

Had nature run amuck?

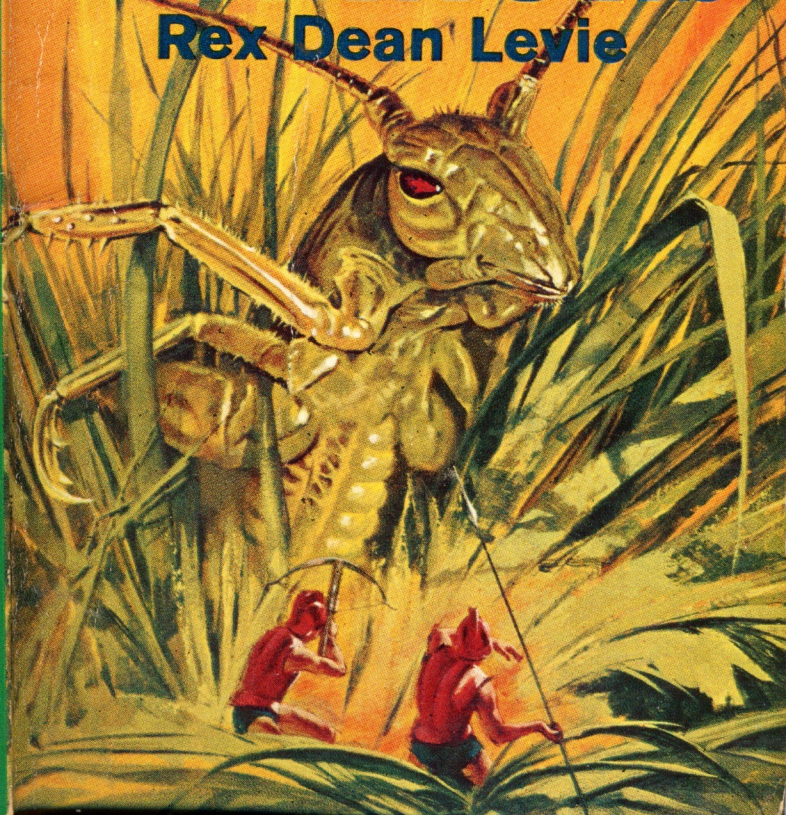
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THE INSECT

WARRIORS

Rex Dean Levie



WHO WERE THE MASTERS OF THIS REVERSED WORLD?

The insects continued to pour out of the darkness. The two men were trapped—for the cave didn't offer much opportunity of escape.

As the battle raged, Tall could hear his friend struggling behind him, and his heart sank—he knew they could not hold out much longer before the sheer weight of numbers carried them under. Individually, the strange, white insects were small, only the size of a man, but their actions marked them as being similar to ants in their behavior; if they were social insects, the men had started a full-scale war that could only end in one way if the insects were victors—horrible death for the two men and their kind.

This is only one of the many, exciting adventures of Tall, the mighty explorer among men, in a world in which man was in constant battle for survival with hordes of enemy giant insects.

REX DEAN LEVIE writes: "I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, am 28 years of age, and have been writing off and on since age 15. I have a B.A. in history, am working for a Master's degree, and spend most of my spare time at the typewriter. Since leaving school, I've worked as a beet hand, a student teacher, an attendant in a cemetery, a personnel specialist in the U.S. Army, and am at present settled down as an estimator for a pipe manufacturer. I live in Baldwin Park, California, with my wife and child.

"I can't remember just which of the spate of giant insect movies that came out in the late fifties and early sixties it was, but one night a bunch of us at a small camp in Germany were coming back from the theater when an argument got started as to just how big an insect *could* get. I dug into the limited facilities of the base library to find out, and after the argument was settled, I happened to hit an article by Dr. Carl Menninger discussing the problems of size . . . This novel was the ultimate result."

THE INSECT WARRIORS

Rex Dean Levie

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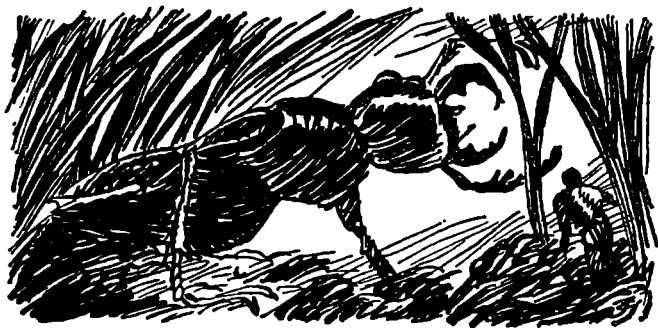
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To Squirt & Barbera

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I

THE GIANT ANT tugged at the edge of the mushroom umbrella, trying to free a piece suitable for carrying. Arching its foot-long body double, the minim surged back and the fungus yielded, sending the insect onto its back in a shower of fragments.

Emerging from the debris, the ant scurried about its booty, tapping it with its antennae to reassure itself that it was really free. Grasping the fragments, the minim started to lift it, only to stop as a slight sound from the undergrowth alerted it to the approach of an intruder. The insect dropped the mushroom-bit and turned to face the newcomer, antennae vibrating in an attempt to catch some identifying scent. The intruder, a man, stopped momentarily at the edge of the clearing and, as the insect—failing to receive the desired proof of identity—set up a shrill stridulation, the man turned his head to locate the source of the cry.

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Tall had not seen the minim under the cover of the fungus, and when the insect's alarm sounded, it took him a second to locate the source. He studied the ant perfunctorily, recognizing the band pattern as that of a hill on the river. The insect caused him no apprehension, since a single ant, and a minim at that, could scarcely pose a threat. He would have to move, however, since on all sides answering shrills told him of the presence of a full-scale foraging party, and while an individual ant was little menace, a group of the insects could pose a nasty problem.

Tall flexed his shoulders to shift his armor into a more comfortable position and moved past the minim. A faint stench of formic acid guiding him, he struck the backtrail to the hill and started down it. He knew that the ant tribes rarely ventured more than a half day's march from their city, and to judge by the sky, the actual distance was somewhat less. Since the hill was two days' march downstream from his goal, he would have at least two and a half days' march ahead.

Pausing, he allowed a caterpillar to rumble past, its bulk overshadowing the path and its multiple legs beating out an irregular tattoo. A tiny parasite astride the beast sat unconcerned as the hulk swayed itself up the trunk of a milkweed to join several of its fellows three hundred feet above. A moment later a green blur announced the arrival of a grasshopper nymph, scarcely his own size. For a moment the nymph sat solemnly surveying the surroundings through goggled eyes, and then as Tall moved, it vanished with a crack of its enlarged hind legs.

As he strode along, Tall noted the presence of life all around him. A hunter at heart, he marked this area off in his mind as a particularly abundant source of game. He would have to see to it that it was hunted by his own kind in the future. On either hand, the plant life had closed in, and then suddenly it opened, leaving him at the entrance of a large clearing.

Pausing for a moment, he scanned the surroundings with inbred caution. The area immediately ahead seemed clear

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enough, but he froze as a flash of scarlet and gold was reflected back to him from the parapet of grasses to his right. Shifting slightly, he saw a spiderling, the young of one of the jumping species, flattened out on the ridged surface of a grass stem fifteen yards away. Just out of its first moult and a scant two feet long, it could be trusted to leave him alone—as a rule the jumpers did not trouble his kind.

Gifted with exceptional eyesight for an arthropod, the spider had also seen him, and with a rare curiosity it followed his movements. The spiderling rejected the strange object below as food. Tall's erect posture, his green body covered with lapped plated chitin, and the manner in which one of his forelimbs stretched into a length four times the length of the spiderling's body were all totally alien elements to the arachnid's limited experience.

Watching as the stranger started to move, the spider suddenly observed something of greater interest, as one of the multitude of gnats that hung over the clearing came down to rest. In a blaze of scarlet and gold the spider-hunter left its perch to bear the gnat to earth, three inch fangs driving into the joint at the gnat's neck. The dipteron shuddered and then lay still, and the arachnid settled to its meal.

Moving past the feeding spider, Tall started across the clearing, then stopped as from behind came the unmistakable shrill of trailing ants. Moving quickly off of the trail he watched the spider return to its perch with equal haste, and a moment later three minims and a soldier broke into the clearing, the leading two workers laden, the third free.

Reaching the abandoned carcass of the dipteron, the leading duo passed on, while the warrior and the unladen worker paused to investigate their find. Twice the size of his fellow and regal in burnished armor and needle jaws, the warrior waited until the minim had struggled under a burden as large as itself, and then led the way past where Tall stood half-concealed. The drained husk kept sliding on its back, and the minim with the fly wandered further and further astray as Tall stepped into the pathway once more and followed the small band.

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Almost ten feet wide of the trail on the sandy ground, the minim suddenly staggered more drunkenly than usual, and then vanished from sight. If the warrior had seen the disappearance he gave no sign, going on in the wake of the preceding workers. Approaching the spot at which the ant had vanished, Tall found himself at the lip of a shallow cone dug into the sand of the clearing. At the bottom of the pit the minim was writhing in the grip of a massive pair of pincers attached to a spiny skull that had been exposed by the forward lunge.

Stepping back from the edge, Tall kicked a boulder the size of his head into the pit. Bounding down the slope in a shower of smaller debris, it struck the bare skull and the ant lion dropped its prey to dip his weapons and send an answering shower up the slope. Tall, well aware of the trick, was already on the trail, and the assassin returned to his hellish meal undisturbed.

Skirting another of the traps, Tall gained the far side of the clearing to find his way blocked by a large stand of grass into which the trail led to form a tunnel under a clump of dandelions. He had no desire to enter that dark and confined space where his weapons would be of little use in case of attack, and examining the ground, he decided that his best route was north, since it led in the general direction in which he wished to go.

Staying far enough away from the tangle to preclude any sudden attack, he noticed a cricket in its lair, its multifaceted-eyes gleaming faintly. The insect was twice his size, but it did not molest him, although at dusk it would have been different. Here was the story of his world, the herbivorous insects feeding on the plants, and the carnivores feeding upon them in turn—and some species that were not adverse to feeding upon him.

A crash from the undergrowth warned him, and a moment later a grate of grass burst outwards as a grotesquely carapaced insect charged into the pathway and spun to face him. As it broke cover, the brightly colored body blazing in the sun, the assassin bug caught his scent, and a moment

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later its spiked snout flashed down, then drew back to vibrate with a low moan against the armor of its own thorax. Lifting its front legs in menace, the thing began a scrabbled charge towards him.

Tall's spear had come off his shoulder at the first alarm, and he dropped to one knee, bracing the butt of his shaft against the ground. The insect was four times his size, and Tall probably could have avoided the clumsy brute, but this was the egg-laying season, and the imperative of generations called for the death of female predators.

The assassin bug lifted its forelegs again to seize Tall, and at the same moment Tall guided the blade into the joint at the neck, the impact of the beast against the crossbar almost carrying him over backwards. The needle-pointed snout flicked in and out, and the spiked forelegs lashed towards him, yards short, as the insect hung impaled. Bracing himself against the strain, Tall rose to his feet, forcing his opponent up and denying it purchase for its legs. The spear point, now buried in the nerves at the joint, was well coated with venom, and slowly the insect grew still as the toxin did its work.

When he was sure that it was dead, Tall kicked the carcass off his spear and stepped back, leaning the shaft against his shoulder. Raising both hands to his grotesque triangular head, he twisted it to one side and pulled off the helmet to expose a crop of close grown red hair and a pair of keen blue eyes. Slipping off his chitin gauntlets and laying down spear and helmet, Tall drew a foot-long flint knife from his belt and with his foot rolled the fallen vampire over to expose the belly.

With a single cut he opened the soft skin to expose the ovaries beneath, bulging with eggs. A quick inspection assured him that they were infertile and he wiped the blade and returned it to his belt. Twenty generations of training demanded that both female predators and their eggs be destroyed whenever possible. Men existed in the world of insects only by grace of their great strength and greater wits, and each female insect killed was equal to a hundred more

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the next year. Even though men did not hunt these woods, the training was too strong to ignore.

Regaining his spear and helmet, his work done, he resealed the casque and slung the weapon over his shoulder. Such encounters were a part of being alive in his world, and a dozen steps later it was forgotten in the press of new sights and sounds.

As he had guessed, it was less than a half day's journey to the river, and despite having stopped for a lunch of grass stem and aphid honeydew, he had his first sight of water with two or three hours of daylight left. Emerging from the woods, he found himself at the top of a sheer drop that fell several hundred feet to a level stretch beside the water. Beneath him an immense tangle of brambles hugged the beach, stretching off downstream as far as he could see. He recognized the location, and at once knew that he was still a full two days downstream from the island that was his home.

In the afternoon sun, a gleam of silver cable marked the web of an orb spider among the brambles, and he could see the yellow and silver of the weaver in the center. Over ten times his size, the spider was of less danger than the tiny spiderling had been, since she never left her web to hunt, but as he turned away from the cliff he saw a trap of another type that raised the hairs on his neck.

On the center of the narrow cleared space that lay between the jungle and the drop, lay a low rampart of stones loosely cemented with silk, and treading carefully to avoid any sound, he crept past it, spear at the ready. Keeping his eyes on the hole behind the parapet, alert to the least sign of the occupant, he worked his way along the base of the jungle, nearly stumbling on a pile of drained husks and shards of armor that marked the orgies held in the burrow. He had passed the hole and was beginning to relax when out of the jungle bounded another of the grasshopper nymphs, its flight taken at random, to land almost in the hole.

A rasping scramble from the bottom was followed by the emergence of an eight-legged horror, and the nymph, startled, vanished. Tall had frozen, but the spider, lashing at the

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air, sighted him and spun to charge down upon him. There was no time to brace for the charge, and the wolf spider weighed two or three tons. Aiming the spear into the oncoming mandibles, Tall held fast. It was a slender shaft, but it was his only chance. If the spear failed, the three-foot daggers of the wolf spider would make short work of his chitin armor, and he could not move fast enough to get clear.

The venom on the spear was concentrated from a black widow spider, bred for centuries for potency, and given enough time it would bring down anything that lived, but if he could not hold off the spider, its eventual demise would do him little good.

But it was the failure of the spear that saved him. As the beast struck, the supple shaft bent double under the impact, then snapped back, tossing Tall fifty yards up and away. A grass blade broke his fall and held him off of the ground, the end of the broken spear still in his hand.

Shaking off the shock, he rolled to a point that allowed him to see into the clearing below. The spider was spinning in an obscene dance as the ten-foot stub of the spear struck the ground again and again, driving the point deeper into its skull. The dim brain of the brute equated pain with attack, and its mandibles opened and closed in spasms as it strove to kill an opponent that was not there. The point drove home at last, and as the venom crippled the legs on one side, the spider spun at last over the lip of the cliff and fell to the beach below.

With double caution, since his sole weapon was now his knife, Tall descended from his perch and approached the edge. Far below he could see the darker splotch that marked the fallen foe, and he was reassured to see that it was definitely dead. The face here was seamed and split, and an hour later he stood on the beach beside the fallen spider, noticing that the hulk had already drawn the first ants.

Walking around the remains, he saw that the spearshaft had broken off within the skull, and that there was no chance to recover his blade. He would have to make a new spear before proceeding, and with this in mind he turned

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downstream towards the brambles, selecting a half dozen likely shapes of flint from the beach as he went.

In the cover of the briars, he knelt and chipped his stones into tools. A two-piece operation yielded him a two-foot-long, leaf-shaped spearhead, while another resulted in a crude but serviceable saw. As he was about to proceed, he noticed yet another chunk, which upon examination needed only superficial work and sharpening to yield him a beautifully shaped, double-bladed ax head. Finding a stout splinter, he split the end with his knife, and using silk from a reel at his belt, bound the ax head to the haft, stretching the material slightly and then releasing it to bind the head as tightly as though welded.

The nearer boles yielded him a spline long and straight enough to suit him, and a quarter of an hour later he had a weapon that was the twin of the one he had lost. The saw was discarded, but the ax had such a nice shape and balance that he kept it, tying it to his belt with a loop of silk.

One last task remained, and removing a flexible seedpod from his belt, he knelt and carefully removed the plug. With infinite caution to avoid touching the stuff with his bare hands, he coated the blade with a thick layer of sticky venom, transforming a merely formidable weapon into a deadly one. The discovery of the black widow venom had been one of the major factors in his race's survival.

Skirting the towering mound of the ant metropolis, he made good time down the beach, but two hours later the lowness of the sun and the growing shadows in the gorge warned him that it was time to seek shelter for the night. A little further down the cliffs he spotted several deserted wasp burrows, marked by the litter at their bases, and a half hour later he was firmly encased in a burrow fifteen feet up the wall, the entrance barred with a boulder.

He had gathered a supply of the moss that served as fuel, and over the single glowing coal of the fire a grasshopper nymph that had fallen to his ax was roasting. Eating slowly and enjoying the meal, he washed the last shreds of

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meat down with honeydew, put out the fire, and went down to the river to wash.

Returning, he easily leapt the fifteen feet from the beach to the cave and rolled the five-ton plug back into place. The burrow, designed to accommodate the carcass of one of the larger hoppers, would hold enough oxygen to last the night, and in the safety of the plug he could remove his armor for the first time in many days. Laying the chitin aside, he filled the helmet with water and washed himself, stretching gratefully to his full six foot ten.

Taking a tightly folded silk blanket from his pack, Tall spread it on the sand floor, stretching to flex knotted bands of muscles that could lift ten tons of dead weight. Laying down, he rolled the cover around him and let the soft sand, still warm from the fire, lull him to sleep in the most comfortable bed he had known for weeks. As a result, he slept more soundly than usual, and stirred, but did not awaken at the movement of a large body over the face of the cliff, followed by a dragging rasp against the plug.

A beam of sunlight past the plug roused him, and he rose and dressed quickly, then placed one leg against the boulder and with his back to a niche in the wall kicked it out of the mouth. To his consternation, however, the stone, which should have sailed nearly into the water, hung a bare ten feet in front of him, meshed in the folds of a dew-spangled sheet of silk. A morning glory spider had spread her trap over his lair in the darkness.

Standing at the entrance, he considered his position. While he was in no immediate danger, since, like most of the spinners, the spider would not attack him if he stayed free of her web, a quick glance showed him that the strands reached the beach in a manner that would effectively bar his exit. This particular species did not gum its silk, but the tangle formed an effective barrier in itself, and he could not work free in time to avoid the spider's rush.

The funnel was evidently located in one of the burrows higher on the wall, and considering the size of the web and the retreat, there was little hope that it was a small spider.

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At that moment the matter settled itself, as the eighteen-foot-long mistress came down to inspect the damage done to her home by the stone. While Tall was slightly the stronger of the two, he could not fight that monster in her own environment. He would have to find some way to kill or cripple the arachnid before hunger and thirst drove him out.

It was an hour before his chance came, in the form of a ten-foot bluebottle that lumbered into the web and became trapped almost opposite the mouth of his retreat. Its buzz reflecting first annoyance and then panic, the dipteran struggled in the maze, snapping treacherous strands at the expense of legs and wings. The spider, alerted by the row, left her funnel and charged down the platform to secure her meal, compounding the damage the fly had already done to the structure. As she settled down to feed, her bloated abdomen rested for a moment cleanly exposed through a rent in the silk, and without hesitation Tall struck.

A half hour later he stood free of the web and on the beach, while above him hung the corpse of the spider beside her last victim, the blood still flowing sluggishly from four gashes inflicted by the razor edges of Tall's spear, and limbs frozen in the paralysis of the venom. It had been hot and tiring work to pick his way out of the maze, and he went down to the river and drank deeply, pouring a helmetful of water over his head.

He made good time along the sandy beach, and as the day passed, he fought, ran, or hid as the situation demanded. The cliffs had slowly receded on either hand, and returned the jungle almost to the water's edge. Bluebottles, their transparent wings flashing rainbows in the afternoon sun, swarmed overhead, and now and again a preoccupied bee passed overhead with a characteristic booming roar. He passed a hunting wasp with its prey, and dodged the attack of a brightly striped, male hunting beetle, then stopped to enjoy the antics of a herbivorous tumbler. If this world held death and danger in ample measure, it also held beauty and pleasure.

With a scant half hour of daylight left, he saw a low

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palisade of stone and wood, half set into the face of a hillock before him, and darkness found him barricaded behind the wood and silk doorway of the structure, one of the outpost hunting camps of the island. A whole mosquito wriggler was spitted over the fire, and another flask of honeydew supplemented the water from the cistern behind him. From this point on, the number of predators would drop off sharply, although over a hundred tombstones in the cemetery beside the camp—the toll of generations—showed that it was still far from safe to travel these woods.

Somewhere in the jungle behind the building, a cricket took up a basso serenade, to be followed by the other night singers. Through the grillwork of the door he could see the river, and as dusk deepened into darkness, the stars appeared and the first of a squadron of fireflies appeared to wheel their mating dance over the reflecting water. As Tall settled back to sleep a meteorite tore across the sky, a chunk of stone or iron no larger than himself, but as bright as the stars.

II

THE TRAIL dipped for a moment into a steep gully, then rose to level at the top of a gentle slope that led, in a cleared plain, to the river. From the top, Tall could see the island, rising out of its protective moat. He was home.

This was the area swept by the daily hunting parties, and a half mile down the slope a large grasshopper was struggling in a net while a half dozen figures in brightly colored armor surged around it. As he watched, Tall saw one of the figures raise something to his shoulder, and a moment later the orthopteran shuddered and fell still. At the same time one of the pack caught sight of him, and a moment later all five of the hunters were charging up the slope, waving and yelling.

"Tall! Tall, you old cockroach! Where in the hell have you been?" The leading figure was Clever, his best friend

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and roommate, and a moment later, the two embraced. "You've been gone over two months!"

"Yeah! Grandpa knew where you'd gone, but he wouldn't tell us."

Peewee, one of the two shortest men on the island, joined them, followed in a moment by Runt, the other, and his twin, and Silent and Smiley, another pair of twins and cousins of Tall's.

"Looks like you had a little trouble, too!" Runt chimed in, examining the dents and tears in Tall's breastplate, level with his eyes. "Some fun, huh?"

"Later boys, later." Tall laughed. "Grandpa gets the word first. You know me better than that."

"Come on, Tall, let's have it. We won't tell anyone else," Smiley prodded him. "We saw you first, after all."

"Forget it, boys." Clever nodded his head. "The big ox has to follow his habits—he's too damn dumb to change them now." He led the way back down the trail. "Let's get that hopper back and we'll all hear it later."

The party paused long enough to sling their prey onto a cradle of spears and netting, then descended to the water's edge, exposing a ribbon of silk beneath the surface, and they crossed, pulling the draw bridge slack and permitting it to sink behind them.

"Hell! Tall!" the guard on the wall shouted as the party climbed the path up the dyke. "When did you get back?"

"Just did, Baldy. How's the hair?"

"Just like a helmet, Tall." Baldy Baker ran a hand over the smooth and featureless surface of his casque. "How about telling my relief to hurry up, will you?"

The group paused for a moment at the top of the wall, and Tall once more looked down into the heartland of his race. They stood atop an artificial dyke, built over centuries against any sudden rise in the water level, while on the opposite side a natural cliff served the same function. In the bowl thus formed was a space about five miles wide and three times as long, divided by neatly marked paths into squares that bore the homes and crops of the population. At the far

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end the island narrowed, cut off by a massive wall. There, roofed over with timbers and silk, were the pens of the black widow spiders and of the more dangerous of the food species that furnished the butcher shops with meat.

Across the floor could be traced the remains of older walls, momentos of the days when men had not even controlled the island itself. On the far wall most of the homes were set into the cliff, built in those same days, but now the bulk of the city lay on the level floor, although a few houses rose on the near face of the dyke.

"There's home." Clever broke his reverie and pointed to one of the nearest structures. "Smiley, would you and the others mind taking the hopper down to the butcher's? Tall and I have to wash up."

"Sure. It's on the way home, anyway. We'll see you at Grandpa's in about an hour." The rest of the party went on and the two friends turned to their home.

"It's good to get back." Tall took off his helmet in the hall and set it atop a T-shaped stand beside several others of similar design and size. "Put some water on, would you?"

"I already have." Clever emerged from the interior. With his helmet removed, he revealed a pair of laughing blue eyes that matched Tall's own. "I'm not the stupid one, you know."

"Listen, I'll have no backtalk." Tall paused in the unlacing of his armor and made a show of looking down on Clever's brown thatch some five inches below his own red-gold scalp. "Here, hang this up, will you?"

"Quite some war club." Clever took the proffered ax and swung it experimentally. "Where did you get it?"

"Made it a couple of days ago," his friend replied from the inner recesses of the bathroom. "Ow! This water's hotter than hell."

"Save some for me." Clever entered the bathroom. "The soap's in the usual place. How long is it since you took a bath, anyway?"

"Since I've been gone, if you don't count dunking in the river."

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"You smell like it, too!" The smaller man wrinkled his nose in mock disgust, then ducked as the bather stopped soaping his face and whizzed the soap past his ear.

Tall dipped beneath the surface to rinse off the soap, and then stood and toweled himself vigorously. Since men did not grow facial hair, he did not shave. Reaching down, he pushed the piston that started the siphoning off of the wash water.

"She's all yours, Clever. The hot water's on the fire."

"Thanks, I'll just be a few minutes." He stripped off his undershirt and trousers, revealing a set of muscles that rivaled his companion's and began to fill the tub again.

He was toweling himself dry when the larger man reappeared in the doorway, dressed in a pair of silk trousers and an open-necked shirt, carrying a T-shaped instrument in his hand.

"What's this, Clever? Another one of your inventions?" He examined the object curiously. "It looks like a regular bow, but what's the other piece for?"

"It's a crossbow." Clever wrapped the towel around his middle and took the object. "You know, of course, that the reason that we don't use bows for most hunting is that we can't hold one strong enough to shoot through chitin armor. They do fine against an unarmored insect, but their power is too low to hunt a heavily-armored one." With a visible effort he tugged the string back and locked it behind a short lever on the stock.

Stepping into the livingroom, he took a flint-headed shaft from a quiver hung beside the doorway and dropped the two-foot bolt into a groove on the top of the cross. Taking careful aim, he pointed it across the room, and Tall followed the end to a scarred plate of chitin hanging across the room.

"What I've done is to substitute a crossbar of wood for your arm. You set the shaft in the groove against the string, aim, and pull back on this lever"—there was a sharp snap and the bolt vanished from the bow to reappear deeply embedded in the plate—"to fire."

He handed the bow back to Tall who plucked the string.

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"Hey! This is pretty stiff, isn't it?" With an effort that bulged even his arms, the big man succeeded in locking the string behind the lever.

"It's got a pull of a little over two tons." Clever stepped to the door of his bedroom, but stopped as the other reached for one of the quivers hanging beside the door. "Don't use those, get one from the nearest to the door. Those are hunting points, with venom on them; the others are plain."

"It takes a little practice, I see." Tall lowered the bow and gazed ruefully at the blotch on the stone wall where the shaft had splintered three feet wide of the plate. "But it's quite the gadget. I could have used one of these things a few times in the last month or so."

His friend emerged from the bedroom dressed in garments that matched his own, and Tall took two light breast-plates from the armor rack, one for himself and one handed to Clever. Even on the island no one went out of doors unarmored or unarmed, for although the walls kept out spiders, ants, and similar crawlers, they didn't protect them from flying carnivores. The duo donned light, plumed helmets, and Clever took one of the bows and a quiver, while Tall selected a six-foot javelin with a weighted base.

"Ready?"

"All set, Tall. I'll shut the door."

Their destination lay in the hollow at the broad end of the island, set into the natural cliffs. A full mile along the cliff-face stretched pillared porches and halls, centered on a massive structure that jutted a quarter of a mile from the face and was dug almost as deeply into the stone. This was the heart of the city, museum, library, school, meeting hall, theater, town hall. The nearest thing these men had to a government building was, in fact, a residence, where Grandpa and Wise, with their families, lived.

Passing the construction that had continued as long as anyone could remember, the pair entered through the museum wing. Here were examples of all of the species of insects—beneficial, harmless, or deadly—known to man. In the entrance was mounted a gray wolf spider, its eight legs

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spread in a lifelike pose, and Tall grinned when further on they passed a magnificent stag beetle displayed in a solitude befitting its majesty. His father and he had brought that one in when he was barely twelve, and it was still an outstanding prize. A little further on, however, his face clouded at the sight of a male mantis. That had been his first independent command, and it had cost the lives of five good men. The exhibits all had a well-known familiarity, for as a boy in school he had come here daily to learn to recognize the deadly species, and to discover their weak spots.

Past the portico at the end of the museum they turned and entered a large hall, dominated by an immense fireplace over which were ten niches, each bearing a gleaming figure.

"Hell, Clever, everyone on the island must be here!" Tall whispered, standing on the threshold and glancing into the room with consternation.

"Everyone probably is, except for the guards. The boys must have spread the word around that you were back."

"Tall! Get over here boy!" At the far end of the room a man had arisen who towered over the bulk of the crowd almost as much as Tall's own six-foot-ten.

"Hello, Grandfather." Tall bent to kiss the older man's cheek, feeling again the odd experience of seeing his own face under a haze of snowy hair.

"Sit down, damn it; and quit reminding me how old I'm getting." He turned. "Somebody grab a couple of chairs. How are you, Clever?"

"Fine, Grandpa." The inventor turned to the oldster, Wise, seated beside Grandpa. "How are you, Grandfather?"

"Fine, Clever. Your grandmother was asking about you today. You should get around oftener," said Wise, taking his grandson's hand.

"Here, sit down you two." Grandpa had gotten the chairs he had asked for. He handed his grandson a flask of honey-dew wine. "Here, wash your throat out, and then tell me what you found out. You've been gone two months, so you should have something to report."

The room grew silent in anticipation, and the scribe de-

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tailed to take down the report put his pen to the paper as the explorer began.

"Well, you know why I went—to find another site for a city." He turned, "We had hoped for another island downstream, as Wise and the council know. I was sent out to see if there was one, and if it would be suitable for colonization.

"I got down as far as the brambles, but then I had to build a raft and take to the water. I found out one thing, at least," he said grinning ruefully. "It isn't practical to move downstream by water. There are several steep rapids, and a lot of predators—beetles and bugs, mostly—who hunt where the current is slow enough. I took four or five dunkings in the rapids, and a couple more in fights." His tone was calm, and he did not elaborate. His audience could take the violence of those fights for granted.

"I stayed on the river for about two weeks, and ended up in a large lake about fifty miles or so wide where the river leaves the valley. The place was crawling with water beetles, and I got turned over close to shore and lost the raft. The shoreline is pure swamp-mud and grasses, and it took me three days to work my way out through the muck." Briefly, he went on to describe the insect forms of the swamplands, mainly inimical—but that too was normal.

"I worked my way around the edge of the swamps, and about twenty miles from where I lost the raft I hit the mountains. The river dives into the cliffs there, in the biggest damned canyon you ever saw, but I couldn't get far enough into it to do any good. I turned back there and turned up along the cliffs inland."

"Damn it boy, did you find any island?" Grandpa asked, leaning forward.

"Nothing on the river. There are a few flat sandbanks, but nothing that we could live on permanently. Since I hadn't found anything on the river, I thought my best bet lay inland.

"I knew that I couldn't cross the swamps, so I stuck to the cliffs. When I had figured that I was far enough inland, I started out across country, hoping to hit the first big bend

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before the river enters the lake. There were the usual jungle and clearings for a while, and then I came out into an open plain where the cliffs had swung out to meet me. There's something growing there, Grandpa. I don't know what it is, but it is *huge*! It's wood of some kind, as nearly as I can tell, and there's some sort of foliage at the top, like a milkweed, but it's so big that I couldn't be sure of the details. It blots out the sky for an area as large as this island.

"Because of the shadow there's a heavy stand of fungus at the base, and there most of the food species grows in the surrounding jungles. If we can clear out the predators a little, it should be a rich source of food indefinitely."

Grandpa and Clever shot him sharp looks, but forebore any comment. Briefly Tall went on, sketching his adventures on the plains and on the return journey through the woods. As he came to his most recent encounters, those of the last few days, he glanced around to find that the younger men were leaning forward with admiration written on their faces, and to his surprise, his grandfather too, was hanging on every word.

"All right, sprout. Out with it," Grandpa said, leaning back as Tall finished. "You never could keep anything back. You must have found something close enough to that freak growth to allow us to hunt there, or you wouldn't have wasted so much time on it."

"You're right." The younger man grinned sheepishly. "Back along the cliffs a way, there's a big gorge cut into the face of a mountain, with a large fall of rock that almost blocks the mouth. The cliffs overhang it most of the way, and I think we could roof it off with silk, the way we do our stock pens, and make it as safe as the island. We'd have plenty of room to expand into—we could go back into the cliffs and get living space in the caves. The walls are honeycombed with them, and there's enough room in the floor to allow us to grow crops."

"What about predators?" The question was from one of the older men in the audience.

"I don't think we should have to worry. Most of the really

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dangerous predators can fly in any case, and we often have to fight them here. With Clever's new invention"—he held up his friend's crossbow—"we ought to be more than a match for them."

"How's the water supply?" asked another of the audience.

"There's a stream right down the middle of the gorge, and the river's only about two miles away. There should be plenty for our use and crops, and it should be fairly easy to distribute."

"How about—" began another, but Grandpa held up his hand and cut him short.

"That's enough for now. There'll be lots of time for questions later. Right now, I want everyone but the council to clear out of here. We've got an expedition to organize."

Reluctantly the crowd filed out, and several of the younger men who were assigned the duty removed the chairs and brought out a long table for the fifty-odd titular heads of the craft families who formed the council. When they were seated, Grandpa spoke.

"Up there are ten suits of armor—all that we have of the founders of this city. The time has come, gentlemen, when we must repeat their task."

At the mention, all heads turned to the niches over the fireplace, each niche occupied by a gleaming figure. The ten suits of armor had been made for eternity from a gleaming substance that defied a race having no knowledge of metals, and each suit was a perfect work of art. Each of the five larger figures was paired with a smaller, and beside both hung a three foot blade with razor edges.

"Those were the Ten—the first men in our world, according to the legend, and the founders of our race. The Seeker, the Wise, the Hunter, the Builder, and the Farmer, with their wives." The old man's voice was strangely reverent although he knew nothing of religion. "They founded this city, and now we have to found another."

"We've been all over this before, Grandpa. I still don't see the need for it. We still have enough unsubdivided land

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to expand further here." Farmer, of the line of Farmer, turned his sunburnt face to the speaker.

"No! The time to move is now, not when we're forced to it!" said Grandpa, banging his fist on the table. "Look at the census. There are over three thousand of us here now, and the population is doubling with every generation. If we move now, we can keep down the size of the expedition, but in another generation or two you'd have to send out half the population—six thousand or more—to do any good."

"That's fine for you, Grandpa, but we're the ones that have to send our sons and daughters fifteen hundred miles through the jungle. How many of them are we going to loose on the way?"

"Not as many as you might think, Armorer," said Tall, forestalling his grandfather's reply. "We can break the expedition into three groups. If I were doing this I'd start out with a group of about fifty men to scout the country. We could build shelters a day's march apart, big enough to hold a hundred or so people safely. A second group of, say, a hundred and fifty or so, could follow, using the shelters as a base of operations to expand them and stock them with food, and the main body would have a safe area to spend every night along the march. A party can just about take damn good care of itself in the daytime, and if we time this to move the main body during the winter, when most of the predators will be dormant or absent, we should be able to make the move without losing more than twenty or thirty."

"You will be doing it, sprout." Grandpa rose and faced the council. "Do you think that I'd expose *any* of our youngsters to a risk that wasn't acceptable! I'm sending my grandson, Armorer, but it wouldn't matter if it were your grandson, or your son; my concern is with all of them. When we started to name the head of the family of Seeker 'Grandpa,' it was because that is my function—to be grandfather to *all* of the youngsters, and I'm damned well not going to put any of them into danger. I think Tall's plan is good enough to minimize the risks."

"If Tall leads the expedition, it's all right with me. My

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boys and girls can go, and I may want to go myself. How about the rest of you?" Potter turned from his seat towards the head to look down the table, and received a flurry of affirmative replies.

"All right then, it's settled." Grandpa rose. "We'll break this up, now; it's dinner time. A meeting is called for tomorrow to start arranging a list of who's going, and we'll worry about the supplies and such then. Tall, you and Clever had better be here too."

As the older men rose to file out, Wise and Grandpa stopped to chat for a moment with some of their friends, and the younger men started for home.

III

EMERGING INTO the sunlight, Tall was dismayed to find that the entire assembly, dismissed a half hour before, was still gathered on the moss lawns in front of the building. A moment later he was surrounded by a milling horde and pelted with questions. For almost an hour he answered questions on the place he had found, and on the fights and adventures of his journey, and then, pleading tiredness and an overdue dinner, he won his way free and fled across the island to the shelter of his own home.

Clever was in hot pursuit, and hearing the footfalls behind him, the lanky explorer redoubled his pace, covering the ground in flat bounds of a dozen yards at a step. Reaching the house, he ducked into the entrance and a moment later the inventor burst in to go sprawling over a long leg, both men laughing.

"Big hunter!" Clever regained his feet. "Scared to death by a bunch of girls and kids. Hell, if a spider had enough sense to flirt with you, you'd faint dead away and she could eat you in peace."

For a reply, the larger man grappled him and they rolled across the floor to come up short against a cabinet on the far wall of the living room. As they struck, there was a shat-

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ter of crockery, and a moment later both of the men dashed from the door, followed by a cloud of yellowish vapor that spread a nauseating stench as it flowed.

"What in the name of hell *was* that stuff?" To his surprise, Tall found that he could speak.

"Stink oil, for my experiments," Clever gasped between retchings. "I've been trying to find a faster killing venom, and I was using it in my formula."

"Hell! Why try to make a venom of it? The stench alone would turn a spider green!"

"Hey, I never thought of that." The face under the brown thatch regained some of its color. "If you could stay far enough away, or shield yourself somehow—"

"Well, we can't go back into there, that's for sure." The big man tried to empty an already barren stomach. "We'll have to see if Grandpa can put us up for the night."

They recrossed the island, meeting remnants of the crowd on the way, but the odor clinging to their clothing assured them of an immunity to questions. Grandpa heard their plight from a safe distance upwind, and tossed them out a cake of soap and clean clothing, and after washing in a natural cistern in the cliffs and spreading the contaminated clothing out to air, they returned to join their grandparents in the house.

"Hello, Clever," Gentle said, kissing her grandson's cheek, her blue eyes sympathetic under the shelter of her plump cheeks. "We have some of the grasshopper you brought in. Thank you for having it brought over."

"That smells good enough to eat." Tall turned to the roast. "I haven't even had lunch yet, and it's almost dark."

"Well, grab a plate and dig in, sprout." His grandfather skimmed a flat slab of wood to him. "There's one thing that Gentle enjoys and that's someone who likes her cooking."

"And he ought to know," Wise added, smiling. "Since your grandmother died, he's been over here every night."

Dinner was finished, and the men retired into the large livingroom. Grandpa took a flask of wine from the sideboard

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and poured each of the four men a drink, then took his place in one of the chairs.

"Wise has some doubts about this expedition, Tall. Perhaps you could set him straight."

"It's not that I have doubts as to the eventual necessity of a move, Tall; it's just that I think the timing is wrong." The scholar sipped his wine meditatively. "I think that our first order of business ought to be settling the problem of the Ten."

"I didn't realize that there was much of a problem there, Wise," Tall said, rising to stand by the fireplace.

"You sound like your father, and I wish he had taken more time to talk to you when you were younger. What do you really know about the Ten, Tall?"

"The usual legends, I suppose. They came out of the western jungles; they did not wear the armor of men, but of gods; they cleared the narrow end of the island and made it safe; and after founding the race of men, they passed on, leaving their armor as a token to their descendants."

"What's the point to all of that, Grandfather?" Clever asked, setting his empty glass beside his chair.

"Just that. That's all we have of the Ten, those legends and their empty shells. Has it ever occurred to you to ask who, or what, the Ten were? You know as well as I do that everything has to have some origin, and even new species have to rise from old ones. But men are unique in this world. Look at yourself. You're a freak—we all are. We have four limbs, everything has six or more, or none. Our jaws work up and down, but every other species that has them works them sideways. The way we breathe, of circulating our blood, our skin, our eyes, our hair— In other words, where did men come from that he differs so radically from every other species in the world, so that there is not a single point of comparison?"

"It's an interesting academic question, but what has that got to do with the expedition?" Tall asked, returning to his chair.

"Just this: Most of the actual records of the Ten and of

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the first nine generations were lost in the big flood thirteen generations ago and the following savagery, but enough survived besides the legends to indicate that the Ten originally may have come from a city much like this. I think we should try to find that city first."

"No, Wise." Grandpa shook his head. "I've already given up my son to that idea, and my grandson is needed here. We have to move now, not later. That search will have to be made all right, but it will take years, and we don't have the time."

"For that matter, Grandfather, they aren't incompatible after all." Clever leaned forward. "The legends say that the Ten came 'from far to the west,' and we're going about as far west as you can get and still be in the valley. It would seem to me that the logical base for the search would be the new colony rather than the island."

"You're right at that, Clever," Wise said, turning to Grandpa. "I hadn't thought of that, but it does make sense. Grandpa, I think that Gentle and I had better go with the colonists. It would be imperative that the youngsters have someone with them to interpret anything they might find."

"Relax, you old fellow. You know that I've wanted that for myself, but I've got too much to do here, and I was going to ask you to go anyway."

The conversation turned to local gossip for Tall's benefit, and then when they went to bed, the late hour, general fatigue, and a sheer heaven of a silk bed combined to keep the explorer snoring until after dawn. Clever had risen early, and an hour later he returned with several pieces of gear which he set on a low table beside the bed. He reached down and shook his lanky friend awake.

"Here. Put this over your mouth and breathe through it." He handed a strip of silk to his amazed companion.

"What's this? Breakfast?" Tall examined the device, a bulge between two strips of silk showing the black of charcoal on one side and the green of a fresh-cut grass blade on the other.

"Forget breakfast. My god, you're a walking stomach." He took the strip from the explorer and pulled it over the

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other's face, tying it behind the ears. "It goes on like this, over the mouth and nose."

The reply was muffled, but to his relief, Tall found that he could breathe through it, although he had suspected another of his friend's somewhat violent practical jokes was in the offing. Clever, his face dead serious, had taken a small clay flask from the table, and holding it at arm's length under Tall's masked face, he pulled the stopper, his own nose wrinkling.

"You did it then, found a way to work with the stuff." Tall removed the mask as the stoppered flask was returned to the table. "From the way you drew back, I expected a stench, but I didn't smell a thing."

"Good! I was hoping that it would work—" It was an unfortunate admission, and the explorer's face caused the inventor to back away.

"Do you mean that you didn't try it out on yourself first?" The tone was ominous, and a moment later he proved Clever's edging away a wise precaution by leaping across the room after the smaller man.

Catching his friend beside one of the ornamental pools in the courtyard of the museum, he dunked the hapless inventor head first into the water, only to be dragged in in turn. Laughing and dripping, they returned to the house and changed into dry clothing.

"Let's go first and get some breakfast." Clever walked beside his comrade. "Some of the boys are coming over, and since we don't have to be at the council meeting until later, I want to get some more oil and a couple of other things on the bank."

"Where were you figuring on going?"

"I spotted a family of stink beetles in a ravine about three miles from here, and they should still be there. Then I figured we might head up river and try to get some venom from one of the digger wasps up in the canyon."

"That's going to mean a fight, but with your crossbow we might not have too much trouble. I'm game, but first we eat!"

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Reaching the house, the inventor suggested that Tall might spend some time familiarizing himself with the cross-bow, and while the big man set up a target in the yard, the other set about to fix the meal. Tall ate with gusto, and they were still at the table when the others arrived.

"Hi, Tall. How's it going?" Peewee set his helmet on the table and ran a hand over his flaming thatch. "You two ready to go?"

"Be with you in a minute. Hi, Runt, where're Silent and Smiley?"

"They'll be in in a minute, Clever. They're loading the gear out in the yard." His snub nose flared under its coating of freckles as he scented the food. "Hey, grub! Mind if I have some?"

"Help yourself." Tall rose and stretched. "I'll get your armor out while I'm at it, Clever." Entering the hallway, he almost ran into two figures that approached his own height.

"Hi, Silent; Smiley. We're just getting our armor on—won't be a minute."

"All right. Hey, that was quite a story you told. We're going with you, aren't we?" The face, bearing a close resemblance to Tall's own, showed concern.

"I don't know, yet." Tall finished lacing up his leg greaves and pulled his breastplate over his head. "That's up to the council. Everyone who wants to go will probably make it though."

"I sure hope so, I'd hate to miss out on it." Smiley turned as Clever, Peewee, and Runt came out of the living room. "You all ready to go?"

The party left the house and crossed the river single file, and an hour later re-emerged from the jungle laden with four swollen sacs of oil. The insects that produced the scented substance were small, but they had encountered an entire herd, and decimated the helpless scavengers for their oil. Pausing only long enough to inform a passing hunting party of the presence of a stranded earthworm in the vicinity, the group deposited their burden in Clever's laboratory and set out once more down the bank.

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Their route this time lay upstream, along the narrow strip of beach between jungle and river. They passed another of the earthworms, its hundred-foot length slowly pulsating as it lay beside the path, and had they been on a meat-seeking expedition, they would have butchered it on the spot and hauled the great cartwheel steaks back to the island, but as it was, they left it unmolested.

The woods on either hand swarmed with life, from grasshoppers ten times a man's bulk to tiny grubs that scurried off at their approach. The cliffs, which were nonexistent opposite the island, started their inevitable climb on either side once more, until they were as high as those that Tall had left downstream. Now the men were walking in a narrow canyon walled in by sheer rises of rock on either hand. They had to redouble their caution here, since the absence of jungle and of game made this area relatively unfrequented, and the major predators had not been as thoroughly cleaned out as they had closer to home.

As they wended their way among a clutter of stream-dropped boulders, the men resembled a file of insects themselves. Each was encased in gleaming chitin armor, and in addition to the useful crossbows all were armed with the formidable spears that were almost a part of their bodies. Tall's twenty-five foot pike was the longest, but even the diminutive twins managed shafts three times their own length. No threat developed, however, since a party of men, like a party of ants, was immune to all but the most ferocious of the predators.

Bluebottles darted over the canyon, and a trio of dragonflies wheeled and dipped among the humming mass, scooping the dipterons into the splined basket of their legs and dining on the wing, then wheeling to seize yet another victim, and letting the half-finished tidbit fall. They had been on the march for over an hour, and the next bend in the river brought them into full sight of a castle of a wolf spider dug into the soil at the base of the cliff. It was symbol of the dangers of their work, and marker of the eastern limits of man's domain.

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Carefully working their way around the ogre's den, they came at last into full view of the eastern mountains. In majestic solitude, the peaks dwarfed the gorge itself, and to the right and left the men turned to begin the long march to the western barrier which only Tall, of all men, had ever seen. Across the next bend they saw evidence of their goal, and a few minutes later they clambored over the soft soil of a mineshaft that marked the presence of a hunting wasp. The burrow was unoccupied, but they would not have long to wait.

It was Tall who first saw the huntress approaching. Burdened with a bulky caterpillar, she was crawling down the face of the cliff, and a moment later a cluster of six quarrels sprouted from her abdomen as the party aimed and fired.

Dropping her prey, the hymenopteron took to the air and fought for altitude, then dove into the midst of her tormentors. The bolts had not struck a ganglion, and the mechanical damage served only to infuriate her. Remarkably resistant to venom, it would have taken a direct hit in a nerve ganglion to have killed her.

Muffled curses coming from his helmet, Tall dropped the bow and plucked his ax from the loop at his belt. The experience with the bow earlier in the day, while hunting the stink beetles, had shown him that he still lacked practice, and he was more certain of his ability to throw the ax with accuracy in a tight spot. The insect had missed in her first pass, and she now dove again, her keening roar deafening in the narrow confines of the gorge.

The others had redrawn their bows, and Clever loosened a shaft that took the huntress in one of the multifaceted eyes, while the others, misjudging the distance or motion, either had their quarrels miss entirely or keen off of the hymenopteron's armor. As the hurt and maddened insect turned to attack the inventor, Tall had a clear shot, and the axhead was a blur as he let fly with all of the power of his arm. Driven almost as fast as one of the quarrels, the flint ax smashed into the base of the near wing, severing the driv-

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ing muscles, and tearing a gap the size of a man's head into the armor.

Falling heavily, the twice man-sized insect tumbled onto the beach with a force that broke its slender waist, and a moment later Tall had leaped the intervening space and wrenching the ax from its bed, shattered the skull. The massive mandibles clenched, and the two-foot rapier at the end of the abdomen oozed a single drop of venom, and then the fight was ended, the huntress dead.

"Whew! I'm glad we don't have to do that oftener." Tall shook the sweat out of his eyes.

"Give me a hand here, will you?" Clever had knelt and slit the abdomen, exposing the heavy venom sacs beneath the skin. "Hold this sac while I pump out the venom."

Inserting the hollow sting into the mouth of a flexible seed pod, the inventor knelt on the flattening glands, while the pod swelled as it received its load of liquid death.

"That's all for that pod, hold it and we'll get another." Runt rummaged in his kit bag and produced another of the pods, tightly folded, and the operation resumed. A third bag was needed, and then the inventor rose.

"That's all of it. Come on, Tall. Let's head for home."

"Just a moment, will you?" The explorer had knelt beside the fallen wasp, and a moment later he rose with the hollow sting in his hand. "I've been toying with an idea of my own, and I'll need this to really try it out."

Their return was marked by a minor scare when the spider proved to be on the prowl from its hole, but they escaped without a fight, and reached the island without further incident.

"We'll get this stuff stowed away, and wash up, Tall. Then we'd better get going. It's almost time for the council meeting."

"Good enough." He vanished into the kitchen. "Do you want anything to eat?"

"You might find some fruit or cold meat in there, and bring some out for me, will you?" The inventor vanished in turn into his laboratory.

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"Do you know, Clever, I thought for a moment that we were in for a fight back there at the spider hole." The big man handed his friend a plate and placed his own on a low table while he stripped. "I think it's about time we got up a killing party and cleaned that place out."

"Why bother with a party?" His face was surprised under its coating of lather. "That's a perfect place to try out our new ideas against a large spider, if you're game."

"No thank you," Peewee had come into the door to deposit a load of gear. "I may not be bright, but I'm sure not crazy, either. You two can keep that little playmate to yourselves."

"Hell! We've got to find some way to fight them." Clever towed his face and reached for a clean shirt. "Tall has killed a few of them, and so have a handful of others, but up till now it's almost always taken a large party to assure a kill. What we need is some way to even up the odds for a lone man, and without the chance that he'll get killed in the process."

"Even so, you'll have to do it alone. We all have guard duty next week." The stocky redhead started to leave, then turned. "I wish you luck though—you're going to need it if you try."

Completing their dressing, the pair crossed to find the rest of the meeting waiting for them, and the ensuing two hours were spent in a detailed discussion of the requirements, in men and materials, of the expedition, and the establishment of committees to arrange for these needs.

"Tall! Clever!" Potter waylaid them as the meeting broke up. "It's good to see you back again, lad. The wife and the girls haven't talked about another blessed thing for two days. You'll come over for dinner tonight, of course."

"Thank you, Potter, but—"

"We accept with pleasure." The inventor forestalled his friend's refusal. "Shall we make it dusk, then?"

"Fine. The wife will have your favorite dishes ready."

"Damn it, Clever!" The big man shook his head in disgust as after a moment's chat Potter moved off. "You know

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how I feel about accepting dinner invitations. Why did you get me into that?"

"It will do you good, Tall!" He slapped the other with bonebreaking force. "Besides, I get to see Star."

IV

"FOR SOMEONE WHO objects so violently to accepting a dinner invitation, you surely put on the dog." Clever regarded his friend critically. "That's brand new armor, and I've only seen you wear that cloak once or twice."

"Well, a man has to make a good impression every once in a while, doesn't he?" Tall flicked an imaginary speck of sand from the burnished sheen of his mothskin trousers, and fluffed the plumes on an ornate dress helmet. "How did the test come out?"

"I left the compound to settle. The widow toxin and the wasp venom mixed all right, but I'll have to wait to find out what happened." He washed his hands in a basin and began to don his own ornate armor. "If my calculations are right, and this stuff works we may have to seriously consider raising wasps in the pens, the way we do the spiders."

"Find out if it works, and then worry about that. I seem to remember that the last time you got enthusiastic about something, it cost me my dinner."

"If you had half as much brains as you have brawn, that wouldn't have happened." Clever drew on a heavy cloak and pinned it over one shoulder. "Let's go."

Taking their weapons from the rack beside the entrance, the two men left the house.

"For that matter, if I had to use your brains I wouldn't have lasted long enough to develop all that brawn." The bickering continued across the island to Potter's home.

Pausing for a moment to make a final inspection, the two stepped out of the dusk and into the vestibule of a large home. Passing through an entryway designed to bar any chance intrusion by insects, they placed their weapons into

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the racks in the vestibule. Helmets under their arms, the two men pushed aside the hangings and stepped into the dining room. Cages of luminescent grubs hung along the walls, casting a soft glow. The conversation stopped as they entered, and their host rose to greet them.

"Welcome, boys." Potter's broad face beamed with pleasure. "I think you know everyone here. Tall, you sit next to Bright, and Clever, I think you would prefer sitting next to Star." He winked.

"Hello, Tall. I was wondering when you'd get around to noticing me." Bright's voice was musical, but there was a touch of coldness.

"Hello, Bright." With a start, Tall realized that he had been caught staring, and there was amusement in the cool green eyes almost on a level with his own. "You know how it is— I mean, you know how I feel about people. I—" He realized that he had managed to say precisely the wrong thing.

"Yes, you always did think more of insects and spiders." Her full mouth pursed, and her lovely face took on a pout, then as suddenly she tossed her head, sending a cascade of golden hair back over her forehead and laughed. "Well, perhaps I can persuade you to pay a little attention to something with only two arms and legs for a change."

"Very nice arms and legs, too." He flushed suddenly as he realized that long solitude had tricked him into thinking aloud.

"Good heavens. The man's impossible." Her laughter was clear this time, without the damning sarcasm, and the long oval of her face was transformed into a dreamlike beauty. "He battles with poise, slaughters spiders with ease, and then blushes at the thought of having uttered a compliment." She turned and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you anyway, Tall."

"I wouldn't let her fool you, Tall. She's been talking about you continuously for the last two days." Star matched her twin in beauty, although she was a bit shorter.

"Betrayed by my own flesh and blood!" Bright smiled

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again, almost dazzling the explorer with the brilliance. "But now that the secret is out, you can see that you don't have to be so shy."

"Tall, we didn't have much of a chance to ask you any questions at Grandpa's." Hungry, the girls' oldest brother, came to his rescue. "What kind of a place is this gorge?"

"Well, the place I've got in mind is right in the gorge itself. The place is cut right out of the heart of the mountain, and the rock is soft enough so that the river has filled the walls with caves. There's an old rockfall at the mouth, probably the remains of an arch, and the only place that's open is where the stream forced its way out."

"Is there any danger of falling rock now?" Roofer looked up from further down the table.

"Not as far as I could tell. The fall seems to be quite old. It's pretty well covered with soil. I didn't go too far up the canyon, but I'd guess for at least five or six hundred years since the last fall. There's no danger at the mouth, at least."

"How far away is this place, anyway?" asked Speedy Roofer from beside his father.

"A month and a half's hard march for a single man—it will take longer with a large party. The land route is somewhat shorter than following the river down."

"How's the hunting?" Squint Hunter asked, having a natural interest in the aspect.

"Tremendous. I've never seen richer country in my life," Tall said. "In the swamps alone there are enough insects to bear hunting for ten generations."

"How about the predators?" asked Mason, who was Potter's twin.

"As I said in the hall, they're there. But there were a lot here before we started to clear the banks, and if a couple of ideas Clever and I are working on, and are planning to try, work out, we'll be a lot better prepared to deal with them."

"Did you notice how the soil would be for crops?" asked Heavy Reaper, who paused with a mouthful in mid air.

"From what I saw it should be fine, Heavy. We'll have one big advantage in the presence of plenty of readily avail-

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able water, and most of the native grains grow freely at the edge of the jungle."

"Tall, tell us more about that growth, the one you found in the clearing," said Silent, who, true to his name, had been sitting quietly at the end of the table.

"What ever it is, it's big. The clearing extends for miles, and you can't see the sky from anywhere beneath it. I'd guess that it may be related to the berry brambles, or to a milkweed, but we'll find out more when we get there."

The conversation eventually drifted to other subjects, and Tall was left in peace to finish his meal. He ate in silence until Bright made a remark he did not quite hear.

"I said, what makes you wander off the way you do, Tall?" She studied his sunburned face. "You never seem to stay on the island for more than a few weeks at most, and then we won't see you for months. Can't you settle down a little?"

"I don't know, Bright. I guess it's in my blood." He pushed his chair back. "You never knew my father well, did you? I guess no one except my mother ever really did. He was the same way. While my mother was alive, he tried to settle down; when she died he felt there was nothing here for him but things that he'd rather forget." He paused, his deep blue eyes somber.

"I've always regretted that I didn't go with him on that last trip—the one he didn't come home from. He used to boast that there was nothing that the two of us couldn't handle together. I guess I'm too much like him. I just never seem to get around to putting down roots. I'm always itching to see what's over the next hill or just around the next bend. Maybe what I need is an anchor, something to tie down to when the old itch starts getting strong and I get footloose." He smiled ruefully.

When the girl repeated the conversation to her mother later that evening, the older woman chuckled.

"The way you tell it, dear, I'd almost think the young man was trying to propose!"

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Her daughter only smiled. She had already reached the same conclusion.

Standing in the crisp night air after the party and the dance that followed had broken up, the two men made their farewells to their host and the other guests before turning towards their home.

"I saw the eyes you were making at Bright in there, my over-sized buddy." Clever swatted the big man on the shoulder. "You'd better watch out, or you'll find yourself with a string of kids."

"And I suppose that all of the attention you were paying to Star was just to be polite? I'd watch myself, youngster, before I started to belittle my elders." He spoke from his two-month advantage in age. "If I were you, I'd really—" He broke off and calmly cocked an ear to the night sounds from the bank. "Do you hear it, too?"

The chirping was almost the same, but Clever caught the deep beat of wings almost at once, and a moment later he could see the stars blotted as a large mass passed over to come to earth with a thud and a fluster, not far away.

"Rhino beetle, and a big one!" Tall drew his bowstring. "He's down by the stock pens. Those damned things are carnivores, and they run as big as six or eight times man-sized."

"He'll slaughter the stock!" The inventor started towards the sounds. "Shouldn't one of us go for help?"

"No, we'd lose half the herd before any help could get here, and we'll have a better chance to stop him if we're together. Damn, I wish you'd had time to fix up some quarrels with the new mix."

"I did, a dozen. Here." He handed Tall a half dozen bolts. "You'd better hope this stuff works, then. Come on!"

Guiding themselves by sound, they worked their way around to a point where they could see the mass of the beetle outlined against the sky, its eyes glowing patches in the darkness.

"Aim for the eyes, and hope we hit them." Clever raised his bow to his shoulder as he spoke, and the men fired to-

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gether, the shafts winging home into the eye as they desperately tugged back the strings for another shot.

"Look out, Clever! Here he comes!" Tall dropped the bow and snatched the six-foot javelin he carried from its clip on his back.

With amazing speed the monster had whirled around and charged down the slope towards them, and as Clever fired again, Tall slung the javelin into the thick skull and leaped aside. The beetle, its speed unabated, thundered past them down the slope to crash sickeningly into the rear wall of the butcher shop. A quarrel embedded in its miniscule brain, the beast had been dead on its feet, and only the slope and its momentum had kept it in motion.

A moment later there was a soft gleam of light, and several men, including the guard detachment, arrived on the scene. One of the fully armored guards approached, and Tall recognized Smiley.

"What's going on here, Tall?"

"Rhino beetle. It's dead, and that's thanks to Clever." He crossed over and picked up his discarded bow.

Smiley had turned to relay the information to the others, and for about ten minutes the two men answered questions. Then the entire group dispersed, the guards to their posts, the others to their homes.

"Remind me never to question your little ideas again." Tall set his bow in the rack and stripped his helmet and breastplate. Clever had removed his own gear, and the explorer suddenly realized that they were both drenched with sweat. "I think we could both use a drink."

During the course of the following morning several visitors stopped by to chat about the fight of the previous evening, and to discuss the size of the beetle. Between interruptions, Clever worked in his laboratory while Tall engaged himself in a project of his own.

Taking the sting of the wasp they had slain the day before, he seated himself on a low stool and began to work at it with a knife. Satisfied that it would serve, he rose and selected a spearshaft from a rack, choosing one for length and

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stoutness. From a block of amber he then carved two rings, fitting them over the smoothed end of the shaft and gluing them into place. Over the rings, in turn, was placed the hollow end of the shaftlike sting and a wooden follower, and a crossbar completed the assembly.

The net result was a freely sliding tube with about a foot of play, the amber doughnuts and the follower serving to prevent the head from moving side to side or pulling off. Working the end up and down until he was satisfied with its movement, Tall rose, and facing the chitin plate that his roommate had set up as a crossbow target drove the point into the plate with a single vicious blow.

"What's up?" Clever, drawn by the ring of the plate, stepped out of his laboratory as Tall was inspecting the point for damage. "Hey, that's something new." He crossed to stand beside his friend. "What is it?"

"It's the sting of the wasp we killed. I've always thought that one of the reasons that we don't get fast enough kills is because we can't concentrate enough venom onto a spear-head to do the job. What I've done here is to make a sort of venom sac right within the head itself. When you drive it home, the shaft acts as a plunger and forces the venom into the wound. It should give us at least twenty times the usual concentration."

"Hell yes!" The inventor whistled in admiration. "It should work at that. It's so simple, though; hell, someone should have thought of it before this."

"Why didn't anyone ever think of a lot of the gadgets you've invented? I guess, in this case, it may be because we so seldom pick a fight with a wasp." He followed his companion back into the laboratory. "How's your work coming?"

"I've finished with the venom," Clever replied, indicating a large vat nearly filled with a greenish-brown liquid of tarry consistency. "There's a bundle of a hundred quarrels here. Would you dip them while I get the rest of the stuff ready to go? You'd better fill your spear, too, and dip mine while you're at it." He turned and left before the explorer could reply.

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Tall set about dipping the flint heads, swirling them to assure an even coating, and a moment later Clever returned with a rack of earthenware flasks and carefully wrapped them before placing them into two carrying bags.

"Here's the last of the quarrels, Clever. What's in this mix, anyway?"

"It's wasp and spider venom, concentrated down as far as I could get it, with a thickening agent. If I'm right, it should be at least three or four times as potent as our best widow venom, and the amount your new idea could deliver should—"

"Fine." Tall reached for the inventor's spear. "But don't forget, the wolf spiders have taken everything we could throw at them so far, and I hope it doesn't come down to spears at all."

"I've got some insurance against that, too." The smaller man held up one of the flasks. "These are filled with stench oil, concentrated about twenty times. If we have to run, these should protect our getaway."

"I'll have to buy that. I doubt if even a fully grown wolf spider would stand up to that stuff very long. If things get too far out of hand all we have to do is convince the spider that we're stinkers of a particularly obnoxious kind—if it works before getting us eaten." He grinned. "Come on, let's try it."

They took a slightly different course downstream, using an inland trail that took them up the cliffs by a gradual rise and eventually left them in a clearing overlooking the silk and stone ramparts on the beach below.

The spider was evidently in the chamber at the bottom of the pit, and instead of waiting for it to emerge, Clever precipitated matters by dropping a boulder weighing over a ton down the hole. There was a scramble from the depths, and a moment later the hairy horror emerged, more insulted than wounded by the attack.

There were two snapping sounds, and the spider spun in rage as the quarrels embedded themselves into her back. For a moment it stopped in baffled indecision. Then another

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round of quarrels caught the thorax, and she discovered the men on the cliffs above. An eight-legged engine of vengeance, she swarmed up the cliff face.

As she came the companions fired vertically into the oncoming mandibles, and as Clever reloaded, Tall seized his spear and waited for the exposure of its underbelly when the brute cleared the lip of the precipice. There was a rattle and the hairy forelegs appeared, followed by the gleaming fangs of the head. At point-blank the inventor fired into the skull, and before his companion could strike, the arachnid faltered, then toppled over backwards to vanish into the abyss below.

For a small eternity the men waited, and then the sound of the heavy corpse hitting the beach reached them. Looking over the edge they saw their late antagonist a crumpled mass on the beach, where she would lay until the ants found her. The venom had done its work well. Though if the spider had reached them, and they had been on the same level, their plight would have been desperate.

"We nearly got it that time, Clever." The big man raised his helmet and wiped off his forehead.

"Well, we've proved one thing." Clever's face was drawn and white beneath the raised helmet. "We've got to figure out a way to use your idea with a quarrel, and then find a stronger venom. Perhaps if we try one of the spider hunting wasps. That might do it."

"Clever, don't move suddenly, but turn slowly." The lanky explorer had placed his hand on his friend's arm.

"What's the matter?" He did as he was told, and then froze.

Forty feet in the air a triangular head turned quizzically over a pair of folded forearms, while a scant twenty yards away the four widespread legs supported one bloated abdomen. The forelegs flexed slightly, revealing spines that ranged from one foot daggers to five-foot swords as they opened and closed nervously.

"Mantis! It must have wandered down out of the jungle and the noise of the fight attracted it." Tall remained absolutely still, facing the largest of the predators of their world.

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"Use the oil flasks. Those stench bombs are our only chance." Clever slowly reached into the case at his side, and Tall followed suit.

"Now!" As he yelled, Tall swung the jar in a long arc, and a moment later snapped the helmet down as the praying mantis instinctively lashed out at the missiles speeding at its head, shattering the crockery and releasing a cloud of yellowish gas around its triangular face. A moment later two more flasks, thrown by those potent arms sailed towards her, shattering on the colossal thorax and adding to the stench. Even through their masks the men found the stink ferocious, and the mantis evidently found it unbearable, too. She stood it for a moment more, and then turned to retreat into the jungle.

"I guess she decided that anything that smelled that bad couldn't be edible," Clever said, smiling. "Come on, let's get out of here before she decides to change her mind." They left the clearing, covering the ground and undergrowth at a half-mile-a-minute pace.

When they reached the island, Clever went at once to his drawing board, while Tall proceeded inland to warn of the presence of the mantis. When the big man returned, his face was grave.

"We've got a real problem, Clever." He set his helmet on the rack. "One of the hunting parties found the remains of a male mantis about ten miles south of here today. The head and most of the thorax had been chewed off. That means she's mated, and she'll be ready to lay her eggs soon."

"I see what you mean." The inventor rose. "We've been pretty lucky in keeping mantises out of this end of the valley, but if a brood hatches out—" He shook his head.

"From what we saw today, I don't think she's laid any eggs yet, but it's hard to tell how long we've got. There's another problem too. I doubt that a really big party would be molested, but four or five men alone . . ."

"And you get what almost happened to us today. But the first thing we have to do is adapt that idea of yours to our quarrels, and make more of those spears. At least we

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know that the oil works against her. That's something." He sat back down to the board and began to sketch again.

"We've still got to hunt her down as soon as possible."

"And we're the ones to do it, Tall. But we'll have a better chance if we can get more power into our weapons. Damn!" He pulled the sheet from the board and flung it aside. "I just can't seem to get it. No matter what I try, the force of the shot itself would eject the venom before it hit."

Tall picked up the discarded sketches curiously. His face grew thoughtful as he examined the sheet, and he took a pen from the table and crossed out several lines on one of the drawings, adding new ones.

"Here, why don't you try this? If you leave the end of the plunger exposed, the way you do on a spear, you'll drive it home when you fire all right. But suppose you closed it off, and used a weight inside the head instead?"

"The force of the bowstring would keep the weight back until it hit, and then momentum would carry it forward!" Clever grinned and tossed the sheet onto the table. "Hey, who's the resident genius around here, anyway?"

It took nearly two hours to gather the needed materials and build the first of the new quarrels. Since wasp stings were not a particularly abundant item on the island, they were forced to experiment with several alternatives, settling on the ovipositor of one of the food beetles which proved strong enough to withstand the impact without serious shattering, and had the advantage of being abundant.

"We've got it now, Tall." Clever set aside the last of the quarrels he was making for their own immediate use. "I took some samples and the drawings down to Spearmaker, and he's promised me a thousand of them as soon as he can turn them out. He's putting the boys to work on them now, getting the materials up from the slaughter dumps."

"I've managed to get six more spears finished, but that's the last sting on the island, including the ones in the museum." Tall set the spear into the rack beside six of its twins. "I was kidding you about raising wasps yesterday, but now it looks as though we'll have to raise them for stings as well

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as for venom. Those beetle heads are a strictly one shot deal."

"That's the beauty of it, one shot's enough. Hey, how about the council meeting? I completely forgot about that!"

"Forget it. When Grandfather found out what we were up against, he called the meeting off. We'd better get some sleep after supper, it's pretty late, and we've got to get up at dawn." He ducked into the kitchen. "Hey, where did you put the rest of that roast grub?"

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"Hi, SLUGABED," Tall said, grinning at the bleary-eyed inventor. "You'd better sit down and grab a bite now—the others will be here in a few minutes."

"Did you get all of the spears filled?" Clever asked, reaching for a slab of bread and spreading it with honey.

"All of them, and the quarrels too. How did you do with the bombs and masks last night?"

"They're all ready to go. I sure hope we have better luck this time than you did with that male."

"So do I." Tall rose and turned to the doorway. "It sounds like the rest of them are here; we'd better get suited up."

There were twenty men gathered in the dooryard, and Clever distributed the masks and bombs with brief instructions as to their use. He was pleased to note that all of them carried his new crossbows along with their spears, and all were in full armor as a matter of course. To one side were stacked the silk nets that would be used to trap the mantis.

Tall, his red hair blazing over his green field armor, chose the five men who, with Clever and himself, would constitute the actual killing party and gave each of them one of the new hypodermic spears. Clever ducked into the house and returned to hand each of the men five of the new quarrels, together with twenty flint points coated with the new formula venom.

"You all know that there's a mantis loose in the jungle,

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and I don't have to tell you what that means." Tall looked around the circle of grim faces. "Some of you were with me the last time we had to do this sort of a job, and you remember that five of us didn't come back from that one. This time we're not going to loose a man—if you do what you're told, and don't try to take it yourself."

Kneeling, he sketched a map on the ground and punched three dots.

"This is where we ran into the mantis, and this is where the male was found. From what we've seen, I figure that it's hanging out somewhere in the jungle on the escarpment. We'll move in two parties of ten, and set up the nets somewhere in here." He rose. "It's my job to get the mantis out into the open, and into the trap. When I come out of the woods, I'm going to be moving fast. Anyone who gets rattled and shoots me instead of the mantis is never going to get forgiven, so make sure before you shoot."

"How are you going to break it down, Tall?" asked Hungry Potter, glancing at the map. "You lead one party, and Clever the other?"

"No, we'll scout ahead. We'd work better as a team for this sort of thing. I want you to take the first party, and Speedy can lead the second."

It was a matter of minutes from their house to the bridge, and the party filed into the jungle, alert from the moment they hit the bank, since the mantis could be anywhere. Tall knew that he could trust no one but himself for the most critical and dangerous part of his plan. If the man executing it faltered, he would be dead, and Tall, coldly assessing the others, knew that only he had any chance of carrying it off.

As they marched, Tall noticed that the jungle life was scunter than normal, a sure sign of the presence of a dangerous predator. But many things still sat, crept, or leaped in the undergrowth. Ants that ranged from foot-long minims to warrior males larger than a man, scavanged through the undergrowth, and on three-hundred-foot skunk cabbages and five-hundred-foot milkweeds brightly striped caterpillars gorged against the day of transformation. It was a land of

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strange beauty as well as violent death, and to Tall it was home. Wiser in the ways of the insects than any man had ever been, he could accept its challenge, and the threat did not prevent an appreciation of its charm.

Stopping suddenly, the lanky explorer signaled the following party up, and sent a runner to call in the second group. A few minutes later Clever arrived.

"What's up, Tall?"

"I just spotted the mantis up ahead of us. Get the nets set up between these two milkweeds. I'll give you a half hour." He shrugged out of his harness and carried only his bow, quiver, and ax. "I'm going in now, but whatever happens, keep the rest of the men out of there. *Don't* come in after me unless you do it in force, and give me at least three-quarters of an hour before you move. When I get here, I'm going to have that thing right behind me, and I want you here to take it off my back."

"Be careful, will you? And don't forget how far those things can reach."

"Thanks, Clever. I won't." He turned and started into the jungle at an easy walk and the smaller man turned to supervise the setting of the nets.

His every sense alert, the explorer covered the ground at an easy pace, leaping obstacles easily, and pausing from time to time to listen to the sounds of the jungle. It was necessary to find the mantis and draw her out before the insect drifted off out of range of the trap. Rounding a clump of grass stems that cut out the sun overhead, he suddenly dropped to one knee and raised his bow to one shoulder.

Across a clearing a hundred yards or so in diameter the mantis had just captured a large swallowtail butterfly, and was daintily taking mouthfuls from the ten-foot abdomen. Tall's shot took her in one of the bulging compound eyes, driving the plunger home and injecting a pint of venom directly into the sensitive optic nerves. The pain was excruciating, and the mantis dropped the insect, the spiked traps shooting out spasmodically, and the half-eaten butterfly

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drifted to earth as the living tower wheeled to locate the source of the outrage.

The man snapped another bolt into place and drove it at the bloated abdomen. It was too much to expect that even this much venom would prove fatal, but he could at least slow down the giant insect. As the mantis completed its turn, the double hooks on its forearms lashed out, and Tall leaped to his feet and danced away, the mantis in hot pursuit. The folded traps could be thrown a full thirty feet with deadly accuracy, and it was necessary to maintain a safe lead. Again and again he twisted aside to dodge those flashing spikes, noticing as the game wore on that the venom was taking effect. The last few rushes had been slower, and there was a definite drag to the left where the last shot had struck. The lashing legs were no longer quite so deadly as their timing grew more erratic.

The insect paused, and while Tall used the respite to reload, the giantess spread her wings and extended her forelegs into a cross. Along the underside of the armpits appeared a row of gleaming white dots, ending in a large white patch ringed with black. This was the spectral attitude, normally reserved for the intimidation of the largest and fiercest foes, but the only result was to bring another bolt into the tempting target of the white patch. Half supporting itself on its wings, the mantis bounded forward, and Tall spun and leaped a hundred yards in a single desperate lunge. The insect followed, still in the threatening pose.

Another half dozen rushes brought them back into the open, and a moment later the baffled beast was trapped in the meshes of an iron strong silk net while a pack of humans surged about her to draw the folds tight. The carnivore went wild, its great arms flailing against the clinging stuff, and under the drive of those great arms even the fantastically tough silk snapped like twine. But on either side swearing men drew back bowstrings and fired as fast as they could, sending whispering death into every exposed chink of armor and pouring gallons of the potent venom into the bloated abdomen and slender thorax.

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Recovering his spear, Tall waited for a moment before striking, and then hurtled the twenty-five foot shaft like a javelin, placing it perfectly into the joint between thorax and abdomen. A moment later six more spears were driven home, each holding almost two quarts of venom. Could it have done so, the insect would have roared in rage and pain, but as with most of the fights to the death in the world of the insects, this one was almost silent. Not even that bulk could sustain the effect of the amounts of venom it had received, and a moment later the towering beast swayed and fell, tearing the netting free of its moorings.

"Not a man lost! We didn't even get a scratch!" Tall said exultantly to Clever, and then he slapped his friend on the back with a force that sent the smaller man staggering, almost dancing with joy.

"Will you take a look at the size of this thing, you two?" Hungry was supervising the removal of the nets from the carcass. "It's fifty-five feet long, if it's an inch, and the damned thing must have stood over forty-feet tall. That male was only thirty. What do you think it would weigh, Clever?"

"Pretty close to thirty tons, I'd imagine. Look at the size of those legs, will you?"

"I sure wouldn't want to play around with this thing," Baldy Baker pulled the three-part foreleg to its full length. "Some of those spikes are five feet long, and these damned double hooks are three feet around the circle, and sharp." He ruefully sucked at a pricked finger.

"What are we going to do with it, Tall?" Hungry looked down at the massive carcass.

"Cut it up and move it back to the museum. Did you check it out for eggs?"

"Yes, she's stuffed with them. We'll have to keep a lookout for egg masses for a while, but I'd say offhand that she hadn't laid yet."

"I hope not, but at least we kept her from laying most of them."

The bloody task of dismembering the giantess finished, the

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parts were loaded into the nets for carrying, and the party returned to the island.

The days following the hunt were hectic. Clever had locked himself into his laboratory while Tall sat in conference with the council. New maps had to be drawn, provision lists drawn up, and arrangements made to apportion all of the needed crafts among those who were to go and those to stay.

To the younger man, more accustomed to the solitude of the wilderness than to the tedium of the council, the details seemed endless. From dawn to dusk the great hall was filled with the multitude that would arm, armor, provision, and fill the myriad other needs of a new settlement. The move was to be of gargantuan proportions, with well over one third of the total populace taking part. Tall's plan had been accepted, and he was to lead the first group of fifty out in two weeks. En route they would prepare shelters for the second group of three hundred, mostly couples, who would enlarge them and stock them with provisions. The main group would follow with the older and younger members of the expedition.

Grandpa became a field marshal, every detail of the massive operation at his fingertips, with his grandson as second-in-command. At the end of the week all of the planning was complete, and noting that the younger man was almost exhausted he excused him from the rest of the meetings.

"He's young enough to be impatient, and right now he'll do more good as Clever's right hand than he can with a bunch of old fogeys like us." He grinned and put a hand on Wise's shoulder as the two entered their home. "Those two youngsters are worth a thousand of the rest of us. Those gadgets they've developed are going to make a big difference in this move. They're the ones who'll find your whys and wherefores for you, Wise, if anyone can."

"Perhaps," the old scholar said, his face proud. "They're our grandchildren, after all, Tall. And someday perhaps they too will turn to wisdom to conceal the fact that they're getting old."

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"Like us, you mean." Grandpa laughed. "Say, by the way, that's the first time anyone's bothered to call my right name since the sprout was born!"

Tall, his sense of release complete, dashed into the laboratory and grabbed his friend.

"Come on, let's go find us a spider or mantis to fight! I'm so damned fed up with talk that I'm ready for a nice, quiet vacation."

"How about some wasps?" The inventor grinned. "Will that do instead?"

"Sure. What's the plan?"

"We're going to need a lot more venom than we've got. I've improved the formula a lot, but it calls for a higher mix of wasp to spider. There's a nest of spider-feeding diggers on the north bank opposite that spider hole we cleaned out, and I'm taking a party up there in the morning after venom. If we hit them about noon, they'll be inside, away from the heat."

"Sounds interesting. Are you going to cook dinner, or do you want me to?"

"You might as well. By the way, don't forget that we're holding a party here tomorrow night, in celebration of bringing down that mantis. We'll have to keep our eyes open for something to feed them."

The following morning they rose early and joined the two sets of twins who were their inevitable companions. Crossing the river at a gravel bar, they turned upstream along the further bank. The north side of the river was virgin country, a fifteen-mile wide strip of jungle that was seldom visited, but they reached their goal without incident. Clever stopped them while he floated a heavy line of silk across to a party of a half dozen men on the steep shore of the island, and they proceeded upstream once more.

The system was remarkably simple, based on their intimate knowledge of the insect's habits. A rattle from within would announce the emergence of one of the wasps, and as it showed its head, Tall would sever the neck with his ax,

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Clever would jab a quarrel full of venom into the wound to paralyze the reflexes, and the twins would pass the corpse down to a growing pile on the bank. By the end of the first three hours they had cleaned out the first three colonies, and another two hours of the hot work resulted in the last of the insects being added to the charnel house growing beside the stream. Only twice during the day did they have to fight, and both times the flying insects fell to their bows without even realizing what had hit them.

"How are we going to get the stuff back to the island?" Tall asked, looking at the windrows of slaughtered insects. "There must be nearly two hundred of them there, and the six of us sure aren't going to be able to make it."

"That's what the line across the river is for. The current here is strong enough to carry them down, and the corpses should float all right. They'll hit the drag line, and the current will carry them across to shore. That's what Hungry's doing over there." The inventor fell to the task of dumping the carcasses, and the others followed his example.

"That should do it, Tall. We should have enough venom and stings there to equip the lead party at least, and Grandpa's already got Hunter and his boys looking for more colonies." The inventor knelt and washed the foul blood off of his hands.

Retracing their steps, the party worked their way back down the beach. They had not gone more than a quarter of a mile however when Tall, who was in the lead, stopped them.

"Hold it. There's something up that canyon. Smell it? I can't make out what it is, but it's better not to take any chances."

Moving forward slowly while the others covered him, he scanned the moss-filled canyon carefully. He almost missed the thing, but a slight movement betrayed it to him, and he could make out a segmented body that almost matched the dun-colored moss and concealed the multiple legs. He cautiously started to back up, and the thing suddenly broke cover on flashing rows of legs, the pincerlike forelegs ex-

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tended in place of the missing antennae. Spinning, Tall broke into a run to stay clear.

"Tall, what is that thing?" Clever yelled as he approached.

"Centipede! I've only seen one of them before, but that one took a full grown wolf spider apart in nothing flat!"

There was the flattened snapping of bows that the party loosed at the oncoming beast, and the shots struck fair and should have dropped the serpentine form. But despite the amount of venom it had taken, the centipede did not even slacken its pace. Fortunately it was no match for a running man in speed, and the men were able to stay ahead of it.

Reaching a point beneath an overhang of rock, Tall leaped upwards, followed by the others, and a moment later the centipede rippled past fifty feet beneath them, unaware that its prey had vanished. Turning blindly up another of the narrow gorges a moment later, it blundered full into the web of a labyrinth spider, and as the men watched in a fascinated silence, the spider dashed from cover to examine its find.

Warned by the vibrations in her net, she tried to stop, but it was too late. Committed to the fight, she buried six-inch fangs into the serpentine back, while the hundred-legger lifted its forebody and twisted it around to sink pincerlike forelegs home into her swollen abdomen. The spider exploded backwards, trying to break free, but the ten-foot horror ignored its oozing wounds and held fast. The spider's venom evidently had no more effect than had Clever's prize concoction. The arachnid, as vital as all of her kind, fared less well. Within seconds all motion ceased, and the centipede set about the grisly task of devouring its opponent.

"Venomous!" Clever said, his voice excited.

"Yes. I'm glad we didn't find it out the hard way, too," Smiley said, looking down at the gorging centipede.

"What do you suppose went wrong, Clever?" Peewee asked, fingering his bow. "You're usually pretty good at getting results with venoms, but that thing wasn't even bothered when we shot it. Do you think that batch went sour?"

"I don't think it was the venom's fault, Peewee." Tall turned

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away. "That thing must be pretty well immune, judging by the fact that the spider's venom didn't slow it down either."

"Tall, give me a hand here." Clever had moved to one of the boulders that lined the lip of the gorge.

"What are you trying to do?" The big man asked as the twins went to join him.

"I've got to get a sample of that venom. We can't hurt it with bows, or spears, but I wonder how well it would stand up to having a boulder dropped on it. I want to block off the entrance first, though."

For an answer the lanky explorer turned, and putting his back to the house-sized mass of the boulder, forced it up and over. The stone balanced for a moment, and then toppled into the narrow mouth of the gorge, carrying a portion of the wall with it. The cork was in the trap. The ground around them was strewn with smaller boulders, and reaching down, Tall grasped a three-ton mass and swung it over his head.

Given time to realize its predicament, the centipede could have made good its escape, but it was still gorging on the fallen spider when Tall's first shot struck it from above, bounding off and leaving the central segments mangled beyond use. Since the beast had no spine, the blow was not fatal, although it would effectively prevent any rapid movement. A moment later Clever and the twins were pouring down their own stones, boulders ranging from one to five tons in mass raining into the gorge, and at last the thing lay still, reduced to a dozen mangled fragments beneath the tons of stone.

"All right, come on, but be careful," the explorer said, and leaped lightly into the gorge, landing on his feet a half dozen yards from the head.

"Is it dead?" Peewee asked when he landed beside him a moment later.

"It looks like it," said his brother who had joined them with the others.

"Watch it, though. Those things are tough," Smiley said as he and his twin prodded at the head with a spear.

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"It's dead all right." The laconic reply was typical of Silent.

"Where are the poison glands, Clever?" asked Smiley who examined the fanglike claws on the foreleg pincers with interest. "I don't see anything that looks like a sac in these legs."

"They'll be in the first segment, probably. Watch it, I'll take a look." Kneeling, the inventor slit the tough armor with difficulty, exposing a swollen gland under the flesh. "Here it is. Does anyone have a seed pod with him?"

Runt offered the requested item, and a few minutes later Clever rose to roll the centipede over and expose the second sac on the other side.

"That's got all of it. Come on, Tall. We've got a party to prepare—remember?"

VI

"How's THE roast doing?" Tall asked as he finished buttoning his loose silk shirt and tucked the tail into his trousers.

"Just about done." Clever poked at the cricket haunches he was slowly turning over the fire. "Want to get the bread and rolls out? And the salad still has to be tossed."

"Good!" Tall took a nibble at one of the cakes Baker had provided. "Where's the stuff for the salad?"

"Over on the counter. Hey, lay off of those buns, they're for later."

"Anybody home?" Peewee asked as he appeared in the doorway with a girl on his arm.

"Hello, Tall. How are you, Clever?"

"Fine, Tiny. Are you keeping Peewee hooked?" He looked down to greet the diminutive girl.

"I hope so, at least!" Green eyes danced over her freckled nose and she shook a mop that rivaled her fiancé's for flaming color. "Parry and I usually manage to keep our men within running distance."

"Tall! That's a woman's work." Parry Mason abandoned

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Runt at the doorway and turned a diminutively perfect face upwards to be kissed by the explorer who towered over her. "Now you two just get out of here, right now! Tiny and I will take over from here on, and you men just stay out of our way!"

"Hey, what's going on in there?" Baldy Baker and his wife, Artful, came into the room, followed by Silent and Smiley with their fiancées, Sparkling and Shy.

"You girls stay here and help. The men go out. Out, do you hear!" Parry rounded on the bewildered males, driving them to seek refuge on the covered court behind the house.

"That big ox, Tall!" Parry trilled. "I love him though, horse face and all."

"I don't know about that!" Parry turned to find Bright in the doorway with Star and Hungry beside her. "I think that long face of his is attractive."

"You would, Bright." Artful laughed. "You're the only girl on the island who doesn't have to look up at it. When are you going to land that big lummox?"

Bright smiled, but did not answer, and Parry rounded on Hungry and chased him off with the rest of the men.

He was greeted, inside, by Runt who said, "Hi, Hungry. Want a drink before dinner?" Runt poured a cup of wine and handed it to the new arrival. "Did you get run out, too?"

"Thanks. Yup! I don't know how you're going to make a life with that hoyden of yours, but I sure don't envy you. Me, I'll stay a bachelor, thank you." He took the proffered drink.

"That's what you think, buddy." Clever's blue eyes twinkled. "Just watch, one of these days you'll suddenly discover that you've been hooked, and by the time you realize it, it's too late to escape."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I'll always have my brother-in-law to give me good advice, and to serve as a horrible example!" He poked the inventor in the ribs with a wink.

"When are you going to put the question to Star, Clever? It's getting to be an open scandal by now." Baldy refilled his glass.

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"We've got too much to do, right now, getting ready for the move. Once we get settled down in the colony, I'll have more time, and that's the first thing I'm going to take care of."

"How about you, Tall. Are you ready to settle down yet?" Smiley looked over at the lanky form sprawled across one of the low benches.

"Nope. I'm sticking with Hungry on that. A man who has to spend as much time out in the jungles as I do has no damned business getting married." He shook his golden mop.

"Soup's on!" Speedy Roofer stuck his head out onto the patio. "Come on, the rest of us are already inside."

"Just a minute, I'll get the drinks." Tall uncoiled his long form and crossed to the well where the wine was cooling, fishing the basket of flasks out of the depths. Taking the flasks out, he wiped them dry and set them on a tray, then entered the house.

He had not thought to invite Bright, and Clever had not mentioned it to him, so he was somewhat disconcerted to find the fire-haired beauty coming across the room towards him.

"Tall, where have you been!" Her green eyes were shooting sparks. "Do you realize that it's been almost a week since I saw you last? Why haven't you stopped by the house?"

"Uh, just a minute Bright, I have to take these drinks—"

"I'll get them." Clever dexterously forestalled him, grinning from ear to ear as he took the tray from the big man's lifeless fingers.

"Uh, hello, Bright." Tall silently promised the inventor a sudden and gory demise. "It's just that I've been pretty busy with the planning and all—"

"That you just couldn't be bothered with me." The petulant pout returned.

"Nol Damn it, it's just that, well . . ."

She laughed, a crystalline tinkle that made a musical counterpoint to the buzz of the party.

"Please don't look so hurt. After all, Tall, I just had to come and congratulate you. I do know, really, how busy

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you've been. I'm just teasing you, and it was cruel of me." Her smile transformed her entire face, and Tall lost the last vestige of annoyance and embarrassment in his admiration for her beauty.

"Forget it, Bright. Here, let me get you something to eat. I'm losing my manners." He crossed to the sideboard and filled two plates and two cups of wine, juggling the load back to her.

"Would you like to eat in the courtyard? There's still enough light."

"Yes, very much, thank you. It is a bit close in here." She smiled again.

"Here, I'll get a table." He crossed the patio and returned with a low bench, and they seated themselves into their chairs to nibble at their food.

"Isn't it lovely up here. You certainly picked a good spot to build, Tall." The patio was set at the rear of the house, overlooking the city. To the west the sky was a fantasy of scarlet and gold, limning the distant peaks and casting a changing pattern of shadows from the flagreed silkwork that enclosed the patio against stray nocturnal intruders.

They sat for a moment in silence, enjoying the majesty of the view. Below them, the city was slowly swallowed by velvet dusk, and soft lights gleamed briefly only to be hidden by lightproof hangings in order to prevent them from drawing lightseeking insects. The night was warm, and from the bank a light breeze drifted by, bringing the rich smells of the grass jungle and the first chords of the nocturnal singers.

The girl beside him rested her head on his shoulder, and Tall placed his arm around her, drawing her closer to him. The scent in her hair was faint, but delicious, and he felt that he could sit like this forever.

"Tall?" She did not move her head.

"Yes?" His reply was a husky murmur.

"Could I be the anchor you're looking for? I'd like very much to be it."

"No, Bright." He gently removed his arm and sat up. "It

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wouldn't work. I could take this life for a while, but then what? I couldn't be a farmer or a herder. My whole life has been spent in the woods, and I don't think I could give them up."

"What if I didn't ask you to?"

"No!" He rose and began pacing. "What could I offer you? Oh, I don't mean that the way some of these crawlers would. I've always got more than enough to eat, and I suppose that I could be considered a good catch so far as position and property go." He turned to face the silent girl. "It's something more than that, Bright. Something I've got no right to ask you, or any woman, to bear. I saw it in my mother once, and sooner or later I'd see it in you too—the strain, the waiting for your man to come back and knowing that one day he's not going to. That the odds are heavily loaded that I won't be able to shoot fast enough, or jump fast enough, or that I'll get careless just that once." He resumed his pacing. "It was the strain that killed Mother, Bright, not childbirth—the doubt whenever Dad went out and the fear that it would be the time he wouldn't come back."

"That's a part of being a woman, Tall. You aren't the only one who goes into the jungles. We all have to accept those things."

He turned away to look over the darkened valley. "You belong to all of this. This is your home. Mine is out there, in the jungles. They don't mix."

Bright was quiet, then. And Tall didn't feel at all comfortable, that night, as he saw her home from the party.

During the next few days the roommates saw little of each other. Clever was tied to his laboratory while Tall flung himself into his work of preparation with such fervor that Grandpa grew concerned at his apparent reckless abandon, and to discuss this, went to see the inventor.

"Clever, what's the matter with that grandson of mine?" he began when the preliminary greetings were over. "The

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sprout seems to be out to get himself killed! Did you hear about the stunt he pulled yesterday?"

"When he tackled that nest of centipedes singlehanded and cleaned them out? The venom's right behind you."

"That's part of it. And today, he left before dawn. Said he was going spider hunting to test your new venom."

"That damned fool!" Clever spun around. "That new stuff is totally untested! He'll get himself killed if it doesn't work!"

"That's what I mean. What's the matter with him, anyway?"

"I don't know, Grandpa," Clever said, shaking his head. "He's been this way ever since the party. Something went on between him and Bright, and while I don't know all of it, it upset him pretty badly. I think she tried to force the issue between them."

"That girl's had her cap set for Tall for a long time. That may be it, all right. The boy won't marry as long as he's obsessed with the idea that his father's job cost his mother her life; and the hell of it is that he's probably right! Aurora never did adjust to Ranger's job as Seeker, but I wish the lad would realize that Bright's made of different stuff than his mother was."

"It's not only that, Grandpa. He's got the idea that he's going to get it sooner or later, and probably sooner. Hell, he's better off in the jungles than most of us are on the island. Don't forget that my parents were killed right here, defending their students against a stray tiger beetle. He doesn't seem to realize how used he is to the jungles."

"Don't underrate his job, Clever." The old man's eyes were grim. "It's a mean job, and a dirty one. Do you know that of all of the men of the house of Seeker who have accepted the burden, there are less than half a dozen in all of our history who have lived as long as I have? And I'm a hell of a lot luckier than I should be." He rose. "I think I'm going to see if we can't get the advance party out of here a couple of days ahead of schedule. The way the sprout is going now, the sooner we get him off of the island, the better. We can't spare him now, Lord knows."

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His face thoughtful, the inventor rose and donned light armor after the old man had left. Tucking his bow into its slip at his back, he left the house to make the rounds of the various industries that were turning out his inventions. Everything had shifted into high gear and he passed endless parties returning from sweeping a five-mile area clean of game. Even the skulls of the inedible ants appeared among the booty, to reappear as helmets. He passed the twin spots where spears and arrows were being produced, and stopped to chat with Spearmaker before going to speak to Armorer about some proposed improvements for the new armor being produced. Even though every inhabitant of the island habitually wore light armor from infancy on, Tall had insisted that all of the migrants be equipped with full field gear, and that the women and older children be armed.

The point had been driven home. The terrain over the route Tall had selected was entirely hostile, and he wanted no non-combatants. The inventor noted long rows of efficient crossbows laid out in various stages of manufacture, and further on huge vats of his latest formula venoms were settling out in the sun. There were other concerns too. On the towering grassblades that formed their pastures, aphids were being milked, while further up the same stems climbers slashed away at the seed stalks to send the yard-wide globules in a golden cascade to the ground.

His immediate concerns satisfied, the inventor returned to his house and waited for Tall to return.

"Lord, I'm beat," Tall said, when he arrived, an hour later. His face was worn and lined, his eyes sunken to an unnatural depth. "That new venom of yours is pretty good, though, Clever. I got a green lynx about eight miles north of here, on the far bank, and it dropped the spider in its tracks."

"Are you hurt?" asked Clever, leaping up as he saw two gaping rents in his comrade's armor. "What happened?"

"It's nothing, really. The armor is shot, that's all. I didn't see the damned thing hiding in the grass, and it got a hold

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of me before I could shoot, that's all." His head nodded in weariness.

"I'm putting you to bed right now, and you're not leaving this house tomorrow. You're driving yourself into the ground, and Grandpa just moved ahead the departure date for the advanced party."

"To when?" The big man's head snapped up.

"The day after tomorrow. You're going to need all of the sleep you can get. Do you feel like eating?"

"Forget that. When did he move it up, and why?"

"Because you're such a big, stupid jerk that you're killing yourself!" The smaller man rounded on him. "Damn it, Tall, I know how you feel about Bright, but that's no excuse for acting the fool. You've got a big job to do, and you're acting like a spoiled brat. If anything happens to you, the expedition is off, and you know it!"

"Leave Bright out of this!" Tall said, his face livid.

"Shut up and listen. You get a little upset, and damn near throw the whole deal away. First those centipedes, and now this! Where in the hell did you leave your brains—out on that patio?"

"I don't remember appointing you my nursemaid. I can take care of myself, and what I do is my own business."

"The hell it is! I'm appointing myself, because, buddy, someone has to. Get it through that thick skull of yours that you mean too much to this migration to get yourself killed out of petulance. There are a thousand people out there, and they're all counting on your being alive and able to lead them. Do you want them to try it without you?"

"They wouldn't make it," Tall said, a new light coming into his tired eyes. "Okay, you win. I can't do what I please. I'll eat like a good boy and go to bed."

"Good. I didn't mean to hit that close to home, Tall, but you had it coming, I'm afraid." He looked over at his friend. "I think you'd better skip dinner," he said, half to himself, and then rose to help his exhausted friend to bed.

Clever rose early, letting his comrade sleep, but when he returned an hour later he was in a towering rage.

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"Damn it!" He slammed his helmet onto the bed in disgust. "Those foggy-headed, old lice can't do this to me, I ought to go up there and clean the whole lot of them out!"

"What's the matter, Clever?" The rudely-awakened Tall rolled over and looked up at his friend. "You look as though someone had used a stink bomb on you."

"*That* gives me an idea!" He rummaged among his gear. "The list of the advance party just came out, and they left me off of it!" He emerged with a mask as he spoke, and grabbed a flask of the stench oil. "You just give me ten minutes with them, and we'll see if their minds are made up!"

He stormed out of the house, and Tall had to laugh. Later in the day he attended a conference with Grandpa, and heard the full story.

". . . so he came storming in here and thumped that flask down on the table, demanding to know why he was left off the list. Wise got up on his high horse and told him that we felt that he would be of more use here for the time being, and Clever offered a counterproposal—either we put him on the list instantly, or he'd stink the place out." The old man's eyes twinkled.

"What happened?" Tall chuckled.

"The argument with the most logic won, of course. Besides, I thought you might like to have him along." They both laughed.

VII

THE NEXT MORNING, when Tall led his fifty adventurers across the bridge to the farewells of the entire populace, Clever marched at his side. The band made a brave display in their new suits of gleaming chitin, and marched at a steady pace despite the heavy slings loaded with gear that encumbered them. Their immediate goal was the hunting camp that had sheltered Tall on his last night out, and when

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they arrived they went at once to work enlarging the compound.

In the days that followed, they developed a routine of moving one day, and then building for two days. The route Tall selected took an inland course, avoiding the precipitous ascent of the cliffs that would have been required by the beach road. They constantly encountered carnivores, but few of the predators cared to trifle with such a large party, and those that did met short shrift under the massed fire of dozens of bows.

When they reached the limits of the known terrain, Tall and Clever began to forge ahead, scouting out the trail for a day's march ahead, then returning to guide the rest of the party to the new site. Behind them grew a slowly lengthening chain of the shelters, spaced twenty to thirty miles apart.

"I figure we've come a little over two hundred and fifty miles, Tall," the inventor said, as he finished sketching the terrain below him on a rough map. "We've been on the trail twenty-six days, so that would make ten miles a day."

"And that leaves us three more months to go," Tall said, as he turned to look down from the top of the hill on which they stood. "Lord, this is a desolate area."

Downhill the land dipped sharply, then broke into a series of irregular ridges and gullies until it reached the base of the barrier range. The ground was barren of vegetation, but great sheets of lichen hugged the sheltered sides of the criss-crossed ravines and an occasional movement below them betrayed the presence of life. Turning, they moved off, skirting the edge of the jungle.

"What do you make of those things, Clever?" asked Tall, as they paused at the edge of a large clearing.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything that resembles them," Clever said, studying the curious depressions that dotted the ten-acre area. Ranging from six to eight yards in diameter, the formations were outlined with slightly raised ridges of soil which ended at a tangent line that cut the almost circular surfaces. The inventor started forward, but Tall placed a hand on his arm.

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"Hold it. Look down there in the hollow." The smaller man followed his pointing arm. In the hollow was a cluttered mass of legs and bits of shells, mixed with crudely formed balls of softer stuff.

"That's spider sign! You never find those balls anywhere else." The smaller man looked around. "I don't see any sign of a web or burrow, though. Do you?"

"No, that's what's got me bothered. Those middens are never far from the nest, and from the looks of some of those balls, it's a big one. I don't see anything that could conceal it, though." He sniffed the air. "I can even smell spider."

"Let's go have a closer look at those circles." Clever led the way down the slope towards the plain.

"I want to look at that midden first," Tall said. The blank face of the helmet turned as the big man looked around. "Something else is bothering me too. We should have spooked at least some game out of the brush, but I haven't seen any sign of it, have you?"

"I saw a couple of 'hoppers come out ahead of us, but I don't see them now. They probably went back into the jungle."

"I don't know. They shouldn't have gotten away that fast. Damn it, there are spiders here, I know it! But where?"

"I don't know either, but—" He broke off and grabbed the explorer's arm. "*Tall!* Down there, on the midden! That's a man!"

They leaped the remaining distance and pulled the badly weathered armor from its place beneath the trash. The bindings were rotted and on the breastplate were the punctures of fangs an inch and a half in diameter. As they lifted the corpse, the helmet rolled free and the skull grinned up at them through the last shreds of parchment-tight skin.

"Do you recognize this armor, Clever?" Tall's voice was odd.

"No, I don't think so . . ."

"It's Dad!" He rose and turned away, his voice on the verge of breaking.

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"I'm sorry, Tall. We'd better get him back to the camp for burial."

The inventor helped his friend wrap the corpse in a blanket and Tall slung it over his shoulder. They stopped for a moment before re-entering the jungle, and Clever stopped to glance back into the clearing, then suddenly froze.

"Don't move, Tall. What ever you do, stay still!"

"What's the matter?" He matched his friend's whisper.

"I just found our spiders. One of the depressions opened, and the biggest spider you ever saw is looking down your back." He paused. "All right, turn slowly. It's down at the midden."

Moving carefully, the big man turned. One of the depressions had been flung up, revealing it as a door over a broad pit, and at the midden the spider was discarding the remains of a large grasshopper.

"What species do you make of it, Tall?"

"It's new to me. It's bigger than any of the wolf spiders, and look at the way its fangs are set. It must use them as picks, instead of crossing them normally."

"Well, there are your holes. Damn! We nearly blundered into them."

"Will your venom work against those things?"

"I don't know." The inventor shook his head. "You saw those fangs, and while they look like arachnids, and may be a variant of one of the hunters, I'd have to vote for an entirely new species."

"I'll have to buy that, and I probably know as much about spiders as anyone." The blank face returned to the depressions. "Dad must have gone down to investigate, the way we nearly did, and run right into them."

"And one of our foraging parties could do the same thing. I don't think they leave those burrows to hunt, though. That's in our favor."

"I'd hate to run into one of them in the woods all right, but if you got too close to the traps, it could be as bad. Detouring this section might cost us a day or two, but not much more."

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"Right, and we ought to leave them alone for the present."

"I'd like to pay them back for Dad, Clever, but the migration comes first. I'll be back, though."

"And I'll be with you. I just hope we don't hit any more of this kind of surprise on the way."

They reached the rest of the party at nightfall, and the next morning they buried Tall's father beneath a simple inscription: *Ranger Seeker: 22d Generation of his line.*

The group pushed on, each mile paid for with combat, and the toll of the journey began as Happy Butcher fell afoul of a tiger beetle before the other men could come up, and they buried him that night beneath their camp. Tall and Clever were bearing the brunt of the danger. But that was their job, and they knew that none of the others stood an equal chance of survival. In the years to come, their exploits, together with the saga of Tall's solitary odyssey and their own earlier and later exploits, were to become the legends of a race.

"As nearly as I can guess, we ought to hit the ant hill I told you about sometime this week," Tall said. His normally thin face was gaunter and older as he sat by the fire in the small cavern that was sheltering the party for the night.

"That would put us about a month from the gorge, then."

"About that. How many shelters do you make it, now?"

"Almost fifty." The inventor spread his carefully compiled map before him, the portion that they had covered inked in solidly, the portion ahead sketched in lightly. The backtrail formed a curving line dotted at regular intervals with the crosses and notes that marked the shelters and landmarks behind them.

"I'm still worried about that hill, though. The ants are pretty pugnacious, and the warriors run larger than a man. I don't want to risk the men too close to them, and I think our best bet would be to work north to the river and go around them."

"We could do that, but if we held to the south, we'd avoid that big bend in the river you show opposite here. It could save two or three days."

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"That's pretty rugged country, though. And I have at least some idea of what to expect by the river route."

"Look, the men are pretty well beat anyway. What say you and I take a look at the southern route and give them a chance to rest?"

"Could do, I suppose. They can start cutting trail for the next leg anyway, and get the shelter built. That ought to keep them out of mischief." He rose and bent under the arch that separated them from the larger cavern sheltering the main body to give the others their instructions for reaching the next station.

The morning sun found the two men on the trail. The armor that had made such a brave display leaving the island was dulled now, and patched in a dozen places from months of hard use. The spears with which they had started were long gone, and only the carefully maintained crossbows held any of their original appearance.

"And to think I used to kid you about the way you smelled when you'd been out for a while," Clever said, as he ruefully surveyed the wrecks that were all that remained of his last pair of clean socks.

"This is worse than usual, too. Normally I'd be moving by myself, and it wouldn't take this long." Tall finished fastening the silk net over the mouth of the burrow in which they were ensconced.

"Well, we're being fair about it, anyway. The cricket that owned this burrow objected to our taking it over, and I think it was nice of us to invite him to stay for dinner." He turned the roasting legs to emphasize his point.

"I doubt that he appreciated the favor." Tall chuckled dryly. "I'm getting a little worried, though. It's three days since we left the others, and we ought to have seen some sign of that hill by now."

"They probably smelt us coming." Clever's nose wrinkled in disgust as he pulled his other boot off and the stench hit him. "Remind me to wear my mask the next time I do this, will you?"

"Have you noticed that the life out there is unusually

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dense? There are almost too many insects, and I'm beginning to be afraid I know why."

"Think something's been driving them this way?" The inventor rose and crossed to the grating. "There's a valley down there—it might be a flood."

"No, we'd see the water glinting if that were it, and most insects won't run very far before a flood. If it's what I'm afraid of, you're going to see why I wanted to stay clear of this region."

Two hours from camp the following morning they crossed an invisible boundary between a jungle brimming with life and one almost devoid of it, and shortly thereafter, faint at first, and then growing, rose the din of large numbers of ants. Twice, the men were forced into the trees overhanging the trail as parties of warrior ants, their armor, the dark red of drying blood, dashed past on the trail attended by longer columns of workers, and it was another hour before they emerged onto a large plain that lay level for four or five miles.

"I didn't think those were foraging parties that passed us back there." The inventor looked out over the blazing tableau of thousands of living bodies locked in mortal combat. "Those were war bands."

"As near as I can tell, those dark reds are from the same city I was telling you about, but I've never seen the others before." One of the armies was formed of the ants that had passed them, but if they had shown the color of blood, their opponents showed the crimson of naked flames, falsifying the hues of the others to a dingy brown. To the north, the parties that had passed them dashed into the fray, overwhelming a smaller detachment of the Flames, the workers darting in and out among the battling warriors, nipping at antennae and legs.

The battle surged down upon them, and the two men once more took to the grass that overhung the clearing, seating themselves on the edge of a broad blade to overlook the fight below. Both Reds and Flames fought with two-foot, curved scimitar-jaws, and directly below them a Red sliced

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off the head of a Flame, only to have the severed skull sink hooks no less formidable into his own abdomen, and with the head still tearing at his guts, the Red leaped at another enemy, the three tumbling into a heap of slain and slayer. The workers, Red and Flame, with a fine disregard of friend and foe fell at once on the pile and began to sever any projecting limbs, only to fall back as another pair of combatants stumbled into them. A bulbous-headed Red had locked mandibles with one of the Flames, and as they strove to reach each other, they formed a living bridge.

The inventor suddenly gripped his friend's arm as from the abdomen of the Flame a short spine was erected, and, a moment later, driven home into the exposed underbelly of his foe. The stung warrior shuddered once, then relaxed his grip as the Flame tossed the corpse aside and flung himself into the thick of a general melee that had sprung up a few yards away. As Clever's grip relaxed, Tall grinned under his screening helmet. He knew the symptoms well, and he knew that if they did not eventually find a source of the Flame's toxin, the inventor would go off into an ungodly fit of pique.

The Flames, despite their potent stings, were heavily outnumbered, and sheer weight of numbers drove them from the field, the battle moving away from them to the north once more.

"Did you see that! The sting dropped a full grown soldier in its tracks!" Clever dropped to the ground beside his friend. "What a venom. Tall . . ."

"You've just got to have a specimen!" concluded the explorer, laughing. "All right, but after we get the others through safely. You don't have your equipment anyway."

"I can see why you wanted to avoid this area. An ant can't tell the difference between a man and another ant, and we could have started a war like this ourselves."

"It ought to be safe enough for a while, though. They'll both be short of warriors and will be licking their wounds for the next few weeks."

Turning, they retraced their route, reaching the cricket burrow with some daylight left, but too late to push on.

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While Clever gathered fuel, Tall brought their dinner down, and they re-erected the netting. Taking his armload to the back of the burrow, Clever dumped it under the overhang of rock that formed the roof.

"Tall! There's been another fire back here. Look at the smoke-marks on the walls!"

Uncoiling his lanky frame with uncanny speed the big man joined his companion, who was digging at the soft soil with his knife.

"We couldn't see it in the dark last night, but I happened to look up just as the sun hit that wall. Look at this. It was a fire, all right." He exposed several chunks of chitin unmistakably reddened by cooking, and resumed his scraping. "And here, look at this!"

"My father's knife!" Tall held the broken haft in his hand and pulled his own blade to match the designs carved into the handle. "He made one for me, and one for himself just before he left. That means he got this far, at least. He must have been on his way back when he hit the trapdoors." Tall's lean face grew puzzled. "But then why go this way? Unless he were coming overland from somewhere further west and south. We're south of anything I've ever explored, though."

"Maybe not." Clever unrolled his map and spread it in the glow from the entrance. "If you draw a line between here and the trapdoors, and carry it west, it hits the growth you described, right in the vicinity of the gorge we're heading for."

"But why would he have gone there?"

"Tall, do you know what your father was looking for the last time he left the island?"

"Not exactly. I was out with a party at the time, and he didn't wait for me to come back. Off hand, all I remember is that he headed in this general direction, and that Wise had something to do with it."

"Grandfather told me about it. He was trying to establish whether there was any foundation to the legend that the Ten came from the west, and your father went to try and find

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evidence one way or another. I'm beginning to wonder what he found."

"There was nothing on Dad's body when we found him though."

"Unless it's at the bottom of one of those holes! If he was dragged into one of the burrows, anything he was carrying would drop to the bottom. We didn't find any pouches or his pack, remember?"

"It looks as though we're going to have to go back and clean out those holes, after all." Tall's blue eyes smouldered. "I'm going to really enjoy that job!"

They made their way back to the others, and the party swung south, avoiding the region of the ant hills. Once over that hurdle, the grueling routine continued as they slowly beat their way step by step towards the end of their argosy. The limits of their endurance had long since passed, and the men moved in a mechanical stupor about their labors, no longer bothering to remove their armor at night. As this tendency increased, so did their casualties, and three more of their numbers earned a permanent rest beneath the simple gravestones.

"Hungry! Whitey! They're back!" Speedy Roofer clambered down from his perch as the ragged band dropped logs or discarded axes to gather in front of the shelter to greet the two tatterdemalion scarecrows coming down the trail.

"What's the news, Tall?" asked Hungry. His normally plump frame was gaunt, and the face under the raised helmet showed little of its usual insouciance.

"Relax, boys! We're almost there. We're camping under that growth tomorrow." The two men slung their spears into a corner and removed their helmets. "Two more camps at most, and we're home!"

The men were too exhausted to cheer, but the next morning they moved out with a lighter step and for the first time in months light banter spiced their way. Moving through the dense forest on a trail that dipped and twisted they ascended a gradually increasing grade, and at noon the jungle

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ended. The open plain before them sloped away to end in a sudden leap upwards to peaks that were lost in dim immobility against the cerulean sky, and to the right glinted the silver ribbon of the river, but all eyes were focused at the foot of the slope.

A tree rose ten miles into the air, framed against the titanic backdrop of the mountains; it rose into a ten-mile leap that ended in an explosion in green that flung clusters of colors and shadow to an equal distance around. In a world where the grasses nodded solemnly hundreds of feet above the ground, the tree stood in a solitude that befitted a monarch.

"Great golden scarabs!" said Whitey Armorer. For him, it was a curse and a prayer.

"What is that thing, anyway!"

"We don't know, Hungry," Clever replied, gazing across the twenty-mile gap that separated them from the base. "I don't know, but I'm going to find out, someday."

"We'll have plenty of time for that later. Right now, I'm more interested in what's over there!" Tall pointed, and the others turned to follow his direction. "Do you see that point of rock? The gorge is just the other side of it. Another thirty miles, and we're there!"

There was one more camp to build, of course. One more stint of backbreaking labor to insure that the following parties would have shelter when they came. But it only took three days until their work was done, and the third night found them at last in the gorge that was to be their home.

For two days the men rested, crowding around the stream to enjoy the infinite luxury of a bath, and fighting only when attacked. But the caves of the gorge harbored others as well, and reluctantly Tall cut the rest short to take up the more pressing matter of clearing the gorge of dangerous insects.

Playing hide-and-seek in a week of deadly close quarters combat, with death laying in ambush at every turn, the men piled an abattoir of predators at the edge of the jungle opposite the gorge. Those species which were edible or useful for their byproducts were penned into a large cave, and in

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the small niche that had been its home a centipede prowled behind its bars, fated to serve Clever as a source for replenishing the group's dwindling venom supply.

"Twitch was a good man, Clever. I hope he's the last one we have to bury." Tall said, as he glanced grimly across the row of four markers that were the price of the caves.

"I hope so too, Tall. I heard him scream when that velvet wasp got him." They turned and walked back towards the cave that served them as headquarters. "We've only got a month before the second detachment is due, and it's going to be a nasty job to get this place ready for them. What's first?"

"Silk!" Tall said. "We're almost out of it, and we have to get more before we can do anything at all. I'm leading a party out in the morning after silk spiders. I want your group to go towards the swamps and harvest all of the grain you can get. We don't have time to start a crop, so we'll have to make do with what we have at hand."

"We'd better get in some forage for the stock insects, too. They haven't been fed for the last few days, and they're starting to show it."

"All right. We'll bring in some with us, too." Tall turned to secure the netting across the entrance, then sank onto the straw mat that served as his bed. "I don't think I'll last until the second party gets here, Clever. I feel as though I could sleep for a week."

But at dawn the big man was up and driving his men as mercilessly as before. Dusk found a half dozen of the small silk spiders penned, and the yolks and reels that would produce the cords from their spinnerets half completed.

Rotating the men's duties to keep them from utter exhaustion, the two leaders worked beside their charges. A number of additional caves were netted off, and into them was poured the spoil of the jungles. Insects, grains, and fruits: the food that would feed a city through the winter. Wood, chitin, the moss that served them as fuel. Luminous grubs and fungi to serve as lighting materials. Silk spiders to meet a growing demand for the vital cordage. Wasps, spiders and centi-

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pedes to provide Clever with the raw materials for his deadly potions, and stench beetles to furnish their protective oils. Day by day the list grew as the men wrenched their living from the hostile countryside.

They were working against a double deadline. In less than two weeks the second party was due, which would swell their numbers sixfold; and following would be the main body, nearly a thousand souls to be fed and housed. It would be winter when the main group arrived, and their survival would depend on how well the small band did its job now.

There were no speeches—none were needed. Each of the men knew the importance of their labors, and there was no grumbling as they worked themselves past the last stages of exhaustion. There would be time to rest later, but now the job had to be finished.

At last the day arrived, and the scout Tall had posted at the last camp on the trail returned to announce that he had met the advance scouting party of the second detachment, and that the larger group was two camps from the gorge. In their battered armor Tall and Clever left the caves to guide the second group in, leaving behind them a fully prepared refuge, well-stocked with food, and ready to receive all of the arrivals in comfort.

"Tall!" Peewee dropped his ax and leaped to embrace the larger man. "And Clever. You old roaches." He turned. "Hey, Runt! I Silent! Smiley! Get out here!"

A half dozen men abandoned their tasks to charge down on the trio, and from the surrounding woods they could hear parties beating their way back in.

"How have you been doing? Have the casualties been bad?" Tall asked as he walked beside the diminutive redhead towards the shelter when the flurry of greetings died down.

"Twelve, all together. Seven men, five women. How about your party?"

"Seven. Three on the trail, four at the gorge while we were cleaning it out." Clever held open the door to the shelter as he spoke.

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"We saw your father's grave on the way in, Tall. I'm sorry!"

"It's all right, Smiley. I knew he was dead, but it was still pretty rough to find him like that."

"You two look as though you'd been through a meat grinder. Has it been rough?"

"Rough enough, Runt. The boys will be pretty glad to see this bunch, believe me." The big man's face was lined more deeply with fatigue and responsibility than any of his friends had ever seen it.

"By the way, Peewee, where are the rest of your men?" Clever asked, sitting beside his friend on the low cot.

"Back at the last camp, with the women. The twenty of us here came on as an advance detachment while they finished building and stocking it."

"Speaking of the women, how's Star?" The inventor's weary eyes lit up.

"She's fine, Clever." Runt grinned. "Parry sort of took all of our girls under her wing, and not even a spider will tackle that redhead of mine. Bright's the one that surprised us all, though. She took to the jungle as though she had been born there, and she's a better shot with a bow than most of the men. The girls have been taking care of themselves like veterans, and when we hit a roving wolf spider, Bright and Parry brought it down before the rest of us could even get up to them."

The stocky redhead did not notice Tall's slight wince at the mention of Bright Potter, and he continued.

"You'd better watch out, Tall. That girl's been after you for years, and the way she's been going, she's going to come after you with a bow next."

"That's the only way she'll ever get him, too!" Peewee said, laughing. "Come on, let's eat. How far away did you say the gorge was now, Tall?"

VIII

TWO-HUNDRED-AND-EIGHTY-EIGHT strong, the second detachment filed through the double gates that barred the river entrance to the gorge, staring curiously at the forty-three scarecrows that lined the walls of the gorge on either side. Having shelters waiting for them at the end of each day's march had saved the larger body the worst of the hardships of the trip, and there were still traces of display in their armor as they marched.

Tall and Clever, who had returned ahead of the larger group to prepare the reception, had their hands full with the task of assigning living quarters and duties to the new arrivals. Temporarily, the settlers would be housed in two large barracks, one for the men and another for the women, but each of the married couples was also assigned to an individual cave among the thousands that lined the gorge, and in the days that followed most of the individual residences had been occupied.

The women labored with the men, and while a large portion of their energy was still devoted to the storage of food, they could now spare the personnel to begin the task of building. Where the hunting parties had consisted of twenty or thirty men before, now groups of a hundred to two hundred swept through the jungles and the borders of the swamps, clearing the woodland of game during the day to have it filled overnight from the inexhaustible reservoir of the hinterland jungles.

In carefully prepared incubation chambers the eggs of the vital black widows hung in their cunningly woven sacs, and wasp grubs gorged on their provender blissfully unaware that they were fated to a life of captivity to sate the colony's need for venom.

Clever lovingly unloaded each priceless piece of his equipment and transferred it to the cave that served the two men as home and was now to become his laboratory as well. With

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the acute manpower shortage eased, Tall left the inventor to his own devices and spent sleepless nights in assisting his friend complete several new devices to test several new ideas.

But by day the responsibility remained, and under the lanky leader's supervision a full-scale foray returned with several silk spiders of a considerably larger breed. Soon thereafter a scaffold of silk began to rise above the city, to grow in the weeks that followed into a tightly meshed netting of multi-skeined silk that not even the largest predator could hope to penetrate. Eventually it would stretch from the notch that gave issue to the river to the barrier of rock across the mouth of the gorge, and a smaller mesh of lighter gage would be added to prevent the entry of smaller pests, while still permitting the passage of ample light and air.

Before the net could be completed Clever's work produced results in the spectacular fashion that characterized his genius. From the cave that was his laboratory, the inventor produced three large crossbows mounted on swivels, bows that threw a six-foot spear instead of a foot-long bolt, and shortly thereafter a catapult that could throw a five-gallon jug of stink oil a quarter of a mile with surprising accuracy. When a male mantis appeared to chase a hunting party out of the jungle and into the gorge, the spearthrower mounted at the entrance was hastily manned, and a moment later the twenty-foot insect dropped under the impact of a six-foot shaft freighted with two gallons of the centipede-wasp-spider mixture that was the apex of Clever's toxicological skill.

Such incidents could not be allowed to interfere with the race against time, and the farmers continued to lay out their crops in neat rows along the floor of the gorge as the nets slowly spread overhead. As distasteful as he found it, Tall had an inherited genius for government, and under his guidance and drive the work pressed on towards completion in the rapidly dwindling time allowed. Tall himself worked twice as hard as any of his uncomplaining galley slaves, and only Star's influence on Clever and the explorer's gradual acceptance of Bright as a factor in his life gave the girls

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leverage at least to insure that the two leaders ate upon occasion and slept every now and again.

Storehouses were crammed to overflowing, and regular dwellings began to appear in place of the makeshift shelters of the early days, giving the gorge somewhat of the air of the city it was destined to become. Typically, however, when the other men banded together to build the two leaders a house, the men refused to occupy it, turning it instead over to the single girls.

As the scheduled date for arrival of the main party neared, Tall posted a string of scouts out over the outposts within a week's march of the gorge, and at last the day for which they had worked so long arrived.

The three-hundred-and-thirty-one inhabitants of the colony spent an inevitable period in decoration and cleaning of the city, and when the morning sun rose, it found them lining the same entrance where Tall's scarecrows had stood months before, their new armor glinting back the light. The day seemed endless, but afternoon heard the first shouts from the walls that the column was in sight, and an hour later the weary migrants were filing between the double gates to the shouts and cheers of the young colonists.

At the head of the line marched Wise, erect in his gleaming red armor and with a spring in his step that belied his travels and white hair.

"Wise! It's good to see you. How's my grandfather?"

"Fine, Tall, just fine." The old man turned to his grandson. "How are you two, Clever?"

"Wonderful, Grandfather. Wait until you see some of the things we've done here."

"I can see that you've been busy." The red helmet tilted up to glance at the netting that was now complete.

"Come on, Grandfather. We'll take you to your house."

"You have a house for me?"

"Yes, for you and Grandmother. Is she with you?"

"No, she's in the next group back. I came ahead especially to be with the first arrivals." He followed the younger men

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up a graded pathway towards the doorway of a large building built into a cave in the cliff face.

"You have a museum already, I see." Wise smiled at the rows of exhibits already rising.

"Tall insisted on it. We have a library too, even if there's nothing in it at the moment but our own journals." Clever took the old man's helmet and set it beside his own and Tall's on a shelf by the door.

"I can take care of that. I've been having copies made for the last ten years, and there's a copy of every book on the island in one of the wagons. This is the meeting hall, I see."

"Yes, and your living quarters are through this door."

"I'm afraid the furniture is a little crude as yet, but it should do until we can get you something better," Tall added.

With a start the elderly scholar suddenly realized that almost the entire group of youngsters had filed in behind them and were standing in the hall. He turned back as the big man continued.

"We felt that in this, our new home, it was our duty to continue as much of the tradition of the island as possible. This is to be our museum and our meeting place, our library and our school. Since you are second only to Grandpa in our esteem, we felt that it was only right that it should also have the honor of being your home."

"Listen to him," Clever whispered as Star and Bright came up beside him. "You should have heard the over-sized lout yell when we suggested that he should make a speech!"

The grin that split his grandfather's seamed face showed that the older man had heard the remark, but he spoke as though he had not.

"Tall, all of you, I am overwhelmed by your kindness and thought. I cannot refuse a gift offered in this spirit, a spirit made so eloquently clear, and in the name of my wife and myself I accept. But with the provision that, as it has always been on the island, my home belongs to all of you, to be used as you see fit."

"Bravo!" Parry Mason led a round of applause, and the

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gathering dispersed to resume the task of settling the new arrivals.

The following week was made somewhat less hectic by the calm presence of Wise, and the older man took a large portion of the administrative details from the younger men's shoulders. By the end of the tenth day, the massive migration was complete, and the massive operation of assigning homesites and allotting herds and fields was well in hand. After a brief reshuffling the arrivals were already turning to the conversion of the gorge from an armed camp into a well-ordered city.

"When I saw your father's grave on the way up, I at once hoped that you might have found something, Tall," Wise said, standing at the window for a moment, looking out over the construction in the gorge. "Now that we've gotten settled a bit, I think it's time to start worrying about recovering his records."

"What was Ranger looking for, Grandfather?" Clever asked, and turned to follow the scholar with his eyes as the older man moved back across the room. "We still haven't heard the story in full."

"Basically, it's rather simple. You've both heard, as children in school and since, the legend of the Ten. What you may not know, however, is that a part of the story is not legend, but is based on an actual history written by Clever of the second generation. A part of the story was lost in the big flood of the tenth generation, and we'll probably never know just what was in them."

"I've heard about the history," Tall said to Wise, "but I still don't see what that has to do with Dad."

"I'm coming to that, Tall. The portion of the records that was lost was unfortunately that which dealt with the arrival of the Ten and their early settlement of the island, but a legend persisted and was rewritten from word of mouth in the twelfth generation that the Ten were survivors of a much larger group. The legend also mentions some undefined catastrophe from which they were fleeing when they reached the island which is in some way linked with the name of this

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valley—"Inheritance." On only one other point is the legend so strong—in its insistence that they came from the west."

"And Tall's father was trying to prove the legend?"

"More than that. If these legends were correct as to the direction, they could be correct about the other points too; and a large body of men cannot move through the jungles without leaving their trail marked with some rather permanent evidence—camps and the like.

"There's more at stake here than the truth of an old story, Tall. The Ten didn't just spring full-grown out of the jungle. The state of civilization shown by that armor needs a long time to grow, longer than we've had by a damn sight. There's other evidence, too—our language for example, both written and oral. It's highly complex in itself, and loaded with words that have no literal referent in our world—hell, damn and the rest for example. Those words had some meaning once, or they wouldn't exist."

"In other words, Grandfather, you feel that if we could trace the route of the Ten we could possibly find an advanced civilization waiting for us?" Clever rose excitedly and began to pace. "They could be generations—they'd *have* to be generations ahead of us. Think of what they could teach us."

"Including where men came from in the first place. Perhaps I'm just a silly old man on the subject, but somehow I feel that it is the one question really worth asking in the time left to me."

"But if there were such a city, such a civilization, why haven't they reached us first?" Tall shook his head. "There are a lot more questions than that I can think of, too."

"Well, when we set out to come here, Tall, we had to take a first step," Clever said, as he stopped his pacing. "The only way we'll ever reach a goal is to find the answer to the first question, and go on from there. It's always been my experience that getting a valid answer depends on asking the proper question, and that asking the proper question depends on already having most of the answer worked out for yourself."

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"You're getting wise beyond your years, sprout." Wise chuckled with pleasure. "What's the right question to ask first, then?"

"I can answer that for you," said Tall. "The first thing we have to do is to find out what—if anything—Dad found. If he had found something, it could save us a lot of searching."

"I'll go along with that," said the inventor, turning to face his grandfather. "We've already decided that there's no use in going until spring, since the spiders at those doors probably hibernate in the cold season. When do you figure we can leave, Tall?"

"In four weeks. If we leave then, they should be out by the time we can work our way uptrail to the area. Things ought to be settled down enough by then to let us get away, now that Wise is here to take over."

"Speaking of which, Whitey Armorer reported some of those Flame ants up country south of here. Now that we can be spared for a few days . . ."

That Clever is damned persuasive, Tall mused to himself, later on, letting the sun warm him through his armor as he lay stretched full length on a leaf overlooking the ant trail below. Across the trail Clever lay in a similar ambush, and as the big man watched the inventor raised one gauntleted hand to indicate the approach of their first victim. Audible before it became visible the insect scuttled into the short clearing that formed the trap, and moments later a quarrel hummed down in a short flight that ended the querulous bustle.

"Cover me!" Clever called, as he dropped from his perch to bend over the fallen worker. "We're in luck, Tall, the workers have stings too. I was afraid it might be a selective development on the warriors."

He did not attempt to remove the venom sacs, but merely dragged the limp form to a spot more favorable to ambush, then leaped to join his friend on the big man's perch.

"You know, Tall, I sort of wish Peewee and Runt were

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here. It would be almost like old times." He settled down beside the taller man.

"Did you see the way those two changed as soon as Parry and Tiny got them tied down?" Tall snorted. "Beetle herders! No thank you."

"Oh, I don't know. After all, there's a lot to be said for coming home to a hot dinner and a warm bed."

"For you, maybe. You're half settled already with your work to keep you happy. For me, this is my work right here. There's always some place else that I haven't been, something else I haven't seen, and I can't help wondering about them until I just have to go and see what there is to see." He stretched his lanky frame. "That's what got my father, eventually. It could have been a hundred other things beside those pits that did the actual killing, but he was dead when he took this job in the first place, it was just a matter of time."

"Maybe that's turning a little morbid though, Tall. After all . . ."

The conversation was left unfinished as a close-ordered column of the brightly colored ants broke into view to stop in milling confusion as the men drew and fired as rapidly as possible from above. So great was the slaughter that it took them the rest of the day to move the plunder to the nearest of the camps for further transfer later.

While Clever battled with the problem of using the new venom in his noxious mixes, Tall plunged back into the still forbidding job of governing the new settlement that was rising under the nettings.

Walking up the pathway that led to the handsome home that had at last been built for them, the lanky leader paused to look over the city that was in large part his own creation. At the barrier wall a party was excavating a series of basins that would serve the multiple functions of cisterns against drought, flood basins against storms, and ornamental pools to provide the beauty men prized. Beauty was of prime concern to his race, and already softly glowing lawns of multi-colored mosses carpeted the dooryards of most of the

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homes that lined the cliffs between the pools and the massive dam rising where the river burst the heart of the mountain. Raw gashes in the earth marked the track of water conduits and sewers soon to be in use.

Reluctantly turning away, he crossed the remaining yards to the house. Built into the wall of the gorge and faced off in gleaming black marble that contrasted the pale gray of native rock, it was a gem of architecture. Tall's objections to the gift had been overborne only by the consideration that Clever and Star had definitely settled on marriage in the near future, and he planned to give them the home when they were ready to set up housekeeping.

"I still can't get used to these damned soft hats, Clever." He slapped the offending headgear onto a peg. "It's sort of hard to keep from flinching when you go out without armor, and I feel naked in these soft clothes out of doors."

"I know what you mean. But now that the gorge is roofed, our children well may never put on armor except to go into the jungle. It's a funny thought, really, after twenty-three generations of learning as children that that was the one unpardonable sin."

"I guess there will be a lot of things to get used to here." The big man plucked his ax from its peg and sat on a low stool honing the edge in what had become a habit.

"You're showing your impatience again. Getting restless?"

"Tall the wanderer, that's me. I've been cooped up too long, Clever. The migration is over, we're settled to stay, and there's no more place for me here. I never could stand cities, they bother me too much."

"And Bright bothers you too, doesn't she?" Clever said, knowing that the girl had been constantly on the big man's mind.

"Yes, she does, damn it!" He rammed the ax back into its sheath. "I love her too much to hurt her the way I'd be bound to sooner or later. I wish I could make her see that. There's no life here with me, and none for her out there."

"She doesn't think so. Besides, I could say the same thing for myself. I've spent almost as much time out as you have."

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"With me or someone else along! Two men have ten times the chances of one in the jungle, and you know it. You'll be marrying Star soon, and settling down, but my job will still take me out alone. You're already married, to your work. I'm married too, to the jungle, and to ten chances to one that every trip will be my last one. It's my world and my work, and I love them both, but I'm not going to ask anyone to share those odds with me."

"You're going to have to share them at least once more, with me. Our four weeks is up in three days, and that means we'd better start thinking about getting the gear we're going to need assembled."

"You're slow. I've already arranged for most of it to be waiting for us. How's the venom coming?"

"It tested out at least twice as potent as the best we've had to date. If it works that well on those spiders, we're going to find out just how tough your little pets are."

IX

"THERE'S NO sign of life down there, Tall. Perhaps it's still too early for them to be out; after all, we don't know too much about their habits."

"I don't think so, Clever. They seem to be mostly nocturnal, or we would have seen them sooner last time. If they were still dormant, there's bound to have been debris on the runways to the middens, but they're pretty well swept clean."

"Nothing for it but to wait it out, then. We might as well get as comfortable as possible, it may be a long watch."

Taking up a post on a milkweed overlooking the clearing, the two men sat patiently. They had laid out a careful plan of action enroute to the trapdoor region, calling for the clearing of all of the holes before any attempt was made to examine them, and below them they could count seven of the circular depressions that they now knew sheltered sudden and violent attack.

It was one of the nearer doors that opened first, and al-

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though the range was nearly two hundred yards the men fired almost as soon as the spider cleared her threshold. Used to shooting game at even greater range, and expert in their weapons, their aim was true and the spider started suddenly as the bolts struck home into the tender abdomen. Shocked by the twin blows, the spider scuttled back into her hole before the men could fire again, emphatically slamming the heavy bulkhead into place.

"Damn. I'd hoped we'd at least slow her down!" Clever said, lowering his bow.

"She's out of range now. What effect do you think that amount of venom will have?"

"I don't know, and it's hard to guess without knowing a little more about these things. Look out! She's coming up again!"

The insect visibly staggered as the trap was cleared, and a moment later the impact of another two bolts carried her from her footing. One of the shots had taken her in the large skull, the end still visibly protruding above one of the chelicera that housed the fangs and evidently blinded by the venom so close to her eyes, the spider blundered over the ridge that marked another of the doors. The men held their fire as from the second burrow surged a second spider, larger than the first, to seize the dying victim.

Mortally wounded already, the smaller beast responded with all the ferocity of her race. Even as the assassin cleared the rim of her burrow, three-foot scimitars drove home into the exposed body, puncturing the armor as though it were tissue. Unable to gain the clearance she needed to strike with the formidable picks that formed her own weapons, the second spider rolled onto the ground, trying to shake her smaller nemesis.

At last she succeeded in freeing the deathgrip of her erstwhile victim, rolling almost to the base of the men's ambush in the lunge, and as her fall exposed the joints of the legs to the thorax she died, dropped on the spot by the perfect delivery of two shots into the nerve center at the second pair

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of legs. The smaller brute lay where it had fallen, dead or dying.

The commotion of the fight had stirred up interest beneath the battleground, and the remaining doors were all slightly ajar as their occupants studied the situation. Before the traps could close the men had succeeded in ending the careers of three more of the lurkers. The venom evidently attacked the nervous system of the spiders, since any wound, no matter how slight, was enough to eventually send the victim out into the open in a mad dash. The game was slow, but the men were patient, and although the job lasted into the following day, at last all seven of the spiders cluttered the clearing that had been their home, drawing the ubiquitous ants.

"All right, let's find out what's in that hole." Tall dropped to the ground with the inventor in close pursuit and crossed to the nearest burrow, avoiding the grisly trophy close to the entrance.

"How much line do you have, Tall?"

"Two-hundred-and-fifty feet. There's no telling how deep these things go. A large wolf spider will dig over a hundred feet." He heaved the eight-inch line of silk, stronger than the chitin of his armor, into the depths. "It seems to be holding all right, if that log doesn't pull out under my weight."

"I don't think it will—it's built right into the rim. Do you have your light?"

"Right here. Wish me luck, Clever, and let's hope that this is the right one."

Lowering himself hand over hand into the depths while the smaller man stood guard above, Tall descended almost a hundred feet before his feet struck the surface of the silk that lined the pit. A quick inspection showed him that this was not the bottom, but the shaft bent here, giving him enough purchase to walk erect on the steep surface, and he continued with one hand on the line.

The bottom, when he reached it, was a disappointment. The surface of the silk lining was perfectly smooth, devoid of any trace of what he sought. But the smoothness was

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suspicious in itself in the light of the spider's habit of feeding in the burrow, and a moment later he had sliced away a large flap with his knife, exposing a second layer beneath. The silk of the second layer was studded with small bits of debris, chitin, and the gravel that the spider had carried in, but it was as barren of any sign of manufacture as had been the layer above. He again sliced at the tough stuff, so absorbed in his task that he failed to hear a faint movement behind him and further up the shaft.

"What the hell . . . ?" Clever spun to see the line that descended into the depths twitching violently. "Tall!" As he yelled, he leaped to the cord, grabbing it in both hands and beginning desperately to haul it out of the shaft hand over hand, muscles flexing under the dead load on the other end. As he hauled the twitching stopped, and his blood surged suddenly with fear, only to calm as he realized that there was still a load on the line.

"God!" The explorer was barely able to hang onto the line as his friend pulled him over the rim and a moment later kicked the foot-long horror that hung by its head to Tall's leg into a bloody pulp.

"Tall, Tall! Are you all right?" He ripped off the helmet to find the big man alive, but his face beneath the red-gold hair was purple, and his breath was coming in tortured gasps from between clenched teeth. "Damn!" Clever exclaimed. "That spiderling must have gotten through his armor. I hope . . ." He broke off as from the pit behind him came the sounds of dozens of small bodies swarming out of the depths.

Grabbing the six-foot-ten Tall, and slinging him over one shoulder lightly, he scooped up the loose gear and ran for both their lives as a horde of the foot-long spiderlings surged out of the rim and into the clearing. Moving at a dead run, the inventor covered the distance to the shelter at a half-mile-a-minute clip through the woods, tearing open the door and dumping his unconscious friend onto the nearest bunk while he ripped off his own armor.

With his knife, he sliced away the leg greaves from the

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larger man's wounds. Evidently the spider had not had a full strike, and the bulk of the venom had spilled into the space between greave and leg, blistering the skin off of the calf. In the leg itself, two small punctures showed white-rimmed red, and the calf was flushed, slowly swelling as he watched.

Grabbing his kit bag, he withdrew a razor-sharp scalpel of flint normally used for dissections. He held his hand steady as he cut around the fang marks, and dropping the knife, he pressed the swelling with both hands. Under the pressure a milky fluid oozed from the cuts to soil the cover of the bunk, and he forced nearly half a cup of the venom out before the blood ran clear enough to suit him. Binding the wound to stop the flow of blood, he rose and washed his hands, then built a fire. He had done all that he could and now it was up to the big man.

Few enough men survived the bite of any spider, and he did not know enough about these to predict the effects of their venom, nor for that matter, the amount that might have been injected. All he could do now was hope that the other's magnificent constitution would throw off the shock. Disease was unknown to the people, and with bones stronger than their armor, any wound that could cripple was usually fatal first. The result was an almost complete ignorance of medicine, and only Clever, with his highly specialized skills, could have done this much for his friend. The others simply lacked the requisite knowledge.

Without warning, the man on the bunk began to lash out wildly, and the inventor threw himself astride the convulsed body to hold the other down. The convulsions increased, and reaching for a coil of cord, the smaller man succeeded in lashing the struggling Tall to the bunk, preventing him from injuring himself. Soaked in sweat, he rose and moistened a cloth, pressing it to the fevered forehead of the stricken giant. Twice more during the long night he was forced to deal with spasms, but by dawn they had ceased, and betrayed by his fatigue, the smaller man slept despite his determination to remain awake.

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His heart thudding with fear, he snapped awake at the cessation of the irregular breathing from the bunk. Leaping to his feet, he saw that the big man was still alive, but the massive chest muscles were immobile except for recurrent waves of shudders. The venom had evidently paralyzed the lungs, and the inventor flung himself atop the still form, placing his mouth to Tall's and blowing with all of the force in his lungs. For almost an hour the artificial respiration continued, then the lungs began to function normally, and by noon the last trace of paralysis was gone.

While the big man's breathing was still hoarse and heavily labored, it no longer sounded in the choking rasp that had marked the earlier stages of the seizure.

"Skinny, look out!" Tall yelled, in his delirium. "It's coming right at you!"

"Tall, Tall!" Clever shook his friend as the struggling man continued to yell commands and warnings. "What's the matter?" He put his hand to the other's forehead. "Delirious with fever. Damn, if that fever keeps up, it'll kill him by itself."

"Clever, Clever!" Tall yelled. "Look out, they're coming up! Get out of here. Don't stop for me!"

"I'm here, Tall. We both got away. It's all right, I'm here."

There was no recognition in the wild blue eyes as Clever changed the cloth.

As the raving continued, and the big man relived past fights, Clever realized that each time a man had died under Tall's leadership, he had felt personally responsible. His friend's soul was being shown naked, and it was a measure of the man on the bunk that in the revelation, the inventor only found more to admire.

Near dawn, the fever broke, and the comatose state into which the stricken man had fallen lapsed into normal sleep. The skin had sloughed away from the blistered leg, but the calf was back to its normal size and the wound was beginning to heal. Fortunately, infections were as unknown as other disease to their race. When Clever was sure that the spasms would not return, he untied his friend.

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Hours later, the man on the bunk sat up, his face calm and the blue eyes rational. "Hi, Clever. How long have I been out?"

"Three days. Are you hungry?" Clever dropped the leafhopper he was carrying and began to shed his armor.

"Starved. I saw those damned things coming, but I couldn't get out of the way fast enough. I guess I was bitten."

"You were! You scared the hell out of me, coming out of there with that spiderling hanging onto your leg. Hey, watch it!"

"Ouch!" The big man had started to swing his injured leg off the bunk, but halted, wincing with pain.

"You're going to have to stay off that leg for at least a week. You just lay there, like the lazy slob you are, and let me worry about taking care of anything you need."

"Nursemaid at my age." Tall grinned feebly, his face drawn. "Did I give you much trouble?"

"A little, but don't worry, if you'd gotten too far out of hand, I'd have taken you back and fed you to the spiders, though, you'd probably be so tough that the young hellions would die of indigestion."

"Damn it, Clever! How stupid can I get? I didn't even think to check for young."

"Neither did I. You were pretty lucky at that—there must have been close to a hundred of those things down there. Either this is their natural hatching season, or they spend the winter in the nest." He finished slicing two steaks from the leafhopper and dropped them to sizzle on the frying stone. "By the way, did you find anything down there?"

"Nothing. I went down to native rock, but the stuff in the bottom is just what you'd expect in a spider hole. That midden was used by the whole bunch, so we'll have to check them all. If we can figure out some way to clean them out first, that is." He ran a hand through the gold-red shock of hair. "There may be some way to do it, at that. Do you remember that huntsman spider we bombed with your new stench oil back when we were building the nettings?"

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"You mean the one that died from the blistering? What has— Hell yes! It should work at that. The stuff hangs in pretty large droplets, and in a closed area like that . . . It should kill, all right."

"I think so too. If we toss a couple of our bombs into the hole, when the stuff settles I can go down with a mask."

"It's going to be rather risky, but I'm sure the oil will kill in that close a space, Tall. Those things are still small."

Tall's hand brushed the discarded greave beside his bunk, and he lifted it to examine the punctures in the quarter inch plate.

"I sure hope so, Clever."

He healed quickly, spending his time in mending and refurbishing his own and Clever's armor and weapons. Clever set to gather raw materials from the jungles, and in a makeshift apparatus, distilled out several gallons of the stench oil to supplement their meager store.

"I don't hear anything down there, do you?" the big man said, as he cocked his head above the bore, the mask protecting him from the whisps of yellow vapor that drifted from the opening.

"No, it seems to have done the job. Remember, if you get into trouble, jerk twice and I'll get you out of there." The inventor finished tying the line to its anchor. "How's the leg?"

"Still sore, of course, but I'll be all right. Here goes nothing."

Three hours later the explorer emerged from the last of the burrows.

"Damn! That's every burrow that could have been connected with the midden, and there's nothing in any of them—not a trace."

"Perhaps if we start over them again?"

"No. If there'd been anything down there, I'd have found it. I took up the entire bottom liner every time." The big man turned to examine the midden in frustration.

"Your dad may not have found anything, after all, Tall.

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Or he may have been attacked in the jungle and lost his spear and pouch before he got here."

"Maybe, but maybe not. Take a look at that midden. Am I crazy, or is there fresh material on it?"

"I don't see how there could be. It's been almost three weeks since we cleaned this place out. . . . By God, you're right! And look at the way it's distributed. It would have to have come from the *far* slope—the other side of that ridgel!"

"And we found Dad on the far side." Tall started down the grade towards the midden, Clever close behind him.

"Freeze! Something's coming up the other side." The big man raised his bow then froze immobile as a massive pair of hairy legs extended over the rim of the ridge, followed by the now hated square face of a trap-door spider. If the others had been large, this was a titan. The gleaming circlet of eyes surveyed the countryside from twenty-five feet in the air, and in a pair of six-foot fangs, she bore the dry remains of an eight-foot gray wolf spider, one of the largest of the hunting spiders. Dropping her garbage, she backed out of sight.

"That, my friend, is the great-grandmother of every spider that ever lived. I didn't think anything got that big!" the inventor said, looking up to the point where the creature had vanished.

"A mantis gets taller, but it wouldn't run half the weight of that baby's head alone. Clever, with all due respect to your toy, we're not going to take that horror with these pin-shooters."

"You're right about that. It's going to take a spearthrower, at least. I don't have enough venom, anyway. We'll have to start from scratch."

"We don't stand a chance of bombing one of these holes by hand." Tall turned to study the construction of the nearest door. "Not as long as the spider is able to fight. How about a bomb thrower? Could we get enough oil into the hole to do any good?"

"I doubt it. The thing would just be driven out into the open, and we'd be back where we started. That armor is

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probably too thick to blister. No, we have to start with a spearthrower, and take it from there."

"How about venom?"

"We won't have any widow toxin, or centipede stuff, for that matter, but I think I can find something better. Come on."

Turning, he led the way back into the jungle, and an hour later the two men stood beneath an immense orb web, the home of a shamrock spider. But the twelve-ton weaver was no longer in her house, and in her place sat several six-foot arachnids, their bodies gleaming patterns of black and red.

"Pirate spiders. I see what you've got in mind." He raised his bow and jointly the two men proceeded to shoot the spiders from the confines of the web.

"Right. We don't hunt them, normally, because the venom is so highly specialized. But they feed on spiders, and this stuff." He knelt to begin milking the swollen chelicerae of the first victim. "It's specialized just the way we need it. It's deadlier than hell against arachnids. Now if it just works the same on that thing. . . ."

With a grunt Tall levered the last of the bowstrings back into its catch, dropped the crowbar, and turned to step into the sheltered alcove.

"That's the last of them, Clever. How are you coming with the spears?"

"All filled. Any sign of her yet?"

"No, not a trace. Damn it, two weeks to get ready, and three days moving this stuff up here, and the only look we've even had is the one that first day. But she's down there, all right."

"I still don't believe the size of that hole," the inventor said as he rose and stepped out onto the deep ledge that overlooked a large flat area. "You could put a couple of houses on that lid." He turned back. "How long do you figure before she comes out?"

"It's hard to say. Depends mostly on when she fed last,

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unless we're lucky, and she comes out to dump at the midden again."

The day wore on without a trace, and the men netted over the mouth of the alcove and cooked dinner, preparing for an all-night siege.

"I hope this pirate venom works as well on that thing as it does on most spiders," Tall said as he examined the dull gleam from the spearhead. "We still don't know if this stuff will hold up long enough to get through that armor, either."

"It ought to." The inventor handed his friend a steaming plate of stew. "That stuff is laminated three times, and you couldn't make it much thicker and still leave space for the venom and the plunger. As for the venom, the smaller ones died fast enough from our regular mix, and I've got two of the spears with that in them. But I think the pirate venom ought to work, now that I've had a chance to dissect one of those spiderlings we gassed."

"What did you decide?"

"They're different from a regular spider, all right. For one thing, they've got four lungs instead of the normal two and tracheal tube set up, and there are other differences. But offhand their structure is close enough to an arachnid's to treat them as the same thing for our purposes."

"There's another thing, though," Tall pointed out. "The spiders we met at first were adults, but this thing's three times their size. Maybe this is another new species."

"Not necessarily," said Clever. "They probably live some years, and possibly moult after reaching adulthood. There are a few spiders that do, you know, and they always keep on growing." He seated himself with his own plate. "Or it may just be a giant of its kind. The trap seems to be identical to the smaller ones, and from what little we saw of the thing itself, I'd say it was the same species."

"Then the outer armor is going to be pretty thick. I wonder—those other things, then, were probably offspring of this one. I sure—" Tall broke off as there was a rattle from below them in the darkness. "Beetle, from the sound. It's going into the clearing."

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They stared into the darkness as from below them came the sound of the trap being thrown back, followed by a short but sharp battle, and the sound of the trap falling back into place.

"Damn. That means she's fed," said Tall. "This looks like a long wait."

X

"LOOK AT THE size of that wasp, Tall. There's a match for your spider, if there ever was one," Clever said, turning to follow the flight of the gleaming, black hymenopteron that had suddenly flown out of the south to start a spiral above the clearing.

"She must think so, too. That's a spider huntress, and she's landing. This is going to be a fight worth seeing. I've known them to last three or four hours, or more." Tall glanced at the sun. "It's a good thing we've got at least seven hours of sun left."

"She's trying to open that hole," Clever said, digging his toes in and pushing himself closer to the edge.

"I hope she makes it. We could use a break after two days of cooking up here. Damn, it's hot."

Queenly with her folded wings, the insect was astride the silk and earth plug, pulling at it with mandibles as long as Tall's arm. The lid yielded, only to be violently slammed from below. If she won the ensuing fight, the wasp would leave the paralyzed spider in its hole, to be eaten alive by her voracious grubs.

Again the hymenopteron levered up, and the men had a brief glimpse of hair legs clinging to the underside as the door lifted, only to be pulled down again. Abandoning her efforts, the insect stepped with surprising daintiness to the center of the circle and began to chew away the tough material. The efficient burrowing mandibles cut quickly. The occupant evidently realized its peril, for this time the wasp's effort to lever up the plug was met with success.

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"She's going down after the spider. I hope she drives it up into the open, where we can get a shot at it." Tall edged yet closer.

For a moment the insect had stood in mused perturbation, then when she had made up her mind, she dived into the burrow. The silence with which the fight had been conducted was suddenly shattered as from the depths came the angry battlecry of the hymenopteron. The spider evidently was not getting the worst of it, since a moment later the insect emerged and backed out of the hole. Pausing for only a moment, she dived back into the abyss, and once more the wasp's battlecry mingled with the frenzied thrash of the spider.

Again the huntress reappeared at the rim of the pit, driven back from beneath, but this time the spider was not content to let its foe escape unscathed, and it swarmed out after the insect. Grappling at the wasp with the elongated front legs, the spider drove forward to bury the pickax fangs, but the hymenopteron broke free and the fangs met empty air. Taking to the air, the huntress dived vengefully back, the four-foot blade at the tip of the abdomen doubled beneath as she tried for the thrust into the nerve center that should end the fight.

"She's got the spider, now, Tall."

"No she hasn't. She got the sting in, but look at the spider. It isn't even slowing down!"

Again the wasp sunk the rapier home, but the spider twitched its fifty-foot bulk with a grace that belied its mass, and deliberately rolled to one side, attempting to crush its rider. Flung free, the insect staggered to her feet and tried to take to the air. But it was too slow, as the spider, its vitality evidently undimmed by the poisoned thrusts it had taken, battered it down with its long forelegs, and a moment later the entire body reared as the picks were driven home. Mortally wounded, the wasp managed to twist enough to drive the rapier through the thick underbelly armor with an ease that was mute evidence of its strength, but without evident

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effect. The spider's venom was more effective, and the black insect at last died.

The men leaped to their weapons, swiveling the two spear-heads around, and as the spider pulled her fangs free, the first bolt flashed down to bury its six-foot length into the abdomen. Suffering from the wasp's venom, the spider reeled under two gallons of pirate-spider toxin, concentrated a dozen times. Driven by a bow ten-feet long with a fifteen-ton pull, Tall's shot streaked down faster than the sound of the string, the ten-pound shaft burrowing an incredible mass from its speed. His aim was perfect, and the bolt smashed into the thick skull, shattering the ridged plate and carrying razor-edged splinters of chitin into the wound. The spider was lurching drunkenly, and Tall leapt to help Clever reload. The third shot took the spider at the joint of the right third leg with the thorax, and a moment later they abandoned the attempt to reload Tall's weapon. It was no longer needed.

"Clever, look at this," Tall said, picking up an object from the ground. "I'll bet that if you looked hard enough in that thing up there, you'd find the head."

"It's a spear, all right." The inventor ran his light up the splintered shaft in the yellow murk that still hung in the air as a result of bombing the hole. "It wouldn't have done him much good, I'm afraid. Even with the new injection-spears and venoms it took three gallons, plus that wasp. With a flint head and the daub method . . ." He tossed the shaft onto a pile of dead spiderlings that littered the burrow floor.

"This is it! Dad's pouch," Tall exclaimed, as he uncoiled his lanky form from the shreds of the eighth layer of lining. "Let's get it open and see what's in it."

"Your father's notes, and a map. We can't do anything with it here, though. Let's get out of here. We have to get this back to Wise as soon as possible." He turned and began to climb the wall, Tall following.

"Wonderful!" The old scholar looked up at the two battered adventurers. "You've read this of course."

"As much as we could. We've been moving for three

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weeks, and moving too fast to get much else done." Tall sank onto the chair.

"It's no wonder you two found his camp. His route must have almost paralleled our own." The old man scanned the weathered map.

"What do you make of that marking, Grandfather?" Clever asked, resting a finger on the point in question.

"It has to be the growth, of course. There's nothing else of that size or prominence in this end of the valley. And this must be the gorge!"

"Right. And according to the journal, Ranger found something that he thought would lead him to the origins of the Ten up a steep canyon *behind* a gorge filled with caves. We've been sitting on the answer all of the time, and didn't know it." Clever slapped the table.

"There can be no mistake, either. There's no formation this side of the river that could be taken for this gorge, and most assuredly not between the river and the growth." Tall rose to study the map. "That means that Dad got at least this far, and evidently somewhat further. But what's bothering me is how?"

"Beside the streams, surely," Wise said, looking up in surprise.

"No. There's no shelf or bank in that canyon, and the water runs too fast and deep to wade. Even before the dam was built, Clever and I had to abandon any attempt to go upstream. Believe me, it was impassable." He turned and studied the diary. "If only Dad hadn't been so insistent about having gone up the gorge. I'd be willing to swear that you'd have to go five or ten miles to even find a place to scale the cliffs. I wish he could have been more specific, too."

"I think I've got the passage: 'Think we've found it. Day's march up from valley.'" The inventor read on, the clipped notes strange when spoken. "Can't be positive, but when can clear interior of caverns, should have thing or two to show Wise. Tall old enough to come with us?—that's a question—'Two of us might do more before leaving.' The next passage deals with his return route."

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"And that's all he said." Wise rose. "Tall, how would you describe the opening this building is constructed in?"

"A large cave, I suppose. Why?"

"You wouldn't describe it as a cavern?" The scholar tapped the page.

"You could, I suppose—but what are you driving at?"

"Tall, you are a lot more like your father than you realize, and you wouldn't have called any of these caves 'caverns.' Your mind doesn't run that way."

"That's right, Tall." Clever's worn face grew animated. "The only time I've ever heard you use that word was for those burrow networks we explored four years ago."

"Of course." The narrow face glowed with comprehension. "If he couldn't have gone over the mountains, or up the gorge, he'd have had to go *under* them! And another thing, Clever. We've been over all of the caves since we've been here, and with a fine-toothed comb. Why haven't we found any trace of a camp?"

"That's right!" Wise was as excited as the younger men. "And if any such discovery had been made since you left, I would have heard about it."

"One thing's sure, he wouldn't have spent the night in the open, not with all these caves. We'll have to search with a finer comb, and . . . Hold it, I've got an idea that may save us some time." He grabbed at a pile of maps, spilling several on the floor in his haste. "Where is that damned map? There! I thought so!"

The others crowded in to find the inventor poring over a map marked off with a series of curving lines inked with numerals.

"What's that, Clever?"

"When I was planning the sewer and water systems, I had to know which way the ground sloped, so I had this map made. Those lines mark off a given level of ground above the level of the streambed, and all points of the same elevation are connected by the lines. Look at this!" His finger shot down to come to rest at a steep V that left the river at a short angle to touch the base of the cliff in a rounded

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basin. "Unless I'm mistaken, whatever cave lies at this point is the one we want!"

"How do you figure that?" Tall asked, puzzling over the map.

"There are only two things that can hollow out a mountain. One is burrowing insects, and the other is water, lots of it. Since we know that water cut this gorge, it was a better than even chance the water was responsible. When water moves, it leaves tracks. See how the sea lines curve towards the cliffs? Something wore the ground down there, and that's where the water came out of the cliffs. Ten-to-one, that's where the entrance to the caverns is."

"Well, don't just stand there, let's go. Can you find this place?"

"I should be able to—our house is almost on top of it!"

Exploding from the building, the two men dashed across the path to their home, covering half the distance before realizing that the scholar, for all of his years, was hot at their heels. Coming to a stop at the gentle dip that marked the intersection of the notch and the wall, they excitedly examined the cliff face.

"Nothing! Not even a crack. Could we have the wrong place?"

"I don't see how. The V ends here, and the nearest cave is the one our house is built into. There's nothing there, though. We both lived there for six weeks without finding any openings, before the house was built. Keep looking." Clever turned back to the rock.

"I'm afraid it's useless, youngsters," Wise said, after an hour of fruitless searching. "Did you find anything at all?"

"Nothing. The nearest caves are our house on one side and the centipede pen on the other, but the rise of the ground rules both of them out, according to Clever." The big man's face was disgusted.

"I'll have a party out at dawn, Tall. You can count on all of the help you need. I'll see you then, but you two had better get to sleep, you've been traveling in the woods for three weeks."

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"Do you want anything to eat? I can fix something," Clever asked as he held open the door to their house.

"No thanks, Clever. I'm not hungry." Tall crossed to the sideboard and poured two stiff drinks. "Here."

"Thanks." The inventor took the drink and the men sat before the empty fireplace. "It's getting dark, I'd better get the lights out."

"Damn it, I thought we had it at last. It made so much damned sense! But that rock destroyed that theory fast enough—there isn't a pinhole in the surface, not to mention something a man could pass."

"Don't I know it." The inventor rose and began to unclip the lights from their storage brackets and hand them to Tall to be hung on the walls. "I know that groove was cut by water, but where did it come from?"

"It's enough to make you jump up and down and swear!"

"What did you say?" Clever looked up suddenly.

"Just that it's enough to make you pretty mad."

"No, before that, something about jumping."

"I said, 'It's enough to make you jump up and down and . . .'"

"Jump up! That's it, Tall! Look, what's the next cave past that point from here?"

"The centipede pen, but . . ."

"Look, do you remember when we fought that centipede on the North bank? The time we had the twins with us. We couldn't outrun it indefinitely, so we—"

"Jumped up onto an overhanging ledge. Of course, and if the centipede were there when Dad arrived, he would have done the same thing. There must be a ledge up there!"

Still dressed in their field gear, the men dashed from the house, pausing only long enough to grab lamps and helmets. Stopping at the base of the cliff, they watched a growing line of shadow above them cast by the sinking sun. A moment later the big man gathered himself into a single tremendous leap to land thirty feet above on the ledge, the smaller man following a moment later.

"No sign of an entrance up here, either, Tall. What now?"

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"We're not above that gorge yet, and if you're right, the entrance should be right above it—about thirty feet to the right of here. Come on."

"That's it!" Clever stopped at the narrow slot that was cut back into the cliff face for a dozen yards. "There's the entrance, up there." The two men squeezed past the narrow portal to emerge into a vast opening only dimly lit by their lamps.

"There's been a fire here." Tall knelt beside the circle of charcoal on the floor. "This is his camp, all right."

"What's that!" Clever had cautiously moved deeper into the gloom, and as the big man leaped erect and joined him, he was pointing his bow at a white mass looming at the edge of the illumination.

"Cricket. Dad was here all right, you can see where the spear went in." Tall moved beside the long dead insect.

"What do you make of this, Tall? Look at the head—there's no sign of eyes. And the white coloration."

"Blind, and judging by the mandible, carnivorous."

"And an albino. In other words, adapted to living in the dark you'd find in a large cavern system."

"Take a look at this, Clever. Footprints. One set in and one out. Shall we follow them?"

"If they don't go too far. Let's find out." They followed the double line of prints, clearly marked in the soft dust.

"He's plugged the way, for some reason, Tall." Clever stepped forward to examine the ten-ton boulder that was jammed against wall and roof, the lever still protruding beneath it. "I'm beginning to wonder how my reading of 'the way is blocked' should be changed. Maybe he didn't mean by rock." He stepped back. "I think we'd better get a full party up here in the morning, before we move that plug."

"I'm against getting too many men up here," said Tall. "In close quarters like this, two men are worth fifty, and the more people you have, the more chance that someone will get hurt." They turned back towards the entrance. "But Dad was worried by something when he put that plug into place, and he was the very bravest man I've ever known."

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We're going to get together everything we can find to fight with, and then some. When we open that hole, I want to be ready for anything that comes out."

"We'll have to use gas in close quarters in here. I'd better make some changes to the helmets, too."

For half an hour the men in the cavern followed the leading footprints through a series of narrowing and widening passages much like that of the entry chamber. They could hear well enough, since ear membranes were essential to survival and had been included as a matter of course, but speech was impossible. Tall, who was in the lead by a step, stopped and his friend came up beside him as he knelt to examine a patch of soft soil. The outgoing tracks were even, but the ones that led back to the exit showed only the heavy toeprints of a running man, and over two of the prints was pressed a pattern of curious scuff marks.

Rising, Tall turned to his friend, who shook his head to indicate that the spoor was totally unknown to him also. Continuing, they came to a bend, and rounded it to stop in amazement as the walls, which had so far been plain granite, suddenly became blazing curtains of light and color as mineral deposits caught and flung back the gleam of the phosphorescent lamps.

They resumed their walking, only to stop again as from one side came the flash of something moving. Two bows flashed up together, only to be dropped as into the light blundered a pale white ghost a foot and a half in length. As they started towards it, the short bristles that covered the soft body quivered, and the thing turned to scabble for cover on two pairs of legs, the third extended to serve in place of the missing antennae. The gait was ludicrous and the men laughed as they moved on.

As they worked their way down the seemingly endless chain of caverns, they passed several more of the comical floppers and another blind albino of about the same size marked by antennae that made up three fourths of the total length of six feet. Neither long-horned crawlers nor floppers

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seemed dangerous; scuttling out of sight at the men's approach they could not have been the cause of Tall's father's long-ago flight. Twice more they encountered the mystifying scuffs overlaid on the earlier spoor, but there was still no clue as to the maker.

At last the cavern chain ended, in a long tubular passage, and as they neared the end of the ten mile bore, the men could see light ahead of them. But as they approached, Tall realized that if it was daylight, it was, at best, considerably filtered, and a moment later his suspicious nature was vindicated as the two men emerged to stand on a ledge overlooking a wide chamber almost overgrown with phosphorescent fungus.

Tall turned to say something to his friend, then swore as the thick helmet mangled the words beyond recognition. Tapping Tall on the shoulder instead, he pointed at the row of tracks that led along the ledge to the right. On the floor of the cavern glowed several golden drops of light, and as the men approached, these soared away with a clearly audible click, but there was no time to investigate.

For four miles they followed the track, which dipped briefly to the level of the floor to rise again into another ledge. The second ledge rose steeply, and they were thirty feet above the level of the plain when the footprints in the dust turned into another cave, similar to the one they had left at the far side of the plain. Entering it, the men saw the surface of the floor almost covered with the cryptic scuff marks. Evidently they were about to learn what the mysterious beast was.

With drawn bows, the men entered the chamber. Tall noted that the tracks, if such they were, converged to the entrance from several side entrances. There was no sign of life in any of the tubes, and the men continued, still fully alert, to come to a stop as they found their way barred by a jumbled pile of debris from some ancient fall of part of the roof.

There was only one way to go, and the pile proved easily climbed. They could not prevent loose debris from rolling

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down the sides as they ascended, and as they paused for a moment, the echoes were still rattling in the tube. As the last clattering sound died, the men turned to examine the perch on which they stood, only to freeze as from the darkness beneath them came the unmistakable sounds of movement—followed a moment later by a similar warning from the far side of the pile. They were trapped.

XI

TALL SPUN and cast the beam of his lamp back the way they had come. Just at the limits of the glow he could see a man-sized bulk, and as he watched, it was joined by a second and a third. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that Clever was facing a similar situation on the opposite slope. A rattle of stone warned him, and he snapped his attention back to find the first two of the unknowns full in the light and coming up the pile. The flat white skull was eyeless, but it bore a two-foot caliper of gleaming black needles, and it took no familiarity with species to know that it was dangerous.

There was the flat crack of a bowstring behind him, and a moment later his own shot tumbled the oncoming insect back to the foot of the slope. As he tugged at the string, four more of the insects surged up out of the dark, and he shot the leader, then dropped the useless bow and snatched his six-foot spear from its clips at his back. The first of the assailants was met with a vicious jab, and with the same motion he tore out the point and smashed the butt into the head of the second with a force that smashed the skull. The third insect met the fate of the first, but already another wave was on its way up.

The spear joined the bow as the big man stooped to scoop up a six-foot boulder and fling it into the close-packed insects. The four tons of stone tore through the pack to add to the growing pile of carcasses at the foot of the slope. Turning, he was just in time to save Clever, his mailed

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foot lashing out with a force that sent the attacking insect spinning out into space as the inventor dealt with another assailant by smashing it with his bow butt. Tall stooped to lift a boulder, and the other nodded to show that he understood.

A new rattle called his attention to his own slope, and as he turned, the lamp at his belt caught another of the close packs. Again the stones rained down on the horde, adding to the slaughter, but the insects continued to pour out of the darkness. As the battle raged, he could hear Clever emulating his tactics behind him, but he knew that they could not hold out much longer before the sheer weight of numbers carried them under. Individually the insects were small, only the size of a man, but their actions marked them as being similar to ants in their behavior; if they were social insects, the men had started a full-scale war that could only end one way. Only their position of isolation had saved them thus far.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the attack ceased, and from the gloom below rose a weird stridulation almost at the upper limits of hearing. Tall recognized that the respite was temporary, the cry a signal for reinforcements. Tapping the smaller man on the shoulder, he turned to point to the only means of escape, a narrow crack that ran into the wall and had been filled with debris to the level on which the two men stood. It was difficult, but the two men worked their way through the narrow opening as the stridulation rose in pitch behind them and the sound of the attack up the slope resumed. As they emerged into a large chamber, Tall seized one of the loose boulders that littered the floor and plugged the entrance, turning to reload his reclaimed bow.

"Tall, look here."

The big man turned to find the inventor, his helmet removed, kneeling over the now familiar footmarks.

"Your father must have gotten at least this far. But how did he get out of here? I only saw that one entrance, and the roof is solid. Do you see any . . ." There was a hiss and something splattered against the rock beside the inventor's head,

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emitting a puff of green vapor. A fatuous expression came into his tanned face, and the smaller man slumped suddenly to the floor.

In a single motion Tall raised and fired at the insect that still stood in the far exit, a curl of the greenish mist still rising from the long snout attached to the flat, white skull. As the bolt sang home, it spit again, and the big man ducked as the sticky globule missed his head by inches. As the insect was drawn back from the far side of the wall, the big man leaped forward, but before he could find a boulder to plug the hole and end the threat, another of the long snouts was at the entry, and in mid-stride the man once more turned to his spear, aiming to strike the beast's bulbous skull.

Sick and dazed, Clever struggled back to consciousness and groping for the helmet, put it on, and then looked for his friend. As he rose, he watched as Tall stood guard at the exit, the heavy ax rising and falling as he fought in a pool of blood floating from a score of severed heads at his feet. His spear was gone, pulled back by a dying insect, but he had not left his post—the entry was still blocked.

Fighting his nausea, the inventor fumbled at his belt and opened the carefully packed pouch of oil flasks. Waiting until he could catch the big man's eye and warn him aside, he flipped three of the bombs in rapid succession, and a cloud of yellow vapor filled the low archway, dropping the lead insect in agony. A moment later Tall leaped to the nearest boulder, and the second exit was blocked as firmly as the first. Turning away from the stone, he was just in time to catch his friend as the smaller man collapsed once again.

"Headache?" Tall grinned as the smaller man at last awoke to rise and seize his temples. "You've been out quite a while."

"The granddaddy of all headaches. What got me, anyway?"

"Nothing fatal, evidently. We just weren't the first ones to think of gas bombs. There's a type of warrior that uses an elongated snout to fire a drop of gum that gives off a gas when it hits."

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"Why didn't you use our own bombs? That was the first thing I thought of."

"With you laid out ten feet away and your helmet off?"

"Ouch. That one hurt. But I had it coming, it was a pretty stupid stunt. If we could talk through these damned helmets . . ."

"You were luckier than either of us realized, though." Tall shone his light on a gleaming figure that lay to one side. "He got that gum in the face."

"One of the Ten! Where did you find him?" Reverently he knelt beside the gleaming armor.

"Laid out in one corner. Look at the face, though."

"Ugh. And that came within an inch of me." Involuntarily the inventor touched his own face as he started away from the horribly eaten skull that stared up through a thick layer of yellow gum, dry and brittle now with age.

"If either of us had been hit, Clever, we'd have suffocated at best, probably worse. From the way that skull is eaten, and the way the helmet was pitted, I'd say it is also a powerful corrosive."

"Twenty-three generations he's lain here, Tall. Almost eight hundred years." There was awe in the voice. "One of our ancestors."

"What's more important, he's definite proof that this was the route of the Ten."

"Did you find anything on the cadaver? Maps, notes, or papers of any kind?"

"No. I checked, but if there were any, they're gone now. Right now I'm more worried about how we're going to get out of here. This is as far as Dad made it—the tracks stop here, and if there's a way out it's through that second hole. I'm for turning back until we can figure out some way to clean those things out."

"I'm afraid you're right. There shouldn't be too much trouble in getting out, though. Your father must have made a dash for it, and we'll have the stench bombs to cover our own run. Those things don't seem to move too rapidly anyway."

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"Do you feel up to moving?"

"I'm all right, except for the headache. Let's go."

The two men rose and crossed to the entrance, putting their helmets back into place. As Tall rolled the stone aside, Clever rapidly heaved a half dozen bombs into the opening, and a moment later the men wormed out to begin their dash for the open air.

"Wise! They're back," someone yelled, as Tall and Clever emerged from the cavern.

The scholar snapped out of his nap and leaped to his feet, running towards the two men.

"Are you both all right?" He grasped his grandsons as the younger men dumped a large white form on the floor and wrenched off their helmets.

"Fine, Grandfather," Clever said. "Slim, get that boulder back into place. We were ambushed on the way out, and there's a full scale war party on our tails!"

"We brought back a sample, Wise," Tall said, as he rolled the quiet burden over with one foot to reveal one of the scimitar-jawed warriors with a bolt in its skull. "This thing was right behind us when we came out."

"Why it's a termite. I've never seen one, but I've heard them described, by your father, Tall."

"There's one of the Ten—or rather, a body in armor like the Ten's—in a cave in there. We were stopped cold by those—termites did you call them?"

"Yes, termites. But you did definitely establish that this was the route of the Ten?"

"It certainly looks like it, Grandfather. There's no mistaking that armor, that's for certain. Those termites explain a lot, too. For one thing, now we know the answer to why they haven't reached us first. They may not even know we're here, in fact it's almost certain that they don't."

"What's more important, we're finally on the doorstep of answering the question of our own origins. Think of the records they must have. If we can trace our own ancestors for twenty-three generations, we may find information leading

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still further back into the past. And to find out where man arose, and why he is so different from the insects. A lifetime of knowledge waiting there once we can get past the termites."

"That's the rub." Tall stared moodily at the dead insect. "How do we do it?"

"With a more potent gas!" Clever said. "If I can make one that will kill without needing a sufficient concentration to blister, I think I know how to do enough damage to get them out of our hair."

The two adventurers blinked in the afternoon sun. They had been in the dark for nearly two days. Taking leave of the others, the weary pair started for their own home.

"What the hell?" Tall stared at the cloud of dust billowing from the door of the house, then relaxed as it was followed by Star, broom in hand. The girl turned to call into the house, then rounded on the approaching men.

"How can you two live in such a mess? I don't think this house has been touched for months!"

"Three months to be exact, darling." Clever laughed. "We've only been in it one night since we left to hunt down the trapdoor spiders."

"Oh darling, I've missed you so much." The girl flew down the steps and into the inventor's arms. "I just thought I'd clean up a little while you were gone, and surprise you when you got back."

Tall ducked quickly into the house to avoid intruding, but as he set his helmet and weapons into the racks beside the door and began to strip his armor, a sharp cry rang out behind him.

"Tall!" Bright dropped the pan she had been carrying. "Where have you been? You came back without even saying hello, and then ran off before I could even see you, and without even a good-bye. How can you be so thoughtless—and Wise told me you were nearly killed when you were hunting those spiders!" Her green eyes showed tears glistening over the dancing highlights.

"Bright, I'm sorry." He looked at her unhappily. Beneath

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a disordered pile of auburn hair, the green eyes showed her concern. Without thinking he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Her arms crept up his bare back and locked around his neck as she pressed him to her as though afraid that he would go away again without warning, and he kissed her again, this time with more feeling.

With an almost crystal clarity he realized then how much the girl loved him, and how much he loved her in return. But with this thought, his old doubts flooded back, and she saw them in his eyes. Pressing her head against his shoulder, she began to cry softly.

"Bright, it isn't fair to you, I know." He stroked her hair tenderly, trying to ease the flow of tears. "You have to understand why it just can't be. You know how you felt when you heard that I'd almost been killed, and I can't ask you to take a life of that."

"I don't care, Tall! I love you too much. All I ask is to have what little time you can spare me." His heart against her skipped as she turned her tear-stained face upwards in all of its beauty. "Is that so very much to ask?"

"Bright, I wish I could tell you how much I love you, but . . ." Her finger sealed his lips.

"That's all you have to say, ever! If we have only a few hours to spend together, then they will have to be enough. But I must spend them with you, Tall. At least that much."

With the same penetration, he saw that she was speaking only the truth. There could never be anyone else, not for either of them, and he was hurting her more by his seeming reluctance than he could ever hurt her by leaving her a widow. Behind him he heard the door open as Star and Clever entered, and with a sudden resolve, the big man turned to face them.

"Clever, when are you two going to make it stick? Any objections to tomorrow?"

"None, why?" The inventor eyed his friend with a dawning comprehension. "Congratulations, Tall."

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"You don't mind making it a double wedding, then, do you?"

Dawn found the two men up and carefully dressing, and when the girls arrived to meet them, the four walked towards the big building on the cliff wall. There had not been time for an announcement, but the girls friends had done a thorough job of spreading the news and Tall was startled to find the entire population of the colony crowded in front of the porch where Wise awaited them beside a small table. They had merely planned on having the scholar make the required entries in the records to seal the marriage, but evidently the old man had other ideas.

"Are you two damned fools still bent on it?" He grinned, showing his excitement and pleasure. "Here's where I get even with you two smart-alec sprouts."

"Men!" He said, turning to the assemblage without further preliminary. "Here is Clever Wise, son of Teacher, son of Wise. It is proposed that he take as wife Starlike Potter, of the line of Builder, to join the line of Builder with that of Wise, of which he is the direct descendant by the oldest line. An examination of the records shows no such bar to such a marriage, and if any knows of such bar, let him speak that the records may show his objections."

There was only silence, and taking up a pen, the old scholar expertly entered the girl's name onto a scroll that listed his own line.

"It is duly entered upon the records of the line of Wise that Clever Wise has declared before the proper witness that he has taken Starlike Potter to be his wife. Let no man come between them." He opened the second scroll.

"Men! Here is Tall Seeker, son of Ranger, son of Tall, known as Grandpa. It is proposed that he take as wife Bright Potter, of the line of Builder with that of Seeker, of which he is the direct descendant by the oldest line. An examination . . ."

The ceremony concluded, the crowd ceased to be silent and immobile and surged around the newlyweds, mobbing them with congratulations, and a moment later Potter ram-

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med his way through the mass to embrace his new sons and his daughters with unabashed joy.

"Come on, everyone. Nobody's had breakfast yet, so I've got it for all of you. Flame's waiting for us, so let's go!" The throng surged down the valley, and as they entered the gate of Potter's yard, the girls' mother ran out to embrace her daughters and their new husbands.

XII

"How's IT COMING, Clever?" Tall entered the small cave that now housed their laboratory and set a large flask on the bench.

"I don't know for sure, yet. Do you remember the formula we tried yesterday? I made a couple of changes in it this morning while you were down at the pens. The first trial flopped, but I think I know why now. This may be it. Get one of the test specimens into the cage, and let's try it."

"Right!" Tall stepped to a large rack of cages and lifted one containing a four-foot ant, transferring the insect to a large cage that stood in the middle of a stained pit. "Will we need armor, or will masks be enough?"

"Better put on armor." Clever looked up from the flask he was cautiously warming. "This stuff is still untried—it may blister." Setting aside the flask, he climbed into his own light armor and the two men snapped on the totally enclosed helmets, now modified with a membrane to permit speech.

"All set?" Clever took the flask as the big man joined him on the low platform overlooking the test pit.

"Right. Go ahead, I'll take the notes." Tall stood before a high table and took up a pen.

"Here it goes." The flask made a short arc to strike the hard floor of the pit.

As it struck, there was a clear "pop" and a cloud of greenish-gray smoke caressed the caged ant with a delicate tendril. It was only a puff of smoke, but the insect convulsed

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at the contact, and amid the last traces of vapor remained a silently curled ball. The entire episode lasted less than a second.

"*That* is some stuff, Clever," Tall said, staring at the contorted insect. "Not even our best venom works that fast! How much did you use?"

"About three ounces, liquid measure."

"Three *ounces*?" The tone was incredulous. The cloud had been as large as that of the old stench bombs. "I thought the old bombs had three *pints*."

"They did, but that's all of this stuff it takes. The trick I was looking for was to heat the fluid after I sealed the flask. The liquid has a funny trick. It becomes a gas at a fairly low temperature, and I haven't been able to get it cold enough to recondense it. The pressure inside the case goes up with temperature to some degree, but even at room temperature it is enough to spread a really fine cloud quite a ways. The old bombs threw a vapor that was rain compared to this stuff, and they settled out pretty fast."

"What makes it so much more potent?"

"I don't really know, Tall. By themselves, most of the ingredients are pretty nasty in concentration, but when you combine them, in just this one way, they reinforce each other. Some of the other mixes showed the same thing, less marked of course, and some of them end up weaker than any of the components. Whatever the reason, this is what we're looking for—it kills on contact."

"Which is just what we want. How long will it take to make the stuff in quantity?"

As they arrived home the men could hear the girls chatter as they prepared the evening meal. Tossing his cap onto the peg beside the door, Tall crept up to his bride of three weeks as she worked and grabbed her from behind.

"Hello, darling." She turned to kiss him with an unabated ardor. "You two look exhausted. Do you want a drink before dinner?"

"I'd sure appreciate one. How about you, Clever?"

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"Good and cold! Thank God that's the last of the lot. We'll be ready to go in the morning." He followed the big man into the living room and they sprawled into their chairs wearily, letting the blazing fire soak away the fatigue.

"Frankly, I'm anxious to get this over with. The sooner we can find out what's the other side of those caverns, the better I'll feel. Every time I turn around, I find something else nagging at me about this whole deal."

"I know just what you mean," Clever said. "We've been stopped short just at the threshold of the greatest discovery anyone ever made, and it's frustrating. Thanks, Bright." He took the dew-covered glass the girl offered, and she crossed to sit beside her husband.

"Star will be out in a minute, Clever." She handed another of the drinks to her lanky mate, showing in her eyes that she had missed him. "You know, Wise stopped by today to see you," she said.

"What did he want?" Tall asked.

"I don't know, darling. You two had such a stench coming out of that den of yours that he decided to come back later." Bright pulled his head down, and he yelped as she bit his ear. "I think you just do those things to get away from your wives!"

For an answer he suddenly spun her around on his lap, and holding the squirming girl easily with one hand, gave her a resounding swat on her seat with the other. He was about to do it again when a knock on the door saved her. Bright quickly squirmed to a more dignified position as Star opened the door to admit Wise and Gentle.

"Grandmother, how nice to see you." Clever rose to greet his grandparents. "I'm afraid I've been neglecting both of you."

"If I'd only been married for three weeks, you'd be neglected too!" Gentle said, her voice still girlish.

"He's right, though, Wise; we have been neglecting you," Tall said, placing a welcoming hand on the scholar's shoulder. "We should have invited you long before this."

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"This visit isn't social, Tall. Potter told me that today you two went into mass production of a new gas."

"That's right. Clever's really got something this time. Enough to give us the edge we've been looking for."

"Good! When do we leave?"

"We?"

"Yes, I'm coming with you. There is entirely too much at stake here to leave any opportunity to chance."

"I'm sorry, Grandfather. I'll have to veto that," Clever said as he handed his grandparents two drinks. "If we hit the same trouble that Tall and I ran into down there, and this gas doesn't work, it's the end for us all."

"Now you listen to me, sprout," Wise said, heatedly, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you! I'll take my chances with the others."

"Wise, have you ever seen an ant war at close range? This is going to be the same thing, but in confined quarters where there won't be anywhere to run if something goes wrong. We have to take those risks, it's our job—but it's not yours."

"It was my job before you were born, squirt! But with all respect to your own and my grandson's abilities, I can't leave anything this important to you."

"There'll be plenty of time for you to come after the road is cleared. Right now, I'll have to join Clever in vetoing the idea."

"Damn it, Tall. You don't understand. There's more at stake here than either of you realize," Wise said as he sat on a couch. "My entire life has been spent in searching for the answer to the riddle of what we are. Twenty-three generations, Tall, eight hundred years. Eight hundred years of endless war against the insects, of endless effort on the part of our two lines to keep man from sinking back into the morass of ignorance that followed the flood in the tenth generation, of endless effort on the part of us all to build our civilization to the point where man would no longer cower in the caves."

"And only curiosity to keep us going, Tall. The drive of our people to seek out answers for the sheer joy of it. It's a

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heritage, bred for all time from the ten men and women who founded this race. That's been the key to our survival since the beginning. That's what drove the first men to learn to make chitin armor and chip stone for weapons; that's what drove Clever of the twelfth generation to discover the use of venom; that's what drove you and Clever to make the discoveries that have suddenly made man the master in this world.

"Why did the Ten fail, Tall? What went wrong with a race of men that could build that armor and those blades, to drive it back to the level of our own ancestors—beasts cowering in the caves? We have to know that, or we won't survive ourselves. I'm an old man now, and there isn't much time left for me, but I've got to know before I die." He finished and the two younger men sat silent.

"I think I have at least part of the answer to that already, Wise," Tall said at last. "The insects got them. Look at their weapons—those blades are fine for chopping, but they'd be worse than useless against most insects. Without venom you can cut them to chunks and then be kept busy fighting the pieces. I know it sounds screwy, but I'm almost ready to swear that wherever they came from, there were none of the insects we know here. Perhaps we're looking at this thing from the wrong angle—the problem may be not where we came from, but where the insects came from."

"Even if that were the case," said Wise, "it's only another valid reason for me to go with you. There may have been immense changes in language, written and spoken, since the Ten left, for one thing, and if that is the case, I'll have to be there to read them or interpret."

"Tall," said Bright, "I think Wise is right. I vote for him coming along." She leaned on the broad shoulder beside her.

"You're taking your wife with you?" Wise asked.

"Yes. When she pulled that beetle off my back in the woods last week, I suddenly realized that there was a perfect answer to my problem in getting married. Five of the Ten were women, and the girls fought with the men on the migration. Until we have our first child, at least, Bright's

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going to be fighting alongside me from now on. I have an idea that she's going to be worth more than me."

"And you, Star? Are you going too?" Gentle turned to her new granddaughter.

"Definitely not. I don't see how Bright could stand it."

"As long as I'm with Tall, I'm not worried, and as long as I can protect his back, I'm not going to be a widow." Her green eyes flashed as she put a possessive arm around the big man.

"Clever, did you agree to this?" The older woman turned to her grandson.

"Completely. Tall and I are going to have our hands full, and I'd trust Bright to keep her head better than most of the men when the going gets really rough. When Tall told me about it, as a matter of fact, I was the one who made up his mind." Bright rewarded him with a dazzling smile.

"Be that as it may, how many men are you taking?" Wise rose and refilled his glass.

"Twenty-two, which with the three of us, makes it twenty-five."

"Will you give in on my coming? If Bright can take it, I guess I can, too."

"How do you feel about it, Grandmother?" Clever turned to Gentle.

"Just as Bright feels about you, Tall. Wise is my husband, and I love him enough to know that what he must do, he will, no matter what the risk."

"Wise, sometimes I wonder which of the three of us got the best bargain when we married," Tall said as he rose and clasped the older man's hand. "Welcome to the party."

The last clatter of the retreating men filled the cavern with a hollow ring as Tall rose from beside the weird device he had been assembling.

"Well, the nets are set," Clever said, "and the trap is ready. Are you finished?"

"Just about," Tall replied. "Do you think this is going to work?"

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"If it doesn't, we're going to have one hell of a time getting out of here." The inventor cast a jaundiced eye at the confined space within the tube and at the massive nettings that blocked the way at a narrowing a few yards ahead of them.

"What is that thing, anyway, darling?" Bright's helmet nodded as she turned to examine the framework on the floor.

"Bait for our trap, we hope. Here goes." Tall twirled a crank at one side and a plate of chitin began to move rapidly against another. There was a low grate that ascended the scale to become the shrill shriek of an angry termite.

The din was horrific, and the girl winced, then turned as Clever tapped her on the shoulder.

"I hope we've got the right call," he shouted over the din. "As nearly as I could tell, that's the sound they use to call for help."

Tall reached down and stopped the device, listening for a moment.

"Hold on, here they come." He rose and stepped across to a rope that was fastened to a point of rock, and Clever joined him at a similar strand.

The tension mounted as the insects approached, but they were still distant, and it took a full half hour for the shrill battlecry to reach its peak as the leading termite warriors surged into the circle of light at the mouth of the tube. Pushed on from behind, the attackers began to pile against the ten ply silk net that barred their way, and Tall tensed as he waited for the other to give the signal.

"NOW!" Clever bellowed above the ungodly storm of sound, tugging his own rope.

For two miles down the tube, anchors tore out of the ceiling and every sixth pendant dropped. The falling weights had a mass of twenty pounds, and they mangled the soft bodies beneath as they fell, but the two-foot cylinders held a more subtle death than this. As they struck, they shattered, and the interior of the tube was filled with the gentle touch of gray-green mist whose caress brought instant death. A faint stir of air, almost imperceptable, carried the mist

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back towards the fungus plain, and the trio looked at the contorted carpeting that now floored the tunnel.

"I knew that you two thought this stuff was good, darling," Bright said, turning to her husband. "But *this!*" She shook her head. "How long do we wait before going on?"

"I wouldn't get too anxious," the big explorer said, already unfastening another pair of ropes. "We're ready for five more of those rushes, and there may even be more."

"Aren't they likely to try to get in behind us, through the side passages?"

"I don't think they'll make it," Clever told her, as he jerked a thumb at a boulder plugging an entrance to one side. "There are a dozen bombs in every one of those side holes, and every time they hit one, it will kill anything in the tube for quite a way." As if to confirm his words, there was a dull sound behind the boulder, followed by a quickly terminated muffled shrill.

"How many of these things are there, anyway?" Bright asked. She bumped her flat helmet face to his in lieu of a kiss. "We must have killed several hundred already."

"Two or three hundred, I'd say offhand. But from the size of the nest, I'd guess that there should be anywhere from three to five thousand warriors, and ten or fifteen times that many workers. An ant colony of this size would easily run that many."

"Then how can we hope to kill them all?"

"We don't have to, Bright," Clever said as he sat on a boulder. "If we're right in assuming that these things are antlike in their behavior, they will only accept so many casualties before they give up these passages as undefensible. The only question is reaching that point before our present trap is exhausted."

"You know, Clever, it's odd that all of these warriors are spike jaws, I haven't seen a longsnout yet." Tall looked back through the netting.

"No, but that's not too hard to explain. If you assume that this is an outpost, not normally defended—and all of the evidence points that way—they would have to bring them

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from the ground entrances, and that would take a little time. We didn't see any of them until quite late in the fight last time, remember? And then they came from the other side of that chamber."

"Thanks for small favors! Bright, if any of those domeheads with a tube for a face shows up, get down and keep down until we've had time to gas them. The gum they shoot is as lethal as Clever's vapor, and corrosive enough to eat its way through your armor."

The trio continued to chatter. The enemy's next move was a squad of scouts that appeared like wraiths on the edge of the light to turn and scamper off. Evidently they reported what they had found, for shortly thereafter the shrill battlecry rose once again, and the men waited until it was almost upon them before rising to the ropes.

"Watch it! Longsnouts!" The men ducked into an alcove as Tall spoke, and Bright dived under the cover of a small cluster of rocks.

The battlecry rose in pitch, gaining an eerie quality, and the first of the bulbous heads was rammed against the netting. Clever waited until he was sure that the trap was full, then yelled as he jerked, "Let them have it! What the hell?" He turned to look at the twin lines following them to the point where they had fouled on an unseen stalactite.

Normally, it would have been a simple matter to have stepped out and freed the cords, but as Tall started to move, there was a hiss and a globule of gum spat past his face to slap against the wall. He flattened himself back as a regular barrage followed.

"Oh God." Clever's voice was sick as he fumbled at his belt, then turned to look helplessly at the gas pouches laying a dozen yards away where they had discarded them for comfort. He tugged again at the line. "It's no good, Tall. They're snagged solid. We can't get them loose without stepping out, and we can't step out until we gas those longsnouts."

"That's not our only problem. Those nets are strong, but the way they're piling against them, they may give. If they

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do, we're going to be up to the ears in termites." He turned suddenly as a flash of color caught his eye. "Bright! Get down and stay there!"

He ducked as the sound brought another volley of the gum past him.

"What's the matter?" She ducked as the far side of the rock that sheltered her received a similar barrage.

"The ropes are fouled. Keep down as much as you can and get out of here. Get the others out too. These nets are going to give before anyone can reach us, and they'll be all over you. Get!"

"Not without you!" She vanished behind another rock. For a moment Tall hoped she had obeyed him, then he saw her working around the far side of the same rock.

"What's she up to?" Clever followed the movement.

"She's trying to reach the gas pouches, I think. Damn, if she gets hurt . . ." He stopped. "She's got them! Good girl, but for God's sake be careful. Those things are dangerous."

Bright finished the task of fishing back the pouch with her spear, and a moment later the slim figure rose to its full height as her arm swung in two blurred arcs.

"Bright! No! They'll nail you before . . ." But the sound of his voice drew the expected barrage instead, and the girl dived back to cover as two dull thuds marked the arrival of the flasks at their target.

"Come on!" Clever leaped from cover to jerk the rope free and Tall followed. The small cloud at the entrance had felled the snipers, and now the trap was sprung in earnest once more.

"Are you all right?" Tall dropped his rope and went to where his wife was rising to her feet.

"I'm fine, as long as you don't crush me to death."

Loosening his grip he stepped back. "Damn it, that was the stupidest stunt you could have pulled. I told you to get out of here."

"And leave you and Clever to die here? Look, you didn't marry any silly fluff like my sister. I said I was going to make sure that nothing widowed me, and I mean it." Suddenly she

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was back in his arms. "Darling, if anything happens to you, I *want* it to happen to me too. I couldn't live without you."

"And I only scolded you because I feel the same way."

There was one more major attempt by the termites to force the tube, and then silence. Tall sat with his friend at his side and his wife in his lap, at peace with the world, when a sound from the side passage drew his attention.

"Clever, they're up to something in there." The three rose and approached the side entrance. Tall reached over and rolled the plug partially aside to let the odd sounds come through. "Can you make out what they might be doing?"

"Why that sounds like Uncle Mason, when he's putting up—a wall?" The girl's statement was transformed into a question.

"I think she's right, Tall. That's too far back to be digging. That means they've given up. We've won!"

"I don't know, though, Clever. I didn't think we'd hurt them that badly. But you're both right. No matter why—they're doing it."

The reason became apparent when the others had come up and the group had moved down the passage to the plain. They walked on a carpet of insects for the ten-mile length of the tube, and when they emerged, it was into a charnel of termites that littered the ground for a thousand yards around the entryway.

"The gas evidently hangs together longer than I would have thought, Tall. Look, you can still see traces of it down in the hollows. They must have had their reinforcements grouped here at the mouth of the tunnel, and the gas blew right out into them." Clever shook his head in wonder.

"We've wiped out damned near the entire population from the looks of it, Clever. I don't think we'll have any more trouble with these things for quite a while. This sure explains why they gave up so easily."

"Well, come on then!" Wise chimed in, starting forward impatiently. "Let's stop wasting our time and get going."

XIII

"TALL, IF THAT thing was built . . ." Clever did not finish.

"How could it have been?" Bright asked. "There must be millions of tons of stone in it. No person, or thing, could move that much rock."

"Even if they just smoothed off the face of a natural cliff, it would have taken years—centuries," Wise said, as overawed as the youngsters. "And why could they have done it?"

"That's what's bothering me, too." Tall shook his head. "And as screwy as it sounds, I think they *did* build it. It's pretty hard to imagine a cliff standing right across the gorge like this, and that stone doesn't match the rocks on the gorge. But why would they? What were they trying to keep out when they built a wall a mile high?"

He looked up again at the towering mass that dwarfed the gorge, then started forward again, the others following. They had come a mile since leaving the termite caverns when a sudden turn in the narrow gorge, in which they had found themselves, brought the wall into view, and they were still several miles from its base.

"Clever, Wise, look, there's a door!" The big man broke into a run with the others close behind.

"I don't like the looks of this, Tall." There was puzzlement in the inventor's voice as they reached the rectangular opening that was the only break in the smooth surface. "Why would they leave the outer door open like this?"

"I don't know, but this whole deal is beginning to have a funny smell to it." The big man examined the heavy grate of metal that had been left half retracted into its slot. "Look at the dirt in those grooves, and on the floor." He slipped the cover from his lamp and vanished into the depths, slashing away the darkness with the beam.

Fifty yards from the entrance the passage ran through a double doorway that had once been hung with wood and

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into a large chamber piled with mouldering fragments of what had once been furniture.

"Darling, this passage can't have been used for years. Do you suppose they could have sealed it off?" Bright asked, as she joined Tall in front of a slab of gleaming stuff set into the wall of the chamber.

"No, there's a handle here." Tall tugged sharply, and with a protesting groan the panel began to move. Setting his shoulder to the door, he leaned heavily, and the section suddenly gave, tumbling him outwards as a flood of light burst through the opening. The others helped him to his feet, and then stopped to consider the panorama before them.

"This is what I was afraid of when I saw that passage, Bright." Tall stared gloomily at the city. Huge spider webs stretched over crumbling rooftops and a ten-foot roach rambling down main street told a tale that could not be misread.

"Deserted!" There was shock and bitter disappointment in Wise's voice. "A lifetime of work, and it's empty!"

"What could have happened to them?" Bright asked, unconsciously drawing near her lanky mate. "There must have been thousands of them, men, women and children. Where did they go?"

"I can't answer that for you yet, Bright, but let's hope they at least left some records behind." Clever scanned the short slope to the city. "There ought to be some sort of library in a place this big. Let's see if we can find it." It took them an hour.

"There's where they went," Tall said, standing in a door's shattered frame still holding the ax he had used to break it in. "There must be rooms like that all over the city."

"Tall, it's horrible. Why did they cluster into here like this to die? And some of those skeletons were children!" She turned away in sorrow for the fate of the eight humans who had existed eight hundred years before her birth.

"The insects got them," Clever said, as he entered the room. "I've checked the whole place, and there's not a sign of a weapon or suit of armor in it. Somehow the insects got

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in, and the people didn't stand a chance. The ones who could run to shelter locked themselves up to die of starvation or suffocation—the others just got it faster. Tall, I've found something I think you two ought—"

"Tall! Clever! Bright!" It was a cry of urgency and triumph from Wise. "Come quickly! I've found their records!"

The scholar was standing in the middle of a nearby room when they arrived, like a child with a surfeit of toys, unable to decide which of the shelves to inspect first. The tiers reached to the ceiling and ran the length of the building, with endless rows of infinitely precious books ranged along their surfaces.

"Find out anything?" Hungry asked, hours later.

"A little, but not enough." Tall sank wearily onto a low bench that had been moved before the fire.

"It's infuriating!" Wise flung down his helmet with a clatter that brought ghostly echoes out of the vaulted darkness. "We've gone through every record we could find that deals with this city, but there's not one blessed word of sense as to how it came to be built, or how the people got here. If anything, they knew less of their origins than we do."

"Did you find out what happened here?" Slim Hunter sat on the opposite side as the men began to gather into a circle out of the darkness.

"Tall called the shot on that, Slim," Clever said, taking the plate of food that Hungry offered him. "The insects got them, all right. There wasn't enough armor, enough arms. They were slaughtered."

"The funny thing, though, is that they knew about it ahead of time." Bright's face was a play of light and shadow beside the loom of her husband. "According to the records, the Voice had been warning them for months."

"The voice? What kind of voice?" Whitey Armorer leaned forward.

"The 'Voice,' with a capital, Whitey." Tall put his arm around the girl. "It's mentioned several times in the records. Evidently someone—or something—outside of the city itself

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that spoke to them whenever they needed help or advice. They never give a description."

"It sounds like a legend to me, Tall."

"Perhaps, Silent. But the only things that all of the records agree on is that the 'Voice,' whatever it was, existed, and there are several verbatim transcripts of messages from it."

"Didn't they have any ideas at all as to where they came from?"

"Yes, and there's a legend for you, Silent." Wise snorted. "Two generations before the catastrophe a thousand *children* went to sleep in a never-never land they called the 'White Room,' and when they woke up they had been transported magically into this city. If you can make a shred of factual history from that, I'll eat the records."

"It sure doesn't make too much sense." Clever set his empty dish aside. "But their insistence that only children were in the first generation may be a clue at that. What if there had been some sort of catastrophe—Tall's idea that the insects may have suddenly moved into this area, where they had been absent before. They could have moved all of their children into this city for safety, and then been wiped out themselves."

"Too many problems to that theory, Clever," Tall said, rubbing his long jaw with a massive hand. "If the catastrophe was not enough to destroy this damned city itself, there should have been at least some adult survivors among the children, and the records are specific that there were none."

"If there were no adults, darling, how did they learn to read and write, and make some of the things we've found?" His wife looked up at him.

"Which brings us right back to the 'Voice.' According to the story, they learned all of those things either in the 'White Room' or the Voice taught them." The big man shrugged.

"Isn't there any clue to where this 'White Room' might be located?" Hungry asked.

"None. After twenty-three generations of searching, we've found our ancestors, and pushed our knowledge back a

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grand total of one generation. All that we've learned that is even worth repeating is that the Ten were probably survivors of an exploring party of a hundred men and women that the Voice ordered out two years before the end, and who never came back."

"The jungle would have seen to that." There was a sadness in Bright's voice. "They knew practically nothing about insects. It must have been a nightmare to them, loved ones dying with every step. The only wonder is that the Ten survived at all."

"They were the only ones that could have, Bright," Clever said, reaching into his pouch, and pulling out a small portrait in a gleaming frame of yellow tint. "I found this while I was checking the rest of the building, but I forgot about it with the excitement of finding the books, until we got to talking about the Ten. I don't think I have to explain it."

The first reaction was a startled gasp, and the girl turned to compare the miniature with the man beside her.

"It's you, Tall!" Her voice was small and meek with the presence of the inexplicable. "But how could it be?"

"That's a portrait of Seeker, Bright. The founder of Tall's line. Look at the inscription across the bottom. Their script differs a lot more than their printing, but you should be able to make it out."

"Seeker Carlson, Born June second, nineteen ninety-three, lost December tenth, twenty twenty-one, while leading the second expedition to leave the city." She looked up in wonder.

"We don't know what dating system they used, of course, but the rest is clear enough. Except that he wasn't lost, after all. There are a few other portraits in the same place, and their general type was human—red or reddish hair with blue or green eyes. It doesn't take much logic to figure out that Seeker was to these people what his line has become to us, and judging by his descendants, I'd say that that explorer had one hell of a good chance of making it through if anyone could."

"Good Lord, talk about forgetting—did you know that there was a message from the Voice specifically directed to

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Seeker? I have it here somewhere." Wise rummaged through the pile of notes at his side. "Here it is. I found it on a scroll just before we left for the night, intending to read it later. 'Shortly after the preparations were completed'—I'm reading this verbatim—"The Voice spoke again."

"Voice: 'Are you ready to leave, Seeker?'"

"Carlson: 'Yes, first thing in the morning.'"

"Voice: 'I wish I could give you a better idea of what to expect, but I'm afraid it's going to be mostly up to you. I can't help you once you're out of the city.'"

"Carlson: 'I understand. We'll be careful. If everything goes on schedule, we should be back in six months at the outside.'"

"Voice: 'I hope so. We have a lot to learn, and there may not be much time left to me. I hate to push you out like this, but if we're going to move the people in time, we need the information.'"

"Carlson: 'I wish you could explain why it is so urgent.'"

"Voice: 'I wish I could too, but I'm afraid that *dizeeze*'—whatever that means," Wise interpolated, "'dizeeze is a term outside of your vocabulary, and out of your comprehension for that matter. I only wish it were outside of mine.'"

"Carlson: 'Isn't there any way we could help you?'"

"Voice: 'No, except to get yourself a new home while I'm still on my feet and able to keep you supplied. My race has had it, son. It's up to yours to carry the ball from here on. It's one hell of a world you're going to face, but it's all I have to leave you. It's your inheritance, such as it is.' " Wise lowered the paper.

"That's all there was to the message." The old man put the slip back onto the stack at his side.

"I think, no matter why he chose to keep out of sight, the source of the Voice was a *man*. I wonder what happened to him, after this!" Hungry said, waving a hand at the city beyond the walls.

"I don't know that, either, Hungry." Wise suddenly seemed very old and tired. "It's ironical, really. I've spent all of my life looking for answers to questions about this city, and

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now that I've found them, all they've done is raise questions I'll never live to answer."

"At least we found out where the name we use for the valley came from. The Voice gave it to Seeker as his Inheritance, and the name must have stuck. I wonder what name they used for this city?" Slim looked around in the darkness.

"It doesn't make any sense, really," Clever looked up. "But they called it 'Lilliput.'"

A beam of light from the silk-grated window struck into the alcove and fell on the sleeping man's face. Tall rolled his head, then snapped awake, the movement awakening his wife beside him.

"Morning?" She shook her disheveled mop and stretched.

"I'm afraid so, darling. I'll get the others up." He rose and pulled on his clothing and armor, then stepped past the blanket that hung as a screen between the alcove and the rest of the hall.

"Come on, sleepyheads. Time's a wasting. Let's get going." He went down the line, prodding the drowsy men awake.

"Morning, Tall." Clever yawned. "How long till breakfast? I'm starving."

"It's on its way now." Tall rummaged among the food packs. "What's on the schedule for today?"

"Getting a better look at the city, first. We'll have to take it from . . ." Clever broke off as from behind the still hanging blanket came the unmistakable flat crack of a crossbow.

"Bright!" Before the others could react, the big man was across the room, and the blanket flew aside to reveal the girl, already dressed, calmly cocking her bow again. She ignored the beetle that hung in the silk grating of the window, a quarrel through its skull.

"What happened?" Tall asked.

"Nothing, really. I had just finished dressing when I turned around and saw it looking through the window. I did the first thing that came to mind, and shot it."

"Clever, what do you make of this beetle?" Tall asked

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as he turned away from an examination of the carcass. "I don't think I've ever run into the exact species before."

"It's a ladybird beetle of some sort, Tall." He joined his friend at the window. "I don't recognize the exact species either, but then there's no reason to assume that the species here would be the same as those in the valley, unless they happened to have come from there."

"Then where *did* the insects come from?" Tall mused almost to himself. "And more important, how did they get in here in the first place? Not through that passage, or we wouldn't have had to break out the door when we got here. I didn't see anything on the walls big enough to have admitted them, did you?"

"It might be too small to see at any distance, darling," his wife reminded.

"No, Tall's right, Bright. If it were that small, they could have defended it, or plugged it up." Clever shook his head. "I should have thought of that the first time we saw this place. As soon as we get some breakfast, I think we'd better go have a look at the walls of this place."

The meal was bolted, and the group that filed out to examine the walls carried a high current of excitement with them. There was little of it left when they filed back into their camp four hours later for the noon meal.

"Well, we settled one thing, anyway. Those walls are artificial." Wise removed his helmet. "Five miles on a side and five hundred feet high, if they're an inch. It would have taken them two hundred generations, and we can only account for two."

"And not a scratch on the surface." Clever gazed moodily at the sketch map he had compiled in the course of the morning. "One door at the place we entered, a dozen more that lead to storechambers that may or may not have held food of some sort eight hundred years ago, and one blank slab of this gleaming stuff that may or may not be a door. But not a single crack that the smallest insect could have squeezed through."

"We may be missing a bet, Clever." Bright turned to Wise.

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"Wise, do you remember anything in the records, any clue that might help us?"

"No. I've been over my notes already, but there's nothing in any of the records so far that would shed any light on the manner in which the insects entered. I suppose that our best course of action now is to go over them again, though, now that we know what we are looking for."

"Speaking of light, I wonder what kind of nets they used to close off the top of this place?" Hungry sat beside them. "They must be pretty fine. They sure don't cast much shadow."

"They probably aren't nets, Hungry. From what we've seen, these people used that shiny stuff where we'd use silk. A net five miles wide would dangle almost to the floor—the silk would be too elastic to support its own weight."

"Then what did they use to roof in this place?" Bright asked the inventor curiously.

"I hadn't really given it much thought. Come to think of it, they must have used something, though. They would hardly have left the ceiling open, that's for sure, it would have been an open invitation . . ." He trailed off as the significance of his own words sank home. "Overhead! Of course, and that's why they couldn't block it off, Tall. The insects got in through the roof!"

"Of course. All of the insects here can fly or climb, and the ants would have come in in the winged form." Tall was as excited as his friend.

"Even if we know how the insects got in, I don't see that it helps us much," Wise said. "We still don't have any way of locating the White Room, nor are we any closer to finding out where these people came from." Wise shook his head. "And how do you propose to scale that wall? It's five-hundred feet high, and as smooth as this floor."

"I haven't figured that one out yet, either, Grandfather. But you're forgetting something important. Every single clue we have shows that the Voice knew intimately what was going on in this city. That means he—or it—would have

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to have been close enough to have observed what was happening. If we can get past those walls, and going through them is out of the question, I think we ought to find out just what the Voice really was. I can't help thinking that that's the key to this whole thing."

"I agree with Clever," Bright chimed in from beside her husband. "We know that something happened to this city, and that at the same time the Voice was afraid of some danger that was threatening him. The two must have some connection."

"There may be a way to get up those walls, too," Speedy Roofer spoke from the gathered men. He turned to the others. "Did anyone here bring any skyhooks?"

"This is no time for jokes, and bad ones at that Speedy." Wise glowered at the younger man.

"It's no joke, Wise." Silent rummaged in his pack. "Here, Speedy, I thought I had some with me." He handed the other a bundle of what appeared to be ordinary quarrels, and Speedy removed one and handed it in turn to the old scholar.

"This is a skyhook, Wise. When we were roofing in the gorge, we had the problem of putting up the scaffolds in some places that we couldn't reach with ladders, or by climbing, and Clever cooked up these."

"Hell, I'd forgotten about them!" Clever grinned as he took another of the bolts from Speedy. "I've never heard that name for them, either, but I guess it fits. All they are, really, is a quarrel with a larger head, modified to be filled with gum instead of venom. When the bolt strikes the wall, or whatever, the gum is ejected and anchors a line into place, and once it's dry, it will hold a ton or more."

"With a bow and one of these, you can put a line a hundred feet overhead—and we've gone higher than that a couple of times, Wise." Speedy handed the rest of the bundle back to Silent. "They came in so handy, and we used them enough, that Dad and I had Whitey run us up several batches, and I was hoping we'd brought some along."

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"Well, what are we all waiting for, then?" Wise's blue eyes beneath his white brows were suddenly filled with the same fire as the others.

XIV

"HERE, BRIGHT. You're the best shot." Tall handed his bow to his wife. "Use my bow, it's the strongest one we've got."

"Ready?" Bright raised the bow to her shoulder and aimed up.

"Let it go!"

The flat snap of the bowstring sent the bolt streaking upwards in a flat line as the cord vanished from the coil beside them with a burring hiss. A second later the sound of the impact echoed back, and the end of the rope dropped back to slap the wall.

"It ought to hold, Clever." Tall planted his feet against the wall and tugged sharply on the cord. "Remember, not more than three men on the line at one time—it's going to be a long way to fall. I'll go first, then Bright, then Clever."

He took a short run and leaped to catch the line thirty feet above the ground, pulling himself up hand over hand almost as fast as a man could walk on the ground. Beneath the chitin casings the muscles of his arms flexed as they moved the two hundred pounds of his body and the added three hundred pounds of his gear easily. He could manage a hundred times that if he had to. Below him the line jerked suddenly as his wife added three hundred more pounds to it, and again as Clever arrived with four hundred and fifty odd. The girl he had married was as strong in proportion to her weight as her two companions, and she had no trouble in keeping up with him.

"Hold it down there." The lanky explorer turned to look down over his shoulder. "I'm at the top of this line, and I'll have to set up another before we can go on."

A hundred and fifty feet in the air, the men below saw the big man stop and set his legs against the wall to stand

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almost at right angles to the vertical surface. With the line over his shoulder held tight by the weight of the man and girl below giving him leverage, and keeping his feet pressed to the stone, the figure above them raised his bow and fired, and a ten minute wait later, Wise, Hungry, and Silent leaped onto the bottom rope as the last of the trio overhead gained the second line.

"This is my last coil. Bright, when I move to the next line, come on up even with me, and I'll get the line you're carrying." Tall hung patiently as he waited for the gum to dry enough to hold his weight, then swung clear on the dangling strand.

"Hello, darling. How are you doing?" Bright stopped beside him and hung still as he removed the coiled silk from her back.

"Fine, how about you? Are you getting tired?" There was concern in the voice that issued from the emotionless blank of his helmet.

"Not particularly. What a view you have from up here. We must be nearly three hundred feet high. You can see the whole city, and look how tiny the men on the ground seem. How much higher do you think we'll go?"

"It's hard to tell how high this wall is from the ground, but I'd say offhand we've probably covered at least a quarter of the distance so far. If you start to get tired, yell, and we'll rest."

The rope below him twitched violently as he started up, and then steadied as the others added their weight. Twice more he paused and fired upwards, gaining a hundred feet at a shot. Then waited as Clever came up beneath Bright and in a double transfer between the two ropes, passed her to reach his side.

"How's the cordage holding out, Tall? I've got four coils here, but that's it. Can you see anything up ahead yet?"

"No, but the light's getting stronger. We're up over six hundred feet now, though, and we ought to hit something soon. If we don't, we'll have to go down and get the cordage

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that Wise and the others are bringing up with them." He tugged at the last cord he had fired. "It's set. Let's go."

"Clever, there's something up there, all right. I think we've reached the top! That last shot didn't hit the wall at all, it went over some sort of rim." Tall waited until his friend joined him, and a moment later Bright also hung immediately below the inventor.

"I can't see anything, Tall, are you sure that bolt went into the wall?"

"Into some sort of opening, at least. I hope the head hit solidly enough to anchor." He glanced at the dangling cord beside him.

"Tall! Clever! Look out—there's a spider up there!" Bright's frantic warning snapped the two men's attention upwards again as over an invisible rim strolled a spider to stand at ease on the vertical wall.

"It's a zebra, Clever, one of the jumpers. A jumper won't bother a man, normally, but if this one does, we're in for it."

"I don't think so, Tall. If it's got enough sense to leave us alone, fine, but a lot of things have changed between us and the spiders, and they're the ones that have to worry when they see *us* coming now."

With a graceful movement, the spider's eight legs carried it smoothly down towards them, the dragline glinting in the afternoon sun streaming down from above them. There was a grace and beauty in the black and white striped arachnid, and it was almost with reluctance that the trio saw that it was about to attack. Even as the long forelegs reared forwards and it gathered for its leap, Clever's arm shot forward, and a moment later a short puff of gas billowed from the wall, and the spider dropped to swing lifelessly at the end of its drag line.

"With this gas, Tall, we'll never have to worry about any attack again. From now on man can walk where he wants to, and nothing can stop him."

"Perhaps, Clever." Tall looked at the six-foot jumper. "But somehow I think we've only begun. When we find out what happened to our ancestors, we may find that we have more

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than insects to contend with." He started up the rope that reached to the top.

Pulling himself over the rim, Tall reached down and helped Clever up, and a moment later his wife joined them.

"I don't see any sign of a roof up here, Tall, do you?"

"No, but then we don't have any idea what it was in the first place. What do you make of those tubes?" He examined a row of curved tubes that rose at regular intervals like the stakes of a palisade.

"Anchors, perhaps. I haven't been able to make sense out of half the stuff we've found in this place. They had a mechanical knowledge so far above ours that I can't even decide what over half of their gadgets were supposed to do, and I haven't the faintest idea how most of them worked." The inventor glanced over the edge.

"Shall we wait for the others, or do we take a look for ourselves first?"

"Grandfather and Hungry are on the last rope now, Bright; let's wait for them, at least." A few minutes later the younger man helped his grandfather onto the hundred-yard-wide ledge.

"Whew. I was beginning to be afraid this place didn't have a top. I'm afraid I'm a little out of shape for a climb like this."

"Thanks, Tall. Hi, sis; Clever." Hungry gained his feet, and looked around curiously. "Quite a place, isn't it? Find anything yet?"

"We haven't looked, Hungry. Who's on the rope behind you?" Bright glanced at the twitching line.

"Silent, the last time I looked. The rest are further down."

They waited until Tall's lanky cousin joined them, then, seeing that the next arrival would be several minutes later, the six people turned to cross the hundred yards that separated them from the far edge.

"I'm curious to see what the country down there looks like, Tall." Wise walked between the big man and his grandson. "As you can see, the mountains are behind us here, and there's no sign that they continue past the city, or we

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could see them from here. The area should be relatively level, and we may be able to see some traces of it if they had farm . . . *my God!*"

They had crossed over to the far edge of the wall, and they stood immobilized by awe as the significance of the scene beneath them slowly gained on them.

"Whoever—or whatever—built *that* was never human—not as we know humanity. I'm beginning to wonder if I *want* to find out what the Voice was," Tall said, the blank face of his helmet glinting as he turned away from the gulf.

"I know what you mean," Clever said as he tore his own gaze away. "It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the scale, but to see a perfectly normal thing, like that room, three hundred times its normal size. . . ."

"*The White Room!* Darling, this *has* to be it. Look at those walls! Wise, this is the room in the legend—the White Room that the children came from!" Fear and excitement mingled in the girl's voice.

"So this is the White Room?" Awe and wonder warred in the old scholar's tone, then his natural inquisitiveness asserted itself, and his voice settled into an almost normal tone, "I never expected it to be anything like this!"

"Let's see if we can get down that wall," Clever started for the edge as he spoke. "There's no telling what we may be able to find if we can only recognize it when we see it."

"The furniture looks human, but that size . . . I don't know." Tall strode past his friend and looked down the wall. "*No! It can't be!*" The cry was almost inhuman.

Before he could warn them back, the others had rushed to his side, weapons ready.

"Tall, what's the mat—" The words ended as the inventor followed his friend's gaze, and a moment later there was a muffled scream from Bright as she joined them.

"Tall, it isn't . . . It can't be . . ." Her voice was a desperate plea for reassurance.

"I'm afraid it is, darling. I might be mistaken about the other bones, but that skull is unmistakable."

"But a third of a mile long? That skull alone is fifty yards

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in diameter." Clever's voice was sick. "How could anything that big have been a . . ." He could not finish.

"A man?" The big man finished it for him. "Don't you see it? I began to suspect it when I first saw this place, and the furniture should have told me at a glance. That is—or was—the Voice, Clever."

"But how, why?" Wise stared in horrified fascination. "When we started out to find the Voice, it was in hopes of discovering our own origins. How are we going to solve this puzzle?"

"I don't think the question has even changed, Wise. You've been so obsessed with finding a homeland for men that the facts couldn't even be considered. Isn't it obvious now?" Tall looked back down at the titanic skeleton that lay close to the base of the wall far beneath them.

"The Voice was never seen, in fact it took extraordinary precautions to prevent it—his, I should say—nature from becoming clear. If the people in the city had ever seen him—and I wonder if they would be even able to comprehend something that big—they would have realized that man was never intended to live with the insects. We're mites, like a man seen from the top of a high wall. Our ancestors knew so little about the insects, because to them, or to their immediate fathers, the biggest insect was so small as to be beneath recognition."

"But what happened to them, Tall? What could have killed a giant like that?"

"I don't know, Bright. Perhaps we'll learn some day, perhaps not, but we'll have to look for the answer in any case. All of your arguments are still basically sound, Wise. We still have to find out what happened to our ancestors, and prevent the same thing from happening to us; that much hasn't changed."

"But why, Tall? Why were we created? What was their purpose?"

"I don't know, Clever. Again, we may learn some day, we may never know. Perhaps they saw the end coming—some

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of the Voice's remarks would point to that—and this was the only way the race could survive."

"Somehow I feel that they were dreamers, darling," Bright said. "Perhaps, in some small way, we were a part of their dreams. Our children may find that dream, and follow it through, someday."

"If they don't, then their children will, or their children's children." Wise turned away from his ancestor to face his successors. "And if they don't, they'll find a dream of their own to follow. Somehow, I feel that perhaps that was our real inheritance from the Voice, and our ancestors; only men can dream."

The sunlight sent their shadows out into the room beyond the wall, and they turned to begin the long climb down.

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Tall was a hunter-explorer, venturing off the tiny island fortress of his tribe and making his way through wilderness inhabited only by giant insects ten times the size of a man. Loosely protected by chitin-armor, and striking with a spear doubly-barbed with spider venom, Tall fought to find a new home for his people.

But as he roamed he became more and more aware that mankind was a stranger in this insect world, that there were no other creatures remotely like men. Then where had his people come from?

As he followed the trail of the almost-mythical Ten who had founded his tribe, Tall found more and more mysteries — and death in more forms than he had ever imagined.