



Ben Bova
Orion 3:
Orion in the Dying Time
To Lester del Rey, mentor

"An intelligence knowing, at a given instance of time, all forces acting in nature, as well as the momentary position of all things of which the universe consists, would be able to comprehend the motions of the largest bodies of the world and those of the lightest atoms in one single formula, provided his intellect were sufficiently powerful to subject all data to analysis; to him nothing would be uncertain, both past and future would be present in his eyes."

—Pierre-Simon de Laplace

What if there were more than one such person?

Prologue

With Anya beside me, I walked out of the ancient temple into the warming sunshine of a new day. All around us a lush green garden grew: flowering shrubs and bountiful fruit trees as far as the eye could see.

Slowly we walked along the bank of the river, the mighty Nile, flowing steadily through all the eons.

"Where in time are we?" I asked.

"The pyramids have not been started yet. The land that will someday be called the Sahara is still a wide grassland teeming with game. Bands of hunting people roam across it freely."

"And this garden? It looks like Eden."

She smiled at me. "Hardly that. It is the home of the creature whose statue stood on the altar."

I glanced back at the little stone temple. It was a simple building, blocks of stone fitted atop one another, with a flat wooden slat roof.

"Someday the Egyptians will worship him as a powerful and dangerous god,"

Anya told me. "They will call him Set."

"He is one of the Creators?"

"No," she said. "Not one of us. He is an enemy: one of those who seek to twist the continuum to their own purposes."

"As the Golden One does," I said.

She gave me a stern look. "The Golden One, power mad as he is, at least works for the human race."

"He created the human race, he claims."

"He had help," she replied, allowing a small smile to dimple her cheeks.

"But this other creature... Set, the one with the lizard's face?"

Her smile vanished. "He comes from a distant world, Orion, and he seeks to eliminate us from the continuum."

"Then why are we here, in this time and place?"

"To find him and destroy him, my love," said Anya. "You and I together, Hunter and Warrior, through all spacetime."



I looked into her glowing eyes and realized that this was my destiny. I am Orion the Hunter. And with this huntress, that warrior goddess, beside me, all the universes were my hunting grounds.

BOOK I: PARADISE

A book of verses underneath the bough
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh, wilderness were paradise enow!

Chapter 1

Anya pulled off her glittering silvery robe and flung it to the grassy ground. Beneath it she wore a metallic suit of the kind I vaguely remembered from another time, long ages ago. It fit her skintight, from the tops of her silver boots to the high collar that circled her neck. She was a dazzling goddess with long dark hair that tumbled past her shoulders and fathomless gray eyes that held all of time in them.

I wore nothing but the leather kilt and vest from my previous existence in ancient Egypt. The wound that had killed me then had disappeared from my chest. Strapped to my right thigh, beneath the kilt, was the dagger that I had worn in that other time. A pair of rope sandals was my only other possession. Anya said, "Come, Orion, we must hurry away from this place."

I loved her as eternally and completely as any man has ever worshiped a woman. I had died many deaths for her sake, and she had defied her fellow Creators to be with me time and again, in every era to which they had sent me. Death could not part us. Nor time nor space.

I took her hand in mine and we headed off along a wide avenue between the heavily laden trees.

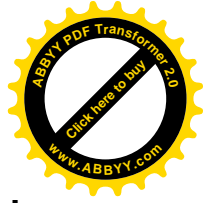
For what seemed like hours, Anya and I walked through the garden, away from the bank of the ageless Nile flowing patiently through this land that would one day be called Egypt. The sun rose high but the day remained deliciously cool, the air clean and crisp as a temperate springtime afternoon. Cottony clumps of cumulus clouds dotted the deeply blue sky. A refreshing breeze blew toward us from what would one day be the pitiless oven of the Sahara.

Despite her denying it, the garden did remind me of the legends I had heard of Eden. On both sides of us row upon row of trees marched as far as the eye could see, yet no two were the same. Fruits of all kinds hung heavy on their boughs: figs, olives, plums, pomegranates, even apples. High above them all swayed stately palms, heavy with coconuts. Shrubs were set out in carefully planned beds between the trees, each of them flowering so profusely that the entire park was ablaze with color.

Yet not another soul was in sight. Between the trees and shrubbery the grass was clipped to such a uniformly precise height that it almost seemed artificial. No insects buzzed. No birds flitted among the greenery.

"Where are we going?" I asked Anya.

"Away from here," she replied, "as quickly as we can."



I reached toward a bush that bore luscious-looking mangoes. Anya grabbed at my hand.

"No!"

"But I'm hungry."

"It will be better to wait until we are clear of this park. Otherwise..." She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Otherwise an angel will appear with a flaming sword?" I teased.

Anya was totally serious. "Orion, this park is a botanical experimental station for the creature whose statue we saw in the temple."

"The one called Set?"

She nodded. "We are not ready to meet him. We are completely unarmed, unprepared."

"But what harm would it be to eat some of his fruit? We could still hurry along as we ate."

Almost smiling, Anya said, "He is very sensitive about his plants. Somehow he knows when someone touches them."

"And?"

"And he kills them."

"He doesn't drive them into the outer darkness, to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows?" I noticed that even though my tone was bantering, we were walking faster than before.

"No. He kills them. Finally and eternally."

I had died many times, yet the Creators had always revived me to serve them again in another time, another place. Still I feared death, the agony of it, the separation and loss that it brought. And a new tendril of fear flickered along my nerves: Anya was afraid. One of the Creators, a veritable goddess who could move through eons of time as easily as I was walking along this garden path—she was obviously afraid of the reptilian entity whose statue had adorned the temple by the bank of the Nile.

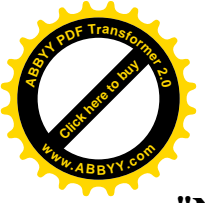
I closed my eyes briefly to picture that statue more clearly. At first I had thought it was a representation of a man wearing a totem mask: the body was human, the face almost like a crocodile's. But now as I scanned my memory of it I saw that this first impression had been overly simple.

The body was humanoid, true enough. It stood on two legs and had two arms. But the feet were claws with three toes ending in sharply hooked talons. The hands had two long scaly-looking fingers with an opposed thumb for the third digit, all of them clawed. The hips and shoulders connected in nonhuman ways.

And the face. It was the face of a reptile unlike anything I had seen before: a snout filled with serrated teeth for tearing flesh; eyes set forward in the skull for binocular vision; bony projections just above the eyes; a domed cranium that housed a brain large enough to be fully intelligent.

"Now you begin to realize what we are up against," Anya said, reading my thoughts.

"The Golden One sent us here to hunt down this thing called Set and destroy him?" I asked. "Alone? Just the two of us? Without weapons?"



"Not the Golden One, Orion. The entire council of the Creators. The whole assemblage of them."

The ones whom the ancient Greeks had called gods, who lived in their own Olympian world in the distant future of this time.

"The entire assemblage," I repeated, "That means you agreed to the task."

"To be with you," Anya said. "They were going to send you alone, but I insisted that I come with you."

"I am expendable," I said.

"Not to me." And I loved her all the more for it.

"You said this creature called Set—"

"He is not a creature of ours, Orion," Anya swiftly corrected. "The Creators did not bring him into being, as we did the human race. He comes from another world and he seeks to destroy the Creators."

"Destroy... even you?"

She smiled at me, and it was if another sun had risen. "Even me, my love."

"You said he can cause final death, without hope of revival."

Anya's smile disappeared. "He and his kind have vast powers. If they can alter the continuum deeply enough to destroy the Creators, then our deaths will be final and irrevocable."

Many times over the eons I had thought that the release of death would be preferable to the suffering toil of a life spent in pain and danger. But each time the thought of Anya, of this goddess whom I loved and who loved me, made me strive for life. Now we were together at last, but the threat of ultimate oblivion hung over us like a cloud blotting out the sun.

We walked on until the lines of trees abruptly ended. Standing in the shade of the last wide-branched chestnut, we looked out on a sea of grass. Wild uncut grass as far as the limestone cliffs that jutted into the bright summer sky, marking the edge of the Nile-cut valley. Windblown waves curled through the waving fronds of grass like green surges of surf rushing toward us.

Silhouetted against the distant cliffs I saw a few dark specks moving slowly. I pointed toward them and Anya followed my outstretched arm with her eyes.

"Humans," she muttered. "A crew of slaves."

"Slaves?"

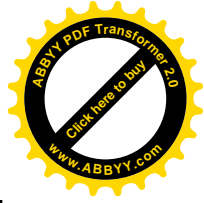
"Yes. Look at what's guarding them."

Chapter 2

I focused my eyes intently on the distant figures. I have always been able to control consciously all the functions of my body, direct my will along the chain of neural synapses instantly to make any part of my body do exactly what I wished it to do.

Now I concentrated on the line of human beings trudging across the grassy landscape. They were being led by something not human.

At first it reminded me of a dinosaur, but I knew that the great reptilians had become extinct millions of years before this time. Or had they? If the Creators could twist time to their whim, and this alien called Set had comparable powers, why not a dinosaur here in the Neolithic era?



It walked on four slim legs and had a long whiplike tail twitching behind it. Its neck was long, too, so that its total length was nearly twenty feet, about the size of a full-grown African bull elephant. But it was much less bulky, slimmer, more graceful. I got the impression that it could run faster than a man.

Its scales were brightly colored in bands of red, blue, yellow, and brown. Horny projections of bone studded its back like rows of buttons. The head at the end of that elongated neck was small, with a short stubby snout and eyes set wide apart on either side of a rounded skull. Its eyes were slitted, unblinking.

It strode up at the front of the little column of humans, and every few moments turned its long neck back to look at the slaves it led.

And they were slaves, that was obvious. Fourteen men and women, wearing nothing but tattered loincloths, emaciated ribs showing clearly even at the distance from which we watched. They seemed exhausted, laboring for breath as they struggled to keep up to the pace set by their reptilian guard. One of the women carried a baby in a sling on her back. Two of the men looked like teenagers to me. There was only one gray head among them. I got the impression they rarely lived long enough to become gray.

Hiding behind the bole of the chestnut tree at the edge of the garden, we watched the pitiful little parade for several silent moments.

Then I asked, "Why slaves?"

Anya whispered, "To tend this garden, of course. And the other desires of Set and his minions."

The woman with the baby stumbled and fell to her knees. The giant reptile instantly wheeled around and trotted up to her, looming over her. Even from this distance I could hear the faint wailing of the baby.

The woman struggled to her feet, or tried to. Not fast enough for the guard. Its slim tail whipped viciously across her back, striking the baby as well. She screamed and the baby shrieked with pain and terror.

Again the tail flicked back and struck at her. She fell facedown on the grass. I strained forward, but Anya grasped my arm and held me back.

"No," she whispered urgently. "There's nothing you can do."

The huge lizard was standing over the prostrate mother, bending its neck to sniff at her unmoving form. The baby still wailed. The other men and women stood unmoving, mute as statues.

"Why don't they fight?" I seethed.

Anya replied, "With their bare hands against that monster?"

"They could at least run away while its attention is diverted. Scatter—"

"They know better, Orion. They would be hunted down like animals and killed very slowly."

The lizard was squatting on its two rear legs and tail now, nudging the woman's body with one of its clawed forepaws. She did not move.

Then the beast pulled the infant out of the sling and lifted it high, swinging its head upward as it did so. I realized it was going to crunch the baby in its jaws. Nothing could hold me back now. I bolted out from the protection of the trees and raced pell-mell toward the monster, bellowing loudly as I could while I



ran. All my bodily senses went into hyperdrive, as they always do when I face danger. The world around me seemed to slow down, everything moved with an almost dreamlike languor.

I saw the lizard holding the squalling baby aloft, saw its head turning toward me on the end of that long snaky neck, saw its narrow slit eyes register on me, its head bobbing back and forth as if it were saying no. In reality it was merely trying to get a fix with both eyes on what was making the noise.

I saw the baby still clutched in the lizard's claws, its tiny legs churning in the empty air, its blubbering face contorted and red with crying. And the mother, her naked back livid with the welts from the beast's tail, was pushing herself up on one elbow in a futile effort to reach her baby.

The lizard dropped the baby and turned to face me, hissing. Its tongue darted out of its tiny mouth as its head bobbed left and right. The tail flicked as it dropped to all fours.

I had my dagger in my right hand. It seemed pitifully small against the talons on the monster's paws, but it was the only weapon I possessed. As I closed the distance between us I saw the other humans standing behind the lizard. My brain registered that they were totally cowed, unmoving, not even trying to get away or distract the beast in any manner. I would get no help from them. The lizard took a few trotting steps toward me, then reared up on its hind legs like an enraged bear. It towered over me, advancing on those monstrous clawed hind legs while its neck bent down between its wide-spread forelegs, hissing at me. Its teeth were small and flat, I saw. Not a flesh-eater. Just a killing machine.

Suddenly bright yellow frills snapped open on both sides of its neck, making its head appear twice as large; a trick for frightening enemies, but I knew it for what it was.

I ran straight at the big lizard and saw its long tail whipping toward my left. Like a slow-motion dream I watched its tip swinging toward me. I gauged its speed and jumped over it as it snapped harmlessly beneath my feet. My impetus carried me straight toward the lizard's scaled underside and I sank my dagger blade into its belly with every ounce of my strength.

It screeched like a steam whistle and reached to grab me. I ducked under the clutching claws and plunged my dagger into its hide again.

In the heat of battle I had forgotten about its tail. It caught me this time, knocking me off my feet. I hit the ground with a thud that made me grunt with pain and surprise. The lizard reached for me again, but with my senses in hyperdrive I could see its every move easily and rolled away from those clutching claws.

The tail slashed at me again. I stepped inside its arc and carved a bloody slice down the lizard's thigh. My blade caught bone and I worked it in deeper, hoping to disable its knee joint and cripple it. Instead I felt its claws circle around me, cutting into my midsection as it yanked me high into the air. The dagger was wrenched from my grasp, still stuck in its knee.

It carried me up above its head and I saw those narrow yellow reptilian eyes staring coldly at me, first one and then the other. Its teeth were not made for rending flesh but those jaws could crush my body quite easily, I knew. That



was just what the beast was going to do. Its yellow collar frills relaxed slightly; the monster no longer felt threatened.

I strained to break free of the demon's claws, but I was just as helpless as the baby had been moments before.

"Orion! Here!"

Anya's voice made me glance down while I struggled in the lizard's powerful grip. She had come up behind me and was pulling my knife out of the lizard's knee. Before the beast understood what was happening, she threw the dagger as expertly as any assassin. It pierced the soft folds beneath the lizard's jaw with a satisfying thunk.

With its free hand the dragon started to reach for the steel in its throat. But I was closer and faster. I grabbed the projecting hilt of the dagger and began working the blade across the lizard's jawline, back toward the frills that had snapped fully erect once again. It shrieked and released me, but I clutched at its neck and swung up behind its head, pulling the dagger free and jamming it in beneath the base of the skull.

It collapsed as suddenly as a light being switched off. I had severed its spinal cord. The two of us came crashing down to the grassy ground. I felt myself bounce and then everything went blank.

Chapter 3

I opened my eyes and focused blearily on Anya's beautiful face. She was kneeling over me, deep concern etched across her classic features. Then she smiled.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I ached in every part of my body. My chest and thighs were slashed from the lizard's claws. But I consciously clamped down on the capillaries to stop the bleeding and closed off the pain centers in my brain. I made myself grin up at her.

"I'm alive."

She helped me to my feet. I saw that only a few moments had passed. The big lizard was now nothing more than a huge mound of brightly colored scales stretched out across the grass.

The crew of slaves, however, was something else. The slaves were terrified. And instead of being grateful, they were angry.

"You have slain one of the guardians!" said a scrawny bearded man, his eyes wide with terror.

"The masters will blame us!" one of the women wailed.

"We will be punished!"

I felt something close to contempt for them. They had the mentality of true slaves. Instead of thanking me for helping them, they were fearful of their master's wrath. Without a word I went to the dead beast and pulled my dagger from the back of its neck.

Anya said to them, "We could not stand idly and watch the monster kill the baby."

The baby, I saw, was alive. The mother was sitting silently on the grass, holding the child to her emaciated breast, her huge brown eyes staring at me



blankly. If she was grateful for what I had done, she was hiding it well. Two long red weals scarred her ribs and back. The baby also had a livid welt across its naked flesh.

But the scrawny man was tugging at his tangled gray beard and moaning, "The masters will descend upon us and kill us all with great pain. They will put us in the fire that never dies. All of us!"

"It would have been better to let the baby die," said another man, equally gaunt, his hair and beard also filthy and matted. "Better that one dies than all of us are tortured to death. We can always make more babies."

"If your masters do not find you, they cannot punish you," I said. "If the two of us can kill one of these overgrown lizards, then all of us can work together to protect ourselves against them."

"Impossible!"

"Where could we hide that they will not find us?"

"They have eyes that see in the night."

"They can fly through the air and even cross the great river."

"Their claws are sharp. And they have the eternal fire."

As they spoke they clustered around Anya and me, as if seeking protection. And they constantly looked up into the sky and scanned the horizon, as if seeking the first sign of avenging dragons. Or worse.

Anya asked them in a gentle voice, "What will happen to you if the two of us go away and leave you alone?"

"The masters will see what has happened here and punish us," said the beard tugged. He seemed to be their leader, perhaps merely by the fact that he was their eldest.

"How will they punish you?" I asked.

He shrugged his bony shoulders. "That is for them to decide."

"They will flay the skin from our bodies," said one of the teenagers, "and then cast us into the eternal fire."

The others shuddered. Their eyes were wide and pleading.

"Suppose we stayed here with you until your masters find us," I asked. "Will they punish you if we tell them that we killed the beast and you had nothing to do with it?"

They gaped at us as if we were stupid children. "Of course they will punish us! They will punish every one of us. That is the law."

I turned to Anya. "Then we've got to get away."

"And bring them with us," she agreed.

I scanned the area where we stood. The Nile had cut a broad, deep valley through the limestone cliffs that rose like jagged walls on either side of the river. Atop the cliffs, according to Anya, was a wide grassy plain. If this region would truly become the Sahara one day, then it must stretch for hundreds of miles southward, thousands of miles to the west. A flat open savannah, with only an occasional hill or river-carved valley to break the plain's flat monotony. Not good country to hide in, especially from creatures that can fly through the air and see in the dark. But better than being penned between the river and the cliffs.



I had no doubt that the slaves were telling the truth about their reptilian masters. The beast Anya and I had just slain was a dinosaur, that seemed certain. Why not winged pterosaurs, then, or other reptiles that can sense heat the way a pit viper does?

"Are there trees nearby?" Anya was asking them. "Not like the garden, but wild trees, a natural forest."

"Oh," said the scrawny elder. "You mean Paradise."

Far to the south, he told us, there were forest and streams and game animals in endless abundance. But the area was forbidden to them. The masters would not let them return there.

"You lived there once?" I asked.

"Long, long ago," he said wistfully. "When I was even younger than Chron here." He pointed at the smaller of the two teenage boys.

"How far away is it?"

"Many suns."

Pointing southward, I said, "Then we head for Paradise."

They made no objection, but it was clear to see that they were terrified. The spirit had been beaten out of them almost totally. Yet even if they did not want to follow my lead, they had no real alternative. Their masters had frightened them so completely that it made no difference to them which way they went; they were certain that they would be caught and punished most horribly.

My first aim was to get away from the carcass of the lizard. It would take a while for whoever was in charge of the garden—Set, I supposed—to realize that one of his trained animals had been killed and a crew of slaves was loose on the landscape. We had perhaps a few hours, and by then it would be nightfall. If we could move quickly enough, we might have a chance to survive.

We climbed the cliff face. It was not as difficult as I had feared; the stone was broken and tiered into what seemed almost like stairways. They puffed and gasped and struggled their way up to the top with me leading them and Anya bringing up the rear.

At the summit I saw that Anya had been right. An endless rolling plain of grass stretched out to the horizon, green and lush and seemingly empty of animal life. A broad treeless savannah that extended all the way across the northern sweep of Africa to the very shore of the Atlantic. To the south, according to the gray-bearded slave, was the forest land he called Paradise. Pointing with my left hand, I commanded, "Southward."

I set as brisk a pace as I could, and the slaves half trotted behind me, gasping and groaning. They did not complain, perhaps because they did not have the breath to. But each time I glanced back over my shoulder to see if they were keeping up, they were glancing back over their shoulders in fear of the inevitable.

I had hardly worked up a sweat despite the warm sun slanting down on us from near the western horizon. I associated the sun with the Golden One, the Creator who called himself Ormazd in one era and Apollo in another, the half-



mad megalomaniac who had created me to hunt down his enemies across the span of the eons.

"You must let them rest," Anya said, jogging easily beside me through the knee-high wild grass. "They are exhausted."

I reluctantly agreed. Up ahead I saw a small hill. Once we reached its base I stopped. All of the slaves immediately sprawled on the ground, wheezing painfully, rivers of sweat cutting grimy streaks through the dirt that crusted their bodies.

I climbed to the hilltop, less than thirty feet high, and scanned the view. Not a tree in sight. Nothing but trackless savannah in every direction. In a way it was thrilling to be in a time and place where no human feet had yet beaten out paths and trails. The sky was turning a blazing vermilion now along the western horizon. Higher up, the blue vault was deepening into a soft violet. There was already a star shining up there, even though we were far from twilight.

A single star, brighter than any I remembered seeing in any era. It did not twinkle at all, but shone with a constant ruddy, almost brownish light, bright and big enough to make me think that I could see a true disk instead of a mere pinpoint of light. The planet Mars? No, it was brighter than Mars had ever been, even in the clear skies of Troy, thousands of years in this era's future. And its color was darker than the bright ruby red of Mars, a brooding brownish red, almost like drying blood. Nor could it be Antares: that great red giant in the Scorpion's heart twinkled like all other true stars.

A shriek of fear startled me out of my astronomical musings.

"Look!"

"He comes!"

"They are searching for us!"

I followed the outstretched emaciated arms of my newfound companions and saw a pair of winged creatures crisscrossing the darkening sky to the northeast of us. Pterosaurs, sure enough. Enormous leathery wings flapping lazily every few heartbeats, then a slow easy glide as their long pointed beaks aimed down toward the ground. They were searching for us, no doubt of it.

"Stay absolutely still," I commanded. "Lie down on the ground and don't move!"

Winged reptiles flying that high depended on their vision above all other senses. My crew of scrawny slaves were as brown as dirt. If they did not attract attention by moving, perhaps the pterosaurs would not recognize them. They hugged the ground, half-hidden even from my view by the long grass.

But I saw the long rays of the setting sun glittering off Anya's metallic suit. For an instant I wanted to tell her to move into the shadow of the hill. But there was no time, and the motion would have caught the beady eyes of the searching pterosaurs. So I stretched myself out flat on the crest of the little hill and hoped desperately that the winged reptiles were not brainy enough to realize that a metallic glinting was something they should investigate further. It seemed like hours as the giant fliers soared slowly across the sky, crisscrossing time and again in an obvious hunting pattern. They may have



looked ugly and ungainly on the ground, with their long beaks and balancing bony crests extending rearward from their heads, but in the air they were nothing less than magnificent. They flew with hardly any effort at all, soaring along gracefully on the warm air currents rising from the grassy plain. They passed us by at last and disappeared to the west. Once they were out of sight I got to my feet and started southward again. The slaves followed eagerly, without a grumble. Fear inspired them with new strength. As the sun touched the green horizon I spotted a clump of trees in the distance. We hurried toward them and saw that a small stream had cut a shallow gorge through the grassland. Its muddy banks were overshadowed by the leafy trees.

"We can camp here for the night," I said. "Under the trees, with plenty of water."

"And what do we eat?" whined the elder.

I looked down at him, more in exasperation than anger. A true slave, waiting for someone to provide him with food rather than trying to get it for himself.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Noch," he said, his eyes suddenly fearful.

Clasping his thin shoulder in my hand, I said, "Well, Noch, my name is Orion. I am a hunter. Tonight I will find you something to eat. Tomorrow you begin to learn for yourselves how to hunt."

Cutting a small branch from one of the trees, I whittled as sharp a point as I could on one end while the young Chron watched me avidly.

"Do you want to learn how to hunt?" I asked him.

Even in the shadows of dusk I could see his eyes gleam. "Yes!"

"Then come with me."

It could hardly be called hunting. The small game that lived by the stream had never encountered humans before. The animals were so tame that I could walk right up to them and spear one of them as it drank at the water's edge. Its companions scampered away briefly, but soon returned. It took only a few minutes to bag a brace of raccoons and three rabbits.

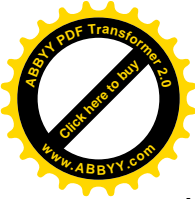
Chron watched eagerly. Then I let him have the makeshift spear, and after a few clumsy misses, he nailed a ground squirrel, squealing and screeching its last breath.

"That was the enjoyable part," I told him. "Now we must skin our kills and prepare them for cooking."

I did all that work, since we had only the one knife and I had no intention of letting any of the others touch it. As I skinned and gutted our tiny catch, to the avid eyes of the whole little tribe, I worried about a fire. If there were reptiles out there that could sense heat the way a rattlesnake or a cobra does, even a small cooking fire would be like a blazing beacon to them.

But there seemed to be no such reptiles in the area. The pterosaurs had passed us by hours earlier, and I had seen no other reptilians in this open savannah, not even the tiniest of lizards. Nothing but small mammals—and we few humans.

I decided to risk a fire, just large enough for cooking our catch, to be extinguished as soon as the cooking was done.



Anya surprised me by showing she could light a fire with nothing more than a pair of sticks and some sweat.

The others gaped in astonishment as wisps of smoke and then a flicker of flame rose from Anya's rubbing sticks.

Gray-bearded old Noch, kneeling next to her, said in an awed voice, "I remember my father making fire in the same way—before he was killed by the masters and I was taken away from Paradise."

"The masters have the eternal fire," said a woman's voice from out of the flickering shadows.

But none of the others seemed concerned with that now, not with the delicious aroma of roasting meat making them salivate and their stomachs rumble.

After we had eaten and most of the tribe had drifted off into sleep I asked Anya, "Where did you learn to make fire?"

"From you," she answered. Looking into my eyes, she added, "Don't you remember?"

I could feel my brows knitting with concentration. "Cold—I remember the snow and ice, and a small team of men and women. We were wearing uniforms...."

Anya's eyes seemed to glow in the night shadows. "You do remember! You can break through the programming and remember earlier existences."

"I don't remember much," I said.

"But the Golden One wiped your memory clean after each existence. Or tried to. Orion, you are growing stronger. Your powers are growing."

I was more concerned with our present problems. "How do the Creators expect us to deal with Set with nothing but our bare hands?"

"They don't, Orion. Now that we have established ourselves in this era we can return to the Creators and bring back whatever we need: tools, weapons, machines, warriors... anything."

"Warriors? Like me? Human beings manufactured by the Golden One or the other Creators and sent back in time to do their dirty work?"

With a tolerant sigh, Anya replied, "You can hardly expect them to come themselves and do the fighting. They are not warriors."

"But you are here. Fighting. That monster would have killed me if you hadn't been there."

"I am an atavism," she said, almost with pleasure in her voice. "A warrior. A woman foolish enough to fall in love with one of our own creatures."

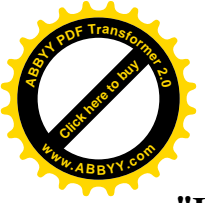
The fire had long been smothered in mud, and the only light sifting through the trees came from the cold white alabaster of the moon. It was enough for me to see how beautiful Anya was, enough to make me burn with love for her.

"Can we go to the Creators' realm and then return here, to this exact place and time?"

"Yes, of course."

"Even if we spend hours and hours?"

"Orion, in the realm of the Creators there is a splendid temple atop a crag of marble that is my favorite retreat. We could go there and spend hours, or days, or months, if you wish."



"I do wish it!"

She kissed me gently, merely a brushing of lips. "Then we will go there." Anya put her hand in mine. Reflexively, I closed my eyes. But I felt nothing, and when I opened my eyes, we were still in the miserable little camp by the muddy bank of a Neolithic stream.

"What happened?"

Anya's whole body was stiff with tension. "It didn't work. Something—someone—is blocking access to the continuum."

"Blocking access?" I heard my own voice as if a stranger's: high-pitched with sudden fear.

"We're trapped here, Orion!" said Anya, frightened herself. "Trapped!"

Chapter 4

Now I knew something of how the tribe of ex-slaves felt.

It was easy to feel brave and confident when I knew that all the paths of the continuum were open to me. Knew that I could travel through time as easily as stepping through a doorway. Certainly I could feel pity, even contempt, for these cowardly humans who bowed down to the terrifying reptilian masters. I could leave this time and place at will, as long as Anya was with me to lead the way.

But now we were trapped, the way was cut off, and I felt the deep lurking dread of forces and powers far beyond my own control looming over me as hatefully as final, implacable death.

We had no choice except to press on southward, hoping to reach the forests of Paradise before Set's scouting pterosaurs located us. Each morning we rose and trekked toward the distant southern horizon. Each night we made camp in the best available protective foliage we could find. The men were learning to hunt the small game that abounded in this endless grassy veldt, the women gathered fruits and berries.

Each time we saw pterosaurs quartering the skies above us we went to ground and froze like mice faced with a hunting hawk. Then we resumed our march to the south. Toward Paradise. And the horizon remained just as flat, just as far away, as it had been the first day we had started.

Sometimes in the distance we saw herds of grazing animals, big beasts the size of bison or elk. Once we stumbled close enough to them to see a pride of saber-toothed cats stalking the herd's fringes; the females sleek and deadly as they prowled through the long grass, bellies almost on the ground, the males massive with their scimitarlike incisors and shaggy manes. They ignored us, and we steered as far away from them as we could.

Anya troubled me. I had never seen her look frightened before, but frightened she was now. I knew she was trying each night to make contact with the other Creators, those godlike men and women from the distant future who had created the human race. They had created me to be their hunter, and I had served them with growing reluctance over the millennia. Gradually I was remembering other missions, other lives. Other deaths.

Once I had been with another tribe of Neolithic hunter/gatherers, far from this monotonous savannah, in the hilly country near Ararat. In another time I



had led a desperate band of abandoned soldiers through the snows of the Ice Age in the aftermath of our slaughter of the Neanderthals.

Anya had always been there with me, often disguised as an ordinary human being of that time and place, always ready to protect me even in the face of the displeasure of the other Creators.

Now we trekked toward a Paradise that may be nothing more than a half-remembered legend, fleeing devilish monsters who had apparently taken total control of this aspect of the continuum. And Anya was as helpless as any of us.

Some nights we made love, coupling as the others did, on the ground in the dark, silently, furtively, not wanting the others to see or hear us, as though what we were doing was shameful. Our passions were brief, spiritless, far from satisfying.

It was several nights before I realized that the mother whom I had saved from the lizard's punishment had taken to sleeping beside me. She and her baby remained several body lengths away the first night, but each evening she moved closer. Anya noticed, too, and spoke gently with her.

"Her name is Reeva," Anya told me as we marched the following morning.

"Her husband was beaten to death by the guard lizards for trying to steal extra food for her so she could nurse the baby."

"But why—"

"You protected her. You saved her and her baby. She is very shy, but she is trying to work up the courage to tell you that she will be your number-two woman, if you will have her."

I felt more confusion than surprise. "But I don't want another woman!"

"Shhh," Anya cautioned, even though we were not speaking in the language of these people. "You must not reject her openly. She wants a protector for her child and she is willing to offer her body in return for your protection."

I cast a furtive glance at Reeva. She could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old. As thin as a piece of string, caked with days' worth of grime, her long hair matted and filthy. She carried the sleeping baby on one bony hip and walked along in uncomplaining silence with the rest of the tribe. Anya, who bathed whenever we found enough water and privacy, seemed to be taking the situation lightly. She seemed almost amused.

"Can't you make Reeva understand," I virtually pleaded with her, "that I will do the best I can to protect all of us? I don't need her... enticements."

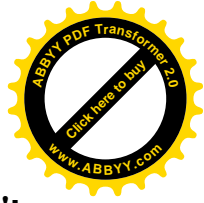
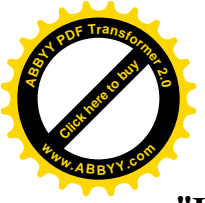
Anya grinned at me and said nothing.

Each night that baleful star looked down at us, like a glowing blot of dried blood, bright enough to cast shadows, brighter even than the full moon.

Sunrise did not blot it out; it lingered in the morning sky until it dropped below the horizon. It could not be any planet that I knew of; it could not be an artificial satellite. It simply hung in its place among the other stars, unblinking, menacing, blood-chilling.

One night I asked Anya if she knew what it was.

She gazed at it for long moments, and its dark light made her lovely face seem grim and ashen. Then tears welled up in her eyes and she shook her head.



"I don't know," she answered in a whisper that carried untold misery. "I don't know anything anymore!"

She tried to stifle her tears, but she could not. Sobbing, she pressed her face against my shoulder so that the others would not hear her crying. I held her tightly, feeling strange, uncomfortable. I had never seen a goddess cry before. By my count, it was on the eleventh day when young Chron came dashing back toward me with an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

"Up on the hill! I can see trees! Lots of trees!"

The teenager had taken to scouting slightly ahead of the rest of us. For all our wearying march and the terror that drove us onward, the tribe was actually in better physical condition now than when I had first stumbled across them. They were eating regularly, and a protein-rich diet at that. Skinny little Chron looked better and certainly had more energy than he had shown only ten days earlier. The hollow places between his ribs were beginning to fill in.

I went up to the top of the hillock with him and, sure enough, the distant horizon was no longer a flat expanse of grass. It was an undulating skyline of trees, waving to us, beckoning.

"Paradise!" Noch had come up to stand beside me. His voice trembled with joy and anticipation.

We headed eagerly for the trees, and even though it took the rest of the day, we finally entered their cool shade and threw ourselves exhausted on the mossy ground.

All around us towered broad-spreading oaks and lofty pines, spruce and balsam firs, the lovely slim white boles of young birch punctuating this world of leafy green. Ferns and mosses covered the ground. I saw mushrooms clustered between the roots of a massive old oak tree, and flowers waving daintily in the soft breeze.

An enormous feeling of relief washed over us all, a sense of safety, of being in a place where the terrible fear that had hovered over us was at last dissipated and driven away. Birds were singing in the boughs high above us, as if welcoming us to Paradise.

I sat up and took a deep breath of clean, sweet air redolent of pine and wild roses and cinnamon. Even Anya looked happy. We could hear the splashing of a brook nearby, beyond the bushes and young saplings that stood between the sturdy boles of the grown trees.

A doe stepped daintily out of those bushes and regarded us for a moment with large, liquid brown eyes. Then it turned and dashed off.

"What did I tell you, Orion?" Noch beamed happily. "This is Paradise!"

The men used the rudimentary hunting skills I had taught them to trap and kill a wild pig that evening as it came down to the brook to drink. They showed more enthusiasm than skill, and the pig screeched and squealed and nearly got away before they finally hacked it to death with their makeshift spears. But we feasted long into the night and then went to sleep.

Anya curled into my arms and fell asleep almost immediately. As our fire died slowly into embers I gazed down on her face, smudged and stained with grease from our pork dinner. Her hair was tangled and stubborn ringlets fell over her forehead. Despite her best efforts she was no longer the smoothly



groomed goddess from a far superior culture. I remembered vaguely another existence, with that other hunting tribe, where she had become one of them, a fierce priestess who reveled in the blood and excitement of the hunt.

It would not be so bad to stay in this time, I thought. Being cut off from the other Creators had its compensations. We were free of their schemes and machinations. Free of the responsibilities they had loaded upon me. Anya and I could live here in this Paradise quite happily like two normal human beings; no longer goddess and creature, but simply a man and a woman living out normal lives in a simple, primitive time.

To live a normal life, free of the Creators. I smiled to myself in the darkness, and for the first time since we had arrived in this time and place, I let myself fall completely and unguardedly into a deep delicious sleep.

But with sleep came a dream. No, not a dream: a message. A warning.

I saw the statue of Set from that little stone temple back along the bank of the Nile. As I watched, the statue shimmered and came to life. The blank granite eyes turned carnelian, blinked slowly, then focused upon me. The scaly head turned and lowered slightly. A wave of utterly dry heat seemed to bake the strength from my body; it was as if the door to a giant furnace had suddenly swung open. The acrid smell of sulfur burned my lungs. Set's mouth opened in a hissing intake of breath, revealing several rows of sharply pointed teeth. He was an overpowering presence. He loomed over me, standing on two legs that ended in clawed feet. His long tail flicked back and forth slowly as he regarded me the way a powerful predator might regard a particularly helpless and stupid victim.

"You are Orion."

He did not speak the words; I heard them in my mind. The voice seethed with malevolence, with an evil so deep and complete that my knees went weak.

"I am Set, master of this world. You have been sent to destroy me. Abandon all hope, foolish man. That is manifestly impossible."

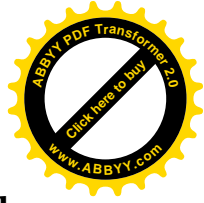
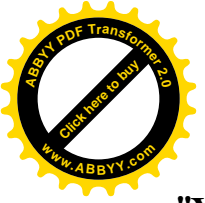
I could not speak, could not even move. It had been the same when I had first been created by the Golden One. His presence had also paralyzed me. He had built such a reaction into my brain. Yet even so, I had learned to overcome it, somewhat. Now this monstrous apparition of evil held me in thrall even more completely than the Golden One ever had. I knew, with utter certainty, that Set could still my breath with a glance, could make my heart stop with a blink of his burning red eyes.

"Your Creators fear me, and justly so. I will destroy them and all their works utterly, beginning with you."

I struggled to move, to say something back to him, but I could not control any part of my body.

"You think you have struck a blow against me by killing one of my creatures and stealing a miserable band of slaves from my garden."

The terror that Set struck in me went beyond reason, beyond sanity. I realized that I was gazing upon the human race's primal fear, the image that would one day be called Satan.



"You think that you are safe from my punishment now that you have reached your so-called Paradise," Set went on, his words burning themselves into my mind.

He was incapable of laughter, but I felt acid-hot amusement in his tone as he said, "I will send you a punishment that will make those pitiful wretches beg for death and the eternal fire. Even in your Paradise I will send you a punishment that will seek you out in the darkest night and make you scream for mercy. Not this night. Perhaps not for many nights to come. But soon enough."

I was already screaming with the effort of trying to break free of his mental grasp. But my screams were silent, I did not have the power to voice them. I could not even sweat, despite bending every gram of my strength to battle against his hold over me.

"Do not bother to fight against me, human. Enjoy what little shreds of life you have remaining to you. I will destroy you all, including the woman you love, the self-styled goddess. She will die the most painful death of all."

And suddenly I was screaming, roaring my lungs out. Sitting up on the mossy ground beneath the trees of Paradise as the sun rose on a new day, bellowing with terror and horror and the self-hate that comes from weakness.

Chapter 5

The others clustered around me, eyes wide, questioning.

"What is it, Orion?"

"Nothing," I said. "A bad dream, nothing more." But I was soaked with cold sweat, and had to consciously control my nerves to keep from trembling. They asked me to relate the dream to them so they might interpret it. I told them I could not remember any of it and eventually they left me in peace. But they were clearly unsettled. And Anya regarded me with probing eyes. She knew that it would take something much more than an ordinary nightmare to make me scream.

"Come on," I said to them all. "We must move deeper into these woods, away from the grassland." As far away from Set as possible, I meant, even though I did not say the words aloud.

Anya walked beside me. "Was it the Golden One?" she asked. "Or one of the other Creators?"

With a shake of my head I answered with one word: "Set."

The color drained from her face.

For several days more we traveled through the forest, following the brook as it led to a wider stream that seemed to flow southward. The men all had spears now, and I was teaching them to fire-harden their points. I wanted to find a place where there was flint and quartz so we could begin making stone tools and weapons.

Birds flitted through the trees, bright flashes of color in the greenery. Insects buzzed a constant background hum. Squirrels and other furry little mammals scampered up tree trunks at our approach and then stopped, tails twitching, watching until we hiked past them. My sense of danger eased, my fear of Set's



lurking presence slowly diminished, as we moved deeper into this cool peaceful friendly forest.

It was peaceful and friendly by day. Night was a different matter. The world was different in the dark. Even with a sizable campfire to warm and light us the forest took on a menacing, ominous aspect in the darkness. Shadows flickered like living things. Hoots and moans floated through the misty gloom. Even the tree trunks themselves became black twisted forms reaching out to ensnare. Cold tendrils of fog hovered like ghosts just beyond the warmth of our fire, creeping closer as the flames weakened and died.

Our little band endured the dark frightening nights, sleeping fitfully, bothered by restless dreams and fears of things lurking in the shadows beyond our sight. We marched in the light of day when the forest was cheerful with the calls of birds and bright with mottled sunshine filtering through the tall trees. At night we huddled in fear of the unseeable.

At last we came to a line of high rugged cliffs where the stream—a fair-sized river now—had cut through solid stone. Following the narrow trail between the water's edge and the cliff, we found a hollowed-out area, as if a huge semicircular chunk of stone had been scooped out of the cliff by a giant's powerful hand.

I left Anya and the others by the river's edge while I went in to explore this towering bowl of stone. Its curving walls rose high above me, layered in tiers of ocher, yellow, and the gray of granite. Pinnacles of rock rose like citadels on either side of the bowl, standing straight and high against the bright blue sky.

Through the screen of brush and young trees that covered the boulder-strewn floor of the little canyon I saw the dark eyes of caves up along the bowl's curving wall. Water and woods near at hand, a good defensive location with a clear view of any approaching enemy.

"We will make this our camp," I called back to the others, who were resting by the river's edge.

"...this our camp," came an echo rebounding from the bowl of rock.

They leaped to their feet, startled. Before I could go down to them they came rushing up to where I stood.

"We heard your voice twice," said Noch, fearfully.

"It is an echo," I said. "Listen." Raising my voice, I called out my own name.

"Orion!" came the echo floating back to our ears.

"A god is in the rock!" Reeva said, her knees trembling.

"No, no," I tried to assure them. "You try it. Shout out your name, Reeva."

She clamped her lips tight. Staring down at her crusted toes, she shook her head in frightened refusal.

Anya called out. And then young Chron.

"It is a god," said Noch. "Or maybe an evil demon."

"It is neither," I insisted. "Nothing but a natural echo. The sound bounces off the rock and returns to our ears."

They could not accept a natural explanation, it was clear.



Finally I said, "Well, if it is a god, then it's a friendly one who will help to protect us. No one will be able to move through this canyon without our hearing it."

Reluctantly, they accepted my estimate of the situation. As we walked along the narrow trail that wound through the jutting boulders and trees toward the caves it was obvious that they were wary of this strange, spooky bowl of rock. Instead of being exasperated with their superstitious fears I felt almost glad that at last they were showing some spirit, some thinking of their own. They were doing as I told them, true enough, but they did not like it. They were no longer docile sheep following without question. They still followed, but at least they were asking questions.

Noch insisted on building a cairn at the base of the hollow to propitiate "the god who speaks." I thought it was superstitious nonsense, but helped them pile up the little mound of stones nevertheless.

"You are testing us, Orion, aren't you?" Noch said, puffing, as he lifted a stone to the top of the chest-high mound.

"Testing you?"

The other men were gathered around, watching, now that we had completed the primitive monument.

"You are a god yourself. Our god."

I shook my head. "No. I am only a man."

"No man could have slain the dragon that guarded us," said Vorn, one of the older men. His dark beard showed streaks of silver, his head was balding.

"The dragon almost killed me. I needed Anya's help, or it would have."

"You are a full-grown man, yet you grow no beard," Noch said, as if proving his point.

I shrugged. "My beard grows very slowly. That doesn't make me a god, believe me."

"You have brought us back to Paradise. Only a—"

"I am not a god," I said firmly. "And you—all of you—brought yourselves back to Paradise. You walked here, just as I did. Nothing godly about that."

"Still," Noch insisted, "there are gods."

I had no answer for that. I knew that there were men and women in the distant future who had godlike powers. And the corrupted egomania that accompanies such powers.

They were all staring at me, waiting for my reply. Finally I said, "There are many things that we don't understand. But I am only a man, and the voice that comes from the rock is only noise."

Noch glanced around at the others, a knowing smile on his lips. Eight ragged, dirty Neolithic men—including Chron and the other beardless teenager. They knew a god when they saw one, no matter what I said.

If they feared me as a god, or feared the echo that they called "the god who speaks," after a few days their fears vanished in the glow of well-being. The caves were large and dry. Game was abundant and easy to catch. Life became very pleasant for them. The men hunted and fished in the stream. The women gathered fruits and tubers and nuts.



Anya even began to show them how to pick cereal grains, spread the grain on a flat rock, and pound it with stones, then toss the crushed mass into the air to let the breeze winnow away the chaff. By the end of the week the women were baking a rough sort of flat bread and I was showing the men how to make bows and arrows.

Chron and his fellow teenagers became quite adept at snaring fowl in nets made from vines. We used the birds' feathers for our arrows after feasting on their flesh.

One night, as Anya and I lay together in a cave apart from the others, I praised her for her domestic skills. She laughed. "I learned them a few lifetimes ago, just before the flood at Ararat. Don't you remember?"

A vague recollection flitted through my mind. A hunting tribe much like this one. A flood caused by a darkly dangerous enemy. I felt the agony of drowning in the lava-hot floodwaters.

"Ahriman," I said, more to myself than Anya.

"You remember more and more!"

The cave was dark; we had no fire. Yet even with nothing but starlight I saw that Anya was suddenly filled with a new hope.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she asked urgently, "Orion, have you tried to make contact with the Creators?"

"No. If you can't, then how can I?"

"Your powers have grown since you were first created," she said, her words coming fast, excited. "Set is blocking me, but perhaps you can get through!"

"I don't see how—"

"Try! I'll work with you. Together we might be able to overcome whatever force he's using to block me."

I nodded and rolled onto my back. The stone floor of the cave was still warm from the day's sunlight. Just like the rest of the tribe, we had constructed a bed of boughs and moss in a corner of the cave. I had covered it with the skin of a deer I had killed, the largest animal we had caught in this abundant forest. There were wolves out there, I knew; we had heard their howling in the night. But they had not come anywhere near our caves, high up the steep rock face and protected by fire.

"Will you try?" Anya pleaded.

"Yes. Of course." But something within me was hesitant. I liked this place, this time, this life with Anya. I felt a real aversion to reestablishing contact with the Creators. They would force us to resume the tasks they wanted us to carry out, their endless schemes to control the continuum, their petty arguments among themselves that resulted in slaughters such as Troy and Jericho. Our pleasant existence in Paradise would end the moment we reached them.

Then I remembered the implacable evil of Set. I saw his devil's face and burning eyes. I heard his seething words: I will destroy you all, including the woman you love, the self-styled goddess. She will die the most painful death of all.

I grasped Anya's hand and closed my eyes. Side by side, we concentrated together and strained to touch the minds of the Creators.



I saw a glow, and for an instant thought we had broken through. But instead of the golden aura of the Creators' distant spacetime, this radiance was sullen red like the dark flames of hell, like the unblinking baleful eye of the blood red star that hung above us each night.

The glow contracted, pulled itself together like an image in a telescope coming into focus. Set's remorseless hateful face glowered at me.

"Soon, Orion. Very soon now. I know where you are. I will send you the punishment I promised. Your doom will be slow and painful, wretched ape."

I bolted up to a sitting position.

"What is it?" Anya asked, startled, sitting up beside me. "What did you see?"

"Set. He knows where we are. I think we revealed ourselves to him by trying to make mental contact with the Creators. We've stepped into his trap."

Chapter 6

A that night Anya and I discussed what we should do. Our options were pitifully few. We could stay where we were, even though Set knew our location now. We could try to escape deeper into the forest and hope that he could not find us. If we tried to contact the Creators, the mental energy we expended would signal Set like the bright beam of a laser cutting through the dark. If we could not contact the Creators, we were practically helpless against this reptilian demon and the enormous powers he possessed.

We came to no conclusion, no decision. Whichever direction we looked in, nothing but bleak disaster appeared. Finally, as the first rays of the new day began to brighten the sky, Anya stretched out on the deer hide and closed her eyes in troubled, exhausted sleep.

I sat at the cave's entrance, my back against the stubborn stone, my eyes scanning the wooded, rock-strewn floor of the canyon. I could see out to the smooth-flowing river and a little beyond it. Any enemy approaching us could be easily spotted from up here. Any noise was amplified and echoed by the natural sounding board of the hollowed rock cliff.

The lurid brownish red star hung in the morning sky despite the sun's radiance. Somehow it made my blood run cold; the star did not belong there. It was intrusion in the heavens, a signal that things were not as they should be.

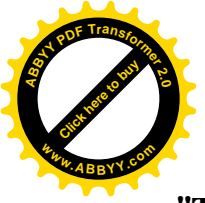
I saw Noch and the others stirring. Noch was actually getting muscular. His arms and chest had thickened. He held his chin high. Even scrawny Reeve had filled out enough to begin looking somewhat attractive. The welts on her back were fading blue-black bruises now.

Scrambling down the steep rocky slope to the canyon floor, I caught up with Noch on his way to the stream. His head barely reached my shoulder's height, and he had to squint up into the morning sunlight to speak to me. But the old servility had disappeared.

Side by side we went to the stream and urinated into its muddy bank. Equals in that, at least.

"Do we hunt again today?" Noch asked.

I replied, "What do you think? Should we go out?"



"There's still a fair amount of meat from the goat we caught yesterday," he said, tugging at his unkempt beard, "but on the way back home I saw the tracks of a big animal in the mud by the bank of the stream. Tracks like we've never seen before."

He showed me. They were the prints of a bear, a large one, and I told him I thought it would be wise to keep away from such a beast. From the size of the prints, it was a cave bear that stood more than seven feet tall on its hind legs. The massive paws that made those prints could break a man's back with a single swipe. I described what a bear looks like, how ferocious it could be, how dangerous it was to tangle with one.

To my surprise, my words only excited Noch. He became eager to track down the bear.

"We could kill it!" he said. "All of us men, working together. We could track it down and kill it."

"But why?" I asked. "Why risk the danger?"

Noch pulled at his beard again, struggling to find the words he wanted. I thought I knew what was going through his mind: he wanted to kill the bear to prove to himself—and to the women—that he was a mighty hunter. The king of the forest.

But what he said was, "If this beast is as dangerous as you say, Orion, might it not come to our caves in the night and attack us? It could be more of a danger not to kill it than to hunt it down."

I grinned at him as we stood by the stream's muddy bank. He was thinking for himself, his slavish docility replaced now by the spirit of a hunter. Perhaps he could even become a leader of men.

Then a new thought struck me. Could this bear be a weapon sent against us by Set? A huge cave bear could kill half our little band or more if it struck suddenly in the night.

"You're right," I said. "Round up all the men and we'll track the beast down."

The eight males of the little band came with me, each of them carrying a couple of rough spears. I had a bow slung across my shoulders and a half-dozen arrows tied in a sheaf on my back. Several of the men had crude flint knives, nothing more than sickle-shaped chunks of flint sized to fit in the palm, one edge sharpened. Anya had wanted to come with us, but I begged her to stay with the women and not upset the precarious division of labor that we had so recently established.

"Very well," she said, with an unhappy toss of her head. "I will stay here with the women while you have all the fun."

"Keep a sharp lookout," I warned. "This bear might be merely a diversion sent by Set to draw the men away from the caves."

It was a long, punishingly hard day, and I was constantly on the alert. Perhaps there was more than a cave bear in these woods. Certainly there should be more than a solitary bear. Where there was one there should be others. Yet no matter how diligently we searched, that one set of tracks was all we could find.



The tracks followed the river's course, and we trailed along its bank beneath the overhanging trees. Colorful birds chirped and called to us and insects danced before our eyes like frantic sunbeams in the heat of the afternoon. Chron clambered up a tall slanting pine and called down, "The river makes a big bend to the right, and then grows very wide. It looks like... yaa!"

His sudden scream startled us. The youngster was frantically swatting at the air around his head with one hand and trying to climb down from his perch at the same time. Looking closer, I saw that he was enveloped in a cloud of angry, stinging bees.

I raced toward the tree. Chron slipped and lost his grip, plummeting toward the ground, crashing through the lower branches of the tree. I dived the last few feet and reached out for him, caught him briefly in my arms, and then we both hit the ground with an undignified thump. The air was knocked out of me and my arms felt as if they'd been pulled from their shoulder sockets. The bees came right after him, an angry buzzing swarm.

"Into the river!" I commanded. All nine of us ran as if chased by demons and splashed without a shred of dignity into the cool water while the furious bees filled the air like a menacing cloud of pain. None of the men could swim, but they followed me as I ducked my head beneath the water's surface and literally crawled farther away from the bank.

Nine spouting, spraying heads popped up from the water, hair dripping in our eyes, hands raised to ward off our tiny tormentors. We were far enough from the river-bank; the cloud of bees was several yards away, still buzzingly proclaiming their rights, but no longer pursuing us.

For several minutes we stood there with our feet in the mud and our faces barely showing above the water level. The bees grudgingly returned to their hive high up in the tree.

I picked the soggy stem of a water lily from my nose. "Still think I'm a god?" I asked Noch.

The men burst into laughter. Noch guffawed and pointed at Chron. His face was lumpy and fire red with stings. It was not truly a laughing matter, but we all roared hysterically. All but poor Chron.

We waded many yards downstream before dragging ourselves out of the river. Chron was in obvious pain. I made him sit on a log while I focused my eyes finely enough to see the tiny barbs embedded in his swollen face and shoulders and pulled them out with nothing more than my fingernails. He yelped and flinched at each one, but at last I had them all. Then I plastered his face with mud.

"How does it feel now?" I asked him.

"Better," he said unhappily. "The mud feels cool."

Noch and the others were still giggling. Chron's face was caked so thickly with mud that only his eyes and mouth showed through.

The sun was low in the west. I doubted that we would have enough daylight remaining to find our bear, let alone try to kill it. But I was curious about Chron's description of the river up ahead.

So we cut through the woods, away from the river-bank's bend. It was tough going; the undergrowth was thick and tangled here. Nettles and thorns



scratched at our bare skin. After about half an hour of forcing our way through the brush we saw the water again, but now it was so wide that it looked to me like a sizable lake.

And hunched down on the grassy edge of the water sat our bear, intently peering into the quietly lapping little waves. We froze, hardly even breathing, in the cover of thick blackberry bushes. The breeze was blowing in from the broad lake, carrying our scent away from the bear's sensitive nostrils. It had no idea that we were close.

It was a huge beast, the size and reddish brown color of a Kodiak. If we stood Chron on Noch's shoulders, the bear would still have been taller, rearing on its hind legs. I could feel the cold hand of reality clamping down on my eager hunters. I heard someone behind me swallowing hard.

I had been killed by such a bear once, in another millennium. The sudden memory of it made me shudder.

The bear, oblivious to us, got up on all fours and walked slowly, deliberately, out into the lake a half-dozen strides. It stood stock still, its eyes staring into the water. For long moments it did not move. Then it flicked one paw in the water and a big silvery fish came spiraling up, sunlight sparkling off its glittering scales and the droplets of water spraying around it, until it plopped down on the grass, tail thumping and gills gasping desperately.

"Do you still want the bear?" I whispered into Noch's ear.

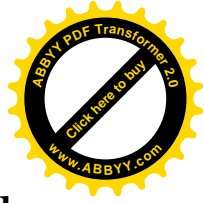
He was biting his lower lip, and his eyes looked fearful, but he bobbed his head up and down. We had come too far to turn back now with nothing to show for our efforts except the bee stings on Chron's mud-caked face.

With hand signals I directed my band of hunters into a rough half circle and made them crouch in the thick bushes. Slowly, while the bear was still engrossed in his fishing, I slipped the bow from my shoulder and untied the crudely fledged arrows. Signaling the others to stay where they were, I crept on my belly slowly, cautiously forward, more like a slithering snake than a mighty hunter.

I knew the arrows would not be accurate enough to hit even a target as big as the cave bear unless I was almost on top of it. I crawled through the scratching burrs and thorns while the birds called overhead and a squirrel or chipmunk chattered scoldingly from its perch on a tree trunk's rough bark. The bear looked up and around once, and I flattened myself into the ground. Then it returned to its fishing. Another flick of its paw, and another fine trout came flashing out of the water in a great shining arc, to land almost touching the first one.

I rose slowly to one knee, braced myself, and pulled the bow to its utmost. The bear loomed so large, so close, that I knew I could not miss. I let the arrow fly. It thunked into the cave bear's ribs with the solid sound of hardened wood striking meat.

The bear huffed, more annoyed than hurt, and turned around. I got to my feet and put another arrow to the bowstring. The bear growled at me and lurched to its hind legs, rearing almost twice my height. I aimed for its throat, but the arrow curved slightly and struck the bear's shoulder. It must have hit bone, for it fell off like a bullet bouncing off armor plate.



Now the beast was truly enraged. Bellowing loud enough to shake the ground, it dropped to all fours and charged at me. I turned and ran, hoping that my hunters were brave enough to stand their ground and attack the beast from each side as it hurtled past.

They were. The bear came crashing into the bushes after me and eight frightened, exultant, screaming men rammed their spears into its flanks. The animal roared again and turned around to face its new tormentors.

It was not pretty. Spears snapped in showers of splinters. Blood spurted. Men and bear roared in pain and anger. We hacked at the poor beast until it was nothing more than a bloody pile of fur shuddering and moaning in the reddened slippery bushes. I gave it the coup de grace with my dagger and the cave bear finally collapsed and went still.

For several moments we all simply slumped to the ground, trembling with exhaustion and the aftermath of adrenaline overdose. We, too, were covered with blood, but it seemed to be only the blood of our victim. We had suffered just one injury; the man called Pirk had a broken forearm. I pulled it straight for him while he shrieked with pain, then tied a splint cut from saplings and bound the arm into a sling improvised from vines.

"Anya can make healing poultices," I told Pirk. "Your arm will be all right in time."

He nodded, his face drained white from the pain, his lips a thin bloodless line. The others fell to skinning the bear. Noch wanted its skull and pelt to bring back to the women, to show that we had been successful.

"No beast will dare to threaten us once we mount this ferocious skull before our caves," he said.

Twilight was falling when I sensed that we were not alone. The men were half-finished with their skinning. Chron and I had gathered wood and started a fire. Deep in the shadows around us other presences had gathered, I realized. Not animals. Men.

I got to my feet and moved slightly away from the fire to peer into the shadows flickering among the thick foliage. Without conscious thought I reached down and drew my dagger from its sheath on my thigh.

Chron was watching me. "What is it, Orion?"

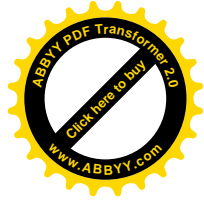
I silenced him with a finger to my lips. The other seven men looked up at me, then uneasily out toward the shadows.

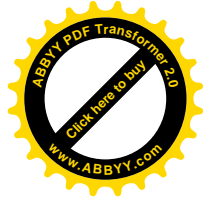
A man stepped out from the foliage and regarded us solemnly, our firelight making his bearded face seem ruddy, his eyes aglow. He wore a rough tunic of hide and carried a long spear in one hand, which he butted on the ground. In height he was no taller than Noch or any of the others, although he seemed more solid in build and much more assured of himself. Broad in the shoulders. Older too: his long hair and beard were grizzled gray. His eyes took in every detail of our makeshift camp at a glance.

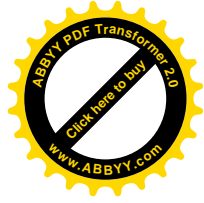
"Who are you?" I asked.

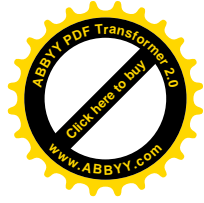
"Who are you?" he countered. "And why have you killed our bear?"

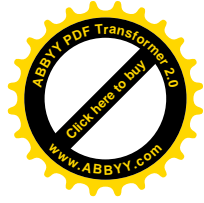
"Your bear?"

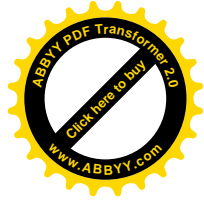
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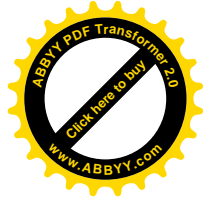
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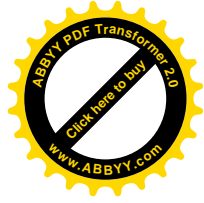
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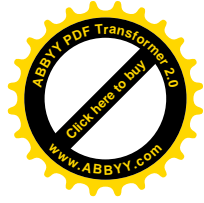
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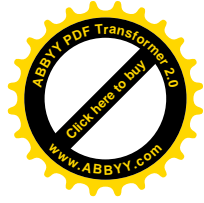
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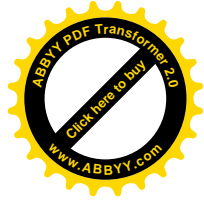
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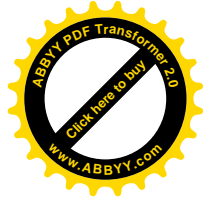
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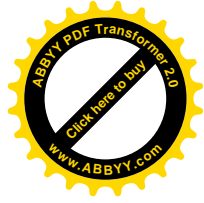
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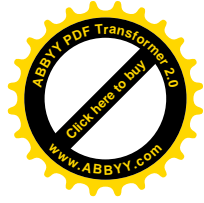
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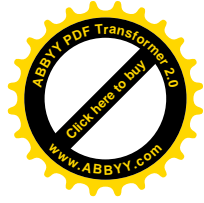
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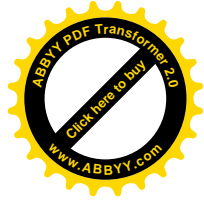
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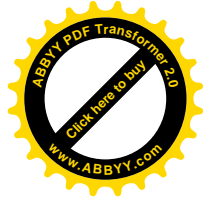
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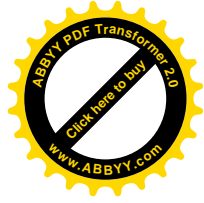
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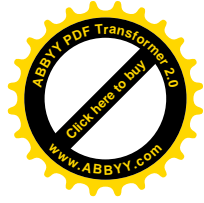
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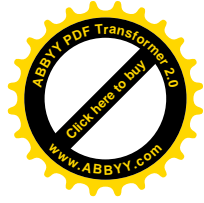
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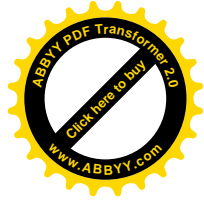
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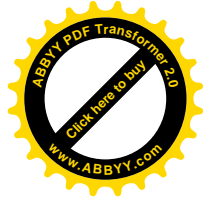
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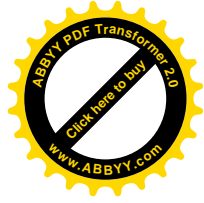
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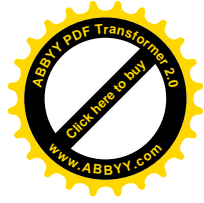
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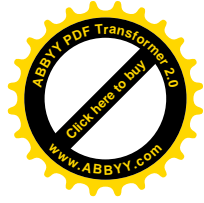
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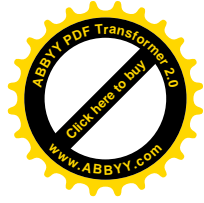
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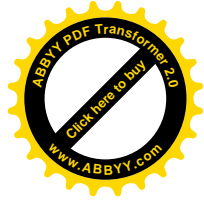
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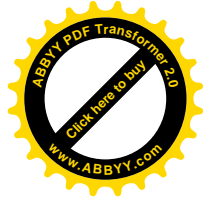
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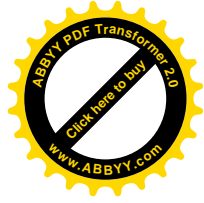
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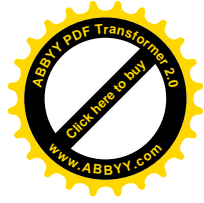
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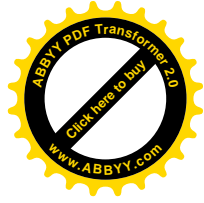
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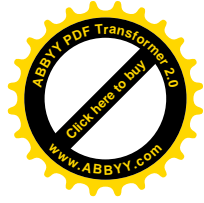
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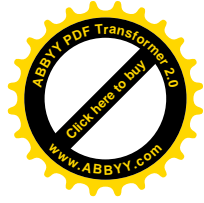
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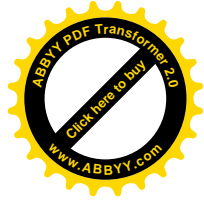
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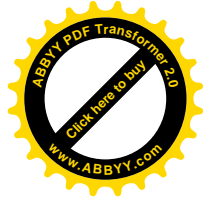
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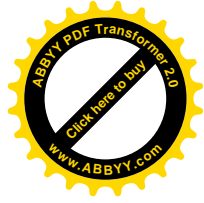
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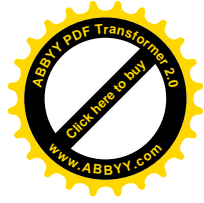
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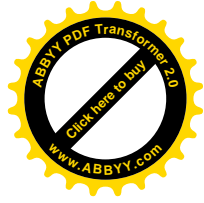
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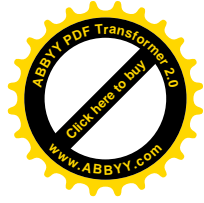
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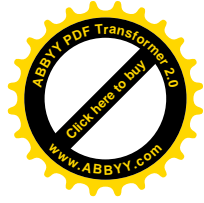
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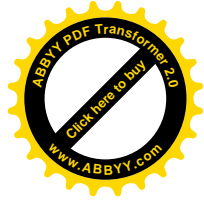
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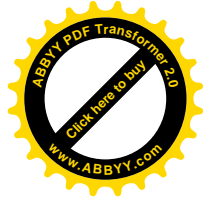
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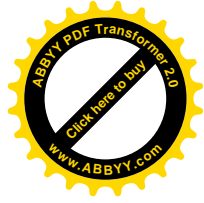
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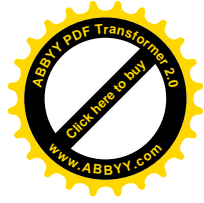
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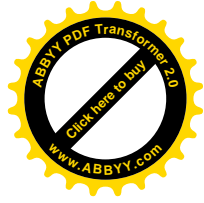
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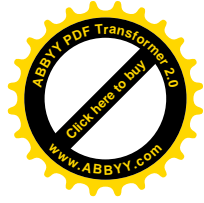
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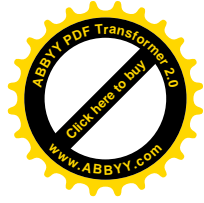
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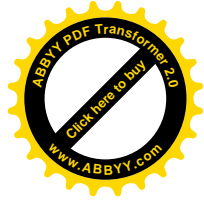
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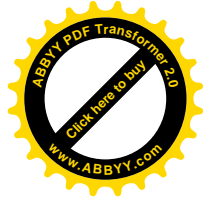
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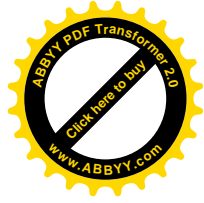
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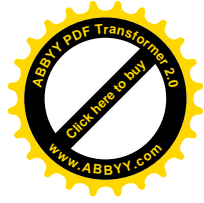
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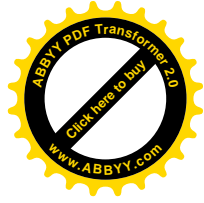
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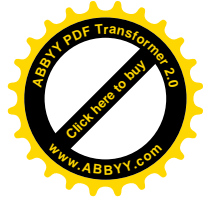
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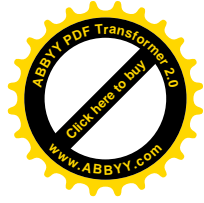
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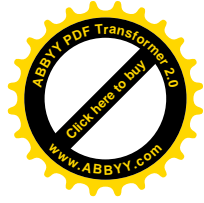
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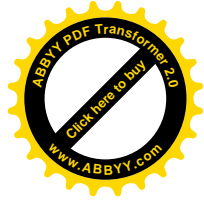
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