
CONFEDERATE
VAMPIRES
IN SPACE

a novel by

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It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

-The Little Prince

ONE

Two young maidens, of which you will recall, the one being fair with flaxen hair and the other dusky and raven dark, came climbing quickly with great exertion and much effort over the rocky escarpment. Under different circumstances, the two maidens might have lingered in their traversing to admire the austere beauty of the windswept canyon and the cerulean brilliance of the clear western sky, but on this day, at this desperate hour, the maidens did not tarry, for their very lives were in danger.

Just as it seemed circumstances could not conspire in a more calamitous manner, one of the unfortunate maidens, the fair young lady with flaxen hair, caught her delicate foot on a gnarled root and fell to the ground.

"Alas," she cried out to her companion. "I cannot persevere in this madness. I am hobbled and well nigh unto despair." Her eyes were wild with a rampant terror, and she awkwardly turned to look over her shoulder as if she expected to find her tormenters mere steps away and stalking closer still.

The maiden with raven-dark hair paused in her flight and, too, cast a fearful glance down the winding path they had so arduously ascended. If their pursuers were there in cunning ensconcement among the rocks and junipers and sagebrush, she could not them espy. The raven-haired maiden knelt quickly by

the side of her prostrate companion.

"Do not leave me," the flaxen-haired maiden implored, grasping the sleeve of her companion's calico dress. "I would rather depart this life than endure the horrendous debasements that I will most surely suffer at the hands of those remorseless savages."

Her wild eyes spied a rock on the path nearby.

"Look yonder at that fateful rock. You must spare me. I beseech you. Strike that rock unto my brow and free me from this impending doom."

The raven-haired maiden looked down at her desperate companion. Her dark eyes were steady and grave. She laid a comforting hand against the flaxen-haired maiden's temple and answered her with a slow shake of her head.

The raven-haired maiden wore a pendant on a necklace around her neck. It was carved from quartz, a white serpent in a closed circle, with its tail in its mouth. The pendant dangled in the distances between them.

At that moment, there came the unmistakable call of a bird from below among the rocks and sparse trees where they had so recently idled. An ominous silence descended over the canyon, and the two maidens became like unto breathless statues and strained mightily with all their being to hear what further song the unseen bird might sing. Hearing nothing further of the bird, if indeed that was what they had heard, the raven-haired maiden

offered her hand to her companion and assisted her as she rose unsteadily to her feet.

The two maidens gazed intently toward the shadows in the copse from whence the call of the bird had come. In their minds, they could not forswear that the shadows did not teem with the foulest abominations of their imaginations, and for a vertiginous moment, a great whirlpool seemed to tug at the very fabric of the canyon and to pull down into the depths of that darkness, faster than the maidens could assail, the rocks, the blazing sun, and the last of the clear, cerulean sky.

But Time ticked on implacably, and the ground did not yield, and the sun continued to shine with comforting constancy. The two maidens summoned new reserves of womanly fortitude and resisted the icy fingers of terror that grasped at their souls. The raven-haired maiden pointed toward the rocky horizon and circled her arm firmly round the flaxen-haired maiden's waist. She offered her shoulder to her companion and with a tentative, halting locomotion, the two maidens resumed their determined ascent.

Unbeknownst to the two maidens, as they pressed onward into the labyrinth of stone, two figures emerged from the shadows in the copse below and with a swiftness that belied sinew and bone came bounding on in a straight, silent demarche along the path the maidens had trod.

The maidens climbed for long minutes with all the deliberate

haste they could muster. Soon, they topped the crest and paused to recover their breath and to reconnoiter the way ahead. The trail cut back and threaded past a great boulder that all but blocked their forward progress. A sheer cliff fell away to one side, and a false step would most assuredly send a hapless pilgrim hurtling to certain oblivion. There was but one way forward betwixt the boulder and the canyon wall. A sliver of sky beckoned with the promise of a more forgiving terrain. Seeing no other course of action, the two maidens resolved to limp and stagger on in stoic persistence toward the eye of the needle before them.

As the maidens drew closer to the boulder, a seeming shadow began silently to move and then to slide away from the surface of the boulder. Before the maiden's horrified eyes, the shadow resolved into the figure of a man.

"Look now," the flaxen-haired maiden warned in a tremulous voice. "I fear we are beset."

The figure of the man stole forward as noiselessly as a creeping panther. The sun fell full on his face, and the maidens were stricken as they beheld the fierce countenance of a red-skinned savage. The Indian's eyes glittered darkly with an inhuman light that pierced the maidens to the marrow of their bones.

The maidens recoiled at the sight of the Indian and staggered back on quaking limbs. The Indian came pacing closer.

His bare limbs were roped lean with muscle. The maidens could see his skin with its mottled and scarred patterns of mud, ochre and charcoal. As he came closer, he began to crouch down nearer to the ground bracing in anticipation of an encounter.

The maidens were frightened most sorely and had no time to settle upon a stratagem other than a sudden and precipitous retreat. They knew the chance of escape would be slight. They would have only a few moments at best, but those moments might suffice to steal away on the flank and avoid the menacing Indian.

But there was no escape to be had. As the imperiled maidens stepped back and turned from their fearsome adversary, they confronted two more stealthy Indians creeping up from the rear. The maidens' hearts leapt in their chests. Circumstances had turned fearfully against them.

The Indians closed in on all sides, and the maidens backed slowly towards the wall of the canyon.

Indians on their front, Indians on their flanks, the maidens were surrounded.

"Help! Indians!" the flaxen-haired maiden cried. "Save us from the unspeakable predations of these pitiless fiends."

If anyone was there in that desolate canyon to hear the maiden's fervent entreaty, their rejoinder was not immediately forthcoming.

The Indians had no intention of retreating. They held forth

with visages of the fiercest description. One carried a hefty, misshapen club of a dubious, ruddy coloration. Matters could not remain thus stationary for any appreciable length of time.

The flaxen-haired maiden cast about with a blind urgency not unlike that of a drowning woman. She sought to grasp any nearby object that might serve as a crude weapon. Her frantic hand fell upon a small rock, and she clutched the rock in her fist and brandished it wildly back and forth in a semi-circle toward the ever-encroaching Indians.

The first Indian who had lain in wait against the boulder was now crouching to the left of the maidens. With the speed of a serpent, he dodged the rock-wielding maiden and reached deftly to the girdle round his waist. He drew an obsidian knife from its sheath and held it with practiced ease low at his side. The black blade glinted in the sun.

Upon seeing the obsidian blade, the flaxen-haired maiden ceased flailing about with the stone and commenced to trembling from head to toe. Unable longer to endure the shock and horror visited upon her, she fell back fainting and unconscious against the raven-haired maiden, who was much perturbed.

The Indians seized upon their advantage. The largest Indian among the three stepped over the flaxen-haired maiden and laid his hand firmly on the wrist of the raven-haired maiden. He thrust his face close to that of the maiden who had cast her gaze askance in the vain hope that her captors would somehow return

to the stygian pits from whence they surely had crawled.

The Indian reached toward her neck and lifted the quartz pendant from her bodice. He held the figure of the small, white snake delicately between his fingers and inspected it closely. He uttered strange words in his harsh tongue, and the maiden felt his fetid breath hot against her cheek. She slowly turned her face toward the waking nightmare beside her and forced herself to meet with a forthright steadiness the red-skinned savage's bestial gaze.

To her surprise, she found there not the eyes of the monster she had conjured, but rather eyes uncanny in their ordinariness. In truth, they were eyes not so very different from her own. For a fleeting moment, they shared something inchoate, a hovering curiosity. She held his gaze and tried to shape what was to come despite knowing that it would all too quickly resolve into an intolerable vulnerability, some pale underbelly, the one missing scale.

Thinking: *After the intravenous tessellation? The linen-white attainer? The chemo? The neuroplasty? What then? What happens next?*

The Indian with the obsidian blade drew close beside her, and, as she had known all along, the moment was lost. He seized her hair and yanked her head back exposing the soft of her comely neck. She sank to her knees. The third Indian loomed over her, and she saw now that he held a hatchet in his

hand. The big Indian still held her arm in a grip tight as a vise. The first Indian raised the obsidian blade and held it poised above the quick of her neck, the sharp edge glinting in the sun. His cruel lips spoke strange words, and she fixed her eyes on the clear, cerulean sky.

Asking: *What happens next? What happens next? What happens next?*

"Stay your blade, you bloodthirsty cur," a booming voice thundered, and a brawny hand reached out and seized the Indian's forearm and abruptly arrested the terrible arc of the obsidian blade.

A new figure had arrived to engage with the Indian brutes, and the course of the skirmish was perforce greatly altered. A strapping figure in buckskin had seized the Indian with the obsidian blade and was tossing him to and fro as if he were nothing more than a rag doll filled with straw.

The two Indians who had heretofore bedeviled the raven-haired maiden were filled with dismay, and the maiden dared entertain the hope that a brave paladin had come in all due haste to deliver her from the loathsome villainy of her wicked oppressors.

With tremendous force, the big man in buckskin launched the bewildered Indian through the air towards the canyon wall. The Indian struck against the rocky surface with such force as to render a man insensate. The big man in buckskin rounded on the

two Indians beside the maiden and in two great strides came close enough to grapple with his overmatched foes. He grasped the awestruck Indians round the neck, one in the crook of each of his mighty arms, and knocked their heads together with a resounding thump. The Indians fell stunned to the ground and staggered back from the vigorous onslaught of the big man in buckskin.

The man leaned forward to address the red-skinned savages.

"Best turn tail and run, you wretches. And when you recollect this day and speak of it to others, know that it was Kit Carson that spared yer miserable hides."

The Indians' mouths fell agape and their eyes grew wide with amazement. They cowered in a manner most unbecoming and stumbled away in their haste to turn and flee from the big man in buckskin.

"Go on and git!" Kit Carson said with a dismissive wave of his stout arm.

The Indians hied away into the enfolding arms of the vast, unknown wilderness, and Kit Carson watched their retreat with narrowed, flinty eyes.

The flaxen-haired maiden was still aswoon, and the raven-haired maiden knelt by her side and endeavored to comfort her fallen companion. Kit Carson moved to join the raven-haired maiden, but as he came closer, with an unexpected suddenness,

the Indian with the obsidian blade resumed his attack.

The Indian had recovered from the earlier encounter, and stepping swift on silent soles, the crafty Indian came now with deadly intent at Kit from behind. The Indian leapt from the concealment of the nearby rocks and raised high the obsidian blade to strike a killing blow.

How Kit Carson sensed the Indian's cowardly assault is as unknowable as the Eluesinian mysteries. Perhaps it was a premonitory zephyr blowing soft against his nape. Or perhaps it was the ineffable play of light and shadow dancing at the edges of his perception that alerted him to the Indian's evil presence. Or perhaps it was some innate goodness ever vigilant at the vital core of his mighty, beating heart. Who can say? For us, dear reader, the answer is obscured, and it must be enough for now to know that Kit Carson somehow sensed the Indian's treacherous debouch and lived to tell the tale.

While the Indian with the obsidian blade was still in the midst of his leap, Kit spun around and met the other in midair and dealt him a mighty blow that laid him prostrate to the ground. Kit then vaulted over the other, and a pitched battle ensued. Kit suffered the other to rise properly, then rained a multitude of swift, heavy blows down upon the other's head, neck and shoulders, uttering at the same time vociferous maledictions and adroitly frustrating the other's feeble endeavors to seize hold.

Now, Kit Carson was not a man given to the quick

dispensation of death. Indeed, if the truth be known, he had a grudging respect for the physical bravery of the Indian warriors with whom he had tangled on occasion in the past. It was only after circumstances had answered the last of any charitable doubt in his mind that Kit believed the Indian before him sought an honorable exit. Kit pinned down the Indian's weapon, drew his knife from its sheath and thrust the sharp tip deep into the Indian's beating heart.

Once he was sure the Indian had breathed his last breath, Kit cleaned his knife and returned to the side of the flaxen-haired maiden. He splashed water from his canteen on her ashen face. The maiden's blue eyes fluttered open, and she quickly came back to her senses.

"We are rescued," she exclaimed, a hand at her bosom. She gazed up adoringly at the tall, broad-shouldered man in the fine-tanned buckskin hunting frock.

"To whom do we own our everlasting gratitude?" she asked in a voice at once both astonished and demure.

"They call me Kit Carson."

"The famous mountain man?" she exclaimed. "With the strength of a grizzly bear? Who vanquished a dozen Indians with but a single blow?"

Kit laughed his hearty, booming laugh, and his great, white teeth gleamed in his round, ruddy face. He doffed his ring-tailed cap and inclined his head, displaying a shock of thick, brown

curls.

"Lady, I am but a humble trapper."

"I know personally several red-skinned savages who might disagree," the flaxen-haired maiden quipped, struggling to arise.

Kit stooped down and placed one strong arm beneath the lady and gently raised her to her feet.

The raven-haired maiden stood silently aside, a witness to all that transpired.

"By what stroke of good fortune did such a humble trapper as you come to find us so wanting and in need of protection in this hard and barren hinterland?" the flaxen-haired maiden asked gamely, as she steadied herself against the burly man's arm.

A dark cloud passed over Kit's jovial face.

"Word came to the garrison at Taos," Kit said in a serious tone. "We pursued them from Point of Rocks past Tukumcari. After we found their encampment, I tracked you here."

Kit paused.

He frowned and rested his hand reassuringly on the hilt of his big knife. He looked then discreetly at the raven-haired maiden standing so quietly behind. His sharp eyes glimpsed the quartz pendant carved in the shape of a circular serpent hanging round her neck. The raven-haired maiden turned subtly, shifting away from the mountain man's eyes.

"Something scared those Indians like nothing I ever seen," Kit said, shaking his head. "Two of them had their throats slit

from ear to ear, and the rest had run off and high-tailed it toward the river."

The flaxen-haired maiden turned, and she looked at the raven-haired maiden. The raven-haired maiden said nothing, and her face was as if cut from stone. The flaxen-haired maiden looked at the ground near her feet.

"We fled. Into the night," the flaxen-haired maiden said softly.

She looked up into Kit's trusting eyes. Her lip began to tremble.

"There was naught else we could do."

He placed a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"Do not be troubled, good lady. I give little credence to the superstitious vexations of the addled Indian mind," Kit said and glanced over his shoulder at the raven-haired maiden. He tried to read the expression on her face, but her face was impassive and inscrutable, and she showed him nothing in her outward appearance that would indicate the substance of her inner thoughts.

"You ladies are welcome to accompany me," Kit said brightening considerably. "I am expected at the Rendezvous to the North. We will find shelter and sustenance at Fort Bent four or five days hence, and there you may secure safe passage onward."

Then Kit placed his coon-skin cap back atop his flowing hair

and raised one mighty arm and gestured expansively toward the horizon.

"Good faith and fair dealing!" Kit exclaimed, and his cheeks were ruddy, and his teeth glinted in the sun.

He turned back to the two maidens.

"I will show you the way," he said

Gratitude and admiration glistened in the upturned eyes of the flaxen-haired maiden.

"Our fearless protector! Thank you, Kit Carson. We will long remember this good deed and bear witness to others of your stout arm and your brave heart."

TWO

The plume of black smoke drifted eastward across the sky. Towards the river, the smoke grew diffuse, and the wind took the last of it, and the sun shone through with a weak, brown light. Where the fire still burned, the smoke billowed skyward in thick, black gout, and the cinders and ash floated down and tinted the yucca blossoms pale blue.

Two men stood at some distance upwind from the fire. The larger of the two wore an oilcloth duster. The smaller man wore a muslin poncho. The man in the duster held a charred book in his hands and was reading aloud to the smaller man. They leaned in close over the open book, their heads bowed together, hatless, almost touching. The man with the book spoke in a deep, clear voice, and the man in the poncho listened closely.

"Gratitude and admiration glistened in the upturned eyes of the flaxen-haired maiden. 'Our fearless protector! Thank you, Kit Carson. We will long remember this good deed and bear witness to others of your stout arm and your brave heart.' "

The man in the duster stopped reading. The man in the poncho looked up at him.

"What happens next?"

The man in the duster closed what was left of the blackened pages.

"I can't make it out," the man in the duster said.

The man in the poncho took the charred book in his small hands and looked again closely at the cover. On the cover was a four-color illustration. A tall man in a coon-skin cap and fringed buckskin was thrusting a large knife toward a band of frightened Indians. The Indians wore feathers on their heads and their faces were painted with garish shades of red and white and green. Within the seared edges of the pages, the big letters of the title were still legible: Kit Carson and the Mountain of Gold.

"So that's supposed to be me," the small man in the poncho said.

The man in the duster smiled a wry smile.

"It's just a fiction, Kit. Like a campfire story."

The small man in the poncho put on his broad-brimmed, felt hat and looked to the west. The high mountains were lead-colored, and cloud shadows were moving across the surface of the earth. The man in the poncho watched the play of light and shadow on the land. The deserts and mountains and mesas seemed to drift in and out of the sunlight, and it appeared as if they were constantly being reformed and recolored, as if, beyond the next rise, the whole world, everything, was fluid and insubstantial.

The small man in the poncho nodded his head toward the fire behind them.

"Ask those two about their fearless protector."

On the ground near the smoldering ruins behind them were

the blackened skeletons of two human bodies. Even from a distance, it was clear they had been tied to the ground and had burned alive. The structures of the trading post around them and all they had held had burned almost entirely to the ground. Great cedar beams, ox-drawn from the mountains, the fire had rendered to ash. Only blackened adobe heaps and the crushed shell of an oven remained.

The man in the duster adjusted the round lenses of the spectacles on his nose.

"It's actually rather ironic. In a perverse sort of way."

The man in the poncho turned and looked at him. His eyes were set deep and in shadow beneath the brim of his hat.

"Spare me the lecture, Professor," the man in the poncho said without emotion.

He spat in the dirt.

"Let's get those bodies in the ground while we've still got daylight."

They rode for a day to the red mesa. The wind shifted, and a line of dark clouds massed along the horizon. The horses watched with rolling eyes and listened with pricked ears. The sky was with them then like a third rider, and the man in the duster spoke to the sky as if it might answer. The man in the poncho, Kit Carson, said nothing, but, like the horses, he turned his eyes

often to the changing sky.

When they reached the mission, the wind was blowing hard, and something metal in the distance was pealing like a bell. The horses were skittish, and Kit talked to them in a soothing voice and stroked their necks, and they settled down once they reached the stable.

The rain began and beat down without mercy, and reddish-brown water filled the arroyos and ran down the ruts in the road. They walked on weary legs through the mud to the old rectory. It was dark now, and the light of a lamp filled the square window of the low, flat adobe house.

The old woman met them at the rectory door, a lamp in one hand. Stooped and gray beneath a dark shawl, she stood in the doorway and stopped them with an open palm.

She pointed a bony finger at their muddy boots.

"Take those off."

The Franciscans had built their church on a sandstone bluff near fresh water. The people living in the pueblos and the nomads from the plains had relied on the water for a thousand years or more. A long succession of priests had come and gone, some more violently than others, and it often seemed as though the mission had survived more in the defiance of any authority, earthly or otherwise. The parishioners were again awaiting the arrival of a new priest. Their ostensible leader, a novice friar, was bedridden.

Inside the rectory, Kit and the Professor sat on benches at a table built from piñon pine. Someone had dressed the surface with a hatchet, and it was uneven and showed the marks from the edge of the blade, but it was a sturdy table. The smooth adobe walls were washed white with lime, and the oil lamp on the table cast shadows across the rounded ceiling. Against one wall, a votive candle burned on a pine shelf altar beneath a carved retablo of the Virgin Mary.

In the shadows, a large green parrot perched high atop a wooden stand. It watched them, occasionally cocking its head or shifting subtly on its clawed feet. The parrot had roosted there in the rectory since before Kit had come for the first time, since before even the earliest memory of the old woman, who remembered more than anyone.

It was said the parrot had been carried on long trails over high mountains from far south of the Rio Grande and had been a gift from the people of a nearby pueblo to one of the first priests at the mission. That priest was long dead and the pueblo all but abandoned, but the parrot had somehow persisted, living on in the rectory, passed from each new priest to the next.

The old woman poured hot chicory coffee into clay mugs and set them before the men. She drew back a hanging blanket covering a doorway and stepped into the next room. Behind the blanket, the men glimpsed in the soft lamp light a plain pallet and beneath the covers the shape of the bedridden man.

The old woman spoke softly and said little. She possessed a furious energy, and her wiry limbs and spotted, veined hands seemed to be in constant motion. Her dour, wrinkled, brown face bore the scars of the pox. Immune, she found herself often at the side of the dying. She had seen many people perish over the years.

The Professor had fallen uncharacteristically silent. The formidable old woman and the ill man in the adjoining room had subdued him.

The flame from the lamp illuminated their faces. The Professor had a bald head and a blunt, round face. The round lenses of his spectacles reflected the lamp's wavering flame. Kit, the smaller man, had delicate, freckled features. His reddish hair was thin and wispy on top. His eyes were sunken deep within their sockets.

The old woman emerged from behind the blanket. She stood next to them at the table, arms akimbo, and looked at Kit.

Kit opened his leather saddle bag and ferreted out an object wrapped in thick felt. He set it on the uneven table and carefully unfolded the square of felt.

"Ah," the old woman said softly.

At the center of the square of felt was a milky-colored figurine. It was carved from quartz in the shape of a serpent in a circle holding its tail in its mouth.

The old woman carefully picked it up between the tips of her

thumb and middle finger and held it close beside the sconce of the lamp. Her dark eyes were cloudy with gray cataracts, and she inspected the figurine for long moments, turning it to catch all the details of its surface in the light of the flame.

The old woman looked to Kit and nodded. Kit folded up the felt and put it back in his leather bag. The old woman took the figurine, drew back the blanket covering the doorway and left them alone.

Kit and the Professor drank from their cups and listened to the sound of the rain falling on the roof.

Then the parrot spoke.

"*Penicillium notatum*."

The two men turned slowly and looked at the parrot. The parrot bobbed its antic head and subtly shifted its hooked beak. The flame from the lamp glittered in the bird's large, dark eyes. It seemed to be amused.

Kit looked at the Professor.

"What the hell was that?" Kit said.

The Professor shrugged.

"Latin?"

They turned back to the bird and waited.

The parrot cocked its head.

The old woman came back into the room. She was carrying a basin and towels.

The parrot squawked an unintelligible syllable, and the old

woman looked at the parrot with her cloudy eyes.

She turned to the two men.

"Wash up," she said, nodding at the basin and towels.

After they had washed, she placed clay bowls on the uneven table and poured more coffee. The bowls held goat cheese, dried apricots and cold corn bread. The stooped old woman stood with her arms akimbo looking down at them with her cloudy almost blind eyes and waited until they bowed their heads to pray.

The two men ate and drank quietly. Rain drummed on the roof, and the old woman's shadow lurched across the ceiling. The two men stole curious glances over their shoulders at the parrot, and the parrot watched them with dark, antic eyes.

Weeks later, in Washington D.C., Kit picked up the charred book and looked again at the cover. Kit Carson and the Mountain of Gold. He could recognize the letters of his own name, but the rest of the letters on the page were like strange glyphs drawn on the face of a boulder.

Kit regretted his illiteracy, but it did not shame him. There were other fluencies. For many years, the best map of the territory between Santa Fe and the Pacific Ocean could be found only in the mind and memory of Kit Carson.

Kit set the book aside on the table and watched the Professor as he finished chewing the last bite of their porterhouse

steaks. The hotel restaurant wait staff weaved smoothly across emerald-colored carpeting between the linen-covered tables. A murmur of conversation came from the fashionably dressed people seated around the room. A bright chandelier hung from a rococo ceiling. A mirror reflected bottles displayed behind the dark walnut and polished brass of a long, crowded bar.

"So this man earns his livelihood writing these . . . fantasies?" Kit said.

His red hair was slicked back. His little ears stuck out, scrubbed and pink.

The Professor wiped his mouth with a linen napkin.

His round, bald head seemed comfortable above a starched collar. Kit thought he looked like an otter. Friendly. But shrewd. With sharp teeth.

"No stranger than a trapper who profits from the sale of beaver pelts," the Professor said.

Kit nodded his head.

"I'd hate to see those poor folks in Paris go bare-headed," he said with a quick smile.

The Professor laughed.

A member of the wait staff, a woman with raven-dark hair, emerged from the bustle of the dining room and hovered at the Professor's elbow, poised to remove the china plate. The Professor glanced at the woman's face, and, for an instant, their eyes met. The Professor seemed to recognize the raven-haired

woman. Her face remained impassive.

The raven-haired woman gracefully took the plate and withdrew with downcast eyes. The Professor turned his head and watched from the corner of his eye as she receded carrying with one hand a tray into the interior of the crowded restaurant. The Professor turned back to Kit and was silent.

"Friend of yours?" Kit said.

The Professor drummed his fingers on the table top.

"No," he said.

An abrupt smile filled his blunt features. He seized the wine bottle and poured burgundy into their glasses.

He held his glass up.

"What shall we drink to?"

Kit thought for a moment.

Kit picked up the charred book.

"Words," Kit said.

"To words," the Professor said.

Kit tossed the book on the table, picked up his glass, touched it softly to the Professor's glass, and they drank.

Kit watched the rivulets of wine collect at the bottom of the glass.

"Words . . . ," Kit said.

He set the wine glass on the table.

"My first wife was Arapaho," Kit said.

He looked at the Professor

"Did you know that?" Kit asked.

"No."

"She taught me her words. Her people's words."

The Professor listened closely. He laced his fingers together and rested his hands on the table.

"It was like seeing a new country," Kit said. "A new world."

"You understand them. Her people."

"I respect them."

"And they trust you."

"Perhaps."

Kit paused.

"It is an ugly business," Kit said.

The Professor sighed.

"Ugly indeed for those two dead women."

Kit nodded.

He picked up the charred book and held it up where the Professor could see its cover and the four-color illustration of the coon-skinned figure and the cowering Indians.

"This . . . don't help."

"Just a tall tale, Kit. A fable."

"I've told tall tales. I never got paid for them."

Kit tossed the book on the table.

"How many people have read this? A dozen? A hundred?"

"Whole cities, my friend," the Professor said.

"These words My wife would be ashamed. These

words are the wrong words. People will take this as fact."

"What would you have written instead? Dry history?"

"That's my name right there on the front for all to see, but inside, what you read"

Kit shook his head. His voice was soft but steady.

"No sir," he said. "That ain't my story."

"Artistic license."

Kit frowned.

"Look here, Professor. You've studied in the universities. What does the law say on this?"

The Professor leaned back in his chair and steeped his blunt fingers.

"You cannot stop it, Kit. You may advance an argument in a court of law, but I fear you will not have much success. They are businessmen. You cannot stop the course of commerce. It is like the river in spring."

"Progress," Kit said.

"Indeed," the Professor said.

The Professor poured the last of the wine into their glasses.

"Drink with me, Kit."

The Professor raised his glass.

"It is an exciting time to be alive."

That night Kit rested his head on a down-filled pillow, and he

dreamed. He dreamed of the fastnesses of the canyon and the last unconquered remnant. He dreamed of towering walls of red sandstone and hidden fields of corn and sheep grazing beneath the cottonwoods. He dreamed of the cool waters of the unfailing spring and the peach trees on the terraced slope and bees thrumming in the shade near the ground where the heavy fruit had fallen. He dreamed of the inaccessible white houses set in caverns in the face of the high cliffs which were older than history which no living man had entered. He dreamed of the last unconquered remnant and the stream of the survivors and their faces as they passed.

THREE

The Professor stopped reading and looked up from the pages of the manuscript. He adjusted the round lenses of the spectacles on his nose. The students were sitting in their various postures in their usual seats around the long oak table.

Each year's class arrived at an unspoken agreement regarding seating usually by the second or third meeting, and they more or less stuck to it for the rest of the semester. By the last class, each student, even the quiet ones, had so inhabited their seat around the table, strewn with their bookbags and scarves and coats, they each left a presence that persisted like a ghost. When the time came to mark down final grades, which the Professor did reluctantly and only because the University required it, he could sit in the empty classroom and look to each empty chair and see the faces and feel somehow the personalities as if the most recent class was still gathered around the table.

Some, like Robert, were always reliably present, hanging on his every utterance. Some, like Marcel, would fade in and out, their eyes glazing over as they mentally wandered away. Some, like Zach, by the end of class, were in a visible struggle to maintain consciousness.

When he began teaching, the other teachers had often remarked that the students never age, and as he watched his own classes gather and disperse year after year, it did seem that

only he among them was growing older. It made for a heavy yoke, he told his tenured friends, but each year's fresh faces still filled him with anticipation and hope and yearning. There were always a few students who set themselves apart for one reason or another, whether it was an affinity for putting words on the page or some other interesting aspect of their character. They kept his writer's antennae busy invisibly twitching above his bald head, and it was still a joy for him to discover each of them as they revealed themselves, from the first day when they filed in and selected a seat, until the last day at the farewell dinner at his home.

The Professor looked back to the typed pages of the manuscript before him on the long oak table and continued reading.

"He dreamed of the inaccessible white houses set in caverns in the face of the high cliffs which were older than history which no living man had entered. He dreamed of the last unconquered remnant and the stream of the survivors and their faces as they passed."

He ceased speaking, and the sound of his voice faded, and a silence filled the small white room with the narrow windows.

"So," he said and looked to the students around the long, oak table.