

/* /*]] */ Dlands 37- Demons of Eden The Lakota raced to their chief's aid

The steady blaster fire from Ryan's friends converged on the warriors, and he glimpsed a bare-chested man jerk and stagger backward, a crimson arterial spray jetting from a severed carotid.

Behind him, over the thunderous noise, Ryan heard Krysty cry out in pain and surprise. Instinctively his head turned in that direction.

He saw Krysty, her back against the curving cavern wall, slowly sliding toward the floor of the walkway. Her hand was pressed against her chest, just below her left breast. A feathered shaft jutted between splayed fingers. She kept her hand there as she eased into a sitting position, as though she were trying to catch the blood.

For an instant their eyes met, hers showing a dull green in the throbbing bright green glow of the cave. Ryan saw death in them.

Demons of Eden

37 in the Deathlands series

James Axler

A GOLD EAGLE BOOK FROM WORLDWIDE

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STOCKHOLM ATHENS TOKYO MILAN MADRID WARSAW BUDAPEST AUCKLAND

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For Melissa and Jim Mooney Artists and sacred warriors of the circle

First edition May 1997

ISBN 0-373-62537-5

DEMONS OF EDEN

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Printed In U.S.A.

Nothing lives long,
Only the earth and the mountains.
Death song of White Antelope, Cheyenne war chief

THE DEATHLANDS SAGA

This world is their legacy, a world born in the violent nuclear spasm of 2001 that was the bitter outcome of a struggle for global dominance.

There is no real escape from this shockscape where life always hangs in the balance, vulnerable to newly demonic nature, barbarism, lawlessness.

But they are the warrior survivalists, and they endure in the way of the lion, the hawk and the tiger, true to nature's heart despite its ruination.

Ryan Cawdor The privileged son of an East Coast baron. Acquainted with betrayal from a tender age, he is a master of the hard realities.

Krysty Wroth Harmony ville's own Titian-haired beauty, a woman with the strength of tempered steel. Her premonitions and Gaia powers have been fostered by her Mother Sonja.

J. B. Dix, the Armorer Weapons master and Ryan's close ally, he, too, honed his skills traversing the Deathlands with the legendary Trader.

Doctor Theophilus Tanner Torn from his family and a gentler life in 1896, Doc has been thrown into a future he couldn't have imagined.

Dr. Mildred Wyeth Her father was killed by the Ku Klux Klan, but her fate is not much lighter. Restored from predark cryogenic suspension, she brings twentieth-century healing skills to a nightmare.

Jak Lauren A true child of the wastelands, reared on adversity, loss and danger, the albino teenager is a fierce fighter and loyal friend.

Dean Cawdor Ryan's young son by Sharon accepts the only world he knows, and yet he is the seedling bearing the promise of tomorrow.

In a world where all was lost, they are humanity's last hope

Chapter One

Ryan Cawdor withdrew his head from the crest of the ridge and mouthed, "Trouble."

Krysty Wroth slowly raised her head over the edge of the ridge, catching only a brief glimpse of a strange, wheeled vehicle outfitted with a white broadcloth sail before Ryan pushed her head down.

"Your hair might as well be a signal flare," he whispered.

"Sorry, lover."

Mildred Wyeth, J. B. Dix, Doc Tanner and Jak Lauren looked up at them tensely, holding the reins of their horses. They didn't voice any questions. The companions were so in tune with one another's moods from their time of traveling through Deathlands together that they instantly assessed from Krysty's and Ryan's body language that a triple-red situation was in progress.

Ryan tapped her shoulder. "Take a look if you have to, but keep your head down."

Krysty cautiously poked her head up over the crest of the bluff. She stared at the scene below, barely able to suppress the utterance of horror rising to her lips.

The prairie schooner or "wind wagon" as they were sometimes called matched the configurations of a longboat. It was about twelve feet long from bow to stem, and a tall mast with a furled sail was set amidships, stretching upward twenty feet. A pair of maneuvering sails was folded like wings against the sides of the craft. Four spoked wooden wheels lifted the keel several feet above the ground. Mounted astern was a huge, wire-encased, four-bladed fan and a diesel engine.

Flapping from the rigging attached to the mast were clumps of human hair, finger bones and shriveled ears. A black pennant fluttered from the masthead, bearing the outline of a scarlet skull. Pirates.

Krysty recognized that emblem, if not from sight, then from tales she had heard in small western outposts, including her Colorado ville of Harmony. It was the insignia of the Red Cadre, a loosely knit group of scalphunters and marauders who preyed primarily on the Indian tribes in Montana, the Dakotas and Wyoming.

According to rumor, the Red Cadre set forth on its raids of pillage and murder in a fleet of wind wagons. The leader of the Cadre called himself Hatchet Jack, and as far as she knew, he could be one of the four freebooters below.

As if picking up on her thoughts, Ryan whispered, "Don't think Hatchet Jack is with them, but he'll be close by. This little raiding party wouldn't wander far from the fleet, not in that small craft."

The schooner stood in the center of a small cup formed by three sloping bluffs and a dry creek bed. To the left was a grove of poplar trees running raggedly between the farthest hills. Three ponies were hobbled nearby, grazing on the tough saw grass. Two of the animals bore saddles made of wood and blankets. The third was apparently a packhorse.

A dark mound, like a huge, humped cigar, lay at the rear of the schooner. It was a buffalo carcass, waiting to be skinned. Its woolly hide was still intact, which was more than could be said for the Cheyenne man tied spread-eagled to the wooden spokes of the schooner's rear wheel.

Krysty had heard stories of "peeling," a torture certain marauder bands reserved exclusively for Indians. The pirates had practiced the ritual with great enthusiasm on the man. Entire strips of flesh had been flayed from his torso and upper arms. Great red, raw patches were exposed to flies and the late-afternoon sunlight.

Though she felt acidic bile climbing up her throat in a burning column, Krysty studied the victim for any sign of movement. She saw none. His swarthy face was a livid mask of dried blood that had flowed from the crimson patch atop his skull where his scalp had been torn away.

She squeezed her eyes shut as the bluff beneath her seemed to spin like a cork caught in a whirlpool. She had seen many monstrous deeds during her life in Deathlands, and had narrowly escaped similar fates more than once. Still, she had never grown accustomed to the horrors people inflicted on others simply for the sake of seeing them suffer.

It took a great effort for her to open her eyes again. She sensed Ryan watching her, gauging her reaction. Krysty gritted her teeth and focused her gaze on the woman tied to the front wheel. She wasn't spread-eagled rather, she sat on the ground, her back against the hub, her wrists tied to the spokes level with her ears. She was totally naked, and her knees were drawn up to her chest and pressed tightly together. Krysty couldn't see what her face was like, but her skin was white, though dabbled red in places. Her head was bowed, and her hair, though hayrick tangled, was cut short and dark blond in color.

A pirate strutted past her, carrying an earthenware jug. He ignored her and she did the same. Another marauder walked over to the Indian, pushed his coat aside, fumbled briefly and urinated on the man's blood-drenched pant leg.

Hoots of laughing approval came from the man's three companions. Krysty squinted her eyes and studied the pirates. The man with the jug was huge and ugly. His swart, flat-nosed face was embraced by a square-cut beard of an unidentifiable color. Gray threads were interspersed with tobacco-stained streaks. He looked to be about fifty years old.

The other three were undistinguished in attitude and appearance. None was tall; in fact the one who was emptying his bladder looked shorter than even Jak Lauren's five feet five inches. One of the pirates was beefy, and a potbelly swelled over the waistband of his trousers. All of them had long, wild-looking hair.

The only firearms Krysty spied among them were a battered Winchester repeating carbine cradled carelessly in the crook of the tall man's arm and a single-shot muzzle loader propped against the stern of the schooner. The stock and barrel of the Winchester were patched and bound in two places with shrunken and stitched deer hide. The other weapons were a variety of knives, nail-studded clubs and a short-handled ax.

The tall man handed the jug to the beefy, swag-bellied man and wiped his beard with bloodstained fingers.

Ryan tugged on her sleeve, and she eased back down beside the big, dark-haired man. She dabbed at the film of sweat on her upper lip. "What are we going to do?"

Adjusting the black patch covering his left eye, Ryan replied quietly, "We ride in and kill them."

He and Krysty slid down the hillside on the seats of their pants. The expressions on the faces of the four people below were tense and watchful. J.B. took off his eyeglasses and stowed them in one of the many capacious pockets of his coat. The brim of his battered and bullet-holed fedora was pulled down over his forehead. With his left hand he held the reins of a roan mare, and his right hand rested lightly on the trigger guard of the Uzi hanging from a lanyard around his neck.

Though Jak's white, scarred face was as impassive as ever, his ruby eyes glittered at the sense of danger. The young albino's stance reminded Krysty of a vicious snow leopard, straining at its leash.

The other two people tending the horses were the only ones who hadn't been born into the war-ravaged remnants of the United States of America. Dr. Mildred Wyeth and Dr. Theophilus Tanner had been thrust into Deathlands due to prenukecaust technology.

A stocky black woman with beaded, plaited hair,

Mildred Wyeth looked as though she were in her mid-thirties, but chronologically she was well over a century old. A medical doctor and former specialist in cryogenic sciences, Mildred had entered a hospital in late 2000 for minor surgery, but an allergic reaction to the anesthetic had necessitated her body being placed in cryonic stasis until a treatment could be found.

It never was. The world was blown apart before she was revived, and she slept, like a fly trapped in amber, for nearly a hundred years. Ryan and his companions had found and freed her. They had brought her back to life, into a world she had never dreamed existed. By her perspective, she had gone to sleep as a thirty-six-year old professional woman and awakened a moment later to the devastating realization her hundredth birthday had come and was long gone. Amazingly the ill effects of the anesthetic had disappeared.

Other than her skills as a medic, Mildred had also proved herself invaluable as a tenacious survivalist.

She had won a silver medal for free pistol shooting in the last-ever Olympic Games, and she was the best shootist that any of the companions had ever seen.

Doc Tanner, unlike Mildred who had bobbed unknowingly down the temporal stream was the subject of a cold-hearted scientific practice known in pre-dark days as trawling. Since the 1940s, American military scientists, and their counterparts in other countries, had tried to reconcile relativistic physics with quantum mechanics. By the late 1990s, the reconciliation attempts had spawned the supersecret experiment known as the Totality Concept. There were several subdivisions of the experiment, such as Over-project Whisper, Project Cerberus and finally Operation Chronos.

With the use of a complex matter-transfer device called a gateway, the project scientists had tried time and again to snatch subjects from a past temporal line and trawl them to the present.

Their only success was a man from 1895. Theophilus Algernon Tanner, Ph.D., scientist and scholar, was plucked from the bosom of his beloved family and deposited in a sterile subterranean chamber a century down the timeline.

Though he learned all he could about the twentieth century, Doc never abandoned the hope of returning to his wife and two children. His constant attempts to return to his own era so angered the whitecoats of Operation Chronos that they eventually used him as a trawling subject again. Rather than send him back, they opted to transfer him to a year nearly a century in the future. The wrenching changes left their marks on Doc. In his worn frock coat, his skinny frame looked gaunt, and his face old beyond his actual years. Sixteen-year-old Jak Lauren had all the hard, bitter experience of a man twice his age. He had whiter

than white skin, with fearsome ruby eyes and a shock of blindingly white hair. He possessed incredible hand and eye coordination and favored bladed weapons over blasters. Scars from several near-fatal encounters marked his body, the least of which curved up from the corner of his mouth and across his high-planed face. Though Jak had buried two sets of families during his young life, he hid the tragedies behind a taciturn mask and an eerily calm, detached manner.

Ryan Cawdor and J. B. Dix had been companions for many years, since they traveled the Deathlands in a pair of war wags with the legendary Trader. Tall and hard muscled, with a scar running down his face from the edge of the patch over his left eye, Ryan was a natural-born leader.

J.B. was an armorer, and he had served Trader's war wags as a weapon smith. His wiry, short frame and unmemorable face disguised a devious mind and a facility with weapons that approached the artistic.

By contrast, Krysty Wroth was tall and slim. Because she possessed the empathic ability to sense danger in the offing, she was, by Deathlands definition, a mutie. Her fiery mane of thick red hair was the outward manifestation of her mutation, stirring, curling, moving as if it were a separate, sentient organism.

Krysty was also gifted with a power that had been passed down the female line of her family. The women were in tune with the electromagnetic energies of Gaia, the great Earth Mother. By tapping into these energies, the geopower field of the planet itself, Krysty could gain superhuman strength for a limited time.

Though Ryan was the group's undisputed leader, he and Krysty were equal partners in their relationship. Though he rarely spoke of it openly, Ryan loved her fiercely. The other great love of his life was his eleven-year-old son, Dean. The issue of a brief encounter between Ryan and a young woman named Sharona, Dean had been united with his father for only a short time. Recently Ryan had enrolled the lad in the Brody School in Colorado, and he missed the boy far more than he had thought he would. He found himself thinking of his son often, concerned for his safety. But travel was hazardous, and the locational jumps unpredictable. So he bided his time to give Dean a chance for independent growth, to let him cope on his own.

Ryan and his companions used the gateway chambers to make mat-trans jumps. Though gateways were hidden in subterranean redoubts all over the continent, the vast majority were concentrated in the Southwest. There was always an element of danger when using the gateways, since the destinations were random. As Doc had frequently pointed out, it was like deliberately jumping from a warm yet familiar frying pan into a potentially raging fire of unknown temperature.

The last jump had deposited them in a redoubt on a Montana mountain plateau. It was, ironically enough, the first of the subterranean installations they had ever found. The century-old garish painting of Cerberus, the three-headed black hound, was still on the wall, though faded and peeling.

Doc was adamant about not making another jump so soon, so the band of travelers decided to strike out overland to explore the area. Though the last time they had visited the region they had been pursued by a warlike band of Sioux, they saw no trace of any tribesmen.

They reached a small settlement nestled in the foothills of the mountain and, after staying there a day and a night, they purchased mounts and provisions and rode off cross-country. It wasn't as dangerous an undertaking as it seemed, since both J.B. and Ryan had skirted the fringes of the region years before with the Trader. Recalling rumors of a "free ville" near Yellowstone, Ryan had made that their destination. At the base of the hill, the six companions quietly engaged in a war conference. Ryan quickly outlined the situation to his friends.

"We've got nine blasters between us," he said. "As far as I could tell, they've only got two."

Mildred shifted uneasily. "You want to stage an ambush?"

"Welcome to the Deathlands," J.B. drawled, checking out the firing mechanism of his Uzi.

Mildred cast him an irritated glance. "I don't need to be reminded of where I am, John."

Walking over to his horse, a big-chested sorrel, Ryan withdrew his Steyr SSG-70 rifle from its saddle scabbard.

Doc spoke for the first time, his tone flat yet touched by anxiety. "You have a plan in mind, my dear Ryan?"

Ryan nodded, carefully cycling a 7.62 mm round into the chamber. "Mildred, you're our best shot. Climb

to the top of the hill and choose a target with this. When you pick it off, I'll ride out and engage them."

"Why just you?" Jak asked.

"I'm the best horseman, and this maneuver will call for some fast and fancy riding."

Krysty fastened her eyes onto Ryan's face. "You may be the best horseman, but I'm the best horsewoman. I'm going with you."

Ryan didn't object. "Fine. Shoot to kill."

"What about rest of us?" Jak asked.

"Mop-up," Ryan answered. "Move in on foot after our charge." He handed the rifle to Mildred and swung into the saddle.

"Half a league, half a league, half a league onward," Doc muttered. No one bothered to ask him the meaning of his recitation. One of his most endearing and sometimes most annoying habits was his fondness for quoting pre-dark poetry and proverbs.

Krysty mounted her bay as Mildred, with the rifle cradled in her arms, scaled the hillside. Seating her denim-encased buttocks firmly in the saddle, she drew her .38-caliber Smith amp; Wesson 640 revolver. Glancing over at Ryan, she saw that he had already pulled his SIG-Sauer P-226 blaster from his holster. He directed his horse to the right-hand foot of the bluff, and Krysty cantered over to the left-hand side. She sat immobile in the saddle, holding the pistol skyward in her right hand, reins held loosely in her left. She waited. The sound of the rifle shot was an unbelievably loud crack. The vibration knocked against Krysty's eardrums.

Almost without conscious thought, Krysty dug her boot heels into her mount's flanks, and the horse lunged forward. Hoofbeats hammered in a thundering rhythm, and she saw Ryan galloping furiously toward the wind wag. He had a good hundred-foot lead on her.

The pirates didn't freeze. One of their number lay facedown in the dust, the earthenware jug still gripped in his hand. Thick red fluid leaking from a bullet-blasted skull mingled with the liquor dripping from the jug. The other three men scrambled for their lives, and Krysty tried to track them with her Smith amp; Wesson. The range was still too great for accurate shooting with a handblaster, but she squeezed the trigger anyway.

She focused on the running pirates. They were dashing for the line of poplar trees that bordered the far side of the creek bed. One had snatched the hemp halter of a grazing pony and was hauling the animal behind him.

Krysty passed the prairie schooner and continued to gallop toward the poplar break, determined not to allow the pirate to get astride a horse. The bearded freebooter with the Winchester paused in his running, turned and drew the rifle to his shoulder. He fired directly at her, flame and smoke spouting from the barrel.

She thought she felt the wind of displaced air as the bullet spun past the right side of her head. She extended her arm and fired the Smith amp; Wesson, double-actioning the trigger so fast her hand and wrist began twinging with the strain. The pirate whirled and dashed into the trees, bullets kicking up clods of earth all around him. A dark spot appeared in his lower back, black against the tan of his coat. The man's momentum carried him several yards farther before his legs folded and he fell.

A shape entered Krysty's line of vision from her left, and she reined in her horse, swinging her pistol in a short arc in that direction, squeezing the trigger. As the hammer fell, she realized it was Ryan, riding up abreast of her. Krysty cried out in panic and jerked down her gun hand. It was too late. The firing pin fell on an empty chamber.

Ryan galloped past her without a word, as if Krysty had done nothing more life threatening than point a finger. Her overwhelming wave of relief was swallowed up by an equally overwhelming wave of embarrassment and anger.

Then, yelping a wolflike cry, a pirate cut in front of Krysty. He was astride the pony, leaning over its neck. She recognized him as the coldheart who had pissed on the Cheyenne man.

Krysty kicked the bay down into the creek bed, fumbling with her empty blaster, not daring to holster the weapon for fear of dropping it. For a minute it was a wild race, with her horse's long-legged stride overtaking the pony. Chunks of gravel and dirt flew in a shower in the wake of both galloping animals.

The bay was gaining, and the woman felt a growing surge of triumph, which abated quickly when she remembered she was pursuing a murderous savage with a blaster that couldn't be fired. She reined in her horse.

The pirate, as though sensing his pursuer's predicament, slowed his mount, then cast a fierce, dark-eyed glance over a shoulder. Barking, " Yee-haw ," he sharply yanked the pony's head up and around. The animal neighed in protest, reared, then was bearing down on Krysty. The pirate placed the blade of a knife between the decayed stumps of his teeth and thumped the pony's sides, urging it on.

Krysty snapped the bay's head around and heeled it in the opposite direction. The horse floundered for a moment, trying to set its hooves firmly to lunge into another gallop. But before it could move, a heavy weight slammed into the woman's body from behind and a little to her right. She glimpsed and felt a stained sleeve encircling her neck. The fading sunlight glinted from steel, and Krysty took the first course of action that occurred to her. She threw herself to the left, releasing the reins, grabbing the sleeve and kicking free of the stirrups.

The fall raised a small explosion of dust as Krysty and the pirate, locked in a straining, belly-to-back embrace, slammed into the creek bed. The red-haired woman released the sinewy arm and tried to roll away, flinging herself painfully across sharp-edged rocks. She levered herself onto her back, kicking out with her right leg, the chiseled silver point on the toe of her boot smashing full into the man's open mouth. His rotted teeth caved in, and blood spurted in liquid tendrils onto his chin.

Her attacker made a gargling sound as he coughed up splinters of bone, crimson froth bubbling on his pulped lips. Face a mask of rage, he scrambled toward her, knife held for a downward thrust. He reached out to grasp her by an ankle.

Suddenly the pirate leaped to his feet, eyes wide and filled with astonishment. The knife fell from his suddenly slack fingers, and as he turned slightly, Krysty saw a blue-rimmed hole in his temple. He swayed, sighed, sat down carefully, then fell facedown in the rocks. A red-edged, fist-sized cavity occupied the back of his head.

Weak-limbed and trembling, Krysty tried to rise. She made it to one knee and slowly turned her head in the direction of the pounding hoofbeats coming down the creek bed. Ryan cantered toward her, SIG-Sauer in hand.

He reined to a stop and swung out of the saddle. Standing over Krysty, he extended his left hand. "Why do you look so surprised, lover? You're still alive."

Relieved laughter rolled from Krysty's throat. "I appreciate you telling me that."

"Thought you might."

Taking his hand, Krysty allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. Then Ryan caught her up in a crushing embrace, and pressed his lips to her face.

Chapter Two

By the time Ryan and Krysty caught her horse and returned to the wind wag, Mildred had freed the woman and Jak had cut loose the skinned Indian and covered him with a tarp. Doc and J.B. were standing a watchful guard, blasters in hand. Doc's weapon of choice was an old, ornately engraved Le Mat. The commemorative Civil War-era blaster had two barrels and an adjustable hammer. Like a shotgun, it fired a single .63-caliber round and, like a revolver, it had a chambered cylinder holding nine .44-caliber bullets.

A blanket was draped about the woman's shoulders, and Mildred kneeled before her, offering her a tin cup. The contents had been poured from the earthenware jug. "This might help to steady you some."

From what Ryan could see of the woman, she didn't need steadying. She stared straight ahead, her blue eyes unblinking, her face expressionless. She took the cup, sipped it, then gulped the liquor in a single swallow.

Ryan gauged her age at twenty-something, though she could have been younger.

The pair of pirates lay where Ryan's and Mildred's shots had hammered them. Mildred had delivered a fatal head wound to one, and the other, lying on his side, had two holes in his torso. The ground around him was clotted with blood, bone fragments and bits of pink tissue Ryan identified as his lungs.

Krysty gestured to the poplar break. "One got away from me."

Ryan clicked his horse toward the line of trees. "Let's make sure he won't be getting up."

Krysty turned her bay to follow. Ryan noticed how she rubbed her rib cage and grimaced. She had taken a hard fall, perhaps even cracked a bone or two, but she wasn't complaining. At the edge of the trees they dismounted and walked among them carefully. Krysty had reloaded her blaster and held it in a two-handed grip.

Ryan pointed the barrel of the SIG-Sauer at a narrow spattering of blood on the ground. The Winchester rifle lay nearby. "The one you back-shot."

"His back was to me," Krysty replied.

The trail of blood extended a few yards, then terminated at the bole of a tree. The bearded pirate sat against it, his face wet with sweat but locked in a mask of defiance and hate. He had his hands clasped over a hole in his midsection, where the .38-caliber slug had exited, and blood dribbled between his fingers. Ryan and Krysty stood and stared at the man for a long moment.

"Well?" the man challenged. "The day's not gettin' any younger."

Ryan's lips quirked in a cold half smile. He raised his blaster, finger crooking around the trigger. "Neither are you, stupe."

The freebooter snorted contemptuously. "Once Jack and the rest of the Cadre starts howlin' along your track, you ain't got much to look forward to, either. You or that hell-haired gaudy slut."

Krysty's blaster came up in reflexive anger, and the pirate grinned at the hollow bore with red-filmed teeth.

"Where's Hatchet Jack now?" Ryan demanded.

"Think I'd tell you?" The man's grin twisted into a grimace. He coughed, and blood spilled out of his mouth and clung in gummy strands to his beard. "Chill me and be fucked, One-eye."

Ryan lowered the SIG-Sauer. "Think I'd rather leave you here for the wolves to find. Won't be long, and you can spend the last few minutes of your life watching them unwind your guts."

Fear replaced the defiance in the pirate's eyes. A gut-shot man could live for a long time, consumed with agony, provided the scent of blood and ruptured internal organs didn't draw predators. A death inflicted by razor-keen fangs and rending talons might be quick, but it was by no means painless.

The freebooter coughed again, this time deliberately, hawking up from deep in his lungs. He spit a jet of blood directly into Krysty's face. She cried out and recoiled in disgust. Ryan lifted his blaster, stepped forward and fired once. The pirate's broad forehead sprouted a neat blue-ringed hole. The back of his head broke apart, sending skull shards, blood and grayish pink brain matter splattering against the bark of the tree.

Ryan shoved the blaster back into its holster. The scar on his face glowed lividly, like a bolt of angry lightning. Krysty wiped away the blood from her face, repressed a shudder and whirled away. "Let's get back while we still have some daylight."

They led their horses through the trees, neither of them speaking. Krysty moved quickly, as if she didn't want to walk beside him, and Ryan knew the reason why.

More than once she had cautioned him about allowing a quick flare of rage to consume him, to control him. Ryan had agreed with her that surrendering to murderous fury was contrasurvival, and he had gone to great effort to bring those surges of berserk anger under control.

However, he couldn't and wouldn't tolerate the kind of swaggering scorn displayed by the likes of the pirate. In the past, especially during his years with the Trader, men had died under his gun or knife, and sometimes his bare hands, for far less. He knew his rare bursts of homicidal rage frightened Krysty, and

sometimes even himself, and he also knew his swift execution of the pirate bothered her. Though Ryan and Krysty shared more similarities than differences, she would never commit murder unless her life, or the lives of those she loved, was directly threatened.

When Ryan and Krysty emerged from the grove, they saw that all the corpses had been moved to the far side of the little valley. Mildred was doing her best to make the woman comfortable, though she was still unresponsive.

J.B. looked up from examining the fuel tank of the wind wag's ancient diesel motor. "It's about a quarter full," he said. "It holds twenty or so gallons, and it probably gets about that many miles to the gallon, so they haven't strayed too far from the fleet and their supply boats."

Ryan nodded as he walked toward Mildred and her patient. "Is she hurt?"

Mildred shrugged. "A few bruises and abrasions, nothing serious. She's in shock, though."

"We need to know where she came from and if she lives with one of the Indian tribes in the area."

Without looking at him, the woman spoke in a clear, toneless voice. "Amicus. We came from Amicus."

Easing to a kneeling position in front of her, Ryan put a friendly smile on his face. "That's where we're headed. We weren't sure if it really existed."

The woman said nothing.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The woman's eyes were blank. Ryan recognized the symptoms of a person who had undergone such terror and witnessed such horror that all emotions were frozen, locked deep within the soul. He could see the pain in her eyes, the memory of it fresh and frightful. She held her body in the stiff posture that came as a result of pain, and of a fear that it would return.

"Look," he said, "we need our questions answered. You need to guide us to Amicus and to tell us how and when the Red Cadre jumped you. That'll give us an idea of how close the rest of them are."

The woman didn't react to his words or his tone, so he slapped her openhanded across her right cheek. Her head jerked back, and Mildred hissed in anger.

Lifting a hand to her stinging, reddening face, the woman fluttered her eyelids, her eyes darting wildly back and forth. They suddenly brimmed with tears. Bowing her head, she began to weep in a racking, dry-heave sob.

Mildred murmured to her, and Krysty kneeled beside her, massaging her neck and shoulders, trying to knead the tension out of them. She had been trained long ago in massage therapy, of how to use subtle pressures to block pain and allow rigid muscles to relax.

Ryan rose and left the woman to the gentle ministrations of Mildred and Krysty. Doc joined him, commenting quietly, "I do not believe your bedside manner met with Dr. Wyeth's approval."

"Got no time to coddle someone who can walk and talk."

Jak was gazing out over the valley. His exceptionally keen sight picked out details of the ruts dug by the wind wag's wheels.

"Came from southeast," he declared. "Could backtrack them."

"No time for a recce before sundown," Ryan replied. "The Cadre might miss these four and send out a search party. I don't much like the idea of meeting them in the dark."

He returned to the three women. "She found her tongue yet?"

"Says her name is Felicity," Krysty answered.

"Did she tell you how far it is to Amicus?"

The woman looked up. She was no longer sobbing, but tears glistened on her face. "No need to treat me like a jolt-brain. I can talk."

"Then do it," Ryan replied. "We don't have much time."

Felicity tried to stand, then groaned and allowed Mildred to help her to her feet. She looked at Ryan with a half sneer on her lips. She was still very close to hysteria, but she was successfully controlling it.

Gesturing with one hand, holding the blanket closed with the other, she said, "Amicus is about twenty miles that way. My husband" she hesitated, almost gagging on the word. "and me came out here to hunt buffalo. We were attacked before we could start the butchering. About two hours ago, I reckon."

"Your husband was the Indian?" Ryan asked.

"Spotted Hawk. A lot of the Cheyenne and the Lakota Sioux live in Amicus."

"Will you guide us there?"

The woman nodded once, her lips tight.

Jak approached him, handing over a small packet bound by oilcloth and twine. "One had this on him."

Ryan untied the twine and withdrew a square of paper. He opened it, careful not to tear it along the creases. The sheet of parchment seemed ready to fall apart with age and use. He looked over the drawings it bore and realized it was some kind of map. The written words were unpronounceable.

Lips unconsciously moving as he struggled to read the words, he studied a dotted line leading north from a squiggly area labeled *Jaune-roc* to a jagged region labeled *Mystere Montagneux*.

"French," Jak announced, looking over his shoulder.

Having been raised in Louisiana Cajun country, Jak was familiar with the language.

"What's it say?"

Touching the wavy lines with a skinny forefinger, the teenager said, "Yellowstone. Must mean river.

Other words mean Mystery Mountains or Mountains of Mystery."

Ryan refolded the paper and slid it into a shirt pocket. "Probably a map of prime hunting grounds. Let's move out. We're wasting daylight."

Doc and Ryan unsaddled the horses and piled the tack in the stern of the wind wag. The bridles were left on, but Mildred insisted the bits be removed from their mouths. Jak fashioned a long lead from the reins and a length of rawhide he found in the wag, securing one end to a cleat at the rear of the craft. The body of Spotted Hawk was placed in the bow. The corpses of the pirates were left to the scavengers.

After everyone was aboard, J.B. manned the engine block. He jerked the starting cord, but nothing happened. Grimacing, he made a couple of adjustments and yanked again. And again.

After the third failure, he went back to tinkering, checking the plugs, the coil wires and the oil level. Then he grasped the cord, took and held a deep breath, obviously steeling himself for another failure. Despite his impatience to get moving, Ryan couldn't help but smile.

J.B. pulled the cord violently, stumbling over the saddles and almost falling. With a series of stuttering pops, the engine roared to life, filling the air with noxious fumes. Everyone nearly sprang overboard.

Birds rushed up from the trees in a squawking flock, taking panic-stricken flight. The fan blades whirled, stirring hair and clothing.

"Spread the sail!" J.B. shouted.

Krysty and Doc struggled to open the heavy sheet of broadcloth. The wind caught it, billowing it out, and with a squeak and creak of wheels, the schooner slowly rolled forward.

The next few minutes were controlled chaos as J.B. yelled orders and instructions, and everyone concentrated on bringing the craft under control.

Ryan managed to figure out how to steer the ungainly craft with a crude wheel, and Doc, who had more boating experience than any of them, dealt with the sail, making sure it didn't swell up with the artificially generated wind and rip loose from the rigging. As it was, he nearly brained Mildred by swinging the boom to and fro.

By the time the craft gained speed and rolled out of the little valley, everyone was at ease within it. The wind wag entered a broad, nearly treeless vista of high plains. Felicity gave directions, and Doc struggled to align the sail properly. The engine noise was too loud to have a conversation unless it was shouted, so to spare their throats, talk was kept to a minimum.

The wag sailed on, bouncing over ruts and rocks, the terrain changing very little. The area was filled with the ruins of old farms. Every mile or so they spotted a barn, leaning red and rickety on itself, its roof cocked sideways, tarred shingles flapping in the breeze.

As the sky began to darken with approaching twilight, Ryan became concerned. He didn't fancy camping out on the plains, especially in one of the ruined barns or farmhouses. But there was very little other cover available.

Turning over the steerage controls to Krysty, he scanned the horizon in all directions for a collection of trees or even a good-sized boulder. What he saw instead was a faint smudge of wispy gray against the deep azure of the sky. Though it was too distant to make an accurate judgment, he guessed the smudge

wasn't smoke. It was trail dust.

Withdrawing a battered set of compact binoculars from his saddlebag, he went portside and squinted through the lenses. A little less than half a mile off, he saw four prairie schooners rolling in a fast, tight formation. They were several times larger than their own wag, and Ryan supposed theirs was a scout craft of some type. The bows of the approaching vessels were pointed on intercept course. He was able to make out a man standing at the bow of the center craft, a set of binoculars lifted to his eyes.

Though he was too far away to pick out details beyond a mane of blond hair, Ryan was positive the man lowered the binoculars for a second and flashed him a gap-toothed grin.

Sweeping the lenses across the four wags, Ryan made a quick head count. At least fifty figures appeared to be aboard the quartet of schooners. They were all long-haired and armed with knives, swords and muskets. From the top of each mast fluttered the crimson skull standard.

Ryan lowered the binoculars and hissed, "Fireblast."

Chapter Three

The wind wag had skimmed across the plains for thirty minutes, and now the fuel tank was nearly drained.

Ryan's hands tightened on the steerage, hoping his grip alone would coax at least one more mile out of the craft. He didn't look behind him, focusing instead on the dark bulk of two hills a mile or so ahead. According to Felicity, the ville of Amicus lay on the other side of the hills, through a narrow gorge running between them.

The roar of the diesel engine faltered, broke its steady rhythm, coughed and died altogether. The fan blades slowly stopped spinning, but the sail didn't drop. A steady breeze blew from behind them. It wasn't very strong, but the current was powerful enough to keep the sail half-filled and the wind wag moving. Still, it slowed.

Ryan glanced over his shoulder. Strung out across the darkening horizon were four white shapes, the full sails of the Red Cadre's prairie schooners. The wind carried the snarl of their engines. They were gaining fast

"We need to get rid of some weight," J.B. announced.

Felicity's eyes flashed in sudden fear. Ryan knew that she realized the most obvious weight to jettison was the body of her husband.

"Cut the horses loose," he said to Jak. "They're ready to drop anyway."

Felicity said nothing, but she directed a look of silent thanks toward him.

Producing one of his leaf-bladed throwing knives, Jak moved aft and sliced through the rawhide lead attaching the animals to the wag. They instantly stopped galloping, cantering in tandem into the gathering gloom.

Doc came to Ryan's side, eyeing the hills ahead. "If the wind does not drop or change direction, we may make it, even at this speed."

The light of a quarter moon peeped over the rim of the world, staining the dark sky with a silver halo. The thudding growl of the diesels seemed to rise in volume. Inexorably the pursuing prairie schooners drew closer.

Ryan called Krysty over and had her replace him at the controls. He made his way aft and peered through the binoculars again, hoping to pick out more details of their pursuers, since the lead craft was only a hundred or so yards behind them.

Tightening the focus on the center wag, he saw a black-bearded man shouldering a short, blunt-barreled

object Though it had a rifle stock, it was far too bulky and spike nosed to be a rifle. When the deep, hollow bore aligned itself with the rear of their craft, recognition rushed through Ryan like a flow of icy water.

The pirate was aiming an old M-79 grenade launcher. The maximum range of the 40 mm high-explosive round was three hundred and fifty yards, and they were well within its field of effect. Though the M-79 and its ammunition were probably a hundred and twenty years old, they couldn't rely on a misfire.

"Krysty!" he bellowed. "Hard to port!"

Before the final word had passed his lips, the dark bore of the grenade launcher spouted a puff of white smoke, followed immediately by a mushy pop.

Responding to Ryan's order, Krysty wrenched the steering handles. The wag drifted sideways, the maneuver seeming to be maddeningly slow and clumsy.

A few yards ahead and to the right of the bow, the night lit up with a hot orange flash, a fireball ballooning up and outward. Shrapnel and chunks of sod rattled against the hull.

"Son of a bitch!" J.B. snarled, unlimbering his Uzi. He checked the selector switch and flicked it to full-auto, firing a long stuttering burst in a left-to-right pattern. Spent cartridges spewed from the ejector port and clattered across the deck.

Then the wind died.

The sail drooped, flapping slack and flaccid.

Carried on by its momentum, the wag kept rolling, wheels and chassis creaking, but by degrees it slowed to a crawl, then to a complete stop. From behind echoed a strident cry of malicious triumph.

No one needed to be told what to do. They all snatched up their possessions, jumped overboard and began to run, feet churning up the dry soil. The blanket dropped from Felicity's shoulders, and she ran naked toward the hills with a steady lightness and sureness of stride that came of long practice.

Ryan hazarded one quick backward glance. Unsurprisingly the wags of the Red Cadre were still on course, bearing down on them. He estimated he and his friends would reach the base of the hills with only a handful of seconds to spare. The skin between his shoulder blades itched in anticipation of a musket bullet drilling into his flesh.

Felicity, in the lead, altered direction, heading for the tumble of rocks at the foot of the nearest hill. They followed her, running across stone-strewed ground. Ryan heard Doc gasping, wheezing and cursing as he tried to keep his footing.

They dodged among larger rocks, banging knees and scraping elbows. The pain of a stitch stabbed along Ryan's left side, the muscles of his legs felt as if they were caught in a tightening vise and his vision was shot through with gray specks. Nevertheless, he kept running, stumbling and lurching from boulder to boulder.

Suddenly Felicity cried out sharply, a confusing jumble of words. " Okiya nitakola !"

From ahead and above them came the unmistakable sound of thrumming bowstrings vibrating through the air, as well as the solid chocking of arrowheads finding hard and soft targets.

Behind them the night erupted in an animal roar of outraged frustration. Ryan looked over his shoulder, catching a brief glimpse of the wind wags sluggishly changing course, one barely avoiding a collision with another. The wooden hulls of all four craft bristled with feathered shafts. The wags of the Red Cadre were barely twenty yards away. A discordant noise bleated from the center craft, the notes of a frantically blown bugle, sounding a retreat.

"Come on!" Felicity gasped.

They followed her flashing nude figure as she picked a path between low rock tumbles and emerged into a narrow pass, the sides of the two hills rising on either side.

There were men in the pass, and when Felicity stopped running, so did everyone else. Ryan and his people stood and swayed, panting, trying to regain their breath and slow the rapid hammering of their hearts.

Though the light was uncertain, Ryan saw a half-dozen men, and an odd collection they were. Some of them were Amerindians, their long dark hair bedecked with feathers. They wore a combination of deerskin tunics, breechclouts and jeans. The other men, though white, were similarly dressed. All of them

were armed with bows and quivers of arrows. The only blaster was a long-barreled muzzle loader, and it was in the hands of a stocky, black-bearded white man who wore boot moccasins and a long-billed cap bearing the faded insignia of some predark sports team.

Felicity rushed up to this man and spoke quickly to him. Ryan couldn't catch much of what she said, since his blood pounded in his ears and his lungs were noisily laboring to suck in oxygen.

The man kept watchful eyes on Ryan and his friends as the woman spoke. When she was done, he gave her a quick hug and strode toward Ryan, extending a hand. "My name is Mose Autry. Welcome to Amicus."

Ryan shook the hand and between deep breaths made introductions all around. Autry nodded politely to each person in turn.

"Thank you for bringing Felicity back to us. She and Spotted Hawk were valuable members of our community. His loss will be mourned."

Jerking a thumb behind him, J.B. coughed and asked, "What about those sons of bitches? They may take his body."

Autry smiled sadly. "They may. Unfortunately all forms of banditry are endemic to this region, including defilement of the dead. However, the Cadre won't dare the pass at night. Now, if you all will follow me"

The man turned and said a few words to the other men in the same language Felicity had spoken. Ryan recognized it as Lakota, a dialect of the Sioux language. Arm around Felicity's shoulders, Autry started walking down the dark gorge.

Ryan hesitated, exchanging quizzical glances with his friends, then they fell into step behind the man. The pass sliced through the narrow hills. It curved this way and that, and all of them had trouble with its navigation. They were feeling weary and wanted to rest.

The hair at Ryan's nape suddenly tingled and lifted. He looked quickly at Krysty and saw that her sentient hair was lying loose and relaxed across her shoulders. Then he scanned the perpendicular sides of the gorge. They reared only a hundred feet above the pass, and the sky was clear and dark beyond them. Something shifted soundlessly atop the crest of the right-hand ridge. Ryan's hand made a reflexive move to his blaster.

Limned by the moonlight, the shifting shape resolved into a shaggy, four-legged figure. Though it was only in his field of vision for a fraction of a second, Ryan realized it was a coyote or a wolf.

When it vanished, Ryan didn't relax. An eerie aura hung over the pass, as if the lupine shadow had been a symbol of savage events yet to come.

The pass turned west, then opened up. Amicus lay before them in the moonlight. At first glance, even on the second, Amicus looked typical of thousands of frontier pesthole villes he had passed through. A big lake spread like a rain cloud in the center of the ville. On its shores was a jumble of tarpaper shacks and tepees, as well as a couple of old predark structures, probably outbuildings of a long-ago farm. Three or four huge fires sputtered redly.

A narrow main street was choked with mud, the boardwalk rotted through and lined by canting houses. A row of outhouses occupied the city square. Even the big vegetable garden at the far end of the settlement looked untidy, what with its straggly bean and tomato poles and mounds of rotting compost rearing from the ground.

A herd of perhaps fifty horses and mules jostled one another in a wide, cockeyed corral. Dogs of all shapes, sizes and breeds ambled along the streets. The air smelled richly of pig and cattle manure.

Doc sniffed and murmured, "Ah, the very best of domestic cologne."

As they followed Autry and Felicity into the settlement, a few of the dogs winded their unfamiliar scents and set up a ferocious racket. A couple of them trotted forward, stiff legged and growling, to sniff at the companions. Everyone kept on walking.

When they neared one of the tepees, a flap opened and a toothless old woman with yellow braids and a buckskin shirt looked out anxiously. Felicity saw her and ran into her arms. She murmured into the old woman's ear, then both of them burst into tears, hugging each other in shared grief.

"Her mother," Autry explained. "Spotted Hawk was their sole support."

He gestured to a low-roofed, ramshackle building on the street. Light shone from the windows, and violin

music floated in the air. "Our local public house. If we tell your story in there, it'll be all over Amicus within the hour. Save you from having to say the same thing over and over again."

Autry opened the leather-hinged door and stepped aside, allowing the others to enter. Only a few people were inside, but the big room smelled of sweat, tobacco and potent homemade whiskey. Two men stood on either side of the rough-hewn slab of pine that served as the bar.

One, a scrawny fellow with a luxuriant waxed mustache, was obviously the tavern keeper. The other man had his back to the door, and all they could see of him was a massive, leather-clad torso and the rear of a black-haired head.

A small middle-aged man with a balding pate and a parsimonious face was sawing vigorously at a fiddle. Judging by the musician's vacant stare, the patrons of the establishment could have started hacking away at one another with tomahawks and he would have gone on playing, perhaps shifting a little to avoid bloodying his shoes.

Autry spoke to both men at the bar. The big man turned, giving Ryan and his people a cool, appraising stare. He was an Amerindian, wearing a beaded-diamond-and-triangle design on his shirt. It was the ancient symbol of the Sioux. His black hair hung in two braids halfway to his waist.

The tavern keeper filled seven mugs from a jug of amber liquid. With a word of thanks, Ryan took a long, satisfying swallow, as did Doc and Jak. As the corn liquor burned its way into their stomachs, Autry silenced the musician with a wave of his hands.

"I've heard some of the story from Felicity," he told them. "Let's hear the rest of it from you."

In simple, unadorned language, Ryan told how they had come across the scene of torture and murder. At the mention of the Red Cadre, the barkeeper sputtered, the ends of his mustache fluttering.

"Oh, shit," he choked out. "Chillin' four and stealin' one of their boats Hatchet Jack will slit you from crotch to eyeball with a dull deer antler. He'll burn this place to the ground to get you!"

Autry cast him an angry glare. "Shut up, Micah. The Cadre knows better than to molest us."

"Why is that?" Krysty asked. Though she held a mug of liquor, she had yet to taste it.

"Amicus does too much trade with the local Cheyenne and Lakota," Autry replied. "Too many of the tribes live here, at least part of the year." He nodded toward the big man. "Like Little Mountain."

Little Mountain was staring hard at them, in a way most Indians would have considered impolite. Ryan met that stare.

The man blinked, then touched his left eye. "Ochinee," he rumbled.

"One-eye," Autry translated. "Little Mountain isn't fluent in English."

The big man turned to Autry and spoke quickly in Lakota. Autry's face registered surprise. "Says he knows of all of you," he told them. "Claims his chief met you, and that you're mighty warriors."

Ryan and J.B. had met a number of tribesmen during their years with Trader. "Who's his chief?" J.B. asked.

Autry asked Little Mountain the question. After the Sioux had replied, he translated, "Yutan-kin-Mahipiya. Never heard of him."

Little Mountain's eyes shone with agitation. He spun on one deerskin-shod heel and made for the door.

Autry called after him in Lakota, but the man either didn't hear him or didn't care to respond.

"I told him to watch out for the Cadre," Autry explained. "Guess he's not worried."

"Maybe he's not," Mildred said, "but I am. Will the Cadre bottle up the pass? Are they that vengeful?"

Autry shrugged. "Hatchet Jack has that reputation. All of you are free to enjoy our hospitality for as long as you care to do so. I'll find you comfortable quarters."

Ryan wasn't sure if the calm the man exhibited in the face of the Cadre's presence was admirable, foolish or forced. "What's the population of Amicus?" he asked.

"It shifts with the seasons. We're at our most crowded when the buffalo hunters follow the herds, but it's too early for that. Right at the moment, we probably have a hundred permanent residents."

"Out of that number, how many are of fighting age?"

Autry frowned. "Hard to say. My best guess would be around thirty, maybe forty."

"And blasters," J.B. put in. "How many in town and what type?"

"What's the point of these questions?" Autry demanded impatiently.

"The point," Ryan answered, "is that a pack of blood-drunk coldhearts is camping outside your burg. I'm not sure of their arsenal, but they have at least one gren launcher. If it comes down to a face-off, we need to know what you can throw against them."

"Muzzle loaders, primarily," Autry admitted. "Old man Hasslich is our gunsmith, makes gunpowder, bullets and so forth. He may know if there are more advanced blasters in town. Personally I was never interested enough to make an inventory."

"If I were you," J.B. said grimly, "I'd get interested quick."

Autry paused for a moment, then asked, "Do you think they'll attack us to get at you?"

Micah snorted out a derisive laugh. "Hell, yes, if Hatchet Jack has a mind that these folks owe him a blood debt!"

Jak's eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. "How come you know about him?"

Micah looked over at Autry, who cleared his throat uncomfortably. He said, "For a few years, the Cadre used Amicus as a sort of winter camp. They behaved pretty well while they were here, but one day they raided the wrong Cheyenne village. The warriors tracked them down, waited in ambush outside the pass and chilled damn near half of them. Hatchet Jack blamed me for not warning him, for setting him up."

"And were you innocent of blame?" Doc inquired.

Autry sighed and shook his head. "No. It was politics, you see. Amicus relies too heavily on the goodwill of the Cheyenne. If we alienated them, we would have alienated the Sioux, the Arapaho and the Crow, as well. Not only would the trade with them have ended, they would've razed the town to make it useless to the Cadre as a base. I had no choice but to cooperate with the ambush."

J.B. smiled without mirth. "Sounds like the Red Cadre owes Amicus more of a blood debt than us."

"Too true. And Hatchet Jack may use you six as the reason he needs to finally collect. Two debts collected for the price of one."

"Unless," Krysty said, "you made a preemptive strike, as long as they're so handy."

Autry wagged his head in a vehement, vigorous negative. "That's not our way. Not our way at all. Amicus came together ten years ago as an experiment in communal, cooperative living. If we start chilling people we disagree with, we'll be no different than any other frontier ville."

"Admirable ideals, Mr. Autry," Doc said. "However, judging by what you just told us, more honored in the breach. You allowed the local Indian tribes to solve your pirate problem."

Autry waved Doc's words away with a dismissive gesture. "Enough of this for tonight. I'm certain you're hungry and tired. Let me show you to your quarters, and I'll arrange for food to be brought to you."

They went with Autry back out onto the muddy, rutted strip that passed as Amicus's main street. Faces filled all the doorways as they walked by mainly children's faces and women's faces, some of them young and pretty, most of them seamed and smoke colored.

From far off came a faint, howling call that was answered by another and then another. Ryan saw that the moon had risen higher. "The hills must be crawling with wolves," he said.

Autry grinned at him. "They're talking to us."

"What do you mean?"

"Wolves are highly respected by most of the tribes. They're regarded as allies, talking to people, telling them what's going to happen."

Doc lifted an eyebrow. "And if you do not happen to speak wolfese, I suppose you are out of luck."

"Not necessarily," Autry replied. "I understand them sometimes. Right now they're talking about you."

Autry led them to a dilapidated building with a stone facade. "Amicus doesn't have an inn as such, but this place serves as a visitors' hostel."

The interior of the building was warm and smoky, with a floor of hand-hewn planks and walls shored up with heavy, smoke-blackened beams. A cast-iron stove glowed in one corner of the common room, its pipe disappearing into the adobe ceiling.

"Three bedrooms," Autry said. "Afraid you'll have to double up. I'll arrange for supper and breakfast.

We'll talk more tomorrow. Good night."

All of the rooms were furnished identically with medium-sized beds holding mattresses that exuded a faint sour odor. Krysty and Ryan chose one room at random, dropped their gear in a corner and stretched out

on the bed.

Chapter Four

Ryan was in Front Royal, riding across his father's green meadows. He was twelve years old and mounted on Witch, his favorite pony. He had both of his eyes, and he saw that Baron Cawdor was still alive and waving to him from the top of a gently rolling hill. Ryan shouted in happiness and urged Witch toward him.

Then the pony stopped, and Ryan kicked her impatiently. Her equine shape melted beneath him, shifting and transmogrifying. And then he was riding on a giant, dark gray wolf. He was afraid and he started to cry. The wolf shushed him.

You've been here before, manling, the wolf said kindly. The voice had no gender, and he sensed it rather than heard it. Time to take you to a new place.

The wolf turned and loped away from the hill. Ryan looked behind him and saw his father still standing there, receding swiftly in the distance. When he turned, he was a grown man again, but he still had both of his eyes. He knew the wolf was responsible for this gift, and gratitude welled up within him.

"How can I ever thank you? You've restored my sight."

You never lost it, the wolf replied. You do not need eyes to see.

The wolf leaped from the meadow and ran through a nightmare landscape. All around them were monstrous mushroom clouds, rising in roaring columns toward heaven, flashing and flickering with hellish light. They loped past ruined cities overgrown with vegetation, and bounded over fetid swamps.

Overhead a boiling, glowing belt of radioactive dust scorched across the sky.

And everywhere there was death, corpses and animated cadavers with their flesh peeled and blistered, their internal organs hanging out boiled and burst, their empty eye sockets weeping gelatinous tears. They reached out with skeletal fingers and gurgled and moaned, and Ryan recognized some of them.

They screamed his name, and there was Lori and O'Mara, Hunaker and Okie and all the crew from War Wag One and Two and all the people he had chilled. And there were the billions who had died in the nukocaust, and they were all equally dead, but it was worse because they hadn't been meant to die.

Deathlands wasn't supposed to have happened.

"They're dead," Ryan said. "Everything, everybody is dead. Dead."

The dead, the wolf replied, will live forever if they die inside the circle.

Ryan didn't understand, and didn't the wolf understand that they lived in a land of death, and death would be with him as it always had been and always would be?

Four circles of life, the wolf said. We are passing through the fourth and last circle. We will go to the beginnings of the first circle.

"Why?"

So you may see what you have never seen.

The wolf began to sing, in a lilting voice full of primal power and pride and happiness so heart-deep and vast that Ryan felt a pain at the roots of his soul.

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been. There is no other one to pray to but you. Everything has been made by you. The star nations all over the universe you have finished. Grandfather, Great Spirit, lean close to the earth that you may hear the voice I send.

On the far horizon Ryan saw a glimmering of light breaking through the black curtain of the Deathlands.

You toward where the sun goes down, behold me! You where the White Giant lives in power, behold me! You in the depths of the heavens, an eagle of power, behold! And you Grandmother Earth, the only

mother, you who have shown mercy to your children who have ripped and burned and poisoned you, I shall heal you!

Lifting his voice, Ryan sang, "I shall heal you!"

Hear me, four quarters of the world a relative I am! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may heal you !

The light spread out over the horizon, like a warm wave, so bright, so brilliant, so blinding, Ryan had no choice but to close his eyes. He could still see the lightgreen and orange, yellow and redspreading out, sweeping across Deathlands, changing it, transforming it.

RYAN OPENED HIS EYE, shutting it again as sunlight shafted through the window. He heard the murmur of voices and smelled a sweetish odor. His wrist chron told him it was half-past eight, and he sat up. His eye patch still covered his left eye, and he had slept in his clothes, except for his boots. Krysty had to have pulled them off after he had fallen asleep.

He pushed the residue of the dream into the back of his mind except it hadn't felt like a dream, not even like the hallucinatory, almost-real illusions he occasionally experienced after a particularly rough gateway transfer.

Smelling bacon from the common room, Ryan stuffed his feet into his boots and quickly laced them up. He felt hungry and thirsty.

The others were sitting around a table laden with platters of food. J.B. sipped at a cup of steaming liquid and grimaced.

Ryan sat in a chair, and Mildred handed him a cup of dark green-black fluid that exuded a strange aroma. "It's some kind of tea," she offered.

Tentatively sipping at it, Ryan found it was strong, bitter and pungent. The platters contained loaves of bread, fatty, blistered strips of bacon and crumbling wedges of cheese. He hacked off a hunk with a knife and chewed it slowly, the cheese so sharp it made his sinuses ache.

Jak spit a half-chewed piece of bacon rind onto his plate. "If plan to kill us, this food simplest way."

Krysty and Doc were silent, nibbling on crusts of bread and nursing cups of tea, their eyes downcast.

"What's with you two?" Ryan asked.

"We took a walking tour of Amicus this morning," Krysty replied.

"And?"

"And," Doc answered, "this is not salubrious ground. As his honor the mayor indicated, the populace is now aware of the circumstances that brought us here. They are displeased about our being encamped on their front doorstep."

"They hold us responsible," Krysty added. "They want us to leave."

"Someone told you that?" Mildred asked.

"They did not need to voice it," Doc stated.

"Their desire is evident in the backs turned to us, the fish-eyed stares and the all-around frigid temperatures of their shoulders."

"Fuck 'em," Jak snapped. "We leave."

"That may not be easy," Krysty told him. "The Red Cadre has bottled up the main way in and out."

Ryan sipped at the tea, shuddered and said, "There's got to be a back door."

"There is," said a voice from the doorway. "But it won't solve the immediate problem."

Mose Autry leaned against the door frame. His face was drawn and pale with worry. "The Cadre hasn't made any overtures yet, but the guards at the pass tell me the fleet is tied up a quarter mile away."

"So why can't we go out the rear exit?" Mildred asked.

"If it's you Hatchet Jack is after, he'll take vengeance on Amicus for providing you sanctuary. Whether you're here or not, he'll expect blood to be paid in blood."

"I thought you said he was afraid of pissing off the local Indians," J.B. said.

"He's more afraid of losing face with his crew," Autry responded dolefully. "As it is, even our resident tribesmen are afraid to leave town and go hunting. He might decide to sit tight and try to starve us out."

Ryan nodded. "A typical tactic. But let's hear what he has to say before scaring ourselves with 'what-ifs.'"

"Yes, but what if he wants you six in exchange for leaving us alone?"

Ryan favored Autry with a slit-eyed stare, and steel slipped into his voice. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Standing, Ryan said, "Show me around so I can get an idea of how defensible this place is."

"That will not take long," Doc remarked.

After visiting the outhouse behind the hostel, Ryan went with Autry through the ville. Amicus lay in fairly open country, in a swale between several broad, low hills. There were no walls, and the only barrier to an incursion from the rear was a great, tangled heap of mottled bones, the remains of all kinds of animals, from trout to muck-sucker to buffalo.

The people they encountered gave Ryan sullen, up-from-under stares. There were many Amerindians in the settlement, but most of them appeared to be old women and children.

They completed the circuit at a low, squat adobe building. Inside was a forge, a crude smelter, work-tables and a clean, ruddy-faced old man Autry introduced as Hasslich. His alert face shone with sincerity, only to be betrayed by the avarice in his eyes when he spied the SIG-Sauer at Ryan's hip. His English was broken, his voice thick and raspy. "Make you gun and give you powder and ball, hokay? Make you trade for your blaster, hokay?"

"No hokay," Ryan said. He examined one of Hasslich's rifles from a stack propped up in a corner. It was a home-built, single-shot flintlock, made of cold-rolled steel, a few brass-alloy fittings and a walnut stock. On a table lay several flintlock pistols. The workmanship wasn't spectacular, but it was adequate. Ryan had seen better and far worse, though J.B. might disagree.

"What other kinds of blasters are in town?," he asked.

Hasslich screwed up his forehead in thought. "I t'ink Bobby Mayhew has old AK-47, no ammo for it, though. Mrs. Red Bear used to have a Ruger Blackhawk revolver, an' a HK VP-70. No, dat's right, she sold it."

Ryan returned the rifle to the stack and surveyed the rest of the stock in the workroom. Three casks of charcoal and sulfur and a few sealed kegs of processed gunpowder were aligned against the north wall.

"Make you trade," Hasslich said again.

"You ever trade with the Red Cadre?" Ryan asked.

Hasslich shrugged. "Sometimes. Sometimes de Hatchet Jack don' wanna trade, wanna take."

"You let him?"

The old man ran his finger across his throat. "I let 'um take hokay."

As Ryan and Autry returned to the street, Hasslich called after him, "You wan' make trade, you come back, hokay?"

Autry was silent for moment, then commented quietly, "Not much to work with, is it?"

"Not much, no."

"Then you can understand why we never made a stand against the Cadre."

"It's never a bad idea to have an idea of your available arsenal." Ryan paused, then said, "Not too long ago a gang of marauding stickies took over a ville in Colorado, a placed named Harmony. The folks there knew the gang was coming, but they didn't prepare. I guess they figured if they didn't prepare, the gang would leave them alone. An old friend of mine used to say, 'Ain't no virtue in hoping for the best when the worst is on its way.'"

Autry swallowed hard before asking, "What happened?"

"Pretty much what you'd expect to happen. The muties chilled a lot of innocent people and took over the ville, used it as a base to launch their raids. Sound familiar?"

"What happened to the gang?"

Ryan waved a casual hand through the air. "Me and my friends chilled the whole lot of them. Didn't take long."

"Why not?"

"Because we were prepared."

Autry blinked at the end of the story, not having realized there could be any connection. "Interesting analogy, Mr. Cawdor."

Ryan didn't respond. He was watching a young man on horseback gallop toward them from the direction of the pass.

"Mose!" he yelled as he reined his horse to an unsteady halt. "Got news!"

"What is it, William?" Autry inquired calmly, in deliberate counterpoint to the youth's excitement.

"Hatchet Jack sent word! He wants to parley at noon!"

Autry's face went the color of old ashes, but he showed no emotion otherwise. "Where?"

"In the pass. Said he'll come under a flag of truce."

Autry turned to Ryan. "Under the circumstances you'll forgive me if I leave you to your own"

"Not with you," William interrupted. His forefinger jabbed toward Ryan. "With him."

Autry exhaled a surprised, startled breath. "With you, Mr. Cawdor. There's no reason to meet with him, though perhaps you may be able to defuse any hostilities. I can't force you, but I can ask. Will you meet with him?"

Ryan had plenty of experience of this sort of situation, and he needed the opportunity to size up the opposition.

"I'll do it," he said. "But the hostilities are already out in the open. I doubt a face-to-face palaver will close them up. Could make things worse."

Autry combed nervous fingers through his beard. "I doubt that's possible."

Ryan turned back toward the hostel. "Believe me, Mr. Autry, it is."

Inside the common room, Ryan told his five friends about Hatchet Jack's request for a conference. None of them was pleased by the notion.

"Parley for what?" J.B. demanded. "He won't let us leave."

"Ryan, dear fellow, though your judgment is sound in most matters, meeting this man might be tantamount to pouring gasoline on a fire," Doc stated.

"I agree," Krysty said. "It's probably a trap."

"Gotta be," Jak added.

Ryan nodded. "More than likely. That's why you're going with me. He might want to talk to me alone, but that doesn't mean I can't arrange for my own cover."

The six companions spent the next two hours cleaning and loading their weapons. A few minutes shy of noon, Autry came to the door and beckoned to Ryan. When the others arose, his gaze narrowed.

"I'm certain Hatchet Jack meant for you to go alone, Mr. Cawdor."

"I'll talk to him alone," Ryan replied, "but I want my back covered."

"There are guards at the pass."

"With bows and arrows and maybe a muzzle loader," Mildred said, hefting her Czech-made ZKR target revolver. "I think our firepower will more than complement your own." Autry opened his mouth to voice an objection, then shut it and smiled in resignation. "As you wish."

Most of the population of Amicus seemed to be lining the street as they marched toward the pass. None of them spoke or so much as smiled.

"They're scared," Krysty said quietly, her hair shifting.

"I don't blame them," Mildred replied.

"Not of the Cadre, of us, of what we might bring down on them."

A blond woman shouldered her way out of the row of onlookers. She was wearing a long, fringed dress of soft doeskin. It took Ryan a moment to recognize Felicity, with her hair combed, face clean and wearing clothes. She fell into step beside him.

"You're going to talk to Hatchet Jack?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Fingers tugging nervously at her skirt, she said, "Mebbe you can ask him to return my husband's body."

Ryan knew that most Plains tribes performed ceremonies for their honored dead, believing the rituals allowed their journey to the spirit world to be speedy and uneventful. Felicity evidently shared those beliefs.

"I'll do what I can," Ryan told her.

Felicity ducked her head and dropped back.

A pair of men stood at the mouth of the cleft cut between the hills. One, leaning on a flintlock rifle, was a white man with a seamed, scarred face. The other was a very young Amerindian, an arrow already nocked into the string of his bow.

Autry stopped at the pass, and the others entered,

Ryan in the lead. The noonday sun filtered its rays through the clouds, playing with the colors of the gorge walls. Rock streaks of green melted into pale blues, which lightened into sandstone yellows. Ryan was reminded of the light he had seen in his dream.

At the curve in the gorge, Ryan halted and slowly poked his head around. A lone man stood on the sandy ground, holding a rifle. Attached to the barrel was a scrap of dirty white linen. No one else was in sight.

"Stay here," Ryan whispered, then stepped around the bend in the gorge wall.

Hatchet Jack didn't move. He watched his enemy's confident approach with no expression on his face.

Ryan's gaze swept him up and down in a swift appraisal.

He appeared to be about the same age and height as Ryan, but built along heavier, massive lines. Dark blond hair flowed from beneath a feather-decorated slouch hat. A matted beard of the same hue clothed his face. His buckskin tunic and leggings were fringed and beaded with Indian finery. A polished powder horn hung by a strap from his right shoulder, and a long-handled tomahawk had been thrust in at his wide belt, beside a fourteen-inch bowie knife. A metal ring was attached to the belt, and from it dangled what looked, at first glance, to be a thatch of coarse black threads. Then Ryan saw the faint pink of a human scalp shining through the hairs.

Ryan strode to within six feet of the man and halted.

Impaling him with frosty gray eyes, the man demanded, "You who I think you are, beauty?"

"Depends," Ryan said.

"On what?"

"On who you are."

"Name's Hatcher, John Jacob Hatcher. Though them that speaks of me at all calls me Hatchet Jack."

"I'm Ryan Cawdor."

Hatcher nodded brusquely. "Seems like I've heard that name before."

"Mebbe. I get around. Speak your piece, Hatcher."

"You have my property in your paws. I want it back."

Ryan hadn't expected that, and it took a great deal of effort to keep the surprise from showing on his face. "Property? You mean your wind wag?"

"No, you one-eyed piece of shit," Hatcher barked. "I mean the map you stole off one of my men."

Ryan realized the twine-and-oilcloth-bound packet was still resting in his shirt pocket. "Assuming I have it, why is it so important to you?"

"My business," Hatcher rumbled.

"Not the way I see it," Ryan replied with a mocking smile. "If I do have it, it's spoils of war. Law of Deathlands."

"I say it's mine, Cawdor." Hatcher hooked his thumbs into his belt and rocked lightly on his moccasined feet. He smiled. "This don't have to be a medley, you know."

Instantly Ryan's instincts flashed a triple red. "If it's so important to you, why did one of your piss-breathed underlings have it?"

"He weren't an underling. He was my cousin. Did you chill him?"

"Is it important?"

Hatcher snorted a laugh. "Not particularly. He never were worth much more than a catfish choked to death on a sandbar." He grinned broadly. "A man like you is different. I could let you in on the deal. Might be you'd be real helpful in this here undertaking I got in mind."

"What undertaking is that?"

"Hand over the map," Hatcher said reasonably, "and we'll talk about it."

"We'll talk about it now," Ryan said stolidly, "or not at all. Mebbe we can arrange a trade."

"What kind of trade?"

"The body of the man your men murdered yesterday. Turn it over to me, and I might just consider giving you the map."

Hatcher stared at him incredulously. "We dragged that maggot bait away. Fucking coyotes have probably already got it."

"Then," Ryan said coldly, "I guess we don't have anything more to discuss."

Hatcher bared his teeth, then took a careful step backward. "I tried, by God," he snarled. "You can't say I didn't."

Then men rose from the sand-covered floor of the gorge.

Chapter Five

In a thinly shaved fraction of a second, Ryan realized the mechanics of the trap the pirates of the Cadre had lain in shallow ditches dug in the ground, covering themselves with neutral-colored blankets. Someone else, Hatcher probably, had sprinkled sand over them.

There were three men, about ten feet behind Hatcher, all armed with oversize flintlock handblasters. Before any of the pistols could spit fire and lead, Ryan took the first course of action that occurred to him. He lunged forward, kicking himself off the ground and slamming hard into Hatcher. It was like body-blocking a tree.

Hatcher didn't go down. Snarling out a stream of profanity, he grappled with Ryan, trying to swing him into a direct line of fire with the flintlocks. The one-eyed man set his feet and resisted. There hadn't been time to draw the SIG-Sauer when the men had risen from the ground and drawn beads on him, and now both his hands were filled with fistfuls of deerskin tunic.

Close locked, the two men wrestled and struggled, staggering on wide-braced legs. Hatcher's arms encircled Ryan's body, and they tightened across his spine. The pirate then jacked up a knee, seeking to crush his testicles, but Ryan managed to shift a few inches so the blow landed against his upper thigh. Still, it hurt.

Mildred's ZKR banged like a door slamming, and though Ryan didn't see her target, he heard a man shrill in pain and surprise.

"Cocksucker!" Hatcher hissed, and tried to knee him in the groin again.

Instead of fighting his way out of the hug, Ryan drove the top of his head into Hatcher's face. The pirate's head snapped up and back, blood springing from his lips. He staggered and Ryan was able to wrench himself from his adversary's grip. He drew the SIG-Sauer and triggered it all in the same whiplash motion.

One of the pirates fell backward, his chest caved in by the bone-shattering impact of the 9 mm round. Ryan hadn't wasted time on Hatcher. Though the man was certainly dangerous, he had dropped his musket when Ryan jumped him.

The third pirate, his face flushed with fury, eyes shining in outrage, aimed his blaster and pulled the trigger. The lock fell, the flint igniting the powder trail in the pan with a little puff of smoke and a flash of sparks. The main charge fired, noise, flame and black-powder smoke blooming from the bore. The ball spun over Ryan's right shoulder, making a faint swishing sound.

The one-eyed man squeezed off a second shot. The bullet struck the pirate in the throat, smashing through his larynx and pulverizing his neck vertebrae. He flailed over on his back, blood fountaining from his open mouth.

Hatcher flung out his hands. "I'm unarmed, Cawdor!"

Ryan centered the bore of the blaster on the man's forehead. "What makes you think I give a shit?"

Hatchet Jack gaped at him. When he saw the promise of his death in that single blue eye, his shoulders sagged. As they did so, the strap of his powder horn slipped off. As it fell to the ground, Hatcher closed his hand around the loop of leather, and he swung it in an eye-blurring, thrumming circle.

Hyan squeezed the trigger, but the shot went wild as the tip of the horn caught the baffle silencer and slapped the SIG-Sauer out of his hand.

Backing away, Ryan shook his stinging fingers. If the horn had struck his hand, all the delicate bones would have probably been broken. The horn was full of more than just powder.

Hatcher swung the horn in a whistling arc that passed over Ryan's head. He began a backswing, but a fusillade of shots cracked and bullets blasted chips from the rock wall. He ducked his head and swore. Return fire came from the opening in the gorge behind Hatcher, the reports softer than modern blasters. More of the Cadre pirates were firing muzzle loaders at Ryan's people to keep them pinned down. They couldn't shoot without risking their leader's life, and the companions couldn't shoot at Hatcher without taking the same gamble.

Ryan leaped forward, throwing a fist at Hatcher's face. The pirate evaded the driving fist with a sidestep, and he swung the horn viciously in return. The container struck Ryan across the ribs, and the impact numbed his left side. In an instant he was fighting for air and trying to keep from falling.

Whooping, Hatcher whipped the powder horn toward him again. Ryan ducked, the horn struck the rock wall and the lid popped off. No powder poured out, only thick, dully gleaming chunks of metal. They caught the sun and sparkled.

Screaming wordlessly in fury, Hatcher sprang forward and looped the leather strap around Ryan's throat. His wind was immediately cut off, and within seconds he heard nothing but his own blood pounding in his ears.

Gagging, he tore at the garrote with his hands, but the pressure on his windpipe only increased. A knee was thrust brutally into the small of his back. Blindly Ryan fumbled for the handle of his eighteen-inch panga sheathed at his hip. After two groping motions, his hand closed over the handle, and he managed to drag it free. He struck behind him and felt the blade sink into yielding flesh.

Through the hammering in his temples, he heard a scream, and the agonizing pressure around his throat lessened. Ryan lunged forward, yanking the strap from Hatcher's grasp. He pulled the strip of leather from his neck and unsteadily scrambled to his feet. Blood streamed from a stab wound high on Hatcher's left thigh, and the man's face was contorted in a mask of rage and pain.

The pirate started to draw his own knife, then he froze, his eyes on something behind Ryan. He back-pedaled, limping slightly. Ryan turned and saw Jak, J.B. and Krysty racing down the gorge, blasters in hand.

Hatcher began to run, expertly keeping Ryan between him and the blasters of his friends. As he ran unsteadily, he roared, "You're dead, Cawdor! You are so fuckin' dead !"

Ryan thought again of his dream, then his friends were all around him. J.B. and Jak started to run farther down the pass, but Ryan called them back. He retrieved his SIG-Sauer and checked it for damage.

"Damn close," Jak said tightly. "Couldn't get clear shot at him."

"He had it planned that way," Krysty said. "What did he want, besides to chill you?"

Ryan didn't answer immediately. He bent and picked up the chunks of metal from the gorge floor. There were three of them, each about the size and thickness of a big man's thumb, and they felt as heavy as lead. All had fairly smooth surfaces. He turned the largest one over. The side was far brighter, rough textured, the marks of a saw still upon it.

Gold. They were pieces of gold, measuring perhaps three inches long and less than a quarter of an inch thick.

He pulled the oilcloth-wrapped packet from his shirt and said, "Now I think I'm getting it."

Krysty frowned, taking the packet from him and opening it. Mildred and Doc joined them, looking over her shoulder.

"A map," she said. "To what and where?"

Ryan clicked the pieces of gold together in his closed fist. "I would imagine this is the what. To where I have no idea. Mebbe Mr. Autry will have an opinion or two."

They met Autry and the pair of guards before they reached the end of the pass. Their faces didn't register relief when they caught sight of the six people, alive and unharmed, but they didn't look disappointed, either.

"We heard shots," Autry said breathlessly.

"Took long enough to make recce," Jak said.

Autry ignored the observation. "Hatchet Jack, is he?"

"No," Ryan replied, "but three of his crew are."

"Did he want you to give yourselves up to him?"

"That subject wasn't raised." Ryan opened his hand, showing the slices of gold. With the other hand he gave Autry the map. "He wanted me to give this up instead. Jak found it on one of Spotted Hawk's killers."

Autry's gaze flicked from the gold to the map, then back again. He was silent for so long, Ryan wondered if he was stunned into speechlessness. Then his face displayed an odd, unidentifiable emotion.

"This map is probably two hundred and fifty, mebbe three hundred years old," he said flatly. "It was the cause of a lot of ugly history a few centuries ago."

"Why?"

Autry sighed, handing it back. "Golden dreams and ugly realities. Let's get back to town, and I'll tell you what I know."

People were still milling about the street, and when they saw the party of outlanders alive and ambulatory, they shuffled away, muttering and mumbling.

"Hell of a chamber of commerce you've got here," Mildred commented.

Autry led them to the tavern, fetched a jug of a concoction he called White Mule and sat at the largest table in the room. When everyone was seated, holding brimming mugs, he asked, "Have any of you ever heard of Coronado?"

Only Doc and Mildred nodded.

"Francisco Vasquez Coronado," Doc said, "provincial governor of Mexico and Texas, explorer, plunderer and, some would say, genocidal monster."

Autry stared wide-eyed at Doc. "You know more about him than I do. All I know are the legends, the campfire tales that have been passed down from generation to generation."

"Let's hear them," Krysty suggested.

"Over six hundred years ago, during one of Coronado's expeditions, he heard about the Seven Cities of Cibola. These were supposed to be Native American treasure cities, scattered all over the West and Southwest. According to legend, they were so full of gold, silver and precious gems that sunlight was reflected off them for miles around. Coronado and a company of conquistadors set out to find these cities."

"There's a similar legend in Central America," Mildred said. Since she had minored in American Indian history at her university, she knew quite a few obscure facts about aboriginal cultures. "Tales of the city of El Dorado have circulated for centuries."

"At any rate," Autry continued, "months passed and the conquistadors were decimated by Indian attacks, disease and exposure. Some believed Coronado traveled beyond the Yellowstone, deep into Utah. He found nothing and returned to Mexico, a defeated man."

"However, the legend of the Seven Cities persisted, due mainly to one of Coronado's soldiers who'd committed their route to paper. According to the soldier, they had indeed found the location of one of the cities, but they were driven back by an army of Indians before they laid eyes on it. During the early days of colonization of this territory, the map and the story wouldn't have been given any credence whatsoever if some of the Sioux groups hadn't enjoyed visiting the Franciscan missions, flaunting ornaments fashioned from gold and silver."

"In the mid-1700s, French explorer de Varennes chanced upon the map while staying at the mission near the Sweetwater River. He made a copy of the map in French, of course and went to Norleans, intent on

gathering men and materials to mount a major expedition. As the story goes, the man died and the map was thought to be lost."

"What happened to the original copy, the one in the mission?" J.B. asked.

"Crazy Horse burned down the mission in the 1870s," Autry answered. "It was probably destroyed."

Ryan flicked the gold pieces on the table with a fingertip. "Like you said, campfire stories."

"Perhaps," Autry replied. "But your map is obviously very old. It may be a copy of de Varennes's copy, but it definitely shows the route from the Yellowstone, across the Washakie Basin where we are, toward mountains that can only be the Wind River Range."

"If you've identified the landmarks," Mildred said, "then why are the mountains labeled 'mountains of mystery'?"

Reluctantly Autry said, "Aside from the stories about the Seven Cities of Cibola, there are old Indian legends about hidden places in the Wind River and Medicine Bow Range. Medicine spots, they're called, doorways to the other side. If these power points, these doorways, are sealed off, Indians believe their souls will wander for eternity. In these hidden places, in valleys and mountain peaks, dwell the ghosts of the First People, the prehuman ancestors of the Indian."

Pausing long enough to swallow a mouthful of liquor, Autry added, "And rich veins of gold are also supposed to be there. To this day some of the Lakota and Cheyenne wear gold ornaments and trade them here for goods. What you have there doesn't look like raw, stream-panned ore. Looks to me like it was hacked from a molded ingot."

Revolving a piece of the gold between thumb and forefinger, Ryan realized he was right. The chunk of metal had been melted, worked and formed some time in the past. Though gold wasn't sought after as a rare commodity in some regions of Deathlands, in most of the baronies of the West, it was still prized and valuable enough to kill for.

"You figure Hatchet Jack thinks one of these Seven Cities is in the Wind River Range?" J.B. asked.

"Seems likely," Ryan replied. "If he could find it, he could set up the most powerful barony in this part of the country."

"Is that not a delightful prospect?" Doc commented sourly.

"Wonder where he got that gold?" J.B. said. "He probably traded or stole or chilled to get the map, but where'd he find the gold?"

"Probably tortured or chilled some poor Indian," Krysty said.

To Ryan, she said, "This Red Cadre is a bad bunch, about as bad as we've ever seen."

Ryan tapped the gold pieces and the map. "And we've got four things he wants."

"Five," Krysty corrected. "Your scalp."

Chapter Six

By late afternoon the guards at the pass had reported no suspicious activity among the Red Cadre, but no one in Amicus seemed relieved. The settlement was unusually quiet. Every door, tepee flap and shutter was closed, and there wasn't a sign or sound of movement from the interiors.

Jak and Doc, walking down the street, were made uneasy by the hush. Though neither was familiar with habits of Amicans, they were fairly well versed in villes, and the absence of children, men and women stirred their hackles.

As the only single members of the group of travelers, Doc and Jak were accustomed to giving Krysty and Ryan, and Mildred and J.B. some privacy whenever they sensed it was necessary. It sometimes was inconvenient to make themselves scarce, but they understood the need for couples to be alone from time

to time.

As they walked through the town, Jak asked, unconsciously lowering his voice, "Think people moved out?"

Doc considered the possibility then shook his head. "According to Mr. Autry, the rear exit is really no exit from danger, since it simply leads to the plains."

Sounds from the tavern attracted their attention. They heard voices, male and female, and quite a few judging by the near-constant murmur.

They pushed open the door and stepped inside. There were about twenty people fairly evenly divided between men and women. The few who noticed Jak and Doc's entrance shot them cold glances and went back to their discussions.

Everyone was talking, arguing, debating, deliberating the Red Cadre, Hatchet Jack, mountain passes, Spotted Hawk, pack animals. Their words were interspersed with noisy slurps as they downed mug after mug of liquor.

One burly, soot-faced, stump-legged and stump-toothed man talked the loudest. He held court at a corner table, gripping a mug in one hand and a jug in the other.

"Shit, me and John Hatcher go way back," he announced, his aggressive voice punching against Jak's sensitive eardrums. "Used to hunt buffalo with him on the Washakie Divide. Saved his life when a chem storm came up."

"Is he as bloodthirsty as his rep makes him out to be, Eli?" one of the men at the table asked. "Can he be reasoned with?"

The man addressed as Eli looked thoughtful for a moment. "He's a lusty infant, no denyin' that," he admitted. "But he ain't unreasonable. Just don't cross him."

Eli's gaze settled on Jak and Doc. "Nope, just don't cross him, like some donkey-shit dumb outlanders I recently heard about."

Though Jak's body tensed, Doc whispered, "Ignore him, lad. He's simply passing wind the frontier fashion."

They walked to the bar. Micah was perspiring heavily, and sweat dripped from the ends of his mustache. "White Mule?"

"If that is all you have on the list," Doc answered.

"It is." The bartender poured a three-fingered amount of liquid into a chipped ceramic mug and pushed it across the wet pine to him. "You and your group stayin' or goin'?"

"We have yet to decide," Doc replied, sipping at the rancid, fiery liquor.

The man tried to grin, exposing brown-speckled teeth. "Like the rest of these souls. Don't know if they want to light out for points east or stay and see what the Cadre is gonna do. Right now they're lettin' the corn make up their minds."

Jak looked around him, and his nostrils detected an odor he hadn't noticed upon entering. Mixed in with the other aromas of the tavern was a faint but pungent smell. Jak had scented it many times before the smell of desperation, of fear. Of confusion. The eyes of the people mirrored it, and it shone there brightly, not in the least dimmed by the liquor they poured down their throats.

Jak understood and sympathized with their confusion. The Amicans were faced with making a decision that could alter, even end their lives. The citizens knew, without really knowing, that if they threw themselves into a fray against the Red Cadre, it would be a far more serious scrape than a backstreet brawl. And they also knew that even if they drank themselves into oblivion, they would still be there when the jugs ran dry to run and live or fight and die.

It was a choice Jak had faced more than once during his short life.

Doc leaned over and said quietly, "My lad, this is not a saloon. It is a waiting room in Hell."

A young man shouldered in between Doc and Jak. He was dressed rather dapperly in a snakeskin vest over a coarse cotton shirt. His breath was redolent with whiskey fumes. He wasn't much older than Jak, and he introduced himself as Allen.

Facing Doc, swaying a bit, he said, "So, tell me, sir, will you and your party oppose the tyrant?"

"Do you mean Mr. Autry?" Doc asked, smiling a bit.

Allen shook his head, and his body lurched unsteadily. "Of course not. I mean" he swallowed a belch, "John Hatcher."

"I believe we already have, sir."

The youth nodded. "I, too, wish to oppose him."

"Ah. And do you think that can be accomplished from here?"

Allen started to reply, then favored the older man with a knife-eyed glare. "Are you questioning my courage, sir?"

"Certainly not," Doc said smoothly. His hands tightened around the lion's-head pommel of his cane, silently loosening the sheath encasing the blade of Toledo steel. "I'm only requesting information."

The young man grunted. "Lucky for you that you were not casting aspersions on the fierce fighting men of Amicus. For if you were"

"Oh, shut your pan, boy," came Eli's weary voice from the corner table.

Allen looked around unfocusedly for the man who had given him the order, then he complied with it. He lifted the cup to his lips, and the rim clinked against his teeth. For a moment his face was that of an embarrassed little boy.

Doc clapped him on the shoulder and said cheerfully, "Never mind, Master Allen. You are all sand, by the Three Kennedys, else you would not be here. I admire your fortitude."

The youth's face flushed, with either pride or drink, and he shuffled away. Jak met Doc's eye and smirked, shaking his white-maned head. "Stupe," he muttered.

A gentle hand touched Doc's shoulder from behind. He turned to see Felicity standing there, her hair pulled back severely from her face.

"Excuse me, Dr. Tanner, but I never heard. Did Mr. Cawdor ask Hatchet Jack about my husband?"

A little jolt of pain went through Doc's heart when he looked into those blue eyes. For a moment he wrestled with his conscience. He had overheard Hatcher's response to Ryan's question about Spotted Hawk, and he knew relaying it might devastate the young woman.

Still, telling her the truth was preferable to allowing her to spend another day wondering and aching.

"I am truly sorry, madam," Doc said quietly. "Mr. Hatcher was unmoved by the plight of your husband's remains."

Felicity blinked, then she nodded. "I expected him to be."

With a swirl of her doeskin skirt, she spun and left the tavern.

Staring after her, Doc felt the pain within him transform into anger. It was the same anger he felt toward the scientists of Operation Chronos who had wrenched him from his wife, Emily, and two children, Rachel and Jolyon.

His constant pleas to be returned to his own era, to his family, had fallen on uncaring ears. To the scientists he was only a test subject, and his emotional agony meant less than a sparrow's tears to the success of the time-trawling experiments.

The scientists had justified their cold-hearted practices by claiming patriotism as a motive, since they were ensuring the safety of the United States against all aggressors. They had told Doc that, as an American citizen albeit one from 1895 he should share their motivations.

The old proverb "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel" was never more descriptive of anybody in history than the overseers of Operation Chronos.

Doc wasn't the least ashamed of the satisfaction he felt whenever he remembered how all of the scientists had perished in the nukocaust. Appeals to patriotism and advanced technology had not saved them, but the latter, misused as it was, had saved him.

He took a long, burning swallow of the liquor. A moral was in there someplace, he reflected.

There was a faint and distant popping sound, as if a faraway balloon had burst. Jak glanced quickly around. "Hear that?"

"Hear what?" Doc asked.

Then the tavern moved, as though a giant boot had given the foundation a ferocious kick. Mugs fell over, sloshing liquor on the tables, laps and the floor. The ceiling cracked, showering the room with sawdust and wood particles.

The sound of the explosion wasn't painfully loud, but it was loud enough for Jak to realize a grenade had detonated either against or just outside the tavern.

Acrid smoke rolled into the one window, and as the Amicans coughed, wheezed and fought one another to get outside, Doc and Jak joined Micah beneath the bar, just in case the ceiling collapsed altogether. The bartender was shaking in fright, but both Jak and Doc had been under fire too many times to allow fear to control them.

When the tavern had cleared of people, Jak, Doc and Micah went outside. The wall facing the pass was blackened and chewed up by shrapnel, and a pumpkin-sized crater smoldered a scant five feet from the clapboard siding.

"Close," Jak said, shading his eyes and gazing toward the hills.

The people milled in the street, shouting in fear and anger. Ryan, Krysty, Mildred and J.B. jogged from the hostel. When they spied Doc and Jak, they slowed their pace.

"Gren," Jak said when they came abreast of him. "Almost direct hit."

Ryan and J.B. eyed the hills but saw no one.

"About four hundred yards," J.B. stated with grudging admiration in his voice. "Whoever aimed the launcher had a decent eye."

"Half the fuckin' town was in there!" Micah shrilled.

"A direct hit would have gone a long way to clearing Hatcher's path," Ryan commented. "How was he able to put men on top of the hill without raising an alarm?"

"Interesting question," Krysty said. "Let's take a recce."

The six companions, followed by a dozen townspeople, ran down the muddy street toward the pass. Mose Autry met them at the opening, waving at them to halt.

"I called for the guards. Nobody answered."

"How many on duty?" Ryan asked.

"The same as before. Two."

"Two?" echoed Mildred incredulously. "With those scumbags creeping around outside of town, you posted two guards?"

"The Cadre has made no direct threats against us, have they?" Autry responded with some heat. "Their quarrel isn't with us."

"It goddamn well is now!" a female voice shouted from the rear of the crowd.

Ryan pushed past Autry and indicated with sign language that he, Krysty and Jak would climb the left-hand slope, while the other three scaled the one on the right.

As was customary, Ryan took the point. Clouds, low and heavy, scudded across the afternoon sky. They were too thin to bring rain, but they cast shifting shadows over the rocky hillside.

When Ryan cautiously topped the crest and looked out on the plain below, the first thing he saw was the bodies of the two guards. They lay about a hundred yards beyond the mouth of the pass. Naked, they were staked to the ground in spread-eagled positions. Their faces, or what could be seen of them, were livid with blood. Ryan figured their tongues had been cut out or their throats cut. Perhaps both.

John Hatcher and four of his pirates stood a hundred yards beyond the mutilated bodies. He cradled the gren launcher in his arms and when he saw Ryan top the rise, he lifted the weapon over his head and gave voice to a fierce, victorious howl.

The pirates were just outside of blaster range. To fire at them would be a waste of ammunition. Ryan fixed his eye on the giant form of Hatcher Jack, and a fury swelled within him, the homicidal rage that made his heart and temples pound.

Up until that moment, Hatcher Jack and the Red Cadre were problems of a tactical nature, not personal. Now they became enemies to be destroyed.

Hatcher bellowed something. Because of the distance, the word was faint, but Ryan understood the meaning nonetheless. The word was "Soon."

Chapter Seven

The westward horizon swallowed the sun, the dying rays turning the sky variegated shades of magenta and purple.

Fires flared in the street of Amicus. The faces of the people were bathed in flickering light, and red pinpoints gleamed from the many pairs of frightened eyes fixed upon Autry and Ryan. The crowd set up a clamor, wanting to know what was happening, and more importantly, how they should react.

Autry managed to quiet them with a few words and announced, "We're in a predicament, but Amicus has been in a number of them during its short history."

"Nothin' like this!" a man croaked. "Not even when the Sioux had hairs up their asses did they bottle up the town this way."

Autry ignored the outburst. "Inasmuch as we're a democracy, I'm soliciting your opinions on our best course of action."

That was the cue for a general bickering session to commence.

"What can we do against the Cadre?"

"They hold a grudge against us, remember?"

"Let's absquatulate at first light!"

"First light, hell! Let's get over the back hills now!"

Autry lifted calming hands. "Even if we could skulk out of here, and if the Cadre indeed harbors inimical feelings toward us, they could easily track us and catch us out in the open."

"And if we stay here," cried a man sounding half-crazed by fear, "we'll die penned up like groundhogs!"

People shouted their agreement with that sentiment, voices clamoring at once, trying to be heard over their neighbors. The Amicans went into criticisms of personal habits and snared themselves in their own arguments. They would switch sides or even forget on whose behalf they were speaking. Finally, when hands clutched at weapons, Ryan realized Autry had lost control of the democratic process, so he stood up beside him.

"Listen to me, listen to me !" Ryan had to yell in order to be heard over the frightened babblings. "This place is defensible. If the Cadre mounts a siege, we'll be able to hit them hard every time they stage an attack."

"And then what?" roared the man Doc had identified as Eli. "Our food supplies won't last more than a week."

"And the Cadre's provender probably can't be stretched out more than two days," Ryan retorted.

"They can at least hunt," a woman said. "We'll be eating our dogs for breakfast if the Cadre decides to wait us out."

Eli stabbed a grimy finger at Ryan. "It's your scalp Hatcher Jack wants, outlander. I think we oughta just turn you over to him, all dressed out and gift wrapped."

There was a muttering of agreement, and a segment of the crowd surged forward. Instantly Jak, Krysty, Doc, J.B. and Mildred materialized around Ryan, hands on blaster butts.

Autry lost his temper, shaking clenched fists. "You goddamn fools! Hatcher wouldn't spare us now, no matter what we do to appease him. It's a matter of principle, of pride. His ego won't allow us to live!"

"What do you want us to do?" Micah asked, his voice quavering.

"All I want," Autry snapped, "is for you to do something that might save your skins and the ville. God knows you've been leaving that responsibility up to others long enough."

His declaration was countered by a few derisive hoots and sarcastic comments.

"I ain't gonna die because of some outlanders," Eli snarled. "There ain't no need to."

"Who's asking you to die?" Ryan asked sharply. "If you can't see the real threat, you'll die with us outlanders, not because of us. That's the godawful bastard truth."

Felicity suddenly stepped into the firelight. Her face was an emotionless mask, and she spoke hesitantly. "My husband you all knew him was murdered by the Cadre for no other reason than they wanted to murder someone and Spotted Hawk was close at hand. And it's funny, since we came to Amicus three years ago so we wouldn't always have to be looking backward to see who was going to shove a blade into us."

Her chin trembled, but her eyes swept boldly over the crowd. "A lot of us came here to get away from enforced slavery to some fat-assed baron, to live free. Freedom from jack grubbing, from chilling another poor bastard so you could take what he had. Freedom from stinking buzzard turds who live only so they can inflict pain on others. You pay for freedom, I guess. Mebbe our lives are the price. But Spotted Hawk used to say, 'The dead will live forever if they die inside a circle.'"

Ryan swiveled his head toward her, having a difficult time keeping the astonishment he felt from showing on his face.

"I never knew what he meant," Felicity continued. "Now I do. Amicus, our community, the place we built, is a circle. I hope you know that before it's too late to do you any good. But I'd rather die than live and eat the shit Hatchet Jack wants to shove down our throats. And unless all of you have acquired a taste for it, you'll stand with me and the outlanders."

Felicity took another step and stood shoulder to shoulder between Krysty and Ryan. The assembled Amicans said nothing for a very long time. The hush was broken by Eli's harsh voice.

"Ain't that inspirin'? Well, I ain't joinin' up with no shirttail army. I know Hatcher, and I know he's a reasonable man."

Turning to him, Autry said wearily, "You're free to ride out and strike your own deal if you've a mind to, Eli."

"Think I won't?" the burly man said with a sneer. "You're wrong. I'll go for a gab, and if I can't talk Jack into leavin' us alone in exchange for cyclops here, I'll kiss old Hasslich's ass."

Facing the crowd, Eli demanded, "Who'll go with me and prove this outland blowhard wrong?"

Eli received many a doubtful stare and a shuffling of feet, but no one elected to accompany him. Snorting out a scornful laugh, he stomped toward the corral.

"I'll be back afore the moon sets. Or mebbe I won't. Mebbe I'll come to my senses and join up with the Cadre. I can do without you mush-minded fools."

Watching him stride away, Hasslich edged out of the crowd and over to Ryan. "No offense, Mr. Cawdor," he whispered, "but I sorta hopes my ass ends up gettin' kissed."

The people who heard the comment laughed. It was a bit forced, but some of the pall of tension hovering over the Amicans lifted.

"As much as I hate to take anything Eli says seriously," Autry said, "perhaps we should wait and find out if his talk with the Cadre bears any fruit."

"Don't be stupe," Mildred said. "Would you believe anything either one of them might say?"

Autry shrugged. "If nothing else, Eli might be able to give us an idea of the Cadre's firepower and actual numbers. If he doesn't return by the time he set, we'll begin making definite preparations."

"Preparations for what?" Felicity asked. "For a siege, a surrender, a flight or a fight?"

Autry dry washed his face with his hands. "I don't know."

As the crowd drifted away, Ryan and Doc decided to visit the pass to see what would be required to barricade it and to check on the six guards Autry had posted. Hasslich and Felicity volunteered to go with them.

As they walked toward the hills, Ryan asked Felicity, "That stuff about dying in a circle that a common Cheyenne saying?"

"I don't know. It was something Spotted Hawk used to say. He said there is a life circle, and that it must not be broken. That there are some things worth dying for, and more importantly, worth living for. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

Hasslich had provided the arms to the guards.

When they reached the pass, he inspected each one, making sure the weapons were being given the

proper care and attention.

The guards reported no movement within a hundred-yard perimeter of the entrance to the gorge. They were edgy, anxious to be relieved. Though the bodies of the murdered guards had been retrieved, they feared the Cadre would creep up on them in the dark. Since their predecessors had been chilled in broad daylight, their fears weren't entirely without justification.

At the narrow mouth of the gorge, Ryan eyed the dark plain. In the distance, at least half a mile away, was a flickering spear point of firelight. It was the camp of the Red Cadre.

"Tain't gettin' it, Mr. Cawdor," Hasslich said, looking up at the overhanging ledges. "I don' fancy bein' hemmed up in here by prairie pirates."

Ryan didn't respond, and Hasslich said no more. He moved away to rejoin the guards. The only sounds were the faint hum of a breeze and the infrequent chirp of a night bird. Very distantly, almost at the edge of Ryan's hearing, a wolf's howl wafted through the darkness and a chill crawled up his backbone.

Doc sidled up to him and said in a low voice, "Has it occurred to you that we six could easily appropriate mounts from the corral and ride into the night? The Crimson Fraternity may follow us and leave Amicus unmolested."

"It's occurred to me," Ryan admitted. "But I doubt Hatcher would bypass Amicus to get on our trail. He'd suspect they helped us to escape. He owes Amicus a serious bloodletting, anyway."

"Then I submit a variation to that same scenario we simply ride into the night, leaving Amicus and Hatcher to settle their scores their own way."

Ryan leaned against an outcropping and ran a hand through his dark hair. "I remember one time Trader found a stockpile of nerve gas on an old military base. Nasty stuff, still potent. A whole lot of it, too, since it didn't get used during the nuking. Trader had customers for it, serious jack, but he disguised the site so no one, not even him, could make a profit from it."

"The point being?" Doc inquired.

"Trader accepted the responsibility. He took the responsibility for uncovering it and he took the responsibility for covering it up again. There were some things that even he felt were too fucking foul to set loose on the world again, no matter how much jack he could put in his pockets."

"And you feel we should take responsibility for leading the Cadre to Amicus."

"You don't agree?"

"Oh, no. I entirely agree. I was just interested in hearing you say it, since you are normally so taciturn when your emotions are involved."

From the gloom came music, rising and falling notes, mournful and angry at the same time. The bugler of the Red Cadre played a tune that carried a relentless savagery in it, stirring, repetitious and a little nerve-racking.

"What're they doing?" Ryan asked. "Serenading us?"

Doc's lean body tensed. "No, they're sending us a message. That's the 'Deguello.'"

"The what?"

"The 'Deguello,' the throat-cutting song," Doc replied, "a perennial of Mexican army regimental bands a few hundred years ago. Very old, dating back to the bloody wars between Spain and the Moors. When Generalissimo Santa Anna had the Texans boxed up within the Alamo, his bands played it on the night and morning preceding the final assault."

Ryan nodded in comprehension. "No quarter. No mercy for the loser."

Suddenly Felicity ran swiftly toward them. "Rider coming in. Looks like Eli."

Hasslich and the guards joined them at the edge of the pass. A rider was coming across the plain, but the horse was walking.

"What's wrong with the fool?" one of the guards demanded. "Why's he meanderin' like that?"

The guards raised their voices in irritated mutterings at the horseman's leisurely pace. As he drew nearer, they could see it was indeed Eli. "Perhaps he's hurt," Doc ventured. "Or drunk," Hasslich growled. Ryan drew his blaster and, bidding a guard and Hasslich to follow him, sprinted out of the gorge. All of them stopped dead in their tracks when they came to within twenty feet of the mounted man. They walked the remaining distance. There was no need to hurry.

Eli was bound to his saddle by a wooden A-frame that held him upright. His face, drained of all color, save for a smear of blood, was twisted in a rictus of terror and pain. The blood had streamed from the top of his head where his scalp had been before it had been shorn away. His chest bore a narrow, gaping wound that had obviously been made by the blade of a broad-headed hatchet.

Pinned to the front of his coat with a sharpened bone needle was a square of paper. Scrawled on the paper, no doubt in Eli's own blood, was a single word "Soon."

Ryan turned away from the corpse, his face expressionless. In a flat voice he said, "Well, Mr. Hasslich, I hope your ass isn't too disappointed."

Chapter Eight

Ryan's plan was simple. There was no need to fancy it up, at least not at first.

Leaving the guards at their posts, despite their terror, he, Doc, Felicity and Hasslich ran back to Amicus to rouse the citizens. They had freed Eli's corpse from the framework, and Hasslich led his horse, the man's body draped over the saddle. The animal wasn't very tall, and Eli's fingers and toes dragged the ground, the blood from his raw scalp leaving a sticky crimson trail in the dust.

Ryan fetched Mose Autry from his shack at the shores of the lake. He was pale and reluctant to go.

"The Cadre will strike at first light," said Ryan. "We've got to be ready."

Autry wagged his head repeatedly from side to side. "Why would Hatcher warn us like this?"

"Ego, like you said. Also to shake us up, scare us so we can't think clearly. Right now we'll concentrate on defense. When that's done, we'll map out an offensive strategy."

"You think either one will do us any good against all of them?"

"Mebbe it will, mebbe it won't, but we can't sit here all night waiting to die at dawn."

When Autry didn't respond, Ryan growled, "You're the leader here."

"They blame me for this. By offering you and your people refuge, I dragged them into this predicament."

"You can let them think you can drag them out of it."

Autry massaged his eyes with the heels of both hands. "I'm tired, Cawdor. Tired of fighting for lost causes. That's all Amicus is, you know another lost, empty dream. And Deathlands won't suffer dreams to live. I should have known."

Ryan grasped the man's arm, squeezing so tightly Autry grimaced in pain. "I know about lost dreams, believe me. I also know it's not always possible or even desirable to fight on the winning side. Maybe the buzzards'll end up making dinner out of our carcasses, but we can make sure we won't be the only corpses."

Autry dropped his hands and stared unblinkingly at Ryan. Slowly a smile spread across his face. He clapped him on the shoulder, saying, "You've the gift of finding hope in hopeless situations, Mr. Cawdor. Mebbe some of that gift will rub off on me, and I can pass it on to my people."

Within twenty minutes most of the Amican population was assembled at the main bonfire. Autry told them of Eli's fate and the message he carried, which drew a collective moan of dismay.

"No, don't let that bastard scare you," Autry shouted. "Brothers and sisters, we can give Hatcher a fight yet. We'll send the Red Cadre back to the Yellowstone to die on its banks. They'll be coming about breakfast time, so by God, let's give them snakes to eat!"

None of the people cheered at the words, but they listened and they accepted the reality there was no other option than to make a fight of it. They weren't determined or inspired; they were simply resigned. Nevertheless, they hustled off in all directions to prepare.

All of the weapons in town were brought to the tavern. Most of them were Hasslich's muzzle loaders,

rifles and pistols. Everyone had knives, many of them homemade replicas of Bowie's famous blade. A few possessed tomahawks, and there were plenty of bows and arrows. Hasslich had powder and shot in his workshop, but it was barely enough for a protracted battle.

As Hasslich had indicated, there was an AK-47 in town. J.B. inspected it, opening the breech and snorting in disgust. "The firing pin's busted. Might make someone a piss-poor club, though."

Autry took a group of men and women to the mouth of the pass and set them to work building a barricade of rock, linking the largest boulders by chest high walls of sandstone and shale that would serve as adequate battlements for the defenders.

The defenders themselves consisted of thirty-six people, nineteen men and seventeen women, none under the age of fifteen or over the age of fifty. All of them had lived many years on the frontier, and Ryan saw no need to drill them. The rest of the citizens were either too old, too young, too infirm or not inclined to take part. They were confined to hastily erected shelters near the boneyard.

The night wore on, with Autry and Ryan supervising the Amicans' appointed tasks. The hills on either side of the pass worried him more than he let on. Barricade or no barricade, he knew that the Red Cadre would split its force, some sweeping through the gorge and others scaling the hills. There weren't enough people to defend both hills and the pass.

Krysty, who had been helping to build the barricade, called to Ryan. In a voice low enough so the others couldn't hear, she said, "With that gren launcher of his, Hatcher could stand out on the plain and pepper the town to pieces."

"I know, but he'll be firing blind. We'll have blasters on the hilltops to keep them from climbing. They'll have to come through the pass."

Glancing at the gorge, she said, "If there was only some way to bring the walls down when they're jammed in there"

"Mr. Cawdor!"

Felicity jogged up to them, rifle cradled in her arms. She wore a brace of flintlock blasters in a sash at her waist, as well as a long-bladed knife. "I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"No matter what happens, Hatchet Jack will be coming after you, right?"

"I'm counting on it."

Felicity took a deep breath. "If you can, will you spare his life?"

Ryan's eye narrowed. "Why?"

"So I can have it."

"Revenge for your husband?" Krysty asked.

Felicity shook her head. "Not revenge. A reckoning of the spirits. It has to be done, or Spotted Hawk's spirit will never rest."

"I can't promise anything. I'll do what is necessary, even if that includes sparing his life for you."

Felicity's lips compressed, and she turned and walked away.

Ryan shook his head in bewilderment. "I never heard of that spirit-balancing belief before."

"It's not too different from balancing Gaia's earth energies," Krysty commented. "They've got to be maintained on a certain level, or one side will tip and cause a negative- or positive-power avalanche."

"Avalanche," he echoed.

Taking Krysty by the arm, he rushed back into the ville, fetching Doc, J.B., Mildred and Jak along the way. Ryan sent Jak and Mildred to the tavern to collect every jugempty, full or otherwise they could find. Micah was out building fortifications and wasn't able to object when they poured the acrid contents of some of the jugs onto the ground. They joined the others in Hasslich's workshop and examined the ten one-gallon jugs for punctures or cracks. All of them were whole.

Prying up the lids of two kegs of gunpowder standing against the wall, Ryan explained his plan. If it failed, the supply of powder would either be inaccessible to the defenders or literally up in smoke.

"If we fill these jugs with gunpowder, drill holes in the corks and if a fuse can be run from each of these jugs and braided and linked to make one long fuse," Ryan said, "do you think the bang will be big enough to drop the sides of the gorge down on the heads of the Cadre?"

Eyeing the kegs, J.B. replied uneasily, "If the powder is of halfway decent burn quality, yeah. If it isn't, we'll just have a fizzle and no way to retrieve the powder unless Hatcher finds it and uses it himself against us."

"That's a chance we'll have to take."

Hasslich had the proper material for a fuse in the workshop, and Jak and Doc set to work puncturing the corks of the jugs with knives. Mildred and J.B., with the use of a funnel, carefully poured the gunpowder into the jugs. Ryan and Krysty busied themselves partially unbraiding the long loop of fuse, sprinkling powder along its length, then entwining it again.

When the jugs were filled and the corks punctured, Ryan bound the containers together with rope so if one detonated prematurely, the others wouldn't be hurled away by the explosion. Putting them all in a big burlap bag, he and Krysty made their way back to the pass. According to his wrist chron, it was nearly five o'clock.

The climb to the top of the right-hand hill was rugged, with Ryan weighed down by the jugs of gunpowder. He was panting with exertion when they reached their destination. There were a few tangled mesquite bushes at the crest, as well as patches of wildflowers with drooping petals.

Not stopping to rest, Ryan examined the lip of the ridge overhanging the gorge for cracks or faults. He found a deep split in the strata, seven steps from the edge. It was three feet deep and fifteen feet long. He and Krysty inserted the loose tendrils of fuse into the holes in the corks.

When the job was finished, Ryan stood and ran out the fuse, tossing it down the face of the hill. The powder-impregnated line was not long enough to reach the barricades, so when the time came, someone probably him was going to have to expose himself and climb fifty-odd feet to light it.

Chapter Nine

The sun was a bare finger's width above the horizon when they began to arrive. The wind wags of the Red Cadre swept across the plain. They rolled in a compact, orderly formation, from two different directions. A few hundred yards from the pass, the pirates disembarked. Ryan had expected a disorganized mass, like spooked cattle, but the men marched in ordered ranks.

Ryan stood atop the right-hand hill with Krysty and Jak. Six men stood behind them. On the left-hand hill were six men, all identically armed with long blasters. Mose Autry stood with them. Mildred, Doc and J.B. were at the fortifications below.

"There's more of them than I thought," Krysty breathed. "Must be two hundred."

Ryan scanned the approaching pirates and said, "More like fifty. The manner they march in is an old Indian trick, to make the enemy think he's hopelessly outnumbered." He peered through the binoculars and saw well-built men with faces devoid of warmth or humor. Most of them carried muzzle loaders, but he spotted a few multishot blasters here and there among them.

John Hatcher brought up the rear. On his belt was a new scalp, the color of Eli's hair. He cradled the M-79 gren launcher, and a bag hung from one shoulder. It looked heavy, and Ryan figured it contained the explosive rounds. A man walked beside him holding a battered, verdigris-eaten green bugle.

Turning to the men assembled behind him, Ryan said, "Remember what we planned. Pick your targets and fire. While you reload, me and my people will blaze away."

Ryan glanced at Krysty. She had her Smith amp; Wesson in both hands, and she gave him a reassuring smile. He propped the cushioned stock of the Steyr against his right hip.

The bugler sounded a brassy, bleating note. At the same moment the pirates thundered across the plain, moving as though they were being pushed forward by a wind from death's kingdom. They uttered

strident, wordless cries. Blaster stocks slapped against shoulders, and puffs of smoke bloomed amid a staccato popping sound.

A few musket balls rattled on the stones around the defenders. The men aiming their long blasters murmured prayers and muttered curses. But most of them were veterans of frontier battles, and they waited until the first wave of pirates was clearly framed in their weapons' sights. When they fired, it was without haste and without mistake.

At each shot, one of the Cadre either tumbled to the ground or slapped at a wound. As the men fell back to reload, Ryan shouldered the Steyr, squinted through the Starlite nightscope and squeezed the trigger. Within the crosshairs of the telescopic sight, he saw a pirate pitch over backward as though struck by lightning. Working the bolt action smoothly, Ryan fired twice more, picking his targets with care. A clear view of Hatcher was obscured by running, milling men.

Jak fired his .357 Magnum Colt Python and cursed when he missed his target. Even with a six-inch barrel, the range was too great for a handblaster.

The pirates wavered, turned, then raced back toward their wind wags. Seven of them would never sail the prairie again, and as they fled Autry drilled one of the rearmost marauders in the center of the back. A ragged cheer erupted along the ranks of the men arrayed on both sides of the pass. Ryan didn't join in, nor did Jak or Krysty.

"Were testing us," Jak said. "Won't turn them back easy next time."

A raspy voice shouted across the plain. Hatcher was exhorting his brigands to do better next time. The defenders heard him, too, and they feverishly finished reloading their weapons. None of them had been so much as scratched, but Ryan knew such good fortune couldn't last.

Ryan watched the activity through the binoculars. The Cadre milled around their wags, and several clambered aboard each one, Hatcher included. The low growl of the diesel engines turning over and catching wafted through the early-morning air. With a series of lurches, the fleet rolled forward. The wags were maneuvered closely together until a gap of only six or seven feet separated the hulls.

The pirates were crouched between the curving sides of the craft snug on the inside of the formation. The remainder marched behind. Almost every man was protected by mobile cover.

It was a strategy Ryan had expected and feared. The first sortie had been experimental, testing their defenses and the quality of their marksmanship. Hatcher hadn't wanted to risk damage to his craft unless it was absolutely necessary. Apparently he now considered the risk necessary.

The engines that powered the fan blades, which in turn filled the sails, were protected by sheet-metal cowlings. The balls fired by the muzzle loaders didn't have the velocity to penetrate the sheathing. Even shooting the sails full of holes would only slow the advance, not halt it.

The fleet picked up speed, and bullets began to pound into the hillsides. A man on the right hilltop screamed and fell backward, hands over a pulsing throat wound. A disconcerted shout went up from the defenders. They gazed in shock at the wounded, bleeding man.

"Eyes on your targets!" Ryan yelled. Across from him, Mose Autry repeated that command.

Bullets bounced from stone and hard-packed dirt, sending up sprays of soil and ricocheting away. Ryan raised the Steyr to his shoulder, fixing one of the pirates in the scope's crosshairs. He waited until the man's head, shoulders and torso filled the sight. Though the light was growing stronger, the Starlite scope's laser image enhancer was still useful.

"Fire!" he shouted.

The men on both hilltops squeezed the triggers of their long blasters. A hail of bullets smote the wind wags, splintering handrails, tearing gouges in the woodwork and puncturing sails.

Ryan kept his eye glued to the sight. He squeezed the trigger. A man standing on the deck of the second wag to his left jerked as the 7.62 mm round walloped him in the belly, bending him double and slapping him overboard.

Shifting the sights of the Steyr to a center wag, he saw Hatcher appear on the deck. A ferocious grin split the man's bearded face, and Ryan's finger tightened on the trigger. At the same instant, Hatcher brought up the M-79, a plume of smoke spurting from its bore.

Ryan had barely enough time to shout "Down!" before the hill trembled beneath his boots. The gren had

fallen short, impacting explosively against the face of the hillside. Still, the concussion shook the ground and gouted dirt, turf and gravel in all directions.

A cloud of smoke, dust and pulverized rock particles hung in the air like a veil of soiled chiffon. A couple of the defenders, unnerved by the explosion, fired blindly through the haze.

Ryan retreated across the crest, yelling, "Fall back! Everybody fall back!"

Just as the defenders began to comply, a gren landed no more than three feet away. Ryan turned, and a giant fist punched him the small of the back, a blizzard of dirt and pebbles swirled around him and a battering ram of hot, almost solid air slammed him off the top of the hill.

He cartwheeled down the slope, hearing rocks pattering all around him. He tried to maintain his grip on the Steyr, but he struck a projecting finger of earth, and the body-numbing jolt jarred the long blaster from his hands. His thrashing descent came to a breath-robbing, spine-compressing halt against the stone barricade at the foot of the hill.

Dizzy, his ears ringing, Ryan clawed at the rocks, fighting his way to his feet. Then Mildred and Doc were on either side of him, pulling him erect, helping to steady him.

A column of smoke twisted up from the top of the hill, and he saw the sparse grass was covered with a glistening crimson dew.

"Krysty," he croaked, and started a shambling, stumbling run to the base of the slope. He tried to shake free of Doc and Mildred, but their grips were tight and he dragged both of them along with him.

"No!" Mildred said sharply. "Ryan, stop fighting us!"

Krysty, Jak and two of the riflemen appeared on the crest of the hill. All four people were daubed and streaked with blood, but they appeared uninjured, though Jak was favoring his right leg.

Ryan waited until they had half climbed and half fallen to the bottom before running out to meet them.

"Blood isn't mine," Krysty said unsteadily. "I was standing behind the man it belonged to."

Mildred ran exploratory fingers up and down Jak's leg. "Chunk rock hit me," he said in a voice tight with repressed pain.

"I don't think any bones are broken," Mildred observed. "But I imagine you'll have a hell of a bruise."

At that moment a gren arced down out of the sky and landed on the hilltop to their left. The blast sent bodies as limp as rag dolls flailing into the air, rending them apart with shrapnel and shock waves. The detonation bit a sizable portion out of the hill and spit it skyward.

From the far side of the hills, from the plain, rose laughing catcalls of vicious delight and victory.

A body came tumbling down the face of the hill, and J.B. broke from the cover of the barricade and ran toward it. Before the corpse rolled all the way to the bottom, it reached out a bloody hand and grasped a handful of tough grass to stop the tumble.

J.B. ran up the slope and grabbed Mose Autry. The man's eyes were unfocused and glassy, and he breathed heavily through his open mouth. Blood trickled from lacerations on his arms and legs, and from his ears.

Recognizing the symptoms of concussion-induced hemorrhage, J.B. grasped Autry's wrists, stooped and wrestled him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. As he sprinted back toward the fortifications, a few bullets rattled on the rocks. The Cadre, was pushing through the gorge and climbing the hills.

Retrieving the Steyr, Ryan joined his friends behind the makeshift battlements just as a pack of pirates appeared at the mouth of the pass. No one gave the defenders at the walls an order. Half of them shouted in fear and anger and squeezed the triggers of their muzzle loaders. At that range every ball found a target, but the men of the Red Cadre managed to return fire.

The defenders of Amicus sheltered themselves behind their barricade as the bullets hammered into it. A man cried out and fell, hands over his belly, crimson squirting between the fingers.

The bugle sounded a discordant retreat. The men and women with fully loaded weapons straightened and fired a volley, raking the marauders who were backing into the gorge and running back over the hills.

There was sporadic return fire from the Cadre, and two more Amicans went down, writhing and crying out.

Then the six outlanders were the only ones firing. Their blasters kept the pirates cowering in the pass while the defenders reloaded. Everyone continued to glance toward the hilltops for any sign of Hatchet

Jack or a gren.

The stretch of ground between the battlements and the pass was carpeted with bodies, some moaning and trying to move, most motionless and leaking fluids. A pirate whimpered, shot through the head but somehow still alive. Smoke drifted in flat planes over them.

The companions quickly reloaded their weapons. Ryan glanced around, and J.B., Mildred, Jak, Doc and Krysty all met his gaze with self-assured nods.

A small dark object rocketed out of the cleft between the hills and struck the barricade broadside, with a shuddering shock and rolling boom of thunder and a ball of flame. The gren tore a ragged hole in the stonework. None of the people standing at the detonation point had the time to scream.

Fragments of rock blew in a horizontal column inside the perimeter. A chunk the size of a hen's egg hit Ryan on the right side of his rib cage, bringing a sharp dart of pain. A few gobs of torn, blood-slick flesh thudded to the ground, and a red mist mingled with the dust and smoke. A shout of rage, terror and despair rang out among the defenders.

The air was still shivering with the vibrations of the explosion when the Red Cadre boiled out of the gorge in a shouting, shooting mass.

The wall hadn't collapsed under the concussive force of the gren as Hatcher had evidently hoped. The men leading the charge hesitated, slowing their pace. The marauders behind them kept coming, throwing the first wave headlong against the rock barricades.

Men fell, were dashed against the jagged bulwark, and screams of pain replaced the war yells.

In an instant the Amican defenses were a writhing welter of shrieks, kicks and thrashing bodies. The men in the rear had to pick their way over their fallen and broken-limbed comrades as they swept forward.

The defenders fired, the blended gunshots giving rise to a loud thunderclap.

The bullet-slashed pirates dropped atop their dead or crippled brothers, but more appeared to clamber over the red shambles of flesh and bone. Like a tide, the howling horde flooded over the half-topped battlements.

The Amicans met the Cadre with knives, tomahawks and clubbing blaster stocks. Along the line of stone was screaming, bloody chaos. Hatchets chopped, knives broke on rock, skulls were split with blaster butts.

The Amicans fought with the fury of desperation. They hacked, slashed, bludgeoned and died.

Ryan, half-blinded by dust and black-powder smoke, glimpsed Micah go down with a tomahawk buried in the crown of his head. He saw one of the Cadre rush toward Mildred, who had her back turned, and he fired his blaster point-blank. The marauder flopped facedown, a geyser of scarlet pumping from a cavity in the side of his head.

A rush of bodies knocked Ryan sprawling, and a knife blade thrust for his throat. He wrenched himself aside and heard the blade break against the rocky ground. He fired the SIG-Sauer into the bearded face snarling over him, and the eyes and nose dissolved in a bloody smear. Elbowing aside the corpse, he leaped to his feet, working the trigger, the blaster bucking in his fist.

It was J.B.'s Uzi that tipped the scales. The diminutive Armorer squeezed off 3-round burst after 3-round burst, and at that range he didn't miss a single target, nor did any of the targets survive the pounding hail of 9 mm stingers.

Responding to a bleating note from the bugle, the Cadre engaged in a slow, stubborn retreat, climbing over the barricade and backing away toward the gorge. Their covering fire was ragged and sporadic.

No one cheered the rout. There were too many dead and too many wounded inside the fortifications.

Ryan went to Krysty, who was bleeding from a wound in her right arm. He didn't have the opportunity to check on the rest of his friends. Mose Autry forced himself through the dust and smoke and came to his side. His lower torso was sodden with blood, and he held a scarf over the knife slash across his belly.

His upper lip was split, and through clenched, red-filmed teeth, he said, "We're done. It's over. Almost no ammunition left, dead and wounded everywhere. All Hatcher has to do is fire one more gren."

Ryan looked toward the cleft. He saw no movement, but he knew the narrow gorge was clogged with the survivors of the last assault and the walking wounded.

Then Hatcher's voice rolled out from within the pass. "Listen to me, you dumb shits. Listen to reason!

There's no escape. I have more men than you can ever kill!"

"Bullshit," J.B. muttered, his face streaked with soot and dirt. "I bet he's out of grens, or down to his last one."

"I can blow you out of there, but let's end this now!"

No one responded to Hatcher's words.

"The outlander, Cawdor, knows what I want! All he has to do is give it to me, and this is over. You have my word!"

"Do you all want to die," he went on, "all your women, your children? You want your houses burned, your animals slaughtered, your crops stomped flat? Is that what you want?"

Hatcher barely waited for a response. His hoarse, maddened voice roared, "If that's what you fuckers want, we'll give it to you!"

A volley of shots ripped out of the gorge mouth. Everyone ducked, and the bullets flattened themselves against rock. Then the bugle sounded, playing a familiar series of melancholy rising and falling notes.

"No quarter," Doc said with a bleak smile.

"Good," Ryan replied. "That's just the way I want it."

Chapter Ten

Wincing in pain, Autry said, "Even if he's out of grens, he still holds the pass. We're still boxed in."

Ryan laughed, a low, harsh chuckle without humor. "Not as boxed in as he's about to be."

Rising, he and his friends conducted a quick inspection of the fortifications, Autry shuffling along behind them. Of the thirty-six defenders, only eleven remained on their feet. More than a dozen were injured so severely that they could only lie on the ground, bleeding and groaning.

Making a quick head count, Ryan counted at least nineteen Cadre casualties, both in and outside the perimeter. He could only guess at how many wounded were within the pass.

The young man named Allen sat upright against the rock wall, his legs stretched in front of him. Both hands were clasped over a hole in his stomach, and pink-gray entrails showed between bloody fingers.

When Doc knelt beside him, he stared up at him through unfocused eyes reflecting the sure awareness of imminent death.

Face white beneath its coating of soot, Doc patted him on the shoulder and murmured a few words to him. As he did so, Allen expired quietly, his body relaxing and slowly sliding to one side.

With gentle fingers Doc closed the lids over the young man's staring eyes and rose, turning away from the others.

After completing the circuit, Ryan said to Autry, "When I get over the wall, I want you to pin down the Cadre inside the pass. Shoot at them, throw rocks, anything to stop them from coming through it again."

"Get over the wall?" Autry asked. "Where are you going?"

Ryan holstered his blaster and didn't reply. He handed the Steyr to Krysty and vaulted over the barricade and sprinted toward the foot of the right-side hill. He had run only a few yards when musket balls began to strike around him. He saw the winks of several muzzle flashes in the shadows of the gorge's mouth. Heavier fire answered from the barricades behind him a triple burst from the Uzi, the door-slamming bang of Mildred's ZKR, then deeper reports from Krysty's and Jak's handblasters, as well as a few softer pops from flintlocks.

A couple of musket balls plucked at his clothes, but he kept running. His eye was fixed on the powder-impregnated fuse that stretched down from the top of the hill.

But even as he looked at it, the length of line suddenly quivered, was drawn upward in a jerky fashion,

then came flying back down, looping and coiling.

Ryan snarled and scrambled up the slope, grabbing at rocks and tufts of grass. When he reached the crest, he flung himself to where the jugs of gunpowder were cached. Then he rocked to such a sudden halt, his feet nearly went out from under him.

Standing spraddle legged over the containers of powder, slapping the blade of his hatchet into an open palm, was John Hatcher. As Ryan's hand darted for the butt of his blaster, Hatcher brought the hatchet up and over his head. The SIG-Sauer cleared leather at the same time the hatchet spun toward Ryan. It rotated through the air, on a direct line with his head.

Ryan didn't aim, squeezed the trigger from the hip. The bullet struck the blade of the hatchet and deflected it from its course. It spun crazily to one side.

Hatcher didn't gape at the incredible accuracy of the hip shot. Roaring in anger, he bounded forward in a flying leap, feet first. The soles of his moccasins thudded solidly into Ryan's stomach. The one-eyed man stumbled, his nervous system momentarily overwhelmed by the force of the unexpected kick.

A moment was all Hatcher needed. One hand wrested the blaster from Ryan's suddenly slack fingers, and the other, clenched in a fist, sent him staggering half a score of feet away. His foot caught in a fissure, and he fell on his right side.

Hatcher aimed the SIG-Sauer at him. "I want the map and my gold, you one-eyed thief," he said hoarsely.

From below rose the sound of strifegunshots, shouts and the blaring notes of the "Deguello."

Hatcher smiled. "Hear that, Cawdor? It's just about over, but me and you ain't done yet. Before we're through, you'll give me exactly what I want."

Ryan's hand made a motion toward the panga knife at his hip. Hatcher stepped in and delivered a kick to the side of his head, flipping him over on his back.

Grunting with exertion and pleasure, Hatcher kicked him three more times, once in the belly and twice in the head.

"Try it again, Cawdor," Hatcher said, affecting a wheedling note. "I ain't had much fun today, but then the day's still young."

Ryan tried to rise, but his strength was gone, as if his muscles had been drained through a sieve. Blood streamed over his good eye from a laceration in his forehead, and a ringing pain echoed within the walls of his skull.

Raising his head, he blinked back blood and tried to collect enough saliva in his mouth so he could spit at the coldheart chief of the Red Cadre. A light breeze whispered across the hilltop. Its touch was soft, a caress on Ryan's throbbing face. The breeze helped his senses return to him.

"You cost me, Cawdor," Hatcher grated. "Cost me more than I can ever get back, and I mean to cost you plenty."

Suddenly Hatcher's body twitched, as if he had received a blow in the back. His deerskin shirtfront acquired a ragged hole, and a splash of crimson spread across it in an artless pattern. He grunted in pain and surprise.

Neither man heard the shot, but both of them saw Felicity struggling over the lip of the hill, a blaster in her right hand, a tendril of pale smoke curling from the barrel. The left side of her face was completely covered with a sliding flow of blood, gushing from a bullet wound in her scalp.

Hatcher swayed, gasping out a curse. He fired the SIG-Sauer, and the 9 mm round caught her in the chest, between her breasts, smashing her sternum and ripping her lungs asunder.

The woman didn't cry out, but her body was jolted backward and to one side. The shock waves of the bullet's impact traveled down her arm and sent the blaster twirling from her fingers. In one sweeping, red-tinted glance, Ryan saw the blaster lying only three feet from his right hand, the cache of gunpowder and the two-foot length of fuse that ran from it.

His weakness and pain gave a great surge and faded. He shot out one arm for the blaster, but as his fingers closed over it, Hatcher spun toward him and lunged. He cursed, but only a crimson spray came from his lips.

Ryan fell onto his back, and, unable to check his plummet, Hatcher met his adversary's uplifted boots

with his stomach. As those legs straightened, the pirate stumbled backward, his arms windmilling. He grabbed at the mesquite bush to regain his balance and dropped the SIG-Sauer. But one foot slipped into the crack where the jugs of gunpowder were placed. He sat down atop them with a grunt of forcefully expelled air.

Ryan dived forward, thumbing back the blaster's lock. Hitting the ground, he aimed the weapon toward the fuse. Hatcher struggled to his feet at the same time Ryan squeezed the trigger. The lock fell, striking the flint, and a spark jumped and touched the powder-treated fuse. Sizzling, the spark smoked its way along the fuse.

Ryan had just enough time to roll away from the edge before the spark flashed its way along the fuse to the jugs of powder.

The explosion dazzled him, deafened him, coated him with a fine layer of dust, and the concussion rolled him over and over. Through the tongues of flame, the upflung clouds of smoke and grit, he glimpsed a dark shape flying overhead, limbs flailing.

The echoes of the explosion were swallowed up by a grinding roar that grew louder with every passing heartbeat. Peering through the shifting planes of smoke, he saw the entire edge of the ridge sliding from view. The "Deguello" ceased trumpeting.

Rock cracked and split, then the entire wall of the gorge was in motion, flowing down in a grinding, crashing torrent. Ryan got to his feet and peered down. He had only the briefest of glimpses of buckskin-clad men jamming the narrow passage below, then they were blocked from sight by the down-rushing tons of dirt, shale and sandstone.

The few of the Cadre still out on the plain stared at the bouncing storm of stones in wide-eyed shock. Their upturned faces blanched, and they began to race toward the wind wags. There was less than a dozen, and they all clambered aboard the largest craft, fighting one another to align the sail and to start the engine. There was no strategy, no order, only the half-mad desire to flee.

Turning away, Ryan looked down over the Amican defenses. Everyone was looking up at him. He waved, and the people below waved in return, voicing a wordless victory cry. The few who were able began to dance. He picked up his SIG-Sauer and absently brushed away the grit.

Halfway down the hill lay Felicity's body, arms outflung, face turned to the sky. Far above her, with wings outstretched, a hawk glided gracefully on the air currents.

The sickening odor of scorched human hair and flesh was more overpowering than the acrid reek of burned powder. Sprawled facedown at the far end of the hilltop was John Hatcher. Smoke curled from the seat and legs of the man's pants, but moans of agony bubbled from the loose-limbed, fire-blackened shape. John Jacob Hatcher was still alive.

Ryan limped over and toed him over onto his back.

His long hair was crisped black, only a stinking, smoking fuzz covering his head. His beard was a smoldering patch of charred bristles, and his face was covered by red, raw patches and huge, leaking blisters. He gazed down at him and Hatcher gazed back, trying to bite back the groans. He breathed in whistling gasps, his lungs and sinuses cooked.

Staring into his eyes, Ryan removed the map from his pocket, unfolded it and waved it before Hatcher's eyes. Then he touched one corner of the parchment to a tiny flame on the man's pant leg, and the map went up in a flash of fire and cinders.

Ryan blew the handful of ashes directly into Hatcher's face. The ashes scattered, dancing on the breeze. The wind shredded the gray scraps to bits, leaving only a thin residue adhering to Hatcher's peeled, sticky flesh.

Hatcher's chest rose and fell, then rose no more.

"I gave you exactly what you wanted," Ryan whispered. "No quarter."

Chapter Eleven

The voice spoke in Ryan's mind as he slept, penetrating his dreams. There was a nonhuman quality to its vibration that set even his slumbering mind bristling with suspicion. It was a voice he had heard before. Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been.

Ryan knew he was dreaming, knew he was stretched out on a cot in Amicus, sleeping the sleep of the utterly exhausted. His mind crawled at the inhuman, relentless tone of the voice as it spoke again.

Grandmother Earth, you who have shown mercy to your children who have ripped and burned and poisoned you, I shall heal you!

"I shall heal you," Ryan heard himself say.

Then his eye snapped open, and he lunged up from the cot, reaching for his blaster and panga, staring wildly around the dim room. A shadow slid past the open window and was gone before his blurred eye could focus. He scrambled to the window, shoving aside the blanket serving as a curtain. He heard the padding of feet out in the gray, oyster-hued light just after sunrise, but he could see nothing.

He stood at the window, confused and a little angry, his mind still fogged by fatigue. The tension of nerves eased. There was nothing out there in the dark but a few lights and bodies that had yet to be recovered. Scraps of pink and orange glowed in the eastern sky. The cool air still retained a faint odor of blood, gunpowder and seared human flesh.

Turning away from the window, he saw that Krysty was gone, but he heard her voice from the other room. Making a deliberate effort to push away the strangeness of his dream and the voice in his mind, he holstered the SIG-Sauer, sat on the edge of the narrow bed and tugged on his boots.

He checked his chron, noting it was nearly twenty-four hours to the minute since the Red Cadre had arrived. During the day and most of the night following the battle, he and his friends had patched up their wounds as best they could and helped the survivors of the battle collect and tidy the dead. The thought of remaining in Amicus another day suddenly revolted him.

Ryan went through the door into the common room of the little hostel. Jak and Krysty sat at the table with a pot of the pungent tea before them. Doc stood shaving in front of a tiny trade mirror, carefully scraping the straight razor across his face. Mildred and J.B. were evidently still asleep, since he heard snores from an adjoining room.

"Did you call out in there?" Krysty asked.

"Mebbe," Ryan replied. He pulled out the chair next to her and sat.

"Bad dream?"

Ryan hesitated. "I don't know. Thought I heard someone outside the window."

Jak narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

"Mebbe I just dreamed it," Ryan answered with a shake of his head.

"I'm not surprised," Krysty said, placing her hand over his. "The past few days have been a nightmare. And if what's left of the Red Cadre manages to regroup"

"We'll be long gone before that happens," Ryan interrupted a bit more harshly than he intended. "Let's be out of here after breakfast."

A voice spoke from the doorway. "I'd hoped you might stay until at least lunch."

Ryan turned, facing Autry who leaned against the door frame. He was wearing a wooly buffalo robe that was far too big for him. His gentle, bearded face sagged with pain and grief.

"We'd rather get on the move as soon as possible."

Autry nodded. "We'll be sorry to see you go. Amicus owes you great debt." He didn't need to add, what's left of it.

Ryan smiled slightly. He knew the survivors of the battle still blamed the outlanders for bringing such a flood tide of blood and pain to their community. If they stayed, he and his friends would be resented almost as much as the Cadre.

"Give us some food and some mounts, and we'll call it even."

"Where will you go?" Autry asked.

"Does it matter?"

Autry shrugged. "I suppose not. I'll have some food brought to you."

He turned and left the hostel.

"Where we go?" Jak asked. "Mountain ranges all around. Can't sail wags on them."

"We can go back to Colorado, mebbe, so we can see how Dean is doing at school."

"And after that," Doc added, toweling the lather from his face, "I daresay we shall make another jump."

Autry returned, bearing platters of food. It was the same mixture of cheese, bread and bacon they had eaten on their first morning in Amicus, and it was even less appetizing this time around.

After Autry put down the platters on the table, he said, "If you're looking for a guide, there's a Lakota tribesman who arrived late last night. He wants to talk to you."

"Who is he?" J.B. asked.

"Little Mountain remember him? says he's a highly placed war chief."

"You mean this Yutan-kin-Mahipiya?" Krysty asked, stumbling over the pronunciation.

Autry nodded. "Says he knows you."

Jak's eyes narrowed. "Knows who?"

"All of you. Wait a minute, I'll fetch him."

Through the open door they watched Autry cross the muddy street toward a tepee. A man sat there, wearing a hooded deerskin cape. He rose with the lithe, coiled movements of a panther when Autry approached. There was something vaguely familiar about his smooth, quick motions. He cradled a Gewehr automatic assault rifle in his arms.

Autry and the stranger marched across the street. As they entered the room, the man pulled back the hood of his cape. His face was lean and sharply planed. His black-haired head was alertly erect, and a pair of red hawk feathers were pinned at the back. He was no wild tribesman. His face and dark eyes had fire and pride and a haughty intelligence. Mildred recognized him first.

"Touch-the-Sky," she blurted.

"Call me Joe," the Lakota replied in uninflected English. "I'm pleased you remember me."

Ryan wasn't sure if he was pleased; the summer before they had met Touch-the-Sky in the Black Hills. Though they hadn't been allies, the Lakota and his band of warriors had saved Krysty, Mildred, J.B., Jak and Doc from the guns of Helskel's sec men. From what he had been told, the rescue had been unintentional, more of a by-product of the Lakotas' attack on Lars Hellstrom and his squad of sec men. Touch-the-Sky himself, who preferred to be called "Joe" by the whites, prowled the ancient tribal lands of his people, seeking out and punishing interlopers and desecrators. He had warned them about the chill-crazy citizens of the settlement of Helskel, and a few days later Ryan had spared the man's life when he could have just as easily ended it. Under the circumstances he supposed they owed each other nothing and had to renew their relationship on fresh terms.

At a loss for something say, Ryan ventured, "Autry told us your name was Yutan-kin-something-or-other."

"That's the Lakota pronunciation," Joe replied with a thin smile. "The English translation is, of course, Touch-the-Sky."

"Care to join us for breakfast?" Krysty asked.

Joe shook his head. "Thank you, no. This isn't a social call. When Little Mountain told me that Ochi-neethat's you, Mr. Cawdor and his friends were here in Amicus, threatened by the Red Cadre, I came straightaway. I arrived too late to help rout them, I see."

"That blaster of yours would have been a big help to us. As it is, some got away," J.B. told him.

"The survivors, the stragglers, have already been dealt with." Joe's tone was cold, firm and decisive.

Ryan leaned back in his chair. "You said this isn't a social call. What do you want with us?"

Joe pointed through the open door toward the gray-green mountains on the horizon. "My people dwell there, in the mountains you call the Wind River Range, in a valley called Ti-Ra'-Wa. We have enemies there, and they are too powerful for us to conquer on our own. We have few weapons. I came to Amicus when I heard you were here because you left Helskel aflame and drove their evil from my

people's ancestral land. You can help us in our struggle."

Ryan suddenly felt certain Joe wasn't seeking aid to win a petty intertribal conflict. The stakes were far larger than property or hunting rights.

"Not mercies," Jak said.

Joe shrugged. "You are warriors, and that is enough. I'd hoped to reach Amicus in time to aid you in your battle with the Cadre, and you would subsequently discharge the debt by helping me. Therefore, we must bargain. Though I won't pay you, I will reward you."

Doc's face suddenly showed interest. "Reward us with what?"

Joe reached beneath his deerskin cloak and brought forth a dully gleaming object that he laid carefully, almost reverently on the tabletop.

It was a flat wafer of dull yellow metal, several inches long. Inset on either side of the wafer were two small hexagons of crystal. Though they looked like quartz, there was something odd about their structure. Each was only an inch in diameter, but bore an interlocking pattern of facets that blurred the vision, made it difficult to focus directly on them.

"More shiny metal," Jak snorted scornfully.

"Not again," J.B. muttered.

Joe started. "What do you mean?"

Ryan dug around in his pocket and brought out the pieces of gold he had taken from John Hatcher. "Got this off Hatcher Jack."

Joe's eyes widened, and his nostrils flared. "That is from Ti-Ra'-Wa! It is the Mazaska WakenSacred Gold. How did he get it?"

"He never said," Doc replied, picking up the slice of metal. "He was more concerned about accruing more."

Gingerly Doc nipped at one corner of the wafer. He examined it closely, saw the faint indentations of his teeth and exclaimed, "By the Three Kennedys! Pure gold!"

Ryan looked up at Joe. "Where did this come from?"

"From Ti-Ra'-Wa," the Lakota answered. "There is more. All you can carry away. If you help me."

"The map Hatcher had on him," Autry said in surprise. "It must have been legitimate after all."

J.B. turned to Ryan. "This could be big. All the years you and me traveled with Trader, we never had an opportunity like this."

Jak merely gazed impassively at the metal wafer. Doc looked interested, but not particularly excited.

Krysty and Mildred eyed him, waiting for his reaction.

Taking the slice of gold from Doc, Ryan fingered it. "It looks almost like it was machined, more like some kind of instrument, not an ornament."

Joe hesitated before replying. When he spoke, his tone was evasive. "It came from a cavern in Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"Did your people mine it?" Krysty asked.

"There is much more like it there," Joe responded.

"That's no answer," J.B. said. "Is there a gold mine in this Ti-Ra'-Wa of yours?"

"Ti-Ra'-Wa," Mildred repeated slowly, musingly. "That seems familiar, from my Native American studies."

Joe stiffened. "Your answer, Ochinee. Will you come?"

Ryan exchanged a quick glance with Krysty. Her hair wasn't stirring, and she shrugged, indicating she sensed no danger, or at least not an immediate threat. Still, there was too much about Joe's proposal that was in the dark. But the promise of a definite destination was a strong inducement.

Fixing his gaze on Joe's angular face, Ryan said, "I won't commit us to anything without a discussion.

We've just fought one battle for others. That might be enough for a while. I'll let you know by sundown."

Joe nodded. "Until then."

With that he picked up the gold wafer and stepped out of the room and into the street.

When the Lakota was well out of earshot, Mose Autry smiled sourly. "He doesn't seem like a fool, but doesn't he realize with your blasters and skill you can just take his gold and walk off with it?"

Krysty turned on the man, her eyes flashing emerald sparks. "No matter what we agree to do, we'd never do that. If we were that sort, we'd have sold out your pesthole ville to Hatchet Jack."

Autry cast his eyes downward, shame spreading across his face in a red flush. "Of course. I'm sorry. I'm just tired. I'll leave you now."

He shuffled out of the door.

Addressing Ryan, Doc inquired, "What is your initial reaction to our noble savage's invitation?"

"To tell him thanks but no thanks," Ryan replied.

"Gold is still the best grease in most of Deathlands," J.B. reminded him.

"Could buy anything we want," Jak offered.

"Except safety," Mildred said. "We'd draw packs of two-legged coyotes to our trail."

"If the setup is how he said it is, we'd be fighting someone else's battle for solid jack this time," J.B. stated.

"We could have fought this last one for gold if we'd had a mind to," Krysty said. "We could have followed Hatcher's map. It probably would have led us right to this Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"Mildred, didn't you say there was something familiar about this place?" Ryan asked.

"Vaguely. Though my studies revolved around tribal linkages and genotyping, I touched on creation myths from time to time."

"And?"

Mildred shook her head, the beads in her plaited hair clicking faintly. "It's been a long time, and my recollection is foggy. Anyway, there's a legend among some Plains tribes that says the source of creation came from a cave in a valley. Ti-Ra'-Wa means, roughly, Sacred or Mystery Valley."

"Is this place anything like the villes of Cibola and El Dorado you told us about?" J.B. asked.

"No, not really. It's more of a Garden of Eden type of myth. I remember a bit of poetry about it. 'Magic Ti-Ra'-Wa/Life, death, good, evil, joy and sorrow/All born in the Cavern of Creation.'"

"A myth, mebbe," Krysty said. "But Joe said he came from Ti-Ra'-Wa."

Ryan shrugged. "The tribe in the mountains probably named their valley after the legend." Doc chuckled.

"Nature imitates art," Wilde said."

He turned to Mildred. "Are you suggesting Joe wants us to fight a war in the Native American equivalent of Eden?"

"I'm suggesting nothing of the sort," Mildred answered a bit sharply. "I'm not even sure if I'm remembering the legend correctly, since all cultures share similar creation myths. I may be confusing Ti-Ra'-Wa with Tir na-Nog, the ancient Celtic land of promise. The two words are similar linguistically. It's been a very long time, and my memory is faulty. You should be able to relate to that, Doc."

At the acid reminder of his own unreliable and occasionally severely fogged thought processes, Doc lapsed into an abashed silence.

"I'll leave this decision to a vote," Ryan announced, "since nobody but me was anxious to leave this place."

On the one hand, we can turn Joe down and stay, mebbe help Amicus rebuild. On the other hand, we can accept Joe's offer, have a destination in mind and, at least, be on our way to somewhere again."

Krysty tapped her fingers on the tabletop. "This really all boils down to whether we trust Joe."

"Only one way find out," Jak said.

No one could argue, or even cared to, with the statement. After an hour of discussion, it was agreed to accompany Joe and at least find out if he was telling the truth.

Chapter Twelve

Around midmorning Ryan sought out Joe and told him they would accept his offer. Joe said they would

embark at dawn the next day, and he offered to buy the mounts and pack animals. He added that the march to the valley would take three to four days. It was agreed they would meet at the hostel at sunrise. Taking a tour of Amicus with his friends, Ryan regretted ever raising the possibility of staying to help the citizens rebuild.

The population had been reduced by one-third, and the elderly and children had been pressed into service as medical aides and undertakers. The tavern served as a hospital, and the boneyard contained the unburied dead. The Amican defenders were covered with blankets and hides; the corpses of the Red Cadre had been stripped and dumped unceremoniously on the heap of animal bones and left to rot. The few able-bodied people in the ville were working at clearing the pass sufficiently so it could be used again as an egress.

As they passed them by, the Amicans eyed the companions distrustfully, even angrily. Ryan wasn't pleased that his assessment of their prevailing attitude had been so accurate.

Rebuilding the open ville of Amicus seemed like far more effort than it was worth.

They returned to their quarters in the afternoon to rest. Ryan and Krysty lay together in the narrow bunk, but she was unresponsive to his caresses; she was troubled, haunted by what had happened the day before.

She was also exhausted, as all of them were, since they had gone for nearly forty tension-drenched hours without sleep. Their rest the night following the battle had been fitful.

As aching and as tired as he was, Ryan found he was a little afraid of falling asleep. He tried to repress the memories of the ghostly, inhuman voices echoing through his dream, but he still felt uneasy.

He had experienced nightmares before, many of the most vivid and terrifying after a long mat-trans jump. He couldn't understand why he was so disturbed by his dreams of the wolf and the voice except he harbored a flicker of suspicion that they hadn't been dreams at all.

But exhaustion drove him into a deep slumber, and it was dreamless.

He awakened at close to sunset and he found he was alone, not only in the room, but the entire hostel.

After getting dressed and splashing water on his face, he went out onto the twilight streets of Amicus. He walked toward the big corral to find out how Joe's preparations for the journey were coming along.

He didn't trust the Lakota any more than any other stranger he had met in his many years of trekking across Deathlands.

He drew in a deep breath. The air was still musky with the odor of violence and death. Usually after a victory the air smelled new, sweet and sharp. It was becoming apparent that he had seen too much death in his years, played too much a part in adding to the world's store of it. To cheat death, he had to deal death. He wondered what would happen when his killer's reflexes no longer obeyed his killer's instincts. Ryan skidded to a sudden stop on the uneven ground. Tawny, greenish gold eyes blazed at him from directly ahead in the gloom.

A dark, shaggy, silver-shot shape crouched in the shadows, staring at him. For an instant Ryan thought it was a dog, then his hand went to the SIG-Sauer at his hip.

The creature was too big for a dog, its head a trifle too wide, the tail too bushy, the posture too feral. It was a wolf, watching his every move with a hypnotic intensity. Though very large, probably tipping the scales at close to one hundred sixty pounds, the wolf wasn't one of the mutie strains that prowled the Rockies.

Ryan carefully unleathered his blaster. Then a soft voice spoke from the darkness behind the animal.

"He will not harm you. He is a friend," a soft woman's voice said.

She came toward him out of the dusk, past the crouching wolf. Her movements were light and lithe, with a grace that reminded him somehow of Joe. She wore the combination of homespun and buckskin clothing of the Amicans, and at first he took her for a Cheyenne. Her waist-length hair was sleek and black enough, but the face it framed wasn't ruddy and her eyes were a brown so light they were almost tan or a shade of gold. She didn't look more than eighteen years old.

There was a pride and a touch of arrogance in those eyes, though there was something oddly childlike in them, too, almost an innocence.

"I am Sisoka," she said softly, her glance tilting to meet his. She was only a few inches over five feet tall.

"It means Robin's Wing. His name is We'-mna. It means Blood-sniffer."

"I'm Ryan Cawdor," he replied.

"I have seen you here in Amicus, before the battle."

"I don't recall seeing you," he said. "Or your friend. I think I'd remember you both."

The instant he said it, he regretted it. With a chilly sensation at the base of his spine, he realized the wolf did indeed look familiar.

Sisoka stepped closer. "You fought well. You saved Amicus."

Ryan only grunted.

"You look tired," she murmured, "and a little sad. Is it because you are leaving us?"

Ryan glanced again at the wolf. It was still watching him with that fixed, faintly luminous green-gold gaze.

"If you'll pardon me," he said, making a move to step around her and the beast.

"You look," Sisoka continued as though she hadn't heard the dismissal, "as if you've had some bad dreams."

Ryan stopped. "What did you say?"

"Touch-the-Sky offers you only another bad dream, Ryan Cawdor."

Something in her tone, even the sound of her voice, set off a warning vibration in his brain. The caution and instinctive suspicion that had kept him alive for two decades in the Deathland hellzones came up to triple red. The SIG-Sauer fairly leaped into his hand.

Towering over Sisoka, he asked, "What do you know of Ti-Ra'-Wa?"

Sisoka barely glanced at the bore of the blaster. Her eyes flicked to Ryan's glaring blue eye, and she said softly, almost sadly, "Kte ."

It was a Lakota word Ryan understood. It meant "kill."

The wolf was a dark thunderbolt that sprang from the ground, and it struck Ryan full in the chest, knocking him sprawling. He felt razor-keen fangs on his right forearm, keeping his blaster hand immobilized.

Ryan knew that before he could switch the weapon to his left hand or even draw his panga, his throat would be ripped out. He squeezed off a shot, hoping the blaster's familiar cracking report would draw Krysty or one of the others.

Blood-sniffer's paws tore rents in his shirt as he struggled, and the jaws increased their pressure around his arm. Cursing, Ryan gathered a handful of furry hide at the beast's ruff and tried to wrench it backward and off balance. He wrapped his legs around the wolf's body and rolled to the left in an effort to outmuscle the animal long enough to un-scabbard his blade.

The wolf resisted his maneuver, shifting its weight without voicing a growl or a snarl. As he strained and wrestled, Ryan received the strange impression that despite the young woman's command, the wolf had no intention of killing him, as though it were acting on its own agenda.

"Ryan!" Krysty shouted.

"We'-mna, inankni yot" Sisoka called.

The wolf released its grip on the arm and bounded away, its hind feet springboarding from Ryan's chest and slamming him to the ground, the back of his head striking hard. He rolled to his feet, dazed and bleeding.

He began a shambling run, but he had no idea in which direction Sisoka or Blood-sniffer had gone. He bumped into Krysty. The titian-haired beauty had her Smith amp; Wesson revolver in hand and wore an anxious expression on her face.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "What the hell is going on?" She grasped his arm to examine the lacerations.

"The girl!" Ryan snarled, his daze dissolving in his anger. "Where is she?"

Krysty gestured to the northeast. Ryan got a shadowy glimpse of a horse and rider and a loping wolf racing past the boneyard and toward the bluffs beyond in the uncertain starlight.

"Who was she?" Krysty demanded, trying to get a better look at his fang-slashed forearm, but he wrenched it away.

"I don't know. She spoke to that wolf and it attacked me. I think she told it to kill me."

"Why?"

Ryan moved rapidly up the street of Amicus. "Mebbe Joe can make an educated guess."

They found Joe at the corral, overseeing the selection and hobbling of their mounts. He stood tensely, his figure telegraphing impatience. Jak and Doc were watching the procedure from the split-rail fence.

Ryan strode up to him, his question direct and flat. "Who is Sisoka?"

Joe wheeled like a bee-stung panther, his eyes narrowed. "How do you know her?"

"She introduced herself to me right before she sicced her pet wolf on my ass. She comes from Ti-Ra'-Wa, too, doesn't she?"

Joe, staring past Krysty and Ryan, spoke quietly between gritted teeth. "Sisoka here. And We'-mna. They followed me, spied on me."

Doc and Jak moved closer to hear the exchange.

"Who the fuck is she?" Ryan rasped. His arm was throbbing and burning, blood streaming from the cuts to splatter on the ground.

Joe answered with a brooding reluctance. "She is the niece of Pizi, chief of the Akicita Sunkamitu Tanka."

"I never heard of that tribe," Ryan snapped.

"It is not a tribe, it is a warrior society. It means the Wolf Soldiers. They are enemies of my people."

"And who are your people, exactly?"

"Kiciyuha Makoholoka."

Ryan stared at him unblinkingly, waiting.

Joe said tightly, "Loosely translated, it means the Cavern Keepers. The Wolf Soldiers are striking at us here. They intend to prevent us from reaching Ti-Ra'-Wa. We must go swiftly if you are to help me and win your gold."

"Gold is seeming less alluring at this juncture," Doc said, "especially if we must contend with a witch-woman and her animal familiar."

Ryan was angry, mainly because he was a little frightened of the girl and the wolf.

And the dream.

As if sensing his emotions, Joe said softly, "You are Ochinee, the one-eyed warrior who brought much sorrow to the half men in the Black Hills. Surely you are not afraid? Surely you will not renege on your word?"

Ryan resisted the urge to barrel stroke the Lakota across the face with his blaster. Instead, he made a deliberately careful show of leathering it.

"All will become clear to you in time," Joe murmured. "Until then, know this you will be fighting to heal the wounds of Grandmother Earth."

Ryan's body twitched, as if someone had tapped him hard on the shoulder. He quickly tried to compose himself, but he knew Krysty had noted his reaction.

Joe continued talking smoothly. "I may sound a bit melodramatic, but this is not the time or the place to explain further. Sisoka may have other spies here."

Jak pointed to a nearby dog who sat licking its privates. "Him?"

Ignoring the sarcastic query, Joe said, "You have my word, Ochinee."

"All right," Ryan replied. "That'll have to do at least for right now."

Ryan, Krysty, Doc and Jak returned to the hostel and found Mildred and J.B. waiting for them in the common room. At the sight of blood on Ryan's arm, Mildred bustled about treating the wounds with the only materials at hand. As she cleaned and disinfected the lacerations with a dash of White Mule, Ryan told them the story and what Sisoka had said.

"There's something else," Krysty said. "Something Joe said bothered you."

Ryan sighed and nodded. He took a swig of the corn liquor, propping the jug on his forearm and tipping the neck toward his mouth. He shuddered. "Something Sisoka said bothered me more."

He told them about his dreams, about riding the singing wolf and the voice that had intruded on his slumber.

"If I didn't know better," Mildred said, tying a bandage around Ryan's forearm, "I'd be of the opinion you

experienced a vision, or the beginnings of one."

Ryan knew Plains tribes attached a crowning importance to visions, but he also knew the normal procedure for obtaining one was a period of solitude, fasting and suffering.

"I don't want a vision," he said wryly. "I see just fine as it is."

Mildred smiled. "From what I've read, spirit guides and animal totems occasionally come unsolicited to befriend mortals. Maybe that's one interpretation."

"A wolf," Doc mused. "I can't think of any animal more appropriate to serve as your totem, my boy."

Mildred's words had brought an incredulous stare from J.B. "We don't need to get tangled up in Native religions."

"Mebbe not," Krysty said quietly. The sparkle of her emerald eyes was slightly dimmed by worry. "Can't help but wonder if we won't be."

Ryan took another swallow of White Mule. A long one.

Chapter Thirteen

If Ryan had felt worse the morning after indulging in corn liquor, he couldn't recall the occasion. When he was shaken awake by Krysty, he saw the sky was still dark, with no sign of the sun. Everyone else was up and in the common room, getting their possessions together.

Massaging his temples, he croaked, "I've changed my mind. Let's stay here and help rebuild Amicus."

"No," she said unsympathetically. "You should have known better than to drink that rotgut on the night before a journey."

"You didn't say anything."

"I'm not your mother, Ryan. You go on and on about folks taking responsibility for their actions. Well, you'd better take responsibility for this hangover or you'll be left behind."

Ryan felt too fragile to argue with her. At least he hadn't had another strange and disturbingly vivid dream. If he had dreamed at all, he couldn't recollect it.

He got up, managed to dress himself and stumbled over to the washbowl. After dunking his head four times into the water, the pain in his skull had abated enough for him to talk.

"Where's Joe?"

"Outside. He has our horses ready. Do you want breakfast?"

The very thought of the green-black tea, cheese and fatty, blistered bacon made him want to heave. He swallowed the column of burning bile working its way up his throat and shook his head, but not too vigorously.

Joe was waiting for them at the corner of the hostel, holding the lead ropes of seven horses and two mules. The mules had supplies packed onto their backs.

Everyone was pleased with Joe's ability to judge horseflesh, except for Doc. He had expressly asked for a small animal so he would have less distance to fall when he was inevitably thrown, and Joe had chosen a dun-colored mustang.

Doc walked around the animal, studying its legs and withers. It was a little bigger in the chest than Joe's pinto, and it gazed at him with an alert suspicion in its brown eyes. He took the reins from Joe and put one foot in the stirrup. The pony immediately shied, and he went down in the street.

"The reincarnation of Judas," he said tonelessly, referring to the tricky, recalcitrant, skew-backed mule that had served as his transportation at Jak's ranch in New Mexico.

With the help of J.B. and Joe, Doc managed to corner the little animal against the side of the hostel, and he climbed aboard the saddle. Everyone laughed at the ludicrous picture he made. He squatted on the

pony's back, feet in the stirrups, his knees sticking outward like a grasshopper's.

"Just like Judas," Mildred said with a laugh.

Doc patted the mustang's neck and said, "Then that is what I shall christen him, Judas Redux."

At a walk the mounted party made for the pass. Though there were people up and about in Amicus, none spoke to them or bade them goodbye. Not even Mose Autry turned out to wish them good luck. Ryan wasn't surprised. The Amicans were probably just as relieved to see them go as the Red Cadre. They rode single file through the gorge, which had been cleared enough to make navigating it an extremely tight squeeze. They rode past the abandoned wind wags, or what was left of them. Vengeful Amicans had dismantled them piece by piece. Only the skeletal, wheelless frameworks lay on the plain. By the time they reached the open prairie, the sun had risen above the horizon, drenching the landscape with a yellow-red glow.

The seven people, their horses and two mules walked across the open grasslands of the Washakie Basin. Shallow coulees broke up the monotonous flatness of the plain, and here and there were cottonwood groves. They kept on a straight course for the Wind River Mountain Range far in the distance, so far in fact, it seemed they couldn't possibly reach them in three years, much less three days.

The stretch between the basin and the mountains was probably one of the least-known regions of Deathlands. Even before the nukocaust it hadn't been heavily populated. Even Trader and his old partner, Marsh Folsom, who had boasted a vast library of maps and predark aerial surveys, knew little about the area.

They rode through the morning, speaking very little. Joe was a cooperative, if somewhat taciturn, traveling companion. Doc complained about the low comfort level of his saddle, but not vociferously enough to get on anyone's nerves.

At midmorning they saw the black shapes of vultures wheeling and circling ahead of them. Their route brought them within a few hundred feet of one of the Red Cadre's wind wags. It hadn't been touched, but bodies were strewn over the ground. The air buzzed with flies, and several vultures feasted on the banquet of rotting flesh, blood and excrement.

The body of a pirate dangled from the main mast of the wag, lashed upside down by the ankles. His cranium had been exposed by a scalping knife, revealing blue-white bone with a few clinging strips of red tissue.

The stench made Ryan's mouth fill with sour saliva, and he cast a questioning look at Joe.

The Lakota shrugged and said, "I mentioned the stragglers had been dealt with, didn't I?"

At noon they stopped to eat, but rather than building a fire, they ate beef jerky, washing it down with swigs of water from their canteens. After an hour they got under way again, this time walking to spare the horses. The company was in a better mood, and Ryan was almost completely recovered from his hangover. Joe didn't speak of their destination or what they might find when they reached it.

Gradually the plains gave way to hilly terrain. Toward midafternoon, as they were climbing the slope of a rock-strewn bluff, Ryan felt the earth trembling, every so slightly, beneath his boots. At the same time, he detected a musky, wooly odor in the air. The others became aware of the faint ground quake and smell at the same time.

"Come on," Joe said, quickening his pace as he urged his pinto up the face of the slope.

The seven people assembled on the crest of the ridge and looked across the plains below. On the opposite side of a fast-running ribbon of water, a heavy plume of dust shook with a sound like a continuous rumble of distant thunder. Beneath the dust cloud, a sea of brown, moving bodies blotted out the prairie floor. It was a large herd of buffalo moving across the plains like a rolling, never-ending wave. The ground shivered under the impact of at least two thousand hooves.

"Ever hunted buffalo, Ochinee?" Joe asked with a smile.

"No, but they've hunted me," he replied. He glanced over at J.B., and both of them smiled at the memory of the time they'd been caught in a stampede of mutie buffalo in Colorado. These animals, however, didn't appear to be of the genetically altered variety. They were still very big, however.

Joe explained how buffalo had been hunted by his people several hundred years before. "The soldier band went first, riding twenty abreast, and anyone who dared to go ahead of them would be knocked off

his horse. After them came the hunters, riding five abreast. The butchers came up in the rear. The hunters would circle around the herd and the cry went up 'Hoka hey!' as if in battle. All the hunters went in to killevery man for himself. A bows length away was the distance the hunters had to try for, and the preferred targets were the intestinal cavity just behind the last rib, and just back of the left shoulder and into the heart. Unless the buffalo was hit in a vital spot, he died slowly, which was a disgrace, or raced away and was lost to the tribe, which was an even greater disgrace."

Joe gazed down at the herd, his eyes viewing the distant past. "To the best hunters belonged the buffalo's liver, and when the chase had run its course, they would jump from their horses, cut it out and eat it rawseasoned with gall and still steaming with body heat and dripping blood."

Mildred shuddered. "I think I'll stick with the beef jerky, thanks."

Joe consulted the position of the sun and heaved a sigh. "Time we get through the canebrakes and ford the river, it'll be too close to dark for a hunt."

The party remounted their horses and made for the river. Ryan tried to keep the buffalo herd in view during the ride down the hill and across a wide, grassy swale that led to the river. The banks of the river were enclosed on both sides by huge brakes of cane.

The canebrakes were of a sort Ryan had never seen or even imagined. From the hilltop he had figured the stuff to be the same height and thickness as cane he had seen growing elsewhere, maybe ten feet high, an inch around at the base.

But these stalks of cane were thicker, and the shortest grew to a height of at least twenty-five feet. The bases were the diameter of his wrist. The growth was so densely packed that upon entering it, he was under the impression that a great cloud had passed over the face of the sun.

The ground was marshy and soft, and snakes, frogs and things less identifiable wriggled out of his horse's path. Insects whirled in abundance around everyone's faces and the eyes of their steeds. J.B. pulled off his fedora and tried to wave the buzzing, stinging horde away. What little sunlight that pierced the foliage arching overhead was of a pale greenish hue. The odor of rotting vegetation and sulfurous marsh gas became so strong that they all breathed through their mouths, though they ran the risk of inhaling a handful of bugs.

No one spoke as the horses forced their way through the heavy growth.

Finally a new sound replaced the steady tramp of hooves and the swish of brush the sound of flowing water and chirping birds. Then there was a draft of clean, untainted air. Sunlight, strong and warm, fell upon them. Ryan tried to suppress a heartfelt sigh of relief at leaving the canebrakes, and he saw that the others were doing so, as well.

The river was a shallow one, with clear, frigid blue, mountain-fed water. It showed white foam in places and small wavelets on the surface. The place where they were to ford was perhaps sixty or seventy feet wide.

Joe leaned back on his saddle blanket and cut himself a strip of jerky with a knife. Popping it into his mouth, he said, "River is only six, seven feet deep here, but it's running faster than usual. Be careful, gentlemen" he nodded toward Krysty and Mildred, "and ladies."

J.B. moved his horse close to Mildred's, and Ryan stood shoulder to shoulder with Krysty. The animals were fearful of the crossing, and many of them balked and whinnied. Only the mules displayed no nervousness. Ryan and Krysty hung back until most of the others had gained the opposite shore, then they urged their mounts into the water.

The water lapped at Ryan's shins, his thighs, then his waist, and to the base of his horse's neck. The animal was forced to walk across holding its head almost straight up. He took the SIG-Sauer from its holster and held it free of the river. Krysty did the same with her Smith amp; Wesson. There was nothing he could do about the Steyr scabbarded to the saddle but thoroughly dry, clean and oil it at the first opportunity.

The current was very strong, and Ryan could feel it tugging at his body. He and Krysty were at the halfway point of the ford, with Joe only a few feet ahead of them, when a flicker of furtive movement caught the corner of his eye.

Ryan turned his head, looking toward the shore behind him. He saw nothing, only the muddy tracks of

their horses. Joe called his name, and he turned back.

The Lakota was leaning forward, gazing at the surface of the river. He asked, "Do you like trout? As I recollect, the first time we met, you were preparing a muck-sucker stew. I can assure you trout is preferable, easier on the palate and the digestion."

A feathered shaft miraculously appeared, quivering, in the meat of Joe's left shoulder blade. His body jerked convulsively, a cry of surprised pain bursting from his lips. Only then did Ryan hear the faint twang of a bowstring.

Twisting in his saddle, Ryan glimpsed a blur of a bestial face before it faded into the shadows of the cane. Though he caught only a flickering fragment of motion, the impression he received was of a lupine, wolfish head.

Spinning back, he saw Joe sliding from his pintos back into, and under, the foaming blue water. Both he and Krysty forced their horses forward and flailed with their free hands at the surface. Ryan caught what felt like the fringes on the hem of the deerskin cape. Though his face was almost under the water, he held on. On the shore, attracted by a shout from Krysty, his friends stared uncomprehendingly for a moment. Ryan urged his horse forward, clinging to Joe's cape. Through a water-blurred eye, he saw J.B. riding his mount into the river, unslinging his Uzi.

Backbone crawling in anticipation of catching an arrow, Ryan continued to kick his horse toward the riverbank. Krysty rode to the other side of him, reaching down and pulling Joe's head out of the water by his long hair. Splashing out to them, J.B. grabbed the rope bridle of the pinto and dragged it toward the bank, water erupting in the wake of their passage.

Ryan and Krysty maintained their grips on Joe until they had crossed the river. Mildred waded out and grabbed the coughing man, helping him to the bank and sitting him down.

"Who shot?" Jak demanded. "Didn't see person."

"I thought I did," Ryan said, swinging out of the saddle and yanking the Steyr free of the scabbard. "And it wasn't a who. More like a what."

Joe, his face tight against the pain, asked, "What did you see?"

"I thought it was a wolf."

"What?" J.B. demanded. "A wolf that shoots a bow and arrow?"

Joe bit back a groan. "You saw a man dressed as a wolf. One of the Wolf Soldiers. I should've known they would lie in wait for me."

Everyone dismounted and, with blasters drawn, scanned the opposite shore. Mildred knelt behind Joe, took hold of the arrow and broke the shaft. She threw back the wet deerskin cape. Joe wasn't wearing a shirt, and the jagged stump of the shaft rose from the muscles of his shoulder, moving with the labor of his breathing. There was very little blood. Quickly she examined the wound.

The arrow, fired at fairly long range, had penetrated his cloak easily enough, but hadn't sunk deeply into the muscles. The angle was such that if the bow had been stronger and the shaft had more velocity, it would have punctured his heart. That obviously had been the idea.

"Whoever shot you must have thought you were a buffalo," she said. "If you know who it was, maybe you know if they use barbed points on their arrows."

Joe shook his head. "No. Leastways it doesn't feel like it."

"Good. The arrowhead has to be withdrawn, and there might be some blood loss. If it's heavy, then we're in trouble, because I don't have the materials to stop a serious flow."

Joe nodded, his breathing labored and harsh. "And if it is not withdrawn, then I run the risk of bleeding internally. It has to be removed. At once."

He gestured to his pony. "In that parfleche, the one made of badger skin, is my medicine pouch."

Doc searched through the bundles tied to the pinto and found the furry pouch. It was decorated with wrapped quill bands and beadwork done in Sioux colors and patterns. He handed it to Mildred.

Inside she found seven small hide packets of herbs, the entire foot of an eagle, a small piece of elk horn and a bear claw. On the inner edge of each packet was a small insignia, each different, each in a different color.

Following Joe's instructions, Mildred removed two of the packets and emptied half their contents into her

left hand. They looked like chopped-up herbs, diced so fine they were almost a powder.

"Yarrow plant," Krysty said after a glance. "And something else."

"Buffalo tallow," Joe told her. "Dried and ground up."

"Okay," Mildred said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Rub the herb and the tallow in your hand," Joe directed. "Mix them up."

With both hands Mildred rubbed the material between them. "Done. Now what?"

"Put the mixture in your mouth. When your saliva has softened it, pull out the arrow and spit the stuff into the puncture, then smooth it out with your fingers, making sure the hole is plugged."

Mildred's eyes flicked at the crushed-up substance in her hand and then back to Krysty. "Mother Sonja ever hear of a remedy like this?"

With a wan smile Krysty shook her head.

Impatiently Joe said, "Are you going to do it or not? I thought you were a healer."

"I'll do it," Mildred muttered. "But it's not my field. If you wanted me to freeze some part of you like your tongue I'd feel more at home."

Jak and Doc knelt in front of Joe and took grips on both of his arms. Mildred popped the mixture in her mouth, then she sat behind Joe, planted a foot at the small of his back, grasped the broken shaft and yanked. The arrowhead came free, blood trailing from the sharp iron point.

Joe didn't cry out, but he bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut. Blood began to flow heavily from the wound, down his back, the top of his breechelout soaking it up. Leaning forward, Mildred spit the semi-liquid gob of yarrow plant and tallow at the puncture. She scored a direct hit, and quickly her fingers kneaded the substance, pressing it into the wound, spreading it evenly around the edges. Almost immediately the bleeding stopped.

"I'll be damned," she said in a pleased voice. "A natural coagulating agent." Then she frowned and rushed to the edge of the river, where she dipped handful after handful of water into her mouth, rinsing and spitting repeatedly.

Joe slowly stood, careful not to place too much strain on his back. "Under the circumstances," he said, "I think we'd better find a suitable campsite for the night."

Chapter Fourteen

After Mildred rigged a makeshift bandage and arm sling for Joe, they pressed on for another hour. By the time they reached an animal-forged trail in the high grass, the sun was setting. Following a barely defined path, they walked through a thicket and into a small clearing.

They set up camp there, unsaddling the horses and mules, picketing them so they could graze nearby.

J.B. dug a foot-deep hole and encircled the edge with piled stones. He kindled a blaze in the hole, and no firelight was visible from the "owlhoot's oven."

Doc made a stew from chunks of the jerky, seasoning it with carrots and slices of some unidentifiable root vegetables he had raided from the larder of the hostel in Amicus.

All of them ate slowly, since the meat was tough and had to be chewed carefully. Later they sipped cups of coffee sub. It wasn't particularly delectable, but it was a definite improvement over the bark tea favored by the Amicans.

By the time they'd finished eating, stars burned in the blue-black sky. Jak and Krysty volunteered to stand the first watch, patrolling the perimeter. Though the firelight was poor illumination, Ryan field-stripped the Steyr and meticulously cleaned and oiled all its moving parts. After reassembling it, he did the same to Joe's weapon. The man watched him silently but intently.

"How are you feeling?" Ryan asked him.

"Much better. By tomorrow I'll be much better still."

"Good. Then mebbe you feel good enough to explain about the Wolf Soldiers, and why they're so anxious to keep you from reaching Ti-Ra'-Wa."

Joe shook his head. "I doubt you would believe everything I told you."

"Try us," Mildred suggested.

Joe tried to shrug, winced, then sighed. "Though we are of the same tribe, there are two factions in the valley, the Wolf Soldiers and the Cavern Keepers, of which I am a chief. We believe in keeping the high laws, strengthening our spirit bodies and strengthening the energies of Ah-badt-dadt-deah."

"What?" Jak asked.

"The Grandfather, the One Above."

J.B. rolled his eyes. "Religion. I was afraid of this."

Joe ignored him. "When you strengthen your spirit body, you exercise these high laws against low laws that the material world obeys. The Wolf Soldiers have abandoned the high laws and practice the low."

"You may have to define the practice of low law," Doc said. "I presume you do not mean divorce proceedings."

"Low law is the lust for material power," Joe said. "Power over everything, even the methods of healing Grandmother Earth."

"Healing?" Ryan inquired, looking up from the pieces of the blaster scattered on a blanket before him.

"Explain."

"I cannot. It is something you will not believe or even understand until we reach the valley."

Joe drew a blanket around him with such a flourish it ended the discussion. Ryan put the weapon back together, then went to relieve Krysty. He told her what Joe had said. She pursed her lips but said nothing.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Tribal superstitions?"

"Who knows?" Krysty shrugged, then patted back a yawn with her hand. "Want me to stay out here for a while?"

"No," Ryan said. "I'll be okay. Send J.B. out to take over for Jak in a little while, though."

Krysty kissed his cheek, then returned to the campsite.

Leaning against a tree, Ryan looked toward the distant mountain range. Clouds squatted on the snowy peaks. Before the nukocaust and the earth-shaker bombs, the Continental Divide had followed the crest line of the Wind River Range. God only knew what it was like now, but it was possible it had been unaffected. This was still good, strong country and it had always been.

A couple of hundred years earlier, a government Indian reservation at the base of the Wind River Range had confined the Crow, the Ute, the Bannock, the Sioux and the Cheyenne. He couldn't help but wonder how they'd felt to look up at those tree-lined hills, carpeted with high, sweet grass, and know they could never roam among them again.

The nukocaust had been a blessing to most Indian peoples, the "purification" of ancient prophecy. The white man's government had dissolved in a twinkling, and though the world wasn't as rich and beautiful as it had been when the tribes had raced wild and free across the plains and the mountains, this part of the country was still rich and beautiful enough.

SETTING OUT at first light, the company of travelers followed an old, overgrown paved road that traced its way across high-plains country, flat acres and plateaus of good pasture. In the far distance was the burned-out ruin of an old ranch house.

The day dawned overcast, with thick clouds, but rain didn't come. The color of the day fit the moods of the travels. Everyone seemed absorbed in his or her own somber reflections.

The longer they traveled, the rougher the terrain became, slashed with narrow ravines and steep drop-offs, reminders of the quakes that had shaken the West Coast more than a century earlier.

At midmorning the rumble of countless hooves reached them. The party reined in and studied a dust

cloud hanging in the distance.

"There's your buffalo again," Mildred said to Joe, standing in her stirrups and staring at the cloud beneath a shading hand.

"About a mile away," Joe replied. "Cost us a couple of hours if we wanted some fresh meat."

"After last night's stew," J.B. said. "I wouldn't mind."

"Nor would I," Doc added.

The consensus was in favor of going after the game. Mildred was the only dissenter.

The animals picked their way carefully over the uneven ground, following the crest of a ridge that dipped down into an open meadow. As they continued along the stony slant to the prairie, Jak saw a one-story log cabin set back a quarter of a mile from their path. It squatted in a barren clearing, surrounded by upthrusts of shale and scraggly thornbush.

The cabin displayed no sign of human habitation except for a trickle of smoke that rose from the crude chimney. Also from the chimney fluttered a tattered red flag.

When Ryan pointed this out to Joe, the Lakota replied rather uneasily, "An old woman lives there. A seer, what you would call a doom-sniffer. Everyone thinks she is touched, so even the tribes leave her alone."

Doomseers, "doomies," were human mutants, possessed or cursed with the psychic ability to foresee death. Krysty's ability was somewhat similar, but she couldn't visualize exact details, though she often sensed danger in the offing.

"What's the flag for?" Jak asked.

"Means she wants company, or help for a chore. She always pays off in provisions."

"The flour got wet at the river crossing," J.B. said. "Might be good idea to mosey down there and trade for some."

"What about the buffalo?" Ryan asked, frowning.

"We'll keep them in sight," Joe replied. "Won't take but a few minutes for someone to go down there and get back to us."

"I'll go," Mildred volunteered, "if someone comes with me."

"I'll accompany you," Doc said. "My mouth is already primed for biscuits."

"We'll wait for you here," Ryan told them.

Doc and Mildred guided their horses down the rock-ribbed slant. A chill wind sprang up and plucked at their hair and clothing. Their pants were still slightly damp from the river crossing the day before, and they shivered.

They cantered into the cabin's compound. Reining Judas Redux to a halt, Doc glanced around, feeling an invisible, strange something emanating from the structure's interior, like radiation. The hairs at his nape tingled, and he looked quickly at Mildred. If she sensed the same thing, she showed no sign of it.

Dismounting, they then started walking toward the cabin, but froze in their tracks when a low animal growl reached their ears. Rigid with fear and astonishment, they saw, tethered to a post at a corner of the log building, a tawny cougar, only it was gigantic, a breed spawned by radiation-induced polyploidism, the doubling of all or part of the chromosome complement.

Though this monster wasn't as large as the twenty-five-foot puma that had nearly bitten Doc's head off months earlier, it still stretched fifteen feet from nose to tail tip, and probably weighed nine hundred pounds.

The mouth was open, saliva dripping from the long yellow fangs. The creature didn't snarl or hiss. It growled, very low, very menacing, and regarded them with calculating brown-green eyes. Looking at the rust-eaten chain that attached the beast to the post, both Doc and Mildred went for their blasters.

"He will not molest you, strangers," a clear voice stated.

An old black woman stood in the doorway of the cabin, wearing a collection of colorful rags and scraps of fur. "You saw my flag?" Her voice was strong despite her advanced age.

After exchanging a glance with Doc, Mildred said, "Yes, ma'am. We'd like to trade for some flour."

"Trade with what?"

"Chores or jack."

The old woman smiled a speculative smile, and for a moment the expression on her face seemed a mirror image of the panther's. "What are your names?"

"Dr. Mildred Wyeth and" Mildred hesitated, then nodded toward Doc, "Dr. T. A. Tanner."

The wrinkled face collapsed in a network of lines and creases, and they realized the woman was laughing silently. "An embarrassment of doctors today. Enter, both of you, and be welcome."

They tied their mounts to a post at the opposite corner from the cougar and, drawn by a gesture from a black-nailed hand, they ducked under the low doorway and entered the cabin. Something about the crone's secret smile and easy manner made Doc's hand itch for the comforting weight of his Le Mat.

Surreptitiously he loosened the ebony case sheathing the blade of Toledo steel.

The old woman stoked the fire of buffalo chips in the shallow hearth, and the flames leaped higher.

Mildred and Doc quickly studied the single-room dwelling. The wooden walls were covered by stretched animal hides and grinning skulls, bears with great fangs, long-horned steers and immense buffalo skulls.

Dried herbs, desiccated birds and mummified reptiles dangled from the rafters. Doc was reminded of an apothecary's shop.

The woman bade them to sit on a splintery wooden bench, and she busied herself stirring the contents of the pot in the hearth. "You are strangers to this land, you doctors?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Mildred replied.

"Why do you ask?" Doc inquired.

"Everyone else fears to enter the abode of the doomie woman. I sniff deaths, you see. That is how I have lived here for so many years, unharmed by the tribes, the beasts, the brigands. I can foretell deaths, and no one wants to know about it. They are afraid that if they learn the time and manner of their death, it will arrive before they are ready."

She turned and gave both of them searching stares. "You come from far, far away. Far beyond my range of sight. But I do not concern myself with where you have been. You look only ahead, dreaming golden dreams."

Doc stirred uneasily. "Madam"

The crone laughed, but there was little mirth in the sound, only a smug, cackling mockery. "It is a poor gift, this doom sight. But it keeps me safe from harm."

Mildred shifted on the bench. "Our companions are waiting for us. We can't stay long."

As if she hadn't heard, the woman went on. "My sight does not work on command. I see only when my mind is clear and untroubled. Then, I may glimpse the deaths of others. Of late I have seen colors red for blood, gold for greed, black for doom."

She gazed at Doc and Mildred with a steady, penetrating gaze. "For instance I have known for some time that your company of travelers would be passing this way. More, I knew that you two would be the only ones foolish or ignorant enough to come here."

Doc and Mildred said nothing.

"Unfortunately," she continued quietly, "my sight is frequently dimmed. And then others must arrange the dooms I cannot see."

Some soft sound or some scent goaded Doc to bound to his feet and reach for his holstered Le Mat.

Behind him a narrow portal covered with an animal pelt was swinging open. Before he could draw his blaster or Mildred could get to her feet, the razor-keen point of an arrow was thrust into the room. It was followed half a heartbeat later by a crossbow. Two men stepped inside quietly, rail-thin Indians wearing wolf skins, the hollowed-out, furry skullcaps resting on their heads like hoods.

"They see your dooms," the crone went on. "Whether it is a true vision or merely a wish that will never be fulfilled is too soon know."

Doc opened his mouth and the warrior with the crossbow growled, "Inila !"

"He wants you to be silent," the crone said helpfully.

"What else does he want?" Mildred murmured.

The unarmed Wolf Soldier spoke rapidly, quietly.

"He wants the old one to go to the door and beckon your comrades," the old woman translated.

"Madam," Doc said firmly, "our comrades are very well armed. This pair would not stand a chance

against them."

"They want only Yutan-kin-Mahipiya. Do not make it difficult for yourself and your fellow physician." Doc didn't move. The warrior with the crossbow mumbled something to his companion, and the Indian approached Mildred. Drawing a knife from his belt, he placed the edge against the side of her neck. "They can kill you," the old woman said calmly. "Your people would hear nothing and only much later find your corpses."

The Indian pressed the edge of his knife into Mildred's flesh. She didn't cry out, but she bit her lower lip. Doc held up a hand. "Very well," he said wearily, his voice thin and reedy. "I shall do as they ask." Shoulders slumped, he shuffled painfully toward the open door, leaning heavily on his cane. When he reached the opening, he ducked his head as if to go through it, then he paused and half turned, a questioning look in his eyes. He opened his mouth.

The warrior with the crossbow snarled, "Hoppo !"

Sighing, Doc lifted the cane as if to administer an admonishing wag, then he snapped his wrist and whipped the black sheath from the blade of gleaming Toledo steel. In the same motion he hurled the sword point first at the Wolf Soldier.

The blade traveled only three feet before the point struck into the warrior's open mouth and became fixed in his brain stem. With the sword hanging out like a ghastly metal tongue, the Wolf Soldier's eyes bugged, his knees buckled and his fingers closed convulsively on the crossbow's trigger. The string hummed as the tension was released, and the long shaft drove past Doc's head, close enough to feather-whip his right ear.

The reaction of the other warrior was almost comical. He gave a great leap backward, dragging the edge of the knife along the side of Mildred's neck and drawing a thread of blood.

She spit out a curse and rolled off the bench. When she came out of the roll, the ZKR was in her fist and seeking a target.

The Wolf Soldier's extravagant back-leap had carried him against the hidden door panel. His back struck it, knocking it open, but his heels caught on the raised lip of the narrow portal, and he fell just as Mildred squeezed the revolver's trigger.

The bullet sped toward the shaggy wolf's head, but it dropped down and the slug missed one of the pointed ears by less than a finger's width. The warrior struggled to his feet and raced away from the cabin, across the rear of the compound. Mildred rushed to the opening, aligning the frantically sprinting figure within the sights of her blaster. Her finger had just begun to squeeze the trigger when a huge tawny shape bounded in from her left.

The monster mutie cougar, trailing the length of rusty, clanking chain, caught up with the fleeing human with two spring-steel-legged bounds. A swipe of curving, unsheathed claws flayed the wolf skin and almost all the flesh from the warrior's back. He went down amid flying liquid ribbons of crimson.

As Mildred watched with a horrid fascination the giant cat gutted the man with a single slash of a hind paw. Loops of blue-pink intestines spilled onto the ground. Huge jaws closed over the warrior's head with a sickening crunch, and the cougar's neck jerked back and forth. Arms and legs flopped, like those of a disjointed marionette's.

The cat gathered itself and bounded from sight, the flesh-stripped, eviscerated body dangling from its blood-flecked jaws.

Doc came to her side, Le Mat in hand. He scanned the compound over her shoulder, demanding, "Where is he? Did he get Oh."

When he saw the thick whorls of blood and coils of viscera glistening on the barren ground, he swallowed noisily and stepped back with haste.

"It happened so fast," Mildred said huskily. "Like it had been waiting for him."

"He had," the old woman said. "He has sharp teeth and a keen nose. He had already sniffed out who was fated to die."

Mildred and Doc released their pent-up breath in loud exhalations, but the woman's was punctuated by a loud curse. Holding one hand to the blood-oozing line on her neck, she advanced on the crone, blaster cocked.

"You old bitch! How about if I show you your doom?"

Doc restrained her with a hand. "She's old enough to be your grandmother."

Grunting, the old woman turned back to stirring the contents of the pot hanging over the fire in the hearth. She ignored the dead, sword-transfixed man sprawled on the floor.

"When the cat came this morning," she said cheerfully, "I knew you were in no danger."

"How?" Mildred asked angrily.

The crone touched one of her eyes. "I see through his eyes. He knew who would die, and so did I."

"So" Doc hesitated. "You mean that vicious predator was never chained up?"

"Oh, no. That would be cruel."

Closing her eyes, shaking her head, Mildred pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't understand any of this."

The woman gestured to a five-pound burlap sack in a corner. "There is your flour, Dr. Wyeth. You'd better get it back to your friends. They have heard the shot and are already on their way down."

Doc worked the blade of the sword loose from the Indian's open mouth. "What do we owe you?"

"I've been paid."

Doc frowned. "At least allow us to remove this carcass from your home."

The old woman straightened and tapped the spoon against the rim of the pot. "You don't understand." she said gently, as if trying to explain a complex equation to a child.

She gestured with the spoon toward the corpse and repeated, "I've been paid."

Chapter Fifteen

"What I can't figure," Mildred said, "is if that old lady meant to trap us or the Indians."

Doc shrugged. "Since we're still alive, I presume she meant the Indians." He tapped the five-pound sack on his saddle. "Besides, we acquired the flour, didn't we?"

Doc and Mildred had rejoined the rest of their companions and told them the story of the Wolf Soldiers and their grisly fates. Only Joe didn't appear overly disconcerted by the tale of the doomie, her cannibalistic diet and her partnership with a mutie cougar. His only comment was "Life is strange and cheap out here on the basin."

They rode away from the ridges and rock slants and emerged onto the prairie again. Multicolored wildflowers grew among the high grasses. The sound of muted thunder reached them, yet the sky overhead was clear.

"Coming up on the buffalo soon," J.B. said with an eager smile.

Urging their horses to the top of a gentle bluff, they gazed awestruck at the violently undulating sea of buffalo. They were less than a quarter of a mile from the herd's right flank. The ground quaked at the pounding of their hooves, and the air was choked with the dust of their passing. Their massive tufted humps and domed, horned heads bobbed as they thundered by, the farthest reaches of the herd shrouded by dust-clogged distance.

Tersely, his body taut with anticipation, Joe explained how they would hunt the great animals. They would travel in pairs, pick out a buffalo from the herd and while one hunter tried to drop it with a single, killing shot, the partner would keep a loaded blaster at the ready.

"Buffalo are unpredictable," he added. "Sometimes what seems to be a mortal wound won't kill it. It will be angered enough to charge as its last act of life. That's why standby blasters are needed."

"We only have a couple of long blasters," Ryan argued. "Will our handblasters do?"

Joe eyed the weapons critically, then nodded. "They have plenty of stopping power, at least. Just don't

get too close."

Doc waved a hand grandly. "I, for one, do not intend to do so. I shall be more than happy to participate in a feast of fresh meat, but I have no desire to risk my life to put it on my plate. Judas Redux, the flour and myself will sit this one out."

Joe glanced at Jak. "Partner up with me."

Jak nodded his agreement and unholstered his Colt Python. "Let's do it."

The six people directed their horses down the bluff toward the westward-rumbling herd. Joe's face was alight with excitement. He howled a hunting cry, raised his rifle and heeled his pony into a gallop.

Jak followed him, wondering briefly what would happen if his, or someone else's, horse slipped beneath the hooves of the herd. It wasn't a mental picture he wanted to dwell on.

They shouted encouragement to one another as they rode along the flank of the herd, but the rumble of the buffalo's passage was so loud, their voices were overwhelmed.

Jak had yet to test his mount's speed and gait, so he kicked it hard in the ribs. The next moment he was clinging to the reins for his life. It was as though his horse had exploded forward. The steed rushed at a nightmare pace beside the outer edge of the herd. Rather than reining in the horse, Jak enjoyed the wild ride. The teenager had, more than his companions, the capacity for taking things as they came.

Whether outrunning an acid rainstorm, wading through toxic swamps in the bayou or swapping strangleholds with muties, Jak didn't usually bother to look far ahead.

He had done so only once in his life, when he settled down on a spread in New Mexico with his wife, Christina, and their daughter, Jenny. After they had been murdered by marauders, Jak had steadfastly refused to look very far into the future. There was no percentage in it.

Joe caught Jak's attention by waving and shouting. He pointed out a huge bull that snorted and eyed the approaching mounted men with something akin to anger. From hoof to hump, it stood half a head taller than Jak and it was perhaps ten feet long from nose to the brushy end of its tail. The coarse, curly hair was a muddy brown, with black streaks blended into it. It looked as if it would weigh out at close to a ton. The bull shook its massive horned head, a challenging bellow rising above the cacophony of hoofbeats and bawls.

Nodding in wordless agreement, Joe and Jak picked out the big bull as their common target. They rode closer. The never-ending roar, the choking dust and the cloying odor of the great beasts exhilarated Jak. He galloped alongside the shaggy herd, watching their humps heaving up and down like the prows of ships breasting rough seas.

Joe shouted at the bull, trying to cut it out of the herd. Both men started up a raucous hooting. Foam was wind whipped from the beast's open mouth, and its red-shot eyes bored in on them.

Suddenly, so suddenly that the dodging maneuver of Jak's horse nearly unseated him, the buffalo lunged away from the herd and charged. The mammoth humpback came directly for its tormentors, hooves tearing up clods of earth, horns questing for enemies to rend.

Both Joe and Jak managed to swerve their steeds out of the bull's path, and it kept going. Unhindered by the press of the herd, the big animal's speed was astonishing. It galloped away from them, heading south. Howling with the joy of the hunt, Joe and Jak gave chase, exhorting their mounts to give everything they had.

The horses managed to maintain a long-legged, full-out pace for a mile, yet the buffalo continued to elude them. Glancing over his shoulder, Jak barely discerned the distant figures of Doc and Judas Redux on the bluff. He also noticed that the herd and his friends were almost out of sight, but he didn't worry about either.

The chase after the bull continued, the land gradually sloping into a marsh. Stunted trees stood in tight groups, and the grasses of the rolling plains were replaced by reedy strands of cane and cattails, which formed borders around a narrow creek.

The buffalo splashed through a shallow pond, sending a sheet of muddy water cascading into the air.

Both Jak and Joe were soaked, and by the time they wiped the water out their eyes, the buffalo had run into a copse of cottonwood trees. It didn't reappear on the opposite side. The two men approached the copse from either side. Jak was too excited to be cautious.

With a bellow that seemed to make the air shiver, the buffalo thundered out of the stand of trees, crashing through saplings, snapping off branches like matchwood. Jak's horse neighed in a mad panic, and as he tried to align the sights of his blaster with the shaggy skull, his mount reared, its forelegs slashing the air wildly.

The buffalo's curved horns missed the horse's belly by a hairbreadth. Jak felt himself slipping from the saddle, and he kicked himself free of the stirrups, trying to land on his feet. He managed to hit the turf upright, but he stumbled and went to one knee.

The buffalo came to a sudden, dirt-flinging halt, whirled and charged. He raised his blaster, sighted coolly and calmly and squeezed the trigger. The Colt Python boomed with its characteristically full, deep-throated sound.

Nothing happened. The buffalo didn't falter. It lowered its head and charged on. Even as the echoes of the shot rang in the air, a wedge of a huge, woolly shoulder clipped Jak as he tried to leap aside.

The impact jarred the breath out of him, and he slammed down on his left side, rolling over and over.

When he came to a stop, he was gasping for air, utterly astounded he was still alive. He hurt too much to be dead.

He had kept his grip on the Colt, and he tried to push himself to his feet. The buffalo veered, turned and began another charge. Jak could see a splash of blood on the beast's shaggy skull where the dense bone had partially deflected the first round. He aimed his blaster at it.

Joe galloped around the stand of trees and placed his pony squarely in the maddened bull's path. He placed the stock of the Gewehr against his shoulder and cheek and fired, then he kned his horse out of the way.

A new splotch of blood had appeared on the skull. The bull thundered on for another second, then its forelegs folded and it skidded forward, sledding along the marshy ground like a down-sliding boulder. It left a wide, scoured path in its wake, turf rolling up before it like a strip of carpet. The buffalo came to a grinding stop less than six feet from Jak's position.

Throwing one leg up and over his pony's head, Joe dismounted and approached the buffalo. Its dark, humped form was slumped over, looking like a shaggy, debilitated volcano.

Examining the wound, Joe remarked, "A head shot is something of a break with tradition, but at least only one bullet brought him down."

Walking over to the dead bull, Jak said, "Two."

Joe glanced up at him. "What?"

Extending a pair of fingers, Jak repeated, "Two." He pointed to himself, then to Joe. "One. Two."

"Your bullet did not bring it down, therefore it cannot be counted." Joe's tone brooked no debate.

"You keeping score?" Jak demanded. "Like contest?"

"All life is a contest, young man. Past time you learned that."

Jak glared at the Lakota, then he quickly raised his blaster. Joe recoiled, fumbling to bring up his weapon, eyes wide with sudden fear. Jak's blaster continued to rise, over his head, and he fired two shots into the air.

"Signal," he said. "Two bullets. You lose two points for flinching."

Joe's lips tightened, then he muttered something in his own tongue and turned his attention to the buffalo. Stripping down to his breechclout, Joe removed his pack of possessions from his pony and withdrew a very long skinning knife from a fur-lined sheath. It had no hilt, and the steel blade widened and curved slightly toward the tip.

After recovering his horse, Jak watched the butchering process with an expressionless face but an interested eye. The difficulty with butchering the buffalo was that it could neither be hanged and dressed like a deer nor turned onto its back. Lashing ropes to the buffalo's legs and knotting them around his pony's neck, Joe then backed up his steed until the legs were pulled and braced outward.

By the time Jak saw his friends riding toward them across the plain, Joe had already made the first cut crosswise at the nape and the second cut along the length of the spine. Lateral cuts were made along the insides of all four legs. Tugging, wrestling and grunting, Joe peeled the skin away from the body, revealing the thick layer of fat and tallow beneath. The hump looked like a small hill covered in glistening fat of

surprising whiteness. Joe continued to pull the hide back in jerks of several feet at a time. It was hard, bloody work, and since Jak wasn't asked to help, he wasn't about to offer it.

When Ryan and the others cantered up, Joe was spreading the hide around the flayed beast like a picnic cloth. He was covered with gore, his near-naked body plastered with grease, hair, fat and blood. It was clotted thickly between his fingers.

"You had better luck than we did," J.B. said, swinging out of the saddle. "Stamped on us. Lucky we weren't all stomped and squashed right into the basin."

Joe didn't respond. He plunged the knife into the buffalo, almost at ground level, and slit it open. Then his drove his hand inside the carcass and ripped out the liver, dripping blood and seemingly palpitating. He rose and carried it over to Jak, holding it up in front of his face. He said nothing.

Jak stared at him over the dark, crimson-smeared organ, then leaned forward and sank his teeth into one dangling end. He gnawed off a hunk of the raw, hot liver, keeping his eyes on Joe's face all the while. It was tough, and he chewed through a few stringy vessels before he was able to tear it free and swallow it. Once he swallowed the mouthful, he felt his muscles begin to tense and quiver, relax, then tense again.

For a moment he felt as if he could have caught the breeze and flown to the Wind River Mountain Range. Despite himself, he felt a smile crossing his face, his teeth red filmed, blood streaking his white chin.

He knew Joe's offer of the first bite of the liver was the closest thing he could expect by way of an acknowledgment of his shot or an apology, and Jak decided not to push it further.

Joe bit off a morsel of liver himself, then went back to butchering the buffalo, taking the cuts he claimed were the most desirable. While he worked, he asked the others to set up camp and collect firewood. An owlhoot's oven wouldn't suffice for the feast he had in mind.

"At least we won't want for food," Mildred commented.

J.B. and Doc walked near the creek in search of wood dry enough to burn, and Ryan, Krysty and Jak collected armloads of twigs and branches from the copse of trees.

Once the fuel was collected and piled, Doc built a ring of stones and jammed a pair of Y-notched sticks into the ground over the tinder. He started a fire and, using his steel sword as a spit, cuts of hump meat were slowly roasted over the flames.

Joe was a true Amerindian gourmet when it came to ways of preparing buffalo dishes. He handed them saucers full of what looked like watery custard, but were in reality bone marrow mixed with melted fat. He dumped the buffalo's tongue in a metal cooking pot and placed it directly on the flaming wood to bake. The aroma of wood smoke and roasting and baking meat slowly filled the campsite, and appetites grew.

Joe carried a grease-sheened coil of intestines over the fire, flipped them over the far side of the ring of stones, then dragged them slowly through the flames, searing them and blistering the blue-gray tissue, looping the guts meticulously at his feet, he sat cross-legged in front of them.

He held up one sliced end and asked, "Anyone care to join me?"

The question received polite "No, thank yous" and headshakes all around, though at one time or another, most of the companions had been forced to eat viands far less appetizing.

Joe shove the end of the gut into his mouth and began to gobble it down, not using his hands or even chewing. He swallowed yard after yard of the buffalo intestines, the entire length gliding easily down his throat, like a snake entering its burrow.

Ryan and J.B. watched the process in fascination. Mildred turned her face away.

In an astonishingly short span of time, Joe managed to bolt the entire length of intestine. Wiping his mouth with the back of one hand, he reached over with his knife and stabbed the hump meat roasting on the spit. Fat and blood dripped sizzling onto the fire.

"Done," he announced, "to a turn."

He sliced off large portions of the rich, gamey meat. Ryan and the others dug in without hesitation.

Though the meat was rare, it was tender and easy to digest. He knew the Plains tribes often subsisted on almost nothing else but buffalo meat for long periods of time. It was common knowledge that illnesses endemic to settlements, such as scurvy, were unknown to Indians.

After everyone had eaten their fill, Joe dug out the tongue from where it had been baking in the glowing

embers. It was the last delicacy and it was so soft, its flavor so sweet, that even Mildred had to admit she had rarely tasted anything quite as savory.

As the moon climbed over the horizon, Doc loosened his belt and patted his belly. He sighed, tried to swallow a belch and said, "A time like this is when I truly miss my pipe, my slippers and my armchair."

Ryan looked up at the night sky, the sprawling constellations glinting like powdered diamonds on a black velvet backdrop, and murmured, "Shining times."

For a moment he wondered where that thought had come from. Then fireflies danced around the campsite, winking like stars. A night breeze stirred the grass and the cottonwoods, their leafy boughs rustling and sighing softly.

Krysty moved closer to him and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Shining times," she whispered.

Chapter Sixteen

Ryan looked back down the shoulder of the gray-green mountain. The little line of people and animals crawled up the trail after him. The fourth day of their journey gathered toward the climax of a spectacular western sunset.

The treeless slope ahead of them went up to a hogback ridge. Against the blazing glory of fusing colors that fired the sky, Joe and his pony loomed like statues graven from granite.

Ryan was in a good mood, the best he had been in for longer than he cared to remember. He found keen pleasure in exploring new lands, and he found trekking through the wilderness very congenial. Other than his friends, he hadn't seen another human being in two days, and the animals crossing his field of vision appeared normal, not mutated. Their provisions had held out, and the grass growing in the valleys was thick and rich enough to provide proper graze for the horses and mules. Even the injuries he had suffered in Amicus, from the laceration on his forehead to the wolf bite on his arm, were almost completely healed.

As Ryan rode toward the ridge, he saw Joe suddenly stiffen, point and shout. He gestured to Ryan and the people below to increase their pace.

"Now what?" J.B. demanded, riding up beside Ryan. "Has he sighted his valley yet? He should have. This is the fourth day."

"No, something's wrong," Ryan replied, kneeling his horse forward.

They reached Joe at the very crest of the ridge. From there they looked northward toward another and parallel mountain range. Its highest, most northern peaks were snowcapped, and beyond them was a stupendous vista of other, smaller ranges, probably extending into Canada.

A deep, thickly wooded gully yawned between the crest on which they stood and another rocky rampart. The tall trees were fir and pine and poplar, and the ground was carpeted with high grass.

"Your rifle!" Joe shouted as Ryan and J.B. rode up. "Shoot them quickly!"

Ryan followed Joe's pointing finger to the gully below. At first he saw nothing, but then he spotted two dark shapes skulking through a glade.

"You mean the wolves?" he asked.

"Yes. You must kill them or our danger is great!"

Joe was in deadly earnest, his jet black eyes gleaming with fear.

Ryan drew the Steyr from its saddle scabbard and shouldered it, peering through the scope. Despite the dimming light, the laser image enhancer brought the animals into sharp focus.

The nearer wolf was close to the six-hundred-yard range. He centered the crosshairs on the furry skull, wondering about Lakota superstitions. From what Mose Autry had said about Amerindian beliefs,

wolves were respected to the point of reverence. Joe's fearful demand that they be killed made no sense, regardless of his enmity with the Wolf Soldier society.

"Why do you want them chilled?" J.B. asked. "They're too far away to bother us."

"They'll take word of our coming to Ti-Ra'-Wa," Joe answered grimly. "Hurry, Ochinee."

Ryan's finger tensed on the Steyr's trigger. The wolf's skull was framed perfectly for a lethal head shot.

Suddenly the animal glanced up. There was a swift flash of intelligence, of understanding in the green-gold eyes. In those eyes Ryan saw no malice, and moreover, he recognized them.

On impulse Ryan shifted the rifle's position a fraction of an inch and squeezed the trigger. The Steyr cracked, and a plume of dirt spouted between the wolf's forepaws. Both animals sprang backward and raced into the dappled shadows between the trees.

Joe clenched his fists and glared at Ryan. "You deliberately missed! Now they'll"

His lips clamped tight over his next words, and he made a visible effort to repress his anger.

"Now they'll what?" Ryan demanded. "What can wolves do but act like wolves?"

He didn't add that he suspected the wolf named Blood-sniffer had spared his life in Amicus, a decidedly un-lupine act.

Joe didn't answer. His fierce obsidian eyes swept over the figures of Jak, Doc, Mildred and Krysty and the two pack mules as they topped the crest of the ridge.

"We can't camp anywhere near here now," he said quickly. "We must keep moving through the night and moving fast. The soldiers will be out to cut us off now their scouts have taken back word of our arrival."

Ryan slid the rifle back into its scabbard. "We're not moving at all until we hear some explanations."

"All will be made clear when we reach Ti-Ra'-Wa."

Ryan shook his head. "You've been saying that for days. You'll fucking well make it clear here and now. It seems like you want us to get involved in something more than an intertribal conflict about high laws and low laws. Straight tongue, or we'll backtrack out of here."

Joe smiled humorlessly. "You're forgetting about the gold, aren't you?"

"Don't think we're so greedy you have us where you want us. Curiosity drove us most of the way. You need us worse than we need you. Talk, or we ride out."

Joe eyed the six people, his mind obviously gauging and weighing Ryan's threat. Then he shrugged.

"There is no time to tell you everything. We must move fast or we die."

"Then talk fast," Jak said.

Joe opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head and sighed. "I've told you about the two factions, the Wolf Soldiers and the Cavern Keepers. My faction believes in healing the Grandmother Earth so that all men and women may benefit from the restored earth energies. But Pizi, Sisoka and the Wolf Soldiers aspire to keep the planet the way it is, so the entire world will always be a Deathlands. The earth will never recover from the nuking, and it will continue to be a rad-blasted nightmare."

There was a stunned silence for a moment. Then Jak laughed scornfully. "Man is jolt-brain."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not so," J.B. said. "The gold is real enough."

"So it is," Doc agreed. "But what has it to do with tribal superstitions?"

Joe made a fierce, impatient gesture. "I knew you would doubt me, that was why I dared not tell you the truth."

"'Magic Ti-Ra'-Wa,'" Mildred intoned softly. "'Life, death, good, evil, joy and sorrow/All born in the Cavern of Creation.'"

Ryan spit on the ground, breaking the spell of the fantastic Joe and Mildred's words had woven. "This is all bullshit, but we can spread it out thin later. Right now I want to know what kind of danger we're talking about. How far are we now from Ti-Ra'-Wa?"

Joe gestured to the craggy cliffs on the far side of the wooded gully. "The valley lies on the other side of those cliffs. But reaching it will be extremely tricky now."

"Why?" Krysty asked.

"There is only one entrance into the valley. It leads near the lair of the Wolf Soldiers, yet we must pass through it to reach my people. Now, if the wolves get back word of us, they'll block us at the pass."

"Wolves?" Jak echoed incredulously, his crimson eyes glowing with suspicion. "Wolves tell on us?"

"The beasts of Ti-Ra'-Wa are not the beasts of the white man's world," Joe declared. "They are intelligent, some as intelligent as men. That is why we must hurry."

Ryan and his five friends grasped at least the urgency of the situation. They had, all of them, fought too many battles and made too many forced marches through dangerous territory not to understand the need for stealth and strategy.

"Let's do as he says," Ryan told his friends. "He's either a liar, a lunatic or a superstitious stupe. We'll find out later. Right now I smell trouble." Joe's face was tight with anger at Ryan's words, but he said nothing as he jerked his pony's head toward the path to the gully below.

The sun continued to sink, and darkness came with an unwelcome rush as Joe led the little caravan down into the heavily treed gorge. They made their way through the tangle of fir, pine and poplar. A stream rushed noisily somewhere nearby.

Joe knew the trails. He turned southward, and the companions turned after him, their horses stumbling on loose turf and stones. J.B. swore beneath his breath each time his steed's footing faltered. Only Judas Redux tramped on without mistake.

A cold breeze sighed down from the mountains, stirring tree limbs. Ryan had a sudden and claustrophobic awareness of the huge mountain ranges that boxed them into this wild pocket of the world, and he thought of how the Red Cadre had been trapped in a gorge.

A wolf howled, a long, mournful cry that floated from somewhere up in the wooded slopes on the west side of the gully.

Joe turned on his pony's back. "Faster!"

The wolf cry came again, echoing thinly through the night.

Joe abruptly reined in his pinto and dismounted. "They've pinpointed our position."

Drawing his SIG-Sauer, Ryan turned to his friends. "Blasters primed and loaded. Triple red."

Joe reached beneath his fringed deerskin cape. Ryan assumed he was pulling out a weapon, but in his hand was the wafer of gold with the two crystal disks mounted on either side of it.

"What are you doing?" Ryan demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Quiet," Joe commanded. "I need to concentrate."

He pressed the wafer of metal to his forehead. The crystals caught the glow of the rising moon and the frosty starlight, and the facets seemed to sparkle.

Ryan felt stunned wonder and a swelling fear that the Lakota had suddenly and completely lost his mind.

"What is it? What's he doing?" came Mildred's anxious whisper from behind. There was the rattle of hooves on stones.

"More jolt-brain shit," Jak said angrily. "Can't stand here all night."

The wolf howled again, and this time it was answered by another yelping cry, then a third.

And a fourth.

And a fifth.

"Go," Jak declared. "Leave him."

"Wait, Jak," Krysty said softly. "Joe seems to know what's he doing."

The wolves howled in unison, a quintet wail full of menace.

J.B. scanned the darkness, holding his Uzi in both hands. "Getting closer, sounds like. Surrounding us."

Joe suddenly wheeled toward Ryan, lowering the golden slice of metal from his forehead. He spoke in a brisk whisper. "A force of Wolf Soldiers is on its way to cut us off inside the pass. My warriors can't reach us in time to help."

"How did you come by that tidbit of knowledge?" Doc asked.

Joe didn't answer him. He continued urgently, "We must get through the pass and into Ti-Ra'-Wa before we're encircled."

Ryan exchanged baffled glances with his companions, then faced Joe again. "What kind of opposition can we expect? How many men?"

"Perhaps not so many men, but they have many warriors."

"More crazy talk," Jak said disgustedly. "Means animals come against us."

"They may use trained wolves as fighters, like the one that was set on me in Amicus," Ryan said. "Not

too crazy, but damn messy if they catch us in a narrow pass."

He made a snap decision. "Let's get moving. Whatever's waiting for us, we'll be better off meeting it in the valley than down here or in the pass."

Joe remounted and led them up a trail that twisted among giant boulders and gaunt fir trees. As they climbed out of the gully, the moonlight allowed them a glimpse of a crack splitting the stone rampart towering above and ahead of them.

A pulse-quicken sense of danger filled Ryan as he urged his horse upward along the rock-littered trail. They came up clear of the last trees and onto naked granite shelves and ledges. The lofty rampart loomed before them. The pass was a narrow crack, barely twenty feet wide, shaped like a lopsided, upside-down triangle.

The seven people, their horses and two mules moved into it in single file. It was a place of deep, cold shadows and heavy silences. Only the sound of hooves clattering and clinking on loose pebbles broke the brooding quiet.

The pass wasn't long, barely an eighth of a mile, and ran a fairly straight course. They emerged onto a wide, shelflike ledge splashed with moonlight. Joe reined his pony to a stop and gestured with a sweeping wave of one arm.

"Ti-Ra'-Wa."

A gasp was torn from six throats.

Chapter Seventeen

Ryan found himself looking down on a place he had never visited, yet had always known in his dreams. He sat in the saddle and stared, not moving, not thinking, not blinking, not even breathing. He looked upon a land magically silvered by the moon and the shining, wheeling constellations overhead.

It was a bowl-shaped valley at least twenty miles in diameter, completely and protectively enclosed by towering ranges that rose up toward stupendous, snow-crowned peaks. The valley was a breathtaking vista of green pastures, forests, ponds, lakes and a river. It smelled clean and fresh, untainted by blood or greed or anger. For a moment he felt dizzy. His skin tingled; his heart raced.

J.B. reined in his horse beside Joe's. "Where's the encampment of your people?"

Joe pointed in a southwesterly direction, toward the forest. "That way."

Straining his eye, Ryan discerned shapes and light, a collection of dimly glimmering structures, strangely interconnected with the surrounding tree line. Though he could pick out no details, it looked like no Indian village he had ever seen.

Joe gestured to the northwest. "The lair of the Wolf Soldiers is there."

Ryan followed his pointing hand. The river that flowed across the valley, the loops reflecting the moon, bent toward a little cluster of flickering lights on the far side. Beyond those dancing pinpoints of fire, seemingly against the foothills of the upthrusting ramparts, was another light. It shimmered, seemed to vibrate, a vague, unreal, green-yellow glow.

The blood-freezing call of hunting wolves echoed through the pass behind them. The horses shifted nervously as the howl was answered faintly from the great moonlit valley below.

Joe jerked his pony's head to the left. "They're signaling to the other warriors. We must ride like the wind."

"The pack mules can't go like the wind," Mildred objected.

"Leave them!" Joe snapped, heeling his mount's ribs.

Following Joe, the six companions rode pell-mell down the rocky slopes, the horse's hooves triggering

miniature avalanches of loose shale. The forest came up to meet them, and they galloped between tree trunks, ducking limbs and slapping branches aside. The horse beneath Ryan ran with all its strength in a stretch-legged, thundering stride. An undulating howl drifted from somewhere to their right. It didn't sound like any of the other wolf cries, but the screech was full of anger. Ryan glimpsed dark blurs sliding among the trees, only momentarily visible through the tangle of foliage and underbrush.

Suddenly they emerged from the forest and galloped across a rolling, grassy sward. Far ahead were a few closely grouped flickering lights. Joe directed his pony toward them, then they were lost from view as the party raced down into a declivity of the plain.

The wolves hailed one another with their eerie call as they loped and bounded across the valley to encircle the fleeing humans and horses. Ryan leaned over his animal's neck, its mane smacking his face. The seven riders topped a rise in the plain, and at the same moment the distant firelight came again into view, Doc uttered a strangled yell, "Damn hellhounds!"

Ryan turned in his saddle and saw a dark shape snapping at the legs of Judas Redux. The mustang screamed in fear and reared, then began to buck frantically.

Doc lost his seat, his silver hair flying out like a sunburst, and he went up and then down on the shadow-splotched plain.

Shaggy forms leaped all about them, eyes gleaming and teeth snapping. There were too many moving too fast to be counted, so Ryan didn't try. Dragging back on the reins, he shouted, "Off saddle before they pull us down! Make a stand here!"

Even as he yelled the order, he was sliding from his saddle, kicking free of the stirrups, trying to hold the reins of his terrified horse. A black, hairy bulk rushed soundlessly from the murk, and he triggered his SIG-Sauer three times. The staccato crack of the blaster seemed to startle the bounding, snarling forms. The wolf howled in pain, yelped and loped away on three legs.

Krysty, Jak, J.B. and Mildred formed a rough circle around Ryan, standing back to back, blasters at the ready.

"Where's Doc?" Mildred asked, her voice tight with tension and worry.

At that moment he staggered up to them, grass stained and groaning. He had the Le Mat in his right hand and his unsheathed sword in the left. Through gritted teeth he said, "Just when I was reconsidering rechristening that monster, he has to live up to his name."

Joe dismounted with a feline grace, drawing the blaster from its beaded scabbard with one smooth motion. "Shoot to kill!"

"Look!" Krysty cried. "It's not just wolves!"

The shaggy beasts charging them were apparently the advance guard. Painted men upon horseback, wearing wolf-skin cloaks and hoods, wielding feathered lances and tomahawks, pounded across the plain like a wave. They voiced high-pitched "Yi-yi-yi!" screams.

Ryan, Krysty and Joe fired more or less simultaneously at the anthropomorphic forms surging toward them through the moonlight. The horses neighed and reared, then turned and galloped away, and three writhing figures were left behind on the grass.

"Chill men!" Jak shouted, triggering his blaster. "Wolves run away if we shoot masters!"

Ryan knew, without really knowing how he knew, that Jak was mistaken. The wolves displayed independent tactical thinking. They showed it by the way they came on in irregular zigzag bounds to minimize the chances of falling victim to weapons that were obviously new and fearsome to them.

For a long moment it was all crazy confusion with everyone firing in random patterns, the air full of gunshots, animal and human howling and pounding hooves.

Then, as always, the veterans of hundreds of fights for survival tightened into a well-oiled gestalt of destruction. Ryan and his friends chose their targets coolly and squeezed off careful shots, oblivious to the racket their attackers were deliberately making.

Though flights of arrows and the occasional lance zipped their way, the steady storm of lead exploding from handblasters broke full on their human and beast enemies. The blood-chilling war cries and predatory howls became screams of pain and surprise.

Horses reared, dumping their riders, wolves twisted and fell, painted warriors catapulted from wooden

saddles. The hail of blasterfire continued, a torrent of death spraying in all directions. A bullet fired from Jak's Colt Python struck a pony in the chest.

The beast lurched to a thundering fall, throwing its rider, and Jak managed to jump clear. Another shot from the heavy .357 blaster took the wolf-rider in the right eye, punching a fist-sized, scarlet-squirting crater in the back of his head. More lances arced their way, sticking quivering in the earth.

The charge of wolves and horsemen wavered, then broke. Wolf howl and war cry rose and fell as the attackers retreated in the face of the deadly and accurate fire. Departing hooves drummed on the grassy sward. A comparative silence followed, and Ryan called a cease-fire.

At least a dozen bodies, man and animal, dotted the plain. Joe shouted a cry of victory and held his long blaster over his head. Then something in the shadows attracted his attention, and he moved toward it quickly.

Ryan followed him and saw the Lakota approaching a crouching wolf. The fur of its right haunch was matted with blood, and its leg was obviously injured. The beast turned its face toward them. It didn't snarl. It continued to crouch, glaring from Joe to Ryan, as if trying to decide which human presented the greater threat.

With a start Ryan recognized the wolf as Sisoka's "friend," the one she had called Blood-sniffer, and automatically he raised his blaster. The gold-green eyes flamed into his, and Ryan hesitated before squeezing the trigger.

Then, despite an injured leg and with eye-blurring speed, the wolf sprang directly for Ryan's throat.

Involuntarily stepping back, Ryan stumbled on an uneven patch of ground. He barely saw the motion of Joe's weapon as the Lakota swung it at the plunging wolf.

Ryan heard the thud of metal against bone, felt the wolf's massive weight slam into him and knock him sprawling. He elbowed the limp body of Blood-sniffer off him and scrambled to his feet.

He heard running footfalls and J.B.'s angry voice demand, "Why didn't you just shoot the fucking thing?" Joe smiled, a thin slash of triumph across his high-planed face. Nudging the motionless animal with a toe, he said, "He's far more valuable to us alive."

Ryan and his friends looked around at the carnage of corpses in silence. Somehow all the bullet-blasted bodies seemed blasphemous in this valley.

Joe lifted his rifle over his head, turned his face to the moon and uttered another shrill, fierce scream of victory.

"We have a prisoner!" he exclaimed in a voice full of exultation. "And we have given our enemies their first taste of our new weapons and warriors!"

Krysty came to Ryan's side. The Smith amp; Wesson trembled in her hand. She looked more shaken than he had ever seen her. She stared at the dead animals lying on the moon-washed sward, her sentient hair coiled tight against her nape.

"Ryan, Joe was right. These wolves are intelligent," she whispered. "This is wrong."

Rather than agreeing or arguing with her, he announced, "Everyone reload."

As he rammed a fresh clip into the SIG-Sauer, he glanced down at the senseless wolf, completely at a loss as to why Joe would want to make an animal, no matter how well-trained or intelligent, a hostage.

Krysty was right this was wrong, in an intangible fashion he couldn't easily identify. The battle wasn't like the conflict with the Red Cadre or so many others over the years. He couldn't shake the shameful sensation that he and his friends had invaded the promised land, a new Eden, their weapons enacting the role of serpents.

"We must go on and quickly," Joe declared, "or more of the Wolf Soldiers will be here."

Kneeling, he lashed rawhide thongs around the fore and hind paws of the unconscious wolf. With a wide strip of leather, he muzzled the beast, securing its jaws tightly.

As he tightened the knot, the wolf stirred slowly, its eyes opening. It didn't move, but a low whine escaped its black-rimmed lips. Its eyes blazed with fear, then with such a potent rage that Ryan felt his belly turn a cold flip-flop.

The ground suddenly trembled under the impact of many hooves.

"Riders," Jak declared.

Ryan and the others raised their weapons as the dull thudding grew in volume.

"Wait," Joe said. "They are my people."

Illumined by the white disk of the moon, a band of horsemen galloped toward them from the distant, flickering firelight. The half-dozen men wore buckskin leggings, and, like the Wolf Soldiers, were armed with lances, bows and arrows.

They pulled up their horses sharply, and a burly man slid from his steed and strode toward Joe. They clasped forearms and spoke in rapid-fire Lakota. Ryan recognized him as Little Mountain. Joe gestured for the others to step forward.

"This is Little Mountain, who brought me word of your arrival in Amicus. He will escort us to the village. We must hurry. The Wolf Soldiers are massing for another attack."

The warriors exchanged fierce, gloating words, nodding toward the bound and muzzled Blood-sniffer.

Twice, Ryan heard them say "Sisoka."

Before he and his friends remounted, they ran quick examinations on their wounds. J.B. had taken a cut on his left arm, but it was superficial. Doc was bruised from his fall, though not really injured. However, his eyes were disconcerted as he gazed at the bound wolf.

"Loup-garou," he whispered.

Jak, who knew the legends of the Cajun people, was startled. "Men that change to wolves? Old story for old stupes, Doc. Surprised at you."

Overhearing the exchange, Joe said sharply, "Mount up!"

Everyone swung onto horseback. Blood-sniffer was slung across Little Mountain's pony and tied to the saddle with thongs.

As they trotted across the rolling sward, Ryan knew there was no way he could reconcile the valley of Ti-Ra'-Wa with the rest of Deathlands. This hidden pocket of Earth had existed long before the nuking and sky dark, its people living an ancient way of life, unaffected by the outside world. Or perhaps not the old ways seemed to be moving toward a climax of conflict as a direct result of the presence of him and his friends. They had brought Deathlands to the valley.

He doubted the intelligent animals were the mutated spawns of radiation. Biochemical warfare and fallout had created a host of genetically twisted monsters across the devastated face of America, Europe and the eastern republics, but the beasts of Ti-Ra'-Wa appeared to be throwbacks, survivors of a dim time in prehistory when humanity and animals had coexisted as equals.

He didn't really believe that, and he hoped the uncanny community of beasts and men had another explanation than that the animals were as intelligent as humans.

The party rode down a gentle slope toward a collection of structures near the banks of the valley's timber-bordered river. Ryan had expected tepees or bark lodges, but what he saw was so dumbfounding, he suspected hallucination.

The village was built into the forest, in some ways a part of the forest. Massive hollow tree trunks served as lodgings, giant boughs were like arboreal footpaths and low-hanging branches were so intertwined they formed roofs and shelters. Light shone from within many of the trees, through windows that didn't look cut, but formed out of the living wood.

Here and there, supported by frameworks and lattices of branches and limbs, were crystal disks, giant duplicates of the ones on Joe's golden wafer. They shimmered and glittered, reflecting the firelight. The interlocking facets gleamed with multicolored sparks, like prismatic pieces of a rainbow cut from the sky.

"My God," Mildred breathed in wonder. "This place it's like it doesn't belong on Earth at all."

Mildred had voiced Ryan's own thoughts, or his fears. He felt a rising sensation of xenophobia, as if he had stumbled into a city so alien it very well could have fallen from another planet. The air was aromatic with the scent of unfamiliar resins and oils.

Following Joe's lead, they reined their horses to a walk and rode through the crystal-and-forest-entwined village. There was little underbrush. The great trunks loomed like the pillars of ancient temples he had seen pix of in books. The moonlight, what little of it pierced the multilevel overhead tangle of branch, limb and leaves, was tinted green, as if they were underwater.

Ryan suspected that the tree city was inestimably old, far older than recorded human history. It looked as

if the forest had grown around the crystal disks. The settlement didn't appear to have been built solely for human use. As it was, few people were in the forestways. The community seemed too big for the number of people he saw.

Yet men, women and a few children, clad alike in buckskin, ran toward the troop of riders. Joe gave them a proud wave of his hand, like a returning hero who had conquered fearsome enemies.

The people gaped in excited avarice at the blasters in the companions' possession. More than once the whisper of "Maza Wakan!" rippled through the crowd. Both Ryan and J.B. recognized the Lakota word for "blaster." In lower, almost frightened tones they heard "kaga" repeated over and over.

"I don't get it," J.B. said lowly. "A big place like this, yet they're crazy over a few blasters."

Joe led the way toward a complex of structures made of a wide belt of gigantically trunked trees. The huge limbs were intertwined, like wooden fingers, connecting one tree to the other. A canopy of leaves and branches formed a vast roof that blotted out the star and moonlit sky.

Little Mountain, with the captive wolf, went around the center tree. Joe reined in and dismounted. The other warriors followed suit.

"We need not talk to the other chiefs until morning," he announced. "All of you must be tired."

Ryan hadn't realized the full depth of his weariness until he dismounted.

"Where do we sleep?" he asked. Joe gestured to the central tree. "I will show you. Your weapons must remain with me."

Ryan sensed his friends stiffening with sudden tension. "No need."

Joe's response was unruffled and smooth. "I can assure you they will be well guarded."

"They will," Ryan replied stolidly. "By us." Joe and Ryan locked stares for a long moment. The warriors looked back and forth from their chief to the one-eyed outlander.

Not caring to participate in a second firelight in less than half an hour, Ryan said, "It's for the best, Joe. In unskilled hands our weapons would be dangerous to the people they're supposed to defend."

Joe considered the response for a second, then shrugged and walked through the archway into the tree.

The door was like that of a cathedral, and the interior was broad and empty. Light flickered from torches of resinous wood flaming in crude sockets that looked like knotholes. Joe led them through an empty expanse into a small suite furnished with wooden chairs and bed frames piled high with soft furs. The workmanship was passable, utilitarian and not fancy.

The room had only one window, covered by the pelt of some small animal.

"Food will be brought to you shortly," Joe said.

"Tomorrow, after you're rested, we will talk."

"Yes," Ryan agreed. "About many things."

Joe's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. "Many things, indeed."

Chapter Eighteen

As Joe left the room, J.B. stared after him, suspicion hardening his sallow face. "He's too goddamn cagey. He's got a joker in his pack."

Ryan sank onto one of the beds. The fur robes were soft and almost sensually comfortable. "Then we've got to find an ace on the line to play against him."

Krysty sat beside him, brushing a few strands of flame red hair away from her face. "I've never received impressions like this before."

Doc sat gingerly in a chair, wincing as his backside met the hard wood. "Unfortunately I have. Like the

one I'm receiving from my gluteus maximus."

"What kind of impressions are you receiving?" Mildred asked.

Krysty frowned. "It's a jumbled mixture of human and animal emotions."

"Animal?" Jak questioned, eyebrows raised.

"I've picked up animal emotional impressions before," Krysty explained. "The higher animals, anyway. Generally their feelings are simplefear, hunger, curiosity. What I detected from the wolves was stronger, very pure and clean. The animals here might not be as intelligent as humans, but their emotional reactions are similar in intensity."

Grunting, J.B. stretched out on a bunk, pillowing his head with his arms. "What was that business Joe pulled with the gold piece?"

"Some sort of psionic accelerator, mebbe," Krysty said. "Crystals and precious metals, particularly heavy ones like silver, gold and platinum, are believed to be conductors of psychic energy."

"Yeah," Mildred commented wryly. "I remember that vogue. Used to be called the New Age. Crystals and certain metals supposedly enhanced your spiritual awareness, purified your auras, drained off negative energyand a fortune from the gullible."

Doc nodded in agreement. "In my day it was called spiritism. Some learned men, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, maintained telepathy was a transmission of electric thought waves. Some exponents of this theory believed the right instrument could serve as the transmitter. Maybe that is what these primitives are using. Not very sophisticated, however."

Krysty shrugged. "If that's what the gold-and-crystal pieces are, they don't have to be sophisticated.

Quartz crystals have inbuilt electromagnetic properties."

"It sounds like 'far out, man' mumbo jumbo to me," Mildred said.

Krysty smiled tolerantly. "Mebbe it does to you, and mebbe it truly was in your day, but the fact remains that some Indian tribes discovered long ago how to interchange energy with certain kinds of crystals, thought pattern energy included. Mother Sonja once told me crystals were used for sending and receiving telepathic messages, but because people lost the art, the discipline, the majority of the communications degenerated into three-dimensional visions, in a manner that became known as fortune-telling. In fact my mother could 'far-see' with a crystal. She called it scrying."

"Also called crapping," Jak stated. He was testing the edge of one of his throwing knives against the ball of his thumb.

Ryan almost envied the young man's single-mindedness. The mystery of the valley and even of the strange forest city hadn't disturbed Jak at all. Lack of fear served him well.

A young, slim woman entered. Not even the shapeless doeskin smock and fringed mantle she wore disguised the full-breasted figure swelling beneath it. Ryan had always thought Indian women were supposed to be shy, but she gave Jak a speculative stare with dark, bold eyes. She placed a wicker tray of food platters on the table, and as she left, she strode by Jak, her hips swinging in an inviting fashion.

Jak chose to ignore her, reaching for one of the plates of food.

The bowls were filled with a boiled stew of venison and vegetables and a jar of some kind of fermented fruit juice. It tasted something like cider, but it possessed a mild alcoholic kick. The stew was rich, thick and delicious, though the meat had a faint grassy undertaste.

"Are we dealing with a lost tribe of Indians here?" Mildred asked between bites.

Ryan shook his head and took a long drink of cider. "A lost band, mebbe, but not a tribe. They're Sioux, and they speak Lakota."

Doc cleared his throat. "Shortly before I was trawled, I read newspaper reports about a band of 'wild' Indians rumored to be living in the mountains of Montana and Wyoming."

"So?" Jak inquired. "Thought there still was wild Indians in your day."

"A misconception," Doc retorted. "All the Plains tribes had been pacified and restricted to reservations by the early 1880s. I remember hearing rumors of a band of Sioux vanishing from a reservation, disappearing from the face of the earth. Perhaps this is the valley to which they vanished, and the Sioux here are their descendants."

Jak suddenly stiffened, his spoon poised before his open mouth. His head tilted slightly to one side. "Hear

something."

Everyone fell silent, listening intently. Then they heard the sound Jak's exceptionally keen ears had detected. It was a distant, deep throbbing that came from outside. It seemed to roll through the giant tree like breakers on a beach in a steady heavy rhythm.

"Drums," J.B. stated.

"They're signaling, mebbe," Ryan suggested.

Mildred, head cocked, replied, "No. It's a ceremony of some sort. Let's go and take a look."

"Last Native ceremony nearly was end of me," Jak muttered.

Mildred laughed. "Those were Central American Indians. North American tribes didn't practice human sacrifice. Well, hardly ever."

The companions left the room and followed the drumming through the arched entranceway of the massive tree. A big, blazing fire had been built in the center of a clearing, its smoke rising unwaveringly straight in the breezeless night air. Two small boys tended the fire, placing more logs on it.

A crowd was assembled at the far edge of the clearing, and several men were beating big, hide-covered drums with wooden mallets. The throbbing vibrations were like the steady beat of the invisible wings of a giant bird.

A man strode from the crowd, wearing a headdress made of bird feathers and buffalo horns, and began a high-pitched nasal chant. The chant didn't end but trailed off, as if the man had forgotten the words. The drum thumping continued for several more beats, then it, too, ceased. Wordlessly the man in the headdress stepped back into the crowd.

In the distance came the sound of small, tinkling bells. The onlookers on the edge of the clearing parted, and a man leaped nearly into the fire. Around his hips was a loincloth bearing a green disk design, and on his feet were boot moccasins. A white cloth mask covered his head and face. It, too, bore the green disk. His otherwise naked body was painted bright yellow with bands of green on the chest, back and arms. Bells were strapped to his wrists. In his right hand he held what seemed to be a long piece of cord with a gourd attached to its end.

The man danced around the fire, then around the perimeter. He whirled the gourd over his head, and it gave off a low, ominous humming sound.

Four girls in white doeskin detached themselves from the spectators and arranged themselves into a circle around the fire. The drumming began again, and the girls began to move their feet in time to the drumbeats. Ryan recognized one as the girl who had brought them their dinner.

The hooded man continued to dance vigorously, the bells jingling and tinkling. The girls danced slowly, almost as if their ankles were tied together.

The ceremony progressed, and the six friends watched it, trying to fathom as much of its meaning as they could. The man threaded his way around and between the girls, now and then taking one of them by the hand and leading her in a sort of promenade around the fire. The steady throb of the drums, the incessant jingling, the occasional humming from the man's bull-roarer, added to the confusing quality of the performance.

To one who had grown up with such ceremonies, the meaning was probably instantly clear, but to Ryan and his friends, it could only be puzzling, or perhaps disturbing.

The dancing, the drumming, the bell-jingling, all ended with an unnerving abruptness. As the girls returned to the edge of the clearing, the male dancer pulled off his hood, revealing Joe's sweat-pebbled face. He began to talk, and since he was speaking in Lakota, his speech was more or less incomprehensible. Only Ryan and J.B. were able to recognize one word out of every twenty.

Joe mentioned "Maza Wakan," "wasicun, Akicita Sunkamitu Tanka" and more than once, "Wokiconze Wakan," which Ryan finally realized meant Sacred Land.

Joe waved his arms in an elaborate gesture, and the crowd began to disperse. He glanced over, sighted the travelers and nodded. He walked over to them.

"How did you like the ceremony?" he asked.

"Very edifying," Doc replied. "It would have been more so had we known what it meant."

"It was the Thanking Dance, acknowledging the help of the Four Old Men who brought us here safely."

Sudden understanding made Mildred nod. "The Four Old Menthe ones who direct the winds, the rains, the seasons."

"And who give my people the breath of life," Joe said. "Which is the wisdom necessary for an existence within the circle. You are the first outlanders to see the dance. You should feel honored."

No one said anything.

Joe looked them over warily and said, "A ceremony like this is a very emotional experience, at least for some people. It takes a lot out of me. I bid you a good night and urge you not to leave your quarters again until I send for you."

Before they could reply, he had turned away and strode back across the clearing.

Krysty tugged at Ryan's arm. "We should do as he says. It's been a long day."

They returned to their room and took bunks. Ryan intended to stand the first guard, but he had imbibed more of the cider than he should have. Its alcoholic content combined with his fatigue and pushed him onto the bed beside Krysty.

Jak volunteered to stand watch.

Ryan couldn't summon up the strength or the inclination to respond, and he didn't awaken until Krysty shook him. The others were all waking, sitting up, rubbing bleared eyes, looking around.

The same girl as before brought them food, placed it on the table and silently left. Breakfast was the same simple fare as supper, but instead of fruit juice, the jar contained a strong yet stimulating tea, probably boiled from bark. It was more palatable than the similar tea in Amicus.

As they finished eating, the burly Little Mountain came in and gestured curtly. " Okihe ."

"Where's Joe?" Ryan demanded.

Little Mountain shrugged and gestured again, repeating impatiently, " Okihe . Follow."

Obviously Joe had taught him only that one English word to speak to the outlanders.

The six people made sure their weapons were primed and loaded and walked out of the room after the big-shouldered warrior. They went through a curving wooden corridor that opened up on a small room. The chamber's walls were lined with clusters of crystal formations. Light swirled, sparkled and danced from the countless points and facets. The shades of color were variegated, shifting from light blue to a deeper amethyst to purplish tints.

Ryan was impressed by the chamber's beauty, but he was surprised to see that the mineral clusters conformed perfectly to the circular dimensions of the room, as if they had been grown by design.

In the center of the chamber, secured by a heavy, braided length of rawhide affixed to a wooden staple in the floor, crouched Blood-sniffer. Joe stood in front of the wolf, glaring down at the imprisoned beast. In one hand he held the wafer of gold, pressing it to his forehead.

"Guess he's talking wolf," Jak said, an edge of doubt in his voice.

Joe heard, lowered the wafer and strode toward them, his expression impatient and irritated. "That is exactly what I'm doing. You outlanders have much to learn about the ways of Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"That is quite the understatement," Doc said, jauntily angling his cane over a shoulder. "Perhaps you'll be so good as to educate us."

"During the early epochs of my culture," Joe replied stiffly, "the vast caverns wherein crystals grew were adapted as healing and communication chambers. Our forefathers knew how to tap the energy within them."

Lifting the wafer of gold, he continued, "When combined with gold or silver, my people learned the art of sending telepathic messages, using the Inyan Wakan, the Holy Stones, as receivers. Last night you all saw me call to Little Mountain for help. He stood in this room and was able to receive my thoughts at a distance."

"You can read minds with your little doodads?" J.B. asked, cocking a doubtful eyebrow.

"No. These 'senders' were created by the First People, who taught our forefathers to use them to communicate, one mind to another, not to use them to invade another's mind. Individual thoughts cannot be detected unless the mind is consciously prepared to receive or to send."

Looking at the disbelieving faces, Joe waved at the shimmering facets and points on the walls of the room. "Come into this room, then you will understand."

No one moved.

Smiling sardonically, Joe said, "It won't hurt you."

A little hesitantly they entered the mineral-lined chamber. Joe directed each of them to find a crystal point and to stand before it, touching it with a hand. Tentatively they followed his instructions, hands pressed to the crystals.

The mineral structure was warm, not cool as Ryan had expected it. He experienced a not-unpleasant pins-and-needles tingling that spread up his fingers, along his arm and then flowed all over his body.

Can you hear me?

Ryan began to answer Joe's question, then he uttered a startled exclamation when he realized the Lakota hadn't spoken the question.

"Dark night," J.B. whispered in shock, jerking his hand from the wall as though he had been scalded.

All of them reacted with various degrees of surprise to the words in their minds. Only Krysty appeared unmoved, as if she had expected something of the sort. Joe was pressing the metal rectangle against his forehead and smiling a cold, superior smile.

"You got those things from your forefathers?" Ryan asked.

Aloud, Joe replied, "We shall talk later of it. Now, I want you to speak to our prisoner."

Ryan glanced at the wolf. It met his gaze with a quizzical tilt of the head. "Nice doggy," he said.

Ignoring the nervous laughter from Ryan's friends, Joe said acidly, "Not like that. Touch the crystal point as before."

Ryan did so, mentally focusing on the wolf. The image of a fanged, pointy-eared face materialized in his mind.

Tell him about your blasters, about their power to slay.

It took Ryan an uneasy moment to accept that Joe had addressed him telepathically, not audibly.

In his mind the image of the wolf's eyes flashed a blazing, green-gold fire, bright and beautiful, but almost painful to look upon. Involuntarily Ryan closed his eye.

"I know about your weapons, outlander. They are the reason Sisoka bade me to slay you.

The thought-voice was strange, oddly filtered and husky, yet familiar. Underlying it, however, was a note of wisdom, a sadness combined with a guileless innocence.

Why didn't you? Ryan asked, a bit surprised at the ease with which he formed the thought-words.

Instincts. I trust them. So should you.

Why are you a prisoner?

To make a bargain, such as the bargain Touch-the-Sky made with you and your ignorant outland friends. Ryan's skin crawled, not so much at the concept of a wolf brain communicating with a human brain, but at the ambient tone of sadness tinting the beast's reply.

What do you mean? Ryan asked.

You have been promised a reward Touch-the-Sky cannot give.

Silence! The thought-word flared with such passion that Ryan nearly stumbled backward.

"What?" J.B. snapped aloud, releasing his grip on the crystal point. If he had been amazed by the telepathic conversation between Ryan and the beast, it was submerged beneath a flood of angry suspicion.

Wheeling on Joe, he demanded, "What's it mean you can't give what you promised?"

Joe lowered the wafer and stared venomously at the wolf. The creature's tongue lolled from between open jaws, as if it were enjoying the punchline to a joke.

"He lies. I'll have him removed."

"Like hell," Ryan said sharply. He tightened his hand on the crystal point.

What do you mean?

A soundless burst of snarling lupine laughter filled Ryan's mind.

Touch-the-Sky promised you the yellow metal.

Yes. Is there none?

There is much of it. Ti-Ra'-Wa has gold in abundance, but you cannot reach it.

Why?

It is in the sacred-power place.

And where is that ? Ryan demanded.

Enough ! came Joe's enraged thought-shout.

Ryan ignored the man's command. Explain .

You will not understand.

Explain!

You are only a shadow of the real world , Blood-sniffer said reasonably, and your life here means little.

But the places and things of power must be preserved, for the sake of Grandmother Earth. Many medicine spots were defiled during the purification. You do not understand that if these things and places of power are destroyed, the life circle will be broken and thus destroy the process of life itself .

What are you talking about ? Ryan demanded.

The Cavern of Creation, which nurtures a spark of the first circle. It is the place whence all life sprang, long, long ago.

Why can't we reach it?

The wolfs answer was like a snap of its jaws quick, decisive and painful. It is death for any human who has not been purified. You, with your blasters and your greed, believe you can invade that holy place and steal away its wealth ?

We didn't come here to steal , Ryan responded angrily.

The cavern is guarded by my brotherhood. Their lives are sworn to our Grandmother. You cannot hope to slay them all before you are slain.

We didn't come here to steal . Ryan repeated.

There was a silence for an instant. " I know why you came. You have been deceived, outlander. I am sorry for you .

Chapter Nineteen

Swinging away from the wall, eye blazing with cobalt fury, Ryan advanced on Joe. "Is that true?"

Joe shrugged. "It is true the gold is in the cavern, at the far end of the valley."

"You said it was here," J.B. said harshly.

"I said it was in the valley. That is the truth. When the Wolf Soldiers are conquered and we control the cavern, you will have your weight in it."

"Double cross," Jak hissed, drawing a knife from inside his jacket.

The Lakota eyed Jak fearlessly. "How is it a double cross? Unless you planned to deceive me and take your reward before fulfilling your end of the bargain."

Ryan felt a grudging admiration for Joe's cleverness. Obviously mistrusting their motives, he had set up a method to fight his fight before they could even glimpse the gold.

Jak didn't put his knife away. "Bullshit. We hear only bullshit since we come with you."

"Take it easy, Jak," J.B. said curtly. "If the stuff is here, we can get it after the job is done."

The wolf whined plaintively, lifting a paw toward Ryan.

"Ignore him," Joe said.

Ryan ignored Joe instead. He pressed his hand against the crystal point and opened his mind.

Touch-the-Sky lies, One-eye. Not only does my brotherhood barr the way to the cavern, but inside dwell the ghosts of the First People, which not even your weapons can harm.

What do you mean?

Do not listen ! Joe's thoughts roared. Aloud, he spoke in the rapid-fire Lakota tongue.

Little Mountain stepped into the chamber and looped another braided-leather leash around Blood-sniffer's throat. He cinched it tight until the wolf gagged for air. Then, with the warrior pricking its wounded leg with a lance point, the creature allowed itself to be led limping from the room. It cast one backward glance toward Ryan.

Resting one hand on the butt of the SIG-Sauer, Ryan said to Joe, "Time for straight tongue between us. You got us here, and now we need all the facts before we do anything else."

"You shall have the facts," Joe responded. "But I had to prove some of them first and open your minds to other possibilities."

With a wry chuckle, Doc said, "You've certainly accomplished that, my lad."

"How can these animals be so intelligent?" Mildred demanded. "It makes no scientific sense."

"There is more to existence than white man's science," Joe said coldly. "It was science that destroyed your world. The laws your people imposed on the world are gone, and the old ones have returned."

He motioned them out of the crystal chamber, and they followed him back to their quarters. Joe remained standing as the others seated themselves.

"I'll start from the beginning, the very beginning," he said, "the story of this valley's origins and, in some ways, the origins of my people."

Ryan repressed a wry smile. If he was certain of one fact about Indians, it was they loved to talk as much, if not more, than the most long-winded, full-of-himself baron.

IN THE BEGINNING the First People lived in a world without light or substance. They were a queer folk, part animal, part human, part air, part mineral.

They fought so much among themselves in their dark, formless world that Ah-badt-dadt-deah, He Who Made All Things, took pity upon them. He decided to create a new world for them, one with light and warmth and sensation and substance. So Ah-badt-dadt-deah formed this planet from celestial mud, imbued it with the essence of His sister, Grandmother Earth, and reshaped the First People so they could live upon it. Some of them became rocks, some became trees, some became bears and wolves and buffalo and some He sculpted into the form such as present man, though they were gigantic in stature. Then He released them from their dark world, and they emerged into this one from a cavern, here in the valley of Ti-Ra'-Wa.

In gratitude for their freedom and their great gift, the reshaped First People swore to Ah-badt-dadt-deah that they would always protect His sister. To always remind them of their vow, He placed a tiny piece of the stuff of creation in the cavern, the womb of Grandmother Earth, and charged the First People with keeping it safe, throughout the four circles of existence until the time of purification.

The First People kept this vow and evolved further and learned to live gracefully within the circles.

Though they eventually diverged from one another and spread out across the face of Grandmother Earth and formed separate tribes, they were all of the same matter spawned in the Cavern of Creation.

But always a small group remained here in Ti-Ra'-Wa, living the ancient ways, in accordance with the high laws, fulfilling the promise to Ah-badt-dadt-deah. All the many and diverse manifestations of nature lived in harmony here, the beasts and the humans, the rocks and the trees, the earth and the water.

The First People built this forest city, and their thoughts became audible through the crystals taken from the cavern. They channeled the power of Grandmother Earth to create, to heal, to communicate. It was truly a paradise, a land of happiness.

The greatest warrior of the First People was the founder of the holy Cavern Keepers society. His name was Nanabozho, and when wounded in battle, he retreated deep into the Cavern of Creation to watch over the heart of the Grandmother in a kind of waking death. It was believed his spirit still dwelt there.

Over the course of the centuries, tales of the valley seeped into the outer world. It was known as Quivira, Cibola, El Dorado. The greedy conquistadors and the white prospectors envisioned Ti-Ra'-Wa as having silver spires, gold-paved streets, jade chairs, diamond drinking vessels.

Many were the attempts to locate and invade the valley, and none was successful. Of all who had lived

there, all were descendants of the First People, those were spawned there. They kept the ancient vow to protect the valley and the Cavern of Creation with their lives.

Ti-Ra'-Wa was timeless. It existed unchanged and unchanging to that very day, perhaps to the very end of time.

"AND THAT," said Joe, "is Ti-Ra'-Wa's virtue and its curse."

"Were you born here?" Krysty asked.

"No. But the legend of its existence figured prominently in the lore of my people. When I came of age, I wandered the length and breadth of my ancestral lands in search of clues to its whereabouts. I spent many years and suffered much. A few years ago I found this valley. I also found that the reality fell somewhat short of the legend, but in some instances exceeded it."

"Give us an instance," Mildred said.

Gesturing to the room, to the huge hollow tree around them, Joe replied, "Our forefathers apparently lived here with a great and vast knowledge of how to manipulate natural earth energies. This city is the most obvious example. Most of that knowledge was lost over the centuries, except for a few relics like this."

He hefted the crystal-encrusted wafer of gold. "The ability to communicate with the higher animals in this valley still exists, but now it is limited to the wolves. Somehow the animals here developed a human-level intelligence."

"Maybe due to a long-forgotten technique of bioengineering," Mildred muttered. "As fantastic as it seems, it's the only possible explanation. It may also serve as the basis for the belief in animism shared by most Native American tribes."

Seeing Jak and J.B. glance at her in puzzlement, she added, by way of an explanation, "Animism is the belief that every living thing is connected on a spiritual level, that even animals and trees have souls. It's generally regarded as a primitive religious belief mainly because it maintains that people, objects and even the heavens are imbued with a consciousness, self-aware and interactive with the larger material reality. If what Joe says has any foundation in truth, it's probable that his forefathers took the tenets of animism to their highest possible expression and developed a way, possibly due to deliberately inducing mutations, to raise the intelligence level of animals."

Joe nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting theory. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that in this valley, wolves are in many ways the equals of humans. At one time bears, cougars and even horses shared those traits. For some reason only the intelligent wolves remain. At any rate the prevailing belief in Ti-Ra'-Wa is that all life-forms were created at the dawn of time, spawned as equals from the Cavern of Creation. Animals were put on earth to teach men valuable lessons, and since all living things have a common creator, all animals are our relatives, our brothers."

"And this cavern," Ryan said, "is the storehouse for the gold."

"Side tunnels contain metal relics, but the primary cave has never been entered, at least not in recent historical times. There are supposedly great dangers, not just to the body but to the soul. Only the hereditary Guardian of the Cavern Keepers knows how to enter it safely. For many centuries it was a rite of passage for new Guardians to enter the cave and give Kanabozho gifts, articles taken from those who tried to invade the valley and defile the Grandmother. That practice ended a very long time ago."

"Nanabozho," Mildred echoed. "Isn't that the time of the Algonquian trickster and cultural hero?"

Joe shrugged. "I believe so. Myth is woven so tightly around the cavern, it's almost impossible to untangle truth from legend. The primal energy of creation is believed to still pulse deep within the heart of the cavern, and the Guardian is the warden of the vast powers."

"Who is the current holder of that title?" Ryan asked.

Joe's face darkened a bit with anger and sorrow. "That is the cause of this conflict, Ochinee. The last Guardian was a shaman named Towasi. I was his student. He had no son, so I proved myself worthy of his mantle by going out into the world and destroying all the remains of the predark evil. I was on that path when you met me. When I returned to Ti-Ra'-Wa, I learned that Towasi had died, without officially

passing on his knowledge or title."

"You said he had no son," Krysty said. "He had no other children?"

"One. You met her, Ochinee, that night in Amicus."

"Sisoka?"

Joe nodded grimly. "She has no more knowledge of how to enter the cavern safely and manipulate the energies there than I, but she claims the title. Over a period of months the people of Ti-Ra'-Wa broke into factions. The brotherhood of Cavern Keepers, of which I am a ranking chief, seized this, the main village. Sisoka organized our military, the Wolf Soldiers, and settled some miles from here, around the entrance to the cave."

Ryan sighed, shook his head. The story of Ti-Ra'-Wa seemed too incredible to believe, almost like stories he had read in books as a child, back at Front Royal. A long-hidden valley, holding the relics of an ancient civilization in North America, a valley from which all Native peoples, all life itself, had sprung, a valley where wild beasts were on the same footing as humankind.

"Surely," Doc said, "there is more to this conflict than a mere disagreement over who is the rightful heir to a largely meaningless title."

"Meaningless?" Joe repeated scornfully. "Perhaps it seems so to you, but whoever holds the title of Guardian holds the future of the world."

Mildred blinked in surprise. "I don't understand."

With an almost fanatical intensity, Joe whispered, "The energies pent up in the cavern are the same as that which were released at the moment of creation, when this planet, perhaps the entire universe exploded into existence. My ancestors tended to these energies, worshiped them, knew how to manipulate them to various degrees. You've seen evidence of that, and the use of these energies helped Ti-Ra'-Wa stay hidden for so many centuries. I and my brotherhood wish to manipulate those same energies again, to use them as they were used aeons ago to reshape, to remold, to heal the Earth."

Everyone stared at Joe in shock. He was evidently accustomed to such incredulous reactions to his pronouncement, because he continued speaking quickly, giving no one time to interpose a question about his smity or lack thereof.

"The world is an abomination," he said, "populated with unnatural monsters and spiritually dark people. The waters are poisoned, the sky full of deadly gases and radiation. All that can be reversed, Sisoka and her faction say my dream is only a power mad ambition, that I am tampering with the natural order. I say the natural order has already been tampered with. It's been turned upside down, and it must be set right. The future of Grandmother Earth is at stake here, the future of humanity itself. Can we turn our backs on our Grandmother without turning our backs on the high laws themselves?"

Shaking his head vehemently, black tresses flying, Joe answered his own question. "No, we cannot. Not when we have the means and power to transform Deathlands into a mirror image of Ti-Ra'-Wa!"

Despite his growing doubt and suspicion, Ryan couldn't help but feel sympathy for Joe's burning passion. It was a wonderful dream, to turn the clock back, to transform the horror of this world into an Eden and vanquish all the demons spawned by the skydark. He also realized the magnetic power of the man, the innate leadership that had enabled him to overcome his followers' fears of breaking tribal tradition.

"Sisoka and the Wolf Soldiers do not agree with your ambition?" Doc asked.

"Not in practice. We used to talk about it, she and I, at night" Joe broke off, and his eyes reflected a painful memory. "Sisoka believes that the energies are holy, the life source, the heart of Grandmother Earth. To manipulate them, even for a good cause, is arrogance, blasphemy. She fears that mortals cannot hope to command such power without incurring devastating results."

"The cure might be worse than the disease?" Mildred commented with a rueful smile.

"Such is her fear. I maintain that this valley is living evidence the energies can be manipulated successfully, beneficially."

Jak shuddered. "Crazy talk gives me creeps."

Seating his spectacles more comfortably on his nose, J.B. asked, "So what do you want us to do, Joe? Go over to the lair of the Wolf Soldiers and chill them all, the ones on two and four legs both?"

Joe looked dismayed and even a little shocked. "I don't want to exterminate them. It's simply that they

must allow the Cavern Keepers to fulfill our purpose and duties and the ancient vow to Ah-badt-dadt-deah. However, I'm not ruling out any course of action."

J.B.'s practical mind zeroed in on tactics. "How much of this valley do you Cavern Keepers hold?"

"Only this southern quarter, and a few other places near the river."

"How long have you been at war?" Krysty asked.

"We've been observing an armed truce, at least until last night. But now blood has been spilled, and that means they're willing to kill to prevent us from entering the cavern. That means we must do the same.

Sisoka must have followed me to Amicus to block my attempt to recruit you. She failed when she failed to kill you, Ochinee, and they failed last night. Now, though I regret it, open warfare begins."

"How many people live in this valley?" J.B. asked.

"A little over a thousand. My faction is in the minority. Only my blaster tipped the scales and allowed us to drive away the Wolf Soldiers and occupy the city. However, we can't put more than three hundred warriors into the field. The Wolf Soldiers not only outnumber us in manpower, but they have an equal number of wolves as allies."

"Pretty stiff odds," said J.B. "But if you drove them away with one blaster, we could really raise hell with ours."

Ryan nodded. "If the Wolf Soldiers have only bows and arrows and knives and spears"

"And fangs and claws," interjected Jak.

"Then we should be able to adjust their advantage in numbers. No one has blasters at all?"

"No. Except for my rifle, Ti-Ra'-Wa is firearm free."

Ryan pursed his lips. "The best tactic is a frontal assault, under the cover of night. Hose our firepower around, make a lot of noise, mebbe scare them off without a great loss of life."

Joe grunted doubtfully. "Our warriors might not follow you if you stage a direct attack so near to the cavern. They're afraid of Sisoka."

"Why?" Jak demanded.

"As the daughter of a Guardian, even one who hasn't been initiated, she is suspected of being a warden of the power in the cavern. That's a superstition, of course."

J.B. looked exasperated, "How can we lead a campaign for you when your own people are controlled by superstition?"

Jak suddenly stood. "Let's leave triple-stupe place. Fuck gold. Fuck cave."

"The best strategy is to capture Sisoka," Joe said hastily.

"You don't want her chilled?" Ryan asked.

"You're warriors, not assassins. If that's what I wanted, I could have done it long ago. Besides, killing her would so infuriate the Wolf Soldiers they would never recognize my claim, even if they were defeated in fair battle. No, I think a few of us should penetrate their lair by night and seize Sisoka. Her wolf would lead us secretly and safely to her."

Doc chuckled. "Putting our trust in a wolf flies in the face of the lessons of folklore. What would be the creature's inducement to cooperate?"

Joe smiled mirthlessly. "Freeing him from bondage, of course. The wolves prefer death to captivity."

"We empathize," Krysty remarked. "But it sounds like a complicated plan. Dangerous as hell, too."

"If it's successful," Ryan said, "it would clear the way to returning peace to the valley and mebbe restoring a planet, turning Deathlands into Lifelands. It seems impossible, but it's worth a shot."

Chapter Twenty

Sunlight mottled through the canopy of the tree branches overhead. Ryan and Krysty strolled hand in hand between the gargantuan columns of the forest city. The diffused sunshine was a pale, cool, comforting green.

After a long while Ryan asked, "Do you believe Joe's story?"

Krysty stopped and gestured around them. "Some sort of power made all of this. In all of Mildred's and Doc's stories of predark marvels, I never heard of anything that could compare to this artistry."

They began to walk again, both of them thinking the same thoughts. Though the bloodshed in Amicus was still fresh in their memories, it was difficult to believe that a similar slaughter might happen here.

Under other circumstances, Ryan would have had no misgivings, no hesitation, about smashing hard at the heart of their enemies with every bit of firepower they could muster.

But here, in the valley of Ti-Ra'-Wa, spilling blood and taking lives seemed so blasphemous as to be evil. The valley wasn't a dream, and everything about it had been created to offer a world without want, without need.

Ryan slipped his arm around Krysty, and she leaned her head on his shoulder, reaching down to unfasten the top button of her shirt, then to the second. She was intoxicating, and his arms encircled her, bringing his lips down to hers. Her hands stroked his back, the pressure of those fingers arousing. Then she reached for the belt of his pants.

Part of Ryan knew he should be planning, scheming, preparing for a recce. But here, in Eden with Krysty, time had no meaning. They could follow their hearts, their desires, whenever they wanted, and there would be no consequences.

Hastily they peeled each other's clothes off. It had been a long time since they had had the privacy to make love, an even longer time since Ryan had felt so clean, so young and so full of hope.

They embraced, devouring each other, trails of fire on their bodies from hands roving and fondling.

Krysty pushed her full breasts against Ryan's chest, desire-hard nipples pressing against the muscular hardness.

Slowly she slipped beneath his encircling arms, dropping down before him. With her avid mouth, soft lips and warm tongue, she worshiped his rock-hard length.

Ryan groaned, resting his hands atop her head, and flaming tendrils of hair curled and coiled around his fingers.

Ryan gently disengaged himself from her, stepping back and lowering himself to the ground. Krysty stretched out on the grass, arms upflung, and opened her ivory legs. His lips moved over her, touching and exploring with his tongue.

Krysty moaned deeply, bit her lip, then didn't bother suppressing her orgasmic cries of passion. She reached her peak, shuddering, writhing, hands tangled in Ryan's thick dark hair.

Her limbs were still trembling when Ryan shifted his weight above her, supported by his arms. He carefully thrust down and Krysty arched her back and hips eagerly to meet him. Both of them moaned at the sensation of steel hardness sinking into velvety soft, liquid heat.

Eyes locked, they undulated against each other. Krysty's long legs hugged Ryan's hips to keep him firmly seated within her as they rocked toward a fast, almost frantic rhythm.

The green-hued sunlight cast shifting bars of shadow across Krysty's face. It was a face Ryan loved, not simply because it was beautiful, but because it mirrored a beautiful spirit.

Grabbing his shoulders, fingernails biting into his flesh, Krysty raised her head and gasped into his ear, "Shining times, lover."

Ryan moved harder, faster, and panted, "Shining times."

Then he gritted his teeth as Krysty writhed and bucked beneath him, crying out. He cried out, too, erupting, spilling his seed deep within her.

Both of them breathed hard and unsteadily. Ryan lay atop her, their heartbeats racing. It was a moment to savor, in this perfect place. One that might not be repeated.

WHEN THEY RETURNED to their quarters, they found an argument raging between Doc and Mildred.

That in itself wasn't unusual, but the topic certainly was. Jak and J.B. sat nearby, studiously paying no attention whatsoever.

"Bunkum and bosh!" Doc declared, rapping the ferrule of his sword stick on the floor for emphasis.

"Fairy tales in modern dress."

"If anybody in this room has doubts about quantum physics, it shouldn't be you," Mildred said hotly.

"Quantum physics dragged your scrawny ass across two centuries!"

"What's this about?" Krysty asked.

J.B. looked up from cleaning his shotgun. "Millie's trying to make scientific sense out of Joe's bushwa. Her techno-bullshit got on Doc's nerves. Can't say as I blame him."

"Techno-bullshit?" she echoed hotly. "Don't hold me responsible for your poverty of comprehension, John!"

"Or mine," Doc said.

Turning to Ryan and Krysty, he said, "Dr. Wyeth is spinning an entirely theoretical fable regarding the scientific foundation for Joe's mythography about the so-called Cavern of Creation."

Mildred's face was locked in a stubborn mask. "Was the Totality Concept, which spun off Overproject Whisper, Project Cerberus and Operation Chronos and the mat-trans gateways, just theoretical? If we apply the insights of quantum mechanics to the mystery of this valley, then we can reach a sound hypothesis of how it was formed and created."

Ryan repressed a smile. Mildred's intellect was like an anteater's tongue, always probing and poking into dark corners to find out what was there. Because of her scientific background, she continually tried to make some sort of sense out of the warped world in which she had awakened. Most of the time her theorizing made absolutely no difference about anything, especially her dissertations about genetics to explain the various human and animal mutie strains roaming Deathlands.

Still, there was no denying that her expertise in medicine and cryonics had saved all their lives at one time or another.

Ryan sat at the table. "What's your hypothesis, Mildred?"

"The universe was formed from an explosion of gases, plasma and matter. It was known as the Big Bang theory. For the sake of discussion, let's assume a collection of those energies exists on Earth, in a temporal pocket or packet, fueled by the beginnings of the universe when it was still a primal monobloc." Doc's eyebrows knitted tightly together. "What?"

"The essential building blocks of the universe are no more than ripples in the quantum field. Everything, even hard matter, is stable patterns of these ripples. On a subatomic scale, what appears to be a vacuum is really vibrating and shifting with particle- and wave-energy fluctuations. For example a single cubic centimeter of space can, theoretically, contain the hard matter energy equivalent of a thirty-megaton nuclear bomb."

Ryan resisted the impulse to massage his temples.

Mildred continued, and judging by the timbre of her voice and the expression on her face, she was enthralled with her own words. "This is the quantum stream, which exists on a different plane of reality than our own reality. The scientists of the Totality Concept knew this and, with the aid of technology, managed to tap into it. All the spin-off researches of the Totality Concept used the stream as a transit network between the physical here and there. That's basically how the gateways work up to and including time trawling."

The irritated impatience on Doc's face was slowly giving way to interest. "What does all that have to do with what Joe said?"

"It stands to reason that if the quantum stream can be tapped into, there should be any number of arteries branching off from the primary flow. If whatever is in the cavern is a naturally occurring artery of the quantum stream, then perhaps it contains the energies released in the first picoseconds following the Big Bang, channeling the matrix of protoparticles that swirled through the universe before physical laws fully stabilized."

"You've lost me again," Doc said with a head-shake.

"Me, too," Ryan added. "Though this theory never really found me."

Mildred sighed. "If Joe is speaking the truth as he knows it, this energy packet may exist slightly out of phase with this dimension, with our space-time, just like many subatomic particles. The cavern may be an interphase and an interface point between our reality and another."

"Granting that all you say may possess a subatomic particle of truth," Doc said with a devilish smile, "how does all of that account for the tree city and the crystalline structures?"

"That's the easy part," Mildred declared.

Thousands of years ago the first humans who lived here, Joe's ancestors, learned how to manipulate the energies to build all of this, maybe not on a truly conscious level but through what was known as a probability wave function, a theorem that states that my two particles that have once been in contact continue to influence each other. In other words Joe's ancestors, the observers of this energy packet, created their own branching probability, their own reality."

Tapping her forehead, Mildred continued, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised to learn that close contact with the energy packet enhanced the latent psychic powers of the mind. That may explain the intelligent animals, too."

"As one of my scientist warders at Project Chronos was wont to implore," Doc said, "'bottom-line' it for me."

"If my hypothesis has any foundation, then we may be able to manipulate the energies in the cavern to help ourselves. Maybe even return you to your own time period."

J.B. looked up from his oiling and cleaning. His eyes blinked behind the lenses of his spectacles.

Doc sat up straight in his chair, eyes widening. "Impossible!"

"No," Mildred replied firmly. "Utilizing and manipulating quantum energies brought you here, Doc, with the use of technological interfaces to tap into the stream. If the same kind of energy interface exists in the cavern, a natural packet, then the possibilities are endless."

"And Joe's plan to reshape the planet?" Ryan asked. "Is that possible, too?"

"I don't see why not. Of course, the downside, which this Sisoka woman fears, may be just as valid."

"In what way?" Krysty asked.

"If these energies are as potent as Joe claims, and if their effects can be influenced, even determined by force of will, then they may run wild. An apocalypse could be triggered that would make the nukocaust and the skydark look a Fourth of July celebration."

"That," Joe said, "is a risk I'm willing to take."

The lithe Lakota stood leaning against the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. "I've brought Blood-sniffer back to the crystal chamber. Come with me, Ochinee. There is no need for the rest of you."

Ryan exchanged searching looks with his friends. Doc's eyes were clouded as he thought about the past, and now a possible way to return to it, to his family. That was his dream.

When Ryan and Joe reached the crystal-encrusted room, Little Mountain brought in the wolf, the leash taut around its neck. The animal swept Ryan with its gaze. Once again he felt an uncanny chill upon looking into those bright, cold eyes.

Joe gave Ryan a golden, disk-studded wafer, a twin to the one in his right hand. "Use this."

When both men had pressed the wafers to their foreheads, Joe thought, You must choose now to help end this conflict between our people .

The wolf's black lips writhed back from gleaming fangs in a soundless snarl. You want nothing more than to rule our people , came the fierce reply. "I will not help you. Kill me now.

I do not wish to kill you. I wish to speak to Sisoka.

Speak to her, then , the wolf retorted contemptuously.

On my terms , Joe thought. Not hers. You can guide a few of us into the camp of the Wolf Soldiers. Do so, and you will go free .

Blood-sniffer's telepathic reply came after a long pause. If I do that, I would be in direct disobedience to the Guardian's orders .

Sisoka is not the Guardian. She does not have the support of all of Ti-Ra'-Wa.

Nor do you , the wolf coolly countered.

True, Joe agreed. Therefore you will not be disobeying a Guardian's orders. There is no treachery in this act.

The animal's eyes widened. The simple logic seemed unshakable. It glanced back and forth between Joe and Ryan.

You promise not to kill any of my people?

You have my word.

The wolf's eyes flicked back to Ryan's face. Do I have your word also, outlander?

If my life is not directly threatened, nor those of my friends, Ryan replied mentally, you also have my word.

That is well, Blood-sniffer responded. "I give you my promise to guide you safely and secretly to my lair

Joe grunted and gestured to Little Mountain, who led the great wolf away.

"Good. Now we have a chance," Ryan said.

Joe looked at him with a sardonic smile. "Don't underestimate Blood-sniffer's cunning and resolution, nor his devotion to Sisoka. He intends to lead us inside the borders of his encampment, then turn on us and give the alarm."

Ryan scowled. "Then why the fuck are we dealing with him?"

Joe's eyes and smile hardened. "An intelligent animal he may be, but he's still only an animal. We can outguess him before he betrays us. However, we need to develop a contingency plan in case we're captured. It's tactically foolish for all of your people to accompany us, since their weapons are required to either stage an assault or a rescue. Choose only one of your companions to come with you."

"I don't command an army," Ryan told him coldly. "I'll ask for a volunteer."

Joe nodded. "Have it your way, Ochinee."

Chapter Twenty-One

The velvety night brooded over Ti-Ra'-Wa. The crystal disks entwined in the tree limbs of the forest city caught and reflected a thousandfold the stars burning the blue-black sky.

Ryan turned from the window and looked across the torchlit room at his friends. "The moon won't be full tonight. With luck we can get in and out before sunrise."

"I wish you weren't going. It feels wrong," Krysty murmured. Her beautiful face was troubled, her sentient hair curling and coiling.

"It does to me, too," Mildred added, glancing worriedly at J.B.

The Armorer had elected to accompany Ryan on the mission. He sat at the table, checking his Uzi. Jak sat beside him, watching with his crimson, expressionless eyes. He had volunteered to go on the mission, but Doc had pointed out that his albino coloring wasn't suitable for a stealthy night approach. The scar-faced teenager hadn't agreed, but he hadn't argued, either.

"It's risky," Ryan said, "but no more than a lot of deals me and J.B. pulled for Trader. And if we can capture Sisoka, we have a chance to clean up this trouble without a lot of bloodletting."

Jak nodded. "Watch wolf. It have your heart in belly if gets chance."

"What happens if you're the ones who are captured?" Doc inquired.

Ryan mulled that possibility over for a second. "Mebbe Joe has more of those sender gadgets. We'll leave one with you, Krysty, since you're the most sensitive."

"You don't know the range on those things," J.B. argued.

"They're not radios," Krysty replied. "Thought transmissions don't have range limitations like radio

waves."

Joe and Little Mountain entered in warrior regalia, with beaded buckskins and faces painted black. Little Mountain carried a tomahawk, a knife, a bow and a full quiver of arrows. The Gewehr automatic rifle was cradled in Joe's arms. He held a pair of the golden wafers in one hand.

"You're ready?" he asked Ryan. "Then we'll fetch Blood-sniffer. Take these senders. You two must have them on you constantly."

"Can you spare one for me?" Krysty asked.

Joe hesitated. "I have only three one for me, the others for Ochinee and Mr. Dix. The closer we come to the Wolf Soldiers' lair, the more silence is essential."

"Give mine to Krysty," J.B. said laconically. "I usually know what Ryan's thinking anyway."

Joe handed the wafer to Krysty, saying, "We must go now."

"I'll try contacting you at midnight," Ryan told her.

"I'll be waiting."

After quick embraces between Mildred and J.B., and Ryan and Krysty, the two men followed the Lakota into the corridor.

They walked outside, where the tethered Blood-sniffer stood between a pair of guards. It glanced up at them with its inscrutable eyes. At a word from Joe, a guard handed the leash to him and the animal limped cooperatively into a compound where warriors waited with five horses.

"We're taking an extra mount for Sisoka," Joe said.

The horses tossed their heads when they caught the wolf scent, but they calmed quickly. Ryan swung into the saddle of a bay mare. All of the horses were dark in color, except for Joe's pinto. Ryan had left behind the Steyr, since this was to be a close-in, stealth operation with a minimum of blaster play.

Little Mountain, Ryan, J.B. and Joe rode out of the compound, on through the silent, shadowed windings of the forest city. The wolf trotted at the end of the leash beside Joe's steed.

When they were out of the city and on the rolling sward, Joe put the wafer of metal to his head. He spoke aloud, in English, for the benefit of Ryan and J.B.

"Lead the way, Blood-sniffer, and remember if you break your word and play us wrongly, you will die."

Reaching down, he slipped the leash over the animal's neck. The wolf slid ahead, still favoring his hind leg, trotting almost due north.

Wind, chilled from the distant, snow-covered peaks, buffeted Ryan and stung his eye as the mare cantered steadily across the grassy plain. J.B. rode just behind him, and Little Mountain brought up the rear, leading the spare horse.

The wolf veered constantly to keep always as near as possible to the stands and groves of trees that dotted the plain. It occurred to Ryan that the beast might be leading them into an ambush, but he learned the reason for Blood-sniffer's strange route was exactly the opposite.

Just ahead of them the wolf spun, its eyes flashed a warning, and Joe whispered urgently, "Into the trees! Quickly!"

There was a stand of birch close ahead. They heeled their mounts into the little copse. The wolf hunkered down in front of Joe's pony, staring intently through the curtain of underbrush. Ryan followed its gaze and glimpsed three gray shadows gliding low over the plain. They were wolves, creeping toward the forest city.

After a minute Blood-sniffer stood. Joe whispered to Ryan, "They go to spy on us."

They left the grove of trees and rode on, continually changing course to keep near the infrequent wooded clumps and rises in the valley's floor. They topped one rise and saw a solid forest wall looming before them. The trees were tall, the spaces between them dark and quiet. It looked like the haunted forests he had read about as a child, full of mystery, gloom, witches and trolls.

Ryan didn't want to ride into that black wood, and neither did J.B. The Armorer's voice whispered from the dimness behind him. "If that goddamn wolf has his brotherhood waiting for us in there"

He didn't finish the sentence. There was no need. Ryan's imagination was fully capable of completing the image of a pack of vicious wolves tearing out their livers and chewing their intestines.

When Blood-sniffer padded into the forest, everyone followed. At first it seemed pitch-dark beneath the

towering trees, then Ryan's eye became adjusted to the gloom and he was able to pick out more and more details.

The ground was very dry. Rainless weeks had parched it so that each twig, each leaf the horses stepped on snapped or crackled, the sounds seeming as loud as gunshots. From their right came the faint rushing of the river.

Their animal guide was a deeper shadow in the murk, leading the way carefully between the trees by occasional backward glances and low whines.

Joe turned on his pad saddle and whispered, "No more talk unless I speak first. Use your sender from now on."

The horses were jumpy as they traversed the woods, climbing ridges and down into brush-clogged dells. The mare quivered beneath Ryan as if in fear. Wind gusts rustled the leaves of the trees, and at each faint rattle, the horse would snort and Ryan's hand would reach for his blaster. Now and then he heard the crunch of distant brush as something fled from their approaching party.

They had traveled a little less than an hour when a yelping wolf call from the west was answered by another in the direction of the river. Blood-sniffer stopped and looked up at Joe. The Lakota pressed the metal wafer to his forehead, glared down at the animal for a moment, then gestured to Ryan.

When Ryan had placed the slice of gold to his head, Joe's thoughts said, We must leave the horses here. Too many of the Wolf Soldiers are about and will catch their scent.

Ryan, J.B. and Joe dismounted. Using sign language, Joe ordered Little Mountain to remain behind with their mounts.

Blood-sniffer led them up the crest of a sparsely treed slope, then northward along it, pausing often to sniff the wind. Again they heard howls, but there was no answer this time. The wolf stopped, nose turning back and forth, then it spun and stared at Joe.

Joe gestured sharply, and following his example, Ryan and J.B. crouched in the high shrubbery. Both of them drew their handblasters. Blood-sniffer bounded again, and peering through the screen of foliage, Ryan saw the beast stop between two trees and utter a low bark. He leveled his weapon toward it.

Instantly another bark answered, and a big, shaggy wolf padded out of the gloom. It was equal in size and weight to Blood-sniffer, but it seemed older.

The two animals sniffed each other's anus, both growling theatrically. Then the older wolf fell on its back, exposing its belly. Blood-sniffer obligingly closed its jaws around the submissive wolf's throat for the briefest of seconds.

The older wolf got to its feet, and the two animals exchanged whines and half-barking grunts for a few seconds. The newcomer slunk away into the night, heading southward down the wooded slope.

Ryan lowered the SIG-Sauer as their wolf guide loped back to them. Its eyes shone brilliantly, and the one-eyed man realized the animal had sent its brother off on the wrong trail. Blood-sniffer had obviously lied so it could keep its promise to the humans.

They rose and followed the beast nearly a mile along the crest of the ridge. Blood-sniffer led them down the face of the slope to a fire-scarred break in the trees and stopped, muzzle pointing downward. Below the slope was a curve in the river, and beside the waterway on the opposite side of it glimmered the lights of the Wolf Soldier encampment. A massive log, embedded deeply in the soft banks of the river, stretched across the water course. The bark had long been worn away by human and animal feet.

Bonfires burned brightly between the conical tepees. The camp sprawled before and below them like rows upon rows of hide-covered church steeples. The tepees were arranged in two loose concentric circles, one surrounding the other. The smell of cooking meat was carried to them by the breeze. To one side of the village Ryan saw a herd of hobbled horses, and on the other were racks that bore stretching hides.

Figures came and went past the fires, into the shelters and out of them. Not all the figures were human. Men, women, children and wolves walked together across the encampment, mingling, jostling, trotting. At a quick count Ryan estimated there were an equal number of animals and people.

Surveying the terrain, he saw a slight incline that rose about an eighth of a mile beyond the outer circle of tepees. The incline butted up against the base of a rocky mountain rampart. Tumbles of stones, some

bigger than the tepees, reared out of the earth. Torchlight flared at the outer border of the outcropping, and men in wolf skins patrolled the perimeter.

Between the gargantuan boulders, Ryan glimpsed an opening. He could see it easily because light shimmered from its vague, unreal, quivering glow.

The glow throbbed, a ghostly light, pulsing with an eerie phosphorescence. Ryan discovered that if he focused his vision directly on it, the light seemed to fade, becoming like a faintly luminous mist. He could see it clearly only if he cast his eye away from it slightly.

Joe followed his gaze, put the sender to his head and indicated that Ryan should do the same.

Yes, that is the entrance to the cavern. The light is only the feeble outer glow from the cavern core, deep within. It was never guarded until recently. Sisoka's doing.

Ryan felt a sharp wonder. The pulsing light indicated a powerful energy, maybe exactly of the type Mildred had theorized. And even if it wasn't, it was still powerful enough to have inspired awe and fear for countless generations. He was reminded of an old predark metaphor "lightning in a bottle." If Joe's tale was only partially true, then he was actually looking at "creation in a bottle."

Joe's thoughts intruded. "I see Sisoka's lodge, but we cannot enter the camp openly.

So I see, responded Ryan. What other way is there ?

At the base of the hill there are a series of tunnels and passages, running adjacent, but not connected to the cavern. I have never been in them, but

Ryan interrupted. Then how will we keep from becoming lost ?

We must rely on Blood-sniffer to guide us.

Ryan glanced over at the wolf. It cocked its head at him. He didn't care for the prospect, but unless they took the wolf's way in, they might as well give up the whole attempt to seize Sisoka.

We'll try it.

Aloud, in a whisper, Ryan explained the plan to J.B., concluding by saying, "You can stay here if you want. Wouldn't blame you."

"I'm going."

The wolf slunk down the forested slope on a circuitous route away from the encampment and led them into a gully that opened up on a shallow ford at the river. The water was barely hip deep, and the pebble-spotted hump of a sandbar thrust up from the surface at the midway point.

The opposite bank was cut by a small streambed debouching from the river. It was almost dry at that time of year, the high banks hiding the encampment from them as they approached it at an oblique angle. They moved down the streambed in close single file, treading on the muddy, rocky ground as carefully and as quietly as they could. Their path ended at a dark cleft, wide and tall enough for a human to enter. The wolf paused before the mawlike opening, then it crept into the darkness. Joe, Ryan and J.B., weapons in hand, followed. After a few feet they were in absolute, impenetrable blackness. J.B. turned on his hand torch, startling everyone, including the wolf, with the bright white rod of light.

"What is this place?" J.B. demanded softly.

The flashlight beam glinted off mineral deposits embedded in the rough wall's silvery granite, brilliant quartz and green-speckled limestone. By the light they saw the walls were decorated with faded, crude paintings and carvings, representations of bizarre figures and shapes. J.B. paused to examine one of the paintings, which depicted some kind of horse-like, squat-bodied animal with two horns on its nose.

The tunnel was obviously very old. The brooding, unbroken silence bore down on it like the pressure of vast, invisible hands.

The wolf trotted deliberately forward, the tunnel gaining a slight incline. The three men followed, occasionally confused by their own writhing shadows. The passageway forked, and the wolf unhesitatingly took the left-hand path.

They moved after Blood-sniffer, wincing at the clink and crunch of stones beneath their feet. They hadn't gone far when Joe lurched to a halt, biting back a startled exclamation. Resting atop a shelf of rock, at eye level, was a yellow-brown skull. Looking over his shoulder, Ryan saw it wasn't a human skull, but that of an animal, one he had never seen. Feline in shape, it was twice the size of a normal panther's, and two great fangs, six inches in length, curved down from the upper jaw. Word-pictures were painted

across the brow. The sight of the skull raised Ryan's nape hairs and stirred to life old stories and even personal experiences with cave-dwelling monsters.

The tense, silent progress through the tunnel continued. Ryan tried to keep other thoughts, other worries and fears, from intruding into his single-minded march, but a few penetrated his guard. He couldn't shake the feeling that he, J.B. and Joe were blithely striding through a death trap.

He sneered at his growing dread, but when he hazarded a swift backward glance, he glimpsed a thought he did a shadow shifting in the gloom. Then he heard the faint sound of a stealthy footfall.

Aloud he said, "We're being followed"

Even as the words left his lips, Blood-sniffer acted. The wolf whirled and bounded back in the direction they had come in an explosion of hair-trigger reflexes and steel-spring speed. Its heavy body was a shaggy battering ram that knocked Joe down, slammed Ryan to one side and sent the flashlight flying from J.B.'s hand.

"Knew it!" J.B. said as the hand torch clattered and smashed out against the rocky tunnel floor.

A woman's voice shouted from the darkness behind them. The language was Lakota, but the tone was unmistakably triumphant.

"Sisoka!" Joe raged. "Blood-sniffer somehow managed to betray us without our knowledge!"

There was another rapidly spoken stream of Lakota from behind them, the words "Maza Wakan" figuring prominently.

"We're ordered to lay down our blasters," Joe translated bitterly.

J.B. silently mouthed a curse and squeezed off a triple burst into the blackness. The rounds bounced in whining shrieks off the curved walls of the tunnel.

"They're back around the fork where our shots can't reach them," Ryan said.

Joe nodded tersely. "We can't go back, so we must go forward."

"Go forward to where?" J.B. asked.

"To wherever we end up."

The three men trotted through the black tunnel. Chunks of rock, feeling like malformed human skulls, clattered at their feet. They caromed off outcroppings and bumped their heads on stalactites.

Testing the air currents with a wetted forefinger, Ryan felt a fairly strong movement to their right. By groping and feeling, he found a narrow side passage branching off from the tunnel. Since they were in a dead end, they had no choice but to crawl into the rough-edged passageway.

All three men squeezed into it. It crept upward at a forty-five-degree angle, and the passage narrowed very quickly, the walls catching at Ryan's broad shoulders. He was forced to turn sideways and scabble onward and upward. Sweat slid from his forehead and stung his eye. As he was blinking it back, he realized the darkness was no longer so absolute. He was able to pick out dim, dark gray shapes. Ahead and a little above them was a faint circle of starlight.

"There's our exit," he panted.

They clawed their way up the cramped tunnel toward the little opening. They climbed out in starlight, and J.B. staggered. They were standing on a small hill, and about half a mile away were the cyclopean boulders around the cavern entrance. Below and to their right was the outer ring of tepees.

"One of us should wait here," J.B. panted. "Pick them off as they come out."

"I think they expected us to come out in this place," Ryan said. "They're probably running to outflank us."

"Mebbe so," J.B. barked. "But I want to get that double-crossin' wolf"

Joe was looking around, his blaster held at waist level. "Listen."

At that moment a chorus of wolf howls echoed all around. It was a heart-stopping sound. Four-legged shapes raced swiftly toward them from all points of the compass.

Ryan shifted his SIG-Sauer to a double-handed grip and said, "Here's your chance, J.B."

The dark, leaping shadows of the wolf pack plunged over the ground. The three blasters poured a stream of fire at the bounding, snarling shapes. Most of them dodged the bullets with supernatural swiftness, but two twisted in midair and screamed in pain. The hill became a bedlam of fire, noise and movement. J.B. had the Uzi on full-auto and he swung it in a left-to-right pattern, the muzzle-flash smearing the night with streaks of orange flame.

Ryan squeezed the trigger of the SIG-Sauer four times in rapid succession and one of the loping, bounding shapes leaped and fell.

Joe fired his weapon from the hip, holding down the trigger, hosing the rounds in a semicircle. Bullets skittered over the ground, striking sparks from rocks.

There was a momentary lull in the attack. Ryan pulled the crystal-studded gold wafer from a pocket and slapped it against his forehead. He didn't have time to couch a telepathic call in words. His mind focused on a wordless message that was a plea, a pledge of love and a promise at the same time. If performed vocally, it would have been a wowl of anguish. The wolves came again in a circling rush, and he dropped the wafer.

Ryan, doing his best to pick his targets carefully, heard the Uzi's firing pin click dryly against the empty chamber. J.B. cursed, letting the blaster dangle from the lanyard around his neck and went to unsling the M-4000 scattergun from his shoulder. Then a wolf was at the Armorer's throat.

At the sound of J.B.'s half curse, half scream of pain and anger, Ryan wheeled, triggering his blaster at the dark gray shape ripping at the body of his friend.

He didn't have the opportunity to gauge the accuracy of his shot; a heavy weight slammed into his back with lung-emptying, bone-jarring, teeth-loosening force. Ryan was bowled over on his face, the wind crushed from his body.

Gasping, he levered himself onto his back and looked directly into the blazing gold-green eyes of a beast snarling in murderous fury. Ryan tried to swing his blaster up and around, but a wide, claw-tipped paw eclipsed everything else in his line of sight. Then he knew what oblivion felt and looked like.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Krysty reeled. She staggered several paces back from the table, dropping the drinking gourd on the floor.

Alarmed, Doc rose from his chair and reached out to steady her.

She waved off his hand, her eyes wide and full of fear. In a thin, aspirated voice, she cried, "Ryan!"

Jak, Doc, Mildred and Sunlata stared at her in bewilderment. During the past hour or so, they had been playing arcahey, the Sioux game of bone-casting. Sunlata, the girl who had acted as their food server, had elected herself their one-person entertainment committee, as well.

Krysty had kept the golden wafer by her elbow and, as the night wore on, she consulted her wrist chron every few minutes. An hour shy of midnight, a chaotic explosion of emotions, sensations and colors bulled its way into her mind. There were so many, so fast, she was unable to sort them out. The mental-emotional cacophony lasted but a split second, but she knew, more by the texture of the thoughts than anything else, who had transmitted them.

Ignoring the questions from her friends, she snatched up the wafer and pressed it against her forehead. She didn't concentrate. She lowered her mental barriers, taking deep, relaxing breaths, waiting for a pattern to emerge.

Mother Sonja had taught her the technique of activating her "brow chakra," the seat of the sixth sense, the third eye of mystic legend. Through the opening of this chakra, this biological power-point, she possessed the capacity to "read" emotional communications.

Nothing came to her but flashes of color, psychic spillover from her friends' anxiety and worry. She saw-felt only a void, a lightless tunnel stretching past eternity and through infinity.

Krysty lowered the wafer. It was slick from the perspiration beading her forehead. She opened her eyes and realized she was lying on one of the beds. Mildred sat beside her, holding her left wrist and timing her

pulse, her face etched in lines of worry.

"Krysty! Goddammit, girl, I thought you were dying. Your pulse and respiration rates slowed to a crawl!"

"How long?" Krysty's throat was dirt dry, and her tongue felt like old shoe leather.

"At least twenty minutes. Your entire body locked up, like you were having an epileptic seizure. Sunlata and the others went to fetch the medicine man or shaman."

"No need." Krysty sat up, and a wave of pain surged through her head, then faded. She knew what had happened, what her subconscious had done. She had only rarely entered a "far-seeing" trance, primarily because her mother hadn't fully trained her in protecting herself while in such a state. When her mind had expanded its awareness, her hind-brain took over, slowing her metabolism and reducing her need for oxygen. Leaving the trance state was more difficult than entering into it.

Jak, Doc, Sunlata and a skinny man wearing headgear made of feathers and buffalo horns rushed through the door. It was the same man who had participated in the Thanking Dance the night before.

Before Krysty could stand, the shaman began to skip in front of her, singing unintelligible words in a discordant voice. He shook a set of feathered diamondback's rattles over her head.

Impatiently Krysty elbowed him aside and got to her feet. Speaking loudly to be heard over the crack-voiced chanting, she said, "Ryan is in trouble, and more than likely, so is J.B."

Mildred sighed and muttered something.

"What?"

"I said I was afraid you'd say that!"

"He tried to contact me through the sender," Krysty went on. "Since I didn't have mine working, I couldn't pick up any details. I tried transmitting to him. Nothing."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything dire," Doc replied, casting an irritated glance at the shaman. The skinny man was now hopping up and down on one foot, chanting louder.

Angrily Krysty shouted one of the few Lakota words she knew. "Leave!"

The shaman affected not to have heard. She grabbed him by one arm and, with rather more force than she intended, dragged him toward the door. "Leave," she repeated.

The man stopped hopping and shouting. He gave her a lingering look of reproach, then spit a mouthful of chewed-up flower petals in her face. Sunlata moved aside respectfully as the shaman exited the room in a huff.

Doc gazed after him, remarking, "He provides bedside service, and this is the thanks he gets."

Krysty fingered the flower petals from her cheeks.

"I can't worry about hurt feelings now. We've got to go after Ryan and J.B."

"Don't know where are," Jak said. "Wolf lead them."

Mildred bit her lower lip, ran a hand through her plaited hair and said, "Jak's right. We'd be tearing off into the dark, both literally and figuratively."

Doc nodded in agreement. "Under the circumstances we should wait for word or for one of them to return. Or at least until daybreak."

He glanced sideways at Sunlata, adding quietly, "Besides, I suspect our hosts wouldn't allow us to depart without an armed guard. They're relying on us, remember."

"On our weapons, you mean," Krysty snapped. She glared at Sunlata, who blinked back at her uncomprehending.

She sighed. "All right. Let's wait until dawn. Then we go after them."

"And if our hosts would rather we did not?" Doc inquired.

"Then get demonstration of weapons," Jak growled.

Though she earnestly tried, Sunlata couldn't revive their interest in the game. Nor could she arouse Jak's interest in leaving the room with her. Around two o'clock she left quietly.

Jak and Doc sat around the table, sharpening and honing their blades with a whetstone the teenager always carried. Mildred and Krysty took turns, every half-hour or so, pacing to the window and peering into the darkness, looking for a sign of the sun. All of them knew they should catch some sleep, especially if they intended to undertake a rescue or investigative mission in a few hours. Adrenaline kept them alert. According to Krysty's chron, it was half-past four when Jak's head swiveled toward the door. "Riders

coming in," he whispered.

As one, all four people got to their feet and rushed out, none of them wanting to surrender to either the hope or dread battling for dominance in their hearts and minds.

Outside they circled the great tree, heading for the horse compound. They had taken only a few steps when Joe emerged from the darkness. The right sleeve of his buckskin tunic was ripped, and his hand showed a speckling of blood. The barrel of his blaster drooped toward the ground. In his left hand he held a small, blocky object.

When he saw the four friends, he stopped in his tracks. None of them spoke. With eyes clouded with fatigue and the bitterness of defeat, he swept his gaze across their faces, pausing at Krysty's, then finally settling upon Mildred's.

Joe stepped forward and extended his left hand. Gripped within it was J.B.'s fedora. The crown was battered, the brim notched and stained with a squiggly pattern of dried blood.

"I'm sorry" was all he said.

Chapter Twenty-Three

J.B. had slept for a time, but he had dreamed and the dreams were full of anthropomorphic shapes, obscene blendings of beast and man. He awakened suddenly, and his surroundings reminded him that his nightmares weren't all that removed from his reality.

He lay alone in the depths of the nighted forest and suffered. He had lost a fair amount of blood from the fang-inflicted gash across the base of his throat. The back of his head was swollen, and it throbbed in cadence with his pulse. He figured he was suffering from a mild concussion.

J.B. knew he had gotten off lucky, though. When the wolf had slashed his throat with razored teeth, missing his jugular by a fractional margin, he had fallen and struck his head against a stone. The animal had apparently believed him dead and left him.

The Armorer had awakened alone in the shadows, and his wrist chron told him that only a few minutes had elapsed. He had also awakened weaponless, his Uzi, his scattergun and all the spare ammo missing. He heard voices approaching from the direction of the village and so had climbed back into the cramped passageway.

Stumbling, dripping blood, feeling his way, he had backtracked through the tunnel, hoping to return to Little Mountain and the horses. He had no idea of the fates of Ryan or Joe, and his thinking was so clouded and fragmented, all he could do was stagger through the tunnel, flail across the river and stumble up the wooded slopes.

The effort exhausted him, and he crept into a hollow between two large, gnarled roots and lay down. Now J.B.'s thinking was sharper, and he saw by his chron that only three hours remained until dawn. He doubted Little Mountain was still waiting. A rugged trek on foot stretched before him, a march he wouldn't have enjoyed even if he wasn't weak and racked with pain.

But J.B. had lived most of his life in the wild places of Deathlands. He had spent years on the ragged edge of death, and his inner fiber had been forged into an iron toughness. It was a point of pride with him. He wouldn't break, would not give in to pain and let himself be whipped by anything or anyone.

He stood slowly, wincing and grunting, and examined the wound on his throat by touch. The bleeding had stopped, but his shirtfront was caked and sticky with blood. Though his throat hurt, he realized it wasn't much more than superficial, more unsightly than critical. The swelling on the back of his head was more worrisome.

Mildred would diagnose it as a closed-skull injury, and he knew from his years on Trader's war wags

that head traumas were tricky. He could have sustained a skull fracture and be suffering from a cranial leakage of blood for all he knew.

Grim determination steeled his mind. He was going back to his friends in the forest city and would return with them to rescue Ryan or recover his body. His brains could start to ooze from his ears, but he was going back.

It was difficult to move at first, but as his stiff body warmed and loosened, the pain receded. He crept along the crest of the ridge, then down into the dell. He came across a little family of deer feeding there. For a minute he stood in the foliage and watched them, graceful, lovely things with their moist, black noses and great, innocent eyes a proud buck, two does and a small, spotted fawn.

J.B. walked toward them. The deer lifted their heads and froze. The buck took a step forward, lowering its antlered head in a warning. Then it snorted at the unfamiliar man-scent and the pungent tang of blood. As one, they whirled fleetly and bounded away.

When he reached the outermost edge of the forest, he paused, scanning the open plains before him. The stars burned overhead like millions of tiny match-heads, but he saw nothing but grass. He started forward, walking in a long-legged, ground-eating stride.

J.B. didn't walk far before he wished he had a pair of moccasins. He'd probably end up cutting his combat boots off his swollen feet. The temperature had dropped, not enough to be dangerous, just enough to make him extremely uncomfortable. His breath plumed out in front of him with every exhalation.

He remembered a conversation he'd had with Hunaker, a fellow gunner on War Wag One. They had been hiding from a horde of stickies in a bug-infested swamp, and she had told him, "When the times get tough, just concentrate on a time that was worse."

"Does it help?" J.B. had asked.

The green-haired woman had shrugged. "Nah. Generally the other time seems like a quilting bee in comparison."

Hunaker was dead, chilled by crazy old Quint and his crazier wife. J.B. increased his pace, not wanting to think about her or any of Trader's old crew. A gust of wind slapped at him, setting off a spasm of shivering and numbing his ears. He pulled up his long coat over the top and sides of his head, cursing whoever had stolen his hat.

The terrain dropped into a narrow declivity, which sheltered him from the chill wind for a little while. He was tempted to remain there, but he forced himself to keep moving. He could only become more tired, so it was best to tramp on before he dropped in his tracks from exhaustion.

He managed to keep up a fairly brisk pace for the next few miles, but as the horizon began to glow with the approach of sunrise, exertion, blood loss and pain were taking their toll. He tottered on his throbbing feet like a horse with the blind staggers, and his breath was a constant cloud before his eyes. Though he raged at his lack of stamina, the walk didn't get any easier.

He stumbled up the side of a low bluff, fell and crawled up the rest of the way on his hands and knees.

He crouched at the top, panting. In the distance he could make out the high stand of trees and the crystal glintings between and among them. He whooped with joy, but it was a pretty poor whoop. It sounded like the death caw of an elderly crow. He rolled rather than climbed down the opposite side.

"Hang on," he muttered between lips that were dry and cracked from the chafing wind.

The eastern sky was gray with false dawn. When the first flooding of red sunlight touched the distant, surrounding peaks, J.B. was entering the forest city. The few Indians he saw were bundled against the chill, and at a distance they assumed he was one of them, wrapped in a blanket.

He walked determinedly through the outer perimeter and into the silently brooding avenues between the gigantic trees. Dry leaves blew lonely on the wind, and not even the birds sang. The crystal disks glistened from the rising sun, but torches still burned inside the tree tower that served as their temporary home.

There were no guards at the arched entrance, and he shuffled along the corridor to the room where he and his friends were quartered. Before he walked in, he sensed somehow that only Mildred was there. One dim torch guttered in a wall bracket.

Mildred lay on their bunk. Her face wasn't relaxed in sleep. Dried tears shone dully on her cheeks, and his fedora was crumpled between her hands.

He moved stiffly toward her, slipped, stumbled and nearly fell atop her. Her upper body jackknifed up at the waist, her face contorted in anger and fear, reaching beneath the furry pillow. The ZKR was in Mildred's hands before she was able to recognize him.

He half crouched on the floor beside the bed, his limbs shaking as if caught in a spasm. "So, you have my hat," he croaked.

Mildred gaped at him. She couldn't speak, and for a moment she couldn't even breathe. What she could do and did was jump out of the bunk and catch him in her strong arms and hug him so hard he half groaned, half laughed.

She kissed his face, his lips, even his nose, and while she still held him tight to her body, she shouted, "Krysty! Jak! Doc!"

She repeated the call and released him when they hurried into the room. Their faces in the weak sunlight were masks of grief. Then, when they saw J.B. standing beside Mildred, their jaws dropped.

They crowded around him, pumping his hands, slapping his shoulders, shouting questions. Only when Mildred saw him wincing under their enthusiasm did she say, "Give him room, he's hurt."

Sitting at the table, J.B. allowed Mildred to clean and probe the ugly cut on his neck. Rapidly he told them what had happened at the Wolf Soldier encampment.

"This might need stitches," Mildred grunted, gently sponging the dried blood away.

"Perhaps I should fetch our singing shaman," Doc said.

In a voice tight with fear, eyes clouded by unshed tears, Krysty asked, "Ryan? Is he dead, like Joe said?" "I don't know. Did he tell you I was dead?"

"Thoroughly," Mildred said, planting a careful kiss on the swelling at the back of his head.

"I honestly don't know," J.B. continued. "I don't think Joe knows, either. I guess he left me for dead, and here I am."

"A miscalculation," Joe said from the doorway. "I apologize, Mr. Dix."

The lithe Lakota came into the room, followed closely by Little Mountain.

"Wasn't only thing miscalculated," Jak said disgustedly. "Triple-stupe fuckup."

Joe shrugged, then winced in pain. "The fortunes of war. I admit I was a fool not to realize that when Blood-sniffer sent his pack brother back along our trail, he'd strike our scent and thus know something was wrong. He brought the Wolf Soldiers down on us."

"Outfoxed by a wolf," Doc commented dryly.

"Something of a first, I imagine, even in Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"And a last," Krysty snapped. "I'm heading out to the Wolf Soldiers under a flag of truce. I'll find Ryan or his body."

"Or your death," Joe told her. "Too much blood has now been spilled to call a truce between our factions."

"We're not members of any factions," Krysty said angrily. "We're bowing out of this intertribal conflict right now."

Joe sighed, shook his head, then said in a harsh, grim tone, "You came here for gold and you can get it. Tomorrow we'll start our drive to the Wolf Soldiers' camp and the cavern. After we're victorious, you can do whatever you like."

"Are you deaf?" Mildred demanded. "We're through with it, through with you."

"And you're through, too," J.B. said, glaring at the Lakota men. "You can never take the camp or the cavern without us. The wolf packs will pull your asses down and tear them to bite-sized pieces."

Joe straightened his shoulders. "You're right. But we can do it without you."

"What do you mean?" Doc asked. "You brought us here to do what you could not."

"I don't need you," Joe answered. "All I need are your weapons."

With that, Joe reached behind him and brought out J.B.'s Uzi. Little Mountain stepped forward, the Smith amp; Wesson M-4000 scattergun held at waist level.

Krysty and Jak reached for their holstered blasters. Mildred, still ministering to J.B., was caught

flat-footed, having left her revolver on the bunk. Doc's Le Mat was snug inside the sheath strapped to his leg, but the blaster wasn't designed for quick-draw artists, anyway.

Little Mountain thumbed back the hammer of the scattergun. At the mechanical click, everyone froze, hands on gun butts.

"No," Joe said. "Go ahead and draw them. Put them on the table and step back. Your cane, too, Dr. Tanner."

Slowly, faces grim and sick, everyone obeyed and moved against the far wall.

"You five are in a fix," Joe said curtly. "You have no choice but to live up to your end of our bargain."

"We're not helping you," Krysty replied. "The bargain was we would aid you for gold. We no longer want it."

Joe chuckled. "You're forgetting something. I'm your only way of leaving this valley alive. Like Mr. Dix said, the wolf packs guarding the pass will tear you to pieces."

"What do you propose to do about it?" Doc asked.

"Simple. The prevailing wind blows north toward the cavern, and in this dry season, the woods and prairie grass are like tinder. All we need are a few torches."

"Fire?" Mildred asked incredulously. "If it gets out of control, the damage to the valley's ecology will be"

"Shut up!" Joe snapped. "It won't get out of control, and even if it did, it wouldn't harm the cavern.

Naturally there will be suffering, but that's the price of any victory."

Eyes narrowing, he added, "Besides, once I have mastery of the forces within the cavern, I'll easily restore Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"Sounds like this thought out," Jak said. "May work."

Joe glanced toward him. "I'm glad you approve," he said sarcastically.

"Didn't say that."

Jak gave his right wrist a little shake, and his hand whipped up, a thin, flat, razor-edged knife gripped between thumb and forefinger.

"New contest, Joe," he said tonelessly. "See how fast you drop blaster before I put this in eye."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ryan was dreaming dreams somebody else wanted him to dream. He thought he was asleep until a clump of thick liquid appeared in his mouth, and he felt, in his sleep, half the lump drip down his chin and the other half slide down his throat.

Whatever the liquid lump was, it had no taste and glided easily into his stomach. Then he dreamed a song that sang itself repeatedly to him, the words in a language he didn't know but understood.

You toward where the sun goes down, behold me! You where the White Giant lives in power, behold me! You in the depths of the heavens, an eagle of power, behold! And you, Grandmother Earth, the only Mother, you who have shown mercy to your children who have ripped and burned and poisoned you, I shall heal you!

When the dream was over, he was propelled somewhere new or somewhere old, he wasn't sure which. He saw the whole valley of Ti-Ra'-Wa spread out below him, so far below that the great trees of the forest city appeared as a mere ripple of texture, like a shawl thrown over the laps of the mountains. He saw the high crags of the barrier peaks, thrusting up into the sky, tossing the cold winds from their shoulders in flying clouds of snow.

Colorful patterns and figures writhed, weaving into complex geometric shapes. There were colors he had never before seen, let alone imagined. The light, the figures, the shapes and colors, melded and spiraled

themselves into a vision, a panorama of black man-shapes shambling out of a dark gray gloom. The man-shapes were human but not truly human, only reflections in a broken mirror, great, huge-shouldered, deep-chested brutes of men, with powerfully knotted thews and heavy brows thrusting over tiny eyes.

The brutes melted, became skin-clad red men battling huge, shaggy elephants, dying to gain their precious bounty of meat.

As Ryan dreamed, he could not watch the progression of visions quickly enough. The images seemed to tumble over one another in their haste to enter and exit his mind. He felt they had to slow down, to stop moving, to stand still. They didn't.

He saw council fires of the great tribes bursting into flame for the first time, the red men kneeling in awe of Ah-badt-dadt-deah's mighty works and in gratitude of the Grandmother's many gifts.

He saw a man, much like the Sioux or the Cheyenne, staring in wonder at a shimmering, dancing, shifting column of light. Ryan stared at the light, trying to determine its color, but it blurred, and he couldn't will it back into focus.

Slowly, reverently, the red man touched the light, bowing his head before it.

The images swam faster now, flashing only a fraction of a split second in Ryan's mind. He saw armlets of frozen gold and shimmering silver, and disks of glinting crystal; homes made of living trees; armored, helmeted men tramping uphill toward a mountain pass; arrows whistling, spears flying, matchlocks belching flame.

And over it all danced the unliving, undying light, shining and glowing forever inside the womb of the Grandmother, inside the Cavern of Creation.

Then the light faded, and all Ryan knew was black, a black so deep he knew he was dying. But he also knew he had a choice, not of when to die, but of whether to die. He wasn't sure if he should live or die or dream.

He felt a throbbing pain, and a moment later he became aware of his body, and he knew he had decided to live, not to die or to dream.

Fear and memory exploded simultaneously in Ryan's mind. He made a convulsive effort and opened his eye. Brilliant sunshine shafting down from above blasted into it, and he squeezed the lid shut. He tried to touch his face and discovered he couldn't move either hand. Or his feet.

Carefully he opened his eye again, and this time he wasn't blinded. He focused slowly on the details of his surroundings.

He was in a room shaped like a cone. The sunlight poured in from an opening above him, where the cone narrowed to a point. Dust motes danced magically all around him.

He turned his head, first to the right, then the left and finally down. He was hardly surprised that he was bound tightly; he was more surprised that he was alive.

Ryan's wrists, legs and ankles were tied securely by knotted leather thongs to a wood-framed, skin-covered latticework, like a hide-drying rack. He was in half-reclining position and his hands were bound to the frame at ear level. He also saw he was naked. He blinked. He didn't go away, so he was certain he wasn't dreaming.

"A precaution only," a woman's voice said from the shadows. "Not an attempt to humiliate you."

Sisoka moved toward him, cutting through the sparkling dust motes. She was clothed in soft, white-fringed doeskin and high moccasins. Her raven black hair cascaded down her back like an ebony waterfall.

Blood-sniffer moved forward at her side, and Ryan couldn't keep the anger that flowed through him from registering on his face.

Sisoka caught his expression and said, "You actually owe him a great debt. He saved your life from his pack brothers. Saved all your lives, actually."

"He betrayed us, deceived us," Ryan growled.

"It is no sin to betray a betrayer or to deceive a deceiver." Sisoka's tone was calm, neutral.

"Touch-the-Sky is both, Ryan Cawdor."

It sounded strange, the way she said his name, as though she took pleasure in the sound and taste of it.

"Is Joe Touch-the-Sky here?"

Sisoka said nothing, but her long, sweeping lashes veiled her eyes for a moment.

"He escaped, didn't he?" Ryan said. "What about my friend?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"Neither of them escaped."

Ryan didn't reply, but he strained against his bonds.

"We allowed them to leave," Sisoka said quietly.

"What?"

"You were unconscious and so was your friend. There was no way to capture Touch-the-Sky alive without more loss of life. We allowed him to leave, allowed him to think he had escaped. Between the time we brought you here, to our camp, and returned for your friend, he was gone. We could find no trace of him, nor did we care to track him down."

Ryan began to question her again about J.B., but bit off the words. He had no choice but to accept her words. "Why didn't you chill me?"

"Are you afraid of death?" Sisoka countered.

"I don't want to die," he answered levelly, "but I can manage it if I have to."

Sisoka smiled faintly. "An honest answer, Ryan Cawdor." Then her smooth, girlish face sobered.

"However, it is not death you fear."

Ryan forced a derisive smile. "How would you know, hiding in this valley, isolated from the rest of the world since the time of the caveman?"

Sisoka's eyes narrowed in a way that reminded Ryan of Joe. "How do you know that?" she asked.

He started to retort, then shut his mouth. He had no answer.

"How do you know that, Ryan Cawdor?" Sisoka demanded.

He groped for a response. "I don't know," he faltered. "I must have dreamed it."

"You dreamed it because I wished you to dream it."

"I don't understand."

"I gave you a taste of the dew of Ah-badt-dadt-deah so you would understand."

Ryan ransacked his memory, recalled the liquid slime being forced down his throat, and he snarled, "You drugged me. Made me high, made me hallucinate, tried to turn me into a jolt-brain so I'd believe any bullshit you spouted."

Authority and arrogance were suddenly stamped over her face like an ivory mask. "You are here to be judged, outlander," she said coldly. "Not I."

Sisoka half turned away, stopped and spun to face him. "The visions you saw were true ones, plucked from the ancestral memories of all who dwell in Ti-Ra'-Wa."

Her voice was strong with resolve and conviction. "For centuries beyond counting, our valley has been threatened by the outside world, by invaders. The Spanish conquistadors, the white explorers and, more recently, the group you called the Red Cadre. We must protect the valley and the cavern as it has protected us, the lives and traditions of its children. Now it is threatened from within."

"How?" Ryan demanded. "Touch-the-Sky wants to use the power of your cavern to heal the Earth, the Grandmother, she who has shown mercy to the children who have ripped and burned and poisoned her."

Ryan broke off, mind reeling at the words he had spoken. He glared at Sisoka. "You conditioned me to say that while I was doped up, didn't you?"

"Don't be a fool, Ryan Cawdor," Sisoka responded impatiently. "The spirit of the Grandmother has touched you, using Blood-sniffer and myself as channels. I admit we entered and influenced your dreams a time or two"

"With one of those sender gadgets," Ryan interrupted.

Sisoka acknowledged the correctness of his guess with a nod. "But," she continued, "if your innermost self, your spirit, had not been open to the contact, you would have never remembered the dreams, let alone been influenced by them."

Ryan nodded. "All right, I can't say I believe or disbelieve you. But I can say that I don't disagree with

Touch-the-Sky's dream of healing the earth, setting right what the nuker did to it."

Sisoka sighed heavily. "He has the mind of a visionary, but it is still a human mind, filled with petty dreams of greed and power. He has no idea how easily he could be overwhelmed by the invisible forces in the cavern, powers beyond his control or comprehension."

"How can you be so sure?"

Sisoka stepped up close to him, her eyes shining with an almost fanatic fervor, again much like Joe's.

"There is a tradition, in every religious culture, that holds that anyone who looks upon the face of God will certainly die. For a mere human to entertain the arrogant notion of commanding the forces of creation is the same thing. Only in this instance the entire world may die."

Ryan met her gaze, and his belly went cold. She wasn't being melodramatic. She was speaking the truth, at least as she understood it.

"Why should I believe you?" he rasped. "You might want to keep Touch-the-Sky from reaching the cavern simply because you're afraid of losing your position in the tribe."

"And how do I know," Sisoka asked, "that you are not the wawihangya un kin oy'ate Pizi claims you are?"

"I don't even know what that is."

Sisoka smiled slightly. "The destroyer of the world."

"Pretty big order for one man."

"I realize that." She moved closer, and her breath was warm on his naked throat. "Perhaps you're just a kaga ."

"I think I know that word. It means 'devil,' right?"

"Close. 'Demon.' " Her cool fingers came up and tentatively touched his face. "Yes, I think you are more demon than destroyer, Ryan Cawdor."

Ryan tried to keep his body's reactions under control. He flicked his gaze to one side and saw Blood-sniffer staring up at him curiously. The heat of those blazing eyes cooled his heated, automatic responses quickly.

"You are very brave, outlander," she said in a breathy whisper. "But courage is a good quality only when one is wise enough to know when to use it."

On the far side of the tepee, the flap was thrown back with a rude, peremptory rustle. A man stepped inside. He was old enough to have iron gray hair, but he stood as straight as the feather-bedecked ceremonial lance he gripped in one hand. He wore a loose buckskin tunic and fringed leggings. A necklace of wolf's fangs hung about his throat.

Sisoka stepped away from Ryan. The man's eyes flicked from Ryan to her, then back to Ryan. He spoke to Sisoka in flawless English.

"So, the outlander has regained his senses. That is well. The pack leaders may now begin the judgment."

"Judgment?" Ryan echoed.

Sisoka nodded. "I said you were here to be judged. This is Pizi, my father's brother, chief of the Wolf Soldiers. He demands justice for the lives you took."

With a clicking of claws, three great gray wolves stalked into the tepee, their eyes glaring at him, hating him. Ryan felt icy fingers tracing down his spine. The concept of facing an inhuman panel of judges awoke in him a loathing he had never experienced.

"When does the judgment begin?" Ryan whispered to Sisoka.

Without looking at him, she replied, "It began the moment you entered this valley, Ryan Cawdor."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sisoka gestured to Ryan and said clearly, "Before you judge, brothers, remember that this outlander may be the last thread by which we may draw Ti-Ra'-Wa out of danger."

Pizi looked solemnly at her. "The outlanders and their weapons are our greatest danger. This man and all those who came with him should die. He seeks to help Touch-the-Sky make Ti-Ra'-Wa like the outside world, a place of horror, bloodshed and suffering."

He shook the lance, the feathers rustled and his voice rose in an impassioned shout. "Blood of our dead calls out for justice! The outlanders have brought death and corruption into our sacred land. They have sinned against Ah-badt-dadt-deah and the Grandmother!"

The wolves growled and snarled, lips peeling back from saliva-slick fangs.

"This man sinned in ignorance," Sisoka said heatedly. "He knew nothing of us until he came to this valley. He was deceived, duped into killing without realizing his crime."

"He blundered here through greed," Pizi said with a sneer, "driven mad by the lust to possess the Grandmother's bounty. There can be only one penalty. What is the verdict of the pack?"

As from one throat, a skin-crawling howl burst from the wolves. Ryan saw that Blood-sniffer was the only animal abstaining from the bloodthirsty vocalization.

Pizi dipped the lance, and the point pressed lightly into the soft hollow at the base of Ryan's throat. He kept his expression impassive and fixed his eye on Pizi's face.

"Do the Wolf Soldiers so fear the power of the outlanders that you will murder me while I'm bound and helpless?" Ryan's words were heavy with contempt. "If so, then end this farce and chill me now. I'm sick of all this Wolf Soldier bullshit."

Anger flashed briefly in Pizi's eyes, and the pressure of the spear point increased.

"Enough!" Sisoka snapped. "The outlander, no matter what he has done, no matter what else he might be, is a warrior and deserving of a warrior's chance."

"He had his chance," Pizi said grimly.

"Henakeca!" Sisoka cried angrily.

The pressure of the sharp point lessened on Ryan's throat, but Pizi didn't lower the lance.

"You swore to recognize me as the one true Guardian," Sisoka said sternly. "The pack has rendered its verdict, but it is my duty, my right, to impose the final sentence."

Sisoka paused. Her face and tone were imperious as she announced, "He must face a soldier in equal combat. If he survives, he will be a member of the pack, and if he betrays the pack, then the pack's justice prevails."

In an angry motion Pizi pulled back the lance and slammed it butt-first to the floor. "One soldier must volunteer to face the outlander. If one does not, then he dies."

Without hesitation Blood-sniffer stepped forward and nosed Sisoka's hand. She looked down on the wolf with a fond, sad smile. "We have the volunteer."

Ryan stared at the big, muscular animal, trying to convince himself that, armed with his panga, he could make short work of Blood-sniffer. After all, he had battled other beasts, giant mutie wolves included, and emerged alive, if not exactly victorious or unscathed.

As if sensing his thoughts, Blood-sniffer looked over at him. Something in that intense, inhuman gaze shook him.

Pizi stalked out of the tepee. The wolves remained, watching Ryan. Sisoka moved toward him, drawing a bone-handled knife with an obsidian blade from a voluminous sleeve. She began cutting the rawhide bindings around his arms and legs.

"What kind of weapon can I use?" he asked.

"The same as Blood-sniffer's teeth and nails."

"What?"

She sawed through the last of the thongs holding him to the framework. "Equal combat. Nor may you stand erect."

As soon as she said it, Ryan fell down, his legs like dead fish, as numb as if they had never been alive. Sisoka helped him to kneel, massaging his deadened muscles to restore the circulation of blood in his

arms and legs.

Ryan touched his head, his fingers brushing a crusted lump on his right temple. He felt scabbed-over claw marks. He glanced at the knife Sisoka had laid on the ground while she kneaded the stiffness from his shoulders, then to the four wolves scarcely an arm's length away from him.

Pizi returned, his arms full of a furry bundle. For a moment, Ryan couldn't identify the dark, shaggy mass, then he recognized it as the skin of a huge black wolf. The fore- and hindlegs still retained their shape, as did the head and the thick, bushy tail.

Ryan painfully climbed to his feet, and Pizi shoved the bundle into his arms. "These are the remains of Deathmaul, one of our most respected soldiers. Do not dishonor them."

Ryan looked blankly at Sisoka, who said, "It is the custom of the Wolf Soldiers to retain the mortal coverings of their greatest warriors. The two-legged soldiers wear the skins of their departed four-legged brothers to give them strength and courage in battle."

"And," Pizi interjected sourly, "it is the only protection you will have."

Ryan slowly put on the wolf skin, slipping his hands through leather straps sewn on the underside of the forepaws, attaching the main trunk to his chest and waist with a harness. Pizi pulled the skullcap over Ryan's head and secured it there with a thong knotted under his chin. The muzzle covered his forehead like a cowl.

Outwardly Ryan remained very calm, determined not to allow the flummery of superstitions and ritual to shake his nerve.

"I am half-blind," he said to Pizi, indicating his eye patch. "Hardly an equal contest unless you put out one of Blood-sniffer's eyes."

"Blood-sniffer is lame in one leg," Pizi retorted. "Due to you, I am told. It is as equal a contest as you deserve. Follow."

Pizi marched out of the tepee, Ryan in step behind him. Sisoka and Blood-sniffer dogged his heels. The sun was fairly high, and Ryan estimated it was close to midmorning. He had at least had a rest, of sorts. Only a few people were about in the encampment, men mostly, and he could feel the hostility of their stares as he passed by.

Pizi led the way through the ring of tepees and down a gently rolling incline to where the bases of four bluffs formed a natural bowl, like an amphitheater, as Ryan reminded himself, an arena.

Obedying Pizi's imperious gesture, Ryan went down into the bowl, Blood-sniffer following. Taking position in the center, he made a 360-degree visual circuit. Men, women and many wolves lined the base of the bluffs. All were staring at him unemotionally.

Anger grew within Ryan. No matter what ancient tradition lay behind this trial by ordeal, it was still bread and circuses for the masses, nothing but entertainment of the type he and his friends had been forced to participate in when they were captives of Baron Mandeville. He had survived those gladiatorial games, and he would survive this one.

Pizi raised his lance over his head, and Ryan prepared himself for a long ceremonial speech. But the chief of the Wolf Soldiers said nothing at all. He jerked down the head of the lance, and Blood-sniffer sprang in a beautiful, arching leap, straight for Ryan's throat.

The wolf's great forepaws struck his breast with a jarring shock, bowling him over. Even as he fell, Ryan seized Blood-sniffer by the throat and kicked him up and over. The wolf landed on its feet, though its balance was off due to its injured leg.

It spun and jumped. Ryan rolled facedown to keep his exposed torso and genitals away from the slashing teeth and rending claws. Blood-sniffer's weight landed on his shoulders, and its huge jaws closed on the back of Ryan's fur-covered neck. The wolf shook him as a terrier would shake a rat.

The animal's strength was enormous, and for what seemed like an eternity, Ryan felt as if his head were being torn from his neck. The world tipped and tilted around him, and the ground rushed up to smash his face.

With a final contemptuous shake, Blood-sniffer flung Ryan to one side, rolling him over and over to the very edge of the arena. Dizzy, spitting out grit, Ryan fought his way to his hands and knees. Peering from beneath the wolf snout canted over his forehead, he saw Blood-sniffer strutting in a lordly fashion a few

feet away. The wolf was playing to the crowd, red tongue run out between open, laughing jaws. Around him Ryan heard human laughter and yipping noises of wolf appreciation. He realized the beast was toying with him, intending to humiliate him before ripping out his heart. The anger that had been growing within Ryan suddenly burst in a wild flame of rage.

But this rage was unlike the red fury that sometimes possessed him. He was dimly aware of a strange linking of his familiar human anger to an emotion far darker, more deep and primal. It was a man-rage coalescing with beast-rage, an atavistic fury fountaining up from the buried wells of savagery lurking within all human hearts.

Ryan's muscles coiled tightly as he crouched and faced his enemy. He bared his fangs and snarled. He sprang at Blood-sniffer, his powerful leg muscles catapulting him in graceful bounds.

The wolf leaped to meet him, and the pair of shaggy bodies collided in midair. They clinched and rolled together across the rough floor of the arena, snarling, clawing and biting.

Ryan closed a leg-scissors lock around Blood-sniffer's lean body and gripped a handful of ruff. He kept his own throat covered and sank his teeth into the side of his enemy's neck. He felt hair and hide tear under his teeth, tasted sharp, salty wolf blood on his tongue.

Blood-sniffer's body, all muscle and sinew, twisted, turned and kicked away from Ryan's jaws. Then the wolf's fangs snapped and slashed, and scarlet spurted from Ryan's chest. The beast squirmed backward out between Ryan's locked legs and inflicted a bite on his right calf.

The wolf bounded out of reach and watched as the maddened man-beast got to all fours and sprang again. The animal moved like a great gray wraith, and Ryan fell facefirst to the ground. Before he recovered his balance, the wolf smashed him to one side with its heavy weight, and claws raked Ryan's rib cage.

Ryan didn't cry out or even pause. He leaped again, managing to close his hand around Blood-sniffer's leg. The wolf snarled in pain and anger and its fangs ripped bleeding furrows in the back of Ryan's hand, forcing him to let go.

Rolling, Ryan came back up to his knees as Blood-sniffer bounded forward. He fell over on his back beneath the wolf, coming up with one foot into the belly and kicking. The beast's hindquarters flew up with the impact of the kick, and it tumbled snout over rump to land gracelessly on its back.

Before Blood-sniffer could rise, Ryan was up and over and on top of the wolf. He secured a headlock, one arm around the furry throat, the other pressing forward from behind.

The wolf struggled, muscles like steel cables covered with fur, hind legs kicking and flailing. Ryan heaved the animal's body up, then smashed it against the ground. The wolf grunted noisily as air was driven violently from its lungs.

With a convulsive effort, Blood-sniffer twisted inside Ryan's crushing grip. Fangs fastened around his forearm, and he was forced to release his hold or have his arteries ripped open.

Back-somersaulting away, Ryan kicked the wolf so hard in the rear that its hindquarters rose off the ground and it rolled in a tangle to the edge of the arena. He thought he heard Sisoka cry out.

The pair of combatants paused, glaring at each other. The hot, sweet taint of fresh blood tinged the air, and the spectator wolves sniffed and wrinkled their snouts in snarling grins.

Blood-sniffer stood on wide-braced legs, flanks heaving, head hanging low, ears laid flat. Blood and sweat wetted the gray fur.

Ryan trembled with fatigue. As the first rush of adrenaline faded, he began to feel the pain of his wounds, feel weakness as his blood streamed from them. Perspiration formed beneath the heavy wolf skin, trickling down his body and into the raw lacerations on his chest and ribs. Though they stung fiercely, surrender wasn't an option.

Slowly he scanned the spectators. Pizi and his human warriors were as blank-faced as before. Only Sisoka showed any emotion. An expression of pity, of sorrow, was in her somber eyes, but Ryan had no idea if it was for him or Blood-sniffer.

Though the dulled fire of beast-rage still burned within him, Ryan's reason told him that he couldn't hope to chill his opponent. It was doubtful if Blood-sniffer could chill him, either. They were too evenly matched. The best that could be hoped for, after a protracted and bloody battle, was a stalemate. Even if

that was the outcome, he would be so chewed and clawed he would have to spend days, maybe weeks, convalescing.

Taking and holding a deep breath, his face set in a grim mask, Ryan slowly climbed to his feet, noting distantly that standing erect felt a little strange. He tugged the wolf cowl back from his head.

From his position on the slope, Pizi barked, "On all fours, outlander!"

"Fuck you," Ryan snapped. "I won't perform for you any longer. Neither of us will. Come and chill me yourself if you have the guts."

At Ryan's words, expression and emotion formed on Pizi's face. His brows lowered, and a monstrous wrath flared in his eyes. His lips writhed, and hefting his lance, he made a motion to jump down into the arena.

Blood-sniffer suddenly bounded forward, taking a position between the two men. The wolf took three, soft padding steps toward Pizi, and sunlight gleamed on bared fangs. The meaning of the low, menacing growl was unmistakable.

As though that was a signal, a burst of sound broke from the assembled spectators—the shouting of humans and the long, undulating howls of wolves.

Looking smugly at Pizi, Sisoka said in a loud, ringing voice, "It is over. Blood-sniffer has accepted Ryan Cawdor into the pack. He is now a Wolf Soldier."

Since she made the announcement in English, Ryan knew it was for his understanding alone. He stood in the center of the arena. Breathing was an agony.

Blood oozed and took his strength with it, and every muscle, ligament and joint was a separate ache and pain.

He wasn't sure what to do next, so he did the first thing that occurred to him. He lifted his head and joined in the chorus of howls.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Joe's finger tightened on the trigger of the Uzi, his knuckle turning white. "If any of you have the least bit of influence over your young friend, now is the time to exert it."

Jak's crimson eyes were locked in a sardonic challenge with Joe's black, unblinking gaze. The blade in his hand was rock steady.

Silence fell on the room. A child's laughter from outside sounded huge and hollow. Joe's dark eyes shadowed with menace.

"One knife against two blasters," he said. "Don't be stupe."

"For smart man, you stupe," Jak replied. "Chill me, sure. You die, too."

Krysty edged forward, hands up, palms open, fingers spread. "Enough, Jak. Put away the blade. You can only chill Joe."

"What I want."

"What about you?"

"Don't care."

"I care," she said in a tone deceptively casual. "We all care. And you've got to care, too. When you drop Joe, Little Mountain will open up with the scattergun. All of us will die."

The teenager's gaze wavered slightly.

"It's not necessary," Krysty whispered. "Joe said we're in a fix, and he's right. But we've gotten out of plenty of fixes and fixed the fixers. Remember?"

The knife didn't so much as tremble in the white fingers.

Krysty kept talking, kept moving slowly forward. "You fixed the General, remember? Took you a while, but you fixed him."

At the mention of the man who was responsible for the murders of his wife and child, Jak blinked, his gaze wavering even more.

"Give yourself, give all of us, that same while to fix Joe."

Jak lowered his arm and dropped the knife, and it sank point first into the wooden floor. His white face was grave, his eyes angry and bitter with memories and frustration.

Doc made a muffled exclamation, and Mildred sat on a bunk, running a hand over her face. The moment of relief quickly came to an end when several warriors swarmed into the room and bound their wrists with strips of rawhide.

Joe dabbed at the fine dew of perspiration on his upper lip. "Young Lauren is in your debt."

"So are you," Krysty said coldly as a man tightened the knots binding her wrists together. They were held out before her.

Two warriors collected the blasters from the table. J.B. winced at the clatter and the rough handling.

"Now what?" he demanded. "You going to chill us before you ride down on the Wolf Soldier encampment?"

"No," Joe answered. "You will ride with us. Your presence is required to spur on my more superstitious warriors. Their vanity will not allow them to stay behind while wasicun kagas fight in their stead."

"Wasicun whats?" J.B. asked.

"White demons," Joe explained.

"If you inspire so little confidence among your troops," Doc ventured, "then how can you hope to succeed in your military endeavor?"

Joe shrugged. "Do you think me naive, Dr. Tanner? I have traveled far, farther than any man in this valley, and seen many lands, many people. I have lived among the whites and read many books. I know the fears of my warriors are smoke. With your weapons in their hands, they will know it, too."

He spoke sharply to Little Mountain, who gestured toward the door with the barrel of the scattergun.

"I'll fetch you when I need you," Joe said as they walked past him.

"That," Mildred muttered, "is what we're afraid of."

ONE OF THE FOUR HUMAN Wolf Soldiers acting as an honor guard pulled aside the flap, allowing Ryan, Sisoka, Blood-sniffer and Pizi to enter the tepee.

Ryan began to strip off the wolf skin, then demanded, "Where are my clothes and weapons?"

Pizi picked up a tied deer-hide bundle from the floor and tossed it to him. Opening it, Ryan saw all his possessions, including his gun belt, SIG-Sauer, a spare ammo clip and his panga. Only the golden wafer was missing. He quickly started to take off the skin of Deathmaul.

Sisoka helped him to unlace the harness, saying, "I will treat your wounds. You need a bandage on that arm."

Ryan pulled on his pants and buckled his gun belt around his waist before allowing Sisoka to minister to him. He sat on a buffalo robe, and with a bowl of warm water, a cloth and some sort of stinging, stinking ointment, she cleaned his scratches and lacerations. The bite on his forearm burned like a hot coal, but he knew it wasn't as severe as it could have been.

Blood-sniffer sat on his haunches, licking the bite Ryan had inflicted. The wolf had fought with a restrained savagery, obviously not wanting to kill him unless there was no other choice.

As she bathed and bandaged his injuries, Sisoka murmured, "Tell us about yourself, Ryan Cawdor. You are now a Wolf Soldier, and we need to know of your history, of your place in the world."

Ryan shifted uncomfortably, feeling the pressure of Pizi's stare against his back. He rarely spoke of his past, but slowly, reluctantly, drawn out by Sisoka's gentle encouragement and questions, he began to talk. He told her of his privileged youth as the third and youngest son of Baron Titus Cawdor in Front Royal, the largest ville in Virginia. He spoke of losing his mother, his oldest brother, his father and his left eye to his middle brother, Harvey, during an assassination attempt. He told of how he was wounded, not

only in body, but in spirit, and how he fled his past and his birthright to ride with Trader on his war wags, fighting what seemed an endless battle with the human and inhuman spawn of the Deathlands. When he spoke of Krysty and Dean, Sisoka's lips pursed momentarily in what he interpreted as disappointment.

"I've seen the ruins of all the great cities, the centers of predark civilization," he said in a monotone. "I've roamed in the unknown regions south, east and west and even across the sea. I've been a gunner, an explorer, a father I've been everything except content, and I hope to be that before I die."

He shrugged his shoulders. "This is as good a life as any and better than most."

Sisoka shook her head and leaned forward to help him on with his shirt. Her breasts pressed briefly into his upper arm. "A sad tale."

"Compared to your lives here, mebbe. But to the rest of Deathlands, compared to some of the suffering I've seen that passes for life, not sad at all."

"In bygone days," Pizi said, "you would have died long before you even saw the pass to the valley. You found your way here through a traitor's cunning, a traitor's treachery."

Turning to face him, Ryan said, "According to Touch-the-Sky, you're the traitors. You refuse to use the powers at your command to heal the earth."

Pizi shook his head vigorously, not in disagreement, but in disbelief. "Touch-the-Sky is a vain fool. He found us, several seasons ago, and immediately devoted himself to protecting this valley. He felt he was more worthy of the guardianship of the Cavern Keepers society than Sisoka and so attached himself to Towasi, my brother. When Towasi died, the hereditary title of Guardian automatically passed on to Sisoka, a tradition that has been observed for generations."

"He told me Towasi intended for him to assume the title, because he had no sons. He said that neither he nor Sisoka had been initiated into the secret knowledge of how to call upon the cavern's powers. He feels you practice low laws, not the high laws."

Sisoka snorted. "First of all, Ti-Ra'-Wa is not a patriarchy. The Guardianship mantle is inherited by the first-born child of the Guardian, regardless of the sex."

"Were you initiated into the secrets?" Ryan asked.

"There are no secrets," Sisoka declared. "Therefore, no initiation rites."

"Touch-the-Sky believes there are initiation rites, and secrets to learn."

"We know what he believes," Pizi growled. "The vainglorious fantasy he built up around the valley and the cavern wouldn't allow him to believe anything else. Nor does he understand that Ti-Ra'-Wa acts as a balance between the high and low laws, achieving a balance between the heavens and the earth. He doesn't know enough about us to even begin to realize he doesn't know enough."

"Didn't his ancestors live here?"

"According to some," Sisoka said, a note of amusement in her voice, "everybody's ancestors lived here, tens of thousands of years ago."

"So he has no real tie to Ti-Ra'-Wa, no valid claim to the guardianship title?"

"He has nothing but a rabble-rouser's abilities," Pizi replied. "He convinced some of our people young ones, mostly that a wonderful magical gift lay buried in the cavern and Sisoka wanted it all to herself. He persuaded a few warriors, a few dreamers, that with the gift, he could transform the entire world into a mirror image of Ti-Ra'-Wa, and the planet would be restored to its state before the whites ruined it. As chief of the Wolf Soldiers, and uncle to Sisoka, I supported her against his accusations. We didn't expect him to mount an attack against us and drive us from our own city."

"When he left here," Sisoka said, "Blood-sniffer and I shadowed Touch-the-Sky on the plain. He then went to Amicus and we followed him there, where Blood-sniffer saw you and your friends. He had an instinct about you."

Ryan glanced at the wolf. The animal was stretched on its side, evidently asleep. "An instinct?"

"That you and his kind were kindred. He tested that instinct when you dreamed."

Ryan exhaled a deep breath. "He was my animal spirit guide. My totem. That's why he didn't kill me, even when you ordered him to."

"And that's why you didn't kill him, even when you were ordered to."

He looked again at Pizi. "I know what Touch-the-Sky believes about this place. What do you believe?" A flame ignited in Pizi's dark eyes. "Our forefathers cultivated Ti-Ra'-Wa, but the forest city was ancient even in our oldest histories. Yes, much of the old knowledge has been lost, but we do not mourn it. Nor has this valley always been a land of peace and plenty. Anger, greed and jealousy made Ti-Ra'-Wa run red with blood more than once. For many years human and animal sacrifices were made to the Grandmother, but she was offended by the taking of lives and it ended."

"For centuries we have dwelt in peace. Tribes fleeing the white government found refuge here, and never spoke its location, even when they were tortured by the whites, the Spanish, the French. Ti-Ra'-Wa endured the purification and it will endure until the Grandmother Herself perishes."

"And the intelligent wolves? How do you explain them?"

Pizi shrugged, as if the matter were of no consequence. "Our brothers were always here."

"And the senders? Where did they come from?"

"Again they were always here," Sisoka answered. "The technique of their use was taught by the first Guardian, Nanabozho."

"Who made the senders?"

"The First People," Sisoka replied. "They vanished many, many centuries ago."

"Where did they come from? Where did they go?"

Pizi answered Ryan's question with a long, convoluted story of dark and mysterious matters, of Nanabozho conjuring magic from the catacombs of the cavern. Ryan wasn't interested in old legends, but he listened anyway, realizing the cavern still exerted a terrible elemental power over the people of the valley. It filled their whole lives, a strange obsession that had shut them off from the rest of the world. When Pizi paused for breath, Ryan asked quickly, "What I wanted to know is what you believe is the cavern's secret."

"There is no secret, like I said," Sisoka answered. "The heart of the Grandmother beats there, the life force of the world."

"What does it look like?"

"I have never seen it. I know it is there. That is enough."

Ryan resisted the impulse to shake his head in exasperation. He remembered the Trader telling him that out of mules, women and spoiled children, Indians would win the award for obduracy any day of the week.

Forcing a patience into his voice that he didn't feel, he said, "Touch-the-Sky thinks it's a core of energy, trapped in the cave since the very beginnings of the universe."

"Yes," Pizi grunted.

"He thinks your ancestors once had the knowledge to use that energy to manipulate the planet."

"True," Sisoka agreed.

"All right, then," Ryan said, "why do you think he's a traitor for wanting to use the energy in the same way your ancestors did?"

Pizi's hands clenched tight, and he pounded them on his knees. "He thinks our ancestors used the power as a woman uses a needle and thread. Our ancestors were but vessels for the power. They obeyed its bidding."

Ryan leaned back, staring at the man incredulously. He glanced at Sisoka. "I don't get it."

Sisoka sighed wearily. "It's not complicated, Ryan Cawdor. We cannot use the power in the cavern to heal Grandmother Earth. The power is Grandmother Earth."

Ryan was struck speechless for a long tick of time. He opened his mouth to voice a question, then shut it again. He hunched his shoulders and looked around the tepee, as if expecting to see someone.

"What is it?" Sisoka asked.

Eye narrowed, he half whispered, "Krysty?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The little bark lodge faced west, and since it was still morning, the sun shone against the far wall. The light peeping in around the edges of the animal pelt hanging in front of the low entrance was dim. They sat on the ground, leaning against the wooden walls, their bound wrists resting on their knees.

No one had spoken for what seemed like a very long time. Finally Jak said softly, "Waiting room in Hell." "I've got to get out of here," Krysty stated.

"All of us have to get out of here," J.B. replied sourly.

"No," Krysty said impatiently. "I need to reach the crystal chamber. Mebbe I can contact Ryanif he's still alive."

"If he is, and he doesn't have the sender," Mildred contended, "you won't be able to communicate with him."

"I didn't say communicate, I said contact. With the crystals enhancing my own natural psionic abilities, I might at least be able to sense his mind."

"And if you do, then what?" Doc inquired. "And more importantly, if you do not, then what?"

Krysty didn't answer for a long moment. Finally, in a hushed voice, she said, "I don't know."

All of them jumped at the sharp collection of sounds driving into the low-ceilinged lodge from outside. They recognized the soundsthe dry-twig snapping of the Smith amp; Wesson 640, the deeper boom of the Colt Python, the slamming bang of the ZKR, the heavy thump of the Le Mat and the whip-crack of the Steyr.

After the fusillade of noise ceased, they heard Joe's voice, shouting impatient orders and instructions in Lakota.

"They're practicing with our blasters," J.B. said. "Didn't hear the Uzi or the scattergun, so I guess Joe and Little Mountain are keeping hold of them."

He sighed and added bitterly, "We've got to get out of here."

Raising her bound wrists to her mouth, Krysty sank her teeth into the thongs. Everyone saw what she was doing and followed suit, though Doc gave up after a few experimental bites. The leather strips were tough, but they were sure they could chew through them given enough time, provided they had much of that commodity.

The thongs tasted awful, but their flavor reminded Krysty that they hadn't eaten in nearly sixteen hours.

She kept gnawing until her jaws ached and the rawhide was slippery with saliva. She took a break.

Suddenly the pelt hanging in front of the door was pushed aside, and Sunlata entered. She was holding an earthenware bowl full of water in one hand and another bowl containing some sort of steaming stew.

Jak and Krysty exchanged quick glances. As Sunlata stooped over to place the bowls in the center of the lodge, Jak's wire-taut muscles gave a heave and the thongs parted.

Sunlata's head whipped toward him at the sound, and she began a backward step, but she backed right into Krysty's out-thrust leg. As she began to fall, Jak threw himself across the young woman's body, locking his hands around her slim throat to prevent any cries of alarm. He started to squeeze with all his strength when he realized Sunlata wasn't struggling or even trying to pry his fingers away.

Jak stopped trying to choke her into senselessness. She was staring up at him with a strained smile on her face.

"Stupe," he said, astonished. "Triple stupe."

Mildred laughed softly. "No, I think she's in love with you. Though that might make her more than a triple stupe."

"Let her up," Krysty said.

Jak complied and Sunlata pushed herself to a sitting position.

Doc chuckled. "We're of such a novelty value, especially you, Jak, that whatever loyalty she may have to Joe's cause is vitiated."

"I'm betting she doesn't have much loyalty at all," Krysty said. "He's fairly new here and has caused a split in the society. Mebbe she'll help us."

Using sign language and the few words of Lakota that J.B. could speak, they were able to get Sunlata to understand that Krysty wanted to visit the crystal chamber.

Sunlata frowned for a moment, tapping her full underlip, then her dark eyes brightened with the enthusiasm of an idea. Pointing to Krysty with one hand, she tugged at her doeskin smock and mantle with the other.

"She's suggesting I wear her clothes," Krysty said. She pointed to Sunlata's black tresses, then her own fiery mane, and shrugged questioningly.

Sunlata pulled up her fringed mantle over her head like a hood and nodded.

Krysty smiled. "I suppose it's worth a chance."

She nodded at Sunlata, and the young woman stripped out of her clothes so quickly not even Doc had the time to avert his eyes.

"Uninhibited little minx, isn't she?" he mumbled.

As Sunlata sat naked and beaming at her from a corner, Krysty put on her clothes. She didn't take any of her own off except for her boots so she could pull on the high moccasins. With Mildred's help, she pulled the mantle over her head and tucked all of her red hair beneath it. J.B. emptied the bowls and kicked dirt over their contents.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she said, picking up the bowls. Sunlata sat very close to Jak, smiling gayly as though she were part of a vastly amusing game.

Pushing through the pelt covering, Krysty quickly scanned the area for a sentry and she saw one. He was a young man, a teenager, standing about two hundred feet away. He leaned on a lance, his shoulders slouched. He was humming to himself, obviously extremely bored with the duty. He glanced up at Krysty, then glanced away disinterestedly.

As she walked unhurriedly through the forested avenues, she realized that Joe had set a hard task for himself, to turn a basically trusting, unwarlike people into soldiers. The young guard was probably the best choice out of an undisciplined lot.

She heard more shots, and more angry shouts from Joe somewhere to her left, and she turned in the opposite direction. She might have been able to fool a boy with her haphazard disguise, but she knew she would give herself away to Joe if he caught the briefest of glimpse of her.

She followed a circuitous route between the gargantuan tree trunks and finally reached the one that had served as their quarters. She entered carefully, eyes down, but she encountered no one. She assumed almost everyone was either taking part in the blaster lessons or observing.

Krysty stepped into the crystal chamber and put down the bowls, moving to one of the translucent mineral points. She put both hands around it and pressed her forehead against it, then closed her eyes to begin her preparations.

A rich warmth blanketed her as she followed the route of blood through her circulatory system, tracing the autonomic functions back to the controlling portion of her brain.

She slowed her respiration rate and concentrated on the mantra to Gaia her mother had taught her.

Her heartbeat speeded up, then slowed, and at the same time she increased the amount of adrenaline into her bloodstream.

Krysty's mind went here and there through her body, adjusting it, manipulating it, honing and revitalizing her reflexes and responses. The warmth spread from the center of her belly, flowed through her arms and legs. Her fingertips and toes tingled with energy.

She repeated the invocation, and in her mind's eye she saw a white blossom opening, the petals reaching out to engulf her. She felt as if she were floating, hovering between the solid material world and one made of warm, insubstantial light.

Then, within the white blossom, she saw Ryan's face and she called out to him.

"THE SENDER I HAD on me," Ryan demanded, "where is it?"

Pizi scowled. "Only a Guardian may touch the Mazaska Wakan and the Inyan Wakan."

Ryan snarled wordlessly. Blood-sniffer raised his head from the floor and blinked at him curiously.

Forcing himself to keep calm, Ryan rose to his feet. Bravado, threats and reaching for his blaster would only shatter the tenuous bridge of trust he had built between Sisoka, Pizi and the wolf.

The sudden, insistent pressure in his mind was a new experience, yet the faint, almost intangible touch was familiar. He pulled Sisoka to her feet. She stared up at him in wonder.

"I need the sender," he said in a measured, deliberate tone.

"How do we know you won't contact Touch-the-Sky?" Pizi growled.

"You'll have to trust me. I wouldn't ask you for it if it wasn't important."

Sisoka gave him a searching stare, then knelt and felt around beneath the robe upon which they had been sitting. She brought out the golden wafer and handed it to him.

"Thank you." Gingerly Ryan pressed the crystal disk to his forehead, trying to form thought-words.

The force of the mental energy flooding into his mind nearly bowled him over.

Ryan! Lover! Oh, Gaia, where are you?

I'm here, Krysty.

Her emotions crashed into his consciousness like a sunburst, all golden and glorious. Ryan tried to orient himself. Krysty's riot of emotions became coherent thought-patterns. She told him of Joe's betrayal, their imprisonment, how Sunlata had helped her reach the crystal chamber. Then she told him of Joe's plan.

Fire?

Ryan was surprised by the depth of horror he experienced. His warrior's mind appreciated the beautifully simple plan, but he recoiled at its unutterable cruelty. A fire in the valley was far worse than their blasters in the hands of Joe's warriors.

What do you want us to do ? Krysty asked.

Stay there. Don't start trouble unless you have to. Go back to your cell and send the girl away. I'll come for you.

Where will we go?

Here, the encampment of the Wolf Soldiers.

He felt her wordless reaction of surprise, but he didn't waste time explaining or repeating everything Sisoka and Pizi had told him.

Wait for me, lover , he said. Stay alive .

You, too, lover.

Ryan lowered the wafer and wiped at the sweat on his brow. He swept a fierce blue gaze over Sisoka, Pizi and Blood-sniffer.

"Touch-the-Sky has made prisoners of my friends," he said grimly. "He has armed his warriors with our weapons to use against the Wolf Soldiers."

Sisoka and Pizi said nothing, but they stood quite still and fixed, waiting.

"They'll be coming with fire for the forest," he continued roughly.

"Fire?" Sisoka's voice was strained, trembly with shock.

"That is death for the valley!" Pizi bellowed, outraged.

"Unless we stop them," Ryan replied. "I must free my friends and recover our weapons from your our enemies."

"I will alert the soldiers and the packs," Pizi said. "We will attack the city."

"No," Ryan said. "A frontal assault pitting bows and arrows against automatic blasters will only get yourselves chilled. Your ancestors learned that lesson the hard way."

Pizi flung his arms wide. "The blade has been drawn!" he shouted. "There is no turning back. Blood calls for blood, and vengeance should fall swiftly on this coward!"

Ryan made a spitting sound of derision. "You sent assassins to kill Touch-the-Sky along the trail. That may be expedient, but it means you got no place to brand him a coward. That's the one thing he ain't."

As Pizi sputtered in baffled anger, Ryan turned to Sisoka. "I'm going to the city. Who'll go with me?"

Blood-sniffer rose and pressed his shoulder against Ryan's leg. He reached down and stroked the wolf's broad head.

"While we're gone, get your soldiers ready. No matter what else happens, Hell is on its way."

THE WEAPONS DRILL wasn't going well. In fact it was proceeding badly. Touch-the-Sky had chosen the best bowmen in the city to wield the blasters. Either their marksmanship could only be applied to arrows or they were too disconcerted by the flame and noise that accompanied each squeeze of the trigger.

Only a few of the man-size targets that had been erected in a clearing showed lethal hits. Many of the targets showed no hits at all.

Touch-the-Sky had railed at the men, demonstrated the proper way to fix target acquisition and over and over he had shouted at them to squeeze the triggers, not to pull them.

By midafternoon, the warriors had fired a lot of the outlanders' ammunition and were milling about in a disheartened circle, muttering to one another, complaining and criticizing.

Touch-the-Sky spoke bitterly to Little Mountain about the lack of aptitude and enthusiasm displayed by the warriors. "Are they fighting men or children?"

Little Mountain shook his head mournfully. "You came here from outside and you do not yet fully understand our people. We have followed you against our traditions because you have proved yourself a strong warrior and have said you hold a power to make the world whole again."

The men with the blasters overheard Little Mountain's words and stepped closer.

"My words are true," Touch-the-Sky said. "The power within the cavern is the legacy of our forefathers. It is kept from us."

A warrior holding the Colt Python shook his head. "The First People reared our city in the dawn of the beginnings of day. We have lived according to their ancient ways, and Ti-Ra'-Wa was spared the purification. Even if what you say is true, our actions violate those traditions. You brought outlanders here, and you want us to fight in the outland way against our own people. The valley is no longer the Ti-Ra'-Wa we knew."

"We may bring forth the anger of the Grandmother from the cavern," another man said. "She may purify Ti-Ra'-Wa so it will be as it once was."

The warriors shuddered involuntarily.

"Why did the Grandmother not come forth when the outlanders first entered the valley?" Touch-the-Sky asked. "If I have broken her laws, why has she not expressed her anger?"

"We have not entered the Cavern of Creation," Little Mountain answered. "Yet."

Touch-the-Sky started to speak, gazed at the stubborn, uneasy faces and realized the futility of further argument. He raised his rifle to waist level, but he didn't point it at anyone.

"I am war chief here," he snapped. "You all agreed to it. I have not suffered and bled for all of you to be balked at last by groundless fears!"

He faced them, his eyes bright, and the warriors shuffled away, cowed by the force of his fanaticism.

"We have gone too far to turn back," he said tightly. "We will follow through on our path. Even if it leads to the Grandmother Herself."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The pony galloped across the grasslands toward the forest city. Ryan kept a close watch for Blood-sniffer, who had slipped on ahead, scouting for guard outposts or patrols. So far the wolf had brought them safely to within a mile of the city.

Blood-sniffer appeared a hundred yards ahead, like a wisp of gray smoke blown on the wind. The wolf tilted its snout skyward and snapped at the air, signaling the way was clear.

The sun had sunk behind the highest peaks by the time Ryan reached the outer perimeter of the city. He dismounted, leaving the pony to graze in a stand of cottonwood trees. He wasn't concerned about the animal wandering away, since if he couldn't steal mounts for his friends, one horse wouldn't do him much good, anyway.

Blood-sniffer joined him and they crept forward, threading their way through the high grass, taking advantage of every fold, rise and depression of the ground. Even so, they were almost discovered by a warrior on horseback, trotting less than an arm's length away.

As man and wolf slipped into the shelter of the first line of massive tree trunks, the sun disappeared completely. As silent as shadows, they followed the winding forest ways.

The long avenues were deserted and silent. Only dust and dry leaves blew lonely on the wind. Ryan detected the acrid odor of cordite, as did Blood-sniffer, his muzzle wrinkling.

The crystal disks glistened as cold as ice sculptures under the spreading boughs, and where the open doorways fronted the footpaths, they gaped empty and lightless. Lamplight flared in only a few of the trees, but there was no sound of talking or laughter. Ryan had been in such an atmosphere before; the city was preparing for war.

Ryan and Blood-sniffer made their way to a small bark lodge, which was identical to the image Krysty had transmitted to him. Also, as she had mentally communicated, there was only one sentry, a young man some distance away. He leaned on his lance, head bowed, either half-asleep, bored or depressed.

Blood-sniffer dropped into a crouch, belly almost on the ground, but Ryan touched him and shook his head. He had no doubt the wolf could take down the man, but he doubted Blood-sniffer could take him before he raised an outcry.

Ryan drew his panga and stepped out of the shadow of an overhanging branch, walking quietly, heel to toe. He intended to clamp a hand over the sentry's mouth and slide the eighteen-inch blade of tooled steel between his third and fourth ribs. It was an act he had performed many times in the past, and he could have done it with patches over both eyes.

When he was within six feet of the man, he realized the sentry wasn't a man at all, but a boy, a stripling maybe fourteen years old, only a few years older than Dean.

The boy shifted, uttering a sigh of ennui. Ryan swiftly reversed his grip on the knife and snapped the heavy pommel across the base of the boy's skull, where it joined with the neck. The thud of impact was muffled, and consciousness fled his dark eyes with the suddenness of a candle being extinguished.

Ryan caught the body and lance before they hit the ground. Blood-sniffer padded up, sniffed briefly at the boy and yawned.

Gathering a fistful of deerskin tunic in one hand and holding the lance in the other, Ryan dragged both toward the lodge.

The blow to the nerve center at the base of his skull was probably good for ten minutes of uninterrupted unconsciousness. By the time the boy revived, he would be trussed up and gagged.

Pushing aside the pelt hanging over the doorway with the lance, Ryan hissed, "It's me," before entering. He didn't want to be clubbed senseless by his friends.

Though everyone was happy to see him alive and apparently whole, there was no time for a reunion. J.B. bit back a startled curse when Blood-sniffer entered.

"It's that double-crossing wolf!" he said in an angry whisper. "What's it doing here?"

"Helping us," Ryan answered, laying the sentry out on the ground.

Krysty knelt over the boy. "He's alive," she said in a mildly surprised tone.

Ryan grunted. "Tie him up and gag him."

Krysty and Mildred attended to that, tearing strips from the boy's breechclout to fashion a gag. Mildred quickly knotted the thongs that had previously bound the friends and hog-tied the young man, ankles to wrists.

J.B. and Doc eyed Blood-sniffer distrustfully and not a little fearfully.

"Joe's got our blasters," the Armorer said, not removing his gaze from the wolf. "He's been trying to train

his warriors how to use them."

"I know," Ryan replied.

After the sentry was tightly bound and gagged, the six people slipped from the lodge. Blood-sniffer followed the odor of gun oil and cordite through the dark avenues, and they followed at his heels.

The wolf went to the monstrous tree that had served as their guest quarters. While the humans waited in the underbrush, the animal circled the great trunk, casting for a scent of guards. After one circuit Blood-sniffer paused before the archway, looking toward them.

They joined the beast there and crept inside, the wolf pausing every few feet to sniff the air. The corridor was empty.

They came to a small room and found Joe and Little Mountain. They had a jug of liquid before them, and their faces in the flaring lamplight weren't the faces of happy men. Laid neatly on a low table against the far wall were all of their weapons, including Jak's knives, Doc's swordstick, and the rucksack containing ammunition. Joe's rifle rested at the edge of the table, within easy reach.

Blood-sniffer entered first, and when they saw him, they sprang up, grabbing for blasters. Ryan stepped in quickly, the SIG-Sauer leveled. Both men stopped, frozen in midmotion.

Joe let out a long, harsh breath. "Ochinee. I'm gratified you still live, but not gratified you sold us out to the Wolf Soldiers."

Little Mountain looked from Ryan to the wolf with fear-widened eyes.

As his friends pushed around him into the room to recover their weapons, Ryan said coldly, "'It's no sin to betray a betrayer,' as Sisoka said."

Joe shrugged, his hard, ruddy face tight. "I didn't betray you."

"You kept us in the dark about what this conflict is really about," Ryan said. "You'll bring death to this valley because of some dream, some theory you cooked up, based on nothing but bitterness and ego."

"You've been seduced by Sisoka."

Ryan caught Krysty's swift sideways glance toward him. "Joe, you're going with us to Sisoka."

His obsidian eyes narrowed. "Pizi will kill me."

"Probably." Ryan showed his teeth in a humorless, smile. "I don't know if you deserve it or not. But I do know you're the man who brought war to this valley, and you brought us here to help you wage it."

"You came here for gold," Joe replied. "If you turn on me now, you'll lose it all."

"Don't be so sure all white men are as greedy as history makes us out to be. Now, both of you, let's go."

Joe didn't move. "Go where?"

"To get horses. When we go out, keep it looking natural and friendly, just a friendly stroll with the wasicun kagas. No talking unless I ask you a question. You fuck with me, I'll chill both of you where you stand."

Joe exchanged a quick look with Little Mountain, nodded brusquely, then moved toward the door. All of them filed out into the corridor and then into the brooding, quiet night.

"Who seduced you?" Krysty asked as they walked around the tree.

Ryan sighed. "Later."

They reached the compound, which was unguarded, though Blood-sniffer's ears were pricked up and he stared around as if sensing something that couldn't be seen. The horses snorted and shifted when the wolf scent reached their nostrils.

While Joe and Little Mountain were held at blaster-point, Krysty, J.B., Doc and Mildred selected the mounts from the others and put pad saddles on their backs. Krysty picked out a sturdy pony for Ryan. Mildred handed Joe the lead rope of his pinto. As he checked out the braided bridle on the horse, he said, "You're making a mistake, Ochinee."

"Mebbe," Ryan replied. "Mebbe I'm trying to correct one."

Sighing, Joe reached out to pat his pony's velvety muzzle. Abruptly Blood-sniffer stiffened, hackles rising, a growl rumbling from his throat. Ryan made a move toward Joe, raising the SIG-Sauer to club the man down.

Stridently Joe yelled, "Kicizapi !"

The pony instantly screamed, rearing on his hind legs, hooves and forelegs lashing out. Ryan avoided a

fractured skull by the thickness of a fingernail. As it was, a hoof dealt him a glancing blow on the side of the head, staggering him. Joe and Little Mountain moved so fast that individual motions couldn't be distinguished. They dived toward the horses, shouting shrilly, and the animals neighed and milled in a panic, jostling J.B. and Doc off their feet. Voices yelled from the darkness beyond the compound, and Joe and Little Mountain shouted back.

"Fireblast!" Ryan snarled, grabbing the bridle of the pony Krysty had chosen for him. He vaulted onto its back, squeezing off three shots into the night. The reports sounded obscenely loud, but he wasn't aiming at anything. He hoped the blasterfire would keep the warriors at bay long enough for his friends to get mounted.

With Jak's help, Doc managed to get astride Judas Redux, and when everyone was more or less mounted up, Ryan kicked his horse into a gallop. Blood-sniffer raced beside him.

They drummed up the avenue and veered toward the open plains. Glancing back once, Ryan saw warriors darting for ponies, trying to calm them enough so they could be saddled and ridden.

All six people let their horses run flat out across the grassland for five miles. Only when the black woods rose before them did they slow the horses to a canter.

Blood-sniffer had dropped back due to his injured leg, and Ryan waited until the wolf had trotted up, sides heaving, tongue hanging out with exertion.

Mildred twisted in her saddle. "I don't think they chased us."

"There must be a reason," J.B. said grimly.

Blood-sniffer uttered a low bark. He was sniffing the wind, then he whined, lifted his head and voiced a loud howl. A few moments later the howl was answered from deep in the woods.

"He's warning his pack of something," Ryan muttered. He glanced behind him but saw nothing but the nighted plains. The wolf trotted toward the forest. They followed him, the wolf loping ahead. All through the dark forest they heard howls, an alarm spreading up the ridge, across the river and to the encampment. Krysty's hair was coiled. She felt the fear rising on the wind. Ryan told his friends what transpired at the encampment, and of Pizi's and Sisoka's beliefs regarding the Cavern of Creation.

"So your vision of the wolf as your animal totem came true," Doc commented.

"Especially," Krysty said, "if what Joe said about a seduction has any foundation."

"It doesn't," Ryan muttered.

When they struggled up the hill to the crest, they found Pizi and Sisoka waiting for them. Before Ryan could make introductions, Sisoka said, "It has begun."

The wind brought the first, faint taint of smoke. Looking back in the direction they had come, they saw pinpoints of flame dancing at the far edge of the dark forest.

"The doom you helped bring here is sweeping toward us, outlander," Pizi said somberly.

Ryan didn't know what to say. He simply stared at Pizi and Sisoka. She waved a hand toward the distant crags and peaks.

"You are free to leave Ti-Ra'-Wa," she said. "All of you. The packs guarding the pass are being recalled, so none will molest you."

J.B. gave his pony's reins a jerk. "Let's get moving before that crazy Joe sets the whole valley on fire."

"I'm staying," Ryan said. "I'll try to undo what we helped do here."

He gazed at his friends. "This is my decision alone. The rest of you can get to the pass, and I'll join you when I can."

"You can't make that decision only for yourself, Ryan!" Krysty said angrily. "Anything and everything that any one of us chooses to do affects the others. You know that. We came here together and we'll leave together or not at all."

Everyone murmured in agreement, though J.B. and Doc sounded a little unsure and uneasy.

"Long as we don't have to fight wolves," J.B. said softly.

"They'll fight with us," Ryan told him.

He looked toward Sisoka. "Won't they?"

Her eyes searched his face, seeming to search his soul. "Yes, Ryan Cawdor. They will be your allies. Your help can be valuable in this hour."

Blood-sniffer voiced a staccato series of yelping barks and then a few howls, almost like a vocal Morse code.

"He tells the pack leaders that the outlanders fight with the Wolf Soldiers," Pizi said. "They will pass it along to those beyond hearing range."

Ryan looked again at the forest. He could see tendrils of smoke curling into the sky and dancing orange flames. "That fire will be here in a few hours, and Touch-the-Sky and his warriors will come after it."

Sisoka nodded. "We hope to stop it. While you were gone, our people have labored to cut a firebreak on this side of the river."

"If those dry woods get going," J.B. said, "no firebreak will stop it. It'll jump it, mebbe even jump the river. You've got to start a backfire."

"Use fire as a defense against fire?" Pizi looked worried and surprised. "Our people will not like it."

"Either that or the blaze will burn your encampment to the ground by midnight," Ryan warned.

Sisoka nodded and said, "I will give the order."

They started down the ridge toward the river, leading their horses. Sisoka and Pizi walked ahead of them.

"Joe said he could put only about three hundred warriors into the field," Ryan said to J.B. "What's our ammo situation?"

"I checked on the way through the woods," J.B. replied. "All of us, except your pistol and my Uzi, average about twenty shots per blaster. Joe and his idiots burned up a lot of rounds today."

"Doesn't sound like we can afford to fire warning shots," Mildred put in.

Pizi overheard the exchange and glanced at them anxiously. "But your experience of war will be invaluable to us. We know little of war in Ti-Ra'-Wa. We Wolf Soldiers have not had to fight in over a century, mebbe longer."

"I think I fearyou may make up for a hundred years of lost bloodshed before this night is over," Doc said bleakly.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The whole sky over the ridge was a wall of black smoke laced with livid, bloodred flame. The flames were eating through the forest and scorching their way up the hill. Smoke rolled densely, blotting out the stars. The air was thick with it. Panicked animals, like running shadows, streamed over the ridge.

Pizi, Ryan, J.B. and Krysty stood at the firebreak the people of the encampment had been digging for hours. It was a ragged, hundred-foot lane, cut only a few yards from the riverbank.

Krysty groaned. "That'll never stop a forest fire."

"We've got to get a backfire going," J.B. said. "Stop it before it jumps the river."

Pizi reluctantly gave the order. The Wolf Soldiers and the people of the encampment didn't like it. A few of them argued, and Pizi shouted at them in furious Lakota.

With Pizi translating, Ryan and J.B. supervised the task of starting the backfire. Their torches kindled the dry brush all along the ridge facing the fire lane. Undergrowth, cedar and fir blazed up, and the edge of the lane became a new wall of flame moving up the hill toward the oncoming wall of fire.

The wind was against them. Burning twigs and leaves whirled across the lane to land and ignite new fires at the edge of the riverbank. Half-stifled by smoke, sweating and coughing, Ryan, Krysty and J.B. stamped and beat out each new spark. The wind was like a living, malignant demon, taking delight in hurling fresh fire across the gap.

Yet through smoke-stung, watering eyes, they saw that the backfire was steadily if slowly creeping up the

ridge to scorch a belt across which the giant firestorm couldn't leap.

Coughing, sounding half-strangled, Krysty said, "Let's get across the river, see how Mildred and the others are doing."

They made their way through the smoky haze toward the massive log bridge. As they were crossing, Pizi in the lead, they heard a distant crackle. At first they all assumed it was from the flames. But Pizi grunted, caught at his midsection and stumbled and slid toward the edge. Krysty managed to grab his arm and prevent him from pitching into the river. Then she saw the streaks of crimson on his rib cage.

She wrestled the man down to the smooth surface of the log, shouting, "Pizi's been shot! Somebody's shooting at us!"

Ryan and J.B. fell facedown, and they felt the wood beneath their bodies shudder beneath multiple impacts. Looking upriver, Ryan saw the first of a score of bark-and-hide canoes, loaded with warriors, emerging from the pall of smoke. In the prow of one of the lead canoes was Joe, his automatic rifle at his shoulder.

Ryan clenched his teeth so hard they squeaked and grated. He should have realized that Joe's only possible strategy was to use the river as a safe highway behind and past the conflagration he had set. He had probably seen them setting the backfire and swung through the screen of smoke while they were occupied.

Ryan unholstered his blaster and began to squeeze off shot after shot, all the while yelling at Krysty to get herself and Pizi to safety. J.B.'s Uzi stuttered, but the range was too long for handblasters to be very accurate.

Still, miniature waterspouts spumed in front of the canoes, and the flotilla was rowed toward the bank. Krysty had managed to edge the wounded Pizi off the bridge and onto solid ground. She tried to support him as they ran toward the encampment.

"Get the Wolf Soldiers!" Ryan shouted at her back.

J.B. and Ryan kept up a sporadic fire, hoping to keep Joe and his warriors from leaving the sheltering foliage at the edge of the river. From the direction of the Wolf Soldier village came a multitude of howls, roars and screeches.

Beasts and men clad in beast skins ran across the open ground, screaming war cries, swinging knives, tomahawks and holding crossbows. Ryan and J.B. were forced to stop shooting as the Wolf Soldiers and the packs crashed through the brush and trees at the edge of the red-lit river. They swept into battle, and not even the rapid-fire barking of Joe's automatic rifle stopped them.

The Wolf Soldiers ran up and down the riverbank, their lances stabbing, their arrows flying, fangs tearing, claws flaying. They fought breast to breast with their brothers from the forest city. Great, shaggy bodies leaped and rolled, and slashed and clawed. Bodies fell on the banks or splashed into the shallows. The warriors fought over them, treading faces with their feet, slipping on blood and viscera.

Ryan and J.B., watching from the bridge, were held in a horrid fascination. Lit by the leaping, gouting flames from the forest and the backfire, the scene took on an unreal, deranged, almost hallucinatory quality, like something out of jolt-inspired dementia.

A crackle of autofire broke the stunned spell, and they left the bridge, running toward the encampment.

Halfway there they met Jak, Doc and Mildred. Krysty and Sisoka were kneeling beside the fallen Pizi.

His breathing was labored, rattling, and a crimson froth spilled out of his mouth.

"Got him through the lungs," Mildred said grimly.

"Get me up," Pizi husked.

Sisoka patted the man's cheek. "No, Uncle. We'll take you to your tepee."

"No," he rasped. "Let me make one last appeal to our people, to stop this war before all of Ti-Ra'-Wa is destroyed, before it succumbs completely to the curse of the outer world."

Summoning all the strength he had left in his bullet-shattered body, Pizi, with Mildred's help, stumbled and staggered to his feet. He began a shambling walk toward the screaming chaos at the riverbank.

Sisoka made a motion to go with him, but Ryan restrained her.

"It won't do any good," he said, holding her tightly by the upper arm. "It's gone too far for a peace-making speech to make a difference."

"Guess he has to try," Jak said.

Pizi managed to shuffle to within a few hundred feet of the boiling mass of men and animals. He stood outlined in the glow of the firelight on the opposite bank, his arms raised as his voice rolled out onto the river. He spoke in Lakota, so Sisoka had to translate for them.

"Men of Ti-Ra'-Wa!" he bellowed. "Will you destroy our ancient land in blood and fire? Wrath of the First People, wrath of Ah-badt-dadt-deah, will fall upon you if you follow this road farther."

An instant of comparative quiet followed this pronouncement. The combatants didn't fall completely silent, but some of the blood-mad screams decreased in intensity.

The burst of autofire that came from the brush on the river's edge was short and contemptuous. Pizi folded in the middle, clutching at his belly. He sat down, then slowly stretched out on the ground, trying to arrange his feet and hands in positions of grave dignity before he died.

A mad cry, a cry of fury that exploded from human and animal throats, rose into the smoke-choked air. Sisoka buried her face in her hands and turned, pressing against Ryan. Krysty caught his eye, raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

A sudden, bright flare caught his eye and he turned toward the river. The land between the bank and the encampment was ablaze. The backfire had jumped both the firebreak and the river. Ryan realized that Joe had mounted his attack in order to draw the Wolf Soldiers away from their fight against the firestorm, and the strategy had worked. The flames had overrun their line of defense and were now moving on the wings of the wind toward the encampment.

"Shit," J.B. groaned. "The fire will be into the camp in an hour. We've got to retreat."

Retreat was a lesson the Wolf Soldiers had never learned or never knew was an option. Though they had recovered from the stunning shock of their chieftain's murder, they were slowly being pushed back.

It was the death fight of warriors who courted death in order to deal death, blind, panting and merciless. Back and forth the battle rolled, blades sinking into chests, blood spurting, feet churning the ground into crimson sludge. The Gewehr started hammering from the press of bodies, and more Wolf Soldiers crashed to the ground.

Joe's warriors were outnumbered, but the effect of his automatic rifle was devastating. Ryan saw him moving through the whirling, eddying mass of men and animals, shooting and clubbing. Again and again a Wolf Soldier who heaved a tomahawk or lance at him found a bullet in his head or chest before he could strike. Arrows missed Joe as he moved like a lithe, phantom panther.

Then the screaming wave of combat surged and spilled away from the riverbank and spread out across the smoky, flaming ground.

Ryan, Sisoka, Krysty, J.B., Mildred, Doc and Jak ran toward the nearest ring of tepees. Great scorching winds whipped and hissed behind them, flinging blinding smoke into their path. The steady crackling of the sky-high towers of flame atop the hill had grown to a steady roar. Sparks and embers whirled in corkscrew patterns through the air.

The warriors left to guard the encampment shouted excited questions at Sisoka when they caught sight of her. She answered them in Lakota, and they gave a great cry of woe.

"You must get everyone out of the camp," Ryan said to her. "The fire will be here in an hour, Touch-the-Sky in half that."

She repeated what Ryan had said, and the response was angry mutterings and shouts. She responded firmly and pointed to the sky over the ridge. Already the flickering, crimson glare was casting red highlights on the tepees.

"Tell them they can fight Touch-the-Sky later."

Ryan instructed. "When the ashes cool, they and the packs can come down from the hills and attack again."

Sisoka spoke briefly but determinedly for less than a minute. Then the Wolf Soldiers turned and went through the camp, rousing human and animal alike. Mothers with their children human and wolf moved out of the encampment in an organized exodus. Watching them, Ryan felt their fear, anger and confusion.

"Joe won't wait for the fire to burn down the encampment before he makes his move for the cavern," he said to his friends. "That's where we'll stop him."

Sisoka looked at him with wide, shocked eyes. "You cannot enter the cavern!"
"Mebbe not. But Touch-the-Sky thinks he can. We'll lay in wait for him outside of it."
Sisoka nodded in resignation. "Come."

The encampment was almost deserted now. The last stragglers were disappearing northward across the grasslands. Ash fell like a dingy snow, and the wind was so hot they felt its breath burning their skin. Behind them the flames leaped triumphant, flaring in great, twisting tongues from the treetops, roaring and dancing.

They reached the crude fence where they had corraled their horses and sprang onto their backs, Sisoka riding double with Ryan. The horses coughed and snorted from the drifting smoke and whinnied whenever a flying spark alighted on them.

Pushing their horses into a gallop, they raced up the slope toward the tumble of huge boulders at the barren base of the mountain ramparts. Between the rock tumble they saw the throbbing, pulsing light. After they reined in their horses at the foot of a house-sized boulder, Ryan helped Sisoka down. He remained astride the pony while the others dismounted.

"Everybody find some cover," he said.

"What's your plan?" Krysty demanded.

"I'll stay on the hoof," he replied. "Fight a harassing action. That's something he might not expect."

"I expect Joe is expecting everything," Doc retorted.

Ryan handed the Steyr to Mildred. "I doubt he's expecting to be picked off by sniper fire."

The woman's face was an expressionless mask, smeared by gray ash. "I don't feel good about doing that, Ryan."

"Think I do? Give me an alternative." He spoke more harshly than he intended.

When there was no answer, Ryan turned his mount and rode among the immense pillars of stone. He was too tense to feel awed by the Cyclopean rock formations. The gray- and dun-colored columns and out-croppings were deeply scored and eroded by aeons of exposure to the elements. They loomed bleakly above him like cold, uncaring colossi, too far gone in old age to pay the tiny humans scrambling at their feet any heed.

He picked a smear of shadow cast by an upthrusting finger of granite to lie in wait for whoever came up the slope. He didn't have to wait long.

Seeming to materialize out of the pall of smoke came several bloodstained men. They were heavily armed with lances and crossbows. There were only five of them and they scanned the foot of the slope before moving forward, in close single file, treading as lightly as panthers. One bent down to stare at the ground. They saw the trail of the horses and they halted instantly, their black eyes questing the shadow-spotted outcroppings.

They saw nothing and moved again, more rapidly now. Ryan kept a tight rein on his pony, waiting for Joe to appear. He doubted the man had been chilled or wounded too severely to walk. If either had happened, his warriors would have lost heart and retreated. More than likely, Joe had sent this small scouting party ahead as a feint, to draw a reaction.

Ryan couldn't allow the warriors to reach the rock formation. Knowing he was showing his hand, allowing Joe to see his ace, he heeled his pony from the shadows and rode for the line of warriors. He leaned over the animal's neck, the SIG-Sauer spitting bullets. As one, the men wheeled toward him. A warrior catapulted backward, trailing a streamer of blood from high in his chest. Another clapped a hand to his leg and fell twisting to the shale-covered ground.

A third warrior held his position and launched his lance in a smooth, beautiful arc. Ryan pulled on the reins, turning the pony aside. The lance point missed his mount's right flank by a fraction of an inch, but the animal's hooves struck loose rock, which turned beneath them.

The pony stumbled and slid out from under Ryan, slamming into and crushing the warrior who had thrown the lance. The one-eyed man hit the ground rolling, keeping his body turning over and over to minimize injury. He stopped, slamming heavily into a boulder the size of a wagon wheel, and his blaster was jarred from his fingers.

Groggily Ryan flung himself onto his side to see a warrior racing toward him, his painted face a ferocious

grimace. He raised a long-handled ax, then his head burst apart in three pieces.

Carried by his momentum, he continued to run for several paces before his bullet-blasted brain stopped working and he fell, draping himself over the boulder. Only then did Ryan hear the faint echo of the Steyr's cracking report.

Though he had no idea where she was, Ryan got to his feet and waved toward the massive rock formations as a thanks and a signal he was all right. He reached for his SIG-Sauer, but the remaining warrior came savagely in to the attack. He swung a tomahawk at Ryan's chest even as the larger man swiftly back-pedaled, whipping the panga from its sheath.

The warrior swung again with the ax, an overhead blow meant to split his enemy's skull. The long knife checked the downward sweep and struck the weapon aside. Ryan ripped upward with the blade into the man's belly.

An awful howl burst from the warrior's lips as he crumpled, thrashing, disemboweled. The cry of baffled agony was answered by a wild chorus of yells from the smoke. Some twenty warriors burst through the gray fog, shrieking like the demons they feared.

As they saw Ryan, their screams rose to a blood-freezing crescendo and they increased their speed, loosing arrows as they came. Ryan snatched up his blaster and started to run, shafts showering and breaking on the rock around him.

Over the warbling war cries, he heard the crack of the Gewehr, and dirt exploded in a foot-high fountain near his right leg. Rock fragments stung him, but he continued to race toward the towering rocks and crags.

Chapter Thirty

By the time Krysty had moved to a vantage point atop a flat, house-sized boulder, she had a clear view of Ryan being pursued up the slope. Steadying the Smith amp; Wesson with both hands, she chose the closest warriors and fired a full cylinder into the horde massed behind him.

Several bodies convulsed, then fell. The warriors hesitated, slowing, and Ryan sprinted between a pair of outcroppings and out of her range of vision. Within a moment she was under attack herself by a dozen warriors who had fixed her position by her blaster's muzzle-flash.

Arrows rained around her, clattering and rattling against rock. She leaped desperately to a crag ten feet below.

Hitting the stone, rolling, jumping up and running, she saw Mildred and J.B. on a ledge above her. They gestured frantically for her to climb and join them. She began to climb, tearing the skin from her fingers as she forced them into rough-edged handholds.

She hadn't quite reached the ledge when some of the painted warriors raced around the base of the boulder she had leaped from. Arrows whistled up at her, the steel points cracking against rock, and one bounced off the metal band encircling the heel of her right boot.

The stuttering hammer of the Uzi sounded from above, and from below she heard the whines of ricochets and the screams of wounded or dying men.

Mildred reached down her arms and hauled her over the rim of the ledge. She lay glaring down at the warriors, her breasts heaving as she drank in the air in great, shuddering gasps.

Only a few more arrows whipped up toward the ledge; the warriors knew their enemies could kill them from above if they exposed themselves. They turned and ran back through the labyrinth of stone.

After regaining her wind, Krysty pushed herself to a sitting position, opened her blaster's cylinder and emptied the spent cartridge casings. She put them in a pouch on her belt, then thumbed in fresh rounds.

"Ryan?" she asked.

J.B., on his belly, scanned the stony maze below. "Haven't seen him since he was chased back up here."

"Jak and Doc? The girl?"

"Sisoka's with them. Don't know where they are. Haven't heard their blasters so far."

Krysty glanced at Mildred. "And Joe?"

The woman cradled the Steyr in her arms and shook her head. "Haven't been able to get a clear shot at him. If it's not the smoke ruining my shot, he has his men around him. He must suspect we'd try to take him out from a distance."

They heard the distant boom of Doc's Le Mat, then the deep cracking of Jak's Colt Python.

"We've got to hook back up," J.B. said grimly. "Joe knows this layout, even if his warriors don't. We got them outgunned, but they got the advantage of familiar turf."

Below, the outer ring of the hide-and-wood structures erupted into flame, blazing like huge torches.

Turning slightly, Krysty tried to focus on the wavering luminescence from the mouth of the cavern.

"Only place we can go is the cave," she stated. "If we can get inside there before Joe does, we'll be on more or less even terms. He's never been there, either."

J.B. and Mildred considered Krysty's words for a moment. A war whoop echoed, then came the familiar clapping sound made by Ryan's SIG-Sauer.

"Let's do it," J.B. said, moving away from the lip of the ledge.

Krysty descended first, hand over hand, while J.B. and Mildred covered her from above. Mildred dropped the Steyr into her waiting arms, then climbed down, followed by J.B., who tossed her the M-4000 scattergun before clambering from the ledge.

The three friends wended their way through the shadows, creeping among the looming masses of stone, keeping their eyes on the glow from the cave opening. They moved into a fissure splitting a monstrous rock, so narrow they walked in single file. Ponderous chunks of half-dislodged granite hung over them. They made their way with extreme care, knowing how easy it was to start a slide by accidentally kicking a keystone.

A ghostly silence settled over the tumbles, crevices and boulders, the only sounds the clinks of stone beneath their feet and the ever-present, rising and falling roar of the firestorm consuming the Wolf Soldier encampment.

They reached the end of the fissure but had walked only a few feet when the scuff and scutter of stealthy footfalls caught Krysty's ears. She raised her hand-blaster, sinking to one knee in a wedge of shadow.

Behind her, J.B. and Mildred melted into the darkness. By the dim light provided by the distant flames and the shimmering glow from the cave mouth, they saw four figures shuffle out of the darkness.

The figures halted, as if sensing their presence. For a long beat of time, nothing happened, no movement, no sound. Then Ryan's low voice said, "The silver toes of your boots are a giveaway, lover."

The surge of relief washing through Krysty left her momentarily weak. She rose to her feet and ran joyfully into his arms.

Doc, Jak and Sisoka were with him. Ryan quickly explained how he had been drawn to them by the sound of his friends' blasterfire.

"Joe and warriors crawl all over place," Jak said. "Looking for us. Trapped."

"It's me he really wants," Sisoka said softly. "Perhaps I can convince him to let all of you go."

"And take the location of this magic valley back to the world?" Doc asked. "Not very likely, child."

"Our only escape route is the cave," Ryan said.

"My strategy exactly," Krysty agreed.

Sisoka heaved a deep, forlorn sigh. "I have no choice. Even if I surrendered to Touch-the-Sky, he would still defile the sacred place."

"Then let's move on it," J.B. said impatiently. "Not stand around talking about it."

They moved deeper into the twisting labyrinth, squeezing through narrow places and clambering over heaps of shale, scrambling for footholds on chunks of granite and sandstone.

Sidling around the bulging base of a boulder, they faced the cavern entrance. It was smaller than Ryan had estimated, a cleft wider at the bottom than the top, seemingly punched into the mountain wall. A

narrow stair of handholds had been niched into the rock, extending upward to a shelflike threshold ten feet above their heads.

The wavery glow from inside the cleft was a bluish fog, more like a phosphorescent mist than an actual light.

Everyone stopped to stare for a long moment, then Sisoka moved forward. The others followed, scalps tingling at the prospect of entering the cave.

A dark shape bounded from a patch of gloom between the rock, and as one, blaster barrels snapped up and fingers crooked tight around triggers.

Blood-sniffer nosed Sisoka's hand, then glanced at Ryan and showed his fangs and red tongue in a grin. They all released their suddenly pent-up breaths in gusty sighs.

"Damn wolf again," J.B. growled. "Hoped it'd been chilled."

Ryan eyed Blood-sniffer and saw the beast had only narrowly avoided that fate. A bleeding gash stretched along its right side, and a red-rimmed notch had been chopped into the base of its tail, probably with an ax. Still, the wolf's condition and spirit seemed sound.

A thunderclap came from the rocky maze on the far side of the entrance, and a bullet splashed cold air on Ryan's right cheek. As his blaster came up, he heard the rattle of stones, a breathless exchange of Lakota and running footfalls from the murk.

Ryan and Jak opened up with their blasters, providing covering fire for the others as they scrambled up the stairs chiseled into the rock. Surprisingly J.B. helped Blood-sniffer climb the niches by pushing him upward with a shoulder against his rump.

Rock chips scattered under the impact of the Gewehr's subsonic rounds. Ryan scaled the steps as quickly as he could. He heard a whup of displaced air over his head, followed by the whine of a ricochet. Pulverized stone sprinkled him.

When he reached the shelf, he lay flat and fired the SIG-Sauer in the direction of the autofire. Jak bounded up the niches, not using his hands, his finger working the trigger of his Colt Python.

He stumbled slightly at the top, put a hand over his right hip, brought it away and stared with rueful eyes at the blood glistening on his white palm.

"Shit," he muttered, and staggered, putting out a hand to catch himself.

Ryan slid an arm under his shoulders and half carried, half dragged Jak past the threshold of the cleft. The thundering hammer of the automatic rifle ceased.

Everyone was waiting for them around a bend in a narrow of the corridor of stone. While Ryan reloaded, Krysty and Doc watched the cave entrance. Mildred gave Jak a quick examination, forcing him to drop his pants. Sisoka was listening to the words from outside that floated in.

"Touch-the-Sky is having difficulty convincing his warriors to follow him into the cave," she said. "They're arguing."

Krysty looked tense and impatiently shook her head. "We need to get on the move before the argument is resolved."

Mildred told Jak he could pull up his pants and she said, "Not too bad. The bullet exited his hip above his right buttock. It's deep, sheared through some muscle and might have cracked the bone."

Ryan looked at him. "Can you walk?"

Eyes a bit glazed from trying to control the pain, Jak only nodded, as he shoved fresh rounds into the Colt Python's cylinder.

They moved out, Sisoka in the lead, striding quickly along the stone passageway, peering through the dim, misty blue light. The corridor widened and the ceiling grew in height. Irregular stalactites stretched from above, and they wended their way around stalagmites thrusting up from the floor. Ryan kept listening for the approach of Joe and his warriors.

The light was confusing; it was just bright enough for them to see a few feet in front of them, but too dim to make out shapes clearly. Suddenly Sisoka halted, lifting a hand. They stopped so quickly that they trod on one another's heels.

Dropping to all fours, Sisoka crept forward, her hand groping through the bluish mist. Ryan and Doc stepped forward and knelt beside her. Ryan experienced a shuddery sensation of imminent peril. He

stretched out his left hand and found that the tunnel floor dropped straight down into the misty light. Doc picked up a pebble and flipped it over the edge. He counted aloud. When he reached "six," they heard it strike, far below. He backed away, murmuring, "No, thank you, sir, indeed."

"A dead end," Ryan said grimly. "We'll have to make our stand here."

As Doc backed away, something brushed the top of his head, hanging from above. "Look at this."

It was a length of frayed rope, and they craned their necks to look up to see what it was anchored to. The end of the rope was lost in shadows.

Ryan reached up and tugged gingerly on the length of hemp. Nothing happened, so he pulled harder. His effort was rewarded by a loud creaking sound. He pulled hand over hand, and a long, flat slab descended from the rocky ceiling.

The slab was made of rough-hewn, splintering timber and lashed together with rope. It was a bridge, affixed to the tunnel roof by a pulley system of some kind. Creaking, the bridge lowered until its outermost edge rested on the tunnel's lip, spanning the chasm.

"Who wants to take the first step?" Ryan asked.

Before anyone could reply, Sisoka stepped cautiously on the bridge. Though the timbers squeaked, it appeared secure and solid enough. She walked quickly across and was swallowed up by the mist. She called to them that everything was fine. Unhesitatingly, Blood-sniffer trotted across.

One at a time, as if they were walking on eggshells, everyone softfooted across the bridge. Ryan went last, guarding their rear. When the others had safely crossed, he followed. He was the heaviest of his companions, and the timbers didn't simply squeak beneath his weight; they groaned and a couple of them trembled. He tiptoed the remaining yards to the far side of the chasm.

When he joined his friends, J.B. said, "No rope on this side. We can't raise the bridge to keep Joe from crossing."

"He has no choice if he wants us," Ryan replied. "We can just stay here and pick him and his warriors off as they come across."

"No!" Sisoka blurted. "You cannot kill in the heart of the Grandmother, not in the Cavern of Creation."

"If we don't," Ryan said, "we'll all die."

"No," she repeated stubbornly. "Find another way."

"There's another way," Mildred said. "Jak, since you're the lightweight among us, you can ease out on the bridge and cut the ropes supporting the timbers. It won't be able to support another crossing."

"That tactic will leave us stranded here," Doc objected, "perhaps to wander the subterranean rings of Hades for all eternity, like Virgil."

Ryan turned to Jak. "Do it."

Jak nodded and crept back out across the bridge. His motions were a little stiff due to his wound, but they heard the faint snicking of razor steel cutting into hemp and the squeak of timbers. After a moment he returned, backing up on hands and knees.

"Done," he whispered. "Heard voices from entrance."

The seven people and the wolf walked quietly away from the chasm. After a few minutes they heard a far-off noise, a distant rumble as if a great-wheeled machine were approaching. Then there was a crash and splintering of wood, a noise that swiftly faded except for a brief echo. A faint scream trailed behind the splitting roar.

Chapter Thirty-One

Their path took them along the edge of a jagged rock wall on their right, but on their left was an

unplumbed darkness dropping to inconceivable depths.

J.B. peered into the abyss, muttering, "Kind of makes you want to spit, doesn't it?" Then he stiffened. "I can see some kind of light down there."

Ryan and others moved cautiously to the edge and gazed into the dark void. A faint greenish glow filtered from far beneath, flickering in a rapid, almost hypnotic rhythm.

"That must be the source of the light," Mildred said.

"Light in here is blue," Jak argued. "That green."

She shrugged. "See that strobing pattern? Any light source pulsing at a high speed is red-shifted on the electromagnetic spectrum. Blue becomes green, yellow becomes orange, green becomes yellow."

J.B. looked at her blankly. "So?"

"So nothing," she said impatiently. "Let's go."

The path wound downward, slanting steeply. The throbbing green glow shone far in the distance. The tunnel debouched to the right, shrinking to only a dozen feet wide. Almost immediately it opened up again into a hollow chamber. Sisoka, still in the lead, came to a jarring halt and cried out something in her language.

The chamber was a catacomb, or a vast crypt.

Around them were hundreds, maybe even thousands, of animal and human remains. Most were skeletons; others appeared to be completely fossilized.

Other skeletons appeared more recent, scattered close to the entranceway. Dozens of skulls bore back-sloping foreheads with barred ridges jutting out over empty eye sockets. All of the skeletons were bare, the flesh that once covered them long ago disintegrated.

"Fireblast," Ryan breathed.

"Gaia," Krysty muttered. "This is a cemetery."

"Or a charnel house," Mildred whispered.

Ryan turned to Sisoka. "What is this place?"

"Where the First People worshiped the Grandmother and made their sacrifices to Her. Where they came to die."

J.B. stepped forward, and his foot struck something that rolled noisily. He gazed down at the yellowed human skull that had fallen to pieces at his feet. The teeth grated under his boot.

"We cannot go back," Doc said. "As disrespectful as it sounds, we must pass across the remains of the departed."

"Not bother me," Jak said.

The party moved through the catacomb, trying not to step on bones but finding it almost impossible. The crunch and clatter beneath their feet sounded unnaturally loud.

The farther they walked, the fewer skeletal remains they encountered. The chamber opened up into a vast cavern, a city of stalagmites and stalactites. Towers of multicolored stone disappeared into the darkness above, where flying buttresses and graceful arches of rock stretched overhead.

There were the marks of pick work in the walls, and the light reflected dull yellow gleams. With every step, the floor became more level, as though by design. The green light grew brighter, until it was at the level of twilight on an overcast day. They could see easily now, their vision no longer obscured by the phosphorescent mist. Here and there they saw cavities gaping in the wall and floor and a scattering of crystal shards. They saw petroglyphs painted on the walls, ancient word-pictures in the form of incomprehensible murals.

The sound of their footfalls rebounded and reechoed like the irregular beating of a gargantuan heart. The level floor ended abruptly in a series of stairlike steps, chiseled out of the rock, leading downward through a round orifice. The green glow pulsed from its other side, like brilliant, cool moonlight. Sisoka hesitated, exchanging a quick look with Ryan, then she carefully walked down the steps. Blood-sniffer whined and followed at her heels.

The stairs ended in an enormous chamber, so vast they could only see part of it at one time. It was shaped like an upside-down bowl, with smooth, curving walls. The party stood on a narrow stone walkway encircling the entire circumference of the cavern. They jolted to an unsteady stop, blinking and

shaking their heads, trying to absorb the unreality of what they were seeing.

The walls were patterned with thick, sinuous veins of gold and silver. The floor was scattered with heaps of rough nuggets, smoothly finished ingots, as well as bracelets and artfully fashioned figurines. There was a quartz-crystal cluster the size of a child's head sitting atop a pile of golden pebbles.

The floor inclined in a gentle curve and at the center, surrounded by a collar of interlocking silver and gold slabs, was a perfectly round hole. Ryan guessed it to be fifty feet in diameter. A terrific blaze of green light shimmered from below the collar of metals, almost painful in its intensity. The light was a shifting, dancing column that appeared to swirl, to twirl, to shrink, then grow.

In the steady, unearthly blaze, all of them saw things that astounded and bewildered them. On the floor, arrayed around the well of light in a circular pattern, were wafers of gold, some studded with single crystals, others with three or four. Several of the rectangles were missing, showing the rock beneath.

Either the weight of ages had pushed them out, or greedy human fingers had pried them loose.

Ryan tore his eye away from the glittering splendor of the dancing light and looked up, catching his breath in awed wonder. On the far side of the well, in a place that the shimmering radiance had first hidden from him, reared a five-tiered ziggurat of silver-encrusted stone. Atop the ziggurat sat an effigy gazing down at him, causing his flesh to crawl and his mind to reel with impossible possibilities. Ryan, Krysty, Doc, Jak, Mildred, J.B. and Sisoka stared, stunned, shocked, awed.

And terrified.

Enthroned in a massive chair that looked to be fashioned from gold was the huge, skeletal figure of a man. On closer inspection they saw that the figure wasn't quite a skeleton, nor quite a man. No man, at least none that they had ever seen, even in the most rad-blasted hellpits of Deathlands, had ever attained such a height or stature.

Though it was hard to tell in the wavering emerald-hued light, the figure appeared to be at least seven feet tall sitting down. The figure was outfitted with a weird array of trappings a threadbare buffalo-hide cloak, a beaded belt and rotting boot moccasins. On its head, canted at a jaunty angle, dented and dull with age, was a casque from the days of Coronado and his conquistadors. A dented breastplate from the same era encased the torso.

Lances decorated with feathers and beads leaned against the side of the throne, and at its feet were shattered, rust-eaten matchlocks. The skin of the figure was brown and stretched drum-tight over the bones. The shadows the shimmering light cast across the mummified face lent it an expression of indescribable, inhuman ferocity.

Ryan finally got his lungs and voice working again. He dragged in a great breath and asked, "Nanabozho?"

Sisoka only nodded, too numb to speak. Then she lifted her eyes, her arms and cried, "Nanabozho! Uncir!"

J.B. and Ryan recognized the word for "grandmother." The cavern walls threw her voice back.

Ryan continued to stare at the figure atop the hand-hewn altar. He was sweating, and his heart threatened to glide up his throat. He remembered what Joe and Sisoka had told him of the cavern's history, and though he hadn't flatly disbelieved it, he hadn't truly accepted it, either. If the history was true, then what Mildred had theorized about the nature of the energy trapped within the cavern might also have truth to it. He stepped over to her. She was gazing in stupefied wonder at the light, and he had to call her name twice before she managed to tear her eyes away from the shimmer.

"Is this like the quantum-stream stuff you were talking about?" he demanded.

She blinked her eyes, shook her head and let out a dry, humorless laugh. "God, Ryan, I don't know.

Physics isn't really my field. But now, to see this I don't know what the hell it is and I'm afraid to find out."

Ryan pointed to the giant cadaver on the throne. "And him?"

"Maybe the First People were the sources of legends about giants in the earth, the Grigori mentioned in the Bible."

Krysty suddenly moved forward, walking around the edge of the floor that overlooked the lip of the well. She stepped down and walked toward the rim.

"What are you doing?" Ryan shouted, starting after her.

"I want to know what the hell it is, and I'm not afraid to find out."

"Krysty, that light wavelength could be radioactive for all we know!" Mildred shouted.

J.B. checked the rad counter attached to the inner lapel of his coat. "Nope," he said with satisfaction.

"The needle hasn't moved."

Krysty reached the outer edge of the crystal-studded, golden wafers arranged on the floor. As Ryan rushed toward her, she knelt and pressed her forehead against a crystal. She seemed to freeze, paralyzed by some cold, hidden power.

"Krysty!" he called.

She didn't respond, didn't seem to hear.

At the same time the dancing pattern of the light changed. It leaped, then sank, and the strobing effect slowed. The green color deepened.

Ryan reached Krysty, his fingers biting her arms as he pulled her back and up. Her eyes were slightly glazed. Everyone crowded around them.

"Are you all right?" he demanded angrily.

She ran a hand over her face and murmured, "What I saw"

"Saw what? You touched the crystal for a second. You didn't answer when I called you." He was angry and a little frightened.

"The ancestors of all the tribes, leaving this valley and spreading out over Earth" Her whispering voice faltered and broke.

She shuddered, hugging herself. Ryan tried to put an arm around her shoulders, but she pushed it away impatiently. She spoke quickly, tersely, as though she were trying to keep her excitement bottled.

"An entire culture based on science of the mind, of wholeness with nature and the planet itself."

"That's what you saw?"

She gestured to crystal disks inset on the gold slices. "Those are sculpted memory crystals, like the ones used in the computer databases in the redoubts. I accessed the entire history of this place, and even what I can't explain, I understand deep down."

Doc, Mildred, Sisoka and Blood-sniffer made their way down and joined them. Krysty repeated to them what she had told Ryan.

"Does this energy source bear any resemblance to Dr. Wyeth's hypothesis?" Doc asked. "Is it a manifestation of the quantum stream?"

"It is the heart of the Grandmother," Sisoka stated stolidly.

"Yes and no," she answered. "It's both and neither. The information I accessed is chaotic, but at least I can make a pretty good guess to its true nature. It is a focal point of earth energy, what Sisoka calls the Grandmother and I call Gaia."

"Are you saying this light is sentient, self-aware?" Mildred demanded.

"It's more than light," Krysty replied firmly. "My mother taught me that a harmony, a balance, exists between energy forces we can't see, but can still affect us. Ancient peoples constructed megalith structures to serve as conductors of the earth energy."

"Lea lines," Mildred said, understanding dawning in her eyes.

"Exactly. This power was utilized to aid the propagation of crops, fertility and good fortune. I saw that what's in this cave is a natural phenomenon, a convergence of lea lines, a hub of geomagnetic energy. It's the external manifestation of what used to be called 'geofire.'"

"That does not answer my question," Doc declared stiffly.

Mildred laughed. "Doc, your question can't be answered." She waved toward the glowing waves of light.

"That's the only answer you're likely to get."

"Why did Sisoka's people worship this place, if it's not supernatural?" Ryan asked.

"It is, in a way." Krysty smiled wanly, glancing toward a puzzled Sisoka. "I saw that her ancestors knew how to interact with the energy. They existed in a cause-and-effect relationship with it, like dropping a stone into a still pond, which causes ripples of water to spread out in circles. The First People figured out how to work with the naturally occurring crystals, and through the enhanced electromagnetic energy of their brains, they manipulated the geofire on a non-physical level in such a way as to affect the physical

level."

"I get it!" exclaimed Mildred. "Quantum theory states that all physical forms are of energy, but vibrating at different rates. Nothing exists in a vacuum, so when the First People and their direct descendants focused their thoughts, accidentally at first, I'll bet, they interacted with the vibrational field of the geoenergy. The field absorbed, then carried the intentions of their thoughts. The more focused the intention, the more empowered was the vibrational wave of the geoforce to effect changes in their physical environment." She gazed at the shimmering green radiance. "That doesn't explain everything, but it explains most of the mysteries of Ti-Ra'-Wa, including the intelligent wolves. Over the centuries belief in the kinship with the animals manifested itself in a human-level intelligence in them."

Ryan was more than a little at sea, but he understood enough to be a little disappointed. "So Joe was right. It's a power that he can manipulate."

"No, he was wrong." Krysty's voice was flat, "What he wanted was to make an overnight change, all over the planet. That can't be done. The energy is focused in this valley, and one man, no matter how willful, can't bend the earth powers to do his bidding. Ti-Ra'-Wa evolved over centuries, and it became what it was due to concerted, generational effort."

Ryan gazed at the glow and tried to absorb all that he had heard. It still sounded fantastic, but no more than many other things he'd heard and seen in his life. Pizi had said that much ancient knowledge from the First People had been lost, and Ryan realized with a sense of sadness the Ti-Ra'-Wa that had so entranced him was but a mere shadow of its former glory.

Suddenly Blood-sniffer whirled and snarled, lips curling back from his fangs.

"Touch-the-Sky comes now," Sisoka said calmly.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ryan pivoted on his heel and looked toward the steps leading up through the stone opening. He couldn't see anything, yet he trusted the wolf's instincts. "How many?"

Blood-sniffer voiced seven grunting growls.

"Seven of them made it over the bridge, or they found another way. I'll try to get them as they come through the passage. Triple red, everybody."

Ryan gave no one the opportunity to object, but as he ran toward the stone stairs, Blood-sniffer bounded at his side. Man and wolf exchanged one glance, then they crept into the shadowy mouth of the opening. At the top of the steps, Ryan crouched, blaster in one hand, the other restraining Blood-sniffer's taut, shaggy body. The SIG-Sauer had a full clip, but only three rounds remained in his gun belt. He couldn't afford to fire bullets indiscriminately. Every shot had to find a target.

He heard the slipping, scratching sounds of moccasined feet, and the wolf tensed beside him. "Not yet," he breathed. "Not yet."

The scuffing of feet grew louder. Ryan waiting, counting seconds silently. He couldn't lift his head above the round entrance without giving away his position, so he waited until he felt sure they were only yards away.

He raised himself and squeezed off three rounds.

Thunderous echoes rolled and died, then there was utter silence in the cave. When he heard a mechanical clicking, Ryan grabbed the wolf by the scruff of the neck and dragged him down the steps.

The rapid-fire cracking of the Gewehr rang out, murderous wads of lead ricocheting off the rim of the opening and whizzing down the stairs. They burst into the cavern, Ryan cursing himself for failing to realize that the amplification of sound in the hollow chamber had tricked his ears.

Blood-sniffer's hair bristled, and his fangs gleamed in a snarl. He was angry, and Ryan wouldn't have blamed him for sinking his teeth into his ass.

He and the wolf ran along the walkway bordering the well and reached the others on the far side, near the base of the ziggurat.

"They're still coming," he said grimly.

Sisoka nodded. "I think Ti-Ra'-Wa dies tonight. If it does, I have no wish to live in a world without it." Joe's calm voice came to them, floating from the area of the stone stairs. He and his companions hadn't come out into the Cavern of Creation. Ryan knew why they were afraid of being outgunned.

"Ochinee!" he called. "Are you ready to stop behaving like a fool?"

"How'd you get here, Joe?" Ryan shouted back.

"I lost two men on that booby-trapped bridge." The Lakota's voice was flat, toneless. "But farther down we found a ledge that almost spans the chasm. I knew that from my research into the legends. Something Sisoka evidently forgot or never knew."

Joe paused, then declared, "Ochinee, you joined the losing side. You and your friends are trapped, but I see no reason to kill you. Give yourselves up, and you and your people are free to leave Ti-Ra'-Wa."

"You'd let Sisoka go with us?"

"No!" Joe's voice was tight with anger. "She stays here, where she belongs."

"Why? Aren't you the Guardian? What do you need her for?"

"My affair."

Ryan forced a mocking laugh. "I think you're afraid, Joe, to mess with this place without having the hereditary Guardian on a string. You know your claim is bogus, and you want to cover all your bets."

"Your answer," came Joe's stern voice.

"There's nothing in the cavern that will do you any good," Ryan shouted. "A light show, an old mummy. Lots of crystal, gold and silver, but you're not interested in that, anyhow. The power you crave isn't here."

When Joe's response came, it was infuriated, full of flaming fury and frustration. "Decide, you one-eyed bastard! Don't waste any more of my time! Decide to die in there or not! I'm sick of talking to you!"

Ryan thought swiftly. This situation wasn't much different from the one in which Hatchet Jack roared a similar ultimatum. And like then, he still had one ace on the line. It wasn't a particularly good one, but it was worth playing.

"I don't trust your pals, Joe," he called out. "We'll give our blasters to you if you come to us. Only you. Alone."

There was a long silence, so long that Ryan was on the verge of repeating his words.

"All right, I'll come to you. Remember, if you kill me, all of you will die. My warriors will bottle you up in there until you perish of starvation or thirst."

Ryan patted Blood-sniffer's head. The wolf looked up at him, its eyes showing comprehension, then slunk around to the left, past the ziggurat. It took up a position on the far side of the well, where its lean, shaggy form was hidden by the green radiance pouring upward.

Joe stepped out onto the walkway. He had his automatic rifle in hand and he froze, gaping at the well, at the ziggurat. His head was tilted back, and his mouth slowly fell open in awe and astonishment. That was the instant Blood-sniffer charged him.

Joe managed to catch the streaking movement and bring his blaster up. The weapon blasted over the wolf's head with a fiery breath and voice of thunder as the animal hit him low and brought him down, its snout buried in the man's breechclout. Joe screamed.

As the echoes of the scream still bounced from the walls and ceiling, three of the warriors who were supposed to have stayed topside charged out onto the walkway. One of the warriors was Little Mountain. They didn't know whether to look at Joe and the wolf or the heart of Grandmother Earth. They opted to stare with fear-widened eyes at the green blaze.

Ryan squeezed the SIG-Sauer's trigger three times, and three men were hit. One of the 9 mm rounds tore through a warrior's forehead, blowing the back of his skull all over the stairs behind him. His companion turned and gaped as the warrior spun and fell, and the second bullet drove through the right side of his

head, taking out both of his eyes and most of his left cheek as it exited.

Part of Little Mountain's upper left shoulder dissolved in a gout of blood and sheared tissue. He dropped his lance and tried to clap a hand over the wound as he kicked himself backward toward the stairwell.

Ryan was already running before Little Mountain reached the first step. He was trying to draw a bead on Joe, but he was in a clinch with Blood-sniffer and they were rolling together over the walkway. Behind him Ryan heard Krysty's boot heels beating a rapid tattoo on the stone as she raced after him.

He got to within five feet of Joe just as the lithe, muscular man managed to swing the barrel of the rifle up and around. He squeezed the trigger and flame and lead tore along the right side of the great wolf.

Blood-sniffer yelped in pain, body spasming, crimson strings spilling from his fur. Ryan roared in anger and jumped in front of it, sweeping the wolf aside with one arm, aiming his blaster at Joe.

The rifle spit a narrow tongue of fire, and the bullet chunked into Ryan's right wrist, just below the swelling muscles of his forearm. Blood sprayed, slicking the butt of the SIG-Sauer, and he felt the shock in the soles of his feet. His fingers immediately lost all sensation and strength, and the blaster clattered to the stone walkway.

With his left hand Ryan backfisted the barrel of the Gewehr aside and dived on Joe. Peripherally he glimpsed more warriors running down the steps, and he heard Krysty and Jak shout his name.

Arrows sailed through the air, and J.B., Krysty, Mildred, Jak and Doc plunged from behind the ziggurat, running along opposite sides of the walkway. They opened fire, short sprays of flame erupting from the barrels of their blasters.

Ryan pummeled Joe's face with his left fist and pressed on the rifle with his knees, trapping it lengthwise between Joe's hands and his chest.

They were locked too closely for the warriors to risk loosing a flight of arrows, but the Lakota raced forward with knives and short stabbing spears.

The steady blasterfire from Ryan's friends converged on the warriors, and he glimpsed a bare-chested man jerk and stagger backward, a crimson spray jetting from a bullet-severed carotid.

Behind him, over the thunder of blasterfire, he heard Krysty cry out in pain and surprise. Instinctively his head turned in that direction.

He saw Krysty, her back against the curving cavern wall, slowly sliding toward the floor of the walkway. Her left hand was pressed against her chest, just below her left breast. A feathered shaft jutted between splayed fingers. She kept her hand there as she eased into a sitting position, as though she were trying to catch the blood. The barrel of her Smith amp; Wesson clunked against the stone.

For an instant their eyes met. Krysty's showed a dull green in the bright green glow. Ryan saw death in them.

Then Doc was at her side, and before Ryan could make another move, a heavy, deerskin-shod foot slammed the side of his head, twisting him backward. He flailed at the air, landed heavily on his back. He blinked back the cloud of gray the kick had brought to his vision.

Little Mountain loomed directly over him, his muscular torso streaked with a sliding stream of scarlet. He held a tomahawk back over his head, and he let out a scream of anger as he brought the blade flashing down.

J.B.'s Uzi let loose with a long burst. Twisting, literally jumping from the impact of the bullets, Little Mountain crashed back inside the stairwell. Bullet holes sewed dark little periods across his pectorals. The bore of the Gewehr inscribed a short half arc and centered on Ryan's face, staring at him with a hollow cyclopean eye. Joe squeezed the trigger.

No jet of flame spit from the muzzle, and even over the sound of blasterfire, Ryan distinctly heard the click of the firing pin striking an empty chamber.

Ryan catapulted forward wolfishly, his left hand striking like a great snake, closing tightly around Joe's throat. The Lakota snarled, and his own hands darted to Ryan's neck.

They struggled, rolled and fell over the edge of the walkway and dropped onto the floor. They half slid, half rolled toward the lip of the well and the curtain of green radiance.

Fighting to their knees, they locked together like statues. Ryan exerted all of his strength in his arm, his fingers tight around the slim column of Joe's neck. A choking gasp burst from the Lakota's bloody lips as

he sought to tighten his double-handed grip on Ryan's throat.

Their faces were grinning snarls, veins standing out on their temples, hair damp, sweat pouring down their faces.

Fear suddenly flooded Joe's eyes, and the wind whistled from between his parted teeth, blowing droplets of blood. His face darkened, taking on a purplish tint Ryan's fingers ground deeper into the man's throat tendons, crushing them in upon jugular and windpipe.

Removing his hands from Ryan's throat, Joe began a frenzied wrench and heave, trying to throw himself backward or to one side. He grasped his adversary's wrist, trying to tear away the steely, strangling fingers.

Ryan maintained the grip, but his arm was shaking with the strain. Joe stopped trying to pull away, and his left hand swatted down for Ryan's right, lying bent and numb at his waist.

Joe's fingers closed over the ripped, bloody flesh of his wrist, over the shattered bone. He squeezed, twisted and yanked.

It wasn't pain that flooded up Ryan's arm to take possession of his body and mind. It was a hellish wave of indescribable agony, crashing over him, blotting out everything, even the blazing green glow.

Dimly he heard an animal howl of pain and he realized it had burst from his own lips. He wasn't even aware of his fingers slackening, of his body sagging to the floor. His entire body seemed to literally fly apart.

The pressure on his wrist eased, the wave of agony drew back and his senses returned in a piecemeal fashion. His arms and legs were back where they belonged, and so was his eye, and there was Joe, leaning over him, face a blood-smeared mask of savage satisfaction.

" Huen, iciante mawaste ," he crooned through mashed lips.

He was fumbling at Ryan's hip, and distantly, as though he were watching a not very interesting play, it occurred to him Joe was seeking to draw his panga, the better to cut his throat.

Then Joe's body lurched, his eyes flying wide, flicking down to stare in horrified incredulity at the spear haft that projected from his upper right chest, the slim column of wood standing up at a forty-five-degree angle from just below his collarbone. His hands came up and wonderingly traced the pattern of rawhide thongs wrapped around it.

Sisoka's strong, clear voice carried through the cavern. " Taku ehe kin ekta' Unci !"

Swiveling his head slightly, looking up, Ryan saw her standing atop the ziggurat, in front of the enthroned cadaver. She had hurled one of the old decorative lances through the veil of shimmering light. Her face was tearstained, enraged, grief stricken all at the same time. She was shrieking something about breaking vows to the Grandmother.

Joe made a convulsive effort to stand. The thick pain-fog in Ryan's mind was scattered by an eruption of fury, the old homicidal rage that always waited in a corner of his subconscious to jump in and take over. His left hand shot up, closed around the spear haft, heaved up on it. Joe screamed, and Ryan got his legs under him and rose to a crouch. Holding the spear as if it were a fulcrum, Ryan pushed up on it, forcing himself to stand, struggling to attain his full height. He heard flesh and muscle tear, wood grating against bone, even over Joe's shrieks.

The Lakota's moccasined feet scrabbled on the slick lip of the well, failing to gain a purchase on the polished gold and silver. Ryan hooked the wooden shaft above his left elbow and lifted, raising Joe completely clear of the rim, like a buffalo-hump steak impaled on a skewer. His legs kicked at empty air, as if he were running in place.

Ryan took one lunging step forward and, overbalanced, fell. He dropped the spear haft, and Joe vanished into the fountain of light.

No scream, no sound of impact came up out of that dancing pillar of cold fire. The light shifted, shimmering, the colors sliding from yellow to orange, then to a deep, deep red.

Ryan lifted his face from the gold-and-silver plates and snarled, "Give my regards to Grandma, you triple-stupe bastard."

Chapter Thirty-Three

The arrow was planted deep in Krysty's chest, right below her heart. Her breathing was harsh and shallow, and her eyes didn't open.

"Will she live?" Ryan asked, oblivious to the blood dropping from the nerveless fingers of his right hand. Mildred didn't answer. She was grimly probing the flesh around the sprouting shaft.

"Will she live?" he demanded, louder.

Krysty's eyes flicked open. "Yes," she said, and closed them.

Only Ryan and Krysty had suffered wounds in the fight. Blood-sniffer was dead, and Ryan found himself mourning the great gray wolf as he would a human friend. He didn't allow himself to dwell on the loss. Though racked with pain, he kept his mind focused on Krysty's condition.

In the aftermath of the battle, J.B., Doc and Jak dragged the bodies of Joe's warriors up the steps and into the sacrificial cave. They placed Blood-sniffer's corpse there, as well, after wrapping it in a robe taken from the cadaver on the ziggurat.

The three of them had gone to backtrack Joe, searching for the method he used to jump the chasm. Ryan knew they couldn't bear to see Krysty in pain, and they welcomed the opportunity to perform a task, any task, so they wouldn't have to consider the likelihood of her death.

With Sisoka's help, Mildred carried Krysty over to the base of the ziggurat, laying her on a pallet made of pelts taken from the throne. Ryan was too numb to thank Sisoka for throwing the ancient spear and saving his life. He knew that if Krysty died, Sisoka's effort wouldn't make much difference to him.

One part of Ryan's mind accepted the inevitability of death. He had become accustomed to inevitables over the course of his life in Deathlands, but one inevitable he could never accept was Krysty being taken from him. It was impossible to imagine his life without sharing it with hers.

Ryan took a deep breath and shook his head angrily. Pain jumped around the walls of his skull. He recognized the symptoms of shock, and he wasn't surprised by them. The ulna and radial bones of his wrist were shattered, and his arm was dead up to the elbow. The bullet had missed major veins and arteries, but the delicate network of nerves was damaged. Neither he nor Mildred had any idea if the damage was permanent. She hadn't had the time to give his wound more than a cursory examination. Standing up, moving away from Krysty, Mildred led Ryan aside. Her dark eyes misted. "The arrow is too deep, too close to her heart. It can't be withdrawn without major blood loss and organ damage. If she's moved, the arrowhead will open up arteries, and she'll bleed to death internally."

"Something can be done," he said.

"In an operating room, with decent equipment and a staff of specialists and heart surgeons standing by, yes. But not here."

"Yes," Sisoka said quietly. "Here."

She had drifted close to them, voice and eyes soft. "The heart of the Grandmother will heal her heart." Mildred scowled at the young woman. "No more mystical rants, please. This is a surgical matter, not a ceremony for the corn to grow straight and juicy."

Ryan managed to push away a little of the pain and lethargy. "Wait, Mildred. Krysty said Sisoka's ancestors exerted their force of will on the geofire to change their physical surroundings."

"So?"

"Mebbe we can exert our own force of will on it to keep Krysty alive, to heal her."

Mildred's brows knitted skeptically. "We'd be laying her life on the line."

"It already is," Ryan replied darkly.

He looked at Sisoka. "You know how to do this?"

"The technique has been known and practiced by my people for ages. But all of us must take part. There

must be no resistance to the chosen intent."

"There won't be," Ryan promised.

J.B., Doc and Jak returned within the hour. They had followed an out-thrusting finger of rock that crossed the chasm and gone on through the tunnels for a recce.

"Joe's warriors are gone, chilled or run back to the forest city," J.B. reported. "The Wolf Soldiers are coming back, even though their camp is burned out. I managed to get one of them to understand Joe was dead, and they're marching on the city to retake it."

Doc and Jak were carrying waterskins and food wrapped in cloth, which they had managed to salvage from the remains of the camp.

"Good thinking," Ryan commented.

"I assumed we would be unable to leave for a time," Doc replied.

"How Krysty now?" Jak asked.

"She'll live," Ryan answered. "But all of us will have to work at it. I'll let Sisoka explain."

The woman assembled everyone around the well and told them what to do. Kneeling on the golden wafers, they stooped over and pressed their foreheads against the crystal disks. Though there were a few complaints, primarily from Doc regarding his back, everyone complied. J.B. was the most skeptical, but he restricted his disbelief to a raising or lowering of eyebrows.

The process began that very hour, everyone focusing his or her thoughts on healing Krysty's wound, envisioning her whole, alive and vibrant. It wasn't easy for such tough, pragmatic minds accustomed to dealing with a harsh, uncompromising reality, to invoke their imaginations. But all of them did their best.

THE PROCESS TOOK a week, and the passage of days and nights ceased to have any meaning to the people within the Cavern of Creation. To Ryan the hours blurred into an endless montage of kneeling, concentrating, envisioning, hoping, dreaming. He barely ate or drank or shaved or bathed. It wasn't important.

Sometimes, when he was kneeling and focusing, there seemed to be too much light above him. It would move and pulse and swim to the movement of his blood, match the rhythm of his heartbeat.

Other times the light seemed too dim, and he was angrily aware that his mind was drifting down other paths, floating into unwanted channels. The pain of his wrist impaired his concentration.

One day he was sure he heard a million little bells, chiming softly, the cheerful sound speaking of love and kindness.

On another occasion he saw Joe and John Hatcher striding out of the green light, entering his mind, moving side by side like a pair of lions. Ryan thought hard and swatted them away.

Once, he was sure he saw Dean, sitting at a desk, reading a book, moving his lips, forming the words. Dean glanced up, puzzled, and his lips shaped the question, "Dad?"

Then, on another day, Ryan realized his fingers were hurting, and he was able to flex them. It occurred to him that perhaps an overspill of the green energy, of the geofire, was healing his wound, but he didn't want to remove the splint made of wood and rawhide to check on it. He didn't need any more distractions.

Krysty stayed calm, quiet and dignified during the entire process. She drank and ate whenever she was offered food and water, and she didn't touch the arrow in her chest.

When he wasn't kneeling and concentrating, Ryan stayed by her side. She rarely spoke, though she wrinkled her nose at his odor. Once, with great effort, she whispered, "A long life. None of it wasted, lover."

Ryan didn't reply. He didn't have one. He thought of all the wandering, all the chilling, all the traveling, and it all seemed like a waste.

She managed to smile. "Not the chilling, not the bloodletting. You and me, together. A long life. Not wasted."

"Yes," he forced himself to say. "Shining times."

Then, one day and he had no idea if it was day or night, morning or afternoon Sisoka pulled him away

from the well rim and led him over to where Mildred knelt beside Krysty. Her face was startlingly pale, surrounded by her thick cloud of red hair, but her eyes were bright, more brilliant than the green geofire. "Now," Sisoka said quietly. "Now we will learn if our intentions were pure."

Swiftly, unhesitatingly, ignoring Mildred's word of warning, Sisoka seized the feathered shaft and yanked it from beneath Krysty's breast. It came free as easily and as smoothly as if it had been lodged in cotton wadding.

Black fluid bubbled from the puncture wound, then came a flow of bright red blood. Mildred, her eyes dull with fatigue but registering astonishment, plugged the puncture with a mixture of buffalo tallow and yarrow. No blood seeped around the edges of the wound.

Sisoka touched Krysty's face three times in a ritualistic fashion. "You are well now." And she was.

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was the third morning after they had left the cavern, and they were guests in the forest city. All of them had been given separate rooms. Ryan in particular was far too grateful for a place to bathe and rest to think about their next course of action.

He rose from the bunk he shared with Krysty and stretched. Pain flared along his right forearm, and he groaned. He parted the bandages and touched the discolored, scabbed-over flesh, wondering again how he had regained the use of the hand so quickly. The image of the green glow flitted through his mind and answered his question. Even Jak's wound was almost completely healed.

Krysty touched his back. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he replied. "What about you?" She sat up in bed, her hair tumbling about her bare shoulders and breasts. Only a faint, puckered scar showed where the arrow had pierced her, and according to Sisoka, with applications of aloe juice, that soon would fade.

He and Krysty dressed. "How long are we going to stay here?" she asked.

"That depends on how long you want to stay." She put on her boots. "If it was up to me, I'd say for the rest of our lives."

He paused in buckling on his gun belt. "Why isn't it up to you?"

Krysty shrugged. "The others may not see it that way. May not feel we should stay in this place. And besides, there may be other factors involved."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she responded, running her fingers through her hair. The locks stirred. "I sense something."

They stepped from their quarters into the cool air. J.B., Mildred, Doc and Jak were already outside, their faces downcast. Sisoka was with them. Ryan immediately felt a change in the city's attitude. The past two days and nights had carried with them a snap of good spirits, almost a buoyancy.

The Wolf Soldiers had retaken the city two weeks before without meeting any resistance. With Touch-the-Sky dead, the whole basis of his campaign had been swept away. The Cavern Keeper society was sick with guilt. They vowed to redress their grave wrong and to make Ti-Ra'-Wa the valley of peace again.

Much of the valley was blackened and blasted by fire, though the land near the forest city was untouched. Sisoka had said fatalistically, "It is enough. It will grow again."

They had missed the ritual period of mourning the dead while in the cavern, and when they arrived back in the city, they were greeted pleasantly enough.

Now, this day, the air of mourning seemed to have returned. Ryan and Krysty approached Sisoka, and they saw she was dressed in her costume of office a long buckskin dress, leggings adorned with tufts of fox fur and a necklace made from alternating disks of gold and silver hung from her throat. A buffalo robe was draped about her shoulders. Her dark eyes were inscrutable.

"You can go now," she said. "You can go from Ti-Ra'-Wa with clear consciences. You redeemed any guilt that was yours in bringing death to the valley."

Ryan wasn't so quick to have their responsibility discharged, or the debt he owed Sisoka. "We could stay, to help keep Ti-Ra'-Wa as it is."

Her eyes searched his face, then all of their faces.

"No," she said stiffly. "The stain, the taint, is upon you. The valley cannot fully recover, not heal in your presence."

"Girl, we bled for Ti-Ra'-Wa," Mildred said angrily.

"And you spilled far more blood than you shed," Sisoka replied softly. "It will take a long time for that blood to be absorbed back into the heart of the Grandmother. Until that time, all of you will be a reminder to my people of how close we came to turning her land of happiness into a land of horror."

Her eyes softened, and she laid a hand on Krysty's arm and on Ryan's wrist. "I regret this, I truly do. But it is my duty as Guardian to protect the valley. Besides, it won't be forever. Grandmother Earth will heal, as she always has, and banish the demons of hatred and greed and ambition."

Under the watchful eye of several Wolf Soldiers, the six companions collected their mounts from the compound and prepared to leave. Sisoka stepped in front of Ryan's horse.

"Pilanaya, Ryan Cawdor," she said in a voice barely above a whisper, her eyes wet. "Wakan Tanka nici un."

They rode out of the forest city, passing silent men and women and children. At the grasslands they turned toward the mountain pass.

"What did she say to you?" Doc asked.

"'Goodbye and may the Great Spirit go with you and guide you,'" Ryan replied.

Their horses carried them across the plain at a walk. The colors of the sun danced across the snowcapped mountain peaks. A breeze, bearing a refreshing hint of autumn, ruffled their hair and the manes of their horses.

As they rode, they listened to the chirp of the birds, the drone of insects. The soft blue mountain ranges rose beyond the grasslands. A hawk glided lazily across the face of the sun. All of them were content to simply ride quietly and observe and listen to the life-rich valley.

Doc finally broke the silence. "The gates of Eden have swung shut again, and the demons have been given the boot."

"Not funny, Doc," J.B. said.

"It wasn't meant to be, John Barrymore," he replied.

They reached the slope that crept up to the pass, and they urged their ponies forward, reining them to stop on the shelf of rock overlooking the valley. Ryan gazed at the great piles of white clouds, the wind-ruffled grasses, then to the charred, fire-blackened tract.

Krysty touched his arm. Though she was still a little pale, she was strong, alive and healed. "Are you okay, lover?"

"It was peaceful here," he answered. "Might have been good to stay a while longer."

"We can come back," Mildred said. "The promise of returning to Ti-Ra'-Wa is a very strong inducement to staying alive."

"What'll we do until then?" J.B. asked.

"What we always do, what we've always done, what we do best," Krysty stated. "Survive."

J.B. tugged at the brim of his fedora. "In Deathlands I reckon that's the best we can hope for."

"It is the Devil, and the uncharitable votes of Hell, that desire our misery in the world to come," Doc quoted quietly.

"I liked your 'ride, boldly ride' stuff better," Krysty told him, a strained smile crossing her face.

"Me, too," Mildred added.

Turning his pony's head toward the crack that separated Ti-Ra'-Wa from Deathlands, Ryan said, "Let's do that very thing."

He kept his back turned toward the valley as he led his friends through the pass.