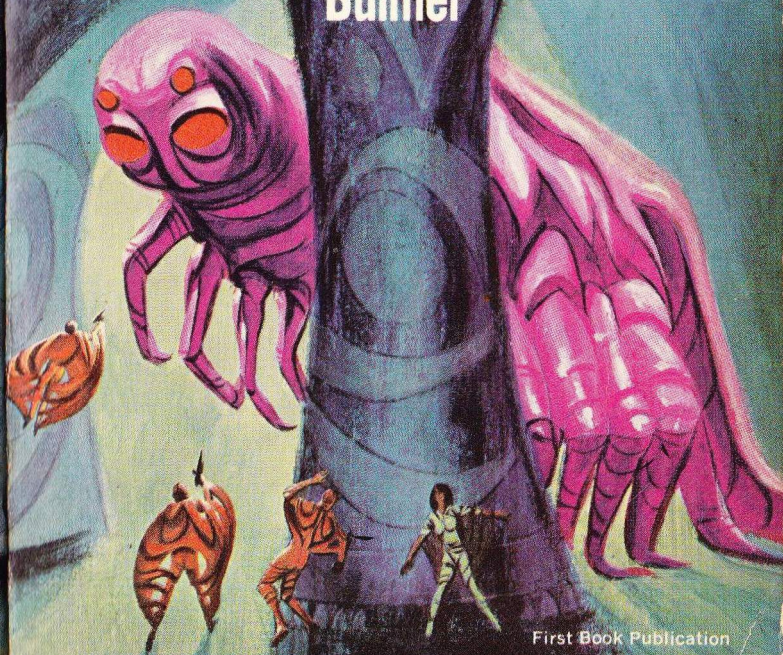


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DEMONS' WORLD

Kenneth
Bulmer



First Book Publication

WHOSE WORLD IS THIS?

He was a tall man, well-muscled and tough, with the strong intelligent face of a leader. But his mind was as blank as a newborn baby's.

The Foragers had rescued him and brought him to Archon; now the Controllers were teaching him, as they would a child, forming his mind. But one day they would send him Outside again, out of the safe runnels of Archon to face the terrors that existed in the land of the legendary Demons.

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DEMONS' WORLD

Kenneth Bulmer

ACE BOOKS, INC.

1120 Avenue of the Americas

New York, N.Y. 10036

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I WANT THE STARS

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Printed in U.S.A.



CHAPTER ONE

THEY FOUND HIM sprawled on the edge of a projecting aerial platform, white, lax, unconscious and as helpless as a baby.

"Push him over the edge," counseled Old Chronic, the veteran Forager. His pouchy eyes moved restlessly in the unceasing survey of all Foragers, his leathery neck creasing and uncreasing like an animated concertina.

"We-el," said Thorburn, hesitantly. This was his first trip as lead Forager and the onus of responsibility had fallen on him with unwelcome surprise. Now he shook his massive head, trying to think and plan, conscious of the six others and contriving not to show the uncertainty he felt was a personal weakness. Tentatively he reached out for assurance from the others, and all the time his eyes moved up and down, left and right, around the back, searching, watching, apprehensive. A Forager out on a trip scarcely ever looked at his companions.

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Old Chronic cackled, clicking his dentures, his eyes bright with gleeful malice. "What frightens you, Thorburn? He won't step on you."

The five others—three men and two girls—nodded and laughed at the sally. There was truth in that. Old Chronic might be past leading a foraging group, but he had lived a long time in a trade where men and women died frequently and they saw the wisdom of his words. All the time their eyes were moving, moving, moving.

Without looking at it, Thorburn jerked a horny thumb at the strange shining machine, lying mute and dumb beside the equally quiescent figure on the cold marble.

"And what about that?"

Julia, the blonde with the big body and agile, slender limbs, glanced down over the edge of the platform, her camouflage cape rustling in the breeze. She turned lithely, looked back at the others, raised a quizzical eyebrow at Old Chronic.

"Go on," he said, wheezing a little in the fresh air.

Thorburn said, "Hold on, now—" and stopped. His eyes, in their ceaseless roaming, had glanced up at the Outer Sky, all a dazzling white-blue glare, far away and infinitely remote. A mile or so away across the concrete plain other buildings rose, black-outlined, colored cliffs of metal and stone and plastic. Every shape lay clearly before him in the brilliant light; yet every outline was encrusted in a blue mist of distance, a soft haze that subdued color and detail, lent the usual blurring to visual inspection. "I don't know—"

The marble aerial platform trembled suddenly, a gentle, skin-felt vibration, a sensation of bodily swinging movement.

At once the Foragers reacted.

The four men and two women flung their camouflage capes more securely about them and dashed with scuttling speed for the shadow behind the doorway towering into dizzy perspective two hundred feet above.

Thorburn hesitated. The tight knot of puzzlement chaining these people had been dissipated and unraveled by that gentle vibration. His way, it seemed to him, had been marked out for him. Effortlessly, he picked up the man lying still and twisted by his strange machine, slung him over his

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shoulder, raced after his comrades with the long sure stride of an athlete in perfect training.

He reached the concealing shadows of the architrave as the Demon stepped out onto the balcony.

The stranger wore no camouflage cape and the odd material of his one piece coverall that had so puzzled the Foragers gave no clue to his origin, but its color, a drab greeny-gray, blended well enough with the shadows to give concealment from the enormous but erratic eyes of the Demon.

Holding himself perfectly still a few yards from his rigid companions, Thorburn watched the Demon stride out into the sunshine.

Displaced wind buffeted him as one gigantic leg swished by. He was thankful to see that Julia's cape now clipped tightly to her without any betraying flutter. The noise of a monstrous foot descending sent shock waves through the feet-thick solid marble; a rushing wall of bright crimson going past, seemingly unending, slithering and scraping across the floor, drew excruciating pangs from his eardrums. The very air shivered as the Demon passed.

Thorburn did not look up now, did not move, stood graven, huddled, holding in the screaming panic within him, fighting the ages-old fear of the Demons that had haunted Mankind from the Beginning.

Thud, thud, thud, crashed the Demon's feet. At each gigantic blow, sound blasted at Thorburn's eardrums. Then that rippling avalanche of glowing crimson passed and he could flicker his eyes furtively within the shelter of his cape, and stare at Honey's white, tensed, panic-drawn face; the rigidity of her pose told eloquently of deep primordial fear rather than an ordered and controlled stillness.

He shivered a little. Honey was young, on her second Forage; he should have stayed at her side. But this stranger who now so laxly hung over his arm had claimed his first attention. Why, he didn't know. Rules of conduct were arbitrary enough for no one to misunderstand and a Forager's first duty was to his comrades. If once a Demon caught sight of a man or a woman, the story might be different.

On the thought Thorburn swiveled an eye at the Demon.

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Enormous, crushingly huge, the Demon stepped out on to the aerial platform, and leaned on the balustrade that lofted eighty feet. Something bright glinted up from a corner; a subdued splintering crash sounded.

Slowly a black shadowed foot lifted, rising like the black belly of a thundercloud swept down in ponderous might. The stranger's queerly shining machine vanished over the edge of the platform. Before it shattered into meaningless fragments on the ground beneath, it must have fallen through three thousand feet of nothingness.

An explosive, blustering snort exploded from the Demon, a rolling, rushing tornado of sound that dwarfed anything that had gone before. Thorburn clenched his teeth and waited through the paroxysm. Staring in that swift, fleeting, camera-efficient, comprehensive glance of all Foragers, Thorburn checked that the Demon was not looking their way, flicked the retire signal to his companions and, on the instant, sprang from the architrave shadow to the shadow of the wall within.

The others joined him, six explosively moving and then stone-still people, in a line, sheltering in the shadows beneath the fifteen-foot-high skirting board.

At their leader's imperious gesture Sims and Wallas, both young and agile, quick-witted, fleet-limbed, moved out ahead along the floor paralleling the crack where wooden skirting board and tiled floor untidily met. As well as an eye for the Demons, roaring and striding ponderously in the upper air, a Forager must spare an eye for every dark crack and cranny, every crevice and corner of his own world.

Bringing up the rear of the group, Cardon, a little older than Sims and Wallas, a little younger than Thorburn, a fierce, dark-eyed black-browed man with a notoriously filthy temper marched, it seemed, with a permanent crook in his neck, his head tilted back, his eyes forever searching the way they had come. The group depended on the rear marker.

Now that the Démon had been left behind Honey had regained some color; her dark eyes flashed no less swiftly and intelligently as she, like everyone else, maintained a constant vigil. She pushed a hand beneath her cape, touched the

warm metal of the walkie-talkie strapped to her back. The touch reassured her. Her job this trip as radioman gave her an importance, at least in her own eyes, and a task to which she could devote her attention and try, albeit with indifferent success, to shut out those screaming primordial fears that would not be denied in the actual physical, dreaded presence of a Demon.

Julia said, "Hold it. That's the entrance; we came through flattened out. There's a beam full-width a foot above the floor. Everybody down."

"You first, Sims, Wallas," ordered Thorburn to make no mistake about who was running this party. Julia, as radarop, tended to get above herself. "When you give the all clear we'll follow. Julia, you and Old Chronic give me a hand with the stranger." Thorburn laid the limp form out flat on the floor a foot from the beam, watched as Julia re-checked her meters. He quizzed her with a glance.

"Still the same." Julia phrased the query beginning to dominate all men's minds. "They aren't any better yet—the beam's still too high—but when are they? Our grandparents didn't have detector beams to worry about—"

"But we have," Thorburn said, cutting her off. "Come on, there's the signal from Sims."

Julia flashed him a glance which said eloquently, Go get trodden on! And then obediently flattened out—with her figure it was no easy task—and squashed through. Pushing and pulling, the three eased the stranger under the detector beam.

Why was he bothering with this man? Thorburn didn't know the full answer to that, but he saw clearly that some of the answers were bound up in that quick glance from Julia.

Apprehensively but quite firmly, Honey squeezed through, her lissome figure finding the task simple, and then Cardon, with a last long look back, followed.

Outside the door they skirted the tiled landing, and saw their goal, the banister-flanked head of the stairs, remote and yawning, three hundred feet away. They took time negotiating the shadow-fringed skirting board, checking each

point and then clearing it in a controlled rush that ended in frozen immobility.

"This is a small house," Thorburn said irritably. "And poor. I'm surprised the Demons have a detector beam here at all. And," he finished with the age-old sarcasm of the Forager for his commanders, "H.Q. briefed us entirely incorrectly. Not a scrap of steel in the whole place."

Sims and Walls, being young, automatically patted their empty sacks. "Steel weighs heavy," Sims said. "Make an easier touchdown without it," said Wallas.

Both smiled as though they had said something profound.

Old Chronic cackled at them, clicking his dentures. "We live in a poor empire, my lads. Every scrap of whatever it may be is useful. Don't be gleeful over empty sacks."

Only half repentant, Sims and Wallas led out to the head of the stairs. Here Thorburn, as regulations demanded, checked batteries. This time it was a mere formality; he knew that they'd only used their antigravs once on the incoming trip to ascend the stairs down which they must now drop. "All right," he said, grasping the stranger more firmly over a shoulder. "Honey, you're the lightest. Give me a hand with him."

Help in dropping down with a burden on antigrav was not really necessary—they could drop under adequate control with a three hundred pound sack—but he felt the need to give orders. This trip had not resulted in any way as he had expected. And Old Chronic, almost in abandon from what a proper Forager should do, kept watching him, cackling and mumbling to himself. Let the old fool get stepped on!

The seven Foragers and the inert passenger dropped, plummeting past the floor levels, even this long plunge unable to give them a comprehensive outline of what this place was like. It was far too big to be understood as a single unit. This house—they knew it to be that from careful architectural drawings by their leading geographers—appeared to them as a vast number of individual places—a dark corner, a beamed doorway, a landing, a long plunge downwards on antigrav, a convenient hole, a whole succession of convenient holes—into which they could dart the

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moment the snorting and blowing and ground vibration of a Demon warned them.

You could not grasp the entire scene. Only if you stood off—preferably in a high vantage nook—and surveyed a distant prospect, could you understand that the world was a succession of buildings. Not many people ever had that opportunity and fewer of those really understood, as Thorburn had only recently understood, just what the world really was.

A man labored his life away at his task down below; only the Foragers and the Hunters were ever likely to *see* a Demon and many a man and woman was born, lived and died without once hearing or seeing a Demon. Thorburn knew that he was glad he was not one of those, but the price came high.

The group landed in the shadow of the lowest stair, checked, froze, then sprinted hard for the slot beneath the five hundred foot tall front door. Vague and misty that doorway towered up, the glow of Outer Sky shining through vast areas of colored glass. All seemed quiet. They tumbled through the slot where wood and tile failed to meet with precision, stumbled down in faint reflected light. A man could see in almost pitch-darkness just so long as there was light enough to strike back from corners and projections. Now Thorburn ordered their lamps switched on, alternately, each two men stepping along in the radiance from one headlamp. He wanted to get this limp stranger home. The responsibility so rashly undertaken now weighed him down, to add to the loss he felt at the failure of the trip. H.Q. was bound to have nasty things to say about that.

The light of Outer Sky had not been bright today and the Foragers had not worn their dark glasses as, usually, they were forced to do. Even so, it was a relief to return from the stark nakedness of outside to the safe runnels of the familiar human world.

"Keep closed up," Thorburn said. The order was unnecessary; still that compulsion lay on him. He had been chosen leader and as leader he had taken the decision to bring this stranger in. He wanted the others to know and keep on knowing that he was leader.

So far there had been no real time to examine the stranger. He lay, white and breathing shallowly, a limp weight on Thorburn's shoulder. Old Chronic voiced the doubt preying in Thorburn's mind.

"He's not one of us," Old Chronic said, sucking a tooth so that his dentures palpitated clickingly. "He's an enemy, sure as sure. What you going to do when he wakes up, Thorburn?"

Thorburn hadn't really thought. Fumblingly, he groped for an answer.

"He may be an enemy," he said slowly as they marched through the dark runnels. "Or he may . . . may not be. But he's a man. I couldn't leave him for the Demons to step on and kick over the edge."

"You're a fool, Thorburn," said old Chronic with the liberty of age.

Surprisingly, Julia turned on the old man.

"You keep a civil tongue, Old Chronic. Thorburn's the leader. Remember that."

Thorburn, studiously, did not look at Julia. He felt a strange warmth in him, and, failing at first to recognize it for what it was, denied it for weakness.

"Checkpoint coming up," Wallas called back.

The dim blue light welcomed them. They marched in with a swagger, the swagger and panache that all Foragers cultivated at home, their eyes still roving, roving, roving. The steel-helmeted guard lowered his gun. He saluted Thorburn. Behind him a sergeant pulled the switch and the barrier rose.

"Hullo," said the sergeant, a brass-voiced, barrel-bodied man, huge in his armor. "What have you got there?"

"A stranger." Thorburn was short with the soldier. "We're taking him to Forager H.Q."

That was quite enough to silence the loquacious sergeant.

Very soon Thorburn was able to lower his burden onto a sofa in the Forager anteroom. He had not felt the strain of carrying the man, but a weight lifted from him as the stranger flopped back, a weight that was not physical. Wilkins walked up and stood pensively looking down.

"Tell me," said Wilkins in his soft voice.

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Thorburn swallowed. Wilkins, whilst a Forager, was a Controller. And Controllers ran all of life, everything, when they felt impelled to do so. Controllers did not speak like the lower classes, did not think like them; Controllers represented an achievement in humanity bewildering and yet perfectly accepted by men in Thorburn's position. Thorburn told Wilkins, watching furtively the Controller's ascetic face and slender hands, watching the faint frown gathering between those aristocratic eyes, watching the full mouth pucker.

"I see. Well, we'd better make a report. When he comes around I'll talk to him." Wilkins had seen the empty sacks, of course, the moment the party marched in. "Empty, Thorburn? If you can't do better than that we will have to think again about your leadership."

"But, sir—"

"Enough of that. Dictate your report to a scribe."

Wilkins turned away. A little cry from Honey brought his head around, ominously, a frown of annoyance beginning to cloud that aristocratic face.

"Look!" said Honey, quite forgetting herself. "The stranger! He's coming tol"

Thorburn bent above the green clad figure. Blue lips moved feebly; the eyelids fluttered like curtains in a draft. The mouth opened, the throat jerked; words, a word, struggled garglingly to be born.

"Stead," said the stranger and, again, with an agonized energy, a frightful toll of energy pouring out into the single, meaningless word. "Stead. . . ."

They stood looking down on him as he lay, white, lax, no longer unconscious, but staring up with the utter helplessness of a baby.

CHAPTER TWO

"BUT HE is a baby!"

"Amnesia, my dear," said Simon, thin fingers cupping his chin. "Everything has gone. Everything. And that is strange. A man usually remembers language, habits, generalized in-

formation when he loses his memory. Usually all that is lost is personal history."

"His brain just isn't working." Della put one slender finger to her lips, mentally correcting that flat statement. "I mean, his upper conscious brain isn't working. The thalamus, the automotive controls, they're all right. He's a husky brute, isn't he? She turned under the lights of the austere, bare room with its single table and chair, stared down on the stranger who lay, naked and unsmiling, upon the table. The bandage around his head struck a hard blow of whiteness against the tawny flush of his skin. His eyes, wide open, a pale distant blue, regarded the ceiling without knowledge, without intelligence, without any flicker of self.

The stranger lay there on the table; a single glance told anyone that here lay a tough, competent, ruthless, dedicated man with yet a wide streak of sympathy and humor. The face, lax now and revealed, was hard and well-formed, the nose nobly beaked, the lips wide and thin, the chin stubborn yet pliant—a strong face, a face used to handling men and situations and forcing them to the will of the brain dominating that skull and body. Yet now that efficient human machine was informed and animated by no intelligence, no understanding, no pride of self.

"Just a baby," said Della, a tiny quirk pulling one corner of her soft mouth down in a smile she knew Simon would not altogether approve. "What did you call him?"

"Stead," said Simon. He looked up at his assistant, the redoubtable and beautiful Della, with her red curls cut barbarously short, her wide gray eyes that, as yet, no man had seen turn violet, her tall lissomness that shook a man's guts with sudden savage power. Simon looked at her and sighed and, as he had done a thousand times, wished he were twenty years younger.

"Stead," he said again. "That was the first word he spoke with he regained consciousness. The first and the only word."

"Stead. Well, it means nothing in any language I know. It could be his name—" Della stopped. Then she said, "The reports you handed me seemed rather confused. I'd like to see Forager Leader Thorburn myself, if you don't mind. If we knew just what had happened to the stranger, to Stead,

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in the moments before he became unconscious, we might have a clue to the—”

“He most probably was in danger. So the word might be a cry for help, a warning to comrades.”

“I thought the report indicated he was alone.”

“So he was.” Simon turned as a low bubbly gasp came from the lax figure on the table. “But before you essay any further guesses, Della, I’d like you to examine the artifacts found on his body. They form a most singular collection. Ah, he’s going to cry again.”

Going towards the door, Della said with that dimpling smile, “All babies cry. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

Simon couldn’t bear to watch her as she left the room. His dead youth cried out in wrath that the merciless progress of time had irreparably separated them. Then, with a visible effort of his scrawny body and scraggy features, he banished Della from his mind, turned to the oversize baby on the table.

Stead’s face creased. His eyes closed and the lids bulged. His mouth opened. “Baawwll” said Stead.

“Flora,” called Simon. He felt suddenly alone, there with a crying baby. The quick sense of desperate urgency, that the baby’s crying should be investigated and stopped in the appropriate manner, filled him with alarm.

“All right, sir.” Flora bustled in, broad and smiling and comforting, her stiff white apron rustling with every breath. “Don’t worry about him, Controller Simon, sir. I’ll soon give him his feed. Then he’ll be as right as a square meal.” She chuckled. “And I haven’t got to burp him. Fancy me trying to stroke *his* back!”

Simon left her to her ministrations with bottle and glass and feeding tube, ignoring the nurse’s joke. The problem of this stranger had been thrust onto him and while all his scientific ardor leaped at the challenge, his essential bachelor shyness cowered at these infant mysteries and filled him with a faint disgust. He’d never married because he had not found any woman he considered suitable, and now that Della had come as his assistant, it was too late.

In the next room of the warren where the stranger’s clothes

had been spread out on a workbench, Della examined Stead's strange one-piece outer garment.

"Practical," she said, turning its greeny-gray, smoothly sliding material over in her hands. "No buttons, just this ingenious little sliding thing that opens it from neck to ankle. Somebody had to think twice before they invented that one."

The man's underclothes lay in a neat pile to one side: white, hygienically clean, again woven of some material with which she was not familiar; they were recognizably a man's undergarments. She dropped them back quickly. She had touched them only with the tips of her slender, delicate fingers.

He had apparently worn no helmet. At least, none had been brought in. He didn't seem to have worn any armor at all. Della thought that strange. Her work had brought her into contact with Foragers, rough uncouth men and women with athletic bodies and ferocious instincts and brains of unsuspected resilience, and she knew that no human being ventured outside without all the safeguards he could command. Even here, home inside the warren, the safeguards were sometimes necessary.

The electric light shone steadily upon the hand weapon. Someone had wired up the trigger so that it could not be pulled. A label had been tied on: *Dangerous. Not to be operated without permission.*

Characteristically of one class of secretary, no indication of what authority was needed to give permission was indicated. Della touched her lips again with a finger, stirred the gun gently with the other.

It did not seem heavy. A ridged butt, a trigger and guard, a barrel, slender at the muzzle, heavily masked around the square magazine section. She assumed that must be the magazine although no sign of hopper or ejector met her interested gaze. Well, Tony or somebody like him over at Physics would have to sort that one out.

For the rest, there were a writing implement, a pad of blank paper, a wrist watch that had no winding knob, a box of extraordinarily thin and tough tissue paper, a leather wallet that wasn't leather, containing papers and small books filled with line after line of impossibly neat printing in a

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language that meant nothing to Della. In a little transparent sheath was a photograph of Stead.

The photograph differed little from any photograph Della had seen before of a handsome, tough young man, not smiling, level eyes gray-blue, fixed in watchful, grave regard. And there, of course, lay the one difference. For this photograph, if it was a photograph, was colored. And the color was not a photographic water tint, but gleamed and sparkled from the paper itself.

"Somewhere," Della said to herself, "somewhere or other on earth there is an empire or federation a little in advance of us."

The thought did not please her. Like any young woman with a scientific training, she was proud of her own Empire of Archon, believing in her own psychological work, only half believing in the tales of Demons. Moreover, she was conscious of an upward destiny for mankind that might end anywhere, or at any rate far beyond the walls that confined the human race now.

A slip of paper lay among the items, bright pink with heavy printing that had deeply indented the thick paper. Della recognized it at once. These receipt forms had been issued by her many times when confiscating some item from a worker or cleric or Forager or Soldier; she flicked it around with one manicured fingernail and saw that it had been signed by Shardiloe.

"Funny," she mused. "If he took this gadget which they believe to be an antigrav, why didn't he take the gun? I'd have thought that to be more important. Oh, well." She turned to the last item on the workbench.

This was a small box, again constructed from the unfamiliar material of the gun butt, with a slender but recognizable aerial telescoping out from one corner. A dial was set in the center, marked with weird hieroglyphs, and a couple of switches appeared to be the only controls. One end of the box was sadly broken in to reveal a myriad of tiny wires and glistening beads. Radio was a field somewhat outside Della's experience. But she knew, with a little moue of anticipatory unpleasantness, that Belle would be along to collect the radio soon.

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A tiny secret satisfaction titillated her that Belle, too, would be in for a shock when she tried to fathom the mystery. This radio, along with the buttonless coverall, the gun, the printing and the missing antigrav, posed problems the scientists of Archon were not yet equipped to solve.

She turned away from the bench with a quick, decisive movement. These, after all, were mere artifacts, the outward symbols of a civilization. Her job was vastly more complicated, exciting and important: to pry into the mind of this strange man, strip away all the appurtenances of his way of life and reach down through the man's mind to the core of his being. Once she knew that, the rest would follow inevitably.

Or so she thought.

Unfortunately, the stranger had received a severe head injury, a blow that had jolted all memory from him, to leave him as receptive to impression and as aware of the past as a newborn baby. Della's face became taut and unconsciously drew itself into a dedicated mask.

"I'll teach him," she said softly. "I'll reach down to him, show him who he is and what he is, and then I'll stretch past that new self and pluck his old self, his real self, out from its crippled skull and hold it up and *know!*"

The door opened. Della turned, guiltily, as though caught pilfering. Belle stood there, laughing at her, hazel locks tumbled about her elfin, urchin face, her snub nose lifted defiantly, her merry eyes shining with the knowledge that here she trespassed on the sacred precincts of Della's laboratory.

"Hullo, Della, dear," Belle said, advancing with both hands outstretched. "You do look solemn!"

"Do I? I'd have said you looked as though you'd just come in from a tumble in a corner."

"And suppose I had? Isn't that fun?"

"For those who like it." Della took Belle's hands, feeling the quick warmth of them, knowing that Belle was feeling the cool composure of her own hands.

"Well, I do. Now, where's the body?"

"Next door. Simon is still making preliminary observations."

"Is it true he can't remember a *thing?*"

"Quite true."

"My dear, how wonderfull He can meet me—us—without any prior complications."

"Why, Belle dear, I didn't know you were frightened of competition."

"I was thinking of you, dear."

"You came for the radio? Well, here it is."

Della fumed and kept a bright smile as Belle walked across to the bench. These cheerfully catty, insulting matches meant nothing to Belle, but Della sometimes really meant what she said. And Belle could be so *infuriating* at times.

Della topped Belle by a good head and so far Belle, in a world of Belle-sized women, hadn't brought out her most crushing remark. Della quivered inwardly as she awaited its inevitable occurrence.

Belle looked at the stranger's radio. She bent closer and a frown knit her beautiful eyebrows. She glanced at Della and a pink tongue wetted her beautiful lips. Taking all this in, Della felt glee.

The words *Belle* and *beautiful* belonged together somehow, and they could never be separated by any act of rationalism. Belle said slowly, "This is a radio—of sorts—all right. But hardly any valves. In fact—what are all these beads? And some of the wiring joins up with circuit-directions printed on the— Or are they solid transparent blocks? This is going to be a tough one."

"You'll understand it well enough," Della said sweetly. "One day."

"Thank you for that kind thought, Della, dear." Belle picked up the radio and stood, cradling it, looking hard at Della. "But then, you always were such a big girl. . . ."

Della writhed all over the inside of her face at the way, this time, Belle had done it. But the smile rigidly adhering to her face did not slip; the pegs of her self-control had been well rammed home.

Simon walked in, breaking the blue haze of the moment. "Hullo, Belle! Come for your part of the loot?"

"Yes, Simon. And if you're faced with a nut like this one, you're welcome."

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"The stranger poses problems right enough. Care to have a peep at him?"

"Try to stop me."

"I don't think," Simon said in his dry, deliberate way, "it would pay anyone to try."

They all walked through the connecting door. Flora wiped the table where much of the stranger's food had found its way and smiled at Belle. She picked up a pair of men's undergarments and began methodically to put them on Stead. Belle stood, face attentive, her bosom moving a little faster than when she and Della had slanged each other.

"But," Belle said. "But he's so *masculine*!"

For some obscure but vital reason, Della let that go. She felt some indecorousness about scratching at Belle in the presence, however unconscious, of this man, when he was not aware. He was asleep now. When he woke up she might forget that momentary jab of inner conflict and understanding.

"You have your radio," she said brusquely. "Simon and I have work to do, real work."

"Tinkering about with people's brains, and you call it work. Now if you had the problem of maintaining wireless communication with all this infernal new howling that's hitting the air these days, you'd find *that* real work."

Simon, ready to enter into a discussion of the interference that had so recently begun on the air, said, "But some wavebands are free of it, and that could mean—"

"We don't want to keep Belle," interrupted Della, pushing the shorter girl to the door with a genteel controlling wave of her hand. "She *is* so busy."

"I'm going, Della, dear. I'll look forward to seeing you again." And Belle, with a quick-blown kiss to Simon, went out.

"The *cat*," said Della.

Simon looked at her, frowned, smiled, put a hand on her arm. His profession had little need to show him what was needed here. "Oh, Della. We'd better begin a chart of Stead's reactions right away. We can teach him what we want him to know, but only he can tell us what we want to know."

Della responded easily. "Right, Simon. I'll open a fresh chart right away." She glanced down at Stead's sleeping

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form which Flora had now clothed in a bright scarlet wrap. "We'd better put him in a proper bed. And I'll need a whole slew of children's toys, teaching blocks, the whole bag of tricks. He's going to be a tough pupil, I feel that."

"But you'll teach him, Della."

"I'll teach him, all right. Of course, I shall be giving him the education received by a Controller's child. Perhaps, Simon, he isn't a Controller. Maybe he's a Forager or a Hunter, maybe a soldier."

"That doesn't matter. We want to know what he is and everything we can give him to make him remember will help. You fill him up, Della, until he flows over."

"I'll teach him," Della said again. Her slender finger touched those ripe lips, her tiny secret smile flowered again. "Of course, he'll fall in love with me during the process. I only hope that doesn't hurt him too much."

CHAPTER THREE

"THE GROWTH of intelligence in a human child is not a steady upward curve; as understanding and knowledge and learning are assimilated, they coalesce and force the native intelligence onward in spurts and starts. Sometimes, when units of information appear to contradict, the child's brightness wanes; he is called stupid and in clumsy hands much harm may be done by barbarous punishments." Simon leaned forward, his creased serious face returning Stead's calm regard. "But you are not physically a baby; your brain has already developed. The cells and synapses and general structure needed for memory and understanding on a higher plane than mere automatic living are already in existence."

Della nodded, flipping the page over to a new algebraic problem. "What Simon is saying, Stead, is that you learn so fast because you have superior equipment at hand. But you are still liable to the flux of learning as new factors interact."

"So that's why I was so stupid yesterday?"

"Yes, and why you're so bright today and may be as stupid again tomorrow. The cycles in your case are more rapid and violent, simply because you are an adult. We've been

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pumping you full of information for the past sixty days, two thirds of a quarter, and you are now educationally on a level with the Hunters and Soldiers."

"But I feel confident in going on." Stead spoke slowly, using the refined accents of a Controller because that was the way he had been taught the language. "The world is a large and wonderful place and, much as I feel my debt to you, I need to go and know more, to find a place for myself in the world—perhaps find out who I was."

"I don't really think you could have been a Forager," Della said.

"Why not, Della?" Stead had given up trying not to look at this girl with her clipped red curls, her face that haunted him, her figure that maddened him in a way he could not understand. She was a woman and he was a man; so far that was all he understood. Frankly, he couldn't understand why there had to be two sorts of human beings. He felt annoyed that this evolution Simon talked about hadn't been wise enough to insure just one sort of human being, a man, like himself and Simon. He got on with men. He couldn't—for some strange and probably absurdly childish reason—feel comfortable in the presence of women, especially of Della.

"I don't think you were a Forager, Stead, because you're rather large. Hunters and Foragers are usually small men and women, relatively speaking. That's just a quirk of evolution, I expect."

"Evolution!" said Stead. "Well, if I wasn't a Forager, what was I. A Soldier?"

"Possibly." Simon pulled forward a book, angled it on the table so that the electric light fell full on it. The room contained many books in shelves, a table, chairs; a functional room, it was, for the teaching of facts. "Here are pictures of soldiers from other Empires and Federations. You were not, we have found out, a soldier of Archon."

"Perhaps," Stead said, taking the book, "I was a worker."

"Oh, no!" said Della, and paused.

Stead glanced at her. Her cheeks were flushed. He wondered what was wrong with her, then he bent to the book.

The pictures leaped out at him from the page, colored drawings, black and white photographs, illustrated detail of

uniform and weapons. A general similarity ran through the ideas governing what a soldier should be. A helmet, varying in size and complexity; a suit of armor, metal, leather, padded; weapons—guns, arbalests, spears, axes, swords—a whole gamut of lethal hardware. But beneath it all, the same human form stood out—two-armed, two-legged; the same sorts of face stared out—grim and lined, with narrowed eyes and thinned lips, harsh and uncompromising, the faces of men who knew the job to which they had been called and were dedicated in its performance.

Slowly, Stead shook his head. "No," he said, "no. I don't think I was a soldier."

"Well, you can't be sure of anything yet." Simon put the book away, revealing the algebraic tract beneath. "Now, this problem—"

"I heard you call those soldiers 'enemies'." Stead stayed his hand and flicked back the page to a man wearing uniform and armor that almost—almost, but not quite—paralleled the equipment of Archon's soldiers. "What makes this man an enemy?"

"But he's a soldier of the Federation of Trychos!" Della was astonished. "Of course, you've forgotten everything. You could not be from Trychos; we know them too well. We've fought six great wars with them and still they raid, stealing our women, stealing our food and raw materials. Why should we *not* call them enemies!"

Solemnly, Simon nodded. "The same facts apply to all outsiders. Only the Empire of Archon, our empire, has stayed the barbaric hordes. We fight in a noble cause, but these others are power mad."

Stead took all this in with a growing feeling that if he had to lose his memory then he had been profoundly, gloriously fortunate to be found by men of Archon. "Suppose," he said on a breath, staring up at Simon, "suppose I'd been found by some Foragers out of Trychos!"

"Don't fret over it, Stead," Della said. "You weren't."

"One thing you must remember, Stead," amplified Simon. "You do not, as far as we know, come from Archon. Certain items were found with you which you will be shown when the time is ready. But you must have come from somewhere."

"I'm glad I did!" said Stead fervently. "How thankful I am that I'm now in Archon!"

Simon stood up and walked a little way towards the bookshelves. Then he turned to stare back at Stead.

"The Captain has asked to see you, Stead, as soon as you can converse coherently. I think that time has come."

"The Captain?" Stead felt once again the rushing sense of fresh discoveries opening up, the heady sense of there being worlds of learning behind each new opening door. Life promised so much; there was so much to grasp and understand. "The Captain? Who is he?"

"The Captain is the chief man of the Empire of Archon. It is he who rules and directs—who *Controls*. There is a hereditary Crew who have only the well-being of Archon at heart. You see, Stead, Archon is the only true civilization on Earth. Our Captain and our Crew are the only true leaders. Trychos and the other Empires and Federations own their own Captains and Crews, but they are shams, frauds, mere ordinary men built up with their own importance and counterfeit titles. In Archon resides the only truth! We are the depository of the ancient truths!"

"That is so," Della nodded solemnly. "For our Astroman is the true lineal descendant of the first Astroman in the Beginning. Through him Archon keeps alive the lights of the eternal truths."

"When do I meet the Captain?"

"In a few days. But first you must learn a great deal more of life."

"Teach me everything you can," said Stead fervently. "I wish to know everything!"

The education of Stead went on smoothly. He learned that the Earth had been born from the condensation of tears from an immortal being weeping for the sins of mankind to come. The animals of the land had grown from a tiny scrap of immortal tissue falling among the thickening tears and slowly, as the Earth assumed its present shape of great buildings scattered over the face of the land, constructed in a single night of immortal compassion, they had diversified and adapted into their present innumerable forms.

"And man?" Stead had asked.

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"Man was placed on the buildings of Earth by the immortal being in a spirit of contrition. He differs physiologically and mentally from all animals. In the beginning a Garden was brought to the Earth containing the Captain and his Crew. But the Captain's children's children quarreled and the light of the immortal being was withdrawn from them and a hideous night fell across the land. From that time the Empire of Archon has been trying to bring together the graceless children of the other nations, to bring them back into a state of grace, to unify with Archon because that is the only path by which the favor of the immortal being may once again be assured."

"These things are very deep," said Stead. He frowned. "But if only the Captain and his Crew came in the Garden to Earth, where have all the other people come from?"

Della glanced at Simon and took a breath.

Simon said, "That you will learn in due course, Stead. The facts of Life and Death will be told you when . . . when you are ready for them."

"But I want to know now!"

"When you are ready."

"Life and Death, just what are they?"

"One thing I must impress upon you most firmly," Simon said with a new gravity which impressed the stranger, "is that humanity, mankind, all human beings—even the benighted heretics of other nations—are superior beings. We did not evolve from any higher type of animal—simple comparative anatomy will show that—and we are as a consequence the highest form of life on Earth."

"Cats," prompted Della simply. "Cats and dogs."

"But they are a special case." Simon rubbed his chin. "Even our most eminent philosophers do not entirely agree. As there is evolution so there must be atavism. Cats and dogs, like men, have four limbs. It could be that some unfortunate human beings degenerated into cats and dogs. I tend to doubt the idea that these animals, charming and friendly though they be, are men in the making."

"The best we can say is that the immortal being created them alongside man to be his helpmates and companions," Della said with a sincerity that warmed Stead. This girl

used her brains and Stead very much wanted to use his. He was thirsty for knowledge.

"The basic fact to remember," Simon went on, reverting to his original theme, "is that mankind is unique. We are the guardians and controllers of the world, set down here on Earth by the immortal being—we scientists seldom use the word God these days—in order to fulfill our destiny." He looked unhappy. "I, personally, deplore our schisms. No one any longer can say with utmost clarity what that mission is. The Captain professes to know and he is the custodian, but scientific thought, in which the Captain stands at the forefront, declines now to accept as absolute the values of the old teachings."

"What it amounts to in your education," Della said, "is that mankind is in a Demonized mess. New ideas are beginning to challenge what we have accepted for decades. But through it all every man, woman, and child remains firmly convinced, *knows*, that their destiny on this planet is secure. We were sent here for a purpose, however mystical that may sound, and by striving that purpose will be found."

Simon chuckled, and slapped Stead on the back. "Cheer up, lad. We're in a muddle but we'll fight our way through. Now, you're going on a tour of the country and, so you won't get into any mischief, young Lieutenant Cargill will go along."

Lieutenant Cargill turned out to be nearly as tall as Stead, barrel-bodied, fresh and scrubbed and eager, with the lines of habitual command already forming around his eyes and mouth, a young dedicated soldier ready to lose his life for Archon.

Stead had no suspicion that Cargill was there for any other purpose than the one stated by Simon; Stead was in many things a baby. Stead accepted Cargill uncritically; more, he tended to admire, and revere him for the work he did.

Just before he and Cargill, together with Della, set out from Simon's laboratory, the old scientist called Cargill to one side. Standing uncomfortably close to Della, Stead watched Cargill with all his attention, saw the soldier in earnest conversation with Simon. What they said he couldn't hear, but Cargill shot a quick, surprised look at him, a look

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of baffled wonder and amusement, a pitying look. Simon clutched the young officer's sleeve—he was not wearing armor—and spoke with a passionate sincerity.

Cargill's reply was loud enough for Stead to hear.

"You mean he really doesn't know about *that*? But, by the Demons, this is rich! Wait until Della—" He lowered his voice.

And then Della herself, richly imperious, spoke over the soldier's careless words, in her turn catching Stead's sleeve. "Come on, Stead. There's a lot of country to cover. Lieutenant Cargill! Are you ready?"

"I shall be with you, immediately, Della." And Cargill, after a last throaty chuckle with Simon, joined the party for the country.

Very little time elapsed before Cargill showed that he regarded this task in the primary light of the freedom it gave him and the chance offered to better his acquaintance with the glorious Della. Stead, walking along in front like a little boy out for a treat, couldn't understand why Cargill was acting as he was—puffing out his chest as he talked, rolling his eyes, continually looking long at Della—and all with an expression indicating he had eaten something that did not agree with him.

Stead said, "Don't you feel well, Cargill?"

"I am perfectly all right, thank you."

And Della laughed and took Stead's arm, to his intense discomfort, and walking on ahead, left the soldier to stare after them and fume, then sprint to catch up, sword jangling.

The country through which Stead was conducted that day differed considerably in detail from that he was to see later but in general the outlines were the same. The warrens, neatly subdivided into class sections where people lived, lay concentrated around a number of axial corridors. Once you left the control points with their blue lights, you stepped outside the normal world of electric lights and busy people, of commerce and factory production and all the civilized pursuits.

At first there was a long sloping ramp of concrete, broken away at the edges, surrounded on all sides by plaster walls.

At the side of the twenty-foot rampway, a number of excessively thick and clumsy wires ran in long rolling loops.

"What are those?"

"Electric cables," Della said at once, before Cargill could open his mouth. "They are part of the construction made by the immortal being for the Outside. We tap them for our own power when necessary, but the Regulations expressly forbid too great a drawing-off of current."

"Oh," said Stead. He walked on in the light of their three headlamps. He'd heard a lot about these Regulations. But no one seemed ever to have read them; they merely *were*, handed on by word of mouth.

"We're not going far today," Cargill told them tartly. He walked now at Della's other side and he seemed to want to keep touching her at the slightest obstacle in their way. When Stead leaped lightly down a six-foot break in the paving, where far below he glimpsed a curious silver reflection, he saw Cargill holding up his arms to Della, above.

"Jump, Della," said Cargill. "I'll catch you."

Della jumped, but she jumped easily and lithely to avoid the soldier. He moved swiftly sideways in the path of her descent; they crashed together breast to breast and his arms went about her. He laughed in a curious, high-pitched way that irritated Stead.

"You oaf!" blazed Della, stumbling sideways. Cargill's hands were upon her, her body caught up to his.

"You nearly fell," he said with that odd husk in his voice.

"I did not, and take your beastly hands off me!"

Cargill stepped back, reluctantly. His face flushed with color and he licked his lips. Della brushed her long blue dress back into place, ignoring Cargill, took Stead's arm, and said unsteadily, "We'd better get back."

"Look, Della," Cargill's voice held a note that Stead dimly realized was pleading, "I'm a soldier. You know that. And *he* doesn't understand."

"Of course he doesn't!" blazed Della. "You imbecile, you Demon-fodder. You deserve to be stepped on! He's got to learn in the right way—when we say so—and not before! Now we're going back. And I'm going—"

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"No, please, Dellal! Don't report me! I couldn't help it! By all the Demons, Della, I'm crazy about you. I only—"

"Shut up!"

The words cracked from Della like the lash of a whip.

Stead looked on dumbly, not understanding, sensing mysteries glowing with awful secrecy and wanting more than anything on the Earth to *know*.

Della's face had tautened, her mouth expressed her complete disdain for this oafish soldier; she swung Stead violently away. "We'll have to go around the other way to avoid that gap," she said coldly. "All right, Cargill."

Cargill was not listening. He was staring along the beam of his headlamp, staring into the far darkness of the concrete roadway. His gun slithered from the holster in a metallic sigh.

"Keep quiet," he said in a soft, controlled voice.

Della looked; her hands flew to her face and their pressure stifled the scream her nerves could not suppress.

Stead looked. His body suddenly crawled with revulsion. He did not know at what he stared with such horror; he had never seen anything like it in his limited new experience. The thing was perhaps twice the size of a man, but bulky, with a multitude of legs stemming from its middle. The head, small and furry with two long horny projections forming a beak, stared at them unblinkingly from four small, hooded eyes. He felt a great sickness in his stomach. Cargill's gun came up as the horrific monster charged.

CHAPTER FOUR

STEAD COULD NOT be sure of his impressions in that chaotic moment. Something incredibly hard and horny lashed him across the back and he fell. A monstrous bloated shadow reared above him. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed Della reeling, a long hairy *something* wrapped around her waist. The blue dress ripped upwards. A vast and sudden booming concussion hit him, the sound of a great explosion.

Struggling to rise, he saw the hairy thing around Della slacken, then lopped and writhed away spouting a blas-

phemous ichor. A sword, gleaming in parts not covered by a glistening thick syrup, slashed again.

Della toppled free. Stead reached for her, and Cargill's hand raked down, took the girl by her back, hefted her, and carried her away.

Numbly, Stead crawled after them.

Cargill dropped Della, turned, and grabbed Stead by the hand, dragging him free. Something soft and warm and furry had enveloped Stead's legs. The touch of that abhorrently caressing softness brought a sickness again into his stomach, made his jaws ache with a revulsion of reaction.

"If you want to vomit, vomit," Cargill said.

The soldier turned at once to Della, propped her head against a knee, his hands very gentle, and felt her pulse. Her eyes flickered open.

"Thank you, Cargill! You saved—"

"Forget that," he said, quite normally. "That's my job. I'm good at that."

"Is Stead all right?"

"Yes. He looks green, but he'll recover."

"What," said Stead weakly, "was that?"

Cargill stood up, helping Della to her feet, holding her hand. Fleeting Stead wondered why, if the soldier wanted to put his hands on Della's body, he hadn't done so then. There was a lot more to the soldier than appeared. "We call those beasts Scunners. No brains. Pretty fierce with those sixteen legs. You saw how the brute used 'em on Della. But a gun will usually see 'em off, unlike the Rangs."

Stead did not particularly look forward to meeting a Rang.

Della had regained her composure and, not without a shuddery glance back at the ghastly thing that lay in its own blood, the three set off for the warrens. Now Stead understood more clearly the reason for Cargill's alertness. If things like that Scunner infested the outer darkness, then a man's total attention and courage was needed to leave the warren.

"There are many animals inhabiting the world," Della told him as they passed the barrier beneath its blue light and re-entered once more the warm brightness of home. "As

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you can see, physiologically we have no relationship with the Scunner, nor with any other animal of the country."

They had entered a different control point from the one they had left and their way led past a series of cubicles lining the main street. In each cubicle a man or youth, a woman or girl, sat engrossed before a whirring, glinting machine.

"Who are they?" asked Stead. "What are they doing?"

"They are workers," Della told him. "This is the street of the tailors and they are making clothes for us to wear. Each street has its own trade, all under the direct supervision of a street Controller, and each contributes something to the wealth of Archon."

But Stead found it difficult to concentrate on the economic system of Archon. He saw workers laboring to produce all the things needed, saw electric and dog-drawn carts distributing the products, saw the great markets with their blazing never quenched electric lights, heard the bustle and hum of commerce, smelt the scents of the factories where foraged food was brought to be processed. But his imagination darted restlessly outside the warrens.

The revelation of the animals to be found outside, the Scunner he had seen, excited him with the wonder and awe of it all. He wanted to go out and explore, to know, to learn more and more of this world in which he had been flung with the careless inconsequence of a workman rejecting a scrap of unwanted material.

Over it all, like the haze he had been told enveloped the Outside, the blurred longings for revelations of self wilted and died. He had long since given up trying to cudgel his reluctant brain into yielding up the secret of his personality, his memories, his hidden lore.

Now all that lay in the past, in another world into which he had no desire to return. He had not been a man of Archon but the immortal being had been kind and had given him a second chance, a second birth, and he was now privileged to be one of Archon. And the humble gratitude he felt sustained him at the fading thoughts of any losses he might have suffered.

No other race could be so well-favored as the people of Archon. He believed that implicitly.

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His schooling proceeded apace. Not without a smile, Della had decreed he should work completely through a standard school course normally occupying an Archon child for six years. Stead completed the whole in the course of a quarter, one hundred and nineteen days.

"And now you can begin to learn about life."

"Learn about life . . . or about Life?" said Stead, who had begun to find his feet in this new world.

"All in due time. Don't forget the Scunner."

"I'm not likely to. I must say, Cargill acted his part well."

"It's his job," Della said offhandedly. But Stead had not failed to notice the warmth with which she greeted the soldier these latter days, the unquestioning acceptance of his presence on every walk they took together. "He's just doing a job, looking after *you*."

On the one hundred and twentieth day after his discovery, Stead was summoned to the Captain's presence.

Despite his growing confidence, he could not repress a quick appreciative shiver of alarm. After all, the Captain was as much above mere mortal men as the Controllers were above the workers. Della had patiently explained that the Captain, and his Crew were mortal, but to Stead the notion that in some way they survived the normal decay of the human body could not be dismissed in simple rational belief. Death, he now understood, was a nastily permanent thing, except for those of the people of Archon who acted blamelessly in the support of Archon and the Captain.

The others, of course—all the peoples of other empires and federations—were doomed from the moment of their birth. Only the people of Archon could be saved, but saved for what, even Della was not sure. "A greater world with greater buildings and without the necessity to forage and work. That is what is believed by the lower classes."

"And you? The Controllers?"

She pouted prettily. "Some Controllers, in these sinful days—Simon for one—do not believe anything any longer. When you are dead, you're dead, they say."

"And a perfectly reasonable and hygienic belief it is, too," said Simon, bustling in, his wrinkled face beaming with news. "We call it Scientific Rationalism. It will sweep away

the mystical beliefs of our forefathers, and it will not make us one whit the less good or noble men!"

"We-ell, I don't know," said Della. Her parents had been strict about the ritual observance of the niceties, the proper rendition of praise and thanks to the immortal one, the strict keeping of the Dates. "There must be some rhyme and reason behind the world we know."

"Well, if there is it must wait," said Simon briskly. "Stead, dress yourself most carefully, shave meticulously, a slight touch of perfume, clean fingernails. You're still a grubby-necked schoolboy in many ways. The Captain has summoned you for this afternoon!"

Preparations passed in a whirl. He had no premonitions of what to expect, or of what was expected of him. All his attempts to draw out Della or Simon were met with a silence, an amused, tolerant silence imposed by their scientific training. He even tried to pump Cargill and was met with a silence that was more rigid, more military, less amused.

A brightly painted electric car, adorned with the personal insignia of the Captain—an upright wedge with two smaller wedges depending at forty-five degree angles below—took them silently and with despatch through the streets of the warren, down descending man-made spiral ramps, deep below and out into a spacious expanse where moss grew greenly under the flood of almost unbearably bright illumination from massed electric lights.

"Down here we are in the lowest, most important and luxurious part of the warren," Simon said. Even his imperturbable scientific detachment sparked visibly at the majesty of the surroundings. The walls rose sheer for a hundred feet and almost—almost but not quite, so Cargill said—induced that panicky feeling of *rooflessness* that could reduce the strongest of men to babbling idiocy. "Only Foragers seem able to throw it off for a time, and even they cannot stand too many trips Outside."

Stead had read about the disease called *rooflessness* in the medical books and had no wish to experience it at first hand, if at all.

They alighted and walked between splashing fountains toward an oval archway through which electric lights

blazed orange and blue. The masonry here showed all the art and beauty and aspiration of the human race at its most magnificent flowering. The buttresses and pillars, the supporting arches and columned majesty of the building spoke eloquently of years of painstaking labor, of an infinitude of small devotions. Here one could feel and see the man-made structure crouching, upholding on broad scientific and architecturally grand designs all the weight and pressure the world could bring to bear. Here there would never be a cave-in. Here the ceiling could never collapse. Here man had built himself the safest, snugest, most magnificent and daring retreat in the world.

"My spirit glows within me whenever I see the Captain's Cabin," said Simon, his face, too, glowing with more than the reflected electric radiances.

They walked through that oval door.

Here luxury reigned. Swiftly and yet with a decent decorum they were led through many chambers, softly carpeted, glowing with myriad lights, adorned with paintings and murals and frescoes that dazzled the eye and, at the end, almost wearying the senses, satiating one in unplumbed depths of pleasure.

Before them doors of solid bronze clanged back like twin strokes of a gong.

Beyond, they had time for one chaotic glimpse of light, of a mass of faces turned to them, of clothes rioting in color, of jewels and feathers and the glint of weapons; the scent of a great throng of Controllers with its thousand different nuances rose up before them; the sound of the discreet murmur of a thousand throats dinned mellowly in their ears, and then they were walking down the unreeling length of purple carpet towards the Control Chair set on its dais beneath the regal splendor of lights above. Emotion caught at Stead's throat.

Stewards dressed all in white brought tiny gilt chairs, placed them three in a row.

"You may sit down," said the presence in the Control Chair.

Sitting obediently, Stead glanced upward. The aura of light blazing in refulgent lightnings around the presence rendered detailed observation difficult, and his own emotion clouded

his view. But he saw that the Captain was an old man, white haired, white bearded, fierce of face, leaning forward slightly and with his two penetrating blue eyes fixed unswervingly upon them.

Stead lowered his own gaze, feeling blasphemous.

"Repeat your log," said the Captain.

Obediently, Simon began his recitation of the work they had done with Stead. As the old voice droned on nothing of importance or significance was overlooked, and not one whit of tension and grandeur in the scene was lost. Two thousand ears listened in the great hall. Stead remained with his eyes fixed on the carpet beneath his feet. These matters were grave and vast beyond his comprehension. And the light blinded him.

At last Simon reached the present. "After this report, sir, Stead should go, as your Crew recommends, to some practical work that may—"

"Yes," said the Captain, and Simon fell silent. "We have decided he will become a Forager."

Utter silence.

Then Della lifted her head. "A Forager, sir? But—" She could not go on.

"When he has completed a first tour of duty with the Foragers, we will see him again. Only then will the artifacts known to you be shown him. That is all. You may return to your stations."

At the ritual words ending an audience, Simon and Della stood up and, as he had been told, Stead stood up too. His mind was in turmoil. Being a Forager meant that much of the painstaking work of Simon and Della became, at one stroke, meaningless. Of what need algebra, the theory of Recurring Buildings, the Evolutionary Theory and its inapplicability to Man The Unique? A Forager needed a quick eye and hand, the ability to run faster than a Scunner and then to freeze into the stillness of inert matter, an expertise with weapons and the knack of filling a sack with forage.

"By all the Demons of Outside!" Simon was muttering and mumbling to himself, rubbing his chin with a shaking hand. "I never dreamed of this outcome! It is almost—"

"Think, Simon!" said Della, her face white under the lights.

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They passed out of the Captain's Cabin, retraced their steps through the grandiloquent chambers, were taken by the electric car back to Simon's laboratory in the higher levels of the warren. All the journey was passed in silence.

Then Simon, the free-thinking scientist, could contain himself no longer.

"I have never questioned the edicts of the Captain," he said, throwing himself into a chair, his hair tousled. "And I never shall. But this—this almost gives me grounds for agreeing with the dissidents. My father would have put away his wife had the Captain ordered it. I would not, because I firmly believe the Captain could never give such an order. Times have changed and we set less store by the old ideas and regimens. But this!"

"Suppose we think what best to do," said Della. Her manner had grown brittle and irritable since the audience of the Captain. She tapped her slender fingers on the arm of her chair in a rhythm that annoyed Stead.

"What can we do but prepare Stead in the best way we can to be a Forager?"

Slowly, Stead said, "The Captain said that this was for one trip. That he would see me after that. Perhaps—"

"Of course!" Simon sat up, again eager and alert. "To succeed in our task you must experience every part of modern life. But the shock has been—is still—an emotional upheaval. To me, at least."

In Archon the day, divided into three equal periods of eight hours each, was demarcated by a one-second flickering of the lights. Then the workers changed watches, the sleepers awoke, the pleasure seekers retired to bed, the guards changed, the whole breathing life of the warrens turned over in a smooth and organized turmoil.

But for the scientists trying to bring the empty husk that had been the stranger, Stead, into the living, breathing, thinking adult that he so obviously was, time meant nothing. There was so much to learn.

"Our society of Archon, we now know," Simon told him, "is not perfect. Only a few years ago such a statement could not have been made."

"You mean society was perfect then?" asked Stead.

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Simon smiled indulgently. "That would follow from my remark. But, no. I meant that although society was no better than it is today, it had no one to impel it to change. Men *thought* they lived in a perfect society. Only recently have we begun to question the basic foundations of our way of life, largely impelled by a great thinker and writer, called B. G. Wills. He explained that as the animals of the world evolved—always excepting Man—so society was evolving. If only we could change society we would improve man himself."

"And what does the B. G. mean?" asked Stead. It had sounded odd.

"They were his off-watch names. We all have more than one name, although sometimes I tend to forget that. I am Simon Bonaventura and Della is Della Hope. But we use our off-watch names nearly all the time. Wills, for some odd reason, simply used the abbreviated form, an affectation. But don't mistake me. He was a great man."

"So if we all changed the society in which we live, then we, ourselves, would be changed." Stead thought about that. Then he said, "Yes. That sounds reasonable."

"I'm glad," Simon said with a flashing ripple of sarcasm softened by his eager old smile, "that you agree with our greatest minds."

"Oh, do come on," said Della. "The party's due to begin in an hour and both of you look as though you've been wrestling with a Scunner."

"By all the Demons, woman!" thundered Simon. "A party has no significance next to trying to teach Stead."

"And that, my dear Simon, is where you are wrong. A party will show Stead in half an hour more about human nature than these books are likely to tell him in a year."

"Impractical flibbertigibbet," Simon rumbled away to himself. But he went off to his suite of rooms to change and make himself presentable.

Stead had been using a small suite, bedroom, anteroom, lounge and study, a very modest establishment compared with some Controllers' cubicles. He went off to change, chuckling at Simon's antics.

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Everyone, it seemed, had turned out for Stead's going away party.

"In reality," Simon told him as they entered the packed and stifling hall, aswim with movement and color and scent, "they are doing you an immense favor, doing you honor. You see, Controllers normally have no social intercourse with Foragers. But you have been educated as a Controller. Up until today you were one of us and, I hope, after your probationary period as a Forager, you will be one of us again."

"I hope so, too," said Stead vehemently. "I feel dishonor, a horrible sense of dirt, at leaving the society of Controllers for that of the Foragers."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GOING AWAY party for Stead blossomed under the electric.

The colorful personalities of off-watch Controllers flowered before his eyes; the bewildering variety of costume, the glitter of jewels, the laughing, painted faces, the noise of music, the rich streams of flowing wine spouting in bounty from ranked faucets into shell-shaped basins, the tables piled with cunningly made appetite-teasing dainties, the roaring clamor of voices and laughter, shrieks, greetings, snatches of song, the whole seething picture of gaiety struck him dizzily.

Banked electric heaters around the walls poured volumes of radiant warmth that progressively disrobed men and women alike. The People of Archon lived in a coldish world; they liked heat and Controllers could afford as much as they wanted.

A remarkable feeling assailed Stead, a sensation he had not previously experienced but one which in its essentials he recognized as being akin to the feeling that so troubled him in his dealings with Della. The dictionary had defined that for him as embarrassment. But why should he feel embarrassed when all these people had come to wish him well and say good-bye?

Prodded forward he allowed himself to be mounted upon

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a table, a drink to be thrust into his hand. Looking down he saw a flowerbed of flushed, upturned faces, eyes glinting, mouths smiling, teeth gleaming. Glasses were raised to him, a forest of white arms, reaching up.

A man shouted, high and powerfully, "Safe nook and cranny to Stead! Long life! And may he soon return home to the warren safely!" It was a toast.

They all drank. Drinking with them, not knowing any different, Stead felt again, strongly, how fine a class of people were the Controllers of Archon.

He jumped off the table and was immediately caught up in strange ritualistic dances, all gyrations and hand clappings and sinuous snaky lines; he tumbled around the hall, flushed and laughing and happy. This, indeed, was life, the full and free life promised him by Simon and Della.

Cargill was not at the party.

A quick commotion took Stead's attention. The dancing line fragmented into laughing, spinning individuals. Women screamed. Men rushed away from Stead, coalescing into a melee of pressing backs in a corner. Here the electric lights had been discreetly dimmed.

"Kill the beastly thing!" "There it goes!" "Ugh!" "What a filthy brute." Cries and commotion filled the air. Peering over straining backs, Stead looked down, and saw the cause of the trouble.

Cowering beneath an upturned chair, a small animal peered out with large, frightened eyes. It was perhaps half the size of his shoe. Its sixteen legs moved erratically, not propelling the tiny, shrunken body in any settled direction, its four feelers waving in mocking parody of the human dancers' gesticulating arms.

"What is it?" asked Stead.

"A filthy rat!" A woman, far enough away to be brave, caught Stead's arm. "Kill it quick!"

"But why?" Stead felt puzzlement. The little rat didn't seem to be doing much harm. He had read about them, of course, but the reactions of these people, especially the women, surprised him.

The rat made a sudden despairing dart for safety. It scuttled in a blurring of speed along the wall. A man threw

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a glass at it. Another threw a goblet. Then two men trapped it. Stead saw a foot rise, go down. He heard—quite distinctly—a squeak abruptly chopped off.

"Filthy things," said Della, pulling him away from the painted woman who had caught his arm. "They infest the workers' cubicles, of course, but one seldom sees any as low as this."

"Horrible," quavered the woman, reluctantly releasing Stead. "They make me feel itchy."

"I want you to meet an old friend," said Della. "Forget the rat. Even a Controller's cubicle cannot be entirely free of animal pests." Looking at her, feeling the pressure of her hand on his arm, Stead forgot the rat.

Della brought him wheeling round to face an old, wise, preternaturally aged, white-whiskered countenance that beamed on him with profound joy.

"This is Stead, Nav," Della said. "Stead, you have the great privilege and honor to meet Astroman Nav." She was obviously happy at this meeting. "Nav is very high in the hierarchy of the Astromen. I'm sure he will be able to help you a lot." She pouted at Nav. "You will, won't you, Nav, dear?"

Nav's pouched old eyes twinkled in the electrics. He lifted the hem of the long garment he wore, sat down on a chair, politely indicating seats for Della and Stead, one on each side. Stead could not fail to notice the odd instrument dangling at Nav's waist, but he decided that good manners demanded no comment.

"If your grandfather had heard you talking to an Astroman like that you wouldn't have sat down for a week." Astroman Nav spoke in a gruff, shouty voice, a voice suitable for declamations now hushed into the more mellow tones of everyday conversation. "You young women. It's all the fault of that fellow Wills. Filled your heads with free-thinking nonsense."

"Now, Nav, dear!" Della was exasperated at the old buffer. And just how much of an act it was even she wasn't prepared to say. "I want Stead to know all you can tell him. When he goes among the Foragers he won't have much time or opportunity for spiritual affairs."

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What Nav had to say absorbed Stead for an hour as the party whooped and hollered and thumped on all around.

"We Astromen are the custodians of the race's progress. We chart the future and hold the people firmly to the ancient beliefs. It is an onerous occupation and one taxing all our strength." He smiled a little ruefully. "This man Wills who emancipated thought—or so the youngsters claim—was a little of a charlatan, when you boil it all down. But, certainly, he brought changes. Religion doesn't seem quite so potent a force as it was when I was a young Astro novice. And I deplore that. Fine a girl as Della is, she could be better if she took her religion more seriously."

"But," said Stead with the acuteness of the newly-educated, "if the ancient truths are true—I mean about the immortal being creating the world and the land of buildings, placing mankind here among the animals, providing our food and raw materials for the Foragers to bring home—if these are true, as they must be, why should anyone seek to doubt it?"

"Go and read Wills. But I like your fire. I believe you have the makings of an Astro novice. Although you are old chronologically, spiritually you are as yet newly born. I don't think Wills will harm you much."

"I . . . I don't know. I hadn't thought—"

"You'll have to think about it after your Foraging tour of duty. If the Demons spare you, that is."

"I beg your pardon?"

"What? Hasn't Della or that scientist fellow—what's his name, Bonaventura?—told you about Demons?"

"No." Again that glorious feeling of new worlds opening to him flooded through Stead. Here, unexpectedly, like walking around a dark corner into a flood of light, fresh learning lay ready to spring into his experience.

"Demons," said Astroman Nav, "were sent into the world by the anti-immortal one to bring penance and suffering, to try us, to make us struggle to find the peace of our own immortal souls through the bitter battles of conscience. Demons are anti-human, opposed to the godhead, utterly abhorrent. To overcome the Demons is to share in the eternal light of the immortal being."

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Stead tried to sort out this spate of new information. Demons? Well, everyone seemed to use the term as a curse word, a swearing block to let off their feelings. Now Nav was saying that Demons were in some way put into the world to test mankind, to serve as a practical yardstick to measure man's own goodness. It all sounded very theoretical and religious.

Stead turned to Della, who had walked across the room toward him with Simon. "Why didn't you tell me, Della? Was it Demons that Cargill, Simon, and you sniggered over that day?"

Simon laughed. A real, boisterous belly laugh.

"No, Stead. Though what we discussed is a demon to many."

Stead glanced at Della as Simon's face and voice and personality changed dramatically. The scientist suddenly took on the aspect of Cargill, and sheer bewilderment crushed Stead. How could he ever be expected to understand if no one would *tell* him?

Della said, "Remember you're a scientist, Simon, and not twenty years younger. Now, Stead, what of Demons?"

"It's rather confusing. They are a sort of phantom monster, sent to plague mankind, to test our faith and worship of the immortal one."

"More or less what we now believe," and Simon nodded, back to his old wizened scientific self. "With all due deference to Nav as an Astroman, the Demons do stand a strong possibility of actually existing."

"Oh, nonsense, Simon!" That was Della, beautifully annoyed.

"Well, the Foragers keep on talking about the Demons they've seen. And you know how often Foragers never return."

"Now you just listen to me, Simon! The nerve of it! A foremost scientist, talking like an ignorant Forager. Those cunning Foragers make up these stories. It give them importance, in their own foolish eyes, against the rest of humanity who do not venture Outside. Oh, I know Forager Controllers who've been Outside have told us the same stories, but a Forager Controller is really only half a Controller at best!"

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Della looked prettily indignant, cherishing her own beliefs and theories.

"But—" began Simon.

"And," Della rushed on, "the Foragers who don't return have simply been killed or captured by enemies. And no Hunter is going to admit he was bested by an enemy, by a lost soul not of Archon! You know how much our soldiers resent being beaten."

Stead, surprising himself, said, "That doesn't seem surprising." And stopped.

They all looked at him. Then Della spoke again in a torrent of anger. She didn't believe in Demons. Wills had said quite plainly that they were figments dreamed up by the old hierarchy to keep the workers in their place. No worker would dream of going Outside for fear of the Demons. Stead listened and again felt bewilderment at the shifting strands of logic and belief.

Della was wearing a knee-length kilted garment of white cloth, embroidered around the hem and sleeves and throat with jewelled arabesques that glittered and glimmered in the lights. More than ever, wearing that garment in contrast to Simon's yellow and green shirt and scarlet slacks and his own simple plain blue shirt and slacks, Della made it plain to him that women just weren't the same shape as men. He'd put the question, of course, and both Simon and Della had told him that that was the way it had always been and the way it always, the immortal being willing, would.

So that when Belle, Della's friend from the radio laboratories, danced up, cheeks flushed, eyes aglow, holding out a goblet of wine, with an invitation to the dance, Stead decided—without daring to look at Della—to accept. Della said, "Be careful, Belle."

"Of course, dear. I always am!" And she giggled to herself as though an enormous joke had been made.

Dancing off into the laughing throng, forming a line, swaying to the music, Stead's first impulse to slip away and think over this Demon talk faded. Something happened to him. He looked at Belle. She wore a black dress with narrow cords over the shoulders, thigh length skirt of thin material that, if he hadn't thought the idea un-Controller-

like, he would have sworn showed the sheen of flesh. She danced with her head tilted back, her mouth open, a pink tongue showing, laughing, laughing, laughing.

Stead let himself go. The music thumped a maddening rhythm in time with the beat of his blood. For the first time the presence of a woman did not disconcert him. The feel of Belle's waist under his fingers as they danced to and fro brought sensations wholly unrecognizable and wild, frightening and yet stimulating. At one and the same time he wanted to go on dancing, go on holding Belle, and to plunge off and away and cower in his cubicle, safe in the pages of a book.

"Enjoying yourself, Stead?"

"Very much. And you?"

"MMMmmm. I thought you said you couldn't—*whoops*—dance?"

"I can't."

"Well, you're doing very nicely, thank you. . . ."

They gyrated out of one line into another. On the next pas-sade Belle expertly eluded the man's waiting grasp and, towing Stead, floated away on lightly tapping feet. Mag-netically drawn, Stead followed. A single, flashing glimpse of Della, standing with her red curls agleam over the bobbing head, almost stayed him. But that taut, inward look lay over Della's beautiful face . . . and suddenly, to Stead, Belle's vivacious brown skin meant life and gaiety and all the unknown joys and dark desires he had dreamed existed—knew existed—and had never tasted. Whatever hap-pened—he was going to learn something new.

Borne on a buffet of expiring music they tumbled laugh-ing through a narrow doorway. Here the electrics had been shaded by rose colored glasses; a deep luster lay on the small room and the cushion-scattered divan. The room smelt scented and secret and . . . hungry.

"I need a drink," Belle said. She picked up a glass from a low table and, copying her, Stead took the second goblet. Drinking, he felt the wine course through his body like fire. Belle stared at him, her brown eyes seeming in that rosy light to grow larger. Stead had thought her skimpy black dress a drab clothing beside Della's glorious white costume, but

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now he realized anew and with a stunning impact that women's shapes were different from men's.

A knife-like pain took him in the small of the back.

Belle pouted. "Don't you like me, then, Stead?"

"Like you? Of course! Why shouldn't I?"

She laughed, a short throaty catching of her breath.

"Well, you don't show it."

Stead felt dismay. "But . . . but—" he stammered. "How can I? I mean, I haven't done anything to displease you?"

"True, lover boy, too true. You've done nothing."

She walked toward him, a gliding, swaying dance rather than a walk, both her hands outstretched, the glass spilling wine unheeded. She came close to him. She put her arms around him, clamping in a sudden and shocking vice-like grip across his back. Her body, soft and quite unmanlike, pressed against him.

For a timeless instant Stead stood rigid. Something was happening. He was changing. A feeling soaked through his body; his blood pounded. He knew he must do . . . do what? Put his hands so, and so. . . .

Belle sighed. She lifted her head and her lips, red and ripe and, somehow quite illogically, inviting pouted up at him.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, Stead?"

"Kiss? What's that, Belle?"

She reached up on tip toe. He felt her against him. She reached her hands up, caught the back of his neck, his head. She pressed his head down.

"*This.*"

A number of things happened simultaneously.

Of those, three struck him with the greatest impact. And of the three his bodily change seemed less important than the blinding vision that crashed across his eyes.

And then Della's hands wrenched Belle away, a fist cracked across her chin, and knocked her sprawling; Della's face swam before him, the mouth open, the eyes blazing, the whole expression blistering contempt.

"You fool!" Della said, her voice like the spitting of a cat. "You imbecile, Belle! I could have you sent to the workers for this!"

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Belle, her black dress ripped down from one cord, groveled on the floor. Looking down on her white flesh, all rosy tinted in the light, Stead felt a feeling for the girl flowing from him; she looked crushed, beaten, stamped on like that rat out there.

"Della . . . I wanted to— I'm sorry. But . . . he's so masculine—"

"I know what you wanted. You're a radioman, not a psychologist. Don't you know you're playing with fire, with gunpowder, with Stead? Now I'll have to—" Della suddenly realized that Stead was there, his ears wide open, drinking all this into the naked and palpitating cells of his brain, learning.

"I'll see you later, Belle. Stead, come with me. And forget this. Forget it, do you hear!" Della's movements were controlled, almost precise.

Incredibly, from the floor, disheveled and panting, Belle cried, "You just want him for yourself, Della! Don't think I don't know what's going on—Psychology! A fine psychology that uses a bed for a laboratory bench!"

Della gasped. Stead noted with surprise how her upper body—that disturbing region so different from a man's—rose and fell in a tumult. She turned wrathfully, body strained, hands lifting with fingers clawed, then she relaxed. She took a deep breath.

"Think what little thoughts you like, Belle. I feel sorry for you. But you're wrong in that dirty little mind of yours. Now, Stead." She grasped his arm in a grip that, he felt with a wry understanding, was no different from a man's. "You're coming home!"

CHAPTER SIX

FORAGER CONTROLLER WILKINS pursed his full lips, his slender hands still on the papers before him on the wide desk. Wilkins was a small, dapper man, neat with dark slicked hair, wearing dull green slacks and shirt. Wilkins owned his own Foraging Corporation and was these days never likely to venture Outside. A gaudy yellow and scarlet scarf

loosely knotted around his slender white throat was a scornful reminder of his position.

Stead stood before him, uneasy, trying to realize that this man was a Controller, and therefore of the class into which Stead had been reborn, but finding the task difficult and clouded by the irrational learning he had absorbed during his quarter's training as a Forager.

The training period had been strenuous, but in it Stead had come to realize that his body had been retrained into a state of fighting fitness well accustomed to it. In his previous life he had been a tough and powerful athlete and he had the muscles still to prove it.

Forager Leader Thorburn stood at Stead's side.

Thorburn had stared with genuine surprise when Stead had reported in. Stead, of course, had no memory of meeting this massive-headed, grave, intense Forager, but an immediate liking for him had warmed his greeting, firmed his handclasp. Thorburn immediately forgot his notions of proprietorship, of patronage for this man and responded with a deep and joyful acceptance of friendship.

Now Wilkins tapped the papers. "I've agreed to take you on, Stead, through friendship for Simon—uh, Controller Bonaventura—but I warn you that if you do not act within the framework of a Forager's duties, I shall have no hesitation in discharging you."

Wryly, Stead heard the change in the man's voice. He didn't know Controller Wilkins' off-watch name; he wondered what the man would say if, knowing it, he had used it in his own Controller's accents before his future foraging mates. This world had many barriers he must learn to hurdle in his own way.

"You have been trained, but that means you are just beginning to learn how much you have to learn. Forager Leader Thorburn will show you. He may not welcome this assignment, but business is pressing lately; I've lost a number of good Hunters, and I have no time to mollicoddle you, Stead." Wilkins looked down again at the papers.

"You have been issued a cape and it has been trained to your bloodstream. Uniform, weapons, respirator, antigrav, sack—yes . . . I think that's all. The Regulations have

been fully explained to you. Understand me. You go Outside for one purpose and one purpose only. To bring back to Archon the fruits of the world so that the people may live. That is all. Everything else is subordinate to that."

But, being a Controller, Wilkins had the grace to add, "I do not forget that Thorburn, in bending that law, assured you of life, Stead. That is between the two of you. But Thorburn has been warned. Full sacks, Stead, *full sacks!*"

When they were outside Wilkin's control cubicle, Thorburn said, "Phew! Let's go and meet the gang."

Down in the Controller's section of the warren, Stead would have prefaced his remark with a blistering, "By all the Demons of Outsides!" and gone on to express himself.

But among the Foragers and Hunters he had learned after using the expression just once, that they were not curse words. It wasn't even a blasphemy. It was so much a part of everyday life that it had no significance, or so much deep meaning that it became inexpressible.

Copying the insolent swagger of Foragers when inside in the company of soldiers, Stead did as Thorburn did and flicked his cape grandly behind him. The cape might have been fully trained to his blood stream—getting used to the twin filaments running into the back of his neck had been irksome and, at first, revolting—but the thing's own life was still frolicsome and it had developed a cunning little habit of drooping down and then licking gently between his legs. Four times, now, he'd been ignominiously tripped on his nose. And how his comrades at the training warren had laughed!

"You'll soon master your cape, Stead," Thorburn told him. "It's a youngster. And a cape with ideas of its own is a better bet than an old worn out rag. Changes quicker. Old Chronic knows that. He's been through a dozen capes in his time."

"Old Chronic?"

"You'll meet 'em all. The gang. The Foraging party I am privileged to lead into the Outside. I wouldn't change it. It's far better than being cooped up as a worker."

Thorburn had changed since the forage when he had found this man who now walked along so lithely at his side, topping him by four inches or more. The changes had been

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within his mind and he had welcomed them. The sureness had come of itself. He no longer gave unnecessary orders on a forage; the party knew what to do and they did it. Thorburn briefed them with any new or particular instructions before they left.

Down in the Hunters' rest rooms in the warren just inside the barrier and the blue light, a room tucked neatly into a crevice between a water pipe and an electric light conduit, Stead met them all.

Julia, big and blonde, with a flashing smile and a warmth for the new man she spilled out for everyone, proud of her prowess as a radarop, sleek limbed and gay.

Sims and Wallas, brothers in all but parentage, young, tough, doltish looking but with brains that held absolute competence in their allotted tasks.

Cardon, black browed, fierce-eyed, bitter, unrelenting, sudden, a man with a sin troubling his conscience.

Old Chronic—well, Old Chronic clicked his dentures and grinned and snorted and spluttered and demanded a whole book to himself.

And lastly, Honey. Honey of the soft, silky jet hair, the soft eyes of innocence, the soft rosebud mouth and the blooming skin of satin. Honey of the slender figure and shy smile, with a reserve of cold courage that Thorburn had seen grow and strengthen in a hundred perilous moments since that time she had cowered frightened by the window as she saw her first Demon. Honey, with the gentleness of girlhood, and a softness that concealed a core of steel.

"And this is Stead," said Thorburn.

What were they making of him? Each in his or her own way greeted the new man. Stead knew that he imbalanced the party, that he was an added and extra risk, that through his presence all their lives might be forfeit. But he smiled and shook hands and tried to hold himself erect without arrogance. In these people's hands reposed his own life.

"One to come, Thorburn," said the Forager Manager, old bald and short-sighted Purvis. Once he'd tangled with a Rang single-handed and brought the carcass in, not to prove

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his deed but because a good Forager always came home with a full sack. "Feller called Vance. Comes from a firm of Foragers right on the other side of the warrens."

"Yes," said Thorburn. "As soon as he gets here we'll step out."

But the gang were arguing and protesting.

"No foraging party takes out more than one new man!" exploded Cardon, savage and black of brow. "What's H. Q. playing at?"

Over the babble of protests, Manager Purvis cut them short. "If you want to argue with head office go and see Wilkins. When you're out of a job you can starve. You know the Regulations. No job, no food. And don't give me the old Forager tale of finding enough food Outside to be independent of the warrens. You wouldn't last a sixth of a quarter."

"I don't know about that," said Cardon darkly.

They were all held in the ritual tension of a pre-forage waiting: the old jokes were unwrapped and cracked and laughed at and put, dustily, away; the building-up meal was eaten with a relish or lack of appetite peculiar to the individual temperament; weapons were checked for the feel of something to occupy the hands; last minute reports from other foraging parties were collated into their own lead-out route.

Signals orderlies passed the blue slips through pneumatic tubes into the Hunter-waiting cubby; Old Chronic irritably read them and clicked his teeth and with his neat precise hand inked in the symbols on his map, always with a complaint. But he was a good Navigator, old as he was, or perhaps because he was old.

"I'd trust Old Chronic to find us a route through a Demon's temple with everything in full swing," Thorburn told Stead with an exasperated look at the old navigator. "He only just failed the finals for his geographer's assistantship. He could never, coming from the Foraging class, be an Architectural Geographer. But we hear how often the assistants do the job while the lordly Controllers slope off."

"I've never met an Architectural Geographer," Stead said, but his interest concentrated on another thing that Thorburn

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had said. "You mentioned a Demon's temple. You mean to tell me you really *believe* in Demons? I know Hunters and Foragers talk about them, but I'm going outside now. Isn't it time to admit the truth?"

"And what is the truth?"

"Well, people are confused about the reasons for the Demoniac stories, but the best scientific theories now are that they were planted in men's minds to check our natural sinfulness, to act as consciences."

"By a Scunner's diseased intestines!" exploded Cardon. "What rubbish they've been filling you with, Stead."

Stead felt anger, anger and shame. "I only know what I've been told."

"Wait until we're outside. Then you can talk."

Stead decided to take that advice; he shut up.

Honey picked up her wavelength log, and grimaced. "Enough changes to work my fingers sore. It's this blasted static howling across the air that's doing it."

"You've got troubles," Julia said, polishing her set with an entirely feminine duster. "This confounded howling is beginning to creep onto my radar frequencies. If it fouls those up—"

"We cut a beam," Thorburn said tartly. "We cut a beam. If any of you Hunters in my party can't scuttle fast enough to elude a Demon, you don't belong with me."

Everyone, as though their heads were on strings, swung to stare at Stead. He swallowed. Truly, this was an entirely new world he'd been dumped into, a world where values had been turned topsy-turvy and life, real and hot, meant more than ever it could in the rarefied levels of the Controllers' warrens.

Purvis called into the waiting cubby. "Here's your new man Vance, Thorburn."

Again as though invisible strings drew them, everyone's head swiveled to the door. This time Stead looked too.

Vance strode in, glanced keenly about, approached Thorburn with a Forager's swagger. He glanced coldly at Stead. "Thorburn? I'm Vance. And this must be Stead."

The new man reeked of toughness. His short, stocky body bulged his dull green Hunter's uniform; his cape, a middle-

aged specimen in mature condition, clung to him with all sixteen legs in a synthesis that told of long and perfect association. His square, craggy face, dour and without humor, seemed rather to glower out on life. Beneath tufted eyebrows his eyes lurked in shadow, pitiless and unfathomable.

Stead felt an unaccountable shiver at sight of the man.

"Welcome, Vance," said Thorburn, holding out his hand. The handshake was brief, perfunctory. Thorburn introduced the others. Even Stead, after so short an acquaintance, appreciated the strange reluctance of the exuberant Julia's greeting. This man knew his job, but he had time for no one but himself.

When he shook hands with Stead, Stead said deliberately, "You won't be a handicap to the party, Vance, unlike me."

Vance did not laugh; but his thin lips moved with the ghost of what might have been a sardonic smile. "That's why I'm here, Stead. Don't get out of my sight."

And the understanding that hit Stead then reduced his own stature, humbled him. This man Vance was going along as a nursemaid!

"If you're all set?" Thorburn, without waiting for an answer picked up his gun, slung it, caught up his sacks and strode for the door. Everyone else followed his example.

Stead looked at the gun issued to him. It was not new but was less action-worn than those he had trained with. Everyone called it a splutter-gun. It fired a smallish projectile, the bullets arranged in the clip in alternate explosive and solid coned rounds. A two-handed weapon, it could be operated with one hand by any trained fighter. He hefted it, flung it. He wondered, not without a twinge of apprehension, if he would have to use it.

Honey strapped on her walkie-talkie, Julia her radar set. They slung their sacks. Old Chronic finished sharpening a pencil and slung his logs and maps. With Thorburn in the lead they stepped out of the Hunters' waiting cubby, boarded their electric car. The soldier raised the barrier, his helmet shining under the blue light, and saluted.

The car purred away down a long echoing corridor. Stead was on his way Outside.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ELECTRIC CAR moved smoothly, running on eight small rubber-tired wheels, its truck body swaying gently. The Foragers sat around the truck on bench seats, their equipment, strapped to them, part of their beings now. Following the car, another truck filled with Forager Engineers kept pace with them. Overhead lights flashed past, to dwindle and die. The driver switched on his headlights.

"What's the drill, then, leader?" asked Vance formally.

"We're going through a new hole. Beams have been appearing regularly across our major exits."

"Yes. It's been getting tough over on the other side."

"Foraging is getting more difficult every day," growled Cardon, his dark face savage. "Wilkins doesn't seem to understand, but then, he's only a Controller. The last time he went Outside must have been twenty years ago."

Stead sat silent, listening avidly, conscious of the strangeness of this conversation. These people didn't seem to appreciate the position of Controllers, didn't seem to understand how fortunate the Empire of Archon was in its ruling class.

But he did not say anything.

Thorburn pulled out his leader's map, angled it so they all could see. "I'm changing the route on my own initiative. Didn't want old Purvis to know; he's a good man but—"

The others nodded understandingly.

"Last trip we opened up a new route straight into a fresh food store. Relatively simple to fill our sacks and lug them back. However, although I want to get back into that store again and that's the way we were routed, I figure that the route will be beamed. There were traps there, all over."

"Traps," said Vance contemptuously.

"One of 'em had caught a Scunner," said Cardon, and Vance raised one bushy eyebrow.

"Nasty, then," he said in a low voice.

The corridor debouched into an uneven, narrow space with raw earth on one side and a flowing wall of concrete

on the other. The truck's headlights speared into the darkness ahead. The sound of running water kept pace with their progress; the air smelt damp.

When, at last, the truck slowed and stopped, they had covered at least five miles. The driver looked up.

"End of the ride. All out."

The engineers' truck pulled up behind. The engineers, Foragers with specialized aptitudes, pulled their equipment out, strapped down to antigrav sleds. They yoked themselves up and began hauling the sleds up a rubble-strewn ascending passage that curved and jinked and gave them some trouble.

The driver and his four guards, Foragers detailed for soldier duties, conversed with the second driver and guards. Then the driver turned to Thorburn. "Blane took his group out this way yesterday."

"Yes. I don't expect we'll meet him, though." Thorburn was checking the engineers' progress. "He was routed to return through that hole over on the cable way."

"I was going to say he dropped a hint he might come out this way. If you see him, pass the word we'll wait for him, too. His own transport can be picked up later."

"Right." Thorburn looked over his group. "Come on."

These men, decided Stead, following obediently, seemed to take a lot for granted. And they made up their own minds, overriding the definite orders of their superiors.

That puzzled him, knowing what he did of the hierarchy of Archon.

Up ahead the lights from the engineers bobbed and winked. In the illumination of every other man's headlamp, Thorburn's party began the ascent.

The world for Stead had always consisted of narrow passages and slots, and cubicles cut from earth or concrete or brick, except for that one frightening experience when he had gone down to the Captain's Quarters. As the party toiled on along slits between earth and rock, negotiating thick cables and wires, brushing through falls of dirt and leaping splits in the ground, he found the surroundings familiar if more cramped. These alleyways through the foundations of the world of buildings were little different from

those immediately surrounding the warrens. He began to breath with an easier rhythm.

Thorburn had them use their antigravs sparingly, checking, as Regulations demanded, each time they were operated. The batteries gave only a certain operating time; they must not go past the halfway mark before they had reached their destination.

Presently, after a long upward drift with the antigravs pulling them up a narrow slot that extended sideways out of reach of their probing lights, they reached a ledge, dusty and filled with the discarded husks of sixteen legged animals, as large as dogs, shining and brittle.

"Flangs," explained Thorburn. "As they grow they have to shed their skins. Stupid creatures. Don't waste a shell on them. Wave a light in their eyes and they'll fracture their legs trying to get away."

He looked up at the top of the ledge, ten feet above. "Lights out!"

As the headlamps died to orange glows and then blackness, the Foragers' eyes slowly adjusted. The engineers were quietly unstrapping their equipment and setting it up, working by touch and feel. Presently Stead felt, rather than saw, a dim illumination seeping over the top of the ledge, a pale washed-out radiance that obscurely depressed him. It felt cold.

"All ready," called the engineer leader. "Cutting."

Muffled drills bit. An electric saw whined and then, at the swift curse of the leader, hurtled down the cliff. Something banged, loud and shockingly.

"Whoever built this ought to be stepped on!" said the engineer leader. "It shattered on the metal. Dark glasses, everyone. We'll have to burn."

"Sims and Wallas," ordered Thorburn. "Left flank. Vance and Stead, right. Move!"

Stepping carefully after Vance into the darkness, feeling the flangs' discarded skins cracking beneath his feet, Stead felt the awful engulfing fear of the dark swamping in on him. Yet mankind knew the darkness as a friendly cloak. Why should it bother him?

Before he removed his dark glasses he stared back. A

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fierce, ravening, man-made flame burned viciously against the metal of the wall, cutting and melting. That gave him heart, and he turned to his guard duty with a feeling of stronger purpose. Nothing happened until Thorburn called, "Check in. We're through."

The engineers were already packing their equipment when Stead returned.

"Wait until I've been through," said Thorburn. "If I'm right, we should be able to pick up food at once. You can take some back."

The engineers didn't argue. They were Foragers, and to a Forager full sacks meant a way of life.

"Stead!" Thorburn motioned. "Stand right behind me. Look over my shoulder. Learn."

Quivering with the excitement of the moment, Stead did as he was bidden. Thorburn climbed purposefully through the hole, his cape not recoiling from the burned edges where the engineer's cooling liquid had brought the temperature of the metal down. All Stead could see in the pale illumination was a shining metal wall, rounded, going up out of sight. To one side of that Thorburn crouched, staring about, his splutter-gun up. After a few moments Thorburn pointed. Stead looked.

The trap must have sprung on the animal just as it had seized the scrap of food in its jaws. It wasn't a Scunner, but it had sixteen legs, sprawled now and lax, and its body had been nearly cut in two by a great shining blade.

"He must have got in by a different route," said Old Chronic's voice in Stead's ear. "Have to remember that."

"You mean—"

"Before you forage anything, Stead, have a good look around. These infernal traps are clever."

Stead felt sick.

Thorburn waved. With Stead pushed back into the ranks, they all squeezed through the hole.

At first, Stead had no real notion of where he was. He stood on a surface of wood, partially covered by a thick and clumsy paper, surrounded by tall, shining, rounded, metal walls, and great humped masses covered in more thick and clumsy paper. The smell of food was overpowering.

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"Fill up," called Thorburn. "And be quick about it. We could get in two trips."

Watching the others swing their axes and machetes, Stead followed their example, and began to hack huge odiferous hunks from the enormous masses of food. He worked on a mountain of meat, slicing foot-thick strips away and stuffing them into his sack, feeling the material bulge with the meat. They passed their first loaded sacks through the hole and the engineers took them with little grunts and piled them on the equipment sleds.

Stead, busily chopping away at his meat mountain, became aware that Thorburn was looking about keenly, obviously coming to a decision. At his side Sims ceased carving, screwed his three-quarter-filled sack up tightly; on the other side Wallas took a last chunk of cheese from his food mountain.

"We've gone far enough here," said Thorburn. "Wipe traces, everyone."

Stead felt bemused. He looked at his half filled sack and from it to Thorburn's massive head, outlined against the glow coming from the distant side of this food quarry. Tentatively, Stead approached, aware of the bustle of efficiency all about him, and said, "But my sack isn't full yet, Thorburn. Full sacks—I thought."

"Regulations, Stead. Full sacks, yes. But not too much from any one place. We've taken our quota; now we move on."

"Regulations. I see," said Stead. But he didn't.

They congregated by the hole, dragging their sacks, scarcely exchanging a word and that in a furtive whisper.

Julia said, "I found another trap around the back."

Thorburn glanced at his watch. "Days and nights are different in the Outside world from our real world, Stead," he said thoughtfully. "We've a little time yet. Come and learn something."

With Thorburn in the lead, the sacks lying at the hole, they all went toward Julia's trap. Massive it was, towering, gleaming and dark with menace. On the floor a man-sized chunk of cheese rested like an accidental crumb fallen from the main mountain. Thorburn unhitched his rope and

grapnel, swung it, let fly, sank it into the cheese. He looked around.

Then he pulled.

The trap hissed. From the ceiling a glittering knife blade descended with the violence of death, sliced across the cheese as the grapnel pulled it loose. Below where the cheese had been, two springs, now touching, were revealed.

"By the immortal one!" said Stead, shaken. The slashing crash of the descending blade half numbed him. He felt the blood beating painfully through his fingers, as though his hands had constricted all unaware.

"Pretty little things," Vance said, kicking the still vibrating blade. "Same sort we have over on the other side." He was quite casual about it. "Do you have those beastly trapdoor things over here?"

Sims nodded. "Yes, they're really tricky."

Vance said with a casualness that Stead could not fault, "Took me three hours to cut my way out of one once. Never again."

The others looked at him with a new respect. If he'd done that, he really *was* a Forager. Thorburn retrieved his grapnel. The trapknife had sheered off one prong. Wrapping the rope up, Thorburn said, "Just another lesson, Stead. Check everything first; there are no second chances Outside."

And that, reasoned Stead, ran counter to what Vance had just told them about the trapdoor trap. Deliberately?

Out of the hole the darkness crowded in more thickly than before. The engineers had gone. The party moved sideways along the dusty, flang-shell littered ledge, lights pooling ahead, thrusting back the dark.

"Should be lighter soon," Thorburn said after another time check. "We can mine in here now and be clear before the Outside day begins."

They had reached a place where the cold faint illumination welled up from a two-foot-high slit running along the floor. Above them, plaster walling towered into dizzy heights, dark and creepy with the unknown.

"This is House Five-Eight-Nine-Stroke-Charley," said Old Chronic, hands creasing his maps. "Ground. Let me see,

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now . . . h'mm. Well, Thorburn, you took a Regulation load from here—do you intend to go into the open?"

"Must do to fill sacks." Thorburn treated the question with tolerance. Old Chronic worried over trivialities at times and passed matters of grave importance. "I'll go and take Stead."

"That means me, too," said Vance.

"Sims and Wallas. Rest of you, stay here."

The five men slipped under the two foot high slot, stood up. Automatically, without conscious thought, horrified, stricken with a panic he had never known he could experience, Stead grasped with one hand for Thorburn, with the other covered his eyes.

"No! no!" he said, his voice a gargling whisper of pain.

Thorburn wrenched the hand covering his eyes away. He took his head between his hands—Sims and Wallas and even Vance were there, holding him, forcing his head back, pricking his eyes open with something sharp—making him look up.

Look up!

But . . . there was nothing up there!

Nothingness—a vast white glaring expanse of emptiness, sucking the blood from his body, drawing out the soul from his breast, tearing him, calling him, entreating him to rise up and up and up.

"No!" screamed Stead into the horny palm that clamped across his mouth. His eyes bulged. He felt every inch of his body open and inflamed, excoriated by the awful lack of substance above his head. "Don't. . . . Stop. . . . No! I can't go out there!"

"Half a minute, Stead, that's all." Vance spoke gratingly.

Thorburn said, "Feel your feet, Stead."

Someone trod on his foot.

He yelped with the abrupt little pain, and felt the ground beneath his feet. But still they held his head back, his face up, still they pricked his eyes open, forcing him to look up to . . . to what? Was there something there? What horror really dwelt up there, wherever up there was?

"Yes, Stead." Thorburn's rich voice burred in Stead's ears. "There is something up there. But it's a long way off and

it's painted white and it isn't easy to see. But it's there, Stead, it's there. It's a ceiling, Stead, a roof. Only it's a long way off. D'you understand?"

Understand? Dimly in the cold and pallid illumination, Stead saw the white wide sweep of roof, felt again the breath of rationality swing back as he realized that of course, there must be something above. How could there *not* be?

"I'll be all right. Sorry. Silly of me. For a half minute there I thought the roof had fallen off the world—stupid. That couldn't be."

No one argued that. But Thorburn had to say, "We'll see you right, Stead. We'll be going Outside one of these days." An uncomfortable silence. Then Honey poked her head through the slot, stared up.

"Haven't you gone yet? Well, that's good. Signal from Blane. He's somewhere near here; he got twisted around somehow."

"He never did have a good navigator," came Old Chronic's sardonic whisper from the slot.

"Well, Honey?" Thorburn slowly let his grip on Stead slacken. Stead took two great lungful of air.

"Blane reports a Rang loose in this House."

At once the electric stir of tension, of alarm, of an apprehension approaching panic that shot through them was completely understandable to Stead.

Rangs meant sudden death, or, maybe, a death not so sudden but just as sure.

"Step on the beastly thing!" exclaimed Thorburn, as much enraged as frightened. "This was a smooth operation up until now. This really fouls it up."

Inevitably, it had to be Old Chronic who said, not without a tang of meaning, "Orders, Thorburn?"

"I'm not going back without full sacks." The stubborn set to Thorburn's mouth chilled the watchers. "I went back with empty sacks that day we found you, Stead, and since then I've never gone back without every sack being full. Right. Cardon, you and Old Chronic stand by the slot here. We'll go in. You may have to cover us on our way out."

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Vance ostentatiously unlimbered his gun and checked the magazine.

"Make sure your cape's tight," said Thorburn, sharply. "That'll be of more use than a gun now." He turned to Stead. "You're an encumbrance I can't risk. Stay here."

"But—"

Vance slung his gun. "I stay with him too."

For another moment of meaning no one said anything. Then Old Chronic smothered a snigger and spread himself out under the slot. "Come and join me, big Hunter," he said, and the tone shot a stiff jolt into Vance's sullen face.

Thorburn looked at Sims and Wallas. Then the three Foragers moved out into that pallidly eerie illumination. Their figures dwindled with distance. Then they vanished behind a tall cubical tower of wood that towered above, topped by a wide and flat expanse like . . . like what? Stead thought he knew, but he couldn't bring it into his mind.

With a fierce thrill of longing he wished he had gone with the three out into that great unknown.

Honey crouched down with earphones clamped over one ear. Her face was twisted with concentration.

"Blane's calling again. . . . Hard to hear. He's in trouble . . . but this interference is wicked. Howling all over the bands—"

Julia interrupted in a firm voice. "Here come Thorburn and Sims and Wallas. Full sacks. Now maybe we can pull out of here."

The three were running fast. They panted across the floor, heading for the slot, and ever and again they swiveled their heads around to stare behind them.

Out there in the great emptiness that that cold and chillingly eerie illumination made only a vast cavern of strange shapes and tall distorted shadows, a form moved.

Something big and looming bearing down out of shadows pouncing down on the running men.

Stead heard a shrill, painful hissing, a gargantuan wrathful spitting, a clicking as though of metal on stone. Looking up in appalled horror he saw a monstrous shape with four round and enormous eyes, shining balefully in that strange radiance, a blasphemous form from nightmare, lunging clum-

sily forward on sixteen stubby legs that moved with a rippling repulsive unison.

"A rang!" screamed Julia. "No . . . Thorburn—"

Cardon and Vance were firing now, a lethal hammer of sound rolling from their guns. Quickly Stead aimed his own splutter gun, cocked it, pressed the trigger. He aimed for one of the four eyes. He saw the shining orb sprout crimson and blackness, the shine shimmer with liquid and then dull and relapse into a matted grayness.

His lips were dry, his mouth sandpapery, his hands clammy. Two other eyes went out. Three streams of lead struck the remaining eye and blotted it out as a man stepped on a blood-sucking pest. But still the rang hurtled on, spitting and snarling, great jaws opened wide and streaming saliva, pounding on by sheer momentum.

A long raking claw slashed. Sims, ducking, struck on the shoulder, stumbled and fell. He did not release his stubborn grip on his sack. At once Wallas turned, hoisted his comrade up, pulled him along.

Thorburn brushed them both aside in a slithering rush of action. The rang, sightless, screaming madly in pain, raging, hurled itself full at the wall above the slot. A thick coarse wall of fur sprang into life before the slot, blotting out the light.

"Along its side—hurry!" That was Old Chronic.

The men and women dashed aside, scrambling over the litter beneath the wall. Thorburn appeared, staggering, waving his gun. Sims fell through and then Wallas. They were snatched up, their sacks slung; eager hands propelled them into the sheltering darkness of the cranny behind the wall.

Everyone was gasping for air. A thick and miasmic cloud of dust had been blown up. Stead felt the grains slick and furry on his tongue. He stumbled along after the others, the blaze of their headlights switching and swathing the darkness before them.

The rush became a rout. Their feet slithered and slid, raking over the dust and brick chippings, the plaster nodules fallen from the back of the wall. At each gap in the wood

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Stead leaped with feet to spare; he was consumed by the desire to run and run and go on running.

At last Thorburn, panting, called a halt to the rout.

"That's enough! You all know Rangs can't follow us through the crannies. Relax! It's all over."

He gave them five minutes for a breather. They sat all in a row, their backs pressed against the wall, breathing heavily, eyes still glazed with the horror of that last charge.

Then Old Chronic cackled and clicked his dentures.

"Trust a Rang to work you up! Wait until you've seen as many as I have."

Sunk in his own thoughts Stead ignored the oldster. That Rang—that *thing*—had been twenty-five feet long from snout to tail, with sixteen thick legs and fangs and claws; the scrabble of those horny claws on the floor rang still in his memory. If monsters like that ravened in the Outside world of buildings, no wonder no one volunteered to be a Forager!

And this was the mad horrible world into which the Captain had so indifferently cast him. A strange, grim, frightening and wholly animalistic anger built up in Stead, one with his consuming desire to know more about the real Outside world of buildings.

"Rangs," Vance was saying, squatting next to Stead. "I hate 'em. I've seen 'em. I've seen the foul things catch a man and play with him, tossing him about between their claws, letting him think he's going to escape and then pouncing on him just when the poor fool thinks he's free. Rangs—we ought to begin a systematic slaughter of them all!"

"Good idea," said Thorburn. "But the Controllers won't spend resources on it. You know that."

"All they want," said Old Chronic with a morose flash strangely in contrast to his usual sarcasm, "is for us to come home with full sacks and cheer, boys, cheer! They don't care if we're all stepped on so long as they grow fat and lazy."

Cardon summed up in tones of such bitterness that Stead felt a shiver of dread, "Controllers are no better than Rangs in human form."

He thought of Simon and Della and Astroman Nav. Were they Rangs in human guise? Of course not. They were

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gentle, civilized persons. But they accepted the order of things; they expected Foragers to go out and risk their lives so that the Controllers might continue theirs in all their luxury. Perhaps—

The Controllers had given him a party when he'd left to train as a Forager. They'd wished him well. Did they know into what sort of life he was going? Certainly, he felt confident they had no inkling of the store of bitterness seething in the lower ranks, no notion at all of the hatred with which they were regarded.

He'd been sent here to learn. And, by the immortal being, he was learning!

He'd wanted fervently to fit into life in the Empire of Archon—a term these Forager comrades of his scarcely ever bothered to mention; he'd wanted to be a good Controller, thankful of the opportunity. Being a good Forager, he had thought, had been a part of his education.

But now, now he wasn't so sure.

He began to see two sides to life in Archon—two sides that had nothing to do with inside and outside.

He wondered, not without panic, where his loyalties would lie in the future.

"Come on," said Thorburn, rising. "We've full sacks. The Controllers will love that. Let's get back home."

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON THE SEVENTH DAY of his life with the Foragers a letter was delivered to him along with the ordinary signals service mail. It was the first letter he had received in his life, at least, of his life in Archon.

"I do hope you are settling down nicely," Della wrote. "Simon and I often think of you and wonder how you are faring. I expect you have made plenty of new friends. We hope, Simon and I, that you won't forget us. Astroman Nav asked after you the other day. If you do decide to accept novitiatship, Stead, do not make a final decision until you have come back to us. Remember, there are still the final educational motions to be gone through."

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The letter left him with mixed feelings. "Settling down," "how you are faring," "asked after you." Pretty, empty phrases. He was quite likely to settle down to a meal for a Rang.

"Ready, Stead?" called Thorburn.

Lieutenant Cargill, the soldier, he remembered had made a small prophecy about a Rang. Now, as a Forager, he knew that Cargill almost certainly never had seen a Rang with his own eyes. Like all the Controllers, it was hearsay talk. They lived in the warrens. What did they really know of the world of buildings?

"Ready, Stead? Come on, lad. The car's waiting."

"Sorry, Thorburn. All ready." Stead went out of the Foragers' waiting cubby and climbed into the back of the truck. He sat down among comrades. As the soldier at the barrier raised it, the antigas curtains swishing up, Stead saw the action as symbolic. That barrier, that antigas curtain, that blue light cut a man off from one world and ejected him into another.

Well, he'd been ejected Outside; perhaps he had found his niche in society here, after all. Perhaps, in that misty, forgotten, un-dreamable earlier life, he had been a Forager. It would have been suitably ironic.

The truck jounced along the dirty corridor and left the lights behind. Six others followed. This time the forage was going to be different, at least for Stead.

From time to time, he had been told, when the immortal being had created a new fresh and potentially rich quarry of food or raw materials, the Foragers and Hunters set up an outside H.Q. They made their forages and returned to the temporary H.Q. with their sacks, making the short journey a number of times, building up a depot which could be removed by a supply train of trucks. Regulations still applied. Only certain amounts of food must be taken at a time. All traces of the men's visit must be erased. They could show themselves outside only in short periods, as usual.

The Regulations covered all sorts of strange possibilities.

One, which had flummoxed Stead, and in which he still saw elements of humor despite the tall tales of his comrades, said quite clearly that no human being must shoot at a

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Demon. "Shooting at phantoms, at figments of the imagination," Stead had said. No one had laughed. They had scarcely heeded him. The Foragers clung to their childish stories about Demons with a relish and love of circumstantial detail that impressed and annoyed Stead. They should listen to Simon and Della for a half hour. That would soon knock the nonsense out of them.

The time scales had had to be patiently explained to him.

"Our twenty-four-hour day and its eight-hour divisions doesn't apply outside." Thorburn touched his wrist watch. "Out there you have an eight day period of darkness with only an occasional and erratic lightening. Then a two-day period of steadily growing light—you recall that light on your first trip—then an eight-day period of brighter and brighter light until, after four days, you can't go out at all. That gradually wanes to another two day period of slight light and so back to the darkness."

Old Chronic nodded. "In my father's time that scale was different. Nearly all dark, then, it was. Only about three days of brightness."

Julia struck into the conversation on the back of the jolting truck. "My grandfather told me that his grandfather had told him that it used to be nearly all bright outside, for days on end. Horrible, foraging was, in those old days."

Stead had been calculating. "That means the bright light is on the wane Outside?"

"Yes. That accounts for our day or two's breather. But now we're off again." He glanced back.

Following the seven Forager trucks rolled another ten filled with soldiers. Up ahead as point rode two more. Archon meant to protect the wealth her Foragers would bring in. And that had dropped another piece into place for Stead. There were two sorts of outside, he had soon realized. The outside of tunnels and corridors and crannies behind walls that lay outside the warrens. This was the outside in which soldiers from rival Empires and Federations fought over women and wealth. This was the outside the Controllers talked about so grandly. But there existed another outside, outside the first—The Outside—the world of the Foragers

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and Hunters, a world that the Controllers talked of again, but not so grandly. And there, Stead knew with a sick feeling dread, was the land of *rooflessness*, of Rangs and . . . of Demons?

He became aware that Honey was looking at him, and he smiled. She turned her face away at once, fiddled with her radio set, sat stiff and unyielding to the bumpy ride. Stead felt the usual mystification strike him and shrugged it off. Honey was a woman. That explained that. A shy, timid little soul, she aroused in him a feeling he found difficult to define—a different and yet allied feeling to his attitude towards Della and, yes, of his chaotic impressions of Belle.

Julia now, well Julia could as well have been a man for all the difference it made to Stead. Thorburn seemed to be interested in her, though. Stead had found an unyielding wall of rectitude between him and his comrades whenever he had carefully, casually, artfully, brought up the subject of men and women and why they were different.

More than once an odd expression had escaped one of them, usually Sims or Wallas, and Thorburn had shut them up. Stead had gradually become voicelessly convinced that Simon and Della had given instructions to his comrades not to discuss the question with him. That rankled at first, but then he thought of Della and her dedicated fire, and smiled and waited until the time came for her to explain. Somehow, he wanted Della to explain it all, not these Foragers, however strong the ties of friendship now binding them.

For he felt now very much a Forager. The Hunter nomenclature, although still used, was an archaism, from the days when Foragers and Hunters had been different classes. The Foragers foraged and quarried; the Hunters hunted live game. Now a Forager hunted what came to hand.

The journey this trip was longer, a good twenty miles. At a halt the Commander—a Controller officer stiff and grim in his armor—walked down the line of trucks. With him strode his Bosun, squat, tough, craggy, merciless. The Foragers didn't think much of him.

Cardon said fiercely, "Class traitor!"

The Commander reminded them all that they were now

driving near the border with the Empire of Trychos. Alertness. Anticipation. Ready weapons. On the ball.

"We know," said Cardon blackly to the group when the soldier had stalked on. "A Forager will spot an enemy, human or animal, miles before a soldier!"

The depths of class distinctions and hatreds within the single body politic continued to astound Stead. If men faced the hazards he knew they faced outside, surely, common sense said, they should stick together. Somehow, they didn't. And, again somehow, the machinery of the state creaked on.

B. G. Wills had said that it would not creak for very much longer.

The convoy reached a narrow crack between two runnels made by a large, earth-boring animal whose runs were frequently used by men. Driving through with whining electrics, they came out onto a flat, low but wide expanse. A solid concrete wall faced them. Down this ran a pipe some six feet in diameter, loud with splashing water. Further along, cables looped down as though sagging through rotten wood—the men had to fight and rout a small army of twelve-legged animals two feet long, and clear away their nests and cocooned young—each cable about eighteen inches thick, alive with electricity.

"The immortal one provides us with light, heat and water," commented Thorburn as the camp arose under the men's capable hands. "If only he'd made it all a little easier!"

The Commander told off pickets, guard details, duty rotas. On this important trip Forager Manager Purvis had come along to supervise his men on the spot. Forage parties went out on schedule, returned with bulging sacks. The pattern of life developed its own rhythms in the advance depot.

Thorburn's group had been allotted a sleeping area against the earth wall built at right angles to the concrete wall of the world. They had their own electric light and heater. Their sleeping bags lay neatly in two rows. Julia slept next to Thorburn. Honey, for some odd reason uncomprehended by Stead, slept a little apart from the rest.

They carried out three trips, very short, going through runnels well marked and signposted, carrying back full sacks.

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The quarry they had mined staggered Stead in the proportions of its bounty. Food lay heaped in quantities limitless to the eye. Regulations would wait long before they called a halt to this gathering.

Four more trips were completed, and now they marched the runnels as along familiar streets in the warrens. The signposts became unnecessary. On their eighth trip and half-way out, Honey called Thorburn. They stood beneath a signpost which said: *Quarry Nine* and displayed an arrow, pointing onwards.

"Signal, Thorburn," said Honey, looking up uneasily. At once their easiness, their casualness, evaporated.

"It's Rogers, up ahead. Some of the signposts have been torn down since he went in. They've run across traps."

"Well, this was too good to last," said Thorburn grimly. And then he said something that, at first, unutterably shocked Stead. Only as the words rang in his mind did he see how they fitted in with Simon's theories, only with stunning force.

"The Demons," Thorburn said. "They're trying to stop us again."

"But . . . but—" protested Stead incoherently. "The Demons can't *do* anything to a man with a rational mind! They are figments of the imagination, controllers of the spirit to order our consciences. It is the immortal being who provides us with food and who also sets the traps."

"Now what sort of immortal one would that be," demanded Julia scornfully, "who'd deliberately trap a man and mangle his body?"

"I see," said Stead unsteadily. "The traps and the Rangs are facts of life, but it is not the immortal one—who cannot be seen—who puts them there, but the Demons—who cannot be seen—"

It all fitted.

Well, he was learning.

"Relay the signal back to depot, Honey," said Thorburn. "Purvis will have to know."

"There's an awful lot of clutter on the air." Honey's silky black hair bent closer in automatic reflex as her slender

hands played with her dials delicately. "All right, I'm reaching him."

The secondary runnel seemed clear. No traps. But up ahead Sims and Wallas walked with immense caution, and Cardon, rear marker, swung his head as though it pivoted on a universal joint. They reached their exit hole without further trouble. Rogers and his group marched past with full sacks, cheerily.

"The Demons are on to us, Thorburn," said Rogers. "But no Rangs. Is Purvis sending out any more parties?"

"Couldn't say. We came in by the secondary route. I'd advise you to try that."

"Thanks. We tripped all the traps we could find. But you'll have to go in some way. Regulations have been reached close to the exit hole."

Thorburn's party groaned at this. It was a groan of affectation, mock dismal; Stead found an amazement that they could joke in such gruesome ways when their every move might bring their deaths.

"All right," said Thorburn crisply. "All in. We'll have to go to the far edge of the quarry. Keep closed up."

Julia flashed him a glance. Thorburn nodded his head at her. "I know, my dear, I know."

The two Forager groups, standing by the hole their engineers had cut into the food quarry beyond, shadowed and dimly illumined by a faint seeping light, turned all as one as Rogers' point man called back sharply.

"Yobs! Action front! Yobs!"

Everyone, including Stead, who had been trained in this, flung furiously to the ground, diving for cover, flattening out, snouting up their splutter-guns. Even so, one of Rogers' group farthest out, was slow. He screamed, staggering back, off balance. A long arrow protruded from his shoulder, artfully penetrating between the junction of arm and shoulder leathers. Before he was snatched down by a raking friendly arm four other arrows feathered into his armor.

Eyes slitted, Stead peered carefully out into the dusty crawling darkness behind the wall of the world. His heart thudded painfully against the ground. His gun felt suddenly cold to his fingers.

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"See 'em, Cardon?" rumbled Thorburn.

"Not yet. If there are more than a dozen they'll rush us in a second or two."

"I hope they do." Julia's tones lashed the dark viciously. All their headlamps had been turned off. "You can pick a Yob off then." She glanced at Stead. "Don't let one get to close quarters, Stead."

Stead gulped. "So I believe," he said in his Controller's voice that had long since ceased to amuse his Forager comrades. He peered down the sights of his gun and willed the tremble in his fingers out of existence.

"Here they come!" someone yelled.

Fire and explosions rippled from the prostrate line of men. Bullets ripped and tore into the charging mass ahead. Firing with the others, Stead tasted the acrid stink of burnt powder, felt the sweat rilling down his face, heard the insane hammer and clatter and the weird alien screams, saw the darting arrows striking down all about.

Then it was all over. Through the roaring in his ears and the streaking retinal after-images in his eyes, Stead understood that another peril of outside had been met and conquered. With the others, shakily, he stood up.

He walked across and looked down on a Yob.

The beast was more than a beast. Nine feet long, it propelled itself on six of its legs, the front pair of this world's usual multiple-limbs being elevated like a man's, the front portion of the Yob lifting up into a grotesque parody of a man's chest. The head was flat and puffed and round, like a tureen, with four horn-hooded eyes, a wide mouth, nostril slits and a cockscomb of flesh, bright ochreous yellow, rising above. Furless was a Yob, like a man. The forelimbs were clumsily manipulative, almost like a man's, the thumb not quite fully opposed. And, like a man, a Yob clad itself in skins and furs, wore a wide leather belt from which depended a knife, carried an ugly cudgel and a bow and a quiver of long, wickedly barbed arrows.

Intelligent, after their fashion, were Yobs.

"Now you've made the acquaintance of the highest level of intelligent animal in the world," said Thorburn. "And now I know why the Demons set those traps." He kicked

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the sprawled, riddled body of the Yob contemptuously. "They are savages; they live by no Regulations. They quarry and forage without check, leaving traces, telling the Demons everything. No wonder the traps appeared."

"I lost a man," said Rogers. "Wilkins will be pleased."

"Take him back all the Yob equipment. You deserve it."

Stead was not surprised at Rogers' reaction of thanks. Yob artifacts fetched a great price in service and resources among the Controllers. They were curios, objects of an alien and strange culture, if culture it could be called.

"Right!" Thorburn grated the words deliberately. "All in."

Old Chronic cackled. "Bring along the least damaged Yob. Usual drill." Chuckling with a Forager's amazing resilience, cheerful seconds after hideous danger, Sims and Wallas obeyed. The Yob was dragged through the exit hole, bundled inside through the mountains of food.

"There's a trap," nodded Julia.

Quickly the men draped the dead Yob artistically in the trap, grappled his naked left hind foot, pulled. The trap swished horribly down. They undid their grapnel.

"Now the Demons might be placated a little."

Stead saw the wisdom of that. Working with the others, right over on the edge of the quarry, hard up against a painted metal wall that reared upwards for thirty feet, until the floor above created the ceiling to this shelf, he stuffed his sack with round white eggs, each over half his own size. He worked with a will, anxious to be off.

The damp moss packing he rammed down between the eggs finished, and still the sack was not full. He walked a few paces towards the metal wall, where one of the mixed-up bread and fruit mountains lay, cut open and crumbling. His axe sliced out neat wedges which he rammed gently down on top of the eggs. Absorbed in his task he heard the click and whoosh of air as though from a distance. He did not look up.

A vivid bar of light crashed down across the floor.

"Stead! Run, man, run!"

Thorburn's frantic yell brought Stead up, all blinking, his eyes closing against that ferocious white light. He had

seen no light so powerful, so actinic, so devastatingly blinding.

Fumbling, he dropped his sack, reeled, tried to run, crashed into the food mountain. Panting, he clung on, feeling it as the only solid refuge in a world of merciless light.

Then . . . horror.

Through streaming eyes that he forced agonizingly to open he saw the floor drop away. He felt his body rising, felt the movement as though his antigrav had been switched on under full power, and had gone wrong.

Swaying, sickeningly swooping, the section of food mountain soared into the air, out into that blazing whiteness of light.

The floor passed beneath his feet. Below that, incredibly far below that, dwindling it seemed in impossible perspective, another floor appeared, so far below him that blueness edged its outlines. He clung onto the food with all his strength. Something white and shiny appeared below. His feet struck it jarringly. The food fragment tilted and, blessedly, its shadow dropped over him. Now he could see.

Now he could see.

How long he crouched there, dumb, numb, sick, filled with a horror that engulfed his entire being, he did not know. It seemed to him like hours.

The ground beneath his feet was hard and white and shiny, like china. It encircled his vision. Beyond it stretched a great plain of brightly colored material. Distantly, he made out two upright columns of wood and two cross bars joining them. He was staring at these in wonder, in a maelstrom of fear and panic and bowel-loosening terror, crouched down, unable to move, when the final horror burst upon him.

Something appeared from the side. Something so huge and vast it dwarfed his being. He did not, dared not, look up. He knew within his soul that there must be a roof up there, but suppose there wasn't? And now, as he watched this something move slowly, so slowly, across in front of the wooden structure, his whole being and body screamed silently and his brain curdled in his skull.

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The thing was vast. Impossibly vast. It towered. And it moved. Slowly it moved, until it stopped in front of the wood. Then, slowly, it sank down.

Stead stared up . . . up . . . at a vast, a world-filling, an earth-shaking, snorting, breathing, moving Yob.

A Yob so huge that it blotted out all vision, so devastatingly monstrous that his overstrained mind could no longer accept the evidence of his senses.

Stead's muscles collapsed. He slid down in the shadow of the fragment from the food mountain.

The Yob reached out an arm twelve feet thick. The fingers, eighteen inches thick, held a bar of steel that winked and gleamed and reached above him with monstrous purpose. The knife descended.

Then Stead knew what he looked at was real.

He knew what it was.

He had met his first Demon.

CHAPTER NINE

A HOLLOW DISTANT roaring beat at the air and vibrated it heavily. Great sluggish waves of sound billowed about him, threateningly, rolling in gargantuan echoes across his ears, dizzying him. He stared up, unmoving, as that gleaming knife blade descended.

He crouched pressed against the food mountain fragment. His cape wrapped itself tightly about him, responding to the chemicals released into his blood stream by panicky glands. Millions of tiny chromatophores on the cape's back rapidly altered their pigment disposition by dispersion or concentration. The crumbly yellow food against which he pressed was studded with large glistening red-brown fruits. One showed under him. Where the yellow ceased and the brown began a neat circular demarcation line ran also across his cape, the camouflage was near perfect.

But that ominously descending knife swooped down on him. It turned over in the air so that the flat of the blade spread five feet wide above him. The rushing displacement of air as it shrieked down tortured his eardrums.

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Cape or no camouflage cape, the Demon had seen him! And it was bringing down a knife on his back.

Action released itself in Stead like a spring lock being tripped. His feet stamped, bent and lunged. He skittered sideways a fractional moment before the knife hit the white china.

The noise, the buffeting of wind, the stunning detonation as the china broke, bruised and flayed him, tossed him end over end out onto the bright material plain, flicked him, ignominiously, out into the open.

His cape went through miraculous color changes as he sprawled headlong, adapting itself dazzlingly to the patterns of the cloth.

In a sucking welter of air, the knife rose and swishing, monstrous, paralyzing, whacked down again.

Stead leaped all haphazardly across the cloth.

Scuttling, he ran, and, scuttling, felt and heard the knife beat sickeningly down three more times before in his half-blinded escape, he felt nothing and pitched out headlong into the air.

The floor below may have been a long way down, but it swooped up at him now with frightening speed. His nervy fingers found his antigrav switch, clicked it on. Abruptly, his descent halted its mad plunge; he swayed for a second, seeking for safety.

In a roaring sliver of murderous speed, the knife sliced through the air where he would have fallen. He felt himself whirling over and over; he released the antigrav and went up on it, shooting up, up and up, soaring away from that ghastly-gleaming wicked knife.

Only when his head bumped comfortably against the ceiling was he satisfied. He looked down. Vertigo now had passed. The Demon moved ponderously. It did something to the wooden construction which, from his altitude, Stead recognized as a chair. The Demon was climbing on the chair. Two legs lifted, then the other two. The Demon swayed, its broad round puffy face lifted up, the knife spearing up like a probing metal arm. Four arms, the Demon had, four eyes, two of these, small and dimmed and half-hooded. But the other two stared up unblinkingly. Stead

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began to push himself along the ceiling, heading for the far wall.

The Demon couldn't reach him. It kept straining up and swiping with the knife. Then it descended, the noise rolling around the room in wave on wave of uproar. Stead had reached the corner, now, and had realized why the light had not been bothering him. Its source, in the center of the ceiling, was shaded to him up here.

Remembering his dark glasses at last he fumbled them on. The intensity of his fear through the last few moments of horror and discovery had paralyzed his natural Forager instincts, and, really, there was little wonder in that.

He could not look at the Demon. Raging, furious, bellowing, it cavorted on the edge of his vision like a nightmare spilling over into the day. The dark glasses picked out for him the cupboard where he had been at work mining food. He had to get back there. But the Demon thirsted for his blood; Stead began to remember some of the more lurid stories told by old Foragers and his fear increased.

The Demon began throwing things at him. They were easy enough to dodge at first—a monstrous book that flapped its pages and clapped with murderous intent, the knife, a shining barbed fork, a rattling brightly colored box—and they all dropped back, back down all that enormous drop to the floor beneath.

A voice, a human voice, shrill with distance, pierced up from below.

"Stead! Down here! Hurry!"

Honey's small figure appeared on the very edge of the cupboard shelf, her arms waving and her silky black hair shining under that cruelly bright light.

At sight of her, a queer physical pain jabbed through Stead's chest, as though his fears for himself had swollen, turned into a ball and clogged his heart and breath with fears for Honey. If the Demon saw her!

Straight down Stead dropped. Like one of those long barbed Yob arrows he plunged down, his camouflage cape gripping tightly to him and streaming away in the violence of his descent, swooped down to the shelf. His feet hit

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the paper-covered wood sickeningly but in his state of fear he scarcely noticed the jar of landing.

"Come on!" Honey screamed, and reached out to him with slender gripping fingers.

She dragged him inwards as the bar of metal smashed down onto the shelf, raising a stinging cloud of dust. The wood shivered under them, throwing them to their knees. The knife lifted, gleaming, turning, rising to come down again to crush them flat.

Stumbling over dislodged crumbs of food fallen away from the food mountains, dodging into the shadow of those tall gleaming metal columns, hurdling obstacles, the two humans fled from the wrath and violence of the Demon. Hand in hand, they fled, the mutual contact a warm and sustaining force between them.

Twice more that cruel seeking blade snapped at the floor behind them; twice more racketing sound waves bruised their ears; twice more the shock pitched them tumbling onward. Then Vance grasped Stead's arm and with savage, released violence, hauled him down and through the slot beneath the wall. Honey pitched after them.

"You complete, utter, idiot! You deserved to be trodden on!" Thorburn fumed with all his leader's susceptibilities aroused. He'd nearly lost a man. He would have felt sorry for the man, but more sorry for himself when he reported in to Controller Wilkins.

"That's finished this mine for a time, anyway," cackled Old Chronic, wheezingly.

"And won't Controller Wilkins be pleased about that." Julia flashed Stead a look that shriveled him.

As for Stead, he stumbled along with his comrades and all through his body the shakes trembled everywhere, dining in his head, splitting his skull with pain, stinging his flesh with the thousand needles of remembered fear. He gripped his fists together so tightly that his nails stung, but he couldn't throw off the effects of that nightmare experience.

The Demons were real!

The Demons existed.

They were no phantasms, no creatures of the dark recesses of the imagination; they lived and breathed and stalked the

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Outside, waiting to maim and kill any human being rash enough to venture there.

By all the Demons of Outside—no wonder that was never a curse-phrase for the Foragers. They lived too near its actuality, its very existence, to use it so lightly and unthinkingly.

Down the dark crannies slogged Thorburn's Foraging party, one lamp between two, capes neatly wrapped, full sacks bulging, weapons ready, heads turning, turning, turning, eyes never still. Through the narrow slots, scrambling up irregular concrete junctions, leaping dark and echoing gaps, clawing up rough dirt slides, moving always steadily onward, the men of Earth returned to their temporary advance depot.

Dumping their full sacks with the Quartermaster's assistants, giving them a helpful shove up onto the stacks aboard the trucks, Thorburn's group could at last seek their own cubby and strip off their armor, lay down their weapons, wash themselves and walk along to the mess for food.

But Stead could not forget his first sight of the Demon.

He never would; he felt that an experience like that would remain with him through any memory-erasing experience such as he had already gone through. He just knew he'd never seen a Demon before. If he had, he knew he'd never forget it.

"You'll soon forget it, Stead."

He turned sharply, surprised, imagining for a weird instant that the voice had echoed in his mind. Honey smiled demurely up at him. They were entering the marked off cubicle used as a mess and her face looked cleaned and scrubbed and fresh, her eyes friendly, her red mouth soft.

"Forget it?" He laughed harshly. "I doubt it."

She sat down and, after a momentary hesitation, he sat beside her.

Awkwardly, he said, "Honey, I want to thank you. You risked your life. If you hadn't— Anyway, thank you. I'm not worth much to anyone, but thank you very sincerely."

"You're worth a great deal!" she flashed. Then she picked up her knife and fork and set to with a resoluteness that stifled any further conversation.

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A bright color burned in her face.

Women! Stead told himself with a sour little chuckle. He might take the Demons for granted as a fact of life—all the other Foragers did and he meant to be as good a Forager as any one of them—but women! Women—no. But no!

All the same, life couldn't be the same now he knew that Demons did exist and were not an immaterial shadow working in opposition to the immortal being.

Only then, sitting thinking in the mess with his comrades about him, did Stead remember Simon and Della. What would they say? He remembered the long discussions and arguments, with Della tossing her red curls and Simon stroking his shrunken cheeks, as they thrashed out the meaning behind the imagination-conjured Demons.

Well! He'd be able to inject some common-sense into any similar discussions in the future.

If there were any, that was.

A signals orderly came in, shouting over cutlery noise and talk and laughter, silencing them.

"We're pulling out. Manager Purvis and the Commander have decided that with the Yobs' betrayal of our routes and mining areas, and the sighting of one of us by a Demon, this lode is worked out. We return to the warrens at once. Everyone to load."

In a welter of relief and excitement, the forward depot was packed up and in a long column of vehicles the men pulled out, headed back for the warrens.

CHAPTER TEN

THE WARRENS seemed unreal to Stead.

Manager Purvis called him into the office and took no pleasure in ripping him to pieces.

"You didn't have to explain to a supercilious Controller Commander that one of your men had seen a Demon, and been seen in return. Thorburn reported the incident in as he was bound to do." Purvis pushed back in his chair and glowered up at Stead standing unhappily before him.

"Thorburn knew that once the Demons sight us they go on

a determined all-out effort to kill us all. But you try telling that to a Controller!"

"They don't believe in Demons."

"Of course they don't. They can't. How could they, stuck in the warrens or the outside immediately surrounding the warrens? The Commander pulled out because we had been betrayed by the Yobs." Purvis thumped the table. "That's one of the few times in my life I've been glad to see Yobs!"

"But can't we persuade the Controllers that there are Demons? Can't we—"

"We can't. And it isn't our job to try. Our job is to go out and Forage and return with full sacks. That and nothing more. Controller Wilkins accepted the Yob report; I doubt that the Commander bothered to repeat the story of the Demon. Y'know, Stead, you've been extremely lucky."

Stead supposed that he had.

"The Controllers consider themselves a superior form of life, Stead. Oh, I know you've been in the inner warrens with them and you speak like a Controller. But you're a Forager. From the reports I've had on you so far, an extremely able one. Until this last fiasco. You've got to remember that you are a Forager. You'll live longer that way."

Stead nodded slowly, reluctantly. He had to agree with old Purvis, at least in part, but he could never renounce his affinities with the Controllers. They had taught him and they had taught him well, and he must not neglect the fact he tended now more often to overlook—that he was out with the Foragers only for one tour of duty. After that he'd go back to Simon's laboratory and Della would enter the final stages of bringing back the memory of his past. He still wanted that to happen, but without the consuming passion the revelation of those hidden days had once held for him.

How she was going to do it he hadn't the slightest idea. He knew only that she could, and would.

"Right, Stead. Be off with you. You've caused me enough trouble with your special guards and surveillance that . . . ah hmmm! Well? What are you waiting for? Rang's dinner? Be off!"

Stead went.

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Special guards? Surveillance?

Well, there was Vance. Was that what Purvis meant? It must be; it had to be.

In the days that followed Stead developed his Forager's eternal head-swinging habit into something that remained with him even inside the most secure burrow. Everyone he saw wore to his sensitive perceptions the sinister aspect of a spy, someone sent to watch over him and to prevent him from learning.

For that, surely, could be the only reason the Controllers had set watchdogs on him. They might just as well have set watch-Rangs; after a week or so Stead had picked out the men he suspected.

His suspicions crystallized the night of the Forager bacchanalia.

Ostensibly the celebrations were in honor of the anniversary of the landing on Earth of the immortal being's garden. Farther in among the Controllers' warrens, elaborate rituals were being gone through; down in the Captain's cabin impressive processions wound through the lighted streets, chanting hosts and singing choirs celebrating the auspicious day. Astromen came into their own this day.

Huge replicas of that instrument that hung at Astroman Nav's waist and had so puzzled Stead would be borne in stately procession, illuminated by spotlights, scented by sweet-burning aromatic woods. An instrument of potent power, it was, said to have guided the garden to its resting place on Earth.

After the solemn rituals would follow the parties.

Sorry as he was to miss all that splendor and color, that pageantry and tradition, Stead did not regret it for an instant. Instead of that, he had the Foragers' Bacchanalia.

Ostensibly the Foragers and Hunters, too, celebrated the anniversary of the garden's landing on Earth; in fact, the day had become through long usage and custom in the wilder sections of the warrens a day of license and jollity, when inhibitions were flung aside and wine and laughter and carelessness ruled.

Caught up in the excitement of preparation and then in the fever of participation, Stead allowed himself to be borne

along in the center of Thorburn's group. Even on such a day, a group of Foragers tended to stick together.

Everywhere the electrics burned. Everywhere flushed faces and laughing mouths and bright eyes brought laughter and jollity to the warrens. Many people wore fancy dress. The heaters burned at full power, reckless of the drain on the cables looped through into the world from the world of buildings by the designing hand of the immortal being. This day no one recked the cost.

Brass bands marched and counter-marched, stunning the overheated air with music and competing brassily with one another for unheeding ears. Foolish papier mache masks grinned and bumbled along, brilliantly colored, eliciting shrieks of laughter and shudders of revulsion. Tickling feather screechers unrolled as youngsters puffed out their cheeks. Food and wine were dispensed on a lavish scale. The aromas of cooking food, sizzling fat, the sweet heady scent of wine, the flat taste of dust in the heated atmosphere, the myriad perfumes of scented women, all combined with the stink of human sweat into a nasal orgy.

Stead pushed along with his group and was pushed along. Painted women clutched his arm. Screechers unrolled, pecking his face, making him dodge, laughing. Someone blew a huge brass snort in his ear and he jumped and Honey dragged him away from the brass band, laughing.

They ate magnificently from nookside tables piled with the warrens' profusion. Wine flowed. Stead drank as his companions drank, laughing.

Thorburn boasted for them, "All this wealth, all this food and wine—all of it brought here through the work of the Foragers. The Foragers keep men alive on Earth!"

And no one could gainsay that.

Honey held his arm, laughing up at him. She wore a parti-colored, red and black costume. Her legs—one black, the other red—were encased in shrunken-on tights. Her body, quartered red and black, and her head, hooded in red and black, moved in jig time to different strains of music as band succeeded band. Her eyes sparkled. Her cheeks flushed. Stead had not missed the single glance from Julia,

at once surprised and then femininely understanding; he had not missed it but he had not comprehended it.

Honey, the reserved, dark, shyly withdrawn Honey, flamed in livid electric brilliance this day.

Stead had contented himself with his old blue shirt and slacks, but among the Foragers that old clothing of his Controller days was itself a fancy dress. He didn't bother; he smiled and drank wine and let Honey tug him along with the others.

A surging, swaying, singing tide of maskers crossed their path, bursting from a cross-runnel. They trundled barrels of wine on handcarts and took their refreshment with them. Everywhere, Stead could see men and women hugging each other, meeting and parting, dancing on, linking hands in long chains, swinging and breaking free. The resemblance to the stately dances of the Controllers struck him with incongruousness. Here, men and women danced with an abandon, a verve, a vivacity that would have gonged a harsh note of discord in the more delicate world of the Controllers.

And then, flushed and laughing, reeling just a little, Stead was dragged away from Honey and from his group. He saw Thorburn's massive head, the mouth open and shouting jovially to Julia, and then the group vanished behind a prancing wall of men and women intoxicated as much by excitement as by wine.

Without a qualm, he joined a jiggling line, went bellowing up a lighted runnel. A goblet was thrust into his hand. He drained it on a laugh, danced on.

He had no idea where he was. Each side of the runnel contained the usual rows of wooden doors and glazed windows. Lights blazed, brilliant vegetable growths depended in artfully wrought wreaths and streamers before every door. Gaily embroidered cloths hung down; banners waved in the electric fans' continuous currents of air. People surged around him bemusingly; noise clanged in his ears incessantly.

Spinning, he staggered from the end of a dancing line as slippery fingers failed to hold him; spinning, he staggered away into a shadowed crevice between cubby holes. He

leaned against the wall, whooping, panting for breath, feeling the wine clouding in his brain.

This, indeed, was life!

"More wine!" bellowed a fat, paunchy worker, waving his goblet frenziedly. Stead felt the deep sympathy of complete understanding with the fat, sweaty man. If he didn't have wine immediately, the tragedy would be beyond a mortal's bearing.

"Wine for my friend!" shouted Stead, looking blearily about, angry that no one should leap forward with ready cup.

A lean, rascally-looking fellow, a silversmith's apprentice, rolled forward, splashed wine liberally into the fat man's goblet and over the stone paving. A girl slithered up behind him, thrust her bare arms under the ruby stream, head back, laughing, her red mouth open and shining, her eyes glittering. Then she sucked the glistening drops from the whiteness of her arms.

"More wine!" yelled Stead, lurching forward.

The girl turned with the speed of a Rang, saw him, gurgled deep in her throat. She thrust her hands under the spilling stream of wine, caught a splashing double-handful, swung towards Stead.

"Here! Here is wine for the good of your immortal soul!"

Scarcely knowing what he did, Stead bent, drank the warm sweet wine. The girl's hands trembled against his mouth. Then they opened and ruby drops cascaded to the ground. She laughed. Looking up at her, still bent over, Stead laughed too.

Her brown, lusterless hair had been powdered with sparkling dust. Her yellow bodice, caught in a deep vee-shape at the neck by large scarlet buttons, had been half torn away. Her black skirt, short and shining, had been even further ripped up its side slit. She swayed there before him, laughing, disheveled, wanton, unknowable and . . . suddenly, a vivid reminder of Belle.

Her tongue flicked over her lips. She took one deep breath, and flung herself forward on Stead. He felt her arms about him, her hot breath on his face, a warm breathing aliveness that stirred a deep-sleeping demon within him.

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"Come on, lover boy! Why so coy! This is bacchanal—come on!"

Vertigo seized Stead. His hands trembled. He bent forward with that hot breath of the girl breathing full on him from her open mouth. He bent forward without knowing why or what to do next.

Rough hands dragged the girl away, thrust her spinning and cursing to fall on one knee. She plunged one hand into her bosom, drew out a slender stiletto, lunged, shrilling curses, to her feet.

Stead sagged back, bemused.

The two men in tight-fitting black, with the square, patient, unemotional faces so much alike, took her by the arms. The stiletto dropped to ring against the flags. They dragged her off bodily. Stead caught a single glimpse of the girl's contorted and frightened face before high black shoulders cut off that disturbing vision.

What they said to her he could not hear above the uproar cannonading down the runnels. But she cast one horrified look at Stead and then turned, all aquiver, ran as though a Rang trod her heels.

The two men in black regarded Stead for a long, scrutinizing moment, a moment that hung humming isolated from the bacchanalia all about. Then they turned as one, and marched off, keeping perfect step. Stead wiped a hand across his forehead. It dripped sweat.

So they were the Controllers' watchdogs. Purvis had been right. He was being watched, and more than watched; Della and Simon intended with utmost severity to prevent him learning anything of that forbidden country of the relationships between men and women.

As a character and a personality, Stead was a very immature being, newly born and still soaking up knowledge and understanding, still hazy about life. He stood swaying for a few indecisive moments. He supposed Simon and Della had the right to order his life; after all, they had conjured it into being from the empty husk he had been. But something he could not define deep within his core rebelled at their high-handed treatment of him. It smacked of the master-slave relationship and, coming as it did on top of the

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revelations he had experienced in the outlook of the Foragers, presented him with a crisis of conscience.

These scientists of Archon—these earliest friends—must know what they were doing. Surely?

He felt a blazing impulse to rush out into the runnel, seize the first girl he happened across, bundle her into this dark cranny and there rip off all her clothes and so discover what mystery lay in a woman's body that all the pictures and all the evasive answers could never give.

How could it be so important? The important things in life were eating and sleeping, drinking and having fun. The important things were going out into the Outside and proudly returning with full sacks. The really important aims of life were the learning of all that science could teach, the probing of the barriers of the unknown. But— But that brought him squarely back to where he had started.

Stead staggered out into the runnel, avoided a miraculously appearing dancing line, lurched away to find his comrades.

It was all too much for him. He would have to go along with Simon and Della and wait patiently until they explained everything. Anything else, now, was far too difficult.

And as he went he hugged the knowledge of the Demons to himself. *That*, at any rate, was one area of knowledge where he was superior to them.

Not that it was doing him much good.

Finding his way back to streets and runnels he recognized took time. He passed endless rows of workers' hovels where the pitiful evidences of their jubilation in bacchanalia, a tawdry reflection of the more robust Forager celebrations, might have filled him with sorrow and a pondering wonder had his mind not been seething with his own problems. These people had little to celebrate. Their lives grayed with daily toil, the fear of sickness, the never-ending search for that extra crust of bread, that extra blanket, that extra heating element.

No wonder, then, at bacchanalia they let their repressions pop.

At least the Foragers and Hunters met the danger and excitement of their lives with a consciousness that they were

alive. The workers might as well be dead, most of the time, for all the difference it made to them.

The wine fumes coiled less chokingly about him now and his steps grew steadier. By the time he caught a glimpse of Cardon's black-browed face, with Sims and Wallas with arms draped across each other's shoulders, Stead was back to his usual self, or, rather, the self he had become out here with the Foragers. He hailed his comrades through the noise.

They were genuinely glad to see him.

"Hey, Thorburn! Here's Stead!" and, "Hullo, Stead. Vance has been worried." Cardon just eyed him and took a long throat-jerking swig at his goblet.

They were standing pushed back against the corner of a pastryshop where already the shelves had been covered by sheets of white paper, eloquent proof of their sold and eaten wares' popularity. In this little eddy in the human stream Stead paused, regaining his breath, looking about for Honey and the others. He turned back, dodging a man wearing a papier mache mask six feet tall, leering and grinning and blowing an immense trumpet, and saw Cardon striding off, pushing his way through with the purpose of a man who would not be denied passage.

Chuckling at Cardon's black-browed intentness, his brooding seriousness even in the midst of Bacchanalia, Stead followed.

What was it that Thorburn had said, off-handedly, without really thinking what he was saying? "Cardon is a man cherishing a secret sin." Sins were acts and thoughts against the sublimity of the immortal being. That was what he'd learned with the Controllers, but among the Foragers, as Astroman Nav had direfully predicted, spiritual matters and the deeper genuflections to the immortal one were mere surface posturings, habits without conviction. That had shocked him. But he'd wit enough to see that Cardon wouldn't cherish a secret sin against the immortal being. At least, Stead, with his new-found knowledge of his latter-day comrades, didn't think so.

Sims and Wallas had vanished and Stead, pushing along in a roseate cloud of wine fumes and heady thoughts and

the blackness of the deeper frustrations within him, supposed that Cardon was trying to catch up with the rest of the group.

Only when Cardon turned off quickly into a narrow crevice under the curving flight of stairs leading up to another level and, with a searching backward glance into the throng that missed Stead, was a hazy idea of another destination borne in on Stead. What was Cardon up to? The man slithered swiftly down a ramp of beaten earth; his cape swirled around the lightless corner and the way lay open and empty. Still with a betraying tremble in his legs, Stead started on down.

A hoarse shout, a blow, stunningly heavy across his neck, and then the greasy taste of earth in his mouth. A man's foot, thick and clumsy in ill-fitting sandal, an inch from his face. The pressing feel of hands lifting, turning, bringing his face up into the light of an electric torch. The blinding brilliance of that light struck through in red whorls of agony past his closed eyelids.

"Who is he?"

"A dirty Controller spy. Dispose of him—quick!"

A rough horny hand under his chin, jerking his head up cruelly. Sparks darting before his closed eyes.

"Wait!"

The voice . . . the voice had to be Cardon's.

"I know him. The stranger. He knows nothing."

Another voice, thick and syrupy and laden with hate.

"You're right. He will know nothing when I've finished with him."

"No, you fool! He has powerful connections."

Two soft yet firm pressures beside his eyes.

"A thumb in his eye will stop him spying."

"Don't do it! You'll precipitate—"

Stead heaved mightily, once. Then he was flat again on his back and a man's foot pressed down without mercy on his chest.

"The people will not tolerate Controller spies!"

"He isn't—at least, I don't think so. But he's followed everywhere by Controller watchdogs."

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"Them! Men who betray their own class."

The slither of metal on stone. Something hard jabbed excruciatingly into his side. He tried to move, to roll over, to curl away from that relentless light. A voice called, faintly, some distance away.

"More! Two of 'em!"

"They'll be his watchdogs; come on, man! Run!"

"I'm not leaving him."

The sound of a scuffle, hard breathing, a curse, the slide and slither of feet on stone. Then, "All right, Cardon, but you'll be sorry for this!"

The diminishing patter of feet. The darkness swamped back, blessed, cool, concealing darkness.

When his two watchdogs reached him, Stead was just staggering up, a hand to his head, swaying, staring blearily about. He wanted to be sick.

They didn't speak to him. They waited, hovering, their hands under their black short-capes resting on gunbutts, watching. They hovered and waited and watched as Stead lurched unsteadily back into the lighted runnels and, filled with a horror he could not put name to, found his miserable way back to his group.

Truly, there was much to learn in this wicked world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DAY AFTER the Forager's Bacchanalia Manager Purvis called Thorburn, Blane and Rogers into his office. The three leaders left their groups speculating on what lay in store for them. Other group leaders had already been briefed; more would be given their instructions later in the day.

"It's another big one, you see," said Julia confidently.

Old Chronic cackled wheezingly. "Must take all we can mine afore the Demons step on us, eh, Stead?"

The oldster shot a malevolently arch look at Stead.

He'd sighted his first Demon on his last Forage and he'd had to stand drinks all around his group, but they still liked to dig slyly at him. That was one of the tricks of the trade, a morale booster, one of the hazards of life that set

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these men and women apart from their warren-dwelling fellows.

Stead didn't mind that. Not now. His values had been brutally altered since he'd joined the ranks of the Foragers and Hunters.

He felt their pride. A twisted force of . . . circumstances, pride, maybe. But it uplifted them and gave them courage in the bright places of the Outside.

He gladly shared in it. He was a comrade, now.

The extent of that comradeship, its real meaning, was highlighted for him in a few gruff words from Cardon.

Vance had lounged across in the Hunters' anteroom, grim and seamed, the essence of toughness, the veteran Forager, and bent down to Cardon. Stead caught the swift, low words.

"That bald-headed pal of yours never knew how near he was to his come-uppance. Lucky for him you stopped him killing Stead."

"You saw?"

"My job, inside as well as out. The womanising angle doesn't concern me, only his life. His two watchdogs look after that."

"I see." Cardon's black eyebrows drew together as he glanced covertly at Stead. Stead's face, with its assumed air of negligence, apparently satisfied him. "Stead's a Forager comrade and in my own group. That bald-headed fellow is a fine man, born organizer, marvelous orator, but he's a worker. I couldn't let Stead be killed, could I?"

Should he let Cardon know he knew what had happened? The problem bothered Stead as they sat there waiting for the orders that would send them Outside to face the horrors lurking there, the Scunners and the Yobs, the Rangs . . . and the Demons.

Cardon settled the problem.

Vance leaned back and Cardon said across the gap, low and yet in that Forager's penetrating whisper that would carry in the reaches of Outside without disturbing the life that festered there, "Stead, forget it all, understand? You'll be all right."

So Stead could only say, as a Forager must, "Thank

you Cardon. I assure you I followed you because I thought you were going back to the group. You're—"

"Just forget it, Stead. That's all."

Sitting back on the hard seat Stead felt the resentment coursing through his mind again. Forget it. Why, sure, that must be easy for him. He was a man without a memory. He was just a child, learning in a man's world; what difference could he make to the great designs these men plotted in their nooks and crannies? He wanted to learn, to know, to understand. Simon and Della had helped and taught him, but their teaching he found every day fell short of what his eyes and brain told him was true. Was all of life then a fraud? Were there always truths behind truths, one opening out of the next? Did men say one thing and do another, and was that expected of them?

Just when Honey came in and sat beside him he wasn't sure; but slowly he turned his head to look at her, the cloud in his eyes a sure sign to her that his thoughts were far away from what now mattered to her, increasingly and with more poignant force every day. Stead, for his part, knew obscurely that Honey looked more troubled and sad each day, but what the trouble was he didn't know. And, naturally, no one would tell him.

They talked desultorily as they waited for Thorburn.

"More and more wavelength changes," said Honey, steadfastly adhering to her radio-talk. "Something's really messing up the air."

"You should worry," Julia chipped in, her blonde hair glinting, her fresh face flushed. "Lorna—she's Rogers' radarop—says that they met a nine-inch beam last trip. Nine inches above the ground! Think of it!"

"You'd never squeeze through that," Old Chronic cackled. "Not with your figure."

"Keep quiet, you old Scunner-bait!" snapped Julia. But Stead saw that she put both hands to her waist and pressed them down and in, smoothing. "I'll be sliding through beam gaps when they feed you to the river."

"River?" said Stead, politely.

"That's where they drop corpses," Cardon said, and jerked his thumb down. "Plunk 'em through the burial gaps

into the river. Read a nice service over 'em and pipe an eye-ful and then, forget them."

"Lethe," said Honey, with a little shiver. "That's what the river's called."

Stead was about to ask where it went when Thorburn and the other leaders reappeared. At once the casualness went out of the talk; the atmosphere in the room grew taut with the knowledge that at last they would know where they were going on this trip. It might all too easily end in a death far away from the cleansing waters of the Lethe.

"A big one," Thorburn told his group—as they gathered around him at one of the briefing tables. Old Chronic shuffled his maps out, sniffing and clicking his dentures. Vance sat relaxed, lounging, but his fierce eyes glittered on Thorburn with a vigilance that chilled. Sims and Wallas sat together, erect, watching Thorburn's face, taking all they wanted from there. Cardon crouched a little in his seat, his hand fingering the worn handle of his machete, his brows a black bar tufting over his eyes. Julia and Honey spread out their logs ready to record wave-lengths and radarop notices of beam positions. Their slender hands moved surely and with purpose, yet they contrasted strongly with the square brown hands of the men.

They were a team, this group. Vance and Stead were now full members, and each individual fitted in like the sliding mechanism of a clock, each party devoted to its task and all depending on the efficiency of each single member.

It was, Stead decided, listening to Thorburn, a good feeling.

Thorburn spoke crisply and yet matter-of-factly, not overly stressing any one particular aspect of the Forage, yet at every word that good feeling leached out of Stead as though his strength of purpose had become a sponge to absorb and let go at the slightest pressure. Appalled, he looked forward to a return to the nightmare world of Outside. His fear uncoiled in him with a physical pain in the pit of his stomach, soggy, dull, shaming. In the level words of Thorburn, the leader, the man who would take them out again from the warrens into the outer runnels, Stead could

find no comfort but only the final sentence of a death he could not face.

Out there were Scunners. Out there were Yobs. Out there were Rangs and all the human enemies of the Empire of Archon.

And . . . there were Demons.

No. He couldn't go out again. He couldn't. That was all there was to it.

He made his mind up in a single chaotic moment of confusion and fear and pain. He put a trembling hand down onto the seat of his chair to press himself up. He would rise and tell them he wasn't going out again . . . not again. Not any more.

He'd get Simon and Della to intervene. They'd understand. They'd fix it. He must have done his full tour as a Forager now; he must have done. His arm straightened to push himself up, and—

And Honey lightly tapped the inside of his elbow, his arm bent, and he remained sitting down, feeling foolish, casting a sideways glance at her, his face burning, a roaring in his ears and the shakes flowing all across his thighs. Honey put her small cool hand on his knees. She pressed hard; she dug her fingernails in. She dug as though her shapely hand had become on a sudden the rending fangs of a Scunner.

Her face, raised to his from her wave-length logs, held a long, aloof look of complete understanding and compassion, and of absolute withdrawnness and disinterest. Stead met that look; he matched it. He drew in a dragging lungful of air, coughed, wiped his mouth with a hand that did not quite tremble, and then put his own hand on Honey's fingers clamping into his knee.

"Thanks, Honey."

"It happens to all of us," she said, softly, allowing the intimacy between them to flower as a precious bloom apart from the others of the group. "I know. Thorburn knows, too. We all do." She lifted her hand from his knee and, for a queer split-second instant her hand trembled against his. Then, with a quick pat, she had withdrawn, was turning back to her logs. "You'll be all right, now, Stead."

"Blane and Rogers and D'Arcy and a number of other

groups are co-operating. There will be a large military escort and as many trucks as we need." Thorburn cracked a gritty smile. "Not so much marching this time. You'll be glad of that, for one, Old Chronic."

"That I will," huffed and puffed Old Chronic, putting on the act, pretending to be the old hasbeen he very nearly was, in all truth.

"We're going in and establishing the usual forward depot. We're likely to be Out for a month or more. Depends on mining progress with the main party."

"Main party?" That was Cardon, sharp and edgy.

Thorburn leaned back, tossing down the pencil he had been using. "Main party. The other day Boris marched in with full sacks, and with only three men left of his group."

He quietened the astonished, shocked exclamations.

"Boris had had to go into the Outside and ran into trouble. Rangs. But he brought back sacks of berries."

"Berries!"

Thorburn looked calmly on their excitement, their flushed faces, fists banging the tables, curses and ejaculations. Everyone—everyone except Stead—seemed filled with a violent storm of emotion and excitement . . . and dread.

"You know the value of a sackful of berries." Thorburn glanced at Stead. "No? Well, after the celebrations in the Controllers' quarters, the stock of berries will have been drastically reduced. I've heard that the Captain and his Crew are particularly partial to berries, particularly so."

They all laughed, all except Stead. He stared about, patiently, waiting for them to tell him and yet annoyed and angry and ashamed, now, that he did not know the most elementary things of the world, things that everyone else knew and took for granted. It all made him very insignificant.

Then Julia leaned across and whispered to Thorburn. The leader's massive head nodded briefly. He looked back at Stead. "What you have to know about berries, Stead, is that they are among the most valuable commodities Foragers can bring in. Automatically they are the personal property of the Captain. For us . . . well, for us they represent an extra hazard in collecting them."

"We do the dirty work and collect them," Cardon spoke

savagely and almost incoherently. "And the blasted Captain takes them all for his own pleasure." He paused, and then said, "Well, nearly all." Then he laughed. Thorburn fixed him with an eye and Cardon slumped in his seat, his hand caressing that wickedly-sharp machete.

"Don't say anything you'll be sorry for, Cardon." He turned to Stead. "Berries grow on things called trees that the immortal being sometimes creates on the Outside. But this means we have to venture right out where the Demons can see us." He stopped, looking levelly at Stead. "You know, now, what that means."

"Yes," said Stead, on a breath. "Yes, I know."

A Forager rolled across to their table, cursing furiously and beating at his camouflage cape that nearly had him on his nose twice. "Get back down, you pesky Rang-disease-ridden-Scunner-bait! Get down there where you belong!" Bang! He hit the cape a great flat-handed blow, knocked it away from where a licking flap crept around his ankle to trip him. "I'll show you who's the master around here!"

"Hullo, Boris," called Thorburn. "Glad to have you along."

In Boris, Stead saw elements of Thorburn and Vance and Old Chronic. Boris, like Thorburn, was a leader and held himself with a leader's authority. Like Vance, he brooded grim and frightening in his uniform and weapons and armor, grim, seamed, and a veteran. But, like Old Chronic, he was ageing and growing slow, losing some of essential flashing mobility of the expert Forager.

"You mean Boris is coming along, too?" demanded Julia.

Thorburn nodded. "He knows where the berries are growing. He'll take us."

Old Chronic snuffled his maps forward. "Mark it on here. I can take you out."

Boris said, "Delia—she was my navigator—didn't come out from under a Rang's claws. I'll take you."

After that there was no further dissent. Manager Purvis and the Controller Commander were going on the forage and as Stead mounted into Thorburn's group's truck, he saw the size and extent of the convoy. There must have been over a hundred trucks. As each one pulled out past the blue light and

the barrier rose swishing the gas curtain away, the sentries turned out the guard and gave a ceremonial send-off.

No doubt they were happy to do so, being thankful they weren't going Outside with the Foragers.

The soldiers cleared a good path and the trucks rumbled through long echoing runnels. They made good time and pulled at last into a flat, open expanse with the roof safely ten feet above their tops. Water, gas and electricity supplies were tapped, with a suitable "thank you" to the immortal one's prescience in placing them here. The camp grew, pickets were posted and duty rotas issued. So far everything had gone with a reassuring familiarity. Stead's fears, alive within him, slept.

Boris's three survivors from his last disastrous forage had joined Thorburn's group as a sub-group with Boris as sub-group leader. All told, there were thirteen men and women marching out in the darkness of the world of runnels beneath the world of buildings searching for a wealth of berries. Thirteen.

The three latecomers, veterans all, were Jan and Moke, taciturn, rubbery little men, and Sylvi, with brown hair and bright eyes and a body as tough as a man's. They fitted in quietly and inconspicuously.

By the time they all set off down the lead-off runnel where engineers had strung lights, Boris had his cape tamed. "Wasn't due for a new one for another three years. But that eternally-damned Rang ripped my old one up, very painful—and I inherited this little blighter."

Thorburn directed Sims and Wallas into the lead. Cardon acted as rear marker. Between these two extremes the others marched as they wished, for now.

A disagreeable lump had formed a hard knotty little ball and lodged in the center of Stead's chest, just below his breastbone. Although the lump snuggled in his chest it had sprouted a smaller twin brother that clogged in his throat. He kept on swallowing, but both lumps stayed there. He supposed that he was too afraid to feel fear; he'd gone beyond that tenuous dividing line.

At every step he expected the ghastly form of a Scunner to rattle out on him, seeking, clutching, rending. But, in a

way he could not explain and hadn't the courage to pry into, he knew for certain that he mustn't own to his fear, mustn't turn tail and run, when Honey marched at his side.

The swollen party reached a wooden wall, very dusty, with discarded Flang skins crackling like broken glass beneath their feet. When Thorburn ordered the lights doused that eerie, pallid, blue-white illumination crept out again from the world of buildings beyond the wooden wall. Out there lay—Outside.

And yet . . . and yet Stead knew with a stark dread that he would have to go out there. It had been carefully explained to him. The immortal being created these strange objects called trees and placed them in the world of buildings. To reach them and their precious crop of berries men must grope out into the full sight and range of the Demons. There was no other way.

Jan and Moke, Boris's men, passed forward, each carrying a sack, full, brilliantly banded in red paint, the word POISON prominent in white and black.

Sylvi said, "We'll be only too happy to do this. Delia was my sister."

Forager engineers had cut an exploratory hole the previous night. Julia stepped back from the round inhibitingly inviting orifice, said, "All clear. No beams."

"They're not on to us yet, then." Thorburn hitched at his weapons belt, looked back slowly along the line of expectant faces, then with a swift decisive movement ducked his head and vanished through the hole.

In his turn, tremblingly but firmly, Stead squeezed through the hole into the Outside.

At once he looked up. But the dimness precluded any sight of the ceiling; the whole vast space before lay shrouded in shadow. He felt the first faint prickings of relief. At least, *rooflessness* had not attacked him.

Vance stayed closed up to Stead.

The line of men stepped forward across a coarse tufty surface of knee-high stems. They marched through bands of different colored stems and with each change, however dimly perceived in the faint ghostly lighting, their camouflage capes changed to conform.

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Thorburn beckoned, a single swift overarm that, in the drilled and rehearsed sign-language of Foragers, meant, "Close up. Flankers out."

They clustered at the foot of a square wooden tower that soared into the dimness above them. Thorburn checked batteries. Then the antigravs were switched on and the men rose into the air. Up and up they ascended with the smooth wooden tower flowing downward past them. Boris, who had taken over the lead, halted them with a single wrist-flick. Jan and Moke had vanished before the ascent had begun, going off with their poison sacks.

The silence, the dimness, the rustling furtiveness of every movement, came home to Stead in a strange and chilling miasma of fear and shame-bolstered courage.

This was a Special Forage, with a vengeance.

Then they had scrambled over the edge of a vast wooden plateau that stretched away before them into the dimness. Walking across it was a strange experience; the wood had been covered with some tacky substance only partially rubbed smooth. Boris halted, pointed upwards. Stead craned his head back and stared.

So that was a tree.

There had been a Tree in the garden that had brought the Captain and his Crew to Earth, he recalled, and wondered if that Old Tree had looked like this. It grew up out of a solid glass-like object fully eighteen feet high, soaring up and away and spreading gnarled branches out above them, its top lost in the dimness. Brown were those branches and each branch was covered with pallid yellow and green leaves each the size of a dining room table cloth. But they did not take Stead's attention. He looked up and he saw myriad shining scarlet berries, round and juicy and glistening, hanging in great clusters from every nodule of those branches.

Setting to work with the others, climbing up on antigrav and plucking the berries, carefully, as he had been told, putting them with caution into his sack, he was struck by the plump juiciness of the berry, the feel of sweet goodness within. He wondered what they tasted like.

As each consignment of full sacks was stacked below, a

transport party formed up and carried them back to the hole in the wooden wall. Soon Stead found himself transferred to this duty. He made six trips. On the seventh, with a returning group of Jan and Moke, their poison sacks laid aside for full sacks, and Honey and Vance, he was halfway from the tree to the drop when Julia's voice shrilled, faint and attenuated by distance from the hole.

"Alarm!"

He heard no more. The ground beneath his feet trembled. A breath of air blasted across the surface, dragging at his camouflage cape. Honey gasped a single short cry, chopped off by rigorous Forager training.

Every ear strained, every sense jumped alert. A monstrous creaking noise blasted at them from the far distance away from the hole.

"Dark glasses ready!" snapped Vance, taking over the lead at this moment of crisis. "There will be light soon. Now, run!"

Shambling, they ran for the edge of the wooden plateau and the drop beyond.

The light, when it came, crashed with actinic violence across his eyes. He fumbled his dark glasses on in haste, nearly dropping them, blinded by sweat and shaking with fear.

When he could see again Jan and Moke were about to drop over the edge some hundred yards away. Vance was tugging at him and Honey had slung her own sack onto her back and had grabbed his.

"Come on, man. Run!" Vance looked back and up.

Stead could not do so, but he ran. He knew at what Vance looked back . . . and up.

Through the air above his head whistled and roared a frightful force, a blast of air, a sensation of wind buffeting around him. The wooden plateau shook under his feet. And ahead . . . ahead— A great white roll swooped down out of the air, lay full length in a crushing blow across Jan and Moke, caught them and bent them and flung them to the floor.

The long roll rose slowly into the air, hovered above their heads. He saw with the numbness of complete fear that the end of the roll was grasped in the hand of a Demon. The

arm reached back out of his vision and he could not swing his head to look.

"Up!" gasped Vance. "Up! It's our only chance!"

Stead remembered the chilling swish of that knife wielded by a blood-crazed Demon thirsting for his life, and he triggered his antigrav and rose between Vance and Honey, shaking.

The blasphemous roll of white blasted through the air, flattened in rolling waves of sound against the wooden plateau. Torrents of displaced air shook him, whirled him over and over, broke Vance's grip on his arm. Honey tumbled headlong away and still she gripped her full sack. The noise rolled around his head like the sound of splutter-guns fired in a constricting cavern—booming, hideous.

"Honey!" he called despairingly.

She checked herself somehow, twisted her legs, began again to rise on antigrav. He couldn't see Vance. Then he, too, was rising with Honey and the white roll went swish! crack! past below.

"There must be a roof we can shelter against up there!" he shouted to Honey, forgetting the sibilant Forager whisper in the terror of the moment.

The roof swooped down on them, white and flaky, with wide areas loose and ready to fall in powder. He bumped against it thankfully, regaining his breath, feeling his limbs once more coming under his control. Honey pressed close to him, her eyes behind the dark glasses wide and fearful. He took a deep breath and wiped the sweat away from his forehead. That first Demon he had seen had been unable to reach him flattened out against the ceiling. That gave him hope.

He remembered that he was a Man. He looked about him; he looked about, *and he saw*.

The Demon was very like a Yob, but for its size and its four uplifted front limbs and four limbs for locomotion. It was dressed in shapeless glittery clothes, much slit and pouched for pockets, the material straining now with the violence of the Demon's movements. He could see the Demon's uplifted crest, erect and fleshy, a dark glistening green, saw the streaky colors around the face, colors that could

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well be cosmetics. The thing's flat tureen-like head sat squatly on its thick neck around which brilliant jewels flamed in a string of splendor. The four eyes were not symmetrical; two were opaque and atrophied, horn-covered, not used. And all the time the Demon snorted and gasped, breathing with a heavy rasping hiss and bubbling like a giant pot of stew.

Stead saw. He saw that the Demon was a real live being, a beast living in this room, in which he could now understand that the wooden plateau across which they had run was a table, that there were chairs in the room, and sideboards, carpets on the floor, windows to the room, curtained now and dark, a room not unlike the rooms he had seen in the warrens. And he was an insignificant figure bumping against the ceiling like a fly.

The Demon slowly climbed from chair to table and that creaking sounded hollow and ghostly to Stead. The Demon lifted a long wooden pole, tipped with what Stead could now perceive to be a broomhead. The bristles, twelve feet long, scraped across the ceiling, dislodging much white plaster, creating a cloud, rustling and clacking past them.

"We can't stay here." Honey grasped his arm. "There's a hole. Come on!"

Together they wriggled across the ceiling, away from the horrific giant broom, squirmed through a hole into a dark world they understood.

Here dust and plaster and dirt festooned everywhere. Their lights threw up wooden walls, rough floors, crevices littered with flang skins and with the red reflected glare from faceted watching eyes.

"Trigons," Honey said, drawing her splutter-gun forward. "Nasty brutes. Spin webs. Got a filthy bite." She stared around, cool now and calculating, back in the world she knew. "Thank the immortal being Scunners can't get in here. But we can't stay."

A clinging strand of some sticky, soft substance brushed across Stead's face and he jerked back, repelled. He brushed a hand to one side, saw in the radiance of his headlamp the white slithery strands trailing away like thrown

ribbons at Bacchanalia. They caressed his hands and arms, stuck, clung, would not be stripped free.

"They're shooting their webs at us. We'll have to get out of here, fast."

"Well, we can't go back down the hole." Stead said that with complete conviction. He couldn't face the Demon again.

"We'll go on up," Honey said firmly. "Work our way through the runnels and rejoin the group." She moved purposefully forward up a sloping mound of crumbling rubble leading to a wooden wall. "I hope Thorburn and the others got in all right."

On hands and knees up the tricky slope, unwilling to drain their antigrav batteries, they scrambled along. The wooden wall had been split in the long ago and through the crack they could just edge carefully. Watching Honey's slim figure determinedly pushing forward, Stead suddenly realized he no longer held his sack. He made a decision, then, that was another milestone along his path to independence.

"We're in a tough situation, Honey. I think it would be best for you to drop your sack."

"But," said Honey. "But . . . full sacks?"

"I know. But our lives depend on quick movement. Drop it here. Now."

She obeyed him without further protest. But a strange glow crept into her face. Stead thrust that aside, concentrated on bashing his machete through the flimsy last strands of wood and webs opposing him. A couple of Trignons stirred and spat. Honey ducked and the rustling webs stranded away above her head. Stead, flowing into action, triggered a quick burst. The splutter-gun in that confined space made nearly as much noise as a Demon.

Light, a bright but yellow light, spilled through the hole he had made. Cautiously, wearing his dark glasses, he put his head through.

Directly before him a bright blue wall towered away and up and curved over in a multitude of small folds, some fifty feet above. Behind him extended a highly polished, reddish, wooden wall. The yellow light lit everything softly

through the dark glasses, and the floor, bare and shining, could not conceal danger.

"I'm going up," Stead said. Confidence flowed back. He was going to fight his way out of this and rejoin the group, and that would show his comrades that he was a real Forager, full sacks or no blasted full sacks.

"Hurry. The Trignons are stirring."

Stead put his hand down on the edge of the hole and pushed himself up. The bright blue wall lapped down over the floor and he trod on it, regaining his balance. It felt soft through his Hunting boots. He turned to reach out to help Honey. Her head showed through the hole, her face, white but resolute, staring at him.

The blue wall moved.

The ground trembled. The blue on which he stood jerked, throwing him on his face. Automatically, he hung on, digging his hands into the material. The blue wall flowed. Above him it shifted aside, revealing a sudden disastrous vision of immense distances, a high white vastness raking away to a ceiling impossibly far away.

The blue material shifted beneath him. He felt its upward movement through every pore in his body. Sweat sprang, wet and dripping, upon his face. He hung on, looking down, seeing the floor sweep away, drop and dwindle. That reddish wall flowed downward too, appeared as a sudden white expanse extended away into the distance.

And still he was jerked up, hanging on, wondering, gripping the blue material.

Comprehension hit him with the subtlety of a gunbutt across the neck.

He was clinging to a Demon's clothing.

He was being dragged up and onto the back of a Demon.

The yellow light blossomed into unbearable brilliance.

Far below—far, far below—he caught a last frenzied glimpse of Honey, staring up at him out of her hole in the floor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE TERRORS that leered and gibbered at Stead then, as paralysis locked his fingers into gripping fists in the blue material, he afterwards remembered with as much clarity as he remembered his former life.

That last receding glimpse of Honey staring up in horror from her hole in the floor had stirred uneasy trains of thought in Stead's sluggish mind, had made him think of blasphemous thoughts no sane man could possibly entertain. All he could see of the Demon he was riding was a vast curve of blue. On either hand stretched a lofty chamber, a place so vast that *rooflessness* would surely have by now struck him down if he had not been immunized by previous experience.

The Demon kept snorting and snuffling and blowing in a most disconcerting way.

It pulled the blue material higher around it and Stead hugged the cloth and was drawn up until he perched atop a massive shoulder in the shadow of the puffed tureen-shaped skull. A pulse beat in an artery the size of a water main. Thick, coarse hairs grew downward in greasy bundles. The Demon's skin, pitted with pore craters, its yellow flushed with the red of subcutaneous blood, wafted a pungent perfume that dizzied his senses. But he hung on. He hung on for he could not yet, not just yet, will his muscles to release their catatonic grip.

The room was a bedroom. That reddish wall was the bed, the vast sheet of whiteness the bedclothes. From the eminence of his vantage point atop a Demon's shoulder, he saw the objects of the room in flat, sharply angled perspective, but everything appeared to him whole. The old and familiar way of looking at the items in the world of buildings on a size-scale in relation to himself and thus seeing only the details had gone—gone for ever. Now he saw the whole picture.

The immortal being had created the world of buildings.

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But why had the immortal one created everything of a size that suited the Demons? Why? *Why?*

Strange clanging thoughts echoed in Stead's bemused brain. The Demon moved towards the window.

The blind went up with the noise of a thousand cave-ins. Air tore at him. He closed his eyes and hung on, determined now to see this thing through, and to discover if the macabre thoughts struggling into coherent life in his brain could possibly be the truth.

For if they were, if they were— Then everything he had been taught and believed was a hollow mockery, a gigantic blasphemy, a callous joke of the immortal being's incomprehensible humor.

At first he had not believed in Demons, had considered them figments of the imagination to frighten men and women into abiding their consciences' dictates. Then he had been forced to accept the unpalatable fact that Demons were real and existed. Now . . . now he was being rubbed in the mire of humiliation, of race humiliation, struggling against an understanding that screamed sheer bedlam at him and would not be denied.

The Demon's shoulder twitched and Stead clung on as the movement rolled thick flesh beneath the blue covering. He stared past the enormous shell curve of the Demon's ear, with tufts of hair like clustered broom handles thrusting out, stared past and out the window.

A pale, washed out, all pervasive light splayed down out there. The dawn of the Demon's day must be only a few moments away, that electric flickering in the air their long-prolonged multi-second vibration of their lighting. The one second flickering of the electric light that served to demarcate time periods in mankind's world would be too small for Demons—too small . . . *too small*.

Slowly, reluctantly, with agony and despair, Stead's eyes focused on the illimitable distances through the window. Outlines showed hazy and indistinct, but he saw monstrous square blocked shapes, miles away: cliffs that hung peppered with the random scattering of lighted windows, yellow oblongs glowing against the pallid radiance and the blackness of mighty buildings.

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Those buildings out there, structures created by the immortal one for mankind to inhabit, were all of a size with the Demons. Mankind had shrunk in Stead's understanding. Mankind had shrunk and he thought he understood and he did not want to understand.

With a wide spinning movement that swung the room about him, he felt the Demon turning, leaving the window, walking with a ponderous undulation for the door. And for the first time the thrill of fear contained an inward-directed core: how long could he perch here before the Demon became aware of him?

Through the door he was carried, down in a series of steeply precipitous lunges, shuddering shocks as each tread halted, followed by a further dizzying descent, down step after step as they went down the stairs.

A number of conflicting emotions kept him where he was. Fear predominated. But also a slow, stubborn will-to-knowledge possessed him, a teeth-grinding will that he knew would sustain him now through whatever might befall. There remained little in that dogged conviction of his earlier eager, naive rushing after knowledge for the sake of it; now he wanted to know so that he could alter and change both himself and the truths of men.

The Demon entered a room where on a wooden table stood a glass vase containing a flowering shrub. All down one side of the shrub the scarlet berries had been picked away, scarlet drops like sprinkles of blood lay trailed haphazardly across the table.

A Demon with a broom was brushing up a couple of mangled bodies—bodies of men, men caught stealing the red berries. Jan and Moke would never return to the safe world of the warrens.

From Stead's Demon volumes of noise poured out in crashing and stunning waves of sound; a great vein in the Demon's squat throat vibrated; Stead could clearly hear the blood rushing through those distended veins.

A shining drop of cloudy liquid oozed through the flesh just before him; the smell of sweat stank in his nostrils.

Were the Demons, then, frightened of men?

The broom wielding Demon, the Demon who had struck so

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savagely with that monstrous rolled up paper at them on the table, turned to face the newcomer, moving with an undulating grace abruptly disconcerting to Stead, crouched, shivering and hating, in the shadows atop a Demon's shoulder. He knew what he must do, but the messages shrilling from his brain to his muscles met impenetrable blocks of fear; his muscles locked. He had to leave this Demon's shoulder. He must plunge out and up on antigrav—he must!

But he couldn't.

The callous broom disposed of Jan and Moke, swept them away, broken and bloody, into a dustpan. The Demon turned that massive flattened head; the two good eyes focused on its companion; the Demon screamed.

A hand like the hand of doom swept down on Stead's Demon's shoulder. Broad and curved, cupped for a stunning buffet, that hand slashed down to knock the puny human being from the blue robe, send it dashing to destruction on the floor so far below.

The hand flashed down, and Stead was shooting up on antigrav, spinning, numbed, shaken with the violence of his reactions, purged of fear as his brain forced its messages savagely past the blocks locking his muscles.

He cavorted in the air, trying to regain his balance, trying to evade the enormous lethal swipes of broom and paper.

A larder door stood open by the wall. On the topmost shelf a shadow moved, metal glinted. Stead looked down.

Down there, peering around the open door on the top shelf, glistening whitely, a row of tiny faces—men's and women's faces. His comrades!

Honey was there. She waved at him, a gesture so brave and so defiant that it stung him. Her voice lifted, a squeak in the vastness of the Demon's room.

"I got back all right, Stead. We had a run-in with a gang of Yobs. Drop down here with us. But hurry! Hurry!"

That strange and inexplicable feeling for Honey seized him now with the desire to ensure that she, of all people, should never again have to face the fear and terror of the Demon myth. He wanted to break the barrier of lies sur-

rounding his comrades. The Foragers—mere rats stealing food from this Demon's larder.

Now Stead wanted more than ever to live and return to the world, and tell the people what he had discovered, what he knew.

As he lifted his splutter-gun he wondered if anyone else had made this discovery before, if anyone else had gone through the blasting of pride and honor in race, had discovered that brave humanity was but a parasite scuttling behind the walls in the darkness of the earth behind this great Demon-created world.

He thought of the Regulations. And he denied them. He aimed the splutter gun very carefully at the Demon's looming monstrous eye.

The gun made a loud sound. But to the Demon it must have made a very tiny, very pitiable spitting.

Even so, a full clip blinded the beast.

The Demon's roars were now so great and reverberating that great billows of sound made Stead clap his hands over his ears. A door opened. Another Demon walked in with that slow graceful movement imposed by their size.

But Stead had dropped on antigrav to the shelf of the larder and had scuttled in among his friends.

He remembered the choking fear he had felt, that all Foragers must feel, as they set off for Outside. That inhibited exploration. *Had* anyone ever reached the same conclusions as he had been forced to this day? Surely they must have done!

Someone grabbed his arms, ran them up his back. Someone else snatched away his splutter-gun.

Thorburn said, "We won't kill you now, Stead. You'll go back to H.Q. where you will stand trial. We're not barbarians any more. You have violated the Regulations."

"Of course!" Stead's brain seethed now with his vision. "I did it to save my own life, but I found out—"

"Take him along!" said Old Chronic with a new and frighteningly savage voice.

These people who had been his comrades had changed. He was met with only hostile stares, vicious eyes glaring at him; he was a pariah, an outcast.

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"But—" he said, pleadingly, not believing. "But I believe in Demons, and I know what they are!"

"We believe in them too. And the Regulations expressly forbid a man to shoot at them." Thorburn hurried the party along, through the food quarry, out the exit hole, along the dark way littered with dead Yobs. "You've committed the worst crime a man can commit, Stead. You'll see! At your trial not one voice will be raised to defend you; you'll die, Stead, because you broke the Regulations."

"All I did was save my life."

"Your life! *Your* life! Don't you see, you imbecile, the Demons will hunt us down mercilessly now. We'll have no peace for generations to come."

That shocked and sobered Stead. He hadn't thought of that.

The fiery importance of his discovery chilled suddenly.

Grimly, silently, the Forager group marched on. The need for hurry possessed them all, Stead no less than the others. An overhanging doom seemed pressing in on them, stultifying thought, making them cast apprehensive glances over their shoulders far more frequently than they covered the way ahead. Cardon scowled and closed up and his face was as black as the nether depths. Cardon, this time, didn't relish his rear marker position.

When at last they marched into the temporary depot, consternation greeted them. Honey, having already passed on news of Stead's deed over the radio, had not been able to meet his eye since. Her pert face was now as downcast as a rock slide.

The Commander's men and Purvis's men had been formed up and rows of sullen, hostile, frightened faces glowered on Stead. The parade watched him in frigid silence. Then everyone boarded the trucks and the convoy pulled out.

Stead, his hands tied together, rode in the back of Purvis's truck, two Forager guards with ready guns eyeing him balefully all the ride.

But that ride was dramatically interrupted.

The first volley riddled the point truck. Men screamed and toppled. Splutter-guns crashed from the slot of darkness up which the convoy had been rolling, headlights cut-

ting a path of radiance ahead. A soldier swung a searchlight and it was shot out at once, exploding in a screech of glass and a shower of fragments.

The two Forager guards grabbed Stead, and in a rolling, tangled bundle, they dropped over the tailboard. Two of the electric trucks had collided. All along the line bullets pocked the dirt. Fire stabbed pitilessly from the blackness.

"Enemy all around!"

Stead heard the orders ringing out, the forming of lines, defense posts, first-aid for the wounded, the trucks' electric motors whining as gallant volunteers tried to drive them into a defensive ring. The noise cracked down in the dark slot beneath the ground.

Beneath the houses of a race of people so giant that mankind was a mere pest to them, Stead still clung to that knowledge as the battle raged and roared about him.

One of the Forager guards yipped abruptly, turned over and lay still. Stead saw the blood seeping, bright in the fire glow from a burning truck. He crawled off a little, inching along with his bound hands. The second Forager guard followed. He, too, was reluctant to be caught under a truck that might explode at any minute.

A dark form, camouflage cape glittering against the fire at its back, glided up to Stead.

"Hold steady."

A knife slashed his bonds.

"What's going on?" The guard moved across, his face wild, gun up.

"We need everyone in the fight," snapped Thorburn, sheathing the releasing knife. "Get into the line." He turned to Stead, gripped his arm. "You, too."

Intermittently caught in the quickly stabbing bursts of Archon searchlights, hooded on the instant, men's figures flitted out there, enemies closing in for the kill. Fleeting, Stead glimpsed the insignia of Trychos. He lined up his sights quite automatically, the gun thrust still warm into his hands by Thorburn, grim-faced, smoke-grimed, dusty.

Where yesterday Stead would have seen in those soldiers of Trychos only enemies to be shot and disposed of, now a reluctance held his trigger finger in a stasis his conscious

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efforts could not break. They were men; why kill a fellow human being when there were so many ravening monsters in this underworld inimical to everything human?

Through the darkness lurid bolts of light leaped and crossed. Men screamed and died, the shriek bubbling from lips already doomed, limp bodies falling all atangle across the lights. The livid beams circled and swept the battlefield, silhouetting maniacal figures in antic motion, marionette of death. The lights threw distorted shadows, picked out the sudden lethal gleam of steel, threw drifting war smoke into silvery beautiful streamers, writhing like gossamer veils. The stench of battle beat up palpably. The feel of it scraped his nerves raw.

Thorburn paused and sagged back, reaching for a fresh clip, smacking the rounds in savagely. His powder-streaked face turned to Stead, all crouched and immobile.

"Why aren't you fighting? There are a lot of 'em. They caught us flat-footed. Sims is already wounded." The breath caught in Thorburn's throat. "We've got to fight, man, if we're to come out of this."

His teeth and eyes gleamed ferally.

"They're men," Stead said, foolishly, as though that was answer enough.

"You mean you've nothing to live for, when we get back. That's understandable. But think of Honey—she's in here, fighting."

Stead shook his head, helplessly, like a dumb animal.

"I thought," Thorburn said, sighting and firing in a winking beam of light, dropping back to earth, "I expected—we all did—that you'd see the way Honey felt about you even if you're not supposed to be talked to about . . . about—" He lifted his shoulder, hunched, fired again, flopped back. "They're getting closer."

"About what?"

"Never mind now. You shot at a Demon. Oh, sure, I understand why you did. He'd have swatted you like you swat a fly if you hadn't. But the Regulations were made to protect all men, not just one Forager stupid enough to be caught in the open in the light."

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"You talk . . . as though you do . . . might . . . understand."

"I've seen what you've seen, Stead. More, probably. I know the position of men in the world of buildings. A number of us do. But what is there to be said, let alone done about it?" He hunched up, fired, cursed, fired again, dropped back with the return fire crackling past his ear.

"You see? You made me forget how to fight—one shot a time, son—otherwise they'll take your head off."

The bedlam of noise hammered on. Smoke reeked in their nostrils, racked their throats. Stead's eyes were streaming again, as they had done when the Demon's light struck them. He coughed, bitterly.

"You mean you *know*? And yet you go on?"

"You forget. We're Foragers. The high and blasted mighty Controllers don't even believe Demons exist. If they thought that man was just a parasite, living on the scraps from a giant's table—no, Stead. It just couldn't get through to them."

"But we ought to try! We've got to show them."

"What for?" Thorburn's tones were brutal. "What good would it do? Racial inferiority? No, son, no. Mankind has got to believe in himself in some things. Just the stupid, down-trodden Foragers have to bear the load."

"Wilkins—he's a Controller."

"Half a Controller, the others call him. And he doesn't know. Even if he did, what could he do?"

"What I must do, Thorburn!" A blazing conviction rang now in Stead's words. He felt uplifted, shorn of fear, dedicated. "I must go into the world and preach the truth! Men must know, and then, *then*, Thorburn, I will instigate a great crusade against the Demons!"

"You'll what?" Sheer surprise at the audacity of Stead's words brought Thorburn down in a rush from his slow aiming. "You'll do what?"

"Tell the world, the world of men! Then we can come up out of our runnels, take over the greater world outside, the world of Demons, and make it rightfully our own!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SOLDIERS' Commander was down. He lay prostrate, pumping out his life blood, prone there on the dirt of a runnel beneath the world of buildings.

Was that, Stead wondered sickly, any way for a man to die?

Lights blazed confusedly before him. Like an apparition from the nether depths he saw Rogers all silhouetted against a burning truck, striking about him with his sword, smashing back a would-be victorious onslaught. Vance, too, and Cardon, leaped to stand with Rogers, sweeping away the soldiers of Trychos, then dropping flat into concealing darkness. Then the orange flicker of their guns took a further murderous toll.

"We'll do it, boys, we'll do it!" Old Purvis's yell knifed clearly through the hubbub. Already the detonations of enemy explosives crashed less frequently; the bright winking of their guns faded to blackness in ever-growing patches. The men of Archon once again were routing the men of Trychos.

Thorburn was up on one knee, now, shooting with calm precision, hurling the last remnants of fleeing enemy soldiers back. Stead looked beyond him. Honey rose, her black hair shining almost green in the lurid lights, shooting with methodical directness. Julia crawled up, clasping a riddled leg, swearing vitriolically. Wallas was binding 'up Sims' wound.

And Old Chronic, cackling, was already slithering out, creeping like some underworld animal, across the churned up ground, out to strip the dead.

"Julia!" Thorburn leaped all asprawl to her, dropped to a knee, caught her to him. "Are you all right?"

"By a Scunner's diseased left kidney!" Julia said, juicily. "Those Rang-bait, illegitimate, thrice-damned, eternally lost goons of Trychos put a bullet through my shapely leg!" She dragged her dull green Hunter's slacks up around the

shattered armor greave. Blood glistened oily. "If it leaves a scar I'll . . . I'll—"

"You're all right, Julia," said Thorburn, fervently. "Thank the immortal being!"

Stead laughed, nervously. His head ached. He had come through a traumatic experience; but there was no time to indulge in fancy psychological exhibitions; if he was to save himself he had to go on along the path he had chosen.

He stilled that silly, nervous, betraying laugh. He walked across in the lights being switched on as the men of Archon began to create order out of the aftermath of battle. Old Purvis was shouting his head off. Cardon, Honey, Vance, all the others of the group except Old Chronic, gathered around Thorburn and Julia. Near them Rogers and his group gathered in the smoky light. The soldiers were out searching for the men shouting out there, the wounded, only now able to call for help.

"Fighting other men," Stead said bitterly. "Julia, Sims, wounded by men!" His face, smoke-blackened, gaunt, with deeply-sunk eyes rimmed in black, bloodshot, glared around on them. "You're going to listen to me!"

Surprised, they watched him. Vance put up a hand. "You're a criminal, Stead."

"Only in the light of Regulations framed to prevent us from taking what is ours by right! I'm no criminal to any thinking Forager! And you all know it!"

Cardon pushed forward. His fiercely eager face, as vicious as a Rang's, thrust out. "If you're saying what we think, Stead—"

"I'm saying that it is time the Foragers told the world the truth! It is time we liberated mankind from the slavery, the thralldom, the parasiticism, that the Controllers have permitted for too long!"

And then, incredibly, Cardon was talking. His lean ferocious face glowed with an animation Stead had never seen it possess before. He spoke with vituperation of the Controllers. His words poured out, pure demagoguery, impelling, compelling, charging words with a new meaning, old-established facts with new, sharper life.

"Our brothers are spread wide!" he cried. "Through every

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firm of Foragers, in the ranks of the soldiers, of the workers—the brothers of the revolution merely await the call!" He pointed dramatically at Stead. "Look at him. He's a new man, but he has become a comrade. He has been thrust down to toil with us in the Outside. He has broken a Regulation, well he may. And he will be condemned to a hideous death because he sought to save his life from a peril the Controllers never face, that they cannot believe to exist!"

Others had drifted up now, Rogers' group, soldiers cleaning their weapons. They clustered in the fitful light, a ring of tense faces, softly breathing, waiting for the spark that would set them alight.

"The Day has come, my brothers!" shouted Cardon. "Stead shot at a Demon. *And how many others have done the same?*" He stared around on them, dramatically pausing. Then, "Vance has, I'll wager. And Manager Purvis. A lot of us. *I have!*"

No sound whispered from the packed ranks.

"The day has come when the masses shall arise in their wrath and their power! The day of the Controllers has ended! We—the Foragers, the soldiers, the workers—must take over the control! We must exercise the power we possess but are too disunited to use." His voice sank. "Brothers, in our hands, lies the opportunity to arrange the world in a saner, more ordered, fairer fashion." His voice soared, keening now with the thrusting, dark ambition of the man. "We must not hesitate! We must go on, march shoulder to shoulder against the tyranny of the Controllers, smash oppression, bring new hope and decent life to all men. To you and to me!"

They cheered then. Helmets rose into the air. Swords flashed. These men of the underworld, these men doomed to spend their lives in unending toil, fighting the horrible denizens of a hostile world unknown to the lordly Controllers—they cheered, these men, cheering themselves and their hopes, famishing for a chance to lead a better life.

But Stead stared on, appalled.

Was this what he had planned? This revolution?

"No," said Stead, weakly through the noise. "No."

Thorburn stared at him, licking his lips, uncertain.

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"So that explains Cardon," the Forager Leader said, softly. "That sin he always carried with him. He, too, shot at a Demon."

"And it didn't bring the results you predicted for Stead," flashed Julia, finishing the bandages with her own fingers. "Cardon speaks good sense!"

"But . . . but can we do it?" whispered Thorburn.

"We'll do it." Julia stood up, grasping Thorburn, reaching out a hand to Stead. "We'll make a better world for our kids, Thorburn! That's what matters to me!"

After that the return to the temporary depot became an inferno of muddled noise and light, shouting and cheering, and an occasional shot. The temporary depot joined up to a man. The brothers of Cardon's conspiracy had infiltrated everywhere; the acceptance of their lot that had so impressed and perplexed Stead lay revealed now as the quiescent, patient waiting of a volcano. Controller Forager Wilkins disappeared from the scene. Stead did not, then, have the courage to make too pertinent inquiries. Tiredness lapped over him, tiredness and a weary disillusion.

He was borne along on the heady wave of enthusiasm, dragged along with the masses, and thankful, inexpressibly thankful that he would not have to face a charge of shooting at a Demon.

But Demons really existed. He did not forget his vow to do all he could to take men out of their warrens and their runnels behind walls, bring them into the real world of the Outside that was rightfully theirs.

Countless meetings were held. Committees were elected. Thorburn and his entire group, with the significant exception of Old Chronic, were elected onto an action committee. Delegates went out to neighboring Forager H.Q. Soldiers drifted in, deserters welcomed with open arms and good food and wine.

For this area on the periphery of the warrens, Cardon, to his own surprise and then gratification, was elected Delegate Member Controller. He was not an ambitious man for himself. Cardon really believed in the message he preached.

And his prophet, to the absolute bewilderment of Stead, was B. G. Wills.

From that erudite and clear-thinking man, Cardon and his associates had gleaned a distorted view of the world and their part in it, and they had set about rectifying the faults. Through all their declamations, their points programs, a queer far-off echo of Wills rumbled down in muted logic but violent fury.

In all honesty, having seen what he had, Stead could not gainsay the right of these downtrodden people to a fair share in the good things of the world.

But he had wanted them to go out into the Outside, and take those goodnesses from the Demons, from the alien monstrosities who dominated the real world and under whose feet mankind was a mere irritating pest.

For the first time since those early days when he had first realized he was a man without a past, a man whose early life was a blank, a cipher figure, he longed desperately to know who and what he was. Perhaps, at this critical juncture in the history of the human race on Earth, he might be able to influence it along the right road if only he *knew*. And then he would groan inwardly at the stupid pretentiousness of a single impotent mote of humanity imagining it could change the destiny of mankind. Mankind's destiny lay in the hands of every individual—Cardon preached that. And, manifestly, it was true. B. G. Wills had said that if society could be changed then man would change, too. Della had said that. And now Cardon was arraigning the human race to answer the charge, was drawing up his legions to do battle for the good things of the world.

A gnawing longing to see Della possessed him.

The ache grew. It blossomed one day of fiery speeches, of a small probing battle over against the blue lights of the barrier, of fresh heart and mind-searchings, into a consuming passion.

He *must* see Della!

An unsuspected well of caution prevented him from telling anyone, even Thorburn, of his intentions.

In the seething tumult of those days, when everything seemed possible, when the old order was being changed,

visibly altering before everyone's eyes, Honey had thrown herself into organizing work with a gay abandon that masked her steely spirit. She believed in the future. Ashamedly, watching her slender boyish figure, her pale set face, the little crease of dedication between her eyebrows, Stead drew back from contact with her. He didn't know what Thorburn meant. The exploration of the hints and innuendos that had come his way, the mystification of that experience with Belle, his feelings about Della, had been pushed into the back of his mind in the tumult of the revolution.

Simon would know. A Controller he might be, but he was a man of science. He understood the murky workings of the human brain. Science, it seemed to Stead now, offered the one last hope. If Forager and Controller met in head-on battle the death knell of the human race would be rung here in the dark crevices behind the real world. Stead couldn't let that happen whilst still there remained a chance and science had not been consulted.

Cautiously, he made his preparations, stifling the guilt feelings that, irrational though he knew them to be, afflicted him with sharp pangs of doubt when he saw the animated purpose of his Forager comrades.

He learned that Forager Controller Wilkins had escaped, and Old Chronic was gone, too. The task of finding a Controller Officer's uniform was not difficult; the dead man's kit lay still neatly folded in his abandoned cubby. Stead picked up the smart blue and gold, the dress sword, the insignia, and stuffed them into a pack slung beneath his cape. He carried food and wine there, a map of the warrens found in Old Chronic's deserted possessions. Then, not without a twinge of doubt and apprehension, he set off.

As a member of the action committee he bluffed his way past the blue light and the gas curtain and barrier with no difficulty. His heart beating heavily, he strode into the warrens.

Every street and level here was alive with workers, pouring randomly from their cubicles, talking, shouting, gesticulating, holding meetings, running; the whole place seethed with an aimless activity. Soon, Stead knew, the workers would be given their chance to join the revolution. As soon

as the foodstuffs stored within the warrens gave out, the workers would join their Forager and Soldier comrades. That would leave the Controllers isolated.

Isolated and starving.

He had need of his cape going swiftly through the lighted runnels. The cape's chromatophores went through their pigmentation arrangements, changing color, concealing him against concrete walls and dirty shadowed alcoves, giving him the chance to penetrate deeply into the warrens. As he left the workers' areas the quality of the panic changed, grew deeper, tolled with a more resonant fear in the faces and bearing of the people he passed.

Here, the Controllers gathered to talk in whispers, to fidget, to wonder what the Captain and his Crew were doing.

Stead passed through the familiar ways, found Simon's laboratory, and dressed in the reassuring blue and gold, the proud insignia of Archon blazing on his breast, went up the steps and through the oval door. Soon, now, he would see Della. But anticipation of that could not live with his burning desire to tell these heedless people the truth, to secure their help in the business of routing out the Demons. The revolt appeared small and petty beside that great aspiration.

Lieutenant Cargill stepped from a doorway into the corridor. He looked grim and haggard, but his face still contained that youthful iron, that awareness that the future of Archon rested on his shoulders. He saw the Commander, resplendent in blue and gold, bulky in armor, camouflage cape swirling, weapons aglitter, and he saluted.

Mechanically returning the salute, Stead went to brush past.

Cargill raised his eyes. He saw the grim, lined, tough face scored with the marks of bitter experience, the crinkles around the eyes, the thin wide lips clamped now into a line of determination, the jutting chin.

Then comprehension flowed in shocking understanding through him.

"You . . . you're Stead! But what— And in a soldier's uniform, an officer's . . . a Commander's! What does this mean, Stead? Quick, now!"

Cargill's hand gun snouted up.

Stead brushed it aside, pushing the muzzle to point to the floor. "Where's Della? Where's Simon? I must see them, immediately! Come on, man—where are they?"

The very vehemence of Stead perturbed Cargill, threw him off balance. He hesitated.

"You may come too. You could be useful. Hurry, Cargill. There is little time. Where is Della?"

"Who's calling?" The sound of the opening door clicked loudly. "Cargill?"

Della walked towards them, pale and drawn, her eyes slowly widening as she saw Stead. One hand flew to her mouth. "Stead! What do you want here? What's happened?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY WERE ALL pleased to see him, of course, even if their first greetings held a note of restraint.

A twinge of nostalgia afflicted Stead peculiarly as he stared around the old familiar laboratory. Here lay his earliest memories, the beginning of his life with the People of Archon, his first fumbling attempts to learn and understand.

He had traveled a long way since then.

"I don't know why you've come here to see us, Stead," said Simon, nervous and fidgety. "The situation is very serious. The Captain is considering taking the very gravest measures."

"What can he do?" demanded Stead with the new arrogance of the emancipated Forager. "We . . . that is, the Foragers, have simply cut off all supplies to the warrens. When the people have no more food, they will be only too happy to talk sense."

"Stead!" exclaimed Della, shocked.

"I thought so," said Cargill uglily. He put hand on his gunbutt. "He's nothing but a filthy Forager now!"

"Wait, Cargill." Simon could still exercise his authority. "Let us hear why Stead did come to see us. Or—" He glanced sideways at Della and licked his lips.

Stead made no comment on that.

"I came for one very simple reason. In the present situation that we know is grave, I believe that the power of science is our only hope."

"If more people believed that," said Simon tartly, "maybe this trouble would never have begun."

Stead shook his head. "No. You're wrong there. The present revolution is no fault of science's; but it can be stopped. It started because you Controllers have been too selfish, blind, arrogant in everything." He waved them to silence, anxious to sweep away their misconceptions. "I, too, feel like a Controller, but only in the good things, in the manners, the graces, the open-mindedness. In everything else I know, now, that the Controllers are an incubus on the backs of the workers and the Foragers."

He let them babble denials and angry counter accusations.

Then he chopped them off brutally. "The Foragers hold you in the palms of their hands. But I have no wish to see my friends killed, deprived of their lives and liberty, even sent to work or become Foragers."

Cargill shuddered at that.

"There are many more workers than Foragers, and more Foragers than Controllers. The soldiers, Cargill, are with us solidly in a fraternal spirit of revolution; nothing you or your fellow-officers can say or do will alter that."

Simon stared at him, his mouth drooping a little, the weariness and disillusion strong across his face.

"Tell us your terms, then, Stead. I assume you have come as some sort of delegate?"

Stead shook his head. "No. I am here as a private individual. You seem to forget that I was brought up here, with you as teachers, as a Controller. I cannot forget that. I am shoulder to shoulder with the Foragers in this revolution. But I seek a compromise."

"Ah!" said Simon. "I take it you do have some position with the Foragers."

"I am a member of an action committee, if that means anything."

"You could get a message to the leader?"

"Yes."

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Both Simon and Cargill went off into a long and involved discussion about the possibilities. Della looked at Stead. He ignored her gaze, troubled, recognizing in him the craven fear of saying what he had come to say. He had been avoiding the issue, talking of the Foragers' Revolution as though that was the most important new factor to influence life in Archon. By a Scunner's infected intestines! They must have had revolutions before.

"Listen!" he said, loudly, explosively, vulgarly.

They stopped talking, jerked out of their planning, swiveled to look at him.

He wet his lips. Della was staring as though he was a madman. Well, he supposed he was, in their eyes.

"I've been Outside. I've seen . . . I've seen—"

Cargill sneered nastily. "We've all been outside, Stead. I suppose you had to run from a Scunner."

"I don't forget you saved our lives from that Scunner, Cargill. You mentioned a Rang. Ever seen one?"

"What?" Cargill blustered. "Why . . . well . . . that is—"

"I have, Cargill." Stead spoke softly. "I have. I helped to kill it. It wasn't pleasant."

"Oh, Stead!" said Della, on a breath.

"I've been Outside," Stead said again. "Out beyond this sham little world of walls and runnels hidden in the earth behind greater walls."

Simon put a shaking hand to his lips. "What do you mean, Stead?"

"I've seen a Demon!"

Silence.

Then Cargill swung a contemptuous hand. "Rubbish! He's a typical brainless Forager, trying to impress us with his fairy stories. Nannies frighten their children with stories of Demons. Grow up, Stead!"

"I've seen a Demon," Stead repeated viciously. "And I know what they are. I know what Demons are and I know what mankind is. And the story isn't pretty, it isn't glorious, it doesn't make us all great heroes; you won't like what I'm going to tell you."

The wouldn't let him tell them at first. They told him he was just a petty-minded braggart, trying to impress them.

Like all Foragers, aware of his inferior social position, he sought any unlikely and ego-boosting story to prove his difference, his superiority. They had no time for phantasms and legends.

He let them run on. They could not be expected to understand at once, but he was frighteningly determined to make them see, to hold them until they did see.

Then, in a controlled, clipped, concise voice he told them what had happened to him since he had left them. He told them everything. When he had finished the white-lit laboratory rang with his words; but the three people facing him sat, pale-faced, trembling, not wanting to believe, and yet transfixed despite themselves by his sincerity, his honesty of purpose, his frankness.

"It can't be," whispered Della.

"I don't know." Simon stood up, paced restlessly. "I've always believed that Demons could exist, that there might be something in the stories, but . . . but *this*!"

"Just a miserable runnel of parasites!" growled Cargill. "Stealing discarded crumbs from the tables of the Demons, raiding their larders—no. By all the Demons of Outside! *No!*"

"Yes, Cargill." Stead spoke levelly. "Yes!"

"But if this is true, it means—"

"It means what you've just said. That man is a rat in the world of the Demons. That's all. But that doesn't alter the facts. The Demons are just one form of life, like a cat or a Scunner or a Yob. All of them, all . . . are inferior to mankind!"

"Then—" said Simon, a new light breaking over his face.

"You are a scientist, Simon, and so is Della. Cargill is a soldier. You can accept this new information. You can evaluate it, find it's truth, and then go on to plan means to alter it." Stead's voice blazed conviction now. "But my comrades of the outside? The Foragers? And the workers in the warrens? No. They couldn't take this. Their minds wouldn't take the strain. A few, a rare few like Thorburn, know and live with the knowledge. But that isn't good enough for a scientist. We don't want to go on living merely accepting the situation. We—"

"We must change it!" Della stood up, her whole figure

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expressing conviction and dedication to this new aim in her life.

"I must convene a meeting," said Simon. "I do believe you, Stead, now. My whole life becomes a mockery to me, but I intend to convince my colleagues. We will form an anti-Demon front. We can overthrow them!"

"Who shall we contact first?" asked Della.

Cargill shook his head dazedly. His tongue kept licking his lips, furtively. "I don't know!" he said, over and over. "I don't know. It's blasphemous. The immortal being would never create *that* sort of world!"

As Simon contacted selected scientists, Della and Stead tried to calm Cargill. The soldier had reacted pathologically to the information of his position in the scheme of things in the world. But his very reaction told the others that he believed. And, believing, the balance of his mind had been dangerously disturbed. A proud, arrogant, confident man couldn't face that sort of truth except in the spirit of absolute humility. There would be others like that.

Questioning, apprehensive, aware of the revolutionary threat ravaging at the barriers, the scientists answered Simon's call. Astroman Nav arrived. Shown the usual deference accorded him, he smiled at Stead quite warmly, shook hands.

"So the Captain's plan worked, then?" he said by way of greeting. "The Crew guessed that the shock of Outside would bring your memory back." He turned benignly on Della. "Well, my dear, and what is he? You have done well to bring his memory back, but I wonder if, now, he will still want to be an Astroman."

"My memory has not returned," Stead said bluntly. "And plan or no plan of the Captain's, he left me to rot out there. Now, listen to Simon."

The shock of this ungracious speech outraged the listening scientists. But Simon quietened them, began to talk. And, as was inevitable with a second-hand dissemination of the truth, he was met by a blank and stony refusal to credit what he was saying.

At least Stead intervened, angry, persuasive, telling the whole story over again. One or two of the younger men and women wavered; some believed him now. The session be-

came protracted, prolonged, arguing and talking and planning long into the night. But the guiding light of science prevailed. Above all, these people wanted to *know*. They could accept anything, if they could know the truth.

The food supply position had not yet reached a serious shortage and the Controllers with their vast reserves were still eating and drinking as usual. During one meal break with arguments still raging as the men and women ate standing before long buffet tables hastily organized by Della, a low growling rumble vibrated through the laboratory. The electric lights shook on their cables. Someone dropped a plate. Dust suddenly appeared in the air, irritating nostrils and throats.

The distant rumbling disturbances lasted for perhaps half a minute. Then, in the wordless silence, everyone heard the soft furtive slither of rock. Then that, too, faded to silence.

"Another earthquake," said one eminent scientist. "We could do without one of those at this juncture."

A puzzled frown creased Stead's weary face. He turned to Simon.

"Earthquake, Simon? You've told me about them, I know. But . . . but surely that noise came from above us?"

Simon laughed, a little nervously, trying to retain his composure. "I thought so too, Stead. But that is the usual impression one receives. The sound waves travel vast distances, you know."

Then the hubbub of argument, denunciation, pleading, planning, broke out again. Simon had placed trusted guards from the ranks of the young scientists who believed Stead on all doors. Everyone knew that they had to reach a decision—a fairly unanimous decision—before they would be free to go. Most of them welcomed that. Cargill sat in a corner, dazed, believing and unable in the young pride of his military strength to take that knowledge and grow in stature with it.

Della said of him, sadly, "I always thought that soldiers were resilient, but now I see that their brains are channeled in a groove of unthinking discipline."

Stead remembered the soldiers' fight against the soldiers of Trychos. Dismal and sad though that had been, one could

snatch a fierce pride at the courage of soldiers in action. But he did not answer Della on that; he took her arm and steered her out of the main laboratory and along the corridor that led to his old suite.

The ground vibrated gently about them as they walked.

"I couldn't say this with all the others kicking up all that row. But you've got to help me, Della. The human race stands at a critical point in its history. And, crazy, paranoiac, swollen-headed though this may sound, I know that I have a part to play."

She did not laugh or deride him, understanding what he meant. "Go on."

He looked at the ground, his eyes clouded, his face slack now, loose with the emotions trying to find expression.

"I am absolutely convinced that I can play a decisive part. Perhaps, I think certainly, the most important part. Everything that has happened has conspired to thrust me forward, into a destiny that at first I did not want, but that now I know is my duty."

"What convinced you, Stead?"

He walked on a space as the distant rumblings died away. "I keep getting the niggling, split-second, hazy idea that I was sent here for that purpose. I feel that I am *in* this world but not *of* it. And I know, Della, that these feelings are originated by my lost memory, battering at the closed doors of my consciousness, trying to break through, trying to make me remember!"

Della nodded. Her red lips pursed up as though she had come to a decision. They walked side by side into Stead's still unoccupied suite. The place brought back happy memories, but he turned a troubled face to Della as she sat on the low divan. She tucked her long legs up underneath her, closed her eyes for a second, then began to speak.

"We are dealing with three separate yet connected phenomena." She ticked them off. "One, the Foragers' Revolution. Two, the anti-Demon Crusade. Three, your lost memory."

"And," said Stead vehemently. "My lost—"

"Yes." She interrupted, speaking with forceful gravity. "Yes, Stead. Your lost memory is the most important of the three."

"It sounds crazily paranoiac," Stead said softly, scarcely crediting the validity of it himself.

She shook her head. She patted the divan. "Sit here." As he sat her perfume wafted disturbingly over him. She was wearing a perfectly normal white lab smock. It buttoned all the way up the front. Her short red curls glistened in the electrics. Her eyes shone gray and candid in that light, unfathomable, depthless, regarding him from puckered eyebrows with a look at once distant and warmly appraising.

"We have had workers' Revolutions before, and Foragers', too. The Controllers always win; I see no reason why they should not now." She stopped him with an uplifted finger. "Uh, uh. But we have never yet faced the situation you have brought to us. I expect other men have found out the truth, other people who had looked down on the Demons' houses and seen them whole. Our Architectural Geographers haven't ventured outside the warrens for generations."

"Yes! I expect that must be so. But why didn't they spread the news? I can understand Thorburn remaining silent, but surely a man of education would see what must be done?"

"That is why I believe *you!* You are different from us. Your memory holds the clue." The ceiling suddenly quivered. Pieces of plaster fell; dust tasted flat and limey on their tongues. Della gripped his arm.

"Stead!"

"That must have been a big one." He went to stand up, but Della held on to him. He was conscious of her quick, shallow breathing. Twin spots of carmine flamed in her cheeks.

"We ought to find out."

"No. Stead . . . don't leave me alone!"

He stared at her, astonished. This did not sound like the trim, practical scientist. That strange upper part of her body heaved now in tumult; her eyes were enormous. "I'm not going to leave you, Della. But this earthquake. The roof might fall in."

"The roof could fall in all over the world; where could you go to escape it?"

"Why . . . why, Outside, I suppose."

"You say you've never been out to the Outside Thorburn

told you of. Our people couldn't face that Outside, not yet, Stead. They'd all contract *rooflessness*."

"That!" Stead remembered that, and hastily thrust it aside.

The shaking of the room became a regular, drumming beat, each solid shock following on at regular, slow, maddening moments. Each interval between maximum effect lasted for about five minutes. Then the shaking and quivering would build up, the room tipped, plaster fell, and slowly the chaos subsided.

"There's intelligence behind this." Stead again tried to stand up and this time succeeded, dragging Della with him. She put both her hands on his back and clutched him, her head resting on his breast. "Intelligence . . . and that means—"

"Demons!" Della said in a choked voice. Her whole body shook. The fear struck up out of her alive and livid and horrible.

"Della!" Stead put a hand under her chin, lifted her face. She had not been crying, but the fear danced naked on that beautiful face. "Della," he said again, soft voiced, wonderingly.

"I'm frightened, Stead. Demons! Real . . . true! And they're digging down to us, digging us out like rats in a hole. Oh, Stead, *I'm frightened!*"

Panic threatened to claw Stead into red ruin, then, but he fought it down. For something to do, something to occupy a brief moment, he reached out, with Della clinging to him, and switched on the radio.

"There might be some news."

Another tremor began, shook the room like a Rang shaking a Yob, receded. The radio said, ". . . everyone to help. Shoring parties to repair and buttress roofs. Parties to clear rubble. Electric lines to be repaired. Everyone must help. The Captain has complete confidence. The immortal being is sending us a test. We must measure up to that."

The radio babbled on, telling of rock falls, cave-ins, the hideous long-drawn-out rumble of a rock slide, the most terrible sound an underground dweller can hear.

Della clung to Stead and the roof fell in on them.

Through the smoke and dust, the choking blindness, Stead realized he was lying athwart Della, the divan crushed

beneath them. She lay there, breathing still, her eyes wide open, her mouth in a blasphemous parody of a smile. The buttons had ripped away from her lab smock and it had been twisted aside. He saw black lace, narrow straps, white flesh, flushed rosy now and all powdered with the acrid dust from the fallen plaster.

"This isn't how I'd planned it," she whispered. "But—"

Her arms tightened on his neck. All the fear had fled from her eyes. He had a moment's shocked remembrance of Belle, and how she had said, "*This!*" And then his lips touched Della's, clung, moved, parted. Her tongue touched his. Something was happening to him. Great world-shaking rumblings ravaged the room, the divan, but they could have been bursting out from within him as much as the Demons digging down to kill him.

He drew his head back, gaping for air. Della lay, limp and yielding, but vibrant now with the key to that mystery that had mocked and eluded him for so long. Without understanding why he did it, he reached out, pulled away that black lace, snapped the narrow straps.

"Oh, Stead!" Della sobbed. Her arms pressed him down with a ferocious strength that filled with a joy he still did not comprehend.

The dusty white lab smock lay discarded. His armor rang and the buckles squealed. The radio babbled on: "Heavy falls all over the warrens. Boiling water is pouring in everywhere. Poison gas on a scale never known before. The immortal one aid us! The boiling water is . . . it's coming in! It's steaming, boiling, scalding. It's—"

Stead didn't hear. His spirit fused with Della's and blinding lights pulsed in his eyes, glorious music cascaded into his ears. A moment of absolute truth would be reached in which he could forget everything save the miracle his body wrought, at any second. Now . . . now—

A beam, dislodged from the cracked roof, fell shrewdly across the back of his head.

There came no climax, only a deep drifting blackness that took him away into nothingness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"STEADY, NOW. . . STEADY."

Captain Winslow Tait of the Terran Survey Corps opened his eyes and stared about him.

Everything seemed very dark and dusty; his head ached; an abominable noise tortured his eardrums; he felt like hell. That damned generator would have to cut out just as he'd been trying to impress the Samians with Terran efficiency. The Samians were a big people, though not as big as some Tait had discovered in the Galaxy, and it looked now as though he'd begun with a very bad impression. He'd crashed his single-seater scout, all right.

But how in the name of a blue-tailed baboon had he got here?

He stared about, then recoiled as though he'd touched a red-hot venturi.

He was lying beside a naked woman.

Clumsily, he stood up, to discover that his regulation green coveralls were missing and that he wore a few scraps of underclothes foreign to him. He shook his head.

What the *hell*?

A cloak-like garment clung narrowly to his back.

The ground shook heavily. Something pattered down from the roof like rain. A light speared from a single electric bulb, wan and pitiful. A wall of this odd room collapsed and water, steaming, boiling water, spewed out. A few drops stung his naked flesh.

Well, the woman couldn't be left there, whoever she was. Tait flung a white smock thing about her, lifted her over one shoulder, and sprinted madly for the door opposite the swirling flood of boiling water.

Any man of the Terran Survey Corps was trained to react to the needs of the moment; Tait doubted whether any of them had met this little lot before.

Through the door he plunged, to be engulfed chaotically in a crazed, screaming, fighting bedlam of people. The cloak was about him now, covering both him and the girl.

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He didn't remember tightening it. A man shouted into his face.

"It's no good! We're too late! Nothing matters now! This is the end!"

Captain Winslow Tait had served a goodly time in the Terran Survey Corps, moving from one globe of space to another, discovering everything he could about them, using his flagship *Cochrane* as the only base and home thousands of people would know for a decade or more. The Galaxy was a stupendously wonderful place and always there extended worlds upon worlds, worlds never-ending. Homo sapiens in reaching out from the Solar System encountered many strange aliens: friendly, hostile, disinterested. When the scouter had reported the Samians, Tait had gone down personally, on the invitation of the Samian prime minister.

He now found himself engulfed in a screaming hysterical mob of human beings, in a corridor that shook itself to pieces, with the stink of fear in his nostrils and the awful stench of scalding flesh and the bubbling sound of tons of boiling water assailing him from every direction.

He wasn't mad. That, he could never believe.

So there had to be a logical answer, that a human being from Solterra could find and understand in the alien inhumanity of the galaxy. Vague and nebulous thoughts washed through his mind. The people jostled him. He was pushed gradually along the corridor—once he narrowly missed a rock fall—going with the living tide.

The girl in his arms stirred. He looked down, then pushed his way into a shadowed alcove, his back pressed against the dirt wall.

The cloak thing *moved*. It writhed away from contact with the wall, adjusted itself, hung neatly at his side.

Winslow Tait's mind crawled. His body erupted into a rash of goosepimples.

The cloak—alive!

Then the girl opened her eyes and stared up at him. Deep violet were those eyes. He looked down on her and he knew that he knew her, but he could not remember.

His first, irrational thought had been: A luscious wench. Now he saw the firmness of purpose in that beautiful face,

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the shadow of tragedy marking its pallor. Her short red curls were matted with sweat.

She opened her lips, soft and supple; they parted on a breath.

"Stead," she said. "Oh, *Stead!*"

And Captain Winslow Tait of the Terran Survey Crops remembered.

"Della!"

Two divergent, colliding, opposing streams of thought clashed in his mind. They were like oil and water, coiling around each other in the case of his skull, refusing to mingle. First one, then the other boiled uppermost.

Now he saw the thick star-clusters of space as *Cochrane* drove steadily across the light years; then he saw the evilly slaverling fangs of a Rang. Now he was standing in the control room of his flagship, conning his scouts down onto a new and unknown planet; then he was creeping with Thorburn and the Foragers along dusty, Flang-skin scattered crannies behind the skirting boards of the Demons' houses.

Demons?

Demons!

No—not Demons—Samians.

Ordinary people, living in a relatively low stage of culture, admittedly with four legs and four arms and two ordinary eyes and two atrophied eyes, but intelligent, ordinary, simple people. The Samians had welcomed the advent of alien life upon their planet. Every overture they made had been friendly. They had only recently invented wireless and the first weak signals spluttering into space had homed in *Cochrane*.

Ordinary, decent, law-abiding folk—albeit hundreds of feet tall—who liked to keep their houses clean and clear of pests.

Della clung to him, demanding his attention. Further sections of the roof fell in. The Samians were doing what a man on Earth would do trying to rid himself of a plague of rats. Boiling water, poison, dig the blighters out.

The situation drove home to him then in every aspect of horror.

His fingers dug into Della's white shoulder.

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"Della, I've got my memory back! I know who I am!"

"Oh, Stead, that's wonderful! But . . . but it's too late. Simon is right. This is the end."

He shook his head savagely. "No. There is a chance. My radio. You mentioned artifacts found with me—where is my radio?"

"Belle—"

"Belle! Yes, the radio tech! We've got to find her! I've got to talk to the ship."

That awful overpowering stifling sensation, the impression inseparable from confinement in the earth that he was nailed down in his coffin, rose chokingly as the lurid darkness, the screaming people, the sinister bubbling of boiling water and the continuous earth tremors rocked in a mad saraband all about. He had to hold on. Had to!

"Ship?" said Della, stupidly. "Ship?"

"You wouldn't know. Thing your ancestors came to this planet in thousands on thousands of years ago. Probably called the *Ark*. Common name for colonist ships going out on the long haul." He smiled down on her, fighting to regain sanity. "One thing you were right about, Della. The Empire of Archon probably did descend directly from that old *Ark*."

"I . . . I don't know, Stead. What can we do?"

"Find Belle and my radio. Pronto! Come on!"

Heaving and struggling they fought their way through the masses of people, avoiding rock falls, ducking where the roof sagged menacingly. Dust choked everywhere. Twice they had to dodge streams of water. But, thankfully, that water now was no longer boiling; as it seeped into the earth, into the man-made runnels, its temperature dropped. But still it came, and soon splashing sounds rose eerily from the lower depths.

"The Captain and his Crew want to get out of there quick," he said, dragging Della after him.

Belle's wireless lab was not too far off. They reached it, found the wall in ruins, bundled through to a familiar scene of devastation. Somehow, Simon had stayed with them. Belle rose up, ashen, disheveled, weeping, staggering amid the ruins, panic stricken.

"Belle!" snapped Tait, brutally. "Where is my radio?"

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She couldn't understand, open-mouthed, distraught.

Simon, knowing only that Stead offered some salvation, began to ransack the place.

The radio stood on a shelf in a cupboard, face down on the floor. Eagerly, Tait snatched it up. The smashed end gave him a heart-jolting second of defeated panic; then he realized that he could still use the transmission circuits; only the receiving circuits were broken.

Without a tremble his fingers span the dial, switched on. He began calling out, voice near the concealed mike to shield it from the dinning bedlam about.

"Calling *Cochrane*! Calling *Cochrane*! This is Captain Tait. This is Captain Tait. Listen carefully. I have no reception, repeat, I have no reception, repeat, I have no reception."

He heard Simon say, "What on earth language is that?" And sorted out the language they had taught him with a feeling of relief that his mind could still function on two levels.

"I am down on Samia. Get a fix on my transmission. Tell the Samians to stop digging out the rats. Repeat. Tell the Samians to stop digging out the rats." He repeated this over and over again as the earth shook and dust stifled eyes and nose and rock fell rumblingly.

At last he paused, said, "I hope they're getting this. It may be a job to find the right house to tell the Demons to stop digging."

Simon and Della gaped.

"Yes, the Demons are a kindly, friendly people. And I . . . I shot one in the eye; God forgive me!"

"The Demons—friendly!" Simon blustered. "You must be mad, Stead; all this horror has broken your mind!"

"No, the Demons are a gentle people—yes, the Demons! You are a gentle man, Simon, yet you kill a rat without a second thought, knowing it to be an evil pest."

"I . . . I see that," whispered Della. "Are you succeeding in doing . . . whatever it is you're doing?"

"I don't know." He went on calling out, sweat running down his body his voice hoarse. He broke off to say, "I can only try. All I can do is try."

He didn't tell them that *Cochrane* might be gone. He had

no real estimate of his time below here. Commander Goodwright might have spaced out, mourning the loss of a skipper and a friend. "No," he said, fiercely. "Nol Come on, Goody! You've got to stop the Demons—the Samians—from digging us out! You've got to!"

The far roof caved in; dirt and rocks tumbled down in an avalanche of terror, and light, bright, white, cruel light, splintered through.

"Stop them, *Cochrane!*" he yelled into the mike. "Stop them! They've dug us open; they'll be trampling all over us soon! For God's sake, stop them!"

The roof ripped back. Brilliant, stabbing beams of actinic fire lanced down, stung his eyes, brought tears spurting. Della screamed. Simon clapped his hands to his tortured eyes.

The noise became impossible to sustain. Hydrogen bombs and planetary volcanoes seemed to combine in one hellish cacophony. Typhoons whirled about the figures of the human beings, crouching in holes in the ground.

Up there lay nothing—up where Tait looked with something still left of the fears of Stead; a sky, a distant prospect of clouds drifting, roseate, far off, serene.

Simon, lowering his hands, looked up and . . . screamed. He fell writhing to the ground. Still shouting into his mike, Tait could do nothing for the old scientist struck down by *rooflessness*. Della clung to him.

"Shut your eyes!" he screamed to her in a panted aside.

Against those clouds, so familiar, so awful to these people of the skirting board labyrinths, a dark shape moved. In the broken-open ground now, pitilessly exposed to the light of the Samian day, men and women ran and screamed and dropped, scuttling like ants in a nest disturbed by a probing stick.

And up there that looming monstrous shadow towered up and up and up. "My God!" said Tait, awed. "They're big!"

Flat on the ground with one arm around Della, the other grasping the radio, he continued to call out desperately, incoherently. The camouflage cape spread itself out over them, its sixteen legs tucking themselves neatly in at the sides. But it was puzzled by the light, by the feeling in the air,

its chromatophores changed sluggishly. The cape, too, felt naked under this inconceivable nothingness above.

Face strained, muscles jumping, the cords in his throat taut with the effort of shouting into the mike, he saw a sudden shining expanse of metal appear with a crash of displaced air directly before them. Something lifted him, a brief intolerable pressure, then he was sprawling on the metal. It lifted. It swooped dizzily up into the sky.

He screamed into the mike, "The Demon's got us! It's put us on its shovell For pity's sake, *Cochrane*, tell them."

A blackness whirled about him. Star-shot darkness engulfed him. Something extraordinarily hard cracked deftly down along his temple. Everything whirled away into nothingness.

Tait woke up in the sick bay aboard *Cochrane*.

He lay in the comfortable bed between sweet-smelling sheets, feeling the goodness in him, the drowsy after-sleep pleasantness seeping along his muscles, his whole body aglow with health.

Old Doc Hejaz must have worked overtime on him.

A sudden fluttery movement at his side brought lazily incurious eyes to focus. His camouflage cape lay in the bed with him, still, he guessed, attached to him by its twin umbilical cords; old Doc Hejaz's eyes must have popped open at that one. But, like the sensible medico he was, he'd left the cape in situ until the skipper woke up to explain.

It felt good just to lie in the sick bay and think over what had happened. Nothing he could do now would alter what had happened. One glance had shown him Della's red curls on the pillow of the next bed. H'mm. She might not understand space rules and regulations.

He thought about her attempts to bring back his memory. She'd been right, too. Sex was, after all, the most potent factor in racial memory; it would have worked probably without that crack on the head. And she'd have shown him the kit Thorburn had found with him.

Thorburn! The Foragers! Honey!

Were they all right? Cursing, *Cochrane's* skipper levered himself out of bed, pressing the call button.

The orderly who answered brought with her Doctor

Hejaz. Hejaz, a roly-poly little man with a prim mouth, soft womanly hands of immense strength, an understanding of a man's insides that came from parsecs of spacefaring and space-doctoring, sat calmly down on the bed.

"Well, skipper. You really believe in delving into the new planet's underworld."

"Huh," said Captain Tait. "Tell me what happened. But, first, there are some Foragers I want looked up."

"If you mean Thorburn and Honey and the gang, they were brought to *Cochrane* an hour or so after you and Miss Hope, here."

"What the—"

"You talked, skipper."

"I see. Well, your conscience is like a blasted monk's, so I don't envisage blackmail. Now, tell me."

"We picked up your signals loud and clear. I can say that everyone felt awful about not being able to reassure you. We found the right house—enormous places, these Samian cities—and the folks, a decent enough old couple, were busily pottering with their kettles of boiling water and their rat poison. The old chap was digging away and cursing the pilfering thieves who'd pinched all his best cheeses and like that."

"The Corps is never going to let me forget this," said Tait, morosely.

"I had a look at their lad. The one whose eye you messed up. I think with a spot of Terrestrial medicine and surgery, he'll regain his sight."

"Thank heavens for that. That was one thing that worried me, made me feel miserable."

"Went after you with a knife as big as a picket boat, I gather. Well, can't say I blame you, skipper."

"But the Samians are such decent gentle people. The Demons—well, the Demons were—"

"The Demons," said Della's voice, "are real, at last. I'll grant you that, Stead."

"You all right, Della?"

"She'll be fine." Hejaz smiled. "Oh, and, Skipper, in case you're wondering. The human people of Samia are just that."

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Homo sapiens. They must have descended from a Solterran colonist venture."

"A damn long time ago. Imagine how they got on in the beginning! Ugh, makes your flesh creep."

"You mean—What *do* you mean?" asked Della.

Simon, from the bed the other side, chimed in with, "I think we have more to learn than that the Demons are real, Della."

"Say, Doc," said the skipper. "Bring in the Foragers, will you? If we're to explain, I'd like to do it to an audience of friends."

When they were all seated, Thorburn, Julia, Sims and Wallas, Vance, fierce Cardon whose revolution had been swallowed up in a world-shaking event, and even Old Chronic, clacking his dentures, Tait looked around for Honey. She stood at the foot of his bed, hesitant, shy, her silky black hair shining wonderfully now in the lights. He smiled encouragingly at her and she sat down on the bed, next to Hejaz. She hadn't looked at Della, and Della's patrician face had frowned slightly at sight of the slender girl.

Tait explained it to them, all about the Galaxy and Solterra and how mankind had set off on his great adventure among the stars and how their long-gone ancestors had come to this planet of Samia and hadn't quite got off on the right foot. It took some digesting.

"That's why the Evolutionary Theory and the Uniqueness of Man stumped you. Cats and Dogs and Men, with four limbs and a common ancestry. All the rest—alien. And that, too, I guess, is why you haven't advanced greatly in the sciences. You have no real record of scientific progress. And all that howling you've been getting on your wireless, Honey. That was the Samians with their recently invented wireless fouling up the bands."

She smiled timidly at him, her hands clasped together in her lap. She looked very lovely. But then . . . so did Della, smiling at him from the next bed. Deuced awkward.

"They dug you out, skipper," said Hejaz, unable to understand the odd language Tait spoke to these people, except for the occasional, understandable word, like "Forager" and "men" and "humanity". "You were lifted on the old chap's

spade, and they're so big and clumsy. He was bound to knock you both out, handing you up to us. Ensign Lewis brought you in."

"Him! I suppose he's found himself a girl already down there?"

Hejaz laughed. "Quite a few have, skipper. This planet is a pleasant place, light gravity, good air."

Tait turned back to his friends from below. "You'll go on living in Samia. But on the surface, where men belong. No *rooflessness* will affect you. You'll form a valuable Solterran colony here, as was planned in the beginning. The Samians—the *Demons*—can only be your friends."

Friends.

He looked at Della and then at Honey. Well?

Well, he was a deep-spaceman, a rough and tough member of the Terran Survey Corps. He had a job to do. He would space out, on the next stage of man's colonization and exploration of the galaxy.

Who knew what they'd find next?

Della and Honey. Honey and Della. Little people from the dank underworld beneath the feet of an alien race. People who'd lived all their lives as rats pilfering and stealing other people's possessions for food, but still human beings.

Good people.

He wondered which of them—or perhaps none of them—would go with him out from this planet into the vasty deeps.

He turned with a joyful smile as a girl's voice—a well-loved girl's voice—stumbling over the unfamiliar language, said, "Skipper?"