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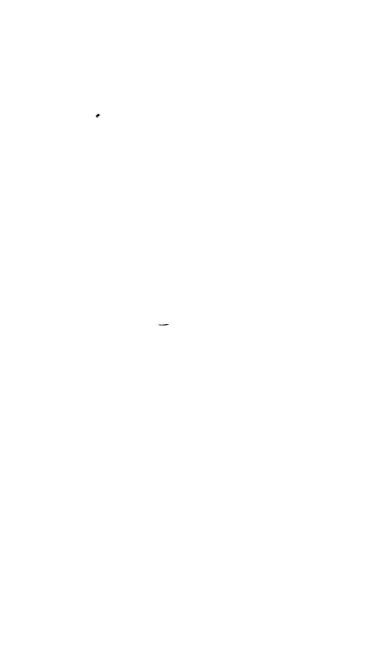
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THE HERO OF DOWNWAYS

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FRIENDS COME IN BOXES





"This is where they waited," the teacher explained. "The Elders stood guard in shifts for long-hibes, a very long time."

"Waited?" John-A regarded the metallic face of the Vat again. "For what?"

"For your birth, John-A. For the vatkid of the Hero. At the time of the Great Battle the Hero lay dying with no issue to inherit his courageous genes. So, in accordance with their inherited knowledge, they took a sliver of the Hero and fed it into the Vat. Eventually you appeared in this tank, a baby in a bath of fluid. You grew, and when the time was right they took you out."

John-A was staring at the Vat. Gradually he comprehended the enormity of the machinery before him; he was suffused with pride. He had been borne by this giant object, not by a mere, weak woman. . . .

His head lifted, he squared his shoulders. "Come on," he said decisively. "I'll lead the way."



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# THE HERO OF DOWNWAYS

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by
Michael G. Coney

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CHAPTER 1

"And praise to the Hero, who slew the Daggertooth."

At this point in his litany the speaker performed a convincing though ritual shudder, causing the sagging flesh on his cheeks to palpitate. His pallid wife shook too, as was customary at the mention of the Daggertooth.

They sat, backs to the wall, on the curving floor of a moist, dim cave. The bluish light of a glowglobe illuminated damp soil, packed tight by the frequent pressure of human bodies. A short distance from their feet was a recess in the wall of the otherwise spherical chamber; within the shadows maggots heaved.

Opposite the couple was the hibeyhole entrance, a circular gap in the wall of barely sufficient size to admit a man. Beside this entrance sat a small girl dressed like her parents in the warm pelt of the blackfur; also wearing an expression of mutinous boredom.

The man paused in his prayer of thanksgiving, detecting a further particle of food nearby. He pronged it with his knife, munched and swallowed, and resumed.

"For had it not been for the Hero, then we poor, timid inhabitants of Downways would have perished before the Daggertooth as the mean maggot perishes before the knife. Timid maggots are we . . ."

The man's voice trailed away into ominous silence as he observed his daughter picking her nose ostentatiously. He scowled. "Be still while I repeat the praise, trukid Shirl," he admonished.

Shirl turned her head away, glancing out of the hibeyhole entrance. Scanning infrared, she detected other trukids passing in the dark tunnel outside. She shifted restlessly. She wanted to go out.

"Look at your trudad when he speaks to you!" shrilled trumum. "Have you no respect?"

Shirl shifted her position again, staring thoughtfully into the light of the glowglobe, her small face serious. She considered the question which had been intended by trumum as rhetorical. She considered it carefully and logically, being that type of child.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said at last, her voice tiny in the outraged silence.

"Not sure what I mean? What do you mean, you're not sure?" Trumum's limited vocabulary was becoming strained—a frequent occurrence when dealing with trukid Shirl.

Shirl shifted her gaze from the glowglobe and regarded her parents. "I've thought about it," she said slowly. "You often say I have no respect. I know you think I'm wrong to have no respect. But what does respect mean?"

Trudad spluttered wordlessly. Trumum set up a thin wailing. An interested face peered in at the entrance to the hibeyhole, nocturnal eyes wide with curiosity. One of the eyes winked at Shirl, then the face was gone.

"Does respect mean fear?" asked Shirl determinedly. She wanted to settle this matter once and for all. "If it does, I can't be frightened of the Hero, because he's dead. And I can't be frightened of you, trudad, because you wouldn't want that. You want me to love you. And I do," she concluded disarmingly. "Can I go out and play now?"

Her parents glanced at each other; wordlessly her trudad shrugged. "Maybe respect is both love and fear, trukid," he said more kindly. "Maybe we don't know what it is—it's just a word we use to describe how we feel sometimes. One of these days you'll find out. But meanwhile just try to behave like everyone else, will you?"

Shirl smiled, huge eyes glowing. "I'll try, trudad," she said. "See you later." She jumped to her feet and scrambled out of the hibeyhole entrance. "Courage remain!" she called back. They heard her feet pattering away on the muddy tunnel floor, then the chamber was quiet again.

"You're too easy with that girl," said trumum at last.

"Sten spoke to me, yesterwake."

"Sten?" Shirl's trumum understood respect; it was in her voice now. Sten was chief of the Downways Council of Elders and consequently a man of importance. Trumum had never spoken with Sten; indeed, if the great man had addressed her in the tunnels, she would have been too awed to reply.

"Sten is interested in Shirl."

"Interested?" There was a sudden edge of suspicion in Trumum's voice. Sten might be chief, but he was an old man; and Shirl was her daughter, her trukid.

Trudad was oblivious to nuances of tone. "He's been watching her progress at school. He thinks she's clever. He says she has ideas which are different. He says ..." He hesitated. "He says she's not afraid of anything, or anybody."

"She hasn't been rude to Sten!"

"I've no doubt she has, but he doesn't seem to mind. It's strange the manner he went out of his way to talk about her. It seems he has something in mind for her ... when she's older, of course."

"How much older?" Distrust of motives is never far from a mother's thoughts.

"Maybe two longhibes from now. He said he would like her to become a teacher."

"A teacher?" This would be a step up for the family status. Trudad was a tender of blackfurs, a low herdsman. Trumum was nothing, an empty shell, a woman whose one experience of childbirth had exhausted and sterilized her thin body. If their daughter became a teacher, there would be a whole new class of people whom they might respectfully address in the tunnels. Trumum hitched her blackfur robe about her and stood up. "Let's go to the Community Chamber," she said.

"Don't tell anybody about it," warned Trudad. "Sten was most particular about that."

Trumum sat down again with a sigh of disappointment.

Shirl hesitated before the Community Chamber. From within came the hum of conversation as the inhabitants of Downways discussed the events of the waketime in the subdued light of a single glowglobe. Scanning infrared, Shirl glanced around the interior, but detected only the larger heat-sources of adults. The trukids of her acquaintance were elsewhere, exploring, playing, getting into trouble out of their parents' earshot. She passed on.

Arriving at the Shrine of the Hero in the Chamber of Praise she remembered her trudad's words and genuflected briefly before the rough pile of stones. It was as well that she did so, for Ned the foundling, a trainee hunter, passed by. He averted his head on seeing her, as was the way of superiors, and made his obeisance to the Shrine before moving off in the opposite direction. Shirl considered calling a greeting after him, but thought better of it.

The fungoid glowglobes became more frequent as she neared the work areas of Downways and it became less

necessary to scan infrared in order to avoid collisions with the people passing up and down the tunnels. A few flutterbugs winged overhead. Pausing at a junction, she decided to pay Poto a visit.

"Fortitude, young Shirl." The inventor looked up from his work as she entered the chamber.

"Poto, what are you doing?" She fingered the stacks of fibrous tubing piled against the wall. "Where did these come from? What are they for?"

The man smiled indulgently. "Why don't you tell me something instead of asking questions all the time?"

"No, tell me." The little girl moved over to the rough workbench and began to fiddle with the incomprehensible objects scattered about. She picked up shorter, cut pieces of tubing and other oddly shaped lumps of timber.

"Leave them alone, Shirl. If I told you what they were for, you wouldn't understand. But if you keep quiet, I'll let you watch."

Obediently Shirl stood aside as Poto took a short tube and fitted a cylindrical section of timber inside. "See?" The cylinder slid easily within the tube. Then Poto took up two of the longer tubes; the ends had been fashioned so that one fitted snugly against the other.

"So tell me," insisted Shirl. "I know you want to."

Poto dropped on one knee and looked into her face. "Shirl, you tell me this. Of all the jobs in Downways, which is the worst? What is the work the lowest people do? The very lowest?"

Shirl thought. "They carry the water."

"Right. Now what I am making is a pump, which will pull the water into Downways without anyone having to carry it. The water is drawn from the well up the long tubes by the pump. When the whole thing is finished, instead of having to carry skins all the way from the well, people will be able to get their water from this chamber."

At this juncture Bott the carver entered, bringing more timber which he dropped with a clatter to the floor. He glanced at Shirl and Poto with his vacant, idiot's eyes, then departed without a word.

Shirl watched him go. Thoughtfully, she said, "After your pump is made and we get the water from here, what will the water-carriers do? What job can be found for them?"

Poto stood up abruptly, staring at her. "You think in a strange way, little Shirl. The wrong way around. First we bring the water here, then we worry about jobs for the

water-carriers. That is the way of progress, otherwise Downways will never improve."

"I don't see why we can't think about everything at once." Losing interest, Shirl moved away. Outside the chamber again, she noticed the joined lengths of tubing snaking away down the side of the tunnel. She began to follow the direction of the pipeline idly, her bare feet sinking into the moist soil.

"May courage remain with you," the inventor called after her.

Shirl had always been a solitary child, most happy in her own company. When she told her parents—and even herself—that she wanted to go out and play, what she really meant was that she wanted to get away from the family hi-beyhole. Her parents had frequently commented on the fact that she rarely joined in the games of other children; this worried them. Like all parents they wanted a child genius who was nevertheless a conformist. Shirl was no genius—in the region known as Downways such people find no outlet for their talents—but she found the stereotyped games of her small contemporaries boring, and preferred to wander around exploring and observing. In a different society she would have been described as an advanced child, but in Downways she was merely recognized as a loner.

Except by Sten the Elder.

He came across her walking along the tunnels, holding a fragment of glowglobe before her, head down, seemingly examining the floor.

"What are you doing, Shirl?"

She looked up, startled, dropping her glowglobe into the mud. The tunnel hereabouts was dark; few luminous fungi grew from the moist walls. Scanning infrared, she recognized his warm outline. "Oh, Sten," she said, confused. "I . . . I was following the tube of Poto."

Sten smiled. "Why? Or need I ask? You were just inquisitive as usual, I suppose."

"Poto says the tube will draw water from the well, and I wondered how. So I thought I would follow it."

They moved aside to allow two water-carriers to shuffle past with a bulging, swaying skin slung from a pole between them.

"Aren't you afraid, being here on your own?" asked Sten, walking beside her, matching his pace to hers.

"Afraid?" They were passing a growth of glowglobes and

she looked at him curiously; there had been a strange eagerness in his tone. "You're with me, Sten. I'm not alone."

"But supposing I hadn't met you. You would still have come here. The tunnels hereabouts are dark. They're a long way from the hibeyholes. It's just possible you might meet"—he paused for effect, watching her carefully—"the Dagger-tooth."

She met his gaze calmly. "There is no Daggertooth. The Hero slew it."

In face of her childish certainty, Sten deemed it unwise to pursue the topic. He accompanied her to the well in silence.

After a while the glowglobes became more numerous again and a muted tapping sound carried up the tunnel. Rounding a corner, they came upon a team of men hacking at tendrils with knives. This was a task which had to be carried out frequently in the vicinity of the well; if not kept back, the strong filaments would eventually block the tunnel.

Sten spoke almost to himself. "They are more numerous," he murmured worriedly. He examined a cut end which exuded white liquid.

"Pale blood," observed Shirl. "The monster behind the tunnels is moving closer, drinking our water. One day, Ros was down here, and she told me a tendril gripped her ankle. I wouldn't like to see the monster's face when he breaks through."

"Monster?" echoed Sten. "What nonsense you trukids talk." Nevertheless he gazed at the wall nervously. The men had stopped work and stood watching the pair silently and with some awe, being several classes below Sten. The Elder addressed one of them abruptly. "Do the tendrils move?" he asked.

"They move, Sten," replied one. "But slowly, in the time between longwakes. Much slower than the jumbo worm, even. I think the trukid was mistaken."

"I remember ten longhibes ago," Sten ruminated, "there were few tendrils. Only in the Chamber of Snakes, far away up the tunnels could one see such things. But they were thicker, and didn't move."

Shirl was fidgeting with impatience; the speech of the Elder often affected her like this. It tended to become slow and pedantic, almost like the Relitalk used in Praise. "Like this," she said, indicating Poto's pipe which ran past their feet. "These tubes came from the Chamber of Snakes. Poto told me."

"I must go," said Sten. "This matter must be reported to the Council."

"Soon it won't matter," remarked Shirl. "When Poto's pump is finished, we won't need to go through here."

"I wish I shared your confidence in Poto, young Shirl," said Sten. "Courage remain." He walked away.

As the Elder receded up the tunnel the work team relaxed and regarded Shirl with interest. "You move in high circles, trukid," said one.

"Jealous?" asked Shirl, pushing her way through hanging tendrils to the edge of the well. She removed her blackfur robe and waded into the dark water, gasping at the sudden chill. Then she flung herself forward and plunged beneath the surface, while the work team watched with astonishment. She emerged and swam a few strokes into deeper water.

Astonishment on the shore changed to fearful amazement. "She crawls on the water," whispered one of the men. "How does she do that? It's not . . ." He struggled to express himself. "It's not natural," he said feebly.

The well which supplied Downways was in the nature of an underground lake of unknown size. A few glowglobes studded the roof of the cavern, increasingly far above as Shirl swam out, lending the water a dim phosphorescent glimmer. Soon she was out of sight of the walls with only the gleam of her own ripples for company. She paused, treading water, staring around into the blackness. Much farther ahead she could make out a glittering cascade; a dim roaring came to her ears.

Suddenly she felt a bit foolish. Carried away by the admiration of the men on the shore, she had allowed herself to swim farther than she had ever attempted before. Indeed, her previous experience of swimming had been confined to short private experiments following an incident when she slipped and fell into the water while filling a skin. On that occasion, as she had emerged gasping and blowing, she had suddenly discovered that her body possessed a certain buoyancy. She had probably never swum more than a few dozen strokes before.

She turned and headed back, feeling cold and a little alarmed, very much aware of the unknown depth of water beneath her. She began to think of monsters, of tentacles seizing her legs and dragging her into the black depths. Her swimming degenerated into a panicky thrashing.

Quite soon she realized that she was lost. The roaring was louder and the water disturbed. The shore where the men waited might be anywhere. She calmed herself with an effort, forcing herself to forget the possibility of slimy tentacles, and she trod water while she considered the situation.

On no account would she call out; the humiliation of admitting her mistake would be too much. She listened for voices, but could hear only the waterfall in the distance. Her legs were beginning to feel cramped and frozen. It was frighteningly obvious that she had been swimming in circles.

Then the phosphorescence gave her an idea. Awkwardly at first, then with increasing confidence, she began to swim backward, kicking with her numbed legs, watching her wake recede behind her. If she could keep that narrow swirl of blue water in a straight line, she must soon reach the wall of the cavern; then she could follow it around to the tunnel.

The plan was almost too successful when, after an eternity of kicking, her head smashed into hard rock. She sank, surfaced coughing with her senses spinning, and got her fingers around a projection. She hung there for a moment, recovering her breath and her nerve.

More glowglobes grew here; in their faint light she saw that she was directly below a ledge. Arms aching, she began to haul herself up, intending to rest awhile before moving on.

Above her, a number of glowglobes suddenly winked out. Automatically her eyes snapped into infrared focus. There was a heat-source directly above her; it resolved itself into the shape of a man, bending toward her silently, reaching for her.

With a squeal of fear Shirl let go of the ledge and dropped back into the water. Frantically she began to thrash her way in the direction where she felt the tunnel lay, keeping the cavern wall to her left. Glancing over her shoulder at one point, she saw the glow of the silent figure immobile in the distance, watching.

Soon she heard the voices of the work team. She staggered ashore, trying to control her breathing and the agonized thumping of her heart.

"How do you do that, trukid?" asked one of the men, unaware of her state. "Crawl on the water like that. I've never seen that done before."

Shirl walked past them. "Practice," she said airily. "Just practice, that's all. Anyone can do it."

Then, farther up the tunnel and out of sight of the team, her legs folded under her and she sat down abruptly, shaking uncontrollably. The vision of the figure on the ledge swam before her imagination.

The shape had only approximated to that of a man. The thing had been weirdly shaped, and she could have sworn it had four arms. . . .

CHAPTER 2

"I can't think what's wrong with the kid. I really can't. Sometimes I feel like giving up."

Trumum's whining filled the hibeyhole as Shirl, painfully stiff after her adventure of the previous wake, stumbled around yawning. The memory of trumums for good things is notoriously short, and Shirl's trumum had already forgotten yesterwake's pride in her daughter's ability.

"I'm tired, that's all," muttered Shirl, picking at her breakfast with little appetite. Lasthibe's dreams had been vivid; four-armed men had stalked through her imagination as she lay half-conscious, her body aching and exhausted. Once her trudad had risen to relieve himself, pulling the cover from the clump of glowglobes; and she had almost screamed with terror at his multiple shadow.

Trumum was well into her stride. "You've no reason to be tired. You don't do any work. I'm the one who ought to be tired, stuck in this hole all wake, feeding the maggots, making clothes for you and your trudad..." In fact trumum spent most of the wake at the Community Chamber bemoaning her lot with the other trumums and old maids. During the worktime, the men gave the Community Chamber a wide berth.

Shirl struggled through another mouthful, then flung the remains of her breakfast into the recess, where it was instantly devoured by the cannibalistic maggots.

"Can't even eat her food, now."

Putting down his jug of koba juice half-finished, trudad got to his feet. "Leave the kid alone, will you?" Outside, the tunnels were coming alive with padding feet as the inhabitants of Downways commenced the new wake. "Come on, Shirl. Time for school. I'll come part of the way with you."

He crawled out of the hibeyhole entrance, followed gratefully by Shirl. As they brushed themselves off and started down the tunnel, they heard trumum getting in the last word, fortunately incomprehensible.

"Don't mind your trumum, Shirl. They're all the same, women are. It comes with being dispensable. Things weren't like this in the old days when everyone lived Up Top, so they say."

"Dispensable?" Shirl was not yet of an age to have learned the facts of life.

"Well, you know, the Vat . . ." Her trudad's tone was embarrassed.

"The Vat?"

"Never mind. You'll learn all about it at school." There was a note of finality in his voice; Shirl knew it was useless to pursue the subject, and was not particularly sorry.

They passed the entrance to Poto's workshop; the inventor was already at work and Shirl caught a glimpse of him shaping a piece of timber. Quite possibly he had been working all through the last hibe; the man was indefatigable when engaged on a project. At other times, when the inspiration had deserted him, he would lie around the tunnels thinking, or drinking koba juice. At such times he was possibly the most unpopular man in Downways.

Nearby, an acrid stench and rhythmic clanging denoted the smithy. Peeping in, Shirl saw the wiry figure of Arch bent over his anvil, hammer swinging, while the chamber glowed an unearthly, unnatural crimson.

There were very few trukids about and Shirl decided that she must have left the hibeyhole too early in her desire to escape from her trumum's tongue. She slackened her pace.

"Like to have a look at the blackfurs?" asked her trudad, guessing the problem.

They had reached his place of work, the interconnecting blackfur chambers. An animal stench hung about the entrance. Pulling aside a rough timber barrier he stepped inside, followed by Shirl.

The chambers were illuminated by glowglobes carefully planted in the moist ceiling well out of reach of the blackfurs' lumbering bodies. The first chamber was empty, its floor a trampled morass of mud and excrement. Shirl kept close behind her trudad as he walked carefully around the edge of the filth and through the gap into the next chamber.

Here a blackfur rooted about near the foot of the wall, sniffing at the dislodged soil with its blunt nose, digging more soil loose with its large claws. It sensed their presence and

wheeled around, watching them myopically from tiny eyes almost hidden by fur, while its sharp teeth crunched at an insect. Whiskers jutted from its cheeks, trembling as it chewed. Shirl backed away. The animal stood as tall as a man at the shoulder, and must have been ten times as heavy.

"He won't hurt you." Her trudad echoed the unconvincing reassurance of ages, meanwhile holding his long spear at the ready.

"I think he would if he had a chance."

"No. They move very slowly. They're almost blind."

"How many are there?" This chamber led to another; scanning infrared Shirl noticed an aura of heat beyond.

"About twenty, but we can't be sure. They burrow all the time and it's easy to lose track. The chambers go all over the place. Some people say that the blackfurs were the original creators of Downways, longhibes ago."

He went on to describe the popular Downways theory which Shirl had heard many times before, then launched into the equally familiar details of his job; an explanation so stereotyped that Shirl always thought of it in capital letters—The Care of the Blackfur in Sickness and Health.

It saddened her. Her trudad—for whom she had a great affection—lived for his job, discussed it endlessly with his friends, took an overwhelming pride in the fact that he was an important if unrecognized cog in the Downways food and clothing machine.

He never realized that he was despised by the majority of the inhabitants as a mere herdsman. He was a laborer of almost the lowest social standing, classed above only the water-carriers. And, worst of all, he smelled of blackfur. The odor of the animals with whom he spent his working life seemed to exude from his every pore. Even Shirl, who had lived in the family hibeyhole for all of her short life, could recognize her father in the dark by his smell, without the necessity of scanning infrared. . . .

As soon as possible she left him and made her way down the tunnel to the classchamber.

The teacher was already there, seated on a ledge facing a handful of trukids who squatted on the floor. The teacher was an elderly woman named Anna whose legs showed traces of hair fungus. Shirl suspected that Anna's only qualification for her job was a rough understanding of the film library, the repository of knowledge from which the old woman taught parrot-fashion and mindlessly.

In due course the classchamber filled up with dawdling, re-

luctant trukids to the number of some thirty, and Anna stood up, scratching at the incipient hair fungus near her knee.

"Fortitude, trukids." She walked forward to a large glowglobe which grew out of the floor, and bent over it, spreading a film over the luminous surface so that the print showed up black against the background of phosphorescence. "The subject of this morning's lessons is . . ." She paused and Shirl thought, *She doesn't know the subject yet. She's picked the film at random. . .* "Radiation and Gigantism. Well now, I'm sure we all know what radiation is. Prince?" She indicated the boy who sat next to Shirl.

Prince rose to his feet. He was big for his age and conceited, which was to be expected of the trukid of Max the hunter chief. Shirl found him irritating. "Radiation is why we live in Downways," he said. It was an axiom which he had never questioned.

"Very good. Now . . ." Anna peered at the film again, then became aware that Shirl had stood up as soon as Prince sat down. "Yes, Shirl?" she asked resignedly.

"I still don't know what radiation is, teacher. I mean what it *really* is."

There was a faint titter from somebody. Shirl was slow on the uptake. The question was already answered.

"It's a miasma, Shirl. A poisonous miasma in the air as a result of the Bomb, from which it fell out. You remember before last longhibe . . . No, of course you wouldn't. You weren't here. Anyway, we touched on some of the effects. Radiation makes things grow wrongly. It's an unpleasant miasma."

Prince spoke up. "A nasty smell, like blackfurs?"

Shirl flushed at this pointed reference to her trudad, but stuck to her guns. "How does it make things grow wrongly?"

Anna knew the answer to this one. "It affects the makeup of the body cells."

Shirl was thinking hard, the rest of the class forgotten. "Could it . . . could it do something like . . . like making a man have four arms?"

She didn't understand why the entire class laughed at this; her question seemed entirely reasonable. Indeed, Anna did not laugh. She was regarding Shirl with sudden interest.

"It could, Shirl. It could. Why do you ask that?"

Taking their cue from the teacher, the rest of the class became silent, watching Shirl with new respect.

"Yesterwake I saw a man with four arms."

"Saw him? In Downways?"

"Well . . ." Shirl became confused. "Really, I scanned him. But I'm sure he had four arms."

"Where was he?"

"Near the well."

"Oh." Anna looked thoughtful; then she said, briskly, "It's always possible to mistake a heat-source. You trukids love to create monsters at the well. Let's hear no more about it. Nobody can be affected by radioactivity now, because nobody lives Up Top on the surface. Sit down, Shirl. Now—" She returned to the film.

For a while she droned on, her face blue in the glowglobe's light, while the class listened with varying degrees of attention. Prince was in a fractious mood and persisted in teasing Shirl, nudging her, pulling her hair, and generally trying to distract her from the lesson. Shirl did her best to concentrate through all this, mindful of a hint about her future which her trudad had passed on to her yesterwake.

In fact the lesson was unusually interesting, dealing with the effects of radioactivity on certain small animals; it appeared that surprising increases in size had been observed with succeeding generations of rats and mice—whatever they were. Anna's voice betrayed her own interest, lending weight to Shirl's theory that the teacher was seeing the film sheet for the first time. She came to the end and eagerly pressed the next sheet to the glowglobe's surface. She paused, examining something closely.

"Trukids," she said suddenly. "Come over here. I'd like you all to see this."

They crowded around the glowglobe, gazing at the marks on the transparent film surface. There was a picture of an animal; Shirl recognized it instantly. "That's a blackfur," she said.

Anna read the caption to them. "The dormouse. A small mammal with a high metabolism; another animal which has shown a tendency to gigantism under irradiation of successive generations." Anna laughed brightly; she leaned well forward over the film, covering the lower half with her body. "Well, you'd hardly call the blackfur a small animal now, would you?"

There was something unnatural about her tone. Shirl looked at her curiously. Anna's shoulders were shaking slightly; her hands, tracing the words beneath the picture, trembled.

"Time for a break," the teacher said abruptly and decisively. "Off you go, trukids. See you all in a moment."

Yelling, the class scrambled for the tunnels, leaping, fight-

ing, crowding the maximum activity into the short period before the next lesson. Anna followed them out; Shirl watched her hurrying away in the direction of the Elders' Council Chamber.

Shirl crept back into the classchamber.

The film was still there. The picture of a dormouse, or blackfur, was followed by a few paragraphs of text. Then came another illustration.

It was an animal of fearsome aspect. Long and deep in the body, long of hairless tail and short of neck. Smaller head, mouth agape showing sharp, cruel teeth. An expression of infinite ferocity.

The caption underneath said: RAT.

Even the word itself looked terrifying in its brutal conciseness. Shirl recognized the picture from the descriptions of ages, maybe even from inborn instinct; and she shuddered uncontrollably.

It was a Daggertooth.

Yet she couldn't take her eyes off it. Gazing at the evil creature, she thought of the legends she had heard in her short life—the ritual shuddering at the very mention of the Daggertooth, the Relitalk references to the Hero who had stood face to face with the monster and vanquished it. She wondered how she would acquit herself if she met such an animal in the tunnels; and she knew her terror would get the better of her.

But the Hero had slain the Daggertooth. A conversation of yesterwake came unbidden to her mind, and with it the word: respect. If she respected anyone, then she respected the Hero.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she almost missed the sound of approaching footsteps. The voices in the tunnel outside broke through her reverie, however; the voices of Anna and Sten. Guiltily she looked around, then ran across the classchamber and slipped behind a projecting boulder. She crouched low, listening.

Sten was speaking. "Near the well, you say? Did you ask her exactly where?"

"No," said Anna. They were in the chamber now. Shirl pressed against the rock.

Sten's voice was thoughtful. "We haven't heard of the Odd-lies for several longhibes. Frankly, I thought they'd died out. How long ago was it, do you remember, that they last raided Downways?"

"Oh, longhibes ago. I remember they took away my little

sister and several other trukids. We never saw them again. I often wondered what happened to them."

"I think . . ." Sten hesitated. "I think they use them for breeding purposes, Anna. The Oddlies can't breed true themselves, so it's said. They're mutants, permanently affected by radiation, and their children are mutants too. It's said that originally they were members of Downways who broke away and went Up Top, intending to live on the surface. They found out their mistake with the next generation. So they dug themselves in again, some distance away on the other side of the Great Chambers. Since then they've never bred true—they've lost the form of the Old People altogether." He made a little noise of disgust. "Unlike us—apart from the abominations we banish. The Bomb knows what they look like now. I wouldn't like to meet one."

Anna said: "This must be brought up before the Council."

Sten sighed. His voice sounded tired as he replied. "Here in Downways we've got enemies on all sides. There are reports that the Daggertooth is around again. Hunters have told me of large droppings near the Chamber of Snakes. The Speaker has been heard in the Great Chambers. . . . Let's have a look at that picture."

There was a pause. Peering out from her concealment, Shirl saw the couple bent over the glowglobe. Sten shuddered violently. "That's it, sure enough. I saw it longhibes ago, when the Hero . . ." His voice trailed away.

"I know. There's no defense."

"Unless . . ."

Anna rested her hand briefly on Sten's arm. "Unless the Project is a success."

"The Vat is slow. Too slow."

On this cryptic note Sten turned and left the classchamber, followed by Anna. Shirl rose from hiding and stood uncertainly.

"Now what do you make of all that, young Shirl?"

She started violently at the unexpected question. Wheeling around, she saw Ned the foundling sitting in the shadows.

"You were listening all the time!" she accused.

"So were you."

"Yes, but . . ." She hesitated. She meant to say that she was a pupil in the classchamber and therefore had a right to be there; moreover, she and the august Sten were on friendly terms. But she didn't. Ned was older than her and stronger; he also had an unpredictable temper.

"I found it very interesting, Shirl." There was a superior tone in Ned's voice. "How about you?"

Shirl was silent.

"And that bit about us having the form of the Old People. There's an example of self-deception by old Sten Bomb, the people we have on the Council . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I can tell you one very important way in which we differ from the Old People. A difference which Sten conveniently forgets."

"What's that?"

"We can see in the dark. We can scan infrared. The Old People could never do that."

"Does that make much difference?" Shirl kept her voice cool, but she was interested. "In any case, how do you know?"

"I went to school last longwake, remember? It was easy to deduce from what I was taught. Everything I learned about the Old People pointed to the fact that they were totally blind in the dark. Infrared scanning was only developed after men moved into Downways."

"So we're different." Somehow this piece of news was depressing. Mentally she riffled through her knowledge of the Old Ones but, now that the idea had been planted, could find nothing to refute Ned's contention. "How did we evolve so quickly?" she asked at last. "An eye is an eye. It doesn't become something different in the space of a few longhibes."

Ned hesitated, regarding her thoughtfully. "Uh . . . what makes you think it only took a few longhibes, trukid Shirl? How long do you think Downways has been in existence?"

"Oh, not all that long, I don't suppose," said Shirl airily, sensing Ned's sudden interest in her opinions. "About a hundred longhibes, maybe. Otherwise, if it had been much longer, all the relics of the Old Ones would have rotted away, you know."

"Maybe they were made to last. And apart from that, a hundred longhibes would give you"—Ned paused, calculating—"over twenty generations. A lot could happen in that time. The Daggertooth could have weeded out those who couldn't see well, leaving the others to breed. . . . It wouldn't take long."

"It's not long enough," said Shirl stubbornly. "And the Daggertooth doesn't come all that often; not even once a longwake." Suddenly a new thought occurred. "Come over here, Ned," she said. She led him to the glowglobe on which the sinister illustration rested. "See that? See the Dagger-tooth?"

"I see it." Ned tried to repress his shudder.

"See its eyes?"

"What about them?" Irritation began to show in Ned's voice; he was two longhairs older than Shirl and was beginning to resent her precocious manner.

A babble of voices outside announced the return of the rest of the class. At the sound of Anna's voice requesting that the trukids desist from stampeding about like a herd of blackfurs, Shirl and Ned withdrew guiltily from the glowglobe and walked quickly over to the other side of the classchamber. As Anna entered, followed by the trukids, the pair were examining the wall etchings with apparent interest.

"To your places, trukids," called Anna.

Shirl, talking quietly and quickly, pointed to an illustration of a blackfur carved into the packed mud. "You see its eyes? They're small. They're small like the picture of the Dagger-tooth. Small like the pictures of the Old People on the film sheets. The only people with big eyes are us. Why didn't the blackfur evolve, Ned? Or the Daggertooth? Answer me that. You seem to know everything."

"Shirl!" The teacher, noticing a gap among the seated class, called across in a peremptory manner. Ned withdrew into the shadows and edged toward the entrance.

"I see you, Ned!" called Anna. "A bit old for school, aren't you?"

The class tittered, turning around and examining Ned, as with burning face glowing in the infrared, he hurried for the exit.

"Shirl's got a boyfriend!" jeered Prince.

His attempt to repeat this degrading accusation ended in a yelp as Shirl, pushing through to her place, stepped firmly on his toes. Scowling, Shirl sat down and the class resumed.

A child on the verge of puberty is sensitive about certain matters and Shirl was mortified, as the lesson ended and they left the classroom, to find Ned waiting for her. She ignored both him and the amused comments of her classmates, striding off rapidly in the direction of Poto's workshop. Doubling down side corridors she tried to shake off pursuit but the pattering of following footsteps grew nearer. Eventually she stopped by a glowglobe, turned, and drew herself up to her full, though inconsiderable height. She spoke with scathing dignity.

"Just what do you think you're following me for, smarty?"

Ned appeared, much taller than she. "I wanted to speak to you, that's all. What's got into you, anyway?"

"What's got into you?" echoed Shirl, trembling with rage.

"What sort of a fool do you think you made of me, in front of everybody? I suppose you think you're pretty clever. And then waiting for me outside like that. You heard what they were saying. You heard that fool Prince." To her horror she found that she was beginning to cry. "I'll never be able to hold up my head in that class again!"

"Take it easy. Take it easy. They're only kids. Bomb, can't one person talk to another? Forget them, Shirl. I've got something more interesting for you to talk about."

"It had bub-better be good!"

"It's about the Daggertooth, and what we were saying."

They shuddered, then Shirl asked, "What about it?"

"I've been thinking. There might be something in what you say—you know, about how quickly we evolved. There's a place I'd like to show you."

"What sort of a place?"

"An interesting place. You'll know when you get there." Ned pitched his voice in a mysterious tone and glanced unnecessarily over his shoulder, thereby stimulating Shirl's curiosity.

"Tell me! Tell me!"

"I'll show you."

"When?"

"Nextwake. Straight after the hibe. I'll meet you outside your hibeyhole."

With this intriguing promise, Ned turned and strode off down the tunnel.

CHAPTER 3

In a remote reach of the Downways tunnels, in a narrow corridor which slants upward thus theoretically approaching close to the dangerous Up Top, a small green fungus grows. Its skin is tough, but once this is penetrated the interior of the fungus is soft and powdery.

After taking a small pinch of the powder mixed with water, a person will fall asleep within seconds; as an added benefit, the sleep is accompanied by pleasant dreams. No harmful side effects have been observed.

Nevertheless the use of the drug—known as Dream Dust—is strictly controlled. The curator of the supply, and guardian of the barred tunnel in which the fungus grows, was an elderly man named Doctor Leo. His laboratory office consisted of a spherical chamber studded with glowglobes and littered with film sheets on disease in many fascinating forms. Doctor Leo was a trustworthy man and had been a member of the Downways Council. Trustworthiness was a prerequisite of his trade, because the euphoric hours induced by Dream Dust were much sought after by malingerers.

Yesterwake, Shirl's trumum had visited the doctor—the only alternative in times of sickness being a vile witch named Rosa.

She had not, she assured him, enjoyed a wink of sleep for forty hibes. She was at her wit's end. So convincing was her story, so persistent were her pleas, that Doctor Leo relaxed his normal rule that the Dream Dust was to be used only as an anesthetic in the case of actual surgery, and handed her a small quantity of the drug.

The hibe ended. Muffled sounds of awakening, the groans and mutterings with which the inhabitants of Downways hab-

itually greeted the new wake, filled the tunnels. Bare feet pattered.

Shirl awoke.

At once she remembered Ned and his promise of adventure. She reached out quietly and drew the cover from the nearest glowglobe. In the dim blue light she saw her parents curled against the curving wall, apart physically, but together in their pursuit of nocturnal delights. Trumum lay on her back and every now and then she wriggled and giggled softly, like a schoolgirl. Trudad merely smiled, his hands cradling his groin.

Shirl wondered what the Bomb had got into them. It had been many hibes since they had looked so happy.

She crept from beneath her skins, rinsed her face briefly with a handful of water from the earthen pitcher, and pulled on her short robe. Her parents still slept although the noises outside were becoming louder; people were shouting into hibe-yholes to arouse workmates and the tunnels were filling with chattering, jostling humanity.

Shirl left the hibe-yhole. A dim figure leaned against the tunnel wall outside. He was idly examining Shirl's trudad's sign, a tablet of mud engraved with a representation of a blackfur with crossed staffs, referring to his job. Shirl flushed. To her sensitive mind, trudad's vocation was not one worth advertising.

"Ned?" she inquired quietly.

"Fortitude, Shirl. . . . Are your parents still sleeping?"

"I was lucky. The doctor gave trumum something to make her sleep yesterwake, and trudad made her give him some before the hibe. Can't think why; who wants to sleep?"

Ned chuckled. "You'll learn." They joined the mob and began to move with the tide in the direction of the work areas.

"Where are we going?" asked Shirl. "What have you brought your spear for, Ned? Is it going to be dangerous?"

"No. It's just that . . . well, maybe some people might think we shouldn't go where we're going. You know, Elders and people like that. So I brought my spear. If we're stopped I can say I'm hunting, following a trail."

"Oh, and what will I say?"

"Don't worry. It's all part of your education. I'm taking you on a worm hunt so that you'll know how we get our food. Your outlook will be broadened," Ned said virtuously.

They left the main body of people behind and began to move downward. The tunnels became more slippery as the mud underfoot thickened. Shirl judged that they must be ap-

proaching the region of the well, although not by the route she used herself. She asked Ned.

"Quiet!" he whispered importantly, frowning.

"Why?" she whispered back, impressed.

"Guards."

"What are they guarding?"

"The place I'm going to show you."

They crept on and the tunnel became narrower, the roof lower. The tunnel changed direction frequently, sometimes almost doubling back on itself, in contrast to the more logical arrangement of the main Downways tunnels. The glowglobes became infrequent. They broke pieces from a large fungus and held them up for illumination. They rounded another corner and suddenly Shirl stopped dead, uttering a little scream and clutching Ned's hand.

A few paces away, smiling at them from high on a dark wall, was a glowing face. Its eyes were black, an unfathomable hooded blackness in the shining translucency of the beautiful head. It seemed to be watching them but there was no way they could be sure, no way they could gauge the direction of those terrible jet stones. The lips dripped wetness, a bright moisture which fell in glittering drops to the tunnel floor and lay there in a pool of fire.

A voice spoke. A low gloating voice.

"Lovely . . . oh, my lovely; oh, yes. Beautiful. . . ."

Then two ebony hands rose and began to stroke the luminous cheeks, slowly, softly. . . .

The quiet laughter died away. Shirl and Ned stood, not daring to run, hardly daring to breathe, while the dark hands continued to caress the shining face in silence.

Then the voice spoke again. Softly at first, an indistinct muttering, then gaining in strength. The hand plucked at the cheeks, then hovered, fluttering a touch away like nervous flutterbugs, then plucked again, a quick peck, a nip between finger and thumb.

"I've got you, my darling, you're all mine now and they can't take you, can they? They wouldn't take you, not now. . . . Not again. They can't find you here, they'll never find you. . . . It was such a small thing, why did it make all that difference? Where was the justice, my love? Where is love . . . ?" The voice became low again, spoke with a hint of cunning. "I can hear them but they don't know I can. They're coming to get you again, my darling. . . . Listen. . . . Listen."

Shirl and Ned held their breath.

"They can't fool me. I heard them breathing, my lovely, I

heard them. They're close, very close. But they're not going to get you; oh, no. They're *not going to get you!*"

The voice rose to a screaming crescendo and a dark knife appeared in the hands. . . .

As Shirl watched, the beautiful glowing face began to disintegrate beneath the slashing blade which soon glittered with phosphorescence. Shining particles fell to the tunnel floor. The face lost its outline, became a blurred glow against the wall as the knife hacked and tore.

Then there was a final burst of laughter of infinite cunning, of total insanity. Then receding footfalls, and silence.

"What . . . what was that?" asked Shirl unsteadily. Her knees were trembling, her skin wet.

Ned recovered with an effort. "Some nut," he said airily. He moved forward, bent down. "Look, it's only a glowglobe."

He picked up a few fragments and scattered them. "Just a glowglobe shaped like a head. Nothing to be scared of, trukid Shirl."

"You were scared yourself," observed Shirl with some heat. "You ought to have more sense than to bring me to a place like this, where you get madmen." She shivered again. "What sort of a hunter do you call yourself?" she asked illogically.

"Take it easy. He's gone now. . . . Did you recognize his voice, by the way? Was it someone you know?" His voice held more than casual interest.

"Don't be silly. Do I know any madmen?"

"He might be quite sane most of the time."

"None of my friends are nuts," asserted Shirl, with dignity. "Shall we go back now?" she asked.

"Back?"

"Yes. Back to the main tunnels. It's creepy down here. There's no point in hanging around waiting for a maniac to get us."

"Scared?" Ned jeered.

"Of course not. I just don't see the point, that's all."

"Oh, well. If you're frightened enough to miss out on something really interesting . . ."

"I'm *not* frightened."

"Come on, then." Ned took her hand firmly and, glowglobe held before him in her hand, sword in his other, began to advance down the tunnel once more. "Keep quiet," he urged again. "Remember the guards."

"Do you suppose the madman was a guard?" Shirl was not entirely sure of the purpose of the company of guards led by

an Elder named Troy, having been brought up in the security of the main tunnels of Downways which had not experienced a Daggertooth raid in her lifetime.

"I hardly think so. . . . Shh . . . there's someone ahead."

In fact the guard could not be seen. His presence was indicated by a faint glow in the infrared against one wall of the tunnel. Here, Shirl deduced, there must be a tiny hibeyhole in which the guard sat. "What shall we do?" she asked. She had gathered that one did not simply walk past a guard.

"Down on the ground." Ned knelt and Shirl followed his example. They crawled down the tunnel, keeping close to the wall from which the heat emanated. As Shirl had expected, there was an opening here at about knee-height. They could hear the guard breathing deeply and evenly. He was asleep. They crept past, rounded a corner, then stood.

"Not much farther now," remarked Ned.

The tunnel had become larger now, and straight, tapering into a regular rectangular shape. Vertical iron bars showed ahead. Ned grasped them.

"Help me, Shirl," he said. "This thing hinges toward us. We have to pull, then crawl under."

Shirl obeyed, gripping the bars and pulling hard. They yielded with a sustained creak and swung upward. The pair crawled through the low opening, crushing a stinking growth of pallid fungus in their path.

"Careful," advised Ned. "The ground drops away here. We have to climb down."

There was a rope tied to the bars, descending into a blackness unrelieved by glowglobes. Shirl hesitated as Ned swung himself over the edge and disappeared from sight. His voice came back to her, impatient. "Come on! It's not far." He waved a piece of glowglobe. Shirl saw the faint light some distance below, took the rope in her hands, and began to descend carefully. Soon she reached the ground and Ned was beside her.

"This way," he said. "These are the Great Chambers."

She swallowed nervously and followed. Her footsteps padded strangely on the hard dry ground and she knew instinctively that they were in a room of vast size. Agoraphobia seized her and she fell, clawing at the unyielding floor, her mind spinning at the concept of a faraway roof and walls she could not reach or touch. It was worse, far worse, than the first time she had visited the underground lake. She felt exposed, imperiled by unknown dangers; she wanted to crawl into a hibeyhole, feel its confines around her and close her eyes, safe. She could not catch her breath for the trembling

tightness in her chest; pressures nudged her bladder, then squeezed painfully and she lost control, wetting herself, vomiting and choking.

Ned was dragging her to her feet. "Over here," he said sharply. "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Don't think of anything else. . . . It happened to me too, the first time I came here."

Shirl concentrated on her steps alone, on the one certain fact that there was a floor beneath her. At last she fell against a wall. She pressed up against it, sobbing, her nails scrabbling at a surface as hard and unyielding as the floor. But at least it was a second dimension to her precarious existence and after a while she relaxed and her breathing became more controlled. She squatted on her heels, feeling and savoring the wall against her back, the floor beneath her feet. As she began to feel better she became aware of her loss of dignity and directed her anger at Ned.

"You might at least have told me what to expect. It made me ill, all this nothingness. This is a horrible place and my things are all wet and messy and smelly." She began to cry. "I want to go home!"

"Bomb," muttered Ned. "Pull yourself together. I told you, I felt just as bad as you, the first time. Now, come and have a look at this."

He moved forward again, away from the wall. After a moment's hesitation Shirl followed, gulping with fear. The darkness seemed to stretch for an infinite distance on either side of her. In this situation there was no difference between darkness and emptiness; so far as she was aware there might be *nothing* in that endless blackness—nothing at all, just space, all except for the tiny area on which she stood. . . . Lost in space, floating in a vacuum, like—memories of lessons came back to her—like an asteroid. Maybe this *was* space, maybe the film sheets were wrong, maybe the infinite void was down here instead of Up Top as she had been taught. . . .

She stepped forward slowly and fearfully as the unpleasant fancies flitted through her thoughts. She put one foot in front of the other, as Ned had told her, and she clutched his hand as he drew her forward into the emptiness.

Suddenly he let go of her. She gasped in panic, groping for his hand. She could see nothing. Then she heard his voice and her heart thumped with relief.

"Look at that!"

Still she could see nothing. It took an instant for her to re-

alize that for the past few moments her eyes had been shut tight with fear. Opening them she saw the outline of Ned against the glow from the fungus. He held the glowglobe up, waving it.

A vast wall rose before them extending upward as far as the feeble glimmer would reach. Sideways also, the wall spread into blackness. Still too frightened to be interested, she nevertheless noticed that this wall was not so featureless as the other had been.

"What is it?" she muttered, shutting her eyes and imagining that she was back in the hibeyhole with trumum and trudad.

"The Vat."

"The Vat?" She opened her eyes again. She had heard of the Vat—the word occurred many times in the Study of Praise, but she had never considered its meaning before. It was just a religious word, Relitalk like the Bomb, and the Hero. And, possibly, the Daggertooth.

If this was the Vat, then it was real. And oddly, in the back of her mind, it seemed familiar. She regarded it with more interest and saw that it was metallic, gray, and reflecting the light from the glowglobe. Farther up, at the extremity of her vision, there were glittering protruberances. Circular glass windows showed, housing dials. There were switches and buttons.

Becoming bolder, she edged forward and extended her hand, laying it against the metal. She felt a faint vibration.

"The Vat's alive!"

"I know."

"What does it do?"

Ned hesitated. "I'm not sure," he said. "I think I know what it ought to do, but . . . Come on around here. I'll show you."

He led her along the vaulting wall of the Vat, past unrecognized levers and dials and input points, until they reached a large rectangular projection. Shirl noticed that Ned's hand was trembling slightly.

"Now." He held the glowglobe up and drew her close.

Shirl was looking into a glass window set into the boxlike attachment to the Vat wall. At first she could not quite make out what she was looking at; she saw gently moving liquid and a few bubbles, occasionally a pink blur. This latter was rounded and imperfect, shifting at the fringe of vision; it was not a sphere, there were lumps and knobs and darker areas. . . .

Suddenly, horrifyingly, Shirl's eyes swam into focus.

A face was staring at her from the other side of the glass.

CHAPTER 4

"What is it?" whispered Shirl.

Ned was staring at the drifting shape beyond the glass. "It's bigger," he said slowly. "Much bigger." His voice was thoughtful.

The entire creature was now in view, moving slowly from left to right, floating in the fluid bath and, Shirl saw, guided in its movement by slender, shining wires attached to its limbs. It was human in form, quite large—about her own height, Shirl calculated as the first shock left her and she began to get interested.

"It's a person," said Shirl. "A boy. What's he doing behind that glass? Why doesn't he drown?" As she watched, the boy's mouth opened and shut as though in slow speech, and the eyes blinked as they watched her.

"He's a vatkid," explained Ned.

"Why did they put him in there?"

"They didn't. He was born in there. The Vat's a mother machine."

"Then why is he so big? He's as big as me. . . ." Shirl felt sorry for the pathetic, mouthing creature behind the glass; her initial horror had quickly evaporated. "Why don't they take him out, Ned? It's cruel, leaving him in there like that. Has he been forgotten?"

In answer Ned pointed. Above the window was a circular stud with a slot cut in it. "You see that? That's a lock. Nobody can open this box without the key."

"Who's got the key?" By now Shirl was trembling with indignation. "They should let him out!"

"Be quiet." Ned cocked his head to one side, listening. "There's someone coming. I can hear voices." He pulled her away from the window and they crouched against the wall of

the Vat, several paces away. In the distance Shirl saw a dim blue light. Ned concealed his own piece of glowglobe beneath his clothing. They heard footsteps approaching.

"What are we going to do?" Shirl whispered.

"Listen to what they say."

Shirl felt herself flushing. "You do a lot of listening, don't you? Do you spend all your time hiding and spying? I'm surprised you need to listen anymore; I should have thought you would have known everything there is to know about this. I want to go. Come on."

"Wait. They'll hear us. We'll get into trouble."

The voices were close by and Shirl fell silent in an agony of embarrassment. She didn't want to hear. This vatkid and these people were connected in some way with Birth, which was dirty, the topic of sniggering in dark corners. In the past, whenever she had asked her trumum about Birth, she had always been told to be quiet. Her trumum had spoken in a queer voice; apparently Birth was something one didn't discuss. Over the past longwake Shirl had consciously ignored the subject, trying not to listen to the half-understood leers and mutterings of her classmates—in particular Prince, who lost no chance to discomfort her. They called her a prude and she ignored them—while all the time her developing body was subtly betraying her.

And now she was trapped beside the worldly Ned, forced to listen to a private conversation which would probably be about the unmentionable subject.

There were two men standing by the window, looking in. She recognized them as Sten and Agar, and wondered what the two leading members of Downways were doing in this strange and remote area called the Great Chambers.

Sten was speaking. ". . . very soon now. And everything is going well." His voice sounded satisfied, almost relieved, as he peered through the thick glass, his expression intent in the blue light of the glowglobe held by Agar.

"So far." Agar's tone was less positive. "And this is only the beginning. The next stage will be crucial."

"Every stage is crucial. Do you know what I fear most?" Sten looked tired, suddenly uncertain as he regarded the creature in the tank. "More than the . . . Daggertooth even, I fear this thing which we're creating. I can't get rid of the idea that there's something wrong in what we're doing."

"In using the Vat? The Old People built it, didn't they? Are you trying to say the Old People were wrong? Wrong in a sinful way? I wouldn't say that in public if I were you,

Sten." Agar's tone was worried. "You call me a radical, but now you're hitting at the very fabric of Downways' belief."

"You misunderstand me. I didn't say the Old People were wrong in building and using the Vat. What I intended to say was, what might be right for them could be wrong for us."

"How do you mean?"

"It's possible that the Vat was built for a specific purpose, and when this purpose was fulfilled, it was intended the Vat should never be used again. We've never found instructions on the use of the Vat—just the key, handed down through generations, secretly. I'm the last of a long line of keyholders—and only you know who I am, Agar. So far as I know, I'm the first keyholder to use the key for many generations. When I hand the key on to my successor, I rather hope it will never be used again."

"There were no instructions, yet we know how to operate the Vat." Agar was puzzled. "And I've never really thought about *how* we know."

"There's nothing strange about it. We know how to copulate, instinctively. The Vat is merely another method of reproduction, and if we are to further the race, then it's essential that we should know this method also. So again, we have an inborn knowledge. But that doesn't mean that it's right, at this time, to use the Vat. Just as it's not right to copulate with another man's wife, or a girl before puberty. It's possible that the Vat should be used only as a last resort, when other methods of reproduction fail."

Shirl, her face burning with embarrassment, was creeping away from this horrifyingly frank discussion, drawing Ned with her. He did not resist and they eventually reached the end of the Vat wall and rounded the corner. Ned drew the glowglobe from under his robe and studied Shirl's face with amusement.

"By the Bomb, you've gone a funny color, trukid Shirl."

"Shut up."

"Hey." He put his hand under her chin and gently tilted her face up. "Don't take it like that. There's nothing wrong with it. It can be very pleasant." He regarded her intently, and a curious expression crossed his dark face. "For someone a bit older than you, of course." He sighed. "Come on. We'd better get back."

"This isn't the right way," observed Shirl after a moment.

"Of course it is. Come on."

They both heard it at the same time; a distant booming, muffled but still loud, hesitant and somehow familiar. They froze where they stood.

"That's the Speaker," said Ned quietly. "They say that when the Speaker booms, the Daggertooth is near."

"It *is* just a little bit like a voice, isn't it?" agreed Shirl nervously. "Much bigger, though. You can't make out the words, although it sounds as though words are there, under all that noise."

They listened for a while as the great voice droned incomprehensibly, then Ned drew Shirl on.

"Wait," she said. They had moved farther around the wall of the Vat; at this point there were a number of protruberances: switches, levers, slots. A plate with raised lettering read: ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTER. Shirl hesitated, regarding the levers and wondering at the dreamlike sensation which their appearance evoked. There was a *rightness* about the position of those things. Those controls. She approached them hesitantly, then ran her fingers over a shining shaft capped with a red knob. She gripped the knob.

"What are you doing?"

She ignored Ned's question, positioning herself against the knob so that it rested against the pit of her stomach, held in her left hand. Her right hand stole forward of its own volition toward a slot in the Vat wall. She fingered the mouth of the slot, her consciousness suspended, waiting. Her breathing became shallow. There was a tingling sensation in her skin, pleasurable, centering on the pit of her stomach and the fingers of her right hand. She pushed her hand forward toward the slot and the pleasure increased, becoming almost unbearable, emanating not from the warm metal of the Vat but within herself, a primeval delight, irresistible, forcing her to thrust forward with her hand, pushing, pushing against a soft obstruction in the slot, pushing with her right hand, the palm alive with electric pulsations.

As she opened her hand further to grasp and squeeze the warm softness in the Vat, a throb of wonderful, unbearable ecstasy built up in her loins, mounted through her body, spread across her chest and crashed through every nerve-ending in her arms.

Her right hand kneaded, clamped onto the softness.

Her left hand, convulsed, gripped the knob and pulled it against her, pressing it into her body.

"Shirl!"

Suddenly she was flung to the hard floor, torn by racking uncontrollable convulsions of the chest, causing her heart to pound painfully as she fell back from the near pinnacle of pleasure into an abyss of disappointment and, soon, despair. Her harsh breathing turned to sobs as she tried to recapture

in memory the wonder of the last few moments and failed, because orgasm is the most real thing and therefore beyond the reach of mere imagination. And Shirl had not quite achieved the summit; not quite, but she had come near enough to guess that such a summit existed.

And she had been deprived of the experience by this oaf beside her. He was kneeling on the floor and his crude, rough hands were around her shoulders. Furiously she shrugged him off.

"W-what did you knock me over for?" she stormed.

His eyes were still wide with the shock of what he had seen. He hesitated. "You were groaning a lot," he said, avoiding her eyes. "I thought the Vat was hurting you." He scowled at the metallic wall, his lips pouting childishly.

"But it wasn't hurting me at all. It was nice!"

"Maybe you're too young for that kind of niceness," muttered Ned.

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded him in surprise. The recently overheard conversation ran through her mind, meshing with some of the half-understood sniggerings of the class-chamber to make a vague sort of sense. Sense enough to hit Ned with, anyway.

"Bomb, you're jealous of a machine!" she jeered.

His swarthy skin became even darker as he flushed with rage, dragging her to her feet. "All right," he snapped. "Since you've got such a good opinion of yourself, I'll show you something." He held her by the scruff of the neck, thrusting her face close to the slot which contained the softness. "Take a look at that!"

There was no softness now. Instead, the mouth of the slot was partially barred by a sharp-edged, vertical shaft.

"That, my dear Shirl, would have punched a hole clean out of your pretty little hand," said Ned grimly. "And held you there." As they watched, the shaft slid upward out of sight and the lever descended to its original position. "Held you there for just that long," added Ned.

"I'm sorry, Ned," said Shirl in a small voice.

"Forget it. Let's get going." They moved off.

It was not in Shirl's nature to remain contrite for long. "If you know so much about that Vat, why didn't you stop me putting my hand in?" she demanded with a touch of asperity.

He did not answer that for a long time. At last he said, quietly, "I didn't know the Vat did that."

"But you've seen those controls before?"

"Yes. I suppose so. They never meant anything to me, though."

Shirl stopped suddenly, taking hold of Ned's hand. "Ned, I just *had* to put my hand in that slot. Don't you understand? It was instinctive, like Sten was saying. I knew, as I was doing it, that this was what Sten was talking about."

"Nonsense. You were just naturally curious. You might have known what to do, but that doesn't mean you had to do it."

Shirl thought. "Perhaps you're right in a way. I seemed to recognize the controls, but I had no problem then. It was only when I gripped the shaft and started fooling with that awful slot, that I couldn't stop."

"That's right," said Ned thoughtfully. "It's just like . . ." He broke off, coloring.

"But the funny thing is," Shirl went on, to Ned's relief, "why didn't it take you that way? You've been here before. You must have fiddled with the thing. Didn't anything happen to you?"

"I never put my hand on that shaft. Forget it, will you?"

She glanced at him; his tone forbade further pursuit of that topic. "Why are we going this way?" she asked eventually. A cloud of flutterbugs passed overhead, indistinct heat-sources uttering their high chirping cry.

"This is the way back."

"It's not."

"I tell you it is!"

"It's not! Stop, Ned. You'll get us lost." Shirl dragged her hand from his grasp and stood her ground. "The way we came is over there." She waved the glowglobe.

"This is the way," muttered Ned. Sweat was streaming down his brow and his expression was tortured, as though he were in the throes of some great inner conflict.

"Ned! What do you think you're doing? Let go of my hand. You're hurting me!"

Ned didn't answer. He gripped her wrist and pulled her through the darkness. Annoyance began to give way to fear as she stumbled behind. He held his glowglobe rigidly above his head, walking fast and straight as though confident of his surroundings.

They passed dim angular shapes, relics of long-lost technology. Ned ignored them, striding on with head down and arm outstretched. Shirl began to scream, the vast darkness swallowing her cries with hardly an echo. This phenomenon, suggesting that they were moving through an almost infinite space, did nothing to reassure her.

At last Ned hesitated, glancing around him as though momentarily puzzled. His set, blank expression relaxed some-

what; his eyes cleared a little. He shook his head, then was still again, and something in his attitude caused Shirl to think he was listening. She stopped screaming abruptly, listening too. All she could hear was the distant booming of the Speaker.

"What is it? What can you hear? Take me back home, Ned. I don't like it here," she pleaded desperately while Ned stared into the darkness with a strangely blind expression. He ignored her completely; only the fierce grip on her wrist told her that he was still aware of her presence. She began to shiver; it was bitterly cold in this vast chamber and the hard floor was icy against her bare feet, reminding her of the onset of a longhibe. "Please take me home," she repeated.

Then she heard it, a tiny squeak almost above the threshold of audibility. Twice it sounded high above the Speaker's drone, then there was a sniffing noise, a loud, moist inhalation. Shirl's heart thumped and her breathing ceased; she froze in terror. Beside her Ned shifted his position, eyes widening. They stood there motionless in the thrall of a primitive fear, a basic Downways fear instilled in their minds over many generations by the simple process of evolution—as, in earlier times, the dove recognized the shadow of the hawk.

In Downways, the person who did not recognize immediately the subtle sounds and smells which denoted the presence of the Daggertooth, died. Shirl had never encountered the giant beast before yet she was warned by her instincts of its nearness, and those same instincts told her not to move, and thereby hope to avoid detection. Nobody can outrun the Daggertooth. . . .

The sniffing was nearer now. Some thirty paces away, a vast heat-source loomed, an outline of a huge body on slender, strong legs, a short neck carrying a pointed head. The shape was infinitely terrifying and Shirl thought she was going to faint as the beast's head swiveled toward her and she saw its jaws glowing brightly in the infrared, dripping spots of shining saliva to the ground.

Then the creature paused, head cocked to one side. For a moment Shirl thought it had heard her breathing and she was about to run in hopeless desperation when Ned's hand closed more tightly over her wrist. She remained motionless, stilling her breathing, watching, trying to remember that the Daggertooth possessed theoretically poor sight in the dark.

Suddenly, with incredible swiftness, the brute bounded away, head low and jaws gaping. There was a scream in the distance, a human scream. The Daggertooth was a twisting, glowing blur some sixty paces away, striking out with its

forepaws, snapping with its jaws at a number of small, frantic shapes.

Ned shook his head again as though to clear it and began to edge away, drawing Shirl after him, back the way they had come. They moved in silence for some moments while the sounds of battle receded and the Speaker boomed on dully. Shirl was trembling violently although Ned seemed remarkably composed; in fact, the trainee hunter was soon glancing around with casual interest as though the Dagger-tooth were forgotten. He spoke.

"When I'm older I'm going to try to get on the Council."

Shirl gaped at him. He had released her hand at last and was now strolling along as though nothing had happened. She recognized a curiously shaped object which they had passed before; they were going in the right direction and would soon reach the Vat. "The Council?" she repeated stupidly.

"There are too many old people on the Council. People like Sten and Agar. They've had their say, so now they ought to step aside and let somebody else have a try at running things." He turned to her, his face animated, a total contrast to the frighteningly blank expression of a short while ago. "Don't you think so, Shirl?"

"D-don't I think what?" she stammered in bewilderment.

"They're too old. They're past it. Downways is stagnating with people like them in charge."

"Is it?"

"We ought to be moving outward, extending our boundaries. Downways hasn't grown for generations. Maybe we should take a look Up Top sometime. We should explore, maybe merge, get together . . ." He broke off.

"Get together with who?"

"With anyone else we might find. How do we know we're the only ones? We've never been far enough to find out."

They had reached the Vat; the comforting bulk loomed beside them as they walked. Shirl was recovering. She was thankful to Ned for having introduced this new topic of conversation in order, presumably, to take her mind off the fear-some events a short while back.

"Is that what you wanted to do, just now?" she asked. "Explore? You might have told me. You frightened me, Ned, dragging me along like that."

Ned was silent, regarding her thoughtfully.

"And about what you said," continued Shirl. "I don't think we're the only ones. You heard what Sten and Anna were talking about yesterwake. About the Oddlies."

"The Oddlies," repeated Ned. "It might be difficult to get

people to join up with the Oddlies. I hear they're pretty weird, although I've never seen any myself. . . . As a matter of fact," he said suddenly, "if it hadn't been for you saying you saw one yourself, I wouldn't believe they existed. I wouldn't put it past Sten to invent them so that he can keep Downways together. All cooperating against the common enemy, so to speak. Like the Daggertooth. I've never been entirely happy about the Daggertooth either." He deliberately refrained from performing the ritual shudder. "It could be a figment of Sten's imagination. Which casts some doubt on the Hero, too." He warmed to his theme. "And the Chamber of Praise. And the Legend. By the Bomb, I don't know what to believe."

"You've got proof of the Daggertooth now."

Suddenly Ned was on the defensive, watching her guardedly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, what just happened."

Ned laughed briefly, nervously, while his eyes drifted away from hers. "Of course," he said.

Some time later they entered the main tunnels of Downways and parted. Ned to the apprentice hunters' quarters and Shirl to her parents' hibe-hole. Shirl watched Ned curiously as he strode off down the tunnel.

She was almost certain that he remembered nothing of the terrifying incident of the Daggertooth. All the way back he had been pumping her subtly, trying to draw her into a discussion of the events which she only wanted to forget. She was sure that although he was aware that something unusual had occurred, he didn't know exactly what it was.

It could be loss of memory following the shock of the Daggertooth's proximity, although Shirl doubted that. Ned had begun to act strangely before that incident. He had been queer from the moment his face had changed and he had pulled her, against her will, through the darkness and away from the Vat. He hadn't remembered that, either.

The incidence of insanity in Downways was high; Bott the carver was only one example, although generally madmen disappeared after a while. Many times in the hibes the inhabitants of Shirl's area would be woken by screaming; the lost lonely screaming of runners in the corridors—the people who, despite the generations which had passed since the inception of Downways, had not fully adapted to their confined environment.

Shirl dreamed, that hibe; vivid dreams in which she was endlessly pursued by a man with Ned's body but no face, while she swam slowly, very slowly through thick liquid,

trapped in a box from which she could not escape. The box had a window; through it, Sten and Agar watched her struggles with interest. Later the faceless man caught her and pushed her hand into the slot again, and the slot was full of maggots.

It was probably the last hibe of Shirl's childhood.

CHAPTER 5

Looking back on her early life from the knowledgeable vantage-point of adulthood, Shirl realized that she must have then appeared a difficult trukid, even aggressive. She frequently became involved in fights with her classmates—although it is doubtful if the word fight accurately describes such one-sided incidents. Downways people are timid to a degree and physical violence between one person and another virtually unknown. (In earlier wakes, the legendary Hero had emphasized his uniqueness in muscular fashion.) They are talking people, not doing people.

The adults spend many hours in the Community Chamber indulging in koba juice and profitless philosophical debate; the trukids spend more time talking and arguing among themselves than in active physical play. Every trukid becomes a skillful debater before he is three longhibes old; proficient in logic, illogic, and the shrewd use of personal insults to divert an opponent's flow of reasoning. Shirl, however, had brought a new tactic to the art of debate; the right hook to the chin.

Yet she remained popular. Not in the sense that the Hero used to be popular—that was a forced and nervous popularity based on fear; nobody dared to admit that he found the Hero unbearable. Shirl was popular simply because people liked her; her contemporaries because of her honesty, the adults because they saw in her bright intelligence the child they would have liked themselves. She was the special pet of the teacher Anna—yet even this stigma did not diminish her standing in the eyes of her fellows.

As she grew wiser and more experienced in the longwakes following her adventure with Ned, she often thought of the creature in the Vat but resisted the temptation of mentioning the subject to her elderly friend Sten. Sten had made it clear

that the topic was not for general discussion when she had tackled him shortly after the incident.

"It's a secret, Shirl," he had said firmly, having got over his initial annoyance at being eavesdropped upon. "You trukids have secrets among yourselves, I'm sure. Well, this is an adult secret, just between Agar and me, and one or two other members of the Council. In due course you'll be told everything you want to know."

"When?"

"When you're older," Sten had replied in the unsatisfactory manner of adults.

He was more forthcoming on the subject of the Daggers-tooth. "It hasn't been seen in Downways for many a wake," he had said worriedly. "I hope this isn't going to be the start of a new onslaught. There's so little we can do, just yet . . ." His voice trailed away and Shirl was left with the reassuring impression that Downways would have the answer to the Daggers-tooth one day. One longhipe later, thinking back on the conversation, she decided that this was the impression Sten had wanted her to get. . . .

She said so to Ned. Following the Daggers-tooth incident she had seen very little of Ned and wondered if he were deliberately avoiding her. She cornered him as he returned from a hunt one wake, his bloody spear over his shoulder, a huge chunk of jumbo worm meat impaled on the point.

He laughed shortly, showing white teeth in the fierce grin cultivated by hunters. "What can you expect from a Council of old men?" he said contemptuously. "All words and no action. Naturally they'll never have the answer to the Daggers-tooth; the thing's too big for them. . . ." Over a period of time he was gradually remembering the incident which at first Shirl had thought was shocked from his mind. The fear was behind his eyes, the memory of dripping, glowing jaws. He shivered, and the spasm was more involuntary than ritual.

Around them the hunters were butchering the meat for storage and the charnel chamber echoed to harsh masculine laughter and virile reminiscences of the hunt. Blood flowed everywhere, salty stinking, dark and glistening in the light from the glowglobes. Shirl glanced around this elite company of powerful men, their muscles rippling under sweat-sleek skin. Near the entrance to the chamber stood the storage clerks, sorry runts by comparison.

"A team of hunters," she said. "Couldn't they hunt down the Daggers-tooth and . . . slay it?" She hesitated before using the verb from Relitalk. One killed a worm, but slew the Daggers-tooth.

"Hardly," he replied with airy superiority, yet avoiding her eyes.

"Scared?"

He turned away, ignoring her, and began to butcher his meat with his back to her. For the rest of that longwake Shirl saw very little of Ned. She did not, however, lack for youthful male company, and as she progressed through adolescence her classmate Prince was her almost constant companion.

Prince was a little younger than Shirl, tall for his age; over the hibes he had lost the air of childish insolence which Shirl had previously found so annoying. His father was a hunter and Prince would shortly start his apprenticeship in the mysteries of the chase—and Shirl's trumum thought he was a very pleasant youth.

"What a nice young fellow," she would say after each of his many visits to the hibeyhole. "So polite, so different from that queer Ned, so well brought up. . . ."

"So wet," Shirl would add shortly.

"His trudad's a member of the Council." Max the hunter rated high on the social scale.

On one occasion Shirl, goaded beyond endurance, had foolishly observed: "Ned's a hunter, too."

"Shirl! Are you serious about that awful man?"

"I just said he was a hunter, that's all. Just like you said Prince's father was on the Council. It was a statement of fact, nothing more."

"I should hope so. . . . Have you ever noticed what a strange color Ned's skin is?" Trumum addressed trudad. "I can't think what his parents must have been."

"He's a throwback," theorized trudad. "The Old People were all sorts of queer colors."

"It's said that the Hero was a throwback," said Shirl cleverly.

Trumum uttered a wail in which despair and outrage were evenly mixed.

The wake went by and Shirl continued alternately to disappoint and delight her parents, remaining unmarried, yet unviolated. Two longwakes after the adventure with the Daggertooth she began teaching and for a while trumum was content.

Shirl pressed the film sheet to the surface of the glowglobe and read slowly to the trukids.

"It is a significant fact that in recent years observations have confirmed the theory postulated in 2086 by Professor

Mainwaring; in that the absence from the Earth's surface of any type of predator or, indeed, any mammals whatever, has resulted in the recommencement of evolution from an early point and the emergence of new creatures from the seas. Whether this will in due course result in a similar evolution of life culminating in the redevelopment of Man may never be known due to our present survival problems and the possibility of full-scale evacuation.' "

Shirl paused and regarded the trukids. "Ang," she said. "Tell the class what that was all about."

The child, hearing her name, looked up suddenly and guiltily, huge eyes wide. "What?"

"You weren't listening. You were fooling with Brag." The male trukid grinned sheepishly and shifted in his seat, moving a fraction away from Ang. The rest of the class watched and scanned, sensing heat-sources in the infrared; their teacher's face was fiery with annoyance.

Shirl sighed. This class was more difficult than most. Either they did not listen at all, or they asked questions which they knew were beyond her capacity to answer—the gaps in Downways' knowledge of history were enormous. They made fun of her; they felt this to be their right, being the oldest of her four history and reading classes. Brag was adolescent and a problem; when he was not playing about with Ang he was scanning his teacher, a leer in his nocturnal eyes as he detected heat-sources through her robe.

"Sorry, teacher," said Ang with no hint of apology in her tone. "What were you saying?"

"Tell her, Ros."

The younger girl stood, face gleaming phosphorescent blue in the light of the glowglobes. "It was about the Mainwaring theory of Cyclical Evolution," she replied promptly. "Again," she added.

"It bores you?"

"It's not relevant. It applies to an environment different from our own. We live here; what happens Up Top is no concern of ours."

This was the insular attitude which hindered progress. But what progress? Shirl wondered, thinking of Ned. Maybe she was getting too wrapped up in teaching, in the dissemination of knowledge for its own sake. Was this what Sten had intended for her? Was this to be her future—drilling useless knowledge into a bunch of trukids for the rest of her life? Pupils who forget every word she had said by the next wake, and lived only for play and philosophical argument?

"Someday we shall need to know," she said. It was her catchphrase and she detected a groan from Brag.

"When?" asked Ros. She was a good child and her questions thoughtful if at times irreverent. It was axiomatic—the Study of Praise dictated—that knowledge should be passed on. There may be no progress, but there must not be degeneration.

"The Daggertooth is mindless," Shirl used the word to attract their attention and was rewarded by a token shuddering. "The worm is mindless, as is the blackfur. Does that mean that we should be mindless too? A knowledge of the past equips us for the future.

"Our truforebears knew this and so they left the film library for us," she continued. She indicated the film on the glowglobe, black with the timeless words transparent. "Our truforebears had light, we know this; bright light a hundred times brighter than the glowglobes. They created this light themselves but now it is gone, dead with our truforebears. Knowing this would happen, they left us with the film library which can conveniently be read against the surface of a fungus. Their words live on, and we must learn from them."

"Hallelujah!" cried Brag sarcastically. He was learning Relitalk in the Study of Praise.

Shirl flushed; maybe her phraseology had slipped into the ancient pedantic style. Disheartened, she peeled the film from the fungus and dismissed the class. Their eagerness to leave was another disappointment. They scrambled for the exit and scampered away down the black tunnel, a jumble of receding heat-sources, a cacophony of echoing voices. Stacking the film sheets in a corner, Shirl left the classchamber and followed them. They had turned a corner so she walked carefully with arm outstretched, following the smooth wet soil of the tunnel wall. Someday she ought to plant a few glowglobes along here; it would make the going easier.

Feeling in need of company she turned in the direction of the new pump chamber, deciding that a talk with Poto the inventor—father figure of her childhood—would cheer her up. Soon she heard the muffled sucking of the pumps, the creak and groan of the treadmill.

"Fortitude, Shirl." Poto straightened up from his examination of the treadmill axle, his face alight with surprise and pleasure. Wiping his hands on his clothing, he approached. Behind him the treadmill revolved ponderously, its motive power supplied by two blackfurs treading the bars of the huge vertical wheel, while Bott the carver urged them on by means of a pointed stick. The chamber had been greatly en-

larged to accommodate the treadmill and pumps; it was now one of the biggest rooms in Downways and slightly agoraphobic.

Beside the treadmill were the pumps, intricate carved wooden devices worked by a connecting rod from a crank on the axle of the treadmill. Occupying the whole of one wall was the huge storage tank. Most of the timber had come from the Chamber of Snakes, a weird place on the fringe of Downways. Another source of supply had been the area near the well where the tendrils pushed through the wall and threatened to cut Downways off from its water supply. This danger had now been nullified; although the tendrils were more numerous than ever it was no longer necessary to use those particular tunnels since the water pipes had been installed. Poto was nevertheless not happy about the situation, and sent Bott down at regular intervals to check for leaks and to insure that the full length of the pipe was still accessible in case the need for repairs arose.

Poto's latest project, now that the water had been successfully brought to Downways, was the installation of a distribution system. Once again his workshop was filled with hollow tubes and Bott spent much of his time carving the ends of the lengths and insuring a snug fit at the joints. As was befitting, the Council Chamber had been the first section of Downways to receive its water supply, and it was intended that the hibeyholes in Shirl's area should be next.

Shirl's spirits lifted slightly at the sight of Poto and all the activity of the pump chamber. Here at least, she felt, progress was being made. She greeted Poto and accepted the succulent maggot he offered—he was a very correct host and even when she was a trukid he had treated her with deference.

"Fortitude, Poto."

"What can I do for you, Shirl?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . School's finished for the day, so I thought I'd drop in and see you."

The inventor regarded her shrewdly. "You don't sound very happy. Is anything the matter?"

Shirl glanced around; there was no one present except Bott, and he was singing tunelessly to himself, totally absorbed, as he belabored the blackfurs. She sighed. "I don't know. It's these damned trukids, I suppose. They get me down. Today I began to wonder what the point of it all is. It's not the first time I've felt like this, either. I don't seem to be going anywhere. Nobody's going anywhere."

"Where can we go?" asked Poto, taking her literally.

The concept of going in its meaning of traveling made Shirl think of Ned and his hunting trips. She mentioned this. "What do the hunters see?" she asked. "What do they find at the end of the tunnels? Nothing? I mean," she said, struggling to express herself. "I can't imagine just nothing, no more tunnels, just soil. It doesn't make sense."

Poto tapped the wall beside him. "You're the teacher, Shirl. I should have thought you could imagine nothing. Just think of this wall going on and on, forever."

"But we know it's not like that," Shirl objected. "The film sheets tell us. Up Top there are the stars and the sky. The Solar System. Open Air." She tried hard to imagine that.

"But your pupils don't believe you."

"Why should they? I can't prove it. I sometimes wonder if Up Top is really there, myself. If it hadn't been for what old Jeb told me, longhibes ago, I really think . . . I keep telling my classes Up Top is there, but that we can't go there because of the radioactivity. Yesterwake, do you know what little Ros said to me? I'd punished her because she'd shown disrespect in the Praise Class and refused to tremble at the Daggertooth. She said she'd never seen a Daggertooth so why should she be scared? She asked how she was supposed to know it existed. Then of course Brag had to mutter something similar about the Hero and I dismissed them both from the class.

"But then I got to thinking what I'd been like myself, as a trukid. I started wondering about the excuse we make—we can't go Up Top because of radioactivity. It's something terrible which we've never seen, this radioactivity—just like little Ros and the Daggertooth. And then I remembered. Do you know what makes the glowglobes shine? Radioactivity. It says so on the film sheets—the same films which tell us about the Bomb and the Fallout." She put her hand next to a fungus, examining it curiously in the glow. "This thing doesn't hurt me. Where's the sense?"

"You've just got to believe, Shirl," said Poto helplessly.

"Either we ought to try to go Up Top, or we ought to stop thinking about it," Shirl said firmly.

"One day we might go there," said Poto. "Not now though, Shirl. Not now. There's too much to do. We're progressing, even though you don't seem to think so. We'll go Up Top when we're good and ready. Don't worry about it."

"But I get the feeling that I'm wasting my time, passing on a lot of superstitions to the trukids, for no reason other than that they can pass on the same stuff to *their* trukids."

Poto put his hand gently under her chin, lifting her face to

his. "Shirl," he said gently. "It's good that you think. Don't take life too seriously, that's all. You've grown into a very pretty woman. Enjoy yourself."

Shirl was about to argue the point when her train of thought was interrupted by a sudden babbling from Bott. The carver had dropped his stick and forgotten the blackfurs. He was staring past them at the chamber entrance, and his face was a mask of hate. The sight of this expression on Bott's normally pleasant, simple countenance sent a trickle of cold sweat down Shirl's spine. The carver's mouth was working soundlessly now and he had picked up his knife. He held it before him and moved forward.

"Back to work, Bott," said Poto casually, turning to the chamber entrance. He bowed briefly. "Come in, Sten."

The Elder entered, ignoring Bott, who shrank back against the wall. "Fortitude. I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying, Shirl. It seems to me that maybe you find your job frustrating."

"Oh no, Sten," said Shirl hastily. "I enjoy it." In her fear that Sten might deprive her of her job, teaching suddenly seemed very sweet.

"Life is good, Shirl," Sten went on. "We must enjoy it in the time we have—and in the place we have," he added significantly. "A man who dies forging new frontiers is just as dead as one who dies of old age—but sooner. We have no need of exploration at present. How can we explore, when our own boundaries aren't secure and might be penetrated by the Daggertooth at any instant?"

"The Daggertooth hasn't been seen for many hibes," Shirl objected.

"Shirl." The Elder's tone was reproving. "That's just the lack of forethought which I expect from the more stupid members of Downways. I'm surprised to hear it from you. No, the Daggertooth is a very real danger. It is the one enemy against which we have, as yet, no defense. It can wipe us out in a wake. We've been lucky for a long time. Our luck can't last."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Shirl, interested. It sounded as though Sten had something in mind.

He smiled. "Maybe I'd better show you," he said. "Before you get too discouraged. And before your friend Ned puts too many of his revolutionary ideas into your head. Come along." He turned and led the way out of the chamber. "May courage remain with you, Poto."

As Shirl followed, she heard Bott begin his babbling again.

"Murderer!" he was shouting, over and over again.

As a trukid, Shirl had often been frightened by Rosa. With her pale warty face, bulbous eyes, and gnarled fingers the old woman presented a daunting appearance. Rosa was a nurse.

At one time an assistant to Doctor Leo, she had long since gone her own way and now operated as a business rival to the venerable doctor with the difference that whereas Doctor Leo backed up his opinions with film sheets, Rosa claimed to have a sixth sense in such matters. In earlier times she would have been termed a faith healer, a witch doctor, or simply a quack. Trumums throughout the length and breadth of Downways swore by her.

Then Rosa disappeared in mysterious circumstances, which is to say that her bones were not discovered. Shirl was delighted at the time, as the disappearance had occurred during a course of treatment she was receiving for boils on the buttocks—a common Downways complaint caused by dietary deficiencies. Her trumum had lost confidence in the potions of Doctor Leo—who, in truth, did his best with the ingredients available—and called on Rosa.

The old nurse, summoning up a lifetime's experience and inaccurate memories, subjected Shirl to a method of treatment which was termed—ancient geography and medicine being by now inextricably entangled in the webwork of Rosa's mind—acapulco. Until the nurse's disappearance, Shirl spent many hours suffering the pain and indignity of a bottom resembling that of a frightened porcupine. Shortly afterward the boils cleared up and trumum, vindicated, gave vent to the cliché of triumph: "I told you so." Shirl assuaged her fury by telling herself that her trumum was so stupid that she didn't even know it was a cliché.

This episode from Shirl's earlier life was, however, far from Shirl's thoughts as she accompanied Sten along the tunnels. She was thinking about Ned, and the remark the young hunter had made during the previous wake when she had met him by chance near the Chamber of Praise—toward which he was exhibiting scant respect. Ned had told her, abruptly, that he would shortly be suggesting his name to one or two Elders for election to the Council. "And when I get in," he had said, "you might see things moving, Shirl."

"But how can you get on the Council?" she had asked. "You don't even agree with their views."

"Don't be so sure of that. Max and Troy are progressive and they can influence nominations." There was only one way of getting on the Council: to be nominated by an Elder who then retired or died.

Thinking back on this conversation Shirl realized, guiltily,

that she had indeed been influenced by Ned, as Sten had guessed. Ned had talked forcefully of extending the boundaries, of further explorations, and of a final push Up Top. He had even, incredibly, repeated a previous observation that it might be a good idea to ascertain the strength of the Oddlies with a view to cooperating. Shirl had stifled her repugnance at this mention of a taboo subject and ventured the view that the majority of Downways would find such a liaison impossible, due to the revolting physical appearance of the Oddlies.

"How do you know they're all revolting?" Ned had snapped. "You've never seen them. By the Bomb, you're as reactionary as old Sten."

"I'm sorry, Ned," she had said, not mentioning a certain character with four arms and thereafter listening politely to his views.

Many of the things he said made a lot of sense. . . .

Sten hurried on with no word as to their destination and soon Shirl found herself in a part of Downways which she had never previously visited. This lay at the back of the Council Chamber and could only be reached by a guarded tunnel. After they had passed the Council Chamber entrance—which Shirl recognized because Poto's pipeline ended at this point—Sten took another two turns into increasingly narrow tunnels, then stopped.

"Shirl," he said quietly. "I want you to realize that what I'm going to show you is important. Right? Forget any other notions. Forget pity and the dignity of the individual, and all the rest of the things we teach one another. What you will see is the most important thing in Downways right now."

Sten moved forward again and spoke into the darkness.

"You can go now, Rosa," he said, and Shirl saw the hated, almost forgotten figure of the old nurse shuffle past; bloated, head down.

Shirl stepped forward and, as Sten had indicated, looked into a small hibeyhole opening off the tunnel.

The hole was dimly lit, but against the far wall a figure was curled; the figure of a young man about the same age as herself.

"Shirl, I want you to see John-A," said Sten.

As the young man looked up on hearing his name, Shirl started. She had seen that face before; it had been the subject of many a childhood nightmare. It was older now, stronger and well-formed, but it was unmistakable.

The last time she had seen that face it had stared at her from out of a glass tank.

CHAPTER 6

"But he's so . . . big," said Shirl in helpless pity. "Has he been shut away here all this time? What sort of a life is this for anyone?"

"Shirl!" Sten drew her away from the hibeyhole entrance. There was a new sign there; she did not recognize the design on the mud tablet. "I told you to forget all that. Just accept the idea that this one young man may be suffering now, but that his suffering is for the ultimate good of Downways as a whole. And it's not even certain that he is suffering; you see, he's never known anything different."

"But why?"

"Shirl, you're an intelligent girl. Now tell me something. Think hard before you answer. What would you say was the dominant emotion in Downways? What motivates us, Shirl?"

She thought. At last she said, slowly: "Fear."

The following wake Shirl said good-bye to her pupils and took up her duties as John-A's personal tutor. She was, surprisingly, sorry to leave the trukids and they made a great show of regret at her departure, bringing gifts of food and making short, carefully-rehearsed speeches. If Shirl had not remembered the normally intractable dispositions of most of these children she might have been more moved—as it was, she felt the ceremony reeked of hypocrisy, particularly when the oafish Brag managed to squeeze a few tears from his nocturnal eyes as he sang her praises to the assembled company. Yet on the whole they were not a bad bunch of kids and Shirl knew she would miss them; her new duties would occupy her time almost exclusively.

Measured in terms of hibes, John-A was the same age as herself, but such standards could not be applied to a child of

the Vat. It was ancient knowledge that a vatkid had to remain in the Vat until a comparatively advanced stage of childhood—that is until physically independent—if he was to take his place in the community as a normal person. Otherwise he would turn out a sickly child, unable to adapt to a human environment, unable to accept the ministrations of a wet nurse. If introduced into society at a later age he would be different from other men of course, but at least would be a normal individual in his own terms and capable in due course of making his way in life. He would not have been subjected to an artificial infantile dependency. In the earlier days of Downways when vatkids were more common, the resultant personality would tend to be arrogant and aggressive.

Shirl therefore faced problems from the start in her education of John-A. He was her own age, of an aggressive nature, and so unwilling to accept her authority. He had a lot to learn; any previous teaching, such as it was, had been at the hands of Sten and Agar—both elderly men of set views. He had also been fed an amount of dubious knowledge by Rosa. Shirl found that her initial task was to persuade John-A to forget all he had previously learned.

As the hibes went by, however, she began to feel that she was gaining ground. The one drawback, the one factor which caused John-A rightly to mistrust Shirl, was the fact that Sten had forbidden her to tell the vatkid of his origins until he, Sten, thought the time was ripe.

A longhibe passed. . . .

John-A was unresponsive; he had grown during the longhibe and was now taller than Shirl. He was strong too; his arms were thick and his chest deep. He possessed small, deep eyes and a high brow, unlike the sloping foreheads and protruding eyes of the average person. Sometimes, Shirl thought he must be very similar in appearance to the truforebears, the Old People.

He had not replied to her greeting. He sat curled against the wall of the hibeyhole and she wondered again whether it had been a mistake to keep him in such strict privacy. She had asked Sten about this just before the longhibe—Sten had been one of the witnesses of the Great Battle and had personally fed a piece of the Hero into the Vat.

"Courage is what all of us lack," Sten had said, sitting upright in his hibeyhole, his long robe of office gathered about his skinny feet. "We are timid creatures of the tunnels, at the mercy of our fears. We eat the little grubs and sometimes we are hungry. Despite this, when a worm moves near—a whole

tunnelful of meat—there are many among us who are frightened to tackle this huge but harmless creature, and will wait for a trained hunter to arrive. Often we allow the worm to escape rather than stick our knives into his flank. And now the Daggertooth is here again. . . .”

Sten performed a ritual shudder which caused his blackened teeth to rattle. The reappearance of the Daggertooth and the death of some twenty members of Downways had been an appalling event, although it tended to strengthen Sten's leadership of the Council. People once more began to realize the importance of defense and some of the more revolutionary political viewpoints lost ground. Even Ned, on one of the rare occasions Shirl met him, was chastened and forbore to mention his views.

“None of us is safe,” Sten had said. “We can only run, but we cannot outpace the beast. The Daggertooth is all-powerful. In living memory only one man has stood up to him. The Hero. And now we have the possibility of a new champion in John-A. We must keep him away from the mass of the population. He must not learn fear, he must not be influenced by the rest of us, until the time is ready. Otherwise he will become a timid runner like all Downways.”

“So we've bred him for one purpose,” Shirl had remarked in response to Sten's sonorous phrases. And then she had been able to shut her mouth and keep her feelings to herself. There would have been no point in getting involved in a heated argument with Sten as to the ethics of the matter. He would merely have dismissed her and found another teacher. . . .

Thinking of Sten's words, she watched and scanned John-A as the vatkid sat sulkily against the damp wall. He stared back at her, impolitely exposing his genitals in the light of the central glowglobe. Suddenly he spoke.

“The Bomb to all this,” he said forcefully. “I want to go out. I see people around when the Elders take me to the Council Chamber but they won't let me talk to them. Why not? And when the Elders talk to me they don't say what they think. I can tell, you know.” He scowled at her belligerently. “The Elders think of queer things. When they say certain words their teeth rattle together as though they've all caught fevers at the same time. I've said these words here in my hibeyhole to myself and my teeth don't rattle, neither do my shoulders shake. What does it mean? Why do I feel as though I want to—” he stared at her and she shrank from him—“strike out with my hand, and . . . hit them. . . ?” His

heavy brows puckered with the effort of expressing the concept.

Later as Shirl hurried along the tunnel she thought over the conversation. Safely away from John-A, she was aware of very mixed feelings. Like his progenitor the Hero, John-A was aggressive. Pugnacious. It was beginning to seem as though their efforts to raise a champion were succeeding. She ought to be pleased but she wasn't. She found herself dismally wandering toward her parents' hibeyhole. She had not been near them for many hibes; in her job as John-A's tutor she had been supplied with accommodation near the Council Chamber.

Her parents were both in. She greeted them; then, as soon as was decently possible, asked them the question which was uppermost in her mind. What was the Hero—the progenitor of John-A—really like?

"He wasn't especially popular," said her trudad frankly. Now that Shirl was no longer a child her trudad felt, rightly, that legend could be leavened with fact. Trudad had aged and there was a growth of hair fungus above his ankle which he scratched absently, spreading the spores. "His ways were strange at times. I remember once—" Shirl's trumum gazed at the old man with pale eyes, remembering also—"he crashed into me in the tunnel. Knocked me over backward he did, and then just ran on, muttering. 'Why don't you look where you're going?' he said."

"Your trudad's leg was bruised for wakes." Trumum took up the tale. "Wouldn't be surprised if that's how the hair fungus started, although it was many longhibes ago." She sighed. "Wish old Rosa was still around. Doctor Leo's worse than useless. Charged me six prime grubs for a pinch of Dream Dust yesterwake, and I'll swear the stuff was diluted. Didn't sleep a wink, last hibe. Not a wink."

"Why don't you come and see us more often, Shirl?" said her trudad in that whining tone reserved by parents for such questions. "We often talk about you, and how well you're doing. Wouldn't be surprised if someone nominated you for the Council one wake. Although I won't be alive to see it." He fingered his leg sadly.

Shirl sighed. "I'm very busy these wakes," she replied. "John-A takes all my time. Sometimes I'm so tired when I get into my hibeyhole, I think I'm going into a longhibe."

"We never hear anything official about John-A," whined trudad. "Nobody thinks to tell us. Just rumors we hear. Everyone seems to know about this wonderful John-A except us. They say he's twice as tall as an ordinary man, with arms like distribution pipes." He tapped a new feature in the hi-

beyhole—a thick pipe running along the back wall with a spigot from which water dripped.

Shirl acknowledged their pride in the new installation with a muttered congratulation, then returned to the topic.

"He's not much bigger than anyone else," she said. "He's a lot stronger, though."

"You watch out for him, my girl!"

Shirl ignored trumum's warning. "The Hero," she said. "What did he look like? What was his face like?"

Her trudad was regarding her with suspicion which changed rapidly to crumpled disappointment. "So that's why you came here. It wasn't to see us. It was to find out what we knew about the Hero." His voice trembled with senile outrage. Trumum set up a high keening, piercing in the small chamber.

"This project is important to us all," Shirl protested.

"Not to us it isn't! Not to us!" He seized her arm in claw-like fingers. "See here, my girl!" Surprisingly powerful, he jerked her face toward the wall, indicating a pale area in the dark soil. In the glowglobe light she saw maggots crawling, dozens of them, pallid and succulent. "I've retired from minding the blackfurs now and I've got contacts. They bring me offal for the maggots. This is all we need," he cackled triumphantly. "We've got no need for your precious project, young lady. We don't need to leave our hibeyhole, ever! We're safe from the Daggertooth! Safe!" His shudder was perfunctory; he believed what he said. The hibeyhole had become a womb-like retreat which he would never leave, from the security of which he could conceive no danger.

"I'm glad for you," remarked Shirl coldly, depressed at the change in the relationship between her trudad and herself. "Courage remain," she said briefly.

The sound of trumum's keening followed her down the tunnel. She moved fast, fingering the wall, scanning infrared and avoiding the few passersby in these parts. Hibeyholes opened off the tunnel frequently; this area had become a warren for the retired.

An arm seized her as she passed, jerking her to a standstill, pulling. She tumbled through a narrow opening and found herself in a small chamber, even smaller than the one she had left, and totally dark.

"If it isn't gorgeous Shirl," a low voice said. "I've been waiting for you."

Scanning, she recognized the shape of Brag. "Call me teacher," she snapped. "And let me out of here!" His hand gripped her forearm tightly and the other hand began to ex-

plore, fondling her breast. She twisted and bit his wrist. "Let me out of here, Brag!" she repeated. "You're just a trukid. You don't know what you're doing!"

"I'll soon find out," he chuckled, squeezing, kneading. "How about a lesson right now? Are you qualified to teach this?" His hand slid down, groping between her thighs.

She struggled, becoming alarmed at his strength. Scanning infrared, she detected heated loins. This was no mere juvenile rough and tumble; it was serious. She squirmed away but the movement served only to inflame him further. "Come on," he grunted, tearing at her robe, pressing himself against her. "It'll only take a moment."

"A moment too long for me," she gasped, twisting and kicking at the region of heat. He yelped and let go; quickly she crawled through the exit and stood in the safety of the tunnel again. More secure, she poked her head back through the hole. "Are you all right in there?" she asked.

"I suppose so," came the muttered reply. "You know your trouble, teacher? You're all wrapped up in that vatkid John-A. You're perverted." He had recovered rapidly and his voice was becoming sly as he developed his theme. "He's not even human. An android, that's what he is. A vatkid. It's not natural."

"Listen closely to your history lessons, Brag," she retorted. "We may all be descended from the Vat. Otherwise why was it built? Think of that." She turned away.

His voice followed her. "You're too clever by half, Shirl. Why not forget the film sheets and try to teach what's happening here and now. You might not find it so easy."

Sten the Elder was interested by her latest report on John-A.

"Sounds as if he's a real slice off his progenitor," the old man wheezed enthusiastically. "One more longhibe and he'll be ready."

"He's getting difficult to deal with," said Shirl. "He's learning, but he lacks purpose."

"You haven't shown him the Shrine yet?"

"No." Shirl chewed her lip thoughtfully.

"If he's showing signs of discontent and asking awkward questions, then perhaps he's ready now." Painfully the old man climbed to his feet, hands braced against the muddy walls. "Come on."

Throughout the region of Downways which stretched from the Chamber of Praise to the Great Chambers and included the Council Chamber, a new project had been under way, in-

stigated by Sten. From the farthest tunnels the hunters had gathered glowglobes, each man bringing back a bagful after the hunt. These had then been planted carefully at regular intervals in the tunnel roofs, giving vastly more light than ever before. So far the failure rate had been low, and Sten was now proposing to extend the experiment to the whole of Downways.

As they walked down the brightly-illuminated tunnel Sten paused, swearing under his breath. A huge glowglobe had sprouted from the wall, spoiling the uniformity of the overhead lighting. Worse, it had been shaped to represent a face. Sten kicked at it, spraying a shower of glowing particles over the tunnel floor.

"This is a restricted area," he muttered.

Shirl was surprised at the venom in the old man's voice; the glowglobe had seemed harmless enough. "We call them Lovely Ladies," she said.

"You often see these carved globes?" Sten asked quickly.

"All over the place."

"By the Bomb, I wish I could catch him at it."

"Bott, you mean?"

"I suppose so. I can't think of anyone else."

"I once saw him carving one when I was a trukid, although I didn't know it was him at the time," remarked Shirl, feeling as though she were telling tales. "It frightened me. Is it always the same face, or is it my imagination?"

"He does it to—" Sten broke off. "Never mind," he said. His face was dark with rage. "And another thing, while we're about it." He stared at Shirl and she flinched; she had never seen him look like this before. "Who told John-A about the Daggertooth?"

"I don't know."

"Of course not." Shirl was becoming stubborn; Sten was in a most peculiar mood and she didn't see why she should tell him that Rosa was to blame. John-A had said so—and questioned Shirl closely about the Daggertooth as a result. It had been a difficult session.

"It's a pity he was told. More than that, it's criminal. It could wreck the whole project, to have superstitious fears planted in his mind at this stage."

"I know." To Shirl's relief they were nearing John-A's hi-beyhole. Sten harangued the guards briefly on the subject of Bott, then they climbed inside.

The android regarded them stonily, chewing on a sliver of meat. "Company," he observed in mock surprise. "By the Bomb, they've come to see me. I wonder what it is this time.

What are they going to tell me? What snippets of remarkable, though useless information are they going to fill my mind with? The Manhattan Project? Einstein? The battle of Waterloo? Tell me." His knees were drawn up to his chest and his expression had become thoughtful. "You talk a lot about fighting, my teacher. Does this phenomenon ever occur—this fighting—or is it all fiction? I've been doing some thinking since I saw you last. This shuddering I notice around me, a shuddering at certain thoughts unconnected with cold. I think it denotes fear."

Shirl and Sten exchanged alarmed glances.

"Fear," repeated John-A, relishing the effect the word had. Suddenly he cupped his hands around his mouth trumpet-fashion and shouted, a terrible noise in the tiny hibeyhole.

"The Daggertooth!"

He observed the effect with satisfaction, then continued: "For a girl who tells me all about battles and great men—and very little else—you seem to have a healthy respect for that word, my teacher. Do you think I don't know what fear is? Don't take me for a fool. Fear is the shivering I get every time I'm taken from this hole to converse with the Elders. It feels bad. I don't want to leave here because it's strange outside. That's fear."

"That's fear, John-A," agreed Shirl. "It's a natural reaction which floods the body with adrenalin to prepare it for swift action, in case—"

"In case of what? You talk the wrong language. I'm not interested in biology. It's the emotion I want to know about. It makes me feel bad, this fear thing. The Nelson you talk about. Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins. All the other names. Did they feel bad? If so, why did they do what they did?"

"I think it's time to take him to the Shrine," said Sten the Elder.

CHAPTER 7

Messengers were sent along the tunnels and before long the entire company of Elders was assembled in the brightly-lit Chamber of Praise, together with Shirl and John-A. The vatkid was gazing about in some interest; he had never been there before. "What's that thing?" he pointed irreverently at the Shrine.

He received no reply as the others were genuflecting at length; indeed, realizing the importance of the occasion, a few of the Elders were prostrate on the muddy soil, murmuring prayer, pleading for courage. Shirl nudged John-A and indicated that he follow her example—bent head, bent knee, downcast eyes. "The Bomb to all that!" he replied curtly, staring curiously at the Shrine.

Hearing another reference to the Bomb, Sten glanced quickly at Shirl, who shook her head. This was more of Rosa's doing. In any case, it was merely a word; it held no significance in everyday life. Shirl had a hazy idea of the awe in which the Old People held the Bomb—this had been evident from various film sheets—but the fact that the word was now used as an oath nullified any implications of fear it might once have held.

Eventually the Elders were finished. They stood, plucking the soil from their long robes. They looked at Shirl, a group of blue-black figures ghostly in the unusually bright light. Apparently they expected her to commence. This was an honor indeed.

"John-A," she began somewhat nervously, awed by the occasion. "This is the Chamber of Praise; that is the Shrine of the Hero."

"Another Hero?" he asked incredulously. "Or would it be Nelson?"

"The Hero. The one man in all Downways who had the courage to face and vanquish the Daggertooth. After the Great Battle, his remains were entombed in this Shrine."

"It sounds like the Daggertooth vanquished him," observed John-A, unimpressed.

There was a murmur of horror at this sacrilegious remark, and Shirl continued hurriedly: "That isn't so. He slew the Daggertooth with his sword, but died from his own wounds shortly afterward. There was meat for many hibes."

"From the dead Daggertooth, I take it. But if the Hero killed the Daggertooth, what's the problem? Why are you all scared of its name?" He thought swiftly, making a genuine effort to understand. "The Daggertooth is a symbol of all that's unknown and therefore fearful," he ventured. "It's no longer a creature of flesh and blood. It's a concept—danger to be guarded against."

"Actually," said Shirl, dropping the pedantic Relitalk for the sake of clarity, "that's not correct. It seems there's another Daggertooth." She was awkwardly aware that this revelation of very real danger nevertheless constituted an anticlimax after John-A's philosophical theorizing.

Agar helped her out. "Many bodies have been found, some only a longhibe ago, terribly mutilated so that they could not be identified, save by the wailings of the bereaved. Also huge droppings."

John-A's teeth gleamed suddenly in a grin of inconsequential delight.

"Sten, tell John-A about the Great Battle," requested Shirl in some impatience.

The old man's voice took on a tone of faraway recollection. "Many longhibes ago there was an event the like of which has occurred at intervals throughout the history of Downways. A Daggertooth invaded the tunnels. Enormous, hairy, and sharp of tooth, it ate everything in its path, be it worm, grub, or . . . man. The depredations were on a horrifying scale and it was unsafe to leave the hibeyholes because the creature could move with uncanny silence. Even the hibeyholes themselves were no guarantee of safety as the Daggertooth possessed a small head which it would poke through the entrances, seizing the occupants in its cruel teeth. All the time it uttered high squeals and people fled when they heard these sounds. Terror reigned in the tunnels."

He paused briefly and indulged in a ritual shudder, in which he was joined by most of those present. Shirl noticed that John-A was observing Sten with interest, his attention having at last been captured.

"The Daggertooth arrived shortly after a longhibe," resumed the old man, "having broken through the tunnel roof at a point where, it is thought, it rises close to Up Top. It seems from the written diaries of Downways that this is an unusual manner for the beast to gain entry—far more commonly it will appear from the direction of the Great Chambers, the Speaker having been heard. Exhaustive examination of the film library failed to identify the creature and it was not until comparatively recently that a picture has been found which coincides with the appearance of the Daggertooth as we know it. Although the Daggertooth which plagues us is considerably larger than that which was known to the Old People. Probably this is due to the beast's habit of living near the surface and becoming affected by radioactivity." Here Sten glanced at Shirl, who nodded mute agreement.

Sten continued. "Came the wake of the Great Battle. Then, unlike now, the Chamber of Praise had only one entrance; it was used as a communal dormitory for a large family of which I was a member. It was a dead end. We were all gathered in the chamber, almost twenty of us, and with us was the man we now know as the Hero, who had arrived unexpectedly, waving his sword. We were not happy at his presence as he was known as a rough character who could make trouble, using his sword on those who stood in his path as frequently as for spearing maggots. But we suffered him while he sat among us, eating our food.

"The screams in the distance aroused us all, dreadful screams as people died; there is only one worse sound. And then we heard that sound also—the high squealing of the feeding Daggertooth, becoming louder. It was approaching down the tunnel toward the chamber in which we sat, and from which there was no other exit! We covered the glowglobes and cowered against the wall, and wept, and there was copious urination. We forgot about the Hero in our fear. We were merely a frightened group about to die.

"Suddenly the Daggertooth appeared, scanning dark and murderous, with terrible heat areas around his jaws so that they seemed suspended in the air; only the jaws were visible, sniffing and questing from side to side as the brute emerged into the main body of the chamber.

"And the Hero stood before the Daggertooth, sword at the ready, unafraid. We could hardly believe it. He stood almost at the entrance to the chamber, silently daring the Daggertooth to approach. The Daggertooth sniffed at him, brushing him aside so that he fell. Yet he screamed challenge and

jumped up, and charged the Daggertooth who seized him in its terrible claws, and the teeth parted, ready. The Hero struggled, uttering cries as the Daggertooth swept him into its cruel jaws—surely then he must have been afraid, but he didn't let go of his sword.

"The teeth closed on the Hero and we cried out, thinking that this was the end; but with a last dying effort the Hero drove his sharp sword into the roof of the Daggertooth's mouth, penetrating the brain. The screams of the creature seemed to stab like a rapier into our very minds and we fell down as the chamber thudded to the thrashing death throes.

"Eventually all was still and we stood, and took the remains of the Hero from the jaws of the Daggertooth and laid him to groan his last against the wall. The Daggertooth we cut up for meat, distributing it among the hibeyholes as some compensation for the depredations suffered. Others, having heard the fight, arrived soon after the death, saw the body of the Hero and would have utilized that too, but we who had witnessed the triumph would have none of it. He was laid to rest in that Shrine, at the very spot where he died."

Sten genuflected, they all genuflected, and the Story was finished. Silently they filed out of the Chamber of Praise.

"I'm taking John-A to see the Vat," said Shirl. "He must know the rest of the Story. Are you coming, Sten?"

The Elder sighed, his face weary. "You carry on, Shirl. I find the Story exhausting. Reliving the experience, I suppose; and the use of Relitalk takes it out of me. I have to think before each word. I'll take a hibe."

"Why use Relitalk?" John-A asked.

"Out of respect, of course," cried Shirl, aghast. She had matured a lot from the rebellious trukid who had questioned her parents' every dictum, and Sten smiled approvingly. "It's the very least we can do, considering what the Hero achieved for us. We can hardly use everywake speech in the presence of his Shrine, can we?"

John-A remained dissatisfied. "I don't understand how using a different form of speech can be called respectful. You might as well say . . ." He sought the most unlikely suggestion. "You might as well say that all people who enter the Chamber of Praise must balance a piece of clothing on their heads. Or to make it more ridiculous, say that women should and men shouldn't. Because you do something different, or unusual, in the presence of the Shrine, who is to say whether or not this is respectful?"

"Don't be stupid, John-A," said Shirl, sharply.

Sten, who had been about to leave, paused. "It may not be stupid, Shirl," he said. "John-A is new to the Chamber of Praise and all that has grown up around it. His outlook may be incorrect, but at least it's fresh. In fact, the principle of Relitalk is much older than the Hero and the Great Battle—it dates right back before the coming of Downways, when men lived Up Top. They had a Hero too, or so someone once found in the film sheets—a Hero much older than those Shirl has taught you about, like Borman and Rutherford. He lived for over two thousand of what they called years—about the interval between longhibes, I think—and didn't die until he was killed by the Bomb. It seemed that his admirers used Relitalk when speaking of him, so we revived the practice out of respect. Relitalk has a long history, John-A."

"Nobody can live for two thousand longhibes," objected the android.

"And there's another very important point, John-A," continued the old man, ignoring the interruption. "We've lost track now, of how long it is since Mankind had a Hero. A Hero, someone to admire and respect, is necessary. In the past, in the absence of a Hero, there were dark ages in Downways—long periods about which nothing is known, when even the diaries were not kept. I imagine the film library went out of use and even writing became a lost art. With a Hero comes resurgence and a purpose. We're lucky to have had a Hero so recently; in longhibes to come many tales will be told of him."

"I don't doubt it," commented John-A.

Sten hesitated. "And they might even tell a Story about you, John-A."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the progeny of the Hero."

John-A's eyes widened in astonishment. "You mean he's my trudad? The man that Story's all about?" He wanted to believe this. There was yearning in his voice and Shirl thought, *The Story impressed him after all. . . .*

"Not your trudad, John-A. You're closer to him than that. No woman's blood has diluted his courage in yourself." Old Sten's eyes were bright.

"You're a vatkid," explained Shirl. He stared at her. "I think I'll go and show him now, Sten," she said.

They came to a place where Bott the carver worked, unaware of their scrutiny; and John-A expressed interest, pausing to watch the half-wit as he toiled muttering with his knife. He was cutting into the meat of an unusually large glowglobe

bulging from a wall. As he carved, little flakes of fungus fell from his knife to lie luminous on the floor of the tunnel like stars. The remains of the glowglobe were taking on the recognizable outlines of a face.

"This man has a sort of talent," observed John-A aloud.

The carver wheeled around, fear on his peering face.

"Don't worry, Bott," Shirl reassured him. "We won't tell Sten." She addressed herself to John-A. "It's Bott's only talent, apart from the help he gives Poto from time to time—and I sometimes think Poto only uses him out of kindness. The face he carves is always the same—I think it's someone he knew once, someone close to him who died."

Bott looked up from his work and indicated the face. "Lovely lady," he said, smiling, then resumed his carving.

"Nobody seems to know her name," said Shirl. "I've got an idea that once he found her dead, and he carved her likeness on a glowglobe outside her hibeyhole as a sort of memorial. Then it became a habit. At least, it's a theory," she finished defensively.

John-A stepped forward, motioning Bott aside and examining the perimeter of the face, thrusting his fingers under the edge. "This was a hibeyhole once," he informed Shirl. "The glowglobe's filled it right up. This face is where it bulges through the entrance. I wonder . . . A giant glowglobe like this needs plenty of food in the form of decaying matter, I should imagine."

Shirl shivered, watching Bott's grinning face. "You mean there could be . . . bodies behind there?"

"Could be. Natural causes, of course. You can't keep track of everyone in these outlying hibeyholes, I don't suppose. People live, people die—and the Daggertooth is blamed. . . . I wonder how many disappearances have been wrongly attributed to the Daggertooth," John-A speculated. "All those stories you've told me; history. They were always men against men. Just suppose it's still that way. A rival section of Downways, raiding us from time to time like berserkers. I still think the Daggertooth could be a symbol."

"The Daggertooth has been seen," Shirl insisted. "Hibes ago, I think I saw it myself." And she shivered again, remembering the Oddlies, and a man with four arms. . . .

"History . . ." John-A murmured, gazing at the face. "I wonder how much reliance we can place in it. . . ."

"History happens," said Shirl, glad to forget the Daggertooth. "It's happened so it must be true, and it can't be changed."

"Achilles and Paris, Napoleon and John F. Kennedy. All

real people who lived at some time or other. But at what time?"

"The time isn't important," insisted Shirl. "It's what they did that matters."

"Shirl." John-A's deep eyes were fixed on her. "I think it matters. I think you should build up a picture instead of thinking too much about individual events—like the Great Battle. A random history taught from random film sheets tells us nothing, and it might even mislead us. You see, we all know what we are and where we are. But we don't know *when* we are and *why* we are. I'd like you to teach me that."

Shirl bit her lip. She had read of World War III, of course. But there seemed no advantage in teaching John-A about *that*. World War III was a defeat for everybody, and not at all the type of heroic teaching which was selected for the android.

John-A continued: "There could be big gaps in our knowledge, you see, Shirl. Time gaps, important ones. . . ."

"I'll see what I can do," she said noncommittally. She drew him away from the luminous face and they continued in the direction of the Vat, passing the tailor's chamber, a large hole where several people worked under the supervision of Paul the Elder, making clothes from blackfur pelts and rare materials obtained from the Great Chambers. The tunnel began to slope downhill and became more slippery, then suddenly they were in the vast chamber of the Vat, holding glowglobes, pausing while Shirl swallowed and tried to conquer agoraphobia.

"Don't you feel it, John-A?" she asked.

"Feel what?"

"As though . . . I don't know . . . as though the space is sucking at you from all sides at once, drawing at your mind, stealing your thoughts and making you stupid."

"No," said John-A flatly, walking ahead. "Where's this Vat?"

In a way it was almost disappointing, the courage of this man in the face of the terrible Unknown; and Shirl followed quietly behind, trying not to think of the Daggertooth and the Oddlies, while John-A strode briskly on, from time to time pausing to confirm their course with her. Presently they stood before the Vat, gazing at the liquid-filled tank. It was empty.

"So this is the Vat," John-A turned to her, smiling. "Now, Shirl, my teacher, suppose you tell me all about it. I've been pretty patient, I think."

Shirl hesitated. "This is where they waited," she explained. "The Elders stood guard in shifts for longhibes, a very long

time. I saw them once—Ned and I saw them. But they didn't know we were there."

"Waited?" He regarded the metallic face of the Vat again; here and there a few circular objects enclosed needles in glass; below was a tank filled with liquid. Smelling strange. "Waited? For what?"

"For your birth, John-A. For the vatkid of the Hero."

She explained, the explanation she had learned by heart for this moment.

"The use of the Vat has been known for many longhibes, in fact the knowledge of its use is born in us. A long time ago the Vat fell into disuse but the knowledge remained, passed on, parents to trukids. We never knew when the Vat might be needed, although so far there has never been any shortage of children.

"Then came the time of the Great Battle when the Hero lay dying with no issue to inherit his courageous genes. So, in accordance with the knowledge, they took a sliver of the Hero and fed it into the Vat, through a hole around the side." She shivered suddenly, remembering. . . . "Then it was just a question of waiting. Eventually you appeared in this tank, a baby in a bath of fluid. You grew, and when the time was right they took you out and smacked you into life just like an oversize trukid. Then you were brought up away from other people, because they didn't want you influenced in any way."

John-A was staring at the Vat. "You say I came out of that thing?" Gradually, he comprehended the enormity, the complexity of the machinery before him; he was suffused with pride. He had been borne by this giant object, not a mere, weak woman. He was a man above his fellows. . . .

His head lifted; unconsciously he squared his shoulders. "Come on, Shirl," he said decisively. "Let's get back. I'll lead the way."

He held up the piece of glowglobe and she followed meekly as he strode away.

CHAPTER 8

As Shirl walked along the tunnels people greeted her deferentially and she smiled to herself; rumors concerning John-A and the Project were rife in Downways these wakes. It was four wakes since the android had been informed of his beginnings and shown the Vat, and before long, Shirl felt, the Council would agree that John-A should be unveiled, as it were, and take his place as a member of the community. His primary education was complete, and the recent wakes had been occupied in perfecting his swordsmanship under the guidance of Max, chief hunter and member of the Council of Elders.

"Fortitude, Shirl!"

She started on hearing the voice; she had been lost in thought again, pondering on the details of the report which she was shortly to make before the assembled Council. Prince stood before her, barring her way.

"I haven't seen much of you lately, Shirl," he continued reproachfully.

"I'm sorry, Prince. I've been busy."

"John-A? He seems to take up all your time. When are we all going to see him?"

"Soon, I expect," she replied noncommittally, trying to get past him, and failing. He was determined to make the most of this chance meeting.

"I saw your parents yesterwake. Your trudad wasn't looking too well. The hair fungus is spreading. They said they hadn't seen you for some time."

"Oh, yes," said Shirl vaguely, striving to conceal her irritation. Prince had the knack of annoying her—this was why she had never allowed their relationship to develop. She was aware that other girls of her age envied her, as Prince was

considered quite a catch. Tall and an expert swordsman, he had followed his father Max into the ranks of the hunters and many people felt that he would be the next hunter chief, despite his youth.

"Perhaps you ought to drop in and see them."

"And perhaps not," she said shortly, at last getting past him. He fell into step beside her and they walked together along the tunnel. The illumination was bright here, and soon they passed a team of men planting glowglobes in the tunnel roof. The next stage in the Downways lighting scheme was well under way.

"What's he like?" asked Prince after a thoughtful silence. Exasperated, she stopped, turned, and regarded the young hunter stonily. "Look here, Prince, I'm getting sick of people asking me what John-A is like, in that tone of voice. If you want to know, he's tall and strong and he looks just a little bit primitive. The sort of man, you might think, that any girl would lose her head over. But the point is academic, because our relationship is that of teacher and pupil, nothing more. Does that answer your questions, verbal and mental?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, abashed.

He dropped behind and she hurried on through a dim section of tunnel which the planting team had not yet reached, then soon into the brighter tunnel leading to the Council Chamber. She paused at the entrance, hearing the murmur of voices from within, then the guard motioned her to enter.

The construction of the Council Chamber entrance was different from the usual hibeyhole which is normally reached by a simple hole in the tunnel wall. Once past the guard, Shirl had to make a sharp turn right, followed by a short climb up a flight of stone steps, eventually to emerge into the Council Chamber at floor level through a hole barely more than a shoulders' width. For this reason Shirl, whose own quarters were no more than thirty paces away, had never actually seen the interior of the Council Chamber before.

It was much larger than the average hibeyhole; almost as big, in fact, as Poto's pump chamber. In shape it differed from the norm, too, the walls being vertical and the floor flat, in the fashion of the Great Chambers. As support for the flat ceiling, two rows of upright posts clamped a lattice-work of poles against the soft earth overhead. In the center of the room was a large rough table, long and narrow, with low benches down two sides. These were probably the only examples of domestic furniture in the whole of Downways. The room was brightly lit by a large quantity of glowglobes planted between the ceiling lattices.

At the table six men were seated, arguing fiercely.

"Come and sit here for a moment, Shirl."

She started on hearing a voice behind her. Turning, she saw the Downways diarist, a wizened little man rarely seen in the tunnels. He, too, sat at a table. On the table, overflowing to the floor, almost entirely surrounding him, were a multitude of books, the large volumes of bound paper favored by the Old People. Shirl stared, amazed at the quantity—and therefore the value—of this ancient writing medium. Back in the classchamber her pupils wrote with sharpened sticks on tablets of dried mud; paper was too scarce for everywake use.

She sat at the bench beside the diarist and glanced over his shoulder at the open book before him—as was usual with such volumes, they had been bound at the tailor's chamber in prime wormskin, a skilled task shrouded in mystery by Paul the chief tailor. It seemed that in their original form the books were unwieldy with, not surprisingly, much decayed bindings. The diarist was apparently engaged in taking down the minutes of the Council meeting, and Shirl felt a sudden flush of pride at the thought that shortly her own report to the Council would be recorded in this book, to remain a part of the permanent records of Downways forevermore.

The diarist wrote steadily while the dispute at the Council table waxed vicious.

"And I say you're a damned fool, Sten!" Troy, captain of guards, was the speaker. He emphasized this telling point with blows of his fist on the stout table. Shirl watched and listened with astonishment; she had never heard an Elder addressed like this before. She was, in fact, getting her first experience of a privileged occasion.

Max the hunter chief spoke quietly. "I second the motion."

"What motion?" Sten looked puzzled.

Dropping his assumed air of calm, Max leaped to his feet. "That you're a damned fool, Sten!" he shouted.

"Hear, hear!" yelled Troy, raining blows on the table.

"Put it to the vote," suggested Clarc the storekeeper sarcastically.

"Elders, Elders," came a reproving murmur from Paul, the chief tailor. "Let us not behave like animals. The time for violence is in the hunt, Max. Not in the Council Chamber, and not before this young lady here. She will be getting a very poor impression of our procedural methods."

Max sat down, muttering, shooting Shirl a venomous glance. Troy relaxed with a conscious effort. Agar took up a mud tablet.

"According to the report from Doctor Leo," he said, "there is no doubt. The child is a mutant."

"But the child is four longhibes old," objected Troy.

"Sometimes such a mutation does not manifest itself until puberty," said Agar, glancing at Sten.

The chief Elder looked suddenly tired. "Or even later," he said. "As well we know. I don't like it any more than you, Troy, but our duty is clear."

The guard captain's voice was quietly incredulous. "You're saying that our duty is to banish from Downways a boy who looks like becoming one of the finest hunters Max has, for the sole reason that some fool objects to his special skill and calls it a mutation. All right, so the trukid's got big ears. So his hearing is so acute that he can detect a jumbo worm through twenty paces of solid soil. So what's wrong with that? How can we say it's a mutation, when it may be evolution?"

Max grinned the fierce hunter's grin. "We're making a mistake when we apply the rule to all mutations. It should only apply to unfavorable mutations. Right, Troy?"

"Right."

"After all, what was the Hero but a mutant?"

"That's enough, Max!" Sten was on his feet. "Even in the Council Chamber, we cannot tolerate sacrilege. I said our duty was clear in this matter and I can see no cause for further argument. We will put it to the vote. I have no doubt which way the vote will go."

Agar, Sten, Paul, and Clarc the storekeeper voted for the motion. Troy and Max voted against. The future of a young boy with exceptionally good hearing was decided.

"They're going to banish him?" Shirl was aghast.

"That's the rule," replied the diarist quietly.

"But . . . I've never heard that rule before. It's inhuman." Shirl thought back; the birth of a mutant was not an unusual event in Downways. "They usually die, or get lost in the tunnels or something like that because they're not strong, or a bit stupid, or something. But to banish this boy . . . They can't do that." She knew the trukid; he had been in her class, bright and intelligent.

"Mutants are always banished, Shirl," said the diarist gently. "How else can Downways breed true? It's not generally known because it's not the sort of thing the Council wants to become generally known. But all mutants are banished; they always have been. Sten can tell you of a case even worse than this. . . . They're taken away at night by the guards and put in a place beyond the Great Chambers."

"But don't the Oddlies get them?"

"Who do you think the Oddlies are?" asked the diarist, and Shirl stared at him in dawning comprehension.

Her train of thought was interrupted by Sten's voice addressing her. She stood and made her way to the Council table, sitting at the place indicated at the foot of the narrow table and a little apart from the Elders. She found it difficult to meet Sten's eyes; she felt as though an old, trusted friend had let her down.

She gave her report in a flat voice, detailing John-A's progress to date, touching on his athletic prowess and his ready intelligence, mentioning his lack of cooperation which had not been such a problem since he had been told the Story. She finished with her firmly expressed opinion that John-A should now be allowed to take his place in Downways.

"Turn him loose, you mean?" said Max doubtfully. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. His purpose is defense, right? So why not keep him caged up until he's needed? At the next sighting of the Daggertooth we give him his sword and unleash him. Otherwise, once he gets among those weak-bladdered runts in Downways, he'll get just like them." He spoke with the hunter's contempt for the general public.

Clarc's face had colored. "I'll remind you, Max, that the hunters are no more courageous than anyone else—any idea that you're a bunch of heroes is a myth built up by yourselves, to boost your own egos. All you hunt is the jumbo worm—and a more harmless creature I can't imagine. The truth is, you want to keep John-A caged up because you're scared of him."

"Scared? Me? It's more likely John-A who's scared."

"You're the one who's been teaching him swordplay."

"I can't teach him courage. I've taught him how to use a sword, right? The best way I can. And I'm good, I tell you. So already he's fair. But that doesn't mean he won't run like piss at the first sign of real danger." Max sat back, grinning ferociously.

"He's the vatkid of the Hero," Agar reminded them.

"It's possible that Max has a point," said Sten unexpectedly. "I don't think anyone will seriously countenance keeping John-A permanently under guard, but it's possible we ought to find out a little more about his character before, uh, turning him loose, as Max puts it."

"So, how do we find out what he's made of?" asked Max.

"We could, uh, confront him with a situation," ventured Sten.

"How do you mean?"

"We could send him on a brief expedition, say, accompanied by Shirl here—for whom he has a great regard. Suddenly, Shirl will be faced with danger—an Oddly, for instance, with a sword. What will John-A's reaction be? Will he dart to her rescue, or will he run?"

"Where do we find our Oddly?" asked Max, interested.

"I don't suggest we use one. We use one of your men, your best swordsman, say. John-A won't know him. We want someone good enough to beat John-A so that the whole thing can be called off before anyone gets hurt. By the time our man has disarmed John-A, or identified himself, we'll have a chance to assess the vatkid's worth."

"That sounds like a good scheme," murmured Max. "I'm sure I can find a man capable of defending himself against that vatkid; he's still pretty inexperienced."

"I would suggest your son, Prince," said Sten quietly.

There was a long silence during which the two Elders faced each other. Sten's face was calm, almost bland. The hunter's grin on Max's face had set into a grimace. Everyone held his breath.

Suddenly Max laughed harshly. "Right," he said.

The meeting continued with the next item on the agenda and Shirl, no longer required, left the Council Chamber. As she walked away down the tunnel, she thought about Sten. The chief Elder was a deceptively powerful man, she thought. He knew how to get his own way. It was fortunate that his policy of slow internal development of Downways was correct. Had he been a hunter and a radical, he would have been able to force through all manner of strange schemes. . . .

In the early part of the wake set for John-A's test, Shirl walked him around the tunnels in the region of the Council Chamber, getting him used to the Downways conception of space. "Later this wake," she said gaily, "we're going to explore places you've never seen before."

"Why?" asked John-A suspiciously.

"Didn't I tell you? Soon you'll be joining the rest of us in Downways."

"You mean they're setting me free? No more guards outside the door? No more Dream Dust in my water?"

"No more of that, John-A." She took his arm, feeling sorry for him.

He smiled at her. "I was only kidding. It's been fun, these last few longwakes. I'll miss the times we've had together."

There was a tightness in her throat. "I'll still be around," she said.

"And so will the hunter Prince you were telling me about."

"I hope not. He's a slob."

They turned a corner and a tall figure stood before them.

"Ned!" gasped Shirl, inexplicably letting go of John-A's hand as though it were red-hot.

"Fortitude, Shirl. It's been a long time again." Ned looked curiously at John-A.

Shirl introduced the men to each other, rather awkwardly. "I'm showing John-A around," she said.

"So you're the famous John-A," said Ned softly. "Well, I'll be Bombed." He gazed at the android in frank curiosity.

"I'm quite human, really."

"I'm sure. . . ." Ned's scrutiny traveled down to John-A's feet, then slowly back, noting the strong legs, the powerful, bare chest and thick arms. "So you're a child of the Vat."

"Ned!" cried Shirl. "Don't be so rude."

"I'm sorry. . . ." There was something strange behind Ned's eyes; a sadness, a regret, and something else, something Shirl could not quite identify. She had seen it before in his face, longhibes ago. . . .

For the want of something to say, to break the peculiar silence, Shirl told Ned of her planned itinerary to familiarize the android with Downways, while Ned nodded with apparent interest and John-A watched them inscrutably. All too soon Shirl ran out of words.

John-A spoke suddenly, in conciliatory tones. "I expect I'll have to get used to curiosity. A lot of people are going to be looking me over before I'm finally accepted. I don't suppose it's going to be easy."

Then, taking Shirl's arm, he nodded a brief farewell to Ned and moved away. Shirl, looking back, saw Ned still standing there, watching John-A with surprise. She was surprised herself; John-A's self-control in face of Ned's peculiar brand of insolence had been totally out of character.

Later in the wake they ate, then Shirl took the android in the direction of the well.

"You see this pipe along the wall here?" she indicated.

"That's where we get our water from. It wasn't always there. Poto invented the whole system. Poto's a friend of mine," she added proudly.

"Another friend?" John-A smiled.

"Not like that. Poto's nice. He's been like a trudad to me. You'll like him. You must meet him soon."

The tunnel, sloping downward in the direction of the well,

was now practically abandoned; indeed, the only person to use it now was Poto himself when he checked periodically for leaks in the pipe. Underfoot it was slippery, and the light was bad after the brighter tunnels of the more central Downways areas.

"Why are we going down here?" asked John-A. "It doesn't seem a very pleasant place."

"You've got to know where the well is, in case the pump breaks down. Besides, I had an adventure here once. I want to tell you about it."

She chattered on, recalling the events of her early childhood, relating the incident on the underground lake. At last they reached the end of the tunnel.

"Oh." Shirl stopped. "It's all overgrown with this stuff now." She brushed at the thick, close tendrils. "We can't get through to the well. It's worse than the Chamber of Snakes."

John-A was holding a piece of glowglobe low as he bent down. "There is a way," he said. "Someone's chopped a tunnel through here, by the pipe. So that they can inspect it from time to time, I suppose. We'll crawl through, shall we?" He dropped to his knees and moved forward.

As he disappeared from sight there was a movement close by and Shirl jumped, startled. A figure rose from concealment behind a bank of tendrils and seized her roughly, pinning her arms to her sides and throwing her to the wet ground.

"There's no need to be so realistic, Prince," she whispered. Then she screamed for help.

John-A backed swiftly out of the narrow tunnel and stood, snatching the sword from his belt. Prince released Shirl and got to his feet, also drawing a sword. The two men faced each other in the dim light, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

Suddenly John-A lunged forward, his blade flashing. There was a metallic clash as Prince parried, leaped back, then thrust himself, hard and straight. John-A was faster, slipping aside and drawing a thin line of blood with a riposte to Prince's chest. It was only a slight cut, but Shirl thought things had gone far enough. John-A had proved his courage but Prince, although doubtless the better swordsman technically, might soon lose his nerve. Already he had begun to whimper and was concentrating on desperate defense as John-A forged forward. Although Max would always insist otherwise, a hunter with a sword in his hand was no less cowardly than the average Downways man. Whereas John-A had been bred for bravery. Not only that, but his entire edu-

cation had been slanted to assure him of his own invincibility.

Shirl was now suitably convinced, and felt that the Council would agree. John-A did not lack courage. Or, possibly, he had been brainwashed into believing he possessed courage—which was effectively the same thing.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop, you two!"

She had not considered the possibility that her words might be ignored but now, as John-A drove forward like a man possessed, sword thrusting and flickering while Prince backed and wept and babbled, she had an inkling of disaster.

"John-A! Listen to me! Stop fighting! The whole thing's been rigged!"

Prince slipped and fell, the sword flying from his grasp. He lay motionless, eyes wide as John-A moved in for the kill.

"I've got you, you bastard." The android drew back his weapon.

Shirl rushed forward, slipped in the same pool of mud which had been Prince's downfall, and landed on top of him, driving the air from his lungs in a sobbing rush.

John-A hesitated over them, sword still held high, bewilderment on his face.

"Out of the way, Shirl. What are you doing?"

"He's a friend, John-A. One of us. His name's Prince. You know, I've told you about him."

The android stepped back, his face darkening with annoyance. "Your hunter friend? The trukid of that loudmouth Max? What sort of a game is this?"

Unhappily, sensing John-A's deep disapproval and disappointment at being deprived of his kill, Shirl explained. The android's expression cleared somewhat after a while and Prince got gingerly to his feet, eyes still on John-A's sword.

Absurdly, Shirl persuaded the two men to shake hands. They complied, although John-A's expression was veiled.

"Well," she said brightly. "Now that's all over, shall we get back?"

A strange voice spoke; a deep rumbling like a subterranean river. "Not just yet," it boomed, with an odd, breathless break between each resonant note. "Not just yet, Prettyfolk!"

There was a shuffling behind them. A group of men stepped out of the shadows. They were surrounded.

CHAPTER 9

"Drop those swords."

John-A and Prince complied; they had no option. The opposition numbered six—no, seven, thought Shirl. The seventh man was the one who spoke, although he remained concealed in the gloom behind a curtain of hanging tendrils.

The enemy closed in and Shirl felt slightly sick as she saw them more clearly. They were indeed Oddlies. Each one had some deformity; one was an albino, white-haired and pink-eyed; another had a long protruding jaw and stared blankly with idiot's eyes, drooling; yet another had a single eye set in the middle of his forehead. Another stepped forward and took hold of her, none too gently. He seemed to possess more than the usual number of fingers.

John-A was seized by the cyclops and the albino; he tried to shake them off, cursing, but they held firm, one to each arm. Prince whimpered with terror as he was taken in hand by a dwarf and a two-headed hermaphrodite.

"What now, Threesum?" asked the albino breathlessly, having received a jab in the stomach from John-A's elbow. A flitterbug alighted on his shoulder and he shrugged, trying to dislodge the huge insect.

"Around here. We'll get them away from this place first, before anyone comes."

"Do we want them all?"

"The girl and the android, I think. You, Shorty and Sally-Ann. You can dispose of the other one. . . . No, not now, you fools!" called the deep voice urgently as the dwarf placed a knife against Prince's ribs, chuckling. "Wait until we're farther away!"

The Oddlies herded the Downways people in the direction of the voice, pushing them through a thick curtain of dank,

hanging fronds. Then they were forced to their knees and made to crawl through a tiny opening, almost obscured by tendrils, near the tunnel floor. Shirl heard John-A muttering rebelliously and hoped he wouldn't try anything foolish.

Soon they were able to stand again. Their captors paused, awaiting further instruction, and Shirl looked around. They were in a spherical chamber dimly lit by three small glowglobes in the roof. The place smelled wet and musty and the air was unpleasantly warm. Behind her was the tiny hole through which they had arrived—obviously a means of access to the Downways tunnels for spies and kidnappers. She had heard of this sort of place before; some people said that Downways was riddled with concealed entrances leading to a secondary system of tunnels used by the Oddlies in their kidnapping raids. Privately, she had never believed these stories. It seemed to her that the Oddlies had as much to lose as they had to gain by such a system which would allow the Downways hunters and guards to pursue them from any one of many starting points. In fact, this entrance to Downways was the first one she had seen—and Shirl knew the tunnel systems well.

At the opposite side of the chamber was a larger entrance, well above the height of a man, and it was from here that the voice now came.

"You may kill him now, Shorty."

The dwarf gurgled with delight and pressed the tip of the knife against Prince's side, feeling for a gap between the ribs while Prince screamed in fear and pain. The two-headed hermaphrodite laughed, a bray of masculine joy from the male head and a squeal of feminine anticipation from its counterpart, while the hands explored Prince's body roughly and ambiguously.

"No!" shouted Shirl. The dwarf paused, glancing toward the entrance again as though seeking confirmation. For a moment the entire scene was frozen like an unreal tableau and Shirl had the sudden feeling that they were being played with, that there was no intention to kill—merely to frighten. . . .

Then the deep voice spoke again. "You heard what I said, Shorty. I'm surprised at you. I never thought the wake would come when you obeyed a Prettygirl rather than your leader."

Scanning infrared Shirl caught a glimpse of the Oddly spokesman and her stomach contracted with fear. The figure she saw, half-hidden by a bend in the tunnel, was unimaginably huge, and jointed in a strange, inhuman way.

The dwarf gurgled.

Desperately, Shirl shouted: "You in there! Are you ashamed to show yourself? Can't even your own men stand the sight of you?"

The voice spoke again, booming. "My people know my appearance, Prettygirl. We all know what one another looks like—and we're not ashamed of ourselves." There was a hard edge to the voice now. "It is you—you Prettyfolk—who are ashamed of our appearance, who banish us from your sight. Look at my people around you! Admit it—don't you find them disgusting?"

The Oddlies grinned at her; toothlessly, witlessly, naked stinking abominations. . . .

The dwarf gurgled.

"Kill that man, Shorty," instructed the voice.

The gurgle rattled in the dwarf's throat and his hand fell. He slid gently to the floor, fingers scrabbling at Prince's clothing. He rolled over and was still. The handle of a knife protruded from his white back; the blood began to seep from around the edges.

The two-headed hermaphrodite screamed on a double note.

Twisting around, Shirl scanned a heat-source hovering in the narrow tunnel through which they had come. The naked bodies around her began to jostle, buffeting her; the clutching hands released their grip.

John-A had retrieved a sword, snatching it back in the confusion. He leaped about the chamber; cutting and thrusting while the Oddlies yelped in fear and dismay. He seized another sword as a figure crumpled before his attack, and threw it to Prince. Prince regarded the weapon, trembling, sick with reaction.

Shirl snatched it from him, holding it before her in both hands as the albino ran for her at the command of the deep voice in the tunnel. She fell backward with the force of the impact and the albino landed on top of her, coughing blood into her face as he clutched at the blade embedded in his chest. His body went slack and she rolled away from under.

"Come on, Shirl!"

For a moment she had lost her bearings. The chamber seemed to be empty; a few heat-sources receded down the dark tunnel outside. John-A stood before her, his breath coming fast, his sword dripping blood.

"What happened?"

"They've run." He laughed shortly. "They're a bunch of cowards. I ran a couple of them through, and the rest of them scuttled away like scared blackfurs."

Something was nudging at Shirl's mind, a quick half-

remembered image at the height of the battle. She bent down; one of the bodies wore clothes.

"Prince is dead," she said flatly.

"Yes."

"Let's get out of here before they come back with reinforcements, John-A."

As they made their way back into the main tunnels of Downways Shirl puzzled over the mysterious figure who had crept into the chamber and thrown the knife at the dwarf—thus saving them, because the surprise had given John-A the chance to go on the offensive. She turned the problem over in her mind again and again as they walked back; the man must undoubtedly have been a member of Downways, yet he had known of the tunnel entrance.

Pondering over this mystery helped her recover from her unnerving experience, which was all the more frightening because she couldn't rid her mind's eye of the image of John-A, near the end of the battle with the Oddlies retreating, jerking his sword from the body of Prince. . . .

The Downways Council was in emergency session. Shirl and John-A stood before them, making their report.

Max was mad with grief at the death of his son. After the initial outburst, the string of profanity followed by the stricken silence, he was now eyeing them narrowly. "And just where did this happen?" he asked, interrupting Shirl as she was in the process of trying to tell the story from the beginning.

"A chamber off the main tunnel near the well."

"There's no chamber there. There's just the tunnel end, where the tendrils are. I know the area well. You're covering up for that damned android. He killed my son. In my book, that's murder."

"I tell you the Oddlies killed him," insisted Shirl.

"Oddlies? There are no Oddlies down there. Oddlies haven't been seen for longhibes. In fact"—his expression became cunning—"the only person who's ever said they've seen Oddlies is you, Shirl. A long time ago when you were a trukid I remember you starting that rumor. Twice, you did it. And now again. There are no Oddlies. There haven't been Oddlies for longhibes." He stared at her suspiciously, eyes bright, lips working.

Sten said quietly, "Can you describe them, Shirl?"

"Of course." She went on to give details of their captors, finishing: "And there was another one we never saw prop-

erly, although I did get a brief scan of him. He was enormous. Frightening. The others called him Threesum."

Sten and Agar exchanged swift glances.

"Threesum, eh?" said Sten softly. "Well, now."

"You know him?" asked John-A.

"We've heard the name. A long time ago, at a time when the Oddlies were raiding Downways frequently, they had a leader called Threesum. We captured an Oddly kidnapper, and before he was utilized he told us a few things. We couldn't persuade him to say much about his friends, but at one point he did mention that their leader's name was Threesum. At the time we thought he was trying to scare us, because he said we could never kill Threesum—but then we decided he just meant Threesum was an android. This present leader could be a direct descendant, a vatkid, like John-A." Sten smiled briefly. "So he tried to tell us Threesum was immortal."

"An exaggeration, I'm sure," murmured Clarc.

"By the Bomb, he won't feel immortal when my sword's in his gut," said Max forcefully.

"So you accept our explanation, Max?" asked John-A coolly.

"I didn't say that," the hunter chief muttered.

"Perhaps you'd like to settle the matter outside." John-A dropped his hand to his sword significantly.

"I don't see any need for that, either," blustered Max. "If the Oddlies killed my son, I'll make them suffer. By the Bomb, I'll take a team of hunters in there and massacre the lot. Now we know a way in there, there's nothing to stop us."

John-A eyed Max keenly, then smiled. "Do you know, I think we agree about something."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Troy, captain of the guards.

"Be quiet, all of you!" Sten was on his feet, pale-faced. "I won't have such talk in the Council Chamber. You all know our policy. For many longwakes now, we've kept clear of the Oddlies and they've kept clear of us—so much so that you, Max, admitted that you thought they'd all died out. I see no need to change this now."

"Not after they attacked three members of Downways?" asked Troy incredulously.

"From what we've heard, there was no such attack. They requested our people to drop their weapons and then took them into a strange chamber. Quite likely this was just a precaution. They may have merely wanted to talk."

"They were going to kill Prince. The dwarf had his knife against him."

"Are you sure?" Sten addressed Shirl. "Did you honestly think the dwarf was going to use that knife? You see, I can't believe that after all this time the Oddlies are going to disrupt things."

"You could be right, Sten," said Shirl doubtfully. "The dwarf certainly took a long time about using the knife. It could have been a trick, prearranged to frighten us into talking. . . ." Her face clouded. "But there's another thing. *Everything* was prearranged. We were ambushed. How did they know we were coming?"

"Somebody tipped them off," muttered Clarc.

"But who?"

Max was staring around belligerently. His eyes fixed on Paul the tailor. "Your hibeyhole's pretty remote," he murmured. "Keep yourself to yourself, don't you? Not married . . ."

Paul flushed. "In that case I'm hardly likely to go blabbing to my wife, am I?" Max's own wife was notorious for her inability to keep secrets; her acquaintances knew almost as much about Council affairs as did the diarist.

Sten was still standing. "This sort of thing isn't going to get us anywhere," he said. "It seems to me there's a motion before the Council. The motion is that we attack the Oddlies. Those in favor?"

Bewildered by the rapid events, Troy and Max raised their hands.

"Those against?"

Paul, Agar, and Clarc raised their hands.

"Motion defeated. Any further business?"

Max leaned forward across the table. "Just one item which we won't settle now, clever Sten. I haven't forgotten it was you who suggested we pit my Prince against the android. I regard that as unfinished business."

Sten drew the meeting to a close with the customary short prayer ending with the familiar words: "And praise to the Hero, who slew the Daggertooth." As the Elders climbed to their feet, he said, "Perhaps we ought to remember those words—and remember who our real enemy is. Not the Oddlies, those poor outcasts of our own flesh, but a vile creature who kills for the fun of it." He pointed to the curious entrance to the Council Chamber, the tiny hole in the floor through which the Elders painfully hoisted themselves to attend the meetings. "Remember that the entrance to this chamber is so constructed to prevent the Daggertooth from entering, not the Oddlies."

The effect was spoiled somewhat by John-A, who muttered, "The Council certainly looks after itself. What about the rest of us? Have we no value?"

Shirl became increasingly concerned about John-A's dissatisfaction as they made their way through the main tunnels of Downways. It had been tacitly agreed at the Council that John-A should now take his place in society—indeed, the subject had not been openly mentioned, because to discuss it would be to pretend that they still had authority over John-A. That might precipitate a showdown. Since the battle near the well it was apparent that John-A was immensely powerful. As Shirl walked beside him in the tunnels she felt pride at the deferential glances of the passersby—the news of the battle had traveled swiftly. She looked at her protégé in the bright light of the improved glowglobe system. She had to admit that he looked different. In fact, she thought, he was extremely handsome in a primitive way, with his deep-set eyes and high forehead.

And his courage. This was the real difference; this was the quality which set him apart from his fellows. He could take the offensive in any dispute from the standpoint of physical magnetism. Even Max, she knew, was privately scared of John-A.

Here her thoughts became confused again as she remembered the battle. Had she *really* seen John-A pulling his sword from the body of Prince? Or was it another sword, one with which an Oddly had killed Max's son, which John-A was merely removing—callously but nevertheless not reprehensibly—for use in the heat of battle, having lost his own sword?

Why didn't she ask him?

She glanced at him again and decided not to. She could find out another way, if there was anything to find out. She knew John-A's sword; she had chosen it for him herself, and had his sign engraved near the hilt; a square enclosing the male symbol (representing his vatbirth) over a stylized Dag-gertooth (symbolizing the Hero's triumph). The sword was now in its blackfur scabbard and attached to the belt at his waist. She shivered a little at the sight of dried blood matting the fur.

She wondered if, possibly, she were a little scared of John-A herself.

They arrived at the android's new quarters: a large, comfortable hibe-hole near the hunters' area complete with a pile of furs and several sets of clothing, running water courtesy of

Poto, adequate lighting and, unusual, a toilet device. This latter was another of Poto's inventions and consisted of a long pipe, similar to the water pipes, sunk vertically into the ground. Waste matter fell down the pipe and gradually dispersed into the soil at the bottom, well beneath the hibeyhole. As an added refinement a cap fitted on top of the pipe when not in use, sealing in any unpleasant odors. The device was much in demand; the fitting of one in John-A's hibeyhole was a symbol of his rank.

The android looked around with obvious satisfaction. "I like this place," he said. Outside, people passed to and fro chattering, occasionally peering in curiously. "It makes a change to have some people around, too," he added.

He leaned out of the entrance, craning his neck. His sign was there on a dried mud tablet affixed to the tunnel wall. He grinned, then frowned at Shirl.

"What about your sign?" he asked.

"Oh." Shirl felt herself flush. "I don't sleep here. My place is along the tunnel. Not very far. I'll show you."

"I see." He looked disappointed and Shirl felt a ridiculous, sudden surge in her heart. "All right," he said. "Show me. You never know when I might want to find you during a hibe," he added naively.

Smiling, Shirl led him to her hibeyhole down the tunnel, some thirty paces away. "Not very far," commented John-A. He looked inside. "Smaller than mine. But nice. Shall we go in?"

As Shirl looked at him she surprised an expression on his face which she had not seen before, and she felt a sudden uncertainty. "Not now," she said. "It's a while before the hibe yet, and . . . and I think we ought to take your sword along to the smith right away, to have it checked over, you know," she finished with a rush, averting her eyes.

"Oh? Why?"

"Well . . . it might have got damaged. They often crack, you know. You never know when you might need it next."

He agreed, reluctantly she thought, and they made their way to the smithy. This was situated, for convenience, close to Poto's workshop. Arch the smith was toiling in the choking fumes which, from time to time, dispersed down a disused tunnel at the back of the shop as fresh air blew in at the entrance.

Arch looked up as he heard them coughing. He was a small man, but his wrists were thick and strong, scarred from many a minor accident. "Poto says he might be able to improve the ventilation for me," he said apologetically. He

wiped sweat from his brow. Not only was it smoky in the chamber, it was almost unbearably hot. "What can I do for you?" asked the smith.

As usual Shirl was staring at the fire: the mysterious hot redness, dazzling in normal sight or infrared, the only fire in the whole of Downways. Only Arch and Poto knew the secret of the fire—when to feed it, how to prevent it getting out of control, when to use the noisy, wheezy blackfur bellows—although of course Shirl and every educated member of Downways understood the principles involved. It was experience which counted here, experience to know when the fire was at exactly the right temperature, when the glowing steel was hot enough to take to the anvil. . . .

"I'd like you to take a look at John-A's sword," said Shirl. "It's seen a lot of action today."

"Of course." Arch forbore to ask questions although his curiosity must have been almost unbearable—he worked alone and diligently, and was not a man to hear the latest gossip. It was not often swords saw action in Downways; they were generally used only by the guards as a ceremonial symbol of office, and occasionally by the hunters. The latter, however, preferred to use their short knives on the jumbo worm, hacking the docile creature to pieces. It appeared to have no vital spot where a sword thrust could kill it.

A short hunter's knife . . . Shirl paused in her train of thought. The dwarf had been killed by a short hunter's knife. . . .

"Let's see it, then," said Arch. John-A silently drew the sword and handed it over.

As Arch held the stained surface to the light of a glowglobe, Shirl stared over his shoulder. There was a sign on the blade. It was a male symbol with crossed swords. It was Prince's sign.

"What happened to your own sword, John-A?" she asked.

"I must have lost it in the fight."

Shirl's heart sang to the ringing of Arch's hammer.

CHAPTER 10

In the course of the next few wakes John-A settled into Downways. His exact duties were not clearly defined, although it was generally assumed that he was classed as a type of hunter. He was not, however, required to go with the hunters on their expeditions, and consequently spent much of his time improving his swordplay to the discomfiture of his opponents. On only one occasion, shortly after his arrival in Downways, did he voluntarily accompany a group of hunters commanded by Max—with whom he seemed to have struck up a strange liaison. He came back full of contempt for the team.

"How they can call themselves hunters I can't imagine, Shirl," he said. "All they do is creep around the remote tunnels shit scared and jumping at every sound."

"But they got a jumbo worm."

"No thanks to them. That was the doing of some queer friend of Max's. A little chap with big ears living in a remote hibeyhole like a hermit. After we'd wandered around for some time and seen nothing, Max called on him. He found us a worm in no time. Why he doesn't join up with the hunters on a permanent basis I don't know. They could use a man like him."

"I wouldn't mention him to anyone if I were you, John-A," cautioned Shirl. She went on to describe the Council discussion she had overheard. "I think Big-Ears has been banished. Technically, he's an Oddly, even if he doesn't live with them. Max shouldn't have anything to do with him really."

"I see. . . ." John-A thought for a moment. Then he said decisively, "Max is right. Why banish a man who is an asset to Downways? It doesn't make sense."

"Don't worry about that now, John-A," said Shirl tiredly.

The android already knew the answer to his question. He was just arguing for argument's sake. "And I shouldn't get too friendly with Max, either. He's a tricky customer. I still think he blames you for Prince's death."

"Too bad," said John-A briefly.

Shortly after this conversation Shirl had met Ned, who had been present on the same hunt. He admitted that Big-Ears had been involved. "But there's nothing wrong with that," he insisted. "He's been banished, which means he isn't a member of Downways any longer. If you like, he's an Oddly. But I hear Sten says that the Oddlies and us are at peace right now. He won't allow any action to be taken against them. So what's wrong with our accepting their help in the hunt?"

Unable to answer that, Shirl asked about John-A's hunting skill.

"I wouldn't say he was particularly good," said Ned. "He tends to be clumsy. He makes a lot of noise, blundering about like a blackfur—I reckon that's why we didn't catch anything at first, although Max wouldn't say so, because of this queer friendship the two of them have."

"You've got to give John-A a chance. That was the first hunt he'd ever been on."

"It may be the last. He wasn't interested. How's he going to earn his keep, sitting in his hibeyhole all the time like . . . like Achilles?" asked Ned with some pride in his simile.

"We'll be glad of him in due course," said Shirl, and felt her heart sink as she realized what that meant. . . .

A few hibes later she was talking to Poto in the pump room. Bott the carver was not present; apparently he was down one of the tunnels installing a water pipe. The treadmill revolved creakingly as the blackfurs trod stolidly on their endless journey. Before their noses, just outside the big wheel, was a bowl of food. This seemed to be all the encouragement they needed.

"It's good to see you again, Shirl," said Poto sincerely, putting down the plunger on which he was working. "Sit down." Grinning, he indicated a chair—roughly made but, as Shirl found, serviceable. "Bott and I are putting a few comforts in," he said. "We don't see why the Council should have all the benefits."

They made small talk for a while, then Poto mentioned John-A. "It seems you did a good job, Shirl," he said. "He's turned out as we hoped—a real slice off the Hero." He paused. "There's a lot of people who can't wait to see him put to the test."

Shirl said nothing, and after giving her a shrewd look Poto

resumed. "I suppose your part in his education is almost finished now. Will you go back to the classchamber again? Anna's due to retire soon, you know."

"I might. I don't know. I still have a lot to do with John-A."

"Look; do you mind if I say something, Shirl?" asked Poto abruptly.

"Go ahead."

"I think perhaps it might be a good idea if you . . . taught John-A some manners. He's making himself unpopular, strutting about like a Hero before he's even proved himself. It's not only bad for him, it's bad for the Legend as well. It debases the Story, to have a fellow striding around acting the Hero with that sword of his, because then the older people start remembering what the Hero was really like—and they start talking about it. And we all know that the Hero was a pretty ignorant sort of man—a damned nuisance, in fact. Much like John-A," finished Poto frankly.

"John-A's all right," muttered Shirl. "He just needs understanding, that's all."

"People aren't going to understand him unless he makes the effort of talking to them. From all I hear he won't speak to anyone he considers below himself. And if anyone gets in his way in the tunnels, he just kicks them out of it. It's true, Shirl." Poto's tone had become almost pleading. "You know it's true. Why don't you do something about it?"

Shirl was silent for a long time. At last she said, quietly, "I suppose I know what you mean. Maybe I hadn't realized it was getting so bad. I don't see him all the time, you know. Honestly, Poto, I've got my own worries about this thing."

"Would it help if you talked to me about it?"

So Shirl told the inventor her suspicions concerning the death of Prince; although, as she said, it seemed that John-A was innocent, nevertheless she couldn't help having the tiniest doubts. . . . And the traitor, the informant in Downways who had arranged for the Oddlies' ambush—who was he? "I'd hate to think that someone dislikes me enough to turn me over to the Oddlies, Poto," said Shirl dismally. "But it must have been *somebody*—which means it's *somebody* we know."

"Don't take it too hard, Shirl. I expect the ambush was aimed at John-A. The Oddlies are bound to be interested in a successful vatkid. The fact that you were there was incidental."

"Which means they would have killed me. They might have kept John-A alive so that they could study him, but they

would have had no use for me, in spite of what Sten seems to think about them being harmless. That makes it worse, Poto."

"All right," said the inventor resignedly. "Who do you think it was?"

Shirl hedged. "You know when you get a sort of funny feeling about someone? When there's something not quite right about them, but you can't put your finger on it?"

"A hunch?"

Shirl smiled faintly. "In a woman we call it intuition. It sounds less chancy. Anyway"—the smile faded—"I've had an intuition about someone."

"Do you mind telling me who?"

She sighed. "Perhaps I'd better not. It's only a guess, after all."

"So long as you don't come along afterward and tell me that your woman's intuition was right."

"If I'm right, then I won't feel in the mood to brag about it," said Shirl sadly.

Word came that the Speaker had been heard again, booming incomprehensibly in the Great Chambers. Sten informed John-A that this was thought to signal the fact that the Daggertooth was approaching.

"A likely story," the android sniffed. "However, it might be as well if I trained a team. Six men will be enough," he continued in the deep powerful tone which always had the effect of silencing those about him. "Six men armed with swords, and myself. We'll lure the Daggertooth into one of the larger chambers where we'll have room to swing the swords. The men will move around the flanks, harrying the animal and diverting its attention. Meanwhile, I'll move in for the kill." His eyes held a glow of anticipation.

"John-A," began Shirl tentatively. "Are you sure it wouldn't be better to hide in a hibeyhole and attack the Daggertooth as it comes past, where it won't have room to turn on you? It can move terribly fast in an open space."

"Nonsense." He gazed at her loftily. "My own strategy will be used. I'll meet the Daggertooth face to face, in the open."

Like your progenitor, thought Shirl. Like the Hero did. So it is to be an exhibition. She wondered if John-A resented his vatdad's fame. . . .

But the Daggertooth did not appear that wake, and John-A began to feel impatient again. . . .

John-A hurried Shirl along the tunnels. "I'm going to see that old fool Sten," he confided. "The Bomb to this hanging around. Downways must move."

Shirl had become more critical of the android's attitude; it was as though Poto's words had opened her eyes. While they walked—and John-A expounded his views on the decadence of Downways and the incompetence of its leaders—she watched the reactions of the passersby. The android was gesticulating violently; she saw people flinch from his flailing arms. His deep voice brayed loudly through the tunnels. People kept close to the wall as they passed, averting their eyes. A team of men, chattering and laughing as they planted glowglobes in the tunnel roof, fell silent as the couple passed, watching them guardedly. Farther down the tunnel, she heard them begin to laugh and talk again.

She had an irrational desire to hit them. What sort of treatment was this for a man who was prepared to lay down his life for their sake? Why couldn't they be friendly? They could speak to him as they passed, or at least smile. John-A's position had never been officially made clear. It had never been said that he was superior to everyone else in Downways apart from the Elders—yet this was the way people were behaving. The averted gaze, the wide berth, they were all signs of subservience. Or dislike. . . . No doubt this was very flattering for John-A but it made for a lonely life. She would have to tell him to speak to other people first, before they had the chance to ignore him.

She recognized an approaching figure. It was Brag, her ex-pupil; she had hardly seen him since his unfortunate loss of control in the hibeyhole, but she bore him no grudge. She slackened her pace. As John-A had hold of her arm, this slowed him too.

"Fortitude, Brag," she said with forced gaiety.

"Oh, fortitude, uh, teacher," he replied uncertainly, his eyes flickering shiftily from her to John-A.

"John-A, this is Brag," said Shirl, determined to get the android talking to some member of Downways, no matter who.

"How nice," said John-A disinterestedly, and Shirl flushed.

"It's an honor to meet you, John-A," said Brag carefully. The two stared at each other with ill-concealed dislike.

Oh dear, thought Shirl. In order to get some sort of conversation going, she asked Brag: "How are you feeling now?"

"What?"

"I mean, since that time in the hibeyhole. . . ." She reddened with embarrassment; it was an inopportune time to introduce that topic.

Brag was grinning maliciously. "Oh, none the worse. You pack quite a kick, teacher. I'll remember not to meet you in the dark again." He addressed John-A. "Watch that right knee of hers. Courage remain!" He walked away briskly, chuckling to himself.

"What the Bomb was all that about?" asked John-A furiously.

"Oh, nothing. Just a little fight we had once."

"What sort of a little fight?" The android's face scanned hot with rage. "What the Bomb do you mean? What did the little bastard do?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just one of those things. A childish romp. A long time ago. It's all forgotten now."

"It doesn't sound like it. It seems to be regarded as an amusing interlude between you two. I mean to get to the bottom of this!" They turned a dark corner and John-A cannoned into someone, knocking him into the mud. "Watch where you're going, you!" the android shouted.

"John-A! What's got into you?"

The tunnel became lighter as they approached the Council Chamber and the android made an effort to control himself. Soon they came to the hibeyhole of Sten, about twenty paces before the Council Chamber itself. John-A glanced at the Elder's sign on the tunnel wall—an open book of the type used by the Old People, symbolic of wisdom and age, and shouted into the entrance.

"Sten!"

"John-A!" whispered Shirl, horrified.

The darkness within brightened and Sten appeared, withdrawing covers from glowglobes. "Just taking a shorthibe," he murmured, ignoring the android's rudeness. "Fortitude, you two. Come on in. What can I do for you?"

"There have got to be some changes around here," began the android without preamble, squatting on a pile of furs.

"Changes?"

"I'm tired of sitting around on my ass. I want to see some action. Do I have to wait around for the Oddlies to get me again? Give me a team of men and I'll wipe them out before they get us."

"I don't see how I can do that. In any case, I've already said that I want us to stay away from the Oddlies. I see no sense in provoking reprisals."

"In that case I'll raise my own team."

Sten sighed. "You can try, if you like. But I don't think you'll get much response. Don't you understand? We're timid people in Downways. We don't think the same as you. I'm tel-

ling you, if you think you'll be able to persuade anyone to go into Oddly territory and risk death for a dubious advantage, you're quite mistaken, young man."

"We'll see about that, Sten." John-A's voice was low and furious. "They're not all as weak-bladdered as you."

"There is another point," remarked the Elder coolly. "In order to follow you, a man would have to like you. He'd have to like you a lot, to allow you to lead him into Oddly territory. So think about that carefully, John-A. Have you got that kind of friends?"

"Shirl?" the android appealed.

"He's right, John-A. A lot of people don't understand you. Don't put it to the test, not just yet. Wait awhile. Think it over."

"Shirl!" John-A seemed to find it difficult to believe she was not supporting him. "People are saying I don't earn my keep! They're calling me a layabout! Do you want that?"

"Your time will come."

"By the Bomb, that's all I keep hearing. Your time will come!" he mimicked, enraged. "Right, I'm going to show you two. I'll show all Downways. I'll get my team without any help from either of you. There's somebody on my side. Somebody you hadn't thought of. Max. We've often spoken about attacking the Oddlies, Max and I, and now I think the time's come. Between us, we can raise an army!"

He climbed quickly out of the hibeyhole and disappeared without further ado, leaving Sten and Shirl regarding each other with alarm.

For the rest of that wake Shirl searched for John-A. First she went to Poto's workshop, for the inventor was a man who enjoyed frequent visitors and was always up-to-date with the news. Poto, however, had not seen or heard of John-A all wake.

She met Ned in the tunnels and asked him.

The dark man avoided her eyes. "I saw him, all right," he muttered. "He wanted to get me in on some fool scheme for attacking the Oddlies. Said he was raising an army like Napoleon and I could be a general or something ridiculous. I told him to recruit his staff elsewhere." He hurried away. Obviously his talk with the android had been painful.

Anna, the teacher, reported having seen the android quite near the classchamber, going in the direction of the guards' quarters.

Troy, captain of guards, was noncommittal. "Saw him," he said, "but only for a moment. He was in a strange mood.

Vicious, you know? He asked me where he could find Max—it seems he went to the hunters' quarters and Max wasn't there."

"Where was Max?"

"I told him: Max and his men were rallying near the Chamber of Snakes for a brief hunt before the hibe. He went that way."

"Courage remain." Shirl almost ran down the tunnel. It was a long way to the Chamber of Snakes and by the time she got there the area was deserted. She listened, but could hear no sound apart from the wind sighing through the hanging tendrils. Disconsolately she began to walk home.

She blamed herself for the situation. John-A's welfare was still technically her responsibility and she should have found ways of diverting his mind, ways in which he could have gainfully occupied himself and so avoided the present crisis which, she was sure, had arisen more through boredom than for any other reason. Boredom and the stupid taunts of jealous people.

She could see her faults clearly now. In her desire to keep John-A to herself she had not encouraged him to mix with other people and as a result had kept him almost as completely a prisoner as he had been in the earlier wakes. Now, because of her stupidity, he was leading an army on a profitless foray into unknown territory—the result of which could be total war between Downways and the Oddlies.

There were less people about the tunnels now; the hibe was drawing near. She reached John-A's hibe-hole and paused. She peered inside. The lights were out.

She stepped inside and pulled the cover from a glowglobe. John-A sat against a wall, regarding her somberly.

"Fortitude, Shirl. Come for a good laugh?"

In her relief she was crying. "John-A, I . . . What . . . ?"

"If you really want to know, that bastard Max backed down. He was scared to go. After I'd been running around Downways shouting about how I was going to wipe the Oddlies out! The bastard lost his nerve. Bomb, what a fool I made of myself."

"Max backed down? I thought maybe you shouldn't have put any trust in him. He talks a lot, John-A, but that's all. As Sten said, you can't conceive how cowardly we all are in Downways." She sniffed desperately, recovering herself.

"You never struck me as cowardly, Shirl." He looked at her gloomily. "But after all Max said at the Council—all that stuff about attacking the Oddlies . . . Mind you, he didn't admit he was frightened. He said the time wasn't ripe. We

shouldn't be precipitate. What he meant was that he had had second thoughts, lost his nerve, and couldn't go through with it."

"I'm sorry, John-A." She took his hand.

"Sorry? Bomb, don't tell me you wanted me to go."

"I mean I'm sorry things didn't work out for you, John," she said gently. "I don't like to see you hurt."

"So it's John now, is it?" he said, but more softly. "What about the Vat?"

"What about it? Maybe it's a difference we shouldn't worry about too much."

"Don't let's kid ourselves."

"Don't let's imagine difficulties that don't exist, John." She pressed his hand against her breast. "Can you honestly tell me you feel different from any other man?"

"Not right now, I don't." His breathing had become harsh; his hands began to move without her prompting. He pushed her onto her back as she wriggled quickly out of her robe, frantic with desire for him.

"Come on, John darling," she gasped, helping him, showing him. "Come . . . that's right now; slowly. . . ."

And he shouted with hoarse desire against her, pounding her body against the rough ground, groping and squeezing with his powerful hands, too aggressive, too inhuman, too quick. . . .

Afterward she mixed some Dream Dust with water, in the dark because she was crying. She took some herself because she wanted to forget what was past, and gave some to John-A because, horribly, he wanted to talk about the future, and his plans for personal greatness.

She managed to stay awake until he fell silent and his breathing became even, then she slipped away to her own hi-beyhole, hating him, hating herself even more for kissing his sleeping face before she went.

CHAPTER 11

"Wake up, Shirl!"

She rode a chunky beast across pillows of cloud; around her were other animals, friendly, their hooves kicking puffs of white as they capered about sharing her joy. Above her was the sky which she had never seen in her waking moments; it was an upturned bowl of pure pale light; here and there the huge disks of stars sparkled even brighter. Brightest of all was the giant sun in the west; fire rumbled in his belly and flames gushed from his mouth, whiter than the center of the smith's furnace. Despite this his appearance was not in the least terrifying; there was a kindness about him and he smiled like the animals as he watched Shirl's passage with a benign eye.

"Wake up, Shirl!"

The gentle hand of her lover fell upon her shoulder as she lay on the soft bed of golden furs and, smiling, she turned on her back, holding her arms out to him.

Her lover sniggered obscenely.

She opened her eyes and she was in her hibeyhole, sleep fleeing and dragging dreams with it. The scent of flowers she had never known turned to foul breath against her cheek, and the face of the dream lover above her became slowly transfigured; became Troy, captain of guards. He spoke.

"By the Bomb, that looked like some dream. Was I in it?" His hand remained on her shoulder.

She sat up furiously, head spinning as the last vestiges of sleep departed, and shook him off. "What do you think you're doing in my hibeyhole, Troy? Get out, before I shout for John-A!"

His leering expression changed as he recollected himself.

His voice became urgent. "Do that," he snapped. "Maybe you'll have more luck than me. I can't wake him."

She looked at him, alarmed; other faces peered around his shoulder. The entrance to her hibeyhole was crowded with dim figures. "What's the matter?" she asked sharply.

"We need John-A right away. The Daggertooth's been sighted." There was a low murmur of sympathetic horror from the figures behind as Troy performed a shudder that was not entirely ritual.

"Where?" Already she was pushing her way out of the hole and hurrying along the tunnel. There was another crowd outside John-A's chamber, muttering with angry fear. A chorus of shouts greeted her.

"We can't wake him up! What sort of a Hero is he, asleep when he's needed! Throw water over him, someone!"

Shirl pushed through the group around John-A's sleeping body and knelt beside him. At that moment someone threw a pitcher of water, drenching them both. John-A groaned and opened his eyes, drowsiness turning to quick rage as he felt the wetness and saw the mob. "What the Bomb . . ." he muttered, struggling to his feet and drawing his sword.

"Take it easy, John." Shirl put her hand on the sword arm. "It seems the Daggertooth's been sighted."

"Now you can show us what you're made of, android!" someone shouted.

John-A ignored this. "Whereabouts, Shirl?" he asked quietly.

She turned to Troy. "Over in the direction of the tailor's chamber," said the captain of the guards.

"Let's get going, then," said John-A decisively and strode for the exit, shouldering people roughly out of his way. Shirl followed and Troy was somewhere behind. They hurried down the tunnel, ignoring the scattered jeers.

"Who brought in this report?" John-A called over his shoulder.

Troy caught up with them, panting, sweating nervously as he gazed down the bright tunnel ahead. "One of my men."

"Where is he now?"

"In the guards' quarters. I had to get Doctor Leo to him; he went unconscious."

"Fine. It's on our way. We'll call in there first."

The guards' quarters was a large chamber; the floor was littered with piles of furs but nobody was sleeping at the moment. A group of nervous guards huddled near the entrance, watching Doctor Leo as he bent over a prone man, forcing koba juice between his lips.

John-A and Shirl pushed their way through. "What's happened to him, Doctor?" called the android.

The doctor hesitated, glancing at the other guards. "He's in shock," he said eventually.

"You mean he's fainted," said John-A contemptuously. "Can you bring him around?"

"I'm trying." There was impatience in the doctor's tone.

"Oh, leave him!" John-A wheeled around on Troy. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said he was on duty in the tunnel which forks off to the right, about twenty paces beyond the tailor's. The Dag-gertooth appeared in the tunnel, moving toward him."

"Did it keep on coming, after it saw him?"

Troy snorted. "I think we can assume that. My man didn't wait to find out, and I can't say I blame him. Anyway, it looks as though that's all the information we can give you."

"Right. Let's get going." John-A made for the entrance, sword in hand.

"Courage remain," said Troy.

"What do you mean? Aren't you bringing your men?"

"Neither my men nor myself." Troy trembled slightly as he faced the android but his face was set in stubborn lines. "It's not our department. I consider that the guards' responsibility ends once the presence of an intruder in Downways has been notified to the proper authority—in this case you."

"What about Max and his hunters? The men I trained?"

"I think you'll find they went on an earlywake expedition in the opposite direction."

"The Bomb to all of you then!" shouted John-A. He strode out of the chamber.

Shaking off Troy's restraining hand, Shirl followed. "I'm with you, John," she said breathlessly when she caught him up.

"You're damned well not. Go back in there."

"You can't stop me coming."

"If you like, then." John-A loped down the tunnel, jerking out his words as Shirl ran behind. "It's your life, not mine."

Obscurely hurt at his easy acceptance of the situation Shirl ran on. They passed side tunnels, the main tunnel twisted right, then left, then they were nearing the tailor's chamber.

There was a strange smell in the air, a warm, fetid stink which took Shirl back to her childhood—a smell of animal excrement and blood. She associated it with a squealing, feeding noise, and a sensation of the utmost terror. . . .

"John!" she called urgently. "The Daggertooth's near here! I can smell it!"

The android laughed, an insanely gay laugh. "Well, that's what we're here for, isn't it? By the Bomb, I'll show those bastards in Downways a thing or two!"

A cluster of glowglobes was grouped about the entrance to the tailor's chamber. They stopped, regaining their breath, and peered cautiously inside.

The chamber was a shambles. The stacked furs had been pulled about, scattered all over the floor, torn and filthy. The precious fabrics originally woven by the Old People and obtainable from a source known only to Paul, festooned the chamber in multicolored shreds. The benches were overturned, the rare cottons, pulled from their spools, hung about the chamber like gossamer. A few huddled, inert heaps lay bloodily on the floor.

Overall, pervading the air and striking to their very bellies, was the stench of the Daggertooth.

Retching, Shirl clung to the chamber entrance for a moment, then followed John-A slowly inside.

He was examining the bodies, turning them over fastidiously with his foot. "I wonder if Paul's here," he said. "I'm not sure that I could tell. . . ."

The bodies were dreadfully mutilated, torn and bloody with missing limbs, in some cases without heads. It seemed that eight men and women had died, although it was difficult to be certain. . . . Shirl pointed.

"I think that's Paul," she said in a small voice. The body was in the far corner of the chamber. Although only the torso remained, she could recognize the bright golden cloth, now bloody and torn, affected by Paul the chief tailor as symbol of his position.

"Too bad," said John-A. "Although he always was a bit of a pansy."

"Please don't say that sort of thing now," said Shirl quietly.

John-A looked at her, then left the chamber without further comment. Outside, he turned left and walked a few paces to the right fork described by Troy. "I expect he's gone back up there," he said.

"I suppose we'd better get back to the main tunnels, then."

"What? Let a chance like this go? I've never been so close to the Daggertooth before. I'm not going to let him get away from me now. What's down that tunnel?" He pointed to the left fork.

"I think it comes out somewhere near the Great Chambers. It's only used by the tailors. And occasionally by the hunters."

"And somebody else," observed John-A, pointing to the

beautiful glowing head and shoulders of a Lovely Lady protruding from the tunnel wall some thirty paces away. He regarded the right fork again. "He's up there," he said positively. "Where does it go?"

"I don't know." There were a few holes opening off the tunnel wall and Shirl regarded them with dread.

"We'll find out." The tunnel was dim, becoming darker with distance, and he broke off a large piece of glowglobe, holding it before him for additional illumination.

They walked for some time, treading quietly and with extreme caution. Shirl hardly dared expel a breath for fear that the sound or scent would bring the Daggertooth springing silently at them from a side chamber.

Soon they knew they were on the right track.

"Look at that," John-A whispered.

A human hand lay on the tunnel floor, pointing with petrified insistence in the direction they were taking. The stump of wrist oozed dark blood.

Shirl swallowed heavily and they moved on, even more cautiously now. Apart from the light of John-A's glowglobe the tunnel was now impenetrably black and, scanning infrared, she detected no heat-sources. They were totally alone. She didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

There had been several openings off their route and John-A was becoming doubtful. "I think we may have taken a wrong turning," he said. "I saw an entrance back there. Let's try that."

They retraced their steps for a few paces and took a tunnel to the left. Immediately John-A uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Shirl, following up, saw a trace of blood on the ground. Once again she could smell the stink of the Daggertooth and her heart pounded as she strove to scan the blackness ahead for heat-sources.

The tunnel meandered from left to right, up and down, and it quickly became apparent that it had not been constructed by any generation of Downways residents. Shirl surmised that it was one of the original blackfur tunnels of which her trudad had spoken. Possibly they were the only humans who had ever trodden this ground. Then she decided she was being fanciful. They were still comparatively near to Downways. The hunters probably knew this region quite well. She began to hope they would meet Ned.

"What's that?" John-A had stopped and Shirl's heart missed a beat again.

"What?" She peered and scanned, but saw nothing.

"That noise. A sort of roar."

Shirl listened carefully and heard it too, a low booming like a giant, drawn-out groan. She shivered. "It's not the Daggertooth," she said. "I don't know what it is." She hoped he would turn back.

But he moved forward again, head cocked to one side as he listened. Reluctantly she followed and the noise grew louder and she realized to her relief that it was not of animal origin. It was too continuous. There was no beginning or end, no rise or fall. It was a combination of many sounds, some tinkling, some thundering, and every note in between.

It was the sound of rushing water.

They emerged from the tunnel into a larger area and John-A halted suddenly, waving the glowglobe. Two paces from his feet the tunnel floor fell away in a sheer vertical drop. They moved forward carefully. "Lie down," commanded John-A. Shirl obeyed.

On their stomachs they looked over the edge, John-A holding out the glowglobe. The noise of water was almost deafening as it rushed past at an unguessable distance below. John-A raised the light again and they could see the tunnel mouth from which they had emerged onto this small platform on the subterranean cliff face. The light was not strong enough to show the far side of the gorge. If there was a far side . . . Shirl began to suffer twinges of agoraphobia.

John-A broke off a piece of the glowglobe and dropped it. The shining fragment fell with seeming slowness, jerked once as it struck an unseen projection, then was suddenly snatched away in a swirling, rapid motion as it reached the surface of the underground river. It quickly disappeared from sight.

John-A sighed, somewhat shakily. "That was a long way down."

"Too far for us, in the dark," Shirl said.

"The Daggertooth must have gone down."

Shirl thought. "He's much bigger than us," she said. "He knows the area, too. He might have bounded straight across to the other side. Or even dived in and swam."

"Well . . ." John-A stood. "I don't think there's much more we can do. We'd better get back. A pity," he said, gloomily. "I'd have liked to meet the brute. You've no idea what it's like, Shirl, listening to the jibes of those bastards in Downways all the time."

"Your time will come, John," said Shirl.

On their return to Downways they met a crowd of people milling around outside the Community Chamber. Shirl hesi-

tated—she was becoming increasingly cautious about the general attitude of Downways these wakes—but John-A strode forward. "What's going on?" he demanded.

The mob quieted and regarded him with varying expressions. "Maybe you know already," a man said loudly.

"What do you mean?"

"Brag's dead, that's what."

"Brag?" Shirl was beside John-A. "What happened? Where was he? We followed the Daggertooth until we couldn't go any farther."

"I'm sure you did," said the spokesman, whose name was Tim, sarcastically. "We'd never have doubted that. But that's got nothing to do with Brag. He was killed by a sword." He glanced significantly at the weapon by John-A's side.

"When did he die?" asked Shirl dully, sickened by a sudden suspicion.

"Doctor Leo can't say, not accurately. But it was some time ago, maybe before last hibe." Tim addressed John-A. "You're pretty useful with a sword. Perhaps you'll tell us all what you were doing late last hibe. You know, round about the time you were trying to recruit your army. As I remember it, you were quite near Brag's quarters, and in none too pretty a temper, either."

John-A stepped forward and hit the man cleanly on the point of the chin, lifting him from his feet and catapulting him back into the arms of the crowd. There was an outraged muttering, but no one stepped forward to take his place. John-A eyed them stonily for a moment, then turned away.

Shirl stole a glance at him as he walked along the tunnel, face set. He had countered an unspoken accusation with an unspoken answer, true enough. But hardly a satisfactory answer. She couldn't help recalling the fury on the android's face after she and Brag had had that ridiculous conversation yesterwake. . . .

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running feet. A panting guard halted before them. "Fortitude," he greeted them. "A message from the Council Chamber. You're wanted there right away."

The Council Chamber, once a place regarded with awe, had become a familiar sight to Shirl in recent wakes. Nevertheless this time, as she emerged from the small hole into the timbered vastness of the room, she experienced a shock. There was a new face seated among the Elders—a face new yet familiar.

"Ned!" she gasped, forgetting her manners in her surprise. He smiled at her.

So Ned had been nominated to the Council of Elders to replace the recently deceased Paul. Shirl was pleased at the honor which had befallen her quiet friend. She wondered whether his views had altered—remembering their discussions of earlier longwakes and his expressed determination to change things. Well, he seemed to have sobered down lately.

Then a more disturbing thought struck her. Ned was a hunter; Max was a hunter. Max had made his opinions clear, and Troy held similar views. Sten's edge of power on the Council was very slight indeed, as it was to be assumed that in any further vote taken on the subject of attacking the Oddlies, Max, Ned, and Troy would vote together. They would only need to win over Clarc in order to defeat Sten and the other conservative, Agar, despite Sten's extra casting vote.

The preliminaries over, Sten stood. Shirl was shocked to see how old he looked—he appeared to have aged dramatically over a few wakes.

"You may regard this in the nature of a reprimand, John-A," the old man began sternly. He then went on to express his "disappointment" as he put it, concerning the android's behavior of the previous wake. "Nothing short of rebellion. Fortunately futile. But just think about it. If you had had your way, young man, we would now have been at war with the oddlies and Downways an armed camp!"

He continued in this vein for some time, while Max and Troy sat back, grinning. The former grief at his son's death had been predictably short-lived. Shirl knew what they were thinking. The next time, it wouldn't be a rebellion—with the present constitution of the Council it could be a proper declaration of war by majority vote. *Then* Max would feel safe in throwing his hunters in behind John-A. Watching Sten as he made his speech, she found herself wondering just what line the Council would take if the old man were dead. . . . Sten did not spare Shirl either; she flushed as she came in for some mild criticism over the incident of yesterwake. After all, as Sten pointed out, she had been instrumental in shaping John-A's character and, even now, saw more of him than anyone else.

When he had finished John-A began to speak in his own defense. Shirl nudged him, indicating that he keep quiet and leave things as they were, but he would have none of it. He spoke at length, painting a rich picture of the secure home which would be Downways with the Oddlies out of the way. He spoke well and passionately.

Alarminglly, Shirl saw Clarc nodding. Max and Troy were smiling.

John-A grew inspired as he felt the audience going his way. "Our treatment of mutants in the past has been nothing short of inhuman!" he declared. "If we had killed them painlessly at birth—as common sense dictates—none of this need have happened. So, according to Sten, we always will. And it's quite apparent now that they've been breeding among themselves, multiplying the abomination of their twisted bodies. In due course they'll outnumber us! Then will they be so peaceable? By the Bomb, friends, we're at an intersection of tunnels! The routes before us are quite simple: inaction and death, or victory and life!"

He stepped back, his face bright and flushed. Max and Troy applauded wildly and, after a moment's hesitation, Clarc joined in.

"I wish to propose a motion!" shouted Max.

"Wait a moment!" The voice was harsh, commanding, and unexpected. Ned was on his feet, his face curiously blank; he looked as though he were sleepwalking. He turned in the direction of John-A and Shirl shivered at the sight of his eyes. They seemed to be staring into John-A's very brain with terrifying intentness.

"Before anybody makes a fool of himself," continued Ned, now in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, "I think I ought to make a brief reply to John-A. I only wish to make two points.

"Firstly I am distressed to hear the vatkid of our Hero uttering wild statements to distract our attention from his failure this wake to fulfill his duty. He was bred to slay the Dag-gertooth and in this he failed—and men died.

"Secondly I would remind him of his difference from the rest of us. He is bigger, stronger and, so he says, more courageous. And he is a vatkid." Ned's voice became harsh again, a rasp of indictment. "On fewer counts than this men have been deemed Oddlies and banished from Downways!"

John-A stared at him white-faced, as Ned sat down.

Sten coughed, hiding a smile. "I take it we can consider the meeting closed. As you all know, it is the last meeting before the longhibe. Perhaps this is as well; it will give us all a breathing space. Much has been achieved during this long-wake—and I am glad to have seen peace preserved during my time."

Shirl felt that the words had a prophetic sound and was conscious of an indefinable sadness as the meeting broke up, despite its satisfactory conclusion. She watched with interest

as the Elders briefly inscribed their tablets, then stood. She shook Sten by the hand and politely wished him a comfortable longhibe.

"May courage remain with you, Shirl," the old man replied.

CHAPTER 12

It was axiomatic in Downways that, on awaking from a longhibe, a person would find things different in many ways. Trukids would have grown during their long sleep; old people would have died. The faces all around would have changed. New mysterious tunnels would have appeared and would require early exploration and, possibly, sealing off. If ever a full-scale attack were to be launched on Downways, the longhibe would be the time to do it. For this reason the guards were entrusted with keeping a watch during the interminable length of the bitterly cold hibe when even the jumbo worms were still. The watch would continue for a few artificial wakes, then reliefs would fail to arrive and the system would collapse as usual. Nevertheless, Downways remained unattacked.

The first meeting of the Council of Elders was always a busy session: taking stock, replacing members no longer present, charting new routes, and planning for the new season's progress. In order that the government of Downways could proceed without interruption, each member of the Council nominated his replacement immediately before the longhibe, inscribing the name upon a tablet and leaving it facedown on the Council table at the conclusion of the last meeting of the longwake. When the Council assembled for the new session the replacements for deceased members could be summoned in due course, and the surviving Elders could destroy their own tablets without anyone being aware of their nominations.

Shirl, like all those around her, found things different. Most disturbing, she found that she had aged. Not drastically, but she was a woman and therefore imagined that the bloom of sex appeal seemed to have deserted her body. By the stan-

dards of the Old People, had she known it, she would now have been described as an attractive young woman—but she was in Downways, where girls take their simple marriage vows young. She hadn't married while she had the chance; the teaching of John-A and her other classes had taken up too much of her time. Now, she thought ruefully, it was quite likely too late.

She wandered the tunnels, renewing old acquaintances and speculating like everyone else as to the outcome of the first meeting of Elders. She spoke to men whom she knew and liked—and who liked her—but on scanning infrared she detected no warming of their joints as they conversed with her. Maybe they were getting older too, but Shirl felt that she herself was well on the way to becoming an old maid, and the notion depressed her.

Her parents had died during the longhibe. She paid a dutiful call to their hibeyhole only to find their skeletons picked clean by maggots which still heaved hopefully among the tattered remnants of clothing. On informing the authorities of the new food source she found that Clarc, storekeeper and Elder, had not survived the longhibe. Even more serious, the rumor quickly flew around the tunnels to the effect that Sten had died. This was distressing news and for the time being it burdened her with the entire responsibility for John-A who, in the early period of waking, was proving difficult to handle.

He had, it seemed, forgotten his humiliation by Ned in the Council Chamber—or possibly he was reacting against it. He was even taller now, and stronger: a young man of impressive stature towering a full head above his fellows. He strode the tunnels confidently, arrogantly, in the manner of his progenitor the Hero, brushing aside those who stood in his path, fighting on occasion, winning invariably.

People resented him—as, before the Great Battle, they had resented the Hero—and they talked behind his back, speaking once more of the way he was living on his progenitor's reputation. Shirl became increasingly concerned during the first wake as reports of his behavior reached her; she swiftly sought him out and began to accompany him everywhere, hoping to provide a moderating influence.

Early in the following wake Shirl was summoned before the Council of Elders. She arrived in some trepidation, feeling that she was about to be censured for not being able to control the android, who had taken to carrying his sword, drawn, and ruthlessly carving a passage with it through the crowded tunnels. The consequent licking of wounds had been followed by several strong complaints to the Elders.

She entered the Council Chamber and genuflected to those present; in recognition of her more mature sexual status she wore a longer robe.

Agar greeted her. "Welcome to the Council of Elders, Shirl," he said pleasantly. He too had aged during the longhibe and was now a distinguished-looking elderly man, thick hair pale blue in the light of the glowglobes. He sat in the place lately occupied by Sten, being now chief of the Elders.

"Thank you, Agar," said Shirl, adding formally, "I am honored to be summoned into the presence of so august a body."

"Sit down, Shirl." Agar indicated a place at the table. With no trace of formal Relitalk, he explained: "You can forget about being honored from now on. You're an Elder now. A member of the Council."

Shirl did sit down, abruptly. "What!"

Agar handed her a tablet bearing her name. "You were Sten's nomination, and in my opinion a good one."

"Hear, hear," echoed Ned, smiling at her. Max and Troy, on the other side of the table, were silent, nodding briefly while they regarded her appraisingly. For a moment she sat quietly, a little overawed, hoping that she would be worthy of Sten's confidence in her.

There was still an empty seat at the table—the one which had previously been occupied by the late Clarc. A tablet lay before it, faceup, and Shirl tried to read the name scratched there without making it appear too obvious.

Agar saw her, however. "You know our sixth member very well," he said.

His remark was well-timed; at that moment John-A climbed through the small entrance to the Chamber. He stared arrogantly from face to face and sat down uninvited. Shirl watched in astonishment, wondering what Clarc had been thinking of when he nominated him. She glanced at Agar, who was also watching the android; there was no outrage on the new chief's face, only a faint smile. "The old order changeth," he murmured.

"I'll say it does," agreed John-A. "As from now, Downways will move." He scrutinized those present, grinning at Max and Troy, scowling at Ned. His expression softened as his eyes met Shirl's. "Fortitude, Shirl," he said.

"In what direction are we going to move, John-A?" she asked quietly.

"Outward first," he replied confidently, "to secure our borders. Then up, I think."

Ned looked at him sharply.

Agar was alarmed. "That brings us to the surface," he said. "The film sheets are quite specific about conditions Up Top. It's hostile territory. . . ."

John-A ignored him. "We need weapons," he said, drawing his sword and throwing it on the table with a clatter. "Better weapons than this. Guns and . . . things. Grenades. Like they had in the old times Shirl's always teaching us about. The Old People must have left weapons somewhere. There must be an armory. We know the Vat and the Film Library, so it's a question of exploring further in the Great Chambers. And if the Oddlies get in our way . . ." He picked up his sword, gestured with it significantly, and sheathed it. "Give me a dozen men," he commanded grandly, "and I'll arm Downways!"

Ned spoke into the silence as John-A sat down. "Don't forget the Daggertooth." The android scowled at him, and Ned continued: "It seems to me that there's quite a simple way in which we can solve this difficulty over the Oddlies—if there is a difficulty, which I doubt. They've never bothered me. . . ."

"They've never taken you prisoner! You'd think differently if you'd had their swords against your gut!"

"Possibly. But listen to my suggestion. As we know, there are a limited number of ways in which they can enter Downways. One of them is down by the well. They also have access to the far reaches of the Great Chambers, and so into Downways via the Vat Chamber. It's possible that they have other ways into the more remote tunnels."

"Or maybe they've duplicated our system, paralleled our tunnels and can break in at any point," remarked John-A.

"Don't let's hear that old trumum's tale again," said Ned impatiently. "I don't think they've got more than three means of access at most. So what I suggest is that we concentrate our efforts this longwake into sealing off these holes. The one near the well is easy. The narrow tunnels we can seal at any point."

Max spoke coldly. "Are you proposing to restrict my hunting grounds?"

"Yes. If we know the exact limits of Downways it will be worth it. You see, not only does it solve this imaginary problem of the Oddlies, but it helps to keep out the Daggertooth as well. We can breed enough meat in Downways for our purposes without hunting. We can be self-contained, self-supporting, and safe."

"Downways men have always hunted. It's our heritagel!" Max was crimson with outrage.

"Heritage? Now what exactly does that mean?" asked Ned calmly.

"And how we can banish mutants, if Downways is self-contained?" asked Troy.

"We don't banish them. We even bring Big-Ears back—I met him yesterwake. We need him. Max uses him for hunting already. He can patrol the tunnels and listen for any attempted break-ins, human or animal."

"He won't live forever," objected Troy. "Is this only a short-term thing?"

"We feed a slice of him to the Vat, and duplicate him," replied Ned simply.

Even Max looked alarmed at this. "Breed mutations?"

"Why not, if they're useful?" Ned glanced at John-A. "It could be said that we've done it before."

"Now look here, you!"

"Forget it. Forget it. I was just illustrating a point. I'm saying that if we want Downways to be strong and safe, then we've got to throw out a few outworn conceptions. We've got to find the men for the jobs. Then, once our base is secure, we can move. Slowly and carefully." He smiled at John-A. "Upward."

"But the radioactivity," objected Agar.

"I said *carefully*. I don't suggest we all go rushing out on the surface like stampeding blackfurs. We send out a test party—or a test animal. If they live, we extend the experiment. It may take longwakes. Generations. But at least in our time, Man will have started on his way up again."

The five men and Shirl looked at each other over the Council table and for once there was no dissension as they digested this inspiring possibility. Shirl saw Ned looking at her; she smiled and nodded slightly. Max and Troy were beaming at each other as they considered the situation from their own points of view. Agar regarded the ceiling with a faint smile. Only John-A seemed not entirely happy. He was watching Ned thoughtfully.

"So we just forget about the Oddlies. Wall them off."

"That's right," replied Ned.

"And what about our blackfurs? They're always burrowing. They might drill a new tunnel through to the Oddlies."

"We make sure they don't. It's quite simple."

"All right," said John-A shortly. "I'll go along with that." There were expressions of relief on the faces of the others. "Provided," he continued, "that I'm made responsible for the

job of walling up the Oddlies' access to the Great Chambers." He stared around the table belligerently.

"John-A," began Shirl tentatively. "It's a bit premature to start assigning duties."

"And to start issuing ultimatums," added Agar.

"Max," John-A addressed the hunter chief. "Give me ten men."

"Wait a moment. Wait a moment." Agar held up his hand. "You may be new here, John-A, but you ought to know that our proceedings are democratic. If dissension arises, we vote. We make no demands on each other."

"I didn't object to his demands," Max pointed out. "I'm prepared to let him have the men."

"Yes, but . . ." Agar paused helplessly. Shirl could see his problem. He suspected John-A of intending to escalate the walling-off of the Great Chamber into an attack on the Oddlies. It was well known that there was an Oddly concentration somewhere within the unexplored warrens which lay between the Great Chambers and the far side of the well.

"Thank you, Max," said John-A in a tone of finality.

"What use are hunters in the task to be performed?" objected Agar weakly. "You need men skilled with their hands, not in the use of swords."

"We may be attacked. The place is a hotbed of Oddlies. In any case, what I'm proposing is a preliminary survey, to ascertain the extent of the work to be done. Having got some idea of what's involved, I'll bring in the craftsmen."

"You must take someone with you on your survey, then. Someone who is expert at sizing up construction work. Bott the carver would be ideal; he has a knack with such things."

"Bott is unreliable." The android's voice held contempt.

"Bott is not intelligent," remarked Agar mildly. "You can't expect too much from him."

"Then Bott should have been utilized, long ago. There's no room in Downways for weaklings now. Ten men, then, Max." With these forceful remarks John-A rose from his chair and strode from the chamber.

"He means action," observed Troy nervously.

"I hope he knows what the Bomb he's doing," Ned voiced his thoughts more specifically.

"He's the vatkid of the Hero," Agar stated uncertainly.

"As I recall it, the Hero was not renowned for common sense."

There was a communal intake of breath at Ned's sacrilege. "The Hero slew the Daggertooth," someone whispered, as though trying to reassure himself of the fact.

"Quite possibly a lucky blow. I was never wholly convinced about the Hero." They regarded Ned incredulously. "All we know is what Sten told us and now Sten's dead. The Hero has become hearsay. A dubious legend."

"Ned!" Agar was on his feet, quivering with outrage. "I must ask you to leave this chamber immediately! Go to your hibeyhole and recall what you've just said, and don't resume your seat on the Council until you can truly say you were wrong!"

Ned rose. "Before I go, Agar, I'd like to say that it's of my own free will—not because you've told me to. As you said, the Council of Elders is democratic. I'm leaving this chamber because I feel sick to my stomach at the incompetence and weakness we've shown in this first session of the longwake. If this is a foretaste of future meetings, then Downways is doomed.

"I'll ask you all to remember that I suggested a reasonable, carefully thought-out, and above all peaceable solution to the major Downways problems. I also thought that his solution would meet with the approval of us all, despite our divergent views. Which it did.

"And then . . ." Ned's voice trembled, and Shirl at last realized how deeply hurt he was. "And then, when everything seemed to be settled, we allowed the chance to slip away from us, through sheer weakness. We allowed that young . . . android . . . to turn my suggestion into an excuse for a skirmish with the Oddlies. We allowed him to do this, not because he presented us with good arguments, but because we were scared of him."

He turned away. "The Bomb to you all," he muttered, and left the chamber in dead silence.

Agar sighed. "I don't know what Downways is coming to," he said quietly. "I thought, maybe, it was a good idea to have some younger people on the Council, but now . . . Sacrilege in the Council Chamber, suggestions of utilization, raiding parties sent into Old Places, and even the use of Relitalk seems to have died. . . ."

It was the first time Agar had admitted that he had guessed John-A's intentions and Shirl suddenly saw him for what he was: an aging, tired pacifist being swept helplessly under the tide of aggressive resurgence. Suddenly she felt sorry for him. "If it helps to rid us of the Daggertooth, Agar . . ." she said gently.

"There will be Daggertooths long after our tunnels have collapsed," he replied pessimistically.

Shirl spent the rest of the wake searching for John-A with-

out success, all the while thinking of the words she had heard just before leaving the Council Chamber.

Troy had whispered to Max: "Do you think it would be a terrible thing if the android failed to return from this expedition, Max? Or don't you?"

CHAPTER 13

John-A moved fast and by early the next wake had assembled a team of hunters equipped with swords, knives, and clubs. Neither Max nor Troy volunteered to accompany them, and Ned, whom Shirl had expected to go along in order to keep an eye on John-A, had disappeared.

In a vain effort to dissuade the android from his course of action Shirl had spent the night with him, offering him the comfort of her body in the hope that he would find such gentle pleasures more attractive than war. It seemed, however, that John-A enjoyed both forms of action immoderately, for the wake had hardly begun before he was flinging aside the furs, jumping to his feet, seizing his sword, and departing into the tunnels.

So Shirl had tried to find Ned, and failed in this also. She was not surprised; Ned had a reputation for moodiness and was probably at this moment sulking in some remote corner of Downways.

Eventually she came upon John-A again. He had assembled his men in the Chamber of Praise and was leading them in a brief adulation before setting off. Shirl genuflected automatically and joined them. As she listened to John-A's measured words a disturbing train of thought occurred to her.

In Downways there were two methods of birth—natural childbirth and the Vat. In order to distinguish between these the resultant children became known as trukids or vatkids respectively. In the course of time the use of the Vat had been discontinued, although children were still referred to as trukids, implying that the concept of the vatkid still existed, buried in Man's hereditary knowledge. Then came John-A, the vatkid of the Hero.

The fault was in the language, thought Shirl as the litany droned on. Because the trukid was the child of its parents, everyone seemed to assume that the vatkid was the child of his progenitor. But they were wrong. In effect, the vatkid was the progenitor—there was no mixing of genes. The vatkid and his progenitor were essentially the same being.

So John-A, in his fervent, heartfelt paean of praise for the Hero—as he neared the end of the litany his voice was vibrant with sincere adulation—was committing the supreme act of narcissism. In praising the Hero, he was praising himself. . . .

They murmured their responses, genuflected, and left the chamber. The religious light in John-A's eyes died and he became brisk and practical. "Right," he said. "We've all got our weapons, we all know where we're going, and I take it that no one wants to back out at this stage." He eyed them keenly and, not surprisingly, it seemed they were all with him. "Fortitude, Shirl," he said suddenly, catching sight of the girl as she hovered in the background. "Have you come to see us off? That's good of you."

"I'm coming with you, John."

"You're what? You're not. This is man's work. You'd be in the way. And there's always the possibility that the Oddlies might attack. You could get hurt."

"Would that really bother you, John?" asked Shirl hopefully.

"Of course," he said uneasily, glancing at his men and obviously concerned that they might take this as a sign of weakness. "Right, then, let's get going."

"Have you got a guide with you? Someone who knows the Great Chambers?"

He swung back on Shirl again, annoyed. "We don't need a guide. I've been down there before. You took me yourself."

"But that was only to see the Vat. There's a lot more to the Great Chambers than the Vat. There's the Film Library. The Chamber of Pipes. The Chamber of Bright Cylinders. The Chamber of Rare Fabrica. The Chamber—"

"All right. All right. So it's a big place. But we'll be going to places where you've never been. This is an exploration."

"How will you know I've never been there, if I'm not there to tell you so?" asked Shirl reasonably. "You could wander about for wakes, covering ground that we know already."

He shrugged, defeated. "Suit yourself. But keep out of our way, right?"

Smiling, Shirl followed the team as they wound their way through the tunnels in the direction of the Great Chambers.

"So this is the Film Library." John-A stared at the endless banks of drawers which stretched the entire length of one wall of a huge room. "How do you know where to find things?" he asked, pulling out a drawer and flicking his fingernail across the edge of countless films.

"There's a catalogue on the wall and an index at the front of each drawer," Shirl explained. Behind them, the ten men stood by unimpressed, indeed, unthinking. They had been chosen for their ability with the knife rather than intelligence. One of them giggled aimlessly as he caught Shirl's eye. "We've got no hope of covering all the knowledge in this place," she continued. "All we can do is to learn what we can. What seems most important. As for the rest, well, it's there when we want it. A lot of it is totally incomprehensible."

"So much for knowledge," observed the android. "I wonder just how much we're missing. . . . Let me see this catalogue."

She showed him the huge index on the smooth vertical wall. A rough ladder had been constructed in the distant past in order that the upper levels could be consulted when desired. Glowglobes clung tenaciously to the smooth surface of the wall, fed by streaming moisture from the unseen roof.

Shirl shivered. There was, she always felt, an alienness, a wrongness about the Great Chambers, and she could never quite figure out what it was. Something at the back of her mind, the glimmerings of an idea at which her imagination balked. Whenever she got back to Downways the feeling always disappeared and, in the familiar surroundings, she was unable to recapture it.

John-A was descending the ladder when a large chart caught his eye. "What's this?" he asked.

It fitted flush to the wall, three times a man's height and blackened with mildew; here and there a small glowglobe gleamed. He brushed the surface, reading the large letters with difficulty. "It's a map," he said, recognizing the obscure lines and symbols from their smaller counterparts on film sheets. "It's a plan of this area, I think." He clung to the ladder, scrubbing with his palm and reading. "Have you ever looked at this thing before?"

"No," admitted Shirl.

"Look." He indicated a rectangle. "This is where we are. It says: 'Microfilm Library.' Now. Let's see . . ."

It didn't take long to locate the site of the armory, a small square some eight chambers removed from their present position. "Let's go," said John-A briefly.

Shirl watched him as he strode off at the head of the group of explorers; he walked with his accustomed confidence, head high and arm outstretched holding a glowglobe before him. He had been bred for this; he was the flesh of his progenitor. His behavior patterns, originally instilled by the Hero's genes, had been reinforced by all he had been taught since; the stories of battles, of great men and their achievements, of glory.... He had been told that he was the epitome of the human spirit, and he believed it, and the last longhibe had fixed this belief into his very subconscious. Shirl hoped it would stay that way, hoped that nothing would occur to destroy this arrogance because, she thought sadly, what would John-A be without his self-confidence? Just a vatkid, an android who couldn't live up to his progenitor's name.... There were many in Downways who would like to see him destroyed.

There was a scuffling away to their right. A short-lived outline against a cluster of glowglobes, gone so soon that Shirl, tagging along behind the party, thought she had imagined it.

But she did not imagine the scream, shrill and terrible, dying in a gurgling murmur after John-A flung his sword into the gloom.

It was the body of a man—naked; the sword had taken him through the back of the neck, the point protruded from his throat. John-A rolled him over with his foot. He was a stranger to them all, white of face as the blood ceased to pump. He was not of Downways; his mouth was disfigured by a harelip....

"Nice throwing, Hero," said someone, and there was a murmur of agreement from the others.

The android accepted the compliment and the reference to his progenitor silently, retrieving his sword with a jerk and a twist and wiping the blade briefly on his clothes. "Keep watching," he said. "There must be others around. I wonder where they come from." His voice was impatient. "They should have been wiped out long ago."

But that poor man didn't threaten us, thought Shirl, horrified. How do we know he represented a danger? We didn't give him a chance.... Surely our enemy is the Daggertooth, not mankind.

As they moved along the vaulting corridors, through the cavernous chambers, there were more scuttlings in the dark, occasional shrill voices. Their progress was being observed. Scanning infrared, Shirl could sometimes make out distant

heat-sources, but the watchers had already learned their lesson and stayed well out of range.

At last John-A paused. "Should be around here," he murmured, waving the glowglobe, peering into the gloom. The secret mutterings and whisperings had ceased; the huge chamber seemed to hold its breath, waiting. They passed through a wide opening to their left. . . .

A brilliant flash, a monstrous explosion. Two men beside Shirl disappeared as though swept away by a giant hand; disappeared with no trace, without even a cry. She was on the hard floor, her eardrums ringing, dimly aware of the confusion around her. She heard the clash of steel on steel. Struggling shapes were apparent in the infrared. Another gigantic explosion was followed by a rain of particles from the wall. In the instant of lightning she caught an image of John-A laying about with his sword; there was no way of telling whether he battled against friend or foe, so wildly and powerfully did he slash. Came an instant thought too: *I don't suppose he cares. . . .*

She crawled a few paces, felt fur beneath her hand, and pulled, intending to wrap herself up and hide until events quieted down. Light gleamed. The fur had been covering a large growth of glowglobes.

The shadowy figures of heat became visible. Almost twenty men battled to the clash of swords, the grunt of effort, the bubbling scream of death. A thick-armed dwarf brandished a sword in either hand; John-A, with his great reach, cut him down almost effortlessly.

Shirl watched, unable to move, as the battle swayed above her and men fell dying. John-A was in the center, his sword flickering like light itself, thrusting, slashing. A flashing sweep severed one Oddly's wrist. The hand, still clutching the knife, fell beside her legs; she kicked it away and vomited quietly, endlessly.

In the midst of her distress she felt a hand on her shoulder. "It's all over," said John-A. "They've gone . . . those who are still alive. They've run off." His voice trembled with exultation. She looked up at him; his face glowed with triumph, he was smiling fiercely, his lips drawn back like—

Like a Daggertooth, snarling. . . .

She shuddered, and stood, and the image vanished from her mind as she surveyed the bodies on the floor. Nine men, visible by the glowglobes but already beginning to fade in the infrared. Seven of them naked, pathetic grotesque parodies of the human form. Three of them clothed, members of their own party.

They had won. What had they won?

"What was it all about?" she asked wonderingly.

"They ambushed us because we were encroaching on their territory," replied John-A. "We were a threat moving in, crowding them. Lebensraum. . . . What's happened to your history, Shirl?"

"Yes, but this is . . . real. . . ." Gashes gaped like mouths on the naked bodies; one figure had stumps for arms; a knife was still gripped in his prehensile toes. The blood was ceasing to pump, now congealing crimson on the floor.

"You mean to say you don't believe your own teachings?" He laughed shortly. "Maybe I didn't either, but I do now. I can see what it was all about." The terrible smile was still on his lips; his breathing was harsh. "Glory . . ." he murmured.

One of the party called out and he looked away, eyes clearing, practical again. "What?" he snapped.

"Over here. A weapon."

It was still warm and the muzzle leaked blue smoke. Almost as big as a man, it had a curious angular shape and was fastened to the floor by a crude framework and lashings.

"A cannon," breathed John-A. "By the Bomb, a cannon!"

It had a huge trigger worked by an improvised leverage. It was weirdly massive, out of proportion, an impossible piece of machinery which nevertheless touched a chord in Shirl's memory.

It was an automatic hand gun, identifiable from photographs in the Film Library.

As Shirl asked herself what sort of hand could hold a gun like that a number of old half-suspicions fitted together in her mind to form a composite, heartrending certainty of the futility of Downways. . . .

John-A straddled the barrel, the blue metal reaching almost to his crotch. "We'll drag it to Downways," he declared, "and blast hell out of the Daggertooth!"

Eleven men and one woman had left Downways to explore. Six men returned elated and confident of the future of their people.

One woman, Shirl the teacher, returned heavy with the sick misery of disillusionment.

Longhibes ago, there had been a man named Jeb who called himself an astronomer. As a trukid, Shirl had been taught by him; but in time the study of astronomy had been discontinued as inapplicable to their present situation in Downways. Jeb had studied the stars from the film sheets; he knew their names, their numbers, their positions, their magni-

tudes. He knew that many of the stars possessed planets, as did the sun. He read the speculations as to the possible forms life might take on these planets. He mastered his subject in the abstract, without ever having seen a star.

Then he disappeared from Downways for almost a full longwake. Memory is short, and many people forgot him. Shirl remembered, however, and missed his teachings; they had always fascinated her although she conceded they were of no practical value.

He returned to the tunnels as people were preparing for the next longhibe; his clothes were in shreds, his skin slashed with scars, but his eyes burned brightly.

He had been Up Top. He had seen the stars with his own eyes. He was the only man in living memory to have done so.

Until he died—some said from radiation sickness—the memory seemed to sustain him and he even recommenced teaching on a voluntary basis with renewed enthusiasm; he had become something of a celebrity and his classes were well attended.

"Stars," he would say, his eyes faraway. "Stars so many you can't count them. Billion upon billion, an infinite number. And among those stars an infinite number of planets like Earth. An infinite variety of life."

"So what?" somebody said.

Jeb looked around the classchamber; his eyes were suddenly sad as he regarded the trukids squatting insignificant on the ground, their faces blue and pallid in the glow.

"I stood Up Top," he repeated. "And I looked at the stars. An infinity of points of light in infinite space. The ground I stood on was fused black and desolate and I could see the curve of the horizon, and I knew how small Earth was, and how small I was. And then I looked at the stars again.

"If I didn't believe there was life out there, I'd feel hellish lonely down here."

Shirl remembered these words as she huddled in her hibey-hole and wondered at the insignificance of Downways, and the dreadful trick which evolution had played on its unsuspecting inhabitants. When had this happened? Over what period of time? Was it still going on? The questions circled the whirlpool of her thoughts as she shifted restless and sleepless in her small spherical chamber. Way back, there was a period of which nothing was known, long periods when Man must have wandered savage and illiterate, first around the Old Buildings until the food ran out, then burrowing, as now; gradually evolving into the tiny creature he was. . . .

Was such a series of events possible?

Again she speculated as to the original purpose of the Vat. Could it have been built in order to breed a new race of tiny humans whose food requirements would be minimal and easily satisfied by the insects in the soil? Could it be that the Old People were to blame for the present situation?

Of course, the present inhabitants of Downways would not realize any of this. They were not, she conceded, particularly well educated, neither were they regular visitors to the Great Chambers which might have given them cause for speculation. No doubt the majority of Downways was perfectly happy in its ignorance.

So she tried to think in a more logical manner. Why should this particular form of evolution be upsetting to her? Was it because it implied that the members of Downways were also . . . Oddlies? Partly, but why should it appear to deprive mankind of hope and purpose? The old Man was dead, his replacement had arrived, and both were insignificant in terms of the stars. Man was now, and Man was still trying. . . .

And there was life in the stars; some bigger than Man, some no doubt smaller. Whatever his present size, Man had company. . . .

But a step had been taken and a challenge accepted. Man had mastered his environment before, and defeated competitors larger and stronger than himself. It was merely a question of dismissing previous victories and starting over again.

Instead of the tiger, there was now . . . the Daggertooth. Later she spoke to Agar privately.

"There's a big celebration in the Community Chamber," the Elder said. "I'm surprised you're not there, Shirl. You were on the exploration, you have a right to share some of the glory of our, uh, new Hero."

"I wouldn't consider it," Shirl replied bitterly. "Do you realize that the whole purpose of the trip was to find weapons that belonged to the Old People? That, and to needle the Oddlies? There was never any intention of surveying the Great Chambers. Once we were down there, the matter was never mentioned again."

"I realized that," said Agar. "I think everyone knows that, but in view of the outcome they're not complaining. Downways folk have always admired manifestations of courage, because they have so little of that quality themselves. Now, with John-A among us, they feel that a little of his courage rubs off on us."

"I'd like to know where courage ends and brutality begins," said Shirl.

"Don't take it like that. As has been said before, Downways needs a Hero to look up to. We haven't had a Hero for some time, but now we've got one. This will do our people a lot of good."

"You have a remarkable knack of agreeing with all sides of an argument, Agar," said Shirl with mild exasperation.

"It keeps people happy."

"That's what counts, isn't it? Keeping people happy. Tell them the good things. Don't frighten them. Conceal unpleasant facts. . . ."

Agar eyed her closely. "It seems you're trying to tell me something, Shirl. I wouldn't bother, if I were you. I've lived a long time and learned my share of unpleasant facts. They're best kept to oneself. That's an interesting weapon which you brought back from the Great Chambers."

"I thought so, too," said Shirl dully,

"It would be a great pity . . . I'll go further than that. It would be a terrible thing for all of us—and, I think, a shattering blow for John-A—if it became generally known just how interesting that weapon is. And all that is implied by that. If you see what I mean, Shirl."

"I see what you mean."

"Come," said Agar. "Let us join the celebrations."

CHAPTER 14

Shirl could hear the sounds of triumph long before she reached the Community Chamber; the tunnels echoed to the roars of the revelers punctuated by an occasional shouted few words from a voice which she recognized as that of John-A. She felt tired already after the events of the wake and longed for her hibe. This, she felt with a sinking heart as she approached the source of the celebration, promised to be a long and wakeful hibe.

The tunnels around the Community Chamber were packed with a jostling throng. It seemed that all Downways was there and for a moment she thought she would not be able to get through. Then someone recognized her, a cheer went up, and her name was swept on a tide of voices into the large chamber. The crowds parted. She went forward, assisted by congratulatory slaps on the back, and stepped into the Community Chamber itself.

John-A saw her. He towered above the other men in the center of the chamber, laughing and shouting. He drank koba juice from a reach pipe—the plugged wooden tube as long as the span of a man's arms used on special occasions. He lifted the pipe in acknowledgment as his eyes met hers and took a deep draft, the fiery liquor spilling down his chin. "Come on, Shirl!" he shouted. "Come and join the fun!" Hands urged her forward and she stumbled over the bodies of those already too far gone in spirit to remain vertical.

John-A reached through the mob and took her hand, dragging her into the small elite group of returned victors. Her eyes widened as she saw the gun squatting on the floor in its timber carriage, black and evil and beautifully machined. She accepted koba juice in an earthen pitcher and drank sparingly. The room was intolerably hot. Like all Downways its ventila-

tion depended on the mysterious breezes which blew almost continuously through the tunnels; now the press of bodies about the door had effectively sealed the Community Chamber off. She began to feel nervous, and found the muzzle of the gun pressing against her back as the crowd surged and yelled. She jerked away, shuddering.

John-A seized her around the waist and sat her on the barrel of the gun. The smooth hard metal was cold against her legs. She could see over the heads of the crowd now, and noticed Ned standing against the wall, watching her. He beckoned to her as she took another drink but she ignored him, gazing around the festive, drunken crowd and wishing she could share their thoughtless revelry. Soon she became bored with her isolated perch and jumped down.

"Fortitude, Shirl." An elderly man was beside her, a transient in the ebb flow of the mob. It was Doctor Leo. "And you'll need it," he added, smiling, "if you're going to survive this hibe."

"I'm leaving as soon as I can. I just felt I had to show my face here, that's all." The last word was a gasp as someone charged her from behind.

Doctor Leo was shouting as nearby voices were raised still further in song. "Do I understand you're not enjoying yourself?"

"Why am I supposed to be happy?"

He watched her face; she took another gulp from the pitcher. "We can't all be happy," he said. He caught a man by the arm. It was one of the surviving members of John-A's task force. "You!" he addressed the man, shouting loudly so that Shirl could hear. "Are you having fun? Was it a glorious victory?"

The man's face was dull, a cut on his cheek still oozed blood, and alcohol had unfocused his eyes. At Doctor Leo's question, however, a glimmer of intelligence sparked somewhere in the recesses of his brain. "It's good to be back," he replied slowly.

"I can imagine the battle; by the Bomb, I wish I'd been there, cutting them down, running them through, blood spurt-ing. And the next time you'll get even more of the bastards. Hey, man? Is that right?" Doctor Leo's eyes were intent.

The man was sobering up. He glanced around, seeking escape. He saw John-A, arms raised, shouting something unintelligible at the crowd, and his expression changed. There was awe, there, and fear. His gaze traveled over the other members of the team, ranged in place of honor beside the gun, drinking heavily, shouting and laughing desperately.

He did not answer the question; instead he took another drink. As the tears began to trickle down his cheeks and the uncontrollable trembling reaction set in, he slid to the floor. Shirl watched with a great compassion as he crawled under the gun carriage—the only refuge from the trampling feet of the mob—and lay there with his head pillowed on his arms, face down, quivering.

Shirl was crying, too.

Doctor Leo said: "I'm sorry, but I had to know. Now I'm satisfied. This is still Downways. People don't change, they don't suddenly become courageous merely because their leader seems to have forgotten fear. They're still the same and they're still scared." He regarded Shirl closely and saw the fear there too. "And by the Bomb am I glad of that," he said.

"It was t-terrible," sobbed Shirl. "There were men dying all over the place, all cut up and bleeding and screaming. It wasn't a bit like history. It wasn't a bit like Waterloo."

"I expect it was, you know. They may not have screamed so much because they'd thought themselves into being brave. Perhaps. Or maybe they *were* braver in the Old Times. We're timid for a reason, Shirl. It's because we've got to be timid in order to survive, because we're so weak and small. Our instinct must be to run, because if we turn and fight, we'll be killed. The animals are so huge. We must even run from the blackfur if he turns rogue."

"So small," said Shirl, wonderingly, looking at the gun.

"I know," said Doctor Leo. "I've known for a long time." He looked up at the towering figure of John-A, who was shouting at his admirers, face flushed. "But . . . does he know, Shirl?"

"No."

"I thought not. . . ." He squeezed her shoulder. "This sort of thing does no harm, Shirl. Let them have their celebration. It makes a change to feel optimism around you."

The crowd surged and Doctor Leo went with the tide, suddenly animated again, laughing and inserting his arm around the waist of a girl young enough to be his trukid. Shirl watched him go.

"But all those men died," she said, almost pleading, to nobody in particular.

And nobody took any notice. She took another drink, a very long one this time, and worked her way across the chamber toward the exit. Faces peered at her and were gone, hands clutched at the intimate parts of her body, taking advantage of the anonymity of the crowd, and were snatched

away as their owners were carried off by another random surge. Shirl shuddered. The mob had become inhuman and she felt even more out of place than she had earlier. The koba juice was not helping in the least.

Ned's face was suspended before her and she eyed it blearily. It seemed to look more sober than most.

"Leaving us, Shirl?"

"That's right. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

He looked puzzled. "What?"

"You know quite well what I mean." In her fury and disgust at the animal behavior of the mob she was looking for a scapegoat. "You're to blame for all this!"

"For this?" His gaze swept over the throng. "I don't see anything wrong, not now." He looked back at her, his eyes very direct. "What was wrong, was what happened in the Great Chambers, and you know it."

"Of course I know it. That's just what I'm trying to say!"

"You were there. Not me."

"You set it up!" cried Shirl. You put the idea into John-A's head. You knew he wouldn't be able to resist turning an expedition into a foray." The koba juice now lent her a sudden, unexpected clarity of thought, and she stormed on: "You're full of smooth words, Ned, but you don't fool me. You keep needling John-A all the time, pushing him the way you want him to go. You're using him, you and Max and Troy. You pushed him into the battle with the Oddlies. . . . Oh!" Her hand was before her mouth, her eyes wide as she watched him.

He said grimly, "Go on." Even among the tumult of the crowd they seemed very much alone.

Shirl was talking quietly now, soberly. "We were ambushed. It takes time to prepare that gun for firing. How did they know we were coming? And again, that time they took us prisoner at the well. How did they know we'd be there?" The unspoken accusation was in her eyes.

"I've been against fighting the Oddlies right from the start. Talk sense, Shirl. I thought you and I were friends."

"Friends? But I might have been . . ." Her voice trailed away. She was going to say that she might have been killed in the Great Chambers—but then she remembered that Ned couldn't have known she would be accompanying the expedition. But on the previous occasion—he had known she and John-A were going to the well. He would even have helped to organize the fake attack by Prince. He and Max.

Max . . . Max and Troy. Both ambitious men, both showing signs of trying to manipulate John-A to gain their

ends. And from what she had overheard in the Council Chamber, both of them were now wondering if John-A was perhaps taking matters out of their hands and beyond their control. Either of them would, perhaps, feel easier now if John-A were dead.

Ned said the words for her. "Are you sure you're looking for a traitor, Shirl? Or could it just be someone who wants John-A out of the way? Perhaps you ought to get your facts straight before you start throwing accusations around. . . ."

Suddenly Shirl found herself forced against him. His arms went protectively about her as the crowd pressed near. In the warm privacy of his embrace she let the tears come fast, sobbing into his blackfur robe as she clung to him, her thoughts a whirlpool of heartrending uncertainty.

From the middle of the chamber, the tall figure of John-A watched them. "More koba!" he shouted, draining his reach pipe. The pipe was refilled from a jug. He continued to watch the couple against the wall as he raised the pipe again and drank deeply.

The only antidote for the aftereffects of koba juice is water, lots of it, cold over the head and drunk in large quantities.

It was an ill-tempered assembly in the Council Chamber at the start of the following wake. Most of them had not slept during the hibe and all of them had drunk more than their accustomed amount of liquor.

After a quiet, even thoughtful opening, the meeting erupted into a full-scale row between John-A and Ned.

"So you've decided to remain on the Council," sneered the android.

"Someone has to provide a moderating influence."

"More likely a cowardly influence. By the Bomb, if everyone was like you we wouldn't have got far in the battle. Luckily I had some good men."

"They're now dead men."

"We were ambushed. Someone warned the Oddlies." John-A stared hard at Ned. "I think we'd all like to know who."

"I expect we'd all like to know who murdered Prince and Brag, as well."

"Just what do you mean by that?" John-A was on his feet.

"No more than you meant by your remark," said Ned calmly. "It's another of life's mysteries, that's all."

Shirl, feeling sick and dizzy from the effects of the koba juice, suddenly began to pay attention. Ned had said Prince

was murdered. Such a suggestion had never been made before. When the utilization party had gone down to the well, they had found the Oddlies' spy chamber empty, the bodies gone. She, Shirl, was the only person who had ever entertained suspicions about the death of Prince. How did Ned come to know anything about it?

He couldn't know. . . . Unless he was the unknown man who had thrown the knife, thus facilitating their escape. . . .

Sighing, her head spinning, she took a drink of water from the pitcher on the table. Ned was watching her, and she wondered if he had guessed her thoughts.

It seemed for the moment that stalemate had been reached between John-A and Ned, and Agar jumped into the breach. "I think perhaps now we ought to discuss the plans for sealing off certain of the tunnels known to be near the Oddly territory," he said hastily.

Ned spoke. "One place has been sealed off already—the hole near the well. The other principal area is the Great Chambers, and I've got an idea for dealing with this. Among the stuff brought back from the armory is a quantity of dynamite—according to instructions on the box this is an explosive. Similar to the Bomb, I imagine, although much less devastating."

Agar spoke quickly. "Are you going to suggest that we explode a Bomb in the Great Chambers?"

"More or less. Yes."

"I'm afraid we can't permit that." Agar's voice was stern. "Ned, I hoped you'd reconsidered your attitude after the last . . . unpleasantness we had here. Now you suggest a further sacrilege. You wish to explode a Bomb—the ancient symbol of evil—in the Great Chambers of the Old People, near the birth-giving Vat. Surely even you, Ned, can understand why we can't do this."

John-A uttered a bark of cynical laughter. "Incredible suggestion. I'm surprised at you, Ned."

"All right," said Ned, flushing. "We explore further and find a place beyond the Great Chambers where we can do the job."

"Shall I take a team of men?" John-A was grinning, in great spirits again. He seemed hardly affected by the previous hibe's revelry and had touched none of the water in the jug from which the others had been drinking deeply. "Shall I go now, Ned?" He half-rose to his feet.

"Perhaps we ought to forget about sealing the tunnels in that particular area," said Agar mildly. He looked around for support but Troy and Max seemed to be sleeping.

"Stay where you are, John-A!" said Ned firmly. "We'll have no more fighting. Now, Agar. We've got to seal the Great Chambers if my scheme is to work. Otherwise we're wasting our time."

Agar had fallen across the table, breathing deeply and evenly.

"So much for the chief of the Elders," observed John-A. "Well, I don't propose to waste my time here any longer. I have things to do. . . ."

"John-A! Stay right where you are!"

Shirl watched through heavily lidded eyes as John-A rose and left the chamber, with Ned staring after him in futile rage. Then, turning back, Ned caught her eye. He shrugged, glanced at the other sleeping figures around the table, then leaned forward, resting his head on his arms.

Shirl swam on an ocean of joy under a vaulting sky of pale blue. The ocean was a deeper blue and flecked with white; beneath the surface silver creatures slid, flickering. The water was warm and salty and soothing, and it bore Shirl forward in a sweeping glide. Now the water was rising, humping itself like the back of a great friendly beast, and Shirl rode this back until it dissolved in a welter of sparkling foam and slipped back from under her, leaving her lying facedown on a soft beach of fine, pink sand, with the sun warm on her back.

Shirl awoke to find herself swinging to an awkward rhythm while her wrists and ankles hurt intolerably and her nostrils filled with the stink of Downways only noticeable on awakening from a sleep induced by Dream Dust.

A strange figure walked in front of her; twisting around, she saw another figure behind. They carried a pole on their shoulders and Shirl hung from this pole, tied by her wrists and ankles. At first she was annoyed; it was an extremely undignified manner for an Elder to be carried and she hoped they would not meet anyone. Then, as the mists of sleep cleared, she realized that the form before her was an Oddly.

At this she tried to scream, but her mouth had been gagged with a malodorous strip of cloth. She swayed to and fro, frantic with fear, wondering where they were taking her.

At last the light brightened as a series of thick clumps of glowglobes passed overhead. Her captors bent down for a moment as they walked, scraping her back painfully over the wet, stony ground. Then they were in a well-lit chamber. She was dumped to the floor, still tied to the pole. Another form was dropped beside her; it was Max, the hunter chief. His

eyes were wide with fear and, like her own, his mouth was covered by a gag.

The Oddlies stood watching them. Although her stomach was contracting with fear, Shirl tried to stare back aggressively. A tall man with no apparent defect—though the Bomb knew what abominations his blackfur robe concealed—bent down and untied their gags, then undid the ropes binding them to the poles. His companion, who was pale and totally hairless, chuckled as he regarded them. He pointed at Max.

"You, Prettyman."

"Yes?" Max's eyes rolled in fright.

"We've got you at last."

"Yes," agreed Max. He would have agreed to anything. The Oddlies both wore short curved knives at their waists.

"We will fetch Threesum." The Oddlies departed.

Shirl, trying to suppress the trembling in her voice, asked: "What do they mean, they've got you at last?"

"The Bomb knows," muttered Max.

"Have they been after you before?"

"Not so far as I know. I'm only the hunter chief. I don't see what they want with me. What do you think they want me for, Shirl?" There was a plea in Max's voice. He badly needed reassurance.

Shirl hesitated, remembering previous incidents. "I think maybe they want John-A, Max. It could be that they've got the wrong person."

"The wrong person? Oh, Bomb," whimpered Max. "Do you think they'll let me go, or ... Will they be annoyed, Shirl?"

"Max! Stop this nonsense. I don't know what's going to happen. They haven't killed us yet. Maybe they just want to talk," she finished doubtfully.

Having rubbed the stiffness out of her limbs, she peered out of the entrance. An impassive cyclops watched from the tunnel outside. She withdrew hastily.

"How long are they going to keep us waiting?" muttered Max.

In fact, in a very few minutes there was a rustling in the tunnel, a pause and a few murmured words, then a figure began to enter the chanber.

It was a huge man, taller and broader even than John-A, clad in a blackfur robe reaching to his muscular calves. In order to get through the low entrance he bent in a strange manner, as though his back were jointed, while the two Downways people watched in horrified fascination.

Once in the chamber he straightened up, regarding them sternly.

"I am Threesum," he said. His voice was odd. Low and sonorous and with a pause before each word.

CHAPTER 15

Shirl regarded the giant figure fearfully, and the large, deep eyes looked back at her with an expression she was unable to fathom. Then the Oddly looked at Max and a flicker of irritation crossed his face.

"Introduce yourselves," he commanded. "Have you Prettyfolk no manners?"

"I'm Shirl the teacher," replied the girl, eager to appease this monstrous Oddly, who, by now, was looking at Max as though he intended to utilize him piece by piece. "And this is Max," she added, as the hunter chief was patently unable to answer for himself.

"Max? I thought so." The thick leg reached out; the bare foot prodded the prone and quivering body of Max with contempt. "I hardly thought that this . . . thing would be your famous android. It seems that my men have made a mistake again. Too bad."

Then the giant knelt in grotesque fashion, his head tilting back at an impossible angle while his torso descended stiffly and vertically. The head snapped forward again, and the deep eyes stared into those of Max, holding them transfixed. "What are we going to do with you, Max?" asked Threesum quietly.

Max did not reply. His knuckles were forced into his mouth and a trickle of blood was running as he whimpered softly.

Thoughtfully, Threesum continued: "You see, you shouldn't be here. You were brought by mistake. Now, I'm not sure that we have any use for you."

The significance of this last remark loosened Max's tongue. "I'm chief of the hunters!" he babbled. "I'm on the Council of Elders! I can tell you anything you want to know!" The

Oddly remained silent, watching him. "Ask me! Ask me anything!" pleaded Max.

"I'm not really interested in your dirty little secrets," replied the Oddly with disdain. "There was a possible use we might have had for you, but . . . Bearing in mind your pitiful cowardice, I'm not sure you're suitable even for that."

"Tell me what it is! I'll do anything. A hunter has to be brave." Max made a pathetic attempt to grin his hunter's grin, but his chin was trembling uncontrollably and the effect was spoiled.

"Brave, eh? Right." Threesum snapped his fingers and the two guards came running. He addressed them. "It seems that this man here is a fine specimen of Prettyfolk fortitude. We need more like him. We must duplicate him. Feed him to the Vat!"

Max screamed, a roaring scream of terrified despair. With sudden desperate strength he shook his arms free from the Oddlies' grip and plunged for the chamber entrance. Threesum took one stride and snatched him up in a gigantic arm. He held him like a baby, while Max struggled and whimpered.

"You poor little man," remarked Threesum, eyeing his prey dispassionately. "You nasty little runt. You're the man who keeps plotting on the Downways Council, provoking wars to serve your own ends so that one day, when the android has done all the killing for you, you will be able to take over—and then you will kill the android because he killed your son. Don't look so surprised, Max my enemy. I am aware of everything that happens in Downways; didn't you know?"

With this cryptic remark he raised his knee and smashed Max downward across his thigh with a noise like a splintering stick. Casually, he tossed the broken body to the guards.

"Utilize him," he commanded briefly.

Shirl was staring at Threesum in horrified fascination. In the course of Max's struggles the robe had slipped from the giant's shoulders, exposing his chest. Was it his chest? Shirl gulped and tried to look away, tried to feel sorry for Max—the guards had now departed and she was left alone with the Oddly chief.

But it was no use; her eyes kept returning to the appalling excrescence on Threesum's upper body. It looked for all the world like a head, another head growing out of the giant's chest. As she watched, the thing shifted, lifted, and two tiny eyes regarded her shrewdly from a tiny face. One eye gave

her a knowing wink, then the head dropped again as if exhausted.

Threesum laughed bitterly on seeing the horror in her eyes. "I must apologize," he said. "I criticized Downways manners, yet I've been remiss myself. Permit me to introduce my torso."

Again the small head lifted, the bright eyes watched, the tiny mouth moved. "Fortitude, Shirl," it said. Around the side of the head was a cluster of little limbs. They twisted and writhed with each movement of the small head.

Shirl turned away and was violently sick.

"Now that's not very good manners either, Shirl," observed Threesum. He hitched up the blackfur robe, draping it about his shoulders again and mercifully concealing the second head from view. "Here in Oddly territory we are more understanding when we meet something strange. Strangeness is all around us; we hardly notice it anymore." He frowned. "Yet this doesn't prevent my people craving for the human form. I'm chief here, and so far as possible I must obey the will of my people. But I don't like wars and kidnappings, and in my time I've done my best to eradicate such violence."

Shirl was recovering a little; she was able to look at him, although with streaming eyes. "What are you talking about?" she cried. "Only a few wakes ago you tried to kidnap John-A and me near the well. There was a fight, men got killed, and it was your fault. Wouldn't you call that violence?"

"Try to think, Shirl." The giant's voice was almost kind. "How many kidnappings were there before John-A came of age?"

"I suppose it was a long time since the last clash between you and us," she admitted reluctantly. "But now you're starting it again. Why?"

"You've got it wrong. You Prettyfolk are starting the new offensive by the very fact of creating a monster like John-A. He will destroy us all. From what I hear, and from certain things I've seen, he's an insane fighting machine."

"But he was bred to combat the Daggertooth! He's the vatkid of the Hero! What's wrong with that? Don't you ever have trouble with the Daggertooth here?"

"Of course. We've lost a lot of men from time to time. But you're missing the point. John-A's strong and has a mind of his own. From what I hear, he gets restless. He craves action, and what he calls glory. The Daggertooth isn't around. So he talks of an offensive against the Oddlies—at a time when our two peoples have been at peace for many longhibes. I've

tried to combat this menace to us all by . . . removing him. Unfortunately I've failed. He's still at large."

Shirl thought of the scene in the Community Chamber, John-A standing tall beside the gun, preaching war. . . . "He can't he'p the way he is," she said in a small voice. "He was bred that way. It wasn't his fault. If anyone's to blame, it's maybe Sten and Agar—and me. But at the time, when the Hero died, they thought they were doing the right thing."

The deep eyes watched her with what looked very much like compassion. "How can you love this monster?" Threesum asked gently.

"Love him?" Shirl flushed. "I never said I did. Love him? As you said, he's a fighting machine. How can I love that?"

"In all of Earth as we know it, no matter how strange and twisted the people who populate it, you can be sure of two things. Male, and female. Would it surprise you to learn that I am loved, too?"

"You?" Shirl uttered a hysterical giggle as she regarded the abomination before her. She was near the end of her tether. "You are loved? Which one of you, for the Bomb's sake?"

"Of course it surprises you. That's the trouble with Prettyfolk—you surprise too easily. And when you're surprised you hit out blindly, fearfully—and banish innocent people. You think you can't love them, so you hate them. But I am loved." Threesum's deep, hesitant voice was vibrant with pride. "Look at me!" He flung the robe from his body. "Look at me, and see what a woman is capable of loving!"

And there was another face, just above the crotch. It leered at Shirl.

Then, slowly and deliberately, the huge arms took hold of the head—the uppermost head—and lifted it off the shoulders. Vestigial limbs quivered. The head was just that—little more than a head with a token body and tiny limbs with which it clung to the massive shoulders of the torso. It squatted on the floor like a fat toad, watching her quizzically.

But Shirl's eyes were on the torso. Around the region of the waist it was shaking itself. It was becoming detached. It swung to the ground and sat there with miniature head on feeble neck now raised and also watching her reactions with interest. At the lower end of the trunk were small legs, almost prehensile, which had previously been locked with the arms of—

—Threesum's legs. They stood like twin columns, muscular and straight, with prominent male organs and, immediately above that, set into the hips, another tiny head flanked by twisted arms. The eyes still leered.

"Fortitude, Shirl," said the legs.

"Interested, Prettygirl?" asked the torso.

The head spoke. "We make an odd threesome, don't you think? Something to dream about in the long hibes to come. Now, Shirl, I hear that you are quite a woman—my informant speaks highly of you. Quite a woman, yet you can feel only revulsion when you look at me—at us. And yet I am loved. Just imagine what kind of a wonderful, understanding woman she must be. I tell you this right now: she's twice the woman you are, Shirl. . . . Come in, my dear."

Shirl's mental processes were by now so numbed with shock and horror that she was unable to watch the entrance; fearing, maybe, another of Threesum's dreadful puns. Twice the woman you are. Twice the woman . . . *What* was going to come in? She watched Threesum as, like a team of acrobats, he swung himself together and donned his blackfur robe.

"Fortitude, my dear."

The voice was low and musical. It was odd, the hideous jokes which fate could play. The lovely face in the misshapen head of the hydrocephalic. The perfect body of the mad woman. Now the rich, low, kindly, sexual, wonderful voice of . . . what? For the sake of the Hero, what?

Shirl looked around.

Through the entrance to the chamber stepped the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

"Don't be afraid of me, Shirl." The woman smiled at her. It was like a dream of sunshine Shirl once had.

"Who . . . who are you?" The perfect face was strangely familiar.

"My name is Ylaine. Does that mean anything to you?"

"N-no," stammered Shirl. "I think I've seen you before, though." She took a deep breath and tried to control herself. In the past halfwake she had been through a succession of shocking experiences which had shaken her into a state of trembling nervousness far removed from her normal phlegmatic self. Now, at least, there was something soothing about the personality of this lovely woman. "I know you!" she burst out suddenly. "You're the Lovely Lady who Bott carves on the glowglobes!"

Ylaine smiled, yet there was a great sadness there. "So he still carves them," she said softly. "Poor Bott."

"I'll leave you for a while," said Threesum.

Shirl hardly heard him; she was gazing at the composed face of Ylaine. It was older than the carvings, certainly, but no less beautiful. There was a dignity there which could only

come with years. Shirl felt herself immature and inferior before this amazing creature—a most unusual experience for her. “What happened?” she asked. “What are you . . . ?” She hesitated, embarrassed.

“What am I doing among the Oddlies? There’s nothing strange about that. I’m an Oddly myself.”

“But . . .”

“But I don’t look like one? That’s true enough, on the surface. There was a time when I lived in Downways . . . Do you want to hear about it?”

“Yes, please.”

Ylaine smiled again. “When I was a trukid I was quite bright, and there was some talk of my becoming a teacher. Sten was the chief of the Elders at the time—he was much younger then, of course—and he was interested in me. Sten always had the best interests of Downways at heart, you know.”

“I know.”

“Keep thinking that. Anyway, in the classchamber I was much the same as the other trukids, except for being a little more clever, so I understand. I played the same games and I had plenty of friends—one in particular they used to call my boyfriend. You know what trukids are like.”

“I used to have the same problems with a hunter called Ned.” Shirl felt that she could confide in this woman. He’s much older than me, though.”

“These things happen, and usually they mean nothing. But as I got older and puberty came along, it turned out that my boyfriend was genuinely fond of me. We used to kiss and so on; you know the sort of thing you do at that age. We were still only trukids, really. After a while, though, things began to get a little more serious—and suddenly my boyfriend had, shall we say, cause for concern.”

“You were pregnant,” surmised Shirl practically.

“No. It was just that I seemed unable to, well, take part in sex in the way I ought to. Knowing that I had a bright future in front of me, he wanted to do the best for me he could. He knew I’d never admit that anything was wrong—one tends to be shy at that age—so he went to Sten, who he knew was a sort of father-figure to me.”

“Sten was like that to me, too.”

“Sten took me to see Doctor Leo, who gave me a complete examination. It turned out that there were a lot of things strange about me . . . there.” She gestured. “So unusual that, well, poor Sten had no choice.”

"He banished you as an Oddly?" exclaimed Shirl incredulously.

"Believe me, Shirl, when I said that he had no choice. Everybody knew I was a favorite of his, so there could be no exception in my case. And I *am* an Oddly. There's no doubt about it."

"And your boyfriend . . . was he Bott?"

"Yes. . . . He was quite different then—you wouldn't have recognized him. The whole business unhinged him, you see. He felt that he was personally responsible for my banishment because he was the one who had reported me to Sten. But at the time he had thought it was the right thing to do. It never occurred to him that I was an Oddly. And he loved me so much, I know that. He used to carve my face on the glowglobes all over Downways, so that he could always see me, he said. Afterward he holed up in his hibe for wake after wake, hibe after hibe, blaming himself and blaming Sten. And now . . . they tell me he's quite insane. . . ."

"I'm afraid he is, Ylaine," said Shirl gently. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. He doesn't remember anymore, and I'm happy here now. I've got Threesum. You were going to say, what do I want with someone like that, weren't you, Shirl?"

Shirl nodded guiltily; Ylaine seemed to be able to guess her thoughts.

"Well, I'll tell you. He's companionship. He's good and kind, despite what you might hear in Downways. There's nothing physical between him and me—how could there be?" Ylaine's expression hardened. "It just so happens that neither of us is capable of sex. Funny, isn't it? And yet I would if I could, you know."

"Thank you, my dear." The two women started, looking up. The huge figure of Threesum was entering the chamber. "Ylaine, would you mind leaving us now? I must have a talk with Shirl before the hibe."

"Of course." Ylaine stood willingly enough, but gave Shirl a warning glance as she left. "Courage remain, Shirl," she said.

"Now, Shirl." Threesum eyed her. "I expect you're wondering why I've been telling you things, why I've shown you myself, why I introduced Ylaine to you, and so on."

"I was wondering." Now that Ylaine was gone, Shirl was beginning to lose confidence, again.

"We wanted to capture John-A merely for the purpose of examining him and, perhaps, drawing certain useful conclusions before disposing of him. He's a menace to us all and must be put down. We also wanted to capture you."

"Yes, but why? I can't help you."

"Oh, but you can. I'm told you have great influence in Downways. As I said before, all I want is peace. With Max dead already and, I hope, John-A dead soon, the pacifists on the Downways Council will be in the majority. It will be you, Ned, and Agar against Troy and two others. And those two others may turn out to be on your side. As newcomers, they'll hardly go against the majority."

"How do you know all this? Who is spying on us?"

"Never mind. All I'm saying is that you use your influence for the good of us all."

"And suppose I refuse?"

Threesum regarded her thoughtfully. "There are three possibilities. One: I can have you killed and utilized. Two: I can keep you alive for the use of my men. I've no doubt they'll find you very attractive after what they've been used to. Three . . .

"I can feed you to the Vat. Did you know that we, too, have a Vat? We use it a lot—we have to, because many of our people are sterile and the Vat is the only way we can maintain the population. But we don't breed true. That is, we can't produce a perfect vatkid from an Oddly."

"You don't breed true because you've been affected by radioactivity through going Up Top," commented Shirl.

Threesum looked at her in surprise. "What sort of fools do you take us for? We never go Up Top. . . . At one time we used to indulge in kidnappings taking one or two of you perfect creatures from Downways"—there was a great bitterness in Threesum's voice—"and feeding you into the Vat, in the hope that we could bring up the fresh vatkids among ourselves. We even tried to get hold of you, once when you were a trukid. But the thing never worked out. The vatkids still didn't breed true, so I stopped that policy—which I never cared much for, anyway. Maybe there's something wrong with our Vat. That's one of the things I hoped to find out from your experiment with John-A. He seems to be physically all right. It would be bad luck if the Vat which is most needed—our Vat—is the one which malfunctions; but that's the way it looks."

A guard brought in food and they ate, squatting on the floor and pronging maggots from a communal plate. It was getting late and Shirl had difficulty in keeping her eyes open as Threesum boomed on, telling her of his hopes for the Oddlies. She began to wish Ylaine would come back.

Threesum was talking about himself. "An example, perhaps, of what can go wrong with the Vat," he said grimly.

"My progenitor was not unduly deformed, although sterile. He underwent the Great Donation and a piece of his hand was taken. In due course, the vatkids appeared in the tanks—but instead of being identical to each other and to their progenitor, they were different components of a whole. I am the latest in a line of these composite beings."

Shirl roused herself at this. "What do you mean?" she asked. "The Vat only produces one vatkid at a time, surely?"

"Oh, no. Now there's proof you Prettyfolk don't have much occasion to use your Vat. There are four tanks on our Vat, one on each side. I've no doubt your Vat is the same."

"I don't know. I'm not sure that anyone's ever looked . . ." Her voice trailed away. She was sure nobody had ever closely explored the Great Vat—it was regarded with superstitious awe and was consequently taboo. Now she began to wonder about those other tanks, the tanks nobody had thought of.

Each of those tanks should by now contain a fully-grown replica of John-A. . . .

CHAPTER 16

Still talking, Threesum got to his feet, handed the empty plate to a guard, and pulled covers over the ground glowglobes, leaving a dim light glimmering from the globe in the roof. He sat down again, apparently prepared to talk all night.

"There's a close affinity between the members of a group produced by the Vat," he was saying. "A remarkable awareness of each other—by the way, did you realize that Ylaine is partially telepathic? Anyway, in normal circumstances the members of a group will look alike and think alike. But in my case it seems to be different."

He boomed on, and Shirl kept thinking of four John-A's, aggressive, identical, each intensely aware of each other. . . . So John-A must know of his brothers. Why hadn't he mentioned them? Had he talked with them, taught them but insisted that they bide their time, stay in the Vat until . . . until what?

She interrupted Threesum's monologue. "You mean they each know exactly what the others are thinking? They can communicate over a distance?"

"Not quite. They think alike, so they will coincidentally act alike. In my case, however, it seems to be different. . . ."

By the Bomb, thought Shirl, this monster is actually proud of the way he is. He likes being different. . . . Maybe that's part of the attitude he's trying to instill into his followers, so that they won't crave for the human form. And maybe that's not such a bad idea. . . .

"My principal center of awareness is in my head." The torso's arm tapped the huge cranium atop the shoulders. "My body and legs are capable of thinking for themselves and are moderately intelligent, but I, the head, can assume total con-

trol of them at any time—so much so, that they are unaware afterward of the passage of time. It is convenient, a perfect symbiotic relationship. I give them brains and they give me physical power, and none of us could exist satisfactorily without the others."

Shirl must have dozed off, because suddenly Ylaine was in the chamber, talking to Threesum. She saw him shake his head.

"No," he said. "You carry on, my dear. This is important. I must gain her confidence."

"But she's asleep."

They looked at her, and by this time Shirl's eyes were fully open as she gazed at Ylaine, tall and lovely in a spectacular albino blackfur robe.

"Well, all right, then," said Ylaine doubtfully. "I'll see you in the wake. May courage remain with you, my love." Then she nodded to Shirl and left.

Threesum resumed his monologue, telling her of the future he was planning for his people. "Downways is ahead of us in its culture," he admitted. "But the Oddlies are catching up—or were, until your recent renaissance. . . . But soon we too will have our water supply, our smithy, and I feel we shall become more advanced than Downways eventually because of your policy of banishing mutations, which may be favorable. . . ."

Shirl dozed and woke and dozed as the deep voice boomed on, until she woke with a start to realize that Threesum had stopped talking. He lay opposite her, stretched out with his robe loose so that she could see the grotesque length of his body. She glanced toward the entrance and saw a guard leaning against the far wall, his cyclopean eye on her. Flitterbugs danced around the glowglobe in the roof. She feigned sleep although by now she was wide awake, and wondered whether there might be a possibility of escape. She wasn't tied up. Now, if only the guard wasn't there. . . . He couldn't stand there all hibe, she thought. He would have to go away some time to eat or relieve himself. He might even fall asleep. Even Downways guards were hardly noted for their vigilance, so she didn't expect much from an Oddly.

In fact, the next time she opened her eyes the guard had gone. She lay there with pounding heart. Now that the chance was here, so unexpectedly, she was scared. She glanced again at the sleeping form of Threesum. His eyes were closed.

But the eyes in his groin were open, watching her knowingly.

Threesum was sleeping in shifts. She ought to have guessed that he wouldn't place much trust in a sentry outside the door. The groin eyes, guessing her despair, winked. Then the tiny head moved, surreptitiously.

Shirl thought hard. She smiled at the legs, moving her body a little, shifting position in a deliberately suggestive manner.

The eyebrows lifted as the eyes stared at her appraisingly for a moment. The muscular legs moved and the vestigial arms twitched, slackening their interlocking grip on the tiny legs of the torso. Now the monstrous creature was free and she could see it more clearly. Below the miniature head was a chest of a sort, flat and thick but ribless, so that she could see the giant pounding of the heart, the pumping of the lungs. The thing was kneeling now, clear of the torso and the robe, creeping toward her on heavy knees while the tiny face winked and grimaced above pulsing chest and expectant loins.

Shirl looked toward the chamber entrance. The guard was not there. The legs were beside her now, lowering themselves awkwardly while the stunted arms grasped at the air for balance.

As the creature fell toward her, Shirl rolled aside and jumped to her feet.

Threesum woke with a bellow of rage, sizing up the situation at a glance. The legs went rigid as he assumed control, then they turned, stilted rapidly across the chamber and began frantically to burrow against the torso.

Shirl ran for the entrance, looked up and down the tunnel and saw nobody. She scanned for distant heat-sources and detected a shape in the far distance to the right, so she turned left, running fast on the slippery surface while Threesum shouted for help as he reassembled himself.

In recent wakes Shirl had become used to the new brighter lighting of Downways; now she found the dim Oddly tunnels very difficult to negotiate. The shouting from behind seemed to be getting closer as she ran. She fell, scrabbling feverishly in the mud, crawled to her feet, and staggered on, the breath knocked out of her, while the shouts of the Oddlies became triumphant as they detected her heat-source.

She passed openings on either side of the main tunnel but did not dare turn into them; they were probably small hibey-holes, dead ends where her pursuers would detect her instantly in the infrared. Now she was running more slowly as the tunnel grew darker and she wondered if she could keep going much longer. The situation was beginning to look hopeless. Feeling the pains in her chest she wondered dimly if

it was worth it, all this pointless running when they were certain to catch her shortly. Even though she might remain out of the Oddlies' sight, she could not escape them in the infrared.

There was nowhere she could go. She halted, reeling with fatigue, and faced the oncoming mob, a jumble of heat-sources pounding down the tunnel toward her. Maybe Threesum or Ylaine would rescue her before the mob tore her to pieces. . . .

Then, as she stood there, she became aware of a smell—a pungent odor which carried her back to her childhood. Her trudad. Blackfur. There were blackfurs near here, maybe domestic. Close beside her was a hole in the wall. She looked in.

It was dark but she could detect four shapes rooting about at the far end of a large chamber. She was about to step inside when she caught scan of another shape, that of a man lying on the ground near the entrance. The herdsman, asleep. Trying to control her rasping breath she stepped silently past him and hurried across the chamber.

The blackfurs shifted position, sensing her approach, and looked inquiringly in her direction. One of them uttered an inquisitive sniff.

"Quiet, boy," whispered Shirl, patting the rank fur. She sidled past the beast and huddled against the wall, out of sight of the chamber entrance. The other blackfurs gathered interestedly around her, a vast blur of heat-sources, particularly bright about the partly-open jaws as they debated her edibility. "Quiet, all of you," Shirl whispered again, mainly for the purpose of convincing them she was human and therefore not to be touched.

"Who's in there?" The shout echoed through the chamber and Shirl froze.

"Uh, Herb, sir," answered a thick, alarmed voice as the herdsman struggled into consciousness.

"Anybody else?"

"Only the blackfurs, Threesum."

"Has anyone gone past here recently?"

"Uh." There was a long pause as the herdsman tried to divine what reply his leader wanted, then realized he had left it too late anyhow.

"Oh, go back to sleep," said Threesum's voice impatiently. The babble of voices outside the chamber faded as the search continued down the tunnels.

Much later she heard them return, and pass by. She crept out from concealment, established that the herdsman was

asleep again, and left the chamber. Outside she turned left and walked slowly and tiredly away from the Oddlies' quarters. She broke a glowglobe from the wall and held it before her to brighten the darker spots, hoping that Threesum had not thought to leave guards behind. She felt utterly exhausted, but still had sufficient residue of fear not to go into a hibe. First, she thought wearily, she had to put as much distance between herself and the Oddlies as possible. . . .

Someone grabbed her by the arm. "Hold it!" commanded a voice. She was so exhausted that she had been walking with her eyes shut. The glowglobe had long since dropped from her fingers.

"Who are you? Let me go!" She struggled, but was firmly held.

"Is that you, Shirl?" the voice asked; suddenly, cautiously friendly.

"Yes. . . . Who's that?"

"It's me, Ned."

"Where have you been? What happened? You reek of blackfur."

She fell against him and his arms went around her. "Oh, Ned. Am I glad to see you! I was captured by the Oddlies. It was horrible! Then I got away and I've been walking ever since. I'm so tired."

"You'll be all right now. They're a long way up the tunnel." He produced a glowglobe from under his clothing and held it up. "There's a hibe-hole here. You'd better get some sleep." He led her through the entrance and drew her to the ground, propping her gently against the wall.

"Are we far from Downways?" she asked drowsily.

"I'm . . . I'm not sure." There was uncertainty in his tone.

Shirl roused herself a little. "What do you mean? You're a hunter, aren't you? I thought you were supposed to know the tunnels like the back of your hand."

"But this is Oddly territory, Shirl. It's dangerous. We don't go hunting in these parts."

"But . . ." She hesitated as a dreadful suspicion occurred to her. "How . . . how did you get here, Ned?"

Who was the Oddly informant? She had suspected Max, but Threesum had killed him. Yet the spy must be a member of the Council. Agar? Never. Troy? Possibly; but the captain of the guards was, she thought, too stupid. John-A? Obviously impossible. Which left Ned. . . .

How could he do it? She felt sick and miserable; she'd always had a fondness for the hunter, despite their differences

in the past. But how could he side with the Oddlies against his own people? Things fitted together in her mind: Ned's frequent disappearances, the incident at the well—it seemed that her earlier unvoiced suspicions of him were correct.

He spoke at last; dully as though he were well aware of her thoughts. "I don't know what happened," he said. "I woke up in the dark, near here. The last thing I remember was being in the Council Chamber, feeling sleepy. You looked sleepy too, and the others were dozing off. I thought the celebrations must have been too much for us all."

"Or else somebody put Dream Dust in the water."

He looked genuinely surprised as he considered this possibility. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Oh, why do you think, Ned?" cried Shirl in annoyance. "Don't take me for a fool. An Oddly spy doped the water so that they could kidnap John-A and me, but they got Max instead, and they killed him."

"Max dead? How did it happen?"

His surprise and horror seemed so real that Shirl found herself describing the events of the wake, culminating in her escape. Ned listened thoughtfully and with particular interest when Ylaine was mentioned. "So Threesum said she was telepathic, did he?" he asked.

"Yes. I think she is, too. She always seemed to know just what I was thinking, and she seemed to have the power to . . . I don't know, sort of make me fond of her. There was a kind of strength in her. While we were talking, I forgot she was an Oddly."

"And both she and Threesum seemed to be in favor of an alliance between the Oddlies and ourselves?"

"That's right. They said they wanted peace. I believe them too . . . except that I have an idea there's something else they're after, too. But . . . you said you were in favor of an alliance yourself once, Ned."

"I still am, if things haven't gone too far. I can't see the point in us fighting each other all around the tunnels. Things are difficult enough as it is. But whenever I try to put the idea forward, something goes wrong. People like John-A manage to twist it into something different," he concluded bitterly.

Shirl's suspicions had ebbed slightly; she began even to feel a little sorry for the hunter, who seemed transparently sincere in his beliefs. "Never mind, Ned. I'll vote for your side next time."

"Against John-A? I'll believe that when it happens, Shirl."

She took his hand. "Come on," she said gently. "Let's get out of here."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Yes, but I can't stay here for a hibe. The place gives me the creeps. It reeks of Oddly. . . . I suppose that's not a very nice thing to say, is it? But it's true. They frightened me, back there, and I just want to get as far away from them as possible."

"I'm afraid we might not be able to do that, Shirl."

"What do you mean?"

"We may have to go back the way we came. I think it's the only way out. You see, I know the Great Chambers lie in that direction, because it's the way I . . ." He hesitated and shook his head as though to clear it. "That's the way I think they brought me. And now, the Great Chambers is the only way back into Downways, because the other entrance near the well has been sealed off."

Shirl was watching him closely and thoughtfully. She said, "I think you're right. I'm sure they brought me through the Great Chambers, now you come to mention it."

Ned stood, helping Shirl to her feet. "Come on, then. It's our only chance, Shirl."

Slowly, reluctantly, they began to retrace their steps up the tunnels in the direction of the Oddlies' quarters. The light began to improve after a while; it was still quiet, however, and Shirl began to hope that the enemy had all gone to sleep, exhausted by the recent excitement of the chase. While she was convinced that Threesum and Ylaine were sincere in their desire for peace, she was equally certain that the average Oddly was bitterly prejudiced against what he called Prettyfolk.

Her nervousness returned when they detected a heat-source in the distance, and her misgivings regarding Ned returned also.

It would be so easy, now, for the dark hunter to turn her over to an Oddly guard. . . .

Ned left her side and she waited while he moved up the tunnel, silently, knife at the ready. The glow of heat was emanating from a hibeyhole many paces away; after a while Ned disappeared into the hole. She thought she heard a muffled cry, then Ned was hurrying toward her, wiping his knife on his robe. "Come along," he urged.

"Wait a moment, Ned. Let me take a look at that knife."

Puzzled, he held it out to her; it trembled in his hand. There was fresh blood near the hilt. Shirl swallowed heavily,

sickened but satisfied that the guard had, in fact, been killed—and not merely warned of her approach.

"I . . . I didn't know you killed men, Ned."

"I don't," he said shortly. "I leave that sort of thing to John-A as a rule. But once in a while a thing is so important—like . . . getting you back to Downways—that I find . . ." He broke off, eyeing her almost savagely. "The poor bastard was asleen. He had no chance at all. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Ned."

They moved even more cautiously now; Ned frequently left her and advanced alone, returning after eternal moments to reassure her that the way was clear. After one such expedition he returned in a hurry, almost running.

"Shirl!" He caught her hand. "Come quickly. I've found something interesting." He drew her around a corner; here it was very bright and the tunnel significantly wider. There was an opening to the left; Shirl hesitated as she heard the murmur of voices but Ned pulled her through the entrance. She averted her eyes from the motionless figure on the ground. "I had to do it quick," muttered Ned. "He saw me. He was going to shout." The knife wound was in the throat.

Shirl thought: *Ned's good with a throwing knife. . . .*

The chamber was small; a flight of stone steps led up to a circle of light. From here came the voices.

"It's the same setup as our Council Chamber," whispered Ned. "Built to keep the Daggertooth out. And there's some sort of meeting going on. I expect they're talking about us. It might be interesting. . . ."

As Shirl followed him up the first few steps until Ned's head was just below the opening, she remembered a remark she had made a long time ago: Ned couldn't resist listening in to a conversation. . . .

The voice was Threesum's. ". . . an unfortunate mistake." He went on to berate an unseen incompetent concerning the error in identity which had resulted in Max being kidnapped. "This could result in outright war," Threesum continued, "which we don't want. We'd be outnumbered. After all the effort I've put into trying to arrive at some peaceful solution . . ."

"You were the one who killed Max, chief."

"He's caused us a lot of trouble. He's better out of the way. If you'd shown a grain of common sense, John-A would be out of the way, too."

"I'm not taking that, chief. John-A wasn't even in their Council Chamber. He must have left before the drug took ef-

fect. I took the biggest man there, like you told me. So what else could I have done?"

A woman's voice spoke, Ylaine, and Shirl felt Ned stiffen beside her. "Did you question our informant about that, Threesum? What was the reply?"

The booming voice hesitated. "In effect . . . that John-A had left the Council Chamber before the others fell asleep."

There was a masculine chuckle of triumph. "I told you so."

Shirl dug Ned in the ribs. "Ned!" she whispered. "*Who* told them that? Answer me, Ned! Who is this informant they're talking about? They've spoken to him recently! Recently, Ned!"

Not John-A, not Max. Not Agar, not Troy. Not herself . . .

Herself? The low musical voice was speaking again and once more Shirl thought of the affinity which seemed to exist between the Lovely Lady and herself. . . .

Could Ylaine read her mind? Could she extract information at a distance?

Uneasy, alarmed, Shirl shuddered at the thought of delicate fingers probing her brain. Listening, through her, to Council business.

No. That was ridiculous. Threesum had said he *questioned* the informant. "Who is it, Ned?" she asked again.

"Oh, shut up. Would I be listening here, if it were me?" Ned's whisper was sibilant with bitterness.

Threesum was talking again. "So what I suggest is this, bearing in mind that events have gone so far that it could be a case of kill or be killed. I suggest that we take the offensive within the next two wakes, as soon as we can organize things."

"Organize what? You've already said we're outnumbered."

"Ah, yes, but that's only a disadvantage in the case of outright war. I'm not advocating that; as you know, I don't agree with senseless killing. I'm suggesting something more in the nature of a . . . takeover. A position where we will be in charge, and we will hold the weapons. And their Vat. . . ."

There was a snort of derision. "Just great. I've always wanted to be surrounded by slaves, obeying my merest whim. I'm sure the Prettyfolk will be only too pleased to sit at my feet." The voice became artificially uncertain. "Or will they? Don't you think, chief, that they might put up just a little, uh, *resistance*, to this scheme of yours?"

"I don't think so. . . ." Threesum paused a moment before producing his trump. "Not if they're all asleep, drugged by Dream Dust which we will introduce into their pipeline where it leaves the well."

There was a long, thoughtful silence, then a delighted chuckle. "Sorry, chief."

"You hear that, Ned?" whispered Shirl. "Come on. . . ." She tugged at his hand frantically. "We've got to get back and warn them!"

They backed down the steps while the voice of Threesum droned on above, enlarging on the plan to subjugate Downways. In their haste they emerged into the tunnel without first ensuring that the way was clear, and were greeted by three startled Oddlies, whose bewilderment at their sudden appearance quickly changed to alarmed recognition.

"Prettyfolk!" yelled one, backing off and fumbling for his sword.

Ned's knife took him in the chest.

Dismayed by this display of legerdemain the others retreated slowly, swords drawn, shouting for assistance. Other Oddlies appeared from hibeyholes behind them, saw Ned and Shirl at bay with drawn sword and knife, and began to press forward. Threesum's voice could be heard shouting from the top of the steps, demanding information.

"Run, Shirl," muttered Ned. "Back the way we came!"

Indeed, it was the only way they could go; in the tunnel ahead the Oddlies were sprouting from the walls like glowglobes. They turned and ran. Long before Threesum emerged to take charge, they were out of sight around the corner.

"Where can we go?" panted Shirl as she ran at Ned's side. "I thought you said it was hopeless this way."

"If we can shake them off we can make for the old way through, near the well. The soil will still be loose. We might dig our way back, in time."

"But they'll catch us long before that."

They ran on, slipping now and then as the tunnels became darker and it got difficult to see the muddy puddles in time. The sound of pursuit was an echoing roar of hate—now that the Oddlies had seen one of their own number killed, there was little chance of Threesum prevailing on them to take live prisoners.

"You hid among some blackfurs before."

"Yes, but I'm not sure where they are. . . . We haven't got time to look in every hole, Ned. I'm getting terribly tired."

"Keep going!"

Ned snatched a glowglobe as they ran—one of the last, for they were now entering a region of almost total darkness. After a while he paused uncertainly while Shirl leaned panting against him.

"Wha—what's the matter?" she gasped.

"I don't know where we are, Shirl," he admitted. "I've just been hoping for the best. I've no idea where the well is."

"Oh, Bomb. So this might be a dead end."

"Could be. . . . Wait a moment. Listen."

Shirl heard it too, a sound of rushing water in the distance. Old memories came back. . . .

"Come on," said Ned. "It's the only way, anyhow."

Soon they stood on the edge of a precipice in almost total darkness. Like John-A so many wakes ago, Ned dropped a piece of glowglobe, saw it fall, saw it whisked away.

"It went in the opposite direction," said Shirl. "We're on the other side."

"What are you talking about?"

Shirl briefly related her previous adventure while Ned fidgeted nervously and the din of pursuit came closer.

"So what was the solution?" asked Ned.

"There was no solution. We never did find the Dagger-tooth—probably just as well. He must have jumped the gap. We had to go back."

"There they are!" A triumphant shout, a mass of heat-sources.

In the instant of hopelessness an ancient childhood memory came back to Shirl. It was so long ago, and it had to do with a waterfall, and a man with four arms. . . .

"Trust me, Ned," she whispered.

Then she gave him a push. He fell. He was gone, and she was alone.

CHAPTER 17

The pursuers had halted a few paces away. They stood in the tunnel entrance where it opened out to the shelf on which Shirl stood. They carried no glowglobes; they were merely a huddle of heat-sources as they watched her.

"Come to me, Prettygirl," said a man's voice softly. He stepped forward. Shirl could not make out all the details in the infrared, but there was something hideously wrong about the man's outline. "Come to me," he repeated in the tone one uses for soothing a trukid. "Your man's gone now. He can't help you."

He stepped closer, reaching out with a hand, or something. . . .

Shirl recoiled, stepped back, and her decision was made for her. She fell endlessly, tumbling over and over and at last hitting the water with an impact that seemed to split her body open. The black, icy water closed over her head and she was struggling, struggling as the current rolled her along the jagged river bed like a loose stone.

Eventually she got her knees under her, kicked, and rose to the surface. She gasped, gagged, and drew deep breaths of chill air. The current whisked her along and there were unseen eddies and whirlpools everywhere. Her headlong progress suddenly slackened and she was fighting underwater again, kicking and thrashing, her head spinning from lack of oxygen—then just as suddenly she was on the surface, swirling past rocks whose presence she could only guess at by the abrupt changes in the direction of the current.

If she smashed into one of those rocks it would be the end. Once or twice she clutched for imagined projections, seeking to slow her progress, but it was no use. Once she even suc-

ceeded in getting a fleeting grip of a boulder, but it shifted and the current bore her away again.

Suddenly the flow slackened. She could see. There was a glowglobe before her, floating in a pool of calm water, lazily circling as the main stream rushed past. She swam toward it, picked it up, and made her way to the shallows beside the jagged wall of the tunnel. She lay in the chilly water for a moment, recovering, toying with the glowglobe. It must be the one Ned was carrying, she thought. Poor Ned.

With this reminder she began to think straight again. Ned couldn't swim. She held the fungus up, scanning the dark water around her. There was no sign of him. He must have been swept on with the current, somewhere downstream.

It was time to move again. She tucked the glowglobe into her clinging robe and swam reluctantly into deeper water. The current snatched at her, whirled her around, and carried her away.

Her speed was increasing. The underground river was falling rapidly downhill in a welter of foam. It was almost impossible to breathe; the spray was in Shirl's nose, throat, and lungs; she coughed, gagged on another mouthful of water as the river roared over a series of undulations in the bed. Something smashed into her shoulder, spinning her around, over and over, and again she was bowling along underwater, totally disorientated.

Then suddenly she was dropping, dropping away in a clear lazy arc, so peaceful after the cruel pace of the river that she wished it would last forever. Water was falling around her but it didn't hurt her anymore, and she managed to draw a breath.

She hit the surface with appalling force and was immediately pounded by the hammering waterfall from above, driving her to the bottom with a power she could not fight. She let the relentless water do what it would; semiconscious, she was in no shape to resist. The beating seemed to last for an eternity until eventually she became aware that she was breathing again. Dimly she realized she was on the surface, but the buffeting roar of the waterfall so close by seemed to drive every thought from her head.

Her feet were touching bottom, too. She was lying in quiet shallow water. She dragged herself forward, upward, and at last found herself clear of the water on a shelf of rock wet with drifting spray.

"Ned!" she called weakly. There was no reply.

She was shivering with reaction and she was deathly cold,

almost too weak to move. Feebly she plucked the glowglobe from the recesses of her tattered robe and held it up.

The water fell past her like a curtain, about ten paces away. Between the waterfall and the shelf on which she lay was an area of slack water, black and evil.

Floating facedown in this water, his body swinging gently in the eddies, was Ned.

Shirl forgot her fatigue, dragged herself to her feet, and waded out. She grasped Ned around the waist and struggled back to land, towing his inert body. She pulled him as far up the rock shelf as she could manage, then collapsed beside him, holding the glowglobe to his face and examining him anxiously. He coughed weakly, spewing water.

There was an ugly bruise near his left temple and a trickle of blood came from his nose, mingling with the water and running freely down his wet face. She felt his head but could find no other lumps or signs of serious damage. She regarded him helplessly, wondering what she could do. Her eyes felt peculiar and she blinked once, then again.

She fell abruptly into a deep hibe of utter exhaustion.

When at last Shirl woke, it was with the feeling that she had been asleep for a very long time. For a moment she lay drowsy, then, as sensation came back, she found she was bitterly cold, soaked to the skin, and aching everywhere.

Then she thought of Ned. She rolled onto her side, found the glowglobe and raised it, peering into his face. He was breathing deeply and regularly, and the sound reassured her. He looked as though he were going to be all right. The bleeding from his nose had stopped and the blue-black bruise on his temple looked no worse.

Abruptly she remembered Downways and the plan of the Oddlies to drug the inhabitants. How long had she been asleep? Certainly for longer than a normal hibe. She began to struggle to her knees. Ned and she must get back to Downways now, and give the warning. Otherwise it might be too late. The image of Downways under Oddly domination lent her strength. She shook Ned vigorously.

"Ned! Wake up!"

He groaned faintly.

"Ned!" She patted his cheeks, having an indistinct recollection of having seen Doctor Leo do this to a woman who once fainted. The treatment seemed to work. Ned began to mutter.

"Wha-what? Oh, my head."

"Wake up, Ned," repeated Shirl urgently, slapping at his cheeks. "We've got to get going. We must get back to Downways and warn them!"

Ned's eyes opened and he tried to sit up. "And where the Bomb is Downways?" he asked weakly.

"I know the way. I've been around this place before, once when I was a trukid. This is the other side of the well. All we have to do is swim across."

"Swim? I can't swim."

"You've done all right so far."

"I can't go in that water again, Shirl." There was fear in his eyes.

"You can't stay here." Shirl began to wade in the dark water. She swam. "Look. It's easy!"

"Easy for you, maybe. It nearly killed me, remember." Nevertheless Ned began to shuffle painfully down from the ledge.

"Just lie in the water on your back. I'll do the rest."

Ned obeyed with some trepidation and Shirl, grasping him under the arms, began to kick strongly with her feet. They left the shallow water, skirted the roaring waterfall, and began to follow the vertical rock wall by the light of the scattered glowglobes. As she swam she found herself wondering about the Oddlies, and the man she had seen as a child at the spot they were just passing.

Somewhere here a tunnel must emerge from Oddly territory to the lake—this was probably where the Oddlies got their water from. And it was quite likely that the Oddlies knew of the Downways tunnel on the far side of the lake. Now that their other nearby route to the Downways side of the well had been blocked off, this would be the way they would reach Poto's pipe in order to introduce the Dream Dust. It only required the ability to swim a short distance. Downways would have to mount a constant guard at the point where their pipe dipped into the lake.

Suddenly she felt the ground under her feet again. She stood, pulling the spluttering, trembling Ned to his feet also. "Here we are," she said unnecessarily. There were a number of glowglobes here, and Poto's pipe could clearly be seen, emerging from a forest of tendrils and plunging into the lake.

They pushed their way through, following the line of the pipe at their feet. Soon the tendrils became so dense that they had to crawl along the narrow tunnel kept clear for inspection purposes. Then at last they were able to stand again. To their right was a heaped mass of rocks and loose soil

where the Oddlies' spy tunnel had been blocked off. A straight tunnel ahead, well lit, led into the distance.

They were back in Downways.

They sat in the Council Chamber waiting for the others to arrive. Agar was there already, and it was to the old man that Ned addressed his astonishing remarks.

"I've come back here with Shirl," he said slowly, watching Agar's face. "I found her in the Oddlies' territory, and between us we managed to escape. She helped me and I helped her. On the way back, we picked up some information which is of great value to us all, right?"

Agar nodded, watching the dark hunter carefully.

"So, I don't think my good intentions are in doubt. No, Shirl," he said as the girl was about to speak. "I know what you've been thinking and . . . I'd rather not discuss it right now. Just believe me when I say I'm all for Downways, will you?"

"I believe you, Ned," Shirl said unhappily, not knowing whether she was telling the truth or not.

"Good. So now I'm going to ask you something. A favor you can do for me, if you like. I'd rather not go into any explanations, other than to say that we've met a lady Oddly with a very strange mind. . . ."

"So what do you want?" asked Agar.

"I want you to tie my hands and feet together."

"Oh . . . I see." Conflicting emotions crossed the old man's face, then he repeated with sympathy: "I see, Ned." He rose and went across to the diarist, who was not recording this interesting exchange, and returned with a length of twine. Carefully he roped the hunter's feet together. Ned was placed at the table again, and Agar tied his hands.

"You don't have to prove anything, Ned," said Shirl miserably. "I don't think you're a spy."

"Don't you, Shirl?" said Ned softly. "But what makes you think I'm trying to prove anything? I'm merely taking precautions, that's all."

"And how long are you going to stay like that?" asked Agar.

"That depends on what happens at this meeting."

At this point John-A and Troy entered. John-A stared hard at Ned, who kept his bound hands concealed beneath the table. Then the android ignored the hunter and sat down, listening moodily while Shirl recounted their adventures and gave details of the Oddly plans. John-A was disappointed. He had been in the process of organizing a full-scale army for

the purpose of rescuing Shirl. Now that the girl had reappeared, the army had lost its purpose. Yet it still existed in John-A's mind—a large body of men under his command. Unfortunately he had no commands to give them.

Unless he could stage a reprisal for the kidnapping. . . .

It had been the biggest hurt of Shirl's life when John-A, instead of rejoicing at her reappearance, complained to the Council about the waste of a perfectly good army.

Agar sighed. "I really can't understand any of this. Why have the Oddlies suddenly turned aggressive? We haven't had this problem for longhibes. Why now?" There was a plaintive tone to his voice, as though he felt it unjust that this should have happened during his term of office as chief of the Elders.

"I've been thinking about it," Shirl said. "I've thought of all sorts of things, bearing in mind what Threesum and Ylaine said. Only one possibility makes sense."

"What's that?"

"Threesum hinted at it. Most of the Oddlies are sterile so they have to breed by use of their Vat. And Threesum suspects their Vat is malfunctioning, producing monsters instead of true vatkids. Before I escaped, I think he was working around to asking me if the Oddlies could use our Vat. Earlier they searched me and I think they were looking for the key. Maybe they thought I was the Keyholder."

"What!" John-A regarded her incredulously.

"We hardly ever use the Vat ourselves. What's the harm in letting the Oddlies use it, if it means we can live peacefully together? Threesum's not really warlike, you know. He's just trying to do the best for his people, like we are for ours. Unfortunately, I think he's got himself into the position now when he can't ask us, because there's too much enmity."

"But why has all this happened only recently?" asked Agar.

"Because of John-A," Shirl explained. "John-A bred true. The Oddlies have been very interested in him—we know that already. They've been wanting to take a close look at him. But the main point is: they now know our Vat works perfectly. And they need it. But if they want to use it, they've got to subjugate the whole of Downways."

"So what do you suggest, Shirl?" asked Agar.

Shirl took a deep breath. "I think we should send a messenger down to the Oddlies and tell them they can have the use of our Vat."

"I won't tolerate the use of my Vat for the breeding of abominations!" shouted John-A. He glared around. "And I demand to know who the Keyholder is!"

"You've got it wrong, John," Shirl said gently. "There's nothing wrong with the Oddlies' genes. In effect, the pattern fed into their Vat is the correct one. The distortion takes place within the Vat itself. Put a slice of Oddly into our Vat, and the chances are you'll get a normal person."

"But then you wouldn't be able to tell Oddlies from us!" Troy, who hadn't spoken for a long time, looked concerned.

"They wouldn't *be* Oddlies any longer," explained Shirl.

"Once an Oddly, always an Oddly," snapped John-A. "I'm not having Oddlies walking around the tunnels masquerading as normal persons. By the Bomb, they'd be sleeping with our women, next!"

"Would that be so wrong, John?" asked Shirl, hoping with all her heart that something would happen to make the android see sense, see logic, see . . . kindness.

"Wrong? I'll say it would be wrong. I think we've wasted enough time on this. Now, here's my plan."

"Plan?" Agar looked startled.

"You don't think I'm going to let the Oddlies get away with drugging Downways, do you?"

"Oh, that. No, of course not. But the answer is, surely, that we put a guard on the pipe. Troy can organize that."

"Ah, no. That's where you're wrong, Agar. We put no guard on the pipe. We let them introduce Dream Dust into the system. We let them come. We lie around, looking drugged. Then, at the signal I will give, we jump up and slaughter them!"

"By the Bomb, that's a fine scheme, Hero!" Troy's eyes were gleaming.

"You can't mean it, John," said Shirl.

"Perhaps we might just take them prisoner," suggested Agar.

John-A regarded them, judging the voting. Max was dead. "Right," he said lightly. "We take them prisoner. Then we can negotiate with them from a position of strength."

"All right," agreed Shirl doubtfully. "But no killing."

"No killing."

"The motion is carried," said Agar formally, nodding to the Downways diarist, who was scribbling away industriously in the corner.

"Ned!" exclaimed Shirl involuntarily.

The dark hunter was writhing in his chair, face contorted. . . .

John-A regarded him for a moment, seemed about to speak, then departed from the chamber in contemptuous silence.

After the others had gone, Shirl and Agar took Ned and placed him under guard in a small hibeyhole, bound hand and foot. Shirl picked the most vigilant guards to watch him, two at a time, while the rest of Downways made their preparations for the coming Oddly raid.

In order not to put the Oddlies on their guard it was necessary for Downways to use its water supply in the normal manner. It was obviously out of the question for a stream of water-carriers to move back and forth between Downways and the well, laying in supplies. So the blackfurs labored incessantly in Poto's pump room while the old water skins were got out again and filled at the tap outside. The full skins were then distributed around Downways. In order to ensure that the water did not become contaminated at any time during the operation, a volunteer was stationed at the tap. It was his duty to drink a jug of water after the filling of every six skins. He was watched closely for a short while before each batch of skins was released for distribution.

A man was stationed near the well, concealed in a thicket of tendrils. He carried a glowglobe. When he sighted the Oddlies he would wave the glowglobe to and fro past a small observation hole, thus creating a winking light which would be recognized by sentinels farther up the tunnel. On seeing this warning, the sentinels would alert Downways that stage one of the Oddlies' plan had been carried out. The signaler would remain in his thicket as the Oddlies worked, trusting to the density of the tendrils to hide any betraying heat-source.

Large numbers of people gathered at the Chamber of Praise, where a continuous service was held for those in need of courage. The story of the Hero was told and retold, and the enthusiasm of the preachers created many new details which thereafter became an accepted part of the Legend. People sought fortitude from the Shrine of the Hero, and when they met his progeny John-A in the tunnels, they clutched at his robe and drew succor from that.

John-A was busy with an unexpected difficulty which, in later longwakes, became famous as the Hero's problem and was taught to trukids as an example of Downways logic. He had reassembled his army and was training them to lie still as though drugged. Even in rehearsal this was proving difficult because the prone figures would start with fear and commence to quiver at the first footstep. John-A reasoned that the Oddlies would be at their most suspicious in the early tunnels before the visible mass evidence of their success had given them confidence. He therefore placed his bravest men

on the first stages of the assumed Oddly route. They were able to lie still convincingly, at least in practice.

Unfortunately this meant that the most timid members of the army were at the farther end of the route—and these were the men who were expected to spring to their feet and give battle. A rehearsal was held, using the braver men in the role of Oddlies. They crept through the chambers with drawn swords, passing prone figure after prone figure, while imaginations fermented. The mock ambush did not take place, although many of the defenders lay with exemplary, convincing stillness. It was later found that they had fainted from fear. Those who remained conscious were in no condition to rise and fight.

John-A's solution was classic in its simplicity. The braver men were to spring the ambush. The remainder, the more timid men representing some two-thirds of the army together with most of the women and children, were scattered around the farther reaches and issued with Dream Dust dissolved in water. They were to drink this immediately after the alarm was given.

Shirl and Agar together with six hunters and six guards went to the Great Chambers. Arriving at the Chamber of the Vat, they examined its entire lower surface with glowglobes. As predicted by Threesum, they found three more tanks. In each of these tanks lay a full-sized replica of John-A. Each android was dead. Their throats had been slit and the fluid in the tanks was crimson. The tanks were not locked—had never been locked—the Keyholder had not been aware of their existence. . . .

In fact, there was only one person in Downways who could have known.

The party returned, leaving the guards and hunters at intervals along the tunnels. A signaling system was arranged as before, and Dream Dust issued. Unlike the situation at the well, in this instance there was no means of concealment for the signaler, so a brave man was chosen who was capable of lying still. It was thus reasoned that both probable routes of Oddly access were covered, although Troy was a little concerned about one or two scarcely-known passages near the Chamber of Snakes.

The main strategy, however, was to lead the Oddlies into the center of Downways and cut off their retreat. For this purpose several tunnels were sealed off, effectively turning the main area around the Chamber of Praise, the Community Chamber, and the general quarters into a dead end. Here, the Oddlies would be outflanked and confronted.

Later versions of the Third Great Battle of Downways would make this important point with much force, and also comment at length on the vulnerability of the large numbers of drugged men. John-A had, in fact, forgotten an important factor, although this omission was glossed over in later versions of the Second Legend. . . .

Agar wondered what they were going to do with the prisoners.

Shirl slept with John-A that hibe and he made violent love to her.

Troy, racked with nervous anticipation, was unable to sleep.

Ned foamed and writhed in his hibeyhole, bound tightly and unable to comply with subtle demands which probed at his brain. . . .

Midway through the next wake, the water-taster at the pump fell unconscious at his post.

Some time later, the message arrived.

The Oddlies were on their way.

CHAPTER 18

John-A reasoned that the Oddlies already had a working knowledge of the Downways tunnels—many of them had lived there and, he was heard to say bitterly, Ned had probably drawn them a map. They would know, roughly, where to find the Elders. It was a safe bet they would first make their way to the Council Chamber; then, finding it empty, proceed to the central areas where the ambush was to be sprung.

In order to make things more simple for the invaders, most of the trukids had been assembled in the classchambers and drugged. The Oddlies would reach this region early in their advance and would find the sight of sleeping trukids reassuring. Even the Oddlies, reasoned John-A, would not harm trukids.

Next, the Oddlies would reach the Community Chamber, and here the remainder of the women and other noncombatants were gathered. They, too, were drugged. The Oddlies would waste no time on them, as it was well known that the gossipers who gathered each wake in the Community Chamber were of scant importance.

Finally there was the dead end area around the Chamber of Praise. Here the warriors sat alert, well-rehearsed and ready at any moment to go into simulated slumber. John-A looked around them as they waited, grinning hunters and stolid guards, for the latest news of the advance. He hoped he had enough men. The defenders numbered sixty-odd, and it was expected that the Oddlies would attack with a slightly smaller number—in fact the overall Oddly population was estimated to be less than two hundred.

A messenger arrived, panting as he made his brief genuflection to the Shrine. John-A watched impatiently. "All right, forget that stuff," he said abruptly, and Shirl heard Agar

draw a sharp breath at the sacrilege. "Give us the news, man."

Without further delay the messenger made his report. The Oddlies were near the classchambers. There were about thirty of them. Threesum was among them, as was Ylaine.

"Right," said John-A. "Now, you all know what to do. Wait until they're all in the chamber, if possible at the far end, then attack."

"Attack?" repeated Agar uncertainly. "I thought the idea was to take them prisoner. There was nothing agreed about attack. There are only thirty of them, anyway. We just jump up and take them prisoner, that's all. We can't have a blood-bath in the Chamber of Praise."

"I have a feeling that this victory will make the present setup of the Chamber of Praise redundant," replied John-A. "Downways will not want to live on ancient memories after this." His voice rose. "We shall move forward, outward, and upward!"

His catchphrase drew quiet approbation from the warriors. "Hero, Hero!" they murmured.

Agar turned to Shirl. "It seems the Hero is dead." He sighed. "Long live the Hero," he added bitterly.

Shirl's mind was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions as she watched the android giving his men their final instructions. "You made him," she reminded Agar sharply.

"We all made him. You taught him, remember?"

"On your instructions."

Another messenger arrived. "They're in the Community Chamber, Hero," he reported. "No problems. They were just looking at the faces, turning people over."

The quietness and the hushed voices seemed unreal to Shirl. The whole situation was becoming dreamlike. Was this really happening here, in Downways, in the Chamber of Praise? She shut her eyes and tried to imagine Downways as it ought to be; busy tunnels alive with the voices of people passing to and fro. Comradeship, security. She wondered if it would ever be the same.

"On the ground, men," John-A whispered.

Everybody lay down, arranging themselves in attitudes of comparative comfort, weapons concealed beneath their bodies.

"No more noise," hissed the android. "Wait for the signal."

A few coughs, then silence apart from Shirl's own shallow, rapid breathing and the hammering of her heart. She became aware of Agar's trembling, whistling breath nearby. She

thought she could feel the ground vibrate with the Elder's nervous shivering, but then found it was herself.

She heard voices.

Indistinct at first, they echoed eerily through the quiet tunnels. After a while, more distinctly, Shirl heard Ylaine's low laugh. Then a general murmur of conversation and, as the sounds approached, individual voices.

"... stink. Quite different. Too many of them together, I suppose."

This insulting comment came in Threesum's hesitant bass. Shirl shivered again as she visualized the bulbous head, the winking torso, the leering legs. Against her better self, she found she was hoping the giant would be killed before he had a chance to see her again, or talk to her. . . .

Her eyelids barely open, she saw the Oddlies enter the Chamber of Praise.

Threesum was in the lead, stooping under the low roof. His deep voice boomed around the chamber, fortunately drowning out an involuntary whimper of fear from one of the motionless warriors. "So this would be their Chamber of Praise. And that, if my information is correct, is the Shrine of the Hero. Isn't it touching, my dear, the way the Prettyfolk cling to their superstitions? And they're the ones who talk of progress."

Ylaine said, "They have no continuity of life. They give birth to trukids, then die. So, frightened of the future, they must cling to the past. They need their Heroes. Whereas we who use the Vat—we *are* the future. We're immortal. We have no need of legends. All we need"—her voice trembled—"all we need is human form."

Threesum spoke gently. "Do you remember this place? How much of Downways do you recall? Are you sorry you had to leave, my dear?"

"I'm not sorry. I remember all these places, of course. And I wish I could see them again with people awake, like it used to be. But seeing Downways like this, with people lying around as though they were dead, well, it's not the Downways I knew. It arouses very little emotion."

"Bitterness, perhaps?"

"I'm not bitter, not anymore. If anything, I think—"

"Look there!" Threesum interrupted her. "It's the android! See? That big man, over by the wall. Now, first . . ."

"Be careful, my love."

"Don't worry. He's out cold, like the rest. Pity . . ." The Oddly regarded the motionless figure at his feet. "Pity he has to go. I'd have liked to keep him alive, just as an example of

what Man can achieve, physically. Unfortunately his mental outlook leaves much to be desired. If he lived, he would be a constant problem. . . ."

"Fire!"

John-A leaped to his feet, sword in hand. Threesum jumped back, for an instant losing control over his component parts which, acting in alarmed independence, smashed the head against the roof. It became detached from the shoulders and fell heavily to the ground, rolling to a halt against the wall.

Simultaneously there was a deafening roar which shook the chamber, bringing down a shower of dirt. In the accompanying flash Shirl saw Oddlies falling as the immense projectile plowed through the group near the entrance with unimaginable force.

As her eardrums recovered she heard the screams of the injured, and another shout from John-A. "Right, men!"

The Downways warriors jumped up and stormed forward, hacking with the desperate strength of fear at the confused and stricken Oddlies.

Many of the invaders did not have time to draw their swords and were cut down where they stood; others retreated across the chamber and congregated in a knot about the fallen head of their leader. Shirl heard Ylaine cry out.

"Stop! Stop, all of you! We surrender!"

Urged by John-A, who was fighting like a maniac, his flickering sword dispatching twisted shapes in rapid succession, the Downways warriors pressed on, driving the enemy against the wall near the Shrine. Everyone had flung himself into the battle except Shirl and Agar and the couple stood sickened, watching the crazed press of men against the far wall. Agar's hands hung limply at his side; he carried no weapon.

"Why don't they stop?" he asked dully.

"Because John-A doesn't tell them to."

"They've all been cowards for so long. I suppose this is the only chance they'll ever get. . . ."

Shirl ran forward, forced her way through the mob, and found John-A in the thick of the battle. At close quarters he had dropped his sword and was hacking with his knife. Shirl saw a gash open like a scream and his opponent fell, entrails flowering.

She flung herself at John-A's knife arm. The android nulled and jerked but she held his wrist with the desperate strength of both hands. She looked into his face a short distance from hers; the eyes were blank and the lips drawn back in a snarl.

"John! Stop it! Now!"

There was a flicker of recognition; his eyes focused. He stared around at the cowering Oddlies, the grunting, thrusting Downways men.

"Right! That's enough! Back off, men!"

He stood back, Shirl relaxed, and the Downways warriors drew off, watching the Oddlies warily.

The Third Great Battle was over and Downways had won.

There were no Downways casualties apart from a few minor cuts. The Oddlies, however, had lost a full two-thirds of their force.

"Congratulations, vatman," said Threesum, now recovered and sitting atop his shoulders. "I never thought Prettyfolk had the guts. Just tell me one thing. Why didn't you call on us to surrender? Why didn't you stop when Ylaine called out? In other words, why all this?" He indicated the results of the battle—twenty Oddly bodies lay on the ground.

John-A stared at him arrogantly, hands on hips. "Why all what? You attacked us—just as you did in the Great Chambers. Just as you did at the well. Every time, the Oddlies have attacked first. This time you paid the price."

Threesum sighed. "I take your point. But people aren't all good or all bad, John-A. There are faults on both sides. Remember a large proportion of my people feel bitterness at being banished from Downways. Others, born in a faulty Vat, go through their lives in twisted shapes, sometimes in constant pain. Just recently, they've found out that if they had been born from the Downways Vat, they would have been perfect. It was the will of my people that in the future we use the Downways Vat—which is rarely in operation. We know you wouldn't allow us this privilege of your own free will. So we had no option."

More Downways folk from the near vicinity who, according to John-A's plan, had not been drugged, drifted into the Chamber of Praise to stare with interest at the captives. There was a distinct smell of koba juice. Shirl noticed a new practice, and her blood chilled. . . .

The new arrivals did not genuflect to the Shrine. Instead, they genuflected to John-A.

It was to be assumed that John-A's makeup was almost identical to the Hero. Why, then, did it seem so wrong to have a live Hero, rather than a dead one? Shirl sighed and tried to ignore her misgivings. This was difficult when she saw even Bott the idiot carver arrive, bow and regard John-A with something close to adoration. Then Ned came in, ac-

accompanied by a guard but now untied. His face was drawn and he looked exhausted.

John-A was still engaged in a triumphal speech to the prisoners—it appeared that these were the last words that he intended them to hear—when Ned, shaking off the guard, strode forward and stood before Ylaine. He had picked up a knife from somewhere.

John-A, finding that the prisoners' attention had somehow wandered, turned to see Ned there, and a flicker of annoyance crossed his face. "So it's you," he said. "Our tame traitor. I'm surprised you've dared to show your face here." There was a murmur of agreement from the spectators. It was a common supposition now that Ned had been feeding information to the Oddlies—a supposition reinforced by a few words dropped by John-A during the previous wake.

Shirl caught her breath. Bott had strolled near and was regarding Ylaine with vacant interest—and apparently no recognition whatever. He seemed to find no connection between the beautiful, calm planes of her face as she watched him, and the lovely carvings with which he decorated Downways. Agar stepped forward anxiously, sensing a crisis, and Shirl joined him.

"Don't you know me, Bott?" asked Ylaine sadly in her low voice.

Bott scratched his head, watching her in perplexity.

For an instant the focus of attention was off Ned and John-A. Ned moved close to Ylaine, drawing back his knife.

"Now you die," he muttered. The knife flashed forward.

And stopped, a hairbreadth from Ylaine's breast.

Threesum spoke, a deep booming. "You will not kill the woman I love, Ned. You, least of all."

"But she can control my mind!" Ned's face was grim as he watched his knife hand, visibly trying to urge it forward, and failing, while sweat ran down his brow.

"What makes you say that?"

Ned regarded her steadily. "We know you're telepathic. Can you deny that?"

"No, but—"

"All of you," said Ned bitterly, his gaze now traveling from Agar to Shirl to John-A. "All of you have suspected me of passing information to the Oddlies—even you, Shirl. That was bad enough. But what was worse—I was beginning to suspect it myself. I had blackouts. I came to myself in distant tunnels, wondering how I got there. I said nothing, thinking maybe I was ill. But recently I found that the blackouts happened before some Oddly ambush. The kidnapping of Max

and Shirl." He stared at them, his expression tortured. "Can any of you conceive what it's like to suspect yourself of being a spy, of being used yet incapable of overcoming the influence—because you can never remember what happened?"

"It was only when Shirl told me you were telepathic, Ylaine, that I knew what was going on. So I was able to take precautions. Now"—his eyes stared into hers—"face to face, we'll see who's the stronger. . . ." The knife began to tremble violently, and a patch of blood appeared at a slit in Ylaine's robe.

Shirl seized Ned's arm and found it rigid, the muscles knotted as though in cramp. She was unable to move the point of the knife from Ylaine's chest and the beautiful woman was pressed back against the wall, hardly able to draw a breath. "Ned!" cried Shirl in desperation. "There's been enough killing. Drop it. Please!"

"He can't." The voice was Threesum's. "There is no way Ned can move that hand while I'm controlling it."

There was a startled silence.

"You . . ." whispered Ned at last, incredulously. His gaze left Ylaine's and locked with the huge eyes of the Oddly giant. "You, by the Bomb . . ."

"Yes, me, Ned. I'm the one who controls you, when I so desire. My lady Ylaine has no such power. Sometimes she can look into thoughts, but she can't control them. How could she?"

"How can you?" asked Ned softly. "By the Bomb, how can you . . .?" His eyes widened. He knew. Watching him, watching Threesum, Shirl knew too. . . .

Threesum.

The giant spoke. "They called you a foundling, Ned. Nobody in Downways knew where you came from, but one wake—there you were. And you were demonstrably not an Oddly. So you were accepted. After all, Oddlies don't breed true. . . . Now, look at me!"

Threesum flung aside his robe and stood naked. The bulbous, almost spherical head, sitting on the deep, broad torso with the tiny head tilted, watching them with cunning little eyes. Sitting on the massive legs. And again the small head, in the groin above the immense organs, and the round eyes peering.

"Look, Ned!" The thick arm lifted, the finger pointed. "My head!"

The arm dropped, tapped the massive chest. "My body!" The fingers snapped. The tiny eyes in the stunted head closed.

"My legs!" The fingers snapped and two more eyes closed.

"And you, Ned!"

And the finger pointed at Ned, who flinched back, moaning, and the fingers snapped, and Ned's eyes closed. . . .

Threesum replaced his robe, then glanced at Ned, who awoke, blinking. "You see, Ned, there are four tanks on a Vat. Not three. You are a part of me, Ned. We are a four-some. We are the same flesh, bred at the same time from the same progenitor. And just as I can control my body and legs when I wish, so can I control you. You can't free yourself by killing Ylaine. You must kill me. . . ."

Afterward Shirl often wondered about that instant of time. Exactly what had been in Threesum's mind? Was it despair? A realization of defeat, of futility? Compassion for Ned? Was it suicide . . . ?

Because Ned's arm was suddenly freed from its unseen bonds, and he leaped forward, and thrust his knife into the soft flesh beneath the huge head; then, pulling it out amid a splattering of blood, he plunged it into the broad chest. . . .

As the giant crumpled and toppled, Shirl saw Ned's eyes. They were blank; then, as the figure on the ground became still, they came to life, and Ned looked from the knife to the body in growing, appalled bewilderment. . . .

And so none of them saw Bott at first, as he took hold of Ylaine's throat in his powerful hand, pressing her back against the wall. Then Shirl's attention was caught by the glitter of the knife.

"They're coming to get you again, my darling. They're so close, but they're not going to get you because I won't let them. Oh, no. They're not going to get you, the bastards, they're *not going to get you!*"

There was no fear in Ylaine's face, only pain. As Bott's grip tightened and he raised the knife, she whispered, "Me? Or an image . . . ? Please let it be me, Bott. . . ."

Then feverishly and with flashing knife Bott destroyed his Lovely Lady.

As more people crowded into the Chamber of Praise the horrified quiet muttering of the past few moments changed tone gradually, becoming gaiety and triumph once more. Only the few Downways people standing around the stricken group of Oddlies remained numbed by events.

John-A, losing patience, moved away from them with an injunction to Troy to keep guard, and went to join his admirers. He was greeted enthusiastically, stepped onto a rock pulled away from the Shrine, and began to address the crowd.

Meanwhile, Shirl and Agar were watching in silence and revulsion as the bloodstained legs of Threesum detached themselves from the inert remains and stilted unsteadily upright. The head lifted with an effort and the eyes stared vindictively at Ned.

"You bastard," snarled the legs. "You might have warned us all. Whatever else you might have done, at least you've always reported to us regularly."

"What?" Ned was still in shock. "Warned you? How? What do you mean? I was tied up, and in any case I don't see . . ."

"You don't see why you should? You're an Oddly, man, an Oddly. Isn't that reason enough?" The legs spoke in a high whine and the expression on the lopsided face was unpleasant. "The trouble with you is, you fell in love. No, don't try to deny it. You fell in love with a Prettygirl, of all things." The legs laughed derisively. "Oh, Bomb, what a joke. Ned the Oddly in love with a Prettygirl! So you protected her instead of us. You bastard."

Ned took a step forward. "Look here, you . . ."

"I said, don't deny it. Hibes ago, when she was a trukid, we tried to force you to kidnap her—but your feeling for her was too strong for us even then. You were all set to bring her to us in the Great Chambers but something happened between you. By the time our head recovered control of you the Daggertooth came and it was too late. Threesum—our head, that is—didn't trust you after that. But we thought at least you'd be on our side when the crunch came!"

Ned flinched as a tiny misshapen arm shot out and the finger pointed at him accusingly. "And that fight by the well. Sure, you told us John-A and the girl would be there. But then what do you do, you bastard? You knife Shorty in the back. One of your own kind!"

Ned was white. "Who are you to tell me what kind I am? I saw my friends being held prisoner, that's all. My friends, you understand? To me, they're more important than an accident of birth!"

Shirl watched and listened in horrified, disgusted fascination as the obscene figure of the legs stalked about the corner of the chamber, little eyes shooting fierce glances from under thin but projecting brows, twisted mouth muttering into the beard of coarse pubic hair. The eyes lighted on John-A, the mouth contorted with scorn.

"And him, that leader of yours. What a bastard. Twice now, I've seen him kill his own men. That's one thing an Oddly would never do. I tell you something else, he even killed

his vatkin, the other members of his foursome, because he couldn't face the competition."

Another man was on the speaker's rock now. John-A had come down and was listening in appreciation to a catalogue of his virtues. Then he became aware of the disturbance in the corner and strode across.

"What's going on here?" he snapped, regarding the legs with revulsion. "Utilize those things, Troy."

Behind him, the triumphal roar of the crowd changed subtly. Shirl, listening, saw Agar cock his head.

"Think you're such a big man, don't you?" sneered the legs.

John-A moved forward with drawn sword. The legs skipped nimbly aside. "Makes you feel better, does it, killing folk?" whined the high voice. "Makes you feel bigger?" The legs performed an astonishing leap as John-A thrust again. "Makes you forget how small you are?"

"Oh, no," whispered Shirl. "Oh, Agar . . ." The old man gripped her arm in sympathy.

"I'm bigger than you, Oddly," roared John-A. "And a damned sight stronger!" He feinted, sending the legs the wrong way and nicking a thigh.

The crowd was restless now, and scattered screams could be heard in the tunnels. Heads began to turn, ignoring the combatants.

"But not so big as the Old People, eh, android?" The legs danced as John-A slashed. "That's what hurts, isn't it? No matter what you do, you can't forget that. It makes you feel insignificant."

John-A paused, panting. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said as calmly as he could. "Does it really matter, Oddly?"

The crowd was surging about the entrance to the chamber and the cries of alarm were closer. A word was whispered once, passed from mouth to mouth, and became a chorus of terror.

The legs paused in their dance also. The eyes regarded John-A shrewdly. "You really don't know, do you, vatman? You've been kept in ignorance. I tell you—"

The tiny warped arm jutted from the side of the head, pointing.

"Shut up!" shouted Shirl above the din of the crowd.

"That's a handgun, vatman! *An automatic!* Imagine that if you can, you bastard! And imagine the hand that held it!"

"The Daggertooth! The Daggertooth!" The crowd's roar was now a single, combined scream of terror, continuous and

deafening. They surged through the Chamber of Praise, jostling the small group of Elders and Oddlies against the wall in the unthinking terror of their flight. A packed, fighting mass of humanity with one thought: to get as far away from danger as possible.

Shirl and John-A were flung against the disgusting nakedness of the legs. As John-A jabbed awkwardly with his sword at close quarters, trying to find a vital spot, trying to quell the stream of shrill vituperation about which he did not want to think, the legs uttered their final screams.

"Now's your chance, Hero! The Daggertooth! Now you can show them what you were bred for, you bastard! You're going to be a big man! A big man!" Suddenly the termagant yelling ceased as the mouth vomited blood. The legs remained upright, propped against the wall by the press of bodies. The mouth whispered. Despite the terrified din from the crowd, Shirl and John-A, forced against the tiny ashen face, could not help hearing.

"But not big enough, John-A. Not big enough."

The legs shuddered and died.

CHAPTER 19

John-A was shuddering beside Shirl and she felt an overwhelming sympathy for the android. Then the press of the crowd eased for a moment and she was able to see him properly again.

He was plunging his blade, again and again, into the legs.

"John!" She caught his arm. "He's dead now. There's no point in going on."

The android raised a stricken face to hers. "You heard what he said, Shirl. He said we're midgets, compared to the Old People. Is . . . is this true?"

Shirl hesitated. "I'm afraid it is, John," she said gently. Now that he suspected, it would be easy enough for him to find out—the evidence was all around.

"But . . . does anyone else know? I mean, I suppose it's obvious now. The Great Chambers, the size of the Vat, lots of things. . . . But why didn't we realize it? Why isn't it accepted? Nobody ever talks about it."

"I think we were all bred from the Vat to start with," Shirl replied. "And at the same time as making us . . . small, they put some sort of block in our mind to stop us from realizing the truth. In case it discouraged us." Shirl tried to smile. "After all, it *is* a little discouraging, isn't it? That shows the Old People did the right thing."

The crowd was jostling again; there seemed to be even more of them. Every person who had not received a dose of Dream Dust must by now have been present. They fought their way through the Chamber of Praise, yelling with fear. Now and then there were screams of agony too, from those trampled underfoot.

John-A was ignoring all this; his eyes were inward-looking.

"So why make us small?" he was muttering. "Of all things, why that?"

"More convenient for us," suggested Shirl. "We need less food, less room."

"Like domestic blackfurs. Planned for, kept and used, like stinking blackfurs!" His voice had risen; he eyed the crowd around him wildly. "The Bomb to this! Look at them all, a pack of screaming midgets!" He seized a man from the mob and drew him closer. "You! Do you realize just what you are?"

The man's eyes were crazed with fear; he nodded frantically.

"Oh, you damned fool." John-A flung him back into the seething crowd. He stared at them, some of his old belligerence returning. "What a mob of damned stupid fools!"

"They're scared of the Daggertooth, John," Shirl reminded him.

A woman in the mob saw John-A and detached herself from the main stream of refugees. She clutched at his robe. "Hero!" she cried. "Save us, Hero! I can't find my trukid! Stay the Daggertooth, Hero, before it gets my trukid!"

"I expect your brat is in the classchambers with the other trukids, woman," snapped John-A contemptuously, prying her fingers loose. "Go and save her yourself. Where's your mother's instinct?"

A small knot of people were gathering around now, as more men and women recognized John-A. "Save us, Hero!" the cry went up.

And another shout even more to the point: "What do you think you were bred for?"

Now John-A was looking uncertain; events of the past few moments had moved too fast for him. A short while back, he had vanquished the Oddlies and been receiving the adulation of Downways. Now, abruptly, things had changed, his ego had received a savage blow, Downways was in flight, and his own position had changed—he was being accused of inaction.

"This is what you've been waiting for, isn't it?"

"There are hundreds of people up there. You drugged them. They can't escape!"

"Stay the brute, before he gets us all!"

"What do you think you were bred for?"

Shirl, watching in helpless sympathy, saw John-A's eyes clear. He drew his sword and glanced swiftly around. The crowd fell back; she could sense the relief of those nearest. John-A was himself again. He might be a bastard but, by the

Bomb, he was competent. He would slay the Daggertooth, have no fear of that.

"I need six men!" shouted John-A.

Shirl found that she had been holding her breath; she exhaled shakily. Despite the prospect of terrible danger ahead, her principal emotion was one of relief. Action might give John-A a chance to get over his recent shock.

The crowd had thinned out considerably now. The Oddly captives had gone, presumably swept along into the Downways tunnels with the rest of the mob. A few of John-A's warriors were still in the chamber, watching him uncertainly. On hearing his call for assistance they stepped forward.

Shirl regarded them in surprise—seven of them—as they assured John-A they would accompany him on his quest. She found it difficult to understand the hold the android had over his men. She could only assume that somehow they had come to the conclusion they were protected by the aura of immortality which seemed to surround him in battle.

"I'm coming too, John," she said.

He hadn't heard her. He was giving rapid instructions to his men.

Ned appeared beside her, still looking shaken. "It might be better if you stayed here, Shirl," he said diffidently.

She shook his hand off impatiently. "Run away with the rest of the cowards, Ned."

He looked hurt. "I'm not cowardly. No more than most. I just don't see the point in getting myself killed on a fool's errand, that's all. Nobody can kill the Daggertooth; I've said that before. The old Hero must have enjoyed some lucky fluke."

"Follow me, men!" John-A was plunging into the tunnels. Leaving Ned looking miserable, Shirl hurried after him. She found Agar at her side as they walked quickly away from the Chamber of Praise.

"I'm not kidding anyone," the Elder said quietly. "I intend to go as far as I can, that's all. When the crisis comes I think I'll panic and run, if I'm still able to run at my age. But at least I'll have done my best."

"Don't worry, Agar. You won't be alone."

"Possibly not, but you won't run with me, Shirl. You're different." There was admiration in the old man's voice. "I think you'll be right beside John-A to the end."

"What end? Do you know, Agar?"

"No." He was already panting from their unaccustomed speed.

"If John-A dies, I've got a feeling I'll die as well. You know that, don't you, Agar?"

"I know. I can't say I understand it, though."

"I don't understand it either. But maybe I'll learn very soon," said Shirl the teacher, as the task force hurried through Downways.

There was a babble of voices from ahead and John-A stopped suddenly, holding up his hand. "Quiet," he whispered, and his men gathered around him, swords at the ready. Shirl and Agar stayed to the rear, watching.

There was as yet no sign of the Daggertooth. They were still in the brightly-lit part of Downways, near the Community Chamber. The stream of refugees had ceased; a few drugged noncombatants lay in the tunnels. They wondered who the new arrivals could be.

Around the bend came a mob of Oddlies.

They were walking, crawling, or hopping with much gesticulation, arguing among themselves. On seeing John-A and his force their leaders halted, but were then forced forward again by the press from behind. It was an untidy, undisciplined throng and John-A regarded them with contempt.

"What a mess," he observed.

"There's a lot of them," one of his men ventured.

"They're the cowards, the women, and kids. The ones they left behind."

By now the Oddly advance had developed into a struggle as those in front tried to backpedal but were forced forward by the ignorant main body.

John-A stepped forward, flourishing his sword. "Stop!" he roared.

Word at last passed through the Oddlies' ranks and the tidal advance halted.

"Who's in charge?" asked John-A.

A pathetic thing moved forward. "I suppose I am."

"You realize you've lost the battle? If you were coming to occupy Downways, then you're in for a disappointment. I suggest you get back to where you came from, before I have you all utilized."

"But the Daggertooth . . ."

Shirl saw Agar biting his lip nervously. Suddenly the old man stepped forward. "Excuse me, John-A. May I have a word with these folk?"

"If you like," agreed the android with some reluctance.

"You people," Agar addressed them. "Can we assume you were coming for sanctuary?"

There was a babble of assent and many fingers and other

appendages pointed fearfully back down the tunnel. The word Daggertooth occurred frequently.

"All right," said Agar. "Come through to where our folk are. It may be safer there. I'll come with you to make sure you're not attacked by mistake. We'll take care of you, believe me."

The mob surged forward gratefully. As they passed, Agar said to Shirl, "I don't think I could do a better thing, however much farther I came with you. Once we get the Oddlies and our own people together, facing a common danger, there's no telling what benefits might result. I think we'll realize we're all human, no matter what shape we might be. May courage remain with you, Shirl." He shuffled off among the Oddlies.

"Courage remain, Agar!" she called after him.

John-A was watching her closely and without approval. "Yes. Well, we'll see about all that when the time comes," he remarked cryptically. "Let's move on."

They arrived at the place where the tunnels branched, and halted. To the left lay the Council Chambers and the Great Chambers, to the right ran the lesser-used tunnels leading eventually to the Chamber of Snakes. Ahead lay the classchambers, Poto's pump room and, farther on, the well. Somewhere, was the Daggertooth.

John-A uttered an exclamation, walked swiftly to the wall, and bent down. "Blood," he said, showing a dripping finger.

"But where . . . ?" The men were glancing nervously about them. The tunnels were silent.

Then, strolling unconcernedly down the tunnel leading from the Chamber of Snakes, came a small figure. He was dressed in a short, neatly sewn tunic of blackfur which tended to emphasize his somewhat rotund figure. He had an elfin face and a large smile which had become rather fixed as he approached. He had extremely large ears jutting out from the sides of his head like wings. He was young, but there was about him the dignity of a much older person, despite his bizarre appearance.

"I assume you're looking for the Daggertooth," he said ingratiatingly. "Would you like me to help you? The brute moves so quietly that it's not easy to tell his whereabouts."

John-A was regarding Big-Ears in disgust. "By the Bomb, I won't accept help from an Oddly."

"Aren't we all Oddlies?" asked Big-Ears blandly. "I think so, in one respect. But you see, we people who admit we're different to start with, we can face up to a lot of other things more easily. You know, like a certain discrepancy in stature

between us and the Old People?" The jolly eyes twinkled maliciously.

Shirl watched John-A flinch, and wondered just how much Big-Ears had heard in his quietly secret peregrinations about the Downways tunnels. In the longwakes since his banishment he had become almost a legendary figure, flitting here and there, illegally assisting the hunters in return for news and food, picking up information and gossip with his incredibly acute hearing, while all the time, due to that same hearing, managing to keep one step ahead of the guards.

John-A's face had darkened with temper and he was regarding Big-Ears threateningly. "Just get going, you," he said roughly.

But the little man's expression was curiously blank, his head tilted to one side. A flicker of alarm, then slow horror, crossed his face.

"You'd better move yourself, and quickly," he said abruptly. "The Daggertooth is in the main classchamber. And the trukids are still all knocked out by the Dream Dust."

"Just what we wanted!" cried John-A triumphantly. "The classchamber is a dead end. He can't get out. We'll cut him off!"

And the trukids? thought Shirl, as she ran with pounding heart, sick with horror. Even if they were awake, there would still be no escape for the trukids. . . .

Soon they could hear the squealing, the high-pitched delighted voice of the feeding Daggertooth. They heard just the squealing as they neared the classchamber; nothing else, no crying of terrified trukids. . . .

"He's still in there!" The entrance to the classchamber was large and John-A stood before it, sword at the ready, staring into the blackness where all the glowglobes had been covered to dissuade the Oddlies from entering. The Daggertooth's squealing stopped abruptly. Shirl stood at John-A's side; scanning infrared she made out the dreadful shape of the creature against the far wall. It was enormous, occupying a third of the chamber, a giant heat-source of terrifying aspect. The head was turned toward them so that the warm jaws were apparent, the lips drawn back from the darker teeth and dripping little glowing globules of saliva, or blood. . . .

"The Bomb to this!" cried somebody in a voice shrill with terror, and there was a scurrying confusion around the classchamber entrance as John-A's team turned and fled down the tunnel.

The android hardly noticed; he stood still, staring into the

blackness as though hypnotized. "The Daggertooth's in there," he said softly, flatly.

A statement? Or a question . . . ? Shirl scanned the huge, vile shape within; it had shifted slightly—it was moving toward them. It could move fast when it chose, but now it was puzzled. The eyes blinked luminous in the infrared as it advanced and the nostrils on the sharp face dilated in an echoing sniff. Shirl looked quickly at John-A.

His eyes were narrowed and the beginnings of fear were plucking at the corners of his mouth; he was peering; peering. . . .

And suddenly Shirl knew.

"He is in there," muttered the android.

"He's moving toward you, John-A," said Shirl.

"But how . . . ?"

"Look out!" It was a scream; Shirl jumped aside as the Daggertooth moved, lunged swiftly, jaws agape. John-A was still staring as the blade-like teeth took his arm. His sword dropped to the ground. The Daggertooth, squealing again, began to draw him into the chamber.

John-A thrashed like a pierced maggot, his eyes flickering this way and that in blind bewilderment. "Shirl!" he cried. "Help me!" He screamed with pain as the beast's grip tightened.

Suddenly there was a dim figure beside Shirl, thrusting with a sword at the dripping muzzle of the Daggertooth. The point slid away, deflected uselessly by sharp teeth, hard bone. The Daggertooth backed into the chamber, retaining its grip on the android, preparing to feast. Shirl made to follow but was thrust aside by the newcomer. The air was thick with the stench of the creature, overlaying the salty odor of fresh blood.

The Daggertooth bucked its head, a mammoth toss which landed John-A squarely between its gaping jaws.

In that instant Shirl remembered the words of old Sten, and knew what the climax of the Story really meant. "The Hero drove his sharp sword into the roof of the Daggertooth's mouth. . . ."

She screamed at the shadowy figure dancing before the Daggertooth.

"Jam your sword between the jaws!"

Throwing himself forward, the man thrust his sword upright between the jaws of the Daggertooth, the instant before they closed over John-A.

No mere man with his puny strength could have pierced

the bone of the Daggertooth. But the strength of the Daggertooth's own jaws . . .

The single squeal was short, penetrating, deafening. The giant body heaved once and shuddered and was still, relaxing slowly, then rolling ponderously to its side.

Shirl knelt before John-A; he was whimpering with pain and his arm was a ragged wreck. "What . . . ?" He felt her hands on him. "What happened? The Daggertooth! Where's the Daggertooth?"

The Daggertooth was right beside him, its glow of heat fading slowly. John-A's eyes were looking straight at it, but he didn't see. . . .

Shirl looked up. "Thank you, Ned," she said. "But please leave us for a moment, will you?" As the dark man left the chamber she turned back to John-A. "You can't see me, can you, John?" she asked gently.

"It's dark. . . ."

"But you can't see my heat. Your eyes can't scan a heat-source. We've had good lighting in Downways for so long that nobody realized. But maybe if you'd mixed with people a bit more, instead of . . ." She broke off, biting her lip. "Is that why you sometimes bumped into people in the darker chambers?"

"They got in my way. . . . The Daggertooth; I couldn't see the Daggertooth. I was scared. Bomb, I was scared. I couldn't see anything, the others all ran off except you, and there were no glowglobes. . . ."

"Ned didn't run off," said Shirl, and wished she hadn't.

John-A was silent for a while as he took this in. He remembered the shadowy figure with the sword and slowly his expression changed and Shirl shivered.

"You can all see in the dark," he said harshly, wincing as the pain intensified. "You can and I can't. And the Hero—he couldn't either, and that's why I can't. . . . The Story, the Great Battle, they were all a myth. A stroke of luck, that's all. The Hero couldn't see enough to run away, and he ran right into the Daggertooth. . . ."

"A Hero is necessary. People must have some sort of Hero to believe in."

"The Bomb to the Hero!" John-A was weeping now, racking sobs caused by the ultimate disillusionment as much as by pain and reaction. "The Hero was no brave man and neither am I. I just kidded myself I was, because everybody told me so. That's all finished now. I'll tell them. I'll show them how they've ruined me, forced me to live as an impostor because of their stupid little legend. . . ."

His tone was shrill, his words becoming a disjointed scream of hate and disappointment.

Far away Shirl heard voices calling, fearful inquiries.

They would be here soon. They would find John-A weeping on the floor, broken and bitter and vindictive, intent on shattering any myths they cherished, intent on making them understand just how small, how cowardly, how insignificant Downways people were. . . .

She drew the knife from her belt and leaned toward him; he was a clear warm outline in the blackness of the chamber. Little trickles of blood ran away from him but he would live, he could live. . . .

Could he live?

"I'll tell the bastards!" he wailed. "I'll tell all those little people in their stinking tiny holes!"

"Die like a Hero, John darling," she whispered, and slid the knife gently home between his ribs.

Ned joined her beside the body. "What are you going to tell them?" he asked.

"Just that John-A slew the Daggertooth, and died while doing it."

"But I slew the brute." Ned was aggrieved.

"Do you really want to argue about it?" Shirl asked. "I can tell you this, Ned; people will believe me rather than you, because they want to. It seems right and fit that John-A should slay the Daggertooth and fulfill his destiny. So they'll believe it, whatever you might say. And they won't thank you for trying to cast doubts on a good Story. Remember the problems you ran into before, when you denied the old Hero?"

"But to give credit to a man like John-A . . ." Ned was still disappointed.

"All the better, Ned," said Shirl, trying to conceal the hurt within her. "This way, people won't feel guilty for being glad John-A's dead. It becomes a joyous occasion, because he slew the Daggertooth."

The shouting was nearer; there wasn't much time. . . .

"You see, Ned," Shirl continued hurriedly, "it's humanly impossible to have a live Hero. A dead Hero is an established fact and becomes a legend which grows with the telling. But a live Hero . . . he can never live up to his name. Everyone thinks he's some kind of superman but he's not—he's just a man like you who once conquered his fear, but may not be able to do it the next time. . . .

"And think of that next time, Ned. The next time the Daggertooth is in Downways. The people looking up to you,

looking to you for leadership—and in the end, when all of them run, looking to you to save them. You personally, alone. Just you against the Daggertooth. And you remembering that maybe you were lucky, this time."

She watched him anxiously. "I did it because I loved you," he mumbled. "The Bomb to the Hero and his lousy destiny."

"But the Hero's destiny was to die, Ned. Would you rather have died in his place? Let him have this one thing, please. He had so little else, while he lived. . . . Think of your own destiny."

He laughed shortly. "And what is my destiny?"

"To be the first leader of Downways to bring the Prettyfolk and the Oddlies together," said Shirl simply. "You have ties with both factions and you're already the most influential man in Downways second to Agar. You can unite all of us, and Agar will be on your side until he dies."

She reached inside her robe and drew out a golden object. "You take the key for the Vat, Ned, and use it as you think fit. You have the authority now; you're the new Keyholder. When at last you pass the key on, give it to someone you trust completely. Sten gave it to me longhibes ago, and I've tried not to let him down. . . .

"Remember what you told me a long time ago? About how you wanted to extend our boundaries and push upward? Without including war in those objects, like . . . like John-A did?"

"I remember." The light was back in Ned's eyes as he looked at the key. "Will you help me, Shirl?"

She hesitated. "If I can," she said at last. "But I'm going off for a while. I need to think. To sort myself out. . . ."

"So you did love him," muttered Ned.

"Why does everyone keep telling me that?" Shirl stormed, reaction setting in, tears starting. "I don't see why, just because—"

"Anyone up there?" There was a nervous shout from down the tunnel.

"Ned!" whispered Shirl. "I'm going. Tell them you don't know where I am. I'll see you some time. Courage remain."

"Courage remain, Shirl . . . my love."

As she slipped out of the chamber and hurried away up the corridor, away from Downways, she heard Ned shouting.

"Come up here, everyone! The Hero has slain the Daggertooth!"

CHAPTER 20

After a while Shirl turned right into a narrow, rarely-used tunnel which led in the direction of the Chamber of Snakes. Soon she emerged into a larger tunnel again, and felt the wind on her face—the wind which always blew through Downways, hibe after hibe, wake after wake.

Faintly, far behind her, she heard the mounting roar of triumph as the story of the Hero's success spread through Downways. She wondered miserably if they would have been so delighted if John-A had lived. . . .

She forced her mind away from the subject. There was nothing she could do now. Instead she thought about the wind, and she wondered where it came from. Whether it was provided for them by the Old People, like the Vat, or whether it was of natural origin. From her incomplete and random learning from the film sheets it seemed to Shirl that a natural wind must come from Up Top. Which led to two questions. Firstly: Where was the hole through to the surface?

Secondly: What about the radioactivity which the wind should have brought with it?

By the time she reached the Chamber of Snakes—where the tendrils, some thick as an arm, some fine as a thread, thrust from the walls—she was exhausted, and went into a hibe.

Before long she was awake again and exploring. She found the remains of a blackfur carcass and breakfasted off the succulent maggots. Although the meal was a welcome surprise she was nevertheless disappointed to find that she was still in hunter territory. By now, she felt, she should be exploring unknown reaches. Once again she wondered at the extent of Downways.

The tunnels were much narrower now and the wind blew stronger. Flitterbugs winged to and fro. Shirl had brought a knife for the purpose of defense but now she found it useful for hacking a path through the ever-thickening tendrils. She struggled on for a full wake, pausing only to eat from the maggots which she had collected from the carcass and now carried in a bag hung from her waist. When at last she was unable to summon the strength to raise the knife, she collapsed into a deep hibe.

She woke aching in every joint, but still determined to go on. In a way, the journey was a catharsis for the loss of John-A; already she was beginning to see the event in perspective. John-A had represented a purpose to her; she was not married and, she told herself, the android might even have been a substitute for a child. With his death, it would be so easy to relapse into aimless apathy, like so many childless women of Downways. But now she had a new purpose.

She wanted to look at the stars.

She was quite certain that the tunnel was leading gradually upward, and checked this with the flow of water on the ground. In the light of her glowglobe she saw a definite slow trickling backward toward the direction from which she had come. Encouraged, she continued, hacking and prising the tendrils aside with blistered fingers. The wind continued to blow strongly in her face.

She slept and woke again, and labored onward. The tendrils had become so thick and strong now that she was unable to get the knife through them, and had to proceed by wriggling and crawling, occasionally getting stuck and having to retreat and find another route. The tunnel itself seemed to have petered out. She was crawling through a vast network of thick tubes similar to the ones Poto had used for his water supply. The spaces between the tubes were partly blocked by loose granular soil through which the wind sieved endlessly, showing her the way.

She turned upward, climbing, clawing her way through gritty soil which fell into her eyes, blinding her. Once, the entire region of soil around her became disturbed by her presence and fell, and Shirl fell with it, finally bringing up against a thick tube coughing and fighting for air. She struggled on again determinedly, but more carefully, keeping close to the tendrils where the pockets of air were, and where the soil was more securely anchored.

Then suddenly she was through. There was no more soil, no more tubes or tendrils above her. She could reach up with her arm and feel nothing. For a while she lay gasping for

breath, feeling the pumping of her heart against the hard shape of the very last horizontal tube, feeling the wind cool against her sweat-soaked hair. She pulled the crushed remains of a glowglobe from her tattered robe and held it before her. Just ahead, there was solid ground. She crawled toward it and again lay still. Then she rolled onto her back.

And saw the stars.

When she woke, it was with a strange brightness against her eyelids; she tried to open her eyes but immediately they flooded with tears and she squeezed them shut against the unimaginable brilliance, feeling the wetness trickle down her cheeks. She was warm and strangely dry. Her skin was dry and her blackfur robe was dry. It was weird and unsettling. She sensed an area of coolness to her left and crawled toward it, eyes tightly shut. She huddled up against something solid and rough, comforting in that it represented a point of reference from which she could get her bearings.

She was bewildered and disappointed. Was this Up Top? What was the point of her coming here, if she couldn't see anything? True, last hibe—night—she had seen the stars, but there was more to Up Top than stars. She remembered the words of old Jeb: "The ground I stood on was fused black and desolate, flat so that I could see the curve of the horizon, and I knew how small Earth was, and how small I was."

So she had seen the stars for an instant before fatigue had betrayed her and she had fallen asleep. But what about the fused ground? The horizon? Would she have nothing further to tell them back in Downways, except the words "I saw the stars"? Now her hands were covering her eyes, shutting out the terrible glare. Her skin was sore, burned as though she had been too near the smith's fire. She was hungry and she had eaten all her maggots. For all she knew there was food all around her, but there was no way she could find it.

There was one grain of comfort which she derived from her previous learnings. In due course, she believed, the Earth would spin around, the darkness would come, and she would be able to see again. So she curled up into a ball, hands pressed over her eyes and waited for a long time. Sometimes she slept but for long periods she just lay there, hot and dry and unhappy.

And at last the glare began to fade. She straightened up and removed her hands from her face. She waited while it became more comfortably dark.

Then she opened her eyes.

She stared at the ground beneath her; it consisted of crum-

bly black soil, similar to that in the tunnels, but dry. Cautiously she raised her eyes further.

She saw a riot of green plants. She looked up, squinting.

She was sitting under a huge plant which reached into the sky. A tree.

She stood. The verdure stretched as far as she could see.

She fought agoraphobia and, in a while, conquered it.

She began to walk, her knees trembling with reaction.

Soon she was among the plants. Most of them had blades rather than leaves and reached to her knees; but some were taller and she soon became dissatisfied with the obstructed view. She paused and looked around. There was a stretch of higher ground away to her left, the rim of a low hill. She waded through the plants in that direction. Soon, she began to climb.

She reached the summit and stared at the scene before her in bewilderment. She was standing above a shallow basin-shaped valley where the ground was black and hard, and no plants grew. It was just like old Jeb had described it. The horizon would indeed seem very close to anyone emerging from that cracked, brittle ground in the middle of the basin.

But from the high ground Shirl could see something which Jeb never saw. Beyond the opposite rim of the basin rose an angular projection: huge, metallic, glinting in the dying rays of the setting sun.

The setting sun? From her high angle Shirl could see—and bear to look at—the dull red orb sinking beneath the horizon, splashing the low clouds with blood. The sun was to her right, as she stood. And straight ahead, just below a horizontal projection of the metal object?

Another sun, glowing dull, setting.

So somewhere history must have gone wrong. Or maybe there was merely a gap in her knowledge. After all, the number of film sheets seemed almost infinite; a man could hardly study even a single drawer in his lifetime. But every astronomical reference Shirl had seen stated that Earth revolved about a single sun. True, there was a moon too, but the object she could see was no moon. The moon was cold and dead, and merely reflected light. The sun blazed. Well, both those suns blazed. . . .

If there was an answer to the mystery it would be found at that angular object, the only man-made artifact visible to her. She trudged around the rim of the basin and eventually stood on the brink of a steep slope.

Beneath her was a cluster of large rectangular construc-

tions. Buildings, she decided. Lying beside them and dwarfing them was the metallic thing, enormous and cylindrical. This, she knew, was a spaceship. It traveled from star to star. So maybe it had come from Earth, bringing men to a place where there were two suns. And it was broken. The bright paneling on the underside was burst open, the metal plates scattered. Huge holes gaped and the overall cylindrical shape was slightly flattened, collapsing under its own great weight. She tried to remember the relevant film sheets. The projections nearest her would be the legs. The circular tubes within the triangle formed by the legs were for propulsion. The ship was lying on its side, according to the pictures she had seen. The legs were useless in that position.

Unlike some of the more superstitious members of Downways she had never assumed that the Old People were perfect. So she looked behind her at the fused soil in the basin, then she looked at the stricken spaceship again, and she could conceive that the ship had suffered a bad landing and fallen over. . . .

Shirl was different. Old Sten had always known this. Shirl was bright.

She trotted down the hill toward the cluster of buildings, not considering the possibility of danger. To a Downways person danger was represented by the Daggertooth or giant rat and Shirl thought of the Daggertooth as an underground thing, a menace to be connected with Downways, not this wonderful new world of hers. Because this world *was* wonderful, now that the fierce suns had gone, and Shirl was carelessly, irrationally happy. She was also very lucky. The rats had long since left the buildings and the ship and had, with few exceptions, become herbivorous—apart from those few who lived underground for the meaty pickings.

So Shirl entered the gaping, open doorway and stood among the giant furniture of the Old People. She went curiously from room to room and at one point saw a flight of steps leading downward; and in spite of the bewildering mass of new impressions she was able to divine that this led to the Great Chambers. At the foot of the steps was a door, and against the door was a pile of rubble.

Somewake, thought Shirl, Downways people would come up that way. . . .

She passed into a comparatively small room, neat and tidy like the others with large window intact, the twilight glowing through. She did not notice the small studs near the floor on either side of the entrance, but they blinked at her like eyes. The reactor was still operating and so was the equipment, in-

cluding the Environmental Adapter . . . and the Speaker. In the past the Speaker had pointlessly addressed rats after being triggered off by the eyes but now, at last, it was to perform the job for which it had been built, so many years ago.

The Speaker spoke.

"Do not be alarmed, little one," it boomed, and Shirl looked about her wildly, terrified for the first time. "Just make yourself comfortable and I'll explain. I knew that one day you'd find your way back up here because it will always be in Man's nature to explore—whatever form Man might take. I expect you've spent many generations underground—and it's also safe to assume that your knowledge of your beginnings is scanty, if not altogether forgotten.

"My name is Spiro Andrucles and I am a geneticist and also a member of the crew of the ship *Inflexible* whose tender crash-landed on this planet fifty standard years before this recording. The other members of the crew are now all dead—two hundred and thirty-eight men and eleven women, all dead. Some of them lived out their life spans; others died from radiation sickness following the leak from the pile which disabled the ship. Two hundred and thirty-eight men and eleven women—and all those women sterile, forced to spend the remainder of their lives on an uncharted planet. . . ."

Shirl shivered, sympathizing but not entirely understanding, as the voice went on to describe the initial hardships encountered by the castaways. The ship *Inflexible* was part of a larger expedition bound for an Earth-type planet in the distant reaches of space, Earth itself having become an increasingly hostile environment since World War III, not to mention extreme pollution problems. It was intended that the emigrants should start a new life with, it was hoped, a new outlook.

"We carried genetic equipment and other items including a vast repository of knowledge for the new world. The other ships, those who lost us when we dropped so suddenly out of hyperspace, they carried the hardware of colonization and the seeds of plants, and the seeds of Man. We crashed without the tools of progress.

"True, we had a few simple implements and we were able to utilize parts of the ship's tender to dig ourselves in and make ourselves comfortable, but basically it seemed that we must sit here and wait to die because there was no way in which we could further the race of Man on this planet.

"Until the idea came to us. We had been able to ferry a certain amount of equipment down from *Inflexible*; why not

set this up and do the best we could? The planet would support life; plants and insects were already abundant. There were, however, no animals, although a few rats and mice which escaped from the ship had begun to breed. They could be monstrous too, as many of them had been affected by the reactor leak. We caught a few and tried some experiments, while we set our Environmental Adapters. . . .

"These are interesting machines. They are used for creating the most suitable type of livestock for any given planet. Operation is comparatively simple—the details of the environment are fed into a computer. Gravity factor, bacterial count, radiation count, atmospheric makeup and other characteristics of the planet; together with further information such as the local climate, available fodder, water, and so on. The computer is linked to the Adapter and automatically adjusts the controls so that one can produce the perfect cow, pig, sheep, or any strange animal in between for any given environment, merely by inserting a small piece of body tissue.

"Forgive me for dwelling on this at length, little one, but this machine was my own pet. It was of little use for actual breeding because the process was slow despite a quadrupled output system. For this reason we had two machines which were, of course, intended for experiment only. With animals.

"The question was, would the machines work with Man?

"Our small party couldn't breed, but they could provide tissue for the Adapters. Thus humanity might be preserved on the planet. But what shape would humanity take? In due course we found out. Several of our members committed suicide rather than spend the rest of their lives experimenting with miniature humans who appeared to be of nocturnal burrowing habits because of the severe radiation of the twin suns. . . .

"Our people were falling sick as the environment took its toll. But the little folk were bred to survive. They began to reproduce and, as their metabolism was high, we were able to observe several generations and achieve some measure of perfection. In case natural reproduction ever broke down the little people were indoctrinated genetically—given a race memory—so that they could use the Adapter in times of emergency but otherwise ignore it. We built a device on the side of the Adapters which was designed to exercise a sexual attraction on whoever approached. As generations went by the indoctrination would fade, of course, but by then we hoped the new race would be firmly established. . . ."

The Speaker boomed on, telling of hope, despair, suicide, death, and the passage of years. At last it fell silent and Shirl

became aware of her surroundings again, suddenly finding herself stiff. She must have been sitting in the same place on the hard floor for well over a hibe. It was totally dark and there were no glowglobes here, Up Top. She wondered what the old People did in the darkness. Perhaps they slept—but if they did it would be a very long hibe; there was no sign of either sun rising yet.

So Shirl slept herself, at last, curled in a ball with the ragged blackfur robe wrapped about her; and when finally she woke it was still dark.

She rose and went outside. There was a moon in the sky. It was a very small moon, a long way off, but still bright enough for Shirl with her nocturnal eyesight to see her way about. She climbed back up the hill and looked into the basin. She thought briefly of old Jeb. He hadn't seen the half of it.

They had never known the extent of the ignorance gap—the huge holes in Downways' knowledge of human history which had led them to believe that World War III was a recent event. In fact, it was hardly more than a legend. Like the Hero. . . . Long ago, in a rare reflective moment, John-A had said: "We don't know when we are and why we are. There could be big gaps in our knowledge. Time gaps. . . ."

She reached the point under the tall tree where she had emerged into this new world and sat down, nibbling at the little grubs which ran among the roots. It wasn't so bad being small, she thought, if there was a good reason for it. On this planet, the little people were stronger than the tallest giant. She wished John-A had been able to hear the Speaker; then she decided that she must not think about him anymore.

She very quickly found that this decision would not work so, when once again his image slid before her mind, she deliberately began to concentrate on John-A. She thought about his achievements, and found herself thinking that they had involved killing a lot of people. She thought about his love for her—and she knew it was selfish and possessive, and had cost the lives of Brag and Prince. She thought about her love for him—and she found it flawed, imperfect, an unhappy mixture of lust and, of all things, mother instinct. . . .

Around the rim of the sky the blackness was lifting to gray and Shirl could see her new world more clearly now—the short grasses, the tall slender trees, silver and sleeping but gradually turning green and alive as the first sun crept up and the wind brushed their leaves. She guessed that the night had been at least two hibes and two wakes long. It was going to be an interesting future for Downways folk spending half

their time on the surface and the other half, while the suns blazed Up Top, in the tunnels. Eventually they would learn to construct buildings, and live Up Top all the time. . . . For a while she dreamed happily of the longwakes to come.

She liked her world; it was wonderful to be able to sit here and plan while the pale sky turned blue, yet her reverie was somehow incomplete. She realized that she was longing for someone to come and share all this with her. Someone strong and brave who would love this world, and love her too. It was a very ancient emotion which Shirl felt as her eyes dwelt upon the round hole in the loose soil from which she had emerged.

"Oh, who will come and love me?" she sighed to the hole.

And as is the way of real life, her question went unanswered, and no eager man climbed through to join her.

She laughed suddenly, gaily. "Oh, well, in that case I'll just have to go down and get you, Ned," she said, and wriggled headfirst under the surface.

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