

# Be Merry

## Algis Budrys

Illustrations by Kandis Elliot

*Some of my story scenarios assemble themselves over the years. This is one of them. First--when I was just beginning to list ideas I might write as SF professionally--I noted that eating an intelligent alien might not, under some circumstances, fall under the taboo of cannibalism. Then, years later, my family and I lived in a coastal Atlantic community--among good people, who were kind to us--which serves as the physical model for the locale of this story. Finally, one day in Illinois I had a need to think about immunology, and I thought about all this, instead.*

*You might say this story is a hell of a way to repay hospitality, and you might be right. But none of the people in this story are drawn from among our many friends in New Jersey, although they are equally human. The operatic scene is from my aunt, Vladislava Grigaitiene, prima donna of the Lithuanian State Opera, and from Delilah, a neglected novel by Noah Goodrich.*

Be Merry

I.

OUR OLD MAN is a good Old Man. His name is Colston McCall and I don't know what he used to do before. Now he's Chief of Policing for the Western District of Greater New York, and he knows what's important and what isn't.

I was sitting under a big pine tree, feeling weak and dizzy. I had taken a load of aspirin, and my stomach wasn't feeling right. But it was a nice sunny day. I could feel the soft, lumpy bark giving in to the weight of my back. The branches made a sweet, shady canopy.

The ground was soft under the spongy pine needles, too, and it felt good sitting there, looking out over the meadows. There were wild flowers growing.

We might have had that ground plowed up, and people planting things. But there weren't enough people to plow up everything, and we had as many fields going as we had machinery for. We were doing our best. It still took a lot of people who had to go into the warehouses for packaged food that hadn't spoiled. There just wasn't any way we could have been organized better. We all had something useful to do, all of us who weren't in beds. I shouldn't have been sitting under any tree.

But it was a beautiful day, and I had been hurting bad all night and morning. The doctors in the hospital had given me a piece of paper saying I only had to work when I wanted to. I guess that means I only had to work when I could stand it, but if they had written it out that way it would have made a sadist out of anybody who asked me if I would do something for him. We've gotten very careful. Very considerate, in nice practical ways. Our manners are

lousy, because there's no time to be polite, but it's true what people used to say--the fewer people are, the more important people become. I remember what it was like back before the Klarri had their accident, but I can't believe how mean people used to be to each other. I remember specific things they did to each other, and it gets me boiling mad because that's how I'd feel if somebody tried to do that kind of thing to me these days. It's how we'd all feel.

I think some of the things that used to make us sick, before, came from living like that. I think that if I was fifteen years younger and just coming to make my own way in the world we have now, I wouldn't have my trouble, and I wouldn't have to sit here thinking. I mean, a man like me who had come so well through the Klarri sicknesses should have had a lot to do in this world, and instead I was shutting off because of something the old world had done to me.

I wished I wasn't sitting under the tree. I wished I wasn't trying to soak it all in. I knew that if I could, I would soak in all the sun and pine trees and wild flowers in the world, just for me.

I had thrown away the note the doctor had given me on the back of a page torn off a calendar pad. Well, you don't keep a note like that. Not when it's been written with a pencil stub by the light of a gasoline lantern in a big tent. Not when the doctor's so tired, and the people in the tent are so bad off from sicknesses nobody knows. I mean you don't walk around with something like that in your pocket. I would rather just sit here for a while and feel guilty.

But, you know, you can't keep that up very long. You know all you're doing is playing with yourself, because any time you feel guilty for having something simple and clearcut like cancer, you're really just pretending you can afford luxuries. I didn't have to feel guilty about anything, not one blessed thing. But it's human to feel guilty, and the thing about any kind of pain isn't the pain. It's that it turns you back to that wet, helpless thing you were when you were born. You know the sky and the earth have gone soft and could smother you or swallow you any time. You know it's not that way for anybody else. Other people are still doing things in a world that will still be there and be dependable tomorrow. But you're not. You've poled your raft to a one-man island of jelly. So you enjoy the chance to put splinters into yourself. And that's playing.

I was just starting to get up when Artel, my partner, came walking to me from the Old Man's house. "Ed," he said. "Mr. McCall wants to talk to us."

"Right," I said, and the two of us walked back. Facing this way, I could see all the tents, and the houses that had been turned into offices, and the tracks of trucks and people curving back and forth across what used to be the front and back lawns of the development. The whole thing was turning into a plain of mud, but at least there was a decent amount of space between the houses and a decent amount of open ground to put up tents and prefabs on, instead of everything jammed together the way it was in the cities and towns.

It was rotten in the cities and towns. Not just the fires, or the other kinds of trouble you get when a bunch of close-packed people get awfully sick and lose their heads. We were over that, but still when you went into some place where the buildings were like walls along the street and everything should have been alive and working, selling shoes and groceries, the feeling of death would come over you and you couldn't do anything useful.

They used to talk about how people were all moving out of the cities, before. Maybe because they already had something like that kind of feeling. Anyway, this place where the Old Man had set up was a development out along Route 46, and back in there up in the hills, there were lakes and wild animals, and you had a better feeling. You had better contact with

the permanent things of the world.

"Is he sending us out on something?" I asked Artel.

"Yes."

Artel didn't ever talk much. The Old Man had teamed us up about a year ago, and it worked well. Klarri are a lot like us. Their arms and legs are longer in proportion to their bodies, and their shoulders are wider. They have long, narrow skulls, with all the cerebral cortex formed over what would be the back of the brain in a human, so if you're a highbrow among the Klarri, you're a bigdome. When they haven't washed for a few hours, there's a light, rusty deposit that forms on their skins and turns them that color. And nobody likes the way their teeth look. If a human being had teeth like that, he had some bad vitamin deficiency when he was a kid. But they're decent people. When they look at a hospital, I think they feel exactly the way we would if spaceships of ours had brought pestilence to a whole world of theirs.

There's one other thing about Klarri. Their kids all walk bent forward, and so do some of their adults, because that's the way their spines are. But they have a lot of trouble with that. It's like appendicitis with humans, and there isn't a Klarr who isn't aware that he could have severe back trouble almost any time. So there's a lot of them have had a fusing operation on the lower spinal column, either because they became crippled, or they started to feel little twinges and they got worried and had it done right away. It's just like people. Only instead of appendicitis scars, the ones who've had the fusing operation have this funny way of walking and standing as if they were about to fall over backwards. Artel was like that, but he also had to wear a back brace because he'd been hurt in the lifeboat crash that killed his wife and children. Back braces are faster than re-fusing operations.

You see, there can't be any doubt about it any longer. You do the best you can. We don't much believe in theory any more. You can be as civilized as the Klarri, and know you shouldn't go around contaminating other people's worlds, but when your faster-than-light ship breaks down and you've got to ditch, you pile into the lifeboats and you ditch. If you're really lucky you've had your FTL breakdown within reaching-distance of a solar system, and the solar system's got a planet you can live on; you come down any way you can, and you don't put decontamination high on your priority list. Life is hard; it's hard for Klarri, it's hard for humans. You spend each day living with whatever happened the day before, and that's it--that's how it is in all Creation, for everything with brains enough.

II.

Colston McCall was a big man--there must have been a time when he weighed close to two-hundred-fifty pounds. He was way over six feet tall, and now he was all muscle and bones except for a little bit of a belly. He was about fifty or fifty-five, I guess, and he would lean back in his chair and look at a problem and solve it in a voice that must have been hell on his help in the days when he was running some kind of company. Whenever he raised his voice and called out a man's name, that man would get there quickly.

We went through into his office, and he looked up and waved us toward a couple of folding metal chairs. "Sit down, men." We did, with Artel straddling his chair backwards the way cowboys did in movie saloons.

"How are you feeling, Ed?"

"All right."

The Old Man looked straight at me for just a second. "Can you go twenty miles to someplace where there might not be any doctors?"

Well, the only other answer to that is, "No sir, I'm ready to lie down and die," so I didn't say that.

"All right. There's a town down the coast where nobody's sick."

Artel sat up straight. "I beg your pardon?"

The Old Man laid his hand down flat on a small stack of papers. "These people have never asked for any medicines. Now, I don't know what that means. We first contacted them about two and a half years ago. One of our scouts found a party from their town foraging through the highway discount houses down along Route 35, there."

I nodded. That was the usual pattern in those days. The towns were all gutted on the inside, and any survivors had to start spreading out and looking for supplies outside. But that was a mug's game. You burned up what fuel you had, running emptier and emptier trucks farther and farther, coming back with less and less. What happened after that was they'd pool their remaining fuel, load everybody into the trucks and come busting up north, because everybody had the idea the big city had to be different.

The Old Man went on: "Well, it turned out that, for once in a great while, these were the kind of people who'd stay put if we'd promise to send food down. So that's how it's been ever since."

And pretty grateful we were, too, I thought.

"Well, that was all right," the Old Man said, "but it's getting to be too much of a good thing, maybe. They're not complaining at all. You've got to figure any medical supplies they might have had left would be pretty much down to basics by now. Your antibiotics and your other fancy drugs either don't exist any more or have turned to mush. Well, hell, you know that."

We knew. It was the biggest problem we had; things were tightening up pretty badly. And it wasn't any use being able to grow penicillin or any of those fermentation drugs you don't need much of a plant for. All that stuff was just so much extra peanut butter on the sandwich for the strains of bug we had now.

"But these people don't seem to have noticed that. They don't even complain about their food; they take whatever the trucks bring, they never ask for more, they never ask for anything different from what they get. I don't like it when people don't gripe about what we can deliver. And these people just take it and go away with it and never say a word."

"How many people?" I asked.

"A hundred and eighty-odd. I cut down their ration by three percent just to see what would happen. They haven't reacted at all. About the medicine, I had one of the drivers ask them if they needed a doctor, and they said no. They didn't say they had a doctor, and they didn't say they were all healthy. They just said 'No' and walked away."

"They're either very lucky or very generous," Artel said.

The Old Man gave him a quick look. "I'm always ready to believe in those things up to a point. But now I'd like to know if maybe there's something they haven't told anybody about."

Artel nodded.

I wanted to know about the food part. "What kind of a town is it?" I asked. "What kind of people are they? Could they be fishing or farming?"

"Not in that country," the Old Man said. "They're just property owners--squatters, some of them, but it's a community. All friends and relatives, all townies. Real estate agents, storekeepers, tree surgeons; all they know is how to sell cars and salt water taffy to each other." He sounded angry. The same thing angered us all: it had turned out farming was more than scratching the ground and dropping seeds into it. And it's slow, besides being hard to ream. He'd tell you just the opposite, but your hungry townsman would rather die than farm.

It sounds good, to just wave a hand and say, "Let there be light again." But *that's* the kind of thing that drives you wild. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are ducks, and they nibble you to death.

"No, I don't believe it," the Old Man said, slapping the inventory control forms again. "Go down there and find out about it. Come back and tell me about it. Quietly."

"Of course," Artel said. "It wouldn't do to raise false hopes."

"Or even real ones." That was what made him a leader and me and Artel troopers. Our Old Man likes to go softly. He might not have been a top man before, when you had to move bing, bing, bing because the competition was clicking along right behind you. But he was good for us now.

You want to keep it soft. You want to take it slow and easy, and you have to know what to let slide. Cancer, they say, used to hit twenty-five per cent of the population in one of its forms or another. They had been pretty close to cures, before. They weren't any closer now, because you can afford to ignore something like that when you've had diseases that each kill sixty, seventy per cent in one summer.

You don't even care whether it was all the Klarri's fault or not. They were in awful trouble, too, cast away on an uncharted shoal, with our diseases beating the hell out of their survivors, and them with fewer biochemists than we had. I mean--what are you going to do? You could have some kind of lurching war and string them all up to lampposts, but there were better things to do with the energy, especially now that the first impact had passed and most of us that were going to die of each other were pretty much dead. If somebody was to put me in a time machine and send me back, the people then ought to shoot me down like a mad dog in the streets; I was carrying more kinds of death in me than anybody ever dreamed of, before. And if it wasn't for this home-grown thing of my own, I'd count as a healthy man by today's way of judging. So you don't worry about yesterday. You take what you have, and you work with it today.

"All right," the Old Man said. "Go down there, the two of you. Maybe we've got a miracle." That was as close as any one of the three of us got to laughing and clapping each other on the back and crying hallelujah.

I went down to the hospital while Artel waited for me. I walked through to the back, to where the dispensary was. The idea was, if you were well enough to walk in and ask for medicine, you had better be sick enough to walk by all those beds and still want medicine. I saw them all; the ones with the sores, and the ones with the twisted limbs, the ones with the blind eyes, and the ones with the hemorrhages. I heard them and I smelled them, human and Klarri.

These were survivors. The losers were dead. These were the ones you could expect still had a chance to live, if they could be kept strong enough to avoid things like pneumonia and the other killers of the weakened. I still had some kind of low-grade lymph node trouble. My arms would go to sleep, and I couldn't squeeze anything very hard without having my fingers go numb for hours afterward. While they were trying to do something about whatever bug it was that made my lymphatic system react, they found this other thing that had been living in me for quite some time already.

It didn't matter. I was around yet to walk down between the beds. Now, my Mary had drowned in her own blood. And I'd had this kid, about six, with his own little two-wheeler. A sidewalk bike, with solid rubber wheels, that was supposed to be for just diddling around in front of the house. Kind of a first step after graduating from a trike. There was an ice cream store that was open on Sundays fourteen blocks away from where we lived, and about ten days before the Klarri lifeboats came showering in from the sky, this kid and I had gone to that ice cream store, with me on my Sears, Roebuck three-speed and him on that boneshaker of his. Six years old, and pumping away like mad with just a little four-inch crank sprocket that gave him no speed at all, and me reminding him to slow down and pace himself, and him grinning over at me as he went bouncing over the potholes in the alleys. Good little kid.

The dispenser nodded when he saw me coming. He was a young Klarr, usually with his head bent over a medical dictionary; the wall had human and Klarr anatomical charts, and there was a human clerk putting together the mimeographed pages of a new medical text. We were beginning to shape up. For a long time, now, the Old Man hadn't been letting them put Klarr and human patients at separate ends of the tents. The idea was, if you were a doctor in the ward, by now you ought to be able to work most of the problems you saw no matter who had them. You'd have maybe one or two Klarr patients in the hospital at any time. It meant something that you'd always have more Klarr than that on the staff, or studying to join it.

Anyway, I showed the dispenser my Special Branch requisition permit, and he punched another notch on the edge of it and gave me a plastic bottle with twenty-five aspirins, and I said thank you and went back out through the tent. There was a supply truck running down to Trenton that would come within twenty or twenty-five miles of this place we were going to. Artel had drawn a couple of bikes from the transport pool for us on his permit and was just lashing them on to the side of the truck. We got in and we rode in the back, on top of a bunch of cases and bags. Artel made a kind of a hump-back pad out of bean sacks for himself and lay down on his stomach. I wedged myself into a nice tight fit where I wouldn't be bounced around too much, and after a while we took off.

III.

The name of the town was Ocean Heights. After the truck dropped us, we moved toward it through some very pretty country, using the Garden State Parkway for a while. We had good gear; Artel's bike was a Peugeot and mine was a Raleigh, both of them fifteen-speed lightweights with high pressure tires and strapped pedals; they weren't specially comfortable, but they were very fast on any kind of decent surface, and with all that gearing

to choose from, hill-and-dale touring was a snap.

We each had a .22 hunting rifle--the Old Man would have had our hearts if we'd carried anything to kill more people with--and some food, some tools and a water bottle apiece. We looked very technological, and you feel pretty good when you've got good gear. So we were both pretty well off in our own minds as we went zipping along, through the pine woods and along that smooth asphalt track. When we cut off and got onto Route 35, of course, we started running into signs of taffy salesman life--lots of roadside stands and one saloon painted DaGlo orange, and a lot of garden tool and outboard motor shops, along with great big discount centers. All of it looked shabby, beat up, and just a shell. There was nothing left in the discount houses but phonograph records, and little plastic pots to raise rubber plants in, and games made by the Wham-O Manufacturing Company. The wind was in off the ocean, and that was all right too.

It started to get dark while we were still five miles away from Ocean Heights. That was the way we wanted it.

We took ourselves a couple of miles farther, and then we cut out up a side road, into the woods. We found a good place to leave the bikes and made a little bit of a camp. It was good getting off the bike. Artel was walking very slowly, and he was leaning farther over backwards than ever. I didn't remark on it; I guess I've already said that in our own eyes from ten or fifteen years before, we'd all seemed like very rude people. Artel sighed when we were finally able to sit down and lean against something. So did I, I guess.

We sat down close together. Artel had one of those squeeze type flashlights that generates its own power. We put my windbreaker over our heads to muffle the light and we studied the map, laying out a heading for Ocean Heights from where we were. We'd be able to walk it in not much more than a couple of hours. We got our compass headings straight in our heads, and then we were able to come out from under the windbreaker, which was all right with me. One of the reasons Artel and I could work as a team was because I didn't mind his smell. (That was what I said; actually, I liked it). But not in big doses like this. It was like eating a pound of milk chocolate.

We'd done this kind of thing before; we knew what we were doing. A couple of hours from now, when it was still dark and we could expect most people to be thinking of sleep, we'd get moving, so that by the time we hit the place it would be tight-fast in dreamland. We'd post around and find out what we could. Get the lay of the land, figure an escape route and boltholes if we needed them. It sounds like playing Indians, but it's the kind of technique you work out when you're dealing with unknown people these days. You can't even tell in advance sometimes whether they're humans or Klarri; that was originally why a Special Branch team had to have at least one of each.

We sat in the woods and waited until it was time to move. We didn't talk much as a rule. For one thing what had happened to Artel's respiratory system gave him a lot of trouble with breath control. For another thing, life's too simple to need a lot of conversation. But it was lonely out there, and nightfall bothers me. "Listen," I asked Artel, "do you think your people will ever find you?"

"Pretty unlikely," he said after a while. "The volume they'd have to search is mighty big." After a while he added: "It'd be better if they didn't. We'd be as deadly now to our home as we were to you." I could see him smile a little. "We Klarri here have traded too much back and forth with Earth. We've become much more like you than like our people."

He folded his arms with his hands over his shoulders, the way they do. "I don't see much difference between us, in anything, really. Our machinery may be a little better. But most of us don't understand it any better than you understand yours. We lose ships, once in a while. We don't find them any more often than you'd expect. We have to pretend this isn't so, because otherwise we couldn't sell tickets to each other."

"Travel agents about the same any place, I guess," I said.

He shrugged. "Civilization's about the same any place. You take a ship from one star to another, and you say to yourself, 'Here's something my father couldn't do.' It's true. My father couldn't infect a world with a population of six billion, either. Nor lose an interstellar passenger ship. And end with only a few thousand survivors from it. And have a whole future to solve."

He pushed himself down and lay on his back for a minute, with his hands behind his head, looking up. "I'm glad I don't have to imagine how they're going to do it." He didn't sound particularly worried; well, it wasn't our problem. I'd heard humans and Klarr talk about things like what'll happen when we build spaceships again. It's a cinch they won't be rockets; they'll be a lot like the Klarr ships, I guess. But where will they go? Looking for planets where Klarr and humans from Earth could start the same business of living together, or contacting the Klarr worlds, or what? What would happen if we met Klarr from some political faction that didn't like our Klarr? Well, there are damn fools everywhere, I guess. When the real problems really came, they'd more than likely have some shape of their own, and they'd either be solved or flubbed in some way that was possible to their own time.

"You heard about this new idea?" Artel said cautiously. "There's some biochemist with a hypothesis. He says that with two or three generations of gene-manipulation, it might be possible to have Klarr- and human-descended compromise people who could breed true with each other. Think there's anything to that?"

"I've heard that. What do I know?" It shouldn't have, but the idea made my stomach turn. I guess Artel felt the same way.

"It's an idea," Artel said, and I could see he didn't like it any better than I did. But that was one of those things the two of us didn't have to worry about. And I appreciated what he was trying to do. You try to make as much contact as you can. Probably the Old Man had put us together originally because we were both lonely in the same way. Everybody wants to see a team as good as possible. Just for its own sake; not just because so many of the Klarr ships had happened to hit the Western Hemisphere. Other places, there'd been so few Klarr, I think they killed them all during the pestilence feelings. There were people who talked about national pride being involved; they said a lot of things like that, maybe getting ready to hand the next generation something they could go to war about.

Talk's all right in its place. Now we'd done some, Artel and I just waited in the woods.

IV.

At about ten o'clock we started to slide into the outskirts of Ocean Heights. These Jersey coast towns are all a lot alike. There's always a highway paralleling the ocean, leaving a strip maybe three miles wide with feeder roads running down to the Atlantic. Follow the feeder road and you find you're on the main street of some town that saw its heyday in 1880. Right up near the water there'll be a strip of big Steamboat Gothic summer homes; frame and shingle construction, three, four storeys high, with lots of



cupolas, and gingerbread, and maybe even an imitation widow's walk. Big verandas, hollow wooden columns and lots of etched glass in the ground-floor windows. Some people think that's a sign of gracious living. I think it just proves how much we wanted mass production.

Closer in toward town there'll be a lot of stores. Some of them will have bright new cast stone or aluminum fronts, but the buildings are all fifty years old behind them. There'll be a couple of yellow fire-brick structures, with almost anything in on their ground floors now, that used to be the A & P and the Woolworth's. Those moved out to the shopping center back in the 1950's. There'll be a couple of movie theaters, and one of them was closed long before the trouble hit the town itself. There's a Masonic Temple, churches of various Christian denominations, a hotel for little old ladies and salesmen. Used car lots full of stuff carrying ten dollars' worth of paint over the salt rust. A railroad track. A couple of television repair stores, and a weekly four-page newspaper dedicated to getting people to shop at home.

On the ocean there are some seafood restaurants, a miniature golf course and a building that looks like a horse barn but in the summertime houses a wheel of fortune and a couple of dart-toss games, with most of the stalls standing empty even in the height of the season. The parking lot for the oceanfront amusements is where the dog track used to be. The boardwalk is falling down everywhere. There are piles and sheets of rusty iron sticking up out of the beaches farther along, where the boardwalk used to reach. The people say it's the Republican legislators from the inland counties, with their blue laws, that killed these towns. If you approach from the beach, the first thing you notice is the plastic-coated paper from the frozen custard stands. It doesn't mash up and wash into the ground at all; it just turns gray.

We slid on in through the outskirts. Artel said: "It was bad here."

Looked like it. There were a lot of burnt pits full of bricks and pieces of charred timber, with dead trees standing around them, where there had been fires. There was all sorts of trash in the gutters, swept in from the fires and the general scraps that blow around and pile up when nobody collects them. The gutters were clogged with odd pieces of wood, tarpaper, sand and gravel. The sewer grates were all choked, and the streets were broken down. Rain water and frost had broken up the asphalt and undermined the cement. Some of the streets had been laid in brick, and they now looked as if long walls had collapsed onto the ground. It wasn't unless you looked hard, toward the ocean, that you could see the occasional lantern burning and could believe that anyone lived on beyond this mess.

We found only one street that was really open. It had truck ruts in it, with trash smashed down into them, and unmarked sand washed into pools in other places. The last supply run had been a couple of weeks ago, and it looked as if our trucks were the only things that came and went. Once we had found the main drag this way, we moved off away from it and worked our way along the back streets. We came across dead cars, and the weathered tumble-down of barricades. Once I tripped over a shotgun wiWe found only one street that was really open. It had truck ruts in it, with trash smashed down into them, and unmarked sand washed into pools in other places. The last supply run had been a couple of weeks ago, and it looked as if our trucks were the only things that came and went. Once we had found the main drag this way, we moved off away from it and worked our way along the back streets. We came across dead cars, and the weathered tumble-down of barricades. Once I tripped over a shotgun with a broken stock; the wood grainy from rainwater and sunlight, the barrels just tubes of rust. "You'd think they'd have cleaned up the useful things," Artel said.

"It's broken."

"But it could have been fixed."

"No, not here," I said. The soil was sand, just one great big bar that the Atlantic had raised over thousands of years of pounding itself up against the rock coast of what were now the northern counties, and you couldn't raise anything on it but scrub pine. West of the line running from New York down to Camden you were off the interstate highways and main railroads. The only thing you could do with this part of the world was sleep in it and play in it, and sell taffy to each other. We'd passed a horse-racing track coming in. Big looming plant, standing dirty in the darkness. Its parking lots had been full of cars, and there was a smell, originally trapped in all that wet upholstery, that hung in the air. That was as far as they'd gotten--the people trying to get out of the city. They were turned back by the local cops, cursing and sweating, and thanking God there was some place to point to where all those people could go to die.

Farther in toward the town we passed the Women's Club building--a big place with a phony Grecian front, that the local people had probably tried to make into a supplementary hospital at this end of town. We padded on up the steps, and there were three-year-old bodies right up against the doors, inside. We backed off.

"We won't find anyone living right around here," Artel said. Twenty years from now, the Women's Club building and the cinderblock walls of the bowling alley down the street would be all that stuck up out of the second growth. There'd be trees growing out of the sewers.

We crossed the railroad tracks, and we stood there as if we'd just sat straight up in bed in the middle of the night. The first thing I noticed was the smell of fresh paint. But there was plenty of other stuff to hit you, all at once.

It must have been one of the best parts of the town to begin with. The houses were brick, two and three storeys high. They were all set in the middle of very nice lots; and most of them had those Georgian fronts that spell class. In daylight, we might have seen soot and patches in some of the brickwork, but we didn't see it now. All the outlines were crisp and sharp; there wasn't a warped board or a sagging roof anywhere here. There were neat, well-located privies in the backyards, we found as we started to move around. The fronts of them were made out of brick and had shrubs planted around them.

It was all like that. The hedges were trimmed. The lawns were like velvet. There wasn't a chipped place in any sidewalk, nor litter on the grass, or anything.

There were lanterns burning upstairs in two or three of the houses. "What the hell?" I said. There were eight or ten solid blocks of this stuff. All it needed was a wall around it.

"This is 'way off the supply route," Artel said. "To see this part, you'd have to do what we did. You notice the trees--how thick they are? I think they even had airplanes in mind when they picked this spot."

"Listen," I said. From one of the houses, through a window open to the soft night air, you could hear it:  
*"Bella figlia del amore..."*

"What is that?" Artel asked.

"Opera. Somebody's got a windup phonograph."

"Or a generator."

"But no bulldozer to bury his dead with."

Artel looked back over his shoulder toward the other side of the railroad tracks. "That is different."

We kept moving, with faint music. There was no other living sound. No night birds, no cats in love, no dogs. There wasn't any sound of people sneaking through yards. This town didn't have teenagers who liked to visit each other. All these people were locked up tight in their little clean town-within-a-town, most of them sleeping the sleep of the innocent. The innocent and the healthy.

We worked our way closer toward the ocean. We were only a block away from it. The waves were rolling in to the shore regularly and gently, making the only steady sound we could hear, now that we were out of range of the phonograph. I looked back over my shoulder, and I could see nothing but those few upstairs lights, some of which had been put out since we had gone by. Solid citizens turning in. I thought they were lantern lights. They might have been lightbulbs on low voltage. We were getting more questions than answers out of this town.

We got down to the beach, and we found another dirty fringe--a motel with its windows broken out, a playground with scrub bushes growing up among the teeter-totters and the monkey bars, a flight of wooden steps tumbled down the stone jumble of the sea wall. If you had been going by in a boat you would have never known about that neat little clean patch with its edged flower beds and its unlit streets.

There was a big, dark building just inland of the playground. Flat-sided and square, it was two storeys high, and the ground floor windows were well over the height of a man's head, long and very narrow. If this was a war, and the building was at a crossroads, I would have reported it for a bunker. The sign over the doorway said "Ocean Heights Professional Bldg." The double doors were at the head of a flight of stairs set back and flanked by solid masonry. I could have defended it from the inside with one machine-gun. There was a padlock hanging on the doors, closing a chain looped through the handles.

"There was a gambling casino in Ocean Heights for a while," Artel said. He was the one who'd gone through the Old Man's background file on the town. "It was closed by state investigators in 1977."

"We've found it." Going by the delicately scalloped, once white-painted directory board bolted to the wall beside the stairs, an architect and a real estate agent had set up offices in it after the space became available. There was no sound in it now, and no lights. But I noticed something, and it made me wonder. I pulled in a deep breath through my nose.

"It's not empty." I said.

"I agree," Artel said. "I have that feeling. And yet I can't say why." In the starlight, I could see him shake his head quickly. "It bothers me. It was built to be a hiding place. They might be doing almost anything in there."

"Let's look around some more," I said.

"If you say so," Artel said hesitantly.

The other thing we found was down at the beach. It was something looming, most of it under the water, the waves phosphorescing weakly against the one side that we could see. It stretched away into the darkness, and its curved sides went up like the biggest dead whale in the world. I could see a long strut extending out over the water at a shallow angle, and the round circle of a landing pad hanging at a crazy

angle from the end of it. It was a crashed Klarri lifeboat.

"What happened to the people in it, I wonder," Artel said.

"They're in that building back there. Locked up and kept out of sight," I said. I had smelled them, the scent seeping out weakly through the double doors and God knew how many other barriers inside. "What do you want to do about it?"

It was up to him. They were his people. If he wanted us to go in there and break them out now, I didn't see any way for me not to help him. Maybe we could get away with it; I wasn't crazy about the idea of trying to do all that without making any noise, but it was up to him. "Anything you say."

"Come off it, Ed. We don't know anywhere near enough about the situation in this place. We haven't found what we were sent for." Artel sounded a little mad. He had a right to be. I'd as good as said he wasn't a team man. I felt bad about having been rude. "Come on--let's go back to camp," he said. "We had a plan and let's follow it." Artel slipped off into the darkness.

I followed him. We didn't say anything more to each other that night. We got back to our camp and sacked out.

A team is a little bit like a marriage. I don't care what anybody says, sometimes it's better not to talk it out. It makes you feel like hell for a while, but you've got an even chance the next morning one or the other of you will say some thing in a friendly way and then the other one will feel relieved and it will be all over.

V.

In the morning we went in straight. There's no point to horsing around. If we'd had things like phone taps, snooper microphones and truth serum to work with, we might have decided on something different. But life's too simple these days for any of that kind of stuff to be worth a damn. We'd just ask them questions, and then see what their lies added up to.

Coming down the main drag on our bikes, we went through the dead shopping district of the town and then cut right on a concrete street a couple of blocks in from the ocean. I figured we'd be coming up to signs of life soon.

What we heard first was the sound of a ball bat from some field two or three blocks away and off to our right, somewhere near where the clean patch of houses was. We couldn't see anything, but we could hear kids yell; it was the kind of noise you get from a schoolyard at recess time.

We made another half a block, still going by houses that were all abandoned, and then we heard some little kid yelling "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" The sound of fast little feet on the floor of a veranda went clattering in echoes along the street, and then a screen door slammed shut. We'd finally been spotted. We stopped and began walking our bikes up the middle of the street.

About a hundred-fifty-yards ahead there was a traffic light hanging from guy wires over an intersection. There were a couple of gas stations there, and the drive-in apron of an ice cream stand. It made a kind of open place where you might expect people to gather when you unloaded your supply truck. Between there and us there were a couple of houses that might be lived in. They didn't have any broken glass in

their windows, and there were light-colored streaks of unpainted putty in places along the sash. They didn't look neat, but they looked livable. They looked about the way you might expect houses to look in a town, if it wasn't a town on its feet enough to have that nice little residential section tucked away back there.

A screen door slammed again, and this time we caught the direction of the sound. It was coming from a couple of houses down and to our right. It was a big green three-storey house, and we could see faces at the windows, but the glass was dirty, and we couldn't tell much about them. What we could see was the man coming out from the veranda and walking down the front steps. He stood there for a minute as we came closer.

He was a tall, thin, oldish-looking man with a checked shirt and suit pants, wearing glasses and carrying a pipe in his hand. He looked seedy and comfortable, with the pants hanging down flat and bum-sprung behind, and the knees baggy in front. He waved a hand at us in a nice neighborly way, and then he walked around the side of the house. There was a sudden hammering of metal on metal--a wild, carrying sound--and all the other noises we'd been hearing stopped. The only things to listen to were the steady wash of the ocean off to our left and the grit of our tires on the street. The man came back from around the house just as we reached his front walk. He had bushy salt-and-pepper hair growing out of the sides and back of his head, and a streak of it growing back from his forehead; his hairline was shaped like a thick-tined pitchfork, and he reminded me of all the retired men who might come around to your place in the summertime and help you build a rose arbor for a few dollars.

"Howdy!" he said. "Didn't hear you coming." He was looking closely at Artel. I had the feeling he was having trouble making up his mind whether Artel could possibly be a Klarr.

"Howdy," I said. "My name's Ed Dorsey. This is my partner, Loovan Artel. Artel's his first name. What was all that racket?"

The man came forward and stuck out his hand. "My name's Walter Sherman. Got one of those iron fire-alarm rings set up next to the house. I kinda let people know when we've got company. Pleased to meet *you*." He shook my hand, and then he gave Artel another look, very fast. He thought it over and shook Artel's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"My pleasure," Artel said, grinning a little.

Sherman blinked once. He was trying to act right. He was doing pretty well, I thought, considering he hadn't ever before seen a Klarr wearing human clothes and riding a bicycle. Sherman looked all right, too. He was getting old, but there was a nice glint in his eye and good color in his face. His hair wasn't dead and dull, and the whites of his eyes were clear. He didn't move or talk like a man who was anywhere near sitting down and waiting to get older. He looked like an upstanding gent, and you don't get to see very many of those any more.

I took a quick look around.

There were people beginning to show up. One or two of them were coming out of nearby houses, but most of them were beginning to gather down at the intersection under the traffic light, coming up side streets and back from where the clean houses were. Just looking down that way, if you were a supply truck driver, say, you'd guess that they had all come out of the houses down there. "We're from Philadelphia," I said to Sherman. "Survey team." Artel and I got cards out of our shirt pockets and showed them to him. They were signed "F. X. Daley, United States Commissioner, Philadelphia

District."

"We're just starting to check this part of the country," I said as Sherman took the cards in his hand and studied them, peering and blinking with the pipe in his mouth. The pipe was cold and empty--had been for years, probably. "We'd just like to find out a little bit about this community--how many people, what kind of social organization...that kind of thing."

"That's right, sir," Artel said. "We'd appreciate your cooperation. Or if you'd rather direct us right away to your mayor or whoever's in charge, why, we'll get out of your front yard and let you go back to what you were doing."

"Oh, no--that's all right," Sherman said, handing us back the cards. "I imagine there'll be some people from our Town Council here in a minute. Glad to help."

There wasn't any doubt we were bothering him. He was talking off the top of his head and thinking very hard about something else. I wondered for a minute if these people had some way of knowing there wasn't anything in Philadelphia--not a blessed thing--but it didn't seem likely. One of the hardest things to be sure of in this world is nothing.

"Well, come in and--" He waved with his pipe toward the steps of his veranda. "Ah, why don't you sit down?" He was looking at the touring saddles on our bikes. "I imagine it might be nice to rest yourselves on something flat."

He tried to chuckle. He was trying to be pleasant, he really was. But we had caught him off base very bad by not coming into town with a truck engine roaring ahead of us, and by not both of us being human.

We sat down on his front steps. We left our bikes up on their kick-stands, with the .22's strapped down to the carriers, just like any survey team would have.

"You--ah--people look bushed," Sherman said. "You come all the way from Philadelphia on those bikes?"

I nodded. "Easy stages, yeah," I told him. "There's a lot to check out." He looked a lot healthier than either one of us, that was for sure.

"We ought to explain," Artel said. "It's the people who can't do a regular day's work they can spare for things like surveys." Like me, he was watching the bunch of people coming toward us. They were walking fast. Not running; just coming on at a good pace. There were young and old, and a few kids, a good mixed human crowd coming to the railroad station to watch the streamliner go by. A good, healthy crowd. Even not running, they were moving faster than any bunch of people I'd seen in years. They looked good; clean, eager. They looked the way people ought to look when something exciting is happening. You could see the front ones slow down and frown as they made out what Artel was.

A freckled man in suntans and a rainhat, with squint-wrinkles around his blue eyes, came through them as they began to gather into a clump on Sherman's front lawn. "Hi, Walt!" he said as he came up to us. "I see you got company."

"Couple of government men from Philadelphia," Sherman said.

"Philadelphia, eh?" he said, shaking hands with us as we stood up. "My name's Luther Koning. Pleased

to meet you both."

"Luther's sort of like our mayor," Sherman explained.

Whatever he was, he was the man we'd come to see. I guessed he was about fifty; all long, flat muscle under that weather-tight skin, and able to act as if it was nothing unusual to see a Klarr walking around instead of being in that big, silent building out behind the abandoned playground. He had fast reactions, Koning did, and where other people had slowed to a walk and stopped, he had come on forward.

"Glad to meet you," I said. I told him my name, and I told him: "This is Artel, my partner."

"Mm-hmm," Koning said. "Well, I can see that," he said in an agreeable enough voice, looking over at the bicycles and the two rifles. "Two equally intelligent races in the same jam, after all. They waste their strength in fighting, there's no hope at all. So they work together. It makes sense." He looked at me and then at Artel. "You look tired--both of you. Things still aren't so good in the big city, huh?"

"Things aren't so good anywhere, Mr. Koning," Artel said. "But we're trying to make them better. That's why we're here."

"Why *are* you here?" Koning grinned again. "We're standing here talking, and for all I know you two are anxious to get something done right away."

Walter Sherman had gotten a chance to settle down some, and his voice was easier. But he was really fast in getting something across to Koning, even though he said it in a careless voice. "Gave me a turn, coming in that way. On bicycles." He chuckled: "Real fancy machines, those are. Smart idea. Saves on gasoline." I think the point he was trying to make was that we were dissimilar from the people who came in trucks, and that we might not even know about any other organization.

"We're just trying to find out if you people need anything," I said harmlessly to Koning. I was watching the crowd. There were thirty or forty of them, and it seemed to me that any time you can collect twenty percent of the total population at the drop of a hat, you're dealing with an excitable population. But they didn't look jumpy the way a crowd of sick-nervous people might. You don't see the kind of shuffling and feverish face-jerking you get sometimes. These people weren't looking for excitement. Sick people need excitement because it interrupts their misery. When they get it, they lose their dignity; it's a dose of the stuff they crave, and when you pour it out in front of them they can't hide how much they need it. These people weren't like that. They didn't need to be a mob. But they were very, very interested. Like members of the same club, and a famous guest-lecturer. There wasn't a Klarr among them. That would have struck me even if I hadn't known about the special building.

I couldn't make this crowd out. I kept looking at them; men of all ages, housewife-types in cotton print dresses, some of them with water-spotted aprons around their middles where they'd been washing up the breakfast dishes. There were young men in T-shirts, who looked as if they'd been working around the yard, and older men who were like Sherman and Koning in looking like they'd lived useful, cheerful lives, and had a lot of useful time in them. It was the kind of crowd that gives you the feeling life is comfortable and pleasant all the time. There wasn't another one like it in the whole world.

It bothered the hell out of me. Some of the kids had brought their gloves and started a game of catch out beyond the fringes of the crowd. Other kids were circulating back and forth; you couldn't get their attention with a conversation on a veranda, but they were either going to be where the attraction was, whatever it was, or they were going to spread the news. Some of them had been up to Sherman's house

and back down to the intersection several times already. Now one of them on the edges of the crowd yelled: "Here comes Tully!" Koning turned around as if he'd been shot, but he recovered nicely.

"Hey! Let's keep it down; we're trying to talk here," he said. But he kept looking sideways over at a man ambling along the sidewalk, so Artel and I did too.

VI.

Tully was like one of those men you'll see sitting on a beachfront bench staring out over the water. Nobody can do anything for or to them. They're past the big tussle. He had given up trying to look as if God never made pot bellies, and was wearing loose weave light pants with a big, comfortable waistline and baggy legs. He had rubber-soled cloth shoes on and bright socks that you could see showing under the flipping cuffs of his pants. He had broad-strap suspenders holding up his pants, and he was wearing a short-sleeved, bright shirt. His bare arms were thin and knobby, tanned an even darker and shinier brown than Koning's face was under his freckles. He was wearing a headband with a transparent green eyeshade. There was a fringe of white hair around his stuck-out ears, and the top of his skull was tanned and glistening. He had a big, amiable grin. He walked along as if he had all the time in the world, knowing that he was a center of interest, too, and the rest of the show would wait for him.

Neither Koning nor Sherman said a word. People will do that. People think that if they stop, time stops.

Tully ambled into the crowd, still grinning, and the crowd drifted out of his way. There wasn't anything obtrusive about it; it wasn't like the Red Sea parting for Moses into two straightedged and shiny walls. It was just that they drifted out of his way, easily and naturally as if everybody in town knew from a baby that you didn't stand close to Tully. Tully walked forward, still grinning.

He cocked his undersized, round-chinned, round face up at the veranda. He looked at Artel, and then he looked past Koning and me at Sherman. When he spoke, his voice was high, like the cackle of a chicken with the biggest egg in the yard. "Ah-heh, Doc. Heard you had one of them Hammerheads visiting on your porch." He looked Artel up and down. "Looks like a prime example, considerin' how puny critters are these days."

He looked at me now. His eyes under the shade were small and black, and smart. "His partner don't look so good either, does he?" He stood there with his little squirrel-paw hands hooked into the front of his trousers, and when he began to laugh, first his cheeks quivered, and then the loose skin in his neck, and then his belly under the shirt, and then he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. But he didn't make any noise. He flapped with laughter as he ran his eyes around from Sherman and quickly across Artel and me to Koning, and then he began to turn very slowly and his glance didn't miss one of the people around him. And then he walked away. He went back down the sidewalk the way he'd come, his hands still hooked in the waistband of his pants, his back shaking a little bit, the suspenders tight across his wizened shoulders, and a reflection of sunlight bouncing off the curved sheen of his eyeshade.

"Well," Artel said in an amused and careless voice, "I see every town has its character."

Koning rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, where the skin was seamed and granulated from years of exposure to sunlight. His jaw was out; I could see his lower teeth. They were wet and brown, and snagged by oncoming age. The breath was pushing out steadily through his nostrils, making a very thin whistle. He took off his khaki rain hat and ran his hand over his scalp. He put the hat back on, all without taking his eyes off Tully. The crowd was looking up at us expectantly, and I believe half of them were holding their breaths.



"I didn't know you were a doctor," I said to Sherman, as if this were interesting but not vital. Of all the things that had been happening to us since Sherman had given the alarm, this was the one that I couldn't make out to have not noticed. "Want to make a note of that, Artel?" I went on. "It's good news. It means we won't have to send one of our own in." Artel nodded and took a pad of mimeographed form sheets out of his pocket. He got out a pencil, licked the tip and made an X-mark in a box.

"Doctor present. Right," he mumbled boredly.

"By the way, Doctor, congratulations," I said to Sherman. "You must be doing a fine job here. These people look fine."

Sherman said quickly: "Now, wait--you're getting the wrong idea. I'm no doctor. We don't have any doctor. That's just something that crazy old coot calls everybody." His glance flickered over to Koning.

"I ought to lock--no, God damn it, I...can't..." Koning wasn't talking to me. He was talking directly to Sherman.

Whatever it was, it had them completely shaken up. I can imagine how they must have planned for snoopers in advance, sitting around a kitchen table and nerving each other. "Well, *listen, Luther--what'll we do if somebody comes around asking questions?*" "We'll handle it, Walt. After all, it's our town, we live here. The important things are all kept out of sight, and how would they know what questions to ask? Don't you worry about it, Walt. You just always let me do most of the talking, and I'll make sure they don't find out anything but what we want them to know." That was exactly how it had gone between them; it's the kind of conversation smart, decent men with a secret have held between themselves since time knows when. And it had worked, back when things were looser.

They were looking at each other like two men tied to opposite ends of a rope, and the middle of the rope hooked over a spur of rock on the side of a twenty thousand foot mountain.

"Oh. Sorry, Mr. Sherman," I said. "Artel, looks like you're going to have to start a new form."

"Yeah. Before I do that--Mr. Sherman, do you have very many seniles in your population? Will you require any special supplies--tranquilizers or that sort of thing?" Artel asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know," Sherman, said doggedly. "And Tully don't seem to do any harm, as long as you don't pay him any mind."

"We've been very lucky here," Koning said. He was beginning to get back to himself. He was talking a little fast, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes weren't completely relaxed. But he was doing a good job of recovering. "We're all healthy people here. Oh, once in a while somebody mashes his thumb with a hammer or something. But that's not anything that can't be taken care of. We live nice and quiet. It's good. When I look back on how it was in the old days, I've got to say we live better. That's a terrible thing, when you think of how this town used to have twenty-five thousand people in it and mighty few of them ready to be dead. But now we've got through the bad time, things are pretty good. For the live ones. Meaning no insult, maybe a lot better than they are for you outside."

He was looking steadily at Sherman. And he had come to something in his mind. He wasn't back on his heels any more. He was nervous, and he didn't like to trust his own improvisations any better than anybody else would. But he was going to go with it, whatever it was. He wasn't looking to Artel and me for his cues any longer. You could see that happening in him; you could hear it in his voice. "Look,

gentlemen," he said, stepping back and smiling. "I got taken up here in a hurry, and there's a couple of little things that I'd like to finish up, if that's all right with the two of you. I mean, this isn't any kind of an emergency. It's a surprise, but it isn't an emergency. So if you could excuse me for about a half hour, I could come back then and I'd have the rest of the day clear to talk to you. I'm sure Mr. Sherman can keep you entertained, and maybe fill you in on some of the background. Just the general stuff; I'll be back in time to give you the specifics. How would that be?" He grinned at Sherman with everything but his eyes. "Why don't you take them inside, Walt? Millie could maybe give them a little refreshment."

"Well, I don't know--" Sherman looked at Koning as if he had gone just as wild as Tully. "I mean, the house is a mess..."

It was sad, watching a man turn into a nervous housewife right in front of my eyes.

"No, you go ahead and take them inside," Koning said. "Don't worry about the house." He grinned again. "Relax, Walt! You're just not used to company," he chuckled.

Sherman nodded slowly. "All right," he said, "take your word on that."

His face went through a spasm; I think he started to grin back, and then realized immediately he couldn't make it stick. I didn't dare look over at Artel myself, for fear we'd lay ourselves open in the same way.

The crowd was livening up again; Koning's starting some kind of action was taking the dismay of Tully out of them. The kids, of course, hadn't stayed quiet for more than a minute. Some of them were back to playing catch, and some of the others had drifted on down the street after Tully--I didn't know whether on purpose after Tully or just happening to be headed in the same direction. I noticed nobody had tried giving Tully any catcalls or joshing, not even the kids.

It was a nice town; they were polite to their sick ones.

"It sounds like a practical idea," I said. "And I sure could use a cool drink, Mr. Sherman. How about you, Artel?"

Artel nodded. "Yes."

"Oh, well, sure," Sherman said. "No problem about that. Got a good well down by where the Nike site used to be. Deep, Government-dug well. Lucky that way, too, we were. Lots of good water."

"Well, that would be fine!" I said.

I could hear Koning sigh just a little bit. "Okay! So it's all settled--Doc here'll take care of you two fellows 'til I get back, and everything'll work out just fine." Koning turned and trotted down the steps. "Be seeing you!"

I waved a hand cheerfully after him. So did Artel. "Well," Sherman said. "Let's--let's go inside." So we did.

VII.

A blonde young woman of maybe twenty-five was waiting in the hall, carrying a baby over her shoulder, one arm around it and the spread fingers of her other hand supporting it over the fresh, clean diaper. There were a couple of other kids clustered around her; a girl maybe a year older than the baby, and a

boy in a T-shirt and corduroy rompers who was just under school age. He had little leather shoes on, scuffed up around the toes since the time this morning his mother had coated them with some of that polish that comes in a bottle with a dabber. The little girl had her arms around her mother's knee and her face buried in the side of her skirt. Sherman said: "This is my wife, Millie. And my kids. That's LaVonne, and Walt, and the baby'A blonde young woman of maybe twenty-five was waiting in the hall, carrying a baby over her shoulder, one arm around it and the spread fingers of her other hand supporting it over the fresh, clean diaper. There were a couple of other kids clustered around her; a girl maybe a year older than the baby, and a boy in a T-shirt and corduroy rompers who was just under school age. He had little leather shoes on, scuffed up around the toes since the time this morning his mother had coated them with some of that polish that comes in a bottle with a dabber. The little girl had her arms around her mother's knee and her face buried in the side of her skirt. Sherman said: "This is my wife, Millie. And my kids. That's LaVonne, and Walt, and the baby's name is Lucille. Millie, this is Mr.--" He looked over at me.

"Dorsey. I'm very pleased to meet you. This is my partner--"

"Loovan Artel. Loovan's his family name," Sherman said.

Millie Sherman nodded, looking at Artel. Her eyes were very big, and the comers of her mouth kept twitching. Finally she said, "Oh."

"It's all *right*, Millie," Sherman soothed.

"We just need a place to sit, Mrs. Sherman," Artel said gently. "Until Mr. Koning gets back."

"That's right, honey," Sherman said, throwing Artel a grateful glance. "Luther just asked me to give these men some refreshment until he gets back. He asked me to bring 'em in."

Putting the seal of authority on it seemed to buck her up, some. "Oh." She wet her lips. "Well, won't you come in?" She pulled the boy Walter out of the way and stood back against the wall. We were in one of those narrow foyer things, that runs through toward the back of the house and has doors opening off it into the main rooms, and a flight of stairs going up.

"Let's go straight on through to the kitchen. I'm sure you fellows don't mind," Sherman said.

"Not at all," Artel said, and we followed him toward the back of the house. I threw a glance into the living room as we went by. There were couches and a lot of chairs up against the walls, with a coffee table in front of each couch. There were books on the tables, bound in bright-colored cheap cloth. Novels.

The kitchen was big, with a chrome-legged table, wooden cabinets and a lot of chrome-legged chairs with padded plastic seats and backs. Next to the capped stub of a gaspipe coming up through the floor was a cast iron wood range, and in the sink was a big, galvanized iron pan with the washing water in it. The drinking water was in a regular office-type water cooler with a big glass bottle held upside-down in it. And in one corner, standing spindly legged, was a kerosene refrigerator. "Well, now, that's something," I said, nodding toward it. "You people are really starting to get straightened around here." Sherman's eyes followed mine. He looked at the refrigerator as if all hope were lost.

"I have to have it," he said.

"Oh? Are you a diabetic?" I said.

What happened to his face now was like nothing I could recognize, but if he had been made out of

strings, I could have heard them snap. The look he gave me was damn near unbearable; I might have been a cobra.

Without taking his eyes off me, he said to his wife: "Millie, I'm sure you and the kids have things to do elsewhere. I can take care of these gentlemen by myself. You go on, Millie. You go on, now."

Millie nodded and backed out of the room, taking the kids with her. The kitchen had a swinging door on it, and it swung shut.

"What do you mean, am I a diabetic? All the diabetics are dead."

"It's just that refrigerators and insulin go together in this house, Doctor," I said. "And before you tell me again you're not a doctor, any fool can see Koning doesn't care any more whether we find out or not. Artel, you figure his office is across the hall from that waiting room?"

"Uh-huh. I could smell the antiseptics."

"Look, Dr. Sherman, why don't you relax?" I said. "Koning told you that, and I'm telling you that. So you're getting it from both sides, and you might as well believe it. Let's sit down and just wait. We can talk if you like. Koning's obviously gone to do something."

"Town Council meeting, I guess," Sherman said desperately.

"I figured something like that. Take it easy. Doc--it's us that may have our heads in a noose. Artel, drift out there and see what his office looks like, will you?" Artel nodded and went out. I could hear Millie Sherman gasping out in the hall and Artel murmuring something reassuring that ended in "'scuse me, Ma'am, kids ..."

Sherman sank down in one of the kitchen chairs. He held his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees. "You had to bring one of them in with you," he mumbled.

I pulled another chair away from the kitchen table and sat down. "Well sure, Doctor. He's a United States citizen. At least where we come from he is, and he's got just as much right to walk these streets as I have."

"You don't realize what you're doing to us."

"No, I don't, except I know guilt when I see it. But it's a pretty good question who's doing what to whom."

Sherman's head came up fast. "What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Whatever we know, we'll know a lot more, and if we never go back to tell our Old Man about it, why that'll tell him something, too."

I started to talk very fast. I had him on the ropes, and win, lose or even, I was going to press that as long as Koning would let me. "What do you people think you're doing here, Sherman? Living in some little world of your own? You may think so, all fenced off behind a bunch of skeletons and burnt-out houses, but there's a whole goddamned world out there, and in the middle of the night sometimes you know it. This is just one town. *One* town, in a whole country. On a continent. On a world. We're not just dying out there--we're living and breathing, too. You think it's *fun* for me and Artel to come down here and

play patsy with you people? There's no time for that."

He was white and sweating. He was shaking his head back and forth. "No. No, this is a good town. You're not the only people we've seen. We've seen other people from outside. You're all sick--all of you. You're weak, and you're in pain. I've been watching the way you move, Dorsey. You treat your bones like glass. I can imagine what it's like out there. You lived through it--you were the lucky ones, and look at you! Your livers and your kidneys must be like old pieces of sponge. Your lungs are in rags. And maybe, maybe if you get halfway decent food, and enough rest, and enough time, you'll slowly get back toward what you were. But most of you will never make it. Your kids might--for those of you who've got the energy for parenthood, and those of you who can successfully transmit immunities to your offspring. What's your infant mortality rate, Dorsey? What's your live birth rate? Who takes care of your kids? Who educates them? Who keeps up the public sanitation? How many psychotics have you got?"

Artel came back into the kitchen. "All he's got in his layout is surgical stuff. He's a bonesetter. Just about the only medicines he has are aspirin, iodine and vaseline. Funniest doctor's office I've ever seen. Well, Koning told us. But it's no surprise they thought they ought to hide it." Artel got a chair for himself and sat down watching Dr. Sherman with a sleepy, unwavering expression. "I'm sorry your wife and children are so upset by me," he said. Sherman nodded blindly, not looking up from the floor.

"Boy's by my first wife," he said. "I married late. Always figured it would be too big a change in my life. Got older, changed my mind."

"You've been very fortunate," Artel said.

"I know it. There isn't another family in town with two survivors. You think I didn't know the odds, when I finally realized what we had on our hands? What do you think I wouldn't have done to save Mary and the boy both? It was hopeless in the hospital by then. I voted to dynamite the place, it was so bad. Didn't matter--if they'd all voted with me, there wasn't time nor sense or strength to do it. Man, you can know how to swim, but when the wave hits you the next thing you know you're smashed up against the shells on the shore. I came home and I barricaded this place. Had big pans full of carbolic acid, soaked rags in it and stuffed them in the windows. Had spray guns full of disinfectant. You could barely breathe in here. What good was it? I wasn't even thinking. We were all out of our heads. We were sick, and we were using it all up. When it started, we were using up the antibiotics as if we could always order another truckload in the morning. Had lab technicians--*technicians*--working up slides, and had all the doctors out on the floor. We did everything backwards. We couldn't believe--" Sherman held his head and laughed. "We couldn't believe what was going to happen. We couldn't act like we believed what was going to happen. I mean, if we'd let ourselves think about what was going to happen--"

He stood up quickly. "I never got you your water." He went to a cabinet over the sink and got out some glasses.

"We kept listening to the radios, telling ourselves somebody somewhere would announce treatments. I had a radio with me everywhere I went, in my shirt pocket. I listened to that radio night and day, had my pockets full of batteries. When I couldn't get stations any more, I kept it on anyhow--kept it on wanting to know if WRKO would get back on the air." He pushed the glasses clunking under the spigot of the water fountain.

"I wasn't listening for any announcement. I was just listening to the cities die. Every time a station went off the air, I'd say to myself 'There, you smart people at Massachusetts General. There, you fancy labs down at Johns Hopkins. There, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center--you couldn't find it either.' That's how we were--you remember how you were?" He came over to us and pushed the glasses into our hands.

"Here. Here." Water slopped on my wrist.

Sherman went back to his chair. He sat there looking at us. His hands turned the pipe over and over, and the ferocity had taken hold of him. "Luther wanted me to give you the background. All right, I'll give you the background. What do you think happens to the organization of a place like this? The water mains lead from a reservoir that belongs to a town fifteen miles away. What happens when they close the valves up there because they're scared they'll need it all to themselves? What happens to your food storage when your refrigeration goes? How much do you think we had stored around here, when we could always bring everything down from Newark in a couple of hours? What happens when you realize that's all there is, hah, and you're not going to bring any more from any place else, 'cause nobody's producing any more, nobody's packing it, nobody's putting it on trains? By God, they fought for it in the dark! They broke into houses where fat people lived, sometimes before and sometimes after they set fire to a block on account of pestilence.

"It's dead, it's dead out there," he said, pointing. "You came in through it. You saw it. You lived through it where you were, but you were in a goddamned metropolis with the rivers to scoop water out of and the warehouses jammed up. Do you know what we had to do to clear the site for that well you're drinking from now? They were dead! They were all dead, and we'd come crawling through the gutters, we'd come through three-hour journeys that took a block. We didn't clear them out. We--we as good as burrowed through them. We were twisted around them like snakes." He looked up. "Of course, it's all clean and neat now," he smiled. "Everything's clean and neat. This is a model community." He wiped out his eye sockets with the backs of his hands. There was sweat drenching his shirt under the arms.

"Drink your water," he said.

"Thank you," I said. I took a hearty swallow. "I gather you didn't save your Mary."

"No," he said bitterly, outraged at my manners. "I didn't save my Mary."

Well, I hadn't even intended for him to get some of my point. But it would have been nice if he'd been able to realize you couldn't buy anything with that story these days. They were always like that, when you contacted them. The loners--the ones we pick up in open countryside because they used to be farmers--would run around our town for days, telling their particular story over and over again.

It always took them a while to understand that nobody was listening. The communities we'd contact couldn't believe that the rest of the world was just like them. They all had this vision that theirs was the only town blighted, even though nothing that used power or fuel or the cooperation of large groups of people could be seen in the world any longer. We had all run screaming. We had all spent everything we had, trying to run, trying to learn an answer, trying to hide, trying to wipe out. You could only be glad the world's military was still shocked from what the air defense missiles had done to the incoming Klarr lifeboats, because if they'd been full of their usual spirit we would have found some excuse for unloading that stockpile on ourselves, too. The only special grief Ocean Heights might have would be from having that lifeboat land on their doorstep and provide them with five hundred-odd immediate centers of cross-infection instead of their having to wait their turn from the winds and the refugees. But I figured that silent building farther down canceled that excuse, too. And besides, Mary is a common name.

VIII.

"Look, Doctor," I said, "we've got cards from the United States government. You remember the United States. We obviously represent the return of some kind of social organization to the world. You see

us--you see what kind of shape we're in. You say you've seen other people. What's more, you can't tell me somebody in town doesn't know how to build a crystal set. There isn't much to pick up, but there's something. You're trying to tell me you're cut off, but you're not--you know what kind of shape the world's in, even if what you know is only little bits and pieces. We're sitting right here in your kitchen working on the little bits and pieces we know, and it adds up bad. It adds up real bad, Doctor, just from what you've given us. What's going on in this town?"

Sherman shook his head miserably. "I can't tell you," he whispered.

"You've been trying to," Artel said. "You're doing everything but putting it into words." Sherman's glance jerked over toward him and saw pity. I don't know whether he could tell that's what it was on a Klarr face or not. "Doctor, you have a great secret in this town. But you are its only sentry. It's possible to get as far as your house without being detected. And then you call attention to yourself by hammering on a gong. When you and Koning talk to each other in front of us, you make sure we notice every lie. You think Tully told us about you? We didn't need Tully for that. But it was you and Koning who told us Tully is important--you and Koning, and all your other neighbors and friends. When you tell us how things were in this town, you're apologizing in advance for what we'll know when we put all the pieces together." Sherman was going whiter and whiter. The wood of the pipe was creaking in his hands as he squeezed them and the skin slipped damply over it. "You couldn't fool anybody who's the least bit interested," Artel finished up, still gently. "You know that. You've always known that."

I put down my water glass and walked over to the refrigerator. "He marched us by the waiting room because it was smart not to let us sit there and figure out he was a doctor, so we wouldn't ask him any medical questions. He walked us right in here into the kitchen. Where the refrigerator is." I opened it.

Sherman cried out: "We couldn't get two! We could only find one, and it made sense to keep it in the kitchen!"

I nodded. "And there was a fuel problem, too," I said. I could afford to be understanding. I didn't have the foggiest notion yet what the hell he meant. "It's a hard world; we've got to economize."

I was looking through the refrigerator, and it was dark enough in there so that I was having trouble. There were a couple of heads of lettuce, wrapped in cellophane with the New York seal on them, and some leftovers in plastic-covered dishes, half a sausage...and, up close to the weak cooling coils, a half-pint cream bottle with a homemade rubber diaphragm stretched over its mouth.

I took it out and held it up to the light. It was three-quarters full of a just faintly yellow liquid with white clouds stirring around the bottom.

Sherman stared at it and me and Artel. Then he jumped up and made a lunge for it. He had his hand open, and he was trying to slap it away and smash it. His eyes were bulging. His face looked like it was a foot wide and made of chalk. "No, let me!" he panted as I ducked it out of his reach. "Please!"

First, I stepped back from him, so that he fell clumsily against the standing cabinet, and then as he put his hands down to catch his balance, I said: "All right," quietly, and held the bottle out. He straightened up, and I carefully put it into his hands. He stood looking down at it, and just as suddenly as he'd jumped up, tears began to fall on his shirtsleeves. Woebegone, he carefully put it back in the refrigerator and closed the door. He turned around and leaned his back against it. He took a long, gasping breath, and then he sniffed sharply. Well, anyone will when they're crying.

I looked over at Artel.

"That's the kind of setup they use when they want to measure out doses for injections."

Artel nodded. "He'd do his sterilization in here, on the stove." He began opening cabinet doors, and on the second try he found the leatherette-covered tin case with the syringes and the needles carefully nested. I turned to Sherman. "We've been in this town what--forty-five minutes? That's how long it took you folks to lead us straight to the wonder drug. Sure this is a good town." Sherman kept his eyes on the floor. He had shrunk inside his clothes. He was shuddering, and he was still weeping. I looked over at Artel. Artel shook his head--he couldn't tell what that stuff was either.

"That's it, huh, Doctor?" I asked. "The stuff in that bottle replaces all other kinds of medicines. You come into Dr. Sherman's office with, say, liver flukes, a bad heart and a broken arm. He sets your arm, and he goes back into the kitchen and comes back with a syringe full of this stuff and squirts it into you, and you walk out smiling, all cured. You come in with spots in front of your eyes, a roaring in your ears and a swelling in your armpit. Doctor gives you the needle, and six hours later you're dancing with your best girl. Doc, is that the way it is?"

"Don't make fun of it," Sherman whispered.

He was down to that. It was all he had left. We had broken him--well, no; the three of us together, and this town, and this world had broken him. That'll happen, if you let it, every time. Sherman was saying: "It's specific against Klarr-transmitted infectious diseases and allergic reactions. And it has broad spectrum applications in treating the older forms of infectious disease. It won't repair a damaged heart, no. But it reduces that heart's burden."

He looked at Artel and winced the way he would have if he were hit with a gust of windy rain. "It may be a panacea," he explained. "In a matter of hours after a three-cubic-centimeter injection, the subject is completely free of everything that can possibly be destroyed by an antibody. I'm--I'm trying to make myself clear to you. The human body reacts to the stuff by manufacturing counteragents which not only destroy it, but every other invading organism. At least, I've never seen the infectious disease that one dose isn't effective for. I--" He waved his hand in the air. "The population's too small for me to have seen examples of all the sicknesses that humans could get. But it's never failed me yet. And the reaction's nearly permanent. The only people we routinely need it for is the new babies. There's no disease in this town, Mr. Loovan." The tears were starting in his eyes again; not the big, steady running wetness on his face he'd shown before, but he had to keep blinking. "You see, the human body has its defense mechanisms. And this stuff stimulates them. Fantastically." He shook his head violently and turned to me, because Artel had kept looking at him deadpan.

"You can see it, Dorsey! You must know that the normal human being's body is constantly engaged in staving off all sorts of potential illnesses. At any time, a great deal of the human mechanism's functioning is directed toward the destruction of invading micro-organisms and the filtering and disposal of the resultant wastes. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you how vulnerable the organism is if it has been exhausted. And I don't have to tell you how debilitating even simple illnesses are; at some time in your life you must have had a common cold, or a reaction to an infected tooth, or a cut. Can you imagine how much energy was constantly being drained from your system by things as commonplace as that? Energy that could have gone to doing work or maintaining the growth and repair functions of your body?" He was shifting back and forth between the two of us now. We kept looking at him blankly because there wasn't any need to encourage him and we weren't planning to interrupt him. And he kept trying to get through to us--trying to get us to smile, or pat his hand and say. "It's all *right*."



"Can you imagine what the population of this town is like? It's free to devote full energy to life. There's none of that gray, dragging stuff they used to come in to me with in the old days, that I couldn't diagnose, and made them miserable, and I'd write tonics for. Do you realize how much tension has been wiped out of their lives? They're not nagged by a hundred little illnesses. They're not terrified by sudden stomach-twinges and mysterious rashes or coughing spells. They don't find themselves spitting or passing blood. They don't worry themselves into stomach ulcers, and they don't come down with nervous diseases. When you add that to the fact that they no longer have many of the old social tensions... Don't you see? It's like a miracle for them! It's like perpetual springtime--they're alive--they're vital. They don't tire as fast, they don't mope--"

"And they laugh all the time," I said. "Artel and I could see that; running and dancing and singing and clapping their hands when they saw us. Like a bunch of happy South Sea islanders in a book. Nature's Children."

Sherman ducked his head again. "They were pretty well off until you showed up," he muttered.

"No arthritis, Doctor?" Artel said. "No athlete's foot, no kidney stones?"

"I didn't say that," the doctor said. "If you had something like that before the Klarri came, there's nothing that can be done for you except to make you generally healthier. That helps." His head came up a little farther, "There is something interesting about that, though. I don't see any new cases starting. You can't tell with a sample this size, but it just may be we won't have any of that after this generation.

"There's a lot I don't know about it. What I've got does the job it has to. But I'm not going to pretend to you that my extraction methods are exact. I haven't got the time or equipment to isolate the precise effective fraction, whatever it is. I've got a bundle of stuff there, and some part of it does the job. The rest doesn't do any harm." He was starting to gather the little pieces of himself back together again. Talking shop was doing him good. Well, that had to be one of his reasons for talking shop.

"What does it do for cancer, Doc?" I asked.

"I think it prevents it. I know it doesn't cure it."

"That's fine, Doctor." I looked at him from a long way away. I had an idea I was about to smash him again.

I looked over at Artel. He had caught it in the doctor's choices of words. It was sad to see his face. "Doctor--where do you get this stuff?"

He had nearly made himself forget it. He had been talking, and talking, and all the time his mind had been putting the screens back up. He stared at me as if I'd belched in church, and then he took a little half step away from Artel; a little, sidling, sheepish step I'm sure he didn't know he was performing. "Extract it from human-infected Klarr blood," he said, his mouth blowing each word in its own bubble. Artel sighed and bowed his head.

I'd had my next question ready, and I was pretty sure of the answer to that one, too, but I had to stop and study him for a minute. Then I said. "And everybody in town knows where it comes from?"

Sherman nodded, two or three times, slowly. "All the adults. I *wish* you hadn't brought in Mr. Loovan."

"I think we'd better move, Artel."

He wasn't keeping all his mind on the spot we were in, but he nodded. "Yo." We pushed open the swinging door.

"Wait!" Sherman cried behind us. "If you try to run for it, they're *bound* to kill you."

Artel was moving quickly up the foyer. "We know that," I said over my shoulder. That kind of talk annoys me. I didn't need him to teach me my business. Sherman's wife and his kids were hanging over the bannister three-quarters of the way up the stairs, staring down at us. Artel hit the front door as hard as he could, slamming it back against the wall, and then kned the screen door open so that it spanged against the outside wall. The people standing around out there jumped. Well, that was the effect that he wanted.

"Good-by, Mister Boogeyman!" the little girl piped as Artel hit the veranda with his boots clattering. I went just as fast behind him, slamming both doors shut. Artel didn't slow; you never want to do that. I jumped the steps and picked up speed, so that we reached the crowd side by side. We went right by our bikes, picked the biggest man in the group, and stood with our toes practically on his. "Where do we find Luther Koning?" I barked in his face. The rest of the people were falling back. Artel and I were both glowering and obviously beside ourselves with rage. The man took a step back, and we took a step forward. Artel reached down and grabbed his belt. "Come on, you! You're fooling with the Government!" The man waved vaguely down the street toward the intersection.

"Right!" I said. "Let's go, buddy." Artel pushed the man back firmly, letting go of his belt, and the two of us swung down the sidewalk, marching side by side, our feet coming down regular as heartbeats, our faces grim, our arms swinging. Kids and housewives scattered out of our way. "You can't--!" somebody protested.

"Well, then, you run tell him," I said, and we kept going.

IX.

"Dorsey! Loovan!" Sherman shouted, coming down his veranda steps, his feet thudding across the lawn as he cut over to us. We kept marching. He came panting up to us. He was trying to keep up, but he lost speed as he turned to try to talk to us. I kept my eyes on the people down at the intersection; there were a fair number of them down there, and I saw one of them notice us coming and freeze.

"Dorsey!" Sherman panted. "You don't understand. It's not just--" He tripped over the cover of a water meter, stumbled, and lost pace. He came running up even with us again. "Loovan--" Then he realized he'd picked the wrong one to tell the rest of it to. "Dorsey! We were dying. We were too weak to move. We hadn't eaten in days. We hadn't eaten enough in weeks, and all that time we'd been burning with fever. My wife was lying dead upstairs. For three days. And I couldn't get up there. I had the boy in my office; on the examining table. I was lying on the floor. I couldn't reach him. I had him strapped down. He was crying. I couldn't reach him. We were all like that."

"So were we," I said. I had run out of patience with him entirely.

But Sherman wanted to make his point. I had been waiting for him to tell me where their captive Klarrs

were, and it seemed to me at the time that would be the only other interesting thing he could have left to tell us. Instead, he kept babbling on: "You weren't lost and cut off from the rest of the world! Do you know how bad the human animal wants to live? Do you know what it will do to keep alive? Do you know what it will keep trying to do, right up to the last minute? As long as it has its teeth and claws?"

I was listening for any footsteps coming up fast and determined behind us. I was paying most of my attention to that. There weren't any. We'd left them standing there. Now we were almost up to the intersection. The fourth corner was a big saloon-hotel thing, and I guess it was a town hall now, because I could see Koning and a bunch of other men come out quickly through the doors and stop dead, watching us. There was a grinning, jumping figure with them, pointing at us coming on and slapping his broomstick thigh, making the flapping cloth of his pants billow as if he had no bones at all.

"It was Tully!" Sherman puffed out. "There was a lot of Klarr-killing going on for a while. Then we got too weak, and we gave it up. But Tully wounded one someplace where they'd both crawled to die, I guess. Starving to death, both of them. Tully must have been just as far out of his head--just as far back to being a dying animal as you can get. You know what I mean?" he pleaded. "You know how Tully was? It was just him and this dying Klarr. It was Tully. It was Tully that was the animal. But it was Tully then that had sense enough to come and save me--and save little Walt--after he was back to being a man again." He barely got it out. "It was Tully who found out. I just refined his discovery. Made it nice and medical and sanitary. But you see how it is--they *can't* let the two of you go!"

Artel had stopped dead. He had turned to salt in the blink of an eye. "Move. Move." I said to him, "You've got to move," still looking straight ahead, stopping dead with him. Whatever we did, we had to do it together. "If you don't move, none of this gets back." We moved.

Now there were about fifteen or twenty people at the intersection. They were all men. They were wound up tight, moving their feet and hands back and forth. They stood on the corner in front of the hotel as we marched off the end of the sidewalk and across the street toward them.

Tully was bouncing and grinning at the crowd's left. He had a lot of energy; a lot of drive. You had to figure him for spunk. For him to be the historical personage he was, he had to have had the persistence to have haggled hot raw meat with loose teeth in a mouth full of open sores.

You won't often find that kind of grit, even in your really desperate person. Even so, the nearest man to him was drawn a little away from him. Like the others in the crowd, he was watching Artel and me, but he kept darting side-glances at Tully, too.

We walked up to Koning, who was trying to keep his face blank and was keeping it tense instead. I looked only at him; straight into his eyes. It was important to hit him before he could say or do anything. I said casually: "Well, it worked out the way you were hoping. Sherman cracked wide open and told us all about it. So you didn't do it. It's all out of your hands and off your mind."

Koning started to frown. "What do you mean by that?"

Artel Artel said, "Look, Mr. Koning," with his voice patient, "if you really didn't want it taken off you, you would have made sure to ask the supply trucks for some drugs now and then. Whether Doc wanted to deprive the poor sick outside world or not."

"Now you can just be mayor," I said. "That'll be a lot easier, won't it?"

"Well, we've got things to do, Mr. Koning." Artel said. "Let's go, Ed. That building's four blocks down and over to our right."

Sherman had been trying to catch his breath over to my right for the last few moments. He said: "I never--"

I gave him something that might pass for a smile. "We know where the lifeboat is, too, Dr. Sherman. And those over there." I waved my hand in the direction of the neat houses, off beyond the bulk of the hotel. "Well, you can see we have to open that casino building, Mr. Koning. Care to come along?"

Koning's jaw flexed a couple of times. He looked around, and once you do that, of course, you've lost it.

He took a deep breath. And then nodded hastily, looking back at the crowd. "All right. Okay."

Artel and I stepped out. We walked down the middle of the street, with Koning walking along beside us, and having to compromise between a casual walk and a trot, until he finally settled for keeping in step with us. Doc Sherman tagged along. One or two other people started to follow, and then the rest of them, and with the group that had slowly followed us down from Sherman's house, it made a respectable bunch. Tully had set out down the sidewalk. He was keeping pace with us the best he could. He kept trying to attract the attention of people who passed near him. I could hear him saying: "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" He said it to young and old, irrespective of sex. "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" I could hear it as a fading mutter in the background. People were looking at him and then looking away. They were dodging around him, and twitching their feet nearer the center of the street. Except for him, nobody was talking.

X.

In daylight, the building was painted green. Not new--from before. Artel and I trotted up the steps. Koning pushed himself ahead and unlocked the doors into the lobby. The crowd waited out in the street.

The lobby was dark and musty. It was floored in a checkerboard pattern of red and brown vinyl tiles with a black rubber runner laid down over them. There were office doors opening on the lobby, but Koning went ahead toward a flight of stairs leading to the left. "Lantern around here somewhere," he said.

"Never mind," Artel said, taking his flashlight out of his windbreaker. We went up the stairs with it whirring. At the top of the stairs there was another set of double doors. Koning unlocked those. The smell kept getting stronger.

There was some light coming in from one window near us. They had bricked up the rest from the inside. The entire second floor was one big room from here on back, and the open window was on this side of the row of bars and cyclone fencing they had put in from one wall to the other. Artel shone his light in through the bars.

We could see six iron cots with mattresses on them. There were two Klarri lying on two of them. The mattresses were turned back and rolled over on three others. There was another Klarr sitting on the edge of the remaining bed. He was wearing what was left of his shipboard clothes, I guess.

"All right, unlock that," I told Koning, pointing to the pipe-and-cyclone-mesh gate that went from floor to ceiling. Some master craftsman had worked hard and expertly, custom-building that. Koning nodded, went over to it and trembled the key into the lock. He pushed in on the gate, and it swung back. He turned around and looked at Artel and me expectantly.

"I don't think anything much is going to happen to you, Koning," I said. "We don't mess with communities if we can possibly help it. We all had to live through a bad time, and we all found out things about ourselves."

Koning nodded.

"We didn't find out what you found out. I'll give you that," I said.

"But that was just luck," Artel said; he took a deep breath before each phrase. "Just your luck. Instead of somebody else's, somewhere else."

Koning shook his head. "Listen--that Tully--

"I'm sure Artel understands," I said. "After all, you couldn't do anything to Tully."

Koning said bitterly: "The son of a bitch kept reminding us and mocking us. He'd ask us if our arms were sore from Doc's needle."

"I wish you'd go away," Artel told him.

Koning nodded again and went around us to go back down the stairs. He went down quickly, and then we could hear his footsteps in the lobby, and the sound of him going out through the double doors outside. He was not a bad man. Not the sort who would eat the flesh of a Klarr, no matter how hungry. Just the sort who would take a Klarr's blood to make medicine out of it. And take. And take.

As soon as it was all quiet, Artel began to tremble. He shook like a leaf. He put one hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Oh, Ed."

"Easy, easy, easy."

"Chicken punks," Artel muttered.

The Klarr who'd been sitting on his bed had gotten up. He came shuffling forward, peering ahead.

"Artel, I don't see any reason why it might not work the other way. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see why Klarr-infected human blood fractions wouldn't do it for your people."

"They didn't try that, though, did they?" Artel said with his eyes shut.

"Well, they couldn't," I said. "They needed these Klarri to stay infected."

Artel nodded. "I understand that "

The other two Klarri had noticed something was different and had turned over on their beds. I speak a pretty good version of Klarr. "Hey," I said to them. "We're policemen. You can come out."

"What are we going to do with them, Ed?" Artel said.

"Move 'em into one of the houses. I'll stay with them until you send a truck down to pick them up. If you take a bike out to the Camden route, you'll probably be up at the Old Man's maybe late tonight, tomorrow morning for sure."

Artel nodded. "All right." He put his hand back on my shoulder as the white-haired Klarr came closer, got to the gate, and stood in it with one hand on each upright, leaning forward and looking out at us.

"I am Eredin Mek, Sub-Assistant Navigating Officer. My companions here are very weak and may be frightened. Could one of you go in and speak to them, please?" He came closer.

"Go ahead, Artel," I said, and he ducked through the gate and walked quickly toward the back of the cell.

"Is it possible to go outside?" Eredin asked me.

"Certainly," I said.

"I'd like that."

We walked together to the stairs, and then, with him putting one hand on the bannister and the other over my shoulders, we got down the stairs and out into the lobby. I could see the crowd milling around outside, and for a minute I thought we were in trouble again, but their backs were to the glass doors. Then we got out through those, and stood at the head of the steps. Tully was across the street. He was standing on the sidewalk, and he was saying something to the people. They were ducking their heads away from him.

Tully saw Eredin and me. He pointed over at us. "Hey, critter!" That made them raise their heads. They all turned, and when they saw Eredin leaning against me, they sighed like an extra wave. Sherman and Koning were in the middle of them, pale. They could all see what it meant, the Klarr up there on the steps with me, stinking and sick, but out. Only Tully didn't see what it meant to him. He thought he still had something going for him.

He laughed. "Hey, critter! I believe you're even scrawnier than me! What's the matter--ain't we been feedin' you right?" He looked around for his effect.

"Who is that man?" Eredin muttered, peering, groping like any sensible person will when he's weak and is in a world he doesn't understand; like somebody senile. "What's he saying?"

Klarr is a language that made my answer come out: "He is the savior of their tribe."

"Yah!" Tully was crying out. "Yah, ya bunch of needlepushing arm-wipers--"

"Ah, God!" Sherman groaned and turned and rammed back through the crowd toward Tully. Then they were all as if they were being yanked on strings. They clustered suddenly around the squirrel-checked man in the green sunshade. I could see Koning's face. The veins were standing out; his mouth was wide open, and what was coming out of him and all of them was what you might hear if all the lovers in the world were inside one big megaphone. The people at the back of the crowd tried to push in. The whole

mass of them fell against a tall hedge.

Eredin looked up at me, squinting, his eyes watering; there had to be a lot of things he couldn't know the reasons for. "They--they kept taking our blood," he complained.

"I know," I said. I patted him on the shoulder.

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