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Falling Toward Forever **by Gordon Eklund**

CHAPTER ONE

Despite the brutal, bristling heat that infected the savannah from dawn to dusk, the nights often turned rapidly chilly. A cold wind whipped gently across the flat, desolate plain, as Calvin Waller patiently waited for the campfire to spring sufficiently to life before joining the other men crouched around the orange flames. Waller sat with his arms hugging his chest, trying not to shake or shiver. The moon, a thin crescent, hung low in the sky, while the stars burned with a splendor impossible to equal in any of the supposedly civilized centers of the world. The nearest significant human habitation was a hundred miles from here.

"Would you care for something more to eat?" asked the stout, heavily muscled black man who crouched nearest to Waller. He offered his tin plate.

"No, not me, thanks."

"The reason I ask," said the black man, "is because I wonder. Does it affect you the same as it does me? Each time, before I enter battle, my stomach grows very nervous, tense."

Waller did not recognize this man. He wore the tattered combat fatigues and the high filthy boots of all of them. He could just as easily have been another. "I'm not afraid, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, no, not afraid. Just tension. I meant nothing else."

"I'm just not hungry"

"The colonel, once when I talked to him, he says you are never used to it."

"He may be right."

"Especially the killing. We are never used to that, are we?"

"I don't know why not." Waller felt himself growing angry. Why wouldn't this man shut up? "Isn't it what we're here for? Look at that gun you're wearing. What's it for? Killing, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry if I have offended you," said the man, but he sounded more amused than apologetic.

"I'm not offended." Waller started to turn away, but the man came with him. His spoken English was excellent, if stilted. Most of the guerillas spoke French, if anything.

"The reason I ask these questions is not wholly for myself. Your presence here is an enigma to all of us."

"I'm not the only white man who's ever fought with you."

"No, but the others were here for one of two reasons. It was either the money or it was the ideology. Tell me, then. Which is it with you?"

"Neither."

The man smiled, his teeth made bright by the reflecting firelight. "Then you must see why it is so difficult for us to accept your presence."

"The colonel seems satisfied. Shouldn't he know?" The colonel, in fact, sat among them tonight. With the other officers, he squatted beside another, somewhat larger fire.

"The colonel is an excellent soldier."

"I never said otherwise."

"But neither have you said why you are here."

"For one reason," said Waller. "I'm a soldier. When I was eighteen, my country sent me to fight in a war. I'm twenty-six now but fighting is all I know. I tried other things and couldn't do it. So I came here. It's the only war available. It keeps me busy."

"And our beliefs—they mean nothing."

"No."

"But why choose our side? The insurgent side? Wouldn't you be safer fighting for the government?"

"I decided a long time ago that I don't like governments."

"Not even your own? They are not supporting us, you know."

"Most especially my own." In spite of the cold, Waller stood and backed away from the fire. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm tired."

"Of course." By his smile the man clearly indicated he didn't believe a word of it. "Perhaps we can talk some other time."

"I hope so." Clutching his rifle, Waller went away, stepping cautiously across the dark land to the place where his bedroll was waiting. A few of the other men had also retired but Waller would have bet—considering what was to occur tomorrow—that nobody was sleeping yet. He crawled between the blankets, covering himself from neck to toes. The wind continued to pour across his exposed face. He uncovered his hands and quickly lit a cigarette. The smoke failed either to calm or warm him. Maybe the man was right. Maybe he didn't like the fighting—or the killing. He wasn't afraid—he had never been that—but he didn't much like it, either. There were times when he wouldn't have minded waking up at home in bed.

Not that he had a home. Not unless you wanted to call it simply the United States of America and get no more specific than that. He had been born there—years and years ago. He

remembered nothing of the place, except that it was a long way from here. Home was a place, when they talked of Africa, you envisioned Tarzan and his apes, a wet jungle, raging charging lions, frenzied native dancers. It was nothing like this: a flat, arid, bleak stretch of savannah waste. Or the dreadful dry heat that sucked the water whole from your body. Or the tall, handsome natives—devout Moslems, all of them. Or— a sight he would never forget—the naked, big-bellied, starving children standing in front of their empty, death-ridden huts. No, home was a place where some people owned more food than any one man could eat in a lifetime. Home was a place to be avoided—and despised. The six months he had spent there last year—the first such months in seven years—had been plenty enough to last him a lifetime. He would never go back.

And if he ever did, they would surely jail him. He was a traitor now.

And he liked it better here. The men respected him— even the one who had questioned him tonight—and he respected them. What else mattered?

A jagged shadow loomed over him. Instinctively, he reached for his rifle.

"It's me!" cried a voice.

"Oh." Waller relaxed. "It's you."

"Yes." The shadow crouched down, becoming a man. "I wished to say I regretted offending you before."

"I told you I wasn't offended."

"May I have one of your cigarettes, then?"

"Sure." Waller flipped a cigarette at the man. "By the way, what's your name? You forgot to tell me."

"It is Ahmad. One of my grandfathers was once a king of Songhai." He said this last as though it was a necessary part of introducing himself.

"Then is that why you're here? You want to regain the lost throne?"

"Oh, no," Ahmad said hastily. "My country is done with kings for all time."

"I hope you're right."

"But that is not what I came to tell you."

"I thought you wanted to apologize."

"Yes, that—but also I wished to warn you."

"Warn me? Of what?"

"Of the fact that, tomorrow when we fight, I will be assigned to lead my squad upon your right flank. I wanted you to know I intend to avoid you as much as possible. If I see you coming near, I will choose to run. If you are in trouble, I will not help."

Waller ground the smoldering stub of his cigarette against the dry earth. "I seem to have turned you off."

"It is because I feel you are a dangerous man, Waller. If you do not fear death, then I fear you. You are seeking death; you wish for it to come.

"That's ridiculous. Who do you think you are?"

"I have received university training in the science of psychology. In Paris."

"I think you ought to take some graduate studies." Waller said weakly.

"I just wanted you to know. You are a fascinating man, Waller, but a very dangerous man. I will see you again when we have won the battle."

"I hope so," Waller said.

"As do I," Ahmad agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

Before morning the colonel slipped away to rejoin the main regiment near a small insurgent village some twenty miles distant. So it was Captain Malik, a good officer, who would be leading them into battle today.

On the surface, their mission seemed little more than routine. It was Waller's first action since joining the company but that didn't make it any different. Addressing his men shortly after dawn, Captain Malik, speaking good French, called it just that: routine. The outpost they were hitting was an old walled village, once a French fortress. The present occupying force of government troops was not a large one and, for the most part, they had always stayed safely hidden behind the shelter of their stone wall. The colonel had let them alone in the past. Now he needed their weapons. Various rumors claimed the outpost had recently received a large shipment of modern American automatic rifles. The only conceivable obstacle, said Captain Malik, to a smoothly functioning mission was that stone wall circling the village. It was eight feet high and kept in a state of good repair. But the element of surprise would work against that, Captain Malik believed. It would even the odds or tip them slightly in favor of the insurgents. Waller wasn't so sure. The element of surprise, he thought, was just another way of trusting to good luck.

He was given a squad of six men to lead. Captain Malik took each squad leader aside and explained in careful detail exactly what would be expected once the wall was scaled. Waller listened carefully, preferring to leave nothing to chance. Then they marched, moving swiftly and neatly across the flat, parched landscape. Three hours passed while they walked. The sun rose hurtling through the empty sky, burning the life from everything it touched. Waller noticed Ahmad at the head of the squad to his right. They nodded once to each other but did not speak.

As soon as the first faint glimpse of the fortress village appeared at the northern horizon, Captain Mahk ordered everyone to get down. Now he spoke more re-vealingly of their

mission. Among the troops stationed inside the village, the insurgents had a friend. At exactly noon, this man would open the rear gates. Four squads would attack through there, while the remaining four would wait in front. Once the government force went to protect its exposed rear, these men would scale the front wall.

The squad Waller led was one of those assigned to the front. He knew it would be tough here, though maybe not so tough as at the rear. Waller and his men crawled forward. The landscape failed to provide the most meager protection. They crawled on their bellies till the front wall of the village was less than a hundred yards away. Waller could see men moving up on the wall. He took two of his men, the most proficient marksmen, and told them to train their rifles on the wall. "As soon as we move, I want you to start shooting. Don't let them stand up if you can help it. If they do, we may be gone."

It seemed like a half-hour, but was probably much less, when the sound of a single rifle shot reached his ears. It came from the back of the village. He signaled his marksmen to be ready. He assumed a crouching position himself. Another shot sounded—then another—then a massive burst. Waller waved at his men. The other squad leaders were doing the same. In a mass, the men rushed the hopefully vulnerable wall.

Gunfire greeted them the moment they showed themselves, but it was sporadic and not well aimed. Waller lost only one of the men behind him. He ran cautiously, not eager to be the first to reach the wall. The man, when he did arrive, died swiftly. So did the two men following. But the next went up and over the wall. Waller jumped, too. He had his rifle strapped to his shoulder and both hands free. He gripped the top of the wall and pulled. The soft rock crumbled beneath his grasping fingers. He kicked, leaped, rolled. A narrow walkway caught him on the opposite side of the wall. Below in a courtyard lay a half-dozen dead men. Only one was an insurgent. Cheered by this, Waller drew his rifle and began firing. By this time, more than a dozen insurgents had scaled the wall. With Waller, they crouched upon the walkway, firing below. The noise of answering gunfire was fierce but Waller noticed few bullets striking near. He guessed

that much of the apparent clamor was actually emanating from the rear of the village. He could see high, black puffs of smoke rising from there. He thought it was time to move.

Jumping down from the walkway, he urged the remainder of his squad to follow. They crossed the open courtyard quickly and then began edging carefully forward through a host of scattered wooden huts. His assigned task was to reach the store of weapons and guard them from deliberate sabotage until the fortress could be secured. The weapons were kept in a stone hut near the middle of the village. The closer he brought his men to this point, the more sniper fire they met. He lost a second man and a third. Many of the huts seemed occupied now. He tried to stay clear of the windows.

There wasn't time to flush them out. All he could do was hurry and hope.

He lost another man.

At last he thought sure he had found it. The hut was made of stone and the door was a thick metal barrier. He stationed his remaining two men one on each side of the door. Then he fired at the lock. He pumped a dozen bullets into the door, clanging and ringing, without the least effect. Suddenly, the door sprang open. "Get down!" he shouted flopping into the dust.

But the two men with him were eager. While bullets rattled the dust near his head, the men dashed through the door. Waller shrugged, stood up, and followed them cautiously.

By the time he passed through the door, the room directly behind was empty of any life. There was a dead man—one of his. From a second dim room in the back, the sound of gunfire continued. Waller darted forward and threw himself against the wall beside the open door. He dropped his rifle and raised his pistol, peeping around the corner.

It was too dark in there to see well after the bright sun outside. He thought he saw a body—no, two—upon the floor. More clearly, he made out, stacked against the rear wall, piles of crates and boxes. The weapons. So he had found the right place.

But could he go in to claim them? Unable to see, he tried listening. He thought of other places, other times, acquiring patience. He watched the door behind him but no one entered. If there was anyone in that room, he wanted to lure them out. Pop them off one at a time. It was the only way.

But no one came out.

Finally, Waller sensed that it was past time to move. Until the very end, he kept his ears poised for any disturbing noise. He went around the corner and darted through the doorway.

Inside the room, he glimpsed a man. Soldier. He was armed, aiming. Without forethought, Waller lifted his pistol, dropped to a knee, and fired. The man screamed and his gun flew up. Something hit Waller from behind. A bullet cracked his arm. Clutching the pistol, he spun around.

Crouched in a corner he discovered his assailant. A woman. A young white woman with blond hair and a pretty face. She wore khaki desert garb but was not anything like a soldier.

From the look in her eyes, he guessed she was as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

She was pointing a pistol right at his face.

"Don't shoot," he said, aiming at her chest. "Move a muscle and I'll have to kill you."

She frowned and made an ugly sound deep in her throat. He saw her hands tighten around the gun. He didn't want to shoot but neither did he want to die. Someone was shouting his name from behind. "Waller, don't! Waller, drop—!"

Startled, the woman fired. Her bullet went wide, piercing the wall and ricocheting wildly.

He got ready to shoot himself.

But he never did. What happened next he didn't understand at all. The world jumped. It was as if someone had jerked a rug

out from under it. The world jumped and he fell. Down, down. Down into forever.

CHAPTER THREE

Calvin Waller first awoke to a sight he had last seen so many weeks before that he wouldn't believe his eyes. He shut them. Blinking rapidly, shaking his head, he finally dared to look again. The sight hadn't changed. There above his head, drifting gently in the breeze, hung a bright patch of thick greenery. No, no, this just couldn't be. A green tree in the savannah—impossible.

He sat up and saw, standing beside him, a massive green pine tree.

Nor was that all. He turned his head. There was another tree, and another, and another. This was a forest. The heavy green foliage nearly hid the sun and sky from view. The ground was covered everywhere with fallen needles and leaves. He had awakened in the middle of a forest. But that just could not be.

Then the pain struck him. Wincing, he glanced down, seeing the jagged hole torn in his shirt, the bloody wound exposed beneath. Tenderly, he examined his arm. The blood had dried. He must have been out cold for some time. The wound itself did not appear too dangerous, a hole in the flesh. He would have to have it tended to. But where? Was there a doctor in this forest? Or anyone?

He made himself stand. His legs wobbled but finally held him. Trying to walk, he staggered like a drunk. He reached the trunk of the big pine tree and dropped there. The pain swept over him. Moaning gently, he waited for it to subside.

He decided to survey his present situation. Wherever he was, he definitely seemed to be alone. His ammunition belt was full and that was a good sign but his guns—both the pistol and the rifle—were nowhere to be seen. His canteen was full. He took a drink. The water was warm and flat but not unbearable. He poured a few drops on his wound but chose not to waste any more. He didn't have any food. The company's supplies had been

left behind at the original camp.

So what now? He tried to consider the available possibilities as carefully as possible. They seemed to break down into two general categories: either he could go or he could stay.

After a long moment's consideration, he decided to stay. He was too weak to walk far and, besides, the main question now facing him seemed to be trying to figure out exactly where he might be. Someone must have brought him here—maybe they would come back and tell him. If not, then what? It just didn't feel like any part of Africa he knew. A pine forest, where the air was cool, damp, almost cold. Set down without preconceptions and he might have guessed this was Oregon or Washington or some secluded place on Vancouver Island. But that just couldn't be. That was thousands and thousands of miles away. He decided to put the question aside. He couldn't answer it now. He would have to wait till later—when he knew more.

But, even ignoring that, a more difficult question remained. Wherever he was, how had he come to be here? Who or what had brought him—and why? He tried to stretch his mind backward, tried to remember, but no matter how much he strained, the last memory he could reconstruct was when he was about to shoot that woman.

Maybe she had shot him. Could that be it? He was dead—in heaven? Strangely, the idea seemed to have some appeal to it but it was one he was forced to dismiss. If he was in heaven, then why was he wounded, and if he was dead, then where was the wound that had killed him?

So he accepted the fact that he was alive. Beyond that, he could proceed no farther. So he didn't. Settling against the tree trunk, he prepared to wait. For anything. For whatever happened next. He was sure something would—it must.

And something did. Only a short time later, in the woods to his left, a twig snapped. He sat up with a start and heard the sound again. Silently, he crawled away, slipping behind the tree trunk. Holding himself poised, he peered surreptitiously into the forest, awaiting his first view of whoever was approaching.

The crackling twigs came nearer. The forest shuddered with approaching footsteps. They struck slowly now, with caution. The birds fell silent. The insects ceased humming. Waller was alone with this unseen stranger. He was close now, very close.

Then the footsteps stopped. They seemed to hesitate, then waver. The footsteps were going away.

Waller jumped painfully to his feet. He wasn't about to let the man come this close, then wander away. He hurried to keep the footsteps behind him. He found a trail and huddled in the bushes there. The footsteps kept coming. He couldn't see. When the footsteps were even with where he was hiding, he jumped out. He grabbed for the man's arm, caught it, jerked it behind his back, and pulled up.

"Stay right where you are—freeze."

The stranger disobeyed, struggling. "Let go of me— who do you think you are?"

Waller thought he had passed beyond the point of surprise but the sight of this woman did succeed in startling him.

She was the same blonde, thin young woman who had shot him back in the stone hut.

He let her go.

Spinning around, she slapped him solidly on the cheek.

"Haven't you hurt me enough already?" Waller said, indicating his wounded arm.

"Oh," said the woman. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be. Just tell me this: what did you bring me here for?"

She frowned and looked hurt. "I was just going to ask you that myself," she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

One of the good things about living in a forest was the ease with which firewood could be gathered before nightfall. Waller ignited the blaze with a handful of dry grass and one of the matches he had happily discovered deep in a pocket. The fire rose quickly toward the darkening sky. They were sitting in an open cleared space between the trees.

With the fire safely lit, Waller settled back and turned to the woman. Before he could speak, she frowned sourly and said, "If you think I'm going to sit out here all night long, you're nuts."

"Do you plan on taking a stroll?" he asked.

"I don't know what I want to do. I know I'm thirsty and I'm starved. That water you've got is dreadful and I haven't eaten a bite all day." So far, she had willingly revealed little more than that. Her name, she had admitted, was Sondra Wyler. She was an American. Waller had also told her his name.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," he said.

"Then do you mind if I help myself?" She had also continued to claim total ignorance as to where they were and how they had got here.

He smiled. "Not at all. If you want to go, then go. I promise not to twist your arm."

"You want me to go out there?" She gazed in horror at the surrounding forest. "Alone? Unarmed?"

"It's your choice."

"I think you're mad."

He laughed. "I think you are if you expect me to go out there."

"You're afraid." She smirked. "That's what it is— you're a coward. What is it you find so scary?"

"The same things you should fear: the ones I don't

understand."

"You don't understand any of this?"

"No, I don't. Do you?"

She shook her head wearily. "No."

"Then our best bet is to sit right here, at least until morning. Who knows? With a fire, maybe somebody will drop by and spill the whole story and we'll discover it's really something simple after all. I don't think we have to worry about food. In a woods like this, there must be plenty of wild things to eat—roots and berries, if nothing else."

"But you don't know where we are." She seemed suddenly to think he should.

"I don't think we're in Africa." This was the first time he had admitted this—even to himself."

"But we have to be. How else could—?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. In fact, I don't even think it's worth worrying about. Why don't we talk about something else instead?"

She smiled suspiciously. "I ought to warn you I'm trained at hand-to-hand combat. I can break your back with my little ringer."

"I don't think that will be necessary. Why don't you tell me—let me see—why don't you tell me what you were doing in that village?"

She pointed to his arm. "Shooting you, of course."

"I know. Before that, I mean."

"My father is a botanist. He works for the UN. We were here as part of the famine relief corps. All we wanted to do was—" Suddenly, she broke off. Waller saw, to his amazement, that she was crying.

He started to approach her, then thought better than that. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

She looked at him with wide red eyes. "It's just that— well, my father. He—he never harmed anyone in his life. Do you happen—he had left the village about an hour before you came—do you know what happened to him?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, I thought your people—they didn't—"

"No. We aren't concerned with UN people. They may be stupid but they're not dangerous. I'm sure your father is all right. If he isn't, it wasn't us that did it."

"At least my father is trying to help people. I don't think you should call him stupid."

"Help? How?"

"By teaching the farmers how to grow high yield crops upon their land. By teaching them that modern—"

"Isn't that rather the hard way?" said Waller. "It seems to me, if people want to eat, there are better ways than charity. How about seizing control of their own country's resources?"

"Don't tell me you believe your own propaganda?"

"I was willing to die for it."

"Then you should be willing to think about it, too. No government, whether of the people or not, is powerful enough to control the world's climate. That's what caused this famine—nothing else."

"But other things have made it worse. Famine or not, there's no good reason for people to starve when others have more than they need."

"But does killing help, either?"

He smiled. "Sure it does. Fewer mouths to feed."

"Now I know you're joking. And you're disgusting, too. How can you even pretend to have ideals? You're just a hired killer—like Al Capone."

"A much cheaper one. How much do you think an insurgent private makes in a week? In a year?"

"I don't care. Besides, that just makes it worse. If you're going to slaughter innocent people, at least don't do it for free."

"I don't think I've ever met a really innocent person."

"My father was."

"And presumably still is. Don't make him dead before his time."

"Well, I just wish I knew. One way or the other. I'd like to know."

"And so would I. I'd like to know a lot of things." Waller waved at the high, dark trees surrounding them. "But we agreed not to worry about that. Look, tell me something else, If your presence in the village was purely innocent, then what were you doing in that room?"

"Hiding. They told me to go there."

"Who?"

"The commander himself. He said it was the safest building in the village."

Waller laughed. "He really said that?"

"Yes."

"But he forgot to add it was also the building we were attacking. Didn't you notice the guns?"

"All those boxes?"

"Yes."

"I never realized... he didn't tell me... you mean he sent me in there deliberately to get killed?"

"No, I doubt that. I imagine he was simply being protective. Seeing you in there might make us hesitate a moment."

"Well, I did help them. Look at your arm."

"Yes," he said, "you did a good job."

"Why shouldn't I? Look, I thought you were trying to kill me."

"And I thought you said you were innocent."

"I was."

"Then I wouldn't have hurt you."

"I—" she suddenly smiled, relaxing "—I know that now. I'm even sorry I did it. Shot you. I guess I must have panicked. Can you blame me? I'd never seen anyone killed before."

"No, I can't blame you. I'm even very glad I didn't kill you as I was going to. I suppose that should make us friends of sorts, both being so glad. Look, it must be late. Why don't you rake up a pile of leaves and try to sleep?"

"What about you?!"

"I'll stand watch."

"I'll help."

"No." From her expression he could tell she wasn't about to be shunted aside. "I'll tell you what. When I get tired, I'll wake you."

"Okay. But don't wait too long. All right?"

"Sure."

She began, after his suggestion, gathering leaves and pine

needles from which to make a bed. He watched in silence. After lying down, she said, "Good night," and was asleep in an instant.

Throughout the long cold night, Waller stood a careful, cautious watch. He left the woman's side only to step briefly into the woods to gather additional firewood. He never moved to wake her.

A vague glimmer of golden light pierced the eastern trees when, past the crackling fire, Waller heard the patter of footsteps approaching through the trees. They sounded close—very close. This second intruder, whoever he might be, was far more practiced at stealth than Sondra.

Hugging a big stick, Waller crept away from the fire and slipped softly into the woods.

Then he stopped—and waited.

CHAPTER FIVE

Waller stood poised behind the comforting shelter of a thick tree trunk and watched the man with the rifle who was standing above the sleeping Sondra. The man seemed more confused than amazed at his discovery of the girl and, reaching forward with the point of his weapon, prodded her awake.

Sondra, seeing the strange man looming above her, immediately screamed in mortal fear.

The man backed coolly away, holding his rifle steady. "Shut up!" he said, bluntly.

But Sondra kept screaming.

Waller decided it was time to show himself. With his hands cautiously raised, he emerged from the forest. "Ahmad," he said calmly, "it's good to see you again."

Ahmad spun around, gripping his gun. This time his dark, smooth face did reflect his inner amazement. "Waller! Whatever

are you doing here?"

"At the moment, watching you," said Waller.

"And who is this?" Ahmad indicated Sondra, who had at last stopped screaming.

"Didn't you see her? In the room with me? I was going to kill her and you told me not to."

"You didn't seem to be listening."

"She's alive, isn't she?"

"Are you certain? Are you certain about any of us?"

"Not certain, no." Waller came over to the fire, dropped upon the ground, and thrust out his hands toward the flames. "I don't suppose you have any other idea of what might be going on."

"Nothing," Ahmad said. He sat down, too. "I was hoping you might know."

Sondra would not permit Waller to reply. With Ahmad safely seated upon the ground, she seemed to have recovered some of her past vigor. She turned her rage upon Waller, screaming, "You left me here with him alone! What kind of man are you? When you heard him coming, you crawled into the woods. You're nothing but a—"

"Oh, he's friendly," Waller said. "Ahmad is a hired killer, like me, but a friendly one."

"I don't think it's funny." She trembled in her anger. "You didn't know who it was. He might have been anyone."

"But he turned out to be just poor, sweet Ahmad, peaceful as a butterfly. He's already saved your life once. I think you ought to thank him for that."

"I'll thank him, but not you. You coward."

Waller easily shrugged off the insult—only one with a measure

of truth might hurt him—and turned his attention deliberately back to Ahmad. "Well, how about it? We ought to share stories. You tell us how you got here, then we'll tell you."

Ahmad nodded. "I must begin at the beginning then."

"Where else?"

"The beginning is the feeling that I never trusted you, Waller."

"A good beginning." This time smiling was difficult. "Filled with the promise of things to come."

Ahmad went steadfastly on: "I always expected that you would commit some foolish act to harm our entire cause. As you know, my squad was assigned to assist you in securing the weapons. Yet, when we arrived, I discovered that you had already entered the hut."

"There were snipers outside. It would have been stupid to wait."

"Still, you disobeyed an order and that seemed only to confirm my past suspicions."

"It was necessary," Waller said sharply.

"I will not argue that point. The fact is that, from within the building, I heard gunfire. Taking one of my men, I entered cautiously. In the second room, I discovered you with your pistol pointed at this woman. I shouted a warning. You did not obey. I reached for my rifle to shoot you down but, as I did, the room seemed to collapse into darkness. It was a puzzling sensation. I felt I was physically falling. A nerve gas? I thought. I must have lost consciousness. I awoke here, in this forest. It was sometime yesterday afternoon."

"You were alone?" Waller asked.

"Yes."

"Have you seen anyone since?" This was Sondra, speaking

with hope.

"No. Upon awaking, I quickly set to exploring. When night came, I climbed a tree. This morning I spotted your fire and came to investigate."

"And you've seen no one?" Sondra asked again, though with less hope than before.

"No one alive."

She started. "Or dead?"

"At times yesterday I discovered certain indications that men had been here. Trails marked by hand. A few campfires, old and burned out. Also, I found a skeleton."

"Long dead?" asked Waller.

"No, recent. Within a few days. It was difficult to tell. Most of the flesh had been removed—and the skin."

"Carrion eaters?"

"No, men."

"Not cannibals?"

"Around the campfires, I also found various human bones."

Sondra made a painful, gagging noise deep in her throat.

"Then where can we be?" said Waller, ignoring her.

"Not Africa," Ahmad said, firmly. "In spite of your American fiction, it is not true that cannibalism is a common practice on my continent."

"Nor is it in very many places." Waller shook his head, pondering his confusion. "And this isn't New Guinea or the Amazon. Tell me, this body, could you learn anything from that?"

"The hair was blonde. A white man, I would guess. And

tall—six and a half feet."

"Anything else but the body? Clothing? Jewels? Weapons? Tools?"

"I'm afraid I didn't stay long enough to investigate."

"Coward?" asked Waller, mocking Sondra more than Ahmad.

"Careful."

"Then I think you ought to take me there." Waller stood up, flexing his knees. He tried to move his wounded arm similarly but winced. "If it's not far, I should be able to make it."

"Three miles, perhaps. It's near a large lake so should be easy to find."

"A lake That's good. We could use the water."

But Sondra seemed less sure. "Is this really necessary? A half-eaten body? Haven't we seen enough killing and death lately?"

"But this is important," Waller said, shrugging off her protest. "Ahmad, what about food? Is there game? Wildlife?"

"Plenty. Much deer and antelope, unafraid of men. Wild cattle and pigs. A buck passed within a yard of me.

I didn't shoot, as I had brought a few stores with me."

"And your rifle. You don't know how glad I am to see that."

"And these two." He tapped his ammunition belt. "Two grenades. These were strapped to me when I fell and so came with me. I lost my pistol, I'm afraid."

"We lost ours, too. But let's go."

"Yes." Ahmad started off. After a moment's hesitation, Sondra came, too, her head down. Waller followed last. The forest, still cold with the dampness of early morning, hung deathly still

around them. What's wrong? Waller wondered to himself. Has nothing yet risen in this place?

CHAPTER SIX

Waller crouched beside the skeleton, attempting to examine the bones, but the fact was that there was little to be discovered here that Ahmad had not already revealed. One set of human bones was pretty much the same as another. This skeleton was not extraordinary.

"Don't forget the head," Ahmad said, pointing toward the skull. "You'll want to look at that, too." He seemed amused by Waller's obvious discomfort.

"I intend to." Laying the bones aside, Waller reached for the skull—it had been severed from the skeleton—• and grasped the thin, filthy yellow hair. He turned the head over and peered at the face but the sight proved disappointing at best. A good deal of skin and flesh remained intact but with the eyes, nose, teeth, and cheeks missing, the face was only faintly identifiable as human. Except for its extreme height, the skeleton might have belonged to either a man or woman.

"It stinks here," Ahmad said, wrinkling his nose. A thick rancid odor did indeed cling to the air. Waller was determined, however, not to leave the area until a thorough search had been conducted.

He let go of the skull and faced Ahmad. "You start from that side of the clearing and I'll start from over here. Anything you find, I want to see it."

Ahmad seemed less than eager to stay. He sniffed the foul air and frowned. "Are you certain this is necessary? What do you expect to find?"

"When I find it, I'll know it. Now let's get started."

Waller dropped to his knees on his own half of the clearing and began methodically searching through the high, damp grass.

His left arm remained a useless stub but with both his thirst and hunger satisfied he felt better than he had in some time. Near the lake they had come across what almost appeared to be an untended orchard of apple trees. They had all eaten their fill before proceeding onward to sample the pure, sweet water of the lake. He could not help thinking, as he scoured the grass in search of clues, that this might not be such a dreadful place to live. After Africa, the climate at least was a delight. The problem lay in the growing multitude of unanswered questions facing them; there were simply too many of these to make comfortable living as yet possible.

"Waller, here's something," said Ahmad.

"What?" He came over to see. Crouched down in the grass, Ahmad reached up to show him a tiny glistening object that caught the faint sunlight and reflected it.

"It's a ring," said Ahmad, handing it over.

Waller studied the trinket carefully. "A diamond," he said. "But it can't be real."

"Why not?"

"Out here?"

"But we don't know where out here is. Perhaps it's South Africa."

"You know better than that." Waller kept turning the diamond ring in his hands. Its pure cut beauty, the sparkle and twinkle, fascinated his eye.

"Then how about a trading post? Some form of civilization? Perhaps nearby?"

"It's possible," Waller conceded. "But did the ring belong to him?"

"He stole it?"

"I doubt that he bought it." Waller drew the ring away from his eye and started to pocket it.

"Wait," said Ahmad.

Waller glanced up. "What?"

"That ring." Ahmad smiled painfully. "I cannot see where it should all be yours. There are three of us, you know."

"You can't believe that?" Waller was genuinely amazed.

"In the end I will. We won't be here forever. When we get out, I want a share of that."

"Then take it now." Waller held out the ring, controlling his anger. "I don't want you to suffer."

Ahmad took the ring calmly and dropped it into his pocket. "I will keep it safely until we reach a place where it can be sold."

"We'll never reach such a place," Waller said.

"We can't be stranded."

Waller lifted his eyebrows quizzically. What he was saying now was something he had so far kept hidden even from himself. "I think we are. I think we'll never get out of here. Something awful has happened to us and there's no way out."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Late that afternoon in a third try they finally succeeded in bringing down a deer—a young doe; Ahmad turned the trick. After twice missing badly because of his arm, Waller turned the rifle over. When the deer went down, Sondra looked away, gazing into the drifting blue-and-green branches high above. She didn't want to help with the skinning, either, but Waller insisted she help or go hungry. She helped but once more spent much time gazing distantly away.

By the time they finished eating the first of the meat, night

had long since descended upon the forest. The blazing campfire made Ahmad nervous. He said, "Keep that burning and I fear we will be the ones roasting above it."

"Not if we keep a good watch," Waller said. "With three of us, that shouldn't be difficult."

Ahmad nodded toward Sondra, who had eaten only meagerly. "Her?"

"She has to learn."

"But at our expense?"

"How else?"

Ahmad stood up, clutching the rifle. "Then I must tell you what I intend. I am going to find a very high tree with a good perch in its crotch. I am going to lie there and sleep. When our hungry friends come creeping around, then I will be able to rest in peace. In the morning, over your gnawed bones, I will say, 'I told you so.' "

"That's something I think we should talk about."

"What? Bones?"

"No, the cannibals. It seems to me we have to make up our minds. Do we stay here or do we start moving? Either build a good strong shelter or else leave the area in hopes of finding something more secure."

"The proposition is simple enough." Ahmad remained standing. "Why should we stay?"

"Why should we move? The area is rilled with game. The lake is nearby and there are numerous creeks. Except for the cannibals—and the most recent signs of them are days old—this could be paradise."

"No, Waller. Paradise is filled with people—and that is what this place lacks. I intend to leave here and rejoin my comrades.

You can do as you wish."

"Ahmad, your comrades are not out there. Look around. By now you must have realized this place isn't right."

Ahmad shook his head stubbornly. "Right or not, this is still the planet Earth. Study the stars at night and you will know that. The Moon. Nothing has changed. If this is the Earth, then there must be men out there somewhere. I intend to find them."

Waller turned to Sondra. "Well? What do you think?"

She frowned at him. "You can't mean I'm actually permitted a say?"

"More than that. The deciding vote is yours. Do we stay or do we go? It's up to you."

"Stay," she said.

"Stay?" Waller was no less surprised than Ahmad.

"That's what I said." She looked away, pretending to stare at the Moon Ahmad had just mentioned.

"But why?" said Ahmad, unwilling to let her escape. "Why should a bright, educated American girl such as yourself fall prey to Waller's simple foolishness? Don't you agree we are on the Earth?"

"I don't know where we are," she said, still gazing at the Moon. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"What do you mean?" Waller approached her, sensing something had changed, something was different. "What about your father?"

She laughed shrilly and faced him, her expression ambiguous. "What are you mad about? You wanted me to stay."

He gripped her arm, though not forcefully. "I want to know why."

She held out her fist. Suddenly, the fingers opened, revealing upon the palm a good coin. "Because of this."

"Where did you find that?" Waller reached for the coin.

"On the ground. When you and Ahmad were wallowing in that dead body. The sun made me see it."

Waller looked at the coin, turning it between his fingers. Ahmad, crowding behind, peeked, too. The coin seemed very old, rusted and soiled. It could only vaguely be identified as an American dime. The face upon the front, though obscured, clearly was not Franklin Roosevelt; it was a man but not him. Then Waller read the date, strangely decipherable.

"It's a fake," he said.

"You don't believe that."

"I want to."

"But it's not true."

Waller looked again at the coin. Ahmad had seen it, too. The date was 2039.

"And it's old," Sondra said, unnecessarily. "Who knows how long it has been lying out here? Ten years? Fifty? A hundred?"

Waller looked straight at Ahmad. "We're staying," he said.

Ahmad nodded, refusing to demur.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They had come here together so that Waller could teach her how to shoot but so far, in spite of the plenti-tude of game, Sondra had only managed to miss nine clean shots. Waller then suggested they seek out a shady place and rest. Both wore loose-fitting, hot cowhide sheaths that fell from their shoulders past their knees. Wild cattle, like much else, roamed freely throughout the forest. Their own clothing had worn out within

the first month. On their feet were loose, ill-made moccasins which, when they walked, flopped and slipped.

They lay beneath a wide tree, shielded from the hot summer's sun. Long ago they had estimated their arrival at March. If so, this now was June.

Sondra said, "I just can't seem to keep it all in mind. Either I flinch when the deer runs past or else I tug the trigger instead of squeezing it or else I just forget completely to hold my breath."

"Maybe it doesn't matter," he said. "We'll be out of ammunition soon enough."

"Then I've just been wasting it."

"Oh, no. Not if you learn how. Then it won't be a waste. The first time I ever fired at a target I scored fourteen points out of a possible three hundred."

She laughed at that. "How did you ever manage?"

"It was easy. There was a sergeant—some grizzled old goat—who kept yelling in my ear. It was an old trick of theirs—to test your ability to work under pressure, I imagine. Well, I didn't. In those days I was much more sensitive. I got rattled and started firing at the wrong target, the one beside mine. The sergeant never let on—he kept yelling. I scored fourteen. The guy beside me marked up the highest count in the history of the U.S. army, though."

"That's funny but it isn't my problem. I know what I'm aiming at. I just miss it."

"I know."

"On tv or in a movie it looks so easy. They point the gun, pull the trigger, go *bang*, and everybody falls over dead. But, you know." She sighed and stretched her arms toward the high, shifting branches above. "I'm sick of talking about me. We always talk about me. Why not, for a change, talk about you?"

She smiled, saying this, but also risked a furtive glance. He understood she knew she was treading upon dangerous ground. But why hide it? "Sure," he said. "Is there something you want to know?"

"Well everything. I'm basically a nosey, curious person. But I'll tell you what: I'll settle for just one thing. Tell me why it is you are who you are. I used to think it was because you were a savage, heartless beast."

"I am." He didn't smile.

"No, you're not. You can't get off that easy. You'll have to tell me the truth."

"Didn't Ahmad?"

She pretended innocence. "Why? Does he know something about you?"

"He knows a lot less than he thinks."

"Well, he did tell me something. He said, whatever it was you were, it started during the war."

"That's right."

"You were a prisoner for five years."

"Almost six."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"Only the first two years. After that, I was moved into a nice, neat prison camp. It was dull, lonely, and tedious, but I stood it. The time in the jungle is what hurt."

"And that's what changed you? Why you became a guerilla yourself? They converted you."

"They never tried. Out there in the jungle they lacked the necessary facilities for an orientation program. I got all that later but it slid off my mind like water off a duck's back."

"But what about the jungle? Did they treat you well?"

He turned his back on her. It was easier to talk this way. Picking up a long dry pine needle, he fastened it between his teeth. "They treated me horribly."

"How?"

"It would take me two years to tell you all of it."

"Then tell me some of it."

"For the first year, I was kept caged in a narrow burrow dug out of the ground. The top was sealed with wire mesh and often covered with loose grass so that it couldn't be spotted from the air. Inside, it was pitch dark. I could almost stand upright after a fashion and did what calisthenics I could every day. In the dark when our own bombers flew over I couldn't see them. When the bombs dropped, I heard them. I'd crouch way down in the farthest, deepest corner and just scream. It was the only time I was really afraid. I didn't want to die in that hole—not at the hands of my own people."

"They never let you out of there."

"Only twice the first year. After that, we moved around a lot and I was broken. Worse was the fact there was no one to talk to. My guards were peasants—they couldn't talk English. Some were friendly, most ignored me, only one was really mean. He would jab me with a stick or spit on me through the mesh. The food was dreadful. Often there was none. The guerillas rarely had enough to eat and I got what was left over."

"You were always alone?"

"No. At different times two men were held with me. The first was the boy who had been taken prisoner with me. Within the first month he died of a fever. I didn't want him to do that. I knew how much I needed him. I let him lay dead beside me for a full day before I finally got sick and the guards found him. The second man was later. A civilian, much older than me, maybe CIA. He wouldn't talk about himself. I think he thought I was a

spy."

"Did anything happen to him?"

"He died, too. Unlike me, since he was somebody important, the guerillas often took him away. For questioning, I suppose. He would never say anything to me. One night when I was sleeping they brought him back. I didn't wake up to talk to him. In the morning he was dead. Somehow he had managed to unravel a few strands of the mesh. He cut his wrists with it—must have taken hours. Blood all over the hole, over him, over me. I broke then. They let me out, let me start moving. I'd never try to escape. They knew that. I didn't."

"But that can't be why you swung over to their side." She shook her head. "Calvin, I just don't understand you."

"Then I'll try to explain, though I don't know if it'll help. You see, hi that hole, seeing Davis die in my arms and finding McLish with his blood drained, for the first time in my life I truly understood how inhumanely some people treat others. That didn't make me choose sides. Not then. It disgusted me—that was all. It was when I came back home, after that, when I discovered that this same inhumanity was being practiced there, everywhere, that's when I decided I had to do something. But what? How could I help? Pick a side. I felt I had to. Which? The underdogs. Ideology didn't matter. Whoever was on the bottom—they were my people. I'm not a Communist, socialist, fascist, Democrat or whatever. So I went to the savannah. I wanted to help those people. Fighting was all I knew. It's what I did best." He smiled here at the end. "See? I said you wouldn't understand."

Sondra, smiling also, shook her head sadly. "You're right. I don't. Why do you have to kill? Is that a way of helping people?"

"Do you have another suggestion? Should I have taken a vow of poverty? Founded a charitable organization? You tell me: what?"

"Anything. My father helped—he never killed."

"In a way he did. He made it so people were less apt to fight. He gave them something to cling to. A man who won't fight for what he deserves is a dead man."

"You don't believe that, Calvin."

He shook his head. "But I do." He stood up, turning slowly to face her, then reached out to grasp her hand. The cool summer breeze whipped his face, ruffled his long hair. "Ahmad may be worried."

She came with him. "What about dinner? We were supposed to bag something."

"We'll try for a turkey on the way back."

They found nothing. Sondra apologized so profusely Waller had to tell her to shut up. Back at camp, when they entered the log cabin, they found Ahmad seated serenely in the middle of the one big room. He had his rifle casually trained upon a giant, naked blonde man whose wrists were tied behind his back.

Waller stopped and stared. "They're back," he said. "The cannibals."

Ahmad nodded. "I found him in the orchard. What do you think it means?"

Waller sat slowly down. "I think it means our paradise is lost."

CHAPTER NINE

It wasn't till late that night, while standing a lone watch in the moonlighted cabin, that Waller realized the gibberish the big blonde man had been speaking was actually a distorted, constricted form of English. Whole sentences were squeezed into brief, guttural words of a few syllables each.

Waller attempted to match the other man's dialect. He said, "I can understand you now. Can you understand me?"

The man said, "Yuri," which Waller thought meant yes. He

added, "I understand you very well."

"Good. Then I'd like to ask you a few things." And he did. The process went on through the remainder of the night. In fits and starts, with much needful repetition, Waller obtained the facts he sought. He became so involved with questioning the man—his name was Jador— that he failed to consider waking Sondra or Ahmad.

When dawn came at last, Waller was ready to move. He felt fully awake and alert, despite a night without sleep. He decided to ask one final question:

"Do you know what year this is?"

Jador nodded, screwing up his face. Facial expressions and hand gestures played a significant role in this transformed version of English. "I do not understand. What is this year?"

"A year," Waller patiently explained, "is the length of time it takes for the seasons to pass through their full cycle. The years are often numbered. 1886 was a year. And 2039."

"I am afraid I do not know this way of reckoning."

"Then—" Waller decided to reach his objective by way of a different route—"can you tell me about the cities? When was it they were destroyed and deserted? Was your father alive then? Your grandfather? His father?"

Jador thought. The question was one he had plainly never considered before: "Not him and not any of them. It was many fathers before."

"How many?"

Jador shook his head, unable to answer. "It cannot be said."

"No," said Waller. He patted Jador's knee, alleviating his sorrow. "I understand that." But did he? Wasn't the whole thing simply incredible? The fact was that Jador's story fit snugly with his own knowledge. And it contradicted nothing. But could it

possibly be true?

Were they really in the future?

Somewhere, perhaps, in the thirtieth century?

"I must go wake my friends," he said. "Then we will be able to help your people as I promised."

"I am glad." Jador smiled brightly.

Strangely embarrassed by this show of outright emotion, Waller hurried across. He woke Ahmad first, prodding his shoulder. Rolling sleepily over upon the floor, Ahmad suddenly blinked in the harsh sunlight. He sprang abruptly up: "What's wrong? Why didn't you wake me?"

"It wasn't necessary. I found out everything for myself."

"What do you mean?"

"He talked."

"In English?"

"Yes. Let me wake up Sondra first. I want you both to hear. All right?"

"Sure," Ahmad said. "But at least tell me how much you've learned."

"Everything," Waller said. "Everything we've ever wanted to know."

CHAPTER TEN

Waller sat facing Ahmad and Sondra, while Jador crouched diffidently upon the ragged stone hearth before the cold fire. Turning, Waller pointed to him and said, "I wish Jador could tell you his own story in his own words but I'm afraid there just isn't time. We're in trouble—in real danger—Jador did not come here alone. He was brought—a prisoner—and his captors were those

people we've feared: the cannibals. According to him, they're camped very near here—on the other side of the lake. If you look outside, you may be able to see their smoke."

Ahmad took this as a signal. He went to the open window facing the lakeside and peered out. Turning at once, he nodded sharply. "It's there."

"And they may be here any moment, so let me talk quickly." But he waited until Ahmad returned to his seat.

"So where are we?" was the first thing Ahmad asked.

"I don't know."

Ahmad grinned mockingly. "But I thought he told you everything."

"Everything important. Be quiet and let me talk."

"Yes," said Sondra sharply. "Be quiet and let him."

Ahmad shrugged, still grinning. Waller went on:

"We're probably where I first thought we were: in Oregon, Washington, British Columbia. We've never ventured very far from here but Jador says an ocean is very close. But it's not important. Not where. What's important is when."

"In other words," said Ahmad, unsurprised, "that coin Sondra found."

"Yes. Exactly."

"This is 2039?"

"No. Later than that. Much later. Several hundred years at least."

"So then where are the great cities? The space ships to Venus? If this is the future, I'd like to see it."

"You won't," said Waller. "It's gone."

"Gone?" For the first time Ahmad's expression underwent a change: now he was surprised.

"Our whole so-called civilization—the cities and machines, cars and planes—not only gone but largely forgotten. Our rifle. Watch Jador. See him staring at it. You know why? Because he's never set eyes on such a thing in his life. He knows it only by reputation, through myth. It is a product of the men of the cities, our dead ancestors, and to him they are gods."

"The diamond ring?"

"The same. And the coin. His people wear them, care for them. They are objects of veneration, magical talismans."

"And there's nothing left? Just this?" Ahmad shook a vague hand at the windows, the deep forest surrounding them.

"Not that Jador knows about. Of course, the world is a massive place and he knows only this tiny segment of it. But, as far as he is concerned, this is everything."

"But the cannibals—he isn't one."

"No. Jador's people are the Nesquash—peaceable farmers and herders. Their settlement, his home, is twenty, thirty miles from here—just outside the forest. The cannibals are the Vayash. They're marauders, raiders. I'm not exactly sure where their home is—even if they have one. Jador just says they come from the sea."

"And they eat people?"

"Not always. Their cannibalism is a rite—a religious sacrifice to the gods."

"And we're the gods?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Then I suppose we have -nothing to fear. How can we be sacrificed to ourselves? If we tell them that, I'm sure they'll

understand and let us alone."

"I wouldn't bet on that." Waller smiled slightly at Ahmad's joke. But they also take slaves. That's what happened to Jador. His village was raided and he was taken."

"And escaped?"

"Yes."

"And they'll follow?"

"I—I imagine so."

"And come here? And eat us?"

Waller, in spite of himself, glanced fearfully around. "No," he said. "At least not yet. What we have to do is hit them first. We've got—" he nodded toward the floor "—that." He meant the rifle.

"Wouldn't it be easier to run?"

"They've still got Jador's wife. I promised him we'd help her."

"A big promise for you to be making. Don't you think you might have asked us first, before laying our lives on the line?"

"Yes," Sondra suddenly agreed. Turning to her, Waller noticed a painful presence in her eyes: it was fear. "I think we ought to run, too. I think we should get as far away from here as we can. Calvin, I don't want to die —not that way."

He tried to soothe her. "We won't die. Look, they're afraid of us—afraid of our gun. As soon as they catch sight of us, they'll run straight home. A few shots maybe. It'll be nothing."

"That sounds promising," said Ahmad, "but aren't you neglecting a fairly essential aspect? I refer to the payment of money. Shouldn't any good mercenary, before committing himself to battle, at least demand some form of payment?"

"Jador has promised me his people will take care of us. When

this is over, we can go there and live in their village."

"But you rejected that in March. Remember, you were the one who wanted to stay here."

"Only when there was no place to go. Now it's different."

"As far as I can see, the only difference is that now there is indeed no place. Before, for all we knew, some great city might lie a four days walk from here. Now we know there's nothing."

"If we stay here, we'll die. The Vayash will catch us. This band isn't the only one. Jador says they pass through here once or twice every year."

"Then we hide. Once or twice every year. We can manage that, I believe."

"But..." Waller paused as he felt himself losing control of the situation. The problem was that Ahmad's arguments were not wholly invalid. Waller didn't care. Right now he wanted to act, he wanted to fight; he was tired of being timid. The fact was that he was probably simply bored. "But don't you care about the people? Jador's wife? The others? Jador says the Vayash are holding at least a half-dozen of his people as slaves. Do you want that?"

"Waller, Waller," said Ahmad, lifting his brows in mock astonishment. "Do my ears deceive me? Are you spouting ideals once again? I thought you told me you were burdened with none of those." He shook his head, then smiled broadly. "But that's unfair of me. I should be more appreciative of those occasional flashes of humanity on your part. How can I possibly refuse your offer in the light of that? So—yes—I will go with you. Together we will wipe these dreadful cannibals from the face of this future Earth. We will kill and kill and kill, if necessary. But only for the greater good—for freedom." He winked, continuing to smile.

"Thank you," said Waller, with more irritation than appreciation in his tone.

But Sondra suddenly shouted, "No!"

Waller spun to see her leaping to her feet. He was startled by the sight of her changed appearance. Her face had gone deathly pale; her hands and lips were visibly trembling.

"Sondra, what's wrong?" he said.

"You—you're wrong. You and him and all of you. How can you sit there, taking this so casually? Can't you even hear your own voices? Don't you know this means it's over? We're lost. Stranded in this terrible place— this dreadful tune. And we're never going home. Never. We're going to live here till we die."

Waller shook his head, unable to understand her fervor. Yes, she was right: they were indeed stranded here. But so what? What could they do about it? Screaming surely did not help. He reached for her arm but she jerked it furiously free from his grasp. Without another word, still trembling, she spun on a heel and hurried toward the door.

"Don't!" he cried. "Don't go out there! They—"

She wheeled back. "I don't care about them. They can't be any worse, any less human than you. Just let me alone." And she went on out the door.

Waller shook his head and looked speechlessly at Ahmad.

"You don't understand, do you?" said Ahmad.

"No," Waller admitted, "I don't."

"Of course not—and I can tell you why. It's because Sondra is presently suffering from a dreadful plight that happens not to afflict either of us. The disease is called normality, Waller—that's what her problem is. Having just now heard that her life has reached its unnatural end, she weeps. She is upset, disturbed, horrified. And us? What difference does it make? One life or another—it's all the same thing. You see, unlike us, Sondra possessed a real life worth losing. She cares."

"But she'll have to come with us," Waller said grimly. "I won't have her staying here alone."

"It would be wisest."

"Then go tell her. I'm sure she's right outside. Go tell her we're going."

"Oh, no. Not me. That honor, Waller, is yours." Ahmad took up his rifle and went to the fireside. He pointed to the door. "Go tell her. When you're done, we can all go hunting."

Hesitantly, Waller approached the door. He threw it open and found Sondra seated right outside. Silent tears flowed down her cheeks. Her body shook and quivered.

Waller reached out, touching her shoulder tentatively. "Sondra," he said, speaking softly. "Can you hear me?"

Her voice came distantly: "Yes."

"We're going now."

"Not home?" Her voice was not hopeful.

"No, not home. But you'll have to come with us. It won't be safe for you to stay here alone."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yes." She sighed, lifting a fist to wipe fitfully at her eyes. "I'm afraid I know much better than you do."

Shaking off his hand, she stood and went back into the cabin. Waller slowly followed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The vertical trail of gray smoke puffing easily through the morning sky served as a perfect guide to the Vayash encampment.

"I see they're not exactly timid," said Waller, waving a hand at

the smoke. They walked in the woods at the edge of the lake, allowing the trees to cover them.

"Who do you expect them to fear?" Ahmad asked. He pointed disparagingly at Jador. "Surely not him."

"He escaped from them, didn't he?"

"Only because running was less frightening than staying."

Waller studied the sky visible through the branches. The deep blanket of pine needles crinkled noisily beneath his moccasined feet. "I think I know where that smoke is coming from. Remember that meadow at the other end of the lake? The one beside the big oak? We thought of building our camp there but it was too exposed."

"Yes, I remember." Ahmad also studied the direction of the smoke. "And I think you're right. Still, we ought to approach carefully. They may have established guards or sent out scouts."

"I bet they've done neither. I bet they haven't taken a single precaution."

"They can't be that bold."

"No. You said it first They have absolutely nothing to fear."

Nor did they seem to. When the dark smoke came drifting through the trees ahead in a thick heavy cloud,

Waller called their procession to a halt. They had met no one so far and, if it was located as expected, the Vayash camp was now barely a hundred yards distant. Waller drew Ahmad aside, then nodded circumspectly at Sondra. She had long since ceased taking any interest in the outer world. She wouldn't talk, lost in some private trance.

"What do we do with her?" Waller asked, whispering.

Ahmad jerked his head at Jador. "Let them stay together."

"Oh, no. Not Jador. Do you think he'd miss this—a shot at real

revenge—for anything?"

"Since you ask, yes, I do. Take a look at him. Do you see any eagerness there?"

Waller had to admit that he did not. If anything, Jador's face reflected nothing beyond anxiety and fear. "Let's ask him," he said.

"No, you."

"Jador," said Waller, approaching, "our woman needs someone to watch over her while we attack the Vayash. We know how deeply you despise them, but were wondering if—since you do not know how to use the shooting weapon—you would be willing to do this for us."

Even in his truncated English, Jador seemed to burble with delight: "Oh, yes, Waller. I will do it gladly. Oh, yes."

"But we'll get your wife out of there alive. I promise you."

"Of course, of course." He bowed, scraping his knuckles across the ground. "You are a good man, Waller—very good." His gratitude seemed more related to Waller's offer of avoiding a fight than to his later promise.

"Thank you. I—I—" Waller drew away, embarrassed. Ahmad's wry chuckling did not help. "And you,

Sondra." He touched her arm lightly, trying to draw her attention. "I assume you won't mind staying here. Ahmad and I are going in now. You should be safe with Jador."

Her head jerked spasmodically. She seemed to want to speak but the words refused to come. "Stay? Me? Alone? No—you can't do that. Not alone—never."

"But, Sondra, it's necessary. You can see that."

"No! Not here!" Desperation flooded her voice. Her head spun, eyes darting into the surrounding forest as though it was a

dreadful place filled with lurking, fearsome things. She clasped his shirtfront. "Take me with you. Calvin, please."

"You don't want to fight."

"Please!"

"I'm sorry." Cocking his fist, he clipped her firmly on the jaw. Her eyes sagged shut and she fell in a heap. He caught her gently a moment before she struck ground. He lowered her the rest of the way. "If she wakes, you keep her here," he told Jador. "Do whatever you have to do but don't let her go. Understand that?"

"Oh, yes, Waller. Yes."

"Good. Then we're moving. Ahmad?"

"Right behind you."

The two of them moved forward into the smoke-filled forest. To Waller, it still seemed far too easy. These final yards of approach proved to present no more obstacles than the first. The utter arrogance of the Vayash began to worry him. If they were this totally fearless, then might they also be utterly fearsome indeed? His first peek at their encampment, glimpsed through a surrounding thicket of high yellow grass, provided a different impression. The men, most of whom squatted or lay beside the high glistening campfire, seemed old, fat, languid, passive. The few women he noticed were even less awesome in appearance. None wore any clothing beyond a narrow strip of fur around the hips, although some of the men had crudely shaped copper helmets perched on their heads. All of the men wore a variety of trinkets and medallions, rings, bracelets, necklaces, beads. Waller paused to count them: there were two dozen men, only seven women.

"There's what we came for," said Ahmad, pointing past the fire.

He meant the prisoners. There were six, each held by a separate rope to a branch of a bare scrub tree. Two helmeted guards with clubs and spears stood watch over them.

"What do you think?" Waller whispered.

"I think we should have stayed home."

"They don't have one of these." Waller tapped the rifle, which he was holding.

"Yes, but clubs and spears can kill, too. Ask my ancestors."

"They don't unless we let them get close enough. If their true selves are closer to what we see than to what Jador told us, this might work."

"What are you going to do?"

"Watch." Waller raised the rifle and pointed it carefully at the biggest, plumpest Vayash he could find. The man sat beside the big campfire, while two thin, bony women waited upon him. He gobbled a handful of choice meat. Waller sighted upon the glittering medallion which hung from the man's neck: a round, bright silver dollar.

He squeezed the trigger. The rifle kicked and coughed. With a low groan, the man dropped neatly on his face. The chunk of meat popped from his hand and rolled across the green grass.

Waller immediately turned to the next man and quickly shot him through the heart.

As the man fell, Waller lowered his rifle.

"That was sweet," said Ahmad, "but now what?"

"Now we wait."

The bullets had scattered the Vayash. The men, more terrified than enraged, gripped their weapons but stared into the sky. The women dropped to their knees. Raising their arms, they began to wail.

"That looks promising," said Ahmad.

"Yes, but the idea was for them to run away." With a sigh,

Waller lifted his rifle again. This time he sighted upon one of the chanting women. He fired quickly but the woman suddenly moved and the bullet went wide, missing her heart. Wounded in the side, the woman twisted on the ground, shrieking and crying out.

"Give me the gun," said Ahmad.

"What for?"

"Just give it."

Taking the gun from Waller, Ahmad placed two neat bullets squarely into the woman's head. She stiffened, then fell silent and still.

"From now on," said Ahmad, "I think we should limit ourselves to killing men. The women pose no danger to us."

"How do you know that?"

"They're not armed."

"An enemy is an enemy."

"Waller, please." Ahmad returned the rifle with a show of disgust. "Even you are not quite that bloodthirsty."

Waller took the rifle, aimed, and shot down one of the men guarding the prisoners. His aim was right this time. He sighted on the second guard and hit him, too.

By now, the surviving men had fallen to the ground with the women. All were chanting, wailing, calling upon the sky for salvation. Waller could make out few words they spoke. Their English was even less decipherable than Jador's.

"They're not running," Ahmad said. "I think we'll have to move on them."

"We could sit here and pick them all off, one-by-one."

"Is that what you want to do, Waller?" he asked coldly.

"No, it isn't."

"Then I suggest we move."

"Good. You first."

With a friendly wink, Ahmad stood, immediately exposing himself. Without hesitation, Waller came after him, his rifle propped in readiness against his shoulder. Together they came forward. The chanting continued, rising to a furious pitch. When they were barely ten feet from the nearest of the kneeling men, Waller whispered, "Why don't you go around the side and cut them free? I'll stay here and watch. I don't think they even know we're here."

"They will," Ahmad said, with certainty. But he moved to circle the throng. Approaching the tree, he removed a stone knife from his belt. It was one he had fashioned himself from a rock, strong but not sharp. The prisoners seemed uncertain at his approach. He motioned them to be silent, then began to cut the vine ropes which bound the nearest man.

The chanting began to subside. Waller noticed a few tentative eyes now focusing in his direction. He waved his rifle from side to side, covering as much of the mass in front of him as possible. *Hurry up*, he thought, meaning Ahmad. *This won't last much longer*,

Ahmad had freed the first of the prisoners and was now working on the second, an elderly woman. Waller wanted to shout to him to find Jador's wife and hurry but the chanting was so soft now that he didn't want to risk a sudden yell.

The prisoners—as each was freed—came running over to stand protectively beside Waller. Despite this, if Jador was any example, he didn't intend to count on these people if fighting did erupt. Ahmad, cutting his third set of ropes, kept pausing to jerk a finger into the air, waving it at Waller.

At last understanding the significance of this gesture, Waller decided the suggestion was worth trying. Raising his rifle, he fired a single shot into the air above the Vayash. The effect, at

first, was reassuring. The chanting increased dramatically in tempo. A third prisoner ran over to stand behind him. The Vayash who had been watching him now returned their eyes to the sky.

But, only a few moments later, the wailing once more began to subside.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

We were stupid, Waller told himself. To think that two men, rifle or no rifle, could easily overcome a small company of seasoned warriors: that was plain stupid.

One of the Vayash men stood slowly up. He was a blonde giant of a man covered with bright, gold medallions. He let loose a loud, inarticulate howl of rage and anger. At the tree, Ahmad spun around, gripping his knife. Of the three prisoners still to be freed, only one was a woman. Somehow Waller was certain this must be Jador's wife.

Dropping to a knee, he focused his rifle and fired a single shot. The wailing blonde man dropped where he stood. Before he hit the ground, however, a dozen spears had been launched. Waller fell flat on his face. The tip of one spear brushed his fingertips. He howled in pain, Struggled back to his feet. The three prisoners who had stood with him were already gone, darting for the forest

What was worse, the mass of the Vayash, men and women both, bore down upon him with the fury of a lynch mob.

"Run!" he cried to Ahmad. The rifle in his hands was largely forgotten; there simply wasn't time to fire.

Skipping in a circle, he turned to run. The loud pounding of heavy feet echoed behind him. They were fast—too fast. He knew one of them was right behind him. He smelled the man's breath, felt the heat of his exertion. The woods opened shortly ahead, but even if he reached the sheltering trees they would surely have him there.

Waller swiveled. When death came, he preferred to meet it head-on. Thrusting out a leg, he sent his nearest pursuer sprawling. There was triumph in that. The next man raised a stone axe. Waller took the handle cleanly on a forearm. He howled in pain. His eyes streaked and he felt himself falling.

And then they were on him. Clubs and axes, spears and fists. He gave up, rolling on his belly. This was the end.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The moment Waller regained consciousness, Ahmad took him immediately to task for their present predicament. "In the future," said Ahmad, "I shall know better: one should never confuse surface appearances with matters of fact. You represented yourself as a hard, tough man and yet you allowed some savage to convince you to come running here to risk your life for his wife. How do we even know she wished to be saved?"

The best defense Waller could manage was simple boredom: "I was tired of laying around all day. Besides, I felt sorry for Jador. How would you like it if your wife was held prisoner by these people?"

"I have no wife," said Ahmad, which seemed to conclude the subject. Waller was glad that it was gone. Now that night was falling, the glittering campfire of the Vayash burned with an unearthly splendor. The men, dark shadows highlighted by the flames, gestured wildly, while their women on their knees wailed and chanted. It was a scene of brutal, primeval power. In none of it could Waller discern the least hopeful sign. They're going to cook us, he thought. They're going to cook us and eat us.

Among the flickering shadows he spied the narrow outline of the rifle, hopelessly out of reach. The Vayash danced around it but none dared to actually touch the mysterious weapon.

Waller tugged at the ropes that held him to the tree. They were more than secure: they were immovable.

"All of my life," said Ahmad, his voice soft, nostalgic,

"I have waged a struggle against personal slavery. I risked my life a dozen times in order to be free. And yet how is it all to end? Just that way. A slave. Here. Among savages." He dipped his head and seemed on the verge of outright weeping.

"You needn't fear slavery." This was one of the three prisoners they had failed to free: the lone woman. She was tall, stockily built, forceful in speech. "Haven't you been listening to them?"

"Why?" asked Ahmad, lifting his head.

"They won't enslave you. You killed their chief. They'll eat you now."

Ahmad turned pale and looked as though he was about to be sick. To forestall this, Waller asked the woman:

"Do you know a man named Jador?"

"I do." She seemed disappointed by the admission.

"He's your husband?" Waller felt prepared to have his failure realized.

"In the past he has been. Only yesterday did he desert me. The pig."

"He deserted you? We thought he escaped."

"Is there a difference? He is gone, while I remain. Yesterday, the Vayash chose to commit one of their monstrous feasts. A fellow prisoner was chosen, stripped, dressed, and cooked. While they were so engaged, I managed to break loose from my ropes. I released Jador and meant to free the others, when I was discovered by one of the more watchful women. Turning to flee, Jador first knocked me down. By the time I regained my feet, the Vayash pursued my heels. Naturally, I was caught, while Jador bolted into the woods. If you have lately seen him, my only wish is to find him firmly lodged in the belly of a dying dog."

"I'm afraid he's very much alive," said Waller. "In fact, he sent us here to free you."

The woman seemed less than impressed by this: "Only because he feared I would manage a second escape and come hunting him down. Had I caught him, his heart would have been torn, still beating, from his breast. I would have then fed it to a dying dog. But what of his help? If he sent you to save me, why am I still tied to this tree?" She laughed bitterly. "Tell me that."

"Because we failed. Don't blame Jador. It's not his fault you're not free."

"Still—" she continued to laugh "—I am more free than you."

"But we're not dead yet," said Waller, more for his own benefit than hers or Ahmad's.

It didn't help. Talk seemed as useless as anything as a final tactic for warding off despair. In the center of the clearing, the great fire continued to lick at the black sky. The odor of smoke made him cough and gasp. The ropes at his wrists cut into the flesh, a slow torture. The voices of the Vayash men grew louder and more violent. The women chanted with monotonous, furious regularity. Waller felt his skin crawl. What was worse, none of this made sense. If he died, he wanted there to be a reason for it. But not this. Fallen into the future. But why? For what reason? Had he been brought all this way—a thousand years into tomorrow—only to die? What purpose could exist behind that? The only way of explaining it was to assume the presence of some great cosmic practical joker, a pratfall comedian in charge of the heavens. The very concept made him shudder with mortal dread.

"Listen," Ahmad suddenly whispered. "Hear that?"

"Hear what? People screaming? So what?"

"No. That owl. Hear it?"

"Maybe. So what?"

"That's no owl."

The sound appeared to come from the woods behind. "What makes you think so?"

"There aren't any owls here."

"How do you know?"

"I've listened. Know your environment, Waller. You always should."

Before Waller could pause to consider any of this, the men leaping beside the fire erupted in a final burst of wailing and howling. One of them thrust a hand into the fire and drew forth a flaming stick. Then, waving his torch, the man rushed toward the tree where they were held.

"This must be it," said Waller.

"Yes," Ahmad agreed. "It does look that way."

The other men followed the waving torch. They whooped and hollered. I'm going to be burned alive, Waller thought, with a serenity that disturbed him. Like a martyr. Like Joan of Arc.

But, before the mob had reached a point halfway between the fire and the tree, the former chose to explode. The blast was neither tentative nor insignificant. What happened was that the whole of the campfire seemed to be lifted physically up into the air. Flaming sticks and coals fell throughout the clearing. Waller yelped as he was burned. Those Vayash nearest the fire—mostly women—also flew up. Coming down, few were able to move.

Waller, knocked off his feet by the blast, dangled by his wrists from the tree. He struggled to get his feet back under him.

Then a deep, hollow voice of tremendous impact spoke throughout the clearing. It said:

"HALT AND STAY."

The Vayash, a few of whom tentatively begun to stir, immediately froze as if sprayed with solid ice.

"Rescue," said Ahmad, who had also regained his feet.

"How?" Waller whispered.

"It's that owl. It must be."

The Vayash had not moved. After the explosion, several small grassfires had erupted within the clearing. Now these fires spread, but the Vayash made no effort to avoid them. One man was plainly being burned as he lay. He barely whimpered in pain.

The voice sounded again: "ONE VAYASH MUST STAND."

The burning man jumped to his feet in an instant, momentarily saved.

"I know that voice," said Waller.

"Sondra," said Ahmad.

"Yes, I'd swear it. But how can—?"

The voice boomed: "FREE THE PRISONERS."

The man took a step, then hesitated. He glanced back at his people, at the remnants of the fire. He seemed to be recalling the past occasion when his people were tricked by something they did not quite understand.

"I, THE MAN OF THE CITY, COMMAND YOU. THESE PRISONERS, MY CHILDREN, MUST BE SET FREE." To emphasize this point, one of the small fires at the edge of the clearing abruptly erupted in a series of loud, rapid, miniature explosions.

The man sprinted obediently forward. Drawing a knife from his belt, he swiftly severed the ropes holding Waller and Ahmad to the tree. Without pausing, he also freed Jador's wife and the two remaining men prisoners.

"NOW KNEEL," commanded the voice. "KNEEL AND SALUTE YOUR MASTERS."

The men immediately came to their knees and commenced to chant. The fires continued to burn and spread throughout the clearing.

"I think we better go," said Waller. "They may be stupid but I don't think they'll wait to be burned alive."

"No," Ahmad said. "This way." He pointed toward the woods behind them.

Waller told Jador's wife, "You, too. Let's get out of here."

The woman appeared quite capable of handling her obvious shock and bewilderment. She said, "Yes," and ran ahead of them. Waller gave the two stunned male prisoners a shove each, then left them to their own abilities. A trail opened ahead of them in the woods. The woman ran first, then Ahmad, then Waller. He glanced past his shoulder and saw the men coming, too. But the Vayash were on their feet and not looking happy.

As they passed a high, huge oak set at the edge of the trail, a familiar voice suddenly cried out: "Halt, my children! It is I, the man of the city!"

Waller skidded to a halt and spun back. Standing in the faint starlight beneath the oak, was Sondra. Jador crouched beside her. Seeing his wife, he suddenly darted back into the shadows.

But the woman had seen him, too. Her anger clearly gone, she rushed forward and embraced him violently. She kissed his lips and hugged his shoulders.

Waller felt he could have done the same to Sondra. "How did you ever do it?" he asked.

Grinning, she slapped the oak tree with a fist. "It's hollow as a straw. Does wondrous things to the voice."

"But the explosion? The fire?"

"Did you forget the two grenades Ahmad brought with him?" She opened her other hand, showing the dark object. "There's one left now."

"I could kiss you," said Waller.

"I'd rather you ran with me. Those idiots will be coming soon. They won't be happy."

"But where do we run?" said Ahmad. "We can't return to the cabin. They'll find us there."

"Jador's village. We can hide there."

"We can hide here," Ahmad said. "The trees are deep. We split up and they won't find us."

"No." She was adamant. "The Vayash will be sure to attack the village after this. We have to be there to warn them."

"Let him do the warning."

"No, we caused this. We have to help."

Waller shook his head in amazement at her transformation. "What happened to you out here?"

"I'll tell you as we run. Ahmad, are you coming?"

"I'm afraid so." He shrugged. "I seem to lose all the arguments these days."

They trotted through the forest, not rushing, maintaining a cool, even pace that would not exhaust them. After a time, they slowed to a steady walk. It was thirty miles—three days at the least in this woods.

Waller walked beside Sondra. "What did you do with the others? The three Ahmad and I set free?"

"They went back to their village. I wanted them to deliver an early warning."

"You must have felt sure of setting us free."

"Oh, I did. When I woke up and you weren't back, I crawled up to see what was wrong. There you were, unconscious, tied to that tree. I sent Jador back to the cabin to fetch the grenades. I talked to him, found out what the Vayash feared. The men of the

city—it's the common superstition here. Worked fine, too, didn't it?"

"Worked delightfully." he said. "I'm glad to see you this way after—after the way you felt before."

"I guess I just got over that." She shrugged. "It's still terrible/though—being here. The worst part is the lone-liness. Without you and Ahmad I was even lonelier. I thought I had to get you back."

"I'm glad you did."

She laughed. "You would have made a terrible meal, anyway. I'm sure I saved the Vayash from a bad case of indigestion."

"They weren't the only ones you saved," he insisted.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Abruptly halting, the forest parted to reveal a flat, broad expanse of dreary, dusty land stretching toward a distant low line of bare brown hills. Much more distantly, far beyond the hills, vague white mountain-tops could dimly be seen.

"There," said Jador's wife—her name it turned out was Norgo—"is our village."

She pointed toward a bare acre of cleared land, in the center of which squatted perhaps three dozen modest huts made from mud, grass, and leaves. A few pigs and cows—smaller and skinnier than the wild beasts of the forest—lollled in the open spaces between the huts. The time was early morning and no one as yet seemed to be stirring. Beyond the huts were the fields. Waller recognized a few stunted rows of corn. There were beans and peas as well. Norgo, noticing the direction of his gaze, announced that they also grew lettuce, beets, carrots, and cucumbers. Their crop this year had been a good one. Unfortunately, the Vayash had destroyed most of it.

Waller noticed various charred spots within the area of the

huts. "Did the Vayash do that, too?" he asked.

"Yes. Sometimes our life is terrible. We work so hard and then it is destroyed so easily. What do you feel we should do, Waller?"

"Fight back," he said. "What else?"

Norgo laughed hollowly. "I'm afraid you do not yet know my people."

"That's why we're here."

Sondra interrupted to suggest they hurry ahead. "The

Vayash may not be far behind. We have to rouse your people, Norgo, get them up and ready to fight. Don't you even post guards? I thought those men ahead would warn you."

"My people prefer their sleep," Norgo said. "It is more restful than fear."

"So is dying," said Waller.

"Then come." She led them toward a hut that seemed no different from the others but which, she explained, was occupied by the chief of her people. Jador and the two other men slipped away with apparent gladness. The three had seemed to grow less at ease the closer they came to the village.

Norgo entered the hut through its open doorway. Stooping down, she shook a sleeping figure gruffly awake. "The Vayash are coming. These three strangers have come to us from the cities. They wish to help drive the Vayash forever from our lands. They carry mighty weapons of destruction."

Waller was about to protest that the only mighty weapon remaining to them was the single hand grenade but, at a glance at the Nesquash chief, thought better of it. She was an elderly woman, a revelation that should have come as less of a surprise than it did. In an agricultural and herding community, pure masculine strength was not necessarily the most essential virtue in a leader. But this particular woman reminded Waller more

strongly of Jador than of Norgo. She was gray, pale, frail, and plainly terrified at the very mention of the name Vayash. Norgo continued to talk to her. She was called the Old Mother. Norgo's words of warning clearly fell on tired deaf ears.

At last the Old Mother interrupted her: "My child," she said, ignoring the presence of the others, "you must not allow these strangers to deceive you. The fact is, as always, that we are doomed. You failed to accept your designated fate, Norgo, and for that I must pity you. Why did you return here only to bring a terrible destruction down upon the bowed heads of your own people? Why did you not remain with the Vayash? It is only because of you that they come here again. We will not suffer for your wrongs. You must face their anger alone."

Before the Old Mother turned over and went back to sleep—she appeared ready to do just that—Sondra spoke out. "It wasn't Norgo. It was us. We came here to help you."

The Old Mother shook her head sadly. "There is no way you can do that. Except by leaving us alone. Why not go now and spare us this destruction?"

Sondra glanced at Norgo, as if seeking some assistance. Norgo hurriedly said, "Old Mother, the Vayash will be here very soon. These people have weapons. It is possible for us to fight."

"No!" The thought of resistance seemed to terrify the old woman. "That is foolishness. Now go. I have spoken. We must sleep. That is the way."

Norgo pointed toward the door, indicating the session was over. Before they were outside, the old woman was snoring again.

"Are all your people like this?" Waller asked.

She nodded sadly. "All but a few. I was hoping— your presence—it might give them hope. I see that it is too late."

"We can't fight them alone," Ahmad said.

"I'm afraid he's right," Waller agreed. "We came here to

help—not to commit suicide."

"Please give me time," Norgo said. "I cannot speak for the others but I do not wish to be ruled by fear any more. I am willing to fight, to die—with your help. Let me speak to my friends. They will not all cower in their huts."

"All right," said Waller. He looked at Sondra and Ahmad; both nodded their agreement. "We won't rush you."

"Then I will go get Jador. I will have him rouse the village."

"We'll want to eat," said Ahmad.

"When I return, I will show you our stores."

"Good. I'm starving."

They waited in silence for her return. There seemed very little to be said. Waller glanced longingly at the distant, visible mountain peaks.

When Norgo returned, she led them proudly to a large hut set somewhat closer to the fields than the others. Ahmad smacked his lips in keen anticipation. He told Waller he hadn't eaten a square meal in more than three years.

Once inside the hut, he wheeled angrily. "This is it?" he cried. Waller couldn't help laughing. On the dirt floor were a few ears of dry corn, a wilted head of lettuce, and a few ripe cucumbers. "This is the feast you promised us?" said Ahmad.

"I'm afraid it is all we have," Norgo said, more sad than embarrassed. "When we were taken prisoner, there was much more but my people, after the Vayash come, they often cannot work for several days."

"Nibble on the lettuce, Ahmad. It will do you good." Waller took Norgo aside, feeling the need for privacy. "There's one thing more important than food," he told her. "Weapons. I've got to know what you have. Can you make an estimate? Clubs, spears, swords, whatever? No matter how many bodies Jador recruits,

we have to be able to arm them."

"Oh," said Norgo innocently, "you must be mistaken.

We Nesquash do not possess any weapons. We will have to use yours. What use would we have for such things? We do not kill, you know."

Waller glanced quickly at Ahmad, who had taken his suggestion and was eating a leaf of lettuce. He was glad. For some reason he had long since decided to stay here and make a fight no matter how desperate the situation became. Now that it seemed to have struck a definite low point, he was no less determined than before. But Ahmad might have been.

"Then we'll have to try something else," he told Norgo, keeping his voice low. "Something. I just wish I knew what it might be." He shook his head and went off to consult with Sondra.

She couldn't think of anything, either.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Standing alone in the dust, Waller patiently surveyed the edge of the forest, waiting for the first sign of life to appear there. He knew the Vayash had come. The smoke of their fire showed clearly in the sky above the forest. But they, too, were waiting. How long? he could not help wondering. And why? The dangerous possibility was they were waiting for night. He prayed they would not prove so cautious. To wait for night before attacking would mean the utter ruin of the precarious plan he and Sondra had at last devised. Once darkness fell, the land would belong totally to the Vayash; they could sweep through the village at their will and whim. *Come on*, he thought. *Attack—don't wait. You have nothing to fear from us.*

He clutched a blunt, homemade wooden club in each hand. At his feet were three sharp, hastily whittled spears. This was the sum total of his personal armory. In a pile about twenty feet to his rear were more clubs—big sticks actually—two dozen or

more. Also armed with clubs were Sondra and Norgo, who stood at opposite points slightly to his rear and far to the left and right. The three of them together formed a neat but elongated triangle. The first few rows of huts occupied the interior of this triangle. The fields were far behind. Ahmad, Jador, and the handful of Nesquash—mostly young women—who had volunteered to help were hiding here, crouched in the thick dust. Everyone was awaiting the arrival of the significant moment.

If that moment ever came.

It would take two things to make this plan work, Waller knew, two qualities: the first was surprise, the second courage. Given these, they would win; the Vayash would fall. Without them, death would come for them instead—and soon.

"Look," said Sondra, from his left.

He quickly refocused his attention on the edge of the forest. He saw what Sondra meant. They were coming—the Vayash—they stepped from the forest onto the bare and empty land. He counted each one individually as he appeared: seventeen men... eighteen. There were no women.

They did not attack at once. Instead, holding their spears and clubs, they glared in mass at the Nesquash village. Contempt spread across their features—contempt and disgust. They were particularly interested in glaring at Waller, whom they seemed to remember. One of them—apparently their new leader, coated with medallions like fur—cupped his hands to his lips and called out. The words came too quickly for Waller to pick them out.

Norgo supplied him with a rough translation: "He says he remembers your rancid face and now intends to slit open your belly and remove your innards and fry them slowly over an unbearably hot fire. Then he'll eat them, chewing carefully."

"That's not very friendly," said Waller.

"No, it isn't," Norgo agreed. "You better tell him that."

"I will." Cupping his hands to his lips, Waller answered the

Vayash in kind. He spoke from a long list of suggested curses supplied to him earlier by Norgo. These were part of their plan. Norgo had explained: "Any one of these ought to drive a Vayash senseless.

Two and he'll seethe with rage. Three and he won't see straight. Four and he'll charge."

Waller used five of the curses. The Vayash leader, with a loud low grunt of wounded rage, lowered his head, waved his club, and prepared to charge. Two of the other men grabbed him and held him. For a moment, it appeared as though cooler heads would prevail.

But Waller knew how to overcome that. He simply went back to his list of insults and this time threw them out not at one man in particular but rather at the whole mass of the Vayash. By the time of the second curse, the men stirred angrily. A spear pierced the air. Waller stepped hastily aside. The spear struck the hard ground at his feet. Picking it up, he added the weapon to his pile.

He told the Vayash: "Each of you is a yellow coward, afraid to glimpse his own shadow on a bright day. In your camp, I saw you crawling upon the ground on your bellies like snakes. My companions and I have laughed openly at your silly fears. I cannot call you women. No, nor even dogs. Instead, you are the lice that infest the thick fur of a dying dog, rancid parasites, vermin."

He thought that ought to do it. The Vayash danced in anger. Reaching down, he quickly grabbed the spear so recently sent his way and hurled the gift flying. To his surprise, the tip struck home, ripping the chest of his original adversary and sending the man down dead to the ground.

As if this were a prearranged signal, the Vayash sprang to attack. The scent of blood shone powerfully in their eyes.

Waller stood his ground, dancing carefully, dodging spears. He threw the few he had but none struck home. He began edging backward, moving toward a spot parallel with Sondra and

Norgo, then beyond that point. The huts closed around him. The Vayash continued their charge.

"Ready!" called Waller. He raised a hand. The attacking Vayash paid him no mind. Their attention was fully fixed upon simple revenge. If they even noticed the two women, they gave no indication. Waller gauged their rush, figured their trajectory. Then he waited... waited...

He dropped his arm.

Immediately, stooping down, Sondra and Norgo struck matches. The flames ignited, burned. Both laid their matches against the ground at their feet.

Whoosh! The gunpowder removed from the remaining grenade and sprinkled upon the earth caught and burned. Opposing fires swept across the ground, straining toward a central point of contact. The Vayash, intent upon Waller, failed to comprehend this sudden new danger. Instead, oblivious, they rushed straight ahead into a flaming wall of fire. Screaming, they fell. Their garments caught fire. They beat at the flames, rolling on the ground.

But the fire itself did not stop here. It continued to spread. A nearby hut burst into flames. In a moment, others followed. The fire soon swept through the village. The Nesquash came pouring from their burning homes. Outside, they stopped frozen, seeing the screaming Vayash.

"Get them!" Waller screamed. "Hit them now! Don't let them getaway!"

He moved forward himself, though carefully. Ahmad and his helpers now emerged from the fields. They rushed the Vayash, hurling their spears. One struck solidly home.

Waller appealed to the still milling Nesquash: "Get them!" He pointed to the pile of clubs. "Grab one! Attack! The Vayash have destroyed your homes!" This was partially true. The flames by now had engulfed the village. Only a few huts had escaped the conflagration.

Sondra stationed herself beside the clubs. Anytime a shaken Nesquash came near, she thrust a club into his hands and shoved him toward the Vayash. "Get them," she urged. "Kill them."

And some moved. Only a few at first, hesitant, bewildered, but they moved; they fought. Ahmad and his group had also reached the struggling Vayash now. The battle began in earnest. Waller hurried to join them, waving his club.

More of them were coming—more Nesquash. The sight of the fight, the sound of wood striking bone, the odor of spilled blood: they come—more and more.

The fire had swept past them and so the battlefield was clear. The Vayash stood their ground but the results were no longer in doubt. Numbers would decide the final end to this, and the Nesquash outnumbered the Vayash: five-to-one at least.

Waller grabbed a struggling Vayash and pulled him down. The man, badly burned in the beginning, could offer only token resistance. Waller clubbed him once, then again; the man failed to move.

Waller closed with a huge blonde giant of a Vayash. The man swung his club and the air whistled. Waller ducked, blocking the wild blows with the tip of his own club. Finally, spotting an opening, he used his club like a billiard cue, poking the man's belly. The giant went, "Oof," and bent over. Waller raised his club for the final blow.

But Jador got there first.

Over the fallen man, they grinned at each other.

Jador shook his club in triumph. Waller slapped him on the back.

The remaining Vayash were surrounded by as many as five and six Nesquash each. A fit of bloodlust had gripped the once passive villagers. No quarter was offered or given. Waller turned his back on the battle and staggered away. The odor of smoke

jammed his lungs; he needed fresh air.

"It worked," said a nearby voice, shouting to be heard over the clamor of battle. "I never gave it a chance —but it did."

Waller pulled Sondra down beside him. He pointed at the smoldering remains of the village. "We made it so they no longer had anything to lose. Then they'd fight— only then. Then they'd win."

"Did they?" she asked.

He turned and looked at the battleground. It was over. The Vayash to a man—dead. "Yes," he said. "They won. Because, from now on, if this ever happens again, they'll fight. They've learned how."

"But they've lost everything, too."

"They can rebuild the village. It was nothing much to begin with."

"No." She shook her head furiously. "I don't mean the village. What does that matter? I mean their innocence. We took that away from them, Calvin, and they can never get it back. Look at the blood—look at what they've lost."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Waller permitted the Nesquash one day in which to celebrate their victory and mourn their dead and then— with Norgo—demanded the immediate reconstruction of the burned village. Within a week, a sufficient number of the huts had been built to house everyone but Waller didn't let them stop there. He demanded additional huts, log cabins; he assigned people to work in the fields. Norgo followed him about and, by the second week, had taken charge of her own people.

The Old Mother had occupied one of the first of the rebuilt huts and had seldom been seen since. Waller suggested he and Norgo go see her. They found the old woman tired and drawn.

She spoke bitterly of the disgust and grief she had felt during the terrible battle.

Without any urging from Waller, Norgo said, "We want you to surrender your claim as leader. You are no longer fit to serve. The old ways are gone. You must realize that."

The Old Mother did not resist: "My people are no different from the Vayash. I ask only that they stay clear of my door and permit me to die. If you wish to lead, you may do it. I do not care."

From the Old Mother's hut, Norgo led Waller to a second dwelling place, one of the new log cabins. The Old Mother's legal successor, a younger sister, lived here. Norgo asked Waller to wait outside. He did, squatting in the dust, watching the men at work in the fields.

When Norgo emerged, she flashed a smile: "It's done.

I'm the Old Mother now—or the chief. I think I like that better."

Waller pointed at the cabin. "She didn't want it?"

"Oh, she wanted it." Norgo winked. "I convinced her to step aside."

"There won't be any trouble over this?"

Norgo shook her head with positive certainty. "Nothing I can't handle."

Their gravest problem during these days of reconstruction was food. Because of the fire and the preceding neglect, there simply wasn't enough to feed even half the village properly.

During the first few days, everyone ate sparingly; Waller instituted a careful rationing system. Search parties were sent into the woods to gather wild fruit and berries. Waller went with one of these and, when a wild pig suddenly rushed past, found himself incapable of resisting. He threw his spear and finished

the pig off with a club.

That night he and Ahmad and Sondra ate splendidly.

Norgo, who shared their hut, stared at her own bare plate of lettuce and corn. "All right," she finally said, "give me some."

"You can't eat meat," Sondra said.

Norgo threw away her vegetables. "I can't eat these, either. Give me some."

Waller passed a small portion of the pork and smiled reassuringly. "Try it."

Norgo raised the meat to her mouth and chewed slowly, tentatively, swallowing with ill-concealed distress. She tried a second bite and swallowed that. Then, gasping, she stood up and dashed from the hut. The others ate in silence. When Norgo returned, her face was pale. She sat down, picked up the remaining pork, and ate again. "My stomach cannot accept this meat," she said, "but my mouth enjoys it."

"You'll have to teach your stomach," Waller said.

"I don't think it's her stomach," said Sondra. "I think it's her conscience."

But Norgo asked for a second helping.

Some children also came by and, seeing the feast, diffidently asked to be served. The children ate eagerly, showing none of Norgo's symptoms and, when finished, asked for more.

The next night, as Sondra roasted the remainder of the pork, a whole flock of children arrived to watch. Soon, some adults joined them. A few tried to chase the children away. Waller stopped this. "If you want to eat, stay. If you don't, go away."

A surprising majority—children • and adults—chose to stay. And eat.

When Waller was ready to go hunting again, a half-dozen of

the younger men came and asked to go with him. In the forest, he carefully explained the best methods for bringing down wild game in the open. The men listened and learned.

"Now do you see what I mean?" Sondra asked, the night Waller returned. After the feast, they were alone again. "We've destroyed their innocence, all of it."

"I don't see that. If it's a question of eating meat or starving, only an idiot would starve."

"No, there's more to it than that. Can't you admit it's over? They won't go back. Even when the crops are good, they aren't going back to corn and lettuce."

"Why should they?"

"That's not for me to say, but that's not all of it, either. For instance, who was it who went hunting with you? Was it the women, the supposed leaders? No, it was the men. We've changed everything, Calvin. We've worked a social revolution."

"It couldn't be helped," he said.

She looked at him intently. "Are you sure?"

As time passed, however, the Nesquash weren't the only ones to change: so did Waller. It began when he stopped going hunting with the young men. The fact was they no longer needed him—they had mastered the few skills involved themselves and were eager to display their prowess. Waller began to go fishing, instead. There were several small creeks in the area and a good-sized lake two days distant in the low hills. He went alone—it was more peaceful that way.

Norgo took charge of the village itself. Although she consulted Waller often, the decisions made were always her own. He spent many quiet evenings with her. She loved to sit long hours beside him and hear him talk of the vanished marvels of the twentieth century. Alone among the Nesquash, Norgo knew the truth of their origin—she even seemed to believe part of it.

Sondra often complained about Norgo. She was trying to set herself up as a virtual dictator, Sondra said. Waller told her he saw nothing so terribly wrong in that. "There are times," he said, "when dictators are essential for order and progress. I can't see that the Nesquash were better off under the Old Mother and she certainly wasn't much of a dictator."

"I don't care about them," Sondra said. "I care about us. You don't think she's going to stop where she is, do you? Like today. I was standing near her when a young couple came up and asked permission to marry. Norgo told them no. The woman, she said, was too good for the man. He was a poor hunter and didn't deserve a wife. You should have seen the look on his face—I couldn't bear to watch. What if she did that to you? Then would you think she's so wonderful?"

"She'll never do that to me," said Waller.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure."

"I would." He laughed. "I don't plan on getting married. Why? Do you?"

Sondra flushed slightly. "No, of course not. Don't be stupid."

Waller finally figured out what his problem was: he was bored. The truth was really as simple as that. He was bored and Ahmad and probably Sondra, too. This must be what it's like, he thought, in the fairy tales. When the poor king is doomed to live happily ever after.

Although the three of them now occupied cabins of their own, they often met together in the evenings to share dinner. Tonight Sondra cooked trout—caught by Waller—over the stone fireplace. The three of them chatted amiably and then ate well.

After dinner, however, Waller was strangely gripped by an expansive mood. He began to speak of the possibility of leaving here. Sondra suggested they return to their old camp in the forest but Waller explained he had more in mind than that. The village should remain their base camp, but what about the empty city of which they had so often heard? From what he

could gather, it wasn't more than a hundred or so miles from here. "I'd sure like to see that," he said. "Or those mountains out there. We can see them on a clear day but nobody seems to know for sure what lies beyond them. More cities maybe. Or the ocean. We could go there. Find the Vayash in their own home and maybe start another war. We've got the whole world at our feet. Why stay here where our work is done?"

Ahmad nodded sagely. "Waller, for the first time in our relationship you have shown yourself to be a wise man. I do not ask if we should go—I ask when."

But Sondra was more suspicious. "Who else goes? Norgo, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," said Waller. "Norgo has too much to do here. It will just have to be the three of us. We could ask some of the others but I think they're still too afraid

He stopped. Something had happened—something had changed. Sitting across from him, Ahmad was no longer there.

He had disappeared.

Astonished, Waller turned to tell Sondra what had happened. Just then, she screamed. By the time he had turned his head to face her, Sondra, too, was gone.

All at once, he knew what was happening. Again. They were falling again. Irrationally, he threw himself to the floor, hugging the cold earth, as though it could keep him here. The cabin faded around him. He screamed, too.

Then the blackness descended. Waller shut his eyes, moaning. He was falling... falling... falling...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As soon as he opened his eyes, Waller decided that he must have been the victim of some silly dream. He hadn't fallen through time; he was here. Relaxing, he lay softly back upon the

moist bed of wild grass beneath him. Overhead the sun beat down, while a dry soothing breeze rippled across his face. Beside him was a familiar, reassuring presence which made him smile.

It was Norgo.

"What happened to me?" he asked. "Did I fall or—?"

Her expression, listening to him, said something wholly at odds with his optimistic thoughts: her face told him that all was not right with the world. Something had happened—something dreadful. Norgo was afraid.

"What is it?" he said, sitting suddenly up.

"There," she said, pointing past him, behind. "Over there. Tell me what it is, what has happened to us."

He turned, following her hand, but stopped. He shook his head in stark amazement. There, five, even ten miles distant stood the three most massive buildings he had viewed in his life, giant steel towers stretching into the clouds. The buildings stood alone. He tilted his head as far back as it would go but still could not make out the end of the towers.

He told Norgo: "I'm sorry but there's only one explanation: it's happened again; this is the future."

"No!" She drew back in horror.

"I'm afraid so."

"But—•" she pointed to herself "—why me?"

"How should I know?" He was suddenly angry with her and struggled to stand. "I don't even know why it happened to me."

"But I wasn't with you. I was alone."

"No." He was remembering the scene of his departure. "I was with Ahmad—and Sondra." He spun suddenly around. "Where are they? Have you seen them?"

She stood up with him. "I have seen no one."

"But you landed here."

"No, it was away." She waved in the direction opposite the towers. "I began to walk. I came some distance, then saw the birds. They were circling in the air. I came to see and found you."

"Then it's not random," he said. "Whoever or whatever is doing this—some conscious entity is behind it all. But why? For what reason?"

Norgo shook her head weakly. "I do not know or care. Waller, I just want to go back. We can, can't we? There must be a way."

"If there is, I don't know it."

She sat down slowly, hugging her knees. Her head continued to shake in pointless, spasmodic bursts. "Then what do we do?" she said.

He turned in a circle, studying the surrounding landscape. But there was nothing: no trees, flowers, even weeds. The land was flat but not dry. Nothing—only the towers. "We go there," he said.

"But what are they?"

"Who knows? Buildings, I hope, with people. Half a city could live in one of these. Whatever they are, there must be food and water."

"When?"

He shrugged. "Now if you like," He studied the sky. "It must be after noon. We may as well start."

She stood straight up and walked off. He hurried to keep pace with her.

It wasn't hot—just pleasantly warm. At first Waller tried to interest Norgo in conversation but she failed to respond even weakly. Together they lapsed into silence. The farther they went,

the more Waller expanded his original estimate of the towers' distance. Fifteen miles at least, he thought. The crisp weather was a blessing. He had arrived in this time even less prepared than before for the ordeal of survival. The only weapon he carried was a short, dull stone knife. His clothes though functional were hardly protective. What if they had been dropped in Siberia in mid-winter? Or the Gobi Desert? Their continuing good luck only served to convince him further of the presence of some deliberate force behind their timejumping. He found this conclusion a reassuring one. There was nothing so frightening in human affairs as apparent randomness. All sane men needed to believe that a clear purpose lay behind their every move, and more than anything else, Waller wanted to be sane.

As dusk fell, it became possible to make out individual windows along the sides of the nearest tower. These windows began half the distance up the length of the tower and continued as far as he could see. Five miles—each one must be at least that high. A hundred thousand people could easily live in each. He only hoped these towers, like the cities in Norgo's time, would not prove to be empty relics from some long forgotten past. As an alternative to that, even Alaska seemed preferable.

He thought night would surely cut them off short of their goal and yet, soon enough, the towers came to life with a gold, shimmering light that bathed the landscape to a point just short of natural daylight. It was bright enough they could see their feet as they proceeded.

"It's beautiful," Norgo said, speaking for the first time in several miles. She meant the illuminated towers. "But frightening, too."

"For me also," he admitted.

"But weren't there wonders such as this in your world?"

"No," he said. "Nothing the same."

"In my world the one thing of such power and beauty was the sun itself, and that is here, too. And yet the sun is nothing compared to this. Men did not make the sun."

They were close. Waller stared up into the sky. The tower, the nearest of the three, wasn't more than a mile away. But when they arrived—then what? What would they find?

The two of them walked on, silent once more.

When the men emerged from the ground, they seemed to spring to the surface as if in a miracle. One moment the land ahead was green and flat and empty; the next two dozen men stood blocking their path.

Waller grabbed Norgo and stopped. "There they are."

One of the men stepped forward. Raising a hand, he called out. Waller listened intently but the language made no clear sense. He tried to reply himself, first in normal English, then in Norgo's dialect. If the man understood, he gave no sign. "We are strangers," Waller said. "We come seeking food and shelter. We mean you no harm. We want help."

The man raised his arm. At the signal, the others came forward. Sensing trouble, Waller backed off. The men were each holding something—a silver, gleaming device, a weapon.

Once more, he shouted out, trying to explain himself. The men did not pause. Seeing no alternative, he grabbed Norgo. "Run," he said. "They're not listening."

But it proved too late for that. Even before he finished speaking, the weapons hummed and flashed. A light silver mist sprayed from their nozzles. It was wet, like a warm rain. Waller backed off, struggling. The mist burned his eyes, stung his throat. He dropped to the ground, gagging. He heard Norgo choking beside him. The pain turned to numbness. First his mouth, then his throat, then his lungs.

In a moment, he was unconscious.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He knew he must be dreaming again.

Above him, Sondra floated, drifting gently through a pure blue sky, dressed in a shimmering gown that reflected a natural rainbow spectrum, changing shape each time she moved, clinging to her body one moment, blossoming out the next. And, though her lips moved constantly, not a single sound reached his ears. It was a dream—a wonderful, remarkable vision of peace and beauty. Shutting his eyes, Waller leaned back, intending to ride with his mind.

But: wait. With his eyes shut, the dream went away. That wasn't right—it could not be. He opened his eyes and there she was again. A soft, humming music accompanied her motions, the rhythm of the melody perfectly matching the steady drifting of her body and gown. He wouldn't shut his eyes again—he was too afraid of losing this dream. No, that was wrong, for he had been forced to decide that it couldn't be a dream. It was much better than that: he was dead. Dead and in heaven and the music was that of the spheres.

Then, suddenly, a too familiar voice disrupted his closely conceived world. It said: "He's not dead."

Waller protested. "I am dead—you're wrong—I am." The voice he had heard belonged to Ahmad. Had he died, too?

"You are not." A firm hand gripped his elbow. "So get up and look alive."

Waller found that he was sitting up. Sondra stood in front of him and Ahmad beside her. Both were alive— and very mortal.

"I guess I am alive," Waller said, with genuine regret in his tone.

"You took forever waking up," said Sondra.

"I didn't think I really wanted to. Where—" the sky, he now discovered, was actually a blue ceiling "—where am I?"

"Here," she said, making a wide sweeping motion.

He tried to look, too, but what he saw was so astonishing he

quickly lowered his gaze after only a brief moment. He seemed to be seated somewhere in the middle of a vast indoor chamber so huge its walls were barely visible. Everywhere he looked, in any direction, there were people, people, and more people. The raw cacophony of their voices assaulted his recently dreaming ears painfully. Everyone dressed indistinguishably—like Sondra—in light, bright gowns.

Glancing down at himself, he saw that he was no different.

"I'm in the tower," he said.

Sondra nodded. "Yes. We know they caught you— Norgo told us."

He swiveled his head carefully, observing only the nearest people. "She's not here?"

Ahmad, who seemed less than comfortable in his bright attire, said, "She's here. She went to get our dinners."

"But what is this?" said Waller. "Are we just—just here?"

"You might say that," Ahmad said. "We're slaves."

"Whose?"

"Theirs." Sondra pointed at the ceiling. "The people who live up above, in the top floors. We grow their food but that's all. We never see them."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three days now, if you can believe the local time. We were getting afraid you wouldn't show up. Of course, you might have been right here in this room the whole time and we wouldn't have found you."

"We were outside."

"Yes, we were, too. At first. The guards brought us here. All we've done is slave and slave. It's night now, by the way."

"But you work outside?"

"Oh, no. Nobody ever goes there. The slaves on this floor—they've never seen the sun or moon. The fields are upstairs—on other floors. The ground is just like dirt."

By this tune Norgo returned, bearing a plastic tray holding paper bowls filled with a thick substance halfway between soup and oatmeal. Waller sampled a bite. The taste was tepid, almost non-existent; he was reminded now of baby's pabulum. Hungry, he forced himself to finish the entire bowl. Norgo, who hadn't eaten a bite, gave him her bowl. She seemed strangely passive, depressed. Finding him awake upon her return, she had barely nodded an acknowledgement—and not spoken a word since.

"Any ideas?" Sondra said, when he finished the second bowl. "We were rather hoping you might be able— well, there has to be some way out of here."

"I'm sure there is. But give me time. I just arrived."

"Of course. I'm sorry. It's just so—so unbearable here."

"She's inexperienced at being a slave," Ahmad said. "My genes see me through."

"I do have one idea," Waller said, belching. "I think we ought to find another source of food."

"There isn't one," Ahmad said.

"Not the fields?"

"Touch any of that and the guards stun you. Then you work two shifts for the next month. I'm afraid it's hardly worthwhile."

"Well," said Waller, "then that makes it simpler. I wouldn't mind so much being someone's slave if only they fed me well but if this mush is the best we can expect for the rest of our lives, then I'm not going to stand for it. The way I see it we've got only one realistic alternative."

"What's that?" said Ahmad.

"Why, we revolt, of course." Waller took Ahmad's half-full bowl and tossed it high into the air. The contents splattered equally down upon them. Wiping a blot of the mush off his forehead, Waller grinned. "We take over the show and run it ourselves. That way it'll be our turn to eat cake for a change."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Within an hour after starting his first day of slaving in the fields, Waller became even more firmly convinced than before that revolt was an absolute necessity. The simple truth was that he was not cut out for this work. It wasn't so much that the work was hard—he had done hard work before—it was that the work was boring. Moving about all day in a stooped position, while depositing tiny seeds in narrow dirt furrows—no, he just could not stand another forty or fifty years of that. The work seemed so futile. Could it really be necessary in a civilization sufficiently advanced to have constructed the towers? No machines were used at all—everything was done by hand alone. He tried to estimate the numbers of slaves at work on this one floor alone and the figure he came up with was just short of one thousand. Ahmad reported that another dozen or so floors were under various stages of cultivation, while several more were opened at various times of the year. An additional five floors were given over to the raising and grazing of various livestock—cattle, horses, sheep, pigs.

"But why in here?" Waller kept asking. "Why not outside where it's warm and green? I just don't understand it."

"There used to be a reason," Ahmad said. "At least I gather that was so. At one time the outside world was largely uninhabitable. A war, a plague, some natural disaster. And you are familiar with the force of habit, Waller. Self-sufficiency has become just that. And what better technique for a slave society? The more a man's life is constricted, the less apt he is to seek freedom. Few of the slaves are even aware of the existence of an outside world. They are born here, they live here, they die here. Ouch!"

A guard had caught him chatting. Besides the weapon containing the silver spray, each guard was also equipped with a short club which emitted a strong electrical shock. Cursing his pain, Ahmad bolted toward the guard. Swiftly, Waller grabbed and held him. "No, Ahmad, not yet. Don't be a fool."

"Then, when?" Ahmad tugged weakly to be free.

"Soon, soon. You know it takes time. Just relax."

In silence, they returned to their work. Waller's back and shoulders ached and burned. It's got to be very soon, he kept thinking. If we don't hurry, they'll beat us slowly down. We have to fight while we still have the strength to resist.

The absence of any clock—including the sun—caused the day to seem to stretch eternally. At last, a general rest break was called. Waller dropped eagerly to the ground. Norgo volunteered to go in search of food and water. "Will it be the same?" Waller asked.

"The food? Oh, certainly," said Ahmad. He laughed. "It's very healthful, you know."

"This just doesn't make sense." Waller spoke bitterly. "There's no good reason in a world as rich as this for people to suffer such basic wants."

Ahmad seemed amused. "Ah, but who says they're suffering? You should have been here our first night. Some local celebration occurred. The people were out laughing, singing, dancing. Is that what you call suffering?"

"It doesn't matter how happy they are. Compared to what must exist upstairs, the people are suffering. And you know it."

"And you believe that's extraordinary? Waller, please, haven't you ever taken a good look at your homeland? Or mine?" He raised his eyebrows quizzically. "Is there much difference between the upstairs and downstairs here and there?"

Waller sighed. "No, I suppose not."

"Then don't say it doesn't make sense. I'm afraid it does—a great deal of sense^This is the way it's always been, though not, I hope, the way it always will be."

Waller lapsed into a shamed silence. Perhaps Ahmad was right—it wasn't fair to demand that a future civilization display more sanity than his own ever had.

Eventually, Norgo appeared with their food: four paper bowls of mush. This time, though hungry, Waller failed to eat more than half a bowl. The water provided tasted salty and brackish. He spat most of it out on the ground.

"Where's Sondra?" he asked.

"Over there." Ahmad waved at a nearby circle of slaves, men and women both. Sondra sat somewhere in the middle of them. Ahmad indicated a young man seated beside her. "That's Coulton, a friend she's made."

Waller noticed that the two of them were laughing together. It struck him as almost obscene for people to be having such a good time here. The sight also reminded him that he had not yet spoken to any of the natives.

He asked Ahmad, "How do they understand each other?"

"These people speak English. Not our English, of course, or even Norgo's, but you'll pick it up rather quickly."

"But what about them?" Sondra and Coulton continued their frantic giggling. Waller felt his temper rising. "Any idea of what's supposed to be so funny?"

Ahmad shook his head sadly. "Aren't you asking the wrong man? I'm afraid it's been far too long since I last experienced that emotion. Young love? No, I'm afraid it's alien to me."

Waller scoffed. "Love? What are you talking about?"

"Call it a close friendship, then."

"I won't call it anything of the kind." Waller started to his feet. "She doesn't know how to love. She's barely a kid. And him—he's a slave."

Ahmad grabbed Waller firmly. "So are you," he said softly.

Waller jerked his arm away. "Keep away from me. I was just going to talk to her."

"No."

"What do you mean no? Who do you think you're talking to? You don't go ordering me around."

"I meant just what I said, Waller—I meant for you to sit down and shut up. Right now Sondra is happy. It isn't a condition she has often experienced recently. I want you to leave her alone."

"And if I don't?"

"I really wish you would."

After a long moment's hesitation, Waller sat stiffly down in the dirt. The tension between them visibly dispersed. Waller said, "I'm sorry—I shouldn't have gotten mad."

"Oh, that's quite all right. I do remember what it was like to be jealous."

Waller felt his anger rising up again. "Who's jealous? That has nothing to do with it. Fraternization with the enemy—that's what I'm talking about."

"Coulton's no enemy."

"In a place like this, everyone is."

Just then the guards blew their whistles, a signal to return to work. Waller jumped up immediately and began shoving his seeds into the moist earth. Ahmad, from behind, told him to slow down. "I don't want them getting the idea you're typical and making the rest of us work harder."

That night, the walls and ceiling glowing as fiercely as ever, they returned down the elevators to their home floor. Waller's body was so shot through with pain that he found even walking an arduous process.

Sondra joined them only long enough for dinner. Norgo fetched the bowls and once more, without being asked, passed hers to Waller. He hesitated, then accepted it.

Sondra quickly disappeared again. Ahmad confirmed that she had indeed gone to see Coulton. "But look," he said, "you needn't get upset. I was just about to suggest you and I go that way ourselves."

"I don't want to meet him. Why should I?"

"I had another man in mind, a very old man, his name is Landom. His function among these people is that of a breathing, living history book. Without a written language, it's necessary for them to pass their knowledge orally from one generation to the next. I think he's worth listening to."

"Why?"

"He might provide us with some clue as to how to get out of here."

"Then let's go." Waller stood up at once. "Norgo, you ought to come, too."

She looked at him with eyes that seemed incapable of focusing. "No," she said, "I will stay here."

"Are you sure? It might be better to move around."

"Why? It's all the same, isn't it?"

He couldn't answer that. Her condition was something he felt helpless to correct. He had often heard of people who, deprived of their freedom, simply could not bear the psychological loss. Such people first died inside, then without, as well.

The best help he could give Norgo was simple reassurance: "Look, this isn't going to last forever. We're going to get out of here—I promise you that. It may not come in a day or a week but it will happen. You have to believe that. Don't lose your faith. There's no use dying until you're dead."

"But how?" she asked. Her voice lacked any trace of its once tremendous animation. "How can anyone fight all this?" She waved weakly at the vast chamber surrounding them. "We'll find a way."

"No, Calvin, I do not think so. It is not your fault. This place is just so much greater than we are."

"You don't have to believe that."

"But I do."

Ahmad drew Waller gently away. "It isn't any use," he explained. "She won't listen—she can't. You'll just have to show her."

"But what if I can't? Look, Ahmad, the Vayash took her as a slave. She wasn't like this then—she didn't give up hope."

"No, but she could still believe in her own abilities there. She was smarter than the Vayash and knew it. But here—how can you expect her to understand any of this? We can barely comprehend it ourselves. You can't expect Norgo to do anything more."

Ahmad led them on a careful path through the crowded floor. They passed Sondra, who was sitting in a group with Coulton, and stopped beside a frail old man who sat alone.

Ahmad indicated that Waller should sit. "This is

Landom. Because you've never heard their language, I'll try to translate for you. But ask him anything you want—anything—and I'll relay what you say."

The old man nodded at Waller and smiled amiably. He said

something that sounded like an angry gurgle but then nodded again.

Waller smiled briefly in return, then turned back to Ahmad. "Ask him this," he said. "Ask him how we get out of here."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The trouble with Landom's reply to Waller's question was that nothing the old man said ever came out directly. Instead, he had apparently committed great chunks of raw material to memory and although he could approach and find any particular large chunk he lacked the ability to draw conclusions from his own data; the best he could manage was to repeat the entirety of what he knew.

So, when Waller—by way of Ahmad—asked how to escape the tower, Landom said, "This was nine full generations ago." Ahmad promptly translated, adding by way of explanation that the three towers had been erected some thirty-one generations in the past. "There lived then a young man who was called Coulton." Ahmad explained: "Not this Coulton, of course. The name is as popular here as Jesus in Latin America and for many of the same reasons."

Landom then went on: "Although a happy and obedient youth, Coulton soon grew discontented with his lot. He had witnessed the great waste and drudgery surrounding him and had become convinced that it was wrong for some men to work as slaves while others enjoyed the harvest of their labors without lifting a hand in their own behalf. Since birth, Coulton had heard many tales of the Supreme Ingear, the immortal man who occupied the ultimate three hundredth floor of the tower and who had caused it to be erected in the long ago beginning. It soon became Coulton's belief that if only one man would go and visit the Supreme Ingear in his own quarters and there ask openly, then that great man in his deep wisdom would surely grant to all his slaves the freedom that was rightly theirs. And, since no one else was sufficiently bold even to conceive of such a plan, the man who-went would have to be himself.

"And so one night when the slaves had finished their work and been sent below to their homes, Coulton hid himself in the dark fields in order to begin his quest. The guards remained in the area for some considerable time, but Coulton was patient and waited until one happened to pass his hiding place unaware. Then, springing suddenly out, Coulton thrashed the guard and stole his badge and weapons. Thus disguised, he was able to accompany the remaining guards to the elevators, one of which carried them up to the sixty-second floor, which was their home. Once there, Coulton immediately realized that he had already ventured farther and higher than any slave before him and this realization also caused him to believe, perhaps for the first time, that his quest might not be in vain and that he would, in the end, win out and reach the sacred domain of the Supreme Ingear."

"What made him so sure," Waller interrupted, "that this Supreme Ingear wouldn't simply have him killed?"

But Landom went on, oblivious to the existence of the question. He stated that the guards, as soldiers, were quartered in the working men's area. Here lay the great machines whose power created the light and heat that kept the tower itself from perishing from within. Coulton soon learned of one particular group of workers who were kept separate from their fellows. These men were the ones permitted to venture outside and work there. Knowing he would be safest here, Coulton sought these people out and established himself through subterfuge as one of them. Here he also took a lover, the woman DiAnn, who hearing his story and weeping for the dreadful condition of the slaves, agreed to hide and keep him. For six long months, Coulton remained with DiAnn, giving her a child who would soon be born as a son. This boy would eventually rise to be a tower manager, with a home on the two hundred ninety-eighth floor, but that was another story and one not always pertinent to this one.

In time it became clear that Coulton, if he wished to complete his quest, must part from DiAnn. She wept bitterly when he told her this but understood that his purposes were deeper than love itself and soon came to wish him well.

Coulton was then able to include himself among a party of

workers being sent outside. There he gazed upon the single yellow sun that burned in the heavens with a light and intensity greater, some said, than all the lights in all the ceilings throughout the length of the tower. The purpose of the group to which Coulton now belonged was to collect certain specimens of outer wildlife to be taken and kept in the zoological gardens on the one hundred fiftieth floor. These animals proved to be very different from those who grazed within the slave area. Many, it was said, were fierce, angry beasts who consumed raw flesh, including—if they could get it—human meat. Landom then digressed, while Waller fretted, to recall in intricate detail a furious battle between an unarmed Coulton and a huge gray wolf. Needless to say, Coulton eventually managed to slay the wolf, emerging with barely a scratch. But it wasn't the battle that most impressed Waller at this point: it was the intrusion into the story of such a pedestrian concept as a zoo. The reference confused him; it was like coming across a swear word in the middle of a sermon, and the whole thing provided a certain aura of reality which the tale had not previously possessed. For the first time Waller seriously considered the possibility that some of this story might actually be true.

"At first," Landom was saying, "Coulton had shivered fearfully beneath the hot eye of the single sun but after his struggle with the wolf a sense of his own divine mission possessed him and he came to walk high, with his arms held stiff and straight and his faith in himself once more running undiminished through his veins."

Coulton further managed to include himself among those sent to do the actually delivering of the wildlife. On the one hundred fiftieth floor, he made his escape, throwing off the guards with the strength of a mad man. These higher floors, unlike those he had so far known, were not vast open chambers but were rather divided up into a multitude of small, separate rooms. Some of these were used for work but a majority served as private apartments for individuals or families. Coulton, after a variety of adventures, each described in total detail, discovered an empty apartment and hid himself there for a day and part of a night.

Then, emerging into darkness—the deepest he had ever known

inside the tower—the ceiling lights here extinguished—Coulton went in search of the elevators.

Passage between floors was freely permitted in these regions and so Coulton soon rose without difficulty. It wasn't until he reached the two hundredth floor that his garments—those of a worker—attracted the attention of the local guards. A great battle soon ensued and although finally beaten down, Coulton first disposed of a full dozen of the guards. In fact, so imposing were his feats that the captain of the guards—a man named Samese—spared his life and took Coulton to his home where he would soon live as his son. With Samese, he learned to read and write and was given a routine job upon the two hundred twelfth floor. He came to love and respect his benefactor and yet his own sense of mission refused to permit him to relax. Upon leaving work one day, he chose to ride the elevator up instead of down. His quest had been resumed.

The higher he rose the fewer people he saw and yet the greater the barriers he was required to face. He fought against hideous, savage men and monsters. Things half-human lurked in these high, dark corridors. Waller, listening, found himself losing interest; his sense of belief faded rapidly. He began to yawn and twitch.

But when the point was reached that called for Coulton to come at last to the two hundred and ninety-ninth floor, Waller found he could no longer resist listening. The moment Coulton stepped from the elevator, he was taken prisoner by the private guards of the chief tower manager, who alone occupied this wide penultimate floor. The manager personally ordered Coulton put to death for a variety of crimes but Coulton resisted long enough to plead his case, stating the many reasons behind his quest. So effective were his words that the guards refused to obey their master's will and instead escorted Coulton to the secret and private elevator that allowed him to ascend the final distance to the top floor.

At this point Landom's use of detail, which until now had been careful and complete to the extreme, became abruptly vague and tenuous. The Supreme Ingear was described as an old

but vigorous man, with a face so wise and wonderful that Coulton immediately fell to his knees and wept without restraint.

At last the Ingear directed him to rise and state the reasons for his appearance here. In a rush Coulton described his quest and told of the many obstacles he had faced and hardships he had overcome during the course of his journey. Landom repeated every word of this summary, though none of it was new to the story.

Shaken as only a truly wise man could be, the Ingear drew Coulton close and kissed his lips. "For many ages," the Ingear supposedly said, "I have lived alone. In that time I fear I have neglected the affairs of my children below. It is a wonderful thing that you have come to remind me of my obligations. But, please, we must talk. You must inform me of the state of your world—it is mine, as well. How do our people live?"

Coulton spoke movingly of the terrible drudgery their own people suffered, how they slaved all day in the fields and received nothing in return for this selfless labor. The Ingear nodded as he spoke and said at the end that this was wrong. "I never intended," he said, "for this practice of slavery to persist beyond our earliest years. Now it is my duty to correct this horrible mistake. Those responsible will be punished and the slaves will be set free at once. I promise you this before everything else."

But at that very exact moment the tower manager suddenly appeared from behind a tree and thrust a poisoned dagger into Coulton's back. Death came instantly to him, without pain, and with, some said, a smile upon his lips at the end.

So shaken was the Supreme Ingear by the death of Coulton that he ordered the manager's tongue removed and his limbs severed from his body. The manager was then carried outside and left in the wilderness to survive as best he could.

Coulton, in turn, was buried as a true hero in the soil of the three hundredth floor. The Ingear personally presided at the ceremony and drank the funeral toast. The child born to Coulton and DiAnn was traced and brought to live with the Ingear. He was trained to become the new chief tower manager and, on his

sixteenth birthday, assumed this post.

Alas, the slaves and their plight were soon forgotten. In his grief at Coulton's death, the Ingear neglected his vow. Coulton's son proved to be as cautious and ambitious as he was able and he failed to make any effort to remind the Ingear of his past promise. "And so," said Landom, "even up to this very day, we slaves have remained in bondage, awaiting the time when a second Coulton will emerge among us to again ascend the many elevators and reach the three hundredth floor and remind the Supreme Ingear of his long forgotten promise."

"Hasn't anyone ever tried?" Waller asked.

Ahmad repeated the question to Landom, who replied with some excitement. Ahmad translated for Waller's benefit: "Many men try each year but none has survived to reach the workers' floors but that is because none of these has been Coulton."

"Then thank him," said Waller, standing. "Tell him his story was very interesting. I'd like to come back some time and hear more."

Ahmad obediently conveyed Waller's feelings to the old man.

Then the two of them set off toward home. Sondra was nowhere to be seen. Both she and the other Coulton were missing from their former group. x

"Well, what did you think?" asked Ahmad, as they walked.

"I thought it was the highest pile of sheer rubbish I've heard in my life."

"I thought you'd say that. But I wanted you to hear it."

"You knew all that before?"

"Oh, yes. The story is basic with these people. Any of them will tell it to you at the drop of a feather."

"But you can't believe it. I mean, supposedly all of this took

place upstairs where no slave has ever been since. If that's so, then how do they even know what happened?"

"It could be a grapevine. The guards come from above. They talk. They could have heard something from someone living above them, who heard something from somebody living above them, and so on. It's not impossible."

"And the monsters in the corridors? The poisoned dagger? Isn't it all a bit melodramatic?"

"Isn't our being here melodramatic, too? That doesn't mean it's not true."

"But even if it is—I mean, so what? I don't see any hope for us in that story. If we tried to duplicate what Coulton did, we'd be dead in ten minutes. Even the old man knew that."

"We don't have to duplicate it," said Ahmad. "We can just make use of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why should we act alone?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

If he had come to believe during his first day working in the fields that slavery was a dull, tedious existence, Waller soon came to understand that what was bad could very easily become worse. He thought three weeks had passed but it might have been four. How could one be expected to keep track, when every day was exactly the same as the one that followed? Up in the morning, elevator to the fields, work, work, work, a rest break, more work, lunch, more and more and more work, and finally the elevator to the home floor. After that, he usually slept till morning. It wasn't so much that he was tired. No, but what other sure means of escape besides sleep was available to him? So far he had found nothing.

But tonight Ahmad insisted he stay awake. They would be

having a guest for dinner.

"I can't eat that slop," Waller said. /

"It doesn't matter if you do," said Ahmad. "I want you to hear."

"Then who's the guest?"

"Young Coulton."

"Then I'll sleep."

"No." Ahmad grabbed Waller. "This is important. Essential. You must stay awake."

"Well, I'll try," said Waller.

He had of course taken an early and immediate dislike to this curly-headed, dark-skinned young man, but later experience had showed that this reaction was not entirely fair. The truth was that Coulton was an extremely likeable person. Too likeable, Waller thought, still dis-liking him. Coulton was bland, empty, stupid, a vacancy. While Sondra gazed with moonstruck eyes, the best Waller could manage was a faintly stifled yawn.

He had never expected slavery to prove conducive to the production of intelligence but, even given this, Coulton was surely a sad example.

At the moment, Coulton spoke to them—Waller, Sondra, Ahmad, Norgo—of his dreams and hopes: "If only I could live to see my people free, I then believe I could die without regret. We repeat the old stories endlessly. We talk of my namesake. And yet we never do anything. Why not pass beyond what Coulton did? Why not learn to fight? I ask them this and am told the guards have all the guns and sticks. We cannot fight them. It is my belief our greatest obstacle is not weapons but rather our own ignorance. We do not understand this world in which we are living; we have never been permitted to experience it. Beginning with ignorance, we have moved inexorably onward to a state of fear. In order to fight, to resist, we must first make a giant step

across a wide chasm of unknown depth. To that, my people prefer slavery. It is a state they know and understand. For that, I despise and blame them."

"But what about you?" said Ahmad, who all night had pretended a fascinated interest in every word Coulton spoke. "If it were your choice, which would you do? Fight?"

"Of course. But the choice cannot be mine alone. That would mean nothing beyond my personal death and in that would lie nothing but continued failure. If anything else could be gained, please tell me."

"No, you're right," said Ahmad.

"I'm not so sure," Waller muttered. Sondra heard. The glare she sent Waller's way bristled with a thousand sharp knives.

"Perhaps I ought to go now," said Coulton. He had seen Sondra's glare and probably guessed its inspiration.

"It is late," Sondra said. She stood up, taking Coulton by an arm. "Thank you, Ahmad, for inviting us. We have had a fine evening with you."

Ahmad nodded. As soon as Coulton and Sondra were out of earshot, he wheeled on Waller. "I wish you would at least make some effort," he said, "to control these petty jealousies of yours. I invited Coulton here for a particular purpose and now you've driven him away."

"It might have helped," said Waller, "if you'd bothered to tell me the meaning of this great purpose."

"It's a plan."

"What sort of plan?"

"A plan for escape, what do you think? For many weeks now, I have been considering a variety of possible avenues, but each time have been drawn back to a concept I originally developed even before your arrival here. Lately I believe I have perfected

this concept to the point where it works."

"You've really found a way?"

"I have." /

Any thought of Sondra and Coulton promptly vanished from his mind. Waller leaned eagerly forward. "Then tell me. I'm all ears."

"My plan," said Ahmad, "has its basis in the various details of the Coulton legend. Surely nothing has so captured the imagination of these people as that little story. For instance, if one of us—you or me—was to go among them, counseling immediate revolt, we would likely be ignored. And yet if the original Coulton were to reappear miraculously and do the same, then there would surely be a fight. This fact is explicitly contained in the legend. It speaks, as you may recall, of a second Coulton."

Waller grinned. "And you think our Coulton is that Coulton? Ahmad, you are nuts."

"It does not matter if you believe or I believe. What matters is that they must. And I believe that will not be impossible. I believe they are ready to believe."

"Even if they are, how can they? Our Coulton is not alone. Every year people show up and try to duplicate the legend. I'll bet you half are named Coulton. You told me yourself it was a common name."

"Ah, but that is where my concept becomes a genuine plan. It includes the one factor necessary to add real verisimilitude to our Coulton's claim."

"And what is this mysterious factor?"

"Sondra."

"I was right to begin with: you are nuts."

"No, no, listen. Ask yourself this question: who are we? More specifically, who is Sondra? You can answer that, yes, but can these people? No, never. We are something way, way outside their meager knowledge, strangers, aliens. I suggest that Sondra quite bluntly assert that we are pilgrims come down from the workers' floors above and that she in particular is none other than the daughter of the original DiAnn. Don't you see, Waller? We take the old legend and complete it. We not only have our messiah but his lover as well. I don't see how we can fail. The plan is absolutely, wonderfully perfect."

Waller smiled happily. "Then what you mean is that Sondra has been part of this all along? That's why she took up with this idiot Coulton."

"Oh, no," said Ahmad, hesitantly. "I'm afraid not." He tried to brighten. "But she will go along as soon as we explain everything to her."

Waller sought to conceal his disappointment behind a barrier of anger: "Then that blows your whole plan. Sondra has no doubt already told him all about herself."

He's not going to believe her now when she suddenly starts claiming to be someone entirely different."

"It doesn't matter if he does. You heard him when he was here. He wants to fight. He doesn't care how. When he hears my plan, he'll take to it like a duck to water."

"And if he does, so what? Are we just going to walk upstairs and visit the Supreme Ingear and get him to accept our every little wish and demand? You can't seriously believe that."

"I don't. What I do believe, plain and simple, is bloodshed. There are a thousand slaves on this floor alone. In the fields they are watched by a mere dozen or so guards. When the revolt comes, the guards will be crushed. In the ensuing chaos, you and I, Sondra and Norgo, we will make our escape. Capture one of the guards before he is killed and then get him to find the way out."

"And the slaves?"

"What about them?"

"Aren't we going to be leaving them in rather a mess?"

"I suppose that's true." The point was one Ahmad had clearly not considered. "Why do you ask?"

Waller shook his head with weary disgust. "Ahmad, when you want, you can be a very cold man. Whatever happened to the ideals you were practicing in Africa?"

"Those people were mine—these aren't. It's really not a matter of ideals, it's one of loyalty. I may not enjoy doing what must be done but neither do I intend to spend the remainder of my life as a slave."

Waller nodded. Arguing further, he could tell, would be useless; Ahmad had made up his mind to be selfish. "So what's next?" he asked.

"You must tell her."

"Tell Norgo?" He pointed to the woman crouched beside them. "She can hear us."

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"No, not her. Sondra."

"Me?"

"Of course. It has to be you. Remember, what we are asking is for her to help destroy a young man she likes very much."

"She won't listen to me."

Ahmad laughed long and hard. "Waller, you are underestimating your charms rather severely."

"I don't think I am. You saw her tonight. She loathes me."

"No, Waller, you're wrong. Are you blind? Sondra doesn't loathe you—she loves you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It seemed to Waller that he had been asleep only a few moments when he was awakened by someone's hand tugging lightly at the fabric of his gown. He opened his eyes to the brilliant overhead light and found Norgo seated beside him.

"What is it?" he said, sitting up in alarm.

"I wanted to talk to you." There was a light burning in her eyes brighter than any he had glimpsed there in many weeks. "I want you to tell me the truth: what Ahmad was telling you about, it can't work can it?"

"I believe that it can," he told her. What else? There was no good reason for dashing any meager hope she might have managed to produce in herself. "Don't you think it can?"

She shook her head slowly. "It seems so—so incredible."

"Norgo, our entire presence here is incredible."

"That's true, but still..." A look of deep despair returned to her face.

"But you can help, too," he said, swiftly.

"I can?" She brightened visibly. "How?"

"By helping prepare the way for Sondra, by serving as our secret agitator. When you work in the fields, talk openly to the people around you. Drop—but, wait, you can't speak their language, can you?"

"Oh, yes, I can. I've listened." She smiled proudly.

"You have? Good. Then what you do is drop hints. Mention that we come from upstairs. Be mysterious. Prick their interest. Build a foundation of credibility.

That way, when Sorldra makes her claim, they won't be so apt to laugh in her face. You can do that, can't you? Ahmad and I will be doing the same."

She nodded carefully, as though some great effort were involved. "I'll try, Calvin."

"Good—that's all I ask." He patted her arm tenderly. "Now go back to sleep. You know how early morning comes around here."

The next day, when lunchtime came in the fields, Ahmad gave Waller a meaningful look and jerked his head sharply. "You better do it now," he said.

"Can't I wait for my food?" Norgo had already gone to fetch three bowls.

"Are you sure you can afford the time? You don't want to have to rush."

"I don't want to have to go hungry, either." He sighed. "But I'll go. Keep your fingers crossed."

"Oh, I don't believe that is necessary, Waller. My faith in your charm is quite complete."

Waller's own faith was considerably less inclusive than that. He set out to cross the fields, not eager to reach his goal. During the past week, Sondra had begun working with Coulton's group as well as sleeping with them. Except for rare occasions such as the dinner last night they seldom set eyes on her.

He found her seated for lunch with a group of her fellow workers. Coulton was among them, and also Landom, who in spite of his age was still required, like everyone, to work a full day every day in the fields. Sondra frowned when she spied Waller approaching. Coulton managed a polite smile.

"What do you want?" Sondra asked, when he came near.

"Oh, nothing urgent." He tried a casual smile. "It was lunchtime and I felt like talking to someone."

"What*s wrong with Ahmad? Has he taken a vow of silence?"

"No, I meant you."

"Well—" she shrugged "—then talk."

"I meant alone," he said.

Her frown grew deeper. "What are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing." He had to struggle consciously to keep his temper under control. "I just want to talk."

"Alone?"

"It's a private matter."

"Oh, all right. It better be." Standing, she muttered briefly to Coulton about how irritating certain pests could be. Then she waited patiently for Waller to lead her away.

He sought out what seemed to be an acceptable secluded spot between two rows of young corn and sat down in the moist dirt. After a moment's hesitation, Sondra dropped at his side.

"Now talk," she said, "and be quick. We're alone— it's private. And this better be good."

"It's a plan. Ahmad wanted me to tell you."

"What kind of plan?"

"A plan for getting out of here."

"That's stupid."

"Now wait." He loosened his control slightly on his temper. "Before I go on, I want you to promise me something. Until I'm finished—completely finished—I want you to keep your mouth shut. Do you understand? I want your promise."

"What makes you think I ought to give it?"

"Then don't." He started to stand.

She grabbed him desperately, forcing a smile. "No, wait. I'm kidding. Sit down. I'll promise."

He relented, dropping down. "Good. Now listen." He went on to describe in as complete detail as he could the entirety of Ahmad's plan. In spite of some reluctance, he made clear to Sondra the hazards of her own selected role.

To his surprise, she kept her promise faithfully. It wasn't until he was completely done that she said, "That's the most foul and coldblooded thing I've ever heard."

"I thought you'd say that."

"Isn't it true?"

"Yes, it probably is. But, remember, this is Ahmad's plan, not mine."

"What do you mean by that? You agree with it, don't you?"

It pleased him to be given such a wonderful opportunity for startling her: "I'm not sure that I do. I wanted to hear what you had to say. If you agree, then I'd go along, too. Since you refused, I won't argue with that, either."

She chuckled sarcastically. "Which makes it very simple for you, doesn't it? Except for one little thing: I didn't refuse and I'm not going to."

Now it was his turn to be startled, that. This will mean Coulton's death-sure."

"It might also mean his freedom."

"No, I've thought of that, but it's impossible. This is only one slave floor in one tower. There's no possible way they can succeed and, even if they did, what would that mean? The actual operation of the tower undoubtedly requires many thousand of trained and experienced technicians. A bunch of slaves can't do

that. If they won, the tower would fall. But they can't win."

"I see you have it neatly worked out." She smiled at him.

"You can't mean —that much is for

"I didn't want you agreeing to something if you didn't understand it."

"Well, the fact is that I do understand it. And I said yes. If you feel it's necessary, I can do it again. Yes, yes, yes. Now are you happy? Now do you feel better?"

"No."

"Good. Now let me go to work." She stood and started to move away but, at the last possible moment, Waller reached out and caught her wrist. Their angry eyes met and held.

"There is one other thing," he said, "and I want to know it. Your reason. Why are you saying yes? You're killing them, killing him. Why?"

"Why do you think? Because I can't stand living here."

"But I thought you loved him."

"Me?" Laughing sharply, she jerked angrily free from his grasp. "Love him? Coulton? That's the most ignorant thing you've ever said to me in your life. I don't want him to die. I'd give almost anything short of my own freedom to spare him from that. But I also happen to believe—laugh if you want—that it's better to die free than live as a slave. Coulton's not stupid. He'll know he's no demigod. If he chooses to go ahead and die, then the decision will have been his. Not mine—not yours— not Ahmad's. I like Coulton and I respect him. But, no, I do not love him."

"Then why did you turn against me?" He held her with his eyes, his hands at his sides. "Why did you leave me?"

Her laughter came harsh and derisive. "I never knew I did.

Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Norgo."

"Norgo?"

"Yes. It was a long time ago, maybe so long you have forgotten. It was before we were ever brought here. You left me then. That hurt, Waller. It really did. So when we came here, I stopped waiting. I made a friend. Coulton. Just a friend, too. But I wasn't waiting any more—not for you."

"But I want you," he said.

"You had a funny way of showing it."

He reached tentatively for her. "But k's true."

She drew away. "No. Don't lie. I said yes, now shut up. Leave me alone."

"I'm not lying."

"Yes."

"No, Sondra, no."

"No?" She paused, staring at him, genuinely incredulous.

"I feel the same about Norgo as you do about Coulton. I like and respect her—she's a friend. That's as far as it goes, or ever went. It's you I love. If anyone."

She laughed again, but the sound was clear this time, not harsh. "I like that. If anyone. At least you're honest."

"I always try to be."

"Then," she said, dropping down beside him, "let's do this right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Did these people really believe? Were they that gullible? Didn't they understand that the whole thing was nothing but a vicious, coldblooded fake? These were the sort of questions Waller could not avoid asking himself. And yet was the sincerity of their feelings actually at issue? Did it matter whether they were only pretending—like Coulton and Sondra? Weren't the results the same in any event? Resistance. Revolution. Revolt. These words ran powerfully through the very air. A feeling of tension, impending release—everyone knew it. Any day, he thought. Any day now and the whole thing is going to blow sky high.

Each night after dinner, Coulton and Sondra moved about the crowded floor, stating their message, describing their mission. The openness of this agitation continued to amaze and worry Waller. Didn't the unseen powers from above have any conception of what was soon to happen beneath their feet? Were they, rather than their slaves, the truly ignorant ones?

"Tomorrow," Ahmad whispered, adopting a secretive tone less because of any real fear than because it seemed appropriate to the mood of the moment. "I'm afraid if we do not move now, some incidental accident may arise and provide the initial spark without our agreement. These people are ready to go. One can feel it in the very air. We must move."

"Yes," Waller agreed. Norgo sat with them. Most nights, one or the other of them accompanied Coulton and Sondra but not tonight; this was their last chance to decide.

"The way I see it," Ahmad went on, "is to move at once ourselves. As soon as the revolt has begun, we must capture one of the guards. It should be simple to force him to guide us outside. Once there, flight should prove a relatively simple process. There's no chance at all of them following us."

"I suppose not."

"You don't sound particularly enthusiastic."

"I'm not. I just wish there was another way."

"But there isn't," Ahmad said firmly.

"No, I suppose not."

"Then we're all agreed?"

Waller nodded sadly. After a moment's hesitation, Norgo did, too.

"Good," said Ahmad. "Then I think one or the other of you ought to go after Sondra and Coulton. It's essential that the proper pitch be found and maintained tonight. We don't want to cool them off or get them too hot, either."

"I'll go," Waller said, standing.

"And don't forget to tell them of our decision."

"I won't. Coulton has been eager to move himself."

"Of course." Ahmad smiled. "That boy is no fool."

Norgo stood up, as well. "I think I'll go, too. If no one objects."

"No, of course not."

The two of them turned and walked in silence, passing through the crowded throng of men and women. During the furious activity of the past few weeks, Norgo's past despair had largely gone away. She was not wholly recovered. Her past animation and enthusiasm were still absent. But she had improved. And Waller was very glad of that.

"So what do you think?" he asked, as they passed through a rare uncrowded place. "Who's right? Me or Ahmad?"

"I didn't know you disagreed." Her tone was not mocking—only her words.

"Only on the lightness of his plan. On whether we should feel guilty or not."

"Then I agree with you. Our plans seems very selfish to me."

"Oh, it's that for sure. But it's also necessary. We can't stay here. Being a slave almost killed you."

"But what if we fought," she said, "and died? We know we'll never go home. What do we have to lose?"

"Our lives."

"But nothing else?"

"That's hard to say, but I do know this: when I die, I don't intend for it to be a useless act. I want there to be a reason. And there's none here. With or without us, these people are doomed."

"But isn't resistance in itself reason enough?"

"For them maybe, not for me."

"Then what about this? I've been thinking. What about trying to bargain with them? We can hold the one upper floor. The only way in or out is through the two elevators and we can watch them. There's plenty of food and water. We can stay there nearly forever if necessary. Eventually, they'll have to meet our terms. Right?"

"Not necessarily. It's only one floor. Can it matter?"

"It might. Sondra says it may matter a great deal. She says it's not likely these people produce more food than they actually need—abundance would hardly make sense in an environment such as this. So, even deprived of one floor's worth of food, they may suffer."

"But not enough," he said firmly.

"It's possible, though. Isn't it?" She seemed to be pleading rather than arguing.

"What isn't? But it's not probable. That's all I was saying. Did Sondra put you up to all this?"

"We talked about it. We—" she took a deep, heaving breath—"we've both decided to stay."

Waller spun angrily around. "She didn't tell me that."

"She was afraid to. She said she knew you'd never agree. So I decided to do it myself."

"It's crazy," he said.

"Is it?" She touched his arm with more feeling than he'd known she possessed. "Calvin, I believe it is also what you wish to do."

"I'm not crazy."

She smiled. "That's what I mean."

"Then take me to her." He started off, shoving people aside. "I'll talk to her and get this straight. I won't let her kill herself. Not this way. Not for no good reason at all."

Norgo hurried to keep pace. "But you don't understand. There is a reason—a good one. At least Sondra thinks so."

"I want to hear her say that. Not you—her."

"Then you will, for there she is." Norgo stopped and pointed toward a thick, tight circle of people. Dimly over the noise of the crowd, Waller could hear Coulton's voice. Using his elbows, he forced a path for himself toward the middle. Norgo came after him.

When he came within sight of Coulton and Sondra, Waller stopped and waited. He did not want to interrupt them at this time. Coulton was speaking. Repeating the old legend, he drew his own specific conclusions from the myth. Listening to him now, in spite of his personal impatience, Waller was deeply aware of how greatly he had underestimated this man. Coulton was anything but anyone's fool. When Sondra had first broached the idea of revolt—Waller was present at the occasion—Coulton's response had been more than enthusiastic; even before the

practical details were explained, he had become a willing convert to their plot. The one thing he had never been willing to do, however, was to follow their original plan to the letter. He had a mind of his own—and a sharp one. He never claimed, for instance, to be any sort of incarnation of the original Coulton. Instead, he used the legend as a taking off point. He wanted general revolt—not a private quest. The fact was that Waller and Ahmad had not only underestimated Coulton but also his people as well. Ahmad had believed that revolt could come about only by fooling the people into thinking they had nothing to lose. Coulton said his people already knew that was true. All they demanded was hope. He had given them that now, and they were ready to fight.

When Coulton completed his remarks, Waller called Sondra over. Coulton followed and the four of them broke free from the circle.

"Norgo will tell you what we decided," Waller said. "I want to talk to Sondra alone."

"It is tomorrow, isn't it?" Coulton said.

"Yes, it is."

"Good." He smiled with satisfaction. "That's all I need to know."

"Sondra?" said Waller. From the look in her eyes, he guessed she knew what he would be saying.

They moved to a relatively open space upon the floor and crouched down side-by-side.

"Norgo told you," said Sondra.

"Yes."

"And you think I'm crazy, don't you?"

He was amazed to discover that his anger and concern had both fled. Instead of telling her what an awful, idealistic fool she

was acting, he surprised himself by saying, "No, I don't think that."

"Then what do you think?" She was no less surprised than he.

"I think you ought—ought to know that it's impossible. We can't win here. We'll be killed."

"I know that," she said.

"Then why—?"

"Why do you think?" she interrupted.

"Because," he said, slowly, carefully, measuring his words, "there's no reason not to. If we run away, what have we gained? If we stay here, at least we've helped."

"We're prisoners," she said. "Of who or what we do not know. But I believe this much: I believe that, as long as we're here, it's our duty to help, to act."

"By killing ourselves?"

"By fighting to save these people."

"We can't do it," he said.

"I told you I knew that. I won't ask you to come with me. I should have told you a long time ago and it was my fault that I didn't. But I knew what you'd say —you'd say no. And, Calvin, I didn't want to hear that; I was afraid."

"Have I said it yet?" he asked.

"No." She smiled weakly. "But you will—I know you will."

"I won't," he said.

"You mean—" Her eyes, already damp, glistened in wonderment.

"I'm staying, too."

"But you don't want to."

"I'm doing it."

"But you'll die. You'll—"

He laid a soft, tender hand upon her lips. "If I do, there'll be a reason for it. Not these people. I care about them, want to help them, but that's not the reason. You are, Sondra. Just you. If I die, it won't hurt me in the least."

She took his hand and moved it aside. "Then we won't die," she said. "We'll fight—and we'll win."

"Yes. It's not impossible. I think we can do it."

"I know we can," she said.

"And so do I." He smiled as well as he could, knowing full well that every word they spoke was a lie. "We'll win."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The instant Coulton gave the signal, dropping his hand like a shot, all those within eyesight stopped working. They laid down their tools, stood up, folded their arms. The movement then spread swiftly across the floor, proceeding like a circular wave upon the surface of a pool, a chain reaction. When one person stopped working, another saw and stopped, too. Within a moment, from one corner of the floor to the opposite, no one was at work. Waller stood beside Coulton, thinking how this instant must tie one unparalleled in the history of the tower: never before had absolutely nothing ever been permitted to occur.

The silence, too, was -complete—and frightening. No one thought to speak. No one budged a muscle.

The plan, so far, was working perfectly.

Then, from a distance, Waller heard first a shout, then a scream, then a loud burst of cheering. He could interpret all of this: a guard had moved to quell the revolt (the shout); he had

used his stunclub (the scream); he had been beaten down and defeated (the cheering).

Now the guard standing nearest to them also came forward. He started to approach Coulton, whose status among the slaves was apparent even to the guards, but hesitated. Waller didn't quite know why, but the guard suddenly changed direction and came toward Norgo instead. He picked a shovel up off the ground and held it out toward her. "You are supposed to be working," he said. At the same time, he removed his stunclub from his belt and held it in readiness. His spraygun was left untended.

"We are through working," Norgo said.

The guard, unhearing, continued to push the shovel close to her. "Work," he said. "That is an order." He raised his stunclub and prepared to use it.

Norgo was too fast for him. In a swift practiced motion, she lunged forward, reached down, and drew the guard's spraygun free from its holster. A moment later, she flashed out with a fist. The guard never got his stunclub close to a useable position. Norgo's fist caught him flat on the chin. His knees buckled like rubber. He fell without another word.

Calmly, Norgo turned the captured spraygun upon its past owner. A brief burst of the silver mist covered the guard. He gurgled, choked, then lay still.

Waller came over to retrieve the fallen stungun. "Good work," he told Norgo. "Fast—it has to be fast."

"He was afraid. That was his mistake. He did not understand what was happening."

"He won't be the only one," Waller said.

Coulton, too, had now moved quickly. Picking three slaves at random, he told them, "Stay and watch this guard. Whatever happens, do not budge from his side."

Waller threw one of them the captured stunclub.

Ahmad grabbed his shoulder and whispered, "Shouldn't one of us stay with him? He may turn out to be our best way out."

"I think he'll be safe. Nobody will tear him apart now." Ahmad, of course, had not been informed of their decision to stay. Waller was dreading the moment when this would become too obvious to be further concealed.

Already, from around the floor, more screaming and shouting could be heard. The guards were most often spaced around the floor in such a way that one rarely came in sight of another. Because of this, it was difficult to follow the progress of the revolt. In some places, clouds of the white mist could be seen hanging in the air. From this and the continued screaming, Waller gathered that many of the guards were mounting a firmer resistance than here.

Coulton waved at him. "The elevators," he said. "We must go that way."

They hurried. Ahmad, Norgo, and Sondra ran with them. On the way, they passed a place where another guard had fallen. Coulton told them to stop. The guard lay dead upon the ground, but a good dozen equally dead slaves surrounded him. Either the spraygun or stunclub, used with sufficient strength, could kill. Both weapons lay crushed and broken in the dirt beside the corpse. Seeing this destruction, Coulton swore softly. Waller joined him. Weapons were a crucial factor in all their planning. Without any, they would stand even less a chance of success than was already the case.

The smell of blood was running clearly through the air. The slaves who had brought down the guard stood restlessly around. Their growing fury, though presently contained, showed signs of bursting. A clear and definite danger existed of the revolt turning into a mere riot.

Coulton promptly rushed in to calm the men. He shouted a series of vague, general instructions, attempting to establish some sort of order among these people. He assigned specific

tasks, ordered the guard stripped, his body carried to the incineratory chute. Waller had realized all along that this would present one of their most difficult problems. At the moment when it broke, all the leaders of the revolt—himself, Coulton, Norgo, Sondra—would be bunched together in a single group. Because they had taken to working as a team, it might well have aroused some suspicion if they had chosen to split up today.

Coulton was not unaware of this problem, either. After calming these slaves, he turned and ordered Waller, Ahmad and Norgo to hurry to the elevators. "The rest of us will have to move individually across the floor. We cannot allow any more of this unnecessary destruction. We must protect the weapons, if not the guards themselves."

Waller and Norgo immediately turned to comply, but Ahmad reached out and stopped them. "Now is the time," he whispered carefully. "We won't go to the elevators but back to that first guard. We'll get him to lead us out of here."

Waller saw no alternative now except telling the truth. "We're not going out, Ahmad."

"What? But why wait? Why not—?"

"You don't understand. I'm not talking about waiting —I mean never. Norgo, Sondra, and I all agreed—we want to stay and fight. You can, too. Or go, if you want. But you're not taking that guard."

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Ahmad struggled to keep from shouting. "I'm not staying—"

From Ahmad's face, Waller clearly saw that further argument would solve nothing. Ahmad's mind was made up. Cocking his fist, Waller swung. The blow clipped Ahmad neatly on the jaw. He sagged at once, his eyes rolling shut.

Waller caught him and lowered him evenly to the ground.

Coulton stared in astonishment. Sondra seemed to understand what had occurred.

"A minor disagreement," Waller explained. "He'll understand better when he wakes up. I think someone should guard him, though."

By now, Coulton, too, appeared to understand. "I'll have that done. But you had better hurry to the elevators. We must have them watched—and soon."

"We're going now." Waller grabbed Norgo and away the two of them ran. Whenever they passed any milling group of people, Waller called at them to come, too. By the time they approached the elevators, a crowd of fifty or more pounded at his heels.

The elevators were located together hi one wall. The two high doors stood side by side. Both were presently open but it was difficult to see inside. Waller saw that it had been unnecessary for him to bring people along. An angry mob had already gathered here—perhaps as many as one hundred.

He reached out, grabbing the nearest man. His eyes burned with the bitter color of long repressed hate. "What are you doing?" Waller asked.

The man did not appear to recognize him. He waved through the crowd at the open elevators. "We're going to ride them up," he said. "We're going to see the Supreme Ingear—and we're going to kill him."

Waller had previously inspected both elevators carefully; neither was equipped to raise higher than the twenty-fifth floor. He didn't bother explaining to the man. Instead, taking Norgo by an arm, he tried to fight his way to the front of the mob. Surprisingly, the people moved aside and let him pass.

At the front he discovered that habitual meekness of the slaves had so far prevented them from taking actual control of the elevators. Much shouting was going on but very little action. A vacant space had been left clear between the mob itself and the elevators. He hurried forward and stood here. By now the people he had brought had joined the mob, swelling its ranks even more.

"Get inside the elevators," he told Norgo. "Get in and shut them down. As long as they're here, we don't want them taken away."

Norgo did as he directed. Seeing her, the mob at first howled and started to rush forward. Waller shouted at them to halt. Norgo hurried to shut down the second elevator. She called, "It's done!"

The mob seemed to understand. There was an awareness among them—the knowledge that they had been tricked. One man shouted out angrily, calling Waller a coward and traitor. Others took up this tune. Sweating, Waller tried to hold his ground. Norgo came scurrying over to join him. A rock whistled through the air, grazing her skull, and banging off the wall.

Waller was certain, any moment, the mob would charge and tear them both to pieces.

Just then, a voice reached his ears, firm but not loud: "Stop and let me pass."

It was Coulton. Waller suddenly saw his high head bobbing above the crowd. He came rigidly forward. Waller let out a deep sigh of relief and gripped Norgo's hand.

Reaching the space occupied by Waller and Norgo, Coulton turned and faced the mob. "What is this?" he cried. "Why are you fighting my good friend, Waller? What are you trying to do?"

"He tried to stop us," shouted a woman in the front ranks. "He wouldn't let us use the elevators."

"No one is going to use them," Coulton said. "We have no place to go."

"Go up!"

"Yes!"

"Kill the Ingear and make us free!"

Coulton patiently waited for the shouting to subside. Then he set out carefully to explain why their demands were unreasonable, why it was safest to wait. The crowd responded with silence. Was it working or wasn't it? Waller genuinely did not know. Was it possible to reason with an angry mob?

He was still listening, with the others, to Coulton when what he had long been dreading finally occurred. The trouble was that the event happened in a most unexpected place.

Coulton disappeared.

Waller said, "Oh, no," and immediately shut his eyes. Knowing it was coming, he was prepared for it. Besides him, Norgo screamed. He could hear the mob gasp in astonishment.

After a moment, he could hear nothing else. He opened his eyes to emptiness. He was falling. Once again it had ended.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The sun was much larger.

It stood alone in the distant sky—an orange, thin, almost transparent ball of fire.

Calvin Waller dropped his gaze, feeling ill. Wherever this was—whenever—it was an even more dreadful place than he had ever imagined. For a brief moment, he was struck by a past inspiration: Could this be hell? He laughed at the thought but the sound, coming from his lips, echoed dully in the dank, black air surrounding him.

He struggled to sit up, glancing furtively at the landscape. It was no less bleak or disheartening than the sun that illuminated it. A light gray mist hovered here and there across the land, clinging to the high branches of the occasional bare trees, floating gently upon the tops of the many low hills. Now Waller stood up, turning a circle, trying to decide if one direction was any different from another, if there was some way of moving without resorting to purely random action.

He did make a choice. A hill lay nearby, the gray mist upon it. He went that way, climbing. The slope was gradual but walking was difficult, for the soil itself seemed to stick to his bare feet, worse than mud, almost like paste or glue. The ground was not damp to the touch. He went on.

At the top of the hill, he penetrated the mist, very thick up here. He could see the ground below only dimly through it. Everything seemed slightly distorted, vaguely awry. He had to look away to avoid being ill.

Crouching upon the summit of the hill, he stared at his feet. In spite of the huge orange sun, it was cold up here. The gray mist seemed to deflect the heat, chasing it away. His thoughts came no warmer. What if this were a terrible trick? He had to consider the possibility. What if this were some totally distant, totally barren locale of the future Earth? And what if—even worse—he had been sent here alone? He did not think he could bear that. No. For the first time since waking, he was driven by real fear. Springing to his feet, he threw his hands toward the sky and screamed at the top of his lungs. He wanted to hear a voice—any human voice—even his own would serve.

But the sound reached him, flat, dull, not human.

He sobbed, unable to stop.

Then, out of nowhere, someone answered: "Waller? Is that you? Where are you?"

"Ahmad!" he cried. There was no way of gauging the direction. He spun like a crazy top, vainly striving to penetrate the mist. "I'm up here. On top of the hill. Come and find me."

"I'm here, too," said Ahmad's voice.

"Where?"

"Right below you. Hold on."

Waller stared. "But I can't see you."

"No, but I can see you. It's all right. You'll have to come down. Just walk—get out of that mist. And hurry."

"Yes," Waller called. "Yes, I will." And he did try to obey. It was the dirt that stopped him—it stuck even more resolutely to his feet than before. After only a few halting steps, he had to stop and clean the soles. He cleaned the left foot, then the right, then the third foot, as well. He was not the least surprised by this abrupt apparition of an additional limb. Then there was a fourth foot, too. He cleaned that but now he'd never get down. His head was swirling. The giant orange sun swayed and dipped, rapping at his eyes with the fury of an attacking hawk. He threw up his hands to ward the creature off. His sight went blind. He tripped, fell, flew. Striking the ground, his head slammed deep into the sweet earth. He could taste the soil upon his lips and tongue, warm, delicious. He screamed, wept, moaned, wailed. Sounds reached him in monstrously distorted forms, the bellowing of many great beasts. He pounded his ears, filled them with dirt. He moved. Drifted. Floated. He started to laugh aloud but the ground was jerked from beneath him and he cried out, "No!" Someone laughed, someone new. It was his voice. He choked. The ground pulsated far below, with the sun lurking inside it. The ground was black and the sun was red. No, the ground was red and the sun, dark. No the ground was...

"Waller, drink this." He gagged and spit as something cool and wet struck his face. It rained. No, it was just water. Now he drank happily in great, heaving gulps. All at once his vision cleared. The mist dispersed. He could see. He lay on the ground, with the sun overhead. Two suns. No, one. One sun and a human face.

"Ahmad," he said.

"Yes, are you better now?"

"I remember... remember you called to me. I stood on the hill."

"It was that crazy mist. There's something hi it. This whole world is crazy. I've learned to avoid the places where it lays."

"But did I fall?" ^

"No, I brought you down. I held my breath."

"You're not alone?" He had recovered sufficiently to feel a flash of hope.

"No. I am now but Coulton is with me."

"Not Sondra?"

"I'm sorry, no. I was hoping she was with you. Just Coulton."

Waller drew a deep breath with which to speak but, when he tried, no sound came out.

Ahmad helped him gain his feet. They stood as equals now. "We'll find her," Ahmad said. "Don't worry. Until this moment, Coulton and I thought we were alone."

"I thought that, too."

"But you were wrong." He smiled. "And I'll wager you're wrong again."

Waller was remembering. "Then you're not still angry? About what happened at the tower?"

Ahmad, still grinning, rubbed his jaw. "How could I be that? You never gave me a chance. And, besides, even if I were angry, what could I do in response? Kill you? What possible point in this world could be served by that? Why here it's far worse to live than to die."

"Then let me have some more of that water."

"Here." Ahmad passed a canteen made from the hollowed pod of some large green plant. A hole had been poked in one end for drinking.

"What's the food situation?" Waller asked, lowering the pod.

"How long have you been here?"

"Only a few hours—if that."

"Strange. Coulton and I arrived three days ago. But the food situation is poor. In fact, you see it right here. This pod. It's the one plant in my wanderings I've dared to sample. The taste is sweet and I have not died. So Coulton and I usually have it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

"I'll want to talk to Coulton," Waller said.

"Good. It means you're returning to your old bossy ways and I'm glad to see that. In fact, I think it's high time we both went to see Coulton." He glanced past his shoulder. "The sun falls quickly here. We may have to hurry."

"How far is your camp?"

"About an hour from here."

Waller found, after some practice, that he was able to walk unaided. The stickiness of the soil did present some problems and slowed their pace. Ahmad wore a pair of makeshift shoes made from wide green leaves.

Waller asked, "Any clues as to where this might be?" He laughed selfconsciously. "When I first awoke, I thought it might be hell."

"There is a similarity, now that you mention it. I believe Coulton holds an identical opinion. He thinks it's the basement of his tower."

"Well, it's not that."

"No, I agree with you there."

"But what about the people?"

Ahmad looked suddenly nervous. "What people? Have you seen any?"

"No, but I wondered if you had."

Ahmad shook his head distantly. "That's hard to say." He jumped suddenly ahead, forcing Waller to stagger to catch up.

"What do you mean by that? Hard to say? Either there are people here or not. Which is it?"

"It isn't that simple."

"Yes, it is. And stop running away from me. If I have to keep walking like this, I'm apt to break a leg."

Ahmad relented, slowing his pace. He said, "I have a riddle for you, which may be helpful in explaining. Tell me, when was a man not a man?"

"When is he?"

"No, when was he?"

"I don't—"

"You don't? I thought it was obvious. A man was not a man when he was a monkey."

"Ahmad." Waller paused, struck by a sudden thought. "This is the future, isn't it?"

"I believe so, but time seems to move in peculiar circles. Come—you'll see soon enough. Night is falling fast. We must hurry or we'll miss the camp and be lost."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As predicted, night fell rapidly upon the land, without advance warning. By the time they reached camp—a barren spot of ground nestled between two low hills—the light was barely sufficient for Waller to make out his own feet. A stand of tall, naked trees peered through the gathering darkness like scarecrow shadows and, as they passed one of the pod bushes Ahmad had mentioned, they stopped and picked several of the ripe buds for later eating.

They were almost upon Coulton before he at last noticed them. Springing to his feet, he dashed forward, uttering glad cries of joy and delight. Throwing out his arms, he clasped Waller tightly to his chest. He shivered and seemed close to tears.

"Coulton, I'm glad to see you, too," said Waller, pushing the other man gently away. This was a point Ahmad had neglected to mention: poor Coulton was plainly terrified, a faint shadow of the man who had incited and led the revolt in the tower.

"We ought to build the fire," Ahmad said, from beside them. He appeared deeply embarrassed by this show of emotion. "We'll need to gather wood and it's close to dark. We haven't seen the moon since we came here." He laughed sharply, suddenly. "Waller, do you think it may have fallen at last?"

"It's not impossible." But what wasn't? "Coulton." He reached out, gripping Coulton's arm. "Why don't you and I go together? You can show me how to find wood."

"The trees must be climbed," Coulton said,

"He scurries up them like a goat on a mountain slope," Ahmad said. "When I tried, I nearly broke my head."

"Then you stay here."

"I'll clean the pods. That way, when you return, we can eat." He looked in distress at the green buds in his hands. "Tonight, I think I'll try frying them."

As he and Coulton moved toward the place where the high trees grew, Waller sought to reassure him. "If you're concerned about your people, I wouldn't be. They'll do all right. You've done more for them than any man could. They'll win now—I know it."

"How can they? The revolt will be crushed. All my life—so much work—and then a hand comes from nowhere and brings me here." His terror and confusion plainly showed. "Waller, surely you must know. Why did this happen? Was it wrong of us to seek freedom for my people? Who did this? Was it the

Supreme Ingear?"

"Whoever it was, it couldn't have been him. Or anyone from your world. As Ahmad must have told you, this has happened to us before."

"But I still do not understand. Who, Waller? Who, and why?"

Waller shook his head, no more able to answer these questions now than at any time. "Think of your own people, Coulton. Think of how much you've given them. Even if those from upstairs come and destroy the rebels to the last man, a new legend will have been born. Your legend, Coulton, and it will never go away."

"But we could have won. If this terrible thing had not happened, the revolt would have succeeded. Isn't that true, Waller?"

He no longer saw any point to lying. "No, it isn't true, Coulton. You wouldn't have won."

"But you stayed and fought. You could have run away. Why didn't you?"

"Because I wanted to help create that legend I told you about."

"Without winning?"

"Not this time. The next time—maybe. Or the time after that. There can often be more real glory in defeat than hi victory."

Coulton stopped at the base of one high tree and quickly removed his long, light gown. With his nakedness showing clearly in the rapidly expiring light, he shinnied up the thick tree trunk, disappearing into the bare branches above. Waller, listening but unable to see, heard a sharp cracking noise.

Coulton's voice reached him from above: "Be careful, Waller. I am about to drop the branches."

Waller stepped back, as a large chunk of wood fell at his feet.

Another sharp cracking noise and then another branch. As each one fell, Waller retrieved it, forming a neat pile of wood at his feet. When the pile had grown to what appeared to be sufficient size, Waller called to Coulton and told him so. A moment later, he dropped down, landing firmly in the dirt. Bending down, both men then began gathering the wood in their arms.

"Did you arrive here in the same fashion as we?" Coulton asked, as he worked. Some of the terror and confusion had left his voice; Waller was glad to hear that.

"Yes, it was the same."

"Then the others must come, too? Norgo and DiAnn—Sondra."

"Yes, they'll come." He tried to make his words sound positive and sincere.

"But none of my people?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why was I chosen alone? If I am not being punished for my wrongs, then there must be some other reason. If you know, Waller, you must tell me."

"I don't know. I have some ideas—guesses—but only that."

"Then tell me them."

"No. It wouldn't be fair."

"Then will we ever know for certain?"

"Yes, I think we will."

"Why do you say that?" Coulton's voice had grown eager. Waller realized now why he was afraid. It was nothing specific—not even the fall—it was not knowing why.

"Because," said Waller, "whoever sent us here, he'll eventually come and show his face. There has to be some reason behind all

this and when he comes we'll force him to tell."

"Ahmad says we should not worry of such things. He says it may be all a joke. Whoever did this is laughing now."

"Ahmad is trying to be a cynic. Don't believe it. He's just as scared as you are—or me."

"You are afraid, Waller?"

"I am."

"Then Ahmad is wrong?"

"I hope so. I believe so. But won't we need some larger logs? We should have one big enough to keep the fire burning all night."

"We already have those. Our first day, using sharp stones, we managed to fell a wide tree."

"Then I guess we can go."

"Yes."

At the camp, Ahmad was busily engaged preparing the fire. In a round, cleared place, he had placed two thick logs. Coulton and Waller laid the branches they had gathered on top of the logs, then ah¹ three searched the surrounding land for dry leaves. Using one of the few kitchen matches remaining to them, Ahmad set the leaves to smoldering. Once burning, the flames spread rapidly, brightly, sending out high huge puffs of coal black smoke. The wood hissed and growled, issuing sparks. Soon it caught and also burned.

They huddled close to the fire. Waller held his hands to the flames, feeling the soothing heat. Ahmad passed him two of the pods, raw, not fried. He ate quickly, wishing for more. The taste was flat, like melon rind.

Finished, Waller asked Ahmad how carefully the nearby area had been explored. Ahmad admitted he had ventured little

farther than the belt of bills where Waller had been discovered.

"Then I think we ought to do more than that," Waller said. "We ought to look around more."

"If you wish. With the three of us, exploring will be easier, less danger of being lost. Still, I must admit I see little reason. There's nothing in this world but what we can see here and now."

"What about Sondra and Norgo?"

Ahmad shrugged. "Yes, we must look for them."

"And for any other people we can find."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that." Ahmad grinned suddenly. "This world is not one for people."

"Then what is it? Ahmad, I'm tired of playing this game of yours. Whatever this mysterious secret, I want to know it—and now."

"You want me to tell you?"

"Yes."

"But wouldn't it be so much easier if I simply showed you?" He pointed. "There—look."

Waller turned in time to see a short, stooped, skinny figure entering the ring of the fire. The creature was covered with body hair from the toes to the throat but the face was bare, the skull bald. Whatever it was, man or monkey or both, it gazed familiarly at first Ahmad, then Coulton. Glimpsing Waller, the creature chattered in sudden surprise, waving both stubby arms and pointing into the surrounding darkness.

Just then, two more entered the circle of light. One, slightly taller than the first, more than five feet, was a female. The three approached the fire together. They spoke excitedly to one another in high, sharp clicking tones.

Waller could understand why Ahmad had felt it necessary to

grin. It wasn't embarrassment—it was simple shame: these were the descendents of man.

"Can't you hear them?" Ahmad said. "Listen—they're talking. It's a real language."

One-by-one more and more of these monkey-men emerged from the darkness. Several squatted beside the fire in wide-eyed wonderment.

But Waller barely had time to express his shock and surprise when a new and even more remarkable figure came into the light. Pausing, she turned her head, found his eyes, then cried out. Running toward him, she called, "Calvin, you are here! Oh, I'm glad—so glad."

He stood to meet her, crying out, too. The sight was the second most wonderful he could imagine.

The figure was Norgo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Only after she had taken a deep drink from the water pod would Norgo agree to answer their questions. "They don't seem to need water the way we do," she said, pointing to the monkey-men. A good twenty stood in the firelight now. "We walked for three days getting here and they didn't bring a drop along."

"You've been with them?" said Waller, expressing concern.

"Oh, yes." She nodded and drank again, gulping the water. "For two weeks now. We live with them. At first we looked all over for you but it started to look bad. You don't know how happy we were when the klaptu told us you were here."

"The what?" asked Ahmad.

"It's their name for themselves: klaptu." She pronounced the word as a series of high-pitched, sharp clicks.

"You also said we," said Waller.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Grinning, Norgo grabbed Waller's hand. "Of course you didn't know. Yes, I mean Sondra. She's with me. We arrived together."

"Then she's all right?" Waller couldn't prevent his deep sense of relief from flooding his voice.

"Perfectly fine."

"Then where is she?" He peered into the darkness past the fire, as if expecting Sondra to emerge at any moment.

"Not here. We thought one of us should stay behind. But she's waiting for us."

"With these things?" Ahmad made no effort to conceal his frank disgust. "Alone?"

Norgo, who lacked the egotism of twentieth century man, failed to comprehend his attitude. "Of course. The klaptu are very harmless. Toward us, at least. In the enclave, more than a thousand of them live together. There is plenty of food and water."

"But they've been coming in here every night since we arrived," Ahmad said. "Don't they live near here?"

"The ones who stopped here are raiding parties. You see, there's a sort of war going on between two enclaves. You're right in between them. You've probably been visited by both."

"I thought you said they were harmless."

"I did—toward us. They almost worship Sondra and me. But they don't really harm each other, either. Since we've been with them, the enclave has been raided three times. Many prisoners were taken on each occasion but no one was ever killed."

"A civilized form of war," said Ahmad mockingly.

"But how did you discover where we were?" Waller asked.

Now that he knew and believed Sondra to be safe and well, it was possible to relax and live again. "They couldn't have told you."

"Why not? They talk. Can't you hear them?"

"But you can't understand them. Not so soon."

"Oh, no, not all of it. In fact, I can't speak more than a few words—their sounds are very difficult to make. But the language itself isn't complex, fewer than a thousand common words. This, by the way, is Nandigo." Norgo indicated one of the klaptu, a male slightly taller than most. "He's the great warrior who brought me here. We'll have to go back by ourselves. Nandigo is on his way to raid the other enclave."

Waller reached out tentatively—Nandigo had glanced up at the mention of his name. Their hands met suddenly and gripped. Nandigo bowed slightly and clicked a rapid reply.

"What do you mean about us going with you?" said Ahmad. He peered in distress at the clasped hands. "Wouldn't it make better sense for you and Sondra to come here to stay?"

Norgo glanced around in distaste. "Here? I can't see why. The enclave at least is located in a place where real trees and flowers and plants grow. After this, you'll love it."

"That sounds good to me," said Waller.

"I must agree," said Coulton, speaking for the first time. "There is surely nothing for us here."

Ahmad shrugged, relenting. "All right. Have it the way you want."

"Then we're all agreed," Norgo said. "Tomorrow at dawn we start on our way."

"Why the hurry?" Waller asked. He was eager himself to depart but her attitude puzzled him. "Don't you want to rest?"

"Well, there's something else," she said, "something I haven't

mentioned before. It may be the best news you've heard in your life, or it may be the worst." She folded her arms across her chest, clearly expecting them to beg. Waller gladly complied:

"Then what is it?"

"A man. A real man, like us."

Waller glanced at Ahmad, seeing his smile. "Then these monkeys aren't all there is. Have you talked to this man?"

"No. That's just what I mean. He lives in a house, a round glass dome, with turrets on top. It sits on a hill about five miles from the enclave, through a forest. Sondra and I went there and caught a brief glimpse of him through the glass. If we hadn't, I don't think I would have believed in him."

"And what did he do?"

"Nothing."

"You mean he didn't see you?"

"I'm sure he knew we were there."

"Then what is he? Who?"

"The klaptu are afraid of him. They won't even approach the house. It reminds me of the way Coulton's people regarded the Supreme Ingear."

"Well, if he's the only man they've ever known, that makes sense."

"There's more to it than that. They're afraid of him for good reasons. I'm not exactly sure what but I do know I'm just as much afraid as they are. That time Sondra and I saw him, there was something else, too. In one room—we could see through the glass—there were pictures, photographs, three of them. Sondra said a machine captured them from life."

"And so?" said Waller, when she refused to go on. "What were they?"

"Pictures of you. Of you and Ahmad and Sondra. And they were taken—Sondra said so—taken before. When you lived in your own time."

"Oh, no," said Waller. "Then this man might be—"

"Sondra thinks he is."

"This is the man who's done this to us," Ahmad said. "The manipulator."

"Yes," said Norgo, fearfully.

"At last," said Waller, totally unafraid. "At last we've got him."

"Oh, no," said Norgo. "It won't be that easy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Standing at the foot of the hill, he stared up at the place on the peak where the twin glittering turrets of glass rose winking beneath the thin orange sun. The house itself was little more than a squat though enormous glass dome but the turrets afforded the entire structure a certain sense of additional grandeur, which in this dismal, bleak setting was deeply impressive. Could this be real? A palace of glass in a dead world? A bit of fairy tale magic in a land of harsh reality? Shaking his head, he looked slowly away.

"So that's it," he said.

"Yes," said Sondra.

"And you're sure there's a man living there? It's not an empty ruin?"

"No, Calvin. Remember. Norgo saw it, too."

"And the photographs? They were real?"

"Yes." She spoke without anger, realizing his need to be reassured. "We both saw them."

He raised his hands, then let them fall wearily to his sides. "All right. Then let's go up and see for ourselves." Lowering his head, he plunged ahead, climbing the slope. Sondra came after him.

They were alone. Both Ahmad and Norgo had also wanted to come but Waller said no. He thought their best chance of inspecting the glass house would come by doing so without being seen. The fewer people who came, the less attention they might attract.

It was also true this was the first chance he had had of being alone with Sondra since arriving at the klaptu enclave late last night.

Exhausted, they had fallen asleep almost immediately, so today on the way here each had hurriedly filled the other in on every last detail of their respective lives since their last separation. Both spoke powerfully of the personal desolation they had felt at waking alone in this strange world.

But once they came within sight of the first high turret, they fell silent. To Waller, the view was simply too incredible to be marred by mere talk. And he couldn't help thinking of the possible identity of the man who lived up there. The great manipulator? It could very well be.

As he ascended the hill, reaching behind to grasp Sondra's hand and draw her upward, Waller again tried to make some sense out of this situation. As before, he failed utterly. The problem was that it just did not make good sense. If their manipulator really did reside in this fantastic palace, why had he brought them all the way here only to fail to recognize them when they came near? That was only one question; there were many, many more. He ceased trying to answer them. Instead, he walked.

"When you were there," he asked Sondra, "did you see any sign of a door? Any crack or break in the surface of the glass?"

"No, nothing. And we looked. We went all the way around the dome twice and didn't see a thing."

"We'll have to try again."

"If you want."

When he reached the summit of the hill, Waller immediately came all the way forward and laid his nose against the thick glass of the dome. He could see easily through it. The distortion, even at the edges of his vision, was slight. What he saw was a large, neat room, well furnished with several soft chairs, a small couch, a wide wooden table, and some fat fluffy floor pillows. None of these objects resembled anything he had seen before, not in design. The angles were all right angles; there was not so much as a hint of a curve or arch. The table was an exact square, while even the floor pillows were stiff and straight and blocked.

Sondra stood slightly to the right of him. She waved a hand. "Here, Calvin. This is the room I told you about. The photographs are here."

He came and stood beside her. This second room was as conspicuously empty as the first had been full. There was absolutely nothing here, except the three photographs that lay upon the bare floor. He could see each one clearly, as though they had been deliberately set to be seen. He studied his own reflection, recognizing where the picture must have been snapped. It was the prisoner of war camp where he had finally been taken, a place he would surely never forget. A camera there? He had never seen one.

The photograph of Sondra was a more conventional study. She stood in the middle of a dense crowd—the background resembled a modern airline or train terminal—with one man particularly close to her. He was middle-aged, dignified, well-dressed, and slightly graying.

"That must be your father," Waller said.

"It is." She stared sadly at the photograph, a moment of captured past time.

"Do you remember when it was taken?"

"Yes, that's the airport in London. But I've never seen it before—not the photograph. Maybe my father took it—"

"He couldn't have. He's in it."

She shook her head. "Then I don't know."

The third photograph showed Ahmad seated among a tableful of young black men at an outdoor cafe. Waller remembered Ahmad once having mentioned attending school in Paris. Could this be it? He studied the various faces in the photograph, the background, intending to ask Ahmad later.

Waller drew back from the wall, taking Sondra with him. "Now let's go around," he said, "and look for the door. Is there anything else I should try to see?"

"Just the stairway. That's where we saw the man. He was going up, with his back to us."

"And that's all?"

"Yes. Otherwise, all the rooms are very much the same. There's furniture but never anything else. No real signs of life—books, paintings, personal effects. And everything's so neat."

"Then let's look for the door."

They circled the dome cautiously. Waller made it a point to glance into every room but Sondra was correct; there was really nothing to be seen. He felt the glass with his fingertips, searching for any sort of rupture in the smooth, firm surface. He rapped the wall with his knuckles, listening for any hollow noise. When they reached the staircase, he paused to examine it closely, peering up. There seemed to be a ceiling way up there but he couldn't tell for certain; there was darkness at the end, that was all.

Eventually, they returned to the room where the three photographs lay undisturbed. As far as he could tell from once around, the building was composed of a solid sheet of curved glass.

"There has to be a door," he said. "It must be higher up, where we can't reach. He must lower a ladder when he wants to go out."

"If he ever does."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"The klaptu say he's never gone out."

"Never?"

"They've never seen him go out. At least that's what Norgo tells me. She tries to talk to them—I don't."

"Maybe I ought to learn their language."

"It couldn't hurt."

He shrugged, turning hopelessly away from the dome. What bothered him was coming so close to the answer without being able to bridge these last few inches.

"There has to be a way in," Sondra said, as they moved down the hillside.

Waller wouldn't look back. "I hope so."

"Norgo will have some ideas."

"She had better." He sighed. "I don't."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

By the time Waller reached the klaptu enclave, he was feeling weary, drawn, and depressed. To have come so far and stood so close—bare inches from a final understanding of this whole mystery—and still fall short, it was a terribly draining, frustrating experience. When Norgo, Ahmad, and Coulton came rushing excitedly forward to greet him, it was all he do not to shove them aside and hurry straight on to some place where he could be alone.

Norgo had been accurate on at least one point: the land here, though desolate, was a distinct improvement over the place he had first landed; even Ahmad now admitted this was true. More than anything, he was reminded of the high veldt of East Africa, although a steady, tempering wind kept the heat from becoming unbearable. There was plenty of wild game, too, and several nearby lakes and streams. The klaptu enclave was little more than a certain flat area of land located between a thin scrub forest and one of the larger lakes. No permanent structure of any sort had been erected here; the klaptu seemed to lack any but the most rudimentary aspects of technology. Their weapons were stone clubs or strong bones. They ate mostly meat. Waller guessed the klaptu moved the site of their enclave frequently. Their utter lack of sanitation measures was probable proof of that.

But it was none of this which had stirred the others to such a high pitch of excitement. It was Ahmad who spoke first:

"You found nothing, didn't you?"

Waller admitted this was true. "I couldn't even find a door. Now Sondra tells me the man rarely goes out in any event—maybe never. Unless we decide to rush the house and beat down the glass walls, I don't think we're ever going to get inside."

"That's what we want to tell you about," Ahmad said. "It's Norgo's idea. She can tell you."

"Then tell me," Waller said, without enthusiasm. "I'm not in the mood for guessing games."

"Then I will tell you: we've figured it out—we've found a way."

"A way inside?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"Yes, you do. Listen. I did it by talking to the klaptu, by questioning them about that man and forcing them to tell me.

I'd talked to them plenty of times before but it was always hard because of their language. I found out how the man never went out but I missed something else, something I should have noticed. The klaptu always seemed to know a great deal about the interior of the house."

"Of course. The glass is very transparent."

"But the top floor?"

"The top?"

"Right under the sun." She nodded firmly. "The way they know—I finally asked one today—many of them have been inside."

"He let them in?"

"He made them come in."

"Then tell me why." He was interested but not excited. No, he just wasn't going to make himself too vulnerable to the disappointment that would surely come afterward. Although surely interesting as pure information, what Norgo was telling him had so far not shown itself especially useful in getting them inside.

"It happens only occasionally," Norgo went on. "Maybe four or five times a year. He might ask for a dozen klaptu to come, or maybe only one. I think he performs tests on them—experiments. I believe he's some sort of scientist."

"A mad one, no doubt," said Waller.

"That, too," Norgo agreed. "What happens is that he lets the klaptu inside. He leads them to a room on the second floor and there he puts them to sleep. When they wake up, whole days may have passed. He usually lets them go then. Some have gone in and never come out but most do."

"But what has any of this to do with us?" said Waller, feeling it was time for this question. "Even if he opens a door to let them

in, he won't leave it open. We won't be able to slip through in time."

"We can if he doesn't notice us."

"And when will this thing be?"

"In exactly nine days. One of them told me. Every-time the man finishes with one group, he tells them when he expects the next group to come. He wants two klaptu in nine days. And we—"

"You're going to be the klaptu, I suppose."

"Yes, exactly."

"Aren't you forgetting one significant detail? We aren't klaptu—none of us. We're not going to fool him."

"But can't we try? Look here." Norgo held out her hand. In the palm lay a thick clump of matted brown fur. "They shed," she said. "All we have to do is pick it up and stick it on. We can use sap or honey as glue. We've got nine days in which to get ready. Of course, we'll have to shave our heads, too."

"And height? The klaptu, none of them, they can't stand over five feet."

"Then we stoop," Ahmad said. "We bend over. In order to determine any man's certain height, it's necessary to meet him standing more or less upright, flat on his feet. We don't have to pull off a complete masquerade. All we have to do is fool him long enough to get inside."

"You won't. Twelve, fourteen inches—you can't conceal that much height."

"And five inches?" Norgo said. "Even six?"

He frowned. "What do you mean? None of us is under six feet tall."

"I am," Norgo said. "Sondra is. That's one plus one: two. The

man said he wanted two."

"But you can't—"

"Who can't?" said Sondra, suddenly interrupting with a glare. She crossed over and stood beside Norgo. "If it won't work any other way, then it has to be us."

"No. The whole idea is too stupid. There's no way you can make it work. I won't let you do it."

"You haven't any choice," Ahmad said. "The three of us are agreed and that's enough for a majority right there. I have a feeling that Sondra further concurs with us. We all know this may be our perfect opportunity. Who knows if we'll ever get another? That man fears us—I'm sure of that."

"Then he'll kill them." Waller pointed to Norgo and Sondra. "Do you want that on your conscience?"

"It won't be. I'm not forcing them. I want out of here and so do they. I thought we all wanted to know what this thing was about."

"Not me," said Waller.

"But you don't have any choice."

Waller looked from one of them to another in turn.

He saw Ahmad, Sondra, Norgo, and Coulton. Nothing in their eyes or features even hinted that he might stand a chance.

"I still say you're crazy," he said.

"And if it works?" Ahmad asked.

"Then you're still crazy. That won't change it one little bit."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Crouched down close to the ground, a wide jagged boulder

-serving as a shield, Waller strained to keep his eyes securely fastened to the pair of bald shining skulls that seemed to float through the air high up the slope of the hill near the edge of his vision.

"Are they moving yet?" he asked, speaking very softly, a near whisper, not moving his eyes. "I can see them but not what they're doing. I think—" As he spoke, unconsciously, he started to stand.

"No." Ahmad grabbed his shoulder and pressed firmly down. "Be patient, Waller. Coulton will tell us if anything extraordinary occurs."

Upon arriving here below the glass house, Ahmad had so positioned them behind the boulder that Coulton, at the far right end, was the only one afforded a decent view. Waller wasn't sure if this was by deliberate design or not. In any event, Ahmad continued to insist it would be dangerous to try to move; the man in the house might very well be watching.

"They remain standing as before," Coulton reported. "Neither has attempted to move."

"See?" said Ahmad. "Nothing to worry about."

"But what's wrong with him?" Waller meant the man in the house. "We've been here—what?—a half-hour now. He hasn't made the slightest move."

"It's quite likely," said Ahmad, "that he's a more patient man than you. And we haven't been here fifteen minutes, if that. Calm yourself, Waller. The man is probably only asleep."

They had been forced to depart the enclave much too early this morning, a good hour before dawn. The klaptu, fully capable through means of their own at counting days, had sent two females out to keep the appointment at the glass house. So it had been necessary to sneak out early, lie in wait, and then to intercept, capture, tie and bind these two. That done, the five of them moved freely up the slopes of the hill. Ahmad, Coulton, and Waller took shelter behind the boulder. Sondra and Norgo,

disguised under bogus fur, had moved on.

"What else can you see?" Waller asked Coulton. "What about the man? Is he visible anywhere?"

"It is too far. I cannot see through the glass. The reflection hurts my eyes."

"Then what about a shadow? Can you see anything like that? A shadow against the glass?"

"No, I—"

"Oh, let him alone," Ahmad told Waller. "You're getting to the point of absurdity with your shadows. When anything happens, I'm sure Coulton will tell us. Until then—"

"Something is happening," Coulton said, in a steady unexcited voice.

"What is it?" Waller cried, nearly springing up.

"Get down," Ahmad said. "Do you want to cause their deaths?"

"I want to know what's happening. Coulton, tell me."

"They are moving forward," Coulton said. He drew himself slightly higher along the rock.

"Sondra?"

"Yes, both. They are moving forward together. Now they have stopped. They are standing directly beneath the house. The wall is so close, if they wished, they could touch it. I can see nothing more."

"Then watch," said Waller. "There's got to be some-thing. Why else did they move? There has to be a reason."

"Maybe they were restless," Ahmad suggested. "As you seem to be."

"I saw nothing," Coulton said. "I don't think—no, wait, here it is now." Coulton waved a finger but Waller, frustratingly, could see nothing beyond the shimmering peaks of the twin glass turrets. He cursed the jagged bulk of the boulder in front of him, swore at the silly necessity of concealment.

"Well, what is it? We can't see anything. Don't point —tell me."

"It is a hole in the glass."

"A hole? Where?"

"In the front, perhaps halfway down. There is a dark space there now—it opened slowly—a square hole. Now —I cannot see—yes, now there is something coming out."

"Is it him?"

"No, I—I—"

Waller couldn't wait. It was a terrible risk but he decided to take it. Jumping suddenly to his feet, he peered at the glass house. He saw what he needed to know. As abruptly as he had risen, he dropped back down.

"It's a ladder," he told Ahmad. "Some kind of metal ladder extending down from the second floor. That's where it is, all right. The door's on the top where we couldn't see it."

"You fool," Ahmad was saying. "What if he saw you just now? What if he becomes suspicious and sees through their costumes and has them killed? Will you be able to live with yourself after that?"

"I'm sorry. I just had to see. I know it was—"

"They're climbing the ladder now," Coulton interrupted. "Norgo is going first, then Sondra. There is something—someone—in the doorway. It maybe be a man but I cannot say for certain."

Waller resisted the impulse to peek again. "We could run for it," he suggested. "Follow them straight up the ladder, rush right in. It might work."

"And it most likely would not," said Ahmad. "No, we must wait here. We must be patient."

"But he's sure to find them out now. We've talked about this before. What's to stop him from killing them then?"

"We've already decided this. You were out-voted. The risk must be taken. We must wait."

"I still don't like it."

"The responsibility is theirs—Norgo and Sondra. They must handle it."

"And if they don't? Or can't?"

"You know very well what happens then. All we can do is wait and hope."

"They're inside the doorway now," Coulton was saying. "The door is closing. Norgo is gone. Sondra is gone. Now the door is shut."

Waller nodded his head slowly. So it was over? As quick as that? They were inside. He turned to Ahmad and couldn't help glaring. "May we stand now?"

"I think we should wait. He may still be looking."

"And how long do you intend to do this waiting?"

"For as long as necessary. I would put the tune at thirty minutes at the very outside. If it takes longer than that, my bet would be that they'll never come out."

"Not alive."

Ahmad did not attempt to deny it. "Exactly," he said.

"Then I guess we better hope," said Waller.

And though they did, a full hour passed and the door remained securely sealed. Waller struggled to convince himself there was no reason to be afraid. They would be coming out—both of them—any moment now. Coulton kept his eyes rigidly fixed upon the glass wall. Ahmad glanced down at his feet, then up at the rock face. The one place he wouldn't look was at Waller. The two men continued to wait very much apart.

At last, when Waller was sure a good two hours must have passed since the women had entered the building, he stood up without giving advance warning. "I'm going to go and take a look," he told the others. "If the man sees me, I don't care. I can't believe it matters now. He must know by now who they are—and us, too."

"I'm afraid so," said Ahmad.

"Then it's your fault. Theirs, too, but mostly yours. You should have known better than letting them go in there alone."

"I thought it was the only way."

"Right now I'm going to look for another one."

"Then wait for me," Ahmad said, standing, too.

"And me," said Coulton.

As they came near to the glass wall, Waller realized that the group leadership had been passed back to him. But what conceivable difference could it make now? What, if anything, could he do to help? Sondra was inside—Norgo, too—and he was outside. They have to be dead, a logical part of his mind kept insisting. The man found them out and killed them instantly. The answer was as simple as that.

But he didn't believe it. He wouldn't—not yet.

Standing at the foot of the wall, Waller stared up at the place where, according to Coulton, the glass door had opened. He

could see nothing but the smooth, slick, solid, sloping face of the wall.

"There's nothing there," he said softly.

"No," Coulton said. "It's closed."

"Then let's circle the whole dome. Look into every room. Study the glass both up and down. There must be something to see, some way of getting inside."

"What makes you think so?" Ahmad asked. He shook his head sadly. "There was never anything before."

"It can't hurt to look, can it? We've got nothing to lose."

"No," Ahmad agreed bleakly, "nothing at all."

They began to move around the house. Waller came last, studying the glass only after the others had first surveyed it; he wanted to be sure that nothing, no matter how outwardly insignificant, was overlooked.

Because of this, it was Coulton, in the lead, who cried out: "Look! Up there! I've found something!"

Waller was the first to reach his side. "What? Where?"

"Up." Coulton pointed at the glass directly above his head. "See that? I can't—"

Tilting his head, Waller looked straight up. There was indeed something—a sort of dark formless clump— hanging up there. Whatever it was seemed to be stuck to the wall, growing from it.

"It's hair," said Ahmad, joining them. "That's what it is. A clump of hair."

"Whose?" said Waller, looking down.

"Why, theirs, of course. It's dark—look—it's klaptu hair."

"But that doesn't mean—"

"Maybe it doesn't. But be optimistic. What else do we have? Let's believe it's theirs until we find out otherwise."

"All right," Waller said, grinning, "we'll do that. But first I want to get up there and see." The clump of hair—if that was indeed what it was—hung from the wall a good fifteen feet up. "You two will have to boost me. There's no other way."

"Well, I could go," Ahmad said, with some hesitation. "I am the lightest."

"No," Waller said, "I'm going."

This time no one argued. Ahmad and Coulton both looked at him and nodded. He was indeed the one who would be going.

CHAPTER THIRTY

As soon as Waller reached the proper point upon the wall, he discovered two facts: the clump was indeed a thatch of the hair Norgo and Sondra had used to disguise themselves; there was a doorway here.

Once he had confirmed these two facts by a second glance, Waller experienced a genuine burst of honest hope that almost sent him reeling free from the grasp of Ahmad and Coulton. He giggled aloud and reached out to fondle the clump of hair that protruded half in and out of the second doorway. In a voice that was undoubtedly too loud, he called down at his feet: "It's a door— another door—and the hair is stuck in it."

"Is it theirs?" asked Ahmad, who supported Waller's left leg.

"Yes." He touched the hair. "I can feel the sap—it's sticky. Then they must be alive."

"No, they were alive. And we already know that."

"Then I'm going through the door. I'm going to find out."

"Well, hurry. I'm not in shape to be holding you here all day."

Waller laughed and leaned against the sloping wall. The clump of hair protruded through the doorway about halfway down its length. The actual outline of the door could easily be seen as a hairline fracture in the solid sheet of glass. It was square—about six feet, he guessed. The clump of jammed hair was the only thing holding it ajar.

"Coulton," he called down, "you saw the other door, so tell me. How did it open? Were there hinges of some kind? Can you remember?"

"It seemed to slide open," said Coulton, from Waller's right leg. "It moved very slowly."

"It didn't swing?" He pressed tentatively against the center of the glass.

"I do not think so."

Waller pressed harder. Much harder. The glass refused to budge. "No, it doesn't seem to."

"Well, hurry," said Ahmad. The strain showed in his voice. "I'm getting weak."

"Then hold on. I'm going to try to open it again."

"Good, but be careful."

"Careful?" He laughed. "But I thought you wanted me to hurry."

While Ahmad muttered darkly, Waller forced the fingers of his right hand underneath the glass at the point just above the clump of hair where the door had been pried the farthest open. The fingers fitted snugly inside up to the second knuckle but the glass itself did not budge so much as a fraction of an inch. Waller found he could wriggle his fingers freely. The sensation was an exhilarating one: at last he was inside the fortress of this dome. The glass wasn't nearly so thick as it appeared, a quarter-inch, no more. He tried tugging. He tried harder. He strained, pulling with all his might. Nothing. The door seemed no less solid and

immovable than one formed from the toughest steel.

"I can't budge it," he told them.

"Did you look for a lock? Any sort of latch?"

"I'll try." He moved his fingers up the edge of the door as far as they would go. The inner face of the wall was no less smooth than the outer. He removed his hand and inserted it below the clump of hair, moving downward until the glass pinched his fingers. Again, nothing but sleek, uninterrupted smoothness. He called down to Ahmad and told him of his failure.

"Then try the other side. The door itself."

"There wouldn't be a lock there."

"How do you know until you've tried?"

"You're right." At least he hoped so. If no way existed of getting inside, then why would Sondra—he was convinced she was the one—have gone to the trouble of prying the door open? The clump of hair had to be more than a simple signal; it couldn't be an accident.

Could it?

He slipped his fingers through the crack, the palm facing the door now, and tried once again. He moved upward from the hair, finding nothing.

"Please hurry," said Ahmad, who seemed to be trembling.

"I'm almost finished—hold on." He moved beneath the hair and tried there. He had gone only a brief way when his fingers abruptly touched something.

He stopped, sucking his breath down deep into his lungs.

It was a protrusion. Something hard and round and cold. Not glass. Metal. The thing jutted out a half-inch from the wall, was indented in the middle, and felt smooth to the touch. For some reason, though he stared and squinted, he could see nothing

through the apparently transparent glass.

He thought: *a button*. That was what it was: a button to be pushed.

So he pushed it.

Inside the door itself, something softly hummed. The clump of hair fell away, drifting toward the ground. Waller cried out, "It's moving! It's opening!" Just then, he tottered. Glancing down, he saw Ahmad swaying beneath his left leg. He cried out but lost his supporting hold on the wall. His foot shot out from under him. He was tumbling—headfirst. At the last moment, he threw out an arm, blocking his fall. He sat painfully on the ground.

Above him—a black hole in the smooth glass—the door was open. It stood gaping wide—a six foot square.

Ahmad and Coulton, who had also fallen to the ground, stared at the open door with equal amazement.

Waller was the first to recover, gaining his feet. He said, "Give me a boost. I'm going through."

"Not alone," said Ahmad.

"I'm not that stupid. We'll all go—the three of us." They spoke in soft whispers. With the door open and the inside of the room dimly revealed through it, the fear of being overheard had again assumed a definite reality. Waller felt this was a good sign in itself: it meant they cared enough to be afraid.

Ahmad and Coulton supported his feet. Waller leaned through the open doorway—the bottom of the gap just touched his groin—and kicked through. Rolling quickly over, he hurriedly studied where he was. The room seemed empty, which was fortunate, and it was also dramatically unlike those rooms he had seen below. He thought it must be a scientific laboratory of some sort— a room filled with tubes and switches, lights and gadgets —clutter piled everywhere. There were two long tables, a workbench, many boxes, and a small rumpled cot. He didn't see any need to examine this material immediately. Leaning back

through the doorway, he waited for Ahmad, who leaped up. Waller caught his hands and drew him inside. Coulton helped from below.

"Why, it's a mess," Ahmad said. He paused almost pleased by the fact. "Maybe he's human, after all."

"I think he had to leave in a hurry."

"When he found them out?"

"It seems likely."

"But did he kill them?"

Waller shrugged with what he hoped was sufficient callousness. "I don't see any bodies."

"Well, that's a good sign."

They turned to help Coulton up. When the three of them were together, Waller explained the theory he had developed:

"I think this must be the room where he first brought them. Who knows what he intended doing with them or why but, whatever it was, he didn't do it. He found out about them first."

"And the hair?" asked Ahmad. "When do you think they left that?"

"He might have left them here alone. At first—before he found out what they were. A klaptu wouldn't know how to operate a pushbutton doorway. Sondra did. She planted that clump of hair in case she ran into trouble."

"And she did?"

"It would seem that way." Waller jerked his hand toward the distant door. "But come on—let's go."

Ahmad hung back. "What about the door?"

"Leave it open. We may have to use it later."

"A quick escape?"

"I'm afraid so."

They wound an indirect path toward the door through the various piles of junk and clutter. At one point Waller stopped suddenly and pointed to the floor:

"I was expecting that."

A pile of brown fur, more than enough to clothe a half-grown bear, lay in a heap. Stooping down, Waller fingered one clump of the hair: sticky. Standing, he nodded to the others. "It's theirs, all right."

"Another clue," said Ahmad, without much enthusiasm.

But Waller found himself more pleased than distressed by this latest discovery. If they had made it this far alive—past the actual moment of discovery—then the chances were not bad that they might somehow be alive even yet.

Waller pressed the button embedded in the hard metal door and watched it slide swiftly and silently open. "Follow me," he said, stepping forward, "and keep your voices quiet."

The door opened into a narrow, curving corridor, the walls of which, low and round, were formed from a soft pink plastic substance. The floor, a similar compound, gave slightly with every step. Waller found the feeling a distinctly uncomfortable one, like walking on marshmallows. He proceeded forward as cautiously as his gathering impatience would allow. From the shape, color, and texture of this material, he felt strongly as if he were walking down the inner slopes of some giant beast's intestines.

Their steps carried soundlessly. The silence around them reigned nearly supreme; the soft walls seem to dull any noise. Almost at once, they reached the first corridor door. Waller paused long enough to try the knob but found it securely bolted. He knocked. No response.

"Should we break it down?" Ahmad asked.

"No. We haven't the time. We just have to hope he's not hiding from us. If he is—in here—we may never find Mm."

"It'll be harder than that to hide. He's got Norgo and Sondra with him."

"Yes," Waller agreed. "I hope that's right."

The corridor continued to curve but only gradually so that there was no strong likelihood of traveling a full circle too soon. Waller guessed this particular passage-way stretched the entire outer rim of the dome. There might be other similar corridors in deeper toward the core but, if so, they had not so far found any means of reaching these. Every dozen feet more or less, they came upon another branching doorway, alternating left and right. Waller tried every knob. Most were locked and, of the exceptions, two were bathrooms, with hot and cold running water and huge sunken bathtubs made from the same plastic as the walls. He also uncovered another laboratory, this less cluttered than the first, and one room facing outside that was totally bare.

The fifth open room was a small kitchen filled with a variety of unidentifiable and incomprehensible gadgets. Only a familiar set of twin ovens helped Waller understand what the room must be used for. The wall farthest from the corridor was given entirely over to long rows of glass-covered slots. Rows of buttons ran underneath the slots. Curious, Waller pressed a button. A red apple suddenly materialized inside the appropriate slot above. He raised the glass door, bit into the apple, and found it fine and sweet and delicious.

He asked Ahmad and Coulton if either wished to share a bite.

Coulton said yes and took the apple.

Ahmad protested gently: "Are you certain this is a necessary time for eating?"

Waller shrugged. "It can't hurt. There's something I want to

look for here." He began opening doors in the two cupboards. "Unless cooking has become a completely mechanized process, I should find—ah, here we go."

He drew out three small sharp kitchen knives. "Not much," he said, rubbing one blade tenderly against his thumb, "but they'll have to do." He gave a knife to each of the others and tucked his own in the folds of his gown. Then, leaving the kitchen, they went on their way. Waller estimated they had come perhaps half the distance around the circumference of the dome—their pace slowed by the insecure footing—when the staircase suddenly rose in front of them. Hurrying forward, Waller leaned down, peering below. He could see the foot of the stairs and the dark solid floor beneath. Then he looked up. The stairs went up only as far as the soft, pink ceiling; there they stopped dead.

"Which way?" Ahmad asked, nodding downward. "No," said Waller. "Up."

"But we can't go through the ceiling."

"They did."

"What? Who? Sondra?"

"I think so. Come on, let's look." He led Ahmad to the staircase and pointed to a particular step at the level of their noses. "See this? I thought that's what it was."

He meant another clump of hair, though one more human than the first, less like fur. Waller held the hair carefully in his fingers. A lock of human hair—blonde. Sondra's.

"It's hers," he told Ahmad, rubbing, the soft, silky strands between his fingers. "Sondra must have pulled it out to show us the way."

Ahmad pointed at the high, rippling, unmarked ceiling. "Then you think there has to be a door up there."

"Unless they just walked through. And if the man's that powerful, then we are in trouble. Why don't we go up and take a

look?" Ahmad agreed.

Waller regretfully dropped the hair and turned to mount the stairs. As he did, he also reached inside his gown and drew out the sharp kitchen knife. Glancing behind, he confirmed that both Ahmad and Coulton were doing the same.

At the level of the ceiling, Waller paused and raised a hand. Carefully, he felt the soft plastic, which seemed to ooze and flow around his probing fingers. It wasn't long before he discovered the object he had been seeking.

Protruding slightly from the ceiling was another round, hard, indented metallic button.

Placing a finger against his lips, Waller pointed out the button to the others. Softly, he whispered, "I'm going to give it a push. The instant I do, be ready. Now stand close. Here we go."

Ahmad and Coulton crowded onto the same step occupied by Waller. All three tilted eagerly forward. "Better do it now," Ahmad whispered nervously. "I'm afraid, if you don't, I may suddenly recollect another essential appointment elsewhere."

"I go through first," Waller wanted clear.

"Of course, of course." Ahmad smiled tightly. "We would have it no other way."

Waller nodded, returned the smile, then suddenly pressed down upon the button.

The outline of a door appeared instantly within the solid pink of the ceiling. A peep of bright yellow light slashed through. The door itself slid open grudgingly, by fits and starts and, as it did, made an ugly, gasping, heaving noise.

"If he's up there, hell be expecting us now," Ahmad said. "So much for the element of surprise."

Waller knew he couldn't wait. The moment the opening was wide enough, he threw his shoulders up, forcing his arms

through the gap, grasping the inner floor, and drawing himself quickly inside.

Overhead, the top of the glass dome gleamed and flickered. The room itself was huge and high and bright.

A glittering assortment of machines and gadgets clicked and hummed in every corner. Color television screens, their pictures indistinct, flashed and glowed. Waller spotted the familiar face of a large computer occupying the whole of one curved wall.

The quantity of noise in the room was, fortunately, immense.

In the middle of it, the man was standing. His back was turned toward Waller and he seemed so far unaware of the new presence in his room. He faced a high flat bench, stooped down over it, his elbow swiveling as if he were drawing or writing.

On past the bench stood a pair of low cots. Because of the bench, Waller could not make out anything more than the fact that two figures were lying upon the cots. Sondra and Norgo? Yes, yes, he told himself—it has to be. But were they alive—or dead?

He moved cautiously to his feet and padded swiftly toward the man. Behind him, the door stood wide open now. Ahmad and Coulton slipped through. Waller gripped his knife. He kept his eyes intently focused upon the swaying spine of the man ahead of him. The man was tiny in stature and dressed in long flowing robes. His hair was snow white and his throat, where it showed above the collar of the robes, was pale, creased, wrinkled. Waller ignored the neck. It was the spine where he intended to drive his knife.

Suddenly, Waller felt a restraining hand upon his shoulder. He spun angrily, knife poised to strike. It was only Ahmad.

"No, you don't. We can't kill him." Ahmad struggled to muffle his voice. "If we do, we might never get out of here alive."

"I don't care. Sondra is—"

"You don't know." Ahmad was soothing. "Go look— find out. Coulton and I will take care of him."

In spite of himself, Waller nodded. Ahmad was right: he simply could not trust himself not to murder this man he had hated so long. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Who was? Now go see Sondra."

"All right." Waller stepped aside, allowing Ahmad to pass. Fortunately, the man remained steadily involved in his work at the bench; he had still not turned. Waller moved in a tight semi-circle. Past the bench, he could now see the two cots more distinctly. That was Norgo lying upon the nearest one. He could see her face, eyes firmly shut. Which was she? Asleep—*or* dead?

He hurried now, incapable of further caution. Ahmad and Coulton, on silent tiptoes, remained a considerable distance from their prey. Waller saw that it was Sondra who lay upon the second, more distant cot. A thrill rushed through him. He stopped, staring, squinting. Was she alive? Suddenly, her mouth dropped open. Her lips moved spasmodically. She was dreaming, murmuring. He could not hear what she was saying.

Which was not important. She was alive—she had to be—dead people do not dream.

Sondra was alive.

In spite of himself, at the sight of her lips, Waller let out a high, involuntary cry of delight. He darted toward her.

This time the man heard. Waller was too close now for the noise of the machines wholly to blanket his voice. The man turned at the sound of Waller's cry. Waller himself stopped still. Ahmad and Coulton were no closer than ten feet. The man's face registered shock— shock and surprise and something else, too.

Could it be fear?

This man—their great manipulator—afraid?

All in a moment Waller saw everything clearly. The man was old. This was the prime, significant characteristic of his being: age. Waller had never known a face so withered, wrinkled, ravaged by time.

This man who faced them was thin and poor and fragile and weak. Could he really be the one who had caused them so much pain and sorrow?

Ahmad and Coulton seemed to be experiencing some of the same doubts. Both hesitated, staring at the man who faced them, long enough to allow him time to reach into his robes. This sudden motion seemed to jar Ahmad loose from his timidity. All at once he dived at the man. Something gleamed brightly in the air. The one man held it tightly. A gun. Suddenly, he fired. A bullet—an old fashioned, twentieth century bullet—cracked the air. Ahmad screamed and grabbed his right arm. The man fired again.

This time the hammer of the gun struck with a dull, impotent thud.

Then Ahmad hit him hard. The old man slammed back, flying over the workbench, landing in a still, motionless heap on the opposite side.

Ahmad, gripping his own bloody arm, rushed around to the other side. Crouching beside the old man, he took his wrist and felt for a pulse. "He's alive," he said. "It's beating strong." He dropped the wrist and stood up. "He doesn't seem hurt."

Waller could hardly care. The moment the old man drew his gun, Waller had rushed to the cots. Now he knelt beside Sondra, clutching her still and silent figure in his arms. She, too, was alive. He could feel her beating, thrusting heart. Sondra was alive and, at this particular moment in all eternity, this was the one and only fact that could possibly ever matter to him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The old man sat taut and rigid upon the flat, square surface of

the couch. Only the muscles near his mouth moved—trembling with suppressed hate and rage. Suddenly, he waved an accusatory but unspecified finger at the five of them, shaking it bitterly back and forth:

"You are the monster," he cried. "Each of you, yes, but one in most particular." He spoke good English— the twentieth century dialect. "A monster indeed. The murderer of the human race, cursed and damned throughout all of history until, at last, I came forward to avenge my vanished brothers. If your blood now stains my hands, then I bear this burden gladly, my head held high, my spirits proud. Here. See my throat." He thrust out his head, exposing the withered trunk of his neck. "Slice it at your will. Drain my blood in return for your own. But, remember this, it is you who are the monsters, not I. It is you who are the deadly fiends."

Drained by this outburst, the old man slumped into a spent silence. His shoulders quivered and shook. He wept soundlessly, deep within himself.

Waller glanced in confusion at Ahmad, who laid a ringer to his lips and nodded toward the door. The five of them crept out on hushed feet. In the first floor corridor—a more conventional passageway, with walls of white plaster—Ahmad gestured ahead. "That should be sufficient," he told them. "I wanted you to see what he is like. Now come upstairs and I will reveal what else I have discovered."

"Do you think it's safe to leave him alone?" Waller asked.

"He won't do himself any harm, if that's what you mean."

"How can you be sure? He looked pretty bad off to me."

"Because he's afraid of death. Dreadfully and deathly afraid. Don't let his bluster confuse you. That's as much for himself as us. If you were the last man on Earth, wouldn't you hesitate to die? Why do you think he's chosen to live as long as he has?"

"How long?" asked Sondra. She walked beside Waller, gripping his hand.

"Three thousand years—more or less."

Two days and two nights had passed since their conquest of the house of glass. In that time Waller had largely occupied himself by poking into the many nooks and corners of the house. In particular, he had devoted himself to attempting to comprehend some of the intricacies of the glittering gadgetry of the top dome floor. Ahmad, in turn, took it upon himself to interrogate their prisoner. The two of them spent many secret hours locked up together in that first floor room. Ahmad would reveal only occasional details of what he was learning.

"Just how much has he told you?" Waller now asked, as they mounted the familiar staircase to the dome room.

"Everything," Ahmad said, "except what's really important. But you'll have to wait. I don't want to tell you until I can show you, too." He pressed the button that drew back the ceiling and then leaped through the gap to the adjoining floor.

Inside the dome room, Ahmad directed the others to be seated upon the various scattered benches. Waller smiled at this display. Ahmad was getting set for his own big moment. He was the sort of man who loved to show off any secret that might fall into his private possession, and this particular secret was surely the biggest he had ever owned.

Once everyone was correctly seated, Ahmad took a strategic stance among them. Waller, impetuously, decided to start things off with a question of his own. It was an essential one:

"He's insane, isn't he? That's what you want to tell us." The others, except Ahmad, stiffened at these words. Waller knew he had simply voiced their own deepest fears.

But Ahmad smiled. "Of course he is. But he always was."

"I suppose that's good news."

"Oh, it is. But you must—please—permit me to say what is necessary in my own direct fashion. This tale is a peculiarly complex one and it must be described in proper order."

Waller grinned. "I'm sorry, Ahmad. I didn't meant to spoil your show. Do go on." Sondra had been deliberately stationed across the length of the room from where Waller was sitting. Now Waller winked at her; she returned the gesture with a smile. They were both equally frightened, combating their anxiety with a compensatory lightness of tone. Waller kept insisting to himself there was no point served in expecting anything helpful to come from this. Old man or not, great manipulator or otherwise, they were not likely to be leaving this place. The world of the klaptu was now their world, too. But weren't these pessimistic thoughts only a way of blunting his own eventual disappointment when Ahmad confirmed his worst fears to be true?

Ahmad waved a sudden hand at their glittering surroundings. "How many of you have yet figured out what all of this is?" he asked. The machines and gadgets hummed and clicked without interruption. They appeared to require no human hand to assist their functioning.

"That's a computer," Waller said, revealing the depth of the knowledge he had acquired in two full days of study.

"And that's a television screen," said Norgo, proudly displaying a fact only recent learned.

"True," said Ahmad, "but I meant the whole thing, the entire structure, taken as a whole. In other words, what does it all mean?"

"I thought you were supposed to tell us," said Waller, "not ask us. What happened to your orderly tale?"

Ahmad grinned. "I only wished to afford you the sporting chance of a guess. An opportunity of displaying your full powers of deduction. But now I will tell you. It's a time machine. All of it—the whole mess—a device for transgressing time. Here, step forward. Watch this screen, please."

He placed them around one of the television sets. The picture at present was a mere blur of color. Going to another machine, one whose face resembled an airplane control panel, with various

gauges, dials, and levers, Ahmad began pushing and pulling, pausing often to consider the next move. Waller watched surreptitiously from one eye, while focusing the remainder of his attention upon the screen.

Suddenly, the picture cleared. Waller sucked in his breath. He was seeing himself—and Ahmad, too— shortly after his own arrival in this world. He lay passed out upon the cold slopes of the hill. The foul gray mist swirled around him. Ahmad came rushing forward. Bending quickly down, he scooped up Waller's unconscious form and carried him back down the hill. The picture followed them part way, then clicked abruptly off.

They turned to find Ahmad grinning. "An example," he said, "though I'm afraid it's about all I'm capable of showing." He motioned them back to their seats. "But there could be more. All of Earth's history, from creation to this very moment of Now. Any moment of past time, any place on Earth—this machine can reach it and reveal it."

"Just pictures?" asked Waller. "Or is travel also possible?"

"Obviously, it is. How do you think we got here?" He nodded toward the control panel. "There's your answer right there."

"Then we can—" Sondra began, a smile of hope clinging desperately to her face. None of them suffered any difficulty completing the sentence for her. It was the question they all wished to ask.

Ahmad interrupted: "It is possible. At least I tend to believe it must be. But he won't tell me." For the first time, his frustration clearly showed. Waller now found the worst of his fears confirmed: they were stuck here forever, exiled to tomorrow. "I figured out this much—" he indicated the machines "—only from a few hints he accidentally let drop."

"Then I'll kill him," said Waller, half-rising from his seat. The force and fervor of his own words shocked him.

"No, you won't," Sondra said. "Then we'd really be in a fix."

"I doubt it could be greatly worse than the fix we are presently enjoying," said Ahmad. "For two days and nights, I have been threatening, cajoling, berating that old man. He's weak and worn and tired. But he won't budge. I told you he greatly fears death. I have discovered there is one thing he fears even more: allowing us to return unharmed to our own times."

"But why?" said Sondra. "What is it we've done that's so dreadful? I'm no monster, no fiend, all those things he called us."

"I'm sure none of us feels any differently but Barone—the old man—asserts otherwise. I'm afraid the crucial situation concerns only Waller, Sondra, and me. And especially one of us—he won't tell me which. It seems that someone—either Sondra or Waller or me—was removed from time because Barone wished to save the world."

"You mean one of us destroyed the world?" asked Sondra. She laughed hollowly at the idea of it.

"Barone apparently feels one of us had a hand in it. But first you must understand his very personal point of view on this. Some ten thousand years ago, the final great wave of humanity deserted the Earth. It shouldn't be difficult to understand why. The sun is entering its old age. The Earth itself is a mere shriveled husk of its once majestic self. Evolution has turned puzzling corners. New species have been born. Old, familiar creatures are long extinct. The ape has achieved measure of intelligence. Mankind no longer felt truly at home on this world; the galaxy had been conquered long since. So they left—they went elsewhere. Don't ask me what they were like, these last men. If we saw them, I doubt that we'd recognize much of ourselves in what they are. Barone is no good example. His ancestors, along with a tiny handful of others, did not depart with the others. I received the distinct impression that they were rejected as unfit. In any event, those few who stayed eventually bore children—but not many. Barone is the last of these, the very last man on Earth."

"And he invented all of this?" Waller said. "The time traveling equipment?"

"Oh, no. He inherited it. Time was conquered many centuries ago. In fact, it was this discovery that allowed the laws of relativity to be violated and men to migrate to the farthest stars. Barone happened to come across this outpost and, entering, found it still functional. The use he made of these devices was something totally new. Although always a theoretical possibility, no one had ever previously considered tampering with time in this fashion. It would seem that, in the thousands of years separating us from these inventors, that mankind managed to learn at last to suppress the worst aspects of his own inherent curiosity."

"And his experiments with the klaptu? What was that all about?"

"He won't tell me. I believe he was trying to send them through time but whether he succeeded or failed is another of his secrets."

"But if he could send them, he could also send us?"

"Exactly. But did he? I should go on."

"Yes," Waller agreed.

"Barone was different—more like us than his own contemporaries. A throwback who held a grudge. Not against us so much as against them—those who had left the Earth and deserted his ancestors. Why? he kept asking himself. Why did they go and leave us to rot and die? With his new found ability to witness all of history unfolding, he set out to answer this question. And that's when he found us. You or me or Sondra. The answer— its earliest beginning—happened to lie within one of us. We caused them to leave."

"But how?" asked Sondra.

Ahmad shook his head. "He refuses to say. Something one of us did later. A thing that, like a pebble dropped from a height into the center of a still lake, set off a slow, patient wave that would eventually reach shore and culminate in this final migration."

"Then we aren't monsters," Sondra said. "What we've done isn't wrong—it's right."

"I warned you his point of view was peculiar."

"But wait," said Waller. "Something's wrong. We've been removed from our own time. Whatever it was one of us did has been wiped from the slate of history. But nothing has changed, has it? The human race hasn't come racing back to Earth. So Barone failed—time can't be changed. He ought to be willing to let us go now."

"No, it's working. It's changing. Not in an instant— all at once. The wave takes a long while to reach the shore, but it is coming. I cannot guess how far it has traveled or how much has been changed as a result. But eventually it will sweep past everything—all of time— and Barone is more than willing to wait until then."

"But couldn't he let the rest of us go?" Waller said. "If there's only one of us, there's no need to punish the others."

"I tried that on him. He refused. We're all dangerous, he said. We cannot be trusted."

"Including Norgo and Coulton?"

"Oh, yes."

"But why did he bring us here? I don't understand that part. Didn't he realize how dangerous it was?"

"I'm sure he did, but it was a final resort." Ahmad smiled at the thought. "You see, we kept messing up his best laid plans. Originally, he thought he would simply remove us from our own time and stick us down someplace where we could cause no conceivable harm. He chose Norgo's devastated time. So what did we go and do? We arrived and immediately set about changing everything. We taught Norgo's people a whole new way of life and set them on the road to eventual maturity. He had to get us out of there fast before the damage was made permanent. He also had to bring Norgo along, too, because she had been

contained by us and was now more dangerous than anyone. So then he set us down in the world of the towers. As slaves, what could we do? Well, we showed him. We instigated a great revolt—the first in history—and came close to pulling it off. Again, we were jerked out of time, and poor Coulton was brought along, too. At last we came here. To the present, if you will, his present, where we couldn't change history because none yet existed. He was aware of the fact he was taking a great personal risk bringing us to his own doorstep, but he felt we had left him no other choice. I imagine, once he found a way, he would have disposed of us—probably would have set the klaptu against us. The way we came here—separated his space and time— makes me a bit suspicious; his aim was always perfect before. In any event, we acted too quick, never gave him a chance to move. I suppose we should be proud of that. Except he was right all along. We're beaten. Now that he's done what he first set out to do, there's no way we can change it."

"There isn't?" asked Sondra, a meager trace of hope remaining in her voice. "You're sure?"

"I'm afraid I am," Ahmad said bleakly.

"But I'm not," Waller said.

In unison, the others turned and stared at him wide-eyed.

"What do you mean?" said Sondra. "You don't mean there's—?"

"This machine," Waller said. "Hasn't anyone else noticed something rather odd? It happens to be working. Why? If Barone has done what he set out to do, then why doesn't he shut the whole thing down? Why not simply destroy it? As long as it's here, there's always a chance one of us may figure out how it works and then leave. The man can't be stupid. There has to be a reason."

"Then," Ahmad said, "if you know, please tell us." He smiled thinly. "No more secrets, please."

"Because," said Waller, "the machine not only brought us

here, it's also keeping us here. We're creatures out of time. Some natural power—a sort of gravity of the time-stream—is trying to draw us back to where and when we belong. The machine neutralizes that force and keeps us here. Destroy the machine and we will automatically return home."

"You don't know that for sure," Ahmad said.

"No, I don't, but there ought to be an easy way of finding out."

"What?"

"Bring him here. Bring Barone and I'll ask him."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Calvin Waller stood face-to-face with Barone and said, as calmly as he could, "We've decided to destroy your time machine."

Despite his age and frailty, Barone, hearing these words, did not hesitate an instant.

With the fury of an enraged beast, he sprang straight for Waller's throat.

Coulton and Ahmad gripped him firmly from behind and held him back.

"So I was right," said Waller. "Then there is a way out of here and that's it. Ahmad, where's the gun we took away from him the day we broke in?"

"Right here, Waller." Ahmad stepped away, allowing Coulton to hold Barone, and reached into the folds of his gown. He produced the black revolver and threw it across the room to Waller.

"I'm going to start shooting," Waller announced. "I'll aim at the computer first, then work my way around the room. When none of us is here any longer, then we'll know it worked."

"So soon?" asked Ahmad.

"I can't see why we should delay. Waiting can only work to his advantage. I think we ought to go now— this instant."

Ahmad shrugged, unable to disagree. No one else protested, either.

So Waller cocked the gun and pointed it.

Barone, leaping and straining, struggled against Coulton's far superior strength. Suddenly, he called out: "You won't remember. Not any of it. Shoot now and you'll be killing her too."

In spite of himself, Waller lowered the gun. "What do you mean?"

"Destroy the machine and you will be returned through time to the exact point at which you left. Surely, you have not forgotten the circumstances of that moment. Nothing that has happened to you since will have made any impression upon you. Your memories will be gone. When you see the woman across from you, you will kill her. She has already wounded you—now she will die."

Barone's words forced Waller's memory back to that particular instant. He saw himself holding a gun. The barrel was aimed at a woman's forehead. His finger hugged the trigger. The woman was Sondra.

She, too, seemed to be remembering. "Calvin, do it. You won't kill me. I know that."

He hesitated, staring at his hand. "But I don't," he said softly.

"No." She waved an anxious hand. "You've got to do it. Which is more important, Calvin? The whole human race, or just me? If you stop now, he'll win. You have to shoot—now—please."

"But I can't kill you."

"Calvin, do it!" She was screaming. "Shoot!"

He raised the gun. It seemed to move exclusive of his own wishes. He pointed it. In fear, Barone screamed and struggled with Coulton. Norgo cried out, "Good-by, everybody!"

"Shoot," Sondra said.

Waller squeezed the trigger. The first bullet cracked the body of the computer. He saw a flash of fire but didn't wait. Spinning, he swung the gun wildly, firing at anything that clicked or clattered or hummed. Barone kept screaming. Waller stared at the empty television screen. He fired there. He turned to face the control panel. He fired. He—

Darkness.

He was falling.

Dizzy for an instant, Calvin Waller blinked, recovering at once. He stared at a young white girl crouched across the room. Her gun was pointed at his chest. His gun was pointed at hers. She had wounded him; his arm ached and burned. He tightened his finger around the trigger.

Then she dropped her gun. "Calvin," she said softly, very softly, "don't."

He looked down at the gun. *Don't?* But why? Wasn't she an enemy? One of them?

He threw the gun far away into a distant corner of the room.

She sprang up, rushing forward to grab his good arm. "Come—let's go."

He nodded. "Yes." And he went with her.

They darted out of the room, dashed into the next. On their way, they passed Ahmad, who stared incredulously after them. Waller recognized him and waved happily.

Outside in the air thick with dust and smoke and the rapid patter of gunfire, the two of them ran and ran.

They ran from nothing; instead, they ran toward it.

END