruffy heads and thick eyebrows, the straggle of mane down neck and spine—all curly blond and brown. Their cream-colored skin was smooth and tough, and the eyes of all resembled more closely the eyes of a statue than any human's. Indeed, their very placidness was almost cold, animal in its indifference. Upon closer inspection an abnormality of the hands and feet could be seen. The fingers were long, bony and webbed, like the sea-creatures they were, the feet slightly longer and similarly arrayed.

But in the face of all contradictory evidence, Sylviana clung with sudden conviction to the belief (perhaps unfounded) that inside them remained some spark of humanity, and a soul that might somehow be wakened.

But who would wake it? They had tarried here in their winter home long enough, and must soon return to the seal rich waters of the North. Perhaps they would return again in autumn; perhaps they would move on. Though she could not have known this, Sylviana hung her head in unknown harmony.

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At last as the day wore thin, they reached a tenable stretch of beach, and in the failing light safely landed the water-soaked craft. The smallish waves could not overturn its heavy bulk, which now served them. They dragged it as far ashore as they could, which wasn't far, and lit a fire to replace the sunken sun. There in the lee of a group of rocks they huddled together and slept in the sand, unable yet to think of tomorrow.

They slept, and dreamed, in sorrow.

Chapter 37

The next day brought unexpected hope. As the sun rose, dazzling, across the vast Atlantic, one of its urchins stood up among the wave-ends and stepped cautiously ashore.

Alerted by the sixth sense that every hill-man must possess, Kalus opened his

eyes and remained perfectly still. There in the clear light of morning, he witnessed a scene that recalled to him the simple act of kindness that had changed his life forever. Quietly he woke the girl, knowing that she needed this sight as much as he. Silently, together they watched, touched by the eternal resilience of life, where nothing is new under the sun, and every sunrise is the first for some newborn creature.

A small boy, perhaps four, stood close to the water's edge, holding something in his hand. The cub, having woken before them, remained in her alert, quizzical posture, a short distance from him up the sandy incline. As the boy took a few steps nearer she stood up, but did not bark or growl. Perhaps it was because they were of a kind, and understood each other without the dimness of fear. Or perhaps because they felt the simple affinity which all young creatures share, not yet hardened and made cruel by their elders and their world.

The Child continued to advance, glancing sidelong at the others: aware of their presence, but intent upon his mission. At last only a few feet separated boy and wolf. Squatting, he put the partly eaten fish in the sand in front of her, and took a step back. The pup came closer, sniffed at it briefly, then began to eat. Her tail wagged in childish contentment.

And then the miracle occurred. The Child laughed, throwing his arms up to the sky. If he had known the word hooray', he would certainly have used it.

Such sweet music! Sylviana thought her heart would break for it, and Kalus remembered for the first time without bitterness, the smile and trust of young Shama.

The girl sat up; she couldn't help herself. At once the child sprinted back to the sea, diving into the waters as naturally as a newly hatched sea turtle, thinking no more of the ensuing swim than a bird thinks of flight. A short distance out an impatient, affectionate orca rose between his waiting legs, and carried him home on her back. Sylviana watched in weary peace, with dreamy eyes thinking how sweet it might be to one day have a child of her own. Until something in the emptiness of the beach arrested her.

'Kalus, the boat. It's gone!'

And so it was. He rose beside her, and pointed to a spot on the northeast horizon. There, riding ever lower in the waves, floated the craft he had so agonizingly

constructed. She was appalled by his apparent calmness.

'You've got to DO something. You've got to swim out and get it.' But he only shook his head, clearing his eyes with the back of his wrist.

'Would you have me drowned for a piece of wood?'

'But how can you be so indifferent?'

'I am not indifferent, if only for the pains it cost me. But I have not yet given up hope that the boat will return to us. The tide took it out, perhaps the waves will bring it back farther north. And if it is lost, I think I can now construct a better one, more worthy of our trust.'

'But you worked so hard to bring us here.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I raged at both the sea and wind, cursing them and calling them demons. Then, when I surrendered in despair, something pulled us through, and gave us another chance. We are far out on this limb, Sylviana. We must believe in something. I will trust in the Tao that I have found, and which in all my life, has never fully betrayed me.'

But now he drew back. His eyes grew hazy, and far less confident. He paused as if in fear, for all his resolve, at the words he must now say to her.

'I give you your freedom, also..... I LOVE you. But whatever is to come, I cannot chain you to me. You must return to me, if you would, of your own free will.'

BUT THIS IS AWFUL, she thought. HIS TIMING IS TERRIBLE. She fought back the urge to say, 'And what if I don't want my freedom? Did it ever occur to you that I might feel the same way about you?' Instead she said nothing. So be it.

And here Kalus made a fundamental error of human psychology. For while on an intellectual level a woman may be pleased at the prospect of her freedom', on an instinctive or emotional level, and with a man she loves, such words are a source of deep doubt and insecurity. If Kalus truly wanted and needed her, why wasn't he willing to guard her love, even fight for it? Didn't he care anymore?

But all such thoughts passed through her below the surface only. Her one

concern now (so she told herself) was for their welfare, which he seemed to be taking far too lightly.

'And what if we're stranded here for a month? Our supplies won't last half that long.'

'I don't think we're stranded, or alone..... I saw the lights again last night.'

These words worked on her system like an electric shock.

'What! Why didn't you wake me?'

'You needed sleep more than water, or even air. Please don't fight with me, Sylviana. Much could happen this day. I don't want it to begin with a rift between us.'

She paced back and forth in the deep sand, her strides sinking, failing to carry her any meaningful distance before doubling back. It was not anger she felt now, but fear.

Because she could not yet face the prospect of finding other men and women like herself. Through all their preparations she had only half believed it, deep down. Yet now the most terrible question of her life rose in unshrouded hugeness before her:

HAD OTHERS OF HER KIND SURVIVED THE DESTRUCTION? Or was she truly alone with Kalus, who she seemed to know less and less each day? And why did a part of her WANT to be alone with him? She could not face it. If after all her hopes and fears it came to nothing.....

'All right,' she said, trying to calm herself. 'All right. What do we do now?'

'Build a fire, eat and drink, then move inland carefully. We don't know yet what we'll find. I think I can trace the source of the beams well enough. The Island is large, but not infinite. Only its uneven surface makes it appear so. If we miss on the first try, or even the second, we will be closer to the source; and we can trace the beams by night, if need be.'

But for all her need of nourishment, Sylviana's knotting stomach would not think

of food. 'We've got to go now! I'm sorry, Kalus, but I can't possibly wait another minute.'

He started to overrule her, then checked himself, secretly bitter at her eagerness. 'Very well,' he said. 'But we go slowly, and with our weapons in our hands. I'll take no chances in this wretched place.'

His mood had changed abruptly. He too felt the specter of the waiting unknown, though his hopes and fears were nearly opposite; and he became once more the untrusting hill-man. He lifted his spear, jaw set against the dark uncertainty that awaited them.

Sylviana strode ahead anxiously. Together they cleared the sand, and climbed the first slanting rise. It dipped, and another rose before them, frail earth punctured by an agony of stone and steel. They advanced.

Chapter 38

Inland the earth grew somewhat less troubled. The undulating cross of ridges became smoother and more widely spaced, with patchwork valleys sinking in their midst. The scarred remains of buildings were also less frequent, though here and there an inexplicable mound of slag, half overgrown like an ancient, impoverished barrow, rose to recall the unsleeping dead that still walked there.

Sylviana was soon pale and exhausted, and Kalus could no longer indulge her

almost distracted urge to keep moving. Almost angry, he made her sit down in the grim shade of a leering monolith. For the day had grown hot and humid, with hardly a breeze to calm the reeling senses, or break the spell of sunny, smiling death that seemed to hang in the air around them like a witch's curse. A delirium of fever had come over her from the tumultuous passage of the rapids and the sea, but in her excited state she was not calm or rational enough to realize it.

Kalus gave her water and tried to cool her burning forehead, telling her in no uncertain terms that they would not go one step further until she had caught her breath, and let him do something about the gash on her knee—the result of a fall—which she kept insisting was nothing.

NOTHING?

But she hardly heard him, unable to master her emotions. She knew where she was, mentally, but this drab physical assurance helped not at all. Why in the name of all that was dark, mysterious and unfathomable was she here, ten thousand years removed from the time and world she had known? And who was this half wild man who tended her, and the bewildered animal that licked her hand in half-formed worry and confusion? KALUS. ALASKA. NEW YORK. What were they but names? What was this place, truly, but the untouchable Land of the Dead, which the sun had somehow invaded.

As her breath came easier the thoughts slowed and became less feverish, but did not change in character. Her body ached. She felt lonely and numb and afraid. Yet somehow she grew calmer, feeling that if once she looked into Kalus' eyes the world would again become comprehensible, if still cruel and unfair.

But by dint of some perverse pride she refused to do so. She would not be a slave to any man, or concede her spirit to a Nature so base and single-minded. Whatever that might mean. She did not know.

And as soon as the slightest strength returned to her limbs she was up again, fighting the stubborn rush of dizziness, assuring the nagging voice of caution that she was ready to go on.

Kalus was truly worried, himself not immune to the alien strangeness of the place. He did not know what waited over the next hill, the next series of hills, or how with his primitive weapons alone he would protect them. For he had seen

the wisp of smoke, the kind that only man can make: the white smoke of intentional fire, though he dared not speak of it to the girl.

All seemed lost and out of control. He wanted to yield and to trust, and if it had been his life alone he might have done so. But the more the woman-child railed and pulled away from him, the more he knew that she was family in the deepest sense. Nothing she could do or say made him feel any less bound to her, one with her, or responsible for her safety and well-being.

There was nothing else for it. She had begun of her own to climb the uneven slant. He could either follow behind or forcibly stop her; there was no third alternative. He ran to stand beside her, taking her arm as gently as he could.

'Sylviana, please. Let me lead the way. I do not think it is far, but we must be careful. Please.'

She finally looked at him, and remembered. She wanted to collapse in his arms and weep. She wanted to say that nothing else mattered. She wanted to go back to their life by the sea and never again think of islands and men. But she could not. She took his hand firmly in hers, kissed it, and yielded to what had to be. She must go on, and he must lead her. As he must somehow understand.

Together, more slowly, they dipped two more valleys and climbed a final ridge. They reached the top of it, Kalus for some reason hugging close to the shadows of a stunted oak.....

There, in that small recession, their lives changed forever. An outdoor cooking fire, a row of low stone buildings. Two women and a man moving about a table with plates and cups. And not dressed like animals, but men. Overalls, a blue NASA worksuit, an Oriental dress. Sylviana looked on, not surprised she told herself, then felt the ground rush up to meet her.

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Kalus caught her beneath the arms and pulled her under the partial cover of the tree. But it was too late. They had been seen. Without audible word or gesture, the three stopped what they were doing and began to move toward them. One, at least, had seen her fall, and they began to run, thinking she was wounded or sick.

But they were brought up short by an imposing figure with a sword, and a half grown wolf which seemed unsure whether to welcome their aid, or protect its fallen mistress from them. It growled and lunged uncertainly, looking over at the man, who remained silent. There was a moment of mutual indecision and fear.

But then the woman in the dark silk dress, lit with patterns of gold and lilac, stepped forward. Her appearance was strange to him, the shimmering black hair and olive skin seeming more exotic even than his first memories of Sylviana. Her eyes were calm and reassuring, but not naive. She put a hand to her chest, then opened it toward him in what he clearly recognized as a gesture of truce.

Her stillness, and the way she looked at him without wavering, told Kalus more than any other sign that she meant them no harm. He lowered his sword and said simply.

'Do we speak the same language?'

She smiled sadly. 'Yes, I believe we do.' At this the others came forward.

'Is the girl all right?' asked the man. He started to move towards her, but Kalus' rugged frame interposed.

'She is exhausted and feverish, and startled by the sight of you. She is of your kind, I think. I am not.'

Taking this in officiously, the man once more addressed him, offering his hand, which Kalus did not take. But he persisted. 'I'm Paul McIntyre, flight surgeon..... I'm a doctor, son. Won't you let me help your friend?'

But for all his relief and desire to yield, Kalus found it hard to let another man touch her, even in this simple way. Again the young woman interceded. She laid a soft and delicate hand on his, and looked him full in the face with brilliant, almond eyes, drawn to a gentle point at each corner.

'It's all right,' she said. 'You're among friends. Won't you let us help you?' Her voice and manner were so alluring that for a moment he forgot all else. He looked down at Sylviana, half ashamed of what the Oriental had aroused in him, and said quietly.

'So long as you are gentle. I think she just needs rest.'

The doctor was already at work, lifting her off the hard roots to lean back against his thighs. Then reaching inside a black bag that he had brought, he broke open a pouch of smelling salts and moved it back and forth under her nose. Her head stirred, then turned away in distaste. She regained full consciousness to find herself lying, literally, in the strange older man's lap. Forgetting that this was what her mind had sought, she cried out instinctively.

'Kalus!' And in a moment he was beside her. 'Kalus,' she pleaded. 'Is it all right? Are we safe here?' He looked hard at the doctor.

'Yes, my Sylviana. I think that we are.'

She studied the man once more. 'Is it true? Are you really with NASA? This isn't a dream?'

'Yes, I'm with NASA. Second manned expedition to Mars—we never made it. But there's time for all that later. Right now we're going to get some fluids into you, and give you something for the fever. Then I'd prescribe bed rest, and a further examination. Young man, will you help me—'

But before he could finish the girl had turned her face into his stomach, and was crying like a child. He stroked her hair easily and naturally, speaking words of comfort and assurance. As the man-child looked on and felt lost.

At length she grew quieter. Kalus lifted her in his willing arms, and despite all objections, carried her himself to a bed in the cool darkness of one of the huts.

Chapter 39

All that afternoon Sylviana remained in the hut, sleeping, drinking fruit juice, and luxuriating in the incredible comfort of a real bed. Twice the doctor came in to check on her, and each time she made him sit down on the edge of the bed and talk to her, about what it didn't matter, just to hear his soothing voice that spoke of a world she knew and trusted, and to feel she was no longer alone: that it was all right to be a needing child. And after a time his words became like music, a lullaby, and she would slip back into untroubled sleep, her hand unconsciously resting on his. Then he would gently lift it and set it beside her, and smiling, rise to tell the others that she would be fine.

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Kalus would have remained beside her door all day in silent watch, but they would not let him. Though all at the noon meal of the partly gathered colony were asked to let the newcomers be, by evening their curiosity could no longer be disciplined. He was asked to join them for supper, the first of the year to be eaten outdoors, and it was all but impossible to refuse.

So as the remaining men and women returned from their various labors—there were fourteen in all—Kalus took his place at the far end of the long table, not to distinguish himself, but because he did not wish to sit closely huddled among creatures he did not know. And though by all appearances they seemed the best that modern man had to offer (in fact they were), he could not help remembering the tales of human treachery that Sylviana had read to him; and half fearfully, half angrily, he kept waiting for some sign of it to surface.

But it never did. These people seemed to genuinely care about and support each other, and to respect his wish to be silent. And all would have gone well but for an incident which none could have foreseen, and for which Kalus himself could not be blamed.

Sylviana, hearing the sounds of conversation and real companionship, dressed herself quickly, and against doctor's orders, came out to join them. She was welcomed heartily, and given a place near the head of the table. And all seemed well enough.

But as the dishes were being cleared and those still seated began to push back their chairs and settle themselves more comfortably, Sylviana began to tell her story in abbreviated form. Then Kalus saw that the tall, straight man at the head of the table—their leader, he perceived—kept staring at her in growing agitation. In truth the look was not one of hunger, but of intense curiosity, and of a man racking his brains for some distant memory. But Kalus could not know this. Finally the man interrupted her, saying plainly.

'Sylviana. What is your last name?'

To her amazement, she had to think for a moment. She hadn't used it for what seemed, and was, an eternity.

'Matheson.'

'And was your father Guy Matheson, the physiologist?'

'Yes! Did you know him?'

'Know him? Why girl, I even know YOU, though I'm sure you wouldn't remember. I worked with your father for the better part of a year, trying to smooth out some wrinkles in the cryogenics and life-support systems needed for longer, deep Space voyages. You were only eight or nine at the time, but I've thought of you at least a hundred times since, and wondered what became of you. There was such simple joy in everything you did.....'

And as a look of slow recognition and wonder came over the young woman's face, the normally reserved Mission Commander was overcome by emotion. He stood up, telling her to do the same. He moved closer, and embraced her heartily.

'Dear God, it's good to see you. To know that you're still alive.'

This was too much for Kalus. The chair on which he sat flew backward and the sword leapt from its sheath, in the upward swing knocking hard against the bottom of the table. Jolted, the company turned to face him, as to contain his animal passion he took a step backward and breathed heavily. But the tip of his sword he pointed at the leader in a rage, saying with disciplined fire.

'LET HER GO.'

But none were more startled, or dismayed, than Sylviana. 'Kalus!' she demanded, as if he were an errant child. 'Put the sword away. Can't you see these people mean us no harm? This man was a friend of my father's. And of mine.'

He stood pale in the artificial light, his limbs trembling and his mind confused. He lowered the sword, and slowly realized that he had been a fool, and disgraced them both. He hung his head, and colored with shame.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand these things..... I am a wild, foolish man. But when you touched my woman——'

He looked up quickly, to find his worst fears confirmed. Sylviana had winced at being called his woman. He felt a part of himself dying. Perhaps he overreacted,

but it was what he truly felt.

'I am a fool. I will leave you.' But a firm voice broke him off, that of Kataya, the Oriental.

'NO,' she said. 'Don't ever apologize for who and what you are. Ever.' He looked up to see her standing. 'Commander Stenmark, and Sylviana, too, must share the blame for this.' There was a note of reproach in her voice, though she had not intended it. 'You reacted in the way your world has taught you, a world that none of us can know, and in which there is no shame. You are welcome among us, and you will stay.'

There was an awkward silence. Then the Commander, who was in fact their leader, remembered himself and spoke reassuringly, voicing perhaps the sentiments of all.

'She's right, young man. God help us, she's always right.'

With this the tension faded. The doctor, who to this point had been lenient with his patient, now called her visit to an end.

'You, young lady,' he said in paternal tones, 'Are supposed to be in bed. As for the rest of you gawkers,' he added with mock severity, 'We can put Kalus under the microscope tomorrow, and then heaven help him! You're in a colony of scientists, my boy, and you'll get no rest until we're as bored with you as we are with each other. Enough now! Break up this little party or I'll come up with a new vaccine and inject you where you sit. Literally.'

With this, chuckling, responding in kind, the company began to disperse to the various huts. The Commander approached Kalus, shook his hand, and apologized personally, while the hill-man repeated his own contrition.

At last, looking down, Kalus found himself seated at the table alone, his thoughts as dark and empty as the place itself. Sylviana had been ashamed of him. ASHAMED. As if the past meant nothing, had never happened.

He lay wearily on his arms, trying to understand. How had it all happened so fast? The colony had absorbed her like water into sand, leaving nothing for him. Even the cub had gone in to sleep beside her.

To sleep beside her! How acutely he would feel the absence of her body tonight. He felt himself out of place: in the wrong tale, immersed in chapters and characters that all around him understood, but which were to him as incomprehensible as the Valley had been to Sylviana.

But this new life would not have seemed so bleak, perhaps even pleasant, if while it slowly took possession of him, he was not losing the one thing in all the world that truly mattered: the love of the woman he had once called his. HIS.....

He felt soft fingers touch the back of his head, then slide downward and begin to massage his neck and aching shoulders. He did not move, knowing by touch alone that it was not his mate. He knew it was Kataya, but was too exhausted, both physically and emotionally, to react one way or the other.

But to the watching figure in the doorway, there was no such ambivalence. Sylviana was furious. How different when the shoe is on the other foot, was a thought she strangled as soon as it began to form inside her.

She had gone to the spacious bed, surrounded by things she thought missing from her life, only to experience the same emptiness and sense of loss at not feeling the familiar body beside her, and having no one to tell of her contentment. She tried to shrug it off and just sleep. But she had slept off and on all day, and felt her weariness replaced by a kind of yearning restlessness. PROBABLY JUST MY CONSCIENCE, she had told herself. And with this the gentler part of her nature had begun to rebel, saying that Kalus was a kind and decent man, who deserved better than to be spoken to and treated as if he were some kind of savage.

But these gentle, Christian sentiments were too easily dismissed. He had acted abominably, her harder self retorted, and fully deserved the scorn that she had shown him.

And perhaps this was the problem—trying to make herself think more fondly of him through the mind. Because gratitude and compassion are not lasting in love, while instinct and self-fulfillment never fade. If she could simply have admitted to herself that she missed the security and intimacy of lying in his arms, and that the crowning pleasure of her new-found happiness would have been to open herself to him, both body and spirit, she could have put aside the hopeless tangle of her emotions and simply gone to him, and taken him to her, and renewed

again the bond of true lovers. As it was she could only toss restlessly, then get up and pace in frustration.

At length she had decided to go to him (or merely allowed the greater part of herself to act), telling herself that she should at least say goodnight, and give him the chance to make it up to her. But as she passed through the hallway and began to enter the dimly lit compound, she saw a male figure hunched at the table, and another, female form behind, touching him. Thinking it one of the other couples, she drew back into the shadows of the doorframe. But as her eyes grew more accustomed to the half-light, she saw plainly the scene laid out before her.

And there she remained, her mind and heart a whirlwind of conflicting impulses. She wanted to rush at the woman and scratch her eyes out. She wanted to walk up calmly and ask, 'Have you quite finished with my husband?' Her HUSBAND? She wanted to scream at Kalus, to apologize for being cold, to seduce him, and to have him out of her life forever.

But she did none of the things, remaining stock still in the doorway. She forced herself to be calm, and tried to rationalize. Why was she so upset? After all, what had he done? And why did it matter to her anyway? She wanted to break away, and put the whole thing from her mind. But she couldn't. She had to see what he would do.

After a time Kataya sensed the man-child's indifference, or at least his unwillingness to yield to her. This did not cool her half-admitted desire for him, but only made it more patient, tactful. She moved to sit in a corner chair, beside him.

'Why so glum, Kalus? Or are you just ignoring me?'

'I am sorry, Kataya. It's not you. I just feel. . .overwhelmed.' And with this, he surrendered.

'How so?'

'So much has happened,' he began, feeling as he said the words the bewilderment that lay beneath all other emotions. 'Three weeks ago Sylviana and I made love as if there was nothing else in the world. And for us, there wasn't. Three months ago we struggled together against the Cold World, in a place we called our home. At the time it often seemed like Hell, but it brought us closer than you can

possibly imagine. And three days ago. Three days. I lived more or less in the land where I was born, with paradise at my fingers.'

'Then why did you leave?'

'Because I couldn't keep lying to her, that we were alone..... She isn't like me. She needs the company of her own kind.' He spoke now more to himself, and to the darkness. She was silent for a moment, her own feelings and experience submerged.

'And now?'

'That's just it. I can't bring it all up to now. It's like a great wave that just goes on and on. The voyage here. . .sweet Jesus. And just this morning I held her close while she slept, then woke her to a sight that broke both our hearts, and opened to us the possibility of a child of our own.' Again she felt him drifting, into a world that did not even recognize her existence. 'And now all of you, a flood of strange names and faces, and emotions I don't know how to read. It just goes on and on, with Sylviana slipping farther and farther away.'

'All waves must eventually end, Kalus. This one will, too. And when you find yourself safely landed among us?' She hesitated. 'And if the girl is no longer yours? What then?'

'I cannot even think of that. It would be the end of everything, of life itself.'

Kataya hung her head. WHY MUST IT ALWAYS BE SO?

Kalus saw this gesture of defeat and knew, for all his confusion and despair, that he had been selfish, and forgotten her. There in the stillness of night he felt her presence acutely, felt the soul inside her and knew she was as achingly alive as himself. And the feelings this knowledge aroused in him both troubled and comforted his own loneliness. He put his hand beneath her chin and raised the lovely, oval face to look at him.

'You are very beautiful, Kataya. I have chosen Sylviana, but you are a woman that a man could truly love.' She wrapped her hand about his wrist, whispered something in a strange language, then broke off and quickly walked away. He watched her go in sadness.

All this time Sylviana had watched them, unable to hear what was said, imagining the worst. Then she saw him lift her face to his, and whisper tender words which should have been hers alone.

Confused and angry, she stormed back into her room. Confused and weary, Kalus spread himself on the ground like an animal, missing them both, and staring at the stars. Confused and bitter, Kataya swore she would not let herself want him, and be hurt yet again and again.

All three slept alone, finding no shelter from the mocking night.

Chapter 40

The next day was Sunday, and the one day a week which the hard-working colonists had agreed to set aside as a respite from their labors. Those who worked the fields, those who maintained the power and water supply, those who scavenged the city for underground vaults filled with books and computer records, as well as those who performed the experiments, translations, and radio communications (never answered) which were vital to the group's morale and sense of purpose, all surrendered for this one day the businesslike security of

endeavor, to think and contemplate like the first pious Jews, who had looked to the heavens and tried to understand their world.

In the hushed morning they gathered for the non-denominational service, Christian, Jew, Buddhist and atheist alike, spread about the candle-lit conference room. And it was here that Sylviana first felt the depth of loneliness and sorrow that this handful of survivors carried with them as inescapably as a damaged organ, or the memory of an amputated limb. And she realized that all their surface carelessness and ease, all the jokes about being bored with one another, were mere facade, the necessary illusions of commonplace existence. It was clear in this small chapel of honesty, that they not only loved and respected one another, but clung to each other, and held the value of each human life high above any other aspiration.

Commander Stenmark in particular she watched, and began to wonder at this grizzled pioneer whose age was so incongruous to all around him, most of whom were under forty. And during the moment of silent prayer she had to restrain with difficulty her own emotions, as she saw the same face that could be so still and dispassionate, draw close over the fervently folded hands with tears of age, and thanks, and tired responsibility flowing like the sudden, relentless Spring. And it was with warmth and a further shock that she realized this outpouring was for her: that something, someone dear to him had been spared. She had never felt so honored.

When the service ended they moved outside, and after a light meal, spread themselves more comfortably on the grassy earth of a clear space at one end of the compound, backed by a gentle rise and a single, lithe and undistorted maple. This in preparation for what remained to them the greatest pleasure (and diversion) in life. Learning.

Sylviana's story was fascinating, what they had heard of it the night before, but it was Kalus whom they longed to interrogate. For here was an anthropologist's dream: a young man who had lived among throwback Neanderthals, who had carved his existence, without medicine or steel, from the harsh realities of a world in which Man not only held no exalted place, but was on the contrary smallish and ill-equipped, as likely to be hunted as hunter. And the fact that he himself had emerged from the recessed traits of three hundred generations, to be born fully human..... They knew nothing yet of the Machine or the Visitors, only that for most of his life Kalus had possessed no spoken language, had been an

outcast and object of suspicion because of his appearance and greater intelligence, had met and shared deepest communion with a young woman and fellow creature of the twenty-first century. And for now, this was more than enough.

Dr. David Rawlings, cell biologist, spoke first, a strongly built, intense black man in his mid thirties. Apparently the least abashed of the company, he assumed the role he had chosen for himself, and which the others now expected and took for granted.

'Well,' he said, moving to stand at the fore of the group. 'I suppose first we should tell you something of ourselves.' And without the wasted words of diplomacy, he did.

'You see before you the surviving crew members of Virgo II, the manned exploration of Mars. Two years into the flight, and not yet two-thirds of the way there, we received a delayed signal from earth, and at an undesignated interval. The bloody butchers who called themselves our leaders had finally done it: missiles and satellite stations vomiting their nuclear death, and pounding the cities flat. The emotions of those conscious—most of us were in a suspended state, so as not to age unnecessarily during the voyage—I can't imagine. But Stenmark, and the Doc, and poor dead Rene' Christian, well, they had to do something.

'So they turned the ship about, and upon returning to Earth engaged in a high orbit around it, and tried to make contact, with anybody. No one there. Even the orbiting agri-colonies and Moon bases hadn't been spared. The latter might have been construed as some kind of military threat, to the sick and paranoid, but to kill innocent civilians, farmers for Christ's sake, just to be sure all was ended..... The worst you can think of us isn't bad enough, Kalus, if you look at what we did to each other in the end. Maybe we common people' of the superpowers didn't take an active part in the destruction; but we sure as hell sat on our asses, and let the presidents and the generals make it inevitable.' He subdued, or at least restrained, his rising passion.

'But that's neither here nor there. Or anywhere, now. That world is gone, and will never return.' He sighed bitterly.

'Back on the ship, Christian lost her mind when she saw the devastation, and

knew that her husband and son were dead, like all the others. She couldn't live without them, and so she killed herself. That left only Stenmark and Doc McIntyre to try and decide our fate. The best they could do, under the circumstances, was to re-rig the entire ship—computer, cryogenics, life-support, everything—for a vastly different purpose than what they'd been designed for. Their new function was, simply, to hold us all in suspension, retain the high orbit, and wake us all when, hopefully, it was safe to return to the surface.

'It's no coincidence that you, Sylviana, and William—you haven't met him yet—came out of suspension at approximately the same time we did. A German scientist named Krause had been advocating a common de-suspension date, in the event such a travesty ever occurred. He was considered a black pessimist at the time, and partly insane. But your father, and Sten, and possibly others, took his advice, and set the wake up call' for exactly ten thousand years from the first day of Armageddon, hoping that would give the planet enough time to heal itself, and support recognizable life-forms once more.

'So the rest of the crew, myself included, came back from our little nap to find our world ravaged, Christian dead, and the Commander aged twenty-five years. The poor compassionate bastard had kept himself conscious all that extra time, making sure the orbit wouldn't decay, that the converted solar panels and other adjustments he'd made would hold up. Probably would have died for us if he thought it would help.....

'You've seen the worst in us, Kalus. But that damn Swede over there . . . is the best. And a lot of others like him paid the same price as the political cowboys, and blind hedonists who elected them. Death.

'So. That's the long and short of it. We dealt with our feelings and our fears as best we could, and landed here, for a variety of reasons, just over a year ago. We found William underground, and apparently you found us. So maybe our efforts aren't entirely futile. And who's to say, there may be others scattered around the planet, each feeling as isolated and cut off as we do.'

He concluded as frankly as he had begun. 'But now I'm heartily sick of standing here and telling you our troubles, and I should hope you're as tired of hearing them. Apologies to the meek, and you see the kind of Earth' you've inherited. We'll let the customary interval of moody silence pass, and then we'll begin our scientific questioning.' With that he moved off and sat on the hard ground,

leaving the raw taste of truth, accepted willingly or not, in the mouths of those around him.

Just as he had said, an interval of silence ensued. Then, to the surprise of all, Kalus rose without prodding and moved to stand before them.

'This will not be easy for me,' he said. 'But I begin to see that it is important, if only for myself. I feared at first that you would think me a mindless animal. But I see now that isn't true. Kataya told me not to be ashamed of what I am, and inside, in the heart of me, I'm not. I am proud. Because I survived for twenty-two years a world that would kill most of you in a week. That is not said to hurt you, and I begin to see that you are strong in other ways. It is only the truth. Here on the Island there is shelter from predators—there are no giant spiders or lizards—and you have the knowledge to bring food from the land without killing. My people have none of these things.

'We call ourselves the hill-tribe. Yes we, Sylviana, I will not renounce them.' She started to glare at him, then colored when she saw others (including Kataya) watching her, and looked away.

'We live in a cave of many entrances, in the heart of the Wild, with enemies all around us. We survive by being shrewd and fiercely determined, and by showing any creature that comes too close there is a high price to pay for thinking us weak and afraid.

'But we are not cruel, if we can avoid it, and do not kill without need. If there was some way we could live in peace and well-fed contentment, we would throw away our spears and never kill again. But no one has ever shown us how to do this, if such a way exists.'

A gleam came into his eyes such as Sylviana had not seen for many months: when he first looked out from the smaller cave, and beheld the power and majesty of the Mantis. 'Go ahead,' he told them, almost defiantly. 'Ask me any question. Thank you Kataya, and David Rawlings. You have made me feel strong and unashamed.'

At this there was another brief space in which the company felt reluctant to speak. But it did not last. Their desire to know, and to touch new life, was stronger than their natural timidity.

'Yes, I have a question,' said a woman. 'You say that your people have no spoken language.' (Sylviana had told the doctor, who in turn had passed it on to the others). 'And yet you have a name. How is that?'

'My people all have names, but no sounds to go with them. My name is a sign made with the hands, or a figure drawn in the dirt, so that I can be identified to others at need, such as during a hunt. The Machine called me Kalus, to my mind as well as my ears, just as it gave names to all the elements of my world. I have always wondered how this was done.'

Brushing over this last information, which none understood and which they could always come back to, they asked several more questions about the hill-people, until one of the younger men produced a greaseboard and marker, and approached him.

'Your sign, the one that identifies you. Could you draw it?' Kalus took the board, and after being shown how to use it, drew a straight line, horizontal, then a long curving tooth like a saber at the end of it, pointing downward.

'This represents the upper jaw of the hill-cat, one of the greatest hunters of our world. My first father made it for me, hoping that I would be as fierce and cunning. All our names our similar. When he was killed by a bear. . .I drew it in anger on the ground, then with my foot blurred away the sharp point, to show that I was no great predator, but only a man. Like this.' He smeared the lower half of the tusk, leaving only a squarish root. 'That has been my mark ever since.'

'The MANtooth,' said Sylviana suddenly, and much to her own consternation. But half embarrassed, half proud in spite of herself, she pushed on. 'The Machine called you the Mantooth.'

'Yes,' he said simply. 'And that is what I am.'

'This machine——' began another.

'No, no, we'll come back to that later,' said Rawlings.
'Your first father', Kalus. What did you mean by that?'

'Barabbas is my father now. I think it is what you would call adoption, though to us it is much more than that. The adopted sons of a childless leader are more dear to him.....' He stopped as emotion swelled in his throat, and he realized

with a sudden pang the truth of these words. 'Barabbas is my father now.'

'Barabbas,' replied Rawlings thoughtfully. 'Surely that's not a name given by a machine.'

'Yes. In fact it is. But I too have always thought it strange, and somehow appropriate, since I learned of the Barabbas in your Bible.'

'It's not MY Bible,' said Rawlings quickly. 'But still, how do you mean that?' Kalus pondered for a moment, trying to think how to express it.

'It wasn't Barabbas' fault: that he was freed, and Jesus crucified. He was only trying to survive. And who can say what his crime' was that he should have been imprisoned by the Romans, who seem to me among the greatest criminals of history. And yet for the simple fact of his presence on that day, and his desire to live rather than die in agony, he is branded a villain and hated, by those who need such symbols of hate, and love. Surely Jesus did not hate him.'

At this all were quietly stunned. For until that moment they had retained the subconscious arrogance that Sylviana first experienced, and to which she had lately returned: the belief that a rough man without education could not think or feel as they did, could not possess the same soul, or depth of feeling.

They were wrong.

'Well said,' came a voice. And for the rest of the afternoon the questions were not asked as from adult to child, from superior beings to inferior, but as from man (and woman) to man. Sylviana could only watch and listen, and tell herself in vain she didn't love him.

Because she had been stung by the affection he showed Kataya, and refused to admit she was afraid of losing him.

Chapter 41

The next morning Kalus was woken by Kataya, who came to the secluded clear space where he had made his bed on softer ground, with the sleeping bag that Rawlings had given him. In the first light and waking life of morning she was beautiful, and sad, and it was only with an effort that he reminded himself he

was not free, to take her then and there, and make love among the sacred rites of Spring. But she showed no such inclination, saying only.

'The Children will go North today, if Ishmael speaks the truth. I want to say goodbye, and I want you to be there with me.'

Her tone was passive, and yet deeply serious. He couldn't fully understand the reason, but consented, giving to her, unquestioningly, the next hours of his life—giving as only the innocent can, without exacting a price, or expecting anything in return.

They walked together through the jumble of wounded landscape, now growing less stark with the blooming of flowers and the spreading of new leaves. She seemed to know the way by heart, and he followed her with every confidence. They spoke little, but there seemed no need of talk between them, and Kalus felt no awkwardness.

At length the sounds of the sea became closer, and they emerged from the crumpled hills to stand at the high back reaches of the inlet, the fjord. It was not great, knifing inland for less than a mile, and scarcely sixty yards wide as it met the open sea. Yet still it formed a separate world, and spoke of green, unspoiled lands beyond.

>From their rocky overlook they began to descend along an angular path that skirted its northern face. They moved carefully and quietly, as the waterline grew nearer, and the sounds of the Sea more pervasive. Turning a last, difficult bend, they saw the Children among the rocks and moss-covered earth of the uneven slope ahead of them, the margins of their amphibious, Winter home.

As the man and woman continued to advance, a cry of 'Ay, oy!' was heard, and the younger members leapt into the water, as the whales clustered about the lower stones, waiting.

But one of the older males, in particular, showed no fear, and no sign of retreating. Kataya he knew, and trusted, and the strong man with the sheathed weapon he had seen, in the boat, far away. Also, as Kataya had intended, he felt something akin to jealousy at his presence here with her. There was the matter of possession.

This was Ishmael, so named by Kataya—the second leader, who would be first

when the eldest died. He stood his ground in silence, along with the leader, and slowly the others returned, though maintaining their distance, and keeping close to the water's edge.

Kataya asked Kalus to remain where he was, and walked the numbered strides that took her to the fourteen year old Ishmael. He smiled as she approached, and together they stood on the tiny patch of level ground between them. She brought an open hand to her chest, as she had done with Kalus, then opened it toward him in greeting. He did the same, taking childlike pleasure in the understanding of her ways.

'Izmai,' she said softly, pointing to the North. 'You go?'
Then remembering that she had affixed no time, she added. 'This day, North?'

'Izmai go,' he said proudly. Then his look became one of eager entreaty, touching in its innocence. 'You go, Kai-tai, Noth?' And his arm followed hers in obvious longing, a sweeping arc that to his mind held images of bergs and floes and sweeping tundra, and vast islands of thirty thousand seals: the cold, exhilarating perfection of unspoiled Arctic Seas.

She looked down, as pain clouded her face. How could she tell him, who in naive trust believed that she could follow wherever he led?

'No, I cannot.' But this word she had not taught him, and he would not have understood. She looked up into the huge, puzzled iris of his eyes—blue, crater lakes that drowned all efforts to reach him. Weakly, the more pitiable because it came from one so strong, she said. 'You come, in Winter, this place?'

But he could not get past the non-answer to his own question. Knowing no other course, he repeated it. 'You come, Kai-tai, Noth?' She shook her head, and there was nothing more she could do or say. He looked hurt, but could not bridge the distance between them.

At this the unnamed Eldest, a supple, wizened hunter of fifteen, grew impatient. This day they must begin the long migration, and it was time to be gone. He raised a bony left hand to his mouth and emitted a whistling, clicking sound that was more of the deep than the land, and which the whales understood as well as he.

Ishmael turned to face her one more time, his own pain not lasting. Coming closer, he touched her with the tip of his penis, indicating possession. Then he slowly turned away, and followed the others into the water. Their restless mounts surged beneath them, and soon they were drifting out of sight.

Kataya stood motionless, as if frozen by a curse, until she felt Kalus' warm hands upon her shoulders. She brushed him aside angrily, pulling forward. But this time he did not relent, listening to his instincts instead. He grasped her by the arms and turned her towards him, holding her firmly as she struggled.

'Cry,' he said. 'Just cry.'

For a moment her face showed bitter conflict, but she could deny herself no longer. She leaned against his chest, sobbing in the uncomprehending grief of one who has spared herself nothing, yet come to no reward. He stroked her hair gently, much as he had seen the doctor do with Sylviana. And though the two women were worlds apart in experience, and seemed so cold to one another, in this singular female emotion of love and loss, they were much the same.

'He'll be dead in two years,' she said finally, not leaving the shelter of his body. 'He wants me, and I would dearly love to bear his child.... If we could only mix our blood with theirs, through interbreeding, maybe we could end the tragedy of sure death in adolescence.'

'But they will only mate in the North,' she continued, stepping back and clearing her eyes with the back of her wrist. 'How.... How can I reach him?' She could only repeat herself, an echo of tragedy. 'He'll be dead in two years.' Both turned and looked out to sea, to the place where whale and rider moved, nearly out of sight.

'Goodbye,' she said darkly. 'Always goodbye.'

'You need never say goodbye to me,' Kalus answered, almost before he knew what he had said. He shook his head reproachfully. 'I'm sorry.'

She was neither hurt nor angry with him, nor even soothed and pacified. She seemed, rather, calm with a strange, fatalistic indifference. Her eyes regarded him, slightly mocking.

'I know what you mean, Kalus. You love Sylviana, but feel a sense of loyalty to

me. I guess it's better than nothing.' And with this she mastered her emotions. Or so it seemed to her then.

Kalus' mind began to race along strange passageways, trying to find the right words. But again instinct warned him off. He wanted to heal her hidden wounds but could not, and perhaps should not try, until he better understood them. Though unknown feelings were at work inside him, too.

*

They returned to the camp in silence, not touching, not sharing, and if they had dared to admit it, feeling more alone than if each to the other did not exist. They returned to Sylviana's glaring reproach, and to the doctor's knowing questions about the Children, the others having gone off to work. For he was the one member of the company to whom Kataya would open her thoughts; and he, too, shared her desire to understand and cure the baffling self-destruction of the Children's bodies as they neared adulthood, never forgetting that a living soul was carried within.

And as always among the social intercourse of men, many actions and words held cross-purposes at once, some realized, others forming like vague bubbles in the dark depths of the sea of human consciousness. Some would rise visibly, for those who knew how to read them; others would be raised only in the seclusion of after-thought. And still others, unwisely, would be suppressed. For all, in the end, must rise.

'Have they gone?' asked McIntyre, needing only Kataya's desolate expression for an answer.

'We'll get em next year,' he said more quietly.

'Who? What do you mean?' asked Sylviana.

'The Children,' he answered. 'Every Spring they migrate north.' He observed the tension between herself and Kalus, and added. 'You've wondered, no doubt, why the killer whales took up with them in the first place?'

'Yes,' said Kalus. 'Why?'

'Intelligent symbiosis, my friend. Works every time. A hunter like yourself will no doubt appreciate their technique. The youngsters make land some distance from the beaches where the seals lie in their hundreds, then come up behind them with sticks, startling them and driving them into the sea, where the orcas are waiting. Then the Children kill a few themselves, on land, and eat them on the spot. Feeds em both, neat as neat. A lesson for us all, I dare say.' He exchanged a look with Kataya, who said nothing.

'But they'll return next year?' asked Sylviana, still moved by the memory of them, though compassion was receding before the onslaught of jealous anger.

'Or move on to another island,' said Kataya coldly, unable to mask her dislike.

'Oh, they'll be back,' assured the doctor, 'As soon as Ishmael takes over. Only a fool leaves a beautiful princess trapped in the tower forever.' He looked at Kalus as he said this, though only Sylviana seemed to take his meaning, flushing with confusion and resentment.

Though neither of the newcomers could know it, the remark was neither light nor haphazard. The doctor was testing the waters for a procreation problem which struck much closer to home. And though lost in the swirl of double meanings, Kalus realized nonetheless that despite including several couples (he had no word for married'), there were no children among company. He looked first to Kataya, whose expression in return was almost angry, then to McIntyre, who nodded gently. Sylviana would not even look at him.

'Hell, kids,' said the doctor at length, 'I might as well just tell you.' He set down the potted plants he was working on (from which he hoped to make new medicines), and pulled an end chair toward them. Then seating himself like an ancient storyteller, he bade Kalus and Sylviana to sit at his feet. To this only Kalus consented, the two women still exchanging poison glances. But if this was the audience to which he must speak, then speak he would, torn as his own feelings were by the animosity of the two young women, secretly heartened as he realized that Kataya's scorn must be the result of physical stirrings for Kalus—as strong and healthy a sire as he could wish.

'Of the seven male crew members of the Virgo, four came out of suspension sterile.' At this blunt beginning Sylviana gasped, sensing perhaps what was to come.

'Yes,' resumed McIntyre. 'Of the three still capable of producing living sperm. . . myself not included,' he added somewhat wistfully, 'None are married, or even much attached to a woman still in healthy child-bearing years. They can't father a child,' he explained for Kalus' benefit. 'An unforeseen side-effect of so long a period of physiological inactivity. We have no children, as I'm sure you've noticed, and unless we can overcome our natural timidity and social taboos, we never will.'

He looked again toward the lovely Oriental, trying to gauge what should and should not be said. But lost in her own bitterness, she could give him no sign. So he sighed, and said simply.

'Kataya and I had hoped that perhaps Ishmael..... But he's gone now, and who knows if we'll ever see him again, or even if his chromosomes would match.'

'Ishmael will come back,' answered Kalus seriously, the doctor's words largely lost on him, but wanting to ease Kataya's pain. 'Once a man has touched his own soul through another, there is nothing else in life that matters.' And not understanding the effect that this would have, he looked not at Sylviana, of whom he was speaking, but to Kataya, by way of explanation and reassurance.

At this Sylviana let out a wordless execration, threw down the sheet she was mending, and stormed off . Kalus followed in sudden fear.

'I did not mean——' he said desperately, but found her door slammed and bolted in his face. In confusion he returned to the doctor, imploring.

'What do I have to do?' he said in frustration. 'Can't she see that there could never be anyone else for me? Why can't she understand?'

'Give her time, my friend,' said McIntyre. 'She'll come around. If you want my observations, you're in her deep, and that frightens her. Just have a little patience, and if a man of science may say it, a little faith. What's meant to be, will always be in the end.' These words seemed wise, yet Kalus could find no comfort in them.

'But my stomach crawls without her. My heart is in my throat, and I cannot sleep. If I lose her there will be nothing. Nothing at all.'

'You haven't lost her, son.' With this he looked ruefully toward Kataya. 'And if

'I'm any judge, you won't. Just be steady, with open arms, and she'll come back to you in time.'

But as McIntyre continued to study the younger man, he saw that his expression remained deeply troubled, so much so that he was truly touched, as Kalus had been at the simple confusion of Ishmael.

'If it helps, I'll tell her what you meant just now. Kataya and I understood. She's just too close, and can't see it.'

'Would you really do that?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you,' said Kalus, though his fear was not abated. 'I have to go somewhere and think.'

Bewildered and restless, Kalus called to the cub, and went walking off in no particular direction, perhaps heading vaguely toward the solace of the sea.

He tried to tell himself that things would work out—that he would one day understand and be more comfortable among the baffling maze of human interaction. But it was no use. What was he doing here, surrounded by people and emotions he could not begin to read? Is this what Sylviana had wanted?

He found himself thinking, with sudden longing, of the world and way of life he had known in the Valley. He thought of his brother, who had taken a mate, and wondered if she was yet with child. Perhaps it would be a boy, like Shama, who would not mistrust him, but look up to him in friendship. He thought of the wolves, now led by Akar, his noble friend. Surely he did not mean for them to keep Alaska forever sundered from the pack, or from himself, who would need a mate. And last, though far from least he thought of Avatar, who would always be free. And for a time his spirit ran with him, through the heart of a forest five hundred miles deep.

Was a compromise of worlds possible, he wondered, some meaningful coexistence between the hill-people and the colonists? He tried, but could not imagine it. And what did it matter, if he lost the only woman he would ever love? Again he felt the sudden, sour turning of his stomach, and the debilitating flow of unused adrenalin.

He wanted just to go to her, and take her to him, and tell her he was hers alone, and always. He felt the longing for her touch like a hole in his chest. But what could he do, when she would not let him near her? He had not been alone with her for two days, which seemed an eternity, and she showed no sign..... Anger and jealousy hardly seemed the signs of love.

He could not work it out, and was soon too weary and sick at heart to care much, even for something that touched him so deeply. There was no understanding the minds of women, he conceded in despair. Or of men.

He could only be what he was, and hope this self-honesty would bring him to his proper place in the end.

AND IF IT DIDN'T?

Coming out of the ragged confusion of earth and stone onto a tranquil stretch of beach, he stripped off his outer garments and began to wade out into the waves, stooping to wash away both grime and fatigue. The water was not warm, and perhaps there were lurking dangers—

'I don't care!' he cried in answer, the torrent of his anger returning with sudden force. He dove and swam out into deeper waters, while the cub remained on shore and barked at him.

Slowly, fighting the undertow, he made his way back to solid ground. **OR AS SOLID AS I'M LIKELY TO FIND**, he thought bitterly. Emerging truly exhausted, he fell to his knees, then sorrowfully held and reassured his unspeaking friend.

He lay down in the sand like an animal. And slept.

Chapter 42

That night, wrapped in the tragicomedy of human pride and affection, none of the three found peace.

For Sylviana the evening seemed endless, trying to drag conversation from the tired and otherwise absorbed company. And when hard night fell at last she found she could not sleep. Instead she restlessly mulled over the situation' with Kalus, as she called it: the doctor's explanation for his actions, and his relayed message that, 'There could never be anyone else.'

But this only made her angry with herself for having been so obvious in front of the others. What did it matter to her what he said or did? He had given her her

freedom', and seemed intent on exercising his own, no matter what his words might say. So she tried again to make herself interested in the young botanist, Smith, who had already asked her a number of leading questions, under the pretense (she assumed) of scientific inquiry.

But the bed was still empty, and her thoughts still vague and rootless, without Kalus there beside her. She felt again the primal urge to go to him, just go to him, and renew their bond through physical love. But remembering the pain of her last submission to it, she stubbornly refused. Or tried to. Until it was too late.

Kalus lay on his back on the ground, the sleeping bag giving him warmth, but little else. He put his hands behind his head and looked to the sky, while the cub nestled at his feet.

How far away the stars looked, how indifferent and utterly unreachable. Thinking yet again of his love, he felt the loneliness and broken longing that every unfulfilled man must know: that of useless labors, and barren seed. The worry-sickness of caring for one who no longer returned that love, had slowly eaten away at the warmth and loyalty he felt for her, leaving him hard and cold and indifferent. Or so it seemed to him then. He rolled over onto his side, muttering, and perhaps an hour later fell at last into a restless, brooding sleep.

But Kataya could no more sleep than bring back the dead, stung to the very heart by intolerable memories of the love she had lost forever. And this pain which lay at the heart of all others, aggravated that very day by the departure of Ishmael and the poor, doomed Children, tormented her every thought, until even the simplest feeling could not be accomplished without a pain that was almost physical.

And while she considered herself superior to Sylviana, and even in a way to Kalus himself, the lashings of emptiness at the hollow discipline of denial were no less acute for it. She remembered the words of Sinclair Lewis, from the book she was then translating.

'Not individuals but institutions are the enemies, And THEY MOST AFFLICT THE DISCIPLES WHO MOST GENEROUSLY SERVE THEM.' A more apt description of her own religious and cultural servitude she could not imagine.

But these self-recriminations were meaningless, and she knew it. What lay at the root of her agitation was her forlorn desire for Kalus. Beyond the strong and

undeniable physical attraction, his innocence, like Ishmael's, of the brutal travesty which had killed both her husband and the unborn child she carried unknowingly onto the Virgo.....

'Enough! Leave me alone!'

But there was no escaping herself. Tragedy, desire, and longing for a new life that she could truly call her own, all drew her toward him as irresistibly as childbirth. Added to this was the knowledge, confirmed by the vaginal thermometer, that this night, this very hour, her body was as ready to conceive as it had ever been since the long sleep, as it might ever be again. All her pain and frustration now focused upon this singular and uncorrupted man as a well-spring of life and relief, pure water to one dying of thirst. If he rejected her, the agony and shame would be unbearable. But dear, sweet holy Buddha, how could any pain be worse than this?

It was not greater wisdom that sent her to him in the end, but an agitation of sorrow and loneliness that were longer, and more inescapable. While Sylviana forced herself to stay, Kataya shed a single, honest tear, and surrendered.

*

Kalus stirred, feeling silken fingers touch his breast, bare legs against his own. He let out a despairing sigh as soft lips caressed him—his mouth, his neck, his chest—all in deepest passion, and solemn entreaty.

It was not his true love, but he could not deny her this. Nor, as he held her close, did he have any wish to, all else falling away in the unconscious amnesia of male passion. He threw open the sleeping bag, longingly kissed her cheek, her neck, the lovely space above her breasts.

'Kataya,' he whispered passionately, and there was nothing else in his world, no other salve for the endless pain and frustration. There was only her, here and now, her face wet with tears, vulnerable, compelling. He released the knotted loincloth, as their most sensitive reaches drew nearer. Her breasts rubbed gently across his. Then he slid down, yielding to that most primal longing: to suckle at the breast, fountain of all life.

'Yes,' she whispered fervently. 'Yes, Kalus. TAKE me.' He raised himself on his arms, opening her legs with his own, and with the sighing aid of her hand, was inside her. He did not love her, but he longed for her, making the physical release and abandon perhaps the greater for it. He was not gentle, nor did she ask him to be. For in that moment she was not a woman, but all women, and his anger would not be abated.

But as he approached climax, too soon, his gentler nature returned, and he not only remembered, but yearned for the soul inside her. She felt him withdraw. And though she experienced a moment of bitter disappointment, that all was yet in vain, he only moved to kneel over her, kissing her lips, her eyes, her neck and then her breasts. And all the while his right hand encircled her deepest temple, caressing, kneading, softly stroking and then penetrating its moist readiness. In rapture she threw back her head, breathed deeply and surrendered to orgasm. Then gently, now quieter, he put himself inside her once more, moving his penis in slow, beautiful patterns that she thought would break her heart with loving pleasure. And in time as his own breathing became deeper, and his thrusts more urgent, she felt the throbbing wetness come again, as together they forgot all else in the throes of that blessed, animal release. Plaintive, moaning sounds split the night.

Then he reached back and covered them both with the sweetly softened sleeping bag, inside her still, their limbs intertwined, breath commingling.

'Thank you,' she whispered, taking his head in her hands and kissing him with all her heart and soul, as she felt his strong arms engulf her and his lips caress her with spoken and unspoken words of affection and reassurance. And soon, very naturally, both drifted off into a sleep no longer bitter, at glorious, indifferent peace with themselves and with their world.

*

In the chill hour before dawn, Sylviana woke from a horrible dream. Some hideous, ill-defined beast had sprung upon Kalus from a shadow, and with teeth and claws and sheer weight pinned him to the ground, slashing and rending, tearing him apart.

She sat bolt upright in the silent gloom. The room was empty, and the dream had

been too real. Forgetting all else she threw on a robe, left the building and ran toward the place where she knew he lay sleeping. She no longer cared for games, or being right. She only wanted to be with him. To hold him and.....

There were sounds ahead of her in the darkness. Two voices. She slowed, and then moved off the path, taking cover behind a small tree. What she heard in its near seclusion seemed less real than the nightmare, and yet far more terrible.

'I should go now,' said Kataya, rising and slipping the silk dress across her arms and shoulders, then lowering it softly into place.

'Yes. I do not think Sylviana would understand. But we understand, don't we? You know what this night was for us?'

'Yes. Just hold me, kiss me once, and then I'll go.'

'Goodbye, my beautiful Kataya.'

'My beautiful Kalus.' And with a tear that no longer wounded her, she was gone.

Sylviana slithered to the ground with her back against the tree, her sorrow as bitter and unquenchable as any she had ever known. Whatever her sins and follies may have been, she paid for them dearly in those moments. For she saw more clearly and painfully than ever, as much as if he had been killed, that she loved him beyond all others, almost beyond her own life. And she knew it as she felt him betray her, and give the precious love that had been hers alone, to another woman.

Another woman! How could he? After all they had been through..... How could he think that she wouldn't come back to him, just because for a time she had been uncertain. Hadn't he driven her to it?

That perhaps it was she who had driven him, that he had given Kataya something beautiful and desperately needed, that she herself might give such a precious gift to a man like Stenmark, none of these thoughts could occur. Because like Kalus or Kataya (or anyone else), she was a product, and in some measure a victim, of the world in which she had grown. For she had been taught (though not by her father) that this was the one, all-consuming act of a man's betrayal, and a thing which could never be forgiven. And like Barabbas in his rage of righteous anger, she too cast him out, out of her heart forever.

On a more human level, and in a flood of final tears, like the little girl bereft of her mother she felt devastated and lost, and swore that she would never again let anyone come so close, and hurt her so badly. She stood up again, desperate and proud and defiant, ready to go on without him.

But she had forgotten his wilderness senses. He had heard her crying before Kataya was out of sight, and realized with crushing finality and self-reproach how much she loved him, and how deeply he had wounded her. He stood now just a few feet away, and committed his second great mistake of human psychology.

Because whatever rash promises she might have made to herself in the depths of rejection and spiritual agony, so long as they remained within her they might still have softened with time, leaving the heart open to forgiveness and return. But by confronting her then and allowing the volcano to erupt, spewing forth its rage upon him, the hateful words solidified and became a reality unto themselves, a spoken curse that foolish, endless human pride would then have to live up to. He stood before her, pale and shivering, neither explaining nor begging forgiveness. His simple heart would only say. 'I have never loved anyone else. I never could. This was not love, in the way that you and I—' Her open hand struck across his face with the fury of all women scorned. 'I hate you!' she cried hysterically. 'We're finished, FOREVER! And I'll HURT you before I'm through. Just wait and see how I hurt you!' And she stormed away, her love and pain alike submerged beneath the weight of hard words, and harder justice. Because male pride is evil enough, in its blunt and stupid way destroying much that is gentle and fair. But a woman's vengeance, turned devious by the depths of her vulnerability, and the intricate contradiction of her emotions..... True Hell would be raised, one way or the other. Kalus watched her go, and though shocked and stunned and hurt himself, felt yet again the indestructible bond that was his love for her. When she struck him it had been as if he struck himself, and even as she promised to hurt him, his one thought was for her safety. Kataya, Komai, even the cub who stood beside him, became secondary, superfluous in his life. She was his woman, his family, and in everything but name, his wife. And whatever she might do or say, he would never leave her. But as the cub gently nuzzled against his leg, seeking some sign of reassurance, he was dismayed to find large tears running down his face, as in his mind's eye he saw Barabbas with the other males huddled silently behind him, telling him to go. 'Why?' he asked aloud, his burning eyes turned toward the heavens. 'Why must I always be punished for showing mercy, and trying to do what is right?' But it was not mercy he felt

when he took Kataya to him, and he knew it. He kicked at a protruding root, but trying to make his anger flare was like trying to make a fire of damp wood. Guilt and remorse quickly smothered it, smothered him. He stroked Alaska's head and said quietly, 'It's all right.' But he neither felt it, nor believed it himself. That afternoon William appeared, like the white shadow of a tenement grave, and Sylviana had found her instrument of revenge.

Chapter 43

All that morning Kalus stayed away, not wanting Sylviana to see him, not wanting to destroy for Kataya what they had shared the night before. The gesture

was not entirely noble: now more than ever he found it impossible to think or plan, and simply did not know what else to do.

But as various members of the company began to return early from their labors, as if by mutual consent at the fine Spring weather, the amiable Smith accosted him in the place where he sat brooding. The youngest of the company, he had a pleasant, almost boyish face, with sandy hair and a light moustache. He took Kalus up as if they were old friends, and insisted they share a bottle of wine to celebrate the day. Kalus hardly felt like celebrating, and was half fearful of the liquor's effect on him; but the other's friendly oblivion made it all but impossible to say no. So at last, wearily, he consented.

The two went briefly to the botanist's rooms to fetch it, then turned themselves again out of doors. There in the clear space by the tables Kalus saw the two women: Kataya, who looked up from her work and smiled faintly, and Sylviana, who did not smile, though she could not entirely hide her relief at seeing him at all. But the embers of her anger still smoldered, waiting only for a restless wind to stoke them again to withering fire.

The two men moved to the crest of the hill which formed one border of the grassy bowl in which the others had gathered, and sat beneath the speckled shade of a young tree that grew there. From here they could survey the company without feeling too close, and therefore inhibited. Smith opened the bottle, and after taking several large gulps (despite the assumed bravado he was nervous, and uncertain how to proceed) passed it to Kalus, who was much more cautious.

In time he felt the liquor, though he was not overwhelmed by it. Yet he spoke little, gazing wistfully into the small valley at the two women he had loved: desiring again the one, though he rebuked himself for it, loving, and at the same time hating, the fallen angel of his heart. Smith observed this, and failing in his attempts at indirect conversation, spoke more plainly.

'I guess by now the Doc has explained to you something of our breeding problem..... Dave Rawlings can be a bit blunt—subtle as a truck, really—but he generally says the things that need to be said. About mating, for example, and children.' Kalus turned toward him curiously, as Smith pretended not to notice.

'He and I were just talking about it last night, and do you know what he said? Stop screwing around and just ask them. Enough of this timidity. It's high time

for those of us who can still procreate to get down to some serious fucking."

If Smith had stopped talking long enough, Kalus would have gotten up and walked away from what seemed to him a lunatic assault on those things he held most dear. But he did not stop.

'We've all been in rather a state of shock the past year, sexually as well as otherwise. And of course we had plenty of other things to think about first: constructing the shelters, laying up food for the Winter.'

'Survival,' said Kalus bluntly. 'Just like everyone else.'

'Yes..... Are you angry with me?'

The man-child studied the face of the other, finding nothing but friendship, sensitivity and good intentions. 'No,' he said sadly. 'I don't know what to feel.'

'Should we talk about this another time?'

'What would it change?'

'Probably nothing,' said Smith ruefully. 'You understand that I'm only speaking for the good of the group. We're a family, really.'

'But one without children,' added Kalus sympathetically.

'Yes. We need them. . .or everything we do dies with us. Along with all hope for the future.' He took another drink to keep from betraying emotion. But this only augmented, rather than submerging the yearning for life that so overwhelmed him. 'The sound of their laughter,' he began again, his eyes welling. The wail of newborn life. . .would be such blessed relief from the dry, sterile sound of our own voices.'

At this Kalus eyes' misted as well, remembering Shama, and the Child on the shore. 'I would give everything I have to hear it,' he said, surprised by his own words, and the thoughts that lay behind them.

'Me, too.' And the young scientist put a hand on Kalus' shoulder. 'What I'm trying to tell you is that according to our tests, only Rawlings, myself and the Commander, still have the ability to father a child. And in your case, of course,

there would be no reason for the sterility.' At Kalus' questioning look he added. 'Oh, the others can still make love, it just doesn't get them anywhere..... No pregnancy. No kids.'

'What are you asking me to do?'

Smith sighed, knowing it was now or never. 'Look down there. You see that beautiful, slender reed in the black dress?'

'Kataya.'

'Yes..... She's twenty-six, and in the full flower of womanhood. She desperately wants a child, but apparently the rest of us don't do anything for her. And then Dr. Welles, there.' He pointed. 'Thirty-four, and married to a man who can't give her children. Should they both be punished for it? And your own Sylvania. Wouldn't the two of you, at least, consider having a child?'

But Kalus' mind was reeling. The concept of free love was so incredible to him, at once both desirable and unthinkable..... He gave voice to only one of the myriad questions that confronted him.

'Is there no other way?'

'There's always artificial insemination: taking a man's sperm and a woman's egg and placing them together, either in the uterus, or in the laboratory. But that's so cold and mechanical. Also, we're trying to stay a little closer to nature than our predecessors, hoping to avoid some of their mistakes. And for me, at least, there's a spiritual' side to it: which sperm cell is MEANT to fertilize which egg. Can you see what I'm driving at?'

Kalus, who had understood very little, could only say. 'I have made love to only two women in my life. And I should have been more than content with the one, if she..... Well if..... I don't know if I can help you,' he finished weakly. But then, whether because of the alcohol, the other man's openness, or the sheer physical need to let it out, he told him.

'I made love to Kataya last night.'

'Good,' said Smith warmly. 'Good for you.'

'Not good for me. . .or Sylviana. She learned of it, and cast me out.' He lowered his face, bitter and ashamed. 'I feel as if I'm already dead.'

Smith was quiet for a moment, allowing the other to gather himself, then simply said what he thought.

'You did nothing wrong, Kalus. I see in you no more of the user and the taker than I do in myself—probably the reason we've both slept with so few women. But as for Sylviana. . .maybe she won't understand. But maybe, in time, she will. Welles is probably giving her the same talk right now.'

At this Kalus looked down into the bowl once more, and saw to his relief and glimmering hope that Dr. Welles was in fact speaking seriously with Sylviana, who blushed, looking down, then up at him uncertainly.

'In the meantime,' Smith continued, 'Try not to isolate yourself so much. Loneliness will kill you by itself. Throw in alienation and remorse, and it's no wonder you feel the way you do.' He looked the man-child straight in the eye, and said sincerely.

'Be my friend, Kalus. The rest of us aren't so bad. But if you have trouble being open with them, then start with me. I'm not nearly as shallow and glib as I come across—a defense mechanism I guess, to keep myself from being hurt. But I do care, and I'd be honored.' And he gave Kalus his hand on it.

Kalus took it in his own, finding unexpected relief, as Sylviana watched him, and listened to Dr. Welles, and felt her hard resolve begin to waver.

And all might still have been well, but for the sinister and unknown timing of the Stranger, who at that moment descended the rise at a cold distance from the two men, and seeing the strange and alluring new woman, devoted to her all his questionable attention.

Chapter 44

William, who admitted to having no last name, was of slightly less than average height, with dark hair, a rough complexion, and a certain quality of nondescriptness about his face and features.

Until one met the eyes. These were at once both black and pierced with light,

aloof and penetrating, as if possessed of some underworld knowledge that rendered all waking truth both poignant and, in the end, utterly meaningless. Once seen, though the rest of the face remained difficult to recall, these darkened orbs were indelibly burned into memory—fierce, desperate, and dying. Restless, fearful, weary of the crumbling bridge that so narrowly separates life from death.....

He had not always been this way. Though his childhood had been tragic enough—abandoned shortly after birth, stored like some kind of hazardous waste in orphanages and foster homes, moving on as he became a troubled adolescent (and who wouldn't be?) to jails and juvenile detention centers—it had not killed him, and that at least was something. He had run away (escaped) at the age of sixteen, and like so many other lost souls without hope or guidance, had gravitated to New York City to be tried by the relentless hell-fire of the streets.

But unlike most, he had survived. Here, through various underground activities, ranging from petty theft and burglary to trafficking narcotics, he had somehow managed to keep body and soul together. And no one seemed to take much notice of one more suspected junkie, living in abandoned buildings and selling small quantities of marijuana, cocaine, and whatever assorted pills he could buy, make, or steal from dockside warehouses. He was left alone for the most part, and aside from the odd roughing up by the police, given tentative permission to exist.

But as he unknowingly turned the page on his twentieth year (for the date of his birth was known to no one, and his childhood but a blur of pain and abuse without names or numbers for reference), and as he found his heart still beating, his lungs still demanding air, and the various hungers of life giving him no chance to cease his restless moving, a small miracle had occurred. Someone noticed, and more than that, fell in love with him: a fifteen-year-old Chicano girl named Kathy.

Their meeting was chance enough, and would have passed like so many others, but for the small compassion that still lived in him. Finding her tearful and alone on the front steps of a tenement, in which her alcoholic father had beaten and fondled her for perhaps the thirtieth time, refraining from actual rape only because she screamed so loudly and the walls were thin, William sat down beside her, gave her his bandana to wipe the blood from her ear, and offered to take her to a public health clinic that he knew. When she declined as the result of

a questionable immigration status (and a desire not to return to the even more brutal life of Guatemala City), he had given her an ounce of marijuana, along with spoken directions to the condemned building in which he slept on the floor on a mattress of flattened cardboard boxes. If she needed anything, he said, he would try to help.

The next day when he returned to check on her, he found that her father, aided in his spiritual pilgrimage by a fifth of tequila, had fallen from the fire escape, and was now in a City hospital pending deportation. That was why she had not returned to their room, but remained on the front steps, freed from one hell but confident that another awaited her, which no doubt it did: she had no money, and would soon be evicted.

William had bought her breakfast, stolen her a jacket and scarf, then brought her to his mansion of rats, fallen plaster, moldering walls, and warmed by a kerosene heater which only smoked dangerously toward morning.

After waiting for three days to be put to work on the streets, she found to her amazement that he neither demanded she sell herself to others or perform sex tricks for him, and had not put a hand on her except in awkward comfort and reassurance. That night she gave herself to him, they made sweet and tender love; and he had done something even more inexplicable. He had cried, and promised to protect her with his life against the bitches of poverty and despair that he knew so well.

>From that time on they were inseparable, living where they could, doing what they had to do, to survive. William was not, in fact, a junkie, though he came as close to the line without crossing it as any human being ever could. But for Kathy's sake he gave up hard drugs almost completely, finding that with her he no longer needed the barbiturates to sleep, injected amphetamines to feel alive in the night, or alcohol to keep the spiritual agony from killing him. Without the world's help, or even its consent, he pulled himself and his young woman up out of the gutter, and as she had done for him, gave them both a reason to live.

But then Armageddon had come, oblivious to his, and everyone's, agonies and ecstasies, bitter triumphs and long defeats. The War, that had been building for centuries from Man's ignorance, and inability to overcome his instinct for violence, finally broke out. The satellite lasers had protected the City for a time, keeping the first wave of missiles off them, for perhaps an hour. But it didn't take

a genius to know that New York's famous minutes were numbered.

So through the crash of panic-stricken people, trying to evacuate or merely crying, 'Oh, my God!' while still others who had not seen or heard the broadcasts stood about in a daze and tried to understand what was happening, William took Kathy and sought out his friend, Dr. Wilhelm Krause—the black pessimist, partly insane. Looting, too, had broken out, but it was halfhearted, so that even the police, grim soldiers of the street, showed little inclination toward retaliatory violence. The City, for all its noise and seeming activity, was in a strangling state of shock.

William found Dr. Krause—whom he had met while hospitalized with hepatitis (from a rusted syringe)—in his basement laboratory, sunk ninety feet below the ground, side-cut into solid bedrock at the base of gigantic Mercy Hospital. For among the towering sky-scrappers, some reaching over two hundred stories, it was not uncommon for their foundations to sink another tenth that distance. And along with the subways, bored farther and farther beneath the level of the streets, they formed the literal New York underground, a silent world unto itself, a still, protected inlet in the heart of the maelstrom.

When William burst in upon the aged Krause, the latter did not at first seem to recognize him. For though he had been preparing for this day for many years, now that it had come, his mind and heart were simply overwhelmed. He found himself unable to act, or even think. It was really happening, not in theory, not in the lecture hall, but in damnable and undeniable reality. The unspeakable, of which he had spoken for thirty years, had happened at last. There was something he was supposed to do.....

Slowly his weary eyes and mind focused, his German courage rallied, and he saw before him the young man he had once caught trying to steal morphine from the hospital storeroom. In a moment almost of nostalgia, he recalled the incident. He had not called security or the police, had not tried to confront the sick and desperate youth, but said simply, 'Go back to your room, son. No, I'm not going to turn you in. We'll talk about it later.' And to the young man's astonishment they HAD talked, on several occasions and for hours at a time. William found in the aging and alienated recluse a friend, and the closest thing to a father that he would ever know. When he had spoken of his life, Krause listened attentively, as if finding in the bitter tale of poverty and poor health, pursuit and persecution, a note in harmony with his own struggle amidst the viper-filled pit of

unenlightened human nature. Upon William's release he had shown him his laboratory, and explained what it was for. And he had told him to come, if this moment ever arrived.

'Hello, William,' he said quietly.

'Doctor!' said the other breathlessly. 'I don't care about myself, but you HAVE to save Kathy. She can't die, she just can't!'

'Now, now,' said Krause, 'There's no need to be heroic. You sound like one of those detestable Wagnerian operas—all full of blood oaths, and absurd quests to dubious ends. Damned prelude to the Nazis is what they were, along with Nietzsche and all that, Great men create their own morality' horse-shit. Did you know Hitler was impotent? That's why he never married Eva Braun. They say that Goring used to wear eye make-up when they were alone, and—'

'Doctor, please!'

'Yes, yes, I know. You're sure that at any moment the lights will go out, we'll hear the rumble from above, and the chance will be lost. You underestimate me, young man. This laboratory will be intact, and protected from radiation, ten thousand years from now. You forget the lengths that a mad German' will go to.' But seeing William's anguish, he said. 'Yes, we'll save Kathy. And just for the hell of it, why don't we save you, too? Since I don't seem to have any other volunteers.'

William looked around him, then at the two elaborate suspension casks, the best and most advanced in the world—made by Krause's own hands, and prepared against every contingency.

'But what about you?'

'Me?' The old scientist laughed morosely. 'I'm an old man. Do you think I want to crawl out of one of these things a hundred centuries from now, and try to rebuild what's left of the world? No, William, I don't mind dying. I'm just glad the two of you came, or it would have been much harder.' And at that moment they had in fact heard a rumble, and felt the disbelieving earth tremble at the nuclear concussion. But the lights stayed on, and the caskets of life still waited.

'Well,' said Krause grimly. 'Shall we get on with it?'

And the young lovers were put into suspension, with precision and good hope.

William had woken the prescribed ten-thousand years later, intact, roughly one year from the present. He had lain very still for a time, not understanding, not remembering where he was. But as the truth slowly returned to him he felt no weight of sorrow or loss, but an unexpected joy at just being alive. And he thought of Kathy, so close beside him. He had saved her! She was ALIVE, and they would start again. He forced himself to remain in the soft warmth of the casket a while longer, as Krause had instructed him. Then he turned the inner handle, broke the seal, and emerged into the brave new world.

But even prepared against every contingency things can go wrong, and the Devil fingers of Chaos reach into the strongest fortress. And nothing made by man can endure unchanging the ravages of Time.

Something had gone wrong with Kathy's support apparatus. What it was hardly matters, and no one ever learned. But she had died at least a thousand years before, and all that the sealed cask had done was to act as a mummy's wrap, slowing, but not eliminating her body's natural decomposition. He rose to find his only love, a half-rotted corpse.

McIntyre and Jennings had heard the anguished cries, as they searched through the underground vaults and passageways for the faint life-signs they had detected, and entered the laboratory to find him lying face down on the floor. Screaming. He offered no resistance as the doctor injected a sedative, and the two brought him out into the cruel light of day.

His true love was buried, along with all his hopes, and he never spoke of her again.

*

Sylviana knew nothing of this tragedy, or of the menace to himself and others that he had since become. She saw only the obvious way that he looked at her, and the effect it had on Kalus. The man-child rose instinctively, as if she were in danger, and would have strode down the hill sword in hand to confront him. But Smith, who had seen the sudden brush-fire of his eyes, seized hold of his arm protectively.

'Easy, Kalus. That's William. We'll go down together.'

There in the depression, stiff introductions were made. Kalus, with the help of Smith beside him, managed to restrain his emotions, though making no attempt to conceal them. For his own part, William sneered at him indifferently, and continued to bathe Sylviana with mock interest and open lust. His only reply to her question, 'Why haven't I seen you before?' was a rude:

'Him Tarzan, you Jane. Me come back tomorrow.' And he had taken some food, without asking or thanks, and made off the way he had come.

'How can you let him treat you that way?' demanded Kalus.

Since the question was directed at no one in particular, Ruth Welles replied, neither apologizing nor defending their actions. She was a tall, serious woman in her mid thirties, with pincers of brown hair surrounding a pleasant face and striking eyes, which revealed to those who knew how to look, a nature both stubborn and compassionate.

'That's just his way,' she said, 'And there are reasons for it. We've all been hurt and bereft by the War, but his pain..... Let's just say it's much harder for him to forgive and go on, and that we're all worried about him, because we do care.'

'But he won't let anyone come close enough to help him,' added Smith. 'He storms in and out for food, occasionally takes wine or medicine along with it, and that's all we ever see of him. We helped him set up a laboratory, before we knew what it was for. We considered smashing it afterward, but what can you do for someone who makes his own poison, and flaunts his own destruction?'

'Why?' asked Sylviana. 'What does he use the lab for?'

'To make LSD,' said Welles sadly. 'If there were poppies on the island, no doubt he'd make heroin as well.'

Kalus found himself breathing heavily, unable to control it. He began to pace a short distance from them, then suddenly turned and came back, his manner tense and worried.

'Maybe I am wrong to say this. Maybe I have no right. But I don't trust that one, and I don't want him near me or mine.' He looked squarely at Sylviana. 'If you

have any sense left you will stay away from him, whatever you think of me. He means to hurt you, or I know nothing at all.'

But her gaze was equally unyielding. 'I will see, or befriend, whoever I DAMN well please, and you have nothing to say about it.' And she returned to her work, as if he wasn't there.

Smith released a breath, Welles shook her head, and Kataya said nothing, reproachfully. Kalus lifted the cub, forlornly lowered his forehead against it, then turned and walked away.

Chapter 45

And so a period of days ensued in which little of note seemed to happen, as is often the case when the most potent of life's forces are at work, though beneath the surface and not yet brought to fruition. William became a more frequent visitor, and often took long walks with Sylviana. Kalus, feeling a genuine desire to work and do his share, as well as needing something to distract him, began to work the fields with Jim Smith, the botanist, his only real friend among the colonists. He still spoke to Kataya, but had told her that for a time it was best they keep some distance between them, and she had not objected. She understood, and kept a warm secret of the fact that her menstrual cycle was now a week overdue.

Under other circumstances, Kalus might have fallen in love with the rigors and lessons of farming, which taught patience and perseverance, and returned the most beautiful and honest of rewards: Life itself. When Smith told him that by the year 2000 the smaller, family farms of America were largely a thing of the past, he thought it a greater tragedy than almost any he had heard of. And unknowingly, as Smith continued to tell him of his own childhood on the Indiana farm, of his family's hardships and eventual ruin, Kalus weaved the themes of the story in and out of his own.

Because as he toiled, he too felt the creeping sense of fatalism that told him all was lost, and the meaning gone out of his life. He too felt events pushing toward some dark and bitter climax over which he seemed to have little control. All this though he raged, and cursed, and worked harder still. Because Sylviana would not let him near her, and heeded none of his warnings.

So he worked, and waited, and prayed to the wind which knew could not hear. While the woman-child, oblivious, pursued the treacherous shadow of revenge.

It should be said in her defense that Sylviana had not stopped loving him. Hers, rather, was a classic case of one who has struggled with the help of another to achieve some desperate goal, but whom, upon attaining it, felt that he or she no longer needed the life partner who had been a pillar of love and support throughout: that she was now free to choose a more appropriate mate for her elevated status, and leave the other to get on as they would. As if that made it any better. Lastly, that if she had been herself she would have wished him no harm, whatever he had done to hurt her.

But her emotions, too (or so she told herself), were in a violent state of flux. She felt as if she had been the one struck across the face, betrayed and unjustly punished for simply following the inevitable course of events. She had never been an evil person, and was not now.

But a sin of omission can be every bit as deadly, and the venomous spider does not stop to ask the nature of its victim before it bites, a soft sting that is hardly felt, until the poison starts to work. Neither of them had realized the gift their isolation and struggle had been, or how much more complicated love becomes when lives are sheltered, and hearts confronted by a baffling array of choices. Perhaps that was why, as Smith had remarked to Kalus, the well-off never seemed to be much in love, but only to play at life. His love with Sylviana had

been simple and direct, a beautiful and necessary outgrowth of their world. Now their reality had been altered, and something precious lost.

It should also be said that in dealing with a dark, embittered soul like William's (and to a lesser degree, her own), Sylviana was every bit as naive as she had been about the primal, life and death existence of the Valley. Had she known for one minute the vicious hatred that he held for her, or the imminent danger of the course she was now pursuing, she would have fled from him and never looked back.

Because to William she had become a symbol of all the protected, thoughtless sheep whose blind acceptance of personal comfort and political ruthlessness had made the destruction of the Earth and the murder of his love possible, even inevitable. He would listen as she spoke of her days at Ithaca, and of her soft and sheltered childhood, with apparent interest and appreciation, all the while choking back his passion, and plotting her destruction. In his mind she was the 'pretty little college whore', and the very strength of his desire for her only intensified his wish to wound her, as he had been wounded, to punish and destroy her, as his love had been destroyed. He hated her with a malice so deep it could fain love without detection, and wallow in thoughts of sexual violence without remorse. The spirit had been charred to ash inside him, leaving only the bestial desires of the twisted animal: lust and hate and vengeance.

But his plans were not yet ripe, and like the cat, he would play with his victim before killing it. And perhaps too, though the chance was faint, the smallest part of his conscience remained, and needed further goading before ceasing to rebel.

For her own part, though she might have wished it otherwise, Sylviana could feel nothing for him but pity and a kind of awe. At times the obsidian hardness of his eyes would push her senses toward the protective realm of fear; but always his words, and her own twisted purpose called them back. She was neither attracted nor repulsed, only determined.

In truth she thought little during those final days, following out the treadmill of her plan in a kind of dull stupor, unable, for the pain it cost her, to listen to her heart and turn aside. Her scheme, if such a name can be given to walking wide-eyed into a trap, was to sleep with him at a time and place where Kalus would either witness it directly, or hear of it straight away. She meant only to raise the horrible specter of betrayal before him, to hurt him as he had done to her.

Beyond that she saw nothing, knew nothing, though some half thought out rationale told her than then, perhaps, she could forgive him.

She wanted, in short, to summon the demon of Vengeance—to do her bidding, then be gone. But Hell, if it has a master, is no woman's slave, and once raised, follows its own path of wanton destruction. And it found in William a willing conspirator, and favorite target of seduction: a man who no longer cared.

Kalus had spoken of a benevolent current to which, along with his own free will, he would entrust his life. But there is also a malevolent, just as real, and Sylviana was being carried along by it without resistance, and without awareness.

As William plotted, and Kalus burned.

Chapter 46

But life, and the myriad realities around them, did not cease because two lovers had been driven apart, or because another lived in the darkened world of near death. And their interaction, however tragic and to whatever end, was hardly its only concern. Perhaps that is life's greatest cruelty—that it goes on, regardless—or perhaps that is its greatest gift. Nature, stern father that it is, has many children, and those who have grown must be strong and self-sufficient, able to survive and create again, without help or intercession.

There were others in the camp with lives and dreams and heartbreaks of their own. And in the seemingly distant Valley, countless animal young were being born, some who would rise to the magnificent freedom that only an untamed creature of the Wild can know, some who would never reach adulthood, their

flesh sacrificed to feed the young of others. But all would continue to strive and struggle, not understanding the human concept of despair. And if the spirits of those who died returned in other forms, or if the energy that constituted their existence was merely recycled, it rose up to struggle again, filled with the endless enigma that so bravely turns to face the Night, forever battling death and the Void:

Desire, the cornerstone of Life.

*

On the day before the storm would break, Sylviana felt a stillness and sense of well-being in everything around her: in the gentle breeze of early morning, in the frolicking of the cub with David Rawlings, who would never have been so free with a human companion. She felt it in the absence of William from the camp, and even in the stubborn, unspeaking presence of the man-child. He would never leave her, of that she was now certain. And he would be near, very near when tomorrow, at last, her plans would be ripe.

She no longer felt any hatred towards him. As their eyes met briefly she even felt the old, half admitted love that had once been the most important reality of her world. She didn't hate him. But she knew what she had to do. It didn't have to mean destroying him, which she was equally certain would never happen. How could steel be destroyed? It couldn't, she thought, only disciplined to be a better servant.

And in her live imagination she felt the strong, shy touch of his hands across her back, her ribs and then her breasts, accentuated by kissing and tender words, the mouth sliding down across her neck, her chest, licking her nipples and then squeezing and sucking in earnest, the movements of his torso becoming less gentle as his penis grew rigid against her thigh. Then he was inside her, with or without her help, and began the innumerable thrusts that made of her body a single, roused vehicle of warmth and pleasure. She gently, and not so gently massaging his back, his buttocks. Till in the last fiery moments of passion he crushed her to him, crying out in a voice made terrible by jealous rage.

'You are mine!'

She felt the strength of these images in the quickening of her heart, and the stirring of her womb. That the next day she would give herself to a man for whom she felt nothing, and who might have feelings of his own, she could not realize. It made it all too cold and sad. But this cruelty was not HER doing. She had not wanted it, or asked for it. It simply had to be done. She must think of herself first, be truly selfish for once, and let the men work it out as they would. That Kalus might hurt William, or himself, she refused to consider. That William might try to hurt HER, was beyond her imagining.

Her eyes were hazy, her senses unaware. And she did not see the deadly serpent that crawled towards her through the grass. She knew nothing of it until the air beside her was rent by the sweep of some instrument whirled in sudden violence.

Startled, she turned to find Rawlings standing, too close it seemed to her, then bending down over a wounded snake, pinned to the ground beneath his hoe. Without hesitation or remorse he drew out his knife, and separated it from its head.

'You better wake your ass up, girl,' he said bluntly. 'Or death will find you, even here.'

But surely he was being too dramatic. It was only a little snake. And why would anyone or anything want to hurt her, who would not even kill a spider if she found it in her bedroom. But as she looked down at the bright bands of color encircling the serpentine corpse, she vaguely remembered something nasty about the coral snake. She moved away with a shudder.

But remembering herself, she looked around quickly. Kalus was gone—he had not seen. And Rawlings was walking off without further comment. TOO CLOSE, she told herself. TOO DAMN CLOSE. She was not sure whether she referred to the snake, or to the show of weakness, when the illusion of strength was so critical.....

WELL, replied her harder self, AND WHAT OF IT? You couldn't let something like that ruin your whole day. Especially this day, when she had to be calm, and prepare herself. She cleared away the dishes as if nothing had happened.

And Nothing had.

Later that morning she at last admitted her loneliness, and her fear. She wanted

to go to Kalus, so badly, to forgive him and start again..... But she could not. Too much strength remained in her illusions. So she set upon a compromise, going instead to her closest friend among the colonists, a man whose affection was unconditional, and (she thought) without judgment: Flight Commander Miles Stenmark.

She found him in the solitary structure a short distance from the camp: the library, or archival building. Filled with the life-giving books, computer records, maps and charts, it held a special status among these refugees of Man's destruction, and its deep, quiet interior had the aura almost of a church. Sylviana entered soundlessly.

The Commander sat with his back to her, leaning across a large drafting table. Before him were spread a series of orbital photographs, which he reproduced in minute detail upon a wide, scroll-like map. She moved closer, standing behind him, needing to feel his reassuring presence which never wavered, and his friendship which never questioned.

She began to massage his shoulders, which tensed involuntarily, and then surrendered. With difficulty she fought back an urge to embrace him, and cry like a child. She continued, but with a softened and affectionate touch he could not help but feel.

'Bless you, Sylviana,' he said wearily. She almost smiled.

'How did you know it was me?'

'I knew.' Then, as if this conveyed too much. 'Ruth Welles always tells me I'm working too hard, and Kataya's fingers feel like flesh wrapped around steel, though she means well..... I'm afraid she's still not quite comfortable around me. Around any of us, really.'

'Why?' asked the younger woman, unable to feign indifference.

'Will you promise not to hold it against her? I wish the two of you could make peace. There's so much that's good in both of you.'

Sylviana sighed deeply, again fighting off the urge to embrace him and pour out her heart. 'I'll try. Why, then?'

'She still has too much resentment against the west.'

She moved to stand beside him, her look intent. 'From what?'

.. 'A large number of Japanese, including her grandparents, died a slow and terrible death from the radiation left behind by the bombing of Hiroshima. And here, now, losing everything to a War in which her country played no part, but was decimated nonetheless, killing her husband. And to lose the baby the way she did—not even knowing she was pregnant, then coming out of suspension to immediate miscarriage, hormonal crash, and the end of the world as she knew it. . .sweet Savior. It would have killed almost anyone else. You HAVE to forgive her, Sylviana. It's not her fault.'

She pulled up another stool and sat beside him, silent and thoughtful. Finally she said. 'It's not my fault, either.'

Stenmark sighed. 'She knows that, on an intellectual level. But to lose so much.' His expression became faraway, recalling perhaps some bitter pain of his own. 'So much suffering.'

Sylviana looked full into his face, deeply stirred by the physical and emotional closeness to this wise and noble man, who had seen and known so much of life. And in that moment she wanted nothing more in the world than to nestle against him, to feel him put his arm around her protectively, kiss her gently, and tell her it would be all right. Kataya no longer mattered. This mattered. She wanted to give herself to him, as Kalus had to her rival. Even bear him a child..... And suddenly she knew that was it. His sorrow. Not a loving spouse perhaps, but a child lost. How much more terrible and bitter that sting, to lose one innocent, and with a lifetime ahead of him. Or her. Tears welled in her eyes.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, both understanding.

'Yes. It would have been harder. But for you.'

And in that moment, to be so close, their sides lightly touching, was a blessed intimacy for which no words exist, and in which there is no stain. She leaned closer to examine his work, though if the page before him were blank she would still have done the same.

'What are you working on, Miles?' She was the only one among the company

who called him by his first name, and then only in private. Such was the respect they all held for him, who had sacrificed so much for their well-being. And she could not restrain herself from touching him lightly on the arm. He turned toward her gratefully, smiling, then turned back to his work, so deeply reluctant to complicate or even injure her young life.

'I'm trying to chart. . .the topographical changes that took place during the first two decades after.' There was no need to clarify after'. 'You see, so far as I know, I'm the only one who saw it. And the photographs can only tell you so much. Do you want me to go on.' She nodded tearfully.

'I want to recreate the full magnitude of the aftershock, as vividly as possible. I try to do this through maps and computer enhancements, along with the written account, which I'm afraid I'll never finish.'

'Are you sure it's worth the heartbreak?' she asked sorrowfully. 'Why not just leave it in the past, and go on?'

'Because it's important,' he said, 'For the same reason it was important for the Germans to see the concentration camps after World War II, and to give an honest account of what happened to them as a people, that could ever allow such unspeakable atrocities. From my observations, it was because everything was dealt with abstractly, through dangerous philosophies and brilliantly sinister propaganda. They were taught to rationalize the deaths of others as the only means of caring for themselves: in order for their families to live, all others must die. And blinded by their desire for this utopian world they never saw, until it was too late, the true horror and vicious sadism of the Nazis.'

Sylviana wept silently, recalling images of the Holocaust, set against memories of German families she had known, so loving, nurturing, hard working. 'How horrible.'

'Yes. As it's been said many times, we must learn from the mistakes of history, or we're doomed to repeat them. We must all realize what we're capable of, when we close our hearts, and allow our minds to justify such brutal and inhuman acts. Or we DON'T learn, until it's too late.' He gave a bitter sigh. 'Until it comes to this.'

Needing perhaps some escape from the relentless intensity of these truths, her eyes took in the map before her: the northern Atlantic. The altered North

American coast formed one boundary, the European the other. She studied the latter quietly, not wanting to look too closely at the plunder of her native America.

The European main did not at first look radically different, her eyes readily identifying Italy, though the boot' had been rounded off, and Spain, similarly worn so that the strait of Gibraltar was now broad enough to pass a small country through. But as her gaze continued toward France and the Netherlands..... Something was missing. NO. It couldn't be.

'Where are the British Isles?' The home of her deepest ancestors. A last, disbelieving hope. 'Or haven't you drawn them yet?'

'They're gone,' he said somberly, 'Along with all of Scandinavia, my home..... A huge rift opened between them and the mainland, here, and swallowed them like Atlantis. I watched it happen, day by day, year by year. And Sweden. It was one of the saddest experiences of my life. To watch the destruction of that beautiful land, from which my ancestors set out in many-oared galleys, practically rowing themselves, when the winds weren't favorable, all the way to northern Canada, centuries before Columbus. When I think of the courage and determination that must have taken, to brave the storms and chilling waters. All lost, the chain of humanity broken forever, ending with me, in the grim twilight of a futile existence.'

He forgot his own emotions as he found the young girl collapsed upon his chest, sobbing like a frightened child. After a moment's hesitation, in which he saw that restraint would be tantamount to cruelty, he put his arm around her and brought her close, kissed her forehead and said gently. 'Don't cry, little Sylvie (the name he had heard her father use those many years before). It's over now.'

'But it's not over,' she said wretchedly. 'It's not. And if you only knew what I was going to do. You'd hate me. You'd never speak to me again. It's too awful..... And I don't WANT to. I don't want to.'

He waited for her to become quieter. 'The only thing I couldn't forgive, and that I don't understand, is why you keep punishing yourself. The way you've withdrawn, and won't let anyone close to you. Especially Kalus.' He knew from the hurt look she gave him that he had struck upon the heart of her unhappiness.

'Or is it him you're trying to punish?'

'You don't understand,' she said weakly. And she would have told him, and perhaps have found in his wisdom a way to let go, and renounce the evil thing that she proposed. But at that moment she heard a voice outside the open door.

'I thought I saw her go into the library,' answered McIntyre to an unknown questioner. She stiffened, quickly wiped the tears from her eyes. Kataya knocked lightly, then entered.

'Hello, Commander. Am I disturbing you? I'd hoped to speak with Sylviana.' There was no animosity in her voice. If anything, it was softened and conciliatory. 'Would it be all right?'

Though the question had been directed to Stenmark, Sylviana felt the intrusion keenly, as if she had received yet another slight from this woman, who continued to encroach upon her most intimate acquaintances.

'Anything you have to say to me,' she replied without turning, 'You can say in front of the Commander.'

Stenmark began to rise diffidently, but she took his arm and would not let him, unsure herself if she wanted his strength to lean upon, or simply did not wish to grant anything so personal to the woman who had hurt her so badly.

'Really, Sylviana, maybe I should go.' But the childlike anguish he saw in the honest look she gave him, made him turn instead with a sigh.

'Please come in,' he said.

'Are you sure, Sylviana? It's very personal.'

'You heard my answer,' she said coldly, still not turning. 'Speak to me here, or not at all.'

'All right. The Commander will have to be informed in any case.' Kataya took a deep breath, trying with all her self-discipline not to sound too triumphant.

'The tests were positive. I'm going to have a child. By Kalus. I wanted to explain that it changes nothing between you, and that I feel no hostility—'

But Sylviana broke her off, whirling in a frenzy. 'You sorry Asian WHORE! Sleeping with him behind my back, and humiliating me again and again!'

'No,' said Kataya calmly, firmly. 'There was only the one time, which never would have happened..... But it did happen, for which I'll always be grateful. I just wanted to tell you that I bear you no grudge, and would never try to steal him from you.'

Sylviana stood in shocked silence. And though her face and whole bearing were hostile and inconsolable, Kataya realized they might never speak again. Better to say it all now, and have done.

'Taking him away from you was never my motive. And though I am deeply fond of him..... Can't you see how much he loves you? PASSIONATELY, single-heartedly. Don't you know how much that's worth? I've only experienced it once in my life, and I would give all the world to have that back..... My gentle husband, so unlike the hard, cruel men among whom he was raised.'

'Get out!' screamed Sylviana, 'Before I tear your eyes out! You MONSTER. You whore.' And she fell to weeping.

Kataya swallowed hard, then left to control her own emotions. Rising, Stenmark spoke for her, perhaps for all the company.

'Sylviana. SYLVIE. I know you don't want to hear this right now, but I think you have to.'

The young woman fell back upon the stool, sobbing. Touched with pity though he was, the aging Commander knew he could not comfort her until he had made her see the truth.

'The men of Japan, Kataya's ancestors, were every bit as cruel as the Germans during World War II. They killed millions in their march through Asia, raping women to death, cutting men to pieces, never sparing the children..... So that when America finally developed the atomic bomb, those with the power to use it had very little sympathy left. But loosing that atomic death, whose lingering effects were not yet known, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making war against the innocent women and children of that tragic country..... One atrocity doesn't justify another.' And while he was not sure she would understand the parallel, he knew no other way of reaching her.

'The problem with revenge, Sylviana, is that you never hurt the people you're trying to, but only create new victims. Your country condemned to a slow and horrible death, by all the ills and cancers of radiation poisoning, more than a million men, women and children who had no knowledge of, and took no willing hand in, the butcheries of their military government.'

'I don't care!' cried the young woman bitterly. 'You have to care,' said Stenmark grievously, 'Even if it happened before you were born. And even then, that's only the smaller part of Kataya's anger. You lost your father, as we all lost those dear to us..... Imagine if you had lost Kalus, in the full flower of your pure and uncorrupted love for him? And not only Kalus, but the innocent life his seed had planted in your womb.' But Sylviana only wept harder, unable to feel anything but her own pain.

'She may be the last Japanese left alive,' he continued. 'And the silent suffering forced on the women of that country by their culture is beyond any power of mine to convey. Should it all be for naught? Hate the men of that time if you want; sometimes I do myself. But not the women. God love them.....'

'She has the right to bear a child, Sylviana, and to choose that child's father. Think about that the next time you find yourself hating her, or despising the blessed and innocent life that now grows inside her. I don't think you'll have the heart to hate her then. Not in your worst moments.'

But it was all too much for her: too overwhelming to forgive, or even understand. She raised herself, angrily pushing away the hands that would have comforted her, and ran out of the room with a wordless cry of pain and self-loathing. And kept on running, as if the Devil ran behind her.

In time she slowed to a walk, though she could no more stop moving than deny her lungs the air they screamed for. 'Just walk!' she cried. 'WALK. Until you can't feel anything.'

But after another mile she stopped, and knelt down and wept for the third time. Because she knew that she would do it. She would betray the one she loved most. Until she made him feel her pain, thinking nothing of his own—

'I don't care!' she cried, raging, the three words which so often precede the worst that we are. And though they were not entirely true in her case, the tragic end is often identical.

She would go through with the evil act. She would do it.

Chapter 47

That night Kalus dreamed he was alone in a dark cave, too small and dank for a man. But the light rose slowly through a stone-lipped entrance, and he saw a familiar form beside him as he sank into the wall, to watch. Kamela lay with three cubs beside her. But two had been turned to stone. He struggled to wake himself, because he knew what was to come.

A large wolf entered, looking black, and bared its yellow fangs. Another stood guard outside as the earth parted to admit the terrible and magnificent bastard, Shar-hai. He entered, silent as death, and lifted the living cub and set it gently, almost lovingly, in a corner. Kamela never once moved, or changed her expression as they came closer, snarling sadistically.

They raped her, as he struggled to break free. Only then it was no longer Kamela, but Sylviana they raped, and the face of Shar-hai became human as it tore at her. He struggled desperately and called her name as Smith and Rawlings pinned him to the floor. BUT THEY'RE MY FRIENDS! He cried out to her with heart-crushing passion, as the sound of it filled his ears, and woke him.

*

He lay on his back, wet with sweat, unable to remember. He threw off the sleeping bag which now seemed to him a coffin, or a mummy's wrap. He tried to shake off the dream, but the images of Kamela's rape had never left him, and those of Sylviana as the victim transferred themselves with terrifying ease. His own reality, as it returned to him, seemed far less real. And it came as no surprise as he recognized the human face of Shar-hai. It was William, his teeth like knives.

The sun was climbing: she would be awake. But this was only an afterthought, as he ran toward the compound. He threw open the first door, then the second, and burst into the room he had never seen. She was there, half dressed, seeming but a continuation of the dream from which he felt he had not woken. For there was no waking from the truth.

'Sylviana,' he pleaded, closing the door while she glared at him. 'You must not see William today. I have seen a terrible vision. And I know, as I have always known..... He will rape you, and try to hurt you! Perhaps he will even (the thought was unendurable), KILL you.'

She forced herself to finish dressing calmly, as he forced himself not to touch her. But as she tried to walk past him as if he did not exist, he could contain himself no longer. He seized her by the arms, and both lost control.

'You can't go to him!' he shouted. 'I won't LET you.' And his hands were like claws. Then they softened, along with his eyes, and he all but begged her. 'PLEASE.'

'Take your hands off me!' she cried, breaking free with a terrible strength of her own. 'Don't you touch me, ever!' He drew back from her, trembling.

'Haven't you punished me long enough?' he said. 'I am SORRY. For this. For everything. I am in agony; is that what you wanted? But I am also afraid for you, mortally afraid. In some things you are still very naive. You can't see, no one can see, what he will do to you! But I know the look in his eyes, because I have seen it before. It stood in front of me in the arena, at no greater distance than the length of my sword—'

'Shut up!' she screamed. 'You shut up! What do you know about MEN? You couldn't, because you're barely more than an ape yourself. Go back to your beloved hill-people, and eat rotten meat in the dirt!'

But here she paused, remembering her purpose. And through the heat of the first real hatred she had ever felt for him, came the cold touch of poise in the act of betrayal, and she knew with a twisted thrill what it was to surrender to Evil.

'But if you're really worried,' she said placidly, 'Wait for me at the Vale of the Obelisk. I'll meet you there at noon, to tell you of our love-making. And then we'll say goodbye, forever.'

She strode out, and left him shaking. He fell to his knees and wept, much as William had screamed, to find his lover dead. He was alone in a dark cave, too small and dank for a man.....

*

William did not wake, because he had not slept. He told himself that he was letting it build inside him, mounting toward the kill. But in truth he was far beyond even that. The amphetamines he had injected though every voice of body and mind cried against it, ate him like a cancer. He had lost all control. This would be an act of vengeance, but not his vengeance. Somewhere in the mincer of pain and loss he had become the very thing he had fought all his life against, what he swore he would never become: an instrument in someone else's, someTHING else's hands. He could not admit this. He could not admit, or think, of anything. For his mind was no longer his own. Not by a conscious act of submission—

He gave a violent cry and hurled a bottle at the crumbling half-wall. As it shattered, as he saw the broken glass and knew what it could do to human flesh,

he remembered his purpose. In large, painful gulps he drained most of a second bottle, letting the wine take the place of blood in his veins.

He would be Master yet. The sun was up and it was day. He would have her, and then destroy her. Then destroy himself. Nothing else mattered, and Nothing never needed justification. It simply was, the only truth: the hole when the bottom fell out. It was the naked razor, stalking through the streets, cutting out men and women at random. Letting some grow fat for its later pleasure. Wantonly hewing the poor, who though possessed of a greater capacity for suffering, had reached the limits of endurance and could be tortured no more.

He had become a willing servant of the thing he had always fought, and feared. But he did not care.

He did not care.

*

When he came to her, as arranged, there was a moment when Sylviana saw what Kalus had seen: a wild, desperate hunger in his eyes, that could no longer feed on things which the earth gave as food. They wanted not flesh, but blood, not nourishment, but to mock the very act of nourishment. They could not be fed, or appeased, any more than one could quench the rape of napalm fire.

She turned away, and felt her heart throb violently in revulsion and fear. Only the perverse pride and will that had slowly taken hold of her, kept her from running away at the sight of him. This, and the stubborn naiveté of the illusioned, which told her this instinctive fear was a flaw of perception: that true, malignant evil did not exist, and that things could not possibly come to the ends envisioned by nightmare imagination. It was the same voice that told the world the Holocaust could not happen, was not happening, even as six million Jews, Russians, intellectuals, homosexuals and other defenseless minorities, were led to the fire. She listened to that voice, and made it her island of hope, the one that made the twisted dream of murder and healing, kindness through cruelty, destruction and rebuilding, still possible. Like one who had stared too long at the sun, insisting there was no danger, she was completely blind.

She turned back to him, more composed, and wondered only why he made no

attempt to aid her: to dim the cutting laser of his eyes.

But he was through with hiding, and playing the part of the weak and worshipful lover. LET HER SEE! rang the twisted chime of his thoughts, distorted and horrible. Let her walk into the jaws of death with eyes wide open. And this choice also was correct: that his eyes and intentions were obvious, only made them the more impossible to believe.

She merely said, 'Shall we go?' And she couldn't understand why at that moment she should think of the black widow that her father had found in her bedroom as a child, killing it as she cried at his cruelty.

*

Kalus sat on a piece of broken stone with his head in his hands, unable yet to look up and go on. Alaska stood before him, puzzled. Her young mind had continued to develop, so that now she was aware of her existence as clearly, if without the same complexity, as any human adolescent. In the preceding weeks she had realized that such a choice might come: a choice between the two people she loved. And for reasons no more complicated than simple feeling, she had chosen Kalus, had remained with him as he lay helpless on the floor, and not followed when Sylviana called to her angrily.

It was his one compensation. He knew that if he left the colony the cub would go with him, regardless of what lay ahead. It was that simple, and that beautiful. And in that moment, alone and forlorn among the ruins of yet another tortured depression, this singular act of giving broke his heart. Because he saw in her pure, animal innocence the thing that he had always wanted from a woman, but had not dared to ask:

Loyalty, which so many have forgotten, and for which there is no other word. And not the pale imitation of it found in some marriages, which demand that each cut off and subvert some part of themselves, to be joined like hobbled twins at the place of amputation. What he wanted was nothing more and nothing less than the bond of true allies: not half a woman, because of him, but a whole woman, for the same reason. Not to enslave but to enrich, not to question in time of crisis, but to love and support, not blindly, but freely and fully. All these things he had offered her; but he knew they meant nothing if she was unwilling

to give the same in return. Because there is no such thing as one-sided love.

He did not know how he understood these things, or why they had come to him now, only that he knew them, and that their truth was unbending. Yes. He would wait for her at the designated time and place. If she came to him and said she could not do it, and asked his help to rebuild the things that they had lost, he would remain with her forever.

But if she came to him in mocking triumph—if she ever again spoke to him as she had—all was finished between them. He would leave her, leave this place, and never look back. There was no middle ground. Because he knew finally, defiantly, that he was physically incapable of being other than himself, and should never have tried to be. The consequences of rejection would be devastating, and in the cold light of day he did not know how he would find the will to go on, without her. But this no longer mattered. Nothing mattered, but that this agony and fear must end. There was no other way.

He rose and walked the remaining distance. To the Vale of the Obelisk.
To wait.

SO FAR IT'S GONE WELL ENOUGH, she told herself, though she still could not look at him, or one second further than the present. They sat together on the sunlit slope of a wide, grassy recession. Its quiet symmetry would have been lovely and serene, but for a single thrust of gnarled stone which pierced its center, ringed about the base by a matting of jagged weeds. The company called it Devil's Thumb. It was a protrusion of the devil to be sure, but she wasn't at all sure that thumb' was the correct metaphor. She kept her eyes away from it, concentrating instead on the white sheet spread beneath them, on the bread and wine before them.

He had brought the wine, for which she was grateful, and she drank of it probably more than she should. But it gave her confidence, and helped dull the edge of her rebelling senses. Perhaps half an hour had passed from the time of her first ready mouthful; and he smiled each time the glass touched her lips. If an eerie contraction of taut face muscles can be called a smile.

'Have you ever done hallucinogenic drugs?' He tried to ask carelessly, but could not quite pull it off.

'What on earth made you ask that?'

'Oh, nothing really. Just curious.' She wished he would stop looking at her that way.

'Yes I have. Once, with Kalus. We..... It was peyote.'

'How much did you do?'

'Two buttons each. One right away..... Why are you laughing?'

'Two peyote buttons, and you think you've seen it all. Ha! That wouldn't be enough to open your pretty little eyelids.' She wondered why she suddenly felt restless and irritable.

'What makes you think it's only how much, and not how pure? Or maybe we just didn't need to have our whole consciousness blown away to get something meaningful from it.' She felt angry, defiant, and horribly uncomfortable. 'I could do LSD if I wanted to.'

'Could you now? We're going to find out.' She felt the touch of an icy hand inside her.

'What do you mean?'

'The wine is laced with it.'

And the current closed over her head.

*

Kalus sat in the fore of the leering monolith, which lay just inside the rim of the oblong vale. The dwarfish Obelisk, like a pointed tombstone, lay swart and square in its center. Kalus remembered the first time he had come here, driven on by Sylviana's almost distracted haste to find others of her kind. AND TO ESCAPE, he thought bitterly, HER DEPENDENCE ON ME. It was here,

beneath the monolith, that he had tried to cleanse and bandage the wound on her leg. The memory and sight of it, of blood on her beloved flesh, filled all his thoughts. Through the strong taste of pride and anger, a fresh and cutting sense of worry returned to him. The protective instinct was too strong inside him, and what they had shared, too deep.

He thought of following after her, but did not know which way she had gone, and doubted Alaska's ability (as well as his own) to find and isolate her most recent trail among the layered and crisscrossing paths of the colonists. He could only wait, and watch the sun wheel the shadows around him. When the longer shadow of the Monolith joined that of the deeply carved Obelisk, locking together into a long sword of darkness upon the earth, it would be time. And she must come to him.

But that remained at least two hours away. He looked down at the deerskin pouch, which had slipped from his shoulder and rested, half open, on the ground. Remembering one of its contents, he emptied it out onto a gray, porous stone before him.

There, beside the wrapped hunting knife (which she now refused to carry), the whet-stone, and the flints for making fire, he saw them. Drier, less green, but still potent in their otherworldly magic: the five remaining peyote buttons. He lifted one and turned it in his hand, wondering. It had helped him to understand once before..... Perhaps it would show him something now, which he could see no other way.

Guided by an impulse he did not completely understand, and half against his better judgment, he put the first in his mouth, and chewed it. Then slaked his throat with water. Again. And a short time later, again.

*

There are no words to describe LSD. For the person who has taken it before it is still like landing from another planet: nothing is familiar, and nothing can be taken for granted. Everything is powerful, evocative, unknown. For the person who has not, it is like a bewildered and even unconscious dream. If the experience is good, it is life at its deepest and most intense. If it is bad, there is no greater horror on the Earth. And in either case, the mind is never quite the

same. Doors are opened which cannot later be shut, and some residue, both chemical and spiritual, remains forever.

The acid that William had made was not particularly strong or pure, and this alone saved her sanity. But it was strong enough, and tinged with strychnine and speed. She could not hide, from anything.

Sylviana tried to master her panic. And so far, by the narrowest of margins she had succeeded. ALL RIGHT, she told herself. All right. It had happened. There was nothing to do now but see it through. Except that she kept forgetting what the words meant, forgetting the words she said, forgetting words. She was alone in a gruesome place with a man she did not know or trust. She could not force herself to remain there a moment longer.

'We have to go,' she said, rising. The motion, scarcely felt, elevated her head, the line of her sight. But she could not shake the feeling of being deep under the water, lungs bursting for air. She wanted to swim with all her strength, upward toward the surface. But some horrible weight, or cold serpentine grip held her down, wrapped about her legs and ankles. That grip was her obsession. The life-saving air was Kalus, and she knew it.

But no, her stupor-rationality insisted. It's not so. I can breathe. I can walk. She strode to the top of the hill, feeling a moment's release, only to find that William had followed her soundlessly, like a shadow. And that she no longer knew where she was, or how to find her way back.

BACK. To what?

And then the real fear, the telling blows, began to find her. Because it seemed, it was, an overriding certainty that there was no returning. This was reality, doubly real. She had fallen into a bottomless pit.
NO WAY OUT!

'Let's go for a walk,' said William gently, now so sure of his prey that he was almost disappointed. But he would see it through, and knew that to do so he must build her up again, just enough. Then tear her down. Again, until the moment was ripe. And then God help her.

But Sylviana was there ahead of him. She clung to this mockery of care and affection, five simple words, with all the desperate power of her desire not to

believe. 'Yes, my dear, sweet William. Let's go for a walk.' And he smiled, a moment of sympathy that he knew would only make the fire of his hatred burn the whiter. She might make the going pleasing, after all.

'Yes,' he said wryly. 'A walking tour of the neighborhood. I'll show you how the other half. . .dies.'

So they set out, Sylviana forgetting that this unraveled the last of her plans, and that Kalus would no longer be close at hand.

For better or worse.

*

Kalus remained, still as the stone on which he sat. He had moved some time before to the more level ground before the Obelisk, though the grotesque figures carved upon it kept him from coming too close. The peyote had begun to work on him, but its effect was entirely different than what he had hoped. Instead of giving him peace and a quiet understanding, it filled him with a dread that was almost physical. All his thoughts, worded and otherwise, seemed to crash in upon themselves like the breaking of a wave, crushing and smothering every positive impulse, every hopeful thought within him. He was back in the hopeless world of his past, from which she had helped him to escape.

But there was no escape. No matter how he turned it around, no matter what contingencies he tried to make and force himself to swallow, the bitter truth remained. Without his woman he had nothing: no love, no purpose, no home. No way to go on, and no reason to try. The ancient sense of fatalism and betrayal returned to him, with still greater intensity, because for a time he had been free. And the brief interval of spoken words and close female companionship evaporated, could no longer protect him from the silent, brutal worlds he had known. Again he saw before him the long chain of savagery and violence, of endless pain and pointless perseverance. All leading to this. To be broken and alone, as only the last of a species is alone.

He too felt the razor, though dully. And his one regret in those darkened moments was that he had been so skilled in eluding it.

*

'Forty-second street,' said William, continuing in the manner of a tour through Hell. They stood at the base of a long, flat stretch, like a sunken airport runway before them, the grassy dikes to either side still suggestive of the tombs, the mass graves they barely covered.

'You see before you a busy street—strip joints, adult book stores, pornographic theaters. But you don't seem to notice the background much. No. It's the ragged flowers springing from the sidewalk that catch and hold your eye: prostitutes, the whipping girls of the city.

'On a good day all they're required to do is give their bodies to pawing, drooling idiots, who in their half-assed passion call them mother', cheap whore', or the name of some long-lost lover. Oh, but of course they don't really FEEL anything. They're not real people, like you and I.' At this he curled his lip, barely able to contain his rage. 'On bad days..... They're harassed and preyed upon by police, jaded social workers and psychotic killers, or just beaten and abused by the fatherly' pimps.

'And what is their crime, that makes them the object of universal scorn and reprisal? They're VICTIMS, vulnerable, bringing out the predatory instinct in all of us. And more than that, they commit the most unforgivable sin of all: they make us look at ourselves, and see something about our pretty little world that we don't like. Because they do, in fact, what the rest of us do in spirit: sell themselves, body and soul, for MONEY. Only they lack the skills and social graces, like the ones you learned in college, to be subtle and self-justifying about it. They are OBVIOUS, and much too real, an easy target for nearly everyone. And the human animal never misses easy prey.'

Sylviana heard the words—stark and depressing enough—but what gave them their power were the images her own memory provided. She saw it all: the rooster-like pimps grabbing gaudily dressed women by the hair, and without remorse throwing them into the back seats of still gaudier cars, for later punishment, which no doubt included beating and rape. And if her head happened to strike the roof, starting a rivulet of blood.....

And she remembered the murder she had so nearly witnessed: saw the chalk outline that the homicide detectives had drawn on the sidewalk as the

paramedics arrived to wheel her into a waiting ambulance, her death a foregone conclusion, the eyes still terrified though the life even now fled from them. A face once young and fair: a sixteen-year-old runaway from nameless suburbs, driven from her home perhaps by an abusive parent, drawn to the city like a moth to flame. And brought to the same end. While the jagged man the police had cuffed and were dragging away, screamed in bursts of occasional coherence, 'All women are whores!'

And she remembered too, even as he said, the thoughts that she had always used to dismiss such women, and the hopeless tragedy of their lives. HOW CAN THEY DO IT? THEY MUST JUST TURN OFF THEIR MINDS, AND NOT FEEL ANYTHING..... IT'S AWFUL, BUT SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO WALK THE STREETS ALONE. As if this was something she had done of her own volition, and against the warnings of loved ones and friends. And she thought of her own plan, which was worse. Not to sleep with a man for money, which could at least claim the honest shred of need. But for revenge.

And coming back to herself for a moment, she realized with a sudden shock that this same plan, along with the subconscious safety valve she had built into it, were now completely out of hand. She had no idea where they were (in relation to anything else), only where they weren't: within hearing range of Kalus, on whom she had relied to protect her at need. As the dagger of fear sank an inch lower into her breast.

'You're right William,' she said hurriedly. 'And it's horrible. But please, please take me somewhere else.' Sheer movement seemed the only defense from the razor—

'My GOD.' There seemed to be a literal razor forming out of the air before her, a glint of sunlight on cold steel. She cowered, and crossed her arms defensively in front of her.

'Oh, no, not yet,' said the Stranger, as if he understood it all. He seized her by one foreshortened arm, and led her toward the next exhibit. After an interminable length of time he stopped again, and pointed.

'Seventh Avenue.'

*

Kalus remained, still as stone, but no longer in confusion and despair. He stood rooted to the spot in horror.

The two shadows had met and become one, a broadsword of Death upon the wounded earth. The sun was now directly south of the monolith. Yet it was not the Shadow, but a patch of wicked, unexpected Light that showed him in a searing instant the real danger into which his woman had fallen, and the true Evil that walked upon the earth. A square-cut hole high in the center of the monolith, hidden earlier by its vague, uncountoured grayness, now let through a shaft of light, which came to rest in impossible coincidence upon a single carving of the dwarfish Obelisk: the face of a horned Devil, its lolling tongue six inches long, was held in the internal pentagon of a ghoulish star, pointing downward. Carved perhaps by some mutant from the days when half-men, like lepers, still clung to the fire-pillaged rock, it looked down upon the slab of altar at its feet, just large enough for a child, just deep enough to contain its flowing blood. As remorseless and aroused, the Beast smiled in the helpless light of day.

'Sylviana!' he cried aloud, knowing now that only he could save her. No answer. He stood up and called again, one last act of desperation.

Nothing. He went down on one knee, and patted the ground with his open hand. He needed no more prodding. The time had come to act.

'Alaska,' he whispered intently. 'Sylviana. SYLVIANA.' This time the cub seemed to understand, and apparently had some insight as to where they might be found, for she set out at once. Or at least some idea where they might begin to look.

If it was not already too late.

*

'Stop it! Stop it!' she cried, covering her face with her hands. She had gone with him, and listened as he spoke of junkies, toxic waste, victims and violence and hospitals. From place to place, in growing horror, thinking with one last gasp of

real courage that perhaps she deserved this, and needed to know.

But when he brought her at last to the ruins of an enormous research facility, and began to describe, in detail, the torturous experiments performed here on bound, terrified animals in the name of progress and the greater good, she felt the tip of the blade licking at her heart.

Because she knew it was true. Her father had been assigned here as an intern. He had stormed out in a rage at the asphyxiation, force-feeding of toxic substances, vivisection, 'Sweet Jesus,' and stress tests', performed on dogs and cats, rhesus monkeys and other primates, some more intelligent than the lackeys who tormented them. Refusing to participate had put his career in jeopardy, something he was willing to do, to stand up against what he knew was wrong and indefensible. And he had spoken out against the Horror, for those who could not speak.

But many of his colleagues had not been willing. All the beloved doctors and scientists, characterized as forthright, altruistic men and women, working for the good of humanity, if not actively involved, at least turning the other way as innocent, uncomprehending creatures were subjected to physical and psychological tortures that were the rival of the Holocaust. The Leeds Institute of Animal Research, called by its critics, LIAR.

She kept thinking of Alaska.

But William felt no sympathy for her. The fact that such men had murdered themselves in the process, that humanity had been no kinder to its human victims, that it was over now', could not cover the brutal shame of it. All of it. Could not bring back the dead. The innocent and the dead, who had been helpless before the grim machinations of vicious human fear and ignorance.

He let her remain there, hobbled against a mound of slag. Then he drew out his stiletto, and shot the blade into place. And held it six inches from her face. She had ceased weeping and sat helpless, sobbing, ready for the fall. As he said in a gentle, sing-song voice.

'Time to wake u-up.'

She opened her hands and her eyes, as if seeing for the first time.

She opened her eyes. The razor stood before her. Not as some dark and frightening intangible, but a stark physical reality, held in the iron grip of her fellow man. Because malicious evil is still only a weapon, and requires willing human hands to wield it.

For a single instant she sat there numb, neither believing nor comprehending. But then he seized her violently by the front of the blouse, lifting her to him. And with a quick insertion of the blade and a hard jerk backwards, he cut away her bra, ripping the garment wide open as he threw her back onto the ground.

A startled, 'William, don't do this,' tried to form in her throat, but was drowned out as he screamed in a wrath no longer his own, but that of all creatures brutalized and turned vicious by the bloody hells from which man has barely begun to raise himself.

'And do you know who's going to PAY for it! YOU ARE!'

One word alone would form from her terror, a last, instinctive cry against the Razor, and the trickle of blood at her breast. She screamed, louder than he.

'KALUS!'

*

>From a distance of three hundred yards he heard her. Instantly his senses were trained upon the spot and he was running, leaving the startled cub far behind. The broken, undulating ridges kept her from his sight, and tried to impede him. But he did not need to hear the sound twice to locate it, or force his hammering body to respond.

And by the time he reached the final crest, his anger had turned to a rage that bordered on madness that ANYONE, EVER, would DARE to attack his woman. All his pain and frustration now found release in thoughts, soon to be acts, of violence. The sight of them struggling, of William again throwing her down and glowering over her, knife in hand, undid the last thin strands of mercy and restraint. He all but flew down the hill, and from atop the same mound of slag, leapt out like a panther with a savage cry.

An instant later their bodies crashed together, as Sylviana crawled back against the shelter of broken stone, drawing her torn blouse shut against the maelstrom.

William was stunned, the knife sent flying from his hand. For all the hardships of his life, he had never before faced the merciless onslaught of an animal defending its own. Blows rained upon like a landslide, and he knew that his death was at hand. He backed away in desperation, crawling on his elbows, pushing with his legs.

But Kalus was already on his feet, the sword seething from its scabbard. He lofted it high above his head, both hands hard on the hilt, as his eyes chose the place that he would strike, a thundering blow to cut his enemy in two.

But then time stood still.

*

Time stood still.

Kalus looked into the face of the man he was prepared to kill. A hideous change had come over it. His heart wrenched inside him, and the blow never fell. Sylviana gasped as well, and struggled for the breath to plead mercy. But there was no need, as both finally understood the words of the Spirit.

There before him, where a human form had been, lay the contorted figure of a demon, a face twisted and insane. A man possessed. But not by some Bible-black devil, or mythological spirit of Evil. By the more real, the more horrible.

The demon, the reality, of Fear.

Slowly Kalus lowered his sword, sick with pity and remorse, as Sylviana hid her face against the stone.

More slowly still, some semblance of its original shape returned to the red terror of William's face. And as terrible to him as his own countenance had been to Kalus, were the words that his enemy now spoke, who should have killed him.

'Forgive me,' said the man-child sorrowfully. 'I didn't understand.'

As if struck by a hammer, William fell back. Something inside him tried to laugh, but was drowned instead by anguished tears, and a groan of pain that twisted his soul like a rag. The terrible voice continued as the cub, knowing nothing yet of hatred and violence, but only an instinctive compassion, came closer and licked his face.

'I knew only that you had lost your woman. I did not know how deeply you loved her, or what it had done to you..... We will leave you now, because you need to be alone.'

Then Kalus drew a breath, remembering hard reality.

'It is only possible for a natural man to forgive, when his enemy can no longer hurt those entrusted to his care. I cannot let you close to my loved ones, and if you ever again try to hurt them, I will kill you without pity or remorse. But I see now your pain and sickness, and I will ask the others to help you if they can.'

And the fallen man hid his face in shame.

Sylviana, who had risen, moved now toward her beloved mate. She stood beside him, looking down, silently begging forgiveness. But his touch, the way his arms enfolded her, told her there was no need, said everything that must be said. Three words only remained, and she spoke them with all her heart.

'I love you.'

Chapter 48

Together the weary lovers walked across the wounded landscape to the sea. Reaching its margins, Kalus drew out the remaining peyote buttons. The two exchanged glances, and both understood.

'You have been both a teacher and a killer,' he said. 'But I have no further need of

you, nor would I ask another to follow down your dark and treacherous path.' And he threw them into the sea. Then together they knelt in the cool and cleansing waters, and washed the sins from their hands.

Then returning to the narrow stretch of sand, the woman-child lay back. She lay very still, and listened to the stories told by the waves, touching them all, and hiding from none. Until all that remained was the sun behind, the sea before, and the man she loved beside her. She stood up and embraced him, and her soul was restored to her.

And together they returned slowly to the colony, as Alaska strode beside them, thinking of Akar, and of the wild woods of youth. As Avatar ran free, and the unborn life inside Kataya continued to grow.

*

And so one chapter ended, even as another began, as it always has been, and always will be. The only question left before a man, as before Man himself:

Will he be a part of that tale?

The End

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