

# RUIN

by Isobel Noble

## Book One: The Tent City



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Cover by the Author

Lo! Death has reared himself a throne  
In a strange city lying alone  
Far down within the dim West,  
Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best  
Have gone to their eternal rest.  
There, shrines and palaces and towers  
(Time-eaten towers that tremble not)  
Resemble nothing that is ours...

Edgar Allen Poe, "The City in the Sea"

## PROLOGUE

His parents were fighting, again. Behind the tapestry hanging that separated his sleeping area from the rest of his mother's tent, Deke Wolfson heard the blow, heard his mother's cry of shock and pain, heard his father curse her for a witch before storming from the graceful pavilion.

Slowly, he sank down on the lynx-pelt throw that covered his bed. The fights always began the same way, with his father accusing his mother of one infidelity or another perpetrated when he was away to war. His mother generally laughed and pointed out that Barr Wolfson, great leader of all the Wolf People, was known near and far for his appetite for young women.

This usually made Barr roar, for it enraged him to think his business was so well-known to his beautiful, wise, and thus far, completely unmanageable wife, Tilva.

The fact was, the boy mused, cupping his chin in one square, brown hand, his mother was chaste. He'd been into every bit of Wolf business since infancy, and would have known otherwise. In every way Tilva seemed to play the perfect wife, caring for him and his father meticulously.

Deke's red-gold curls fell unheeded over his face and his brilliant, blue eyes grew more intense. It must be that, he decided. It must be that his mother merely play-acted the role, for her own reasons. His father liked to own things, but he could not own Tilva. Tilva was the People's foremost witch woman, and such a one never could be tamed fully even by a chieftain.

I will never marry, Deke thought matter-of-factly.

He rose quickly, a lithe, well-coordinated youngster who moved with uncanny grace and fluidity. His skin was sun-bronzed even in early winter, a result of ultra-violet exposure caused by the war's depletion of the ozone layer. Many faint scars criss-crossed his flesh, the minor wounds of a healthy, active twelve-year-old, with the occasional deeper wound gotten during the rigorous weapons training a chieftain's son had to undergo each day of his life. He shook his gleaming hair from his forehead with a characteristic gesture, and checked to be sure he had his knife and slingshot in his carrying sack.

"Mother," he called. "I'm going out."

Tilva came from behind the hangings, his stoicism moving her as always. That tawny mask he wore would cripple him as it had crippled his father, as it crippled all the people of the Wolf. Tilva's people came from the south, almost at the edge of the world. Proximity to the ruins had taught them that life could be short, therefore it was something to be nurtured. Wolf folk, on the other hand, were nomads, warlike and proud. They were hardier, more self-contained than southerners. Frequently Tilva could see these two sides battling within her son. Right now he was all Wolfson. She motioned him towards her and gave him a swift kiss, smoothing his hair with a gentle hand, noticing how tall and straight he had become.

"Off with you, then," she said, hiding her thoughts.

His eyes shifted to meet hers before moving away. "Everything will be all right," he muttered roughly, wishing he could say more. Then he sped from the tent.

Tilva looked after him, her throat aching. "No tears," she told herself sternly. She had given up crying long ago. Her people now lived peacefully to the south because seventeen years previously, at fifteen, she had been handed over by her father to the bearded chieftain of the barbaric wildmen who had swept down out of the north threatening to plunder everything of worth her people possessed. From the moment the horsemen thundered into her city, she had felt Barr Wolfson's eyes singling her out. Somehow she had known what he wanted, had understood the price he would demand for their survival.

Normally Tilva had few regrets. She'd always craved adventure, and in the early years of riding behind her husband had come to love the boisterous, colorful bandit, for she learned that within his own frame of reference, Barr was neither cruel nor unjust, merely absolute in his power and voracious in his appetites.

She sighed and twisted her dark hair into a knot on the back of her neck. It was freezing in the tent, and her breath made smoke in the air. She called for servants to bring a brazier, despising the cold. Spring will come soon, she told herself, rubbing her reddened fingers together briskly.

A shiver rippled through her as she contemplated the arrival of spring, and Deke's thirteenth birthday. Thirteen had its own meaning for boys. The rites of passage for young men were terrifying and barbaric, and Tilva wondered how her son, unusually intelligent and gifted with the sensitivity, would endure the trials of the Wolf.

She withdrew her forecasting tiles from their deerskin pouch and sat at a broad table set convenient to the kitchen area. She'd never dared look at the time of Deke's testing before, fearing she might betray an anxiety that would cripple her son and keep him from being able to outthink fate, karma, or whatever was necessary to survive. But now, filled with inexplicable foreboding, Tilva prepared her mind for casting the tiles. She had to know if her son was to fail this spring as did many youths, or whether he would succeed to become veritable king over a domain stretching three hundred miles in every direction, controlling more than half a million souls and a hundred communities, the largest area and population to be united under one ruler since the great war more than a millennium earlier.

Her hands barely quivered as she made her first cast, studying the position of each tile with accomplished skill. They hadn't fallen in any resolved patterns. Reluctantly, she gathered them up and threw once more. Again there was no discernible pattern. A small frown formed between her brows. Third time would tell the tale. With great care she picked up the tiles, and muttering a quick prayer to her personal spirit guide, let them fly. She stared disbelievingly at the table. The tiles still lay in random and meaningless heaps. There was nothing for her adept clairvoyance to see. This was very unusual, and meant her spirit guide didn't wish to divulge Deke's future to her.

Agitated, Tilva returned the tiles to their pouch. Later, when she was calmer, she would try again. In the meantime, she would meditate, for perhaps the fault lay with her own concentration.

Huddling deeper into her cloak, she looked up as servants brought the brazier of hot coals and set it nearby. She stretched her hands towards the heat thankfully, and cursed the cold anew. Nothing good could come of a people who loved ice and snow, she philosophized dourly, for they were the worshippers of death.

Light snow was falling as Deke made his way down the hill away from his mother's tent. He drew his heavy cloak closer about him and pulled the hood down across his eyes. His sheepskin boots made no sound in the two or three inches of new snow layering the ground, and all the noises of the community were muffled as people hurried to get under cover.

From his tent at the top of the hill, Barr Wolfson watched his son's progress through the snowstorm and marked his direction. Damn his eyes! Had the boy been in his mother's tent throughout that whole spat?

As usual, Barr's feelings were mixed. On the one hand, he knew the constant domestic battles were scarring his son, and this he would end if he could. But on the other hand, the boy had replaced the father in his wife's heart, and this rankled Barr, making him shout at Deke when really it wasn't the lad's fault Tilva was what she was. Aye, what wouldn't he give to see affection just once in his boy's eyes instead of the usual caution!

Barr scrubbed his red beard with both hands, his midnight-blue eyes narrowed to crevices. His broad, massive frame was powerful with no trace of fat along the ridged musculature. He was dressed in sheepskin and leather; sheepskin-lined leather boots, wool-lined doeskin trousers and parka, with a fur-trimmed winter cloak over all. He was better than six feet tall with authority ingrained into every inch of him. Barr Wolfson could wither a man with a stare and fell a steer with a blow of his fist. Yet for all his physical and intellectual force, he couldn't intimidate the witch or her witch's whelp. He didn't know what tricks she was teaching the boy, but he knew in his heart the boy was learning something. There were times when Deke's brilliant eyes seemed to travel all the way through him, and at those times Barr felt he had been assessed and found wanting. This infuriated him, for who was a child to judge a proven man? And why should the boy be so stiff-necked in his appraisals?

Barr's own great vitality protested his son's nature, because he sensed Deke didn't love life. This saddened him, for despite his tempers and tantrums, the chieftain celebrated each day with relish and gusto. If it weren't for Tilva's and Deke's strangeness, he would be content. Especially if Tilva would learn her place and stay in it.

A wry smile touched his lips. Not bloody likely, he thought with grim humor. She hadn't changed since the first day he had seen her and fallen wildly, obsessively, in love with her. Aye, what a woman she had been, even at fifteen. He'd had to have her for his wife, despite the warnings of advisors who predicted that southern ways were insidious, and treachery must be her only motive in agreeing to come along with him. Barr knew that might have been true in the beginning, but after a time her passion had rivaled his own. At least, he modified, until the day her love for him had died and become instead a studied and dutiful acquiescence. He frowned slightly, remembering that day, and wondered what madness had been upon him that he should have come to his young wife without first bathing the stench of that fort whore from his flesh.

A large, wolfish dog who until now had rested silently at his feet, stirred and stretched. Absently, Barr reached down to stroke the animal's head, and for a moment considered calling out to his son. Then, changing his mind, he wondered why he should. To apologize? To explain? What would be the point? So long as the boy lived with his mother, there would remain that distance between them.

Next year, Barr thought, when he's a man and has his own tent, then we'll see about mending things between us. After all, Deke was a boy any man should be proud to call son and heir: smart, sound, and with that special glow which won men's and women's hearts alike. The boy had charisma, Barr acknowledged honestly. If only he were a bit more...something, Barr didn't know what, couldn't quite put his finger on what it was that made Deke strange to his heart of hearts.

By the ruins, he loved the boy. If he also felt combative around him then it was his job as man and father to put those feelings aside. He nodded to himself and watched his son's back disappear beyond the edge of the Wolf encampment where the chieftain's horses were stabled.

A few moments later, Deke re-appeared astride his own horse, a fiery mare of about four years. He rode with only a hackamore, his seat impeccable.

He drummed his heels against the mare's flanks and she leaped forward. For a second Barr thought his son was riding to greet him, then a slow burn started in his temples as he realized the boy had seen him but had deliberately turned his horse away to disappear behind a line of tents belonging to the less high, the laborers and merchant classes.

Ah, my son, he thought, you will pay for that insolence with unpleasant chores which you hate. Maybe that will temper your arrogance a little. Barr turned and stalked into his tent, the dog following.

Deke called his mare Micmac after the people who had bred the sire and studded him to a Wolfson brood mare. In color she was grey, white, brown, and black, with the clear and flashy markings prized by the People. Within a thousand yards there wasn't a horse who could stay near her. She had been given to Deke for his twelfth birthday, and he had trained her himself.

The snow was flying thicker and faster, and there was a cold wind behind it promising twenty-four hours of foul weather. Deke squinted against the blowing flakes. Going back was unthinkable. Micmac pranced restlessly beneath him as he glanced indecisively from left to right. Then, making up his mind, he wheeled the mare west into the oncoming wall of snow, away from escarpments that stood like sentinels along the borders of the ruins.

Tilva paced her tent, every so often glancing at the spring-wound fort clock that adorned one corner. It had been built by folk who lived west of the People's wintering grounds, and taken during a raid of conquest. It was one of the first gifts Barr had given her, back in the days when their marriage was new and filled with the hopes of two cultures.

The boy had been gone too long. The wind howled outside, shaking the tent with its fury. The blizzard was worse than anyone had anticipated, and Tilva was beside herself with worry.

A sudden blast of icy air chilled her anew, and she turned to see Barr tying fast the door. Snow fell from his cloak and gathered about his boots. The wolfish dog settled near the brazier, black eyes gleaming in the lamplight.

"Call Deke out here," Barr growled.

"He's gone," Tilva said.

Barr's scowl deepened. "He was here before," he said accusingly. "Listening!"

"He lives here," Tilva stated curtly.

"Never mind. I saw him and that pony hightailing it. I thought sure he'd be back by now."

"You let him go in this weather?" Tilva's eyes began to burn and she took a step closer to her husband.

"He's nearly a man, or so he keeps telling me." The chieftain's expression was cold and his tone held a warning.

"He's a boy of twelve," Tilva spat. "Only a boy."

"And so you'd keep him, eh, woman?" Barr unfastened his cloak and threw back the hood.

"Don't get too comfortable," Tilva replied stiffly. "I intend sleeping alone tonight."

Barr's eyes stayed level. "Perhaps." He went to the table and poured wine. "He probably went to see Mastra." He turned the wine goblet in his hand, admiring it, recalling the village he had plundered to obtain it. "That's where he'll turn up."

Tilva shook her head. "No. He's in the storm."

"Despite your best efforts, the boy has sense enough to come in out of a blizzard!"

"Yes, my lord. But at this moment he is alone in the wilderness to the west."

Barr studied her. Her voice had the odd cadence it got when spirits spoke through her, and utterances made at these times were never in vain or casually stated. Barr didn't understand such matters very well, but he knew there were powers abroad in the world which acted whether a man understood them or not, believed in them or not. He was intimately acquainted with the power that moved within Tilva at certain moments, using her body as an instrument of expression. It was this entity that gave Tilva her abilities not

only to heal and divine future events, but to see into human minds and hearts.

“What is he doing there?” he asked finally.

“He is meeting his greater Self.”

A wave of superstitious fear washed through him. “Do you mean he’s dying?”

The voice was Tilva’s again. “No,” she said. “But he will die if someone doesn’t find him soon.”

Barr’s expression hardened and he went to the tent flap where he called for a servant. When a woman came, muffled against the storm, he spoke tersely. She bobbed a curtsey to him, cast a worried glance at Tilva, and fled from the tent. Barr refastened his cloak, strode through the hangings into the boy’s quarters and swept up a spare boot. “Canis!” he called, and the dog came to stand expectantly at his feet. “Mark it, Canis. Find Deke.”

At the mention of the boy’s name the dog pricked up his ears. He sniffed the boot deeply and barked, moving impatiently for the door.

Barr tossed the boot to Tilva, then threw open the door flaps. Canis bounded eagerly into the snow and Barr plodded after him, the storm making him a dark shadow before swallowing him from sight. Tilva came to the tent door and looked out with foreboding. The snowflakes were tiny and driven by a gale force wind. Already her husband’s footprints were nearly obliterated. It would be a miracle if they found the boy, she thought. Even the dog wouldn’t be able to catch a scent in such a storm. She drew down the flaps and looped them shut. Still the sound of the wind reached her, and on it she thought she heard the distant scream of a lion, though she couldn’t be sure.

I’ve been here before, Deke thought numbly, feeling as if his essential self had drawn inward away from the lash of the storm, finding a quiet refuge where he could hear himself think. This place, this situation; I know it, I recognize it.

His mind was filled with unusual clarity. He felt that if he could only separate from his physical situation he would be able to see everything, and know what to do. Even now, a part of him was doing just that, and he sensed a wisp of emotion that had to be his mother’s seeking out into the blizzard. It was easy for him to sidestep that probe. He had known for a long time that his own gift of sensitivity far outshone hers. He also knew one must want to be found before he could be found in fact.

He sensed the bearlike presence of his father riding behind Canis, and it was the dog who made him most wary. Canis was of the wild ruins breed, and possessed heightened sensitivity in those areas pertinent to his species’ survival, particularly tracking prey. If anyone could find him against his will it would be the dog.

Micmac whinnied loudly as a particularly fierce blast of wind drove stinging particles of snow against her tender muzzle. The sound dragged Deke back to the frozen landscape and he examined his predicament with slowly accelerating panic. He could barely feel his extremities. His horse was moving uncertainly in a slow circle, unwilling or unable to proceed directly into the wind. When he looked around, he realized he had no idea where he was. Visibility was zero. His disorientation progressed, and with a cushioned thump, he landed on the ground at his horse’s feet. With shocked surprise, he stumbled to his feet and clutched the mare’s lead rope. Which way should he go?

As if in answer to his unspoken question, a heavily cloaked figure appeared at his side and silently lifted him onto Micmac’s back. Taking the lead in one fur-mitted hand, the stranger set off into the snowstorm, leading horse and boy behind him.

Deke made no effort to struggle. Whether captor or rescuer, at this moment the stranger represented

salvation, and Deke was too cold and confused to argue or worry about it.

Together they faded into the storm, and moments later, wind and snow erased their tracks completely.

Deke became aware of warmth and light, stony walls and leaping shadows; knew he lay on a fur-covered platform inside a cave. His ears told him Micmac and other horses were nearby, as well as a single person preparing food. His stomach gave a growl as he propped himself on an elbow.

A spare, doeskin-clad man knelt by a fireplace. He threw a pinch of something into the flames and the fire leapt up in a flurry of sparks and smoke.

Unexpectedly, Deke felt awe. It was something about the man's face.

Ancient, it was, criss-crossed with a thousand lines. His eyes were black and deeply set, and they, too, gave an impression of great age. The hair was silver and worn in long braids, contrasting sharply with the mahogany hue of his flesh.

Deke watched for a moment longer, registering him. "Who are you?"

Jet eyes regarded the boy penetratingly. "I am myself and selves," he said, his voice rich and crisp.

"I'm Deke Wolfson. Thank you for helping me." He gestured to the cave. "Do you live here?"

"Here, there, many places. For now, I am here."

"Where exactly is here?"

"Here is where we are." Humor twinkled briefly in the black eyes before he lowered his gaze to the fire once again, whether to hide laughter or watch the stewpot Deke couldn't be sure.

"What are you cooking?" He sniffed appreciatively.

The man ladled a generous portion into a wooden bowl and offered it with a spoon.

Deke climbed from the bed, relieved to find the cold had done him no lasting damage. He took the bowl, tasted the steaming mixture. A combination of meat and root vegetables thickened with grains and herbs, he noted. Delicious.

The man took a portion for himself and settled back on his haunches to eat. Until his bowl was clean, he said nothing further. Noticing the boy's bowl was empty, he gestured to the pot. Though he easily could have eaten more, Deke refused another helping. Winters were hard this far north, and it was possible the old man needed every bit of his rations.

"Your people are seeking you," the old man said, handing across a skin of drinking water.

A twinge of remorse passed through the boy as he quenched his thirst. He imagined his mother's desperation, and, if truth were to be told, his father's as well. "Aye," he replied. "But how would you know that? Does my father know you?"

"Our paths have crossed." The old man's eyes were shrewd as he watched Deke. "Come, I will show you a brujo secret, and then we will sleep until Mother Storm has passed." He withdrew a leather pouch from his belt and removed a carefully wrapped bundle. On a flat rock, he set an unusually carved wooden pipe and a box covered with bizarre symbols.

"Brujo?"

"First we will smoke," he said to the wide-eyed youngster. "This is an act designed to open the way."

"What way?" Deke asked, his trepidation overpowered by curiosity. He watched while his host opened the wooden box and took a generous pinch of the substance inside between his fingers. Rolling it into a ball, he dropped the stuff into the pipe bowl. Then he offered the pipe stem-first.

Deke admired the smooth, worn feel of the wood, appreciating the superior craftsmanship that had

gone into its carving. Then he fumbled quickly in the fire and popped a small coal onto the smoking mixture, his fingers moving too swiftly to be burned. He looked up and met the dark gaze watching him. He felt something momentous was about to happen, and his eyes were alight with anticipation. Before he could lose his nerve, he put the stem to his lips and drew, filling his lungs with cold, aromatic smoke that expanded the longer it was inside him, until with a choking gasp, he exhaled in a strangled cough.

Lungs aching, he looked up to see the old man's silent scrutiny.

"Again," the old one said.

"Is this tobacco?" Deke asked hoarsely. He felt warm all over.

"No questions. Smoke."

Deciding the fellow hadn't rescued him merely to kill him in this weird way, Deke raised the pipe and inhaled strongly. Again he exploded with coughing, but this time the fit passed more quickly. When he had himself under control, he realized he was discovering things, things like the many-textured surfaces of the stones comprising this cave, surfaces that breathed. There was a pattern to the way the smoke curled upward from the fire, traveling along a thermal pathway into a crack in the rocky ceiling, and thence, Deke supposed, out of the cave and into the world. For an instant he felt himself following the smoke, as incorporeal as it was, but he caught himself and looked out through changed eyes.

The old man's face appeared different. Nuances of expression were visible where before he had seemed impenetrable. The boy gazed wonderingly and barely noticed when the pipe was removed from his nerveless fingers.

"Too loosely tethered," he heard the man say. "We have begun just in time."

"You were going to show me a secret." Deke heard his voice but felt nothing. His tongue and lips were numb, his eyes glazed, the pupils dilated.

His mind swam. He saw the old man's hand reach to touch his heart, and gasped when it made contact. Images flowed across his thoughts in an accelerating rush.

He saw ugly, mushroom clouds spreading their deadly dust over the earth; saw steel and concrete buildings exploding in a nanosecond's flash of nuclear fire. He saw the clouds raining down radioactive deluges that soon turned to snow as the sun's rays were reflected back into space and the planet began to cool. He heard the old one's voice in his head, but the words didn't make much sense.

Further images swept across his mind's eye: of stragglers survivors who scurried like animals to find a scrap in the wasteland, of ragged men and women grouping together into scattered tribes and communities.

There were some who turned their backs on the world and barricaded themselves into walled towns; fort dwellers, Deke thought with the contempt all his people felt for such folk.

A moment later the images shifted to display his own people as they had developed over the years. Like the Mongols of ancient times, Deke's ancestors dwelt in the saddle, moving their herds, living off the land.

A man's face appeared among the many, and Deke knew this was the chieftain, but the features, though familiar, were unknown to him.

The old man removed his hand from Deke's breast, and the boy felt as if an intimate connection had been broken, which in fact it had.

"Do you recognize that man?"

Deke waited, aware the question was rhetorical.

"He was your grandfather, my young chief. He laid the foundation for the conquests of your sire's

chieftainship. Though Barr later outstripped by far the deeds of his father, Rael Wolfson designed the model of what was to be.”

“I never met my grandfather,” Deke said. “He died before I was born.”

“You favor him somewhat,” the old man said. “Like your father.”

“So I’ve been told,” Deke replied.

“And yet, superficial resemblance aside, you favor Rael and Barr not at all.”

“What do you mean?” Deke was on guard. He knew he was different, but how could this person know that? With difficulty, he tried to order his thoughts. He felt disconnected from his body, and realized what it meant to be “too loosely tethered.” The old man hadn’t referred to his sanity, but to his Self. As he examined the implications of this meeting, dismayed awareness swelled in his mind. “You didn’t find me by chance,” he stated flatly.

The old one nodded. “You are as quick as I was told you would be,” he said after a pause during which he analyzed the limits to which he could push the boy in this, their first conversation.

“Who told you?” Deke demanded with bitter disappointment. “My mother? My father?”

“Both. But I would have found you in any case.” The old man gestured vaguely. “The rocks, the wind, the earth told me to watch for you. I have been waiting a long time.”

“Why?” Deke’s face was taut with anger and betrayal.

“Because of who you are. Unless you learn everything I teach you, all will be lost.”

Deke seemed to feel a wind blowing through him, as if he were hollow and insubstantial. The old man’s voice was filled with such compassion and gentle awareness that his anger abruptly died. “What are you doing to me?”

“You are no helpless child,” the old man said sharply. “I do nothing. You do it all.”

“But who are you?”

“When it is important for you to know, you will.”

“You don’t expect I’ll put myself further in your hands without knowing, do you?”

“You are in your own hands, Master Wolfson. I am merely sent to show you the way.”

“The way,” Deke repeated, confused.

“Yes. Come. Arise! Destiny awaits.” The old man rose and beckoned.

Filled with misgivings, Deke got up and followed him towards the back of the cave, where numerous recesses were hidden in eerie shadows thrown by the sparking fire.

He trailed the old one into darkness that deepened as they moved away from the hearth. He stretched his hands before him to ward off any potential collision either with the walls or, he smiled a grim, grownup smile, his destiny. He thought now of his mother’s words on the subject, that each human had his own destiny, or karma, his own purpose for choosing to be born.

They emerged from the passageway into a natural cavern. Crystal rock formations emitted spectral radiance. The quality of light was fey and unearthly. A mist gathered about his feet as Deke came to a halt, staring. His eyes had to be playing tricks, he decided. What he saw couldn’t possibly be real.

Stretching as far as he could see were row upon row of metal shelves, and stacked upon those shelves were more books than the boy had seen in his life, more than he had dreamed existed or could exist in his world. He had the oddest feeling that he could walk along those stacks and never reach the end of them, that they, and the cavern in which they were preserved, were infinite in dimension.

“Ruins,” he whispered, afraid to disturb the sanctity of the place.

“Stored here is a repository of the most important and essential records, works of literature, technical

and scientific manuals extant today. How or why these books are here is not important; that you make use of them in our time together, is.” The old man peered intently at the boy.

“What is this place?”

The old one shrugged. “It is a library. Almost any subject you can think of is represented in these texts, and there is a cunning catalog system located over there in that wall of drawers.”

“Are only books stored here?” Deke asked. “Or might there be other things, maybe in further grottos?”

“What kinds of things?”

Deke hesitated. In his mind’s eye he saw a vision of another underground place filled not with books but with the steel-cold weapons of war.

The old man frowned. “I see what you are thinking. Any weapons preserved from ancient days are better left unfound. Look what they wrought! Look what they brought down.”

“Maybe the old ways had to be brought down,” Deke said thoughtfully.

“Why would you say this?”

“Before one can plant this year’s crops, one must cut down last year’s withered stalks.”

“That is an analogy of youth, my young philosopher.” The old man’s eyes were rueful. “Sometimes there is still fruit to be gleaned from a withered stalk.”

“I’ll be expected to make war soon,” Deke said. “Until I kill a man in battle, I can’t possibly command respect among Wolf fighters. If I can find a better weapon than my enemy has, it’s to my advantage.”

The old man was chilled by the boy’s matter-of-fact tone as he casually discussed taking another human being’s life. He looked into Deke’s amazingly blue eyes and tried hard to fathom the boy’s soul. There was anger in Deke, he decided, but no sadism or evil. The boy was not one of those who would take pleasure in another’s pain. Yet he recognized that this was a creature bred to wage war, and to wage it effectively. Establishing dominion was in the nature of Wolfsons; he had known this when first he had planned taking over the boy’s education and training some years ago. It was the type of society he would create within his dominion that interested and concerned the old man. Yes, he was very concerned about that, yet he must make no overt attempt to indoctrinate or propagandize the youngster, because he also sensed a deep and abiding stubbornness in Deke, and it would take only one false step on his part to alienate the boy forever.

“Come,” he said lightly. “Choose a book to take home with you. I know you read well.”

“Aye,” Deke responded. He paused, then said without obvious guile but with charm the old man found irresistible, “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d be honored if you would choose one for me.”

The old man was pleased. He knew the boy had tried deliberately to make him so, but still he was gratified. “I will pick one for you this time,” he said, “But next time you must make the choice. Are we agreed?”

“Aye,” Deke replied, eagerness growing in him, hungry to discover what secrets these books held. He wondered how many the old man had read, and found himself jealous of his host’s superior learning.

“Let us begin at the beginning,” the old man said. He pulled a small volume from the shelves and turned to the boy. “Handle this with care. It has been treated to make it resistant to damage, but nevertheless is an ancient thing and fragile.”

Deke looked at the cover. “This is a children’s book.”

“Oh, so it might seem at first. But do not be fooled. It was written this way for a reason, and when next I see you, you will tell me that reason.”

The boy’s face was doubtful as he turned the volume over in his hand. The title was not inspiring,

and he wondered why the old man would want him to read a child's primer on agriculture. What possible interest could a chieftain's son have in such a book?

He read aloud, "Animal Farm, by George Orwell."

"Yes," the old man said with satisfaction.

Later, lying in the furs and blankets provided for him, Deke thought about the book grotto, the library, and felt that his brief sojourn there had had about it the timeless quality of a dream. He knew this impression would never fade over the years, that he would carry the experience of his first visit to that place with him for the rest of his life. So many books, he thought sleepily. And if books, perhaps other things. Maybe not here, but somewhere. He felt sure of it. And if they existed, then he would find them.

He would.

The morning sun was dazzling on the fresh snowscape as Deke led Micmac from the cave. His book was carefully tucked away in his carrying sack and he had eaten a light breakfast. He grasped the mare's mane and with a quick spring was on her back. The old man stood by the horse's head, looking up.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Deke said. "I'd like to return, if you'll have me."

The old man nodded. "It is decided." He paused. "Are you certain you can find your way?"

"Aye," Deke said, and it was true. Today in the clear, morning air he knew exactly where he was, often had ridden past this very spot with his friends. What amazed him was that he never had noticed a cave. None of them had. Now that he knew where to look, it seemed impossible to have missed it.

He shook his hair out of his eyes and lifted one hand in salute. Then he turned his horse and headed away from the rocky escarpments towards home.

When next Deke looked back over his shoulder, he saw the old man sitting high atop a great rock, facing into the rising sun. His eyes were closed and his lips moved, and the boy could hear faint chanting. He shivered, for he was having the strangest feeling, the oddest notion. It seemed to him the old man was chanting a prayer of thanks to the spirit of the storm. The thought came and went quickly, but not before a part of him registered and was stupefied by the implications of such a thing. Then, making a face, he faced front again, dismissing the idea as childish superstition. No matter what strange lore he possessed, the old man was only that: an old man. He could no more command the storms than could Deke.

The ride home was laborious and he was glad when he came over the last rise and saw the widespread tents of his city laid out before him.

He had been spotted by lookouts miles previously, and now he saw the reception committee coming out to greet him; men and women who had spent the night searching through the snowstorm, small children for whom the excitement was an interesting novelty, and behind everyone, Barr and Tilva Wolfson. Seeing his parents together and moving as a unit caused the boy an internal lurch, as if events had progressed in his absence and he was now a step out of the earlier rhythms of his life.

Already he was devising the story he would tell them, for he had decided not to mention his encounter with the old man. His friend Mastra, a tall, lean youth with brown skin, crinkly hair, and warm, dark eyes moved into position alongside Micmac, lending his support.

"Where did you go?" Mastra whispered. "What a hornet's nest you've stirred up!"

"Later," Deke murmured back. "Stay close. They won't make a scene if you're here."

Mastra nodded and the two boys' eyes met, the one's dark, the other's light, yet there was a resemblance between them, something in the set of their cheekbones.

Deke's look was one of gratitude for his friend's presence, then he turned to face the mob. He

flashed a grin and a roar of greeting went out over the snow separating them. Then he was among them, feeling hands patting him, reaching for him, as the Wolf People welcomed their wandering cub home.

## CHAPTER ONE

What makes a man? What distinguishes the man from the boy he was? Strength? Experience? Ceremony?

The General always said that what made a man was his ability or inability to face the unknown by himself. Easy to be brave in a group, he reckoned, that's the child's way, the gang mentality. But to be brave when there was no one to witness the bravery or lack of it, that was the measure of a man or woman. And that, he affirmed, was what made the People of the Wolf so special.

Yet even as he told me this, his expression was troubled, as if memory belied his confident words...

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

The day dawned warm, and a hot breeze blew off the ruins. Scattered bits of ancient rubble glittered in the sunlight; flashes of fire adding heat to the day. As far as the eye could see lay desolation. Everything was brown or grey, covered with silt-like alkali dust mixed with ash. It seemed nothing could live in this vast wasteland, but that was an illusion. The ruins were home to a variety of creatures, not all of them natural or recognizable. Mostly, people prospered best who avoided the worst devastation zones.

Except for us, Deke thought as he stood with a dozen other boys preparing to be initiated into the mysteries of male adulthood. In the weeks to come more would follow, but these were the season's first, all sons of highly placed men. His friend Mastra alone was fatherless, without traditional rank or status, but from earliest childhood had been included in the events and ceremonies of the highest ranked chiefs. That this was in deference to his friendship with Deke was the official story. The truth was more complicated and only a few understood it completely.

The previous night the boys had been awakened by none-too-gentle, gruff-speaking men who made them dress, put dark sacks over their heads, and led them to horses they were helped to mount. Each was told to remain silent, not to speak for any reason. Then they had ridden away at a stiff trot, each boy trying to quell the trepidation in his heart even as he clung to his horse's mane.

At dawn they had stopped, here, wherever here was. The sacks were removed and they were permitted a few minutes to allow their eyes to adjust to the light. There were two men attending each boy, the men cloaked and masked. The boys had no way of knowing if their own fathers or brothers were among those present. There was one extra man, robed and cowl'd entirely in black. He stood aside, pointedly ignoring the boys.

When the sun reached a certain angle, the black-robed man faced the group. He stood with the sun behind him, and such was his timing that his cowl eclipsed the light, making a corona of fiery brilliance around his head. Only his eyes were visible, and they glowed redly with ambient brightness. They fixed on each boy in turn, and each tried not to fidget beneath that unsettling gaze.

When the eyes turned to Deke, the chieftain's son lifted his chin defiantly. An unspoken challenge rippled between the two and the others shifted uneasily. It had been a long time since a future leader of the People had been tested.

"So you wish to be men," the robed figure rasped. "Yet you are afraid. You wonder what will happen to you. You fear pain and discomfort. You know nothing about these matters, yet you expect the worst.

You are filled with expectations.” The red-tinged eyes raked the group. “Little boys, believe me when I tell you that before this ritual is complete your expectations will be scorched out of you, never to return. Your expectations make you emotional. They make you weak. They keep you children.” He paused dramatically. “When the ruins have had their way with you, you will have no more expectations.” He paused again, then added, “That is, those of you who survive.”

A collective shudder went through the boys.

“Now, strip,” the man ordered curtly.

The boys looked uncertainly at one another, and some began to unfasten garments.

“Hurry up,” said the man. “To enter manhood you must be as naked as the day you entered life. In a sense you are being born anew, and everything you hope to gain must now be found, made, or won.” He waited in silence as the boys disrobed. When each stood uncomfortably naked next to his pile of clothes, he nodded to one of the men who brought him a rough, cloth sack. Reaching inside, he removed a hunting knife as long as a man’s forearm. With a quick flick of his wrist, he threw it at the feet of the nearest boy, where it struck quivering in the ground. The boy stood transfixed. In rapid succession the man threw knives at the feet of all boys but one. His hooded gaze fell upon the chieftain’s son.

“For the People’s future leader, expectations are especially dangerous,” he said, and there might have been a tinge of regret in his stern voice. “You go into the ruins truly naked, Master Wolfson. We shall see what blood you carry.”

Deke’s initial expression of surprise changed to one of comprehension. Thirteen boys into the ruins, he thought, twelve knives. He turned to look measuringly at his fellows and saw them watching him. He grinned reassuringly and winked. Then he turned back to the initiation master. “Not that kind,” he said with bravado. “Not the blood of betrayal, you hooded hobgoblin!”

The robed man chuckled harshly. “Bravely spoken,” he said. Then, to the group, “You have at your disposal all those things you find about you, those things you can make or devise from the environment, or whatever you can win by whatever means you choose. There are no rules.” He paused and looked at the naked boys. Some actually shivered though the air was sultry.

“Remember,” he added sharply. “These are ruins. Dangers lurk here. Animals, spirits, demons, the ruins themselves: all will test you before you emerge men.” He nodded once, curtly. “You must find your way back here. When you get hungry enough and thirsty enough, you will have a vision or spontaneous awareness, and this will change you, help you. Remember! You begin alone, as prey. Those who survive must become predators, and learn the essential lesson of the Wolf.” A final time the red-rimmed eyes raked the group. “Pick up your knives. You may not ask questions. The ruins will make everything clear.”

One by one the boys obeyed.

The black-robed man nodded to the other men. Sacks were whisked over the boys’ heads once more, and each was put aboard a horse.

“Remember!” he shouted after them as they departed. “You are on your own! Do what you must!”

The group of riders separated into pairs of men, each leading a blindfolded boy into the ruins, each pair finding a route away from the others.

The sack was stifling. Sound came to him muffled by burlap. Deke couldn’t perceive direction or terrain, though it soon became apparent he was accompanied by only two men. He was uncomfortable; the tender skin of his scrotum and buttocks was getting chafed by the rough, leather saddle, and the sun burned ever hotter across his bare shoulders. Sweat broke out on his body as he tried to resign himself to the various

physical discomforts, the purpose of which, he suspected, was to soften him up.

They jogged steadily for hours. When they stopped and he was allowed to dismount, they removed the sack from his sweat-drenched head and handed him a skin of water.

“Drink deep, Master Wolfson,” one of the men said in a deep, eerily familiar voice. “It’s the last ye’ll see unless it’s by yer own ingenuity.”

Deke looked around, trying to get his bearings. The sun was at zenith. He raised the waterbag and drank as much as he could hold, then drank a bit more.

“Good luck,” the men said when he handed it back. They mounted their horses and rode away, leading his. He knew he could try to follow their trail, but on horseback they could lay so many false tracks and paths that there was no point in wasting his time. Even now it was certain they weren’t heading in any useful direction. He looked at the ruins, trying to find a distinguishing landmark, anything to give him a clue as to where he might be. He’d been on a few forays into the ruins during training, always with a well-armed group, never alone, certainly never naked. Nothing like this, he thought.

The area was depressingly bleak, with dust everywhere and occasional tumbled hills that might conceal anything. Cracks and crevasses and sinkholes stretched as far as he could see. As he scanned the landscape, the hair prickled involuntarily on the back of his neck. He looked quickly behind him and thought he saw a movement. He cast about for something to use as a weapon, anything, and picked up a couple rocks. He could hardly believe something would hunt him in the light of the noon sun, hadn’t expected that anything would try until dark. He’d thought he’d have time to prepare.

His neck prickled again, and this time it felt as if a fingernail had trailed lightly up his spine, a very sharp, dangerous fingernail. Again he glanced back. Nothing. His stomach spasmed. He felt too vulnerable standing naked with only rocks in his hands. Attack or retreat? What would Hawk Farflight advise? Hawk was his weapons-master, had been teaching him and the other boys in his manhood group one-on-one combat techniques since they were old enough to grasp knives. When the enemy is unknown, he told himself, make him known.

He took a tentative step away from where he’d seen the movement, hot dust and gravel burning into the soles of his bare feet. Then he paused and waited, remembering everything he’d been told about the ruins, how a man had to be very strong in his head to withstand them, that one’s own mind could become one’s worst enemy.

Imagination, he finally decided, almost shaking with relief, his knees weak from tension. Nothing more. There was nowhere anything could hide, unless it burrowed into the dust.

With that thought, Deke strained his eyes harder, squinting against the sunlight. Again he felt something watching him, hunting him. Yet again it seemed to come from behind him.

This is crazy, he thought. What could be under the dust...?

This is a bad place, he decided. The Old Man had warned him there were places on the earth intrinsically detrimental to one’s health and well-being, and this must be one of them.

Deke stretched his arms and legs, turned three hundred sixty degrees, and tried to get a sense of where he should go, what he should do. His life’s training as a warrior helped him maintain his composure for now, but beneath that layer of imperturbability was a place where he realized he might be quite frightened if he allowed himself to feel it.

West, he decided finally, into the setting sun. Sunsets held significance for him on an unspoken level, drawing him, pulling at his center. He didn’t know why he felt that way, thought it might be connected to his father’s attraction for the West. He knew one day he would spy out the land there, and see if he could

find anything worthy of a Wolfson's interest.

In the meantime he realized that when night fell he would need shelter. Demons lurked in ruins: beings without form or shape who attacked hu-mans at their psyches' weakest link, draining their life-force. Demons were attracted to any psychic whiff of fear or weakness, actually becoming stronger in the presence of it. This Deke believed at the deepest levels of his awareness. He knew also that naked and unarmed as he was, he would be particularly attractive to demons.

He clutched the rocks tightly in his hands and picked up his pace. The afternoon progressed. Shadows stretched.

He jogged lightly through the ancient dust, senses tuned to the utmost, his breathing audible but measured. There had to be something he could use. Had to be.

He centered his mind in the way the Old Man had taught him, focusing on the inner creaks and rumblings of his body's functions. He listened to the even thump of his heart and the steady whoosh of his lungs pumping air. These sounds were familiar and reassuring. They had a calming effect, and soon he moved along without the rising swell of anxiety that had been threatening to overpower him.

He saw an antiquated skeleton silhouetted against the sky, standing as if suspended by strings, and blinked against the brilliant sunlight. The image resolved itself into a dead tree: small, shriveled, dry as bone. Its death could have come from drought or radiation, maybe both. He examined the tree critically, then, using one of the sharp stones he'd been carrying in his hands, laboriously cut three, straightish branches, each taller than himself and as thick through the middle as two of his thumbs. Painstakingly, he sharpened an end on each, working carefully so as not to shatter the ancient wood. Though dry, the limbs weren't rotten, and soon he had three crude but serviceable spears.

He hefted one in his right hand, testing it for weight and balance. Primitive, but effective at close range. Certainly possible to kill prey with such a weapon, even, he thought, armed prey.

He gathered the spears under his left arm, took up the rocks, and carefully scanned westward. Was there a dark patch visible out there, something shadowed in the otherwise uniform landscape? It was worth a look. With a quick glance to mark a line from the desiccated tree, he set off at a rapid, ground-covering trot, feeling a little more at home in this particular patch of ruins. He felt he had been helped, that the little tree had been a gift, and he thanked whatever force it was that might have given him aid. He stretched outward with his sensitivity, seeking to find the source of positive energy that now suffused him, but had to satisfy himself with the simple awareness of that energy, and use it to his advantage.

Deke's shadow lengthened behind him as he trotted steadily over the ruins, and the sound of his feet in the dust was no louder than a whisper. The whisper spoke to him in the sibilance of sand, of deserts out of time and mind. He felt the ruins penetrate him body and soul until he knew what they knew, witnessed what they had witnessed. This was his home, his place, his moment in the Universe. Here on earth's graveyard his people had been spawned and he was coming to manhood. All the men he knew had passed through these rites. If they could do it, he could, too. And, he told himself, he would do it better.

He grinned, filled with pride and pleasure in being alive, then stumbled over a chunk of crumbled cement half-buried in sod and came to a startled halt. His breath pumped faster as he stared at the increasingly green stretch of territory which lay before him. There were many tumbled ruins, growing more plentiful the farther he looked. Things lived here. Plants, probably animals. That meant food, water.

He looked back towards the dust desert. Gnawing his dry lips nervously, he tried to decide what to do next, what the authors of this ritual would have intended.

He heard a deep, grunting cough.

His stomach lurched and he gripped a spear in his right hand, turning slowly to find the source.

Deke felt his knees tremble. There was nothing in sight. The sound was inside his head, yet perfectly clear in his ears.

“Ruins help me,” he muttered.

Again the sound came, this time stronger. Still Deke could see nothing, strain his eyes though he might. He recognized it now, remembered how the big cats made coughing grunts unlike other animals. He remembered, too, that only one species of cat could be heard inside a man’s head, knew his people’s wolfdogs followed the psi emanations given off by these cats the way bloodhounds of old had trailed prey by scent. Deke thanked his own sensitivity which had given him early warning of the danger. It was possible the cat known as the esper tiger was far enough away that he still might escape.

The sun’s rays were decidedly longer now. The day was waning. This awareness filled him with renewed anxiety. He had to find shelter. He had no illusions about his chances if the tiger caught him in the open. He was a skilled hunter of deer and rabbit, had even killed a foul-tempered, long-tusked wild boar of the northern forests, but a big cat was something else, especially the stealthy, infinitely cunning, ruins tiger. A male could weigh as much as six hundred pounds and the females often went as high as four.

Deke quartered his gaze across the countryside, squinting carefully at any crack, any crevice rocky and protected enough into which he might squeeze. His instincts told him the tiger had detected him hours ago, had been toying with his psyche the way lesser cats toyed with their prey’s physical selves.

The feeling of being sneaked up on was irresistible and he whirled, half-expecting to see the golden, black-striped esper tiger licking its chops behind him. Nothing. Relief made him break into a fresh sweat. He sighed audibly, turned back towards the greening ruins, took a step, then froze. His hands clutched spasmodically at spears that suddenly felt like brittle twigs in his sweating fingers.

Standing not fifty yards in front of him, tail lashing back and forth in nervous jerks, the esper tiger met his eyes with slitted gaze and bared its teeth.

Deke took in the animal’s stance, size, and lean ferocity in a glance. Hunger radiated into his mind with palpable energy until he felt a sympathetic twinge in his own stomach. He got a picture of a small, furless rodent swallowed down in two bites, the cat’s last meal taken days ago, not nearly sufficient for so large an animal. He saw himself through the tiger’s eyes, felt the eager anticipation of a feline about to make a kill.

With a supreme effort, he forced himself to move his body into a more aggressive posture, unconsciously letting his teeth show in a snarl even as he brandished his spears with short jabs towards the cat. The external image of himself radiating into his mind changed. Now he looked less like prey, more like predator. He felt the tiger’s increased caution, felt the creature calculating the odds.

Apparently making up its mind, the cat raked the ground with its claws and snarled with vicious power that made every hair on Deke’s body rise involuntarily. He knew the terror that rolled through him making his knees weak, making his jaw quiver, was a purely evolutionary limbic response to the ancient confrontation between feline and primate, but knowing this did not reduce his terror. In his mind’s eye he could see the long teeth crunching through his ribcage, could feel the slashing claws like razors in his young flesh. The taste of blood was in his mouth as he took a step backwards.

The tiger paced forward, its every fiber radiating hunger, its entire being focused on the two-legged prey that crept away so temptingly. Here was a substantial meal at last, and the tiger wasn’t about to let it escape. It snarled again, with deeper menace. Its tail whipped faster. Deke allowed the rocks and two of the spears he carried to drop onto the mossy turf beside him. He grasped the third, thickest, and longest spear in

both hands, bracing himself for the tiger's charge. Part of him recognized the ludicrousness of the picture he presented; the tiger was four times his weight and armed with a far superior array of weapons.

Common sense dictated a hasty withdrawal, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. If he turned his back, the cat would be on him. His only hope was to make himself too much trouble for such an obviously hungry animal to waste its limited reserves on. With this thought, he stopped retreating, mentally as well as physically, and forced himself to look deep into the tiger's eyes, prepared to will the fierce creature into submission.

Nearby, a pebble skittered across a larger rock. Overhead, a cloud passed in front of the lowering sun. The tiger's gaze twitched so briefly Deke thought he had imagined it.

Now the big cat growled with savagery that made everything that had passed before sound benevolent. Every hair on its body stood up and it lifted its lips to show its immense teeth. In an instant Deke realized the tiger was no longer focusing on him. He flicked his eyes in the direction the tiger was looking and for a second couldn't process what he was seeing. Half its massive body hidden behind a boulder, one front paw resting easily on the bloody carcass of a fresh kill, stood a gigantic, brown bear. It roared a warning at the tiger, barely acknowledging the boy's presence.

Deke stood frozen, unable to take his eyes from the bear's kill. Though horribly torn and mutilated, the carcass was recognizable as that of a thirteen-year-old boy. A quick movement got his attention as the bear rose menacingly onto its hind legs. It loomed enormously over the landscape, a massive animal Deke thought only an idiot would confront willingly. He took an almost imperceptible step back, away from both tiger and bear. While they were engaged with each other, perhaps he could escape. He looked regretfully at the extra spears and rocks he was too frightened to pick up and eased backward, never taking his eyes from the two animals.

At once there was a deafening roar both outside and inside his head. The esper tiger was watching him, and Deke could swear the cat had ordered him to stay put! He squeezed his hands around the spear convulsively.

Eyes locked on the cat who flickered its gaze rapidly back and forth between him and the bear, Deke carefully moved his left foot. At the same moment he realized his foot was reaching into empty air, he saw the tiger accelerate towards him in a series of swift bounds. The bear bellowed furiously as Deke lost his balance and fell on his face. He slid back and down on his belly, feet-first through a small hole and into a narrow passageway. Clods of dirt and pebbles showered onto his head as the world disappeared from his frantic view. He still had the spear clutched in his fingers and it jostled his ribs painfully.

Moments later he jerked to a halt. The last of the grit and gravel that had accompanied him down the hole slowed, then stopped. When he looked back the way he had come he couldn't see the opening but could see the light, which reflected around a bend in the passageway and lit the earth dimly nearby.

There was a frustrated snarl above him and he heard claws tearing through the surface dirt. A huge shadow moved across the light, burying him in darkness. He felt a shuddering scream in his head as the esper tiger challenged the bear. Then he froze. He could swear he had felt something move against the soles of his feet. His straining ears picked up a sound like a whimper. The whimper was echoed by a bubbly little growl.

Now what? Deke thought feverishly, his senses reeling from too many successive shocks. Calling on reserves of courage he didn't know he possessed (and steeling himself for an attack by cave rats at the very least) he slithered out of the cramped passage and into the wider cavity that lay beyond. His hand brushed against something soft and fuzzy and he felt a warm, little tongue lick his fingers. Wolf pups! He was in

a wolf den! He felt around carefully and located half a dozen of the young creatures. Needle sharp milk teeth closed on his fingers and he calculated that the puppies were perhaps four weeks old. But where was their pack?

His mind automatically catalogued these facts and questions while he listened to the frightening racket outside. One of the puppies whimpered again, and instinctively he murmured soothingly. He wriggled his way back up the passage to see what was going on.

Bare feet scrabbling for a purchase in the packed dirt, spear held protectively in front of him, he poked his head out for a moment, then as quickly pulled it in.

The bear and tiger were facing one another in a standoff, snarling, growling, making threatening gestures, neither willing to precipitate battle. The bear kept itself between the tiger and its kill; the tiger kept itself between the bear and the wolf den. Both were protecting their interests; neither could bring itself to turn away from the other. The tiger sent waves of hatred and ferocity directly into the bear's psyche but the bear was unmoved. It had faced down hungry felines before.

Deke could feel the edge of what the tiger was sending and knew most creatures would have quailed before the onslaught. His own limbs were trembling just from the side impact of the cat's emotional energy broadcast.

Every few moments the bear glanced towards the den. Bears were notorious diggers and Deke dreaded the possibility of the animal deciding it liked boy meat enough to attack the tiger straightaway and take its intended prey. A panicky feeling rose in his throat. Bear claws could cut through the packed earth around the mouth of the den like blades through butter. And what would the tiger do if the bear made such an attack? Which animal would survive to come eat him?

A faint sound reached his ears, penetrating his fear and filling his head with a kaleidoscope of alien and yet familiar emotions: concern, protectiveness, then, with greater clarity, a growing savagery as awareness of the situation grew.

Deke realized he was getting a combination of visual and scent images of the scene outside his hideaway as if perceived from many different angles at once, too many for him to count. A series of sharp howls and barks could be heard, closer now, stronger and more menacing.

The bear turned its head from the tiger to evaluate this new threat. At the same moment, with a spring too fast for the eye to follow clearly, the tiger leapt across the intervening turf and landed on the bear's back. It swiped one massive, razor-clawed paw across the bear's eyes, and bit savagely at its neck.

Bellowing with pain and outrage, the bear beat at the clawing, spitting cat that clung on awkwardly but with tremendous strength.

Deke's head spun as his mind was beset by violent images. Too many viewpoints created a sensory overload, buffeting him with almost physical pain.

He scrabbled his way back up the passageway in time to see the bear shake the frenzied tiger from its shoulders and throw it ten feet. The tiger twisted with quick agility and managed to land on its oversized paws, crouching and glaring furiously both at the half-blinded bear and the swift, silent shapes circling closer in the fading sunlight.

Six or seven wolves had the tiger fairly surrounded. They darted in and out, wove sideways slashing at the striped cat's rear, leaping free when it whirled to face its tormenters. A similar group was attempting to close with the bear, but it had had enough. Turning, it lumbered back to its kill, snatched up the dead body in its jaws, and tried to drag it away, swinging powerful blows with its paws at the harassing wolves as it went. The wolves seemed inclined to let the bear go, more concerned with the safety of the pups in

the den. This Deke understood as clearly as if the wolves had told it to him, which in a real sense they had, but in the form of mental images.

Abruptly, he was filled with rage. Maybe it was the sight of the dead boy's head lolling and bumping along the ground that did it; afterwards, he never would be sure what moved him to do the crazy thing he did next.

Shouting at the top of his lungs, he threw himself out of the hole, spear brandished in both hands. He ran after the retreating bear like one possessed, and wolves scattered before him, astonished by this muddy apparition that had burst from their den and was charging their enemy as if he were one of the pack himself. Deke's voice was a hoarse cry amidst the bedlam of roaring, snarling, snapping jaws and hurtling bodies. With all his strength, he drove his makeshift spear into the bear's flank and felt it slide home between two ribs.

The bear let out a surprised grunt and dropped its kill.

Deke's arms were almost jerked from their sockets as the bear whirled to rake him with its claws. Before the beast's motion could be completed, a huge wolf, larger than the rest, slashed at the bear's far flank and two more closed from the rear. Deke was thrown violently to the ground. His hands scrabbled wildly, seeking a rock, anything he could use as a weapon, and his fingers closed over something long and metallic. It was the dead boy's knife.

Grasping desperately, Deke snatched up the dagger and rolled to his feet. His spear still protruded from the bear's side, giving the animal a weird, off-balance appearance. Its movements were hampered by the shaft, and Deke could see dark trails of blood staining the ground.

Behind him the esper tiger was broadcasting waves of increasing anxiety. It tried again and again to flee, now perfectly willing to abandon its potential meal in order to do so. But unlike the bear, which the wild canines had been willing simply to chase away, the tiger was a primeval enemy, and its feline emanations were of a sort no wolf or dog could ignore. The urge to kill the cat was too strong. Carefully, but inexorably, the pack crowded in. Deke turned away as the wolves tore the screaming, thrashing tiger to pieces. It continued broadcasting its insane, rage-filled emanations until the very last, when with shocking abruptness, it was silenced.

Spotting his extra spears lying where he had dropped them an eternity ago, Deke sprinted over, snatched them up, and charged after the bear. Again the wolves made way for him, and if he had had a moment to think about it, he would have been amazed by his own temerity. It seemed they were watching to see what he would do, willing to follow his lead. Images still poured into his mind from their many brains, and strangely there was no hostility towards him. In fact, one wolf took a long sniff at his feet and legs, then actually wagged its tail before returning to the business of the bear.

One of the wolves let out a yelp as the bear's flailing claws laid it open and crushed its skull. Again the wild rage surged through Deke, echoed in kind by the wolf pack. Why he should be so enraged over the death of a wolf escaped him just then, but the power of the emotion carried him back into the melée of colliding furry bodies who now attacked the great bear in deadly earnest. Deke felt infused with their desire for the kill; he could taste flesh and fur between his teeth, could feel the jarring impact of his blade striking into tissue and bone. In a silence which fell so quickly he couldn't pinpoint when it had begun, he realized he was stabbing frenziedly at the fallen bear, his face and limbs streaming with heated blood and shreds of pulsing matter.

Slowly, he came back to himself and looked around. The area surrounding the den resembled a battlefield, with gore splattered everywhere. There was a living wolf's eyes and jaws inches from his face

where he crouched over the still-twitching carcass. The wolf's hot breath mingled with his own. His blue eyes met the wolf's yellow ones. Then the wolf licked his cheek.

He rose, flesh dyed scarlet by blood and the reddening fire of the dying sunlight. His breath came in short gasps. One by one the wolves turned their noses skyward and began to howl, and after a time the boy joined them, his breast full to bursting both with awareness of the miracle of his escape, and the joy of his strange, new-found, wild companions.