

Scanned by Highroller.

Proofed by a ProofPack Proofer.

Made prettier by use of EBook Design Group Stylesheet.

# **To Renew the Ages by Robert Coulson**

## ***CHAPTER ONE***

The afternoon was sunny and pleasantly warm. Bill Ashley lounged under a tree, avoiding the stench of the brush huts, and tried to look like a man who had brought meat into camp and hadn't a care in the world until the supply ran out. In reality he was planning his next move: time to be moving on. The clan had no information for him; it had lost members to something out there in the Wild Lands, but had no clue as to the nature of the killer. Moving on, however, might be a problem, since he'd been fool enough to lose his horse to that band of raiders a week ago.

Furthermore, this clan's chief, Eric, had more brains and considerably more greed than most of the wanderers in this country, and he'd been eyeing Bill's crossbow hungrily. Bill suspected he'd been a fool again, to bring down that boar and prove the crossbow's superiority over the weak longbows of the clan. Nobody out here had any scruples about murdering strangers for their possessions.

Well, no sense in brooding over past failures. They'd be watching him at night, of course. If they didn't jump him tonight, he'd make a run for it tomorrow. The clan was too poor to own horses, and he was in better physical condition than any of them. He still had a surprise or two in the way of weapons, for that matter. With any kind of a start, he'd be clear of them by tomorrow night. Then he could get back to what had drawn him south from the Wyoming settlements: tracking down the rumors of a mysterious danger.

The decision made, his mind registered the distant humming his good ear had been reporting for several minutes. Bees? Too early in the season,

and anyway it didn't sound like bees, it sounded mechanical. But what sort of machinery would be operating here in the Wild Lands? He shook his head to clear it, but the humming continued. If anything, it was a trifle louder, as if whatever was making the noise was approaching. He checked his weaponry. Crossbow okay, plenty of bolts in the quiver, knife and hatchet at his belt. He didn't need to check the hidden pistol, since its hammer was digging into his lower left rib, and he had no intention of making any betraying motion toward it. That pistol might be needed tomorrow.

Big Andy came out of one of the huts, listened a bit, and went over to Eric's hut, returning in a moment with the chief of the clan beside him. Bill made a mental note; the boy with his dull eyes and sagging mouth might resemble a hulking half-wit, but his ears were sharp, and on the boar hunt he had slipped through the brush and rocks like a shadow. Getting away from him wouldn't be easy.

By now, other members of the clan had appeared, all listening intently and clutching an assortment of primitive weapons. Ethel, who had gone partly deaf, kept inquiring what was wrong until Eric swatted at her. She dodged out of the way and shut up. The rest looked frightened. Bill couldn't decide whether it was fear of the unknown or whether they knew very well what the sound was, and that it was dangerous. Old Wilse, a tottering scarecrow who might or might not have been Eric's father, was mumbling to himself in a sort of singsong until Eric wheeled around and smashed a hand into his face. The old man crumpled to the ground and lay there, rubbing his mouth silently.

Bill wished Eric hadn't been so quick to shut the old man up, though he'd understood only a few tantalizing words of the refrain: Something coming from the city. And then a phrase about killing. But what was coming? The key word might have been understandable with a few more repetitions. Fire? Fear? Flare? Language was changing; at its clearest, the accent of the people of the Wild Lands was difficult for Bill to understand, and Old Wilse's mumbling was far from that. Flower? None of the possibilities seemed to make much sense.

The humming by now had become a very distant roar, like that of a faraway mountain waterfall, or a continuous roll of thunder. Neither seemed possible in this dry country, and neither had that definite mechanical sound.

Bill swung his head back and forth, trying to hear better and pinpoint the source of the noise. One ear had never worked right since his encounter with a grizzly years ago; it handicapped him in this country where hearing was almost as important as sight.

There it was; coming in from the southwest and, judging from the increase in volume, coming fast. The members of the clan had scattered to their huts, except for Old Wilse, who had struggled to his feet but still stood in the open, rubbing his mouth absently. Bill wasn't at all sure that any of the clan members would allow him in one of their homes, and in any event, the brush shelters didn't look as though they'd be much protection against whatever was coming. He prudently put one of the larger trees between himself and the noise, wishing that he was among his familiar mountains, where trees grew to a decent size and a man could lose himself among them.

Then the source of the noise was in sight, and Bill realized what Old Wilse had been saying—flier! He watched in amazement as the machine came roaring in above the cracked concrete of the Old Days' highway, with the overgrowing grass, sage, and clumps of greasewood whipping violently in its wake. Fliers belonged to the Old Days; to the world before the Blowup. As a child, Bill had been fascinated by the old books in the Popo Agie library. One of them had contained material about the machines that allowed man to fly like birds, and Bill had spent hours reading the text and absorbing the strange scenes in the photographs. Even now he was able to recognize the approaching vehicle; it had been called a hover-something. Hoverplane? Hovercraft, that was it. And if speed like this could be called hovering, he wondered what speeds had been like. Figures dealing with miles per hour had meant little to a child of his age. Now he was an adult who had never before seen a man-made vehicle traveling faster than a good horse could run.

If any community in America had retained enough of the old science to be able to build or even restore hovercraft, why hadn't it made contact with Wyoming long before this?

Bill took another look around the camp. The clan members were all out of sight except for Old Wilse, who stood in the clearing next to the cookfire, spittle running down his chin and an arrow nocked in his bow. His defiance might have seemed gallant if it wasn't so obviously the product of senility rather than misplaced courage. Probably, Bill thought,

the old man didn't have any real idea of what was going on; he was operating on memories of some dim past. As Bill watched, Eric poked his head out of his hut and shouted something at Old Wilse, but by now the hovercraft was so close that it drowned out the words. Trying to hide would be no use anyway, if that was Eric's intention; the huts might pass for tangles of brush, but the ashes of the communal cook-fire in the clearing were too obvious to be ignored.

Then the machine had reached the edge of the trees and turned to parallel the creek. Bill automatically breathed a sigh of relief before he had time to wonder whether he should be relieved or disappointed.

Relief changed to shock almost immediately as Old Wilse, obeying some obscure instinctive command, swung his bow up and launched an arrow at the hovercraft. It bounced off the side; the clan's bows weren't powerful enough to penetrate anything much thicker-skinned than a rabbit. Bill flattened against his tree, hoping that the pilot hadn't noticed the impact. The hope fled as the machine swung back toward the camp. The resulting scramble reminded him of a hawk over a hen-roost; clan members erupted from every hut, racing frantically in all directions. Only Old Wilse stood firm, nocking another arrow as calmly as though he were shooting turkeys—which he probably thought he was, Bill decided.

From the hovercraft came an eye-searing shaft of red light. It caught Old Wilse high in the chest, and the old man stiffened momentarily, then collapsed. The beam of light winked out and then appeared again, and Ethel howled and sprawled to the ground as it transfixed one of her legs. Watching and trying to think what this strange weapon might be, Bill momentarily forgot to keep the tree between himself and the machine. It suddenly swerved to point at him, and he threw himself flat as the shaft of light speared completely through the tree inches above his body.

The wisest course, as he realized later, would have been to "play possum" and hope the pilot believed him dead; there were plenty of moving targets to attract attention. However, his temper had been aroused by the unprovoked attack on himself, and by the pilot's violent reaction to an arrow he must have known couldn't harm him or his machine. Bill lay still until the hovercraft turned away after livelier game, then sat up. He cocked the crossbow, dropped one of his precious steel bolts into the groove on top of the stock, and swung the bow to his shoulder. The pilot's figure was dim and wavering behind a canopy that

reflected sunlight in irregular flashes. After a moment's hesitation, Bill aimed for the rear fan, exposed as the machine banked slightly to pursue another member of the clan. The bolt drove into the center of the whirling blades, there was an agonized scream of metal, and the rear of the hovercraft began to settle.

Bill hastily recoiled the bow and reloaded, but there was no need. If the hovercraft had been a trifle higher, or moving less rapidly, the pilot might have avoided the giant cottonwood that dwarfed the rest of the scrubby trees in the copse. As it was, the back end of the machine dropped, and the forward motion carried the hovercraft inexorably into the top of the tree. Broken by the impact, the machine crashed to the ground, carrying a good share of the tree with it.

Bill stayed where he was, sheltered by his tree, bow cocked, waiting for any activity from the hovercraft pilot. Nothing moved inside the broken machine, but the clan members began poking their heads out from behind various trees to see if it was safe to return. Ethel was still wailing from where she had rolled behind a screen of bushes near the creek. Bill realized that instead of helping himself, he'd made matters worse. Eric would be even more determined to obtain a weapon that could defeat such a terrifying enemy, though he would probably be even more cautious in how he went about it. Now that the excitement was over, Bill realized that he should have played dead and let the hovercraft pilot destroy the clan for him. He'd reacted to an unfair assault without stopping to consider the practical aspects; impatience would be the death of him yet.

Reassured by the lack of activity inside the machine, the clan began to trickle back to the clearing. Bow in hand, Bill walked forward to see if he could glean any information from the wreckage. Big Andy and scrawny little Harl scrambled out of his way. But Eric, feeling some obscure challenge to his supremacy, hurried to reach the machine first. Bill let him go; he had more important things to worry about than counting coup, or whatever form of status Eric was anxious about. Nobody paid any attention to Ethel's continuing screams.

Eric reached the hovercraft well ahead of Bill, hesitated a moment, saw Bill still ambling forward, and began pawing through the wreckage. The machine had landed on its side, and the impact had jarred the canopy loose from the body, as well as smashing the metal and wood underside. Eric peered into the pilot's compartment, then gave a triumphant shout;

with considerable struggle he hauled forth the pilot, who was rather incredibly still alive and conscious, though evidently dazed.

Bill stopped abruptly, and for a moment stood with his mouth open and his crossbow dangling in one hand.

The pilot was a woman.

She was surprisingly tall for a woman. When Eric had hauled her free of the wreckage, her head was almost on a level with his. Shoulder-length black hair framed an attractive face in which bewilderment was beginning to be replaced by anger and fear. Her body was pretty well hidden by a one-piece, brownish-orange coverall (the couple of stripes on each shoulder made Bill think of pictures of uniforms), but what few indications the coverall gave were interesting enough. She was young; early twenties, he guessed. Her major attraction to Bill, however, was that she was clean. The tribes in the Wild Lands tended to bathe whenever it rained, and Bill hadn't realized how much the sight and smell offended him until he saw this woman in contrast. He felt a brief wave of homesickness.

Eric was chuckling happily. "Look what we got us!" he announced. "A city woman!"

She tried to wrench away from him, and he tightened his grip. "Want to leave, girlie? It's not so easy to get away from the Lindsays. Bring a rope, Andy."

Andy nodded, licking his lips in anticipation, and turned toward one of the huts. Bill made another hurried decision and lifted his crossbow, pointing it at Eric.

"Looks like the man who shot her down ought to have some say in what becomes of her," he said.

Eric scowled. "Prisoners are tribal property. You ain't even a member."

"I'm still the one who brought her down, and that gives me some say in the matter. And I'm the one who'll finish you, if you don't turn her over."

"One man can't whip the Lindsays," Eric said.

"Maybe not, but you won't be alive to find out. Turn her loose."

At the sound of Bill's voice, the woman had looked at him, then gasped and turned her head away. One corner of Bill's mouth twisted in an ugly smile, the only kind he could manage these days. His face tended to affect women that way. The right side was acceptable. In his younger days, more than one woman had declared that his dark, hawklike features, a rangy body, reaching a six-feet three-inches height, were ruggedly attractive, if not handsome. The left side of his face, however, was a twisted mass of scar tissue. That eye was gone, along with the top half of the ear. A set of deeply indented claw marks ran from under his black hair to his jawline, with the flesh puckered and seamed around them. Underneath the scars, the bones themselves had been broken and healed crookedly, giving that half of the face an almost inhuman cast. When he first came out of the hospital, even his friends had tended to look away from him when they talked to him. Eventually, they'd gotten over it—some of them. In the Wild Lands he was less of a monster, but even there people avoided him at times.

Eric flashed a look at Andy and Harl, and Bill twitched the crossbow slightly. "You don't have a chance, if trouble starts, Eric."

Eric thought this over sullenly.

"By any rules," Bill suggested, "I'm entitled to a share in the loot, and by most rules I get to pick first. All right; I pick the woman. You can share out whatever else you can find in the flier. Or you can try taking what's mine, and get an arrow in your gut. Make up your mind." He paused, as an inspiration struck him. "After all," he added, "I'm not keeping her permanently. You can have her when I'm done." He wasn't going to be done until he'd got both of them well clear of the Lindsays, but Eric didn't need to know that.

Eric squinted at him to see if he meant it, decided that he did, thought over his chances of dodging a crossbow bolt at this range, and found them negligible. Sullenly, he shoved the woman toward Bill.

"Take her, then," he muttered. "Come on, Andy, Mark, Harl, Jud; let's see what we got here." He turned to paw through the wreckage.

Bill maneuvered to put a tree at his back, and kept his crossbow ready. "Come over here," he said to the woman.

She looked around, estimating her chances of escape and finding them poor. Then she looked at the crossbow, and her interest sharpened. Still avoiding looking at his face, she came slowly toward him. She was recovering from her shaking-up, Bill decided, and beginning to think. There was intelligence in that face; she wasn't going to be easy to handle as a prisoner. But would she accept a partnership with him?

She stopped in front of him, still keeping her eyes on the crossbow. "This is what brought down my flier?" she asked. Bill found her easier to understand than the Wild Lands tribes; her accent was only slightly different from that of Wyoming.

He nodded, and then realized that since she wasn't looking at him she couldn't see the gesture. "I put a bolt into your rear fan. It was steel, and hard enough to wreck your rotor. What kind of a gun did you have in there, anyway? I never saw anything like it before."

Startled at his use of semi-technical terms, she glanced up at him. This time she shuddered slightly, but didn't look away.

"Adaptation of an industrial laser," she said, smiling faintly, "if that means anything to you. Did you make that crossbow?"

Despite the situation, Bill chuckled. "Look, miss whoever-you-are, right now you're my prisoner and I ask the questions. To begin with, what's your name?"

"Tamara Bush." She looked steadily at him. "Do you have a name, or do I just call you Master?"

Bill grinned again, and this time she did look away. He'd been told often enough that expressions of humor made him look more hideous than normal. He gave a quick look around to check the location of the tribal members. The Lindsay males all seemed to be involved in a complicated quarrel over material being stripped from the flier. Eventually, Eric would get their attention back to finishing him off, but it would take awhile.

"The name is Bill Ashley. Friends call me Bill. And you will, too," he added as she started to say something. "Come over here away from the camp. I want to talk to you without any of that bunch hearing me."

He led the way to a point some distance from the huts, where his pack



rested under a bush. He'd made a point of sleeping some distance from the clan, both for sanitary and safety reasons.

"Now, pay attention," he said, "because I haven't time to argue with you. Eric let me have you because he's planning on having the clan kill me anyway; he's had his eye on this crossbow ever since I've been here. I've already planned to leave here in the morning. If you'd rather stay with Eric's bunch, you can; I'll never get away if I have to drag an unwilling prisoner. If you stay with me, I'll need your help, or at least no hindrance. I don't know what your quarrel is here and I don't care. If you hadn't taken a shot at me with that laser I'd have stayed out of the fight altogether, but I don't take kindly to being shot at. Anyway, all I'm here for is information. You ought to know this country pretty well; you could cover enough of it with a hovercraft. If you come with me and provide some of that information, I'll let you go once we get away from here."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You don't belong with this tribe, then."

"Not by any stretch of the imagination. My home's a long way from here."

"What proof do I have that you'll let me go, or that all you want is information?"

"My word, take it or leave it." He eyed her intently. At close range, she was even more attractive; even in a badly fitting coverall she did things to his hormones. "To be honest, information isn't all I want, but I'll settle for that. I can't watch you night and day, and I think I'd have to, if I took anything you weren't prepared to give. Anyway, either you go with me, or you stay here. You know better than I do what the clan will do to you."

She nodded and again looked at his crossbow. Bill recognized that look; Eric had worn much the same expression.

"I'll come with you," she said.

Bill nodded, wondering why anyone from a city with lasers and hovercraft would covet a crossbow. Something didn't add up.

"Remember," he said, "if you don't like the arrangement, now's the time to say so. If you want to make a run for it on your own, I won't stop you. If you stay now, you do what I say tonight and tomorrow; no arguments and

no questions."

She shrugged. "I said I'd go with you," she said angrily. "What chance would I have on foot against them?" She jerked her head to indicate the clan members. "I don't think you have much chance, either, or that you'll keep your word, but there's only one of you."

"All right. Now, is there anything in that wreck that we can use? That laser, for instance?"

"No." Tamara was positive. "It's too big to carry, and the power comes from the main engine. Originally, you see, it wasn't a weapon at all, but..."

"I know the history of lasers," Bill cut in, causing her to look surprised again. "What I don't know is your technology. There's no reason a laser couldn't be made small enough to carry; some of them were in the Old Days. Where are you from, by the way? Any group with your amount of technology should be better known than it is."

Her head came up. "I am a scout for the Matriarchate of Losalam."

If she expected Bill to be impressed, she was disappointed. "Never heard of it," he said. "And I should have. Matriarchate? You mean... Never mind, we can get into the details of government later. What else is there in the wreck that we can use?"

She thought a bit. "No food or clothing. We can cover such distances that we don't need to stay out long on patrol. No power sources; everything is powered by the engines." She eyed him carefully and added with elaborate casualness, "There are a few tools that might be useful, if they aren't broken."

Hand weapons, Bill thought to himself and inquired, poker-faced, "what sort of tools?"

"Oh, various hand tools. For cutting, and, uh, for drilling holes, things like that."

Bill nodded soberly. She certainly was a poor liar, but he'd be better off not telling her that he knew it. "Don't you think the clan'll have your tools parceled out among themselves before we get a chance?"

"Them?" She tossed her head contemptuously toward the quarreling clan members, where Eric had just kicked Harl away from what looked like an Old Days' vacuum bottle. "Savages don't know anything about searching a flier, and they wouldn't know what to do with my tools... if they did find them."

"You might be surprised at some of the things savages know," Bill said. "Anyway, we'll find out tonight. I'd planned to leave in daylight when they weren't watching me so close, but with you here they just might decide to jump me tonight, when they figure I'll be otherwise occupied. So after dark we keep an eye on them, and before morning we grab what we can and leave. Since we won't be getting much sleep for the next few days, we better get some right now. You watch first; wake me up when you get sleepy." He lay down under the bushes, resting his head on his pack.

Tamara stared at him in perplexity. "You aren't going to tie me up or anything?"

Bill grinned at her. "If you want to run off, go ahead. I told you that. I don't reckon you can kill me with your bare hands, and if you do, you'll just have to face the Lindsays by yourself. If you're going with me, keep watch."

Still looking a trifle bewildered, she sat down, squirming around in an unsuccessful attempt to find a comfortable position. Civilized, Bill thought. Used to chairs. But she was beautiful... have to remember he was after information... not likely to get anything else except a knife in the back if he tried to be a bit more intimate... not with that face of his. He drifted into bad dreams in which heat, thirst, a giant long-clawed paw, and a vision of a Wyoming girl averting her lovely face from his were inextricably mingled.

He awoke at dusk, with Tamara's hand on his arm.

"No hostile moves from our friends over there?"

She shook her head. "They had some sort of big discussion an hour or so ago. I wanted to listen, but decided I'd better stay here."

"You should. You wouldn't have a chance of getting close to that crowd without them hearing you."

"Anyway, after that they all went to their huts. They haven't done anything since. You said to wake you up when I got sleepy."

"Right. Guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be. You get some sleep, now, while I watch. No point in making a run for it until it's good and dark."

She looked at him dubiously, but lay down under one of the bushes, still keeping an eye on him. Bill glowered back at her. What did she think he was going to do, anyway? Didn't she think he had any sense?

He swung his head around at a noise from the camp, but it was only a coyote scavenging for scraps. The coyotes had learned rapidly after the Blowup that Man's weaponry against them had diminished, and they profited thereby. Camp refuse was now a regular food source, even in places like Wyoming where Man was once again struggling back to civilization. Bill had wondered if some day a pair of coyotes would repeat the act of those prehistoric canines who elected to stay permanently in the human camps. If they did, it might be interesting. Coyotes today seemed smarter than the books said they used to be. A little radiation in the genes causing a beneficial mutation? It had never been studied; lots of things had never been studied. There was too much to do, and too few people to do it all. He watched the animal for a moment before turning back to the woman. In the brief interval, she had gone to sleep. Less from trust than from exhaustion, probably; she'd had a rough day.

He checked the sky. Clear; stars were just beginning to appear. The moon would be late; by the time it arose, they'd be long gone from camp. Or dead... He wondered about the clan discussion that Tamara had reported. Such discussions were frequent enough; almost any major decision and a lot of the minor ones had to be argued endlessly, though the outcome was generally whatever Eric wanted it to be. Bill had endured several long and acrimonious disputes during his short stay with the clan. But he had the feeling that this one had been about him, to gauge the best time to catch him off guard. He smiled grimly; they didn't know it, but the best time to catch him off guard had already passed.

A movement from the direction of the camp brought him to full alertness, but it was only the coyote back again. No, this was a different one; an older animal with a gray muzzle and a slightly stiff walk. It sniffed carefully for any remains left by the earlier visitor, found nothing, and eventually drifted silently out of camp, a slightly arthritic gray ghost. That's where I'll be in a few more years, Bill thought; an old, lonely wolf,

scavenging off my betters. The bitterness of the unexpected vision startled him; he wasn't used to such morbid thoughts. Well, becoming a bitter old man required that he first live through the night, which wasn't a certainty by any means. Quietly, he rose and walked toward the huts, moving as softly as the coyotes had done. Everything was silent, which wasn't natural; someone ought to be keeping watch. The clan's safety precautions were pretty sloppy, but if they were planning anything for his benefit they'd be keeping an eye on him, and he needed to locate that eye before making his own plans.

He circled the camp. Nothing stirred. Reaching his original position, he stopped, puzzled. Big Andy should have been awake, standing as inconspicuously as anyone Andy's size could. He wasn't. If there had been a watcher anywhere in camp, Bill would have spotted him. It didn't add up. Thoughtfully, he returned to his clump of bushes. He'd been figuring on leaving about midnight, to give the woman as much rest as possible, but that plan had been based on Eric's doing the logical thing. The total silence in the camp wasn't logical, and it made him uneasy. She'd have to do without her rest; whatever Eric's plans were, Bill was leaving before they matured. He glided to the edge of the grove, where he could get a good look at the stars. Still early; it was probably safe to wait awhile longer. He slipped back to his post, but this time he didn't sit down. He checked the crossbow and waited.

He stood motionless. To an observer, he would have seemed asleep on his feet—or dead. The only sign of wakefulness was the constant shifting of his eye, to watch the entire area in front of him. After he'd lost an eye, it had taken him a long time to learn how to watch without moving his head, but he had learned to cock his head to one side and then remain motionless. It cut down his field of vision, but there were too many animals—and men—in the Wild Lands that could detect any movement. When his mental clock told him that another hour had passed, there had been no further sound or movement from the camp. Time to go. He bent and laid a hand lightly on the woman's shoulder.

Her reaction startled him. One of her arms lashed out, barely missing him as he stepped back. Rolling over, the woman came up to her knees with her arms in front of her, ready to fight off an attack. Looking wildly around, she caught Bill's gaze; recognition of where she was flooded her face, and she dropped her arms.

"Do you always wake up like that?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "I used to. Now I do it only when I'm worried or frightened. But then, I'm likely to stay worried and frightened as long as I'm with you."

"I hope you got more rest than that sounds like. Come on; time to go look at your flier." He picked up his pack and slung it over his shoulder.

She moved more quietly than Bill had expected, but to his trained ear she still made a lot of noise. Once he thought he heard a sound from the camp they were circling, and held up a hand to halt her while he listened, but the sound wasn't repeated. They crept up to the wreckage of the flier, which was altogether too near the camp for Bill's comfort.

Putting his lips to her ear, he whispered, "Can you find what you're looking for with no light and no noise? We can't risk either one."

It was fully dark now, but his eye had adjusted to the darkness and he could see her nod impatiently and crouch beside the flier, running her hands over the broken framework. Locating the cabin, she leaned forward, feeling the interior. Bill turned away to keep watch on the camp.

Everything was quiet. Behind him, he could hear the woman's hands moving over the surface of the flier, and then there was a click that sounded louder than a shout to his straining ear. He started to turn and warn her to be quiet, but suddenly there was a flurry of sound and a startled exclamation from the clump of bushes where he and the woman had been sleeping.

"Over here!" a voice bawled, far closer to them than it should have been. "They're at the flier!" It sounded like Jud. Bill swung the crossbow up, but there was nothing to shoot at. Anyone at all close should have been visible in the faint starlight, but there was nothing. Jud must be behind one of the trees. Sounds told him that the other Lindsays were coming toward them. Bill tried to calculate their chances. Running now would mean having the entire clan at their heels. Alone, he could probably outrun them, but he doubted if the woman could keep up, and he wouldn't abandon her. That was one lesson learned early in the Wyoming country; women were valuable and to be treated as such. The clansmen knew the country; Eric would have them ambushed before morning, if they weren't run down immediately. He had no chance against the whole clan in

hand-to-hand combat, either: Andy alone was more than a match for him in any situation where Bill's superior weaponry was nullified. It looked like they'd have to take the chance of running—and that was no chance at all.

## ***CHAPTER TWO***

Abruptly, a beam of light stabbed past him into the darkness. It picked out Jud, slipping noiselessly forward between the trees. Automatically, Bill triggered the crossbow. But Jud at the same time made a leap to get out of the light. The crossbow bolt took him in one arm and he yelped in pain, but he wasn't seriously hurt, and the light showed the remaining members of the clan coming for them.

Bill dropped the crossbow, yanked up his buckskin shirt, and pulled out the revolver stuck in his belt. Jud was close enough now so that Bill didn't need the light to see him. The Lindsay had swung his arm back and was grinning in anticipation of driving his long knife into Bill's ribs when Bill shoved the revolver almost into his face and pulled the trigger. A cloud of smoke blotted out Jud's face, and then he was reeling backward, arms flung wide.

The remainder of the clan, stunned momentarily by the shot, had begun to scatter as Bill swung the pistol toward them. He fired again, and Eric went down with a scream that sounded too lusty and outraged to be mortal. Andy was a target too big to miss, but the gun misfired and the big man disappeared behind one of the huts. Then there was nothing left to shoot except Eric, sprawled in the dust and moaning theatrically. No point in wasting another shot on him; he wouldn't be following them. He turned to the woman.

"Got everything?"

"Aren't you going to kill him?"

"No. Come on."

He couldn't be sure in the dim light, but he thought she looked surprised again. He didn't wait to find out, but started away from the camp at a fast walk, again asking "Did you get everything?" as he went.

She had turned out the light and was moving beside him. "Everything

necessary," she said. "The light was part of it."

And a weapon was another part, Bill thought. Well, plenty of time to find out what it was. She looked smart enough, and nobody with any sense at all would kill him before they got clear of the Lindsays. Maybe by that time he could convince her that he meant what he said. Circling the camp, he moved swiftly out over the plain, not even looking to see if she was following. She would be.

When they were a couple of miles or more from the Lindsay camp, with no sign of pursuit, he stopped and unslung his pack. "Show the light," he ordered.

Without comment, she flicked on her light, which he assumed must be an electric torch of some sort. He removed his powder flask from the pack, rummaged until he found the ball pouch, and then drew the charge from the chamber that had misfired, cleaned the contacts thoroughly with a bit of sandpaper, and reloaded all chambers with powder and ball. The woman watched him interestedly.

"I never saw a gun like that before," she commented.

Bill grinned. "One of our little inventions. We don't have the equipment for drawing brass yet; not strong enough for cartridges, anyway. But flintlocks are awkward and percussion caps are dangerous to carry and too easily lost, so a while back old Jake Astor got to tinkering with a cap and ball revolver and came up with this. The fall of the hammer closes a contact and sends an electric spark through the powder. Simple and reliable—except when the contacts get dirty. There's a battery in the butt; helps balance that heavy barrel. Our steel isn't top quality, either, so we have to use a lot of it."

Finished with the reloading, he carefully lowered the hammer to its "safe" position between two contacts and began repacking the powder and ball.

"None of the savages here have firearms at all," the woman said.

Bill nodded. "We're a little more advanced where I come from. Surprised the Lindsays back there, didn't it? I'd been saving the pistol for emergencies."



At mention of the clan, the woman's face had paled a trifle. "Do you think they'll follow us?" she asked.

"Bound to," Bill assured her. "How far and how fast they do it depends on how badly wounded Eric is. He'll be after revenge, but they'll have to patch him up first. I don't look for them to move before morning."

He set off at a mountaineer's easy gait, which the woman had to struggle to match. By dawn, she was exhausted, staggering along behind him. He stopped on a low rise, watching her stumble up to him. She wasn't used to foot travel, she'd had less sleep than he had, and he'd set a hard pace for a city woman. But not once during the night had she complained. He was beginning to like her; she had courage. When she reached the crest, he pointed to a tangle of barren rock, like the blocks of a giant child, just visible in the strengthening light.

"Time to rest. We'll hole up there for the day."

She looked at him gratefully but said nothing, concentrating on making her legs carry her to the rocks. Bill poked among them until he found an overhanging boulder that provided a semi-cave. It seemed as secure as any place could be in the Wild Lands. The woman crawled inside and was asleep almost instantly.

Bill checked the immediate countryside and found it empty. Then he crawled under the rock and examined the sleeping woman. She couldn't have carried very much—there it was, a cloth satchel, still clutched in one hand. Very carefully, to avoid waking her, he eased it out of her grasp and examined the contents. A long narrow cylinder probably was the source of last night's light. There didn't seem to be any way of opening it. He also found some squares of cloth, a box containing several compartments holding pills and powders, a short-bladed, sturdy knife useful for cutting meat or kindling or people, and various small trivial items. And there was a pistol. Bill handled this carefully, turning it over in his hands and looking closely at every part. It seemed, he decided, rather like an air gun of some kind, though he couldn't see any handle for pumping it up. It didn't look particularly dangerous, but he knew better than to make snap judgments of unknown weapons. Carefully, he returned all the woman's possessions to the satchel. Then he crawled over to a corner of the overhang where a second rock provided a sort of pocket, and lay down. They'd have to work out a way of sharing watches, but that could wait. He'd slept in less safe places by himself—and if anyone found them here,

they'd find the woman first and just possibly keep their attention on her long enough to give him his chance.

When he awoke, it was midday, and the woman was still asleep. Bill climbed to the top of the rocks to check the countryside. Everything was quiet. No large animals were moving; the entire country was to all appearances inhabited only by tumbled rocks and sometimes familiar, sometimes alien and grotesque, forms of plants. More radiation down here, Bill had decided weeks ago. In Wyoming, the mutations had pretty well died out. Here he had seen few mutated animals, but the plants still showed strange forms and it was often impossible to tell what their ancestry might have been. Radiation in the soil, in all probability, kept the mutations coming down through the generations.

After a careful look around, he climbed back down to the opening of the cave and sat there, where he could alternately keep an eye on the woman and get a fairly comprehensive look at the land ahead of them.

The woman's eyes opened while he was watching her. For a moment she stared at his face and he thought she was going to scream, but then memory flooded back. She looked away hastily, crawled out of the cave to join him and, making an obvious effort, looked him in the eye.

"Now what?" she inquired.

In response, he handed her a nondescript piece of something she evidently couldn't identify. She turned the leathery object over in her hands and then looked up inquiringly.

"That's breakfast," he advised her. "Eat it."

"But what is it?"

"Pemmican. Dried meat, fat, a few vegetables and berries, pounded together. One of my very old family recipes, in fact. It doesn't taste like much, but it's nourishing." He avoided mentioning a few of the other possible ingredients of the pemmican; he doubted if either Wyoming's sanitary or culinary arrangements would be very acceptable to someone from a city environment.

She tasted the pemmican doubtfully, made a face, and then gnawed off a chunk and managed to chew it up.

"Good girl," Bill applauded. "Take your time and get it all down. We aren't going far today, anyway."

She looked at him doubtfully, but continued chewing. After a while, she asked, "Are you Indian? You said it was a family recipe, and our history says that pemmican was a primitive Indian food."

Bill grinned faintly. "Part Indian. To be precise, part Blackfoot; part Cree; part Negro, original tribe unknown; part English; part Irish; and just a trace of Polynesian. Our family were always great wanderers—and record-keepers. And how about yourself? The Matriarchate of Losalam can't go back before the Blowup, and I assume your ancestors do."

Her face reddened slightly. "I suppose so. I never thought much about it, and I know Mother didn't. The Bush family was one of the founders of Losalam; Mother never bothered to find out anything before then. I wasn't aware that savages knew anything about their family history."

"Savages," Bill emphasized the word, "don't. However, since I aspire to the status of barbarian, I learned all the appropriate background for the job."

She wasn't sure how to take that; she knew he was making fun of her, but not how to react to it. A society without humor? Or simply a society that assumed savages had no humor?

"I think we ought to decide just how far we're going with one another," Bill suggested. "You don't trust me, of course."

"Of course," she agreed.

In fact, he thought, you're scared stiff of me and determined not to show it, and I don't suppose I can blame you. But if you keep on being that scared, you're going to be dangerous to me. So first job is to ease the tension.

"To begin with, then," he said, "I'll repeat what I said yesterday; I'm here looking for information about certain rumors we've heard at home. I don't know anything about Losalam and I'm not really interested." Or at least, he added to himself, I'm not going to admit any interest at this stage of the game. "I don't know anything about you, and while you're interesting enough I think it would be dangerous to try forcing you to do

anything. I want information and you want to get home and we can work together while attaining our objectives. But working together requires a little trust, so to begin with, how about explaining to me how your gun works?"

She straightened up abruptly, and one hand flashed to the cloth satchel. Bill sat where he was, grinning with the half of his mouth that was capable of grinning.

"I went through your stuff last night," he explained. "I knew you had weapons, and you didn't seem disposed to tell me about them."

"But you didn't take anything."

"I told you we have to work together; why should I steal your gun? But there could come a time when I'd need to know how it works, so I want to find out now."

She considered that, and finally nodded reluctantly and took the gun out of the satchel. "It's actually an air gun," she said. "Or nearly; what it works on isn't air, but—"

"Carbon dioxide," Bill supplied. "Yeah, that would explain why it didn't have a pump, though I didn't know there was any technology left that could bottle CO<sub>2</sub> under pressure. How do you reload it? I couldn't find any way to open it."

She had sat open-mouthed during his comments. Finally she shook her head and continued. "You can't reload it. It was made that way; if any of our scouts lose a gun to the savages, they can only fire it until the charge is exhausted. It holds enough air for ten shots, and a supply of darts."

"Doesn't look very dangerous."

"It... no, you wouldn't believe me if I said it was only for small game. It's a short-range weapon, but the darts are poisoned. They'll kill a man in a very short time."

"Nasty thing," Bill said. "How does it work against something really big, like a bison or a rhino?"

"Not well. There isn't enough poison to kill a bison, and the darts won't

penetrate a rhino's hide. Losalam's enemies aren't bison or rhinos."

"All right," Bill said. "Let's see it a minute."

She didn't want to hand it to him; her reluctance showed in every line of her body. But she did. He examined it, raised it and pointed it. No sights, but then at the range it was designed for sights weren't all that much help anyway. There didn't seem to be any safety catch, either, and he asked about it.

"No," she said. "You just pull the trigger. But don't waste a shot now."

He handed the gun back and she put it back in her satchel with a sigh of relief. He brought out his own revolver.

"This one does have a safety," he explained. "The hammer is down here in the notch between two contact points. To fire it, you have to cock it by hand first. When you're done, you lower the hammer between the contacts. You saw me load it last night. Not likely you'll need to do it, but if you have to, just put powder and ball in each chamber." He handed her the pistol, and caught another look of surprise as she hesitantly accepted it.

"I have a feeling," he said, "that I'm not following the accepted rules of barbarian behavior."

She managed a brief smile in return. It was the first time he'd seen her smile, and he decided that he liked it. "I didn't expect a sav—barbarian to hand over his weapon so easily to a possible enemy," she said.

"That's the point. I don't want you as a possible enemy; I want you as a partner for as long as we stay together."

She aimed the gun briefly, then returned it. "I'm afraid," she said coldly, "that I am a possible enemy, whether you like it or not." But she didn't seem quite as suspicious of him.

"Finish your breakfast," he advised. "There's no need to push it today, but I don't want to stay here all day, either."

They started out, moving southwest, which was the general direction from which the woman had come, in the hovercraft. In the beginning, Bill

had suggested that she take the lead.

"You ought to know the country better than I do," he said. "If we're heading for Losalam, you point out the way."

She swung on him angrily. "We aren't going to Losalam. Do you think I'd show you where it is? With your weapons and your talk of barbarians, you could be the greatest enemy Losalam has ever had!"

Bill stared open-mouthed for a moment, then shrugged. "What's the secret?" he inquired mildly. "Every clan in the Wild Lands ought to know where your hovercraft come from; all I have to do is ask somebody. And if we don't head for Losalam, how do you expect to get home?"

"I don't expect to get home," she replied. "If you keep your promise to let me go, I'll try to make it by myself, though I probably won't succeed. As for the tribes knowing where it is, I doubt it. If they were close enough they might, but not out here. They don't move around all that much; most of them don't know anything about the country a few miles from where they live."

Bill decided not to correct her on that point; if she thought her secret was safe, so much the better. Privately, he thought that Eric or any of the other clan leaders could probably tell him the location of Losalam within a few miles. Cities were hard to hide.

Getting a description of the area through which they walked was equally difficult, though Bill decided this was probably because the woman had never walked through it. Flying over it in a hovercraft hadn't given her much intimate knowledge of the area, or any idea at all of how long it would take to walk from one of her hazily remembered landmarks to another. However, his attempts helped keep a conversation going. Anything, as long as it eased the tension. Walking through the Wild Lands with a partner who didn't trust you was a quick way to die. If he didn't make some headway by tonight, he'd have to leave her. He didn't want to do that, although he wasn't too sure just why he didn't want to.

He paused at the crest of one barren ridge and surveyed an endless panorama of similar ones, marching to the horizon. "Losalam," he mused. "There was an Old Days' city down here somewhere with a similar name; Los Alamos. Any connection?"

She looked stubborn for a moment, and then nodded. "Our ancestors came from Los Alamos. There were scientists there, working for the government. Before the Blowup, somebody got a warning. If there was trouble, Los Alamos would be a target. The women and children were sent away, to a safe location many miles north. They survived. For awhile they called their city New Los Alamos, but eventually it was shortened. The original Los Alamos is south, in the radioactive wastes."

Bill looked at her thoughtfully. "Have you in Losalam ever heard tales of something out here in the Wild Lands that might have come from the radioactive areas? Something that isn't human?"

"There are plenty of animals here, but—"

"Not an animal. The stories—and I've heard them from wandering clans all over this area—is that there is something out here that thinks—but that isn't human."

She shivered involuntarily. "I've heard the tales. Is this the information you said you wanted?"

He nodded. "We heard rumors in my homeland. I was sent down here to see if they were true. We didn't really think they were, but if nothing else we'd get some information on a new part of the country."

"And if you didn't get back?"

Absently, Bill rubbed the left side of his face. "Scouts are paid to take chances. They sent me because I was—expendable. If I don't get back, they'll send somebody else, and keep at it until they get an answer."

Actually, he thought, they probably wouldn't; Wyoming was too short of manpower to go chasing crazy rumors. They wouldn't have sent him if he hadn't volunteered. But no need to tell her that.

"I don't think I can help you much," she said.

"Some of the prisoners we've taken have said there is a... a something out here that will destroy Losalam and all humanity. The Matriarch says it's just savage superstition; we're more powerful than they are, so they dream up a monster or a god of whatever that's going to get even with us. But when they talk about all humanity being destroyed; that includes

them! They wouldn't envisage their own destruction, would they—just to bring down Losalam?"

"I suppose that depends on how much they hate you. Do these tales give any location for this monster or god or whatever?"

"Not a specific one. Just—south. South of Losalam somewhere, in the wasteland." She shivered again. "Some of the scouts who have gone down there say the rocks still glow at night. Sometimes, when I think about all that radioactivity, I dream of glowing monsters coming up from the south to destroy humanity. They say everything is dead down there, but what if something didn't die? What if it—changed, instead?"

She had unconsciously drawn closer to Bill, as if seeking reassurance. Now she stepped away, shook her head, and laughed shortly. "I'm afraid you tapped one of my private fears. As you can see, I have lots of imagination and very few facts."

"Nobody has any facts," Bill said, rather glumly. "Maybe imagination is what's needed. You ever see any evidence of your glowing monster?"

She shook her head.

\* \* \*

Bill spotted the tiger late that afternoon. It was trailing them; he couldn't quite decide whether it was stalking them or just curious. He said nothing to the woman, but she spotted it a quarter of an hour later, just as it trotted across a patch of open ground.

She said "Bill," quietly, and jerked her head toward the animal.

"I saw it," he said. "Just keep moving; I don't know if it's stalking us. How does your dart gun work on tigers?"

She looked dubious. "It's a pretty big animal. And we'd have to be awfully close; even if the dart did take effect—"

"It could still kill us. I was afraid of that. Get the gun out, anyway. The cat's too big for anything I have; I wish I had a rifle, but they're scarce and I thought the crossbow would be enough. Keep your eyes open; if you see a spot with plenty of firewood, we stop for the night."



"Will fire actually stop it? I've heard about keeping animals away by fire, but it never sounded very believable."

"It will discourage it a trifle, anyway. If we're lucky, it will find something else to eat, though I don't know what. I don't know what it's doing here, anyway; the big cats are supposed to be out on the plains, killing bison."

"Cats are never where they're supposed to be."

Bill chuckled. "True enough. Look, Tamara, I know you don't trust me much, but as long as that beast is around you've got to do what I say, and do it without argument. I won't have time to explain everything."

"All right," she said calmly, surprising him. He'd expected an argument, and said so.

"Someone must be leader in times of danger," she said. "You're the barbarian, so you're the animal expert."

They moved on, the tiger trailing them. By dusk, Bill was beginning to think it was more curious than hungry, since it had made no move to attack. But if it wasn't hungry, it would be, sooner or later. He found his firewood shortly after dusk; a patch of dead brush and small trees, looking like a blight had struck the area. Probably it had; there were queer diseases abroad, attacking plant and animal both since the Blowup. He looked for the tiger, and it was gone.

"Like it knew we'd found a weapon," he said. "Well, we'll just stop here, anyway. No water, but that's what canteens are for. Fire is more important, right now." Unslinging his pack, he pulled out his camp ax and strode into the thicket. When he returned with an armload of wood, he saw Tamara regarding him oddly.

Dumping the wood, he grinned at her. "I did something wrong again?"

"In Losalam," she said, "we were taught that the savages made their women do that sort of work."

"Savages probably do," Bill said cheerfully. "Us barbarians have higher standards. But then, what's the use of being boss if you can't get someone to do your dirty work for you? I'll bet your Matriarchate makes the men do

the dirty jobs."

"That's different," she said stiffly. "Our men do the jobs men are capable of doing. They're stronger than women and better fitted for manual labor. But the Old Days proved that they are incapable of mature judgment or logical reasoning, so we can't have them doing work that requires those qualities."

"I don't think we have time to argue politics right now," Bill said. "Maybe after we've eaten. What do you know about cooking?"

"Nothing."

Bill shook his head sadly. "Since I got the firewood, and I'm going to be getting the meat, you're elected to cook whether you know anything about it or not. Too bad, though; I'm a lousy cook and I was hoping for a decent meal for a change."

"Why can't I do the hunting and let you cook?" she asked.

"Because it's my crossbow. You think I'm going to eat anything killed with your poison darts, you think again." He rummaged in his pack and tossed a small package to the sand at her feet. "Ever use a flint and steel to make a fire?"

"No. I read about it, once."

"No time like the present to learn. If the tiger shows up before you get it started, scream." Fitting a bolt to his crossbow, he slipped quietly into the brush. That tiger was off hunting; with any luck, he'd be back well before it was.

He was very lucky; in less than half an hour he was back with a wild chicken dangling at his belt.

Tamara was looking exasperatedly at a small wisp of smoke curling up from a pile of twigs at her feet.

"It keeps going out," she said, pointing at the fire.

"They do that," he agreed. "We need more tinder. By carefully feeding the fire, he worked it up to a moderate size, after which he skinned and

cleaned the chicken and handed it to the woman.

She stared at the bird thoughtfully, as if not too sure what to do about it and glanced at Bill for a clue. He sat impassively. Finally she went into the brush, found a long stick which seemed somewhat green, cut the chicken into several pieces, impaled the pieces on the stick, and held the entire affair over the fire. Bill nodded to himself. She didn't know anything about cooking, as she'd said, but she was smart enough to figure a few things out. Good enough. The fire was too high and the chicken was going to be burned on the outside and half-raw inside, but he'd eaten worse.

When it was more or less done, he took half the pieces and ate them without comment. She obviously didn't relish her portion, but she ate it.

"I wonder where the tiger went?" she said. "It's pretty rare in this area, though the scouts have reported one occasionally."

"Which reminds me," Bill said. "Just what are you scouts scouting for, anyway? You patrol a set territory, which has nothing in it but savage tribes, and when you locate a tribe, you do your best to wipe it out. It sounds like a military operation to exterminate people who aren't doing you any harm."

"That isn't it at all."

"I saw you attack one tribe back there; I was in it at the time."

"They shot first."

"Sure they did; with a bow and arrows that couldn't have damaged you in the least. All you had to do was keep going."

She flushed. "I know. I made a mistake; and I'm certainly paying for it. But you've never lived in Losalam; you don't know. The tribes hate us. We have the machine civilization, or part of it, that they lost; we have a decent standard of living, and our women rule. They want to loot the city and drag us down to their level. We aren't trying to exterminate them; we're trying to keep them from exterminating us. The job of the scouts is simply to watch them. If there is a buildup of manpower, if one tribe begins to dominate a larger area than usual, we report it. If tribes join together, we report it. We can't allow any concentration of force, because it's probably aimed at us. Sometimes the scouts break up the groups, but usually we let

the army do it.

"I shouldn't have attacked that group at all. But there are stories about what the tribes do to scouts they catch. We're trained to hit back instantly if any force is used against us. When I saw that arrow, I didn't even think; I reacted."

Bill nodded, keeping his expression noncommittal. That explained more than she had intended. The reason for her first initial interest in his crossbow, for example. Probably the reason for her coming with him at all; so she could find out what sort of threat he represented. She knew now, and to her, it was probably a big one. The one thing she didn't know was where he came from. Once she knew that—would she simply leave, to bring her information to Losalam, or would she try to kill him?

He rather wished he hadn't thought about that, because killing him was the most logical solution. If he didn't get back to Wyoming, obviously Wyoming would never know about Losalam and the threat would disappear, or at least be postponed a good many years until mutual expansion put the two cultures into contact. Tamara was intelligent enough to figure that out, certainly. He looked at her, licking a few drops of chicken grease off her fingers. Because she was a woman, it was going to be hard to keep on his guard; she might be a member of the Losalam military, but he wasn't sure he could regard her as a cold-blooded killer.

Then he looked past her and saw the tiger watching him from across the fire.

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

"Tamara," Bill said quietly. She glanced at him questioningly.

"Don't make any sudden moves," he said. "We've got company."

She looked around slowly, and saw the tiger. She sat motionless for a moment, then slowly reached behind her for her satchel.

"Don't shoot it unless you have to," Bill said. "But keep the gun ready." He was pleased by her reaction; he'd known men in Wyoming who would have fled screaming from such a killer.

He eyed the animal carefully. It was crouched, ready to spring, but gave no indication of any urgency. The tail was twitching slightly. Sooner or later, it was going to jump, however, and whatever he did would have to be done fast.

"I'm ready," Tamara said. "Will it give any... any signals, before it jumps?"

"None that you can read without a lot of experience. Just keep still, and be ready to shoot. And to move fast, if that beast springs."

Without taking his eyes off the tiger, Bill leaned forward slowly. Reaching out, he took his eyes off the animal long enough to select two of the biggest sticks projecting from the fire, and withdrew them. Holding one stick in each hand and waving them in circles to keep them blazing brightly, he rose to his feet in one smooth motion. The tiger shuffled its feet in indecision and watched him uneasily. Careful, he thought. Any sudden move, and it's going to

jump. He glided quietly around the fire, waving the burning sticks in front of him. The tiger growled and shuffled its paws again, and suddenly Bill knew that it wasn't going to attack. If it had been hungry enough, nothing would have stopped it, and if either of the humans had panicked it would have pounced on them, fire or not. But it was confused by prey that stalked forward instead of running and not really hungry enough to risk any uncertainty. Bill walked forward steadily, waving the burning sticks, and suddenly the tiger whirled and vanished.

Bill tossed the sticks in the fire. Tamara, he noticed, was watching him with something like admiration.

"How sure were you that it would run?" she asked.

Bill shrugged. "Not at all sure, at first. But it was a good bet. If it had been hungry enough it would have come right through the fire at us, but it wasn't. If we'd shot it or startled it, though, it would have attacked. We didn't have anything big enough to stop it; I've heard of men killing full-grown tigers with hunting knives, but that's on a par with the old codger who claimed he once strangled a grizzly bear with his bare hands. Saloon talk. So the fire was the best chance we had."

She smiled at him. "Anyway, it worked. I'm beginning to see the

difference between theories of survival in the wild, and experience. And I think I'd better get some rest, unless you want me to take the first watch."

Bill raised an eyebrow. "Who said anything about keeping watch?"

"I'm not totally ignorant. If you have more than one person in your group, you take turns standing watch. You never all sleep at once; not in the Wild Lands."

He grinned at her. "You'll make a respectable barbarian yet. Go ahead; I'll take first watch."

She lay down and, to his surprise, was almost instantly asleep. She must have iron nerves, he thought. She wasn't stupid; she knew they'd both been close to death. Bill wasn't sure he could have gone to sleep that rapidly, and he'd become used to traveling in the wilds.

His own watch passed uneventfully. When it was time to wake Tamara, he considered long and thoughtfully: the logical thing for him to do was to take his pack and leave. She regarded him as an enemy. He couldn't watch her twenty-four hours a day, and he couldn't last a week in the Wild Lands if he had to drag an unwilling prisoner. If she wanted to kill him, she'd have her chance. Would she? She'd killed savages in battle, though a pretty one-sided battle. But deliberately murdering a traveling companion took a lot more cold-bloodedness than she'd shown so far.

Then he grinned at his own reasoning. Considering her calmness in the face of danger, and her feelings about Losalam, she could probably kill him with no more compunction than she would swat a fly, if she thought it necessary. The real point was that she was attractive and he didn't want to leave. He'd much rather convince her to be friendly—except he hadn't had much luck in that department with anyone for years. Absently rubbing the left side of his face, he leaned over the woman and tapped her on the shoulder. She came awake quickly but without trying to fight him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Your turn to guard. Remember, if you see anything at all out of the ordinary, wake me up. I'd rather lose a little sleep than my head. Don't go off investigating on your own; it's a good way to get killed."

She nodded and rose, noticing for the first time the light blanket he'd

thrown over her. She looked at it curiously, but instead of commenting, she asked if he'd seen anything dangerous during his watch.

"Not a thing." He paused, and then added. "I've been feeling uneasy, though. As though somebody was looking over my shoulder. I've seen no evidence of anything out there, I've heard nothing out of the ordinary, and my mind keeps telling me that something is there, anyway. So don't take any chances."

He crawled into the recently vacated warm blanket, reflecting that standing first watch had its advantages. The nights were cool here, even in spring. They'd have to arrange to trade off, once they got organized. His last thought before sleep overtook him was a hope that Tamara would be able to recognize danger if she saw or heard it. She was too civilized to be tramping around out here.

If any dangers were abroad, they didn't manifest themselves; the next thing Bill knew was that Tamara shook him awake, none too gently.

"Morning," she announced when he uncovered a bleary eyeball. "I'm glad there weren't any emergencies last night; I'd never have waked you up in time."

Breakfast consisted of more pemmican.

"We don't have enough of this stuff," he said, waving a piece of pemmican at Tamara, "to let both of us use it all the time. I brought it for emergencies. From now on, we're going to have to hunt."

"I suppose we can't move as fast if we stop to hunt," Tamara said, and managed a faint smile, "but I don't think I'm in shape for constant travel, anyway. What about the savages, though? Will they still be following us?"

"Probably. But they have to hunt, too, and Eric's wound will slow them down. He's the only one with enough drive to keep them after us at all, so they won't just abandon him—or if they do, they won't be chasing us anymore. I want to head down this valley today," he added, pointing to a rift between the hills that led south. "It looks like it might have water, and therefore game."

Tamara shrugged, and they broke camp and headed south. Grass and water were good; a small stream meandered down the center of the valley,

more or less, and evidently provided enough moisture for a fairly luxuriant vegetation. Game, however, was scarce. Once they saw a small herd of wild cattle, but Bill shook his head when Tamara pointed them out.

"Too big. We couldn't handle that much meat, and what we left would attract scavengers. Human as well as animal, I suspect; something around here is spooking the game."

Not only the game, he thought; all day he'd had the feeling of being watched, though there was no sign of any watchers. He had never been given to hunches or feeling eyes on his back, and he didn't like the sensation.

"At least it explains what that tiger was doing here," Tamara suggested.

"It does indeed, and I begin to suspect that coming down here wasn't one of my best ideas. Well, we can cut west over the hills in the morning; right now I want to find something to eat."

Where a game trail crossed the creek, he stopped to examine the tracks and nodded in satisfaction. "People and horses; we're in some tribe's hunting grounds. Keep an eye peeled; I want to see them before they see us."

At least, he thought, it explained his feeling of being watched; probably he'd subconsciously noted signs of the tribe. Except that it occurred to him he'd been in the Wild Lands, pursuing and being pursued by its human population, for over a month now, and he had never previously felt this vague alarm. If it wasn't humans he was worried about, what was it?

Near noon they reached the crumbling ruins of what had once been a farm. Mingled with a tangle of raspberry briars in bloom, a few wild bean vines surviving from a long-vanished garden meandered. Cornstalks sprouted here and there. None of these feral plants had yet produced anything edible; it was too early in the year. Bill found some lily stalks and a quantity of pigweed, while Tamara located a terrapin resting quietly under a bush. This time Bill handled the fire and cooking, boiling everything together into a sort of stew that was edible if not terribly tasty.

"I'm surprised at the amount of greenery here," Bill commented. "The books say all this was pretty much rocks and cactus before the Blowup."



Tamara gestured to the west, where the mountain range on the horizon showed a gap, as though a giant tooth had been knocked out. "We call that the Notch," she explained. "They say a stray H-bomb flattened some of the mountain peaks; enough to let through more of the moist coastal air. There's more rainfall now than there used to be." She sat a moment, thoughtfully. "The idea of men being able to just wipe out a whole mountain by accident; that's the sort of thing we must prevent. We can't allow anyone that kind of power."

"You're not going to stop it by keeping your neighbors in savagery," Bill said. "Losalam's authority doesn't reach far enough. You haven't any idea what people are doing on the other side of the Mississippi, let alone on the other side of the world. You didn't even know about my people, and we're on your side of the Mississippi. And if you're going to prevent other people from getting power, you're going to have to have it yourselves; you can't police the world without it."

"At least," she flared, "if we get it we'll use it peacefully! The men of the Old Days caused the Blowup; not the women!"

Bill grinned at her. "Actually, the major cause of the Blowup was overpopulation, and the women have to share responsibility for that. In the end, there weren't enough resources to go around, so our ancestors fought to see who'd get what resources there were. They managed to ruin a lot more while they fought, but once they'd killed off enough people so that everyone who was left could have a share, the fighting died out. Now we're building up again, and we have it easy. Sooner or later we'll probably have the whole thing to do over again."

"There's an idea worthy of a man," Tamara said scornfully. "The Blowup didn't teach you to live in peace with your neighbors, so you don't believe anyone learned anything from it. That's why the Matriarchate must survive."

"Survive by riding around in hovercraft and shooting anyone that gets in your way? I suppose it's the ideal way to enforce peace; a dead man is always peaceful."

"They're savages; that's different," she said shortly.

"All males seem to be savages to your way of thinking. That's another thing that set off the Blowup; a firm belief that anyone who was a little

different had to be wrong and probably evil."

"Well, they are savages. If the world is to know any peace, women must rule."

"Women don't go around killing people, eh? Well, look at us. For my part, I haven't made a hostile move and never intend to. Now as to you?" He raised his good eyebrow. Tamara's face slowly reddened. She started to say something, thought better of it, and abruptly stood up and strode off around the sagging corner of a building.

At least she was ashamed of the urge to kill him, Bill thought, which was probably an improvement. Unfortunately, his attitude seemed to have been softening more rapidly than hers. After he'd come out of that Wyoming hospital with a ruined face and Leah had decided that she no longer wanted to marry him, he'd tended to avoid women, just as women had tended to avoid him. Being around Tamara seemed to have lowered his resistance, which in this case was ridiculous. This woman not only didn't like his face, she didn't like the fact that he was a man.

Bill hunted unsuccessfully most of the afternoon, but late that evening a herd of wild pigs came down to drink at the stream. Bill hesitated; a herd of pigs was nothing for a lone hunter to tangle with, but it seemed unlikely that anything better would come along. Finally he waved Tamara back into the ruins, noted a small tree that he could climb hastily if the boars charged, and brought down a small pig with the crossbow. The herd milled around, but Bill remained motionless; the boars never spotted him, and eventually the herd moved off across the stream.

Only when they were well out of sight and smell did Bill walk down to his kill and begin butchering. Tamara came to help.

Working efficiently, Bill soon had a small pile of meat beside him. He buried the hide, head, and entrails by the stream bank where the ground was soft.

"Something will dig them up sooner or later," he said, "But with luck we'll be long gone from here by then. I hate to waste the hide, but we don't have time to cure it."

"Is that what your clothes are made of?" asked Tamara, eyeing his buckskins.

"Just the shoes," he said, indicating his calf-high moccasins. "Shirt and pants are deerskin; it's softer. Pigskin is too heavy for clothing; so is cowhide. But there are a lot of uses for it." He looked regretfully at the spot where the hide was buried.

They carried the meat back to the ruins, and Bill removed the bolt from the crossbow, preparatory to uncocking it.

"Could I try shooting it?" Tamara asked.

"If you want to." Bill replaced the wooden bolt and handed her the weapon. "Shoot at something on the ground," he said. "I don't have enough bolts to be breaking them on trees."

Tamara selected a burdock leaf as her target and fired, managing to come respectably close to the leaf. An attempt to cock the bow, however, was less successful. She managed to get the steel bowstring halfway back to the cocking notch and could bring it no further. Trying again, with utmost strength, she got the string about three quarters of the way back before she had to release it.

She glared up at Bill. "All right; how do you do it?"

"That's one of those jobs that takes male muscles, girl." He took the bow and with a smooth motion cocked it, then lowered the string to the rest position. "With a hundred-and-twenty-pound-pull like this, you need either a lot of muscles or a cocking lever."

"I never believed there was a weapon made that I couldn't handle," she said ruefully.

"If it's any consolation," Bill replied, "I doubt if many of the Lindsays who wanted it so badly could have handled it, either. Andy could, maybe. The rest just weren't healthy enough." He grinned at her again. "You're healthy enough, but you just don't have the build for it. Though you've got a great build for other things."

She regarded him coolly. "The only thing I'm interested in is getting back to Losalam. What do we do now?"

"Now we cook our meat. It won't keep otherwise. First, though..." he walked over to where the crossbow bolt was sunk into the ground, pulled it

out, and wiped the dirt off the metal blade fitted to the head. "Never waste weapons. I can make more bolts if I have to, but it's a job, and even then I'd need to reuse the head."

In the corner of what had once been a barn was a clear spot where a fire would be concealed from observers. "Though if anybody gets close, they'll smell it," Bill said.

They cooked the meat, ate what they could, and wrapped the rest in leaves and distributed it in their packs. Finding a fairly smooth spot close to the fire, Bill lay down.

"You take the first watch tonight," he said. "We'll try to alternate, from now on."

Bill quickly made himself comfortable but Tamara was perplexed. "How do I know when to wake you up?" she asked.

"Middle of the night," Bill said, his eyes already closed.

This time she sounded a little desperate. "But how do I know when that is? We had clocks in the fliers, but I don't have anything here."

Bill sat up again. "I forgot. You wouldn't know our quaint barbarian methods of time-keeping, would you? Come out here."

He led the way out of the buildings to where there was an unobstructed view overhead. There was a slight haze, but the stars were still visible. He pointed to the north. "See that combination of stars there?"

Tamara came close and he held her so she could sight along his arm and forefinger. Finally she nodded. "You mean those three stars in a curve, and the other four in a rectangle."

"Right. That's the Big Dipper. That constellation makes a complete revolution around the Pole Star in twenty-four hours. You want to watch for about four hours, so when it's moved about a sixth of the way around the circle, you wake me up."

She nodded, and gave him an odd look. "Some of my friends thought I was odd because I used to go out at night and look at the stars. I thought they were pretty. But I never thought of using them for anything, or

paying any attention to how they moved."

"When you don't have clocks, you use what you have. It's not hard to learn how to tell time by the sun and stars. You can pick up the basics before you get back to Losalam."

She looked thoughtful. "I hadn't realized how much the savages had to know. I don't think anyone in Losalam actually realizes what savage life is like."

Bill wagged an admonitory finger. "Barbarian, remember. Savage life is pretty depressing, but I'm above that sort of thing."

Tamara laughed. "You know, when I first came with you I was terribly afraid of you. You looked so much like an ogre out of one of my childhood books. But you're not, really."

"Well, I won't eat you for supper; not as long as the pig lasts, anyway." He lay down again, watching Tamara. She was certainly pretty, standing there in the glow of the firelight, with that black hair framing her face and a charcoal smudge on one cheek.

"I'd have had all sorts of problems if I'd tried to get back to Losalam by myself," she said.

"But you're not by yourself, so don't worry about it. I'll look after you."

She didn't answer, and he was dropping off to sleep before he realized how insulting that might sound to a woman whose occupation was that of military scout.

A touch on his arm awakened him. From long training, he was instantly alert. The air felt moist; that haze earlier had evidently heralded rain. It was a dark and undoubtedly cloudy night, but he could feel Tamara close to him, even before she spoke softly into his ear.

"There are people moving along the stream; coming here, I think."

"All right," he whispered back, and took a moment to think. Unusual that anyone would be traveling by night, but if they were they probably had a definite destination in mind, and these ruins seemed the most likely one.

"Get your satchel and let's be gone," he said.

"I've already got it. Here's your crossbow."

He had been using his own pack as a pillow; he quickly slipped it on and took the crossbow. With his free hand, he caught one of Tamara's hands.

"We don't want to get separated in the dark," he explained.

She said nothing, but didn't try to pull away. Quietly they crept out of the ruined building. There was no light anywhere; not a star shone. Operating from his memory of the area, Bill led the way, pausing now and then to feel a tree or a rock and recall where it lay with relation to the rest of the rums. They had reached a screen of scrubby bushes when he heard sounds coming from the buildings. Humans and horses, he decided, listening carefully. Not the pursuing Lindsays, then; more likely the tribe whose sign he had seen earlier, who used this valley as their hunting grounds. So they wouldn't be aware that he and Tamara were around. And they had horses...

He explained his idea to Tamara.

"But can we kill all these people?" she whispered back doubtfully. "It sounds like a dozen, at least."

"I don't want to kill all these people! I just want to steal a couple of horses—if possible, without killing anybody."

"But if we don't kill them, they'll follow us, and we already have one clan following us."

Bill sighed. "For a representative of civilization and peace, you're remarkably bloodthirsty. In the first place, I don't go in for wholesale murder if I can avoid it. If this wasn't the Wild Lands, I wouldn't steal the horses at all; I'd buy them; but buying and selling just doesn't work out here. In the second place, it's going to rain tonight. They can't see to follow in the dark, and any tracks we make will be wiped out by the rain. We'll probably lose the Lindsays tonight, too, if we haven't already."

"All right," Tamara said. "But I don't understand you. After all, they're only—"

"Savages," Bill said. "Well, so am I, according to you. Us savages like to avoid killing our own kind, if possible."

"But you aren't... oh well. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, yet. We wait until they get settled. What we do after that depends on how far from their horses they sleep, how many guards they put out, and how the horses are fastened."

Crouched in the bushes, they waited. Bill expected some commotion when the newcomers discovered the remains of their campfire, but nothing happened. Very confident or very careless—and if they had held onto their horses in the Wild Lands, it was probably the former.

He followed the activities of the group by sound. The horses were watered and led to an open patch of grass south of the buildings. The humans busied themselves with some form of activity between the buildings and the river. Setting up tents? There were no fires; settling in was accomplished swiftly. Someone was designated as a horse guard; at first Bill thought there was only one guard, but later he decided there were two. The horses were apparently picketed individually and then allowed to graze. So much for any idea of stampeding the horse herd to prevent pursuit. On the other hand, the horses had to be picketed some distance apart to keep them from fouling one another's picket ropes, which meant a lot of area for two guards to cover.

He waited until all activity had died down, except for occasional sounds from the horses and guards. It sounded as though the guards were making only occasional circles of the herd. So if he was quiet enough...

Thunder rumbled along the mountains to the west.

Better and better; a good thunderstorm was just what he needed; it would discourage the guards and cover any sounds he might make.

"We're going to move over closer to the horses," he whispered to Tamara. "Then you'll stay put while I sneak in and grab a couple of animals."

"Why can't I go along? Then we could each get one animal; it would be easier."

"And noisier. You'd alert the guards and I'd end up having to kill somebody and probably rouse the camp. You're pretty good for a city woman, but you've still got things to learn about keeping quiet, and those guards are the best; this tribe wouldn't have a horse herd at all if they weren't."

Tamara made no response, which he hoped indicated agreement. Hand in hand, they crept past the buildings to a point south of the herd, putting the herd itself between them and camp. Bill posted Tamara within a large group of boulders near the stream, where he could find her again. As he turned toward the horses, a thought struck him.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?" he whispered softly.

"No," came the equally soft response. "Is it hard to do?"

For a moment, Bill almost gave up all thought of horses. One horse wouldn't help them much, and there wasn't much chance of getting away with two if Tamara couldn't ride. Then he shrugged. If he got away without disturbing the camp, he could lead the other horse until Tamara had some riding experience. If they had to abandon it, they'd be no worse off than before.

"You'll learn," he whispered, and slipped away before she could comment.

The rumble of thunder was now more or less continuous, and lightning flickered along the mountain peaks. The storm was moving in fast. He might be better off waiting until the rain helped cover him and discouraged the guards, but he was impatient. Waiting around would increase chances of their discovery, and rain wouldn't help Tamara in her first experience of riding.

He crept forward. The wind was rising now, and the horses were shuffling about nervously. He could sacrifice some quietness for speed. Getting close to the herd, he waited for a guard to make his rounds; the best chance would come after the man had passed. The wait seemed endless, but he knew it was actually only a few minutes before a vague shape passed between him and the other vague shapes that were the horses. Bill blessed the distant lightning; without it he couldn't have seen the guard at all, and the man's passage was absolutely soundless. Giving the man time to get clear, Bill moved in among the horses. No point in



trying to pick any particular animal; grab the two nearest and hope they were good ones.

A horse loomed up alongside him. Big, anyway; bigger than the usual run of horses out here. Patting it briefly and getting a snort in return, he worked his way to its head and then down the picket rope to the stake. Drawing his knife, he began cutting through the rawhide rope. There was another horse nearby now; a smaller one, from what he could see by the flickering lightning. That would be the next job, but first he had to get this one loose. The rawhide was tough, and the horse was getting nervous about the storm and kept jerking its head and twitching the rope in Bill's hands.

Finally the rope broke. Bill moved back toward the horse, coiling the loose rope as he went, and then began urging the horse forward, toward its neighbor. Then there was a flash of lightning directly overhead, and Bill was staring into the face of one of the horse guards, not ten feet away.

## ***CHAPTER FOUR***

The crossbow, an awkward encumbrance for a horse thief, had been left behind with Tamara. Bill had his revolver, but a shot would wake the camp faster than the horse guard could do it. Briefly wishing that he'd had more practice at knife-throwing, Bill leaped on the horse's back as the lightning-flash died and the guard yelled an alarm. The horse was remarkably docile, and Bill got him to the boulders with a minimum of effort. Tamara threw him the crossbow, and then he reached down and hauled her up in front of him. She was carrying both his pack and her satchel. With the crossbow slung across his shoulder, Bill had one hand free to guide the horse, and one to hold Tamara.

Another lightning-flash showed him one of the horse guards mounted and riding toward them. Men were beginning to flow out of the tents as the camp was aroused. The mounted guard was armed with a longbow, and an arrow sang over their heads as Bill urged the horse forward.

Then the rain came, blotting out all sight of camp and pursuit. Bill crossed the stream and then guided the horse down the valley, angling toward the western hills. It was a slow, wet, cold, uncomfortable ride. At first there were shouts behind them, but these gradually faded. The pursuers had no way to tell which way Bill and Tamara would go once they

got away from the camp, and no way to locate them in the storm except by accident. Nobody had been hurt; only one horse was gone. They'd probably take their loss more or less philosophically, though they'd be on the lookout from now on. As long as Tamara and he stayed out of the tribe's sight, Bill thought, they'd be relatively safe from retribution.

Having an arm around Tamara, he discovered, was a pleasant sensation. The figure disguised by baggy coveralls was indeed a good one. Too bad their closeness couldn't have been achieved in a more comfortable location.

By morning they were opposite a small gap in the hills that Bill had noted the day before. The sky was still overcast, and dawn was late, cold, and damp, but the rain had stopped. At the base of a low, rocky ridge, they halted.

"Until we're well away from that tribe," Bill said, "we're better off traveling at night and holing up by day. Besides, after going all day yesterday and most of last night, we could use some rest. There's a patch of grass over there where the horse can graze; we can keep watch from the top of the ridge."

He slid off the horse's back and tethered the animal to a sturdy-looking bush. Tamara swung down from the horse's back and toppled into Bill's arms as her knees gave way.

"Whoo!" she exclaimed. "I can't move!"

As she managed to get her legs to cooperate more or less, Bill steadied her before leaving her to hobble about while he slung the pack, satchel, and crossbow about his person.

"One of the disadvantages of horseback," he commented. "Walk around a little; you'll get over it."

"Ouch! Walking hurts. Can't I just sit down for awhile?"

"Keep moving. Walk the stiffness out, or you'll be even sorer tonight. After a few days, you'll get used to it," he advised cheerfully.

"Frankly, this doesn't feel like anything I want to get used to." She started to bend over to pick up a comb that had fallen from her pack, and

abruptly decided not to, contenting herself with glowering at Bill when he picked it up and handed it to her.

"You're awfully hard on my preconceptions," she commented. "All my life I've been told that men are inferior to women, as well as being stupid and brutal, so why can you do so many filings that I can't? It's unfair."

Bill chuckled. "You're doing all right. I might find it just as hard to get along in Losalam. Difference in background is all. Come on; let's get up to the top of the ridge before we eat."

They opened the packs and produced more of the pork. After eating, Bill rose and looked along the ridge. "I want to do a little exploring along here. You'd better get some sleep; there are some bushes just over the crest there for shade."

Bill strolled south along the ridge top, heading for a slight prominence, which would give him a better look at the surrounding country. Once on top, he spotted an Old Days' highway cutting across the valley a couple of miles away. That would probably be the best way of getting through the hills; walking would be easier, and they could follow it at night with less danger of becoming separated. That horse wasn't going to carry double for any long distance, so they'd have to alternate riding and walking. Across the valley were some moving objects that he eventually decided were antelope. Whatever they were, they weren't human, and he lost interest. To the north, there was nothing moving. If either the Lindsays or the tribe from whom they'd taken the horse were following them, they were being very cautious about it. The new tribe definitely wasn't moving; horses create a lot of dust. And since the Lindsays would have to get past a larger group which by now was alert and not well disposed to strangers, it looked as though he and Tamara were in the clear.

He walked back north, still thinking. Somewhere along the line, he'd become committed to getting Tamara back to Losalam. After that, he could pursue, his own problems. Strange that the beast or superstition or whatever it was had remained so amorphous. The Wild Lands' tribes talked about it, but they obviously had no idea of what it looked like, how it lived or where, or even what made it so terrifying. Oh, they said it killed people, but nobody had been able to describe any specific individual it had killed. The residents of Losalam didn't even believe in it. For that matter, the residents of Wyoming didn't, either; going to look for it had been mostly Bill's idea. It was more of a way to get away from Wyoming for

awhile than it was a serious venture, though the Elders had been happy enough at the idea of obtaining reports from the south. Their explorations so far had concentrated on the more hospitable country east and north. The Wild Lands offered little to a burgeoning civilization.

He passed Tamara, glanced down at her relaxed form, fought down an urge to brush a strand of hair away from her face, and strolled north, walking easily along the ridge top. Nothing moved. He was beginning to wonder if that horse-owning tribe had been nocturnal. There ought to be dust somewhere, if they were moving at all. None of the human mutations in Wyoming had survived past infancy, but that was no reason to believe the rest of the world was free of them. Night sight would be a minor one, certainly; there were nocturnal animals, so why not nocturnal people? It would explain why they'd moved into the ruined farm well after dark, and why that horse guard had spotted Bill so easily.

He was about to turn back when his eye caught sight of something unusual just below the crest ahead of him, and he moved forward to examine it. Then he strode back to where Tamara was sleeping. His first thought was to awaken her immediately, but then he realized that she'd had no sleep at all the night before. What he'd seen wouldn't go away. Patiently, he sat down with his back against a boulder.

It was early afternoon when Tamara stirred. She twisted and turned for a few minutes, trying to get her face out of the sunlight, and then sat up, looking around until she spotted Bill. He thought she looked relieved to see him, which seemed odd.

"You didn't wake me up," she said. "I thought for a minute you'd gone."

"I thought the sun in your face would get you up soon enough. Though it did look for a minute like you were going to crawl around to the shady side of the bush while you were still asleep."

"Well, I didn't, and I'm awake. Your turn to sleep."

"I've got something to show you, first." Bill led the way north along the ridge until they reached his discovery.

"Ever see anything like that before?" he asked.

The object was the complete skeleton of a grizzly bear, stretched out

among the rocks. The bones appeared to be fresh, but every scrap of flesh had been removed; they were as clean as if they had been prepared for a museum display.

"I've seen old skeletons," Tamara said. "Animals—and men, too, from the Blowup and before. But these look like fresh bones."

Bill nodded. "As far as I can tell, they *are* fresh."

"No, I've never seen such a skeleton. What...?"

"There isn't a mark on it," Bill said. "I suppose that's possible; animals do get sick and die. But when they do, scavengers disturb the bones. Coyotes might eat a dead bear, but they'd scatter the bones for yards around. They wouldn't pick them that clean, either; and they'd leave tooth marks. Even vultures would leave some disturbance."

"So what happened to it?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea. Grizzlies are hard to kill; I know that from personal experience." He rubbed a hand reflectively over his face. "But very little dies from natural causes here in the Wild Lands. Mostly, I'm trying to figure out what would strip the skeleton like that, but I'm getting nowhere."

"You called it a grizzly," Tamara said in surprise. "That's an Old Days' word; I've read it in books. People now say brown bear or giant bear."

"Not in Wyoming," Bill said absently, and then stiffened as he realized what he'd just said. He looked at Tamara, who was staring somberly at the skeleton. If she realized that Bill had just specified the location of his home, she gave no sign.

"I can't think of any way at all to get all the meat off the bones without disarranging them in the process," she mused, "unless they were disarranged and someone put them back together afterwards."

"That's an idea," Bill said. "But I can't think of a reason for that, either. If it was for a religious reason, there ought to be something more elaborate here; an altar or something. Not just a bunch of bones lying in the rocks."

Tamara considered that. "Some of the savages here have pretty strange beliefs," she said. "Did you see any tracks around?"

"Not on bare rock; nothing here that would take a print. We might as well get back and keep an eye on the horse."

They walked back along the ridge. "Would it be safer for us to move away from here?" Tamara asked.

"Why? Whatever killed the bear, if anything did, isn't still on the ridge with us, and we don't know where it might be. My guess is we're as safe here as anywhere."

They reached the spot where Tamara had slept, and Bill sat down. "I'm not sleepy yet," he said. "You sounded pretty familiar with the Wild Lands' religious beliefs. How come, if your main job is to keep them from congregating?"

"Some of them come into Losalam," Tamara said. "They're glad enough to get away from their sordid lives, and they can do menial tasks. If they're sincere, we let them stay."

Bill looked skeptical. "I should think they'd be a source of trouble for the Matriarchy, and from what you've told me, the Matriarchy is devoted to preventing trouble, or indeed any change at all."

"There aren't many of them." Tamara paused, then continued. "I might as well tell you. Sometimes one of the scouts will find a savage she's attracted to. She's allowed to bring him back; Scout's Privilege was established back in the early days, when Losalam was nearly all women and children. Now the Matriarch and her officials don't like it much, but it's too firmly established to stop. The scout usually gets tired of her lover after a while, but if the man is docile enough he's allowed to stay in Losalam."

"I gather from the tone of disapproval that you've never indulged," Bill commented idly.

"No, I haven't. I think it's disgusting. I suppose it might have been necessary in the beginning, but there are plenty of males inside Losalam now."

"Got a particular one in mind for yourself, or are you still playing the field?" Bill inquired interestedly.

"That sounds like a man's comment!"

"Well, it could hardly sound like anyone else's," Bill pointed out reasonably.

Tamara regarded him with annoyance. "I wonder if Wyoming didn't just send you down here to get rid of you," she commented.

So she had noticed his slip after all, Bill thought. Blabbermouth. At least she didn't seem disposed to remove his presence immediately; maybe she had decided that getting back to Losalam with her information was enough.

"I gather that it was a giant bear that did that to your face," Tamara said after a short silence.

He nodded. "About three years ago. I was bringing in some cows. Got careless and stumbled into a mother and her cubs. I got off lucky; she hit me only once and then apparently left me for dead. It's not," he added, giving his twisted grin, "a very heroic account. When I got out of the hospital I signed up for scouting because too many people at home couldn't stand to look at me any more."

"I should think your people would be used to wounds and disfigurement."

"Yeah, but there are limits. I gather you don't get many injuries in Losalam?"

"Not from animals. Some industrial accidents and the like. A lot of medical supplies were sent with the original founders, and some of them were nurses and doctors. We've kept up the medical traditions. I expect," she said thoughtfully, "if you had a photo of the way you used to look, our doctors could restore your face."

"Or they could if they'd work on barbarians," Bill said. "No matter; I'm used to it now. And I'm a little suspicious of letting strangers work on me."

"They wouldn't hurt you; they're doctors. And you aren't a

barbarian—exactly."

"Thanks for the promotion."

"Losalam doesn't have any records of a culture like yours. Even if you aren't quite civilized, you're almost back to the Old Days' cultures."

"Some of them, anyway, even if not the North American one. I suppose to qualify for civilization we'd have to have a matriarchy?"

"It would be the most logical. I suppose," she said doubtfully, "it would be all right to allow men to vote—if they were enlightened."

Bill chuckled.

"All right," Tamara said, flushed, "you've had a lot of fun laughing at my ideas. What are yours?"

Bill chuckled again. "Mine or my people's? Not necessarily the same, you know. I suppose Wyoming believes in total equality of everyone—in theory, at least. We have whites, Indians, and a few blacks; there isn't supposed to be any discrimination because of color or sex. There is, of course. In the beginning of our society, women were scarce and had to be protected, and we're taught that. Most of us believe it."

"You don't sound like you do."

"Not much—but that sort of teaching creeps up on you when you aren't looking. I can't say I ever believed in much of anything except myself. I was going to get married once. The girl broke it off after I came out of the hospital. She said it was my face, but I suspect that was just an excuse."

"And that's why you came down here," Tamara continued for him.

"That's why," he agreed. "The Elders wanted the information, and whatever I wanted wasn't to be found in Wyoming." He yawned. "It isn't in the Wild Lands, either; maybe it's in Losalam."

"But they wouldn't let you in to Losalam!"

Bill yawned again. "If you claimed your Scout's Privilege, they would."

"If you think for a minute—" she began furiously.



"I don't, but you react so beautifully," Bill interrupted. He broke off to yawn and moved over to the bushes "Somehow, I begin to feel that I can go to sleep now. Keep a sharp watch; you ought to be mad enough by now to stay awake even in this heat."

He lay down in the minuscule shade of the bushes and in a few seconds was snoring, while Tamara glowered at him.

Nevertheless, she awoke him gently enough at dusk, reporting that nothing had stirred all afternoon. They ate before starting off. Rather than wear the horse out by forcing it to carry double, they started out with Tamara on the horse with the packs and crossbow, while Bill led the animal.

As he walked, Bill wondered about this country. Wyoming was teeming with ruins; abandoned towns, concrete roads, broken plastic containers still littered the countryside. Here the land was empty. In the two days since they'd left the Lindsay Clan, the only evidence of past civilization he'd seen were the buildings they'd stopped in the night before, and the Old Days' road they were now heading for. The country must have been barren, even before the Blowup. There had been less rainfall back then, according to Tamara, and according to the few books he had read, the population had always been scattered. A few cattle ranches; some oil drilling, some mining.

With increased rainfall and game, he wondered if there weren't as many people living here now as there ever had been. Even with the extra rain, it was an inhospitable area; he'd be glad when his quest was over and he was out of it.

Before full darkness descended, they reached the Old Days' road and turned west on the worn concrete. It might be hard on the horse's unshod hooves, but no harder than scrambling around in the rocks after dark, and it made for much easier walking. It was more dangerous; the old roads were often used by the wandering clans. But it would speed them out of the valley, and they could stay alert.

During the night they exchanged places several times. Tamara was beginning to feel a trifle more adept at riding, but the unaccustomed nature of the exercise made her back and thighs even more painful than they had been the night before. She walked until she was tired, and then rode until she was too sore to continue. It was almost dawn when Bill,

leading the horse, halted. Half asleep, Tamara slid off the animal's back, wincing as her feet hit the ground.

"I used to think I was in good condition," she muttered.

"Shhh!" Holding a hand up for silence, Bill was listening intently. There was something out there, ahead and to the south of the road, but he couldn't tell what it was.

After a long silence, Tamara whispered, "I don't hear anything."

Bill realized that he hadn't really heard anything, either. But he was still convinced that there was something hostile ahead. It was as though he was hearing sounds directly inside his brain, rather than through his ear.

"There's something up there," he whispered back.

"I don't know what it is, but I think we'd better make a detour." Without waiting for a reply, he led the horse off the road and headed north, through a flat land dotted with sparse scrubby bushes and occasional cactus plants. The horse made more noise than he liked, but by being careful where he led, he kept it to a minimum.

Dawn found them well off the road. Bill continued north until he came to the edge of a creek that even at this time of year showed only a trickle of water. To the west were the ruins of another ranch; house, barn, and a few foundations of what might once have been outbuildings. Bill scouted the place, decided it was empty, and led the horse to it.

The buildings had long ago been looted of anything that might prove useful, but the walls still stood, for the most part. Brush grew a little thicker along the creek, and Bill halted at one good-sized thicket.

"You stay here," he told Tamara. "Try and sleep, and stay out of the buildings; they're the first place a tribe would head for. I'll picket the horse down the creek a ways. It will attract the attention of anyone coming here and maybe give you a chance to slip away."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to see what that was along the road. If I'm careful, I ought to be able to get close enough to see without being spotted."

"What do you think it was?"

"No idea; that's why I'm going back. It could be what I'm down here to look for."

Tamara started to say something else, changed her mind, and nodded soberly. Bill took their packs off the horse and led it a good half-mile downstream before picketing it near the water. Returning, he rummaged in his pack until he found some spare loads for his revolver. He looked at the remains of the pork, picked out one piece, and returned the rest to the pack.

"Don't move out of the brush any more than you can help," he advised Tamara. "You don't know who might be watching."

When he reached the top of a low hill and looked back, she was already out of sight. He wondered if she'd be there when he came back.

If he came back.

With light to see by, he made better time and reached the road before he expected to. He shook his head in irritation; he should have put Tamara farther away from the danger. Darkness and hard going had fooled him about the distance. Working carefully now, he crept to the top of a low hill and peered over. He was looking down at an empty road. Barren land swept away to the south. Lying behind a plant that might have been mutated sagebrush, Bill waited, motionless, until his mental clock told him that at least an hour had passed. His major annoyance while he waited was the acrid stink of the bush, which made him want to sneeze. However, the smell seemed to discourage insect life; he made a mental note. The Wyoming Elders might be interested in a worthwhile insect repellent.

Nothing had stirred while he watched. Swiftly, now, he was on his feet, across the open road, and hidden in a patch of brush on the south side. Still nothing moved. After another wait, he worked his way cautiously toward the spot where something had waited for him only a few hours ago.

The land was still; almost too still. There should have been early-morning stirrings of small animals, but nothing moved. There were no birds in the sky.

Hidden in the brush, he waited again. Still nothing. His feeling of last night had not returned. Either his hunch had deserted him, or whatever had been there was gone.

He moved carefully forward again, and then stopped at the edge of a clear area. Ahead of him, gleaming in the sunlight, lay the fresh bones of a man.

## ***CHAPTER FIVE***

Keeping a wary eye out for any danger, Bill walked forward and knelt to examine the bones. They were undamaged and as fresh as if the man had been killed just a few hours ago, when he and Tamara were on the road. They were picked clean.

A movement nearby caught his eye, and he saw several large ants going away from the bones. He sat back and thought. That might explain the cleanness of the skeleton; ants did the final stripping. But where had the rest of the meat gone? And what had done the killing? A bear, tiger, or even a cougar would have crushed the skull or the spine. Wolves would have cracked some of the bones for their marrow, and probably left other marks. Humans, if any had descended to cannibalism, would have cut up the body and hauled it away, bones and all.

He considered the original rumor. Something which was evil and intelligent, but not human? Something that could kill without leaving a mark, and strip the meat from a carcass without moving the bones?

Bill made the return to the ruins swiftly and uneventfully, and was mildly surprised when Tamara came out to greet him.

"Find anything?" she asked.

He described his discovery. "No idea what could have done it," he concluded. "The bones were lying in sand, this time, but still there weren't any tracks around them."

"I've been thinking," she said. "Could it be some sort of new weapon? I don't know of any Old Days' weapons that would work that way, but there are still new discoveries being made now and then."

"A disintegrating ray that works on flesh but not bone? Doesn't sound very likely. I can't imagine how it would work."

"Possibly someone else might have a more active imagination."

"Some woman, no doubt. Okay, I'll accept it as possible, but I still don't think it's at all likely. You're going to have to show me some new physical laws before I believe it."

"Well, it was an idea. Come on and have lunch; I found some more of those lily stalks you picked back at the other place."

While he ate, Bill watched Tamara moving restlessly along the creek. Her coverall had been ripped in several places, creating an unintentionally tantalizing effect. He doubted that the Matriarchate would have approved.

"I'll bet a lot of the boys in Losalam will be heartbroken if you don't come back," he commented.

Tamara looked offended. "You don't take the Matriarchy very seriously, do you?"

"I don't take anything very seriously. Except grizzly bears. Show me a Matriarchy of female grizzly bears and I'll respect it immensely."

Surprisingly, Tamara laughed. Bill looked questioning, and she explained. "I was thinking of our squadron commander; if she isn't a female grizzly bear she's the next thing to it."

Bill nodded soberly. "I know the type. We ought to introduce her to my uncle Zeke Abel; they could have lots of furry children."

Tamara chuckled. "I can just imagine introducing Commander Paula Crosby to some whiskery barbarian—I suppose he does have whiskers?—and telling her they were made for each other. I'd want to be at a safe distance."

They finished off the pork in the most amiable atmosphere they had achieved since their uneasy partnership. After the meal, Tamara produced a printed map showing the general features of the country.

"This was part of my survival kit on the flier," she explained.

A quick look showed Bill why it hadn't been produced before; while he was gone Tamara had torn off that part of the map showing Losalam. Where it had been when he searched her satchel was more perplexing; in a pocket of the coveralls, perhaps. The attempt at concealing Losalam's whereabouts was amateurish; the amount of detail shown decreased toward the three original edges of the map, so Losalam was obviously somewhere near the center of the torn-off portion. Just about where he'd figured it would be. The map showed several possible routes through the country, using the Old Days' highways. Bill memorized the general features.

Before going to sleep, Bill set several snares along the creek, for rabbits or any other small game that might happen by. There looked to be rabbit trails in the thickets.

In the evening, when he awoke, there were no rabbits in the snares. But when he and Tamara hunted along the creek, they discovered that the rabbits were there all right, in some numbers. Bill picked off several with the crossbow, and Tamara surprised him by borrowing the bow and then hitting a rabbit that ran from a clump of grass a few yards ahead.

"That's enough," Bill said. "No need to get more than we can eat in a couple of days; it will spoil. I'll get started cooking while you spring the snares; no need to leave them set."

They returned with caution, but the horse still grazed undisturbed, and the buildings were empty. The floor of the house was sagging; in some places it had collapsed entirely. Bill cleared the rubble out of a corner and built a fire there, where it couldn't be seen by anyone outside. Tamara moved the horse to a new location, closer to the buildings, and returned.

"Should I help, or stand guard outside?" she asked.

Bill gestured through a partially collapsed wall to a window in another room. "You can get a pretty good view of the south from right there. If anything comes across the creek, I'll know it."

She picked her way carefully across the floor and propped a broken chair against some rubble to make a seat for herself by the window.

"I was a little surprised to see you when I came back this morning," Bill said. "I thought you might take the opportunity to head for Losalam on

your own."

For a moment she looked puzzled; then understanding came. "I'm not as afraid of you as I was when I said that about getting to Losalam by myself, and I know more about the Wild Lands than I did then. As long as you're going in the same general direction that I want to go, I'll stay with you. It's safer."

Bill made no reply, and after a moment Tamara spoke again.

"Did you know this was the first time I ever killed my own meat? We have domestic animals in Losalam; there's no need to hunt. I've read about hunting for sport in the Old Days, but it always seemed like one of those brutal things that men did; nothing that could be of any interest to me. But it was actually a fascinating experience." She paused a moment in thought, and added, "I'm going to have a lot to think about when I get home to my debriefing session."

"Your scouts get contaminated by savages very often?"

"Oh, no. Or at least, not that I know of. I suppose there must be some contact, or the scouts wouldn't meet any savages to bring back to Losalam. But I don't know of any."

"You can't have been in the scouts too long," Bill pointed out. "You aren't old enough."

"I'm twenty-two, and I've been a full adult and a member of the scouts for eight years; I think that's long enough to have a reasonably good idea of scout activities."

Bill stared at her. "How does Losalam define an adult, anyway? Age fourteen seems a little young."

"We operate realistically and scientifically. An adult has attitudes that are different from those of a child; anyone in Losalam who can pass certain psychological and intellectual tests is an adult. Only a savage would define adulthood by age."

"Actually," Bill said, "the savages generally use puberty as their standard, since they don't keep track of age. It was the Old Days' civilizations that used age as the standard."

Tamara dismissed this as a quibble. "The point is," she said, "that debriefing is necessary for the good of the Matriarchy. Subversive ideas can be exposed and treated before they become a danger."

"That sounds more like something you memorized, rather than anything you believe in."

"Actually, debriefing is mostly a formality these days," Tamara admitted. "The advantages of the Matriarchy are too obvious to question. I suppose they'll worry about me, though; I can't recall any scout returning after this long an absence. I'm probably marked down as dead."

"If you class amount of contamination by length of exposure, you're going to have a rough session," Bill agreed. "Do they just question you, or do they have a lie detector, or what?"

"We use a truth serum. Or they will on me, anyway. I guess a lot of time they just question the common workers. The Matriarch's Council and the scouts get truth serum because they're more important and have to be watched more closely. They use it on criminals, too."

"You ever have any impure thoughts to confess?"

"Of course not!" She was indignant.

"You will have, this time," Bill said.

She shot a sharp glance at him. He seemed intent on adjusting one of the long sticks that held the rabbits over the small fire.

"I don't expect the Matriarch's Council would approve of me getting back to Wyoming in one piece," Bill suggested.

She stared at him. "What are you trying to do?"

"Find out what you're going to do. If you're going to be a loyal member of the Matriarchy, I'd like to find out as soon as possible."

He wished he could see her expression, but darkness had made this difficult. "I don't know what I'm going to do," she said in a low voice.

"If you find out," he said, "be sure and let me know. I'm..." He paused suddenly, listening.



"Go check the other side of the building," he ordered. "Something just came across the creek."

Tamara moved as quietly as possible across the creaking floor. Because most of the outer wall there had collapsed the room overlooked the creek. She returned, smiling.

"Just a pair of deer," she reported. "They are watching our horse very suspiciously."

After it was fully dark, they moved out of the house to the creek bank where Tamara had waited that morning. Tamara offered to take first watch. Bill wasn't sleepy, so he sat up for awhile, watching the stars over the distant mountains.

"This is something else new to me," Tamara said, after a while. "Being outside and watching the night. In Losalam, I used to go out to look at the stars, but there were always lighted houses and people close by. And I never even did that very often. We avoid the dark."

"When I was a boy," Bill said, "we'd blow out the candles sometimes and tell ghost stories. I suppose the kids in Wyoming still do it."

"The male mind tends toward fantasy and superstition," Tamara commented. "Women are more rational."

"Then why are you enjoying the night?" Bill inquired. "It can't be very rational to enjoy being here when at any moment something could swoop in and kill both of us."

"I think it's the difference," Tamara said slowly. "The moon and stars are giving the only light. With our electricity, we don't see much of the moon and stars."

"Electricity?" Bill was startled. "I thought Losalam was a pretty small city; all that interrogation wouldn't work if you had a large population: too time-consuming. But you keep telling me about industries; a small population couldn't support them. How big is Losalam, anyway?"

"Oh, it isn't large. But we kept our technology, you see."

"No, I don't see. Old Days' technology required vast numbers of people

to make it work; that's why it fell apart so fast after the Blowup. You've kept the technology without the population, and it just won't work that way."

"Of course it will. All it takes is power."

"But what provides the power? Atomic energy might, and I suppose there was an atomic plant in the original Los Alamos. But if your ancestors were refugees, they couldn't have carried an atomic plant with them."

"Of course not! Do you think we'd have used atomic power anyway, after the Blowup?" She sounded horrified. "The world must never again use atomic power! But when my ancestors arrived at Losalam, it was already the site of an experimental plant for producing gas from coal. Instead of mining coal and transporting it, it was to be gasified at the source, and the gas transported. The plant had just begun production before the Blowup, and we've been using it ever since. The fliers are gas-powered. Our scientists have been working on solar power, as well, and for the last ten years, so we've produced most of our electricity that way. For the rest; there are books and blueprints of what we need."

Bill nodded slowly. "That might work. And it explains why you've stayed small and exclusive; that power plant would never support you if you really succeeded in converting the savages to your way of thinking. I've been wondering why such a fanatical group didn't send out missionaries to convert the surrounding males to the True Way; now I know."

"That isn't it at all! We have been expanding, as fast as the savages will let us; we haven't the population to just overrun them. And any that come in are welcomed. Now that the solar power plant is working, we have plenty of power."

"But it wasn't working when the direction of your society was set. Now it's all tradition. You can dominate the savages around you and tell yourselves that you're preserving civilization from masculine brutes. I wonder what happens when you run into something that doesn't fit your pattern?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean Losalam isn't going to be alone much longer. You've got a

radiation desert to the south and the Wild Lands all around, so you thought you were the only civilization left. But the rest of the country is rebuilding. Wyoming hasn't reached your stage of technology yet, but we're coming. There's a small group on what used to be the border between Wisconsin and Illinois. There's a bigger one running from Kentucky to southern Illinois, where two survival areas expanded, met, and merged. There's a smaller area in what used to be Saskatchewan, and one starting up in the ruins of Minneapolis. Then there's a very small group in northern Indiana, but they seem a lot like the Losalam residents; they won't talk to ordinary mortals. And there are probably others we haven't found yet, plus all the other continents. Africa would be my choice for the most advanced cultures these days; there weren't that many bomb targets between Cairo and Cape Town. By this time, Nigeria or Kenya may have exploration teams in Europe. Sooner or later, Losalam will be found by somebody too big for you to fight. What do you do then?"

Tamara thought about it. "I don't know. The Matriarch's Council may have plans for such an event, but they've never been discussed. I suppose all these other places are male-dominated?"

"How should I know? I suppose they are; most of the Old Days' societies were. I said that Wyoming is theoretically in favor of equality. Anyway, when you meet another group, you'll have only two choices. You can join the others and try to convince them of your superiority, or you can reject the union, keep to yourselves, and in another fifty years become an unimportant city-state in the new world."

"We'd have to join," Tamara said, her face white in the moonlight. "We can't have separate, warring cultures again. But to join forces with semi-savages, even technologically advanced ones... it would be the end of us."

"Well, you've got the fliers. You've got the technology to build bombs. You could always knock the other groups back into the savagery you seem to think they're in now, even if we're too widespread for you to eliminate altogether."

Tamara shuddered. "Losalam is devoted to preserving peace!"

"You might be surprised at what some people will do to preserve their position."

"What a cynical comment! I don't believe that anyone in Losalam would betray our principles. But then, a week ago I wouldn't have believed that I could sit in the middle of the Wild Lands discussing the future of the world with a barbarian."

"Now you're getting the idea," Bill grinned at her. "Almost anything is possible. Even believing something contrary to your indoctrination."

"That might seem simpler to you, since you obviously don't believe in anything."

"Right. And when a man and a woman are alone on a bright moonlight night, they ought to have something better to do than discuss politics." He looked at her and slowly shook his head. "But in this case they obviously don't, so I'm going to sleep. You can stay awake thinking up nasty things to say to me in the morning. Or when you wake me up at midnight; I'll be too befuddled to answer them then."

But it was far short of midnight when he awoke, with Tamara's hand on his shoulder. "What is it?" he whispered.

"I don't know. I just had this sudden urge to walk out of camp to that ridge over there." She pointed to a blur in the moonlight. "It scared me; it was as though someone had put the thought into my mind. It's hard to explain; it was in my mind, but it didn't seem like one of my thoughts."

Bill got up and looked at the ridge. "Still feel it?"

"Yes, only not so strong, since you woke up."

"Funny; I don't feel anything. But I'll go find out what it is." He started forward.

"Wait! Bill, you...."

He swung to face the woman. "No time to argue. This could be what I'm down here to look for. I've got to get up there before it leaves!"

"Without your gun?"

Startled, Bill clapped a hand to his belt. The revolver was missing. Tamara pointed to it on the ground where he had been sleeping.

"You take it out of your belt when you sleep, remember?"

He scooped up the gun and turned again to the ridge. "Satisfied now?" he inquired.

She caught his arm. "Bill, listen! What's the first thing you do when you wake up?"

He looked at her in bewilderment. "I don't know. Open my eyes, I guess. What's that got to do with anything?" He tried unsuccessfully to pull his arm loose.

"Listen! I know you do it because I've watched you. The *first* thing you do when you wake up, *every time*, is check to see where that revolver is. This time you didn't. You said you didn't feel any urge to leave camp—but you were going out there as fast as possible, unarmed."

For a moment, the words didn't penetrate. He was concentrating on the woman's grip on his arm, holding him back, spoiling his mission. Then he realized what she was saying. He stopped trying to pull away and stared at her in dawning horror. She let go of his arm.

"It worked." She expelled a pent-up breath. "I wasn't sure I could get through to you."

"You did, finally. I still think that whatever is out there is what I'm after, though. In fact, I'm beginning to be certain of it. You didn't react properly, so it shifted to me and used my own determination against me. If that isn't intelligence, I don't know what is. And it's certainly not human."

"You don't think it could be a human mutant of some kind? We've had some strange ones down here."

"If it is, it's mutated so far that the term 'human' doesn't really apply. You've had strange mutations; how long did any of them live?"

"Not long."

"Neither have any of the ones I've heard about. This thing has been operating down here long enough for stories about it to reach Wyoming. When there isn't any direct contact, that could take years. I don't think it's

human, and I don't think its ancestors were. I've got no idea what it might be, but it's still my job to find out."

Tamara looked shocked. "You mean you're still planning to go out there?"

He nodded. "Aside from it being my job, I want to find out what's going on. Besides, I think it just attacked me. You know what I did to your flier when you attacked me; I get mad when I'm picked on."

"I'll go with you, then."

Bill shook his head emphatically. "Not on your life. It might reach you again, if you try stalking it. You stay right here, no matter what thoughts you might have. You'll probably think that you should come out to see what's happened to me, or to help me. Don't do it. Fight any thoughts like that." He gave her his lopsided grin. "That shouldn't be hard; you'll know they aren't yours."

"I don't seem to be as susceptible as you are."

"You were wide awake when it hit you; I was just coming out of a sound sleep. I'm on my guard now. If I'm in doubt, all I have to do is err on the side of cautiousness. Don't worry; any ideas I get will be analyzed thoroughly to make sure they're mine, before I act on them."

He slipped away, and Tamara sat down, her chin on her hands. She could feel nothing at all from the direction of the ridge. Was it concentrating on Bill? Maybe she should... she brought her head up with a snap. The thing was getting better with practice. Bill had said that if she got any ideas about wanting to be with him she'd know they weren't hers, but the trouble was that she did feel safer when he was around. What if the thing had lured Bill away so it could circle around and get her while she was alone? Safety in numbers and all that.

No! Stay in camp!

But what if it *was* creeping up on her? There was no reason why it shouldn't have lured Bill away; maybe it wanted to separate them so it could attack one at a time. If they had stayed together, they could have watched one another. She should have thought of that before. If she hurried, she could...

With an effort, she sat back down again. "I—will—stay—here!" she said, aloud. Then she sat and wished that Bill was with her.

\* \* \*

Bill moved out cautiously and quietly. Within ten yards, he found himself hurrying forward, and deliberately stopped and waited motionless while his mind informed him that the thing was getting away, it was moving down the back side of the ridge right now and if he didn't hurry...

He didn't hurry. Deliberately spacing his steps, he moved forward again. He unconsciously picked up speed, caught himself, and set off at right angles to his former course. For what seemed like hours he moved parallel to the ridge, but when he turned forward again he saw that he had come only a few feet. He stopped again and gauged the distance to the ridge.

When he moved again, it was on hands and knees. Fighting an impelling urge to hurry, hurry, *hurry!* he crawled toward his goal. By the time he was halfway up the ridge, he was exhausted physically and mentally, and had to stop to rest. The certainty that if he didn't hurry he'd be too late pounded at him. A far, dim corner of his mind cataloged the fact that the lure grew stronger the closer he approached it.

When he started forward again, he was on his feet, staggering upward as fast as he could go. Somewhere in his consciousness, he was aware that this wasn't right and his very life depended on slowing down, but he no longer heeded it. He must get up there and *see*, before the thing got away from him.

## ***CHAPTER SIX***

He was on top of the ridge, searching for the quickest way down the far side, when the scream stopped him. It came from somewhere ahead, down the side of the ridge and to his right; from the place where he had been heading. And it sounded human.

Bill stopped as though he had run into a wall. The compulsion to hurry was gone, leaving him with a clear and horrifying memory of how he had scrambled up that ridge. He hadn't been pursuing a fleeing foe; he'd been running toward destruction.

He felt a sudden revulsion; an urge to get back to the camp and reassure Tamara that he hadn't been the one who screamed. The idea of going forward felt sickening, but he moved ahead down the slope. If he couldn't even get close enough to the thing to identify it, he might as well give up and go home. It wasn't calling him any more; maybe he could get close enough to see something while it was concentrating on whoever it was who had screamed.

The night had returned to silence. Too much silence; the night sounds of small animals and insects had ceased. Bill walked carefully, the moonlight enabling him to avoid rocks and the scraggly bushes that stank and discouraged insects. He wondered if they bore flowers and if so, how they managed to get themselves pollinated.

The body was sprawled near a clump of mesquite. A man, Bill thought, though something had already eaten enough of the body so that it was hard to tell. He stood for a long time, silently watching the body in the moonlight. Nothing stirred. Whatever had killed the man had vanished from sight.

From sight. The hairs on the back of his neck stirred as he considered the possibilities that phrase conjured up. Was an invisible something observing him, even now? Then he shook his head at such fancies. If it was invisible it had no need to lure victims to it; it could sneak up on them. (And if so it had undoubtedly sneaked up on him some minutes ago and he was already dead.) No, it was a perfectly visible monster, which had left when he arrived.

Why? No real answer to that, either. It could have controlled him as it had done before and killed him as easily as it had the other man. Unless it couldn't use its telepathy immediately after killing? Or maybe it could do only one thing at a time, and thus couldn't telepath and eat simultaneously. That sounded ridiculous, but then nothing about the killer seemed to make much sense. There seemed no reason for him to wait around on the ridge while he tried to figure it out, however.

Tamara challenged him before he came within fifty yards of the creek. She was standing in the open, holding his crossbow.

"Stop right there," she commanded. "Is that you, Bill?"

"An ogre never changes its spots," he replied. "Who else were you



expecting?"

"I don't know what I was expecting. Who screamed out there?"

"I couldn't tell you; whoever it was isn't identifiable any more."

She lowered the crossbow. "Come on in. When I heard that scream, and at the same time stopped having silly thoughts about leaving camp and going after you—I was afraid it had got you. When I heard somebody coming back, I didn't know what to think; I was scared stiff."

Bill walked up to her, staring at her oddly. "You were *afraid* it had got me?"

"Of course; you don't think I want you fed to a monster, do you?"

"I wasn't sure," he said. She looked like she'd been crying; she must have worked up a good case of nerves over being left alone. He could hardly blame her. She hadn't panicked; she hadn't even been as affected by the menace as he had been himself.

"Why did you insist on going out by yourself, anyway?" Tamara demanded. "If we'd been together, we could have watched one another. If this thing has any limits at all, then two minds should be harder for it to control than one."

Bill thought this over and nodded. "You're right. I guess I wasn't being as objective and clear-headed as I thought I was. And then," he added with embarrassed honesty, "to tell the truth, I wanted you where you'd be safe."

She stared at him with her mouth open for a moment. "I suppose," she said finally, "you meant that well. But it's still the most insulting thing anyone had said to me since I became a scout."

Bill realized his error. To a woman from Wyoming, the phrase would have implied concern. To Tamara, it implied that he thought her inadequate. But, dammit, couldn't she make allowances?

He sighed. "I did mean well, and if I didn't intend to be insulting, then I wasn't. Don't be so touchy."

"I suppose I might have expected something like that from a savage," Tamara said bitterly. "All right; my watch isn't over, and I'm not the one who's been wandering all over the country trying to find a lion's mouth to put my head into." She stopped speaking and considered. "Now, I wonder where that saying came from? Who would ever try to... ? Oh well. We're both mentally exhausted. Go to bed."

Bill did. The odor of cooking meat woke him, and he rolled over to see Tamara warming up one of the rabbits he had roasted the night before. For a city girl, she was adapting quickly to the wilds, he decided. The fire was small, and the dry mesquite limbs produced almost no smoke. What there was, the light morning breeze dissipated before it reached the top of the brush.

She noticed his movement, and smiled. "Breakfast is about ready."

"You didn't wake me for my watch."

"You looked exhausted, and by then I was sorry about the argument. I shouldn't have expected you to learn civilized social customs in just a few days."

"Especially since I'm a mere man," he said. She looked at him sharply, but cut the rabbit in two more or less equal parts and handed him one without comment.

"When are you planning to sleep?" he asked.

"I slept yesterday while you were scouting the road. I can pick up more sometime; neither of us has been getting much sleep lately."

After breakfast, Bill walked over to the ruined buildings and managed to scramble up to a rickety perch by a window in what was left of the barn loft. The land about them was utterly quiet. Nothing moved, within range of his vision. He spent half an hour watching before descending to find Tamara dozing by one of the small trees.

"I'm not too fond of moving in daylight," he announced, "but I'm even less fond of staying here another day. Whatever is out there, it's too close for comfort. Let's see if we can get farther west."

"I thought you were bent on meeting this thing face to face," Tamara

said, one eyebrow lifted quizzically.,

"Face to face, maybe. I think I've had about enough of this mind to mind stuff. There's a time to realize that you're outgunned and retreat, and I think Wyoming would rather get a partial report than none at all. The Elders can figure out what to do about it; it might end with a full military expedition down here. I don't suppose Losalam would like to join it?"

"You're going back now, then?" Tamara inquired. "You said when you'd got your information, I'd be free to go home."

Bill grinned at her, a habit which she was gradually getting used to. It wasn't quite so frightening when you knew what it meant. "I'll see you a little closer to Losalam first," he said. "Right now, I want to go up on that ridge and see what I can find out by daylight. Might as well pack up and take horse and all; we can cut back to the road after we've inspected the scene of the crime."

The body on the ridge had been, as Bill half expected, reduced to a clean skeleton.

"Overnight?" Tamara gasped. "What could possibly do that?"

"I don't know, but I'm starting to get some ideas," Bill said. He watched a few ants stripping the final morsels of flesh from the bones in front of him, then circled the skeleton, searching for tracks. There were none; not even his own from the night before. The ground was too hard.

Again, they alternately walked and rode. Once they reached the Old Days' highway, they made good time.

Bill was alert for signs of any wandering clans, but once again the land was empty.

He knew it couldn't be, though. The man who had inadvertently saved his life the night before had come from somewhere. Lone wanderers were rare in the Wild Lands; one man couldn't watch his surroundings twenty-four hours a day. The basic unit was the family group. Where enough children survived, the family grew into a clan. The more successful clans attracted the remnants of the less successful ones, so there were a few fair-sized tribes roaming the area. Where there was one man, there

were likely to be more. And the lack of any evidence of them might well mean that they were deliberately keeping hidden.

When they stopped near noon, he explained his suspicions.

"But we're trying to keep hidden, aren't we?" Tamara asked. "Why shouldn't they do the same thing?"

"If we were trying to hide," Bill said, "we wouldn't be traveling down the middle of an Old Days' road. We're just being careful. But anyway, it isn't their trying that I object to; it's their success."

She looked skeptical. "You mean if they can avoid your eagle eyes, they're expert and therefore dangerous?"

"Eagle eye," he corrected. "Singular. But yes, that's what I mean. If I wasn't good at spotting people in this sort of situation, I wouldn't have lasted long as a scout. If a group of more than two people can stalk me without my finding any evidence of it, then that's a group to be wary of."

"I suppose," Tamara said, "that since I'm not an expert at your barbarous versions of hide-and-seek, I'll have to take your word for it. But what makes you think the group does consist of more than two people? We've already seen two skeletons. Maybe there are only one or two members of the tribe left."

"In which case, they wouldn't be following us, which is why I haven't found any evidence of them. Neat. Except I have a feeling that there are more people around here than I can see."

"So what do we do about it?"

He chuckled ruefully. "That's the problem; I can't really think of anything. Except keep going and watch for an ambush."

"Maybe we should leave the road?"

"If they're already trailing us, it wouldn't help; they could follow our tracks. At least the road gives us a clear field of view ahead and behind; it would be easier to surround us in the brush."

"You're very cheerful today," Tamara commented.

He shrugged. "I came close to getting killed last night, and in the process found out that maybe I'm not as smart as I always thought I was. It's sobering."

They continued along the road that afternoon. The stops for rest and changing from walking to riding were now fewer; Tamara was gradually becoming accustomed to both activities.

She was worried about one thing, though. "This is the first time since my Ceremony of Maturity that I've had to depend on another person. It's not pleasant, after years as an adult, to find yourself being forced back into childhood."

"It's hardly the same thing," he said. "I don't know any adults who expect to be expert at everything."

She smiled faintly. "You know me."

"Nonsense. Everyone depends on other people."

"You don't," she pointed out. "You act like you made adult status at age six and haven't required any assistance since."

Bill chuckled. "You ought to meet my mother. She insisted I never would be an adult. I finally made it, but I think she's still surprised about it."

"Aren't you ever serious?"

"No; that's why I stayed a juvenile so long. Time to move; talk while you're walking."

"Part of my dislike of childhood is the way people patronize children and order them around," Tamara commented, but obediently stood up and started forward.

"No, no, that's not a reversion to childhood," Bill said earnestly. "That's because you became my slave when I captured you. Slaves are always being ordered around, but I suppose if you've never been a slave before you wouldn't know that."

"I thought you said people in Wyoming didn't believe in slavery."

"That's why I have to turn you loose before I go back. As long as I'm in the Wild Lands it's all right, because everybody here believes in slavery. But I couldn't take you home as a spoil of war or anything."

"I wonder where that phrase came from?" Tamara mused. "Why would the victors want something that was spoiled?"

"Maybe that's all there was left after a war," Bill suggested. "Getting something spoiled was better than getting nothing at all."

Tamara laughed. "You know, I think that's why I quit being afraid of you. It's hard to be afraid of someone who makes jokes all the time."

"I'm glad somebody appreciates me. My fellow citizens think I'm frivolous."

Tamara looked up at him in surprise. "That's odd. Some of the scouts complained to my superior that I didn't regard life seriously enough. I was reprimanded."

"And you've been trying to make up for it ever since. I noticed."

Near evening, they came to a stream flowing across the road. Once there had been a bridge, and a few rusting steel beams sagged forlornly down into the water. Bill considered the stream while Tamara waited impatiently; since it was neither wide nor swift-running, it presented no obstacle at all that she could see.

"Let's see that map," Bill said finally. She produced it, wondering what he needed it for, and he studied it for some time. Finally he spoke. "Take a look at this."

She moved closer and looked where his finger rested. There was a junction of a wavery line and a straight one, near the bottom of the map. "Would you say this is where we are?" She considered, then nodded. They'd made better time than she expected; they weren't at all far from Losalam now.

"What's up north of us?" he asked. She shrugged. "Pretty much what we've been going through. It's flatter; not so many ridges. Not as much water, either; more like the desert it was before the Blowup?"

"What about south?"

"I don't have any idea; we're about at the south edge of my patrol area now."

"Okay; south it is. A flat desert area doesn't sound good. Get your satchel off the horse."

"Why?"

"Because this is where we and the horse part company."

"After all you risked to get it?"

"I was taking the risk for two horses. One is conspicuous and not all that much help if you're in a hurry. Besides, right now we need a diversion."

He removed his pack and crossbow from the horse, and handed Tamara her satchel. Then he slapped the animal on the rump. It bolted forward, across the creek, and then stopped to eye them accusingly.

"Let's go," Bill said. He walked into the center of the stream and turned south, slogging through the water.

Tamara followed, muttering under her breath. "Do you really think this is going to confuse anyone following us?" she asked irritably.

"Not if they were tracking by sight, but I don't think they were. If they could see us, I could have seen them. If they were following our tracks, then we suddenly quit leaving any."

"With a rather obvious cause, I should think. Besides, who could follow tracks on an Old Days' highway? It's solid concrete."

"Overlaid with dust. They could follow us."

"So we stop leaving tracks and they follow us into the stream and watch for tracks wherever we leave it."

Bill grinned. "But which way? They've got a 50-50 chance of being wrong. Or if they split and go both directions, there will be only half as many of them on our trail. Less than half, probably; they'll send someone

after the horse. It was leaving tracks enough, even though they'll be able to tell nobody was riding it."

"And if this was all your imagination to begin with?"

"Then we've had an uncomfortable time for nothing, and when you get back to Losalam you can tell everyone about the stupid barbarian you met. But for now, you just slosh ahead."

She did. Night fell, and they continued to walk down the stream bed. It was after moonrise, and Tamara was reeling with exhaustion, when Bill called a halt.

"Rock over there," he said, gesturing. "Hard bed, but it won't leave much evidence we've been here."

The night wind was cold, and Tamara shivered in her wet clothing. The bare rock was hard, and she knew she'd never get to sleep. The next thing she knew, she was waking up in the gray light of dawn, and he was sitting beside her, hunched over, his head on his knees, his body providing a partial shelter from the wind. His lone blanket had been thrown over her. She stirred, and he looked down.

"Ready for another wet day?"

She sat up, wincing; the rock had imprinted what she hoped were temporary dents in various parts of her anatomy.

"Did you sleep at all?" she demanded.

"Nope." He gave her his twisted grin. "Rock was too hard."

"Hadn't you better sleep a little while I watch?"

"I want to get out of here more than I want to sleep." Fishing inside his pack, he handed her a piece of cold rabbit. Coming up with another piece for himself, he swung his pack to his shoulders and stepped into the stream.

All day they followed the stream. At midday they saw what looked like a wall of black rock to the south. They approached it through the afternoon, and reached it just short of sunset. Here the stream turned back east.



Ahead of them was the rock, a dead black, pitted with thousands of tiny holes. It was soft; Bill scrambled up out of the stream, and the rock crumbled under his feet until he reached the top. South, the black stuff continued in a series of immense waves, like furrows turned by an impossibly huge plow, or perhaps like a petrified sea. Never having seen a sea except in pictures, Bill wasn't too sure of that similarity, but it reminded him of paintings of a stormy sea. He turned to give Tamara a hand and found her already beside him.

"What do you make of that?" he asked.

She shook her head wordlessly.

"Think it's something left from a bomb explosion?"

Tamara looked scornful. "You ever see a bomb crater that looked like this?"

"No," he admitted, "but then I never saw anything else that looked like this, either. What do you suppose it is?"

"I don't know, but it's inside Losalam's patrol area, so it's recorded somewhere. It isn't recent, and it isn't atomic."

Bill pried a piece of the rock loose with his knife. "Looks like lava," he commented, "but there aren't any volcanoes around."

"I think that's it," Tamara said. "It isn't from a volcano; it just seeped out of the ground. Millions of years ago. Not even savages live here, so we never paid much attention to it. I think I read a report about it, years ago."

"Not even savages, eh?" Bill studied "the ground thoughtfully. "Not much cover, but there are plants down in those crevices, and where there are plants there ought to be animals. I wonder if anyone would figure us to cross it?"

"I don't know if we can cross it," Tamara said. "I don't know how big it is, but it's miles across. And there isn't any food or water."

"Well, let's try going out a ways. We can parallel this edge and come back if the going gets too hard."

The crevices in the rock were higher than their heads. They scrambled up and over the waves of rock until Bill called a halt, deciding they were far enough out to be safe. No grass grew in the crevices here. They took turns standing guard, and by morning Tamara was thoroughly miserable and disgruntled. While they breakfasted over rabbit, she informed Bill that she wanted to take her share of the supplies and head for Losalam by herself. She looked nervous, almost distraught.

"I still think there's a clan or tribe back there looking for us," he said mildly, watching her carefully.

"I don't believe you. It's the male imagination working overtime. I think it's time I got away from you."

Bill looked at her in amazement, then tossed the pack over to her. "Help yourself. Take the blanket if you want it; I've done without it before."

"I don't need much—only my share of the food." Anxiously she rummaged through the pack and satchel, sorting out food parcels and dividing them into two piles. There weren't very many packages in either pile, she noted.

Then he realized what was troubling Tamara; as she drew closer to Losalam she became increasingly worried about what her people would think of her actions. Suddenly she had realized just how close to home she was. What Bill could not know was that the degree of intimacy and trust close proximity had developed between them aroused vague feelings of guilt in Tamara.

Bill heard the noise first, but failed to identify it. A humming sound that seemed familiar without being recognizable. He straightened up and cocked his head to hear better. Tamara noticed the movement, and stopped her work to see what had attracted his attention. To her, the noise was totally familiar, and she reacted without stopping to think.

"Down!" she shouted, scooping up her satchel and diving for one of the crevices in the lava. Automatically, Bill followed, getting his pack and himself off the top of the rock and under a small overhang.

"What?" he began, and then made the identification. "Oh."

The hovercraft roared out over the edge of the lava, but then paralleled

the edge without coming close to their hiding place. The hum increased to a low roar, held steady, and then gradually died away. When it had vanished completely, Bill sat up and looked quizzically at Tamara.

"Why weren't you up there waving your arms to be rescued?" he inquired.

She looked embarrassed. "Because I've been out here so long that I automatically duck for cover whenever anyone else appears, I guess. And then, I'd rather make it back by myself. A scout shouldn't have to be rescued. And if the pilot had found you with me, she'd have wanted to take you in for questioning, and when they found out about Wyoming...."

"They'd have made sure I didn't get back there. I'm not sure why you cared, but I'm grateful. Come on; I'll stay with you until we're out of this stuff, at least, and then we can go our separate ways. If there's any pursuit, it can worry about which of us to follow."

They were off the lava by midafternoon, but Bill decided to stay with Tamara until dark. "No point in separating now," he said. "Neither of us would get very far today." He was reluctant to leave at all, but decided not say anything about that. He was going to miss her, though.

They made a dry camp near sundown. Water had been nonexistent since they left the stream, and their canteens were running low. "I hear that sometimes you can get water out of cactus," Bill said, ambling over to a large squatty specimen and experimentally poking it with his knife.

"There's firewood here, if we need it," Tamara said, bending over to examine a pile of dead mesquite. Abruptly she jerked her arm back, uttering a small cry.

Bill was by her side immediately. She was holding her right arm with her left. Clearly visible on the right forearm were two puncture marks.

"What did it look like?" Bill demanded.

"Big snake," she said. "Five or six feet long, and fat, with sort of diamond markings on the back."

"Did it make a noise?"

"A sort of buzzing, just when it struck. It was in the pile of brush; I never saw it until it bit me."

"We're in trouble, then," Bill said. "That was a rattlesnake. Before the Blowup they had all sorts of gadgets and medicine for snakebite, but now we're back to primitive remedies. Sit down on the ground."

Tamara sat, and Bill took off his belt and wrapped it around her arm, using the barrel of his revolver to twist it tightly until she moaned in pain.

"Hold that," he ordered, "while I get ready for the next part—which isn't going to be pleasant."

## ***CHAPTER SEVEN***

The tourniquet wasn't pleasant, but Tamara held it, watching her arm slowly swell below the twisted belt, while Bill built a small fire with the mesquite branches. As soon as the fire caught, he walked over and loosened the tourniquet a moment, then tightened it again. Tamara gasped with pain.

With the fire blazing, Bill drew his knife from its sheath and thrust the blade into the flames. Tamara sat watching him, holding the belt tight around her arm. She was beginning to feel dizzy now, and the world was slowly dissolving into flickering firelight. When Bill rose and walked over to her, he seemed enormously tall, towering above her. The knife-blade flashed red. Some corner of her mind assured her that it was merely reflecting the firelight, but it seemed to have become part of the fire itself.

Then Bill released the tourniquet, held her arm firmly in his left hand, and slashed the knife-blade across the puncture wounds, and Tamara was convinced it had become part of the fire. It felt as though a burning brand had been laid across her arm. She cried out and tried to jerk away, but Bill held her arm in an iron grip and slashed again. Then with the blood flowing freely from the wound, he sheathed the knife and covered her with the blanket.

She could feel a gentle heaving of the earth beneath her. Illogically it reminded her of the term "ground swell," but surely the ground couldn't actually be moving. Her right arm ached terribly. Looking up, she saw Bill kneeling beside her.

Fumbling with her left hand, she clutched his wrist for support.

"You'll be all right," he said reassuringly. "I'll bandage those cuts when they've bled enough, but right now the thing to do is relax, sleep if you can, and let the poison bleed out. You're going to be sick for awhile, but you ought to get over it."

She remembered their decision to part company. "You'll stay with me?" she asked. Somehow, that was terribly important.

"I'll take care of you. Now lie back and relax."

The next thing she knew, it was morning. Her head hurt, her arm ached, she was covered with sweat, and her stomach was in turmoil, but at least the ground had stopped moving. Turning her head, she saw Bill sitting in front of a small fire.

He caught the motion of her head and came over. "Feel any better?" he inquired.

She considered this awhile. "I don't see how this could be an improvement over anything, but I seem to recall feeling worse last night."

"You'll be all right, then," he said reassuringly. "The way that snake venom hit, I was beginning to wonder."

"I thought snakebite... killed people," she said weakly. "Not just made them sick."

"No, it doesn't often kill, even without any treatment. It hit you harder than it does most people, though. I suppose it might have killed you if nothing had been done."

She raised her right arm: it seemed slightly puffy, and a rough bandage covered the knife wounds. It also ached when she moved it, and she let it drop back to the ground.

"I guess," she said slowly, "you saved my life."

"It seemed the logical thing to do at the time," Bill replied. "I hope it doesn't somehow offend your military code."

She managed a slight chuckle. "Barbarians aren't supposed to go

around saving the lives of citizens, but I don't know of any rule against it. I think I'm going back to sleep now."

She was already snoring softly when Bill sat back down by the fire. They were in a bad spot, he thought. They needed water, and there didn't appear to be any within reach. He had squeezed what they had out of the pulp of a cactus, but that variety of cactus seemed scarce, and others that he'd tried didn't yield much liquid. He'd made a primitive ground-trap for obtaining dew, but that wouldn't amount to much. Tamara was going to need a lot of water, and she was in no shape to go looking for it. The obvious solution was for him to leave her and go look for water by himself. If he found any, he could bring it back, assuming she was still alive. He didn't regard the idea with much favor. Logic or not, he didn't want to leave her alone in the Wild Lands. He smiled faintly at his own squeamishness; Tamara would undoubtedly scorn any idea that she was entitled to any protection because of her sex. Except, he finally admitted, it wasn't just because of her sex; it was because she had become important to him. He thought of Leah, back in Wyoming, and smiled again. Leah had done him a good turn when she broke their engagement; otherwise he'd probably have married her and never known what he was missing.

But now it was up to him to do something.

There was a small hill about a mile away. He walked to it and examined the countryside from its top. There was no trace of water. Not even the stream they had followed yesterday was visible, though it obviously couldn't be too far away. If they could get back to it.

Bill wondered about that. If their unseen pursuers had followed them downstream, then going back would mean walking into their hands. But going forward would be taking an even greater chance, unless Tamara knew of a source of water ahead.

He walked back to look at her. She was sleeping peacefully; the delirium from the venom was gone. But she was still feverish and had lost a fair amount of blood before he had allowed the cuts to close. She was going to need a lot of water.

The day wore on. Tamara awoke once, or at least came half-awake; he gave her a little cactus juice and she lay back. Late in the afternoon she woke again and took a little food before going back to sleep. Near dusk she

began moaning and thrashing about. This didn't seem to be related to any snakebite symptoms he'd ever heard about. Worried, he watched her awhile, before bending to replace the blanket she'd thrown off. As he touched her, she came awake with the same violence he'd noted before, striking out blindly. She hit him hard once in the eye before he caught her wrists and she looked up, fully awake now, and startled. Seeing him, she relaxed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I haven't done that in days. Did I hurt you?"

"I've been hit harder, but I wouldn't exactly say it was pleasant. How do you feel? You were thrashing around so much I was worried; I never saw snakebite act that way."

"It wasn't the bite," she said. "I had a bad dream. You'd left me, and one of the savages had caught me and was twisting my arm. That's probably why I woke up fighting."

He expected her to go back to sleep, but after lying with her eyes closed for a short period, she sat up. "I feel better now," she announced. "How long have I been asleep?"

"All day." He considered. "How long before you think you can walk?"

"I don't know; why?"

"We're short of water. As soon as we can, we need to get out of here. Do you know of any water between here and Losalam?"

She thought about it before answering. "There must be some," she said finally, "but no, I don't know of any. We're beyond my patrol territory. Even in the area I know, there isn't much water until you get within a few miles of the city. Our farms are mostly on the west side; there's more water there."

"All right," Bill said. "Then as soon as you can walk, I think we'd better head back for that stream."

"And this pursuit you were worried about?"

He shrugged. "If I was alone, I'd go ahead. But you lost a lot of blood from my surgery on that bite, and you're still feverish from the poison. You

need water; more than we can carry, probably. We'll need to stay by the stream for a day or two. It's got nothing to do with your ability to keep up with me."

"But you don't think I could, even if I was perfectly healthy," she said.

"Well, no," he agreed. "But if you were perfectly healthy I'd be afraid to tell you so."

She managed a chuckle. "But it's all right for you to tell me so as long as I'm too weak to hit back. What are you going to do if these mysterious pursuers turn out to be real?"

"I hope they'll turn out to have given up when we entered the stream. If they didn't, we'll just have to dodge them. Or fight."

"Which reminds me," she said, frowning. "I thought we were going to go our separate ways once we got out of the lava."

"That was before you got hurt. I wouldn't leave anybody out here alone in your condition. Unless," he looked at her carefully, "you'd rather I left."

"No." She looked as though she intended to say something more, but changed her mind.

They ate the last of the rabbit, and Tamara commented that Bill would need to do more hunting.

"Not until we get to water. That's our most important need now."

That night Bill again stayed awake while Tamara slept. He'd been taking catnaps during the day, but he was getting short on sleep. Eventually he'd have to rest, even if it meant not keeping a watch. They'd both be at the end of their strength by the time she'd recovered enough from the bite to move.

Wouldn't it be simpler for him to go to the stream by himself, refill the canteens, and come back? He could make it in a day; they couldn't be all that far from the stream. Or in a night; if he left now, he might be able to get back before Tamara woke in the morning. That was the solution, he thought excitedly; he must have been more tired than he thought, or he'd have thought of it sooner. Don't try to drag a sick woman to water; bring



the water to her. He slung his canteen across one shoulder and fumbled for her more cumbersome water container. It stuck in her satchel, and he yanked at it; if he was going to reach the stream and return by dawn, he'd have to hurry. The container pulled free, clanking against something else in the satchel, and he hastily threw it over his other shoulder.

"Where are you going, Bill?" The question halted him momentarily, as he quelled a brief urge to race away from her without getting involved in a time-consuming discussion.

"No point in making you walk to water," he explained. "I'll just go get some and come back. But I have to hurry to get back by dawn."

"Come here a minute, first. I want to tell you something."

He hesitated, then strode over to stand by her. "What is it?"

"Down here. I won't yell up at you." He squatted down, and she reached out and caught his wrist with her left hand.

"I don't want you to go."

"But it's the obvious solution!" he said, exasperated.

He started to rise, but she held his wrist with a surprisingly firm grip. "No, it isn't the obvious solution," she said. "It isn't even your solution. Remember the last time you wanted to rush out of camp at night? Can't you feel it out there, somewhere, putting thoughts into your head?"

His overwhelming rush to reach the stream evaporated. "No," he said slowly, "I didn't feel anything out there. As far as I could tell, everything was my own idea. You mean you felt it?"

She nodded. "When I woke up, I had this urge to go east. But that was silly. I think I'm beginning to be able to tell which thoughts are mine and which are put into my head by something else."

Again he tried to stand, and again she pulled him back. "No! Whatever it is, its power is lessened when we're in contact. Maybe some of my immunity rubs off; I don't know. But stay here."

He gave her his one-sided grin. "I guess I don't have much choice; for a

sick woman, you've got a powerful grip there."

He moved to sit on the ground instead of squatting on his heels, and for a moment her grip was broken. In that moment, the urge to go to the stream came back full-powered. Caught off balance, he gasped, and sat down heavily. Tamara's hand found his wrist, and his desire to leave camp faded. He turned to look at her.

"For a moment there, when you weren't touching me... now I believe you."

"You didn't before?"

"It was hard to. You had to be right, but it just didn't make sense." He grinned again. "It still doesn't, but now I've felt it myself. I wonder why it works that way?"

"Does it matter?"

He was surprised. "Of course it matters. If you know something works, you can control it. But I guess I'll have to be content with describing it and letting our scientists figure it out. If they believe me at all."

There was no answer, and Bill looked down to discover that Tamara was asleep. Surprisingly, the urge to leave hadn't increased, so it didn't depend on any transference of willpower. Unless Tamara had more willpower when she was asleep than he did when he was awake, which wasn't a train of thought that he cared to pursue.

Experimentally, he released his wrist from her grip. She stirred and moaned in her sleep, and he felt again the desire to walk out into the night. Hastily, he located her hand and held it. The desire faded, and she relaxed, smiling a little in her sleep.

The next morning there was enough water to give Tamara a drink. The alien presence was gone, which seemed fairly conclusive evidence that it was nocturnal. Tamara felt considerably better; the fever was gone, and on trying it, she found she could stand up.

Bill packed their supplies, loading everything on his own back. "If you can stand up, you can walk," he said. "With no food or water, we'll both just get weaker if we stay here. Even going slow, we should be able to make the

stream by tonight."

"You're the boss," Tamara said. Then her eyes glinted. "Except at night, when your Menace is abroad."

It was a hazy day, but still hot. They walked slowly, making frequent rest stops. The insects were frustrating; gnats danced around their faces, and other small biting insects were a constant annoyance. Bill had thought himself well used to these, but here next to the old lava flow they were almost unbearable. He looked in vain for one of the odorous bushes he'd spotted earlier. He was willing to experiment with the juice of the plant as an insect repellent, but naturally when he needed one, there were none around.

The heat increased as the day wore on, and the rest stops became more frequent. Tamara plodded ahead, while Bill began making side trips, to check on possible water sources, look for food, and scout for any possible ambushes. He found nothing.

"You know," Tamara said during one rest stop, "I always thought I'd die before taking orders from a man. I'd read about the Old Days, of course, and I could never understand why the women acted as they did. But now that I have a clear choice, I'm taking your orders instead of dying."

"There isn't much that people won't do instead of dying," Bill said. "A few people will die for honor, but there aren't many of them; I never met one. There are even fewer who will die for their prejudices."

"What a cynical attitude," Tamara said. "If you feel like that about honor, why are you risking your life here in the Wild Lands?"

"For honor," Bill said, straight-faced.

Tamara stared at him uncertainly for a moment before laughing. "My superiors used to warn me about being irreverent; I don't think they could even conceive of anyone with your attitudes."

"You're not irreverent," Bill said. "Or you weren't; I've been trying to give you a little education in irreverence while I'm with you. If the residents of Losalam are that rigidly indoctrinated, I don't see why you're in such a hurry to get back there."

"Why... it's my home. My family, all my friends, and it's civilized. Not to mention my military responsibilities. Of course I want to get back."

"What you mean is, it's the only place you know. Are you sure you have any real friends there?"

She looked startled for a moment, and then thoughtful. Finally she said, "Well, I didn't have many real friends there. I hadn't realized that until now. Losalam looks—different—than it did a week ago, and not nearly as inviting. But there's still my duty. And I have one very close friend there, and I want to see him again. He's partly responsible for my survival, too, you know. If it hadn't been for my talks with him, I would probably have committed suicide when I was captured, like so many scouts do. The thought of being abused by a man is too degrading for them."

So she had a boyfriend back home, Bill thought. It was what he should have expected.

At the next stop, Tamara asked, "Aren't you anxious to get back to Wyoming?"

Bill, who had been trying to estimate their chances of reaching water before Tamara collapsed, had to think a moment before he could relate the question to their previous conversation. Then he said, "No, I wouldn't say I'm anxious. I want to get back sometime, and in one piece, but I'm not in any hurry about it. I like being on my own."

Tamara shook her head. She had enjoyed seeing new country and had joined the scouts partly because of that, but full reality had always been the tightly structured world of Losalam. The idea of preferring to be alone was strange. Then she looked again at Bill's face. Since her first shocked encounter, she had become gradually accustomed to the dreadfully scarred features, to the one-sided grimaces that substituted for expressions of humor. But if people in Wyoming shunned him because of his face?

He divined her thoughts. "Right. If people could look at me without shuddering, maybe I'd be more interested in being with them."

"If you were more interested in being with them, they might have a chance to get used to you. I thought you were an ogre when I first saw you, but I've managed to get over it."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You have, at that. More than some at home who've known me all my life. And I did give them a chance to get used to me; I stayed in Popo Agie almost a year before I took my first scouting trip."

"Maybe it's because I haven't known you all my life; I never saw you look any different. Your friends had to forget what you looked like originally."

Bill shook his head. "I don't think so. You just have more tolerance for monsters. Which I guess is encouraging, because I think if we're going to get rid of this telepathic killer here in the Wild Lands we're going to have to unite to do it, and we'll need Losalam's resources. Maybe your people will be more willing to cooperate than I thought."

"I don't think so," Tamara said. "They won't cooperate with males unless their noses are rubbed into necessity, like mine has been. Come on; I'm rested now."

At the next stop, there was no conversation. Tamara was tiring rapidly. Stops became more frequent and longer. By midafternoon, Bill was helping her walk; when he finally spotted the line of brush that marked the stream, he was carrying her. She managed to stagger the last few yards on her own. After they both drank, she insisted that she was strong enough to stand or at least sit guard over their packs while Bill hunted.

Bill came back at dusk, empty-handed. Tamara looked up expectantly, saw his expression, and said nothing. He walked over and sat down beside her.

"Nothing stirring," he said. "Something has scared off the game."

"Your Menace?"

"Don't call it my Menace, as though I'm responsible for it," he said irritably. "I don't know. It could be that, or it could be whoever is following us. I found somebody's recent camp. Couldn't tell how many people; three or four, anyway. I hope they went on downstream. They should have; there wasn't any reason for them to hang around here."

"But you think" we're in trouble."

"I know we're in trouble. No food—well, make that not much food. I'll go get some edible plants in a minute; there should be some along the stream. Anyway, there's something around that can call us to it and kill us; and at least part of the Wild Lands' clans are on our trail. I can't think why they've followed us this far, unless it's Eric, still after revenge. I didn't think even he was that persistent, though."

"But if they've gone on downstream..."

"If they keep going, we're all right. But they won't follow the stream forever; sooner or later they'll either have to get back to their home hunting grounds or risk having to fight another clan. And if they split up to follow the stream both ways, they'll probably follow it back to make sure they meet."

"Then we can't stay here."

"No longer than we have to. We'll camp tonight. How far is Losalam from here?"

"I don't know. I've been trying to think." Tamara gestured at the map, lying on the ground beside her. "It's hard to judge how long it will take to walk somewhere, but I'd say we could make it in two or three days. Maybe four, if I get any weaker. But you can't go there; they'd kill you."

"I thought savages were sometimes allowed inside."

"Not carrying crossbows and firearms, they aren't. If you aren't killed on sight, you will be after you're questioned."

"Point is, you have to go there. We can carry enough water for that long, if we're careful. I'd like to find some food, but I can do without if necessary. Once we get there, I'll take my chances on being able to keep clear of your people. Your scouting may be good enough to find and disperse large groups of savages, but I'll bet you are not able to locate just one specific man."

"I'm not a package that you have to deliver on someone's doorstep, you know. Once we get within a day's walk of the outlying farms, I'll make it by myself."

"When we get within a day's walk of the outlying farms, we'll see what

shape you're in. If necessary, I'll deposit you on some farmer's doorstep like an unwanted kitten. Now then, let's see about something to eat."

This time, he returned with an assortment of stalks and roots of various plants, which he boiled together. The result was tasteless, but Bill guaranteed it to be harmless and more or less nourishing.

After eating, Tamara yawned.

"Sounds like time for sleep," Bill said. "I'll sit up and watch."

"Have you been getting any sleep at all?" she asked. "You've got to rest sometime."

"Sometime I will. Now it's your turn."

"Sit close, then," she ordered. "I don't want you wandering off to feed a monster."

Bill obeyed, sitting-next to her as she lay down. She took his hand, lay back, and was asleep immediately. Bill sat thinking. If this sort of contact was going to be necessary, how was he going to manage after he left her? Maybe the thing wouldn't come close to Losalarn; the residents evidently knew little about it, so it must keep its distance. But if it picked him up later? He really should practise resisting its call on his own.

But he continued to hold Tamara's hand.

She woke up before dawn and insisted that Bill get some sleep. Although he slept for a few hours, they were on their way early in the morning. Bill had filled the canteens with water and the empty spaces in their packs with various plants, so they'd be assured of at least one more meal.

By the middle of the morning, they were into a grassland, with few bushes or trees. Not enough water for the larger forms of vegetation, Bill decided, but quite a bit more than was available near the lava flow. For a time they followed a rivulet, apparently a tributary of the stream they had left, but eventually it turned north and they refilled their canteens with its muddy water and continued west. Rest stops were still frequent, but Tamara was slowly regaining her strength. Bill made side trips for hunting, but game was still scarce. Twice he took shots at circling birds,

and both times he missed. At noon, he gathered the droppings of some large grazing animal and made a fire of them, cooking about half of the plants they had brought. This time the results had a flavor—an unpleasant one—but they ate everything anyway.

"With grazing herds here, that tiger might be around somewhere," Tamara commented.

"Thanks for the thought," Bill muttered. "We don't have enough trouble; you have to dream up a tiger for us."

"I've never understood just where the tigers and rhinos came from, anyway," Tamara said. "I suppose they escaped from zoos, but if the cities were H-bombed in the Blowup, why did any of the zoo animals survive? The people didn't."

"That's one I can answer," Bill said. "We had an old man in Wyoming that Dad used to talk to a lot. The old man had lived in California before the Blowup. He said things were bad there; there were food riots in Los Angeles and the other cities years before the Blowup. Anyway, he said there was this big outdoor area in California where they kept wild animals. Sort of like a zoo, only the animals were in a big area—several square miles—and not in cages. There was a fence around the whole thing, of course. During some food shortage, a mob went out there and broke down the fence to get the animals to eat. They killed most of the animals, but a few of the dangerous ones got away. And I suppose they bred and gradually increased their population. Besides, if there was a big zoo like that in California, there were probably others, and the same thing could have happened. The man said there was a big hunt for the escaped animals, but the Blowup came before they found many of them."

That night, they had reached a rocky hillside. They camped in a formation of strangely sculptured rock on the crest of the hill. At first, Bill thought the place had been constructed for some human purpose, but when he examined the rocks he found that the sculptors had been wind and water. The formation of oddly-shaped columns stretched for some distance along the hillside. He had to hunt for materials to make a fire with, but eventually found enough fuel to cook the rest of the plants, boiling them and then drinking the cooking water at the finish of the meal. That left them without too much water in the canteens, but Tamara thought they might reach the Losalam farms in another day-and-a-half, and they could last that long.



That night, Tamara insisted Bill get his share of sleep and took her turn at guard duty. She woke him before dawn, they packed their equipment, and headed west, downslope. The telepathic summons hadn't reached them during the night, and Bill was more cheerful, hoping that they had moved beyond the range of the thing. He'd feel a lot safer coming back with an expedition from Wyoming if he did any further investigating of the thing.

The morning was cool, and the walk downhill was easy. They had made perhaps a hundred feet, and were well out into the open, away from the rocks, when an arrow from above them took Bill in the shoulder.

## ***CHAPTER EIGHT***

He sprawled forward, a second arrow burning a crease in the side of his head as he went down. He was still conscious. His first thought when the arrow struck was that they were trapped in the open, with no cover in sight, and he was facing downhill, away from their assailants. He'd have to get his revolver out, sit up, and turn to face uphill, by which time he'd look like a porcupine, if they were any good at all with their bows.

Suddenly there was another weight on his back. Tamara had thrown herself upon him, screaming and wailing and probably, he thought, tearing her hair. He tried to figure out what it was all about. She sounded like a tribeswoman mourning a dead husband. Even if she had that much emotional involvement with him, which wasn't likely, she wouldn't have expressed it that way. So what was she up to?

Then he felt one of her hands reaching inside his shirt and fumbling for the butt of his revolver, and he knew. His first reaction was to keep the gun himself, but then he remembered his awkward position. The way Tamara was thrashing around, it would look perfectly coincidental to the watchers if she happened to be facing uphill in a few moments. He never doubted that she could use the gun. He shifted his position slightly, taking the weight of his body off the revolver, and she pulled it from under him. Instead of using it, however, she went into further paroxysms of mock grief. Now what?

Her wailing continued, and after a time he realized what her plan must be. She was gambling that the attackers wouldn't kill her from their positions in the rocks, but would come down to capture her, deeming a

grief-stricken woman harmless. Women in the Wild Lands weren't expected to be fighters, or to resist after their men were killed. If she could lure their ambushers out of the rocks, she might have a good chance to destroy them, particularly if she let them get close enough. The closer the better, with a strange gun. He wondered why she hadn't drawn her own dart pistol, and then remembered that since the snakebite he had been carrying it for her in her satchel, along with other nonessentials. Getting it out might have looked just a wee bit suspicious.

Apparently the ruse was working to some extent; at least no more arrows were falling around them. But nobody was coming down to collect the loot, either. Maybe they were just being cautious. Tamara's wild grief was being allowed to subside into sniffles. She had worked her way around him so that she could still direct her alleged grief at his fallen head, while her body was below his on the slope, and facing uphill. In fact, he realized with amused admiration, she was in a position where his body would partially protect her from any fire from above. So much for the genuineness of her grief, he thought. Nothing like using your lover as a barricade.

Her muffled sobbing continued, while he lay still and tried to look dead. He wouldn't be far from it if something didn't happen soon; he needed to get that arrow out of his shoulder and stop the bleeding. Weren't those cowardly devils up there on the hill ever going to move?

When they did move, Bill sensed it by a tenseness in Tamara's body. Then she relaxed again, calmly waiting until they came closer. Bill was considerably less calm; he wanted to turn around to see what was going on. But he willed himself to lie still.

Now he could hear footsteps crunching on the rocky ground. Somebody coming, and somebody big, with sounds like that. He strained to listen. Yes, there were other, lighter footfalls. More than one pair, though when he tried to make out the number he couldn't tell because of the distant roaring in his good ear. He knew that sound of old, and very nearly shook his head in exasperation. Dammit, he couldn't afford to go into shock now!

Then there was a voice, very close to him.

"*This* stupid wailing woman is the fearsome city warrior you told me about?" The contempt was scathing. Bill felt Tamara stiffen, but then she

resumed her moaning.

"Be careful," came another voice, from farther back. "She knows city magic; we should have at least wounded her before coming close." That voice was familiar; it was one Bill had heard not too many days before. Eric of the Lindsays had finally caught up with them. Since the first voice had been strange, Eric had evidently picked up some recruits along the way.

"The woman doesn't live who tricks me, or uses magic against me," the first voice came again. "I'm Norman of the Plains, and I have ways of teaching obedience. Get up, you!"

No more need for concealment. Bill turned his head to watch, as Tamara rose to her feet. Norman of the Plains was a big man, with a full beard, unkempt hair, and brawny muscles. He wore only a breechclout, with a long knife stuck in one side of it and a horsewhip in the other. He was standing easily, feet well spread, one hand resting on the butt of the whip.

Tamara had been holding the gun under her body. She concealed it as much as possible while she rose, then stepped forward, thrust the muzzle of the weapon almost into Norman's face, and pulled the trigger. The big man looked incredibly surprised, opened his mouth in a silent gasp, and went over backward as though he'd been hit with a club. He bounced when he hit the ground and made no further move. The gun kicked backward in Tamara's hand, surprising her; her experience with weapons had been confined to dart guns and lasers. She hung onto it and frantically brought it around for a shot at the next man.

Bill twisted around and sat up, ignoring a wash of pain in his back that nearly flattened him again. Mark of the Lindsays and a strange middle-aged tribesman were frozen in astonishment on the slope. Eric of the Lindsays was in full retreat; he'd heard the sound of, that weapon before and wanted no part of it.

Tamara fired at the stranger and missed. He brought up his bow, and she took careful aim and fired again. The man dropped the bow, folded both arms across his stomach, stood swaying for a moment, and pitched forward.

Mark now had an arrow nocked. Bill flung out an empty hand and

Mark instinctively flinched and the arrow went wide. Without trying to fire again, he turned and ran for the rocks, where Eric had already disappeared. Tamara fired at him, and he shrieked and continued running. Not seriously hurt, evidently, but it looked like it might be a while before he stopped running. Which left Eric and whoever he had left behind to cover him. Could be almost any number, considering that two of the four they'd seen had been strangers; Eric might well have joined up with another tribe.

Bill turned to tell Tamara to be careful, before realizing she was no longer standing over him. Revolver in hand, she had started up the hill, pausing only to pick up Norman's long knife as she went. He opened his mouth to shout after her and then closed it again. She knew what she was doing and had no time for distractions. Their attackers couldn't be allowed to take cover in those rocks while he and Tamara were still in the open. They had to be killed or driven down the far side of the hill, and it should be done as soon as possible, before they recovered from their surprise. Eric was still unwounded, which meant Tamara was no match for him physically. Give him time to think, and he could still gain his revenge.

Then Bill realized something else. He had automatically kept track of the shots fired, without thinking about it; it was something one learned to do. There had been four of them, which meant that Tamara was pursuing at least two men while carrying a revolver with only one shot left in it. Her dart gun was in the satchel at Bill's side, and since she wasn't used to the revolver, she probably didn't even realize her danger. This time he did call to her, but she disappeared into the rocks without stopping.

Bill pawed through the satchel, withdrew the dart gun, and stuck it in his belt. Then he had to sit and pant for a while. The roaring in his ears had receded a bit, but could he stand up?

Somehow, he forced himself erect. The world around him appeared to be swaying dangerously, but he managed to wobble forward. The hill seemed twice as steep as he remembered it. He was positive that it hadn't been moving from side to side a few minutes ago, but he continued to work his way toward the rocks. He had almost reached them when there was a shot from somewhere ahead of him. He hoped Tamara had hit something, because now she was carrying an empty gun. When Bill moved past the column where Tamara had disappeared a few moments before, a

wave of dizziness swept him and he had to lean against the rock for support.

When it passed, he looked for Tamara, and saw her near the crest of the hill, carrying the now-empty revolver. As he watched, he saw Eric dart from behind a column to the shelter of a pile of fallen rock. Tamara swung up the revolver and pulled the trigger just before Eric disappeared from her sight. The hammer clicked, and she stared at the gun for a moment. Then she must have realized the problem, because she dropped the revolver and reached for Norman's long knife, now thrust in her belt.

Unfortunately for her, Eric realized the problem at the same time and sprang toward her. She got the knife out just as he reached her, and with a sweep of his arm knocked the blade from her hand. As she backed up, he drew his own knife.

Bill swept out the dart gun and fired. He was still shaky, and the dart flashed past Eric's face instead of hitting him. He looked up from his intended victim to see Bill with the dart gun. He didn't see that Bill was on the verge of collapse; all he saw was that the stranger with the magic weaponry was apparently unkillable, and prepared to attack him again. He whirled and disappeared over the edge of the hill. Bill took a step toward Tamara, and the dizziness hit him again and he never felt it when he hit the ground.

When he awoke, it was night again. He lay quietly, examining his surroundings. It was a dark night; from the lack of moon or stars he decided there were clouds overhead. A flickering light nearby he identified as a fire; more careful appraisal revealed that it was reflecting from a rock. He was still on the hilltop, then, in all probability. There was something around his head; bringing a weak arm up to investigate, he found that a cloth had been tied around it. A bandage, presumably. Another, larger bandage circled his chest and shoulder. He was lying on his back; therefore the arrow had been removed. He thought about trying to sit up and decided against it. His arm dropped back to the ground, making a small sound.

Instantly, Tamara's voice came from somewhere behind him. "Are you awake, Bill?"

"Yes." The word was barely audible, even to him. He tried again, putting more force into it. "Yes!" This time it was a harsh whisper.

"How do you feel?" Her voice sounded anxious.

He thought about that for awhile. "Terrible," he decided. His head ached, his entire body was a slow, dull throb, and he was so weak that the slightest movement required the full force of his willpower.

"I think they're still out there," Tamara explained. "Two of them got away, and there seemed to be another group farther back. I've got the dart gun, but it doesn't carry very far. I can't cock your crossbow, and I was a little afraid to try to reload your revolver."

"Forget the crossbow," Bill whispered. "Let me lie here awhile and I'll try to reload the revolver for you."

"You don't have to do the reloading; just tell me how. I was afraid I'd do something wrong, but if you hadn't wakened up I was going to try it by myself, anyway."

"All right. Where are they, and how many?"

"I don't know how many. They've got a fire over there." She gestured to a vague area beyond the edge of the hill. "It's pretty far away. I could see figures. There were at least three, but I don't know how many more there might be. I didn't want to make a fire at all, but I thought I'd better sterilize the knife before I cut the arrow out of your shoulder. I saw that one of the savages had some raw meat in his pack, and I cooked it. Want some?"

"Not yet. A little water might help, if we have any."

"We've got plenty of that. Both the men I killed were carrying water." In a moment she was beside him, her left arm under his back, lifting him to a sitting position. Her right arm, holding a canteen, was still bandaged, but the swelling had disappeared. He drank, taking less water than he really wanted, and shook his head when she offered more. She carefully laid him back down.

"That's better," he said, and she smiled at him.

"I couldn't tell how badly you were hurt," she said. "The arrow was in pretty deep and angled toward your back; I was afraid it might have hit something vital."

He shook his head weakly. "Doesn't feel like it. Only awfully sore, and awfully weak; I must have lost a lot of blood."

She nodded. "You lost a lot from the arrow wound, and more when I cut it out. I... we're given training in dealing with arrow wounds, but I'm not very good at it."

"Good enough, I guess; the patient survived. Bring the gun over, and my pack. I guess we can see well enough over here to reload it."

"I could move you closer to the fire."

He laughed silently. "Not with black powder. This is close enough."

She brought the gun, and he examined it. "How long has the hammer been down on the contact here?"

"Why... since the fight, I guess. Several hours."

"All right. We'd better change the battery, then. It might still be good, but this is no time to take risks. Always put the hammer down in one of these safety notches when you aren't shooting; leaving it down maintains the electrical connection and drains the battery."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Bill was surprised. "Why should you be sorry? For somebody who's never fired one of these guns before, you did pretty well. Two men dead and one wounded in five shots would be a pretty good average for someone who had been handling the gun for years. Changing batteries is no problem."

While she did the work, he coached her in opening the butt, replacing the battery, and loading each cylinder with powder and ball, ramming each charge in tightly so it wouldn't fall out when the gun was fired or carried muzzle down. When she had finished, he lay back and closed his eyes.

"Watch out for Eric. He's tricky."

"Eric?"

Bill opened his eyes again. "You didn't recognize him? Well, I guess you

didn't see as much of him as I did. That man you were playing tag with there at the last; he was the leader of the clan I was with when you were shot down. Somehow he managed to pick up some new recruits, and he's been following us. After the crossbow, I think. And the gun. And you."

"You mean I only rank third in his lusts?"

Bill managed to smile. "He's got very poor taste, and anyway, he's probably owned more women than he has crossbows."

"All right. Go to sleep now; I'll keep watch."

Bill slept, woke, ate something that Tamara fed him without waking up enough to know what it was, and slept again. When he finally became conscious of his surroundings again, it was late afternoon. Tamara was nowhere in sight, but after a few minutes she came around one of the columns. She looked exhausted, but managed a smile when she saw Bill was awake. For the first time, Bill realized where his bandages had come from; her coveralls had been roughly cut down to a sort of blouse and shorts. Her figure was just as good as he thought it would be.

"Better?" she inquired.

"I think I'll have to be. How long have you been awake?"

"I don't know. I can last awhile longer; you're in no shape to do guard duty."

"Any word from our friends out there?"

"Nothing. I'm not even sure they're still there."

"They are. One of them is, anyway." Bill tried to sit up, but didn't quite make it.

"Stay down," Tamara ordered. "You can't afford to start that wound bleeding again."

"I can't afford to have you fall asleep on your feet, either. Look, if you could help me up to the top of the hill, I could keep looking while I was lying down. Just for a couple of hours, maybe, but you could be getting some rest. You weren't exactly in top shape when all this started, you



know."

She considered the idea, then nodded. "I guess you're right. I am pretty tired." She flashed him a quick grin. "I just didn't want to admit it in front of a mere barbarian."

With Tamara helping him, Bill crawled the few feet to the top of the hill. She started to pull him over behind one of the columns, but he resisted.

"No point in my being here if I can't see what's going on," he said.

"As long as they don't see you first. That column would give a lot of protection."

"Hard to see a man lying down and being still, and I couldn't do much else if I wanted to. I'll be all right; you get some sleep."

She handed him his revolver, hesitated a moment, and then gave him her dart gun as well. "Know how it works?" she asked.

"You explained it once."

The land was quiet in the afternoon sun. Bill wondered how much food and water they had and decided it didn't really matter. They couldn't go look for any. If supplies ran out, then something would have to be done. He wondered if Eric was lying out there somewhere, watching the hilltop. Probably. It was surprising that the savage chief hadn't attacked them last night, but maybe it took awhile to get his followers sufficiently worked up to face the revolver again. They probably thought it was magic. Again, it didn't matter; whether or not Eric was really out there, they had to act as if he was. Eric and his followers had a big advantage, but Bill hoped they didn't know it. With Bill unable to stand and Tamara exhausted from the strains of snakebite, the battle, and caring for him, one good rush would finish them. His crossbow outranged any of the weapons on the other side, but it did no good when neither of them was strong enough to cock it. However, since Eric's last vision had been of Bill firing at him, he ought to be wary of the weapon. In fact, as long as Eric didn't suspect how badly Bill was hurt, they ought to be pretty safe in daylight. After dark it would be a different matter; then it would all depend on how well Eric could control his followers.

Bill wondered if the unknown menace was still around. Since Tamara seemed partially immune and he couldn't answer any call if he heard one, the creature could do them an immense favor by appearing and reducing the number of Eric's men.

Lying there in the sunlight, he became sleepy. He was about to call Tamara just before dusk when she appeared.

"I've found something... funny," she said. "I want you to look at it."

She helped him up and supported him as they walked along the top of the hill to a point perhaps twenty yards from where the fight had ended. Bill was feeling well enough to decide that it was pleasant to have her arm around him and to wish that he was in better shape. But then, if he was in better shape, the arm wouldn't be there. Near a cluster of small boulders, she stopped and pointed.

"There," she said.

Bill looked. Just below the rock cluster someone had removed some of the sand and shallow soil from the hillside. The corner of something that looked remarkably like a wooden door, was exposed.

"The sand had blown away from the top of it there," Tamara explained. "I cleaned away some more, until I got to the corner."

She helped Bill over to a spot where he could sit with his back against a rock and still see the door.

"Do you think we should clear away the rest of it?" she asked. "I've been using your camp ax, and the soil is thin."

Whatever was behind the door, Bill thought, was unlikely to be of much help to them, but considering their position they might as well try anything.

"If you can finish before dark," he said. "I don't think they'll attack in daylight."

Dusk was deepening into darkness when the last sand had been cleared away. Exposed was a solid wood door set into the hillside. A rusty handle projected from one side, and a chain and padlock secured the door to a

ring set into the rock.

Tamara attacked the door with the camp ax and discovered that the solid appearance was misleading. The rotten wood splintered under her assault; in a few minutes the handle and lock had been cut loose, and she had wrenched the door open on creaking hinges. She came back to help Bill to his feet, and together they peered into the opening.

It took a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the gloom of the interior. Then they saw a rough-hewn passage extending into the rock, back and down. Tamara crept in. As it sloped down into the hill, the passage also became smaller, until it finally ended, some thirty or forty feet back. Stacked along the walls for the first several feet were boxes and crates, covered with dust and fine-drifted sand.

"An Old Days' supply dump!" Tamara exclaimed. "Military, do you think?"

"Doubt it," Bill said. "Not big enough; I've been with exploration parties when they discovered military dumps. They're big, and they have thousands of containers all the same size. These are all different."

"But who else would dig out all this just to store supplies?"

"I don't think anyone did. This looks like a small and unsuccessful mine shaft. Whoever started it either lost interest or was interrupted. Probably the vein of ore either petered out or wasn't rich enough to bother with. I've seen plenty of old mine shafts, and they look like this, only they go deeper. Then somebody else came along, dumped his supplies in the hole, and probably put in the door and lock.

Scientific group, maybe; they were always out poking around for bones in the Old Days."

"Let's see what's here, anyway. There might be something useful."

Privately, Bill doubted it, but it wouldn't hurt to look. The crates were wooden containers, firmly nailed shut and still sturdy. After vainly trying to lift the lid off one, Tamara went back and picked up the camp ax.

In a short time she had battered a hole in one of the crates and impatiently wrenched out the splintered remains of the lid. Then she

stared at the interior for a long time. Finally she reached in, pulled out a sheet of paper, and brought it to where Bill stood, leaning against the doorway.

"Does this make any sense to you?" she demanded. "The whole crate was full of them."

The sheet depicted an Old Days' map of the United States being encircled by a red sickle. Beneath the picture in giant letters were the words "SAVE OUR COUNTRY FROM GODLESS COMMUNISM."

Bill shook his head slowly, trying to remember his history lessons. "I think Communism was some sort of Old Days' religion," he said finally. "I remember reading about it, but I can't recall just what the book said."

"Wait a minute," Tamara said. "I remember now! The Communists were Russians—I don't know why they weren't just called Russians, but they weren't. The book was sort of confusing about that. Anyway, they're the ones that started the Blowup!"

Bill shook his head again, more positively this time. "I don't think so. The Blowup was just the finish of a long squabble over natural resources. The way I learned it, the United States was as much to blame as anybody, though it didn't start dropping bombs. The teacher I had said it started in Europe, and France was thought to have dropped the first bomb, but she admitted there was no real proof; it happened too fast. An old manuscript I read said that India started the war by attacking Burma. Nobody knows, really."

"Our teachers were pretty definite in saying it was Russia," Tamara said, "but I suppose it doesn't matter now. Anyway, the Communists were all in Russia. So these must be some sort of army supplies, after all!"

"Maybe. Why would the army be asking for help, though? Oh, never mind. See what's in those other crates."

The second crate was full of books. Tamara looked at one, shrugged, and dropped it on the rock floor. The third and fourth contained more printed matter; pamphlets which seemed to be urging the population to sacrifice for the good of the country. Bill thought they could probably be used by the Wyoming administration right then, if a few of the names were changed. By now it was getting dark and he was worried. A roomful

of books was valuable enough to historians, but not of much immediate help, and their danger increased with the darkness. If Eric had got his followers in order, he'd want to strike at the first opportunity, before they had time to waver again. If there were no weapons here, this tunnel would be a trap for them.

The fifth crate contained Old Days' rifles, and Bill's hopes soared. The weapons looked to be in good shape. However, there was no ammunition for them in the crate. Then came a big crate full of rotting tents and knapsacks, another big one rilled with folding shovels, canteens, cook kits and eating utensils, and a smaller one with more books. Bill had Tamara stop her assault on the crates while he listened to the outside noises: common night noises, and they reassured him. If Eric was creeping up on them, he might well do it without making any noise himself, but his approach would silence the normal animal and insect sounds. Bill signaled to Tamara to go ahead.

The ninth crate contained rusting containers of food. From the smell, most or all of them had spoiled in the interim. The tenth crate, a small one, contained a strange-looking contrivance that seemed to be some sort of weapon, though Bill couldn't think what it might be. It looked vaguely familiar, like something he might once have seen a picture of. It consisted of three metal tanks fastened together, with straps so that the tanks could be slung on someone's back. Connected to the tanks was a flexible tube which in turn was fastened to a long straight metal tube with a wooden handgrip at the back and some sort of contrivance projecting into the opening at the front. Everything was carefully sealed in plastic. Bill puzzled over it for awhile and finally signaled Tamara to go ahead.

The eleventh crate was the jackpot. It contained dozens of oval metal canisters, each with a lever jutting from one side and a ring in the end, arranged in layers between heavy plastic sheets, with plastic separators between each canister.

"That's it!" Bill said.

Tamara looked puzzled. "What are they?" She picked one up and experimentally tugged at the lever on the side.

"Don't do that!" Bill shouted.

She stared at him, startled. "Is it dangerous?"

"Those, my girl, are Old Days' hand grenades," Bill said. "That mean anything to you?"

It did. Her eyes widened, and she hastily replaced the grenade she had been holding.

"Will they still work?" she asked.

"After a fashion." Remember I said I'd been with an exploration team that discovered an Old Days' military supply dump? There were grenades there. We didn't know what they were, so being young and foolish we experimented to find out. I was one of the lucky ones. Ike Galbraith was killed, and Jed Smith lost a hand and most of one arm, plus his eyesight. Thing is, the grenades have deteriorated over the years. They used to be pretty reliable, or so the books say. The ones we had, though, acted all different ways. Most of them wouldn't go off at all. Ike's blew up as soon as he pulled the pin. Jed just hung onto his too long, not knowing what it was, but when it exploded it didn't have much force left. There were a lot like that. A few, though, worked just like the books said they were supposed to."

"But how do you tell which is which?"

Bill produced his lopsided grin. "You pull the pin and see what happens. If it blows up right away, you had one of the bad ones."

She looked at the box and shuddered. "I'm not sure I'm brave enough to do that."

"You don't have to. In fact, I wouldn't let you if you wanted to. You just stay out of the way."

"I don't want you trying it, either. Let's see if there aren't some other weapons here."

The last crate they opened contained the ammunition for the rifles. Bill looked at it dubiously. "Trouble is," he said, "that it's probably no more reliable than the grenades. We might try one, though; it's a nice long-range weapon if it works. Not much good to us tonight, except for frightening them by the noise, but it could keep them off our backs if we manage to get out of here. The grenades are still our best chance tonight. If they rush the door they'll have to bunch up; one good grenade could

wipe out the lot."

"And a bad one would wipe you out."

"Eric will be glad enough to do that, anyway, if the grenade doesn't work."

Delving into the last crate, Tamara brought up a strange, fat-barreled single-shot pistol and three cylinders that were apparently supposed to be loaded into it. Bill examined it with interest.

"Flare pistol," he explained. "It might reduce the odds against us a bit—if it works." He loaded the weapon and put it in his belt, after which he selected several grenades over Tamara's protests.

"Best we can do," he decided. "Help me get propped up here in the doorway. Can you move that crate of advertisements in front of me? It might stop an arrow. You take both our pistols and a rifle and get to the back of the tunnel."

"I can't see well enough back there," she objected.

"No sense in killing both of us if one of these grenades goes off early," Bill retorted. "You stay put. You can cover me from there if they get close; if they don't get close we don't need to worry. Try the rifle first and save the pistols; we know they work. Now, we wait."

They waited. The night was quiet. Bill wondered if he'd receive one of the alien calls to come and be killed, but decided that it didn't matter; he couldn't walk out of the tunnel if he wanted to. Just standing up and leaning on the crate in front of him was an effort.

"I suppose I should report this place to Losalam when I get back," Tamara said. "Unless you'd have some use for it in Wyoming."

"I don't think so," Bill said. "Not enough stuff here, and too far to transport it. We're building our own weapons now, anyway; the ones left from the Old Days are getting too unreliable. I expect our historians would like some of the books, but there seems to be only a few different titles here; one of each would be plenty. I could probably load everything Wyoming would want in my pack. I don't know if it's worth the trouble, though. The Popo Agie library has a pretty good supply of Old Days'

books."

"Is Popo Agie another name for Wyoming, or what?" Tamara asked curiously.

"It's a town. We don't just have one city, like you do; we have lots of small towns. Popo Agie is the biggest one, and the capital. Wyoming is really just a lot of rural communities getting together. It's why I'd like to meet the Losalam leaders, to see if I couldn't open up some trade. You've got a lot you could teach us, if you would."

"But we wouldn't," Tamara said bitterly. "I know the Matriarch's Council; all they know how to do is follow tradition."

It was near morning when the night sounds changed. Bill had been dozing; suddenly he was awake and listening intently. Yes, there was somebody out there. He couldn't tell how far away. Deciding to gamble, he pulled the flare pistol from his belt, pointed it as high as possible without hitting the tunnel mouth, and fired. The flare burst in a shower of tiny sparks, each of which went out immediately, but it drew a surprised grunt from somebody outside the tunnel. The second flare failed to fire at all, and then there were footfalls near the cave mouth. Bill picked up a grenade, pulled the pin, and threw.

When it went off just outside the cave mouth, the explosion mingled with a scream. Bill thought his battered eardrum picked up the sound of more footfalls, retreating. He threw another grenade, which failed to go off.

The footfalls quieted, and then Bill realized that there was blood running down his face and arm. The grenade had exploded too soon, and he'd taken some of the concussion. He couldn't tell how serious it was; he felt numb, which was probably a bad sign. Hastily, before he could collapse, he hauled out more grenades and threw them into the darkness. Most of them failed to go off, but two exploded satisfactorily. If Eric was still out there, he should be thinking twice about tackling them again.

It was almost dawn; he could see the first few streaks of light. He picked up the flare pistol, ejected the faulty flare, and tried his last one. And then, suddenly, it *was* dawn; a strange harsh white dawn that picked out the rock formations and the savages among them in stark relief.



Bill hadn't realized that Tamara had crept up close to him until the crash of the old rifle sounded in his ear, followed by several clicks as cartridges failed to ignite. Then, as the savages began moving to get out of the light, Bill heard the familiar boom of his own revolver. The rifle shot had hit nothing, but now he saw one of the savages fall, and then another. The revolver clicked empty, but there was no longer anyone in front of them. The attack was over; whether or not Eric could nerve them up for another assault by night was dubious.

Then, before he realized what he was hearing, there came the loud roaring sound he had heard twice before. From the sky to the north of the hill, the eye-searing red flame speared across his vision. Someone on the slope screamed. The flame stabbed out again and again, and Bill could picture the tribesmen fleeing before the flier.

Then Tamara was tugging on his arm, half carrying him back to the rear of the tunnel, where she lowered him to the rough floor.

"Lie still!" she commanded. "I'll get her away from here somehow and come back for you, but don't let her find you alive!"

## ***CHAPTER NINE***

Lying in the dark of the old tunnel, Bill had to concentrate to hear the activities outside. The hovercraft had roared over the hill, apparently pursuing the fleeing tribesmen. Now it swept back, seemed to stop in midair some distance to the north, and settled to earth. Bill recalled an open space on the hilltop there; if the hovercraft could go straight down, the space was big enough to land in.

Then there was silence for awhile. He could visualize the pilot surveying the hilltop for possible traps. Then there were metallic sounds—the canopy being raised so the pilot could get out? More silence, broken by a sudden exclamation that was drowned out by Tamara's voice.

"Linda! Linda Johns! Don't you know me? I'm Tamara Bush!"

There was a long pause, and the pilot's voice replied, tinged with uncertainty. "Tamara? But we thought you were dead."

"I was shot down. I've been trying to get back, on foot. Times like

tonight, I didn't think I'd make it."

More silence, and then the pilot's voice, from closer to the tunnel. "I guess it is you. I wasn't sure at first; you look different."

"You'd look different, too, if you'd been walking through the Wild Lands for a week. Come on, I want to get back to Losalam." Tamara laughed, the tone sounding false to Bill's ear. "I've given up seeing it so many times; I couldn't bear if anything happened before we took off."

There was another laugh. "Don't worry; we'll take off all right. But you know I'll have to make a report of the action here. I have to see the area. Do you mean you've survived a week in the Wild Lands, by yourself?"

"Except when I had—company."

"You poor girl! Of course you're in a hurry to get back. But I do have to follow the rules; you know that, too."

Another silence. Trying to deflect that sort of rule-book mentality wasn't going to work, Bill knew. He hoped Tamara didn't bring suspicion on herself by trying to push it.

Apparently she agreed, because her voice changed to a bright helpfulness. "All right, Linda. I do know the rules; I guess I was just so anxious to get back that I forgot. I'll show you around. What do you want to see?"

"I want to see what happened. I was on my way out on patrol; I'd got an early start because I wanted to finish in time for Sandra's party tonight. Oh; you wouldn't know about that. Sandra's finally been caught! She's throwing an engagement party tonight, poor girl. Anyway, we're all coming to send her off in style, and I had to leave early on my patrol, which is why I'm here. And I saw this light in the sky; never saw anything like it before. I came over to investigate, and there was flashing coming from the hilltop like... like nothing I ever saw before! And those savages were running before I arrived; I just speeded them up a bit. What were you doing to them?"

"I can show you better," Tamara said. "It's over here. I found a cave with a bunch of crates in it from the Old Days, and some of them held weapons. They didn't work very well, but I used them anyway; they're

noisy, and they frightened the savages."

"What happened to your survival weapon?"

"I lost it when I was shot down," Tamara said, and Bill listened in amazement. Tamara seemed to have developed a very creditable ability for lying since her first attempts with him, but why? And how? The gun had been in her belt, and she'd hardly been wearing enough clothing to conceal it. The other woman made no comment, however, so apparently she believed the statement.

Now he could hear footsteps, and then there were two shadows against the blacker night. A beam of light flashed into the tunnel and played over the broken crates.

"You certainly were industrious," came the pilot's voice, sounding amused. "What did you use to open them with? Your fingernails would hardly have been sufficient for this carnage."

"There was an ax here in the tunnel," Tamara said. "I don't recall what I did with it, but... there it is. On the floor over there."

"Convenient." The voice sounded slightly bored. "You say there are Old Days' weapons in these crates?"

"In some of them. There are books in others." Tamara stooped and picked up the rifle she had fired. "This is one that I used, but it's so old the ammunition doesn't work very often. And there was a pistol that shot flares, but I used them all up; it was the last one you saw."

The pilot was moving back into the tunnel, her light playing into the crates. "What are these?" she asked, holding up one of the grenades.

Tamara hesitated for a moment. "I don't know," she said, finally. "I thought they might be a weapon, so I threw some of them at the savages, but nothing happened."

The pilot tossed the grenade in her hand, and put it back into the crate. "We'll let our technicians examine them." She swung the light over the crates. "Anything valuable enough to take with us?"

"I don't think so," Tamara said, sounding relieved. "We can come back

with a cargo flier and get everything. Unless you want to take something to interest the techs."

"That's an idea," Linda agreed. "They never want to take scout reports seriously." She picked up two of the grenades. "These ought to get their attention."

"I hope so," Tamara said. "Now, if you've seen everything?"

There was another laugh. "You want to get back to Losalam, do you? All right, I suppose I'm ready. There aren't any more crates farther back in the cave?"

"No, they were all up in front."

"That should be it, then." Idly, the pilot asked, "How far back does this cave extend, anyway?" and flipped her beam of light into the depths of the tunnel. It swung past Bill, stopped, and backed up to center him in the beam. There was a whisper of metal against cloth.

"Don't!" Tamara said. "What are you going to do?"

"This one's still alive. I'm putting him out of his misery."

"Don't do it! He was helping me; he was shot helping me. You can't just kill him like any other savage."

The women were coming back down the tunnel. Bill didn't know what the proper reaction ought to be, but decided that the nearer to dead he looked the easier it would be for the pilot to ignore him. He lay unmoving. It was, he discovered, the wrong reaction.

"Look at him!" the pilot said. "He can't possibly survive. If he helped you, you wouldn't want him to suffer, would you?"

"I don't want to kill him, Linda!"

"I know you don't; you were always a little squeamish. That's why I'm doing it. But we can't just let him die slowly, in agony. It isn't humane. Ugly, isn't he? With the kind of life he's led, I'm really doing the best thing for him."

"No." Tamara sighed. "I was going to leave him here and let him make

his own way home, but if you're that determined, then we'll take him back with us."

"Take back a savage? What are you talking about?"

"Scout's Privilege," Tamara said firmly. Bill wondered vaguely what that was, and then remembered. Everything was beginning to get hazy; he struggled to hold on to consciousness.

"With that?" Linda was obviously dumbfounded. "You've been out in the sticks too long, honey."

"I think I have," Tamara said in an odd voice. "But it's my right."

"That it is," Linda said resignedly. "Come on; help me carry him."

Bill felt himself being picked up. Then there was a flash of pain and he blacked out.

He awoke in a bed, and the sensation was so novel that he spent some time trying to decide where in the world he might be. Giving up, he opened his eyes, to discover that he was in a large room. One wall was of stone, the others of roughly sawed timber. All had been whitewashed. The room contained eight beds including his, only five of which were occupied. He thought this over for awhile before deciding that he was in a hospital. Which in turn meant he was in Losalam.

The other four patients seemed to be either badly hurt or asleep; all were lying quietly, and therefore not likely to provide information. He tried to recall everything that he could about Losalam; the memories weren't reassuring. The next step was to check himself. The arrow wound in his shoulder was the most serious, evidently. He was still weak from it. His head was bandaged, and it hurt, but that couldn't be serious. A serious wound there would have killed him. His right arm was also bandaged and aching, but he could move it and wiggle his fingers, so no bones broken. On the hill, he hadn't been able to stand without Tamara's help; something told him that he'd better be able to improve on that if he wanted to get out of here. He was about to try when the door opened and he looked up to see a man entering the room. He stared.

He'd never seen a man like that before. The newcomer was of average height, well-proportioned, with medium-length blond hair carefully waved

back across his head. Features were handsome almost to the point of beauty and enhanced by what Bill suspected must be makeup of some kind. He wore a one-piece white uniform somewhat similar to the orange one Tamara had worn when he first saw her, but this fitted much more snugly than hers had. The man looked very trim and athletic and made Bill feel uneasy.

A second person had entered behind the man, but Bill's interest was all on the first individual until the blond man stopped just inside the door and the second person walked forward. When he looked, he realized it was Tamara. She had changed into a clean new uniform, had her hair rearranged, and to a casual glance looked the same as she had the first time he'd seen her. But there was an almost imperceptible difference; she looked more mature, Bill thought. Before, she had been bewildered; now she was sure of herself.

He smiled as she came over to his bed, and she smiled back and held up a hand to forestall any questions on his part.

"I'm not supposed to be here," she said in a low voice that would hardly carry to the next bed, let alone to the man at the door. "But the Head Nurse is an old family friend, and he was willing to bend a couple of rules for me. I can't stay long, so just listen."

Bill nodded.

"I've got to give my report sometime tomorrow morning. I won't volunteer any information, but I'll be under truth serum, so if they ask any questions about you, I'll answer. And then..."

"They'll make sure I don't get back to Wyoming. Right?"

"They'll probably ask, too. I invoked Scout's Privilege to get you here; it was all I could do. Linda was going to put you out of your misery, as she called it. Anyway, I've never done anything like it before, and considering your appearance, they're almost bound to inquire."

"I remember your friend seemed a little surprised when you mentioned it."

"Surprise is hardly the word for it. Anyway, once they've questioned me, they'll want to question you. Pretend to be in worse shape than you are;

you look like you're dying, anyway. It may stall them awhile. I'll try to think of a way to get you out of the city. What shape are you in, anyway?"

"No worse than I was. Maybe better. I was considering trying to stand up when you came in."

"Don't do it in front of the nurses; they mustn't suspect you're able to. If you keep quiet, they won't; certainly none of them could with wounds like that." She threw a hasty look at the man in the doorway. "Ken there is in charge of this ward. He won't be around much; he spends more time on his appearance than he does on his job. But you'll have to be careful. And I have to go before anyone on the council knows I'm here."

Swiftly she leaned over the bed, kissed him, and walked rapidly to the door while the nurse smirked. Bill realized that Tamara had once again been smart. Breaking hospital rules because of an overwhelming passion was generally winked at. Doing it to subvert State authority wouldn't be.

He was surprised that she'd gone as far as she had. Any obligation she felt to him for helping her would clash with her entire upbringing. Still, it was pleasant to think that she was willing to help.

The nurse was coming over, looking expectant. Bill tried to project friendliness, aware that his real feelings would probably show anyway. The nurse, however, didn't seem to notice.

"Well, you're certainly a lucky one," he said. "How did you ever manage to attract the attention of Miss Bush, anyway?"

Bill thought of several undiplomatic answers, beginning with "None of your business." Instead, he said, "I shot down her hovercraft and she fell into my arms."

"Really? How romantic," the nurse said, looking at him admiringly. "I must say none of us thought Miss Bush was the romantic type. Beautiful, but cold. Just shows that anyone can be wrong, I guess."

Bill said nothing.

"Are you from one of the tribes around here?" the nurse asked.

"No. My, uh, tribe is from a long way off. I'd never heard of Losalam

until I met Tarn... Miss Bush."

The nurse looked incredulous.

"Is Miss Bush an important person here, then?" Bill asked.

"Oh yes. She's been one of the most eligible maids ever since she passed her Maturity. Ah... sought-after, I mean," he added, seeing Bill's incomprehending look. "All the men in her social group threw out hints, but she hasn't seemed interested in any of them. Her mother is president of the council, you see; next in authority to the Matriarch herself. Miss Bush is bound to be on the council once she finishes her Service Period; some people say she's got a good chance of being president. I must say she's always seemed too nonconformist for that, but Mr. Jerralt—he's Head Nurse—says that's just an adolescent phase, and she'll get over it. And of course her mother's political connections will help."

"That sounds familiar," Bill muttered.

"What?"

"I said it sounds like politicians everywhere." Then he wondered if he should have admitted knowing anything about politicians, but Ken didn't notice; he was too shocked at the implication that Losalam could be like anyplace else.

"How can you say such a thing?"

"I just opened my mouth, and—"

Ken laughed. "You certainly don't sound like any savage I ever met."

"You meet very many, in your business?"

"Silly. Some of the scouts bring men in. But they're all so... so uncouth. And they don't make jokes like you do."

"Nobody makes jokes like I do. It's the secret of my charm."

Ken eyed him. "It must be. It couldn't be..." Then he became flustered, started to say something else, and abruptly recalled that he had duties to perform.



Bill closed his eyes, more from disgust than exhaustion. He needed information about Losalam, not gossip. Still, it shouldn't be hard to feign severe injuries; that nurse was never going to trip him up. The doctor might be harder, though. He wondered if this was what Losalam did to all men, and decided not. Probably they differed as much as women did in a male-dominated society; it was just his bad luck to draw one of the empty-headed ones. Probably popular with the girls, though; there might be some information under those blond waves if he could drag it out. Cheered somewhat by the thought, he fell asleep.

When he awoke, nothing had changed except that one of the other patients, the one in the next bed, had rolled over and was looking at him. This was an older man, somewhat corpulent, with a heavy face, rather distinguished gray hair, and a sallow complexion that might have been the result of illness. Bill wondered if it would be safe to test his legs in front of another patient, and decided to wait. He also realized that he was ravenously hungry.

"Don't they serve food in here?" he inquired of the man watching him.

The man smiled encouragingly. "Evening meal in an hour or so. They won't wake you up if you're sleeping, so you'd better stay awake if you're hungry."

"Thanks," Bill lay back and considered. With a meal forthcoming, the patients were going to be active. Afterwards, though; would they be active, or would they go to sleep? If they slept, he could try wandering around a bit. He looked around and found the middle-aged man watching him. The man looked embarrassed.

"Sorry; I don't mean to be rude," he said. "I heard the nurse talking about you. My name's Morris, by the way; Roy Morris. I was trying to think..."

"What Miss Bush saw in me?"

Morris looked even more embarrassed. "Yes, actually. Perhaps it's the strength."

"I don't feel too strong right now," Bill said, deciding it was about time he began playing up his injuries.

"If you don't feel up to talking?"

"No, I can talk. Maybe I'd better; it will keep me awake until mealtime. What are you here for?" Get them to talk about themselves; it keeps their minds off you.

"Cancer."

It was Bill's turn to look embarrassed. "Oh, then you're..."

"Dying, yes," Morris said. "Don't mind referring to it; I've had a long time to get used to the fact. Interesting that you should know the word; I wasn't aware that savages were that well educated."

"We all got a dose of radiation in the Blowup," Bill said. "Cancer is a pretty familiar term in the Wild Lands, along with typhoid, flu, scurvy and smallpox."

"You don't make it sound very pleasant."

"It's not very pleasant. Why do you think we're so anxious to get into Losalam, one way or another?"

Morris nodded. "I suppose so. An interesting viewpoint. You know, all my life I've wanted to experience life out there. A place where men still rule. Even with its drawbacks, it would be—different. I've always been interested in variety. But I never went; now I never will. I talk to the few savages who come inside, but it's not the same thing."

The man sounded so wistful that Bill almost laughed. The idea of one of the protected male residents of Losalam having a burning desire to experience life in the raw was hilarious. But he held it back; never antagonize a source of information. Besides, Morris looked like a sensible sort; perhaps in his younger days he would have been able to make good in a more rugged life; if not in the Wild Lands, then at least in a frontier community somewhere.

He continued talking with Morris until the meal arrived, brought by the blond nurse everyone called Ken, and an older, flabby man incongruously called Ricky. Conversation during the meal was general, with the patients joking among themselves and with the nurses, who had to help two of the patients to eat. One had been involved in an industrial

accident and had both arms in splints. From the muffled sounds of the other man, and the wary way the nurses approached him, Bill suspected some mental disorder. The man didn't join in the conversation, but glared impartially at everyone.

As the newest patient, and a savage, Bill was the target of a great deal of curiosity. When Ken mentioned that he had been brought in by Tamara Bush, the curiosity increased. Bill gathered that Tamara had achieved somewhat of a reputation by ignoring the unmarried males of Losalam, and eluding all stratagems aimed her way by fathers of marriageable sons, and thus anyone she had chosen was an object of intense interest. He also decided that Tamara must indeed be a power in Losalam, since everyone in the ward knew of her.

Roy Morris, however, was the most persistent in eliciting details of Bill's background and the savage life in general. He was, in fact, both persistent enough and intelligent enough to arouse suspicion. Armchair wanderlust was one thing, but Bill had interrogated enough people himself to recognize an expert at the casual approach. Morris was definitely digging for information, and doing it well enough to keep Bill nervous, wondering if he would be able to carry it through without making a slip. Was Morris satisfying a hunger for adventure—or collecting information to present to the Matriarch's Council?

Bill smiled at everyone, parried some questions, told the truth to as many as possible, and lied when necessary. Shortly after the meal was finished, he pleaded exhaustion and dropped into a simulation of sleep that had fooled men far more alert than these.

"No wonder he's exhausted," he heard one man say. "Did you hear Ken describe that wound in his shoulder? I'm surprised the poor boy is alive, much less able to sit up and eat."

"Yes," Morris agreed. "I'm afraid we've been hard on him, with all our questions. The head wounds alone are enough to sap his strength. No, not the face; he told me that was done by a bear years ago. But didn't you notice those gashes on his forehead and the side of his head when they changed the bandages? Both of them quite serious, and I gather one of his arms is badly injured as well."

*Now what was that all about?* Bill wondered. Morris surely knew better. The explanation fit his and Tamara's plans beautifully, but why

had Morris given it?

The room quieted gradually; so gradually that Bill actually drifted off to sleep briefly while waiting for the other patients to do so. When he awoke it was dark; the room was only dimly lighted by the reflection of a light in the hall coming through the open door. Cautiously, Bill looked around, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Everyone seemed to be asleep. Morris, the patient Bill was most suspicious of, was closest to the door and could be seen better. He was snoring gently. No time like the present to try one's legs.

Bill quietly threw off the blanket covering him and eased his legs over the side of the bed. There were no problems about sitting up; his back protested, but he'd learned to ignore things like that. Slowly he eased himself upright, holding on to the bed for support. So far, so good; his legs were wobbly, but they held him up. Cautiously, he released his hold on the bed, and moved two steps into the room. His legs still held him. Moving slowly, he walked toward the door. He had almost reached it when a wave of dizziness swept over him and he stumbled into a small table standing near the door. It scraped across the floor as he bumped it, and then he was leaning on it in order to stay upright, and checking the room. Nothing moved; he was still unobserved. The dizziness passed, and he straightened up and again headed for the door.

"I wouldn't do that," came a whisper from Morris's bed. "The night nurse makes his rounds in five minutes or so."

## ***CHAPTER TEN***

Bill made it back to his bed, his legs wobbling badly on the last few steps. He lay quietly for what he judged must be ten minutes, until he had almost convinced himself that Morris had lied to him for some unknown purpose. Then the door opened, and a freckled face appeared in the opening.

"Everything all right?" the nurse inquired. "No; the room caught fire five minutes ago and burned us all in our beds," Morris growled.

The nurse laughed at the comment and withdrew.

"The younger generation," Morris said with distaste. "Sometimes I

wonder if Losalam can survive this creeping mediocrity."

"I guess I owe you some thanks," Bill said. "It might be hard for me to convince anyone that I'm near death if I'm seen up and around. But I'm not sure why you did it."

"And so you're suspicious," Morris chuckled. "All you savages are a trifle paranoid, you know. Obviously, I'm not doing it for your sake; I hardly know you. And I assure you—not that you'll believe me—that I'm not a spy for the council trying to ferret out your secrets by pretending to be friendly. Which really leaves only one conclusion."

Bill nodded. Tamara, then. She was certainly turning out to be an important person in her old home town; no wonder she'd been anxious to get back to it.

"Thanks, anyway," he said. "In fact, I do believe you, but I've learned not to broadcast my plans. You know I can walk; as far as everyone else is concerned, I'm near death. I won't tell you anything else." He chuckled. "I'm not sure I could tell you anything else, even if I wanted to. This is Tamara's plan."

"You could tell me your background."

Bill looked surprised. "I spent an hour before the meal doing that; what else do you want to know?"

"The truth would be nice."

Bill stared at the older man. Morris was smiling, and Bill grinned reluctantly at him in return.

"Was I that bad at lying? I'm supposed to be an expert."

"No, you were quite good at it. You presented what I assume was a mixture of truth and falsehood as such a consistent picture that I'm unable to tell which part was which. Only it wasn't the picture of a man Tamara would want for a lover."

Bill opened his mouth to say she didn't want him for a lover, and then closed it again. That lie was the main key to his getting out of here, and he'd almost been suckered into giving it away. He looked at Morris with

respect.

"If you aren't a spy for the council," he said, "you ought to be."

"I was, for awhile," Morris said quietly. "I was friendly with the savage boyfriends some of the scouts brought back, and I picked out any potential troublemakers. I circulated at parties and picked up information the council might find useful." He paused, looking down at his hands. "I got sick of it," he said finally.

Not sure what to say, Bill said nothing.

Morris looked at him again. "Actually, all I need is for you to fill in some gaps. Ignoring your interesting fabrication, I can deduce the major points."

"Such as?"

A sudden spasm of pain crossed Morris's face, and he lay back in bed. After a few minutes he spoke again, still lying down and staring at the ceiling.

"Sorry. The pain bothers me at times. You wanted to know what I've deduced. To begin with, you aren't a savage and you're not from the Wild Lands. Since you're obviously not from Losalam, that means there is another group of humans, somewhere, on the road back to civilization. Not as far along it as we are. You're tougher; you haven't had machines doing your work for you. You still go out in the wilderness where there are giant bears; I think that part of your story was true. Possibly your culture is male dominated, like that of the savages. I don't know why Tamara brought you to Losalam, but now you're trying to get out before the council decides you're a menace and has you killed. Of course, that's just a broad outline; given time, I could do better."

Bill had been holding his breath; he let it out in a rush. "I'm glad you're not still a council spy. I can fill in one of your gaps, anyway; Tamara brought me in because the scout who found us was determined to do the humane thing and put me out of my misery, and invoking Scout's Privilege was the only way Tamara could stop it. As for the rest, if Tamara says we can trust you, I'm willing. Until then, I keep what few secrets I have left." He considered a moment. "Except that I'm a scout for my own country. Nothing to do with Losalam; we'd never heard of it. Now that I

have heard of it, I'd like to bring the two states together; I think there is something out there in the Wild Lands that is going to require the cooperation of all humanity to defeat. But I don't think there's much point in trying to do anything about it now. Incidentally, I'm considered pretty good at extracting information—and I wish we had you working for us."

Morris chuckled again. "Thank you. When you're my age, you'll be better at spying than you are now, but you'll never be as good as I am. The man of the decadent civilization is always better at intrigue; he gets more practice at it."

"Do the nurses come around any more tonight?" Bill asked.

"They're supposed to make their rounds a couple of hours apart. Anyone who gets in trouble between trips has to yell for help. If you want to try walking again—though I don't see how you can, with that back wound—you should be fairly safe. There's a nurse's station at the end of the corridor outside, though; it won't be safe to go outside this room."

Bill began circling the room. He stopped once to look through the small window in the stone wall, but there was shrubbery outside and he couldn't see anything. After three circuits, his legs began getting rubbery, and he wobbled back to bed. Morris was apparently asleep again, and Bill lost no time in emulating him.

Breakfast was filling but tasteless. Bill idly wondered if Losalam had progressed to synthetic food, but Morris laughed and said it was only hospital cooking. With everyone awake, there was no way for Bill to exercise, but he felt stronger. He had to keep reminding himself that he was supposed to be near death. Morris helped, by being solicitous.

Lying back and trying unsuccessfully to look pale, Bill abruptly realized that he was passing up an opportunity. As the ignorant savage, he could legitimately ask questions about Losalam. By throwing in a question just often enough to keep a discussion going among the other patients, he obtained a fair amount of information on the geographical layout and the social life of the community. Morris caught his eye once and nodded approvingly, and Bill had to stifle a laugh.

One of the other patients mentioned, with a shudder, the dangers of the Wild Lands, and Bill expounded on snakes, tigers, bears, and savages, keeping his voice down to an anemic whisper. Then he described his

telepathic Menace.

"Then it's real," Morris said, slowly.

Bullseye, Bill thought. If anyone could put together his clues and come up with an answer, it had to be Morris. He feigned sleep until the other patients had drifted off into discussions of their own, and the two who could walk left the ward to seek amusement elsewhere. Then he turned to whisper to Morris.

"The telepathy is real," he said. "Some people seem to learn how to resist it. Tamara did, after the first time. I didn't. But I don't have any idea of what it might be. I must have been within a few yards of it one night, but I didn't see anything."

"Obviously a mutation of some kind," Morris said, speaking softly. "All that radiation to the south. And other places as well, I suppose, but it's the belt to the south that concerns us. We always assumed everything down there had been killed. Never had any reason to doubt it, until now." He paused, thinking. "Did those thoughts seem, well, human?"

"How does a human telepath differ from any other kind?" Bill asked.

Morris smiled briefly. "Ah, yes. Since you have no previous experience with telepathy, it is difficult to speculate on what kind this is. But did the thoughts appear in words, or were they simply, ah, urges?"

Bill considered. "Since I could never separate them from my own thinking, it's difficult to tell. But they seemed more like just a feeling that I should go to a certain location. I think I made up my own reasons for going." He gave Morris his twisted grin. "At least, I think I did. The other way would mean that it was reading my mind and providing reasons which fitted perfectly into what I was thinking, and I suppose I just don't want to believe that."

"If it only projected an urge," Morris said, "then it's less likely to be human."

"Would a telepath that kills and eats people be human, anyway?"

"Human-derived, then. If the urge was felt by only one form of animal life, we could narrow the possibilities of what this thing's ancestry might



be. But since it apparently works on anything, there isn't a lot to go on."

"All large animals, that I saw," Bill suggested.

Morris smiled again. "When you're hunting, would you rather kill a deer or a rabbit?"

"Um. You think it draws in everything in the area, and picks the biggest?"

"Seems logical. One other possibility. Would you particularly notice the bones of a rabbit or a mouse if you saw them"

"Yes," Bill said flatly.

Morris nodded. "The savage alertness. I'd forgotten that. Very well; it chooses its kills. Which doesn't help in identifying it, but raises it a grade in intelligence."

"Have to be fair-sized, then," Bill said. "Small animals don't have big enough brains for much intelligence."

"Not necessarily. Before the Blowup, there were speculations about the forms that an alien intelligence might take, and someone came up with the idea of a group mind. A colony of creatures, such as bees or ants, which thought and acted as one. The individual creatures would be no more truly independent than your finger is, and each would contribute a few brain cells to the total intelligence. Of course, there weren't any such creatures then, but radiation that could create telepathy could create a group mind, and a group mind would need telepathy before it could exist."

"That's some help," Bill said. "I wanted to narrow down the possibilities, not expand them."

"Then you'll have to bring in more information. So far, the fact that you have never seen this creature, or even its tracks, is an argument for the group mind, but it's not conclusive."

Bill nodded and lay back to think. The group mind idea fitted into one theory he'd considered and then rejected as impossible.

The other patients were discussing something about hospital routine.

Bill let the words blend into a blur in the background. Tamara hadn't said exactly when her interrogation was scheduled. Maybe right at this moment? He felt restless, all the more so because he couldn't move around. Still, there was some information he'd need. He opened his eyes. Morris was not in his bed. Looking around, Bill found him standing by one of the other beds, discussing something about new bathing facilities. Bill waited patiently until Morris glanced at him, and then beckoned. Morris walked over.

"I can't go running around Losalam in this thing," Bill whispered, indicating his hospital robe. "Where would they keep my clothes?"

"They probably burned them," Morris said softly. "Sanitary procedure. They'll provide new clothes when you recover."

"Since I expect to be leaving here before I recover, where do I go to provide my own new clothes?"

Morris thought a bit. "There is clothing for patients and nurses in a supply room. I don't think any of it would fit you; you're bigger than most Losalam residents. But if you want to try it, turn right outside our door, go to the end of the corridor, turn right, and go to the end of that corridor. The supply room is locked except when something is actually being distributed; you'll have to break in."

"Thanks," Bill said. "I'll have to wait until Tamara comes, I suppose, but I can make a few preparations."

Morris sat down on the edge of Bill's bed. "*If* Tamara comes," he said.

"If she comes? What do you mean by that?"

"The council can revoke citizenship privileges. It's very unlikely in this case, but if they did, Tamara would be held for a public trial. If convicted of crimes against civilization, she could be exiled or executed. Exile, probably; it would have to be a very serious charge for the courts to execute Paula Bush's daughter."

"Held where?"

"The prison is across town."

"Could you show me, if it's necessary?"

Morris looked perplexedly at Bill's feverish face, then shook his head. "I can walk, a little. I might get out of the building. But not much farther. If I wasn't loaded with painkiller, I wouldn't be talking to you."

Bill stared. "I hadn't realized it was that bad—I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You can't help me, but you've at least provided some interest for my final days. I thought I'd die with a bunch of old men; talking with you has kept my mind off myself."

"I'll get her out, one way or another," Bill said.

Morris looked at him closely, "You might."

In midmorning nurse Ken entered, followed by a severe-looking woman Bill guessed was a doctor. She made her rounds efficiently, checking one patient briefly, spending more time with the more seriously ill. At Morris's bed, she merely smiled and asked how he was feeling. When he mentioned pain, she told Ken to provide painkiller on request.

"Any amount required," she added, looking at Ken to make sure he understood.

"It's not that bad yet," Morris said, but she merely shook her head.

"When it becomes that bad, you must have whatever you want."

She moved over to Bill's bed. He concentrated on looking as weak as possible, but she ignored that, checking pulse, temperature, lungs, blood pressure. Finally she asked how he felt.

"Weak," he whispered. "And it hurts."

"Strong heart action," she commented. "You appear to be in better shape than I would have expected."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear. "So tired," he whispered. "And the pain."

"I don't like using painkillers with wounds like that. Apt to further weaken the system. But you seem basically healthy; you'll recover."

"He does seem terribly weak," Morris said. "Even a little conversation tires him out."

"Well, I daresay if you'd lost as much blood as he has, you'd feel weak, too," the doctor said. "It's not serious; it will just take him time to recover." She turned to Ken. "Best thing for him is nourishing food. See that he gets an extra portion of meat at his next meal." Nodding pleasantly at Morris, she stalked out of the room.

The doctor returned shortly after the noon meal, this time accompanied by an even more severe-looking woman whom Bill gathered was a member of the council. The Councilor wanted to question him; the doctor pointed out his weakness and probable inability to tell a coherent story. Morris supported her, and Bill opened his eyes and made a few weak noises when the Councilor bent over him. She straightened up abruptly.

"He gets like that," Morris said. "Now, this morning, he was weak but still intelligible. I could barely hear what he said, but it seemed to make sense."

The Councilor turned to Morris. "Has he said where he comes from?"

Oh-oh, Bill thought. They asked Tamara just what she was afraid they would.

"He didn't say," Morris replied. "He's not from the Wild Lands, though; the accent isn't right."

The Councilor sniffed. "And how would you know about his accent?"

"Perhaps you don't remember me. I'm Roy Morris."

The woman started. "You were a council investigator."

"I was the best investigator you had."

Suddenly the Councilor was smiling. "You were, at that. All right, what have you found out about this man?"

"Well," Morris said slowly, "I wasn't really trying to obtain information. But a few things are obvious. He's not from the Wild Lands, but he's lived outside all his life; look at that coloring. So he's a savage of some kind. In

addition to the accent, he's taller and healthier than the savages near here. Those wounds have incapacitated him, but they'd have killed anyone from this area. So, I'd guess he's from an area that didn't have as much radiation damage as we did. Healthy stock, you see. They've slipped back to savagery, but since they weren't hit as hard in the Blowup, they may have salvaged more, and have slightly more advanced weaponry than the local savages. And since we've never seen anyone quite like him before, he's probably from a long way off. Perhaps he's a wanderer, and simply strayed into the Wild Lands; his people may well be migratory, following game or domestic herds."

The Councilor considered. "Beyond military reach?"

"I don't know our military capabilities these days, but if they're not any better than they were when I was an investigator, then I'd say yes. We can't reach them; if they're migratory we'd even have a job finding them."

The Councilor nodded slowly. "Very well." She turned to the doctor. "Keep me informed if there is any improvement in his condition. The council wishes to question him."

The doctor agreed, and the two women left the room.

Bill waited until he was sure they were gone and then whispered to Morris, "Thanks. That was an inspired guess about the weaponry."

"Deduction, not guesswork," Morris replied. "The council doesn't get into an uproar with no reason. They think you're a menace, therefore they have a reason to think that, and the reason is most likely some sort of weapon superior to those of the tribes. So I did my best to discount its importance."

"And a good job, too. But I still have to get out of here. If they've held Tamara—"

"You'll still have to wait until night. You can't just walk out in the middle of the day; you'd be caught immediately. Besides, you should give Tamara time to arrive; we don't know that she's being held."

"But if they asked her about getting me out—"

"It's not very logical for a woman to bring a savage into Losalam and

immediately scheme to smuggle him out again. So it isn't likely she was asked."

"You're right," Bill admitted. "I'm just worried about her."

He lay back in bed hastily as the door opened and Ken poked his head in, surveyed the room, and disappeared. Lying there, Bill decided that since he couldn't do anything until night anyway, he might as well conserve his strength. Deliberately, he relaxed tense muscles, then blanked his mind. He slept, dreaming of Tamara.

When the nurses began distributing the evening meal, he awoke and found Morris looking at him admiringly. When the nurses had left, Morris said, "For a man in your position, you're certainly calm. I couldn't have slept if I'd been in your place."

Bill grinned around a piece of what might have been meat. "Nothing else I could do. We savages learn to sleep when we can, so we're alert when we need to be."

He was less calm after the meal. He wanted to pace around the room until either Tamara came or it was dark enough for him to go look for her, but the other patients sat and talked about inconsequential matters, and Bill lay in bed, trying to appear exhausted, inwardly writhing.

Tamara slipped into the room, a bit breathlessly, a short time after dark. Bill gave a sigh of relief when he saw her. She hurried over to the bed and began stripping off the remarkably ill-fitting orange uniform she wore. Under it was a second uniform. She handed the outer one to Bill.

"Here's some clothing. I don't know if it will fit; it's the biggest I could get."

"That solves your problem about raiding the supply room," Morris remarked.

Tamara swung around in surprise. "Oh, hello, Uncle Roy. What are... ?" Then realization came. "It's the cancer?"

Morris nodded. "I'm glad I got to see you again. We all thought you'd been killed."

"I thought so too, at first. I would have been, if it hadn't been for Bill. I wish we had time..." She turned to Bill. "Uncle Roy is the friend I told you about that I wanted to see again. He's responsible for any ideas I might have had about male equality before I met you."

Bill raised his eyebrow. "I hadn't noticed that you had any."

She ignored him. "I used to be able to talk to him, when I couldn't to my own father—or mother, for that matter. I wish we had time to tell him all about this."

"Never mind," Bill said. "He's deduced most of it, anyway. Uncle Roy, eh? I feel more like an amateur than ever."

Tamara looked bewildered.

"Never mind," Bill said. "Uncle Roy has been giving me lessons in interrogation. What do we do now?"

"Well, first you get dressed." She turned back to Morris. "I'm so sorry you're here, Uncle Roy. Is there anything at all I can do?"

Morris smiled at her. "Nothing physical. I was just telling your man here that he'd provided some interest for my final days. All I want now is for you to be sure that you'll be happy with your decision. Equality is hard to maintain."

"You've always warned me never to be too sure of anything," Tamara said, "but I'm as sure as I can be."

"Okay," Bill said, buttoning up the front of his coveralls. "Now what?"

"Now you have to get out of Losalam. They questioned me about you."

"I gathered that," Bill interrupted. "We had a Councilor in here this afternoon. She wanted to question me but I managed to be too ill to be of much help. Your Uncle Roy tried to convince her I was harmless."

"He didn't succeed. They know you're from Wyoming, and that your people have rediscovered firearms. They think you're a menace to Losalam. They're going to question you and then have you destroyed. I tried to tell them about the telepathic monster out there, but they weren't

interested."

"Concept is too new for the bureaucratic mind to assimilate," Morris said.

"So you have to get away," Tamara concluded. "They put a guard outside the ward here until you're well enough to be interrogated, but I don't know how long they'll wait. They might get impatient."

"How come they let you go?" Bill asked. "Morris had me convinced they'd lock you up for high treason for bringing me into your fair city."

"And he was all set to go tear down the prison, brick by brick," Morris commented.

"Why, I did nothing wrong," Tamara said, innocently. "They were quite grateful to me for capturing you and bringing you to their attention. I'm sort of a minor heroine at the moment."

Bill and Morris both laughed. "I should have known," Bill said. "But while I'm able to stay on my feet after a fashion, I'm not exactly in top form. How do you propose that I stay ahead of a search party equipped with hovercraft? In the Wild Lands I could probably do it, even in the shape I'm in, but you said Losalam is surrounded by farms."

Tamara looked smug. "You have a flier of your own, of course. They all operate at about the same speed; if you have a head start, you stay ahead."

Bill stared, appalled. "But I can't fly a hovercraft. And while I admit to remarkable intelligence, I don't think you can teach me in one easy lesson."

"Of course not," said Tamara, still looking incredibly cheerful. "So isn't it convenient that I can fly one?"

Bill was stunned. "But you don't want to..." he began. "This is your home. All the time we were together, you were thinking about getting back here. You can't go."

"I can," she said softly. "And I *wasn't* thinking about getting back here *all* the time. A good share of the time I was wondering what Wyoming was like, and what it would be like to live with a man who thinks he's as good



as I am. But you were too busy taking care of me to notice."

Then Bill stepped forward and she was in his arms and nobody said anything for a long moment.

Tamara finally broke away and said, "We still have to get out of here."

Bill absently rubbed the scarred side of his face. "I guess I got too used to not getting the things I wanted. I wanted you more than anything else in life, but I never dreamed..." He shook himself back to awareness. "You're right. We don't have any time to waste."

He shook hands with Morris, and Tamara kissed the older man. "Goodbye, Uncle Roy," she said. "If we get out of Losalam, we'll be all right. Don't worry about me; I've found what I've been looking for." Hastily, they crossed the room toward the door. Roy Morris watched them go, smiling until the smile was erased by a spasm of pain. The other patients stared, uncomprehending.

## ***CHAPTER ELEVEN***

Getting past the guard at the door was a simple matter. Tamara went out first and stopped to chat with the guard. While they talked, Bill opened the door quietly, repressed all his boyhood training on the dishonor of striking a woman, and delivered a rabbit punch to the back of the guard's neck. Afraid of killing her, he didn't hit hard enough, and she started to turn. He pulled his arm back and caught her on the jaw. When she crumpled, Bill caught her and eased her to the floor.

He picked up the guard's weapon and examined it. It had looked like a rifle at first glance, but on closer examination turned out to be a long-barreled version of Tamara's air pistol.

"It works the same as mine," Tamara explained, "except that it holds a larger amount of air and can shoot farther. And it can be reloaded, not that we'll have a chance to do so. Oh, and it will be loaded with tranquilizing darts instead of poisoned ones; lethal weapons aren't allowed inside Losalam."

"You still have your pistol."

"Yes, but I told Linda I'd lost it; survival weapons are always turned in on return from a patrol. I had a feeling we might need mine. But I don't want to shoot it; if we get into trouble, you use your gun. Anyone we meet will probably be someone I know. Fellow officer, friend of the family... they're all my people."

"But you kept the gun," Bill said.

"Yes, I kept the gun! And I'll use it, if I have to. But not unless there's no other way out."

Bill agreed and started down the corridor. Then he turned and fired at the fallen guard.

"Keep her knocked out as long as possible," he explained. "As long as there's no permanent damage to her, we might as well be safe."

As they approached the end of the corridor, Tamara touched Bill's arm, and they stopped.

"There's a nurse's desk right around the corner," she whispered. "Mr. Jerralt, the head nurse, is on duty tonight. He saw you when you were brought in; if he sees your face, he'll recognize you."

"What's the layout from here on?" Bill asked.

"Simple. That's the reception area around the corner. We just walk past the desk and out the front door. Unless Mr. Jerralt recognizes you, in which case we run out the front door."

"Guards outside?"

"No. The council thought that one guard would be enough for a savage who had no friends in the city and who was too weak to leave his bed anyway. Which reminds me; how do you feel?"

"Terrible, but I can move. Let's go."

They turned the corner, walking rapidly. They were almost even with the desk, when a shout came from the corridor they had just vacated. Head Nurse Jerralt, who had been filling out forms and paying no attention to a pair of uniformed scouts, jumped and looked around. As his

gaze swung past Bill, his eyes showed startled recognition. Without hesitation, Bill whipped the air gun to his shoulder and fired. Jerralt opened his mouth to shout, and then his eyes glazed, he swayed forward and slumped heavily over his desk.

"Fast-working stuff," Bill commented.

"Admire it later. Come on!"

Once outside, they slowed again. Running was the quickest way to attract unwanted attention. "Where are we going?"

Tamara chuckled. "Since I have to get the flier, you might as well just follow my lead. It may gall your male supremacist soul, but until we get out of here, I'm in charge."

"And you're going to make the most of it. I guess I can stand it. Do you know where they put my weapons?"

"In the Science Hall, under lock and key. Our techs will be studying them, but right now you couldn't get at them with anything short of one of those Old Days' grenades, and using one of those would start the whole city after us. That reminds me." She put a hand in one of the uniform pockets and withdrew a grenade, which she handed to Bill. Then she repeated the process.

"Linda took these along to impress the techs, but they weren't impressed. They just stuck them in a corner, so when Linda and I left the building, I picked them up again. The techs will never miss them."

"You're marvelous," Bill said, leaning over and kissing her.

"I hope you respond to something besides weapons," she said doubtfully. "But I suppose I can find that out later. This way."

Bill followed her, muttering under his breath about his lost revolver, but Tamara ignored him, and he soon began to observe his surroundings. From Tamara's conversation, he had envisioned Losalam as an Old Days' city, with buildings made of plastic and alloy and other Old Days' inventions, perhaps even a skyscraper or two.

The reality was different. The city might be large in area; it was

difficult to judge while he was in the middle of it, at night. But the buildings were mostly one-story affairs built of stone or concrete or another substance that puzzled him for a while until he realized it must be what the old books called adobe. Here and there a two-story structure towered over its neighbors. Popo Agie might be a smaller city, but it boasted more impressive buildings. Bill noticed that very little wood was used here; aside from door and window frames, there was almost none.

There were no lights and very few people in the area they traveled; he assumed it must be a factory or warehouse district. It was fairly large, which argued a sizeable city. He wondered where the food came from; Tamara had spoken of farms, but it would take an incredible number of acres of the barren soil he'd seen in the area to feed the city people. Perhaps they irrigated, though; in the Old Days there had been irrigation here.

Now they were away from the warehouses and into a residential area. Still not many people abroad, but there were lights behind the windows of the buildings. Small houses, obviously individual family dwellings. They had traveled less than half a block when a siren began wailing ahead of them.

Tamara stopped, and Bill halted at her side. "I knew it had been too easy," she said.

"Alarm siren?" Bill asked.

"Yes. I was beginning to hope that knocking out Mr. Jerralt had confused them enough so we could get away without trouble. But now they'll put a guard on the fliers; it's a simple deduction that we're trying to escape, and any of the patients can tell them we left together. We'll have to fight our way through."

"They might think we were going to sabotage something," Bill offered.

"Not likely. Though since they think you're a savage, I suppose they might assume you could go berserk."

Bill grinned evilly. "You think I can't? Look, if they've got a guard on the hovercraft, what we need is a diversion to draw it off."

"Let's make sure they have a guard, first."

They had. The hovercraft were in a field with a high fence around it. There were two guards at the gate. As they watched, one of the guards inspected the papers of a woman entering the field, while the other guard held her weapon ready until the identification was complete. Beyond the guards stood a large office building; more people were moving around inside it.

"Doesn't look too hard," Bill said. "I can take out both guards from here, and we run through and grab one of the machines."

Wordlessly, Tamara pointed to the top of the office building, where three more guards stood around some sort of weapon mounted on a tripod. The distance put them well out of reach of the air gun.

"That's a portable laser," Tamara commented, pointing at the weapon on the tripod mount.

"All right," Bill said. "I know when I'm licked. We need a diversion. Why don't I go toss a grenade at the Science Hall, and—"

"Will you please forget those weapons of yours? If you must start throwing grenades, throw them where they'll do some good."

"Where would you suggest?"

"That depends on what diversion you're planning, and how you expect to meet me later."

"Easy enough. We separate. I go somewhere and attract attention. If the grenades will go off, they'll do fine, but if they won't, I'll think of something. Everyone rushes to the sounds. Meanwhile you sneak onto the hovercraft field, grab one of the machines, and pick me up."

"And how will I find you? I can't just go cruising around looking."

"Actually, you probably could. Who's to know you aren't a regular pilot helping to hunt me down? But I'll try to attract your attention. Can you land one of those things on a roof?"

"If the roof is solid enough. Not on an adobe; the downdraft would probably blow a hole in the roof. Or if it didn't, the weight of the machine would buckle it."

"Okay, I find a stone building with a good solid roof and I get up onto it, and you pick me up there. Might as well make it a building you can find easily, while we're at it. Which one is best?"

Tamara looked at him for a long moment, and then very reluctantly said, "The Science Hall."

Bill laughed, and Tamara had to shush him while she was giving him directions. He slipped quietly into the shadows, but for a few minutes she could hear chuckles coming out of the darkness.

Bill slipped silently and almost invisibly through the city. When he could, he kept to the shadows. When he had to cross an open street illuminated by moonlight—or, once, a thoroughfare lit by gas lamps—he sauntered. He slouched inside his ill-fitting uniform, keeping his face down and hiding as much of it as possible.

The Science Hall was a good six blocks from the hovercraft field. By the time Bill reached it, he had decided that Losalam was, indeed, a city of rather monotonous architecture. It was hard to tell one building from another, and if he hadn't noted the inscription "Science Hall" neatly chiseled in the stone over the door, he might have missed his target. He faded back into the shadows and studied the situation.

When he made his diversion, he might as well make it a good one. If he could locate his revolver inside the hall, a few shots should produce as much consternation among Losalam residents as an equal number of grenades. So he'd get his weapons back if he could.

He circled the premises. One main door in front. A small door at the rear, securely fastened from the inside. A few small windows in the stone walls; no chance of getting in that way. It looked like the main door was it—and it was the only entrance he'd have to defend once he got inside.

While conducting his scouting operation, he'd automatically avoided the few pedestrians on the streets, but now their numbers were steadily increasing. Losalam was buzzing like a disturbed hive of bees.

He hefted one of the grenades thoughtfully. Throwing them in the heat of battle was one thing. Deliberately pulling the pin in this city with nobody immediately menacing him was something else. Reminding himself that the odds were in his favor that the thing wouldn't blow up in

his hand didn't help much. Finally, he pulled the pin and hurled the grenade in one quick motion, before he could think about it any more.

Nothing happened. The grenade arced through the air, landed well short of the door, rolled up and bumped the door, and lay there. One of the passing townspeople noticed it and peered into the shadows where Bill stood, obviously wondering why anyone would throw rocks at the Science Hall. Bill stood perfectly still until the townsman walked away, and then pulled the other grenade from his pocket. Might as well find out if it was a dud, too. Then a group of four uniformed women with the long air guns came around the corner, and Bill decided to let them pass; this was supposed to be a diversion, not a suicide mission.

While he was waiting, the grenade in front of the door went off with a satisfying amount of noise. Along with everyone else, Bill jumped. The four women guards turned to look at the building, and then moved forward to investigate. Bill shrugged, raised the tranquilizer gun, and dropped them with four well-placed shots. Someone in the next block shouted, and then Bill was across the street and forcing his way past shattered pieces of door. Inside, it was darker than on the street, and he had to wait to let his eyes become adjusted to the dim light seeping in through door and windows. There didn't seem to be any possibility of barricading the door; he'd hoped to create a disturbance down here, but by the time many troops arrived, he'd have to retreat to the roof.

His first move was to locate the stairway Tamara had told him about. That done, he started on a search for his weapons. If they were being examined by Losalam's scientists, they obviously wouldn't be out here on the tables or in showcases. There should be a back area devoted to research. Or a basement, he thought glumly. If his stuff was in the basement, it was gone; if he went downstairs, he could be cut off from the roof too easily.

The light was too dim for him to see into the showcases as he went past them, but the items on the tables were mostly uncovered and he glanced at them as he worked his way to the back of the big room. They seemed to be mostly Old Days' relics. He recognized a television set, a radio, a powered lawnmower. Over in the corner loomed the bulk of an automobile. A pretty common collection; most of the objects included could still be found scattered around the countryside. He wondered what the museums had been like in the Old Days; had their contents been any

more interesting?

Suddenly there was a wall in front of him. He searched along it until he came to a door. He tried the handle and nothing happened; it was locked. He was considering what he might find in a museum that could be used to break down doors when a noise from the front of the building made him turn around. People were beginning to crowd in through the broken main door.

No chance to locate his weapons now. He hoped the Losalam scientists had fun dissecting them. Bill let out a war cry that his Indian ancestors would have been proud of and charged toward the crowd. As he expected, the people in front tried to run back out of the building, and became entangled with the ones behind them still trying to get in. A tumult of voices arose. Bill swerved suddenly toward the stairway and raced up it to the second floor. The air here was musty; great piles of unknown material lay about, covered with large cloths and scraps of plastic. Tamara had said there was a way to get from this floor to the roof, but where was it? He should have come up here immediately, instead of wasting time hunting for his weapons. People had begun crowding up the stairs. Bill shot the leader of the rush with the tranquilizer gun, and the crowd halted. A voice that sounded definitely military came up from below, ordering people to get out of the way. If things started getting organized down there, he'd better find the way to the roof pretty fast. They were getting lights of some sort below him now. And then, in the glow of light coming up the stairway, he saw a ladder leaning against one wall, and above it a sort of hatch set in the roof.

He glanced down the stairway. The crowd had dispersed, and a very smart-looking military group was preparing to ascend. No way to fight that bunch. He went up the ladder as fast as he could. The steel hatch was barred from the inside, but it was a simple matter to slip the bars back, boost the hatch out of the way, and scramble onto the roof. As he reached the rooftop, he felt something scratch his leg. Looking down, he saw a dart embedded in his coverall.

Quickly, he dropped the steel cover back in place and looked for something he could put on top of it to hold it down. There was nothing; the roof was bare. Bill stepped on top of the hatch and sat down, hoping the troops below didn't have any weapons that could penetrate rusty steel. Then he realized that of course they did: lasers. He wondered how long it



would take them to get one set up.

Pulling the dart from his coverall, he squeezed the scratch until it bled. He longed for his knife, but that was gone with his other weapons. So far, he felt nothing, which he suspected was a bad sign. Tamara had said the poison worked slower than the tranquilizers. From what he'd seen so far, the tranquilizers worked almost instantly. If he'd been hit by one of those, he would be unconscious by now. Still, Tamara had said there were no lethal weapons inside Losalam, so he might have a chance.

At least, judging from the tumult in the streets around the building, he'd created a splendid diversion. He could feel blows raining on the underside of the hatch, and once it even lifted slightly, but he didn't worry about that. The ladder would allow only one person at the hatch at a time, and he hadn't seen anyone in Losalam who could, while standing on a ladder, lift a steel plate with a large man on top of it. As long as they kept battering at the hatch, he was safe. It was when they quit that he'd have to worry, because that would probably mean they'd brought up a laser.

More people seemed to be arriving outside. Lovely. The more who showed up here, the fewer there would be to bar Tamara from the hovercraft. He wondered why he felt nothing from the drug in his leg. Surely even poison would have begun to work by now. Of course, the dart hadn't penetrated and he'd bled the scratch promptly. Maybe he hadn't received a full dose.

Abruptly, he realized that he was hunched over, his head resting on his knees, with no idea of how he had got in that position. So it had been a tranquilizer dart after all! He had only been nicked, but it would affect him eventually. He nodded again, and again snapped alert. Maybe he'd better get up and walk around to stay awake. He stood up and had one foot off the hatch when it rose up under him, threatening to send him sprawling to the surface of the roof. He whirled and jumped back on it. He and the hatch hit the rooftop with a thump, and there was a satisfying amount of crashing and general uproar from below. He grinned and adjusted the cover so that it fitted the opening, leaving no cracks for any more darts to get through.

The action had even wakened him up again.

A voice came up from below. "Tamara Bush!"

Great, Bill thought. They think we're still together. He didn't answer.

"Tamara!" the voice shouted again. "This is Commander Crosby! I order you to return to your duty!"

When no answer was forthcoming, another voice came up from below him. This one sounded reasonable and persuasive, pointing out that Tamara was acting irrationally, promising that there would be no retaliation if she surrendered now, pleading with her to think of her family and friends. Bill considered telling them that Tamara had already been wounded and couldn't reply, but decided that silence was probably a better way of keeping them talking. And where was Tamara and the hovercraft? He was getting sleepy again.

"Tamara!" roared the first voice. "This is your last chance! We have brought up lasers! If you don't surrender, we'll cut our way through that hatch and onto the roof!"

Bill looked around for a hiding place; and saw the airgunner on the roof opposite taking aim at him. He ducked as the dart whizzed by him, and his return shot dropped the gunner. But more people were coming out on that roof now. Time was running out. By now, they probably knew he was alone; while they might have some compunction about endangering the life of Tamara Bush, they'd have none at all about disposing of an obstreperous savage.

Then there was a familiar roar from down the street, and a hovercraft was racing along at rooftop height. Bill dropped flat to the roof as more darts showered past him, and the first laser beam sliced up through the hatch. Even now, he'd be lucky if Tamara got to him before he was hit. The hovercraft raced in, swerved at the last minute to avoid another laser beam, and stopped between Bill and the snipers on the other roof. The canopy swung up, and Bill dove inside. Tamara was there, looking grim and operating an assortment of levers. The canopy snapped shut, and the hovercraft lifted off the roof.

"Thought you said there weren't any lethal weapons inside town," Bill said. "Those lasers look lethal enough for me."

"No lethal hand weapons," Tamara said, swinging the hovercraft away from the mob below. "I thought I wasn't going to get there in time."

"So did I, for a minute or two there." He yawned. "I got nicked in the leg by a dart. I must not have got a full dose, but I keep getting sleepy."

Tamara turned briefly to smile at him. "I suppose there's no reason why you can't sleep. We've got a straight run to Wyoming now."

Bill turned around several times, craning his neck to watch for the inevitable pursuers. "There won't be any," Tamara informed him. Normally, they'd send out other craft to shoot us down, but I think they'll just let us go now. There are advantages to being Paula Bush's daughter." She smiled in grim amusement.

Bill relaxed in the second seat, and looked through the canopy. They were still at rooftop height, which was a trifle nerve-wracking to someone who had never flown before. He had the sensation that they were going to crash head-on into each new building that appeared. As he clutched the sides of his seat, all thoughts of sleep again evaporated.

Then they were past the city, and Bill's stomach gave a lurch as Tamara dropped the hovercraft and sped north just a few feet above the surface of an Old Days' highway. Trees, bushes, and an occasional farmhouse flashed by on both sides. The speed seemed tremendous; Tamara's ability to control the machine seemed little short of miraculous, and Bill was terrified the miracle would cease at any moment.

He managed a slightly sick smile. "If you're trying to get back at me for the scares I gave you in the Wild Lands," he said, "you're certainly succeeding."

Tamara looked at him in amazement. "But we aren't even flying very fast," she said. "I don't want to get up to top speed at night, unless we're being pursued. This is just cruising; about the same speed I use when I'm on patrol."

Bill considered the possibility of moving even faster than they were at present and shuddered.

Even fear, however, becomes monotonous after a while. Tamara was busy with the controls of the machine, and Bill didn't want to distract her. Definitely he didn't want to distract her! They continued to follow the highway, trees continued to hurtle past, catastrophe did not occur. Gradually, Bill relaxed again. The flood of adrenalin seemed to have

neutralized most of the tranquilizer in his system, but there was enough left to put him into a sort of wakeful doze. He decided that flying might be rather pleasant after all, though he would have preferred one of the Old Days' airplanes, which flew high enough so there was no immediate danger of being impaled on a tree at any moment.

The highway turned west, and Tamara kept the hovercraft headed north, slowing down as she threaded her way through obstructions. The trees were growing thinner up here, gradually giving way to the same scrubby brush that existed east of Losalam.

Bill wondered how long it would take them to reach Wyoming. He thought about asking Tamara, but then he realized that while she might know what speed she could average, he didn't remember the exact distance in miles. It hadn't seemed important, when he left Wyoming on horseback, to know precisely how many miles lay between him and the source of the rumors he was tracking. And it really wasn't important now. The hovercraft was working properly, there was no pursuit, and once they reached that hill up ahead, everything would be all right.

There seemed to be something wrong with that last thought, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. They were approaching the hill fairly rapidly, but he had time for a good look at it. It seemed perfectly ordinary. Rather small; hardly more than a bump in a countryside that had flattened out north of the highway and was now an irregular plain. The mound was surprisingly symmetrical, but other than that there seemed nothing unusual about it. Still, it represented safety. Once there, no pursuit from Losalam could catch them.

Now they were over it, and he couldn't see it any more. He had an urge to look at this salvation and began flipping latches to see if he could open a window so he could look. He was rewarded when the canopy opened, and he peered over the side. They were hovering now, descending, and the mound below was obscured by great clouds of dust and sand blown up by the fans. That was all right, though. Tamara was bringing the hovercraft down steadily, and soon their worries would be over.

## ***CHAPTER TWELVE***

Then, just for a moment, the euphoric mood slipped, and Bill realized where they were. With desperate speed he grabbed the last grenade from a

pocket, dropped it overside, and screamed "Forward!" in Tamara's ear.

She hadn't yet shut off the motors, and she reacted automatically, like a person under hypnosis. A lever moved, and they were creeping ahead.

"Faster!" Bill yelled. "And up in the air!"

The speed increased, and the nose had tilted up sharply, when the explosion came behind them. Suddenly Tamara was wrestling with the controls as the hovercraft bucked and pitched. She got it more or less under control, and turned a frightened face toward Bill.

"What was that?" she asked.

"That," Bill said grimly, "was our Menace. We just came very close to becoming cleanly picked skeletons back there. I don't understand why its control slipped, unless the downdraft from the hovercraft fans disturbed it. That could be, if it was a group mind; I suspect the group was getting dispersed by the down-draft."

"What did you do to it? Is it dead?"

"I dropped a grenade on it, and I doubt if it's dead. Or at least, not all of it."

"Not *all* of it?" she echoed, turning to stare at him again. "What sort of a creature can you kill part of?"

"A kind your Uncle Roy and I discussed back at the hospital. Or, to be honest, he discussed it and I listened. Telepathy, he said, makes possible a group mind, where thousands of small creatures can pool their brain cells to produce one large mind to do their thinking for them. I suppose part of their cells would still have to control their own automatic responses like heartbeat and breathing, assuming they have either response. Roy didn't mention that. Our Menace was a group mind. I suspect it could lure people to it only when all its parts were working together. When they separated, such as when the parts were busy carrying back the meat from a kill, it couldn't communicate with other animals any more. It was drawing us to it, but it didn't know about hovercraft; when we settled down on top of it, the fans blew some of its parts away, and its control weakened. And I weakened it some more with the grenade. But I suspect there's enough left to build back."

"But what *is* it?"

"An ant colony," Bill said quietly.

Tamara looked disbelieving.

"I'd wondered about that, when the only living things I saw around the skeletons were ants," Bill said. "But I couldn't see how they could become intelligent until I talked to Roy. It fits, though. Ants at the edge of an atomic blast would have several feet of ground to protect them from the radiation. If they were too close, they'd get vaporized anyway, but at some distance from the center they'd survive, and the radiation would induce mutations. There was probably only one successful one, but that's all it takes. They've been spreading out ever since, and a few years ago they reached Losalam. I suppose they must have come from the south, since there aren't any rumors of monsters from any other locality that we know about."

"You mean there are more of them?"

Suddenly the hovercraft dipped alarmingly toward the ground, and Tamara had to concentrate on the controls. There was an odd rattle coming from one of the fans; the machine was obviously becoming hard to control. Tamara fought the controls, spotted an open space just ahead of them, and managed to set the hovercraft down. It was a hard landing, but the machine stayed in one piece.

"They say," Tamara said, "that any landing you walk away from is a success. I think your grenade did some damage to us as well as to the monster—the ants, I mean."

They got out shakily. Tamara looked at the crumpled underparts of the machine and shook her head. "With a repair shop and a week or so, I could get this flying again. As it is, it looks like we have a long walk to Wyoming."

"Well, I walked a good part of the way down here. I had a crossbow and a revolver then, though; we'll have to avoid meeting people on the way."

"Can't we? I thought you were the eagle-eye scout."

"I suppose so. I wasn't trying to avoid people when I came down; I

wanted to talk to them."

They stripped the machine of anything valuable, which wasn't much. Bill poked into the mechanical sections, borrowed Tamara's survival knife, and managed to remove several feet of cable. He looked more cheerful after that.

"With some time," he explained, "I can whittle out a crossbow stock. I don't know what the pull of this will be, and sights will be crude, but I think I can manage something that will get us a rabbit now and then." He carefully wrapped the cable about his waist, and then ripped the covering from the seats of the hovercraft.

"These coveralls aren't as well adapted to outdoor life as my old buckskins were," he said, noting Tamara's odd look. "We'll need any cloth we can get, before we make Wyoming."

Later, as they walked north, Tamara returned to the subject of the ants. "You said they would probably be able to build their colony back?"

"Of course. We didn't kill all of them, by any means. And if they still have a queen, we didn't get her; the grenade wouldn't have been powerful enough to reach her. But it doesn't make any difference, really. Those ants didn't become telepathic on that spot. The original colony is somewhere south of Losalam, and it's probably still going. This one was started the same way any new ant colonies start; a new queen established a new nest. It's not the only one; there are probably dozens of the nests by now. They've avoided Losalam for some reason, but they're gradually encircling it. If they really are intelligent, they may think Losalam is the center of human development, and they're surrounding it in preparation for an assault that will destroy it and leave them dominant"

Tamara halted. "We ought to go back and warn them."

"Think it would do any good? Besides, that's just a guess on my part. I don't even know if they're really intelligent or not, much less how they would think. That telepathic lure may be as much an automatic, unthinking action as a normal ant's foraging for food is."

"But it's dangerous to humanity, whether it's instinct or intelligence," Tamara objected.

"You're right, and we're going to need more than the resources of Losalam to combat it. We can't warn them; I'm a savage and you're a traitor and they wouldn't listen. But Wyoming will; enough to investigate further, at least. I'm still well enough thought of up there for my word to carry weight. Once we can get the results of a full-scale investigation, then maybe we'll know what to do. And maybe the Wyoming scientists can show the Matriarchy enough proof to be convincing."

"Do you think we'll be able to stop the ants?"

Bill looked surprised. "Of course. They may even turn out to be a blessing; humans will have to stop fighting one another and unite against them. Though that's probably too good to be true; I can't imagine any possible menace that would unite all humanity. Humans are too used to fighting each other. We'll unite many of the communities, though. And if you and I could cripple one nest with nothing but a hovercraft and one hand grenade, I think combined human science can finish them off."

He smiled at her. "Anyway, it's a long way to Wyoming, and we can think about that when we get there. Right now we've got other things to think about." He took her in his arms.

"We'll never get to Wyoming this way," Tamara objected. But she didn't pull away.

## ***EPILOGUE***

Tamara Ashley sat back, brushing a strand of graying hair out of her eyes and eyeing the papers in front of her with distaste. Sighing, she crossed the sparsely furnished room to stand at the window and watch a wagonload of iron castings rumble by on the street outside.

The noise of the wagon drowned out the sound of the door opening, but a motion at the edge of her vision caused her to turn, as a tall, bronzed, and excessively dirty young man entered the room.

"Roy!" she exclaimed in pleased surprise. "We weren't expecting you for another two or three days."

The young man crossed the room and hugged her, leaving a few dust-streaks on her dress. "We pushed the horses coming back," he



explained. "Chouteau wanted to get back to his wife, and I was anxious to see you."

Tamara snorted. "Of course you were; I can just see you panting with eagerness to be reunited with your beloved mother^ Though I expect there's someone here you were anxious enough to see."

"Now, how can you doubt me?" he protested, grinning. "I came here first tiling; didn't even stop to wash up."

"You came here first after somebody at the stables told you that Sheryl McKenzie is over at Portneuf running tests on the cattle-buffalo hybrids and won't be back for two days. Don't try to con your poor old mother. How did your trip go?"

"So-so. We got the dispute between the Horde and the Grennell Clan settled; old Bork can be reasonable if you handle him right. But Losalam is still being stubborn. This time they said they might sometime join Normerica if you weren't on the council. We told them where to stick that idea and they broke off the talks. They're weakening, though; they know we don't need them as much as they need us."

"We do need them, though, Roy. Mankind can't afford splinter groups, and there are good people there."

Roy Ashley shrugged. "They'll come in, sooner or later. Chouteau's a good talker; I'd have told them where to go a good week before he did. They aren't big enough to bother with."

"Anyone is big enough to bother with," Tamara corrected him gently. "But their objection will be taken care of before long. I'm not going to run for council again after this term."

"But why?" Roy was startled. "They're talking of you for president, one of these years."

"Because I'm being neglected, that's why," came a voice from the doorway.

"Hello, dear." Tamara walked over and kissed her husband.

"Anyway," she added to her son, "I think I've spent enough time

running the country; I need to spend more on running your father. He needs a firm hand."

"And other things," Bill added, putting an arm around her. He turned to his son. "Hear anything from Sublette while you were down south?"

"They've wiped out everything north of the Vermejo," Roy answered. "The word is that with one more push, the ants are finished."

Bill laughed. "That's what they said after old Jake Astor developed the catapults for dropping cyanide gas into the burrows, and again when Lisa and Fitzpatrick developed the remote-controlled bombs. Trouble is, the ants are intelligent; they can learn from past mistakes as well as we can. I wonder what the council would do if one of their hills applied for admission to Normerica?"

"You got a weird sense of humor, Dad."

"Part of my quaint barbarian charm," Bill said, smiling at his wife. "It captivates civilized women. Maybe if you practiced it more, Sheryl would have been waiting for you here instead of over at Portneuf. But it doesn't work with politicians; they want someone dedicated, like your mother. Humor offends their dignity; they want someone pure and fervent and uncorrupted."

"All a sham," Tamara said. "You corrupted me a long time ago. But I think Roy's right; we've finally reduced the ants to less than the numbers needed to maintain themselves. They haven't enough queens any more. Anyway, let's talk about something more cheerful; Roy's back and we ought to go out and celebrate. I've done enough office work for today."

Together, they walked out into the sunlight.