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Children of Tomorrow

by

Arthur Leo Zagat

Chapter I: NIGHT WINGS

"Dikar," Marilee said, low-voiced.

"Of all the day between sunrise and sunrise, I am most happy in this quiet hour just before bedtime." Lying on the grass beside him, the warmth of her love enfolded Dikar like the warmth of the fire behind them and the scent of her in his nostrils was sweet and clean as the breath of the woods that enclosed the wide, long clearing. "I am so happy that I'm afraid," Marilee went on. "Something out there in the night hates to see me so happy."

Dikar's great paw tightened on the slim, small hand of his mate, but he said nothing. "I'm afraid," Marilee's gray eyes widened, "that someday it will take you away from me, and leave me all empty."

Dikar's high forehead was deeply lined with thought, his lips pressed tightly together within his blond, silken beard. From the logs on the Fire Stone the crackling flames leaped high, reaching always for the leafy canopy a giant oak held above them, never quite touching it. The ruddy light of the flames filled the clearing, from the long Boys' House on one side to the Girls' House on the other, from the Fire Stone at this end to the table and benches under the pole-upheld roof of the eating place at the other. The light played on the brown, strong limbs of the Boys of the Bunch, on the slender bodies of the Girls, as they walked slowly or lay, like Dikar and Marilee, in pairs on the grass, murmuring.

Over the clearing the purple-black Mountain hung, and the forest enclosed the clearing with night. The forest was silent with its own queer silence that is made up of countless little noises; the piping of insects, the chirp of nesting birds, the scurry of small beasts in the brush, the babble of streamlets hurrying to leap over the edge of the Drop.

Dikar thought of the Drop, of how its high wall of riven rock completely circled the Mountain, so barren of foothold that no living thing could hope to scale it unaided. He thought of the tumbled stones below the Drop, stones big as the Boys' House and bigger, and of how the water of the streamlets foamed white and angry between the stones, and of how beneath stones and water slept the Old Ones who brought the Bunch to the Mountain in the Long-Ago Time of Fear that none of the Bunch remembered clearly, most not at all.

"Dikar!" As Marilee's head rolled to him, a gap formed in the rippling mantle of her soft, brown hair and a round, naked shoulder peeped through. "You won't let it take you away from me, will you? Will you, Dikar?"

Beyond the tumbled stones, as far as Dikar could see from the topmost bough of the tallest tree on top of the Mountain, stretched the far land where they lived from whom the Old Ones had hidden the Bunch on this Mountain.

"Why don't you answer me, Dikar?" There was sharpness in Marilee's voice. "Don't you hear me? Dikar! What are you thinking about?"

Dikar smiled slowly, his blue eyes finding Marilee. "I am boss of the Bunch, Marilee," he rumbled. "And I've a lot to think about. You know that."

"Yes," she whispered. "I know. But sometimes you could think about me."

"I do. Always." Dikar loosed his hand from Marilee's and, sliding it under her supple waist, drew her close to his great body. "Whatever else I think about, I am always thinking about you too." The trouble within him was a little eased as he looked into her bright and lovely face. "Do I have to tell you that?"

"No," she murmured, nesting warm against him. "You don't have to tell me." She sighed with contentment. Her eyelids drooped drowsily, but Dikar's remained open as his gaze returned to the Boys and the Girls in the clearing.

All the Boys had grown in the long years since the Old Ones brought them here, their cheeks and chins fuzzed, their flat muscles banding torsos naked save for small aprons of green twigs split and plaited. Slim the Girls had grown, slim as the white birches in the woods, and graceful as the fawns that bedded in the forest.

Their loose hair fell rippling and silken to their ankles but as they moved Dikar glimpsed lean flanks, firm thighs brushed by short skirts woven from reeds, ever-deepening breasts hidden by circlets woven of leaves for the unmated, of gay flowers for each who had taken a Boy as mate.

Near the middle of the clearing three or four of the younger Boys knelt, playing with small, round stones the game called aggies. They were beardless as yet, their faces rashed with small pimples, and as they argued about the game their voices were now deep as Dikar's own, now broke into thin squeals.

Abruptly their chatter hushed, and then one of them was on his feet, was running towards where Dikar lay. He was Jimlane, thin-faced, puny, but keenest-eared of all the Bunch.

Dikar put Marilee out of his arms and was rising when Jimlane got to him. "I hear one, Dikar!" the kid gasped. "It's far away, but I hear it."

"Shut up, everybody!" the boss called aloud. "Listen."

There was no sound in the clearing, save for the crackle of the fire. For a long time Dikar heard no sound except the crackle of the flames behind him, the tiny noises from the woods. And then there was another sound, so faint that he was not quite certain he heard it. In the star-prickled sky, it was a buzz like the buzz of a bee although no bee flies at night.

"There!" Jimlane pointed. Where he pointed a star moved, a sparkle of light like a star. "See it?"

"I see it," Dikar said, quietly. Then, more loudly but just as calmly. "Out the fire, Bunch. Quick."

They came running toward him, the Boys and the Girls, and past him into the edge of the woods and then out again, and now each had in his hands a birch bark bucket of earth. Marilee snatched a burning stick from the fire and darted with it into the woods, and the others threw earth on the fire, till the flames flickered and were gone, and the clearing was dark as the forest.

Dikar stared into the sky.

The buzzing was louder now, and nearer. The dot of light came nearer and nearer, moving among the stars, and about it the stars blotted out, and shone again behind it, and now Dikar could make out a black shape in the sky.

"In the houses, Bunch," he ordered, and he heard swift movement in the darkness, the padding of many feet. He was alone, standing under the canopy of the great oak, with the hot smell of burned wood in his nostrils and of baking earth.

The noise in the sky was no longer a buzz but a great roaring and the black shape was very distinct now; its spread wings, its long body, the yellow light at its very tip. Like a bird, it was, but larger than any bird. Its wings lay flat and without motion, like a soaring bird's, but no bird soared so long without wing flap, no bird soared so straight. It was a plane and there were men in it, and it was flying straight toward the Mountain. At the height it flew, it would just clear the tall tree that stood on the tip of the Mountain.

The roar of the plane beat at Dikar. The plane was almost overhead now and Dikar was afraid.

Dikar was afraid as he was in the dream that so often came to him in his sleep, dream of the dark Time of Fear when was a very little boy called Dick Carr, and the sky over the city would fill with screaming of sirens, and he would run hand in hand with his mother to crouch in the subway, the ground heaving and rolling under their feet. A dream it was, but also a memory so vague Dikar could not be sure which was memory, which dream. But this was no dream, this rattling thunder that clubbed at him out of the sky.

"It will go by," he said to himself. "They always go by."

* * * *

Every once in awhile a plane would fly over the Mountain. At the first sound of it the Bunch would hide--if at night, first outing the fire. The Bunch knew, not quite knowing how, what the planes were, but they were not afraid of the planes. They hid from them because it was one of the musts the Old Ones had left, and the musts of the Old Ones must be obeyed.

No more than the rest of the Bunch Dikar had been afraid of the planes until the day not long ago when he had gone down into the far land from which they came.

Dikar had gone far and wide that day, a shadow flitting through the fields and the woods, a silent shadow none saw; but who had seen white men and women huddled within fences of thorn-covered wire, had seen them beaten by yellow men till the blood ran. He had seen a thing, dried and gray, swing from a tall pole at the end of a rope, and the rags that fluttered about the thing had told him it once had been a man. He had seen white men and women working, thin and sunken-eyed and so weak they could hardly stand; when they fell, had seen them lashed to work again by men dressed in green, black men with yellow faces.

Dikar had seen many terrible things that day, and he had learned how terrible they were who ruled the far land that had seemed so pleasant from his perch on the Mountain's tallest tree.

It was they who rode in the planes, and Dikar knew what it would mean to the Bunch if they found out the Bunch lived on the Mountain, and this was why Dikar was afraid when there was a roar in the sky and a plane flew overhead. But this plane was now hidden from Dikar by the oak's canopy, and the roar in the sky was lessening.

"It's gone by," he said to himself, "like they always--" The roar in the sky was loud again, the plane, lower now was again blotting out the stars--A white light blazed in the sky, a great white light like the sun! It floated down, making the woods green, filling the clearing with brightness!

Terror was ice in Dikar's veins.

This too was out of his dream, a white light floating down out of the sky, a noise like hundreds of sticks rattling along a hundred fences, screams and crashes, the screams of kids who were fleeing a destroyed city, the crashes of the trucks in which they fled. The truck in which was eight-year-old Dick Carr, in which were Mary Lee and the other kids who now were the Bunch, rocking to a halt on a tree-roofed side road. The two Old Ones stiff with terror on the front seat of the truck...

That white light floating down, showed only an empty clearing, weather-grayed houses about which there was no sign of life. The light was fading. The black plane was turning again to its course, was blotting the stars no longer, itself was blotted by the purple-dark Mountain. The roar in the sky became the buzz of a monstrous bee. Dikar wiped cold sweat from his forehead with the edge of his hand.

From the plane, held high by the tall forest and steep slope, they had seen nothing of life in the blaze of their white light and they had flown away. But why had they turned back? Why had they lit the clearing with their white light? Always before the planes had flown straight on, over the Mountain.

The bee-buzz in the sky faded to nothingness. The shrilling of insects in the woods began again. Dikar cupped hands about his mouth and called, "Come out. Come out wherever you are."

Forms began to come out of the doors of the houses. Dikar turned to face the woods. "Come out, Marilee," he called through his cupped hands. "M-a-a-arilee."

His shout rolled away into the purple-dark woods, seeking the cave where Marilee hid with the burning stick that must light the fire again, as was her job when a plane came in the night. "M-a-a-rilee." Behind

Dikar the Bunch chattered, but no light from Marilee's flaming stick moved among the black tree trunks.

"Ma-a-rilee," Dikar called again, sending his shout into the whispering night of the woods. The woods sent his shout back to him. "Ma-arilee," hollow and mocking, and that was all the answer that came to his shout.

Chapter II: TO FIGHT NO-FAIR

Breath pulled in between Dikar's teeth and he was lunging past the oak's enormous bole, plunging into the dark woods. Earth was cold and wet to the soles of his feet. Cold, wet-earth smell was in his nostrils and the green smell of the woods and the smell of mouldering leaves and of the pale things that overnight grew among the leaves. Faintly in his nostrils, too, was the sharp tang of smoke, and that could only be from the stick Marilee had carried off to the cave.

Even to Dikar's eyes, keen as they were, there was no light here, but he moved swiftly, never stumbling, avoiding tree trunks and bushes with the sure deftness of the small woods creatures, no more aware than they how he did so. The ground lifted under his feet, and then there was no longer ground under his feet but rock.

Dikar stopped, sensing walls about him, a roof above him, and so knowing he was in the cave he sought. "Marilee," he called into the sightless blackness. "Marilee. Where are you?"

No answer came. But in his nostrils the smoke-tang he'd followed was sharp, so Dikar knew that Marilee had been here. In his nostrils was the warm, sweet smell of his mate, so that Dikar knew she was still here, somewhere in this blackness-filled cave.

He started moving again, slowly, groping with his feet in the dark. And his feet found her, found her form outstretched on the cave's rocky floor, unmoving even when his feet thudded against her.

"Marilee!" Dikar choked and went to his knees beside Marilee, gathered her into his arms.

She stirred in his arms! "Dikar." Breath gusted from Dikar's great chest at that uncertain murmur, breath he did not know till now had been caught in his chest, "Oh, Dikar."

"What happened to you, Marilee? What-?"

"I--Someone sprang on me from behind, just as I reached the cave and hit me! Dikar! The fire stick! Where-?"

"Not here. Or if here, gone out. No. Not here. Even if gone out its smell would be stronger--"

"The fire, Dikar!" Sudden terror in Marilee's voice, of life without fire, of food without fire to cook, of winter without fire to warm. She was out of his arms and on her feet. "I've lost the fire, Dikar."

Dikar whirled out of the cave, was running through the woods, Marilee at his side. They burst out of the woods into the clearing and Dikar was shouting, "Get the dirt off the fire logs, everybody. Quick."

Dikar went on without stopping, darting to the door of the Boys' House, into it. He lifted an axe from its pegs on the wall, was out in the open again, was running toward where the Bunch were scooping earth off the piled logs on the Fire Stone.

He shoved through the Boys and Girls, made out, by the dim light of the stars, a log they had uncovered, black, lifeless. His axe swept up, smashed down.

Chunk!

The log split open. Red sparks flew, stinging Dikar's legs. He did not feel them. He was staring at the redness from which they had flown, the glowing red heart of the log that still had life in it, the life of the fire, the life of the Bunch. "Dry leaves," he commanded. "Bring dry leaves. Quick! Bring dry twigs. Billthomas! Halcross! Build up the fire. Fredalton! Take this axe and split up one of those logs into little sticks."

Dikar watched Billthomas put dry leaves on the glowing redness, watched the leaves take flame from the log's heart. Watched Halross feed little dry twigs to the leaves and the twigs catch flame from the leaves, and the sticks from the twigs. The fire grew again on the Fire Stone, and the light of the fire grew again in the clearing, but Dikar's forehead was deep-lined and his eyes were no longer blue, and in the darkness of them was a red light that did not come from the fire.

Dikar's eyes moved over the red-lit faces of the Bunch that stood about the Fire Stone watching the fire grow again; and his eyes seemed to ask a question of each face and pass on. They came to one face, and stayed on it, Dikar's brow-lines deepening.

That face was chunk-jawed, black-stubbled, the eyes too small, too closely set, but what held Dikar's gaze was the odd, leering grin that sat on the thick lips.

Tomball had had little to grin about since the day Dikar had returned from the far land and ended Tomball's short time as boss, forcing him to confess to the Bunch how he had tricked his way to being boss in place of Dikar. Why, then, was he grinning now?

"Do you think it was *he* who hit me?" Marilee whispered in Dikar's ear, "and ran away with the fire stick?"

"Who else of the Bunch would do a thing like that?"

"But why should he, Dikar? He's smart enough to know that if we lost the fire it would be as bad for him as for the rest of us."

"That's what I don't--Wait! I've got a hunch. Look. Walk along with me like we were just talking about nothing important. Laugh a little, you know, and hold on to my arm."

Marilee's fingers were cold on Dikar's arm, but her laugh rippled like a little stream running over pebbles in its bed. They walked slowly away from the fire reached the shadowy edge of the woods, were closed around by the forest darkness.

"Now!" Dikar said, and he was flitting through the forest night, Marilee a silent shadow behind him. It was like her to stay close behind, like her to ask no questions as he ran through the woods to the cave again.

At the cave-mouth Dikar stopped a moment, sniffing the air. "Yes," he said, more to himself than to Marilee. "I can still smell the smoke of the fire-stick. The wet night air holds smells a long time." Then he was moving again, following the sharp tang of smoke in the air, following it away from the cave and away from the clearing.

The scent-trail led him downhill. Soon the laugh of a streamlet came to his ears and then Dikar pushed through tangling bushes and came out into starlight on the edge of the brook that he heard. The smoke smell was very strong here--

"Look, Marilee!" Dikar pointed to a black something at his feet, half in, half out of the water. "Here is

your fire stick." He squatted to it.

"He brought it here to put it in the water," Marilee said, squatting beside him.

"No," Dikar answered, his voice a growl deep in his chest. "No. He slipped on a wet stone and fell, and the water outed it. See. Here are the marks of his knees on the bank. But he brought it here because this was the nearest open place in the woods, the nearest place where its light could be seen from the sky."

"From the sky? Dikar! What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know now why the plane turned back." Even in the dimness Marilee could see that Dikar's face was hard and still, his lips tight and gray. "If he hadn't slipped and dropped the stick in the water, so that they were not sure they'd seen--" Dikar stood up. "Come," he said, grimly.

When they came again into the clearing, it was filled once more with the wavering light of the fire and everything was as it had been before Jimlane had heard the plane. Dikar paused beside the Fire Stone, stood there straddle-legged and glowering, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

Marilee laid finger tips on Dikar's arm. "There's Tomball," she whispered. "Talking to Bessalton down there near the eating place."

Dikar's gaze moved to where she had said. Bessalton was boss of the Girls and tallest of them, her cloak of hair black as deepest night, her legs long and slender, her hips wide. Tomball was heavy-built beside her, bulging arms hanging loose almost to his knees, great chest black-matted, his belly black with matted hair. Black-haired was Tomball, and squat. He was strongest of the Bunch, and there was shrewdness in him too, a shrewdness Dikar already had learned to fear.

The little muscle twitched in Dikar's cheek. "Marilee," he said, low-toned. "Find Jimlane and Billthomas, and tell them to come to me first chance they can without anyone seeing them."

She slipped away. Dikar watched her, slim and lovely, the fire's red light caressing her, and there was pain in his arms and his chest, sweet pain of the knowing that she was his.

Tomball too watched Marilee, small eyes following her, thick lips a little parted. Seeing this Dikar felt a tightness in his neck and across the back of his shoulders. His hands closed into fists. If he wasn't boss of the Bunch!

Dikar's hands opened and lifted, cupping around his mouth. "Ho Bunch!" he called through his cupped hands.

The talk in the clearing stopped, and the strollers turned to him. "Bedtime, Bunch," Dikar shouted. "A good sleep and happy dreams to you all."

"A good sleep to you, Dikar!" they cried to him, but Tomball did not cry Dikar a good sleep as he went toward the Boys' House with the others of the mateless Boys, while the mateless Girls went toward the Girls' House, and the mated pairs went hand in hand past the end of the eating place and into the dark woods behind. Dikar saw Marilee waiting for him by the eating place, but he did not go to her till Steveland and Halross, pimply-faced youngsters whose turn it was to stay awake the night and watch the fire, had taken their places on the smooth bench-rock near the Fire Stone.

"Be sure that one of you stays always awake," he told them. "Be sure to listen always for the sound of a plane in the sky. If you hear one wake the Bunch right away to out the fire."

"Yes, Dikar," Steveland said, his blue eyes wide. "We get you. A good sleep, Dikar."

"A quiet night to you both," Dikar said and went to join Marilee and go with her to the little house in the woods behind the eating place that, when they took each other for mates, he had built from logs to be theirs and theirs alone.

"Dikar," Marilee said, her eyes puzzled in the ruddy dusk that sifted through to her from the fire. "Why didn't you tell the Bunch about Tomball's hitting me and taking the fire stick to where the plane could see it? Why didn't you punish him for it?"

"Would it be fair, Marilee, to say to the Bunch that it was Tomball, when we do not know that it was? Would it be fair to punish him for doing it, when we do not know that he did it?"

"But we *do* know!"

"No, Marilee. We do not. You saw nothing and I saw nothing that would make us sure it was him. Or did you see something--something you have not told me?"

She stopped, Dikar stopped, looking at her face on which the dim red light fell leaving the rest of her in shadow, thinking how lovely her face was, the red light tangled in the cloudy softness of her hair, her gray eyes grave and thoughtful, her small mouth puckered.

"No-o," Marilee breathed at last. "No, I saw nothing that would make me sure it was Tomball. But I am sure, and you are sure, because we know that Tomball is the only one of the Bunch who would do a thing like that. Look, Dikar. Tomball wants to be boss, and if he cannot be boss of the Bunch he would destroy the Bunch, and he would stop at nothing to do it. You know all that as well as I do."

Sadness came into Dikar's face, and trouble in his eyes. "Yes, Marilee, I know that as well as you do. Tomball has always wanted to be boss, and when he couldn't get to be boss by fighting fair he fought no fair, and now that he knows he can't get to be boss by fighting either fair or no fair, he would destroy the Bunch rather than have me or anyone but him be boss. But it would not be right for me to fight him any other way than fair."

"Why, Dikar? If Tomball wants to destroy the Bunch, it seems to me it would be right for you to fight him any way you can, fair or no fair. Why isn't it?"

The lines were back in Dikar's forehead. Very clearly he knew the answer to what Marilee asked, but it was very hard to think of how to say it in words. "Look, Marilee," he cried. "When we were littler we played lots of games, and we always picked someone for umpire to see that everybody played according to the rules of the game, because if there were no rules there would be no game. Remember?"

"Yes, Dikar. I remember."

"Now sometimes the umpire himself would be no fair, letting one side break the rules. And then the other side would break the rules too, and pretty soon the game would bust up because with all the rules broken there was no game any more. Right?"

"Yes. But I don't see--"

His gesture stopped her.

"You will in a minute. Look. The life of the Bunch is no game, but it is lived according to rules, because if there were no rules, if every one of the Bunch did just as he or she wanted to, all the time, there would be no Bunch. Now, I don't think you or anybody else would say that if we hadn't lived all these years as a Bunch; sharing what we had, sharing the work, each doing what he can do best, all helping one another; any but the strongest of us would be alive and happy today. Would you?"

"No. We are all alive and happy after the long years here on the Mountain because we have helped each other."

"And played fair with each other. You call me boss and obey me, but you really obey the rules the Old Ones left us and the rules the Bunch has made for themselves, and all I am is an umpire to see that everybody obeys the rules, to see that everybody plays fair. Now, suppose I played no fair myself. Suppose, whenever I felt like it, I broke the rules. What would happen?"

She answered slowly:

"Everybody else would break the rules too. I see. Because if the umpire is no fair, all the ones playing the game feel it's all right to be no fair too."

"Exactly. And pretty soon there would be no rules any more, and the Bunch would bust up. If Tomball is trying to destroy the Bunch, I've got to fight him. But if I fight him no fair, that will destroy the Bunch, sooner or later, much more surely than anything Tomball could do, or anything they who live in the far land can do. Now do you understand, Marilee?"

"I understand," Marilee said. And then she cried, "But you've got to do something, Dikar! You can't let him--" She stopped short, twisted to a noise in the brush behind her. "Dikar! There's somebody-!"

Dikar thrust her behind him. "Who's there?" he demanded, his neck thickening. "Who is it?"

Shadows moved in the shadows of the brush, where the red light from the fire could not reach.

Chapter III: THE GUN ON THE ROOF

"Who's there?" Dikar cried again, and then the shadows were coming out into the light, and they were Jimlane and Billthomas.

"Marilee told us you wanted us," Jimlane said. "We waited till everyone was asleep in the Boys' House."

"Did anyone see you come here?"

"No. They were all asleep."

"All right," Dikar said. "Listen, Jimlane and Billthomas. I have a job for you, but I am not going to order you to do it. I'm going to ask you to."

"We'll do it, Dikar," Billthomas said. He was shorter than Jimlane, yellow-haired, blue-eyed, his skin as smooth as any of the Girls', his movements as graceful. "We'll do anything you ask us."

"Anything at all," Jimlane agreed.

"Wait, youngsters," Dikar warned, "You may not be so ready to promise that when you hear what it is. I hate asking you to do it, but it needs to be done, for the good of the Bunch. It won't be easy. You may be hurt doing it, you may even be killed. Nobody but Marilee and me will know that you're doing it."

Two pairs of bright eyes were fixed on his face. "If it's for the Bunch, we'll do it," Jimlane said. "Whatever it is. Tell us what you want us to do, Dikar."

"Before I tell you, you must promise, cross your hearts and hope to die, that you will say nothing about it to anyone. Whether you will do it or not, you will always keep silent."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Billthomas said solemnly. "I will say nothing." Jimlane said the same

and then the two spat over their left shoulders to show that they could never take back what they had said.

"Now listen," Dikar said when they had done that. "The job is to watch Tomball, by day and by night. You sleep in the Boys' House with him, and I'll always make sure to put you on the same jobs with him, so that part ought to be easy.

"If he slips off any time, day or night, by himself, I want you to follow him without his knowing it. Do you think you can do that?"

"We once followed a deer all day," Jimlane said, "All over the Mountain, and it never knew we was anywheres near."

"I know that," Dikar nodded. "And that's why I picked you to ask first to do this job. I also know you two are champeens of the Bunch at shooting with bonarrers, an' that's another part of the job."

The eyes of the youngsters widened, but they said nothing.

Dikar went on. "Keep your bonarrers near you all the time, and if Tomball does go off by himself, take 'em along. If you see him start to make a fire where it can be seen from the sky, or from the kind of woods that will make a smoke go up through the tops of the trees, shoot him in the legs, right away, and out the fire. If he starts to go out of the woods to the edge of the Drop, in the daytime when they who live in the far land might see him, shoot him in the legs and drag him back. Stop him if he does anything else that might show Them that someone lives here on the Mountain. Do you get me?"

"We get you, Dikar." Billthomas looked puzzled. "But all those things are Must-Nots of the Old Ones. Why do we need to shoot him to stop him from doing them? If he tries to, the Old Ones would wake from their sleep under the rocks at the bottom of the Drop and strike him down. He wouldn't dare to do 'em, and if he tried, the Old Ones wouldn't let him."

"Look, Billthomas." Dikar put his hand on the kid's shoulder. "Do you remember the time when the Bunch stoned me away from the clearing and made Tomball boss?"

"And you came back with a little gun that made a noise and killed our fawn, and you made the Bunch listen to you while you proved why we shouldn't have stoned you away. And then you threw the gun up on the roof of the Boys' House and fought Tomball who should be boss, and licked him. Sure I remember."

"Well, between the time I was stoned away and the time I came back, I went to the edge of the Drop, and I climbed down the Drop to the rocks under which the Old Ones sleep. That is the most terrible of all the Must-Nots of the Old Ones, but they didn't wake from their sleep, and they didn't strike me down. Nothing happened to me. I went into the far land, and I came back, and the Old Ones did nothing to me."

"You went into the far land," Jimlane repeated in awed tones. "Dikar! Did you see *Them*?"

"I saw Them, Jimlane, an' I saw many things that made me know how very terrible it would be if they found out the Bunch lives on the Mountain. But the Old Ones did nothin' to stop me. The Old Ones sleep under the rocks, Jimlane, an' under the water that foams over the rocks, an' they cannot awaken to stop Tomball from lettin' Them who live in the far land know that the Bunch is here on the Mountain."

"But Dikar!" Billthomas broke out. "Tomball wouldn't do anythin' like that!"

"I hope not," Dikar answered slowly. "Honest Injun, I hope that he wouldn't. But I must be sure, an' I'm

askin' you two to help me be sure--No wait," he said as he saw their mouths start to open. "Before you answer I want you to remember how strong Tomball is, an' how he said he would kill you, Jimlane, that time when you wanted to tell the Bunch why they were wrong in stonin' me away, an' how afraid of him you were, that time. I want you youngsters to think of that before you say that you will do this job."

"I've thought about it, Dikar." Jimlane stood very straight in the firelight. "I won't say I'm not afraid of Tomball, but afraid or not, I will watch him, an' I will do my best to stop him from doin' anythin' that will hurt the Bunch."

"Me too, Dikar," Billthomas said his voice clear and steady, his eyes steady as Dikar's own. "I am afraid of Tomball, but I will do this job the best I can."

"Good kids," Dikar said. Something had him by the throat, so that it was hard to say it, and he could not answer when the Boys wished him and Marilee a good sleep and slipped away, their naked young bodies ruddy one moment in the firelight, then merged with the noiseless dark.

"Oh Dikar," Marilee's soft voice said in his ear. "They're so young. Are you right in what you are doin'?"

"I don't know," Dikar sighed. "I don't know, Marilee." And then he said, "It is a hard job to be boss of the Bunch. A dreadful hard job."

* * * *

Her hand reached up to his cheek, her cool fingers touched it, lightly, "A hard job, Dikar," she said softly. "But it is night, an' just past these bushes is our little house, an' there you are not boss of the Bunch but my mate..."

He drew her close to him, her softness close against the hardness of his body. He looked into her eyes, and then his head sank and his lips found hers.

A little later they knelt by their bed of pine boughs covered with a white blanket of rabbit fur. "Now I lay me down to sleep," they said together. "An, should I die before I wake..."

What was it like to die, Dikar wondered. He had seen death, of course, a deer killed by his arrow, a squirrel stiff and glazed-eyed under last year's leaves. What was it like to lie stiff like that, never seeing again the flaming colors of the sunrise, the shimmer of sunlight on water, never feeling again the coolness of the wind on one's skin, the warm touch of the rain? "God bless the Bunch," he said, along with Marilee. "God bless Marilee..."

Marilee rose but Dikar stayed on his knees. He heard the piping of the insects outside the little house, the peep of the nesting birds, the whisper of the trees. They were trying to tell him something, but he could not quite make out what it was.

"Poor Dikar," Marilee said. "You're so tired you've fallen asleep on your knees."

"No," Dikar said, rising, nor could he sleep, even with Marilee in his arms, their cover of rabbit-fur warm over him. Something was troubling him. Something that he must do, and he could not think what it was.

He lay wide-eyed, watching the open door of the little house grow pale with the light of the moon that was rising over the Mountain, watching the leaf shadows dance in the pale moonlight. With the moon a wind rose in the forest and the rustle of the treetops was louder, and bough-tips tapped on the roof--

The roof! That was it! Billthomas had spoken of the little gun Dikar had taken from one of them down in the far land, a black faced one, and had thrown up on the roof of the Boys' House and forgotten. Dikar

had seen what that small thing could do, and Tomball had seen what it could do. Dikar must get it. Now. Tonight. Get it and hide it...

Marilee stirred in her sleep as Dikar slowly took his arms from about her. She muttered something, but she did not awaken. Dikar stole, more silent than the shadows, through the woods, reached a tree whose boughs overhung the Boys' House, swung himself up into those boughs and from them to the roof of Boys' House.

The moonlight was bright on that roof, every crack in its gray boards, every mark of them, distinct. There were faded, dried leaves on it, broken twigs...

But no gun.

Chapter IV: THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE

The sun struck brightness through Dikar's eyelids and though the night had held very little sleep for him, he was instantly awake. He flung out his arm to waken Marilee--found only the fur of the bed-covering!

He rolled over. She wasn't there beside him. She wasn't anywhere in the little house. Dikar was on his feet, his eyes wide, his heart bumping his ribs. The door of the house darkened and Marilee stood there.

"Marilee!" Dikar exclaimed. "I thought--What's the matter?" She had hold of the doorpost, as if to hold herself up by it. There was green under the bronze of her skin and her forehead was wet with sweat. "Marilee!" Dikar made the single long stride that took him to her. "What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong?" Her eyes refused to meet his. "Nothin', Dikar." She laughed, but it was not the merry tinkle that her laugh always was. "Listen, sleepyhead. The Boys are already on their way to the bathing pool." Gay shouts, the threshing of many bodies through the brush, came to him. "Go quick, or they'll be through before you have rubbed the sand from your eyes."

"Marilee." Dikar's hand was on her shoulder. "What-?" She jerked free of his hold, faced him, her lips tight and white.

"Go, you fool!" she yelled at him and thrust past him into the house, threw herself on the bed. "Let me alone."

Dikar stared at her, unbelieving. Never before had she yelled at him in anger, never before had her morning smile failed him. She lay face down, unmoving.

"Marilee," Dikar named her. "If I've done somethin' to make you angry at me, I ask your pardon, but what have I done?"

"Nothin'." He could hardly hear her. "You have done nothin'," she sobbed. "But please go, Dikar. Please leave me alone."

Dikar turned slowly away, heard his name called from outside. "Comin'," he answered red-bearded Johnstone, who called from the little house where he lived with Annjordan, "Last one in the bathing pool's a yellow belly."

They ran through the dew-sprinkled greenery, downhill to where a stream leaped from a ledge into a shining pool that foamed with the flashing limbs, the brown torsos of the Boys of the Bunch.

Dikar dived low into the icy water, swam to the opposite bank, stood up, shaking his head to clear his sight, the shining drops spattering about him. He saw Tomball, squat and shaggy under the foaming

waterfall, saw Jimlane swimming nearby. Dikar dived again, swam under water to where the drooping, slender boughs of a willow dipped into the pool and made a screen behind which he came up unseen.

The Boys' House was empty when Dikar went into it by the door away from the clearing. He darted to Tomball's bed, lifted the coverings from it, pressed hands on grass-filled bag under them. There was no hard lump inside the bag. He looked under the cot--a darkening of the light straightened him, whipped him around.

Tomball stood spraddle-legged just inside the open door from the woods. His hands were stretching a bow taut, and laid across the bow was a stone-pointed hunting arrow that could kill a deer--or a Boy.

"Got you," Tomball grunted, his eyes, small and red, hating Dikar. "This is Fredalton's bonarrer. Nobody saw me leave the bathing pool just like nobody except me saw you, an' I'll be back there before they find you." The head of the arrow was pulled back to the curve of the bow's wood. Dikar's muscles tightened to dodge the arrow, but he knew he could not hope--

Whang!

Tomball's arrow was broken in two parts, was clattering to the floor! Dikar threw himself headlong down the length of the Boys' House, tripped over the bow that Tomball had flung in his path. Thrust at the floor to get up and saw another arrow quivering in the wall toward the clearing, saw Tomball dive out of the door toward the woods, got to that door only in time to see Tomball vanish in the brush.

Dikar shook his head to clear it of its stunned surprise that he was still alive, that Tomball's arrow had broken at the exact moment it was loosed at him.

"Dikar!" Billthomas, slender brown body wet-shining, face gray-white, was suddenly there in front of him. "He didn't hurt you?" There was a bow in his one hand, the other reached out to Dikar. "He didn't-?"

"No, Billthomas," Dikar said, guessing now the meaning of that second arrow. "Thanks to you." His voice was steady enough, but inside him he was shaking, knowing suddenly how close he had been to death. "That was as fine a shot as ever was made on the Mountain."

Billthomas' blue eyes shone with the praise. "It was nothin', Dikar. The sun was on Tomball's bonarrer through the other door, makin' it a good mark, an' I was only ten paces away. Any of the Boys could have hit it."

"How did you come here, just in time?"

"Carlberger ducked Jimlane," Billthomas answered. "While he was under Tomball got to shore. I saw him from the other end of the pool an' I followed, I stopped to pick up my bonarrer where I'd hidden it near by, like you told us to last night. That let Tomball get out of sight, but I tracked him. When I got to the edge of the woods he was already in here, was pullin' tight his bow. But why're we wastin' time? I'll call the Bunch to hunt him down--"

"No!" Dikar commanded. "No, Billthomas. I will not have the Bunch know that one of them has tried to kill an other. For then there will be only two things left for the Bunch to do. Either they must stone him from the clearing; an' that will make certain of his hate for the Bunch, with no hope that he will ever change; or they must kill him, which is worse. That the Bunch shall kill one of themselves coldly and with thought before, is more dreadful than that Tomball should have tried to kill me, excited an' angry."

"But, Dikar-?"

"But nothin'! This is a thing I will take care of myself, in my own way, an' it will remain a secret between

you an' me. You will not call the Bunch." Dikar said sharply, his eyes commanding. "You will call Jimlane only. The two of you must track Tomball an' keep him always in sight, but you will not let him know you are around unless he does one of the things I talked about last night, or unless he tries again to hurt one of the Bunch. If that should happen, stop him, but hurt him as little as you can help, an' tell me about it. Get me?"

"I get you, Dikar."

"Then call Jimlane, an' get busy."

"Yes, Dikar." Billthomas was gone into the woods and Dikar heard the trill of a lark from where Billthomas had vanished, three times, and from far off he heard the answering three trills of a lark, and he knew that Billthomas had called Jimlane, and that there would not be a moment from now on that Tomball would not be under the eyes of the two youngsters. But Dikar's forehead was furrowed and his heart heavy within him as he turned to pluck Billthomas' arrow from the wall and the pieces of Tomball's arrow from the floor, and went out into the woods to hide them.

* * * *

It was queer, he thought, how he had talked to Billthomas the way he did just now, without thinking about what he was going to say beforehand. It was as if someone else had talked with his voice, someone much wiser than he was.

It was queer, too, how he knew now that what he had said was the right thing to say. How he knew now, sure as that his name was Dikar, that what he was doing was the best thing for the Bunch.

And for Tomball too. After what had happened Tomball would stay away from the Bunch, afraid of what Dikar would do if he came back. The youngsters would be watching him, but Tomball wouldn't know that. He would think he was alone on the Mountain, and he would learn what it meant to be alone, as Dikar had, and he would learn what it meant to be one of the Bunch and have a place in its life.

After awhile Dikar would send Tomball word by Jimlane or Billthomas that he need not be afraid to come back, and when he did come back he would be ready to take his place in the life of the Bunch, and he would give Dikar and the Bunch no more trouble.

That was what Dikar hoped would happen.

The Boys came back, shouting and happy, from their morning swim in their bathing pool, and the Girls came back to the clearing from their pool on the other side of the clearing, and they all ate breakfast at the long table of the eating place.

Marilee came to sit beside Dikar when breakfast was all on the table. Dikar looked sharply at her, but her color was all right now, her eyes bright again. She didn't say anything about what had happened in the morning, and Dikar didn't say anything about it, only too glad to forget about it and to let her forget.

It was Steveland who first said something about Tomball and Jimlane and Billthomas not being there. Across the table so that all could hear, Dikar told him that he had sent them on a special job on the other side of the Mountain, a job that might take them three or four days, and that they would not come back till it was finished.

Before anyone could ask what the job was, Dikar started telling what everybody was to do that day, although he usually didn't do that till after breakfast.

There was a lot to do, because it was time to start getting ready for the winter.

Dikar sent some of the Bunch to hunt for deer whose meat would be dried over the fire, and whose skins the Girls would make into clothing against the cold days to come. He sent some to pick berries that would be cooked with the sugar that they'd gotten from the maple trees in the spring, and others to search for honey in hollow bee-trees, and he set some to stopping up cracks in the walls of the houses with mud.

He himself took four of the older Boys, Johnstone and Danhall and Henfield and Bengreen, up near the top of the Mountain, to where some big trees had been blown down by a storm last year, to cut them up into logs for the fire now that they were dried out and would burn well and without smoke.

When they went to the Boys' House to get their axes, Danhall said that it would be a good idea for them to take their bonarrers along too, in case they happened to see a deer or some squirrels, and Dikar agreed. They hung their quivers of arrows on low bushes, and rested their bows against the bushes, and set to work.

It was shady and cool where they worked, and *the kerchunk-kerchunk* of their axes was a pleasant sound. Soon Dikar had almost forgotten what had happened last night and this morning, and the day seemed no different from all the other days on the Mountain. He liked the way the flying chips shone bright yellow against the dark green of the moss and the almost black brown of the ground, and he liked the way little spots of sunlight filtered through the leaves high overhead and danced on the ground. He liked the smell of new-cut wood in his nostrils, and the smell of damp earth and of last year's leaves, and the sweet smell of the breeze that was like the scent of Marilee's breath.

It was grand to feel the swell of his muscles, their smooth swell in his arms and across his back, to feel the *chunk* of his axe into a great tree-trunk, to feel the wood break apart under his strength; grandest of all to feel the touch of the other sweaty shoulders against his own as together the five would yank and haul at a hewn log.

Marilee and Annjordan, Johnstone's mate, brought lunch up to the choppers--cooked rabbit meat and dandelion greens and blackberries big as the end of Dikar's thumb. Dikar and Marilee sat a little apart from the rest, eating their lunch, washing it down with icy water brought from a nearby stream in a cup of birch bark.

"Dikar," Marilee murmured. "I have often wondered about the Drop." Her finger touched a little blue flower that grew out of the moss by her knee, but she didn't quite seem to know she touched it. "It goes all around the Mountain, an' it's so high an' steep. We were very little, Dikar, when the Old Ones brought us here. How did they climb the Drop with us?"

"They didn't." Dikar recalled his dream, recalled the memory that gave form to his dream. "The Drop didn't go all around the Mountain then. A sort of narrow hill slanted up to the top of the Drop, left by men who had been cutting away rock from the Mountain, the same men who built the houses in the clearing an' left cots here, an' these axes an' all the other tools we use. A road ran on top of that narrow hill, an' the Old Ones brought us up that road."

"What became of the hill an' the road?"

"The Old Ones hid us on the Mountain from the terrible hordes who came out of the East an' across the continent from the West an' up from the South," (Dikar was repeating words a Voice had said in his dream). "But some of them came to the foot of the Mountain, so the Old Ones brought the narrow hill down, on them and on themselves," he told Marilee what his dream had helped him to remember. "That is why there is no road to the top of the Drop, an' why the Old Ones sleep under the rocks, down there below the Drop."

"I know you went down there once, Dikar, but you never told me how you got down there, nor how you got up again."

"I plaited a rope of vines, Marilee, as long as the Drop is high. One night I tied the rope's end to a tree an' let it down where a stream leaps out an' down, so that the rope hangs behind the white curtain of the stream an' cannot be seen from below. I climbed down the rope, an' by it I climbed up again the next night, havin' seen what they have made of the far land that looks so green an' pleasant from the top of our Mountain."

"You climbed down a rope of vines!" Marilee's hand went to the flowery circlet that covered her breast. "You might have been killed, Dikar!"

Dikar nodded. "Yes, I might have been killed, an' I didn't care much whether I was or not. I'd been stoned from the Bunch, remember, an' you had cried me no fair. Have some more of these berries, Marilee. They are swell."

"No. You have them." Marilee fed them to Dikar, placing them one by one between his lips. Then they were finished. Dikar lay back, and Marilee lay by his side, quiet and drowsy, and Dikar was dreamily content.

Marilee stirred. "Dikar. Does the rope still hang behind the stream where it leaps down?"

Dikar sat up, pounding his knee with his fist. "Jeeze! It does! I did not lift it when I came back to the Mountain, an' I've forgotten it since. I must do that. Tonight I must do it, as soon as it is dark enough that I cannot be seen from below when I go to the edge of the Drop. Do not let me forget."

"I sure will not," Marilee answered. And then, with that curiosity Dikar had noticed all the Girls had so much more than the Boys, she asked, "Just where is the rope?"

Dikar looked about him, thinking how he could tell her. He knew every inch of the Mountain as well as he knew the lines on his palm. "That's funny," he laughed suddenly. "That brook, there, is the very one at whose end the rope hangs. By following it down the Mountain you would get to it. But look," he went on, rising, "the sun no longer strikes straight down through the treetops, an' much as I hate to send you away, it is time for work again."

"Yes, Dikar," Marilee sighed, reaching a hand for him to take hold of and lift her by. "Time for work." As she came up she swung close to him, and her arms went around his neck and her lips pressed against his, and they were flame on Dikar's lips, burning flame in his veins. "Oh, Dikar," Marilee sobbed. "I hate not to be with you."

"It is only for a little while," Dikar murmured. "Only till night." He held her away from him, drinking her in with his eyes. "What are you goin' to do till night, Marilee?" he asked. "I like to know what you do, all the time, because that way I can think myself with you, an' am not so lonely for you when we are apart."

"That's sweet, Dikar," Marilee smiled, touching Dikar's cheek with her fingertips. "I shall be somewhere in the woods. Bessalton wants me to hunt for a certain kind of grass that is best for sewin' with. Think of me a lot, Dikar," she said, and Annjordan called her, and she was gone.

Dikar and the rest set to work again. Marilee's lips still burned on Dikar's, and the touch of Marilee's fingertips lingered on his cheek, and he would not wipe the sweat from his face lest he wipe that touch from it too.

The *kerchunk-kerchunk* of the axes ran loud and long through the woods, and the pile of cut logs grew

slowly but steadily. The beams of sunlight striking down from the leafy roof of the forest slanted more and more, and the shadows lengthened. At last Dikar rested.

"Enough for today, fellows," he said. "Tomorrow we'll--" The words caught in his throat. He'd heard a sound from far down the Mountain, a sound that should not be in the woods.

The sound came again, very far off, but Dikar knew what it was. He'd heard it down in the far land, and once, only once, on the Mountain. That time he'd made the sound himself, shooting the little gun out of the great oak that canopied the Fire Stone.

Chapter V: OVER THE DROP

"Come, fellows," Dikar snapped, springing to the bush where hung his bow and arrows, snatching them up. "Quick." He was off through the woods, running down toward along the bank of the stream because there it was clearest of bushes and trees. The other four ran after him.

Long the time seemed, endless, that Dikar ran thus through familiar woods suddenly grown strange and fearful. Dreadful the thoughts that Dikar thought as he ran. Who had shot off a gun on the Mountain? Had that plane, last night, seen something to tell those who rode it that someone lived here? Had they climbed the Mountain, the men dressed in green that he'd seen in the far land, the men with yellow faces and black who were so brutishly cruel?

Never had Dikar run so fast. The others could not keep up with him, so fast he ran, but still he saw nothing but the flicking shadows of the woods and the glinting sun on the stream beside which he ran. The stream was rushing faster now, was hurrying to throw itself over the Drop, just ahead--

Dikar dug heels to stop himself. Something in the water--Jimlane! Jimlane lay face down in the water, very still, and the water that swirled away from the still, small body was pink and dreadful. Jimlane lay in the water, but on the bank of the stream lay Billthomas, limp as an arrowed deer, his side red and terrible with blood.

Dikar dropped to his knees beside Billthomas, and inside him Dikar was cold, cold as ice. "My fault," he heard himself groan. "I set you to watch Tomball, an' Tomball had the gun hid in the woods, an' he got it an' shot you. My fault, Billthomas."

Dikar touched Billthomas, and Billthomas moved under Dikar's hand, Billthomas' eyes opened and stared up into Dikar's face, unseeing. Then they smiled. A faint smile touched Billthomas' gray lips and they moved, but Dikar could not hear what they said.

"What?" Dikar's voice was hoarse, strange to him. "What, Billthomas?" He bent, got his ear near Billthomas' lips.

"What are you tryin' to tell me?"

"Tomball--" the faint whisper came. "Went--over Drop--Took--Marilee--with him..." The whisper faded, Billthomas' eyes closed.

"What?" Dikar yelled. "What was that about Marilee? Billthomas! Did you say Marilee-?" But he saw that Billthomas did not hear him.

Shouts, exclamations, above him told Dikar the Boys had meanwhile come up. "Jumped over the Drop!" someone exclaimed. "They must be smashed on the rocks--"

"No," something shrieked inside Dikar's head. "Not Marilee!" and he was on his feet, was twisting

toward the edge of the Drop.

The stream rushed away from Jimlane's still body, rushed down to the end of the woods. Not five paces away it leaped out--up from where it leaped slanted a thick rope of plaited vines to the great trunk of the last tree of all and it was wound round and round that trunk, tight-fastened.

Tomball and Marilee had not jumped over the Drop--!

Somehow Dikar was at the edge of the Drop, careless whether from below they saw him or not. Dikar was looking down, his eyes burning.

Down and down fell the white spume of the stream, down and down fell the awful wall of the Drop, gray-shadowed. Far, far below, the stream smashed itself on a great, jagged rock and joined the waters that brawled white and angry among huge rocks that might have been tumbled there by some unimaginable giants at play.

For a wide space from the foot of the Drop the ground was covered by the great rocks, and that space was made somehow fearful by the shadow of the Mountain that lay on it, but beyond it the sun still lay on a green forest that stretched away to the far land.

Dikar's staring eyes found the edge of that forest, found two figures, small as the dolls the Girls used to make out of rags when first the Bunch came to the Mountain. Two figures clambered over the rocks, nearing the edge of the forest, and the one behind was chunky, black-haired, and the one ahead was brown with her mantle of brown hair!

Till now Dikar had clung to a hope that he had not understood Billthomas rightly, that Billthomas had been mistaken, but now that hope was ended. A terrible rage flared up in Dikar, a rage hotter than the heart of the fire on the Fire Stone. He snatched an arrow from the quiver hung on his shoulder, fitted it to his bow.

"This was why she asked me how I climbed down the Drop," ran searing through his mind. "She planned it this mornin' with Tomball. This mornin' she stole from our bed to seek Tomball an' warn him I'd set the kids to watch him, an' they planned then to kill the youngsters as soon as they'd found out how to flee from the Mountain, together."

He had Tomball on the angle of his arrowhead. The muscles in his arms swelled, the bow grew taut. Careful, now. Careful. The distance was great. He must not miss.

He might miss Tomball and hit Marilee.

What matter? She was as much to blame as he.

Dikar couldn't! His fingers wouldn't open on the bowstring, wouldn't loose the arrow that might bury itself in the flesh of Marilee.

But he must! Not because they fled him. Not even because they had killed Billthomas, and Jimlane. Because even if they didn't want to, the men in green would make them tell where they'd come from, make them tell about the Bunch. That thought opened Dikar's fingers.

Whang!

Dikar's arrow flew straight and fast and true--far out over the rocks it veered, was no longer a live and deadly dart, was a dead stick tumbling aimlessly down, a plaything of the wind.

Another arrow lay ready across Dikar's bow, but he did not loose it. No use. They were too far--Marilee reached the woods, and Tomball. The woods swallowed them. They were making their way through those woods to Them--

Dikar turned to voices behind him, saw Danhall and Henfield, Johnstone and Bengreen, huddled just within the edge of the woods, pale-faced, mouths agape, eyes wide and dark. "Johnstone," Dikar snapped, banging his bow over his shoulder. "Take over as Boss. Take care of Billthomas an' Jimlane. I'm goin' down."

"You dare not," Danhill gasped. "Dikar, you dare not. The Old Ones will strike you--"

"Damn the Old Ones," Dikar snarled and was in the stream, had hands on the rope. He was lowering himself over the edge of the Drop. His legs caught around the vine-rope.

* * * *

The water battered Dikar. The water filled Dikar's mouth and his eyes and his nose, so that he could not see nor breathe nor hear anything but the roar of the waters. The water had a hundred clubs that pounded Dikar, bruised him. Suddenly the water was only a stinging cold spray on Dikar's naked skin, and he was swinging free between the wet-black face of the Drop and the roar of the stream as it fell, and he was climbing down the rope of plaited vines.

This was as it had been that other time Dikar had climbed down this rope of plaited vines, but that time it had been night and once he had gotten through that first rush of waters it had been black-dark. Bad enough it had been to climb down into dizzy dark, but now there was light, and Dikar could see how the Drop came down from nothingness above and went straight down to nothingness below.

He could look down, endlessly down the swinging frail thread of the rope, down to where the jagged points of rock waited for him if he fell, and the stream smashed itself on the rocks as Dikar would smash if he fell.

From the rocks, so far below, there reached up hands that Dikar could not see, and they pulled at him, pulled him down to the rocks, his climbing too slow for them. Dikar wanted to let go of the rope, wild the desire was in him to let go and fall, fast and faster, down to those gray painted rocks.

Dikar was sick, sick with the terror that he would let go and with the wanting to let go. Suddenly his arms and his legs were without strength to move. He clung to the rope, unmoving, knowing that in the next moment, the very next, he would no longer have even the strength to hang on. "Dikar!" His name came through the mists that swirled around him. "Go on, Dikar. Go on." Dikar looked up to the voice, and he saw that it came not from far above, as it ought, but from the rope itself, from Danhall, hanging on the rope not far above him.

Down through the seething waters at the top of the rope, Bengreen climbed, the water streaming from him! They were following Dikar down. Danhall and Bengreen were following him where he went, in spite of their fear of the Old Ones, in spite of their fear of what might await them down below the Mountain. He was their leader, and they followed him--

Strength was back in Dikar's legs and his arms and he was climbing down again, but he kept his eyes on the wall of the Drop and did not look down. And at last his feet found rock beneath him and Danhall was beside him, and Bengreen; and then Henfield dropped off the rope.

"We wouldn't let Johnstone come," Danhall said, squeezing water from his brown beard, "because you said he should be Boss. What do we do next, Dikar?"

Dikar looked across the waste of tumbled rock to where Tomball and Marilee had been swallowed by the woods. "We go after 'em an' bring 'em back," he said through tight lips, "or we don't go back ourselves. Come on."

They climbed across the stony space, slipping and falling. When they reached the woods, that seemed no different from their own woods, it was easy at first to follow the trail of those they followed, by the small growth they had trodden down, by twigs bent with their passage. Marilee and Tomball had gone carelessly, not knowing they would be followed.

The shadow of the Mountain lengthened with the fast-dropping sun, and it grew dim about the four who hunted a Boy and a Girl. The green faded out of the bushes about them, the brown out of the tree trunks. All color grayed in the dimness, and suddenly there were no marks by which the four could tell which ways Marilee and Tomball had passed.

They cast around, their keen eyes searching each depression in the mossy floor of the woods, the way each tiny leaf hung on the brush, but they could find no sign of where Tomball and Marilee had gone, no sign that they'd ever been farther than where a twig pressed into the last mark of Tomball's foot.

The four Boys from the Mountain came together again, and huddled close, and they became aware that the graying air was chill against their skin, and the forest seemed strangely hushed about them.

"I don't like it here," Henfield said, and it seemed right that he spoke low-toned, as though someone were near to overhear what he said, someone or some thing no one could see. "There's somethin' wrong about these woods. They're too--too quiet." He was yellow-haired as Dikar, his chin fuzzed with what would soon be a beard like Dikar's. "The birds are still, an' the insects, an' I've not seen or heard a rabbit or a squirrel, or anythin' livin'."

"I don't get it." Bengreen was the shortest of the four, his face sharp, his eyes black and deep as a forest pool at night. "I don't get it at all. It's like--like Tomball an' Marilee got this far an' then--an' then *were not*."

"The Old Ones!" Henfield's voice was thin and piercing, louder it would be a scream. "The Old Ones have taken 'em an' they'll take us. We're lost! Dikar, we're dead an' worse than dead!"

Chapter VI: DEATH IN THE WOODS

A chill struck deep into Dikar as he heard Henfield's cry. All his life, all his life that was real to him and not a dream of Long-Ago, Dikar had believed that anyone who broke a Must-Not of the Old Ones would meet with a punishment the more awful because none knew what it was. By climbing down the Drop Marilee and Tomball had broken the most fearful of those Must-Nots.

Dikar recalled that he was the first of the Bunch to have broken that Must-Not, and that he had not been punished. "The Old Ones sleep under the rocks," he snapped, angrily because of the tremble of fear that had not yet left him. "They're not in these woods an' there is nothin' else here that could have taken Tomball an' Marilee without leavin' a sign. Stop talkin' foolishness an' use your eyes, an' you will find some sign of what took 'em, or of which way they went."

"Maybe," Danhall grunted. "Maybe *you* can, Dikar, seein' you're so smart."

"Maybe I can," Dikar answered. "Wait here, an' I'll try." He turned from them, moved to a big tree near which they were standing, ran up into its top as swiftly and easily as any squirrel. Thick boughs made steps for Dikar's feet, leaves rustled against his face, stroked his body, and then his head came out through the roof of the tree into a sunlight strangely ruddy.

The top of the forest stretched away from Dikar, a strange, bright green in that light, and solid seeming. About as far from him as from the clearing to the edge of the Drop, the forest ended and past its end the ground rose in a hill that was neither green nor stone--gray like any other ground Dikar remembered ever seeing, but a pale yellow that seemed to be striped.

Up through this yellow ground a wide brown stripe curved to the top of the hill, where, sharp-lined against the darkening sky, was a house not as long as the Boys' House but higher, its roof curiously shaped. Midway up the front of the house another roof stuck out, and the outer edge of this was post-propped like the roof of the eating place.

Just above this smaller roof, a row of windows flashed red as though there was fire within, but no smoke rose from the house, so Dikar knew this could not be.

Dikar's eyes came back to the leafy canopy of the woods. A low exclamation guttered in his throat. All that green stretch swayed a little with the wind, but, quarter way between him and the edge of the forest a tree swayed *against* the wind, and then another, just beyond, did the same.

Dikar marked the direction in which the trees moved so strangely, and dropped down to the waiting Boys. "Found 'em!" he cried. "They've taken to the treetops. They're goin' that way." Dikar threw out his arm to show.

"Come on then," Bengreen cried.

"Not in such a hurry," Dikar checked him. "They don't know we follow 'em, an' they'll be goin' slow, not sure of what is ahead. We can take time to think, an' we must, for remember Tomball has the gun an' can kill us, one by one, before we get near enough to him to bring him down with our arrows."

"What then, Dikar?"

Dikar told them the plan that had come into his head, and, as he had ordered, they spread out wide either side of the path Tomball and Marilee traveled, wide of each other because that way there was less chance of making noise to warn Tomball. Then they moved in the direction those they hunted moved, swift and soundless as when they hunted a deer downwind.

* * * *

Now that Dikar was alone he needed no longer to pretend to be unafraid. These woods were fear-filled, as Danhall had sensed, but not for the reason Danhall had named. The Old Ones did not prowl them, nor were there any other strange beings in them that could make a Boy vanish.

The dread that lay heavy here was the dread that lay over all this far land, of Them who were more cruel than any beast, of their fists and whips and guns and the fearful things they did to the people who once had lived peacefully in this land.

There was no longer an endless, rolling thunder in the sky, such as Dikar remembered from his dream of the Long-Ago, but in the sky was a dark, dark cloud, unseen but very real, that laid over all the land, over the forests and the fields and the cities, a night of the soul that had lasted long, too long.

Only on the Mountain had there been any light, this long time, any hope of a tomorrow. Dikar was thinking of his dream, as he ran naked and silent through the woods, was thinking of the Voice he had heard in his dream, the Voice that had spoken to the mothers who, with their very littlest children and the very oldest of the men, were the last ones left in the last city untaken by the hordes, the city there no longer had been any hope of saving from them.

"This is the dusk of our day," the Voice had said, "of the America we lived for, and die for. If there is to be any hope of a tomorrow, it must rest with these little children in an attempt to save whom you are about to sacrifice yourselves. If they perish, America shall have perished. If by some chance they survive, then, in some tomorrow we cannot foresee, America will live again and democracy, liberty, freedom, shall reconquer the green and pleasant fields that tonight lie devastated."

The little children of whom that Voice had spoken, all of them who survived the flight from the city, had grown now to be the Bunch on the Mountain. And now, when almost they were ready for their task of bringing that tomorrow to these once green and pleasant fields, two of them swung through the treetops to betray them to their enemies, and destroy them.

It was of this that Dikar thought as he ran through the woods. Had Tomball been only his own enemy, only one who had taken his mate from him, if Marilee had been only the mate who was false to him, Dikar would have sent Danhall and Henfield and Bengreen back to the Mountain and pursued them alone. But it was the enemies of the Bunch he hunted, the enemies of an America, love for which, though he had never known it, was part of Dikar's blood, part of his breath, part of his soul.

And so Dikar came to the edge of the forest and fell to his hands and knees and crawled a little way out into the high, yellow grasses that striped with yellow the hill beyond the forest, and lay there waiting.

Somewhere in these grasses, Dikar knew, along the front of the woods, lay the three others, their eyes on the tops of the trees, on the green brush that met the grasses, arrows fitted to their bows, as his was. For this was his plan.

When Tomball and Marilee came to the edge of the woods, and came out into the open, the nearest Boy would shoot them down at once, before they were seen, before Tomball had a chance to use his gun. That they would come into the open, Dikar did not question. Had not Tomball tried, last night, to show the flame of the fire stick to the plane? Tomball was not afraid of Them. Tomball had come down to the far land to look for Them.

If only it did not get too dark to see Tomball, and Marilee, before they came out of the woods. The sun no longer lay on the grasses here. It just touched the roof of the house, there on top of the hill, soon would leave that too.

The sun no longer lay on the grasses, here where Dikar hid, but the hot smell of the sun was in his nostrils, and the ground was still warm with it. The ground was warmer than the ground on the Mountain ever got, it was warm as the body of Marilee when Marilee lay against Dikar's body, and the scent of the grasses was like the scent of Marilee's breath.

A lump rose in Dikar's throat. He was waiting here for Marilee, waiting to send an arrow into her slim, brown body. As so many times he had waited hidden in the forest to kill a deer, he was waiting to kill Marilee.

In that very instant that her lips lay on his, burning, Marilee had been thinking how she would find Tomball, how she would tell him of the rope that hung over the edge of the Drop! With her arms about Dikar, she had planned how to help Tomball kill Jimlane and Billthomas!

If ever anyone deserved to be killed, it was Marilee!

The ache in Dikar's breast was not an ache but a terrible, tearing pain--his muscles tightened. His head lifted, his lips tight-pressed within his beard, his nostrils flaring, ears and eyes straining.

Dikar started to ease, tensed again. No, that rustle in the treetops was not made by the wind. It came nearer. Nearer. Something brown, moving, showed among the leaves. Vanished. An' arm it had been, of this Dikar was sure, though he could not be sure whether it was Marilee's or Tomball's. They had come straight to him. He it was who must kill Tomball. Who must kill Marilee.

The pain within Dikar was as if someone had plunged an arrow into his vitals, was twisting it--

Dikar saw a form, crawling out on a thick bough. It was screened by the leaves at first, then Dikar saw black hair, a thick-lipped face. Tomball! Peering out of the tree with narrowed eyes. Dikar leaped erect, his bow taut--

Whang!

A feather quivered where Tomball's eye had been. Tomball, sprawling, black-shaggy, tumbled out of the tree, thudded into the brush beneath. A scream, a Girl's scream, came out of the tree and Dikar had another arrow laid across his bow, was tautening his bowstring once more. Shadowy in the treetop he could see Marilee. Marilee's voice came out from among the leaves. "Dikar!"

Marilee was out now, where Dikar could see her plain. Erect on the bough where Tomball had been, she held to an upper bough with one hand, stretched the other out to Dikar.

She was crying his name again. Her long hair was caught back among the leaves out of which she'd come, and Dikar could see her satin body, her lovely body he had held in his arms. His eyes fastened on the flowery circlet over Marilee's left breast. He would shoot her there--

"Dikar! What are you doing, Dikar? You're not going to--" Marilee's cry was checked by the arrow that was in her side, caught by its head in her flesh. She swayed, started to fall. Dikar's shot had gone wrong!

Dikar hadn't shot at all. *His* arrow was still across his tautened bow! Marilee fell! She caught the tree's lowermost bough with blind hands, hung from them, red streaking her side from where the arrow was caught in it. Someone else had shot her with that arrow. One of the other Boys. Marilee's left hand dropped from the bough by which she hung. The right hand let go and she fell--

Into Dikar's arms, somehow he was under the tree in time to catch her. Her weight crashed him down into the brush, but he fell sitting, with Marilee in his arms.

"Dikar." Her lips were white, her nostrils flaring. "You killed Tomball." There was pain in her brown eyes, but they were shining. "I'm glad. He was awful. I saw him shoot Jimlane and Billthomas, an' then he turned the gun on me--said he'd shoot me if I didn't go with him. He had the gun an' Jimlane's bonarrer, an' he'd found the rope long ago. First I was going to let him--kill me--but then I went with him, hoping to get a chance to take the gun away from him an' shoot him before--before--he told Them--"

Marilee's voice, strong at first, faded away. Her head rolled sidewise to Dikar's shoulder, lay there. She lay limp in Dikar's arms, as so often she'd lain asleep. But she wasn't asleep now. She was--

"Dikar!" Danhall was standing above them. "I was too far away to hear what she was saying." Dikar hadn't heard anyone come up, but Danhall and the other two were there. "I shot her. I couldn't hear what she was sayin' to you, thought you were holdin' your arrow because you couldn't get a clear aim at her. I could, so I shot her. Can you forgive me, Dikar? Can you--?"

"Forgive you, Danhall?" The words fell like stones from Dikar's lips. "You didn't know--Sure, I forgive you for killin' Marilee."

"Killin' her!" Bengreen exclaimed. "Bunk! She's not killed. Look at the way she's bleedin'. I've killed too

many deer not to know bleedin' stops when one's dead. She's alive, you nuts, but she won't be alive long if you keep on sittin' there, holdin' her like a ninny an' lettin' her bleed."

"Not dead," Dikar whispered, staring down at the redness that welled out of Marilee's side and ran down over his thighs. "She's not--"

He could think again, could move again. He lifted Marilee across his arms, laid her gently down on a bed of soft moss near the foot of the tree out of which Danhall had shot her, knelt again.

"Find me some of those leaves that stop bleedin'," he threw over his shoulder. "Quick." He saw now that the arrow had gone deep in Marilee's side, but its point had hit bone and so it had not gone in far enough to kill her, not even far enough for its barbs to be held except by a little skin. Dikar pulled the arrow out, flung it away. Blood spurted and he put his hands down on the wound, pressed.

"Lift han's up, you fella!" a new voice ordered, hoarse and terrible. "Hurry befoh you get one big lot lead in you."

Dikar's hands were red with Marilee's blood, but the bleeding had stopped and if he lifted them it would start again. He turned his head to say so, saw a great long gun pointing from out in the light, saw the black hands that held the gun, and the man against whose shoulder the hands held the gun.

The man stood straddle-legged out in the yellow field. He was dressed in dark green, and the little round things that held the green together were yellow bright in the fading light. His black face was flat-nosed and shiny, animal like. His thick, purplish lips snarled like those of a wildcat, just before it pounces on its prey.

Chapter VII: REFUGE

The brush rustled, a little way from Dikar, where Bengreen and Danhall and Henfield had been looking for the leaves Dikar needed. "Come out you fella," the black man ordered. His big eyes, that had too much white in them, moved back and forth a little and his long gun moved back and forth. "Come out fom dere."

Dikar's heart bumped his ribs. Neither eyes nor gun were moving quite to where he was. The black man hadn't seen him! The black man was out there in the light but Dikar, bent down behind the tall brush that marked off the field and the woods, was in the deep shadow of the woods and so the man with the gun hadn't seen Dikar at all.

Arms above his head, Bengreen came out in the field, and Henfield and Danhall came out beside him. "Stop dere," the man said, and the look on his black face, gaping at them, was funny. "Wat kind fella you are?" the black gasped. "W'ere your clo'es?"

"What clothes?" Bengreen asked, grinning. "This ain't winter, is it?" Dikar looked down at his hands. They were red with Marilee's blood but she wasn't bleeding any more. If he took his hands away she would start bleeding again, and she would die.

"You one fella tink you smart, huh?" Dikar heard the black man's hoarse voice, but Dikar was remembering what he had seen men like him do to white women, that dreadful day when he had been in this far land before. Better for Marilee to die than that. "But Jubal smarter," he heard. "Jubal know you 'scape from one fella jail camp an' take all clo'es off so if you get killed nobody know wat guards you pay to let you 'scape. See? No use try fool Jubal. You tell Jubal were you come from, so Jubal get rewahd, an' Jubal make fings easier foh you."

Dikar took his hands away from the wound in Marilee's side. "A good sleep to you, Marilee," he whispered. "A good night. I'll be with you soon."

"W'ere you come from?" Jubal asked again, slow and hoarse, and there was something in his voice that made Dikar shiver. A gust of wind brought the smell of Jubal to Dikar, and that was worse than his voice.

Dikar pulled an arrow from his quiver, looked around for his bow. "If we told you,"--the grin was still in Bengreen's voice--"you would know as much as we do." Dikar remembered that his bow was out there in the field, dropped there when he jumped to catch Marilee. The arrow was no good without the bow.

"W'at you gonna know after Jubal blow you to little pieces wit' dis gun? Don't fink Jubal, no do it. T'ree more dead 'Merican make no diff'rence, Jubal kill plenty already."

"Go ahead. Blow us to pieces an' see if we care. I dare you, an' double--" Dikar didn't hear the rest of what Bengreen was saying because Dikar had slithered silent as a snake, behind the great trunk of the tree. And now he was erect, was leaping high to the tree's lowermost bough, was lying motionless along that bough while all about him was the rustle of leaves, loud and terrifying.

"W'at dat," he heard Jubal's shout. "W'at dat in de tree?" All of Dikar, inside him, pulled together, waiting for the thunder of Jubal's gun, waiting for Jubal's lead to tear through him, but he managed to make a sound through his rounded mouth, the "*koooo-hooo*" of an owl.

"Nothin' but an owl, Jubal," Danball laughed. "Ain't you ashamed, bein' scared by an owl?"

Dikar slid along the bough, slowly, very slowly, very carefully, and now the tree's leaves made no more sound than as if the wind were blowing through them.

"Jubal no scared," the black's voice came up to him. "Jubal not scared of not'in', but you better be big fella scared of Jubal. You tell were you come from, befoh Jubal count five or Jubal shoot. One on end, with yella hair, first. All right. One--"

Dikar could see them now, through the leaves, the three Boys from the Mountain standing in a line, their arms over their beads, brown and naked except for their little aprons, Jubal, spraddle-legged, black and huge, his eyes small now, and red, his long gun butted against his green shoulder and pointing straight at Henfield.

"Two--"

The Boys were under the tip of the tree boughs, but Jubal was farther out in the field, seven paces at least. Dikar slid further out along the swaying bough.

"Three--"

Dikar was almost to the end of the bough, and it was bending with his weight. If Jubal looked up now, he would see Dikar, couldn't help but see him.

"Four--"

Dikar, gathering his legs under him, saw cords stand out on the back of the black hand whose finger was curled around the little thing on the gun that, pulled, would shoot it off. Jubal was going to say five now, and then--

"No," Henfield screamed. "Don't shoot. Don't shoot me. I'll tell. We're from--"

Dikar leaped, the whip of the bough added to the lash of his muscles sending him out, far out over the heads of the Boys. He hurtled down, straight down on top of Jubal, pounding the black down. Thunder deafened Dikar but his hand slashed down, the arrow clenched in it, lifted and slashed down again on the heaving, screaming thing beneath him, and warm wetness spurted over Dikar's hand and that which was beneath him heaved no longer.

Dikar was on his feet, and the Boys were around him, jabbering words he could not get. Dikar saw Henfield's face, eyes still wide, mouth still agape. Dikar's hand lashed out, slapped, open-palmed, across Henfield's cheek.

"You yellow-belly," Dikar heard himself say. "You lousy yellow-belly," and then he was striding, stiff-legged, back to Marilee, was once more kneeling beside her.

Marilee lay on the green moss, terribly still and terribly white except where the blood was scarlet on her side and browning at the edges. Browning! The blood flowed no more out of Marilee's wound. She'd stopped bleeding--

But Dikar saw the pale nostrils flutter, and he breathed again. Her wound, he saw, had closed of itself. That was why she'd stopped bleeding. The wound wasn't bad, Dikar saw now. Many of the Bunch had been hurt lots worse and none had died...

"Here's your bow, Dikar," Bengreen said, bending to him, "An' Jubal's gun." Dikar looked up.

"You keep the gun," he said, "an' take the Boys back to the Mountain. Go in the tops of the trees, that way you'll leave no trail. It will be night very soon now, an' you have a good chance to get back without their bein' able to follow you."

"To follow us!" Bengreen exclaimed. "What about you? What about Marilee?"

"Marilee can't be carried through the treetops," Dikar sat back on his haunches, "without openin' her wound, an' so she will surely bleed to death on the way. If we make somethin' on which to carry her along the ground, we will make so many signs that we would lead them straight to the Mountain. So Marilee must stay here. I will stay with her, but I promise you that if they come, they will not find either of us alive. Now go, Boys. The quicker you start, the better your chances. Go."

Bengreen shook his head. "No, Dikar. We do not go without you an' Marilee. But you are right about leavin' a trail to the Mountain if we carry her, so we must stay here with you. I must stay, I should say. I have no right to speak for the others."

"You speak also for me, Bengreen," Danhall said. "I do not go back to the Bunch without you an' Dikar and Marilee."

"I speak for myself." Henfield stood straight in the forest shadows that had grown so dark that he too, seemed a shadow. "Dikar! You slapped my face. You called me a yellow-belly. Did you have a gun pointin' at you? Did you bear a voice count, 'One, two, three, four,' very slow, an' know that when it counted 'five,' you would die?"

"No, Henfield."

"Then what right did you have to slap my face an' call me a yellow-belly?"

"I suppose I had no right, Henfield. I suppose I was no fair."

"You had no right, Dikar, but you were right to call me that. I was a yellow-belly, but I am not, an' never

will be again. I looked death in the face, an' I did not die, an' I never again will be afraid to die. Dikar, will you let me stay with you an' Bengreen an' Danhall an' Marilee? Because I want to. I want to very much."

Dikar lifted to his feet, put his arm around Henfield's shoulder, and smiled. "You are no yellow-belly," he said, very quietly. "But I will not let you stay, an' I will not let Bengreen or Danhall stay. The Bunch needs you three, an' you can do nothin' by stayin' here. I am still your Boss, Boys, an' I order you to go, an' it is for the good of the Bunch that I order you--" Dikar whirled to a rustle in the brush, saw that a formless shape blotched the fading yellow of the field beyond, saw that Bengreen and Danhall had their bows lifted, arrows across them.

"Don't shoot them things off at me," the shape said, its voice thin as a Girl's but higher-pitched and very tired sounding. "Not that I got much to live for, but I'm a friend, and I came to help you."

"Don't shoot, Boys," Dikar said, and moved nearer, peering. He made out that it was a woman who stood waiting for him, her dress gray and shapeless about her thin, bent frame, the skin of her face stretched tight over the bones beneath, her hands like birds' claws, her hair brown as Marilee's, but drab and lifeless. "You are white," he said. "You are not one of them." In one of her hands was something Dikar could not make out.

"No," the woman laughed, and the sound of her laugh sent a chill through Dikar. "No. I'm not one of them. My name's Martha Dawson and I was born in that house on the hill, and my father was born there, and his father before him. But who and what I am doesn't matter, and it's better for me not to know who you are. I can see that you must have escaped from one of their concentration camps, and I came down to warn you to get away quick, before the patrol comes along to change the guard here, and finds you."

"I can't go away," Dikar said. "My Marilee is hurt too bad to be taken away."

"Your who?" Martha Dawson looked in the direction Dikar had motioned. "Oh. The Girl who fell out of the tree. I heard her scream and I looked out of the window and saw you catch her." She was bending over Marilee. "She *is* hurt bad, isn't she? She must have been cut by a stone when she fell. Oh, the poor thing."

The woman went down on her knees, putting what she carried down on the ground. "So pretty too, and her hair's long. I never seen--Why, she has no clothes on, only this queer grass skirt. You all must have been hiding in the woods a long time. Yes, I can see that you were. You look too well fed to have been living on the scraps they give us. Your wife has lost an awful lot of blood. She is your wife, isn't she?"

"My--" Dikar checked himself. He'd remembered what "wife" meant. It was the same as mate. "Yes. She is my wife."

"I thought so when you called her '*my* Marilee.' Well, don't you worry about her. I saw the way you fought the soldier and I thought one of you might be hurt, so I brought some stuff along. I'll just put a plaster on this cut to hold it together, and then you can carry her up to the house and I'll fix her up right."

"Carry her--!" The way Martha Dawson's hands were working at Marilee's side, Dikar knew that she could heal her, but--"But won't They find her there? Won't that get you into trouble with Them?"

"I've had trouble enough. A little more won't hurt. Besides, I don't think They'll find her, or you neither, unless they search a lot harder than they have already--Oh!" She rocked back on her heels, her eyes widening. "But they will. They'll find that soldier dead in the field and they'll know I couldn't have killed him but they'll be sure I know who did it."

"We can hide Jubal in the woods."

She shook her head.

"No. That won't do. They'll see the blood all around here, and they'll find him, never fear, them blacks is like Indians. Oh goodness. I don't know what to do."

"I do," Dikar exclaimed. "Look, Martha Dawson. One of us wanted to give us away to them an' we had to kill him." By the calm way the woman had acted when she saw how bad hurt Marilee was he knew he could tell her that without her getting excited. "We'll fix things so it will look like he shot Jubal with an arrow, an' that Jubal killed him with his gun before he died."

"Good!" The woman nodded. "That will do it. But you better carry your wife up the hill while your friends are fixing things. We'll go up by the road, the way come down, so as not to leave more tracks than can be helped."

* * * *

Dikar told the others what to do and then he picked Marilee up in his arms, and went to the road, Martha Dawson beside him, went up the road toward where the house was a pale glimmer in the deep dusk that now had come down over the hill and the fields. just as they reached the house, Dikar heard a shot, and he knew that Tomball had no face any longer, knew that Bengreen was laying the long gun back in Jubal's dead hands, and that Danhall and Henfield were wiping out as much as they could of the marks that would show there had been more there than just Jubal and Tomball.

Martha Dawson opened a door for Dikar, and he went into darkness that smelled a little like the eating place on the Mountain. The door closed behind him, and he felt a hand on his arm.

"Bring her upstairs," the woman said. "This way."

Dikar didn't know what she meant, but he went the way her hand guided him. His toes struck wood, and he half stumbled. "Come on," the woman said, tugging at his arm.

"But there's somethin' in the way here. I can't go any further."

"Something? Oh dear Lord! Don't you know what stairs are?"

"Stairs?"

"Wait. I'll strike a match." Dikar stood stock-still, listening to the sound of her going away from him. He didn't like this place. He was afraid of it. It was too closed in. He could hardly breathe. The woman was coming back, and there was a strange, scratching sound and then there was a little flame growing on the end of a tiny piece of wood in her hand, and her other hand was cupped over it, and she was looking at Dikar as if she'd never seen a Boy before.

"Don't know what stairs are," she said again. "Well, I never-! Look. There they are in front of you." Dikar looked and he saw a kind of hill built out of wood. "Hurry and take her up, before someone comes."

Dikar climbed up what Martha Dawson called stairs, and came to a level place, and they went along the level place, and came to more stairs that he climbed. At the top of these stairs they came into a big room whose roof was high in the middle but slanted down low towards the sides, so that there were hardly any walls at all except in one place where the wall was made higher to make space for a little window.

Dikar stood still, Marilee nestled in his arms, and looked around him. By the light of another match Martha Dawson held he saw that the room was full of tables and little benches, and boxes, and a lot of things Dikar had never seen before, all old-looking and dirty and piled every which way on top of one another, right up to the roof. So full was the room that Dikar couldn't see where he was to put Marilee.

"Wait," the woman said and went past Dikar to a box that stood on end in the middle of the pile's front, a black box almost as big as she was. She knocked on this in a funny way.

The box moved--not the box but the side that was all Dikar could see of it. The side swung out on one up-and-down edge, like a door, and inside the box was a tall man with a thin white face and gray hair. The man was stooped over, and his eyes, deep-sunk in his face, glittered in the matchlight like the eyes of animals glitter in the night-blackened woods.

The man saw Dikar. His lips pulled away from his teeth and his hand came up, and in his hand was a little gun that aimed right at Dikar.

Chapter VIII: SEARCH

"It's all right, John," Martha Dawson said. "They're all right. They escaped from a concentration camp, and this young man's wife is badly hurt and I've promised to hide her here with you."

The man John peered past Martha Dawson, looking more closely at Dikar. "From a camp?" His voice was deep, much deeper than Dikar thought could come from so thin a chest, and it was a very tired voice. The woman moved so that the match light from inside her cupped hand fell on Dikar. "Aye, I see now. I could only see a black shape in the dark, and I thought that I had been betrayed, and that they had forced you to show them where I was."

"Never!" Martha Dawson cried out, and then. "Who would betray you, John? Who would tell them you are here?"

John looked at her, and Dikar saw that there were deep lines in his face, lines of pain, and that his lips were gray. "I've just had bad news, Martha. They raided zee-seven this morning, so suddenly there was no chance to blow it up, and they took Ed Stone alive. But we're keeping our friends standing. Bring her in here, my friend," he said to Dikar, moving back into his box. "Bring her in."

John's voice came out of blackness inside the box, but something in that voice told Dikar he need not be afraid of him, nor of anything in the blackness, and he went into the box carrying Marilee. Martha Dawson's match went out, and Dikar stopped short, the blackness thumbing his eyes.

Martha Dawson pushed against Dikar's back, and he got moving again, and the other side of the box wasn't there, as he'd expected, but he went right on into a feel of bigger space. He heard sound of door-closing behind him, felt a hand on his arm stopping him, and then there was light.

The light came from a shining thing that hung by a wire over Dikar's head, and Dikar saw that he'd gone right through the box into a room hidden behind the pile.

"Lay her there," John said, pointing to a bed that stood against one side of the room. "It's clean and comfortable, I assure you."

Dikar put Marilee down on the bed, and Martha Dawson was beside the bed. Her hand took hold of Marilee's wrist and she seemed to be listening for something, and then she smiled and said, "Her pulse is strong." She put her hand on Marilee's forehead, and said, "She has no fever at all."

Dikar didn't know what the words meant, but he knew that Martha Dawson meant that Marilee would be all right, and breath hissed from between his teeth. "Martha," John said. "You'd better go down and make some hot water to wash her with, and bring it up with the iodine and bandages. You ought to have light on down there anyway, or our sweet guardian might start wondering what you're up to."

Martha (the man called her that, Dikar noticed, instead of the longer Martha Dawson) looked queerly at John. "Our guardian won't notice anything," she said. "He's dead. This young man killed him."

"Ah," John nodded. "That means trouble, of course. Well, we can only hope and pray as we've done all along. Go on, my dear."

He moved, and there was darkness again. Dikar heard the boxdoor open and shut. The light came back, and Dikar was peering around the room, so much in it strange to him.

There was the bed on which Marilee lay and a little table in the middle of the room, and a little bench with a back. The wall of the room in which was the door was covered with things Dikar vaguely recalled were named "books." The roof slanted down to the wall opposite this, and this was low except for a narrow space where it was built higher to make space for a window, but the window was covered over with a gay-colored, thick rug so that Dikar couldn't see them.

But it was at the fourth wall at which Dikar stared longest. A narrow table along the full width of this. Under the table were a lot of small black boxes, and on top of it was a jumble of wires and black boards standing up and lying down, and round things marked with little white lines, and a lot of shining things like what hung from the ceiling and made light in the room. In the middle of the wall above the table was something that Dikar recognized.

It was from a thing like it that the Voice in Dikar's dream had come, the Voice that had spoken about the dusk that had come to America, and the tomorrow that might never be. Dikar remembered the name of this thing, and said it aloud.

"A radio," he said.

"Yes," John said. "And now you know that you're in one of the stations of the Secret Net." His hands went wide. "The oldest of them, my friend. Five years I've operated it from here, five long years since I escaped from a concentration camp and in all the five years I have not seen the sun. In those five years I have had from that loud speaker"--he pointed to the thing on the wall that Dikar had recognized--"news of the unearthing of hundreds of our stations, news of the death of hundreds of our co-workers. Time and time again that speaker has brought me word that we were almost ready to rise against the invaders, and time and time again it has brought me word that they had found our leaders and hung them, and that all the work was to be done over again."

"Yes," John said. "This is the oldest of the stations, now that at last Ed Stone's gone, and I am the luckiest of the agents of the Secret Net, but tonight, my friend, I somehow have a feeling that my luck has run out. Perhaps that is only because I am tired and hungry, for Martha dares not bring me food until dark. They do not, I know, suspect that I am here, but they know I am alive, somewhere, and always they keep a sentry, out there in the woods, watching my wife and waiting for me to contact her." He smiled, and his smile was bitter. "That is why they have permitted her so long to live on here, unmolested. But I must hear your story. I thought that the prison camps were now too well guarded for anyone to escape from them. How did you and your wife manage it? What camp do you come from?"

Dikar shook his head. "We come from no camp. I don't even know what you mean by that word, camp."

"You--you don't-! You're American, aren't you?"

"Yes," Dikar said. "We are American." He knew, without just knowing how, that he could talk to this man freely and that it was important that he talk to him. "We come from the Mountain, off there beyond those woods."

And then Dikar went on to tell John about the Bunch, and about how they came to live on the Mountain, and about their life there.

John listened without interrupting, except to ask a low-toned question or two, when Dikar stopped, and soon after Dikar started talking, Martha came in and listened too, while she tended Marilee. Dikar told about his dream, and how he had come down into this far land and seen what went on here, and how he had gone back to the Mountain.

"I knew then that somehow, sometime, I must lead the Bunch down off the Mountain and try to take back this land for America," he came near the end of his story. "But I could not think how we few could do anything against the black and yellow men when you who are so many could do nothin' against them. Perhaps you can tell me, John?"

"Perhaps I can," John said, his eyes shining. "I must think. But you did come down again to us, Dikar." (Dikar had told them his name.) "And without any plans. Why did you do that?"

Dikar told him about Tomball, and what Tomball had done, and how Tomball died.

"There you are," John turned to Martha. "There's the innate depravity of human nature for you. Here are these youngsters who were isolated from the world when the oldest of them was only eight, who grew up together in such an ideal communion as man has not known since Eden, and yet a renegade turns up among them who would sacrifice them all because his personal ambitions were thwarted. Doesn't that make you despair, my dear?"

"No!" Martha answered, her hands still busy with Marilee. "No, John. Because if Dikar's story has in it one black-souled renegade, it also has in it forty who have worked for one another and lived for one another, sweetly and unselfishly, from childhood to young man--and womanhood. Because it has in it courage and loyalty and self-sacrifice and love that was not taught out of books. Despair, John? No. Dikar's story gives me new hope, new courage."

John moved to Martha, where she knelt by Marilee's bedside, and laid his hand on her head. "I'm wrong, Martha. You are wiser than I. Far wiser--" Just then Marilee stirred, and her eyes opened.

"Dikar," she whispered. Then, fright in her voice: "*Dikar!*"

Dikar leaped to her. "It's all right, Marilee. Everything is all right. We've found fr--"

"Hush," John broke in. "Quiet. Listen." At once the room was throbbing with silence.

Into that silence, well-muffled, came the sound of men's voices, shouts. "The patrol's here," John said low-voiced. "They're looking for the sentry you killed. You'd better get downstairs quick, Martha. They might come to ask you about him."

Martha was on her feet, her face set, her hands trembling. John's arm went around her, and he was holding her close to him. He was saying something Dikar could not quite make out, and then they were apart and Martha was going toward the door, straight, trembling no longer. The light went out, and the door opened and closed.

"Let's take a look outside," Dikar heard John say, and he heard him moving in the darkness. Then there was pale light in the darkness, starlight breaking the blackness of a wall, John's hand blotching it as it held

aside that which hung over the window.

Dikar darted across the floor and was pressed against John, looking out.

Just below was the smaller roof Dikar had seen from the woods, and below that, yellow light lay on the ground. Down at the bottom of the hill, bright lights danced in the yellow grass and on the brush and trees at the edge of the woods. Black against these lights were the forms of men, and it was from these men that the shouting came.

"Look," John whispered, "there in the wheat." Dikar saw the black shape of his finger pointing, and looked in the direction the finger pointed.

Where the finger pointed, in the middle of the field, was one man who did not move. The arm held a light, and the light was on his face, and Dikar could see that the face was round and yellow. The mouth of that face was a straight, thin line and the eyes were slanted slits in the yellow skin, and there was a look on the face that made Dikar afraid.

"That's Captain Li Logo," John said. "He's provost for this district. He's shrewd as a fox and cruel as a tiger. It's hard luck that he had to come along with the patrol, on this night of all nights."

Dikar felt Marilee press against him from behind. "Go back to bed, sweet," he said. "You'll hurt yourself more."

"I'm all right, Dikar," Marilee whispered. "I feel fine. And I want to see too."

A louder shout came through the window. "They found the body," John said quietly but, pressed against him, Dikar could feel that now he was trembling.

The lights moved together, clustering at one place just at the edge of the woods. Captain Logo went down to where the lights clustered, and the babble of shouts from there stopped, and all Dikar could hear was a single high-pitched voice.

"I'll open the window," John said, "if you'll let me get at it." Dikar and Marilee moved back a little.

"Are you sure you're feelin' all right?" Dikar whispered under cover of a scraping noise in front of them.

"Sure. The woman gave me something to drink, before I quite woke up, and it's made me all warm inside, and strong again."

Cold wind came in on them, and the sounds from outside were louder, the sound of that single high-pitched voice, but Dikar could not understand what it said. Then there was another shout, hoarse like Jubal's, and a light showed within the edge of the woods, and Captain Logo went in there.

"They've found Tomball," Dikar said. "We'll soon know if we've fooled them."

Logo's high voice stopped the shouting again. The other shapes were separating. They were running back and forth in what John had called wheat, their lights shining on the yellow grass, and on their black faces. They were all dressed in green, like Jubal, and had queer round things on their heads, and they all had long guns like Jubal's.

"There are seven of them," Marilee said. "I counted."

One of the lights stopped, suddenly, and the one that carried it bent low, and straightened again, and as a shout came from him Dikar saw what the light shone on.

"Jeeze!" he grunted. "It's my bow. I forgot all about it. There was one by Tomball, so now they know there was at least one more of us."

Captain Logo came to the black who had found Dikar's bow, and he looked at it, and then he put his band to his mouth, and there was shrill sound from him. The blacks all came running to him, and clustered about him a minute, and then they were all running up the hill toward the house, their long guns in their hands, slanted across the front of them, their lights out.

"That's torn it," John said, low-toned. "They're coming to search the house, and they're certain to find this hideout. My premonition was right. My luck has run out. Well," he said, pushing back from the window. "There's only one thing left to do."

"What?" Dikar asked.

"To let them get inside," came the answer in John's tired voice, "and then push a button on this radio table, a button that will blow the house and everyone in it to pieces. If you kids are afraid to die, you can get out by this window and surrender, but I wouldn't advise it. No," he sighed. "I would not advise you to surrender to them."

"Wait," Dikar said. "Maybe--" He was still looking out and down. They had reached the house, and had stopped in front of it, and Li Logo was saying something to the black men he bossed, was waving his arms around. "Maybe something will happen to save us yet. Maybe they'll go away without searching the house."

"Not Logo," John answered. "Not when he's on the scent of something. But I'll wait as long as I dare."

Down below, the black men were separating. One moved a little away from the house and stood in the field, his gun in his two hands, looking watchfully around him. Two went one way, one another, and disappeared around the corners of the house.

"They're going to watch," Marilee whispered, "on all sides to see that nobody gets away."

An owl hooted, somewhere in the dark. The three blacks left went with Logo under the little roof that stuck out from the front of the house, and there was the sound of knocking from down there. The sound of knocking was in the room! Dikar whirled around.

"It's all right," John said. "I've just turned on the speaker system--something that lets me hear everything that happens downstairs--" He checked as another voice came into the room. It was Martha's voice.

"What shall I do, John?" she asked, very quietly.

"Let them in, dear, as we always planned," John answered her, just as quietly. "And--Martha. I'll meet you--on the Other Side."

"On the Other Side, John dear," Martha's voice came through the knocking.

There was the sound of footsteps going across the floor. There was a rattle, and the sound of knocking stopped, and Dikar heard a door open.

"Good evening, Missee Dawson," he heard Captain Logo's voice, very gentle, very smooth. "So sorry I must bother you, but I wish to come in with my men. You have no objections, of course."

"Of course I have objections, but they won't do me any good, will they?"

"Sorry, no. So very sorry." Feet trampled, many feet. Then, "Well, Missee Dawson. Where is he?"

"He"? I don't understand."

"You understand quite well. One of my men was murdered, down there in your field, some time today. He got one of the assassins, but there was another. That other is your husband, come home at last. I want him."

"Go ahead and look for him, if you think he's here. Search the house."

"I do not wish to bother. You will call him to surrender."

"I will not."

"I think you will, Missee Dawson," and then there was a scream in Dikar's ears, a scream loud and shrill and very dreadful. "So sorry," Captain Logo hissed. "So very sorry."

Chapter IX: TOMORROW WILL COME

Dikar heard that from the sill of the window on which he was crouched Marilee's hand was pulling John's hand away from the button on the radio table. "Shut the talkin' thing off." Dikar heard her whisper, as he'd told her to, and while she was telling John the rest of what Dikar had told her to, Dikar dropped to the little roof below. He crouched out there, looking down to where, quite suddenly, quite silently, the black who watched the front of the house had crumpled into the wheat.

"Hooo-" the hoot of an owl came from his lips, and "Hooooo-" came an answer from near the still, black heap in the wheat. What little sound Dikar made jumping from the roof to the ground was covered by Martha's screams inside the house. The yellow light from the house's windows glimmered on the naked brown skin of Henfield, lifting up out of the wheat to meet Dikar.

"There were four outside," Dikar whispered.

"We got 'em all," the answer came. "I took two an' Bengreen an' Danhall each took one." Two other shadowy forms rose out of the wheat beside them. "What next, Dikar?"

Dikar hooted twice, then whispered his plan. "Give me your bonarrer, Danhall," he finished. "I'm a better shot than you." He took them, turned to the open door of the house, where Martha's screams had stopped.

The door was wide and Dikar could see everybody in the room inside. One of the blacks had hold of Martha. The top part of her clothes were torn and a knife in Li Logo's hand was red-tipped, and now Martha's flesh was bleeding, but Martha and Logo and the blacks were looking at the stairs that came down out of the roof of the room, at the gray-haired man who stood halfway down the stairs, hands behind his back, tall and straight and proud.

One of the blacks held Martha and the other two pointed their long guns at John, but it was Logo who spoke to John, what he said coming clear and distinct to Dikar. "Ah, John Dawson," Captain Logo said in that soft, thin voice of his. "I thought your wife's screams would bring you out of your hole."

Once more Dikar hooted, and in the same instant he loosed the arrow, and the twang of his bow was joined by the twang of two other bows in his ears. Inside the house the three blacks crumpled to the floor, an arrow in each of their backs, and John's hand came out from behind his back and the little gun in it flashed fire, and Captain Li Logo was down on top of one of his blacks, but his head was lifted, his eyes looking hate at John.

"So sorry," John Dawson said. "So very sorry, Captain Li Logo," and his little gun flashed fire again, and Li Logo's head fell down, and he was as dead as the men he had bossed for the last time.

* * * *

The cool, green-smelling dark of the woods closed around the five from the Mountain, and around John Dawson and Martha. The Bunch would have wondered, could they have seen, what strange, heavy loads they were that the Boys and John carried, and they would have wondered at the light without fire that came to life in the hand of Marilee as she followed behind Martha and the men, smoothing out such signs of their passage through the woods as she could.

"Eight rifles, nine revolvers, and all the stuff necessary to rebuild my wireless," John chuckled. "Quite a beginning for what we'll need to bring *tomorrow* to America, as you put it. But you did a good job with your bows and arrows, you four."

The pallid, gaunt man seemed now to have found a new vitality; he walked with the step of a young man, and the memory of horror no longer lived in his eyes.

"We did only our best," Dikar muttered, looking back uneasily. "Martha said their blacks are good trackers. Is that right, John?"

Thunder blotted out the start of John Dawson's answer, a great clap of thunder from where they'd just come, and back there the sky was lit with red light. And then the sky was black again, and the thunder had ended, and John was chuckling.

"Yes. Dikar," he said. "Their blacks are good trackers, but I doubt very much that they will be tracking us. Now you know why I had you carry all the corpses into the house. It was already mined, as you know, and I set a time-fuse before we left, and all that anyone will ever find back there will be a big, charred hole in the ground and a mass of fragments too small to be identified. It isn't the first station of the Secret Net that has been blown up during a raid, and not the first in which everyone, prisoners and raiders, have perished. That is what they will think happened there, and they will not bother to look for Martha and me, nor will they ever know you and your friends were there."

"Ah," Dikar said, and felt eased. There was yet a long way to go to the Mountain, and there was still all these people and all these things to be gotten to the top of the Drop, and the load on his shoulders was heavy, but when he thought of what they would do with the load, of all the plans John and he would make, the load and his heart were light as the feathers of a bird.

* * * *

The sun struck brightness through Dikar's eyelids and woke him, and though the night had held very little sleep, he was instantly awake. He flung out his arm to waken Marilee found nothingness--remembered that he had given his place in the bed in his little house to Martha Dawson, was back again, for this night, in the Boys' House.

Dikar leaped from his cot, and all around him the flashing brown bodies of the Boys of the Bunch leaped from theirs, and there were shouts of welcome to him, but Dikar ran out of the house and through the woods toward his little house, and Marilee. He went quietly when he neared the little house, and stood in the doorway peering in, and then his heart bumped his ribs as he saw that only Martha was inside on the bed.

"Where's Marilee?" Dikar demanded. "Where's my Marilee?"

Martha smiled at him. "Come in," she said. "Come in, son, I want to give you a little piece of advice."

Dikar went in, wondering, and squatted on the floor by the bed. Martha's fleshless hand reached out and took his, and she said, very softly, "Listen son. Don't bother your Marilee mornings. And be very gentle with her, very tender."

"I am," he said. "I try always to be."

"I know," Martha answered. "But try harder now. Don't mind it if she is irritable with you, and unreasonable, and angry over trifles."

"What do you mean?" Dikar cried. "What are you talkin' about?"

He had drawn taut now, staring at her and fear had come suddenly into his eyes.

"Go ask her," Martha said. "She is the one to tell you what I mean, though I had to tell her, myself, this morning. You children," she said, and there was a wetness in her eyes. "You precious infants. Go, Dikar, I hear her outside."

Dikar rose and he went out again, and Marilee was coming toward him out of the bushes, and her face was greenish as it had been the morning before, but her eyes were shining. "Dikar!" she cried, lifting her arms wide to him, and Dikar ran to her. "Oh, Dikar. I have something to tell you."

And then Dikar was holding Marilee close, close to him, and she was whispering something in his ears, and his heart leaped within him and in his veins his blood ran laughing and glad as the streams that laugh down the Mountain.

But after awhile Dikar sobered, and his face was grave, his voice solemn. "Now indeed, Marilee," Dikar said, "I must work hard for the day when I shall lead the Bunch down from the Mountain to an America retaken for freedom and liberty. For you an' I, Marilee, were the children of a dark yesterday, but ours must be the child of a bright an' shinin' tomorrow."

THE END