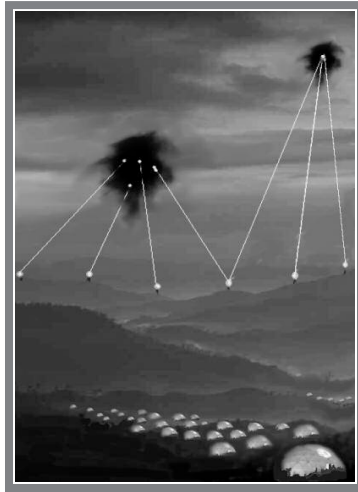


RUIN

BY ISOBEL NOBLE

BOOK TWO: THE CITY OF LIFE Chapter Five



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CHAPTER FIVE

The General told me once about his trip out of the region we refer to as No Man's Land and across the post-Apocalyptic wilderness the Wolf People marked on their maps only as "Unknown." The recounting took the better part of a day as he described for me events that made him certain his was more than physical movement through space, more than simple travel from point A to point B.

No, he said in his compelling way, his was more akin to a pilgrimage of the spirit, an evolutionary journey of the mind that also happened to be expressing itself upon the plane of events.

Whether real or imagined, the events of which he spoke had the hallucinogenic qualities of a nightmare. I was amazed he had withstood their emotionally and physically devastating effects, particularly since he was convinced that endurance would not lead to personal survival, that even if was successful, still his own life would be forfeit as payment against a karmic debt incurred in lifetimes beyond counting and for which final reparation now was coming due.

— *Ourn Rohlvaag; Collected Journals; City of Life, A.D. 3109*

It was mid-July when the Wolf soldiers reached the near bank of the Mississippi and the edge of the territory they had conquered the previous year. For weeks they had passed large numbers of people migrating east, hoping to find lands free of the demons that had grown so prevalent in the west.

From the moment the army entered the ruins they had felt the emotional assault of the creatures which could be seen all the time now, keeping just out of range of the men's disruptors. They paced the riders, making horses and mules edgy and difficult to manage. Incidents recurred with animals kicking and biting or attempting to bolt, and order was maintained only by constant vigilance.

Deke rode at the head of his elite column of two hundred, Melak nearby as usual, but with a disruptor loose in his hand instead of the accustomed rifle. Tim was at his left side, also riding with disruptor unslung. His friend's grey eyes were filled with hatred as he stared at the whirlwinds that stayed parallel to the columns, and Deke could feel him chafing with his desire to destroy them. Since the incident with Sean, Tim's normally lighthearted personality had undergone a change, becoming brooding and severe. His urgent need to disrupt demons bordered on obsession, but it was an obsession with which Deke sympathized.

"You know they're sucking our energy even now," Tim growled.

"Maybe a little." Deke was soothing. "Mainly they're trying to influence us, fill us with despair."

"It's working," Melak said. "I feel like hell, General."

"Keep your spirits up," Deke encouraged them. "Don't make it easy for them."

"Aye, I would if I knew how," Melak agreed.

"Imagine how they look when a disruptor beam hits them," Deke replied. "Keep that in your thoughts for them to see."

“My favorite picture,” Tim said with feeling.

“We’ll camp on the river tonight,” Deke said. “I want to reconnoiter and get the latest news from the locals. It can’t be good; too many people heading east.”

“Are you planning to cross over?” Mastra asked worriedly, his eyes on Deke. “Be a bitch to get the animals across.”

“We’ll worry about that when the time comes,” Deke reassured him. “Besides, I’m sure animals cross the river all the time, with and without people.”

“As bad as it’s been on this side, how will it be on the western bank?”

“Time will solve that mystery.” Deke stood in his stirrups, glancing back to check the mood of the soldiers, seeing that although edgy and fighting depression, they remained grimly committed to the task at hand.

“So many things demons do that I always grew up thinking they couldn’t,” Melak said. “As a sprout I was told they could only live in ruins, that they couldn’t cross water...such nonsense.”

“Aye,” Tim agreed. “The crossing water...I thought they couldn’t do that as well.”

“I wonder what’s happening at home,” Mastra said.

“It’s easier for them now.” Deke squinted against the harsh sunlight.

“Why?”

“Because so many are following us.” He gestured. “I estimate there’s one for each of us.”

“Ruins,” Mastra muttered to general agreement.

They rode without conversation until late afternoon when they stopped at a substantial town set on a bluff. The river was spread out below, the broad expanse flowing like liquid gold in the slanting rays of sunset. The townspeople were glad to see the Wolf riders, gladder to see the disruptors they carried. While the soldiers pitched camp outside the gates, Deke met with the mayor in the town offices.

“Please be comfortable, Lord General.” The mayor gestured to a padded arm chair opposite his desk. An aide appeared with glasses and a carafe of sweet plum brandy, which he set nearby before departing.

Deke studied the mayor, a clever, youngish man with a bald head and large iron earrings in the shape of moon and stars dangling from his pierced earlobes. Deke knew the pattern had to do with his people’s belief system and that the townsmen wore variations of the same iron decorations. He didn’t understand the details exactly, but the arrival of the Wolf armies last year had precisely coincided with a date of special significance. Now these folk regarded him with a combination of awe and hero-worship, looking to him for protection from a foe they couldn’t combat alone.

“Tell me your news,” Deke said, accepting a glass of brandy and settling back in the chair, relieved to be out of the saddle.

“The monsters are crossing the river in droves,” the mayor said, his normally cheerful, round face severe with distress he couldn’t disguise.

“Have they taken any of your people?”

“We’re helpless, Lord General. Even now, if they wanted, they could take us all. I don’t know why they haven’t. Do you?”

Deke nodded, moved by the man's fear and bewilderment. "Aye, I believe I do. That's why I've returned."

"Is there still hope, then? Life here has become impossible. I've thought of leading my people east, away from the danger."

"You wouldn't be the first to go," Deke said. "But unfortunately I think you'd only be buying a little more time."

"What else can I do?" the mayor asked.

"I'm not sure there's anything you can do, except to get me as much information as possible about conditions across the river. Also, and this must remain in strictest confidence between the two of us, I need a boat manageable by one man but big enough to handle the current safely."

The mayor nodded. "Consider it done, my lord." He gazed curiously at Deke, and Deke could feel the questions he was too polite to ask.

"Thanks," Deke said, and sipped the brandy. "Delicious."

"I'm glad you like it," the mayor said, wondering what this man his people called "the Wolf" was thinking. "Will you wish to billet your troops inside the walls?"

"I think not," Deke replied, not wanting to tell the mayor that walls would make him and his men feel like rats in a trap. "But thank you for the offer."

"Is there anything we can get for you...?"

Deke drained his glass and rose, shaking his head. As he returned the glass to its tray, he said, "Remember, not a word about the boat, all right?"

"Yes, Lord General. Where would you like it to be kept?"

"Put it in a hidden spot, maybe in some shrubs near the water's edge."

"How will you find it?"

"I'll find it," Deke said, smiling.

"Whatever you say, my lord," the mayor agreed, disquieted.

"Thank you, Mayor. We'll speak again tomorrow morning when you get your report prepared concerning the...what did you call them? Monsters?"

"Very good, my lord." The mayor escorted him to the door.

"I've arranged bathing, General," Melak said when he emerged from the town offices.

"Thank you." Deke looked around the bustling town, remembering how eagerly the people had welcomed the Wolf soldiers into their homes and sworn allegiance, how pleased they had been to join in the adventure of empire-building. Now he understood their enthusiasm; they had watched the creatures massing across the river for a long time. All it had taken was one demon destroyed by disruptor fire to convince them their young mayor had made the right decision when he swore allegiance to these horse-borne raiders.

"A lot of new babies in this town," Melak commented as he led his commander towards the place where he had arranged baths for the men.

Deke chuckled. "Our men were busy last year." Then, more seriously, "Tomorrow I'll meet with the mayor and get his report."

"Will we cross afterwards?"

"Perhaps, depending on what they can tell us. We still haven't found what we

need to know.”

“Do you really believe we can?” Melak asked.

“I believe one can do anything, if he wants to badly enough.” Deke clapped Melak on the shoulder. “Come, let’s get bathed. Then I want some fresh food. I haven’t forgotten how well they prepare fish in this place.”

“Aye, General,” his faithful bodyguard replied, and Deke felt a pang for how he was planning to deceive him the following night. Then he shrugged internally, knowing this must remain the least of his worries. Once on the western bank of this enormous river, he would be alone in a wilderness none had crossed except for one man in his grandfather’s day who might have been crazy, and whose map might not be worth the paper it was scribbled on.

The two walked towards a tavern with rooms upstairs and baths in the rear. Food, entertainment, even women could be had here, but Deke went straight around back to get cleaned up while Melak waited and watched alertly. When Deke was finished he told Melak to see to his own comfort, that he wanted a meal before returning to his tent. Melak was reluctant to leave him, but Deke made it an order and pointed out that in this town at least, he was a welcome guest.

When Deke entered the tavern, the staff was waiting to greet him formally, lining up to usher him to a choice table. Mastra arrived and Deke gestured for him to join him.

“Have you eaten, brother?” he asked, leaning his elbows on the table.

“No, and I can’t wait,” Mastra said. “I’m sick of dried rations.”

“Me, too,” Deke agreed. His eyes followed a pretty serving girl as she filled their glasses with the sweet black beer these people favored.

“Lots of friendly women in this town,” Mastra commented, watching him.

“Aye, enjoy yourself,” Deke said with a smile.

“Not you?”

“No.”

Mastra's eyebrows went up but he said nothing.

Fresh bread and butter were brought along with a spicy fish chowder. The dining room was full, mainly with Wolf soldiers, but also with some townspeople who cast wondering glances at Deke.

“Poor bastards,” Mastra said, feeling their worry.

“The mayor told me he’s thinking of leading them east,” Deke told him. “These people have no resistance to demons.”

“When will we be heading east?”

“Soon, brother, never fear.”

There was a grim note in his friend’s voice that filled Mastra with disquiet. “What are you planning? Won’t you tell me?”

“Patience,” Deke replied, finishing his soup and buttering another piece of bread.

“That’s what you always say.”

Laughing softly, Deke took a long draught of beer. “So, is there a particular lady you’re looking for tonight?”

“I wouldn’t mind hooking up with one I met last time,” Mastra admitted, realizing there was no point in questioning Deke further.

“That sounds good, brother.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have paper work to catch up on, orders to write and the like. Then I’m planning to sleep.”

Mastra frowned. “That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

They ate their perfectly prepared bass with enjoyment and Deke kept Mastra talking about a series of paintings he was working on, asking questions when necessary to prompt his friend, his interest genuine, but wanting to distract him from his worrisome curiosity.

When they finished, Deke left Mastra to return to the army’s campsite. Most of the soldiers had sought entertainment within the town, but those who remained on guard outside were vigilant, and armed with disruptors. Deke listened to a report from one and gripped the man’s shoulder before ducking inside his tent, lighting a kerosene lamp, and dropping into a folding canvas chair tiredly. He was grateful for the privacy; it was becoming more difficult every minute for him to pretend optimism. He could feel the emotional pressure from the creatures like a weight affecting his body as well as his mind. Sighing, he leaned forward and dragged his chair closer to the table. He drew several sheets of blank paper towards him and dipped his pen in the ink jar standing nearby, wondering where to begin. Chewing on the end of the pen, he smoothed the paper and started writing orders for Tim and Mastra to read when he was gone. Soon his strong, orderly script covered two pages. He read through what he had written, folded the pages, and sealed them with wax. Half an hour later he had completed a private letter to his father and started one to Andara.

He sat for a long time before setting pen to paper, thinking about what he wanted to say, what needed to be said, knowing there was no way to express everything he felt. Soon the words were flowing and he wrote swiftly.

When he was done he used his knife to cut a lock of hair which he folded inside the paper. He added a quick postscript, and sealed this letter as well. Then he doused the lantern and stretched out on his cot fully clothed, his weapons leaning on the chair at his side. In a moment he was out of his body and he sent his consciousness away from the carefully patrolled camp, checking to see that no demons were trying to slip in under cover of darkness. Satisfied that everything was as safe as could be expected, he relaxed his body further and thought about Spring Camp, imagining himself walking the grassy paths towards his own tent, almost able to smell cooking odors wafting from the doors and windows of his people’s homes. Instantly he felt himself shift and knew what he saw was no longer an imagining but a true perception of reality.

Seconds later, he put himself through the wall of his tent and viewed with poignant homesickness the familiar reminders of his former life, the comfortable furnishings and personal memorabilia of a human existence to which he knew with absolute certainty he never would be returning. He could feel Andara wasn’t there and concentrated, letting his mind search for her energy emanations.

Before long he located her in the medical tent. She was bent over the body of

an elderly lady in the throes of heart failure, performing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. He watched as she fought to save the woman. After a few minutes she straightened and shook her head sadly. She nodded to her assistants, then went out to the waiting area to talk to the dead woman's children who thanked her for her efforts.

Andara left the tent and Deke could see her despondency in the way she moved. His heart went out to her, and he Sent comfort into her mind as a whisper across her senses. He could see her lift her head, and knew she had detected his presence. Her thoughts opened to make it easier for him to establish complete contact and in a moment the tenuous link connecting their psyches across more than a thousand miles of countryside firmed.

He heard her voice in his mind as clearly as if he were standing beside her and not resting in his tent on the banks of the Mississippi.

Deke, she thought, making his name into a caress, her joy at his presence filling him with warmth.

Andara, he replied. *Tonight will be my last contact for a while. You mustn't worry if you don't hear me.*

He felt rather than heard the interrogative she Sent.

I want to move away from this area before Sending again, he explained. *Once the creatures realize I've gone, they'll be wild to find me.*

Why? she asked, not for the first time. *Why you?*

I'd answer if I could, he replied.

You can answer. Why lie about it?

He didn't respond immediately. When he did, his tone was reluctant.

They want to learn how to do what I do. He felt her fear as the implications of his words sank in. *Before I let that happen, I would have to kill myself.*

Yes, she agreed, her anxiety for him becoming overpowering in both their minds until he calmed her with energy translated directly into her system from his thoughts.

It won't happen, he assured her.

The woman who died tonight, Andara told him. *She's not the first. I'm losing a lot of elderly people. I think they haven't the heart to go on living.*

My father and Nitsa?

Worried but coping, as usual. As is my father.

And you, Andara?

I miss you, she replied.

Not half as much as I miss you. His thoughts wound through hers intimately for a timeless period before he regretfully began to withdraw them.

No, she begged. *Not yet.*

It's too dangerous to linger, he told her.

Why? They know where you are...

But I don't want them to know about you, he explained.

Chilled, Andara Sent agreement.

As soon as it's safe, he said, *I'll contact you again. But if you don't hear me, don't panic. It may simply become a matter of distance or danger, perhaps both.*

Go with God, Deke.

Goodbye, my Andara.

As he dissolved the connection between them, he heard her sorrowing, final plea.

Come back to me, sweetest heart...

And then he was alone.

The night was sultry when Deke crossed the Mississippi, paddling the small boat provided by the mayor awkwardly through the current. The moon hadn't risen and the darkness was profound, forcing him to use his sensitivity to navigate the unfamiliar waters. The few stars visible through the partial overcast twinkled in the humidity, occasionally reflecting from the river's surface as he moved diagonally towards the other side, allowing the flow to carry him downstream.

Earlier in the day he had consulted with the town leaders, agreeing with the mayor that refugeeing east was probably the best option for his people, and providing a letter of introduction to his father should they arrive safely. In the privacy of his tent he had prepared a knapsack with dried rations, warm clothing, and a first aid kit Andara had provided crammed with emergency supplies of bandaging, herbs, needle and thread, antiseptics and pain killers, even penicillin powder. He'd packed extra flints, fish hooks and line, a small whetstone, mess kit, and two canteens along with his pipe and an airtight wooden box containing his smoking mixture. Three of his favorite books had been wrapped in waterproof canvas: a collected works of Shakespeare, *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, and a volume of sonnets by a twenty-first century poet named Smith, whose works celebrated the fragile beauty of the earth as it had been before the war. His sheepskin-lined cloak had been rolled together with his blankets and all were wrapped tightly inside his oilskin cloak. Two pouches of cartridges for his pistol and two double bandoliers of shells for his automatic rifle had been included. As usual, he had decided to wear his body daggers and weapons belt with knife, machete, and .45. His disruptor was unused and at full charge. Last of all was a coil of light but strong rope hung from a strap on his pack.

These preparations had helped focus him with greater purpose, and when night was full, he had scanned the creatures he knew were nearby watching the soldiers. Everything seemed the same, so he had hefted his pack and strapped on his weapons. Then, putting himself into the spaces between moments, he had departed the army encampment, invisible as a thought.

Now, as he approached the west bank, he could feel the draining effects caused by demons he sensed roving across the countryside. He filled his mind with images common to wolves, allowing the linear, logical aspects of his consciousness to subside beneath an aura he knew would be indistinguishable from those of ruins canines. He planned to mimic the emanations of his wild cousins for as long as necessary, contacting whatever packs he encountered as he passed through these unknown territories. In the company of wolves he knew the mental characteristics common to his humanity, and specifically to himself, would be submerged in the general pack broadcasts, giving him greater camouflage and security. Until he found wolves, he must sleep strategically, for as he had told Andara, in sleep demons might find too many unprotected avenues into

his psyche.

Sooner than he would have wished, his boat scraped up onto a sandbar joined to the bank in a long spit of mud and trapped flood debris. He went ashore, donned his pack and bandoliers, lifted his weapons, and with his foot pushed the boat into the current. For a moment he watched while the wooden craft disappeared into the flowing space where night and river met. Then he turned, and without a backward glance, once again put himself between the pulses of reality, setting off at a long, ground-covering trot he was capable of maintaining for a day and a night, even burdened as he was, without letup except to eat and evacuate. Beyond that he had never pushed himself, and wasn't sure what his physical limits might be. He could draw energy from the natural world and this would help augment his endurance, but even so, his body was a thing of the earth, and eventually must fall prey to mortal demands.

In the meantime, he felt well. He was moving easily, the padded shoulder straps and belt of his pack distributing its weight comfortably. No demons approached or cast their draining pall across his consciousness. He could sense them somewhat north and east of his position, crowding the water's edge like racers awaiting the signal to begin. But none acknowledged his presence or even seemed to know he was there, and with a relieved sigh, he resolved to maintain his fleeting contact with visibility for as long as necessary, because as the minutes passed and he moved deeper into the darkness away from the river, he understood that demons couldn't sense him in this otherness of not-being which allowed him to go where existence and the plane of events didn't reach.

His awareness stretched in front of him seeking obstacles before he stumbled over them, so that although the darkness was nearly total, his brujo-trained senses perceived any rock or dip in the terrain as imperfections in the flow of energy impacting upon his skin surface.

The countryside here was mainly rolling, grass-covered plain strewn with widespread ruins of every size and description. Much of this landscape revealed itself to him through his esper capacity, more through direct contact with the ground beneath his feet. From the topographical maps he had studied in the war tent with his father, he knew the territory he was traversing should be similar in most ways to that on the eastern bank of the Mississippi. Of course, those maps had been drawn and reproduced from charts printed over a millennium ago. Nuclear war and nuclear winter might have wrought extraordinary changes to the continent. In some places glaciers from the little Ice Age no doubt had crushed and squeezed the land into all sorts of tortured shapes, and he hoped none of these would prove impassable to a man afoot.

He came to an area of half-tumbled buildings, once a crowded city street, now a jagged, partially buried home for cave rats. Deke could feel the whirr of their restlessly opportunistic thoughts and detoured widely, repressing a shudder. If he had stumbled into their underground rat cities unawares they would have attacked en masse and eaten him alive.

Overhead the stars were rotating past and the night was advancing. Moonlight, like livid fingers, groped through the darkness out of the east, throwing shadows which hung menacingly from every weird hunk and shard of wreckage. His own intermittent shadow was long and wraithlike, flickering mysteriously in the low-angled glow that

slowly climbed behind him and painted the world with metallic luminosity.

The air grew clammy as it cooled into a pre-dawn chill. Sweat lay slickly on his skin and he stopped running briefly to drink from his canteen and doff his shirt. While voiding his bladder into the tall grass, he sent his mind out for a quick surveillance of the rolling savannah. It was littered with pulverized city and suburban communities, but there were no demons immediately near him. In fact, he realized, as he sent his thoughts searching across the land, there was nothing, no living emanation at all beyond the cave rats he had avoided earlier. This made him vaguely uneasy, though it seemed logical that sentient life would avoid the creatures.

After less than two minutes' rest, he re-fastened his pack on his shoulders, glad to have the soaked, chafing shirt off his skin. He slung his weapons once more, and continued trotting across the ruined grassland, no longer feeling the need to maintain invisibility. He reached out carefully with his awareness, registering the ambient radiations coming out of the night, becoming cognizant of demons, but far away. Nodding with satisfaction, he drew his consciousness back to himself and concentrated on the needs of his body, beginning to pull energy delicately from the earth and grass, taking only what he safely could manage without making noticeable changes in the environment.

Soon he felt buoyed up, the beginnings of fatigue banished by the sense of augmentation that grew in his mind, making him aware that the spirits who always had concerned themselves with the events of his life were helping him, also lending energy that he might more easily maintain a pace that by now should have been causing his muscles to cramp and stiffen. He actually smiled as he felt that influx of support, his grimly purposeful mood elevating from the strength of it.

Quickening his pace, he moved silently through the waist-high grass, which as the expanding sunrise brought color back to the world, showed green and gold to the horizon. The sky lightened, blued, then opened the world even further to his questing vision, revealing emptiness and limitless vistas daunting to contemplate. The only cover he could see was the grass itself, with occasional higher mounds of buried rubble. If he was caught out here, he might be overcome despite his disruptor. If demons could once surround him...

He shivered violently and stopped running. Crouching down below the tops of some tall meadow flowers, he took dried beef and fruit from his pack and walked for a while, eating as he went. When he finished, he drank some water and broke into a trot once more, feeling better with food in his belly.

By late afternoon Deke could feel exhaustion starting in the way his stride had become more jarring, less elastic. He combed the ruins subtly with his sensitivity, putting out an image of wolves greeting wolves, hoping a response would come soon. There was none, not even a hint of warm-blooded life anywhere for miles around. Occasionally he picked up a vibration that had to be demons moving eastward, though he saw nothing. At those times he put himself back into invisibility, but that, too, became more difficult as his body tired. When dusk gathered he stopped doing even that, dropping behind a handy piece of ancient debris or flattening beneath the grass until whatever danger he sensed had passed.

Soon his weariness became impossible to ignore, and as night thickened around him, he slowed to a walk, looking for a sheltered spot to rest. Nothing presented itself, and doggedly he continued walking, pausing briefly to drink water and eat dry fruit.

Tonight no stars penetrated the thick overcast, and the air was heavy and oppressive. He withdrew some jerky from his pack, then took a moment to tuck his oilskin cloak around it more completely, certain that before long he was going to be drenched.

Except for the chittering of small night insects, the plains were quiet. Not so much as a mouse or rabbit disturbed the eerie emptiness, and by the time he found a cluster of fallen building stones which had created a natural overhang in the way they had landed, he was more than glad to stop and crawl underneath, spreading his blankets on top of his waterproof cloak. Lightning strobed the sky and there was a long rumble of thunder. As the first heavy drops of rain began to fall, he stretched out, propping his head on his pack as a pillow.

Despite his determination to remain alert, he dozed, lulled by the sound of the rain. The temperature dropped and he pulled a blanket over himself. Try as he might, he couldn't keep his eyes open. Waking slid into sleep without transition, and a moment later he was dreaming in a crazy, free-associative way, his mind filling with seemingly unrelated images that tumbled through his awareness like stones rolling downhill. There were scenes from home, momentary glimpses of the people and city he loved, more precious to him now than ever before. Fleeting pictures of battles fought in recent years mixed with those from other lives, and then he dreamed of a shadowy figure first seen during his peyote experience. The man was terribly familiar, though try as he might, Deke couldn't place him.

In his dream he saw the man's face: dark, sharp-featured, intelligence and ruthlessness combining in equal measure behind eyes like black opals. This face teased his memory with flashes of recollection that appeared and disappeared the way the world did when illuminated by lightning. There was cruelty in the man's expression, a hungry, eager quality like an esper tiger on the prowl.

The man was a desert nomad, a tent-dweller like himself, though there all resemblance between them ended. Except for their warrior traditions and their natural inclinations for leadership, the worlds and stresses which had formed them were as different as wet and dry, before and after.

He almost heard the man's name, but a portion of his awareness kept sliding away from the information. Who are you? he demanded of the personality whose presence in his non-waking thoughts seemed especially strong this night. What the hell do you want from me?

As usual, the presence didn't answer, only staring out from his innermost being like a deadly specter, the smoldering gaze filled with contempt for everything and everyone who might oppose him. He could feel the destructive force of the man shifting within his psyche like tectonic plates beneath the earth, a sensation that made him jerk upright with a start, hitting his head painfully on the concrete overhead.

The face lingered in his mind even as he rubbed his head, trying to bring himself fully alert. The rain was falling hard, beating the tall grass flat around him.

Thunder still growled and boomed, and Deke took the opportunity to place his cookpot and mess kit bowl outside to collect drinking water. In moments both were full and he topped off the canteen from which he had drunk all day. He filled them again and drank deeply before stretching out once more with a biscuit. He gnawed thoughtfully while he listened to the storm, wondering if this man whose face he saw was someone he was going to meet or someone he had known in another lifetime. The familiarity haunted him, the feeling of connection was even more disturbing. There was something about the man he didn't like. No, it was more than dislike. He feared this man, and Deke had never been frightened by a merely human enemy in his life.

Sighing, he tried to rest. He drifted, opening his senses fully in the way the Old Man had taught him, listening to the world with more than his ears; feeling the environment through a place in his center that had no conventional relationship to his body but used it to focus energy coming in and out of his awareness.

He thought about home and Andara, growing erect as he remembered their last day together. He turned on his side, realizing he would go mad if he didn't stop torturing himself this way. Andara belonged to the past, where all he loved had been consigned to cold storage.

He had thought by now he would have found wolves, and realized how much he had looked forward to their company to distract him from the introspection that tantalized his mind but which he had to avoid if he was going to survive his lonely trek west. Once more he wondered where the animals had gone, suppressing a momentary panic that all had been drained and discarded by the demons who had swept across the prairies and gathered by the Mississippi. He had his suspicions about their purpose; thought they might be trying to assemble overwhelming force before taking on his people. There was something about his people's latent esper capacity that both drew and frightened demons: drew them because they were eager to learn the secrets inherent in drawing energy from alternate realities; frightened them because they must sense the People's potential to use that energy against them.

But how? he asked himself for the hundredth time. How to turn that potential against these emotional succubi?

He didn't know the answer to that question, but before his quest was through, he would.

Morning dawned greyly. Fog lay densely over the countryside, hugging the ground like wet smoke. The rain had ended an hour earlier and as Deke emerged from his shelter and looked around, he realized he would have to wait for the sun to burn off some of the mist. Visibility was limited to a matter of feet, giving him a close, claustrophobic feeling. Any danger could be nearby and he would never know it by sight alone, and for some reason this morning, he was unwilling to send his awareness out. In fact, he thought, his nerves almost quivering with tension, he was unwilling to move away from this spot.

He quickly crept back into the haphazard stone structure in which he had rested, forcing his mind into the intuitive aspect of a wolf once more, quieting his sensitivity by measured breathing and disciplined inward focus.

There were demons in the area. Their draining pall was unmistakable. He couldn't see them but he could feel them. What was worse was that he could feel their intent, and he knew without a doubt that they were looking for him, combing the prairies relentlessly for any clue to his whereabouts.

There was something else in the fog, something that made the hair on his nape prickle with apprehension. He picked up his disruptor and squirmed around until he was facing the opening of his shelter, glad beyond words that he had found this nook to provide cover for his back. The feeling of apprehension increased; the atmosphere became thick, difficult to push in and out of his lungs.

Something was pressing on his mind, trying to get inside past the lupine aura he maintained. Gasping under the increasing pressure, he threw himself into the spaces between moments, fighting the urge to leap from his shelter, disruptor spitting. The urge strengthened, filling him with an almost irresistible desire to show himself to whatever it was that now swept directly over the tumbled building stones under which he crouched. The pressure became unbearable and he squeezed his hands tighter around the disruptor, feeling that his ear drums were about to explode, taking his mind with them.

For a full minute the pressure beat at him; then, gradually, it eased.

Almost babbling with relief, Deke tried to calm himself, breathing deeply as he realized the things he recognized as several greater demons were moving off across the plains with their coterie of lesser creatures in close attendance.

Fortunately, none had perceived him clearly. The pressure he had felt must be a simple physical manifestation of their presence. He took a quick look outside the shelter and saw the fog being twisted apart by the cluster of demons as they departed.

He gathered his belongings and arranged his pack, crawling out from the shelter and stretching before strapping on his daggers and donning his burdens. Today he carried the disruptor unslung and ready, hoping he wouldn't need to use it, but afraid he would.

The fog had thinned considerably and the sun was getting hotter as he struck off towards the west, trotting steadily through the grass that was beginning to recover from the effects of the previous night's downpour. Tentatively, he allowed his awareness to spread away from him, imitating the broadcast of wolves seeking prey. He remained in near-invisibility, desperate to avoid further incidents with demons.

As he ran, he wondered what had brought the creatures to his campsite. Had they been examining every likely hiding spot? Or was it something more sinister?

Deke was afraid they had been drawn to his sleeping mind. While asleep, his awareness relinquished all conscious controls. Who could say what emanations might broadcast haphazardly into the world?

The heat and humidity increased. At midday he paused to eat, drink, and skin out of his trousers, resuming his easy trot dressed only in boots and underwear, the sweat flowing freely over his body. In the late afternoon he crouched down below the level of the grass and rested for more than an hour. By sunset he was moving again, but more slowly, not wanting to exhaust himself. As he strode in his long, effortless pace through the tall grass, the sun and sky blended in a blaze of orange and pink fire. The extraordinary beauty of the sky lit up in a display like fireworks in slow motion

mesmerized him, his attention wandering before he forced himself to scan the ruins for danger. There was nothing, and he sighed, wondering once more why the land was devoid of life.

Dusk was almost full when he became aware of an uncanny feeling in his center. It was faint, but made the skin flutter over his solar plexus, and he couldn't imagine what it presaged.

The feeling grew as he walked, and he cast his mind out, wondering if an enemy was trying to harass him. After a while he decided what he felt was not a manifestation of conscious intent. This sensation came from the earth itself, rising upward through his body like something invisible burrowing under his skin.

When the first vibrating movement started, he stopped running, puzzled by the prairie's peculiar behavior. In a second the vibrations intensified until the grass jerked unnaturally back and forth. Abruptly the earth shook violently, throwing him to his knees where he tried to keep from shouting with fear. He could hardly credit what his senses were telling him; the ground rose and fell, thrashing with grinding power. He lay flat, certain he was about to die. The noise was horrific; he could hear the tearing of rock and earth like the meaty violation of flesh when a carnivore's teeth rip it to pieces.

The racket built to a terrifying crescendo, then ceased. Deke pushed himself to a sitting position, his breath hoarse in his throat. An instant later the ground shook again, this time in long, rippling waves with a cacophony of sound that made what had gone before seem peaceful. He felt his gorge rising and struggled for control. Stress fractures appeared in the sod, small crevasses that showed black soil as the heaving turf expanded and contracted.

Perhaps as many as twenty seconds passed while he watched the earth's contortions with amazement and awe. When it stopped, he discovered his fingers were clenched in the grass and he opened his hands to see crescent-shaped cuts made by his fingernails in his palms. He waited several minutes before moving, still registering small tremors through the savannah.

Eventually he drew a deep breath. Earthquake, he thought. He had read about them but never expected to experience one. Maybe that explained what had happened to all the animals; they had fled in anticipation of the quake.

Relieved, he stood up and drank from his canteen, rinsing the taste of fear from his mouth. He scanned the prairie in all directions, saw it continued like a green, waving sea to the horizon. In a moment he began to walk again, working the stiffness from his joints as he went.

Soon it was full dark. Tonight the air was clear, with no hint of clouds. Stars adorned the sky, a sky somehow wider and more impressive than the sky under which his people made their home. The constellations stood clear as signal beacons, glittering against the mystic wash of light that comprised the Milky Way.

Deke tried to imagine how far he had traveled from the Mississippi, studied the stars to attempt a reckoning, then shrugged, his mind too weary to do more than keep aware of the countryside around him.

He decided he would walk through the night, stopping only to eat and relieve himself. Better not to sit down; if he rested he would fall asleep. With a wry expression,

he thought his ability to drop off quickly was no advantage in his present situation. On this trip, he could wish he was an insomniac.

When the Great Dipper had moved halfway across the sky, he paused to eat and drink, hoping he would find water the next day. Despite efforts to ration himself, he had consumed half a canteen today. Heat and exertion made it impossible to do otherwise.

He was getting tired again, his mind half-drifting while he walked. He felt dirty and sweaty, and longed for a pool, a stream, anything big enough to bathe in. In his imagination he saw himself immersed in hot water, into which Andara had thrown a handful of aromatic herbs. He could practically smell the herbs now, and his nostrils twitched in unconscious memory.

The night passed in an increasing haze of exhaustion. When dawn rimmed the horizon behind him with pale light, he stared across the limitless prairie, his eyes crusted from lack of sleep, and wondered if he ever would reach the end of it.

This morning for the first time he began to see signs of life; at least, he saw a bird of prey circling overhead and knew it was watching him with its keen eyes, trying to gauge his potential as a meal.

At the same time, he heard voices. With a shake of his head, he tried to clear his mind, certain his imagination was playing tricks on him. The voices were faint but undeniable, and there were a lot of them, too many for him to sort through. He listened for a few minutes, hearing pathetic moans and howls, terrible cries of grief and pain, hopeless pleas for help.

What? he asked himself with growing disquiet as the voices continued. There were children weeping, begging for someone to free them. There were women screaming, men bellowing themselves hoarse. The awful clamor was inside his head, getting louder as he walked, and soon he was wincing in pain.

He came to an area of low hills, really extensions of the rolling undulations of the plains, but higher and rounder. He could hardly hear himself think as the desperate shrieks and cries increased, and along with them he also became aware of a confusing barrage of powerful emotional emanations that sent sympathetic tears down his bearded, sunburned cheeks. A sense of overwhelming terror and suffering filled him as if it was his own, and though he fought to keep from being crushed under the weight of it, he couldn't block it out completely.

By mid-morning he was climbing a long, easy grade to the top of one of the rounded hills, the voices and emotions bombarding his awareness like physical blows. He was reeling when he reached the summit, nearly blinded by an anguish that had grown palpable.

For a second he stood swaying, his jaw clenched.

At the bottom of the hill lay a walled community. Or what once had been a walled community. Today the stone buildings and defenses were toppled and lay in undifferentiated heaps. Not a single structure remained standing.

Deke stared at the demolished town and understood that this was the source of the voices. He listened, hearing people crying aloud for help, and realized at once what must have happened. Yesterday's earthquake had buried this community under stone rubble. The survivors were trapped beneath their former homes, entombed.

His lips compressed as he half-ran, half-slid down the hillside towards the town whose decimated population filled his mind with their fright and despair.

Picking his way carefully among the fallen buildings, he dropped his pack and weapons and scabbled frantically through the rocks, digging until his fingernails bled. Though he moved hundreds, thousands, of pounds of stone, he could get no closer to the people he heard both inside and outside his head. He called to them, pleading with them to help dig themselves out. When they heard his voice, they began to scream in a racket of terror and affliction that threatened to drive him insane. He thought if he could free just one man, there would be two sets of hands to move boulders. This idea motivated him anew and he flung rocks aside with frenzied strength, shouting with frustration while sweat mingled with the dirt on his skin, streaking him with mud.

“God help me,” he muttered as the daylight began to die, and with it, his hope to save even one life. Alone as he was, he could never move the giant building stones which held all these hundreds of people imprisoned. He paused for a minute, breathing hard, his muscles trembling with exhaustion.

Immediately the people began yelling again, begging him to keep digging.

Tears spilled from his eyes as their emotions pierced him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, his total being suffused with their suffering. “I’m sorry...”

He kicked at the rubble around him, raging, cursing his helplessness, unable to bear the terror that beat at his psyche. Again he began to throw rocks to the side, knowing it was useless, but unable to make himself stop. The feeling of futility and anger grew in him until abruptly he paused once more and spread his arms wide, calling on his guides to help him, beginning to fill with energy. His sensitivity soared as the inner door leading to alternate sources of power burst open. Light and incandescence poured from him, creating a visible glow that radiated in all directions.

In seconds he was flinging dirt and rock wildly, digging with strength he didn’t know he possessed. So engrossed was he that at first he didn’t notice the stirring of the grass towards the southwest. When he did, he ceased drawing energy and put himself between moments, panting hard, grabbing his disruptor even as he tried to become completely invisible.

For several minutes he sensed the casting, searching intelligences as they tried to locate him. He could feel their intent, and huddled within himself, trying to remember the way wolves thought when resting.

Eventually the awareness of being hunted faded. Once again all he could feel was the agony that came from the buried townspeople.

He looked around the devastation, his heart twisting in his chest. There was nothing more he could do. His only hope for freeing these people had been to fuel himself with energy drawn from *elsewhere*, but doing so was as good as sending up a rocket to advertise his location.

He tried to close his ears and mind to the heart-rending cries, strapping on his weapons and sliding into his pack. Again he looked around the town, his tears overcoming him before he forced himself to turn away. Weeping with grief and self-condemnation for leaving these poor souls to die in so ghastly a fashion, he trudged through the debris and dirt of this graveyard that once had been their home. Their dismal

keening stayed with him for miles, torturing him with hellish images of babies and little children pinned by the weight of the earth, buried alive in the dark, while everywhere around them their relatives and neighbors screamed and writhed as they struggled vainly to get free.

Orange moonlight flooded the prairie, illuminating ruins and grass with macabre light that pushed shadows west in sharp definition. Deke walked numbly, oblivious to the night's unusual beauty. Intellectually he knew he couldn't have dug those people out of their wrecked town. Still he was tormented, his thoughts echoing with their fading cries as he left them behind to die, or worse. Helpless as they were, radiating terror, it wouldn't be long before demons found them and made grisly use of their life energies.

By dawn he was staggering with exhaustion but couldn't bring himself to stop for more than the few minutes necessary to eat and drink sparingly. He tried to remain alert, his awareness spreading around him in a subtle web to gather any useful information. Here and there across the wide savannah he began to sense the presence of warm-blooded life; birds, rabbits, field mice, even a fox, and this filled him with relief. Where there were animals, there would be water.

The sun rode the day across the sky. At noon he paused to scan painstakingly through the ruins, still unable to locate so much as a trickling brook in the tall grass. Sighing, he moved on, ignoring his thirst, determined not to drink again until nightfall, and then only a sip or two.

Just before dark, he stopped again, doffed his pack and weapons, and stretched his muscles thoroughly. He took a few steps away to relieve himself, thinking he soon might be drinking his own urine. The idea made him ill, and he turned to his pack, longing to stretch out on his blankets and sleep. He fought the desire, sweating, then withdrew some jerky before hefting his burdens once more.

Chewing the dried meat while he walked, he blinked a few times, his eyes dry and scratchy, the lids heavy, pulled downward by gravity. He didn't know how much longer he could go without sleep. Already he was beginning to see things in the darkening air, little hallucinations brought on by fatigue. In his ears he could hear the whisper of the natural world as it communicated to him on subliminal levels, with now and again a twinge of fear, as if all living things were drawing together in dread of the alien creatures who had invaded the earth.

Morning followed night in due progression, but Deke was almost unaware of the change. He sipped from his second canteen, closed and shook it, frowning as he heard how little water remained. His muscles trembled whenever he stopped, threatening to spill him into the grass. Knowing how dangerous it would be to collapse in open country, he began to look for a nook or cranny amongst the sporadic ruins into which he might crawl for shelter. Before long he found a perfect place, a hole dug under some tumbled concrete. Once the spot might have been a den for a bear; now it was abandoned but dry and clean, and above all, safely enclosed.

Too tired to do more than throw his bedroll onto the packed dirt and drag his pack inside with him, Deke pitched face down onto the blankets, the disruptor clutched

in his fingers, and was unconscious before he fully landed.

The cave looked forbidding, unfamiliar, though he had been here countless times and knew it well. As he paced his horse up the short approach, he looked for the Old Man, but couldn't see him. Yet the place was not deserted. This he sensed as he probed outward with his awareness, seeking the source of his uneasy emotion.

With suddenness that made him jump, a hooded figure emerged from the dark opening, mounted on a white mare of exquisite beauty. Deke felt a quick surge of envy before he suppressed it. The figure threw back its hood, and Deke saw it was him, the man he almost recognized, and he stared as the man watched him in return, chin lifted arrogantly.

"Come in, little brother," the man said in a soft, insinuating tone that sent shivers up Deke's dream-body.

As if entranced, Deke dismounted and followed him into the cave, certain something terrible was about to happen.

"Where's the Old One?" he asked the dark man who sprang lightly from the white mare's back and released her.

"You know he was never a match for me, brother," and the man's tone was complacent.

"What have you done to him?" Deke demanded, feeling rage beginning, his esper sense making him surge with dangerous energy.

The man laughed, his black eyes glittering with pleasure as he sensed Deke's anger. He dropped his desert robe at his feet and removed his underclothes until he stood naked, lit solely by the flickering glow of a fire Deke noticed only now. Someone was kneeling beside that fire, back towards him, also nude.

Deke's mind lurched as he stared at the shapely back he would recognize no matter the circumstance, and started forward. He didn't know what it was that made him stop, his fists clenching, but he stood frozen, unable to move.

Andara turned away from the fire, gave Deke a long, measuring glance before she shrugged, laughed a little, and began to service the dark man with her mouth. The dark man grunted with enjoyment and looked Deke straight in the eye.

"Don't look so surprised, my lord Wolfson. Surely you know it's me she really loves..."

With an inarticulate bellow, Deke's dream-self charged the pair, machete in hand, determined to kill him, then her, and then himself. But his blade whistled through air and he twisted to keep from falling, and failed. The ground rushed up and smacked him in the face.

Then he was awake, thrashing with fury as he struggled to loose himself from the emotional grip of his nightmare.

For a moment he was disoriented and couldn't place himself. He felt the brush of an errant wind across his face, and his skin started to crawl. Instantly he stilled his thoughts, and tried to put himself into reality's intervals. But his mind was too tired, his thinking too muddy, and he couldn't summon the focus to do so. He could feel demons

nearby but didn't dare use his sensitivity to spy them out.

Facing the opening of his shelter, he readied his disruptor, possessed by a weird sense of déjà vu. He tried to make his thoughts into those of a wolf and only partially succeeded. The air thickened, grew more dense, and dirt particles whipped into his eyes. Visibility was non-existent as he strained his senses into the night, breathing deeply while the wind increased.

Blue sparks like unnatural lightning flickered just outside and Deke's teeth bared in an unconscious snarl as the atmospheric pressure mounted suddenly, crushingly. He opened fire with his disruptor as several spinning presences tried to swarm their way into his shelter.

"Die, bastards," he gritted before his voice rose in a shriek matching that of the disruptor. Molecules fell to pieces in the air separating him from the powerful demon that had found him. In moments as he swept the beam back and forth, the lesser creatures accompanying their superior were destroyed. He could feel the greater one's fury and frustration as it fought to maintain its energy structure in the face of the relentless disruptor fire. Without warning, the pressure dropped and the emotional assault on his mind ceased.

Chest heaving, Deke sent a tentative probe out into the plains. There was no further hint of demonic energy, and with an exhalation of relief, he drew his thought back to himself.

He tried to still his trembling and scrubbed his hands through his beard. There no longer was any doubt. His sleeping mind drew demons. He was going to have to find a way to stay awake.

Breathing deeply, he began the mnemonic process he used to center his will. In a few minutes he felt clear-headed enough to roll his blankets and fasten them to his pack. He took a single swallow of water and rose stiffly, drawing on the knapsack like an old man, slinging his weapons with somber resignation. Before long, he was walking under the stars, scanning to locate familiar constellations and determine the lateness of the hour. He estimated he had slept no more than four hours, just enough to make him aware of how tired he really was, and how desperately he needed to rest and recharge.

But his sensitivity told him the countryside through which he now walked was busier with demons, mostly the smaller variety, than at any time since he had left the river. His wariness increased, and he concentrated on sending images of wolves greeting wolves into the night, praying for a response. There never was one, and soon he began to lose hope, sending his calls out with less frequency, until eventually he stopped altogether.

Two days later his canteen was empty. The prairie stretched interminably towards the horizon, endless grasses rippling beneath the fierce sun.

Deke wasn't sure what was keeping him upright, but he had fallen into a strange, jerky rhythm requiring very little conscious monitoring to maintain. This was fortunate, since he had little concentration to spare. His eyes were red and inflamed, and he squinted myopically in the brilliant sunlight. He passed out of the region of little demons as if from a dream, his mind wandering all the time now.

Thirst became the primary reality of his existence. There had to be water

somewhere; he couldn't imagine why he wasn't finding it. Surely the little animals rustling through the grass around him had to drink sometime. They couldn't live off condensation alone, as he had been attempting to do these last mornings, sucking dewdrops directly from the stalks of meadow plants in an effort to quench his intensifying thirst.

After another night and day he was desperate. At midday he spotted an unwary prairie dog sitting outside its burrow, and sent his thoughts into the little animal's mind, holding it immobilized with his will. Its button eyes flicked wildly as he snatched it up, whipped the knife from its sheath at his belt, and slit its throat. He opened the frantically twitching carcass and drank the heated blood greedily like wine from a skin, continuing until the animal's struggles ceased and the last drops of blood had pumped out of it.

Amazed and repulsed, Deke threw the dead animal aside convulsively and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. His breathing was rapid and he gazed across the savannah, feeling his senses responding with increased acuity even from that small influx of liquid.

Thereafter, whenever thirst assailed him, he would catch whatever animal presented itself. Once it was a rabbit he drained of its blood, then seared with his disruptor on a burn setting. Another time a prairie chicken became both food and drink.

During this period he knew he was behaving peculiarly, sometimes mumbling to himself or to the many apparitions who flitted about the periphery of his vision. He grew leaner daily and tried to eat more, but couldn't concentrate on chewing or anything else for very long, and there were periods when he knew his mind simply had turned off. He might be walking in full moonlight one moment, while in the next he was sweating beneath a noonday sun. There came a point when he realized he had no idea how long he had been traveling. It felt like months since he had left the Mississippi, but couldn't possibly be more than three or four weeks. He had lost track of time out here on the savannahs. Some days ago even the ruins had come to an end; now everything was grass and sky and infinite horizons, the sameness soothing him into somnolence like a visual lullaby.

Hallucination and dream ran together into a surreal stream of unconsciousness he seemed to perceive outside himself, though he had a notion this was only a projection of his sleep-deprived delirium. At moments he saw whole scenes which, like mirages, shimmered in his mind's eye, filling him with yearning. Often these were images of home, other times he saw places he thought might be from alternate lives. Soon the images merged confusingly and he was no longer certain what he was seeing.

One morning shortly after sunup he was startled by a herd of antelope running directly across his path. He leveled his rifle, prepared to kill one and drain its blood, when he realized they already were fleeing from four-legged predators. He saw the tufted ears in the tall grass as the pursuing lionesses drove the herd towards their sisters lying hidden in ambush. For a second a lioness stared at him, as startled to see him as he was to see her. He sent a warning image into the big cat's mind, making her bat at her face before turning away from him, confused. She trotted off after her pride which was tearing a hapless antelope to pieces.

Deke kept moving, watching the pride feed. When he thought he was a safe

distance away, he faced forward again. He wondered if there was a water hole nearby and tried to send his awareness out to search but was unable to get more than a quick glimpse of the immediate vicinity before exhaustion made his esper net snap back into him.

There came a day not long after his encounter with the lions when he thought he saw storm clouds to the west but couldn't be sure. His vision now was rarely reliable, and he couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep, just that he was moving, or seemed to be. At least, the vast prairies of wild wheat, rye grass, and varieties of flowering blue and purple weeds slid steadily past his blurred sight. He no longer felt the ache of exhaustion in his legs; in fact, he barely felt his body at all. Sometimes he thought he was floating a few inches off the ground but then he would stumble over an unevenness in the terrain that reminded him he remained part of this increasingly clumsy physical vehicle powered exclusively by his will.

He thought he blinked only once, but realized he must have lost a few hours because the storm clouds were much nearer. It was odd; it seemed they had remained stationary and he had moved towards them. What kind of storm stayed in one place in such open country...it didn't make sense, and he kept walking, putting one foot in front of the other mechanically.

He blinked his eyes again and it was late afternoon. The storm clouds had disappeared like a bad dream. He was just trying to remember his nightmare about the dark man when he reached the top of one of the many dome-shaped hills which typified this part of the prairie. He paused, his breath rasping, before he started wildly and dropped to his belly beneath the grass.

Below him lay a fort. Pennants hung limply from its guard towers, and stone battlements glistened in the light of the westering sun.

As he lay trying to catch his breath, he could feel something terribly wrong about the place. He peeked cautiously through the grass, trying to see over the walls. From this angle he could see only that it looked unnaturally dark down there, and he rubbed his eyes with grimy hands, smearing dirt and sweat across his face, wishing his sight was working better. His instincts told him to remain where he was, his awareness pulled in tight so not a single psychic signal escaped to be detected by the enemy whose presence he sensed with the edge of his esper ability. Demons were near, invisible to the eye, but making themselves known by the emotional stink they raised.

His head swam as he watched the fort, every muscle quivering with fatigue. His lips were dry and cracked and he ran his tongue over them painfully, aware there must be a well in the fort, almost exploding with the desire to pour water down his parched throat and over his fevered skin.

His body went rigid. Something was happening below.

For a minute he couldn't understand exactly what he was seeing, then a chill went through him as darkness moved through the open places in the fort. Black clouds of dust and more than dust twisted upward in spirals; within them he saw sparks of blue electricity that flickered and snapped in compelling, synaptic pulses and he had to force himself to look away before he became hypnotized.

The darkness increased, rising to cover the entire fort. There were multitudes of

little demons, too many to count, along with a number of bigger ones, and Deke smothered a groan as the pressure grew painful in his ears. He could hear screams and cries from within the walls and realized the pressure directly under that whirling black cloud must be unendurable. Cowering down farther into the thick grass, he was startled by a sound like an explosion, then the fort's gates blew open to hang precariously from their wrecked hinges.

Now what? he wondered, fighting the urge to burrow into the dirt head first to escape the mounting pressure. A moment later he heard the tramp of thousands of feet and then people were marching out through the destroyed gates: men, women, children staring fixedly ahead as the darkness increased around them. The mass of greater demons hovered everywhere, combining into a storm of energy and flying debris more powerful than anything Deke had seen from them thus far. He struggled to keep his thoughts quiet while he watched the population emerge from behind the walls, controlled and possessed to the last ambulatory soul.

Shivering, he lay prostrate on the earth, praying no demon sensed him, for he knew he had nothing left, no strength to fight them.

Minutes passed as the townspeople streamed onto the prairie, heading east. Gradually the darkness and flashing electrical disturbances grew faraway, and below him, the fort was silent, dead in the stark sunlight. He waited nearly an hour before moving. Then, his muscles and bones creaking with fatigue and tension, he slid carefully down the grassy embankment towards the open gates.

When he reached the gates he glanced around swiftly and slipped inside, his disruptor leveled and quartering back and forth as he made his way across a cobblestoned plaza. Beyond this open space the fort was crowded with buildings jammed up against one another. These structures had been built higher and higher until they leaned over and met above the streets, making all the thoroughfares more like tunnels in a cave rat nest. Deke started down one of these streets picked at random, hating the darkness and claustrophobic closeness of the place. His senses were preternaturally alert as he chose a doorway left ajar by the departing townspeople and went inside.

He found himself in a cramped, poorly lit space that led towards what looked like a kitchen in the back. Quickly he covered the floor and a sound of relief escaped his lips as he spotted the hand pump affixed to a counter. In an instant he was working the handle and a thick stream of water gushed out. He put his mouth underneath and drank deeply, water splashing everywhere. Next he stuck his head under the faucet, groaning with pleasure to feel the cool moisture flood his filthy hair and the back of his neck. He stood up after a minute, muddy rivulets coursing down his chest and shoulders. There had to be bathing facilities somewhere in this place and he walked out of the kitchen, spotting a flight of stairs leading up. He climbed tiredly to the second storey and was rewarded by a room with a bathtub and another hand pump.

Quickly he looked around, then sent his awareness out of his body beyond the house, searching for danger. He could maintain the search for only a few moments, but in that time satisfied himself that all was safe. In seconds he had dropped his pack on the floor along with his weapons, wrestling with the sweaty, leather straps of his body daggers and kicking off his boots. He stripped off his socks and underwear and began

filling the tub. There was a bowl of soft soap standing nearby and he carried this with him into the bath. Soon he was immersed in cold water that felt like a balm to his sunburned skin. He soaked for a few minutes in complete luxury, then began to scrub. When he finished, the water was black, and he opened the drain.

Filling the tub once more with fresh water, he washed again, pumping water to rinse the soap from his hair. Once more he drained the tub, refilling it a final time. He leaned back against one end and rested, hardly able to believe his good fortune. He drank more cold water directly from the tap and reached over the tub's edge to drag his pack closer. Removing his shaving kit, he peered into the small mirror, shocked by his haggard appearance. His skin was tanned darker than he'd ever seen it and there was a new assortment of fine lines around his scratchy, bloodshot eyes. His beard needed trimming but he didn't trust the steadiness of his hand with a razor. Moving slowly, he withdrew a small scissor from the kit and clipped steadily until the red-gold hairs were fairly uniform. He returned the scissor to his kit and pulled out his tooth brush, spending several minutes brushing vigorously until his teeth showed white in the mirror.

When he was finished, he rose reluctantly from the tub, found a clean towel in a closet and dried himself. Then he threw his underwear, socks, and the shirt and pants he had worn when first he crossed the Mississippi, into the water. He washed everything thoroughly, using plenty of soap, and wrung them out.

Donning clean underwear, he strapped his weapons belt around his waist and slung the disruptor over his shoulder. He lifted his belongings and carried everything downstairs, where he deposited them by the door. Then he went into the kitchen and began to ransack the place for food. There was bread in a cupboard, fairly fresh, and he tore into it. Some kind of meat was in a pot on the stove, and he sniffed it cautiously before consuming it as rapidly as the bread. His best discovery was a pair of gallon jugs made of a thin, lightweight metal. These he rinsed carefully before filling them and his canteens with water.

Sorely tempted to spread his blankets on the floor and sleep, Deke wondered if he dared risk it. He had to rest sooner or later; he couldn't keep going like this forever, his mind would break or his body would; either way, whether by nervous collapse or by demons, he would be equally as dead.

Making up his mind, he unrolled his blankets and laid his wet clothes out to dry. This was the first sheltered spot he had seen in days, maybe weeks, and since demons already had taken the population, maybe they wouldn't be looking for him here. He returned everything he wasn't using to his pack, readying it for a quick departure. Then he lay on his blankets on the brick floor and felt he had reclined on the softest of feather beds. So exhausted was he that he couldn't fall asleep immediately. His muscles and tendons jumped and twitched as he closed his eyes. Slowly, he relaxed, feeling himself begin to float. A few minutes later he could no longer feel the pain in his limbs, and a minute after that he felt nothing at all. His breathing evened and then he was out cold, in unconsciousness more like coma than sleep. A house cat wandered in through the open door, stepping lightly over his sleeping body, but he never stirred, not even when it curled against him purring. The cat would never be able to tell anyone what she had seen happen in her formerly secure home, but she was glad, in her feline way, for

company, even insensible company.

The day waned and became night, and still Deke slumbered on. Perhaps it was because no demons happened to be in the vicinity, or perhaps it was as he thought, this fort no longer held interest for them; whatever the reason, he slept undisturbed until morning, dreaming happily that his mission was over and he was home in his comfortable bed, making love to Andara with extraordinary slowness while she gripped him with her legs and whispered her most intimate desires huskily in his ear.

The day was well advanced by the time he awakened, refreshed. He stretched his aching muscles thoroughly, almost jumping through the roof when the small, grey, house cat stirred against him and meowed loudly. Chuckling, he swept the animal up and stroked it reassuringly while it calmly looked him in the eye.

"Well," he said, "It looks like you're on your own. I wonder why you're alive." He deposited her on the floor and rose from his blankets, rolling them neatly before strapping them to the pack.

The cat wound between his legs, rubbing against him and mewling. He prepared his burdens, strapping his weapons belt around his waist and putting on his body daggers. He wasn't sure why he bothered with blades; his disruptor was all the weapon he really needed, but he shrugged, thinking that old habits died hard. A little smile tugged his lips as he remembered Willie O'Dale's lifelong repetition that a warrior always kept himself ready for any combat, and never made the assumption that one weapon was sufficient. Weapons could fail, and a smart man provided himself with backup.

Today he felt much better. His muscles still griped, but his mind was clear and his vision had returned to its normal keenness. He looked around for a chamber pot or other waste receptacle and saw nothing. Shrugging, he faced into a corner and urinated onto the floor, knowing no one would be returning to be bothered about it.

The cat watched him with a slightly disdainful expression, as if appalled by his lack of manners. He grinned, then went to the kitchen where he drank as much water as he could hold. He put out a bowl for the cat who delicately lapped at it while he shrugged himself into his pack and hoisted his weapons.

A few minutes later he was walking out from under the tilted buildings, the mid-afternoon sun bright on the cobblestoned plaza. Tossing his hair away from his forehead, he took a quick look out through the broken gates before setting off once again into the grass.

Today his long strides carried him quickly away from the fort and he tested his sensitivity, relieved to discover that he was able to extend his awareness in its usual sensory net over the countryside. He sent an image of wolves greeting wolves across the prairie, his mind and body replenished by twenty hours of sleep.

He thought he should have reached the Mississippi's sister river, marked on his maps as the Missouri, by now. He at least should have encountered some of the many tributaries which fed the giant river from the western side, and was concerned that he had not done so. It meant that his father's maps were badly out of date, and the scribbled map to the Dead City might be even less reliable.

That evening he carefully checked his location against the stars, frowning when it became clear he was west of where the Missouri should have been, without so much as a trace remaining of the course it had cut through plains and hills. It was possible he had crossed its former path during the past two weeks of delirium, but there was no way to be certain.

As he continued walking, he was amazed at the force that would be needed to wipe such a waterway out of existence. Or maybe it had been re-routed to run to the Mississippi north of his position. He tried to imagine the ice coming down over the land or the earthquakes that might have swallowed an entire river. With a sigh, he knew there were a thousand things he might never understand about what the war had wrought in his world, but he wanted to know because he believed it was the only way he could solve the deadly puzzle of the demons.

The night was pleasant and he made good time, feeling very strong. Miles passed beneath his steady stride, the countryside gradually becoming more broken and rugged as he walked. By morning he entered an area of deep gullies and crevasses, some showing fresh soil from the recent earthquake. He shivered, glad he hadn't been in this place when the tremors started. These long ditches running from north to south and into and out of which he had to clamber to traverse, looked like they had opened violently and swallowed anything unlucky enough to be in their way.

By early evening he knew he had to rest again, and found a convenient hole in the side of a gully that was thickly overgrown with weeds and grass. His eyebrows went up as he noticed a bushy, female cannabis sativa plant well along in its flowering process and filling the air around it with a fruity yet pungent odor. Impulsively he plucked all the buds from the tops, approving the glisten of sticky pollen on his fingers where he touched them. His mother had taught him many of the benefits of this medicinal and psychotropic herb; he knew when steeped or infused it had powerful soporific qualities, relaxing muscles, relieving spasms and cramps, quieting coughs, headaches, and nausea. But its greatest benefit was in the way it altered consciousness with none of the deleterious side-effects prevalent in other mind-expanding substances. Mixed with certain toadstools and prepared in special ways, it was the smoke with which adepts enhanced awareness. Smoked in a pipe or rolled in paper, it was a gentle helper with the capacity to assist a brujo's meditations and explorations of alternate reality frameworks.

He strung his cluster of red-fibered gold and green buds from a primitive drying rack made by stretching rawhide between two daggers driven into the packed wall behind the shrub. Dumping his pack, he sat down beside it and removed a piece of dried fruit which he chewed slowly, trying to get every bit of nourishment from its leathery flesh. He checked his supplies, saw he was getting dangerously low on dried provisions. He had only a few pounds of meat and fruit left. There were biscuits, but they were hard and unappealing. Soon he would have to take time to hunt and dry more meat. In the meantime he would browse as he traveled, seeking wild roots, grains, and vegetables he could parch with his disruptor's lowest setting.

He sipped sparingly from one of the gallon jugs, finished his fruit, and closed his eyes briefly, casting his mind out in a strong burst of lupine greeting images, waiting to see if there was a response. When there was not, he glanced around the countryside

from his elevated psychic position. Satisfied there was no danger on the surrounding prairie, he drew his thoughts back in.

It felt good to lie down though he couldn't completely banish the feeling of motion which remained with him. It seemed a part of him was traveling still, and for a moment he saw the countryside flowing past his eyes until the colors blended together, and he dozed.

In the darkness he felt something touch his face and jumped up with a startled cry, disoriented. A moment later he heard a soft meow, and with a relieved chuckle, scooped up the small housecat who had followed him from the fort.

"What are you doing here?" he asked rhetorically, seating himself once again on his blankets. He petted the cat who purred and rubbed its face against his beard. "Pretty lonely back there, eh?"

The cat meowed agreement and settled into the crook of his arm.

"You know this is probably a journey you don't want to make," Deke said. "Hell, I don't want to make it myself." He leaned against his pack and stretched his legs. "But I know there's no point discussing it; cats do as they please." He laughed, and knew he, too, would be glad for the company.

After a few minutes, while the cat purred happily against him, he began to center his mind, deciding that as long as the night was peaceful and there was no hint of demons in the area, he would try to establish contact with Andara. It had been at least a month since his last contact, and he was sure by now she was frantic with worry. Without even considering that he might be too far away to reach her, he began to imagine himself in Spring Camp. He imagined the familiar tents of those he loved, the alert guards who no doubt patrolled the city inside and out. In seconds he felt himself separate from his body where it rested in a gouge cut into the lonely prairie and experienced a strange vertigo as he cast his awareness out through space. He could feel himself seeking eastward in a sliver of time so minute that it was past before he fully registered it. Then he was there, and he zeroed in on his tent, certain by the lateness of the hour that Andara would be asleep.

She lay on the bed, a book open on her chest, the oil lamp burning warmly, with a part-grown wolf pup sprawled alongside, gazing adoringly at her face. She was only half-awake, and for a long moment he watched her longingly. At the same instant he reached to touch her mind, she sensed his presence and threw her thoughts open.

Andara, he said in the non-physical place where their energies met and combined.

Deke, she replied, her joy too huge to contain. *Thank the ruins you're all right. You are all right, aren't you?*

Aye, he told her, winding his thoughts through hers until she thought she'd go mad for not being able to put her arms around him. *I've got a new friend*, he added.

Who is your friend? she asked.

He sent her a picture of the grey cat and she smiled at the accompanying nuance that showed how the animal had followed him from the deserted fort.

I see Phoenix has grown, he continued. *How does my father feel about him choosing you?*

Your father gave him to me, Andara told him. I think he felt sorry for me.

Why? Is something wrong?

He knew how badly I wanted to be pregnant, she responded after a long pause.

The hesitation told him everything.

How are you doing? she asked.

The Missouri River no longer exists, he told her. He quickly transmitted a series of moving images to give her the gist of his trek so far.

Her hand unconsciously went to the wolf pup's head.

Next time I contact you, think of a good name for my cat.

Her agreement was immediate. *When?*

Soon, he answered. He paused, then Sent regretfully, I have to go now. When the army gets home, you can tell my father about my progress. I'm sorry to stick you with the job of reassuring him.

Don't worry, she told him. I'll do what's necessary.

I know you will. Be well, and I'll see you in my dreams.

Take care, Deke. I love you.

Not half as much as I love you, she heard him say, and then he was gone, and she was left wondering if he really had been there at all.

Days passed as Deke and the grey cat traveled arduously through the region of deep crevasses. No demons bothered them, and when necessary Deke caught a small animal or two which he seared and shared with the cat. She seemed disinclined to wander too far; mainly she hunted the grass nearby, often catching a rat or bird, sometimes bringing one to him as a gift offering. Her need for water was slight since she lapped the blood of whatever she killed, and he found her lively interest in the countryside a cheerful distraction. More often than not he caught himself smiling at her unexpected antics, and didn't mind that when tired she would climb his knapsack in a series of quick jumps, curling herself on top comfortably, happy to let him be her legs.

He rested and drank minimally, and altogether tried to keep his mind focused in a place where he could process all the sensory information his esper net gathered while avoiding any inner dialog whatsoever. At night he checked his progress against the stars and chafed to see that he was covering barely ten miles daily, the best he could manage in this difficult terrain. Much time was wasted climbing in and out of what rapidly were becoming deep gorges, until a day came when he turned south, determined to bypass this frustrating countryside that forced strenuous exertion without much reward in westward progress.

It was more than a week before he reached the southern edge of the vertical gullies and badlands, and turned west once more.

The grass went on like a green dream, and still he found no sign of water. Again he felt the anxiety of thirst and fatigue, wondering how the animals he occasionally encountered managed to survive. It seemed impossible to believe his luck was so bad that he was missing every water hole in the area. Soon he was back to drinking the blood of whatever he could kill, and he wasn't certain if it was this or the monotony of the prairie, but before long his mind was wandering into strange, blank places from which he emerged with no memory of where he had been or what he had been thinking.

Small piles of ruins reappeared, as well as spaces of graveled concrete mixed with the pervasive dust reminiscent of the ruins near his home. The weather was clear with panoramic blue skies. Though the temperature continued high, there was little humidity and he didn't perspire much. His body had become all lean muscle and bone, the tendons visible in individual detail across his arms and legs, every rib in clear definition beneath his deeply tanned skin. It worried him to have no reserves yet he felt strong and fit enough, despite being tired and thirsty all the time. The cat was lean as well, though more rested, since she had no compunctions about sleep, and of course, her sleep did not draw demons.

He wondered why he had seen none of the creatures, not, he hurriedly told the Universe at large, that he wanted to. But it seemed odd, and he wondered about it in the few scattered moments when he wondered about anything cogently.

On a night when he found a sheltered dip beneath a tilted foundation stone in which to rest, he tried to gather his awareness together long enough to contact Andara, certain dehydration and exhaustion soon would make it impossible.

It took longer than usual to center himself and turn his sensitivity in the direction he wanted. He felt he was wrestling his mind out of his body, and fought to orient himself. After a while, gently tapping the earth for the energy necessary to Send himself instantaneously across the night-swathed continent, he located Andara's energy signature, and made the connection.

My last contact for a bit, he told her, his thoughts chaotic and uncontrolled.

Fear for him rose in her. *Deke, what's wrong?*

Tired, very tired, he tried to reassure her. *Also thirsty. But I've found a place to rest; I'll be better tomorrow.* He struggled to focus himself, succeeding partially. *How is it at home?*

As well as can be expected, she replied. Then, after a moment, *I thought of a name for your cat.*

Ah? Interest surfaced past the muzziness of his broadcast.

Aye, I think you should call her Sacajawea.

That's a lot of name for such a small cat, he commented.

Perhaps, but Sacajawea accompanied explorers west in the early nineteenth century. She was lucky for them. I pray this cat will be as lucky for you.

I vaguely remember reading about that...Lewis and Clarke, wasn't it?

You remember perfectly, she told him, trying to put her energy into his wavering thoughts.

Not so perfectly, he amended, aware of her attempt to bolster him. *The army will be returning soon*, he said, changing the subject. *When they do, don't forget about explaining to my father.*

I won't forget, she assured him.

I know you won't, but I'm forgetting so much myself it's hard to remember what to remember.

Andara tried not to let him feel her worry at his near incoherence.

It's time to go, he said inside her thoughts. *Don't fret, a little sleep is all I need.*

Please be careful, Deke. Her mind caressed his for the briefest of moments.

When will I hear from you again?

His presence began to fade even as she fought to hold him with her for another few seconds.

Wait...! she called to him.

Goodbye, he told her, too exhausted to maintain the contact, beginning to fall asleep despite his best effort. *Goodbye...*

And then he was back in his body, the grass-strewn ruins scattered all around him. Sacajawea curled against his belly as he rolled onto his side, facing the opening of his shelter with his disruptor held loosely in his hands. The night air was cool, and he drew a blanket over himself, his mouth dry and tasting unpleasantly of blood. Tomorrow maybe he would find water. Aye, and he tried to be positive. Tomorrow he would find a whole river of water.

As he thought this, he fell asleep, dreaming he was swimming the river which bordered Spring Camp, and wondering how he ever could have taken it so for granted.

The following day he did not find water, nor the day after that. The weather continued sunny and hot, and slowly the savannah across which he had hiked all these weeks began to change, giving way to hillier, more elevated terrain. The grass went on, but soon the ruins disappeared, and he was in undulating country that gradually slanted upward. His calf and thigh muscles ached constantly and he was dizzy from thirst and the relentless beat of the sun on his head.

No sheltered spot presented itself, so he rested only intermittently, taking an hour here and there to stretch out in the tall grass. His energy reserves were nearly expended but he wanted to keep moving until he found water. The map drawn in his grandfather's day indicated several spots where that traveler had discovered potable water, but Deke was well south of his route and had to count on luck.

One day he came alert out of a walking doze and found himself face to face with a shaggy, horned beast with a hump like a mountain and bloodshot eyes glaring with baleful admonition. He halted, looked around, realized he was in a herd of the animals, and that they were getting restless, making vaguely threatening motions towards him.

He unslung his rifle and took a few steps backwards. Raising the weapon to his shoulder, he aimed carefully at the little eye that moved as he moved, and fired.

The herbivore collapsed where it stood and the rest of the herd thundered off towards the northwest, away from the loud report.

In a moment Deke had his knife out and his mess kit pot ready. He slit the animal's throat and allowed blood to drain into the pot. When it was full, he replaced it with a bowl, pouring the sticky liquid into one of the gallon jugs. He continued until he had gotten as much fluid as he could, collecting nearly half a gallon. It would provide a day's drink before becoming toxic to his bowels.

He cut choice meat from behind the ribs and removed the liver, searing both with the disruptor. Deke had never been especially fond of liver, but he knew he needed the nutrients it would provide. Now, as he cut off pieces and chewed them, he could feel energy flowing into him with each bite. He had an idea; poured a good bit of blood into his cookpot, added meat and a few herbs Andara had provided, dropped in a pinch of salt,

and heated the pot with his disruptor. Before long everything was cooked through and actually smelled pretty good, especially compared to what he had been eating lately.

He removed one of the last biscuits from his pack and dipped it in the blood-gravy, taking a cautious bite. Encouraged by the flavor, he gobbled the chunks of meat and liver quickly, then upended the pot and drank the liquid, wishing he had a mug of ale to wash it down.

Renewed by the influx of liquid and calories, he began to cut steaks from the dead animal, slicing them finely and drying them with his disruptor on its lowest setting. Overhead several vultures were circling, and he could see the creeping approach of scavengers through the tall grass. Foxes, coyotes, lions... This was getting very uncomfortable, he thought, firing a shot into a badger that had sneaked boldly around the back of the carcass. The badger (bigger by far than eastern badgers) squawked pathetically before a coyote dove in and snatched it up, disappearing quickly into the grass.

At the sound of the rifle, the animals retreated slightly, but soon were moving in on him again. He gathered his belongings and quickly cut forty or fifty pounds of meat which he carried by jamming his bayonet through it and hanging it from his rifle over his shoulder. Moving cautiously until he was clear of the dead animal he now remembered was called a bison, he avoided the mobbing scavengers as they closed in, trotting as rapidly as he could until he was several miles away. Here he paused again, and while Sacajawea watched with interest, began to dry the meat into jerky, rubbing it with herbs and salt to help flavor and preserve it.

By early evening he was done. He stored the ten or so pounds of hardened buffalo meat inside his knapsack, thinking it had been a lot of work for little reward.

He was exhausted but didn't dare linger so close to all those predators. They easily could follow his scent trail and feed on him if he fell asleep, and this thought kept him upright for many long hours while the land slanted higher and the going became increasingly more difficult.

As he walked he scanned through the grass, finding here and there ripe raspberries and blackberries that had been overlooked by birds and small mammals. He ate these as he found them, as well as wild carrots; immature, but edible. Evening turned to night and became day again without him noticing particularly, and on the few occasions he thought about it, he knew he was often asleep on his feet.

On a day when he killed two hares and drank their blood, he stopped to rest briefly, his bleared eyes taking in the higher plains over which he had been traveling these many days. After several moments it became apparent to him that the grass was coming to an end. A few miles beyond where he stood he could see it thinned, then stopped. This made him sit down abruptly, frightened. He wondered if he should attempt to circle around what looked suspiciously like a desert directly ahead. If he hadn't found water on the grass, how much more likely was he to find it in a desert?

But what if there was no way around? What if it stretched all the way to the mountains?

He drew out his maps and studied them with sight that was incapable of deciphering the small print. It was possible he could bypass this area by turning north

again, but the days were passing, and he was sure by now it must be September at the very least. Better to stay at this latitude; he had no idea how early cold weather started in these upland prairies.

Deciding swiftly, he sent his consciousness out of his body, spreading his sensory net across the countryside. He expanded his perceptions to the farthest limit of his exhausted mind, meticulously checking every dip in the terrain for signs of water. After what seemed an eternity, he started to pull his awareness back, discouraged. Just then he thought he saw something reflect the light, and immediately he sent himself towards the spot.

Seconds later he let out a whoop of joy, setting off towards the south where he had spotted the flash of sunlight. He jogged through the grass until he came to the sandy bank of a small but deep creek that poured into a pond perhaps thirty feet in diameter. The grass was so thick that both creek and water hole were invisible only thirty meters away.

Dumping his pack and weapons, he waded in up to his waist, then immersed himself. He practically inhaled water, drinking rapidly, but taking care not to swallow too much at once. After a few minutes, he got out, took off his boots and dumped the water out of them, removed his socks and underwear, then got back into the creek, sighing with pleasure.

An hour later his water bottles were cleaned and refilled, his body was refreshed, and his mind felt clearer than at any time since departing the empty fort. He studied the game trails leading to and from the area, trying to decide how dangerous it would be to linger. There were tracks from a variety of small animals, as well as wild cattle, bison, and the predators that fed on them. When he saw spoor from a pair of esper tigers, he made up his mind to keep moving lest he, too, become a meal for the big cats.

Sacajawea, meanwhile, had drunk her fill and killed a family of field mice she nibbled daintily until Deke dressed in fresh underwear and socks, dried and donned his boots, and set off towards the desert, willing to take his chances now that his water supply was replenished. The cat scampered after, barely making a rustle as she bounced through the tall grass.

His first night on the sand and dust of the high desert was uneventful. The stars were exquisite against the moonless sky, barely flickering in the dry air. The land continued to climb in a gradual way that wasn't too debilitating, but he could feel the incline in the way his muscles ached and his breathing deepened.

By mid-morning, the sun was a fiery disk overhead, and he was beginning to drag his legs. He strained his eyes to find a place to rest, but saw nothing. The area was barren; flat rocks and dry, sandy dirt overlaid with alkali dust. He paused for a moment and pulled a shirt from his pack, winding it into a sunshade to cover his head and the back of his neck.

Night fell and he walked on, the cat perched on his pack. He stopped and sat down on a rock and she jumped off, dashing away into the dunes. When she returned an hour or so later, she was using her paw to wick droplets of blood from her whiskers with a self-satisfied expression. Refusing the water he offered, she settled on his pack, purring contentedly. He sat on the stone for another hour, sleepy, wanting to spread his blankets

on the sand, but hoisting everything once more and walking on through the darkness, taking advantage of the cooler temperature to make as much progress as possible.

By noon the following day he could go no further. He used a blanket to rig a crude tent, crawling in out of the sun to sleep until sunset.

This became his pattern for the next ten days: traveling by night, resting when the sun was high. On the tenth day when his water supply was no more than a trickle at the bottom of one canteen, he climbed to the top of a long hill and halted, breathing deeply, staring out across the half-moonlit desert. Sacajawea sat on his shoulder as they looked down at a small oasis consisting of a water hole, a cluster of boulders, a few stunted shrubs and several medium-sized cacti.

Thank the ruins, he thought. He half-jogged down the hill, his boots sliding in the loose sand and dirt. Dumping his pack on the ground, he lay flat between two boulders and tasted the water. It was sweet and clear, and he drank deeply. The cat crouched next to him, lapping softly.

When he had finished washing himself and his clothes, he refilled his water jugs and canteens. He checked the area meticulously for animal tracks and when he saw only a few bird prints in the moist sand around the spring, spread his blankets and stretched out with a sigh. After a moment he removed the copy of Shakespeare from his pack as well as his pipe and a bud of the cannabis he had picked back in the crevasselands. Using some dead brush he found beneath one of the bushes as tinder, he struck a spark with his flint and steel, igniting a tiny fire. Breaking off a bit of the cured, sticky bud, he packed his pipe bowl. He lit the herb with a burning twig and puffed contentedly until he had consumed it all. Then he opened his book, turned to a favorite passage of Henry V, and by moonlight, while his mind drifted pleasantly, read the soaring words that had inspired him since boyhood.

An hour later the book began to droop in his hands and he put it and his pipe in the pack before strapping on body daggers and reclining fully on the blankets. The night was balmy, quiet. For a few minutes, Deke lay on his back staring at the sky, enjoying the view of stars and moon, feeling very insignificant against the vastness of the land and the turning constellations he knew so well. He yawned hugely, his jaws cracking, and closed his eyes. Soon he was asleep, snoring lightly, and Sacajawea lay comfortably next to him, purring.

He was awakened by the cat's savage scream of fear and aggression. He was about to leap up when he felt something move on his abdomen, something large and unpleasantly heavy. With icy control, he kept himself absolutely motionless, his muscles rigid with the effort needed to keep them from trembling. Slowly he slitted his eyes to see what was happening, and felt his heart stop before it lurched back to life, beating so fast he could see it throb through the hair on his chest.

The thing on him was a foot and a half long, with claws extended out in front of it, and a mostly yellowish shell-like body tinged with red and black. It had eight legs and skittered in a circle with incredible rapidity. There was a fat, segmented tail held curled over its back, tipped with what he could only assume was a stinger. The tail was the length of the body, and when the creature raised it threateningly as it swiveled to the

right, Deke knew the glistening four-inch sting was deadly poisonous.

Eyes remaining slitted, he looked sideways where the thing was facing and clamped his teeth together to keep from making any inadvertent sound. Another of the things was about ten feet away, and now Deke understood the sounds he had been hearing. Sacajawea's tail lashed back and forth as she crouched, hissing and spitting, facing the creature whose name Deke abruptly plucked from his memory: *scorpion* was what the unholy thing must be, but how could it be so big?

He heard another strange noise, and sent his awareness out and up, desperate to know the full extent of his danger.

Poised near his feet was a small sea of seething, translucent, young scorpions, each perhaps an inch long, none with hardened exoskeletons, but every one with a small stinger raised instinctively in anticipation of any threat. There were scores, and Deke struggled silently to keep from panicking.

He put his awareness back through his physical senses, trying to make himself think clearly. The scorpion on his belly was getting increasingly restless. The sensation of its sharp, many-legged touch against his bare skin was almost too much for him to endure, and he could see that it wanted to attack the other before harm came to its babies, but was unwilling to move away from them to do so. This conflict was making its instinct-driven behavior very aggressive indeed, and when its long tail whipped past his face only inches from his eyes, Deke realized he had to do something quickly, but was damned if he knew what.

Sweat dripped audibly from his temples to the blanket, and the scorpion standing on him twitched, its many eyes watching alertly. Hardly daring to breathe, Deke felt his hopes sink even further. The cursed thing was too nervous, too quick with its stinger, for him to take a chance on moving. All he could do was lie as quietly as a stone and pray it moved off him.

He tried to make contact with the cat's mind, wanting to suggest her into fleeing, but her feline thoughts were too focused on the enemy in front of her for her to hear him. That enemy whirled and crabbed back and forth, frantically watching the cat and its giant counterpart on Deke's torso. Every time it moved, the scorpion whose claws raked Deke's skin leaving little white scratches in the sunburn, leaped menacingly and slashed its tail through the air. When this happened, he had to fight to keep from jerking or crying out, certain he was about to die agonizingly.

How fast would it be, he wondered in sick fascination, watching as the huge animal (he couldn't think of it as an arachnid) almost lost its footing in the perspiration pooling in the hollow under his rib cage. His eyes remained nearly closed, yet he was able to study the scorpion minutely, hating everything about it, but appreciating, nonetheless, its terrifying efficiency and hair-trigger reflexes. It scuttled down between his legs and a new flood of anxiety slicked his skin. He felt its clawed grip dig into the tender flesh on the inside of his right thigh while its rear claws flailed briefly across his scrotum, finally gaining purchase on the inside of his left thigh.

Deke watched the thing in horror which emptied his mind of rational thought. He could feel his self-control fray as the hooked feet shifted uneasily against the thick hair around his crotch. Just as he became certain he couldn't remain motionless for

another minute, Sacajawea let out an ear-splitting screech. His body jumped involuntarily, and the scorpion on him unfurled its tail in warning. He moved his eyes imperceptibly and saw the other scorpion stalking the grey cat as she dragged herself away bleeding, her entire body seizing with pain and the effects of the poison she had taken.

Stricken, Deke watched helplessly as her hitching movements became slower, more labored. A moment later, she came to a stop and he could see her diaphragm working frantically as she attempted to draw air.

The stalking scorpion put one of its huge claws around her neck and wrenched powerfully, decapitating her with a dreadful crunch.

Deke squeezed his eyes shut, unable to watch the awful thing feed. He felt the scorpion on his body clatter its claws aggressively, and suddenly it leaped from between his thighs in a hideous spring.

In a single, convulsive movement, he was on his feet, a knife in each hand. Before the scorpions could react, two daggers pierced their outer shells, knocking them off balance.

The pair recovered swiftly, and, both of them oozing yellow, ochrous matter, scuttled with extraordinary speed in Deke's direction. He drew the daggers from his calves and fired them off with equal rapidity. While the advancing scorpions tried to dodge these razor-sharp missiles, he grabbed his automatic rifle in a rolling scramble across the sand and fired. Instantly the scorpions exploded in a disgusting spray of carapaces and foul juices.

Deke eyed the horde of babies malevolently and reached for his disruptor. He spun the power pack and fired at the creeping, pale bodies, melting them into molecular sludge.

Chest heaving, he looked at Sacajawea's mangled corpse. "Poor girl," he said sorrowfully, knowing she had saved his life. All at once he decided he didn't want to spend another moment in this place. He rinsed the sweat and dirt from himself in the spring and drank deeply, shuddering as he recalled the way the scorpion's tail had nearly emasculated him before it leaped to do battle. He felt his gorge rise, and vomited up all the water he had consumed.

When he recovered, he rolled his blankets, fastened them to the pack, checked to be sure his water jugs and canteens were full, and drank again, swishing out the inside of his mouth to get rid of the acid taste. He collected his knives, noticed one of them had a ding in the handle where a bullet had struck it, and scrubbed them clean in the spring before drying and returning them to their scabbards.

Soon he was ready, but before he donned his pack he scraped a hole in the sandy dirt near the base of one of the cacti, retrieved the remains of the cat's body, and buried her. Nodding mournfully in gratitude for her sacrifice, he hefted his belongings, setting off once again into the dust desert.

Behind him, the sun brought grey and pink to the sky, bathing him in soft shadows and colorful pastels as morning dashed its palette against the world and another day began.

Deke walked through ankle-deep sand, his body and spirit flagging under the relentless assault of heat and sunlight. His eyes were dazzled but he couldn't bring himself to stop moving. The desert through which he trudged was all sand with never so much as a rock to break the clean monotony. He couldn't stop thinking about the giant scorpions and the ease with which the one that had killed Sacajawea had separated her from her head. He wondered if they were commonplace in this region, and if so, where and how they survived. Maybe they dug under the sand by day, he thought, frightened by the idea. He determined neither to sleep nor stop until he absolutely had to, and then with his weapons ready in his hands.

As he stared at the dunes that stretched to the horizon, he was overtaken by familiarity, as if the landscape was one he knew or had lived in. He thought he must be having a past life recollection, for the recognition grew stronger as he carefully avoided sinkholes and dangerous slipfaces with instinctive awareness. The sand was incredibly hot where it touched his skin, hot enough to cook him, but he ignored the discomfort, squinting into the distant horizon with dogged purpose. He could feel his body giving up its moisture to the arid air, could feel the sweat evaporating off him before he even noticed its wetness.

At times he caught himself talking to Andara, as if she were inside his head with him. He wasn't sure if this was a symptom of loneliness or the first stage of encroaching dementia. Not that it mattered either way; the solitary soliloquies in which he indulged were unconscious and not under his control. Since he didn't have the strength or concentration to contact her mind directly, he did the next best thing, reliving conversations they had held during the course of their lives together or inventing new ones that had the power to make him shout out loud with the depth of his homesickness and isolation.

Deke was never entirely sure how long he spent on the deep sand; he vaguely remembered a night when he thought he sensed demons moving through the darkness, but they either didn't notice him or didn't care about him, for they left him alone. With far more vividness, he remembered a day when the horizon turned brown and rushed at him, lashing his flesh with wind-driven sand and blinding him with stinging fury. He quickly stopped and wrapped himself in blankets against the storm-flung particles, covering his mouth and nostrils with the sleeves of the shirt he wore as a sun shield. He was unable to travel; he couldn't see the sun and had no idea which way was west. All he could do was try to keep from getting buried alive or flayed to pieces, and both these tasks kept him busier than he wanted to be for the rest of the day.

When night fell, so, too, did the wind, and the sandstorm was over as abruptly as it had begun.

There was the day he killed the rattlesnake, a type he had never seen before that moved in rippling undulations sideways across the sand. It was a large snake, giving him a substantial meal with enough left over to dry.

During this time he couldn't recall whether or not he slept; once again he supposed he was sleeping on his feet, because hours passed without him being aware they had. Frequently he snapped to attention to peruse the bleak, moistureless countryside with sun-scorched eyes, certain he saw movements in the periphery of his vision.

Yet whenever he looked, there were only shimmering heat distortions bouncing off the pale sand. He never saw the demons he kept expecting to turn up and take advantage of his exposed, weakened condition. Nor did he see anything else remotely dangerous, and for this he was grateful. The desert was becoming hazardous enough as his water supply dwindled and he discovered no further oases.

There were things he did see, however; on more than one occasion he was positive he saw his mother walking near him, and he wanted to talk to her but was too ashamed to meet her eyes. As difficult as it had been to face Andara's disgust and disillusionment, the thought that his mother knew who he was and what he did when he went to war was much worse, and made him want to let a demon eat his soul if it would save him from having to confront her when he died. What was most frightening about having her appear and disappear in the brilliant sunlight was that it seemed he must be much closer to death than he knew, for otherwise why was he seeing so clearly across the veil that separated the dead from the living, and why else could he barely see anything in the physical world around him anymore?

An evening came when he was too tired to take another step. He shook out his blankets and spread them on the sand, taking time only to drop his pack before he fell face down, his cheek resting on his forearm, the disruptor clutched tightly in his free hand. He was asleep instantly, his over-weary limbs jerking with reflexive muscle spasms, his mind plunging downward so swiftly into insensibility that it felt like a leap from a cliff into the plummeting ecstasy preceding impact with water lying far below.

His dreams were chaotic, disconnected, dominated by weird scenarios where he felt himself riding a mechanical vehicle across endless sand, while around him men dressed in khaki camouflage and flowing, banded headgear rode crammed together on other, larger vehicles. These self-propelled machines made a grinding, rumbling sound as they tore through the extreme heat, and for some reason, Deke hated them and the men who drove them. Now and again a face surfaced that was familiar, and his dreaming self chafed to understand who and where he was. The expressions that looked back at him were fanatically loyal; he knew that like his own men, any one of these would die happily at his command.

He looked at his hands, saw they were smaller and finer than usual, their backs covered with black hairs instead of gold ones, the nails fastidiously manicured in a way Deke never would have done for himself. His uniform (for that was what he perceived himself to be wearing) was crisp and freshly laundered, decorated with unfamiliar medals and insignia. He could smell himself, smelled musk and heady perfume rising from his flesh, and first was shocked, then repelled. Who was this arrogant, scented dandy decked out in quasi-military trappings? And what was he doing inside this man's head?

The dream journey across the sand continued through much of the night, with occasional breaks during which Deke thought he heard his father telling him to stop lying abed like a slug of a fort dweller and get his lazy bones off to his lessons. Deke heard himself tell the chieftain that he would get up in a minute, and to stop raising such an infernal ruckus.

"Let me sleep, Papa," he murmured, the night air cool on his heated flesh. "I

need to sleep...”

Pearlescent light awakened him with the dawn, and he sipped sparingly from a canteen. He walked more quickly this morning, sleep having healed some of his fatigue, but still possessed by a deep weariness that made him long to go on sleeping.

By noon the sun was burning him again and he licked dry lips, his thoughts wandering aimlessly while his feet carried him ever westward. He was just noticing a darkened spot on the horizon when something tickled his neck. He raised his hand to brush it off and felt a horrible, burning pain as if he'd been stabbed by an acid-covered knife. Frantically, he batted the thing away, staring in disbelief as it hit the sand running on all eight legs, its tail held up threateningly, its soft, translucent body already frying in the brutal heat.

He flung off his pack, searching through it meticulously to see if any other baby scorpions had ridden away from the oasis with him, but it was clean. Meanwhile, the spot on his neck just under and behind his ear was beginning to throb and burn in earnest, and he wondered how poisonous the little ones were, whether their stings were lethal. Battling the fear that rose in him, a fear not only for himself but also that he might fail in his purpose, he opened the first aid kit Andara had provided and quickly searched through the herbs, taking tobacco leaf, shredding it, moistening it with a few precious drops of water, and placing it over the sting, hoping that as with bee and wasp stings, the leaf would help draw out the venom and soothe the reaction. He used a strip torn from the tail of the shirt he wore as a hat to bind the poultice in place.

A few seconds later he settled himself into the straps of his knapsack and fastened its belt. He hung his weapons from his shoulders, cursed all scorpions ever spawned, and started walking. The tobacco leaf eased some of the superficial pain but not enough. He could feel the inflammation spreading and tried to ignore the pulsing ache that was expanding into his head and shoulders, even into his face. A wave of dizziness passed through him, and he shivered once, hard. He retched and almost lost his balance. Squinting in the harsh glare that pierced his skull from the corneas back, Deke struggled to focus on the place on the horizon where he thought he'd seen something different, and made his feet move faster.

Soon the pain radiating outward from his neck became more severe and he gasped in his effort to contain it. The dizziness increased, and with it what felt like raging fever that, combined with the desert heat, made his senses buzz with anguish. He stumbled through the sand, his vision narrowed to an enclosed tunnel directly in front of him, his brain feeling as if it was swelling dangerously, becoming too big for the skull cavity in which it resided. A few minutes later he staggered and fell to his knees, willing himself upright from a place in his center that had little to do with his physical being. He panted hot air into his lungs, feeling as if his heart was on fire. Reeling like a drunk in the last stages of fatal intoxication, occasionally crawling on hands and knees, he dragged himself towards the setting sun, certain that by nightfall he would be dead. His agony increased, and before long he began to yearn for death's cool arms to cradle his tormented flesh and grant him surcease.

But when the chill of evening replaced the desiccating furnace of the day, he was still alive and suffering. He forced his protesting limbs to carry him through dunes

that gradually began to change in texture, though he never noticed. Even when his feet no longer dragged through sand and the first strands of vegetation appeared in the packed earth beneath him, he never stopped his broken, jerking stride. All he felt was the heat and his pain, and a restless need to escape from both.

At midnight he rested briefly, groaning with the misery of the poison in his blood. When the moon rose, its light was too bright, and he turned away, beginning to walk again, limping on legs that felt clumsy and stiff. There was an unpleasant, constant nausea in his stomach, not enough to spur active vomiting, but keeping him feeling as if he were on the verge all the time. His head hurt abominably and the skin around his neck, cheek, and shoulder on the right side where he had been stung was stretched until he thought it must split.

Sunup found him sprawled in a patch of tall grass where he had dropped in a haze of pain an hour earlier. He stared dully like a wounded animal: mute, uncomprehending, sensing Death at his side as an alert and patient companion. There was almost no water left in his last canteen, and the gallon jugs were long emptied. He didn't have the strength to catch any small animals to drink their blood, nor could he see well enough to determine if there were any in the area. There was a dimness to his vision today that would have frightened him had he the energy to think about it. He tried to rest, his muscles trembling uncontrollably in rolling compressions that wouldn't stop even when he put what remained of his attention on them. He leaned against the pack he had been too exhausted to remove, wondering at the arrogance that had made him believe he could cross half a continent alone on foot. This thought rode around and around inside his mind and he rubbed his gritty eyes, knowing he had always been arrogant and cocksure, positive he knew best or had the right answer, perpetually certain that only he could do whatever insane thing had to be done to make a situation work out successfully.

For the first time in his life Deke doubted his judgment, doubted his capacity to make a rational or correct decision. As he sat in the grass thinking about these things, he knew he had reached his limit. He didn't think he could get to his feet.

Despair filled him. He thought about his people, tried to imagine what was happening at Spring Camp. The army must have returned, and he knew Andara would be having a difficult time of it with his father. An ache started in his chest separate from the pain of the scorpion sting and he fought to keep from weeping, aware he didn't have the moisture to waste on tears, but too despondent at the prospect of his failure to hold them back.

For a moment he saw the faces of all the people he loved, saw their expressions become fixed and rigid as demons infiltrated their psyches and drained their energy. In his mind's eye he saw Andara possessed and consumed, her living spirit absorbed by the ravaging creatures who sought to envelop the earth. So disturbing was this image that he bellowed aloud with wordless horror and fury. Without knowing how he did it, he thrust himself to his feet, swayed for several seconds in spiritual and physical distress that galvanized his movements, and then he was walking again, pushing through sawgrass that, like fine-edged knives, slashed at his body ceaselessly, creating a myriad of bloody wounds he neither felt nor saw.

The countryside continued upward in a gentle incline that felt like a sheer, unreliable slope littered with obstacles. He hauled himself along by force of will, trying to draw energy from the environment, discovering he was too weak. His mind twisted in on itself, caught up in pain and futility. So preoccupied and inwardly focused had he become that he wasn't paying attention when he almost stepped off the earth and into mid-air.

With a cry of shock, he forced himself backward before he could go over the peak of the hill he had been climbing for longer than he could remember. He landed hard on his flank and lay wheezing for several minutes. When his breath quieted, he turned on his belly, dragged himself up to the edge, and looked over.

He had reached the eastern ridge of a wide, increasingly green valley, through which wound a substantial river flowing a little south of west. His head swam as he tried to follow the motion of the water, and he blinked rapidly, hardly able to believe the forest hugging the water on the far bank was real. It spread far to the west, and though he tried to remember if either river or forest existed on any of his maps, he was unable to recall a thing.

With infinite care he got his body started down the steep ridge towards the river, alert for danger, his disruptor slung conveniently.

Half an hour later, after painfully crawling the last several yards, he collapsed at the water's edge, panting like a dog. He tasted the water, found it good, and drank thirstily before removing the dusty tobacco poultice from his neck and replacing it with a handful of wet clay from the riverbank. The relief was immediate and he sighed, hardly daring to believe he might be saved. He unfastened his pack and rolled free, leaning his weapons against it. In a second he dragged himself into the water, and the sound of easing stress he made was heartfelt and profound.

He soaked for a long time, welcoming the cold on his drum-taut swellings. When some of the heat was out of his flesh he forced himself from the water and lay quietly in the cool mud on the shore, wanting to spread his blankets on the raised grassy knoll out of the wet but not having the strength. He thought it dangerous to lie here in the open, naked and debilitated as he was, and pulled himself closer to his pack where he fumbled the disruptor into his arms and clutched it to him like a lover. He sighed, his head fell to one side, and he was unconscious in moments, his sleeping mind lulled by the lapping current flowing gently past, and that in the dream carrying his thoughts away, had become a metaphor for his life and this endless journey upon which he had embarked uncounted miles ago.

It took a full week for Deke to recover sufficiently to consider moving on. It was clear the river could provide a speedy thoroughfare if he could build some kind of boat, especially if it continued in a westerly direction. He eyed the trees on the other side and wondered if it would be possible to fell some of the smaller ones and lash them into a raft. The idea grew in his mind while he recuperated, stringing hooks and lines to catch some of the many trout populating the eddies and snags nearby. He used driftwood gathered along the shore to build a cookfire, and spent most of his time eating and resting, too enervated to do anything else.

At the end of his second week beside the river, Deke found a shallow crossing a little way downstream and waded across, carrying his knapsack and weapons overhead to keep them dry. Once there, he built a lean-to from forest deadfall and put his belongings inside.

The woods were cool and mysteriously dark, smelling intriguingly of greenery. Deke sniffed appreciatively, stretching his awareness in a watchful, receptive focus requiring little concentration to maintain. There was an abundance of small animals rustling through the underbrush, as well as white-tailed deer which came so fearlessly to look at him he knew they never before had seen a human being. He planned to kill one or two, drying meat to last a month or more. Also he wanted to search the area for edible fruits, nuts, grains and legumes, knowing by the color of the leaves that the harvest season was upon him.

It took no more than half a dozen blows with his machete against the trunk of a tree by the water's edge to convince him that chopping down a tree was going to be more work than it was worth.

Returning the machete to its sheath, he picked up the disruptor, spinning the power pack to the setting he wanted: a narrow, focused beam. He had seen this setting separate steel into two pieces, and pointed the muzzle at the tree he had been hacking. Seconds later the tree toppled into the water, sending a spray of water over him where he stood watching.

By the end of the day he had cut enough trees for the task, trimming branches and cutting the logs into uniform lengths of about twelve feet each. He lashed them loosely with rope and then to trees on shore, leaving them to swell for a few days before tightening the ropes and making them into a proper raft. In the meantime he built two drying racks near the fire, and sharpened the blade on his machete.

He slept deeply that night, and in the morning went hunting.

Soon he was stealing quietly along a game trail showing fresh deer scat. His sensitivity revealed a small herd of bucks not far away, and he crept up on them eagerly. He sent his thoughts into a yearling just sprouting its first unimpressive horns and held it frozen while he strode up and cut its throat. The other males stared stupidly at him, fleeing only when they smelled their brother's blood and saw him drop. Before they took two leaps, Deke's mind grabbed another, and he killed this one as uneventfully as the first. When both were gutted, he hauled them the short distance to his campsite.

He spent the rest of the day butchering and slicing the venison, hanging it on the racks he had prepared and building up the fire to discourage predators. Some of the meat went into his cookpot, along with wild onions, garlic, carrots, potatoes, mushrooms, thyme and basil, a little salt and water. He spitted a couple steaks and set them over the coals to broil, then bathed in the river.

After making a meal off the steaks and some of the carrots eaten raw, he filled his pipe and pulled the volume of sonnets from his pack, remembering that the last time he had felt well enough to smoke or read was the night before the scorpions. Sighing, he lit the pipe and exhaled a cloud of smoke towards the sky.

"This is for you, Sacajawea," he said to the ether, his loneliness immense. Soon

he was lost in the lyric poetry he liked so well, and shortly after that, he was sleeping dreamlessly, wrapped in a blanket against the increasingly autumnal chill, the disruptor tucked securely in his arms.

On a warm morning near what he judged was the middle of October, Deke set out on his raft. He had affixed a crude rudder to one end and carried two long poles for moving in sluggish water. He also had fashioned a small platform raised above the twelve foot logs which made the floor of his primitive craft, and on this he kept his pack and weapons secured by knots which could be released with a single tug if need arose. There was room on the platform for him to lie full length, and after the first few minutes he was glad he had made it big enough, since the logs underneath became soaked every time the raft tipped or bobbed.

The current was gentle but steady, the river winding in lazy curves towards the west. By late afternoon he was deep into a woodland that kept both banks in shadow and from which the sounds of birds and insects could be heard.

It was cooler beneath the trees, a pleasant relief from his many days on the desert, and he was glad to sprawl drowsily on his raft's platform, eating almost non-stop to heal himself from exhaustion and the near-starvation of his journey.

He noticed there were many flowers of late summer still blooming, saw they were unusually large and colorful. He saw several uncommon varieties of flying insect; there were wasps with glossy, blue-striped abdomens, dragonflies with a dozen wings on either side, big enough that he almost mistook them for birds. The speckled yellow mosquitos were especially unpleasant; large, aggressive, and capable of leaving a welt the size of a walnut. Even the gnats and flies were peculiar, and Deke wondered about this as the day and the current drifted him along, supposing that the gamma radiation in this area might be considerably higher than what he was accustomed to, but knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

Several unfamiliar species of birds swooped and dove around him, snatching tiny, silver fish from the shallows, and occasionally on either bank he spotted scampering small animals; squirrels, chipmunks, even a community of otters who jumped playfully in and out of the water, surfacing now and again with varieties of fish struggling in their jaws.

It was peaceful among the trees. The sunlight dappled the river with patches of brilliance, and when he sent his senses across the countryside, he could detect no sign of demons at all. He worried about that on and off during the course of the day. It was not that he wanted to see any, far from it, but for them not to be seeking him anymore might mean they were occupied with other prey, and imagining who that might be filled him with anxiety.

When evening came, he poled the raft towards shore and tied it to a tree which overhung the water, unwilling to risk traveling this unknown river in the dark. He built a fire on a pebbled spit of beach near enough to his raft that he could be aboard and floating downstream in an instant.

The sounds of the forest at night were strange to Deke's ears, accustomed as they were to the ruins and open spaces he had crossed. He ate a meal of wild tubers that

tasted like sweet potatoes, spitted and roasted on sticks over his fire along with the remains of his venison stew, finishing up with past-their- prime blueberries and raspberries picked from nearby bushes. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, and trimmed his beard by firelight, luxuriating in the convenient water source flowing past in a gurgling murmur, soothing his cares and making him sleepy. Stoking the fire, he rolled into his blankets, his last waking thought one of pleasure in the uneventful way his first day on the river had gone.

The fire had burned low when Deke woke, all his senses straining into the darkness. He held the disruptor ready, certain he was being watched. A second later he laid the weapon aside and rose to his feet, relief and gladness flooding him. He sent an image of wolves greeting wolves into the woods around him and after a brief hesitation, was rewarded by the curious response of a sizable pack that emerged onto the starlit beach with eagerness tempered by caution.

He stood quietly as the Alpha male approached him, the fur along the reddish wolf's spine elevated slightly. Several pack members crowded close on the Alpha's heels and, as Deke touched their minds with his, they bellied forward with obsequious deference to lick his hands and legs. A moment later, the Alpha looked at him and, lowering his ears submissively, laid his muzzle trustingly in his palm.

Deke could hardly believe he had found wolves; he pretty much had resigned himself to travel without them, and he had a wry moment of irony at encountering a pack when he was rafting along in a region totally devoid of demons. Nevertheless, the wolves probably ranged a wide area, and while he drifted down river, perhaps they would be willing to hunt their way west with him.

With a series of quick images, the pack showed Deke the location of a herd of mule deer and invited him to join in the hunt. After a moment's hesitation, he sent affirmation, strapping his weapons belt around his waist and lifting the disruptor.

The wolves led him swiftly through the dark woods until they began to move stealthily towards a partially moon-lit clearing in which quite a few dark shapes could be seen browsing. Not troubling with concealment, Deke strode into the clearing, reached into a doe's thoughts, and held her immobilized before cutting her throat with his machete.

The deer fell in a heap and the wolves stood without moving, startled by the ease with which the kill had been made.

He sent the Alpha an image of the pack feeding, and the wolves tore into the still-shivering carcass. He watched until the Alpha raised his blood-flecked muzzle to meet Deke's blue eyes with his yellow ones. Deke nodded imperceptibly before turning away, feeling the wolves' thoughts follow him as he started back towards the river. He put a farewell image in their minds as well as the suggestion that they follow the river with him, and when their agreement came back to him, distracted somewhat by their preoccupation with the meat, he nodded again with satisfaction.

In the following days, Deke maintained esper contact with the wolves while he rafted downstream, occasionally seeing one or more on the bank or gazing at him from the treeline.

These wolves were a different variety from the ones inhabiting the region

around his home. They were smaller, males approximately ninety pounds, the females seventy to eighty. The Alpha was little bigger than the rest, his dominance achieved by the strength of his commanding eye rather than size. In color they were deep red, with some black on their backs and silver on their undersides.

The river wound along peacefully and in among the trees Deke could find no indication that demons had passed this way; there were no residual images in the wolves' minds to concern him, and he thought perhaps the creatures didn't like places where the press of growing things was too great. He wondered if they could draw energy from vegetation at all or whether they required the quick flow of animal emotion to fuel themselves. With a sigh, he realized he likely would never know the answer to that question. Meanwhile he floated without incident at about three miles an hour until a week later when he saw the forest thinning, the trees and undergrowth getting sparser.

At midday he came out from under the trees into a spreading wetland swamp. Here the river flowed more sluggishly and with regret Deke realized that this muddy delta filled with cattails thirty feet high marked the end of the ride for him, and he poled his raft through the tall, waving plants slowly, seeking a dry place where he could come ashore. What little he could see looked treacherous in the extreme. After his experiences in the southlands, he knew every stagnant pool and puddle could hide quicksand or other, worse hazards.

Every so often he passed upended concrete cairns, some broken open, others simply crushed. Scattered among these he could see the gleam of metal, a lot of it, and wondered what community had existed here and also what force had torn it apart so completely. He took time to examine the metal, puzzled by the flawless, curving shapes. He even picked up a small piece, certain its smooth surface felt warm to the touch, much warmer than the water in which it was immersed.

Aside from the cattails and the occasional peculiar insect, he saw nothing living, and when he cast his awareness out and up, he realized what a dismal spot he had discovered. Even the wolves didn't seem to want to travel through this yellowish, gripping muck, and he couldn't blame them. Of all the places he yet had crossed on this trip, this was without doubt the most unpleasant.

The temperature was much higher out from under the trees, and soon he was sweating. He stripped down to boots and underwear, stowing his clothes inside his pack before picking up a pole once more and pushing the raft towards the northwest where his sensitivity had shown him the nearest edge of the swamp.

A half hour later he was stuck. He shoved with all his strength before giving it up as useless. Sighing at the thought of walking the rest of the way out of the shallow, mustard-colored waters, hardly able to bear the foulness of the prospect, Deke gathered his belongings and began to remove the ropes which bound the logs of his raft. It took a while to unknot the swollen, cotton-hemp blend, but eventually it was done and he coiled the muddy line neatly, hanging it from a strap on his pack. Then he set off into the repulsive ooze which stank and hid all sorts of lumpy impediments just beneath its surface, heading for firmer ground and hoping there was clean water nearby.

Every few steps his boots disturbed a sulfurous gas bubble buried in the mud and it floated up to release a noxious stench, making him gag. The water came only to

his thighs in the deepest sections but there was an oily, unpleasant feel to it, disquieting him to his core. Rotting cattails left slimy trails on his skin wherever they touched, and he shuddered as if they were the chill fingers of Death himself, caressing him with loathsome intimacy. There was no visibility in the tall, waving growth and Deke turned to esper sight as he trudged resolutely through what felt like the bottom of a huge and ancient, untended latrine.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he slogged out of the swamp, and he sat down to rest briefly, sending his awareness away in search of water. There wasn't any in the immediate vicinity so he kicked off as much as he could of the drying, caked mud from his boots and stood up, stretching until his muscles and joints cracked. He drank from a water bottle and slung on his pack, draping his weapons automatically.

The heat and humidity were intense. Dry grass crunched underfoot; rain hadn't fallen here in months. He walked until nightfall over the barren countryside, his sensitivity tuned for danger. Far away at the very edge of his sensor web he could feel the red wolf pack hunting well north of his position, and from this he determined that no animals lived in this arid, climbing plain broken by mounded heaps of boulders deposited by the retreating arm of a glacier. No animals meant no water, and Deke wondered at the strange fate which seemed bent on keeping him thirsty and sweating. He longed for true autumn weather, for crisp skies and cool afternoons and the sound of the People's children shouting happily as they played by the river.

Today as he studied the way the land sloped steadily upward away from the swamp, he found himself thinking about home in long pictorial sequences that had about them the perfection of fantasy. In his imagination, he saw his father meeting with the scores of people who came each week to speak with him about the People's affairs; common folk who, bypassing their own regional governors, often arrived to seek his impartial judgment. The chieftain's fairness was legend, and no citizen of his domain doubted that he would get at the truth behind any problem, then dispense justice in a manner which generally satisfied everyone concerned.

Deke remembered asking Barr how he kept his patience even with the most trivial foolishness. His father had laughed cheerfully and explained that it wasn't for him to decide a problem wasn't worthy of his attention; if it was important to his people, it had to be important to him, for whatever affected one affected them all.

"Ah, Papa," he said to the air as he looked around at the astonishing emptiness of this vast land, "How I miss you and your counsel. Not to mention," he added with humor as his stomach growled, "Your chef!"

In the gathering darkness he walked through grass dusty and dry as standing hay, beginning to edge a little west of north as he climbed what rapidly were becoming real foothills. The stars were clear overhead, and Deke calculated that if all continued well, he should begin to see the mountains before very much longer. The prospect excited him even as it filled him with trepidation. With the season progressing, he ran the risk of getting trapped by winter while he sought the high passes marked on his maps. He knew he was well south of the area where his predecessor had entered the Rockies on his way to the coast, but this didn't worry him particularly. His ancient charts said there would be other passes, and, ruins willing, those might remain open despite the deep

snows of winter.

For a moment Deke was contemplative as he realized how close he was to the enormous range he had dreamed of crossing his entire life. It hardly seemed possible he had come as far as he had, yet the reality of distance and isolation was inescapable. He had been lucky, despite all that had befallen him. He was alive, felt well and strong. In the silent privacy afforded by space and the lonely emptiness through which he strode, he admitted to himself how surprised he was to have survived this long.

The night was peaceful. As he listened to the world in the way only a brujo could, he was pleased with how connected he felt to the land beneath his feet, how in tune with the earth and all her living vibrations. He felt centered in himself and aware of his place under the stars; his body crackled with energy and a sense of well-being.

This feeling continued into morning without letup while he climbed up and over the increasingly hilly terrain. The higher he went, the more extraordinary the views became, revealing a country still barren, but beautiful despite that, and reaching as far as his eye could see. At noon he stopped to eat and drink, then moved on, not wishing to linger in this unsheltered territory.

When night came he rested again, stretching full length on the grass, immersing himself in the subtle emanations from the environment that told him all was safe. His mind finally had run out of analysis, the normal stream of his consciousness had run as dry as these foothills through which he was hiking. He felt relaxed, alert without introspection, and this was a novel sensation. For the first time in his life he was not at war inside himself, and he knew this was because he actively was seeking what he had accepted was his inescapable destiny. For him, purpose and karma had fused.

For the next several days he climbed into increasingly rugged hills that in the eastern part of the country where he had grown up would have been called mountains. The dry grass had given way to rocky dirt sporadically broken by a hardy shrub or plant. Here and there were ruins he supposed had been small towns or villages, now practically invisible beneath the soil of time.

On the fifth day after departing the swamp, he awakened with a nagging headache and upset stomach. He drank some water and ate some of his dried provisions, hoping the queasiness came from hunger. Sure enough, an hour later he was feeling better, and climbed with renewed vigor through an area of dried river beds and upthrust granite formations which gave the countryside a tortured appearance he found oppressive.

On the sixth day the headache returned, this time accompanied by cramping as well as nausea. After a bout of diarrhea that left him sweating and wrung out, he took up his burdens and continued, walking more slowly as the day wore on and his physical discomfort increased. He wondered if he had eaten something bad, picked up an organism in the water or an imperfectly preserved bit of meat. By nightfall he was feeling quite ill and spread his blankets under a sheltering boulder. No sooner had he put his head down than he was asleep, and he slept without interruption until after sunup.

In the morning, after a further episode of vomiting and diarrhea, he actually felt a bit better, and decided he could go on. The area was getting less barren, with greenery more plentiful every hour. This seemed a hopeful sign, and he plodded along trying to

ignore the uneasy feeling in his belly and the rubbery quality of his muscles.

Two days later he began to feel alternately cold and hot, with nausea too intense even to attempt eating. His head pounded all the time, with occasional darts of sharper pain that made him stop short and clench his teeth until they passed. He tried to imagine what was wrong with him and worried that if he was suffering from food poisoning or contaminated water, he was freshly re-infecting himself every time he drank or ate, but he couldn't see an alternative. He had to drink to replace the fluids he was losing to vomiting and diarrhea, and he still hadn't found a fresh water source or seen an animal he could kill to replace his dried provisions.

On the eleventh day after leaving the swamp, Deke knew he was in serious trouble. He was semi-delirious much of the time, hardly able to walk for half an hour before having to collapse and rest for two. Fever made his joints and limbs ache, and his bowels were in constant spasm. There were only a few swallows of water left in one canteen, and he saw no prospects of getting more any time soon.

Worst of all was that also on the eleventh day, a day when the temperature abruptly took a downward turn and forced him to struggle into pants and shirt and doeskin tunic, he began to have the sensation that demons were in the area. At the edges of his greatly reduced sensory awareness he could feel the emotional pall they put forth, and he kept his disruptor unslung and ready, having to fight waves of panting weakness that threatened to take his legs out from under him. He tried to send an image of wolves greeting wolves towards the area where he last had detected the red pack, but was too exhausted to sustain it for more than a few seconds and wasn't sure he had been successful.

In the late afternoon he climbed a rocky protuberance and stood for a while exposed against the sky. From where he stood there was a commanding view of a canyon sprinkled with plentiful, unusual ruins whose disintegration seemed the result of antiquity rather than destruction. Through these ruins ran a meandering little river, really a broad creek, that looked more beautiful to Deke than anything he had ever seen. He was about to start down the rocky canyon wall when he saw something so uncanny it made him drop behind a boulder, heart pounding. Gathering his wandering thoughts, he peeked around the side of the boulder, staring in astonishment, certain he was hallucinating.

Below him, a thing resembling a giant metal insect with rotating blades front and rear was hovering over a grassy patch of earth near the most prominent ruins. As he watched, it settled. A minute later, its blades ceased spinning and a hatch opened in its side. From this doorway several figures emerged, suited entirely in reflective, silvery material covering them from head to toe. They wore cylindrical packs and moved clumsily, as if the suits were awkward and encumbering.

Almost too fascinated to feel his sickness, Deke studied these people, wondering what they were doing here, wondering about their strange craft, wondering above all why they were wearing such uncomfortable-looking garb. Two of them waved little boxes through the air and gestured excitedly to their fellows. A second later all of them stood around looking at the boxes, then turned towards the west, their motions becoming decidedly more excited. In fact, Deke thought, forcing his awareness out of

his body to get a closer look, they weren't excited; they were terrified, and as he used his esper sense to perceive the ambient energy in the nearby area, he understood what was making them behave so agitatedly.

Without hesitation, he flung himself from behind the boulder, reaching deep into himself for strength, centering his mind against the sickness of his body. In a moment he was skidding down the steep incline, taking dirt and a shower of rocks with him as he half-bounded, half-fell towards the creek bed and what he now recognized was a concentrated grouping of lesser demons moving steadily towards the strange insect craft and oddly-clad people.

The demons weren't visible, weren't traveling in the tornadic winds he was accustomed to, and by this Deke knew they were going to attack by stealth. He remembered how the manhood group had been attacked exactly the same way in the ruins near his home, and he gripped his disruptor in both hands as he dropped towards the canyon floor, determined never again to stand idly by while human beings were taken by the creatures.

Raising his voice in a shout to draw the attention of the demons he sensed as clearly as if he could see them, he leaped the last dozen feet from the rocky hillside and leveled his disruptor while still in mid-air. Simultaneously he opened his mind to the energy of the earth around him, drawing its energy through his weakened body in the form of light which braced him, banishing for now the pain and illness that for days had held him fast. The rush of power surging through him was almost uncontrollable in his diminished physical capacity, but he managed to channel it, barely, and put himself into the spaces between moments.

When he disappeared he could feel fury explode from the things. They rose in spiraling whorls of sparks and flying dirt, moving swiftly towards the last place they had perceived him clearly.

But by this time he was sweeping his disruptor beam through them at full power. At the same time, he felt the doorway in his mind swing open more fully, and a force greater than any he'd ever accessed detonated through his senses. He closed his eyes, aiming his disruptor fire by clairvoyant vision alone, his whole being focusing a twisting burst of esper-driven energy towards the greater demons that had appeared as insidiously as a nightmare, rising out of the dust to support their attendant coterie of smaller whirlwinds. There was a shrieking, sirening screech as of metal tearing against metal, and then his energy impacted the creatures.

Deke continued to pour disruptor fire into the smaller demons while the energy surging through him grew, coalesced, became an almost tangible entity as he attacked with single-minded hatred and ferocity. He could feel the leaders trying to pinpoint his exact location, but they were confused, unable to perceive him clearly. Their movements became slower, less cohesive. Another burst of energy lanced from Deke's mind and he could feel them beginning to come apart, dirt and dust dropping to the ground as he destroyed their structural integrity with a deadly, double assault of physical and mental energies.

Moments later the rest of the whirlwinds were dissipating and he could sense the last of their negative influence spinning away into the distant twilight in tatters.

It took a long minute for him to get control of his esper sense and shut down the window in his mind. When he did, the influx of strength that had sustained him was abruptly terminated, and he returned to full visibility in a half-faint, the sickness back upon him, but a hundred times worse than before. The disruptor dropped from his fingers to hang from its strap as he used his hands to try and push himself upright. He heard the call of the pack inside his head, got the images of wolves greeting wolves, but was unable to respond. From the corner of his eye he could see the silver-garbed group of people approaching, their body language conveying amazement, curiosity, and tentative concern.

Deke struggled to his feet, tottered a few steps towards them, then fell, retching weakly, too ill to see clearly. His head throbbed and his stomach cramped and he curled on his side in an agony of spasming muscles. He tried once again to rise, but never made it. He was distantly aware of the red wolves streaming down the canyon wall to surround him protectively, snarling fiercely at the people who had stopped and were now talking confusedly among themselves.

“Wait...!” Deke croaked feebly, trying to touch their minds to gauge their intentions, but failing. He could see them looking through the visors of their suits at his disruptor and he quickly held his empty hands out in a universal gesture of peace and greeting. In the same instant and with the last of his fading awareness, he sent the wolves a farewell signal, and made it an imperative. He felt consciousness ebbing fast, and as he reached weakly towards these people who might or might not represent salvation, he made an effort to speak, but sickness overpowered him, and the only word they heard clearly before he became insensible was, “...please.”