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A Science-Fiction Novel by Brian R. Utley

# Martyr

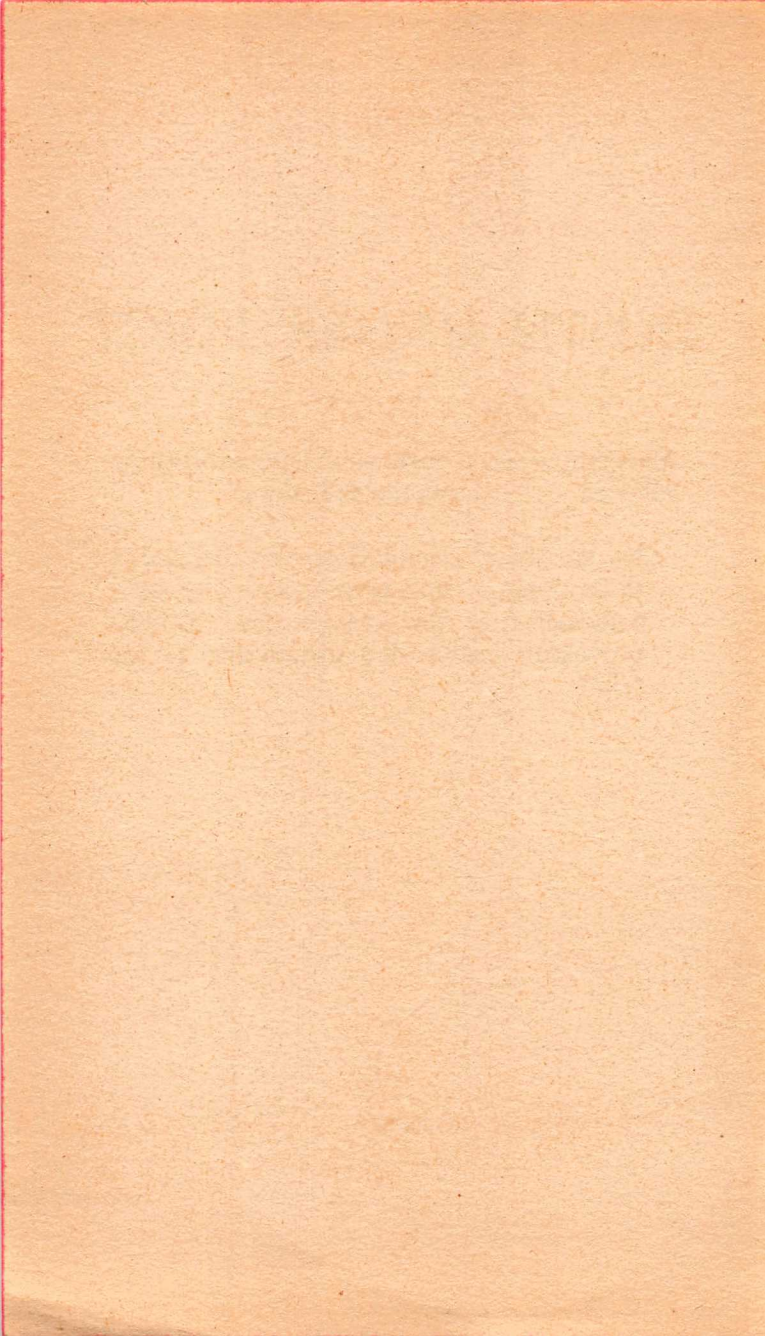


# DOWN UNDER EDICT

Everything was pure euphoria, everything allowed . . . except the following:

No emotional stimulation—too disturbing to the human. No exotic foods—too many drawbacks to the system. No thought-provoking media—too disquieting to the mind.





# MARTYR

BY BRIAN R. UTLEY



CURTIS  
BOOKS

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□ *Slap!*  
*Slap!*

The fly lazily drifted up and away, then buzzed down onto a greasy platter left from some long-digested meal. On flimsy legs it scooted about spasmodically, after the fashion that flies scoot.

"Glunt!" the old man muttered in irritation. He sniffed, ruffled his features to a sour pose and straightened the heavy quilt that covered his ancient legs as he sat nearly helpless in his floating convalescent chair. He carefully laid the flyswatter across his knees, tested a quick snatch at the weapon.

"Grooked flies!" he wheezed at the younger man who sat across a low mobile-table laden with odd clutter. The visitor occupied the only other chair in the barren little room.

"Sire, about our interview? If you please, sire."

"If I please?"

The old man frowned from beneath shaggy white brows. His small eyes were set deep in his black face and were alive with a nimbleness his body had lost long ago. "Yes, if I please."

Almost unconsciously the old man reached feebly downward, felt along beside him and located a string. He pulled and the door *slammed* shut.

"The flies . . . and the cold," the old man said. "Can't keep the ginzy flies out, really—no way—but it'll keep out the phompin cold. Terrible cold."

The young visitor slicked at the frost still on his mustache. "Very well, sire. May we begin?" There was no awe in his voice, only the tolerance of a peer, which spoke well of the opinion the man held of himself.

For he was *not* the old man's peer—not equal to the Father of TAR, chief fool of the Dynasty of Fools—but his opinion of himself was appropriate. He was a leader of all the young bucks.

The old man smiled to himself. A silent chuckle rippled through his ancient flesh. He countenanced a wise look, scratched at his bristly chin and said, "You're the number one hand in this new bunch of phomped-up upstarts? The ones who've been having so much nonsense about going back Down lately, eh, boy? The ones who've been making so much noise?" He studied the younger man carefully, watching his reactions. A lesser man that he suspected this young buck to be would betray the uneasiness of youth. Just how sure of himself was he?

The younger man said nothing at first. He straightened his heavy, quilted cloak and studied the wizened figure before him for several seconds. Of himself, the old man was a shelved, impotent force left over from the early years of *Topside After Revolution*, but what he represented in the way of a figurehead, a symbol . . . possibly even a *legend* . . . must be reckoned with. This was not an encounter to be muffed.

He nodded a simple affirmative to the old man's question.

*Good. He's careful enough. No husk, this one.*

"Ummph. Well listen then, young phomp, to what it is you're doing here. Why you're doing it. I'll tell you about the heritage you're tampering with. Listen if you want my blessing. Listen to what you ask me to forget when I bless you.

"Most of all, you've got to be able to hear the cries of anguish reaching up from the grave—the burden of those who've gone before me . . . and after whom I long with an ache you couldn't imagine. You've got to smell the stink of the terrible destruction, the carrion, the moldering bones, that we remember from those who *meant well*. They meant well, and so we have what we have."

The old man sniffed. "What will we have when you finish?"

The younger man remained patiently silent, letting the old man have his say.

*"Forsters. Procs. Mother . . . that's what we called*



her, you know. *The Man from Topside. The Man who killed the Proc.* These are all questions in your mind, eh? *What was it like Down?"*

The old man sniffed again. "Well, I'll tell you. I'm the last of the old guard; this is no ginziphonic, watered-down nonsense.

"Listen."

The younger man looked smugly blank. "Begin then, before I grow cold and tire, old man." This was the proper thing to say, he felt it, even as he secretly shook with excitement.

The old man noticed the attitude, the wisdom apparent.

Satisfied, he laid his hand carefully across the flyswatter on his knees and began.



## CHAPTER I

□ *We were going Topside.*

Down, the conditioned-air breeze blew gently along the level 87 toobe. It had blown that way forever, gentle, bland and very glauu. In every toobe, every cubicle, every slot-apartment, the breeze gusted, circulating everywhere throughout our intricate underground city network. Eventually it gusted throughout even the world. Nobody noticed it, though. It was just there and it blew. Conditioned air. Regulated climate. Uninterrupted. Gentle. Something stable. Something secure. Unchanging. *Glauu-ness!*

It set the tone for Down.

The source of the canned-air breeze in this quarter of level 87 was a massive blower which hung from the overhead, partially concealed behind an intricate latticework grille. The huge blower puffed and whirred and sometimes belched the controlled breeze out through the grille and down the toobe. Others like it sucked instead of belched, drawing in the old air and its thousand new contaminations from its journey through The Greater Down Empire. From there the air was washed and recirculated through the herboriums, and the contaminations were chemically sorted and reintegrated into our overpopulated and very delicate ecological balance in a more useful form.

Every blower was concealed behind a grille. There was a competition of kinds. This particular grille had been artfully fashioned from a solid slab of burnished fish-quill alloy. It was a masterpiece in cover-up. It had received several awards for excellence. The metalsmith was a prominent artisan on the tenth level.

As I said: *We were going Topside.*

I remember John Dearborne and Roger Pleasant and I were inspecting this fish-quill grille as we glided swiftly toward it on the level 87 skimmer. Inspecting, so to speak. Actually we could hardly help ourselves, for the grille stretched a full fifteen meters on a side. Roger P. stopped for a momentary second look just as we passed through the wide portal that was too-be's end. He hopped from the A-trix to the B to the C and off onto the squeek-way. We followed.

"Now, we need a guy like that on my level," Roger P. said with what I supposed was enthusiasm. "His work's got something. That glunt-garbage my smith turns out—well, we could do without." The criticism sounded as though it had been simply turned on and then as simply turned off.

I smiled to myself, perhaps a little smugly. That was about par for Roger P.'s discontent, as superficial as the grille.

We didn't know about him then, nor did I really know anything about discontent. So it was easy for me to assume that he was a sop like most everyone else Down—everyone except Dearborne, of course.

I said that *we* didn't know about Roger P., but that's not quite correct. Actually Dearborne was aware, but I didn't know that he knew, not until much later.

With Roger P.'s comment, I automatically looked to Dearborne, noted him nod politely at our friend's commenting and smile accordingly at the fish-quill. I'm sure that to Dearborne it looked nearly identical to the ones on our own level and to all the other levels of the world. He said tolerantly, "I'm sure you're right, Roger P. old friend. Use some of your influence and get him if you must—get him just for you. *You* could do that." He nodded succinctly. "But not now, huh, fella? Scheme later. Right now, let's get the glid Topside. You'd squander our whole allotment in this phomped-up grave, wouldn't you, phomped-up fella?" He smiled something very precise at Roger P. then turned, hopped the C-trix and glided quietly into the uplift.

Roger P.'s face held a pinched look. He was one of those Downers who had that characteristic gray look about them—tall, slim/fragile, soft eyes like dust, a sel-



dom ruffled countenance. His voice followed Dearborne into the uplift. "I'm sorry. I underestimate your impatience." He turned and threw me an apologetic smile and continued on into the uplift, where he performed the ritual required as preparation for Topside excursion.

Dearborne neglected his ceremony. Roger P. finished his with a razor sharp flourish that testified of considerable practice. This sharpness was added as a mild and silent disapproval of Dearborne's flaunt of social convention. I estimated it didn't bother Dearborne one bit.

I smiled inwardly at this. I would side with Dearborne, even in the brunt of criticism, criticism more severe than Roger P.'s mild disapprobation. I would neglect my ceremony as well. This I knew was the reason for my being allowed the presence of Dearborne's company. I always made decisions in his favor.

I entered the uplift.

As postscript to Roger P.'s finale, the uplift sprang to life with a *hum*. The door hissed closed and the conveyance headed for the surface—up through the fraction of a hundred levels between 87 and Topside.

Roger P. retained his pinched look, and I, my composure.

Dearborne, however, was neither pinched nor composed. He was enraptured. At least he looked enraptured, and with good cause, I knew. Topside for him was nearly an obsession. He exuded his passion openly, always had, always would. This tripping in the uplift to the surface was his ritual and he savored it with relish, almost ribald abandon, although I'm sure that these latter extents were apparent only to me, his confidant.

"This some kind of obsession you got?" asked Roger P. in his grotesquely lopped-off manner of speech, sounding so unlike the Greater Down barrister that his title said he was. "You scramble for the surface every chance you get lately."

Dearborne looked blankly at the man. His great black face radiated an aura of strength even now as he indulged himself in the more vain aspects of excursion. Then he feigned dismay. "Obsession? Like glunt! Friend, how did you ever worm up with that idea? You're cut for better thinking."



Roger P. looked thoughtful, after the fashion that counselors should look, and shrugged. "Whatever you say, phomp. Whatever you say. But it's like nothing could keep you Down."

Dearborne smiled at Roger P., a deep-eyed smile. "Does it make you uneasy, this discontent?"

Roger P. looked into Dearborne's confidence, started to say something, then changed his mind, perhaps thinking better of it. He no doubt knew that from Dearborne this was a gibe, at least *I* knew that it was. Roger P. was pretty much a Downer's Downer, but he wasn't stupid.

The near imperceptible whine of the uplift, resembling a whinny, approached a crescendo promising our destination. The whine cut off. The uplift door slid open with a muffled hiss. We had arrived Topside. John Dearborne stepped across the polished chrome threshold and out into the raw air. We followed him.

"Now smell that, will you?" The big black man gulped deep breaths of the unconditioned raw air. "*That's air*, not that filtered, humidified, re-reconditioned glunt they feed us Down. This makes a Downer feel like breathing."

"Yeah, phomp, that's the real Raw all right," Roger P. agreed, attempting to humor. "The real Raw."

The real Raw was draped tenuously over and around giant, twisted oaks and aging sycamores enclosing the dab of a park outside the small outcrop dome that was terminal for the uplift that had delivered us. Out here, outside the toobes, the air was undoctored, almost wild in flavor and intoxicating to the palate. All about the breeze gusted with spirit and a hint of chill, so different from our droned and belched soup Down. It was almost wispy. It blew into the park with a spirit of its own, coming from beyond the protecting forest, from the *real* Topside world, a world seldom seen by anyone. When the wind left the park, it would seek its own way, perhaps never to be breathed again by a man. There were few men Topside nowadays and it wasn't just a matter of fashion.

Topside was gluntsville.

The powers had ruled that Topside was too valuable in terms of food production and a thousand other little things to let men wander hither-thither over the land in-

eptly squashing, damaging or destroying all the vital little things. Now we were Downers, almost totally. There were laws—hear-and-obey laws—formidable laws. Except for the small enclosed parks at the Topside terminals, men were denied access to their former heritage and home.

Yet some still came Topside, those who were extensions of the Machine. But they were hardly men. We Downers knew of them, but we didn't know about them. We were told they came up to tend the world of food. The governors in concert with the Machine felt obligated to allow no one up but their minions. For the rest of us, there were barriers. The dab-parks were the extent of our excursion to the land above. To my knowledge at that time, no one but the Procs had ever set foot in the real world in one hundred generations.

Now with all those generations crying out within me, I longed for more free days, yet my cry was only an echo of Dearborne's.

Dearborne stood, hands on hips, feet spread wide, confronting our world Topside. Smiling, he said, "You see, Roger P., it isn't so much that I'm enamored with Topside—although you'll admit that it's *some* place—it's just that the warren down there is getting to me. Glunt, friend-phomp, that's the real problem. I'm not obsessed with Topside. It's this other thing, things. Two reasons, actually."

I suddenly had the feeling that he was for some reason being overly patronizing with our Roger P., and I wondered why.

"You've heard of a thing called claustrophobia," Dearborne said.

"Nope," said Roger P.

I nodded that of course I had, but Dearborne didn't notice.

"I didn't think so," said Dearborne. "It's the name for a very glunty, closed-in feeling that's got me lately. Some grock on 72 gave me the word. He laughed when he told me about it—the grock! I about choked.

*"Just like I just about choke all the time."*

"It simply means this: I've got to have air, Raw air,



Topside air, and the wide open spaces. It's this claustrophobia that's got me."

Roger P., in good form with his Down-oriented nature, just looked puzzled and said, "I've never heard of anything like that before."

"Well, now you have."

Roger P. was unmoved. "What was the second reason you mentioned?"

"The second reason," answered Dearborne slowly, "is that ginziphonious state of affairs the human family Down has let itself get coerced into. That *really* tears me up." Dearborne looked at me and slowly grimaced.

I was probably more aware of his true feelings than anyone, and I could feel an ache within him, knew his struggle. Prior to this, the association between the three of us had been grossly superficial. I'd never stopped to think of it as so before. I could not recall a time when the depths of our inner feelings had threatened to burst forth. Dearborne was a quiet man. Roger P. cast the image of one who is shallow, though at times another light flickered through. I was the disciple of John, little more than a poor reflection of my referent.

"Do you understand now, Roger P., why I'm drawn to Topside?" Dearborne searched the man's face. "It's the indifference, the complacency, the contagious mediocrity that's set in Down. It's arrested any honest progress we could have. Glunt, sometimes I get the feeling that someone's just come along and turned out the light—now that's what you get for living in a phompin hole in the ground. Can do?"

For Roger P. it still looked like it was *no can do*. For me, I nodded and nodded some more so that Dearborne would see, would see and know that I applauded him for his feelings.

"You agree, my friend?" he said turning to me.

I nodded more, vigorously. He approved.

Then his next question caught me unprepared. And not only did it startle me, but I noticed aside that it caught Roger P.'s interest as well. In fact, it caught his interest in a way I'd never seen before. It struck me as strange, in a corner of my mind, that he should be so concerned



about my answer, so seldom had he actually been so before.

Dearborne countenanced a very serious frown and said, "Why?"

It was this simple question that startled me.

I suddenly felt flimsy in a shouldn't-I-be-smiling sort of way.

Why?

"Why?"

"Yes, why do you agree with me?" Dearborne asked again.

I looked to my friend and then to Roger P., and they both just stared back at me. Suddenly for a moment they looked like two hungry-eyed Procs anticipating a kill, but I recognized my own infirmities in this misjudgment. There was nothing more than concern waiting there before me.

Why did I agree? Because that was what Dearborne had said and that's what counted, wasn't it? Wasn't he always right? But of course Dearborne wouldn't want to hear that.

Dearborne had never asked me anything like that before. He'd never asked me to defend my feelings about that predator world Down, never asked me to speak out and be counted. *Never.*

I suddenly felt too much alone standing out there in the naked world in the strange park and the harsh sunshine and cold air. Dearborne and Roger P. waited for me to say something I was sure I didn't know how to say. The breeze muttered in my ears and spoke of insecurity. I wavered under the beat of my heart and answered.

"Because . . . because I think that I want to be happy."

The two men frowned.

"And," I rushed on, "I think that the only kind of happiness I can expect to find Down must be likened to . . . euphoria. *Categorical Euphoria.* The same kind of euphoria, I'm convinced, that a vegetable might enjoy . . . or . . . or one of those big sprangley trees."

I gestured toward the crooked oaks that stood sentinel over the park. There was a turning away to follow my line, to my relief. I felt no appetite for attention.

"So . . . ?" Dearborne asked, returning.  
So?

"So, in company with this euphoria, I think that a man without the problems of opposition, as we know is supposedly the case Down, will become as stagnant as a receptacle of water without an outlet. With no vitality, there can be no happiness. At least not the kind I'm looking for. And, if you'll excuse my dribble, let me say that I think happiness may sound like something very slobbery amidst its sophisticated cousins we seem to favor with more respect Down. We revel in animal gratification to the extent of mindlessness. We wallow in pleasures that dissipate. We delight in a conformity that hedges us all about, denying us our destiny. And our first love is a machine. Our total involvement is with the nuances of Mother Machine and her moods and methods and her extensions that surround and confine . . . to the ultimate exclusion of even self-interest, let alone interest in our fellows. It is so uninspiring I almost weep, weep for the forgotten ways of those who went before us long ago. I know that I'm at odds with the Machine, and in this I don't delight . . . I wish her ways were different."

Dearborne's passive dark face and glittering attentive eyes told me he listened. I was elated. Roger P., on the other hand, listened but didn't hear. He did not believe. No matter. Dearborne had asked and I had made account.

"You are an eloquent phomp," said Roger P. "Your generalities glisten; they could almost convince. Prove them—*prove them for me.*"

"Why? I'm not trying to convince anyone. *He* asked me how I felt, why I agreed. It is not a thing of intellect. Almost all emotion. I believe we're in the twilight of an era. The Greater Down Empire no longer serves, if it ever did. Forster said the Machine would stop. I'm not a *Fors-ter*, but I know this: There is a horrible truth in his words. We live as though unborn within a dying carcass."

Roger P. was plainly pained, but my mouth pressed on.

"We are decaying. Any arguments in justification for our existence Down are pure hoakum-glunt. Any free spirited constituent of The Greater Down Empire who gave the least little phump about his energetic soul would



get the glunt out of there before his intellectual arteries became so atrophied that his common sense started to flow like thick syrup and he actually got to thinking there's something to this bright, happy, glorious glunt-garbage they're trying all the time to ram down our throats Down. And furthermore, may the Machine stop!"

I had finished in a rush. All Dearborne had to say was, "Steady, boy!" This thrilled and rattled me at the same time. Roger P.'s pain had turned to helplessness. He looked as though something important had been taken from him.

"You might do well to keep words like those to yourself," said Roger P. "You never know just who might be listening."

I hazarded a flippant wink at Dearborne. "Well, it always does one good to verbalize about such things, helps one to better understand one's own mind, don't you think?"

"Yes, if that's what you're doing—*understanding your own mind.*" The sarcasm was as raw as the Topside air.

We all just stood there looking silently at one another, conflict filling the void between us. The drama of the world about us went unnoticed—the sunshine, the breeze, the leaves, the wild creatures. It seemed perhaps that we argued the value of the world Topside from too subjective a state. All we needed to do was look around us, and worship.

Roger P. dropped down on his haunches and picked absently at the green grass at his feet. He looked strained, perhaps because he was a little far afield in the arena of socio-political conjecture. Being a man-about-law, he should have been at home with such talk, but he wasn't—never had been—had deliberately put aside conjecture and criticism, or so it seemed.

He said finally, "I've got to admit that I know what you phomps are suggesting. I've heard this line before many times. Don't let it surprise you. I've contacted these deviant ideas before. In my business . . . well, that doesn't matter, but you phomps should be told that it's a standard line—obviously you didn't know." A smile flirted with his mouth, and his eyes were intent upon Dearborne.

"Why is it a *standard* line, Roger P., this line of ours?" asked Dearborne with a quiet smile of his own.

Roger P. ignored the implications of the question.

"Your grumble is that we've stopped growing intellectually, isn't it, that our cultural development isn't developing? Right? Well, man, don't forget to keep score. Sure we've given up some things, but the sacrifice has been worth it. Poverty, hunger, disease and all those other nasty little problems are gone, wiped out. We designed—*legislated*—natural harassments right out of existence. Life is suddenly bright and happy Down. We live by design, order, regularity. We live in mutual approbation, mutual respect between all agencies of our society. We live in unity. In other words, phomps, we got a good thing going." He shrugged, trying for a favorable response from one of us, particularly Dearborne, I was sure.

Dearborne was silent for a moment, then he said, "Yes, Roger P., but the good thing you've got going isn't *freedom*. You've designed the individuality of man right out of existence along with the other natural problems. It's like our friend's stagnant pool. Nothing new coming in, nothing new going out. Men no longer have a right to be wrong."

I brightened at Dearborne's reference to my earlier example.

"Well, there's not a phompin thing you can do about it!" Roger P. said with finality.

Dearborne's person seemed to freeze for a long second; his gaze looked on a view from another world, then he said, "Don't sound quite so certain, friend-phomp. Actually there is one thing I can do about it. One very simple thing." He smiled over at me. "And just so you'll know, this one very simple thing I can do, I *am* going to do. There's only one way to beat that hole down there and you know of it as well as I do, don't you? And that is to go *Topside*—to come up here, out of that underground trap you worship. And that, friend-phomp, is the phompin thing that I *can't* do that I am going to do." Dearborne grinned a great black grin at Roger P., then turned abruptly away and walked further into the park.

Roger P. scarcely flinched a muscle in his passive ashen face. He looked calculating in an inward way, rather than



shocked as I would have supposed.

Something had passed between the two men that I couldn't understand at that time, but whatever it was I was sure that now the talking between them was over. Whatever points there were to be proved were proved. Lines had been drawn.

I followed Dearborne into the park, and Roger P. accompanied me, though he seemed wrapped in thoughts and paid little attention. We scattered pigeons and other birds along the way and could hear the scoldings of squirrels and other things.

As we joined Dearborne, without looking up he said very quietly—almost as quiet as the murmur of the breeze through the branches of the great trees reaching high into the wonderful blue sky above us—"Do you see that, my friends?" He pointed to a calmly grazing stag amongst the trees. "*That* is Topside. That is the nature of things, the way they should be. The real nature. Freedom. *Freedom.*"

We gazed upon it in awe. I'm sure even Roger P. must have felt awe. The flicker-quick animal, apparently so much at ease, grazed undisturbed a scant thirty meters from our vantage point. Only an occasional flip of his ear hinted that he was giving us any attention at all.

Dearborne was right. There was true freedom. I knew about this animal. I was quite proud of this knowledge, the knowledge of it and other Topside fauna and flora. I knew about reindeer and cobras and the coyote, as well as bison and the dodo bird. I knew about noxious weeds and thorns and some flowers and the names for many trees. Mother Machine didn't hush everything up.

"That's real Topside," Dearborne repeated almost to himself. Roger P. remained mute.

"That's right," I said. I hesitated, then pushed on, "That's real Topside, and *that's where you and I are going . . . and the sooner the better, hey?*"

Dearborne looked for the instant startled, then frowned, then smiled. Looking me over as though to size me up as something new to reckon with, he said, "You phomp! So you're more full of surprises than I thought."

And we chuckled, all but Roger P., who stared away as though part of a different world.

## CHAPTER II

□ *Down.*

What we had here was a subterranean world.

Dearborne's grave.

It was a strange world, but it was *nature* to us. Discontented though many of us may have been, nevertheless, it was nature. Whelped, weaned, existing, bellying-up—for many generations we had so lived, knowing nothing else. Moles, bound to a world of toobes as a man born without sight inherits the curse of darkness. We had our darkness—there, underground. A darkness to the mind.

We revered our one hundred levels of civilization—the infinitude of the universe forgotten in favor of our ordered, closed-in, hedged-up, confining, concentric spheres. What vision we had to let it happen! How docile we were in the face of such oppressive circumstances. How kind we were to our tyrant world. How considerate the mindless beasts for many, many generations.

We revered our *Mother*. Mother Machine was our world of concentric levels and toobes, kubies and slots. It was hard to swallow, but we did it . . . most of us. Some few could see a glimmer of light but played the game because it was convenient. *Convenient*, grock! One played the game, or *gluntsville!*

It had been forced by population pressure. As a move, it hadn't been an overnight transit but once the exodus had caught on, it had taken little more than a single pre-Down generation before the entire surface of the land Topside had been vacated.

Undoubtedly it had been an unprecedented migration, but the whole phomped-up thing had been universally encouraged as the *humanitarian* thing to do by every pre-



supposing political voice in current glory. And it had happened—and that's what counted when it came to figuring the score. It really did no good to speculate over the course history might have taken. Civilization went to living in a burrow.

Billions had teemed over the earth's shrinking surface, and the apparent necessity of this drastic action, this *digging in*, was never seriously questioned, or so we were told now. In light of the requirements of the times—which had been tempered by hunger pangs—everyone had gone Down, leaving the surface of the land for food production.

Prompted by the promise of enough food to eat, the plan had overwhelmingly succeeded. In this current era everyone called it a spectacle of brilliance. At least, this was the chant rehearsed by Mother Machine, and everyone more or less followed its persuasion.

Folks already had lived and worked in vast complexes Topside, where they were at all times surrounded by conditioned air, artificial lighting, a synthetic physical environment, millions of people all about, and all the other oddities now commonplace in the world of the toobes. As a result, folks could scarcely tell the difference when, first, the various military and government, the industrial facilities and, finally, the individual homes and dwellings, the sprawling apartment houses, the merchandising centers, the pleasure centers, the schools and everything else were transported underground. Of course, it was a *forced* thing . . . yes. But empty bellies sometimes turn the most unfettered freeholders into willing bondsmen.

Now people had enough to eat.

Of course it was the old story of selling birthrights for bowls of pottage. But, as the educational extensions of the Machine testified . . .

*. . . where once the great cities of Earth had sprawled horizon to horizon in great tangled masses of confusion, now there lay vast productive farmlands and orchards and lands for the grazing of livestock . . .*

They had entertained a few good ideas in the early years of The Greater Down Empire. For instance, where

there had been a tiny Topside park *here*, or a remote and impractical recreation area *there*, there were planned expansive parks and wilderness and recreational areas of almost limitless dimension to accommodate an anticipated greater leisure-time society. At the beginning, ideas like this had served to win over many diehards who had no doubt balked at the original proposition.

Interestingly enough, this stratagem had never materialized, which naturally generated my suspicion. I suspected someone had simply gotten it under his bonnet early, at the outset or perhaps even before, to use the recreational lands, too—temporarily, of course—for food production. (Actually, this was something Dearborne had brought to my attention, but I had pursued the thought some on my own.)

I should mention that not everyone was barred from Topside. There were the *Ags*, the farmers and ranchers, the ones nobody ever saw. There were the *Screws* from maintenance—nobody ever saw them either. And there were the *Procs*. Of course these weren't really men but were human extensions of the Machine. For the rest of us, billions deep, there were only the terminal parks to distract us from the overwhelming magnificence of our most dreary, world-wide, underground hovel—the world of the toobes and the Machine.

I've said little concerning the Machine, Mother, our mechanical despot without equal as an authoritarian head in the organic world.

In the beginning the Machine had been envisioned as the ultimate answer to a perennially sloppy and unreliable environment. The idea was to surround men with a cybernetic watchdog that could anticipate and provide for all the little things in the daily humdrum of day-to-day living that seemed to give men fits to the extent of distracting them from their true destiny as *Homo Sapiens*, *thinking man*. All the little plagues could be reduced to a series of electrical stimuli and impulses in the memory of a computerized machine, and men would then be free to wander the fertile fields of the mind unencumbered by the drudgery of physical requirements. Food, shelter, transportation, sanitation, health requirements—in a



single stroke of the input machine were accounted for. All environmental responses became a matter of coded record and man's needs were no more.

Only it didn't work that way.

Of course it had been an involved, agonizingly complex and drawn out process to accomplish all this, but eventually they had a near-perfect product. It got to the point, this machine, that it could synthesize itself—that was when it became the *Machine*. And as a provider the Machine was an overwhelming success, but it grew so complex of itself and so capable that it came to possess what resembled enthusiasm in its synthesizing and its watchdogging. And then it seemed that it even began to Mother us. And in its role as a Mother, the Machine was a disaster. It was like the old sow that smothered the litter. It became so thorough that it allowed very little of anything that could be considered damaging to its human charges. What a ginziphonious, grocked, phomped-up situation! Have you ever been swallowed with concern?

*The stimulation of high emotion was disturbing to the human. Exotic food had drawbacks to the system. Thrill-seeking could lead to discorporation. Media for too much thinking could produce unreconcilable problems that could be disquieting. And so on. . . .*

The forbidden ways were barred, much as Topside had been barred to save the food. And there was no way around it—the Machine was everywhere. It had its extensions which were wired in on mental energies: Procs and others. But what really counted was that every molecule of the vast complex called the Empire was the cybernetic protoplasm of the despot. It was everywhere.

This, however, was no problem.

What a machine could do, a man could undo.

The root of the problem lay buried deep in the jargon of Down, in that when we spoke of the Machine, we spoke also of the men who were in league with it. Not the half-men Procs and others, but the cunning unknowns who sat enthroned in the very bowels of our monarchical Machine and told it what to do. These were the Programmers of Terror, or so they had come to be called. And what men with a machine—the Machine—

could do, other men cannot necessarily undo, even when they want to very badly.

If I have said little about the Machine, I have said even less about its only organized opponent, the *Forsters*.

The movement had originated with the Prophet of Doom himself when he had penned the words which showed the way—*our way*—though Dearborne's feelings were that E. M. Forster doubtless thought his work of prose an ingenious fabrication with little basis in dismal future fact. This unobscure little book, *The Machine Stops*, was the fetish of the opponents to the Machine in the early days, being raised from the dust of antiquity to serve the "See, there's where we're going!" purpose. But its proposition was not to be so lightly regarded as Mother Machine became more overbearing. Now in our present era of Empire the little book was revered as a startling note from a celestial bell tolling doom over the inhabitants of the Earth. Or at least so it was regarded by the Forsters—the cult of the reactionaries.

I knew little at the time about the Forsters. How they could remain hidden under the watchful eye of Mother was a mystery; but hidden they were. I was not entirely at odds with their cause, which as I understood it was a tuning down of the Machine and a prudent movement to portions of Topside, but I had no desire to associate myself with them.

In the main, Downers had little to do with criticism. Some managed to intellectualize about gluntsville Down, but generally Topside was considered far too unpleasant an environment for modern man, and the security and coddling of Mother Machine could be very appealing, especially in view of the fact that Downers had never known anything different.

Generally, we were a bunch of phomps. Helped to be phomps, made to be phomps. Fashioned in the image of the prototype phomp—the Machine.

*Mother.*



## CHAPTER III

□ *Down.*

*Claustrophobia.*

I could sense John Dearborne shudder as the letdown hurried us back to the lower levels, specifically, level 1, Roger P.'s level. Down through the hundred levels of steel and concrete and plastosilt. Down to the bottom of the city. Down to the bottom of The Empire. Down beneath a billion billion tons of earth and stone and monstrous construction, tunneled and honeycombed, all of which, I feared, could come crashing down on us at any moment.

*Claustrophobia.*

As we dropped, a thin film of perspiration appeared on my brow.

Of course, nothing had ever collapsed in our underground world before, at least nothing that I had ever heard of. Probably nothing ever would, because the builders had built well. But the weight and massiveness of the underground world seemed to press in, seemed ready to smother, crush and confine.

I glanced at Roger P. To him this was Utopia. He delighted in the very complex and weighty surroundings of our artificial world.

The letdown was a fraction faster than the uplift, the former being the complement of the latter. In almost no time we were back in Dearborne's trap. Now it was my trap, too.

Roger P. breathed deeply of the soup, glanced at us and said with a wry smile, "*Home, phomps!*" He wheezed a prolonged and dramatic sigh, then invited, "*Bee-fit?*"

"Fine, Roger P.," Dearborne said, and I nodded yes, too. I was thirsty.

"See? This isn't so bad, eh, fellas?" Roger P. began.

Dearborne silenced him with a curt nod and bounded the C-trix, moved over to the B and finally hopped the A. I guessed he was in a hurry, or something. We automatically followed and were carried off down the seemingly endless toobe. Roger P. busied himself by going through all the motions of enjoyment. I had to smile silently to myself at his dogged determination not to be influenced by our subversive intentions.

Roger P. was a patriot to the interest of the Greater Down, all right. I wondered just how much a patriot's patriot he could be. How secure was our position now that he knew as much as he did? It seemed suddenly an important consideration, but I reasoned it away with the thought that surely Dearborne would not have confided in him if he weren't certain of the man's position.

We passed under fish-quill grille after grille, all of different vintages. Their huge blowers were puffing, whirring and belching. How long had this legion faithfully done the bidding of the Machine? Too long. It was time for a fresher wind.

A few long minutes later we squeaked off at the impressive entrance to Roger P.'s slot. Bee-fit would be good after the briskness of Topside. Dearborne was still silent. I diagnosed it as an air of deep consideration, perhaps even meditation. In favor of this, I, too, assumed the posture of sobriety.

Roger P. with flourishes performed the brief ceremony for entrance.

We joined him this time in custom, since he wouldn't let us in if we didn't. I wondered about the reason for these customs. Flattery to the Machine? But was there such a thing as mechanical vanity? The customs could almost swallow the intellect, so extensive were they . . . perhaps there was reason here after all.

We entered Roger P.'s slot through the beautifully figured portal, the ornate door swinging wide. The figuring and the anachronistic swinging were all peculiarities of the lower levels. These folks rated differences, I guessed. I still hadn't figured how Roger P. rated. His apartment-slot was luxury, the luxury of level 1. We feasted upon it at entry.



The toobes webbed through the interior of the globe of each of the hundred levels, running north to south, east to west, sometimes indiscriminately in any other direction of the compass, joining the entire Empire complex in a mesh network. This was the world of the toobes. Toobe 1 ran continuously on level 1, the bottommost penetration, and the highest prestige level. Being on the bottom of the heap was coveted by most. Only the elite, so-called, enjoyed this caste designation as level 1 Downers. Toobe 1 was supposed to be an important place, and it was if one thought so—which Roger P. did.

The secret behind his managing his way into the level 1 crowd had always been a mystery to me. And he wasn't one to talk much about it, even with prompting. Roger P. was a *doer*, in his own simple way, and ambitiously persistent from the Downer's Downer point of view. Actually, as a real personality he was nilsville. But he'd apparently just kept hammering away at the super structure Down until he'd made himself a dent.

Success itself was usually measured in conformity. And in this, Roger P. was a winner.

Roger P. had been friends with Dearborne and consequently me for several years. Although we hadn't done much together except jaunt Topside and conflag now and then. Once he'd shown me how to rub at some forgotten bi-sex dancing affair we'd attended in the endless chain of social events that kept our pleasure centers hop-hop-hopping steadily. I rubbed fluently, not so much because it was the *thing* in terpsichorean expression, but because it made me feel . . . expressive of myself. Which I seldom was, of course, being devoted to Dearborne.

But I had never been really well-acquainted with Roger P. I wondered what it would be like to confront him on other than a social level. I wasn't sure at all what he did to fit into the scheme of things Down. To say he was a barrister meant nothing. It was of course no custom to pry, but Dearborne had once mentioned in passing that Roger P. held influence, whatever that meant. I figured that Roger P.'s reluctance to join us Topside stemmed, partly if not wholly, from his possession of this influence, whatever it was. This was his world Down, his ball of wax, and he knew it. Why throw away a good thing?

Inside Roger P.'s slot Dearborne and I settled luxuriously into the delicious comfort of sprawling couches. Soft and cool radiant lighting caressed us as we lay relaxed. Music in soft, rhythmic strains danced about the room, and a musky aroma filled our nostrils, rising heavily from the dark, deeply oiled neowood that paneled the walls in a cacophony of textures. It was all faintly dizzying. The room vibrated softly, in tune with our respective body chemistries. The entire effect was mellowing and half dreamlike; such was the artistry of the Machine. I wondered briefly if I was really willing to deprive myself of such pleasantries.

. . . Until I looked over at Dearborne and caught his eye, his ever wary, foreseeing eye.

It was good that he was here. I'm sure that I could have become almost unconscious to the burdens of Down living, there in Roger P.'s sensual and luxurious retreat, had I been left alone.

Following the necessary ritual, Roger P. prepared us stimulant.

"Bee-fit hot or cool?" he asked as he tinkered over the automatic equipment that had sprung from the wall.

"Hot, man," growled Dearborne, reversing suddenly into a good-humored smile.

"Going to be hard to enjoy bee-fit *hot* Topside, isn't it?" our friend chided. "You guys will get up there and you'll miss the advantages of civilized living right off."

"The point, friend-phomp, isn't to miss them, but to *avoid* them," Dearborne assured him with a mock smile. Then he continued questioningly, "But are you sure we can make it up, then?"

Roger P. smiled over at Dearborne, a careful smile. "Aren't you?"

Dearborne returned in kind. "Yes," he nodded; "there's a way."

Roger P. continued smiling. "I know," he said.

I didn't understand this exactly, but I wanted a piece of the conversation so I said, "If you weren't so wrapped up in this ambition to influence that you've got down here, you could come up there with us for some stumbling around and have one phompin good time yourself for a change."



"Ambition to influence?" Roger P. looked puzzled. Then he smiled at Dearborne, who in turn smiled back.

Roger P. smiled again at Dearborne and continued puttering over our drinks.

"How soon?" he asked without looking up.

"A few days," answered Dearborne as absently and without hesitation.

"So soon?" Roger P. looked faintly surprised.

The dark twilight of the room seemed to close a little tighter down upon me. *I had not realized it would be so soon.*

But why not? Our original premise justified immediate action, didn't it?

I automatically looked to Dearborne.

But Dearborne was a million levels away. At that moment he was Topside, roaming free and unfettered, free from the stifling encumbrance that was Down. I tried to join him, but my imagination was blind.

"So soon?" Roger P. repeated. Thoughtfully he gathered together his preparations on a large crystalline tray and administered the steaming decanters of brew to us. "I guess I hadn't figured you'd be leaving quite this early."

He set the tray down on a low table in the center of the room, and winking over at me, said, "It's still hard for me to get acquainted with the idea, you realize?"

I nodded cautiously. Roger P. settled down companionably into the softness of a sofa.

No one said anything for awhile. We only sat and sipped the good flavored preparation, slowly. Very stimulating, very satisfying. We sat, feeling the melodious strains as they filled the apartment and our souls.

"What about your female friend?" Roger P. asked suddenly out of the calm reverie.

Startled, I didn't quite grasp it. *Female?*

"Freddie."

"Freddie?" I coughed.

Dearborne grinned over at me. It was a wondering sort of grin.

"I . . . I didn't know you knew about her . . . about Fredrica," I stammered.

Roger P. grimaced at Dearborne with a nod. "Oh, tales get told, fella. Can do? The Machine knows all."

*Not so, Sir . . .*

I felt uncomfortable. Still, I was forced to smile at the thoughts of my Freddie.

Dearborne looked inquiring.

"Well, she's a new friend of mine . . . actually. And as you intimate, suddenly she is a little bit of a problem. Not any real problem, of course. But, you see, she's a *very good* friend . . . a *very nice* friend. We met at the last festival on 76 at their Mediterranean pleasure center and, well, you know how those things go." I suddenly felt embarrassed.

But then Roger P. began to chuckle politely. Then Dearborne joined him. And finally I let go of my embarrassment as well, till we had ourselves an all-out roar that ended on the verge of tears, though Dearborne was a little more reserved, of course.

I sobered in bursts and thought: *It was good to hear Dearborne laugh.* It made me warm and happy, even though I was the brunt of their pleasure. It pleased me to give Dearborne joy, Roger P., too.

But laughter at this time seemed out of place and strange.

I straightened myself with my surroundings and said, "But making the split now is going to be difficult, honestly." I turned inward and reflected over the prospect with an increasing uneasiness. Leaving her Down was really going to be something else again. It almost cast a whole new appearance on the prospect. But, first things first. Dearborne's cause had me nailed even better than hers.

The smoothness had returned to Roger P.'s ashen face. He moved over and helped himself to another cup of beef hot. "You know, phomp, that this won't be the last of the difficult or unpleasant things either. With what you're plotting, you'll just be getting started."

I felt frustrated for a reply and turned to Dearborne, but he only smiled calmly. And abruptly it occurred to me to wonder if Dearborne had a woman Down.

I didn't really know but it seemed an interesting question. *Strange*, I thought, *that I didn't know a simple thing like that.* Although, for sure, nothing was simple with Dearborne. If he had a woman, probably only he—and she—would know about it. Glunt! She would really have



to be something else again, wouldn't she?

Roger P. just sat, looking thoughtful. He sipped his bee-fit hot noisily, looking from one of us to the other. He said, "Let me tell you a few things about Topside.

"First, you can figure out some way of staying alive up there for a day or more—you know about that already—and if you do that, then the fun starts. Next, figure in the Law, our sacred function of order, the extensions of our deliberate norm. *The Machine will not be mocked . . .* Those extensions will be breathing down your necks within twenty-four hours, and they tend to be something on the heartless side, if not artless. I know. They just do their job, but they tend to do it pretty well. They won't leave you alone. While you phomps are up there going out of your minds figuring how to stay alive, they'll be on the prowl and just one step behind you."

"You seem to know all about them," said Dearborne with his quiet smile.

Roger P.'s face was noncommittal. "Yes, I know . . . some," he said. A touch of irritation sharpened his measured tones. "Now, I think you'd be all right if they'd leave you alone. The requirements—the food, elements, and so on—are all very much available. But—they won't! They won't leave you alone at all. And you know that, Dearborne. If you have the element of surprise working for you, you could get a fair jump on them. But forget about that. You'll embarrass them for awhile, but that will only make them harder on you later."

Dearborne said, "You're certain we'll make it past the automatic defenses of the Machine, then?"

"Oh, you'll make it," Roger P. smiled. "But once you're up, you'll be dead. They'll make an example of you."

"Is that a promise?"

Roger P.'s countenance grew dimmer as he realized he wasn't reaching anybody. "They'll make an example to discourage others, if there are any others like you. But they won't do it to satisfy any personal ambition you might have to become a martyr."

Dearborne didn't blink at the slam. "To discourage the others, you say? That's senseless. There's no need. The Empire isn't run by fear anymore; it was once but not now. Now there's only spinelessness, a lack of interest in

personal welfare—the same old harangue I've pitched before." Disgust played at the corners of his mouth.

Roger P. nodded thoughtfully. "How about the Forsters?"

"The Forsters?" Dearborne said blankly.

"Yes, what about them?"

Dearborne shook his head. "Forsters aren't of any consequence."

"Aren't they?"

"Not now."

"You should know."

Dearborne didn't say anything. I wished he had, since this exchange wasn't clear.

Roger P. stared at Dearborne. Then he suddenly shifted his attention to his drink and seemed to become preoccupied.

"Suffice it to say," said Dearborne, breaking the silence, "that the laws are rigid. They're strong laws, potent laws; a man would be a fool not to recognize this. But it doesn't matter. What is to be done, must be done."

Roger P. looked exasperated. "Phomp, that food supply up there is like God—you've heard of Her? At least it's like that to most of us Down. We're going to be pretty uncompromising where it comes to protecting it."

"What food supply?"

I looked to Dearborne incredulously.

"The food Topside," prompted Roger P. as though he couldn't believe what he heard.

"Oh," admitted Dearborne mockingly, "*that* food supply." His eyes were ice on Roger P.

"You talk with no regard for the sacred nature of Topside," Roger P. said slowly, barely audibly. "I don't understand you. The belly filling problem is still with us, as it was in the old days. It isn't just tradition that you trifle with, but the very substance of our existence. People will starve without the land Topside for food production. They'll starve. *Phomp*, man!"

Dearborne shook his head. "We both know that this could never happen, don't we, Roger P.? And we both know the reason why. But even if it could happen, I'd say let them starve. They'd be better off dead than they are now."



Roger P. looked sullen, his dusty complexion, the color of ashes, his eyes like two embers.

Dearborne suddenly signaled for our departure. I accordingly rose to leave.

Roger P. continued to look at us both very long and very hard. Then he simply shrugged.

"Be careful, phomps," he said.

Dearborne nodded, and I followed suit. We left through the fine swinging door, leaving Roger P. still sitting, absently sipping his bee-fit hot, which by now was surely cold.

## CHAPTER IV

□ Out-slot, down the toobe, amid the ivory glimmer of glazed walls, we glided along the C-trix skimmer. Dearborne looked at me very seriously and said, "He's a good man, isn't he?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "He's wormed up with something better than the average Downer to keep him alive. His being on top of the heap is an obsession if ever there was one. It's the only thing that's kept him animate in this dead world of ours. Interest, interest in anything, is just about a dead sport."

"Do you wish he were going with us?"

"Well, he's got more than a flicker of guts, and I think this is going to be important. It will take a lot more than complaints and dreams up there. He would be a big help."

"Ummm. On the other hand, maybe he's not so dumb in not going. What do you think?"

A nagging suspicion. Was he trying for something?

I shook my head. "No, I meant what I said back there, I really did."

Dearborne chuckled. "Well, it's a good thing. We'll just have to get along in spite of Roger P., won't we?"

I nodded, then caught myself, wondering if I completely understood what he'd meant by that. I wasn't sure I *ever* really understood Dearborne.

Down sped by.

It made me ill at ease to have turned away from it and still sup its foul swill, the stale breath of the decayed. Down was both mother and father to me, yet now it was dead. I felt a most possessing dread trafficking through the corpse. I was convinced there wasn't room enough for it



and me in this grave. Destiny for me was not a hole in the ground.

Everything within sight blared out in numbing regularity. I was pressed in upon by it. With humdrum monotony the branch toobes full of their insipid clatter buzzed by one after another. Between portals there were tasteless ornaments decking the bleached white walls in massive arrays of unimaginative colors and shapes which blended into a pointless and boring blur as we fled past. Overhead the cold brilliance of the endless strip of light illuminated the toobe with a flood of ultra whiteness which washed out over everyone and everything leaving them blanched and pale, lackluster and dull. One could not escape the light and its sallowness. The people it bathed were colorless, their personalities ashen, their destinies dim. The light hid things, hid things like *brilliance* and *flashes* and *sparks*. Everywhere there was the illuminated dullness.

As I looked around at those trafficking the skimmer around us, I was impressed even more by the examples they were of this dullness.

The Downers bore almost outrageous and sometimes humorous looks of such extreme piety—so completely self-satisfied, appearing thoroughly confident and secure in their well-organized, tidy, and unobtrusively glauu little world of toobes and slots and order. I looked into the pallid faces so apparently contented, so at peace with their world. At peace? No, *in order*. Order was what counted. The sweet, sickly flood of order that washed over the inhabitants of the world of the toobes, the great world society, The Greater Down Empire . . .

I wondered silently why disorder had to be such a threat to our security. Why must the idea of *disorder* exist at all? Why such a concept? Surely alternate orders would be more acceptable.

My eyes filled with tears. Those around us were pale, smug and dead. Very dead. When they had killed variety, they had killed themselves.

A shrill siren sounded.

Traffic control was calling. The skimmer coasted smoothly into idleness and the chatter and tumult hushed

into silence. Only the whining-grinding siren that seemed to echo from each molecule of the fabric of Down continued through the silence, wailing in a sharp singsong.

Then it, too, ceased and we all automatically stooped, pressed a thumb to the tread, or to the squeakway, or to some surface . . . in tribute to the Machine. In that instant, Mother knew the whereabouts of each of us Downers—all million million of us.

What a monstrous spectacle that would be to see the relays and circuits go to action in this simple act of record. What splendid horror, the very thought. No one could escape the record. Any who felt inclined not to comply would be hunted down and forthwith be induced to show more respect for Mother.

Seconds later, the gentle hum of our living environment returned and the skimmer began to move. As though there had been no interruption, the talk and buzz and clamor resumed and all was as before.

*Though not quite as before.* The tasteless blob that had settled even heavier in my stomach now seemed almost unbearable.

We skimmed on down the toobes. Dearborne, perhaps feeling what I was feeling, said softly, "It's a grave, a stinking grave."

We separated to make our preparations. Dearborne had outlined a few points for readiness to get me started, but something else must come first. Never had I known a love till now. This must come first.

Freddie . . .

The thought of her was a clog in my mind. Strange these attachments one could have for another. I must remind myself to stay free from any such entanglements.

Alone with her love and anguish, I looked deeply into Freddie's tearful eyes. She didn't understand. Of course, she couldn't.

But I nodded. "It's true, Freddie, I have to. You know I have to."

Her eyes could not believe. She sobbed.

"What can I say? I know what I have to do." I said no more. My throat and being were suddenly too filled with



a new pain to ease her sorrow. I could not. She could never understand.

As final supplication for her understanding, I kissed her lovely tattooed knees.

Then I left.

With a sputter, the flame died and the tallow grew hard and cold.

Leaving Freddie's kuby-slot, I turned on impulse and bowed a gestured farewell to indicate my highest compliment to her hospitality, if, indeed, *hospitality* was what we'd shared the past few months. As I bowed, those Downers in my general proximity along the squeakway interrupted their traffic and paid similar compliment to this dwelling as was the custom, of course. We all nodded politely to one another in disinterested fashion then continued on our ways.

Some slot, that Appian Way-alpha-alpha-Medi-76. Some slot! I would carry its numeral designation branded into my memory banks for a long time to come.

I left the squeakway—so called from the characteristic sound caused by our pliable footwear when we Downers hopped from the skimmer—and bounded the skimmer A-trix via the slower two. I decided I had better not think of this special slot and of Freddie. My sentiment was rapidly changing to near reverie and was beginning to encroach upon my good sense. I was almost ready to turn back.

*Proc!*

Up ahead on the skimmer . . . coming this way. My thoughts were in an instant silent. The frost-gray tunic burned out of the crowd, and I, along with a thousand other Downers unfortunate enough to be within his—*its*—perimeter of sight, stood immobilized. The fleeting skimmer carried us in solemn catalepsy. We were semi-transfixed against the rushing backdrop of the toobes.

*Proc.*

Slowly, at his own repugnant leisure, he—*it*—passed by, seeming to give each in turn a penetrating, melting gaze. As he advanced by my position and turned his eyes to mine, I blazed into a million disorganized molecules. My psyche seemed to blur.

*Proc.*

He continued on, depositing in the cringing memory banks of my mind a residue, a reminder of his evil power. He ambled, swung, swayed, in the lumbering gait characteristic of no other creation under heaven. I found myself wondering why they had created such a stunningly brilliant creature, in its specialty, with the appearance of an oaf, or a demon. It didn't seem technologically consistent, not with the present era.

*Proc*—unnatural from the word phomp. Terrible.

I guessed that was really what its specialty was: *Terror*.

I found myself wondering what was he hunting, this *Proc*? For surely he was hunting. *They all hunted*. And in a flash, relief shot through me at the thought that he hadn't been hunting me.

It could have been me—terrible, traitorous me, with the breath of sin still lingering at my lips. In a dazzling flash, the plan—our plan, Dearborne's and mine—every other grievous transgression I'd ever committed against the Empire, my entire life history, as well—all exploded in my mind. I shook. The thought of a *Proc* discovering our intentions almost overwhelmed me. I shook . . . and watched.

Further on down the line of so solemn passengers and squeakers, the wart of a *Proc* suddenly stopped, leered out at the world. In almost ultra deliberation he turned on a terrified man and kicked him in the groin. It had been in one motion. Decisive swiftness. Then the monster bellered:

"FORSTER!"

A wail swept through the crowd.

The helpless man fell soundlessly to his knees, stifling agony from the blow. As in a wave, the bystanders wilted away from his defense, and he was suddenly alone with the *Proc*.

*Procl*

The menace lashed out with its other foot and caught the disabled citizen under the chin, hideously disengaging his face from his head in a splatter and spew that generated an epidemic of retching among his fellow Downers.

*Proc.*

A terrible laugh, and it continued its march, leaving the sickening was-a-man in its wake and a lump of terror clogging the toobe.



The bloody remainder—*reminder*—just lay there. I turned away not wanting to see the awful corpse where it had fallen on the skimmer tread. Surely someone would kick it off onto the squeakway. But no one did—everyone kept his distance, avoiding the mess.

I turned and moved off along the A-trix afoot, which was seldom done, but others were doing the same, I noticed. We needed to move away from the ghastly scene.

*Proc. Dirty, filthy Proc. Like a rotten grock.*

I had to find Dearborne.

I boarded an uplift with a horde of fellow travelers. It whined to a stop at level 87 and I made final exit.

*Home.* My thoughts were dashed from further consideration by the relief this offered. Now I would reunite with Dearborne and we would plan, or at least I would help. The grim climate Down would soon no longer trouble us.

We were going Topside.

The whole world lay before us. *Whole and alive.*

## CHAPTER V

□ We left.

It wasn't so simple as that, of course, but by means of several stratagems, through which we laid alternate indications of intentions, we were able to leave in confusion all who might possibly be directly or indirectly aware of our going Topside.

This was probably because we left in confusion.

Or rather, I left in confusion. I doubt that Dearborne was ever the least bit uncertain about his activities.

As Roger P. had warned us, twenty-four hours was our maximum tolerance once up there; after that we'd be fair game for law enforcement—the Procs. We had to get ourselves lost up there within that narrow limit or forget about it.

So, we did it.

Apparently Dearborne had done some extensive planning toward this end, which one would expect, knowing Dearborne. The only question that could arise was whether even his plans would be sufficient. Topside was a big unknown. I knew now that I simply had never taken enough time to get acquainted with it.

To a discerning eye, I'm sure we would have appeared quite picturesque in a simple, homely sort of way. We were both dressed in heavy, very warm and hard-come-by clothing, clothing that was very much an anomaly in the toobes. In truth, our ideal climate Down was of a mildness suited perfectly for no clothing.

On the other hand, clothing, and particularly our heavy clothing, was a must Topside.

On our backs we carried bulky bundles of equipment in antiquated rucksacks. Around our middles we had lit-



tered various effects and baggage, some field-held, some clamped and some even strapped, so that we bristled with gear. We even had pockets, stuffed full of this and that. You could tell our apparel was indeed hard-come-by; where Dearborne had scraped it up was a matter of some mystery. And finally, trailing along behind, we had our flote-tote utility sleds heavily laden with a devilish assortment of paraphernalia too big or bulky to be carried otherwise.

I also carried a small *Total-Sense* recorder and a good supply of sensitive memory cubes and accessories.

We had made it out into the Raw without incident. The elaborate ritual to make the uplift work for us did tax Dearborne's patience, however; of all the ritual in the toobes, it was the most demanding and precise. I almost had to chuckle, seeing great black Dearborne there waving and mumbling like some apostate priest.

After he had gotten us in, he fooled around with the peeper system in the conveyance. Using two long, thin electrical probes, he jiggled and hazed the circuit out of kilter sufficiently to affect its operation. The peeper system did not betray our unusual exit.

The whine of the uplift subsided and the door hissed open. Abruptly a gusting Topside breeze blasted us with raw air. It carried coolness. Dearborne glanced over at me and smiled, a most confident smile. I took faith. How different this would be. How different this wind was from the endless gush of the grilled blowers Down. Here the wind was free.

*Freedom from walls and ceilings and boxlike slots and toobes. Freedom from being closed in.* We now had freedom to gaze in wonder at open lands that lay just beyond the protecting forest, though I'd never seen them. Freedom to see the sky . . . and horizons . . . the stars so humbling . . . to feel this wind, cool and startling . . . and to see and touch and hear and smell and taste the other elements that men had almost forgotten in their artificial, sterile, unfeeling and unfree world. Freedom, finally, from *legislated environment*.

We stepped out of the uplift and looked around at our freedom. It was wrapped in browns and reds and the

goldest golds I'd ever seen. Dearborne pointed out that it was the fall season and that it was evening, Topside time—our time, now. Emotion swelled inside me at the crispness and clarity of detail in the richly thick evening sunlight filtering through the barrier of sycamore and oak that ringed us all about. I felt alive and outside my being. I felt ginchiphonious . . . just plain ginchiphonious.

I stepped back into the uplift and unpacked the Total-Sense recorder, with its extensible tripod shooting back in upon itself and into a compact package more suitable for carrying. Dearborne had suggested that I record our entry into the world above. He had indicated he would have me do likewise from time to time, in record, I supposed, of our travels as we adjusted to our new and permanent home.

With a sweeping glance, Dearborne took in the tiny park surrounding the outcrop dome of the uplift terminal. During the past years and months and weeks and days of his increasing restlessness, he had courted and learned and loved this tiny plot of land with increasing intensity, I knew. He pointed toward the barrier and frowned, then motioned me with my recorder in operation to follow him. We walked across the well-manicured lawns, through the well-tended but wilting flowers of the gardens at the periphery, then under the shadowing branches of the ancient trees, our flote-tote sleds trailing along behind.

With a sudden surge of indecision, I realized I'd reached the frontier. The anxieties within me jumped forth anew. I'd never been further than this before—never. This before me now was the limit where commitment really began. It wasn't too late to turn back yet.

I looked anxiously ahead to Dearborne, who was leading off through the wood without any hesitation. I caught his confidence in the Total-Sense. Then suddenly anxiety rocked me again.

*What in the world was I doing?*

*What was Dearborne doing?*

I struggled my resisting feet a little forward across the almost virgin soil, extending my frontier, and began. As I recorded our escape, I wondered who it might be that tended the gardens up here. Strange that a useless thought like this would catch my attention just then, overriding my



fear, but it did, and I wondered. The neatness here was appalling. Appalling just like Down, and certainly it was a product of that place. Where before the park had been the freshness necessary to satisfy my appetite for something new and better, now I knew I needed more . . . more that was unkempt, more that was wild.

Ahead, Dearborne was striding swiftly away. I scrambled to catch him. Overtaking him, I said excitedly, "This place . . . This place is really something."

He nodded and smiled back at me and my excitement. He continued intently through the strange forest which now had completely swallowed us up. "Just make sure you're getting all of this recorded. Can do?"

I assured him I could and accepted this as a gentle reminder that my recording must have some significant purpose.

It was evident Dearborne knew where he was going. We did not wander aimlessly at all but made a direct line for . . . somewhere. Occasionally there were detours around the thick gray and brown trunks and low-hanging limbs of the trees, but we kept to our line.

A shadowy darkness seemed to issue from the forest floor and hang heavily below the spreading limbs. I wasn't sure the Total-Sense could do justice to this, since it was more a feeling all about that an actual phenomenon for sense reception. But we did get the new smells and tastes that rustled through the trees and brush with the gently gusting air currents. Underfoot the fresh fallen leaves crunched.

Occasionally I was startled by the scurry of a wild creature. I'd never seen many of them before, but I got them with the Recorder. It kept me busy . . . getting Dearborne's progress and the strange newness all about as well. It was all so very different. The newness rose from everything. I was almost insensitive to its wonder; mostly it passed in a blur as I busied myself with my assignment.

Suddenly Dearborne held up his hand in warning. I stopped and held myself rigid in caution. What should I expect? I grew intent upon my surroundings, forgetting the Total-Sense. The wood was alive with sound.

On impulse, I turned and looked behind me, back down

the trail we'd taken, but I could neither see nor hear anything suspicious.

"Over there," said Dearborne very softly. "That's the place."

Not understanding, I looked anxiously to him for explanation.

"Over there," he repeated. "It's the way out." He turned and looked at me, a glint reflecting an inner burning behind his calm. "That's important to you, isn't it, my friend?"

"The way . . . Certainly," I mumbled. "But why there?"

Dearborne twinkled an eye. "You don't know about this, do you?"

I looked again. We had come to almost the edge of the wood and the world stretched before us.

"Do you mean that?" I asked, pointing to the outside.

Dearborne remained patient. "I mean that . . . the barrier."

I didn't understand. He knew it.

"The stories . . ." he began again, "the tales of death and maiming, and so forth, associated with attempts at going Topside—you've heard some of them, I know—they're gross exaggerations, the product of generations of overactive imaginations. But they do have some basis in fact.

"There is a barrier. It was there in those times . . . to stop Topside trespass . . . and it's still there. I don't mean just this forest of trees, either, my friend. I mean the *force field* . . . around the woods."

"You mean here? Around the park?"

He nodded silently. "Can you imagine all those useless generations that no one even came out here on the periphery to examine the extent of their prison? So colossal an acceptance is overwhelming. The sheer terror of it . . ." Dearborne grasped for words. "Even you, my friend. *Even you.*" He shook his head.

"Anyhow," he continued, brightening a little, "the force field is here. And because I had sufficient gumption to come out here and see for myself, I became aware of its limitations." He smiled.



"Watch."

He walked a few paces ahead, nearing the outermost trees, where the forest gave way to a prairie. Here he halted, called for my recorder and, carefully selecting the spot where he should stand, extended his arm. Suddenly there was a glaring blue light, sparks and crackling.

I flinched with the Total-Sense, startled.

Dearborne pressed on by pushing his hand and arm outward with obviously great force. Nothing happened. His arm was caught, held back, and the sparks danced brighter.

Through clenched teeth as he pressed with all his strength, he said, "Nothing can pass beyond here."

I nodded, dumbfounded.

"A very interesting way to keep Downers in, don't you think? Light passes through it, obviously. The wind can penetrate. Animals—in fact, all lesser organisms—can pass through it. But men cannot. Not Downers."

I shook my head, amazed. I had never suspected anything like this. Knowledge of a simple thing like this was lost. And to think, no one had even walked out here and looked. I had never known of anyone. I had never even thought of it myself. I suddenly became angry.

"Then how—how can we?"

Dearborne silenced me with a wave of his hand. "I found a way. There's a gap—apparently a separation at the poles of the field, or some such. It's over there."

I could see nothing different about the spot he indicated just a few feet away. Grass and leaves rustled in the wind, and the yellow twilight lay the same upon the landscape . . . thick and yellow.

"I'll explain."

Whereupon he related to me his discovery of the gap. He'd found the force field some time ago, actually running full tilt into it during a Topside excursion. Sometime later, after much consideration, he had come out and felt his way around the circumference until he had actually tumbled headlong through the opening and found himself on the outside looking in. That had happened just one day before the last discussion with Roger P.

He hadn't wasted much time.

"It's right between those two trees . . . to freedom, phomp! Freedom like you've never known. Freedom you'll love and savor. Freedom that'll make a man out of you." He indicated that I should get this on the Total-Sense, then without hesitation he stepped through the designated portal, pulling his sled after him. As with the breath of a magic wind, his whole person seemed to change.

Turning, I glanced back down the trail we had thus far followed, but the uplift terminal and the park were hidden from view. I reflected that there was very little back there and Down that I would miss. Some, though . . . like Freddie. But those few things must be sacrificed in favor of the great adventure. That's just what it was I thought: A great adventure.

I swallowed hard.

Took a step through . . . and a great weight was lifted from me as I made the commitment.

I felt free. Phomp, I *was* free.

I was out of the trap.

I had escaped.



## CHAPTER VI

□ We marveled.

The world spread out before us as though it began right there. We stood before an endless prairie of lush yellow grasses, nearly waist deep, rippling under a fickle breeze. Awe came to me in a helpless surge.

Silently we watched a blood-red sun sink slowly into a low range of dusty blue hills, many kilometers away, hazy in the distance. It was so red and rich and seemed so unwilling to slip away beyond the rim of the world.

And such a rim . . . such a horizon. I had never imagined there was so much of it.

We watched the evening sky turn from blue to gray flecked with pink and copper . . . finally to a brassy dusk.

An inexplicable feeling of smallness, of insignificance, overcame me. It was all so big . . . and untouched . . . and fresh . . . and raw. Topside was real. All else was imitation.

"We miss too much down there," Dearborne said when even the twilight began to wane. "*Too much.*" His voice was low and controlled, holding back what I felt must be bitterness. Then he softened, pacified with the recurring thought of our freedom. We'd been reborn into a fresh, untainted world; bitterness had no place here.

Only the land wasn't untainted—not completely. For I noticed a short way out there before us, sticking up very straight and unnaturally, a shaft—a shaft of obvious Down origin. It stood about three meters high and must have been seven or eight centimeters in diameter. Dearborne noticed it at the same time I did and immediately pointed out some symbols written along its ebony black surface.

"Recorder," he said abruptly.

I flipped up the Total-Sense automatically and began to record.

Squatting down, Dearborne read the inscription. Through the view finder I could see a smile begin to spread across his face. He straightened quickly, grasped the shaft in his two great hands and yanked it from the ground. With a resounding *crack!* he brought it down over his knee, breaking it cleanly in two. He threw the pieces over near the gap in the force field, then stood grinning at his work. He almost looked defiant.

He flipped a sidelong glance my way and noted that I was still recording everything.

"Sufficient, friend." He pointed at the broken shaft. "Somebody wants to play games." He turned about, considered the sleds and said no more.

Curiosity banged through me hollowly, seeking satisfaction. But I resigned myself to waiting upon the big black's whims.

It was getting dark fast. I sensed that Dearborne was anxious. The idea was to get as far away as possible from any Topside terminal. Undoubtedly there would be pursuit.

The Machine would be watching. When we didn't come back Down from our excursion Topside, when a damage report was acted upon in the case of the altered peeper system, when we didn't report during the next traffic check—*then* we'd be fugitives. The Machine would be watching.

Dearborne began to uncouple the several miniature mobile flote-totes that our larger versions carried tag-along for small moving chores.

"We'll use these as decoys," he explained as he worked. "Will you help me, please?"

I jumped to his aid, embarrassed at my lack of immediate response. Soon we had the half-dozen vehicles lined up and had carefully aimed them in pairs.

"You see, my friend, we're aiming each pair to follow a random path under auto-control, aiming them generally to the west and north." He smiled to himself. "While we travel to the east . . . to the mountains." It was like a proclamation.



"I need quiet, meditation, a chance to gather my wits about me . . . then we shall see . . ."

*See what?* But I didn't ask. Dearborne would tell me when he was ready.

Dearborne slipped out of his pack and removed a large piece of neurofiber which I recognized as the lining to his fluff-eze back Down. He had me help him tear it into six strips which we knotted to the six miniature totes, tying them securely in such a way that a portion of the strip would drag on the ground when the tote was in motion. I stepped back out of the way, focused the Total-Sense recorder and got Dearborne setting their controls to automatic. He flipped the six switches to ON, and with a slight grumble the tiny vehicles headed out across the prairie at about forty kilometers an hour, the neurofiber strips dragging along behind. I continued to record them until they were almost out of sight in the dimming light.

The flote-tote was a small wagonlike vehicle more flat shaped than anything, but boxlike. The upperside was an open receptacle, and it was designed for carrying cargo and passengers. The miniature models we watched had dimensions of a half-meter or so and could carry several hundred kilograms float fashion, suspended a few centimeters above the earth by a maximum null-gravity field. The larger version could carry much more, almost as much as one could pile on it.

I knew that Dearborne wasn't worried about the weight/capacity ration of the little totes. He wanted them as decoys, and now he had six of them.

The tiny conveyances finally disappeared into the shadows of the dusk. Out on the plain darkness continued to crowd more and more into the vast expanse. The six sleds would continue along their separate ways through the night.

"That ought to give the robo-hounds something to follow for a while," Dearborne chuckled as he slipped back into his rucksack. "It'll fool them long enough. By then we'll be long gone."

"Robo-hounds?" Recollection flooded my mind. Decoys. Decoys for the robo-hounds, the scientific sniffers. *But—ancient!* Surely they'd have to requisition them from

the archives . . . if they were going to use them on us.

*On us?*

Dearborne nodded very seriously. "Yes, robo-hounds. I know you find it hard to believe, but you must accept the fact that they are used. And believe me, they'll use them on us as readily as they have on the others."

I didn't understand. "What others?"

Dearborne caught himself with a thin smile. "Yes, well . . . I know you aren't aware of it, but there have been other attempts at escape. I hadn't planned to say anything . . . not at first, anyhow."

I simply stood there a little stunned. "What happened to them?"

"Well, phomp, let me put it this way: there have been many attempts, but this one is going to be the first successful one."

*Great! Barfvonious great!* That didn't help at all.

Dearborne stared at me with his serious gaze for a long moment. He watched my reaction and the way I took this new revelation. Then he said, very slowly, seeming oddly to speak more to himself than to me, "I have important work to do, my friend. Important enough that I must succeed. *Must*—please understand that. Your heart must never fail you. You must never fail me. All right?"

I didn't know what he meant, but I nodded my head open-mouthed.

"You wondered, too, about the pole, that shaft that was left for us here, and the message on it?" Dearborne asked.

The question was rhetorical. He knew I was curious.

"It was a message from Mother. It was written in computer symbols and was intended for us. *I shot a shaft into the air, and where it fell, I do not care, for you shall surely find it. But this I know as sure as I am. From Topside, boys, you had better scram! Or you shall surely catch it.* Roughly translated, of course."

It sounded like the sick humor of a sick machine bloated and puffed up by a sick world.

"I told her to go suck on a lemonade. When her stooges who planted that thing there come out to get it, they'll get the message, and she will, too. Can do?"



"Can do!"

*Go suck on a lemonade, Mother Machine.*

But what in the name of glunt was Mother doing sending us poison pen letters anyhow?

Anticipation?

*How?*

My mind floundered.

I looked automatically to Dearborne, but he wasn't buying any just then. He walked about in the deep grass some more, studying the slight trails left where the gravitic repulsion between the two masses—the small flote-totes and, in this case, the ground and the grass and anything else handy that possessed mass—had left crushed evidence of its passing. He knelt down and fingered some of the broken plants. He seemed to be estimating their resilience. He stood up slowly, brushing away the small bits of debris that seemed to cling almost magnetically to his knees, a reverse to the gravitic impulse field. A silent assurance sat securely on his black face.

"Ha," he said with a laugh, "wouldn't it have been a surprise and a half if they *hadn't* anticipated us?" That's all he said. He stepped over to his tote and appeared to evaluate his load.

I wondered, had he expected the warning? It *had* been a warning, though its purpose escaped me. Many things must be escaping me, my mind was in a terrible jumble. I decided upon a course of desperate optimism.

I hooted. "Well, let them warn, hey! Phomp, we'll tear them up but good!"

Dearborne turned from his load and scowled at me. "Tear them up? Yes, we'll show them. But what would you know about such things?" His eyes glared through my flimsy shell of security. They were like frozen amber and twice as cold. "What was it that you were, Down? A plumber? Right? Class three or four?"

"Two," I said to keep the record straight.

"Yes . . . a two. Good fling, fella. A two—I guess you do know from whence you speak. After all . . . a class two plumber.

"And an intellectual, too, huh? Oh yes, mustn't forget that. Conqueror of the world of wisdom and strategy . . .

in your spare time and on Sunday, when you weren't busy living up your spare seconds away from the taskmaster.

"You?

"Glunt-garbage, fella. What do you know about survival . . . improvisation . . . suffering . . . denial . . . all . . . the little extras your commitment to this project included in the fine print? Wake up to this, man: Where was there ever a heaven that didn't start out as a hell? It's *hell* that sits there before us, phomp. Nothing but hell."

He seemed to soften a little. "Tell me, fella, do you really think they'll fall on their faces that easy? The great Greater Down? Come on, phomp!" He softened a little more.

"We'll have to see if we can make them stumble, but don't get so caught up in your vanity and pride that you stumble yourself. Just don't do that."

I felt swallowed in the shadow of this chastening; its darkness was a gloom in the lowering evening about us. I blinked and tried to think of some reply, but my mind was a whirling emptiness.

Suddenly Dearborne seemed to brighten. "And, now, my friend, that's enough harassment. It's a great day—a day for humility, but a great one."

I was sick. I'd only been stabbing at optimism. Why chew me out? Glunt!

Then I remembered, and realized. Dearborne hadn't been talking at me, but at himself. *Get thee behind me, Satan!* Dearborne had been a class two plumber, too.

Feeling a whole world more confident, I climbed up onto my flote-tote and didn't say a word. Dearborne looked blankly over at my perch, then mounted his vehicle in like manner. With a grin, he eased off, into the east . . . and we were launched.

I glanced back at the forest surrounding the terminal. In the darkness it appeared very dim and unimportant, but what lay within the confines of the vague shadow . . . and Down . . . had been my whole life up till that time. And I was leaving it behind.

The man I was . . . *what* I was now . . . it had made me.



It had been home.

With a jolt I noticed a gravity-mass trail of crushed grasses in the wake of each of our heavy machines. We were leaving a trail.

But Dearborne seemed unconcerned. So be it.

## CHAPTER VII

□ We traveled pell-mell across the same flat, rolling plain that seemed to extend forever into the east. The air whipping past us beat with a force that was invigorating at first, then numbing as it went on and on.

I felt as though I were in some kind of dream. The stars coming out to fill the vast heaven in all their profusion were icing to the cake. Their shine cast an eerie flush over the surrounding prairie and gave the landscape an almost unreal quality. And even in this subdued light the extent of the world appeared dizzying.

Finally I grew more accustomed to the bizarre surroundings. The further into the night we traveled, the better I felt. I grew to understand the wind and its sting and the horizon, which was evident only as it blacked out the wash of stars above and around us.

Frequently I had thoughts of Freddie. It was a loneliness I had known often, but one that I had now willingly imposed upon myself. Freddie's face darted in and out of my memory. It had been scant hours, but it seemed as though a millennium separated me from that final kiss . . . and her tears.

I swallowed my melancholy many times that night.

*"Soon be morning time,"* Dearborne shouted over the rush of the wind.

I nodded. Ahead of us there was a feeble glow that promised liberation from the darkness that veiled us and our new world. My thoughts of Freddie retreated as I stared ahead in anticipation. So many things I'd never seen before, never imagined, must be eluding us in the darkness.

But as we traveled on, morning did not arrive so soon



as we had scheduled. Instead, we watched a moon rise slowly, brightly, above the distant horizon. First, only a peep over the edge of the skyline—a tiny slice of radiance, startling us—but soon, as it rose, it looked like a crystal jewel balanced delicately on a black velvet, diamond-spangled backdrop. The silvery flush that washed more and more over us was as welcome as the morning would be later, for now we could see this new world about us much better.

We crested a slight ridge and suddenly a wide expanse of blackness appeared before us, low on the horizon. As we drew near it, I was startled to see that it was a great herd of animals bunched together against the night, shifting and restless as we approached. Several broke away in fright at our passing, and I recognized them as *bison*, an almost endless herd of bison. Their darkness seemed formidable in the moonlight, but we soon left them far to our rear.

Finally, morning did arrive. A colorful dawn slipped into the wake of the rising moon. The sky began to blue out of blackness. The moon became pale; fleecy clouds in a mackerel sky hung orangish above the expansive horizon.

"Recorder," Dearborne yelled over at me, pointing to the unveiling of the morning. I responded quickly, aiming the Total-Sense ahead of us as we rushed on. A record of the morning's mood would be of lasting value.

Finally, Dearborne indicated that I should begin to slow. Up ahead there clustered a line of large trees growing up out of the prairie. "There should be a river up ahead," he said. "We'll stop there."

I grew excited. It would be good to take a break. My legs ached unreasonably, but the prospect of seeing a river caught my imagination. Hydrodynamics and water flow had been a point of special interest to me Down. I wondered, though, how Dearborne was able to anticipate the river.

Minutes later we drew up under the great trees and found that they indeed lined the banks of a broad river of slow moving gray-green water. So *that* was a river. Thick and wide and heavy, moving like an endless sea.

"We'll break here for a meal. Can do?"

I glanced around at the roughness, the greenery, the soil, the dead wood and the great aging trees. "Can do!" I nodded. I flipped OFF my idling tote, hopped down to the ground and set to finding some *firewood*. Kicking around in the bushes and weeds, I found dead logs and branches that I felt would work fine. As I came dragging them back to Dearborne, I noticed that he had some of the equipment unloaded from the totes. He glanced up at my contribution and smiled.

"That's pretty good for a start . . . if you can break that stuff into some shorter pieces."

I decided that I couldn't and turned and headed out again, this time collecting an armful of smaller kindling.

"That looks okay," said Dearborne, surveying my collection. He reached into a package near at hand and withdrew his Burp—the Brian Ultraviolet Radiation Pulsator—aimed it at the firewood and played the beam over the kindling. Almost instantly the wood ignited, and in seconds we had a blazing campfire. I watched, fascinated. The crackling and the smell of the woodsmoke was nice—here were extremes in stimulation that were totally foreign to my Down orientation.

Soon Dearborne had some edibles spread out and a cast-iron sheet roasting over the blaze, propped on two rocks. He loaded a generous portion of food on the griddle, and in no time it was cooking and smelling delicious. The aromas struck me as being far more intense. My mouth watered in anticipation.

"Okay, phomp, get a plate and I'll fill it up."

It got me scrambling.

My first bite was indescribable. Dearborne grinned at my obvious pleasure. "I'll bet you'll find it tastes a little better out here than it did Down."

I nodded, scarcely interrupting my attack on the food. Dearborne prepared himself a hearty plateful.

Sometime later, after several heaping servings, the meal was finished. Dearborne had put on a small pot of be-fit—minus the phomped-up Down rituals—and it was gently steaming, awaiting our pleasure. I leaned back in the grass where I had sat down to eat. I scrunched down close to the soil, tucked my hands behind my head and stared contentedly up into the treetops. There was a peace and



a softness out here that was almost overpowering. Looking up into the spreading boughs decked with leaves of green and changing yellows and browns, I heard an occasional twitter from a bird and an intermittent scold from some unknown forest creature. There was still a rosy brightness to the morning, and the whole world seemed to be filled with enchantment.

"Nice, isn't it?" reflected Dearborne, following my gaze.

I nodded comfortably.

He shook his head. "A terrible thing, that burden Down. Hardly a soul knows about this."

What he said made me suddenly think of Roger P. He ought to know about this place . . . the way we were knowing about it right now. I was sure it would change his mind.

"Too bad Roger P. isn't here, huh?" I said.

Dearborne smiled over at me, amused. "You think so, do you? You might be surprised to know that he's already aware of what things are like up here. When he made the decision not to come with us, he knew what he'd be missing."

I didn't understand. "Excuse me . . . ?" I said.

"Oh, he gets around. He knows more than you might think."

"Yeah, but he's never been up here."

"Don't be so sure of that."

This made me hesitate. "You think he's been up here? When?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter, does it? He's not here now. But we are . . . and if we want to stay here, we'd better get hopping. Can do?"

Could do, but that didn't satisfy my curiosity. Yet I knew I could hound Dearborne till the gymphs grew tails and he wouldn't tell me what I was plugging for till he was ready.

In minutes we were ready to push on.

"Where do we go now?"

"Across the river. But there's something else that we need to do first."

"What?"

Dearborne shook his head. "Okay troop, look back out there across the plain. Tell old dad what it is you see."

I blinked out across the yellow prairie. "Uh . . . grass," I hazarded hopefully.

Dearborne's face formed into a black wrinkle. "No. I mean our tote ruts."

"Oh. Yeah, I wondered about those."

Dearborne twisted his head and stared at me for a second. "Don't you think we ought to do something about them?"

Automatically I stepped into his casual approach. "Yeah, I'll buy that. What'll we do?"

Dearborne smiled. "Watch what I do and learn, phomp."

I did . . . through the Total-Sense.

The "ruts" showed signs of being relatively permanent. In a meter-wide swathe, the grass was broken and crushed. Dearborne walked out into the furrow through the grass that his tote had made earlier and began walking up and down, scuffing about. Then he left the rut and walked up to the base of one of the big trees. He walked some more up and down this path until he had a furrow there also. When he'd satisfied himself, he told me to do the same with my furrow, and he pointed out a specific tree. I put the recorder aside and did it . . . feeling a little self-conscious, I might add.

Dearborne surveyed my work when I finished and seemed to approve. "A sniff of that and they'll go out of their minds." He turned then and looked hard out across the prairie from where we had come, and nodded to himself. "They'll be coming with the sun."

"Who?"

"The robo-hounds, of course."

I was confused. "I thought we got rid of them."

"Glunt—don't you think we left enough spoor out there in those ruts as we traveled last night for a robo to follow?"

"Okay, I'll buy that, but what about the decoys?" I felt ill at ease questioning Dearborne this way.

"Those?" Dearborne smiled. "Well . . . that's another story. Robos will follow them, too, but not for long. I have a remote control in my gear that switched them off a short time ago."



*Glunt.* I was more confused. "What do we do when the robos get here, then?"

"Take this and climb up on that limb, and I'll explain."

He handed me a dull gray, mesh cloth of some sort that I'd never seen before. I looked at him, but he only grinned; so I tucked the thing under my arm and set to climbing my tree. Dearborne did likewise his own tree.

The lead robo-hound came sliding across the prairie, the tall grasses rustling in its wake. It was a scant hundred meters out and closing fast. Its companion trailed close behind, following the trail I had left on my tote hours earlier. There was nothing much to them—they were almost all sniffer, a flat, six-meter disk that glided along on anti-gravitic pulse like our totes, their *brain* located centrally on the upperside in a tiny housing. A signal was transmitted back to base from this tiny transmitter. We had to shield this housing with the special-substance, electromagnetic muzzle that Dearborne had brought along; and, if all went well, like *whirrr*, *buzzzz*, and *clunk*, they would be at our mercy.

The hounds glided up to the spot where we'd walked around, and hesitated, seeming almost to buzz with a little more excitement. Our spoor would be thick and juicy there, a delight to their sensitive detectors. Instantly they sprang to the new paths we'd made leading toward the trees where we waited. Without hesitation, they came up to the base of the trees.

*Thunk!*

My hound hesitated, confused by the obstacle it hit. It hummed and buzzed, seemed about to slide away to search out my path elsewhere. It was directly below me, throbbing and tipping. Now was the time.

I leaped off my perch and down, landing on the smooth surface of the hound with a metallic *thang!* The machine dipped and swayed violently under my weight. The gravitic field threatened to collapse. Without a second's delay, I whipped out the cloth Dearborne had given me and threw it over the tiny hump in the center of the disk. The whining ceased abruptly, and the hound fell lifeless to the ground with a jarring crunch. I fell to my knees

dazed . . . more by the quickness of events than by the sudden fall.

Over by the other tree, Dearborne stood laughing. At his feet rested the lead hound muzzled and still. *Great phomp!* I thought. *We got them.*

"They're going to be wondering what happened to their mascots back at home base, but this won't take long." Dearborne was working with some kind of contraption that he intended to fix to the robos. I was sitting in the grass still unsettled by our boldness. I had been content to watch and catch my wits while Dearborne had quickly unloaded some more of his equipment. Now he had a long, rigid rod with a string tied to one end from which dangled a mushy piece of goop he'd unwrapped from some foil.

"What's that for?" I asked.

Dearborne grinned. "This, my fine feathered phomp, is going to send our nosy friends on the wildest wild goose chase you ever saw conjured up."

He took his Burp in hand, laid the long rod so that the end with the goop extended way out over the edge of the detector disk, and welded the setup to the metal surface of the hound. He checked his work, then glanced over at me again.

"In a minute we're going to yank the muzzle off these things so they'll go out on the prowl again. This bait dangling from the rod is loaded down with my scent—I've been carrying it in my pocket since before we left. It'll be so attractive to these whiffers they won't pay attention to anything else. They'll head toward the scent dangling sort of hither-flip out in front of them. And what happens? They'll keep chasing it, but never catch it."

A wide grin broke across my face, but Dearborne forestalled any comment. "Up into the trees again," he said, and began to climb, trailing behind him a cord that was attached to the muzzle covering the robo-hound's brain. I turned to my own tree and pulled myself up into its branches.

Dearborne waved his hand to me, then reeled in the cord. The shielding fabric lifted, and the hound sprang instantly to life. It *buzzed* and *hummed* and *thrummed*.



Suddenly it rushed toward the gob dangling directly in front of it. As the robo moved, the gob jiggled back and forth on its wire, swinging from side to side—and the machine jerked this way and that, following it. Out across the field it went, darting to the right and swinging back to the left. The sound of Dearborne's laughter followed it. Before long it had disappeared in the tall grass.

Together, we climbed down from our trees and walked over to my hound, which still lay dormant. "Quick," Dearborne said to me, "handle that second gob there on my tote while I rig up this beast to follow it."

I obeyed, and Dearborne got busy with the Burp. I handled the stuff, plying it, squishing and twisting it in my palms, then I tossed it to him. He knotted the blob to the long string and let it dangle. He handed me the cord attached to the cloth.

"We'll have to get back in the trees," he said. "Don't drop this on your way up."

We repeated the whole process and when I lifted the shield, my hound *buzzed* and jerked and headed out, chasing its tail. I hoped it wouldn't stop till it reached the end of the earth.

## CHAPTER VIII

□ Morning of the second day out dawned as bright and colorful as the first. It differed from the first only in that it brought the mountains Dearborne sought. The rocky summits had broken up into the skyline while silver dawn still floated cool across the prairie. They had risen with the sun in the east, till now an entire range, coarse and rough-hewn against the silky foreground of prairie grasses, lay exposed, stretching mightily from horizon to horizon. They cut straight up out of the prairie floor, and Dearborne pointed out a narrow valley which opened at the base that had the appearance of reaching some distance up toward the summits. Here we would find shelter from the searching that surely followed us.

Dearborne signaled a halt. Our totes coasted slowly to a whirring stop. "They'll soon be coming behind us," he said, shading his eyes against the brightness of the morning. He scanned the prairie to our rear. "But, we'll be all right after we get up high."

"You really think they'll be coming this soon . . . after all we've done?"

Dearborne looked amused. "Fella, let me call one little fact to your attention that apparently you've forgotten to consider in your enthusiasm for this great, wonderful world up here. Okay?"

I nodded cautiously.

"Where is Down from here, phomp?"

I hesitated, startled at this odd question. "Why . . . why, Down is down. We left it back there yesterday." I was a little mixed up.

"Fella, Down is *down*, all right. Right there under that spot where your tote is sitting—straight down, probably a few hundred meters or so. Right under your feet, so close



you could almost spit on it. And remember, those phomps aren't limited to coming up at a particular terminal, either. The Procs can come up after us any place they take a notion to. They're down there filling up the whole world, and we're up here treading around on the ceiling. We can never get very far away, except maybe in the mountains; and, brothers and sisters, let me tell you, that's where we're heading, fast! That world down there doesn't extend up into these high places too much, only once in a while. Right down below us now are those same billions of phomps galumphing along through life just like they were two days ago when we left them. The only difference is that we've altered our space coordinates a little so that we're now over Combine Veldt-A-62."

Suddenly I felt a million kilometers closer to home. I looked down at the grass with a paralyzing dread. *Veldt*—right under my feet. *Good glunt!*

"So you see, for me to say that they'll be along directly is to say nothing. It is as it is. So . . . come on, let's get going."

We headed toward the canyon. The sun was rising low above the mountains. Heat waves were beginning to rise in patterns from the land. But I hardly noticed our new world now . . . I was again seeing Down.

The long night before had been another entry in my long history of anxieties.

Freddie's face was before me every time I dozed off. The comforts of our makeshift camp set out there in the willows along the river at the point where we'd left the waterway were meager. We'd decided to stop there in the interest of reducing near complete fatigue, so we'd just slapped it together.

I had tossed fitfully in the strange surroundings, the fantasies of sleep playing havoc with my imagination. But mostly it had been the thought of Freddie. Perhaps it was even guilt . . . guilt for the abandoning. As a result, today I was a wreck. Wasn't worth a glid. In this state of mind, Dearborne's simple recollection of the nearness of the enemy was terrifying. The power of Down wanted to overwhelm me. No doubt, from an academic view, this

was the greatest power the monster had over any of us: the belief in its omnipresence and terrible power. Our psychological awareness was the chain . . . and it rattled noisily about my neck.

The sun was just beginning to flood its light into the narrow valley as we entered it. The wan yellow disk seemed to speed across the heavens. I pulled up along beside Dearborne, and he shouted that we had only a few hours of daylight left. He glanced back over his shoulder and fleetingly surveyed the plain. He didn't seem to be worried.

High rugged cliffs and peaks loomed over us. It was almost humbling. Where before, at a distance, the mountains had looked huge, overbearing, but simple, now true character and composite nature was plain. Chunky boulders and hunks of rock. Dusty, gritty sand and dried out bushes. Colors and textures far more wild and untamed than any we'd known Down. And there was some kind of smell that made me sneeze, a tight, eye-watery, miserable kind of sneeze that burned. In fact, everything around us, the entire landscape, burned into our senses. The pure light from the sun shone down with almost a crisp sparkle that cast a sharpness all about. Everything was fresh and undisturbed. No one had been here for a long time.

From time to time, when the view permitted, Dearborne would stop and look back over the prairie. Nothing moved out there. It was quiet and still, as though everything had just stopped doing whatever it had been doing through the middle of the day.

Dearborne said, "Let's get this on the Total-Sense."

I responded and made the required record. With the recordings I'd made from time to time earlier, we were going to have a record of Topside almost good enough that we wouldn't even have to be there to enjoy it.

For several kilometers we ascended through the twisting canyon, climbing constantly. Great boulders worn smooth by millennia of spring torrents and bleached bone-white by the sun lay in confusion along the path the canyon followed. Sand and dust swirled up in clouds in our



wake. An afternoon sun beat down with increasing intensity, making our slow journeying the more uncomfortable. I continually wiped the sweat running down my cheeks on either sleeve.

We were phampin awful high up. How high up, I didn't know. The canyon had long since disappeared. Now we were forced to tackle the open face of the mountains themselves. Glunt! What a lot of fun. On the steep slopes, the flote-totes automatically adjusted to natural terrain and were doing fine in a slow-progress sort of way, gliding along canted and all. However, in adjusting so, they had quite unceremoniously dumped us off—several times, at that, before we had finally swallowed the idea along with a lot of dust and dirt that we were just not going to get to ride any further. It had evoked a lightness and laughter at first, but now it was giving rise to a good measure of ill comment. After awhile, every millimeter of the way was turned to cussing—some surely foul enough to curl the hair on the toe of a gymph—and we each chuckled under our breath in turn as the other responded to the less noble aspects of our environment. We cussed and chuckled, that is, between gasps of the ultra thin, high alpine air we were being forced to breathe.

We were perhaps two thousand meters above the prairie floor when we finally got where we thought we were going. At least Dearborne mumbled something like "This is the place" and we just sort of stopped and called it home. The last little distance had been up, around and sometimes down, backtracking, avoiding and hating tough thickets of scrub oak and some other devilish bushes cleverly designed to ensnare. Over boulders and rough, rocky ledges. Around juts and jaggs. Under weird outcroppings. And all the time, of course, enjoying the fresh brazen rawness and the thin, delicate, razor-sharp air of the altitude . . . until we'd finally arrived at this place. There was no question but that we'd arrived. *Phompsville!* This was it.

We were out on a ledge that had been chunked out of the granite of the mountain we'd elected to struggle up. Rather than a ledge, it was more a plateau, reaching a full fifty meters in either direction; being faced on three

sides by a sheer drop practically to oblivion and on the fourth by the steep face of the mountain continuing sharply on up to the summit. A small exception to this isolation was a slope of boulders and vegetation extending downward from the southern exposure, up which we had made our approach. At first observation there seemed to be no other way on or off the flat bench. Our view of the land westward was spectacular and entirely unhindered. We could see from horizon to horizon in the north and south and out to the limits of detail across the prairie. It was like a sea of yellow. The sun like a gurgling ball of bright fire was settling swiftly toward the misty line of yellow-gray-blue in the infinite distance. Sunset . . . and darkness would soon be upon us.

"Best set up some facilities in a hurry—can do?" said Dearborne.

I nodded, pooped.

"Before we do, though," Dearborne continued with hesitation, "I want you to look out there across that amazing country we've been crossing and tell me what you see. Okay, phomp?"

I nodded, still pooped, and squirmed a little, trying to get a softer chunk of rock under me. I considered what I had been asked. "There's wilderness out there," I said, willing to try anything, but hardly thinking that was what he was after.

"That's right," he said with an instant smile. "That's absolutely right. Wilderness." He paused a moment, then went on. "Did you ever stop to think since we came up what there *ought* to be out there?"

I didn't understand what he meant. I shook my head.

"Well, ask yourself how come you don't see any food growing out there anyplace . . . anyplace across that broad land we crossed and that we can now see all too well. How come there isn't any food growing in this land out there Topside . . . the land upward that's all supposed to be used to grow the food we eat Down. How come, fella?"

An interesting question. I was unable to speak a single word. A horrible question, and in the gathering darkness up there on that high mountain an ominous horror closed in about me.



It was a hoax, a terrible, terrible hoax—and all mankind had been the fool.

"How come, fella?" repeated Dearborne as softly as the night. "How come?"

## CHAPTER IX

□ *You talk with no regard for the sacred nature of Topside. I don't understand you. The belly filling problem is still with us . . . as it was in the old days. It isn't just tradition that you trifle with, but the very substance of our existence. People will starve without the land Topside for food production. They'll starve.*

*We both know that this could never happen. And we both know the reason why. But even if it could happen, I'd say let them starve. They'd be better off dead than they are now.*

The face of John Dearborne would swirl up before me in the storm, then I would see Roger Pleasant. . . . The dialogue drummed on through the terrible night. *They had known. What were they trying to do?*

*It had been during that last meeting. Roger P. had challenged, and Dearborne had countered with a sneer. They both had known the reason why Downers wouldn't starve without the land Topside for food production.*

And now I knew.

The storm raged on. I didn't know whether it was inside or outside my mind. Freddie's face entered the drama. She seemed to be crying in a hollow wail, moaning for food . . . but it came out sounding like my name. I was unable to get up to help her, and Dearborne and Roger P. just walked away. Suddenly her face began to melt, and it spread out into a mist that completely covered the earth. The misty whiteness soon reached me, and I put out a testing finger and hastily withdrew. It was death . . . and it was suddenly still except for a silent, soft lapping across



the earth even to my ankles. I tried to avoid the clammy, damp death that had been my Freddie, but I couldn't. It was everywhere.

I awoke. It was as black as death and there was the roaring of demons.

The storm had come with the darkness, gathering around our mountain in great black clouds that blotted out the sky. Static discharge had ripped across the heavens, crashing fiercely at our mountain. Then had come the rain, moisture from above, in drenching torrents. We had been caught right in the middle of unpacking. Our shelter had been lying on the rock, half assembled, our gear stacked carelessly about. As the storm broke, we struggled against the blinding downpour to get some semblance of a shelter over our heads and our equipment. What we finally settled on wasn't doing an adequate job.

I lay in my fluff-eze sack there in the dark, rigid, half frightened. I knew Dearborne was sleeping restlessly at the other end of our enclosure, but I felt alone. The wind whipped roughly at the flimsy fabric of the tent, and gusting fingers found their way through tiny openings and cracks . . . and the rain followed it. I twisted in my bed uncomfortably. I was lying in a puddle. I had no idea how long I'd tossed and dozed, or how long a wait I still had till morning. All I could do was wait and shiver helplessly.

I woke with a start to find warm sunshine streaming into our battered tent. Groping out of sleep, I looked about for Dearborne, but he was nowhere that I could see. I lay there a moment more, then pulled myself stiffly from my fluff-eze and staggered out into the daylight. The morning sun, just above the crest, blinded me with its warmth.

The storm had passed.

Dearborne was busily hunched over some project he'd erected on a large, flat rock. I wondered what he was doing so early while our camp still lay in a mess. I stumbled up behind him with the idea of looking over his shoulder. Before I could, however, he glanced back and said, "Hold it a minute, will you, fella?"

He had the Total-Sense out and was working over it. Seconds later he slipped it back into its metal case, turned

and smiled warmly. "What do you need, my friend?" he said.

"I was just wondering . . . when are we going to get this place shaped up?"

He smiled again at the metal case, nodded to himself. "Why don't you get started right now. I'm through here."

I turned away, still wondering what he'd been doing. But I concentrated on the arrangement of our camp, which right now didn't have any. We could begin over there—

"Friend," came Dearborne's quiet voice behind me. I didn't turn. "What I was just doing there . . . don't worry about it, can do?"

I looked back, almost to where he was standing, but didn't look him in the eye. "All right," I said, "if that's what you want."

"It is."

Turning, I walked out to the edge of our plateau. I couldn't understand him sometimes. He didn't seem to trust me very much. I almost felt like extra baggage to the expedition.

"You're sure," I said looking out over the edge, and changing the subject for my own sake, "that this couldn't be one of those tracts the early planners set aside for recreation?"

He didn't answer, so I turned and saw that he was eyeing me seriously.

"Don't you believe what I told you last night?" he said.

"Yes, of course."

He slowly walked over to where I stood, looked about and indicated a spot. "Sit down," he said.

"You see, the growing of food Topside for us starving Downers went out generations ago." He smiled, catching the look on my face. "I know it's hard to accept; you've had the ginzy idea crammed into your head since you left the embryo banks. But, things aren't always as they appear." Dearborne let a flicker of an inner smile reach his lips.

"That land out there is barren as far as organized productive growing is concerned."

"All right," I said—the obvious thought had already



occurred to me—"where *do* we get our food, then, if it's not grown up here?"

"That," said Dearborne, "is a good question. And, of course, the answer is: *Mama*. What else?"

"Through the processes of transmutation, synthesis and so on, the Machine assimilates the basic ingredients for our food supply and manufactures all the little goodies we delight upon and think come from Topside. It's quite a fabrication, this hoax they've thrown at us, and it's done nicely." A scowl formed where his friendly reflection had played.

"The question is asked: If we don't need Topside for preservation of our food supply, why can't we come up here any time we want? And, again, of course, the answer is that Mother figures that if she started letting the phomps out of her cybernetic prison, she'd lose control over us, and this doesn't set too well with her logic. She wants to control us, feels she *has* to—to protect us. Also, there are those behind the Machine who feel much the same way, but for a lot less altruistic reasons. They like the slimy feel of power. Hence, nobody even gets a good look at things up here. It'd just be too risky to their interests."

He paused to let me soak it in. I did, with little comfort, except that I sure was glad Dearborne knew about all this. I wondered just how he did.

"So you can see, phomp, a little of the motivation behind my wanting to change things Down. I intend to do what I can to fight the rat-phomps. I've kind of made it a personal challenge." He said it simply, but I seemed to feel the earth quake under me at the thought of what this could mean.

"You've never said anything about . . . uh . . . crusading before," I said.

"I haven't, have I?" He grinned. "Well, you know . . . *The time has come, the Walrus said* . . ."

He stood up. "Let that suffice for now. You know about the problem that faces us. It isn't one of coping with Topside. It's sort of a matter of hand-to-hand combat with the mechanical monarch, Mother, and her whole ginzy world. You think about that for awhile."

I shrugged and continued to sit upon the hard, bumpy rock on the ledge on the mountain Topside.

*A crusade.*

First, we crusaded through camp, straightening, fixing, arranging things. When we finished, we had a snug little base for operations.

What Dearborne had told me made more sense. At first it had seemed a miracle that he should be going Topside to escape and that he would take me with him. When the novelty had worn a little thin, however, the prospects of just running away from the problem Down seemed a little shoddy. Now I knew that this had never been his intent at all.

But the question that weighed heavily upon my mind was:

What could even he possibly do against that ginziphoni-ous situation Down?

*A crusade.*

Dearborne had asked me to go to the spring we'd crossed down slope a short way the afternoon before. He was interested in a cold drink of water. So I had grabbed a collapsible bottle and headed out.

The clear water gurgled out of a big rock which squatted at the base of a cliff. A pool formed immediately and I was able to fill my container easily. From the pool, the cold water splashed down the mountain slope in an old familiar waterway green with moss. I headed back up the mountain, lugging the now heavy load and thought about the prospect of slipping down here a little later for a refreshing shower beneath the spouting rock. I shivered, feeling the cold spray already.

I hadn't been watching too closely where I was going, and suddenly I realized that I had missed the path. Surely, the way was up there . . . over those rocks. Yes, that was right.

I struggled upward through the new path and a minute later stopped again. Phomp! It didn't look familiar. I had better go up some more.

Several minutes more and I still didn't feel any closer



to my goal. Why hadn't I been more careful? Then in instant relief I caught sight of the plateau. I had foolishly made the mistake of coming up too high; now I would have a difficult climb down. Oh well, I was learning.

Suddenly I caught my breath and slid to an abrupt halt on rolling pebbles. Fear blasted through me at what I saw down below, now that the entire plateau came into view over the lip of an outcropping. Instinctively I crouched down.

Down below me I could see Dearborne, and he was talking to someone. I couldn't make out his words, but he was talking very quickly and from a surprisingly relaxed stance. Surprising, in view of whom he was talking to. Or *what*.

It was a Proc. *Dirty filthy Proc . . . wears a smelly sock . . .*

As I crouched, fear continued to run havoc through me. What to do? They had us. All of Dearborne's plans, dead before they were barely born. *Great glunt!*

I crawled a little nearer the brink to get a better look. Inadvertently, I dislodged a small pebble which bounded down the slope. I froze in instant horror. I would be discovered. I watched, petrified, as the pebble picked up others in its flight and soon there was a minor landslide of small stones rattling toward the camp.

With machine-quick reflexes the Proc swiveled its head in my direction. I ducked lower, but I was certain it had seen me in the instant before I could react. In panic I scrambled up the slope, dislodging more rocks, some quite large. With sudden awareness of my foolishness, I ceased and turned back to look over my shoulder, scrambling to keep upright on the slipping terrain. It was just in time to see Dearborne kick his foot upward and disengage the weapon the Proc had been holding from its hand. I heard it clatter out of sight behind a rock. It turned the Proc's head just long enough. As the huge monster turned to face his attacker, Dearborne lunged. I suddenly felt as though I was watching from high up above an arena. The two locked in combat below flayed at each other as though to the death . . . all in company to the rumbling of rocks and earth gathering in momentum below me, crashing toward *them*.

Suddenly Dearborne was thrown back by a powerful blow from the enraged Proc. I saw him fall heavily against a sharp rock. He didn't move. The Proc stood heaving mighty breaths, gloating over his prize. Then it turned, bewildered, just in time to meet the onrushing avalanche of earth and rocks as it roared down the mountain into the clearing. The Proc was helpless before it, and I watched with excitement as the fiend was completely overwhelmed, knocked to the ground and buried.

It would be a good long time before anyone would dig that Proc out of there. *A good long time.* Tons of rock and earth had relocated squarely on top of the creature who had suddenly been a threat to our freedom . . . and had just as suddenly been eliminated. Right then, that seemed like the way to settle all problems. Totally, completely, irrevocably. Under all that mountain, the Proc would be very, very dead. The way all good Procs ought to be.

*But Dearborne—*

I scrambled down the slope to the base, still lugging the cumbersome water jug. Much to my relief, I saw Dearborne begin to move. By the time I'd reached the level and hurried over to the spot where he'd fallen, avoiding carefully the heap of rubble that marked the burial of one slightly damaged Proc, he was on his feet and shaking off the assault.

"Glunt," I said as I held his arm to steady him.

Dearborne shook his head, clearing it, glanced over at the pile of debris, shook his head again and said, "Well, you sure got rid of him, didn't you?"

I beamed a smile and nodded.

Dearborne looked at me through suddenly angry eyes. "It's too damned bad you couldn't have waited to see what I was going to do."

"I don't understand." I didn't.

He only shook his head. "Well, it's no matter now. But I had an electrochemical disruptor all ready for him. Of course, there was the little matter of him wiping me out before I made my move, for which I'm grateful to you, but I still think we could have saved him."

"Why would you want to save him?" I asked incredulously.



He struggled into a more upright position. "Because I wanted him to run a little errand for us. It's one thing for Roger P. to know where we are but it's another for him to be really hot onto us."

"Roger P.?" I gasped.

Dearborne smiled weakly. "Oh, yeah. Well, that's another little matter you don't know about yet."

"Roger P.?" I repeated, still unbelieving.

Dearborne didn't say anything, only looked steadily at me for several seconds, then over to the heap again.

"It's too bad, too," he said flatly, "that we didn't get our friend's demise on the Total-Sense. It'd have made good viewing when we get back Down."

## CHAPTER X

□ "You see, fella, there are many things afoot. Sunday sermons don't count much. The forces at work Down are just too complex. There never was and never will be anything simple about a million million lives. The power that controls that many destinies is correspondingly more complex. It's overwhelming to the ordinary mind—and, my friend, you *do* have an ordinary mind. If my efforts to explain things have seemed like gross simplifications, it's just because there has to be milk before meat. Can you understand that?"

I didn't want to.

"Besides, there was the matter of security. In spite of the fact that I've known you for so long, there was still the possibility that you were fooling me. I didn't know about Roger P. at first, only much later, recently, in fact. So you see, if he could do it, so could you. Only now I'm convinced—nobody could fake your reactions to things Top-side. Nobody."

That hurt a bit, but I doubt that he noticed. "What about Roger P.?" I asked.

He smiled. "Roger P. is the key man they planted on me early, at the outset, anticipating my critical attitude. I don't know too much about his actual place in the hierarchy of Down officialdom, but he's a Mama's boy, for sure. They anticipate trouble, and I suspect that Roger P. was groomed from the embryo banks for just such activities. Of course, since I've known about him it's been cat and mouse. And he's been a real factor in the plans I've laid."

He paused, then said, "Here, let me show you." He walked quickly across the barren rockiness and dug into



his gear, came back bringing a book with him. "Did you ever see one of these?"

I read the title as he handed it to me.

### THE MACHINE STOPS BY E.M. FORSTER.

I stared rigidly at the book cover for what seemed an eternity. Finally, I looked up at Dearborne and nodded noncommittally.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked.

"Yes, I know what it means."

"Well, what do you think?"

I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what I thought of Forsters. "Phomp, what do you want me to say?"

He grinned a broad smile, his black face and his very much alive eyes wrinkling in glowing mirth. "Phomp, I don't want you to say anything. I just want you to think."

So I automatically thought, looked at the contraband book and thought. And then I thought some more.

A crusade, he'd said.

I smiled resolutely. "Can do, phomp. Now that we're Forsters, what are we going to do to revolutionize the world?"

Dearborne nodded and went into immediate action. "I'll see if I can get that Proc's flyer going. It'll have a homing transceiver of some sort, too, that we'll have to kick out of condition."

I hadn't noticed it or thought about it, but the Proc had come in on a small winged craft which lay half hidden behind some rocks. It looked barely bigger than the Proc itself, but apparently it'd done the job.

Dearborne went over to the flyer, opened the transparent domed cockpit, scrutinized the instruments briefly, then wriggled into the cramped space. I stood beside the flyer and noted over his shoulder that the controls didn't appear too complicated. That was one thing about a Proc-operated device: it couldn't be too complicated. They were buggers when it came to brute detection, but complete misfits when it came to manipulating their physical environment.

Dearborne fiddled with several of the more obvious fixtures for a minute, then deliberately went through a

sequence of flips, twists, pushes. He was answered almost instantly by a grinding buzz.

He glanced back at me, hesitated, and said, "Uh . . . why don't you scare up some victuals. I probably can handle this here."

I lingered a second, then nodded. I wasn't hungry, but I guessed he must be. I returned to our gear and opened the larder. I couldn't see Dearborne, but I was sure he'd be along directly. What to eat? Decisions.

Suddenly I was sure I could hear somebody talking. It sounded like Dearborne. Despite his enjoinder to leave him alone, I found myself getting up and slipping over a little closer.

He was talking—I could see him voicing something into a small hand pickup on the flyer. I still couldn't tell what he said, but his manner indicated that he was emphatically trying to get something across to . . . someone. Suddenly he stopped and, without any indication of really finishing, replaced the mike in its cradle. As quickly as I could, I returned to our makeshift table and sat back down. It was none too soon, for that instant he appeared around the rocks and walked toward me.

"Well, it's all ready to go," he announced briskly. "I've destroyed the homer and the communicator, so we should be as isolated as we ever were."

The moment I opened my mouth I regretted it, but I couldn't hold back what I said. "Did you take care of the communicator before or after you made that call?"

Dearborne was silent for a long moment, appraising me. Then he said softly, "I hope you never feel the need to spy on me again."

At first I avoided his eyes, but then a notion grew in my mind from a tiny speck of self-respect to a suddenly monstrous indignation that seemed that it could fill the entire world. I had to let it subside before I could speak.

"Look, you know I hold you pretty high, so don't misunderstand this. But you know, I'm going to try to quit this little game of mine where I crawl off into some corner of my mind and count my complexes . . . you know what I mean, I'm sure."

A new look jumped onto his face.



"And," I continued, "I think it's about time you stopped trying to intimidate me every time you turn around. If I was spying on you—which I was, though I didn't hear anything you were saying, if that's a relief—if I was spying on you, it was because you made me do it by not confiding in me the way you said you would. I'm human; I can get hurt. I've got enough insecurities of my own without your adding to them."

Dearborne's great black form was as motionless as a big rock, his face as passive as though it were carved from stone. He was looking at me, but his gaze went right through me and off into nowhere. Then he began to nod.

"You're right. You know, you're right. I've lived with this thing by myself for so long that I almost can't force myself to share. I'll see if I can't change that." He smiled, not apologetically, but as though he was really including me in things for the first time.

It was a great smile. I couldn't hold back. It was just the natural thing to join him. We just stood there smiling at each other for quite some time. Phomp! Dearborne sure did have a way about him.

Dearborne said, "I was calling our old friend Roger P. through the facilities of the Machine, which is in direct hookup with that flyer—all Proc flyers."

"I don't suppose you'd mind telling me what in the world would make you call *him*?"

"No," he said mildly. "It's quite simple, actually. The extensions of the Machine are sufficient—believe me, they really are—to know most everything there is to know about us up here . . . which puts us in a ginzy spot as fugitives. Consequently, Roger P., who is no doubt heading up this particular operation at Proc Central, wherever that is I've never found out, knows almost as much about our activities as we do. There are limitations on this, of course. The situation, then, is not unlike that which Roger P. and I enjoyed Down. He knew that I was up to something—and I knew that he knew and he knew that I knew that he knew. Follow? Well, they're curious . . . so while they're curious, it's hands-off me and consequently hands-off you, too.

"We were just bothered by one of their vital little ex-

tensions. It was brandishing all kinds of threats, so we wiped it out. It's just some more of the same cat and mouse we were playing Down. But it's a life and death struggle, and don't you forget it. Now you're a part of it. When things finally come down to a real showdown, there'll be no quarter given . . . on *either* side. I want you to remember that.

"But as long as we can keep Roger P. and his boys from panicking we'll be all right. As long as they know where we are, they're not too worried. Let them lose sight of us for long, or get to thinking we're up to something that they can't handle, and they'll nab us *mos-skishy-quick*. So I keep Roger P. informed. He expects that kind of impudence from me, thinks it's my prime weakness. Only now we're going to pull a fast one."

Dearborne sat down beside me, smiled, and went on talking. And it seemed to me that for once we *really* talked . . . for the first time ever. We talked on through the remainder of the afternoon, the evening and into the night. What he told me was why he had come up here in the first place . . . and I became almost scared.

It was about time he was telling me things sufficient to *scare*.

He told me things I'd never suspected. They seemed strange things, even coming from him. But when he was finished, I knew that these were the things I had wanted to hear for a long time.

He talked of things he had done, little things and big. And he talked of things undone as yet. The Greater Down Empire was to become a symbol of universal disdain. There would be revolution; there would be the recreation of life from death. With a single breath he charted the destinies of millions; with a wave of his great black hand he planned salvation for billions.

It was almost like God talk.

And . . . he was telling all this to *me*.

I suddenly felt rebirth.

It was this place, this new world around me. It had been in the soft orange stillness of the afternoon as we'd sat together, and in the twilight of the evening which had long since faded . . . hanging ever so briefly, but won-



derfully, lavender and misty over our sky-high mountain. And it was in the knife-icy blackness that I felt it. It was the hard, bumpy and very, very strange rocks we sat upon . . . the naked peaks overhead . . . and the heavens. The smells and sounds and sights of Topside . . . the new world . . . the *old* world.

Rebirth.

All we had to do was overthrow Mama. Lick her Procs. Convince everybody in the world they ought to go Topside. And organize an Exodus rivaled by none other in history.

"Dark, isn't it?"

"Ummm."

"I appreciate what you said, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"So now we find that lost terminal that's on this mountain?"

"Tomorrow."

*Tomorrow.*

"Fella—"

"What?"

"It'll get rough from time to time. You can hack it, can't you?"

"I can hack it."

"Yes . . . I'm sure you can." He paused a moment in the silence. "Let's hit it."

"Right. Let's hit it." The fluff-eze would feel mighty good.

Sometime later:

"Fella—"

"Uh-huh?"

"You don't really have an *ordinary* mind."

## CHAPTER XI

□ I spent another night with Freddie . . .

She floated up out of sleep's nothingness and kept calling me to come back. At first she was very far away and then she seemed to draw closer—and I received a terrible shock. She no longer had the fair complexion of my Freddie, but instead had the great black face of Dearborne. She/He continued on through the night beckoning. *Come home. Come home.* The vision faded before the coming dawn which filtered over the sharp crest of the mountain.

Dearborne stirred at a hearty breakfast while I fixed up the camp in case we might be absent for awhile. There was a feeling of excitement in the air. Dearborne had said we were through fiddle-faddling around.

A short time later, as we finished our meal, he said, "Friend, I would like you to hang around here today . . . kind of watch things, if you don't mind. You never know who or what might come nosing around."

My spirit took a nose-dive.

"Besides, there's barely room for one in that flyer as it is."

True, though disappointing.

So, I'd spend the day keeping my eyes open.

By the time the sun had risen over the crest, it was apparent that it was going to be another good day. I knew this was not always so in this particular Topside season, but so far we'd been fortunate. After awhile it even got hot, and I found I even had trouble following Dearborne's simple instruction to keep my eyes open. For some reason I wasn't too concerned about anybody unwarranted put-



ting in an appearance, so I'm afraid I loafed at my watchdogging. If I'd been alert, I'd probably have discouraged the visitor we had later that afternoon.

He came while I was down at the spring enjoying the fresh rinse I'd promised myself earlier. It was just shortly after my late afternoon lunch, and feeling a little sleepy, I had decided a dip would be just the thing. I gathered in my collapsible jug, figuring to collect a fresh supply of water while I was at it, and headed out back down the mountain toward the bubbling spring. It probably wouldn't be too long before Dearborne returned. He couldn't do much searching after dark.

The water felt even better than I had expected, and I hung around a little too long. I had a lugging-heavy supply of water I'd collected, and I couldn't have been in better spirits. I really felt eager to do battle with Mother Machine.

The only problem was that I didn't get to face Mother. One of her stooges visited camp while I was away . . . and he left before I got back.

I strained at the jug one final time and made the last little pull into camp. Just then the grumbling whine of Dearborne's commandeered flyer sounded above me, and he came winging in like a bird, landing with the rattle and crunch of an inexperienced pilot.

"Good news! Phomp!" he called with excitement. "How went things here?"

"Can do," I grinned.

"Great!" He stretched out of the cramped flyer and jumped to the ground.

"I found it," he said, his eyes alive. "It's up there a little to the south, right on top. If we move it, we can still make it back there tonight. Can do?"

"Can do? Good phomp. Good ginchiphonious phomp!"

He grinned the brightest blackness of his spirit out at me. This was the reason he'd come Topside—to find the lost terminal.

"Let's check what gear we're going to need, get it ready, and get the glid out of here. You get the hypertensile line, and I'll get together our Total-Sense recordings . . . we'll need them, I can promise you."

I leaped to my task and got busy. Then suddenly there came a startled yell from Dearborne. "Who in glunt's name has been playing with our recordings?"

*Not I said the pig . . .*

Dearborne considered the situation he confronted, then said, "I thought everything went all right."

"What happened?" I asked, confused.

"We've been visited. The recordings are gone."

"Who—?"

He frowned. "*You know who.*"

He was right. I did. Phomp, stupid and damn!

Then Dearborne said, "It's a good thing I anticipated this, huh?"

At first it didn't register, then—

"Anticipated what?"

"That they might be curious about our recording."

"They?"

He ignored me. "So I made duplicate copies and stashed them. Uh . . . that's what I was doing the other morning when you got nosy. It would have been obvious to a trained observer that we'd been making quite a supply of them. It would be an obvious second thought to wonder why. They wondered, then borrowed them . . . in the name of The Empire.

"Were you gone today anywhere?"

I admitted that I had been. He nodded. "Well, they did it then . . . were probably watching you. Might be watching us now." He glanced around cautiously, signaled me to silence.

Quietly we began to gather our gear together. We didn't need much and would leave the rest behind.

Shortly Dearborne called me over, using low tones, and said, "We're as ready as we'll ever be. Now for the darkness and we'll try to slip away."

"Why do we need all that cord?" I asked as I sat hunched-up against a rock.

Dearborne sat beside me, invisible in the darkness. He silently munched on some food-sup tablets. "Ummm. You'll see why when we get there."

This satisfied me, and I wrapped my cloak tighter about me against the chill. It was much colder this night



than the others had been. I hoped Dearborne didn't plan on sitting around too long.

There was almost a kilometer of the hyper-tensile line he'd had me get together, and I had wondered from the very beginning why he brought so much.

"It's about time," he said softly out of the still night. I nodded.

"There's something here I want to give you before we get going," he said. "It's something that I want you always to keep with you—will you promise me you'll do it?"

I didn't understand what he was driving at, but I said I would. "What is it?"

"Fella, I don't want you to ever let it leave your person," he repeated. "Will you buy that?"

"You make it sound strange," I whispered, "but if that's what you want, I can try."

"I don't want you to try, I want you to do it."

"Phompsville! I'll do it!"

Dearborne rummaged through a few of his possessions and handed me something. "Guard it with your life."

"You mean it?"

"Phomp—"

I was ruffled a little by the drama, but my attention was caught by what he'd just handed me. It was a book. Without really thinking about it I knew what book it was. *The Machine Stops* . . . somehow I knew it could be none other.

"You want me to have this?"

Dearborne seemed to be exercising superb patience. "Yes, again . . . and now that you've got it, never let it from your person . . . at the cost of even life itself."

"Good phomp!"

"That's right, be a good phomp."

The cold continued to close in tighter about us.

Surely if someone was out there, they wouldn't see us leave now. More of the cat and mouse. I wondered about some of the things I'd seen him do over the last few days. The decoy totes . . . fiddling with the robo-hounds . . . all when he expected them to be right on our tail anyhow. Had he just been playing the role for the benefit of the opposition?

In sudden decision, I found myself putting it to him straight. "What was all that gobbledegook with the decoy totes and the robo-hounds?"

"So, you're wondering about that. Well, you should know, I guess. But I've been putting off telling you—I didn't want to endanger you till you were really committed, I guess. And there *is* danger involved here. If you are caught, when things get a little tighter, knowing about those two elements of our plan could be most damaging to you, since they'd stop at nothing to get it out of you. It'd make you literally a walking bomb."

He hesitated, then continued. "What would you say, old phomp, if I were to tell you that I had planted imploding bombs, *Imps*, on those miniature totes . . . and that during the fracas we had with the hounds, I planted detonator homers on them?"

"I'd ask *why*?"

"Good enough. The answer to that would be that it becomes our ace in the hole. They're not going to pay any attention to those decoy totes. To them they're just a nonessential part of the intrigue, part of the cat and mouse. The robo-hounds will be taken back Down now that they're an inessential part of the pursuit. They'll take them to Proc Central. So you see what happens? When I activate the homer—if I activate it—it calls home the bombs stashed on the totes. The bombs will detonate on the surface in an overlay pattern in the general proximity of Proc Central. It'll be messy, but a last resort. The consequences will be one phompin big crater, no Proc Central any more, no Mother Machine . . . no more tyranny."

I did a mental double take. "Yeah, and no more civilization, no more half the Downers, no more technology . . . and no more world, either."

"I know that," he said sharply. "But I said *as a last resort*."

I nodded, considering the odds.

"You asked, so I told you. Those phomps will suspect nothing . . . the circumstances surrounding our dealings with the decoys and the hounds shouldn't arouse any suspicions. Will you buy that?"

"Okay, I'll buy that." It was a good plan, but it didn't



seem like a *Good* plan. I could see billions of Downers going out like a light if he had to follow it.

Well, I'd been curious and had asked. Now I wished I hadn't.

It was time.

Dearborne gave the silent command. We stood up and silently made our way over to the flyer. Since there wasn't room in the flyer for me, I would ride outside, suspended below the tiny craft by a length of the tough metallic cord he'd had me get. I didn't like the idea, but there was little question that it was necessary. Earlier I had fashioned a sort of cradle that would give me support. I slipped into this while Dearborne settled himself before the controls. Without hesitation the power plant jumped to life and we took off.

I was gripped with a sudden fear. As we shot upward into the black sky a stinging cold wind gripped me. In minutes we were gliding swiftly up the mountain, hoping to leave any pursuers behind and unaware. My only contact with reality was the taut wire wrapped around and around me and reaching seemingly to infinity above me. I swung to and fro as we raced along and upward, and I felt alone save for the light-spangled heavens and deep engulfing void below that was the complete blackness of the mountain's face.

Suddenly, most of the black yawning pit fell away and the entire dome of the world was alive with the stabs of light. I knew we'd cleared the crest of the mountains and were now sailing over the flat plain of the summit. I had been surprised when Dearborne had related this to me, having supposed the tops to be a sharp apex instead of an extended plateau. Our terminal was up here on this mile-high plain.

Then from out of the blackness I detected a second whine, far to our rear. As I listened against the whipping wind, the tension increased. The whine was still there and closing. Suddenly I spotted a dark blot against the heavens. Then without warning a fiery tongue swept out from the craft and played about the air near us. I could feel its warmth and looking up, I saw Dearborne's flyer

dimly lit with a yellow, fiery glow. But the heat ray didn't even come close—just a warning.

Never had I felt so exposed as hanging out there from the line. The pursuer moved his fiery beam over and began to sear my metal life-line. Panic leaped from every molecule in me and tried to spread itself thin throughout the universe, tried to hide. But, there was no escape. Up there above me a licking flame turned my line from silver to a glowing red.

I looked up with a dryness in my mouth, hoping to see some indication that Dearborne was doing something, landing the flyer—anything! But we made no change in course. It seemed almost as though he was giving our pursuer no heed.

Then I heard a dull-sounding *whuummp!* and caught sight of a glowing missile streaking swiftly across the heavens. It seemed to adjust its course in mid-flight, then plummeted directly for the source of the fiery ray that threatened my line.

A brilliant *roar* blared out from the spot where the pursuit flyer had been, then the entire mass of flame and molten matter seemed to collapse in upon itself and was swallowed up by the utter blackness of the night. Almost as quickly as it had raised the trumpet of hell itself, the explosion had turned in upon itself and was snuffed out, as though it had never been.

*Imp.*

Dearborne had launched an imploding missile/bomb, and had unleashed a fury that I knew had been unknown in the world of the toobes for many generations. It was ghastly in its effectiveness. There simply was no longer a pursuit vehicle or a pursuer. It was as though they had never existed.

I could feel my hair standing straight on end all over my body. Imps were the most closely guarded weapon of control and destruction that Mother Machine had ever conjured up in all her evil wisdom.

We began to descend. I couldn't really tell, but I began to *feel* the gulf below come up to surround me. Suddenly we pulled to a stop in midair, and I felt myself



being eased to the ground. With a little bump, I made contact and busied myself with harness while Dearborne settled down beside me in the flyer.

"This is it," said Dearborne, his voice ringing sharply across the still night air.

"Phomp!" My voice still felt like it didn't want to do much more than *gurgle* and *hiss*.

"They had infrared sensors. I hadn't realized. We had them, too. Took me a minute to find them but when I did, it was a simple matter to zero in on them—just loaded the catapult with a Proc-seeking Imp."

"But it's not that simple now," I said. "You've gone beyond playing cat and mouse with Roger P."

I could feel him look me over, sensed the deliberateness of his pause. "You're more important than the disadvantage that bomb caused, you know? But you're right. I hadn't planned tipping my hand so soon, but we'll be all right. We're alone now. They'll have glunt to pay trying to find us. This terminal is like *something else* to find . . . and I thought I knew where it was before I began."

"Where?"

"Oh, it's over there." And as simply as this, he led the way to the terminal that would take us back Down . . . back to the world I had sworn never to see again.

I was surprised to find we were entering what must be a cave.

"This is impossible to see from the air," came Dearborne's voice from up ahead, sounding hollow in the enclosed quarters. "We'll pull the flyer in here and vanish."

I stumbled across the uneven floor of the cavern, trying to catch up. Suddenly he halted, and I could see him standing before a large hole in the floor of the cave.

"Down there?"

"That's right."

"Where's the *letdown*?"

He laughed. "You didn't expect it to be here, did you . . . and working?"

I shrugged, feeling foolish. I looked down into a cylindrical shaft. There was no sense trying to see into the depths . . . I couldn't even imagine the distances that must be involved. *The bottom of the bottomless pit.*

"How do we get down there, then?"

"That's why I brought the line," Dearborne said, studying the shaft with deliberation. "Haul that gear in here, and we'll be set for the night, or at least part of the night. During which, fellow phomp, we'd better get some rest."

We moved the flyer with its load of equipment into the cave. Soon we were settled down as comfortable as the terrain would allow, and munching on some sustenance. As Dearborne had said, it was time for rest, in preparation. We would sleep.

As I munched, I held the book Dearborne had given me and wondered if I'd be *able* to sleep.



## CHAPTER XII

□ The light was more than adequate to illuminate the gleaming metallic surface of the cylindrical shaft we were descending. Dearborne had produced some self-rigged headset lamps which flooded the ten-meter diameter of the shaft in a near dazzle. The light wasn't sufficient to see where we were heading as we descended, but we didn't need to see where we were going. All we had to do was get there.

As the feeble morning light of early dawn had just begun to filter into the cave, we had woken from the drug-like sleep that had overtaken both of us minutes after we'd settled down in the darkness. With instant anticipation, Dearborne had been ready to move out, while my numb brain still struggled with the memory of my dreams.

Again it had been Freddie. She'd somehow gotten hold of my book—Dearborne's book—and had gaily run about tearing page after page from it while I ran behind trying to collect them against a nuisance wind that would blow the pages away just as I was ready to leap upon them and retrieve.

"Get with it, Uncle Phomp," Dearborne said. "The waiting is over."

"El Phomparino to you, too, Sir!" I grumbled.

"You'll have to carry this bundle I've thrown together, and we'll leave this glorious land for less pleasant circumstances."

I eyed the bundle of gear critically. "On my back?"

"Yup."

I shrugged; there was a second one for him, too. They'd probably each weigh near fifty kilos.

Dearborne slung his pack up onto his back, indicating that I should do likewise, and walked back outside into the open Topside. I followed, knowing that this was important . . . this one last look. That old pit had a way of getting to you that wasn't nice. It was like wearing a solid rock overcoat.

He turned, smiling resolutely at me. "And just think, phomp, if we're lucky, we may even get to come back up here sometime and enjoy this place. Hey?"

I decided I didn't like where he was placing the emphasis in that last statement.

At the edge of the shaft Dearborne knelt and inspected one of the overhead girders anchored into the solid rock of the ceiling, noting that it was centered over the opening. As I silently watched, he produced his Burp and another piece of equipment and began to weld the high-tensile line to the girder. Seconds later, apparently satisfied, he attached the second piece of equipment directly to the line. It was an explosive disruptor. Triggering it by remote control would sever the line. He had to do this since we only had about a kilometer of the stuff . . . and we would have to drop closer to two kilometers to get back Down.

Good phomp! What a ginziphic little jaunt this would be.

And now we were in the middle of our descent.

Dearborne had quickly shown me the technique for scaling down the line and after tying a safety length between us, he'd hopped onto the ultra-slim metallic threadway and started down. I, of course, followed right on top of him, and just like that we were underway.

But the vertigo . . . *good glunt!* And beyond this, why say more? Just imagine descending that threadlike route with two kilometers of empty blackness between you and the bottom. Vertigo . . . *good glunt!*

Our technique was something Dearborne called a Geronimo. He'd seen the principle in a museum piece and had adapted it to the two tiny straddle-slide gizmos he'd put together himself Down. It consisted of the line



fed through a braking pulley and a second one, offset, with a dangling T-bar straddle saddle. With a man's weight on the T-bar, gravity brought the brake into play; and there was a hand-controlled press lever for manual override. It allowed us to descend as fast or as slowly as we desired, sliding down the line like monkeys on a string.

A half-hour later we were at the end of the rope.

"End of the line," came Dearborne's shout up to me, and in that instant I hit the brake and held it tight.

"You'll have to get me swinging if you can, over to the wall."

I knew what he had to do, so I grabbed the line and began to push and pull. After an eternity of awkward struggle, he began to swing to and fro like a pendulum. In each hand he carried a cube of *stic-um*, and all he needed was contact and he'd have a grip on the side.

The arc widened. Seconds later he reached the micro-smooth cylindrical wall and quickly stuck his adhesive implements fast. He fished into his cloak, withdrew his Burp and began to burn away at the metallic surface of the shaft wall. The idea was to burn a niche we could slip into as a sort of way-stop.

Smoke from the smoldering metal billowed out and hung about us in the dead air, stinking and blinding. Rivers of glowing metal oozed and ran down the sides. And sparks in a cascade flew out, attempting to burn at Dearborne behind his protective cloak. The power of the Burp was impressive. Finally he was into the rock strata that lay behind the thick metal wall, and it fairly flew before the full-force blast of the heat ray. Seconds later the niche was finished. Now all we had to do was wait for it to cool.

After minutes of restless waiting, and while the metal was still just plain *hot*, Dearborne crawled up into the niche and beckoned me to join him.

"Now we set free that end up there and let it drop down the rest of the way." He carefully laid the metallic end of the line against the inner metal surface and once more secured the line. Then he pulled a remote sensor-trigger from another fold of his cloak. "Now watch."

As he depressed the button, the line was severed by the precise explosion a thousand meters above, and it dropped . . . and kept dropping, down the shaft, before us. Then the free end passed us almost too quickly to see and continued its way on down the shaft. We waited silent, tense seconds.

*Whing!* and the line went taut.

Dearborne aimed his forehead lamp on down the shaft and said, "Well, phomp, here we go again." He positioned his Geronimo and jumped over the side. And I was right behind him.

It was good to be on the last leg. The T-bar tended to bite into my legs. It seemed that in spite of the exotic nature of our adventure, the drudgery of the moment could be every bit as intense as any other time.

"Heyooo!" Dearborne suddenly shouted. "We made it."

I hit the brakes almost instantly but still almost plowed into him as he was brought up sharply by the end of our journey. I slowly eased myself down the remainder of the way, then dropped with a hollow *thunk* to the floor. Only it wasn't the floor. As I followed Dearborne's lead in stamping around on the surface, he informed me that we were on top of the uplift and would have to burn down through it as the *final*, final leg of our strange descent.

He immediately bent to this with the Burp, and I looked back up the shaft we'd descended. Phomp, what a long way up. The smooth metal walls stretched upward into darkness.

"Okay, phomp," said Dearborne, stamping heavily on the rectangle he'd etched in the roof of the uplift. "Down we go."

He was answered by the ringing *clang* as the metal slab fell through to the floor below.

"You first," I said, grinning.

His grin matched mine, and he tossed his bundle before him and jumped down through the opening into the dark compartment below. I followed his light, then caught him in my own beam. He signaled me to join him, so I jumped and lit hard on the floor below.

Out beyond the jammed, half-open door of the uplift, dimly revealed by the headlamps, there waited a dark



and musty corridor—most unlike the toobes—and beyond that a large chamber opening out into the distance. It was filled with machines.

Dearborne didn't say a word, only looked with the silent look of one who is surveying the elements of his salvation.

As for me, I could only stand in ordinary awe.

## CHAPTER XIII

□ A soft layer of dust lay upon the corridor before us. It ran for some fifty meters then opened into an extensive chamber of undeterminable dimension.

"How long since they were last here?"

"More than three hundred years."

I whistled in amazement. "And it's just sat here all that time—fifteen generations out of the embryo banks."

"Well, that's what you get for getting so wrapped up in a phompin machine."

"Come again?"

"The Procs, fella—between them and Roger P., among others, they're so enamored with the omnipotence of Mother they don't even consider the possibility of chinks in her armor."

"This is a *chink*?"

"You could say that again and it'd be just as true. Mother doesn't know about this place . . . *not at all*."

*I'd call that a chink.*

We stepped out of the uplift onto the dusty smoothness of the corridor floor. The tracks we left in the fine powder seemed like the disturbing of a long sleep.

"Why didn't they ever come back?"

Dearborne chuckled without humor. "For the same reason we won't come back, if we get caught."

I nodded to myself. "Procs got them, huh?"

"Almost. But they executed a joint suicide, after the tenets of their order, before the Procs could whisk them away to Mother."

"And they were Forsters?"

"*Sub V* Forsters, a sub-cult within the early formation of the organization."

"And they built this place?"



He nodded, the light from his head lamp dancing about. "Phomp, that must have really taken some doing."

He seemed to consider that briefly, then said, "Yes . . . it really did."

Progressing very carefully we slowly made our way along the ancient entrance to this long forgotten Citadel of the semi-Down, as he said it had once been called. Underfoot the floor was very smooth, but the walls and rough ceiling resembled the cave we'd slept in the night before. Dearborne suddenly came up short, and I noticed there began a series of branching passages, similar to, but smaller than, the one we were in. Their dark recesses were lost to the reaches of our lights. I wondered where they might lead.

"We'll check these later," Dearborne said, his voice seeming to echo about in the darkness. "I want to see what's down there." He headed toward the great chamber.

Our lights were useless. So extensive was the room that we could discern neither the opposing walls nor ceiling. All about was a clutter of equipment thick with dust—great monstrous hulks of machinery dimly revealed, and collections of smaller apparatus stood about and extended out into the dimness.

We stood on a high balcony and overlooked this scene below.

"How do we get down from here?" I asked.

In silence, Dearborne headed along the balcony where it led in either direction at right angles to the corridor. From there it broke down a series of steps. Phomp, that was something to see. A ginchiphonious anachronism: *steps*. Dearborne descended them cautiously looking about, spotting what he could with his lamp. I followed.

Suddenly we spied what appeared to be an organization of instrument panels, consoles, chairs, tables and other fixtures which modified the general warehouse atmosphere. Dearborne gave a shout and raced over to the control room. He ran from this piece of equipment to that, stood before large vacant video screens, handled with warm reverence the knobs and switches.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he said, grinning. "It means we've won. There was always the doubt that what I *thought* was here might not be here

after all. Now we can forget that glunt-garbage. *Phomp! can we.*" He paused for a breath, and I waited with a new anticipation.

"You remember my telling you about how this place was almost a legend to the present Forsters? When the original Sub V's built this place, they kept themselves aloof from the rest of the Forsters Down. Kept it a secret, and they did a bang-up job of it—"

"But they were killed or were forced to eliminate themselves," I interrupted.

"Right. But they took their secret with them. That was the purpose of the suicides in the first place: to make sure none of them would weaken and talk once they were captured. The internal security of the Forster organization proper wasn't as good as their own, and there were massive raids by the Procs. But the secret of the Citadel never leaked out. Some information floated around, undercover. Sketches here, hints there, nothing solid, though. I suspect the builders knew that someday somebody would come along and unearth it. Fortunately we did it before the Procs. If Roger P. had known that I was as close to the secret as I was, I'm sure we'd never have slipped through his clutches so easily."

"Well, you'd have just figured out another way to do it, if he'd gotten rough."

Dearborne smiled. "Well, phomp, I'm just glad it's over and we're here. *And by glunt we are here!*" His pleasure exploded again in a new surge.

"But how did they keep this place secret from the Machine? It seems impossible."

"Don't fall into the same trap that Roger P. fell into. That old bitch of a watchdog is still just a machine, and *only* a machine. Her circuits are only circuits, and even though she has innumerable auxiliary circuits and checks and safeguards, she still has the same weakness of any cybernetic concoction."

"All right, I'm a stupid phomp. What is it?"

"Turn off the juice, and *whizz, bamm, clunk . . .* everything stops. The Machine stops. And, oh friend of mine, the Machine *will* stop. I guarantee it." He had that look in his eye.

"Right here, it has stopped already. And that was the



Sub V's secret. They were able to isolate a portion of Mother's circuitry and tell her to forget all about it. Now she has permanent blocks set up that are immune to penetration. As far as the Proc's, Roger P. and the rest of the world are concerned, this chunk of Mother's immortal innards doesn't exist—never did."

In a few minutes we were busily engaged in trying to figure some rationale to the operation of the machines that filled the darkness around us. Scientific logic was never my cup of bee-fit, but I was an avowed *tryer*.

We began to experiment, and I found the light switch.

I was toying with dials and sensor-spots with enthusiasm, but with no results, when suddenly one most prominent knob began to glow at my touch. I grasped it and pulled . . . and the lights came on.

We stood there, looking suddenly very foolish with our feeble head lamps. Then Dearborne gave a pleased smile, pulled off his light, turned and immediately was again busy at the instruments.

The rest of the discoveries were Dearborne's. In no time he had things *humming*, *popping* and *whizzing*. Lights blinked on, colors glowed, screens lit up from blankness into equally blank test patterns, and very suddenly our underground chamber that had tasted of the flat stillness of a tomb was alive with the saving forces for mankind.

It still seemed fantastic to me that things worked . . . I mean, *actually worked*. I was almost redundified.

A half-hour later we retraced our steps back up to the narrow balcony, which we could now see formed a semi-circuit of the domelike cavity that was the Citadel. The balcony led to several darkened openings which we learned through exploration were portals to a collection of smaller chambers set back in the rock. In each room we discovered more and more of the same machinery and gadgets that filled the expansive floor of the main cavity.

"It looks like they were storing this stuff to use Top-side, after they made their move," Dearborne finally said as he toyed with what appeared to be some kind of modified Burp. "But the extent of their collecting surprises me

... and their technology. They built most of this stuff, you know."

"Must have been a lot of them."

Dearborne nodded, thoughtfully.

We checked out the dozen branch corridors we'd seen earlier, all of which were brilliantly lighted now, as was the main corridor we'd first encountered. They led to living quarters, which were cold and austere, with only the simplest of accommodations.

As we stood there midst the accumulation of dust—centuries of dust—and the cold glare of the white lights, it seemed as though we had just turned off death. I could almost feel the squirming, feeble forces of life struggling from the oblivion fate had resigned them to with the death of their sponsors.

Back at the control room Dearborne approached the consoles with the calm assurance of a much skilled operator. "Watch," he said confidently.

I did.

"This is the control for uplift/letdown override," he said, excitement edging into his calm. He pointed to one of several low cabinets and an array of controls which were meaningless to me. "When it's activated, the automatic control which Mother has over the entire uplift/letdown system throughout all of Down will be in our power."

I grinned, amazed at this idea. *To control the uplift . . .*

Then a wonder crossed my mind. How was it that Dearborne had been able to figure out so quickly the myriad controls here? They should have been as foreign as glunt.

"And *this*," he continued, "is the override for the Top-side terminal park barriers. And *this* is the traffic control analysis bank . . . we might even locate Proc Central with it." He was moving quickly in increasing excitement from console to console, his former delight returning anew.

Then he stopped, seeing my troubled expression.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"How do you know so much about all this?"

Dearborne looked momentarily taken back, then he shrugged and smiled. "You're right, of course. I didn't



pick this up as fast as I might have led you to believe. I've known about it for a long time now."

"But how?"

"Uh . . . sit down over at that table with me, and I'll tell you. I've never shared this with anyone . . ." He looked at me long and hard, as though struggling within himself. We sat together at a low mobile table.

"How have I known about this place and things for so long?" He continued to eye me seriously. "My friend, I learned about them from my father."

*Father . . . ?* I gasped.

"Yes," he nodded. "I'm not one of my Mother's little bastards. My father was a man . . . a Forster . . . a Sub V."

I was stunned. One joked about such things, but . . .

"My mother was a Sub V, too. Neither of them is alive now . . . for obvious reasons."

I was still having trouble coming to grips with the idea: Dearborne had *parents*. I suddenly envied him very much.

"How?" I asked.

"Through the processes of these overriding instruments, I was included on the population roster in Mother's memory. And that made me as good as the rest of you." His dark face took on a sudden look of defiance, as though he expected me to sneer in disapproval.

And, had this been another time and another place, I might easily have looked down on him, a womb-child. But labels and epithets have no strength when they're applied to someone you know so well. And, this was *Dearborne*.

"Perhaps it makes you a little better than the rest of us," I said quietly, realizing with startling insight that this might actually be so.

He smiled some thanks. "My friend, you are a very good man. With the conditioning Downers receive, there are few who could say such a thing about someone like me . . . so easily."

Suddenly, a contradiction grabbed me. "But . . . you said the Sub V's all killed themselves . . . over three hundred years ago!"

Dearborne nodded, patiently. "Yes, my friend, that's

true. The fact is, I was actually born over three centuries ago. At the time my parents died, the entire body of Forsters who had any association with the Sub V's went into suspension—kept alive under vita-radiation. These people, of course, had no information concerning the whereabouts of this place, but they deemed it best to retire temporarily from the scene due to the pressure the Procs were exerting then. If you recall, that era is known as one of Mother's bloodiest purges. Those of us in metabolic suspension missed most of it, but eventually we came around again, waking up to the way things are now."

"But no one knew about this place," I said, cutting in.

"Well, that's not quite right. One person knew a little about it—what his parents had told him. And that was *me*. And, though what I did know was indeed little, I finally managed to scrape together enough legends and rumors from the other *old* Forsters . . . and so we're here now."

I must have been staring in amazement, for Dearborne suddenly broke into a wide grin. "Don't take it so hard, old stick. It's just the way things are."

"I know, but *good phomp!* You're an old man . . . as old as a gymph."

"Yes, but don't let it fool you. I'm no different from you. For all you know, *you* may have been held in the embryo banks for glunt knows how long before they mustered you out. Don't forget that; you're an old man, too, but just in a little different sense."

I'd never thought of it that way.

"But, now that we're here, and now that we have this place working for us . . . at least a little, I think we better get right along with what we came here for . . . can do?"

"Can do."

"I think, then," said Dearborne, assuming a pose of mock officiousness, "that we shall save the world."

And I grinned.



## CHAPTER XIV

□ *The Machine is stopping . . . the Machine is stopping . . .* came the whisper floating into the hubbub of the tooebes.

It was hardly noticeable, but it was there. The overriding facility in the Citadel worked. Dearborne smiled over at me as we stood there on the squeakway of the level 100 tooebe and nodded, satisfied.

Our attack was launched. As far as we were concerned, the doom of The Greater Down Empire was sealed.

"Rat-phomp!" swore Dearborne, coming back down to earth. "We'll have to do it, but we don't have to like it."

I nodded sore agreement, and we jumped the C to the B to the A-trix. *Nice to meet you again, old ginzy skimmer*, I thought as we sped toward Dearborne's destination.

It was Gluntsville.

*The Machine is stopping . . . the Machine is stopping . . .* came the whisper across the audio. It was almost below the level of conscious awareness. It whispered on and on.

In the Citadel Dearborne had set the audio circuit override to broadcast a conditioning slogan. "It's a good beginning," he had said, listening to the subliminal whispering. "Now let's go Down and take a look at our handiwork."

"Down?"

"Down. Our comrades are waiting for us to come back. They're your comrades, too, now, you know."

The prospect of Down was making me nervous.

"Come on, you phomp, it's got to be done."

I shrugged and accepted. "Okay, I'll buy that . . . but I won't like it."

Dearborne grew more serious and said, "*Don't.*"

After making sure that all was in order in our control room, Dearborne had led me across the expanse of floor toward the opposite side of the Citadel. We wound among the monstrous machines and stores of equipment. Scant minutes later Dearborne halted before a large outcrop which appeared to be a heat duct of some sort.

"Here's where we go down," he said. "This is where they tapped into the heating system to maintain the temperature in this place. I'm sure there must be an easier way in and out, but I don't know where it is."

We pulled the dome off the cylinder-shaped ventilator projecting out of the floor and crawled into the narrow opening. We found ourselves in a tube which sloped gently downward; it was large enough for us to stand upright as we walked. We'd redonned our head lamps and their glow glistened on down the tube before us.

"From here it's Down . . . all the way."

I found myself wondering: *How's your claustrophobia, John Dearborne?* Mine wasn't so good. Topside had left its mark.

Some undetermined time later—undetermined because I lost consciousness of its passing in the agony of getting up enough courage to put one foot in front of the other—*some time later*, we drew up before a solid block in the tube, and Dearborne indicated that this was the final barrier. Beyond this was the Down heating system.

I plopped down into a heap of nearly lifeless jelly. Long walks weren't one of my strong points.

But Dearborne wasn't to be denied. He stripped off his gear for action, pulled out a long bar, inserted it near the top of the obstruction and began to pry. Nothing happened at first, then slowly a crack began to appear and widen.

The block was a curved surface appearing as though our tube butted into the side of another tube running



perpendicular. As Dearborne pried the surface downward, it seemed to slide along this curve. I could imagine that once there had been an easy access automatic control to open this block. Dearborne's brute tactics, though, were proving just as effective, and soon he had it open.

*We were Down.* The warm blast of *soup* gushed in upon us from the heating tunnel and I felt like melting on the spot. I could imagine no more exquisite torture than to be surrounded with this lifeless mush that represented almost the sum total of Down vitality.

*We were Down . . .* and I felt sick.

"All right, fella, don't swallow your tongue. We go on from here."

A short distance further and we found what Dearborne was looking for. A small louvered grate looked out of the tunnel into a Down slot-apartment. A pale phosphorescent lighted the room. Dearborne stooped and worked at two clamps which held the meter-wide rectangle and soon had them loose. Carefully he eased the grille out away from the wall and let it drop soundlessly into the room.

"You first," he said with a grin. "There's nobody in there as far as I can see. I'll slip back and close the door to that tunnel we came down. Wouldn't do to have anyone stumble on it accidentally. There are occasional maintenance surveys along the system."

I scrambled through the open vent and into the semi-twilight of the slot and stood on the edge of fear in the strange surroundings. I hoped Dearborne would not be long.

The room was richly furnished. I was in the sleeping quarters. We must be somewhere near the lower levels for such luxury. *The lower levels . . .* Suddenly I felt the weight of this hell of an underground even more.

Then Dearborne came through the vent, picked up the grille and replaced it. "Well, we're all sealed up back there," he said. "You'd never know we passed through."

He looked around quickly at the room and whistled. "Pretty good fare for level 100, huh?"

"Level 100 . . . Phomp, I'd say so."

"Probably some Proc-subsidized woman . . . there are a few of those, you know."

I didn't. *A Proc's woman.*

Dearborne crept over to a large door panel, carefully slid it open and motioned me to follow. Silently we walked through the remainder of the slot-apartment. For what was supposed to be skid row, the luxury was alarming.

"Well, fella, now the big step. Avoid traffic control and visual sensors at all costs. I've got a place for us to go, but it's no good if we don't get there."

Without further discussion, he immediately turned, pressed open the hissing outside door to the slot and stepped out into the busy hum of the toobes. I followed and seconds later we were lost in the clatter of level 100 traffic.

### *Gluntsville!*

Seeing all of them again, feeling all of them again, was strange. All of those bodies, everywhere, all of those Downers. Phomps! Rushing everywhere. Rushing along with the gush of Down.

*The Machine is stopping . . . the Machine is stopping . . .* continued the whisper.

With the gush of Down . . . in dreary rhythm with Down . . . in rhythm with the puffing and whirring. Still limpid. Still tasteless. As limpid and tasteless as the air—air, like glunt! Soup.

Bodies in motion—not lives. Mother's determining will sporadically manipulating all. Bodies moved from without. Bodies moved like ripples in a stagnant pond.

The colors in company . . . blatty, soupy colors in a profusion of paleness. Colors of people and fixtures thrown about like garbage and smear. Bodies bedecked with the smear. Lives that weren't lives draped and hung with garish dye—dyed and stained with taint. Variegated and glaring . . . colors flowing as gravy.

And the sound . . . the din . . . *hummm* . . . beat . . . *bleat* . . . vibration . . . grumble. A thousand senseless syllables. Babble here, babble there. Nothings. Spew of ignorance. Verbal syrup. Syrup stirred with the fat stick of ignorance . . . stirred with a fat stick. Ignorant cacophony.

And I was here . . . here with Dearborne in the middle of it.

A sweat broke out on my brow. I felt faint. The pack on



my pack-weary back, drawing stares, seemed as heavy as the weight of the world. I gasped as before a faceful of foul breath.

"Steady, fella," Dearborne said, with a confident smile. "Don't phomp out on me now."

"It isn't far, is it?"

"It isn't far."

I took strength from his words.

A shrill siren sounded: traffic control. Our skimmer coasted smoothly to a stop as the siren continued its wailing singsong. Automatically everyone bent in the traffic control requirement of a kowtow and pressed home his identity on Mother's universal memory fabric. Everyone except Dearborne and me, that is. We only faked it. It seemed like the best thing to do if we didn't want her to know that we were back Down. And it seemed like the thing to do, not to want her to know we were back Down. (Like it seemed the thing to do to want to go on breathing.)

The siren wailed into a ringing silence, and the skimmer ground into motion to a happy *hum*, and we all resumed our frolic through the halls of hell.

"Just a little further," Dearborne said. "We'll catch a letdown and be there."

I nodded midst my concentration. Down would not get to me. If Dearborne could hack it, so could I . . . even if it phomped me up royally. I'd be sterner stuff or know the reason why.

"Greetings, fellow Downers," came the blare that filled the entire world of the toobes.

Mother's six o'clock message.

It was the voice to end all voices. The voice we associated with the Machine. It was always the same voice. No variety in commentators. Always the same jolly wart of a voice.

*"First for a report on that super-fabulous quinishelt-phino nubile game I just know you've all been waiting for . . ."*

Goodie-goodie.

The voice went on about how nubile the quinishelt-phinosaurs had been and . . . oooh! just *how thrilling* it all was, wasn't it?

The commentary went on and on. Occasionally we passed giant vision screens set along the skimway. It showed that friendly old motherly face we'd all known since the embryo banks. That one we knew as Mother.

*"Oh, and here's another juicy one for you kiddies. The establishment of a new psycho-massage thermaldyne system guaranteed to jiggle you into ecstasy is complete. This is from level 76 on Down. Come on, kiddies, don't be phomps—get in there and show Dear Old Mom you've got what it takes. Get that spirit of '76 . . . and Down."*

Eventually she signed off. What a relief to return to the peaceful clatter of the toobes.

Dearborne looked over at me after listening silently to the Machine's spiel. "That was heard in every toobe, on every level, in The Empire. When we come on strong with our propaganda through the Citadel overrides, it'll be just as potent."

I listened to the silent undertone that droned along with the clatter. *The Machine is stopping . . . the Machine is stopping . . .* No one really heard it yet, but they would . . . soon.

Eventually we arrived. We jumped from the skimmer to the squeakway and confronted slot gamma-gamma-Circle Boulevard-Kenya-33. A short spurt on the letdown had brought us to level 33.

"This is it," Dearborne said. "This is Helen-She's slot."

"Helen-She?"

"Helen-She," he affirmed.

Dearborne *did* have a woman.

We opened and passed through a broad slot door, and we found ourselves in a narrow hall which apparently led to quarters within. The quiet in here was beautiful; I almost sagged with relief. It beat the clamor out in the toobes on the other side of the door.

At the end of this hall was another doorway. Dearborne opened it.

*Hell and commotion leaped out the door in a brilliant glare of light and sound.* And the clatter of the toobes was born anew. Only it wasn't the toobes; it was a party.

*Laughter! Gaiety! Bodies! Bodies in play!  
Bodies.*



I slipped through the doorway and made my way along one wall near the door . . . a dusty blue, softly opaque, glowing wall. I shrank before the revelry.

Dearborne continued on into the room.

*Bodies dancing . . . bodies playing . . . bodies drinking . . . bodies laughing . . . bodies loving . . .*

I watched, my senses in a turmoil.

"Hey, man of color, how do you like my body?"

I jumped, and peered through the hazy lack of light at the body who had spoken to me—and jumped twice over.

It was a body, all right. A girl, very much naked . . . and she had sidled up alongside and was purring and rubbing and swaying softly, with great feeling . . . over and along my arm and side and flank.

"Ooooo. It's soft and warm and alive, isn't it, man of color—this body of mine?" The body stepped back and her hands played over and around and up across her bareness and then fell away . . . upward, ending in an almost feline stretch.

I raised my eyes to her face.

She grinned. It was a dazzle.

"Yes," I managed softly. The word hung harsh and stale in my ears. "And . . . I think it *smiles*." This was my standard caught-off-guard comeback.

She wiggled with almost ecstasy, her entire tantalizing, creamy-white torso almost vibrating with eagerness. Sparkling. Displaying.

*Then she was gone.* The wildness and the crowd had swallowed her up. As I slumped back against the glowing wall, I couldn't get over my surprise. I had never seen anything so uniquely appealing.

Not even Freddie.

After a moment more I tried to look above the frenzy, out across the darkness filled with smoke and uproar. Where had Dearborne gone? It seemed almost hopeless. Then I spotted him away across the room clustered by a group of petitioners. Heart in hand, and eyes mostly closed, I made my way over to this more orderly gathering. I waded through the devilish assortment of folk. Nudity was not confined to just my former little tease. Nor were a thousand other taboos left untampered with among this group.

And the apartment was a real goodie, too. *They must have a pleasure center status here*, I thought to myself. The erratic decor was a little extreme in the general Down sense.

Dearborne was busy talking and answering questions that were being fired at him on every hand. I held back, not wanting to interrupt what I didn't understand.

As I listened, I realized that he was explaining to them some of the details of our journey. They were an odd assortment of Downers, this collection of petitioners. Refugees from the wild revelry and mania that hammered from all about at this tiny nucleus of sanity. They seemed hard pressed to get more than the smattering of information Dearborne was rationing out.

If these were Forsters, I wasn't much impressed. Looked like a bunch of *real* phomps.

Suddenly my female friend was back at my side. I jumped, startled, when she snuck up and clutched at my arm unannounced. For a moment I didn't recognize her—she had clothes, of sorts, this time.

"You didn't like me before, did you?" she said with no reserve.

I reddened, embarrassed.

"I knew you didn't," she continued in a light, delicate voice that sounded like music. "New ones are always bothered."

"Am I a new one?" I asked, still shaken by the surprise of her approach.

She nodded with a pixie smile. "But I know who you are—everyone does."

*Swell.* "How in the world would you know that?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Oh, we just know. You're a friend of his, aren't you?" She pointed to Dearborne.

I nodded.

"Then we know you."

"Who are *you*?" I asked, wishing to switch the focal point from myself.

She smiled, hesitated, moved closer to me (if that was possible), and said, "I'm Gentle."

Gentle . . . ?

"I'm *your* Gentle," she continued, staring unblinkingly from clear blue eyes.



"My Gentle," I said past something that seemed to be lodged in my throat. "What does that mean?"

"Just that, oh man of color. I'm your Gentle."

*Nobody was mine.* Not even Freddie . . . any more.

"Hey, phomp!" I heard a yell. It was Dearborne. I could hardly turn from the girl.

"I'd thought I'd lost you," he continued, beckoning.

"Come meet these phomps."

"Who are they?" I asked as I made my way to him.

"Don't you know?"

"Forsters?" I hazarded, knowing this must be so. I reached out and firmly grasped his outstretched hand and he pulled me in. The faces of the Forsters looked at me anxiously and expectantly. Gentle still clung at my side.

"Here he is," pronounced Dearborne, "my friend and confidant. He journeyed with me to the land upward. He saw the beauty and the abundance of opportunity for free spirits who have the gumption to go up there and take it back—in the name of *heritage!*"

His words brought forth a cry from the immediate crowd. They were rocked with hope and promise. I immediately felt a sudden kinship with them.

I looked down. Gentle still clung there. Maybe she *was* mine.

"And he'll stay with me till the end," Dearborne continued. "Together we'll win the battle you've begun. Together we've made the discovery that gives all of us hope . . . against *Mother.*"

Others of the party had stopped to listen. They looked from him to me, but I felt that no one was fooled by his inclusion of me in his plans. It was Dearborne who held their attention and interest. He was the savior.

"Now, you phomps," Dearborne said, "go back to your slots. You'll be called when the time for action comes. There is planning to be done."

As one, the crowd began to melt away. I automatically turned to leave with the others, but Gentle wouldn't let me. The commotion ceased. The nooks and crannies of the apartment emptied. The music stopped. The lights came on brighter. And suddenly we were alone. Alone, that is, save for Gentle and four lieutenants at Dearborne's side. And then I saw the other woman.

It was Helen-She. No question. It could be no other. She was Dearborne all the way. She came over to us and took John Dearborne's arm as though it belonged to her. She smiled at Gentle, then at me, pointed toward a very comfortable looking arrangement of easy chairs, and spoke.

"Good to have you back, my lord."

Dearborne smiled with a reverence all his own. "It's good to be back, dear lady—today is the beginning of the world."

"I know," she said.

We all sat down, Gentle still at my side. A whole new flavor and spirit settled in upon the gathering with the exit of the wild hordes and faceless masses . . . and with the arrival of Helen-She.

"Excuse me," said Dearborne to me. "I didn't think. Friend, this is Helen-She."

It was a mere formality. I nodded both to her and him.

Dearborne had a *woman*.



## CHAPTER XV

□ Dearborne's woman was as fair as he was black . . . except for her raven hair, that is. But she had that same quiet, wintry look that made them automatically two of a kind. Helen-She was Gentle's sister. *Womb-sister*.

Gentle's yellow-gold hair didn't tip off this fact, nor did her bubbly nymph albedo. Yet the two had a similar aura that left one's mouth ajar by their very presence.

We sat, the eight of us, confronting one another in a circle of comfortable chairs. I hadn't realized the extent of my fatigue till I plopped down. My number should have been called hours ago. The nimble vibration of the body-contour molding recliner was like heaven.

Gentle only sat and gazed at my comfort with the limpid eyes of an idolizer. (Who was I that she should so behave? Good phomp!)

Dearborne's four lieutenants were: one, shortish and shriveled, very possibly from his youth, for he looked used to it; another, fattish and soberingly red-skinned and puffy, with a slick, almost ripe look, and seemingly without personality; the third, grizzled and bristly with impressive almond eyes; and finally, one hard and steely, dressed in ashen gray the color of his complexion—he looked hard and seldom spoke.

I knew the answer: Dearborne had gathered them at a freak's convention.

Then Dearborne began, but not before he was interrupted by the voice of Mother.

*"I detect that your recreational group has dispersed, child Helen-She . . .*

*"You are off pleasure center status at the sound of the tone.*

*"Bing!"*

*"Remember: In the words of Redundant, Malfunctionous and forty-three others—recreation is balm to the welfare of the Empire. The society that plays together, stays together . . . Ta ta."*

Dearborne hesitated, a ponderous frown hovering around his features. Then it vanished, and he said, "As I was about to say, group: we here all know each other, except you." He meant me. "This will soon be remedied, since we'll be working closely together in the final stages of this project."

"What does he do?" asked Almond-eyes in as grizzly a voice as his features.

Dearborne shot him a curt glance. "Everyone here has a function. He is . . . my aide. And, of course, there'll be other things for him to do."

I waited for orders. My own place in this tremendous plot was somewhat vague in my mind. I felt little within me to contribute. As an aide, I was a bumbler at best, but if Dearborne had chosen me for this, then I'd do it.

Dearborne looked from face to face around the circle, then he said, "There are plans to be made. Let us begin."

They were immediately deep in talk. For my part, I remained silent and listened. No matter what Dearborne said of me, I was nothing more than the phomp's phomp; I knew that. Gentle imitated my silence, mostly, and continued to look at me with large eyes.

There were plans which had apparently been a long time in the developing—a long time before I came on this scene of intrigue. When they finally wrapped things up, many, many hours later, they'd polished off a little gem of a master plan that really would, I thought, do the very trick Dearborne intended it to. Of course, it had been his plan all the way; he only put the words in their mouths to make them a part. But when the talking was over, everyone figured that it was partly their baby, too. Everyone but me, I guess, and maybe Gentle.

During most of the haggle-haggle, make steps-retrace steps, I had found it a real effort to stay awake. Somewhere during the course of things Gentle had eased her way onto my lap and had gone to sleep as though nothing more important than yesterday's gossip was being aired.



There had been stints of darkness during which Dearborne revealed the Total-Sense recordings I had made—and he did give credit where credit was due. Needless to say, I was very much awake during these viewings. And I did have some good shots. Seeing Topside again only sharpened the stark unreality of the toobes to which we'd returned. Only there was no showing of any portion of our journey after we'd scaled the letdown shaft and had entered the Citadel. This was, of course, because we had curiously failed to record our activities from that point forward.

They discussed the events we'd run into—the decoy totes, the robo-hounds, the Topside terminal barrier, the Proc I'd buried. Nothing, however, was said about the bombs, the Imps that Dearborne had planted, or the homing devices on the waylaid robo-hounds. As he had said, this was a special secret that apparently only he and I were to know. Nor did he say much that was concrete about the Citadel or its entrance . . . or exit. The absence of recordings and words seemed to suggest general information about the lost fortress was another secret . . . perhaps. In either event, I deemed it wise to keep my mouth shut on the subject.

They planned more and more subliminal proddings like *the Machine is stopping* slogan we'd shot across the wire by way of warming up. They talked of songs that would appeal, Downers being particularly responsive to musical suggestions in this particular era of The Empire. They talked of subtle, devious rumors concerning the collapse of Empire. They talked of sabotage, of raids on Procs, and a thousand other things, each small in its own way, but with collective power.

Dearborne would become the *Topsider*. He would project himself over the Empire-wide network as *The Man from Topside*. He would tell people in a very straight from the shoulder manner the virtues and true situation Topside. Then he would invite them to come up there for themselves. It would be the campaign to end all campaigns.

How does one go about influencing a million million rat-phomps to chuck the whole show Down and get out into the world in a Topside way? I asked myself this ques-

tion more than once as the evening progressed. But I faltered before the staggering complexities ringing about me. These wiser minds sounded like they knew what they were doing. Me . . . well, I would save the world tomorrow after breakfast.

When the talking was done, everyone seemed exhausted, emotionally and physically. The meeting broke up almost silently, the four gargoyle-lieutenants letting themselves out the door. Dearborne indicated that I should remain, so I did. Besides, Gentle was still asleep in my lap.

"You two find your way into those quarters over there," said Helen-She, pointing out sleeping quarters beyond a shimmering veil of iridescence on the far wall. "We'll slip into fluff-eze in here."

I hesitated, sure that I hadn't heard quite right. Gentle and I together? Phomp, we weren't even soulmates.

"Go ahead," said Dearborne with a wink, "this has been a night for breaking precedents. It may do you good to strike out on a new pursuit."

It sounded like a ginzy way to say *Forget Freddie*.

But I supposed he was right.

The softness of the chair had grown stale, and that seemed like a good enough excuse to rise, with Gentle still in my arms. After that there didn't seem anything better to do than head for the shimmerng curtain and our assigned quarters. This I did, to the smiles of our companions.

The room on the other side of the veil bubbled out like an enchanted fairyland. There were twinkling lights and little fountains of effervescence. It was definitely a woman's hand that had worked this place over. The large bed in the center of the spongelike carpet was turned back for two.

Phomp! Dearborne should've known I wasn't equipped for sudden changes like this.

Following the pattern that I supposed I should take, I managed to tuck this strange Gentle into the fluff-eze. What clothing she wore wouldn't hamper her night's sleep. What clothing she wore wouldn't hamper anything, much.

It was time for me to seek other things. I stumbled back through the shimmering curtain in time to catch Dearborne all alone and apparently bent upon retiring himself in other quarters beyond a second curtain. I mumbled



something about the little boys' room, and he pointed the way.

I stopped, asked, "Who were those guys, anyhow?"

"They're the good guys," Dearborne said with a soft smile. I could tell his interest was somewhere else.

"Yeah, but who are they?"

"They're brothers—the offspring of Sub V Forsters. Just like me."

"Helen-She and Gentle, too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Those Sub V's really got into the *swing* of things, didn't they?"

Dearborne nodded. "You'll find that most Forsters to-day don't trace their genealogy back through the Machine's embryo banks. We're kind of birds of a feather."

He shrugged, then, dismissing the subject, he asked, "What did you think of all that we said in here earlier to those phomps?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think they bought it?"

I must have looked blank. "Weren't they supposed to?"

Dearborne chuckled at me. "Were they?"

I shrugged, confused.

"My friend, we'll never make the grade on the basis of the rudimentary scheming we did here tonight. Never in this world. Sure, all of this is fine, but it'll never upset the whole system. Downers are too security oriented to make the switch. Something will have to happen to really shake them up. Then maybe we'll get a few. I'm afraid it'll be pretty hopeless for the rest.

"These things we discussed here tonight were just the beginning; nothing really important was discussed. Those four are competent enough, but they couldn't grasp the more subtle aspects of the problem. The nature of man and his relation to his environment is far more weighty than battle strategy. By the way, you do still have the book I gave you?"

I patted my cloak. "Always. I'll never let it from my presence."

He nodded his approval, turned and made his way to the other sleeping chamber. Not another word was said.

I took care of my obligations, then found my way back

to Gentle. I was a little embarrassed about slipping into bed beside this beautiful creature, but this was the way it was to be.

Why should I argue.



## CHAPTER XVI

□ That night was well-spent . . . as were the next two. Dearborne had disappeared on his obscure machinations, so I spent all my time with Gentle.

And I no longer dreamed of Freddie. Perspective makes things seem smaller in the distance; right then I had something much closer to distract me. Gentle was fantastic.

By the third night, I was dreaming about *her*.

Gentle: a mote of sunshine in the tomb.

Gentle: a note of laughter.

Where did my doldrums go?

The first morning I awoke to an empty bed. It was with a start. Raising myself up onto one elbow, I peered around. I wasn't sure where I was. Then I remembered and relaxed, dropped back down into my fluff-eze.

Overhead was a ceiling. I remembered that, all right. And the sleeping chamber, though it was less alive than the night before. I remembered a sleeping companion (and that's all she had been, that first night), but the bed was empty.

I swung out of the bed, stood up to a dizzy display of fireworks and tried to collect my mind. Gentle must be about the apartment. I quickly began slipping back into my clothes, which I had discarded during the course of the night in favor of sleeping in comfort. I was suddenly embarrassed by the mental picture of the eyeful Gentle must have gotten with her early rising. I figured it was worth a chuckle so I complied.

"Well, sir, you find the morning amusing," came Gentle's voice, like the light music of bells. She had just stepped through the iridescent curtain and was standing

there, delicate hands on hips, surveying my activities. "I was beginning to think you'd never rise again."

I shook my head, smiling. "Given enough time, I can manage almost anything. Dress myself. Feed myself. And, oh, a whole bunch of things."

"Yes, friend Dearborne was telling me that you've talents."

"Dearborne is out there, is he?" I asked, sobered by her mention of him.

But she shook her head.

"No? Well, where'd he go?"

She grinned mischievously. "Out."

"Out where?" Impatiently.

"I don't know. Just out."

"Well, when will he be back, then?"

"I dunno." She could hardly keep from laughing at my impatience as I struggled into my remaining clothes.

But she was smart enough to recognize when enough was enough, and she came and sat beside me on the bed. "Dearborne and my dear sister left for unexplained reasons . . . really. But they said not to worry. They'll be back in good time . . . maybe tonight, maybe in a few days. They said they had to take care of some things, but that you and I had much to do, anyhow." She paused, her eyes twinkling. "Now what do you suppose they could have meant by that?"

"All right, I'll bite. What did they mean?"

"They meant, oh noble sir, oh possessor of infinite light, oh conqueror of infinite darkness, that you and I . . ." She paused and suddenly became serious to a concentration: ". . . that you and I should become soul-mates, get to know each other as well as we know ourselves, so that we can live together, in harmony, for the benefit of the cause, both before and after the Machine stops." She was looking at me frankly, warmly, with complete openness, her hair, golden . . . her eyes, an infinite blue . . . the beauty of her face, soft and quiet.

"You see, I really am to be yours . . . as I said last night. It's part of Dearborne's plan."

I could only stare at her, understanding, but not really understanding. "Dearborne's plan . . ." I said.



She nodded. "You do believe in the plan, don't you?"  
"Of course I do!"

"Then it's settled. *We are ours.*" She began undoing her garment and in an instant had displayed herself before me. She was definitely worth seeing; Dearborne's taste for me was to be complimented. She was a *person* . . . beautiful and sweet and very, very good to look at.

"You truly smile," I said with a mouthful of tongue. And that was all I could say, because it was the only thing I was able to think at that moment. *Gentle*: she was a smile.

She came softly into my arms.

And that is how my Gentle and I came about.

Strange that it took only a word from Dearborne to begin it, and strange that Gentle should respond to me as she did. For certainly it seemed she could do better than a phomp like me.

We spent that day and the next two seeking and finding each other . . . and it turned out that we didn't care one bit whether it was for Dearborne or not.

I was now *two*.

Dearborne and Helen-She returned from their travels the evening of the third day.

"First," said Dearborne, "let me say, greetings, brother-in-law."

"Greetings back, brother-in-law," I answered. "Good to see you again."

Dearborne took Helen-She's hand in his in a tenderness I was not used to seeing in him. "It's good to be back. And I think that we can now report that the stage is set. The battle will be ours."

"You're sure as that?"

"You can bet your life on it. And that's just what we'll all be doing, by the way."

The reminder sobered all four of us. I felt Gentle moving closer beside me, in an unconscious seeking of reassurance.

"One point before going. Are you carrying the book with you?"

I started, guiltily remembering my promise. It was on the bedstand. "No, but I'll get it."

"Never mind just now," he said reproachfully. "But, never, I repeat, *never*, let it from your person again." He looked over at Gentle.

"You will help him with this?"

She looked a bit confused but said that she would.

"All right, then," said Dearborne, "the stage is set, and that book is an important part of it. That's all I'll say about it now, but the time has come and I'll need you at my side as things develop. Can do?"

"Can do!" we said. All three of us, even Helen-She.

Through the remainder of the evening, Dearborne briefed us on the latest details of the battle. The whispered warning over the audio circuits was raising a storm as Downers started listening. Already there had been seven incidents of unexplained sabotage in various quarters of the toobes. Mother was turning these against the Forsters by pointing up the destruction and the loss of innocent life. But the Man from Topside had made his first public appearance and was playing down the whole issue. Using overriding audio circuits, he told of Mother's apparent inability to control the situations. He told of the obvious dissatisfaction that some Downers must feel in order to deliberately aim destruction at Mother. Could it be that some of Mother's policies should be reevaluated . . . *questioned?*

The Man from Topside would ask questions. Only by forcing answers could we make the complacent hordes of vegetablelike Downers *think*. Only by forcing answers . . .

It took Dearborne three weeks as The Man from Topside to put Down in a ferment. Downers—some of them—were beginning to wonder about their world. The Procs were disorganized masses of inconsistency, acting on apparently erratic directives from Mother Machine. And Mother was a mess! She literally didn't know which end she was on. Every time she would give a directive—snap! Something would happen, and all phomp would break



loose. For Mother Machine, nothing would go right. And there were newscasts coming across her circuits that could not be stopped. Damaging, incriminating newscasts that told of tyranny and terror, of horror and hell.

And then, I could imagine, there was Roger P.'s disquiet. Of course, there were others who stood behind Mother, were, in fact, Mother's guts—but Roger P. was our own personal little target. When we made a move, it was against him. When we enjoyed a victory, it was to his defeat. When we suffered minor setbacks, it was to his hell-sent name we uttered streams of curses.

We had neither seen nor heard of him since we had come back Down. It would be interesting to see his reaction to our coup. Surely he knew it came from us. I suspected that his respect for Dearborne rivaled my own, which meant he knew this had to be Dearborne's doing. I could hear him cuss himself for all the cat and mouse, and for losing us up there on the mountain. I imagined that Procs were up there now in great numbers combing the high plateau, but a few thousand square kilometers of mountaintop are not an easy thing to comb, particularly when you have only three weeks to do it. For it was apparent after only three weeks that things were coming to a head. Those Downers who could be influenced were influenced. The rest would have to remain as sheep before the shepherds.

It had been a battle of many delights . . . and a few tragedies.

One tragedy in particular.

Dearborne had commissioned Almond-eyes and myself to head up a sabotage mission in the area of Appian Way-alpha-Medi-73. Gentle, of course, accompanied us, as did a dozen more from the ranks of the Non-Moles, a newly organized branch of the Forsters. (By this time The Man from Topside had turned off the last of his subtle approaches he'd employed in the early stages and was now using subversion with a smile. He preached civil disobedience and rebellion—not against Mother so much, but against those who he said were perverting her benevolence. As a result, many recruits had started flocking to the haven of the Non-Moles. When anyone was sufficiently

fed up, he was able to find us—because we found him.)

This simple mission was just one of many hundreds in which the Forsters had engaged. Or at least it should have been just as simple and routine as the others, but it wasn't. At least for me it wasn't.

When we headed out, I didn't really give too much thought to where it was we were going. If I had, I'm sure I'd have had second thoughts. As it was, I waded into it with the easy abandon of the truly dedicated revolutionary.

We formed in an inconspicuous group with the raw Non-Moles recruits and trailed off down the skimmer toward the marked sector on level 73. The idea was to show the recruits just how the job should be done. We had an almost endless supply of small Imp imploder bombs, but a definite shortage of manpower. The more that could be trained in the art of demolition, the more widespread our operation could become.

There was a particularly attractive complex of social and pleasure centers there on level 73 in Medi. The inability of the Machine to protect these kinds of facilities bothered Downers the most. Also, the disruption of skimmer service in this sector, which was a standard procedure with us, would shake things up a bit. We would slip innocently into the target area, lay our little eggs and beat a hasty retreat.

The Imps had radial settings that allowed us to control the extent of the damage. This was one of the most amazing features of the deadly little tools. If we wanted a one-meter spherical cavity, we simply set it for that. If we wanted a five-hundred-meter cavity, likewise. Upon detonation the matter included within the prescribed range would collapse in upon itself with a relatively slow liberation of energy. All that would be left was a great gaping hole.

The important thing, of course, was not to make the hole bigger than needed. Increasing the destroyed mass with the cube of the radius could get wasteful in a hurry . . . unless, of course, you were just interested in wiping out a great big chunk of the physical universe, with little regard to what you were annihilating in the process.

This however was not our aim. Our sabotage was to be carefully planned and timed to give maximum impact



on social fixtures with a minimum amount of destruction of physical effects.

Only this time it didn't work that way.

We arrived at ground zero without incident and laid our little Imp eggs as planned. The pattern of implosions was a well-designed overlay that included many sacred features that were a part of the Down social and cultural evolution. We were to get in and get out, leaving mouths gaping almost as big as the relatively small cavities we were planning to blow.

Only some stupid cleed of a Non-Mole got to twiddling with the destruct radius control and moved it up a notch or two more than he should have. As a result, when we activated, after we as a group had skimmed a way down the toobe and were casually standing by to watch the fireworks, we took out part of levels 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75 and 76 in one huge earth-shattering implosion that left us tottering at the brink of a gigantic two-hundred-meter-diameter cavern.

*And then an awful awareness came to me.*

Freddie's slot had been in this particular section on level 76. Furthermore, I happened to know that this was her sleep allotment . . . *I would* know that.

The atoms of my body seemed to explode into a billion tiny droplets of light and dark staggered like a checkerboard.

*Freddie had been . . . now very probably she didn't exist.*

*Blink!*

A blinding rage swept through me. My mind was a whirling confusion. Destruction, implosion, death, Freddie . . . A gaping cavity settled gradually into roaring silence before me. I thought: *Freedom?* I thought: *Revolution?*

I thought: *Dearborne.*

Revulsion and an adrenalin sweat pushed me down the toobe at a maniac's pace. Ignoring the voices of my companions, even Gentle, I went looking for him. *John Dearborne.* The name meant murderer.

We found him in the Citadel. I didn't really think I could find my way back there all alone, even though I had

been there on several repeat trips since we'd initially come back Down. But we did it, Gentle and I . . . found the proc-woman's slot deserted in a moment of desperate luck . . . opened the now loosened dummy heat vent panel with careless ease. I had no business, really, coming here uninvited, but I was in no mood to quibble over propriety. I was ready to chuck the whole phompin show.

Dearborne was at the consoles. He didn't know we were anywhere around until suddenly we burst upon him, and it was one of the few times I had ever seen him truly startled.

"What in glunt are you doing here?"

Though my anger had cooled, I was still well out of the range of speech. Gentle picked up the ball.

"Fredrica . . . Freddie was in the radius of one of our Imps."

"*What?*"

"Some recruit set his Imp for an awful big chunk . . . and Freddie was part of that chunk."

I was surprised to see the real concern she was showing for Freddie, who had been her only competition. This caused me to soften, I guess, because I then managed words.

"What gives us the right to play God?"

Dearborne looked at me with nothing resembling comprehension.

"What gives us the right?" I demanded. "We just blew up several thousand phomps out there . . . not to mention all the others in all the other raids. Who are we that we can take that right upon ourselves?" I was still hot enough to boil water.

Dearborne remained silent.

"This isn't revolution, it's just a series of mass murders! I think we're a bunch of phomps gone crazy with our oh-so-noble little cause—I think the whole program can go to *Glunt!*"

Dearborne finally spoke, very slowly and quietly. "I'm sorry to hear this about your Freddie. It seems we all lose things more precious than even life from time to time."

I immediately remembered his parents.

"But loss and sacrifice are the rules of this game. We cut ourselves off from friends, we lose people we loved, we



give up our consciences and self-respect for something a lot more important than we are. For freedom. If you want to call that playing God, go right ahead. But I deny it. Our friends at Proc Central are playing God . . . that's what *playing* God is. Not this. Not this at all.

"Again, I'm sorry about Freddie." His voice was soft. "But . . . isn't she just as well off? Isn't she better off *dead* than *living* in a coffin like Down?"

"She didn't need to be dead. She could have lived with the world Topside."

"We're human, my friend. We try not to make mistakes, but some of us do. Should we execute the fool who caused her death? Do you want that?"

I shook my head.

"Of course not! It was a mistake like many mistakes that are being made daily by both sides. We have to live with it.

"Use that mistake, my friend. Build it into a symbol of all the mistakes people ever made, any time, throughout history—every mistake that finally led us to The Empire of the Greater Down. And let's get rid of this final mistake, this worst mistake ever!"

He paused from his emotional pleading. I felt compelled to take a seat at one of the tables. Gentle joined me.

Yes, he had been pleading, but pleading for me. And he was right, of course. A look at Gentle was proof of this. The glow in her eyes testified. And then suddenly I was aware of what it was she saw in me. It was that I was a part of Dearborne . . . This was the secret. She saw in me a part of him.

This business of living could surely get involved. But how better to know the sweet than to feel the bitter. How better to appreciate joy than to feel the bitter grip of sorrow. And it was a bitter grip . . .

## CHAPTER XVII

□ "I imagine you two came here a bit spontaneously, didn't you?" Dearborne asked, eying both of us after the brief interlude of silence in which each of us, I suppose, had thought back over our values and hopes (and regrets).

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact," I admitted.

"A bit of a security risk, wouldn't you say?"

I nodded. Security being what it was, I should have been a good deal more careful. A lot hung on this place's remaining a secret.

"Next time think twice. Can do?"

I nodded that I could . . . and Gentle agreed.

"It was horrible," she said, trying to break the tension.

"It was a great big hole there where all those people had been."

"I know," said Dearborne. "I picked up a report just a few minutes before you came. Mother didn't waste much time hopping on the issue in telling about the terror and blood. I'm just now in process of whipping out a rebuttal."

*A rebuttal*, I thought. A rebuttal to a massive mistake, with thousands of people dead. Yet, if Dearborne wanted to explain it away, watch out, Mother. I knew how effective he could be.

He had begun his stint as The Man from Topside in a very mild fashion, introducing himself as Mother's new commentator. Through the overriding facilities of the Citadel, he had informed the People of Down that Mother Machine had chosen him from among their ranks as a special symbol toward whom they could direct special devotion. Once this suggestion was firmly implanted in the minds of Downers, all the resources of the cybernetic monster herself couldn't alter the fact, though she tried.



She tried everything that a near infinite machine could conceive of. But the overrides were not to be denied.

If it could not be a matter of frustration with Mother, it was compensated for by the befuddlement the men behind the Machine must have felt. To Mother it was simply a matter of binary arithmetic—yes or no, electron flow or no. But to the men who made it their work to manipulate the Machine it was a matter of confusion and failure. They were stymied because Dearborne was always one step ahead. Then, too, the phomps of Proc Central had probably become so dependent upon their Mother Machine that they were next to lost without her.

So went the conflict.

After Dearborne had successfully won the heart of Down as Mother's favorite hero, the situation was half in our hip pocket. He began with entertaining and comprehensive discussion of the many, many Down facilities that would naturally attract interest and attention. Dearborne made quite an appeal as the suave, sophisticated commentator on the *in* things. Then he stepped up his pitch and informed them all that he was a special sort of fella, being one of only a few who had ever been permitted access to Topside . . . the *real* Topside. It was important, he told them, that they understand that he had been specially commissioned by Mother to acquaint her children with this marvelous kingdom above which had, quite unfortunately, been passed over as of little interest for too many generations.

This is where The Man from Topside bit really got started. If he'd been a hero before, now he was the modern-day manifestation of an Apollonian God. And God told them about Topside . . . phomp, did he ever tell them!

This is where my Total-Sense recordings really came on big. He used them—after suitable editing, which I didn't mind at all—and the populace went wild. Men started feeling old race memories from way down inside stirring at the very root of their molecules of conception. Much like the stirrings I myself had felt way back when—it seemed centuries ago—when I had first seen Topside . . . the *real* Topside.

He told them and showed them of the beauty of the

sunset, the grace and ease associated with the heaven full of clouds . . . the majesty of the myriad stars glittering in the night sky . . . the awesomeness of wide-open spaces and a horizon that reached to the very fringes of infinity. And then the hard sell began.

He started telling them about man . . . men. Men and Topside. And here the going got real tricky. Here was where men were most in the dark. For men really didn't know they were *men*. Men had no concept of heritage or destiny or personal worth. So Dearborne carefully enlightened them. And as things of this nature would naturally progress, he lost a few of his fans and believers here—but he had expected that, perhaps he even encouraged it.

With the potent leash he had with which to restrain Mother and make her heel, it would have been a simple matter to recommend to the constituency of The Empire, in the beloved name of Mother, that everybody, man, woman and child, pack up lock, stock, and kiboodle and move Topside. Because, after all, this was really what Dearborne was proposing . . . in the final analysis. But this just wasn't the way it was going to be done. Because it couldn't be done this way. What would we have when we got everybody up there that way? And certainly they would all go because that would be what Mother wanted, or so they would think.

We'd have nothing better than we already had. We would have just succeeded in transporting the monstrous problem inherent in Down up Topside—up where we weren't even as well-equipped to handle it as we were Down. And the very fact that we *ordered* them up there in the first place would be nothing more than a manipulation of the tyranny that we so despised.

No, that would never do, and Dearborne realized it better than anybody. His entire plan from the beginning had revolved around this very idea—that men would have to move up there of their own free choice after hearing the facts of the matter. Then they'd be up there under the right conditions.

This is what Dearborne was doing now. Giving them the straight facts, the hard cold picture of the deplorable situation they and their kind had been forced to func-



tion under for a seemingly endless history of generations. And this was why, when he reached this point in the crusade, he lost a lot of them. Some of them were so far gone, so enamored with the numbness Down had forced upon them, that even Dearborne's appeal couldn't reach them. If there had never been such before in the long history of mankind, I was convinced that now there was an entirely new *race* evident in humankind. I called them *superficial people*—Mother's true children.

Dearborne continued to give them the facts. His presentations, which almost continually filled the visiscreens throughout the realm, were becoming most specific about the implications of what he had shown them and told them. Could men who called themselves men continue on under the tyranny and oppression created by those who had misguided Mother?

He told them to declare themselves Sons of Liberty (Forsters), though only in the privacy of their own closets. And he told them to wait . . . for now. Wait . . . but not for long. Wait and hate those who had caused this burial, this exile, this oppression. Wait and hate.

Dearborne had them tottering on the brink, but they were not yet quite ready. Dearborne figured that if he suggested they go Topside right now, he'd lose most of them. As he had explained to me, he might lose them anyhow, but he had to give the strong the best possible fighting chance.

His next step, as he explained to Gentle and me that afternoon in the Citadel, would be the clincher. It would be the one that made them jump. It would be the one that saved the world . . . or left it to rot with its malignancy.

I hadn't realized we were this close. The expectation almost overwhelmed me.

"What are we going to do?" I asked with excitement.

He smiled a warm smile. "Won't you allow me one more secret, my friend? Besides, there still remains the matter of security. This last point is so important that a knowledge of it could completely frustrate our entire crusade. I must emphasize this, so that you won't feel too badly at my not including you."

"But . . . there's no question of security with *us*."

"I know that, but can you imagine what would happen if the Procs got their hands on you? You couldn't withstand them; no one could. And you know enough already that it could very nearly scuttle the whole show if it were ever found out."

I nodded, understanding the secret message in what he'd said. My knowledge of the Imps planted on the decoy totes and the robo-hound homing devices would be like manna to the Procs. My knowledge of the Citadel would be a *delight* were I ever to be apprehended. I decided Dearborne was right; I didn't want to know about this last step. Responsibility is sometimes a bugaboo.

"Now I think I'm ready to begin," Dearborne said, and he busily attacked his preparations, while we stood on with a kind of awe.

He sat before the pickup module of the override visiscreen circuit and activated the instrument. Immediately Dearborne was visible on the screen of the monitor.

"Greetings, fellow constituents of The Greater Down Empire," he said. "A welcome to you from Mother. It's good for me to chat with you again. We hope you'll stop briefly from your engagements and give us your full attention—I have a very special announcement today.

"I want to take you today into my confidence and show to you a very special place known only to myself, to Mother, of course, and to a select other few. It's a place that we call the Citadel."

I gave a start. Was he really going to tell the world about this place . . . even now before we were completely through. (But then again, maybe we were through.) Phomp, was I mixed up.

"The Citadel is a special retreat built by some of the most outstanding sons and daughters of Mother. They had her best interests in mind when they built it, but it was done as a surprise for her. Fellow Downers, I can tell you now that when Mother learned of this Citadel it was very much of a surprise to her. Now it's our desire that you, her children, should know about it as well."

With that, the scene on the monitor trailed off into a wide angle shot of the main chamber of the Citadel. The picture panned around the interior of the immense bubble-like room, showing the various high points after the fashion



of a guided tour. Apparently Dearborne was a bit of a photographer in his own right.

"As you can see, this special retreat has been supplied with an extensive supply of equipment and materials to aid anyone who might find need to use the facility. It was known that the time would come when Mother would no longer be able to supply the needs of some of her children, when these children would have to break away from the parent. It was for this reason that the Citadel was conceived, constructed and outfitted. And now comes the time to give you perhaps the most significant message in the history of The Greater Down Empire."

All during this, the visiscreen had been filled with shots of the Citadel's physical plant. One could feel the dryness of the air, could smell the age of the stores. Now it flashed to Dearborne.

"It's our purpose today to inform you that it is time for that separation between the Machine and man. It's time for those children to leave the parent. It's time for us to become uncyberneticized. . . ."

He paused deliberately, letting this declaration sink into the hearts and minds of Downers throughout all the land of the toobes. Then the scene shifted to a beautiful scene of Topside. I immediately recognized it as sunset as seen from our mountain base.

"This, Downers, is our recommendation to you . . . this that you see before you now on the screen. What do you think?"

It seemed like a strange question to ask them . . . this way. But I could imagine many soul-searching Downers throughout the Empire asking themselves, *Well . . . why not go Topside?* (I could also imagine the vacant stares of all those who could find nothing in these words and ideas to understand.)

"It's an intriguing idea, isn't it? I want you to know that we consider it the most amazing idea to confront mankind in many generations. Yet there are those who do not think kindly toward this wonderful offer.

"As you know from our previous chats, Mother has great hopes for many of us. Many times she's been forced to strike back at things she didn't understand . . . as she did most recently in condemning the incidents of

riot and destruction that have increased throughout the Empire the last while. She wasn't aware that these were actually the efforts of loyal citizens striking out at the individuals among us who seek to corrupt and misuse her nature. But now she does know this, and she agrees that those who would wrongfully use her must be dealt with. And this is being done.

"I'll show you the details surrounding one such incident—how an enemy of Mother and of *all* of us was dealt with. It's an incident in which I participated."

The scene immediately switched to a view of the Proc-woman's quarters through which we passed quite regularly in coming to the Citadel.

*Surely, he's not going to show them this, I thought.*

But he was.

"This is a slot on level 100. A most elaborate set of furnishings for level 100, isn't it?" The scene showed several fixtures of the slot that indicated it was well beyond the class of the usual level 100 dweller.

"And it *is* elaborate, my fellow Downers. It's the home of one of the enemies of Mother, the home of a Proc-supported woman."

I could imagine the bombshell this was in the laps of those Downers who were hovering before their visiscreens with the word *Forster* forming on their lips. Then to hear *Proc. Proc-supported woman*.

"This slot is also significant because it lies on the route that must be followed to reach the Citadel."

I shook my head, disbelieving what I was hearing him disclose.

He went on quickly. "One afternoon I entered this slot and set up my recording equipment. My intent was to confront the Proc and his woman with their corruption and ask them how they could justify this to Mother. For as you all know, it's against the code for Procs to fraternize with people, since they're only *half* men." (That's good. Get 'em down and kick the phompin Procs in the ribs.)

The scene switched to a close-up of Helen-She, who apparently was with him.

"So with our preparations made, my escort and I waited for them to make an appearance. And this is what happened."



The scene shifted; Dearborne and Helen-She could be seen standing together as though patiently waiting and resolute. Seconds later the door to the slot opened and two shadowed figures walked casually into the picture.

Dearborne straightened and confronted them . . . just as Downers would expect their *hero* to do. The two figures stopped instantly when they noticed him and Helen-She. Neither party moved. Then the two newcomers seemed to grow more clear. It was a woman . . . and a *Proc*.

There was no mistaking that it was a *Proc*. The frosty gray tunic . . . the gilded buttons and hardware of one in authority . . . the glittering, unreal, highly shined chromaloy crown that replaced its upper skull . . . and those deadly, unblinking eyes . . . .

*Dirty filthy Proc. Wears a holey sock. . . .*

"Filthy *Proc*," we heard Dearborne growl from the screen. It was clear he wanted to provoke the *Proc*.

A cruel smile spread across the face of the blunt, bull-like *Proc*. The women seemed to blend into the background. With a grunt the monster moved toward Dearborne.

"Does Mother know you're breaking the code?" Dearborne called at the advancing *Proc*. It stopped dead in its tracks.

"The *bitch* knows nothing!" it said harshly.

I could almost hear the shriek that swept across The Empire.

"You realize you're routed for short circuit," said Dearborne.

The *Proc* only shook its ugly head and lunged at the great black man.

Dearborne crouched, avoided and began to circle away. Then he reversed and slowly crept toward the menace. The brute turned lightning quick on its heels and feinted a challenge, its two massive arms rock solid, hands extended. . . .

"Filthy *Proc*," Dearborne repeated.

"*Dirty Mother lover*," roared his opponent . . . then laughed.

At that precise moment Dearborne lunged, and all of Down saw him plant his shoulder full in the middle of the

laughing belly. He rolled free as the Proc staggered back, surprised hands fumbling for a grip on its elusive opponent . . . but too late.

The Proc growled with animal abandon—and leaped, catching Dearborne's ankle in a viselike pinion. Dearborne kicked at the brute's hands and face desperately, only to be rewarded by a second locking grip trapping his other leg. With a violent jerk, Dearborne was suddenly pulled off his feet. He hit the floor with a sickening thud . . . and didn't move.

The Proc laughed even more, a coarse, guttural laugh, and pulled itself to its feet. He viciously kicked my fallen friend in the side and groin, then stooped and swung a devastating hammerlike blow to his head. Dearborne quivered limply.

Then the monster turned on Helen-She, who suddenly became more prominent. It stalked over to her as she cringed in a corner of the screen. We saw its vacant eyes and mouth hanging slack. Then Helen-She was framed, wide-eyed with terror.

The great meaty hand reached out and clutched at her. It grasped her throat and began to squeeze; we could see with horror the thumb sink deeply in her windpipe. We could hear her thrashing, struggling to free herself, and saw blackness begin to descend over her.

Suddenly a roar came from the screen and from nowhere a great black rod swished down and collided with the Proc just as it turned to answer the new challenge. It struck the monster full in the face with a *thunk*. It was nothing but the finish for the Proc. There was no blood . . . only a blob of smashed flesh. Its jaw was half ripped off and there was an odd-looking dent marring the shiny chromaloy dome.

I felt a wave of relief . . . and ghastly horror.

And then Dearborne was bending over the crumpled form where it had fallen. He was gasping in pain, holding himself doubled over. He carefully withdrew the fireplace poker where it had stuck. The Proc had thought him finished. But you couldn't finish John Dearborne that easily. He knelt down beside Helen-She where she lay unconscious.

Suddenly there was a scurrying sound on the far side of



the slot. The picture showed the woman who had accompanied the Proc attempting to escape. Almost by reflex, Dearborne reared back and let fly with the poker in a mighty heave. It struck and penetrated deep into her back. She went down without a shudder.

"Proc-woman," Dearborne said to the screen, and there were generations of revulsion in his voice. I knew it would strike chords throughout Down.

The scene immediately switched back to Dearborne in the Citadel, and he took up where he had left off.

"These were enemies of The Empire, creatures who would corrupt Mother's benevolent powers. Beware of them. They will tell you that Mother needs their guidance; they will tell you that *you* need their guidance. Beware of them! They deserve only our hate."

His face remained on the screen in a picture of intense resolve for long seconds, then his features dissolved into blankness and the show was over.

*The Man from Topside had become The Man who killed the Proc.*

"And that," said Dearborne, "is that." He sat before the pickup module, unmoving. The finishing of the pitch seemed to have left him spent and in an introspective mood. The frown on his serious black face puzzled me.

"That was really slipping it to them," I said, breaking the mood. "That script and filming was ginchiphonious—much better than any of those you had me do. How'd you get the Proc to cooperate?"

Dearborne glanced at me absently. "Uh . . . sorry. What did you say?"

"The Proc . . . he was awfully cooperative."

"Ummm, yes. Well, I had his circuits juggled and hazed. Of course, it was a put-up job—but he fooled them, didn't he?" Somehow he didn't look very excited about it.

I glanced over at Gentle and gave her a nod. It was time to make an exit, I could tell. It was apparent that something was on the big man's mind. There was a tension about his mood. I knew enough about him to know that he'd be better left alone at a time like this.

"Well, sir, there are things that we could be doing. We'll leave you to your masterminding."

"Yes," he agreed readily, "it's time for you to go. Just remember: You're committed to me now—don't forget it. But, what's more, you're committed to a new world. *The new world. Do you understand?*"

I nodded, my resolve matching his. *Can do.*

"And remember security . . . and everything I've told you. Don't forget the experience on the mountain, or the journey across the prairie or anything else. *Can do?*"

I assured him that I could, and we left him, still sitting there before the module. It was several moments later, after we'd wound ourselves around much of the equipment stores in route back to the outcrop ventilator, that I made the discovery. I had left the book—*his* book—back on the table where we'd been sitting. I had been leafing through it, as I sometimes did, and had not returned it to its now familiar resting place beneath my cloak.

I asked Gentle to wait and returned to get it.

Dearborne was nowhere in sight, but the book was there, and I retrieved it and retraced my steps. I wondered where Dearborne had gone so quickly. But no matter. It was good that I had come back for the book. Dearborne's trust must not be betrayed by carelessness.

Gentle and I made our way back down through the heating tunnel to the Proc-woman's slot. It had been strange watching her die. We slid out of the Citadel heating branch and into the main heating duct with its blast of soupy warmth. I was very careful to close the sliding wall section so as not to betray our passing. I wondered silently in a part of my mind what we should do next. Dearborne hadn't been very clear about that. I slipped the grate from its pinions and directed Gentle through to the waiting, silent slot.

Suddenly Gentle screamed.

I lurched forward without thinking, landed deftly in a catlike crouch, waiting whatever it was that had startled her. The darkness was thick. Listening, I heard breathing, but not that of Gentle. Her breathing, I knew . . . very well.

*Over to my left.* I swivelled, every faculty alert, and caught the full impact of a swinging fist in the mouth. I felt the teeth give . . . and then salt. The blinding flash of numbness lasted but a second, and I was lunging, giving



no thought to what I confronted. I caught a rough face, grabbed and whipped and tore in one motion, kicked and beat with a ferocity I'd never known. *Fear, and Gentle's terrifying scream . . .* I felt the seething power of a mad-man billow forth through my frail person. I grappled with the assailant on even terms . . . for at least one whole second.

Then his friends joined him.

I found myself thinking as they overpowered me that this phomp sure was lucky there'd been some help handy. I cursed in undaunted tune to my struggling, but soon they had me thrust into some kind of receptacle which was certainly too small for a person. Gentle was in there with me.

It was the Procs. *Captured*. Good glunt. Barfvonious glid. Ginziphonious grock. My mind blasted itself into ragged chunks of phosphorescent protoplasm that dodged and weaved before my eyes. Good glunt! The world was coming apart.

Trussed up as we were, I had no idea where they were taking us, but they were *taking* us. An eternity of cramped stiffness and they stopped taking us, and we were dropped to some solid surface with a bruising thud.

I quickly told Gentle to keep quiet. If something was to be said, her friendly phomp would say it.

They dumped us out of the bag into the jungle. I gasped in surprise. My first impression was that somehow we had been transported. Topside. But then I realized that we were still Down. Somebody had just brought a little heaven into hell. We were in a large chamber with a high ceiling, nearly lost overhead. Great trees, lush grasses and plants, steaming vegetation hung about us as we lay there on spongy, mosslike turf. It looked like Topside, but only a fool would make the mistake. It still had the sick something about it that would forever be a part of Down.

And there were Procs . . . a whole army of them, in disciplined rank and file in a clearing among the heavily leafed plants and bushes. They seemed to be curiously disinterested in us—almost as though they were waiting to be turned on. All except one big wart of a pig who stood with a stance that was as much a glare as the look spread across its cruel-smiled face. I was filled with a loath-

ing that reminded me of once when I had seen a snake.

"You know," I said to the big Proc, looking up at him with what I could manage of a confident smile, "you know what you look like?"

It looked as though it already knew.

"You look like a pimple. A big, white, fat pimple."

I barely dodged its flaying foot but couldn't deny myself a chuckle. Hysteria was slowly taking the place of fear. The idea of our hopelessness hadn't quite reached me yet. Gentle was silent and watching.

"Who is he," summoned the Proc as though speaking to no one in particular.

"The *second*," came a great hollow voice from nowhere. Of course it was Mother.

The glaring face leaped to instant approval. "So . . . the big fella's little fella himself." It looked as pleased as if somebody had just polished its badge. "Well, we know what to do with you, *don't we?*"

I hoped not.

They didn't leave us lying there long, but it was long enough for me to notice the soft carpet of vegetation, alive with organic smells that whelmed up memories of Topside. I wondered where we were. I assumed we were in Proc Central—but where was that?

The goon directed the squad to latch on and carry us to some undetermined destination. I kicked and swore and made a nuisance of myself, and Gentle did likewise. Dearborne would have been proud.

*Dearborne!* Great phomp! What was he to do?

We had been captured. His fears, the big ones, had come to being. We were in the hands of the enemy. *And I knew the secrets.* Suddenly the weight of all the world rested smuggly in the roaring pit I called a stomach.

Of course, there was one solution to the obvious problem: don't talk. And I suddenly realized that this was just exactly what I would do. Dearborne's trust would not be in vain. I would carry this resolve with me into the bowels of the monster. The day would yet be ours.

They carried us from the jungle into a formidable looking place that had the look and feel of the *brain center*. The goon ordered its squad to drop me down a hole in the center of a large elevated stage located at the far end of



the chamber. It was a deep, half-meter diametered pit with slick walls. They *stuffed* me into it feet first, and the only movement I could make was to tilt my head up and look into the bank of lights which spun above the orifice a few meters overhead. These boys didn't waste much time. Fifteen seconds, give or take, and I was already on their version of the *rack*.

Then I heard the order for Gentle to be taken elsewhere, and I almost leaped from my little worm hole despite the handicap. I tried to squirm my way up, but the walls were too smooth. It was like being rammed down the barrel of a rifle.

"Leave her alone!" I yelled out of my confinement.

"Huh?" A dumb face stuck itself over my orifice.

"Leave her alone, do you hear?"

"We will take the young woman away to be sadistically molested and assaulted," said the dumb face, in the voice of Mother. "Pending, of course, your cooperation."

A picture of Gentle formed for a dazzling instant in my mind, then I spat. The spray that didn't find its mark showered back down on me, but I suspected that I received only a small fraction of the benefit. The face hastily withdrew with a coarse grunt. The lights returned with their dizzy pattern, and I guessed I'd been left alone.

The sharp pinpoints of illumination against the blackness above the opening filled the tube above me with weird patterns. I groaned in my inability to move. I could smell a long wait.

My feet started to swell first. I tried raising up and down on my toes, but that got old in a hurry. Then my knees began to ache with an ache that was horrible. Then I itched. I didn't have enough room to scratch. If I sucked in my sides, I could rotate my body, but that seemed as useless as looking up at the hypnotic lights. Though it did give me something to do, and it did take my mind off less pleasant considerations.

My dangling arms and hands and fingers began to grow tight with swelling. My shoulders ached. My back felt like a straight stick. When would they come? I kept looking up with increasing impatience, but the lights only blinded.

Then I began to forget. I forgot that it was torture. It

became the world . . . the entire world. I breathed and tasted it with every breath. I felt it with every slightest movement. Pain, agony, vexation, torment, terror, hell. I slept it, I awoke it. It consumed me.

I doubt that I was in there more than three or four hours before they came back, but it was the end of eternity that brought that pleasantly unpleasant face above me at the opening.

"Having fun?" called down the voice.

I managed a groan.

"Good. We like to hear that." Caught in the lights, I couldn't see the face, but the voice sounded familiar.

I struggled up out of the consuming defeat and spat again.

The face didn't like it. "Go have a bloody nose," it said.

And that's just what I did . . . sometime later, before the face came back the second time. This time it came back to tell me they'd caught Dearborne.

I almost fainted.

"So now," continued the face, "you might as well tell us all the things we want you to tell us. We didn't ask you before, of course, because we knew you wouldn't tell us. But now there's no need for you to remain down there stewing over obsolete secrets."

It turned away and called, "You phomps, come over here and help me lift this poor guy out."

Three more faces joined the first above the opening. I think I got all of them with one shot as I spat a mouthful of contempt. What kind of rube did they think I was, anyhow?

The faces quickly withdrew, and I welcomed the spinning lights. Compared to those guys, I'd take the lights any day.

So far they hadn't really given me the hard sell. The hole would wear down my alertness, and soon they'd be pulling me out and hitting me at all sides. They figured I'd make a slip somewhere along the way. Right now they needed some slips all right. Dearborne hadn't made many.

(Except: letting them know about the Proc-woman entrance where Gentle and I had been picked up. I couldn't reconcile that . . . yet.)



With several eternities having slowly recorded their progress as they trudged with deliberate footsteps through my besieged mind . . . taking their time, dwaddling, lingering here and there, laughing to themselves about me, I was slowly brought to mind that I was being lifted from the cylindrical shaft. I gasped and grasped at reality. My first coherent thought was for Gentle. They didn't know it, but she would keep me alive.

A face swam before me and I struck out with animal emotion, felt my hand bounce off unyielding flesh. The recoil almost knocked me off my numb stilts. There's nothing quite like slugging a Proc with a hand that's gone to sleep. It's about as smart as pulling your own teeth with a pair of plyers. Feels about as neat, too.

Several of them grabbed me roughly and hustled me off to some kind of chair affair and strapped me in. They placed something over my head, adjusted it and then the music started . . . and alternated in blasts with a blinding flash of light.

Later came the questions. And they kept coming . . .

*What is the exact location of this foolishness called the Citadel?*

*Where is your colleague, John Dearborne?*

*Amplify our knowledge of your plans and tactics for overthrow.*

*Finger the main operatives in your organization.*

Over and over and over and over . . .

But they didn't get any answers. I was winning. I could feel myself winning. Dearborne would be proud. I prided myself way down inside where that last little kernel of me still clung on. Dearborne would really be proud. He could count on me.

The blinding flashes stopped. The noise stopped. The silence slowly filtered in upon me.

I had won.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," came the voice.

I had won.

"Take him out of there," it came again.

I had won.

"Stand him up."

I had won . . . unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER XVIII

□ A flicker slunk up out of the cloud. It was a light. One single pinprick in all the darkness. Then there were two . . . then three . . . then slowly more.

Eons later the points of light began to coalesce, forming a ragged pattern of white and black. Even slower, the black pattern began to dissolve away.

I licked dry lips, sniffed, knuckled tears from my eyes. Bells rang ambitiously inside my head. I wondered if I should crawl in through my ears and put a stop to the clang. *Then I remembered.*

I remembered that I had won.

*I had won.* It was like a flood of celestial bliss.

A pimple on Mother's complexion sat before me in a chair. I noticed that I, too, was sitting sprawllike in a soft chair.

"Hi, *Pimple!*" I called in a coarse whisper out of my sandpapered mouth.

The Proc nodded and smiled maliciously. "Have your fun, phomp," it said. "We had ours."

"You're not so tough," I returned.

It didn't say anything to this. Then I noticed that it was thumbing through a book it held in its lap. Then I noticed it was *my* book.

"What are you doing with that," I asked with more authority than I felt I could physically muster.

"It's an interesting fairy tale."

"Give it back."

It only shook its ugly head.

I turned to being sullen.

Another body entered the room. The initial smile that



automatically rocketed across my face froze in the middle of itself.

The Proc leaped to its feet and attention. "Sire—" it barked.

Roger P. smiled a slick smile at me then told the underling to get lost. He sat down and began to nod, almost to himself.

"You know, old phomp, it's too bad you didn't stay on my team. You'd have been good to have around."

I was deciding that I didn't like the color gray very well, especially the color of his ashen complexion. "You make me sick, Roger P."

"Yes? Well, still I'd liked to have had you on my team. I wasn't sure at first. But now I'm sure. You may accept that as a compliment."

"Why would you want me on your team?"

"Because you're loyal, old phomp."

It puffed me up a little. "I'll bet you thought I'd talk, didn't you? Thought you could wear me down. But I didn't talk, and now all you've got is wishes." I felt a fire kindling within me.

But Roger P. shook his head and entertained an incredulous frown. "That is not the reason at all, phomp. Apparently you don't understand. I would like to have had you on my team, not because you didn't talk, but because you were a very hard nut to crack. That, my friend, is loyalty. You see, what you fail to recognize I'm sure is that you, in fact, did talk."

My heart jumped into the fire and was immediately consumed. "*What did you say?*" I whispered hoarsely.

Roger P. smiled, enjoying it. "I said, oh phomp of old, that you *did* talk. You blabbed. You told us everything we wanted to know."

"*I don't believe you,*" I shouted. I didn't.

"Okay, so don't. No matter. As of right now you are no matter—nor is that little pleasure bit you were toting, though she has some attraction and might be put to some use."

"Where is Gentle—bring her here." I could manage little more than a blurted hiss. The effort to speak at all was a disaster. I was confused. I couldn't remember. My

mind was divided between something I had clung to . . . and an acceptance of what Roger P. had said.

"She is coming, too," Roger P. said.

My mind was grasping. "It's a trick. I didn't talk," I said returning to the impossible lie.

Roger P. shook his head. "Not so, fella. You told us about the Citadel . . . about all the equipment . . . about the preparations of the Sub V's . . . about the way in, through the branch heating tunnel . . . about Dearborne, what he intended to do . . . why he is trying . . . about his *parents* . . . about many of the other Forsters . . . about this book . . ."

I hadn't noticed the goon had given him *The Machine Stops*.

". . . and you even told us about the bombs in those decoy totes Dearborne sent out. He really fooled us there, I'll have to admit. That was the hardest of all to get out of you. And you told us about the activator/homing device in the robo-hound which we had brought back here to Proc Central, as you so-call this place."

He was right. I had talked.

*Gluntsville.*

My mouth hung slack. My eyes were glazed. Disillusionment hung gauntly on my limp, sprawling frame. I had nothing more to say. Even when they brought Gentle in, I had nothing to say. Her head hung as though she knew. I had nothing to say to her.

*I had already said it all.*

"Incidentally," said Roger P., offering a chair to Gentle. "We are even now making a pickup of friend Dearborne."

The terrible truth was true.

Roger P handed me the book. "Here, you might as well have this. Redundant knows I couldn't care glunt about it."

I took it, let it lie there on my lap. "*You Mole!*" I snarled at him. But I knew it was my own guilt that called this forth.

Roger P. looked as though he knew as much. He only shook his head in pity. He knew I was beaten.

They brought him in just as Roger P. had said they



would. There was a small army bunched around him. He was hooded, fully stripped of all clothing. They marched him over to Roger P., and he just stood there, hands bound behind his back.

A Proc that could have been *the pimple's* twin stepped forward and addressed Roger P.

"Sire, we found him even now broadcasting to the phomps his traitorous lies. There is no question but that it is he."

Roger P. stepped up and jerked off the hood.

It was Dearborne, a great broad grin breaking the blackness of his face.

"Hi," he said to Roger P. He didn't look at me, and I knew why.

Roger P. stepped back, barked an order to loosen his hands.

Dearborne rubbed his wrists where the magnetic clasps had worn and chaffed. "Thanks, noble sir," he said making special effort to make *noble sir* sound like "pile of excretion."

In spite of myself, I smiled. Then Dearborne looked over at me, and my smile wilted as before the refiner's fire. He neither smiled nor frowned. It was a case of acceptance. I was just there . . . the traitor. It was so.

"I underestimated you, Roger P.," he said.

"I very nearly did the same with you, old phomp."

Dearborne smiled and nodded.

"It was a good game, was it not?" said Roger P.

Dearborne smiled and nodded again.

"But the game is over."

"Yes," agreed Dearborne, "it is finished."

"They'll never get off the ground again—not without you."

"That's right," said Dearborne, "they won't have me, will they?"

Roger P. considered his captive a moment more. "Take this man away. It is best that we make preparations to be done with him."

Dearborne glanced up, concern showing in his eyes. "A word to this man . . . *please.*"

Roger P. was enjoying his victory. "All right, if you please. Is he worth your words?"

Dearborne shrugged this off, turned on me and smiled. It suddenly felt like the warmth of the Topside sun had been turned on me.

"They gave you a kind of rough time, I guess?"

I didn't say anything.

"Well, I can understand that. I guess you feel pretty bad."

I nodded that I did.

He nodded back as though he understood. Then he glanced at the book on my knees. A flicker of light lit his eyes.

"I see you're still lugging that book around that I gave you."

I glanced up, puzzled.

He went on, speaking now to Roger P., who was standing aside patiently tolerant of our exchange. "I gave him this thing, hoping the ideas in it would help make a man out of him . . . but you can see what happened." He looked back at me. "I'm sorry you couldn't use it. Perhaps I should take it back." He took the book from my lap.

"Go ahead," said Roger P. "You can spend your last few hours rehearsing the fairy tale."

Dearborne shrugged, tucked the book under his arm, stepped back and acted as though he was ready to go. Then as an afterthought he said to Roger P., "Incidentally, old opponent, you'll let them go, won't you?"

Roger P. looked surprised. "Why would I do that?" he asked.

Dearborne looked as though he were disappointed with Roger P. "Good glunt, man. It's over. *You have me*. Why kick the poor little guy in the ribs when he's down and beaten?"

Roger P. considered. "All right, can do. Never let it be said that Mother is not forgiving. He is no use to us. The girl could be, but we will pass over that as well." He looked like somebody had stuffed his shirt.

Dearborne grinned a shrug and nodded with head humbly bowed.

"Take this . . . man . . . out. Give him his bitch. They'll be no trouble to The Empire." He turned his back on us and gloated some more over his more preferable prize.



The army of goons gathered us in and escorted us out of the chamber. I glanced back and saw Dearborne following us with his eyes. I had a sudden feeling that they carried a message with them as they rested upon us. It was a simple *goodbye*.

And that was just what it was. Goodbye to all the dreams, all the talk, all the plans. Goodbye to all the hopes. Goodbye to the blessings mankind could have enjoyed. Goodbye to everything.

And, of course, Goodbye to Dearborne. Because I knew that he would never see the light of day again.

They hooded Gentle and me and led us back into the hustle of Down, taking some time about it to make sure that we would never find our way back to the secret headquarters. Before we knew it, we were suddenly left alone. I ripped off the hood, helped Gentle with hers and looked about. We were on a squeekway on some undetermined level of the Greater Down Empire. The Empire that was destined to be our prison from now until the merciful advent of death should strike us down.

They would, no doubt, close off the Topside terminal parks, or at least sure up the barriers. It would become a true prison. Soon the ferment would be forgotten. Mother's phomps would again become the glorious vegetables she liked them to be. And all would be well with hell.

I almost brought myself to curse the name of Dearborne for what he had shown me. My eyes were opened. Curse my eyes.

I had seen things I wished I'd never seen.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory . . .*

The glory was a corpse.

## CHAPTER XIX

□ An involved wave of the hand in the Machine's non-sense ritual, and the door to Gentle's and Helen-She's slot-apartment hissed open. We walked slowly down the soft-lit corridor and into the central living room. It was quietly dark. In the feeble phosphorescence of wall panels at minimum-glo we saw Helen-She sitting before us in a soft chair. We stood unmoving. I did not know what I would say to her. With a surge of deliberation, I stepped forward to her, knelt and kissed her knees.

The flesh of her tattoos seemed almost cold. She reached forward and brushed her hand gently across my hair. Her touch was soft and reassuring. Gentle came forward and knelt beside me.

"I am sorry," I said, trying to communicate my remorse.

"Sorry?" came Helen-She's voice, skeptical.

*Didn't she believe me.*

"Sorry is for the child, not for a man of destiny," she said.

"Destiny? All our destinies lie crushed by dishonor and failure." I raised my eyes to hers for the first time and saw their pride.

"Your wretchedness is imagined, servant of Dearborne."

"What do you mean, sister?" asked Gentle.

"It is so. You are John Dearborne's man. Now you stand in his stead."

I calmly raised from my knees, helped Gentle up, found each of us something to sit on, then set about setting somebody's record straight.

"You obviously know of Dearborne's predicament, and you must know then how he got there. Yet you can talk of the *traitor* taking his place? With all respect, sister-in-law, you're out of your phompin mind!"



She hesitated, looked at us both. "You know, dear brother, I think it is you who doesn't understand. You were apprehended by the enemy because *John Dearborne* wanted you to be apprehended. You carried information to the enemy with your capture . . . information *he* wanted you to carry to them. You yielded under the pressure they exerted . . . as John Dearborne knew that you would yield—no man could withstand them. And you delivered him into their hands . . . because this is just what John Dearborne knew that you would do . . . and you did it with *his* blessing. This is the fair accounting of what happened. So you see, this is no time for sorrow. It is a time for rejoicing. The battle has been won and the victory will be ours." She didn't look all that happy.

My mind had exploded in attempt to follow the foot race of her words. I couldn't quite comprehend a single thing she'd said.

"Say that again," said Gentle ahead of me. I was still in the *Good glunt!* stage.

She smiled. "He left instructions for you. There will be those awaiting your leadership. Can you readjust your thinking along the lines I've outlined?"

I nodded, dazed. Glunt knew that I'd done it often enough lately.

She explained that I had been laboring under several misconceptions . . . and that my biggest misconception was that Dearborne was immortal.

And she was right. Even though doomsday had hit me in the stomach when Roger P. had revealed that I had *talked*, I had never really been convinced that Dearborne couldn't find his way out of it. Hadn't he been pulling himself from one short circuit after another for heaven knows how long?

But this time John Dearborne had no intention at all of frustrating Roger P. His only intent was the *final* frustration. It was his contention that only through the sacrifice of himself could he pull the ultimate coup. Only the death of their hero at the hands of the monster would awaken the duped to overthrow their tyrant lethargy.

I shuddered.

And there were other misconceptions, too. Dearborne hadn't cared two glunts about the Imp bombs aboard

the decoy totes. That's just what they were, *decoys!* The real bomb was somewhere else.

The revelation was a real bomb to me.

When they had taken me apart, mental molecule by mental molecule, as they had been forced to do to get the information from me, Roger P. had credited his wit with the full truth about the bombs. Instead Dearborne had slipped the real bomb in right under his very nose while the phomp had been patting himself on the back.

Or rather *I* had slipped it in. Good glunt!

It was the book. *The Machine Stops*. Delicious justice! I had carried the child home to Mother and it would eventually blow out her guts.

Dearborne would arm it . . . then . . .

*Plooeey!* Gluntsville.

We sat there in heavy silence, feeling the weight of our responsibility. The bowels of Mother Machine would be ripped into nonexistence by the implosion and so would the dead vitality.

"Isn't there still a chance?" I asked, not wanting to feel the hopelessness.

"You must understand that there is no other way." Helen-She was most emphatic. Dearborne had rehearsed her well.

I wondered whether I should accept this. Dearborne could be stunting as he had done before. *Perhaps this was it!* Soon he would be here with us to view the frustration of the phomps with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye.

"You see," continued Helen-She, "he has prepared the world with as much prompting as the psychological climate Down will tolerate. It is for the strong to show themselves. Yet even they still stand some prodding. This will be in the form of a shock. The shock, of course, will be the execution of their hero . . . The Man from Topside . . . the Man who killed the Proc."

I marveled at her control.

"And," she said, "despite his abilities, I am still convinced that only history will tell whether or not his assessment is correct. His motives are beyond reproach, but the requirements of the task are monstrous. It is hard to lose him . . . if only for a moment. It would be harder, were his death to no avail."



"For a moment?" asked Gentle.

"Yes. I, of course, will join him."

My breathing shrunk at the thought and was hesitant to return.

"And then," she continued, "the reins of leadership will be in *your* hands. He does not know how many will ascend Topside when the Machine stops, but there will be some. You must try to collect them and establish order."

I shook my head. "No, I'm nothing but a phomp."

"Don't question his judgment. You were not always so in his favor. Now he entrusts you with everything. Though many will have to fend for themselves."

"What do I have to offer? Nothing."

"You have everything. Why do you think that he was able to trust so convincing a betrayal to you and to you alone?"

I didn't know.

"Because of the one thing which you possess to such a refined degree. And that thing is loyalty. The finest virtue in possession of a man. And not just loyalty to Dearborne, but loyalty to the ideas he loves—that's what counted. And that's why you've got to be the one."

I could only sit and stare at her.

Suddenly the visiscreen blinked to life, and Mother's voice boomed out across Down. The Empire cringed. She was about to exult in her brief advantage. We knew she was full of hot air. In a few more minutes the entire Empire of The Greater Down would also be so enlightened.

But it wasn't Mother's voice after all. It was the voice of Roger Pleasant, friend of The Empire, protector of the kids, chief bootlicker from the fiery pit.

*"Attention citizens of The Greater Down Empire. A traitor has been discovered in our midsts."* He repeated it a half-dozen times.

*"You are invited to watch us kill the traitor."* And now he would have every ear.

*"This is the home of Mother. We invite you to come in and see her meting of justice."*

The scene changed from Roger P.'s sallow face to a brightly lit, efficient-looking chamber, with a special plat-

form spotted and pointed out as the place where the ultimate dues would be paid.

*This was the black heart of Mama.*

Onto the scene came a troop. I recognized them as my former tormentors . . . Roger P.'s shock troops. They marched the tall black man and presented him as the much cursed traitor. He was still in his state of disrobe, except for one minor point of attire. He carried a small book under one arm.

*And there nestled the truth . . .*

Roger P.'s voice began to explain the crime this vile enemy had committed, with all the color and flourishes that one would expect from Roger P. By the time he was finished, he had Dearborne standing up there before the world of Down, and could have almost convinced me that he really needed the axe.

Only he was talking about the *hero*, and there would be others out there as well who would recognize the awful truth . . . and would know who was the *real* enemy.

They led Dearborne up a row of equipment and tables to the platform. As we watched, we saw him casually remove the book from beneath his arm where it was tucked, set it down on a piece of equipment and continue toward his destiny. He looked directly into the pick-up module at one point, and I'll swear by every God that ever was or will be that he smiled right at me, and that for a second he was there with us. I could feel the burn of his presence in my bosom. Then he was before the gun which rested innocently off to one side.

*"Downers, beware. Beware the fate of this man who thought to tamper with the greatness of our world. Beware that your thinking does not become perversion. Beware that your actions are selfless and directed toward pleasing Mother. Beware that you do not traverse unwise and forbidden paths. Justice is immutable. The example you see before you. Let the example die!"* Roger P. was never one much given to long speeches.

One of the shock troops walked quickly over to the gun and flipped a switch. An energy leaped out . . . played upon Dearborne . . . his great black self withstanding the terrible forces for an instant. Then he was no more. It was as though he had never been.



I could almost hear Roger P. cackle.

In the shock of the shock, our eyes turned to the spot where *The Machine Stops* lay.

Where the hope of mankind had rested in the man, now hope rested with his bequest. I could almost hear it ticking. The soul of Dearborne had been transmuted to this symbol. The soul of his work would find its culmination when its final voice would sound. The Machine *would* stop. This was the ultimate warning. They killed him, but they couldn't kill the message.

"And now," whispered Helen-She as the screen blanked the awful scene, "it is your opportunity to fulfill the final step in the plan." From nearby she produced a tiny box.

"His special gift to you. Press this stud and the Imp ignites. His request was one hour. *Now you must use your judgment.*

I was aghast.

He'd known from the beginning that the evil power of the Machine must be destroyed, but he was placing the final decision in another's hands. It seemed like the ultimate irony.

And I was it. And I was alone. Alone as I never had been before. Alone, and in my hand I held the world.

We sat there a moment more, then Helen-She dismissed herself. She would, of course, be going to search out her departed soulmate.

As we sat there, my Gentle and I, we were suddenly startled to hear a great booming voice come across the audio circuits. It was double forte and it was Dearborne.

*"The Machine is stopping. The Machine is stopping. You have one hour to leave the tyrant in her grave. The Machine is stopping."*

And then I knew it wasn't Dearborne, only his memory. The Citadel overrides still worked in spite of Roger P.'s inevitable sabotage.

*"The Machine is stopping. You have one hour to leave the tyrant in her grave."*

As it worked out, they didn't have an hour. They had only fifty-six minutes. We had to cut things a little short to save the whole project.

## CHAPTER XX

□ I gripped the tiny remote control detonator in one hand and Gentle's hand in the other. It was time to go. Gentle turned and slipped away for a moment into the room behind the shimmering curtain. She returned with a Burp clutched tightly in both hands.

"This was his. Helen had it." Her eyes were rimmed with tears. "We'll need it, won't we?"

I nodded. The thought of a weapon bothered me, but the panic at the uplifts would be fantastic. I suddenly feared that we might not make it Topside before the end. Then I scoffed at my foolishness. There wouldn't be an end till we were ready.

And there would no doubt be Procs at the uplifts, too. By now Roger P. would have me back on his drop dead list.

We stepped through the hissing door onto the squeakway, and surprise hit me in the face. The Down traffic was proceeding along as though nothing had happened.

The warning droned overhead very clearly. *The Machine is stopping. You have one hour . . .* It was loud, its meaning precise.

A flood of frustration washed over me, and my knees felt weak. What had happened? The phomps should be rushing about in the beautiful grip of panic.

Had Dearborne been wrong?

Down the toobe I spotted a sizeable force of gray tunics running along the skimmer toward us. It wasn't hard to guess where they were headed. As yet they hadn't spotted us.

Grabbing Gentle, I leaped to the A-trix and ran along it, bumping and shoving the travelers without regard for



their sapless souls. We had to get out of this grave . . . fast.

The uplifts would be working by overrides. Mother's automatic control over them would be useless. We had to find an empty one quick.

*The Machine is stopping.*

I could hear a confusion behind us rising above even the usual clamor of the skimmer traffic. They had spotted us. I didn't need to look back. I glanced over at Gentle. She was with me all the way and just as determined. There was one thing for sure: the control that would detonate the Imp would not fall into their hands. I'd blow the place first.

*Up ahead—an uplift. Empty.*

Then I noticed why it was empty. There was a squad of Procs stationed all around it.

I knew what had to be done. Releasing Gentle's hand, I withdrew the Burp and adjusted the control to spray. I leaped from the skimmer and fired the heat ray point blank into the mass of frosty gray tunics. There were sparks in profusion as artificial circuits shorted out and a *beller* and *roar* I'd never heard before or since. In a second's time the Procs lay in a smoldering heap in front of the uplift door. Gentle was screaming in horror, as were the scores of Downers all about. They crowded in a panic back up the skimmer, and served to delay the Procs pursuing to our rear. Another force came down the too-be from the opposite direction. We were closed in. Gentle was still screaming.

*The Machine is stopping. The Machine is stopping.*

The commotion about me ascended to madness. I stared down at the tiny box I clutched viselike in my hand. *Now?*

*No.* First we had to get the glid out of here.

I turned on Gentle and slapped her without feeling. She stopped crying and stared at me wild-eyed. I grabbed her roughly and dragged her into the uplift, trying to avoid the bodies of the dead Procs. *Nothing happened.*

Great glunt! What was wrong?

I waved my hand in the standard performance of ritual, mumbled the slogan of Down piety and ridiculousness, and the characteristic *hum* sprang into being.

The door hissed slowly closed. Out through the narrowing crack I saw a missile launched at the gap.

*Imp!*

*Whoosh!* we were launched and gone. A dull rattle at our feet told that a cavity lay somewhere down below where the Imp had detonated and blown a piece of world into oblivion. It was, no doubt, the same chunk of real estate we'd occupied a split second earlier.

Seconds later the whine ceased, and the door hissed open. A gusting wind hit us full in the face. A Topside sun lay low in the trees. Malt brown leaves whipped and whirled.

We were Topside.

I grabbed Gentle and dragged her out of the terminal. The grass was all brown and withered. It made me think of death. Together we limped out into the park and dropped down in disorganized exhaustion at the foot of a tree.

My attention turned to the box in my hand. It had become a part of me. I glanced at my chronometer. I still had some time before Dearborne's token time limit. Give the phomps as much time as possible. Some would come . . . somewhere. I continued to stare at the dials, and I was so intent upon the time creeping forward that I failed to notice the small pursuit force that crept upon our position. When I did notice them, I was too surprised for words.

I leaped to my feet and in front of Gentle in a gesture of protection, and yelled like a wild man at the dozen Procs that had us surrounded.

*"Stop or I'll detonate the Imp!"*

Whether they understood what I was saying, I didn't know, but they stopped.

*"There's a bomb in Mama's guts. I'll blow it."*

A voice came in answer. It was Roger P.

*My how you do get around, phomp, I thought.*

*"Can you stop the Machine?"* Roger P. shouted across the separation.

*"You know I can."*

*"Get him. You heard. For the glory of Mother."* Roger P.'s command to his troops rose above a gust of wind.



As one they charged toward us. I looked at the remote control, breathed deeply and deliberately pressed the stud. I looked up at the horror thundering toward us . . . and saw the wild charge falter in mid flight.

The Procs flew wildly into the air with their final thrust and dropped at our feet. This was answered by a grinding vibration that must have left its mark on the molecular structure of creation. It felt as though the demons from the fiery pit itself had bellered protest to an enemy god.

And then it was silent.

And I knew Mother was dead. And all about lay dead Procs. The extensions of the Machine had died with her.

And that was that.

We had won. Topside was ours. It was the new home. The old home was dead.

*The Machine had stopped.*

Somehow the victory seemed hollow.

I turned to a sound at my elbow and confronted Roger P.—*villain*—face to face. I raised up my Burp, prepared to blast him to the nothingness he was.

But he only held up his palm, asking me to reconsider my intent. His countenance seemed somehow much grayer than usual, with a tinge of red in the crimson light of the setting sun.

"Don't bother," he said slowly. "I'm no fool."

I didn't bother telling him he was wrong.

## EPILOGUE

□ The old grizzled faced man scrunched down in his floating convalescent chair, coughed and watched a fly.

The young man hadn't said anything since the account had ended.

Suddenly the door swung open and a bundled figure scrambled in out of a roaring blizzard. The newcomer's identity was lost in the folds of animal skins and fur. In a moment these were discarded, revealing a middle-aged woman, who came over and knelt beside the old man.

"This is my companion I spoke of in my account. Gentle, I believe you know of this young gentleman."

The woman nodded silently at the young man, then said, "We have never been deeper than the old level 92. You're the one who wants to descend to the lower levels, aren't you?"

The young man plucked at his mustache and nodded. "There is much down there that we need."

"Haven't we disturbed their bones enough?" pleaded Gentle.

"Indeed we have—" interrupted the old man.

"Then I shall do it *without* your blessing!" shouted the young man, rising.

But the old man waved him back down. "You have our blessing, upstart. For it must needs be. Now settle your plans."

The younger man looked relieved.

Just then the door banged open again, and another figure stomped in out of the raging blizzard. He threw back his furred hood, revealing a face with a peculiar grayness about it.

"It's not so nice out there," said the old man to the gray man.



"No, Sir," mumbled the other, who immediately squatted on the floor by the door. "Ferocious."

The young man studied this new arrival momentarily, then made to leave. The gray man immediately sprang to his feet and held the door open for the departing guest. As the young man passed, he looked into the self-conscious eyes of the doorman.

"Roger Pleasant?" he asked.

A flicker of brightness arose in the grayness. "Yes, you remember me?" the man stammered hopefully. "You remember my glory?"

The younger man twisted his mustache unconsciously, shook his head as though in pity and plunged out into the howling swirl of snow.

The gray man closed the door carefully, seemed to think a second more, then turned and looked at the couple across the room. His eyes asked *Who was he?*

"He wanted to know about the old days," the old man rasped not unkindly. "He wanted to know about the glory—your glory—old comrade. And he wanted to know about Dearborne."

The gray man nodded to himself, turned and went back to his spot on the floor by the door and squatted.

The old man looked up at Gentle. "They just don't measure up to the great black man, do they?"

Gentle nodded, "They all need Dearborne."

The old man sniffed and nodded. "But they already have him." He swatted at a fly.

# making of a revolutionary in a weird future world

Threatened by disease and starvation, man had for a hundred generations lived in the bowels of the earth. Mother Machine reigned as Monàrch producing all children, performing all work. Man was satiated with all possible pleasures...but with certain exceptions.

Then John Dearborne, respected citizen of Down Under went Topside—and had a “peak experience” that he couldn’t forget...an experience that would lead him to conspiracy, rebellion and worse.

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED