

# Shikari in Galveston

S.M. Stirling

## PROLOGUE: A Feasting of Demons

I told you not to eat him!" the man in the black robe said. "Come out!"

He was alone, standing on a slight hillock amid the low marshy ground. The log canoe behind him held more—three Cossack riflemen, their weapons ready, a young woman lying bound at their feet, and a thick-muscled man with burn scars on his hands and arms. He whimpered and cowered and muttered *pajalsta*—please, please—over and over until he was cuffed into silence by one of the soldiers.

Beyond them the tall gloom of the cypresses turned the swamp into a pool of olive-green shadow, in which the Spanish moss hung in motionless curtains. There was little sound; a *plop* as a cotton-mouth slipped off a rotting log and into the dark water, arid muffled with distance the dull booming roar of a bull alligator proclaiming his territory to the world. The air was warm and rank, full of the smell of decay . . . and a harder odor, one of crusted filth and animal rot.

"Come out!" the one in black snapped again; he was a stocky man in his middle years, black-haired, with a pale high-cheekboned face and slanted gray eyes.

They did; first one, then a few more, then a score, then a hundred. The man laughed in delight at the sight of them: the thickset shambling forms, the scarred faces and filed teeth, the roiling stink. One with a bone through his broad nose and more in his clay-caked mop of hair came wriggling on his belly like a snake through the mud to press his forehead into the dirt at the man's feet.

"Master, master," the figure whined—in his language it was a slightly different form of the word for *killer*, and closely related to the verb *to eat*.

"He sickened," the savage gobbled apologetically. "We only ate him when he could not work."

The robed man drew back a foot and kicked him in the face; the prone figure groveled and whimpered.

"A likely story! But the Black God is good to His servants. I have brought you another blacksmith . . . and weapons."

He half turned and signaled. Most of the men in the canoes kept their rifles ready and pointed; a few dragged boxes of hatchets and knives out and bore them ashore. A moaning chorus came from the figures, and hands reached out eagerly. The man in black uncoiled a whip from his belt and lashed them back.

"Who do you serve?" he asked harshly.

"The Black God! The Black God!" they called.

"Good. See you remember it. Keep this man healthy! Set more of your young to learning the smelting and working of the iron! No one is to hunt or kill or eat such men, for they are valuable! It is more pleasing to the Black God when you eat His enemies than when you prey on each other—"

He let the moaning chorus of obedience go on for a moment while he lashed them with words, then signaled; the young woman was pushed forward. She was naked, a plump -swarthy Kaijan girl trying to scream through the gag that covered her mouth. There would be a time for her to scream, but not quite yet.

"And the Black God has brought you food, tender and juicy!" the robed man called, laughing and grabbing her by the back of the neck in one iron-fingered hand. She squealed like a butchered rabbit through the cloth as the eyes of the watchers focused on her.

A moment's silence, and another cry went up, hot and eager: "*Eat! Eat!*"

"We shall eat, my children," he laughed. "But the killing must be as the God desires, eh? Prepare the altar!"

They scurried to obey. When the work was done, the man who commanded their service drew a long curved knife from his girdle; the rippling damascened shape was sharp enough to part a hair, unlike the crude blades of the savages.

"If you want the Black God to favor you, you must kill his enemies—kill them in fight, on the altar, by ambush and stealth. Kill them! Take their lands! Hunt them down!"

"*Kill! Kill all Tall Ones! Kill and eat!*" A vicious eagerness was in the words, and an ancient hate.

"And on that good day, I shall return to bring you His blessing! Now we shall make sacrifice, and feast."

He reached down and flicked off the gag, and the sacrifice gave the first of the cries prescribed in the

rite, as he swept the blade of the khindjal from throat to pubis in an initial, very shallow cut. The man sighed with pleasure and swept his arms open and up, invoking the Peacock Angel.

"Eat!" the swamp-men screamed. "Eat!"

Technically, they should be chanting the Black God's name at this point in the ritual. But it was all the same, in the end. For would not Tchernobog eat all the world, in time? He cut again, again . . .

"Eat! Eat!"

## I: The Bear in His Strength

Robre—Robre sunna Jowan, gift-named the Hunter, of the Bear Creek clan of the Cross Plains tribe—grunted as he strode southward past the peeled wands that marked the boundaries of the Dan-nulsford Fair. There were eleven new heads set on tall stakes in the scrubby pasture outside the stockade, fresh enough with the fall chill that the features could still be seen under the flies. One was of his own people, to judge from the yellow beard and long flaxen hair; that color wasn't common even among the Seven Tribes and rare as hen's teeth among outlanders. He thought he recognized Smeyth One-Eye, an outcast from the Panthers who lived a little north and west of here.

*Finally caught him lifting the wrong man's horses*, he supposed with idle curiosity. One-Eye had needed shortening for some time, being a bully and a lazy, thieving one at that. *Or maybe it was lifting the wrong womans skirts.*

The other heads were in a clump away from One-Eye's perch, and their features made him look more closely, past the raven damage—they weren't as fresh as the outlaw's. They were darker of skin than his folk, wiry-haired, massively scarred in zigzag ritual patterns that made them even more hideous in death than they had been in life, several with human finger-bones through the septums of their noses. The lips drawn back in the final rictus showed rotting teeth filed to points.

*Man-eaters*, Robre thought, and spat.

He waved greeting to the guards at the gate—Alligator clansmen, since Dannulsford was the seat of their Jefe. The Bear Creek families had no feud with the Alligators just at the moment, but he would have been safe within the wands in any case. A Fair was peace-holy; even outright foreigners could come here unmolested along the river or trade roads, when no great war was being waged.

Two of the Alligator warriors stood and leaned on their weapons, a spear and a Mehk musket, wearing hide helmets made from the head-skins of their totem and keeping an eye on the thronging traffic. They wouldn't interfere unless fights broke out or someone blocked the muddy path, in which case they could call for backup from half a dozen others who crouched and threw dice on a deerhide. Those warriors kept their weapons close to hand, of course, and one had an Imperial breech-loading rifle that the Bear Creek man eyed with raw but well-concealed envy. The Alligator tors were rich from trade with the coastlands, and inclined to be toplofty.

One of the gamblers looked up and smiled, gap-toothed. "Heya, Hunter Robre," he said in greeting.

"Heya, Jefe's-man Tomul," Robre said politely in return, stopping to chat. "A raid?" He jerked his thumb at the stakes with the ten heads. "Wild-men?"

The hunter stood aside from a string of pack mules that was followed by an oxcart heaped with pumpkins; axles squealed like dying pigs, and the shock-headed youth riding the vehicle popped his whip. The three horses that carried Robre's pelts were well trained and followed him, bending their heads to crop at weeds when their master stopped.

"*Yi-a/i*, swamp-devils, right enough." The Alligator chieftain's guardsman nodded. "Burned a settler's cabin east of Muskrat Creek—old Stinking Pehte."

"Not Stinking Pehte the Friendless? Pehte sunna Dubai?"

"Him 'n' none other; made an ax-land claim there 'n' built a cabin two springs ago, him 'n' his wife 'n' younglings. Set to clearing land for com. Jefe Carul saw the smoke 'n' called out the neighborhood men in posse. Caught 'em this side of the Black River. Even got a prisoner back alive—a girl."

Robre's eyebrows went up. "Surprised they didn't eat her," he said.

"They'd just started in to skin her. Ate her kin first. 'S how we caught 'em—stopped for their fun."

*Stinking Pehte must have been an even bigger fool than everyone thought, to settle that far east*, Robre thought,

but it wouldn't do to say it aloud. Men had to resent an insult to one of their own clan and totem, even if they agreed with it in their hearts.

"Where's ol' Grippem 'n' Ayzbitah?" the guard asked, looking for the big hounds that usually followed the hunter.

Robre cleared his throat and spat into the mud of the road, turning his head to cover a sudden prickle in his eyes. "Got the dog-sickness, had to put 'em down," he said.

The guards made sympathetic noises at the hard news. "Good hunting?" Tomul went on, waving toward the rawhide-covered bundles on the Bear Creek man's pack saddles.

"Passable—just passable," Robre replied, with mournful untruth. He pushed back his broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat to scratch meditatively at his raven-black hair. "Mostly last winter's cure, the second-rate stuff I held back in spring. Hope to do better this year."

"Jefe Carul killed two cows for God-thanks at sunrise," Tomul said; it was two hours past dawn now. "Probably some of the beef left if you've a hunger."

Robre snorted and shook his head. Sacrificial beef was free to any man of the Seven Tribes, but also likely to be old and tough. Lord o' Sky didn't care about the quality of the Cattle, just their number, it being the thought that counted. He wasn't *that* short of silver.

Tomul went on: "See you around, then; we'll drink a mug. Mind you don't break the Fair's peace-bans while you're here, or it's a whuppin' from the Jefe."

"I'm no brawler," Robre said defensively.

"Then give me these back," Tomul chuckled in answer, pulling down the corner of his mouth with a little finger to show two missing molars.

The other warriors around the deerskin howled laughter and Robre laughed back, taking up the lead rein of his forward pack horse and leading the beasts under the massive timber gateway, between hulking log blockhouses. The huge black-oak timbers that supported the gate on either side were carved and painted; Coyote on the left grinning with his tongue lolling over his fangs and a stogie in the corner of his mouth, the Corn Lady on the right holding a stalk of maize in one hand and a hoe in the other, and God the Father on the lintel above. Robre bowed his head for an instant as he passed beneath the stern bearded face of the Lord of Sky, murmuring a luck-word.

The pack horses followed him into the throng within, shying and snorting and rolling their eyes a bit. Robre sympathized; the crowds and stink were enough to gag a buzzard. Nearly a hundred people lived here year-round; Jefe Carul in his two-story fort-mansion of squared timbers, and his wives, his children; his household men and *their* wives and children in ordinary cabins of mud-chinked logs; a few slaves and landless, clanless laborers in shacks; plus craftsmen and tinkers and peddlers who found Dannulsford a convenient headquarters, and their dependents.

Now it swarmed with twenty times that number; the Dannulsford Fair got bigger every year, it seemed.

This year's held more people than Robre had ever seen in one place before, until only narrow crowded lanes were left between booths and sheds and tents and more folk still spilled over into camps outside the oak logs of the stockade. The air was thick with wood smoke, smells of dung and frying food and fresh corn bread, man's sweat, and the smells of leather, horses, mules and oxen, and dogs. The Fair came after the corn and cotton were in but before hard frost and the prime pig-slaughtering season; a time for the Jefe to kill cattle for the Lord o' Sky and to preside over disputes brought for judgment, and for the assembled free men of the clan to make laws.

*And, he thought with a grin, to make marriages and chase girls and swap and dicker and guzzle popskull, boast, and tell tales.* Robre was a noted tale-teller himself, when the mood was on him. *Time to trade with outland men, too.*

Dannulsford was as far north on the Three Forks River as you could float anything bigger than a canoe; that meant the Fair of the Alligators was far larger than most. There were Kumanch come down over the Westwall escarpment with strings of horses and buffalo pelts; Cherokee from the north with fine tobacco, rock-oil to burn in lamps, and bars of wrought iron for smiths; Dytchers from the Hill Country with wine and applejack and dried fruits; and black-skinned men from the coast with sugar and rum, rice and cinnamon and nutmeg.

Some from even farther away. A Mehk trader rode by, wearing a broad sombrero and tight jacket and tooled-leather chaps over buttoned knee-breeches, his silver-studded saddle glistening. The great wagons

behind him were escorted by a brace of leather-jacketed lancers, short stocky men with brown skins and smooth cheeks, bandannas on their heads beneath broad-brimmed hats, gold rings in their ears, machetes at their belts, sitting their horses as if they'd grown there.

*Say what you like about Mehk, they can ride for certain sure,* Robre thought: or at least their caballeros and fighters could. Among the Seven Tribes every free man was a warrior, but it was different beyond the Wadeyloop River.

The merchant the lancers served was crying up his wares as he went; fine drink distilled from the maguay cactus, silks and silver jewelry and bright painted pots, tools and sundries, dried hot peppers and gaudy feathers and cocoa and coffee in the bean. He had muskets and powder and round lead balls for sale, too; Robre's lip curled.

A smoothbore flintlock didn't have the range or accuracy of a good bow, and it was a lot slower to use—slower even than the crossbows some favored. A musket was useful for shooting duck with birdshot, or for a woman to keep around the cabin for self-defense, but he didn't think it was a man's weapon.

All the foreigners stood out, among his own folk of the Seven Tribes—the fearless free-striding maidens in shifts that showed their calves or even their knees, wives more decorous in long skirts and headscarves, men much like himself in thigh-length hunting shirts of linsey-woolsey or cotton, breechcloths and leggings of deer hide, soft boots cross-laced to the knee, their long hair confined by headbands and topped by broad-brimmed leather hats often decorated by a jaunty feather or two, their beards clipped close to the jaw.

Robre returned waves and calls with a polite *heya*, but stopped to talk with none, not even the children who followed him calling *Hunter! Robre the Hunter! Story, story, story!*

Partly that was a wordless shyness he would never confess at the sheer press of people; he was more at home in the woods or prairies, though he knew he cut a striking figure, and had a fitting pride in it, and in the fact that many men knew his deeds. He was tall even for his tall people, his shoulders and arms thick, chest deep, legs long and muscular, a burly blue-eyed, black-haired young man. who kept his face shaved in an outland fashion just spreading among some of the younger set. His hunting shirt of homespun cotton was mottled in shades of earth brown and forest green; at his waist he bore a long knife and a short sword in beaded leather sheaths, with a smaller blade tucked into his right boot-top. Quiver and bow rode at his shoulder—he preferred the shorter, handier recurved horn-and-sinew Kumanch style to the more usual wooden longbow—and a tomahawk was thrust through a loop at the small of his back.

The man he sought should be down by the levee on the river-bank, where the flatboats and canoes clustered. And where . . .

*Yes. That's it, and no other.*

The boat from the coast was huge, for all its shallow draft, like a flat tray fifty feet long and twenty wide. At its rear was an odd contraption like a mill's wheel, and amidships was a tall thin funnel; a flag fluttered red and white and blue from a slender mast, a thing of diagonal crosses—the Empire's flag. Somehow a fire made the rear wheel go round to drive the boat upstream—

Robre made a covert sign with his fingers at the thought, and whistled a few bars of the Song Against Witches. The steamboat was an Imperial thing. Imperials were city folk, even more than the Mehk, and so to be despised as weaklings. Yet they were also the masters and makers of all things wonderful, of the best guns, of boats pushed by fire and of writing on paper, of fine steel and fine glassware and of cloth softer than a maiden's cheek. And they told tales wilder than any Robre had made around the fire of an evening, about lands beyond the eastern seas and a mighty queen who ruled half the world from a city with a thousand thousand dwellers and stone houses taller than ojd-growth pines.

Robre snorted and spat again. The Imperials also claimed their *Queen-Empress* ruled all the land *here*, which was not just a tall tale but a stupid, insulting one. The Seven Tribes knew that they and none other ruled their homes, and they would kill any man among them who dared call himself a king, as if free clansmen were no better than Mehk peons.

*I figure the Imperials come from one of the islands in the eastern sea,* Robre thought, nodding to himself. Everyone knew there were a mort of islands out there: England, Africa, the Isle of Three Witches. *Past Kuba or Baydos, even, maybe. They puff it up big to impress gullible folk down along the coast.*

The clansman pushed past an open-fronted smithy full of noise and clamor, where the blacksmith and his apprentices hammered and sweated, and on to a big shack of planks. The shutters on the front were opened wide, and he gave an inward sigh of relief. He'd have had to turn round and go home, if the little Imperial merchant hadn't been here; he usually stopped first at Dannulsford Fair on his yearly rounds, but not always.

"Heya, Banerjii," he said.

Banerjii looked up from the gloom inside the store, where he sat cross-legged on a cushion with a plank across his lap holding abacus and account book.

"*Namaste*, Hunter Robre, sunna Jowan," he said, and made an odd gesture, like a bow with hands pressed palm-to-palm before his face, which was his folk's way of saying *heya* and shaking hands.

"Come in, it being always wery good to see you," the trader went on, in good Seven Tribes speech but with an odd singsong accent that turned every *w* to a *v*.

*Odd*, Robre thought, as he sat and a few local boys hired by the trader saw to his baggage and beasts.

But then, the merchant was odd in all ways. He looked strange—brown as a Mehk, but fine boned and plump, sharp featured and clean shaven. His clothing was a jacket of lose white cotton, a fore-and-aft cap of the same, and an elaborately folded loincloth he called something like *dooty*. Even odder was his bodyguard, who was somehow an Imperial, too, for all that he looked nothing at all like his employer, being three shades lighter for starters; there were men of the Seven Tribes who were darker of skin. The guard was nearly as tall as Robre, and looked near as strong; and unlike his clean-shaved employer, he wore a neat spade-shaped beard. He also tucked his hair up under a wrapped cloth turban, wore pants and tunic and belt, and at that belt carried a single-edged blade as long as a clansman's short sword. He looked as if he knew exactly what to do with it, too, while Banerjii was soft enough to spread on a hunk of cornpone.

A young man who looked like a relative of the merchant brought food, a bowl of ham and beans, the luxury of a loaf of wheaten bread, and a big mug of corn beer. All were good of their kind; the cooked dish was full of spices that made his eyes water and mouth burn. He cleared it with a wad of bread and a draft of the cool lumpy beer, which tasted like that from Jefe Carul's own barrels. Banerjii nibbled politely from a separate tray; another of his oddities was that he'd eat no food that wasn't prepared by his own kin, and no meat at all. Some thought he feared poison.

They made polite conversation about weather and crops and gossip, until Robre wiped the inside of the bowl with the heel of the bread, belched, and downed the last of the beer. During the talk his eyes had kept flicking to the wall. Not to the shimmering cloth printed with peacock colors and beautiful alien patterns, though he longed to lay a bolt of it before his mother, or to the axes and swords and knives, or to the medicines and herbs, or *to* the tools. You could get cloth and cutlery and plowshares, needles and thread anywhere, if none so fine. It was the two rifles that drew his gaze, and the bandoliers of bright brass cartridges. No other folk on earth made *those*.

"So," Banerjii said. "Pelts are slow this year, but I might be able to take a few—for friendship's sake, you understand."

"Of course," Robre said. "I have six bearskins—one brown bear, seven feet 'n' not stretched."

The contents of the packs came out, all but one. They dickered happily, while the shadows grew longer on the rough pine planks of the walls; the prices weren't much different from the previous season. They never were, for all that Banerjii always complained prices were down, and for all that Robre kept talking of going to the coast and the marts of fabled Galveston on his own—that would be too much trouble and danger, and both men knew it. Robre smiled to himself as the Imperial's eyes darted once or twice to the last, the unopened, pack.

"Got some big-cat skins," he said at last.

Banerjii's sigh was heartfelt, and his big brown eyes were liquid with sincerity. "Alas, my good friend, cougar are a drug on the market." Sometimes his use of the language was a little strange; that made no sense in Seven Tribes talk. "If you have jaguar, I could move one or two for you. Possibly lion, if they are large and unmarked."

Robre nodded. Jaguar were still rare this far north, though more often seen than in his father's time. And there were few lion prides east of the Westwall escarpment. Wordlessly, he undid the pack and rolled it out with a sweeping gesture.

Banerjii said something softly in his own language, then schooled his face to calmness. Robre smiled as the small brown hands caressed the tiger-skins. *And not just tiger*, he thought happily. Both animals were some sort of sport, their skins a glossy black marked by narrow stripes of yellow gold. And they were huge, as well, each nine feet from the nose to the base of the tail.

"Got 'em far off in the east woods," he said. That was a prideful thing to say; those lands weren't safe, what with ague and swamp-devils. "You won't see the likes of *those* any time soon."

"No," Banerjii said. "And so, how am I to tell what their price should be?"

Robre kept his confident smile, but something sank within his gut. He would *never* get the price of what he craved. He was an only son, his father dead and his mother a cripple, with no close living kin—and his father had managed to quarrel with all the more distant ones. Most of what he gleaned went to buy his

mother's care and food; oh, the clan would not let her starve even if Robre died, but the lot of a friendless widow was still bitter, doubly so if she could not do a woman's work. The price of the rifle was three times what he made in a year's trapping and trading . . . and if he borrowed the money from the merchant, he'd be the merchant's man for five years at least, probably forever. He'd need ammunition, too, not just for use but for practice, if the weapon was to do him any good.

The Imperial smiled. "But perhaps there is another thing you might do, and—" He dipped his head at the rifles. "I think, my good friend, you have put me in the way of something even more valuable than these pelts." He rubbed his hands. "Another of my countrymen has arrived. A *lord*—a Jefe—not a merchant like me, and a hunter of note. He will need a guide. . . ."

## II: The Lord in His Glory

"And I thought Galveston was bad," Lt. Eric King of the Peshawar Lancers said to his companion, laughing. "This—what do they call it, Dannulsford?—is worse."

Both were in the field dress of the Imperial cavalry: jacket and loose *pyjamy* trousers of tough khaki-colored cotton drill, calf-boots, leather sword-belts around their waists supported by a diagonal strap from right shoulder to left hip; their turbans were the same color, although the other man's was larger and more bulbous than his officer's, which was in the pugaree style with one end of the fabric hanging loose down his back.

"*Han, sahib,*" Ranjit Singh grunted in agreement as they stood at the railing of the primitive little steamboat. "It is so, lord. These *jangli-admis*"—jungle-dwellers—'live like goats.'"

The lands along the river had been pretty enough to his countryman's eye, in a savage fashion; swamp and forest on the banks, giving way to a patchwork of wood and tall-grass savannah to the west, with the occasional farm and stretch of plowed black soil. The settlements of the barbarians were few and scattered, crude log cabins roofed in mossy shingles, surrounded by kitchen gardens and orchards of peach and pecan, and farther out, patches of maize and cotton and sweet potatoes surrounded by zigzagging split-rail fences. Corrals were numerous, too, for they seemed to live more by their herds than their fields; the grasslands were full of long-horned, long-legged cattle and rough hairy horses, and the woods swarmed with sounders of half-wild pigs.

Woods stood thicker on the eastern bank, wilder and more rank. The air over the Three Forks River was full of birds, duck and geese on their southward journey, and types he didn't recognize. Some were amazing, like living jewels of jade and turquoise and ruby, darting and hovering from flower to flower with their wings an invisible blur. That sight alone had been worth stopping here, on his way back from the European outposts of the Empire to its heartland in India.

"Sahib," grumbled Ranjit Singh, "This wasteland makes England look like a cultivated garden—like our own land in Kashmir."

King nodded. England remained thinly peopled six generations after the Fall. Still, after long effort from missionaries and settlers you could say it was civilized again in a provincial sort of way; farms and manors, towns, and even a few small cities growing again in the shadow of the great ruin-mounds overgrown by wildwood. Four millions dwelt there now, enough to give a human presence over most of such a small island. The countryside here had the charm of true wilderness, if nothing else.

This little settlement called Dannulsford, on the other hand . . .

*Squalid beyond words is too kind,* he thought. The stink was as bad as the worst slum in Calcutta, which was saying a good deal; smoke, offal, sewage' hides tacked to cabin walls or steeping in tanning pits, sweat and packed bodies. The water smelled for a mile downstream, as well.

"Probably they're not as bad when they're not jammed in together like this," he said. "And we won't be here long. Off to the woods as soon as we can."

"Of woods we have seen enough, this past year and more, sahib," Ranjit Singh said, as he dutifully followed Eric down the gangplank. "Europe is full of them."

"And the woods there full of danger," Eric chaffed. He'd just spent six months as part of the escort for a party of archaeologists, exploring the ruins amid the lost cities of the Rhine Valley and points east. "We've earned a holiday."

"In more woods?" the Sikh said sourly.

"For shikari, not battle," Eric said. "Some good hunting, a few trophies, and then back home."

"After this, even Bombay will feel like home," the Sikh said. "When we leave the train in Kashmir, I

shall kiss the dirt in thankfulness."

King shrugged, a wry turn to his smile. "Well, *daffadar*, you're free to spend your leave as you please."

Ranjit Singh snorted. "Speak no foolishness, *sahib*," he said. "If you wish to hunt, we hunt."

The Imperial officer shrugged in resignation. King's epaulettes bore the silver pips of a lieutenant; Ranjit's arm carried the three chevrons of a *daffadar*, a noncommissioned man. Besides being his military subordinate, Ranjit Singh was the son of a yeoman-tenant on the King estate, and his ancestors had been part of the Kings' fighting tail ever since the Exodus, martial-caste *jajmani-chents* who followed the sahib into the Peshawar Lancers as a matter of course. That mixture of the feudal and the regimental was typical of the Empire's military, and it made discipline a very personal thing. Ranjit Singh would obey without question, as long as the order didn't violate his sense of duty—by letting his sahib go off into the wilderness without him, for example.

They climbed log steps in the side of the natural levee and strolled up the rutted muddy street that led from the stretch of river-bank. The Imperial cavalymen walked with their left hands on the hilts of their curved *tu/war-sabers*; besides those they carried long Khyber knives, and holstered six-shot revolvers, heavy man-killing Webley .455's. Otherwise they were alike in their confident straight-backed stride with a hint of a horseman's roll to it, and not much else.

Eric King was an inch over six feet, broad-shouldered and long-limbed, with a narrow high-cheeked, straight-nosed face, glossy dark-brown sideburns and mustache, and hazel eyes flecked with amber. Ranjit Singh was a-bear to his lord's hunting cat, four inches shorter but thicker in the chest and shoulders, broad in the hips, as well, and showing promise of a kettle belly in later years. He was vastly bearded, since his faith forbade cutting the hair on head or face, and the black bush of it spilled from his cheekbones down to his barrel chest. His eyes were black, as well, moving swiftly despite the relaxed confidence of his stride, alert for any threat.

*Mostly the mud is a threat to our boots*, Eric thought. *Either sucking them off, or just eating them.*

Someone had laid small logs in an attempt to corduroy a sidewalk, but heels had pressed them into the blackish mud; passing horses and feet kicked up more, and a small mob of shouting children followed the two foreigners, pointing and laughing.

A wooden scraper stood at the door of their destination, the small building with banerjii & sons on the sign above, and they used it enthusiastically before pulling off their footwear and putting on slippers.

"*Namaste*, Lieutenant King sahib," the little Bengali merchant said. "I received your note. Anything I may do for the Queen-Empress's man . . ."

"*Namaste*, Mr. Banerjii," King replied, sinking easily cross-legged on the cushion and gratefully taking a cup of tea laced with cardamom, a taste of home. Sitting so felt almost strange, after so long among folk who used chairs all the time.

He handed over a letter. The merchant raised his brows as he scanned it. "From Elias and Sons of Delhi!" he murmured in his own language.

Bengali was close enough to King's native Hindi that he followed it easily enough for so simple a matter. "They're my family's Delhi men-of-'business," he said modestly, keeping his wry smile in his mind.

*Every trade has its hierarchy*, he thought. *And in some circles, it's we who gain status from being linked to them, not vice versa.*

"I will be even more happy to assist an associate of so respectable a firm," Banerjii went on, in the Imperial dialect of English; that was King's other mother-tongue, of course. "As I understand it, you wish to see something of the country? And to hunt?"

King nodded. And to make a report to the military intelligence department in the Red Fort in the capital; likely nothing would come of it, but it couldn't hurt. North America *was* part of the British Empire in theory, even if Delhi's writ didn't run beyond a few enclaves on the coast in actual fact. Eventually it would have to be pacified, brought under law, opened up and developed; when that day came any information would be useful. That might be a century from now, but the Empire was endlessly patient, and the archives were always there.

"You will need a reliable native guide, servants, and bearers," Banerjii said.

"Are any available? The garrison commander in Galveston lent me a few men. Locally recruited there, but reliable."

*And you should have asked for more*, radiated from Ranjit Singh.

Banerjii shook his head. "Oh, most definitely you must hire locally," he said. "Coastal men would be of little use guiding and tracking here—" He gave a depreciatory smile. "—as useless as a Bengali in Kashmir. But the natives have some reliable people. They are savages, yes, indeed, but they are a clean people here,

all the Seven Tribes and their clans. From the time of the Fall."

King nodded in turn; that was one of the fundamental distinctions in the modern world, between those whose ancestors had eaten men in the terrible years after the hammer from the skies struck, and those who hadn't. The only more fundamental one was between those who still did, and the rest of humanity.

"And they are surprisingly honest, I find, particularly to their oaths—oh, my, yes. But proud—very proud, for barbarians. There is one young man I have dealt with for some years, a hunter by trade, and—"

With a gesture, he unrolled the tiger-skins. King caught his breath in a gasp.

### III: The Maiden in Her Wrath

Sonjuh dawtra Pehte thrust her way into the beer shop through the swinging board doors, halting for a second to let her eyes adjust to the bright earth-oil lamps and push back her broad-brimmed hat. The dim street outside was lit only by a few pine-knots here and there.

There were a few shocked gasps; a respectable girl didn't walk into a man's den like this unaccompanied. Some of the gasps were for her dress.—she'd added buckskin leggings and boots, which made her maiden's shift look more like a man's hunting shirt, and so did the leather belt cinched about her waist, carrying a long bowie and short double-edged toothpicker dagger and tomahawk. A horseshoe-shaped blanket roll rode from left shoulder to right hip, in the manner of a hunter or traveler.

One man sitting on the wall-bench, not an Alligator clansman and the worse for corn-liquor, misinterpreted and made a grab for her backside. That brought the big dog walking beside her into action; her sharp command saved the oaf's hand, but Slasher still caught the forearm in his jaws hard enough to bring a yelp of pain. The stranger also started to reach for the short sword on his belt, until the jaws clamped tighter, tight enough to make him yell.

"You wouldn't have been trying to grab my ass uninvited, would you, stranger?" Sonjuh said sweetly. "Cause if you were, after Slasher here takes your hand off, these clansmen of mine will just naturally have to take you to the Jefe for a whuppin'. Less they stomp you to death their own selves."

The man stopped the movement of right hand to hilt, looked around—a fair number of men *were* glaring at him now, distracted from their disapproval of Sonjuh—and decided to shake his head. A sensible man was very polite out of his own clan's territory. If he wasn't. . . well, that was how feuds started.

"No offense, missie," he wheezed.

"Loose him," Sonjuh commanded, and the dog did—reluctantly.

The man picked up his gear and made for the door; several of the others sitting on stools and rough half-log benches called witticisms or haw-hawed as he went; Sonjuh ignored the whole business and walked on.

The laughter or the raw whiskey he'd downed prompted the man to stick his head back around the timber doorframe and yell, "Suck my dick, you whore!"

Sonjuh felt something wash from face down to thighs, a feeling like hot rum toddy on an empty stomach, but nastier. She pivoted, drew, and her right hand moved in a chopping blur.

The tomahawk pinwheeled across the room to sink into the rough timber beside the door, a whirr of cloven air that ended in a solid *chunk* of steel in oak. The out-clan stranger gaped at his hand, still resting on the timber where the edge of the throwing-ax had taken a coin-size divot off the end of the middle finger, about halfway down through the fingernail. Then he leapt, howling and dancing from foot to foot and gripping the injured hand in the other as the mutilated digit spattered blood; after a moment he ran off down the street, still howling and shouting *bitch!* at the top of his lungs.

Most of the men in the beer shop laughed at that, some so loud they fell to the rush-strewn clay floor and lay kicking their legs in the air. She went and pulled the tomahawk out of the wood, wiped it on her sleeve, and reslung it; Slasher sniffed at something on the floor, then snapped it up. The roaring chorus of guffaws and he-haws was loud enough to bring curious bystanders to the door and windows, and send more hoots of mirth down the street as the tale spread; several men slapped her on the back, or offered drinks—offers she declined curtly. The older men were quiet, she noticed, and still frowning at her.

Instead she pushed through the long smoky room toward the back, where the man she sought was



sitting. The air was thick with tobacco smoke—and the smell of the quids some men chewed and spat, plus sweat and cooking and sour spilled beer and piss from the alley out back. Still, she thought he'd probably seen all there was to see; those smoldering blue eyes didn't look as if they missed much.

"Heya," she said, and to her dog, "Down, Slasher."

"Heya, missie," he replied formally, as the big wolfish-looking beast went belly-to-earth.

"You Hunter Robre? Robre sunna Jowan?" The form of a question was there, but there was certainty in her voice.

"Him 'n' no other," the young man said. "You'd be Sonjuh dowtra Pehte, *naw?*"

His brows went up a little as she sat uninvited, pulling over a stool that was made from a section of split log, flat side sanded and the other set with four sticks. The rushes on the hard-packed clay floor rustled and crackled as she plunked it down and straddled it.

"*Yi-ah.*" She nodded, a little mollified that he hadn't used her father's gift-names. Nobody wanted to be called the daughter of the Stinker or the Friendless. "There's no feud between the Alligators 'n' the Bear Creek people, or quarrel between our kin."

"No feud, no quarrel," he acknowledged; both clans were of the Cross Plains folk, which meant they didn't have to assure each other that there was no tribal war going on either. It was more than a little unorthodox for a woman to go through the ritual, anyway.

"How'd you know who I was?" she added, curious, as she tore off some of the wheat-and-injun bread he had before him, dipped it in the salt and ate it; that satisfied courtesy, in a minimal sort of way.

He was supposed to be a sharp man, but as far as she knew they'd never met—her family had lived solitary. Robre was famous, after a fashion: Sonjuh dowtra Pehte had begun acquiring a little notoriety only in the last few weeks.

"Figured. Old Pehte had red hair like yours before he went bald, 'n' 'sides that, you favor him in your looks." He ate a piece of the bread himself, which meant he had at least to listen to her; then he went on: "He was a dab hand with a tomahawk, too; saw him win the pig 'n' turkey here at Dannulsford once when my father brought me, must be ten years ago now."

Sonjuh tossed her head, sending the long horse-tail of her hair swishing. Being unmarried—likely she would be anyway at nineteen, even were her father someone else—she wore her hair down and tied back with a snakeskin band, in a torrent the color of mahogany reaching to between her shoulder blades; a thick band of freckles ran across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Any man of the Seven Tribes would have accounted her comely, snub-nosed face and red lips and the long smooth curves of her figure as well, until he saw the wildness in those haunted leaf-green eyes.

"Nice throw, too, missie," Robre continued. "Pehte must've taught you well."

"I *missed*," she snapped. "Wanted to split his ugly face!"

Robre laughed, a quieter sound than most men's mirth, then stopped when he realized she wasn't even smiling.

"Welcome to a share," he said a little uneasily, indicating the pitcher of corn beer and clay jug of whiskey.

"Didn't come to drink," she said, after taking a token sip from the beer jug; refusing a man's liquor was a serious insult. "I came to talk business."

The young man's black brows went up farther. "Shouldn't your . . . oh."

Sonjuh nodded. "My father's dead." *Oh, merciful God, thank You he died first of all.* "So's my mother. So's my three sisters. I saw—"

Of itself, her hand shot out and grabbed Robre's glass. She tossed back the raw spirits and waited with her eyes clenched shut until the sudden heat in her stomach and a wrenching effort of will stopped the shaking of her hands and pushed away the pictures behind her eyelids. When she looked back up, Robre was frowning at her left forearm, where a bandage had slipped from a healing wound. A patch of skin had been removed—neatly, the way a skinning knife would do it in skilled hands.

She tugged the sleeve down over the rawness and went on: "Didn't come for sympathy, either. Like I said, I've got business to talk with you, Robre Hunter."

He took a pull at his mug of beer, wiped the back of one big calloused hand across his mouth, and nodded. "I'm listening, missie."

That was more than she'd expected, if less than she'd hoped. "I didn't have brothers. My pa didn't hold with hiring help, either, so from my woman-time I've been doing a son's work for him. Hunting, too." She took a deep breath. "I know my pa wasn't well liked—"

Across the table, a polite lack of expression said as plainly as words: *He was about as disliked as a man can be and not be outlawed. Or just plain have his gizzard cut out.*

More than one had tried, too, but Stinking Pehte had been a good man of his hands, and it had always gone the other way. All fair fights and within the letter of the law, but killing within the clan didn't make you any better liked either. One or two was to be expected, in a hot-blooded man, but public opinion thought half a dozen excessive; the clan needed those hands and blades.

"—but he was a good farmer, 'n' no one ever called him lazy. We got our crop in before we were hit. Not much, but we sold most here in Dannulsford. Deer hides 'n' muskrat, too, V ginseng, and potash from the fields we were clearing, 'n' soap 'n' homespun me 'n' my ma 'n' sisters made. The posse got back most of our cabin goods 'n' tools, 'n' our stock; then there's the land, that's worth something."

Not as a home-place; too ill-omened for that, and too exposed, as her family's fate proved. But someone would be glad to have the grazing, plus there was good oak-wood for swine fodder, and the Jefe would see that they paid her a fair share. That would probably amount to enough ham, bacon, and cow to put her meat on the table half the year.

"Glad to hear you're not left poor," Robre said.

"What it means is I can pay you," she said, plunging in. This time his eyes widened, as well.

"Pay me for what, missie Sonjuh?" he said.

She reached into the pouch that hung at her hip, supported by a thong over the shoulder; it was the sort a hunter wore, to carry tallow and spare bowstrings and a twist of salt, pipe or chaw of tobacco and a whetstone and suchlike oddments. What she pulled out of it was a scalp. The hair was loose black curls, coarser and more wiry than you were likely to find on a man of the Seven Tribes.

Robre whistled silently. Taking scalps was an old-timey, backwoods habit; Kumanch and Cherokee still did it, but few of their own folk except some of the very wildest. These days you were supposed to just kill evildoers or enemies, putting their heads up on a pole if they deserved it. And for a woman . . .

"I expect that's not some coast-man out of luck," he said.

"Swamp-devil," she said flatly. "Not no woman nor child, neither. That was a full-grown fighting man. Slasher 'n' I took him, bushwhacked him."

"Well. . . good," Robre said, with palpable uneasiness, blinking at the tattered bit of scalp-leather and hair. "One less swamp-devil is always good."

"That's what I want to hire you for," Sonjuh went on in a rush. "I can't. . . I swore 'fore God on my father's blood I'd get ten for my ma, 'n' ten for each of my sisters. I can't do it alone."

"Jeroo!" Robre exclaimed, and poured himself another whiskey. "Missie, that's unlucky, making that sort of promise 'fore the Lord o'Sky! Forty scalps!"

"Or that I'd die trying," she said grimly. "I need a good man to help. All the goods I've got is yours, if you'll help me. Jeroo! Everyone says you're the best."

"Missie . . ." There was an irritating gentleness in his tone. "A feud, that's a matter for a dead man's clansmen to take up. It wouldn't be right or fitting for me to interfere."

Her hand slammed the table, enough to make jug and bottle and cup rattle, despite the thick weight of wood. "The gutless *hijos* won't call for a war party! They say the ten heads they took were enough for honor! Well, they *aren't!* I can hear my folks' spirits callin' in the dark, every night, callin' for blood-wind to blow them to the After Place."

Some of those nearby exclaimed in horror at those words; many made signs, and two abruptly got up and left. You didn't talk openly of ghosts and night-haunts, not where the newly dead were concerned. Naming things called them. A ripple of whispers spread throughout the beer shop, and bearded faces turned their way.

"It's all because nobody liked my pa, 'n' because they're all *cow-ards*! Her voice had risen to a shout, falling into the sudden silence.

"That's a matter for your Jefe, missie," Robre said. The soothing, humor-the-mad-girl tone made the blood pound in her ears. "'N' the gathering of your clan's menfolk."

"I came to offer you two Mehk silver coins each, if you'll come with me 'n' help me," she said, in a tone as businesslike as she could manage. "'N'. you can show these gutless, clanless bastards that a girl 'n' an out-clan man can do what they can't."

"Sorry," he said; the calm finality shocked her more than anger would have. "Not interested."

"Then damn you to the freezing floor of hell!" she screamed, snatching up his mug and—dashing the thick beer into his face. "Looks like I'm the *only* one in this room with any balls!"

That made him angry; he was up with a roar, cocking a fist—then freezing, caught between the insult and the impossibility of striking a freewoman of the Seven Tribes, and a maiden of another clan at that.

Shaking, Sonjuh turned on her heel, glad that the lanterns probably weren't bright enough to show the

tears that filled her eyes. She stalked out through the shocked hush, head down and fists clenched, not conscious of the two weird foreigners who blocked the door until she was upon them. One twisted aside with a cat's gracefulness; the other stood and she bounced off him as she would off an old hickory post; then he stepped aside at the other's word.

Sonjuh plunged past them into the night and ran like a deer, weeping silently, with Slasher whining as he loped at her heel.

"I wonder what *that* was in aid of?" Eric King murmured to himself, raising a polite finger to his brow as the room stared at him and Ranjit Singh, then walking on as the crowded, primitive little tavern went back to its usual raucous buzz—although he suspected that whatever had just happened was the main subject of conversation.

Even in the barbarian hinterlands, he didn't think a girl that pretty dumped a pint of beer over a man's head and stalked out as if she were going *to* walk right over anyone in her way, not just every night. In a way, the sensation she'd caused was welcome; the two Imperial soldiers probably attracted less curiosity than they normally would. Eric waited courteously while the man he'd come to see mopped his face vigorously with a towel brought by a serving-girl, looking around as he did. This wasn't much worse than the dives he'd pulled soldiers overstaying their leave out of in many a garrison town; the log walls were hung with brightly colored wool rugs, and the kerosene lanterns were surprisingly sophisticated—obviously native-made, but as good as any Imperial factories turned out. He'd have expected tallow dips, or torches.

"Mr. Robre sunna Jowan?" he asked, when the man was presentable again. "I'm Lt. Eric King. This is my *daffadar*. . . Jefe's-man . . . Ranjit Singh."

"Robre Hunter, that's me," the native replied, rising and offering his hand. "Heya, King, Ranjeet."

The hand that met his was big, and callused as heavily as his own. They were within an inch or so of each other in height and of an age, but Eric judged the other man had about twenty or thirty pounds on him, none of it blubber. A slight smile creased a face that was handsome in a massive way, and the two young men silently squeezed until muscle stood out on their corded forearms. The native's blue eyes went a little wider as he felt the power in the Imperial's sword-hand, and they released each other with a wary nod of mutual respect, not to mention mutual shakings and flexings of their right hands. Eric read other subtle signs—the white lines of scars on hands and dark-tanned face, the way the local moved and held himself—and decided that native or not, this was a man you'd be careful of. And no fool, either; he was probably coming to the same conclusion.

"Dannul! Food for my guests from the Empire!" Robre bellowed. "And beer, and whiskey!"

King understood him well enough. The local tongue was derived from that of the Old Empire, and the Imperial cavalry officer had experience with the classical written tongue of the Pre-Fall period, with the speech of the Cape and Australian Viceroyalties, and some of the archaic dialects still spoken in remote parts of England, as well. With that, and close attention in weeks spent along the coast near Galveston, he could follow Robre's speech easily and make himself understood with a little patience. It was mostly a matter of remembering a few sound-changes and applying them consistently.

"No beef," he said. "Cow-meat," he added, when Robre looked doubtful. The vocabulary had changed a good deal, too. "It's . . . forbidden by our religion. Our Gods." He pointed skyward.

*To oversimplify*, he thought, as Robre nodded understanding.

"*Yi-ah*, like our totems," the Bear Creek clansman said. "I don't eat bear-meat, myself."

King smiled. *To vastly oversimplify*, he thought.

His grandfather had eaten beef now and then; so his father had, at formal banquets among the sahib-log, though rarely at home. His own generation mostly didn't touch it at all, although as Christians it wasn't against their religion in theory. *More a matter of not offending*. The idea made him a bit queasy, in fact. *Well, you don't expect a taboo to make rational sense. That doesn't make it any less real*.

Luckily, Ranjit Singh was a Sikh, and so—apart from cow's-flesh—had fewer problems with the ritual purity of his food than most Hindus. Nanak Guru, the founder of that faith, had made a point of having his followers eat from a common kitchen with converts of all castes, and even outcaste ex-Muslims; they were the Protestants of the Hindu world, more or less. It simplified traveling no end.

A stout middle-aged serving woman brought wooden platters of steaming-hot corn bread, butter, grilled pork-ribs slathered with some hot sauce, and bowls of boiled greens; the food was strange but good, in a hearty peasant-countryside sort of way. Local courtesy, according to Banerjii, meant that you had to eat with someone before getting down to serious business. And drink; the maize-beer was vile, but better than what the Seven Tribes called whiskey. The stuff they imported from the south, made from a cactus, was

worse. The local wine was unspeakable even by those low standards.

"So," Robre said. "You two are from the Empire?"

"Yes," King said. *Technically, so are you, of course, my friend.* "We're here to hunt. Mr. Banerji tells me that you're the man to see about such matters."

"Awfuj long way to come just to hunt," Robre said. "How'd you get the meat 'n' hides home?"

"Ah—" Eric frowned. Obviously, the concept of hunting for trophies wasn't part of the local scene. "We're on our way home from England to India, which is the . . . biggest part of the Empire. That's where I and my man here live. . . ."

Robre frowned. "*England* is part of your Empire? In the old songs, we spent a powerful amount of time fighting England." He threw back his head and half chanted

*"Fired our guns 'n' the English stopped a-comin' Fired again, 'n' then they ran  
away—"*

"Ah . . . well, that was before the Fall, you see."

Local notions of geography were minimal; evidently these people had lost all literacy and most sense of the past during the Fall. Not surprising, since this area was on the southern fringe of the zone where total crop failure for three freezing-cold summers in a row had killed nearly everyone but a few cannibals who survived by eating their neighbors. These Seven Tribes might well be descended from no more than a handful of families. Small numbers meant fewer memories and skills passed down, and the older people who might remember most were most likely to die.

The lands farther south, what the old maps called Mexico, had preserved some remnants of civilization, with gunpowder and writing and a few small cities atop a peasant mass. India and the Cape and Australia had done much better, thanks be to Christ and Krishna and St. Disraeli. . . .

There was no sense in stretching poor Robre's idea of the world too far—and for that matter, King's own schooling hadn't covered the Pre-Fall history of the Americas in much detail. The Mughals and the East India Company had taken up a good deal more space, and so had the Romans. He did know that there had been a temporarily successful rebellion against the Old Empire here in North America by British colonists just about a century before the Fall, and that the New Empire had only started to make good its claim to the continent in the last couple of generations.

*There's so much else to do,* he thought wistfully.

The growing tension with Dai-Nippon, for example, or the . . . chronic menace of the Czar in Samarkand, hanging over the North West Frontier, and the Caliphate of Damascus in the west. It was a shame that the Powers spent so much time hampering each other, when the world was so wide and vacant, but such seemed to be the nature of man, chained to the Wheel and prey to maya, illusion.

"I'm sorry if I, ah, interrupted," King went on, nodding back toward the door where the redhead had made her spectacular exit.

"*Naw,*" Robre said. "That was Sonjuh dawtra Pehte. Pretty girl, hey?"

"Indeed. Hope I wasn't queering your pitch," King said cautiously. He'd gotten the impression that the locals were more free-and-easy about such matters than most higher-caste Indians or other Imperials, but making assumptions about women was always the easiest way to get yourself into killing trouble in a strange land.

It required a little back-and-forth before his meaning was plain. Robre shook his head. "Coyote's dong, I'd sooner sport with a she-cougar. She's pretty, but mad as a mustang on loco-weed, or ghost-ridden, or both. Well, no wonder, seein' as she saw all her kin killed 'n' eaten by the swamp-devils, 'n' they held her captive for two, three days. 'S too bad. Not just pretty; she's got guts, too. Probably get herself killed some hard, bad way, mebbe some others with her."

King listened to the story with a frown: keeping the peace and putting down feud and raid was his hereditary caste duty, and such lawlessness irked him even in a place only theoretically under the Imperial Pax.

"Well, no wonder she's not looking for a man, then," he said.

That took another bout of struggling with the language, and then Robre shook his head. "Oh, swamp-devils don't force women. Kill 'em and eat 'em, yes; that, no."

"That's . . . extremely odd," King said, conscious of his eyebrows rising. *Unbelievably odd,* he

thought. *Perhaps it's some sort of make-believe to protect the reputations of rescued women?*

Robre frowned, as if searching for some memory. "Near as I can recall, they questioned a swamp-devil 'bout it once, a while back. He wasn't quite dead when they caught him, 'n' he could talk—not all of 'em can. Anyways, story is he said our women didn't *smell* right." He shrugged. "Now, 'bout this hunt-outfit you want—"

Apparently there was a long-established etiquette for setting up a caravan, for trade or hunt. After an hour or two, they could talk well enough to exchange hunting stories. Robre enjoyed the one about the elephant in musth hugely, while obviously not believing a word of it—drawing the long bow was another local custom, in fact an art form, from what the merchant had said. . . . King found the story of the yellow-striped black tigers even more fascinating, and the circumstantial detail very convincing indeed. Killing *those* beasts, alone and on foot and with only bow and spear . . . that took a man. He'd already bought both pelts, for what he suspected was several times the sum Banerjii had paid—not that he'd queer the little Bengali's pitch by telling the natives, Imperials should stick together—but that wasn't the same thing at all as a trophy brought down on his own.

"My father will be dumbstruck, for once," he said, sobered by the thought of the fierce scarred face of the lord of Rexin. "He's always on about a lion he got in the Cape with a black mane big as a hayrick. It gets a little bigger every year, in fact."

Robre laughed and slapped the table. "My pa's dead, but I know that feeling from the old days, when I was young."

King kept his face straight; if the native wasn't within six months of his own twenty-two, he'd recite the Mahabaratha backwards. "It's a bargain, then," he said.

"A bargain," Robre agreed.

They shook hands again, not making it a trial of strength this time. "You can come collect the rifle tonight, if you want," King said.

He'd seen the naked desire in the blue eyes when they spoke of that payment; modern weapons were deliberately kept expensive by Imperial policy and taxation. Trade in guns over the frontier wasn't banned altogether, though, except in a few particular trouble spots: control over supplies of ammunition and spare parts was a powerful diplomatic tool, once buyers had become dependent on them. Robre surprised him by shaking his head.

"Put it with Banerjii," he said. "I wouldn't be good enough with one to be much use on this trip. Not enough time to practice— though I do expect some training with your weapons as part of the deal, you understand."

"*Koibatnaheen* . . . I mean, not a problem," King said, and yawned. The local whiskey tasted vile, but it did its business. "And now, adieu . . . I mean, see you tomorrow."

# # #

Sonjuh woke slowly, feeling stiff and sandy-eyed and with a dull throb in her head. Crying yourself to sleep did that, the more if you had been drinking; at least she hadn't woken herself up screaming again, though a heaviness behind her eyes told her that the dreams had been bad. She swallowed past a dry throat and scolded herself for the whiskey.

*Jeroo, how much did I drink? Ifs too damn easy to crawl into a jug to forget,* she told herself, rubbing her eyes fiercely. *You don't want to forget.*

She ignored the stiffness, as she ignored the small voice that said *oh, yes, you do*, and sat up, scratching and frowning as she cracked a flea. Slasher stirred and whined beside her as she rose from the straw of the loft. The beasts below were starting to stamp and blow in their stalls, and they'd be up in the farmhouse soon—her uncle wasn't what she considered a hard worker, and it wasn't the busy season, but a farmer got up with the sun, like it or not. She slipped down the ladder and watched the dog follow more cautiously—even now, the sight of Slasher on a ladder made her smile—and tossed hay into the feed troughs, took up pitchfork and wheelbarrow to muck out, rubbed them down. Two of the horses and a mule were hers, and the others all knew her, blowing affection at her and then feeding heartily.

Then she took down the bowie and tomahawk and worked the rest of the sand out of her joints by shadow-fighting, lunge and guard, stab and chop, her bare feet dancing across the packed dirt of the threshing floor outside the barn.

. *Move light and quick,* she told herself, in an inner voice that sounded like her father's. *Light and quick. Anyone you fight'll have more heft, so you 'd best move right quick.*

Pa had taught her; being sonless and indulgent with his eldest daughter, and living far enough offside

that neighbors wouldn't be scandalized. Besides, a lone steading needed more than one fighter, and it was old law that a woman should fight when her home was attacked.

After a while sweat was running freely down her body, the sun was over the horizon, and her head felt clear. She worked the counterbalanced sweep to bring more water out of the well, drank as much as she could, then dashed more buckets over herself; at least her relative didn't grudge water, having three good wells and a creek. She was rubbing herself down with a coarse piece of cloth when she became aware of a disapproving glare from the cabin; her uncle Aydwah's wife, throwing cracked corn to the hens and taking in more wood for the hearth fire.

*And she's no brighter a candle than those broody birds, Sonjuh thought. Always there to have their heads chopped off just 'cause she throws them some corn of a morning. Still, no harm in being polite.*

She tied on a fresh breechclout, slipped on her leggings and laced them to her belt, cross-gartered the moccasin-boots up her calves, and then pulled on a clean shift of scratchy undyed cotton. By then the house was roused, adults and older children scratching and spitting as they spread out for their dawn chores, naked tow-haired toddlers tumbling about, dogs keeping a wise distance from Slasher.

Aydwah had a big place, two shake-roofed log cabins linked by a covered dogtrot, several barns besides the one she slept in, loom-house where the women of the family spun and wove, slatted corn-crib of poles, toolsheds, smokehouse and more. Several poorer kin and hired workers lived with him, too, sleeping in attics and lofts, and a single Kumanch slave taken prisoner from a band raiding the westernmost of the Seven Tribes, beaten into meekness and sold east. It was a prosperous yeoman's spread, no wealthy Jefe's farm, but two steps up from her father's place.

Cooking smells came from the house, and Aydwah's wife came out to beat a long ladle against an iron, triangle hanging by the cabin door. Sonjuh's belly rumbled as she sat with the others at the long trestle-table set out in the dogtrot, where everyone ate in good weather. Breakfast was samp-mush, with sorghum syrup and warm-fresh milk poured on, and she bent over her bowl with the wooden spoon busy.

Her uncle had the family hair, gray streaking bright fox red in his case, but he was heavier set than her father, slower of mind and words. His voice was a deep rumble as he spoke from the head of the table: "We've the last of the flax to plant today, 'n' the goobers to lift. Sonjuh, you'll—"

"I've got business of my own today, Uncle," she said, trying for respectful firmness and suspecting it came out as sullen. "I cleaned out the workstock barn."

Aydwah flushed; it showed easily, despite forty years' weathering of his fair freckled skin. "You'll do as you're told, girl, 'n' no back talk! I took you in—"

"'N' you're well paid for it," Sonjuh said. "This milk's from my folk's milch cow, isn't it? All that stock's mine, not yours—that's the law! You're getting more than I'd pay in Dannulsford for tavern-keep."

Her uncle's flush went deeper; that was the truth, and he knew it and that the Jefe would uphold her.

Her aunt-by-marriage was shriller: "'N' the stock 'n' gear might get you a husband, if you didn't gallivant around like some shameless hussy!"

Sonjuh restrained herself, not throwing the contents of her bowl in the older woman's face. Instead she set it down on the puncheon floor, where Slasher gave the huffing grunt that meant *don't mind if I do* in dog and went to it with lapping tongue and slurping sounds. He was used to yelling.

"I made an oath 'fore God, 'n' I can't make it good sitting in the loomhouse, or married off to some crofter you bribe to take spoiled goods with my kin's stock," she shouted back. "What's worse luck 'n' oath-breaking to God?"

"Fighting is man's work, 'n' so are oaths 'fore the Lord O' Sky," her aunt screamed, shaking her fist at Sonjuh; several of the younger children around the table began to cry, and most of the adults were looking at their feet, or the rafters. "You're a hex-bearer, 'n' you'll bring His anger down on us all."

"Lord O' Sky saved us all in the Hungry Years, didn't he? Brought back the sun after Olsaytan ate it? Leastways, that's what the Jefe says come midsummer 'n' midwinter day when he kills cows for God; you telling me he's lying? Lord o' Sky hears an oath, don't matter who says the say."

Aydwah's head had been turning back and forth like a man watching a handball game. Now he rose to his feet and roared at her: "You speak to your aunt with respect, missie, or I'll take my belt to your backside—that's the law, too, me being your eldest male kin. Or have you forgot that part?"

"You could try!" Sonjuh yelled, all caution cast aside.

Her uncle's roar was wordless as he started a lunge for her. Sonjuh jumped backward from the bench, cat-lithe, looking around for something to grab and hit with—never hit a man with your bare hand unless you were naked and had your feet nailed to the floor, her father had told her. An ax handle someone had

been whittling from a billet of hickory was close by, and she snatched it up and held it two-handed.

That wasn't needful; Aydwah froze as Slasher came up from beneath the table, paws on the bench and bristling until he looked twice his size—which was considerable, because the dog had more than a trace of plains wolf in his bloodlines, and outweighed his mistress's 115 pounds. His black lips curled back from long wet yellow-white teeth, and the expression made his tattered ears and the scars on his muzzle stand out. Slasher had been her father's hunting dog—fighting dog, too; the posse had found him clubbed senseless and left for dead at the ruins of her family's cabin, and he'd woken to track the war band that carried her off.

"Get me my bow," Aydwah said, slow and careful, not moving as others tumbled away from the table and backed to a safe distance. "Sami, get me my bow. That there dog is dangerous and has to be put down."

"You shoot at the dog saved my life, you die," Sonjuh said flatly. The words left her lips like pebbles, heavy dense things not to be called back. "I'm leaving. I'll send for my family's gear later; look after it real careful, or I'll call the Jefe to set the law on you."

She backed away toward the stable, her eyes wary and the ax handle ready, but none of the other grown folk tried to stop her; Aydwah wasn't quite angry enough to call on them to bind her, although his son Sami did bring his bow. By that time Slasher had followed her, walking stiff-legged and looking back over his shoulder frequently. Stunned silence fell, broken only by the idiot clucking of poultry and noises of stock and a few dogs barking at the fear and throttled anger they smelled. Sonjuh saddled one of her horses, stashed her traveling gear on the mule's pack saddle, slung the blanket-roll over her shoulder, and swung into the saddle; the morning's mush was a cold lump under her breastbone, but her face was a mask of pale, controlled fury. The last thing she did was to use the goatsfoot lever to cock her crossbow, setting one of the short, heavy steel-headed and leather-feathered bolts in the groove.

She held the reins in her left hand and the weapon in her right; the spare horse and mule were well-enough trained to follow without a leading rein. Aydwah waited by the laneway that led out across his land to the Dannulsford trace, between the tall posts carved with the figures of the Corn Lady and Lord o' Sky.

"I cast you out!" he called, as she came near. "You're no kin of ours! I put the elder's curse on you, Lord 'n' Lady hear my oath!"

There were gasps from the other folk of the farm; that was a terrible thing, to be without immediate family. Not as bad as being outlawed from your clan, but close. Sonjuh dropped the reins for an instant to flash the sign of the Horns at him, turning the curse.

There were more shocked exclamations at that, and someone burst out: "She's ghost-riden!"

"Yes, I am—by my pa 'n' ma, 'n' my sisters, your blood you weren't man enough to get revenge for," Sonjuh said coldly. "I call their spirits down on you, Aydwah sunna Chorge, to haunt you sleeping 'n' waking, by bed 'n' field 'n' hearth, you 'n' all yours."

Aydwah raised his bow, a six-foot length of yellow-orange *bois-dawk* wood.

Sonjuh ignored the creak of the shaft being drawn and cast a jeering call over her shoulder: "Go ahead, Aydwah Kin-Killer—shoot your brother's girlchild in the back 'fore witnesses, 'n' put your head up on a pole!"

With that, she squeezed her mount with her thighs and left at a canter. The flat unmusical smack of the bowstring sounded behind her, but the shaft flashed off to one side to bury itself amid the stooked corn and pumpkins arid cowpea vines; her uncle hadn't quite dared.

*I wonder if this is how father felt, when he pushed a quarrel,* she thought briefly; it was an intoxication, a release of frustration like a dam breaking. *Bet the hangovers worse than whiskey, though.*

#### IV: A Gathering of Eagles

"Sah!"

The corporal in charge of the squad he'd borrowed from Gal-•veston's garrison commander gave a crackling stamp-and-salute; Eric King returned the gesture. The noncom and his squad were natives, too, stalwart muscular men, dark brown of skin, with kinky hair and broad features. They'd been recruited from the farming and fishing tribes who were spread thinly over the central Texas coast, it being policy to raise local levies where possible, since they were always cheaper and often hardier than imported regulars.

*But Imperial discipline puts down deep roots,* King thought, as the man wheeled off to supervise his

squad; they struck the tents and folded them for pack-saddle carriage with practiced efficiency.

An ox wagon had brought the gear this far from the steamboat; two tents, a large and a small—military issue—and a fair pile of boxed weapons, ammunition, equipment, and supplies—the latter including brandy from France-outre-mer, distilled in the hills near Algiers, and whiskey from New Zealand. Robre Hunter had raised his brows and smacked his lips over a small sample of each, and King made a mental note to advise Banerji to keep some in stock. Being teetotal as well as a vegetarian, it probably hadn't occurred to the Bengali that booze came in different qualities and prices.

The native guide looked at the pile of equipment. "Lord 6' Sky!" he said. "If you Empire men take this much on a hunting trip, what do you drag along on a war-party?"

"Considerably less," King said dryly, remembering fireless bivouacs in the Border hills, rolled in his cloak against blowing snow and gnawing a piece of stale chapatti while everyone listened for Pathan raiders creeping up on their bellies under cover of the storm.

"I'm hunting for pleasure and I'm not in a hurry. Why not be comfortable as possible? When we of the Angrezi Raj *fight*, all we care about is winning."

Robre nodded slowly. "Makes sense," he said. "Let's get on about it, then."

The Imperials had camped in the pasture of an outlying farm owned by the Jefe of the Alligators, a few acres of tall grass drying toward autumn surrounded by oak and hickory and magnolias and trees he couldn't identify. It had a deep stillness, broken by the whicker of horses and the trilling of unfamiliar birds, and the smells were of sere grass and wet leaves and dew on dust. King smiled in sheer pleasure as he stood with hands on hips looking about him; an Owl flew past him, out late or early, with a cry like *who-cooks-for-you*.

"What's that called?" he asked Robre.

The native guide blinked at him in astonishment. "You don't have 'em? That's a barred owl—come out in daylight more 'n most of their kind."

"That's the point of traveling," he said. "To see things you haven't got at home. Now, to business."

He sat in a folding canvas chair, Ranjit Singh on one side and Robre on the other. A table before him bore a register book, pen, ink bottle, and a pile of little leather bags cinched tight with thongs around their store of Imperial silver rupees. The natives here, he'd noticed, were fascinated and impressed by writing; very conveniently, they were also quite familiar with the concept of coined money as a store of value. Stamped silver came up in trade from the city-states farther south, although the Seven Tribes minted none themselves. He'd been in places where everything was pure barter, and the simplest transaction took forever.

"Step up," he said, in the local tongue, then sighed as they crowded around, yelling; the concept of standing quietly in line was *not* part of the local worldview.

About two dozen men had applied for the eight wrangler-muleteer-guard-roustabout positions; Robre knew some of them personally, and most by reputation. In fact, two slunk off immediately when they saw his face. Most were young, given leave by their fathers in this slack part of the farming year and eager for the rare chance to earn hard money.

Robre put them through their paces, checking their mules' and horses' backs for sores and their tack for cracked leather, watching them pack and unpack a load, follow a track, shoot at a mark, run and jump and wrestle.

King had Ranjit Singh handle the hand-to-hand testing. It was a good way to teach these wild natives a little respect, and none of them lasted more than a minute before finding themselves immobilized and slammed to the ground. The local style was catch-as-catch-can, the men strong and quick and active, quite oblivious of pain, but utterly unsophisticated. He wasn't surprised; it was often that way, with warrior groups like this. They put so much into their weapons that they neglected unarmed combat, and the style the Imperial military used drew on ancient Asian traditions.

The Sikh rose grinning from the wheezing, groaning body of the last, dusted his hands, beat dirt and bits of grass and weed off his trousers; sweat glistened on his thick hairy torso, where iron muscle rippled in bands and curves.

"Not bad," he said jovially. "For a man who knows nothing."

The Sikh said it in Hindi, which took the sting out, although the object of it could probably guess the meaning of the words as he sat up and rotated a wrenched shoulder; the other candidates laughed at his discomfort. He was older than most of them—in his thirties, a tall rawboned swarthy man.

"All right," the local said to the Sikh as he rose and rubbed his bruises. "You got some fancy wrasslin' there—'n' you're strong as a bear with a toothache 'n' twice as mean. Now, Jefe," he went on to King, "Who's going to be your trail-boss on this trip?"



"I'm in command," King said. "After me, my man Ranjit Singh here; after him, Robre sunna Jowan. Any problems with that—" He glanced down at the register. "—Haahld sunna Jubal?"

"You bet there is, by God. Robre is a good man of his hands 'n' a fine hunter, no dispute. But it's not fitting he should be trail-boss over older men, him so young 'n' not having wife nor child nor land of his own and all."

The-rest stood silent; one or two seemed to agree. Robre flushed, but King put out a hand to restrain him. "In that case, you're free to go," he said cheerfully.

The face of the native standing before him turned darker. "That's a mighty high-top way to speak, stranger, considering you're far from home 'n' alone here. Who'd you think you are?"

King rose, still smiling slightly, but the other man took a step back. "I *know* I'm an officer of the Empire," he said calmly. "Which means that I'm an automatic majority wherever I go." He gestured to the moneybags. "If you take my silver, you take my orders. If you won't, get out."

His body stayed loose, but his hands were tinglingly aware of the position of saber and pistol and knife. He'd met men like these before, from peoples whose ways demanded that a man be prickly and quick to take offense and forever ready to fight. You had to begin as you meant to go on, and be ready to back it up, like the head wolf in a pack. The air crackled between them, and the native's eyes shifted slightly.

Just then the drumming sound of hooves turned heads. A ridden horse, a remount and a mule, all sweating a bit. And the rider. . .

*Well, well, it's the little redhead,* King thought. He'd gotten most of her story out of Robre, and felt a certain sympathy—it was a hard world, and harder still for an orphan. *Well, well, not so little, either.*

In sunlight and flushed with exertion she looked even better than the other night's tantalizing glimpse. She kicked a leg over the pommel of her saddle and slid to the ground, bosom heaving interestingly under the coarse cotton shift as she came toward him with her dog panting at her heel.

"Heya, Empire-Jefe King," she said bluntly.

"Hello, miss," he answered, amused. / am *an* Imperial chieftain, / *suppose*.

"Hear you're hiring," she said. "I want work." At a snicker from the crowd of clansmen, she turned around and glared. "And not as no bedwarmer, either!" Turning back to King, "I can carry my load, 'n' I know the eastern woods. Hunted east of the Three Forks since I was a girl, 'n' with my pa east of the Black River twice."

Beside King, Robre stirred, surprise on his face. *Evidently that's some claim; but she's not lying, I'd think. Intriguing!*

Haahld sunna Jubal snorted. "You got to be a fightin' man for this trip, missie, able to carry a man's load. Want me to test your wrasslin'?" The clansman roared with laughter.

Sonjuh's face flushed red, and her foot moved in a blur while Haahld sunna Jubal was still holding his sides and hooting. There was a meaty *thump* as the toe of the girl's boot slammed into the native's groin.

King's lips quirked upward; he thought he'd have been better prepared than the luckless Haahld, but then he'd stopped thinking of women as necessarily helpless when he was an ensign leading a patrol to break up a brawl in a military brothel in Peshawar Town. An Afghan tart crouching under a table had nearly cut his hamstrings with a straight-razor, and he'd never forgotten the raw terror of the moment.

The haw-hawing laughter turned into a strangled shriek of pain as the man doubled over and fell to the ground, clutching himself and turning brick red. *Ouch.* That hard a kick in the testicles was no joke—something might have been ruptured; the girl's long legs were slender, but muscled like a temple acrobat's from running and riding and tree-climbing. *Now, there's native talent,* he thought, grinning and wincing slightly.

She stood back in the sudden silence, then seemed to lose a little of her bristling aura as most of the company guffawed and slapped their thighs; even Robre, who seemed like a sobersided young man, grinned openly.

Haahld was puking helplessly now, and moaning. Someone threw a bucket of water over him, which seemed to give him a little strength, and he crawled away to haul himself upright along a tree trunk, still nursing his crotch with one hand. He got a good deal of witty medical advice about poultices from the crowd, although a few of the older and more respectable looked shocked and disapproving.

"Well, miss, generally if I want to kick a man in the "groin, I handle it myself rather than hiring it done," King said, smiling. "Although I concede that was good work of its kind. What else can you do?"

"Ride. Rope. Run like a deer. Handle a pack mule. Track meat-game or big cat—or a man—through brush country; we lived aside in deep woods. I'm a pretty good shot, too."

She turned, unslung the crossbow from her saddle and fired it at the target eighty yards away. The snap of the string and the *thunk* of the bolt striking the-magnolia came almost instantly, and the octagonal steel

head sank deep into the midriff of the human figure chalked out on the bark. King raised a brow, impressed despite himself, and at the speed with which she reloaded. Then she slid the tomahawk from where it rested across the small of her back and threw; that went home in the center of the X they'd carved in a dead pine twenty paces away. Haahld winced away—he'd used that trunk to regain his feet—and fell again.

"Your man Robre there can look at my beasts," she said. "Sound backs 'n' feet, 'n' kept proper."

"Well and good," King said calmly, as Robre did just that, picking up hooves to check their shoeing and seeing that no bare gall-marks or sores hid beneath the tack.

King continued: "But why do you want to go on a dangerous expedition?"

"You're going into the east woods," she said. "Mebbe as far as the Black River, *naw*? I can't go that far by my own self; too dangerous."

King frowned; he'd heard of her obsession. "I'm not taking a . . . what's your term? War party? I'm going to hunt, not fight."

For the first time Sonjuh smiled, although it wasn't a particularly pleasant expression: "Mebbe not, but that won't be much of a never mind to the swamp-devils. If your trail-boss there—" She used her chin to indicate Robre. "—has told you it's unlikely, he's a mite too cheerful about the prospect, to my way of thinking."

"Well then, miss: can you cook?"

She flushed again, and opened her mouth, then closed it. When she spoke, it was with tight calm. "I'm not looking to hire on as kitchen help, Empire-Jefe."

"When I'm in the field, usually my man Ranjit does for both of us," King said. "But I need him for other work now. You can carry our provisions on your mule and do our cooking and Robre's; same daily rate for your work and your animals as the rest. Take it or leave it."

Their eyes locked, and after a long moment she nodded. *And you can control your temper* somewhat, *my red-haired forest nymph*, he thought, inclining his head slightly. He wasn't going to take a complete berserker along, no matter how attractive and exotic. *Stalking the wild Sonjuh will add a little spice to our expedition, eh, what?*

One of the pieces of advice his father had given him when he got his commission was that excitable women were wearing, but often worth the trouble.

A shout brought their heads around. Haahld had recovered enough to pull Sonjuh's tomahawk out of the dead pine. He'd also recovered enough to start shrieking again, a torrent of curses and threats. His first throw was erratic but vigorous; not only Sonjuh-but also half a dozen others went flat as it pinwheeled by. The handle struck a mule on the rump, and the beast flung both heels back and plunged across the meadow braying indignantly, knocking Robre down and nearly stepping on him. Haahld wrenched at another throwing-ax stuck in the tree, froth in his beard; several men shouted, and Son-juh did a rapid leopard-crawl toward her crossbow.

King wasted no time. His Khyber knife was slung at the back of his belt with its hilt to the right. He drew it, and threw with a hard whipping overarm motion; like many who'd served on the North West Frontier, he'd spent some time learning how to handle the versatile Pathan weapon.

His had a hilt fringed with tiny silver bells, but the business part was eighteen inches of pure murder, a thick-backed single-edged blade tapering to a vicious point, like an elongated meat-chopper from the kitchens of Hell. It turned four times, flashing in the bright morning sun, then pinned Haahld's arm to the stump like a nail, standing quivering with his blood running down the wood. The silver bells chimed. . . .

Another silence, and Haahld's eyes turned up in his head; his fall tore the *ctiora-knife* out of the wood, and the thump of his body on the ground was clearly audible.

"Somebody see to him," King said. "And to that mule."

Sonjuh was staring at him, in a way that made him stroke his mustache with the knuckle of his right hand in a quick sleek gesture; Robre was giving him a considering look, evidently reconsidering first impressions. Knife-throwing was more of a circus trick than a real fighting technique, but there were occasions when it was impressive, without a doubt.

"No trouble with your local laws?" King asked, sotto voce.

Robre shook his head. "*Naw*. Haahld fell on his own doings." A grin. "Couldn't hardly do anything right, after that she-fiend hoofed him in the jewels. He'd been beat by a woman—'n' beatin' her back would just make him look mean as well as weak."

"Well, their customs have the charm of the direct and simple," King muttered to himself, in Hindi.

Sonjuh had gone to investigate his supplies after she retrieved her tomahawk and beasts, unpacking her

mule beside the boxes and sacks. She returned leading her riding horse.

"Four o' them *rupees*," she said, holding out a hand. "The stuff you need, I can get it in Dannulsford 'n' be back in about an hour."

King blinked in mild surprise; he'd left purchasing trail supplies to Robre, who seemed unlikely to miss anything important. When he said so, Sonjuh snorted.

"You've got enough cornmeal 'n' taters 'n' bacon and such," she said contemptuously. "Plain to see a man laid it in. Men don't live like people on their own; they live like bears with a cookfire. If I'm going to cook, I'm going to do it right—I have to eat it, too, don't I?"

King handed her the money and stood shaking his head bemusedly as she galloped off. Her dog sat near the pile of supplies she'd set him to guard, giving a warning growl if anyone approached them too closely.

"Hoo," Robre said, looking south down the pathway that led to the Alligator Jefe's steading. "Taking Sonjuh Head-on-Fire with us . . . ought to make the trip right interesting, Jefe King."

"My thought exactly," King said, and laughed.

"What's that?" King asked, waving a hand *to* indicate the loud *tock-tock-tock* sound that echoed through the open forest of oak and hickory.

Robre's brows rose; the Imperial was astonishingly ignorant of common things, for a man who was a better-than-good woodsman and tracker.

"That's a peckerwood, Jefe," he said. "A bird, sort of 'bout the size of a crow, with a red head 'n' white under the wings. Makes that sound by knocking holes in trees, looking for bugs to eat. The call's something like—"

The hard tocsin of the woodpecker's beak stopped and gave way to a sharp, raucous *keek-keek-keek*.

"—like that."

The fact that he'd fallen into the habit of calling the Imperial

—technically the word for a clan chief, but often used informally for any important man—rather surprised him. Everyone else in the hunting party did, too, even Sonjuh, whose new gift-name of Head-on-Fire had stuck for good reason.

The men-at-arms from the coast obeyed like well-trained hunting dogs, of course, but they didn't count; although they'd fought hard in recent wars against his people and the Mehk, legend said they were descendants of those who'd been slaves to the Seven Tribes in the olden times.

No, it was something in the man himself that did it. Thinking back, Robre appreciated how shrewd it had been to let Ranjit Singh be the one who tested the hand-to-hand skills of the men. Singh had beaten them all easily—Robre suspected he would have lost himself, and had been picking up tips on his wrasslin' style since. That had let King's follower start out with the prestige of one who was a hard man for certain-sure. Then he'd shown himself to be fair, as well, good-humored, a dab hand at anything to do with horses, as ready to pitch in to help with a difficult job as he was to thump a man who back-talked him.

Which in turn made his unservile deference to King's leadership easy to copy.

*Fact of the matter is, King's unnatural good at getting people to do what he wants*, Robre mused.

Most of all, the Imperial officer simply *assumed* that he was a lord wherever he went, one of the lords of humankind. Not with blows and curses and arrogance, which would only have aroused furious—murderous—resentment among proud clansmen, but with a quietly unshakable certainty that went right down to the bone. It set Robre's teeth a little on edge, though he couldn't put his finger on anything specific.

King stopped and looked around, his double-barreled hunting rifle in the crook of his left arm; Robre had his bow in hand, and a short broad-bladed spear with a bar across the shaft below the head slung over his back.

"Pretty country," the Imperial said. "Not many farms these past two days, though. Not since that. . . what's your word for it?"

"Station," Robre said; that was the term for several families living close for defense, surrounded by a palisade. "No, not this far east. Too close to the Black River, 'n' the swamp-devils."

"Are there many of them?"

"Thicker 'n lice, down in the Big Thicket swamps. They hunt each other mostly, every little band against its neighbors, but every now 'n' then some try crossing the river for man's-flesh and plunder. More lately, what with more of our folk settling in the woods 'n' making ax-claims."

They'd been on the trail for a week and a half, counting from the morning they took the ferry across the Three Forks at Dannulsford, traveling without any particular hurry. Once past the bottomland swamps, too prone to flooding to have much permanent population, they'd traveled for two days through country where as much as a quarter of the land was cleared. Those new-won farms had petered out to an occasional outpost, then to land visited only for hunting and seasonal grazing, claimed by no clan. It rolled gently, rising now and then to something you might call a low hill, or sinking more and more often into swamp and marsh.

This particular stretch was dry and sandy, sun-dappled between tall wide-spaced trees, oak and hickory and tall sweet-scented pines; the lower ground was patched with a layer of sassafras—bright scarlet now—dogwood, and hophornbeam. The leaves of the oaks had turned a soft yellow brown where they weren't flaming red, and the hickories had a mellower golden tint; the leaf-litter was already heavy, rustling about their feet. To the east and south the woods grew denser, with water-loving types like tupelo and persimmon and live oak; that was laced together with wild grapevines and kudzu.

It was thick with birds now, as well, parakeets eating acorns off the trees, grouse and wild turkey on the ground, and squirrels rustling through the undergrowth after the nuts. And not only birds . . .

"Ah!" King exclaimed softly, going down on one knee.

A wetter patch of ground showed where he parted the spicebush. In it was the mark of a narrow cloven hoof, driven deep. The tips of each mark were too rounded and the impression too square overall for a deer. . . .

"Wild boar?" the Imperial asked softly.

"Don't know what a boar is," Robre said equally quietly; they often had to hunt for a word like that, though the Imperial had become fluent enough at the tongue of the clans, if thickly and weirdly accented. "Wild pig, right enough."

He cast forward, following the trail and gauging the weight and length of stride. "Big un, too. My weight 'n' half again. Might be a bull-pig with a sounder"—group of females and their young—"if one of the sows is in season." Wild pigs bred year-round in this mild climate.

"Let's go look, then," King said with a grin, wrapping a loop of his rifle's sling around his left elbow and pulling it taut; that gave him a firm three-point brace when the weapon was against his shoulder. "We could use some fresh pork."

Robre made a note of the trick with the sling; he'd been getting a thorough rundown on Imperial firearms and how to use them. He also noted that King wasn't the least bit bothered by the thought of going into thick bush after tricky, dangerous game. The clansman put an arrow to the knock of his recurved bow, a hunting broadhead with four razor-sharp blades to the pyramid-shaped iron head.

*Damn, but I can't help but like this buckaroo,* Robre thought. *Toplofty or no.* Aloud, he said, "You've hunted them before?"

"Boar? Yes. But in India we take them on horseback, with lances," King said casually, and Robre blinked at the thought.

"Well, mebbe yours are a might different. Ours here, they'll mostly run, 'less you get between a sow 'n' her young uns. Or a boar that's breeding, he'll charge you often as not 'cause he feels like killing something. Or sometimes they'll fight out of pure cussedness."

They followed the trail downhill, one to either side, walking at a slow steady pace with as little noise as possible; they kept trees between themselves and their goals as much as possible, and the wind was in their faces, giving no warning to any sensitive noses ahead.

Sonjuh was panting a little, trotting through an opening in the woods with the twenty-five-pound weight of the wild turkey on her back; she'd cleaned it and cut off the head—and removed her crossbow bolt—before throwing it over one shoulder and holding it by the feet as she headed back to camp, but it was a big cock-bird fat with feeding on fall nuts and acorns. It would make a pleasant change from dried provisions, now that the remaining venison from two days back was gone off, even if it would also be a chore to pluck it. But get the feathers off, rub a little chipotle on it, and roast it over a slow hickory fire with a few handfuls of mesquite pods thrown on the coals now and then—she'd bought a sack in Dannulsford—and stuffed with some corn bread, the pecans and mushrooms she'd gathered . . .

*No better eating than a fat fall turkey cooked that way—*

Her mouth watered. Then her gorge rose; sometimes just thinking of the word *eating* was enough to bring back the screams and the blood. . . . For a long moment she halted and pressed a hand to her eyes,

fighting for control. Slasher's low warning growl brought her back to the light of day; he'd been trotting along, utterly content with the live-for-the-moment happiness of a dog out in the woods with his master, and wouldn't make that noise for anything but a present threat.

Now he crouched and bristled, his nose pointing like an arrow to some chest-high underbrush. The girl lowered the gutted bird to the rustling leaves and squatted in cover, bringing her crossbow around. A chill struck at her gut—could it be swamp-devils? This was farther west than her father's steading had been, but it was possible—

No. The bushes were moving, but in a random way; swamp-devils would be more cautious. Animals, then, but ones confident enough not to care if they were heard. That ruled out deer. Wild cattle or woods-bison would be visible, so—

Wind blew toward her, mild and cool. The dog's nostrils flared, and hers caught a familiar scent, gamy and rank.

*Oh, jeroo*, she thought, trying to make out numbers and directions. At least a dozen, counting yearlings; there were glimpses of black bristly hide through the shrubs, and the ground was *too* be-grown for a human to run fast or straight. A sounder of wild pig would go through it easy as snakes, and they were nearly as fast as a horse in a rush. She'd walked right into their midst in a brown study. *Stupid, stupid. This could be more lively than I'd like.* It all depended on which way they ran—it was a toss-up whether they'd flee or attack if they scented a human.

The ground rose to the south, and the underbrush opened out under tall hardwoods. She came to her feet and began to walk, placing her feet carefully and trying to look in all directions at once. If she was very lucky, none of them would be in her way.

Luck ran out. A low-slung form burst out of the reddish-yellow sassafras where it had been feeding on the seeds, squealing in panic; from its size, a four-month spring-born piglet. By pure reflex, Slasher spun in place and snapped, taking a nip out of the young pig's rump and lending a note of agony to its cries.

*"Oh, shee-yit on faahrV*

Sonjuh was up and running when the piglet's squeals were joined, by others, deeper and full of rage. She risked a look behind her and wished she hadn't; the young pig's momma was coming for her with legs churning in a blur of motion, big wicked head down, little eyes glinting and tusks wet and sharp—what woodsmen called a land-pike. It weighed more than she did, a long low-slung shape of bone and gristle tipped with knives, and well used to killing—wild pig ate anything they could catch from acorns and earthworms to deer and stray children, and even a cougar would hesitate to take on a full-grown adult. If this one caught her, they'd all feast this morning and crunch her bones for the marrow.

Slasher spun and charged the pig, mouth wide open and his growl ratcheting up into a roaring snarl-howl. Sonjuh spun, too, forced herself to steadiness, took stance, whipped the crossbow up to her shoulder. The fighting-dog was dancing around the wild pig, feinting, leaping back and rearing on his hind legs to dodge a slash that would have laid his belly open, then dashing in to snap at the hindquarters. The sow kept those down, pivoting and whipping her short tusks in deadly arcs. The girl brought the business end of the weapon down, sighting over tailfeather and bolt-head, then squeezed the trigger.

*Twunkl*

The hickory thumped her shoulder through the shift. A blur nearly too fast to see, the bolt hit the sow behind her shoulder, sinking almost to the stiff leather fletching. The animal screamed in pain, spinning again as it tried to reach the thing that hurt it, and the sound went out in a fine spray of blood from its muzzle. A lung-shot, fatal in minutes if not instantly.

Sonjuh didn't wait to see. She was running again instantly, slinging the weapon as she went, dodging and jinking through the underbrush, shouting: "Slasher! Follow!" over her shoulder.

More squeals followed her, and some of them—another glance over her shoulder showed what was coming. A boar, full-grown. No, *two* of them—they must have been getting ready to fight for the females, just when she came along. Coyote had sent her luck, his kind; or maybe Olsatyn: Lord o' Sky must be asleep, or out hunting, or sporting with his wives, because he certainly wasn't listening to her prayers.

Now both the boars were after her, with the instinct of their kind to mob a threat added to the mindless belligerence of rutting season. Both of them were huge, night-black except for the grizzled color of the bristles that thickened to manes on their skulls and the massive shoulders, better than twice a big man's weight, their short straight tails held up like banners. Long white tusks curled up and back on either side of their glistening snouts, sharp-pointed ivory daggers that could rip open a horse or bear, much less

a human. They fanned out as they came, throwing up leaves and bits of bush in their speed, with all the grown females hot on their heels. Wet open mouths showed teeth and red gullets, let out hoarse rending screams of rage.

Breath burned dry in her throat, and her long legs flashed as she waited for the savage pain of a tusk knocking her down. There was a big oak ahead of her though, ten feet to the lowest branch—

—and two men coming out from behind hickories to either side.

"Run, you idjeets!" she screamed and went up the tree's root-bole at a full-tilt run without breaking stride, the bark blessedly rough under fingers and the soft flexible leather of her moccasin-boots' soles.

She leapt off that sideways, hands slapping down on the thick branch, her feet coming up as she hugged it like a lover with arms and legs both. A black missile flew through the air below her, and a bone dagger flashed inches below her back. With a convulsive effort she threw a knee over the limb and swung herself up and stood with an arm around the main trunk, panting and shuddering and on the edge of nausea as blood beat in her ears.

Eric King saw the red hair flying as Sonjuh Head-on-Fire cleared a bush with a raking stride and hit the ground in a blur of motion, head down and fists pumping as she ran—much like a deer, as she'd claimed, light on her feet and very quick.

"Run, you idjeets!" she screamed, as she went through the space between him and Hunter Robre, with her dog on her heels.

The boars were on her heels as well, far too close to shoot as they burst out of the undergrowth. King flung himself to one side with a yell, and heard Robre doing likewise. He landed on his back with a jarring thud, and the right barrel of the double rifle went off with a *crack* like thunder in his ear.

"Dammit," he wheezed as he came back up on one knee. Then he shouted "*Krishna!*"

Something shot out of the yellow-red underscrub at him like a cannonball, and he snapped the weapon up to his shoulder. Instinct and training brought the sights between a pair of furious red-glinting piggy eyes barely ten feet away, and the recoil punished his shoulder.

*Crack!*

It was a sow; less dangerous than the boars, but only in an academic fashion seeing as it was nearly on top of him. The heavy .477 slug blasted its way through the thick skull and the brain beneath it; the wild pig nosed into the leaf-mold and dropped at his feet, dead although its little sharp hooves were still kicking. King came back to his feet and broke open the action of the rifle, shaking out the spent brass and pulling two more long fat cartridges from the bandolier across his chest. As he snapped it shut, he saw a flickering montage: another sow dragging herself back into the bushes with her hind legs limp and one of Robre's arrows through her spine; a boar landing again after a leap that had nearly caught Sonjuh, landing with an agility unbelievable in so gross a beast; the girl's staring face in the tree; beyond that Slasher and the other boar whirling in a snapping, snarling, stabbing dance that cast up a fog of yellow leaves and acorns from the forest floor; Robre whipping out another arrow from his quiver and nocking it, drawing the shaft to his ear.

Then both men had more than enough to engage their attention, as the rest of the sounder boiled out of the brush and attacked with the reckless omnivore aggression that men and swine shared. It was a big group, in these man-empty woods so rich in their kinds of food, and not much afraid of humankind. King shot twice more before he had to use the empty double rifle to defend himself from a pig that seized it in her mouth, wrenching it away and then running off into the woods in panic flight. The rest of the sounder followed, less the dead.

Except for the boars.

King felt a profound wish for his rifle—loaded and in his hands, not lying uselessly a dozen paces off. Time seemed to slow like honey. Not far off a boar stood alone, the gouge of a bullet wound bleeding freely down one dusty-black flank, and an arrow standing out of a ham, making abortive stabs to either side with its tusks and panting like a steam engine in a Bihari coal mine. The other backed off from where Slasher held a natural fort behind a thick fallen log, turning just in time to take Robre's arrow in the armor-thick hide and bone around its shoulders rather than the vulnerable flank. It staggered and then charged, and Robre ripped free the spear slung across his back by the simple expedient of snapping the rawhide thongs that bound it by main strength. He brought it around, dropping to one knee and thrusting the blade of the spearhead out to receive the living missile that hurtled toward him, mud and leaves spraying out behind it.

King had his own boar, and nothing but the Khyber knife in his hand. Its charge was slowed a little—a very little—by the arrow wound, and it came silently save for the bellows-panting of near exhaustion. The Imperial tensed himself to leap aside and then in—not much of a chance, because he was weary, too, and the sidewise strike of the boar's head would be swifter than a hooded cobra.

*"Kuch darnahin hat!"* he shouted, the ancient motto of his house. *There is no such thing as fear!*

A wolf-gray streak came from behind the boar, soaring over the 'litter of the forest floor, from shadow into light. Slasher's jaws clamped down like a mechanical grab edged with ripping fangs on the beast's hock just before it would have cannoned into the human. Snapping-swift it spun and tried to gash the dog, but the same motion flung Slasher around like a spinning top. King leapt as well, *onto* the boar. It was like landing on top of a living boulder, one that heaved beneath him with terrifying strength and ferocity, battering him about like a pea in a can. He reversed the *chora-knife* and slammed it into the thrashing mass beneath him, hanging on to the hilt like grim death with one hand and a handful of bristly mane with the other, working the blade back and forth between the boar's ribs. It was dying, blood spraying out of nose and mouth, but it could still kill him. He twisted his legs about it and put forth all the <-strength that was in him.

Hands came into his field of vision, long slender hands, well shaped but with dirt beneath the fingernails and ground into the knuckles, holding a crossbow. The string released, and the bolt blossomed from the base of the boar's skull. It shuddered, hammered the ground with its head, and died. King rose from the limp body.

Sonjuh was watching him, head tilted slightly to one side. "Why'd you jump in, when Slasher had him by the leg?" she said quietly. "You could've gone for your gun."

King shook his head, suddenly aware of how glorious the young morning sunlight was. "He'd have killed the dog," he said.

They were close. Suddenly the clan-girl was in his arms, and their lips met. The moment went on . . .

. . . until Robre cleared his throat. Sonjuh jumped back, two spots of red in her cheeks. King straightened, suddenly conscious that he'd lost his turban. The Bear Creek man was leaning on his spear beside the body of the other boar, scowling and brushing at a trickle of blood from his nostrils.

Eric King laughed, smoothing back his mustache with the knuckle of his right hand. "Looks like we're having pork tonight," he said gaily.

"I left a turkey just back there," Sonjuh blurted, and ran off after it.

*'N' when the snow-winds lifted  
Then summer came again; Three summers of snow 'n' ice*

*Then the warmth once more;  
Olsatyn, he cursed 'n' 'fled  
No more he held the Sun enslaved  
Black hammer that broke the Sun,  
Broke on the sword of Lord O' Sky;  
He called the tribes out!  
Out from where they sheltered  
Blessed them for staying clean  
Not eating of man s-flesh,  
When hunger was bitter;  
Gave them His blessing  
Gave seed corn 'n' stock  
Set the bounds 'n' the bans  
Named clan 'n' tribe 'n' law;  
But those others who 'dfallen  
Who 'd eaten of man 's-flesh;  
Them did God curse forever  
Lord O' Sky gave us their lands;  
With steel 'n' 'fire we drove them out  
Drove the devils east into the swamps  
Festering land of evildoers—*

Eric King leaned back in his canvas chair and gnawed the last of the savory meat from a rib as he listened—one of the yearling piglets, to be precise, slathered with a fiery-hot tomato-based sauce full of garlic and peppers before grilling. Sonjuh dawtra Pehte had outdone herself, from the stuffed turkey to the

pudding of corn-meal, molasses, and spices.

Hunter Robre sat on a log on the other side of the fire, his fingers moving on an instrument he called a *gittah*—surprisingly like the sitar in both form and name—as he half sang, half chanted his people's creation-myth. The flickering of the low fire showed a ring of rapt bearded faces. And one beardless one, her chin propped in a palm and the other scratching in the ruff of the great gray dog lying beside her, the firelight bringing out the ruddy color of her hair as she puffed meditatively on a corn-cob pipe.

A huge crimson oak stood over the campsite, and its leaves took fire as Well from the yellow flames, shifting in a maze of scarlet and gold amid the rising column of sparks. The stars above were bright and many, if you let your eyes recover from the fire glow a little. The air had turned soft and a little cool, with wisps of mist drifting over the little stream to the south; it smelled pleasantly of cooking and hickory smoke and horses. Somewhere a beast squalled in the distance, and an owl hooted.

King tossed the bone into the coals as Robre finished. *Well, that's another*, he thought. *I've heard worse. I've definitely heard sillier ones.*

Every folk he knew of had some sort of legend attached to the Fall; even the Empire had Kipling's great Exodus Cantos, about St. Disraeli and the evacuation that had taken his own ancestors from England to India. He smiled wryly to himself. Kipling had made it all sound very heroic, but the Kings had a tradition of scholarship as well as Imperial service, and lived near refounded Oxford. From what he'd read in sources of the time, it had been more of a panic flight, teetering on the brink of chaos, with only the genius of Disraeli and Salisbury and the others to make it possible at all. A lucky few had made it out to India and the Cape and Australia before the final collapse; the other nine-tenths of the population had stayed perforce, and starved, and died.

Robre's version of his people's origins made the founders of the Seven Tribes a host of saintly warriors, when they'd probably been a handful of scruffy but successful bandits; the great battles against the "devils" were probably bloody little skirmishes with a few hundred, or perhaps a few score, on each side.

Still, the epic had a certain barbaric vigor; much like the people who had made it. They'd certainly done well over the past few generations, pushing their borders back on all sides . . . from what Banerji and the garrison commander at Galveston had told him.

"Heya, Jefe," one of the clansmen said. "Tell us some more 'bout the Empire."

He did; a rousing tale of raid and counter-raid along the North West Frontier courtesy of the great Poet Laureate, and described the mountains in his own home province, Kashmir. They were even more eager for stories of the great cities and oceangoing steamships, locomotives and flying machines, but those they took as fables, more so than their own tales of haunts and witches and Old Man Coyote, evidently some sort of minor godlet-trickster. Their own bogies frightened them, but foreign marvels were merely entertainment.

*Although I think Miss Head-on-Fire believes me somewhat, because she wants to*, King thought, conscious of her shining eyes. *And you, as well, Robre Hunter, because you're no fool and can listen and add two and two.*

The clansman had noted the direction of Sonjuh's eyes, as well, and was half-scowling. *Jealous?* King thought. The big clansman hadn't shown much interest in the girl himself. . . but a man often didn't discover he wanted a woman until she turned to another, and that was as true among natives as among the sahib-log, as natural in a nighted forest about an open fire as in the blazing jeweled halls of the Palace of the Lion Throne in Delhi.

King smiled again, and had one of the kegs of New Zealand whiskey brought and set out on a stump near one of the other cooking fires. It was a bit of a waste, being finest Dunedin single-malt, but such gestures never hurt; and what was the point of being wealthy if you couldn't indulge yourself now and then? The local hirelings clustered about it eagerly; it was enough like their own raw corn-liquor to be familiar, and enough better that they recognized the difference. Robre brought three mugs over to where King sat and Sonjuh sprawled beside her villainous-looking guardian. He handed one to the girl—for a barbarian, his manners were almost courtly, in a rough-hewn way—and one to King.

"Sounds like a place worth seeing, your Empire," the clansman said.

"It's not a place, it's a world," King replied.

"Jeroo," Sonjuh said with a sigh. "Seems the world's a bigger place than we thought. Went to San Antwoin oncet with Pa, 'n' that was a wonder—stone walls, 'n' twice a hand of thousands within 'em. Sounds like that's no more than Dannulsford Fair next to your home, Empire-Jefe. But I'd like to see it."

King thought of her alone and bewildered and friendless on the docks of Bombay, or worse, Capetown, and winced slightly. Furthermore, she was just crazy enough to try getting passage on some tramp



windjammer out of Galveston. She'd be a sensation at court if some wild chance took her that far, but that was no fate for a human being.

"That. . . that really wouldn't be a very good idea, my.dear," he said. "A foreign land is more dangerous than these forests."

Robre nodded. "Bare is your back without clan to guard it," he said, with the air of someone quoting a proverb, which he probably was. "Cold is a heart among strangers."

The redhead pouted slightly, and he went on a little hastily: "They'll be a lot of sore heads tomorrow, if you were thinkin' of moving on, Jefe."

His nod took in the rowdy scene around the keg. Not everyone was there, of course; Ranjit Singh and the garrison troopers were standing picket tonight by turns. King might have trusted that duty to Robre, if none of the others, but the Sikh wouldn't hear of anyone not in the Queen-Empress's service doing guard duty.

"I was thinking of moving on," King said, taking a little more of the whiskey and sighing satisfaction. The transplanted Scots of the South Island's bleak Antarctic-facing shores had kept their ancestors' skills alive. "I want a crack at those tigers before I go. But we can't take the full caravan with us there."

"No, true enough," Robre said. "Not enough fodder for that many horses, either. And"—he flicked his eyes to Sonjuh—"that's mighty close to the Black River. Swamp-devils prowl there."

"Hmmm," King said, stroking his mustache. "How much of a problem are they likely to be?"

"Not so bad, if you're careful," Robre said. "Mostly they live farther south 'n' east, down in the Big Thicket country 'n' the Sabyn river swamps. You mostly won't see more 'n' three, four of 'em together, grown bucks, that is, for all that there's a lot of them down there. Also they're short of real weapons, not hardly; they hate each other poison-bad, 'n' who'd trade with them?"

King nodded. That was the common way of things, with those who'd kept up the cannibal ways that brought their ancestors through the terrible years of hunger and death after the Fall. When men hunted each other to eat, there could be no trust, and trust was what let even the wildest men work together. Usually man-eaters had no groupings larger than an extended family, and often they barely retained the use of speech and fire. Human beings were not meant to live like that; only the hammer from the skies and the planetwide die-off could have warped so many of the survivors so bitterly.

Sonjuh stirred. "There was twenty in the gang that hit our place," she said. "Pa 'n' me 'n' the others, we killed four—they caught us by surprise. The posse got most of the rest, but a few escaped. 'N' they all had iron."

*Of course, they can change,* King thought. *A lot of the European savages are organized enough to be dangerous. Not to mention the Russians, who are deadly dangerous.*

Robre shook his head. "That was a freak, Head-on-Fire. There's not been a raid that size in . . . well, not since Fast-Foot Jowan 'n' his sons were killed, what, three years ago?"

"And the Kinnuh fam'ly, four before that. Before that, never, just bushwhacking by ones or twos. I tell you, they're learning, 'n' have been for years. If they ever learn to make big war parties—"

"Mebbe," Robre said dubiously. He turned his head back to King. "We needn't take more 'n' four, five altogether," he said. "More 'n' you're not likely to see the big cats. I went in alone, myself 'n' never saw sign of the swamp-devils 'tall."

"Four, then," King said. "Ranjit Singh I'll leave here to run the camp; he'll complain, but someone has to do it. You, of course, and me, and two of the garrison soldiers with their rifles just in case—"

"And me!" Sonjuh said, rising. Robre began to say something; King cut him off with a negligent gesture. The redhead went on: "I won't do anything hog-wild, I swear it by God. But you've seen I can take care of myself 'n' carry my load. 'N' if you do run into swamp-devils . . . this is what I came for!"

King thought for a long moment, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. "All right, then, true enough. I don't expect we'll be gone more than four or five days—I can't spend much more time than that anyway, my furlough is long but not indefinite. And you will *not* go haringoff on your own. Understood?"

"I swear it, Empire-Jefe," she said.

Robre sighed. "You're the man payin' for this," he said unwillingly. "'N' she's right, Coyote nip her, she *is* as good a hunter as anyone on this trail but you 'n' me."

"Excellent," King said. "Well, time to—"

"I'm for a walk," Sonjuh said. She had relaxed from her cat-tense quiver, and smiled as she looked at him. "Care to walk along with me for a spell, Empire-Jefe?"

King smiled back; Robre gave a disapproving grunt and stalked away. Sonjuh tossed her head. "It's our law, an unwed girl can walk out with a man if she pleases," she said. "'N' if her Pa 'n' brothers don't object."

"What if her pa and brothers *do* object?" King asked, when they'd strolled far enough to be out of easy sight and hearing of the camp-fires.

Sonjuh looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes. "Why, they warn him off," she said slyly. "Then beat 'n' stomp him if he doesn't listen."

*Good thing you're an orphan*, King thought but carefully did not say aloud, as he slid an arm around her supple waist. The girl leaned toward him, her head on his shoulder, smelling pleasantly of wood smoke and feminine flesh.

Some time later, Sonjuh gave a moan and pushed herself up on her elbows, looking down to where he kneeled between her legs, a dazed expression on her face.

"*Jeroo!*" she panted. "Corn Lady be my witness, I didn't think there *was* so many ways of sporting!"

King grinned at her. "Benefits of a civilized education," he said.

He'd been given an illustrated copy of the *Kama Sutra* at twelve, and had never had much trouble finding someone to practice with; when you were young, handsome, well spoken, athletic, rich, and the eldest son of a zamindar, you didn't. From Sonjuh's surprise and artless enthusiasm, he gathered that the native men here went at things like a bull elephant in niusth.

"But I've been having more fun than you," she said, and laughed. "And looks like you're ready for some."

His grin went wider, and he put a hand under each of her thighs, lifting them up and back.

She chuckled lazily: "Remember what I said about walkin' out?" He nodded, reaching for the pocket of his uniform jacket; the girl had tossed it when she ripped it off his back. "Well," she went on, "if the man gets her with child, then her Pa 'n' brothers—'n' the rest of the clan, too—see to it he takes her to wife. Just so you'd know, Empire-Jefe."

"Behold another wonder of civilization," he said, busy with fingers and teeth on one of the foil packets; being an optimist and no more modest than most young men, he'd slipped half a dozen into his pocket earlier that evening. "Vulcanized rubber."

Sonjuh stared for a moment, then burst into a peal of laughter. "Looks like it's wearin' a rain-cloak!"

King growled and seized a shin under each arm—

## V: The People of the Black God

Hunter Robre spread his hands. "I can't make the cats come where they don't have a mind to," he said reasonably, then slapped at a late-season mosquito. Dawn had brought the last of them out, to feed before full sunlight.

The blind where they'd been waiting all night was woven of swamp-reeds, on a hillock of drier ground. The wild-cow yearling they'd staked out was beginning to smell pretty high, and all their night had gotten them was the sight of a couple of cougars sniffing around, and two red wolves who'd had to be shooed off. Forest stood at their back beyond the swamp, tupelo and live oak and cypress knotted into an impenetrable wall by brush and vines, the trees towering a hundred feet and more overhead. Even on a cool autumn morning the smell was heavy and rank, somehow less cleanly than the forests where he spent most of his time. Wisps of mist drifted over the surface of the Black River where it rolled sluggish before them; the other bank was higher than this, and thick with giant pine higher than ship's masts.

"No, you can't," Eric King said, infuriatingly reasonable. He sighed. "I don't expect that tigers of any sort are too numerous here, although it's perfect country for them."

"They aren't common," Robre agreed. "Weren't never seen until my pa's time, when he was my age." Then he puzzled at the way the Imperial had said it. "Why shouldn't there be more tigers here, if it's such good tiger-country? And how would you know?"

King pulled a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket—that cloth coat had a hunting shirt beat all hollow, and Robre had decided to have a seamstress run him up one—and offered one to his guide. Robre accepted; they were tastier than a pipe, and a lot less messy than a chew. For a moment they puffed in silence, blowing plumes of smoke at lingering mosquitoes: it didn't matter now if the scent warned off game.

"There weren't any tigers here before the Fall—before the time when Olsaytn stole the Sun, you'd say."

Robre's brows went up. *Odd*, he thought. When he thought of the Before Time, it was simply as *very longago*, the time of the songs and the heroes; certainly before his grandsire's grandsire's time. The Imperial seemed to think of it more as a set date, as if it were something that had happened in his own

lifetime. *Odd way to think. Mebbe it's all that writing they do.*

"Why not?" Robre said. "Plenty of beasts a tiger can tackle that a cougar or wolf can't. What were those fancy words you used last night. . . *ecological niche*?"

King shrugged. "I don't know. There just weren't, or so our *books* say. Why are there elephants in India, and not here? Nobody knows."

Robre grunted noncommittally; he wasn't quite sure if he believed in elephants yet.

King went on: "No lions either. When the fall came, they—the ancestors of the ones you've got now—probably escaped from *circuses*, or *zoos*."

They thrashed out the meaning of those words. Robre rubbed his chin, feeling stubble gone almost silky and reminding himself to shave soon. "Wouldn't folks have eaten them?" he said.

"They probably did eat the elephants in the menageries." King grinned. "But a few predators would have been turned lose before people realized how bad things were going to get. Then, in the chaos, when every man's hand was against every other's . . . well, hungry tigers used to being around people, they'd be good at picking off stragglers, wouldn't they? And most of the dying happened *fast*; by the third or fourth year, people were scarce again in these lands, very scarce. Other things—game and feral livestock that survived in out-of-the-way corners, or country farther south—bred back faster than humans, spreading over the empty lands as the vegetation recovered, and so gave the big cats plenty to hunt. They breed quickly themselves, so even a few pairs could produce a lot of offspring. Eventually they'll fill all the land humans haven't taken over again, but that will need another century or two."

Robre nodded. It made sense in a twisty sort of way, like most of what King said when he wasn't doing an obvious leg-pull. It still made his head itch on the inside. . . .

"And because they're descended from so few, they'll have a lot of mutants . . . freaks, that is, due to inbreeding. Like the black-with-yellow-stripes you shot. . . What's that, by the way?" King said casually, pointing with the hand that held the cigarette.

"What's what?"

Robre turned and looked upstream, across the Black River. Then his eyes grew very wide, and he whipped the cigarette out of his mouth, crushed it out, did the same with King's. The Imperial froze as Robre laid a hand across his mouth, and they crouched watching through the slits in their blind.

The light was growing now, and the mist on the river to the north was lifting. What had showed as mere hints of shape turned hard and definite. A canoe, a big cypress log hollowed out and pointed at both ends, big enough for ten men to kneel and drive their paddles into the mirror-calm surface of the morning river. Beside him King leveled his binoculars and swore, swore very softly in a language Robre didn't understand. He did understand the sentiment, especially since it was the first time the Imperial had seen the swamp-devils. Robre's own eyes went wide as a second canoe followed the first, then a third . . . more and more, until a full ten were in view, the foremost nearly level with them.

He put out a hand, and after a moment King passed him the binoculars. He'd learned to use them well—another thing he'd save to buy from Banerjii, if he could—and his thumb brought the image sharp and clear.

// is *swamp-devils*, he thought helplessly. *But it can't be. Not that many together!*

There was no mistaking them, though. The sloping foreheads and absent chins, faces hideously scarred that grew only sparse bristly beards, huge broad noses, narrow little eyes beetling under heavy brows. The build was unmistakable, too, heavy shoulders and long thick arms, broad feet.

"I thought they were men," King whispered, shaken.

"They were, or leastways their fore-folks were, when we drove 'em into the east."

Swamp-devils right enough, but only a few carried the clubs of ashwood with rocks lashed into a split end that were the commonest tool-weapon of the cannibals. Nearly all the rest had spears with broad iron heads, black bows with quivers of arrows, knives and tomahawks at their belts. They couldn't have gotten all that in raids on his folk and the Kaijan settlements east beyond the Sabyn.

After an eternity, the last of the canoes passed—a full hundred swamp-devil bucks, in plain sight of each other and without a fight breaking out. They kept silence as well, paddling swiftly along the eastern bank, occasionally scanning the western shore. He could feel the weight of their stares, and froze into a rabbit's immobility until the last one pulled out of sight.

"Lord o' Sky!" he gasped. "Lord o' *Sky*!"

"Well," King said whimsically. "I gather that this means trying for tiger on the east bank of the river is definitely out."

Sonjuh dawtra Pehte hummed tunelessly to herself as she stirred the ham and disks of potato in the

frying pan—small children had been known to cry when she sang, but *she* liked the sound, which was what mattered. The morning was bright, and cool by the standards she was used to; the smell of the frying food mingled pleasantly with the damp dawn forest. Birds were calling, in a chorus of clucks and cheeps and—  
*Jeroo, I'm actually happy*, she thought. That brought a tang of guilt, but only slightly—the Lord o' Sky had heard her oath, and she intended to keep it or die trying. The Father-God wouldn't care whether or not she regretted the dying. *Of course, E 're doesn 'tplan on staying*. That brought a stab, and he'd never hidden it, either. . . .

Running feet sounded through the woods. Slasher woke and pointed his nose in their direction. Sonjuh caught them a few seconds later; she'd already set the\* food aside and reached for her crossbow. The two coastlander men-at-arms in Imperial service dropped their camp chores—armfuls of wood in one case, fodder gathered for their single pack mule in the other—and went for their rifles. They moved quickly to kneel behind cover on either side of the camp, looking outward in either direction as they worked the actions of their weapons and loaded a cartridge. Even then, she had an instant to notice that. Her people had never had much use for the coastmen, but these were *very* smooth; evidently they'd learned a lot, in the twenty years or so since the Imperial ships arrived to build their fort on Galveston Island.

She relaxed a bit as it became clear that it was Robre and Eric King loping back to the little forward camp. Not much, because she could see their faces.

"Swamp-devils?" she said.

"More 'n I've ever seen in one place," Robre said grimly.

She turned and kicked moist dirt over the fire, stamping quickly *to* put it out before it could smoke much.

Robre nodded, and gave a concise description of the canoes they'd seen. "You were right, Head-on-Fire. Fore God the Father, there were a hundred of 'em if there were one. What's *happening?*""

"Whatever it is, it's not good," Sonjuh said, her voice stark. *Jeroo, there goes being happy, all of a sudden*. She didn't feel bad, though. Alert, the blood pumping in her ears, everything feeling ready to go. *Pa, Ma, sisters—soon you can rest easy, stop comin' to me in dreams*.

Eric had spread a map out on the ground; she craned forward to look at it. The written names were nothing to her or Robre, but the bird's-eye view of the land was easy enough to grasp, and they'd both learned how to use them.

"We're here," Eric said, tapping their location—not far from the west bank of the Black River. "As I understand it, the . . . swamp-devils . . . live mostly here." His finger moved down to a patch of stylized reeds and trees.

"The most of 'em," Robre confirmed. "But you'll find little bands all through—" His hand swept upward, north and east. "Then they sort of thin out, there's big patches of empty country, 'n' then Cherokee 'n' Zarki; I don't know much about them—nobody does. Then east beyond the Sabyn, you get the Kajun; sort of backwards, from what I hear, but clean."

"Well, what we just saw was a large group of them moving from north to south, where most of them are. I'd say it was in the nature of a gathering, wouldn't you?"

The two natives looked at each other. "Jeroo," Sonjuh whispered, past a throat gone thick. "If the devils is gathering, then our folk have to know—raids, big raids."

"Raids with *hundreds* of 'em," Robre said. "Lord o' Sky, that's not a raid, that's a *war*, like with the Kumanch or even the Mehk—but they don't kill everyone 'n' eat the bodies."

"A pukka war," Eric said. When Sonjuh gave him a puzzled look, he went on: "A real war, a big war, a proper war."

Robre put up a hand. "Wait a heartbeat," he said. "What *are* we going to tell our folks?"

Sonjuh felt a flash of anger. "That the swamp-devils—"

"That the swamp-devils use canoes? That we saw a big bunch of 'em?" Robre shook his head. "What's Jefe Carul of your Alligators, or Jefe Bilbowb of us Bear Creek folk—never mind clans farther west or south—going to say?"

"Ahhh," Eric King said, and Sonjuh closed her mouth.

If they both thought that, there was probably something to it. She reached for her pipe—it always helped her to think—then made her hand rest on her tomahawk instead.

"We need to learn more," she said, shifting on her hams.

"We do that, 'n' nothing else," Robre said, giving her a respectful glance; Sonjuh warmed a little to him for that.

"So," King said. "Who goes, and who goes back to give a warning."

The girl furrowed her brows. "Well, no sense in *me* going back— Mad Sonjuh Head-on-Fire,

dawtra Stinking, Friendless Pehte."

Robre had the grace to blush. "Everyone knows I've a wasp-nest betwixt my ears about the swamp-devils. Wouldn't listen."

"Nor to an outlander like myself," King said thoughtfully. "Robre would be the best, then; he has quite a reputation."

Robre flushed more darkly under his outdoorsman's tan, his blue eyes volcanic against it. "Run out on my friends? And I'm the best woodsman, meaning no offense. You'll need me."

The three looked at each other. They had less than sixty years between them, and when Sonjuh gave a savage grin the two men answered the expression with ones of their own, just as reckless.

"I'll send the two privates . . . the men-at-arms . . . back to Ranjit Singh at the main camp," King said. "And as for us, we'll go see what the hell is brewing."

"What hell indeed, Jefe," Robre said somberly, his smile dying. "Hell indeed."

The telescopic sight brought the canoe closer than Eric King would have wanted, on aesthetic grounds; and while there was no disputing their usefulness, he generally considered scope sights unsporting. *But this isn't a game*, he thought, as he kept the cross-hairs firmly on the lead man . . . or man-thing . . . in the vessel. The three swamp-devils were as hideous as the ones he'd seen before; even knowing what inbreeding, intense selection and genetic drift could do, it was hard to believe that their ancestors had been men.

*More like a cross between a giant rat and a baboon*, he thought.

They had their wits about them, though; they came down from the north three-quarters of the way toward the western shore, beyond easy bowshot from the east and where it would be simple to run the cypress-log dugout into a creek and disappear. All three kept their eyes moving, and they had bows and quivers or short iron-headed spears to hand. He closed his mind on a bubble of worry, and switched his viewpoint southward. A little hook of land stood fifty yards out in the Black River, covered in reeds and dense vine-begrown brush. At the water's edge lay a deer—a yearling buck, with a broken arrow behind its right shoulder, still stirring and trying to rise. He nodded approval; that had been a very good touch.

The westering sun was touching the tops of the trees behind them, throwing long shadow out over the water. It would dazzle eyes trying to look into the deep jungle-like growth along the riverbank proper, under the heavy foliage of the tupelos and sweet gums.

His lips curled in a satisfied snarl as the swamp-devils froze, their paddles poised and dripping water that looked almost red in the sunset-light. His finger touched delicately against the trigger, hearing the first *click* as it set, leaving only a feather-light pressure to fire. Still, that would be noisy.

The savages turned their canoe toward the mud, gobbling satisfaction at the sight of so much meat ready-caught; they'd assume the deer had run far with the shaft in it, losing whoever shot it. They drove the dugout ashore and the first two hopped out, grabbing the sides and pushing it farther into the soft reed-laced dirt.

Yes, shooting would be far too likely to attract unwelcome attention. He turned his head and nodded fractionally to Sonjuh. The girl let her breath out in a controlled hiss and squeezed the trigger of her own weapon. The deep *tunngg* of the crossbow's release still brought the first swamp-devil's head up; he was just opening his mouth to cry out when the quarrel took him below the breastbone, and he fell thrashing to the ground. At the same instant Slasher came out of the tall grass before them and charged baying, belly low to the ground as he tore forward. King and the native girl charged, as well, on the dog's heels, tulwar and Khyber knife in his hands, bowie and tomahawk in hers.

The second swamp-devil let out a horrified screech, turning back and snatching for his spear, almost turning in time for the point to be of use. Then Slasher was upon him, and he was rolling on the ground screaming and trying to keep those fangs from his face and throat. The third was quicker-witted, or perhaps had just a second longer. He lifted his bow, and was drawing on the ambushers when an eruption of water and mud behind the canoe distracted him. Snake-swift he threw the bow aside and pulled out his tomahawk, half rising to meet Robre's onslaught. The two struck, and fell into the mud at the edge of the water with a tremendous splash.

King accounted himself an excellent runner, but Sonjuh drew ahead of him, her feet light on the soft ground that sucked at his boots. *I'm eighty pounds heavier, that's all*, he thought. Slasher's teeth were an inch from the screaming swamp-devil's face when she scooped up the spear he hadn't had time to use, thrust it under his ribs, then turned and threw it three paces into the back of the last. Robre

wrenched himself free of the slackening grip and chopped twice with his tomahawk.

"I'd have had him in a second," he grumbled. "But thanks."

"Then he wouldn't have counted," Sonjuh said, flashing him a smile. She bent, grabbed a handful of the man's filthy, matted hair and cut a circle through the scalp before wrenching the bloody trophy free.

King swallowed. *Oh, well, she is a native*, he thought, and pulled the spear out of the swamp-devil's back instead of speaking. He washed it in the stream, then peered at the head. The light was uncertain, but he could see that the edge of the weapon was ragged, although wickedly sharp. *Uneven forging*, he thought. That happened if you didn't keep the temperature even enough. *An amateur did it*. Not at all like the work of the Seven Tribes, whose smiths were excellent in their primitive way. But the long-hafted hatchet still in the savage's belt was very well made, and the knife likewise. He frowned; according to what he'd been told, the eastern savages had no knowledge of ironworking themselves, but. . .

"Is there much iron ore in these woods?" he asked.

"Plenty," Robre said, wading back ashore after washing the mud and blood off in the river. "Bog-iron, grows in lumps in the swamps. That's one reason our Seven Tribes folks have been pushing across the Three Forks into the forest country—charcoal and ore. Iron from the Cherokee and Mehk costs."

"Well, I think someone has been teaching your swamp-devils how to smelt for themselves," King said grimly. "And how to work it."

Robre snorted. "Be a good trick, to keep 'em from eating their teachers."

Sonjuh shook her head. "No, it makes sense, Hunter-man. Like their gathering in big bands. They're *changing*, 'n' not for the better."

*Well, technically, it is for the better*, King thought. *They're starting to live a little more like human beings and a little less like mad beasts. The problem is that men are more dangerous than beasts. And they 're still a lot closer to vicious mad beasts than to real human beings, like my friends here.*

"What's this?" Robre said. "Never seen anything quite like it."

He pulled something from the ear of the savage who'd been rear paddle—steersman—in the canoe. King took it, looked, and felt sweat break out on his brow; his stomach clenched, and a feeling of liquid coldness stole lower in his guts.

. It was a piece of silver jewelry, shaped to the likeness of a peacock's tail. The two natives gaped at him; like any high-caste member of the sahib-log, he was not a man given to quick emotions, or to showing those he did have. The way his soul stood naked on his face for an instant astonished them.

"You seen that before?" Robre asked sharply.

"It's Russian," he said softly, after a moment to bring himself back to self-mastery. "It's the sigh of initiation into the cult of Tchernobog—the Black God. The Peacock Angel is one of His other names. Yes, I've seen this before."

The Czar in Samarkand had always been among the Empire's worst enemies. Partly that was a rivalry that went back before the Fdll—St. Disraeli had spent much of his earlier life frustrating Russian designs on the Old Empire's territories, or so the records said. Most of the rivalries were Post-Fall, though, after the Russian refugees in Central Asia had made contact with the descendants of the British Exodus in India. There had been some direct conflict, though not much: the Himalayas lay between, and the uninhabited wastelands of Tibet, and the all-too-inhabited hill country of . Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush. Fighting through a hostile Afghanistan was like trying to bite an enemy when you had to chew your way through a wasp's nest first. The Afghans hated the *Angrezi Raj* only somewhat less than they loathed the *Russki*.

"They're enemies of ours," King said. "Man-eaters."

"Like the swamp-devils 'n' us?" Robre asked.

"Not very. During the Fall. . . It's a long story. They ate their subjects, not their own people, mostly; afterwards they kept it up as part of their new religion, making human sacrifices to their Black God, and then eating the bodies as a . . . rite that bound them together. Their nobles and rulers, at least. But they like to spread their cult, when they can. I can see how it would change your swamp-devils, too—it would give them a way to work together."

Robre made a disgusted sound, and Sonjuh swore softly before she said, "Like I said. We've *got* to get more scout-knowledge about this."

"So we do," Robre said grimly.

"So we do indeed," King added in the same tone. "For the Empire, as well."

His mind drew a map. The center of Russian power was in Central Asia, between Samarkand where the Czar had his seat, and Bokhara, the religious capital, where the High Priests of Tchernobog were

centered. Theoretically the Czar claimed much of European Russia, but it was still mainly wasteland,, thinly populated by tribes whom he tried to reclaim with missionaries and Cossack outposts.

*Still, they could get out through the Baltic and the Black Sea,* King thought. There were Imperial bases in the lands facing reclaimed and recivilized Britain, but they were little more than trading posts and bases for explorers and traders and missionaries of the Established Church. The interior. . . he'd just come from there, and parts of it were almost as bad as this.

*Yes, they could slip small groups out—pretend to be something else, Brazilians or whatever—travel by ship . . .* But why spend the energy to interfere in this barbarous wasteland? What difference could it make to the contending Powers?

*Well, the area is theoretically part of the Empire,* he thought, with the part of his mind trained at Sandhurst, the Imperial military academy in the Himalayan foothills. *It's naturally rich, has plenty of unexploited resources, and it could become populous. When we finally get around to developing it, we'll probably rely on the Seven Tribes—make them an au-. tonomous federation, and give them backing.*

That was one of the standard methods, far cheaper and more productive than outright conquest, *if you could find suitable natives.*

*If the Czar can weaken them and strengthen their enemies—and Krishna, we'll never give the swamp-devils anything but the receiving end of a punitive expedition—it'll make this region less of a source of strength to the Empire. Which means,* he realized dismally, *that this ceases to be an adventure that I could back out of, and becomes a duty that has to be seen through to the end. Oh, well.* "Let's go," he said aloud.

Robre Hunter hopped out of the canoe. Slasher disappeared into the blackness ahead, silent as a ghost; Sonjuh followed him, nearly as quiet. King and he pushed together, running the dugout into the soft mud under an overhang; the current had cut into a bluff, exposing the root-ball of a big live oak tree and making what was almost a cave. They arranged bushes and reeds to hide the vessel and waited until Sonjuh returned. It was very dark here, with the rustling leaf-canopy above cutting out most of the starlight, and the moon wouldn't be up for a while. The smell of silt-heavy water and decay was strong, but he found himself sniffing deeply to catch the unmistakable man-eater stink.

*Now, don't get yourself worked up into a lather,* he told himself sternly. *No more dangerous than those there wild pigs.*

Although there was something about the prospect of being eaten by things that walked on two legs and could talk that made his scrotum draw itself up the way no pack of wolves or wild dogs or stalking big cat could do. He was relieved when Sonjuh stuck her head over the tangle of roots and gave a slight *hiss*.

The Imperial made a stirrup of his hands to boost Robre up, and a flash of a grin with it; the unexpected resentment he had felt over her walking out with the Imperial faded a little more. There was a faint path on the natural levee above, more of a deer-track than anything else. Traveling on a beaten way was dangerous, but it saved time—and the noise you made in the underbrush was dangerous, too, in hostile country. He took the lead, with King in the middle and Sonjuh on rear guard; Slasher was weaving in and out ahead of them, dropping back for contact with his mistress every now and then.

Even then, he felt a tinge, of envy toward. Sonjuh for the well-trained beast. *Quite a girl in every damn way,* he thought, then, *Keep your mind on business, idjeet.*

Eyes were little good in dark this deep. He kept his ears working as he walked, nose, the feeling you got from air on your skin. Once he held up a clenched fist, and the others paused. Slasher had his nose pointed in the same direction, quivering. They went to their bellies in the trailside growth, eeling their way along, until the glimmer of firelight came through. More cautious still, moving with infinite care, he came closer and parted a final screen of tall grass with his fingers, making just enough space to see out.

*Oh, shee-it onfaahr,* he thought.

There were the canoes they'd seen, and as many again, drawn up on the beach. A campfire burned higher, and something seethed in a big iron pot hung; knowing swamp-devils, his stomach twisted at what might be cooking, from the pork-smell of it. Every troop or family of them had one such pot, heirloom and symbol. . . A clump of them sat around the fire, at least half a dozen, reaching in to pull gobbets out or dip up hot broth in wooden ladle-spoons, talking in their gobbling, grunting tongue, snarling and snapping at each other occasionally. One sank his teeth into another's ear, hanging on until three or four of the others kicked him loose.

King came up beside him, whispered in his ear: "We could make our retreat a little safer, don't you think? I wouldn't like to come running back and meet those chappies." He went on for a few soft

sentences.

"Good idea, Jefe," Robre said; it was a risk, but it would give them an added margin of safety on their return if it worked. If it didn't and the sentries were able to rouse their fellows deeper in the woods, the three of them could just high-tail it.

He drew an arrow from his quiver, stuck its point in the earth, drew more and set them ready to hand. Sonjuh settled in behind branches, down on belly and elbows—that was one advantage of a crossbow, you could shoot it lying down. When—if—he came back from this trip, he'd have an Imperial rifle that could do that and more besides. Still, the bow had some advantages. King turned to take rear guard, with the firepower of his rifle.

*I'd have done the same in his place, Robre thought. But I'd have argued about it.* The Imperial was a good man in a tight place, and not the least shy—no doubt about it. But he was disturbingly . . . coldblooded, *that's the word.* Though not too cold-blooded to attract the attentions of a very attractive girl—

He thrust everything from his mind save the bow as he came erect. It was a hundred long paces from here to the fire, a long shot in the night. The sinew and horn and wood of the Kumanch weapon creaked as he drew, a full 120 pounds of draw. Back to the angle of the jaw, sighting over the arrowhead and then up . . . he loosed, and the string snapped against the black buffalo-hide bracer on his left wrist.

One of the grisly figures around the fire looked up suddenly, perhaps alerted by the whisper of cloven air; half-animal they might be, but the savages were survivors of generation upon generation of survivors in a game where losers went into the stewpot. He began to spring erect, but that merely put the arrow through his gut rather than into his chest. With a muffled howl he dropped backwards into the flames and lay there, screeching and sprattling, the iron pot falling on him and its contents gushing out to three-quarters smother the fire. His second shot was on its way before the first hit, and the third three seconds after that, and then he was firing as steadily as a machine. Sonjuh fired her crossbow—and then had to take a third of a minute to reload it, bracing her foot in the stirrup at its head and hauling back on the jointed, curved lever that bent the heavy bow and forced the thick string into the catch.

By that time his quiver was about empty. The cannibals had churned about for a moment, eyes blinded by the fire they'd been grouped around, until more of them fell. Then they turned and ran howling at the woods from where the deadly shafts came; Robre answered, firing smooth and quick, oblivious of the shafts that were whickering around him from the swamp-devil's bows. One had a better idea; he turned and ran yelling up the trail that led away from the riverbank. Robre drew, drew until his arms and chest felt as if the muscle would rip loose from the bone. He loosed, watched—and four seconds later that last shaft dropped out of the night into the fleeing cannibal's back, sending him pitching forward limp at the edge of sight.

"Let's go," King said, his voice stark. He slapped Robre on the shoulder as he passed. "Well done, man. Well shot indeed."

Sonjuh touched his arm, as well. "Better 'n well. That shot was three hundred paces, in the night—it'll be told around the fires for a hundred year 'n' more."

"If anyone gets back to tell," he mumbled, embarrassed.

The men spent a few hectic minutes pushing the dugouts into the current, sending them on their long journey down to the Gulf—the Black River reached the sea to the northeast of Galveston Bay. The log canoes were heavy, but none of them so heavy two strong men couldn't shift them; they glided away silently into the darkness, turning slowly as they glided empty into the night. While they worked Sonjuh went from one body to the next with her tomahawk and knife in hand, recovering Robre's arrows and making sure the enemy dead were unlikely to twitch. King looked up and winced slightly; the clansman blinked in surprise. The only good swamp-devil was a dead one . . . and for that matter, even if they deserved a favor you weren't doing a man one leaving him with an arrow through the gut and burns over half his body.

"Let's leave one canoe," Robre gasped, as they finished their work. "We might be coming back faster than we go—rather not have to dog-leg a half a mile north, if that's so."

King nodded. "And now, let's see what's going on."

*Ten, Sonjuh dawtra Pehte thought exultantly as she eeled forward on her belly. Ten scalps! Ma, you can rest quiet. Mahlu, Mahjani, Bittilu, soon you can rest, my sisters.*

It was not quite so dark as it had been earlier, with the moon huge on the northeastern horizon, hanging over the swamp-forest ahead. The land sloped down here, away from the section of natural levee along the



river behind them. It grew thicker and ranker, laced with impenetrable vine and thicket along the trail, then opened out into cypress-swamp, glowing ghostly as the lights of many fires on islets and mounds in the muddy shallow water filtered through the thick curtains of Spanish moss. They stopped there, at the border where the trail opened out, and stared.

"*Shiva Bhuteswara*," King muttered, in the odd other language he sometimes fell into. "Shiva, Lord of Goblins."

They pullulated over the swamp, squatting in mud and on beaten-down reeds, swarming, erupting in screaming throat-rending fights that ended when others appointed to the task clubbed them down again. Hundreds, perhaps thousands. On the patches of higher ground crude altars of logs stood, with figures strapped across them—swamp-devils, and others that looked like normal men and women. Those were mostly hundreds of yards away, and she was thankful for it. What she *could* see brought memories back and the taste of vomit at the base of her throat. In the center stood an altar taller than the others, built on a platform of cypress logs. Standing upon it was a figure in black, silhouetted against a roaring fire. He raised his arms and silence fell, save for the screams—then a chanting, discordant at first, growing into unison.

"*Tchernobog! Tchernobog! Tchernobog!*"

Drums joined it, war-drums of human hide stretched over bone, thuttering to the beat of callused palms. The beat walked in her blood, shivered in her tight-clenched teeth.

"What does that mean?" Robre asked.

"Tchernobog," King whispered back. "Black God. Peacock Angel; the Eater of Worlds. That's the one who taught them." He hesitated, looked at both of them. "If I kill him, there's a chance they'll be demoralized and run. On the other hand, there's a chance they'll come straight for us. At the very least, they'll be short of leadership beyond the kill-and-eat level. Shall I?"

Robre nodded. Sonjuh did, as well. "He's the cause of our hurts," she said. "Kill him!"

King nodded in the gloom, the shadow of his turban making his outline monstrous. He unslung the heavy double rifle, lay behind a fallen log, waited a long second. A silence seemed to fall about him, drinking in sound. He could be more *still* than any man she'd ever met, and it was a bit disconcerting—like his habit of crossing his legs in an impossible-looking position and doing what he called *meditating*.

Now there was a slight, almost imperceptible hiss of exhaling breath, and his finger stroked the trigger.

*Crack.* The sound was thunder-loud, and she'd never seen the weapon fired at night. The great bottle-shaped blade of red-orange fire almost blinded her, and left her eyes smarting and watering. She looked away to get her night vision back, blinking rapidly. The foreigner who'd taught the wild men how to act together—the *Russki*—was staggering in a circle. At six hundred paces, Eric's weapon had torn an arm off at the shoulder; the swamp-devils were throwing themselves flat in terror, their voices a chorus of shrieking like evil ghosts.

*Crack.* The distant figure fell.

"Dead as mutton," King said. "And now, let's go."

Scarred chinless faces were turning their way now, the huge goblin eyes staring. The moonlight would be enough for them; legend said that they saw better by night than true men did. Sonjuh came to her feet and ran, with Slasher trotting at her heel. Behind her the sound of the others' feet came, and behind them more of the squealing, shrieking horde. There must be hundreds of hundreds of them. . . .

The gun roared again, and again. Below it she could hear Robre's bow snapping; they must be discouraging the foremost pursuers. Sonjuh kept her head down and *ran*, the cool wet air of the river-bottom night was good for it. She blinked in surprise as the riverside came into sight, moonlight making a long rippling highway on it. There was no time to waste; she tossed her crossbow into the last of the big dugouts and dug her heels into the mud, putting her back to the wood and pushing.

Nothing happened, nothing save that stars and glimmers danced across her vision as she strained. It *did* give her a good look at what was going on behind. Eric came out first, panting so that she could hear him across fifty paces, turned, knelt, breaking open his weapon and reloading. Behind him Robre came, turned, drew, shot, drew, shot—incredibly graceful and swift for so large a man. Sonjuh abandoned her efforts at the canoe, scurried over the sand, grabbed the quivers of the dead swamp-devils, pitched them into the canoe, went back to shoving. Was that a slight movement, a sucking sound in the mud? Her feet churned through slickness.

"*Lord O' Sky bumyou, you stupid log, move!*" she shrieked in frustration; her own sweat was stinging her chewed lips like fire.

Another *crack*—*crack* as Eric fired his rifle. Two cannibals almost to spearcast of Robre pitched backwards, one with most of the top of his head disappearing in a spray of blood that looked black in the

moonlight. Robre came pelting back past the Imperial, threw his bow into the canoe, bent to put his shoulder beside hers.

A spray of swamp-devils came out of the trailhead into the open, howling like wolves with every step, their tomahawks and knives glittering like cold silver fire in moonlight and starlight. Eric had slung his rifle; now he drew the revolver from his side. He stood erect, shoulder turned to his enemies, his feet at right angles to each other and his left hand tucked into the small of his back, weapon extended. It seemed a curiously formal pose. . . .

*Crack.* Much lighter than the boom of the hunting rifle; more like a spiteful snap, with a dagger of red flame in the night. The foremost swamp-devil stopped as if he'd run into an invisible wall, arms flying out to right and left, weapons turning and glinting as they flew, then collapsed; the next tripped over him and never rose. The Imperial's long arm moved, leisurely and sure, and the pistol snapped. Again and again, six times, and there were six bodies lying still or writhing on the sandy mud. The seventh came leaping over the pile of them, screeching and swinging a mace of polished rock lashed to a handle with human tendons. Eric's sword flashed out, a clean burnished-steel blur in the moonlight, cut again backhand. The cannibal staggered, gaping at a forearm severed and spouting blood in pulsing-fountain spurts, then collapsed as his guts spilled out through his rent belly. An eighth lay silent as Slasher, rose from his body, jaws wet. The Imperial turned and ran.

The canoe was moving, finally moving. King was nearly to them; Slasher soared by him, hit the ground and leapt again, flashing over the two clansfolks' heads like a gray arrow. Dark figures moved behind King's back, more of the swamp-devils come from their sabbat, loosing as they ran in a chorus of wolf-howls, pig-squeals, catamount screeches. Black arrows began to flicker past Sonjuh in a whispering hiss of cloven air, invisible until they were almost there; some of them went *thunk* into the canoe and stood quivering with a malignant hum like evil bees.

The heavy craft was in the water now, river up to her knees, then her thighs, soaking into her leggings and chill against flesh heated by running and the pounding of her heart. She rolled over the side; Robre was pushing hard, his greater height letting him wade out. Sonjuh stuck her head up enough to see over the upcurved stern-end of the dugout, and saw Eric splash into the water at speed, lunging forward to grasp the wood. She also saw more arrows heading toward her like streaming horizontal rain, and ducked down again. King landed atop her, driving the breath out of her with an *oof!* and grinding her back into the inch or two of water that swilled around in the middle of the hollowed-out cypress log.

The man gave a sharp cry and then spoke fast in that other, utterly unfamiliar language he had—she could tell the difference when he was speaking the one that sounded almost-but-not-quite like Seven Tribes talk. From the sound of it, he was swearing with venomous sincerity. Robre was in the hull now, digging his paddle into the water and looking back to find out why King wasn't.

Sonjuh had a good idea why, even if it was a little too dark to be sure. She wiggled out from under King and felt down along his legs.

"Arrow," she said—more were falling into the water about them. "Nearly through the calf slantwise—missed the bone—head's just under the skin here."

"Push it through arid break it off," Eric King wheezed. At her hesitation— "*Do* it, there's no time!"

She drew her tomahawk, drew a deep breath, as well, and hammered the arrow through with the flat of the hatchet against the nock. The long body beside hers went rigid for an instant, with a snarling exhalation, his hands clamping on the wood. She used the sharp edge of the weapon to cut the shaft off to stubs on either side, moving his leg so that wood rested on wood for a quick strong flick of the hatchet-blade.

"Give me a hand," he said tightly; she helped him to a sitting position, and he seized a paddle and set to work.

So did she, in the more conventional kneeling manner; the canoe was long and heavy, made for ten or fifteen men. They managed to drive it out past midpoint, and the rain of arrows ceased. Glancing over her shoulder, Sonjuh gave a harsh chuckle at the screams of rage, as hundreds of the swamp-devils poured onto the riverbank and found their canoes gone.

"That—won't—hold—'em—long," Robre panted between strokes.  
"They'll—have—more—close by."

"Or swim, or use logs and rafts," Sonjuh said unhappily.

*We are screwed up,* she thought.

Oh, the wound wasn't all that serious—unless it mortified, which was always a danger and doubly so with something a swamp-devil had handled. It wasn't even bleeding seriously; arrow wounds often didn't, while the shaft was plugging them up. But with his leg injured, there was no way the Imperial could run, or fight beyond sitting and shooting. King reached for his rifle, fired again, reloaded and fired before he put

it down and resumed paddling. "That'll keep them cautious for a bit," he said.

There was no energy to spare for a while after that; paddling went easier once they had reached the ebb-water on the other shore, driving northward to the little semi-islet they'd left. Robre hopped overboard and took a line over his shoulder, hauling them into a tongue of water, halting when the canoe touched bottom. Instead of trying to haul it out solo, he tied off a leather painter to a nearby dead cypress root. Meanwhile Sonjuh got their weapons in order and helped the wounded man out. He hobbled upward, supporting his weight on her shoulder; their supplies were undisturbed, and when she let him down next to them he immediately broke out a box of shells and refilled bandolier and pistol. Then he took out a notebook, made quick notes, tore out the sheet of paper and folded it. Robre squatted nearby, replacing scavenged enemy arrows with shafts from his own bundles.

"All right," King said, looking from one to the other. He closed the notebook; when he spoke, his voice had more of the hard, clipped tone than it had shown in a while. "What you've got to do is get this to Banerjii back at Donnulford. He'll see that the garrison commander in Galveston gets it. And you have to warn your own people on the way—?"

"Wait just one damn minute," Sonjuh said hotly. "You expect me to *leave* you here?"

"Well, yes, of course," he said, peering at her in the moonlight. He smiled. "My dear, do think—"

She restrained herself from slapping him with a visible effort. "What're you thinking of me, that I'd take up with a man 'n' walk off from him when he's hurt, like some town trull?"

King winced, since he'd obviously been thinking something like that. He went on more gently: "Sonjuh, remember how *many* of them there were. The only thing that they could have gathered in numbers like that for was war. They're going to come swarming over the border and hit your people's frontier settlements like In-dra's lightning—like Olsaytn's hammer. They might not even stop at the Three Forks River. Your people have to be warned."

Sonjuh opened her mouth, then closed it, then brightened. "Robre can do that. I'll stay to keep you safe—we can hide you—"

Robre shook his head. "Empire man, I swore to guide V help you, not leave you for the swamp-devils to eat, 'n' that's a fact."

King's face went grimmer. "I might have expected more logic, even from a native," he said.

Sonjuh felt herself flushing with anger again—she'd guessed what *that word* meant—but Robre surprised her by laughing.

"No, Jefe, you're not going to argue me into leaving you, 'n' you're not going to anger me into it, either. I figure we'll stock the canoe, then try 'n' get you down past the swamp-devils. Your folk hold the coast, no?"

King gaped at him. Sonjuh unwillingly admitted to herself that there was some sense in that, cold-blooded though it was. Fighting their way for days downriver, through hordes of the cannibals, with only three warriors and one of them wounded, in a canoe too big and heavy for them to handle well—

"We hold *Galveston*, and we patrol the coast to either side . . . lightly and infrequently," King said. "Talk sense, man!"

"You do the talkin'," Robre said cheerfully; his face was grim. "I'll get busy on loading the canoe."

King was swearing again when Sonjuh put her hand across his mouth for silence. Slasher was on his feet again, bristling, fangs showing in a silent snarl, his nose pointed landward whence came the wind. The humans froze, peering about, and then Robre quietly put the box of supplies down and stepped backward to dry land to reach for where his bow leaned against another.

"Down!" she called.

They all flattened themselves. Arrows whipped by at chest-height above them, and a howling broke free from the woods to the eastward. More screeches answered it, out on the river; Sonjuh looked that way, and saw canoes boiling out from the bluff there, paddles stabbing into the water.

A rhythmic cry rose from the crews, near enough to her tongue that she could understand the words: "*Meat! Eat! Meat! Eat!*"

"Watch the land!" King shouted, rolling behind a couple of sacks of cornmeal and aiming his rifle riverward. *Crack . . . crack*, and a canoe went over as a rower sprang up in the final convulsion of death.

Howls came from landward. Sonjuh prepared her crossbow with hands that would have shaken, if she had permitted it. *They must have sent runners up the bank and then over*, she thought. *And had more canoes there . . . too smart, for swamp-devils. They've been learning, damn them!*

The cry from the woods turned into a chant: "*MEAT! EAT!*"

"I was never so glad to hear good old-fashioned Imperial volley-fire . . . *ail!*"

The last was a brief involuntary exclamation as Ranjit's thick-fingered right hand pulled the arrow-stub

free with one long surging draw. His left poured the disinfectant, and King felt it through the wound and in streaks up the nerves of his leg, into his groin and belly. It was far from the worst pain he'd ever experienced, but it was certainly among the top five in an adventurous life. To deal with it as the Sikh's experienced fingers tied on the field dressing, he looked past Sonjuh's anxious face where she knelt holding his leg for the bandage and to the eastern shore where the sun rose over tall forest, across a river like molten metal wisped with mist. Were hating black eyes looking at him? *Probably*, he thought. *We only killed a dozen or two of them*—it was hard to tell how many bodies had gone into the water, especially since a patrol of alligators had gone by, picking up snacks—and *there, were thousands over there. I'd be surprised if they aren't crossing north and south of here already. Dismally determined types.*

The clansmen and soldiers were grouped around the islet, less three dead and several wounded. The stink of the cannibals' corpses was strong, stronger than the newly dead usually were; flights of ravens and great-winged buzzards waited, on the wing or perched in trees nearby.

"How did you get here so fast, on foot?" King went on.

Ranjit Singh grinned whitely in his black beard. "I mounted us all on the pack animals, *huzoor*," he said. "By turns; each man on foot to hold onto a strap while he ran. So we made good time."

King nodded; that had been clever. The trick had been used before; sometimes cavalry brought infantry forward so during an attack, with a foot soldier clinging to a stirrup while the horse trotted.

"Did you hear?" he called over to Robre, who was sitting in a circle with his fellow tribesmen, amid fast speech and gestures.

"Yup," Robre said, turning to face the Imperial. "Figure you're planning on leaving us now?"

"To get help," he said, and at Robre's dubious look, "We have several vessels at Galveston, and this river is navigable to the coast. It'll take me some time to get there, with Ranjit and the garrison soldiers. Your people need to be warned."

"Am I comin' with you?" Sonjuh asked quietly.

"My dear—" Eric winced slightly at the hurt in her eyes. "My dear, we should each go to our own people now. Believe me, it's best."

She nodded quietly and picked up her pack, rising and turning away. He winced again, for himself, and then shrugged. *Well, I'll be over it by the time we make the coast. If we make the coast. Six guns was not much to run that river of darkness.*

"Let's go," he said briskly.

Robre Hunter rose up from behind the overturned oxcart and loosed once more. The fresh wound in his left arm weakened the draw, but the target was only thirty feet away—and the swamp-devil went down coughing out blood, with the arrowhead through the upper part of his right lung. The others wavered and fell back a little; they were the outer wave of the onrushing cannibal flood, a scouting party. The clansman looked behind him; the last of the settlers they'd warned were out of the road through the woods, and probably across the cornfield. He worked a dry mouth, hawked, spat, suddenly conscious.

"Let's go!" he called.

Slasher came out of the brush on the left side of the trail, licking wet jaws. Sonjuh came from the right, her bright hair hidden by an improvised bandage with a little blood leaking through it, almost like a wife's headscarf.

Robre looked back down the road; there were swamp-devil bodies scattered along it, and two of the men who'd come back from the Black River with them. It galled him to leave the dead men for the enemy to eat, but there was nothing that could be done—it was a miracle so many of the settlers had gotten away. Pillars of smoke smudged the horizon, from burning cabins and hayricks and barns, filling the air with the filthy smell of things that should not burn, but far fewer of his people were dead in them than might have been.

Sonjuh flashed him a brief smile. *Ten miles of grit and bottom that girl has and no mistake*, the hunter thought admiringly. Aloud, he went on: "Let's run."

They turned and trotted out of the woods. The fields beyond still had occasional oak and hickory stumps in them—this was ax-claim land—but mostly they were full of cornstalks, tall and dryly rustling. The rutted path through them showed the twelve-foot logs of the station stockade; it was littered with goods refugees had dropped ... and the narrow gate was closed.

A howling broke out behind them, far closer than he liked; the swamp-devils had found the bodies of their scouting party.

"Made your tally of scalps yet?" he gasped to the girl running beside him, bow pumping in his hand as he

bounded ahead. She kept pace easily, despite his longer stride.

"I have," she said. "Doesn't seem so important, no more."

*Well, that's different,* he thought.

The howls behind them grew louder; the two clansfolk gave each other a glance and stepped up the pace, almost sprinting. Normally a half-mile, wouldn't be anything much, but they'd been running and fighting for near a week now, and even their iron fund of endurance was running low. Slasher panted, as well, tongue unreeled, his gray fur matted with blood; some of it was his, and he limped a little.

"No use telling them to open the gate," Robre grunted, as an arrow went *whissst-thunk!* into the red mud behind him. "We'll have to go over. You first."

"Won't hear me complaining," Sonjuh gasped.

Robre looked over his shoulder. The swamp-devils had hesitated a little; the sun was shining directly into their eyes as they pursued, and they weren't enthusiastic about coming into the open in daylight anyway. But they were coming on now, not graceful on their short powerful legs, but as enduring as one of the Imperials' steam engines. At the sight of two enemies on foot, their screeching ran up the scale to the blood-trill, and even now the hair along Robre's spine tried to stand up.

"Lord o' Sky with us!" he shouted, and made a final burst of speed.

More arrows were whickering past him now, on to thud into the dry oak timbers of the palisade; luckily the marksmanship wasn't good, with the sun in their eyes and shooting while they ran. Breath panted hard and dry through a parched throat, and his muscles were one huge ache. He threw his bow up over the palisade—it was lined with cheering spectators—and bent, making a stirrup of his hands. Sonjuh covered the last ten yards in her old bounding deer-run, then leapt high for the last; her foot came down into his hands, and he flung her upward with all the strength that was in him. She soared, clapped hands around the pointed end of a log, and eager hands dragged her over it. Slasher whined as Robre's hands clamped on his fur ruff and a handful at the base of his tail, and he made a halfhearted snap. The man ignored it, swung him around in two huge circles and flung him upward likewise; he *did bite*, a couple of the people who pulled him over. Then a rope dangled down for the man. He jumped, caught it three feet above his head-height and swarmed up; the wound in his left arm betrayed him, and he would have fallen at the last if Sonjuh had not leaned far over and grabbed the back of his hunting shirt.

He gasped for a moment as he lay on the fighting platform inside the little log fort that made up the Station; three families lived here usually, but now it was crowded with refugees, their faces peering upward awestruck at him.

"Get those idjeets under cover!" he shouted; a few arrows were already arching over the walls to land in the mud-and-dung surface of the courtyard.

Winded, he still forced himself back erect, took his bow, looked to right and left. The swamp-men were pouring out of the woods, a black insect tide in the lurid light of the sunset. Some stopped to prance and flaunt bits of loot at the defenders—a woman's bloodstained dress, the hacked-off, gnawed arm of a child. Others were cutting pine trees, bringing them forward, trimming off branches to use them as scaling-ladders.

"What are you waiting for?" he bellowed, to the men—and a few women—who crowded the fighting platform. "We'll need torches up here, water, more arrows. Move!"

The horde poured forward. A sleetstorm of arrows, crossbow bolts, and buckshot met it; the howling figures pressed on, and a counterstream of black arrows hissed upward—

There had been fighting all along the Three Forks River, fierce fighting before the walls of Dannulsford. The tents and brush shelters of refugees clustered thickly all about it, and the eastern horizon was still hazy with the burning cornfields, and the air heavy with the smell of it. More tents sprawled to the west, where fresh war parties of wild young fighting-men from all the clans poured in each day—the war-arrow had been sent throughout the lands of the Seven Tribes, by relays of fast riders. Other aid poured in as well, wagons filled with shelled corn, hams, bacon, wheat, jerked beef, cloth, and whiskey. By the western gate the skulls of bear, bison, wild cow, cougar, plains-lion, and wolf stood high beside the alligator, the standards of many a clan Jefe. No heads on poles were there now, but many were being set up along the river—hanging in bunches rather than impaled singly, to save work. Canoes and ferries went back and forth without cease. Noise brawled surflike through the stink and crowding, voices, shouts, songs, war whoops, the neighing of horses and bellowing of oxen; the wind was out of the west, cool, dry, and dusty.

And in the middle of the stream floated a steamboat; not the little wooden stern-wheeler of a few weeks ago, but a steel-hulled gunboat, likewise shallow-draft but bristling with Gatling guns behind shields, an

arc-powered searchlight, and a rocket launcher.

The Empire's flag floated over the bridge, and the bosun's pipes twittered as the chiefs left. Or most of them—one young war-chief, newly come to fame as a leader, stayed for a moment. Beside him stood a young woman in the garb of a male woods-runner; she clung to his hand with a half-defiant air, and her dog bristled when crewmen came too close. The captain of the craft and the colonel who commanded the Empire's garrison in Galveston had discreetly withdrawn, as well.

"*Yi-ah*," Robre Devil-Killer said. "We heard how this—" He gestured about at the Imperial warcraft, which rather incongruously bore the tile *Queen-Empress Victoria II* in gilt on its black, bows. "—turned 'em back when it steamed up the Black River. We might have lost all the east-bank settlements, without that. The ones who got across 'fore you came back weren't enough to do that, or cross the river and take Dannulfsford."

"Glad the Empire could help," Eric King said sincerely.

He was in uniform again, his turban freshly wrapped, although he also carried a stick and limped heavily. He looked at their linked hands, smiled, and murmured, "Bless you, my children," in Hindi.

"What was that?"

"Just that I'm glad to have met you. Met you both," he said. "In India, it's customary to give gifts to friends on their wedding. I understand that's in order?"

He called, and Ranjit Singh came up with a long rosewood chest strapped with brass and opened it. A double-barreled hunting rifle lay within.

Robre nodded, grinning as he took the weapon and broke the action open with competent hands; he'd received the single-shot weapon as pay from Banerji, but this new treasure was pure delight. Sonjuh smiled at last, as well.

"Well," King went on, "For the bride, I could have given a cradle . . . or a spinning wheel. . ." The smile on the girl's face was turning to a frown. "But since it looks like you'll be having other work to do first—"

Another case—this held a lighter weapon, the cavalry-carbine version of the Martini-Metford rifle. She mumbled thanks, blushing a little, then laughed out loud as King solemnly presented Slasher with a meaty ham-bone; the dog looked up at his mistress for permission, then graciously accepted it.

The Imperial and the clansman shook hands, hands equally cal-lused by rein and rope, sword-hilt and tomahawk.

"Good-bye, and good luck in your war," King went on, "I hope you exterminate the brutes."

"So do I, Jefe," Robre said. "But I doubt it. They're a mighty lot of 'em, the swamps are big, 'n' they can fight. Fight even harder in their home-runs, I suppose."

"In the end, you'll beat them," King said. "You're more civilized, and the civilized always win in the end, barring something like the Fall."

Robre looked, around at the gunboat, frowning slightly at a -thought. "Could be you're right," he said. "Time will tell."

The slight frown was still on his face when he stood on the bank, and watched the smooth passage of the *Queen-Empress Victoria II* downstream. Then he turned to the girl beside him and met her smile with his own.

## Why Then, There

Alternate history has many uses. One of them is to revive literary worlds that time has rendered otherwise inaccessible to us. Writers like Edgar Rice Burroughs or A. A. Merritt could, with some small degree of initial plausibility, litter the remoter sections of the world with lost races and lost cities; their models, writing a generation earlier, had a broader canvas to work with, as exploration wasn't nearly so complete.

By the 1930s, Burroughs was taking his heroes to other planets and to a putative world within the hollow core of ours, and the last lost races were tribes in the interior of New Guinea. Even Mars arid Venus were taken from us a little later, their six-armed green men, canals, and dinosaurs replaced with a boring snowball of rust and a sulphuric-acid hell. . . although alternatives to *that* are another story, one which I hope to tell someday.

Likewise, the supply of exploits available to a dashing young cavalry officer became sadly limited after 1914. Being machine-gunned at the Somme just isn't up to the standards of the sort of exploit conveyed by Kipling, Henty, or (in nonfiction) the young Winston Churchill, who participated in one of the last

quasi-successful charges by British lancers in 1898, against the Mahdists at Omdur-man. Dervish fanatics tend to use plastique these days, rather than swords. Pirates are rather ho-hum Third World extortionists and sneak thieves, rather than characters like Henry Morgan—who was sent home in chains and ended up as governor of Jamaica, after a private audience with Charles II!

In short, by the second decade of the last century the gorgeous, multicolored, infinite-possibility world that opened up with the great voyages of discovery of the sixteenth century was coming to an end. So was the fictional penumbra that accompanied, mirrored, and even inspired it—for the Spanish conquistadors were themselves quite consciously emulating the feats of literary heroes, of the knights of the *Chanson du Roland* or the fantastic adventures of Amadis of Gaul.

From a literary point of view, this was a terrible misfortune. It's often forgotten in these degenerate times how close to the world of the pulp adventurers the real world could be in those days.

Allan Quatermain, of H. Rider Haggard's *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*, was based fairly closely (fantasy elements like immortal princesses aside) on the exploits of Frederick Selous, explorer and frontiersman.

What writer could come up unaided with a character like Richard Francis Burton, the devilish, swashbuckling swordsman-adventurer who fought wild Somalis saber-to-spear, once escaped certain death on an African safari when he ran six miles *with a spear through his face*, snuck into at least two "forbidden" cities (Mecca and Medina) in native disguise, and translated the *Thousand and One Nights* to boot, after writing a firsthand account of the red-light district of Karachi?

Or Mary Kingsley, who went singlehanded into the jungles of Gabon and did the first field ethnography among the cannibal Fang. In her books, she recommended from personal experience a nice thick set of petticoats, which was exactly what was needed when falling into a pit lined with pointed stakes, and noted that said skirts should contain a convenient pocket for a revolver, "which is rarely needed, but when needed is needed very badly."

Who could devise adventures more unlikely and fantastic than the real life of Harry Brooks in the 1830s, who sailed off to the East Indies in a leaky schooner with a few friends, fought pirates and headhunters, and made himself independent raja of Sarawak? And *he* was at the tail end of a tradition that began with Cortes and Piz-zaro setting off on private-enterprise quests to overthrow empires at ten thousand-to-one odds;

That world is still available to us through historical fiction, of course, but that is sadly limiting in some respects; the "end" of the larger story is fixed and we know how it comes out. The Western Front and the Welfare State are waiting down at the end of the road.

Like many another, I imprinted on the literature of faraway places and strange-sounding names at an early age, and never lost the taste for it—or for the real-world history and archaeology to which it led. Fortunately, I also discovered *alternate* history, a genre within the larger field of speculative fiction, which allows a rigorous yet limitless ringing of changes.

Alternate history can give writer and reader a breath of fresher air, of unlimited possibility, of that world where horizons are infinite and nothing is fixed in stone; where beyond the last blue horizon waits the lost city, the people of marvels, the silver-belled caravan to Shamballah and the vacant throne. . . .

"Shikari in Galveston" springs from the backbone of my novel *The Peshawar Lancers*. The universe of *The Peshawar Lancers* stems from an alteration in the history of the nineteenth century: a catastrophic strike by a series of high-velocity heavenly bodies. We know that this sort of thing actually happens, and that a similar (though larger) impact ended the dinosaurian era 65 million years ago.

Being fictional, my impacts could be precisely controlled by authorial fiat, within the boundaries of the physically possible. What they did was to derail "progress" by taking out the most technologically advanced part of the world, and by drastically reducing the world's overall population.

And so the twentieth and twenty-first centuries see a world where the most advanced regions are only just surpassing the Victorian level of technology and social development, and much remains sparsely inhabited by a wild variety of cultures at a very low level of technology.

In other words, a world larger and better suited to the classic adventure story than ours.

*The Peshawar Lancers* took place mostly in India, the center of the British Empire and the most advanced state of its day; "Shikari in Galveston" is set on the Imperial frontiers, in the wilds of a re-barbarized Texas. Both put people in situations that suit the definition of "adventure": somebody else in very bad trouble, very far away.

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it!

S. M. Stirling was born in Metz, France, in 1953; his father was an officer in the RCAF, from Newfoundland, and his English-born mother grew up in Lima, Peru. He has lived in Europe, North America, and East Africa, and traveled extensively elsewhere. After taking a history BA, he attended law school at Osgoode Hall, Toronto, but decided not to practice and had his dorsal fin surgically removed. After the usual period of poverty and odd jobs, his first book sold in 1984 (*Snowbfother*, from Signet), and he became a full-time writer in 1988. That was the same year he was married to Janet Cathryn Stirling (nee Moore), also a writer, whom he met at a World Fantasy convention in the mid-1980s.

His works since then include the *Draka* alternate history trilogy (currently issued in a combined volume under the title *The Domination*), the *Nantucket* series (*Island in the Sea of Time*, *Against the Tide of Years*, and *On the Oceans of Eternity*), *The Peshawar Lancers*, and *Conquistador*.

He and Janet and the obligatory authorial cats currently live in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's currently working on a new alternate history novel, *Dies the Fire*, which will be published by Roc.

Steve Stirling's hobbies include anthropology, archaeology, history in general, travel, cooking, and the martial arts.